

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING FRONTIERS

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Mobility is an underappreciated topic in most historical and social science research. The reason for this may be that population mobility constantly disturbs the construction of neat analytical units. Anthropologists typically do research in small communities in which face-to-face contacts dominate. Historians concentrate mostly on political centres which remain relatively stable. Geographers, by their trade, pay more attention to mobility, but the scale at which they work precludes the fine-tuned analyses favored by social scientists and historians.

Another reason why historical and social science research has neglected the topic of mobility derives from the way in which 'modern' knowledge on Mande has been constructed over time. From pre-colonial times there are relatively few written sources. Moreover, these sources contain very few statistical data which allow us to assess the nature and extent of the population's mobility. A systematic re-reading of travellers' reports and local sources from the perspective of mobility might reveal this hidden dimension of pre-colonial history (see e.g. Klute 1996). During the colonial epoch the construction of knowledge was the prerogative of people who were intricately linked with the colonial administration and with its obsession with controlling people by fixing them in space and attributing discrete ethnic identities to them (see Amselle 1990).

Without wanting to deny the importance of migration and mobility in the past it is clear that population mobility has taken new dimensions in present day West Africa. According to the World Bank (1990) West Africa has the most mobile population of the world. More than 13 percent of its population resides outside their country of birth (Zachariah & Conde 1981). The percentage of internal migrants is not known, but is probably at least as high. In the environment of the Sahel and the Sudan it seems imperative for people to move. The climate, with its variable rainfall, and the uneven distribution of economic opportunities incite people — not only the so-called nomadic people, but also the sedentary cultivators — to move regularly. Of course in all these societies some groups of people do not move, but they represent only part of society and their communities.

So there are very good reasons to pay more attention to population mobility, as was the aim of a panel on this topic at the 4th International Conference of the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) in Banjul, The Gambia. We were very happy with the positive response to the call for papers. We are also very grateful to the editors of *Mande Studies* for the opportunity to publish most of the papers presented at the conference in Banjul (one was withdrawn for personal reasons).

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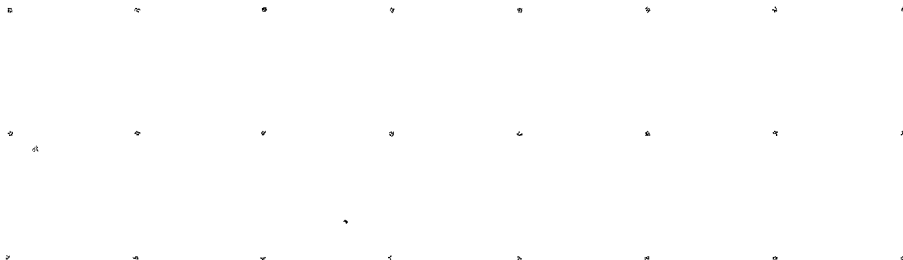
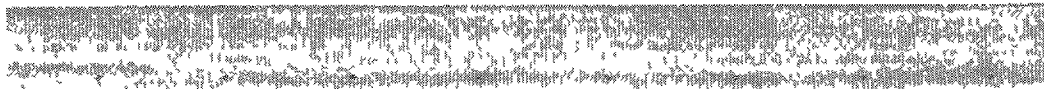
Our specific theme was inspired by two other sources. The first is our own experience with the Fulbe. The Fulbe pastoralists, among whom we did extensive fieldwork, are very mobile people. Their mobility consists of transhumance, nomadism, migration, displacement, and travel for adventure. Doing research among the Fulbe inevitably raised the question, what influence has this mobility had on Fulbe culture, on its creation, on its stability and on its dynamics?

Our quest for Fulbe society and culture, ending in research on the travelling aspect of their culture, was also inspired by recent debates about the role of the 'field' and 'fieldwork' in anthropology and cultural studies (Clifford 1997). These discussions question the way research is often organized: in a fixed place and often in a very immobile manner. In anthropology some people plead for the refashioning of research towards interethnic relations, on research on diaspora, in order to escape the 'fixed irreality' created in mainstream ethnography.

Another thought leading to this panel was the round table we organized for the previous MANSAs conference in Leiden, held in 1995, on interethnic relations between Mande and Fulbe (see De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1997). It struck us that these relations often arose from the fact that both Fulbe and Mande peoples were mobile and moved into each other's 'territories', if these can be labelled this way. This idea was confirmed by our last fieldwork among the Fulbe in 1997, which took us into the Mande world while looking for Fulbe migrants, or travellers as we prefer to call them.

Approaching these areas, their inhabitants, and their various cultural forms, from the perspective of mobility is bound to change our view on African societies. Ethnicity becomes something fluid, a creation arising out of interaction with others and thus something without clear borders; it also questions the identity of a people whose identity is related to the question of the division and management of natural resources, which must also be very flexible.

These insights may also be relevant for current policies with respect to administrative reform in West Africa. There is a real danger that decentralization leads to fixation of communities and their resource bases, a fixation which may create social and political ruptures for any peoples involved who may not be used to fixed boundaries. Administrative reform in the form of decentralization may also transform ethnic or cultural minorities into political minorities. The study of mobility may also be relevant for the rationale behind many development interventions that still divide the world into sedentary cultivators and nomadic pastoralists. Are such divisions reality or a creation so that reality can be handled? Do they promote ethnic cleavages and conflicts or the hardening of identities? Are development interventions in natural resource management and sustainable land use relevant when most people choose to become mobile and migrate as the principal coping strategy with adverse conditions?



Through the organization of this panel we mainly aimed to gather concrete cases of mobility, of interaction, of creation of bonds and new formations of resource use and related political structures, between different so-called 'ethnic groups', or maybe it is better to say just groups of people in the Mande world, in order to get more insight into the processes described above. This may give us the opportunity to understand better what identity and ethnicity of various groups in Mande signify and what these labels mean for people. It will also give us insight into the specificity of each group and its space- and time-boundedness.

The papers in this collection give in a nutshell a nice overview of the type of studies that fit into this idea. The paper by Allen Howard takes us back into history. Concentrating on traders, Quranic teachers, and other specialists, he gives us a fascinating insight into the multiplicity of ways to articulate interethnic, or better intergroup relations as his argument goes, among mobile people, by means of a very diverse and dynamic cultural and institutional framework. He paints a very nuanced picture of regional rather than ethnic cultural patterns over time, and how this social and ethnic 'continuum' was evolving towards differentiation during the colonial period. The question is of course whether these divisive tendencies would have occurred without colonial intervention, on the basis of increasing competition over resources and trade routes, or if the particular directives from the colonial government led such intergroup relations to be based on ethnicity rather than regional, class, or status-based divisions.

The paper by Koenig, Diarra, and Sow is about a contemporary example of mobility and interethnic contact. They too assert that ethnicity is by no means the only way of defining strata. Their study explicitly takes modern development interventions into account as a possible major driver behind migration, (re)settlement, and ethnic conflict. Their comparative approach reveals that distinct patterns of ethnic interaction are arising across their study sites. Ethnicity is used differentially in light of different state activities. This leads them to the important insight that state policies alone are not a sufficient explanation for the articulation of ethnic identities. The study of local level dynamics is a necessary supplement.

De Bruijn and Van Dijk's paper goes into the recent southward migrations of the Fulbe from the Sahel into the Sudan. It draws attention to the problems which are on the rise as a result of the diminishing resource base in the Sahel and increasing resource competition in the south. They also treat the human dimension of these problems, how people adapt socially and culturally to their new Mande environment, and the backlash of these migrations 'at home'. The authors show that these particular migrations, unique in their form and organization, are nevertheless part of a greater tradition of mobility and migration into Mande, which has characterized the life of Fulbe pastoralists for centuries.

The last paper, by Edda Fields, deals with the complicated interaction

between past and present in oral traditions of the Baga, Nalu, and Landuma in Guinea, especially when they are used for the reconstruction of migration histories. To this subject she adds the issue of migrants having to adapt their agricultural strategies and technologies to new environments, a subject which is seldom treated because migration is most often supposed to be from rural to urban areas. Despite the fact that Fields' article is a work in progress it is a much promising first account of a very interesting research project.

The subject is by no means exhausted by these four papers. Historically a lot of work remains to be done. Unfortunately, no state-of-the-art study based on a re-assessment of existing sources and publications exists at the moment, but such a study might be pieced together with relatively little effort. As far as the present is concerned the whole issue of mobility and the accompanying increase in intergroup contacts is extremely important and will only gain more significance in the future. The population of West Africa is expected to rise enormously in the coming decades. As possibilities for economic and agricultural expansion in the Sahel and Sudan are limited, more and more people will move southward towards the coastal countries of West Africa (OECD 1995). Of these people a major portion will move to cities. Intergroup relations involving peoples termed Mande, non-Mande, Fulbe or whatever, will acquire new dimensions in these new settings and will provide interesting sites for many scholars in the future.

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