

Kamikaze migrants? Understanding and tackling high-risk migration from Africa

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Introduction

The year 2006 saw the emergence of a new flow of large-scale unauthorized migration to Europe. More than 30,000 people arrived on the Canary Islands in small boats, the vast majority having left West African shores and spent a week or more at sea. This article addresses the underlying dynamics of this flow. Given the danger of the journey, we ask how it could become a large-scale social phenomenon. The analysis focuses on how prospective migrants assess, and relate to, the risks of migration.

The new migration flow from West Africa to the Canary Islands represents both continuity and change. Significant numbers of unauthorized boat migrants have reached Spanish coasts since the early 1990s. The routes have shifted in response to control efforts, with an ever-larger proportion of boats arriving on the Canaries as opposed to the Spanish mainland. At the same time, Sub-Saharan Africans have come to outnumber Moroccans and other North Africans among the passengers. The recent migration flow from West Africa sustains these trends, but represents a remarkable new development in three respects. First, the number of migrants grew dramatically, with arrivals in the Canary Islands increasing more than six-fold from 2005 to 2006. Second, the itineraries are very much longer. While the Canaries lie only 100 km off the coast of Morocco and Western Sahara, the departure points in West Africa are up to 2000 km away from the islands. Third, this route constitutes the first direct flow from the large pool of prospective migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unauthorized migrants from this region have previously had to travel through North African countries, which have acquired important roles as buffer states in European migration management. The emergence of a direct route thus changes the regional geopolitics of migration control.

The vessel used by the boat migrants leaving West Africa is the traditional pirogue, a long, wooden fishing boat decorated in vivid colours. We use the term “piroque migration” as a shorthand term for unauthorized migration aboard small boats from West Africa to the Canary Islands. Departure points are located along the coast from Mauritania in the North to Guinea-Bissau in the South. The analysis here is based on fieldwork in Senegal, from where the bulk of boat migrants have come.

The pirogues measure approximately 20 metres in length and 3 metres in width. Upon departure to the Canary Islands, they have been known to carry more than a hundred passengers. Our informants explained how the men are squeezed tightly together in a maximally efficient pattern, oddly reminiscent of the stowage plans of slave ships. In sharp contrast to this sombre connotation, we were told that the ubiquitous Senegalese tea-drinking is also part of life on board. The journeys are generally well planned, and the crew invariably navigate by means of GPS.

Migration control efforts can seem futile in the face of such determined and apparently fearless migrants. “They are like kamikaze terrorists” said a General of the Spanish Guardia Civil on the Canary Islands, “they have nothing to lose and everything to gain” (Soudan 2007:22). In this article, we add complexity to this picture, using ethnographic material to show how pirogue migrants relate to the risks of the journey.

Methods

The analysis in this article draws upon fieldwork in a coastal community which we have called Ndiarène, located in the Dakar region of Senegal. The majority of Ndiarène’s population are Lébou, who are closely related to the Wolof ethnic group and speak a variety of the Wolof language. Fishing has been the traditional livelihood of the Lébou, and still is for many. Even for those who earn a living in other ways, the mere fact of being Lébou is often taken to encompass an affinity with the sea and preparedness for the hardships of pirogue migration, in contrast to non-Lébou migrants. For this reason, fieldwork among other population groups in Senegal could have yielded different results. The intensive fieldwork was conducted between September 2007 and January 2008 (cf Hernández Carretero 2008).

Fieldwork data consists of field notes and transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were young men in the approximate age range 20–35 years. The decision to focus on men was made on the basis of their overwhelming predominance among pirogue migrants arriving on the Canary Islands (Mbow and Tamba 2007). Within Senegalese society, it is traditionally men who take on the role of migrating (Kaplan Marcusán 2005).

Interviewees could be divided into three broad groups in relation to pirogue migration. *Aspiring pirogue migrants* considered pirogue migration as an option but had not yet attempted the journey. *Pirogue returnees* had attempted the journey and returned to Senegal following apprehension by patrols, technical problems, storms at sea, or repatriation after arrival. *Aspiring migrants* wanted to migrate, but rejected pirogues as a means of doing it. A logical fourth category would have been young men who did not aspire to migrate at all, but they appeared to be inexistent in the community.

The interviewees were recruited through several independent snowballing chains. Interviews lasted up to three-and-a-half hours, and some informants were interviewed more than once. Basic Wolof was used for establishing relationships and interacting in group settings, but interviews were conducted in French or with an interpreter. In total, the interview data amounted to 90 hours of interview time. Transcripts were subsequently analyzed by means of *NVivo* software for qualita-

tive research, which enables multi-level coding of text and thereby exploration of the richness of interview material. All the names of informants are pseudonyms.

The risks of pirogue migration

Pirogue migration is a risky undertaking, even when journeys are carefully planned. The two most important possible adverse outcomes are involuntary return, and death. Less serious possibilities include physical and psychological harm, to which prospective migrants appear to give relatively little importance. Interviewees seemed convinced that, no matter how severe, the hardships of the journey would soon be forgotten after entering Europe.

En route towards the Canary Islands, migrants face potentially life-threatening challenges in three areas: navigation, health, and on-board conflicts. Navigational hazards result from the storms and ferocious waves that pirogues could encounter at sea. Although they are large and sturdy vessels, pirogues can capsize in such conditions.

Health hazards include seasickness, dehydration and hypothermia. The overcrowded and unhygienic conditions on board, sometimes with the presence of dead bodies, can aggravate sickness. Health risks become particularly severe when equipment failure or weather conditions prolong the journey. In numerous cases, boats have drifted at sea for several weeks, with passengers gradually dying from thirst and starvation. A pirogue that set off from Southern Senegal in October 2007 provides an example. After the engine failed, the boat drifted for sixteen days before being washed ashore in Northern Mauritania. By then, more than a third of the 150 passengers had perished. In other cases, currents carry boats further out into the Atlantic Ocean, drastically reducing the chances of survival. One interviewee pointed to the risk of being taken for dead and shoved overboard while sleeping. Passengers who accidentally fall into the water are often not rescued because the delay would provoke the loss of precious time and fuel.

Beyond the somatic risks, passengers are exposed to potentially dangerous psychological stress. The combination of overcrowding and isolation over a long period of time is a strain in itself, sometimes exacerbated by dramatic episodes with loss of life. Psychological risks become lethal when people jump into the ocean out of delirium or despair. Others are said to “go crazy” as a consequence of the experience. Many of our informants mentioned the psychological duress of the journey and some said they had suffered nightmares after returning.

Overcrowding and the hardships of the journey can easily result in disputes between passengers. Arguments could be triggered by paramount decisions, for instance about giving up and returning, or by minor issues that escalate in the atmosphere of tension. Technical failure, accidents, illness, getting lost at sea, and other adversities are at times attributed to the mystical powers of “sorcerers,” “demons,” or “vampires” who are said to board pirogues with the deliberate aim of causing suffering and death. Suspicion may fall on fellow passengers, and contribute to disputes on board. Our informants pointed out that in a diverse group of passengers, it is difficult to be certain of everyone’s intentions.

In addition to the risk of death, involuntary return is the most serious possible adverse outcome. Stakes are high for many migrants, whose families may have

pooled resources to finance the journey. Pirogues can be forced to return by technical problems, bad weather or other adverse events en route. In addition, boats could be intercepted by patrols near the African coast, or passengers could be repatriated after arrival on the Canary Islands.

Patrolling along the pirogue route was intensified in the second half of 2006, through new forms of cooperation between African and European authorities. Under the so-called Hera I and II operations, vessels, planes and helicopters from several European countries patrolled the waters of Mauritania and Senegal. Migrants that are intercepted less than 24 nautical miles (44 km) from the shore are escorted back. From mid-2006 to the end of 2007, almost 13,000 migrants were cut off in this way (Ministerio del Interior 2008). Those who are intercepted may be prosecuted upon return and are liable to fines and prison sentences.

A large proportion of unauthorized immigrants who have reached the Canary Islands have been able to remain in Spain. This is primarily because it has not been possible to identify them and prepare readmission to the country of origin within the 40-day detention period (Carling 2007a, 2007b). However, Spanish authorities have intensified cooperation with West African countries in order to facilitate the repatriation of unauthorized migrants. The first planeload of pirogue migrants was returned from the Canary Islands to Senegal in the summer of 2006; thousands followed in the remainder of the year.

Return, regardless of the circumstances, represents the loss of a significant investment. In many cases, migrants' families have had to sell property or borrow money in order to afford the price of the journey, which can be as high as US\$ 2000. Fishermen and other migrants from coastal communities like Ndiarène are often able to travel for free as part of the crew, or receive discounted prices when they know the organisers. Beyond the financial loss, however, return has a psychological cost. Returnees are not only frustrated and angry but also speak of a sense of shame in relation to having failed and coming home empty-handed.

The social acceptability of high-risk migration

Achieving a social position as adults is a key theme in the lives of young men in Africa (Barrett 2004, Gavin 2007, Vigh 2006a). In societies tied together by inter-generational transfers, adults are distinguished from children and the elderly by being providers as opposed to receivers. When the socio-economic context inhibits young men from establishing an independent livelihood, they are excluded from social adulthood. Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2006b:37) describes this confinement as a *social moratorium on youth*, “a predicament of not being able to gain the status and responsibility of adulthood [...] a social position that people seek to escape as it is characterised by marginality, stagnation and a truncation of social being.”

The accounts of our Senegalese informants reflected this social moratorium on youth, and the shame that is associated with it. “Sometimes, someone can hurt you a lot,” said Bocar:

He will say something like ‘look at you, your father brought you to the world, has seen you grow up, has devoted himself to you, and you have nothing to give.’ So it hurts. So, before... before having to hear those things, you are forced to try to do something, in order to never hear that kind of thing.

This section elaborates on why this need to ‘do something’ often translates into attempts at high-risk migration.

Social stagnation and migration aspirations

Migration aspirations are formed in specific social contexts. Rather than absolute poverty, the decisive factor is often a perceived inability to fill a social role. Research from across West Africa has shown this to be a common theme, while the precise nature of the social roles differ (Åkesson 2004, Bjarnesen 2007, Carling 2002, de Haas 2007, Jónsson 2007, Vigh 2006a).

In Senegal, the widespread migration aspirations can be interpreted in light of the social moratorium on youth. Even prospective migrants with regular employment are often unable to reach financial independence and establish their own families. Typical salaries are in the region of 50,000 FCFA, or US\$ 100, per month. “What is that kind of money going to do?” asks Pape (33).

Because don’t forget that all persons want to settle down one day. And settling down, what does it mean? It means having something of your own. [...] It means having a wife, a house, and why not, a nice car. And children. That is what we call settling down. And, 50,000 francs per month won’t get you that.

His mention of “a nice car” reflects the remarkable growth of certain segments of Senegalese society, and illustrates a central paradox in the relationship between migration and poverty: when poor societies develop, migration aspirations tend to increase, not decline. Still, it was the inability to establish a family that was the pivot of our informants’ experience of stagnation. “If my life does not change, I will never be able to marry,” lamented Thierno, a fisherman in his late 20s.

The financial barriers to marriage are manifest at several stages. First, romantic relationships are hard to preserve, our informants complained, because of women’s material wishes, such as clothing and braids. Second, entering marriage is obstructed by the expectation that the groom pay bridewealth and provide a room with basic furniture for his young family. Consequently, young men often expressed their fear, or experience, of long-time girlfriends leaving them for a man with more financial means—often an emigrant—who could formalise a relationship into marriage. Third, in married life, men are expected to fulfil the role of breadwinners, ensuring the family’s material well-being. Given the widespread frustration over inability to marry, it is not surprising that the majority of pirogue migrants are unmarried men (Mbow and Tamba 2007).

Beyond the specific role of marriage, our informants often expressed the social implications of material resources: “If you have nothing,” they said, “you are nothing. You are not considered.” This applied not only to relationships with women, but to society at large. Our informants linked opportunities for upward social mobility to patrimonialism, emphasizing the importance of having the necessary contacts. Such a structural explanation implies a locally rooted powerlessness.

It is precisely this combination of perceived stagnation, and place-bound explanations for it, that underlie migration aspirations (Carling 2002). Among our informants, those who had attempted or planned migration by pirogue shared two characteristics: they were determined to break out of protracted stagnation, and they were convinced that this could not be done by staying in Senegal. Migration

has appeal as a way of 'breaking out' because it represents a radical break; it holds the promise of individual progress, unrestrained by the impediments prospective migrants face in their everyday lives.

The idea of migration to Europe or America has become established in a growing range of African societies. As Cindy Horst (2006) notes, increased exposure to media images of life in the West, and to personal accounts of emigrants enable increasing numbers of people to imagine their own lives as migrants. Cultures of migration emerge as "migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviour, and values associated with migration become part of the community's values" (Massey *et al.* 1998:47).

In Senegal, the figure of the emigrant, locally referred to as *Modou-modou*, is seen to embody economic success and social prestige, and has become a social role model (Ba and Choplin 2005, Fall 2007, Ndoye 2006). This image encourages the perception, among youth, that emigration is synonymous with success. The desire to emigrate seems ubiquitous, like a collective dream, or even an obsession. As those at home witness emigrants' ability to assist their families, build a house, get married, and even buy a car, the notion has developed among Senegalese youth that emigration is the most direct path to success.

Among our informants, the prevailing image of Europe was that one can become economically independent and socially respected solely through one's effort. "The way they pay you in Europe," Modou argues, "is not like in Africa. [...] Because what you work, that's what they pay you." By contrast in Africa, he says bitterly, "they pay you just enough to buy bread so you can come back the next morning." Work in Europe is also believed to be widely available, implying that economic success depends only on effort. "Most Senegalese know that, in Europe, there is work," Modou explained, "so if you come home empty-handed, that means you messed up over there." In this perspective, emigration is first and foremost about unleashing one's individual potential.

Despite the faith in success overseas, prospective migrants are not oblivious to the hardships that may result from undocumented residence in Europe. Our informants acknowledged that "lacking papers" could pose some difficulties, but said they could rely on their social network for assistance. Furthermore, they emphasised, difficulties in Europe would never compare to the hardship of life in Senegal.

The possible hardships of emigration are downplayed because they are beyond the inquisitive gaze of one's kin and peers. "I prefer to suffer over there, rather than here," said Assane (34), pointing to the shame of facing his mother empty-handed. "If you go *travelling*, you go looking for something, she will know that 'my son has courage. He went looking for something.' Each day, she will pray, ask the good God that he helps her son who is over there."

Africans who want to go to Europe are faced with a range of possible modes of migration, each with specific obstacles or requirements (Carling 2002). Family reunification and labour migration are inaccessible options for the vast majority of prospective migrants. Emigration by means of forged documents or illicitly obtained visas requires considerable financial resources. In general, our informants spoke of a long-lasting unfulfilled wish to emigrate. Virtually everyone knew some-

body who had left by means of an illicitly obtained visa. Some had even tried this option, but fell victim to fraud and lost almost US\$ 5000 in the attempt.

In this context, the emergence of the pirogue route was seen as a chance not to be missed: the ticket was relatively inexpensive, and the bureaucracy inexistent. This made up for the risks. “All the while knowing that there were dangers,” said Lat, “all the while knowing that we could die, we left.”

Pride and shame, life and death

The preceding section showed how migration aspirations are closely linked with gendered social expectations. Moreover, pirogue migration as a specific mode of migration must be interpreted with reference to gender. Our informants’ justifications for undertaking this kind of migration appeared imbued with great symbolic value. Notions of manhood, honour, pride, responsibility and courage intertwine in accounts of the decision to embark a pirogue to Europe, making of it almost something heroic that a man *should* do in order to ensure his independence, assist his family and, ultimately, restore a tarnished sense of dignity.

As thousands of men started boarding the pirogues, everyone constantly talked of who was going, who was preparing to go, and who had successfully arrived to Spain. As Mansour says, “at that time, well, everyone saw that it was... simply following that path, it was a good thing to do.”

The social pressure that developed was closely linked to masculinity. Real men would be fearless, while those who did not go would be labelled “women”. Men’s decision to board a pirogue to Spain thus had implications for their image as courageous men willing to risk their lives to protect their dignity and confirm commitment to their family. “If my son grows up”, said Ibrahima (23), looking back on his decision to go, “I didn’t want that he ask me, ‘dad, why, at the time of the pirogues, why... uncle so-and-so, and uncle so-and-so went, why didn’t you go?’ What am I going to tell him? [...] Am I going to say that, well, ‘I was scared?’”

In this context, where pirogue migration is seen as a courageous action to fulfil the duty to one’s family and protect one’s dignity as a man, the possibility of death becomes, for many, framed in a narrative of honour and sacrifice. For Pape, dying in these circumstances would be akin to dying “a martyr.” For Modou, it would be an “honourable death,” filled with dignity:

Those who died over there – well... it’s like, maybe the soldiers who are dead on the battlefield. Because they had their aim, their destiny, and their ambitions. And they died – they did not die because they were stealing and were lynched. [...] It is like they died in the battlefield. In the field of honour.

Purposeful risk-taking is not only presented as heroic, like Modou does here, but also as a natural part of life. “Africans,” Aziz explained, “are born into risks,” because they have much higher chances of spending their entire life in poverty than of escaping it. At some point, he argues, one is willing to do “whatever it takes” to emerge from poverty. Many informants echoed the necessity of risk-taking. Most importantly, their accounts made it clear that pirogue migration cannot be understood as a risky undertaking opposed to a safe alternative. “At the time when we were leaving”, Modou said, “the only risk that we saw was staying in Senegal. [...] The only danger, or the only death, was staying in Senegal.”

The reasoning of our informants almost invert the notions of life and death in relation to pirogue migration. Setting out on the dangerous journey represents hope, ambition, and glory—even if death, if that should be the outcome. By contrast, *not* departing is presented as wilting away.

Assessing the risks of migration

A central assumption in many of the policies developed to regulate, or stem, unauthorized migration is that it takes place because aspiring migrants are misinformed about the risks involved. As Céline Nieuwenhuys and Antoine Pécoud (2007) explain, policies involving the production of awareness campaigns generally expect that providing aspiring migrants with accurate risk information will alter their perceptions and decrease unauthorized migration flows. Pirogue migrants expose themselves to very high risks, and may appear to be a case in point. What our analysis shows, however, is that their relationship with the risks of migration is not one of ignorance. This section of the article will address how prospective migrants relate to information about risk, and how they assess the dangers of setting off by boat towards the Canary Islands.

Imagining risks

Risk can be conceptualized as “a compound measure of the probability and magnitude of adverse effect” (Lowrance 1980:6). In the context of pirogue migration, there are, as noted earlier, two main possible adverse outcomes: involuntary return, and death. Assessing the risks of migration thus involves an evaluation of how likely these outcomes are, and how bad it would be if they were to occur.

Risk-taking decisions are made on the basis of risk perceptions, which are in turn influenced by risk information and personal experience. Risk perceptions are intuitive judgments about hazards that tend to be influenced by personal experience and media information (Slovic 1987, Tulloch and Lupton 2003, Wilkinson 2006). This is so because our ability to imagine certain hazards, and therefore our perception of their likelihood, is affected by the information on those hazards available to us (Slovic *et al.* 1979, Tversky and Kahneman 1974). It is thought that the “faulty” risk perceptions created by such “availability biases” can be redressed by providing “objective” risk information that brings lay judgements of risk closer to expert assessments (Kasperson and Kasperson 1996, Sjöberg 2000, Slovic 1987).

Information is crucial to decisions on dangerous, unauthorized migration. Aspiring migrants receive risk information through accounts of other migrants’ journeys, media reports, and awareness campaigns. A number of factors, however, provoke variations to the availability of accurate information on the risk level of this option. First, given the isolation of the journey and the secrecy surrounding departures, it is very difficult to establish the exact number of migrants who die in the attempt. In addition, emigrants often conceal the hardships of unauthorized border crossings, hampering the availability of accurate risk information in home communities (Reyes *et al.* 2002). As a matter of fact, many of our informants said they had hardly talked about their pirogue journey to others before the interview. A second source of variation in access to accurate risk information is place of origin. Aspiring migrants from distant interior regions are likely to have little general knowledge

about sea travel and the organisation of pirogue journeys than people from departure areas. This is exacerbated when organisers fail to warn willing travellers of the difficult conditions of the journey. Anecdotes circulate of inland migrants arriving to departure areas dressed up “as though they were travelling by plane” and who only became aware of the journey’s duress once onboard.

Risk information has a central place in the accounts of aspiring migrants who decide against going by pirogue. Such is the case of Alioune (33), who expressed the ambivalence felt between yearning to migrate and being aware of the risks: “Frankly speaking, all I regret is not leaving when everyone did. [At that time] there were no accidents, we didn’t hear such things. All we heard was that those who left arrived safely.” While he now feels unable to knowingly put his life at risk, Alioune wishes he had left in the naiveté of ignoring the risks involved, leaving the outcome in the hands of destiny. His words express one of the complex ways in which aspiring migrants relate to risk information when making migration choices.

Relating to risk information

Aspiring migrants adopt different attitudes to risk information, from acceptance to disregard or even discredit. In the end, risk information is merely one of the factors that inform decisions, and often not the most important. Opinions are difficult to change through the provision of risk awareness messages, since new information is always interpreted through the lens of existing views. As Paul Slovic (1987:281) explains, “new evidence appears reliable and informative if it is consistent with one’s initial beliefs; contrary evidence tends to be dismissed as unreliable, erroneous, or unrepresentative.”

There are three main ways in which prospective pirogue migrants relate to information about the risks of the journey: 1) avoiding information contrary to one’s opinion; 2) discrediting information considered unreliable; and 3) accepting the validity of risk information, but dismissing it as irrelevant to one’s individual case. In addition, of course, risk information can lead people to reject the option of pirogue migration, as with Alioune, cited above. The following discussion focuses on those who are determined to attempt the journey.

Some aspiring migrants, in line with Slovic’s suggestion, hold on to their initial opinions of high-risk migration by *avoiding information* about the difficulties of unauthorized crossings and focusing on successful accounts. Maintaining this kind of “tunnel vision” might be a way to protect oneself from having to reconcile the wish to emigrate with awareness of the existence of serious dangers. Prior to departure, some migrants recount, they expressly rejected thinking or asking about potential negative outcomes, instead focusing on the possibilities of life in Europe. Ibrahima (25) said he often avoided people who would talk about the risks of pirogue journeys because he saw them as wanting to spoil his plans. Aziz (24) justifies not asking his friend in Spain about the journey because he did not want to remind him of “such things.”

It is also relatively common for aspiring migrants to *discredit the validity of risk information*, accusing it of being biased. Trust and credibility attributed to information sources generally determine the value given to risk information, as audiences tend to dismiss information when they consider sources to be biased by

vested interests (Anderson 2006, Lupton 2006, Short 1984, Slovic *et al.* 1979, Tierney 1999). Prospective migrants receive risk information from authorities, private institutions, acquaintances, and relatives, and seem to consider most trustworthy those closer to them and least those they presume have an interest in preventing them from emigrating. Awareness campaigns are often criticised of being inaccurate or biased, especially by those who see them as governmental initiatives to keep them home for political reasons. Distrust of state initiatives is tied to a deeper sense of dissatisfaction among much of Senegalese youth, who blame the government for disregarding their plight and failing to create employment opportunities.

Typical statements discrediting awareness campaigns as biased describe the disseminated information as “manufactured” and corrupt. Ousseynou (31) says: “They make up their own thing. Feature some people, pay them, and put them into a pirogue to make some clips.” Pape (34), failed pirogue migrant, claims: “The majority of those who go on TV are corrupt [...] you have to say whatever suits them [otherwise] they will not broadcast you. That’s for sure. So, that’s the reason why I never listen to the radio and all that.” Labelling first-hand testimonials in information campaigns as corrupt delegitimizes their message and undermines the awareness-raising effectiveness usually attributed to this information strategy (Finucane and Holup 2006). Discrediting awareness campaigns as biased moreover serves some, such as Pape, to justify ignoring them.

A third attitude among aspiring migrants is to accept the credibility of risk information, but *dismiss it as irrelevant* at a personal level. This can be because the information source is perceived to represent a perspective too distant to one’s own. Experience, identity, or socio-economic position is often the determinant of such distance. Gaps in experience and knowledge are commonly referred to by fishermen and others from coastal regions, who consider their own knowledge of the risks of pirogue journeys more important to their decision than information propagated by the media. Still, they generally concede that awareness campaigns are useful to inform inland populations with no sailing experience. Besides identifying oneself as an experienced fisherman, other migrants position themselves as brave men in an effort to create a distance between them and those concerned with risk warnings. To do this, they might discredit others’ position by writing them off as less fit than themselves to face the risks of the journey. Ibrahima, for example, so dismissed his brother’s words of caution: “He said, “Ibrahima, it’s not safe! You have to stay.” I said “Shit! You’re a woman! You’re a woman! You can stay! I am going to leave! I am going to leave. Me, Ibra, I go or I die!” You see?” By labelling those concerned about risks as “women,” Ibrahima places them in a position of weakness with respect to him for whom, being a brave man, those warnings are irrelevant.

Social status is also very commonly alluded to in justifying the irrelevance of risk messages. Aspiring migrants often argue that opposition and warnings against pirogue migration come from those in successful socioeconomic positions. It is common to hear youth protest Senegalese music star Youssou N’Dour’s participation in awareness messages saying, “If I were as wealthy as him, I would stay too.” N’Dour’s wealth makes it difficult for unemployed youths to identify with his perspective. This, however, does not mean they are oblivious to risks or distrust reports as biased or inaccurate. Instead, it suggests that factors other than risk in-

formation are involved in their decision. Bocar, who has attempted the journey on multiple occasions, says he was fully aware that he had put his life in danger by making the boat crossing. Still, he explains, he felt compelled to do so because if successful, he could improve his life in ways he considers unattainable in Senegal.

Our informants' statements suggest that in many cases high-risk migration does not result from ignorance about risks but from the compromises, or sacrifices, some individuals must make to attempt at overcoming a life of hardship. This becomes most evident in the case of migrants who attempt the pirogue journey multiple times. Migrants' differing ways to relate to risk information show that making such information available will not necessarily provoke a determined opinion change in aspiring migrants. Moreover, while discrediting or dismissive attitudes may reflect genuine distrust of or disinterest in risk information, they may alternatively represent more or less conscious attempts to overcome the predicament of having access to risk information yet insisting on taking very high risks to migrate.

Minimizing the risks of migration

People are more likely to undertake high-risk activities that are familiar to them and which they perceive they can control. Psychological theories partly attribute this tendency to the effect of "cognitive errors" that provoke an illusion of control or unrealistic optimism. These cognitive biases partly explain why people perceive themselves to be more able to achieve positive outcomes or less vulnerable to risks than others (Fischhoff *et al.* 1978, McKenna 1993, Sjöberg 2000, Slovic 1987, Taylor and Armor 1996, Weinstein 1980, Whittaker 1986, Wilkinson 2006). A positive effect of risk denial is that it fosters optimism and a sense of control, infusing the necessary confidence to overcome anxiety and cope with stressful or uncertain situations (Slovic *et al.* 1979, Taylor and Armor 1996, Whittaker 1986). Overconfidence may, however, also lead people to dismiss risk information, ignore precautions and engage more easily in risky behaviour (McKenna 1993, Slovic *et al.* 1980, Weinstein 1980).

Migrants who undertake pirogue migration resort to mechanisms, both cognitive and tangible, which allow them to feel in control of, or even minimize, the hazards of pirogue migration. Emphasizing one's ability to confront or contain the risks of the journey appears to play an important role in justifying taking such risks. This is often done by stressing one's familiarity with danger or alluding to available strategies to minimize potential risks.

Familiarity with danger

Familiarity with the risks of pirogue migration is often expressed through references to collective identities or personal experience. This is most visible among fishermen and others who consider they have an especially close relationship to the sea. Experienced in the dangers of the ocean, fishermen often claim that "there are no risks for those who know the sea" because being familiar with the difficulties of the ocean, they are more prepared than others to succeed in undergoing the pirogue journey. Some insist that it is non-fishermen who create complications, as they are more prone to falling ill, or becoming scared and provoking disputes about returning to shore. Not all fishermen feel immune to the risks of the journey. Some,

though few and often older, insist that those who *really* know the sea would not attempt the journey to Spain.

Superior preparedness for the pirogue journey is presented in terms of *physical*, or pragmatic and *psychological* familiarity with sea travel and its dangers. At the physical level, fishermen stress being “immune” to seasickness, experienced with storms, able to swim and remain balanced under rough weather, more resilient to the harsh living conditions on an open boat, and used to conducting daily tasks in the restricted space of the pirogue. Some compare the journey to their routine activities, which may include 15 day-long fishing expeditions reaching as far as Sierra Leone on the same kind of pirogue. At the psychological level, fishermen point out being used to spending long periods at sea and consequently less likely to succumb to the psychological strain of the journey. They are also familiar with the possibility of dying at sea, and may more easily accept to take this risk. Fishermen’s preparedness is oftentimes described as a collective attribute to the safety of the entire migrant expedition, as expressed in Pape’s confident statement that “Senegalese fishermen are the best sailors in Africa.” The feeling of immunity to the sea’s dangers is also found among non-fishermen from coastal communities. Lébou identity and the ability to swim are denoted as markers of this perceived superior preparedness to confront the perilous journey with respect to other migrants.

Familiarity with other types of risk-taking is also referred to by some as a way to justify being better prepared than others to make the journey. Interviewed former soldiers, for example, explained the army had built them to “fear nothing” and face any danger. Aziz (24) even said that, after living things “worse than death” in the army, the risks of pirogue migration did not seem so serious.

Risk minimization strategies

When justifying the decision to attempt pirogue migration, our informants referred to strategies used before, during, and after the journey in order to minimize the risks. They insisted that properly planned journeys had high chances of success. Careful preparations include acquiring a sturdy pirogue, two engines (often one new and one used), and one or two GPS devices, hiring capable navigators and ensuring sufficient fuel, food, water, cooking devices, tools for minor repairs and even pills against seasickness. Departures are planned according to appropriate sailing seasons and weather forecasts. Related men avoid travelling together to minimize losses at the family level. Discretion is kept to avoid malevolent spells from jealous acquaintances. Migrants trust that their trip will be well planned, though not all are. Sometimes they themselves verify the safety of their pirogue, as Modou who insists, “I will never die of negligence. [...] I will do all the necessary checks [...] Emigrating irregularly does not mean one has no right to see what is good and what is bad!” Many others, however, admit to having jumped on the first opportunity without giving much thought to safety details, only to later find out that their trip was poorly planned.

Obtaining spiritual protection is also an important element of preparing the journey. Religious leaders, or *marabouts*, help with this task. They suggest appropriate departure dates, scan passenger lists for problematic individuals, provide

organisers and travellers with amulets for protection and luck, pray throughout the journey's duration, and may advise organizers to offer sacrifices. The use of amulets is widespread among migrants, who seek in them protection from sickness, accidents, and malicious spells. Some rare amulets are said to have the power of making pirogues invisible to patrols when attached to them. Prayers are also important. Many migrants say special prayers before leaving, commend themselves to their parents' prayers, and might bring a copy of the Qur'an with them. Ultimately, a successful outcome is seen to depend solely on God's will.

Minimizing the possibilities of apprehension and repatriation is also crucial. Departures avoid heavily surveilled times and areas, and at times organizers make use of contacts and bribes to keep patrols at bay. Once at sea, pirogues follow itineraries that maximize time on international waters to avoid Senegalese, Cape Verdean, Mauritanian or Moroccan coastal guards. On Spanish land, migrants aware of repatriation agreements attempt to withhold their nationality. They travel without documentation, local currency, or any other identifying objects, and may even refuse to speak. Some go as far as declaring to originate from a war-torn country and illegitimately claiming asylum.

Religion and high-risk migration

References to religion were common in our informants' accounts of pirogue migration and the risks it entails. In this section, we will use religious beliefs as a lens for recapitulating the article's analytical disaggregation of risk-taking behaviour.

First, religion is central to many of the strategies used to minimize the *probability* of adverse outcomes. As described above, special prayers, amulets, and sacrifices provide spiritual protection from death and involuntary return.

Second, religious beliefs affect migrants' assessment of the *magnitude* of adverse outcomes. Most importantly, this applies to perspectives on death. Our informants spoke of death as an inextricable part of the life given by God, not something to be feared. Death in the attempt to migrate was also, as mentioned earlier, viewed as a "good death" in moral terms.

Third, the very notion of risk is challenged by faith in divine destiny. In the event of interception and return, migrants were comforted by relatives who ensured them that "it was God's will." With respect to dying at sea, our informants explained that one's time of death is established by God from the moment of birth. When the time to die comes, it will not matter if you are lying in bed or aboard a pirogue headed to Spain. Based on this belief, most interviewees insisted that migration would not necessarily influence the likelihood of death. The apparent fearlessness of pirogue migrants is thus closely linked to religion. "If you are fearful", said Ibrahima "then, you disbelieve God."

Migrants seem to combine deterministic faith in divine destiny with pragmatic risk-reducing strategies—prayers, amulets, sacrifices—which are also based on religion. This shows how the logic of risk-taking is both confirmed and challenged by religious beliefs.

Public debate in Senegal has been influenced by the contention that pirogue migration is a suicidal action. This is a strong accusation given the Qur'an's prohibition of suicide. Our informants who had attempted migration by pirogue, or wanted

to do so, were all religious and strongly protested this comparison. This labelling was absurd, they argued, since migration would only be suicidal if the intended outcome was death. There is a big difference, they argued, between wanting death, and not fearing it.

Conclusion

Policy responses to the surge in boat migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands have included information campaigns that warn prospective migrants about the danger of the journey. Information campaigns have become a popular element in migration management policy since the 1990s (Nieuwenhuys and Pé-coud 2007). They are based on the assumption that migrants who follow high-risk migration routes are unaware of the risks involved, and that with better access to information, they will refrain from going.

As the preceding analysis has shown, however, there is no simple relationship between risk awareness and attitudes to pirogue migration. Aspiring migrants actively engage with the risk information they receive, evaluating the validity of its content in relation to the credibility of the source, and filtering it as they see relevant to their case.

The conventional notion of risk as “a compound measure of the probability and magnitude of adverse effect.” (Lowrance 1980:6) is not challenged by our analysis. However, we have shown how interpretation of probability and magnitude are context-specific. Risk acceptability is mediated by life opportunities. This explains how an option as dangerous as pirogue migration may seem attractive to young men with few realistic alternatives. The assumption that all migrants undertake high-risk migration because they are oblivious to the risks is misleading and may result in ineffective migration management policies. Instead, our analysis suggests that high-risk migration is perceived as a unique opportunity. Accepting the risks involved should not be seen as fatalistic behaviour. On the contrary, the risk-taking of pirogue migration is seen as purposeful and morally justifiable behaviour.

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