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God brought you home – deportation as moral governance in the lives of Nigerian sex worker migrants

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ABSTRACT
Set in Nigeria among deported sex worker migrants and the institutions that seek to intervene in their migration, this article explores how deportation serves the dual function as a tool for migration governance as well as a tool for moral governance. Deportation has often been analysed from a Global North perspective and as a technology of migration governance imposed upon migrants and their nation states in the Global South. Yet, among Nigerian institutions working with deportees, such as anti-trafficking institutions, as well as among the deportees, the analysis shows how invoking the powerful languages of God, morality and nation-building, deportation emerges as a technology of moral governance – a site for reconfiguring, circumscribing and actively practicing what it means to be a legitimate Nigerian citizen.

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Sister Maria, a Nigerian Catholic nun, sits in her office at an anti-trafficking shelter, an old villa in the centre of Benin City in Southern Nigeria. She explains the objective of her job among Nigerian sex worker migrants returned from Europe through anti-trafficking reintegration programmes:

Counseling the girls spiritually after they are deported to Nigeria is necessary because the girls don’t know the essence of what they did to themselves and to the nation at large … if they now stay home in their own country [in Nigeria], they could contribute to make the economy better, they could contribute to the nation’s building …

In a Nigerian context, there is nothing unusual about Sr. Maria linking spirituality, deportation, women and nation-building. These themes are continuously entangled in the politics and practices of anti-trafficking and deportation in Nigeria. Deportation of Nigerian citizens is in Nigeria not merely an imposed technology of EU migration control, neither is reintegration of victims of trafficking simply an immediate humanitarian intervention. As Sr. Maria’s excerpt attests, they are also something else.

Set in Nigeria among deported sex worker migrants and the institutions that seek to intervene in their migration, this article brings the role of religion and questions of moral governance in dialogue with deportation studies. The article’s main argument is that deportation is not merely a technology of migration governance, but also a technology...
of moral governance. That is, though deportation is primarily utilised as a tool for migration governance in the Global North, in deportees’ home countries, such as Nigeria, deportation also serve as a tool for moral governance. Obviously at times the technologies of migration can moral governance overlap – so that deportation is voiced as moral governance in the Global North, in particular with regard to women sex workers, and deportation is framed as migration governance in the Global South. The article discusses this by questioning the way in which deportation primarily is understood as migration governance – as the re-direction or ending of a migration journey. The article illuminates how deportation not only physically re-directs migration journeys, but also is a site to convert and adjust migrants considered immoral and illegitimate, such as undocumented sex worker migrants, into morally legitimate citizens.

In the current climate of increased deportation from the Global North to the Global South, the deportation of Nigerian sex worker migrants is merely one return flow (Kanstroom 2012; Eurostat 2014). This development has been labelled the ‘deportation regime’, meaning that deportation, rather than being a fragmented and local phenomena, is understood as a systemic regime of exclusion and expulsion in global migration governance (de Genova and Peutz 2010; Walters 2010). While this conceptualisation of deportation has prompted crucial questions on policing, citizenship and sovereignty in migration governance, it is often analysed from the perspective of the Global North (For notable exceptions see Peutz 2006; Drotbohm 2011; Sørensen 2011; Barrios and Brotherton 2011; Kanstroom 2012; Ratia and Notermans 2012; Schuster and Majidi 2015). The limited research on deportation in the Global South documents how deportation often leaves migrants with feelings of powerlessness when orders of removals are imposed upon them (Peutz 2006; Kanstroom 2012), and how deportation creates multiple challenges for deportee receiving countries in the Global South (Sørensen 2011; Barrios and Brotherton 2011). This article contributes to and builds upon the emerging field of deportation studies in showing how deportation is debated in Nigeria and how it is entangled with religion, morality and gender deeply embedded in daily lives and politics in the deportee receiving countries.

**Ethnography in the post-deportee field**

The study is based upon ethnographic fieldwork among Nigerian women from Benin City, in everyday language called Benin, who migrated in search of better opportunities and earned a living by selling sex on the streets of European cities. Eventually all of the women were returned or deported to Nigeria. I interviewed and did fieldwork among a core group of 30 Nigerian women between the ages of 19 and 35, and their families. Approximately half of the women were officially identified as victims of human trafficking and returned through the so-called Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme, implemented to assist officially identified victims of human trafficking to return to their home country. The other group of women was deported as ‘undocumented immigrants’. AVRR is a humanitarian exception within the broader politics of deportation, exemplified by the fact that 160,699 migrants (including Nigerians) were deported from the EU in 2013, and only 16,660 were returned through the AVRR programme (Eurostat 2014).
Some of the women had multiple return experiences – some had been deported, later migrated to Europe again, identified as a victim of human trafficking, and then returned through AVRR. I met the women identified as victims of trafficking through NGOs in Benin and Lagos (these women were from Benin, but stayed temporarily at a shelter in Lagos immediately after their return because they had arrived at the international airport in Lagos). Over time, I developed my own rapport with this group of women, and we met outside the realm of the NGO in Benin. I met the deportees through my research assistant’s personal networks in Benin. I also met the deported women through some of the women I met at the NGO who had several friends who had been deported. Since most of the women I met knew other deportees, I benefitted from a snowball effect. We regularly met at my rented apartment in Benin and talked about our different lives and experiences while eating meals, watching TV, going to church or preparing food in their homes. Besides interviewing and staying with the deported women and their families in Benin, I also conducted interviews with social workers, governmental anti-trafficking employees, a group of Nigerian researchers in charge of a research programme on human trafficking in Edo State at the University of Benin City, as well as local pastors at the churches and the priests at the shrines which the women frequented.

Deportation as moral governance

Nigerians began migrating to Italy in the 1980s as a response to a high demand for low-skilled labour in agriculture and the service sector. Women selling sex were only one of many groups that migrated (de Haas 2006). The first sex workers tended to work independently, but European immigration restrictions made prospective emigrants increasingly dependent on large loans in order to finance their journey (de Haas 2006). Some of these migrants, mostly women – the so-called madams – began to recruit and organise the migration of other women from their region, fronting the money for travel and creating a system of what I term, indentured sex work migration – states of indenture which at times produce vulnerability and severe exploitation. Today, the women’s journeys are typically via airplane and counterfeit documents, others are high-risk migration through the Sahara Desert, relying on ramshackle boats to sail them across the Mediterranean Sea.

When Nigerian women migrants end up in exploitative situations in Europe, it is not merely due to criminal trafficking networks, but also a consequence of the ways in which immigration restrictions and aspirations for a better life spur a market for migration exploitable by the ‘traffickers’, ‘sponsors’ and ‘madams’, as the Nigerian women term them. Critical trafficking studies bring to the fore the complex intersection of morality, immigration restrictions, inequality, political economy and migratory agency of women in the sex sector, a field otherwise concealed by the rhetoric of victimhood and sexual slavery. Building on this I understand human trafficking as fluctuating on a trafficking/migration-continuum. That is, the precise point at which tolerable forms of sex work-related migration ends and human trafficking begins will vary according to political and moral values, not easily captured by legal definitions (Anderson and Davidson 2003). Furthermore these lines of thoughts help to understand the ways in which the legal and
cultural rubric of ‘trafficking’ simultaneously has led to forced deportation and politically ambiguous humanitarian anti-trafficking ‘rescue projects’.

While human trafficking is the primary centre of concern, the focus in Nigeria and among international donors was also on how Nigerian migrant sex workers on the streets of European cities were harmful for Nigeria’s image abroad (de Haas 2007). That is, the ‘immoral’ mobility of Nigerian women into sex work in Europe is not merely a threat to the women themselves, but also to the Nigerian nation. In this discourse, the women have not only violated immigration laws, but also as sex workers they have violated ‘moral laws’ and have failed as the symbolic bearers of the nation’s morality and image (Yuval-Davis 1997). Thus, the powerful connections between deportation, women’s sexuality, morality and a nation’s image are not new or specifically Nigerian. Gender-nation constructs emerge continually in both colonial and post-colonial contexts across the globe, at moments spurring demand for the control of women’s mobility in order to control national image (Yuval-Davis 1997; Luibhéid 2002; Moloney 2012). The staining of the image of the nation becomes possible because the sex worker is imagined to transgress social norms and is thought of as a social criminal (Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010, 197). Yet, while women’s migration to the European sex industry and their deportation certainly epitomise the gender-nation juxtaposition and, thereby, spur moral panic in Nigeria, as I will show, male undocumented migrants deported from Europe are likewise inscribed in a language of immorality.

While critical trafficking studies sets the frame for understanding Nigerian migrant sex workers, in the Nigerian context it is almost impossible to talk about the deportation of sex workers without including how religion and ideas of morality of women’s mobility and sex work intersect.

Migration studies offer abundant accounts of the buffering and integrative roles of religion as immigrants integrate into their country of destination (Levitt 2003; Mahalingam 2006) and on the ways in which religion interacts with earlier stages of the migration experience (Pandolfo 2007; Hagan 2008). Undocumented migration is in a European and US context – increasingly understood as the compelling, yet often unrealisable project of a high-risk border crossing. In migrant communities this-worldly travel has become intimately connected to theological and moral dimensions of departing either literally or by death due to the increased risks involved in crossing borders (Pandolfo 2007; Hagan 2008; Lucht 2010). Yet, the role of religion in the lives of deportees and in institutional discourses surrounding deportation has received scant attention. In my utilisation of religion, I am less interested in the theology or ontology of migration. Instead, I focus on religion’s this-worldly responses and how it provides explanations to the women’s situations. That is, I view religion as a moral form of governance and praxis in exploring deportation and how religion is utilised by the institutions that seek to intervene in the migrants’ lives. Recent studies on deportation to Nigeria emphasise how deportation and the stigma of coming back empty handed is intimately intertwined with gender, kinship and morality (Ratia and Notermans 2012). The history of migration governance elucidates how moral ideas on family, gender, sexuality as well as post-colonial anxieties have always shaped migration control and deportation (Luibhéid 2002; Kapur 2010). Building on these arguments I likewise show how deportation is a gendered process and how religion in this context shapes deportation as moral governance.
Multiple spaces of religion in Nigerian deportations

Nigeria has been under intense pressure from the US and the EU to combat trafficking (de Haas 2006). Yet, despite humanitarian desires to ‘rescue’ the women from their purported situation of human trafficking and despite that many Nigerian women apply for asylum in the EU on grounds of human trafficking, Nigerian women migrants commonly end up being deported to Nigeria, some in the context of reintegration programmes for victims of human trafficking, the AVRR (Bitoulas 2013; Eurostat 2014a). Spurred by these developments and funded by European governments and international organisations, NGOs providing assistance to deportees upon return have mushroomed in places such as Lagos and Benin City – to the extent that they now constitute a Nigerian ‘rescue industry’ (Agustín 2007).

In Nigeria, most of the NGOs are faith-based (Christian). Thus, while the NGOs certainly provide crucial assistance in the form of food, shelter, legal and spiritual counselling, the reintegration of deportees also emerges as a moral space for debating the ‘moral laws’ that the migrant women are imagined to have violated and a site for converting the migrant women into women of dignity. As Sr. Emmanuelle, a Nigerian nun at a Catholic NGO explains:

It has become a tradition among the families in Benin City to travel [to Europe] and later bring younger sisters. They think it is the only way to make a living … I must say that most of them, they traffic themselves, it is not poverty, it is greed. It is the greed and the yearning for greener pastures … Sometimes I go to the deportation centers in Italy, I visit our daughters sitting there, and I ask them to come back home to Nigeria. And they say to me: Sister, there is no electricity; there is no water in Nigeria. All they want is comfort, they do not care what they go through or what they suffer or the amount of freedom they are deprived of, or that they live in fear, or are on their own. But in Italy there is light, there is water, transportation – there is comfort. That is the main problem … Only God knows the hell they go through in Italy, and the courage he gives them to defeat the devil inside them … We believe the suffering in Nigeria depends on the attitude. If you have a good disposition you wouldn’t see what is happening in Nigeria as suffering … you need the right attitude, the rest of us haven’t died. We are managing.

By pointing out how suffering in Nigeria is a question of having a good disposition and the right attitude, deportation and reintegration of women becomes a site to convert a purportedly greedy and immoral attitude into the ‘right attitude’.

Removal and deportation of migrant women and sex workers are, however, not a new phenomenon in a Nigerian context; neither are the desires of regulating sexuality, mobility and attitude. Women sex worker migrants, or those assumed to be sex workers, have continually been returned from other states within Nigeria, and the genealogy of moral concerns with women’s mobility has a long colonial and post-colonial trajectory (Usuanlele 1999; George 2011; Aderinto 2012). In this way, contemporary transnational deportation of Nigerian sex workers is a moment on a continuum of practices spurred by desires to control women’s, in particular sex workers’, ‘wild tendencies and the belief in migrant women’s innate moral weakness’ (Doezema 2010, 99). In the current moment, anti-trafficking efforts in Nigeria are also inscribed in the context of a growing humanitarian sector within global migration governance providing for so-called vulnerable migrants, such as refugees, asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking. Much writing on humanitarianism and international organisations, such as anti-trafficking institutions, presumes a
secular division between politics and religion (Bornstein and Redfield 2010). Yet, as I have shown the lines between secular and non-secular intervention are in Nigeria often blurred in the field of anti-trafficking.

Another way in which religion comes into play in the Nigeria-deportation-trafficking context is in Europe. Here the theme of religion in the context of Nigerian women’s migration in particular has received attention because of some of the women’s relation to, practice of and belief in the ‘dynamic cultural complex’ (Smith 2007) labelled juju. Especially, the focus has been on the oath that some women take before leaving Nigeria. In the context of migration to Europe, these women swear an oath prior to departure and are under bond not to reveal anything about their journey, their debt or their situation in Europe to authorities. When the oath-taking of Nigerian women emerged in Europe in the late 1990s, juju caused a moral panic among several Western anti-trafficking institutions as well as among authorities and popular media, as an exotic and foreign practice. Some even concluded that juju was the driving force of trafficking (Dijk 2001). Ultimately, the moral panic constructed Nigerian women migrants as the ‘exotic other’ having a ‘backward culture’. Yet, with the emergence of juju in discourses of Nigerian ‘trafficking’ in Europe, the question of repatriation to Nigeria became taboo among anti-trafficking organisations and some policymakers and instead the crucial question became if fear of juju could be recognised as grounds for asylum (Dijk 2001). However, though the concept of juju came to both ‘reify migrants’ alterity’ (Giordano 2008, 593) and was turned into a language of extreme victimhood. In this way the women are not only ‘coerced sex slaves’, but also coerced by exotic cults and occult threats, juju has only in a few cases played a part in the granting of asylum to Nigerian women. Thus, ultimately the repressive migration regimes ‘won’ over ‘the rescuing women from backward religion’ paradigm.

Juju and evil forces are among the practices and beliefs the women are being counselled to change their attitude towards in the reintegration process when they return to Nigeria. The NGOs typically associate all forms of the occult within the realm of trafficking with the work of the devil. In this way, rescuing the women from ‘trafficking’ simultaneously requires a conversion away from their beliefs in juju. Thus, anti-trafficking intervention is not only about controlling women’s sexuality, perceived greed and moral depravement abroad, but also about controlling evil forces.

Arriving in Lagos airport

Several times a week a chartered plane with Nigerian deportees from Europe lands at the cargo area in the international airport of Lagos. In close proximity to the metal gates, from where the deportees from Europe exit the airport into the bustling Lagosian chaos, a Catholic NGO opened up to assist the many deportees (men and women) wandering randomly around after their arrival. Previously it was a church, but as the locals living close to the airport increasingly directed deportees searching for shelter to the church, the pastor decided to open a small NGO providing immediate assistance to deportees. The NGO does not have beds for the newly arrived deportees, but as most deportees arrive with only a few Euros and the clothes they were deported in, they are offered a few meals, pieces of used and donated clothes and, if without phones, they can use the phone or get a phone card to get in contact with their families. The NGO also offers to go
through the various travel documents the migrants are deported with to identify and help the deportees understand what kind of legal status they have and whether there are other organisations that might be able to help the migrants. In some cases they refer the migrants to IOM (International Organization for Migration), and commonly they refer the women migrants to the nuns who work with victims of trafficking. Because of the many NGOs assisting women migrants who are categorised as victims of trafficking in Europe, the NGOs have more possibilities of referring women to get assistance than men. The statuses of the migrants (men as well as women) are multiple – some arrive with documents testifying that they have been identified as victims of trafficking in the deporting state, but were not picked up at the airport upon arrival as they had been promised; others are deported because they have violated penal or immigration laws and prohibited to enter EU territory within the following 2–10 years. The migrants were often unsure about their status and what it meant in terms of the re-migration to Europe, which many of them considered.

The group of deportees I watched disembark in the airport in Lagos is by far the largest group compared to the migrants identified as victims of trafficking and returned through an AVRR programme (Also confirmed by data from Eurostat 2014; IOM 2012). A few of them were picked up by family members, whom the deportees had called prior to leaving Europe. But since many family members live far away from Lagos with no access to cars and bus tickets are too expensive, the deportees are on their own until they find a way to get back to their families. Some decide to stay in Lagos to look for work, instead of returning to a family whom they know cannot provide for them in areas with no work to be found, and some consider the deportation too embarrassing to return to their local communities. Thus, some refrain from telling their families that they are back in Nigeria.

A minor group is those migrants, primarily women, who in Europe were identified as victims of trafficking and who through an AVRR are being picked up in the airport by an NGO. These pickups are arranged between the organisation in Europe where the woman was staying prior to leaving for Nigeria and an NGO in Nigeria, typically one in Lagos who then arranges for the women to go back to Benin.

In such a shelter in Benin where Sr. Maria whom we met in the introduction of the article works, the project of the nuns is to provide counselling as well as assist the women in starting up a small reintegration business. Upon arrival, the newly arrived deportees stay at the shelter for a few days to several months, and while planning what to do after they leave the shelter, the women have to do practical work, clean, cook and do the laundry. This often causes conflicts between the women and the nuns because the women do not want to perform the domestic chores or directly and vocally oppose them. In the nuns’ explanation, it is because; ‘Instead of working they just want to sleep with men and have money, instead of doing those things that require discipline … only some girls are principled and ready to do a dignified job’. The nuns were often frustrated and at times felt discouraged to continue their anti-trafficking work, because they felt that the deported women were hostile, causing trouble, and that they did not care about shelter property or the daily chores. Some of the women quickly took responsibility in the everyday life at the shelter, others explained that they never asked to be there, that they wanted to leave and go back to Europe as soon as possible. Most of the women talked about the long and rough hours of selling sex on the streets of European cities. Yet, the nuns did not talk about such experiences as a job requiring discipline or persistence. In their
explanation, selling sex ‘to sleep with men and have money’ emerges as both an easy, immoral and bodily awful thing to do. The women’s hostility and carelessness often appeared to stem more from their frustration of being deported, than not being able to work hard and be disciplined.

**Welcome-home-parties**

A major challenge for the anti-trafficking NGOs in Nigeria is that due to limited funding they have very little to offer the women in terms of real and long-term livelihood possibilities, which is as frustrating to the nuns as it is to the deported women. What the nuns seek to provide instead is social and spiritual counselling, providing emotional support to the women, who are dealing with the massive distress of deportation. In these processes of counselling lies a strong emphasis on attitude change, which is anchored in moral perspectives on sex work and the greed, laziness and lack of discipline the nuns attribute to the migrant women. Yet, these counselling processes are also fuelled by the fact that the nuns try to prepare the women for the harsh Nigerian reality and have little else to offer besides a positive attitude and hope in God’s protection. In this process the nuns try to circumscribe deportation from a moment of despair in the lives of the women into a moment of celebration because the woman now has an opportunity to change her life.

Initiating the reintegration process, the nuns arrange so-called ‘welcome home parties’ for the newly arrived women. During these events the other residents at the shelter, as well as former residents and other deportees, are invited for food, music and dance. The shelter is decorated with banners saying ‘Welcome Home’ and a pastor or a nun gives a short speech and welcome the women home to Nigeria. ‘Welcome home … We want you to know that, no matter the possibilities in Europe – there is no place like home … your nation is your family – your home’. Such speeches are wrapped up by congratulating the women, who now have the potential for a new life and providing them with a new sense of belonging. The shelter is described as a place for continuous support – a welcoming Nigerian family. During the parties, some women would just watch TV. Others invited would happily participate, dance and enjoy a free meal. The newly arrived women would typically look a bit perplexed and were often so stressed about the entire deportation experience and coming back to Nigeria, often after several years abroad, that the sudden inscription of her deportation into a celebrated homecoming did little to assuage her immediate worries.

The parties were followed up by counselling sessions. These could be of a practical nature, planning where the woman should move after being at the shelter, calling organisations in Europe to ask about when reintegration funds would arrive, trying to trace the woman’s family members, or of a more spiritual nature. For example, in one session I observed, how one of the nuns counselled a distressed woman recently deported from Germany:

God has a plan for you. God brought you home. This is no accident in your life. The God that we serve is a master planner. That you were there [in Europe] may have been a part of his plan. Now that you are back he has something for you. And if Europe was a mistake, the joy of it is that our God rides straight on crooked lines, he can put right all the things. Our country is not as bad as you think. There is hope that you can make it here too.
Some women would engage in prayers with the nuns. Some women prayed to God for forgiveness upon return, as did this woman who returned to Nigeria after six years in Italy:

I can’t travel again and use my body; I can’t do ashawo work [sex work] again. I can’t do it again because it’s a sin for the presence of God. I pray every day. Let God forgive me. I know what I have been doing is not good for God’s eyes.

Most others would not be so remorseful. Temmy here explains:

Sometimes we put God on standby. Because you see, the good thing about the Christian God, compared to the African Gods [whom Temmy described as punishing instantly], is that he forgives you for all your sins. When you come back to God again, he forgives you. I have to put God on standby in my life once in a while. Otherwise I won’t survive.

Several women saw their choice of migration as fulfilling God’s plan for them, providing for their family by travelling abroad. They would not defend sex work itself as God’s preferred plan, maybe, but that was more incidental and still could be excused in the way Temmy excused it. In these ways God, ambitions, sex and mobility are intertwined for women in Nigeria generally, and migrant sex workers especially (Vanderhurst 2013). Most of the women described ambivalence towards this, and often described their relationship to God in pragmatic terms. Although most Sundays they went to church and often claimed that their fate was in God’s hands, a common theme was also the ways in which life sometimes required them to place God on standby in order to live or even survive. Migrating undocumented and selling sex were practices that required them to place God on standby hoping he would forgive them at a later stage.

This at times pragmatic relationship to God did not mean that they were not concerned with the immorality of selling sex and that they did not consider their job in Europe sinful. For instance, one of the women, Mary, described how she, upon return to Benin, had a relationship with a Nigerian man and when she was with him would not dress in a sexually inviting way. She explained how she would decline having sex in the day time or in places other than in the room they were sharing because she was afraid he would think about her as ‘bad material’ (for a wife or girlfriend). Others described how, when they married prior to migrating, they took less initiative to sex than they did with their clients in Europe. The women’s attention to morality and their desire to separate what they did sexually with their husbands and boyfriends, versus their clients in Europe, was shaped both by the nature of the job in Europe, which they said required them to be pro-active, but also by the fact that ‘Europe is not my country’, as one of the women said, which meant that boundaries were different when they were away from family and community. Their migration and being outside their community required them and made it possible for them to be sexually pro-active to attract clients, but that was a part of the job and migration itself. In fact, they were far more concerned with their Nigerian husband’s and boyfriend’s infidelity, than with their own immorality (infidelity is a much debated theme among many Nigerian women and among NGOs working with gender issues and HIV) (Smith 2009). Infidelity was also one of the reasons why some of the migrant women wanted to marry European men (whom they considered more trustful), or not get married at all.
Who brought me home?

Rather than questioning their own morality or seeing deportation and reintegration as an opportunity to adjust their moral attitude and embark on a future in Nigeria, most of the women would upon return try to find answers in their immediate past as to why their migration project to Europe did not go as planned and why they were deported. In my initial meetings with the women, a common practice was that they showed me the documents that they had been given in the countries who returned them, and as a European they hoped I could help them interpret why they were deported and what possibilities they had to re-enter Europe. A few asked me to help reestablish their Facebook accounts, and others asked me to call individuals in Europe. For instance to call a former British boyfriend who had promised to help a woman get back to Europe or to call an Italian woman who had assisted one of the women who no longer picked up the phone when the woman called with a Nigerian country code. The women wanted to settle disputes and reestablish lost or complicated relationships in Europe and suggested I used my Danish cell so the individuals would pick up their phone. In general, the women were far more preoccupied with the social groups, conflicts, plans and life they were removed from in Europe than the hopeful future they now were asked to imagine in Nigeria. In this process of solving social conflicts and understanding and trying to make sense of their experiences, the women also searched for answers at the local ‘witch-doctor’ (a term used by the women), their church and among the explanations given to them by humanitarian organisations.

Several of the women would consult the local shrine asking the witchdoctor if he/she knew who brought them ‘back from the other side’ (deported them). Through a ritual process the witchdoctor would find the answers, which commonly reflected conflicts of jealousy and aggression in their social relations. The primary explanation and the one the women seemed to find most valid, was that the women’s madam deported her. The women explained that just before or right after the debt is repaid and they can work debt-free, that is when they are taken to a detention camp. Now that the women are no longer income generators for the madam, they are considered competition to other women on the streets who still have not repaid their debt. In a similar vein, the deportees described how other Nigerian women, not madams, would turn them into the police because of jealousy and competition. One woman explained what happened to her just a few months before the debt was repaid; ‘One day my madam asked me to leave the money [forget about the remaining debt] and face my family [return to Nigeria] … Then the police took me to the deportation camp’. The women would rarely explain that they were deported by the police or immigration authorities, but often that other Nigerians were instrumental in their deportation. The detention and deportation occurred, in the imagination or explanation of the women, because their madam and other Nigerians had connections within the police. One woman explained that she had received a spell which casted her as a visible ‘illegal’ on her forehead making her visible to the police. In these explanations, deportation emerges as a tool for social control among migrants and not merely a technology of migration control.

While being preoccupied with the occult and the social dynamics of deportation, the women would also explain their deportation as caused by a combination of divine
intervention by God and the politics of migration governance and humanitarianism, as this woman deported from Italy explained:

Before I left Italy, we (IOM, International Organization for Migration and the woman) made an agreement that they would accommodate me and that they would pay house rent and start a business for me. They said, come and start a good life in Nigeria. But when I reached Nigeria it was quite different … If they want to deport you home, they will say, come there’s a lot of jobs here. But there is no job – there is nothing. In my own understanding, the Italian government pays our government a lot of money when they want to bring girls home. Italy pays a lot of money, which our government is enjoying. Then they go to Ghana for vacation. They don’t use the money on us. When we come home there is nothing … Had I known this, I would have stayed in Italy. Now I am thinking, anything God says, let it happen. If Nigeria is where I will make it in life, take me there; if it is Italy, maybe I will come back.

The variety of explanations to deportation invoked by the women cannot be forged into a neat narrative; they are both aligned and in tension with each other, and they depict the complexities of deportation, morality and social reality as well as the historical, political and regional context that produces them.

Thus, deportation understood as a crisis in the women’s lives, vividly illuminates the broader argument that individuals live through religion to find meaning and create order in times of crisis. Hence, rather than merely a tool of migration control, deportation emerges simultaneously as a political problem, a human rights issue and a moral and spiritual problem.

Homecomings of lost sons and daughters

Just as the nuns at the anti-trafficking shelter in Benin were frustrated over limited funding, so was the pastor running the NGO close to the Lagos airport receiving deported men and women. The NGO could not provide beds or any more long-term assistance, and they knew that several of the migrants the NGO assisted would scramble around in Lagos, trying to travel to Europe again. Therefore the pastor offered more moral and spiritual assistance.

An example of these practices is illustrated by a simple wall decoration: two paintings hanging on the wall at the NGO. The first painting depicts a young man embraced by Jesus Christ illustrating the parable of the prodigal son coming back home. This parable describes how a younger son travels to a distant country and wastes all his money in wild living and greed. When a famine strikes, he becomes desperately poor and is forced to take work as a swineherd. When he reaches the point of envying the pigs he is looking after, he finally returns to his father (‘Luke 15:17-20’).

In the second painting the parable is creatively circumscribed. Here we see a deportee, a young man wearing a cap, t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, surrounded by three comforting men in tribal outfits. The three men represent the three largest tribes in Nigeria – the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. The pastor at the NGO describes the two paintings,

The three tribes, as an imitation of Jesus Christ welcoming the sinner back, depicts what we [the NGO] are about. In Nigeria we don’t talk much about how the three tribes can work together – there is conflict. We decided to show how this situation [deportation] could involve all three tribes. The three tribes united and welcoming their own son back home.
The moral tale is, of course, that the deportee is now home where he belongs and is protected by God. Here, we learn how travelling to distant countries is connected to sinning and loss of your senses. When you come to your senses, you return home to your father, to God – and he will welcome you, and so will, powerfully, a tribally united nation – Nigeria. This invocation plays into a larger debate of Nigerian citizenship. The construction of post-independence (1960) Nigerian national identity is dominated by major tensions between the North and the South and between the three largest ethno-national groups (Kraxberger 2005). In this painting, the deportee as a young man – representing the Nigerian youth – is embarrassed, welcomed and comforted but he is also the one uniting the three tribes and thereby uniting a post-independence Nigeria.

Through such depictions, the morality of men’s migration and deportation likewise emerge as a theme. In many communities in Southern Nigeria, young men’s migration is seen as a rite of passage. Those who do not migrate or manage to establish a respectable livelihood are shying away from hard labour and familial obligations. Migration and remitting is a socially acceptable way to escape obligations and control by community elders (Okali, Okpara, and Olawoye 2001). Yet, because of deportation and the fact that some migrants reportedly get an income by small-scale drug-selling in European cities, male migrants are often described ambiguously as both adventurers and providers, but also as criminals who violate penal laws abroad and, thereby, stain the nation’s image. The pastor of the deportee NGO at the airport explains this ambiguity poignantly,

Some of them [the deportees] carried cocaine, some of them committed crime, some of them sold sex – they have gone and spoiled our name, they cannot depict Nigeria a good name. But then again we are all God’s children … these are young able men and women who should have been contributing to the growth of this country. This [trafficking and undocumented migration] is like the second enslavement, the first one carried people away. This time now is a voluntary enslavement. We do it ourselves.

The idea of migrants spoiling a nation’s or a community’s name also exists in other parts of Nigeria. In cases where rural to urban migrants constitute a burden of disgrace to their place of origin, his or her relatives or townsmen escort the person home compulsorily (Okali, Okpara, and Olawoye 2001). Thus, the morality of deportation concerns both men and women migrants and is played out in the context of transnational, as well as internal, migration inscribed in broader debates on tribalism, shame and national as well as community honour. While gender-nation relations have often circled around the ways in which women in particular stain the nation’s image (Yuval-Davis 1997; Jeffrey 2002), male migrants are not immune to these accusations. Men can also humiliate the nation and their community. They share with women migrants the burden of the nation’s image. These ambiguous and interchangeable roles are also reflected in the fact that the parable of the prodigal son is invoked among women migrants as well.

A nun from the anti-trafficking shelter in Benin described her first trip to Italy visiting Nigerian women in detention centres waiting to be deported:

In Italy, I met this one girl. She said “Sister don’t come near me because I’m a fornicator and all fornicators will go to hell.” I understood that the girl felt that she had worked against God, that God had condemned her and that she was going to hell, that there was no hope for her. Then she started crying. Me and the other sisters started crying as well. The girls crying showed that she has conscience. If she were so hardened and conscienceless, she wouldn’t have cried. When the girls reach that stage of despair, that they so have offended God, that God has given up on
them, and they are going to hell, that is where we [the nuns] move in and say to them, “God never gives up on anybody, you are a child of God, God loves you like the prodigal son. God was waiting for his child to come back home”. (italics mine)

The invocation of the powerful image of the prodigal son at the deportee centre in Lagos and in the explanation of the nun visiting the detention centre in Italy illuminate the ways in which faith-based NGOs utilise the language of God, gender and nation. Though both draw upon ‘the prodigal son’ the difference between men and women migrants in these debates are commonly that women migrants are described as ‘immoral’ because of their sexuality and sex work, whereas male migrant’s sexuality abroad is not a theme for condemnation. This is reflected in the discourses on women’s reintegration and during the counselling sessions which often are about having only one man (as opposed to many clients), getting married and having children. Such themes are rarely debated in relation to male migrants where the discourse instead emphasises establishing a sustainable business and livelihood.

Thus, while both men and women as migrants can be illegitimate Nigerian citizens staining the national image, the conversion of women from having ‘wild tendencies’ to legitimate Nigerian citizens through deportation and reintegration is also about controlling women’s sexuality and is as such highly gendered. Returning to marriage and family, rather than promiscuity abroad, the Nigerian migrant women serve as central figures to re-establish the nation’s moral legitimacy. In linking deportation, women’s bodies, nationhood and nationalist discourse as it circles within the Nigerian context, the NGOs in Benin have not merely emerged to assist the returned women involved in sex work, but also to counteract:

The social stigma it has placed on all respectable, decent and hardworking Edo’s and their rich cultural and historical heritage and value … the social crusade against international export of teenage Edo girls into prostitution and sex slavery … is a worthy and noble cause that should be supported and fought with all our might … it is a battle for survival and national rebirth. (Usuanlele 1999, 5)

However, the paradox of this is that even as a ‘dignified’ and morally legitimate citizen, gender inequality in a patriarchal Nigeria leaves the women with few choices other than to marry as a livelihood strategy. Furthermore, through this conversion the migrant women are constructed as something other than what she already is, which is paradoxical, since the migrant women first and foremost consider themselves neither morally illegitimate, nor bad mothers, daughters or sisters, but as women trying to provide for their families, constrained by inequality, poverty and restrictive European migration policies.

**Conclusion**

This article argued that deportation serves the dual functions as a tool for migration governance as well as a tool for moral governance. Through the language, in which female honour and national dishonour are linked, the deportation of sex workers is a poignant site to explore the ways in which deportation emerges as a step towards rebuilding the Nigerian nation. Yet, as the above makes clear, men and women migrants alike are portrayed as staining the nation’s image.
Men and women deportees, however, emerge in this discourse simultaneously as something more than ‘stainers’ of the nation. As Sr. Maria points out in the introductory excerpt, deportees could, if they stay home in Nigeria, contribute to bettering the economy – ‘they could contribute to the nation’s building’. These are themes the pastor also points out when he argues that migrants ‘are young able men and women who should have been contributing to the growth of this country’. Thus, while being inscribed in a language of immorality, deportees simultaneously are described as something more than merely victims, criminals or immoral. They are also described as ‘able’ Nigerian citizens Nigerians who rather than ‘enslaving themselves’ and living deportable lives at the margins of Europe, contributing to nothing else but Nigeria’s bad image and individual remittances to their own family, could and should participate in the much more collective project of making the economy better and building a future Nigeria.

There is the subtle inbuilt political message: If Europe humiliates you, then do not stay there struggling, while you contribute to their economy; come home where you belong and where you are seen as an (potential) able-bodied citizen and contribute to your own nation’s economy. This interpretation of deportation reflects the ambiguities in the religious-nationalistic discourses pointing to a complex image of the deportee, in which they are illegitimate citizens staining the image of the Nigerian nation abroad while simultaneously being ‘able-bodied’ citizens who should contribute to Nigerian nation-building. Nigeria needs its young people, not as migrants abroad, but as nation builders at home. Nigerian faith-based NGOs or deportee receiving institutions are not uncritically nationalistic. Rather, born out of their simultaneous critiques of bad governance and unequal distribution of Nigeria’s wealth, they do not necessarily put their trust in the Nigerian state apparatus, but instead in the Nigerian people (including deportees) to move the country forward.

With this in mind, deportation subtly emerges as a technology of moral governance – a site of nation-building and a site to observe the everyday practice and governance of the post-colonial state.

Notes

1. While Benin City is in everyday language termed Benin, it should not be conflated with Nigeria’s neighbouring country (to the West) the Republic of Benin.
2. Names that would allow the identification of any person(s) described in the article have been removed.
3. Twenty-eight of the women were former sex workers in Europe of which most had been there five to six years before their return to Nigeria.
4. In IOM’s definition, AVRR is the program that returns and manages the reintegration of migrants, such as identified victims of trafficking, who are unable or unwilling to remain in host countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin (IOM 2012).
5. I use the term deportation to refer to a range of practices that go under different terms, such as observed departure, forced removals, juridical deportation and AVRR. Building on Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti (2011, 549) I see the core of deportation as the expulsion of individual non-citizens from the territory of a state by the (threatened or actual) use of force. I also apply the term ‘deportation’ and ‘deportee’ as used by the migrant women and their families who did not separate between those different terms.
6. The fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2012 in four periods in Denmark and Nigeria. The interviews were performed in English and Bini assisted by my Nigerian research assistant.
7. My use of the term indentured sex work migration does not exclude human trafficking, but points to the way in which migrant labour is organized.


9. While acknowledging their individual differences, for the purpose of simplicity I here collapse Catholic, Pentecostal and Protestant into Christianity.

Disclosure statement

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