“God’s time is the best”:
Religious imagination and the wait for emigration in The Gambia

Paolo Gaibazzi

Following the boom in undocumented boat migration to the Canary Islands (2006-9), Sub-Saharan African youth have received a lot of public attention. Most local and European media have featured dramatized stories of shipwrecks, rescue operations on the high seas and arrivals of exhausted young men on the islands. Journalists eventually made the opposite journey, seeking to report on the reasons for such a hazardous undertaking in countries of origin. A market for vivid stories of young men emerged. For instance, Emmanuelle Bouilly has mentioned that the Collectif pour la lutte contre l’immigration clandestine de Thiaroye-sur-Mer (a group of women fighting against illegal migration) takes European journalists on a tour of the town, where they can meet local young men and listen to their despair, dreams and misadventures: the ‘candidate for emigration’, the ‘repatriated’, the ‘friend of the migrant’, etc. As one of Bouilly’s informants boasted, “Me, I’ve helped the journalists a lot, I’ve done about ten reportages.” (Bouilly 2008, 24-26, my translation)

Youths’ hardship and despair are real enough not to be dismissed as mere media constructions, however morbid and ideological these representations may be. For many young men in the region, migrating is not just a well-entrenched livelihood strategy; in places where the usual avenues to social adulthood (marriage, work, etc.) are closed, migration seems to have become a way, or even the only way, out of misery and social invisibility (e.g. Mbodji 2008, 308; cf. Vigh 2009). I myself have documented the migratory aspirations of Gambian young men and their frustrations at being forced into a perpetual wait for emigration by restrictive migration
policies (Gaibazzi 2010a). However, even when narratives of potential emigration are nuanced by ethnography, an exclusive focus on migratory aspirations may cloud African youths’ relationship with emigration and home, thus reproducing tropes of representation that conceal as much as they reveal. Without neglecting the poignant experiences of hardship and compelling presence of travel in young men’s lives, a critical anthropological reflection on youths should deal with the complexity of young men’s understandings of home and travel.

This chapter concentrates on religious imagination as an under-researched, and yet central, aspect of discourses of (im)mobility among Gambian youth. It shows that aspirant migrants’ horizon of experience and expectation (cf. Introduction) is not simply dominated by an ‘elsewhere’, but it is also overlaid with moral concerns and discourses about staying and managing the appropriate timing of emigration. While, on the one hand, youths feel impatient to leave the country, on the other they maintain that the lure of emigration can be fraught with perils. Too much haste can lead to dangerous and religiously illicit behaviours. Youths may thus praise waiting as a virtue, an appropriate pacing of opportunities in life, delivery from temptations, while at the same time showing readiness to seize whatever opportunity may be offered by the vagaries of destiny.

In the Gambia, a predominantly Muslim society, encouragement to wait for ‘God’s time’ – the right timing established by divine will – generates new hope and prompts young men to regain agency. Hope reveals not only a fatalistic attitude and a future-oriented projection, but also an active mode of engaging with the present (Zigon 2009). By referring to ‘God’s time’, youths call for proper timing and patience: they articulate a moralizing discourse that addresses the sense of urgency and despair in their lives and suggests ways in which they can live a moral life at a time of hardship and uncertainty (cf. Kleinman 2006).

Alternative discourses of migration and immobility are not necessarily verbalized as coherent narratives suitable for journalistic reporting. Moreover, youths do not envisage pious conduct as the sole solution to prolonged abeyance, nor do they talk about waiting for the divine schedule solely in doctrinal and erudite terms. Rather, references to religion surface in everyday conversations and narratives. I thus use ‘God’s time is the best’ as an index to discourses on emigration and immobility which draw on, and yet go beyond, the religious domain in the strict sense. I am interested in how young men’s use of Islamic concepts in narratives and discussions about migration sheds light on the complex and at times contradictory predicament of going and staying through which they view and attempt to repossess the wait for emigration as a purposeful social time (cf. Pandolfo 2007).
It is impossible to speak in generalizing terms about Gambian youths’ religious imaginations. Although Gambia is a small country, it is a very diverse setting, one where different currents and practices of Islamic thought coexist and are quickly changing. The chapter is thus best seen as an attempt to show the complexity and diversity of discursive articulation. Its objective is to describe how specific individuals construct themselves in relation to the temporality of (im)mobility and how their imaginations are grounded in social interactions. Such narratives were collected in 2006-8 in rural and urban Gambia, mostly within the Soninke speaking milieu, an ethnic group known in the region for its long history of mobility and Islamic scholarship (see Jónsson, this volume). When I followed Soninke young men from the village to the city during the dry season, I also had the opportunity to interact with a more diverse group of youths, as my interlocutors often participated in ethnically mixed youth gatherings in their neighbourhoods. While the essay is heavily influenced by a rural Soninke perspective, this experience proved that the concerns and discourses described in what follows are highly relevant to many other Gambian youths.

“God’s time is the best”

Since the 1980s, international migration has become a key livelihood strategy across all segments of Gambian society. Over the last three decades, employment and subsistence opportunities in The Gambia have shrunk as a consequence of declining agriculture, rising inflation, neoliberal restructuring and, at least for some, the deterioration of political liberties, all of which have contributed to making international migration a dominant model of success (Gaibazzi and Bellagamba 2009). Although women’s presence in migratory flows is by now solid, in most (rural) Gambian families it is still young men who must take up migration in order to provide for their households. In a context in which success stories are increasingly migrants’ stories (cf. Riccio 2005), young men thus imagine their future lives in another country, searching for means to maintain their families and to carve out a personal trajectory of emancipation and success.

Restrictive immigration policies in popular American, European and African destinations are, however, such that most Gambian young men must often put their plans to emigrate in abeyance (cf. Carling 2002). Gambian youths who wait impatiently for an opportunity to leave the country often experience mounting frustration at the impossibility of fulfilling their aspiration. To use a local expres-
sion, youths are *nerves* to travel. Elsewhere (Gaibazzi 2010a), I have described this feeling *nerves* as a double edged phenomenon: on the one hand, it is an embodied longing for travel, an urge and a determination that young men perceive to be fundamental in order to emerge from hardship and succeed; on the other hand, being *nerves* can easily become an overwhelming burden of concerns and frustrations about the inability to travel *and* the uncertainty about performing as householders and farmers, activities that ought to give respectability to ‘stay-at-homes’ within migrant households, but ones which are overshadowed by the achievements of the migrants. It is as if youths are called to a state of alertness, showing their readiness to travel and to be hard working, while at the same time the absence of meaningful income opportunities in the Gambia and the deferral of emigration progressively wear out their hope. As youths cultivate an aspiration to travel, these contrasting experiences eventually lead to a degeneration of self-confidence, loss of focus in the everyday struggle for subsistence and even despair.

Given that aspirations and preoccupations relating to migration are central in young men’s lives, it is perhaps no surprise that religious-moral matters play an important part in their discourses. It is impossible to underestimate the significance of religion (Islam in particular) and religiosity in Gambian society, politics and everyday moral life (Darboe 2007). References to God are ubiquitous in verbal and non-verbal forms of expressions, including popular music and the visual arts (cf. McLaughlin 1997). Sometimes religious references are, however, more implicit and demand some decoding of the commonsense knowledge that lies behind them. The following story, which I collected in one youth gathering in Serekunda (Gambia’s metropolitan area along the Atlantic coast), provides us with an example of such implicit references as well as with a starting point to discuss religious imagination in young men’s understanding of emigration and its temporality:

A young man from the rural areas, from the very ‘deep rural areas’, comes to Serekunda in order to look for a visa. He barely speaks any Mandinka and speaks no Wolof at all; and obviously he does not speak English, the official language. Nevertheless, thanks to some good contacts, he manages to file an application at the American Embassy. At the Embassy, after having checked all the paperwork, the receptionist tries to notify the next appointment to him; he tells him in Mandinka: ‘Ta, sama yen na’ (‘Go, come back tomorrow morning’). The young man stands still for a moment, nods and goes back to his host’s house. In the evening, his host calls him into his room and asks for news about his application.
‘Everything was fine’, the young man replies, ‘I’ve handed in my papers. I just have to go to Soma [a town a couple of hours’ drive from Serekunda] tomorrow morning. So I’m going to bed now’. The host frowns at the young man’s plans but does not enquire further, and lets his young guest go to bed. After morning prayers, the young man goes to the station and waits for a vehicle heading to Soma. Meanwhile, at the Embassy the clerk, not seeing the young man coming, rings the telephone number on the application form. The landlord picks up the phone and, after crafting an excuse, rushes to the station. He finds the young man already seated on the vehicle and yells at him: ‘What are you doing here!? The Embassy is looking for you’. ‘But’, he replies, ‘they said: ta Soma, yen na’ (‘go to Soma, and come back’). The landlord shakes his head, grabs his arm and drives him to the Embassy, reaching there just before the clerk stamps ‘rejected’ on the young man’s form. The young man is then issued with a five year permit.

This story theatrically rehearses several common tropes of migration in Gambian young men’s discourses. Even the ‘remotest’ areas of rural Gambia – usually associated by urbanites with backwardness and ignorance – have been reached by the ‘fever’ of migration, the nerves syndrome. The young protagonist is not educated and has not even mastered the country’s most widespread vernaculars – Mandinka and Wolof – and yet he harbours a greater goal in his mind. He is determined to emigrate to America, where many Gambians are working hard to support their families back home and saving money to marry, to build good houses and live a good life. He thus ventures into the maze of visa applications, reference letters and bank statements. When he is so close to securing a visa for himself, his lack of awareness of the ‘modern world’, epitomized by his lack of familiarity with national languages, nearly jeopardizes his opportunity.

Narrated with much irony and mimicry, the story caused hearty laughter among the young men in the audience. Some of the young men sitting around me could readily connect to the experiences of the protagonist. Like him, they were from the rural areas and had spent a few dry seasons in Serekunda. Unlike the young man, however, they had become acquainted with Wolof and English (most already spoke Mandinka), and most of them were very familiar with the daunting bureaucratic procedures involved in visa applications, either by direct experience or through friends and relatives who had gone through the process. Due to the very restrictive conditions of migration policies in European, American and some African countries
(e.g. Angola), they had failed to obtain travel papers. Some had tried to circumvent the legal barriers to emigration but lost their money to canny visa dealers or their counterfeit papers were discovered during ordinary airport checks. Others still wished to travel but did not have either the money to apply for a visa or a relative in Europe or America who could help them do so. For all these reasons, I felt that the story had a bittersweet epilogue for them. In spite of all their attempts and impatience to leave the country, they were – unlike the naïve protagonist of the story – still waiting for their opportunity to go. The young unemployed often sat jobless in groups, brewing green tea, pondering on their situation and nourishing a dream to be in Europe or America one day.

What I had not realized was that for many of them the story contained a deeply moral and hopeful message. At the end of the story, seeing that I hesitated as if looking for an explanation, a friend commented: “God is great, you see...God's time is the best.” This expression ‘God’s time is the best’ is a common reply or consolation phrase for someone who is overwhelmed by concerns about a goal the realization of which depends on several, often uncontrollable, variables. Emigration appears to be a perfect example of this: while someone may strive to migrate as soon as he can, due to the difficulties and vagaries in acquiring rights to travel, it is only in due time, God’s time, that this will happen. When this time arrives, no matter how inexperienced and clumsy the aspirant traveller may be, he will realize whatever his destiny has in store for him. As my friend added, by obtaining the visa the protagonist “got his 'luck': nothing could stop him from getting it. If God decides something for you, you will not die until you get it.”

‘Luck’ (Soninke: warijaxe) is not a chance event as commonly understood in English. In Gambian English, it refers to the lot – or bounty, benefit, sustenance or providence – decreed by God as a part of one’s own destiny, along with one’s lifespan and the fruits of individual effort.6 ‘Luck’ can manifest itself in many ways, though the term is usually employed to talk about begetting children and acquiring material wealth (see also Bledsoe 2002, 164ff; Whitehouse 2003, 25-27). ‘Luck’ is a central element in life, and partly accounts for personal success. Although several ‘worldly’ elements certainly affect progress, differences and uneven distribution of resources between individuals may be accounted for in terms of ‘luck’.6 God’s will may be especially invoked in situations of unpredictable happenings, windfall gains, or sudden economic losses.

Given their complexity and unpredictable course, visa applications thus fall into this category of ‘luck’. Indeed, my informants would often conceptualize migration as a quest fraught with incognita and unforeseen twists. It should be noted that the
commentary on the ‘visa story’ subscribes to a fatalistic view of Islamic predestination. Yet Muslim Gambians’ understandings of destiny are often more nuanced and ambivalent (cf. Acevedo 2008; Hamdy 2009). Interpretations that emphasize a predetermined course of events comparable to the ‘visa story’ often offer an \textit{ex post facto} rationalization of outcomes over which little or no control can be exercised (Horst 2006, 45). In other circumstances, my interlocutors highlighted self-determination and free will. If God ultimately sets the limits of what one can and cannot have, the young men I worked with held that they had actively to search for the means to sustain their families and themselves. After all, visas must be applied for.

One may wonder whether there is any consistency in views on destiny and self-determination in the Gambia, and it may well be that there is little. As Fortes (1983 [1959]) pointed out more than half a century ago, West African religious systems often juxtapose views of unchanging and inexorable predestination with views that allow space for individual agency. What matters for the present discussion is less accounting for diverging views than highlighting the ways in which young men mobilize them to frame migration and immobility. Invoking ‘God’s time’ youths position their desires and concerns about emigration in a multidimensional horizon. In sight is not simply a spatially removed place – a country of destination – but also a temporality of actions and steps that lead to that place. This has a religious significance. In many ways, it is precisely the mutlivocality of religious concepts such as destiny and ‘luck’ that allows youth to appropriate them, but also poses fundamental questions: if a person must actively create his ‘time’, how far can he shape the course of his life? Does he have to migrate at any cost and as soon as he can? And if not, what should he do in the meantime?

\textbf{A matter of life or death? Undocumented boat migration and (im)proper timing}

If the bureaucratic uncertainty of visa applications appears to constitute fertile ground for religious discourses to proliferate, undocumented routes make the religious stakes of migration even more evident. When boats full of migrants began to depart from the Senegambian coastline around 2005 (Tall 2008, 47), the debate on migration in the region became heated. In spite of the limited number of youths who actually left, the Senegalese media covered this phenomenon extensively and depicted candidates of the \textit{voie piroguière} as people gambling with their very lives (Bouilly 2008; Hernández-Carretero 2008, 45ff; Willems 2008). Journalists gave
echo to the sentence ‘Barça ou Barzak’ (Barcelona/success or Hereafter/death), which became a symbol of the combination of bravery, despair and risk associated with the journey at sea. In Gambia, the coverage of illegal migration was much less abundant and sensationalist. In addition, few youths with whom I spoke would depict themselves as either completely hopeless and destitute or reckless aspirant migrants. Nevertheless, discussions about the virtues and vices of boat migration eventually penetrated informal circles of sociality, triggering some young men’s imaginations and prompting them to position themselves vis-à-vis questions of life and death raised by the availability of the ‘water path’ to Europe. This is where the trope of divine temporality and destiny emerged most poignantly.

During my fieldwork, I often had the opportunity to discuss boat migration with H., a man in his late twenties from the Upper River Region. H. often said that this was a route for people like him who have no ‘supporter’ or sponsor, that is, no close relative willing to help with the paperwork and the finances needed to apply for, let alone obtain, a visa. Some of H.’s friends who were in a similar situation had taken boats to Spain. They had raised the money for the journey (in the range of 800-1200 Euros in early 2008) by doing odd jobs and engaging in petty trade in Serekunda, and probably by borrowing money from a number of friends and other relatives. Once they reached Spain, some of them called H., so he had concrete evidence that journeys by sea were often successful. H. too migrated seasonally to the city after the harvest season was over (November-December). He went “to find money – but money is too small”, as he often remarked. “If I have a good chance”, he often said to me, “I will go [by boat]”. In response to my counter-argument that such routes proved fatal to many, he often rebuffed by saying: “If your day has come, you’ll die anyway, whether you take a boat or not.”

H.’s reference to death is directly linked to destiny, for lifespan is an element of it. His statement would seem to subscribe to a static, fatalistic view of predestination, as if the occurrence of death lay beyond people’s control, and they had to accept it for what it is. However, when H. made such statements in the company of his friends, some of them firmly rejected his interpretation. Like many other informants, they likened gambling one’s life on migrant boats to suicide, which is a forbidden act in Islam precisely because it defies God’s timing and power over life and death. They proposed a more nuanced interpretation of destiny, one which left room for human agency and co-responsibility in causing death. Often, even H. was much more ambivalent about his real intentions to board a boat, and seemed to resort to statements like the one above as a mantra borrowed from other people during discussions on that topic. As I pointed out, attributing agency to a predetermined
course of events can be a way of rationalizing (possible) outcomes over which people have little control. Yet, H. turned down the charge of suicide because, “If I go on the boat, I don’t go because I want to die; I’m going to hustle abroad.” In his view, encountering death during such an undertaking would thus be regarded as honourable and just (Hernández-Carretero 2008, 46-47).

Clearly, the timing of death is only one instance of ‘God’s time’, an extreme example of the moral significance of discourses about leaving and staying. The urge to emigrate, fomented by the glimmer of migrants’ successes, created slippery ground for H. and other Gambian young men like him. Looking, so to speak, at the horizon at the end of the sea allowed them to see themselves beyond the impasse of their everyday livelihoods and potentially having achieved honour in their attempt to secure a living. At the same time, religious concerns fogged the horizon, casting doubts on the religious legitimacy of boat migration as a path leading to success.

**Haste and patience**

The moral hazards of improper temporality of migration emerge not only in relation to (il)licit routes of emigration, but also in relation to one’s conduct during other phases of the migratory process, including the stay in the Gambia. The story of another young man in his late twenties, A., illustrates this point well. One night, I was spending time with some acquaintances in a neighbourhood that I often visited in Serekunda. A. arrived at the crowded youth gathering and, noticing the presence of a European, he introduced himself. He greeted me in German – which I did not speak – even though he had heard me speak Soninke with other youths. His introduction immediately bespoke his migratory past and, as I soon realized, A. was eager to talk about it.

A. began his story by listing in rapid succession his movements to and within Europe. It had all started when a relative entrusted him with a considerable amount of money. The money was to be delivered to A.’s father. With this wad of cash in his hands, A. instead rushed to Bamako, where he knew that some visa dealers were issuing original documents to go to France. He paid for and obtained his visa, and flew to Paris. In the French capital, he managed to find a job, yet overstayed his permit. However, anxious to make money, **fast money**, as he described it, he moved to Germany, where some of his acquaintances introduced him to drug dealing. He made money, fast money; but after a year the police caught him. He was detained in a camp, and before the German authorities flew him back to Gambia a drug was
injected into his left arm to sedate him. A. showed me his arm: it had not yet recovered its full mobility. A. concluded his story by turning to the young men around him, and citing a Soninke proverb: “all these boys are in a hurry to travel, but ‘if you speed up the horse of the world, one day you’ll be walking like a chameleon [Soninke: \textit{an ga na duna si wurundi, kota yogo an na ri tera xoyi nyange}].’”

A. used the story of his failed migration as a moral lesson, ending his narration with a proverb to warn other young men: ‘more haste, less speed’. The way he narrated the stages of his migration conveyed the sense of a rushed trajectory, each stage underpinned by an excess of haste that caused mistakes and sins, from stealing his father’s money, to dealing in drugs, and thence to detention and harassment by the German police. After all that travelling and hustling, A. was nonetheless back to square one. He was, so to speak, an immobile man with an immobile arm. His reputation was now more compromised than ever. As he himself acknowledged, it was very unlikely that his senior relatives would trust him if he ever tried to find support to leave the country again.

A. was acutely aware of the social and political determinants of his failure. He said that he had realized ‘many things’ during his journey. He lived in the \textit{banlieux} during the riots in 2005; he supported the grievances of the \textit{banlieusards} and criticized Sarkozy – the then Minister of the Interior. It did not escape his mind that the injection he received in Germany was a blatant violation of human rights, and he lamented that African immigrants in Europe can be abused and kicked out of the continent. And yet he ultimately imputed his arm injury to the fact that he had hastened his quest for money abroad. One may even say that his public self-reproach was an attempt to express repentance and show that he had grown wiser now. Nevertheless, at least for that night at the youth gathering, his audience were young men who were in haste to leave the country and make \textit{fast money}.

Although not all youths were as forthcoming as A. about their failures, their stories were often narrated in their absence. When youths engaged in discussions anticipating what they would do and how they would behave when they went abroad, referring to known examples was a common way of substantiating the points one made. In some cases, these stories had a social life of their own, passing from mouth to mouth, from gathering to gathering, until they became almost allegories, many of which had a religious, pedagogical overtone, like the ‘visa story’. In truth, that night it was sufficient for youths to look about fifty metres down the road from where A. was telling his story to realize that his adventure could have had a different outcome. There stands a fine four-storey building which, according to the youths, was built by a Gambian drug dealer in the US. Although they praised the building,
the youths speculated that this man’s wealth would wither sooner or later because it 
was acquired through illicit means. Such money was not blessed, the precondition 
for wealth to stay and proliferate.9

A.’s hastened quest for money was interpreted along similar lines. On the way 
back to my house after speaking with A., my friend Baba and I continued to talk 
about him. As Baba tried to explain the meaning of the Soninke proverb A. had 
cited, he insisted that A. had not made real progress despite all his efforts to make 
money. A. was in the same situation as he was before he had left the Gambia. Baba 
thus concluded that ‘God’s time is the best’. By invoking a divinely sanctioned tem-
porality not only did Baba frame A.’s impatience and hastened life trajectory in 
religious and moral terms, but he also highlighted A.’s individual responsibility. A. 
was held responsible for ‘causing’ his fate. His current situation was the result of 
illicit conduct before and during migration.10

Baba proposed patience and endurance (sabari, from the Arabic: sabr) as an 
antidote to haste. Acceptance of the divine schedule and patience did not necessarily mean fatalistic resignation to him; rather, he commended engagement with 
affliction, which in theological terms can be framed as a trial to test people’s reliance 
on God and perseverance (Mahmood 2001, 220). As Hamdy (2009) has shown 
in relation to Muslim medical patients in Egypt, acceptance of affliction requires 
continuous alignment and the cultivation of forbearance and faith through work 
on the self and prayer. Having tried and failed several times to emigrate to Europe, 
Baba was not exactly the kind of person who passively waited for his turn to travel. 
Yet he also represented himself as a person who, in contrast to A., knew that ‘things 
come little by little’. For him, ‘managing little by little’ did not imply forgoing aspi-
rations to emigrate; nor was it simply a way of making ends meet. It was a proper 
way to wait for emigration, choosing pace over haste, and showing his readiness to 
look for money abroad. Not only did he show this by being a pious Muslim, but 
also especially by engaging in more mundane local activities, he traded in second-
hand mobiles, and supervised the construction of his migrant brother’s building.

I do not wish to construct people like Baba as heroes who resist the call for migra-
tion. If, on the one hand, by trying hard at home, young men may eventually find a 
good business opportunity in Gambia and forget about travel, on the other, finding a 
stable and well-paid job is extremely hard for young men, especially for the rural and 
uneducated ones with whom I conducted my fieldwork. Accumulating or accessing 
enough start-up capital to do business at home is difficult and depends on one having 
good contacts among well-established kin in Gambia or abroad. Enduring market 
and income uncertainty may heighten the young men’s sense of being stuck in a loop.
As one acquaintance put it, it is to remain in a ‘world of management’, where one can make do on the brink of survival, but where money goes from hand to mouth, with no possibility of saving and financing long-term security and investment plans.

Concluding remarks

A number of scholars have rightly pointed out that African youths live in a state of abjection, and have interpreted their aspiration to mobility as a response to, and an expression of, it (Jónsson 2008; Mbodji 2008; Bordonaro 2009; Vigh 2009). Gambian young men’s expectations of leaving the country are rooted in similar experiences and make manifest a wish to accelerate their social emancipation. This makes the wait for emigration an inchoate time fraught with concerns and mounting impatience. However, exploring the way in which young men discuss the temporality of (im)mobility, this chapter has revealed surprisingly tenacious hopes and discourses that defy the simplistic categorization of youth as abject and desperate candidates for (illegal) emigration. I have highlighted religious imagination as a central element in these discourses. Stories and debates about the wait for ‘God’s time’ provide a window onto their diverging, and often contradictory, understandings of travelling and staying put as well as on to the ways in which youths moralize and inhabit their immobile present.

It may be countered that faith is a last resort in desperate situations, or that emphasizing moral conduct and reliance on God inhibits the full expression of young people’s grievances, and produces God-fearing, docile subjects who dare not challenge the status quo. It is nonetheless necessary to underline that subordination and agency seem to coexist in young men’s religious imagination of timing, patience and forbearance (cf. Mahmood 2001). While religiosity is important to young men, by moralizing spatial and temporal moves, people like Baba are also concerned with reconfiguring their options at home in practical, economic terms. Rather than allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the lure of migration, their engagement with local employment and business may be thought of as an active, meaningful mode of occupying the time-space of immobility, and thus a way of expressing forbearance and maturity.

References


Notes

1 Although women migrate too, young men are still the main migrant group, and the exclusive one in hazardous routes like boat migration. ‘Young men’ broadly refers to men aged between the late teens and mid-forties, the age group which normally expresses a desire to migrate.
Funds for field research and writing up were generously provided by: University of Milano-Bicocca, Unicredit Foundation, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via Ethnological Mission in Benin and West Africa (MEBAO), and Germany’s Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) via the research project ‘Muslim World – Worlds of Islam?’ hosted at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin). I thank Knut Graw, Samuli Schielke, Alice Bellagamba, Jonah Wedekind and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on previous versions of this chapter.

Labour migration to urban areas on the Atlantic coast is seasonal (December-June). Despite rural-urban mobility, for young men ‘travelling’ in the true sense means emigrating to a foreign country.

The act of decreeing refers to the existential determination of destiny, or predestination (Arabic: *kadar*). ‘Luck’ corresponds to the Arabic *rizk*: lot, sustenance, provision (Bosworth and McAuliffe 2009).

In a seminal essay on the topic Fortes (1983 [1959], 7-10) found that concepts similar to ‘luck’ are widespread in West Africa. Ronald Cohen (1966, 134ff) found that among the Muslim Kanuri of Bornu a similar concept (*arziyi*) is used to account for personal success and an uneven distribution of power. Somali Muslims refer to *nasiib* (chance, fortune, destiny) to explain the vagaries of events and fortunes (Horst 2006, 38ff).

Destiny is one of the most debated concepts in Islamic theology, particularly regarding the role of human free will in the course of achievements and actions as determined by God (see Watt 1948). In some places in the Quran, free will is accorded to human beings: to obey or disobey, to discern the right or wrong path (e.g. Quran 7:43, 18:29, 76:3); nevertheless, according to a Sunni interpretation, God’s power and knowledge are unconditioned by time and space, so that He will know in advance the outcomes of human choice (Rabbani 2005). This view is especially popular among Gambians with a formal Islamic education.

Barça can refer to the city and stand for reaching Spain, but it is also a reference to the Spanish football team, and thus a sign of success (Tall 2008, 47).

In her interviews with Senegalese candidates for boat migration, Hernàndez-Carretero (2008, 46) has found similar statements.

Blessing (*baraka*) is the state of grace one earns through material support and devotion to parents and family elders (and towards charismatic religious figures). In some cases, parents do not spend the money received from their migrant sons if they suspect it was obtained illicitly (e.g. by drug dealing).

People generally tend to attribute misfortune to misconduct (hence the teaching of free will), whereas positive achievements are rhetorically attributed to God’s benevolence.