

## **Japa Pandemic: Battling for the Souls of Nigerian Youths**

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### ***Abstract***

*The "Japa" phenomenon has gained widespread recognition among the Nigerian populace, particularly the youth demographic. "Japa" denotes a prevailing trend where numerous Nigerian youths, impelled by aspirations for improved prospects, contemplate emigration to foreign territories. Amidst the backdrop of Nigeria's economic downturn, characterized by dwindling economic indices, business closures, institutional deficiencies and a pervasive absence of effective governance, advocating against the pursuit of opportunities abroad for young Nigerians or families equipped with the means to facilitate their offspring's overseas relocation would be morally contentious. The prevailing sentiment among citizens reflects a profound skepticism regarding the nation's prospects, compounded by a prevalent sense of disenchantment. Consequently, resorting to illicit means of emigration, despite the attendant perils, becomes an unfortunate recourse for citizens who do not have the financial muscle to emigrate legally, exacerbating the issue of brain drain and propelling disillusioned youths towards illicit endeavours as a means of subsistence. The paper relied on secondary data and an extensive review of related literature to contend that the proliferation of the "Japa" phenomenon, which has now become a pandemic, finds its genesis in systemic governance failures, which engender widespread apathy and disillusionment among the nation's youth cohort. It concludes that rectifying this trend necessitates a concerted emphasis on instituting effective governance mechanisms capable of reinstating youthful confidence in the nation's trajectory, thereby mitigating the prevalent inclination towards emigration.*

***Key Words:*** *Japa, Pandemic, Governance, Nigerian Youth*

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### **Background of the study:**

The second strand of Achebe's famous quote "Being a Nigerian is abysmally frustrating and unbelievably exciting" seems not to be ageing well. The recent fever-pitch mass exodus of Nigerians, particularly youths to foreign countries in search of greener pastures is a testament that nothing seems to be exciting again about Nigeria at the moment. Nigerian presently is abysmally frustrating. Life seems to have been scuttled into the famous axiom of Thomas Hobbes "short and brutish". This disillusionment has catalyzed the emergence of the term "Japa," – a Yoruba word

meaning “to run, flee or escape” – resonating across Nigerian society with an epidemic fervour, encapsulating the fervent desire of Nigerians to seek refuge elsewhere in pursuit of more promising prospects (Agbajileke, 2023).

Olayinka describes "Japa" as a term recently integrated into Nigeria's socioeconomic and political vernacular, denoting the inclination of Nigerians to emigrate without intentions of imminent return (Olayinka, 2023). It has become emblematic of the prevailing desperation to depart from Nigeria. Liu (2023) captures this phenomenon vividly through interviews with Michael, a 20-year-old journalist in Lagos and Aisha, a 20-year-old student from Ibadan. Michael characterizes "Japa" not merely as migration but as a flight for survival. In his words: “ Japa doesn’t mean to migrate; it means to run for your life”(p.2). While Aisha equates it with relinquishing one's struggles and fleeing from overwhelming circumstances. She states: “Japa means, I’m done. I’m not doing this anymore. I am running away. I can’t cope” (p. 2). These accounts underscore the urgency among Nigerian youth to escape their homeland. Afunugo (2023) cites studies conducted by Oluwaseyi and Adeosun (2020), Omonijo, Nnedum, and Ezeokana (2011), and Odimegwu and Joe-Akunne (2023), all indicating that a significant portion of Nigeria's youth and young professionals comprise the highest contingent migrating abroad or intending to do so. Liu (2023) astutely observes that within the context of Japa, “ it is fleeing which is important – the destination is secondary” (p. 2).

The question that every reasonable person will ask is what brought about this fever-pitch desperation to leave the country? The simple answer to this question is bad governance. The leadership failure in the country has forced the citizens, particularly youths to pass a vote of no confidence in the government. Olumoyo and Abiri (2024) corroborate this assertion, positing that Nigerians are departing the country in response to systemic failures and institutional corruption. They contend that while relocation is a natural human phenomenon, Nigeria's context reveals a pronounced departure driven primarily by economic adversity exacerbated by governance inadequacies. The professional and skilled cohorts within Nigeria harbour a collective sentiment that the nation's trajectory is irreversibly downward, devoid of any viable recourse. The disillusionment stemming from the contentious 2023 elections, which yielded a contested leadership, serves as a final affront to their confidence in the nation's prospects (Afunugo, 2023). Consequently, Nigeria finds itself relegated in the estimation of its youth, perceived as inferior to foreign counterparts and bereft of substantive opportunities.

The "Japa" syndrome emerges as a direct reaction to prevailing impunity and lawlessness within the country (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2024). Despite the youth demographic embodying the potential vanguard for national rejuvenation through their creative prowess and innovative capacities, the deteriorating national milieu has instilled an overwhelming urge to seek refuge elsewhere. A survey conducted by the CLEEN Foundation and Afro-Barometer (Olaoluwa, 2019, as cited by Afunugo, 2023) underscores this trend, revealing that one in every three educated young Nigerians contemplates emigration. The survey further discloses that the motivations for departure encompass employment prospects and the desire to escape economic hardship, with a notable proportion actively pursuing emigration plans or contemplating such measures in the near future. Moreover, the study reveals that the majority of prospective emigrants fall below the age of 35,

with a significant contingent possessing post-secondary qualifications, emblematic of a substantial brain drain from the nation.

According to findings from the Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey, a considerable portion of the Nigerian populace, representing seven out of 10 individuals, expresses a willingness to relocate to foreign nations, citing various motives for such actions, with a noteworthy proportion achieving successful transitions (Oludotun, 2023). This inclination towards emigration persists unabated, encompassing both older and younger demographics. Presently, the prevailing net migration rate in Nigeria stands at -0.273 per 1000 population, indicative of a trend where more individuals are opting to emigrate from the nation (Oludotun, 2023). Recent data released by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) further underscores the severity of this phenomenon, as it indicates that no less than 260,000 Nigerians have sought assistance from the organization to facilitate their departure from the country within the current year. Such statistics suggest a looming crisis for the nation, akin to a proverbial time bomb (Ogunode, 2024).

Oludotun (2023) underscores that the impetus driving the inclination of Nigerian youths towards emigration lies in their disillusionment with the socio-economic adversities exacerbated by unmet governmental commitments and deficient leadership characterized by a dearth of transparency and accountability. This state of affairs has precipitated stagnation in development, resulting in the misallocation of scarce resources that could otherwise bolster infrastructure; impede educational advancement and compromise public health, thereby exacerbating the plight of the impoverished masses. Consequently, this precarious milieu has eroded the trust of the youth in both the nation and its governance structures. This sentiment is succinctly encapsulated by Olumoyo and Abiri (2024):

Many who are fixed up in the 'japa' syndrome say they have lost confidence in Nigeria and trust that the country practically has no promises for them. While many have chosen the education and employment route to 'japa', others chose more exceptionally dangerous trips, either crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The belief, therefore, is that immigrating to other parts of the world would afford them better education, better career opportunities, better paying jobs, and of course, a safer and more secure future for their children. These benefits, they believe are quite vague in Nigeria at the moment (p. 92)

The prevailing circumstances have engendered a scenario wherein individuals exhibit a willingness to undertake any means necessary to depart the country, irrespective of the associated hazards. According to African Strategic Studies (2023), as cited in Afunugo (2023), African migrants confront dire risks, including but not limited to murder, torture, rape, persecution and exploitation by traffickers, militias and certain state authorities within the purported "countries of their dream." It is further documented that approximately 15 per cent of African migrants, particularly those travelling without official documentation, confront heightened susceptibility to exploitation and trafficking, either en route or upon reaching their destination (Afunugo, 2023). Consequently, Africa has recorded over 9,000 migration-related fatalities since 2014, with an additional 25,000 individuals reported missing while attempting to traverse the waters between

Africa and Europe. Against this backdrop, Nigerian youths, many of whom possess tertiary education credentials, evince a readiness to assume considerable risks in their quest to migrate to Western nations in pursuit of perceived better prospects (Ogunode et al., 2024).

Despite the significant emigration observed, a substantial portion of the Nigerian populace continues to grapple with impoverishment, rendering them unable to afford the costs associated with emigration. Consequently, these individuals often resort to illicit means of travel or engage in nefarious activities to make a livelihood within Nigeria's confines. This raises concerns regarding the fate of those who lack the means to depart and rely solely on governmental provisions for sustenance in the absence of conducive governance. Central to these challenges is the issue of bad governance and leadership failure, which engenders a dichotomy of rulers devoid of empathy and citizens, stripped of identity. It is within this context that disillusionment among the youth towards their nation and its governance institutions festers, as they confront the stark reality that their prospects for growth and prosperity appear stunted within the Nigerian milieu.

This discourse posits that the proliferation of the "Japa" phenomenon finds its roots in the systemic failures of governance. It contends that without the emergence of leaders dedicated to serving the collective interests of the populace rather than self-aggrandizement and committed to fostering an environment conducive to societal advancement, the endemic nature of this phenomenon is likely to persist. Thus, the crux of the issue lies in the imperative need for good governance, which can instill confidence and hope among the youth, irrespective of their social standing, by providing equitable opportunities for advancement and prosperity.

### **The Genesis of the Japa Pandemic**

Before the adrenalin rush to leave Nigeria became a pandemic housed in the Yoruba word "Japa", Nigerians have always been moving out of the country for years. Olayinka (2023) observes this pattern, highlighting the historical backdrop of Nigerians migrating en masse from their homeland. This assertion finds resonance in Olajide's (2024) affirmation, emphasizing that the contemporary "great japa" movement is not a novel occurrence but rather a manifestation echoing historical migration trends. As Olajide aptly states:

The genesis of the 'Japa' movement can be traced to the 1980s, a period of military transitions, socio-economic breakdowns, and political maladministration in Nigeria. Following that, the movement took form during the urbanization wave in the country, a period when the ambitious youths migrated from their villages and hometowns to the cities, notably Lagos, Abuja, or Port-Harcourt, seeking improved working conditions and greener pastures (p. 2)

He maintains that the sole differentiation lies in the heightened buzz engendered by social media platforms, thereby transforming it into a sensationalized narrative (Olajide, 2024). According to Olayinka (2023), the substantial migration of Nigerians witnessed during the 1980s and 1990s was precipitated by political instability and the introduction of visa lottery schemes. This phenomenon colloquially referred to as 'checking-out' in the 1980s and the exodus of the 1980s, as well as the visa lottery schemes of the 1990s, bears historical precedence. Therefore, the apparent coordinated

departure from the country in recent years does not represent an entirely novel occurrence within our national consciousness (Olayinka, 2023). He aligns with Olajide's (2024) perspective, asserting that the proliferation of this trend has been amplified by the advent of the internet, compounded by the allure of the term "Japa." In his elucidation, the contemporary surge:

coincides with the Internet age and mass information, it only makes sense that emigration stories are now being shared in real-time, going viral and becoming more of a spectacle than it ever was for previous generations. The implication is that these days, everyone knows about it, everyone follows it and everyone seems to have an idea of how Nigeria's epic relocation wave is shaping up. While permanent relocation has remained a reality and ever-present aspiration for Nigerians across different generations, no word has been more interwoven with the idea than 'Japa,' the recent social media-speak that has permeated pop culture and other facets of Nigerian life. All conversations surrounding travel out of Nigeria are now twined with the word (Olayinka, 2023, p. 6).

The term "Japa" has historically been a component of the Yoruba lexicon. However, its widespread adoption within popular culture can be attributed to Azeez Adeshina Fashola, a British-Nigerian musician and songwriter, known by the stage name, Naira Marley. In his 2018 composition titled "Japa," Fashola depicts a narrative characterized by swift and evasive manoeuvres undertaken to elude pursuing law enforcement officers (Olayinka, 2023). Of particular significance to the emergence of the "Japa" syndrome is a segment within the song wherein he vocalizes:

"Japa japa, japa lo London // Japa japa ja wo Canada // Japa japa, ja wo Chicago // Japa japa, ja lo si Africa" (p. 6-7)

In the above verse, Naira Marley depicts the act of "Japa'ing" as a metaphorical reference to seeking refuge in countries such as London, Canada, Chicago, and Africa. Ironically, empirical evidence indicates that the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America are favoured destinations for Nigerian emigrants. Consequently, the song "Japa" garnered significant acclaim and gradually disseminated its associated colloquialism into social media discourse, thereby establishing itself as a vernacular term denoting attempts to escape the deteriorating conditions prevalent in Nigeria (Olayinka, 2023). By 2019, the term had permeated social media platforms to the extent that it became customary to denote relocation plans as "japa-ing" out of the country. Presently, this colloquialism has not only gained widespread acceptance but has also attained pervasive popularity, such that discussions regarding emigration—both within and beyond the confines of social media—frequently revolve around its usage (Olayinka, 2023).

According to data sourced from the United Nations on Population and Migration (Olayinka, 2023), Nigeria's Net Migration Rate depicted a positive trend, signifying a surplus of individuals entering the country over those departing, during the period spanning from 1974 to 1980. This era coincided with the Oil Boom period in Nigeria's history. However, beginning in 1981 and persisting to the present day, Nigeria has consistently exhibited a negative Net Migration Rate, indicative of a greater number of individuals emigrating from the country compared to those immigrating into it.

Olayinka (2023) further elaborates on this trend, highlighting the specific Net Migration Rates recorded for successive years, with figures indicating a progressively declining trend: -0.280 in 2022, -0.288 in 2021, -0.295 in 2020, and -0.303 in 2019. Moreover, the United Nations World Population Reports, as cited in Otelemate (2024), projected Nigeria's Net Migration Rate for the year 2024 to be -0.267 per 1000 population. These figures are a matter of concern and a clear pointer that something is wrong somewhere.

### **Literature Review: Overview of Japa pandemic causes and solutions.**

The Japa phenomenon has emerged as a focal point of scholarly inquiry within the academic sphere. Various researchers have undertaken comprehensive investigations into its underlying causes and have proposed potential remedies. This literature review aims to critically assess these diverse perspectives while reaffirming its central assertion that bad governance serves as the principal catalyst for the Japa pandemic.

In his research titled "Japa, or to flee or to run: Nigerian youth and the urgency of departure," Liu (2023) delves into the intricate socio-economic dynamics that underpin the urgency of migration among Nigerian youth. He underscores the imperative of addressing these underlying issues to mitigate the pervasive desire to emigrate from the country. Liu contends that the pressing nature of migration is fueled by a confluence of political, economic and social factors, including but not limited to economic dissatisfaction, distrust in governmental institutions and the devaluation of the Nigerian currency. Consequently, he posits that Nigerian youth, adopt the "Japa" phenomenon and its associated imagery of "fleeing" as a means to articulate their aspirations to depart from an environment where individual endeavours are consistently thwarted, (Liu, 2023)

In his discourse titled "Nigerian Japa Syndrome: Quo Vadis," Olayinka (2023) examines the phenomenon of Japa, characterized by the emigration of Nigerian citizens, and underscores its adverse implications for the country's economy. He highlights concerns such as brain drain and the potential for social unrest arising from widespread unemployment, underemployment, and poverty within the populace. Olayinka acknowledges the inevitability of Japa given the prevailing economic circumstances; however, he proposes a nuanced perspective. He posits that the Nigerian Diaspora could serve as a valuable resource for ameliorating the economic challenges back home, emphasizing the need to harness the talents, expertise, resources and time of diasporans. Consequently, rather than dissuading Nigerians from seeking opportunities abroad, Olayinka advocates for a strategic focus on enhancing living conditions and environmental factors to improve the prospects for the majority who opt to remain within the country, (Olayinka, 2023)

Nwaeze (2024), in his study entitled "Japa Syndrome and the National Economy," directs attention to the phenomenon of the "Japa syndrome" and its ramifications on the Nigerian economy, with particular emphasis on the healthcare, education and petroleum sectors. He discerns the primary catalysts of the Japa syndrome as emanating from both push and pull factors, including deficiencies in basic amenities, institutional weaknesses within the education system and a paucity of employment opportunities. The resultant brain drain, a significant byproduct of the Japa syndrome, precipitates the exodus of skilled professionals and poses a formidable obstacle to the country's

economic advancement. Nwaeze contends that to effectively address the Japa syndrome and mitigate its adverse impact on the national economy, there must be concerted efforts to rejuvenate the healthcare and education sectors, (Nwaeze, 2024)

Osigbesan (2021) undertakes an analysis of the factors driving the departure of healthcare practitioners from Nigeria and the resultant ramifications on the nation's healthcare sector. She posits that the phenomenon of brain drain in Nigeria is predominantly attributed to multifaceted challenges encompassing living conditions, inadequate governmental support and a deficit in knowledge dissemination. Osigbesan contends that the dearth of governmental assistance in the reconstruction of the healthcare infrastructure stands out as a pivotal contributor to the brain drain phenomenon. She maintains that unless the Nigerian government addresses the pervasive challenges associated with residing in the country, the ongoing exodus of skilled professionals from the healthcare sector will persist unabated, (Osigbesan, 2021)

Olumoyo & Abiri (2023), in their study titled "'Japa' Syndrome: Causes, Effects and Solutions for Sustainable National Development," delineate the fundamental causes of the "Japa" phenomenon as comprising bad governance, unemployment, insecurity, recurring disruptions in tertiary educational institutions and substandard working conditions. The reverberating effects of these factors manifest in the form of brain drain, a dearth of expertise across diverse sectors including healthcare, education and technology, and an erosion of confidence in Nigeria's potential for a promising future. They advocate that the most efficacious approach to mitigating the "Japa" syndrome is to bolster the nation's economy, (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023),

Olajide (2024) advances a novel perspective on the Japa pandemic, contending that the "Japa" movement ought to be perceived as an opportunity rather than a calamity for the Nigerian economy. From his vantage point, he posits that this movement has the potential to catalyze socio-economic and political rejuvenation and advancement. Olajide argues that it presents an impetus for the government to address the underlying causes of migration and retain valuable human capital. Accordingly, he asserts that governmental initiatives should focus on fostering a conducive environment to facilitate the repatriation of Nigerians in the diaspora. This entails the implementation of favourable legislative frameworks and policies, incentivizing foreign direct investment and enhancing the business climate in the country. Nonetheless, in his concluding remarks, Olajide acknowledges the historical antecedents of the "Japa" movement, which stem from factors such as military transitions, socio-economic disruptions, and political mismanagement in Nigeria, (Olajide, 2024)

Nduka & Avegbenga (2024) posit that the Japa pandemic constitutes a significant impediment to economic progress in Nigeria. They bemoan the migration of skilled individuals, particularly among the younger demographic, which has precipitated a phenomenon commonly referred to as brain drain, thereby impeding domestic development and stifling economic advancement within the nation. They unequivocally assert the imperative of mitigating this unrestrained emigration owing to its deleterious consequences. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that the prevailing trend is largely driven by a confluence of factors including poor governance, elevated unemployment rates, inflationary pressures and limited access to quality education and healthcare. In response to these

challenges, they underscore the necessity for the implementation of strategies aimed at discouraging illicit migration, fostering brain gain and enhancing the educational infrastructure to harness the potential of Nigerian youth for catalyzing economic development (Nduka & Avegbenga, 2024).

Afunugo (2023) discerns the significant impact of the Japa pandemic on Nigeria's labour force, attributing this trend to the exodus of youth, professionals and skilled workers to seek opportunities abroad. He contends that factors such as bad governance, unemployment, unfavourable working conditions and insecurity within Nigeria contribute substantially to this migration pattern. Consequently, Afunugo highlights the existential threat posed to Nigeria's labour force, characterizing the resultant phenomenon as a form of "brain drain" whereby the country experiences a depletion of skilled workers and professionals, leading to potential shortages across various governmental agencies and other sectors. In response to these challenges, Afunugo advocates for religious-based solutions, particularly drawing from Christian teachings, to address the adverse impacts of the Japa syndrome on Nigeria's labour force (Afunugo, 2023).

Ogunode, Cletus & Christiana (2024) highlight the prevalence of the Japa pandemic within tertiary institutions in Nigeria, noting its deleterious effects on academic staffing levels, institutional quality, capital flight and overall institutional development. They identify a range of factors contributing to this phenomenon including substandard salaries, unfavourable working conditions, economic challenges, security concerns within Nigeria, inadequate infrastructure and deficient leadership. The authors emphasize that effective governance and the provision of comprehensive security measures nationwide, among other interventions, represent viable strategies for ameliorating the prevailing circumstances (Ogunode, Cletus & Christiana, 2024).

A panoramic view of the diverse perspectives articulated by researchers regarding the principal determinants of the Japa Pandemic reveals a plethora of push and pull factors, encompassing phenomena such as unemployment, poverty, insecurity and political volatility, among others. These factors are identified as exerting influence by compelling individuals to depart from their native environments while simultaneously attracting them to alternative locales that offer desirable attributes. Notably, the overarching impetus behind these push factors is attributed to instances of poor governance and leadership deficiencies prevalent within Nigeria. Consequently, the surge of "japa" enthusiasm signifies a pull effect emanating from foreign jurisdictions characterized by a diminished presence of the adverse push factors abundant within Nigeria.

In alignment with this perspective, the present study transcends the conventional exploration of push and pulls dynamics to concentrate explicitly on the role of poor governance as the primary catalyst of the Japa pandemic.

### **Governance and Government Failures in Nigeria: A Precursor to Japa.**

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing with the Nigerian land or climate or



water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to its responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership (Achebe,1983, p.11)

Chinua Achebe's enduring assessment of Nigeria's leadership over the past four decades remains pertinent in understanding the nation's prolonged stagnation. Despite its abundant human and natural resources, Nigeria has struggled to make significant progress in the sixty-two years since gaining independence. The country boasts the largest economy in Africa, with a GDP estimated at \$477 billion in 2022 (Nduka et al., 2024). However, its economic growth has been hindered by various challenges, including a decline in oil production, leading to a modest real GDP growth rate of 3.6% in 2022 (Nduka et al., 2024). Despite its economic stature, Nigeria grapples with persistent hardships, as evidenced by high unemployment rates, inflation and limited access to quality education and healthcare (Tanimu, 2023).

Moreover, Nigeria consistently ranks among the top recipients of remittances in Africa, indicating substantial financial inflows into the country (Nduka, 2023; Chinedu, 2023). However, these financial inflows have not translated into significant improvements in the lives of Nigerians, primarily due to poor leadership. Despite twenty-five years of uninterrupted civilian rule, the country remains underdeveloped and lags in key indicators of human development such as poverty, acute unemployment and inequality (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). The transition to democratic governance was expected to herald positive change, yet Nigeria continues to grapple with insecurity, corruption, political instability and a host of socio-economic challenges (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). These persistent issues have eroded public confidence in the country's ability to achieve meaningful development under its current democratic dispensation. The volatility and instability stemming from poor governance have exacerbated the loss of human capital, further hindering Nigeria's prospects for progress and creating a conducive environment for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Contrary to Nigeria's developmental stagnation, several other African nations that gained independence around the same time or even later, have made notable progress. Countries such as South Africa, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Botswana, Tanzania and Ghana have demonstrated visible advancements in various aspects of governance, including the conduct of credible elections, the rotation of power among political parties and the expansion of political and civil liberties, accompanied by improved respect for human rights and the rule of law (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). Regrettably, Nigeria finds itself mired in a transitional crisis characterized by widespread election rigging, a trend towards one-party dominance, inter-ethnic electoral conflicts, political violence, the consolidation and personalization of power and the emergence of political dynasties, all of which signal a regression in the country's democratization journey (Ikenga & Chima, 2021).

Furthermore, successive Nigerian governments have struggled to address the persistent decline in various sectors of the economy. The deepening socio-economic and political crises are symptomatic of the dysfunctionality of government institutions, leading to a failure to deliver essential services to the populace (Umoh et al., 2023). With each electoral cycle since 1999, public

confidence in the fulfilment of campaign promises and the delivery of constituency projects has dwindled (Peterside, 2022). Consequently, campaign pledges have devolved into deceitful rhetoric and propaganda, exploiting the pervasive lack of political accountability in Nigeria's governance framework (Brook, 2005). In reality, the country lacks robust mechanisms for political accountability (Peterside, 2022).

Despite the transition to democratic governance, the effectiveness of leadership in Nigeria has shown signs of decline. Issues such as inadequate policy formulation, the implementation of broad measures that lack specificity in addressing economic challenges and instances of governmental inactivity characterize the socio-political landscape of the nation. These factors have contributed to a growing disconnect between elected officials and the populace, who bear the consequences of governance failures across various sectors (Umoh et al., 2023). This sentiment among Nigerians was echoed in a study conducted by Umoh et al. (2023), where respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the state of governance in the country. Their feedback highlighted the following concerns:

Nothing works in this country. Till now, the power sector is worse, bad schools, and people die daily in the hospitals that have become like roadside chemists. Nobody is accountable; they use our money for committees and others for themselves, not for the welfare of the people .... Bad governance in Nigeria has turned into a culture; I wonder if any Nigerian politician, leader, or president is fulfilling their electoral promises. May the Lord help us....What we have as political parties is a joke. They are just a group of people interested in meeting their own needs. These politicians are just a bunch of self-serving people who do not care about this country as long as they benefit wherever they go. Our political parties are a sham. No ideologies, nothing! How can there be when the politicians need to stay in more than one long enough to grow them like in the developed countries (p.147-148)

With the above atmosphere that clouds Nigeria, the current Japa pandemic that is currently pushing many Nigerians to practically escape the country in droves is a testament that the citizens, particularly youths have lost faith in their leaders and see no hope in their country. Umoh et al., in affirmation of this, noted:

The dearth of sectoral vibrancy and performance, facilitated by the lack of commitment to transparency and accountability by the legislative and the executive, constitutes the bane on which the “Japa syndrome” has taken over the youths and professional populations in the country, (p.154).

The procedural implementation of democracy in Nigeria is hampered and its intended conceptual outcomes have failed to materialize in meeting the populace's expectations. A significant disparity exists between the desired and actual provision of democratic governance and good governance in Nigeria (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). While citizens aspire to democratic governance as the optimal framework for constructing a just society and securing a promising future, the delivery of such

governance by political leaders remains limited and incongruous with Nigerian expectations (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). Scholars such as Osaghae (1999) and Fagbadebo (2007) argue that due to the extensive degradation of political structures and democratic norms within society, entrenched interests are unlikely to relinquish power easily. They posit that the transition to genuine democracy and good governance will occur in two phases: first, with the establishment of civilian rule through credible elections and second, with the consolidation of democratic norms and practices. However, current evidence suggests that this process is arduous and protracted, indicating a lengthy journey toward democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Omede & Ngwube, 2017).

Consequently, a significant proportion of Nigerians have yet to experience the benefits of democratic governance. Ogundiya (2010) concurs with this assessment, highlighting several key issues: Firstly, the dividends of democracy have not been substantially realized by Nigerians. Secondly, Nigeria's democratic journey has been marred by violence, resulting in the wanton destruction of lives and property. Thirdly, electoral processes are often tainted by irregularities, diminishing the significance of citizens' votes in determining governance outcomes. These systemic challenges have fueled a desire among citizens to seek refuge elsewhere. The recent political transition, culminating in Bola Ahmed's assumption of the presidency, characterized by a lack of substantive electoral promises, has further exacerbated disillusionment among Nigerian youth, prompting many to embrace the 'Japa' movement (Olajide, 2024).

The prevalence of the Japa pandemic in Nigeria underscores a fundamental crisis in the nation's governance system, challenging conventional definitions of democracy. Nwigwe (2003) highlights the complexity of Nigeria's governance structure, which defies easy classification. It neither fits the model of a monarchy, despite the presence of numerous traditional monarchs in influential positions, nor does it adhere to the principles of an aristocracy, characterized by governance by the best individuals. Moreover, it diverges from the ideals of democracy, which entail governance by and for the people. Nwigwe (2003) provocatively suggests that Nigeria's governance resembles a "Mafia Government" according to St. Augustine's definition, characterized by the dominance of powerful, self-serving operatives who wield control over political affairs.

These observations underscore the pivotal role of governance in driving the Japa pandemic. Citizens, particularly the youth, are compelled to seek opportunities abroad due to pervasive issues of neglect, oppression and disdain from the government (Oludotun, 2023). The mass emigration of the youth, who are vital for the nation's future leadership, exacerbates the brain drain phenomenon and undermines critical sectors such as education and healthcare. Furthermore, the exodus of skilled individuals perpetuates a cycle of decline, relegating Nigeria to a state of perpetual stagnation and hindering its prospects for sustainable development.

The forgoing equally shows that the Japa pandemic if not curbed has grave consequences that will keep debilitating the nation and mitigating the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in the country.

## **Major Consequences of the Japa pandemic**

The exodus of skilled professionals from Nigeria to Western nations underscores the nation's abundant human capital. Notably, data from the government of the United Kingdom illustrates a substantial increase in the issuance of worker visas to Nigerian nationals. Between December 2019 and June 2022, approvals for such visas surged by 11,854, representing a 303% increment from 3,918 in December 2019 to 15,722 in June 2022 (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023). This trend, indicative of the "Japa" phenomenon, primarily affects professionals in fields such as medicine, finance, academia, and technology, redirecting them towards more favourable work environments abroad. Consequently, Nigeria experiences a depletion of its intellectual capital, impeding the potential knowledge acquisition and innovation that these individuals could have contributed domestically.

The emigration of skilled individuals also has significant financial implications for Nigeria. Statistics from the Central Bank of Nigeria reveal substantial expenditure on foreign education by Nigerian citizens. Between December 2021 and February 2022 alone, expenditures amounted to at least \$220.86 million. Moreover, a cumulative expenditure of \$11.6 billion (₦5 trillion) on foreign education was reported between 2019 and 2022 (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023). Additional financial burdens stem from expenses incurred for visa fees and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examinations required by the British Council for Nigerians seeking educational opportunities abroad. The cumulative effect of these expenditures, coupled with the estimated 15 million Nigerians residing in the diaspora, suggests substantial revenue loss in terms of potential tax contributions from an estimated 7.5 million individuals of employment age (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023).

Furthermore, the "Japa" phenomenon engenders negative perceptions of Nigeria in the international community, thereby undermining investor confidence and diplomatic relations. This perception, influenced by the perceived inability of Nigeria to retain its workforce, perpetuates stereotypes of a nation in decline. Consequently, foreign investors may be deterred from engaging with Nigeria economically. This sentiment was exemplified by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) decision to ban Nigerians from entering its borders in October 2022. Despite former President Muhammadu Buhari's appeal to lift the ban, the UAE's rejection underscores the strain on bilateral relations precipitated by negative experiences with expatriated Nigerians (Nwaeze, 2024). Such developments highlight the critical importance of perception management and workforce retention strategies for sustaining Nigeria's economic development trajectory and fostering robust international partnerships.

## **Conclusion.**

This study provides conclusive evidence that the current Japa pandemic is fundamentally rooted in bad governance and leadership failures. While Bill Gates (cited in Olisa, 2023) contends that the mass emigration of Nigerians signifies a positive development and is beneficial for the country, Peter Obi (cited by Oluwasanjo, 2023) echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the potential for brain drain to ultimately translate into brain gain for Nigeria. He asserts,

I have always preached and maintained this same position that “our brain drain today will be our brain grain tomorrow”.... Nigerians leaving the country may look like a loss today, but when we start doing the right things and taking the governance of our nation more seriously, the knowledge and resources from them will be critical in the building of the New Nigeria, as it happened in China, India, Ireland and other developing countries. (p. 1).

However, Obi's statement implicitly assumes that governance in Nigeria is not adequately addressed, suggesting that the Japa phenomenon is primarily a consequence of ineffective governance. He qualified his assertion with a conditional "but," implying that Nigeria can only harness the resources of its emigrated citizens if and only if governance is addressed seriously. Without such efforts, there is a risk that the nation may eventually witness a widespread exodus of its population to other countries. This notion aligns with the conclusion reached by Elazeh (2023), who suggested that without significant and potentially radical changes, Nigeria may face a scenario where only politicians, senior civil servants with access to public funds, and individuals lacking the means to emigrate remain in the country. Therefore, the resolution to this predicament lies in heeding Achebe's call for Nigerian leaders to demonstrate willingness and capability to fulfil their responsibilities and set a personal example, as exemplified by true leadership.

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