

“Even if I am going to die, I must go”: Understanding the influence of predestination thinking on migration decision-making in the Gambia

Cham, Omar N.

Published in:
International Migration

DOI:
[10.1111/imig.13317](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13317)

Publication date:
2024

License:
Unspecified

Document Version:
Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Cham, O. N. (2024). “Even if I am going to die, I must go”: Understanding the influence of predestination thinking on migration decision-making in the Gambia. *International Migration*, 62(6), 45-58. Article N/A.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13317>

Copyright

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, without the prior written permission of the author(s) or other rights holders to whom publication rights have been transferred, unless permitted by a license attached to the publication (a Creative Commons license or other), or unless exceptions to copyright law apply.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document infringes your copyright or other rights, please contact openaccess@vub.be, with details of the nature of the infringement. We will investigate the claim and if justified, we will take the appropriate steps.

“Even if I am going to die, I must go”: Understanding the influence of predestination thinking on migration decision-making in the Gambia

Omar N. Cham

Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

omar.n.cham@vub.be

Abstract

The existing migration sociology literature predominantly explains migration decision-making through rational frameworks (socioeconomic factors), often influenced by Western (scientific) bias, neglecting other relevant subjective factors. By relying on data collected through interviews with 60 potential migrants in the Gambia, I go beyond these socioeconomic explanations and identify a key ideational factor—predestination- thinking— as an important factor that influences migration decision-making, especially concerning the perception of risk associated with irregular migration among potential migrants. This article demonstrates how predestination thinking influences different aspects of potential migrants’ decision-making, including the decision to embark on an irregular migration trajectory, risk assessment, and the nature of family support provided to a potential migrant. I argue that non-conventional, intangible factors such as predestination thinking cannot be neglected when explaining migration decision-making, especially in societies with embedded belief systems. This article contributes to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of migration decision-making beyond Western-centered perspectives.

Keywords: Migration decision-making; potential migrants’; predestination thinking; EU; The Gambia

INTRODUCTION

Migration scholars have extensively studied the various factors that drive individual migration decision-making across different geographies and contexts (Thompson, 2017; Bal & Willems, 2014; Battistella, 2014). Different from the ‘root causes’ of migration, Van Hear et al. (2018: 927-930) describe migration drivers as “forces leading to the inception of migration and the perpetuation of movement” that “shape the broader context within which aspirations and desires to migrate are formed and in which people make their migration decisions—whether to move or not.” Root causes, on the other hand, refer to “the social and political conditions that induce departures-especially poverty, repression, and violent conflict” (Carling & Talleraas, 2016:6). While the difference between ‘drivers’ and ‘root causes’ can be attributed to personal and contextual factors respectively, these two elements of migration decision-making can also constantly influence each other. For example, an individual may be forced to migrate for several reasons; however, the decision regarding a possible destination and migration mode among others, can be influenced by aspirations (see Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017).

Therefore, the drivers of migration decision-making are often complex and context-specific. Notwithstanding, scholarly research has long focused on the socioeconomic and structural factors to explain migration decision-making (Massey et al. 1993; Migali et al. 2018). While these tangible factors are extremely relevant, intangible factors are equally important and should be considered in explaining migration decision-making (Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023; Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey & Mazzilli, 2023).

The overemphasis on socioeconomic factors can perhaps be attributed to the fact they can be easily measured, unlike intangible factors. Other factors may include the question of rational choice associated with socioeconomic factors, which (Western) researchers can easily relate to and make sense of (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; de Haas, 2021). This reflects a scientific bias

(Grosfoguel, 2010), and the fact that socioeconomic factors are more often linked to policy interventions.

In recent times, however, scholars have begun to incorporate non-tangible factors in explaining migration decision-making, such as the role of culture in migration decision-making (Thompson, 2017), the influence of family norms and expectations (De Jong & Gordon, 2000), the influence of spiritual practices (Auer, Gereke, & Schaub, 2023), fatalistic beliefs (Thornton et al. 2020), the role of values, norms, and beliefs (Ryo, 2013), as well as emotions (Silver, 2023), among others.

This article intends to contribute to this nascent literature by outlining the influence of predestination thinking on migration decision-making in relation to EU information campaigns in the Gambia. In this article, I define predestination thinking as an individually or collectively held belief that the overall events and outcomes of human lives are preordained by a higher power (God). The belief in predestination is grounded in different religions, including but not limited to Islamic theology (Belo, 2008). In the context of Islam, Menin (2020: 516) argued that “mainstream Sunni ideologies endorse both a theory of predestination and the belief that human beings have free will and responsibility for their actions, which will be judged on judgment day.” This type of belief system is particularly relevant for most Muslims in the Gambia, where this study has been conducted.

This article focuses on the case of the Gambia, a tiny country in West Africa with high rates of emigration, mostly within Africa, Europe, and North America (Trauner et al. 2023; Kebbeh, 2013). The Gambia is a good case study as a segment of its population, particularly those perceived as potential migrants, is the target of the EU messages emphasising the risk and dangers of irregular migration, often conveyed through migration information campaigns. Moreover, the Gambia is a society with embedded belief systems, including the belief of predestination (Auer, Gereke, & Schaub, 2023), which provides a good case to examine the influence of predestination thinking in migration decision-making among potential migrants.

The analysis in this article builds upon extensive fieldwork, comprising in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 60 potential migrants, held in four out of the seven regions of the Gambia with the highest rates of irregular migration (see Trauner et al. 2023). The results show that predestination thinking plays an important role in migration decision-making by influencing the decision to embark on a risky migration trajectory, shaping risk assessments,

and determining the nature of family support a potential migrant receives. Through the use of predestination arguments, potential migrants challenge EU strategic communication messages that emphasise the risk of irregular migration by framing the act of migrating as predestined by God and an inevitable part of their life trajectory regardless of the risk involved. Secondly, potential migrants also deploy a predestination argument in the context of risk assessment by arguing that death is natural and inevitable and should not be feared as a response to the risk of dying during an irregular migration journey. Finally, the results show how potential migrants use predestination arguments to garner support from their parents and family in their migration decision-making endeavor.

This article argues that to fully understand the complex drivers of migration decision-making, the influence of predestination thinking cannot be underestimated given its societal relevance in the Gambia and West Africa by extension. I argue further that shifting the focus from the traditional socioeconomic factors to underlooked non-tangible factors allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migration decision-making, and this from a non-Western point of view.

The article is structured as follows: The next section presents a state of the art on migration decision-making, identifies the gaps, and highlights how this article contributes to the literature on migration decision-making beyond the traditional socioeconomic explanations. The third section provides a contextual background of the Gambian case, presenting an overview of the socio-economic and political situation, the relevance of migration to the country, migration patterns, EU (irregular) migration deterrence, and an overview of belief systems in the Gambia. Section four presents the methodology. Section five discusses the findings on how the belief in predestination thinking influences the migration decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia. The last section provides a conclusion and highlights our major findings and the article's broader contribution to the migration decision-making literature and debates.

UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF PREDESTINATION THINKING

While theories and debates on migration decision-making have traditionally placed significant emphasis on the influence of socioeconomic factors (Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey & Mazzilli, 2023; Thornton et al. 2020), the significance of non-tangible factors remains largely understudied (Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey & Mazzilli, 2023). The reason for the overreliance

on socioeconomic explanations in migration decision-making is partly due to the common assumption that the prospect of socioeconomic benefits drives individuals to seek a better quality of life and improved living standards elsewhere. Furthermore, the overemphasis on socioeconomic factors can perhaps be attributed to the fact they can be easily measured, unlike intangible factors. Other factors may include the question of rational choice associated with socioeconomic factors, which (Western) researchers can easily relate to and make sense of (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; de Haas, 2021). This reflects a scientific bias (Grosfoguel, 2010), and the fact that socioeconomic factors are more often linked to policy interventions.

While socioeconomic factors are relevant and provide valuable theoretical insights in explaining migration decision-making (Auer, Gereke, & Schaub, 2023), Thornton et al. (2020:3) have argued that “there is much heterogeneity in the migration decision that remains unexplained”. Thus, equally relevant is the influence of intangible factors, which remains largely under-explored (Auer, Gereke, & Schaub, 2023; Hanger-Zanker, Hennessy & Mazzili, 2023; Thornton et al. 2023). Intangible factors include but are not limited to the influence of culture, norms, religious beliefs, values, and emotions on migration decision-making.

Due to the wide acknowledgment of the relevance of non-tangible factors in migration decision-making, scholars have in recent times focused on the influence of ideational factors in migration decision-making (see e.g. Auer, Gereke, & Schaub, 2023; Thornton et al. 2023; Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020; Feyissa et al. 2024; De Jong & Gordon, 2000; Ryo 2013; Menin, 2020). This article contributes to this line of research by highlighting how an ideational factor—predestination thinking—influences the migration decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia.

Existing research has shown that predestination can influence migration decision-making. For example, Thornton et al. (2020) in their study in Nepal on the correlation between fatalistic beliefs and migration decision-making showed that individuals with fatalistic beliefs tend to exert more effort to achieve their migratory goals. They also showed how fatalistic beliefs influence the decision to migrate and destination preferences.

In the context of West Africa, where this study is situated, the belief in predestination is widespread (Dopamu, 2014; African Religion Survey, 2010) and impacts not only migration-related decisions but other life-related choices as well. Bredeloup (2017) observed, in her longitudinal study of West African migrants in Europe, North, and Southern Africa, that some

migrants, used religious and predestination arguments to justify their migration decision-making. Similarly, Hernandez-Carretero & Carling (2012) observed that among young Senegalese potential migrants, religious and fatalistic beliefs served as tools for evaluating the risks associated with irregular migration, thereby influencing their ultimate migration decisions. Auer, Gereke, & Schaub (2023:1) in their study in the Gambia showed that aspiring migrants who engage in “spiritual practices are strongly associated with a decreased perception of one’s own risk of dying on the migration journey.”

Despite the relevance of ideational factors in migration decision-making, as demonstrated above, it is also important to emphasise that its influence on migration decision-making is not straightforward. The context in which the decision is taken plays an important role (see also Massey et. al. 1993). For example, in the context of Nepal, Thornton et al. (2020) hypothesise that when migration is difficult, risky, and uncommon, individuals with fatalistic beliefs are less likely to embark on a migration journey. Other studies in African countries have shown that people with fatalistic beliefs are likely to venture into risky irregular migration journeys (Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020). According to Minaye & Zeleke (2017), Ethiopians with high fatalistic beliefs perceive their decision to migrate irregularly as having no impact on their destinies. For them, danger or death along the journey is considered predestined (ibid).

Whilst these studies offer interesting insights and are situated within the broader debates on the relationship between ideational factors and migration decision-making, few studies (e.g., Jinkang 2022; Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023), focus on the interaction between migration decision-making, ideational factors and EU migration control policies. This article intends to build upon these studies and seeks to contribute to the extant literature on migration decision-making vis-a-vis EU migration control policies. Specifically, this article focuses on how predestination thinking influences migration decision-making in relation to a specific EU migration control policy—migration information campaigns.

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS, EU (IRREGULAR) MIGRATION DETERRENCE, AND BELIEF SYSTEMS IN THE GAMBIA

Migration and socio-economic trends and EU migration deterrence

Migration is an important aspect of Gambian culture and daily reality (Gaibazzi, 2020; Altrogge & Zanker, 2019). This is evident in the country's long history of both internal and international migration (Alberola, Strain, & Horne, 2018). Besides regular migration, a substantial number of young Gambians, mostly men, have over the years embarked on irregular journeys to Europe, locally known as the 'backway' (Jinkang, 2022). Jinkang (2022: 2) describes 'backway' as "adventurous journeys to Europe that involve illegal crossings of physical frontiers, the Sahara Desert or/and the Mediterranean Sea through migrant smugglers and human traffickers." This type of migration has significantly contributed to an increase in the total number of Gambian emigrants over the past decade or so (Kebbeh, 2013).

Emigration from The Gambia has been largely attributed to unemployment, economic hardships, rural-urban disparities, bad governance, and corruption (Kebbeh, 2013). With a substantial segment of the population living below the poverty line coupled with high illiteracy rates and low household incomes (World Bank, 2018; Touray, 2023), many young Gambians perceive migration as a predetermined path to address the challenges they face as an individual and for their families by extension (Trauner et al., 2023). Furthermore, the complex, difficult, and if not impossible task of securing visas and the limited possibilities for regular and legal migration opportunities for most young Gambians push many to venture into irregular migration, as it is perceived as a cheaper and more realistic option to migrate to Europe (ibid). This article explores how the belief in predestination is used to justify irregular migration decisions among young Gambians amidst the limited options for regular migration to Europe.

Even though young Gambians continue to embark on irregular migration to Europe, there has been a recent drop in the number of irregular departures compared to the peak of the 2015/16 'migration and refugee crisis' in Europe (see Hunt, 2017). The reason for the decline has been

attributed to the deteriorating security situation in Libya and the change of government in the Gambia in 2016.

The Gambia witnessed a transition from a 22-year-old autocratic regime under former President Yaya Jammeh to a more democratic regime under the current leadership of President Adama Barrow in December 2016 (Hunt, 2017). This was the first democratic transfer of power since the Gambia gained independence from Britain in 1965 (Cham & Adam, 2023a). In the context of migration, the regime change in 2016 resulted in an increased politicisation and salience of migration, which was not evident under the autocratic regime of Yaya Jammeh (ibid). The EU, which provided financial and political support to the new regime, was keen for more collaboration on migration issues with the new democratic regime (Cham & Adam, 2023b). The funding, among other goals, has been intended to deter irregular migration by providing information for safe and regular migration for returnees and potential migrants through migration information campaigns (Trauner et al., 2023; Altrogge, Cham & Zanker, 2021).

In the context of the Gambia, various methods have been deployed, including the use of migrant returnees, radio, TV, and social media to dissuade potential migrants from migrating irregularly (Marino et al. 2023). Migration Information Centers, run by the National Youth Council, have also been established in some regions to raise awareness of the dangers of irregular migration. Despite its widespread use in controlling irregular migration and the negative deterrence messages it emphasises, potential migrants in the Gambia hold a more positive view of migration and perceive migration information campaigns as merely a propaganda tool by the EU (Trauner et al. 2023).

Beyond migration information campaigns, the EU and member states have been also pushing for more cooperation on the forced return of irregularised Gambian migrants in Europe, as part of its broader strategy of controlling migration from the Global South (see Landau, 2019). Similar to information campaigns, there has been resistance, especially among citizens regarding cooperation on deportations with the EU (see Cham & Adam, 2023a). For example, following a large-scale deportation of Gambian migrants from Europe in 2019, public protests eventually led to the imposition of a first moratorium on forced returns by the government from Europe in 2019 (Altrogge, Cham & Zanker, 2021). Ordinary citizens largely put forward economic arguments as a reason why the Gambian government cooperates with the EU on deportations. The moratorium was lifted in January 2020 after which few deportations took

place. A second moratorium was imposed by the government a few months before the first presidential election after the regime change. While this was largely seen as a voter-pleasing move, the EU Council went on to adopt visa measures against the Gambia for the lack of cooperation on forced returns (European Council, 2021).

Therefore, the above shows the complex interplay between the different factors that influence the migration decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia and the context in which predestination thinking is used to justify migration decision-making. The next section shows the relevance of belief systems in the Gambia, laying the groundwork to illustrate how they influence migration decisions among potential migrants in the Gambia.

Belief systems in the Gambia

The Gambia is a Muslim-majority country, widely described as a traditionally religiously tolerant nation (Jaw, 2023). Beyond the importance and influence of religions, other forms of cultural and supernatural beliefs also significantly influence the day-to-day life decisions of individuals. For a majority of ordinary Gambians, certain life events, good or bad, are often perceived as predestined by God (see Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023). This attribution of one's (mis)fortunes to God is evident in common linguistic expressions such as '*Yallah mokoh doggal*' (God-willed it) in the Wolof language. The belief in predestination or supernatural belief is not only widespread in the Gambia but across Sub-Saharan Africa (African Religion Survey, 2010).

In addition to the belief in God, religious guides, often referred to as '*Marabouts*' wield significant influence in Gambian society. Ordinary people consult marabouts for guidance and prayers before making major life decisions, including decisions to migrate. Auer, Gereke & Schaub (2023:2), in their study on how spiritual practices predict migration behaviours in the Gambia, argue that "magical beliefs are associated with a higher likelihood of attempting to migrate (mostly irregularly in the case of The Gambia where regular migration channels to Europe are almost non-existent), and that the underlying mechanism is superstition helping aspiring migrants to manage the uncertainty inherently associated with migration."

Beyond the Gambia case, previous ethnographic studies have shown similar uses of religious and spiritual beliefs by potential migrants as a risk management strategy. For example, Marabouts in Senegal often provide different services to potential migrants, such as spiritual

protection and recommending a potential date, time, and place of departure that will likely ensure a successful journey (Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012). In the case of Ghana, van Bommel (2020) found that (Muslim) potential migrants planning to migrate irregularly to Europe usually choose to do so during Ramadan, as they believe the risk is marginal during this period due to perceived blessings associated with the holy month.

Jinka (2022: 4), writing on the significance of belief systems in relation to EU migration control policies in the Gambia, argued that:

[EU deterrence messages] have a scarce reality of embedded belief systems. For instance, the majority of the Gambian communities believe in the notion of destiny. To put it simply, the belief that it is a matter of destiny – and nothing else – if a person dies in the Sahara Desert or in the Mediterranean Sea, if s/he finishes up in a detention camp or prison, or if s/he becomes successful. This belief therefore innately ignores statistics on humanitarian disasters.

Therefore, this widespread belief in predestination makes it more difficult to convey certain messages by the EU or other actors, especially those messages concerning risks and death. For Jinka (2022: 4), “understanding ‘destiny’ is important for a strategic and context-specific targeting of Gambian audiences.”

In summary, the aforementioned studies demonstrate that beliefs can shape the decision regarding the type of migration potential migrants want to venture into. Belief systems may help potential migrants build confidence and navigate the unknown they may face on the journey, providing a sense of control and other psychological relevancies (Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this article was obtained through individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 60 potential migrants across four of the seven administrative regions of the Gambia between March and April 2022. The regions were the North Bank Region, West Coast Region, Lower River Region, and Upper River Region. In each of the regions, 11 individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion comprising four

participants were conducted. The participants were jointly recruited with the help of the Gambia National Youth Council. The participants comprised young people between the ages of 18 and 35—the age group likely to venture into irregular migration (Trauner et al., 2023). The majority of the participants have acquired some level of formal education and were either employed or self-employed. Out of the 60 participants, 15 were female and the remaining 45 participants were male, of which seven were returnees. The over-representation of male participants is because men tend to venture into irregular migration more than women in the Gambia (Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023). Nevertheless, it was easy to access both male and female respondents to participate in the study. Almost all the participants had been previously exposed to an information campaign and its messages, as this was a requirement to participate in the study. In addition, all the participants have plans to emigrate at some point in their lives, albeit with different levels of preparedness at the time of the fieldwork. While our participants were free to choose a language for the interviews, the majority preferred to be interviewed in English. However, few interviews were conducted in the local languages, which were later translated into English.

Throughout the data collection process, ethical standards were observed through the administration of informed consent forms, openness about the objectives of the study, the source of funding (European Commission and its H2020 Programme), and the use of the data generated from the interviews. The central objective of the wider project, BRIDGES, from which the data used in this article originates, concerns the influence of information campaigns on migration narratives and migration decision-making among potential migrants in the Gambia. The questions asked encompassed various topics, including but not limited to their views on ‘Europe’ and ‘migration’, their views on the messages deployed in EU-funded information campaigns, the sources of information they rely on to make migration decisions, and what influences their migration decisions. While analysing the original data, the relevance of a less-explored migration decision-making driver emerged: predestination thinking. This article made use of that data.

The transcribed interview and focus group data were anonymised following the guidelines of the BRIDGES project. For example, an interview with a male participant from the West Coast Region is anonymised as GM_WCR_I_Male, 20s, 7. A focus group discussion is anonymized as GM_WCR_FG_Male, 20s, 7. Thus, ‘GM’ represents ‘The Gambia’, ‘WCR’ for West Coast Region, ‘I’ for interview, ‘FG’ for focus group, and the remaining information concerns the

participant's gender, age, and number. Other individual identifying information such as names and places of work were anonymised.

The data was analysed by inductively coding statements or paragraphs where the belief in predestination was used to explain different aspects of their migration decision-making.

Through the data analysis, three ways in which predestination thinking influences migration decisions emerged: the decision to embark on an irregular migration trajectory, shaping risk assessments, and determining the nature of family support a potential migrant receives. The different information gathered was placed under these three relevant themes as detailed in the results section.

RESULTS: THE RELEVANCE OF PREDESTINATION THINKING ON MIGRATION DECISION-MAKING IN THE GAMBIA

'Migration is predestined'

Whether internal or external, migration was generally perceived as a rite of passage by most of our participants (see also, Gaibazzi, 2018)—a phase they believed they must undergo at some point in their lives. This conviction was particularly evident among our male participants. Furthermore, this conviction hinges on a fundamental religious belief that the act of migrating was in itself destined for them by God before they were even born. This notion of the act of migrating as divine is similar to Feyissa et al. (2024) findings regarding Hadiya's [ethnic group in Ethiopia] migration to South Africa as a divine enactment.

Thus, for many male participants, it is a question of 'when' they will migrate – and not of 'if' or 'how'. Therefore, deterrence communications by the EU that emphasise the dangers of the route and discourage (irregular) migration have little influence on their migration decision-making, as they believe their migration is predestined by God. A participant explains it as follows:

I see migration as a normal thing. Our brothers have left from here to Europe. Honestly, it bothers me a lot when I think about my previous journey and especially when my two friends entered Europe. I was mad. Sometimes, I will sit, and my other friends will say, "look, your

two friends entered Europe and you are still here”. I always tell them that it was destined by God, but when my times comes, I will also go to Europe (GAM, Male, 20s).

Beyond the belief that the act of migrating is predestined, those who have embarked on irregular migration journeys face many risks, including imprisonment or even death. Thus, the EU assumes that potential migrants lack adequate information on the dangers of irregular migration, necessitating information campaigns to raise awareness (Trauner et al. 2023). However, dangers such as death are generally well-known in the Gambia, and the EU’s messages feed into an already existing wider debate on the dangers of irregular migration. For potential migrants who believe an individual’s decision to migrate is predestined, being confronted with potential risks such as death while on an irregular journey is also believed to be predestined by God. Thus, the emphasis on the dangers of the route, especially death, by the EU is rendered irrelevant by this belief. For some respondents, dying on the journey implies that it was already predestined by God, with little or no human free will or responsibility to alter it. A young male respondent in his 30s puts it as follows:

The only thing you hear from newspapers or radios is to discourage irregular migration. The only thing they advocate for is to stop it. But yes, you will get information about the number of people that died, just to discourage people. You will hear some youths will say, “Even if the water [Mediterranean Sea] is boiling, we are going.” We have the concept and belief that death is one. It will never become two. So, it is a matter of you going and succeeding, or you die, because you will never die two times (GAM, Male, 30s).

The same respondent went on to express the following sentiments which were also widespread among other male respondents:

So, you want me to live in this terrible situation and I am seeing people going to ‘backway’ and within one year, they are able to do things that people cannot do here in the Gambia for 10 years and still you want me to stay? And people are campaigning, people are sensitizing me telling me “Don’t go, is not good, if you go you will die”. If you tell me that if you go you will die, I will tell you “If I die, I will not die again because death is one [-off incident]” (GAM, Male, 30s).

To further justify their beliefs regarding migration and the risks one might encounter as predestined by God, some participants argued that human beings will inevitably face difficulties and ultimately die, regardless of whether they choose to migrate irregularly or stay

in their countries. Some participants tend to rationalise this argument by highlighting the experiences of individuals who opt not to migrate but still tragically experience events in their lives that they believe were predestined by God. A participant explains it as follows:

I believe like whatever difficulty happens along the way; the same thing can happen to you in The Gambia. The example I will give to you is: if you go to Mile 2 [Gambia's central prison], people are jailed there for no reason; people get locked up for the crimes they did not commit, and these are people still serving their jail time in the Gambia here. So, it's like it is just destined to be (GAM, Male, 20s).

Therefore, as seen above, these findings confirm how (predestination) belief, rooted in religion, can be used as a coping strategy and also to rationalise risk-taking (Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023; Bredeloup, 2017). It also confirms the observations by Hagen-Zanker et al. (2023:353) that “framing migration and connected events as part of a divine plan helps an individual to feel their own decisions are legitimate, ‘authorised’, or governed by a higher force.

Overall, the findings also confirm the significance of the belief in predestination in migration decision-making previously conducted in other settings such as Senegal (Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020) Nepal (Thornton et al. 2020), and Ethiopia (Minaye & Zeleke, 2017).

‘God will save me from risks’

Embarking on an irregular migration trajectory comes with a lot of risk (Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022). However, previous studies have shown how some migrants rely on a belief system, whether supernatural or religious beliefs, to cope with potential challenges, motivate themselves, or even rationalise their decisions (Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023; Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012). Similar to these findings, some participants rely on the belief that whatever risk they may encounter on the journey will be averted by God's protection. Thus, the deep-rooted conviction in divine protection provides a sense of optimism and partly influences their migration decisions. This belief not only applies to some potential migrants but also to returnees who have previously embarked on an irregular migration journey. Many of these individuals plan to re-emigrate if an opportunity arises. In their view, God's protection manifests itself through meeting ‘good’ people along the route, having a smooth journey, finding a ‘good’ and ‘reliable’ smuggler, or being saved from dangerous situations. A returnee explains it as follows:

I tell them: it is only God who saved me from those people because I was there all alone, no Mum, no dad. You only meet new people. So, who is there to guide you? Only God can bring you with the good people who you are meant to be with (GAM, Male, 20s).

For the potential migrants who are yet to embark on an irregular journey, the many stories of friends and relatives who overcame hardship or survived extraordinary circumstances along the route reinforce their beliefs in God's protection. These stories of survival along the route are often re-echoed in informal gatherings of young people, such as at '*Ghettos*' (an informal place of gathering for young people in the Gambia). This creates a narrative that makes it even more compelling to embark on the journey. A young man explained the difficult experiences of his friend who embarked on the journey and how this reinforced his belief that God will protect him when confronted with risk:

Honestly, there is this friend I had a conversation with. He told me one time whilst [being] in Libya, he had a gun pointed on his forehead. He told me: "Like right now, if I send you a picture of me you will see a mark on my forehead, that was from a gun pointed at me." All his friends were killed right in front of him, and I told him: "They are destined to die there." So, he told me there was an Arab man standing in front of him, talking to him brutally. The Arab man said: "If you take more step, I will shoot you." So, he said he stood his ground to the extent that he urinated on himself because he was so scared. Thanks to Allah [God] he made it and was able to cross that river and he is in Europe now. You know my belief is whatever is going to happen to you will happen to you (GAM, Male, 30s).

As highlighted, the belief in God's help when faced with risks shows how embedded belief systems tend to influence the interpretation of all the humanitarian disasters, sufferings, and deaths that international actors put to the forefront when communicating the dangers of irregular migration to potential migrants (Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023). This finding is particularly relevant in West Africa, where the expectation of God's help and intervention during difficult and extraordinary circumstances is widespread (Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020). Moreover, it illustrates how faith and the belief in God's protection not only demonstrate the complex interaction between religious belief and migration decision-making but also the role such beliefs play in shaping attitudes, decisions, and risk assessment for people with plans to migrate irregularly.

'I pray God can help me to take my children to Europe'

In the context of the Gambia, family support plays a crucial role in migration decision-making. Therefore, plans for irregular migration may require the approval and support of family, particularly from parents. Securing approval and support from parents not only signifies their willingness to provide financial and moral support along the journey but also symbolises the conscious surrendering of their children's fate to God, accepting that their decision to venture into an irregular migration trajectory was predestined. Thus, potential migrants who plan to embark on an irregular journey use this logic to seek the approval and support of their parents. While some parents may grant approval on the basis of this assumption, others are reluctant. In such instances, the close friends of those intending to embark on the journey emphasise the need for parents to have faith in the path predetermined by God for their children and allow them to migrate.

With the widespread belief that an individual's decision to migrate is predestined and only requires the right time to happen, some participants also mentioned how parents would pray to God to facilitate their children's journey to Europe. Here, offering prayers and seeking God's acceptance of the offered prayers aims at securing fewer challenges along the route and higher chances of success for their children (see Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020). For example, a young female respondent explains how her mother constantly prays to God for a successful migration to Europe for her children:

They will always say: "Europe is nice". Even my mother will sit sometimes and say "Europe is nice" because she used to get money from someone in Europe. I will tell her: "Mum you always say that Europe is nice, and we have never been there." She will respond and say: "From my dream, I see that Europe is nice. I pray God can help me to take my children to Europe" She used to say: "If I have money, I will go to Europe" (GAM, Female, 20s).

According to some participants, their parents believe that a challenging journey is the path to eventual success. Therefore, this belief not only undermines the relevance of the EU messages on the dangers of the journey but also encourages potential migrants to attempt an irregular journey. Consequently, certain potential migrants who wish to embark on irregular journeys will rely on these beliefs held by their parents to make decisions rather than the dissuading messages from the EU or other international actors:

My Dad would say [that] any difficulties you will face during travelling to another country as a man means there will be success in the end. Difficulties are obviously bound to happen. But my Mom, every time you try to explain the dangers to her, she will withdraw and say: “you are not going.” But my Dad says: “Hey, those difficulties are bound to happen, just go, face it, and find the destination.” That’s how they talk (GAM, Female, 30s).

For returning migrants, such a belief held by their parents reinvigorates their hope to successfully migrating to Europe at some point in their lives. A participant explains it as follows: “I saw someone from my area who came back, he didn’t get mad. His parents told him, ‘If God says you will enter Europe, you will enter Europe’” (GAM, Female, 20s).

As demonstrated above, the support and approval potential migrants receive from their parents plays a vital role in their migration decision-making. This support reflects their parents’ belief that their decision to migrate is predestined and serves as reassurance of God’s protection throughout the journey. It also underscores their determination to succeed in the face of any challenges they may encounter whilst on the journey.

CONCLUSIONS

This article highlighted the influence of predestination thinking, rooted in religious beliefs, on the migration decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia. The analysis is situated in the context of the EU and other international actors’ growing efforts to deter irregular migration through migration information campaigns (Trauner et al. 2023; Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022). While socioeconomic and structural factors are relevant drivers of migration decision-making (De Jong & Garner, 1981), and have provided important theoretical insights in explaining migration decision-making, ideational factors such as predestination thinking, which have been largely underexplored, play an equally influential role in migration decision making, as documented in previous studies (e.g. Hernandez-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Gueye & Deshingkar, 2020; Thornton et al. 2020; Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023). The finding from this article thus contributes to this nascent literature.

As demonstrated in the empirical section, the belief in predestination among potential migrants undermines the EU and other international actors’ strategic communications, which emphasise

the dangers and risks of irregular migration. Potential migrants put forward predestination arguments to counter EU messages aimed at deterring irregular migration. They argue, first, that the act of migrating and the potential risk of death are predestined by God before their birth. Therefore, if God has destined that will they die during an irregular journey to Europe, so be it. Secondly, potential migrants rely on predestination thinking, rooted in deep religious convictions, that God will protect them from any risk that they may be confront along the journey. Therefore, holding such a belief helps potential migrants to deal with uncertainties, reduced risk perception, and increases their perceived chance of survival (see Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023; Lang et al., 2020). Finally, parents of potential migrants often trivialise messages about risks and dangers along the route. They argue that if God predestined their child(ren) to emigrate to Europe, nothing could prevent that from happening. Therefore, they have no choice but to support their children's decisions.

The above illustrates how different predestination arguments are deployed by potential migrants to counter the messages of the EU and other international actors' aimed at deterring irregular migration. While predestination thinking, as demonstrated in this article, does influence migration decisions, it is also important to exercise caution regarding generalisation. This is due to the complex nature of migration decision-making, the various types of migration, diverging individual religious beliefs, and changes in contextual factors. Nevertheless, this article provides valuable insights by demonstrating how ideational factors, such as predestination thinking, can influence migration decisions.

As highlighted earlier, traditional socioeconomic factors have been long used to explain migration decision-making, and stakeholders like the EU have broadly focused on addressing socioeconomic challenges that compel potential migrants to migrate. They have sought to create job opportunities and intensified their messaging on the need to explore local opportunities. However, important ideational factors, such as the belief in predestination and its influence on migration decision-making, have been often neglected, as shown in this study and similar ones before (see e.g. Auer, Gereke & Schaub, 2023). Therefore, it is important for the EU and other stakeholders to note that beyond socioeconomic factors, ideational factors equally influence migration decision-making, especially in certain contexts. While the purpose of this study is not to provide recommendations to make EU policies aimed at deterring irregular migration more effective, considering such thinking and belief in the design and

implementation of information campaigns can help reduce deaths associated with irregular migration.

Finally, the findings of this article are relevant to the West African context, where embedded belief systems play a key role in many aspects of people's lives, including migration. Thus, this study serves as an invitation to further explore the influence of predestination thinking in migration decision-making across different settings, and beyond EU information campaigns. Doing so will not only contribute to providing new conceptual and theoretical insights into the influence of ideational factors in migration decision-making but also offer nuanced insights into the drivers of migration decision-making.

REFERENCES

Alberola, C., Strain, Z., & Horne, R. 2018. "Migration routes in West and Central Africa & East and Horn of Africa". Maastricht University and GIZ.

Altrogge, J., A. & Zanker, F., 2019. "The Political Economy of Migration Governance in the Gambia". Freiburg: Arnold Bergstraesef Institut.

Altrogge, J., Cham, O., & Zanker, F. 2021. "The Gambia-Migration Control", <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/the-gambia-2021/>

Auer, D., Gereke, J. & Schaub, M. (2023). Spiritual practices predict migration behavior. *Sci Rep* 13, 12535,1-7

Bal, E. & Willems, R. 2014. "Introduction: Aspiring migrants, local crises and the imagination of futures 'away from home'", *Identities* 21 249– 58

Battistella, G. 2014. "Migration in Asia: in search of a theoretical framework": In: G Battistella ed *Global and Asian perspectives on international migration* Springer, London 1– 25

Belo, C. 2008. "Predestination and human responsibility in medieval Islam: some aspects of a classical problem". *Didascalica* XXXVII, 139-51.

Bredeloup, S., 2017. The migratory adventure as a moral experience. In N. Kleist & D. Thorsen (eds) *Hope and uncertainty in contemporary African migration*, pp.134-153.

Cham, O. & Adam, I. (2023a). “The politicization and framing of migration in West Africa: transition to democracy as a game changer?”, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 11:4, 638-657

Cham, O. N., & Adam, I. (2023b). “Justifying opposition and support to EU-Africa cooperation on deportation in West Africa.” *Governance*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12846>

Crawley, H. & Hagen-Zanker, J. (2019). “Deciding where to go: Policies, people and perceptions shaping destination preferences”, *International Migration*, 57(1).

de Haas, H. (2021). “A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework.” *CMS* 9, 8

De Jong, G. F. & Gardner, R. W. (1981). “Migration Decision Making: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Microlevel Studies in Developed and Developing Countries”, Pergamon Press

Dopamu, A.T. 2014. “A Socio-Religious Evaluation of Predestination, Destiny and Faith Among the Africans,” Proceedings of International Academic Conferences 0100021, International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences

European Council. (2021). “Council adopts visa measures against the Gambia”. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/07/council-adopts-visa-measures-against-the-gambia/>

Feyissa, D., Zeleke, M., Gebresenbet, F. (2024). “Migration as a Collective Project in the Global South: A Case Study from the Ethiopia–South Africa Corridor.” In: *Crawley, H., Teye, J.K. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of South–South Migration and Inequality*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Gaibazzi, P. 2018. “Bush Bound: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa”. Berghahn Books. New York. Oxford

Gaibazzi, P. 2020. “Frontiers of externalisation: borders and temporality in the Euro-African zone”. *Paideuma* 66.

Gladkova, N., & Mazzucato, V. (2017). "Theorising Chance: Capturing the Role of Ad Hoc Social Interactions in Migrants' Trajectories." *Population Space and Place*, 23(2), e1988. Article 1988. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1988>

Grosfoguel, R. 2010. Epistemic Islamophobia and Colonial Social Science, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 8 (2), 29-38

Gueye, D., & Deshingkar, P. 2020. "Irregular migration in Senegal: faith, dreams and human smuggling through the desert and sea." *Migrating out of Poverty Working Paper Series*, Working Paper 67, p20.

Hagen-Zanker, Jessica & Hennessey, Gemma & Mazzilli, Caterina. (2023). "Subjective and intangible factors in migration decision-making: A review of side-lined literature." *Migration Studies*. 11(2), 349-359

Hernández-Carretero, M., & Carling, J., 2012. "Beyond "Kamikaze Migrants": Risk Taking in West African Boat Migration to Europe." *Human Organization*, 71(4), 407-416

Hunt, L. 2017. "New Gambia, new migration?" <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58dd0fc04.html>

Jaw, S.M. (2023, April 14). Uniting against criminal behaviour: protecting religious freedoms in the Gambia. *Standard Newspaper*. <https://standard.gm/uniting-against-criminal-behaviour-protecting-religious-freedom-in-the-gambia/>

Jinkang, A. 2022. "European-funded information campaigns contrasting irregular migration from The Gambia." *PERCEPTIONS Policy Brief*: <https://www.perceptions.eu/european-funded-information-campaigns-contrasting-irregular-migration-from-the-gambia/> , pp.2-4

Jong, D., & Gordon F. 2000. "Expectations, Gender, and Norms in Migration Decision-Making." *Population Studies* 54(3):307–19.

Jørgen, C., & Talleraas, C. 2016. "Root Causes and Drivers of Migration: Implications for Humanitarian Efforts and Development Cooperation." *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. P.6

Kebbeh, O. C. (2013, August 15). “The Gambia: Migration in Africa’s “Smiling Coast.””
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/gambia-migration-africas-smiling-coast>

Landau, L.B. (2019). “A Chronotope of Containment Development: Europe's Migrant Crisis and Africa's Reterritorialisation”. *Antipode*, 51: 169-186.

Lang, M., Krátký, J., & Xygalatas, D. (2020). “The role of ritual behaviour in anxiety reduction: an investigation of Marathi religious practices in Mauritius.” *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences*, 375(1805), 20190431.

Marino, R., Schapendonk, J., & Lietaert, L. 2023. “The moral economy of voice within IOM’s awareness-raising industry: Gambian returnees and Migrants as Messengers”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2023.2206001](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2206001)

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. 1993. “Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal.” *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466.

Menin, L. 2020. ““Destiny is written by God’: Islamic predestination, responsibility, and transcendence in Central Morocco”. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 26:3, 515-532.

Migali, S., F. Natale, G. Tintori, S. Kalantaryan, S. Grubanov-Boskovic, M. Scipioni and T. Barbas. 2018. “International Migration Drivers. A Quantitative Assessment of the Structural Factors Shaping Migration.” Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Minaye, A. & Zeleke, W. A., 2017. “Attitude, risk perception and readiness of Ethiopian potential migrants and returnees towards unsafe migration.” *African Human Mobility Review*, 702.

PEW Research Centre (2010). “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

Ryo, E. 2013. “Deciding to Cross: Norms and Economics of Unauthorized Migration.” *American Sociological Review* 78(4):574–603.

Silver, A.M. Reconstructing Roots: Emotional Drivers of Migration and Identity. *Soc. Sci.* 2023, 12, 60. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020060>

Thompson, M. 2017. "Migration decision-making: a geographical imaginations approach." *Area*, 49: 77-84.

Thornton, A., Bhandari, P., Swindle, J., Williams, N., Young-DeMarco, L., Sun, C., & Hughes, C. (2020). Fatalistic Beliefs and Migration Behaviors: A Study of Ideational Demography in Nepal. *Population research and policy review*, 39(4), 643–670.

Thornton, A., Williams, N., Bhandari, P., Young-DeMarco, L., Sun, C., Swindle, J., et al. 2019. Influences of material aspirations on migration. *Demography*, 56(1), 75–102.

Tjaden, J. & Gninafon, H. (2022). "Raising awareness about the risk of irregular migration: Quasi-experimental evidence from Guinea." *Popul. Dev. Rev.* 48, 745–766

Touray, S. (2023) "Poverty Trends in The Gambia: A Tale of Two Crises", Retrieved from: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/africacan/poverty-trends-gambia-tale-two-crises>, World Bank Blogs

Trauner, F., Adam, I., Cham, O., & Sattlecker, H. 2023. "The role of narratives in migratory decision-making: Analysing the impact of EU-funded information campaigns in the Gambia." *BRIDGES Working Papers* 15. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7773991>

Van Bommel, S.(2020). "The perception of risk among unauthorized migrants in Ghana." *Journal of Risk Research* .23,47–61

Van Hear, N., Bakewell, O., & Long, K., 2018. "Push-pull plus: reconsidering the drivers of migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44:6, 927-944,

World Bank (2018). The World Bank in The Gambia. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia>