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Mobile Africa: An introduction

Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk & Dick Foeken

Anybody who has ever boarded a city-bound bus in Sub-Saharan Africa will have had the privilege of sharing in part of a typical journey for many Africans. Crammed into an often-ramshackle vehicle is not only half the local community but also chickens, goats, agricultural produce, bicycles, suitcases, trunks, not to mention everything piled on the roof of the bus. A cross-section of the population shares the ride into town and does so for a range of reasons. Some will be trying to sell their produce at the urban market hoping for a profit, others will be visiting hospital, paying relatives a visit, attending a funeral, finding schooling, or are looking to buy goods to sell back home at a price that will cover their bus fare. The bus passes through numerous market places, is swarmed at each stop by vendors trying to sell fruit, drinks and food to the passengers, is checked at police roadblocks and is boarded by Pentecostal preachers who prophesy God's wrath upon the unbeliever. A bus is a microcosm of African life.

This metaphor of a bus ride somewhere on the African continent captures in a nutshell some of the essential ideas this book aims to address. This is not just an everyday story about migration into town but about how mobility is engrained in the history, daily life and experiences of people. In a compressed way, the bus demonstrates how mobility appears to refer to an array of forms of human behaviour, each inspired by different motives, desires, aspirations and obligations. The scope of this phenomenon as well as the enormous variety in expressions and experiences contained in this single example indicate that there is a wide field for academic study to cover if other forms of mobility are also taken into account. Not only are there many ways in which mobility is per-ceived and experienced by different groups, mobility itself appears in a myriad of forms. Mobility as an umbrella term encompasses all types of movement including travel, exploration, migration, tourism, refugeeism, pastoralism, nomadism, pilgrimage and trade. In these forms, mobility is essential to many, even a means of survival for some, whereas in most African societies it is often a reality that is taken for granted.

This introduction argues that mobility in its ubiquity is fundamental to any under-standing of African social life. The astounding degree of mobility in Africa (see Chapter 2) makes one wonder whether it is indeed possible to understand the livelihood of large sections of the African population without taking into account the perspective of movement. To what extent does the African bus metaphor capture the ways in which

African societies survive, maintain social relations, explore opportunities and fulfil hopes and desires?

By exploring mobility on the African continent, this volume aspires to continue a long-running research interest of the African Studies Centre (ASC) marked by the start of a multi-disciplinary research project in the 1970s and that led to a major conference on issues of migration in Africa in 1977. Important insights into processes of migration from the conference were published in a edited volume for the ASC journal at that time, *African Perspectives* (1978, no. 1). Its central focus was migration: the 'geographical displacement of people'. In their introduction the editors critically discussed the then-pervasive approaches to migration; a concept mainly captured in dichotomies such as rural-urban, subsistence economy versus money economy, tradition versus modernity, and so forth. They recorded their unease with this emphasis on dichotomies, stating that: "The dualism pervading most social science approaches to migration in Africa may take too much for granted, distinctions and boundaries (conceptual, structural, political) which the ongoing transformations of Africa may render increasingly irrelevant" (Van Binsbergen & Meilink 1978: 12). It is striking that almost a quarter of a century later this problem is still evident in the way migration is perceived. Despite for instance the convincing argument of Jamal & Weeks (1988) concerning the "vanishing rural-urban gap", a great deal of migration research is even now dominated by the kind of dichotomous interpretations these editors argued against.

Recently it has been more from the side of the Cultural-Studies approach to migration that notions of cultural continuity – for instance through the introduction of concepts like 'travelling culture' or 'diaspora' – have gained headway in understanding mobility in Africa. While this angle inspired ASC research in recent years, no new multi-disciplinary effort had come up with further insights until two seminars were held in June and September 2000. They came to form the basis of this book. The adoption of the term 'mobility' instead of 'migration' in the present volume reflects this change in focus. Moving away from the neo-Marxist perspective of the late 1970s this book reflects on mobility as implying more than just movement from A to B in geographical space alone. As the metaphor of the bus indicates, a cultural perception of mobility implies a close reading of people's own understandings of the spaces and places in which they move and the experiences these movements entail.

Another crucial element of the present approach is how to move away from the interpretation of migration or mobility as a 'rupture' in society, as the result of a social system in disarray. Many forms of mobility are part of life and of making a livelihood. In some societies, *not* being mobile may be the anomaly. The extent to which people themselves perceive travel and movement as forms of breaking away from a social or ecological environment, from family and friends or from a specific cultural domain, needs to be investigated. What we argue is that sedentarity, i.e. remaining within set borders or cultural boundaries, might instead be perceived as an act of escaping from social obligations. The whole notion of mobility as presented here turns the supposedly rupturing effect of travelling on its head: through travelling, connections are established, continuity experienced and modernity negotiated.

This perspective does not, however, exclude the fact that there are forms of mobility that do result in ruptures in society, and indeed serious ruptures. Africa has many refugees and their numbers have increased dramatically over the past decades. Dissolving states, interethnic strife, struggles for hegemony and control over natural and mineral resources are causing enormous hardship. This has to be dealt with, not only technically but also as a social issue affecting our own societies. The movement of people within and beyond Africa has become an issue of global concern.

The case studies in this book all critically debate dichotomous interpretations of mobility and reject the idea that migration indicates a breakdown in society. They adopt the approach that sedentary and mobile worlds converge and that mobility is part of the livelihood system of African people. Furthermore, the cases encourage the reader to pose questions about relations between individual, group and larger entities in a much broader geographical perspective. We are challenged to delve into the traveller's mind, as well as those of relatives left behind. People do not think in the bipolar models scientists have developed for them. What they do, are, and want to be unfolds through the decisions they make every day, to move or not to move. Terms like multi-spatial livelihoods, travelling cultures, mobility of forms, ideological representations of mobility, all recur in the case studies. They refer to the fact that interpretations along the lines of dichotomies are no longer our model of analysis and that indeed a new model is emerging.

This book does not try to give a complete overview of mobility in Africa but to show how recent empirical work addresses issues that present themselves in the study of the massive movements of people which are so characteristic of much of Africa. Indeed the insights gained from these empirical studies shed new light on the understanding of mobility in Africa. The different chapters present challenging views on what mobility is in contexts of scale (from the local up to the global), what mobility means for the people involved and what it may mean for our interpretation of historical and current realities. The studies of mobility here deal first of all with many forms of movement of people in geographical space; urban-rural, rural-rural movements, labour migration, nomadism and refugeeism. In addition to geographical interpretations of such forms of movement, socio-cultural interpretations are highlighted. Questions revolve around issues such as how people move within social networks, how forms of mobility go hand in hand with a mobility of social forms, how people become mobile as the result of religious conviction or seek upward social mobility, for instance through labour. Being mobile has many implications for those involved: it influences people's choices, produces specific decision-making processes and leads to the formation of certain social institutions. In short it transforms lives.

How people perceive mobility and the ways in which they give meaning to processes of social change are highlighted in some of the contributions. Several chapters deal with the 'organisation' of mobility (emerging networks, state policies, etc.) and others focus on the various aspects of the flow of mobility (i.e. the statistics and the direction that mobility takes).

The volume opens with an overview paper by *Han van Dijk, Dick Foeken & Kiky van Til* (Chapter 2). After a brief discussion of the definitional and conceptual problems

related to migration, an overview of the various flows of mobility in Africa based on the available statistical data is presented. Although migration figures are not always reliable, the authors show a reality that cannot be ignored. It confirms that for millions of Africans, being mobile is part of their daily experience. Some of these modern mobility patterns may be linked to recent developments in the wider world, i.e. the opening up of the international world, but also to such negative processes as the deterioration of the ecological environment. These present-day patterns can be compared to similar processes in Africa's past, such as the slave trade, wars and ecological disasters. Furthermore, labour migration, moving with cattle and seasonal migration are realities of daily life that have specific links to modern times. The authors show that, more than ever before, Africa is indeed a continent 'on the move'.

The following three chapters explore people's own experiences of mobility, the way it is expressed and the way in which these experiences shape people's own worlds. *Todd Sanders* (Chapter 3) offers an insider's view of how one ethnic group, the Ihanzu in Tanzania, are experiencing the slow process of invasion by another group. The Ihanzu articulate their fear of their expanding neighbours in terms of witchcraft; an expression often recounted in dreams that tell of magic buses crossing their land. These buses are hard, if not impossible, to stop but it is the superior knowledge of medicine of the encroaching group that renders the Ihanzu helpless in the face of this invasion. Sanders demonstrates that different rationalities come into play in the perception of mobility and the detrimental consequences it has for a particular society. On the one hand, these rationalities speak of objective economic circumstances and ethnic conflicts, but, on the other hand, do not match with local people's ideas of the causes and consequences of mobility in terms of occult powers.

The contribution by *Marja Spierenburg* (Chapter 4) is another case in point. She deals with the kind of society in which being mobile is institutionalised in the relationships of newcomers with their hosts. In the Dande region of northern Zimbabwe it is a religious form, the territorial cult of the *Mhondoro*, that has always played a crucial role in the regulation of mobility and access to land for newcomers. This *Mhondoro* cult used to provide the ritual means by which newcomers, immigrants and strangers were granted a place in their new environment. As in Sanders's case study, however, important changes in this domain of religion, such as the exclusion of newcomers from certain *Mhondoro* rituals, signal a shift in the perception of newly arrived migrants. They are no longer as welcome as they once were.

Chapter 5 by *Mirjam de Bruijn, Han van Dijk & Rijk van Dijk* deals explicitly with the question of how the concept of mobility can be understood. They indicate firstly that forms of mobility can only be properly understood concomitant with a mobility of forms and the way these influence people's daily lives. The Ghanaian Pentecostal churches that have 'travelled along' with Ghanaian migrants have come to play a crucial role in their communities. The authors apply the term 'travelling culture', as was first introduced by Clifford (1992), to indicate the specific features of situations where forms of mobility (for instance nomadism or intercontinental migration) are combined with a mobility of social forms and institutions. Using the example of the West-African Fulbe, it is argued that some cultures should be seen as being essentially mobile and that these

cultures become sedentary only by force of circumstance. A sedentary existence is not taken for granted and this opens new ways of understanding the creation of 'non-sedentary' identities. It challenges the general tendency (in studies of mobility and in policy discourses) to perceive mobility as something anomalous or as carrying a negative connotation.

The next four contributions address changing perspectives in the study of what otherwise is the 'classic' domain of mobility, namely rural-to-urban migration. Jens Andersson and Jonathan Baker each draw attention to the cultural dynamics within these much-studied mobility patterns in Africa. *Jens Andersson* (Chapter 6) shows how Zimbabweans move to town to earn a living and in the process of creating supportive social networks in fact become a travelling culture. The migrants he studied operate within social networks that link villages and cities but do not perceive a geographical space consisting only of two opposite poles: the village versus the city. Instead, the networks the migrants create allow for a continuous movement between various places, making their mobility part of their being. As *Jonathan Baker* (Chapter 7) also demonstrates in his contribution on Ethiopia, people use different spaces to generate a livelihood. Here it becomes difficult to explain the motivations behind being mobile because mobility is part of their cultural repertoire. The accepted idea that migrants leave for negative reasons does not hold in all cases. Although 'negative' push factors are present due to the detrimental economic and ecological situation in Baker's study area, the province of Welo in Ethiopia, many people move out of their own free will in the hope of giving a positive turn to their existence. Their cultural background and their optimistic perception of the outside world encourage them to move.

The contribution by *Dick Foeken & Samuel Owuor* (Chapter 8) also deals with people who have an economic foothold in town as well as in the rural area, a situation termed as multi-spatial livelihoods. They show that the majority of the inhabitants of Nakuru Town in Kenya have access to land in the rural areas, mostly in their 'home area'. However, how and by whom the land is actually used is a different story. Like Andersson, the authors demonstrate the continuity between the various places involved. It appears increasingly difficult to maintain dichotomies like rural versus urban. Moreover, recent research to discover migration flows also shows that the picture of migration and mobility is not linear. There is a whole pattern of rural-urban linkages characterised by, for instance, return migration, circular movements and differentiation within the 'migration flows'. In Chapter 9, *Cecilia Tacoli* describes the recent phenomenon of return migration and how, in various parts of Africa where people are moving out of town in ever greater numbers, this is leading to 'de-urbanisation'. Based on the migration statistics of Tanzania, Nigeria and Mali, she argues that although movement patterns have changed over the last few decades, links between rural and urban areas remain strong. It would be interesting to situate the de-urbanisation discussion in relation to de-agrarianisation, the on-going process of diversification out of agriculture (see e.g. Bryceson 1996). Where do de-agrarianisation and de-urbanisation meet?

The last three chapters deal with yet another dimension of the changing patterns and interpretations of mobility on the African continent. Here the historical and political realities of mobility are considered in addition to the cultural, economic and geo-

graphical dimensions discussed earlier in the volume. *Youssouf Diallo* (Chapter 10), dealing with pastoral Fulbe movements in the border region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, shows that mobility patterns in addition to being very old may also have political consequences. The movements of these nomadic people are constantly changing in reaction to changes in their environment. The author discusses how historically rooted but at the same time adaptive these mobility patterns are. Moving into new territories always leads to new arrangements with other groups and societies, something that can only be interpreted as a political process of the balancing of power and conflict, an idea confirmed by Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk and Han van Dijk in their contribution. As Todd Sanders and Marja Spierenburg both stated, so-called sedentary agricultural people, like those in Diallo's study area, also move in search of good land and/or better watering points. Such mobility patterns can truly be labelled as rural-rural.

Whereas these authors deal with rural-rural mobility patterns at a local level, *Piet Konings* (Chapter 11) highlights the fact that in modern African states such issues can become of national political significance. His contribution on the political developments in western Cameroon illustrates the actual problematic in many African states concerning allochthony versus autochthony. Those who were at first welcomed as labourers on the plantations are today being branded as strangers who should preferably be expelled, by the very same national politicians who once encouraged their participation in the workforce. The same dynamics of national politics are present in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, as described by Diallo, where pastoral people were first welcomed to furnish the booming economy with animal products but today are looked on strangers who do not belong in the country and who have no rights. These people are being sent back to their countries of 'origin'. In some cases the influence of national policies is visible through 'development' projects, as described by Marja Spierenburg in her Zimbabwe case study where rights to resources are no longer defined by the institutions of the people themselves but by outside agencies that privilege those who, in the eyes of the autochthones, are considered outsiders. Such policies thus redefine who the strangers are in a community. Being a 'stranger' is not just a label but is linked to a series of actions sometimes accompanied by violence. The old institutions that formerly integrated strangers are being turned upside down by local or national policies and strongly influence the perception of the people themselves.

The case of the refugees in Rwanda and Burundi described by *Patricia Daley* (Chapter 12) shows the influence of international politics. She describes an extreme case of labelling people as refugees, defining them as an anomaly to be adjusted to the circumstances. People are either forced to return or to become a refugee in a refugee camp. The negative connotations that mobility often carries are highlighted in this chapter. The overall tendency in academia as well as in policy circles of *a priori* assumptions that mobility is problematic in any given society is of particular significance in the refugee situation. Refugees are probably the best example of a form of mobility that is not generally welcomed and that states and policy makers feel needs to be controlled and be re-ordered into a 'decent' sedentary pattern. The dichotomy between sedentarity and mobility frequently recurs in discussions about refugees.

With Daley's article we have come full circle back once more to one of the issues mentioned in Chapter 2, namely moving up from the local to the international in understanding the relevance of the study of African mobility. This mobility has become a pressing international, even intercontinental issue. International migration within the African continent but also to Europe and America is discussed in the chapters by Daley (12), Diallo (10) and De Bruijn, Van Dijk & Van Dijk (3). It appears that land shortages and diminishing economic resources make the mobility of people more problematic today than in the past, a fact that has acquired international ramifications more than ever before. Refugees in many ways have become the vested interest of international involvement with Africa. Their international mobility is the reason why they are recognised as refugees at all, as is shown by Daley's discussion of the situation in central Africa. The case of Pentecostalism in Ghana, described by De Bruijn, Van Dijk & Van Dijk (Chapter 5), shows the concomitant mobility of forms and the way a group of people deals with their (international) mobility and their cultural integrity or identity. In addition to relations of a more material nature (e.g. multi-spatial livelihoods), ideologies may form an important link between the various spaces in which people live and work. Hence, with the term 'mobility' this volume tries to combine insights into the material and immaterial aspects of the movements of people in Africa.

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