

# At the time of the “backway” Mobility rules and moral breakdown from the standpoint of a rural Gambian community

*Elia Vitturini and Alice Bellagamba*

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*Abstract:* “Backway” is the Gambian term for the outflow of people, mostly via the Mediterranean and oceanic routes that during the 2010s turned the country into one of the highest per capita origin points for sub-Saharan migrants in Europe. From the standpoint of Kerewan, a Gambian rural community proud of its migratory legacy, a mobility rules perspective uncovers the specificity of the “backway” in sensible arenas of village life: household and family networks, intergenerational relationships, and development. Since 2017, initiatives linked to the Euro-African mobility regime to immobilize young Gambians meet the practical rationality on the ground of communities like Kerewan engaged in a moral conversation about what family, village, intergenerational and transnational solidarity, and development should and do mean in the current predicament.

*Keywords:* Gambia, migration, mobility rules, moral breakdown, remittances, village development

Over the last twenty years, the expansion through diplomatic relations, legal frameworks, technological tools, and infrastructural facilities of a Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime has ushered in a renewed interest in the study of African migrations, and animated research on the African “backstage” of European border externalization (Gaibazzi et al. 2017: 4). Contextualized analyses have brought to light the historicity (and diversity) of African internal and external circulations as much as the moral implications and legitimacy of “the adventure,” as perilous and risky migrations have long been labeled in emic terms (Bredeloup 2017: 134; see also Dia 2015; Schmitz 2008;

Timera 2009). In the effort to understand how sub-Saharan migrants “navigate” (Schapendonk 2018; Vigh 2009) the business of the European Union anti-immigration measures (Anderson 2014: 274; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013: 188), their trajectories and experiences have received a large share of scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> But a “mobility rules” perspective (Fradejas-García and Salazar, this issue), as this article maintains, can further the knowledge of how family networks and communities face the intended and unintended consequences of what from a Eurocentric perspective qualify as “irregular” migrations. Here, rules are understood in the broader sense of general norms that inspire and orient



people's behavior in a given context (Fradejas-García and Salazar, this issue). The notion of "moral breakdown" (Simoni and Voirol 2021: 2518; Zigon 2009: 262) addresses instead the dilemmas raised in the power dynamics of family and village life by the continuous expansion of the "backway," as during the 2010s Gambians familiarly labeled entering Europe without a visa, mostly via the oceanic and the Mediterranean routes. The analysis starts with the rural community of Kerewan where since 2000 the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of the European Union have put under strain the moral repertoires of practices and discourses stemming from the village history of national and international mobility.

With roughly 300 households and 4,600 inhabitants (The Gambia Bureau of Statistics 2013), Kerewan is one of the large villages in Baddibu, a north bank region proud of its migratory legacy. Together with young men from the upper part of the river, men from Baddibu pioneered migrations to the Sierra Leone diamond fields in the 1950s. This wave of mobility developed from an earlier history of seasonal work in the commercial towns of the Senegalese peanut basin and in the urban and peri-urban areas of the (by then) capital of the British Colony of The Gambia (Bathurst, today Banjul), which had begun to turn into a permanent settlement by the end of World War II. The rural exodus intensified during the 1970s with the first serious setbacks in the agriculture sector. Usually called the "Kombos," the urban and peri-urban areas around Banjul today host a well-established community of retired workers, wage laborers, hustlers, and businessmen hailing from Kerewan, and the village youth, both boys and girls, go there for studies, apprenticeships, and marriage in the case of the girls. In the last two decades, boys have often used a period in the Kombos as a step toward international migration or for temporary resettlement after having failed to reach Europe. In the following pages, every time the people of Kerewan are mentioned, we mean Kerewan and its Kombos ramifications: connections back and

forth between the village and the urban areas are on a daily basis, and some of the elders currently leading the village were former Kombos residents. International mobility took off in the 1980s, when with the Economy Recovery Plan (1985) living standards within the country seriously deteriorated; they increased in the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, turning Kerewan into a multisited village, namely an evolving network that the flow of ideas, affections, resources, moral repertoires, and political initiatives keeps together throughout the home village and the different strands of its diaspora (Dia 2015: 34).

In the course of the 2010s, the escalation of the "backway" prompted the diasporic dislocation of numerous members of Kerewan's young cohorts, a large inflow of remittances, and the all-pervasive presence of returnees from the Central Mediterranean route engaged with the material and moral consequences of homecoming. Against this background, after briefly introducing the position of The Gambia in the Euro-African transcontinental regime of mobility, mobility rules will be addressed in three sensible arenas of village life, starting with households and family networks as gateway to understanding the specificity of the "backway" for the people of Kerewan in respect to earlier histories of international migrations. The second arena is that of remittances. The "backway" inflow of money has become at the same time the context and the object of everyday confrontations between younger and elderly men in Kerewan. The third is "the migration-development" nexus, one of the pillars of anti-"backway" interventions that, since 2017, have interested The Gambia. While other Gambian communities have a consolidated record of transnational engagement in the development of the home context, Kerewan has addressed the problem only recently. Although the village and its diaspora cannot but creatively cope with historical circumstances heavily influenced by the Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime, changing migration policies are, in their eyes, only external assemblages of constraints that also made international mobility challenging in

the past, although in different ways. What they discuss are their “internal” mobility rules at the intersection of the specificity of the “backway” with the reciprocal positioning of young and elderly people, in an effort to re-organize the social life of the multisited village to assert its centrality in the moral geography generated by its diasporization (Dia 2015; Lacroix 2019).

### Experiencing the “backway”

Between the military coup of 22 July 1994 and 2016, The Gambia was under the authoritarian regime of President Yahya Jammeh. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the country’s diaspora increased from approximately 35,000 people to roughly 65,000—though some estimates quote up to 90,000 people—out of a total population of roughly two million (Kebbeh 2013: 3).<sup>2</sup> In the following decade, the country “became one of the highest per-capita origin points for migrants across the Mediterranean” (Hultin and Zanker 2019: 20), with a peak of 11,929 entries into Italy by sea in 2016 (Fall 2020: 3). This upsurge happened during the conjuncture of the transformation of Libya into a human trafficking and smuggling hub after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 with increasing internal hardship in The Gambia. The sentencing to death of the leaders of the attempted 2009 coup against Jammeh, the sudden resumption of capital punishment in 2012, and the waves of arrests and incommunicado detentions that followed the failed 2014 coup (with the federal prosecution of the Gambian Americans involved) were some of the events feeding Gambians’ generalized disillusionment with their country’s future.<sup>3</sup>

While triggering high levels of out-migration, Jammeh’s regime profited internally by negotiating aid from the EU to fight it (Hultin and Zanker 2019: 23–25). Since the Canary Islands crisis of 2005–2006, Jammeh continued to comply willy-nilly with European requests to curb Gambian attempts to reach Europe in an “irregular” way. Mostly, however, he increased his po-

litical client base through the financial support received from European countries in order to fight the “backway.” Campaigns such as “Back to the Land” (Gaibazzi 2015: 65), launched in parallel with the 2006 agreements with Spain and Italy that followed the Canary Islands migration crisis of 2005–2006, or “Operation No Backway” inaugurated in 2009 served to co-opt youth networks across the nation into his propaganda machine. The “backway boys,” as this generation of migrants is locally known, and expatriate Gambians in general, played a crucial role in his unexpected defeat in the 2016 presidential elections (Hultin et al. 2017; Jaw 2017: 115–126). Under President Adama Barrow’s first mandate (2017–2021), the Gambian government, in exchange for millions of euros meant to avoid state bankruptcy, promised the European Union that this financial inflow would help stem out-migration to Europe and even attract people back to the country. Less than two months after Barrow took office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) started to repatriate Gambians stranded in Libya and Niger through an EU-funded program (Fall 2020: 6). In 2017, interventions to empower young people by tapping economic opportunities in the country, rather than migrating, began under the auspices of the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), a key tool of the Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime launched at the Valletta Summit of 2015 to counter the Mediterranean migration crisis triggered by the outbreak of the second Libyan civil war in 2014.<sup>4</sup>

At the local level, interventions and awareness-raising campaigns against the “backway,” together with a significant reduction of the flow toward Europe since 2019 (Fall 2020: 3), initiated a process of retrospective assessment of the novelty of this kind of mobility. In the eyes of Kerewan people, non-compliance with European rules of legal mobility was not the point at stake. Pioneers of migrations to the Sierra Leone diamond fields traveled without a permit from the colonial state and faced mass deportation in the 1950s; the villagers who ventured to Spain

and southern Europe in the 1990s regularized their position once in place. The volume and impact of the travel itself, rather than the lack of an entry visa, identified the “backway” from a local point of view. Through a dynamic already observed by Abdelmalek Sayad ([1999] 2004: 116–117) in the waves of Algerian migration to France, households, family networks, and Kerewan as the home place felt a loss of control over the entire mobility process and have striven to regain it since then.

After the outbreak of the first Libyan civil war in 2011, Kerewan witnessed a frenetic outflow of young people. In the presidential elections of that year, like other north bank communities that had been so far opposed to Jammeh, the village voted for him for fear of being completely marginalized from government infrastructural development. The decision of the village elders was largely shared, but discouragement mounted, as all avenues of social promotion seemed blocked apart from those depending on Jammeh’s volatile favor, and thus on the individual capacity of continuing to play the role of loyal supporters efficaciously. One of our young interlocutors in Kerewan reported that once, when trying with a group of friends to count their acquaintances who had traveled the “backway” in those years, he reached the conclusion that at least 310 people were in Europe: “Eighty percent of the young people living in this community have already migrated. I am 100 percent sure of this because all the youths I grew up with have migrated . . . my close friends, my classmates . . . most of them travelled.”<sup>5</sup>

The emotional and social impact of the “backway” was equally pervasive. With the impossibility of repatriating and burying the mortal remains in the appropriate way that would ensure their belonging to Kerewan, losses at sea shocked the community, as much as young men’s abrupt and secret departures.<sup>6</sup> As a rule, earlier generations of migrants traveled with the support of family networks; the preparation could last a few years. However, the 2010s rush toward Libya marked a major change with the individualization of decision-making (Cissokho

et al. 2021: 29) and with the rule-breaking that became typical of sudden departures. Some travelers, for instance, stole family property in order to start the trip, only to call for the support of relatives when stranded along the Central Mediterranean route. Others left without notice and remained off the family radar for long periods. In all these cases, family relationships had to be reconstituted after a period of emotional and affective crisis.

Dudu, today a man in his thirties,<sup>7</sup> is an example of this trend. The boss of the carpentry workshop in the Kombos where he served as apprentice used the deposit for an important commission to take the “backway.” Other colleagues traveled too, and Dudu decided to try as well. Lacking financial resources, he worked his way to Libya through petty jobs in Senegal, Mali, and Niger. In Libya, he found a job, but his employer fell victim to a military clash. After meeting personnel from the International Organization of Migration (IOM), Dudu agreed to be repatriated: “I said I was from Senegal so they took me straight to Senegal. I hung around one year. I said to myself: ‘I don’t want to go straight to The Gambia like this. For so many years, I tried to travel to Europe. Before going back, let me try to get some money so that I can give it to my mom, or start some business.’”<sup>8</sup> Dudu managed to find a job in Dakar at a food producing company. After a few months, with his first savings, he bought a mobile phone and a SIM card and called his family. He could only remember the number of his elder brother in Banjul, who had become family head after their father’s death: “I called him to ask for my mother’s number. He answered: ‘You, before asking for your mother’s number, where are you? Did you know what you left here? Your mother never slept, asking about you all the day. When you come back here, I will punish you, you traveled without even informing me. I am your brother. Why did you not inform me?’”<sup>9</sup>

For the people of Kerewan, international migration has become, over the last part of the twentieth century, a socially valued path to the household’s material and social reproduction.

By traveling without notice, however, Dudu broke one of the pillars of filial piety by distressing his own mother. Family roles and positions but also emotions and affects within the close family network were challenged in the process and renegotiated upon his return, which was delayed precisely because of his feelings of shame (Cole and Groes 2016: 8).

Issa’s story highlights another aspect of the “backway” social dynamics. Kerewan family heads have long played a key role in migration decision processes, and Issa was among those who reached the conclusion that the gains from supporting the “backway” travelers were indeed worth the risk. But if the journeys of his brothers had turned tragic, as often happened, he would have faced, in addition to his personal culpability, also social blame for having exposed his juniors to terrible risks and having substantially destabilized the economic situation of the household under his responsibility.

Although living in the Kombos with his wife and children, Issa became leader of the household in Kerewan after the death of his father. In this role, he handles the distribution of the income generated by the yearly peanut harvest, dividing it between family consumption and the investment necessary to start a new farming cycle. He also bears financial responsibility for the household: the co-wives of his father and the younger brothers and sisters still live in Kerewan. “I spend 2,500 dalasi [slightly more than 40 euros] on a monthly basis,” he explains, “and they use it to buy rice and whatever things they may need. I send additional money depending on their needs and requests, for either medical bills or gardening materials. I am like their emergency contact when they have issues and problems.”<sup>10</sup>

The three months that follow the selling of the yearly peanut harvest are the only period when Issa feels partly relieved of his financial responsibility. In order to alleviate it, in 2014 he decided to finance the “backway” for two of his brothers who are now in Italy. As an established business person in the Kombos, he could mobilize the necessary resources. The first journey

went smoothly. The brother wanted to go; Issa invested 65,000 dalasi, an equivalent of roughly 1,100 euros, and covered the travel expenses. Their mother was not informed, as they feared her opposition. For the second trip, Issa played an even more direct role in organizing the journey. He spent 85,000 dalasi (1,400 euros) and also needed the financial support of the brother already in Italy and of another relative. This time, they informed their mother as the first successful attempt quieted family fears. For some time after this second departure, Issa lacked funds to pay his suppliers. Only thanks to his solid reputation could he buy the merchandise on credit and pay for it after sale. “To be honest,” he commented during one of our conversations, “I did not like [the idea of this “backway” migration], but that was the trend among the youth. But on second thoughts I consented, in view of the fact that, since the whole family depends on me, and there is an opportunity to help someone in the family that would lessen the burden on me, why not?”<sup>11</sup> Although his financial investment was not a loan, Issa definitely expected the brothers to reciprocate, which they have done by taking on some of his economic responsibilities toward the family in Kerewan as soon as they were in a position to do so.

### Contesting the moral value of remittances

Precariousness in host countries (and the impending menace of repatriation) has left Kerewan “backway” boys disillusioned with integration in Europe (Andersson 2014: 278). Managing their uncertain presence within “translocal topologies” of migration regimes and social worlds, and consciously swimming “in very different seas at the very same time” (Haile and Schapendonk, this issue), they have kept their focus on the importance of investing at home (see also Castellano, this issue). As soon as they could, for instance, many of them tried to alleviate the distress initially caused with small remittances of a few hundred euros per month, which raised their families’ living standards compared with

the average villager or Kombos resident. Another important step was refurbishing the dilapidated family home and constructing new buildings either in Kerewan or in the Kombos; the “backway” has brought small solar panels to charge mobile phones, bicycles for the family’s students so that they could get to school more easily, mobile phones and motorbikes that make a difference to their daily mobility.

Driven by the desire of rule-breakers like Dudu to make amends, this inflow of remittances makes clear that the travelers of the “backway” left in order to be in Kerewan. “Moral breakdown” is a notion introduced by Valerio Simoni and Jérémie Voirol (2021: 2518) to explain how remittances are morally driven and, in turn, part of the process of morality-in-the-making in given sociohistorical and cultural contexts.<sup>12</sup> Money from people abroad influences local moral norms and generates forms of self-reflection on the implications of individual and collective actions as well as dilemmas and paradoxes. This is what has happened in Kerewan. Young men who stayed put, trying an economic activity in situ, or returned from Libya after having failed to cross the Mediterranean have started a public discourse that directly criticizes the dependency of local residents on the “backway” resources. In their perspective, exalting the “backway” is immoral because it suspends the moral judgment of the entire community concerning the sources of remittances.

For Kebbeh, a young man in his early thirties, Kerewan households and family networks have placed powerful pressure on the young travelers even if they were not directly involved in the organization of the travel itself. With his two younger brothers in Italy, he finds that his personal financial contribution to the household is constantly undervalued in comparison with their remittances:

I put money into the family every day, but [the migrants’] contribution is more valued. Their money has a different value. . . . If one month I don’t buy the bag of rice, the whole village will know it. If I don’t

buy the Cashpower<sup>13</sup> there will be a serious problem. They will say: “He is working; he is only giving money to his wife; he is not supporting the family.” That’s why we who are here are in a serious situation. That’s why many will force themselves to go.<sup>14</sup>

According to Kebbeh, people have also stopped caring about the source of remittances. Confronting the other villagers at the *bantaba*<sup>15</sup> about the origins of the money that they use, for example, for performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, is for him a matter of principle:

I say to them that Gambians in Europe may earn their income from selling drugs. I also heard my mom who was blaming, with other people in front of the house, a young boy from Kerewan arrested for selling marijuana. I got annoyed and asked them if they were sure that the money that their children were sending from Europe was not from the same source: they all remained silent.<sup>16</sup>

Other young men in the village lament the devaluation of their economic activity at home. Siaka, a local shopkeeper whose younger brothers traveled the “backway,” agrees with Kebbeh. For Siaka, residents are not supporting his efforts and do not visit his shop frequently, as they should if they were truly respecting his efforts to carve out a living in The Gambia.<sup>17</sup> Frustration is common among his peers, both those who did not travel yet and those who returned empty-handed from Libya. Momodou, for instance, came back in 2015. In the Kombos, he attended some of the training courses organized since 2017 in support of returning migrants thanks to Gambian institutional participation in the Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime. Having realized that petty trade was gradually expanding in Kerewan, at the beginning of 2020, he opened a shop in the village. During our conversation, he was optimistic about his activity and his personal capacity to make it grow,

although concerned about the village’s overall economic situation: “Kerewan was probably in the past the main farming community of North Bank, but now people are relaxing. If there was 100 percent farming, now maybe it’s 35 percent. The rest are sitting and relaxing because of this backway.”<sup>18</sup> Kerewan’s agricultural decline is visible in the abandonment of farmlands, even in areas not far from the settlement. But, according to Momodou, the financial dependency of households and family networks on their diasporic members ignites internal tensions as well as new inequalities:

There is a problem here. Elders, when they meet at the *bantabas* exchanging ideas, they try to . . . [say things like] “You are nothing! Look at me, I am not doing anything today; I am not working. My son is abroad doing everything for me. Look at me!” . . . Even at their *bantaba* . . . if before they were sitting to one side, when their son is in Europe, they start to sit in the middle. They encourage each other, so maybe someone encourages his son to leave. The first thing a father does when his son enters Europe is to go to the *bantaba* and say: “Now I also have someone in Europe.” Those who do not have anybody do not even talk.<sup>19</sup>

To Momodou, and other young village men, it seems as if the elders have stopped praising and valuing hard work, a fundament of historically inherited pathways of individual maturation, when Kerewan mostly relied on agriculture. Instead, they make an open display of their reliance on external resources and express disparagement and even contempt toward young men engaged in local business. This shift has put young men onto the path of becoming “foolish to themselves” in the words of another young interlocutor.<sup>20</sup> According to him, the people of Kerewan know that the precarious legal status of Gambian asylum seekers in Europe forces many of them to explore every possible way to start sending remittances back home as

soon as possible. This uncovers a double moral standard: why do the villagers judge the morality of money earned in The Gambia and avoid questioning the sources of international remittances? The figure of the family head who goes to Mecca with the money collected by a son who sells drugs in Europe epitomizes the critical reflection that Kebbeh, Siaka, Momodou, and other young men try to promote in Kerewan. The “backway” inflow of remittances has generated moral breakdowns over what course of action should be encouraged and/or taken with regard to this specific kind of mobility. Elders whose children were successful look down upon young men who never traveled or were compelled to come back. On their side, young men have begun to contest the accent put on the “backway” as a fast track to individual and collective well-being and called for a more egalitarian re-orientation in the patterns of social recognition. In their eyes, by staying in Kerewan they provide a contribution to family and community life as significant as those who successfully traveled the “backway.”

### Rethinking the migration–development nexus

In December 2020, the Gambian government officially presented the first National Migration Policy (NMP) with the dual purpose of channeling migrants’ investment in the country and offering a contrast to the “backway” through the promotion of “skill development, funding opportunities and productive employment for youth” (Bellagamba et al. 2021: 4). As it was under Jammeh, there are internal political implications to Gambian institutional participation in the Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime. Barrow’s first mandate used migrations to promote an official narrative that endorsed the citizenry, rather than the state, with the responsibility for national development. In line with the philosophy of the EUTF, the “new Gambia” is a country capable of drawing on the diaspora “for continued investment and support while

pursuing programs of immobilization for its youth at home—preparing them to be service providers for tourists and the wealthier Gambian transnational community” (Aucoin 2022: 10). At the local level, this perspective from above of the migration–development nexus has clashed with the fact that the remittances from the “backway” have raised living standards in the home contexts. Certainly, in Kerewan, some young men have put the morality of this money inflow under discussion; but to a large extent, the positive consequences of the “backway” are acknowledged. When in 2018, the EU and the Gambian government produced a “non-binding ‘good practice’ agreement” aimed at increasing forced returns from European countries (Altrogge and Zanker 2019: 28–29), the people of Kerewan started to worry about their young men in Europe in a precarious legal and economic position. In their eyes, controlling the migration–development nexus does not mean stopping the outflow of young people or forcing their return home but rather fostering unity among the different strands of the village diaspora.

Residents in the Kombos began to organize in the 1970s under the guidance of elders such as Alhagie Kemo Ceesay, the Imam of Old Jeshwang. In the 1980s and 1990s, while people from Kerewan in the United Kingdom and United States were also trying to come together, a group of villagers in their late forties and early fifties, all residents in the Kombos, organized public forums to discuss the future development of Kerewan, such as the Kerewan Congress that took place in 1994, on the eve of the military coup that brought Jammeh to power.<sup>21</sup> The coup stopped further initiatives at the local level, partly because of the ban on political activities that the military enforced in the aftermath. In the 1996 elections that heralded the return to democracy, Kerewan and Baddibu qualified as opposition strongholds under the spotlight of Jammeh’s repressive apparatus with the side effect of curtailing migrants’ contributions and ability to mobilize for local development. Remittances interested households and family net-

works mostly because any public display of money could attract the unwanted attention of the regime. With Jammeh’s removal, migrants’ participation in the local arena has come into the limelight. Three main hometown associations are active today, one based in the United Kingdom, another in the United States, and the third in Europe, Kerewan One Family. According to our interlocutors, the creation of the latter by a group of youths who traveled the “backway” and reached continental Europe in 2014, specifically Italy, Spain, and Germany, also triggered the formalization of migrants’ associationism in the United Kingdom and United States. The name itself—Kerewan One Family—is evocative of the attachment of the “backway” travelers to the village in the spirit of overcoming internal divisions stemming from communal history and also from recent politics. The first nucleus, numbering fifty young men, came together through WhatsApp. The objective was to provide mutual help to face emergencies in Europe, but their numbers rapidly rose to hundreds with the inclusion of village residents and people from the diaspora, turning Kerewan One Family into a strong, multisited association with a representative in the village.<sup>22</sup> Their commitment strengthened during the 2016 electoral campaign: they gave financial support to Barrow’s coalition and pressured their families in The Gambia not to vote for Jammeh.<sup>23</sup>

If there is one long-standing rule in the village, it is that the “children” should not challenge the “fathers.” But the travelers of the “backway” defied this principle, not only through their rule-breaking departures but also by taking the initiative of mobilizing against Jammeh, while their elders in The Gambia and in the diaspora reasonably feared his revenge on the village. As their move was successful, they have become primary interlocutors in the discussion on the future of Kerewan. Crucial in this respect was the investiture in 2019 of a new village chief, who had been one of the organizers of the 1994 Kerewan Congress. Together with supporters of all ages, the new chief has actively engaged in the process of building up the multisited village



cohesion through the coordination of its associative life, and other important initiatives such as the promotion of the incisive participation of different social categories in the decision-making arenas through the involvement of the youth and of members of families who are not part of the original group of village founders.

Kerewan One Family and the two other diasporic associations are involved in the organization of the annual Quranic recitations or *Gamo*. This annual event lasts for two or three days and attracts the diaspora back to the village. In the words of Ousman, another businessman from the Kombos, “the *Gamo* was created to make people come back, to see people back, to make you reflect in your mind . . . because they saw people going out.”<sup>24</sup>

Over the last two decades, this kind of celebration has spread all over The Gambia, even in localities where it was not a long-standing tradition. Each village has an organizing committee that negotiates internally, for instance through consulting the WhatsApp groups of the associations, to identify the most convenient weekend of the year for the greatest number of people to attend. During the recitations people share prayer sessions; they wish each other well, eat together, and discuss common issues. They also assess the diaspora’s contribution in public.

People who return to Kerewan for the occasion have the chance to monitor the situation of their “left behinds” and of other families. Gossip comments on the absence of migrants who failed to provide a visible contribution to their village households. Forums involve migrants in the identification of infrastructural gaps in education and health facilities, road maintenance and flood defenses, and commit to finding the financial resources and organizing the interventions. Individual public pledges about the covering of specific expenses may trigger competition, especially among people living abroad, to provide sizable monetary contributions for addressing collective issues. As a socially formalized event through which Kerewan brings discipline to village development interventions, the *Gamo* provides a stage for the conduct of

the individual migrant, who evaluates his personal performance in comparison with others. In Sayad’s perspective ([1999] 2004: 137), this dynamic would have expressed the effort to handle the “culpability, culpabilization and self-culpabilization” at the core of the migrant’s existential condition, which in Kerewan is today mostly represented by the travelers of the “backway.” Robert Smith’s ethnography of the diasporic connections between a Mexican village and the United States, in contrast, has theorized home visits as key to the renegotiation of gender and generational roles and to the historical trajectory of accommodation between transnational and local power structures (Smith 2006: 120–121) that constitute the multisited village, though he never used this expression.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Kerewan, the challenge is to accommodate the proactivity of young migrants who risked their lives to reach Europe, in a historical conjuncture where the local acquires a renewed agency over its future in the new circumstances created by the end of the Jammeh’s regime in 2016.

## Conclusions

Moving beyond the wisdom of policy-making and state-oriented approaches, the Kerewan case study shows how mobility rules emerge out of multiple and also diverging political, societal, and cultural discourses and practices that are all affectively, emotionally, and morally loaded (Fradejas-García and Salazar, this issue). This kind of perspective uncovers the practical rationality of the multisited village captured in between the “above” of the Euro-African transcontinental mobility regime and the “from below” initiatives of individual migrants who cope with its constraints. Our choice of the term “rationality” is here intentional: Kerewan acts with the purpose of maintaining its centrality in the affections, thoughts, and economic investment of those who, for one reason or another, left. At the time of the “backway,” as we have tried to show, this intermediary collective level is a window into the effort of recovering control

over a centrifugal process that risks transforming the original village into a ghost settlement, as already happened in other rural Gambian contexts. Local power dynamics are shaped by intergenerational tensions as much as by the interplay between particularistic family interests and the communal agenda. Mobility rules are not set apart from other institutionalized (and fundamental) aspects of Kerewan social life: they must be considered in the context of ongoing transformations and adaptation, as they contribute to an ongoing moral conversation about what family, village, intergenerational, and transnational solidarity should and do mean in the current predicament. Family heads and junior males are expected to share the moral duty to contribute to the material needs of the family and of the community at large. Young men who stayed put or returned from the “backway” promote a public discourse about the non-sustainability of this kind of mobility for the future of individuals, family networks, and the community. The new village head and his supporters are absorbed by the task of strengthening platforms of transnational coordination, like the *Gamo*, in order to valorize the contribution of those who claim to belong to the multisited village. All these are areas of intense moral, social, economic and political ferment. As suggested by Riccardo Ciavolella (2018: 55–57), moral dilemmas can demonstrate the impossibility of a social group challenging the oppressive political economy that causes its marginality. In the case of Kerewan, moral dilemmas involve political issues that are maintained at the circumscribed level of the household, family networks, the village, and its diaspora. Kerewan people, of course, do not ignore state policies but they note the difference between the internal and daily politics of the multisited village, and the national political arena, with whose dynamics the majority are disillusioned. For years, Jammeh’s regime put all forms of social solidarity under strain and left in its wake interpersonal grievances and resentments of which Gambians are unready to talk openly. The processes of social recomposition under way in Kerewan mediate

inherited normative visions of social roles and relations with conjunctural and locally situated attempts to manage the transformations that, in emic terms, compound to “development,” namely the capacity of the multisited village to grow and retain a sense of unity and collective agency despite ongoing and ever-changing geographical dislocation.

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**Elia Vitturini** is postdoctoral researcher of the project “Traces of mobility, violence and solidarity: Reconceptualizing cultural heritage through the lens of migration,” University of Milan, Italy. In 2017, he received his PhD in social anthro-

pology at the University of Milan-Bicocca with a historical-ethnographic research project on emancipation and marginalization of minority groups in Somaliland. Until 2022, Elia carried out fieldwork research on the migration–development nexus, multisited villages, and the Euro-African migration regime in The Gambia as a member of the “MigChoice” project (University of Birmingham, University of Milan-Bicocca) and the PRIN 2017 project “Genealogies of African Freedoms” (University of Turin). *Email:* eliavitturini@hotmail.it; elia.vitturini@unimi.it | ORCID: 0000-0001-9059-6562

**Alice Bellagamba** is Full Professor of Political Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Milan-Bicocca (Italy). She has a long-term research experience in the Upper Gambia and Southern Senegal. Her publications include *Ethnographie, histoire et colonialism en Gambie* (Paris 2002), *L’Africa e la stregoneria: Saggio di antropologia storica* (Roma 2008), and together with Sandra Greene and Martin Klein, *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*: vol. 1: *The Sources* (Cambridge 2013), vol 2: *Essays on Sources and Method* (Cambridge 2016), *The Bitter Legacy: African Slavery Past and Present* (Princeton 2013), *African Slaves, African Masters* (Trenton, NJ: 2017). Currently, she is leading the project Navigating Returns: West African Experiences of Difficult Homecoming (2023–2025).

*Email:* alice.bellagamba@unimib.it  
ORCID: 0000-0002-2762-381X

## Notes

1. For instance, Caroline Melly (2011) on Senegal, more recently Gaibazzi (2019) on the existential dimension of Gambian irregular dimensions, and Clara Lecadet (2018) on post-deportation trajectories in Mali and Togo.
2. The term “diaspora” in Gambian jargon refers to expatriate nationals. According to Kebbeh (2013: 3–4), until the early 2010s the largest number of Gambians abroad were in Spain, followed by the United States, United Kingdom, Nigeria, and Senegal. Migration to Spain and the United States increased after the 1994 military coup. The 2010s consolidation of the Central Mediterranean route as infrastructure of northward sub-Saharan mobility turned Italy and Germany into two other important recipients of Gambian migration.
3. For the 2009 attempted coup: News Wires (2010); on capital executions: CNN (2012); for the 2014 failed coup: Amnesty International (2015).
4. For instance, between 2017 and 2021, Make it in the Gambia–Tekki Fii and the Youth Empowerment Project promoted vocational training and offered grants for the establishment of small-sized enterprises. The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration (launched in December 2016) was a second EUTF-supported program to build up the capacities of government and local stakeholders in sustainable reintegration; it also provided reintegration assistance to return migrants. Other EUTF interventions were carried out by international and Gambian NGOs in partnership with government and local associations.
5. Interview: 24 February 2020, Kerewan.
6. On body repatriation in the moral geography of its diaspora, see Thomas Lacroix (2019); Gerhild Perl (2016: 202) describes the practice in terms of a “genealogical reconstruction’ . . . that pacifies the bereaved and reinstalls belonging after death.”
7. Interview: 25 February 2020, Kerewan.
8. Interview: 25 February 2020, Kerewan.
9. Interview: 25 February 2020, Kerewan.
10. Interview: 6 March 2020, Serrekunda.
11. Interview: 6 March 2020, Serrekunda.
12. On the social value of remittances see, among others, Jorgen Carling 2014; David Garbin 2019; Peggy Levitt 2009; Supriya Singh 2013; Hung Cam Thai 2014.
13. The payment system for electric energy in The Gambia.
14. Interview: 29 February 2020, Kerewan.
15. The *bantaba* is a structure similar to a gazebo that serves as a meeting point for men. *Bantabas* are located inside extended family compounds and in central places of the villages. They host public daily forums of vital importance as well as special community occasions. They are also a stage for performing and discussing hierarchies of prestige and power.

16. Interview: 29 February 2020, Kerewan.
17. Interview: 24 February 2020, Kerewan.
18. Interview: 1 March 2020, Kerewan.
19. Interview: 1 March 2020, Kerewan.
20. Interview: 24 February 2020, Kerewan.
21. Interviews: 6 September 2021, Old Jeshwang; 13 October 2022, Old Jeshwang.
22. Interviews: 7 October 2021, Kerewan; 13 October 2022, Old Jeshwang.
23. Interview: 2 February 2020, Yundum.
24. Interview: 5 March 2020, Serrekunda.
25. On migrants' home visits as crucial moments in the construction of a balanced trajectory of accumulation and redistribution inspired by the social and moral rules of the home community, see also Maria Hernández-Carretero (2015: 2034–2035) for Senegal.

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