Irregular migration from Senegal is facilitated by a network of intermediaries or co-seurs – people that mediate between migrants and other parties along the way, including the passeurs or smugglers who take them across the Sahara.

Most intermediaries started out as migrants themselves.

My name is Diaba. I tried to migrate, but wasn’t successful. In Libya I was treated like a slave and insulted for being ‘black’.

Diaba, 35, passeur

Through a childhood friend in Libya, I now coordinate migrant transport between Tambocounda and Agadez.

Migrants take two routes to reach Europe
1. Sea Route: by boat from Elinkine (Senegal) to Tenerife (Spain).
2. Land Route: through Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Algeria and Morocco.

At border crossings, migrants are approached by co-seurs trying to recruit them for their particular gheto (a “safe house” at transit points) that pays them a commission. They greet them in their language.

I like women migrants, they don’t negotiate the cost like men. They agree to stay 2-3 months as my wives.

Momba, 42

My ambition was to go to Spain, but in Morocco I met a smuggler who showed me how much money I could earn. I decided to stay.

The smuggling network is structured: the chief, the chief’s assistant (me) and co-seurs. Stranded migrants tell new migrants about us. We don’t go to them!

Migrants pay 20,000 - 100,000 CFA francs* in “tax” to enter the gheto. Only then will they be protected against robbers and the police.

*USD 32 - 160

Women who cannot mobilise the same resources as men are often forced to engage in transactional sex with smugglers.

Diarama!

Hello in Fulani

The gheto is structured per country and region; each country has a president, each region a leader. They get a share of the money and maintain order. As long as it is calm, police turn a blind eye.

I sometimes made 500,000 CFA* in a month!

*USD 800 (about)
CUSTOMERS CAME LOOKING FOR US. MY JOB WAS TO PUT THEM INTO CONTACT WITH THE BOATMEN TAKING THEM ONWARDS.

...OUR ONLY JOB WAS TO FIND A BOAT FOR THE MIGRANT. I WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH THE REST OF THE JOURNEY OF THE MIGRANT.

Cokseur, 35, Tambacounda, with connections in Agadez and Tripoli.

I BECAME AN INTERMEDIARY AT THE AGE OF 30.
YOU HAVE TO SELL TRUST. IT'S LIKE HUNTING; YOU HAVE TO SET A TRAP YOU TELL THEM IT'S A DIFFICULT ROAD, BUT WITH ME IT WILL BE FINE.

I DON'T CARE WHO I WORK WITH, AS LONG AS THEY HAVE MONEY. I LIKE WORKING WITH WOMEN. IF THEY DON'T HAVE MONEY, THEY CAN PAY WITH THEIR BODIES.

OF COURSE I CAN HELP YOU, BUT THERE WILL BE EXPENSES.

THIS JOB IS NOT WITHOUT RISK. SOME MIGRANTS WILL BLAME YOU IF THEY FAIL. LAST MONTH, MIGRANTS WERE CAPTURED AT SEA BY THE LIBYAN NAVY. AFTER THEIR RELEASE, THEY HUNTED DOWN THE SMUGGLER AND BEAT HIM TO DEATH.

Cokseur, 34, Tambacounda, with connections in Tripoli.

EVERY INTERMEDIARY IS PART OF A NETWORK, BUT NOT EVERYONE KNOWS WHO THE CHIEF IS SO THAT HE CAN ERASE ALL TRACES IN CASE THERE IS A POLICE ATTACK. WE KNOW ONLY THOSE WE NEED TO KNOW, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.

MIGRANTS ARE BROUGHT TO QUIET, ABANDONED COMMUNITIES IN THE FOREST BY MAFIA TAXIS - ILLEGAL TAXI DRIVERS IN OLD CARS WHO KNOW HOW TO BYPASS POLICE.

I AM ONLY RESPONSIBLE FOR MY LEGS OF THE JOURNEY. THE COSTS HAVE SHOT UP TO 1,500,000 - EVEN TO 2 MILLION FCFA* BECAUSE MIGRANTS WILL LEAVE AT ANY COST!

I WORK WITH A LARGE NETWORK OF SMUGGLERS IN TRIPOLI AND AGADEZ.

WE HAVE OUR WAYS AND KEEP THEM SECRET.

*USD 2,400 - 3,200
People leave Senegal because they feel there are no opportunities there. However, some of them return. Here are two stories of two migrants...

Karfa, a returned migrant, subsistence farmer, Kolda.

I migrated because...

Well, look around you! We do not have any opportunities here.

I had heard stories of people in Libya and Europe - how they have success there.

My family paid for my migration, but my father advised me to visit a marabout. My mother also went to consult one.

*Fortune teller

We sold cows and an ox to pay for the trips to the marabout and to finance the migration. The sale of cattle was the only way for us not to borrow money. No one will lend large amounts to migrants because it is known to be so risky with many perishing along the way.

The first marabout was pessimistic. But I went to another seer. He told me someday I would be in the land of the whites.

Nowadays anyone can migrate. You just have to listen to the stories of returned migrants on the radio. They tell you how they left and where they went and how much it cost.

Ironically, returned migrants are interviewed on the radio to discourage migration by explaining the risks.

I traveled through Tambac, Bamako, Burkina Faso, Niamey, Agadez and Dourkou.

Life of a migrant is hard. Sometimes I had to wait for days for money from family, without food, sleeping outside.

I did not trust intermediaries. They are only out to take your money.

Getting money was dangerous. Thieves would wait outside the Western Union office to rob you.

When I reached Libya, life was really hard there. Migrants are robbed and they cannot open bank accounts. So they are often short of money.

Fellow migrants also had told of bad stories about Europe...

In Italy, you have to wait years for your papers. You cannot work or do anything.

So I decided to return.
Moudou - returned migrant, shopkeeper, Kolda.

We departed from the coastal town of Elginkine in Senegal and arrived in Spain nine days later.

We were fortunate. Only one person died on our pirogue. He had depression and jumped into the ocean...

Hey, you!!

After nine days at sea, we arrived on Tenerife Island. We were brought to a camp.

Witchcraft!

You have to take care to not appear as a Senegalese. People from other places where there is war are considered refugees, but not us... we are easily recognised by our language.

I can tell you are from Senegal.

There were four planes at the camp. Two flew to mainland Spain and two back to the African continent. If you were handcuffed, you knew you were being sent back to Senegal.

At first, I was devastated by my misfortune. But now, I thank God for my house and my shop. I will not go back to Europe.

But there are great opportunities in Europe! I will try to go a second time!

One man opts out, the other will try again.
A Grandmother's Story...

My family has six migrants, but two have died. The remaining ones are in Spain, Portugal, and Libya.

When their father was working, we prospered. But after his retirement, we suffered and needed other sources of money.

I knew migration was dangerous, but we had no choice. We have nothing left. There is no rain and our crops won't grow, so I did not discourage them.

Migration changed our lives. Before we had huts made of clay and straw. Now we have a house and electricity. With the money my sons send, we have bought machines to cultivate the land. Our children go to school because my sons pay for their tuition and books.

My parents had enough money from their business, and my brother saved a gun. He knew a smuggler. I was impressed by the way he dressed and spoke. He inspired confidence.

But the trip is dangerous. My brother wants to bring my sister - but only if she goes by plane. Otherwise it is too dangerous for women. My father wouldn't agree anyway.

A Sister's Story...

We have only one migrant and he is the only boy in the family. Our father says migration of women is no good because once they get married, this does not benefit the paternal family.

My brother made the decision to migrate by himself. My parents did not agree.

Our lives have changed. My brother sends us 150,000 or 200,000 CFA francs* at the end of the month. We have a better house. We eat better, our health is better, and we can go to school.

*USD 250 or 330
About the Project

This comic is based on research done in the Casamance area of Senegal, conducted by Doudou Guye, of the University of Assane Seck, Ziguinchor, Senegal in collaboration with Priya Deshingkar, of the University of Sussex, UK. Return migrants, the families of migrants and smugglers were interviewed in villages of origin and points of transit along the border.

In the last decade there has been an intensification of border controls through sea patrols as well as measures such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s Regional Strategy to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants in West and Central Africa (2015–20). This has resulted in an increase in irregular migration and a diversification of routes over land and sea to evade detection.

The research shows that the criminalisation of migrant smuggling has not succeeded in eliminating the practice. Risk-awareness campaigns do not deter irregular migrants as there are complex sociocultural reasons for migrating.

The migration industry in the Casamance is characterised by a plurality of actors who work either together or independently and who may have fluid roles depending on the need of the moment and their capacity to find innovative solutions to a particular problem. While some of them have networks extending to origin and major destinations, others are work on their own and simply pass migrants to the next intermediary without any accountability.

In such a mercenary environment it is no surprise that Marabouts or fortune tellers assume such importance. Migrants and their families spend vast amounts of money seeking their blessings.

The research concludes that efforts need to be made to open up more channels for legal migration and labour circulation.

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