Social Mobility and Spatialised Slowness

Imagining 'Success' among Sierra Leoneans Living in France

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Abstract

This article analyses the individual aspirations of Sierra Leoneans living in France in relation to normative expectations related to mobility. It argues that aspirations and expectations are expressions of spatialized forms of social becoming situated within broader norms concerning socially-valued forms of mobility. Aspirations to social mobility link up distinct places in a fragmented transnational field, transform them as value-laden spaces, and inform migrants' assessment of their own trajectory within them. Individual aspirations are formulated with regard to spaces migrants have left, spaces they live in, and spaces they would like to reach. Sierra Leoneans living in France have reached a 'destination country' and yet, do not experience their situation as the ideal migratory path. Their achievements are measured with regard to expectations of social mobility as imagined in English-speaking spaces, thereby reinforcing the narrative of mobility and the persistence of local idioms of 'success' based on historical transnational connections.

Keywords

migration – aspirations – transnationalism – imagination – social mobility

Résumé

Cet article présente une analyse des aspirations de migrants sierra-léonais vivant en France, en tant que produits des attentes collectives et des objectifs normatifs liés à la migration internationale. Les aspirations sont des expressions de *formes spatialisées de devenir* situées dans le cadre plus général de normes déterminées par un

contexte culturel. Pour les Sierra-Léonais, la réussite sociale est imaginée dans un « ailleurs » qui nécessite un déplacement spatial. Les aspirations individuelles sont géographiquement situées et formulées au regard de destinations spécifiques, qui reflètent l'existence de connexions transnationales. Ainsi, les Sierra-Léonais vivant en France, bien qu'ils aient atteint un « pays de destination », ne vivent pas leur situation comme un parcours migratoire idéal. Ils évaluent leurs accomplissements à l'étalon des attentes de mobilité sociale imaginées dans les pays anglophones. Ce processus révèle la persistance des imaginaires locaux de la réussite sociale dans le contexte migratoire.

Mots-clés

migration – aspirations – transnationalisme – imagination – mobilité sociale

The study of migration as a social, cultural and emotional process has gained importance over the last two decades, as it offers the possibility of understanding migratory projects beyond solely economic rationales.[1] Studies focusing on aspiration, desire and hope for transnational movement converge in showing the relevance of social and cultural determinants in shaping discourses and strategies regarding migration. At the same time, aspirations are situated at the juncture between personal dreams and collective dimensions of migration (Carling and Collins 2018: 115). The processes by which individuals project themselves into meaningful futures draw both on locally-specific meanings of mobility – and of particular migration trajectories seen as socially valid and valuable – and on the normative expectations of what is to be achieved *with* mobility. As such, desires for individual self-making 'elsewhere' collide with aspirations for social becoming in the society of origin (Vigh 2009, 2018). Situated imaginations of geographical spaces frame those desires by attributing social value to them in comparison to one another. As the introduction to this special issue highlights, those evaluations reflect a contemporary stratification between spaces that concentrate socioeconomic opportunities and those that do not (Kleist 2018; Bal 2014; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). This contemporary stratification is built upon historical, often colonial, relationships between countries or regions of the world, thereby drawing forth a specific social imaginary of mobility.

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1 See Bal and Willems (2013); Graw and Schielke (2013); Carling and Collins (2018); Kleist and Thorsen (2018).

This article analyses the aspirations of Sierra Leonean migrants living in France as the product of culturally-informed representations of mobility in relation to specific spaces. With Carling and Collins (2018: 916), I use the term *aspiration(s)* to refer to the (imagined) potential transformation of the self in a situation of migration, although this intersects with the desire *for* migration in itself. By contrast, I understand *expectation(s)* as normative objectives that are consistent with regard to international migration and to which migrants wish to conform. Aspirations and expectations are expressions of *spatialised forms of becoming* situated within broader norms and ideologies concerning socially-valued forms of mobility. By 'becoming', here, I refer to the process of successfully actualising one's potentialities and acquiring social existence (by becoming a person of substance) within interpersonal networks (peers, friends, family, associations, etc.). For Sierra Leoneans, as for their peers in neighbouring countries, international mobility often appears as the only alternative to existence in conditions of poverty and social marginality. Positive social change and well-being are not just imagined in a future time, but also as located in an 'elsewhere', which requires spatial displacement (Vigh 2018: 196–197). At the same time, the articulation between physical and social mobility relates to the existence of transnational connections that link social achievement with specific destinations, in a manner similar to 'cultures of migration' (Jónsson 2008; Kandel and Massey 2002).

While a focus on aspirations draws attention to the temporal dimension of migration (Collins 2018: 967), its spatial dimension – namely, the way(s) aspirations to, and expectations of, social mobility link up different places in a fragmented transnational field, transform them as value-laden spaces, and inform migrants' assessment of their own trajectory within them – appears only 'in-between the lines'. It has not, up to now, been systematically explored.[2] However, individual aspirations remain geographically situated, and are formulated with regard to spaces migrants have left, spaces they live in, spaces they would have liked to reach, and spaces they aim to reach in the future. This article, thus, focuses on the differentiated social meanings, values and expectations attached to places that underpin spatial preferences in migratory projects (Carling and Schewel 2018: 954), as well as transnational links and movements between destination countries.

In this article, I argue that the locally-informed social imaginary that links geographical with social mobility (see Bedert, this issue) persists *within* migra-

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2 A noticeable exception is the article by Lubkemann (2018) on the constitution of spatialized hope between Liberia and the USA.

tion and contributes to the shaping and transformation of the social values attributed to spaces. The social imaginary of mobility, that is, the values and meanings associated with mobility and informed by cultural norms (see Ménard and Bedert, this issue) provides the discursive frame by which migrants understand their own social position and achievements, and orient their plans. By drawing references from it, they formulate mobility as a continuum of social expectations that are meaningful to them and affect their choices. The data present norms of social upward mobility, or 'success', among Sierra Leoneans living in France. Those migrants have reached a 'destination country' and yet, they do not experience their situation as the ideal migratory path. They do not necessarily consider themselves in transit, as many of them will settle in France in the long run. However, they assess their situation in relation to an idealised 'emigrant script' (Lubkemann 2005) that presents English-speaking countries, and the United Kingdom in particular, as places that allow for full self-realisation. Although their aspirations are not always located there, their achievements in France continue to be measured with regard to expectations of social mobility *as imagined* in English-speaking spaces, thereby reinforcing both the historical narrative of mobility based on transnational connections and the social hierarchy drawn between spaces in a globalised world (Bal 2014). The desirable path towards social upward mobility corresponds to a delineated geographical path that prolongs internal mobility (King and Skeldon 2010). Aspirations, however, can also change with movement, and goals can be reassessed according to revised contexts (Scheibelhofer 2018). France, for migrants, is a place of individual becoming, which allows them to rework the meaning of migratory 'success' in a different way, and emplace it in a different setting.

The study draws on an ethnography carried out with Sierra Leoneans living in just such a different setting, the town of Evreux, a small provincial town of 50,000 inhabitants, situated to the north-west of Paris. The data rely on numerous visits and participations to meetings and events of local associations between 2017 and 2019, as well as twenty in-depth interviews conducted in Krio, the common language to Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora. Sierra Leonean citizens started to settle in Evreux in the 2000s and most of them went through, or are still going through, the asylum process. As a small community of Sierra Leoneans formed in Evreux over time, other co-nationals were directed to the town by friends or acquaintances. Like most migrants, Sierra Leoneans living in Evreux are embedded in 'transnational social fields' (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004) and engage with co-nationals beyond borders, both in Sierra Leone and other countries. Many have family and friends in other European countries or in the United States, and are part of wider economic or associational networks.

Those engagements in various social fields play a role in reproducing a specific idea of upward social mobility, and allow for comparisons of achievements.

1   The Performance of Social Mobility in a French Town

Social mobility, more than economic achievement, is at the center of the narratives of Sierra Leoneans living in France. In Evreux, many experience precarious socioeconomic situations and reside in social housing in one of the city's deprived neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, performing social mobility through discursive acts helps them establish their new status as migrants, both individually and collectively, in line with the normative expectations placed upon them. Their performances draw on a local imaginary of mobility that connects tightly physical mobility and spaces with specific social achievements, and education in particular (see Bedert, this issue). References to this imaginary do not point towards future 'horizons' (Crapanzano 2004), but position agents in the present, with reference to the social norms which supported their initial migratory project. They substantiate migrants' claim to a new social status, one derived from their presence in Europe. This new identity is projected into speech acts as a way to mark one's membership in a higher educated class (Le Page and Tabouret Keller 1985).

During my first encounters with members of Sierra Leonean associations in France, I was puzzled by the use of the Krio word *tɔng* (town) to refer to Sierra Leone, and not only to its capital Freetown, which is the usual language idiom there. Although Sierra Leoneans who arrive in France as asylum seekers have diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, my enquiries concerning where people came from usually ended up with the answer 'Na tɔng ar komot' (I come from town), without further explanation. People were usually reluctant to specify their area of origin, unless we were sitting down for a one-to-one 'formal' interview. The use of *tɔng*, however, concealed ethnic or regional origins in a merely superficial manner, but had a decisive role in masking socioeconomic backgrounds. Use of the word *tɔng* suggested that the speaker had already belonged to a higher social class before leaving Sierra Leone, and this served as a social validation of his or her presence in Europe. Locating one's origins in *tɔng* played on the imaginary of social upward mobility as a physical path from rural spaces to urban ones (Tonkin 1980; Murphy 1980; Bedert this issue), in particular capital cities, that eventually lead to international mobility (King and Skeldon 2010). By using this idiom, people presented themselves as having followed the expected 'stages' of the mobility journey, something which implies social change. Moreover, capital cities commonly appear as the main points of

departure for international migration, where aspiring migrants acquire knowledge about the world and access the necessary social and material assets for their project (Vigh 2006). References to *tɔng*, thus, emphasised the value of urbanity as the space of modernity and, by associating their identity with it, Sierra Leoneans also crafted their claim to legitimately access the European world (Ferguson 2006).

Mentions of *tɔng* blur individual backgrounds and have a unifying effect among Sierra Leoneans abroad. Sierra Leoneans who reach Europe enjoy the social prestige associated with their new geographical environment. Invoking *tɔng* as a common region of origin distinguishes them from those who have stayed, and demonstrates their new relationship with their country of origin. The indexical use of *tɔng* as a social marker positions Sierra Leoneans who have migrated within a historically grounded social hierarchy. *Tɔng*, in its common use, refers to Freetown and its surroundings, which formed the Colony of Sierra Leone, the land populated by black settlers and freed slaves throughout the nineteenth century. Until independence in 1961, this territory was strongly associated with Krio identity, which, after its emergence from creolisation processes among various populations, had come to symbolise social exclusivity based on the adoption of Christian education and Victorian values (Ménard and Bedert, this issue). Present-day Krio identity remains a category that marks social prestige and educational achievement, while being increasingly employed as a synonym for a modern 'urban' identity (Ménard 2015, 2018). The use of *tɔng* as a space imbued with social meaning merges those two dimensions. The discursive opposition between *tɔng* and *upline* (the provinces) positions those spaces in a socially-loaded dichotomy that situates possibilities for positive social being, to borrow Vigh's words (2009: 95), almost exclusively in *tɔng*, while making education the most desirable of the goods to be achieved through mobility. The use of *tɔng* in the migratory context reactivates the idea of a space related to social prestige and *creates*, discursively, a migrant group that identifies with its attributes.

Tɔng as a social category rests on the realisation of educational aspirations. Urbanity is associated with (a better) education, which allows for achieving social mobility. Thus, the value of geographical mobility is measured by the possibility of furthering educational goals. In the context of international migration, migrants' educational achievements become a key part of the life 'stories' they perform for different audiences, including the anthropologist.[3] The

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3 The term 'story' was used by Sierra Leoneans abroad to refer to the life narratives of others and highlight their ambiguous nature: they are often crafted for asylum procedures and weave

life narratives of Sierra Leoneans living in Evreux emphasised the educational capital they had acquired in Sierra Leone, whether through secondary or tertiary education. Joseph, who had arrived in France in the early 2010s, and was then granted asylum a few years later, commented on these 'stories' of his co-nationals:

> Everybody was up there in Sierra Leone [...] Everyone who arrives here tries to pretend to be someone [else] ... nobody was born in the village, nobody missed out on education ... they all have a degree, they all went to university ... they want to fit the country they came to live in.

Joseph's own narrative, however, was a case in point: it included all the common ingredients of the 'stories' commonly crafted for French authorities. In Sierra Leone, he had been enrolled at university, but was not able to complete his degree. As a result of this, he had become a political activist, only to find himself persecuted by people belonging to another political party. This background of social involvement contrasted with the invisibility and precarity he experienced in France, where he and his family struggled to survive on state benefits.

In their 'stories', most Sierra Leonean men contrasted their present situation in France, which placed them in a situation of marginality, with a previous 'public' life in Sierra Leone where political engagement or youth activism had indicated a higher intellectual and socioeconomic status. While many had claimed asylum on the basis of political persecution or other forms of oppression, asylum seeking still put them in a social category that they rejected. Therefore, narratives that put forward previous success both alleviated negative assessments of one's situation, and helped those men in asserting a newly-gained social status towards other co-nationals. At the same time, it conformed to the ideas they had formed of the European context as a place, where social mobility is gained through education. In this regard, 'stories' were gendered, as more men stressed education as the condition of their social becoming.

Joseph's statement implied a contrast between *tɔng* as the place of Western education and social mobility, and its opposite, 'the village', a phrase which refers to custom and social fixity. Mentions of 'the village' – both in Sierra Leone and abroad – can have a positive meaning as the place of origin, but can also

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'true lies' with 'false truths' to present an acceptable narrative frame for administrations (Piot 2019). However, among groups of co-nationals, those 'stories' become attached to individuals, as nobody would take the risk of disclosing the reality of his or her own path to Europe, even to friends. The 'story' becomes part of a new performed migrant identity.

be placed within the spatialised hierarchy of social mobility, and thus become pejorative. In the discourses of Sierra Leonean migrants, 'the village' opposes *tɔng* in that it does not confer the social prestige one seeks with international mobility. Migrants displaced their origins from 'the village' to *tɔng*, but also transposed the imagination of mobility to the European context. Evreux was often referred to as 'the village', characterised as it was by both a lack of professional opportunities and also by an absence of prestige. Eddy, who often hosted visiting friends living in other European countries, told me that they were disappointed at him residing 'in the village' and not in Paris. Fatima, who had been commuting between Evreux and Paris for years, mentioned that a similar hierarchy opposed Sierra Leoneans living in Paris and the others:

> The Paris people … [they live there] just to tell you that they are in Paris … but actually, there are an hour from Paris [in the suburbs], and myself I am also an hour from Paris, so it's the same. It's only the transport that is different, they are better connected with buses, metros, trains …

In many ways, those statements reflected the position of Evreux in French economic geography. It is sometimes dismissed as a mere dormitory town, with little advantages other than the fact of being an hour by train from Paris. Sierra Leoneans appreciated the town for its low rents, but also stressed its lack of job opportunities, and the absence of social activities. They often felt left aside and marginalised from other groups of co-nationals living in Paris. Evreux itself, and, particularly, its deprived neighbourhoods, was often equated with boredom and inactivity.

Thus, the imaginary of mobility, and the opposition between village and *tɔng*, was used to make sense of certain local socioeconomic realities of the host country, in this case the concentration of jobs and opportunities in Paris to the expense of the regions, as well as the greater prestige derived from living in Paris as the place where social mobility can be best performed vis-à-vis other Sierra Leoneans, both at home and abroad.

2 The French Experience, or Spatialised 'Slowness'

While Sierra Leoneans living in France have 'made it' to Europe, their initial dream of migration, for many, was shaped by the existence of transnational connections with anglophone countries. Throughout the twentieth century, many Sierra Leonean families have established network connections in the United Kingdom, Sierra Leone's former colonial metropole, in order to facili-

tate their members' subsequent migration.[4] In the 1970s, new migratory routes opened up, and small numbers of Sierra Leoneans started to move to Europe and the United States. In the 1990s, as the civil war raged in Sierra Leone, resettlement programs sent refugees to various countries. As Lubkemann (2009: 221) notes in the case of Liberia, such programs, by opening up new destinations, both expanded and fragmented the transnational social field that linked, originally, the country to the United States. Likewise, Sierra Leoneans started to migrate to different European countries, and to build social networks in new places, which reconfigured movements to and between destination countries.

From the 2000s onwards, as Europe was closing its borders, the presence of those networks and the circulation of information generated an 'asylum seeking' path to migration, which expanded during the next two decades. Aspiring migrants also increasingly looked up to connections in the United States. Most European embassies, except for the British High Commission, closed during the war and never reopened a consular section. As a result, applicants for Schengen visas have to travel to neighbouring countries, which incurs extra-costs. Recently, the hardening of the British visa policy has pushed more people to look for opportunities in the United States. The longing for the American way of success materialises in the annual rush for the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery that grants the Green Card to winners and their families (see Piot 2019).[5]

Thus, international migration in Sierra Leone continues to be envisaged primarily as a journey to the United Kingdom or the United States and is attached to a promise of social mobility. Among the Sierra Leoneans who have arrived in Evreux since the 2000s, many had never thought of France as a country where they would settle. France, to them, is the place where 'they happened to be' following illegal entry into European territory, and where they decided to proceed with the asylum procedure. This decision ties them to the French territory for many years, making subsequent decisions to leave more difficult. During the period of waiting, family projects emerge, children are born, friendships and social networks are built. In this regard, there may be meaningful purposes in staying. By contrast, some people feel (or felt in the past) 'stuck' in a situation of involuntary immobility (Carling 2002) due to their lack of financial capacity, information and network ties that would have allowed them to move and start anew in another country. Most Sierra Leoneans, during their stay in France,

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4   On chain migration and the role of interpersonal networks as social capital, see de Haas (2010). The history of migration to the United-Kingdom explains that there are more Sierra Leoneans with British citizenship who can apply for visas for family members.

5   The DV lottery registers more than a million applicants in Sierra Leone every year.

struggled with ambivalent feelings and life orientations, as they tried to adapt to a country from which they felt estranged.

Sierra Leoneans present the French experience foremost as one of language inability, which affects many dimensions of their lives. The lack of knowledge of the French language is stated as the main factor that slows down processes of social adaptation, and inhibits entrance into the economic market. Slowness, as related to the French language, becomes an idiom that describes the country itself, an attribute of space, that also describes migrants' inability to 'move' forward socially. Carolina Kobelinsky (2010), in her compelling study of waiting among asylum seekers in France, shows that the asylum procedure is a time of uncertainty, imposed by external forces, an 'empty' time during which feelings of boredom and uselessness coexist with anxiety. Many Sierra Leoneans in Evreux stressed that their experience of economic precarity and uncertainty over their legal status affected their capacity and willingness to learn French. Simon, a young asylum seeker who had come to France a few years earlier, expressed the problem in this way:

> French is complicated for us who come from an Anglophone background ... but the stress complicates everything. When my mind will be at peace, it will be better for me, I will be at liberty [to learn] ... I am angry and anxious now, I keep thinking all the time, I am not able to provide for anybody.

Simon had recently received the letter informing him of his obligation to leave the country, and he feared expulsion in the near future. At the time, he had no income except for the help provided by his girlfriend, who was working legally in France. In his position, administrative, economic and language issues combined to trap him in a vicious circle of anxiety and downward social mobility.

Joseph, who had lived for four years in France as an asylum seeker, also stressed that the process of language learning is overshadowed by material concerns and uncertainty:

> There is too much interference ... you need money, you need to work ... people think how will I eat today, where will I sleep ... all these problems overcloud the rest ...

At the same time, French language and culture are themselves perceived as participating in 'a system' characterised by slowness, in particular due to the emphasis placed on language proficiency as the means to achieve socioeconomic integration. Language remains a sensitive issue, even when migrants'

material situation has improved and their immigration status has become stable. It is presented both as a difficulty in itself, and the cause of additional problems. Many Sierra Leoneans stressed the discouragement they faced, as asylum seekers, when they had the feeling they could not understand 'the system'. They also expressed their frustration that people working in administrations would deliberately tell them "I don't speak English" to avoid dealing with them, which, in some cases, delayed their access to social housing or public assistance. Often, they cited co-nationals who had relocated elsewhere, because "they found the system too slow [in France]". 'Elsewhere' meant a country where language proficiency did not condition access to unskilled jobs and where the job market valued English-speaking skills, such as the Netherlands. In Evreux, where jobs were scarce, Sierra Leoneans emphasised the competition they suffered from francophone Africans. To their view, if a position needed to be filled, employers favored them, thereby blocking the way even to menial and undeclared work.

The idiom of slowness expressed the feeling of being at the bottom of the social scale with little opportunity to evolve. Migration, as Gaibazzi (2014: 173) notes, is "a powerful trope for imagining oneself as being socially on the move" in a stratified world. It promises an escape from stuckedness and opens up the possibility to imagine positive futures. Physical mobility is seen as a way out of "existential immobility" (Hage 2009 cited by Kleist 2018: 14) that is, the feeling of not moving forward in life. Slowness, in this regard, refers to 'being stuck' both existentially and socially. Upon their arrival in France, Sierra Leonean asylum seekers realise that the social mobility they had envisaged for themselves may take time, and may never happen at all. They understand this state of 'stuckedness' as attached to a specific space to which they have few transnational links (unlike French-speaking Africans), and this reactivates the idea of English-speaking countries as destinations where one can realise the full potential of one's individual life and *become* somebody.

Frustration is the dominant feeling attached to slowness. Long periods of unemployment are described with the Krio word *sidɔm* (sitting down) – a word that, in Sierra Leone, implies waiting for something better, but which also stresses the difficulty for young people to access resources that may allow them to meet the social and economic expectations associated with adulthood (Enria, this issue, 2018; Vigh 2006). In France, generational dynamics are reversed. For young people, finding a job is a relatively easier process, as they are more geographically mobile and can work flexible schedules. Many young Sierra Leoneans living in Evreux work in Paris during the week. Their jobs and language classes provide them with the right environment to pick up French. By contrast, people who reached France at a later age have no other choice but

to *sidɔm* and live on state benefits. This situation challenges the usual image of older men as family heads and providers. For them, the state of waithood that started during the asylum procedure, described by Kobelinsky (2010), is prolonged and fuels heightened feelings of uselessness.

Difficulties in learning the language are central to explain this generational reversal. Allieu, who was over fifty when he arrived in France, had worked as a technician in an oil company in Sierra Leone. He complained that his work experience was not valued in France:

> I have acquired experience, training … I met the demands of clients … because of the language ability, I just worked for two years [in France] […] If I had been in England, I would have done a Master's [degree] … I did oil marketing and distribution, here they have oil terminals too. I have technical knowledge … now I am going to retirement. I call them wasteful years. I did not do anything. Even serving customers at oil stations, I would have done it very well. There are so many boys [back home] whom I trained to do this.

Allieu was particularly vocal about the language proficiency requirement that prevented him from getting a decent job, which, he thought, would have enabled him to learn by way of speaking and socialising. He had turned to self-employment, but regretted that he was not given the opportunity to build a satisfying situation for himself. Like him, many people praised the French welfare state, yet most said that living on state benefits did not make a man's worth.

The slowness they associated with the French migratory context led Sierra Leoneans to interpret the possibilities for social achievement with reference to their culturally-informed imaginary of mobility. It was implied that every asylum seeker *sidɔm* (sits down) before getting legal papers. Yet, people reckoned that, as in Sierra Leone, the process could be facilitated by *sababu*, namely personal connection(s) that could ease one's way out of waiting (see Enria, this issue). Whereas *sababu*, in Sierra Leone, concerns mainly the redistribution of financial assets, in France it referred to a person that could 'interpret' French society and give advice. Concerning the complex administrative procedures of asylum seeking, Joseph told me that:

> When the place is dark, you have to have someone who will show you your seat. Some Sierra Leoneans are sitting on the wrong place […] I do not care how people came, but they have to work inside the system. Some people, because they have met [the wrong person], they do not understand [how to go through the asylum procedure].

Those discourses, in line with practices of patronage, emphasised the importance of connecting with local French, whose could pass on their *knowledge* about the social and cultural aspects of France, as well as guide migrants through those French administrative conundrums that appeared particularly opaque. Social resources varied. Some people referred to a language teacher who encouraged them to persevere, a civil servant who speeded up administrative procedures, or a member of an association who helped to craft their 'story' for the asylum procedure, etc. Thus, whereas slowness appeared as a characteristic of France, it could be alleviated by *sababu*.

3   Locating Success in the 'Elsewhere'

The description of France's slowness as preventing individual progress contrasted with the imagination of an anglophone 'elsewhere' which (supposedly) offered more opportunities for self-realisation. In other words, Sierra Leoneans living in Evreux measured their achievements against what could have been accomplished elsewhere. While comparisons were made possible due to contacts with family and friends living in English-speaking countries, the deployment of the imaginary of 'success' rested on the ideal of accessing social mobility *through education*. Individual narratives consolidated normative expectations and transposed them to the migratory context by reaffirming that the primary goal of physical mobility was not economic success but educational achievement, despite the necessity of providing for the family back home. Sierra Leonean migrants aspired to education as the main avenue for acquiring cultural capital and accessing a middle-class status. By employing this imaginary, they envisioned an alternative pathway towards a full realisation of the self and, at the same time, expressed their disillusionment with their situation in France, and the difference between that situation and what they had imagined before migration. Thereby, they reinforced the idea of success as a spatialised process and continued to employ the idiom of physical displacement to express (temporal) social becoming (Vigh 2018).

In France, many Sierra Leoneans have dropped the idea of starting or continuing their studies due to the quasi absence of English-speaking university curricula. Reflecting on what his desired trajectory would have been in an anglophone country, Joseph commented:

> If I had the opportunity to go to UK, US or Canada … all this time that I spent [learning French] … perhaps I would hold a PhD or double Master's [degrees] … If I had the opportunity to study but here … now I am close

to 50% of knowing the French language, but if you compare the time I
spent learning French, I should have double Master's by now.

The discourse of lost opportunities was also strong in the narratives of people
who had travelled extensively and experienced the realities of different coun-
tries. Eddy, who had lived most of his life in the Netherlands, was looking for
job opportunities in France at the time. He said:

> If I had the choice, I would have gone to America … I could study further
> … but now I have dropped [from university in the Netherlands], I do not
> have appetite to go the US anymore. In America, they do better than us,
> because most of them, they do not have papers, but they work. Here, if
> you do not have papers, you sit down [*sidɔm*], you eat social money, you
> do not enjoy any respect, you are frustrated. This is why I left Holland, I
> [*sidɔm*] until I was fed up. […] You have education, and [*sidɔm*] like some-
> body who never went to school. It's discouraging […] In America, most of
> the [Sierra Leoneans], they have degrees, the ones I went to school with.
> England, it's the same thing. … Of the two friends who moved to England,
> one is teaching English, the other one has a Master's [degree] in IT. In
> Holland or France, nobody goes to university.

Despite his European passport, his ability to move between countries, and his
language skills, Eddy still felt that his achievements were not comparable to
those of his friends in England.

Those statements reaffirmed the necessity of acquiring university education
to obtain satisfying employment that would match one's skills and qualifi-
cations, and secure a higher social status. They drew a spatialised hierarchy
of opportunities in which it was anglophone countries that concentrated the
material and social avenues through which the imagined self could be crafted.
By remaining in France, Sierra Leoneans were aware that they would likely
remain part of the local precariat. Moving to anglophone countries, thus, was
idealised as a move forward. In reality, when Sierra Leoneans living in continen-
tal Europe secure a 'good-enough' situation for themselves, they seldom take
the decision to leave, even if they get the opportunity to do so. They are aware
that starting from scratch in another country is not without risk.[6]

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6   This is congruent with the deployment of strategies by which migrants engage in stepwise
    migration and compare options available in different countries (see Coe and Pauli 2020: 9).

Thus, nostalgic visions like these were less an expression of a belief in a likely future than an attempt to adopt a desired identity in the present, one made with regard to the normative expectations that migrants had carried with them. As Frye's study (2012) of school girls in Malawi exposes, educational aspirations have moral significance and can be read as 'assertions of identity'. They point to personal qualities, such as discipline and determination, which allows individuals to claim moral superiority over those 'who do not aspire' (ibid: 1598, 1600). In imagining a hypothetical university education, Sierra Leoneans positioned themselves in line with the 'idealised script' of migration (Lubkemann 2005) that designates education as *the* means for social upward mobility, but also establishes it as the most desirable good to be achieved *with* migration. The narratives of unfulfilled educational promises presented migrants as aspiring subjects, proving their moral and intellectual worth. Aspiring created social distinction and defined them as 'good' migrants, inasmuch as they had not forgotten the collective expectations placed on them. The articulation of the 'good' migrant identity thus validated one's new status and belonging to the middle-class *already*, which definition rested on 'education, meritocratic values, and the moral good of hard work and self-discipline' (Lentz 2016: 38, cited by Feldman-Savelsberg 2020: 33). Moreover, narratives about educational aspirations allowed individuals to reaffirm a sense of respectability and dignity in situations of precarity (Feldman-Savelsberg 2020). They helped restoring self-worth and alleviating a sense of relative failure, not in regard to people back home, but comparatively to Sierra Leoneans living in other countries.[7]

Locating self-realisation in an imagined 'elsewhere' also spoke to the idea of 'success' as an individual achievement that needs to be socially validated among peers. Being successful is expressed by the Krio phrase *E dɔn tray* (she/he has tried to achieve something), and is recognised as the capacity to cunningly seize opportunities in order to lead a meaningful life, a life defined in relational terms. It emphasises agency and determination, as 'successful' people make a conscious effort to attain their goals. This expression relates, in the African context, to concepts of anticipation, alertness and 'active waiting' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 11, di Nunzio 2015: 154–155), by which agents remain attentive to any chance that may change their fate.

In the context of migration, a person has to prove that (s)he does not merely *sidɔm*, but that (s)he knowns how to use the opportunity of being in Europe to acquire social substance. Social being is gained by becoming visible and connected in a "relational landscape" (Vigh 2018) constituted by varied transna-

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7 On failures of the migratory project, see Kleist and Thorsen (2018).

tional networks abroad. Becoming a prominent person within those networks is about being recognised as having a positive impact for Sierra Leone, either by promoting the country abroad or by supporting development back home. Becoming 'successful' is tightly connected to the wish to upgrade the international image of the country, and tell positive stories about Sierra Leone. Displaying 'success' is about offering a counter-narrative to the global story about Sierra Leone, the clichés that link the country with war and Ebola, and place it at the bottom of the spatialised hierarchy of opportunities. In France, as avenues for education are blocked, many Sierra Leoneans turn to self-enterprise in diversified economic branches, such as music, media, fashion, cooking, or door-to-door sales, with the hope to gain recognition among circles of co-nationals. People who engage in such activities often have a paid job and start self-enterprise as a side activity. They wish to gain publicity and centrality in their social networks, and more widely in a transnational social field defined in relational terms.

Nevertheless, the process of achieving recognition is spatially determined, since the most visible and most financially powerful transnational networks are those in the United States and the United Kingdom. 'Put Salone Fɔs' (Putting Sierra Leone First) is the slogan of the All Works of Life (AWOL) organisation, and it reveals those spatialised processes that tie social mobility and 'success' to English-speaking countries. AWOL was founded in 2001 as a charity organisation in Sierra Leone: since then, it has opened branches in countries where Sierra Leonean migrants reside. Its annual event aims at rewarding personalities and organisations of the diaspora who have been recognised as making a contribution to Sierra Leone, abroad or at home. First initiated in the United States and in the United Kingdom, AWOL's annual event is meant to be a prestigious affair, and plays a key role in conveying the dream of 'success' that individuals wish to achieve. Sierra Leoneans living in several European countries have teamed up in the past three years to organise their own event: AWOL-Continental Europe is, therefore, more recent and smaller in size. The organisation follows the standards of social prestige set up by AWOL-US and AWOL-UK, including high entry fees, VIP tickets, formal dress code, the distribution of awards for various categories (associations, projects, singers etc.), and the use of English as a way of marking upward social mobility. In 2019, the event took place in Belgium, but the invited Master of Ceremonies was from the United Kingdom. The official poster of the event also reproduced the design of the award, a golden statuette, that is used by AWOL-UK (see figure 1).

Those recent developments show that Sierra Leoneans residing in Europe want to be recognised as part of social networks that are not located just anywhere in the transnational social field, but are embedded in a specific, and

more socially valued, English-speaking space. During AWOL's awards ceremony, to display the attributes of Britishness (accent, speech, demeanor), was to deploy 'a key marker of distinction and a form of symbolic capital' (Kea 2020: 78). Fittingly, access to AWOL was restricted, since people joined the event upon invitation, marking their social endorsement by peers. This limits participation to people who imagine themselves as sharing a similar social 'higher' status (Feldman-Savelsberg 2020). The implementation of class distinction, along with the performance of success, is clearly spatialised and draws on the legacy of colonial hierarchies that established the superiority of British values. Organisations and events like AWOL reproduce, in their construction and activity, a specific social ordering between spaces, one that reaffirms the importance of historical transnational connections in framing ideals of social mobility.

4 'The Hard Way to Success'

The interwoven aspects of social imagination and success appear clearly in the trajectory of Alpha who, at the time of the research, lived in Rouen, a middle-size town to the north-west of Paris. Alpha arrived in France in 2012 with a visiting visa, following which he applied as an asylum seeker. His initial plan had been to head for Belgium, where he had friends, but members of his family who resided in Paris directed him, instead, to Sierra Leoneans living in Evreux. They advised him to seek asylum in France. In Evreux, he met a French woman and two children were born from this union, although they separated soon after. He also got involved early on in the local association of Sierra Leoneans, in which he attempted to take a leading role.

Nevertheless, when he got his long-term residence permit in 2014, and had to leave the accommodation provided by the state, he decided to move to Rouen by himself. He described this moment as one of relief and freedom, a moment that offered him the range of opportunities he had been looking for in order to start a "normal" life as a legal resident (Kobelinsky 2010):

> I did [several French classes] at a time in different places to accelerate the process ... when I got my papers, I thought about the next step, how I would establish myself, get a place for myself.

Rouen was a bigger town and offered more work opportunities. At the same time, he explained that he wanted to move further from the 'community' of co-nationals in Evreux in order to learn French. He did not sever ties with his friends, but became less active in the local association. In linking his legal situ-

ation, the process of language learning and the decision to leave, he expressed his desire to achieve something *by himself*. 'Success' is a personal attribute, despite the fact that it relies on knowing how to use connections and help (*sababu*). Although the presence of co-nationals ensures a safety net in case of problem, it also prevents linguistic immersion within French society. Thus, Alpha believed that he had to make a move by himself in order to secure his own future and prove his ability to start a meaningful life.

His professional beginnings in Rouen were filled with difficulties. He did not understand the job market and did not know how to write a French CV. At first, he worked in a warehouse. Then, he enrolled on a training program and started an apprenticeship as a car technician. He was recruited a few months later by a good company on a full paid position. Despite the fact that it was below his university qualification, he was particularly proud of this achievement:

> Others, when they have papers, they go to England. … They think they will not manage the system. It is too slow for them. Not only [Sierra Leoneans], but Nigerians, the nations who speak English, they travel. [But me] at the end of the day, I can say, yes, I succeeded (*ar tray*) … I came, I did not know anything, but I cracked (*broke*) the system.

The word 'system', again, expressed a social, economic and cultural environment that appeared difficult to grasp and penetrate. Alpha considered that he deserved credit for trying to fit in. He wanted to stay close to his children. In emphasising his efforts, he reproduced the idea of hard work as 'a marker of aspiration' to a middle-class status (Kea 2020: 78) that indicated moral values of seriousness, discipline and determination. The nickname he had picked for himself, Ezepha (or Eze) meant, for him, 'Extra-Zeal'. It was a testimony of the hardship he had endured as a migrant in France, and of the energy he had deployed to secure his own life:

> It says something about my life … when I want to do something, I give out extra energy and I do it … it means a lot in my life.

He had given the name Ezepha as a middle name to his son and explained that he wanted to leave this as a legacy for his children, to remind them of his trajectory and sacrifices.

Alpha considered that he had chosen 'the hard way to success', which he compared to an ideal 'easy' path that he could have accessed, had he migrated somewhere else. Starting from scratch in France, as if he was uneducated, had been a real humiliation to him and, like most Sierra Leoneans in Europe, he

could compare his situation to those of friends and acquaintances living in English-speaking countries. He had a few school and college mates, who were living in the United States, Britain and Australia. Most of them, he said, continued their education and got better jobs, compared to his own professional achievements:

> They have gotten Master's [degrees], PhDs … and I am here doing CAP [Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle, i.e. professional training] … education has put me behind [them]. Sometimes it is painful, sometimes it can hit me. At times I ask myself, am I doing the right thing?

Some of those friends he was in contact with told him that he was wasting his time in France, and he concurred with them that he would get more opportunities to realise his goals in an English-speaking country. For skilled workers and university graduates living in Europe, travelling to the United Kingdom often proves beneficial in order to secure a job in one's field.

As Alpha continued to look up to the achievements of Sierra Leoneans living elsewhere, he also expressed a desire for social recognition and visibility. His imagination, as it concerned itself with social mobility in anglophone countries, was fueled by images and stories displayed on social media. Alpha referred to one friend of his who lived in Australia, and who would publish pictures of himself on Facebook dressed in a suit and speaking in a microphone at public events. He commented:

> Sometimes, when I see that, it is painful … because in an Anglophone country, those people are able to exploit their own talents … they are given a platform. […] At the end of the day, you have the feeling that you have helped your own community … and this is what I want to do.

Success, in his perspective, was defined by the ability to become a public figure and show one's ability to work for 'the community' – i.e. Sierra Leoneans – beyond one's interests. Success thus depended on social acknowledgement by peers and visibility within social networks.

In line with his objectives, Alpha tried several projects of self-enterprise. In 2019, he launched his own clothing brand called *Salone Borbor* (Sierra Leonean boy). He designed T-Shirts with the colours of the Sierra Leonean flag – green, white and blue – and the phrase 'Salone Borbor' or 'Salone Titi' (Sierra Leonean girl). Then, he used the same concept to design a variety of clothing, sneakers and caps for online sale. He advertised his brand in France, Belgium and the Netherlands at various events and on social media. He became very active at

online promotion. At AWOL-Continental Europe 2019, he was nominated in the category 'Fashion and Design' and, although he did not win the award, it was a great achievement in terms of recognition and fame within the larger community of Sierra Leoneans beyond the borders of continental Europe. One year earlier, he had told me that he had never been invited to such events because of their selective nature. Finally, on November 11th 2019, as an official delegation of the Sierra Leonean government came to meet associations of the diaspora in France, Alpha offered *Salone Borbor* and *Salone Titi* T-shirts to the President, Julius Maada Bio, and the First Lady, Fatima Jabbe-Bio. In his short discourse, he stated that his aim was 'to present Sierra Leone in a positive way, because we already know it for negative aspects'. His Facebook advertisements, shortly after, associated his business venture more tightly with national pride and the promotion of the country abroad, like on November 25th 2019: "If the truth be told, there is something unique about Sierra Leone. We are who we are because we are proud. Proudly Sierra Leonean (SALONE BOBOR). Let's bring out the good image of Sierra Leone, the world wants to see."

Alpha's trajectory showed that he had succeeded in transforming the disadvantages of spatialised 'slowness' – such as his inability to further education – into entrepreneurial and exportable assets. On the one hand, entrepreneurship enabled him to better his economic situation and to be noticed back home, as a result of which he expanded his business possibilities. A few months after the Presidential meeting, Alpha started to advertise and sell his items in Freetown, and, a year later, he founded his own shop in the capital city. On the other hand, he could achieve recognition within different social and professional circles, including diasporic networks that may have appeared otherwise unreachable. Entrepreneurial activities projected him into a transnational middle-class that had its own codes of success, by opposition to his job in France that maintained him in a relatively low social position within national borders. In setting up his venture, Alpha linked different spaces of the transnational field, while acknowledging the role of powerful diasporic networks in shaping recognition and visibility. The transnational nature of his success appeared more clearly in subsequent online advertising, as he displayed the cosmopolitan identity of his brand, mixing French symbols (the Eiffel tower, French flag colours), with African ones (the African map with Sierra Leone flag colours), and a resolutely American youth aesthetic as he posed with sunglasses, a silver chain, a silver watch and sneakers (see figure 2). This aesthetic linked him, materially, to his ideals of social mobility, which constituted the bedrock of his life narrative as an 'aspiring' migrant.

FIGURE 2 'Paris lifestyle' advertisement, October 2020

5   Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how interconnected spaces of the transnational field become value-laden in the discourses and practices of Sierra Leonean migrants living in France. Spaces – *tɔng*, Evreux, Paris, France, anglophone countries of the global North – acquire social meaning in regard to the imaginary of social mobility that migrants carry with them, and which they continue to mobilise in order to make sense of their own social, educational and economic achievements. 'Success' and individual achievement, as concepts, are spatially situated, and they possess a specific iconography rooted in, and in continuity with, the legacies of colonial history. In this regard, the aspirations of Sierra Leonean migrants are grounded in a topography of differential expectations, as various diasporic spaces are placed in a hierarchy of more or less prestigious destinations. Concurrently, the perception of anglophone countries as places where social becoming can 'speed up' reflects the stratification of spaces in a globalised world whose economic life remains dominated by neoliberalism.

Living in France, for Sierra Leoneans, has practical implications with regard to social navigability and opportunities in education and employment. Thus, their aspirations and hope continue to be located 'somewhere else' (Lubkemann 2018). This does not mean that hopes need to be materialised. Hoping itself creates individuals who remain loyal to the collective expectations placed upon them. Further migration is an eventuality, without being experienced as a necessity, as is often the case in the global South (see Graw and Schielke 2013: 8).

The narratives of Sierra Leonean migrants also underline the necessity of considering the rhythms and paces of migratory behavior, and their entanglement with migration's spatial dimension (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021). France, which may have appeared to people in Sierra Leone as a space of personal improvement, becomes defined, instead, by slowness, at least when compared to the (imagined) rapidity of social mobility in the United States and the United Kingdom. Slowness not only becomes the property of a territory, but a concept that people use to describe their own experience of space. The temporal quality attributed to spaces shows that time (or rather, the perception of time) can turn into a spatial lens through which people make sense of their own paths of social becoming.

Nevertheless, despite the feeling of 'stuckedness' associated with their stay in France, Sierra Leoneans do not necessarily express the desire to move away. As Hage (2009) puts it, there is a form of heroism derived from situations of 'stuckedness' – a heroism marked by endurance, resilience and active waiting.

Slowness becomes an adverse environment in which migrants have to build themselves – both professionally and socially – in an inventive way. In describing this process, Sierra Leoneans transposed cultural idioms into a new context: as in Sierra Leone, suffering and active waiting would pave the way to success (Bedert this issue; Enria this issue). They presented themselves as people who would 'try' to achieve social mobility against the odds. The use of the verb *fɔ tray* indicated, as it would have in Sierra Leone, a skill, an art involving the ability to seize opportunities in order to create a meaningful future for oneself. Social recognition and mobility among diasporic networks came not from achievement *per se*, but from the display of efforts, the originality of initiatives, and the demonstration of an entrepreneurial spirit. Alpha's story powerfully articulates the combination of endurance, suffering and ingenuity as ways for transforming the self.

While expectations link Sierra Leone with anglophone spaces, the dreams and hopes of migration are lived in the here and now, in 'slow' France. Aspirations, thus, express the friction between the lived reality of migrants and the realisation of individual potentialities, between 'slow' spaces and 'fast' spaces. The imagination of social mobility, thus, grants to people a common spatialised frame in which they can assess (and hope for) social becoming. In so doing, it constitutes a cultural basis for the production and performance of transnational subjectivities.

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