HIGH-RISK MIGRATION: 
FROM SENEGAL TO THE CANARY ISLANDS BY SEA

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, European newspapers regularly published stories and pictures of West African men arriving dehydrated and exhausted on the touristy beaches of the Canary Islands (BBC News 2006). Particularly alarming were the large number of deaths en route of migrants not fleeing war or persecution but in search of greener pastures (Ceesay 2007). Although migration from West Africa is not a new phenomenon the means and trends of migration have changed considerably over the past years, with most notably the increase in irregular migration routes towards Europe since the early 1990’s. What characterizes these relatively new irregular routes, going overland and oversea, are the high-risks attached to it, with a large proportion of migrants losing their lives en route before they reach their desired destinations. This raises questions on the decision making processes of those participating in these type of migration activities. Are they aware of the risks they might face and how does risk inform their decisions to make use of these means of migration?

In 2005 and 2006 the sea-passage from the Senegalese coast to the Canary Islands was among the most popular irregular migration routes from West Africa to Europe. In traditional wooden fishing boats, locally called gal or pirogue, migrants—the majority coming from Senegal—made attempts to enter one of the seven islands of the Spanish Archipelago from where they hoped to continue their journey to mainland Europe. The number of migrants arriving on the islands peaked in 2006 to 32,000. This figure does not include the number of migrants departing from the West African coast but never reached the islands due to premature return or death en route.

The distance between Dakar, Senegal’s capital, and the Canary Islands, is 938 miles. In the flat-bottomed wooden boats of 14 to 18 meters this trip takes between five to eight days, depending on weather conditions, the navigation skills of the captain and the quality of the boat. The boats in general have no roof and hold a capacity of 50 to 80 persons, depending
on the smuggler and the size of the boat (see also Magoni, Roos, and Buda 2007; Schapendonk and van Moppes 2007a). Many of the boats used on this route are in bad condition, are overcrowded, and do not carry enough food and drinks, resulting in an estimated death rate of 10% to 40% (Gerdes 2010; Magoni et al. 2007). As a consequence, this route has become widely known to Senegalese migrants as ‘Barca wala Barsakh’,1 literally ‘Barcelona or death’, that is, one either arrives in Europe or dies on the open sea.

Within migration-related literature explanations for population movements, in particular from the so-called global South to the North, are mainly based on research conducted on migration from Central and South America towards North America (Cohen 2004). Only recently have African migration flows towards Europe been given attention by social researchers. Understanding reasons behind migration from Africa to Europe is mainly based on quantitative data and often focus on regular migration (van Dalen, Groenewold, and Schoorl 2003; Heering, van der Erf, and Wissen 2004), while qualitative studies on West African irregular migrants have dominantly focused on transit migration in North Africa (Alioua 2005; Escoffier 2006). Studies on irregular migration in non-African geographies are mainly based on secondary resources and focus on identifying irregular migration routes, smuggling methods and numbers (De Haas 2008). Hence, to date there is a lack of qualitative studies on irregular migration flows in the African-European migration context, leaving underexplored the actual life worlds, experiences and decision-making processes of the migrants themselves. As irregular migration involves a high level of risk-taking behavior it is necessary to understand whether the decision to partake in irregular migration can be understood in the same terms as regular migration and how the risk factor influences the migration decision-making process. This necessitates an in-depth understanding of why people decide to make use of migration whereby risk seems to outweigh any expected monetary benefits. In this chapter the following questions will be addressed: What drives Senegalese men to partake in high-risk irregular migration? Who is involved in the decision-making process and how are risks dealt with? The aim is to better understand high-risk irregular migration in the West African context, which will also help to inform and improve policies addressing high-risk migration.

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1 Mapenda Seck, one of Senegal’s famous singers, launched a hit-single with this title in the fall of 2006.