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Imagining greener pastures? Shifting perceptions of Europe and mobility in Senegalese society

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Stefano degli Uberti and Bruno Riccio

Imagining greener pastures?

Shifting perceptions of Europe and mobility in Senegalese society

Abstract

Over the past few years, the European crisis and the EU enforcement and externalization of border control have shaped how Europe and migration are perceived in Africa. Areas of out-migration, such as Senegal, are not only experiencing changes in mobility patterns but also a social diversification in the way in which «Europe» is viewed and talked about. While several studies have underlined transformations occurring over time amongst Senegalese migrants in Europe, less attention has been paid to analysing their migration decision-making practices through a diachronic perspective. Drawing on ethnographic research carried out in Senegal and Italy between the mid-1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, this paper aims to explore how imaginaries and narratives of migration and destination countries are formed. Taking into account the interconnections of global and local dynamics, the paper discusses shifting perceptions of Europe and mobility in Senegal, highlighting how imaginaries of «elsewhere» are ambivalent and historically grounded.

Keywords: mobility, culture of migration, imagination, elsewhere, Europe.

Introduction

Senegalese migration to Italy has now spanned almost three decades, and it still is a considerable phenomenon that shapes Italian society (Riccio, degli Uberti,

2013). From the initial mobility of young, single, educated males (20-35 years old) in the mid-1980s to the more recent phenomenon of migrants who try to find their way to Europe by applying for asylum or refugee status, a certain continuity can be seen in Senegalese migration to Italy, one of the main destination countries. While a considerable number of studies have underlined transformations occurring over time among Senegalese migrants in Italy, less attention has been paid to analysing their migration decision-making practices through a diachronic perspective. What are the motivations, processes and social contexts within which the migration aspirations of a growing number of young men and women develop? What are the shared meanings that inform the social practice of imagination? How has the perception of Europe, as a place of destination, changed over time?

The objective of the article is to fill this gap by seeking to understand the decision-making practices of young Senegalese and their perceptions of mobility and Europe over a long time span. We aim to explore how the imaginaries and narratives on migration as well as on destination countries are formed (see Bal, Willems, 2014; Kleist, Thorsen, 2017), by examining how the contents of these social practices have changed as a result of the interconnection of global dynamics and local transformations (Hernández Carretero, 2015)¹.

Against the background of the recent European economic crisis, in parallel with the increasing enforcement and externalization of border controls, areas of out-migration, such as Senegal, are not only experiencing changes in mobility patterns, but also a diversification in the way «Europe» and migration are viewed and talked about. Narratives about migrants as well as images of foreign countries of migration often become metaphors for thinking about social and cultural changes, in turn characterizing the destination countries and the local context themselves (see Gardner, 1995).

By linking the ethnographic research that we carried out in Senegal between the mid-1990s and the first decade of the 2000s (Riccio, 2005; degli Uberti, 2014a), we will be able to track down the multiple factors that lead to the aspiration to migrate, and which foster the conviction that a better life can mostly be achieved «away from home». In order to examine how perceptions of Europe have changed over time, we will scrutinize two key moments in the history of Senegalese migration: the 1990s trajectories of the *Modou modou*², the pioneers of Senegalese transnational migration to Europe, and the early 2000s phenomenon of the «boat migrants» who set off for the Spanish archipelago of

¹ Although the article is the fruit of joint work, section 2 can be attributed to Bruno Riccio whereas sections 1 and 3 to Stefano degli Uberti. The introduction and conclusion are the result of shared work.

² *Modou modou* has progressively become the Wolof term that refers to migrants, and more specifically the Senegalese migrants from Diourbel, Kebemer and Touba. The expression often identifies an itinerant and illiterate merchant, who stands out for his skills in trading and saving money, mainly directed at investing his gain in showy things once back in Senegal. Their attitude towards saving and working far from home for the well-being of the family are assumed as the key factors of social success. These features support the image of the *Modou modou* as a symbol of Senegalese contemporary society.

the Canary Islands, risking their lives to «*gagner l'Europe*». As we will illustrate, these two figures of Senegalese migration are strictly interlinked, showing the different effects of social practices and narratives that revolve around them on collective representations of the «Senegalese migrant» and on intentions to migrate abroad. We argue that in the Senegalese public sphere the phenomenon of boat migration which has been taking place since 2005 has marked changing attitudes and a profound cultural shift on the social perception of the figure of the *Modou modou*, who had represented the emblem of modernity and progress of Senegalese society for the previous two decades. Examining the narratives and the social practices of migrants and non-migrant people through a historical lens will enhance the understanding of their experiences, the frictions and the shifting perceptions of motivations for migration.

As suggested by several scholars, narratives on migration and on contexts of destination are always socially embedded and culturally informed (Kandel, Massey, 2002; Gardner, 1995). We contend that social representations of Europe and the construction of an imaginary «elsewhere» are also locally specific and historically grounded. Based on ethnographic data collected in different locations and chronological periods, we will develop an analysis of Senegalese migration through a long-term perspective that will enable us to shed light on the cultural shifts and ambivalences that have informed the social representation of Europe in Senegalese local contexts. In parallel, analysis of the similarities and differences shaping the social representation of the «Senegalese migrant» in the two time periods will show how rising ambivalence toward migrants is a consequence of a series of social and economic changes that occurred between these two time periods.

These issues will be addressed by turning our attention to some specific themes: the social and moral status of migrants in Senegalese society; the returning migrant as a mirror of the opportunities in Europe; and the subjective and local dimension of Europe as a destination of migratory trajectories. We will discuss how the ambivalent figure of the *Modou modou* is tied to a specific perception of Europe, the «elsewhere» where the migrants live³. In order to shed light on the changes that occurred in the social representation of Europe since the 1990s, we will turn our attention to the concept of El Dorado and to the meanings attached to the slogan «*Barça mba Barzakh*» («Barcelona or Hereafter») among boat migrants.

In order to understand the processes of social change occurring between Europe and its borderlands, the paper analyses mobility, history and imagination as intertwined concepts (Salazar, 2011; Salazar, Smart, 2011). The theme of the «imaginary» and the concept of the «elsewhere» have already been at the core of several studies on the process of social and migratory mobility in Senegal

³ In this regard, it is worth mentioning the contribution provided by the EUMAGINE international multi-sited project carried out in four countries of origin and transit: Morocco, Senegal, Turkey and Ukraine. The EUMAGINE project aims to study how Europe is perceived from outside the EU, and how these perceptions affect migration aspirations and decisions. The project focuses on how people's perceptions of democracy and human rights affect their perceptions on and attitudes to migration (<http://www.eumagine.org/default.aspx>).

(Fouquet, 2007; Salomon, 2009; Melly, 2010). Against this background, we will take a step further to show how the European «elsewhere» of many Senegalese people is not an undefined idea but rather a social and historical construct. Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, the changing socio-political and economic conditions in Senegal and Europe have triggered a transformation in migration trajectories. We aim to discuss how these transformations, in turn, have modified the way Senegalese people imagine the elsewhere and discuss migration within Senegalese society.

The analysis of how the social representations of Europe «from the outside» changed between the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s will lead us not only to call into question its supposed stability but also to retrace the dynamics that informed the local «cultures of migration» (Kandel, Massey, 2002; Hahn, Klute, 2007; Cohen, Sirkeci, 2011; degli Uberti, 2014b)⁴. By focusing on how culture and lifestyle frame mobility decisions, this piece contributes to problematizing the naive idea that Europe is collectively perceived as a homogeneous El Dorado. We will untangle how some criteria such as history, language and place produce a specific representation and sense of spatiality of Senegal and the places of migrants' destination in Europe, which in turn contributes to the formation of the border between «here» and «there»⁵. In this paper we focus on the opinions and perceptions of the people who have stayed in Senegal, in parallel to the public discourse and to media's representation of migration⁶.

⁴ Against a concept of culture as an unchanging and homogeneous unit, in the paper we adopt the plural – «cultures of migration» – to account for the multiple historical variations and meanings resulting from people's daily interactions.

⁵ This article draws on two multi-sided research projects on Senegalese migration. The first fieldwork period took place over the course of eighteen months (1996-1998) starting in the region of Emilia Romagna (Italy) and then following the Senegalese informants returning to Senegal, while the second field research project was undertaken for seven months, between March and September 2009, in Dakar, its suburbs and in the region of Petite Côte (see Fig. 1). Both pieces of fieldwork are based on qualitative research methods; participant observation was carried out in the Senegalese accommodation of migrants, fishermen and tourist guides, as well as by following their paths in professional and public places in Italy (at markets, on the beach, at cultural events, in trade union meetings, at religious meetings, in vocational training courses) and in Senegal (when visiting families and neighbours, paying visits to friends or surfing the Internet at cyber cafés, networking to organize import-export activities, joining migrant association meetings, implementing development projects in villages and towns, visiting religious guides, participating in baptisms or cultural festivals, guiding European tourists for sightseeing, leisure and through market places). Together with field notes and informal conversations with other public actors, such as shopkeepers, fish-sellers, taxi drivers, newsagents or doormen, the core of the two research projects consists of the transcripts of over ninety interviews and focus group discussions amongst migrants, fishermen, local tourist guides and their kin in both the sending and receiving contexts. For the most part, the interviews were conducted in French and Italian, but several of them were held in Wolof with the help of interpreters.

⁶ In particular, the newspaper and journal accounts considered here cover a period from May 2006 to October 2009 and are taken from: *Le Quotidien* (private journal, critical of the government's activities), *Le Soleil* (journal generally characterized by a pro-governmental stand), *Nouvel Horizon* (magazine which undertakes enquiries into specific topics), *Walfadjri*, *Le Matin*, *Le Devoir* and *l'Observateur*. The article adopts a hybrid approach towards the



FIG. 1.

1. Mobility, imagination and culture(s) of migration

During the last two decades, a growing number of scholars have addressed the study of migration through an analytical lens that mainly refers to the so-called «new mobilities paradigm» or «mobility turn» (Sheller, Urry, 2006). Mobility is the overarching and more encompassing term, while migration clearly relates to the social process induced by physical displacement on various scales. However,

examination of the relationship between media and migration (Wood, King, 2001), focusing on both text/representation and consumption. On the one hand, the study examines the way migrants are (mis)represented in various news formats, by analysing the linguistic style, how terms are juxtaposed and the semantic field of the words used to describe boat migration. On the other hand, it addresses the ways migrants themselves become creative users, and how they use and give sense to media information and the «images of the world created by these media» (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35; Abu-Lughod, 1997).

both concepts share the destiny of only existing in a mutually constitutive relationship with periods of immobility and feelings of stasis.

By questioning the assumed equation between peoples, places and cultures, the mobility approach avoids the traps of «sedentary metaphysics» (Malkki, 1992), in favour of a «nomadic metaphysics» (Cresswell, 2006). For instance, the analytical approach on mobility adopted by Mirjam de Bruijn to study migration in Africa illustrates how for millions of Africans «being mobile» is not an exception but rather a «way of life» (2007, p. 110). «Mobility is engrained in the history, daily life and experiences of the population» (de Bruijn *et al.*, 2001, p. 1). Hence, far from being an exception to sedentariness, «something anomalous carrying a negative connotation», the Senegalese migrations should instead be conceptualized as a phase of continuity in which mobility and sedentariness are a concrete «outcome of a relation» (Adey, 2010). Against the tendency of some theorists who conceive mobility as a self-evident icon of the contemporary global society, studies on some African itinerant groups collected by de Bruijn *et al.* (2001) shed light on the phenomenological dimension of their practices, showing how mobility is always socially, historically and materially grounded.

A historical perspective of human mobility shows how the migration of many Senegalese people is often an experience of re-immigration (Sinatti, 2011). They are individuals who were already mobile within Senegal or West Africa. Their mobility practices have further evolved into the decision to emigrate to Europe (Ceschi, 1999; Riccio, 2001). The mobility paradigm urges us to understand the physical mobility of migrants in relation to other forms of mobility. However, as we noted, even if «one of the most widely appreciated aspects of this perspective is the inter-connection it asserts between different kinds of mobility, such as internal, regional and transnational, but also spatial and social mobilities» (Riccio, 2016, p. 11; see Schapendonk, 2012), it tends to over-look or disregard the borders and the other obstacles that prevent movement (Glick Schiller, Salazar, 2014). Scepticism towards this perspective, suggesting a straightforward bond between mobility and freedom, has driven many scholars to take into consideration the fact that for many people movement is often a phenomenon to which they are subjected involuntarily or that they experience indirectly, through their exclusion from it (Gaibazzi, 2015). Boat migrants are a clear example of how immobility at home, a feeling of being stuck or the actual inability to move (due to economic, social or political factors), may provide the initial driving force for individuals to move away. There are many people who have experienced an «involuntary immobility» due to a scarcity of resources or lack of opportunity (Carling, 2002). Examination of these human experiences has called the attention to exploring the imaginary dimension of mobility and the processes of the social construction of imaginaries of Europe, perceived as the «elsewhere».

The more recent anthropological approaches to the notion of «imaginary» refer to the studies by Appadurai on how the movement of people, technology, finance, media and ideas has fuelled processes of deterritorialization, with cultural groups living away from their territory. The global movement of these phenomena, conceptualized as five dimensions, or «scapes», lies at the basis of the

formation of «imagined worlds» (1996), as well as experiences of «imaginary exile» (Fouquet, 2007), in which the role of electronic means of communication and the socio-economic impact of return migrants are considered prominent.

However, while imaginaries of «elsewhere» largely develop from the images and discourses spread by the mass media and returning migrants, their formation is also closely linked to a specific «culture of mobility» (Tarrus, 1993), namely shared socio-cultural patterns of the individual and collective history of migrants as well as their kin and broader social networks (non-migrants) in the countries of origin.

The notion of «culture of migration», as adopted by Kandel and Massey (2002), brings into perspective the socio-cultural and historical factors for the construction of migrant imaginations. Central to the concept of «migrant imagination» are the social networks that tie migrants, relations, non-migrants and places together. In this sense, the core aspect of the culture of migration from which «migrant imaginations» spring up is that «non-migrants observe migrants to whom they are socially connected and seek to emulate their migratory behaviour» (Kandel, Massey, 2002, p. 983). The changing perceptions on the figure of returning migrants assume a heuristic value. Indeed, the mixed influences of both their economic remittances (e.g. the flaunting of wealth during their return visits or the provision of financial support through co-development projects) as well as their socio-cultural influence (e.g. ideas, values, skills, behaviours, social capital) assume a key role in becoming a metaphor for the changing perception of Europe within Senegalese society (see Kleist, Thorsen, 2017).

As illustrated by Hahn, the term «cultures of migration» also «acknowledge[s] the perpetuation of local cultures which have the capacity to cope with the temporal absence of some of their members and to integrate the migrants' experiences from abroad into their own horizon» (2007, p. 169). In this way it embeds the evolving perceptions and the changing understandings of migration. The act of migrating changes the social context and circumstances in which the decision was made, providing migrant aspirations with new sources of inspiration as a result of the incorporation of different lifestyles, tastes and understandings of migration.

While acknowledging the impact of the success and behaviours of returning migrants, the relational and discursive conceptualization of the culture of migration invites this process to be considered as not directly linked with migration as such. It rather calls for exploration of the interconnection of global and local processes as well as the influence of ideas, values, images and behaviours conveyed by the media or other social actors in the formation of migration aspirations and the imaginaries of the «elsewhere» among those «at home» (see Bal, Willems, 2014, p. 253). As we will further discuss, examination of the local context of M'bour sheds light on how the history of local fisheries, the multiple images, discourses and social representations of boat migration, as well as the role played by the global flows of tourism among the residents conflate to shape local imagination and perception of migration and Europe (see degli Uberti, 2011). As we try to suggest by retracing the key features of the more recent approach on mobility, the concept of «cultures of migration» offers theoretical insights into

the changing cultural meanings, perceptions and conflicting negotiations in the migration process that contribute to perpetuating the phenomenon.

2. Narratives and ambivalent representations of migration and Europe in the 1990s

The representation of migrants is often shifting and connected to broader social and political changes. Indeed, contemporary Senegal is a complex society in which differing migratory trajectories have developed at different stages (Diop, 2008). In this section we will be moving from the gradual gain of success by the *Modou modou* to the first signs of ambivalence towards them and towards Europe as a migration receiving context. As we will see later, the critical nuances grew in the 2000s in the context of the strengthening of «mobility regimes» (Glick Schiller, Salazar, 2014).

In his compelling study on «cultural complexity» in an era of globalization and transnational cultures (1992), Ulf Hannerz provides us with the following cultural distinction emerging from Nigerians' talk of the 1980s: the naive «*Bush*» who is illiterate and ignorant because he never left the bush on the one hand; and the well-respected «*Beento*» who is contrasted to the former and regarded as articulate because he has experienced life in global cities such as London and New York. Interestingly enough, in Senegal at the end of the twentieth century these constructs seemed reversed. During the 1990s, it was the unskilled and sometimes illiterate person who was travelling globally without losing touch with the beloved homeland, whereas the white-collar worker or graduate seemed bogged down in what looked like a failed path of social mobility inherited from colonial and postcolonial legacies and rhetoric.

Like other African countries, between 1960 and the end of the 1980s Senegal experienced high population growth rates. As a corollary, the population structure was characterized by a large share of minors. This «youthfulness» of the population had socio-economic implications such as the large size of the dependent population. Educated young people could not hope to find employment in a situation in which, as Donal Cruise O'Brien remarked, «students often compare themselves with preceding generations, those who could count on a government job with their degree, and they tend to see themselves as an abandoned generation» (2003, p. 168). Against this process of expanding unemployment, made more acute by the decadal drought of 1970 that led to a decline in the groundnut economy and the phenomenon of increasingly chaotic urbanization, France, followed soon by the other Mediterranean countries, carried out a progressive tightening of its immigration policies. However, this did not discourage migration overseas, which increased during the 1980s and 1990s, rendering migration *the* national model of social development. Migration was emblemized by the figure of the *Modou modou*, whose return represented the consecration of a collective success.

The success of returnees and migrants stimulated emulation and perpetuation (Sinatti, 2011) as well as popular imagination (see Appadurai, 1996). It may seem a common-sense stereotype, but in villages one could find young

people who did not want to work anymore because they were just waiting to leave (*dem*). «Why work for years to acquire what you can earn in one year by leaving the country?» said one rural Senegalese to a white-collar worker called Assane, who surmised: «[while] waiting to leave, young people don't invest in the value of the land»⁷. The overall economic success of migration and the development of the culture of migration produced shifts in stereotypes too. For instance, as Buba, a member of Kebemer local government's personnel, explained, before «a district full of migrants was considered a ghetto but now their inhabitants are seen as idols and heroes»⁸.

Economic independence and having enough resources to marry and set up one's own family were the fundamental aspirations of young people. In this respect, there was a shared discourse comparing the *maitrisards*, the graduates, who stayed behind in Senegal and worked very hard at school only to find themselves unemployed in the end, and the *Modou modou* (abbreviation of *Mamadou mamadou*) or *Baol Baol* (coming from the Baol region), the rural migrants who only knew how to trade but nevertheless managed to earn enough money abroad and came back showing off new houses, clothes, big weddings and all the symbols of success. While in the past they had been stigmatized for their ignorance, in the 1990s, these migrants were seen as contemporary heroes. To picture the ideal type of the migrant, we should think of an unskilled man who knew how to trade well, who was very good at saving and who invested in glamorous things when he was back in Senegal. All this drove others to take their chance as well. Oumar, a worker in a hospital near *Dieuppeul* district of Dakar who had siblings abroad, said of the typical *Modou modou*: «He's interested in earning money, building big houses, marrying the most beautiful girls, driving big cars, opening boutiques and leaving again to do more trading abroad»⁹. Like Sall, a migrant himself, many thought that «without *Modou modou*, Senegal [would] be on its knees. Remittances are the real source of the country's development»¹⁰.

Within popular culture, migrants were seen as «gold mines» and the «expectations of modernity» (Ferguson, 1999) and social mobility shifted accordingly. Mor, a graduate from the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar who had many friends living abroad, confirmed the popular heroic representation of migrants, but, ultimately displayed a critical reading which instilled a cautious attitude towards these new champions of Senegalese society:

The people who leave are becoming a point of reference here. Even fathers choose migrants as an example for their children: «look what he did for his parents and his family». Look who's getting married now, they are all Mouride migrants. They are the example, but also people are judged for what they have, sometimes we don't think about how they got it anymore¹¹.

⁷ Assane, 29-year-old unemployed white-collar worker, Dakar, December 1996.

⁸ Buba 50-year-old member of local government, Kebemer, January 1997.

⁹ Oumar, 35 years old, Dakar, July 1997.

¹⁰ Sall, 28 years old, Kebemer, August 1997.

¹¹ Mor, a 24-year-old postgraduate student, Dakar, July 1997.

Thus, one should take into account that there were also negative opinions regarding the *Modou modou*. As Gardner suggests, migration is «a metaphor for power and advancement» and social divisions are more and more expressed in terms of access to emigration (1995). Migration becomes the pole around which inequalities are clustered: «Not only has it helped to create them, but so too has it become a metaphor for thinking about them» (*Ibidem*, pp. 16-17). In Senegal it was a question of «dignity» (*jom*) to try to catch up with the ostentatious power of the migrant. Displaying prestige was also linked with rivalries between different branches of a family to gain the father's blessing. A large family was also a major factor in imposing the distribution of the capital that the migrant had accumulated abroad. As Mar, a teacher from a small town in the district of Kebemer, explained:

When they come back, the migrants are fleeced by their large families, or even by the district or the town where everybody is expecting something, and by the need to show off their success with the purchase of prestigious goods and afterwards they are obliged to leave again. Now there are less traditional weddings and more where the partners choose each other. This is a good thing, but if they are based only on the pursuit of money this is a bad thing. Like for instance with the migrants who always get the nicest girls. But this is beginning to change now, women understand that life married to a migrant is not fabulous: they send money more and more rarely, only for festivities, and the women do not see a lot of them whereas they have to fulfil many obligations with their parents¹².

The effects of migrants on the people who stayed at home could sometimes be severe. Their occasional ostentation (one could recognize migrants easily in the town by their sports clothes which were known to be particularly expensive) provoked bitterness on the part of other people. Moreover, migrants' spending behaviour and the resulting inflation sometimes resulted in real difficulties for those who stayed behind, as Mar stressed: «Migrants push up the price of this kind of celebration to a level that is difficult to reach or imitate».

This critical point of view appears more explicit when talking with Abdou, a migrant himself, who would be regarded as a Toubab¹³: «They are closed, and ignorant. Street selling does not pay enough, people from the city have higher expectations and easily become businessmen»¹⁴. These comments are connected to another criticism of people wasting money on big weddings and houses instead of investing it in more entrepreneurial ways, and producing jobs for others. As Matar said during our meeting at the weekly open-air market in Ra-

¹² Mar, 30 years old, school teacher, Kebemer, January 1997.

¹³ «*Toubab*» means "European". It was, and is, the term used in Senegal for French white people. The term acquires a broader meaning, though, when used as an archetype. Toubab becomes a synonym for acting and thinking like westerners, without God but with *Xalis* (money), lacking solidarity, tolerance, moderation, hospitality and dignity (the main Senegalese values).

¹⁴ Abdou, a 31-year-old migrant, Dakar, December 1996. In the mid-1990s, he left a post in an office in Dakar and migrated to Italy.

venna: «The problem in Senegal is that money doesn't move»¹⁵. More specifically, like with other archetypes of success (Banégas, Warnier, 2001), some people argued that migrants succeeded only because of their "cunning". Furthermore, as suggested by Ass, a social worker employed in an NGO in the suburbs of Dakar: «the Modou modou have given a vision of Europe as an El Dorado and that is false. They don't work as they do in Italy when they are in Senegal. The returnee only has money when he comes back, but nothing else, because abroad he didn't live as he would have done in Senegal»¹⁶. According to this last opinion, abroad it seems easier, because when far from home, one is willing to do things that one would refuse to do in his own country. This last reflection introduces us to the ambivalent representation of Europe as a context of immigration. These ambivalences appear even in celebrative representations, reverberating with an aura of mythology, of these unskilled migrants who manage to learn many languages and to survive abroad, while saving a lot of money and coming back very rich:

Once a child managed to pass the frontiers of Senegal and France, it was as if he was invisible, no one noticed him, but in France he was discovered because of the cold, yes, he couldn't bear the temperature, this is why he was discovered¹⁷.

This story of Badiane reveals the magical air that surrounded the migrant, protected by the marabout's prayers and amulets (*gris gris*), but also the difficulty he might encounter abroad. He had to be helped to hide, to «become invisible» and he had to bear the «cold» of Europe.

Indeed, a repeated critical vision of emigration relates to the receiving context. Many of our interviewees insisted on the impossibility of stopping the migratory flow to Europe and the blindness of policies of closure, which, in the migrants' views, were ultimately bound to fail. There was a demand for respect. This kind of opinion had already appeared in the public discourse around the end of 1990s when the *sans papier* movement became strong in France, and a campaign was undertaken by the EU to convince Senegalese people to remain in their hometown and to contribute to its development. It was the beginning of the extension of Eurafrikan border policies (Brambilla *et al.*, 2015; Gaibazzi *et al.*, 2017). The slogan of this campaign was «pour s'en sortir n'est pas nécessaire sortir», using a play on the meanings of *sortir*, to go out or exit, and *s'en sortir*, to sort out one's life. All of these arguments affected the representation of the phenomenon of emigration. Souleymane, who lived in Bergamo for several years and was employed as a construction worker, said:

The Italian government is doing an anti-immigration campaign. This policy cannot work until the living conditions change here. Even parents push their

¹⁵ Matar, 32-year-old migrant, Ravenna, November 1996. He is involved in import-export activities between Emilia Romagna and Touba.

¹⁶ Ass, 27-year-old social worker, Gwedyawaye, periphery of Dakar, July 1997.

¹⁷ Badiane, 55-year-old uncle of a migrant, Kaolack, December 1996.

children to emigrate because this is the only chance to survive. Italians should understand this, because they made their wealth through emigration, in this respect the Senegalese and Italians are the same¹⁸.

In a more critical vein, Matar, a development practitioner working for a NGO wondered why:

If Europe also became rich through African slavery and colonialism, and now they don't accept us when they are overdeveloped, we will invade them and export our poverty to them. ...Here and in other African countries there are many foreigners: French, Italian, German and nobody bothers them. Actually, there are many aid officials and retired people who really want to stay here, we do not understand why the Senegalese should face all these problems when they are in Europe. What I want to stress is the xenophobic and exclusionary culture developing in Europe. When Europeans come to Senegal they enjoy our hospitality, whereas when the Senegalese go to Europe they are treated as «negroes» and encounter racism and exclusion¹⁹.

In brief, while, on one hand, Europe still represented the «El Dorado», on the other hand, a critical view was also held, based on a postcolonial historical consciousness. The migrants themselves, although celebrated as idols and heroes, could also be the target of suspicion and criticism. The representation of the *Modou modou* and the way this social figure of migration was discursively portrayed shaped the migratory imaginaries of the European «elsewhere». One could feel a profound ambivalence in all these discussions and experiences: towards migration there was a mixture of envy and scorn, towards tradition a blend of nostalgic respect and unconstrained intolerance, towards money a mixture of contempt and unutterable desire. These ambivalent tendencies say a lot about the everyday difficulties in making sense of a life which is constantly stimulated by the international economy through transnational migratory channels, tempered by a profoundly felt Islamic ethic and still rooted in constantly readjusted, although almost unquestionable traditions.

Representations of migrants shift according to social changes and with the transformation of migration itself. Indeed, emigration from Senegal became a tougher experience in the second half of 2000s. Starting from the ambivalent image of the Senegalese migrant of the 1990s, we will now turn our attention to the daily narratives of returning migrants, tourist guides, fishermen and repatriated migrants from the Canary Islands, as well as their relatives and neighbourhood friends. Through this ethnographic lens we will examine the changes of meaning that have occurred over time in the social representations of Senegalese migrants and Europe that frame the imaginaries and aspiration to migrate.

¹⁸ Souleymane, 46 years old, Kaolack, January 1997. At the time of our meeting he worked as a trader.

¹⁹ Matar, 25 years old, development practitioner, region of Baol, August 1997.

3. Roots and routes of an imaginary «elsewhere» in the 2000s

In 2006 the uncontrolled upsurge of undocumented boat migrations, triggered a shift in the social representation of the *Modou modou*. The description of the «Senegalese migrant» appeared gloomier and less celebratory, compared to a previous one mostly surrounded by a sense of ambivalence (Riccio, 2005). This transformation, occurring at a discursive and social level, coexists with media representations that reproduce discordant images of the relationship between the migrants and the places of destination. An idealized representation of Europe continues despite a less heroic image of the Senegalese emigrants.

Boat migrations, as an expression of the desire to migrate abroad of a growing number of Senegalese men and women, were tied in part to changes occurring at multiple levels. Internationally, the reference is in particular to the bilateral agreement signed between the Spanish and Moroccan governments (2005), and the increasing enforcement and externalization of border controls that EU countries undertook towards Maghreb countries (2002), transformed into a «buffer zone» to reduce the migratory pressures at Europe's southern borders.

Although during the mid-1990s the migrants were already arriving to the Canary Islands, by sailing 100 kilometres from Morocco or the western Sahara, when talking about «boat migrations» or «*migrations piroguières*» (*gaalu loco* or *mbëkk-mi* in Wolof) the reference is to the phenomenon involving thousands of Senegalese and other people from western African countries, predominantly young men, who set off for the Canary Islands from the Senegalese, Mauritanian or Gambian coasts²⁰. Some urban and peri-urban areas of the coasts became the main points of departure: Kayar, Saint Louis, M'bour and Saly, as well as Dakar and its peripheries (Thiaroye-sur-Mer, Yarakh and Pikine). With long wooden pirogues, originally built for coastline fishing, they endured a week or more at sea to reach Spain («gagner l'Europe») also at risk of death: «Barça mba Barzakh»²¹.

While *Modou modou* were for the majority young rural men with limited education, coming mainly from the groundnut basin in the north-western regions or from the capital, boat migration involved a wider range of social categories of people (e.g. students and university graduates, youth urban workers without professional qualification, maneuvers and domestic servants, petty civil servants, young fishermen, craftsmen and small traders) from the most urban-

²⁰ Boat migrations from Senegal have downsized considerably with respect to the peak period (2006-2010); however, its impact still reverberates today due to the dire consequences endured by a large part of the population. Unrecorded numbers have died facing the dangers of the Atlantic Ocean, while the luckiest, without any regular expatriation documents, have been forcibly repatriated. According to Caritas-Senegal, many of them were deported to Mauritania. They left their family members, most frequently mothers and wives, in a condition of incessant waiting for their return. Despite that, today the willingness to go abroad has not diminished.

²¹ For reference: Mbow, Tamba 2007; Willems, 2008; Melly, 2011; Hernández Carretero, Carling, 2012.

ized and coastal areas of Senegal (Mbow, Tamba, 2007). They were equally affected by the raising rate of unemployment triggered by multiple interwoven factors, above all: the increased competition in trade sector (especially in the demographically saturated urban area of Dakar), the crisis of the local and regional fishing economy, the effects of the unregulated liberal policies inaugurated by the ex-president Abdoulaye Wade in 2000.

Boat migration is only one of the most recent chapters of Senegalese migration (see Maher, 2017). Examination of the social representations and self-representations of «migrants» sheds light on the patterns of a Senegalese local «culture of migration»²². M'bour is the area with the highest average rate of repatriated migrants (Sarr *et al.*, 2009). In the district of M'bour, fishermen are the ones most actively involved in the pirogue migrations. During the first decade of the 2000s the Senegalese media pictured the relationship between fishermen and migration, and their propensity to migrate to Europe, as mainly connected to the social and cultural influence of the European tourists²³ or the returning migrants and their boasting behaviour. On the contrary, research has shown that the migratory dimension is historically a distinctive aspect of the artisan activities of local fishermen (degli Uberti, 2014a), and more broadly of western Africans who were accustomed to undertaking long journeys from one country to another. These travels mainly occurred in the countries overlooking the central and eastern part of the Atlantic Ocean, from Mauritania to the Congo. During the frequent visits to the fishing dock of M'bour, similar considerations were expressed by Abdou, a young fisherman who joined the *GIE-Migrants* (Migrants' Economic Interest Group) in the district of Tefesse after his failed migration experience.

Today we still travel up to Guinea Bissau or Mauritania in order to fish and buy palm oil. We go to sea for a week or even ten days with pirogues full of ice. We have the licence to fish in these countries²⁴.

Saint Jacques comes to similar conclusions when she maintains that: «current West African migration to Europe and North America are extensions of past migrations to urban centers in Africa. As the comparison of transnational ties and urban-rural linkages shows, the social and economic motives that drive these connections and the practices that maintain them are fundamentally the same» (2009, p. 48).

Based on the narratives of street hawkers, youth workers and university graduates we argue that while the «culture of getting by» (*culture de la débrouille* or *Goor-góorlu* in Wolof) subsumes a complex mix of responsibilities related to the solidarity network system (Willems, 2013) and subjective aspirations, boat migrations are nonetheless the result of endogenous factors that have triggered

²² See Linares, 2003; Fouquet, 2008; Mondain, Diagne, 2013; degli Uberti, 2014b; Hananford, 2017.

²³ In last decades, in the region of Petite Côte international migration is mainly considered the result of the phenomenon of mixed marriages (*mariage mixte*) between young Senegalese and elderly European people (Salomon, 2009).

²⁴ Abdou, 28 years old, fisherman and repatriated migrant, M'bour, July 2009.

socio-cultural and economic transformations in Senegalese urban and rural society. A matter of not minor importance is the social influence of the Islamic morality and culture of the Mouride Sufi brotherhood. As L. Marfaing (2003) notes, the meaning of “*egira*” – which literally means «separation» or «removal» in Arabic – is closely linked to the idea of travel, migration, in memory of the exile of Muhammad who left for Medina after being chased away from Mecca in 622 AD. Among many Senegalese, migration represents a way to retrace the travels or the exiles of their saints, such as Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism, whom after being exiled by the French colonizers, returned to Senegal and founded Touba, the holy city of Mouridism.

Travelling becomes the metaphor for remoteness, a temporary detachment, which is necessary in order to come back to the territory of origin strengthened by the wisdom matured during the exile. Similarly to *Modou modou*, the wish to migrate of boat migrants becomes the symbol of the desire to leave one’s own native land to find «elsewhere» the means to return as a winner or to claim one’s «success» (*réussir*) and social status.

Boat migration fuelled a remarkable cultural production of images, discourses, songs and public representations of their protagonists, as exemplified by the following quotes from Senegalese papers:

Two o’clock in the morning: at that time of the day you breathe a total calm. [...] A dozen intrepid adventurers arrive with their bags, gas cylinders and equipment for tea and utensils for cooking (*Le Devoir*, 11-17.05.06).

Clandestine immigration: faith and fearlessness as sources of life (*Walf Fadjri*, 17.05.06).

As these quotes suggest, the media tended to represent the migrant as someone who wished to «*faire la migration*» not because of a lack of work, but because he was an adventurer, a daredevil, an intrepid adventurer (Bredeloup, 2008; Schmitz, 2008). «Young» was another recurring term with which the press described the clandestine emigrants. Although boat migrations mainly attracted men between 20 and 29 years of age (Mbow, Tamba, 2007), the term did not refer to the generational dimension.

The emigrants are kids looking for adventure to conquer Europe: the Unknown (*Le Quotidien*, 14.05.09).

The Spanish Canary archipelago: the new gateway for El Dorado (*Le Quotidien*).

Far from a biological category, «being young» became a degrading cultural label, a synonym for *naïveté* and immaturity. The media portrayed the «aspiring migrant» as an ignorant victim (see Hernández Carretero, 2015), a naive adventurer (see Bredeloup, 2008), a childish «kamikaze» (Hernández Carretero, Carling, 2012), who was driven to leave by courage and a certain ingenuousness in dreaming up an idyllic and imaginary «elsewhere», whereof they knew little or nothing: «El Dorado». The migrants would be swayed by the boastful

behaviour of the returning immigrants and by the «imagination» of an idyllic European «elsewhere». However, as we will see shortly, comparing media representations to narratives of aspiring migrants provides a more complex and nuanced understanding of the figure of the «Senegalese migrant».

Portrayals of migrants as immature and native, also emerge when analysing media depictions of how migrants perceived «elsewhere», particularly through the concept of «El Dorado» and the meanings attached to the slogan «*Barça mba Barzakh*». Initially coined by the aspiring migrants, this slogan was in fact widely used by the mass media.

Jihad against poverty. A holy war that ends up with the slogan: Barça or Barzakh. Barça stands for Barcelona, the Spanish city that the migrants consider an El Dorado, and therefore heaven. The word Barzakh means the netherworld. It is the heaven reserved for all those people who die in a holy war. Consequently, the destiny of all those people that go to sea in order to get to Spain or death, will be either heaven on earth or hell (*Le Quotidien*, 14.05.09).

Although the slogan «Barça mba Barzakh» is generally translated as «Barcelona or death», in the Senegalese newspapers the term *Barsakh* is interpreted instead as the Hereafter, the «paradise of Allah», placing both conditions in an otherworldly dimension (both «elsewhere»). By attaching the meaning of «Hereafter» to the term *Barsakh* the media does not only perpetuate the image of Europe as an «El Dorado», an imaginary and paradisiacal «elsewhere» that migrants yearn for, but reiterate the idea of migrants as irresponsible and ingenuous people.

Narratives collected during our travels, as well as conversations with several young men, however, suggest different images of the «clandestine» boat migrant to those arising from the processes of victimization and depersonalization disseminated by the media. This latter aspect is clearly suggested by the words of Assane, an experienced fisherman who reached Gran Canaria but was later repatriated to Mauritania.

I am one of those! [...] I'm one of those who have defied the sea and done the clandestine emigration!²⁵.

Assane voluntarily used the term «clandestine» to describe himself, not as a sign of status, but rather as a favourably distinctive trait that identifies people who are proud, responsible for their own destiny and for their role within the family.

Babakar, a local tourist guide also working as a chauffer between M'bour and the Dakar airport, provided a slightly different understanding:

The Senegalese people are dreamers. Luckily today there are fewer people who spend time longing for a 4x4 or a rich foreign woman. I don't dream of

²⁵ Assane, 29 years old, fisherman and repatriated migrant, M'bour, August 2009.

going to Europe but rather of being able to work as a lorry driver so I can travel and cross through cities and countries... Germany, Italy... I want contact with the road! [...] I'm not interested in France or Spain... I'm interested in travelling by night to cross the borders!²⁶

Babakar's words suggest that slogan *Barça ou Barzakh* actually marks a contrast between two real earthly dimensions. «Barcelona» is not necessarily the «El Dorado», and *Barzakh* does not refer to physical death, but rather to the social death of a person trapped in a state of «involuntary immobility», due to the difficulty of being successful in the social context where he lives (Carling, 2002).

In Babakar's words, indeed, life in Senegal versus life abroad does not epitomize an opposition between a poor country and an «El Dorado». Instead, «here» and «there» refer to real and grounded dimensions. While «Barcelona» symbolizes an opportunity of personal and professional development, «Senegal» represents the state of «social death»: a country unable to ensure either economic development or the reproduction of social and family relationships.

The image of the adventurer, as depicted by Babakar, is someone who does not dream about an imaginary Europe. He is «not interested in Europe» but rather desires concrete things, such as working with a truck. By «crossing borders» the aspiring migrant reaffirms the willingness to succeed through mobility and the effort to escape dominant interpretative categories.

Overall, these interviews suggest that migrants' imagination to reach the «elsewhere» is not inscribed in a naive, stereotyped and homogeneous image of Europe as a global and cultured «El Dorado». The «elsewhere» is rather a historically grounded social construct. Unlike the meanings that inform the media representations, the will to «succeed» does not symbolize the desire to get rich quickly but it is rather synonymous with «social success» or «social adulthood».

As suggested by J. Bjarnesen (2007, pp. 6-7) in his study on youngsters in Dakar: «Social adulthood (the 'path towards adulthood') is a multifaceted position which implies more than simply being independent from one's parents and elder brothers and being able to marry. [It] may be understood as the sense of being a complete man». «*Faire la migration*» is experienced as the fulfilment of a desire for knowledge or is synonymous with labour mobility. In Senegal «being mobile» does not necessarily refer to the desire to migrate, but it also means succeeding. It is the desire for social, rather than physical mobility that drives many people to take the risks of the journey by pirogue.

The place of destination does not have a substantial relevance and the journey itself is not perceived as a «rite of passage» but rather as an experience of continuity in daily life that could open the door to multiple unknown opportunities. Mobility symbolizes a social practice of the projection of a future self away from home (Gardner, 1995) and perhaps, as critically maintained by J.O. Ifekwunigwe (2013) with reference to boat migrations, the contemporary

²⁶ Babakar, 28 years old, local tourist guide, M'bour, August 2009.

Mediterranean expression of the historical and persistent devaluation of African life.

Although the comparative examination of the media representations and the narratives of candidates to migration reveals a more complex understanding of the figure of the «Senegalese migrant», we can observe that his more recent identification with the image of the boat migrant rather than the *Modou modou* has arisen alongside growing perplexities and a radical shift in the public perception of the potential benefits of the returning migrants themselves.

Since the appearance of the boat migrations, the presence of the *Modou modou* in Sandaga, the main market of Dakar, has raised harsh criticism due to their growing influence in the most strategic trading area of the capital. Among many local citizens involved in trading fabrics, such as Pape, the migrants have even come to be equated with the Lebanese and Moroccan traders, who are strongly disliked.

Due to clandestine and boat migrations in recent years there have always been more repatriated people who find work as vendors. Moreover, there are always more *Modou modou* who come back [to Senegal] and invade the market of Sandaga. It's a shame... because they don't pay respect!! In Senegal most of the vendors are foreigners... Chinese, Moroccan, Lebanese... and the *Modou modou* are no different!!²⁷

Against the background of the economic crisis that has also significantly hit non-EU countries, such as Senegal, the public social perception of *Modou modou* has also been greatly affected. Little seems to survive of his envied and heroic image of the successful migrants. The lack of respect towards his fellow citizens and the accusations of unfair competition which frame the prevailing everyday rhetoric on the Senegalese migrant, are not only a sign of the ongoing socio-economic transformations occurring in Senegalese society. They also question the very role of the returning migrant, urging an analytical rethinking both of his implicitly favourable role and of the increasingly mediatized projects of «assisted voluntary return and reintegration» that pledge to foster sustainable development in the local context of origin.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the motivations and mechanisms behind migration from Senegal by adopting a diachronic perspective. Using original surveys among returning and repatriated migrants, as well as potential migrants in Senegal, it investigates how people decide to migrate according to people's narratives and imagination of migration and of countries of destination.

While examining the factors behind the formation of the willingness to migrate and the social perception of migration, we argue that growing importance

²⁷ Pape, 27 years old, shopkeeper, Dakar, April 2009.

is played not only by the image of the «migrant» but by the representation of Europe, and more broadly of the «elsewhere», as the real or imaginary destination of the migratory journey of many African people.

Drawing from ethnographic evidence that spans over two decades, we contend that changes in the Senegalese mobility patterns are interlinked with the social and cultural transformations in the way the «elsewhere» is viewed and talked about. The results show that against a dominant public as well as media discourse on migrant motivations – dismissed as biased expectations towards popular destination countries – the representations and imaginaries of «migration» and «Europe» are social and historical constructs. They need to be broken down to reveal the changes occurring in specific local contexts and the role of the people «left behind» as a heterogeneous group who play an active part in the migration processes.

The analysis of Senegalese migration in the city of Dakar, Kebemer, Kaolak and in the urban areas of Petite Côte allows us to pinpoint the socio-cultural and visual impact triggered by boat migrations, a phenomenon occurring a few kilometres away from the national shores. Unlike the ambivalent but rather celebratory discourses surrounding the figure of the *Modou modou*, reflecting a European promised land, the more recent narratives of Senegalese people on migration are informed by imaginaries and representations that depict the Senegalese «migrant» and the idea of «Europe» in a more realistic and disenchanting manner. This appears, for instance, in the case of Babakar, for whom longing for Europe does not epitomize the conquest of greener pastures but rather the possibility to achieve his concrete and defined project of social and professional advancement: working as lorry driver. This cultural transformation regarding the idea of «Europe», which occurs at the discursive and social level, coexists with discordant representations of the relationship between the Senegalese migrants and their contexts of destination (Sinatti, 2008; Kane, 2012).

The motivation to migrate «elsewhere» is not based on a stereotyped image of Europe as a global and cultured «El Dorado». We argue, instead, that the migration imaginaries of Europe, which frame the propensity to emigrate, shift according to the historical and socio-cultural transformations occurring in Senegal as well in relation to migration itself.

The study of migration imaginaries emerges as a heuristic perspective from which to investigate social realities; as suggested by Bal and Willems, they «provide us with an analytical lens or perspective on how people make sense of their life worlds, their individual lives, their pasts, presents and futures» (2014, p. 254). This study provides an example of how, not only in the Senegalese case, research on both the local dimension of the cultures of migration and on the narratives, emotions and gestures through which migrants and non-migrants think about migration and its real or imaginary destinations, is beneficial in providing new and more thorough insights on the contemporary socio-cultural and political changes occurring in the societies of origin and destination.

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