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(Dis)connectivity and the invisibility of mobile Fulani in West Africa

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AFRICA NOW

INVISIBILITY IN AFRICAN DISPLACEMENTS

From Structural
Marginalization to
Strategies of
Avoidance

EDITED BY
JESPER BJARNESEN AND
SIMON TURNER



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Invisibility in African Displacements

From Structural Marginalization to
Strategies of Avoidance

Edited by Jesper Bjarnesen and Simon Turner



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Simon Turner and Jesper Bjarnesen
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11 | (Dis)Connectivity and the invisibility of mobile Fulani in West Africa

Roos Keja, Adamou Amadou and Mirjam de Bruijn

Introduction

The droughts and ecological crises of the 1980s and 1990s have been a driver of mobility for many Fulani pastoralists. It can be said that their mobility changed from pastoral nomadism to poverty-driven nomadism. These mobile people, young families or individuals, mostly men, largely fell outside of all categorizations the international world provided for at the time; environmental refugee was not yet a recognized status. They left no traces back home, so they were 'lost' to (local) administrative bodies. This vanishing has to do with the fact that leaving out of poverty is shameful to a Fulani; in this sense, breaking all social and familial ties is a strategy to survive in a decent way (De Bruijn and van Dijk 2003). They generally ended up living in the fringes of sedentary societies in the South, sometimes as Muslim scholars or marabouts, or as herders for the wealthy urban elites, but certainly as invisible mobile people. In the present-day situation of increasing insecurity, drought and famine in the Sahel, we are observing similar patterns. Recent research on Fulani 'mobiles' who flee the Central African Republic (CAR) and central Mali indicate that many Fulani become invisible, living on the fringes of urban and rural economies (Loftsdóttir 2004; Boesen 2007; Amadou 2018; see also www.nomadesahel.org). The empirical material in this chapter is based on intensive research with Fulani pastoralists and former pastoralists in Chad, Cameroon, Mali and Niger.

The concept of (dis)connectivity to which we refer in the title is not limited to technology, but is about literally (dis)connecting the social. In the unfolding of this story, we will explore in which ways technology of connectivity becomes more important. In the past, invisibility for these groups of Fulani implied complete disconnection from the region and people they left behind. Little connectivity was established, and life on the fringes of urban and rural economies seemed to be very isolated. Recent developments in communication technology, such as mobile phones, have enabled a drastic change in this situation. This development is rather new; the mobile phone only became effective as a communication tool for the poor and for those living in remote rural areas after 2009 (see for instance Keïta et al. 2015; Seli 2014; De Bruijn 2019). Evidently, connectivity is not only brought about by mobile telephony. In this article we explore technology of connectivity also as an interaction between different techniques of connectivity such as mobile phones, travelling and people, and in this

case the specific person of the researcher. However, the presence of the possibility to connect does not necessarily mean that people become visible. In this chapter, we explore a preliminary hypothesis that the wandering nomads stay invisible, even though new technologies of connection theoretically increasingly enable them to reconnect with the people they left behind long ago.

Through an analysis of former research, recent research with invisible nomads in Chad, Cameroon, Mali and Niger, and the biographical approach, this chapter tries to understand the agency of the wandering nomad. Are they a mere proletariat, working for the better off? Are they consciously developing a strategy in which they unfold strong decisions and agency, akin to what Scott has labelled 'the art of not being governed' (Scott 2009), or are these Fulani mere victims of circumstances, in the absence of good governance that denies them a decent life? How complex are the lives of invisible mobile people? Within their trajectories of mobility, we can discern certain moments of invisibility in the relational sphere, for instance vis-à-vis their family members. Can this be considered strategic invisibility, and if so, what would be its purpose? We will shed light on these different aspects, supported by a reconstruction of the biography of Amadou, a Fulani man who 'vanished' for several decades and was reunited with his family in 2016. We followed Amadou between October 2008 and January 2009 when he was in Bamenda, and we had several encounters with him between 2010 and 2016 in Yaoundé, and in Lomé in June 2016, April 2017 and March 2019, during which we carried out in-depth interviews about his life.

Biographies have 'proven to be an excellent way of making theoretical sense of social phenomena' (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007: 3) and 'biographical choices are shaped by the cultural, socio-economic and historical factors that impact [informants'] lifeworlds' (Buitelaar 2014: 31). Hence authors like Fabian (2003, 2007), who introduced the notion of memory work as an active process in constructing a biography, and Jackson (2008), who took the biography in context as his central methodology in understanding the phenomenon of migration, have inspired our method. It is especially interesting to zoom in on an individual case, and Amadou's mobile life path is exemplary for a vast group of people who are not only hardly visible vis-à-vis institutions like the state, but also often overlooked in the literature about migration and displacement. Like so many people, Amadou's mobile life path is dispersed over different countries within the African continent. In order to situate Amadou's biographical narrative, we will first explore our own relationality with the research theme and with Amadou.

Fulani mobility and the researcher as technology of connectivity

It seems difficult to understand any African society without taking into account the high level of mobility of its inhabitants, which has been a reaction to certain circumstances and a basis for millions of Africans to make a livelihood. Although there are many forms of mobility, rural-urban migration has extensively been

studied because of its massive and transformative character (De Bruijn et al. 2001). However, for many groups and individuals, mobility is a way of life, and does not necessarily imply a unidirectional, intentional process in which people move from one well-defined place to another. Semi-nomadic Fulani groups in West and Central Africa have been moving around with their cattle, even though many have become more settled over the past centuries. A few male family members go on transhumance with the cattle during the dry season, whereas their village is more or less bound to a geographical location. The mobility of individual family members is high from childhood onwards; from children in search of Koranic or 'modern' education to spouses moving through marriage; to adolescents trying their luck in the city, or fleeing regions because of drought. In one lifetime these different reasons to be mobile are lived through successively or even at the same time.

The mobile life paths of the Fulani lead to emotional stories and narratives of displacement and disconnection. One such story is recounted by co-author Adamou, and is about his father-in-law. Adamou's father-in-law is a Fulani man who had come from Niger to Cameroon in his adolescent years, just like Amadou, the protagonist in this chapter. Unlike Amadou, Adamou's father-in-law has married and has raised his children in Cameroon. In several conversations, he seemed to lament the fact that he had no contact with his son he had left behind in Niger ever since he had come to Cameroon. Every time that Adamou tried to trace the 'vanishing' of his father-in-law, the old man replied in the same vein: 'If you find yourself under the big trees at the central market of Niamey and you say my name, ask some people whether they know me, and they will surely know who I am.'

Adamou, Roos and Mirjam discussed the scientific interest of actually going to the central market and filming the search for re-connecting a lost Fulani with his family. And so it happened that one day in November 2011, Roos was filming at the central market in Niamey, where she did not succeed in finding acquaintances of Adamou's father-in-law. Not only had the central market burned down several times since the departure of the old man, which had made it impossible to locate 'the big trees', his name also appeared to be a general name for shepherd in one of the local languages. Even though his photo went from hand to hand, no one seemed to recognize the man. Several people in the market replied that it would be much easier if they knew the village of birth of the old man. At a certain stage, a Fulani woman spontaneously left a message for her brother called Ibrahim, who had left Niger decades ago. She thought he might be in Cameroon, so she talked to the camera, asking her brother to come home. Roos contacted Adamou and asked him to insist that his father-in-law provide at least the name of his village of birth, but the old man avoided giving more details, saying it was such a long time ago. Remembering Niger and the relation to his child is an example of how the father-in-law 'worked' his memory to serve mainly his own emotions. We do not know what we did by discovering that the memory of the old man no longer had any link to the present in Niger. Did it increase his invisibility?

While Roos was in Niger, she also lived up to a promise we had made to Amadou, the man whose biography will be unfolded below. We will present his life history and then come to an analysis of the possible motives and factors of his mobility. His case might be special, but at the same time in many ways it is exemplary for this and related phenomena of a perpetual mobility in geographic, imagined, embodied and spiritual directions (Jeannerat 2009; Lentz 2013; Nyamnjoh 2005). A special relationship developed over the years, which we will first discuss in order to situate the case.

In October 2008, Roos met Amadou in a roadside restaurant in the centre of Bamenda, Cameroon, where he had only recently arrived to try his luck. Upon hearing that Roos carried out a study about a Fulani group in town,¹ he was eager to share his own story, actively seeking visibility. Roos introduced Amadou to Mirjam and Adamou, and from October 2008 onwards, several interviews and informal conversations followed, mainly between Amadou and Roos, but also with Adamou and Mirjam.

In 2011, Roos and Amadou met again in Yaoundé, and like he had done in Bamenda, he again gave her the phone numbers of the two sons of his older brother Boukari, Moussa and Hussein, who were living in Niger. When she was in Niamey later that year, she called Amadou to say that both numbers did not pass, and he gave her the name of a wealthy cousin, whom he also described as his enemy, to which we will return later. In order to locate the cousin, Roos visited a Fulani association in Niamey and mentioned the name of the cousin. One of the persons immediately offered to accompany her to the place where she could find him. This underlines the idea that information technologies are never more important than the people who make use of them (Keja forthcoming). However, at the same time their impact is clear; without mobile phones and without the researchers as technologies of communication, Amadou's more recent years would have looked very different. From the moment that Roos passed her phone to Amadou's cousin for them to talk, and the cousin immediately started to say 'Amadou, war, warte' [come], Amadou's return started to materialize. The intention solidified when Roos accepted the invitation of the cousin to travel to their village of birth, and when she passed on Amadou's greetings in a room packed with about forty men and one woman – Amadou's sister Zeinabou. Roos improvised a speech, in which she said that she would do her best to bring Amadou home. After this meeting, Roos filmed his village, and the video included spontaneous messages from the imam, his brother Boukari, sister Zeinabou, dozens of children of his village, yelling 'Amadou come, Amadou come', and his nephew Moussa. When she was back in Niamey, Roos called Amadou to tell him about her trip to his village, and to ask him whether he wanted to return home. He replied that he could leave tomorrow, as his bags were already packed, and Roos offered him her support for the journey.

In the months and years that followed, Roos and Amadou kept in touch through the mobile phone on an infrequent basis, and Adamou sometimes visited Amadou in Yaoundé. They kept on verifying whether Amadou still wanted to return home,

and he always confirmed this. During one of these visits, Adamou showed the video to Amadou in Yaoundé. Upon seeing his family members, including all the children that had been born in his absence, Amadou cried. Seeing the images increased his already existing wish to see all of the people in real life, which was stronger than his shame for his poverty and childlessness.

The ethics surrounding the envisioned intervention in Amadou's life was a point of discussion between us. We had clearly influenced Amadou's wish to return to his village, not only by going there in person, but also by making a video in the village and showing it to him. Even though this had never been the intention, the meaning attached to these actions was shaped accordingly, and transformed into being intentional. Whenever we discussed these issues with Amadou, he invariably replied not to worry, adding that everything would happen according to God's plan. Nonetheless, this divine responsibility does not invalidate the discussion about the responsibility of a researcher towards 'protecting' her 'informants'. At the same time, Amadou is far from being a research object; his agency is apparent. This fits in a changed world in which the boundaries between researcher and researched have become increasingly blurred, not least because of the mobile phone, as was also expounded upon by Pelckmans (2009). The fact that Amadou called Roos once every few months made Roos' disengagement less probable. For Amadou, this particular unfolding of 'co-creation' of not only the research about his life, but also of his life story itself, has given him several chances that otherwise would have been difficult to reach.

The plan evolved to make a documentary of Amadou's return, which did not (yet) materialize. Whenever Roos apologized for not taking any action, he told her not to worry, as he was patient and understood her family duties, and he told her to have faith in God. In February 2015, Amadou got a Cameroonian passport with the help of a friend, for which Roos made a transfer via Western Union. In August 2016, when Roos was in Togo for another research, she finally asked Amadou to accept a flight from Yaoundé to Lomé. She also asked Moussa, the son of Amadou's brother Boukari, to join her in Lomé, to pick up Amadou at the airport, which he and the family readily accepted. Some days later, Amadou and Moussa took a bus to Niamey (see Figure 11.1). They first stayed in Niamey for ten days, and then, on 28 August 2016, after thirty years of absence, Amadou returned to his village.

The wandering of Amadou

Within the past decade, Amadou has shared his life history with us on several occasions. During our last encounter in Lomé, in March 2019, he recounted his life history once more. His different versions do not have great variations, although in earlier stages, he gave more details about what had pushed him to leave. In this last version, he was very detailed, which is why the narrative of his life that is given here is based on this version, at times almost verbatim. As he was suffering from a headache and fever, he was laying on the couch in a villa rented by Roos, and Roos sat by his side taking notes, interrupting Amadou from time to time to verify some details.



Figure 11.1 Amadou and Moussa buying a bus ticket to Niamey

Amadou was born in 1961 in present-day Niger, in an area that was, at the time, part of Burkina Faso, where his parents had settled after having moved from Mali. He started frequenting the Koranic school in his village at six years old. When he was ten years old, his older sister married, and he followed her and her husband to northern Burkina Faso, where he continued his Koranic education, but he did not like it, so he returned home after a year. By the time he was thirteen years old, a marabout from his village who had gone to Mali paid a visit to the village, and Amadou insisted with his father that he wanted to follow the marabout. His father was reluctant at first, because he had heard that people there killed children to use their body parts in their charms, but Amadou managed to convince his father, and he spent five years with the marabout. They left the village by foot and for their survival, Amadou and the other Koranic pupils went door to door to beg for food, as has commonly been the case throughout the sub-region (Cissé 1992).

After having read the Koran from beginning to end, and then back again from the end to two-thirds of the way through, Amadou left his marabout along with four other pupils. The long-haired teenagers stayed for a year in Ouagadougou, ‘wasting time’ while begging for food and clothes, smoking cigarettes and doing nothing. When he was nineteen, Amadou decided to return home, and he walked the last part from Dori to the village. He arrived in the afternoon, and went up to the well outside the village where he asked some girls for water. He stayed under a tree until evening; having spent so many years away, he could not just walk into the village at any time. Around sunset, he walked towards the village, where his older sister Kadiatou was preparing food, while his mother was praying. When Kadiatou saw him, she cried out: ‘Amadou warte, Amadou warte!’ You have come! His mother could not stop asking: ‘Is it you, is it really you?’

Amadou stayed in the village for a year, wanting to return to Mali to continue studying the Koran, but the opportunity did not present itself. His cousin, a close friend and cousin insisted that Amadou should marry his sister, until Amadou asked his father to go to their father to ask for her hand. In 1979, the marriage between Amadou and Ramata was tied, and she gave birth to a boy in 1980 which was, as Amadou adds, the year that my troubles began, the troubles that bother me up to today’.

In 1981, Amadou (Figure 11.2) left for Ivory Coast, and his older brother Boukari came to visit him in Abidjan some months later, begging him to return home. He replied that he would come soon, and Boukari left, but Amadou never followed him. A year later, Boukari travelled to Abidjan once more to ask him to come back, and stayed with him while he had a small job for three months. They left together, and he bought a cow in Boké and sold it before he returned home. Amadou did not mention this, but upon their return home, migrants often invest their money in something like a cow or a motorbike, which might be a safer way of transporting the income earned abroad.

Amadou was reunited with his wife in the village, and in 1984, she gave birth to a girl. As the year was a very harsh one, they decided to dismantle the village.



Figure 11.2 Amadou in 1981

Amadou went south with his wife, sister, mother and the children, whereas Boukari moved north with the cattle. During the severe droughts in 1985 and 1986, Amadou's children both died. In 1985, he left the village for Niamey to sell a cow and, as he explains, 'there was nothing in Niamey that interested me, I could not stay, I just wanted to leave'. This urge pushed him to find a means of transport to Malanville in Benin, at the border with Niger, leaving with only 100 Francs in his pocket. In Malanville, he negotiated with some cattle traders to take him to Lagos, where he got one Naira for his 100 FCFA: 'I bought a cup of tea and a piece of bread, and my Naira was gone'. The owner of the cafeteria gave him an old mat, which he put in front of a mosque. He stayed there for a month, and he recalls: 'The suffering, without anyone I know, without understanding the language, this is suffering'.

His luck was that a Fulani man gave him some coins every day, and he started to gain some money 'writing the Koran', doing some *maraboutage*. He left to Ogbomoshos, a city in Oyo State in south-western Nigeria, where he stayed with a Fulani trader from Burkina Faso for seven months, until he left again for Lagos. The trader was from the Diallo family, cousins to his family. During this time, he had linked up with the network of this trader who became his client for his *maraboutage*, and he often stayed in Cotonou for one or two months. In the nine years that followed, he travelled between Cotonou, Lagos and Ibadan; he would move each time he earned some money from his *maraboutage*. In 1990, he decided to travel to the harbour in Tema, 30 kilometres east of Accra, in order to meet up with a close cousin from his village, whom he managed to find after asking around with several Fulani people at the mosque, mentioning his cousin's name. The cousin was amazed that Amadou had found him.

After having spent some days with him, Amadou left again to Cotonou, where he had rented a room at the time, until he left for Lagos in 1992, aged thirty-one. Towards the end of Ramadan, he coupled up with two Malian Fulani men who wanted to go eastwards, towards Cameroon. They took several minibuses until they arrived in Calabar, where they took a pirogue. The boat stopped on a small island, and left again in the middle of the night, filled with people and goods. However, the motor gave up during a thunderstorm, and in the pouring rain, surrounded by high waves, the pirogue had great difficulty returning to the island. The next evening, the endeavour was successful, and they arrived in Limbé on the Cameroonian coast around six in the morning. The Cameroonians he encountered at the beach were not easy going, as he summarizes: 'We're being made like sheep'. A Hausa man took him and his travel companions to Douala in his small car, and after some days, the other two men moved on to Gabon. Amadou did not want to continue, as he had found other Fulani who 'did the Koran'. He started earning some money, and when he had accumulated 300,000 FCFA, he paid for a small studio in Douala, where he stayed for about twenty years. He went to Yaoundé two times, in 2005 and 2007, but he did not stay there.

In 2008, two Nigerian friends, among whom one was from his own village, urged Amadou to come to Bamenda. He stayed there for eighteen months, but even though both friends had more or less convinced him to go to Bamenda, they never came

to meet him or to settle in Bamenda themselves, something he was somewhat bitter about. This is where Amadou and Roos met, and Roos introduced Amadou to Adamou and Mirjam. At that time, his *maraboutage* did not yield much revenue, and he travelled back to Douala in 2010 and on to Yaoundé, as a wealthy Fulani man from Guinea had invited him there to work with him. However, this did not go as Amadou expected, as they did not really collaborate; on one occasion Amadou earned 600,000 FCFA, but apart from that, he was only asked to write Koranic texts from time to time. Amadou remarks: 'This is not work, he has millions. All the big people in Yaoundé are in his hands, the ministers, ancient and new. The bastard, he will convince you. He is a friend, but often he is not nice. Life is like that.'

Throughout this period of his travelling, Amadou hardly had any contact with his family members. He did not pay taxes in any of these countries. *Maraboutage* is an informal popular circuit. Hence, we can say that Amadou was invisible to his kin, and also to the official circuits of the state. Solitude and loneliness transpire through his story. What did this do to Amadou emotionally? His resentment towards people who failed him, and the events that followed in our interaction with Amadou, shows a form of despair, but at the same time an art of survival; the art of not being governed as an individual.

Remaining invisible while reconnecting?

In today's interconnected world, it has become increasingly complex to disappear and become completely invisible vis-à-vis one's family members and vis-à-vis authorities. People have to develop new strategies to disconnect in their newly acquired connectivity. While it comforts them to feel more connected to their family members and miss them less, it also brings stress; the stress of hearing the worries and problems of their family members and not being able to do anything, and the stress of having to conceal their own problems and pretend as if everything is going well. This, again, has to do with shame. It is tempting to ask the question whether Amadou himself is better off in Niamey than he was in Yaoundé, which, throughout his trajectory, has been a recurring point of discussion between us researchers.

For Amadou and many migrants alike, remaining invisible comes with high emotional costs, but so does greater visibility. Invisibility, as well as connectivity, are most often coupled with ambivalence. In this sense, the question of whether a man like Amadou is more 'in place' among his family members than in a faraway city would miss the point of what invisibility and mobility actually mean – which is exactly the point that this chapter makes.

Amadou's displacement has nearly been an invisible displacement; after he left Ghana, where he had some family members, his family did not hear from him for several years. After he reached Cameroon, he encountered some Fulani from Niger, and also one person from his village. Through this person, he finally got the phone numbers of two sons of his older brother, and the contact was more or less re-established.



Figure 11.3 People greeting Amadou upon his return to his birth village

However, it was only when someone physically moved to Niger to actively search for his family that the contact gradually materialized. In this respect, the researchers themselves are a certain technology of connectivity, as we discussed earlier. On several occasions, Amadou emphasized that he had met other people from Niger, even from his village, but that in all those years, no one had ever travelled up to his village to convey his greetings. He did and does not cease to express his gratitude to Roos for this.

When he was sixty-five years old, after thirty years of absence, Amadou returned to his village, at the prayer of *makthoub* at sunset, and found the house crowded with people (Figure 11.3). He related:

Men, women, children ... I only cry! You, you who are old, how do you cry now, I am someone who has left for thirty years. I left when I was young. When I left, Zeinabou had only one child! Just before we arrived, Moussa told me 'don't cry', but I only cry. So, this is my life, until today, I have not had the chance, I have been harmed. Since I was ten years old, I have never had the chance to stay in the village for more than two years.

After having spent some weeks in the village, Amadou visited his two older sisters who had moved to other villages, and then he settled in Niamey. The climate change did not improve his weak health situation, and he fell ill for about six months. In 2017, a marriage was tied with a girl from his village who was 'given' to Amadou by her father, and she gave birth to their son in 2018.

Being reunited with his closest family members did not only bring joy; they also expressed their expectations of him. When he and his brother Boukari visited their

eldest sister, she assured Amadou that he would be dead to the family if he ever disappeared again. What could be interpreted as a warning, or possibly her fear of another extended period of his physical absence, appeared to be not so far from the truth. As his *maraboutage* does not yield many results, it is difficult for Amadou to let go of the idea of travelling. He mainly gets by with the support of his nephews Moussa and Housseini, and with a casual gift from other family members. In one of the many audio exchanges on WhatsApp with Roos in the past years, Moussa talked about the pressure of feeding so many family members on the basis of his earnings, and explained that they do have wealthy family members to whom Amadou could turn in theory. In practice, this does not happen, as Amadou has too much pride to ask for their help, something for which Moussa respects Amadou. Not long after his return, Amadou was ill at ease with his situation, and between 2017 and 2019 he often sent Roos voice messages through WhatsApp in which he spoke of leaving for a few months to ‘find something’.

In March 2019, Roos invited Amadou and his nephew Moussa to spend a week with her in Lomé, and Amadou revealed his plans to her to find a room to rent and stay in Lomé for some months, visit his cousin in Accra, and earn some money before returning to Niamey towards the end of Ramadan. Moussa expressed his unhappiness with Amadou’s wish, even though Amadou insisted that he could never stay out of Niamey for more than two or three months, especially because he felt the desire to be close to his child. Like Moussa, other close family members had been opposed to his plan. In one of their private conversations, Moussa told Roos that upon hearing that they would meet Roos in Lomé, Amadou’s sister Zeinabou had exclaimed that Amadou would certainly go back to Douala.

However, once again, Amadou’s plans did not materialize. Because of his worries about how to make a decent living and his decision to ‘find something’ in another country yet again, Amadou did not sleep the night before his travels to Lomé. After the long bus ride from Niamey to Lomé, he fell ill after his arrival. When he felt somewhat better, he headed towards a mosque in a certain neighbourhood to meet a Fulani from Niger who could help him with a room. However, on the way, he fell ill again, which pushed him to decide to call off the plan altogether and return to Niamey with Moussa. When he explained that he would go back to Niamey with Moussa, he was full of sadness, but as a recurrent theme in all his conversations, he vowed: ‘This is how God has wanted it to be’.

Reasons for vanishing: adventure, shame and ‘*mauvais sort*’

Amadou’s story has captured our interest for many different reasons, and, as has become clear, it has also become intertwined with our own lives. Therefore, a reflection on the role of the researchers cannot be omitted, to which we return below. However, Amadou is one among thousands of people who leave their home as a coping strategy. Even though Amadou introduced himself in 2008 as a ‘tourist on the

African continent', which resembles the adventurer presented by Bredeloup (2013), there are also other reasons and motives for his extreme mobility, which are more subtle. As also mentioned above, there are indications that many people do not want to return home, because they have not succeeded in life (Collyer 2007; De Bruijn and van Dijk 2003); instead of having to deal with feelings of shame and dependence on a daily basis, people prefer to continue a life in relative isolation. By considering such mechanisms, we do not want to argue that this is necessarily the case for Amadou, but these factors are not negligible in his life.

Amadou attributes his long exile from his village to the 'work' of his enemy. His narrative of exile is similar to what a character in Ekwensi's novel *Burning Grass* (1962) experienced, and described as 'the wandering disease' or *sukugo* in a Nigerian dialect of the language of the Fulani, Fulfulde. Amadou believes that one of his cousins has prevented him from returning home. Since his time in Ivory Coast, he has been having dreams about this cousin, and once he was in Douala, he saw his suspicion confirmed in a dream in which the cousin carried a handgun. This dream made him understand that this was his enemy, and he immediately realized that this was also the reason for his long absence from home.

Whereas the context of socio-economic, political and climatic hardships are factors in the constant mobility of individuals like Amadou, mobility is influenced by many more factors, like the practice of adventure seeking as a normality in the process of growing up. Moreover, a feeling of shame seems to guide people in their choices of mobility and immobility; they sometimes prefer to live in isolation from their families, staying invisible, instead of having to face the fact that their own living conditions are well below those of the people around them.

Amadou's state of deprivation was explained by his nephew Moussa. Moussa judged that Amadou's refusal to turn to his wealthier cousins for help did not make things easier for Amadou. Moussa described this as *yaage*, which means shame in Fulfulde.

Although shame is not confined to Fulani groups, it is certainly a principal 'marker' that plays a large role in interactions and relations among Fulani groups in the Sahel region that we have been following for several decades. Shame is a deep emotion in Fulani life. It guides taboos on social relations, and it guides where a person can go. As De Bruijn and van Dijk (1995) have analysed, it is also related to wealth and not having wealth in Fulbe society. Being poor is shameful. This deep emotion, that may lead a Fulani woman or man to deny her or his own identity, can inform decisions to leave their kin in order not to reveal their poverty.

Nevertheless, even though we may be uncomfortable with the inexplicable, Amadou's own analysis of his 'troubles' needs to be recognized here. When he met with his cousin, who had difficulties recognizing him at first, the cousin exclaimed: 'It is only God who has brought you here.' According to Amadou, this was once again an implicit confirmation that the cousin had never believed that Amadou would return home. As mentioned earlier, according to Amadou, the '*mauvais sort*' or bad luck that was given to him by his cousin is the source of his prolonged exile.

It remains an unanswered question whether this cousin has been the driving force of Amadou's mobility from the beginning, and there are no answers as to the extent to which Amadou has experienced his mobility as a life in exile throughout his different life stages. What is intriguing in Amadou's mobile life path is the way in which he has presented and represented his life throughout the years, and his personal narrative to come to grips with his own story, in other words his 'memory work'. Clearly, at this moment in his life, he considers that he has not been able to achieve what he had wanted to achieve from the onset, and he has lived a hard life. He is grateful that he has been reconciled with his family after so many years, and his close family members are also grateful for the chance to have him in their midst. However, the (emotional) suffering continues; even though it seems to be consoling for Amadou to be close to his family members, it seems to be upsetting to continuously face his situation of economic deprivation vis-à-vis the people with whom he grew up, and who are better off today. It gives him a feeling that he does not really count, and that his life has not yielded what it should have.

Reflections on invisibility

Despite being increasingly connected, highly mobile persons like Amadou remain invisible. When Amadou fell ill in 2018, Moussa complained in a voice message to Roos that Amadou stays in his room in Niamey for most of the time. By doing this, he more or less chooses to be invisible to his kin. According to Moussa, the fact that Amadou hardly ever moves his body harms his physical health. The feeling of shame that renders migrants invisible can be coupled with an invisibility from within; the internal reason for this invisibility is encapsulated in the feeling of shame that one has not yet reached one's aims.

The more obvious layer of visibility is related to recognition as a citizen. States might consider individuals such as Amadou as non-citizens, but this is not the whole story. In his life story, we can discern different levels of visibility, first of all vis-à-vis state actors: he was born in the borderlands between Burkina Faso and Niger, and he has moved throughout several West African countries for three decades. Of course, he came into contact with authorities on several occasions; in Cameroon, he carried a Cameroonian identity card like most others. He went through the process of acquiring a Cameroonian passport, which allowed him to travel by air, but also incited the border police to make him pay for not having the right stamp upon his travel from Lomé to Niger in 2016 – a hassle which Moussa was spared, who travelled with his Nigerien identity card. It goes without saying that Amadou's Nigerien identity card was produced in Niamey shortly after his return.

Even though Amadou might exist in the administrative layers of two countries, he is probably foremost part of communities that have no borders but relate to other social circles – in the case of Amadou that of the Muslim world. As a marabout, Amadou does exist in a religious world that has no frontiers. However, we can question his visibility in this non-state community as well. As became clear from his life

story, he did not really have success as a marabout, in that it has not given him lasting economic success, and hence did not give him visibility in that sense.

Adding a more psychological layer, it is worth considering whether a person like Amadou is visible in his own view. Who is he? He has taken on a personal narrative in which he explains to himself why he is displaced. For Amadou, back in 2008, the narrative of adventurer or tourist was attractive, whereas in 2019, his life of mobility is much more framed as being caused by a '*mauvais sort*', the work done by his cousin. Moreover, he is part of a cultural system in which shame plays a central role, which, in its extreme form, can destroy individuals, and even lead people to commit suicide, the most extreme form of invisibilization (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2003).

In this chapter, we have attempted to understand invisibility not only in an instrumental way, but also in emotional and spiritual ways. As we have seen in Amadou's story, there are cases when invisibility is partly imposed by the person himself. This mixture of shame, the exterior context and the cultural frame, works like a vicious cycle, and can in some ways also be considered '*mauvais sort*'. This 'cultural' invisibility is partly people's own choice, but it is also partly inherent to their cultural context that pushes them to become invisible. In this search of 'lost' Fulani, there are some who really disappear, others who become successful and others who remain poor, and halfway connected. These mobile lives, however, are temporary situations, always in transit.

Amadou's story and its contribution to the debates on mobility in the Sahel

Migration and mobility are not new phenomena. In line with age-old practices in West African societies, where young people have little opportunities to start making a living, they leave their homes in search of wealth and adventure, building up wealth before returning home and settling down (Dougnon 2008; Klute and Hahn 2007; Nyamnjoh 2010). Whereas their stories, and the story of Amadou, can be put in the frame of adventure (Bredeloup 2013) and initiation (Dougnon 2008), they can simultaneously be framed as coping mechanisms in times of duress (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2003). De Bruijn and van Dijk noticed that the semi-nomadic Fulani families with whom they worked in northern Mali 'dissolved' during times of extreme drought. As a coping strategy, the extended families fell apart in ever smaller units, down to individuals going their own way.

Some of the people who migrate reach their destination and find the wealth and well-being that they were looking for. Their stories travel far, and serve as inspiration for others to also undertake the journey in search of better pastures. Whereas in the past, people moved to regional centres such as Abidjan or Lagos, the scope of current migration is larger; people travel greater distances, trying to reach Europe, the Middle East or other parts of the world, which is partly influenced by technological innovation and a proliferation of means and possibilities. Moreover, the intensity of information sharing is denser, and ambitions are also higher to reach

the life that is displayed through different media channels (Pelican 2016; Bredeloup 2013; Buggenhagen 2012; Ferguson 2006). It is also a lot easier to stay in touch with the ones left behind. This connectedness can contribute to people's emotional well-being, but it has also made it more complex to leave one's old life behind and start anew. The connection with home can be established within minutes, implying that people are 'only a phone call away'.

The majority of people who leave their home do this so the intention of returning one day. However, there are many people who never return home from their journey, in some cases because they do not survive, in other cases because they 'get stuck'. On their way to Europe, many Africans stay in Morocco or Turkey and phone home every once in a while, to explain that all is going well, asking for a little patience before they can send money home (Collyer 2007; Schapendonk 2011). Shame and pride seem to play a large role in their considerations of which information to share with 'home'. Moreover, admitting to oneself that one has failed to achieve an aim might break one's spirit, which might as well be the same as not surviving the journey. For the moment, these people have 'failed' economically, and as they return, they would not bring back the wealth they and their families had hoped for, and invested in. This brings with it a set of challenges; for instance, upon returning, migrants who have been deported can be met with ambivalence or even overt disappointment by their social environment (De Latour 2001; Lecadet 2016). So, as much as economic and administrative boundaries can be an obstacle for migrants to return, mental and mystical boundaries also play a role in situations of immobility, as we have also seen in Amadou's story.

Authors like Loftsdóttir (2004) and Boesen (2007), who have studied former nomadic pastoralist Fulani in urban areas in Niger, including Woodaabe groups, have provided interesting insights into these people's ways of interweaving their mobile mind-set with their city life. For instance, Woodaabe urban workers considered their stay in the city as a temporary interruption, necessary for rebuilding their herds in a later stage of their life. They did not seem to construct houses, but rather dwelled in provisional places before moving on. Even though the idea that one's settlement in a new environment is provisional is common for migrants throughout the world (De Bruijn et al. 2001), this 'temporariness' is constant for the individuals and families on whom this chapter is based. The image of temporariness can serve to bridge people's hopes and imaginations, and the harsh reality of their everyday lives. Amadou also has a mobile mind-set. Although his family members complain, they did accept his leaving; apart from the first years when his brother looked for him in Ivory Coast, serious attempts have never been made to reach out to him, until the mobile phone arrived.

Amadou's story adds to our understanding of the reasons to be mobile, giving space to both the agency of the migrant and the constrained circumstances in which this happens. His itinerary, his life history is exemplary as it reveals the experiences and personal narratives of those people who have not achieved what

they aspired for. They live a life in the margins, and their invisibility is not only imposed by the state or society in which they live, but is also, to a certain extent, self-imposed. Considering this in relation to notions of shame and dignity, spelling out Amadou's journey contributes to a better understanding of people's agency in seeking invisibility, a necessarily constrained form of agency in the frame of an enduring experience of hardship (De Bruijn and Both 2018). For Amadou to deal with crises, his personal crises but also the general societal crises like the droughts, his feelings of duress were translated into mobility. This mobility functioned not only as a strategy to survive, but also to become invisible. His invisibility would leave him as a human being, and would allow him a decent identity. It seems that he has accepted at the end of his life to give in to that identity. Is this because he has no choice, or is it that after all, he does want to be among his own people, have a son and be remembered among his kin?

Note

1 Roos did her fieldwork for her MA thesis 'Moving in and into the Urban: Mbororo Generations Finding and Creating

a Place in Bamenda, Cameroon', supervised by Mirjam, who joined her in Bamenda in December 2008.

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