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Bruijn, M.E. de; Hahn H., Klute G.

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Mobility and Society in the Sahel: An Exploration of Mobile Margins and Global Governance

*Mirjam de Bruijn
(Leiden)*

*Global migrants reach 191 million
Nearly 200 million people now live outside their
country of origin - up by about a quarter since 1990,
a United Nations report on migration says.
(BBC News, 7 June 2006)*

Introduction

This heading reveals an important development in the discourse on social transformations in the 21st century: the increasing mobility of people, and the rising spatiality of people's livelihoods. Recent increase in migrants longing to make the hazardous trip from West Africa to the Canary Islands, in old boats despite the dangers of such an endeavour, and the many deaths that have been reported adds to this impression of increasing mobility. It also shows another dimension of this migration: the desperate longing for a different life away from poverty. Is this a new phase in the mobility and migration of the African poor? Reacting to the cited UN report, Kofi Annan commented that the world should embrace migrants as an added value to their economies instead of rejecting them and closing the borders of the world's rich economies. Are we facing a new phenomenon that can be labelled cultures of migration? Should this concept, become part and parcel of the formulation of international policies?

In this chapter I question the relationship between mobility, resources and society, confronting with national and international policies. These 'new' mobilities should be viewed in an analysis of mobility as an old strategy that has informed cultures and societies in their directions of change. Social transformations have always been largely

informed by mobility. Different forms of mobility (plural mobility) have coloured the history of African societies and these new forms or strategies are an addition to these dynamics in a globalizing world, where increasing flows of people can be seen (Nyamnjoh 2005). Mobility, 'strings of people' and spatiality have been pushing people into new relations, redefining their feelings of belonging and their identities. This has created new social forms and cultural, social and economic pluralities, informed by the interpretation of the societies migrants have left behind, by those societies where they arrived, and, finally, by those "on the road". In so called peripheral regions, migration and mobility decisions have become part and parcel of social and economic life and are certainly also related to the economic circumstances in which people live. In this chapter, these dynamics in peripheral rural areas of the Sahel that are often explained in relation to the availability of ecological and economic resources, is put in a broader perspective. In the mobile spaces in which people from these areas work and live, resources become part of a discourse about contested claims and are an expression of new social and cultural realities. Mobilities and travelling cultures are of old Sahelian histories and of the new Sahelian world. Policy and governance during the 20th century has had difficulty including the concept of plural mobilities. Successive governments have had a tendency to think in fixed entities and are not always able to absorb flexible patterns, especially as these mobile pluralities are often enrolled alongside the state. There is a serious problem to include the new transformations in the 21st century in our current models of governance and policy.

This chapter is based on the long periods of fieldwork I have done in West Africa and my experiences there. The chapter starts with an exploration of the concept of mobility and the social transformations it entails; and in the second section social and cultural forms of mobility in the Sahel are presented with concrete examples from my own research experiences among the Fulbe nomads and their drought migration, and the refugees in eastern Chad. The first example shows the extent of culturally embedded mobility and discusses how although

climate variability plays an important role it should be explained in terms of spatiality of this culture: the community can be defined as a mobile margin. The second example shows how international involvement in flows of people creates totally new relationships between people and their environment, and towards each other. It also shows that relationships with neighbours are redefined and new social and cultural pluralities take form with political consequences that are often unforeseen. In the last part, I analyse some recent new policies in the Sahel and consider how they relate to previous policies in their consideration of mobility and resources. In the discussion, the relationship between resources and the environment, plural mobilities, cultures of mobility and governance in the Sahel is summarized.

Mobility and Resources: Understanding Social Dynamics in the Sahel

The relationship between mobility and resources has inspired well-known analysts of processes in our modern world (i.e. Kaplan, Huntington, and Homer-Dixon) to forecast a very gloomy picture of the future of Africa and the world. They analyze mobility in terms of the displacement of people due to climate change, leading towards conflict and disruptions in society. They see a negative trend in these movements, and indeed we cannot deny that their picture may be appealing to policy makers and journalists. Such analyses, however, are based upon old models of migration studies: 'push and pull' factors that make poor people leave (see Rain 1999). In these models, too little attention is paid to the non-economic factors behind decisions to migrate. They are also built on the wave of recent studies referring to processes of globalization, depicting new forms of movement and ignoring their historicity. Mobility, however, is as old as the African continent. The movements of people, and using space to carve out a livelihood, is relevant to all histories. Recently Howard (2005) introduced the spatial factor into historical studies of Africa, showing that mobility has indeed been an important factor in the creation of societies (cf. Iliffe 1987). A recent study on the effects of climate variability to people's livelihoods

has shown that many people have decided to move out of the Sahelian regions because of ecological problems, especially erratic rainfall. It also showed that people's decisions are made on the basis of their personal history, on their interpretation of the circumstances of the moment (De Bruijn *et al.* 2005). The patterns of mobility fit the cultures in which these people live. We should, however, pose the how, why, whether and when of movement and people's related to agency.

Against the negative picture, I propose considering mobility and the plurality of its forms as being essential in the shaping of Africa. Mobility has always shaped African societies. These mobilities encompass all types of movement including travel, explorations, migration, tourism, refugeeism, pastoralism, nomadism, pilgrimage and trade. In these forms, mobility is essential to many people and is even a means of survival for some. It is culturally and socially embedded in society and in each individual's actions. Being mobile, or living in a culture where many people are mobile, is a fact of life and with it goes an enormous cultural, social and economic flexibility (De Bruijn *et al.* 2001).

Spatial dimensions in understanding Sahelian dynamics seem obvious, and we may learn from cultural studies that introduced transnational and diaphora studies. Such studies have made us realize that cultural continuity is embedded in the spatiality of cultures. They are not bound to places but are bound to feelings of belonging. Howard (2005) also translated these insights for the history of Africa. He states that the spatial factor has often been neglected: 'spatial analysis also sheds light on the ways people have constructed mental maps, used discourse to organize territories, altered their locations and physical surroundings in response to crises, and interpreted social landscapes' (ibid: 4). Contributions to his book show how social histories can indeed be related to the movement of people and to the use of space. Howard's insights make it clear that a perspective that departs from mobility should not be ahistorical, but that the present we observe certainly has historical roots.

Howards study also related to the interpretation of the notion of space and time, that may indeed exist outside the social actors, but that certainly are also socially and culturally constructed. This is an important notion when we think about mobility as an inherent feature of societies. Space and time are both social and cultural categories constituted through the relationships between things, persons and events. This concept therefore puts a particular accent on the creativity and modeling of time and space by social actors. In studies analysing social space in relation to mobility, that is geographical space, accent should be placed upon these cultural and social interpretations of the people living in these circumstances. Mobile margins are always coloured and given meaning by the people creating them.

The marginality of the areas discussed in this chapter is a social and cultural construction and thus a relative concept. These areas are indeed considered marginal if we look at the extreme ecological conditions, the economies, their remoteness and the non-intervention of the state (cf. Das & Poole 2004). The question is how people in these areas perceive themselves and this 'marginality'. To consider these areas as being mobile and not disconnected from other regions, but on the contrary deeply connected exactly because they are so marginal in economic terms, turns their marginality upside down and may also give us a fresh look at the relationship between people and resources in these areas.

They are remote rural areas where life is harsh and people have difficulty in surviving materially. Studies of the economies and livelihoods of these areas have largely focused on space in absolute terms, studying the use of and rights to resources and seeing migration as an economic necessity for survival, but less so as part of a cultural repertoire. In the trend I sketched at the start of this paragraph, these studies have focused increasingly on conflict and 'problems' that are an expression of increasing antagonisms and anxieties in these regions and beyond. I argue that a more open view of mobility will throw different light on these regions.

A study from the margins – those areas that are outside the state – provides insight into agencies and the dynamics of a society (Das & Poole 2004). Roitman (2004) studied the border areas between Chad and Cameroon and revealed that, through mobile networks, people are able to create their own economies, but that these are based on social and economic dynamics of the past. She shows that the so-called margins are not marginal in economic terms and that the margins are not bounded to place but could better be described as ‘strings’. These strings are often beyond the reach of national and international policies; development policies and international interventions are all unable to grasp the situation.

To take mobility as an important factor in people’s livelihoods is important if one considers recent developments in West Africa. Movement of people has taken on new forms over the past few decades, and as a result of globalization, flows of people have intensified and increased. These are often movements beyond the vision of the state and are not found in statistics. New ‘strings of people’, creating new social space where an economy, culture and sociality are negotiated outside the state, are pictured as illegal economic circuits. Such flexible social spaces are, however, at the centre of Sahelian economies where resources are no longer defined as being fixed in place but are seen as part of a string of relations. Mobilities are also increasingly limited. For instance, as examples from areas with enormous violence show, old forms of spatiality are often no longer possible and new ones cannot be developed. This is disrupting people’s livelihoods and bringing a new interpretation to the use of resources, leading in many cases to clashes surrounding resources.¹

¹ A recent study of the impact of violence on the economies of Darfur is an example of a marginal area that is dependent on strings of people for its livelihood. The mobile margins are being seen in the impact of violence on the economies in Darfur. These are conclusions from a livelihood survey that was carried out in 2004 (Young *et al.* 2006): ‘the lack of mobility arising from insecurity is the key factor in the loss of livelihoods and in people’s extreme vulnerability’ (...) ‘Until the conflict in 2003, labour migration to other parts of Darfur, to central and eastern Sudan, and to Libya, Egypt and other Arab states were a major source of remittances and income, particularly for groups in north and west Darfur. Remittances have now all but dried up because of the disruption

As resources have no significance outside people's perceptions of them, and their interpretation of their possible use (cf. Ingold 1986), the fact that mobility and spatiality are so important influences the relationship between society and resources. This is an especially intriguing relationship when we look into weak economies and poor people's livelihoods, their mobilities and use of resources. That is why our studies should turn to these social margins and migrant spaces and the demographic, social and cultural contents of those spaces and their economic and political linkages with the source regions, the host society and citizens and institutions (Nyamnjoh 2006:77).

"Mobility provides a window onto how moving people perceive the places where they live, and connects economic activities with behavioural, architectural and geographical settings where they occur.[...]It focuses on the particular circumstances of the movers and the communities affected by mobility, and it considers human livelihoods and reproduction..." (Rain 1999: 4)

Mobility in the Sahel

The history of the Sahel may be written around the concept of resource scarcity, or that the natural environment did not suffice to feed the people and insecurities ruled life (cf. van Dijk 1999). This marginality in economic terms did make people move from one area to the other. In pre-colonial times movement was also related to seasons and the availability of resources for animals or land for people to farm. However, the availability of resources was only one of the reasons for people to settle in a certain area. Economic marginality in terms of resources is not the only link between mobility and the Sahelian economies. The Sahelian history of the 19th century is also a history of big empires that were very central. The dynamics of these empires

and relocation of entire villages, which have made communications extremely difficult, if not impossible, and because of the insecurity that continues to hamper mobility. The closure of the national border with Libya has also been a contributing factor. Few, if any, labour migrants in Libya have had contact with their relatives in Darfur since they were displaced. People have been cut off from one another'.

however cannot be understood if we do not take mobility into account: their existence is linked to the trans-Saharan trade networks and the centrality of the slave trade. Some areas were more specifically related to the slave trade as they were a slave reservoir themselves. In this period refugee streams were considered normal and some areas became populated while others were emptied of inhabitants. At present we may discern also different positions in terms of marginality: Sahel dynamics are increasingly related to informal and illegal forms of politics and economics that entail the introduction of new mobilities, such as with smuggling. Other areas in the Sahel are to be understood in their classical marginal position vis-à-vis the (formal) political and economic entities of which they are part. These areas have developed new mobilities in relation to lack of economic resources (cf. De Bruijn & van Dijk 2003, 2005). Hence, different positions in relation to marginality all dictated political and economic dynamics that were guided by mobility and the use of different social spaces. These mobilities have created communities defined by strings of people who are increasingly outside the nation state as defined in the second half of the 20th century, that is, mobile margins.

Most authors on migration and mobility in the Sahel place the increase in mobility in colonial times. Pacification, the introduction of new economies (plantations) and the construction of roads made the movement of people to these new economic poles necessary. Forced recruitment and free migration were both part of this new development. On the other hand, the colonial state tried to control its people through the introduction of taxes and by creating situations in which people were retraceable. The introduction of borders also limited the mobility of people, a tendency that continues today at state level.

Stories of people gathered in Central Mali and Central Chad in the colonial period are stories of resistance. One way to resist the efforts at control was to become mobile. Many left Central Chad and sought refuge in Sudan. In Mali, pastoralists were never limited in their movements but sought a better and freer life beyond the control of the

state. After independence these movements of people did not change. From his observations in Niger, Rain (1999: 4) concluded:

“Throughout Africa, it is natural to move. Cin Rani and other movements that are partially determined by the climate are common here, for the environment in many places does not permit sedentary living. (...) To the migrants I met and talked with, moving is as commonplace as eating; those who move are no more remarkable than those who eat.”

Today's forms of mobility among Sahelian people are diverse: pastoral nomadism, Islamic scholars and their itinerant schools, drought migrants, labour migrants, internally displaced people, wanderers and travellers, refugees, and transnational migrants. Depending on the circles in which discussions are held, labels are created to define movement. These labels contain implicit ideas about the future of the region.

Quantitative data on mobility and migration flows are always partial, however they place people in categories that may not fit their actions because statistics are gathered only where the state has control. However the mobile margins I refer to in this paper are not controllable. Nevertheless the national statistics or statistics of international organizations give an indication of mobility flows: they refer to international migration, refugees and urban growth, all of which are clearly linked to the interests of the (international) state. These figures do not capture the internal displacement of people as a consequence of drought or war, nor do they capture rural-rural migration. It is therefore difficult to estimate the number of people who are on the move. As Van Dijk *et al.* (2001: 23) concluded:

“The emphasis in official statistics on national boundaries as the basis for migration figures turns the phenomenon into an administrative problem. Such statistics force an examination of population mobility from the perspective of the state. They do not take into account that many national boundaries have little relevance for the population and are used as opportunities for smuggling or other illicit activities.”

Nevertheless these figures indicate change. Refugees are increasingly an important category of mobile people and refugee flows will change the African landscape profoundly. Not all refugees will return home and they introduce a new form of spatiality in the idiom of the inhabitants of an area. I will try to show this later when discussing the case of refugees from Darfur in eastern Chad.

It is also important to guess the migration and mobilities figures that are not in the statistics. Andersson (2006, *fc.*) for instance sketches spatial economies in Malawi where he says the livelihoods of people concentrate on the spaces outside their so-called living area. The same may be true for the nomadic people in Central Mali who are presented in the first case study in this paper. Other examples are internally displaced people in war-torn societies and those who have found themselves in such a situation due to ecological or economic crises. These moves out of loss of perspective or out of deprivation may be part of the rural-urban flows, however many are rural-rural.

In the following section, I sketch the dynamics these mobilities reveal in their relationship with resources in two specific case-study areas in West Africa.

Fulbe pastoral society: Travelling Cultures in the Era of Climate Change²

Recent models on climate change show deep changes in the ecological dynamics of the Sahel. It has defined new policies and posed new scientific questions with regard to people in the Sahel. How and when will these changes influence people's livelihoods? Does this situation position Sahelians differently? What is the perception of Sahelians regarding environmental changes? When we focus on the relationship between climate variability and society in Central Mali we conclude that the main change in these societies would be an increase in mobility, increasing mainly rural-rural migration flows towards the

² The arguments in this section have been elaborated upon in various articles: see De Bruijn & Van Dijk, 2004, 2005, 2003, 1999 a & b, 1997, 1995; De Bruijn 1999, 2000.

south but also to the urban peripheries (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 2004, 2005). This seems to be a logical reaction of people living in the Sahel and congruent to their cultural repertoire.

Society in central Mali may be described as containing mobilities, and certainly has characteristics of cultures of mobility that are historically rooted. These cultures of mobility are embedded in the specific economy of the region and in the related social hierarchies that developed in this society. Central Mali (see map) is a marginal region, considering the economy and politics of Mali as a whole. Its history developed on the margins of large empires in the region. Society in Central Mali copied the hierarchies that these empires had introduced and that were related to the area's specific ecology. Hierarchies that make a distinction between the noble people and the dependent (the former slave groups) organize social and economic life. It entails a division of labour and a division of risk but also social identity markers. The production of food is left to the lower echelons of society and labour in the fields is not highly valued. Trade and cattle keeping are more highly appreciated, and political tasks and religious work are seen as more superior. In this hierarchisation of society, some social groups were more mobile than others, and their mobilities differed related to the economic and social positions and roles.

In the past, wealth mainly came from cattle raiding and from the slave and cattle trades that both implied a mobile attitude among the people concerned. Feelings of belonging are not so much related to land as to power and wealth, and through this power and wealth social relations are established. These relations were often created over long distances: between the chiefs of different small chiefdoms; between Islamic scholars who had long-distance networks through their studies; between cattle nomads who covered long distances. These networks all had important roles in religion, trade and the region's cattle economy. The existence of these networks relied completely on the mobility of the people involved.

Other networks were created through the drought economy. This area is typically a drought-prone region and in the 20th century and in

oral traditions there are numerous accounts of people who had to leave to find economic opportunities elsewhere or - due to hunger - and drought. Slaves who inhabited one entire quarter of a village simply had to leave during the crisis of 1914. Leaving one's home during times of drought has an economic reason but is also a cultural phenomenon. Wealth is the most important indicator of a person's identity. Indeed it is shameful to lose everything and many people will, in such circumstances, decide to start a new life elsewhere.

Difficult ecological circumstances in this specific area, and lack of other economic opportunities have led to a migration economy. Seasonal migration was an important element of the economy in colonial times. Pastoralism that has always been important in the region's economy is mobile in itself and although the French colonial regime tried to contain this mobility, through the levying of taxes and the installation of corridors, movements of people and cattle have always been part of this area's dynamics. The herder societies in particular can be characterized as a travelling culture: they have never been fixed. Their histories are full of movement and migration. Flexibility transpires through the way they organize social relations, habitation and relations in other regions.

People from Central Mali are now to be found in other parts of Mali, in Ivory Coast, Ghana and further to Guinea, and their forms of mobility are based on old and new traditions. It is not so much their relationship to resources that defines this mobility as much as the culture of travel that exists. The historically woven networks, linking different geographical and social spaces, are central to this specific culture of mobilities. Mobilities are plural since different strata in society, and various historical periods, characterise different forms of mobility. Families can trace their heritage to many different regions. Moreover, expectation that people move has become part of the lifestyle of many African communities. One could say that people from Central Mali have literally embodied a mobile lifestyle.

Let us return to the conclusions of the study on climate change. Farmers answered our questions on changes in the ecology with

remarks such as that there is an increase in variability of rainfall but that it would not really change the way they behaved. What is more important is the road that was made in the 1980s, increasing economic activity in the small towns in the area, and rising labour economy as introduced by the French. However these were all opportunities to enlarge the economy and culture of mobility.

The ecological crises in the 1980s and 1990s were important in increasing the mobility of many herders. They entered herding activities often as former sedentary farmers and have developed new labour relations, that is herding the cattle (often not registered, nor being included in tax registers) of rich farmers. They did not leave Central Mali in a vacuum but stepped into a well-known tradition that enabled them to keep their identity. The old host-guest relationships that in fact are a social contract between different ethnic groups with different occupational identities, and the flow of people who left before them paved their way. They have joined the mobile margins of the Malian state and they have extended their own culture of mobilities.

Mobilities also change with the appearance of new opportunities. People from Central Mali have relatively recently migrated to urban peripheries, and from there to other destinations in Africa and Europe. These migrations seem to be a logical consequence of the way they are linked to resources, the way they define their feelings of belonging and the way they feel related to resources. Recent research (Pelckmans 2006) has shown that social hierarchies - in Central Mali are reproduced in mobile spaces. Former slaves still occupy lower labour positions. Although at first sight these seem to be continuities, new power relations are being created.

Thus current social transformations may be transformations in the scale of migration with probably some modification in the form and distance, but it conforms to a cultural repertoire.

As discussed elsewhere (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1999), the policies of development agencies and state policy counter the cultures of mobility as we have described. For instance, policies aiming at nomadic pastoralists seem to have the effect of sedentarisation. Policies uncon-

sciously aim to contain people in place and space. Bureaucracies that have been developed to execute these policies have difficulty in adopting a more flexible strategy. One cause may be that the agents of these organizations often do not appreciate how mobile the people are, and how these mobilities colour their social and cultural life and lifestyles. Their perception of a society is one of a fixed entity that needs to be developed in space by drilling wells, improving pasture areas and organizing people in associations. The effects of these policies will finally contain mobility and change the culture of the people targeted. They create an environment with new cultural, social and economic dynamics in which cultures of travel, and mobile margins are difficult to contain.

Refugees: Mobility in Eastern Chad and the International State³

Eastern Chad is a border region where the influence of the state is barely visible. There are no roads and hospitals are non-existent. The main livelihoods of the people are nomadic herding and itinerant farming. Another important economic activity is trade because nomads and traders cross borders. Similar people, in terms of ethnicity, traditions and economy, live on both sides of the border. Chadians found refuge in Sudan during the difficult periods of Chad's civil war in the 1970s and beginning 1980s. And in 2003/4 refugees escaping the conflict in Darfur crossed the Chad-Sudan border into Chad.

In total about 200,000 refugees settled in camps that were set up by UNHCR. The first refugees arrived without any assistance and the Chadians received them and helped them. Weren't they after all their brothers? It was only later that UNHCR mobilized enough means to assist the refugees. What the inhabitants of this area had thought would never happen was suddenly possible: their zone was actually receiving a lot of aid. Hospitals were built, roads were improved, in the regional

³ I was in eastern Chad in March-April 2005 and visited the refugee camps, autochthonous villages and cattle camps there (De Bruijn & Mahamat 2005). I have been working in Central Chad and the capital city N'djamena since September 2002.

capital, Abéché, NGOs opened offices and helped create a booming economy. Villagers told me that they had never known that they were so poor and that their own government has never invested in the area. For them that was how life had always been, however they suddenly realized that it could have been different. UNHCR and their ways of receiving the refugees – through the creation of huge camps in an empty area – have changed the place forever. Confrontation between the refugees and the autochthonous population has also changed old relationships. For the autochthones, the refugees – who are in fact their brothers – have become a nuisance. For them, aid has arrived but violence has also become a problem in the region. Stories of cattle theft and the occupation of good pasture land by the refugees are just one indication of how new antagonisms are being created. Resources – land and water – and stories about their scarcity are a way of expressing these antagonisms. The repatriation of the refugees would not appear to be realistic and a new social dynamic and a definitive transformation have set in.

UNHCR has been imposed on the region as a form of international governance and the Chadian state can only accept their presence. In a way, attention for this poor and marginal area could have positive effects and people are redefining their relationship with the state. In Chad this has certainly contributed to the anger of many people who have decided to join the rebellions opposition tendencies that have never disappeared from Chadian politics. The Chadian government is also confronted with a new reality in which people have changed and redefined their position while being confronted with a new other: the refugee, partial investments in the region, and the international state.

The number of refugees is growing. Each country in Central Africa today has refugees and internally displaced people, however these large displacements of people are not new – they occurred in the past too although on a smaller scale. Today the international world is interfering in traditional ways of dealing with displacement. However non-interference leading to the deaths of many people, and chaos in the areas concerned, is no alternative. In the new world order the answer to

huge displacements is to contain people and give them the right to return to their 'home' land. However in the organization of Sahelian societies today this may not be the best solution. For people who are used to living in mobile margins and whose traditions have defined flexible social structures, it does not seem to be logical to be contained in one place.

Governance and Mobility

The example of these refugees indicates how interference by the (international) state departs from a model that contains people instead of allowing them to be flexible. - The two cases illustrate that people in marginal areas have always had their own ways of relating to resources, even if they were very mobile. This mobility developed through practices that were only partially controlled by the state, and these induced social transformation and continuity.

Development interventions/practices in Central Mali are focusing on the sedentary livelihoods of people, the demarcation of the land, rules for use, economies and borders. The recent political reforms in these areas have reinforced this tendency by giving control of resources an important political meaning. These tendencies in policy and politics neglect the importance of mobility, of the in- and out-going movements of people, and of relations with other areas. Focus on place as defined by the state or international organizations ignores flows of people and a flexibility in economies that are essential to understanding the relationship between resources, the environment and plurality.

Mobile people are regarded as a burden on a state because it is difficult to control them. Their economies and their movements may disrupt urban planning or create conflicts in rural areas. One 'tool' of a state in containing movements within and across borders is to create statistics and gather quantitative data on movement patterns. In recent decades the international state – embodied in organizations like UNDP and the World Bank – have become interested in the containment of people as an attempt to limit the 'dangers' of problematic migration flows.

To come to terms with recent transformations, we should first understand that mobility in its many forms has always been an essential element in social transformations past and present. These mobilities frequently develop alongside the state. Attempts to contain them have all failed.

Conclusion

Immigration remains a contentious political issue. It is compounded by its perceived link with crime, and increasingly with terrorism since September 11, 2001. Xenophobic manifestations, however, ignore historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient states. (Nyamnjoh 2006: 11)

Although Nyamnjoh is referring to international migrations, this paper has shown that the same is true for migration within the boundaries of nation states.

Sahelian identities are defined within the flexible framework their mobile cultures provide them with, and even in the case of refugees these still play a role. People in eastern Chad refer to their own mobility as a consequence of war, and therefore could accept refugees entering their country. People in these economically marginal zones are confronted with the need to be mobile and they have been developing different forms of mobility: labour migration, nomadism, itinerant schools, refugees and internal displacement. Impoverishment through a lack of access to resources is one of the factors that play an important role in this complexity. Plural forms of mobility, however, are linked differently to the social and geographical spaces from which they originate. These dynamics existed in the past and the mobile margins, or mobile spaces, have been created although the idea of belonging is not related to land but to social space and social relations. Even in the case of the refugees in eastern Chad we can talk about mobile margins and spaces created through trade, nomadism and an old history of exchanges between (19th century) empires. We can question how important relationships with the land and resources are in a spatial bounded area.

Relationships between migration, mobility and resources are flexible. Social institutions and social relations - demand this flexibility. When these features of Sahelian societies are stressed, the migrants leaving Senegal by boat on treacherous journeys, and the herding communities in the south of Mali who risk becoming involved in conflict, are no longer a problem but part of the Sahelian dynamics that we should consider in our policies. This puts the 'doom and gloom' scenario - as described by Kaplan and others - in a different light.

Transformations on the mobile margins may largely be related to the increasing number of people who are migrating and to the increasing possibilities of communication that are enlarging the mobile spaces (as has been shown in the debates on transnationalism). With these, the mobile plurality of culture and social hierarchies will be transferred into a wider space introducing new pluralities.

Governance structures that have been inherited from western development models, and that are determined by western conceptions of space and locality, do not do justice to the flexibilities, plural mobilities and mobile pluralities that have developed in Sahelian societies in relation to the availability of resources and the transformation of these economies. The fixation in space that these entail is to tensions and conflicts, to the definition of the 'others' as an enemy as in the case of refugees and the international intervention schemes in eastern Chad.

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Mobility and Society in the Sahel: An Exploration of Mobile Margins and Global Governance (Mirjam de Bruijn)

African peripheral rural areas are often described as migration areas because of the weak resource base and 'crisis' environment that characterises them. Development in these areas has never been high, also because they have never been fully integrated into the post-colonial state. Policy measures do not reckon with the flexible mobilities that have developed in these areas. This article questions the direct relationship between the environment and society, that so often transpires policy, by examining the multiple strategies and organizational forms that people in these areas have developed and the specific forms of agency that have transpired. Over the past decades people seem to have become increasingly independent of the environment and its natural resources by creating new social, economic and cultural space in their mobile responses to the situation. Agency that develops leads to new social forms on the margins of the state, no longer confined to geographical space only but to a social space that extends from the peripheral rural areas to towns, other countries and even to other continents. In these mobile margins new social relations are created and cultural repertoires emerge, but they are outside the reach of governance by the state, as defined in the post-colonial era. Examples of these mobile margins are the strings of migrant communities that have developed as a result of movements of people from the Sahel into southern rural areas, but also the migratory movements of people from Sahelian countries to European countries through legal and illegal arrangements. This article describes the formation of mobile margins and cultures of mobility in relation to the development of society in its ecological, social and political contexts and it sketches the confrontation between these cultures of mobility and recent and old forms of governance.

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