

# Dimensions and dynamics of the Gambian diaspora in the digital age

*By Sylvia Chant*

The tiny West African nation of The Gambia allegedly possesses a diasporic population of approximately 70,000. This represents around 4 per cent of the national total, making The Gambia's net migration rate (migrants per 1,000 people) the tenth highest in Africa (Kebbeh 2013).

Movement out of The Gambia has a history which stretches back centuries, not least on account of the Slave Trade (Kebbeh 2013). Nowadays, however, flows are more diverse and of differing durations. Over and above short-term (including daily) cross-border transit between The Gambia and Senegal, there are longer-distance and longer-term sojourns. Many international migrants go to other Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) such as Nigeria, while others move to North African countries which often serve as stepping stones to 'Babylon', a colloquial term referring to the world's 'advanced economies'. Yet as many North African countries have become far less manageable staging posts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, journeys by sea have become much more precarious. Going the so-called 'back way' is riskier than ever. If rafts and fishing boats overloaded with people are not apprehended and returned by fleets patrolling the eastern Atlantic, then there are strong chances that deception, dispossession and/or death by drowning becomes the fate of aspirant voyagers at later stages of their journey, as evidenced so starkly by the huge number of fatalities incurred in Mediterranean crossings from Libya to Lampedusa in the first few months of 2015.

The most uncertain and dangerous routes of migration to Europe, and especially to the eventual most aspired-to destinations of Spain and the UK, are often undertaken by young men, who, facing few

opportunities for employment in The Gambia itself, put life, limb, and savings on the line in order to explore 'greener pastures' abroad (Jones and Chant 2009). As with many international economic migrants across the globe, the particular appeal of 'Babylon' owes to the lure of better education and employment, more lucrative earnings, and the opportunity to support immediate and extended family back home.

In many ways this has become easier in the 'digital age', through mobile phones, internet facilities and rapid financial transfers. According to World Bank data, overseas remittances amount to nearly 10 per cent of GDP and render The Gambia one of the topmost recipients in Africa (cited in Figure 3 in Kebbeh 2013). This complements other forms of diasporic assistance such as the shipping of containers packed with second-hand goods for recycling and re-sale. While international migration entails sacrifice and hardship for those who leave, as well as for those left behind, many forms of diasporic support and connectedness, enhanced by the ICT revolution, go some way to alleviate the burden, as well as playing a part in transforming The Gambia's social and economic dynamics.

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*Passengers leaving the Banjul–Barra ferry crossing over the River Gambia, from where many proceed by bus and taxi through the North Bank Region into Senegal. Senegal encircles The Gambia, with which it was briefly united in the Senegambia Confederation during the 1980s. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Can love be transferred? A Western Union bureau at Serrekunda assures its clients that this is so. Another Western Union billboard asks if you are 'Far from your family?', and promises that the company will guarantee that 'you can always count on them'. Western Union is one of a large and growing number of foreign exchange bureaux and banks offering the rapid transfer of remittances to The Gambia. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Banks and foreign exchange bureaux go to the greatest lengths to incentivise remittance flows during Ramadan, the end of Ramadan (Tobaski), and the Islamic new year (Eid) when the majority Muslim population in The Gambia fall under the most intense economic pressure of their annual calendar. Prizes or free gifts include bags of sugar or rice, phone credit, or entry into draws for winning a ram, the ritual sacrificial Eid feast. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Banks in The Gambia are increasingly offering 'diaspora accounts' to overseas workers, which, in further reducing transaction costs, ensures more income flows back to The Gambia. ©Sylvia Chant*





*The rising use of mobile telephony in The Gambia, including smartphones, which frequently find their way into the country in the hand luggage of diasporic friends, relatives and lovers, has given rise to the proliferation of small-scale roadside businesses offering credit for an ever-increasing suite of mobile providers who rely heavily on informal operators to distribute their services. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Comium advertises its increasingly global roaming facilities. On another of its billboards it claims to have the lowest tariffs for international calls. As more mobile providers enter into competition with one another, prices drop, and diasporic communications are better assured. ©Sylvia Chant*





*Never out of touch. The owner of a small neighbourhood 'Naar' shop (grocery store), connects to the world on Facebook during a brief lull in customer traffic. The increased power of Gambian citizens to readily access global social media has been especially marked since the installation of the ACE (African Coast to Europe) submarine cable in December 2012. ©Sylvia Chant*



*The tendency for 'one-way' traffic of phones and other goods exported from the diaspora back home – such as second-hand clothes, bicycles, furniture, computing equipment and household effects – finds notable expression in the huge number of containers which end up becoming permanent features of the urban (and rural) landscape of The Gambia. Here a container has been converted to a depot for the sale of beer and soft drinks, on which global brand Coca-Cola finds another opportunity for advertising. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Container real estate, Fajara. The often unaffordable cost of sending containers back to Europe or North America, can, in their own way, make profits in The Gambia, with the marketing of vessels divested of the merchandise with which they came offering potential conversion into commercial outlets, and sometimes an extension to dwellings. ©Sylvia Chant*



*Mural of love: heartfelt 'welcome home' to a returning migrant displayed graffiti-style on a wall in Kanifing. The economic benefits of international migration must always be weighed up against the emotional sacrifices made by those who go and those who stay – lovers, spouses, relatives, friends – who are often separated for years. The excitement of receiving long-term returnees is such that Gambians will go to the country's international airport at Yundum hours in advance to meet them, and also let their feelings be known in public places. ©Sylvia Chant*

# References

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