

**6th ETHNOGRAPHY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
CONFERENCE**

Rethinking 'Europe' through an Ethnography of its Borderlands

University of Bergamo

*Shifting perceptions of Europe and mobility
within contemporary Senegal.*

An ethnographic and diachronic perspective

Bruno Riccio and Stefano degli Uberti
(University of Bologna)

Aim

- To problematize the *naive* idea that Europe is collectively perceived as an homogeneous El Dorado.

Argument

- The social representation of migrants and Europe (the idea of an ‘Elsewhere’) are deeply ambivalent and historically grounded.
- The notion of “migrant” and “Europe” are multiple and ambivalent, linked to subjective experiences, shaped by historical changes and deeply embedded within local context.

How

- Examine the narratives, representation and self-representation of the so-called *Modou modou* and “boat migrants”.

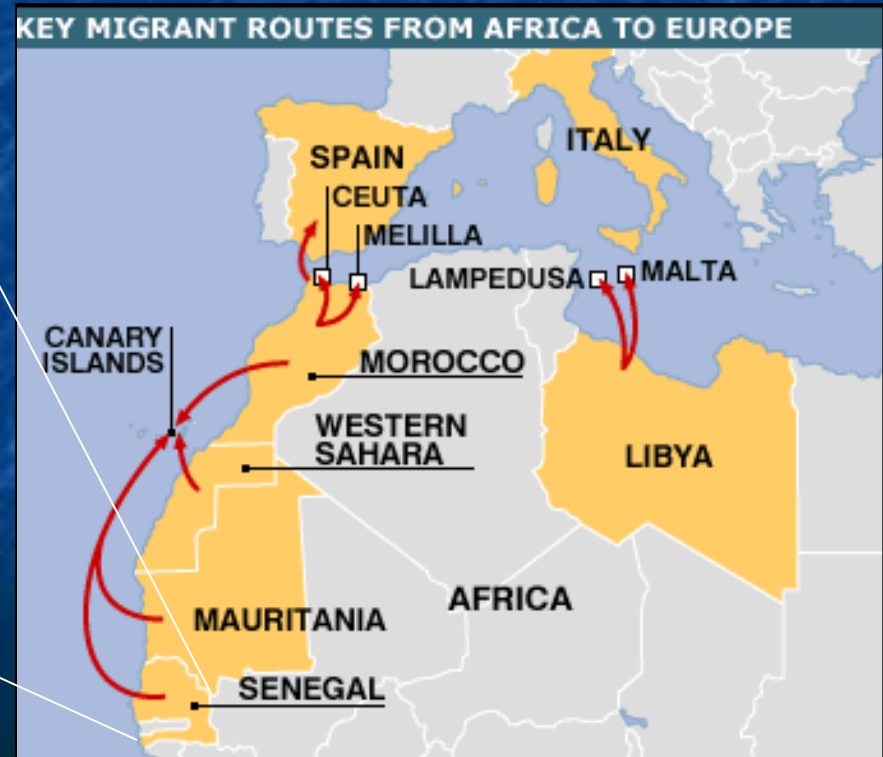
“Mobility perspective” I

- Focusing on ‘Mobility’ rather than ‘Migration’;
- Mobilities, as part of old Sahelian past, **are engrained in the history, daily life and experiences of people** (de Bruijn 2007; de Bruijn et al. 2001)
- Mobility is understood as a **“way of life” in African society**: not as “an exception to a status of sedentariness” but rather as “an aspect of continuity”, as a part of their **“culture of mobility”** (Tarrius 1993).

“Mobility perspective” II

- Understanding the “*Culture of migration*” and how it is embedded in individual and collective dynamics of people to grasp how social practices and culture inform mobility decisions.
- Mobility decisions, images and representations of abroad, (such as Europe) as historical processes subjected to changes and social transformations.

Senegal and the Africa-Europe migratory routes



Senegalese Migrant Representations

The discursive practices which are developed around the migrant experiences, as well as the social representation of their real or imaginary places of destination, become a metaphor for grasping the ongoing social transformations occurring in Senegal (Gardner, 2005; cf. Cohen, Hann Klute “**cultures of migration**”).

We argue that the “**representation of the migrant**” changes and is shaped through time in relation to socio-cultural, political and economic transformations in the daily life.

Modou modou

- Image of social success
- Contemporary Hero
- Smart money saver
- Gold mines



- Boastful braggart of wealth
- *Toubab* (white man, lacking of solidarity, tolerance, and hospitality: main traditional Senegalese values)
- Trickster

Europe

- Eldorado



- Fortress

Narratives of Emigration

'Once a child managed to pass the frontiers of Senegal and France, he was as if invisible, no-one could notice him, but in France he was discovered because of the cold, yes he could not bear the temperature this is why he was discovered'

'The Italian government is doing an anti-immigration campaign. This policy cannot work until the conditions of livelihood change here. Even the parents will push children to emigrate because this is the only chance to survive. Italians should understand this, because they have made their wealth through emigration, in this respect Senegalese and Italians are the same'.

Narratives of Emigration 2

Racist Europe

If Europe became rich also through African slavery and colonialism, now they do not accept us when they are overdeveloped, we will invade them and export our poverty to them. ...

Here and in other African countries there are many foreigners: French, Italian, German and nobody bothers them.

Actually there are many aid officials and retired people who really want to stay here, we do not understand why Senegalese should confront many problems when they are in Europe. What I want to stress is the xenophobic culture developing in Europe.

When Europeans come to Senegal they enjoy our hospitality, whereas when Senegalese go to Europe they are treated as negroes and encounter racism and exclusion.

Narratives of Emigration 3

When he comes back the migrant is fleeced by his large family, or even by the district or the town where everybody is expecting something, and by the need to show off the success with expenses of prestige and afterwards he is obliged to leave again. Now there are less traditional weddings and more where the partners choose each other. This is a good thing, but if they are based only on the pursuit of money this is a bad thing. Like for instance with the migrants who always get the nicest girls. But this is beginning to change now, women understand that life married to a migrant is not fabulous: they send money more and more rarely, only for festivities, and women do not see a lot of them whereas they have to fulfill many obligations with their parents.

A 30 year old teacher

Ambivalence

We can appreciate a certain degree of ambivalence in the way the receiving context is viewed and talked about in Senegal. On one hand, Europe still represents the 'El Dorado', on the other, a critical view also based on a postcolonial historical consciousness is held. Migrant themselves, although celebrated as idols and heroes, may be the target of suspicion and critique. Furthermore, emigration from Senegal became a rougher experience in the second half of 2000s.

Boat migrations



(Thiaroye-sur Mer - degli Uberti, 2009)

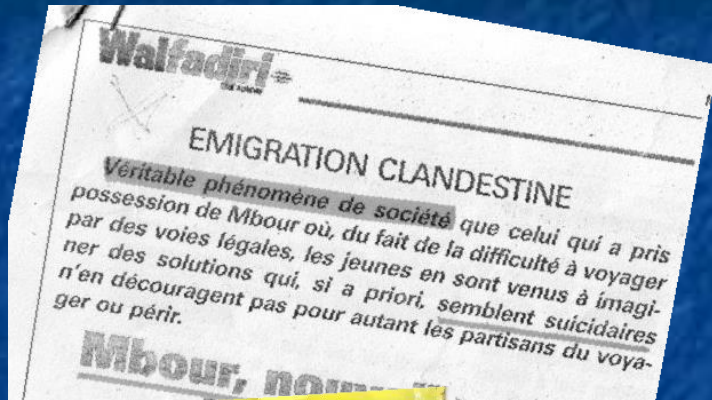


(M'bour - degli Uberti, 2009)



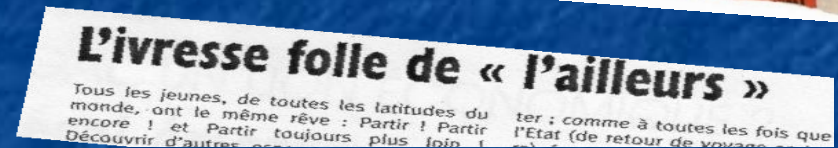
(Thiaroye-sur Mer - degli Uberti, 2009)

Representations of Boat migrants in Senegalese Media



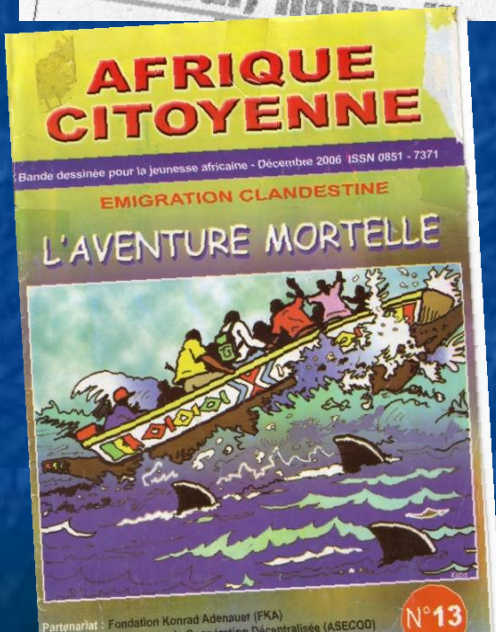
“**Clandestine** emigrants: the **damned** of the sea” (N.H,2006).

“**Victims** of their good faith - Persons driven by the force of desperation” (06.18.09 - Walf).



“**Children** who go looking for adventure to conquer **Europe**: the **Unknown**” (Le Quotidien, 14.05.09)

The Spanish Canary Archipelago: the new gateway for the **European El Dorado** (N.H,2006).



“Boat emigrants” in Media representations

- “Victims” “Children” or “Naive immature adventurers”, “Damned of the sea” who are attracted by an image of Europe as idyllic *Elsewhere*: an El Dorado they know little or nothing.

“The crazy drunk on Elsewhere” (N.H, 2006).

- The '*aspiring migrants*' portrayed as childish, ignorant and courageous people, influenced by speeches of returning migrants.

Migration and Europe: *Barça or Barsakh?*

In the newspapers...

The belief, at risk of their life, is: “*Europe or death*” (L’Observateur, 22.05.06)

Jihad against the poverty. An holy-war that ends up with the slogan: Barça or Barsakh. Barça stands for Barcelona, the Spanish city that is considered from the migrants as an El Dorado, and therefore the heaven. The word Barsakh means the netherworld. It is the heaven reserved for all those people who die in a holy-war.

Consequently, the destiny of all those people that goes to the sea in order to get to Spain or death, will be either the heaven on earth or the heaven on netherworld.

(Le Quotidien, 14.05.09)

Migration and Europe: *Barça or Barsakh?*

In daily life...

*“I am one of those!...I'm one of those who have defied the sea and done the clandestine emigration!” (08.28.09 - **ASSANE**, M'bour).*

***BABAKAR**: Staring at Europe is not a mistake but **it has to be done with reasonableness**. The Senegalese people are dreamers. Luckily today there are less people who spend time drinking ataya and longing for a 4x4 or a rich foreign woman. I do not dream of going to Europe.*

I do not dream of going to Europe but rather of being capable of working as a lorry driver in order to travel and cross over on cities and countries...Germany, Italy...I want to be in touch with the road!

*I would go through roads that I do not know...I would go to a unknown place but only cause I am motivated and **pushed to that place by my interests**. I am not interested in France or Spain...I am interested in travelling by night to cross the borders!*

(Mbour – 22.08.09)

Grounded perceptions of Europe

- The contrast between life in Senegal and abroad is not an opposition between a poor country and an El Dorado. 'Here' and 'There' refer to real and grounded dimensions.
- The decision to migrate “elsewhere” is not inscribed in a stereotyped image of Europe as a global and culturalized El Dorado.
- The Elsewhere is not naïve and homogeneous idea but rather a social construction historically grounded.

Local dimension of Migration

From *Modou modou* to *Européen*

I am not talking of the “Europeans of Europe” but of the “Europeans of Africa” ...I am speaking about all those Senegalese people who live in Europe and come back here. When they return to Africa...these people are always surrounded by young pretty girls whom they could easily conquer because the girls think that “the Europeans” have lot of money!

These “Europeans” exploit this situation and do not pay respect to our society...I am outraged at that!!

*Do you get what I am saying?!...I am talking about that! That is the way of thinking of the Europeans... There are many girls who are forced to leave [Senegal] to stay with the Europeans. The Europeans do not support the construction of schools and so on...they are only interested in keeping their money and taking care of their interests. It seems that **they do not have time for the rest.***

(Babakar – Mbour, 22.07.2009)

From *Modou modou* to *Européen*

Due to clandestine and boat migrations in the last years there are always more repatriated people who find work as vendors.

Moreover, there are always more Modou modou who come back [to Senegal] and invade the market of Sandaga. It is a shame...because they do not pay respect!! In Senegal the foreigners are in the majority vendors...Chinese, Moroccan, Lebanese..and the Modou modou are not different!!

(Pape, shopkeeper of Rue Petavain – Dakar, 18.04.09)

*Construction is the only business...but today it is something done mainly by migrants. [with bitterness and critical sadness] **The migrants do not lead to positive changes...***

What they do, is building a multiple floors house; they rent the upper floor and live in the lower one. They are interested exclusively in their personal life and achievements.

(Simone, painter – Dakar, 25.05.09)

Modou modou...Européens...Dakarois

*Look at them! The Dakarois! **You can recognise the cityboys at a distance**...by how they dress, by how they walk. They never walk on the seaside but on the beaches because they do not want to wet their feet.*

*They do not come to M'bour for the sea but rather because they want to spend a day in a swimming pool of the resorts, in luxury...**in order to experience the European comfort.** For this reason, they spend their weekly salary!!*

The Europeans behave in the same way!

(Babakar - Mbour 02.08.09)

History and Shifting perceptions

- The description of the “Senegalese migrant” and the “idea of Europe” are *more realistic and less celebratory, compared to a previous ones*, mostly surrounded by a sense of ambivalence.
- The representation of Europe is rather linked to the *subjective experiences of individuals* and shifts according to *historical and social changes* occurring in countries of origin as well in relation to transformations of migration itself.
- The dominant representations of “migrant” as well as of “Europe” needs to be *disaggregated* by looking at how there are *socially and locally constructed*.

Thanks for your attention!!

Bruno Riccio : bruno.riccio@unibo.it

Stefano degli Uberti : stefano.degliuberti@gmail.com / stefano.degliuberti@unibo.it