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Non-migrant, sedentary, immobile, or ‘left behind’? Reflections on the absence of migration

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
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Abstract

This paper explores the absence of migration and different frameworks for analysing it. The aim is to move beyond a sedentary perspective, which does not problematise immobility because it is considered to be the norm and therefore, not something to be explained or scrutinised. The paper starts with a discussion of the terminology denoting the absence of migration. Two opposed interpretations of different examples of the absence of migration are then presented, based on a functionalist and conflict approach, respectively. Finally, the paper discusses post-structuralist approaches, particularly addressing the role of power and hegemony in determining who does and should move. Throughout the text, various empirical cases are discussed, mainly drawn from contexts of transnational migration in West Africa.

Keywords: immobility, West Africa, transnationalism, heuristic devices, analytical frameworks, post-structuralism, gender

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Introduction¹

The recent ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences has led to numerous studies of objects and subjects on the move, following a broader intellectual trend of questioning primordial linkages between people and place and bounded views of society and culture (Urry and Sheller 2006; Vertovec 2007; Malkki 1992). Similar approaches are taken by many Africanists, studying local–global connections and imaginaries and cross-continental migration and mobility (Hahn and Klute 2007; Piot 1999; Salazar 2010; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). However, while accounting for movement, connectivities and flows, certain aspects tend to be left out in such studies, particularly the absence of migration and experiences of immobility.

Non-migration is rarely studied in its own right. While there is an emerging strand of literature analysing the experiences of people ‘left behind’, such studies tend to focus merely on various developmental impacts of transnational migration in regions of origin, for example with regards to education, health, or gender equality (see for example Sevoyan and Agadjanian 2010; Liang et al. 2008; Desai and Banerji 2008). Very little research analyses how people experience and make sense of their existence as non-migrants, and how these aspects relate to a greater socio-cultural matrix of values and expectations informing (im)mobility.

In an edited volume on international migration, immobility and development, Gunnar Malmberg (1997) portrays the absence of migration as the result of sedentarism: most people prefer to stay ‘at home’, which explains why only 3 per cent of the world’s population are international migrants (Malmberg 1997: 21). However, this argument does not seem particularly convincing when considering the increasing number of studies that point to the significance of mobilities and flows in contemporary (and past) human life, ranging across movements and circulations of people (tourists, migrants, refugees, pilgrims, traders), goods (commercial products, images, money), ideas and values, etc. Moreover, Malmberg’s sedentary logic certainly does not explain the absence of migration in transnational and nomadic contexts, where mobility is normal and desirable. Finally, there is a fundamental flaw in Malmberg’s proposition that to migrate means uprooting oneself from one’s home: studies of transnationalism show how migrants maintain close ties and reciprocal relations with their families and communities in their places of origin and thus in a sense, they ‘remain at home’ even when they go abroad.

So how can we explain why people, who are influenced to various degrees by a mobile habitus and ideologies of flows, do not migrate? These considerations compel us to take a closer look at the dynamics that determine who goes and who stays. The following analysis will mainly focus on contexts of transnationalism in West Africa, but also occasionally draw on other examples.

¹ I am grateful for the useful discussion and comments on this paper with colleagues at the International Migration Institute – particularly Agnieszka Kubal, Oliver Bakewell, Robin Cohen and Thomas Lacroix – and with participants at the workshop ‘Southern Spaces in Movement’ in Bamako, Mali, where this paper was presented in January 2011.

1 Conceptualising the absence of migration: heuristic devices

In the following, we will take a closer look at the terminology that researchers use to denote the absence of migration. The different terms tend to carry a certain normativity, which may bias the way we collect and analyse data on the absence of migration. It is therefore important to reflect on the meaning of the terms we use to denote our subjects of study, because they guide our observations and interpretations.

1.1 *Sedentarism vs. immobility*

In a binary sense, these two terms imply, respectively, a positive and a negative normative characterisation of the absence of migration. Thus, they constitute two opposed ideal types, or ‘worldviews’. From a sedentarist perspective, the absence of migration is the norm and the ideal. In contrast, construing the absence of migration in terms of immobility may imply a different normativity, whereby migration is considered normal and desirable; in this perspective, the absence of migration is an undesirable condition. In a sedentarist worldview the absence of migration is the ideal, whereas from a contrasting point of view, the absence of migration may be just a means to facilitate mobility, rather than being an end in itself. We can consider the following examples of people who don’t move so that others can move:

- 1) **Slaves working the fields of nomads and traders.** For example, nomads in Niger move between oases, which are inhabited by immobile lower social classes (Retaillé 1998). And historically, Soninke itinerant traders had slaves working on their fields in the Senegal River Valley, so agricultural output was thus complemented by revenues from trading expeditions, allowing the Soninke to accumulate wealth and power (Manchuelle 1997).
- 2) **The ‘migration industry’, which facilitates international migration** (Castles 2004; Castles and Miller 2009). For example, migration lawyers, banks, travel agencies, and bus companies need to be immobile so that migrants can locate them when they want to transfer remittances, seek legal support, travel, etc. This also includes brokers, advertising jobs to migrants, helping them obtain documents and papers to travel, and housing them abroad.
- 3) **Global care chains.** Defined as ‘a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring’ (Hochschild 2000: 131), global care chains may enable primary caregivers to migrate because some people stay and look after their children or other family members.² Particularly in the case of West African women, being relieved of caring responsibilities may enable a rural dweller to move to the city to earn a living or pursue education; or it may enable a female trader to go abroad to source goods to sell.

Meanwhile, as Denis Retaillé (1998) has strongly argued, such ideal types tend to be oversimplified and misleading. Criticising the distinction between sedentary and nomadic spaces, he argues that such stereotypes are typically based on the conception of sedentary

² cf. example from Mali on page 8.

space as well-organised and hierarchical, a divided and material object; while nomadic space is seen as open to anything possible, providing adventure. Nomadic space is thus distinguished as a specific area that can be isolated from the surrounding geography, based on its particular characteristics, such as aridity. Retaillé's research shows that this is not actually the case, as nomadism is socially structured and organised, and is not just a technical adaptation to ecological circumstances. The dichotomy of the two types of spaces is therefore flawed.

While sedentarism is currently being deconstructed by the social sciences, it might also be worthwhile considering whether those people who we argue are largely guided by a mobile habitus,³ at the same time subscribe to certain values that might be considered 'sedentary'. Consider for example, why transnational migrants' bodies are often returned back 'home' to the place of origin to be buried – why is it so important for people who voluntarily migrated and whose mobility is often celebrated as a privilege, to return to 'the soil' they came from? Are romantic notions of homeland and rootedness after all important, even in mobile cultures?

1.2 'Left behind'

This expression has an immediate negative connotation, as it seems to indicate someone who is unable to migrate and who is deprived. It implies that someone else has migrated and prior to departure, he or she was part of a social unit, which he/she has now 'left behind'; hence the focus in analyses of 'the left behind' tends to be the communal (meso) level, particularly the household which the migrant has left behind, but also wider communities from where migrants have departed (cf. Toyota et al. 2007).

Yet, being 'left behind' does not necessarily imply a pitiful situation, but can also be construed as a privilege, which is made possible by migration. In this sense, migration is the means to an end – the end being, not having to move. This would apply to contexts where migration is perceived as a household or survival strategy: some people migrate so that others can stay behind. In this sense, migration facilitates non-migration, enabling people to stay under difficult circumstances.

Considering the advantages of being 'left behind' brings us to reflect on the status that may be associated with being sedentary or, 'sitting'. With enough social and financial capital, a person can remain sedentary and have other mobile people bring them resources from outside so that they don't have to move themselves. There is power in sitting: kings used to sit on their thrones, sending out explorers to bring back wealth and strategic insight; a chief often sits, while his subjects stand; at the universities, we have the so-called research chair (professorship), a notion which indicates sitting construed as a privilege, invoking the image of the powerful academic researcher, who sits in the office and gets other people to come for meetings or to bring data from the field or lab for analysis. Paolo Gaibazzi (2010) describes the complex semantics of 'sitting' in a translocal Soninke community in the Gambia, as follows:

In the Soninke language, when talking about migration, nan taaxu means to stay or to stop 'travelling' (tere), where travelling can be approximated as international migration. Literally, nan taaxu means to sit down or to take a seat;

³ I borrow the term mobile habitus from a recent lecture by Mirjam de Bruijn (de Bruijn 2010).

by semantic extrapolation, it can also mean to settle down, to become emplaced or be founded (of a village, a household, etc.), and to take office as chief, imam, household head, president, and so on. Even the physical act of sitting can convey this sense of becoming established and achieving social recognition. Offering a seat to a visitor is an act of hospitality and respect, the acknowledgment of the social presence of the guest and the first step towards establishing or continuing a social relation with him or her (...) To 'sit' is to establish relations with both close and distant people, and to strive to be socially recognised as someone who is staying legitimately and purposefully (Gaibazzi 2010: 14).

1.3 Non-migration vs. immobility

Non-migration is more than, or different from, being 'left-behind'. This term can for example be applied to contexts from where nobody has ever migrated and therefore, are not 'left behind'. This term appears to broaden the scope of analysis of the absence of migration. Yet, the term may also exclude certain aspects: because the term migration tends to be applied to movements across international borders, the term non-migration would tend to imply the absence of such cross-border movement – which then ignores the fact that many other forms of mobility may still be practised by non-migrants. In this sense, the term immobility is analytically more versatile than non-migration, since it applies to other forms of movement, besides international border crossing, of varying geographical scale, and it addresses social mobility as well. Hence, the term immobility does not necessarily carry the normative connotation that opposes it to sedentarism, as described earlier in this section. Analytically, the term can have the opposite advantage of being very encompassing. Carling uses the concept of 'involuntary immobility' to refer to a condition where migration aspirations are not matched by any ability to migrate (Carling 2002). While current political/legislative barriers to immigration are a significant cause of this condition, more widespread desires to migrate probably also contribute to the increasingly observed gap between aspirations and abilities to migrate. The way contemporary forms of globalisation promote and disrupt mobilities is therefore important to bear in mind when analysing the absence of migration.

It is difficult to talk about migration and the absence thereof, without being normative or adding a value judgement. The above terminology on the absence of migration represents various heuristic devices – in some cases in the form of binary stereotypes, as with nomadism and sedentarism – which may be useful for analytical clarity. They can provide a focus for our observations in the field, helping us to identify and compare various examples of the absence of migration; they may also contribute to the development of more nuanced conceptual frameworks; or simply kick-start a debate on the topic of the absence of migration. Meanwhile, they tend to oversimplify complex realities and disguise contested meanings and experiences related to the absence of migration. Indeed, judging whether a person is 'left behind' to manage a transnational household, or is 'involuntarily immobile' and stuck in a social moratorium with no possibilities for social or geographic mobility, is a subjective matter.

2 The absence of migration in transnational contexts: conflict and functionalist interpretations

A transnational perspective brings out this complexity of meanings and experiences related to the absence of migration. For example, an undocumented African migrant living in precarious conditions in Europe may consider migration as a sacrifice on behalf of the household or community left behind. Hence, from this perspective, the people 'left behind' appear to be in a relatively privileged position, because they are being supported from outside, enabling them to continue to lead a normal life. Yet, a different understanding may emerge when we talk to the people 'left behind', who don't necessarily feel privileged but may consider themselves deprived and immobile: they might also want to migrate and to be seen as the heroes of their community (Jónsson 2007). Here, the idea that some people leave in order to enable others to stay may be turned on its head, if the stayers perceive that they have to be immobile so that others can migrate. I can exemplify this with a case from my fieldwork in Mali (2006–7). One of the young men I interviewed in the Kayes region explained that he was being 'bribed' by his migrated brothers (who were living without documents in France) to stay in the village and look after their ageing grandmother and the house. They bought him smart new clothes and when he started talking more seriously about running away to America, they bought him a brand new motorbike. Later, they arranged a marriage between this younger brother and a local woman. Unfortunately, the woman cheated on him before the wedding; but a few months later, he was married to another local woman instead. Here, it seems the migrants were imposing immobility on this young man, since their absence required his presence. The migrants themselves would probably claim the contrary: they left in order to support and maintain the rural family, and the so-called 'bribes' were in fact hard-earned gifts and remittances to their younger brother. The above example alludes to the contradictions and conflicts inherent in experiences and depictions of the absence of migration.

In the following, we will begin to unpack some of the complexities involved in analysing the absence of migration, by drawing on two divergent approaches in the social sciences, namely a conflict and a functionalist approach.⁴ Put very simply, a functionalist perspective would focus on the role of immobility in reproducing the social structure. In a conflict perspective, immobility is a result of the impositions of people or institutions with the power to determine who gets to go and who gets to stay. These divergent understandings might be applied emically – that is, by the people themselves who are defining, imposing, and/or experiencing immobility. They can also be applied in an etic sense, where they represent a framework of analysis for research.

Let us first consider the example of the absence of migration in settings with strong transnational ties, where the migration of young men is a kind of rite of passage, a necessary step on the path to independence, maturity and adult manhood (cf. Kandel and Massey 2002; Ali 2007; Jónsson 2007). In this context, we need to explain why some young

⁴ Emile Durkheim (1895) is considered the founder of functionalism. He argued that social facts have a function in the social structure and that individuals are external actors to those structures. Karl Marx (1859) offered an alternative to functionalism, arguing that conflict is not a social pathology, but the motor of social change and progress. Building on his argument, proponents of the conflict approach argue that no groups are harmonious, and they view conflict as a struggle for power and resources. These two approaches are considered the foundations of social theory and have been widely applied and developed, particularly in the social sciences.

men remain non-migrants. From a functionalist perspective, these youngsters may be considered as “active stayers” (Gaibazzi 2010) – i.e. they are household members who are left in charge of the family, who manage the remittances, and are responsible for the fields, the house, and other properties. This explains the functionality of non-migration in this transnational context, where ‘staying behind’ is integral to reproducing a social structure that is shaped around a tradition of migration. However, we still need to explain why these young men agree to stay behind in the face of conflicting cultural values and expectations which privilege a livelihood based on migration over a sedentary lifestyle and maintain a strong cultural imperative to migrate. While not necessarily being contradictory to a functionalist approach, a different way to analyse the situation is to apply a conflict perspective. By focusing on conflict instead of function, we may discover that these youngsters actually want to go, but are unable to do so, for example due to family pressure or restrictive immigration policies (cf. Jónsson 2007; Diagne et al. 2010). On the other hand, we might realise that the young men in fact want to stay, but are constrained by the prevailing ideal of migration, which makes a local livelihood a less prestigious life trajectory – so in this case, the conflict over the absence of migration is caused by the dominant ideal, which suppresses and devalues non-migratory aspirations (like farming or schooling).

A second case of the absence of migration that we may consider from different perspectives is the context of harsh climatic and environmental conditions, where it is difficult for a household to survive only through local subsistence means, and where some people are ‘left behind’ while others migrate (Jónsson 2010). From a functionalist perspective, we may argue that some people are able to stay put in difficult environments because migrants are supporting them from outside, for example through seasonal or relay migration.⁵ This is typically referred to as a household or livelihoods perspective on mobility, where local livelihoods are supported by revenues from migration (Hampshire and Randall 1999; Hampshire 2002; Olwig and Sørensen 2002). Hence, the migrants and the non-migrants work together to achieve an overall stability of income and a reduction of risk for the non-migrants, as depicted by the theory on New Economics of Labour Migration (cf. de Haas 2007: 34–6). A conflict perspective, in turn, would examine the role of power in determining which people stay and which people leave in contexts of climatic instability and environmental degradation. Carr (2005) did a study of this in northern Ghana and discovered that young men emigrated first from the environmentally degraded area, whereas elderly males only started leaving the rural area ten years later. Drawing on Foucauldian analysis, Carr showed that the immobility of elderly males was related to the fact that they were clinging on to their authority as household heads and their privileged access to land as village elders. Their status and privileges would have dropped significantly were they to move to the urban context. The young men, however, saw migration as an opportunity to escape these constraining local structures. Hence, the absence of migration may be an attempt to maintain a privileged position in a known social hierarchy, rather than moving to an unknown environment where one’s status is not recognised, whereby one would lose the ‘insider advantage’ (cf. Fischer et al. 1997: 76).

⁵ Relay migration in West Africa usually entails the first-born son in a household migrating for a period abroad, and upon his return, he is replaced by the next person down the generational line, and so on.

3 A post-structuralist view on the absence of migration: deconstructing immobility and power

A conflict perspective does not assume that members of society are merely working for a greater good, which is to keep reproducing society and maintain their functional roles within this 'machine'. Rather, people are struggling for (and against) power, and it is the outcome of these struggles which determines who migrates and who does not. This seems a useful corrective to the sometimes static framework of functionalism, as it stresses the heterogeneity of values and struggles over access to power and resources, and contests the image of social structures, such as households and villages, as being harmonious, well-functioning units.

However, the basic problem with heuristics and structuralist approaches to analysing the absence of migration, as presented above, is that they tend to give the impression that this is an immutable condition, diametrically opposed to migration. Meanwhile, the absence of migration may only be temporary and not a permanent condition. A person who is 'left behind' might have originated from somewhere else, leaving others behind – that is, an immigrant who has stopped moving (cf. Berthet 2011). A person can also become mobile after a period of immobility, whereby the one condition turns into the other - for example, when reaching a certain age or obtaining a certain position in a social hierarchy. And finally, there is the example of 'immobile migrants', who are momentarily stuck, as they are unable to reach their planned destination, for whatever political, economic or interpersonal reasons (cf. Berriane et al. 2011). These examples show that it is important to avoid considering non-migration and migration as exclusive categories and perhaps rather, to consider them as dynamic processes.

To capture these dynamics and complexities, it is helpful to apply insights from post-structuralist approaches. Power and conflict are not necessarily as overt and tangible as the classic conflict perspective tends to convey (just as resistance can be a very subtle act). Concepts like hegemony and discourse draw attention to the fact that certain forms of immobility may be socially constructed, although they appear as natural, normal and even desirable. Liisa Malkki (1992) clearly showed how the entrenchment of a sedentary worldview, particularly in Western societies, naturalises the link between territory and identity, and in turn, pathologises territorial displacement – and by extension, it might be added, a mobile habitus and livelihood. In certain normative contexts, immobility may be valued for specific gender and age groups, while other groups are expected to be mobile. Such normative constructions may maintain a subtle distribution of power and privilege, which may not be obvious to people who have internalised such values. At the same time, people may circumvent these norms related to immobility – but their agency may be deliberately suppressed or simply overlooked. The point here is that the meaning and experience of the absence of migration is tied to certain dominant socio-cultural values and expectations. This tends to create a bias in perception, which is often reproduced by researchers and policy makers, who either ignore the mobility or immobility of particular groups of people, or who construe counter-discourses and actions either as deviant, or as the result of these people's lack of agency. By questioning why the absence of migration in some cases is assumed or expected, we can begin to deconstruct the discourses that make certain forms of immobility invisible or natural.

A pertinent example may be referred to as ‘gendered immobility’: the dominant, naturalised link between a particular gender and immobility. There appears to be a continuous male bias in migration research, which portrays men as more mobile than women (Lutz 2010; Mahler and Pessar 2006). Commonly, men are portrayed as voluntary migrants and women (as well as children and the elderly) as voluntary non-migrants, and the significant participation of women in mass migrations is either ignored or ascribed to a lack of agency on the part of women. Hence, despite the feminisation of migration being recognised as a global tendency, the understanding that women generally prefer to stay at home still prevails (Lutz 2010; Carling 2005).

A primordial explanation of why women are thus associated with immobility may be based on the idea that in the ancient hunter-gatherer societies, the early human form of social organisation, women would nurture the children at home, while men would go out and hunt and look for new land/territory; this could then be considered the historical basis of the link between womanhood and non-migration. Women who migrate are thus considered to be acting outside of their natural gender role and rather, ‘behaving like men’ (Carling 2005: 4). This primordial explanation is carried over into current functionalist interpretations of the role of families in migration, where migration is seen as a functional aspect of the gendered division of labour within the household, where it is the woman’s responsibility to provide care for the family at home, while the man is responsible for the material support of the family by bringing in resources from outside.

The above explanation is speculative and based on ‘common-sense’ ideas, which tend to be tautological – it is not clear what sort of evidence would prove such explanations to be true, or false. Such primordial explanations draw on biased portrayals of the human past, whereby gender roles constitute ancient, natural arrangements, hard-wired into modern brains. Among other things, such reasoning ignores the fact that women in virilocal societies, of which there are several examples in human history, automatically have to move during their life-course, since they relocate to their husband’s household upon marriage (cf. Coquery-Vidrovitch and Raps 1997: 73). Even if in ancient times men were indeed more active movers than women, ancient gendered labour division can hardly explain today’s gender ideologies, considering the significant social changes in labour and (re)production since the days of hunter-gathering.

It seems more plausible that these stereotypes about gender and mobility are linked to male dominance and privilege in contemporary societies. This brings us to consider the role of power, and particularly hegemony, in examining how gender relations facilitate or constrain mobility. Today, particularly in patriarchal societies, there is still a tendency to associate women with the home, the private space, and men with the public, being the more extrovert and adventurous gender. Hence, in some cultural contexts it is considered inappropriate for women to move about idly in public or explore the outer world. This was evident in my fieldwork in a village in the Senegal River Valley (see Jónsson 2007, 2008). Here, migration was construed as a masculinist project, where going abroad was considered a liminal phase in a ritual passage to manhood. This ideal was highly problematic to young men who couldn’t (or wouldn’t) migrate, as they were considered immature, lazy, and cowardly by their surrounding community – in short, not real men. These immobile young men were referred to as *tenes*, a Soninke adjective meaning, ‘stuck like glue, unable to move’, and young women in the village had written and broadcast a defamatory song about these ‘Tenesy’ (Jónsson 2007: Appendix II). Women in the village, on the contrary, were

expected to stay within the compound and only move about in public if they had a very specific purpose, such as visiting other households, going to their fields, shopping, or fetching water. Women should not simply 'hang around' or go exploring around the village. I quickly learnt this, because my host insisted on having someone accompany me during fieldwork every day in the very safe little village, and my host family found it highly peculiar when, as I came home one day and they asked where I'd been, I replied that I had simply been strolling around the village. This was not appropriate behaviour for a woman. Hence, there is a cultural link between extrovert, exploratory, adventurous behaviour and manhood, while the opposite applies to females. It is easy to see how such cultural notions about intra-village mobility and gender may translate on a much bigger scale, into ideas about gender roles in the context of long-distance, transnational migration. Migration – or, adventure – was thus intrinsically linked with masculinity. This was brought home to me when I conducted a small survey in the village. I asked each respondent how many of their household members were residing abroad and it turned out that the people whom respondents considered as migrants were all men. However, a number of women had also emigrated, particularly to accompany their husbands abroad. But when a woman marries, she is considered part of her husband's household and no longer belongs to the household of her natal family. Local households therefore did not count 'accompanying spouses' as emigrated household members, since they had left with their husbands (Jónsson 2007: 8).

This gender bias is of course easily appropriated by researchers who tend to forget that women in fact do migrate and are often more mobile than their male counterparts like to think – as feminists remind us, observable activities of women are often at variance with cultural ideologies (Ortner 1974). Based on a survey of the literature on female migration in Africa, Sally Findley (1989) argues that, 'Contrairement à l'image populaire, le mariage n'est pas du tout la raison dominante de la migration féminine' (Findley 1989: 59).⁶ She provides numerous examples of female migration to cities in Africa, including young women who move to urban households to work as domestics; women fleeing undesired marriages; women joining their husbands in the city; migration for schooling; or particularly in West Africa, itinerant traders. Historian Marie Rodet (Rodet 2008) goes further in deconstructing the naturalised link between womanhood and immobility in the West African context. The French colonial administration simply did not acknowledge that women could and were partaking in labour migration, both because women were not subsumed in the framework of forced colonial labour, and because they did not have to pay colonial tax. Moreover, the administrators' analyses of migration were based on Eurocentric assumptions that imposed the ideals of the nineteenth century bourgeois family onto the African context in which they were working. Hence, argues Rodet, female migration and generally, women's work and experiences, was not explicitly recorded in the colonial archives, and a binary opposition was constructed between wage labour and female domestic duties (Rodet 2008: 167–8).

The above studies show us that we need to question the assumption that women indeed prefer immobility and 'staying at home'. Researchers need to recognise the actual current and historical contributions by women to migration, in West Africa and elsewhere. Moreover, there is a need to examine how different social positionings of women affect their possibilities and experiences of migration. While this section has started to deconstruct the supposed absence of migration amongst women, this should not be seen as a

⁶ 'Contrary to the popular image, marriage is not at all the dominant reason for female migration' (own translation).

celebration of ‘female migration’, but rather an attempt at questioning the meaning and appropriateness of such categorisations and the normative labels they are often assigned. Indeed, women’s motives and experiences of migration and immobility largely depend on stratified social factors such as income, education and age.

The global care chains argument contributes to unpacking the category of ‘female migration’, as it reveals how primary care is passed down through hierarchies among women along geographical, economic, and racial lines, across national borders (Hochschild 2000). By taking over the responsibility for care, women who stay behind may enable other women to migrate. Indeed, child fostering is a widespread and highly institutionalised practice in West Africa, which can facilitate migration: ‘Many urban women may leave their children with rural relatives before migrating or relocate them when burdened by the problems of urban living’ (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985: 69).⁷ Care chains may be limited to the national level, as in this example of rural–urban migration, or they may extend to the transnational or trans-regional realm (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2004). Hence, the woman who leaves her child in foster care in West Africa may go abroad to work in the home of a professional woman, who in turn may be able to pursue her career abroad as her children are being looked after at home by the immigrant nanny. Clearly, experiences and understandings of migration and immobility differ in these three instances: the professional woman may perceive staying at home with her children as constraining, as it would inhibit the pursuit of her career. But to the immigrant nanny, who has left her own children behind, migration may entail a loss, as she cannot give love and care to her own children, left at home with other females (Hochschild 2000; Isaksen et al. 2008). Meanwhile, these women at home may consider their duties as stationary care-givers as limiting of their own possibilities for social and geographic mobility. Hence, it is problematic to insist on any essential attributes or motives of female migration or non-migration.

The analysis of gendered immobility may also apply to another example of naturalised immobility: generational or age-specific immobility. As mentioned, migration is often analysed as a rite of passage and tends to be associated with a specific life stage, namely early adulthood. Young children are often not assumed or expected to migrate: they should stay at home and go to school and, if they do migrate, especially for labour, they are commonly perceived and portrayed as the victims of trafficking and exploitation (cf. Thorsen 2007). Similarly, the migration of old people has received very little academic attention. One emerging field of research does focus on retirement migration, but this tends to only apply to Europeans who use their pensions to move abroad (cf. Benson and O’Reilly 2009). Much less appears to be said about elderly migrants in West Africa. In the African context, we might think of migrants moving back to their region of origin to enjoy retirement as an example of the migration of older generations – but this then reinforces the assumption that the migration of elderly people is only return migration and that elderly people do not have the energy or initiative to settle in a new location. Hence, again there is this naturalised link between a certain social category and the absence of migration. Such bias can easily shape research on the presence and absence of migration. Therefore, rather than

⁷ Unlike the connotations of fostering in a Western context, West African fostering is usually not considered inferior to full maternal care; moreover, foster children in West Africa may be passed from poor, rural parents to a more resourceful, urban foster family (see Castle 1995; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). This seems to counter the often negative portrayals of care chains as largely exploitative and emotionally depriving.

building our analysis from biased and static categories, we might want to turn our attention to actual lived experiences and changing cultural representations.

Conclusion

Migration is a highly politicised topic, and the terms we use tend to carry a certain normativity, which can have direct implications for policy and intervention. Some researchers are aware of the problems involved in for example denoting someone a climate refugee or a labour migrant: migrants have different and sometimes changing motivations for moving, which may depend on their cultural background, political circumstances, their personal aspirations, life stage and gender, etc. The complex interaction between the motivations that drive migration means that these processes cannot easily be reduced to a few, narrow policy categories. In turn, at least in transnational contexts, it would seem obvious to point out that the people who do not migrate have just as many and varied reasons for not doing so; but we still seem to be stuck in misleading binaries and static frameworks when attempting to analyse the absence of migration.

This paper has suggested various approaches that may lead us to question and examine the absence of migration. The focus has mainly been on contexts of transnational migration in West Africa, but the scope of study is potentially wider. To give an example, we might apply the different approaches to the absence of migration to analyse a situation where someone has initiated a long-distance move but has run out of money on the way, or been abandoned by smugglers, or been turned away by the authorities at a border crossing, thus preventing the person from reaching the planned destination. Such situations are commonly considered under the label of transit migration – which might seem somewhat misleading, since at the point of analysis, the situation is rather characterised by the absence of migration and by immobility. If we analyse this situation from a functionalist perspective, we might view these people's immobility as contributing to keeping the migration industry alive through their legal or illegal attempts at moving on. Hence, they actually contribute to the reproduction of social structure (whether functional or dysfunctional). From a conflict perspective, we might look into what structures enable these people to move or not, both in their place of origin and in their current environment, and on what basis decisions are made to facilitate or impede their mobility. Finally, applying a post-structuralist approach, we might consider who has the political power to label these people, for example as 'transit migrants', and how hegemonic discourses about this label shape public perceptions and political interventions in these people's situation. Understanding movement and its impact on people and places also requires an understanding of the absence of movement. The analytical tools and approaches discussed in this paper will hopefully inspire and possibly guide more research on the absence of migration.

Finally, as this paper has shown, it is very difficult to capture and analyse the absence of migration without at the same time acknowledging its presence. Arguably, and despite its subtitle, this paper is not really about the absence of migration because in fact, migration appears everywhere in the examples discussed in this text.⁸ The binary opposition of the presence and absence of migration – or indeed, of sedentarism and mobile habitus – is perhaps too artificial, at least in the West African context.

⁸ I would like to thank Elisabeth Boesen for pointing this out.

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