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Chapter 20

Borders of identity

Return migration and failure in West Africa

Giulia Casentini

20.1. *Introduction*

In this chapter I will consider life stories of migrants who return back to their country of origin by taking into consideration the specific case of some Ghanaians. In their paths towards Europe, and then back to Ghana, they cross many borders, both physical and immaterial, and they often experience a substantial change of social status, economic condition, and personal aspiration. The ethnographies I analyze talk mainly about a negative, difficult experience, which does not match with the image, quite diffuse in West Africa, of the successful migrant who comes back home after a period in Europe with an improved economic condition and a newly upgraded social situation. The "failure" I will talk about is mainly characterized by a forced return, either due to security issues (especially if migrants found themselves in Libya during or after the crisis in 2011), due to the lack of economic means to continue their trip, or due to traumatic experiences lived during the transit phase.

The chapter will consider both the traumatic aspect of the return and the inherent value of the resiliency of these migrant experiences that, by being considered negative or particularly distressing, can still disclose the power of the individual agency put in place by people who migrate.

I shall discuss the categories of transit, waiting spaces, migrant identities, and I shall consider the border as a physical limit to be trespassed, but also as a threshold that determines a change in social status.

Paraphrasing Spivak (1988), one can ask: "does the migrant have a voice to speak? And when he/she speaks, who listens"? When we reflect on the last part of the question, on "who listens", the question itself becomes larger if we extend our reference context to the country of origin in the setting of return migration. Of course, the migrant can often feel voiceless and absent (Sayad 2002) in the context of emigration, where he/she has to confront himself/herself with different social values, legislation, and power imbalances. We shall see in this chapter that the returnee too can feel voiceless, stranded, oppressed by the power relations embedded in his/her own new relationship with the country of origin. Nevertheless, returnees can represent a powerful critical actor in discussing and re-shaping the idea of migration itself, its idiosyncrasies and the social

image behind the "migration-success-remittances" model that is so diffuse in West Africa nowadays.

20.2. *Methodology and the state of the art*

As Cassarino (2004) states, numerous inquiries from a qualitative point of view have illustrated how multifaceted and heterogeneous the phenomenon of return migration is, leading to a hazy understanding of the issue. This chapter aims at shedding more light on the topic through the qualitative analysis of an ethnographic study conducted in Tamale, Northern Ghana (West Africa) in 2014–2015. The results of the research are based on non-structured and semi-structured interviews with men who had diverse paths of migration; the common thread that links their stories is the "failed" character of their experience, as many defined it. Some of them had to come back forcibly from Libya, others were repatriated from EU member states, and others found themselves irregular in Europe and eventually decided to return.

The literature concerning return migrants has developed significantly in the last decade by observing the role of the domestic diaspora as active subjects and a catalyst of socio-economic changes (Mercer et al. 2009). While considering the case of Ghana, and West Africa more generally, the role of return migrants has been widely investigated, especially concerning their positive role in the country of origin in terms of economic development and of the production of social capital. Black and King (2004) highlight the crucial role of economic remittances as inputs to the development process of the country of origin, and others (Ammassari 2004; Tiemoko 2004; Ungruhe 2012) bring about case studies and points for discussion on the topic. Other scholars (Mazzucato 2008; Thomas 2008) reflect upon the fact that return migration is an instrument for contrasting the large-scale emigration of skilled professionals from African countries, and the so-called brain drain.

As I have investigated elsewhere (Casentini 2017), the contribution of the returnees in the political processes of their own countries is also significant. Thanks to their new social status, often connected to the accrued economic position, they can act as catalysts of stagnant political dynamics, or become critical observers of political and social practices. This role is not always perceived as positive, and returnees can themselves be criticized and ostracized. Nevertheless, their agency is well recognized by the community of origin, and their political role becomes relevant thanks to their experience of migration. Having had the opportunity of living abroad, making that specific social experience and sending remittances back home are definitely identified as actions that contribute to the improvement of the social status of the individual (Nieswand 2017).

What I am presenting here is something different that aims at being included in the complex process of migrants' identity construction. This chapter, indeed, reflects on migrant experiences that do not have a positive outcome in the perception of the communities of origin, but rather describe a feeling of exclusion, strangeness, and liminality (see Dünwald 2010; Maher 2013).

20.3. *Border crossing in West Africa: contemporary challenges*

While considering the complexity of the relations between political entities in the trans-Saharan desert area throughout history, Mbembe (2000) observes that these are moving and fluid worlds that have boundaries characterized by a fragmentation into clans and families, and by cycles of alliances and ruptures.

Mobility is a crucial aspect of the life of West African people: trading, seasonal migration, and traveling are central habits in determining the construction of group identities in this region, also in their historical dimension. As De Bruijn notes (2007), being mobile and the plurality of its forms are essential elements in the shaping of African identities and ways of travelling. West Africa has been a crossroads of pre-colonial trade, especially the Hausa commercial network: the region was and still is a crucial hub that provides an organized system of routes and connections to cross the trans-Saharan area. People on the move often followed these historical routes, and still do today: this aspect demonstrates the high level of adaptability of the Hausa trading network, and the existence of hubs and middlemen that can direct, help, and take advantage of the historical mobility network. The contemporary routes used by migrants towards Libya, and eventually Europe, are often overlapping this historical trade network.

It is important to underline, however, that the mobility network followed by people in this area has been undergoing important changes in recent years. Through the policies of externalization of the EU southern border, various European states, Italy above all, are developing a new strategy that intends to move the European frontier southwards, into African territory. One of the first open acts of externalization was the Italian–Libyan agreement signed by the Berlusconi government with Qaddafi in 2008, followed by other accords that intended to control and limit the mobility of African migrants, with the aim of preventing them from reaching Italian shores and, more generally, the European countries. Morone (2015) argues that the rhetoric on the control of migrant fluxes put in place by Qaddafi was actually based on the hiding of real numbers by Libyan authorities: the vast majority of sub-Saharan migrants used to choose Libya instead of Italy as their country of arrival.

The border control strategies put in place by Europe have had an important consequence on migrant routes and on the increase of corruption and exploitation of people on the move across African borders. The Integrated Border Management (IBM) strategy of the European Union, launched in 2006, was strongly directed towards the fight against illegal migration and the establishment of cooperation agreements and links with "third countries", while not in any way mentioning the protection of fundamental

rights and freedoms for people on the move (Cross 2009). This was one of the first signals of an openly protectionist policy of the EU borders, a policy that was going to be reinforced by following agreements and treaties with "third countries" that have been demonstrated to have serious implications for the lives of migrants and for their choices.

Even if West Africans can freely move in the region thanks to ECOWAS agreements, police and smugglers could in any case take advantage of the presence of international frontiers. We shall see that borders drew sharp lines between citizens by investing some of them with rights and duties and by declaring others "aliens" or "foreigners". The negotiation between "state" and "people" is especially clear in marginal areas such borderlands (Baud and Van Schendel 1997).

Hajii gave me detailed information about his trip from Northern Ghana to Libya:

> First, I went to Bawku. There I took a car which goes to Niger. Niamey. I paid 15,000 cfa, from Bawku to Niamey. But on the way, you pay some kind of taxes. To go to Niger you have to pass through Ouaga. You know, Ouaga is in Burkina Faso, and Burkina Faso is at the border with Ghana. So, when you cross the border you pay something.[1]

At that point I asked for clarifications, since to me it was strange that a Ghanaian citizen has to pay a visa to cross a border of a country that belongs to ECOWAS. Hajii continued:

> You know, everybody wants to get something in their pocket … it is corruption. They knew that I needed to reach Libya because they saw my passport and because I was travelling with others that wanted to go there. I asked them to give me an exit visa. They say if you want the stamp, you have to pay. I said no, I have no money. They say no, you have to pay. I asked them how much, and they said 26 GH cedis. So I paid. I needed that stamp, it helps when you are in Libya and you look for a job, they look at your passport to see where you passed through. So I paid 26. And in Burkina, they collected 1,000 cfa. And from Burkina to Niamey, I paid … the lorry fare was 15,000 cfa. When you reach Niamey there is a barrier, so if you are coming from Ghana, or from Burkina, you pay 10,000 cfa in addition to the rest. When you are entering Niamey everybody pays to have the stamp. In Niamey, I took a car … It was a bus, a bus from Niamey to Agadez. It was 15,000 cfa. It took me … it was a 2-day journey. With the bus. A long bus. Once you arrive in Agadez, police come in and collect your passport, they let you get down and they tell you that you have to pay 10,000 cfa if you want your passport back. Then I bargained, I told them take, I can give you 5,000. They accepted.[2]

The presence of migrants travelling with money in their pockets to confront the long trip, together with the militarization of African borders as a consequence of the externalization of the EU southern frontier, eventually permits the exploitation of the people on the move. Police corruption and smugglers' activities often put migrants' lives in greater danger, and define new internal borders to control people fluxes. Sometimes these new borders match the international borders between different African states, some other times they are re-designed by these agreements. As observed by Lemberg-Pedersen (2017), borders are always under construction and re-construction: they are dynamic, they are sites of intervention of multiple national (e.g. ministries) and non-national (e.g. the EU, NGOs, industrial companies) actors.

[1] Interview with H.B., 12/4/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

[2] *Ibidem.*

20.4. *Identity construction and de-construction: who is the returnee?*

Some Ghanaians on their way to Libya could make it and stayed there for a while to work; the majority stopped in Libya, and some decided to take on the trip by boat to Italy. People who settled in Libya got caught by the Libyan crisis in 2011, and were eventually forced to leave the country because of the conflict and the increased feeling of insecurity. The rhetoric against sub-Saharan migrants as job stealers, terrorists and also mercenaries rapidly worsened (see Morone 2015). Some of them took the difficult way to the sea, with the aim of reaching Italian territory, others decided to go back home. Some of the latter were repatriated by IOM programs; the majority were forced to use the smuggling network through the trans-Saharan route.

The ethnography contained in this chapter has been collected during various fieldwork in 2014 and 2015 in Tamale, in the Northern Region of Ghana. At that time I was essentially interested in the transit experience, the figure of the smuggler and the hubs where the trip can be arranged by following the trans-Saharan network. I am quite familiar with the area and its inhabitants, but at the same time I was aware of the methodological challenge in interviewing people who have been involved in irregular activities. As Ellis and MacGaffey pointed out, it is extremely difficult to persuade them to give details about their activities (Ellis and MacGaffey 1996: 24), and it is very challenging, as a researcher, to know some of these details. As soon as I started my fieldwork, however, I realized that I should also take into consideration other aspects, such as the trauma lived by the people I was talking with.

I discovered very soon indeed that the vast majority of my informants were returnees who failed in their migratory project and were forced to come back. I decided then to focus on the experience of the return itself, which proved to be full of interesting cause for reflection and theoretical analysis.

The "failed returnees" I spoke with were all very isolated, and even if they were back in their home town they seemed to feel stranded, lonely, abandoned by their own social environment. Rashid, one of my friends and research assistants, explained me how a "failed" returnee looks:

> You see from his eyes that he came back from Libya or Europe. You can see it from the way he moves and the way he speaks. He is no more there, nor completely here. If someone had to come back from his migration experience without money, or he was forced to come back, then maybe he does not feel like going back to his family … he feels ashamed. He feels his home is nowhere. Often they come to live here, in the zongo, [3] where all migrants can stay. [4]

All of them were ready to speak with me at first sight about their trip and their traumatic experiences, even if they did not know me personally. They were all men, who belong to a strongly patriarchal society, and I found their openness quite unconventional: as a Western woman I know that I normally need some time to gain confidence and trust in my male interviewees. With the returnees in Tamale the social rules I was used to were completely upside down. They were even looking directly in my eyes while speaking for the first time, which is normally not polite with a stranger, or in general with a person you do not have familiarity with.

I understood that this meant that their own world was completely upside down, and moreover, that I was perceived as one of the few people that could probably understand them. After that experience they were feeling strangers in Tamale. Furthermore, they evidently needed to talk about that trip to someone, since they probably did not feel at ease in expressing themselves about that failure with their own families and their own friends.

As Ibrahim explained to me, it was very difficult for him to feel understood by his fellows, and he felt almost voiceless in trying to talk about his difficult experience as a return migrant.

> I don't feel like talking. I don't feel like sharing. I don't want to talk about my trip, here they cannot understand. If you don't come back from Libya or Europe with money to show off, here they think that you are hiding something. [5]

As noticed also by Dünwald, "Often the family cannot understand why people are returned, they assume that they committed a crime, or returned for other reasons" (Dünwald 2010).

Dünwald's observations on returnees in Mali can be easily compared to what happens to Ghanaians in Tamale. Their status as "failed returnees", their change in status and social belonging, is evident mostly from their body language, but also from the place in which they chose to reside once they returned. Peter comes from a small village

[3] The "zongo" is a historical hausa settlement present in almost all the cities of Ghana, built for traders who stop in various towns of West Africa for commercial reasons. Today zongos still exist and host traders, migrants, and generally strangers who can be there for a period, or even who have been settled for generations. For an extensive analysis on the contemporary use and social value of the zongos see Casentini 2018.

[4] Interview with R.A., 20/04/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

[5] Interview with I.W., 22/04/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

in the Gonja region (Northern Ghana), but when he returned he decided to settle in Tamale.

> I cannot live there again. Maybe here I can find another job to make some money. Maybe then I can go back. I don't know … I don't feel like going back to the village." [6]

As Maher (2013) pointed out in her work on failed return to Senegal, exclusion and marginalization of returnees are caused also by the failed expectations of those at home. Relatives can feel upset and show off their disappointment because the returnee wasted the good amount of money they collected on a failed trip. The failure, though, is not only personal, but it becomes collective. Maher interestingly notices that there is quite a burden on youth today in Senegal: the economic need for cash, the social expectations, and the consequent weight of shame when neither of those objectives can be achieved (Maher 2013). Migration of the youth is a collective business back home: families discuss the use of remittances, the impact of restrictions on migration, and the effects of EU member states' Ghana visa arrangements (Cross 2009/10).

The re-integration in their area of origin can be difficult and challenging. As Abdullah told me, he left to find a remunerative job in Libya, with the aim of fostering his business back home and financing his organization that supported local artists. He had to flee Libya after the crisis in 2011, he spent all his money in trying to cross the desert to go back to Ghana, and when he arrived in Tamale he was broke.

> I left many things. Without your presence, your things can't go on well. You yourself must be there and manage it, nobody else can manage it for you, so … coming back home, I lost most of the things. I lost the shop … the shop became empty, my brothers have spent everything, they just sold things and spent everything. I lost my car, somebody who was taking care of my car used it for himself, to help himself. The organization … lost the funders. I was not only an employee, I was one of the funders. I then lost the organization. So, I came back and I had to restart my life." [7]

20.5. *The experience in Europe: expectations and failures*

Some of the people I interviewed actually made it, and spent some years in Europe (some of my informants lived in Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland). Their decision to come back to Ghana was eventually characterized by the "failure", as it was perceived by them, of their experience in Europe. Difficulties in accessing regular documents, complications in finding a sufficiently well-paid job to send remittances back home,

[6] Interview with P.D., 13/05/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

[7] Interview with A.A., 11/05/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

and enormous efforts in adjusting to a condition of stagnation and uncertainty, eventually led them to decide to return.

Following Dünwald's analysis on experiences of failed migration in Mali, one can find some fruitful points of reflection and comparison. Dünwald states that the effects of increasingly strict visa and asylum policies can be multiple and tricky: circular migratory chains can be cut, the divide between the upper and middle classes become deeper, and former transit countries can suddenly become countries of destination, changing deeply the migratory project of many young Africans (Dünwald 2014). Abdullah expressed a clear point in his decision:

> Hemm … it was a hard decision for me … but … I didn't see myself useful in that society, because I have never had a job … so I didn't see myself useful. So, I just took the decision and came back. [8]

So, what does being "forced" to return mean? As we see from Abdullah's statement, it is not a condition necessarily linked to expulsion, but to the restrictive access to regularization. Abdullah waited, entered into the process of asylum seeking, but eventually the procedures continued for so long that he could not cope with that condition of uncertainty. As Mezzadra points out, these mechanisms of production of illegality for migrants are actually fracturing spaces of access to citizenship rights in Europe. The flexibility of markets, and the transformation of capitalism, are strongly connected to the process of "illegalization" of migrants, who become indeed useful for the maintenance of precariousness in the job market (Mezzadra 2013).

I find interesting to reflect on Abbas's story, who managed to arrive in Europe for the first time through a regular visa, granted by his Dutch girlfriend at that time. Then a Ghanaian friend of his, who was working in Spain, suggested to overstay the visa and try to make some money to send back home to his family, with the aim at becoming a "successful migrant".

As Abbas told me:

> He thought I should have stayed much longer, to overstay my visa, to find a job. I was never given a permit to work, so he thought I should come over to Spain and then stay longer, and then I could work. So, I got convinced by his decision, his idea. I went to Spain, my visa was due. I overstayed my visa, and it became harder. I couldn't do anything but work in the farms, and that was even illegally. So I worked in the farms for some time, I didn't like it, but I had to do it anyway because I needed to make money, so I could help my problems back home. At that time, I was working under someone else's name … usually this happens if you are hungry for a job, you got no options … Even if it is illegal … You cannot do it in any other ways. You have to survive. They do say, that you can survive without money, but it is very hard, you can't survive without money, especially in Europe. Money is everything, from transport to food … everything is money. And also the

[8] *Ibidem.*

> expectations of the family back home … you are there and maybe you have spent one year, two years, three years … and the family don't see anything, a reason for your travel … so, you want to make a reason for your travel. I think that migration, for myself … it has always be there, and it is still there. You cannot stop it. Nobody can stop it. That is the way the world is created. We would always need each other. [9]

The tension between the dream of making an experience through migration and the need to demonstrate to your family, your friends and your social environment you have become "successful" is well explained by Abbas. Once you get "there", to Europe, it is almost a waste of energy not to try to make money and explore any possibilities; not only for yourself, but also for your family and for the larger community to which you belong, that is expecting something. This "something" is not just resolved by receiving money, but also by receiving back a fulfilled dream, the idea that someone could eventually make it, the pride of a community towards the success of one of its sons.

As Dünwald observes, "failed return does not only mean the failure of a difficult adventure, but also the failure to trespass the threshold of becoming an adult […]. A rejection of a returnee by his family often comes close to social death, cutting off a returnee from all social links within his home society […]. In many cases returnees do not stay with the family but with friends, sometimes people who were equally expulsed" (Dünwald 2014).

20.6. *Conclusion: a way forward*

The ethnographies analyzed in this chapter are made by border trespassing, both in geographical and in imaginative terms. Borders can be re-defined and used by state and non-state powers to control and exploit migration; migrants continuously cross these borders, and while crossing them they change their status, travel conditions, and aspirations.

The concept and the practice of failed return can be interesting and challenging points of analysis to provide a more complex and complete discourse on return migration. The contemporary condition of those migrants who had to cross borders to go back home highlights the contradictions that exist in between expectations and reality, shedding light on the construction of new social borders inside the society of origin.

Nevertheless, as observed by Maher (2013), failure might be re-conceptualized as a productive space wherein novel models of self-creation are tested and produced. Here Maher argues that the so-called failed migrants are not completely stranded and immobile, but they are actually moving forward and creating new forms of social relations and strategies to accommodate their futures. The stories that I have collected can

[9] Interview with A.M., 12/05/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

confirm this statement, even if I think that there are still many critical aspects about the real inclusion of returnees in their home societies.

When Abbas was explaining to me how much he lost in his migratory experience, he also stated that he had to re-invent himself:

> I am an artist, so I said, let's now use my art skills to build my life. Before I travelled I was not really doing art work, I was purchasing them and putting in my shop. But now I don't buy anymore, I thought ok now I produce my own things. And that is what I have been doing since I came back home. [10]

At the same time, when I was talking with Abdullah about his path and his opinion about his new social and economic position in his town of origin he built up an argument about the meaning of migrating today through the desert and the need to educate the youth:

> I think it is not the best. And I think that it is out of ignorance that people are doing it. People travelling by road to the desert, by sea, to get to Europe … it is sad. When I was in Spain, I was looking the TV and see my brothers and sisters dying … there was no way that they can come in a flight. […] But people should see the reality, documentaries and all these things. To know what is happening. One time I bought a CD about that, how people are crossing … in Melilla, how people cross that fence and what happens to them they die through the wire … and it is sad. So one time some people that were close to me … I show it to them. They were quietly watching it. Surprised, and shocked. I thought about doing it again, for the youth, but it means a lot of things … it means a lot of money. And even if is not a lot, it means money, because you don't only need the CD, you need the screen, you need the stage. You need the projector. I can't do it now. [11]

The agency, and the desire to contribute to the social improvement of their place of origin through the experiences they have gone through, even if ruinous, is well explained here. The great absentee is the state of Ghana, which is not taking into full consideration the presence of these returnees and their potential role in Ghanaian society. Ghana is granting a lot of voice and attention to successful migrants who come back from Europe or the United States with capital for investments and/or provide constant remittances that constitute an enormous source of revenue. The World Bank has declared that diaspora remittances in 2015 alone for sub-Saharan Africa amounted to 35.2 billion dollars, a sum larger than the EU trust fund for Africa (World Bank 2016).

The IOM has taken care of a limited number of repatriated Ghanaians from Libya, making available a fund to open a small business activity. These actions are very helpful, but are not sufficient in terms of inclusion of the failed returnees, who feel expelled from the society and abandoned by the state.

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[10] *Ibidem.*

[11] Interview with A.A., 11/05/2014, Tamale (Ghana).

I want to underline that in 2016 Ghana launched a National Migration Policy (NMP) plan which aims at working on return, readmission and integration of migrants in the national territory. This action could represent a positive way forward for Ghanaians who come back home without a successful story, but who still want to be included and want to contribute to the production of knowledge and to the development of their own place of origin.

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Part III

Deleting the borders?