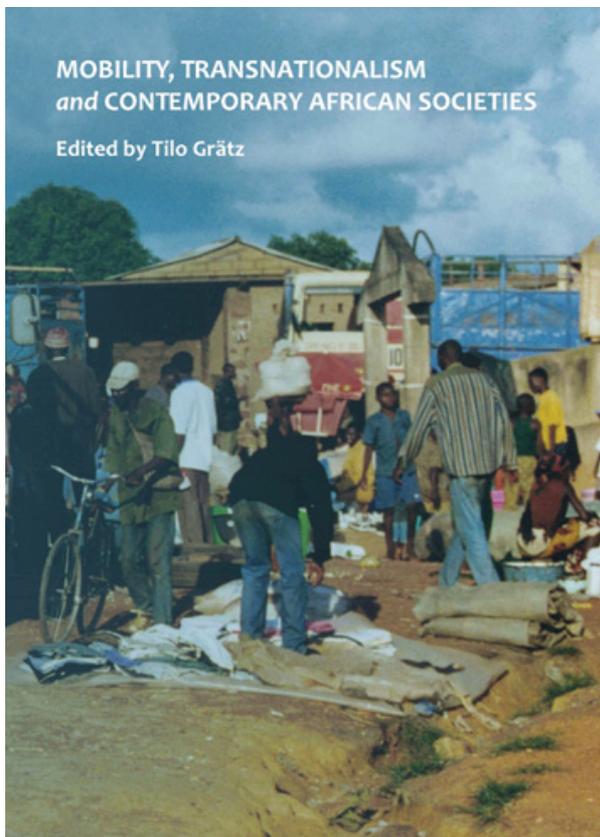


BOOK REVIEW

*Mobility,
Transnationalism
and Contemporary
African Societies*
Tilo Gratz (ed.)

Calvin Walds

Syracuse University
Department of African-
American Studies



*Mobility, Transnationalism and
Contemporary African Societies.*
Edited by Tilo Gratz. Newcastle:
Cambridge Scholars Publishing,
2010.

When I arrived in Accra, Ghana, in June 2013, I was quickly attuned to the omnipresence of mobility. Movement in all forms, in all directions, and at all speeds surrounded me as I headed toward Kasoa, the community I would be living in one hour outside of Accra. The constant presence of mobility in Ghana is reflective of the manifold changes – political, economic, social, cultural, and geographic – occurring across the African continent. African mobility is complex, operating across different scales and actors moving in multiple directions, within nations, across nations and oceans for different reasons. The book *Mobility, Transnationalism and Contemporary African Societies*, edited by Tilo Gratz, informatively explores the complexities of mainly voluntary African migration as a “particular form of mobility” (1) in a variety of contexts – translocal rural-urban to transnational south-south and international south-north migrations – which contribute to the creation of “supra-regional social, political, and economic connections” (1). Implicitly and explicitly, these connections work against state and international policies that obstruct movement or expel migrants while also integrating Africans into the world economy “from below” in informal, even clandestine spaces and modalities beyond what is sanctioned by dominant sociopolitical institutions.

The contributors to the book address the “political and cultural dimensions of migratory linkages,” that is, the “combination of interests and motivations,” with a focus on “issues of citizenship, ethnicity, religiosity, and economy” (2). This advances the conversations on African migration by focusing on the “new livelihoods, social and religious practices and lifestyles created by migrants” (2). Illuminating the flux, ambivalences, and oscillations of migrants who are often “simultaneously incorporated in various societies, moving between moral fields as well as spheres of exchange” (2) enlivens previously static or localized concepts and assumptions regarding the identities and social and ethnic figurations of African societies. In

noting this, the book draws off Nina Glick-Schiller's work on transborder citizens¹. These citizens are individuals who may not have legal rights in more than one country, but who may claim social or cultural citizenship in more than one. Transborder citizenship goes beyond the legal and juridical definition of citizenship, creating not only an expression of identity that crosses borders, but transnational spaces in which one can exist and pursue modes of socialization and relationships beyond the territory of nation-states.

Nina Glick-Schiller notes, in her chapter "Transborder Citizenship: An Outcome of Legal Pluralism within Transnational Social Fields", that to study transnational processes is to "enter a domain in which crucial elements of social, economic, cultural and political life take place across borders but in which nation-states and their borders influence and shape such movements" (32). In an important move, many contributors to Gratz's book, including Ines Kohl, Nadine Sieveking, and Paulo Gaibazzi, among others, emphasize the agency and efficacy of migrants in negotiating transnational domains, which may entail a liminal or marginal living situation due to xenophobia and racism.² In practices that differ according to the geopolitical and cultural context of migration, migrants have undertaken particular strategies. These strategies include "developing new identities," creating "their own infrastructures, such as bars, workshops, teleshops" (e.g. Sebastien Lo Sardo's article), or using religious networks as a "social anchorage" that aids in "both the adaptation of migrants into host societies and guarantee[s] the maintenance of strong links to their countries of origin" (e.g., Michaela Pelican, Ekaterina Shakhbazyan's articles) (4). Such insights make the book an important read for

¹ Glick-Schiller, N. 2005. Transborder Citizenship: An Outcome of Legal Pluralism within Transnational Social Fields. In: Benda-Beckmann, F. V., Benda-Beckmann, K. V. and Griffiths, A. eds. *Mobile People, Mobile Law: Expanding Legal Relations in a Contracting World*. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp. 27-50.

² As exemplified by the recent protests and resistance efforts of African migrants to Israel in the face of xenophobic and anti-African fear and violence, a phenomenon not discussed in the book, but pertinent to a discussion regarding African mobility.

anyone interested in the relationship between transnational migration and the nexus of culture, social life and identity, and politics.

The ten articles that compose the book are organized thematically into three sections: 'Mobility and Modes of Flexible Adaptation,' 'Effects and Limits of Migration,' and 'Transnationalism and Borderline Strategies'. The book's geographical purview includes a range of regions and countries throughout the African continent as the articles work on a variety of scales, from a localized analysis of specific ethnic groups to a nationwide and regional lens. This review will move between the three major thematic points of the text through a brief discussion of each of the articles.

Tilo Gratz's article concerns miners and taxi drivers in Benin, migrants seeking short-term economic opportunities (27). In Benin, mining and taxi-driving are systems of labor organization that migrants can relatively easily enter and gradually integrate into full employment, which can provide the means to "stabilize their situation" (26-7). This ability to achieve stability through an informal enterprise connects to Gratz's larger point: even though gold mining and motor taxi driving are "marked by the influx of numerous income-seeking migrants" (29), this does not mean these enterprises are "incompatible with a high degree of normativity" (29). Further, the presence of multiple ethnicities working together within these enterprises results in an "open informal network of co-workers evolving beyond ethnic ties" despite ethnicity remaining "pertinent to many other sectors of public life and economy" (29).

Such complexities are also evident in Sebastien Lo Sardo's article in which there is an interesting negotiation of presence and absence, materialities and immaterialities in his discussion of Hausa migrants in Belgium and Urban Niger. The flows of materialities, such as "money, media, and various [...] goods, [which] circulate through the same channels" (34, 40). This occurs alongside the movement of people working to produce connections between formerly disparate "urban and

rural” spaces that are now “...filled with material, visual and discursive fragments of distant elsewhere” (34), changing how either space is viewed outside the other. The flowing materialities also come to stand in for and fulfill the social obligations of the people who have migrated elsewhere, producing presence amid human bodily absence. Migrants negotiate space in Belgium, where they forge transnational circulations and seek out ethnic migrant communities. The migrants’ conceptualization of both their home cities and villages and the place of migration is partly based upon how their lives are confined to a “few streets of southern Brussels” (40), which misconstrues the sense of public space and limits social interaction. Migrants, then, occupy a space of geopolitical ambivalence, an in-between state that is “neither in Belgium nor in Niger but in the very channels connecting them” (40). Thus, for those thinking about the contemporary global flow of capital and materialities, it is important to remember the human beings who may live within this flow, residing neither here nor there, live in the non-spaces in-between.

Shifting to the relationship between religious institutions and migration, Ekaterina Shakhbazyan’s article on “Africans in Moscow” explores religion as one of the primary “mechanisms of migrants’ ... adaptation to and socialization in a new environment and [for also] maintaining links with native cultures and home countries” (45). Despite contemporary discussions of the increased secularization of human life, religious institutions still fulfill various social, cultural, and political functions. For migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa living in Moscow, “religious life is not separated from other parts of their life but is interlocked and overlaps with them” (45).

For scholars and students interested in societies that emerge from histories of enslavement and colonialism, Olivier Leservoiser’s article focuses on the Haalpulaar society in Mauritania, a place in which slavery is still a topical issue as the “groups of servile origin are still facing various forms of discrimination... [and are the object of] more and more frequent social conflicts” (59). The groups of servile origin face

matrimonial and religious discrimination and being stereotyped. Additionally, they face contestations over land tenure control. Migrants' agentic roles play a significant role in the emergence of new legitimacies as different political and economic changes occur, including "migrant associations [contributing] to introducing new principles for the management of local affairs which can result in certain people of subordinated status playing a political role" (64). International migrants influence local politics by both supporting "the political goals of social movements" and "introducing new ideas and strategies" (68). These ideas, such as equality, dignity, and individuals skills, then influence and motivate local migrant communities.

Departing one's home country is often an unfulfilled aspiration for individuals stuck in a state of immobility, as discussed in Riccardo Ciavolella's article on the relationship between the FulaaBe, a pastoral Fulani group, and the State in the southern-central region of Mauritania. For the FulaaBe, new forms of mobility are not a success but a "strategy for survival" for coping with "dramatic living conditions" (83). This forces one to recognize how the forms and experiences of mobility transmute unevenly in different geopolitical contexts. The translocal spaces that the FulaaBe communities live in are not "contexts of large and powerful transnational or translocal networks" (83). A paradoxical aspect of the entrenchment of autochthony is that it calls for excluding 'strangers' while stressing the importance of local belonging. Local political elites are simultaneously benefitting from translocal connections and resources coming from supra-local national and international contexts, such as remittances, NGOs, and investments from development agencies. The contemporary marginality of Mauritanian FulaaBe shows that "contemporary translocality and new forms of mobility are only partially linked to African 'cultures of migration' and depend on the logic of inclusion and exclusion to formal and substantial citizenship" (87).

Paolo Gaibazzi's article, "'I'm nerves!': Struggling with Immobility in a Soninke Village (The Gambia)," speaks to the aspirations and frustrations of African youth as

they negotiate a neoliberal world composed of flows and linkages. These unevenly produce states of immobility for certain groups of people, especially those who reside in the Global South. The amplified desire to move is contradicted by an increase in blockages that prevent passages across borders, such as “policies and border enforcement [that] leave narrow opportunities to travel to Europe, America, and other destinations like Angola” (131). Having *nerves* is a desire to migrate from Gambia, particularly to the West, which is seen as a place of opportunity to employ one’s ambitions. Being stuck in a state of immobility in one’s home village can be difficult as the conditions there grow increasingly dire as part of socioeconomic difficulties connected to the larger global political economy. For the Soninke youth, the materialities and places of the West seem to shimmer as they represent novelty and modernity; the names of local communities and social groups take on the names of the West, as emblemized by one Soninke *ghetto* being named Los Angeles. Migration came to be integrated with one’s social worth and ambition. In turn, this produces contemporary subjects in Africa who are at once dealing with transnational pressures and expectations from the position of a local environment.

There are multiple ways one can react to the portrait of life sketched by Gaibazzi, and other authors in the book. Is the drive to move an extension of the human condition, the desire to create one’s own life in the act of movement, or are these *nerves* a symptom of globalizing, neoliberal capital flows that seemingly force individuals around the world to move? The ambitions of these Gambian youth are akin to the ambitions of young people around the world who not only want to provide for their families and communities, but also want to begin envisioning and creating a world of connections, not boundaries. They want to begin envisioning and creating a world of complexities and perspectives that extends beyond the conceptual and political limitations of the still-lingering colonial and imperial ideas that created contemporary global socioeconomic stratification.

Ines Kohl's article titled "Saharan "Borderline"-Strategies: Tuareg Transnational Mobility" explores the transnational mobility of *Ishumar*, a group of the Tuareg pastoral society. This transnational mobility is a relatively recent phenomenon provoked by climatic, political, economic, and cultural changes in which (ex)nomads move within and without the borders of Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Libya. Such mobility can be seen as clandestine as many move without papers, passports, or identity cards. It can also be seen as cosmopolitan as "they see, hear, know, and understand more than their nomadic counterparts who just move in cycles in their relatively bounded territory" (99). The *Ishumar* movement has origins in postcolonial arrangements in the nation states connected to Tuareg, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. This has led to a decrease in the Tuareg's traditional nomadic way of life in addition to making life in the Sahara unstable and risky. The *Ishumar* movement "have become crucial to a form of Tuareg youth culture and constitute a certain initiation rite..." (94).

Just as the *Ishumar* movement can "go in all directions" (94), it also moves between conceptual categories as it is predicted on the specific situation of the individual in movement. Thus, some who undertake it can be described as seasonal workers, others as political or economic refugees. This evasion of easy categorization is an important point as Kohl emphasizes that the terms refugee or migrant cannot fully account for the consistent movement of the *Ishumar*, writing that "their mobility can be described as partly cyclical, partly situational, sometimes seasonal, sometimes permanent, but always irregular" (96). The *Ishumar* are not just passengers in 'transnational illegal movements' but agents, employing borderline strategies — e.g., desert knowledge, kinship affiliations, and multiple national identities — in organizing and delivering the transportation of passengers and goods through the Sahara desert (100). This agency underpins the mobility of the *Ishumar*, a mobility that is not determined solely by 'push-pull factors' or socio-structural conditions. It is a decision of the migrants themselves. Transnational mobility for the *Ishumar* and

many others on the African continent is not the exception or an undesirable consequence of sociopolitical phenomena. Instead, it is the rule. Movement constitutes normality. It is culture, a way of being in the world in which one has “multiple citizenships, multiple places of residence, and multiple strategies of moving” (104).

Nadine Sieveking’s article, “Mobility and the Gendered Dynamics of Migration –Challenging German Development Cooperation in Ghana and Mali,” similarly addresses conceptual issues behind defining contemporary African mobility and connects the ways mobility is understood to the discourses surrounding and the perceptions of, development – which can include economic, social, and political transformations – and gender norms and relations. Sieveking employs qualitative research methods to elucidate the heterogeneity of perspectives on migration and the contradictions between these different perspectives. She works to go beyond the predominate focus on international migration with policy-oriented debates. Instead, she analyzes the gendered dimensions of discourse and policy surrounding translocal and transnational mobility patterns. There is a disproportionate focus on the economic dimensions of development within policy-related debates and a lack of focus on the social transformation processes, such as the “aspirations for social mobility attached to specific spatial mobility strategies and the changing of social relations through transnational migration” (139).

The dichotomization of internal and external migration in which one studies them as discrete phenomena is incorrect, for this denies how both flows are interrelated and “produce a view of a selective reality that cannot account for the multi-faceted meanings of mobility...” (147). This is made clear when one notes how there are different mobility patterns of men and women from the same locality, as well as the notion of “stepwise migration,” which refers to how one can migrate from a rural area to an urban area. Separately studying internal and external migration makes sense from a Eurocentric perspective: “Why would the EU be interested in

investigating migration dynamics as long as the latter are constricted within the boundaries of the respective African countries or regions?” (146). Internal migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, is still perceived negatively as a result of the “poverty driven rural exodus” and “uncontrolled urbanization” (146). Conversely, international migration is perceived in terms of its economic potential for “financial remittances,” which can counterbalance “brain drain” (146). This potential affects local, regional, and international organizations and actors working with the globally established development discourses espoused by projects, such as the Migration Information and Management Centre established by the European Commission in Mali.

Civil society actors and activists have critiqued this economic perspective on international migration as “migrants should not be assigned the tasks and responsibilities that belong to the state” (146). Such an argument is a further critique of the neoliberal consolidation of the state as the responsibility for social welfare expenditures falls more heavily on non-state actors and civil society organizations. The differing perceptions of internal and external migration are also gendered in that internal (female) migration is viewed as a biopolitical problem that can disrupt social normality — such as breaking up families or contributing to the spread of diseases (151) —and external or international migration is seen positively as male dominated with development (economic) potential. In the focus on the ostensible positive effects of male international migration, one neglects how internal (female) migration can transform social spaces and produce a “modernization of agriculture, embodied by a mobile and dynamic rural society,” as well as how “local regulations of mobility can also result in a drawback of women’s rights and gender equality” (155). The ways in which different forms of mobility are understood and addressed are connected to dominant Eurocentric and economic paradigms with international policy debates as well as the alternative, oppositional, often localized voices of activists and migrants,

especially women, who are working to change and complicate the concept and practice of mobility and development.

Giulia Casentini's article titled "Socio-Cultural and Political Change in a Transnational Group: The Konkombas (Ghana-Togo)" focuses on the Konkomba politics and political transition as a medium through which to discuss three central aspects of postcolonial state-building in West Africa — "the role of traditional institutions; the relationship between "tradition" [chieftaincy] and "modernity" [the state], and the role of the international frontier in building identities and giving rise to political issues" (165). The Konkomba people are settled across the northern area of the Ghana-Togo border, a border that is quite porous as the Konkomba cross it on a daily basis for multiple reasons. The border is not only a central tool in regulating access to citizenship rights, it is also an essential aspect of socio-economic life and a source of political change. Because the Konkomba have historically not had a structured chieftaincy, they have not only been seen as stateless or acephalous by anthropologists and colonial administrators, but they have faced issues in freeing themselves from political subjection to "chiefly" groups and acquiring recognized political representation (168). This is partly due to how colonial powers asked the rulers of chiefly societies, who then claimed to have control over "stateless groups," which included the Konkomba, as well as how the external colonial power was expressed through identifying which groups could provide chiefs, which played an important role in "constructing identity [and] manipulating concepts of ethnicity." Even though the border can be seen as porous on the level of family and economic activity, it has been used as a political tool to deny the Konkomba's people "autochthony" in Ghana by attributing their origins elsewhere. This has fueled the Konkomba's continued struggle to be recognized inside of the states in which they live, whether Ghana or Togo, despite their transnational passages. This illustrates that the contemporary African state is "clearly perceived as a real entity, not a mere structure brought by colonization" (174).

The final article is Michaela Pelican's "Local Perspectives on Transnational Relations of Cameroonian Migrants." It uses the launch point of how international migration is widely discussed both privately and publically in Cameroon as a way to explore how the idea of traveling elsewhere to achieve a better way of life has gained prominence there over the past 15 years. The increased prominence is analogous to another burgeoning view that Cameroon has little to offer to its "economically, intellectually, and, arguably, politically aspiring citizens" (178). This burgeoning view is connected to how structural adjustment programs have contributed to a significant decrease in government employment and local buying power, as well as an increase in corrupt and illegal practices in the country's government (178). The article presents the findings of three streams of research, which focused on intra-African migration, migration of Muslim Cameroonians to Arab countries, and Chinese-African exchange relations. These three research streams work alongside the researchers hopes to focus on "South-South migration and to contribute to the theoretical framework of transnational migration by adding an African perspective to the dominantly Euro-American approach" (181). The researchers make an important contribution in their focus on the "economic, moral, and spiritual support provided by relatives and friends [of migrants]" in opposition to the predominate focus on "remittances and goods sent by migrants" (188).

Concluding Comments

Advances in transportation and communicative technologies have allowed humans to connect in ways once unimaginable. However, one must not forget that the processes of globalization are embedded in a complex web of material and ideological power, violence and domination, and historical legacies of enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, and neoliberal capitalism. Even though the flows of globalization allow human social and political identities and relationships to form across boundaries of geopolitics, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, ideology,

gender, and sexuality, the capitalist task of accumulating the most profit at the lowest cost and developing a multinational circuit of resource extraction and consumption are not only deepening inequality between different geopolitical localities, but also deteriorating the broader biosphere in which we live among other organisms.

One of the principal contradictions of globalization is how many people around the world have a more limited or compromised right to freely move and travel throughout the world than objects. Poor migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, especially those of African descent, are often excluded from the freedom and benefits of increased human mobility. *Mobility, Transnationalism, and Contemporary African Societies* provides a much-needed critical discussion of the forms and patterns of migration within and outside of the African continent. This discussion ventures beyond the traditional conceptualizations of African mobility that are often grounded in a Eurocentric, economic paradigm by focusing on non-linear migrations, changing gender roles, shifts in individual motivations, and the relationships between historical sociopolitical and economic factors and contemporary migratory patterns.

Importantly acknowledged is the agency of migrants and the role mobilities play in empowerment and self-efficacy, a means of exercising control over one's life and working to ameliorate negative socioeconomic conditions. Migration is at once deeply existential and practical. Movement across space generates new ideas and ways of being in the world, new ways of redistributing resources, while opening pathways and geographies that are not bounded to the state, but yet do not wholly transcend the state, operating in an unforeseen modality that cannot be limited to just 'here' or 'there.'