

Victims of their Fantasies or Heroes for a Day? The Study of Representations/self-representations as Contribution to the Understanding of the Phenomenon of Boat Migrations from Senegal.

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From 2005 to present, the waves of Atlantic ocean that shatter on the Senegalese, Gambian and Mauritanian coasts, have been ploughed by about ten thousand migrants in pirogues (most of them Senegalese) who lay up for the Spanish archipelago of the Canary Islands, risking their lives in order to “*gagner l’Europe*”. Many of them, without any regular expatriation document, are forcibly repatriated, following a temporary period of detention. In Senegal the phenomenon of the *boat migrations* has triggered a remarkable social production of images and discourses. In assuming movements as exception, the ‘boat migrant’ is portrayed as a “kamikaze” or a “naive adventurer” who is driven to leave by the imagination of an idyllic European “Elsewhere or in order to achieve the same economical richness displayed by returning migrants.

Conversely, drawing from the works of De Bruijn *et al.*, for millions of Africans being mobile appear rather a “way of life”, a part of their daily experience, implying “more than just movement of people in geographical space [but] also non-human and no material things such as ideas and values [that] can adopt specific form as a result of the movement of people” (2001: 9). Starting from these premises, it is suggested that the phenomenon of ‘boat migrations’ can be better understood by exploring both the manifold forms of social representations/self-representations of migrant which circulate within Senegalese society, and the meanings conveyed by Senegalese media and narratives of migrants and non-migrants.

Drawing from the findings of a field research undertaken in the urban areas of Dakar and Mbour-Saly (Senegal) the contribution wishes to present and analyse some ethnographical materials – such as “daily life narrations”, newspapers, periodicals and some iconographical documents – aiming to discuss and highlight how the study of the ‘social construction of migrant’ emerges as a fertile soil to understand the role of the different social actors involved in the phenomenon of ‘boat migrations’. The representations/self-representations of migrant appear as a meaningful device to deconstruct the macro-analytical interpretations and to question the official rhetoric on “clandestine migrations” from Africa that are too often understood as the mechanistic result of underdevelopment and poverty.