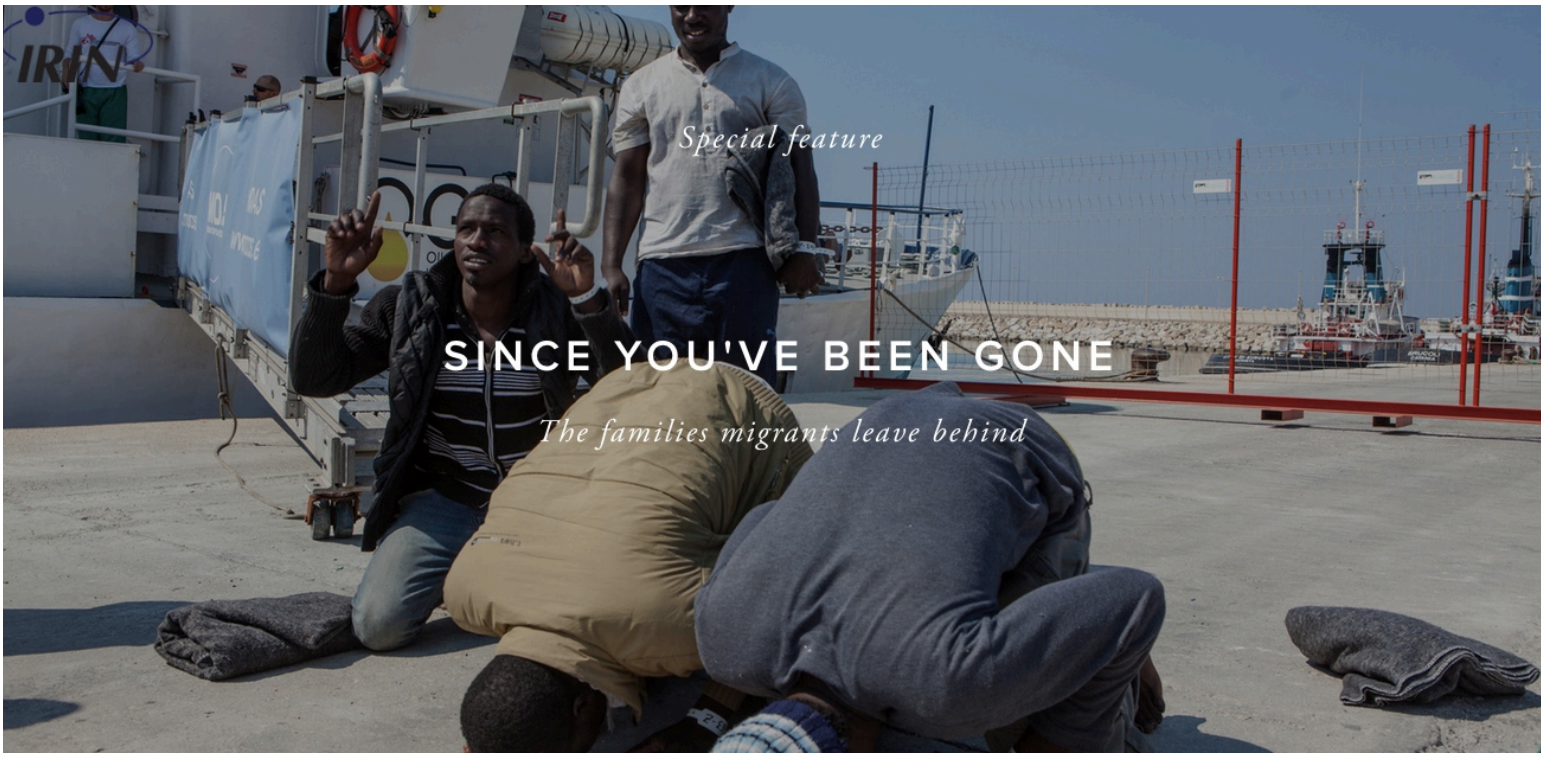

Every migrant who sets out on a journey leaves behind a family.

Our natural focus is on the odyssey, and the crisis that drives people from their homes. But migration is much more than just about people fleeing conflict or seeking asylum. It affects many more than those actually on the move and navigating hostile borders. Those left behind, out of the media spotlight, also carry a burden – both financial and emotional – in supporting loved ones on their journey.

This special report focuses on two such families.

Nigeria to Morocco

FROM A ROCK TO A HARD PLACE

Gambia to Italy

TAKING THE 'BACK WAY' OUT OF GAMBIA

By Obi Anyadike in Amankwu, Nigeria and Nador, Morocco

I’ve been guided over the phone to a small village square in Amankwu, in southeastern Nigeria, by a man on a mountain in Morocco. But aside from an elderly couple, there is nobody else here – and that was not the plan.

I met “Biggy”, the man on the other end of the phone, two months earlier living in the forests of Mount Selouane, just outside the northeastern Moroccan city of Nador. The old fishing port of Nador borders the Spanish enclave of Melilla, a historical anachronism that grants Spain 12 square kilometres of territory on the African continent. For undocumented migrants looking to enter Europe, it’s an irresistible lure.

Biggy, 31, is not seeking asylum. He has not been driven from his home by war or disaster, but like many other young men and women living rough on Mount Selouane, he wants a better life for himself and his family back home. And he is prepared to suffer hardship and risk plenty to attain it.

Lucky's journey from Nigeria to Morocco

"Our governments don't look after poor people. That's why we decided to come out [of Nigeria]," he told me. "Today I may suffer, but tomorrow, if I happen to make it [to Europe], I know my family will lead a better life."

But Morocco and Spain work very hard to dissuade migrants from getting into Melilla. A triple-layer, nine-metre-high security fence separates the two territories, manned by border guards with a reputation for being handy with a baton. To add insult to likely injury, Spain's controversial "hot return" policy means anyone caught is immediately deported back to Morocco.

In the four years he has been in Morocco, Biggy has "touched Spain" six times. But at close to two metres tall, his size works against him: the border guards can see him coming, and pay special attention to his subjugation. After the last beating, his face swollen and unrecognisable, he gave up on the fence. Now he's looking to raise the money to chip in on a boat and row across to mainland Spain, even though he can't swim.

Each time I met Biggy during a week-long visit to Nador this past summer, he was guarded, refusing to have his photo taken or divulge his real name. He was with other Igbo migrants (the Igbo are one of Nigeria's big three

ethnic groups known for their drive and determination to succeed) and seemed to hold some sway in their camp.

But his bravado – the "only the strong survive" machismo – was slipping. Four years of the indignity of life as an undocumented migrant, the deprivation, the teeth-grinding frustration has taken a toll. The last time we talked, he admitted to living "like an animal" in the forest, "winter and summer", constantly dodging the police. He had come to feel it had all been a colossal waste. "I have achieved nothing," he confessed.

He knew his family's hopes rested on his shoulders, but despite his strength, charm and resourcefulness, he'd been unable to make it through. So, in our last conversation, he finally gave me the phone number of his sister, Celia, and permission to visit his mother in his village of Amankwu – almost certainly in the hope that I might be moved to help them out.

(Full disclosure: One of my nephews travelled to Europe on dodgy papers and was deported. But I have a host of other family that have never seriously contemplated leaving the country. One quit school to work as a labourer in Lagos port, carrying sacks on his back to help his jobless dad – a tale that always brings a tear to my eye. So stories of migration out of Nigeria hit close to home for me.)

FAMILY AFFAIR

Amankwu, in Anambra State, is a busy village of unpaved roads, a market, church, school – and that's about it. But it is close to the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, named after Nigeria's nationalist hero and first president, which makes Biggy's decision to quit his country all the more poignant.

I am in the near-empty village square, on the phone with Biggy, who still refuses to provide his real name – preventing me from asking directions from a couple of curious stall owners. His sister Celia has switched off her

phone yet again, and I'm out of airtime anyway. So I tramp through the village looking for more phone credit, wondering whether, bewilderingly, I'm being punked.

Twenty-minutes later, Celia appears, wreathed in smiles, as I'm heading back into the square: the interview with Biggy's family is finally on.

But why all the secrecy? "Nobody knows he's in Morocco except his closest friends," his mother explains when we finally meet. It comes from a Karmic, evil-eye kind of idea, to protect him on his journey. And she quickly clears up the other mystery: Biggy's real name is Lucky Kodili Nwoye.

I'm in a near-completed house, without a ceiling, that Celia and her mother share. We sit awkwardly in a bare reception area – both of them unsure of the purpose of my visit. Why would a total stranger come all the way from Morocco to Amankwu to visit them?

"I was worried that something had happened to him," says a now-relieved Mama Lucky. "We hadn't been able to get through. I thought maybe he was in prison or dead, but the God I serve wouldn't allow that to happen."

> "Of course it's been hard – look how we're living – but it was his idea to go, and we supported him"
>
> — Mama Lucky

I came to Amankwu to understand the cost of migration on a family like the Nwoyes – or more precisely, the price of failure. What happens to the families left behind, hoping their loved ones will succeed, yet living in the knowledge, the guilt and the dread that so many perish trying? And how do you cope when you get that call that your son needs a little bit more money, when you are just about getting by as it is?

Lucky is one of nine children. His father died a few years after he was born, and the family has since struggled. Lucky didn't finish secondary school until he was in his 20s, picked up a trade as a mason, and worked in the village and nearby main town.

His two elder brothers have similarly hand-to-mouth jobs, one a motorbike taxi rider, the other an unlicensed taxi cab driver. Celia works with her mother on their small farm, and they sell their surplus cassava and cocoa yam in the small market outside the village.

Nigeria has an official unemployment rate of 8.2 percent – surprisingly low due to the power of the informal sector, where even graduates are selling phone airtime cards to make ends meet. But even if more formal jobs were available, research shows that rising expectations in middle-income countries like Nigeria mean migration actually increases rather than recedes. People move because they have the opportunity, with aspirations fuelled – to be simplistic – by watching soaps on TV and social media.

FACEBOOK

A subsistence lifestyle was not for Lucky. His Facebook profile banner features a BMW 4 Series M coupe convertible parked at an exclusive yacht club. For good measure, the insert image is of a mess of currencies, cans of beer and a packet of Marlboro. His timeline is a full-throttle fetishization of 'making it' – post after post of cars, watches, luxury homes, more cars.

Lucky says what drove him out of Nigeria was the urge to set his family up, and provide for his future children. But it was also about his self-worth and status. He wants to "wash the shame of poverty" from his family and show he has just as much grit and gumption as the other young men who hustle in South Africa, China, Malaysia, the US, and Europe.

But he left behind an ageing mother, struggling with rheumatism. “Sometimes it takes me an hour to stand up straight, and I can’t walk far,” she says. When she speaks to Lucky on the phone, maybe once a month, she always insists that she’s well, “so please don’t tell him”.

The family has also had to bail him out – doubling down on the investment. In Niger, early in his journey, Lucky got cheated out of the roughly $1,200 he’d managed to put together for the trip. His mother scraped and borrowed to make two payments to him, one instalment was $350 – the other amount she can’t remember. She says that after that tribulation, he knew he could ask for no more.

“Of course it’s been hard – look how we’re living – but it was his idea to go, and we supported him,” says Mama Lucky.

> “To go back is not easy. To go to Europe is not easy. To stay here is not easy,”
>
> — Lucky

When I ask whether it isn’t time for him to come home, she shoots me a look of incredulity. “How will he come back? My God will not allow that. I ask God that anyone that starts a journey will get to his destination. God will favour him and allow him to get to his destination.”

The mood lightens when she talks about how Lucky doted on her – embarrassingly even in public; how he always settled arguments in the house; and was known by everyone. “Does he still laugh his big laugh?” she asks.

What I recall instead is Biggy/Lucky talking fast, almost unintelligibly, as he knocks back cheap vodka. He is angry. There’s nothing for him in Nigeria. He doesn’t think the new government of President Muhammadu

Buhari will bring any real change. He just wants to help his family; they're even worse off than he is. Yet Morocco stops him when all he wants to do is leave.

And then he crashes off into the trees, hollering in raging, impotent frustration.

I can't tell her this. Or show her the photos stored on my computer of him living in a tent on the stony ground of Mount Selouane, shielding his face so he can't be identified, looking like a criminal, among other young men, similarly desperate, forlorn.

In Amankwu, the feeling is he must stay until he succeeds, and so Lucky is trapped. "To go back is not easy. To go to Europe is not easy. To stay here is not easy," he told me.

Slideshow and film available on website

Edited by Heba Aly and Andrew Gully

Cover photo by Michael Igwe-Ngerem

By Louise Hunt in Banjul, Gambia

It has been more than a month since Nene Sanneh has had any news of her 26-year-old son Mohammed Lamin*. All she knows is that he left their home in the Gambia determined to reach Europe from Libya on a smuggler's boat.

Now she's looking at an image on a mobile phone of her son aboard The Phoenix, the vessel that rescued him from a stricken fishing boat in the Mediterranean and delivered him safely to Italy.

"Albaraka, Albaraka," she says, expressing her gratitude and relief that her son is alive.

"I am so happy, so happy to see that he is well. I couldn't eat or sleep. We were so worried about him. We did not know if he had crossed or what happened to him."

Mohammed Lamin aboard rescue ship The Phoenix (Jason Florio/MOAS/IRIN)

The Ceesay family live in a village on the edge of the sprawling city of Brikama, the first stop for many Gambian migrants moving out of the impoverished countryside. Central Brikama is a hub of market stalls and traders, its potholed streets lined with ironmongers and tyre shops, with rows of women selling mangos.

The Ceesay compound lies down a waterlogged dirt road, where sand bags and breeze blocks serve as stepping stones through fetid, algae-skinned puddles.

The compound is home to Lamin's parents and 11 children, including those of his older brother Pa and his wife.

"You see how we live here? That is why Lamin wanted to go: to find a better life," says Pa, standing on the veranda, under a tin roof that radiates heat.

NO OPPORTUNITY

The Gambia is one of Africa's smallest countries: a finger of land around its namesake river, with a population of under two million. And yet it consistently ranks in the top six nations with the most citizens taking the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy.

Gambians have traditionally migrated to find their fortunes, settling throughout West Africa, and much further afield. Remittances from abroad made up 20 percent of gross domestic product in 2014, according to the World Bank. In the 1980s, the destination of choice was Scandinavia, a connection reinforced by the Swedish origins of Gambia's tourism industry. In the 1990s, it was oil-rich Libya under Muammar Gaddafi.

Gambia's under-developed economy means there are few opportunities at home, especially for the youth. Growth contracted to -0.7 percent in 2014, largely as a result of the impact of the Ebola scare on tourism and the poor seasonal rains on the all-important agriculture sector.

'BACK WAY' IS THE ONLY WAY

Lamin was not jobless (he worked as a mason for his uncle in Senegal), but he saw no real future for himself or his family, which he felt obligated to help.

> "In Gambia, things are not working. I have nothing.
>
> — Lamin

He decided to do something dramatic to try to change their circumstances. With some financing from his eldest brother working in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau to get him on the road, he risked his life on what is known in the Gambia as the 'back way': the 5,000-kilometre journey through the Sahel to an insecure Libya, and then a dangerous sea crossing to Europe.

When he was rescued from a fishing boat crammed with other migrants and refugees in July, the only personal item he had on him was the paper from a cigarette packet on which he had written an Islamic prayer and the telephone numbers of a few relatives and a close friend.

Safely on board The Phoenix, a boat belonging to the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), a privately-funded search-and-rescue initiative, he explained to photographer Jason Florio, working on the vessel, why so many other young Gambians were making such an extreme choice.

“In Gambia, things are not working. I have nothing. It’s poverty, that’s part of it, because there, you’re wasting your time doing nothing… So you ask your friends in Europe and they will say to you: ‘here is fine, you at least find jobs’.”

Lamin's journey from Gambia to Europe

Lamin is among more than 5,500 Gambians who have successfully made it across the Mediterranean to Italy from Libya in the first eight months of this year, according to the latest data from the Italian interior ministry.

THE HARD ROAD TO 'PARADISE'

There were plenty of points during Lamin's journey when he doubted his decision.

"We spent three days in the (Libyan) desert. We had no food, no water. I thought: 'what a huge sacrifice I'm doing; a lot of people die in the desert.' But I have to do it, you know. I said: 'Let me try because my other friends crossed. They're in Europe so let me also try. I may not die.' But it's not an easy thing."

> "When we were stranded I said to myself: 'I'm going to die like my other brothers, I'm not going to see my parents again.'
>
> — Lamin

In Libya, having paid a smuggling agent for his passage to Italy – the money raised for him by his family at home – he was kept in squalid conditions in a so-called connection house, until the boat was full.

The migrants were told to choose a captain from among themselves and buy their own compass to help them navigate. They soon got lost and ran out of fuel. Fortunately, they were spotted by a helicopter after one of the passengers called a friend in Italy to alert the emergency services.

On his way to the port of Pozallo to be processed by the Italian immigration authorities, Lamin beamed when asked how he was feeling.

"When we were stranded I said to myself: 'I'm going to die like my other brothers, I'm not going to see my parents again.' I never thought I was going to survive. I feel like I'm in paradise."

The first thing he would do, he said, was call his brother and tell his family he was alive. “I will call and say: ‘Don’t let any of our brothers use this way because it is not an easy way’.”

He knew his family would rejoice at the news they had a son in Europe. “They have in mind that I’ll be sending them money. This is the [belief] of most families: that you are there to work and send money (home). They don’t think it will be hard to find work.”

Social media plays a big role in perpetuating this belief. There are stories of migrants borrowing gold chains and posing with sports cars for photos they share with friends and family back home. Some even send home the 40-euro subsistence allowance they receive each month while staying at reception centres in Italy, awaiting a decision on their asylum applications.

But Lamin was vague on what he would actually do now that he had reached Europe. “If I can learn any skills I will be happy. My ideal job? Any kind of skilled work that I see; work where I can have money and support my family.”

STRUGGLES ON THE HOME FRONT

Back in Brikama, Pa is now the main breadwinner. His father Mamoud is a farmer, growing cashew nuts and maize for the family’s consumption.

“I have worked for 20 years as a tailor but still I cannot make enough money to improve our home,” he says. “It is always hand to mouth.”

Pa complains that the cost of food is rising rapidly. “A sack of rice costs over 1,000 Dalasi ($25), but most people only earn 1,500-2,000 a month. It is always a struggle here.”

Home front - Brikama (Louise Hunt/IRIN)

Inside their dingy home, the plasterboard walls are crumbling and the floors are bare concrete, save for patches of worn lino. A battered wooden dresser is the only item of furniture in the living area.

“You see other compounds here and you know if they are better it is because they have a family member in Europe. You can see the difference in how they are built. Some are (two-)storey houses and have solar panels. If you can’t change your circumstances, you have to change your environment,” says Pa.

THE FAMILY PAYS

Lamin's childhood friend Buba Jallow knew about his plans from the start and understands why he left his job and took the risks he did.

"It is very hard here because your family think you are a big man if you are in the city, but there are no good jobs here. That's why people go the 'back way': because they feel the pressure to provide for their families," says Buba, who sells horse rides to tourists on the beach.

But it is the family members themselves who are initially out of pocket. Despite not being aware of Lamin's plans at first, they ended up making the enormous financial sacrifice to pay for his passage from Libya.

"We sent him 45,000 Dalasi ($1,150)," says Pa. "We knew it was a big risk (taking the boat), but we had to support him.

"We halved everything we spent money on – bought half the amount of food – so that we could save to contribute to Lamin's boat passage. It was a big sacrifice, but everyone feels that if you give up your land or sell something and your family member can make it to Europe, it's worth the sacrifice."

Asked what would happen if Lamin was deported back to the Gambia, everyone is silent. Eventually Pa responds: "We don't want to think about it. But if that happens, that is our fate."

Standing by the well in the yard, Pa reveals that he too is contemplating taking the 'back way'. "If it wasn't Lamin that travelled, it would be me. I am waiting to go too."

Younger brother Bambu agrees. "It is great he is in Europe," he says, enthusiastically.

Lamin is currently housed in a hotel in Italy, awaiting a decision on his asylum claim. He has yet to send any money back to his family.

Mohammed Lamin's new European chapter (Jason Florio/MOAS/IRIN)

*All names have been changed

Film available on website

Edited by Kristy Siegfried, Obi Anyadike and Andrew Gully

Cover photo by Louise Hunt
