

## **Maybritt Jill Alpes, *Brokering High-Risk Migration and Illegality in West Africa: Abroad at any cost***

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In this insightful book Alpes challenges mainstream discourses on irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling through research on perceptions of risk and illegality among aspiring and failed migrants and their families in Cameroon. She draws on 13 months of ethnographic research in Buea, one of the two provincial capitals of Anglophone Cameroon. This is a region where the desire to migrate and succeed as a “bushfaller”, a term that derives from the history of hunting in the bush and signifies coming back having achieved success, is ingrained in the imaginations of young Cameroonians. Alpes shows how these imaginations and visions of the future are linked to cultural rites of passage for young people, as well as the history of the region which has seen much population movement since the time it was the colonial capital of the German Kamerun. She moves beyond a migrant-only focus to study how migration aspirations and decisions are socially embedded in family trajectories, social networks and the governance context in the country. She employs a range of ethnographic techniques to gather information for this holistic analysis: from aspiring migrants themselves, but also their families, as well as those who mediate migration such as brokers and government officials. One such method which yielded particularly valuable insights into the social relations that shape migration, was observing the day-to-day practices in migration brokers’ and consulate offices to delve deeper into their relations with aspiring migrants. These observations were followed up with in-depth interviews with migrants and their families to understand their hopes for the future and their strategies to realise them. Alpes skilfully crafts a richly textured narrative drawing on these life stories and observations to challenge the strong dichotomies between legal and illegal as well as forced and voluntary migration which underlie discourses on trafficking and smuggling. One way in which she challenges these dichotomies is through an analysis of the reasons for would-be migrants choosing informal brokers to fulfil their desires for a better life. This, she explains, is because brokers understand their desires and visions for the future and hold the promise of getting them to their desired destination albeit through irregular channels. By contrast, the official migration management system seems to work against their dreams by emphasising the risks of migration with the ultimate goal of reducing irregular migration, an objective that does not chime with the way that migration is conceptualised in Cameroonian culture and families.

Despite the growing vilification of informal brokers as traffickers and exploiters, aspiring migrants in Cameroon view them as legitimate facilitators of their migration project. Alpes argues that the success of brokers hinges on their ability to build up symbolic capital as trustworthy people by performing international connections that hold the promise of going abroad. The broker can survive and maintain a reputation even without delivering a visa and even if the migration fails. While the state attempts to delegitimise informal brokers and position itself as the sole legitimate facilitator, this does not appear to have the desired deterrent effect among aspiring migrants who are looking for reassurances of the possibility of travelling.

By taking a gendered approach to the analysis of social narratives around risks of irregular migration, the author further unpacks how the risks of irregular migration are conceptualised differently for male and female migrants. She shows how aspiring migrants and their families evaluate the risks of irregular migration in terms of gender norms, risks to themselves and bureaucratic procedures and whether and how they can navigate them. Female and male migration trajectories are compared and contrary to the portrayal of women as victims, their experiences indicate a degree of agency as all but one of her female respondents had actively sought out migration. Sexuality is entrenched in the day to day lives of her female respondents and was mobilised to obtain money, official documents and other opportunities. Marriage is also a key strategy to migrate and women migrating to marry bushfallers abroad are stereotyped by emigration officials as cheats, taking advantage of legal loopholes that allow women to migrate. Alpes takes an altogether different view and analyses it as a strategy for achieving conventional expectations attached to married life, which are harder to fulfil locally given the limited earning opportunities.

An important theoretical contribution of the book is the recognition that the state, market and family are inextricably linked in the migration process. Alpes considers these the three spheres through which the outcomes of migration must be analysed and critiques the way that the state frames migration, families as well as brokers. The state presents itself as the only legitimate means of migration and constructs other actors as morally inferior and less universal in their representation of interests. She examines the interconnected role and meaning of documentation, money and marriage at different points in the migration process and how these can influence the outcome of the migration project. She explains why migrants trust brokers with their money as these relationships are grounded in social dynamics between family members and brokers. Whether or not brokers operate legally is not migrants' primary concern; their main focus is on getting across. For them "luck" is a stronger belief system than risk as the interviews with failed migrants and deportees shows. Their accounts show how migrant men and women and their families understand, experience and deal with deportation. Deportation is interpreted as bad luck, bad behaviour or laziness rather than being regarded as a failing and deterrent as policy makers hope.

The book contains seven chapters starting with an introduction that provides an overview of the core thesis contained in the book and its different chapters. This is followed by the first chapter which discusses why aspiring migrants give money to brokers. The second chapter is concerned with the seemingly contradictory phenomenon of brokers surviving despite failures such as failed migrations and deportations. The third chapter focuses on the process of getting a visa to travel in Cameroon. The fourth is about marriage and processes at the consulate which

illustrate the normative stances of both consular services and the families of female migrants who are asserting control over them. The fifth chapter draws on the case studies in the book, and powerfully illustrates why deportations do not work as a deterrent and to change perceptions of migration risks among aspiring migrants. Alpes analyses local terminology for clues about the interpretation of official warnings of risk through the lens of the local moral economy where they do not make sense.

The book ends by pulling together these insights to conclude that there is a fundamental divide between the approach of the state, which tries to establish the characteristics of typical victims and traffickers, and the way that aspiring migrants view the process. The author contends that migrants and their families have to pay such high costs and undertake risky journeys because of the migration governance system which imposes constrained choices on the people of Cameroon. Ultimately Alpes argues that migration brokerage and irregular migration are created and buttressed by the state and border controls rather than reducing them. She shows how aspiring migrants, their families and brokers together plan and execute journeys in an increasingly hostile migration policy environment where options for legal migration are shrinking.

This book would be a valuable source for researchers and students with an interest in trafficking, human smuggling, forced migration, migrant agency and migration in West Africa. It would also be useful for those with an interest in policy as it explains why seemingly logical approaches to irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling fail to work and why all of these are on the increase rather than abating as governments hope. While the book is based on a case study of the region of Buea, the findings inform the wider discussion on these topics by bringing to light the expectations, belief systems, social relations and trust that underpin irregular migration and brokerage.