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The Experience of Failed Migration

Investigating returning after a failed migratory attempt through the narratives of Liberian returnees

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Abstract

Returning to one's country of origin can be a devastating experience. In a Liberian context, those who return are after a failed migratory attempt often experience much hardship when they come back to their country of origin. But how do we make sense of this hardship?

This thesis investigates the lived experience, and informs the concept, of returning after a failed migratory attempt, based on the narratives of recently returned returnees in Liberia. Applying a grounded theory methodology and a narrative analysis, it becomes possible to unravel the returnees' experiences, which in turns informs the understanding of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. What can be seen in that the returnees return to Liberia with memories of severe abuse, but even though they experience abuse during their migration, they are afraid of returning because they are afraid of shame and stigmatisation in Liberia. They are afraid because they have not yet been successful in their migratory endeavour. The returnees understanding of success is important to investigate, as it informs the understanding of failure. Their narration of success shows that success is determined upon return to Liberia, and that success is something which is experienced not by the individual returnee, but something that is determined through the social relationships of the returnee, and their perception of the returnee's migratory endeavours. Success is perceived as the ability to improve one's living conditions and mobility in Liberia. The understanding of success is altered upon return, as the returnees perceives success as something unobtainable after they have failed in their migratory endeavours. However, the notion of success is still needed in order to imagine a future where you are unstuck from your current situation. It can also be seen that when the returnees returned to Liberia, they felt severe shame because they were unable to live up to the expectations of their migration, and they experience stigmatisation from their family, kin and surrounding society, because of their inability to succeed in their migration, and because they did not have anything to show for themselves upon return.

These above empirical findings allow for four analytical aspects which assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt: shame and stigmatization upon return, the relational aspect of failure, how return pervades everything, and how it is possible to understand failure through understanding success.

Keywords: Return migration, failure, success, Liberia, returnees

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List of Abbreviations

IOM: International Organization of Migration

LRRRC: Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission

LAPS: Liberian Association of Psychosocial Services

LRN: Liberian Returnee Network

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

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Introduction

*“When you are a migrant you are a slave,
and when you return,
you return with your experiences and shame”*
- Mulbah (a Liberian returnee).

The experience of returning to one’s country of origin can vary greatly. It can be an experience which sees the social and financial status rise for not only the returnees but also their family and friends. Nevertheless, the experience of return can also be devastating.

As can be seen from the quote above from a recently returned returnee, the experience of return can be harsh. Mulbah was not alone in expressing the devastating effects of returning to Liberia. Several recently returned returnees expressed the same shame and from returning to Liberia. But what was it about these individuals that made their return such a challenge? When investigating testimonies of Liberian returnees, one common theme began to materialise: **Failure** - failure in meeting the expectations of their migration, failure to be successful, and shame and stigmatisation from the failure.

Mulbah’s story of return is not unique. In recent years, the number of returnees to West African states has risen drastically, with an increase of 42% between 2016 and 2017. This accounts for 10% of the world’s populations of returnees (IOM 2017, 11). Whilst some might return in the light of success, migrating successfully has been increasingly difficult in the Saharan and Sahel region. This suggests that there will probably be more returnees who return to their country of origin after a failed migratory attempt in the future, and as such, it becomes important to investigate the experience of these returnees, which can clearly be devastating to the returnees and affect their everyday lives.

How do these returnees make sense of their experiences, and how do they understand returning after a failed migratory attempt? This is what this thesis seeks to investigate—how the returnees themselves understand the experience of returning after a failed

migratory attempt, and how may this assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. This is investigated by engaging with the testimonies of the returnees and looking at different aspects of the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt, such as the understanding of success, the fear of return, and the imagined futures of the returnees. All these themes add to an understanding of the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. Furthermore, this thesis also seeks to add to the understanding of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt, informed by interviews with returnees in Liberia.

In order to obtain such a better understanding, the following research question guides the thesis:

RQ: How do returnees in Liberia understand returning after a failed migratory attempt, and how can this understanding assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt?

This thesis investigates the lived experience of the returnees. The main purpose of this thesis is therefore not to understand the structural or descriptive aspects of returning after a failed migratory attempt, but to investigate how the returnees themselves understand returning after a failed migratory attempt. If we want a more holistic picture of the reality of the lived effects of failed migratory attempts, the focus should be directed towards those who lived the experience of migration and return. Furthermore, by investigating the narratives of the returnees, this thesis aims to unpack the complexity of the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt, which will assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Chapter outline

First, the methodological considerations regarding understanding the experience of return after a failed migratory attempt through the testimonies of Liberian returnees are outlined. Secondly, the historical context of migration from Liberia is presented. Thirdly, the context of migration and the histories of abuse of the interviewed returnees is presented, along with testimonies about migratory attempts. This allows for an

understanding of the memories with which the returnees return to Liberia. Thereafter, the analysis, based on the testimonies of the interviewed returnees, is outlined. This section focuses on how the migrants feared returning to Liberia, how they perceived the concept of success, how the myth of success influenced their return and migration, and lastly, how the returnees themselves understand return after a failed migratory attempt. These chapters inform a discussion on the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Methodology of understanding returning after a failed migratory attempt

It does not necessarily have to be a challenge to return to one's country of origin after migration. If the migrant succeeded in their migratory endeavour, return can be a pleasant experience. Returning after a successful migration can see your social status rise, and your financial situation improve, not only for yourself but for your family, kin and community (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2007, 23). For the interviewed returnees in Liberia, this was not the case, who on their return were faced with a host of challenges. They had memories of abuse which some had difficulties coping with, they experienced a vast amount of shame, felt stigmatization from their family, kin, and friends, and their migratory attempt degraded their social or financial situation rather than improving it. All these issues stemmed from the returnees' failure in their migratory attempt.

The question is then, how we make sense of experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt? Rather than applying various theories to the phenomena of return and failure, the focus of this thesis will be on how the returnees themselves understand and narrate return after a failed migratory attempt, and how this can assist in informing an understanding of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. Grounded theory provides the overall methodological approach, with narrative analysis being the method applied in analysing the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt¹.

¹ For the purpose of this thesis migration refers to any act of moving across international borders, to look for livelihood, improve living conditions, and a host of other purposes (UNHCR 2015). It should be noted that there is no political attachment to the notion of migration—it should be seen as a descriptive concept within this thesis. Furthermore, when mentioning returnees, it should be understood as someone who had returned to their country of origin, regardless of their time spent abroad, their legal status, or their ability to go to a receiving country. This should also be understood as a descriptive concept.

Grounded theory

So how do we make sense of this issue of failure from the perspective of the returnees? From talking to the returnees, failure seemed to be at the forefront of their experience of return and directed the way in which they lived their lives after coming back to Liberia, but also how they conducted their migration. If we want to understand this issue from the perspective of the returnees themselves, a methodology that focuses on the data, and derives conceptual and analytical understandings from this, needs to be applied. The methodology of grounded theory allows for such an engagement.

Grounded theory comprises of a systematic and inductive approach for conducting an inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory (Charmaz 2007, 2). Grounded theory allows the researcher to persistently interact with their data while remaining involved with their emerging analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 2). It should be noted that due to the current data set being insufficient to develop a full theory, the focus of this thesis will be on informing the concept of return after a failed migratory attempt, instead of developing a full-fledged theory. Grounded theory provides a linear framework for engaging with the collected material, in order to develop theories and conceptualisations (Charmaz 2006, 10). Even though grounded theory in its origins, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a flexible methodology, and calls for abstract interpretive actions, there are principles and practices which assist the researcher in their process towards conceptual and theoretical development (Charmaz 2006, 9). These are the guiding principles of the analysis.

After returning from Liberia, I started to look at the narratives of the returnees, reading them over and over again. Every time, more interesting aspects of their narratives became apparent, and common themes within their narratives started to surface. The theme of failure became an apparent factor in their return, and thus I started to look for other theories or conceptualisations within and outside the field of migration studies, to see whether or not any were applicable. The situation of the interviewed returnees, how returnees understand and narrate return after a failed migratory attempt, was not found to be represented in the literature, thus I decided to try and illuminate this area. This

exact process is intrinsic to grounded theory methodology where at first the researcher needs to collect data used for analysis. After the initial data collection, the researcher should devise a form of coding, which is not rigid in nature but develops throughout the grounded theory process. Thereafter, the researcher engages with the surrounding literature, before developing the theory or conceptualisation (Charmaz 2006, 10). This way of organising the approach to the interview data allows for their narratives to become the centre of the analysis. As the point of departure is the data, this becomes the very foundation upon which the research lies.

Narrative analysis

As mentioned above, returning home from a failed migratory attempt is not an easy endeavour. How the different returnees make sense of their return differs between individuals, but one way in which it becomes possible to access their understanding of their experiences is through narratives. Therefore, if one wishes to investigate the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt, one can analyse the narratives of the returnees.

Narrative analysis is a method which sees narratives as the basis for investigation and analysis. Narrative analysis refers to analytical approaches to diverse forms of oral or written representations, which have in common a storied form (Riessman 2005, 1). Everyone constructs narratives, and it is important not only to look at the large-scale narratives but also to look at the individual narratives. As Catherine Kohler Riessman (2005) explains it:

“As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organisations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience” (Riessmann 2005, 1).

But what defines a narrative? Not everything is a narrative. Sometimes what is told are general statements, such as: “I spend most of my time in the garden” (Lawlor and Mattingly 2000, 4). This statement might be a part of a narrative but is not a narrative.

Mary Lawlor and Cheryl Mattingly (2000) provide a definition of what determines a narrative:

“Narratives are event centered and historically particular, located in a particular time and place. Stories concern action, more specifically human action, and particularly social interaction [...] Stories show how human actors do things in the world, how their actions shape events and instigate responses in other actors” (Lawlor and Mattingly 2000, 4).

From the perspective of this definition, it becomes clear that the stories of return from the Liberian returnees are, in fact, narratives. The narratives that the interviewed returnees presented focused on a specific event in their life, the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. The event(s) that they experienced occurred during a specific time and space in their life and shaped how they interact with their friends, family, and society. Their narratives show how they have interacted with the world that surrounds them, and how the interactions that they experienced affects how they live their lives. The analysis of how the returnees themselves understand returning after a failed migratory attempt is based on the narratives they presented during the conducted interviews. This was done by investigating cues and explanations about failure in their narratives, making the analysis thematic in its nature.

The narratives of those who have experienced a phenomenon as complex as returning after a failed migratory attempt are important to understand, in order to discover the lived effects of the return. Investigating and analysing narratives allows the researcher to not only understand the phenomenon but illuminate how people themselves understand the phenomenon (Greenhalgh et al. 2005). If we want to understand what returning home entails for those who actually do return home, we can look at their narratives and how they themselves tell the story of their return. In this way, it becomes possible to assess how they understand their own return after a failed migratory attempt.

Approaches to returning after a failed migratory attempt

Besides the knowledge of the returnees, how do we know which aspects of returning after a failed migratory attempt need to be investigated? There are several approaches when it comes to understanding return migration. One of these is structural ways of engaging with issues regarding return migration. These conceptualisations and theories tend to focus on the larger-scale aspects of how return migration affects society in general. Furthermore, the politicised nature of migration and return migration have caused the research on return migration to lean towards a focus on policy-oriented research, in order to establish the effects of policies on return migration (Van Houte et al. 2016, 2). Whilst it is important to focus on the policy and political aspects of return migration, this kind of research can sometimes insufficiently address the complexity of return migration (Van Houte et al. 2016, 2). This is in part due to policy-oriented research often following bureaucratic definitions for pragmatic reasons of communicating with, and to, policymakers (ibid). Following these narrowly oriented frameworks can cause the researcher to limit themselves in their ability to fully understand the nature of return (ibid). Return migration involves a complex decision-making process that may take place under varying levels of choice (ibid).

By looking at the testimonies of the returnees themselves, one can begin to unravel the complexities of their experiences in order to obtain a better understanding of the reality of these individuals, thereby moving away from understanding the nature of return through bureaucratic or policy-driven frameworks. Return had been recognised as an essential component of mobility and movement, but research in this area is largely lacking insights into migrants' own perceptions of migration and return (Sinatti 2011, 153). Therefore, if we want to understand this complexity, there is a need to focus on the narratives of the returnees.

Returning after a failed migratory attempt is something that is dreaded by migrants. Several stories exist of migrants that continue with their migration, with little regard for their life or wellbeing, because what they can expect to experience upon return might be more horrible than death (Pujol-Mazzini 2019). So why push onwards? A way of

approaching this notion could be to apply the ideas of “cruel optimism” to understand why the migrants keep pushing onwards. Cruel optimism is a term relating to the attachment to compromised conditions of possibility (Berlant 2006, 21). The cruelty of these attachments, Berlant argues, is that the subjects who have something in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their wellbeing (Berlant 2006, 21). When we are attached to ideals and values that are unrealisable under present conditions, humans have tendency to still gamely strive to realise them anyway (Roberts 2013, 383-384). Our subjectivity “wears out” in pursuit of promises that cannot be kept or cannot be kept with the tools available. Cruel optimism is the condition in which our optimism about such promises is injurious to us (ibid).

The notion of cruel optimism can help us understand why migrants decide to push forward, even in the face of severe adversity. Even though the possibility of better conditions might be unobtainable, there is still optimism towards eventually succeeding. However, this begs the question of how we then understand situations in which migrants push forward not because of optimism, but of fear of return. Whilst cruel optimism can help explain why the returnees continue in the face of adversity, due to their optimistic towards what lies ahead, it does not further an understanding of them continuing because they were afraid of what lies behind—the eventual return. What could be beneficial regarding understanding how the returnees understand failure after a failed migratory attempt, is to understand why they are afraid to look backwards – why they have the fear of return. Understanding this fear of the eventual return will help explain the way the returnees conducted themselves during their migration and how they perceive returning after a failed migratory attempt

However cruel it might be, the hope of a better future is what drives human upwards and onwards. It is widely acknowledged that hoping is something integral to being human (Webb 2007, 65). Hope is a multilayered notion resting on the capacity for imagination or desire to believe in a better future, or for the possibility that something can change (Pine 2014, 96). Hope is also integral to migration. Hopes and futures are seen as factual and desirable, but when the possibility of social being and a better future is perceived to

be only possible elsewhere, migration can become a necessity in the pursuit of a worthy existence (Vigh 2009, 103). The hope for a better future is what drove the majority of the interviewed returnees to leave Liberia in the first place. Therefore, it becomes important to look at how the hope for success is narrated in the returnee's testimonies, and why this narrative is enforced—but also how this narrative of success might be a myth, something unobtainable, and how this had implications for the returnee's experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. When the interviewed returnees decided to attempt migration, that hope turned into failure. In this sense, for the returnees within this thesis, their hope and aspirations for a better future was the very factor that led them down the path that would see them return to Liberia as a failure. This begs the question of what happens when the hope for success turns into failure? If we want to gain a better understanding of the Liberian returnees' experience, we must look at their aspirations to leave Liberia, how they understand success, and how it might be a myth. Investigating these notions, we can gain a better understanding of how they understand returning after a failed migratory attempt.

As mentioned, the returnees are afraid of returning after their failed migratory attempt because they are aware of the shame and stigmatisation that they will have to endure upon return. Eric Worby (2010) provides a valuable insight into the dynamics of being afraid of the shame of not having been successful in one's migration. In his article: *Address Unknown: The Temporality of Displacement and the Ethics of Disconnection among Zimbabwean Migrants in Johannesburg* (2010) he outlines how some of the Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg are actively trying to disconnect themselves from their family, friends, and relatives back home because they are ashamed of their situation in Johannesburg. Instead of admitting that their existence and experience in Johannesburg is not living up to their expectations and does not prove lucrative, they try to avoid contact with their family and friends. The Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg use strategies of social disconnection in relation to the social world they have left behind—strategies that involve remaining contactable, but out of sight, socially illegible and sometimes refusing to be recognised at all (Worby 2010, 420). They are so ashamed of their situation, of not being successful in their migration, that they refuse contact to those at home. They are ashamed of not being successful in their migration.

The disconnection of the Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg, helps us understand that shame is ever-present in the realities of failure. This poses the question of what happens when the returnees have to face this shame when they returned to Liberia? Upon arrival, the returnees turn to their family and community for support, as they thought they could be safe there, but instead experienced shame and stigmatisation from their family and community. Because of this, it is important to investigate the returnees' experience of return after a failed migratory attempt, as they face this shame and stigmatisation that others desperately try to hide from.

All the above lead to the understanding that in order to better understand the experience of the returnees, through their return to Liberia after a failed migratory attempt, several aspects should be investigated. The fear of return, success and the myth of success, as well as understanding the returnees' understanding of shame and stigmatisation, are all considerations and questions that can contribute to a better understanding of the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Data and data collection

The data pertinent to this thesis is based on several individual interviews with recently returned returnees in Liberia, and one focus group interview at the Liberian Returnee Network (LRN) with a group of returnees from the self-proclaimed “Liberian Committee in Algeria”, which is comprised of Liberians who had been in Algeria during their migratory attempt and Liberians who are currently in Algeria. The interviews were conducted during a two months period in Monrovia, working with The Liberian Association of Psychosocial Services (LAPS), as a part of an internship at Dignity – Danish Institute Against Torture.

The intention to conduct interviews with recently returned returnees in Liberia was not solely for the purpose of this thesis. Initially, the interviews were directed towards a pre-investigation of the challenges, scope, the reality faced by returnees in Liberia and what forms of abuse they had to endure whilst migrating through the Sahara and Sahel region. This meant that the interviews were not directed towards understanding only returning after a failed migratory attempt but understanding the full experience of the returnee’s migratory attempt. Only after having worked with the material did the presence of failure as a theme across the interviews become apparent. This presence of failure was illuminating for understanding the challenges the returnees face and called for further investigation and deeper analysis. As such, the theme of this thesis was not based on an initial idea for analysis but arose from thorough engagement with the collected material, in line with a grounded theory approach.

Five interviews were conducted with individual returnees in September and October of 2018. These interviews were conducted at the main office of LAPS in Monrovia. During these interviews a LAPS staff member with psychosocial counselling training was present. One of the interviews was conducted with a translator (who was also an employed psychosocial counsellor) present, as the interviewee only spoke Mandingo, a native language in Liberia. The presence of the psychosocial counsellor had a dual purpose. First and foremost, it was to ensure the wellbeing of both the interviewer and the interviewees. Secondly, the psychosocial counsellor from LAPS was able to help the interviewer and

interviewee understanding each other fully. Even though English is widely spoken throughout Liberia, it is often spoken with a specific Liberian-English dialect. This meant that some phrases and words would be different from my own English. Thus, the counsellor, who was of Liberian origins, was able to help with any potential cultural-linguistic misunderstandings between the interviewer and the interviewees.

It is extremely rare for a researcher to feasibly have access to interviews of the study population of interest (Root 2016, 361). Most samples fall short of because of uncertainty, hidden populations, or populations that are difficult to measure (ibid). This is true in the case of the population for this thesis—recently returned returnees. Obtaining access to returnees is not easily achieved without any prior arrangements, as being a returnee is not a visible trait. Returnees do not look different from others and live in and around Monrovia like other Liberians. The factors and conditions that set these people apart from others are hidden in their memories and their past and present experiences.

The interviewees were therefore located by LAPS. LAPS work with traumatised people and have partnered with Dignity in the shared effort of preventing violence in urban slum areas through communal structures, policing efforts, apprenticeships, and working with rehabilitation of traumatised people. Through their contacts, it was possible to locate returnees who were willing to be interviewed. The participants for the group interview were identified by the LRN, which was contacted following researching the organisations that work with returnees in Liberia. Through meetings with the Executive director, a focus group interview was established with recently returned returnees who had been in contact with the LRN. All of these returnees had been in Algeria, where they formed the Liberian Committee in Algeria. Albeit my initial contact with the “Liberian Returnee Network” was initiated by myself, the returnees that I interviewed, was again identified by others, based on their interpretation of the purpose of, or their interest in, the interviews.

This poses some considerations regarding sampling and representativity, as the interviewed individuals were identified by others. The selection of people that LAPS contacted and identified was based on their interpretation of which people were applicable to the aim of the research. This means that the sampling was purposive in its

form. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method used by someone who possesses knowledge on the subject, and who uses this knowledge to identify the individuals who possess the relevant information desired (Root 2016, 363). Because LAPS have knowledge on recently returned returnees, they were able to identify individuals who had the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. A random sampling method was not possible because of the unobservable and inaccessible nature of the subject of this thesis. Thus, the sampling was not in my own hands and was reliant on others. However, given the precarious nature of being a returnee in Liberia, and the challenges of identifying returnees without prior knowledge of their situation, this form of sampling was vital for the existence of this research.

Given the relatively small number of interviews, along with the purposive sampling conducted by others based on their interpretation of the purpose of the thesis, one might consider the data within this thesis ungeneralisable. Though the data might not be generalized to represent the entire population of individuals have returned after a failed migratory attempt, it can be valuable exploratory data, which can provide useful evidence to complement qualitative research, even if it only represents the experiences of those interviewed (Root 2016, 362).

It should be noted that the interviews were not recorded. During the first couple of interviews I asked the interviewees for permission to record the interviews on my cell-phone. The fact that I wanted to record the interviews made the interviewees question the motives and basis of the interview. This created an uncomfortable tension during the interviews and was not in any sense conducive for the interview situation. Because of the stigmatisation the returnees face in Liberia they are very cautious with who they narrate their story to and are wary about the motives for collecting their narratives. Therefore, trying to record the interviews was abandoned, meaning that there are no direct transcriptions of the interviews. The analysis instead is based on my own notes, scribbled down as fast as possible during the interviews in order to catch as much of their narratives as possible. This entails that the words and quotes from the returnees might not be the exact words and phrases that were used during the interviews. However, the words have

not strayed far from when they originally were spoken and have not been compromised for the purpose of this thesis.

The role of the researcher and ethical considerations.

When investigating the narratives of returnees, the relationship between researcher and subject should be considered. The narratives of the returnees should not be seen as objective descriptions of the reality they experienced during their migratory attempt but should be understood in the context of which they were delivered: at the headquarters of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), with an intern and researcher from Denmark. This context influences how the narratives were presented, and what the interviewee chose to focus on. If the interview had taken place with a Liberian national from the private sector, the narratives would probably be quite different, as the context and positionality would be different. This notion of positionality between researcher and interviewee is discussed by Mats Utas (2005), in what he refers to as “victimcy”. He found it puzzling that the individuals he interviewed insisted on presenting themselves as victims (Utas 2005, 410), and describes the methodological concerns it poses:

“I argue that “victimcy” - as a form of narrative that structures the presentation of self in particular ways - cannot be interpreted apart from an understanding of the interaction context within such presentations are made” (Utas 2005, 410).

Research carried out by strangers who wish to understand private and traumatic events will most of the time have few interactions with those they wish to research. From the informant’s point of view, there is therefore much to gain by supplying a complete image of themselves as victims (Utas 2005, 410). An image of oneself as victim opens possibilities for partaking in lucrative aid and support programs. Victimcy was a theme that was clearly present during the interviews with the returnees. Most of them emphasised the different forms of abuse they had been victims of, and how they were unable to care for themselves.

This argument is not meant to disregard the returnee’s experiences of abuse, but to gain insight into the way the returnees narrate their experiences. The relationship between the

researcher and the interviewee in this research established a situation in which it makes sense for interviewee to insist on their victimcy, and this should be considered when investigating the returnee's narratives.

Another aspect regarding the role of the researcher is that of parachute research. When engaging with challenges and issues for people "on the ground", there is a risk of conducting parachute research, in which a researcher from the global north conducts research and collects data in the poorer parts of the world, and publishes their findings without credit to or thought for the community they conducted their research in. Because the material for the data was collected with a local organisation who wish to continue working for the wellbeing of the returnees, and because of this knowledge provided in this thesis being used by the organisation, hopefully this issue can be avoided. Furthermore, the knowledge within this thesis can hopefully support efforts towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of recently returned returnees in Liberia.

The wellbeing of the interviewees and the researcher

It is essential to ensure that one does not cause any harm when engaging with research which involves people who have been the victims of potentially traumatic experiences. Talking about their experiences is an arduous task, and if the wellbeing of the involved individuals is not considered, dire consequences can occur. To make sure the interviewed returnee suffered no harm, a representative from LAPS was present who had been trained in psychosocial counselling. The representative from LAPS could thus offer support to the interviewed returnees before, during, and after the interview, and make sure that the returnee could be directed towards the proper assistance if necessary. Furthermore, the interviewed returnees experience stigmatisation during their migration. Therefore, in order to maintain anonymity and not to add to their experience of stigmatisation, the surname of the interviewed returnees was not used.

Not only is it vital to ensure the wellbeing of the interviewees, it is also important to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the researcher. Investigating topics involving hardship, abuse and potential trauma, can cause harm to the psychological health of the researcher. For this reason, Dignity provided a psychologist who was able to provide psychological

support before, during, and after the time spent in Liberia. This was well needed, and much appreciated.

History of migration and conflict in Liberia

When investigating the understanding of returning after a failed migratory attempt, attention should be directed towards the story of migration and return migration in Liberia. This assists in contextualising the experience of returning to Liberia, based on its migratory history.

The following sections highlight the inception of Liberia through the notions of migration and return, ethnic division and civil war, how Liberia is a country that has seen perpetual migration and returns, and the return of the diaspora following civil conflicts.

The inception of Liberia, ethnic division and civil war

Migration and return are not new concepts in Liberia. On the contrary, the very existence of modern-day Liberia has its foundation in migration and return. Liberia was founded in 1822 by several US colonisation societies supported by grants from the US government (Nmoma 1997, 1). These were driven by slavery abolition movements in the US, as Liberia was meant to be a refuge for freewomen and freemen, who used to be slaves in the US. Additionally, when the United Kingdom abolished the slave trade, vessels transporting slaves who were intercepted by their naval patrols would be told to return to Liberia, thereby making Liberia the place where recaptured African slaves would be settled (Nmoma 1997, 2). The inception of Liberia can be seen as both migration and return. The freemen and freewomen migrated from the US, and the intercepted slavery vessels had their onboard slaves involuntarily migrate to Liberia. At the same time, Liberia was founded as a place of return to the ancestral homeland for the freed slaves in the US. These people were forced to the US through the slave trade from Africa, and when the slave trade was abolished, they could now return to Africa where they originated from.

Liberia has a violent past, with ethnic division as one of the main aspects of the Liberian civil war (Kieh 2009, 7). Even though Liberia became a democracy shortly after its inception, with general elections every second year, the country was founded on strongly segregated policies based on ethnic division (Dennis 2006). The freewomen and freemen that came to Liberia, the so-called Americo-Liberians, established the True Whig Party,

which would more or less rule the country continuously until Samuel K Doe staged a coup d'état in 1980, which effectively overthrew their almost 150-year stranglehold on Liberian Politics. The long-spanning political rule of the True Whig Party had a large effect on the social structure of Liberia, as their rule was typified by unequal distribution of wealth and power. The population was hierarchically divided into four groups (Dennis 2006): 1) Americo-Liberian officials of mixed black and white descent (mulattos), 2) Darker-skinned Americo-Liberians, which both encompasses around 2.5 % of Liberia's population, 3) Recaptives, who had been rescued by the US Navy and returned to Liberia - Referred to as the Congos, which also encompasses around 2.5% of Liberia's population, and 4) at the bottom of Liberian society were the indigenous population of African Liberians, which encompasses 17 different groups, and around 95% of Liberia's population (Dennis 2006; World Population Review 2019)

The freed slaves from the US that settled in the new Colony of Liberia, saw themselves as distinctively more enlightened than the Africans they met there, and referred to them as heathens and savages (Abrokwaa and McNair 2006, 56). Believing the racist notions prevalent in the West at the time, which labelled Africans as inferior, the Americo-Liberians took full advantage of the indigenous Liberians, viewed them as unfit beings to live with, and segregated themselves from the rest of the indigenous population (Abrokwaa and McNair 2006, 56). As Omonijo (1990) notes:

“Right from the beginning [...] the seeds of discontent were sown. The newly freed Negro slaves, rather than see themselves as Africans who were lucky to have been brought back to their roots, merely transferred the oppression they suffered in the United States of America to the Native population; they became the new lords of the settlement “ (Omonijo 1990, 11).

This attitude generated the notions of the superior and civilised freed slaves and the inferior and backwards native Liberians. This perception helped to determine the highly unequal socio-political and economic relations between the Americo-Liberians and ethnic Liberians and laid the foundations for the political and economic exclusion of native Liberians from the affairs of the country (Abrokwaa and McNair 2006, 56). This

systematic exclusion and marginalisation of the indigenous population of Liberia from the economic, social, and political arenas during the years of Americo-Liberian dominance created an unsustainable situation in Liberia, and is widely regarded as one of the causes for the initial outbreak of the Liberian civil wars (Foster et al. 2009, 59).

Perpetual migration and return

Liberia has since its inception been the site of continual migration and return. The country was a net receiver of migrants up until quite close to the civil war. People would migrate back to Africa from the US and other countries where there had been slaves, as Liberia was seen as the country for ex-slaves and their descendants. After the outbreak of the civil war, this image reversed, and Liberia saw many of its inhabitants flee the country in order to avoid the savagery of the civil conflict (Bacchi et al 2016, 207). Emigration flows from Liberia have mostly been determined by the prolonged civil war. In accordance with the rise and fall of violence in the country, Liberians have fled and returned (Bacchi et al. 2016, 200). At the height of the crisis, it is estimated that 700,000 refugees were hosted in mainly neighbouring countries, and since the end of the conflict, most have returned. Accurate statistics are however difficult to provide, as there is no national data on emigration flows (Bacchi et al 2016, 201).

After the end of the civil wars, some stability was brought to the country—but then an outbreak of the Ebola epidemic hit Liberia. This caused many to uproot their life in order to avoid being infected by the horrible and deadly disease. As well as these migrations caused by conflict and disease, many Liberians have attempted to improve their economic and social position in society by migrating. We are now witnessing an increasing number of returnees who come back to Liberia after having failed in their migratory attempt to get to either Northern Africa or Europe (IOM 2017, 11). The exact number of these forms of migrants are difficult to obtain as their migration is highly irregular, and due to stigmatisation and marginalisation they receive upon return they might be disinclined to inform authorities about their return. However, the authorities in Liberia have seen a rise in the number of returnees who have been the victims of abuse during their migratory attempts and have failed in reaching a final destination, which indicates the rise in this

type of returnees ². All these forms of migration and return show that these concepts are not something new to Liberia.

Returning differently

Those who returned to Liberia after the civil wars were over, and who had resided in western countries, came back to Liberia wanting to capitalise on Liberia's "virgin economy" and start to build up the country financially and socially (Pailey 2007, 17). The well-off Liberians who had been abroad during the civil war were believed to have become more industrious and could assist in jumpstarting the national economy, and they were proposed by the World Bank to be one of the main pillars of an effective reconstruction strategy (Pailey 2007, 17). Even though the Liberian economy is not thriving, the return of the Liberian diaspora has seen a lot of small businesses being opened by Liberian returnees, and, as of 2007, the diaspora returnees account for the largest sector of GDP growth after foreign direct investment (Pailey 2007, 23).

What characterised the diaspora returnees in the wake of the second Liberian civil war was that they represented a new and bright Liberia. These returnees were infused with foreign education, were trained and highly skilled, and were filled with a sort of "back to Africa" ethos which inspired their predecessors' centuries before (Pailey 2007, 24). What has replaced the ethnic and religious structures set forth in the nineteenth century is a new fusion of legitimacy defined by the experience of life abroad--schools that the returnees had gone to abroad, their international associations, and their networks in the diaspora (Pailey 2007, 25). When you go abroad, you want to become more "international", so you can come back to Liberia and use your "international knowledge" to help rebuild and reshape Liberia. Return migration is thus about being transnational and international in orientation, whilst rediscovering social identities (Pailey 2007, 27). This idea of leaving Liberia in order to return a more successful individual and rebuild Liberia resonated in the testimonies of some of the interviewed returnees. This was their

² Exact numbers are difficult to obtain. The IOM in Liberia, the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC), along with other organisations in Liberia were contacted. They provided some estimates on the number of returnees who returned to Liberia within the last couple of years. However, these numbers could not be confirmed. Nevertheless, the numbers portrayed a rise in the number of returnees returning to Liberia.

success criteria when they left Liberia. Sadly, they were not able to live up to these criteria and did not return to Liberia more “international”, but rather more broken and incapable.

The above sections have shed some light onto the reality and history of migration and return in Liberia. Whilst this history might not directly speak to the area of investigation in this thesis, it provides an overview helping to set the stage for understanding the reality of the returnees. It shows how migration and return have been an integral part of almost every aspect of Liberian history and have shaped the current state of the country. And whilst the above shows that some managed to return to Liberia more successful and better perceived by society, the vast majority of migration and return in the history of Liberia has been due in part to violence, conflict, disease, and fear. Now some people want to migrate to become successful or to look after their family and friends and to escape their situation of being stuck in Liberia. Sadly, their return is marred by failure, which results in marginalisation, shame, and stigmatisation.

Analysis - Returning after a failed migratory attempt

What all the interviewed returnees had in common was that they all returned to Liberia in the light of failure, and this failure pervaded the way in which they experienced their return to Liberia. The question that will be investigated in this analytical section of the thesis is how to make sense of this failure from the perspective of the returnees themselves, which will assist in answering the research question: *How do returnees in Liberia understand returning after a failed migratory attempt, and how can this understanding assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt?*

However, before engaging with how the returnees narrate the actual experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt, several questions are needed, in order to inform such an investigation, as outlined in the section on approaches to returning after a failed migratory attempt. Firstly, the migratory experience of the returnees is outlined, in order to contextualise their experience of violence and ill-treatment, and to understand the experiences they return to Liberia with. Secondly, how do we make sense of the fact that the returnees seemed to continue with their migration, even in the face of severe danger? Thirdly, if we want to understand returning after a failed migratory attempt, the questions become how do the returnees themselves understand success? For the understanding of success informs the understanding of failure. Fourthly, how and why is the notion of success reproduced, and how do the returnees understand success after their migratory attempt? These considerations and questions are all aspects that are vital to engage with to understand the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. Furthermore, these considerations and questions inform the second part of the research question, focusing on informing the conceptual understanding of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

1. Context of migration and histories of abuse

When investigating returning after a failed migratory attempt, the migratory experience of the returnees should be considered. This assists in understanding the context in which the returnees returned to Liberia, and what experiences of violence and ill-treatment they experienced during their migration. This also highlights the difficulties of migrating through the Saharan dessert, and what hindrances the returnees experience during their migration. These hindrances are growing, meaning that the issues of migrants returning after a failed migratory attempt will probably continue to grow.

Migrating through the Sahara Desert is a daunting and dangerous prospect. Not only do migrants have to cope with the extreme climate in the desert, but they also have to navigate through a minefield of smugglers, organised crime groups, and “agents” that all operate in the Sahara Desert (Kazeem 2018). The route that many migrants choose, via Mali and Niger towards Morocco, Algeria and Libya, has been in operation for centuries as the way one could transverse the unforgiving desert (Exchange - Research on Migration 2019, 6). Historically, many of the inhabitants of the city of Agadez (one of the focal points of the Saharan migration route) made their living by facilitating transport towards the northern parts of Africa (Carayol 2019). However, the reality and climate surrounding migration in this region has changed drastically

Now that there is no legal way for migrants to be transported through the Sahara Desert towards northern Africa, the number of migrants that try to make it has fallen (BBC 2019). But for those who do try to migrate, their situation has been worsened, and the risks involved have risen (UNHCR 2018, 5). This can partly be attributed to the fact that the facilitation of smuggling now happens without any control and in the dark, and partly because the facilitation of smuggling is now more in the hands of groups of organised crime and insurgency groups (Miles and Stephanie 2017). One of the interviewed returnees explained how he was held captive by Al Qaeda, and that they had no respect for the lives of the migrants. For them, the migrants were a source of income to support their political and religious struggle.

Additionally, if the migrants make their way to countries like Libya or Algeria, they are in danger of being captured by the authorities and placed in migration camps, waiting to be either dropped by the border to Niger (Hinnant 2018), or to be involuntarily repatriated. The conditions in these camps are quite violent, and those who are unfortunate enough to be within them have to endure many hardships (Boitiaux 2019). As explained by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in their 2018 report on the human rights situation of migrants and refugees in Libya:

“While conditions vary across detention centres, they are generally inhuman, fall far short of international standards and, in some cases, may amount to torture. During visits to DCIM detention centres in 2017-2018, UNSMIL staff have consistently observed severe overcrowding, lack of proper ventilation and lighting, inadequate access to washing facilities and latrines, constant confinement, denial of contact with the outside world, and malnutrition. Conditions lead to the spread of skin infections, acute diarrhoea, respiratory tract-infections and other ailments, and medical treatment is inadequate” (United Nations Support Mission in Libya, and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018, 5)

In general, the migrants that attempt to cross the Sahara and establish themselves in Northern Africa or Europe are quite vulnerable, and their vulnerability can be exploited. This can be seen in the testimonies of Mulbah and Janice, along with the outline of the different forms of abuse experienced by the interviewed returnees.

Testimonies of migratory attempts

The following outlines two migratory experiences. This shows how these returnees conducted their migration and assists in contextualising their experiences. The testimonies are from two returnees, Mulbah and Janice, who both experienced abuse and detention during their migratory endeavours, along with a host of other potentially traumatic experiences.

Besides the two presented stories of Janice and Mulbah, 3 additional returnees were individually interviewed: Ousman, who had experience detention in Libya, and now had issues with substance abuse after having returned to Liberia; Cassamma, who had a very hard time upon return; and Osman who had successfully migrated to Italy, but was deported after 9 years, and still returned to Liberia as a failure. Besides these individual interviews, one group interviews with the “Liberian Committee in Algeria” was conducted, as mentioned in the methodological section.

The Story of Mulbah

Mulbah is in the start of his 30's and lives in Monrovia. With his pleasant eyes and big smile, he comes across as a normal young Liberian man, with a positive attitude towards life. What cannot be seen by only looking at Mulbah is the fact that he has attempted to migrate to Europe, that he failed in getting across the Mediterranean, and that he carries the burden of having returned after a failed migratory attempt. Mulbah decided to migrate because he wanted to go to Europe in order to get a better life. He felt that there was a lack of opportunities for him in Liberia, so he left in order to seek these opportunities for a better life elsewhere.

Mulbah left Liberia in March 2017, when he hired a taxi to take him to Guinea. He stayed in Guinea for a while, in order to make all the arrangements for his migration towards Algeria, where he would try to find a boat that could take him to Europe. But first he had to find someone who could facilitate his migration. In Guinea he found someone who smuggled migrants to Mali, so he gave these people some of his money as payment for the transportation. These people coordinate everything and come and pick you up when it is

time to start the journey. He was not alone in this part of the journey, as there were many migrants who would go in the same direction as him. Mulbah made it across the border from Guinea to Mali and continued to the capital of Mali, Bamako. It was after Mulbah left Bamako that his hardships really began, and where he witnessed and experienced a lot of abuse.

After having slept on the floor in a building in Bamako for several days, Mulbah was stuffed into a Landcruiser with a truck bed in the back. According to Mulbah, 50 people were in the car and on the truck bed - in a car that usually fits five people. It was so cramped that it was difficult for the migrants to hold on and stay in the car. If someone fell off the car it would not stop, and the person who fell would be left in the desert. If anyone complained or asked questions they would be killed. This would go on for several days, with very little water to drink and no food. After some days, they were stopped by a group of armed men. These men took the migrants out of the car, and if they did not have any money to bribe them with, they were beaten and violently abused. Luckily, Mulbah still had some money so he only received a minor beating, but was forced to watch the abuse of the other migrants who were not so lucky.

After this incident they drove onwards, only to be intercepted once again. This time, however, the armed men who stopped them were part of a rebel group. The car was followed by a drone for 30 minutes when they were eventually caught by the armed men. All of the remaining migrants in the car were instructed to get down on their knees in a long line. Here they were instructed to pay 50 francs to the men from the rebel group. One of the migrants was unable to pay the 50 francs, as he had used all of his money to pay the driver. The armed men took a gun and shot a bullet just over the migrant's head, as a warning shot—if you could not pay you would be shot. The rebels started to argue amongst themselves, and in the end they decided to beat the migrants who could not pay instead of killing them. The migrants were let go after a while, but the car had no more gas left, so they pushed it for several hours until they made it to Muhammad Talantar's base in the desert.

Muhammad Talantar is the leader of one of the rebel groups that resides in the desert, and he controls a large area of the northern Sahara, as Mulbah explained. The reputation of Talantar is that he kills someone every single day, so Mulbah feared this person very much. When the migrants were intercepted by Talantar's men, they were driven to a prison-like facility in the middle of the desert. The facility is far away from other cities or structures, so there was no possible escape. Here Mulbah spent several days in a locked room with other migrants. The guards thought that Mulbah was from the US, as he spoke English and because Liberian Dollars can look similar to US dollars. Because they believed he was from the US, they also thought he had a lot of money. Therefore, they put a gun to his head and screamed at him to pay his US dollars to them. Mulbah tried to explain that he was from Liberia and showed them a small Liberian flag he had with him. One of the guards knew about the president of Liberia, George Weah, as he used to be a very successful player in the European football league. For this, they decided not to kill Mulbah.

The conditions in Talantar's facility were gruesome and violent. The migrants detained there would be beaten regularly, and the abuse would only stop if the migrants paid some money to the guards. The migrants would often not have any money to give the guards, so they would be instructed to call family back home. When the migrant would get in contact with the family, the guards would take the phone and start beating the migrant so that the family could hear it through the phone. The guard would then tell the family that they would not stop beating the migrants, and even kill them, if the family did not send some money immediately. In addition to the regular beatings, the migrant would not be provided with much food. The only food they would get was the leftovers from the guards. This food was often several days old and had gone rancid. Some of the migrants did not want to eat this food, in fear of getting sick, but because they did not eat the food provided to them they were killed by the guards.

Eventually Mulbah and some of the other migrants were taken away from the facility by a car. The car drove through the desert and stopped at a seemingly random point. Here, the driver pointed the migrants in a direction and said that a city in Algeria was in that direction, but that they should get there as fast as possible and not be caught by the rebel

groups in the area. Mulbah explained that he ran from nine in the morning to four in the afternoon and waited outside the city until it was dark. Mulbah worked in this city for some time, in order to obtain money to continue onwards with his migration. From here, Mulbah would go towards Libya and try to make it to the Mediterranean so he could cross to Europe. When he reached Tripoli in Libya, there was a lot of violence and shootings all around the city, and some rebel groups attacked the city while he was there, so Mulbah went on a boat as quickly as possible. The boat was inflatable with too many migrants in it, and shortly after leaving Libya it started to sink. The migrants started to scream and shout, and panic erupted in the boat. The captain wanted to continue onwards, but Mulbah and the other migrants convinced him to return to Libya. After this incident Mulbah decided not to try to get across the Mediterranean as he was afraid to drown. Instead he went to Morocco where he would try to enter Europe via the Spanish exclaves, Ceuta and Melilla. When Mulbah came to Morocco, he had used all the money that he had brought with him on his migration, as well as the small amounts of cash he had earned working here and there, so he started to beg on the street for food and cash. In Morocco, Mulbah used most of his time either begging for food or running from the police, who were, as Mulbah explained it: “very violent and wicked”. The police were very harsh to the migrants who tried to make it to Ceuta and Melilla. Mulbah explained that this was because the EU paid Morocco to keep people out of the exclaves. Therefore, if the police caught migrants trying to run towards the exclaves, they would stop them and break their legs, so they could not run. Mulbah saw this happening and decided not to try for himself. Mulbah finally decided that he did not want to try getting to Europe anymore, as he was too afraid of the police to try and make it to the exclaves, and he did not dare to make another attempt at crossing the Mediterranean. He went to the Liberian embassy in Rabat and told them that he wanted to go home. The embassy assisted him in getting in contact with the International Organization of Migration (IOM), who facilitated his repatriation. Mulbah returned to Liberia on the 15th of December 2017, on an airplane filled with other Liberians who had failed in their migratory attempt, and to a reality of return filled with daily struggles and stigmatisation.

The story of Janice

Janice's migratory story is not as long or detailed as Mulbah, but contains equal amounts of ill-treatment, hardship and abuse. The fact that she is a woman makes her even more vulnerable during her migratory attempts. As one of the other interviewed returnees expressed it: "*Women are in the most difficult situation. If you look good, they will take you*". Janice is a woman in her late twenties or early thirties. She looks like a regular part of the urban backdrop in Monrovia with her clothes and demeanour. However, her positive attitude and energy changes quite drastically when we start to talk about her migratory experience. Even without any psychological background to draw experience and knowledge from, it is quite clear that she is distressed by her experiences during her migration. Janice is not fully comfortable with talking about her experiences, but she thinks it is important for people to know what happens to Africans when they migrate towards Europe.

Janice left Liberia to look for greener pastures, as there were no possibilities in Liberia for her. She migrated because she wanted to look after her family, and to be able to provide them with a better life in Liberia. She left with her brother, who also wanted to look for a better future outside of Liberia. Janice and her brother did their preparations, saved up money, and got their travel documents and governmental clearances to leave the country. However, their issues began as soon as they set out on their journey. The first thing that happened to Janice and her brother was that their carrier took their passports, travel documents, and all of their money. They were told he would safeguard them, but they did not see them again. After they were left by their carrier, they had no money, passports or travel documents, and had to work to get money for food. From Liberia, Janice went through Guinea and Mali, to Agadez in Niger. This was a hazardous journey, which took very long. For several days during the journey to Agadez, they did not have any food, and very little water. When they finally came to Agadez, all the migrants that were with Janice and her brother were taken to different houses throughout the city. The women were put in a separate house and were all told different stories about how long they should be there, why they were there, and what would happen to them. All the women had to face sexual abuse. The women who were held in the house were abused by

those who ran the household, as well as several strangers who wanted to use the women sexually. Besides the sexual abuse, some of the women were also sold to others as sexual slaves. Janice saw several girls and women being sold. She does not know what happened to them afterwards. Janice stayed in this house for one month, before being allowed to move on.

After release from the house, Janice joined another group of migrants who went to another city in Niger. Here she was held in another house under similar conditions. After two months in the city, violence erupted. There were shootings and chaos in the streets. Janice saw this as her opportunity to escape. She was advised by some of the migrants in the house to cover her face and locate some Guineans who worked for the Guinean embassy. Luckily these people were able to help her to get to Guinea, where she stayed for one week before returning to Liberia.

Janice does not know what happened to her brother. She had not seen him since they were separated and have not heard from him since she returned. She fears that he is dead in the desert, but she might never know. Currently she is living by the Somali drive highway with some friends, looking for jobs here and there to sustain a living.

Abuse of migrants.

The following provides an outline of some of the types of abuse migrants endure during their migration. This is based on the experience of the returnees, as well as reports and news articles focusing on the abuse of migrants. Hopefully this will provide insight into the experience of migration, and the memories of abuse the returnees return home to Liberia with.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of migrants trying to reach Europe is widespread and affects both male and female migrants (Hinnant, 2019). As mentioned above in the story of Janice's migratory attempt, she experienced sexual abuse first hand. She was held in a house in Niger, and was not allowed to move on since she could not afford to pay to be released. In this house, there were many girls, and all of them were victims of sexual abuse. Janice was abused by men coming to the house, whilst some of the other girls were taken away, and came back days later after having been abused by many different men. Some also told Janice how they were kept as sexual slaves.

Some of the returnees also mentioned that when the migrants are handled by smugglers or the organised groups that facilitate smuggling, they often keep some women from moving on in order to abuse them sexually. This means that these women are in an even more vulnerable position from the perspective of the migrants. As one returnee expressed: "*Women are in the most difficult and vulnerable situation, especially if they are pretty*".

Forced detention

Detention of migrants is a common practice along the migratory routes through the Sahara and Sahel region, especially in countries like Libya (UNHCR 2018). Whilst Mulbah was migrating through the desert on a truck, his group was intercepted by a rebel group (possibly Al Qaeda). They were taken to a large camp in the middle of the desert where they were held for ransom, before being allowed to move on. During his time there he witnessed several beatings, and seemingly indiscriminate killings.

Almost all the interviewed returnees had experienced some form of detention during their migration attempts. This detention happened in several different locations and was done by several types of agents. First, there is the more official detention where the migrants are detained by public officials, mostly in prisons. This happened to some of the interviewed returnees, both in Libya and Algeria. Then there another type of detention conducted by organised groups. These would hold the migrants in some form of facility, both in cities and in the desert. Here the migrants were held until they paid more money in order to continue their migration, or they had worked long enough to pay for it. Thirdly, there is detention at “hosts” where the migrants are “sold” to a host by their smugglers, to work for the hosts under the promise of security and salary, which was not always the case.

Indiscriminate killings

Extrajudicial and unlawful killings are the reality of migration through the Sahara and Sahel region and in northern African countries (Brennan 2018). One of the interviewed returnees, who had been stranded in Algeria, explained how the life of migrants seemed to be worth little for some of the inhabitants of Algiers. He said that there was one man who would go into the migrants’ ghetto every day, screaming and shouting, until he found a migrant he could kill. The man would explain that he would kill because he was angry, which seemed to be the only reason.

Another story of indiscriminate killings come from an experience one of the interviews returnees had in the desert. He and his fellow migrants were captured by some form of rebel group. The group lined up the migrants on their knees and decided to shoot one of the migrants, apparently to scare the others to pay whatever they had to the rebels. If they did not pay, they would be killed as well.

Abandonment

One returnee from the self-organised group of ‘the Liberian Committee in Algeria’ explained that when the migrants were transported through the desert the cars and trucks were very tightly packed with migrants. There was little space to move and little to hold on to. Because of this, and the bumpy conditions of the roads they were taken, he

explained that often people would fall off the vehicle. The driver would not stop to pick up the migrant who had fallen off, instead driving on and abandoning the migrant, without anything to protect them from the brutal conditions of the Saharan desert.

Another form of abandonment can be seen through the testimony of Cassamma. He was captured by officials in Algeria, and after 5 days in prison, he, along with other prisoners, was taken by the Algerian officials and driven to the desert. Here they were left and had to make their way to the nearest border, if they could survive the sun and lack of water for long enough. This form of abandonment has been reported by various sources, and some reports state that upwards of 13,000 migrants have been abandoned by Algerian officials alone (Hinnant 2018). An unreported number of migrants die in the heat of the desert because of this abandonment, supported by the testimonies of the interviewed returnees. It is estimated that for every migrant that dies on the Mediterranean, two die in the Sahara (Laurent and O'Grady 2018)

Extortion

Migration from Liberia towards northern Africa and Europe is very expensive. The migrants have to bring with them a lot of money in order to pay for their movements. The interviewed returnees often explained how their money was taken from them through extortion. One of the interviewed returnees explained how he had to pay some rebel group, so they would not kill him. Another interviewed migrant explained that he had to pay his 'host' to let him go and to continue with his migration.

The extortion is not only limited to the money that the migrants have on them. Several of the interviewed migrants explained how they were instructed by rebel groups to call their families back home. Someone from the group would then take the phone and demand payment from the family—if they refused, they would kill the migrant. Social media was also used to extort the families into paying ransoms (Africa Times 2017). Often the migrants were beaten and tortured during calls and in videos on social media, in order to pressure the family to pay immediately.

Violence and ill-treatment

The migration from Liberia towards northern Africa is marred by extensive and brutal forms of violence (Martín 2019). The interviewed returnees told several stories of the brutality and torture they experienced for no apparent reason. The violence is carried out by all forms of agents: public officials, individual civilians, rebel groups, and organised criminal groups.

Violence is apparent during all parts of the migration, according to the interviewed returnees. One returnee explained how he was kept in a room in Agadez along with other migrants, both male and female. Throughout the day, their captors would come to the room and take someone to the middle where they would beat them, whilst he or she was tied by their hands and feet. Another interviewed returnee described how he was kept at a rebel base in the middle of the desert. The only food that the migrants would receive here was rancid food, often pasta. This was not something anyone would eat, but the people at the base forced the migrants to do so, and if they refused, they would be beaten or killed.

This section explored the experiences the returnees bring with them when they return to Liberia. These experiences are very harsh and violent, but as we see in the next section, the returnees pushed forward through many of these hardships because they were afraid of returning to Liberia without having succeeded in their migratory endeavours. Even the violence, abuse, and ill-treatment were not enough to deter the interviewed returnees, it was only when the fear of staying became greater than the fear of returning that the decision was made to return—or when the decision was made for them through the repatriation programs that exist in the Sahara and Sahel region.

2. Fear of Return

It might be a challenge to understand why some of the migrants who experience harsh forms of abuse, sexual exploitation, and overt violence decided to push forward in their migratory endeavours. As can be seen in the migratory experiences of Janice and Mulbah, they experienced much hardship and abuse before they returned to Liberia. This begs the questions of why the returnees pushed onwards even in the face of severe danger? Why did they not set their sights on returning home when they experienced abuse? What stopped them from trying to return to Liberia before they did? As will be shown in this section, the answers to these questions can largely be understood through the notion of fear of return.

It should be noted that other concepts than fear could be used to investigate how the returnees themselves conceptualise return; for instance, as anxiety or scared. However, the term “fear of return” is not used a label only for the purpose of this thesis but is a phrase the interviewed returnees themselves used to describe their sentiments towards returning to Liberia. This entails that the notion of fear of return is an emic notion, since it stems from personal experience, and is from the perspective of the returnees (Young 2005). Furthermore, the concept of fear can also be seen in news articles engaging with migrants and returnees in the Sahara and Sahel region, as well as other information outlets (Montag and Schaap 2018). Therefore, if we want to investigate how the returnees themselves conceptualise returning after a failed migratory attempt, it seems appropriate to use the concepts and phrases they themselves use in their narratives.

First, this section outlines how return is not only the physical act of coming back to one's country of origin, but something that is present throughout the migratory experience of the returnees. Moreover, this section focuses on the fear of what will happen if you return home after a failed migratory endeavour, and what this fear of return entails for the choices that the interviewed returnees made whilst they were migrating.

Return has been conceptualized as the act of returning to one's country of origin (Gmelch 1980, 136). While this is true in when it comes to the physical act of returning, the idea of return and concept of returning happens long before. However, the concept of return

existed within the minds of the returnees while the migratory experience was unfolding, and shaped the ways in which the migrants conducted themselves while they were attempting migration. Returning to one's country of origin is when the success of one's migration is being determined. Therefore, migrants often do not want to return home because of the fear of returning as a failure (Hernández-Carretero 2017). This means that the interviewed returnees themselves considered return long before it physically takes place—return pervades everything. The fear of returning in the wrong manner is so strong that they are willing to take considerable risks in order to not return as a failure. This fear of returning in the wrong manner can also be seen in an interview that Al Jazeera conducted with an Eritrean migrant in Libya:

“But now I have no choice, I can't go back. My mother is in debt because of me. So, I must continue. I must help her now. She lost her home because of me. I must pay off her debt. I want to study psychology to help people with mental illness. My mother suffered from it, and I want to help people like her. It's OK if I die in the sea. It's better than the hell I saw in Libya and the hell awaiting me in Eritrea if I return. If I make it anywhere in Europe, I might have a chance.” (Naib 2018).

Even though he is far from home, his focus is on the manner of his return. He has to help his mother through studying psychology and paying off her debts before he can return to Eritrea. The return is what is guiding his choices, and his fear of returning is what is pushing him forward.

This fear of return is something that directs the migratory experience and guides the way in which the returnees conduct themselves en route. The interviewed returnees were afraid of what would happen to them if they returned to Liberia without having succeeded in their migration. They were afraid because they knew that it would be difficult for them to reintegrate into Liberian society, if they came back to Liberia empty-handed and without anything to show for themselves. Because of this, the interviewed returnees, stayed in dangerous and abusive situations for an extended period, as they were afraid of returning without anything to show to their friends, family, and society, that they indeed

succeeded in their migration. This can be seen in how Mulbah stayed in Morocco, even though he was afraid of the police.

“The Moroccan police are very violent and wicked - if they caught you they would break your leg [...] but I begged to stay in Morocco to learn something before going back home “.

Here we can see that Mulbah is afraid of the violence he experiences in Morocco. During the interview it was clear that he felt resentment towards the Moroccan police, and that he despised what they do to migrants. Even though he was calm and collected during most of the interview, he became angry and distressed when he talked about the authorities in Morocco. Yet, despite his contempt, Mulbah still begged to stay in Morocco. He did not want to return to Liberia without having earned something from his journey—he needed to have something to show for himself. His fear of return to Liberia was too great for him to leave behind his migratory endeavours and try to make it back to Liberia. His fear of return made him stay in a situation which was clearly dangerous and uncomfortable for him. But it was not only in Morocco that Mulbah considered returning but decided to push forward out of fear of return. During his time in the desert, he also thought of going home, but was afraid to do so.

“After two weeks in the desert I was thinking of returning. But I was afraid of returning to Liberia, and I had no money, so after talking to a friend, I decided to try to earn some money to continue”.

Again, this shows how Mulbah continued even though he considered returning to Liberia. He was afraid of going back as he had no money and he had nothing to show for himself. As can be seen in the narrative of migratory endeavours, Mulbah had endured much hardships in his time on the desert: forced detention, ill-treatment, and abuse, and yet he decided to continue through all this. His fear of return made him continue through all of these hardships, in order to avoid returning to Liberia as a failure. This shows how big the fear of return is, and how much failure plays in his understanding of return—returning as a failure must be avoided at almost any cost.

The fear of return had the returnees stay in dangerous situations for a long time, but at one point they all made their way back to Liberia. How can we understand their return if they were afraid to do so? It would seem that return happens when the fear of staying becomes greater than the fear of return. Had they not been afraid of returning without being successful, it is likely that they would have returned sooner than they did, thereby avoiding a lot of potentially traumatising experiences and abuse. But the fear of returning as a failure, and the stigmatisation that it entails, propels them forward into increasingly dangerous situations. Thus, when the migrants choose to stop their migratory endeavours and try to make their way back to Liberia, this can be partly attributed to the fear of staying where they are becoming greater than the fear of returning. This fear of staying becoming greater than the fear of returning can be seen in the narratives of the interviewed returnees. Although they did not necessarily claim specific reasons for returning, most of the interviewed returnees experienced some form of violence, abuse, or danger which, accumulated with other violent experiences, made them look back towards Liberia. An example is Casamma, who endured several hardships during his migratory attempt.

Cassama is a young man in his late twenties. He originates from the Lofa region in Liberia. He only speaks Mandingo ³, so we talked together through a translator. He left Liberia in 2017 and was away for about a year and a half. Casamma was able to facilitate a lot of his travels on his own. This entailed that he was able to avoid most of the smugglers, who were the perpetrators of much of the ill-treatment and abuse experienced by the other returnees. He made his way to Algeria mostly on his own, but this was when his hardships began. He experienced much antagonism from the population and was afraid for his safety. Therefore, he took up work for a host with whom he could stay. However, he did not receive any pay and was held against his will. When he managed to leave the host, he was detained by the Algerian authorities shortly after and put in jail. Here he would spend five days and five nights:

³ Mandingo is the Native language of the Mandingo population in Liberia, who mostly reside in the Lofa and Nimba regions of Liberia.

“I spent five days in prison with no food and no drinks. They beat people here, and after they beat you, they would tie you up. Many people were in this jail, from many different African countries”.

Upon release from prison he was dropped off by the Algerian officials by the Niger border, where he was picked up by a rescue team from Niger and driven to Agadez. Here he would spend two more months before he got help from the IOM and the LRRRC to repatriate to Liberia. What is interesting is that he did not try to migrate towards the Mediterranean once he came to Agadez. Many stories exist of migrants who make several attempts towards the Mediterranean in order to get across to Europe, even though they were captured and returned to Niger again and again. It seems that the experience that Casamma had in Algeria deterred him from continuing with his migratory endeavours. Partly because of this, he turned homewards even though he feared what would happen upon return. At this moment, his fear of what could happen to him in Algeria made his fear of staying greater than his fear of returning.

Another example is Janice. She was kept in a house in Agadez in Niger for an extended amount of time, how long she could not remember, where all the girls and women there were abused sexually, and some sold as sexual slaves.

“We all went to the house. They told us all different kinds of stories, and there was sexual abuse with all the girls there. Some were sexual slaves and were given out afterwards”.

After she had been in the house where the sexual slavery took place, she spends two more months in another city in Niger, in another house, with little to no food, waiting to continue onwards with her migration. Even though these experiences would potentially cause many to try and make their way back to their country of origin, it was not until violence and shooting broke out in the city that Janice started to look homewards.

“There was shooting in the city, and I tried to escape. A man from Guinea told me to cover my face to get out and go to the Guinean embassy. Here I got help to come to Guinea, where I could make it home to Liberia.”

Again, we see that even though she experienced abuse in the form of sexual exploitation, and saw others being sold as sex slaves, it was when violence erupted that she looked for a way home. This moment was when the fear of staying became so much that it overcame the fear of returning without anything, even though she had been trying to make her migration a successful one.

The fear of return made the returnees stay in precarious situations, and even the prospect of dying did not deter them from pushing forward. This understanding is important when engaging with how the returnees themselves experience returning after a failed migratory attempt—the return of the interviewed returnees was not something that they all did willingly. Return was the last resort, and it was only after a long time of abuse, ill-treatment and potentially traumatising experiences that they decided, or were forced, to return to Liberia. Their return should therefore be seen from this perspective, and furthermore, return should also be understood not only as the act of coming back to one's country of origin, but as a process that takes place long before the return and shapes the way the migrants conduct themselves during their migratory endeavours. These notions assist in understanding how harsh an experience returning after a failed migratory attempt is, as the returnees were willing to stay in dangerous situations in order to avoid returning to Liberia in the light of failure.

3. How does the returnees understand success?

When trying to understand how the returnees experience returning after a failed migratory attempt, it is important to investigate the antithesis of failure—success. The understanding of success informs the understanding of failure, as one cannot exist without the other. The question then becomes how do the returnees themselves understand the concept of success? How do they narrate it, and what purpose does it serve? These questions are vital in order to answer the research questions of how the returnees experience returning after a failed migratory attempt, as their failure is contingent on the way in which success is understood and perceived.

It should be noted that the returnees' understanding of success is not homogenous. Every person that leaves their country of origin has different reasons to do so. Therefore, this section is not meant as a one-fits-all approach to understanding how returnees understand success, rather it is an attempt to highlight some of the aspects and underlying analytical points that can be drawn from the testimonies of the returnees, in order to investigate how the returnees perceived success, and how this can assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. It should also be noted that the way in which the returnees understand success is retrospective. Since none of the returnees (except Osman) managed to migrate to a country where they could stay for an extended period, they understand success through their failed migratory attempt. This influences the way in which they perceive success. However, since the focus of the thesis is to understand failure from the perspective of the returnees, how they themselves perceive success (and subsequent also failure) should be understood from their own normative perspective, and not from an objective or descriptive standpoint.

What can be seen from looking into the narratives of the returnees is that most of them perceive success not as something that happens at the receiving country, but something that is experienced at home. Secondly, success is not necessarily experienced by the individual, but something that is relational: your success is determined on your ability to care for others, and your ability to show others that you have indeed succeeded in your migratory endeavours. Besides these aspects, some of the returnees try to position

themselves in the global world order and try to break through the barrier between the developed and developing world (Vigh 2009, 93). These themes are important to bear in mind when it comes to understanding how the returnees themselves understand failure after a failed migratory attempt.

Success in Liberia

In the previous section we saw how the returnees would push forward, because they were afraid to return to Liberia. What this fact alludes to is that success is not something that lies in the place the returnees were trying to migrate to, but something that is experienced in Liberia. The people that the returnees needs to prove their success in their migratory endeavour to are not living where their migration might take them but are living at home in Liberia.

One of the ways in which this becomes clear is in how the returnees describe that their decision and motivation for migrating was to improve the situation for their family. Janice explained that her reason for migrating was to be able to look after her family:

“I wanted to leave Liberia to look for greener pastures, maybe in Europe. There are no possibilities in Liberia, and I have to look after my family”.

Here it becomes clear that the criteria of success that Janice initiated her migratory endeavours with, were that she would be able to look after her family, if her migration succeeded. This makes the success of her migration contingent on something which is present in Liberia – her family. The migration was a decision based on her perceived inability to look after her family in Liberia, so the only viable option that was left was to migrate. Janice decided to leave her family in order to be able to provide for them, and migration was the tool she used to obtain this ability. But even though she physically left Liberia, success was still in Liberia, i.e. the well-being of her family

Migration can also be seen as a tool for improving the social mobility of the family (Tacoll 1996, 17). It is important to note that often international migration is not a matter of survival, but rather social mobility as the household level (Tacoll 1996, 27). Often it is not those who have the least in a society that migrates, as migration is an expensive

endeavour. This also often means that it is the family who funds and support migration and not the individual. This follows the arguments of the “New Economics of Labour Migration”. This stipulates that the household sends out the best suited individual to gain income elsewhere. The finances they obtain abroad assist in spreading income risks, increase income, improve living conditions, and help future investments (De Hass et al. 2014, 417). New economics of labour migration then argues that the returnees will only return once they have successfully saved and remitted enough financial and human resources to realise their investment plans (De Hass et al. 2014, 417). The criteria for success for Janice might be similar to that stipulated by the new economics of labour migration, but the reality of return was not. She returned long before she was able to collect enough financial and human resources to realise the family’s plan, and to meet her success criteria.

Janice physically left Liberia, but the criteria for success was still in Liberia—her family and their wellbeing. This is an important aspect for understanding how the returnees themselves perceive success—success is not something that happens abroad but at home in Liberia, thus their decision to migrate is contingent on the manner of their return. Leaving Liberia is, from this perspective, a temporary decision. It should be noted that remittances are a way in which one can look after one's family financially without having to return to one's country of origin. However, remittances, or sending money back to one's country of origin, was not mentioned in any of the interviews. Sending money back as a way of being successful in looking after one’s family does not seem to be within the returnees understanding of what success in one's migratory endeavours entails. Even if remittances are part of the returnees understanding of success, the place of success is still based in Liberia, as the determining factors of success is the wellbeing of one’s family.

Another notion that also shows how success is being situated in Liberia, is how the social relations of the returnees that determines whether the migratory endeavour is perceived to be successful.

Success through relations

Another important aspect of how the returnees understand success is how success is perceived to be determined through relations. It is not the wellbeing of oneself that determines whether the returnee's migratory efforts have been successful. Instead, success is measured through the returnee's social relations, their ability to provide for others, and to show them that they have been successful. The next section focuses on these aspects of the returnees understanding of success.

It becomes apparent that the returnees perceive success to be based on their relations to others in Liberian society when they talk about the need to have something to show for themselves upon return. Ousman described this quite frankly during our talk:

“When you come back to Monrovia, you need to have something to show for yourself”.

Here we can see that Ousman places the determining factor for success on what he has to offer for others. He needed to prove that he had made it. If he would have “made it” it would not be enough in itself, he needed to be able to show others that he was successful. This entails that whether his migratory endeavours are perceived to be successful is contingent on how others perceive the manner of his return. He *needs* something to show to others in society that he, in fact, made it, and that his migratory endeavours were not in vain. It was not only Ousman who stated that it was difficult to return to Liberia without having anything to show for himself. The majority of the interviewed returnees stressed the same issues, as one of the interviewees from the Liberian Committee in Algeria stated:

“Now that we are away from danger, it feels good to be home, but there are many challenges, and it is very difficult. Many of our things have been lost, and people return without anything”.

Here we see the same issue being stressed, namely that the fact that people return without anything is one of the determining factors for the manner in which return is perceived. At the group interview at LRN the returnees also pointed to the fact that their return had been made difficult and challenging because they had lost their belongings abroad, and

they returned without anything. They did not have anything to show for themselves, which posed a challenge upon return.

The fact that success is determined by what you must show for yourself upon return became the way in which Mulbah experienced his return. What makes Osman's story highly interesting is that he was the only returnee that I talked to who had actually managed to migrate successfully to Europe for an extended period of time. Nevertheless, his experience of return, and how he perceives success, did not differ extensively from the other returnees who did not make it to their final destination ⁴. Osman left Liberia in 2008, wanting to migrate to Europe. After enduring the hardship of crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean, he eventually made it to Italy, where he settled down and got odd jobs here and there. Here Osman worked and lived in Italy for 9 years. Sadly, he was not allowed to stay. Potentially due to the political climate in Europe shifting towards a more antagonistic approach to migrants and migration, Italy began to deport many of its migrants—some who had lived there for more than a decade. Osman was detained in Italy and eventually put on a plane to Agadez. When he left Italy, he was not allowed to bring anything with him, not even spare clothes.

“All the countries [Italy, Libya, France, Morocco and Algeria] are deporting people back. You cannot take anything with you home, not even your clothes”.

The fact that Osman was not able to bring anything with him back to Liberia meant that he had nothing to prove the success of his migration.

“When you come back, you can't return with your possessions. Even if you make it to Europe you can't bring back your possessions. People return even without clothes”.

Even though that Osman managed to go to Europe, he did not perceive his migration as successful because he was not able to show something for himself upon return. This also

⁴ Note that “final destination” is difficult to determine, as the purpose and aim of migration changes en route. What is meant with final destination is that none of the other returnees managed to reach a place and position where they could settle down, and were all repatriated whilst they were still migrating.

highlights the fact that was mentioned earlier, that success is something that happens in Liberia. The manner of your return determines if you have been successful or not.

Another aspect of the understanding of success is that some of the returnees believed they could not improve in Liberian society. Thus, they believed that migrating was the only way they could become “better” or “more”. They had reached a ceiling in Liberia, where they perceived it impossible to improve their situation with the options the Liberian society have to offer. Hence, they decided to migrate. Even though this might not be directly related to the notion that success occurs in Liberia, the notion of leaving Liberia to improve and better oneself, is highly related to the historical context of return migration in Liberia following the second civil war, where the returnees were seen as successful (Pailey 2007).

An example of leaving Liberia due to the inability to improve can be seen through Ousman’s reasoning for his migration. The first interview I conducted was with Ousman. Some of the staff from LAPS knew him from earlier encounters and called him and asked if he wanted to do an interview. Ousman agreed, but it became clear that he did not feel entirely comfortable talking about his migratory experience. However, he felt it important that others knew what could happen to them if they attempted to migrate. Ousman had been away from Liberia for some time, since he decided to migrate to Ghana to seek work in 2005. He did this because he wanted to look after his family, but moreover, because he could not make ends meet in Liberia.

“In Liberia I had problems with making ends meet. So, I left Liberia in 2005 and decided to try and find work in Ghana. I was there until 2016 when I decided to see if I could go to Europe”.

As we can see, Ousman was not able to provide for himself and his family in Liberia, and his decision to move to Ghana shows that he believed that he could not succeed in making ends meet in Liberia. He did not see a prosperous future for himself and his family in Liberia, so therefore he saw success somewhere else. In his instance this was Ghana, and when he saw the opportunity to become more successful by going to Europe he took the chance. Another returnee who also perceived Liberia to have exhausted its potential for

him to succeed in society was Mulbah. He expressed this notion of improving his situation by migrating:

“I had an education in Liberia, but I could not get better. There are no opportunities in Liberia for me, even though I have education. Before I left, I taught people in Lofa County, but I could not get better in Liberia”⁵.

Even though Mulbah did have an education in Liberia, and even though he held a position as a teacher in Lofa county, he felt that he was unable to move up in Liberian society. He was stuck in his situation and could not improve it. He wanted to become “more” in society, but perceived Liberian society as unable to provide the opportunity for him to do so.

Mulbah’s understanding of success and opportunities lies outside of Liberia because he is aware of the situation himself and his country is in, in the global order of things. He understands that he needs to break out of his position before he can become “more”. This understanding is what Henrik Vigh refers to as *global awareness from below*, and is described as:

“An understanding of a world order consisting of societies with different technological capacities and levels of masteries over physical environment, as well as the spaces and social options which are open or closed to persons of different social categories within it (Vigh 2009, 93)”.

Mulbah sees the lack of opportunity in Liberia as one of the major reasons for his decision to migrate, and he positions himself and his position in Liberia in the realm of the global order of things⁶. Of course, he is aware that Liberia is not in the core of the developed world, but rather in the developing section. However, he wants to break out of the role that he has in Liberia. He wants to be able to grow, and to become more successful in his

⁵ Note: This was in a conversation after the interview, where Mulbah and I had a talk about where he came from, and what he did before he migrated.

⁶ For more info on world system theory, and the global order of things, please refer to: Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press

life, which he cannot become in Liberia. His migration can be seen as an attempt to break through the barriers between the developing and developed world. He knows that currently the spaces and social options that exist elsewhere in the world are closed to him because of his heritage and nationality. But by migrating he can break through this barrier, and potentially enter some of the spaces and receive the social options that other, more fortunate people in this world can access.

Breaking through this barrier to the developed world is closely related to a particular type of returnee, who returned to Liberia in the wake of the second civil war, and after the inauguration of Ellen Sirliel Johnson as the first elected post-conflict president. These returnees returned in quite a different manner than the returnees that are the focus of this thesis. These returnees came back to Liberia after having lived abroad during the civil war, where they had the chance to obtain formal education, business skills, and build international social relationships (Pailey 2007). These returnees were successful in their migratory endeavours and highlight the ideal returnee—someone who is able to leave Liberia and return with experiences, skills, and abilities that can help Liberia grow and develop (Pailey 2007). They had become the new social elite of the youth in Liberia. As Pailey describes in her article, *A Diaspora Returns - Liberia Then and Now (2007)*:

“What has replaced the familial names, religion and the social structures set down in the nineteenth century is a new fusion of legitimacy, defined by the experience of life abroad - schools attended, associational affiliations, accents, and networks/alliances ...” (Pailey 2007,25).

The importance of international affiliations and social networks shows how they were able to open the door to the technological capacities and levels of mastery over the physical environment, that other parts of the world enjoy, but they themselves were not born into (Vigh 2009, 93). And now, in peacetime, they returned to Liberia to use the skills they acquired abroad to rebuild Liberia. Return migration is thus about being trans-national and international in orientation, whilst rediscovering social identities (Pailey 2007, 27). When Mulbah tried to position himself in the core of the world, rather than in the periphery, he attempted to obtain what other successful returnees obtained—

technological capacities and mastery over the physical environment, in order to be able to return to Liberia successfully. This again shows the highly relational aspect of how the returnees understand success—successful returnees are those who can return to Liberia and improve society, not only for themselves, but for others. Again, we see that success is indeed experienced through the returnee's relations to society.

Having looked at how the returnees understand and narrates success, it becomes clear that success is not something that is determined necessarily by where the migratory experiences might take the returnees, but rather it is determined when they return to Liberia. Furthermore, success is not experienced by the returnees themselves, but is experienced through relations—both intimate relations, such as family and friends, but also the returnee's relation to others in society. Success is something that is shown to others and cannot be experienced by the migrant in a vacuum. Furthermore, migration becomes a tool for heightening social mobility, and improving living conditions, both for oneself and for one's social relations, as well as a way to break through the invisible, but strongly enforced, barrier between the developing and developed world. These aspects directly inform how the returnees experience returning after a failed migratory attempt, as it is these success criteria that they are measured on upon their return to Liberia.

4. Understanding succes after return - myth of success and imagined futures

Having looked at how the returnees narrate and understand success before leaving Liberia, the question now becomes how the returnees understand this success once they have returned to Liberia. Did their perception changed towards their understanding of success change? This section investigates how the returnees perceive success as something which might not be feasible, or realistic—something which might be a myth. The notion that success is something which might be unobtainable is supported by Henrik Vigh's work on imagined futures. This assists in informing how the returnees experienced and narrate their migration upon return, lending understanding to the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Establishing the myth of success

What seemed to be the case is that the returnees experience success as something unobtainable during their migratory endeavours—something that is a myth. Of course, there are people that succeed in their migratory endeavours, but it is extremely hard to do so. As Henrik Vigh writes in his 2009 article *Wayward Migration: On Imagined Futures and Technological Voids*:

“The sad fact of the matter is, however, that the experience of migration often seems to be characterized by a continuous distance from a worthy existence [...] Yet the positive prospects of imagined migration often turn into negative migrant imaginaries ” (Vigh 2009, 104).

The migrants of Bissau that Vigh focused on had spent many hours talking about migration, and how their lives would drastically improve. As with the migrants in Vigh's article, the interviewed returnees also had the notion of success enforced through relations. As hopefully have become apparent by now, migration, return, success, failure, and everything in between, is experienced through the social relations of the returnee, and the myth of success is no exception. As can be seen with Mulbah's migratory experience, and how the notion of success was enforced by his friend:

“I called my friend in Italy, and told him that I was afraid, and that I thought I was going to die, and that I couldn't make it. But my friend told me that I should push forward, and that all would be better in Italy “.

The excerpt above is from when Mulbah explained how he communicated with his friend in Italy, after being imprisoned in the Saharan Desert by some form of war lord or rebel leader for four days and four nights, only eating rancid food. Mulbah was afraid to move on and wanted to stop his migration, but his friend spurred him on. This was not the only time that Mulbah called his friend during his migration. Several times along the route Mulbah told his friend that he was afraid, but every single time his friend told him to keep pushing forward in order to succeed in his migration. As can be seen with this quote from the interview with Mulbah, he was spurred on to continue with his migratory endeavours, by his friend who was residing in Italy at the time. Had it not been for his friend persuading him to continue Mulbah would probably have halted his migration earlier, which would have saved him from many hardships and memories of abuse. But when Mulbah realised that he was unable to succeed in his migratory endeavours, he stopped communicating with his friend. The advice of his friend only brought him more danger. Furthermore, when Mulbah realised that success was a myth, it altered how he conducted his migratory endeavours, and what he sought after during his migration. This can be seen in how after Mulbah first tried to cross the Mediterranean, Mulbah stopped communicating with his friend:

“Everyone started to shout to turn the boat around before reaching international water. I cannot go to the sea anymore, because I am afraid of drowning. After this I stopped communicating with my friend in Italy ”.

After this incident. Mulbah tried to reach the Spanish exclaves in Morocco, but the police would break the legs of the migrants that they caught. This was to make them unable to try and run again. Mulbah saw the Moroccan police as very wicked, and decided not to try anymore, fearing for his life. When Mulbah realised that he would not make to Europe, neither by crossing the Mediterranean nor by reaching the Spanish exclaves in Morocco, he started looking for something else.

“I begged the king to stay in Morocco and learn something before returning”.

Realising that he was unable to be successful in his migratory endeavours, Mulbah wanted to have something to show for himself before he returned home. He stopped looking forward and started to prepare for his eventual return, by learning something, just anything, so he could show that his migration was not in vain upon his return to Liberia. He did not want to return empty-handed, because he knew what would happen when he returned after a failed migratory attempt, namely shame and stigmatisation.

Realising that one’s migratory efforts have been in vain, and that success is mythical and unobtainable, is devastating for the migrants. Ousman experienced this devastation and realised that the expectations on him were unobtainable. He knew he had to suffer the consequences and the negative migrant imaginaries associated with them.

“What is expected of you, you cannot deliver, and that is very shameful”.

Ousman had come to the realisation that he could not have been able to succeed in his migration, no matter how hard he tried. He had understood that the reality is that success is a myth. As Henrik Vigh argues:

“Migrating across continents, from Africa into Europe, increasingly seems to result in a realization of one’s place in the global order of people, and, thus, to an awareness of the inescapability of marginal social position” (Vigh 2018, 40).

What Henrik Vigh argues can be seen through Osman’s story. Even those who manage to live abroad in Europe returned to Liberia as a failure.

Osman’s story underpins how success might be something unobtainable, something that is a myth. As explained earlier, he actually managed to cross the Mediterranean with his life and settled in Europe. But even though he lived there for nine years, he did not manage to bring anything with him when he was deported from Italy. This means that he returned without anything to prove the success of his journey, hence he perceives his return as a failure. But Osman also perceives success to be unobtainable for everyone:

“Everyone who comes back, comes back with nothing”.

Here he stresses how he believes success is unobtainable for everyone. Everyone who comes back does so in the light of failure, because they are unable to have anything with them when they return. The myth of success starts to form when his statement is coupled with the already mentioned notion of success being perceived to occur in Liberia through the returnee’s social relations, and that you must have something to show for yourself upon return. Because you cannot bring anything home, because you cannot show that you succeeded, and because you are unable to care for you family and friends upon return, even if you have been away for nine years, it seems like the perception of the returnees is that you are unable to become successful in your migration. This notion is also supported by the fact that several of the interviewed returnees wanted to tell their story in order to dissuade others from migrating from Liberia, and instead encourage them stay at home and help rebuild the country. The returnees know what hardships migrants would have to endure, and they know that success is something elusive. Of course, it should be noted that the returnees’ perspective of success being a myth is affected by their own experience of failure. However, the purpose of the thesis is to investigate returning after a failed migratory attempt from the perspective of the returnees who have the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt. Therefore, how the returnees perceive success as a myth should be understood from their own normative perspective, and not from an objective or descriptive standpoint.

Through his fieldwork amongst former and would-be migrants in Guinea, Henrik Vigh (2009) also describes how going to Europe does not equal success in one’s migration, in line with Osman’s experience, of not obtain success, even though he lived in Europe for an extended period of time. Vigh outlines how the situation for the migrants in Europe was not dissimilar from their situation back home. As one of the former migrants stated:

“Here they have the metro, they have shops, they have electricity and water, but for us blacks it’s the same life ... it’s the same” (Vigh 2009, 104).

What the above quote describes is what the former migrant referred to as *“same shit, different country”* (ibid). Those who make it to Europe do not necessarily become

successful, as their situation might not improve, but be the same as when they left their country of origin. Instead of improving the situation for those who make it to Europe, it can have the opposite effect, as the it can have marginalising effect of the lives of the returnees:

“Life in Portugal results, as such, not in an escape from social death but in a much denser marginalization, in which the impossibility of gaining a worthy life becomes consolidated and existential uncertainty heightened by a deterioration of established social relations and obligations” (Vigh 2009, 105).

Thus, the elusive nature of success is exactly that: elusive. The expectations towards the returnees seems to be unobtainable, and the returnees themselves perceive them as such. Even those who make it to Europe often do not see their situation improve and are unable to have something to show for themselves upon return. Hence, we need to include the myth of success when we want to know how the returnees understand returning after a failed migratory attempt, because they themselves see success as unobtainable.

Imagined futures

But if success is in fact a myth, then why did the returnees leave Liberia in the first place? Why put themselves through the dangers of migration, and the marginalisation, shame and stigmatisation that occurs upon return? As mentioned in the section on the returnees understanding of success, the common traits for the reasons for leaving Liberia, was to seek a better life and social mobility for one’s family, or because of the returnees feeling that they were not able to become “better” or “more” in Liberian society.

A reason for the existence of the myth is that it is needed in order to imagine a life that is better than the one currently lived, a way of looking forward towards better times, which helps with enduring the hardships that people from poverty stricken or conflict-ridden societies can face (Vigh 2009). The notion of stuckness can help us understand the reason for the myth of success being in place and replicated. Being stuck can be understood in a variety of ways, but has often been seen through sites of confinement, such as in ghettos or prison. However, people can also be stuck not in a physical site but stuck in their

current situation. Jefferson, Jensen and Turner's (2009) article *Introduction: On Stuckness and Sites of Confinement* lends understanding to how structures of stuckness and confinement impact on the possibilities of 'making life' (Jefferson et al. 2009, 1). Mobility is one of the stratifying factors of being stuck or unstuck. They argue that mobility is a spatial metaphor which links movements in space with freedom of choice, political agency and, social potentiality (Jefferson et al. 2019, 3). This implies that immobility leads to the opposite, namely un-freedom, lack of political agency and social immobility and stagnation (Jefferson et al. 2019, 3). As the late Zygmunt Bauman wrote in his 1998 book *Globalization: The Human Consequences*:

"[...] [M]obility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor; the stuff of which the new, increasingly world-wide, social, political, economic and cultural hierarchies are daily build and rebuild" (Baumanm 1998, 9).

The myth serves the purpose of trying to claim mobility, in order to become unstuck. By claiming mobility, the returnees have the opportunity to improve their living situation. This very much relates to how success in migration can be seen as a way of breaking through the barrier between the developed and developing world, as mentioned in the section on how the returnees understand success. Migration is the tool used to claim agency, taking control, and demanding mobility.

Becoming unstuck through migration should not, however, only be understood at an individual level. Besides becoming unstuck themselves, some of the interviewed returnees also tried to get their family "unstuck" through migration. As explained above, some of the interviewed returnees decided to migrate from Liberia in order to look after their family. As Janice told explained:

"I wanted to go to greener pastures, I wanted to go to Europe. Because here in Liberia, there is not possibility to take care of your family".

She needed an imaginary for a better future for herself and her family, in order to justify her migration. She needed the positive migratory imaginaries. This can be seen in relation

to imagined futures, as argued by Jefferson, Jensen and Turner (2019). In their article, they address how people that are stuck imagine their future outside of their sites of confinement, as well as the temporal and spatial aspects of confinement. One temporal aspect of imagined futures and confinement is the aspect of migration in order to look after one's family. This understanding of becoming unstuck through acts for the family highlights how narratives and structures of kinship demonstrate that the projected future may also be the future of the kin (Jefferson, Jensen and Turner 2019, 5). The understanding of hope for a better future has often been seen as an individual endeavour. By migrating to take care of her family, Janice is trying to claim mobility, and to try to create a better future for her family. It can be argued that she saw herself as confined in Liberian society—she felt stuck, both for herself and her family, and migration was a tool to become unstuck. This is why she needs the “myth of success” or the positive imaginaries. She wants her kids to be unstuck in their life situation, she wants them to get a better future. There is a need for looking forward to a future in order to escape the stuckness for not only oneself, but one's family.

So how do these notions of the myth of success, and imagined futures assist in understanding returning after a failed migratory attempt? It lends understanding to how the returnees perceive success after they have returned in the light of failure. They see success as something unobtainable, something that you cannot have. It also assists in understanding how the returnees wanted to become “unstuck” in their current situation, but were unable to because of their failure in their migratory endeavours. Whilst there are undoubtedly some migrants who succeed in their migratory endeavours, often the positive imaginaries of would-be migrants become negative migrant imaginaries instead. Nevertheless, the myth still lives on, and is enforced and enhanced through social relations, both before and during the returnees' migratory endeavours. Having a positive outlook for the future is needed in order to imagine a future where the migrants are unstuck from their current situation—both for themselves and their family.

5. The Experience of shame and stigmatisation in returning after a failed migratory attempt

Following the fear of return, how the returnees understand success, and how success might be a myth, we now come to the point of looking at the actual experience of returning home after a failed migratory attempt. As has been mentioned in the previous chapters of the thesis, the return to Liberia was a tremendously harsh experience for the returnees. These individuals have endured much hardship, through the ill-treatment, violence, and abuse they witnessed and experienced during their migration. But what happens when they return to Liberia—what reality do they face and how do they experience this reality?

Without going into detail about the negative psychological effects and potential trauma, that migratory attempts entail, it was clear that the returnees were distressed about their experiences and memories of abuse, violence, and ill-treatment. Having these memories fresh in their minds, it would be safe to assume that these people require support and assistance, both from the state and from their social relations, family and friends. Sadly, this was not the case. Instead of experiencing support the returnees experienced stigmatisation, and felt very shameful about having returned to Liberia after having failed in their migratory attempt. When talking to the interviewed returnees, a clear shift in their way of narrating happened when the conversation moved to their return. The returnees would often become very emotional when addressing this issue, their voices would break, and their eyes would get distant and watery. There was little doubt that this was one of the hardest challenges for the returnees. They left Liberia with the prospect of becoming more successful and gaining financial and social independence. However, their return saw them becoming more financially dependent on others, their social status lowered, and their social relations strained or destroyed. Instead of improving their situation, migration made their situation much worse than before leaving. For this the returnees felt severe shame.

Shame upon return

Cassama experienced this shame. He was one of the returnees that I talked to who was the most visible distressed by his inability to stay with, or even see, his family. When we

started to talk about what happened after his return to Liberia, his eyes started to tear up, and his gaze started to wonder around the room. Even though Cassama only spoke Mandingo, and we had to communicate via a translator, there was no doubt that he was in deep pain about his experience of return:

“When I came home, my mother cried and gave me small money. But because of the shame, I did not stay in the village. I could not stay in Lofa [county] so I came to Monrovia ”.

He was not able to stay in his village because he had failed in his migratory attempt. He felt unable to stay with his family in Lofa because of the shame of his failure, thus he came to Monrovia instead, in order to escape this shame. Ousman also described this shame.

“It was hell coming back to Monrovia. You have to have something with you when you return ... what is expected of you, you cannot deliver, which is shameful “.

Here it becomes clear that the experience of return is extremely hard for the returnees, as Ousman describes the experience of returning to Monrovia as similar to *hell*. Hell ought to be the worst possible place to be, meaning that Ousman cannot think of anything worse than his return back to Liberia. Other stories of shame also lends credence to the harsh experience of return migration. As Anna Pujol-Mazzini writes in her article for the IOM: *When Returning Home is a Deadly Journey, “Shame is the Returnee’s Worst Enemy”*, the experience of returning home can mistakenly be seen as easy and unproblematic, as migrants reintegrate and resettle with families or friends. However, this assumption does not consider the emotional strain and the complexity of the social and cultural world the returnees might face (Pujol-Mazzini 2019). The returnees can, upon return, experience negative psychological reactions like shame, guilt, self-perception of failure, hopelessness, low self-esteem, amongst a host of other negative feelings (Pujol-Mazzini 2019).

One reason for this shame could be argued to be that the returnees did not live up to the expectations of the outcome of their migration. Furthermore, as haven been argued in

this thesis, the results of migration are experienced through the social relations of the returnees. Hence, they feel ashamed for not being able to provide what was expected of them, to their family and friends. As one of the interviewed returnees stated

“When you return home, the responsibilities towards you are very hard to handle”.

Another aspect which is important to understand regarding the shame the returnees experienced, is shame in not being able to meet the expectations of migration from one’s family and friends. Janice was one of the returnees who were unable to meet the expectations towards her family. Her shame was so strong, that she could not stay with her family upon return

“I could not get any help from my family, so I returned to Monrovia. Now I live on near the highway with some friends. They also returned not long ago ”.

Janice could also not get any help from her family, and she told me that she was unable to live with them due to the shame she felt. Ousman, who returned together with Janice also decided to live with his friends when he came home to Liberia, instead of staying with his family.

“I lived with friends for a couple of weeks after I returned to Liberia, because I could not see my family

Another returnee that I met at the LRN also stressed how it was difficult returning home to the family, as he had a difficult time meeting the expectations towards him.

“It was very hard to return, and to meet the response and responsibilities to the family “.

There is no doubt that family relations took a hard hit, due to the failure of the returnees to meet the expectations of their migration, particularly when the family assisted in planning and financing the migration. Without knowing for sure whether the interviewed returnees relied on financial and planning support from their family and friends to fund

and facilitate their migration, this is nevertheless a common occurrence when it comes to migration. Migration can be interpreted as a livelihood strategy employed by households and families instead of individuals, in order to overcome the sending country's market constraints (De Hass et al. 2015, 417). This entails that it is the whole family who supports the migration, but also the entire family who would reap the benefits of a successful migration. The family is therefore often involved in the migration because departure equals success (Pujol-Mazzini 2019). As Papa Lamine Faye, a senior psychiatry professor states:

“The family has often contributed, it has sold cattle, it has made sacrifices to make the project possible. The migrant, who has all these hopes placed in him, comes back, and he is ashamed because he feels the rejection of the family ”.

Return after a failed migratory attempt may not only disrupt personal hopes and plans, but also those of the family and friends, especially if the migrant or their families have fallen into debt, or other issues, to finance the migration (Bob-Milliar and Kleist 2013, 2). Another aspect of the returnee's migratory experience that could strain the financial aspect of their migration was the extortion that some of the returnees experienced during their migration. As mentioned in the section on the abuse of the returnees during their migratory endeavours, this extortion was not limited to the returnees themselves. Sometimes the people holding the returnees during their migration would call up the family of the returnee. During this call they would abuse the returnee so loudly that the family could hear it through the phone. If the family did not promise to transfer money immediately, they would kill him or her. Besides being horrific, this experience of extortion forced the family to spend more funds on the migratory endeavours, adding to the financial burdens of the family.

Stigmatisation

Thus, the returnees feel immense shame when returning after a failed migratory attempt. They were unable to meet the expectations towards their family and social network and had potentially indebted their family and friends. But besides the shame that the returnees feel upon returning, they also experience stigmatisation from their surrounding

society and social relations. This made their lives and their daily doings very difficult. They were constantly reminded of both their failure and their experience of violence and ill-treatment during their migration. Furthermore, this made their reintegration into Liberian society extremely difficult, as they did not have their social network to fall back on, and to get help re-establishing themselves. Instead of migration improving their situation, their return after a failed migratory attempt had a marginalising effect. But how do we make sense of the stigmatisation that the returnees experienced? Why did their family and social relations marginalise and stigmatise them to the extent where the returnees were unable to live with them anymore?

This question is quite difficult to answer, as the returnees themselves did not fully understand why they were experiencing this stigmatisation. But it seems that the returnees mostly believed that this stigmatisation was specifically because of their failure in their migratory endeavours, and because of their inability to meet the expectations towards their migration. It should be noted that because it was very difficult for the interviewed returnees to talk about their experiences of stigmatisation, they were not forced or pushed to tell more about their experience with stigmatisation beyond what they were comfortable with. This meant that their testimonies are full of mentions of stigmatisation, but not necessarily the reasons behind it. Furthermore, since the focus is on the returnees, i.e. those who received stigmatization, it should be perceived from their perspective, and not those who stigmatise. Therefore, their inability to understand the stigmatisation they receive is also a vital point in their experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt, as they feel helpless in the face of this stigmatisation.

One returnee who experienced severe stigmatisation from his community and family was Casamma. He was forced to move from his family's home community because of the stigmatisation he experienced.

"I was stigmatised because of my failed migration. I could not stay, because of this [stigma] so I came to Monrovia.

Here we again see that the stigmatisation was because of his failure. He perceived the stigmatisation towards him to be because he had failed in his migratory attempt. The very

fact that he failed was the reason he was unable to stay at his community. Another returnee mentioned why he believed why he experienced stigmatisation was Osman. He believed that it was because of his inability to show something for himself, that he experienced stigmatisation.

“You feel stigmatisation when you come back, because many go back, but you can’t return without your possessions. Even if you make it to Europe, you cannot bring back your possessions “.

Here we can trace Osman’s perception of the stigmatisation he experiences back to the notion that you are unable to succeed if you do not have something to show for yourself. You need proof that you have succeeded in your migratory endeavours, and you need to show this proof to others. If you do not have this proof, then you are perceived as a failure. Furthermore, as with how the returnees themselves understand the shame that they experience, the failure of meeting the high expectations towards the outcome of the migration can also be a contributing factor to the stigmatisation. When the migration was not successful, it is not only the returnee who experience the loss of mobility and resources, but also the family and social relations. The returnee has let a lot of people down through this failure.

Furthermore, there can also be misconceptions of the reason for the return of the returnee. As mentioned in the article *Life after deportation and migration crisis, the challenges of involuntary return*:

“The situation of involuntary returnees may be further undermined by rumors about the reason for their return, including supposition or immoral behavior, causing social isolation and stigmatization” (Bob-Milliar and Kleist 2013, 3).

Without knowing exactly whether this is the case, this misconception could be a contributing factor to the stigmatisation the returnees experience. Furthermore, if the returnees are ousted by his or her social relations, these misconceptions might flourish, as there is little communication with the returnee. As mentioned in by a Senegalese returnee in Pujol-Mazzini (2009): *“Here in Senegal, it is not our culture to accept*

someone who tried migration and failed, and furthermore, Family members refused to but him [the Senegalese returnee] up. He was a failure” (Pujol-Mazzini 2009). As was seen with the interviewed returnees, they were unable to stay with their family and friends, which could have the effect of these misconceptions to flourish.

Another aspect to consider regarding the way in which the returnees understand and narrate returning after a failed migratory experience, is that when talking to the interviewed returnees, they were quite insistent in describing themselves as victims. This is quite understandable, as they have endured more pain and suffering than most. But the detail in which they described their suffering during their migration along with the way in which they narrated the consequences or returning after a failed migratory attempt was vivid. They would not hold back with details and would describe one horrific event after another. This was a surprise, as one would think that intimate details would not be shared upon meeting a foreigner for the first time. This phenomenon is what Mats Utas (2005) describes as victimcy, which was briefly mentioned in the methodological section. He argued that victimcy is a form of narrative that structures the presentation of oneself in a particular way, and that this cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the context within which such presentations are made (Utas 2005, 409). From the point of view of the returnees there is much to gain in supplying a complete image of themselves as victims. Such an image is intended to rid the person of blame, and creates a platform for both social reacceptance, reintegration, and socio-economic possibilities (ibid). Providing a narrative that supports an image of oneself as a victim opens up for possibilities of not only partaking in lucrative aid, but also for the creation of compassionate bonds with social actors (ibid). The position of the researcher which in this instance represents a Danish organisation (Dignity), there is no doubt that it could be a beneficial strategy to support an image of oneself as a victim.

This perspective of victimcy is not meant to take away any of the experience of the returnees, or to discredit any of their stories or narratives, but a way to understand the setting that their narrations happened in. I would also argue that when the returnees present themselves as victims, it can be seen as a last resort in claiming agency. Upon their return they have lost most of their independence and belonging. They are now

dependent on help from others, as they cannot obtain or hold jobs, and they have no possessions or money, as this was lost during the migration. They cannot sustain their social relations, due to the strain of the shame and stigmatisation they experience. Therefore, when they present themselves as victims, is it their last resort for claiming agency. As a victim you can get support, you can build social relations through this support, and you try to rebuild your life again. If they cannot be anything in society, at least they can be a victim.

When the returnees returned to Liberia after a failed migratory attempt, they returned to a reality filled with shame and failure. They felt immense shame because they were unable to live up to the vast expectations towards them when they left Liberia. The shame is towards their family, but also friends and social relations in general. The shame towards the family can be heightened by the fact that often migratory endeavours are supported by family and social relations. Therefore, the returnees did not only worsen their own situation after a failed migratory attempt, but also their family's, which were a source of great shame. Moreover, the returnees also experience stigmatisation from their family and social relations in general. This has major consequences for the returnees, as they have a difficult time reintegrating into Liberian society. Whilst this stigmatisation might be difficult to fully grasp, the returnees perceived it to be specifically because they failed in their migratory endeavours, and because they were unable to have something to show for themselves upon return. Lastly, their narration of their experiences could also be understood in light of the concept of victimcy, where it might be beneficial to victimise oneself, but also because it can be an opportunity to claim agency over one's experiences of violence and ill-treatment.

Discussion on informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt

Having investigated the narratives of the returnees, regarding how they understand failure, how does this inform and assist the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt? This section unpacks the conceptual and analytical points of the complex phenomenon of returning after a failed migratory attempt, which can be drawn from the empirical investigation of how the returnees themselves experience and understand returning after a failed migratory attempt.

What determines conceptualisation and concepts differs between various fields of academia. For the purpose of this thesis conceptualisation and concepts refers to specifying what is meant by returning after a failed migratory attempt, and what is not meant by the term (Sequeira 2014). In other words, what are the classes of objects surrounding returning after a failed migratory attempt that are bound together via their commonality and sufficient features (Adcock 2005, 1). Even though there are general aspects to the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt within this thesis, there is not sufficient investigation and evidence to claim a full conceptualisation of returning after a failed migratory attempt. However, the empirical findings can inform the exploration and investigation of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

I argue that four main analytical aspects can be identified and assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt: 1) Shame and stigmatisation, 2) how return pervades everything 3), the relational aspect of failure, and 4) understanding failure through understanding success.

Shame and stigmatization

There is much shame and stigmatisation involved in returning after a failed migratory attempt. Some of the interviewed returnees stressed the fact that it was much more devastating to return after a failed migratory attempt than to experience violence and ill-treatment during their migratory attempt. As mentioned, the perception of the returnee's

social relations towards the outcome of the migratory endeavour is one of the determining factors for whether or not the migratory endeavours is deemed successful. Therefore, it is also through the social relations that the returnees experience failure. Thus, it is crucial to understand failure through these social relations, and not as an individual experience. There is so much pressure, and such high expectations for the migratory experience, that returning after a failed migratory attempt is perceived as extremely shameful. Furthermore, the returnees experience much stigmatisation from their family, friends, and wider social relations, namely because they are perceived as failures. Instead of migration being a tool to obtain further physical and social mobility, the returnees experienced marginalisation and stigmatisation upon return. The experience of shame and stigmatisation regarding returning after a failed migratory attempt is one of the most severe consequences of returning after a failed migratory attempt. Therefore, special attention should be given to these notions when investigating the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

How return pervades everything

It becomes clear by talking to the returnees and by analysing their narratives that the notion of the eventual return pervades everything. Long before the migrants return to their country of origin, the eventual return is present in their reflections about their migration. The way they conduct themselves during migration and the way they push forward with their migration, even in the face of severe adversity, imminent danger, and violence and ill-treatment, is guided by their reflections about their eventual return. As shown in the section on the fear of return, the returnees were so afraid of what would happen if they returned to Liberia before having succeeded in their migration that they continued with their migratory endeavours. Furthermore, the eventual return should also be considered in relation to the decision to migrate in the first place. As shown in the section on how the returnees themselves understand success, the criteria for success were understood to be placed in country of origin. Thus, the eventual return is present in the consciousness of the returnees long before the actual physical return to country of origin takes place. If there is a wish to fully understand returning after a failed migratory attempt, there is a need to look much further than the actual physical return, but to extend

the scope of an investigation to encompass the returnee's reflections on, perceptions about, and fears of return, before and whilst they are migrating. Therefore, migration and return should not be understood separately, as the notion of return is present throughout the migration and informs migratory decision.

The relational aspect of failure

Another important conceptual point to make regarding returning after a failed migratory attempt, is whether or not the migration is deemed a success, which is determined through the social relations of the returnee. Success is seen as being able to provide for others, and to show others that the migration has been successful, through having something to show for yourself upon return. Now, there is nothing new in postulating that the social relations of a migrant or a returnee is highly important for the migratory or returning experience. But what this thesis suggests is that the perception of the returnee's social relations does not only contribute to the success or failure of the experience of return, but is the determining factor of whether or not the migratory endeavours of the returnees is seen as success or failure. Therefore, in investigating the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt, it is important to pay close attention to the perceptions towards the outcome of the returnees' migratory endeavours by the returnees' social relations.

Understanding failure through success

If there is a wish to investigate and understand the experience and understanding of failure, one first needs to investigate and understand the experience and understanding of success. Because the perception of return is contingent on the success criteria for the migratory endeavours, if one wishes to investigate returning after a failed migratory attempt, one should start by looking at the perspective of what determines a successful migratory endeavour and subsequent return. The two notions of success and failure are contingent on one another and cannot be understood separately. From the empirical investigation of how the returnees experience and understand success, we can see that success is not experienced in a receiving country, but upon return to Liberia. Furthermore, success is not experienced on an individual level but understood and

experienced through the social relations of the returnee. Success is also seen being able to break through the barrier between the developed and developing world. Sadly, the returnees were not able to live up to these criteria. The returnees did not manage to improve the situation for themselves or for their social relations, nor did they manage to break through the barriers between the developed and developing world. Instead they saw their social and financial situation decline, and their distance to the developed world lengthen. Their situation did not improve but declined instead. The returnee's inability to meet the criteria for a successful migration, determined wither or nor the migratory endeavours of the returnee are seen as a failure. Thus, the two concepts of success and failure cannot be separated because they inform one another. Therefore, if investigating returning after a failed migratory attempt, an understanding of the understanding of success should be included.

The analytical notions of shame and stigmatisation, how return pervades everything, the relational aspect of failure, and understanding failure through understanding success, assist in unpacking the complexity of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. The experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt is an arduous endeavour, and hopefully these analytical points can further an understanding of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the experience of returning home to Liberia after a failed migratory attempt was devastating for the returnees. Their migration saw their financial and social status decline, they felt very shameful, and experienced stigmatisation from their social relations, and surrounding society.

But how did the returnees understand the experience of returning after a failed migratory attempt? And how does this understanding assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt?

What can be seen is that the returnees return to Liberia with memories of abuse after having been the victims of severe abuse during their migration. However, the returnees pushed forward with their migration, even in the face of severe danger. They were afraid of returning to Liberia as a failure. This suggests that return is not something that only happens when the returnees physically return to Liberia, but something that is present in their minds long before the physical return takes place, as they are afraid of returning if they have not yet become successful.

The way in which the returnees understood and perceived success helps us to understand how they experienced returning after a failed migratory attempt. Success is perceived at something that is experienced not by the individual, but by the individual's social relations. Additionally, success in the migratory endeavour of the returnees is seen as the ability to improve the mobility and living situation for the returnees' social relations, especially the family. Success is also perceived to be the ability to break through the invisible, but strongly enforced barrier between the developing and developed world. The returnees did not obtain any of these criteria for success, and therefore their migratory endeavours were perceived as a failure upon their return to Liberia.

After the returnees returned to Liberia, their perception of their ability to obtain success changed. Now success was perceived to be something unobtainable, something elusive—a myth. This myth exists in order to perceive a situation of being “unstuck” from their current situation. The positive imaginaries of becoming unstuck often become negative

migrant imaginaries—which can be seen in how the returnees experience returning after a failed migratory attempt.

The returnees felt shame when they returned to Liberia. This is linked to their inability to live up to the criteria for success, which were established before their departure from Liberia. Their situation in Liberia was worsened because of their migration and instead of their migration resulting in independence and mobility, it resulted in financial dislocation and dependency. For this the returnees felt very shameful. Additionally, the returnees also experienced stigmatisation from surrounding society. This made their return and reintegration to Liberian society very difficult. The returnees perceived this stigmatisation to be exactly because of their inability to be successful in their migratory endeavours, as failure is not something which is condoned.

These empirical findings assist in informing the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt. What was shown is that return pervades everything in the minds of the returnees. Return is present throughout the migratory experience and cannot be separated from the rest of the returnees' experiences. Return was also not something that was planned or calculated, and should not be understood as such, but should be conceptualised as something unplanned or arbitrary in form. Another conceptual point is that the perception of the returnees' social relations towards the migratory endeavours is one of the determining factors for whether the migration is seen as a success or a failure. This return after a failed migratory attempt is also filled with shame and stigmatisation. Lastly, because the perception of return is contingent on the criteria for success at the initiation of the migratory attempt, how success is understood and narrated is an important aspect of the concept of returning after a failed migratory attempt.

Further research

As this thesis has been conducted within the field of social science, from a migratory perspective, it has not dealt with issues of traumatisation and PTSD. However, this is an aspect of returning after a failed migratory attempt, which is important to recognise and further investigate. The returnees experienced severe abuse during their migratory endeavours, and witnessed even more. This can potentially lead to the returnees

developing harmful ways of dealing with the memories of their experiences, as well as potentially developing PTSD. Some of the returnees also mentioned that they have issues with substance abuse, in order to be able to forget their memories from their migration, which puts further strain on their already scarce financial and social resources. These notions make it a challenge for the returnees to reintegrate into Liberian society, where there are few possibilities for getting treatment for trauma and PTSD. This both has individual consequences as well as societal consequences, as the returnees' risk developing severe mental issues, which makes them unable to function in the Liberian society. As more and more return after a failed migratory attempt, this challenge will only grow. Therefore, it would be beneficial to further investigate the psychological consequences of returning after a failed migratory attempt, and opportunities for treatment.

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