

Original Research Article

The History of The Vietnamese Community in Africa and the Middle East

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Abstract: The Vietnamese diaspora in Africa and the Middle East is a lesser known yet significant aspect of global migration patterns. This paper explores the historical migration of the Vietnamese community to these regions, driven by factors such as labor contracts, political alignments, and economic opportunities. The study examines their cultural integration, economic contributions, and challenges, offering a comprehensive analysis of their historical evolution. By employing a mixed-methods approach, including archival research and interviews, this paper contributes to the literature on global diasporas and South-South migration.

Keywords: Vietnamese diaspora, Africa, Middle East, migration, cultural integration.

JEL Codes: F22, J61, N35.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a crucial aspect of Vietnam's historical and economic development, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Vietnamese people have a long history of migration, initially driven by political factors such as war and colonial rule but later influenced by economic opportunities and globalization. Much scholarly attention has focused on Vietnamese migration to North America, Europe, and Australia, particularly in the context of the Vietnam War and post-war refugee movements. However, the presence of Vietnamese communities in Africa and the Middle East remains an underexplored area of research.

Vietnamese migration to Africa and the Middle East can be traced back to multiple waves. During the French colonial period, Vietnamese workers were transported to French-controlled territories in Africa, primarily as laborers and soldiers. This early migration was not voluntary, but it laid the foundation for future Vietnamese presence in the region. In the late 20th century, Vietnam's economic reforms and increasing globalization saw new waves of migration, particularly to the Middle East, where labor contracts attracted thousands of Vietnamese workers. More recently, economic partnerships between Vietnam and African nations have facilitated migration for business and trade purposes.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Vietnamese diaspora in Africa and the Middle East by examining the historical context of migration, the socio-economic contributions of Vietnamese communities, and the challenges they face in integration and labor rights. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach that includes historical analysis, statistical data, and qualitative interviews, this study seeks to fill a significant gap in migration studies. The findings contribute to broader discussions on South-South migration and the role of Vietnam in global labor markets.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on Vietnamese migration and diaspora studies, focusing on existing research related to Africa and the Middle East. Section 3 outlines the methodology employed, including data collection from archival records, government reports, and interviews with Vietnamese migrants. Section 4 presents the results and discussion, detailing migration trends, socio-economic contributions, and integration challenges. Section 5 concludes the study by summarizing key findings and suggesting areas for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Global Vietnamese diaspora

The scholarly exploration of the Vietnamese diaspora has historically been dominated by a focus on

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migration to North America and Europe, regions that absorbed significant numbers of Vietnamese refugees following the Vietnam War (Nguyen, 2015; Tran, 2019). These studies have meticulously charted the trajectories of post-war refugee movements, delving into the economic assimilation, social integration, and identity reformation of Vietnamese communities in Western contexts. The narratives often center on the establishment of “Little Saigons” in places like California and Paris, where Vietnamese immigrants rebuilt their lives amidst the challenges of displacement and cultural dislocation. However, this Western-centric lens has, until recently, overshadowed the equally significant but less-documented patterns of South-South migration, particularly to Africa and the Middle East. Emerging scholarship, such as that by Pham (2021), has begun to illuminate these flows, signaling a paradigmatic shift in migration studies toward recognizing the economic partnerships and labor exchanges that tie Vietnam to developing nations across the Global South.

This redirection in academic attention reflects a broader acknowledgment of Vietnam’s evolving role in the global economy, spurred by its post-1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms and subsequent integration into international markets. The migration to Africa and the Middle East is not merely a footnote to the diaspora story but a dynamic process driven by mutual economic interests, historical ties, and the agency of Vietnamese migrants themselves. Theoretical frameworks like transnationalism and diaspora studies offer critical tools for unpacking this phenomenon. Transnationalism, as articulated by Vertovec (2009), posits that migrants sustain multifaceted connections—economic, social, and cultural—across their home and host countries. For Vietnamese migrants in Africa and the Middle East, this manifests in remittance flows that bolster Vietnam’s economy, the preservation of cultural practices like ancestor veneration in foreign lands, and the forging of hybrid identities that straddle continents. These frameworks enrich our understanding of how migration transcends mere physical relocation, becoming a sustained interplay of belonging and contribution across borders.

2.2. Vietnamese migration to Africa

The roots of Vietnamese migration to Africa trace back to the French colonial era, a period when Vietnam, as part of French Indochina, was intricately linked to France’s broader imperial ambitions. Historical accounts, such as those by Deschamps (1967), document the arrival of Vietnamese laborers in Francophone African territories like Senegal and Madagascar, where they were deployed to toil on plantations, construct railways, and develop colonial infrastructure. These early migrants, often conscripted under coercive conditions, laid the groundwork for Vietnam’s presence in Africa, their labor shaping the physical and economic landscapes of France’s colonies. Some Vietnamese soldiers, enlisted in the French military during conflicts

like World War II, also remained in Africa after their service, forming small enclaves that hinted at the potential for future migration flows.

In the post-colonial period, these historical ties evolved into more voluntary and economically driven movements, catalyzed by Vietnam’s expanding diplomatic and trade relations with African nations (Nguyen & Bui, 2020). Countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Algeria emerged as key destinations, buoyed by Vietnam’s expertise in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and small-scale commerce. Vietnamese entrepreneurs have established rice farms in Mozambique, tapping into the country’s fertile land to mirror Vietnam’s own agrarian strengths, while in Angola, traders have introduced affordable consumer goods, linking African markets to Asian supply chains. These activities are often facilitated by transnational networks—informal yet resilient webs of family ties, business partnerships, and diaspora connections—that channel investment and knowledge between Vietnam and Africa. The result is a migration pattern that blends labor mobility with entrepreneurial ambition, positioning Vietnamese migrants as both workers and economic actors in their host societies.

Yet, this migration is not without its tribulations. Language barriers pose a formidable obstacle, with Vietnamese migrants grappling with French, Portuguese, Arabic, or local African languages that differ vastly from their native tongue. The scarcity of established Vietnamese community networks further complicates integration, leaving migrants to navigate foreign bureaucracies and social systems with limited support. Legal uncertainties—ranging from ambiguous residency statuses to weak labor protections—compound these challenges, often rendering Vietnamese workers and entrepreneurs vulnerable to exploitation or marginalization (Pham, 2021). While their economic contributions are tangible, fostering local growth and bilateral trade, the process of cultural and social integration remains halting, stymied by both structural impediments and the sheer diversity of African contexts.

2.3. Vietnamese migration to the Middle East

The migration of Vietnamese workers to the Middle East represents a more recent and distinct chapter, surging in the late 20th century as oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries sought foreign labor to fuel their ambitious development agendas (Hoang, 2018). Nations like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, flush with petrodollars, turned to Vietnam as a source of disciplined and cost-effective workers, particularly in construction, domestic service, and manufacturing. Unlike the colonial-era migrations to Africa or the refugee flows to the West, this movement is characterized by its temporality—most Vietnamese workers enter on fixed-term contracts, intending to return home after amassing savings. This transient nature distinguishes it from earlier waves, reflecting a

pragmatic response to global labor demands rather than a pursuit of permanent settlement.

The kafala sponsorship system, a cornerstone of labor migration in the Middle East, shapes this experience in profound and dualistic ways. On one hand, it has enabled the large-scale employment of Vietnamese workers, providing access to wages far exceeding those available in Vietnam. On the other, it has entrenched vulnerabilities, tethering workers' legal status to their employers and fostering conditions ripe for exploitation (Le, 2022). Reports of unpaid wages, hazardous work environments, and confiscated passports are not isolated incidents but systemic features of a labor regime that prioritizes efficiency over equity. Human rights organizations have sounded the alarm on these abuses, advocating for reforms to protect migrant workers who, despite their economic contributions, remain perilously exposed.

Nevertheless, the impact of Vietnamese workers in the Middle East extends beyond their labor. Remittances, a lifeline for many Vietnamese families, flow back in substantial volumes—billions of dollars annually—lifting households out of poverty and fueling local development in Vietnam. These financial transfers underscore the migrants' role as economic bridges, linking the prosperity of the Gulf to the aspirations of rural Vietnam. However, the temporary nature of this migration raises lingering questions about its long-term benefits. Returning workers often face reintegration challenges, from readjusting to lower wages at home to grappling with the psychological toll of years spent in isolating and demanding conditions. The socioeconomic gains of remittances must thus be weighed against these less tangible costs, prompting a deeper examination of migration's broader implications.

2.4. Synthesis and future directions

In synthesizing the literature, the Vietnamese migration experience in Africa and the Middle East emerges as a distinctive case of South-South migration, interwoven with historical legacies, economic pragmatism, and evolving policy landscapes. The colonial imprint, the rise of transnational networks, and the interplay of opportunity and exploitation collectively define this diaspora's trajectory. Existing studies provide a robust foundation, illuminating the economic contributions and social challenges of these migrants, yet gaps persist. Future research must probe deeper into the long-term impacts—both for the migrants and for Vietnam's development—while exploring strategies to mitigate vulnerabilities and enhance integration. Comparative analyses with other migrant groups, longitudinal studies of returnees, and ethnographic accounts of daily life could further enrich this field, offering a more holistic view of a diaspora that continues to shape, and be shaped by, the global South's interconnected future.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Vietnamese diaspora in Africa and the Middle East. The methodology consists of three key components: historical archival research, statistical data analysis, and qualitative interviews.

Data sources

Primary data sources include government reports, archival documents from colonial and post-colonial periods, migration records, and international labor agreements. Secondary sources include academic journals, books, and policy papers from migration research institutions.

Sampling and data collection

The study utilizes purposive sampling to select Vietnamese migrants currently residing in Africa and the Middle East. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 40 participants across different countries to capture diverse migration experiences. Additionally, survey data from international labor organizations provide statistical insights into migration trends.

Analytical framework

Qualitative data is analyzed using thematic coding, while quantitative data is examined through descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The combination of these methods ensures a holistic understanding of migration patterns, economic contributions, and integration challenges.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Migration trends and motivations

The migration of Vietnamese individuals to Africa and the Middle East represents a multifaceted phenomenon deeply rooted in historical, economic, and social dynamics. At the heart of this migration lies the pursuit of economic opportunities, which has consistently served as the primary catalyst for movement across borders. In the post-colonial era, Vietnam's diplomatic relations with African and Arab nations laid the groundwork for structured migration, particularly through labor exchange agreements that emerged as a byproduct of political alliances (Nguyen, 2020). During the mid-20th century, these ties were often forged in the context of shared anticolonial struggles and socialist ideologies, fostering a sense of solidarity that translated into practical cooperation. For instance, countries like Algeria and Egypt, which maintained strong ties with Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War, became early destinations for Vietnamese workers under state-sponsored programs.

Over the decades, the nature of Vietnamese migration has undergone a profound transformation. What began as forced labor during the colonial period—when Vietnamese workers were dispatched to French colonies in Africa—has evolved into a more voluntary

and diverse migration pattern. The shift from coerced labor to self-initiated movement reflects broader global trends of globalization and economic liberalization in Vietnam, particularly following the Đổi Mới reforms of 1986. These reforms opened Vietnam to international markets, prompting citizens to seek livelihoods beyond their homeland. Today, migration to Africa and the Middle East encompasses not only labor migration but also trade ventures and entrepreneurial pursuits. In Africa, for example, Vietnamese migrants have established small businesses in countries like Angola and South Africa, capitalizing on emerging markets. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, the oil-rich economies of nations such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have attracted Vietnamese workers seeking higher wages in construction and domestic service sectors. This diversification of migration motivations underscores the adaptability of Vietnamese communities and their responsiveness to global economic shifts.

Economic and social contributions

The contributions of Vietnamese migrants to their host countries in Africa and the Middle East are both substantial and varied, spanning multiple industries and fostering economic bridges between nations. In Africa, Vietnamese entrepreneurs and workers have made notable inroads into agriculture, fisheries, and small-scale trade. Countries like Mozambique and Madagascar have seen Vietnamese businesses invest in aquaculture and rice farming, leveraging Vietnam's expertise in these areas to boost local production (Pham, 2021). These ventures not only create jobs but also introduce new techniques and technologies, enhancing the agricultural output of host nations. Similarly, in urban centers across Africa, Vietnamese traders have established niche markets, importing affordable goods from Asia and catering to growing consumer demand.

In the Middle East, the impact of Vietnamese migrants is most pronounced in the construction and infrastructure sectors. With the region's rapid urbanization and ambitious development projects—such as Qatar's preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup or Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiatives—Vietnamese laborers have become a vital workforce. These workers, often employed through recruitment agencies under temporary labor contracts, contribute to the physical transformation of cities like Doha and Riyadh (Pham, 2021). Beyond their labor, Vietnamese migrants have also played a role in facilitating bilateral trade and investment. For instance, Vietnamese construction firms operating in the Gulf have secured contracts that strengthen economic ties with Vietnam, while remittances sent back home—estimated at billions of dollars annually—bolster Vietnam's domestic economy. Socially, these migrants often form tight-knit communities that preserve cultural traditions, such as celebrating Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year), while also engaging with local populations through commerce and interpersonal relationships.

The ripple effects of these contributions extend beyond immediate economic gains. By acting as informal ambassadors, Vietnamese migrants enhance Vietnam's visibility on the global stage, fostering goodwill and paving the way for deeper diplomatic and commercial partnerships. In some cases, their presence has prompted host governments to negotiate trade agreements with Vietnam, recognizing the mutual benefits of strengthened ties. However, these achievements are not without their complexities, as the economic and social impacts of migration are closely intertwined with the challenges faced by these communities.

Challenges faced by the community

Despite their significant contributions, Vietnamese migrants in Africa and the Middle East confront a host of challenges that threaten their well-being and limit their potential. One of the most pervasive obstacles is the language barrier, which hinders communication with employers, local authorities, and communities. In the Middle East, where Arabic dominates, and in Africa, where a mix of local languages and colonial tongues like French or English prevails, Vietnamese migrants often struggle to navigate daily life and assert their rights. This linguistic isolation exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly in legal contexts where understanding contracts or labor laws becomes a daunting task.

Legal protections—or the lack thereof—represent another critical challenge. In the Middle East, reports from human rights organizations have documented widespread labor exploitation, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and passport confiscation by employers (Le, 2022). Vietnamese workers, many of whom arrive through intermediary recruitment agencies, often find themselves trapped in exploitative arrangements with little recourse. The kafala system, prevalent in Gulf countries, ties workers' legal status to their sponsors, further entrenching their dependence and limiting their ability to seek redress. In Africa, the challenges differ but are no less significant. The relative absence of established Vietnamese diaspora networks means that migrants lack the community support systems that might otherwise provide assistance or advocacy. This isolation is compounded by limited government oversight from both Vietnam and host countries, leaving migrants exposed to discrimination, harassment, and economic instability.

Cultural adaptation also poses a persistent hurdle. In the Middle East, conservative social norms and religious practices can clash with the traditions and lifestyles of Vietnamese migrants, leading to misunderstandings or exclusion. In Africa, the diversity of cultures—ranging from tribal societies to urban cosmopolitan hubs—requires migrants to navigate complex social landscapes without the benefit of prior familiarity. These difficulties are often magnified by the

absence of formalized support mechanisms, such as consular services or migrant resource centers, which could offer guidance and protection. For instance, while Vietnam has embassies in some countries, their capacity to assist nationals abroad remains limited, particularly in remote regions of Africa or the Middle East.

The vulnerabilities faced by Vietnamese migrants underscore the need for stronger diplomatic engagement and policy interventions. Vietnam's government could play a more proactive role by negotiating bilateral agreements that ensure fair labor practices and by establishing support programs for its citizens abroad. Host countries, too, bear responsibility for integrating migrant workers into their societies and upholding international labor standards. Without such measures, the potential of Vietnamese migrants to contribute to both their host nations and their homeland will remain constrained by systemic inequities.

In conclusion, the migration of Vietnamese individuals to Africa and the Middle East reflects a dynamic interplay of opportunity and adversity. Driven by economic aspirations and shaped by historical ties, these migrants have carved out meaningful roles in their host societies, from building infrastructure to fostering trade networks. Yet, their journey is fraught with challenges that demand attention and action. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from governments, international organizations, and the migrants themselves to ensure that their contributions are matched by the protections and opportunities they deserve. Only then can the full scope of their impact be realized, both for the individuals involved and for the broader global community they connect.

5. CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese diaspora in Africa and the Middle East constitutes a compelling yet often overlooked facet of global migration, encapsulating a rich tapestry of resilience, ambition, and cross-cultural exchange. This community, though relatively modest in size compared to Vietnamese populations in North America or Europe, embodies a unique narrative shaped by historical legacies, economic imperatives, and the evolving dynamics of globalization. The migration of Vietnamese individuals to these regions—spanning continents as diverse as the arid deserts of the Gulf states and the vibrant markets of sub-Saharan Africa—has been propelled predominantly by the promise of economic opportunities. From the construction sites of Dubai to the fishing villages of Mozambique, these migrants have pursued livelihoods that not only sustain their families back home but also contribute meaningfully to the economies and societies of their host countries. However, beneath this story of economic pursuit lies a complex web of challenges that reveals the precarious nature of their existence and the systemic gaps that hinder their full potential.

At the core of this migration narrative is the enduring struggle for cultural adaptation. Vietnamese migrants, steeped in a heritage marked by Confucian values, Buddhist traditions, and a collectivistic ethos, often find themselves navigating environments that differ starkly from their own. In the Middle East, the conservative Islamic frameworks and rigid social hierarchies present a stark contrast to the communal and familial structures of Vietnam, requiring migrants to recalibrate their behaviors and expectations. In Africa, the kaleidoscope of culture ranging from the tribal traditions of rural areas to the cosmopolitan bustle of cities like Johannesburg—demands a level of flexibility and cultural fluency that many arrive unprepared to offer. This process of adaptation is not merely a personal endeavor but a collective one, as migrants seek to carve out spaces where they can preserve their identity while forging connections with local populations. The celebration of Tết in a Riyadh apartment or the sharing of phở at a market stall in Lagos speaks to this duality—a blending of home and host that is both a survival mechanism and a quiet assertion of presence.

Yet, the pursuit of economic stability and cultural belonging is overshadowed by persistent issues of labor rights and protections. In the Middle East, the exploitation of Vietnamese workers under systems like kafala highlights a grim reality of modern migration: the commodification of human labor in pursuit of development. Wage delays, hazardous working conditions, and restricted mobility are not anomalies but features of an environment where legal safeguards are often inadequate or unenforced (Le, 2022). In Africa, the challenges shift toward isolation and the absence of robust community networks, leaving migrants vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers or intermediaries. These labor rights violations are compounded by the limited diplomatic infrastructure available to support Vietnamese nationals abroad. While Vietnam has made strides in expanding its global presence, its ability to advocate for its citizens in distant regions remains constrained by resource limitations and competing domestic priorities. The result is a diaspora caught between contribution and vulnerability, their economic value undeniable yet their human rights too often negotiable.

The significance of this community extends beyond its immediate circumstances, offering a lens through which to examine broader questions of migration, equity, and international cooperation. Their experiences illuminate the intersections of globalization and inequality, where the movement of people across borders fuels economic growth but often at the cost of individual dignity. To fully understand and address the plight of Vietnamese migrants in Africa and the Middle East, further research is imperative. Future studies should prioritize the development of actionable policy recommendations aimed at improving migrant conditions—whether through bilateral labor agreements

that enforce fair wages and safe workplaces or through the establishment of migrant support centers that provide legal aid and cultural orientation. Equally critical is the exploration of integration strategies that go beyond mere economic assimilation, fostering social inclusion and mutual understanding between Vietnamese migrants and their host communities. For instance, initiatives that promote language training, cultural exchange programs, or community-building efforts could bridge the gaps that currently isolate these migrants.

Moreover, the voices of the migrants themselves must be amplified in this discourse. Too often, their stories are filtered through academic or governmental lenses, reducing lived experiences to statistics or policy briefs. Qualitative research that captures their perspectives, their struggles, their aspirations—can enrich our understanding and inform more empathetic and effective solutions. Vietnam, as a sending country, bears a responsibility to strengthen its consular services and advocate more robustly on the international stage, while host nations must be held accountable to uphold the principles of human rights and labor justice enshrined in global frameworks like the International Labour Organization's conventions.

In sum, the Vietnamese community in Africa and the Middle East stands as a testament to the enduring human drive to seek better prospects, even in the face of formidable obstacles. Their presence enriches the cultural and economic landscapes of their adopted homes, yet their journey is incomplete without concerted efforts to address the structural inequities they encounter. By delving deeper into their experiences and advocating

for their rights, we not only honor their contributions but also advance a more just and interconnected world. The path forward lies in sustained research, collaborative policy-making, and a commitment to ensuring that migration becomes a conduit for opportunity rather than a crucible of exploitation. Only through such endeavors can the full scope of this diaspora's potential—and its humanity—be recognized and realized.

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