

Mygration Story: Longing for the Grass Fields of Cameroon



Our '[Mygration Story](#)' series tracks the family histories of staff and fellows at UNU. The aim is to show that many of us owe our lives and careers to the courage of migrant ancestors. People who left their homes to build safer or better lives — for themselves and for their children. With this monthly series we want to show that migration is not an historical aberration, but a surprisingly common element in family histories worldwide.

•••

'Savages, monkeys ... go back to the jungle!' was the ghastly woven prose splashed across my door, the day after I arrived in Belgium. It was 23 August 2002. I was living with my cousin in the heart of the Molenbeek district, now sadly famous for other reasons. And surprisingly, those responsible for the racist diatribe were not Belgians but Caucasian immigrants from other European countries.

The day earlier in Yaoundé my parents and siblings had all congregated to see me off. At 22 they knew I would be fine, but they were also guarded. My father's authoritative aura and voice dovetailed with mother's firm

counsel to avoid swimming pools at all costs. Those from the Grass Fields in Cameroon have measured familiarity with water beyond its thirst-quenching role.

As I boarded the SN Brussels plane (as Brussels Airlines then was) that would take me to Belgium, I was soaked in anxiety because I was the first in my nuclear family to travel beyond Cameroon; and also because I barely knew anything about Belgium except for the escapades in ex-Zaire of Leopold II's surrogates. But who cared? I had to leave Cameroon to explore new frontiers and to 'get out my comfort zone'. Above all, I had to make my family proud. So in the spirit of this series, I am my own ancestor.

On balancing perspectives

For over two centuries my families on both sides have been relatively sedentary within what we now call the Northwest Region of Cameroon. My parents are born educators with strong conservative streaks, who imbued in their five children the values of respect, discipline, fairness, hard work and especially from mother, humility.

“

... my experiences of being called a monkey, or being spat at while getting off a bus, or being chased by those who thought I had a tail, are dwarfed by the richness of my migration story.

Stephen Kingah
UNU-CRIS

”

The family is now dispersed across Belgium, Cameroon, Canada and the USA. Thankfully distance is partially mitigated by the great tools we now have to have livestream conversations with loved ones. But these tools only go so far. Home remains Bamenda in Cameroon. Despite all the efforts I make as a community coordinator for a Cameroonian socio-cultural non-profit to enable members to feel integrated within Belgium, I still feel a strong longing for the grass fields of Bamenda.

For many like myself, there is a strong sense of mental entrapment, which is anything but abstract. One barely feels accepted in Belgian society, in

terms of engaging in socio-political and cultural life. It always seems as if one is hovering around the peripheries of both mental and physical alienation. Most of my contemporaries share a sense of confusion.

Not fully accepted in Belgium, heading back home to Cameroon is even more debilitating. The Cameroon we left in 2002 did not wait for us; it moved on. In fact, people back home mock those of us who live abroad – for being less than patriotic. The schism of perspectives and time even permeates families. In my own extended family I know barely half my relatives, either because they are too young to remember me or too old. Either way, renewed encounters can be awkward.

The immigrant experience catalogues highs and lows that alternate in spasms of volatile changes. During the first three years in Belgium, my parents would reprimand me for suggesting a sudden return home. Nonetheless, my presence in Belgium soothed their pockets for a while. Today, the money I send home has lost its appeal and now everything pales in the shadow of absence. In my calls with father and mother, as they age, they simply want to know when I will be coming home to Cameroon. They still see me as the 22-year-old lad who braved the skies for the white man's world. But I have now had exposure to the world. Some of the encounters have not always been comforting.

On courtesy and curiosity

I recall once travelling to China for work. After hiking around the Forbidden City we walked to Tiananmen Square. Believe it or not there were some young lads chasing me and looking at my bottom just to be sure I had no tail. We do not choose our physical traits from birth. We take them on and live with them. If others see me as a curious exhibit fit for a museum, I can only hope that they wake up to reality.

During another mission to Turkmenistan many, including government officials, were bewildered to see me and very unsure how to engage with probably the only black man in Ashgabat. Then, on a second trip to Buenos Aires, I was basically detained at the airport for two nights

because I lacked a courtesy visa on my UN Laissez-Passer. I was eventually returned to Belgium, which for better or worse has also become home.

As an optimist who deeply believes that the long arc of history bends towards justice, my experiences of being called a monkey, or being spat at while getting off a bus, or being chased by those who thought I had a tail, are dwarfed by the richness of my migration story. I have been able to study at great universities, work for the United Nations, the European Parliament and European Commission – despite being a non-EU national.

Even though my parents remained in Cameroon, they sacrificed immensely for their children to travel to other countries to improve the family, themselves and the world. I am now ready to return and use all the immigrant experiences I have garnered to make a contribution, however small.

- **ANY COMMENTS?**

Please share your thoughts on our [Facebook](#) page and our [Twitter](#) feed.

- **FULL SERIES**

[*Mygration Stories*](#)

- **NOTA BENE**

The opinions expressed here are the author's own; they do not necessarily reflect the views of UNU.

- **MEDIA CREDITS**