

Migrations of Africans to Europe are a vital current issue. Thousands of Africans each year are trying to reach European shores and penetrate its borders. The media inform regularly of yet another tragedy on the sea. Is it only the most dramatic of circumstances that push people to the decision about such a risky journey? My research so far suggests that socio-cultural phenomena play an equally important role as the political and economic aspects of the situation. The aim of this project is to investigate, in the Gambia and in Guinea-Bissau, the phenomenon of idealisation of Europe as a vital factor in migrations, including cultural mechanisms contributing to its persistence, secondly, to examine elements contradicting that idealization, i.e. attitudes towards European cultural norm and values, thirdly, migration strategies of Africans and fourthly the long-term sources of the idealization of Europe and individual motives for migration.

Europe is the object of dreams and aspirations for many Africans today. Gambians as well as Guineans talk about Europe very often and the desire to migrate there is a commonly voiced aspiration, especially among young men in the urbanities. For many, Europe seems the ideal destination of their imagined life path as its image is strongly idealised. How do they actually imagine their life in the West – their career possibilities, the degree of wealth that would become their share? Preliminary research suggests that this image is blurred and incomplete and expectations are idealistic. The degree of idealization of Europe is especially striking in religious and magical beliefs of the region, especially in contemporary forms of beliefs in witchcraft, an enduring part of African philosophy. The power of the image of Europe in Guinean discourses is such that I propose to describe it as living in European shadow. It has a fundamental significance for migrations.

While the West in general is strongly idealized, the attitude of Guineans towards European cultural norm and values is more ambivalent. Some of them are approved of, others induce criticism. Men dreaming of emigration postulated for example retaining their rights to polygamy. Some of my interlocutors wished to have one (white) wife in Europe and another (black) one in Africa, proposing polygamy in a kind of a “transcontinental” version. What arguments do Africans use to approve of or reject certain cultural elements of the West? In what ways are European norms incorporated into their own customs and values?

What are the migration strategies taken up by Africans of this region? It is often emphasized nowadays that globalization has brought about an unprecedented mobility of people and the geographical space has dramatically shrunk. In what way is the global space experienced by people living in an average African country however? To them, Europe seems a barricaded place which Africans find extremely difficult to get to. The way they talk about Europe makes one think of a “fortress”. The most frequent strategy is the help of emigrants in the family. Another road to Europe leads “via the beach” – contacts (including sexual ones) with Western tourists spending their holiday in seaside resorts of the Gambia and Senegal. Some Africans of this region take up illegal migration “via the sea route” – a dangerous journey across the ocean on board of wooden boats setting off from Senegal, which ends tragically for many.

What gives Europe such a prominent place in the collective imagination of contemporary Africans? I want to demonstrate that the dominant European presence in Guinean discourses needs to be explained not only in reference to global economic differences but in the context of specific conditions of globalisation of the present day, colonial legacy and the impact of the Western ideology of development and modernity.

Fieldwork in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, vital for the realisation of the project will enable gathering the necessary ethnographic material. It will be based on anthropological methods of fieldwork, which includes above all the method of interview and participant observation: structured, semi-structured and free-form interviews as well as in-depth biographical interviews will be carried out and recorded. The so called djumbai-approach will also be employed, a method appropriate to African realities and cultural norms, and consisting of the observation of informal group conversations with partial participation of the researcher. The preliminary fieldwork that I have already conducted in Guinea-Bissau show the presence of the attitudes mentioned above among Guinean people.

Migrations of Africans to Europe are a phenomenon of the utmost importance in today's relations between Europe and Africa. They have serious consequences for the host societies and a dramatic dimension for its participants. They require not only actions on the level of immigration policies but an in-depth understanding of the roots of the problem.

I propose to analyse an area which has not been thoroughly explored in social sciences so far: the phenomenon of idealisation of Europe in discourses of Africans as the driving force in migrations. A large part of anthropological literature of the recent years underlines positive outcomes of global cultural processes for the identity, aspirations and life trajectories of people around the world. It is common in social sciences today to question treating global connections in terms of “centre” and “periphery”.

Researchers emphasize that the horizons of the social, collective imagination have widened; this process has been described as “freeing the imagination”. The West, however, exerts an intensive cultural influence over various places of the world. In spite of the optimistic literature produced about global cultural processes lately, we have to consider these influences in terms of cultural domination; a symbolical power that the image of the West has over peoples' imagination in various places of our planet. It has fundamental significance for the direction and intensity of today's migrations.