

# Narrating migration in terms of the Global North: Institutional attempts to counter the ‘Paradise Europe’ narrative in Cameroon

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Within the policy framework of external migration management, the EU and its member states are increasingly funding so-called awareness campaigns in Africa, in order to discourage irregular migration. Based on an empirical approach derived from cultural narratology, this paper analyses two campaigns implemented in Cameroon. The two-fold choice of material, namely official campaign material and interviews with Cameroonian migrants, reveals that two master narratives are at play: Informed through political convictions of the Global North, the campaigns are designed to counter and invalidate the local imagination of Europe as ‘paradise’. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of this counter narration on the level of its content, its structure and the credibility of involved narrators. The findings uncover basic misjudgements of the structural nature of narratives, the role of facts in migratory decisions and the social inevitability of migration in Cameroon. These flaws are not surprising as both, the local and the institutional approach to migration, are not based on complete and rational knowledge but rely on the narrative steadiness of deeply rooted imaginations. In their respective context they fulfil the criteria of a good story – when confronted, underlying collective storylines unfold.

**Keywords:** Awareness campaigns, Cameroon, Counter narratives, Migration management, ‘Paradise Europe’

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## 1. Introduction

Evoking strong emotions, South-North migration is a highly discussed topic today. The guiding image of media coverage in the Global North is the prototypical photo of a half-sinking, overcrowded boat filled with refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. Within the restrictive interpretative framework of migration as a ‘crisis’, migrants are often exclusively narrated as threatening enemies or helpless victims. This objectifying process of othering is embedded in a non-reciprocal ‘we’/ ‘they’ schema, where the other becomes an “inverted image of the familiar” (Schneider, 2017, 117). The rhetoric of a threatened ‘we’-group rarely allows space for self-narrations of migrants: How they became migrants – hence “the imaginations, expectations and motivations that fuel the pursuit of migration” in countries of origins – stays unexplored (Graw, K., & Schielke, 2012, 11). This kind of oversimplification can also be observed in the institutional portrayal of ways of migrating: In the spotlight is the figure of the migrant who is confronted with European border

regimes when trying to enter the continent irregularly. Through deportation and exposure to the forces of nature, migrants are often “pushed into a sphere of mere biological survival”, as Estela Schindel points out (2016, 221). Following Giorgio Agamben’s concept, the appearance of the absolute other becomes one of “bare life”, deprived of rights (Schindel, 2016, 222). The polarization and unique focus on the crossing of the desert and the sea distorts a reality in which migrants travel in various legal ways facilitated by migration brokers (Atekmangoh, 2017, 172-175). How migrants are perceived is not simply an interpretation of prior social facts but constitutes the world as we understand it (Friese, 2017, 18). Narrations around migration reveal a European self-understanding which is constructed in contrast to a non-European other. These perceptions influence European policy approaches and are strengthened by political actions.

In addition to border securitization, the EU and its member states are developing various strategies and instruments of external migration management. Within a framework of African-European relations, these new approaches are largely funded by the *European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa* (EUTF for Africa), established in 2015. The name of the trust fund reflects to what extent the perception of migration is dominated by a “sense of urgency to stop irregular migration to Europe” – as Oxfam points out in a briefing note titled “An Emergency for whom?” (Kervyn & Shilhav, 2017). In this paper I will take a closer look at the public face of migration management, so called awareness raising campaigns which make up for four per cent of the 400-million-euro budget allocated to migration management (Kervyn & Shilhav, 2017, 4). I will focus on the narrative structure of these campaigns, specifically in the Central African country of Cameroon. The biggest player in this field of migration management is the *International Organisation of Migration* (IOM) who promotes awareness as one of its pillars of action. The EU funds these projects in 26 Africans countries through the *EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration*.

## 2. Empirical narrative research

### 2.1 Research questions

Previous research and policy analysis have shown how awareness campaigns are designed to counter local perceptions of irregular migration as an opportunity by depicting these channels as a “source of danger and vulnerability” (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007, 1675; Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen 2015). In the Cameroonian context, Maybritt Jill Alpes (2012, 45) elaborates on the interpretation of available knowledge by looking at “flows of information and their respective evaluation as trustworthy or not”. This leads her to an explanation of “why and how migrants’ hardship abroad and cases of failure cannot become visible in a place of departure” (Alpes, 2012, 12). The methodological implementation and the online presentation of the awareness campaigns reveal confidence in the power of storytelling. Thus, an empirical approach derived from cultural narratology is promising to add insights to the existing doubts about the institutional key assumption that more information will prevent people from migrating irregularly. I use the role of the imagination in migratory decisions as a point of departure for an in-depth analysis of the content and the structure of the ‘Paradise Europe’ narrative in Cameroon. It is precisely this influential master narrative of immediate and all-encompassing success abroad that the EU-funded institutional narratives are designed to counter and invalidate. In a broader sense the results will lay open implications and ambivalences of how Europe represents itself and how it is represented in today’s post-colonial Africa. In this paper, I focus on the following questions: How does a counter narrative need to be structured in order to be successful? Which functions does it need to fulfil in order to replace an existing master narrative? And how far does the institutional narration around the dangers of irregular migration fulfil these

criteria and where does it fail? After a theoretical and a methodological outline, I analyse the effectiveness of the counter narrative on the level of the content, the structure and the narrators' positions – and I do so in constant comparison with the 'Paradise Europe' narrative: What is actually narrated, how is it narrated and who narrates it? The answers to these three questions lead us to the ambivalent underlying storylines of both master narratives, the local imagination of a better life abroad and the institutionalized political narratives of the Global North. I show that both approaches to migration are not based on complete and rational knowledge but rely indeed on the narrative steadiness of their structure and the fact that they fulfil the criteria of a good story in their respective contexts.

## 2.2 Narrative theory and the question of knowledge

Nowadays, narrative is a potent and widespread concept which is used in a variety of fields and disciplines. Through this broad transdisciplinary interest, the subject has been expanded to a point where a clear positioning becomes necessary to produce meaningful interpretations. As a cultural scientist I build my analysis on cultural narratology, particularly on Albrecht Koschorke's attempt to outline a general theory of narrative and its interwovenness with our perceptions of reality:

*"The drive to model the world along narrative lines does not come to a stop at the boundaries between various systems of social function. This is the case at all levels – from daily stories to scientific theories and onward to the master narratives through which societies understand themselves as living entities. And it is the case with all forms, from the commonplaces within which smaller narratives hide themselves, settling into a vernacular grammar, to the most elaborate narrative labyrinths, only decipherable by specialists. Wherever socially significant material is negotiated, narration is in play" (Koschorke, 2018, 9).*

The term narrative is frequently used in the media and its claim of validity makes the concept appealing for strategic political purposes. The German Federal Office, for example, wants to intensify efforts in strategic communication and justifies this enhancement of public diplomacy with challenges arising from a "global competition over narratives" (GFFO 1). This statement reveals the ambivalence of the political appropriation of narratives: Their instrumentality as a medium to foster the visibility of particular interests and values is clearly recognized and cherished. At the same time, the Federal Office claims narratives as a tool to provide putatively objective and reliable information (GFFO 1). Awareness raising campaigns targeted at potential migrants are a result of this ambivalent strategy, and an example for what Sujatha Fernandes (2017) calls "curated stories". She criticises the contemporary storytelling boom for a "utilitarian approach to stories that seeks to reduce experiences and histories to easily digestible soundbites in service of limited goals" (Fernandes, 2017, 3-4). Although factual narrations obviously contain a referential as well as a constructive element (Klein & Martínez, 2009, 1), narratives are not simple mediators of facts but cultural modi of world construction (Nünning, 2013, 18). They can offer sense and orientation and thus help to cope with contingency. I show in this paper, that the narrative of Europe as 'paradise' fulfils these functions in the Cameroonian context. It is important to note, however, that narratives can also dismantle efforts at sense-making and blur the lines between truth and falsehood:

*"Like thinking and speaking in general, narration does not have a sufficient intrinsic truth-sign at its disposal. As in a vortex, mixed within it are elements of truth, semblance, hearsay, ignorance, error, lies" (Koschorke, 2018, 4).*

The role and structure of facts in countering established narratives lies at the core of the academic discussion about awareness campaigns. Nieuwenhuys and Pécout have raised concerns over the basic assumptions that "migrants lack information on migration; second,

that their behaviour is based on available information; and third, that information on migration is dark enough to discourage them from leaving" (Nieuwenhuys & Pécout, 2007, 1683). My paper further challenges this institutionalised view of the "economy of migratory knowledge" (Alpes, 2012, 46) by stating that – on the contrary – narratives actually generate "stabilization in the mode of incomplete knowledge" (Koschorke, 2018, 244).

### 2.3. Research methodology

In Cameroon, awareness campaigns are realised through different forms of public outreach, for example discussion rounds in schools, photo exhibitions in public markets or concerts with popular local artists. The preferred medium is personal testimony of discouraged return migrants and its written variations, for example in a comic magazine for the youth called *Molaa* (Molaa 1). In order to materialize and decode these manifestations and semiotic configurations of migration narratives, I developed a methodological bricolage. Based on qualitative research methods from the social sciences and the three key questions of literature analysis ('What is narrated, how is it narrated and who narrates?'), I focus on the specificities of narrative interaction. Storytelling is a broad and dynamic process, therefore the range of material I use is wide. To derive the dominant institutional patterns forming a counter narration, I examine campaign materials and policy publications of the involved actors in Cameroon. I concentrate on two recent examples, one implemented in 2017, the other in 2018. IOM cooperates with two local NGOs, namely SMIC (*Solutions aux migrations clandestines*) and OEMIT (*Organisation pour l'Eveil des Jeunes sur la Migration Irrégulière et la Traite de Personnes*), funded through the *EU-IOM joint initiative* (IOM 1). In addition, I look at *Molaa. Look I am back*, a campaign implemented by a diaspora Cameroonian living in Germany in cooperation with the local Cameroonian NGO ARECC (*Association des Rapatriés et de Lutte Contre l'Émigration Clandestine*) and funded by the German federal foreign office (Molaa 2). The campaign materials are supplemented by semi-structured interviews I conducted in Yaoundé with an IOM official, a local mediator who temporarily cooperated with IOM's community outreach programme and a European journalist covering IOM's reintegration efforts.

Applied empirical research is particularly suited to analyse processes of meaning-making in dynamically changing migration contexts. The eligibility of such an interdisciplinary approach to permeate imaginations of migration and their consequences, has been shown by pioneer projects such as "La migration prise aux mots" (Canut, 2014). In order to outline the 'Paradise Europe' narrative which serves as a target to the campaign countering efforts, I selected interview extracts from my PhD research in Yaoundé and with the Cameroonian diaspora in Germany and South Africa. The oldest material is from explorative fieldwork in 2016, but most interviews were conducted between September and December 2018. This article reflects a polyphony of voices ('Who narrates?'): Officials, non-migrants, potential migrants, former irregular and regular migrants share their stories and perceptions. The names of all interview partners have been anonymised. The multiplicity of actors reflects "narration as a democratic art" where "stories thrive in the medium of socially shared knowledge" (Koschorke, 2018, 23). It is the nature of this shared knowledge that I bring to light by first categorizing the transcribed content according to key terms and concepts and then identifying general patterns and individual variations. This leads to insights into dominant content lines ('What is narrated?') as well as a better understanding of the structural stability and incompatibility of the two master narratives ('How is it narrated?').

### 3. Local realities and global horizons of possibility

#### 3.1 Self-narrations of migrants: The power of imagination

When speaking of narratives, it is indispensable to recognize that narration intervenes into the world: storytelling can trigger actions and has political consequences. A narrative, as I understand it, is not made up of a single story but based on the continuous presence of similar stories and resembling storylines (Müller-Funk, 2008, 160). It is a generalization and an abstraction that has to be distinguished from the multitude of individual stories. Nevertheless, the effect and communicability of a story depend on the degree to which it adheres to the structure of a conventional narrative. This key thesis of narrative theory guides the paper on multiple levels. Arjun Appadurai (2010, 31) foregrounds the importance of the imagination by describing it as “an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiations between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility”. The influence of the mass media, per his argument, constitutes the particularity of contemporary migration movements. The imagination of an elsewhere becomes more immediate and the depicted life seems more accessible. Migration becomes a routinely imagined social project, put into practice by many ordinary people (Appadurai, 2010, 4-11). John, a 35-year-old Cameroonian living in the United States, summarizes this shift as follows:

*“There is a huge cultural difference between those actually of my age group and those younger to myself. I am talking the coming of the internet today, the mobile phones. They see a lot of big dreams on their phones, on the TV and they think they must go there to be able to live...live it live (John, Yaoundé, 2018).”*

The inclusive promise of migration to “live it live” informs the understanding of local realities as being intertwined with global horizons of possibility. This highly influences local definitions of success and the degree of expectations towards migrants who left for the Global North (Nyamnjoh, 2011, 707). Considering imagination a major factor at play, Knut Graw and Samuli Schielke (2012) claim the necessity to conduct research on migration from the Global South which goes beyond the public discourse on socioeconomic or political causes. They illustrate this change of perspective with the house built by the migrant, an iconic imagery which underlines the social visibility and omnipresence of the promise of migration in emigration contexts:

*“[The houses] incorporate the very social effects of migration [...]. A whole set of possibilities and expectations that mark the path of social arrival. They tell stories of success that are compelling, not only for the power of the path they open up, but also because of the increasing difficulty of pursuing any other path” (Graw & Schielke, 2012, 8).*

Many interview partners insist that these success stories of the diaspora lie at the heart of a narrative depicting Europe as ‘paradise’. John concludes: “People have seen the success stories and they think that that success, they also have to go and get it!” (John, Yaoundé, 2018).

#### 3.2 The ‘Paradise Europe’ narrative

In one of my first interviews conducted in Yaoundé, Nina, a 36-year-old mother of five, revealed the potency of the imagination of Europe when she said: “Life is not easy here. When I see someone who wants to leave I encourage this person. It’s better to suffer in paradise than to suffer in hell” (Nina, Translation from French (TfF), Yaoundé, 2016). Europe becomes “paradise” while Cameroon is “hell” (Atekmangoh, 2017, 135). The historical roots of this narrative reach deep, and its inherent binary opposition composes a stable cultural semantic. This thesis can be illustrated by the actualization of the master narrative

through daily media input from the Global North. Wilson, a 42-year-old who ended up in South Africa after several failed attempts to travel legally to Europe and Canada, points this out:

*“They tell you how Londonians are living. And show you a street for example in Berlin! [...] So those are the things that tell you, No, I want to live in an organized community like that’. Because Cameroon of course, it’s not so organized and structured like societies in Europe. – I know what TV does sometimes. If this TV wants to show a part of Africa, then they go to where the mosquitos are living. The bidon villes and the shanty towns. [...] So you always have this feeling, Oh, Africa is hell. It’s not a place to live!” (Wilson, Pretoria, 2018).”*

This quotation shows how the European gaze, perpetuated through the media, leaves its mark on the Cameroonian self-image. Structurally, these ideas of the self and the other are stabilised by powerful binary oppositions of European superiority and African inferiority. Achille Mbembe (2015) explains that this internalised sense of Africa as hell draws from a European colonial discourse which painted – and by means of the development industry still paints – Africa as deficient and improper:

*“First, the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation. [...] It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished [...]” (Mbembe, 2015, 1).*

Due to the weakness of local media infrastructure, Cameroonian TV consumption perpetuates these affect-loaded notions. Wilson concludes by saying: “With Europe you did not need experience from people. You just knew that the place is beautiful, there is so much employment” (Wilson, Pretoria, 2018). This reveals the vague nature of the conventional success story which is based less on concrete knowledge about the realities in specific European countries than on a socially shared imaginary and a truth claim which is vouched for “through the belief that everyone else believes in it” (Koschorke, 2018, 22). Moreover, a hierarchization between potential migration destinations becomes tangible throughout the interviews: Destination countries like South Africa need personal testimony, while the imagination of European countries feeds from the idea of an indisputable ‘paradise’ – a master narrative that the awareness campaigns try to counter.

#### 4. Collective storylines of success: What is locally narrated?

##### 4.1 The function of the promise of Europe in the Cameroonian context

As we have seen, storytelling does not stand for itself but influences practices of society. Therefore, it is central to comprehend narrative theory as a theory of culture. Within this framework, cultures can be seen as narrative communities which are marked by a common narrative stock (Müller-Funk, 2008, 14). In Cameroon, these collective storylines are highly contested: After 36 years under the quasi-dictatorial regime of president Paul Biya, a continuous economic crisis since 1987, dramatic youth unemployment and a civil war raging for three years in the two Anglophone regions, the Central African country finds itself “at the verge of social explosion” (Gabriel, Yaoundé, 2016) – as one of my interview partners puts it. Such a context is well-suited for applied narratological research, because fundamental narrative operations become particularly visible and traceable. In Cameroon, the overall crisis leads to a fight over the official self-representation of the society. The propaganda of the Biya government with its surreal promises of a better future for all can no longer bind the majority of a population starved of political and economic participation. This “unbearable discrepancy that exists between publicly announced reality and that other constantly changing, unstable and uncertain, quasi-elliptic realm” (Mbembe &

Roitman, 1995, 342) demands constant negotiations of belonging. Confronted with a highly corrupted and increasingly absurd environment, the youth loses the belief in education and hard work as a guarantee of success and starts to look for alternative trajectories (Jua, 2003, 15-22). Seen from this “position of detachment within their own society” (Jua, 2003, 27), the idea of Europe carries a powerful promise of inclusion. Going abroad promises a path to maturity because at home the youth “could neither satisfy some of the social obligations of manhood, such as providing a social security to their parents, nor guarantee their ontological security” (Jua, 2003, 19). In comparison, life in Europe seems to master contingency and to offer an open future full of possibilities. Success abroad is perceived as immediate and encompassing, as Wilson explains:

*“It was not like that in all the countries, just in key countries like Germany, Denmark, Norway, the UK, France at a certain point. [...] We always knew that immediately your family succeeds in getting you a visa, it’s an immediate achievement and a success. When we are going to see you off at the airport, the only story we tell you is that ‘Go and then make for us a way’. Because we know that there is nothing that will stop you from succeeding. That is how we perceived it” (Wilson, Pretoria, 2018).*

The sharp contrast between this imagination and the elusive and ephemeral hustle at home is of major consideration for the analysis of awareness campaigns. Alpes points out how they put a sole focus on the risks of the dangerous journey, overlooking that “migration often functions as a means to alleviate local risks” (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015, 2).

#### **4.2 “You can be happy at home”: The institutional counter narration**

Janine, a 30-year-old European journalist who wrote a number of articles on the basis of interviews with Cameroonian return migrants, shares an observation which leads to the central problem of the institutional counter narrative: “There is this big push of people. For instance, there was this big concert, rap concert. [...] A big Cameroonian rapper telling the youth of Cameroon ‘Don’t go to Europe, it’s dangerous’. But without an alternative being presented to them, what are you actually giving” (Janine, Yaoundé, 2018)? Slogans like “My future is also in Kamer” (IOM 2) are little effective because they lack what Koschorke calls “reality-validation” (Koschorke, 2018, 203). The following interview of Alain, a 36-year old return migrant, offers insights into this factor. He first describes the long preparation phase which preceded his journey to Europe: “[...] it was a project which has taken ten years. More than 10 years I did nearly nothing in Cameroon, everything...I was completely focused on leaving, yes leaving” (Alain, TfF, Yaoundé, 2018). Even after he was deceived by a migration broker and lost all the money intended for the journey, he did not give up on his plan to leave for Europe: “I needed to regain [the money] again because we were focused on leaving. All my being was about leaving. I didn’t see myself in Cameroon anymore.” It becomes clear how the dream of a better future in Europe completely preoccupied his life in the Cameroonian present. After having invested a lot of time and money into this project, it was basically impossible for him to give up on it. This is a potent example of what Koschorke describes as “highly endowed” collective narratives” which “press for their realization, meaning validation of their reality” (Koschorke, 2018, 203). If this validation fails, like in Alain’s case, who was repatriated from France after a very short stay, it leaves a feeling of futility and despair: “I want to say that I felt very very bad. Very very bad. It was even necessary that I was always with someone close to me. Because they were afraid that I could commit suicide. Because it was not easy to accept. After ten years of perseverance for one thing and then you get the thing and in a short while...”(Alain, TfF, Yaoundé, 2018).

It is in this context of extreme social and emotional pressure on potential migrants and return migrants, that the efficiency and simplistic approach of the institutional counter narrative should be questioned. The IOM official I interviewed, partly recognizes the circumstances and suggests the following counter strategy:

*“The challenge is that there is quite a strong amount of social pressures and the fact that you have to succeed and succeed is economically succeed. [...] I mean it’s something that we try to address during our activities by presenting the fact that ‘Yes, you succeed if you are happy actually, at home! Not if you have the last watch or the most expensive shoes that you can find’” (IOM official, Yaoundé, 2018).*

The promotion of “happiness at home” is a conscious attempt to reduce the definition of success from a global point of reference to a not further elaborated local level. This idea of happiness remains a hollow catchphrase because it does not account for the complexity of the Cameroonian crisis experience. Furthermore, the emphasis of individual happiness ignores the degree to which success needs to be collective in Cameroon to be seen as such (Nyamnjoh, 2013, 6). Structurally speaking, this approach is not able to fulfil the necessary requirements for a promising counter narration which Koschorke outlines as follows: “The dismantling of such reality-validation is only possible when complimentarily to this, we have a new narrative realization that takes over functions and in altered form, some of the contents of the preceding figuration” (Koschorke, 2018, 203). Janine describes the drastic void which occurs when giving up on the project of migration: “Every time I write an article, I get this phrase: ‘We are starting again from zero [...]. Over and over again’. Someone said ‘It’s like being a new born again, I have to learn everything a fresh’” (Janine, Yaoundé, 2018). The reintegration strategy within the *EU-IOM joint initiative* tries to address this despair by offering an economic alternative to the hopes put into migration: People who return voluntarily to Cameroon can apply for money to start a business or to pay for further education (IOM 3). Recipients of this aid are portrayed with short personalized stories on social media, unanimously promoting a “happy-end” (Nieuwenhuys & Pécout, 2007, 1685). On the occasion of the programme’s two-year anniversary, IOM released “mini videos of returning migrants expressing their gratitude” throughout the month of June 2019 (IOM 2). These reduced and framed testimonies are a paradigmatic example of what Fernandes calls a shift away from underlying political structures in curated storytelling: “If there is a shift to the political in these stories, it is usually a predetermined slogan or a campaign messaging, and not an interrogation of the structural conditions that shape one’s life story” (Fernandes, 2017, 6). The EU-funded institutions have no interest in presenting more nuanced migrant stories, as they might reveal the deep paradoxes and flaws of European migration politics. Despite some migrants benefitting from the reintegration programme, the high demand regularly exceeds capacities. In some cases, long and insecure waiting periods render migrants even more vulnerable to discrimination by their home communities: “They are coming back to the same reality. Same old, plus they added stigma of being here, of being pointed at and laughed at. No jobs, they are in debt with their families, some people don’t even go back home!” (Janine, Yaoundé, 2018). In such transitional zones the old master narrative easily regains ground by suggesting that a variation of the migratory route or the means of transportation might this time bring the desired outcome.

## 5. The structure of the master and counter narrative: How is ‘abroad’ narrated?

### 5.1 “To be successful you need to travel to Europe”: The master narrative

As Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995, 326) point out, the crisis is a prosaic lived experience for the Cameroonian youth – permanently present through the “routinization of a register of improvisations”. In contrast to the unpredictability of everyday life, the narrative schema of success in Europe forms a simple and steady tale: A classic adventure story which contains fixed narrative components of departure, unknown adventure, successful return and social recognition by the community. Gabriel, a 30-year old Cameroonian start-up entrepreneur and dedicated observer of his society, describes this pattern as follows:

*“Most often you will have a guy that didn’t graduate from high school travel to Germany, to France, to Canada or in any European country. He goes there, five years later he comes back with a lot of money. [...] like 10.000 Euro, [...] here in Cameroon it’s a lot of money. So now when he comes back, he becomes like a local role model [...]. That influences other families who now begin thinking that in order for their children to be successful, they need to travel to Europe” (Gabriel, Yaoundé, 2016).*

In Anglophone Cameroon this schema is known under the concept of ‘bushfalling’, a metaphor of hunting: “Bushfalling is the act of going out to the ‘wilderness’ (bush) to hunt down meat (money) and bring the trophies back home” (Alpes, 2012, 43). The return component is essential because without being present at home, the ‘bushfaller’ is not seen and not rewarded (Nyamnjoh, 2011, 706). A characteristic of adventure narratives is the continuous subordination of dangers to a successful endpoint (Eming & Schlechtweg-Jahn, 2017, 25). For many Cameroonian migrants, the travelling risks are worth to be taken temporarily, as there seems to be a success guarantee of some sort, upon arrival. Potential migrants are focused on these “fruits of migration” as Franklin, a 45-year old post-doc researcher, explains: “People are not blind, they see. And that is the reason why many people still want to migrate. [...] Other people are progressing; they have seen the fruits of migration. And nobody can stop them, nobody can tell them ‘Don’t go’” (Franklin, Yaoundé, 2018). This inevitability and the sense of urgency attached to the migration project becomes clear through the formulation of the master narrative as “In order to be successful, you need to travel to Europe”. Highly visible success is transmitted as the norm, failure on the other hand is individualized as bad luck or laziness (Alpes, 2017).

The institutions generally emphasize that they do not want to prevent people from travelling. The *Molaa* campaign even seems to offer a valid alternative by promoting “Travelling is good. But travel legally” (*Molaa* 3). But in the Cameroonian context this argument is specious because, in reality, legal options are scarce and not affordable for most people. Although, the enhancement of safe and legal migration options now and then appears as a bullet point in European policy declaration, it is clear that fear of domestic pressure inhibits unity and determination amongst European states (Kipp & Koch, 2018, 12). A good part of those who consider travelling ‘par la route’, do so after failed attempts to get a visa: “Cameroonians perceive the world as closed off. Possibilities for air travel out are referred to as lines, openings and programmes” (Alpes 2012, 45). When migrants describe themselves as adventures, travellers or conquerors it can be understood as an attempt to challenge this feeling of abjection (Ferguson, 2006; Pian, 2009). The newest conjoined campaign (EU, IOM and local NGOs) is titled “Cameroun, mon aventure” (IOM2): This framing shows us how institutions capture, undermine and decontextualize local concepts, leaving empty shells deprived of meaning.

## 5.2 #WillNotDieAtSea: The institutional counter narrative

Within the described schematization we observe an inviting openness: How did the migrant travel? Where did he go exactly? And how did he earn the money he comes back with? These are the gaps in the common storyline that the awareness campaigns try to fill: They do this through twofold information concerning the dangers of the overland route and to a lesser extent, the probability of failure abroad. The majority of the slogans are formulated in negation to the positive imagination of Europe and in direct opposition to the perception of migration as “openings”: “Say no to illegal emigration” (Molaa 4), “I do not expose my life” (IOM 2) or hashtags such as “#WillnotDieAtSea” or “#WillNotDieInTheDesert” (IOM 2). Tellingly, the comics in the magazines are dominated by images such as the burning sun, sharks, overcrowded boats, migrants in chains or swimming coffins (Molaa1). Besides descriptions of the difficult domestic situation for youths, the campaigns are heavily focused on the life-threatening risks of the overland and Mediterranean route – feeding into the European perception of irregular migrants as “bare life” (Schindel, 2016, 222). Raphael, a mediator for community outreach who temporarily collaborated with IOM, expressed his profound discomfort with the morbidity of these slogans: “I personally find this campaign degrading, it doesn’t humanize. It is nearly without a soul [...]” (Raphael, TfF, Yaoundé, 2018). Scholars have criticized the display of drastic images through the argument that most aspiring migrants are aware of the possibility to die or to be exploited if travelling on the Sahara-Mediterranean route (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015).

But the more interesting question for this paper is a structural one: How is this knowledge adapted and integrated in order to maintain the validity of the success narrative? Alain, the return migrant, points out that even horrible experiences during the journey could not discourage him:

*“We didn’t see all those risks. It was about arriving. [...] And it was just when I arrived in Spain that I realized that it was nonsense to take all those risks. There were people who died in the water and even then, it didn’t tell us anything. We still wanted to go further. And we went. Thank God we are alive” (Alain, TfF, Yaoundé, 2018).*

To actually see people dying did not tell Alain and his fellow migrants anything. The formulation reveals that before arriving in Europe this kind of information was irrelevant to them. This has to do with the schematized structure of the expectation they departed with. The dangerous nature of the way is part of the narrative void inherent to stable patterns. It can easily stay unfilled as long as it is constantly overshadowed by the highly anticipated events of arrival and successful return. The positive outcome of migration is mostly perceived within the local Cameroonian context, prior to departure. The omnipresent story of a neighbour who has made it, continuously strengthens the affective ties with the migration project. It fulfills the major features of a good story: It reduces complexity by ascribing agency to a local hero, emits appeals to take personal action and is therefore believed and retold (Koschorke, 2018, 59-60). Increasingly, migration becomes socially inevitable and can no longer be countered by facts (Graw & Schielke, 2012, 12).

## 6. Narrators in the field of awareness campaigns: Who narrates migration?

### 6.1 The precarious position of the diaspora

The question ‘Who narrates?’ seems to be less significant than the adherence to common storylines. This is an experience that Samuel, a 30-year old local Cameroonian, often has when he tries to advise people who approach him in the quartier. When Samuel asked his brother, who is pursuing a PhD in Germany to pay a broker for him to kickstart his soccer career in Europe, his brother’s blunt refusal angered and confused him at first. Over the

years and with more exposure to Europeans he ended up convinced that travelling with shaky documents and prospects should be discouraged:

*“If someone wants to get information before taking a decision, if I tell them that for me abroad is mostly about studying, it isn’t sufficient for him! Because he doesn’t want to hear that. So he will go and see someone else to be reassured. Because not everyone sees it like me, for the majority it’s Europe at all costs...If you approach such a person, the person will tell you ‘No, just try your luck!’. We have this expression ‘Tente ta chance’. ‘You can arrive, it will work out’. And when the person hears that, voilà, he is motivated” (Samuel, TfF, Yaoundé, 2016).*

Samuel’s differentiated advice is easily dismissed because flexible phrases like “Just try your luck” confirm the predisposition of the person seeking advice. This rejection of “deviant” narrators becomes even more obvious with people who have succeeded to arrive in Europe and try to dismantle the positive imagination. In many cases, these Cameroonians are no longer considered a “trustworthy source of information on bush” (Alpes, 2012, 53). Those who feel left behind assume motives such as selfishness behind the negative stories, as Trevor, a 33-year old master student studying in Germany, recounts: “The way they look at you, your pictures or social media [...]: ‘Oh I also want to be like you! You are just trying to fool us not to come over there to experience the same thing like you!’” (Trevor, Yaoundé, 2018).

Once arrived abroad, the master narrative of immediate success cannot withstand the realities on the ground and the pressure to keep in touch with the Cameroonian home context is high. The local ideas of the good life in Europe considerably restrict the diaspora’s narrative leeway (Atekmangoh, 2017, 265) as Fanny, a 23-year old master student studying in Germany, recalls:

*“You have little sorrows like the integration not being easy. And you can’t explain them little details like that. This bothers you; it stays in your head and your heart for a long time. But you are obliged to play along” (Fanny, TfF, Nürnberg, 2018).*

Under the pressure of her parents’ expectations to live her best life and to support her family, she adapts her storytelling: She leaves out unsuitable material such as difficulties or failures. Moreover, she modifies her account of reality according to the convention. “For Africans, if you’ve arrived in Europe, it means you are already in paradise. [...] If you are not doing well here, you might have to lie” (Fanny, TfF, Nürnberg, 2018). So, she occasionally lies, makes excuses or falls back on half-truths.

These processes of adaptation, elision and completion also influence migrants’ strategies of action – especially in their self-representation on social media and during home visits. If adaption to the material expectations is not possible because of a lack of means, migrants returning home have to fear sanctions by the community, as Joel, a 30-year old master student in South Africa, confirms:

*“I was telling [my friends] ‘As far as I am concerned, whether I have money or I don’t have money, I am going home’. And they told me ‘When you are going home people are going to insult you’. I was like ‘I don’t care’. So I might going to be a slave because I cannot meet up with peoples’ expectations” (Joel, Stellenbosch, 2018).*

Joel’s defiant assertion of his own agency is met with sanctions by the home community. Francis B. Nyamnjoh describes how migrants’ act of subverting boundaries puts them into a specific liminal state: “Bushfallers simultaneously belong and do not belong, are a present absence and an absent presence” (Nyamnjoh, 2011, 707). The constant pressure can lead to drastic response strategies such as silence and temporary disappearance which both rather stabilize the existing narrative as no serious counter narration is positioned: “I have distanced myself completely from everybody [...]. [...] The pressure from it is just too

much! [...] It's like everybody is dying! ,We need money! '. [...] I just assume God knows I have my own issues" (Wilson, Pretoria, 2018).

## 6.2 Local and international actors in migration management

Most migrants I spoke with use vague descriptions such as 'hustling' or 'se débrouiller' to nevertheless emphasize their agency within the twofold constricted quest for belonging: "It is not enough for bushfallers to define themselves. They are often defined and confined by others who feel more embedded and entitled" (Nyamnjoh, 2011, 707). Besides the pressure from home, European actors play a major role in determining definitions of desirable and undesirable migration. This can be observed in recurring magazine sections such as "The wrong way" or "success story" (Molaa1). At first glance, the question 'Who is actually narrating?' in those awareness raising campaigns is rather confusing. Cameroon's numerous players reflect a general competition of interests in migration management, negotiated on an uneven global playing field. The traditional constellation of the European Union as funding and international organisations such as IOM as implementing party, is more and more extended by individual EU member states enforcing their particular interests through independent campaigns (Kipp & Koch, 2018, 14). As we have seen, the EU policies of external migration management have little to offer in return for the renunciation of irregular migration. Why is it then, that since the first implementation of such campaigns in the early 1990s, the conceptual framework has stayed remarkably unaltered by time or changing social and geographical context (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007, 1677)? The answer lies within the tenacity of institutional narratives: Their formally anchored structure offers "relief from subjective motivation and continuous improvisation of decision" (Arnold Gehlen as quoted in Koschorke, 2018, 233). Moreover, I suggest that the question 'Who narrates in those campaigns?', should be broadened to include the question 'For whom are they narrated?'. The simplistic framework of 'good migration management' works for a European audience because it feeds into established clichés about the Global South, as this EUTF mission statement reveals:

*"The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa) aims to foster stability and to contribute to better migration management, including by addressing the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration" (IOM 4).*

This broad 'root causes' rhetoric fulfils the criteria of an effective narrative: It speaks from a position of power, and stabilizes this claim, by linking unrelated phenomena such as forced displacement and irregular migration, into a seemingly comprehensive plan of action (Kervyn & Shilhav, 2017, 14). The 'root causes' metaphor is clearly directed at the European population. It suggests an attempt to address the problem of irregular migration at its roots, far away from the comfort zones of the domestic electorate. The narrative framework of external migration management offers Europeans a relief from immediate concern as the measures happen in a considerable geographical distance. This helps politicians to shape and channel domestic social energies with regard to migration.

A systematic strategy within the framework of migration management is the cooperation with local NGOs and mediators for community outreach, locally based or brought in from the diaspora (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007, 1682). The following argumentation of the IOM official is paradigmatic in its attempt to legitimize a largely standardized campaign and considerable power imbalances by referring to the relatability and local insights of its intermediate narrators:

*“Among these civil society organizations there is one that is made up of returned migrants. So, they can testify what their experience was and they can really relate to the people because if they have left, they have left for the same reasons. And now that they are back, I think it is very inspiring to see how committed they are to help to succeed in the country” (Yaoundé, 2018).*

We have seen that local non-migrants ascribe unreliability to those who have crossed borders. Therefore, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution to simply let discouraged return migrants show deterrent photos from Libyan refugee camps or speak about their experiences in public places. The assumption that mediators can connect with non-migrants simply because they have once shared the same social context reveals a naive understanding of narrative communities: It masks processes of inclusion and exclusion on various levels. An example is the service of diaspora mediators who try to discourage migration while being “visibly much better off” than their audience (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015, 3). Moreover, the relation between clients and migration brokers is not just one of simple exploitation. It is often nourished by the migrants’ respect and admiration for the broker’s power to enable mobility (Alpes, 2013). Furthermore, numerous local authorities such as teachers, pastors or even police personnel profit from this business. They actively encourage migration and therefore constitute a considerable counterbalance to the institutional prevention efforts.

In the shadow of the powerful development industry, European governments can position themselves through migration management projects as principled, yet assertive sponsors. The established nature of their policy justifications, reliefs them from having to acknowledge colonial continuities and exploitation contributing to migration today (Bake-well, 2008, 1355). Stating “that the root causes of exploitative migration rest with human smugglers and traffickers” deflects from European policies forcing migrants to take ever more dangerous routes (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015, 1).

## 7. Conclusion

My empirical research has shown that the imagination of immediate and encompassing success abroad is a crucial factor for migratory decisions. The ‘Paradise Europe’ narrative is difficult to refute because it offers alternative trajectories for the disillusioned Cameroonian youth and promises access to a good life, as measured by global standards. As an omnipresent and “highly endowed” collective narrative” (Koschorke, 2018, 203), the idea of Europe triggers action. A successful counter narration would have to cover similarly massive dimensions: “disabling one story means telling another” (Koschorke, 2018, 203). For the Cameroonian context, the EU-funded institutions involved in the awareness campaigns fail to tell a good story. The incentives for staying in Cameroon are either ignorant towards the local social structure (“Happy at home”), overwhelmed by logistical difficulties (reintegration efforts) or politically unwanted (legal migration options). Moreover, the one-dimensional emphasis on dangers and risks of the journey to Europe, underestimates the structural power of the ‘Paradise Europe’ narrative: The intuitive structure of a simple adventure story seems to guarantee a good ending - for which considerable risks are temporarily worth taking.

From a narratological point of view, the basic misjudgement of the campaign design lies with the naïve assumption that stories are an effective medium to convey facts. The claim to provide “quality information” is all the more contestable, as the instrumentalization of fragmented and curated migrant stories towards European interests lies at the heart of the two examined campaigns. Generally, the diffusion and communicability of a story does not depend on its truthfulness but on its suitability for the context and its adaptability to common sense. Successful stories are those which are believed based on familiar expectations and then retold. The credibility of the narrator can also play a role and members of

the diaspora are generally evaluated as rather unreliable narrators. The assumption that migrants lack knowledge is incorrect: What I have shown is that the provided information is irrelevant for the motivation of potential migrants. The adamant conviction that a better life awaits them is not based on detailed information but on affect-loaded common sense. Intriguingly enough, it is precisely this mode of incomplete knowledge that also allows the institutional awareness narratives to stay unaltered for the past 30 years, despite their obvious flaws. The power of the underlying European master narratives about the self and the African other even allows to unite apparent contradictions within the same policy framework. Raphael, the community mediator, expresses his deep unease in view of this power:

*“Because it is the decoding that allows me to always question the impertinence of the approach of these international institutions. I am really worried because those are the same people who write reports every day about Africa being a place where one cannot live – where everyone dies [...]” (Raphael, Tff, Yaoundé, 2018).*

The longstanding and deeply rooted European imagination of Africa as deficient and in need of development helps to preserve the self-image of the European Union as a humane, yet rightfully hegemonic patron. For many aspiring African migrants however, it is precisely this imposed feeling of incompleteness, maintained through continuous exploitation, which keeps the guiding dream of Europe alive. In this context, the campaign approach fails because it does not lead to an open and self-reflective debate on the positionality of Europe within fundamentally unequal power relations.

*“And those are the same people who just tell you tomorrow ‘No, you should not come [to Europe], it’s appalling patati patata’. You feel like asking ‘Why it is that they want to present this place as hell on earth and at the same time they want to prevent people living in this hell from moving by blocking them on the spot?’” (Raphael, Tff, Yaoundé, 2018).*

The vagueness and considerable historic underpinning of globally spread European master narratives absorb ambivalences and contradictions in migration policies and thus succeed to stay acceptable, but only for a European public.

My paper has shown that narrative theory offers a lot of potential for the study of migration. The premise that all socially significant material is negotiated through narration allows us to look at migratory imaginations, expectations and motivations through the analytical category of narratives. Storytelling is an essential tool for migrants to constantly negotiate their identity, longing and belonging. Therefore, the methodological toolkit of cultural narratology is well-suited to decode migrants' narrative strategies and the respective political counter initiatives.

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