

Why aspiring migrants trust migration brokers: the moral economy of departure in Anglophone Cameroon

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Migration brokers are commonly thought of as playing either a positive or a negative role in people's aspirations for geographical and social mobility. A growing body of literature in the social sciences and humanities recognizes the importance of mediation for migration trajectories (Baird [forthcoming](#); Xiang [2007](#); McKeown [2008](#); Lindquist *et al.* [2012](#); Sanchez [2014](#); Spener [2009](#)). These studies are beginning to analyse how relations between brokers and migrants are articulated in different contexts by geographically and culturally specific norms. Most research dedicated to migration brokerage, however, frames brokers as traffickers or smugglers (Aronowitz [2009](#); Chin [1999](#); Finkenauer [2001](#); Kyle and Liang [2001](#); Zheng [2010](#); Koser [1997](#); Doomernik [2012](#); Triandafyllidou and Maroukis [2012](#); Salt and Stein [1997](#); Van den Anker and Doomernik [2006](#)). Qualifying migration brokers according to such legal categories risks foreclosing our understanding of migration brokerage by unwittingly importing a functionalist as well as a state perspective into the analysis (Scott [1998](#)).

States have a vested interest in portraying migration brokers as criminal and immoral as this allows them to deflect from their own responsibilities in creating structural conditions for the exploitation of migrant labour (Anderson [2012](#)). Scholars working on exploitative forms of labour migration have illuminated structural, including legal, sources of vulnerabilities for migrants in their countries of arrival (Van den Anker and van Liempt [2012](#)). This body of literature has overlooked to a large extent the cultural dynamics that tie together brokers and migrants from their shared countries of departure. Anthropologists and geographers have studied the cultural and social dynamics in which aspiring migrants seek to migrate (Graw and Schielke [2012](#); Ndjio [2009](#); Mazzucato and Schans [2011](#)). This body of literature provides important insights into the values and norms of aspiring migrants and their families, but has largely neglected the infrastructure of migration: that is, the authorities that deny or give access to geographical mobility (Xiang [2013](#): 15). While a group of Africanists has done very illuminating work on self-made men as emerging local authorities who create wealth amongst others through transcontinental mobility (Beuving [2013](#); MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga [2000](#); Ndjio [2008](#)), this body of scholarship

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has not related itself to academic debates on socio-legal processes that in other disciplines are framed as smuggling, trafficking or broadly as transnational crime.

This article seeks to fill the gap between these different bodies of literature by offering empirical analysis of how migration facilitation processes work on the ground and how they relate to the vulnerability of migrants and non-migrants more widely. In the article, I argue that migration brokers cannot exclusively be understood as actors who are instrumental in making migration happen. To grasp why aspiring migrants continue to entrust money to migration brokers, it is imperative to also consider migration brokers' symbolic capital. The article therefore looks at the cultural universe of migration in Cameroon. It deciphers moralities within a context of departure that shapes relations between migration brokers, aspiring migrants and family members – both at the point where clients hand over money and at points of failure.

Rather than evaluating the credibility of brokers in terms of the supposed 'legal' or 'illegal' nature of their work, I elaborate on how aspiring migrants distinguish between dokimen, feymen and big men. Dokimen are migration brokers who offer travel documents for travel purposes without further guarantees about success or other follow-up services. Feymen are tricksters who use the scarcity of legal avenues for international travel to swindle and make money. Big men are public figures who use their social networks to act as patrons for others who are less well placed. The economy of trust for migration and international travel is discussed through these three vernacular categories.

The empirical material for this article comes out of a broader research project on the control and facilitation of emigration trajectories from Cameroon to wealthier countries in the 'West'. Between 2007 and 2013, I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in a small university town called Buea in Anglophone Cameroon. I observed how aspiring migrants and their family members engaged with migration brokers and consulate offices in their attempts to leave the country. The research covered a broad range of migration brokers offering very different kinds of services. Two of these brokers had offices and I was thus able to observe their work in their respective work spaces on an almost daily basis. I accompanied them on various trips and visits and have followed their trajectories for seven years now. All conversations and interactions for this research were in Pidgin. Where appropriate, I have endeavoured to share the wealth of these local forms of expression.

The article asks why aspiring migrants continue to trust migration brokers even in the case of prior failures and disappointments. After providing an overview of facilitation services and transcontinental migration in Anglophone Cameroon today, the article discusses three local categories – namely dokimen, feymen and big men – that have come to characterize norms and values that surround departure projects. In the first case study of a failed departure project, I examine the range of hopes and fears that drive relations between brokers, migrants and their families. The second case study examines how aspiring migrants and their family members continue to relate to and seek compensation from brokers after a failed departure project. The article closes with a discussion of the way in which migration brokerage relates to European migration management and aspirations for global membership (Ferguson 2006: 155–75).

Aspiring migrants and migration brokers in Anglophone Cameroon

Since the early 1990s, migration aspirations in Anglophone Cameroon have been widespread, visible in public life (see, for example, the naming of restaurants and bars such as Bushfallers' Spot, Schengen Restaurant or Ambassade), and present in daily conversations and jokes. While different social classes have different means to access the opportunity to study and work abroad, migration aspirations nevertheless touch young Cameroonians from wealthier as well as poorer families from all walks of life and with varying levels of education. Both men and women succeed in getting financial support from their families to try to migrate, yet migration aspirations are strongest among young Cameroonians in their twenties who are not yet married and without children for whom they are responsible (Alpes 2012). In Anglophone Cameroon, migration aspirations are particularly strong as Anglophone Cameroonians are faced with even fewer business and employment opportunities as a linguistic minority compared with their Francophone co-nationals.

Migration aspirations have become an essential part of society in Cameroon in the wake of the economic crisis following the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the devaluation of the country's currency, the CFA franc (Van de Walle 2001; Konings 1996: 252; Monga 1995). The effects of the economic crisis are still tangible today: family homes that are unfinished, insufficient pensions, civil servants who take on extra jobs to make ends meet. Since the initial crisis, rates of unemployment have been high, the informal sector large, university employees have needed contacts to be able to find paid employment, and apprentices are often forced to work for many years without pay. The sense of crisis has endured for almost twenty-five years and has firmly established itself in people's livelihood strategies. In a routinized state of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Johnson-Hanks 2005), coping has become a new way of life. In large parts of West Africa, people experience a lack of meaningful citizenship, which in turn has fed into strong desires for the global (Piot 2010; 2006). Migration attempts are an important avenue through which these desires take shape.

While local perceptions of migration vary regionally and take shape in relation to both national and global power dynamics (Pelican 2012), physical mobility in Anglophone Cameroon has historically been closely tied to social mobility. Consequently, many aspiring migrants give large amounts of money to migration brokers in the hope of being able to leave the country. At times, families even take out debt to finance emigration attempts and often the money invested comes from important financial reserves for retirement or ill health. Only Cameroonians who belong to the elite of the country and have a strong network of international connections within their family or have already travelled abroad themselves are less reliant on the help of migration brokers. Typically, those who are in a privileged position because they are politically and economically well placed to be able to choose to stay and construct a life in Cameroon (Pelican 2012) are also able to migrate without a broker.

Since the late 1990s, Anglophone Cameroonians have invented a new term to describe the contemporary migration phenomenon of the region: 'bushfalling'. Bushfalling is the act of going out to the wilderness (i.e. the bush) to hunt down a trophy (i.e. meat or money) and bring it back home (Nyamnjoh 2011). A

person who has successfully travelled and hunted is called a bushfaller. Bushfallers are expected to return home with money for the survival of the family. By drawing on images of hunting, Anglophone Cameroonians reveal how closely they associate travelling and migrating with risk taking, bravery and adventure.

It is not coincidental that the same period has seen a tightening of border controls. So common are the stories of visa refusals that many aspiring migrants have given up on their attempts to access geographical mobility through this route. The seeming impossibility of legal travel is experienced all the more violently as richer parts of the globe are inherently present in and through images, news and consumer goods. Young Cameroonians – like so many of their peers on the African continent – are not simply disconnected but actively cut off from places where their labour would be remunerated more highly, and thus feel a sense of abjection (Ferguson 1999: 236). Migration policies seeking to avoid the exploitation of migrants by traffickers and smugglers have done little to alleviate people's vulnerabilities and have instead heightened people's dependency on and need for such facilitators of mobility by adding new layers of control and suspicion at the border (Anderson 2012; Andrijasevic 2010).

Aspiring migrants try to overcome these hurdles to mobility by liaising with public figures who have important international connections that could facilitate their travel projects. Migration brokerage services can vary from support with visa application forms in internet cafés, to the issuing of invitation letters for conferences by NGOs, to actual all-inclusive travel packages offered by specialist offices. Travel opportunities can change very fast and the degrees to which mediated services are commercialized differ. The prices for travel programmes varied between 1.8 million CFA francs for China and Dubai (roughly €2,700) and 2.5 million CFA francs for Canada and Europe (roughly €3,800).

To be able to facilitate migration, brokers require a set of skills for the fabrication of travel documents, connections abroad or with state actors for the mobilization of documents, and/or cultural and social skills to be able to convince potential clients that they are able to deliver on their promises. As a line of business, migration brokerage offers the potential for a high level of profit. Yet, brokers are not necessarily amongst the wealthiest in their places of origin. Migration as a line of business entails many risks, and the two brokers whom I have followed in greatest depth have both repeatedly been obliged to close down (and then reopen) their offices.

While trust through ethnic networks can be crucial in individual relations, in practice, none of the individuals and offices I observed had a tendency to recruit more clients from their home communities. Anglophone migration brokers come from both the South and the North-West Province. Only in exceptional cases did I hear about female migration brokers, and I did not personally meet any. While women can, of course, also become symbols of economic success (cf. Khor 2009), the symbolic capital required to act as migration brokers makes it easier for men to be credible as brokers of global mobility. Regardless of the gender of aspiring migrants, migration brokers are not 'other' to aspiring migrants; rather, they are 'allies' and 'helpers' in a quest for both geographic and social mobility. Often, brokers have the expertise and the connections that they need for their work precisely because they have previously attempted emigration themselves or have managed to leave the country and have then been deported back.

In a context of imposed immobility (Carling 2002), any knowledge or experience of the outside world is a social currency that can be exploited as a resource. In this sense, deportation is not necessarily a total failure (Alpes 2014). At least two of the brokers with whom I conducted research had experienced deportation prior to or during their work as migration brokers. Because both brokers had other social, political and economic resources to rely on, they were able to capitalize even on failed departure and migration projects in order to establish themselves or enhance their work as facilitators of other people's migration projects.

The moral economy of departure: dokimen, feymen and big men

Legal considerations hardly arise in discussions between brokers and aspiring migrants. During the entire fieldwork period, I only once heard a migrant ask about the nature of the visa he was going to receive. The broker's reply was that 'a visa was a visa'. Relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers therefore cannot be understood through the lens of legal paradigms, but need to be analysed according to the moralities that shape the economy of departure.

With the moral economy of departure, I refer to the production and circulation of values, emotions and norms as they are evoked by the event of departure. Originally, Thompson coined the notion of the moral economy to tease out both the 'view of societal norms and obligations' and the 'proper economic functions of several parties within the community' (1971: 79). Recently, however, the moral economy has been used as an analytical lens to elaborate less on notions of economic justice and exploitation (Scott 1977) and more on values and norms of a given group at a given moment (Fassin 2009: 1257; 2005). Following the work of Olivier de Sardan, this article seeks to elaborate on the moral economy of departure in Anglophone Cameroon by making visible 'processes of legitimation from the actors' point of view' (1999: 25).

An inductive analysis based on indigenous categories can render visible these actors' point of view. When talking about migration facilitation services, emic categories can make visible a moral economy of legitimacy and illicitness that is connected to, but distinctively different from, the value judgements inherent in legal categories. In the moral worlds of policymakers, for example, the potential illegality of a migration facilitation service merges with either its illicitness or its potentially harmful effect on migrants. In a place of departure where legal means of travel are largely unattainable for a great section of the population, however, migration facilitation services offer real avenues of hope for geographical mobility. Aspiring migrants relate the potential trickery of a broker to the institutionalized sabotage of their migration ambitions, notably by destination states that deny visas. As a consequence, aspiring migrants and their families do not necessarily distinguish harshly between their different failed travel attempts that did or did not involve a migration broker.

Rather than referring to migration brokers as smugglers, aspiring migrants in Anglophone Cameroon talk about 'dokimen', 'feymen' and 'big men'. Such emic classifications do not refer to separate social groups or different professional activities, but to different appreciations of the work of migration facilitation. One migration broker might be classified as a dokiman by some and as a feyman or big man by others. Evaluations of the work of migration brokers can depend on

normative values about the legitimacy of mobility, understandings of law, and the social dynamics of (transnational) family life, among other things. Emic classifications are thus also indicative of the socio-cultural position of the person characterizing the work of migration brokers.

Migration brokers, aspiring migrants and family members articulate, perform and evaluate their relations through the use of the terms *dokimen*, *feymen* and *big men*. Each term indicates different types of expectations, hopes and fears. Issues of trust and trickery need to be evaluated with respect to the expectations that aspiring migrants had when they decided to trust a broker. As aspiring migrants expect different things from *dokimen* and *big men*, their cut-off point to formulate accusations of deceit will vary depending on the type of person they believe they had in front of them when they handed over money. I will discuss each category in turn.

Big men pose as powerful people with good connections. They usually dress elegantly and are equipped with multiple mobile phones, or endowed with other signs of wealth and status (Rowlands 1994). The term 'big man' can be used for businessmen and politicians (Daloz 2003). Migration brokers who are *big men* successfully manage to act as patrons and function as social elevators (Daloz 2003; 2005). Their legitimacy is connected to this dispersal of powers and the potential bestowing of status. Aspiring migrants expect *big men* to have important connections through which international travel becomes possible. These connections can be with *dokimen* as well as with both international and/or state institutions. One of the brokers in this study, for example, had a large photograph of himself shaking hands with the Chinese Ambassador in his office. Another broker used to decorate his office with Cameroonian flags and some of his clients would call him 'Ambassador'.

It is the highly visible social status of *big men* that instils trust among aspiring migrants. In the event of a failed departure project, an aspiring migrant will talk of trickery only if he has reason to doubt either the quality of the connections of the broker or his willingness to mobilize them. In the former case, the aspiring migrant will evaluate retrospectively that his migration broker was not a *big man*, but a mere *dokiman*. If the broker was unwilling to mobilize his connections, the aspiring migrant will come to the conclusion that his migration broker was a *feyman*.

Feymen are con artists and businessmen who operate on the basis of occasional scams (Ndjio 2006; Malaquais 2001). They generate money through swindling and financial deception. Some *feymen* generate so much money that they become local and national benefactors. Despite the often unlawful nature of their economic activities, *feymen* are respected as wealthy and powerful men. Visually, *feymen* dress in exactly the same way as *big men*. In a context where deception and trickery play an important role in African economies (Bayart *et al.* 1999: 70), all new forms of wealth have come to be closely associated with 'feymania' (Ndjio 2006).

Feymen are migration brokers who by definition trick their clients and do not deliver what they promise. They might have connections or skills, but they are not willing to put these at the disposal of their clients. *Feymen* typically disappear after a failed emigration attempt or cut off relations even before the actual departure project. Aspiring migrants will always fear that the broker they have chosen will turn out to be a *feyman*. If, in the event of a failed departure project, a *big man* maintains contact with his or her clients, he or she is not necessarily a *feyman* but may be a mere *dokiman*. Classifications of migration brokers as *feymen* are mostly based only on post hoc evaluation.

Dokimen are craftsmen who imitate and manufacture documents. They mostly offer support with administrative processes in the national context. Dokimen dress inconspicuously and typically do not set up offices, but rather advertise their services on posters outside universities and on flyers in internet cafés. They operate individually and with a much smaller profit margin. Dokimen rarely specialize in international travel. Instead, they mostly offer documents that can facilitate access to a visa or a residence permit, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, school leaving certificates, banking statements or entry or exit stamps in passports. Some dokimen also directly manipulate and produce travel documents, such as passports, visas or residence permits. Dokimen can sell these travel documents to both aspiring migrants and to big men who facilitate travel for aspiring migrants.

An aspiring migrant will trust a dokiman because of his skills and will expect in return only a document that will hopefully stand up to the scrutiny of the relevant control agent in a consulate or at the airport. In the event of a failed departure project, aspiring migrants will not evaluate that their dokiman has duped or tricked them. Rather, they will come to the conclusion either that they were unlucky or that the technical skills and know-how of the dokiman were not good enough. When entrusting money to a dokiman, aspiring migrants fear controls by state agents much more than the potential for deceit on the part of their chosen broker.

Emic framings of migration brokers as dokimen, feymen or big men are not necessarily stable over time. After a failed or successful departure project, aspiring migrants will know whether their chosen big man was a true man of powerful connections, a mere manipulator of travel documents or a person seeking only to increase his own personal wealth. In what follows, the article examines in greater depth how issues of trust and trickery play out in family networks over time.

Involuntary return: fears of selfishness and jealousy

After five prior failures to migrate, Pamela's parents got in contact with the migration broker Mr James and gave him an initial amount of 500,000 CFA francs (€760) in 2008. At the time, Mr James offered travel programmes to Dubai, Europe and South Africa. Although he was later pursued in court for abuse of trust, his prison sentence did not stop him from being credible as a migration broker after his release. At our last interaction in 2014, he had just opened up a new migration broker's office – this time in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon.

After further delays, Pamela's parents proceeded – despite their daughter's repeated warnings – to hand over a further 2 million CFA francs to Mr James (€3,000). Pamela's parents are originally from the North-West Province and had migrated to work in the Ndu Tea Estate in the North-West Province and later for a tea estate in the South-West Province. The plantation company was privatized in 2002 and Pamela's parents were both made redundant in 2006. Nevertheless, they continued to have important financial responsibilities for Pamela's younger brothers, sisters and cousins. Due to the death of Pamela's two maternal aunts, her parents were responsible for the education of nine children in total.

Pamella's parents ended up putting great trust in the migration broker Mr James, not despite of but *because* of the financial burden of educating her younger siblings and cousins. At the village level, Mamie Pamella was an educated woman.¹ Without bushfalling, she believed that there was no hope of the younger children being able to go to university. 'Look at the children,' Mamie Pamella told me. 'Nobody is really in a position to "survive" [i.e. to support] the others.' She needed her eldest and most educated daughter to begin to take charge of the remaining dependants. Despite her undergraduate degree in law, Pamella was not able to do so while in Cameroon; when I met her, she had been working for years without pay as an intern in a law firm. The rent of her room was paid for by a married man who she was dating.

Furthermore, Pamella's father feared that his wife and daughters would be disinherited at his death and left without any means at their disposal. Upon death, customary law assigns belongings to the eldest male child in the family.² As Pamella's father considered his eldest son irresponsible, he had registered his two stores under the name of his wife and his eldest daughter. Nonetheless, he feared that his legal testimony would not be respected by his male siblings. If Pamella could become a migrant, however, she would be able to take care of her mother, sisters and cousins regardless.

After a series of further delays, Pamella finally left the country at the end of 2008, but when a week later I prepared to visit her parents, I heard surprising news. Pamella had come back. A few weeks after her involuntary return, Pamella told me what had happened. Her journey never went beyond Kiev airport to her imagined final destination in Norway. The flight ticket, which a contact of Mr James had booked, brought Pamella and another client straight into the military airport of Kiev. Controls here were tighter. Together with her travel companion, Pamella was immediately sent back to Cameroon.

Although deeply disappointed by Pamella's involuntary return, her parents continued to consider Mr James a big man and not a feyman. In Cameroon, a broker can fail but still maintain his reputation as a big man if he has succeeded in sending out others in the past and if his intention to do the same again is not at stake. When Pamella's father went to the office, Mr James said that he wanted to pay back part of the money, but did not have it at his disposal. Mr James also proved that he was not selfish by providing shelter to Pamella, who needed to recover from the shock of her involuntary return. When Pamella left his house to see her parents, he gave her 60,000 CFA francs (roughly €90) for transport. He thus remained the 'big man' who handed out money to people around him.

When considering her daughter's failed migration attempt, Pamella's mother compared Mr James's office to a camera. Before you develop the film, you cannot see the photographs on the film. The horizon of expectation vis-à-vis a migration broker always includes the possibility of failure. Migration attempts are always risky and their outcomes uncertain. The only way of being able to

¹In Cameroon, mothers are often named after their children. Hence, Mamie Pamella is a popular way of referring to Pamella's mother.

²For further details on financial dynamics within family networks in the North-West Province, see Endeley (2001: 38).

migrate is to take risks – including by giving money to a migration broker who has been able to send others abroad in the past.

While the level of expertise, skills and intentions of a migration broker are important, the success or failure of a travel attempt also depends on secrecy. Pamela and her parents, for example, kept both her departure and her involuntary return secret. Aspiring migrants who attract jealousy can all too easily become the objects of witchcraft attacks that lead to the faltering of migration attempts (Alpes 2012). Aspiring migrants thus keep their departure projects secret to avoid the jealousy of friends and neighbours. As a result, migration brokers' successful cases are more visible than their failures. And even if failures become visible, aspiring migrants will often put the blame for these failures on jealous family members or friends, rather than on their migration broker.

Although Pamela had been sceptical about the powers of Mr James, the need for secrecy curtailed her scope to be more active in preparing her departure and in trying to claim back money from Mr James after her involuntary return. She had little bargaining power with her parents, who – in the words of Pamela – were 'simple labourers' and did not expect the outside world to be attainable by their daughter without the mediation of a broker. When her parents insisted on maintaining their payments to Mr James, they were investing in her being able to take care of the remaining family. Resistance on her part could have been understood as selfishness. Mr James' performance as a big man and his emphasis on his 'international connections' outweighed Pamela's much higher level of education.

After her return, Pamela was contemptuous of Mr James and accused him of being a mere *dokiman*. The opening that he had found was not based on real knowledge or on genuinely powerful connections. He merely offered her an Italian residence permit.³ Although Pamela was in distress, she did not blame her migration broker. She exclaimed: 'I blame Biya' (the Cameroonian president). For one thing, Pamela considered conditions in Cameroon to be unbearable. Her real suffering stemmed not from the money she and her parents had lost in this failed migration project, but from the impossibility of earning a living in Cameroon. Pamela saw her state of destitution as resulting not predominantly from her broker, but rather from the overall economic and political situation of her country of origin.

In addition, Pamela blamed Biya by pointing out that she had also been the victim of state regimes of migration control. A substantial part of the money Pamela had lost on this failed migration project had gone to Cameroonian police officers and airline company staff. On her way out of Cameroon, Pamela had come under suspicion because of the Italian residence permit she was carrying. She had needed to pay €300 to Cameroonian state officials at the airport to be allowed to get on the plane to Ukraine. On her involuntary return flight from Kiev, Pamela was wary of police accusations of using fake identity documents. Over the years, migration and development programmes have invested heavily in the development of civil registry reforms. For police at the airport, combatting fraud has become an important issue. As the Ukrainian police had entrusted Pamela's travel documents to the airline staff, she had to negotiate to get them back

³In Mr James' plan, Pamela was to use her Italian residence permit to travel from Ukraine to any place in Europe where she had a Cameroonian support network.

against a fee. Unlike others, Pamela was thus able to avoid imprisonment upon arrival at the airport.

The above case has illustrated that a migration broker's potential failure needs to be understood in relation to local understandings of deceit and success. After Pamela's involuntary return, her parents continued to consider Mr James a big man and Pamela considered him a *dokiman*. None of them accused Mr James of *feymania*: that is, bad intentions and selfishness. They compared the failure of their migration broker with the failure of the Cameroonian state to provide more viable economic opportunities and the failure of immigration states to deliver long-term work visas.

The potential for deceit on the part of migration brokers is mitigated by cultural beliefs and internal family dynamics. Migration failures can be attributed as much to the failure of an individual broker as to the jealousy and witchcraft of neighbours and friends. And aspiring migrants are equally under pressure to avoid being seen to be as selfish as migration brokers. Finally, migration brokers offer – despite inherent risks – escape routes from structural forms of theft and injustice.

Delayed departure: debt transfers between family members

If continued interactions between aspiring migrants, family members and facilitators help to defer judgements about deceit, we need to understand better how these relationships are recalibrated within a broader social context so that they can indeed be sustained. My informant Victoria was from the South-West Province and had undergone one year of accountancy training at university. Her level of education was the highest in her family and it therefore was clear that she was destined to become a migrant. Victoria knew the migration broker Mr Walter because he was the husband of a fellow university student, as well as a member of the same church. Victoria lobbied her paternal uncle who agreed to finance her bushfelling project, which, as a cocoa farmer, he was able to do. In 2004, he handed over 1.3 million CFA francs (€2,000) to Mr Walter.⁴

In the end, Victoria was not able to go because – as Mr Walter explained – he had had to spend her money on 'another purpose'. Victoria struggled in vain to get her money back. Victoria's paternal uncle was angry with Victoria because he suspected her of having 'eaten the money' herself (Bayart 2009): that is, of having used the money for her own personal advantage instead of travelling to earn money for the benefit of her family in Cameroon. Subsequently, Victoria was severely ill for eight months. Knowing that her uncle did not trust her on the subject of how she had used his money, Victoria was convinced that her illness was the consequence of a witchcraft spell that her uncle had put on her.

⁴Victoria's paternal uncle was a North-Westerner who moved to make his fortune in cocoa farming in the South-West Province. Victoria herself was born in the South-West Province. As her parents were dead, her uncle was responsible for her. Since about 2000, cocoa has sold at relatively good prices and, according to Cameroonian standards, farmers have done quite well. A plantation like the one Victoria's uncle owns can generate in one year almost 3 million CFA francs (€4,500).

After her recovery, Victoria gave up on the idea of migration and married a North-Westerner and gave birth. After her marriage, Victoria's husband took it upon himself to pay back the debt to her uncle. Four years after her initial failure to leave the country, her husband had managed to pay back half (i.e. 650,000 CFA francs). As times became more difficult financially, however, he asked Victoria in 2008 to return to Mr Walter to try to retrieve the money. Over time, Victoria had grown very sceptical of Mr Walter's activities, yet she still fundamentally considered him not as a feyman but as a businessman in his own trade. When they met again in his office, Mr Walter made an offer in a conciliatory tone: if Victoria could bring him another client, he would be able to deduct money from that fee to reimburse her. Victoria was not satisfied with this offer as she could not immediately think of anybody who wanted to go. A few weeks later, it was decided that her younger brother would go out and travel. Matthias had only his A-levels, but, as her only brother, he was 'chop chair': that is, the successor and future head of the family. In the case of the death of the current head of the family, he would have responsibilities within the family, and so, if he were to become a bushfaller, this would be beneficial to the entire family.

When Victoria and her brother went to announce this news to Mr Walter, he promised 'to perform'. He prided himself on being powerful, and in the same breath he pointed to the photograph of himself and the Chinese Ambassador in the room. 'The Ambassador recognizes us.' Mr Walter offered stories about salary levels in China and potential profit margins and went on to speak a few words of Chinese. 'My own level end[s] for visa and ticket. But since we know [each other] ... I will help you with everything.' Victoria was worried about how her brother would cope in China, but Mr Walter responded that he could not 'perform' in his place. 'I can only give you a channel to go. You have to be smart.' The way in which Mr Walter put matters, any failure would be Matthias's responsibility and not the consequence of the kind of visa he had, the job market there or his own qualifications and connections. Mr Walter managed affairs in such a way that many of his services were provided out of kindness, not as part of the actual agreement with his clients.

When Victoria wanted to leave the office, Mr Walter asked her to 'perform'. Victoria did not understand, but Matthias did. He took out 500,000 CFA francs and handed them over to his elder sister. His uncle had given him the money. Victoria had not been aware that Matthias had this money on him, nor that her uncle had already seen Mr Walter. After the first failure in 2004, the uncle might have wanted to secure the transaction by interacting directly with the broker. The potential deceit of migration brokers is often also intermingled with potential deceit by family members who might seek to prevent the departure or the success of other family members, or who deliberately act to maintain the image of a successful bushfaller even in the face of hardship in the country of arrival.

Mr Walter did his calculations. He imposed a 25 per cent reduction on the initial payment of 1.3 million CFA francs three years previously because he argued that 'Victoria had not shown up for travel'. There was little space for Victoria to challenge this reduction, which amounted to a loss of 325,000 CFA francs (€500). As it was, Matthias still needed 800,000 CFA francs (€1,200) to complete the payment for the new travel attempt. This new payment allowed Mr Walter to break even:

that is, he was able to get a visa and a flight ticket for Matthias without making either a profit or a loss. From Victoria's perspective, the transaction meant that her husband no longer needed to pay back his debt to her uncle. Instead, as it was not the responsibility of an in-law to pay for Matthias's departure, the uncle now needed to reimburse Victoria's husband for the money he had already paid back.

Victoria held the bills Matthias had given her and hesitated: 'Money that I will give you the second time?' When Mr Walter kept stressing how very quickly Matthias could be leaving, she ended up handing over the money. Immediately afterwards, Mr Walter began calling Matthias 'boss'. Having now officially signed up for bushfalling, he advanced to the status of a real 'man'. Having overcome her fears, Victoria complimented Mr Walter for speaking with confidence. As she was about to leave, she asked him to 'dash' her some money.⁵ He stated that he never really carried money, because, if he did, he would immediately spend it. Just putting fuel in the car would cost him 50,000 CFA francs, he boasted. Victoria was impressed and again complimented him on being rich and on a different level. Obviously pleased, Mr Walter laughed and handed two 2,000 CFA franc notes to Victoria. Victoria thanked him. Victoria and Mr Walter had symbolically turned the page following their past disputes. By 'dashing' her a monetary gift of 4,000 CFA francs, Mr Walter accepted his role as protector and patron. His symbolic gift proved his generosity and goodwill (Dalo 2005: 168) and showed that he is a big and powerful man who will do his best to look after his dependants – which is what Victoria's family had once again become.

In an analysis of the social dynamics of migration facilitation services, aspiring migrants and migration brokers cannot antagonistically be opposed to each other. Just before Matthias's departure for China, it turned out that the uncle was reluctant to give Matthias pocket money for his first weeks in China. Mr Walter was there to mediate relations between Matthias and his uncle. He printed a statement with an institutional letterhead, specifying that 1 million CFA francs were necessary for Matthias's accommodation and bills upon arrival in China. With this paper in hand, Matthias was able to win over his uncle's trust.

At his end, Mr Walter proceeded to obtain a Chinese visa for Matthias and the uncle completed all payments on the day of his departure at the airport of Douala. Upon arrival in China, Matthias never received any of the help and support Mr Walter had so very generously promised. This was, however, largely invisible to others in Cameroon. For most, Matthias had gone out and was now a bushfaller. Mr Walter had proved his power. It was now up to Matthias to also 'perform' and earn money.

Evaluating the limits of trust between aspiring migrants and migration brokers according to the expectations and motivations of aspiring migrants themselves allows us to see beyond formalistically understood 'rights' and 'obligations' of an economic business agreement. Aspiring migrants trust migration brokers even in the face of failed departure projects, partly because these setbacks can be temporary and partly because both failure and success are never individual but always collective. When Mr Walter first failed Victoria, he did not turn out

⁵'Dash' is Pidgin for 'offer' or 'give'.

to be a feyman as he recognized past payments. By sending her brother out, he proved his status as a big man as he was able to transform Victoria's family into a bushfaller family.

Prospective migrants, their family networks and facilitators are obliged to piece together ongoing relationships in a context where migration projects are characterized by fragmented and contradictory knowledge, infused with many critical aspirations, and subject to arbitrary occurrences and elements of chance. These relations are only partially subject to familiar tropes of trust and certainty. Instead, fears of jealousy and selfishness reign over all interactions, including those between family members.

Conclusion

The discourse of trafficking and smuggling blames migration brokers for the vulnerability and exploitation of migrants. The policy discourse that follows from the Palermo Protocols simplistically associates brokerage with illegality and illegitimacy. Consequently, giving money to migration brokers comes to be seen as naïve and risky. This article has sought to overcome state-driven polarizations between naïve migrants and criminal brokers by reconstituting the social field of migration brokerage through the terms of aspiring migrants themselves. By drawing on the vernacular categories of feymen, big men and dokimen, the article has explored relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers from the perspective of people in a place of departure.

Referring to migration brokers as either smugglers or traffickers also overshadows economic, legal and social sources of migrant aspirations and vulnerability. As legally contested yet culturally grounded actors, migration brokers operate in sites of (attempted) government intervention. Along with other broker figures, such as traders (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), *voleurs impreposables* (Roitman 2005), *démarcheurs* (Beuving 2013) and feymen (Ndjio 2006), migration brokers fulfil the role of gatekeepers in facilitating access to a desired object or objective, such as mobility, money, goods or citizenship. As such, migration brokers mediate Africa's extraversion (Bayart 2000) – standing at and shaping the crossroads of local and global dynamics.

In the Cameroonian moral economy of migration, the success of migration trajectories plays a limited role in the credibility of migration brokers. Clients continue to do business with brokers, even though they are not always successful in making migration trajectories happen. This phenomenon can only be understood if we appreciate the moralities and ethics through which aspiring migrants and their families evaluate risks and benefits. Aspiring migrants entrust money to migration brokers because they are also dealers in hopes for global belonging (Ferguson 2006: 174–5). Hopes are immaterial and thus the appearance of migration brokers as big men with global connections can suffice in part for them to realize their role as helpers and facilitators of access to the international arena. Further restrictions in Europe's management of migration will only increase the worth and value of international connections and geographical mobility, and thus the demand for big men to act as migration brokers.

Aspiring migrants also entrust money to migration brokers because they evaluate risks from the vantage point of societies in emigration countries. In the face of

economic hardship and in the absence of a functioning social security system, migration can serve as a source of social protection. Given that migration without the help of a broker is doomed to fail for great parts of the population, the source of migration failure is not necessarily located with the broker but considered to be an inherent part of any travel project. Not being able to trust state actors has rendered being duped by a feyman and committing fraud with the help of a dokiman acceptable risks for aspiring migrants.

Against the backdrop of reductive framings of aspiring migrants as naïve and migration brokers as potentially abusive, this article has demonstrated how relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers are embedded in broad social networks that unfold over time periods that extend beyond one-off departure attempts. Consequently, the key question is no longer why aspiring migrants trust migration brokers, but why they have so few other means to realize their aspirations for global citizenship. And yet it is not enough to arrive at the conclusion that migration brokers are, to a large extent, the social effects of European migration management. It is important to recognize that states have stakes in framing aspiring migrants as naïve and vulnerable. The criminalization of migration brokers legitimizes the state's control over movement and thus feeds into the continuous construction of its monopoly over the legitimate means of movement (Torpey 1997). In the future, any study of migration facilitation services will require greater socio-legal analysis of how states set up both the context and the terms of the debate on migration brokers.

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Abstract

In the face of restrictive migration policies, migration brokers in emigration countries sell services that are meant to facilitate departure projects. Not all aspiring migrants who give money to migration brokers are able to travel. This article asks how aspiring migrants in Anglophone Cameroon understand and deal with the potential for deceit by migration brokers. The analysis is based on sixteen months of fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2013, predominantly in the town of Buea. By studying the social effects of European migration management through the lens of norms and values in a place of departure, the article argues that migration brokers cannot be understood exclusively as actors who are instrumental for the realization of migration trajectories. In a context where European migration management frustrates aspirations for global citizenship, migration brokers are also dealers in hopes for global belonging. Relations of trust between brokers and aspiring migrants are articulated through local terms such as ‘dokimen’, ‘feymen’ and ‘big men’. The article’s two case studies examine relations between migration brokers and aspiring migrants within a broad social framework that includes family dynamics, as well as with a temporal perspective that stretches beyond the initial moment of failed departure.

Résumé

Face aux politiques de migration restrictives, des intermédiaires de la migration vendent des services destinés à faciliter les projets de départ dans les pays d’émigration. Les candidats au départ qui versent de l’argent à des intermédiaires de migration n’ont pas tous la possibilité de voyager. Cet article s’interroge sur la manière dont les candidats au départ au Cameroun anglophone

comprennent et gèrent la possibilité d'être trompés par les intermédiaires de la migration. L'analyse s'appuie sur seize mois de travaux menés sur le terrain entre 2007 et 2013, principalement dans la ville de Buea. En étudiant les effets sociaux de la gestion de la migration européenne sous l'angle des normes et des valeurs dans un lieu de départ, l'article soutient qu'on ne peut pas comprendre les intermédiaires de la migration exclusivement en tant qu'acteurs dont le rôle est instrumental pour la réalisation de trajectoires de migration. Dans un contexte où la gestion de la migration européenne frustre les aspirations à une citoyenneté mondiale, les intermédiaires de la migration sont aussi des marchands d'espoir d'appartenance mondiale. Les relations de confiance entre les intermédiaires et les candidats au départ s'expriment à travers des termes locaux tels que « dokimen », « feymen » et « big men ». Les deux études de cas de l'article examinent les relations entre les intermédiaires de la migration et des candidats au départ dans un large cadre social qui inclut la dynamique familiale, ainsi que sous une perspective temporelle qui va au-delà du moment initial de l'échec du départ.