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Law and the credibility of migration brokers

The case of emigration
dynamics in Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper analyses relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers from the perspective of a place of departure, such as Anglophone Cameroon. The paper seeks to go beyond a statist perspective on so-called irregular migration by drawing on empirical insights into the perspectives of aspiring migrants, their family members, as well as on direct observations between migrants and brokers within their respective context. Relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers cannot be understood through the lens of legal paradigms, such as trafficking and smuggling. This paper thus sets out to explore locally relevant terminology and factors: how do aspiring migrants come to evaluate the credibility and ‘powers’ of migration brokers? By exploring locally operated distinctions between doki men, feymen and big men, this paper questions the relative place of state-enforceable law as opposed to other regulatory norms in places of departure. The paper draws on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork on migration aspirations and emigration trajectories in Anglophone Cameroon (2007 and 2009).

Keywords: migration brokers, illegality, smuggling, trafficking, migration risk, deception, credibility, Cameroon, moral economy, trust, irregular migration

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1 Introduction

Embassies in Yaoundé do their best to warn Cameroonians against migration brokers. Notes of warnings are spread throughout public relation activities at schools, open days, radio and TV broadcasts, as well as on notice boards outside the embassy compounds themselves: ‘Beware of dokimen! They are hurting your future.’ ‘These people are just making money out of your fears and ignorance. They are not the friend of the applicant.’ The chief consulate officer made these statements, which I heard on an open day organised for journalists at the US embassy in Yaoundé, pleading with journalists to warn their countrymen not to go to the Embassy with the mediation of doki men. They are ‘giving and selling bad advice on how to present visa applications.’ The main message that is conveyed in the statements of the consult is that doki men are bad for visa applicants, as well as for the country as a whole. ‘Protect yourself. Protect Cameroon. Stop the doki men.’ According to the consulate officer, commercial mediation is a scam at the best of times. Most importantly, the quotes from the US embassy show that relations between aspiring migrants and brokers are understood in terms of criminality, well as merely profit-driven commerce.

While embassies seek to denigrate migration brokerage to the realms of crime and commerce, the first point of departure for many aspiring migrants in Anglophone Cameroon is not the embassy, but a migration broker or a member of family who has already succeeded in getting out. Currently, migration brokers are popular avenues for international travel for Cameroonians of mixed levels of education. Only Cameroonians who belong to the elite of the country and have a strong network of international connections within their family or have already travelled abroad themselves are able to rely less on the help of migration brokers. As a consequence, many aspiring migrants give large amounts of money to migration brokers in the hope of being able to leave the country. At times, families even take out loans to finance emigration attempts and many times the money invested comes from important financial reserves for retirement or ill health. Although failure is common, migration brokers continue to attract new clients who entrust them with large sums of money. While often accused of being criminal businessmen, the migration brokers with whom I worked in the field were greatly admired.

The puzzle of how migration brokers manage to build up and maintain their credibility is at the heart of this paper. Seeking to go beyond statist perspectives, this paper demonstrates that relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers cannot be understood through the lens of legal paradigms, such as trafficking and smuggling, but needs to be analysed through the moralities that shape the economy of departure. With the moral economy of departure, I refer to the production and circulation of values, emotions and norms as they are evoked by the event of departure (Fassin 2009: 1257). Aspiring migrants do not evaluate the ‘powers’ of migration brokers in terms of the supposed ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ nature of their work. This paper thus asks on what alternatives basis migrants come to trust brokers. By exploring locally operated distinctions between doki men, feymen and big men, this paper questions the relative place of state-enforceable law as opposed to the binding rules and customs generated in the social field of migration brokerage.

In the above warnings of US consulate officers, as well as in public and academic debates on trafficking and smuggling, migration brokers are often portrayed to be either criminals (Finkenauer 2001, Aronowitz 2009) or businessmen who instigate trajectories of migration (Salt & Stein 1997). The paradigms of trafficking and smuggling have a tendency to criminalise and stigmatise a broad array of migration intermediaries (for a critical analysis of such tendencies, see Spener 2009, 201–229; Liempt and Sersli 2012; or Gisti 2010). In an attempt to move away from a predominantly criminal way of framing migration brokerage, Kyle and Liang have defined ‘migration merchants’ as

‘anyone who profits from the migration of others regardless of legality’ (2001, 4). With their concept of ‘migrant-exporting schemes’, they propose a model that considers the selling of migration services in terms of business. For them, a ‘migrant-exporting scheme’ turns into a ‘slave-importing scheme’ if most of the profits are generated by the unpaid labour of migrants in countries of destination. Just as illegality and crime are insufficient modes of analysis for migration brokerage, relations between clients and brokers do not confer to ideal types of contractual business deals either. In my paper, I contribute towards prior studies of third-party mediated migration by embedding relations between (aspiring) migrants and brokers into a broader picture of culturally and socially specific patronage dynamics.

In a quest to understand third-party mediated migration beyond the dichotomy of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ (Spener 2009, 162–200; Zheng 2010, 2–3), this paper argues that we can only come to understand why aspiring migrants trust brokers if we place these relations into the historical, political and legal context in which aspiring migrants try to emigrate. Migration brokers have recently become central and credible actors for aspiring migrants as it has become increasingly difficult for many aspiring migrants to obtain visas at consulate offices. In Anglophone Cameroon, for example, dynamics between brokers and (aspiring) migrants take the shape of patronage relations (Bayart 2009; Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 1999; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Smith 2007, 11–16). Cameroon is experienced by aspiring migrants as being ‘closed off’ (Alpes 2011). When migration aspirations are higher than people’s potential to realise these aspirations, attitudes towards brokers and even their potential failure change. I thus argue in this paper, for the need to study migration brokerage in relation to people’s perspectives in places of departure. This perspective will also include some more structural constraints and vulnerabilities beyond the direct (financial or physical) relationship to a broker.

There is by now an increasing body of work that questions distinctions between smuggling and trafficking (e.g. Anderson 2007), as well as of studies that seek to illuminate how migrants themselves experience and consider third-party mediated migration (e.g. Liempt 2007, Spener 2008, Koser 1997). Most of the later studies, however, continue to frame brokerage in terms of the legal categories of smuggling or trafficking (e.g. Doomernik 2012). In light of how (aspiring) migrants experience third-party mediated migration trajectories, this paper suggests moving away from the framework of smuggling towards analysing third-party mediated migration through the more neutral language of brokerage. The term of smuggling is not necessarily of relevance to actors in third-party mediated migration. If scholars want to understand the logics of sociability that frame trust and the limits of trust between brokers and (aspiring) migrants, then we need to explore the terms that participants themselves use to make sense of their relations with one another.

Finally, studies on smuggling and trafficking have so far largely been based on interviews with migrants and mostly at points of arrival (e.g. van Liempt 2007, Koser 1997, Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012). There have so far been extremely few studies that are based on direct research with migration brokers themselves (for exceptions see Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012). There have also been few studies that illuminate the vulnerabilities of (aspiring) migrants before they set upon their journey. Through its ethnographic research material with migration brokers in Cameroon, this paper begins to fill these research gaps.

The empirical material for this paper comes out of a broader research project on emigration trajectories from Anglophone Cameroon to Europe and Northern America (Alpes 2011). Between September 2007 and January 2009, I conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a small university town called Buea in Anglophone Cameroon. As part of my research, I followed 24 aspiring migrants and their family members in different spaces and moments that were important for their departure projects. During my research, I got to know and conducted interviews with a eleven

different migration brokers. In order to gain in-depth insights into how these brokers were able to conduct their work, I chose to liaise with two brokers in particular. I was thus able to observe the work in their respective offices on an almost daily basis, as well as to accompany them on various trips.

Although I have followed the cases of many aspiring migrants, I have chosen here to illuminate relations with brokers through the lens of one specific case study. I selected the case of this aspiring migrant who has failed to leave the country for the complexity of issues it reveals on monetary exchanges between aspiring migrants and migration brokers, as well as for its insights into dynamics of deceit and failure. Driven by a concern to go beyond assumptions in pre-defined classifications of brokers into traffickers and smugglers, I prioritised above all, the depth of my research material so that I could discover how aspiring migrants and their family members come to understand deceit and migration failure in their own terms.

2 Relations between migration brokers and aspiring migrants

The terminology of informality and illegality (as much as the terminology of smuggling and trafficking) assumes the supposed under-cover, shadowy and invisible nature of the market of migration brokerage (e.g. Aronowitz 2001). Contrary to these assumptions, there was nothing hidden, opaque or illicit about the work of migration brokers in Anglophone Cameroon. Cameroonians related to migration brokers and the price of their openings, lines and programmes in extremely frank and candid terms.

2.1 Bushfalling, lines and programmes

So as to understand how and why many aspiring migrants chose to trust migration brokers, I argue for the importance of local terminology such as bushfalling, but also terms, such as lines, programmes, openings and closure. Bushfalling is the act of going out to the wilderness (i.e. the bush) to hunt down meat (i.e. money) and bring back home the trophies. It is under the term of bushfalling that emigration is currently imagined and envisaged in Anglophone Cameroon. To fall bush implies trying against all odds to leave the country to go (i.e. fall) and earn money to send back to the family in Cameroon. A person who has successfully travelled or migrated is called a bushfaller. Successful bushfallers are expected to generate and send back money for the survival of the family.

In Anglophone Cameroon, possibilities for travelling are referred to as ‘lines’, ‘openings’ or ‘programmes’. All three are emic terms through which the possibilities and impossibilities of migration are understood. To travel is understood here as overcoming closure and hence travelling requires the search for openings. For all but the most privileged, the impossibility of travelling is a given at the point of departure. Even if one has found an ‘opening’ or a ‘line’, these can close at any time. The threat of failure is deeply ingrained in language referring to migration and travel. The threat of failure is not located with the broker, but considered to be an inherent part of any travel project. Migration brokers, to the contrary, provide hope and the chance of being able to travel.

Given the risky nature of bushfalling and the ever-looming possibility of failure and closure, aspiring migrants need to ‘rush’ whenever they find out or hear about an opening. If one delays too much, the ‘opening’ can close again. Consequently, the success of a broker is evaluated by the speed with which they can deliver. If one has heard of a particularly good and safe ‘programme’, one talks about a ‘direct line’. A ‘direct line’ is one that goes straight from a migration broker to the outside world. In particular, a direct line does not go via an embassy that could otherwise stop the emigration trajectory.

Any opportunity for a travel project (that entails at least some degree of difficulty to realize) can be referred to as a 'line', 'programme' and/or an 'opening'. While migration brokers are key for many travel projects, aspiring migrants can also refer to scholarship announcements, volunteer programmes, conferences or job offers as lines, programmes and openings. In this paper, I focus on transcontinental travel projects that require forms of paper documentation for individual migrants to cross state borders. The further the geographical distance to be bridged, the more central brokers become to the realization of people's migration aspirations.

2.2 Migration brokers in Anglophone Cameroon

In the last ten years, a whole array of migration agents, brokers and facilitators have mushroomed in Anglophone Cameroon. The range of facilitators and mediators of migration in Cameroon is vast. Cyber café staff charge 1.000 CFA (roughly €1.50) for filling out application forms for the American visa lottery, creating Internet profiles on dating websites and a bit more for filling in visa application forms online. People who are engaged in international trade can 'carry along' others or simply give out information on visa processes. Posters on the street of Yaoundé offer support with visa applications that require bank statements from countries of destination.

This paper predominantly studies the case of two migration brokers that make money through the selling of papers, connections and information that facilitate migration. To understand how and why (aspiring) migrants trust migration brokers, however, it is important to understand how their work is part of a whole range of potential acts of mediation within the construction of migration projects. As a researcher, for example, I often ended up functioning as a broker too. I did not accept money in return for my services, but was certainly perceived as a person with potentially important international connections. To place professional migration brokerage into a range of mediating and facilitating activities can help to unravel assumptions inherent to the framing of brokers as smugglers or traffickers. The regulatory requirements of states are, for example, often so far removed from the daily realities of aspiring migrants that mediation is necessary even for migration trajectories that would be classified by states as entirely legal (Alpes 2011).

Migration brokerage services changed incredibly fast and the degrees to which mediated services were commercialized also varied. Only in very exceptional cases did I hear about (but not personally meet) female migration brokers. The symbolic capital that it requires to act as migration brokers makes it easier for men than for women to be credible as 'big men'. Regardless of gender, distinguishing lines between aspiring migrants and migration brokers were not clear cut. Often brokers had the expertise and the connections that they need for their work, precisely because they have attempted emigration before for themselves or had managed to leave the country and had then been deported back.

While some NGOs and companies can offer bushfalling programmes on the side to their main lines of activity, I also observed individual facilitators who addressed visa applicants in front of embassies and individuals that specialised in the production of travel documents. In particular, I did research with two agencies (called AALC and INACOD) that had offices that specialised in study and work migration. While other facilitators might distribute flyers and put up posters, the directors of these two offices (Mr Walter and Mr James) made radio announcements and were visible through their respective offices.¹ Both served as advertisements of their expertise. Mr James specialised in sending people to Dubai and Mr Walter was known for his connections to China. Both claimed, tried and were known in Cameroon to also send clients to Europe.

¹ The names of all informants have been changed to pseudonyms. Only the names of organisations have been retained.

Mr James had a small office on top of a cyber café and a money transfer company. The signboard in front of the office drew attention to Mr James' office under the name of INACOD (International Assistance for Community Development). Mr Walter had a small office right next to the university campus of Buea. A big signboard at the side of the road invited people to walk over to his 'Common Initiative Group' called 'Africa Asia Learning Connection' (AALC).² The office itself was small, staffed by two secretarial employees who received clients in the reception room, while Mr Walter was mostly travelling and working in much more mobile fashion. Both brokerage offices were registered as NGOs.

Mr James and Mr Walter's main strategies were using 'document dispatch', which does not put at stake the physical safety of aspiring migrants (Spener 2009, 3–123). Document dispatch involves the buying of papers from other mediators or directly from contacts within state institutions or other mediators, or the scanning and graphic production of counterfeit documents. Document dispatching is relatively expensive when compared to other strategies of migration brokerage, such as overland crossings. The prices for lines with Mr James and Mr Walter varied between 1.8 million CFA for China and Dubai (around €2,700) and 2.5 million CFA for Canada and Europe (roughly €3,800).

When the European or North American lines of Mr Walter and Mr James failed, they instead sent their clients out to the countries that they could always deliver on, i.e. Dubai or China. Rather remarkably, even the closing down of an office is not necessarily the end of the ambitions or credentials of a migration broker. Mr Walter had experienced a crisis with his bushfalling programmes a few years before my arrival in Cameroon. To escape the threats of his clients, he and his wife and children had had to take refuge in the capital of Yaoundé. Despite this crisis however, Mr Walter had managed to return to Buea and re-establish himself as a migration broker with a new agency called AALC.

2.3 From traffickers and smugglers to doki men, feymen and big men

In Anglophone Cameroon, aspiring migrants see migration brokers as enabling people. Without their patronage, access to bush is in most cases not possible. Family members abroad are also crucial facilitators of emigration, but often cannot bring over aspiring migrants without the help of migration brokers either. As a consequence, migration brokers are not 'other' to aspiring migrants, but rather 'allies' and 'helpers' in a quest for both geographic and social mobility. For aspiring migrants who stand only a small chance of ever obtaining a visa for a transcontinental travel project, the authority of migration brokers reflects hopes for global belonging (Ferguson 2006, 174–175). As ambitions for success and status have become so closely intertwined with geographical mobility in Cameroon, migration brokers are also perceived as 'agents of benevolence, goodwill and equity' (Simon 2009, 198).

While aspiring migrants admire and trust migration brokers a great deal, their trust is not unlimited. During fieldwork I noticed how aspiring migrants distinguished between 'doki men', 'feymen' and 'big men.' To understand migration brokers in these terms opens up an understanding of the horizon of expectations that aspiring migrants have. Feymen are perceived as con artists and trick businessmen (Ndjio 2006; Malaquais 2001). They generate money through swindling and financial deception. Migration brokers that are feymen do not deliver and have no intention of delivering but merely dupe their clients. Some feymen generate so much money they can become local and national

² Common Initiative Groups have a slightly different legal status in Cameroon than Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

benefactors. Despite the often-unlawful nature of their economic activities, feymen are respected as wealthy and powerful men. In its current economic climate, all new forms of wealth have come to be closely associated with feymenia (Ndjio 2006). Aspiring migrants always fear that their migration broker might only pretend to be big and powerful, but will actually dupe them. Yet, as long as the relationship between an aspiring migrant and migration broker continues in one way or the other, aspiring migrants will not talk of duping.

The type of migration broker that aspiring migrants hope for is a 'big man'. Big men are powerful people with international connections. Aspiring migrants believe that big men can make people travel because of the strength and quality of their connections. Such connections can take the shape of contact people abroad, but also just knowledge about the world outside of Cameroon. The term 'big man' can refer to both businessmen and politicians (Daloz 2002). When an aspiring migrant who had just handed over money to a migration broker was confronted by stories of duping, she responded that her broker was 'big' and that she could thus really trust him. Doki men are much less respected than big men, but also less successful and grand in their projects than feymen. They do not have connections, but merely imitate and manufacture travel documents.

The typology of doki men, feymen and big men is useful in that these terms indicate three different types of relationships. Aspiring migrants will trust and give over money to a doki man with a different set of expectations and motivations than to a big man. The risk of giving money to a doki man rests on the efficiency of the documents the doki man will supply. The risk of giving money to a big man is located with the question of whether or not he is actually a big man. Feymen can pose as big men, but then proceed to merely dupe their clients. In this case, the intention of the migration broker would have been false.

Whether or not the papers of any broker, however, would be classified as real or fake by state officials is not of concern and does not figure within the parameters of how migration-related risks are assessed. The typology of doki men, feymen and big men is unrelated to question of legality. I heard a migrant ask about the nature of the visa and the broker replied that a visa is a visa. Yet, this was the only time that legal considerations were brought into the discussion between broker and aspiring migrant.

3 Trading transformative potentials

Victoria gave money to the migration broker of Mr. Walter, but was never able to leave the country. Through the below case study, I will analyse dynamics of normative regulation beyond the framework of the law. I will argue that migration brokers sell not only the good of going out, but also the potential for the aspiring migrant to become a bushfaller. As patrons, migration brokers function as social elevators (Daloz 2002; 2005). One can only turn another person into a bushfaller, if one is such a person of power and status. As a big man, Mr. Walter can (against remuneration) elevate others to the status of bushfallers. The legitimacy of the work of migration brokers is connected to this dispersal of powers and potential bestowment of status. These dynamics become visible only over a longer span of time and in relation to not just the individual aspiring migrants, but also his or her family members.

Victoria was one of the brightest and most educated within her family. Her cousins ended their education at the level of GCE – the equivalent of the former O-level exam in Great Britain. She by contrast had started a degree course at the university and then did a year of accountancy training. Because of her special position within the family, it was always clear to her that one day she would go to bush. She knew the migration broker Mr. Walter because he was the husband of a friend of hers.

Victoria lobbied her (paternal) uncle who agreed to finance her bushfelling project. As a cocoa farmer, he was able to finance the project and he thus handed over 1.3 million CFA to Mr. Walter (€2,000) in 2004.³

Yet, Victoria was never able to go because – as Mr. Walter explained – he had had to spend her money on “another purpose”. Victoria struggled without success to get her money back. The year 2005 had been a bad year for Mr. Walter. After a series of failed migration programmes, he had had to go into hiding. He first went to Yaoundé and later disappeared to China. His wife, their three children and the secretary Delma also had to move elsewhere for a while until matters calmed down. Even his church, the Christian Missionary Fellowship International, temporarily expelled him from membership.

After her failed travel project, Victoria decided that she could not just sit and wait for Mr. Walter to arrange things. Retrospectively explaining to me how she dealt with this disappointment, Victoria told me that ‘to be a complete woman, you have to marry and give birth.’ After her failure to leave the country, Victoria instead married a North Westerner and gave birth. Once married, Victoria explained, you could not leave for bush again. Yet, Victoria’s paternal uncle was angry with Victoria because he wrongly suspected her of having ‘eaten the money’ herself (Bayart 2009) - that is of having used the money for her own personal advantage instead of travelling out to bush to work and earn money for the benefit of her family back home in Cameroon. After failing to travel out, Victoria fell severely ill for eight months. Knowing that her uncle did not trust her on how she had used the money that he had given to her for bushfelling, Victoria was convinced that her illness was the consequence of a witchcraft spell that her uncle had put on her.

Three years later, Victoria again visited Mr. Walter to try and regain the money that she had given to Mr. Walter for bushfelling. In their conversation, Mr. Walter reiterated that he did not have the money to be able to reimburse Victoria. My research assistant Delphine believed his narrative. Over time, Victoria grew very sceptical of Mr. Walter’s actions, yet fundamentally still considered him a businessman in his own trade, and not a feyman.

When Victoria had given money to Mr. Walter in 2004’, his agency had been called ‘Global Web Enterprise’. As Victoria told this to me, she turned around and tried to read the name on the poster next to the entrance of the small office in front of which we were sitting. This was the first time she bothered to look at the poster and decipher the name. She did not particularly care for the agency or institution. She knew that she was dealing with Mr. Walter. She was disillusioned with him, his lies, and his ways. Yet, she did not see another way of going about bushfelling. ‘How does one do if you don’t go with these kind of people?’ she asked me.

When Victoria finally saw Mr. Walter again in 2008, he offered in a conciliatory voice that, if Victoria could bring him another client, he would be able to deduct money from that fee to give back to her. Victoria was not satisfied with this offer. She did not know anybody in her family or amongst her friends who wanted to go out. A few weeks later, however, her small brother decided that he would like to go to bush. As her only brother, Matthias was ‘chop chair’, i.e. the successor and future head of family. In the case of the death of the current head of family, he would have responsibilities within the family and if he were to become a bushfeller, this would be beneficial for the entire family.

³ Victoria’s paternal uncle was a North Westerner who came down to make his fortune with cocoa farming in the South West Province. Victoria herself was born in the South West Province. As her parents were dead, her uncle was in charge of her. Since about 2000, cocoa sells at relatively good rates and those farmers do according to Cameroonians standards quite well. A farm like Victoria’s uncle can generate in one year almost 3.000.000 CFA.

When Victoria and her brother came to announce this news to Mr. Walter, he promised ‘to perform’. He prided himself to be powerful and within the same breath pointed to the photo of himself and the Chinese Ambassador in the room. ‘The Ambassador recognizes us.’ When Matthias explained that his uncle would like him to go to the U.S., Mr. Walter named the prices of his lines for Europe. Upon hearing the fee, Victoria cut the conversation short: ‘This is beyond me.’ She did not have the financial power to reach to that level and mobilise more money for bush. Mr. Walter hence proceeded to promote a destination for bushfelling that he could deliver at a cheaper rate. If you have money, he explained to Matthias, you can do business in China. He spoke of possibilities to buy goods from factories, to act as a commissioner, to join in operations with other Cameroonians, to act as an interpreter or to teach English. He also mentioned medicine courses in English. Mr. Walter offered information on salary levels in China and potential profit margins. He dropped numbers and conversion rates at an incredible speed. ‘I will start to perform’, Mr. Walter concluded and went on to talk a few words of Chinese.

Convinced by Mr. Walter’s talk, Matthias decided that he wanted to go to China to work there for one year and then use one of Mr. Walter’s contact universities for medical studies. ‘My own level end[s] for visa and ticket. But since we know [each other]... I will help you with everything.’ Mr. Walter assured Victoria that saving up for the tuition fees would be no problem – unless of course Matthias started to fall for and ‘perform’ with Chinese women. Matthias’s A-level results in the natural sciences were not a subject of discussion. Victoria hesitated and asked Mr. Walter the difficulty or ease of things would be for Matthias in China. Mr. Walter responded that he could not ‘perform’ in his place. ‘I can only give you a channel to go. You have to be smart.’

The way Mr. Walter put matters, any failure would be Matthias’s responsibility and not the consequence of the kind of visa he had, the job market there and his own qualifications and connections. Mr. Walter managed affairs in such a way that many of his services were given out of kindness, but not as part of the actual agreement with his clients. Money negotiations, too, were played largely according to Mr. Walter’s tune. As Victoria did not have an idea about the prices for which other brokers currently offer their lines, she asked whether the flight would be included in the 1,8 million that the China line costs.

When Victoria wanted to leave the office, Mr. Walter asked her to ‘perform’. Victoria did not understand, yet, Matthias did. He took out 500,000 CFA (€800) and handed it over to his elder sister. His uncle had given him the money. Victoria was not aware that Matthias had this money on him, nor that her uncle had apparently already seen Mr. Walter in between. Mr. Walter did his calculations. He introduced a 25 percent reduction of the initial payment of 1.3 million CFA (€2,000) three years ago because he argued that ‘Victoria had not shown up for travel’ and then for the transfer of name.

Mr. Walter took Victoria by surprise with his proceedings and regulations. ‘We get standard contracts. These are the rules. I can bring you those,’ he said. Although it was not clear whether Victoria ever signed such a ‘standard contract’, the 25 percent reduction boiled down to a loss of money of 325,000 CFA (€500). Mr. Walter calculated that he already had a payment of 985,000 CFA (€1,300). The new China line cost 1,8 million CFA (€2,700), which left 815,000 CFA still to be paid (€1,200). He even claimed that the uncle had already agreed to all of this: ‘I cannot cheat you by one Francs.’

Victoria held the money Matthias gave her and hesitated: ‘Money that I will give you the second time?’ When Mr. Walter kept stressing how very fast Matthias could be leaving, she ended up handing over the money. When Victoria told Mr. Walter how very nearly she had died the last time she had given him money, Mr. Walter’s secretary reacted by stressing that she ought to be glad the

Mr. Walter was even recognising the money that she had deposited with him in 2004: ‘Are you not grateful that he recognises you?’

As soon as Victoria handed over the money, Mr. Walter began calling Matthias ‘boss’. Having now officially signed up for bushfaling, he advanced to the status of a real ‘man’. Matthias had a series of questions for Mr. Walter. As he got out an empty form for a curriculum vita that he did not know how to complete, Mr. Walter responded: ‘I’m seeing a successful future businessman in front of me.’

By now, Victoria seemed more convinced of Mr. Walter’s powers and complimented Mr. Walter for speaking with confidence. Mr. Walter replied: ‘I speak with confidence because I am a powerful personality. I declare and I act upon my words.’ (In Pidgin: ‘I talk with confidence because I be big boy. I declare and I act.’) As Victoria set off to leave, she asked him to dash her money. He stated that he never really carried money on himself because if he did, he would immediately spend the money. Just to fuel the car would cost him 50,000 CFA (€76), he boasted. Victoria was impressed. ‘I cannot know this.’ They are on different levels. She has never driven a car. Complimenting Mr. Walter, Victoria told him that people were saying that he was rich. Mr. Walter was pleased to hear this and laughed. He searched his pocket and finally found two 2,000 CFA notes (€3). He handed them over to Victoria who thanked him.

Symbolically, Victoria and Mr. Walter had turned the page of past disputes. By ‘dashing’ a small monetary gift to her, Mr. Walter symbolically accepted his role of protector and patron. His symbolic gift proved his generosity and goodwill (Daloz 2005: 168). Mr. Walter is a big and powerful man who will do his best to look after his dependents – of which Victoria’s family has once again become one.

It would also be mistaken to oppose aspiring migrants and migration brokers. When it turned out that the uncle was reluctant to mobilise yet more money for Matthias’s pocket money and start capital in China, Mr. Walter was there to help. He agreed with Victoria to print out a statement on his NGO paper for the uncle - specifying that one million CFA (1,500 Euro) were necessary for Matthias’s accommodation and further bills upon arrival in China. Victoria explained that their uncle was afraid of being duped once more. He did not read and write, but with this pretence document [in Pidgin ‘lie lie document’], Victoria said it had been easy to get the money from ‘Pa’.

A few days later, the visa for Matthias was indeed out. Matthias handed the remaining money over to Mr. Walter at the airport. After his departure, neither Victoria nor her uncle had any news for a very long time. Finally, at the end of January, I received a text message that ran the following way:

‘Hello jill, How are you? Please don’t be angry y I ha’nt cal sins I ariv. things ar stil very hard. Presently de ar celabr Chinese new yr til febr endingso no job til then. My no is (0086) 87450286754. Lots of luv. Matthias, Victoria’s brother’⁴

Mr. Walter never delivered any of the help and support he had initially so very generously promised. Yet, this was largely beyond vision to others in Cameroon. For most, Matthias had gone out and was a bushfaller now. The speed of Mr. Walter’s action had proven his power. It is now up to Matthias to also ‘perform’ and earn money. Although Mr. Walter failed to send out Victoria, he did a few years later send out her brother. The family now finally had become a bushfaller family.

4 For purposes of privacy, this is not the original telephone number of my informant. The spelling, however, was left unchanged.

Through this case study, I traced how relations between aspiring migrants and migration brokers are structurally embedded and regulated through normative frameworks outside and beyond the law. While Mr. Walter first failed Victoria, he did not turn out to be a feyman. He recognised her and through this proved his status as a big man. Through his final act, Mr. Walter proved his capacity to transform Victoria's family into a bushfaller family. The symbolic value of this transformation needs to be taken seriously in an analysis of relations between migration brokers and aspiring migrants.

Locally grounded terminology – for example, feymen, doki men and big men – sheds new light onto migration trajectories, which in countries of arrival, might otherwise be framed as smuggling or trafficking. Brokers who do not put their means at the disposal of aspiring migrants will be shamed as 'feymen'. Migration brokers whose means are merely based on the imitation of papers will be devalued as 'doki men'. Migration brokers whose connections for once fail will be able to upkeep their status as 'big men' if they have past success cases to show for. Even in the face of failure, Mr. James and Mr. Walter were not considered feymen because they genuinely 'tried' to deliver the visas and make the people travel.

4 Conclusion

This paper has asked why and how aspiring migrants come to trust migration brokers. Through the exploration of emigration dynamics in Cameroon, as well as of a crisis situation between an aspiring migrant and a migration broker, it has explored foundations of credibility, as well as limits of trust. This paper has demonstrated how legal categories cannot be assumed to be the single most determining factor in deciding whether or not a broker is credible for an (aspiring) migrant. From the perspective of aspiring migrants, trust in migration brokers is rather related to intentions and levels of international connectedness.

The above insights have several implications for the study of migration brokerage, as well as for the handling of legal categories by social scientists in migration studies generally. Firstly, with respect to the study of migration brokerage, this paper has argued for the importance of embedding relations between (aspiring) migrants and migration brokers into both local power dynamics, as well as the structural context that has created the demand for such brokerage services in the first place. In a country of departure as closed off as Cameroon, for example, aspiring migrants compare the failure of a migration broker to the failure of most people to leave the country. In Cameroon, any connection to the outside world has worth and value. This is why giving money to a migration broker makes sense for those who lack international connections, even if there is the possibility of being duped or the 'programme' of the broker failing. At a minimum, the transferred money constitutes an investment into a patronage relationship and establishes a connection to the outside world.

Secondly, potential vulnerabilities, deceit and abuse between brokers and (aspiring) migrants can be better understood if placed also in relation to the risks and vulnerabilities of (aspiring) migrants in their respective places of departure. By coming to the topic of brokerage from the vantage point of a society of departure, the paper highlighted how (aspiring) migrants in Cameroon will compare and evaluate the risks of third-party mediated migration with the risks of everyday life in their place of origin, as well as the downsides of involuntary immobility. Many times, families give large amounts of money to migration brokers precisely because the financial demands and pressures to pay for the education, health and basic needs of broad family networks are so pressing. While investments with migration brokers can be considered risky, international migration is also considered to be the only

project capable of really being able to make a difference. To not have a family member abroad also constitutes a risk for families in Cameroon.

Thirdly, the analysis of the case presented in this paper has illustrated how the limits of trust and credibility can be better understood through terminology that actors themselves use rather than through externally imposed a priori classifications between smuggling and trafficking. Interpretations of justifiable and unjustifiable forms of deceit depend on the expectations and moral yardsticks of aspiring migrants and their families. According to the above emic distinctions, the danger of giving money to migration brokers consists in mistaking a feyman or a doki man for a big man. Furthermore, a doki man who fails with his programme would not necessarily be accused of deceit in the same way as a feyman. It is clear to aspiring migrants that doki men only try to imitate travel documents and do not in any way guarantee access to bush. Deceit rests, however, with brokers who pretend to be 'big men', but later turn out to be doki men or worse only feymen.

While migration policy classifies migration brokers in terms of their respective legality or illegality, I suggest that this approach towards migration brokerage is based on the belief that law is omnipresent, as well as omnipotent. The assumption that migration brokers are categorised by their clients as either 'legal' or 'illegal' translates a belief in the reach and power of legal frameworks. At points of departure for example, it is not necessarily apparent whether recruitment consultants, travel agencies or transport operators will be categorised as legal or illegal by state actors at later stages in time. Within the analysis of this paper, I did not foreclose conclusions by directly equating legality with legitimacy. I furthermore only discussed question of legality when these issues were of relevance to aspiring migrants. While other scholars have pointed out the multiple grey spaces in which migrants can find themselves (Kubal 2012), I am rather calling for a study of governance dynamics within migration where the place of the state and the law is an open empirical question.

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