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The Urbanity of Movement: Dynamic Frontiers in Contemporary Africa

Journal of Planning Education and Research
XX(X) 1–13
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DOI: 10.1177/0739456X11416366
<http://jpe.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

The economies of Africa's largest metropolitan regions reflect a contested intersection of orientations, practices, demands, values, and articulations to the larger world. While rural to urban migration may have substantially decreased, the circulation of populations within metropolitan regions, across primary and secondary cities, and along increasingly elaborated transnational circuits of movement and exchange raise important questions about conventional notions of population movement. As planning mechanisms tend to assume certain stability in the relationship of population to place, what kinds of understandings of movements may be necessary to engage the variegated ways that cities are articulated through these movements?

Keywords

migration, spatial analysis, international planning, politics, urban form

The Doubled Dimensions of Contemporary Movement

Africans have long traveled widely across the region and the world, moving themselves and goods across many obstacles. Yet it is ironic that history and efficacy is still barely utilized as evidence or precedence for a planning and governance framework that could make productive use of such movement as a formal economic resource. Extreme fluidity and impediment exist side by side, each hardly making a dent on the other. In what ensues, my intention is not so much to explain why such a doubled experience persists but to explore some of the dynamics of the experience of movement itself across the region as a way into further exploring the antecedents of this condition and some critical factors to how the condition might be altered. I pursue these reflections in several narrative registers. Over the past decades, I have myself been a migrant across many different African cities, doing many jobs, some of which explicitly involved trafficking of various kinds. I have also developed several research and intervention projects in cities attempting to better understand who is involved in the business of migration, how it operates, and experimenting with different small-scale interventions to see how such movement could be more productively integrated into local urban economies.

Movement, of people, goods, and information, across various parts of Africa seems to operate within many different realities at the same time. Within households, cities, and nations, it is often difficult to discern clear patterns of efficacy—even in terms of who gets visas, who gets to reach particular destinations; what goods get blocked at particular borders; what quantities and kinds of goods manage to get through.

There is an arbitrary feel about these dynamics that make strict accounting and measurement often difficult. What shows up on official registers, waybills, immigration forms, and statistical profiles is a weak approximation of what seems to really take place. For some, there are seemingly well-organized networks that efficiently tend to each facet of the transshipment of something; for others, everything seems improvised, and it is often that which seems the most provisional or casual that often attains the greatest efficacy. Given these features, I have relied on my own engagements here as a way to try and tease out some of the dynamics lurking behind such apparent obfuscation, recognizing that much is left out in such an approach and that more systematic and inventive methodological processes still need to be pursued.

Parts of this discussion are based on long-term systematic ethnographic research in various districts in several cities across Africa—work that is further elaborated in Simone (2004, 2009). While substantial empirical work on migration issues certainly exists, the intention here is to explore dimensions of frontiers, trajectories of migratory paths, and intersections of flows and agendas where the deployment of conventional empirical methods are difficult and where rigorous insights depend on experimental forms of engagement

Initial submission, July 2010; revised submissions, January and May 2011; final acceptance, May 2011

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with people and places. In addition, “Africa” is used here as a “working device”—that is, as a means of simultaneously considering different facets and locations of migration as well as the ways in which migration is an instrument of articulating diverse locations. Despite a long tradition of referring to Africa as if it were a coherent, univocal entity, there is no attempt here to make such representations.

In the first section, I explore how specific places of convergence—often not those places that one would expect—show movement to be a “world of its own”—a practice exhibiting its own dynamics delink it from being simply instrumental, something descriptive of a larger agenda. Through discussion of a project in a large popular neighborhood of Douala, I then discuss how migration engenders particular kinds of collective orientations to both the local and the translocal that are not easily mediated through conventional forms of organization and planning. This leads to a brief commentary on how the uncertain trajectories of African cities—simultaneously demonstrating marked development and decline—constitute particular kinds of frontiers that operate as a gravitational force and as a space of experimentation for new social relations. These contrast, yet intersect, with the concrete zones formed by national borders. These borderlands, now the site of experimentations in economic integration by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), could become a vehicle in which to address some of the complexities of articulating urban areas. While the task of urban articulation is inevitably subject to normative discourses regarding the development of enabling infrastructure, these discourses must also take into consideration both the vast range of unofficial practices that link cities on a daily basis and the spaces of rehearsing integration that may be located somewhere else besides the city.

The Instrumentality of Movement

During the mid-1980s, while living in Khartoum (Sudan), I made an arduous journey with a good friend to Southern Sudan to attend his wedding in Yei (Sudan). It was a journey of some ten days, on train, truck, and foot across treacherous physical and political landscapes with many deviations, many zigzags to circumvent disputed territories and potential interdiction. This was a time of war, of both clear and unclear sides. Shortly after the wedding, on my foolish insistence, we traveled the 100 kilometers, often by foot, across the Congolese border to Aba (Democratic Republic of Congo), an unremarkable frontier town with the exception of the vast quantities of goods and services available. From sacks of coffee and other agricultural produce as far as the eye could see, to hundreds of Toyota trucks to scores of mechanics, guides, “bankers,” arms dealers, prostitutes, seers, healers, and itinerant teachers, and authorities on all subjects, this was in some respects a thriving city, a magnet for the

ambitions and urgencies of a seemingly constantly changing population.

Throughout this region, people moved in various directions, coming and going. Some would move toward zones of apparent danger and others moving away; some looking for at least momentary stability in order to restart or take respite from former lives and others to make money from uncertainty and conflict. Even the flow of goods had highly variegated patterns. Certainly, some of the consumer items, electronics, and hardware that Somali truck-drivers brought all the way in from Mombasa (Kenya) could have been forwarded on from the town, as well as large volumes of diverted relief supplies intended for Juba (Sudan). But the ambiguity of the town—the fact that one never knew exactly who or what was headed where in any meaningful aggregate manner—meant that traders came to Aba to speculate on the price of things, to try and get good deals, or even change their plans for the destination of the things that they acquired.

Certainly, the region was full of desperate people: people who had lost livelihoods and homes, people that were frightened and on the run, as well as people who stuck it out in terrible conditions. Certainly people carried substantial marks of identity and belonging; they had little difficulty recognizing each other as friend, stranger, enemy, refugee, or combatant. At the same time, there was also a lack of clarity and the anticipation that no one was really who they seemed to be, and that many were available to become something very different from what they were showing you at the moment (Agier 2008).

Here, movement was not simply a matter of running away or running toward, of vacating or reinhabiting. Rather, it was a stepping into a fold created in the moments where the unstable and the sedentary assume an intense contiguity. The process does not create some hybrid mix, but rather a slippery landscape where allegiances always have to be declared and then forgotten; where commitments have to be followed through on, and then turned into opportunities to do something very different. The conditions of underdevelopment and political manipulation are certainly important. But their specificities, especially in a town like Aba, seem to lose relevance as movements take on a life of their own, catapult people into destinations, work, and personalities that are not easy to pin down for long.

Not long after this journey, I left Sudan to return to West Africa, where a university position in Ghana had me working on the long-established dreams of many to maximize the economic potentials of the regional urban corridor running from Abidjan (Côte D’Ivoire) to Lagos (Nigeria). With its combined population of nearly 30 million, encompassing Cape Coast (Ghana), Accra (Ghana), Aflao (Ghana), Lome (Togo), Cotonou (Benin), Porto Novo (Benin), and Ibadan (Nigeria), this “region,” stretching across four national borders, has been viewed as potentially the urban motor of Africa. Under the ECOWAS formalities, large numbers of residents

of these cities move back and forth, taking advantage of niche markets, differentials in national regulatory structures, and singular economic histories in order to ply various small- and medium-scale trades.

Given the long history of well-worn entrepreneurial circuits, urbanized infrastructure, and market density, the existence of thriving markets acting as if they are in the middle of nowhere came as a surprise. While probably now long gone, the market just beyond the town of Ifangi on the road to Sakété north of Porto Novo (Benin) was a riot of nocturnal transactions. Here, almost everything imaginable and then some was for sale, but only during one night a week. The particular date also would arbitrarily fluctuate, compelling reliance on word of mouth. With no readily discernible exceptions, all the goods available in this clearing in the bush were available elsewhere—in Mushin (Nigeria), Cotonou (Benin), and Lomé (Togo). There were no surprises, even in the price. Given that the market was set at some distance from the road and inaccessible to any vehicle except motorbike, the costs of hauling the goods to and from the clearing would seem to unnecessarily add to the price and thus curtail the profits. As Ifangi (Benin) is close to the Nigerian border and connected by road to Otta (Nigeria), and then to Lagos (Nigeria), the prevailing assumption was that the frontier here was less regulated than the main Benin–Nigeria crossing located south and from the old capital, Porto Novo (Benin), and thus permitted an easier flow of untaxed and prohibited goods. But this was not always the case.

Unhinged from clear-cut economic efficacy, the market seemed to function as a coupling of various agendas, affect, and aspirations. Here, like in Aba, it was possible to find “expertise” of all kinds—for example, healers, “pharmacists,” seers, sorcerers, and schemers. Some traders would spend the night talking about their exploits in distant lands; neighbors would travel here to talk to each other about events they felt were not possible to discuss at home. Politicians, “big men,” and “big women” would meet in makeshift shacks for deliberations they could not be seen having elsewhere. Then, there was the continuous party atmosphere, replete with fireworks, music, and other entertainment. This coupling of the surreptitious, the celebratory, and the entrepreneurial was seen as creating opportunities on which it would be difficult to affix a price.

Although established with the veneer of great secrecy, everyone in the region seemed to know about its existence, to the extent that many households viewed it as a kind of family outing. At the same time, the press never mentioned it, and although, as I just indicated, everyone seemed to know about its existence was never discussed in any detail. People had no idea about who administered it or how, and once the goods were loaded on various trucks parked under the trees lining the main road, no one was sure where they would eventually go. There was always a sense that anything could happen, and while many who frequented the night

market certainly garnered much unanticipated information and many opportunities, it always seemed that much more could have transpired than did; that there was a great deal of flash and show. Probably there were layers on layers of dissimulation that I would never apprehend in the few visits I made here. But, nevertheless, it seemed that much effort was expended to make it seem as if a vast world of undercover economic transactions were taking place, when they probably were not.

Indeed many of the logics exhibited in this market have long been incorporated in the major urban markets anyway. Across the massive urban markets in Africa today—from Kinshasa to Adjame (Côte D’Ivoire) to Oshidi (Nigeria), to name just a few—the majority of people who spend their days in markets are not selling or buying anything specific. Rather, they are taking their chances; for markets are spaces of information, impressions, manipulations, and diffuse opportunities. Discrepant goods and services are bundled and sold together in often unfathomable ways, and calculations of price sometimes take into consideration relationships far more wide ranging than supply and demand (Guyer 2004).

But what I think is significant in the existence of places like Aba (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Ifangi (Benin) is their recognition that movement is not simply a reaction to conditions and forces, nor the instigator of still others, but its own “world,” and a world that need not make sense in order to exert value. Within a single domain, there can be those aspects, actors, and dimensions that remain almost sedentary, on the verge of atrophy, while also in the presence of those that are incessantly mutating, and in this contiguity, there are then the prospects for dissimulation of all kinds: Things and people who seem not to be in motion are actually busy transforming what it is they actually do, while those seem to be captured in a frenzy of activity may simply be exerting a great deal of effort to stay in place. The conventional binaries, such as war and peace, stability and instability, as well the gradations of social hierarchy and social attribution may continue to “act as they are” but take on incessantly changing meanings and behaviors.

Terrain and polity combine to construct landscapes of volatile densities, proximities, and separations among people and things. Some people live too far apart; others live too close together. Political demarcations sometimes incorporate manageable relationships, and at other times, seem to have been affected in such a haphazard manner as to ensure eternal problems. Some places live in constant precarity, easily destabilized by seemingly minor triggers; other places seem to thrive off of volatility and rebel at the slightest hint of certain futures. All of these dimensions are present, often in situations of intense proximity across Africa, creating variegated gravitational fields, pushes, and pulls that make clear assessments of population movements difficult to get a handle on (Roitman 2005; Englebert and Tull 2008; Zewde 2008). What I want to suggest through these stories of Aba

and Ifangi is that populations are neither as stable nor as unstable as they often seem. Here, movement is an instrument to keep discordant things, people, and ways of life in some functional proximity to each other.

On one level, it is unavoidable to take note of how livelihoods shift, how macroeconomic conditions impact on the viability of household and individual lives, how colonial and postcolonial histories have cut-off a wide range of possibilities, and how impoverishment, while often compelling resilience, is not in itself a resilient position. Still, a dedication to turning spaces into those of movement, and to hold certain institutional forms in abeyance in order to facilitate productive uncertainties, seems to be an important feature of socioeconomic life in many African contexts (Quiminal 2003; Manuh 2005). Even when the failures of institutions lead to debilitating conflict, a capacity often remains to use such conflict as an instrument to bring things in relationship to each other that otherwise have not yet found an occasion to “be together.”

As Stephen Read (2006) states, places are always on their way somewhere, with different reach and possibilities, and always transformed by what people, materials, technical, and discursive instruments do in the passing. This doesn't mean that people are always mobile, adaptable, and flexible; it doesn't mean that some people are not incessantly cornered or enclaved. These processes, too, are aspects of urbanization, part of the trajectory of oscillating movement through which a wide range of economic mobilities are hedged through the cordoning off of others. So as physical and political infrastructures stratify movement into different interactional possibilities, and steer people into specific densities and speeds, as well as open up weakly controlled reverberations, collective life makes itself known in various ways.

The Desires for Movement: Reflections from Bapenda Omnisport

Conventionally, most analysts of population movements in Africa have first considered the conditions in which people had lived as the constitution of a “push” factor that motivated them to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere. These conditions were then related to the composition of particular “gravitational pulls” that produced certain assessments on the part of migrants, not only of what kind of opportunities and life might be possible in a particular new location but of their present conditions themselves (Akokpari 2000; Adepoju 2006; Lucas 2006). The working assumption was that no matter how bad life was at the moment, if the prospects for significant improvement didn't exist elsewhere, then it was not worth leaving what one was familiar with, and its concomitant affective and social ties. In the long social history of migration in Africa, such a dynamic has been largely borne out.

But there has also been a long history of exceptions to this dynamic as well, and these exceptions seem to have intensified in recent years (de Bruijn, Rijk, and Foeken 2001; Hahn and Klute 2007; Landau and Haupt 2009). Political and economic emergencies have driven people into completely uncertain trajectories of flight. The stories of escapes from famine, regime change, ethnic persecution, and war are well known. Africa, with its long history of incorporating strangers into societies, has been equally adept at turning long-term residents into strangers—as we have seen in Nigeria, Djibouti, Sudan, Senegal, and Cote D'Ivoire, to name a few. Oppressive political regimes that end up wrecking countries economically and politically leave many residents no choice but to leave, such as has been the case in Zimbabwe.

There are also more subtle, even complex, stories that disrupt the conventional push-pull equation. During the past decade, I have worked with youth organizations in a large district of Douala, Cameroon, known as Bapenda Omnisport. This is an old so-called popular district full of former industrial workers, artisans, market sellers, low-level civil servants, and large numbers of the wageless. It represents the kind of district found in many cities across the region—that is, heterogeneous in ethnic background, occupation, settlement history, political and religious affiliation and highly urbanized in terms of attitude and behavior. These are districts from which large numbers of residents set out into the larger world and that have grown dependent on remittances and translocal connections of all kinds. Part of the work entailed trying to understand the migration dynamics of the district—something I was especially interested in since many of the Cameroonian migrants who lived in my building in Johannesburg came from this district, and many of them had traveled widely across the world.

Like many research and intervention projects, this effort relied on local social surveying, focus groups, community assemblies, and charting out individual trajectories of movement over time, as well as charting out the social networks of households grouped on specific streets or related through various other ties. While almost every household had a member that was located in some other city besides Douala and almost everyone we engaged with had detailed individual knowledge about various circuits, destinations, and practices of movement, residents in the district were usually reluctant to meet together and discuss migration as a kind of “normative issue.” Even though in everyday conversations, an enormous amount of knowledge had been built up over time as to where people were going, what they were doing, as well as a voluminous range of details about various practices and events, it was difficult to render this knowledge as a formal community resource—something subject to planning and coordination. Part of the impediment could be found in the attitude of the young, especially.

For them, there is a multiplicity of calculations at work in assessing their actual or prospective personal movement. First, there is diversity in the sense of how much movement is

really personal movement. In some instances, households have designated a particular child from early on as the one who will eventually leave and have invested in their capacity to do so. While these decisions are not necessarily fixed, they are the subject of widespread deliberations and impact on decisions related to schooling and savings. Some children are positioned in complex relationships of obligation where, from an early age, they are responsible for delivering various favors and services to relatives in return for investment in their leaving later on.

In these circumstances, movement becomes a family project and the migrant an extension of a family economy with deeply entrenched obligations to remit earnings or to pave the way for the emigration of other family members later on. In these situations, the choice of destinations is sometimes a matter of cultivation underway for many years, using existing family networks abroad, or a matter of constant assessment, with the family keeping track of possible destinations and the associated changes in immigration policy or economic conditions. Despite these preparations, however, the timing and choice of destination may be a matter of sudden impulse, with the exigency of having to fulfill these obligations somewhere overriding any precise assessment of the viability of either the journey or destination.

Some personal movements are intensely personal. Given intensifying pressures on family and social life and the often sclerotic conditions of local economies, some individuals, particularly youth, find themselves very much on their own. Sometimes expelled from families, cut out from any prospects given their reputation or convictions, or simply unwilling to do the work necessary to cultivate the contacts that will produce jobs or status, some youth will simply set out. They may have a relative or friend somewhere and try to join them; they may have heard stories about particularly advantageous places, but in the end, decisions might be made with little evidence and little money. Increasingly in Bapenda Omnisport (Cameroon), there seem to be more and more people who feel they have little to lose. They feel they face an inevitable social death; that relationships are so frozen or so corrupt that no matter what they do there is little place for them. It is not that decisions are made simply on impulse.

Deliberations may be protracted and undertaken in consultation with many. But many youth have told me that no matter how systematic the assessment process may be—that is, the weighing up of how it might be possible to stay and how it may be possible to live elsewhere—that examining the intended destination in depth, all of its “ins and outs” isn’t really important. They can weigh things all they want—the pros and the cons—but in the end the decision has to be made without a clear perspective.

Without such clear perspective, there is a limited sense of responsibility as to how to incorporate “home” into the eventual trajectory and process of movement. Residents repeatedly indicated that the difficulty with coordinating a calculated district-wide strategy in terms of targeting particular actors,

destinations, and trades—and then coordinating the use of eventual remittances—was that migration implicated the district in too many situations and places beyond their control. Emigration represented a kind of insufficiency—that home was not able to provide a future for its young—and, at the same time, a kind of independence from both Douala and Cameroon. Here, a certain autonomy of operation was attained by an emotional relocation of the district in many different cities and parts of the world. The district, Bapenda Omnisport, survived simply because it wasn’t really “here”—it didn’t really exist as either a social or administrative entity as indicated on maps or popular consciousness; it was already “elsewhere.” The ability of the district to viably exist elsewhere then depended on keeping the conventional representation of Bamenda Omnisport, “out of the count”—as one resident put it. What she meant was that any effort to reiterate the district as some kind of coherent, measurable entity governed through some kind of representational process would tend to operate against the very dynamics that permitted its ongoing survival. Even though residents knew well what was going on with everyone else, and had their own well-elaborated compendium of knowledge of the different dimensions of the district’s “presence” within the wider world, it was difficult to engage in collective performances—meetings, assemblies, public discussions, and planning sessions—whose objective was some kind of consensual position or practice.

This did not mean that there wasn’t a great deal of planning in terms of how trades were pursued and resources mobilized. The proceeds of that wider engagement with the world were concretely visible in the new construction of residential and commercial buildings, the acquisition of consumer items and commodities for trade. But the modalities of mobilization and organization were more based on forms of mutual witnessing, efforts to try and complement what other residents were doing, looking for the loopholes and unexplored avenues and then finding ways to articulate them with the “projects” of others. It also depended on the cultivation of ways of building, living, making money, calculating, and deciding that did not necessarily fit well together or make explicit reference to each other but that importantly provided evidence that different ways of doing things were possible, and that residents didn’t always have to feel implicated or obligated in terms of what others were doing, that it didn’t necessarily constitute an impediment for them to pursue their own ideas and agendas. Once again, as in the discussion of markets before, movement is something that takes place as much within a place as it is descriptive of a practice among places. In Bamenda Omnisport, movement became as much a strategy of staying in place, while taking advantage of being in many different places at once.

The Efficacy of Movement

In considerations of clearly highly dangerous ocean crossings in small boats or in arduous journeys across deserts, a

question that is commonly asked is why do these individuals take such risks with their lives, haven't they thought things through, haven't they considered the odds (de Haan 2007). At least in Bapenda Omnisport, it is not so much a matter of having not realistically considered the risks. Rather, the lengthy deliberations themselves are getting them nowhere and that only taking the decision and being in movement with the decision will put them in the vantage point to know, even when it is too late.

Similarly, the assessments about other places are not devoid of clearheaded reality. There is a sufficient history of emigration to Europe, North America, China, and South Africa to know that these are not paradises and that the lives of Africans are exceedingly difficult. Not only is legal travel of any kind increasingly difficult for Africans regardless of their background and status, but the ability of Africans to live under the radar also diminishes. In addition, the kinds of work available, the demands and internecine politics of Diaspora communities, and the possibilities of creating meaningful lives has also become more difficult. While those who return back home for vacations or because they have been expelled or for some reason have been unable to "make it" may embellish accounts of their time away with hyperbolic tales of how wonderful the life was, most people know enough by now to know what the real deal is. Still, even as this knowledge about other places becomes more precise, the need to get there does not diminish significantly. The imaginary Europe or America continues to expand even as knowledge of the reality grows.

While youth in particular may feel like their lives are frozen in place, this feeling of being stuck seems to intensify the more they have access to a wider world at home. With access to cell phones, Internet, nearly perfect cut-rate imitations of the latest fashions, and with easy access to the images and sounds of popular cultures across the world, concrete platforms exist for feeling as if one is "with the world" while not having to leave. Of course, vast discrepancies of access to information, knowledge, and income persist, and these discrepancies remain critically important factors in terms of migration. Still, youth report that they believe they are not as cut off from the real world as were their parents before them, that they have a sense of what is going on, and that things are not necessarily passing them by.

But yet, this reported sense of being part of the world tends to stoke the desire for movement. Rather than movement being motivated by feeling cut off from the world, with then migration being the means to be fully part of it, youth now feel that since they are already part of the larger world they should feel free to go anywhere within it. Since the person in some sense already knows it, it is simply expected that the individual should circulate through it as if it were part of one's existing neighborhood, as if it should be navigated as an extension of home rather than some fundamental distinction from it. Whereas youth indicate that their progenitors

might have felt so cut off from the "real world" that they did not feel sufficiently eligible or worthy really to be part of it, and thus remained within their local lives, they, themselves, feel little sense of ineligibility. They believe that Africans have been full players in the construction of modernity and that this modernity is now only recognizable in global terms. As such, modernity fundamentally includes them. Increasingly their decisions to move are based on this sense of inclusiveness and that movement is something then that they should engage in.

Additionally, within the popular culture of Bapenda Omnisport and many other urban districts I have worked in, movement is itself valorized as a particular African resource and heritage. Certain regions and ethnicities have long been known for the emphasis they have placed on movement to the extent that such celebration almost becomes a stereotype—for example, the popular representations of Ibo and Bamileke cultures.¹ But more than some ethnic or regional endowment, this popular valorization of movement in urban neighborhoods is based on the accretion of concrete stories about African circulation. Movement itself becomes the locus through which one can demonstrate skill, guile, intelligence, and courage. No matter if one ends up working in conditions of near slavery in the agricultural fields of Southern Italy or Spain, if one has accessed this opportunity with little money and overcoming constant interdiction and highly risky conditions then one has proven oneself as a "man" or a "woman." On top of this, there are hundreds of stories available about the relationship between movement and trade. Material goods pass through African cities not only on the basis of expanding neoliberal circuits that erode regulatory structures, undermine local production systems, and aim for the friction-free circulation of commodities. Material goods also are accessible because Africans themselves have been adept at plying the world's markets in search of advantageous prices, transportation costs, and ease of transshipment.

In Lubumbashi, it is difficult to find anyone who does not know about Didier, a professor of physics at the city's main university, who twenty years ago traveled by land and boat to Dubai in search of second-hand laboratory equipment for his teaching. He did not find what he was looking for, but over the years has become one of East Africa's largest automobile dealers—first plying secondhand parts for trucking companies making long hauls from Lubumbashi to South Africa or to Dar es Salaam, then supplying secondhand vehicles, eventually acquiring an automobile export company in Dubai and exporting new vehicles to ports in Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, and Beira, where they are transported across the region. While his success is attributed to many factors—from facilitating gun trafficking to various militias in the Great Lakes to plying contacts cultivated through his early arrival in Dubai to other African entrepreneurs—his own assessment is that many goods would arrive in Dubai with no clear destination. Intended pickups were never made;

containers full of particular items had been intercepted elsewhere and then dumped in Dubai; the breakdown and repackaging of bulk shipments produced leftovers, often through over- and underinvoicing—and Dider was adept at “arranging eventual destinations,” regardless of the item.

In the Somalian district of Eastleigh in Nairobi, a former “ghetto” has been transformed into a major business center, again largely in the beginning through plying the “bottom of the barrel” in Dubai, bringing commodities by dhow to the coast of the Horn of Africa and configuring elaborate distribution routes across the Horn and Kenya. Now this “artisanal” trade coexists with large-scale entrepreneurial networks, where young Somalians, equipped with millions of dollars in cash, made available through *hawla*²—transnational informal banking systems—fill containers with electronics, textiles, and household items accessed in Guangzhou, Istanbul, Bangkok, Taiwan, and Jakarta. Households are known to pool their money in order to purchase containers of goods, and complex hedging arrangements are made that link purchases of both same and different commodities in different cities—so that the eventual price of a car, for example, may be linked to the price of a ton of rice. Here entire districts acquire a wide range of items as an overall “basket of goods” assembled by the purchases of different entrepreneurial syndicates working in different markets across the world.

Of course, most of everyday “international trade” happens at a much smaller scale. Suitcases are filled with various items ordered by a group of neighbors who save for a plane ticket for one of their own to go to Guangzhou or Johannesburg, for example. Here, profit margins are low, and every decision from the price of plane tickets, to lodging and meals, to occasional bribes, and length of stay have to be precisely calculated in order to make journeys worth it. On top of this, goods are often intercepted; preexisting arrangements to get through customs without having to pay duty may fall through, and additional funds that were to be wired once a trader gets to a destination may never be made. So, much trading activity is fraught with constant anxiety and a sense of urgency.

Still, movement has been elevated into an important opportunity to demonstrate individual and collective efficacy (Bennafla and Peraldi 2008). Many youth in Bapenda also talk about movement as the vehicle through which it is possible to discover oneself as an African. Rather than relying on a common history of colonization or a shared racial identity—both of which have a negative valence—movement becomes a means of repositioning these legacies into something different. While traders may largely rely on contacts and support available through common national or ethnic identity, the search for new opportunities and trades often compels individuals to operate outside familiar networks and find ways of collaborating with individuals or groups from other parts of Africa. Various ethnic and national stereotypes do persist, as does enslaving and discrimination. Nigerians,

Congolese, Cameroonians, Somalians, Kenyans, Senegalese, and so forth, all have their peculiar reputations and have to be watched out for in terms of certain traits and practices. Nevertheless, these reputations and inhibitions also are productively circumvented, and the circumvention itself will often rely on the persistence of these stereotypes as a basis for the recognition and negotiation of complementarities.

In Bangkok (Thailand), I knew and worked with many residents of the Welcome Hotel—a rambling and disheveled building once occupied by Vietnamese refugees, now entirely filled with Africans of different origins, staying anywhere from several weeks to several years. The residents have substantially remade the interior over the years, both to support the congregation of particular segments of traders from specific countries and to facilitate interchanges among them. There are notice boards, savings and discussion groups, and common communications facilities—all of which are set up to promote a cross-fertilization of viewpoints and experiences of traders from different countries and involved in different sectors. While clear-cut delineation of trading groups according to ethnic and national background may persist, the built and social environment of the hotel is arranged to bring these distinctions into proximity so as to expand each resident’s knowledge about what is going on and also to explore possible concrete linkages among trading circuits. As prices of particular commodities rise and wane, as the advantage of particular markets come and go, and as the valuation of commodities fluctuate and relationship to each other, traders seek new forms of articulation among discrete trades and items, while they also search for less crowded opportunities and new markets.

Collaborations among discrete traders and their networks then become an essential facet of this search. These collaborations—which sometimes work and often do not—then become the platform for the concretization of an expanded notion of African identity—something that does not replace existing particularities but adds on to them. The achievement of this identity then becomes a mark of efficacy—an attainment that would not be possible without the concrete experience of movement. Even if the individual goes back home and does not travel again, it is an attainment that can be parlayed into his or her relationship with others; it is a status that enables one now to offer something new to those around him or her.

Movement and Experimental Frontiers

Movement has also been contingent on a long history of engaging different kinds of frontiers, openings, fissures, and understabilized places. These could consist of new factories or mines, new development projects or settlements. Today these frontiers are most likely urban places of uncertain trajectories—where it is not clear the extent to which they are on their way “down” or whether sufficient capacities remain

to be able to bet on some viable future. In these uncertain situations, rules and regulations may be slipping or exhausted enough to allow various insertions of people coming from different walks of life and equipped with very different ways of doing things. They may be domains within larger urban or regional systems that are undergoing extensive political or economic transformation, and where the bulk of institutional and financial attention is placed on other issues or places within these systems—leaving particular domains off the radar. Frontiers could also consist of emerging crossroads that are created within the fulcrum of conflicts, emergencies, or competing resource flows headed in different directions.

In Africa, the inner city districts of Johannesburg; some of the inner districts of Abidjan; towns at the confluence of the Gambian, Senegalese, and Guinea Bissau border; as well as secondary cities such as Aba (a city in Nigeria, different from that mentioned before in the Democratic Republic of Congo), Lumbumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo), Katsina (Nigeria), and Aflao (Ghana) reflect some of these dimensions. Whatever their composition, their vitality depends on their availability as a space of operation for shifting synergistic effects generated by the sheer presence of nascent residents coming from different places. Rather than having to fit into an agenda or way of operating dictated by the rules or necessities of the local system, new arrivals have an opportunity to use their working-out arrangements for coexisting with others, both new and old residents, as a platform on which to initiate new entrepreneurial activities and residential practices.

These efforts are seldom without conflict and contestation. Experiments come and go, and incursions are often of the “hit and run” variety, rather than anticipations of long-term commitments. In some respects, this volatility is necessary as the compulsion to innovate and to go beyond initial accommodations. Because people are often coming and going, making only short-term investments in place and relationships, this provisionality can take its toll on the built environment. Buildings, markets, and services can be quickly worn down, diminishing the capacity of the place to absorb all that is demanded of it. In part, this process is attenuated through the eventual need of new residents to stake certain claims and to institutionalize their presence in ways that can capitalize on efforts made often with great risk and expense.

So the vitality of these places to be what they are—that is, places that enable the productive conjunction of heterogeneous backgrounds, aspirations, and practices and, at the same time, anchor them in ways that eventually lessen the constant need for labor-intensive improvisation—is a delicate balance. It is one not easily amenable to policy or programmatic intervention. As “high-wire acts,” these places are also vulnerable to distortions brought about by skewed economies—such as drug smuggling, property speculation, and other forms of trafficking. These distortions then often

bring in the unwanted attention of various authorities, who are more likely to “join the game” in ways that introduce further distortions. The resultant defensive maneuvers of the majority then steer everyday life into dispositions that increasingly mirror the very conditions that propelled people to leave their former homes in the first place.

Small Steps at Real Frontiers?

While the most dynamic and complicated frontiers of Africa may be located in the uncertainty of what is happening to its cities, there remain the old, lingering frontiers of national borders—many of which states no longer have the political commitment nor resources to protect—but which remain the actants (the living instruments) of claims of sovereignty. Across the region, national borders are crossed often not only at will, but practically cease to exist as markers of transition or difference. Yet, various regional accords and coordination of the official movement of people, goods, money, and information remains slowed down by preoccupations with sovereignty. Even in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), residents have long been able to cross the borders of member states but still are not allowed to take formal work or establish formal enterprises in countries other than their own.

Sovereignty remains the clarion cry of stolen elections—for example, Zimbabwe and Côte D’Ivoire—where strongman can simply shut out compliance to international norms and agreements as threats to national sovereignty. In actuality, sovereignty is the arbitrary decision outside the law to which the law is subject—in the case of many African states, the capacity of those who control instruments of violence to arbitrarily decide what will be subject to the law or to subject citizens to conditions outside the law (Mbembe 2010). It is often estimated that 35 to 40 percent of Africa’s economic product moves through unofficial, often illicit channels (ECA 2008; ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD 2006) and that the proceeds from these transactions are acquired by various tiers of brokers, officials, politicians, and entrepreneurs. Here, the capacity to claim and enforce sovereignty is actualized by its very breach—by keeping goods and money outside of official trade conduits, procedures, and budgetary accounts (Bayart and Warnier 2004). Rather than participate in regional accords and coordination that could officially base developments on the clear mobilization, accounting, and deployment of funds generated by official economic activity, “real” sovereignty is maintained by circumventing any sense of national responsibility—a responsibility, that given Africa’s economic conditions, infrastructural needs, residential patterns, and migration practices, can only be exercised through efforts to work toward more functional economic integration as outlined in the by now long-standing protocols of the Africa Union’s New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

The key issue then is how planning processes can be inserted within this dilemma. Just as Bapenda Omnisport lives through its “elsewheres,” expanding official articulation among African cities may also be largely contingent on developments elsewhere—in this instance, at the concrete frontiers that separate nations. Here, long integrated economies and communities have simultaneously lived in different times—the time of individuated national belongings with their specific array of customs, tax, and land use procedures; the time of integrated economic activities, common or interrelated cultural practices, continuous exchange and contact; the time of complementary exchanges, where national differences are opportunistically plied in order to maximize the accumulation possibilities of those who live on both sides of the border; and oscillating times of over and under-regulation, of times when borders are alternately porous and sealed; where they are sites of military or police activity, interdiction, and manipulation. These simultaneous realities may be analogous to the simultaneity explored throughout this discussion—of fluidity and constraint, organization and provisionality, and visible and invisible knowledges and mobilizations as it relates to movement.

During the past fifteen years the *Prospectives, Dialogues, Politiques* section of the international NGO Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA) has conducted groundbreaking studies on interurban economic articulations in West Africa. These included the study on long-term economic complementarities among three medium-size cities located in three contiguous nations: Sikasso (Mali), Bobo Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), and Korhogo (Côte D’Ivoire)—a situation where their distinct national positionings simultaneously impeded and facilitated various facets of their long-term economic articulation, and where this articulation was the critical element for the development of new capacities in infrastructure and social welfare for each of the national subregions in which these cities were located. In many ways, it would make sense to eliminate the barriers that ensconce these cities in distinct national procedures—and certainly there would be much economic justification for this in terms of expanding contributions to the fiscus of each nation. But Côte D’Ivoire’s preoccupation—given its highly cosmopolitan makeup—with who is a “real” Ivoirian and the subsequent *de facto* division of the country has deferred any concrete moves toward integration here. A subsequent study focused on the ways in which the trade between the cities of Kano, Katsina (Nigeria), and Maradi (Niger) was crucial to each city’s survival, and how their respective markets are thoroughly integrated. Yet again, intranational competition among political elites in Nigeria attenuates the ability of entrepreneurs and public managers to develop protocol, budgetary procedures, and support mechanisms to further develop the capacities of this integration—in this case involving two of Nigeria’s largest and most important urban centers.

Given the complexities entailed in this explicitly urban focus, ENDA Diapol (2007) has, in recent years, been concentrating on the rural villages along the Senegambia border—at the confluence of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea Bissau—working with residents who have long operated by straddling national borders, and where the borders are largely irrelevant to the cohesion of local governance and agricultural production and trade. What has been key in this work has been to develop concrete models of decentralized border governance that can be used by regional bodies in order to develop new, concrete regimes officially capable of practicing and extending economic and social integration among villages in these areas.

At the 29th meeting of ECOWAS heads of state in Niamey in January 2006, agreement was secured to institute the concept of “border zones” to be subject to cross-border cooperation in all sectors, including agriculture, health, trade, peace and security, arts and cultures, as well as the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital (Tam-Tam 2009). The agreement calls for a multipronged effort to be concluded in 2014 by which time the legal and institutional structures would be established to permit the conjoint governance of adjacent areas separated by national borders through decentralized governance mechanisms. Presently, the accord calls for a series of pilot projects, initially in the Senegambia region, that explores the issues related to bringing the governance of the major dimensions of local economic, social, and cultural life under the rubric of institutions conjointly managed by residents of both sides of a border. Mechanisms include collaborative controls by local police and customs officials based on consultative process with new associations of farmers and traders to work out mechanisms for inputs and exporting based on a comprehensive understanding of costs and needed profit margins. They include conjoint strategic planning for enhancing access to domestic and international markets, access to technical assistance, and the distribution of public moneys across integrated sectors to ensure equivalent access to health and social services and to areas of potentially strategic investment. All of this takes place at a scale where the interrelationships between local economy, policing, taxation, social welfare, culture, and local authority systems can be discerned and monitored. The issue is not so much on scale here but rather the capacity-tracing patterns of interrelationship and finding ways to address problems as they arise. Actors of all kinds have long interacted at these frontiers in various forms and degrees of collaboration, while officially remaining accountable to national regimens of authority and control. While this accountability remains, they now must also be increasingly officially accountable to each other—official to official, trader to trader, farmer to farmer, trucker to trucker, and across these designations on both sides of the border.

These pilot projects are scheduled as a prelude to a much broader framework of decentralized management of border

economies and population movements across the West Africa region. Such management would be subject to an overall legal framework specified by member countries of ECOWAS, but which would, for the actual operations of cross-border relations, rely on the specificity of the economic and cultural character of the border region itself, and the development of institutions whose powers may be specified by the regional accord but which would be given substantial latitude in how they organized the conduct of those responsibilities.

While this accord represents a major achievement in working toward overall economic integration in the region, it remains to be seen exactly what transpires in the forthcoming three years in a region prone to intense disputation and caution. The key aspect that allows national governments to cede a certain degree of control over the very instrument—the border—which enables the invocation of sovereignty is the capacity to turn areas that have had a marginal or underdeveloped relationship to national and regional economies into zones of enhanced productivity. This means that in people's minds and behaviors, the border would cease to exist; that people would move and circulate as if there is no border, and have the rights to work and invest anywhere in the borderland. There are no easy methods for making this happen; how do distinct national economies keep competitive urges in check so that a transborder region develops with some sense of overall coherence? Within a framework of principles, rules, and guidelines yet to be fully specified by ECOWAS, how is the flexibility and singularity required in order to deal with the specificities of each border region given enough space to be effective yet adhere to such an overall framework? Given the cultural and economic complexion of individual border zones, what kinds of institutions and authority arrangements are best suited to mediate between the needs of economic productivity, decentralized governance, and compliance to national and regional laws? These are the challenges for planning, and how they are pursued in this arena will have much to say about what is possible to consider for larger movements of people, goods, and services in the region.

The ability of pilot projects to acquire concrete experience in largely governing themselves, while maintaining their formal status as members of two distinct nations, makes significant inroads. It makes inroads into defusing the capacity of regimes to continuously invoke sovereignty as a means of impeding integration activities, while at the same time, hobbling national economic capacity. These small steps at discernible and old-fashioned borders could then posit new breathing space for the long unrealized aspirations of drawing the region's cities closer to each other in ways that go beyond their substantial unofficial interpenetration.

Mobility and Infrastructure

It is obvious that the challenge of enhancing the ease and productivity of movements among cities across the region is

much more complex than that of these borderland pilot projects. It is clear that articulations among cities can only be expanded if there is new infrastructure to do so. The composition of this infrastructure investment will inevitably reflect the exigencies and motivations of powerful economic interests, and in doing so, reiterate some of the insularity and tunneling of the past. If this insularity is not attenuated by a heightened commitment to maximize the density of interconnections among territories, people, and activities, a critical opportunity for development will be lost. In many respects, as we have seen throughout this discussion, Africans are leading the way by "their feet"—by their own efforts to thicken the connections between any given location and a wider world of economic activity. The implantation of infrastructure—highways, optic cables, satellite transmission, solar power, hydroelectric systems—creates important opportunities to define and institutionalize significant articulations among places and economic activities. Given the high sunk costs entailed, maximizing the long-term productivity of this infrastructure, in addition to the potentials for eventual cost recovery, necessitate high degrees of consonance between the articulations infrastructure puts in place and the diverse patterns of connectivity being generated by African entrepreneurs, traders, farmers, and retailers themselves.

Of course not every circuit or trajectory can be addressed; infrastructure will alter routes and ways of life and establish new ones. Many existent circuits of transaction are arduous, diffuse and a waste of time. Enhanced and established connectivity may also lessen the vulnerability of certain areas to protracted struggles over resources and territorial control by extrajudicial forces.

But the most important consideration of regional urban development planning would emphasize how the differentiated resource bases, histories, and geoeconomic positions of cities and towns could be most productively connected in order to create regional domains—crossing distinct national territories or rural–urban divides—with a density of synergistic relationships among diverse economic activities (Mimche and Fomekong 2008; United Nations Human Settlements Program 2008; Foster and Briceno-Garmendia 2010).

The most obvious and frequently cited example is how transactions of all kinds could be maximized between Abidjan, Accra, Lome, Cotonou, Lagos, and Ibadan—long imagined to be the elements of a mega-urban region—in ways that enhance the income and capacity of each individual city. But a similar logic exists more widely across Africa and along various corridors—such as Douala to Aba, Nigeria, that crosses some of most densely populated rural areas in Africa; Llongwe through Nampula to the port of Beira; from Eldoret or Mombassa, through Nairobi, Tanga, Dar es Salaam, to Kigoma and then onward through the Great Lakes region; or the circuit that runs from Niamey, Zinder, Kano, Katsina, to Jos, where it intersects with circuits from Aba to Enugu to Jos, and where the intersection of circuits plays out in

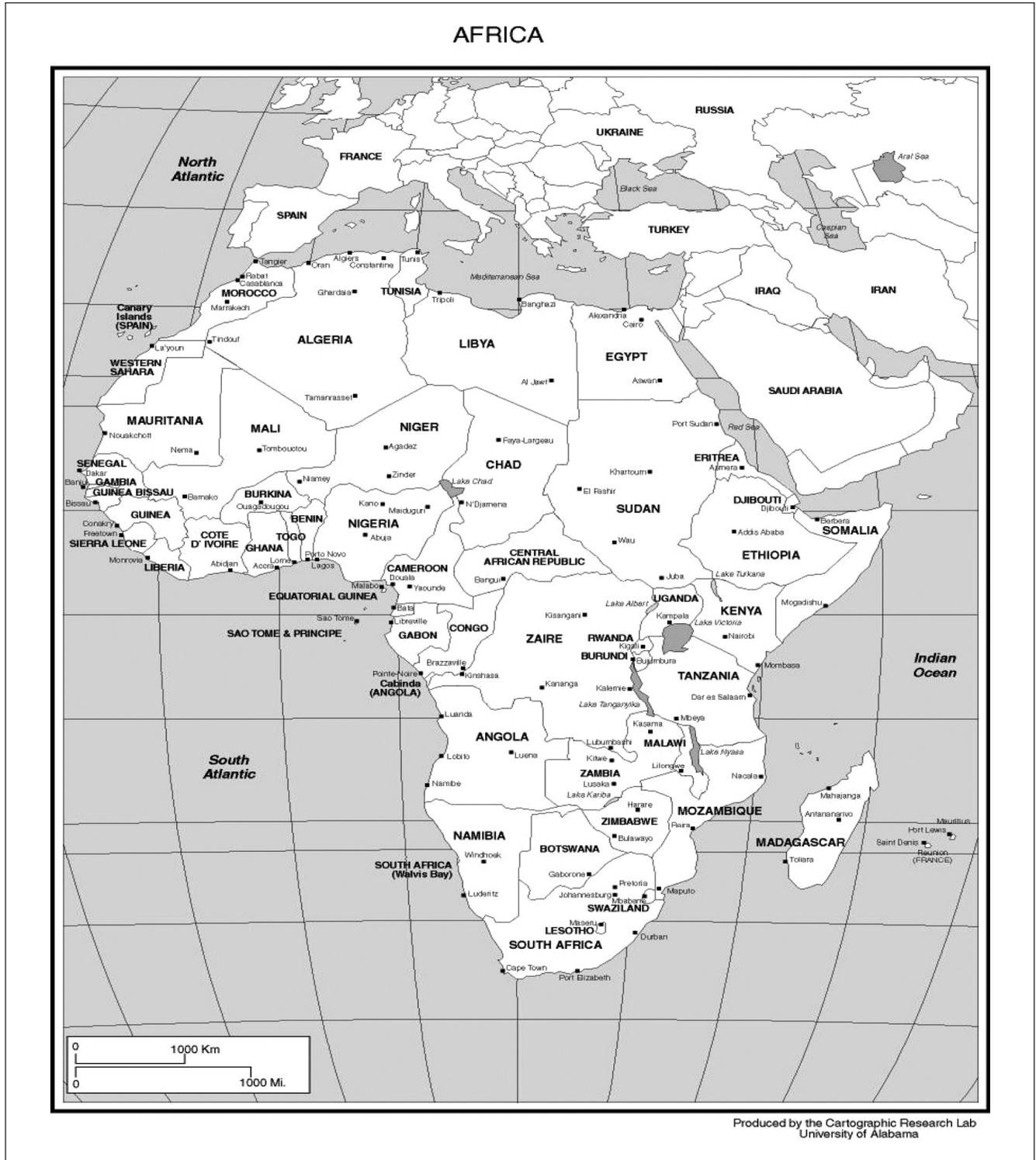


Figure 1. Examples of migratory corridors

apparently religious conflict. In West Africa, there are Sahelian trajectories that run east to west, Dakar to Khartoum to Port Sudan or Djibouti, along historical movements of religious migration, with multiple points of intersection to transit southward (see Figure 1). While subregional bodies

such as ECOWAS, SADC, CEMAC, EAC, and AMU work to harmonize and coordinate economic policy between contiguous nation-states, resident populations are reworking historical transit and trade routes that invoke precolonial circuits and cultural domains. They do this in order to maximize their

exposure and access to a larger world and to generate value in economic transactions that commerce within the formal boundaries of national economies and economic sectors either do not recognize or cannot take advantage. It may be that existent regional organizations are not the most adequate vehicles through which to concretize urban regional articulations, and that, instead, new collaborating city-to-city networks are required.

But again, this is a discourse of what is needed in the long run. There is still little idea about how this discourse actually links to what is taking place in the vast, largely uncharted population movements among cities—how trade is actually done, how money is actually moved and exchanged. This is why it is important to pay attention to the project of cross-border management outlined above—so far limited to highly ruralized frontiers—but to which, ECOWAS—the official regional body of West African integration—has provided official sanction. These projects are intended as spaces of rehearsal, and even if they cannot approximate the complexities entailed in interurban exchanges, they provide evidence of the possibility of conjoint management where distinct entities subject their former capacities to a new mode of governance.

Concluding Note

Movement has long been a resource that has given shape to African cities and regions. It has been used as an instrument of capture and escape, manipulation and autonomy. Movement is designed and deployed as methods of collective action and individuation. It represents both the decline of places and the potentials of others, as it also makes possible the folding in of economies, locations, and identities that do not seem to be connectable. It sometimes entangles vastly different trajectories, histories, needs and aspirations, and sometimes takes apart the coherence of places. Embodied with all of these dimensions, movement is a critical instrument for urbanizing relations of all kinds. Although stabilizing populations and economic practices does have value, not enough attention is placed in urban planning on making use of how movement continuously respatializes social positions and resources. Cities are mobile entities—oscillating relationalities that stretch and retract, include and exclude, filter and circulate.

Taken one by one as discrete administrative entities, most African cities exhibit a wide range of problems and constraints. But in following the multiple lines of articulation among them, largely etched through various everyday movements of their populations, it sometimes seems as if there is an insistence on a particular kind of city to be created, one that exists across multiple sites and permits different kinds of engagements by residents—sometimes here, sometimes there (Roy, forthcoming). Instead of trying to keep people in place, in newly democratic and decentralized localities, perhaps

emphasis should be placed on how to make already existent movement more productive and convenient, and to accede to the possibility that urban residents “come to go, and go to come.”

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 1]**

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 2]**

Notes

1. Across Africa, certain ethnic groups are seen by others and by themselves as so-called specialists in travel and trade, where there is great expectations on the part of households and communities for their members to engage in translocal economic exchanges as the very basis for the survival of the ethnic group.
2. Money will be given to a broker in one location and then a broker in another city is telephoned or faxed with instructions to pay out a designated recipient. The volume of such transactions is sufficient to ensure a continuous circulation of money, and scrupulous records are maintained of each transaction.

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Bio

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