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The Africans Forced into Military



Editor's Note

In early 2026, evidence began surfacing that thousands of young Africans were being trafficked into Russia's war in Ukraine under false pretences. Mainly recruited through social media, WhatsApp groups, and bogus employment agencies, the young Africans, mostly students and job seekers, were promised jobs as security guards, drivers, electricians, and even sports trainers. However, upon arrival, their passports were confiscated, their contracts were written in Russian, and they were forced into front-line combat. Kenya's Majority Leader alleged that they were "basically just given a gun to go and die."

In that direction, Ukrainian intelligence has identified nearly 3,000 African citizens who have signed military contracts, while leaked Russian databases and parliamentary testimony suggest the true figure may be far higher. Forced recruits have come from at least 36 countries, with Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Uganda, and South Africa among the most affected. The human cost has been severe: one leaked database shows a 22% confirmed fatality rate among recruited Africans, while other estimates suggest 42% of foreign fighters in the Russian army die within four months.

The phenomenon sits at the intersection of several forces. Russia, having suffered over a million casualties since 2022, needs roughly 30,000 recruits each month to sustain its offensive while avoiding political-



ly risky domestic mobilisation of the Russian population. African governments, meanwhile, are grappling with youth unemployment that in some countries exceeds 30% — conditions that make promises of \$2,000 monthly salaries and signing bonuses irresistible. Some capitals have responded forcefully. Kenya has opened criminal cases against recruitment syndicates, Ghana's foreign minister has flown to Kyiv to negotiate prisoner releases, and Nigeria has expressed "grave concern" over the trend. Russia's embassies in Nairobi and Abuja deny any state involvement, attributing the flows to criminal networks.

This issue examines the mechanics of Russia's deceptive recruitment pipeline, the African governments' responses, and what the crisis reveals about the continent's vulnerability to labour exploitation in an age of remote warfare.

Migration Monitor

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, thousands of young Africans have been drawn into the conflict through deceptive recruitment networks. Promised civilian jobs in security, construction, or logistics, many arrived in Russia only to find their passports confiscated and military contracts placed before them to sign. Ukrainian authorities have identified thousands of African citizens from more than 36 countries who signed such contracts. Below is a chronicle of how the phenomenon has unfolded in several of the most affected countries.

KENYA

Kenya's National Intelligence Service reported that more than 1,000 Kenyans were recruited, with many travelling on tourist visas via Istanbul or Abu Dhabi. Parliamentary Majority Leader Kimani Ichung'wah revealed how criminal syndicates posed as government-endorsed recruiters, flying job seekers overseas for placement before covertly redirecting them to Russia's war zone. Kenyan security services raided recruitment offices and rescued 22 individuals bound for Russia. Nairobi has opened criminal cases against the recruitment syndicates.

GHANA

Ghanaian authorities estimate that about 272 nationals were lured into Russian service. By August 2026, the death toll stood at 62, one of the highest recorded in the leaked Russian database, with 15 still missing. On August 17, 2026, Ghanaian Foreign Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa raised the issue directly when he



met his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in Moscow and secured a pledge to work towards ending the illegal recruitment of Ghanaians. Earlier, in February 2026, Ablakwa travelled to Kyiv to negotiate the release of two Ghanaian prisoners of war.

CAMEROON

In Central Africa, Cameroon has recorded one of the highest numbers of both recruits and fatalities. Reports place hundreds of Cameroonians among those who signed contracts, with more than 94 confirmed dead, the highest national death toll in several databases. The government has restricted certain foreign travel for lower-ranking soldiers following reports of desertions linked to the war. The scale of recruitment from Cameroon underscores how deeply the deceptive scheme has become entrenched across West and Central Africa.

EGYPT

An estimated 300 Egyptians were recruited, often through the Telegram channel "Friends of Russia" (or Sadiq Rossia), reportedly run by Polina Alexandrovna Azarnykh. Recruits were lured by promises of financial gain and Russian citizenship. Azarnykh allegedly operates in the Bryansk region, which borders northern Ukraine. Dozens of Egyptians have been confirmed killed. Recruits later reported receiving none of what was promised, but instead being deployed to the front lines in Ukraine's killing fields. Cairo has imposed security-clearance requirements for men aged 18–35 travelling to Russia and warned that participation in foreign conflicts can carry severe penalties upon return.

NIGERIA

Among the affected African countries, Nigeria has one of the lowest numbers of identified recruits, with at least two dozen confirmed dead or missing. The Nigerian Foreign Ministry expressed "grave concern" in February 2026 over what it termed a "rising and alarming trend" of Nigerian citizens being illegally recruited into foreign conflicts, without naming Russia directly. In the statement, the ministry's spokesperson said the government was concerned about the safety of citizens recruited through deceptive means. At least four Nigerians have been confirmed killed in Ukrainian attacks while fighting for Russian forces.

UGANDA

A 26-year-old Ugandan medical technician was recruited through a Russian tourist with whom he fell in love, who promised him hospital work and lent him money for the trip. Within four days of being deployed to the front line, he was wounded by a drone and surrendered to Ukrainian forces. Families and local media have reported cases of young men who left for promised employment only to end up on the front line. Kampala has engaged in consular efforts to locate and assist affected citizens. Like many others, the young medical technician never received the salary he was promised and has not heard from his government.

SOUTH AFRICA

In December 2025, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former South African president Jacob Zuma, resigned her seat in Parliament after she was alleged to have misled recruits into believing they would be trained as bodyguards for her father's MK Party. Eleven men returned in February 2026 after President Cyril Ramaphosa telephoned Vladimir Putin and negotiated their repatriation. The Hawks, a branch of the South African Police Service, interrogated them upon arrival. Authorities opened investigations under laws governing foreign military assistance.

From our Writers

Living Here, Earning There: The Rise of Nigeria's Digital Migrants

Victor Ejechi

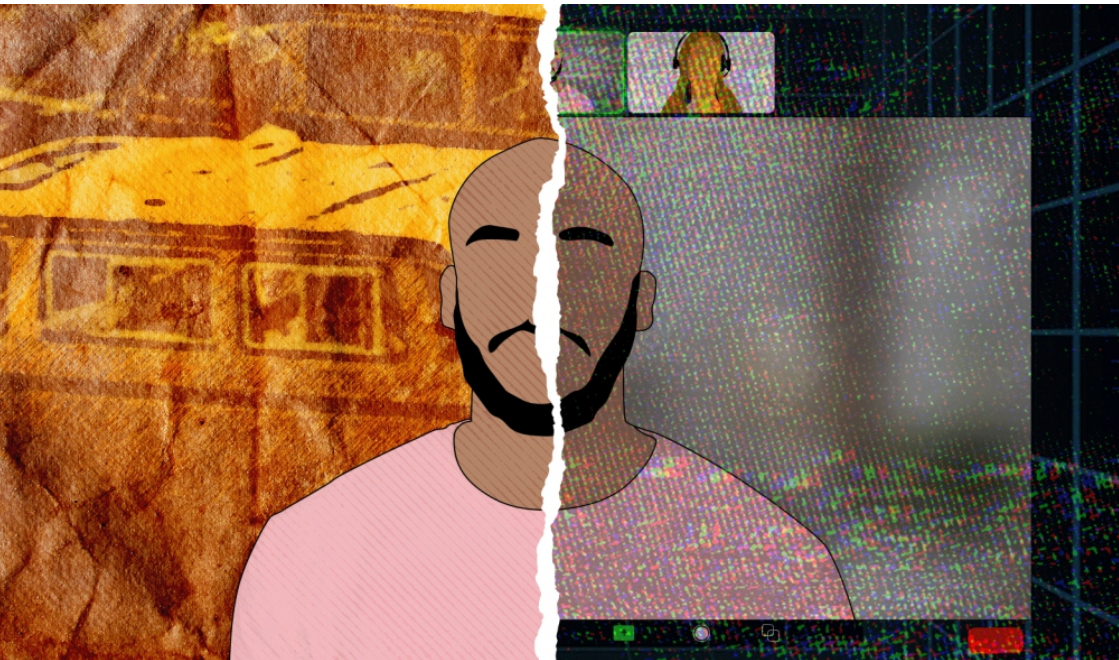
In an era where digital connectivity transcends physical borders, Nigeria is witnessing a profound transformation in its workforce dynamics. The rise of a new category of professionals—termed “digital migrants”—is redefining participation in the global economy.

This trend emerges against the backdrop of the “Japa” movement, a colloquial term derived from the Yoruba word meaning “to flee,” which has come to symbolise the mass exodus of skilled Nigerians seeking better opportunities abroad.

From healthcare workers to engineers and tech professionals, the Japa phenomenon has highlighted the challenges of brain drain, as talented individuals leave the country in search of higher wages, improved working conditions, and a better quality of life.

However, while physical migration continues to shape Nigeria's labour landscape, a parallel shift is taking place. Digital migrants—professionals who work remotely for international clients and companies while remaining in Nigeria—are challenging the traditional narrative of talent loss.

Enabled by rapid technological advancements, the expansion of remote job platforms, and the evolution of financial systems, these individuals are



accessing global opportunities without the logistical and emotional burdens of relocation. This trend is not only reshaping individual career paths but also positioning Nigeria as a hub of globally competitive talent.

The rise of digital migrants represents more than just a personal financial strategy; it signals a broader economic transition with far-reaching implications for employment patterns, national development, and socioeconomic equality.

As Nigeria grapples with the challenges of brain drain, the digital economy offers a unique opportunity to retain talent, boost foreign exchange earnings, and foster local innovation.

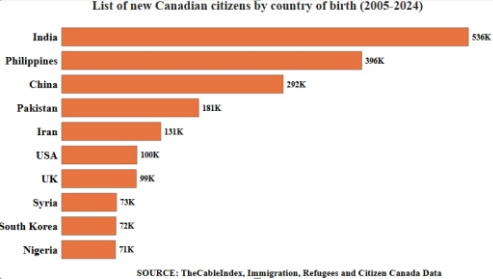
This shift from “Japa” to “Japa-less” success—where Nigerians thrive globally without leaving home—marks a pivotal moment in the country’s journey toward economic resilience and global relevance.

From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation

For decades, Nigeria, like many developing nations, has struggled with the loss of skilled professionals—a phenomenon widely recognised as “brain drain.”

The migration of doctors, engineers, software developers, and other highly trained individuals and experts to developed countries in search of better job opportunities, higher salaries, and improved working conditions has left critical gaps in key sectors of the economy.

This has weakened essential services like healthcare and education, stunted technological advancement, and limited knowledge transfer and mentorship for young professionals.



However, the emergence of remote work and the digital economy is reshaping this narrative, leading to what experts now call “brain circulation.” Unlike traditional migration patterns where talent is permanently lost, brain circulation enables professionals to participate in global markets without physically relocating.

Advances in technology, high-speed internet, and the growing demand for specialised skills in fields like technology, finance, and creative industries have allowed Nigerian professionals to secure employment with international firms while remaining in the country.

This shift is proving to be a game-changer, as it provides individuals with access to global wages, career advancement, and exposure to international best practices—all while keeping them connected to Nigeria’s economy.

The Digital Economy and Job Opportunities

The digital economy has opened new pathways for Nigerians to earn globally competitive salaries while residing in their home country.

The demand for skilled professionals is particularly evident in fields such as software engineering, data science, creative design, digital marketing, and customer support. Nigerian tech talent is increasingly sought after by global firms, while freelancers leverage platforms like Fiverr, Upwork, and Toptal to secure contracts in creative and tech industries.

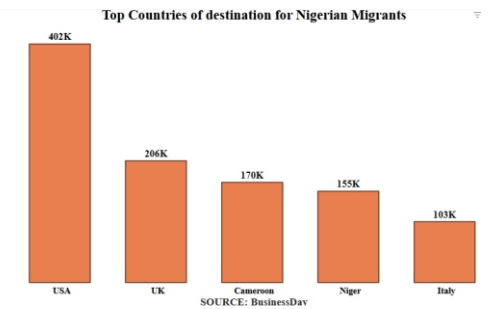
At the same time, companies looking for cost-effective yet high-quality services outsource customer support and virtual assistance roles to Nigerian professionals.

The expansion of broadband services and fintech innovations has further facilitated this transition. Infrastructure projects like Fibre Forward are extending fibre optic networks to improve internet connectivity across both urban and rural areas.

Meanwhile, fintech solutions such as Payoneer, Wise, and local digital banking services have made it easier for digital migrants to receive foreign payments seamlessly, ensuring they can manage their earnings efficiently without the bottlenecks of traditional banking systems.

Economic Impact: Forex Inflows and Local Investments

The rise of Nigeria’s digital migrants has far-reaching economic implications. By earning in stable foreign currencies such as the US dollar, remote workers help boost Nigeria’s forex reserves, which can contribute to stabilising the naira and reducing the country’s reliance on volatile export revenue.



Individuals earning in foreign currency often have greater purchasing power within the local economy, increasing demand for goods and services and driving business growth. Many digital migrants also reinvest their earnings into Nigerian startups, real estate, and businesses, fostering domestic economic development and job creation.

Beyond financial contributions, this trend is facilitating skill and knowledge transfer. Exposure to global best practices enables Nigerian professionals to improve workforce competency and introduce new levels of innovation in the local job market.

This exchange of expertise strengthens Nigeria's human capital and improves its positioning in the global digital economy. Additionally, the success of digital migrants is inspiring a new generation of young Nigerians to acquire digital skills, further expanding the country's participation in the global gig economy.

Challenges and Policy Considerations

Despite the vast opportunities presented by digital migration, several obstacles hinder its full potential. Infrastructure challenges, particularly unstable electricity and unreliable internet access, continue to limit professionals in certain regions from fully engaging in remote work.

Without consistent connectivity, even the most skilled individuals struggle to compete in the global digital economy.

Regulatory uncertainty also poses a significant challenge. The Nigerian government has yet to establish clear tax policies and financial regulations tailored to remote workers earning from international clients.

Existing tax structures are ill-equipped to accommodate this new workforce, creating confusion and potential risks of unfair taxation. Without well-defined policies, digital professionals may avoid formal banking channels, reducing financial transparency and limiting the broader economic impact of their earnings. Moreover, digital migration is not benefiting all Nigerians equally. Those with access to quality education, advanced digital

tools, and reliable internet enjoy a significant advantage, deepening economic disparities.

Many rural and low-income communities remain excluded due to limited digital literacy and inadequate resources, making it difficult for them to compete in an increasingly digital job market.

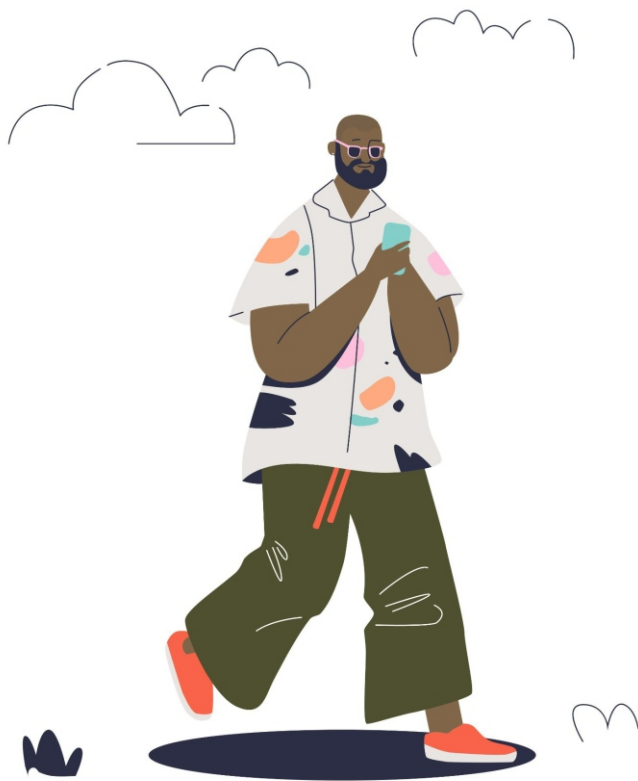
A Path Forward

As digital migration reshapes Nigeria's workforce and economy, the country stands at a critical juncture. With strategic investment in infrastructure, inclusive policies, and widespread digital education, Nigeria can transform this shift into a powerful engine for economic growth.

Expanding internet access, improving electricity supply, and crafting supportive regulations will be key to ensuring that opportunities in the digital space are accessible to a broader segment of the population.

The challenge is no longer just about embracing digital migration but ensuring it becomes an inclusive and sustainable driver of national progress.

By prioritising digital inclusion, fostering innovation-friendly policies, and positioning itself as a hub for global talent, Nigeria can leverage the digital economy to its advantage, setting a precedent for other emerging markets navigating the future of work.



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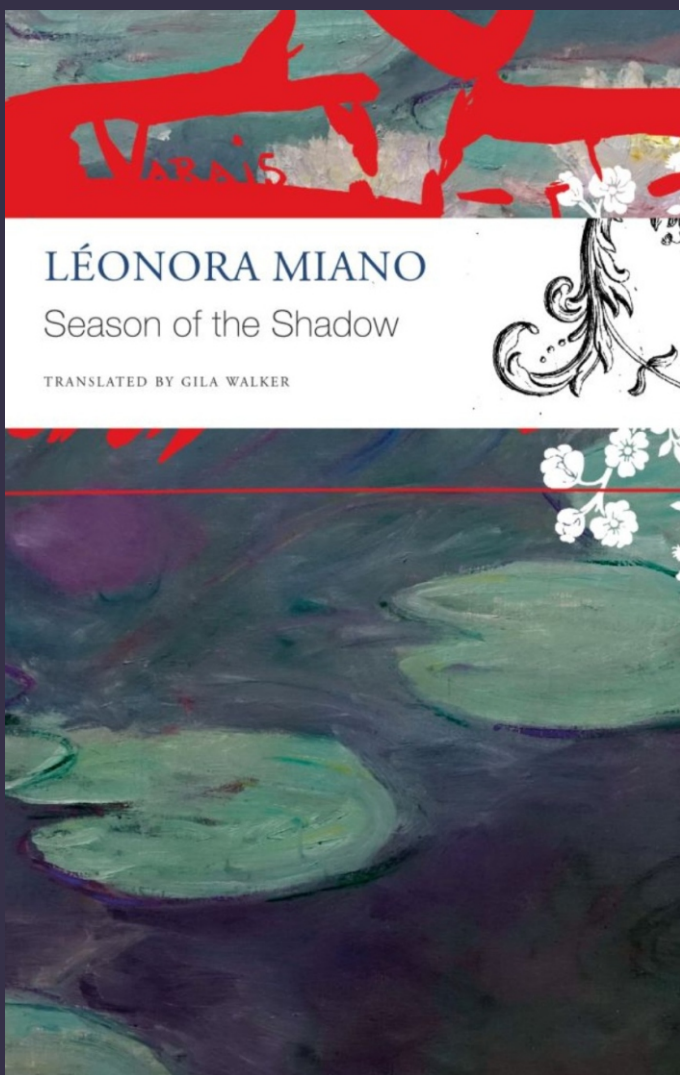
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What to Read Now

Léonora Miano's *Season of the Shadow* offers a harrowing exploration of the inception of the transatlantic slave trade. Shifting from the typical historical lens, the novel follows a sub-Saharan community during the precise moment their world begins to fracture. This pre-colonial civilisation, steeped in ancient traditions and deep ancestral roots, suddenly faces an unthinkable crisis when twelve villagers vanish without a trace. The communal peace is shattered by a terrifying silence that demands answers the elders cannot provide. Amidst this confusion, a collective dream haunts the mothers within their shared dwelling.

In these psychic visions, their missing sons call out in absolute terror, signalling a darkness that transcends physical kidnapping. Simultaneously, a literal and metaphorical thick shadow descends upon the huts, extinguishing the daylight. This

encroaching gloom represents the blight of slavery, a spectral force destined to consume the entire world. Léonora's prose is deliberately strange, perfectly capturing the villagers' struggle to comprehend a reality that feels entirely impossible.



Resources



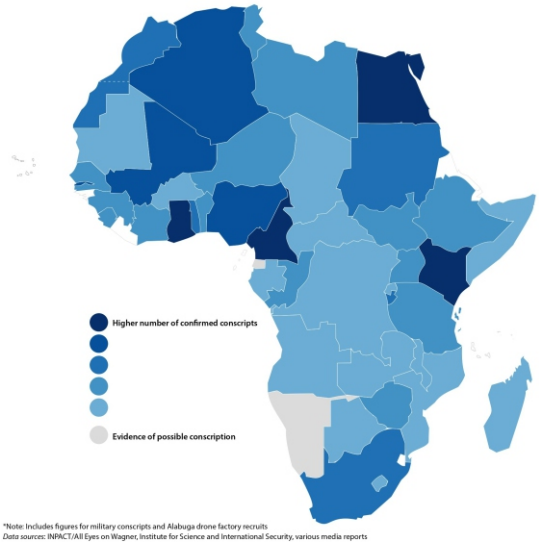
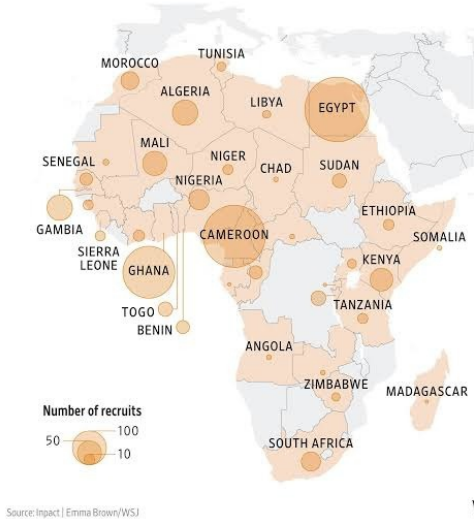
The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is an organisation established in 1951 with a mission to promote orderly migration since 1951. It supports migrants all over the world while partnering with governments, diaspora organisations, and local partners to manage the impacts of migration, particularly those in vulnerable situations. It focuses on the promotion of access to safe and regular pathways. Its objectives include establishing structures for transparent and efficient labour migration flows, promoting safe policies that help migrants understand their rights and responsibilities throughout the employment and migration process, and supporting integration and inclusion in new roles and workplace and communities. This not only ensures safer recruitment practices but also provides support systems that help prevent exploitation, trafficking, and other forms of abuse during the migration process.

Further inquiries: <https://www.iom.int/>

In Numbers

Russia Lures Recruits From Africa to Feed Its Ukraine War Machine

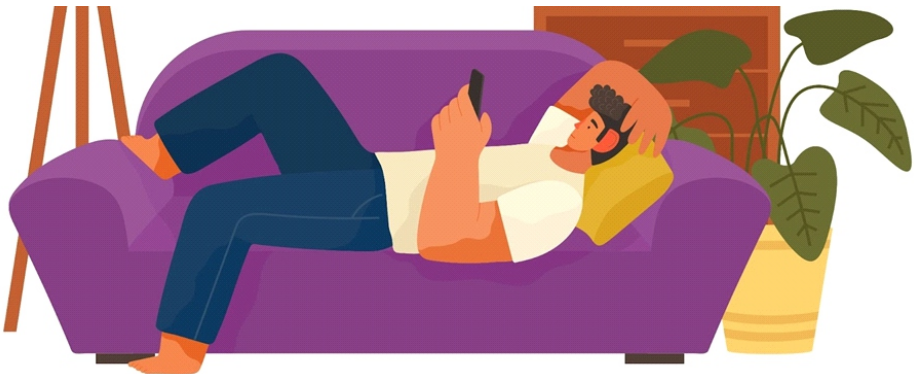
Thousands of Africans from 45 Countries Have Been Trafficked for Russia's War in Ukraine



WSJ

The images above show continued recruitment of nationals across several African countries, contributing to the growing involvement of African nationals in the Russia-Ukraine war. The data shows that at least three countries recorded recruitment figures in the hundreds. Together, this highlights how recruitment efforts presented as overseas employment can ultimately place recruits in military roles, exposing them to life-threatening conflicts and consequences.

Drawn from Africacenter.org & WSJ



The Mobility Gaze



This 2005 P.M. News report highlights how Nigerian fraudsters used fake employment offers in the UK to lure Nigerians, promising jobs and opportunities abroad before demanding money from victims. The report illustrates how fraudulent recruitment schemes have long exploited Nigerians seeking employment overseas.

ARCHIVING
Project

Archiving digitises Nigeria's old newspapers and magazines to preserve history and foster accessibility.

The Community Corner



Gerald Ronnie Odil is a Ugandan multidisciplinary curator and creator whose artistry and identity defies strict norms. Before the Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act passed in 2023 and irremediably affected their life, Gerald could not have imagined living anywhere else in the world. "Something terrible could happen and then, in 15 minutes, I'd just be on a boat somewhere over the lake. The sun is shining, there's plenty of fruit, and I had people I loved close to me. I didn't want to be away from them" they said. Love held them there, and that was enough. But when the place they loved and homed turned "the mouth of the shark, the barrel of the gun", it became impossible to carry on the life that was once deemed tolerable.

A full essay is available to read on Diaspora Africa's website.

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We are building a newsroom & community that counters misinformation and bias in global mainstream news about African migration. We are working with local and cross-border journalists to challenge biased global reporting frameworks that shape migration. We want to disrupt extractive storytelling practices & expand the range of perspectives represented in international media discourse surrounding migration.

The magazine is independently funded by the Diaspora Africa team. Many updates featured in this publication are sourced from our Migration Monitor database, which tracks migration trends affecting African migrants and diasporic communities globally.

monitor.diasporaafrica.org

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