



Postcolonial Passages: Tiken Jah Fakoly and the Musical Intervention of African Mobility

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Ivoirian reggae musician Tiken Jah Fakoly critically engages with issues of African migration, displacement, and postcolonial identity through his music. Drawing on detailed analyses of five selected songs: ‘Le Descendant’ (1996), ‘Où veux-tu que j’aïlle?’ (2004), ‘Ouvrez les frontières’ (2007), ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’ (2022), and ‘Africain à Paris’ (2007), the article argues that Fakoly’s artistic practice serves as a musical site of intervention, resistance, and reflection on the complexities of African mobility. Fakoly’s lyrical compositions engage the entangled tensions of historical rootedness, structural injustice, existential displacement, and diasporic alienation, thereby contesting dominant narratives that reduce African migration to simplistic or stereotypical frames. In addition to a postcolonial lens, the study draws on African epistemologies and cultural knowledge systems to foreground how Fakoly’s music reflects indigenous logics of identity, belonging, and resistance, and its analysis reveals that Fakoly’s songs articulate a nuanced critique of contemporary border regimes, exclusionary politics, and structural inequalities inherited from colonialism. This study contributes to scholarship in migration studies, African popular music, indigenous knowledge systems, and postcolonial critique by positioning Fakoly’s songs as important cultural texts that reimagine migration as both historical consciousness and political praxis.

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KEYWORDS:

Tiken Jah Fakoly, African
migration, postcolonial
mobility, African
diaspora, African
popular music, African
epistemologies

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jemiluyi O. Postcolonial
Passages: Tiken Jah
Fakoly and the Musical
Intervention of African
Mobility. *Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*. 2026;
16(2): 5, 1–17. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1065>

Transnational migration has garnered significant scholarly attention over the past three decades to emerge as a central concern within broader efforts to critically examine the complexities of global flows, including capital, goods, people, and cultural commodities (Koser 2003; Urry 2012). However, Africa—and, by extension, its peoples—is still too often represented through a reductive lens as a continent defined by large-scale displacement and migration, typically attributed to poverty, political instability, and violent conflict (Jemiluyi 2025a: 4). As Flahaux and de Haas (2016) note, prevailing representations of African migration are heavily shaped by media imagery of mass refugee movements, ‘boat migration,’ and alarmist political rhetoric warning of an imminent immigrant invasion. Such portrayals contribute to the framing of Africa as perpetually in motion, reinforcing entrenched stereotypes that depict the continent through the narrow image of hardship and unrest (Jemiluyi 2025a: 8–10). In more recent times, unauthorized migration from Africa to Europe has become a focal point of attention, often framed through sensationalist media coverage and populist narratives. These discourses perpetuate the notion of a mass ‘exodus’ of desperate Africans fleeing hardship in pursuit of a mythical European ‘El Dorado’ (Flahaux & de Haas 2016).

However, since the early 2000s, there has been a notable growth in scholarly work on contemporary African migration, offering a more nuanced understanding of its dynamics (Bakewell & Jászon 2011; De Bruijn et al. 2001; Flahaux & de Haas 2016). Emerging research reveals that the majority of African migration is intra-continental, directed toward other African countries (Sander & Maimbo 2003; Schoumaker et al. 2013). They emphasize further that, when Africans migrate beyond the continent, their destinations include not only Europe but also the Gulf states and the Americas (Bakewell & de Haas 2007; Flahaux & de Haas 2016). Additionally, contrary to the widespread perception that African emigration is predominantly irregular, previous research has shown that a substantial proportion of Africans who migrate beyond the continent do so with proper visas, passports, and other official travel documents (Schoorl et al. 2000). Likewise, scholarship has increasingly challenged the implicit assumption that African migration is somehow ‘exceptional’ or fundamentally distinct from migration patterns in other regions of the world. A growing body of micro-level evidence suggests that, like elsewhere, the majority of African migrants move primarily for reasons related to family, employment, or education (Bakewell & Jónsson 2011; Schoumaker et al. 2013).

Undoubtedly, the discourse surrounding African migration is one that is marked by considerable complexity, and, in fact, further compounded by the negative portrayals of Africa and Africans prevalent in global media narratives. These representations, often racialized and sensationalized, reinforce harmful stereotypes but also contribute directly to systemic practices of discrimination, particularly in the contexts of international mobility and visa acquisition (Jemiluyi 2025a). Africans frequently face disproportionately rigorous, costly, and strenuous visa application processes compared to individuals from European and other Western nations, reflecting underlying structures of global inequality and racial bias (König & de Regt 2009: 2). Given these discursive and structural forces, this article examines the musical interventions of the renowned Ivorian musician Tiken Jah Fakoly within the discourse surrounding African migration and displacement.

Fakoly's position as a prominent figure in radical African artistry is well-established, and numerous scholarly works have explored his contributions to political activism, Pan-African solidarity, and critiques of neocolonial governance (Bourderionnet 2008; Jemiluyi 2024; Schumann 2015). However, despite the critical acclaim and extensive scholarly attention Fakoly's work has received, his explicit engagement with the question of migration and displacement remains significantly understudied. This article addresses this scholarly gap by investigating how Fakoly's music serves as a potent site for interrogating, reframing, and challenging dominant narratives surrounding African migration.

Methodologically, the present study adopts an interpretive, close textual analysis of five songs: 'Le Descendant' (1996), 'Où veux-tu que j'aille?' (2004), 'Ouvrez les frontières' (2007), 'Où est-ce que tu vas?' (2022), and 'Un Africain à Paris' (2007). These songs were selected because they most explicitly engage questions of roots, borders, mobility, and diasporic life, and they are analyzed through a postcolonial theoretical lens and African-centered epistemologies. By analyzing selected songs from his repertoire, this study aims to uncover how Fakoly artistically critiques restrictive mobility practices, challenges discriminatory migration discourses, and foregrounds the lived experiences and agency of African migrants.

COLONIAL BORDERS, POSTCOLONIAL MOVEMENT, MIGRATION, AND MUSIC

Colonialism has exerted a profound and enduring influence on migration patterns across Africa, shaping both the dynamics of mobility during the colonial era and in the decades following independence. Under colonial rule, forced migration was widespread, as African populations were frequently displaced from their ancestral lands to accommodate European settlers, extractive industries, and large-scale agricultural enterprises. Colonial economies were dependent on coerced labor systems, subjecting millions of Africans to exploitative forms of mobility, including indentured servitude, forced resettlement, and conscription into colonial military forces. Colonial administrations actively facilitated labor migration to support the economic imperatives of empires. In particular, workers from British colonies such as Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia), Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia), and Malawi were systematically enlisted to labor in the mining sector in South Africa (Money 2019).

Colonialism also catalyzed significant rural-to-urban migration as colonial powers established urban centers as administrative, commercial, and industrial hubs (Bakewell & Jónsson 2011). Cities such as Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Lagos experienced rapid growth as Africans relocated in pursuit of employment opportunities in colonial bureaucracies, trade, and emerging industries. The colonial carving of African territories imposed arbitrary borders that frequently bisected ethnic groups and disregarded existing social and political configurations, giving rise to artificial nation-states (Fall 2010). These imposed boundaries triggered waves of cross-border migration, as individuals sought to maintain familial ties or access economic opportunities across newly established lines. Beyond migration, such partitioning also planted the seeds of future conflict, as communities once unified were fragmented and positioned within different colonial jurisdictions, sometimes as rivals, thereby destabilizing regional cohesion well into the postcolonial era.

Post-independence migration patterns in Africa are still heavily influenced by the structural legacies of colonialism. Colonial economic systems, designed to serve imperial interests, entrenched structural dependence on the export of primary commodities and hindered industrial diversification (Taylor 2016). This dependency has contributed to chronic poverty and underdevelopment, prompting many to migrate in search of improved livelihoods. More so, political instability and violent conflict, which are often rooted in colonial-era territorial divisions and systems of governance, remain significant drivers of displacement (Flahaux & De Haas 2016). Civil wars, ethnic strife, and authoritarian repression have forced millions to flee their homes, both internally and across national borders (Lichtenheld 2020). Protracted conflicts in countries such as Rwanda, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have produced some of the continent's largest refugee and internally displaced populations. Besides shaping migration patterns, colonial legacy also informs the racialized imaginaries that accompany African mobility in the West. As Jemiluyi (2025a: 2) observes, even in a nation such as the United States, which is often celebrated as a nation of immigrants, Africans are often subsumed into a monolithic category of Blackness, where their identities are filtered through colonial-era stereotypes and flattened perceptions of African backwardness and primitivism.

The intersection of music and migration has itself been a contentious area within scholarly discussions, precisely because it operates at the nexus of memory, advocacy, and resistance. Kasinitz and Martiniello (2019: 860) lend insight into this discourse, highlighting how popular music within urban migratory contexts serves as a powerful medium for cross-cultural dialogue, enabling diverse groups to communicate and foster a shared sense of local citizenship. Similarly, Stokes (2020: 14–15) emphasizes that music actively participates in broader discourses on migration and citizenship, especially when marginalized communities harness it to assert their rights to belong and participate politically and socially within host societies. Although Western contexts have particularly recognized and attributed political agency to musical expressions, analogous dynamics resonate profoundly within African cultures, where music has historically functioned as a transgressive force mobilizing communities, bridging divisions, and articulating demands for justice and inclusion.

This transgressive capacity is also evident in the ethnographic study by Kiwan and Meinhof (2011), who examine how African migrant musicians navigate and reshape global cultural geographies. Their work posits that African artists construct complex linkages between the Global North and South, frequently returning home to reinvigorate local musical communities while carrying with them the cultural capital gained through transnational exposure. Kiwan and Meinhof further note that mobile African musicians inhabit translocal and transnational cultural spaces that expand their networks and facilitate more sustainable cultural production and exchange (2011: 160). These insights highlight African music's role as a dynamic force in shaping identity, connectivity, and agency across borders.

SINGING MIGRATION: AN ANALYSIS OF FAKOLY'S MUSICAL DISCOURSE

Born Doumbia Moussa Fakoly in Côte d'Ivoire, Tiken Jah Fakoly is a renowned Ivorian reggae artist esteemed for his significant musical contributions in contemporary Africa. Embodying what can be described as a modern-day griot, Fakoly uses his music as a platform to articulate political critique, advocate for social justice, and speak truth

to power. True to the role of the griot in West African oral traditions, he has consistently positioned himself as a custodian of memory and a commentator on the moral and political state of the society (Jemiluyi 2024: 30). Fakoly's discography is marked by a commitment to African emancipation, Pan-African solidarity, and the urgent call for collective accountability and resistance. His outspoken criticism of Ivoirian and West African political elites contributed to threats against his life during the Ivoirian crisis, and, in 2003, he went into exile in Bamako, Mali, where he has since made his home while touring widely across Africa and Europe (Bourderionnet 2008: 14). Fakoly's own trajectory—from northern Côte d'Ivoire to Abidjan and then into political exile in Bamako—means that questions of mobility, displacement, and belonging are indeed lived realities that shape his artistic vision. It is therefore unsurprising that issues of movement and exile recur throughout his artistic output, where they are refracted through oral traditions, Pan-African consciousness, and everyday experiences of border regimes. However, despite the prominent exploration of movement and exile in Fakoly's repertoire, academic inquiry into these aspects of his work remains limited. Hence, this study focuses on five of his songs (as seen in Table 1) that center on the questions of migration, displacement, and African mobility. In addition to employing a postcolonial framework, the analysis is grounded in African epistemologies and indigeneity, drawing from culturally rooted ways of knowing, belonging, and remembering that enrich the discourse with a nuanced, contextually specific perspective.

ROOTS AND HISTORICAL INJUSTICE

In narrating African mobility, Fakoly begins with the acknowledgment of his roots. One of his earliest songs, 'Le Descendant' (The Descendant), exemplifies this orientation by opening the song with a strong invocation of lineage and origin:

Je suis Le Descendant de Fakoly	<i>I am the descendant of Fakoly</i>
Je ne sais pas où je vais	<i>I don't know where I'm going</i>
mais je sais d'où je viens...	<i>but I know where I come from...</i>
Moi je suis celui de	<i>I am the one</i>
de Fakoly Koumba Any Fakoly Daaba	<i>from Fakoly Koumba Any Fakoly Daaba</i>

Fakoly situates himself genealogically and historically, asserting a firm connection to his ancestral past even in the face of uncertain movement. However, this lyrical contrast between not knowing 'où je vais' (where I'm going) and knowing 'd'où je viens' (where I come from) establishes a critical tension between displacement and rootedness, and this declaration begs the question of why is it necessary—urgent, even—for the artist to affirm his origins so explicitly? The response to this question

SONG TITLE	YEAR	ANALYTICAL FOCUS
<i>Le Descendant</i>	1996	Ancestry, rootedness, identity, postcolonial belonging
<i>Où veux-tu que j'aïlle ?</i>	2004	Internal displacement, exclusion, ethno-political conflict
<i>Ouvrez les frontières</i>	2007	Border regimes, mobility restrictions, Pan-African solidarity
<i>Où est-ce que tu vas ?</i>	2022	Dangerous migration routes, youth precarity, existential uncertainty
<i>Un Africain à Paris</i>	2007	Diasporic alienation, marginalization abroad, racialized belonging

Table 1 Summary of songs analyzed.

lies in the postcolonial struggle over identity and historical coherence in several African societies. Colonialism redrew borders and restructured economies. It imposed new identities through the forced merging of ethnicities, the arbitrary partitioning of communities, and the institutionalized erasure of precolonial histories (Aregbeshola & Adekunle 2024: 3–4).

It is also important to consider the historical moment in which the song was released, as its timing significantly informs and deepens its contribution to the broader discourse. Released in 1996, ‘Le Descendant’ emerged at a moment of acute national and regional tension. In Côte d’Ivoire, questions surrounding *Ivoirité* (‘Ivorian-ness’), which is a contested notion of national identity, had become highly politicized, particularly following the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and the civil unrest of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The socio-political discourse of the time was marked by exclusionary rhetoric that positioned certain groups, especially those from the north, as less authentically Ivorian (Akindès 2003: 11–15). Fakoly, himself of northern Mandé descent, uses this song to resist such erasures by affirming an unbroken cultural lineage that defeats postcolonial suspicion. His invocation of Fakoly Koumba and Fakoly Daaba, who are historical figures rooted in Mandé oral traditions, grounds his identity in a precolonial Pan-African heritage as an authentic and undisputed Ivorian.

Nevertheless, the crisis of belonging in postcolonial Côte d’Ivoire runs so deep that Fakoly finds it necessary not only to assert his identity but also to substantiate it, as he does in ‘Le Descendant’ by further meticulously tracing his patrilineal ancestry across eight generations:

Mon premier ancêtre s'appelait Toubouré	<i>My first ancestor was called Toubouré</i>
Toubouré a été suivi par Fandê	<i>Toubouré was followed by Fandê</i>
Fandê a été suivi de Djé	<i>Fandê was followed by Djé</i>
Djé a été suivi de Djessé	<i>Djé was followed by Djessé</i>
Djessé a été suivi de Katélé	<i>Djessé was followed by Katélé</i>
Katéle a été suivi par Soumankaly	<i>Katéle was followed by Soumankaly</i>
Soumankaly suivi par Yérélenko	<i>Soumankaly was followed by Yérélenko</i>
Yérélenko a été suivi par Fakoly	<i>Yérélenko was followed by Fakoly</i>

At first glance, Fakoly’s chant resembles a panegyric recitation, a form of praise poetry common across many African oral cultures wherein ancestral names are recited to affirm lineage, identity, and honor (Adéèkó 2019: 335–336). However, in reciting his ancestral chain, Fakoly asserts to enact a form of indigenous historiography, grounding himself in a long-standing cultural logic that values African ancestry as proof of identity, belonging, and authority. This need to validate one’s place within the nation speaks to the perverse effects of colonial boundary-making and the persistent postcolonial anxiety over who truly belongs. It reveals the extent to which the postcolony has internalized the colonial logic of division, requiring citizens, particularly those from marginalized regions or ethnic groups, to prove their authenticity, often in ways that are alien to indigenous ways of knowing. This reflects what Fanon (1963) describes as the legacy of colonialism’s ‘multiplied divisions and opposing groups,’ which fractured communities and ‘fashioned classes and sometimes even racial prejudices’ (11). The lingering effects of these imposed divisions continue to haunt the postcolonial nation, where citizenship and belonging remain contested terrains. Fakoly’s act of tracing his ancestry is, thus, both an affirmation of rootedness and an indictment of a state that demands historical validation in place of justice, dignity, or mutual recognition.

The consequences of these historical injustices and the structural disarray of postcolonial African states are further revisited in ‘Où veux-tu que j’aille?’, a song that shifts the focus from ancestral memory to existential dislocation. Here, Fakoly voices the frustration and alienation of a generation rendered stateless in its own land, disillusioned by leadership, betrayed by borders, and denied a future. The song opens with a haunting refrain:

Où veux-tu que j’aille ?	<i>Where do you want me to go?</i>
Où veux-tu que j’aille ?	<i>Where do you want me to go?</i>
Pourquoi veux-tu que j’m’en aille ?	<i>Why do you want me to leave?</i>
Où veux-tu que j’aille ?	<i>Where do you want me to go?</i>

There is a dual function that these repeated questions perform. On one level, they evoke the deep sense of internal displacement experienced by postcolonial African citizens, those who, despite being born and raised within their countries of origin, find themselves treated as outsiders due to ethnicity, region, religion, or class (Redclift 2015). Fakoly’s voice captures the anguish of being alienated within one’s own homeland, a condition that often propels individuals to seek refuge or opportunity beyond national borders. On another level, the questions are defiant, for, beneath the surface of this expressed despair, there is a fight for recognition; justice; and the right to belong, remain, and participate as a full citizen in one’s own society. Nevertheless, the problem of internal displacement is a big global challenge. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2019), by the end of 2018, there were approximately 41.3 million internally displaced persons worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa recorded the highest numbers, with about 7.4 million people displaced as a result of violence and conflict (Salami et al. 2020: 2). Fakoly’s engagement with the question of displacement is thus situated within a wider context of structural instability that disproportionately affects the Global South, particularly African states grappling with the legacies of colonial partitioning and ongoing political fragmentation. Fakoly deepens this critique in his first verse:

T’as brûlé ma maison d’Abidjan	<i>You burned down my house in Abidjan</i>
Parce que je ne suis pas de ton clan	<i>Because I’m not from your clan</i>
Mon grand-père t’a tout donné	<i>My grandfather gave you everything</i>
Mon papa a tant sué	<i>My father worked so hard</i>
Moi je suis né là	<i>I was born there</i>
Pourquoi veux-tu que j’m’en aille ?	<i>Why do you want me to leave?</i>

In these lines, Fakoly exposes the violence of exclusionary politics, specifically the ethno-political tensions that have erupted in Côte d’Ivoire and beyond. The destruction of his ‘house in Abidjan’ for not belonging to the dominant clan reflects the brutal reality of identity-based conflict, where political belonging is often contingent on ethnic affiliation. The reference to his grandfather’s generosity, his father’s labor, and his own birthright all converge into a stirring argument for national inclusion. Fakoly’s lyrics also speak to a phenomenon seen across multiple African contexts, where tribalism, often exacerbated by colonial divide-and-rule strategies, has fueled internal conflict and displacement. The Ivorian civil wars (2002–2007 and 2010–2011); the Rwandan genocide (1994); and the ethnic violence in countries such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria illustrate how colonial-era divisions

have persisted into the present, reshaped as instruments of exclusion and expulsion (Akindès 2003; Balorda 2021; Paine 2019). Fakoly's 'Où veux-tu que j'aïlle?' thus embodies a cry of pain and, at the same time, serves as a political indictment of the nation's failure to uphold the most basic promise of postcolonial sovereignty—the right to belong.

Significantly, Fakoly's lyrical stance in 'Où veux-tu que j'aïlle?' transitions from the singular *je* (I) to the collective *nous* (we) as he sings:

Nous sommes tous nés là	<i>We were all born there</i>
Exilés sans autre choix	<i>Exiled with no other choice</i>
Nos grands-pères se sont sacrifiés (tirailleurs !)	<i>Our grandfathers sacrificed themselves [tirailleurs!]</i>
Nos papas se sont intégrés	<i>Our fathers assimilated</i>
Même si on nous traite d'étrangers	<i>Even though we're treated like strangers</i>
Pourquoi veux-tu qu'on s'en aille ?	<i>Why do you want us to leave?</i>

With this critical rhetorical shift, Fakoly moves from individual testimony to collective resistance and broadens his voice to speak on behalf of all Africans who have been rendered alien within and beyond their own borders. His use of *nous* (we) reframes the problem of exclusion not as a personal grievance, but as a shared African reality rooted in the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and postcolonial betrayal. He sends his appeal to national governments and African societies at large, encoding a message of solidarity that any African country should be a home for all Africans; whether one is a Beti from Cameroon, a Yoruba from Nigeria, a Wolof from Senegal, or a Bété from Côte d'Ivoire, the shared trauma of historical displacement and collective sacrifice should serve as the foundation for solidarity and not exclusion. With Fakoly's emphasis on collective birth, exile, and ancestral labor, he articulates an Afrocentric ethics of hospitality grounded in historical consciousness and the memory of shared struggle.

It is also significant that Fakoly references 'tirailleurs' to cement his point, 'Nos grands-pères se sont sacrifiés (tirailleurs!)' (Our grandfathers sacrificed themselves [tirailleurs!]), which is also both a remembrance and a reckoning. The tirailleurs were West African soldiers conscripted into the French colonial army, fighting in both World Wars under a flag that never recognized them as equals. These men bore arms for imperial powers that had subjugated them, and many of them died in anonymity while their contributions were erased from official histories (Lunn 2009). The injustice of their experience culminated in events such as the Thiaroye Massacre of 1944, when French forces opened fire on unarmed West African veterans in the Thiaroye camp in Senegal, killing dozens who were protesting delayed wages and poor treatment (Parent 2010). This atrocity has been portrayed in Ousmane Sembène's film *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) as a cinematic indictment of colonial betrayal and historical amnesia. Fakoly's reference to the tirailleurs in his song extends this indictment as a musical reminder that African sacrifice has too often been met with neglect and violence. The historical injustice of denying African veterans dignity mirrors the contemporary injustice of denying African youth mobility, opportunity, and belonging.

This message finds its full expression in Fakoly's 'Ouvrez les frontières' (Open the borders), a song that calls explicitly for the abolition of intra-African borders and the unrestricted movement of African peoples globally. While scholars have examined

the phenomenon of brain drain as a legacy of colonialism that pushed African intellectuals and professionals to seek opportunities abroad due to the limited educational and economic infrastructures left behind (Aregbeshola & Adekunle 2024; Safran 1991), Fakoly's position is more expansive. He does not oppose migration; rather, he advocates for its redefinition by calling for a model of empowered, intentional movement where African youths are allowed access to education and resources across the continent and can then return to contribute to their countries' development through remittances, investments, and skills transfer. In this vision, mobility becomes a strategy for the transformation of African states, although remaining fraught with paradox and resistance.

In the opening verse of 'Ouvrez les frontières,' Fakoly sharply critiques the hypocrisy inherent in global mobility regimes. He points to the ease with which Westerners enter African nations, where they are warmly received and made to feel entirely at home—'Vous êtes ici chez vous' (You are at home here). Yet, when Africans attempt to move beyond their borders, they are met with closed doors and restrictive policies, capturing this disparity keenly when he sings, 'On veut partir alors ouvrez-nous la porte' (We want to leave, so open the door for us), metaphorically signaling the difficulty and frustration of seeking mobility under postcolonial constraints. While highlighting the open-door policies extended to foreign visitors and simultaneously exposing the asymmetry of global citizenship, where freedom of movement becomes shaped by race, class, and the lingering hierarchies of colonialism, he gives voice to a generation that is not seeking to escape responsibility but instead to fulfill its potential as workers, students, and contributors to development as he sings: 'Nous voulons voyager / Et aussi travailler / Mais nous, on vous a pas refusé le visa' (We want to travel / And also to work / But we never refused you a visa").

Fakoly has consistently emphasized, in both his music and media appearances, the indispensable role of African youth in shaping the continent's future. Given that Africa is the youngest continent demographically, with over 60% of its population under the age of 25 (Rocca & Schultes n.d: 2), this concern is rooted in the sobering recognition that the continent's greatest resource is also the most vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and premature loss. When legal migration routes are blocked or burdened with impossible restrictions, many young Africans tend to be driven to pursue irregular migration, often with tragic consequences, and the Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard for thousands, their journeys ending in silence rather than success. The tightening of borders and the proliferation of punitive migration regimes, besides hindering movement, actively undermine the aspirations and potential of a generation. It is through 'Ouvrez les frontières' that Fakoly challenges these structures by calling for a new paradigm where mobility is cultivated and African lives are valued both at home and wherever they seek opportunity, for, according to Fakoly, open borders equals open futures.

DEPARTURE, DISPLACEMENT, AND DISILLUSIONMENT

While some of Fakoly's earlier songs bring to the fore the historical roots of exclusion, some of his other songs shift the focus to the emotional and existential costs of departure. Even as he advocates for open borders and greater mobility for Africans, Fakoly remains critically attuned to the profound sense of uncertainty, alienation, and loss that often accompanies such movement, while simultaneously resisting simplistic portrayals of migration as inherently empowering and firmly rejecting illegal migration

and border crossings. In ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’ (Where Are You Going to?), Fakoly positions himself as both a concerned elder and a cultural commentator, providing counsel to African youth while posing urgent questions about their intentions and decisions regarding migration. In many African societies, elders play a central role in the moral and social fabric of the community, serving both as custodians of wisdom and ethical compasses for the younger generation with their provided advice, warnings, and blessings that often guide life choices, especially in matters as consequential as leaving home (Sefa [Dei 2020](#)).

This role carries even greater significance when one considers Fakoly’s lineage. As a descendant of griots, a hereditary caste of West African oral historians and social critics, he inherits a tradition of public speech, truth-telling, and moral advocacy. Fakoly himself has stated that he performs his griotic responsibility through reggae music, using the medium as a vehicle to inform, caution, and resist ([Jemiluyi 2024](#): 30), and, in ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’, he embodies this role fully, not relying entirely on didacticism but rather through empathetic interrogation. Though studies have shown that a significant number of African immigrants travel with valid documentation and are among the most educated demographics within many diasporic contexts ([Anderson & Connor 2018](#); [Schoorl et al. 2000](#)), the persistence of illegal migration among African youth remains a pressing issue. This is often driven by structural disenfranchisement such as chronic unemployment, corruption, and the failure of postcolonial states to provide economic security or political inclusion, creating conditions that fuel desperation and the allure of imagined opportunities abroad, even at great personal risk. This enigma is precisely what Fakoly captures in the song’s chorus: ‘Où est ce que tu vas? / Toi-même, tu ne le sais pas / La traversée est dangereuse / Si tu savais,’ (Where are you going? / You don’t even know yourself / The crossing is dangerous / If only you knew).

Without necessarily resorting to condemnation, Fakoly offers a cautionary voice through his repeated questioning of ‘Where are you going?’, which serves less as a demand for an immediate answer and more as an invitation to introspection and critical reflection. Seeking to humanize the migrant, he depicts the young Africans he addresses as individuals burdened by the contradictions of postcolonial life full of aspiration, yet blocked by immovable systems, and not as statistical abstractions or policy problems as they are often depicted in media discourse ([Flahaux & de Haas 2016](#)). When juxtaposed with his earlier song ‘Le Descendant,’ in which Fakoly declares that he does not know where he is going but knows where he comes from, ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’ reveals a persistent theme of uncertainty that continues to shape African mobility. In a global context, while European citizens traverse borders with relative ease ([König & de Regt 2009](#): 2), African movement remains heavily policed both symbolically and bureaucratically, underscoring that, for many Africans, migration is a contested terrain marked by instability and restriction. Although this question of precarious movement recurs in both songs, they diverge in a crucial way as such that in ‘Le Descendant,’ the lack of direction is tempered by a strong sense of rootedness and ancestral certainty, whereas, in ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’, the uncertainty is more acute and reflects systemic displacement and constrained mobility. This contrast highlights the complexity of African migration and speaks to the importance of accounting for factors such as historical dislocation, socioeconomic conditions, and geopolitical barriers when studying African mobilities.

In ‘Où est-ce que tu vas?’, Fakoly refers to this pursuit of precarious mobility, particularly through illegal and dangerous routes as ‘à poursuivre un mirage’ (chasing a mirage), where, in reality, ‘nombreux se sont perdus en route’ (many were lost along the way)

in the desperate hope of ‘à croire à un miracle’ (believing in a miracle). This illusory promise of salvation through departure frequently leads to devastating outcomes, and, as Fakoly laments, ‘nombreux ont connu la déroute’ (many have faced disaster). The dream often dissolves into tragedy, culminating in irreversible losses that leads to palpable sorrow and losses:

Combien de mères ne reverront jamais leurs fils	<i>How many mothers will never see their sons again</i>
Combien de mères pleurent ceux qui sont partis	<i>How many mothers are crying for those who have gone</i>

While these lines convey the human cost of forced migration, it is equally important to recognize the cultural significance of youth in many African societies, for it deepens the emotional and societal weight of Fakoly’s words. In many African societies, children, especially sons, are viewed as intergenerational investments; their economic mobility is often seen as key to lifting entire families out of poverty, and their success abroad is expected to yield material and symbolic returns to their communities (Ofosu-Kusi 2017). As bearers of patriarchal responsibility, these sons are often expected to perform masculinity through provision, leadership, and transnational achievement (Jemiluyi 2025b). Thus, when they perish in pursuit of illusory futures, the loss extends far beyond the private grief of a mother; it echoes throughout the societal structure, as it is not only the maternal figures who weep in response but also Mama Africa herself.

Fakoly moves on to a personal warning in the second verse, where he lays bare the emotional and psychological toll of illegal migration:

Tu veux croire à un rêve	<i>You want to believe in a dream</i>
Tu risques de croiser le cauchemar	<i>You risk encountering a nightmare</i>
Et quand tu te reveilles	<i>And when you wake up</i>
Il est souvent trop tard	<i>It is often too late</i>
J’ai vu couler des larmes	<i>I have seen tears f</i>
Quand l’espoir devient désespoir	<i>When hope turns into despair</i>
Je peux raconter les drames	<i>I can recount the tragedies</i>
De ceux qui n’ont pas voulu voir	<i>Of those who refused to see</i>

Fakoly charts the illegal immigrant’s journey as one that moves swiftly from ‘rêve’ (dream) to ‘cauchemar’ (nightmare), a striking antithesis that encapsulates the disillusionment of migration. The optimism that propels departure is undercut by a harsh awakening that often comes too late, and the shift from espoir (hope) to désespoir (despair), another stark antithesis, reflects a deep psychological unraveling grounded in the harsh realities of unmet expectations. The imagery Fakoly constructs here is vivid and intimate, as though he is recounting either a real story he once witnessed or channeling his inherited role as a griot narrating the lived truths of the community with ethical urgency. This moral gravitas becomes even clearer in the verse that follows, where he, again, adopts the tone of a guiding elder to ensure the warning is heard and at the same time deeply understood:

Ceux partis avant toi	<i>Those who left before you</i>
Que crois-tu qu’ils ont trouvés?	<i>What do you think they found?</i>
Ceux partis avant toi	<i>Those who left before you</i>

S'ils pouvaient, ils te diraient
Ne prends pas ce bateau
Écoute le sens du message

Ne prends pas ce bateau
Qui mène tant des vies au naufrage

*If they could, they would tell you
Don't take that boat
Listen to the meaning of
the message
Don't take that boat
That leads so many lives
to shipwreck*

The repetition of 'bateau' (boat) here refers to the overloaded, unseaworthy vessels that have become symbolic of irregular migration across the Mediterranean, routes that have claimed thousands of lives. Studies have documented the deadly risks associated with these crossings, which remain among the world's most dangerous migration corridors (Kassar & Dourgnon 2014). Fakoly's question, 'What do you think those who left before you found?' punctures the optimism that surrounds illegal migration in many communities, exposing a silence around failure, loss, and trauma. If the dead could speak, Fakoly suggests, they would unhesitatingly urge the living to reconsider. Viewed through the lens of African mobility and displacement, Fakoly's 'Où est ce que tu vas?' can also be read as a collective mourning that reflects the broader crisis of forced migration in contemporary Africa. Worsening economic instability, rising youth unemployment, environmental degradation, and persistent political repression tend to prompt young Africans, like their counterparts in other parts of the Global South, to seek opportunities elsewhere without legal migration pathways.

While the complicity of Western migration regimes in restricting African movement is well-documented, Fakoly's lyrics also raise attention toward the role of African leaders in sustaining the very conditions that push their youth into perilous migration. Postcolonial states, having inherited the extractive logic of colonial governance, often reproduce systems of exclusion, corruption, and dispossession. As Fanon (1963: 152) warned, the postcolonial elite frequently acts as a 'transmission line' of colonial interests, managing rather than dismantling systems of oppression. This continuity of structural violence reinforces the very conditions that drive forced migration, leaving the most vulnerable populations trapped between stagnant domestic realities and perilous prospects abroad. While Fakoly's concern is not to shut down African mobility but to reshape its terms, the young African, who becomes a critical figure in his discography as both an agent and victim, must be cured from the intersecting failures of colonial legacies, neoliberal neglect, and postcolonial mismanagement, he posits.

Nevertheless, the disillusionment that marks 'Où est-ce que tu vas?' is not an endpoint on Fakoly's artistic intervention on African mobility, and, though it grapples with the uncertainties surrounding departure and the precarities of irregular migration, 'Africain à Paris' (An African in Paris), a sampled adaptation of Sting's 'Englishman in New York' (1987), turns its gaze toward the alienation, cultural shock, and social invisibility that await on the other side of the journey. In 'Africain à Paris,' Fakoly continues his role as a griot-activist, narrating the everyday realities of African migrants who, after surviving the perilous passage or enduring the legal pathway to get a visa, encounter a different kind of struggle that features a quiet erosion of dignity in exile. In the first verse of 'Un Africain à Paris,' Fakoly opens with a line that initially feels endearing but quickly gives way to the quiet ache of displacement and alienation as the song begins as a letter to his dear mother: 'Maman, je pense à toi je t'écis / D'un trois étoiles à Cachan' (Mom, I'm thinking of you, I'm writing you / From a three-star hotel in Cachan). Although this personal gesture grounds the listener in familial intimacy, this intimate

communication also accentuates the dissonance between the warmth of home and the sterile impersonality of exile.

Fakoly proceeds by assuring his mother, 'Tu vois faut pas que tu trembles ici / J'ai un toit et un peu d'argent' (You see, don't worry / I have a roof over my head and a little money), and adds, 'On vit là tous ensemble on survit / On ne manque presque de rien' (We live here all together, we survive / We're lacking almost nothing). However, the tension in his reassurance is heightened by his choice of diction, which reveals an underlying discomfort as he speaks of 'surviving' rather than 'thriving,' culminating in the haunting line, 'C'est pas l'enfer ni le paradis / D'être un Africain à Paris' (It's neither hell nor paradise / Being an African in Paris), which leads directly into the refrain that embodies a register of melancholy and estrangement:

Oh oh ! Un peu en exil	<i>Oh oh! A little in exile</i>
Etranger dans votre ville	<i>A stranger in your city</i>
Je suis Africain à Paris	<i>I am an African in Paris</i>

In this refrain, Fakoly constructs a disorienting state of in-betweenness where he is not fully exiled and he is not fully at home. As an African immigrant, he finds himself in a suspended condition of 'un peu en exil' (a little in exile), which is an attempt to downplay the immense psychological toll of migration. The immigrant is not cast into outright hostility but rather into a liminal, ambiguous space of polite erasure and social invisibility. When considering Fakoly's 'Africain à Paris,' there are a few stylistic choices that prominently emerge and lend to the song's resonance. One particularly notable aspect is Fakoly's adoption of an autobiographical narrative style. With this narrative intimacy, he moves away from impersonal, abstract portrayals and instead provides a direct glimpse into the emotional complexities faced by individual Africans abroad. Fakoly's use of personal narrative also underscores a broader practice within African oral traditions, particularly the griotic form, which privileges the intimate retelling of lived experiences to convey deeper moral and social messages (Hale 1998).

Another central aspect of the song is its geographical and historical setting in France, specifically Paris, which holds a distinctive resonance for postcolonial francophone migrants. Fakoly deliberately situates the song within France's capital city, which is symbolically significant as a center of colonial power and a primary destination for migrants from former French colonies. France's historical relationship with its former colonies is fraught and shaped by unresolved legacies of colonial exploitation, violence, and cultural domination. Although many African migrants from former French colonies were enticed by explicit or implicit promises of social mobility, citizenship, and prosperity, these assurances frequently went unfulfilled. Instead, migrants were often met with institutionalized racism, socioeconomic marginalization, and cultural alienation (Pernsteiner 2017). Fakoly captures precisely this disillusionment, signaling the gap between the African immigrant expectations and their lived realities. France's role, therefore, is emblematic of a space where the enduring impact of colonialism continues to manifest in contemporary patterns of exclusion, racialization, and discrimination.

Furthermore, the lyrics expose the disheartening and contradictory realities of the African immigrant experience. Fakoly describes a daily life dominated by relentless labor, noting that 'Et du dimanche au dimanche aussi / Je ne fais que travailler' (And from Sunday to Sunday / I do nothing but work). This line speaks to the experience of structural exclusion and socio-economic marginalization that characterizes much of African immigrant labor. Despite their diligent and relentless work ethic, immigrants

often find themselves locked in cycles of low-wage employment, under-recognized and undervalued by their host societies. This reality directly counters the pervasive misconception that is often perpetuated by both media and community narratives that migrating to the West ensures rapid wealth and upward mobility. Instead, immigrants frequently encounter harsh realities, grappling with a profound sense of disappointment, even as they remain burdened by the constant expectation to send remittances back home.

Despite all, Fakoly's portrayal of the condition of the African immigrant is nuanced by a subtle but resilient thread of hope. In reassuring his mother, Fakoly sings: 'Maman je sais que tu as l'habitude / De trop vite t'affoler / Surtout n'aie pas d'inquiétude / Si un hôtel a brûlé' (Mom, I know you tend to panic quickly / Especially don't worry / Even if a hotel caught fire). In these lines, Fakoly acknowledges his mother's instinctive anxiety but still provides reassurance. This expression of hope amidst adversity speaks to a broader cultural and psychological resilience often observed among African immigrants. This act of performing resilience and cautious optimism parallels what Fela Kuti expresses in his iconic song '[Suffering and Smiling, \(1977\)](#)' where he critiques how ordinary Nigerians, despite enduring systemic oppression and hardship, maintain outward signs of perseverance. Fela sings of people who suffer yet continue to smile, critiquing a survival mechanism enmeshed in a unequal society that prioritizes the concealment of pain over collective resistance. Similarly, Fakoly's calm reassurance to his mother masks the instability of immigrant life and reflects a cultural logic in which enduring adversity with dignity becomes both a personal strategy and political stance.

Importantly, although 'Un Africain à Paris' was released in 2007, its sociopolitical relevance remains vividly relevant to contemporary experiences of African immigrants in Western societies. The realities Fakoly describes—structural racism, systemic marginalization, socio-economic precarity, and intense psychological isolation—persist today, as recent studies on African diasporic experiences continue to document ([Asante et al. 2016](#); [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023](#); [Wallace et al. 2021](#)). African immigrants, despite often possessing high levels of education and valuable skillsets, continue to confront significant barriers to meaningful integration and socioeconomic advancement. To include, they remain burdened by complex transnational expectations, continually negotiating pressures to send financial support home, even when their own survival abroad remains precarious. At the end, Fakoly's songs are enduring, critical reflections on the complexities and contradictions that define the African immigrant experiences in the diaspora, urging audiences to reconsider romanticized notions of migration and recognize and critically engage with the continuing structural inequalities inherited from colonial histories.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored how Tiken Jah Fakoly's music intervenes meaningfully in the discourse surrounding African migration, displacement, and postcolonial experience. Through detailed analysis of selected songs, this study has demonstrated how Fakoly's artistic practice critically engages the complexities of African mobility, drawing attention to questions of rootedness, historical injustice, existential dislocation, and the lived realities of African migrants abroad. By integrating close lyrical analysis with postcolonial critique and migration, the article underscores Fakoly's role as a griot-activist whose musical narratives function simultaneously as testimonies, counternarratives, and calls to political consciousness. In doing so, this study contributes to multiple scholarly conversations. It expands migration studies by positioning

African music as a significant cultural text that complicates simplistic portrayals of African migrants, offering instead nuanced narratives of resistance, resilience, and vulnerability. Also, the article enhances understandings of postcolonial African popular music by situating Fakoly's work within broader historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts, demonstrating music's capacity to serve as a vital repository of memory, identity, and resistance.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jemiluyi O. Postcolonial Passages: Tiken Jah Fakoly and the Musical Intervention of African Mobility. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. 2026; 16(2): 5, 1–17. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1065>

Submitted: 2 June 2025

Accepted: 19 November 2025

Published: 21 January 2026

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Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.