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‘GOD HAS DECIDED’: DESTINY, LUCK AND UNCERTAINTY IN MIGRANT RETURN AND DECISIONS ABOUT UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION FROM THE GAMBIA TO EUROPE

“Bóg zdecydował”: przeznaczenie, szczęście i niepewność w powrotach migrantów i decyzjach o nieudokumentowanej migracji z Gambii do Europy

Abstract:
Tracing the story of a Gambian migrant’s clandestine journey to Europe, his failure and return, and analysing other Gambians’ decisions about undocumented migration, I examine the role of destiny and ‘luck’ in these processes. . Far from a fatalistic immobilizing notion, or a mere post factum consolation, the idea of destiny, as I argue in this paper, plays an important role in dealing with past

failures, but it also features in the background to decision-making in the present and about the future. Whereas in undocumented migration the success and even survival of the migrant is radically uncertain, a matter of chance, the idea of destiny allows people to engage with uncertainty in a specific way. It makes it possible to dismiss chance by viewing it as an individual quality, part of everyone’s unique destiny, as the Gambian concept of ‘luck’ illustrates. By sustaining hope and a sense of possibility, destiny also allows people to reframe uncertainty as a condition of potentiality.

Keywords: destiny; uncertainty; chance; luck; migrant return; undocumented migration; Gambia; African migrations

Streszczenie. Śledząc historię nieudokumentowanej podróży gambijskiego migranta do Europy, jego porażki i powrotu, a także analizując decyzje innych Gambijczyków na temat nieudokumentowanej migracji, badam rolę przeznaczenia i „szczęścia” (luck) w tych procesach. Zamiast wyobrażenia fatalistycznego i unieruchamiającego lub zwykłego pocieszenia post factum, idea przeznaczenia, jak argumentuję w tym artykule, odgrywa wprawdzie ważną rolę w radzeniu sobie z niepowodzeniami z przeszłości, figuruje jednak również w tle decyzji podejmowanych w teraźniejszości i dotyczących przyszłości. Podczas gdy w przypadku nieudokumentowanej migracji sukces, a nawet samo przetrwanie migranta jest radykalnie niepewne, jest kwestią przypadkową, idea przeznaczenia pozwala ludziom zmierzyć się z niepewnością w specyficzny sposób. Umożliwia odrzucenie przypadkowości przez traktowanie jej jako cechy indywidualnej, części unikalnego przeznaczenia każdego człowieka, co ilustruje gambijska koncepcja „szczęścia”. Poprzez podtrzymywanie nadziei i poczucia możliwości, przeznaczenie pozwala ludziom również przeformułować niepewność w stan potencjalności.

Słowa kluczowe: przeznaczenie; niepewność; przypadek; szczęście; powrót migranta; migracja nieudokumentowana; Gambia; migracje afrykańskie

Introduction

"What God has decided, no man can change it". It is with these words that a young Gambian man, Lamin[1], summed up the dramatic story of his clandestine journey toward Europe. He had travelled through the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast in Libya, then attempted the sea crossing to southern European shores, but failed. This journey – referred to as *backway* in the Gambia – extremely dangerous, for many deadly, has been undertaken by many Gambians and other West Africans in the last two decades. It requires an enormous amount of energy, resources and self-determination to complete it. Failing in it often amounts to losing the chance for the realisation of a lifelong dream. Such a failure, however, is usually interpreted in terms of destiny decided upon by God.

Belief in predetermined destiny may suggest a certain fatalism with reference to the course of one's life, or passivity. Or else, it may seem like just a *post factum* consolation, helping to deal with the failure of one's plans, leading some scholars to conclude that destiny is most significant in retrospective (Nevola 2018: 302, Homola 2018). In this analysis, however, I am going to demonstrate that as much as the idea of destiny plays an important role in dealing with the past – carrying existential and social significance for returnees like Lamin – it is also not absent in the present and the (imagined) future. Destiny features in the background of decisions made in the present and about the future. It does that by reframing the uncertainty of the future into a condition of potentiality. It does not eliminate such aspects of uncertainty as contingency and chance but the idea of destiny allows people to reinterpret chance in a specific way, in relation to one's destiny, as illustrated with the Gambian concept of 'luck'. As a result, destiny and 'luck' provide lenses through which people view the past, their current situation and the future, as well as make decisions about future undertakings, including undocumented migration.

Drawing on recent anthropological discussions on destiny (Elliot 2016; Elliot, Menin 2018; Homola 2018, Menin 2022; Nevola 2018), and on

[1] Some of the names used in the text are pseudonyms. Lamin is a common Gambian name given to the first-born son.

uncertainty (Brzezińska 2024; Cooper, Pratten 2015; Di Nunzio 2015; Gaibazzi 2015; Graw 2012; Vigh 2010), I will highlight some ways in which the two problems are interconnected. I aim to nuance our understanding of how the idea of destiny may be combined with the notion of chance in a specific cultural context, and how, together, they may be employed to view and manage uncertainty. In doing that I am not concerned with theologian discussions on the topic but rather with the ‘everyday religion’ (Schielke and Debovec 2012), i.e. the way religious ideas feature in everyday lives of ‘ordinary’ people, in their interpretations and choices. At the same time I am drawing on, and contributing to, the wide field of migration and mobility studies (Adebayo 2022; Bachelet 2019; Cohen 2018; Gaibazzi 2015; Glick, Salazar 2013; Graw, Schielke 2012; Lucht 2012, to name just a few) by highlighting the problem of return and failure among migrants, and illuminating the process of decision making with reference to undocumented migration.

In the Gambia, among the predominantly Muslim population (with Mandinkas and Fulas being the largest ethnic groups), the concept of destiny is largely shaped by Islamic theology (Gaibazzi 2015: 228, cf. Graw 2012). I discuss in this paper the ideas of Muslim Mandinkas above all, although many of them were also shared by my Fula and Diola interlocutors in the urban, ethnically mixed setting of the Gambia, as well as by the Mandinkas of the nearby Guinea-Bissau (Brzezińska 2024). Similar notions have been studied among the Soninke of the Gambia (Gaibazzi 2015) and the Mandinka and Wolof of the Gambia and Senegal (Graw 2012). I draw in this analysis on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Gambian urban agglomeration: in my Mandinka neighbourhood in Bakau and in Serrekunda in 2016 and in 2017 (altogether six months), and on the material gathered in the same area by my team of anthropology students in 2017 (over 80 recorded interviews and their transcripts). The fieldwork was conducted by us in English, which is well-known in the urban areas. The text also builds on my long-term research in another, nearby West African country, Guinea-Bissau, in 2002, 2010-2011, 2016 and 2017, which I conducted in Kriol.

The decision to 'go *backway*'

Lamin's decision to try to migrate to Europe stemmed from an aspiration which is nearly universal in the Gambia[2]. To travel to work in the Global North (Europe, USA, Canada) is perceived as the safest strategy against economic insecurity. The economy of the Gambia was affected by the neoliberal reforms imposed by International Monetary Fund in the 1980's, leading to widespread unemployment, poverty, and social polarisation. Economic opportunities also decreased as a result of demographic growth, combined with environmental degradation and declining harvests in the last decades (Brzezińska 2021: 260-261, 268-269, Gaibazzi 2015), and were affected by long-term dictatorial rule and accompanying corruption. Aside from the strictly economic factors, the strong desire to migrate is driven by a desire for social and existential mobility. It is linked to a considerable idealisation of life in Europe. Like in various parts of contemporary Africa, Europe is imagined as a place of unbridled opportunity (Brzezińska 2020: 268; 2021: 264; Graw, Schielke 2012; Cohen 2018: 280). Migration to the North, in the eyes of most Gambians today, embodies and guarantees success, a perception sustained by the visible signs of achievement, such as big houses, cars and other investments made by some migrants leading a transnational life. Moreover, the aspiration grows out of an acute sense of marginality in the world and the desire to be part of, or to 'be connected' (Lucht 2012), to the global modern world.

The aspirations of Lamin, a man in his mid-thirties of Mandinka ethnicity, were shaped by all those numerous factors. His circumstances illustrated typical challenges faced by young Gambian men. Migration is gendered: it is primarily young men who are expected to earn money and to migrate for that purpose. For Lamin, this burden of expectation was even heavier since he was the eldest son in the family, bearing the

[2] In mid-2010's the Gambians became one of the largest single national groups among undocumented migrants reaching Europe across the Mediterranean Sea, comprising as much as 3.1 % of the total figure in 2015 and 10% in 2017 (Frontex 2018: 18), which was remarkable for such a small country.

responsibility for supporting his parents and younger siblings materially. In the future he was going to get married and would be expected to support his wife and children as well. As a result of erratic employment and meagre income, however, he was not able to fulfil those social expectations, and thus to achieve social adulthood and respect. He had no prospects of legal travel, as trying to obtain documents entitling one to enter Europe is a long, complicated and costly process, with little chances of success. It requires specific connections, and usually the help of relatives abroad (Brzezińska 2024; Gaibazzi 2014). With poor economic perspectives in the Gambia but having some savings and a strong motivation to achieve the social upward mobility that migration to the North seems to promise (and for some, ensures), Lamin decided to undertake the dangerous undocumented journey – to ‘go *backway*’.

The *backway* journey

The experiences of the *backway* journey undertaken in 2016 by Lamin exemplify a frequent course of events on the clandestine route, as other Gambian migrants’ accounts confirmed. The first part of Lamin’s journey – 3.500 km through West Africa – was relatively unproblematic. It was in in the city of Agadez in Niger where the perilous journey across the Sahara Desert began – lethally dangerous and dreaded by most migrants. From this point onwards, the conditions of travel were extreme; migrants were at the mercy of smugglers, who often maximized profits at the expense of safety. Travelling in severely overloaded trucks with inadequate food and water supplies, the migrants had to face the extreme natural environment of the desert with its merciless heat. Those who took this route usually suffered severe dehydration, which led to physical exhaustion and many deaths (cf. Lucht 2012: 160-176). Lamin and his companions were forced to drink contaminated water from an abandoned desert well, and were sick as a result. Some of his companions died. Apart from these hazards, the migrants were stopped at numerous military check-points and forced to pay arbitrary ‘fees’ demanded by soldiers who readily used violence to extort them.

Their journey entered an even more dangerous phase on entering Libya. The country has been immersed in political turmoil since the fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011, with government military forces, rebels and criminal groups controlling various parts of it, which made it a politically unstable and violent place. For migrants, one of the most deadly risks came from gangs of armed robbers. Their pervasive tactic was to kidnap migrants and demand a ransom from their families at home. As Lamin, who fell victim to such an attack, recalled: 'While they are calling [the family], they are beating you'. They inflicted violence that sometimes turned out lethal regardless of the ransom being paid, as happened to one of Lamin's friends.

Sub-Saharan African migrants experienced capture and incarceration not only by criminal, but also by state actors. As Lamin reported, the police 'take you to the main prison. Without any judgement, without nothing' and resort to beating and torture in order to extort bribes for the migrants' release. Lamin experienced that several times in the course of his journey. This process of repeated violent immobilization of black migrants (Achtnich 2022) as they become stripped of their financial resources and need to stop travelling in order to earn money, makes *backway* a protracted journey that typically lasts for many months.

Lamin reached Tripoli on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, which is where migrants attempted their final sea passage to Europe, Italy. He made three such attempts – all of them unsuccessful. Each time he and his companions were stopped: either by the police or by boats of armed robbers at sea – pirates. Their time in Tripoli consisted of constant hiding or running from danger: from the police – they were imprisoned, some were tortured, and from criminal groups – exorbitant ransom was demanded, followed by desperate, spectacular escapes of some migrants and cold-blooded killings of others. Their journey was marked by radical, violent uncertainty, which gave their mobility the dynamics of a 'battlefield' (see Brzezińska, forthcoming). Reaching their destination – as well as their mere survival – was largely a matter of chance. Lamin, after yet another arbitrary incarceration, from which he was released thanks to a bribe paid by his mother, finally started considering giving up on the journey.

A soldier who left the battlefield. The return

The decision to go back was difficult. Lamin had been travelling for nearly six months by that point and he was at the verge of mental exhaustion: “Then… Because I even felt… How can I explain that... I felt bad, discouraged. Even [the plan] to go to Italy was no more in my brain. I even disliked to go to Italy. Because of the stress”. Facing repeated failures to make the dangerous passage to Europe, combined with hazardous everyday life in transit Maghreb countries, is so testing that some migrants have been reported to suffer mental breakdowns and ‘go mad’ (Bachelet 2019: 858).

Yet, after so much Lamin had been through, to simply go home seemed almost unimaginable:

> Then I decided… My mum decided. Because I didn’t decide it at first. Then my mum decided… [for me] to come back. Because... You know. It’s too much. And… The money I spent… is more than 100 000 dalasi [approx. 2.150 Euro]. (…) At the start I refused. Because I told her: “No, I cannot come back like that. (…) When I come back to Gambia, it will seem like I’m starting it [all anew]… It’s not fair on me”. All the money I worked for, I spent it on this journey.

After one has invested so much in the undertaking – at all possible levels: material, physical and emotional – to return is like giving up on one’s lifelong dream.

What is more, curtailing the journey was seen by many as a failure on his part. His fellow migrants reacted with disapproval:

> Lamin: People, when you tell them that you are going back home, they look at you very strangely. (…) they cannot understand it. (…) They look at you very strangely. Yeah! “You’re going back home? No!” They say, “Hey! You shouldn’t go back home”.
> Yusupha: It’s like a soldier [who] went to the battlefield and then he left all his weapons and went back to the camp [laughter]…

The half joking remark made by Yusupha, a friend present during the interview (who had not tried to go *backway* himself), was laden with meaning. In the eyes of other Gambians, to return was a failure on Lamin's part. The comparison to a soldier who left the battlefield revealed the stigma attached to unsuccessful migrants in wider society's discourses. Lamin, it suggested, did not have the courage and strength needed to overcome obstacles rather than giving up. Migrants from various sub-Saharan African countries were noted to perceive themselves as 'soldiers' on the 'battlefield' fighting with lethally dangerous obstacles of this journey (Bachelet 2019: 854-5; Lucht 2012: 143). Despite the immobilizing power of the border regime they were facing, they emphasized their own agency. As Bachelet observed among migrants in Morocco, they acknowledged that the success of their journey 'was uncertain and ultimately dependent on greater forces, while simultaneously stressing that it was up to (…) [them] and their heroic efforts to show their worthiness in overcoming such obstacles' (2019: 858). From the perspective of other migrants and fellow Gambians, Lamin's return seemed to speak of his lack of personal predispositions for the challenge. The heavy financial loss entailed by the journey – not counter-balanced with the expected material gains in Europe – contributed to the sense of failure. Like African migrants in other geographical contexts, Lamin was reluctant to return home risking the shame of failed migration (Adebayo 2022: 892). In the Gambia, like in other African countries, unsuccessful return from Europe, rather than being seen as the result of adverse structural conditions, is generally perceived as the migrant's personal failure (Graw, Schielke 2012: 18, Cohen 2018: 282).

Destiny in dealing with the past

Ultimately, however, Lamin managed to see his unsuccessful journey through the lens of his destiny. He had returned to the Gambia. At the time of the interview he was working as a night guard at a local bar. Looking back, he interpreted his failure to reach Europe in terms of God's decisions prevailing over human efforts. In the worldview shared by most

Gambians, not only the shape of one’s destiny is predetermined by God, but its specific timing. One’s destiny will only unfold when the right moment arrives (Brzezińska 2024; Gaibazzi 2015). Therefore, if Lamin’s journey was unsuccessful, it could be because he had not recognized his fate or its timing correctly.

When looking at one’s life in retrospect, referring to destiny can be a way of explaining a difficult or disappointing past. In Lamin’s narrative, the notion of pre-determinacy of human fate served, as in other contexts, as an *ex post facto* explanation which allowed him to rationalize his failure and justify the course of events beyond his control (Nevola 2018: 305).

This has both an existential and social significance. Existentially, the notion of destiny plays an important role in the face of tragedy or misfortune. It allows people to make sense of the course of their lives and accept it (Schielke and Debovec 2012, Nevola 2018). At the social level, calling on destiny may serve to avoid responsibility for one’s actions. As Webb Keane observed, in framing events with predetermination, ‘people are not simply involved in a quest for meaning. They are forming judgments and allocating responsibility’ (cited in Nevola 2018: 302). The idea of destiny may serve as a consolation and prevent people from problematizing the causes of their failures and avoid accountability for them (Nevola 2018: 305). That does not mean, one might add, that responsibility will not be ascribed to them by others, as illustrated by the discrediting comparison to a soldier deserting his battle. When faced with the social stigma of failed migration, referring to destiny may thus be regarded as an example of ‘social navigation’ (Vigh 2010) – a way of deflecting the stigma by shifting attention from one’s personal traits to a much grander cause – a plan decreed by God (while, strikingly, the responsibility of geopolitical powers disappears from view).

‘God has decided’: Destiny only in retrospective?

The idea of destiny certainly plays an important role in dealing with the past. Does that mean that destiny features in peoples’ lives only in retrospective? Some scholars have argued that fate is most significant in

hindsight: in retrospective narratives, especially in rationalizing failure and misfortune (Nevola 2018: 302, Homola 2018). As Luca Nevola points out, fate, in the sense of the (non)actualization of destiny, 'can only exist in hindsight' (2018: 302). Stephanie Homola suggests and that 'the main way in which (…) [fate] not only circulates but also emerges as an object (both for the anthropologist and her interlocutors) is through language', through narratives: rumours, personal stories of crisis, autobiographical accounts of misfortune, and life histories (2018: 340), and consequently fate only 'emerges as a linear development—a life story—when it is observed retrospectively' (2018: 335). Laura Menin observes that destiny becomes partially discernible only in the aftermath of human actions (2020: 527).

Indeed, the actual shape of destiny is only really discernible in hindsight. For Lamin, however, invoking fate was not only a way of dealing with the past – it was also important in his making a decision in the present, and consequently about the future. As he recalled the difficult moment of deciding to give up on the journey:

> L: I said to myself… "No… What! No… Let me go back home." Because, you know… what I should have before I die… I know that God can give me that. Nothing can change it. If I should go to Italy, Europe, before I die… That will happen. What God has decided, no man can change it.
> Y: And then he just came back and is waiting for that time.

Far from just a closure of his past migration prospects, or a fatalistic statement about life, Lamin's evocation of his destiny as decided by God – and of the finality of God's decisions – was in fact full of hope and future-oriented: travel could still be part of his destiny later on in his life. It is crucial to note that even though the actual shape of destiny is only really discernible in retrospective, the *idea* of destiny plays an important role in the present. *Imagining* one's destiny provides a view towards the future.

This orientation towards the future is expressed in the notion of 'waiting for that time', voiced by Yusupha. Like in some other Muslim contexts (Elliot 2016), the concept of (vigilant, alert) waiting for the right time for one's destiny to unfold is an important element of Gambians'

beliefs in destiny (cf. Brzezińska 2024; Gaibazzi 2015). Waiting points to a particular mode of engaging with uncertainty. As Ghassan Hage observed, ‘Waiting indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life; that we are on the lookout for what life is going to throw our way’ (quoted in Adebayo 2022: 891). Waiting – in the form of anticipating, expecting – reveals a hopeful disposition to the future.

Such an attitude shapes the character of uncertainty into one of potentiality. For Lamin, what ‘God has decided’ meant not just a ‘closure of a horizon of possibilities’ (Nevola 2018: 305) but also provided an opening of such a horizon. It expressed an ‘orientation towards the yet to come’ (Vigh 2010: 156). The Gambian idea of waiting for the time destined by God exemplifies the attitude in which rather than simply ‘getting by’ and ‘just surviving’ in the immediate uncertainties of everyday life, people engage with uncertainty in a way that unlocks ‘the creative potential of imaginaries that draw from distant source of inspiration’ (Cooper, Pratten 2015: 12).

Evoking the idea of destiny may thus prevent people from getting existentially stuck. In the context of migration and mobility studies, some scholars have distinguished between physical im/mobility and existential im/mobility. According to Hage, physical mobility, including migration, is often pursued in order to achieve existential mobility, to get ‘a sense that one is “going somewhere”’ (quoted in Adebayo 2022: 886), as opposed to going nowhere (Ibidem). The existential immobility experienced by an unsuccessful returned migrant is even further enhanced by the sense of failure and futility of the efforts undertaken. In these circumstances, viewing one’s position through the lens of destiny allows for a vital reinterpretation of the present. It enables one to reframe the experience from feeling stuck to being in transition: awaiting a moment in the future when one’s life will yet move forward.

‘It’s a gamble’: ‘Luck’ and destiny paradox

Belief in predetermined destiny does not mean that Gambians fail to notice the extreme uncertainty of the clandestine migration to Europe: its contingency, the element of chance determining the course of the journey.

Lamin recognized the contingency of his travel in talking about being 'lucky' or 'unlucky' with reference to various aspects of the journey, such as the reliability of drivers crossing the desert, or the outcome of negotiations about bribes at military checkpoints. He also explained his failure to make the final sea passage to Europe in terms of 'luck':

> I met many friends there. They went on that boat. Some of them… luckily succeeded. To Italy. Yeah, [as] for those ones, they entered [Europe]. I'm the unlucky person. Because we didn't join on [share] the same boat. (...) Unfortunately… [As] For them, they went through. They caught me on the way. That's the thing.

As Lamin assessed the reasons for his fiasco, 'luck' featured strongly in it. Other Gambians, those weighing the decision of whether to risk the clandestine migration or not, also saw the contingency of it. Some emphasized the element of chance even stronger. As another young man, an eighteen-year old Mandinka, Omar, assessed it:

> To travel, yeah... Even though it's dangerous people are going through *backway*. Yeah, it's dangerous but it's luck. Maybe you can go and you can make it there, maybe you can go and not make it. So it's not easy, it's gamble. It's a gamble.

It is clear to Gambians that the result of backway is highly unpredictable. Reaching the destination is a gamble. People also realise of the risk of death. Yet Omar had seriously considered 'going backway' just several months before the interview was carried out. As is often the case in urban Gambia, he had finished school, saw no employment prospects, and struggled with the social pressure to start bringing money to his extended family, which he felt from his relatives daily.

Gambians identify 'luck' as a significant factor both when assessing the past and when considering future attempts of undocumented migration. When they talk about 'luck', however, like the Gambian Soninke, they imply something more than blind chance or mere statistical probability

that the word entails in the English language (Gaibazzi 2015). In the Gambia, ‘luck’ is understood as an intrinsic element of Islamic destiny allocated to each person by God before they are born (Gaibazzi 2015; cf. Brzezińska 2024). On one level then, the Gambian notion of ‘luck’ does entail chance – as the metaphor of gambling illustrates. On another, ‘luck’ is considered an individual quality, part of every person’s unique destiny.

Therefore, Gambians often refer to the chance element as ‘my luck’ – using a phrase which encapsulates this dual quality of human life, the perplexing combination of predetermination and contingency. People use that phrase when talking about contingent events, especially disappointing ones from the past. As another young Gambian man summed up his unsuccessful attempt at backway, in which he had also, like Lamin, suffered great hardships but ultimately failed to make the passage to Europe: ‘It was my luck…’, he commented, with a certain resignation. With that inconspicuous yet meaningful phrase he expressed the common, apparently paradoxical view in which life is believed to be predetermined by God’s decisions and yet affected by chance, too.

In fact, the way Gambians interpret the course of events in their lives reveals that for them, destiny is not predetermined in an absolute way. Even if people said that ‘What God has decided no man can change it’, in other contexts it became clear that they imagined destiny in a much more dynamic way – as to some extent flexible. Destiny is regarded by them as – paradoxically – ‘fixed and malleable’ at the same time (Ellion & Menin 2018), as it may be altered by various (this and otherworldly) factors (Brzezińska 2024). Rather than a fully preordained, unchangeable course of events, it is imagined as a potentiality that may develop in several ways. ‘Luck’ can be viewed as one of the elements of that ‘malleability’ of destiny, of fate’s flexible and dynamic quality.

When confronted with the issue directly, however, Gambians often claimed that regardless of human efforts, God’s decisions have the ‘upper hand’. As Omar assessed, one can make preparations for the backway journey (metaphysical or otherwise), “but you don’t know what God will do. So it’s a problem. It’s luck, it’s chance”. His words shed interesting light on the paradox of destiny and ‘luck’. God’s decisions determine

human destinies, yet it is impossible to know them, and it is their unknowability that makes all human undertakings a matter 'luck'. Therefore, with respect to 'luck' and its relationship to destiny, what appeared to be a paradox, is in fact a matter of perspective. The future seems to be shaped by 'luck' to people only. From God's perspective there is no chance involved, only His decisions. 'Luck', therefore, only exists from human perspective. Nevertheless, and most importantly for decision-making, destiny is unknowable to people before it unfolds.

Decisions about migration

How do Gambians make decisions about migration in view of destiny and 'luck' then? Since destiny is unknown in advance, people are expected to try to recognize their path, as well as the right time to follow it: to 'search for' or 'try one's luck', as they say in the Gambia and the region (Brzezińska 2024). One needs to 'scout out the routes' to the fulfilment of one's destiny (Gaibazzi 2015: 228), to be constantly on the lookout for signs that might point in the right way. Like in other Islamic settings, far from incurring passivity or immobilizing fatalism, the percept of destiny compels people to act (Elliot 2016) and to take moral responsibility for one's actions (Menin 2022), while discerning the right time and direction of those actions.

In practical terms**,** even having an otherworldly horizon to one's life, one nevertheless has to deal with the visible, mundane, tangible issues and obstacles, of course: to consider one's options, weigh one's chances, while drawing on one's social, economic and cultural capital. The decisions Gambians make about migration depend primarily on their material circumstances and social networks, as well as gender, age and education. Those with sufficient material means for economically secure life in the Gambia do not consider the dangerous *backway*. They plan their future locally or try documented travel.

For Omar, the unknowability of destiny tipped the scales to the negative side of uncertainty. He gave up on the plan of *backway* (having been discouraged by his family) and considered other options. He decided to try to obtain the documents for legal travel – to Cyprus, with the help of

a friend who was living there. Presumably, the pressure on him to earn money was not as intense as in some other cases. At the time of this research his two older sisters worked abroad already (as nurses in London), so his family could count on their regular financial support.

For some other Gambians, the belief in destiny inspired a measure of optimism and ontological security. It is with this view in mind that some dismissed the knowledge of lethal danger of the undocumented journey and decided to try it. I discussed the issue with a group of teenage boys in Bakau. Unemployed, despite having finished high school, and unable to find a job apart from some occasional and badly paid work, they could not gain social respect as adult men. A few of them were considering 'going *backway*'. We talked about the risk of dying in that journey, when one of them, Bakary, made a memorable comment: 'If God doesn't want you to die yet, you will not die, you will get there'. It was faith in personal destiny, determined by God and allocated to everyone individually, that gave some young men hope and courage and was in the background of their decisions to travel.

Most Gambians do not actually undertake migration to Europe – even if they harbour a dream to do so – and some frame their decisions not to travel in terms of destiny, too. Few, however, explicitly choose not to aspire to transnational life. One such person was Kebbah (Mandinka, aged 27), an activist and community educator who had been involved in the "Stop the Backway" campaign. In that role he had been to Europe (Holland) on a scholarship, after which he returned to the Gambia. Well-educated and coming from a wealthy family, he had enough social, cultural and financial capital to feel secure in the Gambia. Some people expressed surprise, however, and even criticised him for coming back, rather than staying in Europe. They suggested travelling again:

> Kebbah: Some say: "Why you don't go back to Holland like this? You have to risk your way through the *backway* and go". I tell them: "You know, that is not my destiny". And they say: "Oh, you say money is not a problem!" And I say: Yeah, it's just my destiny, you know, being a teacher when I came back. To study again, to get the knowledge. Just keep on working hard and becoming… making sense of what you are doing."

In a context where, like for many Africans today, 'not to aspire to migration would be like having no ambitions in life' (Graw and Schielke 2012: 18), Kebbah seemed compelled to use the notion of destiny to oppose the general pressure to migrate. At the same time, he seemed to draw on the idea of destiny to make sense of his life for himself. In a similar vein, some other Gambians who, for various reasons, did not plan to migrate, relied on the notion of destiny for existential meaning – to make sense of, and accept, their futures locally.

Conclusions

Destiny is unknowable to people before it unfolds. What 'God has decided' comes into focus only in retrospective. This does not mean, however, that the notion of predetermination is absent from people's daily life and only occurs to them *after* things happen. The idea of destiny is present at the background of events, so to speak. Destiny serves both as a lens to view the past and features in the background of decisions undertaken in the present and about the future.

In dealing with the past, the notion plays an important role by giving meaning to events, allowing people to make sense of what happened, especially to rationalize and deal with failure. Rather than existing only in retrospective, however, as Lamin and Yusupha's perspective demonstrates, destiny provides a particular way of viewing the current circumstances. Through sustaining hope and a sense of possibility, it also allows people to reframe uncertain futures in such a way that they are worth anticipating. By doing that, destiny shapes the character of uncertainty into one of potentiality.

In making decisions about undocumented migration, the hope and confidence that the idea of destiny inspires is countered with caution stemming from the awareness of what a 'gamble' such an undertaking is. Some young Gambians who attempted or considered *backway* relied on the idea of destiny to engage with the uncertainty of it in a specific way. For some, as the perspective of Bakary exemplified, even awareness of the lethal risk of the clandestine route did not seem relevant since the success of

the undertaking was believed to depend on destiny designed for everyone individually. Chance could also be dismissed since it was viewed as part of one’s destiny and hence an individual quality: each person’s individual ‘luck’. This way uncertainty became a ‘productive framing’ providing the ‘grounds for action’, hope and optimism (Cooper, Pratten 2015: 2-3, 11, Di Nunzio 2015). In other words, the idea of destiny allowed people to reframe uncertainty as a condition of potentiality, inspiring hopeful anticipation and justifying the risk.

While sharing the worldview of destiny and ‘luck’, Gambians make different decisions with reference to migration. Most do not decide to risk their lives in *backway*. The radical uncertainty of it, coupled with the unknowability of destiny, prompt some, as the example of Omar illustrate, to look for other avenues of migration. Yet others, as Kebbah’s case exemplified, renounced the idea of migration altogether. In general, the idea of destiny had an existential and social significance: it was evoked by people to oppose the widespread pressure to migrate and the stigmatization of migrants who return from Europe without visible material gains, as well as to make sense of their lives and their circumstances for themselves.

Finally, we could ask: what is the place of destiny beliefs in the face of the vast global inequalities in the contemporary world and the ‘global regimes of mobility’ (Glick, Salazar 2013) which allow free movement of the rich while illegalizing the movement of the poor? The unintended consequence of these beliefs is that the focus on personal destiny and individual ‘luck’ conceals power relations that contribute to and sustain violent border regimes. Where people discuss their personal fate, structural conditions disappear from view. At the same time, the idea of fate as determined by what ‘God has decided’ offers people some existential value. It gives the world a personalised character, where the failures, deaths, and also the few success stories of African migrants travelling to the Global North are not just a result of blind chance, or mere statistics, but a result of individual destiny. In so doing destiny makes the world more bearable.

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