

# The U.S. Green Card Lottery: A Boon to Ghana's Entrepreneurs in the 1990s and 2000s

Carly Goodman  
Temple University

## Abstract

In 2007, Ghanaian-Romanian musician Wanlov the Kuborlor scored a big hit with the title track off his debut album, "Green Card." "We fought to get off the slave yard/ Now we fight to get us a green card," he raps in the refrain, noting the popular impulse of Ghanaians to leave Ghana to go to the United States.<sup>1</sup> As Wanlov recounts in the song, there are few legal avenues for Ghanaians seeking to emigrate to the United States. One option Ghanaians do have, however, is to participate in the U.S. green card lottery. The lottery, officially known as the U.S. Diversity Visa (DV) lottery, created a lawful path to the United States for people with no prior ties to the country, fulfilling a goal of U.S. immigration reformers in crafting the Immigration Act of 1990.<sup>2</sup>

The lottery was actually conceived as a means of immigration relief for undocumented Irish immigrants who had been "adversely affected" by the Immigration reforms of 1965. The policymakers behind the lottery argued that the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had disadvantaged potential (white) European immigrants by removing the national origin quotas that previously reserved spaces specifically for them. Reformers couched the bill in terms of diversity, arguing that the U.S. should embrace more diverse immigrants. They meant the Irish. People in Ghana seized the lottery as an opportunity. They did so with the assistance and urging of a wide network of visa services agents operating in Ghana.

My paper explores the establishment of visa services agents in Ghana, who promoted the green card lottery, and by extension, the United States, who profited from Ghanaians' desire to depart Ghana, and whose efforts enabling emigration has transformed Ghanaian citizenship law and fostered a new network of Ghanaian communities abroad with strong ties to Ghana. My work contextualizes the emergence of these business practices to changes in Ghana's economic policies since the Economic Recovery Program (ERP) implemented through the 1980s and cultural changes that encouraged the formation of small formal and

---

<sup>1</sup> Wanlov The Kubolor, "Green Card," on the album *Green Card*, released November 15, 2007 (Pidgen Music), available on iTunes.

<sup>2</sup> The diversity visa lottery was created as part of the Immigration Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-649). Each year since 1994 the U.S. has run a one-month "lottery" registration during which nationals of countries that send relatively few migrants to the United States may submit their names for selection for a permanent resident visa or green card. 50,000 diversity visas are issued each year, with no country receiving more than 3,500. Approximately 6% of all immigrant visas went to DVL winners each year in the first decade of its existence. However, DVs constituted approximately 1/3 of African immigrant visas. Among Ghanaian immigrants in 1996, 58% were DV winners. Statistics from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1996*, U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1997.

informal enterprises that often approximated state services. The history of the success of visa services entrepreneurs in Ghana is also linked to a period of globalization that simultaneously fostered mass migration and reinforced the importance of borders and national identity.

From 1981 through the elections in 2000, Ghana's government was headed by Jerry John Rawlings, first under military rule, and beginning in 1993, as democratically elected president. In the 1980s Rawlings embraced neoliberal economic policies, proceeding with official policies of Structural Adjustment, promulgated by the IMF and World Bank. While these policies benefitted some in Ghana, many ordinary people suffered, particularly urban workers. High unemployment paired with a reduction in state services led to both privation and productivity. Many in Ghana longed for "exit options," and sought them in neighboring countries and Europe. Simultaneously, it became increasingly difficult for West Africans to enter Europe lawfully (due to a new border regime associated with the burgeoning European Union) or even to attain a visitor's visa to the United States. But then in 1994, the DV lottery began, offering the gift of up to 3500 permanent resident visas to randomly selected Ghanaians who applied – and created new commercial opportunities for squeezed Ghanaian entrepreneurs.

Although the U.S. issued numerous warnings and advisories that entering the lottery was free, and winning was randomized, visa entrepreneurs, both American and Ghana-based, promised to improve applicants' chances – for a staggering array of fees.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there was no way to improve an applicant's chances of winning the lottery. But photographers set up photo booths to produce 2x2 photographs now needed in large numbers for visa applications. Visa services agencies offered to help those applicants stymied by the visa application, promising expertise in navigating U.S. policy. Visa consultants set up information tables on university campuses to enroll students into the lottery. Travel agencies, and later, Internet cafes dedicated their time to visa services. Some businesses promised to help individuals apply for and receive passports and other documentation – sometimes fraudulent – for which many Ghanaians had had no prior need. Visa services agents also facilitated DV marriages, termed "pop-ups" since the relationships were formed after the DV applicants had been selected in the lottery – these arrangements helped individuals raise funds for the visa fees and airfare travel necessary if they won the lottery. Businesses even sprang up to help make travel arrangements for applicants' visa interviews at the consulate in Accra, and consultants coached applicants on how to answer consular officers' questions. The majority of DV applicants, the Accra consulate reported, sought assistance from visa consultants in order to enter the lottery.<sup>4</sup> My interviews conducted in Ghana in Spring 2013 confirm this trend.

These businesses, I argue, not only profited from the U.S. policy, but they served Ghana's state and semi-state functions, from efforts ranging from issuing national identity papers, to ensuring applications were sent to the U.S. via DHL or other private mail carriers, and then posted by U.S. mail to the necessary P.O. Box. West Africans relied on private courier

---

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. visa warning," *West Africa*, May 30-June 5, 1994, p.963

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives: Border Security: Fraud Risks Complicate State's Ability to Manage Diversity Visa Program*, September 2007.

services to deliver their international mail.<sup>5</sup> But because the United States required that applications be delivered to a P.O. Box in the U.S. via national mail carrier, lottery applicants sometimes circumvented the rules by paying visa agencies to deliver their applications to the U.S. where partners were said to be waiting to post the applications via U.S.P.S. mail. In other instances, post offices became a site of Ghanaians' protest of the failure of state services; their protests marked that the limits of privatization were unacceptable.

Ghana's visa services agents served as promoters of U.S. immigration policy. Ghanaians heard more about the lottery from these private business interests than they did from consular staff, whose ability to reach the public was limited. As a result of the format of the lottery and the practices of visa services agencies, the diversity visa became a means of imagining the United States. The lottery created an opportunity for ordinary people to engage with the United States on their own terms. As a result, they gave their own meanings to the American Dream, and hastened to enter the DV lottery.

In 2000, Ghana adopted a dual citizenship law, enabling Ghanaians who departed Ghana and taken on a new national identity, to apply for and retain Ghanaian citizenship.<sup>6</sup> This new law responded to Ghana's increasing expatriate population; it was an effort to maintain close national ties among the Ghanaians abroad. This has had political consequences, as the diaspora is invited to participate in Ghana's electoral politics, material consequences, as remittances have come to form a major source of income for the country, and cultural consequences, as expatriate Ghanaians have come "home" to build large ostentatious houses, deemed "funeral houses," while failing to bring back needed skills and expertise. Dual citizenship has enabled expat Ghanaians to return home more often – but it has also removed a barrier to emigration.

Emigration, in the meantime, continues to be big business in Ghana, spawning various visa services agencies, consultants, and social media sites, where many Ghanaians consider the DV lottery to be a gift from the American people.

---

<sup>5</sup> DHL enjoyed a 53% market share in Africa by 2000, Neta Nwosu, "DHL Courier Company Launches Africa First Campaign," *The Post Express (Lagos, Nigeria)*, August 24, 2000, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200008240424.html>. DHL began operations in Ghana in 1984. "DHL: Corporate – DHL's History," DHL, accessed December 3, 2011, <http://wap.dhl.com/info/history.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Dual nationality is guided by Section 16 of the Citizenship Act 2000 (Act 591) and the Citizenship Regulations 2001 Section 10 and Section 11.