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## **From *jaguar* to *burger*: an historic comparison about Ghanaian migration terminology**

Maria Laura Spanedda

Ongoing PhD in Geography and Migration  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

### **ABSTRACT**

**T**he aim of the current paper is to analyze the migration terminology used by the Ghanaian populations from the 1950s to the present. The comparison is based on the analysis of “Jaguar”, a movie shot between Ghana, Togo and Niger in the 1950s by the French filmmaker Jean Rouch. The film gives us access to some of the clichés related to the myth of journey, still present in the contemporary migrations of many people who move from West Africa to Europe. It shows the persistence of migrant's identification terminology: some terms are transformed or added as a result of routes' modification. In some cases, the encounter with the languages of the arrival contexts generates cross-cultural terms with a specific meaning. By following the path that appellations like Jaguar, Zabrama, Burger etc. have gone through till now, it is possible to retrace the history of a migratory rhetoric that absorbs change into a long tradition in which traveling is the cause of subsistence and social prestige.

### **KEY WORDS**

Language, history, migration, social identity, Ghana, Italy, cross-cultural words.

This paper analyzes the narrative of migratory experience in its linguistic articulation, starting from the identification of some *clichés* related to the travel in contemporary migrations from West Africa to Europe. The group of specific terms considered here is an access key to the Ghanaian migratory tradition and is the result of hybridization or loans arising from European language contexts. The analysis mainly focuses on the language that Ghanaian migrants who arrived in Italy (in the specific case, in Sardinia Island) use to refer to themselves as people who travel. The ongoing ethnographic analysis is carried out through structured and semi-structured interviews with some members of the Ghanaian community in Sardinia. The screenings of Jean Rouch “Les Maîtres Fous” (1955) and “Jaguar” (1957) are used to sum up the similarities and differences between the migration told in the movies and the new paths of contemporaneity. The main references of this analysis are Stoller's (1992) monograph, a historical contextualization of Jean Rouch's work, and Nieswand's (2014) investigation on the Ghanaian *diaspora* in Germany. Starting from the ideas offered in “Jaguar” feature movie and through the evidence gathered among the Ghanaian immigrants present in Sardinia, some appellations related to the migrant person are analyzed. Subsequently, there is a comparison

between the terms that can be found in the film's testimony, in the memories of the collaborators involved in the research and appellations of the latest journeys. Finally, the similarities of terms, of use and significance are shown (Yankey & Siaka, 2007), explaining the peculiarities emerging from the current language influenced by recent events related to the Central Mediterranean route and the passage through Libya. Most people involved are male, between the ages of 18 and 40. The main carrier language is English, sometimes Italian. The terms analyzed refer to Twi's linguistic context, used throughout Ghana as the main foreign language together with English, to communicate between populations of different ethnicities.

### **1. Jaguar**

“Jaguar” is an 88-minute movie made by the filmmaker Jean Rouch in 1957. It can be defined as a shared experiment of ethno-fiction and cinema, where the author and his Nigerian collaborators decided to film their trip to Ghana, adding a later off-field comment on their images (Marano, 2007). It is a film about social transformations through the repetition of a *cliché*: young men travelling beyond the borders of their cultural experience, and consequently their return back home while acquiring a new social prestige. This is a movie extension of the investigations that Rouch began in the mid-1950s, focusing mainly on the economic activities of immigrant groups in the Gold and Ivory Coast.<sup>1</sup> These migrants were called *Zabrama* and were mainly Nigeriens converging in the major cities of Kumasi and Accra (the term refers to a Ghana Muslim community descended from the *Zabarima* group, Djerma populations, Songhai linguistic group, descendants in the nineteenth century in the northern regions of Country). The *Zabrama* was the latest wave of a seasonal migratory pattern that had existed since the first half of the nineteenth century.

According to the testimonies gathered in this first phase of the investigation, *Zabrama* continues to be the name given to migrants moving to Ghana from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Some areas covered in Rouch's film, such as the *Salaga* market, are still the meeting sites of the respective immigrant communities, although the economic activities to which they are devoted have changed from the past. Nowadays *Zabrama* men in Ghana are generally street vendors of leather fabrics and accessories (e.g.: handbags, wallets, shoes etc), while women sell traditional herbs and medicines. The film is able to frame the most important dimensions of migration: choice and preparation of departure, travel experience, placement and work in the context of arrival and coming back home (Amselle, 1999; Avallone & Torre, 2013). The route, indeed, becomes a ritual of passage: made of adventure, it enriches every man who returns home when he has to witness and share his change (Stoller, 1992). When travelers have to tell their experience,

they usually idealize their adventures, hiding difficulties in order not to dissatisfy family and friends. In this way the history of the trip is strengthened, becoming the foundation of a still-current model over time. This is the circle of migratory history, according to a script that Rouch considers the same for centuries and which provides a model for replicating these experiences and building the specific identity of the migrant.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Tycoon, burger

The “Jaguar” movie's vision evokes, in some of the people involved in research, the memory of a way of saying that is now decayed. According to some collaborators, the term was used in Ghana until the 1970s and was inspired by?<sup>3</sup> Due to its innovative performance, that car became a symbol of modernity and was used as an appellative to talk about an immigrant person who carried on his business and could afford to become a reference point for other compatriots. In the off-field commentary of the film, one of the protagonists tries to explain what *jaguar* means, while observing himself: “*jaguar* is a gallant man who has his head always engaged (...) that is marching, which is being watched by everyone, who makes a beautiful life, who smokes cigarettes” (translated from French by the author). *Jaguar* is, therefore, a brand-new important person who can flaunt his change, following a model and lifestyle that is affected by colonial influence and Hollywood cinema. From the collected evidence, it would appear that today something similar to *jaguar* remains in the use of the term *tycoon* (pronounce “taiku:n”) indicating a person resident abroad for a long time owning a business.

In general, the English term *tycoon* is used in Ghana to talk about a person in charge of something (an economic activity, a family, an area, a neighbourhood etc.) that can arouse a lot of respect and intercession for someone under his wing. The adjective or the term that sometimes precedes it helps to clarify the area on which this person exercises control, such as “family Tycoon” or “Italian Tycoon”. Comparing *tycoon* and *jaguar*, the origin of the two appellations dates back to foreign language loans (English), keeping an area of similar meaning. Among the testimonies gathered in this regard that have a particular value is that of Kofi, a Ghanaian cultural mediator who has been living in Sardinia for about 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Kofi works as an interpreter, as a tour guide and is ultimately the chairman of an association that groups the Ghanaian immigrant community in Sardinia. In light of its migratory history, Kofi is nominated and recognized as *tycoon* by the resident community on the island. He himself states:

Tycoon is like a boss, he says, “tycoon business” or ... like ... one at the top, a boss ... as I'm here a lot, let's say, I have the chance that not everyone else has, they've just come, for that I am tycoon (Interview, Kofi S., of 06/08/2015, Cagliari, original Italian).

Zack, one of the members of the association, with a completely different migration path than Kofi's (arrived in Sardinia in 2015 as an asylum seeker after crossing the Sahara desert, having lived in Libya for several months and embarked to flee to Italy) speaks of the *tycoon* with these words: "Someone who invests his money, who is not dependent on others. A father is the head of a family, a family *tycoon*. Kofi is a *tycoon*, working alone, he is the head of the family, the president of the association" (Interview, Zack T., 05/06/2017, Cagliari, original English).

"But if *tycoon* comes home, then he becomes a *burger*" (pronounced "bɜːgə"). These words of Zack introduce another very important term in the narrative of the migratory experience among the Ghanaians. The term *burger* began to circulate in the 1980s among the protagonists of a new migration to Europe, especially in Germany (Nieswand, 2009). The origin of the term is not clear at all but, according to some Ghanaians, it seems to have a geographic root: most of the Ghanaian expatriates travelled to Hamburg, in Germany, where a large immigrant community has long been established. When these people returned home, they were often welcomed warmly and called "those in Hamburg." The pronunciation of the city in English is "hamˌbɜːrg" and hamburgers become "hæmbɜːgɜːz". In the common language, the term was broken, with the elimination of the initial morpheme that facilitated the diffusion and generalization of the use. The turnaround that the expansion of the migratory route has represented since those years has made the appellation a "social class" that begins to designate all those who have departed in Europe or North America to work (Nieswand, 2014). In this regard it is interesting to note that in German the term "burger" is used to indicate a citizen or middle-class city man. As in the use of the appellation *tycoon*, one can be *Italian burger*, *American burger*, *Canadian burger*, etc; for an in-depth explanation of the operation of semantic loans and language calques among the Anglo-African peoples of Ghana see the work of Yankey and Siaka (2007). However, getting to another continent is not enough to earn the *burger* appearance. Only once back home and after re-establishing relationships with the family and the social network, the role changes with the acquisition of the title *burger*.

The behaviours of a *burger* are however despised by Kofi:

Usually, most *burgers* make it clear to everyone that they did, which was successful even when it was not. They show this aspect of well-being ... for example, when one back tries to always dress brilliantly, always with new stuff, tries to buy beer for everyone, so far it costs a little because with 10 euro he can buy so many in Ghana, try to show the difference between those who live there and him (Interview, Kofi S., 06/08/2015, Cagliari, original Italian).

By making clear the social change of migration outcome with their behavior, the *burgers* make themselves recognizable and people change regard towards them. The system of social expectations built around migration is fuelled by the return phase, when the *burger* status

assigned by the community to the migrant is strengthened. However, he must show a series of attitudes to prove the outcome of the experience, among which the most important ones are the ostentation of wealth and the display of new body attitude, vehicles of the foreign cultural element that the *burger* acquired through his stay abroad. They are usually dressed in a flashy way, with luxury cars, jewelry, and accessories, traceable in many music videos by some singers who have managed to succeed in Ghana after becoming a *burger*. According to Zack, the aspect of money power becomes more explicit when they return home:

If you are a *burger* you can do many things, nice and ugly. So you can take advantage of why people respect you. You can conquer another's wife with the money and with the promise to bring her to Europe. If you are a bad person you can do many things (Interview, Zack T., 05/31/2017, Cagliari, original English).

The same term is also used in reference to the Ghanaian female migration, numerically lower than male's one but currently increasing.<sup>5</sup>

In line with Boris Nieswand's studies on *burgers* resident in Germany, public visibility and secrets coexist in their status (Nieswand, 2014). The definition of *burger*, in fact, brings with it some measure of ambiguity: often it describes people with a basic school level who, having no chance at home, decide to leave. The reasons for the migration are various, but there is always the awareness that the economic gap between the North and South of the world can be translated into an advantage for those who wish to increase their standard of living or to help economically their family conditions. The activities undertaken may also be barely legal or poorly qualified, but enough for a community economic redistribution, the figure of silence that even the *burger's* social network maintains (family, friends, acquaintances). Admitting the difficulties encountered on the journey to Europe can thus be interpreted as a personal failure by destroying the social recognition of the *burger* at home. This element emerges in the same way in the testimonies collected in Sardinia. According to Zack:

People in Ghana do not believe this is true because in the past many have left and have built large houses and brought family money. Old burgers migrations were different; it was easier to make money in Europe. It is no longer so easy now. Find yourself to eat, drink and sleep, but work is difficult. It is not easy for them to understand that things have changed; having a burger at home is important and useful. Better silence (Interview, Zack T., 05/31/2017, Cagliari, original English).

Kofi justifies his poor consideration of *burgers* for these reasons:

Let's say yes, in the 70's and 80's certainly any *burger* that came back had something, had some success, because in those days there was work, there was everything. They did not lie, they had money, they built homes ... but now it's all fake, even those who do not work here in Europe when they come home say they work in a supermarket, in the office or in the taxi driver even if that's not true. Twenty, thirty years ago, *burger* was a respectful title, but now a little less ... before you did not have to look for it, you were already when you came home and people called you that way. Now everyone is trying to be *burger* (Interview, Kofi S., 08/06/2015, Cagliari, original Italian).<sup>6</sup>

The historical passage to which Zack and Kofi relate would seem to shape a change regarding

the social consideration of the *burger*, which is affected by alterations related to the socio-economic context of the arrival sites. Until the 1990s prestige was secured, even the lies constructed so as not to dissatisfy the audience when they came back from the trip were still supported by a migratory route that, as a rule, was quite satisfactory (though tiring). At present, there are people who risk their life to cross the desert and the sea, passing into places not always hospitable, where sometimes it is very difficult to find livelihood. Ghana is still a destination for migration to West Africa today but has now become a country from which thousands of people emigrate each year. The situation that a migrant finds once arrived in Italy, a forced stage of their journey to Europe, or specifically in regions of the South like Sardinia, is a condition of general economic recession, with a high unemployment rate and a great difficulty in insertion working for the migrant, which often comes with other expectations.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Bonsu, lampa**

In relation to these latter aspects, there is a term that presents, linguistically, a similar dynamic to that of *jaguar*, that is, *bonsu*. "*Bonsu* is a big animal in the sea, it's a sad word for us" says Zack when he was trying to explain the meaning and use of this term (Interview, Zack T., 05/06/2017, Cagliari, original English). It is an Ashanti word, in the Twi language, that generally indicates large-scale marine animals, such as whales, sharks or dolphins. However, this word has become a specific appellation to indicate a person who has passed the sea and has managed to get to Europe. The 2011 Libyan crisis, with the fall of the regime and the civil war, forced thousands of refugees to leave the country running through the sea. Libya continues to be a difficult border to control and manage, where human trafficking and political instability allows the continuous influx of people from the desert. The human corridor leading to the sea is regularly crossed by thousands of migrants who want to reach Europe. Evidence indicates that only in 2016 some 5,098 people died in the Mediterranean Sea, many of whom were trying to reach the Italian coast. Nearly 20% of recorded deaths can be attributed to migrants from the sub-Saharan area.<sup>8</sup> The traumatic experience that occurs in the Central Mediterranean route has over the years been so much in the imagination of Ghanaian migrants to translate the word *bonsu* into a metaphorical field, where a person who survives the sea seems to cross it "like a fish". Zack, for example, is called *bonsu* for this reason. But if Ghanaian people say that a person "has turned into *bonsu*", it means that someone unfortunately died on the sea trip. It is believed that their body will be eaten by a *bonsu* and, in this way, they become one of them. Talking about the deceased person using the term *bonsu* allows people to keep confidentiality because only travellers that know Twi can understand

the reference to death at sea; moreover, the term alludes to death by not naming it (Losi, 2000). Finally, *lampa* is another name derived from the reduction of the Italian toponym Lampedusa. It has a similar dynamic to that of *burger*, but it comes under different contexts. In Libya, when African migrants are waiting for favorable conditions for boarding, if you want to talk about the project to reach Italy, you have to argue by hiding the argument, so that the Libyan police cannot understand. Immigrants generally experience a climate of tension and inhumanity about their stay in Libya, and talk above all about the need to hide, even simply by speaking about their plans in public. Therefore, it is necessary to find terms that cannot be understood by everyone. Just saying that “there are people who want to leave” means, alluding to the wish to leave Libya for Italy. Lampedusa is the closest destination from the Libyan coasts and those who go to sea in the Canal of Sicily usually point to that island, hoping for the arrival of the rescue. Once in Europe, to introduce someone with a phrase like “this guy is a *lampa*” means that he managed to land in Lampedusa. It is not an exclusive word of the Ghanaians, unlike *bonsu*; *lampa* is an appellation that, according to testimonies collected so far, anyone who has gone to Libya before taking the sea can understand.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Among the words analyzed with reference to the Ghanaian migration, two main dynamics can be identified. In the first case, the formation of appellatives occurs through the caesura of part of the original terms and the generalization of the result, as in the case of *burgers* (Hamburg, hamburgers, *burgers*) and *lampa* (Lampedusa, *lampa*). In the second case, appellations can arise from semantic loans, drawing from different categories and proceeding similarly, as for *jaguar* and *bonsu* terms.

Finally, the use of *tycoon* presents the characteristics of the semantic loan as studied by Yankey and Siaka (2007). This English term, in fact, refers to a person of great success and power, especially in the economic field. Its use among Ghanaian migrants is extended to all those people with a long migratory history who, only because they have acquired foreign experience and have self-employment, automatically become *tycoons* for other fellow countrymen. Although the focus of this investigation is mainly in the history of the terminology used by the Ghanaian migrants, we can see the common *clichés* that connect the context studied by Jean Rouch in the past with the new migratory flows towards Europe.

This is certainly a different migration not only geographically but also socioeconomically, made possible by the opportunities offered by the globalization of markets, communications and information. In the last decade of the twentieth century, considerable accumulation of

money and a social rise directly proportional to the "economic value" of the reception context, facilitate the opportunity to move out from Africa.

The international migration of early *burgers* and the more recent ones, however, seem to be built by translating the oldest model of migration into the West African area. The rhetoric built around the narrative of travel experience, and the change that it represents, resembles the "Jaguar" movie and the testimonies of *tycoon* and *burger*. But the changing terms, like the emerging *bonsu*, emphasize the emergence of the difficulties encountered along their routes in the last decade. Even languages used only among young emigrants, and unknown in the communities of origin, point to the growing need to address those aspects of the most complex migration and which may be a personal failure, if expressed.

Summarizing, it is possible to evoke the value of social prestige that the migration experience retains, through the active contribution of those who continue to travel and the circuits of respect and approval that the communities of origin reserve. With his performativity the migrant shows, demonstrates and repeats the social prestige achieved through the journey, building specific social identities and roles. The pattern that begins to trace has a strong economic root, where the redistribution of goods that accompanies the return process is, recursively, effect and cause at the same time.

In view of these first results, a trans-historic cultural pattern appears to emerge. Some communities in Ghana have built a learning environment over time: they have regenerated contexts for acquiring behaviours or practices geared to specific migration paths such as livelihood and growth strategies. A pattern that can survive and adapt to the historical changes that these communities in relation to the world have to face from time to time (Lave & Wenger, 2006).

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*Les Maitres Fous*, Jean Rouch, Les Films de la Pléiade, France, 1955 (36 min).

*Jaguar*, Jean Rouch, Les Films de la Pléiade, France, 1957 (93 min).

## Notes

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1. Jean Rouch estimated that in the mid-1950s, referring only to West Africa, around 400,000 seasonal workers had migrated each year, moving from the edge of the Sahara desert to the coastal cities of Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Togo.
2. For a more in-depth study of Jean Rouch's investigations at that time, one can refer to his two main essays on *Migrations au Ghana* (Gold Coast): *Enquete 1953-1955* (1956) and *Problèmes relatifs à l'étude des migrations traditionnelles et des migrations actuelles en Afrique occidentale* (1960).
3. Interview with Kofi on 06/08/2015.
4. The names that follow and refer to the collaborators involved in the research work have been changed for privacy reasons.
5. On 01/01/2016, a total of Ghanaian presence in Italy of 48,637, women were about 18,887 –retrieved from: <http://www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/ghana/> [14/04/2017]. In this article I refer only to male migration. For an explanation of the effects of migration on women, both on those who stay at home and on those who decide to leave, a specific detailed study is necessary.
6. The early Burgers migration and the current one, especially as a result of the 2012 Libyan crisis, certainly have considerable differences. In numerical terms, people who move from Ghana to Europe have increased; it is enough to think that in 2007 only 40,000 people of Ghanaian origin lived in Germany and in the last two years asylum flows and humanitarian reasons in Italy have taken on dimensions never reached in the last nine years, from 9,971 in 2007 to 67,271. According to estimates by UNHCR in 2016, approximately 362,753 people traveled to Europe. The African route we are referring to has changed, they are no longer moving by plane, but doing a long and very dangerous journey through the desert of

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Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea. The economic situation in Europe today presents a different picture from the 1980s and 90s and the policies for reception and management of flows allow less freedom of movement and gains because they tend to cope with the humanitarian emergency at the disadvantage of permits of economic residence. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.it/> [07/05/2017].

7. The proportion of non-employed people in the island is around 17.3%, ranking sixth in the ranking of the areas with the highest youth unemployment rate across Europe (56.3%). Labor absorption, in the face of a high demand, is not enough to ensure fair access to work for locals and foreigners. <https://ugeo.urbistat.com/AdminStat/it/it/classifiche/tasso-disoccupazione/province/sardegna/20/2> [07/05/2017].
8. Retrieved from: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean> [07/05/2017].