

## **Beyond “Kamikaze Migrants”: Risk Taking in West African Boat**

### **Migration to Europe**

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### **Authors’ Statement**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, tens of thousands of young Africans have left the shores of Senegal and other West African countries in small boats headed for Spain's Canary Islands. Most have spent a week or more at sea, and unknown numbers have died in the attempt. 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. We show that risk taking is shaped by context-specific interaction of disparate factors. These include economic obstacles to reaching social adulthood, notions of masculinity, pride and honor, and religion, in the form of sufi Islam.

**Key words:** risk, boat migration, unauthorized migration, youth, Senegal

## **Introduction**

Since the early 1990s, unauthorized migrant arrivals to Europe by boat have become common. Every year, several thousand migrants have left Africa hoping to reach Europe in small, overcrowded crafts. Of those who have succeeded, some have applied for asylum, some have been deported, some have remained as irregular immigrants, and others have obtained legal residence. These flows have prompted major logistical, humanitarian, legal, and political challenges to European authorities.

Migration from Sub-Saharan Africa took a dramatic new turn in 2006. Instead of venturing to North Africa and crossing relatively narrow stretches of sea, migrants in the thousands started leaving the shores of West Africa, headed for Spain's Canary Islands. They spent a week or more in small boats, exposed to the dangers of the Atlantic Ocean.

In this article, we address 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. We show that, as in other parts of the world, the dangers of migration are related to notions of obligation and purpose and, thereby, have a moral dimension (cf. Núñez and Heyman 2007).

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. The migrants are neither suicidal nor irrational, but make decisions within a specific socioeconomic and moral context.

### **Pirogue Migration**

Our analysis is concerned with the micro-level processes of perception and decision making. Others have accounted for the broader structural processes that underpin migration desires among African youth (e.g., Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; De Boeck and Honwana 2005). These accounts emphasize how concurrent aspects of “modernization” exert pressure on young adults. Traditional sectors such as agriculture and fisheries no longer provide the livelihoods they once did, and opportunities within the public sector have contracted since the structural adjustment of the 1980s. At the same time, greater exposure to wealth—both locally and through the global media and transnational connections—have created new ambitions and desires. As De Boeck and Honwana (2005:8) write:

The dreams, stories, and imaginaries of the diasporic experience of the West clearly illustrate that young people in Africa are not merely passive victims of the societal crisis that pervades the

worlds in which they grow up. Rather, it illustrates the fact that they are searching for their own ways out of a life that they feel to be without a future.

Our analysis is based on fieldwork in Senegal, a country that is praised for its generally peaceful and democratic post-independence development compared to other countries in the region. Still, many of the structural constraints on youth are the same. The appeal of emigration is strengthened by the prevalent links with Senegalese abroad: an estimated 22 percent of households receive international remittances (Pugliese and Ray 2011). This reflects a long history of intercontinental migration since the days of French colonialism. The resort to unauthorized migration reflects the gross mismatch between African emigration desires and European immigration opportunities. Millions live in a situation of “involuntary immobility” (Carling 2002) in which they would like to migrate but are unable to do so because of restrictive immigration policies.

The vessel used by the boat migrants leaving West Africa towards the Canary Islands is the traditional pirogue, a long, wooden fishing boat decorated in vivid colors. We use the term “pirogue migration” as a shorthand term for unauthorized migration aboard small boats along this route. The pirogues measure approximately 20 meters (66 feet) in length and 3 meters (10 feet) in width. On journeys 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. In spite of the crowded conditions, 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 is invariably navigated by means of GPS.

Pirogue migration represents both continuity and change. Boat migrants have arrived on the Canaries since the mid-1990s but previously crossed only 100 kilometers (60 miles) of sea from Morocco or Western Sahara. The pirogue departure points in West Africa, stretching from Mauritania in the North to Guinea-Bissau in the South, are up to 2000 kilometers (1,200 miles) away from the islands (Figure 1). The majority of pirogue migrants have departed from Senegal.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

When migrants started taking this longer route, the number of arrivals to the Canary Islands grew dramatically, increasing more than six-fold from 2005 to 2006. The route of the pirogues constitutes the first direct flow from the large pool of prospective migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa and presented European authorities with new challenges. In the past, when migrants traveled through North Africa, states in the region played an important role as buffers in European migration management. The emergence of a direct route, thus, changes the regional geopolitics of migration control: measures such as sea patrols along the West African coast and bilateral cooperation on repatriation developed as a result (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011).

## **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. All our interviewees were adherents of Sufi Islam, the predominant religion in Senegal. Religion has a ubiquitous influence on daily life, including, as we will explain, on the practice of boat migration.

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. For this reason, fieldwork among other population groups in Senegal—inland communities in particular—could have yielded different results. Coastal populations have more direct access to information about the pirogue journeys. As a result, prospective migrants are presumably less dependent on the information conveyed by “recruiters” or other third-party sources of information. Moreover, in coastal communities, the boundaries between organizers, smugglers, and migrants were particularly fluid. Some fishermen, for instance, redirected their skills away from the dwindling Senegalese fishing sector towards becoming navigators on a migrant-smuggling trip that would land them in Europe.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2007 and early 2008, before the global economic downturn significantly affected the European destination countries. In recent years, pirogue migration has declined dramatically. In 2011, the Spanish government recorded only 340 boat migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands. The decline in departures is likely to be due to the combined effect of intensified control efforts off the Senegalese coast, repatriations, and the economic downturn.

Fieldwork data were collected by Hernández-Carretero, a female Spanish researcher. The data consist of field notes and transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Informants comprise a large and varied group of people, some of whom were interviewed. The interviewees were deliberately restricted to young men in the approximate age range of 20 to 35 years. The overwhelming majority of those who attempt boat migration from Senegal to Spain are men (Mbow and Tamba 2007).

Informants 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 and French were used for establishing relationships and interacting in group settings; interviews were conducted in French by the researcher or in Wolof with an interpreter. All were recorded, with the consent of interviewees. In total, 38 interviews were conducted with 30 different interviewees, amounting to nearly 90 hours of interview time. Interviews concentrated on attitudes towards emigration in general, and by pirogue in particular, thoughts about apprehension by patrols,

repatriation, and the Senegalese government's attitude to pirogue migration.

Interviewees also talked about their current lives in Senegal, which contextualized their notions of risk and attitudes to risk taking.

Interviewees could be divided into three broad groups in relation to pirogue migration. *Pirogue returnees* had attempted the journey and returned to Senegal following apprehension by patrols, technical problems, storms at sea, or repatriation after arrival to Spain. *Aspiring pirogue migrants* considered pirogue migration as an option but had not yet attempted the journey. *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 virtually inexistent in the community. Out of the 30 interviewees, 18 were pirogue returnees. All the remaining 12 aspired to migrate, but most made it clear that they wished to do it through other means than the pirogue journey.

Although there is a fixed number of recorded interviews, informal conversations throughout the fieldwork period also provided valuable data. Fieldnotes were taken to record observations, reflections, and conversations with informants. At the analysis stage, these notes served both to contextualize and supplement the interview material. Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analyzed by means of *NVivo* software for qualitative research. All the names of informants are pseudonyms.

## **The Risks of Pirogue Migration**

In this article, we conceptualize “risk” in terms of the potential negative outcomes of pirogue migration. In doing so, we rely on William Lowrance’s (1980:6) definition of risk as “a compound measure of the probability and magnitude of adverse effect.” This widely used definition represents a tradition of associating “risk” with “danger,” as a value loaded, typically negative notion. This is not the only possible approach. Jens Zinn (2008:3,4) suggests that the main common element to all definitions of risk is “the distinction between reality and possibility” in the sense that human action can alter future outcomes. In other words, “risk taking” means taking actions with outcomes that are uncertain but may be either favorable or unfavorable. Such a value neutral, open approach to risk is appropriate for conceptualizing risk taking with respect to the overall migration project, that is, including the possible gains from living and working in Europe. We nevertheless find Lowrance’s definition useful for analyzing risk taking regarding the journey itself, which is our focus here. In line with his framework, assessing the risks of pirogue migration means evaluating (1) how likely the negative outcomes are and (2) how bad it would be if they were to materialize. While applying this danger-oriented, traditional concept of risk, we also show how risk taking is intimately connected to the possibility of creating opportunities. Furthermore, we demonstrate how young men’s willingness to be exposed to danger contributes to restoring masculine identities.

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 appeared 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 a wide range of potentially life-threatening dangers. Storms and ferocious waves can make pirogues capsize, even though they are relatively sturdy vessels. There is also a risk of fire related to on-board cooking with gas.

Health hazards include seasickness, dehydration, and hypothermia. The overcrowded and unhygienic conditions on board, sometimes with the presence of dead bodies, can aggravate sickness. The fuel for the engines can emit toxic fumes that endanger the passengers. 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 eventually dying from thirst and starvation. There is also allegedly a risk of being taken for dead and shoved overboard while sleeping. Passengers who accidentally fall into the water might not be 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. The hardships of the journey can also result in disputes between passengers. Arguments could be triggered by, for instance, major decisions such as about giving up and returning.

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.

In addition to the risk of death, involuntary return is the most serious adverse possibility. It can occur in three ways. First, technical problems, bad weather, or other adverse events could force pirogues to turn around. Second, the boats could be intercepted by patrols and escorted back to shore. Third, passengers could be repatriated after arrival on the Canary Islands.

Patrolling along the pirogue route was intensified in 2006 through new forms of cooperation between African and European authorities. Under the so-called Hera operations, vessels, planes, and helicopters from European countries patrolled the territorial waters of Cape Verde, Mauritania, and Senegal under coordination by Frontex, the European borders agency. Migrants that are intercepted less than 24 nautical miles (44 kilometers) from

the shore are escorted back. Those who are intercepted may be prosecuted upon return and could be liable to fines and prison sentences.

Many 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 repatriation. 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 (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011). With the reformed Aliens Law that came into effect at the end of 2009, the maximum detention period was extended from 40 to 60 days, thereby reducing the likelihood of release before repatriation could be arranged.

Return, regardless of the circumstances, represents the loss of a significant investment. In many cases, migrants and their families have had to sell property or borrow money, especially from relatives, in order to afford the journey. The price for the sea journey can be as high as 1 million FCFA (\$2,000), although the average is thought to be around 400,000 FCFA (\$800) (Ba 2007). 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 2006). In societies tied together by intergenerational 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 (2006:37) 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 characterized by marginality, stagnation, and a truncation of social being.” The accounts of our Senegalese informants reflected this difficulty of breaking out of youth and the shame that is associated with it. “Sometimes, someone can hurt you a lot,” said Bocar, an unemployed family man and pirogue returnee:

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.

In the following sections, we elaborate on why this need to “do something” may translate into high-risk migration attempts.

### **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 (Bjarnesen 2007; Carling 2002; Jónsson 2008; Vigh 2006).

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 (\$100) per month. “What is that kind of money going to do?” asks Pape, an industrial worker in his 30s:

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 wealth increases in some segments of Senegalese society. It illustrates a central paradox in the relationship between migration and poverty: when poor societies become wealthier, 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 hairstyling. Second, entering marriage is obstructed by the expectation that the groom pays 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 greater financial means—often an emigrant—who could formalize a relationship into marriage. Third, in married life, men are expected to fulfill the role of breadwinners, ensuring the family’s material well-being. Given the widespread frustration over the 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 an 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 figure of the emigrant, referred to locally as *modou-modou*, is seen to embody economic success and social prestige and has become a social role model (Ba 2007; Fall 2007; Fouquet 2007). This image encourages the perception 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 advance through one’s personal 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, “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 emphasized, difficulties in Europe would never compare to the hardship of life in Senegal.

The possible adversities of migration are also downplayed because they are beyond the inquisitive gaze of kin and peers. “I prefer to suffer over there rather than here,” said Assane, pointing to the shame of facing his mother empty-handed. “If you go *traveling*, 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 legal labor 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 somebody who had left by means of an illicitly obtained visa. Some had even tried this option but fell victim to fraud and lost almost 2.5 million FCFA (\$5,000) 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, the specific characteristics of pirogue 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, honor, pride, responsibility, and courage intertwine in accounts of the decision to embark on a pirogue to Europe. Some of our informants described the journey as something that a man felt he *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 about who was going, who was preparing to go, who had successfully arrived

in Spain. Mansour says, “At that time, well, everyone saw that it was...simply following that path 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 might be labeled “women.” Men’s decision to board a pirogue, thus, had implications for their image as courageous men willing to risk their lives to protect their dignity and confirm their commitment to their family. “When my son grows up,” said Ibrahima, looking back on his decision to go, “I wouldn’t want that he ask me, ‘Dad, why, at the time of the pirogues, why...when 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 fulfill the duty to one’s family and protect one’s dignity as a man, the possibility of death becomes, for many of our informants, framed in a narrative of honor and sacrifice. Mbow and Tamba (2007) similarly point out that aspiring migrants often think of the journey from the perspective of making a sacrifice for the collective interests of the family. Pape, one of our previously mentioned informants, spoke of dying in these circumstances as akin to dying “a martyr.” For Modou, a man in his 30s without a stable occupation, it would be an “honorable 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 honor.

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 inverts 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 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 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, policymakers expect that providing aspiring migrants with risk information through awareness campaigns will alter migrants' perceptions and decrease irregular migration flows. What our analysis shows, however, is that pirogue migrants' relationship with the risks of migration is not necessarily 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**

People make risk taking decisions on the basis of *risk perceptions*, intuitive judgments about hazards. In the literature on risk, these perceptions are thought to be influenced by personal experience and by information received through, for instance, personal networks, institutions, and mass media (Kasperson and Kasperson 1996; Slovic 1987; Tulloch and Lupton 2003; Wilkinson 2006). Our ability to imagine specific hazards and assess their probability depends on the information that is available to us.

The actual scale of risks in boat migration from West Africa to Spain is largely unknown, both to researchers and to prospective migrants. Given the isolation at sea, the clandestine nature of the journey, and the secrecy surrounding departures, it is difficult to establish the number of migrants who die in the attempt. Moreover, as elsewhere in the world, migrants sometimes

suppress the hardships of the journey in communication with relatives and friends at home. Many of our interviewees who had endured the hardship of a pirogue journey said that they had hardly talked about it to anyone before.

Aspiring migrants from interior regions of Senegal or landlocked countries such as Mali are likely to have much less knowledge about traveling at sea and the organization of pirogue journeys. Human smugglers sometimes exploit this ignorance and fail to warn migrants of difficulties that lie ahead. In coastal Senegal, anecdotes circulate of inland migrants arriving to the shore dressed “as though they were going to travel by plane” and becoming aware of the journey’s duress only after boarding the pirogues.

Risk information has a central place in the accounts of aspiring migrants who decide against going by pirogue. Such is the case of Alioune, 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 consciously 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 various attitudes to information about risk, from acceptance to dismissal or even discrediting of it. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

We found that prospective migrants often related to risk information in ways that downplayed the dangers. This occurred through three mechanisms: by actively avoiding unfavorable information, by discrediting the information as unreliable, and by accepting the validity of risk information but dismissing it as irrelevant to their individual case. This section addresses each mechanism in turn.

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. Some migrants recount that prior to departure, they expressly rejected thinking or asking about potential negative outcomes, instead focusing on the possibilities of life in Europe. Ibrahimia said he often

avoided people who would talk about the risks of pirogue journeys because he saw them as wanting to spoil his plans.

It is also relatively common for aspiring migrants to *discredit the validity of risk information*, accusing it of being biased. This reflects general insights from the literature on risk: people assess the value of risk information on the basis of the trust and credibility attributed to the information source; risk information tends to be dismissed when audiences perceive it to be biased by the vested interests of the source (Anderson 2006; Lupton 2006; Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein 1979; Tierney 1999). Prospective migrants in West Africa receive risk information from authorities, organizations, acquaintances, and relatives. They appear to have the greatest trust in sources that are socially close and which are not presumed to have an interest in discouraging emigration. Awareness campaigns are often criticized as inaccurate or biased, especially when they are perceived as politically motivated governmental initiatives to stem migration. Distrust of state initiatives is tied to a deeper sense of dissatisfaction among many of Senegal's youth, who blame the government for disregarding their plight and failing to create employment opportunities.

Typical statements discrediting awareness campaigns as biased describe their content as “manufactured” and corrupt. Ousseynou says: “They make up their own thing. Feature some people, pay them, and put them into a pirogue to make some clips.” Pape similarly claims, “The majority of those who go on TV are corrupt.” In order to be on the broadcast media, he argues, “You have

to say whatever suits them.... So, that's the reason why I never listen to the radio and all that." Discrediting awareness campaigns as biased and, thus, serves to justify ignoring them.

Finucane and Holup (2006) suggest that presenting risk information in the format of a narrative can facilitate audiences' engagement: through the use of emotion, imagery, and anecdote, narratives may make it easier for people to relate to risk information. Firsthand testimonials are indeed used in migration-related awareness campaigns, probably to bring the issue at hand closer to targeted audiences. Where those testimonials are written off as untruthful, however, the content of those messages is delegitimized and their awareness-raising effect is undermined as many choose to ignore them.

The third mechanism through which the dangers are downplayed consists in accepting the risk information as credible, but *dismissing 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 socioeconomic position is often the determinant of such distance. For instance, fishermen consider their own firsthand knowledge more important to their decision than information propagated by the media. Still, they concede that awareness campaigns are useful to inform inland populations who have no knowledge of the sea. In an effort to distance themselves from the legitimate audience of the campaigns, some aspiring migrants describe themselves as experienced and brave. Doing this can involve discrediting the choices of others by writing them off as less fit to face

the risks of the journey. Ibrahima, for example, 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 labeling those concerned about risks as "women," Ibrahima places them in a position of weakness; for himself, being a brave man, those warnings are irrelevant.

Social status is also commonly alluded to in justifying the irrelevance of risk messages. Aspiring migrants often argue that warnings against pirogue migration come from those in enviable 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 information are involved in their decision. Bocar, who has attempted the journey several times, says he was fully aware that he had put his life in danger by making the crossing. Still, he explains, he felt compelled to go because if he succeeded, he could improve his life in ways he considers unattainable in Senegal.

High-risk migration is not necessarily a result of ignorance, but rather reflects the compromises or sacrifices some consider necessary in attempting to overcome a life of hardship. This is most evident in the case of migrants who attempt the pirogue journey several times. The diversity of ways of

relating to risk information implies that simply making such information available will not produce a determined change in opinion. As Antoine Pécoud (2010) has pointed out, merely informing migrants of the risks of irregular migration without simultaneously expanding legal migration channels effectively encourages immobility. For those unwilling to give up their aspiration to emigrate, discrediting or dismissive attitudes to risk information may represent more or less conscious attempts to overcome the predicament of being informed about the risks yet insisting on migrating.

### **Minimizing the Risks of Migration**

Pirogue migrants resort to mechanisms, both cognitive and tangible, which allow them to feel in control of, or minimize, the hazards of pirogue journeys. Risk taking is often justified because of one's perceived ability to confront the dangers of the journey. This ability is often claimed with reference to two factors that we will address in turn: familiarity with danger and knowledge of specific risk minimizing strategies.

#### **Familiarity With Danger**

Prospective migrants often express familiarity with the risks of pirogue migration through references to collective identities or personal experience. Fishermen, in particular, often claim, "There are no risks for those who know

the sea.” Some insist that it is non-fishermen who create complications since they are more prone to falling ill or becoming scared and provoking disputes about returning to shore.

Informants claimed superior preparedness for the pirogue journey by referring to both *physical* and *psychological* familiarity with sea travel and its dangers. Physically, fishermen stress being “immune” to seasickness, experienced with storms, able to swim and remain balanced under rough weather, more resilient to the harsh 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 fishing expeditions down the West African coast in the same kind of pirogue. Psychologically, fishermen point out being used to spending long periods at sea and consequently less likely to succumb to the mental strain of the journey. They are also familiar with the possibility of dying at sea and may more easily accept this risk. The presence of fishermen on board is oftentimes described as an attribute to the collective safety of migrant expeditions, as expressed in Pape’s confident statement that “Senegalese fishermen are the best sailors in Africa.” By extension, other passengers feel protected by the fishermen’ perceived mastery of the dangers of the sea.

Familiarity with other types of danger is also referred to as a qualification for making the journey to Spain. Interviewees who had been soldiers, for example, explained the army had built them to “fear nothing.”

## **Risk Minimization Strategies**

In justifying the decision to attempt pirogue migration, our informants referred to a range of strategies for minimizing the risks. They insisted that a properly planned journey had high chances of success. Careful preparations include acquiring a sturdy pirogue, two engines, and one or two GPS devices, hiring capable navigators and ensuring sufficient fuel, food, water, warm clothing, cooking devices, tools for repairs, and pills against seasickness. Departures are planned according to appropriate sailing seasons and weather forecasts. Relatives may avoid traveling together to minimize risk at the family level. Discretion is kept to avoid malevolent spells from jealous acquaintances and attention from authorities. Migrants trust that their trip will be well planned. 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.” This careful approach was not universal, however. Others admitted to having jumped on the first opportunity without giving much thought to safety details, only to find out later that their trip was poorly planned.

Obtaining spiritual protection is also an important element of preparing the journey. Religious guides, known as *marabouts*, help with this task. They may suggest appropriate departure dates, scan passenger lists for problematic individuals, provide organizers and travelers with amulets for protection and luck, pray throughout the journey’s duration, or advise organizers to make

offerings such as slaughtering a lamb. The use of amulets is widespread among the Senegalese, who syncretically incorporate traditional beliefs to the practice of Sufi Islam, in spite of orthodox disapproval. Senegalese rely on amulets to guard themselves from the vicissitudes of daily life and are often seen wearing leather-bound verses of the Qu'ran tied around their limbs or waist. Other kinds of protective amulets may be placed in entrances to houses, businesses, or attached to vehicles. Ahead of an important event such as a sea journey to Europe, migrants may obtain amulets in order to safeguard themselves and the boats from sickness, accidents, and malicious spells. Prayers too are important. Many migrants say special prayers before leaving, commend themselves to their parents' prayers, or bring a copy of the Qur'an with them. Ultimately, a successful outcome is seen to depend solely on God's will.

Avoiding apprehension and repatriation is crucial to the success of pirogue migration. Migrants plan the departures so as to avoid heavily surveilled times and locations. The organizers sometimes make use of contacts or bribes to keep patrols at bay. Once at sea, pirogues follow itineraries that seek to avoid Senegalese, Cape Verdean, Mauritanian, or Moroccan coast 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.

## Religion and High-Risk Migration

As we have already shown, references to religion were common in our informants' accounts of pirogue migration and the risks it entails. Religious beliefs can serve as a lens for recapitulating the article's analytical disaggregation of risk taking behavior. Three points are central.

First, religion features in 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: it is up to God what the outcome of the journey will be. 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, 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 or contemplated migration by pirogue were all religious and strongly protested this comparison. This labeling 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 dangers of the journey. Such campaigns have become a popular element in migration management policy since the 1990s (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 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 departing.

As our 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 something as dangerous as pirogue migration may come to seem attractive to some people in a particular context. Assuming that migrants undertake high-risk migration because they are oblivious to the risks is misleading and may result in ineffective migration management. Pirogue migrants are not fatalistic, as the “kamikaze” label would imply, but actively engage with the risks and see the perilous journey as a purposeful and justifiable step towards a better future.

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## **Notes**

1. In making this argument, Slovic refers to the work of Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross (1980).