

Chapter 3

It's a Journey That Only God Knows: Understanding Irregular Migration in Senegal Through a Religious Lens



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The authors use the lens of religion to understand how migrants from Senegal embarking on high-risk journeys across the Sahara and the Atlantic conceptualise migration, cope with hardship and give meaning to their experiences. The paper aims to provide insights into religious belief systems and their intersection with the process of irregular migration and human smuggling from the impoverished Kolda region of Senegal. The research adds to the scant literature on how migrants draw on their spiritual beliefs in preparing for and enduring harrowing journeys with a high risk of harm and death. Migrants are aware of the risks as they receive information in real time from other migrants and also because many are return migrants or deportees. But the risks do not deter them as they seek to fulfil their role as good family providers and heed the guidance of Marabout Islamic teachers rather than information campaigns to prevent irregular migration. The study also sheds light on hitherto under-recognised gendered aspects of the infrastructure of migration facilitation in Kolda: while migration is male dominated, women play a critical role in mobilising religious and financial support. The authors conclude that there is a mismatch between the way that migrants take decisions to migrate and the understanding of external agencies that continue efforts to dissuade them through risk information campaigns.

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J. K. Teye (ed.), *Migration in West Africa*, IMISCOE Research Series,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97322-3_3

3.1 Introduction

Senegalese nationals accounted for the largest proportion of irregular migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean in the early 2000s.¹ They were mainly single young men aged 20–29, belonging to the Mouride brotherhood and the Wolof ethnic group which has a long history of migration (Mbow & Tamba, 2007). The main mode of transport in irregular migration journeys was in small dug out wooden boats known as *pirogues* (Mbaye, 2014). Since then, both the ethnicities and routes of migrants have diversified to include overland journeys via Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and onwards to Morocco or Libya (Fig. 3.1).

The IOM “Migration Profile” of Senegal shows that the Casamance together with the Tambacounda region, account for nearly a fifth of Senegalese migration. The research was conducted in the Casamance with a focus on the Kolda region by the University of Assane Seck in Ziguinchor in collaboration with the University of Sussex. Kolda is an important point of origin for migrants travelling towards Libya and also a transit point for migrants from neighbouring Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia. The latest population and housing census shows 7.6% of the departures in Senegal are from the Kolda region. The intensification of border controls

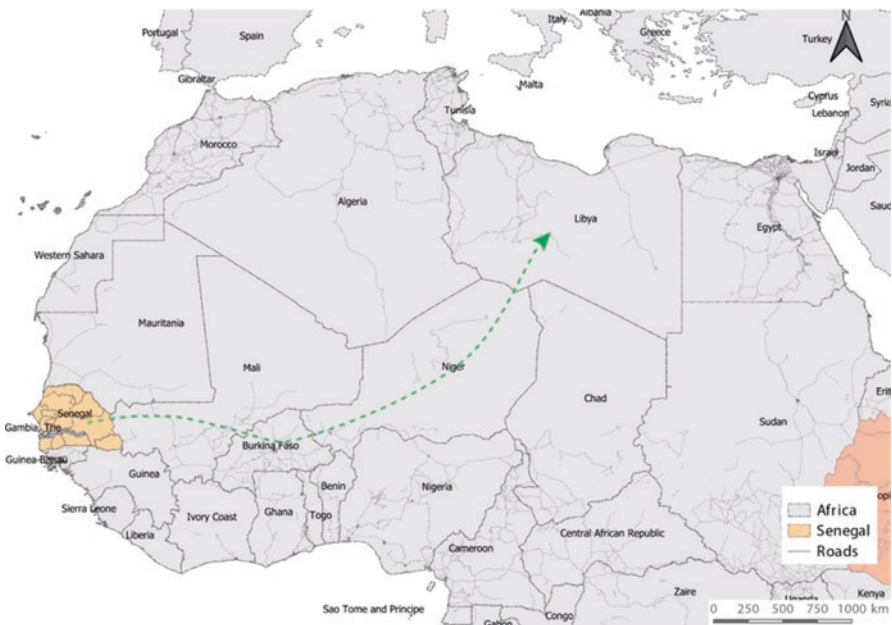


Fig. 3.1 Map showing overland migration routes from Senegal. (Credit: Reitumetse Selepe)

¹ Irregular migration to Spain, via Morocco or the Atlantic, was recorded at 2506 people in 2002, increasing to 19,176 in 2003, of which 76.6% were Senegalese (Cross, 2009).

was in evidence through sea patrols as well as legislation such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Regional Strategy to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants in West and Central Africa (2015–2020). Information campaigns funded by the EU or its member states to dissuade migrants had also been implemented by the IOM since 2007. They were founded on the belief that migrants better informed by the risks of irregular migration would reconsider their plans. However, irregular migration has continued unabated and the research aimed to find out how irregular migration is organised against this backdrop of tightening controls on migration to Europe. Together with an increase in mobility into and out of Senegal, aspirations to migrate to Europe had grown and research by other scholars has shown that it was easier for aspiring migrants to pay smugglers than to wait for an official visa that may never be granted (Ngom, 2018). Consequently, there has been an increase in irregular migration from Senegal (Cross, 2009; Pian, 2009; Tandian, 2019) and intense surveillance along migration routes has forced smugglers to resort to dangerous transport solutions (Wihtol De Wenden, 2005).

In the Casamance, spiritual teachers or leaders known as Marabouts² play a very important role in shaping the migration decision in a context of extremely high-risk migration where the dangers are well known. The research team felt it was therefore important to consider mystico-religious influences on migrants' imaginaries and how they understood and analysed risk, their own fate, luck and what actions needed to be taken to mitigate risk.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The role of religion in migration has been examined from a variety of perspectives: as a focal point for diaspora communities to group around and acquire a sense of belonging in alien societies; providing assistance to irregular migrants en route where spaces for official assistance have shrunk due to migration policies; as a belief system to interpret and give meaning to risk, and as a source of solace and emotional support for migrants and their families embarking on journeys that can lead to death and suffering (Eppsteiner & Hagan, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016; Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012). It is the latter two areas of scholarship that are most relevant to the analysis here.

An analysis of religious beliefs in migration decision making and the migration process can also show the agency that is involved in high-risk migration decisions and situate those in everyday religious practices in particular social contexts. Hagan (2008) studied the religious practices of Central American migrants during

²A Muslim religious teacher in West Africa who is a scholar of the Qur'an, devoting himself to prayer and study. In Senegal and Mali, Marabouts depend on donations for survival.

the hazardous 2000-mile journey to the USA and found that migrants relied on religion to cope with trauma, find meaning, and create order in times of crisis.

In Senegal, the Murides have a long history of migration that is part of their folklore and history as farmers who travelled in search of better work opportunities in the nineteenth century and it has now become inherent to the Muride identity (Tall, 2002). Prothmann's (2017) research among Murides in the city of Dakar shows that theistic thinking and philosophy plays a pivotal role in shaping the aspirations of young men. Success in terms of material wealth and reaching one's destination are believed to depend on *wërsëg* (luck) and *Ndogalu Yàlla* (fate). He emphasises the importance of socio-cultural determinants of migration over economic drivers and argues that young men are prepared to die rather than remain in Senegal and they derive strength and direction from Islam. We extend this research to other ethnic groups from the Kolda region in the south and examine intersections of religion, mysticism and overland irregular migration through extremely dangerous territory crossing the Sahara Desert.

The significance of religion in irregular migration has been observed in other parts of West Africa as well as other religious belief systems. Among Ghanaian followers of Charismatic Christianity there is a belief that God supports migration and will enable one's unique destiny if the aspiring migrant and their family practice fasting and months at prayer camps (Darkwah et al., 2019). Van Bemmel (2020) made similar observations, finding that people believed that a strong belief in God would minimize the probability of an adverse outcome. They reported attending church more often in the lead up to the departure of the migrant. The Muslims in the study deliberately planned to travel during Ramadan in the belief that the risks would be smaller at that time. Mazzucato's (2005) research in Ghana and the Netherlands found that Christian pastors are believed to possess powers to resolve document problems that migrants would encounter along the way or at destination. In her study, migrants carried spiritual symbols for their protection, such as holy images and engraved medallions which are similar to the artefacts given by the Marabout to Senegalese migrants in our study for their protection. In Nigeria, religious beliefs played a similarly important role where in addition to Christianity and Islam, local religions are also pervasive and have been shown to have a link to high risk migration. These local religious traditions invoke ancestral spirits and spirits related to certain places. Magic is an important part of the ritualistic tradition in Nigerian society and performed to influence the course of events in the world with the help of hidden forces (Carling, 2006).

Sara Hamood's (2006) research on migration from West Africa through Libya to Europe is also very relevant for our analysis. She analysed the coping practices of migrants travelling on dangerous, overcrowded, and poor quality boats. These migrants relied on their faith to help them cope with the perils of crossing and to prepare for possible death. Gaibazzi (2015) examines the intermingling of economic concerns with religious and moral discourses related to the timing of migration and the risk of being tempted into immoral behaviour in the Gambia. Gambian society, where Gaibazzi's research was located, is similar to Senegalese society; young men wait for an appropriate time to depart based on "God's will".

This literature illustrates the salience of religion and spirituality across West African people's lives and why it is so central to the way in which high-risk migration is conceptualised.

In this paper, we build on this literature to unpick the role of religion and spiritual beliefs in conditioning perceptions about high-risk irregular migration from southern Senegal through the Sahara Desert. We examine the role of the Marabout in particular and how they shape migration decisions and experiences. Although our focus is on the Marabout who have been described as Islamic leaders we are cognisant of Paul Gifford's warning against interpreting the religious imaginations of Senegalese people through classical labels such as "Muslim" or "Sufi Brotherhoods". Both Ndiaye (2013) and Gifford (2016) call for a broader understanding of the Senegalese religious imagination that sees spiritual forces at play everywhere, interpreting causality of life events in spiritual terms. In such a schema, those who are gifted with powers of spirituality such as Marabouts, can influence people's fate and eliminate opponents and competitors.

Small fetish objects³ are an important part of mystico-religious representations in Senegal. The fetish is a transfer of affectivity to a single or compound symbolic object, attributing to it an efficacy greater than its own reality. Unlike fetishism, maraboutage is the use of knowledge of holy texts by the Marabout for magical purposes, for healing and divination, and the Marabout is socially integrated, more accessible to the community and less feared than a fetishist. In the past, magic, fetishism and witchcraft have been characterised as social practices and incoherent thinking, based on superstition, secret and profane procedures, at the limit of legality (Durkheim (1912)). Religion, on the other hand, was presented as an organised, supportive and normative system, based on the sacred, and manifested in a public and official manner.

When mystico-religious beliefs are invoked to steer the course of clandestine migration, particularly by pirogue or by land to Europe, it is clear that the West African region largely shares this belief in intervening in the course of destiny, either to fulfil or to 'force' a situation. In the same way, when there are fears, mystico-religious processes are used to allay them. In West Africa, risk-taking such as sea or desert migration has always been associated with religious and spiritual beliefs. In a study on Cameroonians living in Paris, dealing with witchcraft and migration, Sophie Bouly (1994) shows that the discourse of witchcraft intervenes at different stages of the migratory journey, and engages variable and complex social relations according to the spaces of migration. Thus, the author shows that inequalities in economic and marital success in migration are linked to pacts made with invisible forces. Consequently, the pitfalls encountered by the migrant can be attributed to an evil action from a jealous entourage. Laye Camara (2018) demonstrates, with reference to the geographical framework of Senegal and Guinea, how crucial the use of beliefs and other rituals can be in interpreting the dynamics of mobility,

³This vast group of objects is used as a representation of Gods to protect those who carry or wear them.

the impact of which is rarely taken into account. In Senegal, Teixeira (2008), in his study on the Guinea-Bissau Manjak, shows how the sorcerer and counter-sorcerer arrangement has adapted to contemporary problems and offers a system for explaining and repairing the world. The magico-religious is a determinant of migration and occult practices, practices capable of triggering success, realising projects and achieving success, including migration, but also of delaying or even preventing it.

We are also guided by existing research that has examined the role of Marabouts in migration in Senegal. For example, Bava and Picard (2014) show how maraboutism and other traditional rituals are summoned by migrants in the migratory act with the aim of thwarting all the traps contained in migration. Nyamnjoh's (2016) research on Marabout networks is also a good starting point as it shows how they have risen in Senegalese society to occupy critical positions in various illicit businesses. Detailed ethnographic research carried out by Ngom (2018) in the Kolda region where our study is based shows that divinatory practices are at the heart of the daily life of the people. They attach paramount importance to the Marabouts who are often consulted by individuals, either to formulate prayers or to fashion *gris gris*, to predict the fate of migrants or to protect them against curses. While our focus is on Marabouts as they were mentioned most frequently, there are other kinds of fortune tellers and spiritualists such as fetishists who are believed to possess the power of interpreting messages transmitted to them through their dreams or premonitory signs in nature that can foretell positive or negative outcomes for the migrants. There are also other ways of accessing religious teachings and predictions on migration. Laye Camara (2018) found that contact with the magi-co-religious world to fathom the future is achieved through initiation courses or mystical teachings at the *dahira* (traditional Koranic schools of the Mourides and Tidjiane brotherhoods, particularly in Senegal).

Another facet of our research touches on the role of women in facilitating the services of Marabouts. While migration from Senegal continues to be male-dominated, the role of women in such a context has been discussed only in a handful of studies. Melly (2011) observes that in contrast to the male members of the family who embarked on dangerous journeys, women played a supporting role as they mourned, worried, pleaded and waited (p. 363). Our research shows that women also play a critical role in finding and funding the services of Marabouts to facilitate their men's migration and brings the details of this hitherto under-researched phenomenon to light.

3.3 Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted in 2018 at a critical time when irregular migration had continued despite the externalisation of EU borders and growing criminalisation of migration facilitation. A multi-sited qualitative research approach was followed to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon at origin and in transit. The research was conducted in four regions: the Kolda region (Medina Yoro Foulla, Vélingara, Kolda

departments). The Sédhiou region (Goudomp department, Tanaf locality). The Ziguinchor region (Oussouye department, Elinkine locality). Although not part of Casamance, the survey was also conducted in Tambacounda city as many brokers are located there. Interviews were conducted with aspiring (18), returned and deported migrants (26), the families of migrants (12), six smugglers and four civil society organisations. The criminalization of smuggling activity meant that smugglers and the people who used their services were very suspicious of our motives and how the information would be used. Probing on the role of Marabouts was also difficult because of their links with illicit activities that we detail in the paper. Consequently, the first six months were spent cultivating relationships that would open up conversations with smugglers and other actors involved in irregular migration and human smuggling.

3.4 The Context

Due to its geographical position, Senegal has a long history of migration. Indeed, located in the extreme west of the African continent, this country of the Sahel has common borders with Mauritania in the north, Mali in the east, Guinea Conakry and Guinea-Bissau in the south. This geographic position makes Senegal a hub that receives migrants from the sub-region while allowing them to migrate to the international destinations. In particular, the Casamance region is an important migration hub in the country receiving migrants in transit and also a point of origin for Senegalese travelling abroad.⁴

Casamance has remained poor due to the combination of deteriorating agriculture and the ongoing insurgency led by the Democratic Movement of the Forces of Casamance (MFDC) which opposes the State of Senegal. The conflict has resulted in the abandonment of villages, the displacement of populations and the presence of mines in fields and orchards which impact on agriculture. A majority of families in Kolda have a piece of land to cultivate for the subsistence needs of the family. In the past they migrated seasonally under the *Rouwmougol* system. This practice dates back to the colonial period and consists of being recruited as a seasonal worker in the groundnut basin of Senegal. The Fulani people of Kolda used it for a long time as an additional source of income. However, groundnut production has suffered in recent years and these days young men are keen on trying their fate to reach other countries, especially Libya or Europe.

It is said that migration to foreign lands is embedded in the culture of Senegal since colonial times when the leader of the Mourides, Cheikh Amadou Bamba was

⁴It should be emphasized, however, that not all those who leave are necessarily from the Kolda region, as there are transit migrants from Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau and nationals of Gambia, attracted by the geopolitical situation of the Kolda region. Generally, people in transit settle for a longer or shorter period in order to better prepare for their migration journeys. Such people present themselves as a native of Kolda in surveys.

exiled (Nyamnjoh, 2016, 196). Different explanations have been offered for the current patterns of high-risk irregular migration from West Africa including economic hardship imposed by structural adjustment programmes (Christiansen et al., 2006), ideas of masculinity, pride, honour and courage (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012, 411) and aspirations for a different way of living and wealth (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). The research team noticed that houses with international migrants were better off and able to eat three meals a day as well as educate their children and invest in agriculture. Those families with more than one migrant look visibly wealthier than others - their homes are built with concrete and they have installed solar panels and bought durable goods.

Many of the men that we interviewed said that they were planning to migrate to improve the situation of the family. In Senegal sons are socialized to undertake supreme sacrifices for the well-being of their parents as Lamine's account illustrates:

My problem is that I can't find a good job that allows me to take care of my family – otherwise I would never go to Libya. Because I know the difficulties I encountered once I left. And I have to succeed so that I can help my brother to take care of the family. But also, my neighbour who went to Italy and today his family is living well, he has built a big building in his house. He has bought agricultural equipment for his family and now his younger brothers are living well; their rice, millet and peanut crops alone provide for some of the family's basic needs. So, it was a great inspiration for me. Today he comes back to Senegal every year, so I talk a lot with him, and it gave me an idea of the road and that's how I decided to leave in my turn in the hope of changing things.

However, wrapped up with these explanations were also aspirations for to transition to a more modern lifestyle themselves. Take the case of Baba, a 24-year-old belonging to a large family of farmers and breeders. Baba was unable to complete primary school because his parents could not afford his school fees. He had completed advanced Qoranic studies like most of his age group in the villages around Saré Woudou. He did not have the chance to practice a trade despite the fact that he wanted to be a carpenter. He wanted to migrate to change his own prospects and the living standards of his family.

In Kolda the majority of inhabitants are under 20 years of age and the desire to migrate despite the risks involved seems to be widespread. The area has been targeted with radio broadcasts with programmes creating awareness about the risks of irregular migration and NGOs that previously worked on agriculture are now working on preventing irregular migration as there is more funding available in that area.

3.5 God's Will in a Context of High-Risk Migration

The interviews with men at origin show that the dangers of being smuggled across borders and the points at the which they occur are discussed all the time in day-to-day conversations in Kolda villages. Aspiring migrants and their families have up to date, often real time information, through their friends and relatives who send them

updates on WhatsApp, Facebook, Imo etc. sending photos and texts from various transit points along the way.

Religious tenets were repeatedly invoked during the interviews and attention to them has allowed us to gain insights into how migrants interpret life events and migration risks. They draw on religious beliefs to situate the migration decision in their cultural meaning system. They also turn to the teachings of God to be able to cope with extremely harsh conditions on the way and dealing with failed migrations.

Our interviews with aspiring and return migrants indicate that the way they conduct their lives is rooted in a sense of Islamic morality and identity. Islamic ideals of being good men to their families and to Allah for the day of reckoning were mentioned frequently in conversations. Their migration imaginaries are developed with these social and religious points of reference and this gives them a way of finding meaning in the decision to migrate despite known risks. When considering the likelihood of death at sea or in the desert during the preparatory stage before departing, such understandings of life, death and fate as well as being a “good” Muslim give them the emotional and psychological means to prepare for bad outcomes.

Although migrants are fatalistic, their actions are also full of hope and agency as they try to make the best of their lives within God’s plan. For Arfang a 38-year-old mechanic in Kolda, the success of his friends compared to his own life was due to God’s design and this was why he was considering migration.

It is God who wanted things to happen like this, if not me I never wanted a friend to go ahead of me in life, because one, I am proud of myself and two, I don’t want to be dependent on anyone. I have always dreamed of having a lot of money to help people and at the moment I have a piece of land that I want to build but I don’t have the means to do so, while my friends have passed this stage, so I too have decided to take this path.’ He was aware of the risks and was prepared to accept whatever God had in store for him as his fate. ‘This kind of journey is always difficult, and it is not easy to say that I will succeed, but since we are believers, I believe that I will succeed insha-Allah, but I may not succeed too and even die there it is possible. It’s the journey, but God is great, I’ll make it Insha-Allah.

Alpha’s interview also shows that he was well aware of the risks of migration but felt that success or failure in the migration project depended on God’s will.

I can say that dangers are numerous in illegal migration. At the borders, migrants are treated like animals by policemen because they asked us for money, and what is bad is that even if migrants give them money, they start to beat them. Besides in the ghettos⁵, the brokers also take any opportunity to take money off migrants. And also, when they’re on board, migrants are in a dilemma because they can be abandoned by a driver in the middle of the Sahara and they die of thirst and hunger. They can also be imprisoned in some countries. Therefore, illegal migration is a very dangerous phenomenon. It’s only with God’s help that you can succeed in migration.

Karfa, a 41-year-old aspiring migrant in Doumassou who was working as a mason locally at the time of the interview expresses his confidence in the success of his migration project because of his faith in God.

⁵The functioning of ghettos is discussed in detail later in the paper.

I'm almost 42 and I do masonry. I want to migrate, and I've thought about it and now I've made the decision... I am very confident because I trust in God and I have the trust and blessing of my parents. The blessing of the parents is very important, that's why I know I will succeed. I am certain that the day I leave, I will reach my destination. Here it is a matter of self-confidence and knowing what you want to leave for and especially what you have left behind. If you know what you have left behind, you have a thousand chances to succeed.

Another migrant Mamoudou believes that only God can know what is in fate for him and he derives optimism from this feeling.

It's a journey that only God knows, but I think it won't be too difficult, I'm optimistic. I don't know why, but I'm optimistic. I'm sure that the day I put on my shoes and leave the house, I'm going to arrive, whatever the difficulties.

While God's will was given importance, the need for blessings from one's parents was upheld as extremely important and those who left without the support of their parents blame that omission for their failed migrations. Aspiring migrant Harouna thinks that his faith and blessings from his parents will see him through the journey safely

I am very confident because I have the trust in God, and I have the blessing of my parents. The blessing of my parents is very important, that's why I know I will succeed. I am sure that the day I leave, I will reach my destination.

Seventeen-year-old Djiby also talks about the risks of irregular migration in great detail but makes light of them by referring to them as rumours. He too feels that the outcome depends on God's will and whatever that is must be accepted.

According to the rumours I hear on this trip the probability that people will not reach the desired destination is very high because there are aggressors, one can get lost in the desert or in the sea for days, that is what the repatriated migrant told me because he got lost for three days in the desert and he also told me that when he got lost in the sea...Of course nothing can dissuade me from leaving! I have to leave in order to have a lot of money and to support my family, my parents in particular, and to build my house like my comrades who went away. If this (anything going wrong) is what God decides I would accept it. But at the moment I only think of going to Italy or Spain.

Leaving the area was also seen as a way of seeking redemption and atoning for one's sins. 45-year-old Diawoula took the decision to migrate to seek God's forgiveness for sins he had committed in Senegal. He interprets the events that led to his migration as God rescuing him from a life of crime and guiding him to seek redemption overseas

I was with Niantang (a rebel leader of the MFDC). We used to poach on the roads. We smuggled cashew nuts and took money from travellers by force. We had an entire night of face-to-face encounters with the Senegalese army. It is thanks to God that I got out and we withdrew to the border to Diatacounda. I lied to my family to tell them that I had found work at Cap-Skirring. I fed my family during this time with the blood and tears of others that I shed. I still look back east to ask God's forgiveness for the crimes I have committed. What I'm telling you now, no one in the family knows. I'm a man from hell. With all the sins I've committed, to be forgiven by God, I have to leave this country. God has said it, repent sincerely and leave the land where you have done wrong and start a new life (he starts reciting litanies from the Koran).

What then are parents' attitudes to the risks and dangers of irregular migration in its current form? How do families assess these risks? These questions are legitimate when we know that the number of victims of this migration is very high and awareness campaigns against clandestine migration by pirogue and by land are carried out by community radio stations and talks are also organised in many villages. These broadcasts are largely sponsored by the State of Senegal and by international organisations such as IOM and are carried out by local NGOs and the community movement. In parallel, awareness-raising sessions called "causeries" are also organised in village communities. The objective of these initiatives is not only to give voice to communities affected by irregular migration but also to call on communities to maintain their threads. The principle of these programmes is to invite an "expert" on migration while opening the airwaves to listeners who can intervene not to ask questions, but rather to reinforce, support and go into depth to consolidate the arguments of the invited "expert". Most of the contributors to these programmes have been migrants who have been deported from Libya, Niger, and other countries.

When we look at these radio programmes, it appears that contrary to their intended objectives, which include raising awareness of the dangers of the road and the sea and deterring clandestine migration, they are used by listeners instead to gain information on the best strategies to put in place to avoid the dangers and obstacles that can result in deportation. However, it has been observed that information on clandestine migration is gathered by the family around the radio to try to decipher the testimonies of deported or returning migrants. Involved in his son's journey, this father of a family of seventeen, who after two years of effort to raise the money to be used for his son's emigration, tells us in these terms about the usefulness of radio awareness-raising programmes against clandestine migration:

Yes, first it was useful for myself, because when he first discussed his plan to migrate to support us, I also started listening to the programmes on migration on the community radio. One day, a gentleman was invited and he was a migrant who came back, the government brought him because he was in prison in Libya. That day, after the programme, I understood that on the road there are intermediaries, drivers, police officers, and crossing points. Above all, I learned that the success of the journey depends on the honesty of the smuggler. The migrant man on the radio explained well that if the smuggler is honest, the journey will be successful.

There is, so to speak, a kind of learning and appropriation by the community of the space in which irregular migration is discussed, as this interview extract reveals. Indeed, since it is supposed to be a clandestine journey and consequently carries the risk of seeing the project fail, potential migrants, helped and supported by their own families, rely on these radio broadcasts and on the "chat" sessions, as well as on migrants who have already left, to pre-identify their migratory path.

Parents' willingness to send their son to face such high risks often stems from desperation to get them out of the area and protect the honour of the family. This can occur if they do not want their children to engage in illicit activities such as wood trafficking, drugs and delinquency which can lead to their imprisonment and damage the family's honour. This happened in the case of the Imam of the village Pata, who feared that his 24-year-old son would engage in illegal wood trafficking or

smuggling of goods between Gambia and Senegal and go to prison. This would have been a disgrace to his social status. To prevent this from happening, the Imam supported his irregular migration by land:

Either he migrates, or he finds himself in complicated situations such as selling (wood) and trafficking between Senegal and Gambia. Imagine the shame I would have felt towards my relatives if he had fallen into delinquency. He had to leave.

Irregular migration can be supported by parents for other reasons as well. In the Ziguinchor region, to protect their children from being recruited by the MFDC independence movement, fathers have supported the departure of their children by pirogue from the islands off Casamance. The honour felt by parents who are respected and adulated by the community when they see the child returning with riches after migrating and the dishonour of the child's imprisonment can explain the risk-taking in some families who commit to helping their children on such risky journeys. Both parents can support this decision and the role of women in the family is elaborated upon below.

3.5.1 The Role of Marabouts

Marabouts play a critical role in both delivering God's message to migrants and their families and also engaging in prayers to higher cosmic forces to protect the migrant and shape their destiny. The importance of Marabouts in blessing migrants and offering migrants protection against risks and failure has been noted before (Nyamnjoh, 2016) but here, we provide more detail on their role and relations with the migrant as well as their family. In Kolda it is believed that Marabouts have spiritual powers that allow them to foresee the future and ward off obstacles. The journey is usually not undertaken without the blessing of a Marabout although those migrating without the knowledge of their families reported that they did not always go to Marabouts. If the Marabout says the travel should not be undertaken then the migrant must obey. On the other hand, if the Marabout ordains that there are obstacles that can be cleared away through rituals or sacrifices the migrant or their family are asked to arrange them. These include asking for offerings: a rooster or a goat which is killed to prepare a meal for the community in order to earn good fortune through good deeds. Marabout may write verses from the Holy Qur'an and attach them around the neck, waist, and arms placed inside "gris-gris" which are a type of Voodoo amulet popular in West Africa. Sometimes the scriptures are macerated in water (*Safara*) and the migrant is made to sprinkle the blessed water on himself or drink it every day. Through such rituals Marabout seek to ward off bad luck and attract luck and success. Their protection extends to preventing theft, scams and all the other hazards along the way. For migrants these rituals and amulets can be a source of comfort during the journey where they have few other sources of emotional or spiritual support. The highest form of protection that the Marabout

offers is a “Bain Mystique” or mystical bath where they will pray for the migrant all night.

Boubacar, a 17-year-old aspiring migrant from the Vélingara department thinks his migration will succeed because he consulted not one but two Marabouts who both gave him their blessings:

I think I have a good chance of succeeding because I went to see two Marabouts. They both told me the same thing about this trip; that I will succeed if I am patient during the trip. They have asked me to make sacrifices (three red colas plus two white chickens that I will give to two strangers) and I must give water as a sacrifice on the day of my departure. So, all that remains for the success of my journey depends on divine strength.

It also transpired during the discussions with migrants that fetishists were also consulted by migrants and their families before departure. Fetishists practice indigenous religions that predate the colonial period. The pejorative term fetishist was coined by Portuguese Christian traders when they encountered local belief systems and the figures that people made to worship certain deities. The term derives from the Portuguese word *Fetisso*, which signifies a divine, or oracular object, from the Latin root *Fatum*, *Fanum*, *Fari* (De Brosse, 1988 quoted in Latour, 2011). Fetishists were not approved of by the Marabout either as 34-year-old Moussa's account shows. He was deported from Libya but was planning to travel again at the time of our study and had shunned fetishists and consulted Marabouts instead.

I prepared my first trip for a year before leaving and it cost me a total of 30 000 FCFA. But I never went to see fetishists because it is forbidden by the Muslim religion. On the other hand, I went to see Marabouts, I gave at the beginning 200, 300 or even 500 FCFA because everything depends on the Marabout. I was given bottles filled with potions; it was often intended to be used as a bath. Sometimes the Marabouts would recommend me to give cola as charity, candles, 5f coins which were difficult even to find.

3.5.2 *Balancing Pragmatism with Spirituality*

When preparing for the journey, migrants will consider both the practical challenges of the journey and the skill of smugglers to circumnavigate official restrictions and also what Allah has ordained for them, as communicated by the Marabout. Youssoupha, a 30-year-old who was working as a plumber in Kolda and hoping to migrate with the proceeds from the sale of his father's land said,

I often go to the Marabouts. They often tell me that I will travel and I will succeed if God wills it, but also I intend to leave with a lot of money and also I have made a lot of inquiries about the road; if however the person does not do all this he risks not reaching his desired destination. But these are people who have learned the Qoran and they work on the basis of that. You know I'm not the one who told them I'm going to travel. They're the ones who knew that, but how? I don't know how. But one thing's for sure, it's God who comes down and tells them that this boy is going to travel, so I trust them.

Islamic Marabouts regard extreme-risk journeys as non-Islamic (Nyamnjoh, 2016, 197), but other soothsayers may tell aspiring migrants that death at sea should be

seen as martyrdom and an act of bravery. This explains one of the well-known mottos of migrants embarking on high risk migration ‘Baca ou Bazrak’ or ‘Barcelona or death!’ (Thomson, 2014, Nyamnjoh, 2016; Ba, 2007).

3.5.3 Gendered Infrastructures of Migration

When we look more specifically at the category of mothers, wives and fiancées of migrants and potential migrants, they are deeply affected by or involved in facilitating irregular migration. In-depth interviews among family members of the migrant showed that when the migration is long and if the migrant does not send any news, his left behind wives, become vulnerable to abuse and violence. Such instances were brought to our attention during interviews with doctors and counsellors serving the community. Although such women suffer terrible violence they cannot easily confide in the community, as reported by a professional psychologist from a state institution in Senegal:

There is another more serious problem, which is the cases of widows. Imagine a young man who marries a girl before leaving. If he dies, the woman can stay three or five years without any news of her husband and these women live in difficult conditions. We receive them here (office) but it is extraordinary. These women cannot get divorced and they are sometimes forced to commit adultery and society judges them. So they are between a rock and a hard place. Currently, we have eight cases that we are following up. But unfortunately, it is the distance that makes it difficult for us to follow them. They cannot divorce because they will be treated as traitors. In any case, these women are direct and indirect victims of immigration. Do they have to listen to a husband who is not sure whether he will return or not? Waiting for a husband who doesn't show any sign of life?

These possible negative impacts of men's migration lead some women them to oppose the migration of their husbands and if they cannot dissuade them, they seek mystical and religious protection for him from bad luck. Women thus play a key role in the search for a good Marabout with a reputation for religious merit and the search is usually undertaken by the mother, the fiancée or the sisters of the potential migrant. One migrant, B Balde, said *‘My mother had decided to support me mystically, and my brothers and sisters too had participated in the financing by visiting marabouts and making sacrifices.’* Another case was Hawa, who was married for just two months before her husband left. She now divides her time between domestic work and marabout consultations for the success of her husband's trip. She and her mother-in-law are constantly consulting Marabouts. As soon as they are informed about a seer or a Marabout, they go there. For Hawa, if her husband's migration fails, she will bear part of this failure herself because it will be said around her that she brings bad luck and she brought it to her husband. This can have serious consequences for her future in the village. She risks being stigmatized for the failure of her husband's migration and is doing everything in her capacity to bring blessings to him. While searching for a Marabout, the women refrain from saying openly *‘I am looking for a clairvoyant or a fetishist for the emigration of my son’*. Indeed,

as much as possible, the migratory project is kept secret so as not to bring bad omen, which could jeopardise the success of the migration.

Sometimes the search for a good fetishist or a good Marabout can lead to the most remote places, far from urban centres. As Aziz says finding a good Marabout is not easy *'Yes, but you know that now to find a good Marabout is not easy; they will only eat your money and I only have 300,000 FCFA and I don't know if that's enough for me. Maybe I'll see, but on this road only God can save the person'*.

This search can bring them into the sub-region (Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali border (Kedougou). In popular representation, it is generally accepted that "good seers and good fetishists" never leave their villages. The lead researcher had a chance meeting in a hotel in Kolda with the sister of a potential migrant who left the Louga region to meet a marabout who lives in Diambanouta, a remote village in the department of Vélingara. The trip took her just over eight hours of travel over a distance of about 580 km.

The costs of consulting a Marabout ranged from 100,000 to 150,000 FCFA at the time of the fieldwork. Mothers are often responsible for funding these expenses through the sale of gold (Ba, 2007). Sona, a housewife and the mother of a migrant, about 60 years old, says:

No dignified mother can let her child go under the conditions that are told on the radio without taking mother's precautions. That's right, only God kills, but a mother cannot stand still watching her child go to death without reacting.

3.5.4 Connections with Illicit Activities

Although performing religious and spiritual rituals, Marabout are locally known as "men of the shadows" because of their links with the world of illicit activities. They have become socially powerful since the '80s and '90s when their influence spread during the structural adjustment programmes and it was essential to have personal ties with influential people to get jobs. 'Favours and corruption became omnipresent. Customs officials earned their money through smuggling goods and nepotism flourished, with ministers involving family members in construction projects, while trade union secretaries awarded their wives or friends catering contracts. A Marabout with a good network soon became a central figure in the Senegalese daily life of small and big favours.' (Osmanovic, 2019, 230). The protection offered by Marabout is critical for illicit and criminal businesses (233). In Kolda, it is known that various migration intermediaries such as cokseurs and passeurs consult them to stay out of trouble. No doubt these connections are critical for placing migrants on certain trajectories within the irregular migration industry.

Marabouts support migrants throughout the journey and as a result, they have a steady income. Khalifa, a 52-year-old migrant from Sinthiou Sara in Kolda Department made two attempts at irregular migration by road and then by sea when he succeeded. A few years later, he took his son but by land. When asked about the nature of his communications with the Marabout, he replied:

In my case, the communication was about how to make sure I could obtain papers ... and now, since I received the papers, it is about how to pay for expenses, how to buy cows and how to build. And as far as my son is concerned, our communication often turns to money when he arrives in transit areas. But after his arrival in Italy, the communication has changed. Now we are talking about what we must do so that he can get papers.

Marabouts are consulted by deported migrants after return to ask why their migration failed and the Marabout may claim that they were able to come home alive because of their protection, thereby maintaining their importance in the imaginations of the men. If the migration fails, migrants are more likely to blame fate, a lack of parents' blessings or jealous relatives bringing them bad luck rather than barriers created by EU policies. One migrant who had left without his parents' permission was found in Morocco with the help of his friends. He told the research team that his return was forced by the Marabout that his parents had consulted.

3.6 Experiences During the Journey

Migrants encounter a variety of actors who facilitate the crossing by land or sea. The type of intermediary encountered first by migrants are cokseurs or migrant recruiters. In southern Senegal, many cokseurs are based in Tambacounda and they operate in clandestine ways due to increased government surveillance. These actors then link up passeurs or smugglers and their drivers to facilitate the clandestine journey of migrants to certain 'ghettos' or safe houses at transit points. The passeur or smuggler is the overall coordinator of the journey across the Sahara. While most of the passeurs that we interviewed were keen to establish that they are honest, their reputation in Kolda indicates that they are seen in a less positive light than they would have us believe. Passeurs are locally known as "*barbarians*" because of their ruthless tactics, abandoning migrants in the desert to fend for themselves if they cannot pay. Details of the infrastructure and functioning of irregular migration facilitation can be found in Gueye and Deshingkar (2020).

The crossing of the desert is done in "combat" in overloaded pick-up trucks led by smugglers armed with Kalashnikovs who leave in the middle of the night. The guns are meant to protect the smugglers against robbers along the way but also protect themselves against revolt by the migrants they are carrying. Conditions in the desert are extremely dangerous and precarious.

In recounting their experiences, migrants talked about the extreme suffering and risk to their lives and repeatedly mentioned that migrants can survive such conditions only if God protects them.

So, we had four days in the desert, and we drove day and night, it was extremely hot during the day as it was cold at night. We were in 4 x 4 vehicles, the chairs at the back of the driver are dismantled. I was among those sitting there, inside. We were all scared since they took out their weapons. In fact, they bring out their weapons as soon as they have doubts, because they know that in case of misunderstanding, they are aware of the solidarity that exists between migrants ... This is how we have advanced until Gadroume, the border between

Libya and Niger. The crossing of the Sahara by combat cost me 250,000 FCFA.... Even if a person falls off the vehicle during the trip, the combat does not stop. Only God can save people in the Sahara. It is only God who can save people in the Sahara.

Similar to the migrants from Central America in Hagan's study who attributed their survival in perilous journeys to a miracle from God, the migrants from Kolda also refer to a higher force that can protect them in the desert. These beliefs gave migrants hope and the will to persevere. The passeurs take no responsibility for the safety of their passengers and more than one migrant mentioned that they did not stop to rescue anyone who lost their balance and fell out. The ability to withstand such conditions and reach the other side safely was again put down to protection from God as Moussa's account shows:

First of all, its small vehicles and people are overloaded like sheep and the 4WDs drive at speed so often vehicles fall down, but the drivers don't care. We don't stop until the order is given by the head of the convoy in person. Often they have parking points which is a place where all cars will stop for a while to refuel because they have big barrels in each car. That's when people will get out to eat and drink. People suffer during these fights because if a person is put in certain conditions, he may lose hope and that kills a lot of people because if he falls down while the vehicles are driving. Unfortunately, if that happens and drivers don't stop, they continue even if they know someone has fallen. It's a very difficult road so sometimes people die like that in the desert and another danger of this trip is that when the vehicles are driving, they raise the dust to a great height and people don't see anything. Sometimes with the shaking, people also fall down, so it is only God who is able to protect a person from these dangers. In the past it used to be dump trucks that were used to transport the migrants during the fighting, but since the war started, people have stopped using these trucks because they were easy to track and chase, so now they use 4x4s for the journey.

3.7 Extreme Suffering and Risk Are Not a Deterrent

To our surprise migrants who had endured and survived extreme hardship through the dessert and the sea expressed the desire to migrate again if they were deported or had to return. They were preparing to depart again almost immediately partly due to unfulfilled goals, the social shame of failed migration and deportation and their belief in the Almighty will see them through the journey. Successful migration is seen as a mark of manhood and being a good son and provider for the family. There was also a sense of a poor outlook for making a living in rural Senegal due to deteriorating agricultural production and the departure of so many able-bodied men. Those who survived and succeeded in accumulating enough money to make the crossing to Europe were perceived to be the blessed and lucky ones. On the other hand, those who had failed or had been deported attributed these outcomes to fate, jealous relatives bringing bad luck or not having one's parents' blessings. EU policies and barriers to migration rarely figured in these interpretations of the successes and failures of migration.

Bécaye who sailed in a precarious pirogue all the way to Spain said he would go again but by land,

Yes. I acquired a cow today. I'll try to build up a couple of animals and I'll sell one to go back. I don't know when, but I know I'll go back. This time I'll try the road. I don't recommend the sea. At least not me. If you hear somewhere that I've had something to do with water, it's because I've washed or drank it. But me and water is over now.

Aziz who had survived starvation in the Sahara and being robbed told the research teams that he was planning to remigrate because he saw no future in Kolda.

The difficulties that I met there are enormous and this time if it doesn't work I will stop for good and come back to continue my business. I'm going back to try my luck again this time... But also, today many young people don't want to stay in the village anymore and consequently the old people of the village don't have any more support for the work in the fields. Even my family never agree to my trip. When I talked about it with my brother, he asked me to stay but I didn't listen. But sometimes it is important because many people have succeeded in this trip. For example, some families in this village have now stopped farming because their sons have succeeded in this trip and they are covering the daily expenses of the family and they are starting to build big buildings in their families.

These accounts raise questions on how well policy makers are understanding migrant attitudes to risk and whether the heavy investments made in risk information campaigns are justified.

3.8 Conclusion

This study adds to the scant literature on the role of religion and spirituality in shaping perceptions of risk and giving meaning to extreme suffering during dangerous migration journeys. Light is shed on the modes of interaction between migrants, their families and Marabout Islamic religious leaders. Marabouts are extremely important in shaping the migration decision and mediating between God and migrants to help them cope with the risks and uncertainties that they encounter along the way.

In the absence of any legal protection and a completely mercenary environment, the outcomes of irregular migration depend on chance. Migrants must depend emotionally and psychologically on religious beliefs and prayers that give meaning to their adventures and offer succour during difficult times. It is hardly surprising then that migrants and their families were seen to place such faith in the Marabouts' blessings and their destiny as ordained by God.

The findings visiblize the role of women in irregular migration and its religious dimensions and show how deeply they are involved in what was hitherto regarded mainly as a male activity. Although women make up only a fraction of irregular migrants, they are involved in facilitating, supporting, financing journeys and sourcing Marabouts. Such a gendered perspective helps us to elucidate a broader and more complex picture of migration where women are a critical part of the infrastructure of migration or the overall system which facilitates men's journeys.

Irregular migrants derived spiritual and emotional comfort through the teachings of Islam when faced with numerous, severe and arbitrary risks including forced

labour, extortion, beatings, abandonment, starvation, theft and destitution. They sought protection from God by mobilising Marabouts and seeking strength in their potions and rituals. But at the same time, they were exercising agency in the way that they negotiated and worked with different actors in the smuggling industry who could help them achieve their dream in highly adverse circumstances in the sea and desert.

The research found that repeated deportations may force people to become temporarily immobile but that does not extinguish their desire to migrate. Experiences of extremely difficult journeys and a real risk to life did not deter migrants from wanting to leave again. This was due to a combination of the shame of failed migration, not seeing a viable future in rural areas and the belief that God would protect them.

Current policy approaches are focused on limiting irregular migration through information campaigns and the criminalisation of migration intermediaries. As this research has shown, these measures have had limited success for complex reasons including religious interpretations of risk; family needs and personal aspirations; as well as the lack of remunerative options locally.

Acknowledgements This paper draws on research funded under the Migrating out of Poverty Consortium funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development (now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office). The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone. The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the paper.

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