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The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey'. De-exceptionalising mobility in the context of West African trajectories

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ABSTRACT

The 'migration journey' has proven to be a fruitful lens to question the simplistic notion that the outcome of migration solely depends on a momentous go/no-go decision in the countries of origin. At the same time, we argue that the normative/sedentarist principles of migration studies produce the risk to approach the journey as an exceptional phase of mobility, in-between presumed place-based lives. This paper therefore aims to explore the conceptual limits of the migration journey literature. To challenge the notion that the migration journey is fundamentally different from pre- and post-migratory mobilities, we combine two empirical research projects that have followed the im/mobility trajectories of West Africans. The first project focuses on the trajectories of itinerant gold miners within West Africa, the second concentrates on the im/mobility of West Africans within Europe. By juxtaposing the empirical insights of these seemingly different contexts, we stress the need to embed migratory movements in a continuous field of mobility practices across spaces in Africa and Europe. This results in our plea for a research agenda that does not see 'migrancy' as a pre-given marker of difference, but as a normative artefact of mobility regimes.

1. Introduction

The 'migration journey' has attracted increasing attention in migration studies – and not without reason. It has proven to be a fruitful analytical lens to further debunk the simplistic notion that the outcome of migration solely depends on a momentous go/no-go decision in a country of origin. With the focus on the journey, migration scholars have become sensitive to the non-linearity of migration processes (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016), the encounters between migrants and mobility regimes (Schapendonk et al. 2018), the importance of serial decision-making (Crawley et al. 2018; Van der Velde and van Naerssen 2011) and changing identities (Innes 2016), as well

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as undertheorised issues such as incoherence (Massa 2018) and chance (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017).

However, as always, with a new debate, new questions emerge. This paper concentrates on one of such questions, namely, how to rethink the role of mobility within migration processes? As Mainwaring and Brigden (2016) write: 'The journey, as an experience with indeterminate beginnings and endings, transcend easily conceptual borders, as well as physical ones' (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, 244). We embrace this starting point to unbound the migration journey and suggest to move further away from operationalisation of the staged journey with separated phases (e.g. preparation, the actual journey, the phase of arrival and the stage of settlement (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003)) as well as from models of stepwise migration with evolutionist interpretations of destinations (Paul 2011). In so doing, we question the foundations by which we (as migration scholars) analytically separate the migration journey from pre- and post-migratory mobilities.

In this endeavour, we take two analytical steps that strongly build on the so-called reflexive turn in migration studies (Amelina 2017; Dahinden 2016). First, we identify the conceptual limits of the migration journey and, from there, we move away from normative/sedentarist understandings of migration that derive from nation-state agendas (Dahinden 2016). We instead use a mobility lens to broaden the notion of the migration journey between nation-states to that of im/mobility trajectories across various places. With this shift, we de-migranticise people's mobility by not starting from a typical migration framework of departure-movement-arrival-integration. This approach, so we argue, helps us to be sensitive to the situations, moments and 'doings' (Amelina 2017) that turn mobility into migration.

The second step is to combine two empirical research projects that both follow through time and space the im/mobility trajectories of West Africans. The first project focuses on the trajectories of itinerant gold miners within the West African region and the second concentrates on the intra-EU im/mobility of West Africans who moved to Europe. Although these mobility practices are often framed by different analytical lenses with their own normative assumptions ('livelihoods' for miners vs. 'migration' for Africans in Europe) the juxtaposed empirical results highlight striking similarities in terms of im/mobility dynamics, border crossings, aspirations, and social networks. By mirroring these similar practices, but in contexts that otherwise pertain to two separate fields of research, we further unpack the conceptual limits of the exceptionalised 'migration journey'.

With these findings, we do not claim that we should replace migration-related labels and terminology with mobility-related concepts to understand journeys. To the contrary, the power of migration bureaucracies and the normative weight of their categories may affect the experiences of people on the move profoundly (Erdal and Oeppen 2018). Our plea, however, is to work towards an approach that does not see 'migrancy' as a pre-given marker of difference, but as a normative artefact of mobility regimes. The task of scholars working on journeys and trajectories then is to identify when and how mobility becomes migranticised and to understand when and how migration becomes meaningful for people on the move.

2. De-exceptionalising mobility in migration studies

Regarding the difference between migration and mobility, there are two basic readings. First, from a mobilities perspective, migration is seen as just one of many forms of

movement that shape and produce the daily lives we live. From a migration framework, however, mobility is mostly regarded as the migratory process – a phase of movement – from a particular place of origin towards a destination. Migration scholars then analyse how this process is facilitated by social networks or migration industries. As noted by Hui (2016) and King (2015), this difference is based on fundamental ontological discrepancies between the two fields. Mobility studies does not only take mobility as its empirical focus, it rather sees mobility as a point of departure to understand social life, including its relative fixities (e.g. Adey 2006; Cresswell 2006). From this standpoint, migration research is criticised for maintaining 'sedentary optics' (Molland 2018) on human movement since their analytical frameworks are strongly related to spatial fixity in which human movement is exceptionalised (Malkki 1992; Cresswell 2006). From this sedentary perspective, the absence of migration seems to be the norm, if not the ideal (Jónsson 2011). With its focus on understanding departures, for instance, migration scholars have long focused on single moment decision-making (Zhang 2018). With this focus there is an implicit assumption that migrants lived relatively immobile and place-based lives before their departures. After all, the analytical quest is how people overcome the threshold of immobility and turn into migrants (Van der Velde and van Naerssen 2011). Furthermore, on the receiving end of migration, the emphasis is on how migrants are incorporated and integrated in their new living places. According to Zhang (2018), this creates the false conceptual linearity that 'thethers movement to outcome, so that once people move, it can be *assumed* that they stay in that place' (Zhang 2018, 205, emphasis in original).

Evidently, the emerging body of literature that concentrates on journeys de-stabilises the presumed sedentary optics of migration studies. As this literature suggests, the migration journey may involve multiple attempts to leave a place and does not necessarily end when a destination is reached (see among many other studies: Collyer 2007; Khosravi 2011; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Moret 2017). With this observation, however, we reach the conceptual limits of migration studies. As Hui (2016, 75) rightly notes:

> But if migration does not stop after moving to another country, when does it stop? Or more precisely, when do 'migrant' practices give way to other types of practices, making migration no longer of primary relevance when orienting research?

As this special issue concentrates on migration routes and journeys (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020), we thus question on what basis we differentiate the migration journey from pre-migration mobility and post-migration mobility. The self-evident response of 'migration involves a change of residency' remains unconvincing since we know from transnational migration studies that migrants may have multiple belongings. The multilocal geographies are even more complex for highly mobile groups (Favell 2008; Camenisch and Müller 2017; Tarrius 1995). Furthermore, this notion that migration is different from mobility since it involves a change of residency does not solve the question regarding the ending stage of the journey. It is widely discussed that journeys can be highly fragmented as migrants reside in different places for considerable periods of time – sometimes for years (e.g. Collyer 2007; Crawley et al. 2018; McMahon and Sigona 2018). We also know that processes of integration are often accompanied with new forms of mobility and circulations (Moret 2017) and some people may indeed 'settle down' in order to be

mobile (Dahinden 2010). Even return migration as a permanent form of resettlement is considered a myth since it involves circulations as well as new attempts to reach previous destinations (King and Christou 2011).

With these dynamics in mind, and in line with others (Camenisch and Müller 2017; Zhang 2018; Favell 2008; Heil et al. 2017), we work towards a framework that de-exceptionalises mobility in migration studies. We do not deny that migrants exist and that migration is in an important field in social science, but we challenge migration scholars to reflect upon the 'normalization' of migrants as an exceptional group in research frameworks (Dahinden 2016; Amelina 2017). A mobility lens helps us to gain distance from the normativity of the nation-state without ignoring issues of power, representation and politics (Dahinden 2016). Instead of demarcating a migratory journey, we focus on 'im/mobility trajectories'. Im/mobility trajectories are open spatio-temporal processes with a strong transformative logic (Carling 2017; Schapendonk 2020; Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). They may include multiple journeys across various places, and do not necessarily follow a linear directionality. These im/mobility trajectories represent the outcome of multiple intersections of individual aspirations, social networking, policy interventions and mobility regimes (Schapendonk et al. 2018). As such they are deeply entangled with trajectories of other people, capital, rules and information. The concept of im/mobility trajectories thus reflects the idea that mobility and immobility are constantly contingent on each other (Schapendonk and Steel 2014, 264). The mobility of some might hamper the movement of others, as often discussed in livelihood approaches (Kothari 2003) and studies on transnational family lives (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). The notion of im/mobility also stresses that processes of movement always include situations of local anchorage and relative stability, including the act of staying somewhere (Zhang 2018).

3. Understanding im/mobility trajectories: methodological notes

The empirical basis for this paper consists of two separate studies on West African im/mobility. The two studies started from rather different socio-political and thematic contexts, but their methodologies share an itinerant character by which the mobility processes of informants are followed for several years. Hence, the two research designs both fit the notion of the 'trajectory ethnography' (Schapendonk 2020). The first research project concentrated on the itinerant mobility of artisanal miners in West Africa in the context of 'Africa's mineralization' (Bryceson et al. 2013), that is the unprecedented boom of informal artisanal mining as a source of income leading to an increase of human movements across the continent. The second project aimed to gain in-depth insights into the im/mobility processes of West Africans once they reached Europe. Both projects relied on ethnographic engagements, including recorded and non-recorded interviews, observations, countless informal conversations, and the researcher's own travel diaries. The two projects followed a selection of informants across time–space, which allowed them to continue their research practices in the different places their informants ended up in.

To relate the findings of these projects, we use two strongly related dimensions to analyse the dynamics of trajectories. First, we dive into the im/mobility dynamics of the trajectories. We describe how trajectories include onward movements and re-orientations as well as periods of rest and intermediate forms of settlement. Furthermore, we explain

how mobility and immobility relate to each other (e.g. Adey 2006). Secondly, we analyse the way our informants navigate mobility through social connectivity. This is what we call the 'network work' – a term borrowed from Pathirage and Collyer (2011) who point to the efforts that are needed to mobilise social networks. Instead of seeing networks as a social given, we approach them as 'social accomplishments' that are only meaningful when they are actually performed. We thus move away from the noun 'the network' to a verb-like notion of network*ing* (Schapendonk 2015). We thereby stress how network work is central to mobility processes, but also how networks change through processes of movement (Wissink, Düvell, and Mazzucato 2017). Together the relationality of im/mobility and the network work involved help to explain the multiple ways im/mobility trajectories evolve over time and space.

4. West African mobility in the context of mining

In this section, we focus on the im/mobility trajectories of itinerant gold miners who travel across informal gold mining sites in West Africa. Although many miners do in practice spend little time in their home place, for most of them the *fabara* – literally the 'father's place' – holds a core position in their mobilities. The *fabara* is the place where personhood is acknowledged and social recognition is ultimately granted (Bolay 2016). The three protagonists for this section are Ibro, Kalou and Traoré, who all self-identify as Mandé ethnics (Ibro as Bambara from Mali, Kalou as Malinké from Guinea and Traoré as Dioula from Côte d'Ivoire). Their enmeshed trajectories will serve as illustrations for broader mobility dynamics in West Africa (De Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken 2001).

I[1] first met Ibro in Guinea, and Traoré the year after in Mali. I connected to both men through Kalou whom I episodically accompanied in his mining journeys during five years. Kalou and Traoré were just under 40 at the time of study and Ibro was nearly 30 years old. All were spending most of their time travelling and working in gold mines located along the Birimian belt spanning from Senegal to Ghana. Ibro had intended once to move to Europe, Traoré had sometimes considered this option and Kalou had always excluded it.

4.1. Im/mobility dynamics of itinerant miners

Ibro's first moves out of his place of origin aimed at complying with family expectations to bring cash home at time of youth – a common life phase among Malian young men (Jónsson 2011; Doumbia 2001). As he expressed it, he entered into mining 'by chance' during an episode in which he had already been travelling across West Africa for several years. During his travels, he had also spent two years living and working in Libya from where he had unsuccessfully tried to reach Italy. At this point, mining gold had appeared as a relatively accessible alternative to make an income while being on the move. Since then, Ibro had been working in informal gold mines in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea – shifting location according to new opportunities or because of forced removals. As many of my interlocutors, episodes of movements and temporary settlement for work had thus succeeded for several years.

Ibro's mobility needs to be understood in a context of diversifying livelihoods in rural areas. In a pervasive context of deagrarianisation and unemployment, artisanal mining

now represents the second source of income in rural areas of West Africa, just after agriculture (Hilson 2016). Like other forms of movement – including migration to Europe – this mobile livelihood is to a large extent based on moral obligations 'at home' (e.g. Dessertine 2019; Gaibazzi 2015) that includes a cultural script of 'adventure' (Bredeloup 2008). Contrary to local uses of the migration lexicon that implies a durable resettlement (whatever distance), the adventure vocabulary suggests that, in the end, the travels aim at obtaining social recognition in the *fabara* which practically represents the only stable locality across miners' trajectories.

The capacity to cope with instability and forced relocations is at the core of informal artisanal miners' mobilities. In the last decade, their presence has been increasingly contested by legally entitled actors of this industry, i.e. multinational companies and state actors. Ibro and his temporal co-workers are thus constantly under threat of being expelled from their work locations (a condition of 'expulsability' that they share with undocumented West Africans in Europe), just as they are prone to shift location fast in case to newly discovered deposits. For instance, when I first met Ibro in Guinea, the place where he worked was under a prospection lease by a mining company. This caused a local rush of artisanal miners. The situation had signalised the local residents and miners that they could possibly be removed at any moment to make room for large-scale exploitation, which is a striking illustration of the economic logics of expulsion (Sassen 2014). A few weeks later, Ibro was indeed removed to the Malian side of the border, following a prefectural decision to close down all artisanal mining sites. The same happened the next year, when I accompanied Kalou to a mining site in Senegal where he and his friend Traoré were collaborating. Both men had successively joined the place after being compelled to leave a site in Mali. After a six-month work period in Senegal, the army now forced them, together with some 20,000 West African workers, to leave the artisanal mine since the land was formally allotted to a mining company. In such context, places – i.e. informal mining fields and mining settlements – are too elusive for durable networks of support to develop, which compels miners to intensify their mobility to adapt to these ever-changing geographies.

The unstable character of miner's im/mobility trajectories may at first sight suggest a fluid geography without local anchorages. However, the ephemerality of places rather leads to different configurations of the relation between settlement on the one hand and mobility on the other hand. Along these mobility dynamics, the 'core' tends to remain the *fabara,* where investments are directed to. Around this core, the secondary places, where miners in fact spend most of their time, form a constantly changing web of possible short-term destinations that seasonally offer alternative occupations to mining. Miners' mobility thus tends to rely little on localities, yet they develop alternative anchorages according the centrality they attribute to the *fabara*. In this respect, four mobility–immobility configurations can be distinguished (Bolay 2017).

First, Ibro who is generally new to the mining circuit, illustrates the most precarious and fluid configuration since local attachments, and hence longer phases of immobility, are nearly absent in his mobility. To him, the challenge is rather to not get stuck in one place and to obtain sufficient resources to pursue his adventure. Secondly, Traoré, who had moved back from Abidjan to his home village for security reasons, illustrates a more opportunistic configuration. From his village, he episodically moves to mining sites when opportunities seem promising enough and less prone to sudden expulsion. This good shot ('bon coup') strategy is not simply a circular mobility pattern since he

may progressively expand his moves to new sites in neighbouring countries. Furthermore, he combines his travels with those of his wife's wax business. A third mobility–immobility configuration involves a more structural relocation of residency from where new mobilities to neighbouring mining sites emerge and multiple residential attachments can be maintained. The trajectory of Kalou, who had explicitly turned mining into his main occupation, reflects this type. He moved together with his wife and children to a new region, and from this new residence started to explore other mining opportunities. In this borderland area, Kalou acquired a Malian ID card to facilitate his cross-border mobility. He thus illustrates that settling in a new place can indeed be a strategy to maintain a mobile livelihood (Dahinden 2010).

It is telling that, in spite of the border crossings and temporary settlements, miners did usually not see their movements as a form of 'migration' (as a form of re-settlement). The political context of ECOWAS – facilitating the free mobility of people and goods across borders – helps to explain this as it allows for flexible movements across borders. Here we see a parallel with Euro-mobility (Favell 2008). Despite this free mobility zone, however, miners regularly encounter migration apparatuses during their travels. They were at times strategically labelled 'migrants' or 'foreigners' by corporate and state actors to justify their expulsion from competed pieces of land (Bolay 2014). Thus, mobile miners are turned into migrants for political reasons. From the miner's perspective, these categorical labels express the various ways their movements intertwine and overlap with other trajectories. At some point on their trajectories they happen to be 'aspiring migrants moving to Europe' or 'returnees' who have turned into mining (Chevrillon-Guibert and Magrin 2018). Ibro, for instance, was successively called an adventurer, a migrant, a returnee, and a miner while all these labels corresponded to the same endeavour of moving in order to comply with obligations 'at home'. In other terms, these cases are clear counter-examples of a sedentarist view of the 'migration journey' between a point of departure and settlement. Rather, new forms of settlement may occur that are embedded in multi-local mobile lives across borders. The next section zooms in on the social dimension of these mobile practices that help to explain how these im/mobility trajectories evolve.

4.2. Network work along itinerant miners' trajectories

When looking for work, Ibro presented himself to Kalou at the mining settlement in Koundiana (Guinea). Having heard about Kalou's successful operations at the mine, he hoped to join the team for a time. He therefore introduced himself by enumerating the episodes of travel he had undertaken. He stressed the heroic nature of the journeys and insisted on his capacity 'not to lose his courage' – an important value among miners. The scene was a telling example of everyday 'presentation of self' (Goffman [1959] 2002) in this elusive context where itinerant miners constantly struggle to draw new connections of friendship, association and patronage to access work and maintain their mobile lifestyle.

Kalou told me later how he was 'touched' by Ibro's story. He felt committed to support Ibro by including him in his circle, a group that counted around ten men – both local residents and itinerant miners from Guinea, Mali and Niger. Oftentimes, miners on the move adopt themselves roles of brokers, patrons and intermediaries towards other adventurers.

These social relations, which require important social and emotional investments, build on ideal-typical configurations of friendship, partnership or patron-client relations. However, they are less binding than relationships 'at home' and they can be unpredictably suspended or abandoned to let individuals continue their own trajectory. The networks are thus highly dynamic entities and resilient to a changeable environment.

To illustrate this, I briefly introduce the case of Moussa, who I also met in Koundiana. Moussa was described to me by Kalou as his 'best friend'. At that time, Moussa mined little but took care of relational work with villages, mining authorities and miners, and advised Kalou on most social aspects. Given their apparent strong friendship – and with all the ideals of sharing and equity over the long term that such notion conveys (Guichard, Grätz, and Diallo 2014) – I was surprised not to see Moussa when I revisited Kalou in Mali, where he had just moved to. After all, Moussa had accompanied Kalou across many places in the last two years. To my curiosity, Kalou responded that he had really 'loved' Moussa, but that the same man had 'left' him in spite of the material gains that Kalou offered him (e.g. managing his own shaft). The year after, I met Kalou again in Senegal. This time Kalou was spending lots of time with Traoré. The latter had also been present the previous year in Mali, yet did not seem as close to Kalou by that time. This changed when Traoré had followed Ivorian friends heading to Senegal, where the mining site of Karakhéna was booming. He called Kalou to inform him about the emerging opportunities. Once Kalou arrived there, he associated with Traoré. Kalou was grateful to his friend for having paved the way for his most recent move. On his side, Traoré had taken over most of the network work previously realised by Moussa. By engaging in this kind of 'friendly patronage', he certainly benefited from remaining in Kalou's close circle at the mining site.

Miners, thus, put a lot of effort in networking activities in order to navigate their movements. In a context were places hardly provide the common features of a locality – in terms of political and social anchorage – these relations are crucial in perpetuating miners' mobile livelihoods. They gain their efficiency from being as flexible as weak ties yet as supportive as strong ones in Granovetter's phrasing (1973). This feature demands continuous nurturing work. Through the network work involved, people's imagined spaces and rooms to manoeuvre expand and shrink over time. This means that, while my three interlocutors moved within the African continent, it is well possible that the same dynamics extend their 'circulatory territories' (Tarrius 1995) overseas. As we will see, the mobility practices of West Africans within Europe rely on similar moral imperatives, networking practices, and ways of articulating mobility with locality.

5. West African mobility in Europe

Below I[2] focus on the im/mobility trajectories of four Gambian men all aged over 40. In contrast to most of my informants, who arrived more recently in Europe (Schapendonk 2020), these four men all entered Europe in the period between 1996 and 2001. Three of these men – Pape, Babacar and Moustapha – shared a living space in the Catalan city of Lleida (Spain) at the time I first met them. Doudou, who is a close friend of Babacar, actually lives in Milan (Italy). Of these four men, only Doudou is not married and does not have any children. The other three men have their wives and children living in the Gambia (I was able to visit two of these families in September 2017).

The four men have very different mobility histories in Europe, but what they share is: they all have transcended EU's internal borders and they all have had moments in which their legal statuses had shifted. At the moment of my ethnographic engagements with these four men, only Babacar and Pape had relatively secure legal statuses in Spain. While the travellers with legal residence status do have a better position to maintain mobile lives, it is worth noting that Doudou and Moustapha also kept crossing borders despite their precarious legal conditions. Doudou moved between Milano and Leiden (a city in the Netherlands), and while Moustapha lived most of the time in Spain he also spent considerable periods of time in Italy. To understand these im/mobility trajectories, I primarily concentrate on the story of Pape, but the analysis of his trajectory will gradually intertwine with that of the other three men.

5.1. Im/mobility dynamics of West Africans in Europe

In the Gambia, Pape used to combine his role as a farmer in his village with a highly mobile livelihood of an itinerant trader – which is a common livelihood strategy in the Gambian context (Gaibazzi 2015). In this role, he had travelled to Mauretania, Senegal, Nigeria and Libya. He first entered Europe irregularly in the 1990s by entering Ceuta. Two years after his entrance, his employer gave him a temporary labour contract. With the labour contract, he returned to the Gambia in order to present his documents to the Spanish embassy that led to a six months valid visa granting him regular access to Spain. From there, he obtained a series of short-lived residence permits. He worked in the agriculture and construction sectors in different regions of Spain, and he combined this with some street vending activities. He also had 'tried his luck' in Switzerland, where he had stayed for more than half a year.

Next to his economic activities in Spain, Pape used to move for a period of five years repeatedly between Spain and the German city of Hamburg to profit from transnational trade. At some point in time, he stayed there up to eight months, but mostly he just went there for brief sojourns of around two weeks. Together with his social contact in Hamburg, he bought second-hand electronic goods and shipped them to the Gambia. He basically continued with this multiplicity of practices until the moment the Spanish economic crisis hit him hard in 2008. Now mobility slowly turned from a lifestyle into a coping strategy. Due to the crisis, he could barely sustain a living by working in the agriculture sector. He moved to Italy instead, and stayed there for about two years. Interestingly, the crisis also re-directed his movements towards the Gambia. Since then, he returned every rain season to the Gambia in order to farm his land.

In the period I was able to follow Pape's mobility dynamics between April 2015 and July 2018, he indeed spent considerable periods of time in the Gambia. In September 2015 he made a 'European tour' to the Netherlands and Germany and he returned to Spain from where he moved to the Gambia where he stayed until April 2016. He went back to Lleida in 2016 to work in the agriculture sector again. When I visited his cousin and wife at Pape's compound in his village in the Gambia in September 2017, they both hoped that he would return very soon to clear the land for the cashew nut production. He actually did so in October 2017 and stayed there until mid March 2018.

Like in the case of the West African miners, Pape's trajectory is characterised by a sort of mobility capital (Moret 2017). His mobility in Europe can therefore best be framed as a

continuity of previous lifestyles. Having lived in at least eight different countries, Pape's story clearly deviates from the sedentarist notion of a journey between a moment of grand departure and a moment of settlement. At the same time, his im/mobility trajectory is not placeless either. First, his mobility in Africa and Europe directs and re-directs him to his village of origin in the Gambia, relating movement to a sense of rural permanence (Gaibazzi 2015). Second, much of his intra-EU mobility also relates to specific locations, such as Hamburg in Germany and Lleida in Spain. In the context of the latter, the mobility of Pape – like that of Babacar and Moustapha – relied heavily on the seasonal rhythms of Lleida, being related to its role in the regional agriculture system (Cross 2013). It is very visible that the city of Lleida attracts flexible workers around spring, coming from various directions, including Granada, Milan and Lisbon. The flexible workers come here to sub-scribe at one of the labour recruitment offices or to connect to the social infrastructures in place to find job opportunities. The city of Lleida is a meeting place where different mobi-lity rhythms and different trajectories intertwine for considerable periods of time (Scha-pendonk 2020).

This implicates that the Gambian men do create local footholds in Lleida, but not in the sense of the integration discourse that somehow suggests that they stay there as 'immi-grants'. In fact, all three men I met in a specific apartment in Lleida in April 2015 had left the place by September that same year. Moustapha first had a short-distance relocation to a village 50 km away from Lleida and moved to Italy some three months later. Babacar left for the Gambia where he started a taxi business, he returned to Spain in February 2016 and, from there, he moved to Milan where he lived in Doudou's apartment. While he initially thought to stay there for several weeks only to visit his friend, he actually became active in the street vending sector of Milan, which enabled him to prolong his stay until the beginning of July. Thus, where a migration lens expects a migrant to reground in a new home place, these three men lived multi-local lives across borders. As with the case of the miners, these mobility processes require careful network work by the people in question.

5.2. Network work of West Africans in Europe

The mobility dynamics of the Gambian men are to a large degree dependent on their networking skills. In the context of 'Lleida's frutta picking season', Moustapha, Babacar and Pape framed the month of April as the 'month of connection and com-munication'. The best illustration for this phenomenon comes from my second visit to Lleida, April 2016. Although the three informants initially kept me up to date about their travels, our communications deprived from October 2015. Their telephone numbers they used did not work anymore. During my next visit to Lleida, I decided to re-visit the same apartment building with the hope to re-connect with the same men. In front of their apartment building, however, there was no sign at all hinting at their pres-ence. This changed when I spoke to a Gambian man who remembered my previous visit. He knew the three men well since he had shared the same apartment with them. When I asked him about their whereabouts, he stated that according to his last information Pape was still in the Gambia. He made one phone call in order to verify the information that Babacar departed to Italy. And Moustapha? He expected him to return any moment now from Italy.

The next day I meandered the city, and an unexpected encounter followed. To my surprise, Pape approached me at a public square and hugged me warmly. After our greetings, he tried to call Moustapha since he too had actually arrived in Lleida. What I witnessed here was how mobility trajectories re-entangle when the agricultural season was about to start. Almost everybody returned from somewhere. I saw how many African men were busy with their 'network work', trying to update their information about friends who moved elsewhere, sharing their new telephone numbers with others, asking new numbers via mutual contacts, etc. As Pape commented on the changed telephone numbers: 'If you move too much, you change too much.'

All attempts of Pape, Moustapha and myself to reach out to Babacar initially failed. Moustapha was the one who finally found a connection, by first calling Babacar's wife in the Gambia. This was the best way to establish a less fragile social connection, as Moustapha told me. This renewed contact between Moustapha and Babacar also enabled me to revisit the latter in Milan a few weeks later. Before he left to Italy, he had contacted his employer in Lleida to find out about work possibilities. There was none for that moment and this gave Babacar the possibility to visit his very good friend Doudou in Milan. His social connection with Doudou provided access to the informal circuits of Milan which made him stay longer than initially anticipated. During the last weeks of his stay in Milan, he was continuously in communication with his employer in Lleida in order to be up-to-date regarding work opportunities. The frutta sector around Lleida is characterised by the need of a flexible work force that is prepared to move instantly into the fields to harvest the apples, peaches and other fruits within a period of a few weeks.

When I visited Lleida for the third time in September 2016, I succeeded to inform Babacar, Pape and Moustapha about my travel plans some days before my departure. I expected to re-visit all three of them. However, when I actually arrived in Catalonia, Babacar had unexpectedly left the place and moved to Italy once again. It was not the lack of work that made him leave Lleida, but rather his responsibility towards a new generation of travellers since one of his younger brothers fell seriously ill in one of Italy's reception centres. Babacar went to see him there in order to find a suitable solution for him. Social networks, of course, bring responsibilities and these responsibilities may induce mobility.

With regard to the latter, Doudou also took up a specialised role in the mobility circuits of the next generation of travellers. His small apartment in Milan can best be considered a guest house (see for an elaborative version: Schapendonk 2020). There are two main renters of the place (another Gambian man, and himself), but they are seldom the only two people who inhabit the place. Doudou had housed many s Gambian travellers in his apartment. Through people's 'network work', Doudou's place became an important local point of stop-overs and periods of rest, especially for people who originate from the same village. His apartment did not only function as a place to sleep, it also was a storage room for travellers. Those who preferred to travel light from Milan to other destinations in Europe could store some of the clothes, suitcases, and other belongings at his place. Some adventurers also handed over their documents to Doudou, including passports, asylum papers and residence permits. They preferred to travel undocumented across borders in order to try 'their luck' in a different EU member state. Like in the case of the miners, this good shot strategy requires particular networking skills.

6. A brief synthesis

The West African trajectories under study include non-linear movements and continuous circulations that deviate from the notion of a journey in certain stages. Many of these mobility practices create 'circular territories' (Tarrius 1995) in which mobility is the defining spatial entity. Movement, in other words, does not automatically lead to processes of incorporation since different mobility–immobility configurations unfold along the way. None of the trajectories fit the notion of a journey towards a single destination in which one lives integrated lives. Whereas in both settings the mobility processes are characterised by precarity and ephemerality due to specific political economies of respectively mining and agriculture, we also highlight that the mobility processes are strongly embedded in cultures of mobility. For many West Africans we met, their mobility was actually framed in a positive light, including the cultural script of adventure, achieving personhood and establishing a better social-economic position for family members 'at home' (Gaibazzi 2015).

With regard to the latter, critical readers could point to the fact that our analysis of trajectories only considers a particular group of people – those who have actually a mobile lifestyle. Hence, we might be accused for falling into a form of 'mobility exceptionalism'. These critical voices could also argue that many migration studies distinguish *settler migrants* from *drifters* or *liquid migrants* (e.g. Engbersen et al. 2013) – and that we are thus dealing with exceptional cases. To some extent, we agree with this criticism. West Africa is indeed a region with multi-fold mobilities (De Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken 2001), and this indeed partly explains the dynamism we have outlined. However, the idea is definitely not to produce a 'West Africa exceptionalism', given that most places are characterised by such multiple mobilities, at least this is the result when one starts to focus on mobility instead of migration (Crettaz and Dahinden 2019; Schapendonk 2020). In this sense, the im/mobility dynamics articulate larger empirical and conceptual issues that we would like to raise in this special issue on migration routes and journeys (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020).

The two projects further destabilise the migration lens that tend to frame people's pre-departure and post-arrival lives as predominantly immobile. In both cases, mobility is a continued practice and the so-called journey is difficult to exclude from other mobility practices. This is important for us because we feel that exceptionalising the migrant journey might fuel politicised images around contemporary cross-border movements of people. As Shahram Khosravi (2018, x) rightly asks himself – and therewith all who share an interest in migration studies:

> As a migration scholar, I ask myself if my focus on migrants'/refugees' experiences of border crossings, journeys, camps, or asylum processes does not contribute to othering of them?

So what then can other studies on migration processes learn from these analyses of highly mobile livelihoods? We claim that even in situations where people live less mobile lives than the West African adventurers under study, it is worthwhile *not* to isolate a so-called journey from other movements. In this light, we invite scholars to be sensitive to all sorts of preparatory mobilities to embassies, consulates, labour offices and offices of migration brokers that people undertake in order to cross borders. In light of family reunification schemes and transnational marriages, we may better take into account the

short-lived travels on tourist visas, the multiple waiting periods and the pertinent uncertainty regarding bureaucratic practices. Moreover, we should not forget about the failed attempts and the lost resources that make people immobile for longer periods of time. All these practices are shaped by a particular politics of mobility induced by so-called mobility regimes that differentiate movements (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Anderson 2014). While their practices remain the same, people then may be confronted with different discursive labels and practices – as in the case of miners who were expelled as irregular migrants. Here mobility becomes migranticised. This migranticisation, thus, does not only occur through policy making or border guards looking for typical migratory behaviour (Anderson 2014), but it may also be an effect of corporate strategies, local media, and the people on the move themselves, who sometimes articulate their adventures in migratory terms. It follows that applying a trajectory perspective to the field of migration journeys is not a matter of making 'simple things more complex'. By following im/mobility trajectories, we intend to do better justice to both the *meaning, politics* and *transformations* that are attached to cross-border mobility.

The two cases also go beyond the migration lens by not seeing mobility as an unconnected opposite of immobility. In other words, there is a lot of stillness to explore in the story of mobility dynamics at play, varying from the home places of the miners to Doudous's role of anchor point in Milan that facilitates other people's travels. There are two interesting aspects of this relationality. First, it displays the way the im/mobility of one person affect the im/mobility of others. Journeys may work as catalysators of mobility projects in the sense that the movement of one may attract the movement of others. But the mobility of one may also be the main reason why others stay in place. Second, this relationality positions people on the move in a broader social setting that help us to move away from the 'migrant gaze' when we study cross-border movements (Gaibazzi 2015).

Finally, the analysis also sheds a different light on one of the most important theoretical components of migration theory: social networks. Whereas social networks are oftentimes regarded as a meso-structure facilitating the mobility process from a place of origin to a destination (Haug 2008), the cases emphasise the changeability of networks (Schapendonk 2015), which on its turn helps to explain the constant evolvement of routes and journeys. Opportunities related to local and translocal support vary along the courses of trajectories – leading at times to forms of conflict and disconnectivity. The networking dynamics are both cause and effect of the dynamic trajectories under study.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we put forward a mobility perspective to the subfield of migration journeys, and from there we have analysed the im/mobility trajectories of two seemingly different types of 'adventurers': itinerant miners in West Africa and West Africans living and moving in the EU. Interestingly, the first project on miners started with a conceptual framework of mobility and livelihoods in Africa, but incorporated discussions on borders and migration 'along the way' (Bolay 2017). The second project started from a migration lens and shifted towards discussions on circulations and mobile territories since the interlocutors transgressed the notion of migrancy through their practices (Schapendonk 2020). This suggests that the method of following trajectories allows us to combine perspectives

and understand mobility processes in the multiple ways they unfold. This approach also means that we might indeed frame these processes by using terminology related to migration and borders when it is most appropriate – i.e. when people on the move encounter migration bureaucracies, practices of Othering, asylum laws and state borders. Equally so, it allows us to move away from these migration frameworks when other identities and practices are at play. With a similar argument, Hui (2016) explores cases of what she calls 'sometimes-migrants'. Such a standpoint would do justice to the observation that adventurers are turned into migrants through mobility regimes. Such a de-migranticised approach, thus, does not see 'migrancy' as a pre-given marker of difference, but as a normative artefact that results from the politicisation of cross-border mobility. Such a framework is sensitive to both the power of mobility regimes as well as the multiple ways people transgress the logics of these regimes. The challenge of the researcher interested in journeys then is to identify when mobility becomes migranticised and to understand how migration becomes meaningful for people in the light of other forms of mobility.

This brings us to our final point of conclusion. With the external dimension of EU's migration policy (Anderson 2014), EU borders have entered the ECOWAS space – the free mobility zone of West Africa. We have seen Frontex operations along the Atlantic coast of Senegal from 2006 onwards, and more recently, the Nigerien town of Agadez has turned into a hub for EU's intervention to curb unwanted migration. As a result, EU's presence increasingly migranticises cross-border mobility in this region of the world. As a result, mobility facilitators between Niger and Libya that have been present for decades are increasingly manufactured as smugglers (Brachet 2018). In addition, candidates of the clandestine passage to Europe are already identified at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso, some 4000 km from Tripoli (Libya). This policy may not only be harmful for those actors who are active in the mobility facilitation industry, it may also negatively impact the mobile livelihoods of, among others, mobile traders and miners in this region of the world. Ultimately, this suggests a counterproductive policy that may ultimately re-frame miner's movements in Africa into migratory movements towards Europe.

Notes

1. Since the fieldwork has been conducted by different researchers, we speak in individual terms here. In this case, we refer to Matthieu Bolay's research activities.
2. Joris Schapendonk.

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