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**Pride, poverty and persuasion: the emerging role of  
identity in migration**

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## Introduction

The migration story is a rich and colourful tapestry of circumstance, intrigue and random occurrences. The manipulations of Governments, the manifestation of natural disasters, or simply the change in consciousness brought about by the experiences of a fellow villager, each have the capacity to set off flows of human beings in search of a better life. Migration literature is increasingly challenging the traditional economic theory, that migration exists to redress wage differentials between different countries. By examining cases that run counter-intuitive to our conceptions of migration, such as urban to rural movement or migration to a poorer country, we are gaining much needed complexity to the body of migration literature. Explanations have been widened to include information asymmetries and regulation, poverty and a quest for personal identity. Maria Leichtman's study of the story of the Lebanese in Senegal is a powerful case study in identity and transnational ties in a migration experience involving permanent resettlement is a case in point. Through a study of self and locally held perceptions of the Lebanese community in Senegal, and their own perceptions of Lebanon, her paper identifies strong transnational behaviour in a case of south-to-south African migration. Using an example of a situation where the migrant's social position, rather than economic circumstances, have improved through migration, Leichtman (2005) firmly rejects neoclassical economic theories of migration and instead turns to identity to explain these flows. She urges the reader not to discount the importance of non-economic factors in migration flows, from the more predictable influence of French colonial systems to something as random as catching the wrong boat.

Likewise, migration writers such as Ernest Spaan have analysed a case of migration between developing countries, to reveal that social networks may play a more important part than economic factors, if not in the decision to migrate, then at least in the choice of destination. He turns the attention away from financial gain, and onto information or regulation asymmetries that these networks seek to exploit. Starting with a review of the historical relationship between Javanese workers and Singapore, Malaysia and the Gulf States, Spaan (1994) traces long standing social roles of Javanese workers in these areas and posits that migration has become part of the identity of the Javanese and that social networks are "conduits of information, social and financial assistance" in this journey (Spaan 1994). He concludes that the desire to minimise uncertainty of the outcome of the migration on the part of these largely temporary workers supersedes the importance of economic gains, giving rise to initial exploitation, at least until workers become more experienced, informed and organised. In a similar vein Amacher, Cruz, Grebner and Hyde (1998) use empirical economic assessment to review the relative importance of income, employment opportunities, distance, political unrest and the availability of undeveloped land in the decisions of internal migrants. They look at the reversal of urban migration that took place in the Philippines in the 1980's, as migrants left impoverished cities to take up land on upland and forest frontiers. The authors of this paper in particular conclude that while income and employment are important, access to undeveloped land is a stronger motivation, particularly for poor agricultural families, and this trend is giving rise to environmental destruction in that region of the Philippines.

## Migration and identity

One of the most powerful factors of migration that is emerging in the body of migration literature relates to the question of identity. Whether responding to an attack on their cultural identity, such as Lebanese migrants in Senegal; seeking a shift of identity, like Philippine migrants in their search for uninhabited land; or indeed simply being born into a culture where migration already forms part of their identity, as in the case of the Javanese workers, the human quest for a sense of self is paramount to the decision to migrate and to the outcome of that migration. By comprehensively addressing several generations of permanent immigrants, writers such as Maria Leichtman demonstrate that identity is a complex equation of perceptions. Migrants are frequently seeking an improvement not necessarily in their economic circumstance, which Lebanese migrants have *not* achieved in Senegal, but in their relative social standing and their right to practice their culture without persecution. Cultural nuances are essential to an understanding of migration. The Senegalese Lebanese have strengthened their identity through dominating the cultural and economic elite of the country, retaining their original culture (but not the damaging sectarian divisions which dominate the mother country), and obtaining passports of different countries to maximise opportunities.

While Leichtman refers to the impact of the French colonial power on their decision to migrate in terms of destination, Spaan (1994) looks at the influence of the Dutch system of indentured labour on present day patterns of migration. In the case of Java, migration to Singapore and Malaysia has been part of the local identity since the early 1800's. Complex informal systems of local merchants, middlemen, brokers and recruitment agencies exist to bring workers to plantations in Malaysia or households and constructions in Singapore and the Gulf states. The strong presence of the specific Javanese ethnic group in Singapore is a testament to the effectiveness of these networks. And once migration becomes an accepted part of identity, the flows increase exponentially. Migration writers should pay careful heed not to posit their subjects as passive participants in the migration networks, and thus, in their own exploitation. An analysis of the identity of returnee migrants often sheds more light on this question.

Identity is a complex equation of both the sending and receiving countries. The analysis of Amacher et al (1998) in Philippines indicates that some migrants, particularly very poor agricultural labourers, may be seeking to establish an entirely new identity outside their current one. There is no sign of the passivity of migrants in their strong positive correlations between migration and uninhabited land with less secure existing claims. The 'empty spaces' are possibly seen as an opportunity to re-establish themselves. The indifference of the migrants to unemployment and possibly political unrest in the destination, as observed by the authors, could support this interpretation.

The affirmation of identity does not occur without cost. While contributing to the economic and social capital of Senegal, Leichtman records that some Senegalese accuse the incoming communities of racism and importing elitist structures. This theme is echoed by Spaan (1994) who argues that the exploitative relationships between migrants and brokers may be carried out in turn, by former exploited workers who conduct

brokerage to finance their own passages. Amacher et al (1998) sees that those peasants that are marginalised by poverty are in turn seeking uninhabited lands to exploit.

The studied experiences of migration often raise uncomfortable truths about the impact of migration. Upheaval of social structures, environmental destruction, erosion of the fabric of societies at the sending country level are all impacts observed by writers of migration literature. However, it must be noted that there is no obligation on behalf of the migrant communities to be moral guardians of equality and fairness. Humans survive through mimicry. Migrant communities are frequently survivors of great injustices themselves, and their quest for affirmation of identity is a means of survival.

### **Economic factors**

The economic factors which underlie migratory patterns are powerful and important to policy makers. Writers such as Amacher et al. (1998) have used economic analysis to compare utilities at the site of current occupation compared to those at the new destination, but they depart from pure neoclassical theory by taking account of environmental, demographic and economic attributes. In this particular study, Amacher et al (1998) reveals a surprising lack of correlation with unemployment, which they put down to the fact that people are pursuing land without tenure, rather than jobs. Their thesis is that the failure of the economy in the cities of the Philippines have driven people back to agricultural existences. They also dig into the detail of income, and find that poor people are motivated not by average incomes, but by incomes of people at their level.

A booming economy in the receiving country and unemployment in the home country are important factors in migration and a paper cannot be complete without an analysis of remittances, and factors such as the relative wealth of returning migrants to those who stayed behind, along with any qualitative analysis of migration. Indeed, an economic analysis may help writers identify more clearly the role of non-economic factor.

Leichtman (2005) reinforces the importance of sociopolitical factors, when she discovers that the financial circumstances of the Lebanese in Senegal are inferior to those who went onto America, and even those who remained behind in Lebanon. The fact that the original migrants were from the poorest area of Lebanon with the lowest social rank was more important. They were seeking to subvert their social class. Once established however, she argues that “the political and economic ties which were so important for determining transnationalism among the first generation, are no longer significant criteria for later generations.” Instead their identity has fragmented into separate working and personal identities, with the youth looking to Europe for their economic safeguards.

### **Market imperfections: Information asymmetries, transaction costs and regulations**

The existence of information asymmetries, transaction costs and regulations are tangible barriers to the application of neoclassical economic theory in migration. The massive growth in the size and complexity of the immigration industry, such as the “collective debt” system for pilgrims to Mecca, studied by Ernest Spaan, is testament to these asymmetries. The transaction costs of migration are frequently high, such as the case of gulf workers who are asked to pay fees of between six and twelve months pay, even if, as

Spaan (1994) notes, that the market is maturing due to an increase in the number of brokers and the increasing incidence of independent organisation. Information asymmetries vary from the orchestrated to the banal. The luring of Lebanese migrants by French authorities to stay in Senegal, through promises of jobs and opportunities, as their ship docked at the African port is a case in point (Leichtman 2005). A seemingly innocuous piece of information has the power to divert masses of people. In the converse, widespread knowledge of unsecured tenure is giving rise to flows of urban people in the Philippines to fragile and uninhabited lands (Amacher et al. 1998).

But as quickly as the information age is whittling down rents that are made from information asymmetries, the trend of tightening labour market restrictions is dragging them back up again. Whereas in the past countries were protected through isolation, they are now turning to restrictions at an increasing rate. The crackdowns on Indonesian migration into Singapore and Malaysia has not stopped the flow of migrants, but simply reinforced the broker systems that once extracted rents because of information asymmetries, and can now extract them for danger and risk. Furthermore, the official government recruitment channels set up to regulate the process are seen to be less attractive because of the large visa fee and bureaucratic delays in the process. This differs from the impact of regulation between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, which has been more effective due to the distances involved, but has still pushed a substantial proportion into illegal channels.

The Lebanese of Senegal know only too well the value of a passport, with Leichtman (2005) indicating that the typical Lebanese in Senegal holds various passport for labour market reasons. She goes onto submit the possibility that the original migrants only originally stayed in Africa instead of going onto America, because of the high cost of the trip and the reluctance of America to grant visas. Amacher et al. (1998) proposes that more secure tenure rights will discourage internal migration rather than regulation of migratory patterns, but like visa restrictions in the Javanese story, this possibly discounts the power of the 'push' factor. The migrants are escaping dire urban poverty and further regulation and enforcement of property rights may give rise to undesirable conflict in the upland areas to which they are fleeing.

## **Conclusion**

Migration literature is increasingly attempting to unravel highly localised reasons as to why people migrate and the impact on those migrants once they arrive at their destination. Whether escaping social hierarchies in Lebanon, seeking new land in the Philippines or entering well established channels of migration from Java, these migrants share the common goal of improving their lives. Using cases which run counter intuitively to our traditional conceptions of migration, the new migration literature is succeeding in conveying the complexity of modern migration, even if writers in the area could all benefit from a more holistic disciplinary approach to their subject matter. The new literature is making valuable contributions to our understanding of the influence of social networks, and to asymmetries and regulation over migration, but it is from the study of identity that the most powerful conclusions are beginning to emerge. Independent of the financial success of their migration, and irrespective of their sending

cultures, migrants seek above all to define themselves as human beings. Whether it chooses to depart afterwards along economic, historical or political routes, any explanation of migration must begin at this point.

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