

“LIFE IS A GAMBLE”: Labors of Mobility, Risk, and Return between Sudan and Lebanon

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“Life is *mughamara*,” Bashir told me. “You have to take risks in life to get somewhere. Like now, I’m investing in this harvest, I’m trying it out, but if it fails, I’ll have to migrate again.”

Mughamara translates from Arabic as “adventure,” “gamble,” and “risk,” and implies in its root form the act of immersion; throwing oneself into something without knowing the outcome.¹ This article is based on fieldwork with young migrant returnees who, like Bashir, are sons of subsistence farmers in western Sudan and worked low-skilled service jobs in Lebanon before an economic and political collapse in 2020 forced them to leave. They returned to Sudan in the midst of its own economic and political crisis after a popular civil revolution in 2019. Like other Sudanese male migrants whom I met in Beirut and Khartoum, Bashir described migration itself as *mughamara*. Following in the footsteps of younger male migrants from Khartoum to Beirut and back again, I show how this term articulates the risk and potential benefits of migration, the value of which is both material and affective for migrants, who validate themselves through their risk-taking.² Building on these migrants’ terminology, I propose *mughamara* as a concept of mobility, in a context where the striving for labor opportunity also means a striving for life.

When I first met Bashir in Beirut in the fall of 2019, Lebanon was gripped by economic crisis and mass uprising (Majed and Salman 2019). Bashir had lost his job as a concierge at a hotel and was looking for a way to go home. He had seemed detached from his migrant friends in Beirut, always reminiscing about life back in Sudan. He left Lebanon in winter 2020 and went back to his village in Kadugli, south Kordofan, a subsistence farming and politically marginalized region in western Sudan, where he helped his mother tend their land. He did not stay there long before making new plans. He tried his luck at smuggling weapons across the border from South Sudan, as well as at working at a construction site in Egypt, where he got injured.

In August 2021, we met in Khartoum to say goodbye again. Migration was on his mind and he was planning to go back to Lebanon. Rain flooded Khartoum's streets, signaling the arrival of the harvest season, and we sought shelter at a popular downtown café. Young people around us were playing cards and discussing the rising prices of food and fuel in Sudan, but Bashir had not come to Khartoum to join their protests. Barely touching his coffee, he began to tell me about his gamble, as he called it, *mughamara*. To migrate to Lebanon, Bashir had to pay a thousand dollars in advance to a broker agency in Khartoum. To pay this cash, he had mortgaged his mother's crops to a local trader, a customary agrarian loan known colloquially as *shayl*. Through this bargain, Bashir risked his family's subsistence, their livelihood, in hopes of making more money abroad that would, perhaps, change their circumstances. This is a speculative bargain. If the harvest fails, he becomes indebted to the trader, but by selling at the market, he becomes "relevant" in market terms.

Just as Bashir bets on the harvest, he also bets on his potential for getting a job when he pays a broker to help him migrate. This constitutes a labor mortgage, insofar as the exchange-value of his labor power is held in suspense; he invests in his own potential for hire, without knowing whether he will get a job. Risk-taking in this economy constitutes a labor that is necessitated by, and yet distinct from, the waged work that migrants may or may not get when they go abroad. The goal of Bashir's speculation is not sky-high; he does not aspire to become rich, but simply to live better. Yet in a transregional economy where cross-border mobility yields profit, the desire for a good life comes at a risk for those who move. Crossing borders, Bashir (and others like him) becomes valuable to state and non-state actors who extract fees from him. His very search for work through mobility becomes a point of value extraction.

Bashir's gamble is relational, insofar as it is necessitated by, and begins, in the family, and it is to the family that the migrant and their labor return. The family invests in, and puts pressure on, the family member to earn money abroad, but the family's labor also proves vital in reproducing the migrant's capacity for labor. In a generational economy, Bashir had returned "too soon." He had returned to Sudan with less than when he had left, and he returned to a material obligation as a son of subsistence farmers. In subsistence farming communities in Sudan, women have become the main household providers in the absence of migrating men and their remittances. Bashir's compromised return spirals from a history of agrarian dispossession and the privatization of land in Sudan. For him, as for others in his position, labor migration constitutes both an inherited burden and a necessary risk in their continuous striving for a good life.

Bashir's itinerant gamble captures the experience of laboring in the midst of uncertainty produced by the multiple, overlapping crises that condition the lives of citizens in both Sudan and Lebanon today—a time when risking your life on the move, or mortgaging your harvest, becomes a survival strategy against the bigger risk of becoming stuck in unemployment, or losing your land altogether. Following in the footsteps of migrants looking for work amid the accumulating crises in Lebanon and Sudan, the article moves through different economies of speculative value extraction—from agrarian speculation to the labor required to move between this work. Through their quest for labor, we also meet Awadalla, a former migrant worker in Lebanon who now operates a clandestine trading network of migrant labor and agrarian produce that links Bashir's labor itineraries to a domestic service economy in Beirut and other cities of the Middle East. The article ends by following Bashir on his way out of Sudan again, striving for a second chance abroad, and, eventually, a better return.

NOTE ON FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This article forms part of a six-year, multi-sited ethnographic and archival research project that I conducted with Sudanese migrant workers in Lebanon, as well as with migrant returnees in Sudan, between 2017 and 2022. The material for this article is mainly based on participant observation I conducted with Sudanese migrant returnees in Khartoum in August 2021, but it also draws on and refers to fieldwork I undertook in Lebanon between 2019 and 2020, as well as in June 2022, when I conducted follow-up interviews with migrants in Beirut. I also include conversations I had with the Khartoum-based non-profit Cooperative for Peace

and Security (CfPS), which works with women farmers and migrant returnees in Kordofan and Jazeera.

My conversations with the migrant returnees in Khartoum were informal and took place in public and semi-private spaces, including a café, a car, and a migrant broker's office. The field sites include a car and a motorbike, which transported us to a clandestine migrant broker's office. The coffeehouse mentioned above presented a rare resting hour in this constant itinerant movement for labor. Due to the nature of the fieldwork, I did not record our conversations. Instead, I took notes, which I stored safely and coded anonymously. All conversations were conducted in colloquial Arabic and translated by me. For their safety, I have changed the names of all research participants. The unstable political situation in Sudan at the time of my fieldwork, two months before the military coup in October 2021, made it impossible for me to get a permit to conduct research in Kordofan. My ethnographic data on agrarian life is therefore based on my interlocutors' description, which they shared in person, as well as over the phone.³

DEBT AND RISK IN MOBILITY: THEORETICAL INTERVENTIONS

In political economic analyses, speculation means to bet on the market with the interest of profiting from the outcome (Bear 2020; Davis 2018). I conceptualize risk and speculation on a different scale, by examining how migrants and farmers bet on their chances to survive the fluctuating demands of a transregional market economy. In many agrarian and urbanized societies of the Global South, risk has become both a “disciplinary discourse” (Bize 2018), imposed by the state, and a practice in response to it (Martin 2007). Speculation is not a metaphor in this process; it indexes the material and affective practices of scavenging and maneuvering for life via labor (Bize 2018; James 2021; Morris 2008; Simone 2020; Tadiar 2022). As Neferti Tadiar (2012, 785) argues, the distinction between labor-time and “life-time” has become dissolved for those who have to put their bodies available for hire at all times, making their life-time valorizable as potential surplus labor.

Of course, mobility has always produced debts for those who go, and profits for those who facilitate their movement (Mathew 2016; Schouten 2022). It is not necessarily that people migrate more than they used to, or that farmers take on more debts than they used to (Agarwal 2021; Federici 2012; Gerber 2014; Graeber 2011; Shah and Lerche 2020). Anthropologists have conceptualized how debt fuels migration (Achnich 2022; Kleinman 2019; Piot with Batema 2019; Roitman 2005; Scheele 2012), and the gendered implications of mobility debt for families (Fer-

guson 1999; Gaibazzi 2013; Ghosh 2015; Grabska and Fanjoy 2015; Melly 2011; Parreñas 2005). Yet studies suggest that mobility has become more formalized as a point of value extraction and exploitation by both state and non-state actors (Achnich 2022; Belloni 2019; Schouten 2022; Reeves 2016; Vogt 2018; Wright 2021). The persisting desire for a wage, both in Africa and on a global scale (Barchiesi 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2020; Denning 2010; Ferguson and Li 2018), and the increased necessity of having to move in search of it, is what renders migrants into a category of control, extraction, and investment by states, humanitarian organizations, as well as non-state fiscal agents (De Genova 2002; Fassin 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Silvey and Parreñas 2020; Ticktin 2011; Willen 2019). At detention centers at the frontiers of Europe, for example, the increased control of cross-border migration has “arrested mobility” and, some argue, made the migrant’s immobilized body, rather than their labor power, a distinct point of value extraction (Achnich 2022; Andersson 2018).

But as Europe has become harder to reach, people still move elsewhere for labor. Sudan is today both a destination and a transit zone for transregional migration to and from the Middle East (Lumley-Sapanski, Schwarz, and Valverde-Cano 2021; Oette and Babiker 2017; Thiollet and Thibaut 2022). In Sudan, EU-funded reintegration programs now invest in migrant returnees as “human capital” through vocational training (Ziai 2022, 2020). Regional scholarship that foregrounds social capital and informalized labor (Elyachar 2010; Hanieh 2022; Medani 2021) is instructive to keep in mind the itinerant and non-waged labor of migration. Going to market, looking for opportunity, making oneself available for hire—all of these activities constitute labors of mobility that respond to market demands of social capital and entrepreneurial self-fashioning (De Abreu 2018; Elyachar 2010), where “making it” demands stretching oneself across time and place, with the risk of stretching one’s family thin. The labor exchange becomes for aspirational migrant workers a mortgage in this process.⁴ Not unlike Bashir’s harvest bargain, they pay brokers to go abroad, without any guarantee of becoming employed. The migrants I follow call this practice a gamble, *mughamara*.

LABORS OF MOBILITY

Working night shifts, moonlighting, digging under the earth, crossing borders illegally, carrying unregistered goods, shadowing someone who doesn’t want to do the job themselves, are necessary tactics for those who, like Bashir, return to a Sudan, where half of the active labor force is “precariously employed” (UNDP 2021), if employed at all, and many work in the shadows of the state economy

(Bakhit 2020; Medani 2021). Shadow labor is coded by racialized and gendered terms of movement and access both within Sudan and in a transregional economy, where some bodies pass easily while others are systematically marked out as suspicious, and/or hypersexualized, and targeted accordingly through extractive and disciplinary measures by state and non-state actors alike.

This racial-gendered coding takes place as well on the route to Lebanon from Sudan, which involves crossing borders in the shadow of state control. Migrants fly to Syria and from there continue on a smuggling route across the border into Lebanon. This route was in use before the Syrian war (2011-), but it has grown as a business since then. Many of the migrants who took the journey across the mountain range bordering Syria and Lebanon alongside other migrants, primarily Sudanese and Syrian, recounted in harrowing detail how they were kept underground for days. But the journey allows for legal flexibility: When Lebanese border guards caught someone crossing, they let them through in return for fees. Once the migrants make it to Beirut, they can become documented through an informal transaction with Lebanon's General Security, a process colloquially known as "fixing the situation," through which they obtain work permits.

Most Sudanese migrants in Lebanon become documented under the category of "domestic laborers," although few today work domestically. Rather, these jobs have been outsourced to the restaurant and hospitality sector, which relies on the steady availability of cheap foreign labor to run its engine. Being employed in this way offers migrants more flexibility than live-in domestic servants have, but little security. As "domestics," they are not protected by Lebanese labor law (Kassamali 2021; Mikdashi 2022). The Lebanese state uses migrants' legal precarity to discipline and regulate them through regular detentions without trials, as well as threats of deportation.

Mohammed, one of Bashir's flatmates in Beirut, recounted over dinner at their house one night in 2019 his experience in Lebanese detention. After being detained for months without trial because his work permit had expired, he went back to Sudan, then tried his luck again, crossing through Syria once more to get to Lebanon. "Were you not afraid to be detained again?" I asked Mohammed. "Afraid, no. It's part of the adventure [*mughamara*]¹—there's a 50/50 chance of succeeding," he responded.

Migration generates debts, as people pay to go and go again, but the Sudanese migrants I spoke with did not describe this as a *debt* exactly. Rather, like Mohammed and Bashir, many spoke of their migration as an adventure and a gamble, *mughamara*, through which they both valued and validated their migration. "You

are the producer of your life" and "migration is a gamble" circulated as mantras between the Sudanese male migrants I met in Beirut, many of whom had been regularly detained. For them, taking a risk on life, *mughamara*, also means a way to retake control of life. Perhaps this emphasis on the activity of risk-taking, rather than its material consequences, allows space for hope; as long as one is still gambling, things can change for the better.

As Lebanon's economy went bankrupt, migrants could still get work, but it was harder to hold on to, and much less paid, than before the crisis. With businesses regularly closing and reopening under COVID lockdowns and the inflation of the Lebanese lira, migrants changed jobs several times a year, often moving between Beirut and other regions of Lebanon as demand required. To survive the inflating cost of living in Beirut, many have had to work double shifts, washing dishes at restaurants and cleaning factories at night, creating eighteen-hour workdays, which might, if lucky, earn them up to US \$500 a month. At this rate, few are able to send any money home. In fact, many have had to borrow money from their families to survive living in Beirut. This has reversed the intended flow of migration, as migrants' families send rather than receive money, investing in migration without seeing a horizon for its anticipated return. Many of Bashir's migrant friends in Beirut hesitated to return, feeling that they had "nothing to bring back," as one of his former flatmates told me. They seemed to experience their present predicament as a crisis that "presupposes its future resolution" (Larkin 2017, 49); the future is in sight, but it does not guarantee a change from the present (Guyer 2007; Morris 2008).⁵ Bashir, meanwhile, couldn't wait to go home.

RETURNING TO REVOLUTION

Migrants who returned from Lebanon to Sudan in 2020, as Bashir did, returned from one country gripped by crisis to a country entering one. Sudan's civilian revolution of 2018–19 was an intergenerational civil uprising, but its main actors—and martyrs—belonged to the generation of twenty-somethings that many of the returning migrants, like Bashir, were born into. Revolution was everywhere in Sudan, yet the migrant returnees I spoke to in Khartoum did not discuss it much. While Sudanese migrants in Beirut had organized solidarity marches in support of the revolution at home in 2019, those who returned spoke about it without a sense of belonging to it. The revolution entered their discourse in the mode of foreclosure, opportunities of a better life that had not materialized. They had returned to a place where things seemed to not have changed or to have even worsened, as it did further in the year after they returned.

As things deteriorated in 2020, migrants were not the only ones who experienced the revolution as an event that did not transform the structure of living in Sudan. The former Islamic regime, which had taken power when Bashir came of age in the 1990s, had largely dismantled the social welfare contract (de Waal 2013; Kaldor and de Waal 2020; Medani 2021; Salomon 2016). The past regime never fixed the roads or upgraded the electricity supply, and shortages of fuel, gas, food, and medicine worsened during the transition period. In opposition to the transition in 2019, military supporters took gas pipelines and bakeries hostage and blocked access to public infrastructure in an effort to (re)assert their control over the country's political and material assets (el Gizouli and Thomas 2021). As a result, Khartoumites can now eat KFC for lunch—if they can afford the inflated prices. When I visited in winter 2020, a large part of the urban population stood in bread lines.

New platforms for political organizing and entrepreneurial economies have blossomed in Khartoum since 2019, but many young Sudanese people feel marginalized from taking part in these. The revolution had propelled a new promise of “opening” Sudan to global capitalism, of attracting international investment. Sudan's national debt had spiraled in the 1980s, when structural adjustment loans had changed the relations of production and ownership in Sudanese society (Barnett and Abdelkarim 2016). Taxes did not materialize into public services and welfare, but were instead spent on paying the state's foreign debts, making Sudan one of the most indebted countries in the world (Brown 1992). In 2020, the United States briefly lifted the sanctions with which it had been disciplining Sudan for thirty years, in return for certain political compromises, such as formalizing peace with Israel. But the United States and other foreign donors mandated new austerity measures that have made basic living goods inaccessible for many (Bakhit 2020; el Gizouli and Thomas 2021). And when the Sudanese army overthrew the civilian-led transitional government on October 25, 2021, the United States quickly suspended its debt pledge of US \$700 million.

The revolution opened a horizon of material and political possibilities that have yet to materialize for most people (Bakhit 2020). Although the protests first erupted among frustrated workers in Atbara in December 2018, the revolution became centered in Khartoum and associated with young middle-class urban professionals (Tubiana 2022). Many of the urban poor in Khartoum are pastoralists or sedentary farmers indigenous to western Sudan, including Bashir's home of south Kordofan, who have been displaced or lured away from their land through a history of colonial and postcolonial state-induced economic warfare (Babiker 2009;

Franck, Casciarri, and El-Hassan 2021). The Sudanese anthropologist Mohamed Bakhit (2020, 919) has argued that the economic hardships hit the middle class the hardest, since “the population of peripheral areas and shantytowns has faced economic hardships for a long time, and most of them work in the informal economy with the ability to get cash money and negotiate their income on a daily basis.”

The past regime had expanded young people’s access to higher education by launching new universities in the provinces and suburbs of Khartoum, but the creation of jobs remained slow (Mann 2014). The increased access to higher education in Sudan today has resulted mainly in a growing class of educated unemployed, many of who migrate into low-paid jobs across the Middle East. Present-day Sudanese migrant workers are often much better educated than the generations who migrated before them, including their fathers and uncles, as I describe below. In the revolution, the political production of social inequality backfired. When the military took power in October 2021, unemployed college graduates took to the streets again, calling for the transitional civilian government to represent their demands.

GENDERED ROUTES

Sudanese migrants who I spoke to in Beirut often described migration as a male endeavor, insisting that border-crossing was “not safe for women.” The twin association of men’s mobility as a masculine privilege—a ticket to ride—and a simultaneous obligation toward home, is a recurring phenomenon in migrant-sending societies across Africa (Bolt 2015; Ferguson 1999; Mains 2017; Menin 2016; Palillo 2022; Vigh 2017). In Sudan, the male-gendering of migration is mandated by law, which since 1994 has forbidden women from traveling without the company of a male guardian (Tønnessen 2010). But women in Sudan do migrate, and they are just as much displaced by ecological and economic warfare. Their different trajectories reveal how mobility is gendered such that while men and women both migrate, they become channeled into different labor (Abusharaf 2009; Grabska and Fanjoy 2015; Leontsini and Lyberaki 2015). Bashir’s sister offers a case in point.

In between his itinerant travels, Bashir stayed with his older sister Amani. She lives in Khartoum with her three daughters in a squatter house and sells tea on the street corner in Souq al-Arabi, a large open-air market in the city. At any time of day, on any day of the week, Souq al-Arabi in Khartoum is alive with commerce. At this busy square in the old colonial center of the city, people of different social classes meet in between work to shop, drink sugary coffee boiled with ginger root, and eat the hot lentil stews prepared by *sitt el chai* (tea ladies). Amani sells her tea

to office workers, students, and people in transit who all stop for a break and a chat on the roadside. As a “tea lady,” Amani forms part of a labor group of internal migrant women displaced from western and southern Sudan because of structural and economic warfare (Abusharaf 2009). In Khartoum, women displaced through these routes are often hypersexualized and discriminated against, and their labor options are limited to forms of “street work” that are considered indecent, even as women they sustain and feed the city’s working masses, and as such are vital to the urban infrastructure and social economy. The gendered and racial discrimination against urban “squatters” has carried over from British colonial anxieties and their disciplining of the urban unemployed (Sikainga 1996); the disciplining of urban labor targeted working-class and migrant women in particular (Boddy 2007; Hale 2001). In colonial Khartoum, “it was not the city that posed an inherent danger, but rather unregulated (and unidentified) women’s bodies that threatened existing social order” (Brown 2017, 143). Women’s bodies have also been a target of state policing in postcolonial Sudan, in particular under Bashir’s regime which disciplined for their labor and movement, while idealizing them for their propriety and reproduction (Fadlalla 2011; Hale 2001). “Under Bashir, tea ladies were relentlessly fined, arrested, blackmailed, and sexually assaulted by public-order police.” (Provan and Rowsome 2020, 70). The presence of women working on the street in Khartoum, even as tea-sellers, is still subject to police harassment and public judgment, but their labor also connects the city in vital ways.

“You migrate because you want to improve your life,” Bashir said when I visited him at his sister’s for breakfast one morning. He wasn’t fleeing from his responsibilities, he said, he was going for his family’s sake. Amani, who had joined our conversation, disagreed with this.

“Men migrate primarily for their own needs, not because their family tells them to. If they can’t make money abroad, better to stay here and care for their families,” she asserted. For her, men’s migration seemed like an “escape” from their obligations rather than a fulfillment of that role. Bashir protested that he had migrated for his family. In the corner of Amani’s one-bedroom sat the flat-screen TV he had brought home with him as a gift from Lebanon, as if to illustrate his point. Yet the TV remained wrapped in plastic, and Bashir had borrowed money from his sister to cover the bus fare back to his village.

Bashir was spared the sexual discrimination that his sister faced on the journey for labor, but he encountered other pressures and temptations as a single male traveler (see also Palillo 2022). After returning from Lebanon in 2020, Bashir first went to Egypt and worked at a construction site for a few months. He injured his

arm one day in an accident on the site, and was hospitalized for a month. This used up the few earnings he had made, and he returned to his village again. Later that year, Bashir began working for a petty trader, for whom he sold agrarian produce across the border to South Sudan. On one such trip, he was approached by a trader across the border who offered him two Kalashnikovs "at a good price." Bashir had never held a gun in his life before he smuggled weapons back to Sudan, where he sold them to a local militia fighter in Kadugli, whom he associated with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). While looking for a buyer, he had stored the weapons under his bed in his mother's village. He called me one day, showcasing the machine guns as if they were toys.

Bashir's family belongs to the Baggara-Messiriya tribal group. They are pastoralists whose cattle grazed in south Kordofan, where they later settled more permanently as subsistence farmers, or "agro-pastoralists" (Casciarri and Ahmed 2009). They have been in a long and politically exploited land dispute with the Nuba tribe, who are indigenous to south Kordofan. Although the SPLM-N technically organized for the Nuba, and in opposition to the interests of the Baggara and other pastoral groups claiming rights to the area (Ahmed 2013), Bashir considered them to represent him and "his people" too. His sense of alliance underscores the shared livelihood patterns between these groups, as well as their common grievances in relation to the Islamic regime in Khartoum and the regional conflict, to which both pastoral and sedentary groups have lost land, limbs, and livelihood (Assal 2009).

Yet the legacy of British colonial land policy in Sudan has racialized terms of land tenure and tribal identification, and antagonized intertribal relations of trade and co-dependence in south Kordofan, as elsewhere in Sudan (see Franck, Casciarri, and El-Hassan 2021; Elamin 2018; Ille 2011; Mamdani 2020). The British colonial administration reformed customary land law by interpreting land rights differently according to tribal designation and area, in a strategy to cultivate cheap crops on mechanized farming in eastern Sudan, while maintaining rain-fed farming in the west (Babiker 2009). For example, they assigned the Baggara tribe land tenure in an effort to buy their loyalty and, later, their labor as a militia, "even though the Baggara wanted only passage rights for their animals rather than land rights" (Komey 2008, 1001). Meanwhile, the British colonial administration designated the Nuba Mountains as their tribal homeland (*dar*) "without Nuba consent" (Komey 2008, 1000). The state's claim to usufruct rights over land categorized as "uncultivated" included the area where the Nuba lived. The British then introduced mechanized farming and cotton production in the area, which had, as Guma

Kunda Komey (2008, 1002) observes, “a disastrous effect on the Nuba” who “were squeezed and had to choose between two options: either leave the area to work for the government as soldiers or become workers in a mechanized farming scheme.” The political privileging of usufruct rights over statutory rights has haunted Sudanese land politics till today.⁶

The former Islamic regime exploited and militarized intertribal land disputes in western Sudan for political purchase, including by distributing weapons among the tribes (Ahmed 2013; Marchal and Ahmed 2010; el Gizouli and Thomas 2021; Komey 2008). In Sudan today, militarized labor has become an “intimate part of rural life” through the interregional trade of agrarian produce, livestock, human labor, as well as weapons and other clandestine goods (el Gizouli and Thomas 2021), all of which cross roadblocks and checkpoints that extract considerable value on their way south and west out of Sudan (Schouten 2022). Bashir’s journey across the border to South Sudan became militarized through this chain; he carried grains across the border and returned carrying arms. But Bashir knew what he was doing, he assured me, when he called one day in the winter of 2020 and displayed the Kalashnikovs he had purchased and stored under his mother’s bed. He was taking a chance to make things better for her, and for himself.

In agrarian migrant-sending communities such as south Kordofan, people and their distributive labor do not return so much as circulate.⁷ Bashir’s story makes visible the relational and reproductive structure of this migration. As the only male bachelor in a family, Bashir has inherited an obligation to provide. His family invested in him going, and it is to the family that he returned when his funds dried up. With the help of the family’s resources, and his sister’s care, he (re)gained his capacity for work and travel. This reproductive labor illustrates how migration takes a “life-time” (Tadiar 2022), but also (re)produces life (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2012). Taking charge of the family’s economy, as would have been expected of them at their age, might be a way for migrants to (re)assert a gendered authority that has been lost. But returning with ambition poses challenges to the family.

Abdelrahman from the Khartoum-based non-profit Cooperative for Peace and Security (CfPS), which facilitates micro-credit and vocational training for women farmers in western Kordofan, told me that the return of male migrants often generates a crisis in gender roles of provision and authority. “The men return expecting everything to be as it was, as if nothing has changed,” he said. The returning sons and husbands have not been actively involved in maintaining and

planning the household and farming economy, and yet "they take charge of the household funds, and use up their wives' funds to remarry," he continued.

BASHIR'S BARGAIN

When we met again in Khartoum in the summer of 2021, Bashir had a lot to tell me. It had taken him two days to travel from his village in south Kordofan to see me. I had wired him money through a friend in Kadugli to cover the bus ticket. He was only in Khartoum for one day before going back to work on the farm. Every day away from the farm was a day wasted, and he could not afford to be away any longer. Bashir then confessed the extent of his investment in the harvest. He had sold his mother's crops in advance to a trader to yield a bigger harvest for the coming season.

Bashir's mother had inherited about fifty acres (*fidaan*) of land from her husband, who had passed away when Bashir was still in Lebanon, but she only cultivated a small part of her land. Since her other children were already married or working far from their village, she took on the farming labor by herself, growing groundnuts (*fuul Sudani*). She farms by hand, without a tractor, as do most subsistence farmers in Kordofan. "We are poor [*maskiin*]," Bashir said.

But this year, Bashir had come up with a plan to change their fate. With the cash he received from selling the harvest in advance to a local trader, he purchased sesame and sorghum, the two other main crops grown in his region. He expanded the harvest to five rows of sorghum, four rows of sesame, and three rows of groundnuts. I drew a chart while he listed off the prices in rapid speech. Based on the market rate, he calculated that he would make double of what he had sold the crops for. "But this is *mughamara*; I'm gambling," Bashir emphasized, pointing to the chart I had drawn of his bet.

By mortgaging his crops as collateral to the trader, Bashir becomes indebted if the harvest does not yield the expected result. Bashir thus enters a relationship of informal crop mortgaging known as *shayl*, which has a long history in Sudan, where it emerged as a way to avoid direct interest loans, prohibited in Islamic law (Abdelkarim 1992; Bernal 1991). Some consider *shayl* exploitative, because the farmer sells below market price to the merchant, who stores the crops until he can sell at the highest bidding market price (Kevane 1993). If the harvest does not turn out well, the farmer owes the merchant more than he can deliver and will have to pay back through future harvests. Bashir understood the risks of his bargain. He knew people from his village who had ended up in prison after a series of bad harvests because they could not pay off their debts. To Bashir, these loans presented

a danger. “People live like thieves, spending money they don’t have,” he told me. In recent years, micro-credit has become the main loan practice, especially among women farmers who are considered more trustworthy and “always pay back on time,” as the director of the non-profit CfPS told me in Khartoum. But whereas micro-credit requires monetary payment, *shayl* is paid in crops, and many subsistence farmers still prefer this form of loan.

“How did your mother agree to this plan?” I asked Bashir. “It’s for her sake,” he responded, “so that I stay with her and marry and don’t migrate again.” Bashir said that he would stay in Sudan if he could; the harvest determines where he goes.

In Sudan, where the wind is hot and dry, the harvest often does fail, despite speculations to the contrary. Through the “neoliberal urbanization” and expansion of Khartoum, pastoralists now produce “for the city” (Franck, Casciarri, and El-Hassan 2021). The Sudanese state has promoted this “pastoral entrepreneurialism” as a form of self-investment (Casciarri 2009). Yet the discourse of entrepreneurialism disguises a reality of dispossession and the privatization of debt (Mbembe 2001). Today, many cannot survive from their harvest and rent out their labor by migrating regionally and internationally to subsidize their livelihood. According to the director of the CfPS, many subsistence farmers today also sell their land, or mortgage their crops to expand their yield on the market.

While a clear division between the land-owning and landless classes in Sudan (Bernal 1991) never existed, the transformation of communal into elite private land ownership took place in some regions already before the British colonial demarcation of tribal land (Komey 2008). In late nineteenth-century Ottoman Egypt and Sudan, land registration had the double effect of privatizing debt and increasing pressure on individual household production. Pastoralists who cultivated on shared land experienced the emergence of private property law as a “penalty” and a burden to their livelihood, as it privatized a heretofore collective debt (Bernal 1991; Hutchinson 1996; Mitchell 2002, 67). Pastoralists in Sudan have long since realized the risk of commodifying their subsistence when increasing cash-crop production for export. Transregional labor migration has proven obligatory to subsistence farmers’ survival since the 1970s, necessitated by economic transformations that put pressure on pastoralists (Bakhit 1991; Bernal 1991; Salih 1990).

After leaving Khartoum, Bashir often called to update me on the harvest, and to complain about life in the village. In December 2021, he told me that the harvest had failed, and that he wanted to migrate again, “this time far away,” to Europe by boat. I warned him against it, but Bashir countered,

All my life, all I wanted is to work and live. Maybe I'll die on the way, but it's worth the risk: that's life's struggle. You never know where death will find you; I might die right here today. . . . Life in Sudan is not life for me. For some it's fine, but I want a future. You see, the Sudanese in Beirut work simple jobs and only think about money, but I think about how I can make a life and a future. My children, how will they live, how will they study? To make a life, you have to struggle.

Bashir migrates in order to live, but he risks his life as collateral for the journey. Like his mother's crops, sold in advance of being harvested, then stored away for future consumption, he is harvesting for future life. The present is not available to him as a time to consume. And yet, life is not only foreclosed or postponed in migration. Migrants in Beirut marry, reproduce, they party, and they gamble. Sudanese migrants in Beirut make kin, organize politically, and live in ways that cannot be quantified as self-investment, but that satisfy their desires for intimacy, friendship, and political identification. These activities of kin-making and leisure count as social reproduction, reproducing migrants not only for more work but also for life outside of, and beyond, labor.

The world that migrants build when they go "in search" does not disappear or go to waste when they leave; it stays, grows, and circulates via daily phone calls between Khartoum and Beirut, and the memories and lessons they bring back. It also reproduces itself through the histories migrants leave behind. In 1960s Beirut, Sudanese migrant workers established a political and communal life, for example, the Sudanese Cultural Club in 1967, which remains active today.⁸ Several Sudanese migrants also joined anticolonial groups that organized out of Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

GENERATIONAL ROUTES

"I was not a *muhajir*; I migrated in order to return," Osman, an elderly returnee who had labored as a butler in Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s, recounted when I interviewed him in Khartoum in 2020. Deploying a distinction between *muhajir* and *mughtarib*, which in this context translate best as "clandestine migrant" and "expatriate," Osman elaborated that the *muhajireen* are those who migrate to "flee their conditions," whereas he, as a *mughtarib*, migrated "with the intention to return." The distinction held true even if, as in his case, these "expatriates" stayed

abroad for decades, and even as Bashir and his friends also articulate an intention to return.

Sons of subsistence farmers in Kordofan today still migrate with the aim of returning with enough funds to invest in a future at home, expand their land, buy property, marry, and settle. Yet they cross borders under much more precarious circumstances than did their fathers and uncles. In my fieldwork with different generations of Sudanese migrant workers in Beirut, I have noticed a marked change in labor identification between the older migrants, who described to me in detail the service work they did, and younger migrants like Bashir, who prefer not to speak about their work at all. The emphasis today on mobility as a gamble—*mughamara*—articulates perhaps a generational response to a sense of increased labor precarity and foreclosed opportunities abroad.

The generational shift in migration also marks a geographical shift from the northern region, which benefited from the returns of labor migration in the 1970s and 1980s, to the western region of Kordofan, from where migrants mainly fled conflict and did not return with as much cash (Abdelkarim 1992; Bakhit 2020; Bernal 1991). In the 1970s and 1980s, men from northern and western rural Sudan worked during the oil boom in the Gulf, Iraq, and Libya, returning with enough money to change not only their household economies but also the national economy. The generation who labored abroad back then retired with sufficient savings to secure their retirement and land tenure. In addition to buying property for their families, many returnees became real estate speculators in Khartoum's urban expansion. Migrants' remittances fueled a new informal Islamic banking system in the 1980s, which offered loans and money transfers to small-scale farmers and seasonal agrarian workers (Osman 1999). This introduced finance capitalism into Sudanese rural life (Medani 2021; Young 2021). Today, Islamic banking has made mobile banking accessible across rural Sudan; several of my interlocutors send and receive money in Kordofan with a click on their phones.

The impact of the Gulf oil boom on the regional economy makes for a well-known story in Sudan (Medani 2021). What has been less documented is that Sudanese migration to Lebanon preceded this migration by a few decades. During British colonial rule, Sudanese men mainly migrated to Egypt for work. There, rumor had it, "you could make good money in Beirut," as elderly Sudanese migrants who labored in Egypt before coming to Beirut have recounted to me. From Alexandria's port, they continued by ferry to Lebanon. Beirut's economy was booming in the 1950s and 1960s, before the civil war broke out in 1975, and Sudanese migrants found work in the city as butlers, drivers, and cooks for elite families, with

whom they often stayed for decades. Being Arabic-speaking workers in an Arab country, however, did not grant them privilege in Beirut, where racialized notions of Blackness seemed to override both class and nationality as identifying markers (see also [Jureidini 2009](#)). Sudanese migrant workers, as well as Sudanese intellectuals who studied at the American University of Beirut in the 1960s, such as the late scholar Malek Badri, recounted to me the racial discrimination they faced on the streets and in the workplace, where derogatory slurs such as *ab'd* (Arabic for "slave") circulated.⁹

Arguably, the racialization of African service labor in Lebanon has only worsened since then with the expansion and regulation of migrant labor ([Kassamali 2021](#)). By the time Lebanon's civil war officially ended in 1990, labor migration had become an established enterprise, run by migrant agencies and governed by the Lebanese state, both of which facilitated *kafala* sponsorship visas to foreign workers. This situation resulted partly from a growing demand from emigrating Lebanese families who had returned during and after the war and who now employed a new group of migrant labor from South Asia to help them with their daily chores. As labor migration became more governed under the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon in the 1990s, migrants began to find alternative routes, escaping the Lebanese and Syrian border police by crossing the border via Syria with the help of smugglers. Khartoum is today a hub for different migrant groups and refugees displaced from South Sudan, Darfur, and Kordofan, as well as from Ethiopia and Eritrea ([Abusharaf 2009](#); [Grabska 2021](#)). Whether coming from Khartoum or passing through, many try the route to Lebanon ([Fernandez 2013](#); [Mengiste 2022](#)).

THE ECONOMY OF RETURN

In Khartoum, migration is so common that migrant broker agencies have an entire area of the city named after them—*mughtaribiin*—the same term that Osman used to identify himself as someone who migrated "with intention." The increased risk of migration is no secret in this trade. On the contrary, migrant brokers often provide risk analysis as part of their sales strategy.

"The Sudanese love *mughamara*; they go the illegal way, even though they can buy tourist visas to Libya, the Gulf, or Lebanon, and it would be cheaper," Awadalla, a former migrant worker turned migrant broker in Khartoum, told me, using the same term, *mughamara*, that Bashir and his friends did. Awadalla is a former migrant worker in Lebanon who, as a broker in Khartoum, has made a business out of his own and others' mobility. But, he insisted, "I am not a "human trafficker" (*muharib*); I help people." He runs a migrant agency network be-

tween Beirut and Khartoum. For a fee of around US \$1,000-1,500, including all travel costs, he offers both formal work visas to the Gulf and clandestine migration routes to Libya and Lebanon. Through the same connections and trade routes, he buys produce from farmers in Kordofan to export to the Gulf.¹⁰ His labor connects the transregional trade in human and non-human production from Sudan to cities in the Middle East.

Awadalla's labor illustrates how migrants and the brokers of migration overlap in the economy of mobility. All the migrant brokers I met in Khartoum were themselves migrant returnees, who on return had found the business of migration their only viable avenue for making a living. Being former migrants themselves makes them trusted salesmen; they know the migrants' needs because they have been in their shoes (see also [Alpes 2017](#); [Wright 2021](#)). The migrant broker agencies in Khartoum operate as family businesses that often employ younger relatives, many of whom later migrate. The agencies also reintegrate migrant returnees by employing them. For Awadalla, as for other returnees, migration is a labor that never ends. It continues on return, not only because the migrant worker who performs reproductive labor for their employer is never off but also because the economy of migration circulates through returnees. The work is easy to get but risky, Awadalla told me, and demands moving about a lot.

Because of the constant demands on his labor, Awadalla preferred to meet me en route. "My car is my office," he explained, laughing. His itinerant office allowed me to follow his workday, which stretched into the night as we drove through Khartoum, maneuvering his black station wagon through the capital's bumpy roads, recently flooded from the August rains. One night, Awadalla and I were going to go to a *nargileh* café that he owns on the notorious airport road, a coffeehouse that doubles as a migrant travel agency where deals are sealed and money exchanged. Yet our drive through the city ended up taking most of the evening, so we never made it to the café. We made a detour to Bahri, one of Khartoum's boroughs, where Awadalla had to "deliver something" to a friend at a roadside. While driving, Awadalla poured us imported American whiskey that he had acquired from a friend at the Ethiopian embassy. Drinking imported alcohol signifies an expat class position in Sudan, where alcohol is banned, and most of those who drink prefer *araki*, a locally brewed alcohol.

Awadalla inherited his trade from his father, who imported shirts from the Gulf to sell in Sudan. Awadalla first traveled to Syria for business for the same purpose, and from there he went to Lebanon. "You know, I never worked for anyone in Lebanon, I was always doing business there," Awadalla asserted. Drawing a

distinction between working for others and doing business for himself, Awadalla fashioned himself here in the idiom of the entrepreneurial, self-owning subject (Ziai 2022), or the investor-subject (Martin 2007). Yet his independence is a solitude produced by his position in a transregional economy, where he is separated from his family and has no "life-time" outside his labor-time (Tadiar 2022). His work stretches into all spheres of life; he is never off. His car is both his office and his living room. He exemplifies in this way the fungible subject who is both at risk and a risk taker. "In migration, there is no mother; you're on your own," Awadalla told me. "You don't feel time, you are always rushing, working," he elaborated. As a migrant worker in Lebanon, he was detained several times. As a broker, Awadalla also feels the same constraints of the international hierarchy of cross-border travel as his migrant clients. He is separated from his Ethiopian wife who lives in the United States with their daughter, whom he has never met because, as a Sudanese citizen under U.S. sanctions, he can't travel there.

Brokers like Awadalla speculate on the value of mobility by selling migration. But, as brokers of labor, they also provide the infrastructure to realize migrants' desires, desires they are themselves shaped and captured by, as former and "retired" migrants, who have few alternative paths for employment. Awadalla brags that he "call(s) no one 'boss'" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987, 192), yet his work relies on social capital, while it also makes a profit from others. For example, his transactions are mediated through social "chatter"—at the café, in his car—but the "relational value" generated from this labor is not "outside" market relations (cf. Elyachar 2010). His labor thus complicates the distinction implied between alienated labor as working for others and non-alienated labor as working for oneself (see, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Hutchinson 1996).

Bashir and Awadalla represent two sides of the same coin of the migration economy. Awadalla was migrating "for business" while Bashir was working for someone else, yet they both inherited the obligation and the incentive to carry on their families' livelihood by traveling for work. Their different trajectories also reveal how this economy operates on multiple scales in which each person has more than one position—farmer, migrant, broker. Bashir mortgages his crops and buys his ticket out of Sudan, possibly from the same broker, since the two economies overlap in the same hands. This person could be Awadalla, a broker of multiple mobilities and cross-border transactions. Awadalla is "working for himself," but he has no social life outside of his labor-time. Having been detained multiple times for this work, he may never get to visit his wife and daughter in the United States. Bashir was migrating "for his mother's sake," he said, but he also expressed a desire

to get away from her village, the farm, and the life that encircled them. The distinction between working for themselves and working for others collapses in both cases. Like most of us, they are driven by a desire to be more than one thing, for more than one person, in more than one place, all at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Labor remains the parameter by which people validate themselves, and labor dependency continues even in the absence of a wage. If, as [Aimee Bahng \(2017, 3\)](#) has argued, “our stories of the future chart the ways we invest—financially, politically, ideologically, and intellectually—in the present,” what happens to the present, the time of living, when the future becomes speculative? How do people imagine and materially plan for uncertain futures? I have sketched some of the consequences for families, and for labor, when risk becomes gendered and necessitated for young male household members. In a socioeconomic context in which people may feel devalued by the work they perform, and at the same time feel redundant without it, the search for labor can lend them a sense of purpose. I have shown how this articulates in the economy of cross-border migration linking subsistence farmers in East Africa to service economies in the Middle East. There, the search for work through mobility has become a point of value extraction by brokers and border guards and, at the same time, a gendered self-validation for migrants, who call it a gamble, *mughamara*, that demands courage.

The circumstances through which *mughamara* becomes a mode of practice and an existence of living through risk exceed its specific articulation. In Africa, and globally, people are forced to pay for future labor opportunities to stay alive, or to keep on going. This constitutes a visible consequence of the neoliberalization of work. Scholars have examined how the economic logic of risk transforms livelihoods and appropriates people’s capacities and resilience, rendering social reproduction itself a zone of value extraction and exploitation ([Bize 2018](#); [Federici 2012](#); [Simone 2020](#); [Tadiar 2022](#)). Navigating an economy in which the future is branded as a commodity demands a fungible political subject who, like an investor, can market their labor-power potential, jump from one opportunity to the next while handling the potential fall, and not be weighed down by particular moral or ideological agendas. Yet no such subject exists fully unburdened by social and ethical demands. As migrants like Bashir and Awadalla experience, and as anthropologists have shown before, the future is not a commodity but a collective economy that changes, as do people’s circumstances and desires. The itinerant lives I describe are

not motivated by individual needs only. Futures go in one direction, and then they go in another, but they do not move on their own.

ABSTRACT

This article foregrounds the returns of migration by following young migrant workers to Lebanon and back to subsistence farming communities in western Sudan during a time of revolution and economic crisis in both countries. Their labor and the returns of it connect these two seemingly distinct zones of labor and production in a transregional economy, linking East Africa to the Middle East. In this cross-border economy, the search for work through mobility has become a point of value extraction by brokers and border guards, and at the same time a practice of gendered self-validation for male migrants. In Sudan, migrants and brokers both refer to this practice as a gamble, mughamara. Proposing mughamara as an ethnographic concept of mobility, I show how young migrants use this term to validate themselves through migration. Comparing their experiences to Sudanese migrants who worked in Lebanon decades before them, I show how the youth's presentation of mobility as a necessary gamble with life reveals an underlying generational experience of crisis and the foreclosure of class mobility. In a political and socioeconomic context where migrant workers often feel devalued in and by labor, mobility is presented as their only way forward—as well as their ticket home. [migration; labor; masculinity; risk; debt; Sudan; Lebanon]

NOTES

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1. The only mention I have found of this term in research on migration is by Laura Menin, who translates the term as "adventure," but also recognizes its association with risk and masculinity. Menin (2016, 272) writes: "The trope of migration as a risky and an exciting adventure (*mughamara*), by which Abdelkarim at times motivated his departure, is one important dimension of Moroccan youths' narratives about the 'outside world' (*l-brra, l-kharij*) in the Tadla. Despite the uncertainties surrounding migration, the idea of 'adventure' implies that the risk is worth taking."

2. I follow scholars who define value as a historically determined variable that mediates between relations of production and changes according to those relations. See [Postone \(1993, 127\)](#); [Harvey \(2018, 127\)](#). Perceived in this way, value combines the sociological and economic definitions deduced by [David Graeber \(2001\)](#).
3. During the 2020 COVID pandemic lockdown, when I could not travel to Sudan, my interlocutors called me often, sometimes daily, from their villages and sent me photos of them farming. In some ways, the distance forced on us by the pandemic lockdown enabled a closer relationship. Through our phone calls, my interlocutors were able to leave their everyday and reflect on their situation in a way they might not have been had I been there as a guest in their house, in which case the dynamic would have differed markedly.
4. As [Neferti Tadiar \(2012, 794\)](#) observes, “today many low-wage migrant workers enter the workplace having to pay backward with work for life-times already spent . . . *their time has been mortgaged*. They ‘pay with work for life advanced to them (life they *owe* rather than *own*).”
5. [Jane Guyer \(2007\)](#) has argued that capitalism teaches “fantasy futurism,” while the near future is out of reach, and the present is evacuated.
6. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 did not sufficiently solve the land rights dispute, but rather exacerbated it. Some observers see the failure to address the issue of statutory land rights as a missed opportunity, without which the agreement ultimately failed to end the war between militias in southern Sudan and the Sudanese government, preceding the secession of South Sudan a decade later ([Babiker 2009](#); [Komey 2008](#)).
7. I am grateful to the reviewer for pointing this out.
8. See [Reumert 2020](#).
9. Interview with Malek Badri, Khartoum, August 2018.
10. On the history of import and export between the Gulf and Sudan, see also [Bertoncin, Pase, Turrini 2022](#).

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