**The ‘Lion’ Returns Home: Reintegration Challenges and Opportunities**

By

Peter U. C. Dieke

Professor of Tourism

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Invited Paper Presentation at the Annual Convention of the University of Nigeria Alumni Association United Kingdom (UNAA-UK), themed *Roaring in Diaspora and Looking Back Home*, held at the International Centre for Life, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 19-22 October, 2017.

**The ‘Lion’ Returns Home: Reintegration Challenges and Opportunities**

1. **Introduction**

This paper explores the argument ‘that unless return is followed by reintegration, large numbers of returnees . . . think about leaving again’ (Jerry Pennington & Balaram, 2013: 2). The argument is rooted in my academic study and career, living and working experience overseas, most notably in the UK, the USA and the UAE (United Arab Emirates), extending for over 31 years, after which time I returned home for good in 2013. The argument emerges therefore from participant observation, supplemented by an analysis of the literature. It might be said at the outset that this argument may be construed as an outburst of empirical whimsy rather than an objective analysis supported by a review of the literature. In defence of the participative observation approach, I would conversely argue that whilst I have no direct writing on this subject, some published work (Storti, 2003) indirectly supports the contention. Although these reflections derive from extensive personal experience in the developed world over three decades, earlier stated, the main considerations are related to the developing world, e.g., Nigeria.

For many of the returnees, part of the motivation to return home is the desire to make a difference and to play a key role in their country’s development. Catching up with friends, rediscovering familiar places and enjoying things such as food or weather can be a true joy. However, this feeling of joy can be dampened by challenges which often surface after this initial period of uninterrupted bliss, as returnees confront harsh realities – corruption, redtape and others. Many find that the environment they were so familiar with has changed while they have been away. Many also find themselves struggling to find a balance between their ‘righteous’ value system nurtured in relatively well-structured contexts of the ‘north’ and the lopsidedness they find back in the ‘south’. People who conform to the status quo are richly rewarded than those who choose to instigate reforms. Regrettably, this vicious circle either ‘kills’ talent, or turns it away. Dispora workers are often compelled to cope with these failed institutions by conforming to the status quo rather than by instigating institutional reforms. Readapting to their home country after being away for a year or more is a huge challenge.

Thus, the purpose of the paper is three-fold: to stimulate discussion on, and awareness of, some of the issues which should concern us in our analysis of return migration; to consider how the process of managing return migration can be challenging; and to suggest the actions required to ensure that return and integration policy is effective, efficient and, most importantly, sustainable.

The paper begins by providing broad overview of the returning home phenomenon – the psychological, emotional and cultural aspects, and poses a question: Why should ‘returning home’ cause one a nostalgia? The focus will be on inevitable home change and adaptation, and the inherent challenges and effects arising from the process. The second part of the paper will address the question of what can be done about the challenges discussed above? The third part of the paper offers some coping management strategies to mitigate them, from getting ‘closure’ on returnee overseas experience.

1. **Overview**

As used here, ‘***lion***’ describes any male (‘***lioness***’ female) graduate of the University of Nigeria who, through the acquisition of useful learning and demonstrable character, upholds proudly the institution’s motto – ‘to restore the dignity of man’. Guided by this tenet, sooner or later, this lion goes abroad seeking to improve opportunity and quality of his life, through either further academic study or work experience or both. On successful achievement of the objectives, the highly skilled diaspora lion decides to return home, because of his passion to give something back to the society that nurtured him. Undoubtedly, diaspora life can be very exciting. The experiences and challenges of life abroad develop one as a person, teach new skills and enhance capabilities, create new meanings in life, and generally translate into valuable memories, which are worth remembering for many years ahead. It is sufficient to stress that the return is *voluntary*, not *forced*. The conventional wisdom is that home is where the heart is. The main concern is that while being temporarily abroad, the lives of one’s peers, relatives and friends back home move on too: families get established and careers progress. Too often the expression ‘out of sight, ‘out of mind’ holds true for these diaspora ‘lions’. But what is ‘home’?

Our concept of ‘***home***’ is built on the ideas of familiarity, routine, communication and identity. It is more than the physical place in which we live. Rather it is associated with all of the people, actions, feelings, emotions and cues that make us feel ‘at home’: ‘*The essence of home can be described in three key elements: familiar places, familiar people and routines, and predictable patterns of interaction*’. So why should ‘returning home’ result in apprehension or culture shock?

Storti (2003) has sought to advance our knowledge in this area by noting that culture shock follows a ***U-Curve pattern***. For instance, upon arrival in a foreign country, people tend to experience a ‘honeymoon’ (or euphoria) period where the new culture is exciting, fresh and fun. Soon after however, as differences surface and mount, sojourners fall into the pit of culture shock. Gradually, as one adapts to the new culture and accepts differences, one regains one’s emotional and psychological stability.

For some, this experience is over in a matter of weeks; for others it may take months. Nonetheless, there is broad agreement that if you have spent a significant amount of time in a foreign country, chances are that you have experienced some of the stresses common to culture shock.

As with cross-cultural adaptation stress, change of routine and a lack of familiarity contribute significantly to reverse culture shock. As some of you have settled in the UK (sometime staying for as many as two, three or 10 or more years), you have spent less time in your home (i.e. Nigeria) culture. For me, upon return, not only is home different from what I am now used to, but it is certainly different from what it was when I left, and different from what I expect it to be like.

Again, Storti (2003) gives us nine key variables affecting re-entry stress (Table 1)

**Table 1: Some Variables Affecting Re-Entry**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Voluntary versus involuntary re-entry | Involuntary is worse. |
| 2 | Expected versus unexpected re-entry | Unexpected is harder. |
| 3 | Age | Re-entry may be easier for older people who have been through more life transitions. |
| 4 | Previous re-entry experience | The first time is worse. |
| 5 | Length of the overseas stay | The longer the sojourn, the greater the chance for adaptation; hence the harder it may be to leave and come home. |
| 6 | Degree of interaction with the overseas culture | The more involved you become in the local culture the harder it may be to leave it behind. |
| 7 | The re-entry environment | The more familiar and supportive the easier the re-entry. |
| 8 | Amount of interaction with the home culture during the overseas sojourn | The more familiar the returnee is with changes in the home culture the easier the re-entry. |
| 9 | Degree of difference between the overseas and the home culture | The greater the difference, the harder the re-entry. |

There are three ways in which Table 1 above has important lessons in the context of your consideration to return home: first, ***home has changed***; second, ***you have changed***; and third, ***you have adapted to another culture and now you must re-adapt***. The paper now goes to discuss each, briefly, in turn.

First, ***home has changed***

Often you expect your home to be just the same as it was when you left. Far from it – as events and new developments, however, have changed the fabric of your old community, which may be shocking and disorientating upon your return.  What is more surprising is how much your hometown has grown (or shrunk), crowded or empty – from your elementary school to your alma mater. Our Margaret Ekpo Refectory has changed focus, from serving meals to students (lions & lionesses) to now hosting convocation ceremonies. There may be new members of your extended family – babies born to siblings – whom you have never met. Your relationships with people may have changed too, and your friends’ lives may have evolved. Friends may have changed their social group.  Relationships that were once strong may no longer be the same. Wherever you come home to, expect to see and feel changes.

Second, ***you have changed***

From our review of culture shock, we know that ‘home’ is much more than just the ‘house’ you live in. Home involves feelings, relationships, routines, and predictable patterns of interaction.  Home is also significantly related to a person's identity - home is where you are most yourself.  As you evolve as an individual abroad and adopt the culture practices of your current abode (UK), your perception of home changes.  Living in the UK can be a life-changing experience and may affect your attitudes, feelings and relationships with the home you left some years ago.

Third, ***you have adapted to another culture and now you must re-adapt***.

In a way, any place that you adapt to becomes ‘home’. Living in the UK adds significance to the phrase, as stated, ‘Home Is Where the Heart Is’. As you adjusted to this country, you brought home with you. As Nigerians, we share English as a common language for education, office or business, although we have our indigenous languages, principally Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, among others, observe Christian and Moslem holidays, and know our National Anthem. These things most likely do not change. As you assimilated into a new culture, you might have incorporated new traditions -- those learned here in the UK -- into your daily life. You became familiar with the routines and customs of your new culture, you immersed yourself in this as culture, and in doing so, ‘back home’ became more distant

As you return home, you will have to re-learn routines and patterns that you have forgotten. The more comfortable you were abroad in your foreign home, the harder the transition back.  Your family might have expectations -- frequent visits to your parents or in-laws or help in caring for a family member or indeed giving endless financial support to wider family members.  Your parents might expect you to join in various church organizations and to donate generously to the churches. Your driving habits would have to change, to avoid being described as a ‘Jew Man’ –one who does not know the ways things are done here. The statement ‘if you are in Rome, do like the Romans’ makes sense. The ‘I don’t care attitude’ stares the returnee on the face. The indiscipline that characterizes the general behaviour of the citizens needs to be noted. Even the law-enforcement agencies are themselves the most offenders. Legalising illegality seems the order of the day. You may need to spend more time on ‘school runs (picking up kids at school or playdates), or running errands.  Some of these are not necessarily bad things, although others are; you simply have to adjust to a new routine.

The above are only but a *tip of the proverbial iceberg*, of change and adaptation issues facing sojourners on re-entry. Challenges are really of four types: first, general challenges; second, challenges of Nigerian ostentatious lifestyle; third, myths & misconceptions about Nigeria; and fourth, new attitudes & values of sojourners.

1. *General challenges*

* People at home are not as interested in hearing about your foreign experience as you are in telling them about it.
* You are not as interested in hearing about what has happened at home as they are telling you about it.
* You miss being abroad.
* You miss the celebrity status of being a ‘Nigerian’ overseas – at home, you do not stand out as much.
* You resent being labelled ‘Johnny-just-come’, ‘you are whiter than white’; and if you have a PhD, they will make a mockery of it by the expression ‘Pull him Down’.
* You miss the ‘royal’ treatment, lifestyle and social status you have enjoyed abroad.

1. *Challenges of Western Culture*

Many diaspora lions observe a few characteristics of key Western culture.

* Materialism/Abundance/Waste – There is a notion that the Western world has expendable income. While this statement might not be true for all of the Western democracies, the majority tend to spend money on items that appear ‘material’ to other cultures, e.g., Nigeria – a classic example of the enigma of extremes of wealth and poverty. Coming into the Nigerian poor environment from a culture that is affluent may be a shock.
* High-speed pace of life – Western economies (for the most part) are fast-paced places. People seem to always be in a hurry. While this ‘fast-paced existence’ may be true in many cities around the world, if you come home from a high-speed pace, non-stop activities culture to a ‘laid-back’ culture, it takes some time to get used to.
* Values/Attitudes – The values and attitudes of some of your family and frieds may surprise you, especially if you have adopted new ways of thinking about the world from your experience living abroad.

1. *Myths & Misconceptions about Nigeria*

Many people have misconceptions concerning life in Nigeria. Some of these myths include:

* Everything does not work better back home.
* People are inefficient.
* Everything is unclean.
* Things are basically the same as when I left.
* Personal relationships can be resumed easily.
* I can cope easily in my own culture

1. *New Attitudes & Values of Returnees*

Nigerians often develop new attitudes, values and perceptions as a result of their travels. These can often cause stress on re-entry.

* I see Nigeria through a sharper lens, both its strengths and weaknesses. I no longer take this country for granted and I really resent unbalanced criticism by Nigerians who have not experienced the rest of the world.
* I see the validity of at least one other culture – the Western world. That makes me realize that the Nigerian way is not always ‘bad’ or ‘worse’. I am impatient with people who are uncritical in their criticisms of Nigeria all because Nigerians never blindly accept everything causing them to never question anything.
* I place more value on relationships than other Nigerians seem to. People in the Western world are too busy for one another. Nigerians care for one another; indeed, we are our brothers’ keepers!
* Everyone in in the Western world is always so stressed and frantic. They never relax. I feel like they cannot relate to others.

Based on the preceding analysis, the key question is: How do all of the stresses manifest themselves in the returnee? Aside from the obvious frustrations, returnees may experience a number of mental/emotional side-effects, such as criticality, marginality, over-exertion/exhaustion and resistance/withdrawal/self-doubt/depression. In short, the returnee starts dividing within himself – asking a pertinent question: how strategic is this return? Let me explain.

1. ***Criticality*** involves the lion making a lot of critical judgements about home. This is because his renewed unfamiliarity with the home culture and similarly the routines can lead to unpleasant and frustrating experiences. In addition, this frustration can be displaced, often unto others. It becomes easy to be impatient with others and hard to be objective – even when the problems are actually insignificant. The ‘lion’ may remember all of the wonderful things about his diaspora years, and compares them against the least pleasant aspects of being home.
2. On ***marginality***, his overseas experience has significantly impacted his identity. As he immersed himself in a new culture, he broadened his perspective and opened his mind to new ideas. Once he returns home, he realizes that tensions exit between his new identity and mainstream society. He no longer feels like he fits in.
3. In relation to ***over-exertion/exhaustion***, because many of the routines, patterns and customs of our culture are new to the returnee ‘lion’, he must consciously pay attention to performing basic functions. Add to that the stress of the logistical tasks of his return, and he may begin to feel overwhelmed by this experience. Exhaustion is a commonly reported effect of the reintegration process.
4. In terms of ***resistance/withdrawal/self-doubt/depression***, it needs to be stated that as he becomes discontented with his home culture, a common reaction is to resist adapting to it. Many returnees withdraw or escape, dwelling on fantastical thoughts of western/foreign culture and avoiding contact with people from home culture. With all of the frustrations and disillusionment of ‘home’, it can be easy to question and doubt himself.

Some authors (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 2010) have somewhat recently described the above narrative of reverse culture shock as W-curve. In essence, they argue that upon arrival in the ‘home’ culture, the returnee experiences a ‘honeymoon’ period where all that is grand about home seems to shine through. Visits with old friends and family are refreshing, and you may notice some exciting changes. The honeymoon period does not last long, though, as cultural differences and the stresses of re-entry continue to mount. For people not expecting re-entry stress, the challenges can be even more severe, plunging returnees into the pit of reverse culture shock. As returnees cope with the cultural differences of their home culture and manage the logistical tasks, they climb up the slope of re-adaptation and again regain their psychological stability. As with initial culture shock, the duration of this phenomenon varies from person to person, but the phenomenon itself is prevalent among returning members of the diaspora community.

1. **Managing Return Opportunities**

In considering these ‘areas of concern’, the logical question will be: What can be done about them? Thus, this section provides returnees with specific information and resources to help them prepare for and deal with many of the psychological and cultural challenges of coming home, in the context of developing stress management skills. While this information will not eliminate the stress of re-entry, using it can help reduce or lessen the severity and duration of re-entry stress.

FIRST, on a general level, the emphasis will be on first, ***pre-departure preparation*** and second, ***getting closure***. Pre-departure begins long before ever you land in Nigeria. This means an awareness campaign -- educating yourself and expecting disruption in your routines and level of comfort in a new place. It further means to expect that it will happen to you. An essential part of entering your new culture is getting closure on your diaspora experience. If you do not feel like you have said ‘goodbye’ to the foreign culture, then you might have a harder time accepting your new home. It is advisable that you make sure you have no regrets when you return home. A few examples of what you can do might be usefully stated as follows: i

* Visit all the places and sites on your list of ‘must see’ before departing (plan these trips in advance, if possible, to assure you have time);
* Take pictures and videos;
* Say goodbye to friends;
* Buy host-country souvenirs for keeps;
* Host a ‘going away’ party to see everyone before you leave; and
* Remember, it is better to plan something small and actually accomplish it than to think about something grand and never get around to it.

This is also a good time to create or update your contacts/friends list (save those phone and email contacts!). You might want to make sure your friends also have your new contact information.  For people you want to maintain more frequent contact with, invite them to join you on Facebook or LinkedIn.  It might also be a good idea to make a list of closure-related activities, with deadlines, to finish before you and your family return home.

SECOND, there is a need to make ***mental & psychological preparation***. You know that you are going home, and you know you are going to experience reintegration to some degree, but it may be hard to visualize how these stresses will occur. Before you return, it is a good idea to sit down and think through some of the potential problems you may face -- and how you should deal with them.

You know that you're going home, and you know you're going to experience reverse culture shock to some degree, but it may be hard to visualize how these stresses will occur. Before you return, it is a good idea to sit down and think through some of the potential problems you may face -- and how you should deal with them. A few general lead questions might suffice.

* What are my expectations of home and what changes may have occurred?

This question prompts you to prepare for differences that may be present upon your return as well as realistically manage your expectations about what life might be like.

* What new things might I have to get used to?

The considers general popular culture shifts of which you may have been unaware.

* What coping strategies will I use to deal with challenges of stress? (discussed more below)
* What activities and groups can I get involved with at home?

Here it is realized that many organisations can be grounding and familiar, and may provide continuity in the face of change, especially if you have been involved with similar organisations in the past. Alternatively, new activities may provide fun and exciting outlets to help you cope with the stress of transition, and making a change is the perfect time to jump in and try something new.

FINALLY, a number of ***coping strategies*** can be offered. After you have been home a short while, the effects of culture shock will start to become more apparent. Some of the challenges you simply have to endure. There are, however, several coping strategies that you can use to help minimize the stress and ease into reverse culture shock. It is important to think of these coping strategies as coping strategies and not as escape routes. After all, you will have to adjust to the home culture sooner or later. These methods help reduce the stress of the transition and not to hide from your need to adjust. These include (a) communication outlets, (b) stress management, and (c) modifying and transferring cues.

1. Communicate with others who have been overseas and experienced reverse culture shock. They will likely appreciate your experiences and provide a sounding board for your frustrations. They can also lend support and advice on coping with the challenges. Keep in contact with the friends you have made while living overseas. As you get used to the new communication patterns of ‘home’, you can maintain communication with your friends overseas. They may enjoy hearing about your new life and experiences, and this can compensate for any ‘lack’ of communication you might be experiencing at home.
2. Known stress reducers are useful in the stressful situation of re-entry as well as many other stressful events. Maintaining your health through diet and exercise will help you to have the energy to accomplish all of the tasks of re-entry. Regular planning and organization will also help you to establish familiar routines, adding stability and predictability to your life, thus reducing stress. When you set goals and accomplish them, you will feel better about yourself and your situation.

Also pay conscious attention to your stress level. Take time to relax and retreat from especially stressful circumstances. Do not overwork. It is important to remember that you are experiencing reverse culture shock: it will pass as you adjust.

© Cues are any of the little things that we are familiar and comfortable with in a culture. One way of adding psychological stability to our re-entry experience is to transfer cues from the foreign culture into your new home culture, or to modify existing cues to represent your favourite cues of the host culture. These cues include things that you became familiar with and that will remind you of your foreign home. For instance, consider cataloging some of your favorite recipes, and/or purchasing CDs of your favourite music (and adding your favourite tunes to your portable device). Other cues might include art or literature of the host country, and photographs or videos of people and places. Perhaps an item of the local traditional dress is something that you would like to wear when you return to Nigeria. It is helpful to think of ideas of what cues you can transfer or modify from the culture you are now leaving to keep with you in your ‘home’.

Transferring and modifying cues is a strategy you can use to help you ‘ease in’ to your new home culture. As you get used to the new cues, the transferred or modified cues can fill in the void of familiarity and routine created by your transition. Remember, however, that you will have to adapt to Nigeria, so do not use these transferred cues as an escape from adapting.

**Conclusion**

In this short presentation it has not been possible to explore in depth many of the issues raised. However, it is suggested that our conventional approaches to reintegration require change. Some of these changes have been identified here and also the role that coping strategies may have in this new approach. As diaspora ‘lions’ and ‘lionesses’ are anxious to return home there will be many challenges to how best to manage this growth to ensure its acceptability to all concerned, creating a mutuality of satisfaction without which sustainability will be jeopardized.

**References**

Gullahorn, Jonathan T. & Jeanne E. Gullahorn (2010), An Extension of the U-Curve Hypothesis, *Journal of Social Issues*, 19(3): 1-15.

Pennington, Jenny & Brhmie Balaram (2013), *Homecoming: Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants from Nigeria*. London: Institute for Policy Research.

Storti, Craig (2003), *The Art of Coming Home*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.