

Long Journeys. African Migrants on the Road

Edited by

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Home	xi
<i>Warsan Shire</i>	
A Migrant's Last Journey	xiii
<i>Kevin Eze</i>	
Listening to Migrant Voices: An Introduction	1
<i>Robert Lawrence McKenzie and Alessandro Triulzi</i>	
Sub-Saharan Migrants Heading North: A Mobility Perspective	9
<i>Joris Schapendonk</i>	
Nigerian Border Crossers: Women Travelling to Europe by Land	25
<i>Kristin Kastner</i>	
High-Risk Migration: From Senegal to the Canary Islands by Sea ...	45
<i>Miranda Poeze</i>	
Stranded in Mauritania: Sub-Saharan Migrants in Post-Transit Context	67
<i>Armelle Choplin and Jérôme Lombard</i>	
Untangling Immobility in Transit: Sub-Saharan Migrants in Istanbul	93
<i>Brigitte Suter</i>	
Marabouts and Migrations: Senegalese between Dakar and Diaspora	113
<i>Amber Gemmeke</i>	
"Today, I Would Never Go to Europe": Mobility for Resources and Local Development in West Africa	135
<i>Laurence Marfaing</i>	

Migration, Class and Symbolic Status: Nigerians in the Netherlands and Greece	165
<i>Apostolos Andrikopoulos</i>	
Lessons for Life: Two Migratory Portraits from Eritrea	187
<i>Magnus Treiber</i>	
“Like a plate of spaghetti”: Migrant Narratives from the Libya-Lampedusa Route	213
<i>Alessandro Triulzi</i>	
Our Journey	233
<i>Dagmawi Yimer</i>	
Notes on Contributors	255
Index	259

LISTENING TO MIGRANTS' NARRATIVES: AN INTRODUCTION

Robert Lawrence McKenzie and Alessandro Triulzi

At the third European Conference on African Studies in 2009 (ECAS 2009) held in Leipzig, Germany, the co-editors of this volume convened a day-long panel under the rubric of “African Migration to Europe.” The idea for the panel was conceived roughly a year earlier in June 2008, at the AEGIS Summer School held at Cortona, Italy, which gathered scholars from different disciplines to examine and discuss the broad theme of “Borders and Border-Crossings in Africa.” It was there that we first met and presented papers on what could be broadly defined as “irregular” African migration to Europe. Despite the growing and considerable political salience about irregular migration, we were concerned about a deep discordance between European public imaginings and the experiences and lives of irregular migrants. Five years later, things have not changed much.

While it has been argued that scholarship should distinguish between dominant discourses and policies (cf. Czaika and de Haas 2011), it is also self-evident that academic discourses are not without social and political consequences. In the case of irregular migration, a set of tropes echoing alarmist rhetoric has increased public disquiet—and shaped ideas and ideologies—about the nature and consequences of new forms of transnational mobility. By and large these tropes have helped fashion and usher in anti-immigration movements, led to xenophobic fears of immigrants, increased racial, ethnic and religious tensions, and isolated new immigrant communities and long standing diasporas alike. What’s more, compassion for the plight of migrants, including exiles and refugees, particularly those coming from Muslim lands, has given way to near fever pitch concerns about security in a post 9/11 environment. That these circumstances have coincided with an increasingly turbulent global economy has only strengthened the resolve of the far-right, fuelled intolerance, and led to a public backlash against nearly all immigrant communities in Europe.

Within this political topography, European states have used instruments of national power to develop a set of comprehensive strategies to restrict immigration through “non-arrival regimes” (Castles 2003: 14). To this end, European states have worked with foreign partners south of the Mediterranean to construct “architectures of exclusion” that have

shifted immigration controls and entrance decisions “away from state borders to a range of new places (the high seas, consular offices, and foreign airports)” (Gibney 2005: 4). These policies have not only been shortsighted and counterproductive, but they have also put countless migrants directly in harm’s way. Restrictive immigration policies have eviscerated old routes and networks and forged new and troubling pathways to (il)legality. Unable to find what once were legal means of travelling to Europe, an increasing number of migrants are drawing on their own capabilities and agency, creating new networks, and embarking on extraordinary and dangerous journeys to reach European shores. But these new routes, networks, and methods do not guarantee success—far from it. In the last decade alone, some twelve thousand people have perished in what some African migrants aptly call the “Cemetery of the Mediterranean.”¹ And these numbers reflect only the casualties that are known.

Worse yet, as the result of misleading nomenclature and criminalising labels—such as, illegal, irregular, undocumented, overstayer, *sans papiers*, *clandestino*—European states have become unable or unwilling to imagine irregular migrants as ordinary human beings, who, under the weight of highly complex circumstances, are compelled to use irregular routes and irregular methods. What’s lost in the deafening din about the dangers of irregular migrants are the complex and multifaceted reasons why a growing number of Africans make these perilous journeys. As researchers who are troubled by serious human rights abuses against migrants, we were and remain convinced of the urgency to contest and dislodge pervasive misinformation and misconceptions about irregular migration in the European public sphere.

It was against this backdrop that we proposed a one-day panel on the issue of irregular migration for ECAS 2009. The panel offered a rare opportunity to generate dialogue and debate among scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds on questions related to irregular African migration to Europe. We received thirty-six paper proposals on a wide range of thematic issues, spanning broad geographic regions of Africa. And we were certainly pleased to see well over one hundred scholars attend our three sessions of twelve papers, each representing fresh research by new or recent doctoral students. Though the panel afforded a platform for a much-needed discussion, it was clear that there was far more to learn

¹ See <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/2006/01/mamadou-va-morire-la-strage-dei.html>.

about the lives of Africans before, during, and after their “migratory projects” to Europe.

Building on the ECAS 2009 panel, this volume subjects to critical inquiry transnational mobility and explores the different phases and contours of African irregular migration to Europe. Through a wide-ranging probing of the topic, we investigate the direct and indirect relationship of macro-power forces on ordinary African lives, examining how these forces at once enable and constrain human agency and action. The central animating theme of this volume is the exploration of the local-to-global context of migration, namely the inextricable links between the so-called drivers of migration, its governance and management, and the various patterns, experiences and forms of agency it leads to. If there is but one fundamental and object lesson it is that one-size-fits all policies for governing and regulating migration have dangerous consequences on both sides of Mediterranean. This is true not only for African migrants, but also for sending, receiving, and transit states and their societies.

FRAMING IRREGULAR MIGRATION

The concept of irregular migration is problematic, unclear, and, at times, contradictory (cf. Düvell 2009; Vollmer 2008). As a result of inadequate data and confused nomenclature, the concept of irregular migration is a source of political and analytical uncertainty that impedes our understanding of this highly complex process (cf. Black 2003; Koser 2005). Therefore, as a starting point, we must ask how *is* irregular migration conceptualized? In other words, how is it defined, by whom, and with what consequences? Does this bedrock designation accurately define African migration or does it obfuscate and obstruct—analytically and politically—our understanding of new forms of transnational mobility? As we begin to complicate our understanding of these issues, we must also ask what is the nexus between patterns and experiences of migration, and forms of governance, management and control? These are but a few of the questions that inform and frame this volume.

It is our contention that western publics have been habituated to think of irregular migrants in binary and reductionist terms. Any casual survey of a wide range of European genres immediately reveals that the public is saturated with myopic depictions of real versus bogus refugees, involuntary versus voluntary migratory fluxes, legal versus illegal entry, regular versus irregular migration, among a growing list of categories

(cf. Zetter 2007). Pundits and politicians alike routinely leverage and magnify these easy-to-grasp notions as a lightning rod to garner support for their own political enterprises.

In this context, it is small wonder that one hears incessantly of irregular African migrants as being part of an “African exodus” or impending catastrophic “invasion” (de Haas 2007). By overstating the threat posed by migration, Canada was, as far back as 1997, spending one billion dollars a year on its internal refugee determination system or about ten times more than it spends on aid assistance to refugee camps (cf. Stoffman 1997). In an attempt to mitigate irregular migration, Canada, the United States, along with Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, spent no less than seventeen billion dollars in 2002 alone (Martin 2003 quoted in Khoser 2005: 4). Yet the fact remains that the vast majority of people in the South, including those who have the means and opportunities to migrate, do not do so (Horst 2006).

That western states are spending so much on migration controls and management systems illustrates the extent to which uncompromising interpretations of irregular migration have shaped global opinion and imprinted themselves on immigration legislation and policies. In short, irregular migrants have been discursively reduced and crudely rendered in convenient images of victims and villains. Bridget Anderson (2007, 2008) aptly recognised that this discourse bifurcates “foreigners” into monolithic and moralising categories of “good” and “bad” migrants. The former have been designated as victims of trafficking and rightly deserve institutional and state assistance, while the latter are framed as cunning queue jumpers and welfare frauds, who, among other things, are responsible for the loss of jobs, rise in crime, social decay, and blight in the poorest areas of European countries.

For the purpose of this collection, we would like to suspend these dominant notions of irregular migration, widen our myopic gaze, and instead ask how are these categories and labels fashioned and reified in the corridors of power in the North and what are the resulting consequences for Africans on the move? Though we engage with these categories, our aim is not to work from a set of rigidly defined designations but rather to dislodge them through rich empirical, evidence-based analysis. Therefore this volume situates the concept of irregular migration within a global and historical context, a context that has allowed for shifting notions of criteria for those who can or cannot enter Europe, with an emphasis on those who cannot.

TOWARDS A NEW NARRATIVE OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

To move beyond binary and easy-to-grasp notions of irregular migrants, it is well to ask: What should we make of the untold numbers of migrants whose complex, heterogeneous lives and experiences do not fit easily within these monolithically consistent categories? What should we make of those, who, as neither refugee nor *homo economicus*, flee grinding marginalisation, injustice, pestilence, and crippling adversity, which has been created from “extreme, even life-threatening, postcolonial poverty” (Malkki 2007: 341)? And how should states, institutions, and international humanitarian regimes label and respond to these nebulous categories of persons? What would these “speechless emissaries” (Malkki 1996) have to say to us if their candour did not prevent their entry or ensure their deportation from Europe?

Clearly we do not mean to suggest that there are no victims. In fact, quite the opposite. The evidence is overwhelming that millions have fled mass human rights abuses, armed conflicts, and brutally oppressive regimes. Worldwide there were no less than ten and a half million refugees in 2011, twenty six million internally displaced persons as of 2007, and twelve million stateless persons as of 2009.² Therefore our contention is not to turn a blind eye to victims, but rather to highlight that a paradigm of factually ill-informed nomenclature and political charged rhetoric has fashioned an increasingly xenophobic ethos, inflated the threat of an invasion, and conflated different categories of migrants. The cumulative effect has forged a European environment that is increasingly inhospitable to migrants, regardless of how one labels them. Far too many European states have been unable or unwilling to grasp the basic human nature of transnational mobility and the variety of experiences that animate such a world-wide phenomenon.

Accordingly, we feel that there is a strong need for a new narrative from which to contextualize and grapple with the complex issues of irregular migration. To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues—and to disabuse or undeceive ourselves from easy-to-grasp notions—the starting and end analysis must be with migrants themselves and their multiform agency grounded in and shaped by local contexts. By listening to their stories and documenting their often rich

² For a detailed breakdown of the statistics see the United Nations Refugee Agency's Website: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c11.html>.

experiences—as they understand them—our research and analysis may begin to offer alternative readings and interpretations of irregular migration. In other words, it will only be through engaging irregular migrants in open and meaningful dialogue that we will be able to expand our own considerations of “irregular” migration.

Therefore an important point of departure for this publication is the focus of migrants’ narratives within each individual chapter and research experience. These heterogeneous narratives, when juxtaposed to empirical findings, offer creative ways of thinking about and representing African migration, an approach we believe is too often underrepresented in scholarly works and public discourse. The integration of these diverse narratives demonstrates that one of the most vexing aspects of new forms of African migration is the extent to which migrants’ narratives are ignored, muted, or elided in the public sphere.

While we are attempting to include migrants’ narratives, we are well aware of the methodological and ethical complexities of the very reaching out and “listening” to migrants’ voices. The link between migration and the colonial past, for instance, appears to be poorly perceived among the new generation of African migrants, mostly unemployed urbanized youth who appear to be escaping from the present “regimes of violence” (Mbembe 2001: 102), rather than from their nebulous colonial past. What these youths are interested in is not the colonial past per se, but whether their present life in poverty has any viable future.

Therefore, this volume demonstrates that the lives of irregular migrants offer many insights into the making and unmaking of today’s transnational mobility. But they also offer a window into the migratory ecology of survival, whereby a morally ambiguous “gray zone” (Levi 1998) allows for the victim to become the victimiser and where, in fact, any clear-cut distinction between perpetrator and victim is often blurred and indiscernible. For this reason migrants’ narratives are sometimes perceived at best as flawed, and at worst as mere rhetorical constructions riddled with secrets and lies. To be sure, the narratives which are presented in this volume were not aimed at providing asylum or refugee status evidence in front of a State commission, but are merely offered as fragments of lives and voices emerging from migrants’ communities in the field or in the country of transit or arrival. In a way, these voices and silences describe the very *hubris* of today’s abused humanity currently displayed everywhere towards irregular migrants. Accordingly, these voices and silences are a useful reminder to a forgetful Europe of what migrants’ conditions meant to its own, often irregular, migrants of the past.

MANUSCRIPT STRUCTURE

The volume offers thirteen contributions from a variety of different local actors and situations, and it privileges the immediacy of firsthand accounts and self-representations. Through rich empirical chapters, the volume attempts to dislodge easy-grasp labels of irregular migrants as either “victims” or “villains.” Moving beyond simplistic terms of how migrants attempt perilous journeys out of visible poverty, chapters demonstrate the complex set of ecological and human factors that help shape migrants’ ideas and inform their decisions on the move. To this end, the volume aims to explore the constant conflict between the externally-imposed and internally-moulded laws of migration, examine its mixed and contradictory governance, and present live experiences and actual cases of individual migrants.

As a coda to the volume, we have included a narrative by an Ethiopian forced migrant living in Rome, who works as a filmmaker-cum-activist. The narrative speaks volumes about the long journeys that some Africans must make to escape suffocating structural violence in the South. Yet the narrative demonstrates that migrants’ journeys, trials and tribulations, rarely end upon reaching European shores. In fact, it is often upon arrival that the painful remembering of the long journey surfaces and the urge to speak out is confronted with the silences and pain of one’s abused dignity. As an Ethiopian female refugee stated in Dagmawi’s film “Like a man on earth” (2008):

I don’t want to remember all this, I know what I went through all along. I can’t tell anymore, but I want it to be exposed...I say this not because I seek pity...but in the hope that a solution can be found for everyone who’s...going through this ordeal.

It would be disingenuous or naïve to suggest that this volume provides comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the intractable problems leading to and resulting from irregular migration. But in a similar vein to the Ethiopian woman just quoted, it is our hope that the narratives and empirical analyses found in this volume provide the rightful opening and exposure, not merely to public awareness and meaningful dialogue, but to the direct voicing of African migrants and refugees and of their struggles and painful journeys.

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