International Migration from (Anglophone) Cameroon

Contributor: Presca Wanki

In Africa, international migration to the Global North is often interpreted as a means to achieve upward social mobility. This article highlights the importance of considering the socio-economic and political transformations that form migration aspirations, especially among African youths. Simultaneously, increasing restrictive migration regimes impacts the extent to which migrants can meet the clauses in the moral economy of migration in their origin communities. We focus on (Anglophone) Cameroon, where international migration is referred to as "bushfalling". A person who migrates to a Western society desires or is expected to return home to share the wealth he/she has accumulated. This interpretation of migration forms different perspectives regarding migrants and guides expectations towards returned migrants. However, little is known on how these expectations are defined and redefined in the society of return. Based on focus group discussions conducted among local community members, we show that the expectations were guided by the visa regimes of destination countries. Moreover, successful returnees were defined by their ability to be visible and create an impact after return. Thus, this article contributes more broadly to an African perspective on the meaning and impact of return migration.

1. Introduction

Mobility has different meanings for different people, depending on the specific historical and social contexts in which it takes place [1]. It is thus embedded in socio-cultural imaginaries and values, economic settings, familiar and community dynamics, and politics and power relations [2][3][4].

In many African societies, migration is constructed as being natural, necessary [5], and a path to attaining increased social status [6][7]. Moreover, international mobility to the Global North is connected with social and collective hopes for a better life and future, with upward social mobility of the migrant and his/her relatives staying at home and with ideas of membership within a globalised world [7][8][9][10]. In this regard, migration has been explained in terms of a fulfilment of social obligations towards family members, as being embedded in intergenerational kinship where mobility is seen as a form of social security [9][11][12][13]. The clause included in this intergenerational contract stresses the traditional duty of the young to care for the old, as included in the principle of reciprocity [12]. The transnational social relations caused by the mobility clearly change kinship relationships between migrants and those who stayed behind, with accounts of entitlement, obligation and practices of economic solidarity as main characteristics—hence placing migrants as different socio-economic actors at the family and community level [6]. In terms of gender, migration has also been described as a means to enact or prepare for respectable adulthood and as an avenue for young men to establish themselves as independent, respectable and marriageable adults [9][14]. In other contexts, the mobility of women is constructed as a painful necessity [15], especially when they assume the breadwinning role [16].

Thus, research has clearly illustrated how a moral economy of migration instils specific expectations towards migrants regarding wealth accumulation, reciprocation of support over time, and fulfilment of particular social and gender role expectations [15][17]. Research has highlighted how such expectations not only shape decisions to leave the country [5][18][19] but also further migration trajectories since the expectations migrants face upon return might lead to postponing the actual return or prevent them from resettling in the home community [10][20]. While return migration is often an inherent part of migration trajectories and the reestablishment of social ties and availability of social support are crucial aspects of a migrants' return and reintegration processes [21], contextualised socio-cultural understandings of return migration, and relatedly, the expectations defined and redefined by communities in the particular society of return migration, have rarely been explored.

Despite the current context of increasingly restrictive mobility regimes imposed by the Global North, precarious migration journeys characterised by periods of waiting and uncertainty, combined with a moral economy of migration, may lead to a complication in the reception of migrants in the community in case of a premature halt to their journeys. This is especially relevant when there are frictions between the symbolism attached to the ideal type of successful return and the

experiences of returnees. Research on the views towards returnees in Cape Verde, Somalia, and Afghanistan, for example, has shown that forced return (i.e., deportation) leads to stigmatisation within communities [22][23].

In most societies, "deportation" is associated with "criminal activities", creating the perception that deported persons do not deserve re-entry into social life; this complicates social contacts between returnees and their origin communities [22][23][24]. Scholars have argued that this negative reception within the community results from their inability to afford a particular "style" of return [25]. Indeed, in many societies, a successful return is measured in terms of economic accomplishment, especially when economic reasons were the primary motivation for the initial departure [20]. Returnees need to demonstrate this financial success by lavish spending, driving luxurious cars, donating vast sums of money to churches, and constructing houses [9][26]. This sharing of wealth, which includes gestures of hospitality or gift-giving, is pivotal to building up their social status [14]. Hence, Bredeloup [8] and Miller [27] rightly pointed out that returnees are confronted with obligations to succeed in accordance with a collective imagination of migration. If not, moral judgements are measured out quickly, and they face rejection by their community. However, a study in Ghana indicates that the impact of the return on the livelihood of the family is more important than the legal mode of return [9][17]. By returning empty-handed, the migrant had failed to realise the migration goals. This had dire consequences on the social relations at the family level, creating a sense of shame and social inadequacy for the migrant who became a burden for his family he had set out to support through migration.

Further, as illustrated, migration expectations operate in the context of social norms incorporating gender roles, suggesting that female returnees will be judged differently than male returnees [28][29]. Nevertheless, empirical studies indicate that all migrants, regardless of their gender, are expected to support those who stayed behind [10], with men receiving requests for investments requiring substantial amounts of capital and women being obliged to remit mostly for immediate consumption [6]. This makes it crucial to investigate further if and how gender plays a role in expectations towards returnees. Moreover, restarting a living in the country of return, finding one's place in society and being accepted within the community are social and relational processes influenced by the individual returnee, as by the community (s)he is returning to [30][31].

2. Understanding International Migration from (Anglophone) Cameroon

Researchers have highlighted how international migration from Cameroon can be understood by disentangling two major conjunctures: the political liberalisation and the economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. These periods had grave consequences on the sustainable livelihood of Cameroonians, which is still evident today. On the one hand, political liberalisation in Cameroon gave birth to what has been called "the anglophone problem" [32]. This can be traced back to 1961 when the political elites of French Cameroon and English Cameroon favoured the formation of a federal state. However, this agreement did not go as planned, as it was interpreted as a means to integrate the anglophone region into a strong centralised unitary state. Subsequently, this led to feelings of marginalisation and exploitation among Anglophone Cameroonians by the French-dominated state. Thus, Anglophone Cameroonians assess their chances of success as higher far away from Cameroon [33]. In most cases, educational mobility through bushfalling is seen as a way of fulfilling their dreams for a better future [10][34].

On the other hand, the economic crisis in the 1980s—called *la crise*—disintegrated the socio-economic order [35]. Inherent in Cameroon's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) agreement with the World Bank in 1988, there was an economic and political conditionality [36]. While the latter was related to processes of democratisation, the "economic conditionality" referred to the requirement of downsizing the state, which translated into "freezing employment opportunities in an economy in which the state was the main employer" [14][37]. This resulted in the reduction of civil servants' salaries and a 50 percent devaluation of the currency [35][38]. These changes led to mass unemployment at a rate between 15 percent and 30 percent, revealing the constraints on the government's capacity to provide jobs to young graduates [39]. As a result, the everyday lives of Cameroonians became too uncertain, thus leaving many people distressed about the present day and fearful for the future [35][40]. This was unlike earlier generations that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, where there was a transition from school to the job market [41]. Consequently, with the disappearance of transitional pathways for youths, political and economic uncertainty turned into a new kind of social uncertainty for young people [37]. As such, international migration was seen as means to attain a bright future.

Despite the "double marginalisation" as youths and as Anglophones voiced by young Anglophone Cameroonians, most young Cameroonians share several vital concerns: unemployment, underemployment, and socio-economic uncertainty [42]. This uncertainty, as a crisis, became "routinised" in Cameroon and ceased to surprise people in and how they define themselves [40]. In this way, Cameroon's postcolonial state is seen as a stumbling block of youths' transition to social

adulthood [42]. Therefore, being faced with an uncertain future, it is little wonder an increasing number of young Cameroonians and Africans more broadly opt for international migration.

In the case of Anglophone Cameroon, the metaphor of "bushfalling" is widely used to refer to international migration and comprises a fundamental part of the culture and society [10][43][44]. The terminology of bushfalling became popular in Cameroon in the 1990s and referred to "the act of going to the wilderness (i.e., the bush) to hunt down meat (i.e., money) and bring back home the trophies" [18][43]. Thus, this socio-cultural understanding of migration imbues a complex web of expectations and obligations for those people going to the "bush". More so, scholars such as Alpes [18], Nyamnjoh [43], and Pelican [44] have shown the metaphorical strength of bushfalling in understanding migration aspirations and its profitability through remittances. Recent literature, however, revealed the "slipperiness" of the notion of bushfalling, involving different and sometimes contradictory understandings of what it means and how it should be performed [10]. In this article, we fill the gap in the different bodies of literature on migration from Cameroon by giving an empirical analysis on how the notion of bushfalling is interpreted and evaluated after return. Therefore, by investigating the concrete expectations of local community members towards people returning to (Anglophone) Cameroon, this article contributes more broadly to an African perspective on the meaning and impact of return migration.

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