

## TURNING UNCERTAINTY INTO RISK: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND WESTERN SUBJECTIVITY MODELS AMONG UNSUCCESSFUL RETURN MIGRANTS OF THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE (VELINGARA, SENEGAL)

GABRIELE MARIA MASI<sup>1</sup>

This article develops the concepts of uncertainty and risk (Calkins 2016) in the context of a particular phenomenon of human mobility: unsuccessful return migrations from the Central Mediterranean route in Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, the article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Velingara (Senegal). Among the Fulbe Fulakunda, empty-handed homecomings are a moment of crisis where people have to rethink their life trajectories. Return migrants interpret the journey and return through historically local concepts such as shame, honour and independence, questioning their meaning to escape social stigma and to value their experience. In this context, the International Migration Organisation (IOM) programme of assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) comes into play. IOM's programme aims to educate migrants into businessmen capable of reading their current situation and planning their future in terms of managing risks and local economic competition. This article shows how the moments of uncertainty created by the economic and social marginalisation experienced by return migrants and their social networks become a contested field where aid programmes appear as forms of governmentality to tackle 'irregular migration' by producing new neoliberal subjectivities.

**Keywords:** return migration, Central Mediterranean route, risk, Fulbe, Fulakunda, AVRR

### Introduction

This article aims to investigate the concepts of 'uncertainty' and 'survance' in the field of unsuccessful return migration studies, focusing on the discourses revolving around unsuccessful returns from the African Central Mediterranean route in Velingara (Senegal),

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<sup>1</sup> University of Milano Bicocca.

among the Fulbe Fulakunda. Coming back without having achieved what one wanted and, indeed, having lost much of one's own and one's family's capital is a moment of profound uncertainty: it means dealing with the physical and psychological consequences of having survived displacement and violence, as well as having to imagine a different future in the difficult context of the contemporary Senegalese 'society of getting by'.<sup>2</sup>

Canut and Mazauric have already analysed how unsuccessful return migrants draw on a vast collective discursive repertoire which goes beyond their personal experience in order to cope with this moment of profound uncertainty (Canut and Mazauric 2014: 261). They draw their narrative material from a variety of sources, consisting of books, policies, films, humanitarian discourses and traditional histories with the aim of countering narratives that see them as losers, marginal, lacking courage, and not determined enough. Taking control over the narrative of their own experience is a fundamental step for reasserting one's presence against the marginalisation created by the failure of their migratory enterprise (Vizenor 2008). Return migrants' narratives are 'a way of engaging with the world that enables one to refine what is known and generates new forms of knowledge' in order to try to make sense of uncertainty (Calkins 2016: 3).

For convenience of exposition, the narrative material available to migrants will be divided into three layers: one relating to historical rooted cultural concepts; one which comes from the reconceptualisation of the *laawol ley* (backway)<sup>3</sup> as a 'school of life'; and the discourses advocated by international aid organisations and programmes, such as the International Migration Organisation's (IOM) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme.

In introducing AVRR programmes, I consider them as biopolitical tools of 'externalisation of the borders between the Global North and the South' (Stock et al. 2019), aiming at re-shaping the desires of the subject. Following Beck's intuition of 'risk as a governmental technology' (Beck 1986), the analysis will show how IOM's discourses aim at filling return migrant's uncertainty with pre-packaged socio-economic recipes. In doing so, as Calkins writes in discussing Mary Douglas' thought, they locate risk in the realm of individual responsibility, holding 'individuals accountable for their actions and for moving beyond the limits of acceptable risk' (Calkins 2016: 75). However, the extent to which the risk can be considered acceptable by the travellers of the *laawol ley* can only be understood by considering the economic and social conditions under which they live.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'culture of getting by' (*culture de la débrouille* in French or *Goorgoorlu* in Wolof) is a definition given by Moumar Coumba Diop to describe the way people live through 'the failure of the development ambitions of the postcolonial state' (Diop 2008: 364). For young people, 'getting by' meant being ready to do anything to survive, finding a place in the informal sector, begging or stealing, switching to forms of open or clandestine prostitution and also 'to leave at all costs' (Diop 2008: 363-364; Degli Uberti and Riccio 2017). The culture of getting by is characterised by a 'survival logic' (Diop 2008: 19) which has fuelled international mobilities: *Tukki ngir Tekki* (travel to succeed) is the Wolof expression which indicates 'going abroad' as an opportunity for opening new horizons and opportunities for individuals and their household (Bredeloup 2018: 99).

<sup>3</sup> *Laawol ley*, which can be translated as 'the route that passes from below', is the local word to indicate the land migratory journey made without legal permissions or papers either by foot or land vehicles. The term 'backway', instead, is mainly used in the Gambia to indicate irregular routes to Europe (Gaibazzi 2018: 245)

## Contextualising return migration in Velingara

Velingara is a Senegalese border town created at the beginning of the colonial era, when the kingdom of Fuladu was divided among Gambia (England), Senegal and Guinea Conakry (France), and Guinea-Bissau (Portugal). The majority of the population belongs to the ethnic group of Fulbe Fulakunda (Fanchette 2011: 21), a part of the vast Fulbe archipelago (Boutrais 1994: 137). The Fulbe Fulakunda entered the circuits of international migration later than other Senegalese populations, at the end of the 1970s, when France was already curbing down the possibilities of entering the metropolitan French territory from its former colonies. This historical delay shapes experiences of international mobility nowadays, forcing many young people to go through the Central Mediterranean route, and joining this overland journey starting from Dakar or Tambacounda and heading up to the Libyan coasts, passing through Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and the Sahara Desert.

Sub-Saharan human mobility was deeply influenced by the armed conflict which ended Mu'ammar Qhadafi's regime in Libya in 2011 (UN 2018: 10), as well as by the European La Valletta Action Plan (VAP) in 2015, which marked a new phase of addressing root causes of irregular migration and displacement in Africa. The process of externalisation of European borders has involved several international organisations and NGOs, which acted as key actors in the diffusion of EU migration policies (Lavenex 2015). An example of these programmes was IOM's Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration (AVRR) through which 118,360 nationals of West and Central African countries were repatriated from 2017 to June 2021 (IOM 2021). Several reasons pushed the Fulbe Fulakunda in Velingara to join this massive movement towards Libya: local economic dynamics, the development of road infrastructure and means of transport, communication technologies, and urban working opportunities which have strictly linked internal Senegalese mobility to international routes. Furthermore, long-distance mobility was also shaped by the reduction of income opportunities in other West African countries, such as the Ivory Coast and Nigeria, the tragic loss of hundreds of lives of young Senegalese in trying to reach the Canary Islands by pirogues in 2005-2006 (Carling and Carretero-Hernández 2008), and the misadventures told by travellers who had attempted the Western Mediterranean route, which passes through Mauritania and Morocco.

At the time of my fieldwork, a bus left from Velingara to Bamako every Sunday. There, travellers could easily find a connection to Niamey, where the crossing of the Sahara Desert can be quickly arranged. Nevertheless, the chaotic political situation in Libya, human trafficking networks, and more and more restrictive laws by European countries has made a positive outcome of the journey more and more unlikely. This resulted in a significant growth of unsuccessful returns after 2015. Empty-handed return became a life-changing event for entire family networks, which have to deal with the disillusionment of 'the possibility of a (desired) alternative to a (currently lived) reality' (Kleist and Thorsen 2017: 2). These unfortunate adventurers – as travellers of the *laawol ley* love to depict themselves – often come back after having lost family wealth, land, cows, and money they (or someone else) borrowed to finance their journey and to deal with the difficulties they encountered. Once they are back, they have to face the shame of having anchored their family even more firmly into a condition of poverty, as well as the shame of a constant comparison with those who made it and are now living

abroad. Despite being physically absent, the ‘migrants who made it’ are constantly present through the houses they build, their regular round trips from Europe, and the remittances they send through money transfer services such as MoneyGram or Western Union. In rural Senegal, remittances have become fundamental to assert one’s social position, and they have also contributed to the corrosion of local residents’ purchasing power and the rising prices of land, houses and maidens’ dowries.

## Methodology

This article relies on ethnographic observations as well as individual and group interviews run between October 2019 and October 2021 in the province of Velingara (Senegal). The average profile of return travellers is that of men between the ages of 18 and 35, often still unmarried, who financed their journey with savings from harvests after the rainy season or from odd jobs in Velingara, Dakar or other rural areas of Senegal, or by selling livestock or land owned by their families. However, I did not focus only on those who return after 2012, but also on those who had come back before, more successful migrants, family members, local authorities, wives and mothers, development agents, local artists and young people. The use of structured interviews was limited and data were mainly of a qualitative nature. All the collected information was verified through an extended period of participant observation in Velingara’s everyday life and by triangulating different stories, as well as referring to official documents and the existing literature.

## Cultural models to live through uncertainty

Unsuccessful return migrants often talk about their homecoming using the French word *échec*, which means ‘failure’, ‘lack of success’, also suggesting the idea of ‘being stuck’, ‘blocked’, ‘held in check’. In fact, they often use the Fulfulde verb ‘*baarugol*’, which has two meanings: ‘to block a road or a path’ (denotative); ‘to find it impossible to reach a place, to achieve a goal or to realise an idea’ (connotative). The return blocks the path which allows people to come out from the ‘socio-temporal space characterised by economic, social and political marginalisation’ (Vigh 2010: 148). Hence, coming back blocks the individual path to being an economically independent *jom galle* (head of the household) as well to *heɓtaare*<sup>4</sup>, that is ‘the economic and social capabilities to handle one’s life at its best’, ‘a sense of self-autonomy’ and ‘the ability to formulate purposes and turn them into action in the awareness of being part of a larger social environment that demands respect for its rules and feelings’ (Bellagamba 2017: 82). Return migrants complain that coming back has plunged them into *tampere*, a word which means ‘fatigue’, ‘strain’, ‘weariness’ and ‘being stricken by a sense of failure’. Indeed, *tampere* has a precise cause: having searched in vain. Once they are back, this feeling of *tampere* becomes

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<sup>4</sup> Historically, this word *heɓtaare* has also assumed the meaning of social freedom: ‘*Heɓtugol hoore mun*’ was an expression that acquired a strong political connotation in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the late colonial period to express the conquest of sovereignty and the end of oppressions (Bellagamba 2017: 73-75).

routinised in daily life, due to the *baasal*, namely a situation of poverty that feels very difficult to get out of. As many return migrants told me: '*kalaia boni, tampere wadi!*' (poverty is fatigue, poverty is suffering). *Baasal* prevents a good *jom galle* from resting, forcing him to spend the day looking for someone who can help him, and so losing people's respect. Hence *baasal* is strictly linked to a condition of dependence, which prevent any possibility of reaching a condition of *heḃtaare*, and of maintaining one's dignity (*ndimaaku*).<sup>5</sup> In Fulfulde societies, poverty has always been interpreted as a shameful condition of alienation of 'the control of one's own head', that 'decrease one's noble status', and force the person to 'engage in types of labour which negates nobility' (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995: 401).

Historically, honour amongst Fulbe Fulakunda is based on a simple principle: 'to be more and never to be less' when one compares with those considered as social peers, and to 'never allow yourself to be left behind'. This concept lies at the heart of Fulbe Fulakunda's agonistic society, which is still vital, as it is shown by international mobility: in fact, *laawol ley* can be interpreted as a way to (ideally) try to socially overcome one's peers by gaining a better economic position and greater social recognition.

In the past, possession of material goods or cattle was strictly linked to the possibility of stating one's level of *dimo* (nobleness and respectability) (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995: 202). However, one's *ndimaaku* (the fact of being *dimo*) had also to be proven by constantly enacting a set of moral values and behaviours: self-respect (which implies having a cool head in difficult situations and not losing control of what one says or does); being courageous, righteous, honest and keeping one's word; showing publicly a selfless generosity and respect for the privacy and the difficulties of others (which implies politeness and discretion). Following the *ndimaaku* was a way to state (and demonstrate) one's *iwdi* (genealogical origin) and a public expression and reproduction of social classification (N'Gaide 2003: 712-714).

Nowadays, the concept of *ndimaaku* has changed. Historical processes like the rise and fall of the Fuladu kingdom (Bellagamba 2017: 77-80), the spread of Islamic religion (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995: 202), citizenship in post-colonial Senegal, education and integration into the urban world (N'Gaide 2003: 727) resulted in a conceptualisation of the *ndimaaku* less connected to one's origins and to the enactment of a set of moral rules (Ly 2015: 224). Being *dimo* has become an individual claim constantly flaunted in the public arena (Ly 2015: 226) – which today, through mobility, social media and the movement of capital goes far beyond the physical boundaries of Velingara – despite one's origins, through modern means, such as money, houses and cars that have replaced cattle in providing the material base of one's

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<sup>5</sup> Studying the legacies of slavery in Fuladu, Bellagamba (2017: 72) defines *ndimaaku* as the innate dignity and authority of the elites. In describing the *haalpulaaren* population of the Futa Toro, Boubacar Ly states that *ndimaagu* is the 'free and noble person's honour' (Ly 2015: 89), while Boesen (1999: 83) translates *dimaaku* with 'noblesse' and 'pride'. Analysing the relationship between *ndimaagu* and the consumption of food in the Senegalese region of Ferlo, Ka, Boetsch and Marcia (2019) have defined it as 'a set of norms, practices, values, social attitudes, behaviours, clothing and dietary patterns that the Peul Dimo (=the peul noble) is supposed to adopt in all circumstances' (2019: 7). In describing the attitude of the Fulbe population in Burkina Faso, Nielsen and Reenberg (2010) define *ndimaaku* as personal integrity and worthiness, taking up the complaint of the local population who affirmed to 'have lost their *ndimaaku*' and hence 'have become like the slaves, depending upon others' (2010: 149).

honour. Moreover, internal and international mobilities have created a multi-located village (Dia 2015: 43) where resources for the social competition can be drawn from different contexts, and in different ways, escaping the possible moral disapproval certain actions may raise: those who have managed to arrive in Europe and settle there, for example, often send money through money transfer systems with which they can buy houses, land, and other goods, but often few claim to know through which activity those living in Europe earn the money they then send.

Hence, life after having failed the route is about proving wrong the image of oneself as a man who let himself go, who did not have enough moral fibre, patience, and determination to reach a social status worthy of respect. That is why most of the return migrants I interviewed clearly stated that even when a man has to accept poverty 'as a fact of life' (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995: 402) or as 'God's will', keeping one's honour is about preventing anyone else from 'holding control' over them (Ly 2015: 100 vol I):

Camara: In the village they think that we were afraid to cross the sea, but it is not true: you must have been on the road to really know what it feels like. There are two people who died from this village. They ask you questions, but when you tell them what the route is really about, they say that you are lying. But this is just because they do not know...

Lamine: When I got back, a group of young people came to me for some advice because they wanted to leave. I told them what happens if you are caught in Libya: you could not eat or sleep, and you could be shot at any time. Even to earn one's living in Libya is practically impossible, because you have to hide all the time, even when you are working. You have to return from work after the sunset, using a torch. If someone sees you, you could easily be shot. So, sometimes you don't even have to use your flashlight, if you want to get home safely. But here they think you tell them that only because you do not want them to have the success you could not achieve.<sup>6</sup>

Those who successfully face the dangers of the *laawol ley*, bringing back wealth for the family, are honoured and welcomed as important and worthy people (*jaɓɓe*). By contrast, the one who comes back defeated is set aside, not looked at (*lartake*). He is *woppaɗo*, namely, 'someone totally abandoned by everyone': nobody looks at him or speaks to him or about him anymore. He is beyond the level of shame that is acceptable in order to partake in society. Return migrants' dishonour lies not only in having returned empty-handed, but mostly in not having been up to the standard of their social peers. They have been defeated in the social competition: it does not matter what a traveller had to endure, honour is measured by the conditions that a subject is capable of creating for himself and his family. The first step to recovering one's dignity is to demonstrate that one has control over oneself: in order to show one's *ndimaaku* a man must show and perform *hersa*, a fundamental concept for understanding social relations amongst several Fulbe groups (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1999: 44). *Hersa* regulates the behaviour of a real man before society. The attitude of *hersa* is a mix of modesty, self-respect, discretion, politeness, and control of one's own emotions and words

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<sup>6</sup> Camara and Lamine, return migrants, Nemataba, 20/10/2019

(Riesman 1998; Ly 2015). Immediately after their homecoming, several return migrants report having undergone a period of isolation where they barely led a social life. This is not just about the need to recover from the hardship of the journey. It is also about showing an attitude of *hersa* while avoiding being exposed in public.

Unsuccessful returns must also be read in their collective dimension. As the collective hope serves as a motivator to travel the backway and to face all the difficulties of the *laawol ley*, a 'collective disappointment' characterises empty-handed returns. As they have lost vital family assets in travelling the Central Mediterranean route, return migrants experience the so-called 'dark side of their social capital' as a shameful moral burden which they experience in their everyday life (Åkesson and Baaz 2015: 39-40). Walking the streets of Velingara, they can see successful migrants' houses, their smartphones are full of pictures sent by friends or brothers in Europe via WhatsApp or social media, and they might come across a wedding, baptism or the celebration of the Islamic national holiday *Tabaski* held by the family of a migrant.

The dark side of social capital also manifests itself on a supernatural level. While *ndimaaku* consists of publicly demonstrating one's ability to act honourably, implying a model of 'positive' social competition, *bau* (mystical attack) is an instrument of a 'negative' social competition based on the principle that 'if I cannot keep up with someone, I can mystically try to prevent him from succeeding'. These mystical attacks, which can be cast by a local *marabout*, are interpreted by return migrants as the reason for reversals of fortune during their journey and as the cause of their *échec* (failure). Hence, return migrants often end up not trusting their family or friends anymore, seeing themselves as victims of the jealousy of an envious brother or neighbour.

Another aspect to take into account is that in today's Senegalese 'society of getting by', where the contingency and unpredictability of economic life creates a productive field of possibilities (Gaibazzi 2015a: 227-240), one's success is largely seen depending on *arsike* (luck). *Arsike* is the kind of luck owned by people who do not need to work hard to obtain what they desire (Camara 2008: 53). Even if, as Islamic religion dictates, one's destiny is in the hands of God, a man must seek his own luck through his actions where *arsike* can happen suddenly. 'The quest for luck [...] provides a framework for actively engaging with the indeterminacy of life' which does not mean 'to merely control and minimise uncertainty, but also to unleash it and even maximise it', when people recognize 'the signs that might catalyse a radical change of circumstances in their lives' (Gaibazzi 2015a: 13). The hardship of the land migratory routes, for instance, is not conceptualised by the social actors as a demotivating factor, but as a challenge to prove their ability to tame the risk. For those who succeed, surviving gives a sense of moral or divine election, elevating them in a 'moral hierarchy of worthiness' (Alpes 2017: 189). God's will, destiny and luck are emic conceptual tools to give sense to the unfolding of a life trajectory, especially considering the 'uncertainty' they have experienced in Libya (Achtnich 2021: 156): eventually, the greatest capital that both adventurers and empty-handed return migrants can count on is God's will and one's luck.

Some of the interviewees use the verb *yonndinorgol* to indicate the capacity of a real Muslim to be patient and to endure difficulties as a form of acceptance of God's will. That is why most of the return migrants equate the courage they have shown along the backway with

the effort to endure the fate of returning. The necessary willpower to bear the *hersa* and to maintain an attitude inspired by the values of *ndimaaku* is not less than the willpower they would have needed to reach Europe.

## Valuing the experience

Coming back does not mean returning to a stable cultural norm but implies an active exercise in the re-invention of local culture (Farnetti and Stewart 2012: 432). Norms and cultural heritage are challenged by return migrants' narratives, often trying to avoid the representation of suffering subjects. Most of the time, when they are asked whether they regret their choice of travelling the route, they often reply that despite not having found what they were looking for, the *laawol ley* should be considered an important experience of personal growth. Fulbe Fulakunda, in fact, have always considered wise men those who 'demonstrate penetration of mind, acuity, clairvoyance, lucidity, sagacity and finesse' (Ly 2015: 169; II). The *laawol ley* allows migrants to refine these qualities, also giving them the occasion to become more expert about the world:

Even if you did not earn any money, you have gained a lot here [he touches his head]. You have the experience. This is what will help you. I have changed a lot, even the business I did in Libya has changed me ... Even if you do not arrive where you wanted to, you have gained experience. Nothing is lost. I came back healthy, while I saw friends there who became sick or went crazy. My friend died at sea. And others were shot. I saw things... Indeed, I did not have the chance to get to Europe, but Alhamdulillah, I am in good health.<sup>7</sup>

Travelling is not just about a modern rite of passage to adulthood: it is a way to claim one's right to full membership in the modern world society. Return migrants feel empowered in their way of thinking, despite having been dis-empowered in their economic and social condition: they claim that travel experience has given them a new perspective on their own society and it has made them more resilient, more responsible, and more aware about their responsibilities. Moreover, participation in the informal labour market during their journey has given them new ideas and skills to be put into practice at home. They feel not lacking in the experience and the capacity to put themselves back to work and rebuild a new successful personal history. However, they feel they clearly suffer from the lack of material conditions to locally build what they have seen in the world outside. *Laawol ley* has left them the sensation of being fit for building their success in Velingara also: they learned patience, frugality, capacity for enduring hardships, self-resilience, and a hard-working mentality. They have the attitude of the ancient *jambaar* (ancient warriors), heroes capable of honourably facing all twists and turns, and by this attitude they will be able to overcome the 'spectre of bare immobility' and to rehabilitate their own 'reputation [...] as worthy men' (Gaibazzi 2015b: 116). Hence, several people declare having started over by working in an acquaintance's workshop, or by

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<sup>7</sup> Labi, return migrant, Velingara, 27/10/2019

borrowing a motorcycle to enter the local taxi moto business; some decided to breed hens or rams at home, others moved away to Dakar, St. Louis, or other areas of Senegal to also ease the social pressure.

However, several years of absence have often had a disorienting effect on many returning migrants: life in Velingara has gone on, children and brothers have grown up, someone has died, friends of the past have often arranged their life by finding an economic activity, getting married and settling their household. The confrontation with those who remained often raises the feeling of having wasted time and the urgency of catching up. As Bellagamba (2013) already wrote about the Mandinka community of Gambia, the trajectory of a man's life foresees the achievement of economic independence at a young age, in order to reach important goals to enter adulthood, such as marriage and the setting of a new *galle* (compound). In fact, a man's social and economic status must ideally reach the peak when he is between 30 and 50 years old, and it will slowly decline as he gets old, as his children start to question his role of breadwinner:

What a man wants is to be a father, to have wives and children, to have a family to manage, and to build a beautiful building. And he wants it right away. That is it. On the contrary, women do everything little by little [...] Men are more 'for today': they want to have land, vehicles, to go abroad and come back. They want it *joni joni* because they already feel responsible. When they see someone else's success, they want to succeed too. A woman does not have these problems, she can be friends with a woman of a better condition without feeling ashamed.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, men are seen as more attracted to activities that allow them to earn *joni joni* (fast); men's *joni joni* way of thinking is linked to the fact that their social status is at stake in the early stages of life; this contributes to the positive perception of international mobility as a way to earn economic independence *joni joni* and to the feeling of having been delayed in case of unsuccessful returns.

In their attempt to make up for lost time, return migrants come to reconsider the value of some economic activities which were traditionally stigmatised, such as the production of coal and the harvesting of dead wood, once considered humble activities which were not suitable for a real *pullo dimo* (noble man): as long as they can be monetised to rebuild one's future, there is no shame. As Mamadu Yero, a local logger, told me:

The exploitation of wood was started by Malians and later by Guineans. The local people did not like logging because it used to be looked at as a humble activity. But when they saw they could earn money out of it, they also started to exploit the forest. Once, Fulbe Futa were called pejoratively '*ramasseur de kirine*' (coal collectors). Sometimes you could see loggers coming into a small village and the chief gave them an out-of-the-way place to stay. If they had no money, they relied on a family who used to give them something to eat. Once the work was done, they paid the family back with the money they had earned. As soon as they saw the money they could make, our parents decided to do the same.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Madame Sidibé, Velingara, 06/03/2020

<sup>9</sup> Mamadu Yero, Velingara, 20/02/2020

Nowadays, the possibility of earning money becomes the yardstick of any activity: economic activities are judged through a 'backward morality', linked more to the income they can generate, than to the activity itself. This is also true for what concerns breeding. Breeding can be divided into levels of importance: breeding of chicken or pigeons is at the bottom of this scale, followed by goats and sheep, while the breeding of herds has always been considered the activity of the nobles amongst Fulbe groups. Many return migrants accept starting over from a small domestic chicken farm as a good solution to provide for their families, counting on a higher reproductive rate as a way to earn money faster. The capital gathered with chicken theoretically gives them the possibility to also start breeding sheep and goats. The sale of 3-5 goats or sheep, or of a good ram, might be worth a heifer that allows the cattle to grow. The domestic breeding of chickens, therefore, is no longer framed as a typical female activity, not suitable for a real man but the demonstration of the individual effort to bravely rebuild one's life little by little. From an external perspective, it can be said that return migrants accept a sort of 'social feminisation', as they enact a *seedā seedā* way of thinking, and they opt to carry out activities historically carried out by women in the domestic environment. And yet, the effort of return migrants consists precisely in re-interpreting these activities from a modern point of view that values an activity by the possibility of generating a good income, building one's success little by little, working hard day after day. However, the experience of return often still implies a temporary social dependence, a step backwards in the search for *heḁtaare*.

### **The IOM's AVRR program: transforming uncertainty into risk**

In the last twenty years in particular, sub-Saharan transnational mobility has often been targeted by various international aid programmes that have considered repatriated and unsuccessful return migrants as individuals who must be re-anchored to their own territory through the creation of new job opportunities. Travellers are depicted by these programmes as ill-advised and vulnerable subjects who have gone towards the unknown, ending up as victims of trafficking. Fostering their success is part of a work of propaganda consistent with the 'diffusion of EU external migration policies' (Lavenex 2016: 2) and of the 'externalisation of the borders between the Global North and the South' (Stock et al. 2019). Helping an unsuccessful traveller to succeed in Velingara may show that success can also be achieved locally and not only through the Central Mediterranean route, hence disqualifying the view of international mobility towards Europe as the only way to succeed.

Following the IOM's glossary of migration, assisted voluntary return (AVR) is defined as an 'administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin' (IOM 2019: 12). AVR has the goal of favouring a good reintegration, defined by the IOM as 'a process which enables individuals to reestablish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life' (IOM 2019: 12). IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) was not originally conceived as a tool of development. Nevertheless,

as reintegration is framed as a ‘process by which a returning migrant re-enters the economic life of his or her country of origin and is able to sustain a livelihood’ (IOM 2019: 176), the IOM has implemented a programme with the aim of helping return migrant to start over, financing them with an amount of 1,000 euro each to set a new business.

The programme included a full training week, from Monday to Friday. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to attend four training weeks, held by four IOM trainers born in the department of Velingara and without a personal history of migration, each involving about 21-22 participants, selected from the lists of return migrants provided by the IOM central offices in Dakar and Kolda.<sup>10</sup> Every training week was divided into two days of dialogue and exchange of experiences, two days of one-to-one interviews in order to fill the business plans out, and a final day for *pro forma* invoices. The latter was probably the most difficult part for participants. According to the business plan, they had to contact a provider to agree on future supplies. For example, if anyone wanted to set up a cattle farm, he should have contacted a *tefanké* (cattle dealer) to sign a formal pre-agreement of the sale. The unusual nature of the *pro forma* invoice in the local economic context – as well as the delay in funding already evident from the beginning – often made this task quite tough.

The *pro forma* invoice is not the only example of the difficulty in applying the bureaucratic mentality envisaged by the IOM to the local reality. The core of each training week was the face-to-face conversation between an IOM trainer and a return migrant to draw up a ‘business plan’, a document in which each personal project was translated into the bureaucratic language of the international organisation. The business plan consisted of a ten-section form to be filled in by return migrants in order to have their project funded. Actually, the forms were filled in directly by each IOM trainer on their laptop, often copying and pasting from pre-filled texts of already approved projects. Return migrants’ answers were not written down verbatim: trainers translated return migrants’ desires into a language which could make the project acceptable and fundable by the international organisation. Even in wording, business plans were full of pre-packaged vocabulary. According to the definition by Calkins, business plans were presented as ‘forms’, namely ‘ways to address uncertainty, [...] a ‘semantic domination [...] pertaining to the creation and imposition of meanings, that is, the establishment of qualifications, which define beings and their worth’ (Calkins 2016: 123).

The first three sections of the business plan concerned personal data, the characteristics of the chosen activity to be financed (including the place of setting, and whether it is a new project, the resettling of an old one, or an already ongoing scheme), the level of education, and whether the person had identity documents or certifications for doing a particular activity (as driving licence for those who want to become mototaxi drivers). The fourth part was dedicated to the applicant’s previous working experiences, followed by a chart to be filled in with a detailed description of the use of the 650,000 CFA budget migrants would have at their disposal. These two sections stressed two fundamental preconditions for future

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<sup>10</sup> The first training week I attended was the ninth of the whole project in November 2019. At that time, there was growing discontent amongst the return migrants in Velingara because funds had not arrived yet, while training courses kept on being organised. At the end of May 2020, the ninth group was still far from receiving funding, as several other ones. The first part of CFA 150,000 was distributed to them as a help for the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the balance of CFA 500,000 had been delivered to all by summer 2021.

success: previous experience in the economic sector and the capability of rationally managing money. Here the role of IOM facilitators in reformulating the often-fragmented speech of returning migrants became evident, as shown by the following text:

The project consists of setting up a beef fattening activity. It is about buying animals, fattening them up before selling them after six months and reinvesting the profits afterwards. Demand is very strong in this area, especially during religious events such as Gamou, Korité, and the annual Ziaras organised in many surrounding villages. Weekly markets are another occasion for selling. Setting up this type of project can be a great opportunity in this area both for myself and for clients, as they will not have to travel far to find good livestock. I will offer my clients very well-fed and groomed oxen. The project requires the purchase of oxen, some materials and equipment as well as prophylaxis and food.

Words like 'location', 'customer satisfaction', 'analysis of the local demand', 'self-sustainability' and 'reinvesting' reflect IOM's vision as well as the intention of suggesting to return migrants the correct way of thinking, which they should use if they want to succeed. The same considerations can be made observing the three following sections in the form, which focus on marketing strategy, competition and risk analysis. Questions like 'who are your main competitors?' and 'what are the advantages of your business over those of your competitors?' implied the acquisition of an individualistic and competitive attitude and of a new rational way of thinking through which return migrants could be turned from 'maladjusted subjects' into individuals fit to navigate the 'modern economy':

Marketing: I intend to find an agreement with local butchers. During holidays and other annual religious events, I will approach important religious families. I will present documents to potential clients to reassure them about medical follow-up. Finally, I will display my cattle for sale during the weekly markets.

Competition: Unlike *téfankés*, I will pay attention to the health condition of my cattle. I am going to offer livestock in a better condition to beat any possible competition.

Risk: The risks I would face are cattle theft and epizootic diseases. I will set up a secure enclosure, I will illuminate the surroundings and I will strengthen surveillance by involving other members of my family. Concerning epizootic diseases, I plan to consult a veterinary technician for health prophylaxis and to always ensure the health of the cattle.

The last point of the questionnaire was about future individual objectives. Despite return migrants often declaring that they saw these projects as individual opportunities and that family involvement would have been an impediment to their success rather than a help, sentences like the following ones were added to business plans: 'I expect to make someone else of my family work'; 'I will employ family members in my business'; 'I will employ as many young people as possible to allow them to have a job'; 'I will create a large-scale enterprise'; 'I will contribute to the employment of young people, to the development of my territory, and of my country'.

Eventually, declaring they agreed with the guidelines proposed by the IOM did not mean for them to embrace a new way of seeing things, but rather expressed their ability to socially navigate a context of scarce opportunity. Ethnographic observation has shown how reintegration is not so much a question of acquiring a particular way of thinking, rather it is a matter of more practical issues, such as having the possibility of accessing credit or relying on a stable family economic situation. In contrast, IOM AVR's approach establishes an ideal model of a self-determined subject who makes decisions following his own desires 'through which he learns to recognize and govern himself' (De Beistegui 2018: 8). The 'free expression of individuals' ends and desires' appears in the IOM's conception as a powerful driver to 'generate order spontaneously' through market and competition (De Beistegui 2018: 66). Eventually, desire appears as an instrument of governmentality (De Beistegui 2018: 31) in the framework of a wider objective to better manage international mobility (also) through the implementation of sustainable reintegration.

## **The traveller and the businessman**

The IOM tries to replace the desire for 'social becoming' (Christiansen et al. 2006: 21; Vium 2014) and 'realising masculine adulthood' (Melly 2011: 363) through migration with the desire to be a successful 'local businessman'. These two representations arise from two different perspectives on the same concepts, such as 'courage', 'effort' and 'success'. An important part of the training week was dedicated to motivational videos with the aim of conveying a positive attitude of commitment and resiliency towards reintegration. Videos were in French and showed images of Western landscapes, movies, and people, such as the American actor Will Smith or the computer scientist Steve Jobs, all connected by the motivational speech of a voice-over. Through these videos, the IOM's intention was to convince participants that to be successful in Velingara was only possible if they showed the right attitude to fight against the suffering and the failure they had gone through. However, the words of the voice-over closely resembled the words used by return migrants explaining their decision to travel the *laawol ley*. This appears clear when observing this quote from a video, available on the YouTube channel 'H5 Motivation', which was one of the most used sources:

You are tormented, you are fed up with this life, tortured by the fear of dying. You suffer because of the anguish that the world makes you live, and you can no longer even look at yourself in the mirror. You have a head full of bad ideas because your soul is colonised by despair [...] You have the right to suffer, but you do not have the right to complain. [...]

If you believe in yourself, if your desire is really in your heart, no one will be able to stop you, no one will be able to prevent you from living the life you always wanted to live. [...]

Death is the second essential test through which every living being must pass. You do not have to look for it, it will come to you by itself. [...] What matters is not to die: what matters is the way of dying. I do not want to die as a victim of

my own life, I want to die with dignity and pride, like a warrior or a lion fighting with the weapons that life has given to him. I didn't choose my weapons, I want to face death, I want to confront it by telling it that I will not let go. I want to look death eye-to-eye, and say that I have lived the dreams I wanted to live, that I have lived without regrets. [...] We cannot have everything in this world, but we can have what we deserve, and we deserve to have a happy life, we all have the right to happiness. Even you. However, to reach that, you have to wake up, you have to be aware, you have to be strong, you have to take the steps to change your mind. I believe in you. I know you can do it: you are the one who can change things.<sup>11</sup>

Sentences like 'the first action against your suffering must come from you', 'if someone has done it before you, you can do it too' and the final call to die with dignity are the same discourses orienting people towards the *laawol ley*, an apology of the '*Barça walla Barzakh*' mentality which led to the tragedy of the Canary Island in 2006.<sup>12</sup> The route, after all, is about pursuing one's idea of happiness, despite a marginal position in the local and global landscape, despite the risk of dying, despite having to face death in order not to be a victim of one's own fate, exactly as the video states. Furthermore, the video suggests a universal idea of suffering through which we can understand both the suffering of Will Smith's character in the movie *The pursuit of happiness* and the suffering of a person who returned to the Senegalese rural periphery after having passed through the dramatic experience of the Central Mediterranean route. This rhetoric of 'you have no right to complain because your success depends only on you', reproduces that 'geography of blame' masterfully analysed by Paul Farmer in Haiti (2006: 58), which superficially glosses over structural analysis to blame the individual for his/her condition. This highlights how there are 'correct' and 'incorrect' ways of fighting for one's own happiness, defined by a hegemonic discourse that 'attempts to produce consensus and shared conceptions of the world' (Ciavolella 2017: 177). On a discursive level, the adventure through the Central Mediterranean route is in tune with the individual right of pursuing one's happiness. On a political level, however, it does not respect the forms allowed by the asymmetry of power in which subjects live.

Moreover, the IOM's model suggests replacing the hazard of the Central Mediterranean route with entrepreneurial risk. The 'uncertainty of certainty' of arriving in Europe is replaced by the 'certainty of uncertainty' of the local society of getting by. The IOM's high expectations on the individual capacity to manage an independent economic activity trivialise entrepreneurial skills as well as the difficulties in running a business in a condition of scarcity, and it does not consider an individual's social networks.

<sup>11</sup> H5 Motivation, Regarde ça avant d'Abandonner - Motivation vs Dépression- H5 Motivation#19 (Video Motivation). The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpubFyxxz04> [last accessed 5/02/2023]

<sup>12</sup> One of the most famous episodes of Senegalese migration was the shipwrecks of the pirogues that were trying to reach the Canary Islands in Spring 2006. Around 33,000 migrants headed to the Spanish islands yelling the famous motto '*Barça walla Barzakh*' (Either we get to Barcelona or to Paradise!). *Barça* stood as a metonymy for all Europe referring to the successful football team, *Barzakh* is the paradise awaiting the people who die in the '*Jihad against poverty*' (Degli Uberti and Riccio 2017: 354). This motto – as well as the '*titanic tales of [the] missing men*' (Melly 2011: 361) who died in the sea – was still well known by the travellers of the Central Mediterranean route, ten-fifteen years later.

Eventually, these flaws along with the lack of follow-up, the inability to connect between different projects and to guarantee further access to credit have undermined most of the projects. While in the short term the IOM's AVRR programme appeared to achieve the goal of providing the basis for rebuilding a good life trajectory, in the long run AVRR ended up reproducing the same conditions that led to the great migratory wave of the post-Libyan crisis years: the rhetoric of motivational videos reproduced the same discourses of the travellers; the financed projects often employed underpaid young apprentices who often quit school, perpetuating poor economic conditions and unpaid employment; competition fostered social agonism while entrepreneurial risk and lack of capital exposed return migrants to the concrete possibility of a new failure.

In a report published in 2020, the IOM also recognised how reintegration could not overlook the reasons that led to departure and the 'social environments that have been set in motion by myriad individual and collective acts and forces beyond our control' (Vigh 2010: 159). Indeed, coming back means to restart from a partly old and a partly new position in the multi-situated and interconnected village migrants never cease to inhabit, 'simultaneously acting and reacting in relation to their current position within a social terrain, in response to current constraints, possibilities and configurations of power, as well as in relation to their perception of the future terrain and its unfolding' (Vigh 2010: 160). Return migrants are 'acutely aware of their position in the world today, of their abjection or expulsion from (or persistent non-inclusion in) European modernity [...] a modernity they hear spoken but may never inhabit' (Piot 2010: 166). Still, they want to keep on claiming their 'rights of full membership in a wider society' (Ferguson 2006: 161). Their projects are not just about unblocking their path to the *heḃtaare*, but also about proudly demonstrating they could measure up to a world that has rejected them and that they dream of visiting as tourists one day as an act of personal revenge.

## Conclusions

This article has highlighted how return migrants in Velingara conceive their life upon their return using historical local concepts and varying their interpretations depending on the practical situation: if during sessions of AVRR programmes they tend to emphasise their vulnerability and suffering, in other contexts they define themselves as modern warriors.

Indeed, an empty-handed coming back is a pivotal point in one's life trajectory. Living after coming back is marked by a question: how to be global subjects locally? According to Calkins, return can be read as a moment of uncertainty, in which return migrants manifest a high degree of reflexivity, radically challenging all the local knowledge embodied in the situation. This uncertainty, however, is counterbalanced by the urgency of action as a means of social rehabilitation. The IOM seems to offer a possibility to answer this need, relying on a vision that polarises uncertainty/premodernity and risk/modernity and seeks to turn travellers into businessmen capable of interpreting the future in terms of rational planning. The conceptual error lies in not conceiving the decision of travelling the *laawol ley* as amongst 'all situations when people or collective actors consciously calculate, deliberate and evaluate

insecurities, frame options, and decide upon them' (Calkins 2016: 84). Several studies have demonstrated that migrants choose to leave, despite being aware of the journey's dangers. Indeed, 'even when it is risky, migration can hold greater promise of a better future than the alternatives' (Carling and Talleraas 2016: 7). As sustained by Maybritt Jill Alpes in describing young migrants' aspirations in Anglophone Cameroon, for those at the social margins, mobility appears as a good investment capable of paying off and changing a family's social status (Alpes 2017: 65). Ultimately, the analysis of the discursive layers around the concept of uncertainty shows that the way of conceiving uncertainty is a way of governing the future and of defining new social realities and new subjectivities. (Zinn 2008: 7)

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