
Travelogue of a Nigerian Codesria Laureate in Lebanon (January–July 2006, July–November 2008)



Peter F. Adebayo

On December 18th 2004, I discovered the Lebanese Emigration Research Centre (LERC), Notre Dame University, Zouk over the internet while searching for a post-doctoral research fellowship program on Lebanese studies in either Australia or New Zealand. I contacted the Director, Guita Hourani, who was instrumental in my winning the Codesria post-doctoral fellowship award. Elated, I departed for Beirut, Lebanon on February 21, 2006.



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We arrived in Beirut at exactly 2:30 p.m. I was fascinated by the beauty of the airport and, as I was whisked by taxi first to the Research Centre and later to my living quarters, by the architecture of the city.

REDIRECTING MY RESEARCH PROJECT

The next day, Guita began by redirecting my project, counselling me to focus on Lebanese-Nigerian return migrants in the two villages of Miziara and Jwaya and their impact on development activities there. Guita assured me that she would provide all the written materials that I would need to conduct this study. She encouraged me to take a new approach to my research that emphasizes the networking of migrants. Guita followed through on her offer, furnishing me with a trove of inspirational books and articles that laid the foundation for my research. While pouring through this literature, I began to learn French and Arabic, the latter through friendly interactions with children in my neighborhood, family friends, and later a university professor.

SUMMER PLANS AND SKILL ACQUISITION

In order to improve my knowledge of migration studies, Guita decided to send me to Italy for training at the Florence School on Euro-Mediterranean Migration and Development in Florence, Italy. However, the plan fell through when the Italian Embassy denied my application for a visa because I had no resident visa for Lebanon. Undaunted, however, Guita urged me to write at least four articles for possible publication, and helped frame the topics for them.

Guita also helped me to improve my internet research skills, registering me with H-

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Net Africa and H-Migration, which are both interdisciplinary organizations of scholars dedicated to developing the enormous educational potential of the internet. Thus having become connected to the international scholarly community, I was afforded new opportunities, including contributing a paper on forced migration from Lebanon as a result of the July 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah. Similarly, the computer training I received enabled me to develop more effective presentations, such as the one on “Transnational Lebanese Migration, Using Traditional Methodologies,” delivered on April 25, 2006, to mark the third anniversary of the establishment of the Lebanese Emigration Research Centre, under the chairmanship of then-Nigerian Ambassador (late) Abdul Kudir Assayouti, who also provided me with financial support.

FIELDWORK

My preliminary fieldwork research began with a visit to Miziara, one of the migrant-exporting Christian villages located in the northern part of Lebanon. With particular reference to Nigeria, Miziara is noted for exporting Lebanese migrants to Lagos, Calabar, Kano, Ibadan, etc. Upon arriving in Miziara — carrying 50 questionnaires and accompanied by Ms. Marie Jose Tayah, my research assistant — we headed straight for the office of the municipal council chairman, Mr. Joseph Salim Chidac. I was really astonished by the magnificent buildings lining Nigeria Avenue, including the pyramid-shaped house and the plane house, which is similar to one that exists in Abuja.

Mr. Chidac received us warmly. Thereafter, we met a Catholic Maronite priest, himself a returnee from Nigeria, whose cooperation in our research we solicited.

It was in the midst of the process of adjusting my questionnaire and analyzing the data that, on July 12, war broke out between Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Lebanon’s Hizbullah. The war temporarily terminated the fieldwork research and studies at LERC. At the height of the war, I was forced to travel to Damascus and then back to Lagos.

Yet, my brief time in Lebanon had heightened my enthusiasm, sharpened my skills, and set me on a path to additional opportunities in the field. Shortly after returning to Nigeria, I received invitations to participate in conferences in Boston and at Aarhus University in Denmark.

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A SECOND RESEARCH TRIP TO LEBANON

With Lebanon having recovered from the devastating war, I returned for a second research trip in July 2008. As part of the Nigeria Trade Delegation that was to take part in the Nigeria Week in Lebanon program, I took up residence at the beautiful seaside Radisson SAS Martinez Hotel.

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Nigeria Week in Lebanon aimed to create awareness of Nigeria among various segments of the Lebanese population, including students, sportsmen, business executives, and public servants. The program, which featured the first ever visit of the Nigerian Trade Delegation to Lebanon, was organized by the dynamic and charismatic Nigerian Ambassador to Lebanon, His Excellency Hammed Opeloyeru, and the Lebanese Nigerian Friendship Association (LENFRA). The Directorate of Emigrants and the LERC helped organize the event.

The program greatly enriched my research. Ambassador Opeloyeru made me part of the Nigerian delegation so that I could interact with the various Lebanese entrepreneurs and discuss my Codesria/LERC research on “Return Migration, Family Networking and Village Development: The Case of Lebanese-Nigerians.”

The delegation visited laboratories owned by the South Business Innovation Center (SBIC), Saleh Establishments, and the biblical site of Cana Galilee Grotto, to name but a few places. The nearness of the Grotto to a mosque and the harmonious relationship between the Muslims and the Christians in the village baffled some members of the Nigerian delegation.

The delegation later met with members of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists — a meeting that culminated in the signing of a cooperation agreement between the latter and the Manufacturers’ Association of Nigeria. Following the delegation’s departure, I resumed my field research in earnest in Miziara and Jwaya.

LEBANESE LESSONS

My experience as a Codesria laureate in Lebanon was an incalculably rewarding intellectual and personal enterprise — for me, a miracle. The guidance and support provided by Guita Hourani and the LERC were invaluable.

The LERC is an institution from which many other promising Nigerian scholars and researchers on emigration studies could benefit. My involvement with LERC, coupled with the training I received from the program, encouraged the current Nigerian Ambassador to Lebanon, H.E. Assayouti to explore how to establish an academic exchange program with Lebanon.

The Nigerian federal government through the National Universities Commission (NUC) would do well to support young scholars’ efforts to gain such experience as I was afforded. The intellectual development of our lecturers, especially in their fields of specialization, through academic exchange programs with overseas institutions is both necessary and possible.