



“Time is on me”: Entangled Temporalities Between Italy and the Gambia

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Abstract

Gambian’s migration towards Europe, mainly constituted by young men, substantially increased since 2010. Arriving mainly through the Central Mediterranean Route because of the extremely scarce possibility to obtain a visa, most Gambians applied for asylum in Italy, the first arrival country according to the Dublin regulation. The administrative and juridical system largely rejected their asylum requests, leaving most undocumented, in legal limbo, and deportable. The paper focuses on the different trajectories of Gambians in Italy in their post-asylum phase, discussing how existential precariousness heavily shapes their lives and how this condition compromises future building along different but entangled temporalities. In particular, the contribution wants to reflect on the various intertwined timelines that people on the move forge and inhabit, showing how they are always multiple and articulated through spatial, social, cultural, economic, and personal dimensions. In so doing, I analyze temporal dispossession as a continuous process that Gambians on the move experience prior to, during, and after their trip to Europe and which they actively struggle to overcome.

Keywords Gambia · Migration · waiting · temporal dispossession · asylum system · borders

Introduction

Although European countries have been a destination for Gambian citizens on the move since the 1950s, a substantially higher number of them started to reach Europe from 2010. Arriving mainly through the Central Mediterranean Route because of the scarce possibility to obtain a visa (Gaibazzi, 2014), most Gambian nationals applied for asylum in Italy, the first arrival country according to the Dublin regulation, and

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secondly in Germany, which is a more desired destination and home of a significant diaspora.¹ However, even though until 2016 Gambia was ruled by the autocracy of Yahya Jammeh, Gambians seeking asylum were mostly considered “economic migrants” by European asylum authorities, even more after the end of Jammeh’s rule. The administrative and juridical system largely rejected their asylum requests, leaving most undocumented or in a situation of legal precariousness which makes them deportable.

The article focuses on the trajectories of some research interlocutors from Gambia to Italy, discussing how (im)mobility and uncertainty heavily shape their lives and how this condition affects the different but entangled temporalities through which they live.

In particular, the contribution wants to reflect on the various intertwined timelines that people on the move forge and inhabit, showing how they are always multiple and articulated through spatial, social, cultural, economic, and biographical dimensions. In so doing, I analyze temporal dispossession as a continuous process that Gambians on the move experience prior to, during, and after their trip to Europe and which they actively struggle to overcome.

Borders are one of the primary devices through which processes of othering are produced in the present (but also in the past, see Hess & Kasparek, 2017), and the temporal dimension is a central element in their unfolding. As Tsianos and others argued more than a decade ago, selective and porous borders dictate people’s mobility, making time a privileged means for managing migration, even more than space (Tsianos et al., 2009). The temporal management of people’s mobility has expanded and intensified even more in the last decade (Tazzioli, 2018), as a result of the “crisis of European borders” (De Genova, 2016) and the crisis of the asylum/reception system (Ambrosini, 2021; Sanò & Tabar, 2021). Borders “aim to disrupt the shared time structure” (Khosravi, 2019:413) through a logic of belatedness, a legacy and reiteration of colonial racism, and of its denial of coevalness (Fabian, 2014). In this regard, Khosravi argued that undocumented subjects are seen already to belong to a “racial time” different from that of the West, and that is why their time can be legitimately disposed of and dispossessed, as the racial other always comes “too late” (Khosravi, 2019). Georgina Ramsay talked about migrants’ disrupted time as a form of temporal displacement, “an existential experience of contested temporal being, in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future.” (Ramsay, 2020:392). In defining displacement as an interruption in the teleology of life, Ramsay highlighted how in this sense, displacement is not exclusively a condition of refugees and migrants. Instead, it is increasingly a dominant reality produced by the forms of dispossession tied to global capitalism everywhere, to which the new migratory scapes are only a partial manifestation (Anderson, 2017; De Genova, 2016; Hage, 2009).

If temporal displacement as a concept captures “non-navigable situations, in which external forces constrain the possibility of a self-directed future” (Ramsay,

¹ Data retrieved from the EUROSTAT database https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data_browser/view/migr_asytpfq/default/table?lang=en.

2020: 410), in this article, I engage the one of "temporal dispossession" to further emphasize the active role structural and historical processes of dispossession have in depriving people of the capacity to manage their time, envisioning futures, and fulfilling personal and sociocultural expectations regarding existential trajectories.

In particular, the article elaborates on how young Gambians try to escape the socioeconomic dispossession and existential stuckness (Hage, 2009) they live in their home country just to encounter the forms of temporal dispossessions produced by securitarian, bureaucratic, and humanitarian apparatuses of the border regime.

Moving from a relational and heterogenous concept of time and waiting (Jacobson et al., 2020; Drangsdal, 2020), I discuss how this temporal dispossession does not only affect migrants' timelines within the borders of the Schengen area but also the other timescapes they have to attend in the Gambia.

If in making the journey to Europe, my interlocutors' hoped to move towards a spatiotemporal horizon that would open up their obstructed timelines and their existential trajectory, the process was far from smooth even in the most successful cases. Regularisation allowed some of them to become financially less precarious, to recover partial ownership and management of their time and reactivate social timelines in the Gambia that were left suspended. Those timelines often envisioned marriage, participating (financially and/or physically) in social events, building a house, providing parents with a form of social security they are missing from the state, and therefore reactivating culturally constructed and collectively participated paths to (in)dividuality. Nevertheless, even in the lack of regularization which makes the possibility of visiting impossible, some of my interlocutors decided to still proceed with their Gambian existential trajectories, getting married remotely (and therefore extending waiting to their spouses), sending remittances, and paying for their sons and daughters, siblings and nephews school fees. Trying to transcend the temporal dispossession endured in Europe, people struggle to still fit into their timeframes back home. In reflecting on their trajectories, I argue that when looking at the temporal dimension of the border regime, the entangled timelines people inhabit need to be taken into account to show how they are differentially affected and how people creatively engage with them in order to build possible future(s) despite the many constraints.

The article contextualizes the situation of the Gambia in the first section, describing how geographical mobility is a structural feature of social reproduction that has become even more important in the last two decades due to increasing inequalities, economic insecurity, and climate change. While labor and circular migration marked the colonial and postcolonial era in the Gambia, in the post-structural adjustment phase, a 22-year autocratic system, market liberalization, and mobility restrictions heavily impacted the political economy of the small country, engendering a situation of existential stuckness and future's dispossession for many young Gambians (Altrogge & Zanker, 2019; Gaibazzi, 2015; Harrison, 2010; Perfect, 2017; Williamson, 2022).

In the second part of the article, I focus on the temporalities of the journey to Europe and the problem of being stuck in the asylum system and at risk of deportation. I analyze the situation of my interlocutors in Italy, the temporal dimension of waiting it entails, and the refraction of such "stuckness" in the country of

origin (Haas, 2017). In the third section, I focus on their post-asylum trajectory, the dynamics of their delayed homecomings, and the attempt to recover different timelines interrupted by the trip, signaling the change of social status so central to the migratory endeavor (Altin, 2021; Bourdieu, 1982; Conrad Suso, 2019; Della Puppa, 2014; Monsutti, 2007).

This article draws on an ethnography on post-asylum political subjectivities and trajectories I carried out as a postdoctoral researcher between 2019 and 2022 between Italy and the Gambia.² The research relied and expanded a network of Gambian citizens residing in Italy I initially came across during a 10-month period between 2015 and 2016 in which I worked as a legal assistant in a reception facility for asylum seekers in the Marche Region of Italy. The idea to focus on post-asylum subjectivities emerged because, like many other asylum workers, I was and am still involved in the lives and relational webs of some former guests. The research takes these relational webs as products of the border regime and tries to disentangle how people's subjectivities were reshaped by and beyond the encounter with(in) the institutional apparatus of migration management and asylum. The research interest in the Gambia stemmed from particularly significant relationships I built with a few Gambian guests of the reception facility which continued and turned into friendships after I left the center. They later became also the research facilitators, interlocutors, and collaborators at the core of my postdoctoral fieldwork. In the years of research, I collected more than 50 interviews with Gambian migrants, returnees and youth, asylum workers, NGOs and international organizations staff, and Gambian governmental officers. In addition, I conducted participant observation in the households of Gambian migrants' families and friends, as well as during recreational and social activities in which my core interlocutors involved me. In this article, I rely on some of this material to outline the sociopolitical situation in the Gambia, but in examining the entangled timelines of Gambian migrants, I refer in particular to the trajectories of Alagie, Baboucarr, and Tijan, whom I interviewed extensively and longitudinally throughout the years of my postdoc. Despite our close relationships and constant conversations that deeply inform the research, I present here the words and stories that they shared with me only in official research interviews.

Temporal and other Forms of Dispossession in the Contemporary Gambia

Senegambia, previously a hotspot of the trans-Saharan trade route, became a crucial area in the Atlantic slave trade, with thousands of people estimated to be enslaved each year during the sixteenth century (Barry, 1998). Circular labor and wage-related migration, mainly in neighboring countries, was introduced in the Gambia during the British colonial era and quickly became a structural element for the social reproduction of its agricultural economy (Bellagamba & Vitturini, 2021). Farmers usually

² All the ethnographic data and interviews presented in the article were given informed consent by research interlocutors. All the interlocutors have been anonymized to protect their privacy.

worked in the field during the rainy season, while the rest of the year they often moved abroad in search of work opportunities. The cash crop system and monocultural model inherited by the colonial rule reduced in time the land available for subsistence agriculture, making the country chronically dependent on imported goods. The crisis of the peanut basin in the Sahel, the IMF structural adjustment programs, and the further forms of dispossession perpetrated by former president Yahya Jammeh deepened poverty and structural unemployment in the country. These conditions made migration, especially in the Global North and in oil-rich countries like Libya, a crucial strategy to cope with the dire economic context (Bellagamba & Viturini, 2021; Ceesay, 2016). However, while until the 1990s, traveling to Europe or the UK was challenging but achievable, the mobility of Gambian citizens, as in the case of many other countries in the Global South and especially in West Africa, has been increasingly hindered by the restrictive visa regimes towards countries of the Global North (De Genova, 2017; Gaibazzi, 2014; Karakayali & Rigo, 2010). The Gambia has one of the highest visa rejection rates for Western countries, and visa requests for EU countries could be processed only by embassies in neighboring Senegal.

This drastic reduction in geographical mobility, also exacerbated by the tense relationships between Jammeh and Euro-American countries, was accompanied by an increasingly tricky internal social mobility for young Gambians in the neoliberal era. Due to the impossibility of farming to generate enough income to ensure families' wellness, a situation worsened by climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies, many young people moved to the country's urban coastal area to find work. But there they remained under or unemployed because of the scarcity of job opportunities and lack of political connections and skills suitable to the job market.

This economic stagnation and an unfinished process of de-ruralization put many young people in a precarious situation, making the transition to adulthood more difficult and socially contested, like in many other African countries (Altrogge and Zanker 2019; Gaibazzi, 2014; Conrad Suso, 2020). Attributes of adulthood such as economic independence, marriage, and parenthood are becoming increasingly unattainable by most young people in Africa struggling with unemployment and unsustainable livelihoods (Ceesay, 2016; Cole, 2005). In this regard, Honwana (2012) and Sommers (2012) use the terms "waithood" and "being stuck," respectively, to describe the experiences of young people who are suspended between childhood and adulthood. These concepts have been criticized as taking for granted gendered and heteronormative assumptions about the temporal frameworks of capitalism, nationalism, and family (Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2020). However, the literature agrees on the fact that waiting does not correspond to passivity and lack of agency but instead implies creative daily survival strategies, in informal economies where everyday politics of waiting could also open spaces for new subjectivities, relationalities, and futures (Honwana, 2012, Jacobsen and Karlsen; Stasik et al., 2020).

In this context, to dream of Europe is simultaneously a form of escapism and redemption for the forms of marginalization and stigmatization young men (but also women to a certain extent) experience as a result of unemployment, precarization, and delayed adulthood (Ceesay, 2016; Conrad Suso, 2019). Compared to previous

generations, which still resorted to age-based cultural *kafos* (socialization groups in Mandinka), many interlocutors described to me how the urban youth hang out in “ghettos” (public spaces, usually under a tree or on a porch, where young people meet to listen to music, drink tea, smoke weed, chat, watch football). In this way, they avoid spending time with their families which shame them for being “unproductive,” and as a stress relief from tiring and precarious jobs. In the ghettos, the backway³ to Europe is often discussed and idealized, not simply as *elsewhere* (Fouquet, 2007) but also as *elsewhen*, a temporal dimension that allows people to overcome existential stuckness and exit waiting (Hage, 2009). Europe is often seen as a solution because the currency gap between the Dalasi and the Euro allows for “fast money” (in the home country), as many Gambians critical of the backway told me. At the same time, as highlighted by some of the Gambians I met who got an international education, moving to Europe is also a way to participate in “what is really going on,” a desire to be present in a hegemonically crafted global time.

In the coastal area of Banjul, these ideas and imaginaries are somehow materialized in the very urban fabric. The houses of people from the diaspora, with their modern styles and utilities, are located next to rundown compounds; the touristy strip, which hosts mainly European tourists, features restaurants and hotels that the majority of Gambians cannot afford and where they are not even allowed to enter by police checkpoints. What is referred usually to as “a better life,” materializes in this area as a racialized and exclusionary property, constantly displayed, reiterated, and embodied by people, venues, and sites related to the so-called Global North.

This situation locates itself in the broader African context where expectations for a future aligned to the temporal narratives of modernity and development are frustrated and delayed on individual, societal, and governmental levels (Ferguson, 2006; Piot, 2019), while neoliberal policies increase economic inequalities. In this situation, hope plays a crucial role in allowing young people to foresee futurity (Kleist & Thorsen, 2017) and “to maintain an *experience* of the *possibility* of upward social mobility” (Hage, 2003, 13, emphasis in original). In the post-Jammeh “new” Gambia of Adama Barrow’s government, this hope was initially placed in the state itself by many after the election. But, as remarked by my research interlocutors and noticed by scholars (Hultin, 2020, Zanker and Altrogge 2022), these expectations have been delayed once again, due to the protraction of economic fragility, which was further intensified by the effect of global events as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Europe then continues to be a space where hope and hope-inducing practices are projected (Kleist & Thorsen, 2017), despite the many sensitization campaigns against “irregular migration” and the developmental projects promoted by the same EU as a means of border externalization (Aucoin, 2022, Jinkang et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2023). As Demba, a migrant advocate in his late twenties who “voluntarily returned” to Gambia after months in a

³ In the West African anglophone countries, and especially in The Gambia, “backway” stands as the undocumented trip to Europe. In this regard, it is interesting to note that backway is also used in everyday language to indicate an alternative way to a destination or a shortcut. It is used often in the hectic traffic of Serekunda, when there is an obstruction in the main streets. In this, one’s cannot help but thinking at the restrictive visa regime as necessitating an “alternative way to Europe” and to the temporal dimension that the semantics around “shortcut” also suggest.

Libyan detention center, told me, "When even the government relies on European aid, how are we expected not to think that going to Europe will solve all of our problems?" Indeed, even if many losses and disappearances resulted from the backway, more and more families rely on those Gambian migrants who took the journey in the past years. While price inflation skyrockets, salaries stagnate, and political dissatisfaction lures in, the currency gap between the Dalasi and Euro also deepens, making even the small amounts that the "backway diaspora" is capable of sending back home extremely significant for entire families.

In this scenario, the journey to Europe plays a crucial role in aligning one's singularity with sociocultural personhood. The same families and communities encourage sometimes young men to undertake migration paths which are often trans-generational. Many people recounted how the decision to take the backway was closely linked to the fact that they already had parents, siblings, relatives, and friends in Europe. The absence of a welfare state and/or public mechanisms aimed at protecting vulnerable or dependent people in the Gambia places the burden of their subsistence on the shoulders of young men and increasingly women. In this light, leaving could be seen also as a strategy to stay and be socially present. Indeed the temporal and meaningful horizon that occupies the mind of those about to leave is often the one of return. Europe is not exclusively imagined as a promised land, offering "greener pastures." Instead, it was described to me by some as a tool and an instrument "to struggle" and correspond to societal and cultural rules back home, finding the means and resources to participate positively in communitarian solidarity.

Nevertheless, the elements are more complex and specific to each person's biography and motivations. People cited the pursuit of internationally qualifying education as a reason to embark in the backway and acquire specific skills or pursue a career that the home country could not offer.

The decision to move cannot be conceptualized then as a pure search for self-realization nor a sheer obligation to provide for one's own family and/or community caught in a structural lack of resources. On the contrary, it locates itself in a much more nuanced and context-dependent conjuncture, where biographical, sociocultural, economic, symbolic, and religious dimensions converge. For young Gambians, as many other West Africans, the search for mobility entails an existential way forward to fight a dispossessed future, a process of formation, and a normative, culturally engrained endeavor crucial to social reproduction and cultural forms of subjectivization (Prothmann, 2018). Finally, moving entails also waiting, as it is something that, as many interlocutors told me, happens according to God's time and is strictly connected to a specific idea of destiny (Gaibazzi, 2012).

In the next section, I will describe how the expectations towards the polysemic spatiotemporal horizon of Europe encounter the many physical and institutional obstacles created by the border regime I will try to disentangle how they interfere with the hoped-for timescapes of Gambians on the move.

Escaping Waithood, Finding Waithood

The asylum authorities of various European countries tended to label Gambian asylum seekers mainly as “economic migrants,” even more so after Jammeh’s regime ended in 2017, and democracy was formally restored. The denial of their asylum requests left most of them undocumented, in legal precariousness, and at risk of being repatriated to the Gambia. While the post-Valletta securitarian turn in asylum policies enacted measures to prevent people from claiming asylum through border externalization (Bradley, 2022), it also created a contraction of asylum facilities and rights in Europe. This aspect heavily affected Gambian nationals, who did not possess a solid diasporic network in Italy compared to other nationalities in the asylum system. Once expelled from reception facilities, they were left in institutional and social neglect while simultaneously racialized and criminalized as illegal migrants. Like other West African asylum seekers, many live in hyper-precarious housing and work conditions, often relegated to informal labor markets like that of the “new plantations” in the South of Italy (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2022). Despite the dire situation, some of them found ways to “get by” and “manage” (Schapendonk, 2018), moving within national and transnational EUrospaces even if constantly hunted by the sedentaristic logics of migration and asylum policies and by the possibility of becoming *Dublinanti*. Finally, very few acquired a more permanent status and economic stability. They can regularly travel back to Gambia to visit their family and freely travel within the Schengen area. This is the case of Alagie, one of my main research interlocutors and collaborators with whom I traveled to Gambia for the first time. Alagie, a former French teacher in his thirties, who arrived in Italy in 2016 and whom I met in the reception center where I was working, turned his humanitarian status into a work permit, which allowed him to finally travel back to the Gambia after 4 years from his arrival. Once there I lived together with him, his wife, and his daughter, who was born after his departure, briefly witnessing the struggle to re-connect or even construct from the ground up their relationality, as well as the wounds, silences, and irreversible gulf that those 4 years had excavated between them. When Alagie’s presence started to be embedded in the time flow more naturally, it was already time for him to leave and go back to his work in Italy, attending the main timeline he physically inhabited.

Discussing the temporality of the journey, Alagie described each moment, each step as something that is somehow exhausted once is overcome and which does not need to be brought back to memory. In these years of research, but even in my 10 months as an asylum worker, I noticed how even the most horrific tales from the journey were always somehow narrated as passages or as stages necessary to access the next phase, one that was closer to the final destination. Paradoxically, “being stuck” in so-called transit countries still allows (even if less and less due to increased border externalization) a certain degree of hope even in the midst of life-threatening conditions and everyday violence (Achtmich, 2022). Once people arrive in Europe, the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that denies rights to migrants defrauds people’s agency in a very potent way, primarily because of the strategies used to overcome obstacles, the level of endurance, the faith and hope that motivates the

venture of migration become blunt weapons. This apparatus, which Alagie defined as a "paper regime," generates confusion, suspicion, and frustration, especially if the level of "bureaucratic literacy" is unevenly distributed between actors. The migration/asylum apparatus suspends time and the journey to adulthood again, infantilizes asylum seekers in reception centers, and sends them back to school, something that is associated with dependency and childhood. The urge to reinstate their capacity to act, move, and accomplish the process of emancipation they started when they left the Gambia in the first place is frustrated once again. This is why the immaterial prisons of the paper regime become psychologically, culturally, and existentially threatening. To be de-activated and marginalized or to resort to illicit activities to survive could be even more shameful than "sitting" in your parents' home, as Baboucarr told me. Baboucarr, who is about to turn 30 and who arrived in Italy in 2014, spent years working as a shepherd in Senegal after leaving the Gambia when he was still a teenager. His early achievement of independence made him confident in his capacity to navigate difficult situations: "when I was in Africa, I knew what to do, how to fight," he told me. He was more familiar with the cultural and social practices; for example, he referred to the informal practices of labor engagement in Libya as something he expected to find in Europe. However, once he arrived, he was discombobulated by the fact that his identity and legitimacy in Italy depended on answering "in the correct way" to the questions about his past and his reason for fleeing. To be asked about "the reasons for leaving" by asylum authorities instead of one's projects and intentions for the future fractures the temporal dimension people on the move share. Baboucarr was surprised that the commission which had to decide about his right to remain in Italy was not interested in what he intended to do there and what kind of future he imagined for himself and wanted to build. The fracture, almost a short circuit, for those who envision the journey to Europe as a way forward in life, appears when the future could be granted only if the expectation of the institutional actors on someone's past is fulfilled. The existential tension, the arch of intentionality is abruptly interrupted, and mismatching temporal focuses clash. The resulting confusion adds to the other complications my interlocutors described to me, from the limitations and opacities of living in reception centers (Rozakou, 2017; Della Puppa and Sandò, 2021) to the unreadability of the rationality behind its functioning and from the state-centric grammar through which their presence is framed to the media attention on migrants' presence and their hyper-visibility in the public sphere. The overall sum of these factors gives a feeling of powerlessness, of being subjected to mechanisms, discourses, and devices one could not grasp or re-conduct to something familiar. The slow violence of the paper regime becomes something that interrupts the intersubjective quality and the "moving with others" of the Gambian migratory ethos (Gaibazzi, 2019), and the collective and communitarian endeavor it embodies. Confronted with an illegible and untranslatable bureaucratic machine that existentially and productively (im) mobilizes them, many of my interlocutors find it hard to re-narrate themselves to the other subjects they move with and who expect them to return a collective investment on their mobility. This impossibility is amplified by the parallel belatedness which marks many Gambian migrants' lives in Europe, so to say, the predicament of "being perpetually regarded and treated as a foreigner" (Khosravi, 2019:456).

This dynamic, generated also by the “schism between the culturally expected and the possible” (Vigh, 2009, 95), is increasingly reinforced not only by securitarian policies in so-called transit countries but also by processes of expulsion in European countries (Nail, 2015). Nevertheless, waiting can also be used as a tactic (Andersson, 2014; Fravega et al, 2023; Sanò & Zanutelli, 2022) to gain time, expand social belonging, and eventually achieve legal stability, as I will discuss in the next section.

Navigating Entangled Timescapes: Post-Asylum Trajectories

Although waiting re-proposes itself back in Europe through a once-again delayed future, “empty time is not always in vain” (Eriksen, 2016: 87). Indeed, in my experience, I noticed how “waiting for the document” in Italy is a strategy adopted by many denied asylum seekers who reiterate their request through all the possible degrees of judgment. Even if the *iter* is eventually exhausted, the reiteration of the asylum request (*reiterata*, literally reiteration, is the name of the last resort to re-examine the whole asylum *iter* because of changed conditions) allows to “gain time” avoiding (partially) deportability. Many people know that with the Eurodac system enforcing the Dublin Regulation, moving to another European country could mean losing their precarious but still legal position in Italy without re-entering necessarily into another national asylum system.

Waiting could also increase the possibility of encountering new beginnings and hope (Altin, 2021; Jackson, 2008). It can be an opportunity to enhance social belonging despite juridical exclusion, as I saw happening in the case of some of the asylum seekers I worked with, who decided to stay in the territory where their former reception center was located because of the relational network they developed within and outside the asylum system. While waiting is used as a strategy to navigate the “cramped spaces” (Walters & Luthi, 2016) in which asylum seekers’ agency can be exercised in the Euroscape (Schapendonk 2018), it could also pay back in regards to their home-country timescapes. To wait, to socialize, to go to school, and to take the time to learn the language could become an investment that, even if it contradicts the tight and urgent timeframe expected from migrants back home, could allow in the long-term to achieve a more grounded position in the two contexts, as the case of Baboucarr.

Baboucarr was rejected as illegitimate by his siblings after his adoptive parents died, and that is why he left his village in the Upper River Region of the Gambia when he was only 13 and moved to Senegal to work as a shepherd. He decided to take the back way in search of better opportunities and to escape from the social shame of not having a family of origin, which prevented him from “having respect and building a family” in the Gambia, and especially in the Fula community he is from. After the boat he traveled on was rescued close to Lampedusa in Italy, he was put on a bus and brought to the reception center where I worked. He lived there for 7 years in legal limbo, going from appeal to appeal due to the Italian authorities’ systematic rejection of his asylum request. Among his many underpaid and exploitative work experiences, he worked informally for a year as a social worker at a reception structure managed by the same NGO which hosted him but in a different city.

He was never paid for his services because the NGO claimed they still hosted him and denied that he was working. Thanks to the pandemic-related emergency *sanatoria* (regularization) that the Italian government promoted in 2020 for undocumented migrants working in the agricultural sector, he finally obtained a temporary working visa. His plan was to move into an apartment with Federico, his ex-social worker who had become his best friend and now works in another sector.

As an uprooted subject bearing the trauma of family rejection at a young age, "when all the pages turned," as he told me, Baboucarr had left searching for a new space and what I would define as a community of belonging. He was curious about social workers as his closest and more immediate "others," and therefore, he fostered ties that exceeded both his and their formal positions in the asylum system (Altin and Sandò, 2017). While his path towards a more stable condition was arduous and bumpy, the constant support from and friendship with some of his previous asylum workers, his talks with the psychologist at the center, and his uncommon willpower gave him a certain resilience. These relationships continued after his time at the reception center and contributed to his decision to remain in the same city. Interestingly, he could "seize the moment" of *sanatoria* thanks to his local support network. Finally enabled to travel back to Gambia after years he was financing his sister's education, he visited his village in 2021, indeed, getting married to a girl with a former schoolmate, started to build a compound, and claimed back his ownership of the land from which his brothers had excluded him many years before. He showed me the pictures of the elders who paid a visit to him and his pride in indicating the notables of other villages at his wedding ceremony. The prestige of being a successful returnee from Europe compensated for his previous illegitimate condition, and he re-established ties with his relatives and the village authorities. Even if his life in Italy is still full of challenges and uncertainty, his social persona in the Gambia has been restored.

As the case of Baboucarr shows, juridical, financial, cultural, and relational timeframes are deeply entangled with each other, and waiting becomes something ubiquitous, constituted through multiple and relational temporalities (Jacobsen et al., 2020).

Even if being stuck in legal limbo mostly means wasting time and not being able to recover the possibility to move and reactivate the temporal timeline that one has left elsewhere, waiting could be used as a tactic to navigate constraints and postpone hope.

Tijan, who arrived in Italy in 2014 and who obtained a humanitarian visa due to a physical problem, moved to Germany in 2018, leaving him to juggle with not just two but three spacetime dimensions. He tried to renew his humanitarian status in Italy while living in Germany as a *duldung* (rejected but tolerated) asylum seeker, waiting for a promised asylum reform that should allow people in his condition to access specialized job training in Germany and be regularized as labor migrants. In the meantime, he married a woman from his town whom he had never met because he was not in the legal and financial situation to afford a trip back to Gambia. In his case, as in the one of Baboucarr, the temporalities of European and national politics (the *sanatoria*, the regularization through labor) become crucial components in the attempt to navigate one's existential trajectory and their entangled timelines. Drangslund in this regard has

noticed how attention towards temporal heterogeneity is capable of accounting for the various “nows” that people juggle in their transnational lives, opening “the lens of waiting to multiple and interrelated futures and thus complicates any story of waiting as tending towards a foretold end that is spatialised as reinsertion into the nation-state.” (Drangland, 2020: 90). As much as a flattening and passivizing focus on waiting could risk naturalizing modernity and capitalism as the only possible temporal horizons in the case of youth in African countries, in the context of migration and border regimes, it could also restrict it to the institutional timing of the nation-state and its mechanisms of exclusion/inclusion. As the story of Tijan and Baboucarr instead shows the temporal lines inhabited by people are multiple and their tensions towards possible futures are heterogeneous. People live and cope with such timelines in complex ways, creatively playing with the few elements they have at hand, such as in the case of precarious legal status. Looking exclusively at the linear timescape of institutions, which envisions national inclusion as the final goal, obfuscates the plurality of forms of belonging and temporalities people are immersed in (Chakrabarty, 2018).

Furthermore, even if the best conditions are achieved (meaning a stable job and legal status in Europe), time continues hunting Gambians with a transnational life. Alagie, who works as a cultural mediator in Italy and regularly goes back to Gambia for a month each year, is constantly torn by the idea that his daughter is growing up without him, and he leaves his wife alone. “Time is on me,” he told me, talking about his asymmetrical presence in the two contexts, a feeling that Drangland also noticed in the case of her interlocutor as “a sense of life *not* waiting” (Drangland, 2020:87). In his opinion, the idea of reunify with them in Italy is unfeasible due to multiple constraints. To name a few, he mentioned the tripled cost of life that would be on his shoulders, the cultural and language barriers they would encounter, and his indirect presence in the Gambia through his wife. Last but not least, he is worried about the everyday and structural racism his daughter would face in Italy, something that as an adult he willingly decided to cope with, but which he thinks would have heavy and long-term consequences for her. That is why, as initially planned, he will go back permanently to the Gambia soon, as he now has a long-term permit of staying (*carta di soggiorno*) valid in the EU. He can count also on an almost finished compound to rent out to middle-class families in the Gambia, some savings, and international work experience that he plans to reinvest in the African migration industry (Andersson, 2014), seizing the moment of increasing policies of the EU borders’ externalization.

In the entangled timescapes of migration, finding the right rhythm, or at least an acceptable compromise, still relies on external constraints and opportunities and on the unique matrix of personal desires, biographical trajectories, and relational geographies each person embodies.

Conclusions

The young Gambians who took the backway moved into space, and at the cost of their own life (better to die trying than “sit,” as many told me) to overcome a stagnant and obstructed existential timeline, to re-appropriate their own time,

suffocated by the various forms of dispossession they endure. The impossibility of meeting the social and cultural expectations, which are increasingly tied to acquiring certain economic stability to afford a house, a wife, and kids, generates the urgency to move future-building somewhere and somethen else. As I showed in this article, this does not mean cutting ties with one's home country's timelines but finding ways to inhabit them through displacement.

It is a cruel irony that people who moved into space to recover their time, to respond adequately to the sociocultural rhythm of existence, found themselves "stranded," "lingering in a limbo," incapable of achieving those milestones, of reaching those goals, to reactivate their hijacked timelines. The timing of asylum and migration policies is used as a deterrence method, and it works because it throws people into a disempowering condition of waiting which configures itself as a form of "temporal injustice" (Fontanari, 2017). At the same time, arriving in Europe engenders in people's back home a reactivation of those expectations. If it is true that every life course requires a certain degree of navigation of opportunities and constraints, where one projects herself through "the socially immediate and the socially imagined" (Vigh, 2009:205), when the socially immediate is made of constraints, the socially imagined also collapses. As expressed by Ramsay:

With cruel optimism (Berlant, 2020), people commit themselves to situations of great suffering—undertaking dangerous migration passages across oceans or enduring grueling hours of demanding labor—only to have their time and energy extracted and to find that the promise of a future of stability is, despite their efforts, out of reach (Ramsay, 2020: 410)

Nevertheless, as I tried to show, people develop creative and diversified strategies to exit temporal displacement and dispossession. If an elsewhere is not possible (as for the Dublin Regulation), then future-building could be placed in an *elsewhen*, like reiterating the appeal to the asylum request or waiting for a new juridical framework for regularization. Nevertheless, as the case of Alagie documents, a stable status does not automatically translate into a resolution of marginalization and dispossession (Khosravi, 2010; Lems, 2020), as differential inclusion, racialization, and complicated management of a double presence (or, as Sayad would say, absence) hunt people's existential timelines.

In presenting the other side of the temporal displacement of the border regime, my will in this article was to account for the multiple existential, cultural, and social dimensions that compose people's trajectory, which is often erased by the presentism of the "refugee" discourse. The "displacement paradigm," even the temporal one, can run the risk of totalizing people's experience (Malkki 1995) and overseeing how people's uncertainty plays on their multidimensional futurity. If the future is political, as Ramsay (2020) rightly pointed out, the entangled and relational temporalities through which people navigate their hopes, responsibilities, and desires despite constant obstructions need to be considered.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The author declares that no conflicts of interest exist.

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