

Challenging masculinities?

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English summary

People coming to Europe are often in the news and topic of conversation in political debates. But what happens to those who leave Europe? This dissertation focuses on the experiences and stories of Senegalese men who have left Europe. Their departure may be a consequence of restrictive migration policies as European states deport migrants, encourage them to leave by offering assistance with return, or make their lives so difficult in the hope that they will then leave of their own accord. Yet, it can also be a decision they themselves make because, for example, they want to start their own business in Senegal or be closer to their family and loved ones.

The central goal of this dissertation has been to understand how men who migrated to Europe position themselves upon their return to Senegal after an aborted migration project. Residence in Europe can offer migrants, particularly men, and their families pathways to economic prosperity and the means to achieve a higher social status. However, migration can also lead to stigma and pain when migration aspirations are not fulfilled. Most studies on deportation and return focus on what happens within the national borders of departing and returning countries or on organizations that implement return programs. This dissertation adds knowledge to this literature by examining the experiences and stories of Senegalese migrant men and their transnational connections after the return of these men to Senegal.

Theoretical framework

In this dissertation, I extend existing understandings about the social implications of return and deportation by investigating the experiences and stories of returning men with a ‘masculinity studies’ lens. This means that I focus on how men and their environment shape and adapt their returns within the framework of dominant forms of masculinity. In doing so, I draw on the idea that norms and ideas around masculinity are context-dependent and relational. Masculinity, as an embodied and performative gender identity, involves enacting social norms and reproducing cultural scripts and taboos. In this sense, masculinity consists of doing: how a person moves, dresses, speaks and perform their appearance.

Focusing on different forms of relational masculinities creates space to consider, in addition to the hegemonic forms of masculinity, those who do not, or do not fully, represent the dominant norm. The focus on masculinity stems from research showing that migration in Senegal is male dominated and seen as a way to grow, in particular for young men. Additionally, black or brown heterosexual men in particular are more

likely to be seen as potentially deportable by European states because they are perceived as “dangerous” and less likely to be in need of help or vulnerable than, say, women and children.

In the dissertation, I focus on those Senegalese men who left Europe for Senegal in the context of more restrictive migration policies. This means that I focus on those who did not have a European passport and depended on a temporary residence permit for legal residence in Europe. They are, for example, rejected asylum seekers, people who were (in danger) of overstaying their study, tourist or work visas or those who (would) lose their papers because of the end of a marriage. They could still be with the right papers at the time of departure, but were living with the realization that they had a precarious migration status or would soon be illegalized. Several participants in this study experienced deportations by European states or returned with so-called voluntary return programs, encouraged by European states, but this is not the case for all. This allows seeing not only the act or experience of a deportation, but the broader process of rendering a person illegalized. Although I am aware of the legal and political differences between, for example, deportation and ‘voluntary’ return, I use the terms interchangeably to indicate that the legal separation is not strictly followed by those who are the subject of this research. In this thesis I follow the concept of ‘deportability’ to indicate this blurredness of political definitions of return. In addition to the connections and interactions men have with people in Senegal, I took a transnational perspective in this dissertation, allowing for the role of transnational connections beyond extended family members to be seen in this study.

Sending people back to their so-called countries of origin is increasingly polarized, with emotions ranging from compassion for noncitizens to hatred and anger toward deportable people and those who support them. Immigration controls, rules and practices also include affective elements, and detention and deportation are often emotional experiences. The dissertation builds on and extends existing literature by describing the affective aspects of return and deportation. It pays attention to the ways in which returnees share stories and practices of success, hope, suffering, and courage to maintain and/or prove their masculinity. By doing so, I shed light on the ways in which they depend on, question, resist, and attempt to negotiate hierarchies of inequality in relation to affect and emotions.

Research design

To investigate how men who migrated to Europe position themselves upon their return to Senegal, some features of the research design are essential.

1). *Ethnographic fieldwork* of one year between 2017 and 2021 in which I spoke and followed men and their surroundings several times in order to also see change in their position after their return. I spoke to forty men who returned and of these, I followed twelve over an extended period of time by meeting them in Senegal, as well as by staying in touch digitally.

2). *Multi-sited ethnography: doing research in different places with a matched - sample*. In addition to the connections of returnees in Senegal, I was in contact with fourteen volunteers who maintained transnational connections with returned migrants in Senegal.

3). *Combining research methods*. During the long-term fieldwork, I combined participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations physically and online. Most of the conversations took place in people's homes, in public places where people come to relax, at cultural events such as religious celebrations, naming ceremonies and marriages, at work and at organizations working with returning migrants. In addition to migrants and their connections, I interviewed thirteen employees from (international) organizations working with migrant returnees. The results were supplemented by participant observation with Senegalese who have no migration experience and Senegalese who had been to other countries.

4). *Seeing research, like any interaction as dynamic and dialogical processes*. This means that I paid attention to how the researcher's positionality might have influenced interviews and observations.

Results

By focusing on masculinity and paying specific attention to how men narrate and shape the notion of return upon returning, unforeseen transnational connections and affective dimensions in the process of deportation and return have come to light. I nuance existing ideas about migrant men and show how returning men sometimes challenge and sometimes confirm conceptions of African migrant men in Senegalese society and in European discourses. As such, this dissertation contributes to recent literature that ethnographically examines the social and gendered implications of deportation and return. Furthermore, this dissertation goes beyond the policy-oriented research focus previously present in studies of return and deportation.

In the first empirical chapter, I examine the multifaceted experiences and performative narrative acts of male returnees to Senegal. I show that not all deportation has to result in a loss of masculine status, as returnees are able to move beyond stereotypical ideas that cast them as victims or criminals and can present their return as a success. By focusing on deportability rather than deportation and eschewing the dubious distinction between forced and voluntary return, I show how migrants who would typically be in opposite categories—an illegalized pirogue migrant and a highly educated legal migrant—behave at times in a similar fashion to oppose stereotypes upon their return. Several returnees perform a successful return despite having faced numerous hurdles, and despite the pain felt when their migration projects are aborted. This helps them to feel that they belong to Senegalese society, to create meaning and to assert agency.

The second empirical chapter allows me to link literature on marriage migration and migrant masculinities with literature on return and deportation which are often studied separately. The chapter focuses on how brown and black migrant men are often portrayed as opportunists pursuing European citizenship through marriages of convenience. These prejudices are challenged by the two case studies in this chapter, which shed light on how men in Senegal assert their dignified masculinity. The men in this chapter discursively restore their dignity by explaining that although they had the chance to stay in Europe by marrying, they decided not to marry and risk deportation. In the stories they tell, they do not marry or remain married under any circumstances. I argue that it is through their narrations and performances of non-marriage or divorce that men who return when their migration projects are aborted can capitalize on their return and demonstrate their morality. By returning to Senegal, they defy European racist stereotypes about violent promiscuous brown and black Muslim men. They maintain their masculinity by reversing stereotypes about dangerous men and portraying themselves as responsible and moral toward other migrant men and white women. At the same time, they reinforce moral hierarchies about love and marriage. These stories of men who broke up with their partners and returned home, or who did not follow a marriage migration path, often remain hidden. This is because most research on marriage migration takes place in Europe.

In the third and last empirical chapter, I examine the relationship between masculinity and affect by following transnational ties between Senegalese returnees and volunteers in Germany. Volunteers in Europe may have long-term transnational relationships with returnees, but do not appear in most academic studies of return. During my fieldwork

in Senegal, I learned that German female volunteers could be important sources of both emotional and financial support for male returnees. In addition, I found that mistrust is an emotion that seems to be constantly present, although it is rarely explored in the literature on deportation and return. Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, German volunteers offer insight into the complexity of mistrust in the context of return and deportation to West Africa. Volunteers can be part of and shape the deportation and return landscape by creating organizations and businesses together with returnees and by providing individual economic and emotional support to returnees through long-term transnational relationships. Being part of a context characterized by considerable mistrust entails risks and frustrations, but mistrust itself can also spark new relationships and dynamics. More broadly, this chapter shows the importance of the affective dimension in the context of deportation and return and the possible relevance of transnational connections for migrants returning.

Broader conclusions

All in all, I extend the existing literature by showing how dominant ideals about masculinity can both empower and put pressure on men after their return. By beginning my research in the country of return and later expanding to through transnational connections to Europe, I was able to track connections and relationships and collect data in multiple locations. This provided insight into the role of informal transnational social networks and the complex dynamics within them. I show how the often-stereotypical ways of talking about African migrant men present in Europe are also relevant in Senegal and contribute to how returnees perform their masculinity in Senegal. Returned men and those around them employ various strategies to steer their lives in the desired direction. All these strategies both question dominant masculine norms but can also affirm them.

This transnational multi-sited study contributes to a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of African male returnees as well as their complex performance of masculinity in a highly unequal social field of migration. Given the current political climate in which in particular migrant men are portrayed as security threats and are included in geopolitical agreements between European and African nations, it is critical that researchers continue to investigate how single brown and black men, in particular, are at the forefront of banishment and exclusion practices. As this dissertation demonstrates, discourses allow for some flexibility, and it takes effort to maintain discursive constructs and legitimate deportability. Through my research into masculinities in the context of return and deportation, and by bringing together different fields of literature on migration

and masculinity, I aim to inspire future research to keep on questioning and investigating the implications of (European) migration policies both in countries of origin and in Europe.