

Article

## Information Sharing and Decision-Making: Attempts by Ghanaian Return Migrants to Enter through Libya

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### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between irregular migration, access to information and migration decisions. Using semi-structured interviews of thirty irregular return migrants who failed to reach their European destinations through Libya, I show that irregular return migrants from Ghana rely predominantly on interpersonal sources, including colleagues, neighbors, friends and relatives, for information on migration. Return migrants seek information from those who have relevant experience with that kind of migration. Existing research focuses on information from ‘formal’ sources such as traditional print media, social media, library or workshops. Here I argue that this focus on access to information conceals the activities and practices of irregular return migrants who perceive European destinations as ‘greener pastures’ and seek information to travel through dangerous routes. Most irregular return migrants interviewed in this study indicated they had access to information from ‘informal’ sources often shared as ‘jokes.’ Although irregular return migrants perceive the information they gather through their everyday activities as reliable, their interactions involve complex and unstructured social processes.

### Keywords

decision-making; information access; information sources; irregular migration; return migrants

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The persistent and increasing trends of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa with the desire to migrate to European countries (Clemens, 2014; de Haas, 2007; Skeldon, 1997) should be viewed in broader contexts to include the critical role of information sharing on decision-making. Although there is a plethora of studies on migration information, people who decide to migrate irregularly share information with others who have that kind of migration experience because ‘formal’ sources may not have information on dangerous, irregular routes. Irregular return migrants, therefore, seek information from multiple interpersonal sources and put the pieces of information together to make the trips.

Scholarly literature has debunked conventional views on emigration from sub-Saharan Africa as poverty,

war, and famine driven (Adepoju, 2000; Ezra & Kiros, 2001; Zuberi, Sibanda, Bawah, & Noubbissi, 2003), as a security threat associated with crime, trafficking, and terrorism (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014; Lutterback, 2006), or as a development failure (Bakewell, 2008). Contemporary research emphasizes migrants’ aspirations and capabilities and extrapolates how those aspirations and capabilities drive future migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Creighton, 2013; Czaika & Vothknecht, 2014; Dalen, Groenewold, & Schoorl, 2005; de Haas, 2010). Other studies have pointed out the need for rigorous research on migration within Africa (Agadjanian, 2008) and increased knowledge on trends of sub-Saharan African migration into Gulf countries (Atong, Mayah, & Odigie, 2018). Debates on mobilities of migrants which help with the analysis of tensions, frictions and emotions in migration engagements have

been considered (Cresswell, 2010; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). Flahaux and de Haas (2016) have posited the need for an investigation into how cultural and social changes such as improved information influence aspirations and capabilities to drive future migration. In this article, I examine how irregular return migrants and intermediaries use information from prior travels as alternative resources when faced with difficulties in obtaining 'formal' information or are skeptical of formal avenues of information access.

Extensive studies on drivers of migration notwithstanding, the role of vital information for emigration from sub-Saharan Africa needs more attention. Migrants' decisions prior, during, and post-migration require vital information. Migrants confront major decisions: whether to migrate, where to migrate and when to migrate (Palm & Danis, 2002; Tabor, Milfont, & Ward, 2015). Silvio (2006) argued that migrants know the importance of information and search for information for decision-making. As a result, many studies have examined how skilled migrants seek and use information from organizations and institutions, traditional print media, libraries, social media and how they deal with information overload from these multiple sources (Balaz, Williams, & Fifekova, 2016; Palm & Danis, 2002; Tabor et al., 2015). Other studies have pointed out the use of cell phones to access information (Newell, Gomez, & Guajardo, 2016). This study is, however, interested in irregular return migrants who use alternative sources of information which are not 'formal' to inform the decision to migrate. Although Sibal and Foo (2016) indicate that information from interpersonal sources is usually devoid of sophisticated content and vital detail, I argue that this assertion does not hold for irregular return migrants whose activities and practices involve an unstructured and complex everyday word-of-mouth information sharing. This study therefore, brings to the forefront contextual issues in information sharing and provides insightful contributions to the literature on irregular migration.

This article explores the social spaces of information sharing among irregular return migrants in two ways. First, it investigates the specifics and nuances of information shared among irregular return migrants. Second, it investigates how information sharing between irregular return migrants and intermediaries occurs. Third, it examines how information obtained from prior migrations is used to fuel migration desires and aspirations. These relatively unexplored areas would provide a new glimpse into the interconnection of irregular migration and information sharing.

### *1.1. Conceptualization of Access to Migration Information and Information Infrastructure in Migration Decisions*

Information flow for migrants is emphasized as an important factor for influencing perceived migration opportunities to European destinations (Hiller & Franz, 2004;

Thulin & Wilhelmson, 2015). The important role of information, as Palm and Danis (2002) point out, is that it serves as a measure that reconfigures and transforms people's knowledge, conceptions, and preferences for a place. Migrants' access to information fosters their decisions to select destination countries (Balaz et al., 2016; Lee, 1966; Lutz, 2017; Sibal & Foo, 2016; Silvio, 2006; Tabor et al., 2015) and serves as a source of knowledge for social, economic, political and cultural advancement (Gigler, 2008; Khoir, Du, & Koronios, 2015). Thus, empirical studies need to provide insights into irregular return migrants' access to information for migration decision-making.

In this study, I operationalize irregular return migrants as those who have made one or more trips outside their home country and have returned to the home country, using routes considered dangerous to travelers. In view of the important role information plays to migrants, migration researchers have long identified how everyday word-of-mouth facilitates information sharing (Case, 2012; Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001; Sin & Kim, 2013; Tazreiter, Pickering, & Powell, 2017). Other studies have focused on emerging virtual practices, rapidly transforming social media and network usage, and migration information from search engines (Sin & Kim, 2013; Thulin & Wilhelmson, 2015). Countless studies on training workshops to equip professionals with the best means to disseminate accurate information for the public have been explored (Newell et al., 2016). Since the early 2000s, the relationship between information communication technologies (ICTs) and migration experiences has become an important subject of social and academic analysis. Transnational scholars have conducted many studies on ICT (Newell et al., 2016; Panagakos & Horst, 2006; Thulin & Wilhelmson, 2015) and ICT studies continue to occupy recent research agendas. But the practices and activities of irregular return migrants who cannot access these sources of information but are compelled to rely on information sharing by word-of-mouth from others with relevant migration information should also be considered.

While leaning heavily on extensive work on motivations, aspirations and capabilities to migrate (de Haas, 2007; Lutz, 2017; Sell & DeJong, 1978) to provide a framework, this study also integrates information sharing to determine migration decisions. Empirical evidence on why people migrate has shown complex and divergent views in scholarship. The emergent human development and social transformational perspectives have refocused migration studies to identify the potentials of migrants. Stemming from this perspective, de Haas (2007) stipulated that demand for skilled and low skilled labor by the developed world would persist as the forces of globalization and socio-economic development increase. As a result, demand for both regular and/or irregular low skilled labor would increase in Western economies. Even when the reverse occurs, where an effort is made to promote development in origin countries, attempts to slow down migration would

fail (de Haas, 2006; Skeldon, 2010). This paradox, according to Flahaux and de Haas (2016, p. 16), explains development-driven emigration booms in contrast to conventional interpretations. Castles and Miller (2003) reiterate the need to consider migration studies as an integral part of development.

Development-focused migration studies draw from agency-structure conceptualizations to argue for recognition of aspirations of people to migrate and capabilities of migrants to make independent decisions (de Haas, 2010; “UN Migration Agency launches,” 2018). Lutz (2017) argues that migrants do not make arbitrary decisions. Rather, they base their decisions on the value and meaning they attach to the migration phenomena. Migration decisions are shaped by the interactions of individual agency and macro-structural opportunities in the economic, political, and environmental structures (de Haas, 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa for example, Agadjanian (2008) argues that potential migrants ponder migration opportunities not only in the region but also regarding European destinations. For example, migrants weigh the expected costs and benefits of migration. Other scholars argue that migrants’ aspirations are reinforced by their capabilities to secure better prospects such as employment opportunities and higher-paying jobs (de Haas, 2010; Khoir et al., 2015).

Using the development-focused arguments help to premise migration decision-making on three basic assumptions: migrants are individual actors; there are networks of family and friends that influence people to migrate; and there are conditions of macro-structural economic, political, and environmental effects on decisions of individual actors (Haug, 2008). This multilevel model critiques linear approaches. The ‘win-win-win’ approach envisaged highlights the argument that development is good for the origin country, host country, and the migrants themselves (Bakewell, 2008, p. 1355). Using this approach, skilled migrants with access to information from the internet, print media, and social media are winners. But Eshet (2004) argues that digital and information literacy are usually more complex for irregular migrants with low literacy skills. According to Burrell and Anderson (2008), the internet helps people gain a fuller understanding of places as living environments. Information from the internet provides general facts about geographical location, population size, communications, physical environment, culture, sports, and many more. Expectedly, irregular migrants with alternative access to formal sources of information are regarded as disadvantaged. However, irregular return migrants rely on various kinds of networks, colleagues with prior experiences, brokers and private actors to fill the information gap.

This study also engages with debates that conceptualize the migration industry as an infrastructure (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) to include social infrastructure. In conceptualizing intermediaries in the infrastructure who facilitate the movements of migrants, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) pointed out that migration infrastructure makes

up the social processes that portray the activities, practices and technologies of migrants. The discussion of migration infrastructure shifts the focus from migrants as the primary subjects of migration into determining the social processes of mediators who facilitate migration (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). These mediators have also directed and controlled migration (Franck, Brandström, & Anderson, 2018). In the migration processes, Xiang and Lindquist (2014, p. 132) further stipulate that “commercial, regulatory, humanitarian, and networks of social infrastructures” shift the focus away from the non-linear movement or even the circular interrelated elements of migration flow into a multi-directional focus that considers self-adjustments in migration (see also Mabogunje, 1970). The interlinked activities and practices of migrants have been geared towards migration negotiation that influences the barriers and challenges of the process (Mengiste, 2019). Information sharing with a multidimensional focus that engages with information shared between irregular return migrants themselves and with their intermediaries is a critical issue.

Several mediators have been identified in the migration infrastructure. For example, Mengiste (2019) identifies commercial recruitment intermediaries to include smugglers and travel companions. Other intermediaries are friends and family networks in the homeland. These private actors facilitate forms and meanings to the migration infrastructure and play a central role in migration decisions in the industry. In the migration industry, Akesson and Alpes (2019) argue that some brokers micro-manage mobility and in the process mobilize legitimacy. Mediators establish knowledge communities to take charge of the migration process. These activities, though unstructured, produce a complex form of interactions and relationship-building to promote and sustain the industry.

Additionally, in operationalizing migrants’ agency, this study determines the mediating influence of actors and networks (Franck et al., 2018) on irregular return migration. Information infrastructure stabilizes and creates the interconnections not only among migrants but also with their mediators. Irregular return migrants engage in information sharing with those with relevant information from their migration experiences to structure mobility and organize migration.

### *1.2. Irregular Return Migrants from Libya*

Throughout history, the economic-politicization of South-North cooperation of Ghana-Libya migration has been recognized. The daily exodus of sub-Saharan Africans migrating into North African countries, especially into Libya, dates back to the pre-Gaddafi era but intensified during the Gaddafi era (Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2013).

The Gaddafi era saw the rising desire of sub-Saharan Africans migrating into Libya as a final destination. It is notable that when there is a boom in business, people make enough income to cover the costs of migration.

During the Gaddafi era, West African migrants, mostly from Ghana and Nigeria, migrated into Libya to take up economic activities for income. Brisk business interests of West Africans in Libya have produced economic communities named after business centers in West Africa. The uprisings in the Maghreb region and the conflicts that led to the death of Gaddafi in 2011 exposed the magnitude of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa living in Libya. Bob-Milliar and Bob-Milliar's (2013) study indicated that the fall of the Gaddafi era and the post-Gaddafi era conflicts that ensued shifted the geopolitics of migration. Perceived 'illegal' migrants were identified and to avoid persecution, many of them successfully or unsuccessfully used Libya as a route to enter Europe or they involuntarily returned to their country of origin. During the post-Gaddafi era, about 18,000 Ghanaian migrants returned home.

Although successful and unsuccessful migrants from Europe occasionally return to their origin countries (de Haas, 2007), this study concerns people who migrated to Libya but when they unsuccessfully attempted to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, they either returned home immediately or chose Libya as a final destination. The peculiarity of this group is that, for those who return, after a brief stay in Ghana, they begin making preparations towards another journey into Libya. The involuntary return of irregular migrants produces continuous high risk and dangerous trips (Kleist, 2017).

## 2. Method

This empirical research explored information access, sources and decision-making of Ghanaian return migrants from Libya. The data were collected through interviews designed to elicit responses from the rich experiences of return migrants. Narratives were used to fit specific, delimited, local situations and problems (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Respondents were reached through snowballing and recruited into the study at their homes and workplaces.

The focus of respondents' narratives was about themselves and their experiences, opinions, and feelings as migrants. Migrants narrated their everyday information access, sources and migration decision-making to provide in-depth analysis in a concise and logical way (Bernard, 2011). The narratives of the findings gave voice to participants who shared their experiences, richly describing their stories to offer new insights into the interconnection of information and migration. They also gave their perspectives to shed light on their sources of information.

Thirty return migrants and two connection men or travel agents were interviewed. The two connection men who have the success of the markets in which they operate (Akesson & Alpes, 2019) served as migration experts who charged negotiable fees and managed the journey from Ghana to Libya. Informal and semi-structured interviews were conducted with different categories of return migrants, including migrants who voluntarily returned

to Ghana following unsuccessful attempts to cross the Mediterranean into Europe ( $n = 14$ ), migrants who traveled to Libya to work for income to cover future travel costs from origin country ( $n = 5$ ), migrants who were deported after they failed in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean into Europe ( $n = 11$ ), and connection men who served as mediators for migration journeys ( $n = 2$ ). The interviews took place between September 2019 and February 2020. Interviews were conducted in Twi, Fante, or English, depending on a respondent's preference. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and complemented with daily field notes. Data analysis was weaved together for recognition of emerging themes, identification of key ideas, and quotes were picked to reinforce the themes and ideas. Data analysis involved theme-centered analysis. Data were organized based on relevant questions and key topics that recurred. These topics were narrowed down to the three main categories: (1) networks of friends and family that shared information in the homeland, (2) information from those who mediated the journeys, and (3) physical communities that formed in destination countries and functioned as information-sharing hub for improved immigrant life (Akesson & Alpes, 2019).

## 3. Findings and Discussions

This study investigates information sharing and decision-making processes of irregular return migrants. Other issues considered include the demographic characteristics of irregular return migrants.

### 3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Return Migrants

This study shows the distribution of all respondents by age, the number of dependents, marital status, sex, educational level, formal skills training and intended destinations. Demographic characteristics of respondents assessed return migrants' experiences prior to their first travel to Libya. Respondents reported an age range between 18 years and 25 years. From the study, seven respondents reported they had children and 23 respondents had no children. In terms of marriage, ten respondents were married and 20 were unmarried. The interviews showed that 20 respondents had no formal education, eight respondents had formal education up to the primary school level, and two respondents had formal apprenticeship training. No respondent had a secondary school or tertiary education. The connection men also had no formal education.

Insights were drawn from respondents' experiences in attempting to cross into Europe. Each respondent was asked to report on their failed attempts in Libya: Two respondents reported they had failed twice in their attempts to enter Europe through Libya; 25 respondents had unsuccessfully attempted to do so three times; and three respondents unsuccessfully attempted to do so six times. One respondent attempted to enter Europe

through Algiers and five respondents who lived in the coastal towns of Ghana indicated that they had earlier attempted to enter Europe by sea.

While 25 of the total respondents indicated their aspirations and attempts were to enter into Europe, five respondents revealed that they had lived and worked in a Ghanaian community in Libya to raise income for business start-ups in Ghana. However, the five respondents were quick to add that they would have entered into Europe if the opportunity showed up. Two of the respondents travelled to Libya in the Gaddafi era to work as *malaga*, i.e., masons in the booming construction industry. Although this study interviewed irregular return migrants in Ghana, Portes (1996) shows that because of the uncertainties that surround their lives and activities, migrants create stronger bonds of support through large physical communities in transit or in their final destinations. The communities pre-socialize potential immigrants of what to expect through the sharing of information regarding job opportunities, loans, accommodation, and offer many other forms of support to irregular migrants.

An irregular return migrant revealed that:

After several years of living abroad, we opened our shops in Libya and continued our business activities. For us, Libya is 'home.' We have lived in Libya for twenty years. Apart from running our shops, we rent out rooms to new migrants.

Although civil wars, deportations, and other events may disrupt the migration process for irregular migrants, they may seek information from other persons to move into another part of the destination country to avoid detection from the Police and Immigration Services. Economic, moral and other expectations from networks in the home country may prevent migrants from returning home. However, networks in home country play key roles in offering support to return migrants, especially when migrants do so involuntarily.

### 3.2. Migration Networks and Brokers

To gauge decisions to migrate, respondents were asked to narrate how they accessed information for their initial travel to Libya. They reported stories from acquaintances as the main sources of information. One respondent who narrated how he accessed information through his interaction with his customer remarked:

I am an auto-mechanic. While I repaired my customer's car one day, I spoke about a land dispute with my landlord to the customer because my landlord had threatened to re-sell a piece of land I purchased from him. My customer told me if I would go to Libya, I can 'make it' there or possibly continue to Europe. He owned a small business in Libya. I could work to make enough money to buy another land for

replacement. A coworker nicknamed *Aponkye* overheard our conversation. The weeks that followed saw us making further enquiries to travel to Libya. Two other coworkers joined us. Having deliberated on the journey with friends and family for six months, we left Ghana for Libya.

The narratives of information sharing among respondents and their acquaintances could be attributed to the strong social ties produced in social settings. Daily interactions between master-apprentice, employer-employee, or business owner-customer in social settings foster information sharing. Respondents, who do not initially aspire to travel beyond Ghana, later on may be convinced to migrate after these interactions take place. The findings aligned with the literature which showed that everyday word-of-mouth information sharing among persons is usually serendipitous and a taken-for-granted activity that emerges from different forms of interaction (MacKenzie, 2003). Migrants' responses showed that, although they received initial information by word-of-mouth, they planned their migration activities between three months and one year. According to one respondent, "when we begin preparations to migrate, we gather information from multiple interpersonal sources to inform our decisions and to guide us." Respondents revealed they are fulfilled when they receive the information they need, whether they have prior experience or not.

The findings also showed that information sharing from interpersonal sources becomes more urgent during migration. Respondents receive information from intermediaries to facilitate migration activities. Intermediaries provide insights into how irregular migrants may migrate (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Intermediaries serve as migration experts that constitute a knowledge community to control the irregular migration process. However, respondents also spoke of contradictory information they gathered from intermediaries about the itinerary, routes, travel documents, travel partners, travel agents, and many more. One respondent gave an account on his journey but expressed his frustrations to the question of how they accessed information for their journey when he replied:

I arrived at Tudu, a bus terminal in Accra, to board a bus to Lome in Togo with two friends. At the terminal, we joined other young guys, totaling twenty-seven, also travelling to Libya. At the terminal, we were introduced to the connection man or travel agent for this cohort. We paid our fee and started the journey, setting off in the night to avoid detection. Only six people possessed valid passports or travel certificates, but no one had a visa. Between the Ghana-Togo borders, we were quizzed at each point by border guards, but the agent talked to them or negotiated with them and we proceeded into Togo. The connection man then handed us over to AG, another agent in Togo

and returned to Ghana. After a lengthy talk with us, AG detailed all the difficulties we would encounter on the way. One member of my cohort informed us about an easier route from Kumasi. Four of us returned to Accra to use the Kumasi route to Libya through Burkina Faso.

Respondents who knew about visa applications mentioned that they were afraid the consulates would deny their visa application because of strict visa requirements. From respondents' narratives, intermediaries such as connection men showed expertise in migration, negotiating migration barriers to ease travel and when necessary, using alternative infrastructures (Mengiste, 2019) along the route. These connection men, with prior experience, build a strong knowledge community to aid irregular migrants with the ability to pay for their services from their homeland to destinations. Even those who could not meet the total expenditure to secure the services of a connection man would intermittently fall on them when the need arises. Regardless of their preparations, all respondents indicated that they began their journeys from their respective towns but converged at Agadez, a transit town on the Niger-Libyan border, to embark on what respondents referred to as the "most dangerous journey" or the "desert journey."

It is noteworthy that respondents indicated that information gathered at Agadez had the most contradictions. According to one respondent, "stories of desert heat, frequent attacks from bandits, or even death came from multiple sources with a lot of contradictions." They continued their journey from Agadez to Libya with hired escorts or 'macho men' to deter robbers. Vehicles carrying migrants to Benghazi or Tripoli from Agadez moved in convoys.

### 3.3. Physical Communities for Information Access and Sources in Libya

Life in Libya was reported with mixed feelings. Apart from the difficulties they faced with law enforcement agencies, respondents indicated they did not have enough information about life in Libya before entry. For example, they had no information on where to seek refugee assistance or other forms of assistance during times of rampant police harassment. Here, their only source of support came from the existing physical communities. The only sources of information continued to be from migrants and intermediaries living in the existing physical communities in Libya.

When respondents were posed with the question of why and how they made several trips to Libya despite the difficult experiences they had expressed, one respondent explained:

I have made six attempts to reach Europe. I have tried to enter Europe both by land and by sea. My first attempt was a trip to Algeria with friends I met at

Agadez. The group abandoned me at Algiers and continued their journey. After two weeks, I run out of funds and returned to Ghana. As I travelled through Agadez, I met another group that told me stories about better opportunities in Libya. With that information, I went to Libya eight months later. I lived in an African community in Benghazi. As a new migrant, I was accommodated and introduced to *malaga*, or masonry apprenticeship, but I was arrested and deported to Ghana. Later on, a friend told me two of my colleagues who travelled with me on my second trip had successfully entered Europe. As soon as I heard the news, I started preparing for a third trip because I believed that I would rely on information from my friends to be successful. I was unable to contact my friends when I arrived in Libya. After two years and having made many failed attempts to enter Europe, I returned to Ghana. I went to Libya for the fifth and sixth times without making any headway. I am still waiting to hear back from my friends.

All 30 irregular return migrants interviewed for this study narrated similar stories. Reflecting on the responses, the back-and-forth movement was a result of lack of reintegration and other intervention programs for return migrants in Ghana. According to respondents, irrespective of the number of trips they made, they continued to tap for information from multiple interpersonal sources.

The 'win-win-win' approach for the origin country, host country and the migrants themselves (Bakewell, 2008) envisaged in the migration industry cannot be realized with irregular migrants whose only source of information is interpersonal. Contrary to the developmental debate, this study showed that many irregular migrants made arbitrary decisions to migrate to meet their needs. They were influenced by images of affluence, wealth, and better life in European destinations from the stories they were told, and 28 of the total number of respondents affirmed they would migrate again. They also mentioned the need for organized channels of information. Knowing that such a demand was unlikely to occur, one respondent reassuringly argued: "Our current sources of information have met other people's needs and they will meet our needs one day." Only two respondents answered that they will not travel again because of family commitments. These two respondents had wives and children and were running their private businesses in Ghana.

### 3.4. Funny Stories and Information Sharing

To gauge the nuances of how migrants access and share information, respondents shed light on relatively unknown process of funny stories in information sharing. With information flow from many directions, the social atmosphere and conditions foster how information was shared. Interactions among migrants and actors produced funny stories to provoke humor and laughter. "Stories of arrests of irregular migrants, police harass-

ment, sleepless nights on pavements or streets were told to us as funny stories,” declared one respondent.

Narrating their interactions with AG, the connection man in Togo, one respondent revealed that:

AG was a very *funny* man who gave us a vivid account of his journeys to Libya. He told us he travels to Libya at least once a week to do business. His business involved two activities: he showed his clients ‘the way’ to reach Libya or he accompanied them to the end of the journey. However, the latter involved a higher fee. He boasted that he does not accompany groups that cannot pay fees as huge as his stature, and this man was about six feet tall. When we chose the former option, he began his funny stories. He demonstrated how he had slept in a sinking boat or buried himself in sand dunes in the desert. This generated a lot of laughter and reduced our fear and anxiety for the journey. We negotiated the charges, collected our map that showed details of the trail and the people who would assist us, then we set off. By the time we began the journey we had built a powerful bond of support.

Another respondent who talked of his experience with funny jokes explained:

They never tell us about the horrid nights they spent sleeping in train stations, open spaces, pavements or telephone booths. They never mention their arrests or police harassments. Even when they speak of unpleasant experiences, they tell them as funny parts of stories and make jokes about it. They give images of a good life in Europe. Of course, we do the same when we return to our country of origin and share information because once we meet people who need information on the trips, we don’t want to tell depressing stories when we are expected to have fun.

Reflecting on these findings, irregular return migrants integrated jesting, funny stories, and humor into information-sharing to produce laughter. The jokes and funny stories shared during interactions with actors of irregular migration from Ghana to Libya create the continuous information process that irregular migrants have to deal with. Migration brokers and networks provide information that causes people to fantasize about living in Europe so whether they reach Europe or not, they feel they would meet their migration dream and this causes them to engage in continuous migration practices.

#### 4. Conclusion

Drawing on empirical data, this research set out to investigate persistent attempts of irregular return migrants from Ghana planning to enter European destinations through Libya. A majority of irregular return migrants rely on interpersonal sources such as coworkers, neigh-

bors, friends and family to alternatively provide them with information. Although Palm and Danis (2002) claim that information from interpersonal sources is devoid of vital details, this article has demonstrated that ‘informal’ sources of information inform the migration decision-making of irregular return migrants. Thus, friendship networks, solidarity networks, resilient networks and many others (Portes, 1996) provide alternative sources of information that are fluid, dynamic and complex. However, irregular return migrants and intermediaries navigate these processes so as to participate in the field of migration.

Consequently, information from interpersonal sources increases people’s desire to migrate. Although migrants’ aspirations drive future migration (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016), this study has shown that information sharing may increase the migration desires of people, with or without aspirations, to migrate. Moreover, images of availability of employment, higher-paying jobs and ‘greener pastures’ are produced during information sharing. Irregular return migrants with migration aspirations rely on colleagues with previous experience to exchange information and fall on brokers for support to migrate.

This empirical study shows that sharing information through jokes consolidate the relationship between the migrants and mediators. Socio-cultural anthropologists have shown how relationship building has been established through joke sharing. What this study reveals is that stories told through jokes have helped shape relationships among irregular return migrants as well as between migrants and mediators in the migration industry (Franck et al., 2018). Juxtaposing the position of intermediaries within the migration industry (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), this article shows that jesting, humor and funny stories have been used to produce relationships among migrants as well as between migrants and mediators. The funny stories and jokes that mediators use to share information on the migration process are employed to allay the fears of the dangers and hardships along the trails from West Africa to Libya and to generate subtleties of the otherwise difficult situations. A form of social control develops from this relationship building and contributes to the sustainability of these knowledge communities whose practices and activities are difficult to penetrate and/or disentangle, especially when they previously engaged in the same back-and-forth movements. Jokes carry assumptions in information sharing and influence the perspective from which knowledge is constructed (Akesson & Alpes, 2019). The use of jokes warrants further investigations in migration studies.

Finally, this study has shown the complexity of the processes that foster irregular return migration. The desires of migrants to leave their home country, then return to their home country and after a while return to Libya produces a back-and-forth movement which tends to disrupt the perceived linear migration processes (Kleist, 2017). But this article has contributed to discus-

sions that reveal the complexity of engagements at the individual, micro-level as well as networks of meso-level actors within the migration information infrastructure.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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