

CONCLUSION

Possibilities



If...

Throughout my stay in the Gambia, and during my desk-bound writing, I have continually asked myself the same question: what would happen in Sabi if restrictions to the freedom of movement were lifted or finally done away with? True, this is a question that I neither found in the bush in Sabi nor brought to it; it is rather one that reached me in the travel-bush, in Europe, via political debates and social movements. Yet if a work of anthropology should consider and reflect on social alternatives across the world so as to ‘keep possibilities open’ (Graeber 2007: 1), then wondering whether the bush stories in this book can contribute to a critique or a different imagination of mobility in today’s world appears to be a legitimate intellectual exercise. As Michel Agier (2008: 9–11) suggests in the opening pages of his book on the humanitarian government of migration, the imagination of the world is today dominated by a spectral science-fiction scenario in which those undesirables from the ‘rest of the world’ who are on the move are systematically tracked down through the latest biometric technologies, excluded, encamped and removed. Confronted with this grim reality show, repossessing the means of critical imagination beyond the existing and the near-future is a significant endeavour. Indeed, it can be a crucial resource in the quest to remain attentive to and critical towards certain prevailing assumptions about human nature and freedom, where such

assumptions can become crystallized as an order of things and ideas and are then used as common sense justifications for exclusion and oppression (Bamyeh 2009: 4–5).

So, if free movement were to be granted, what would happen in the upper Gambia River valley? Well, in truth, probably not much. Young men in Sabi would no doubt take advantage of newly opened routes to Europe, provided that this remained an attractive destination for them. But little of the exodus and invasion in the proportions dreaded by some observers and politicians in the West would, in my view, materialize. Imagining possibilities is here not a utopian dream of a borderless world but an extrapolation of the social reality I have analysed in this book. I have demonstrated that permanence on the land remains important even in a valley where the injurious effects of the global economy and the whims of climate change have made living off the land a gloomy prospect compared to emigration. This is not because people are firmly attached to their bucolic lifestyles, and even less because they think of themselves as a sedentary people. Rather, ‘sitting’ in Sabi is a way of inhabiting a mobile world that has been such since before living memory can recall, certainly before the emergence of Europe as a popular destination. When we look at Soninke men – both words being synonyms of long-distance travel in this region – the underlying assumption that West African youths simply day-dream of Eldorado Europe and that their needy families push them onto boats bound to Spain quickly dissolves into a kaleidoscopic vision of other possibilities. In this book, I have tried to peep into the kaleidoscope and bring into focus the bush-bound trajectories of young men grappling with the hardships of rural life and yet feeling encouraged to come to know it, bear it with fortitude and make it part of their own way of being in the world. Visions of Europe and other migrant destinations do constitute a compelling element of the picture; on the other hand, the lure of travel can only be interpreted in the light (or obscurity) of the forces that wear immobility down and reduce it to bareness, a form of emplacement that is bereft of value and only worth leaving behind. Since the securitarian politics of mobility feature prominently among such forces, here lies the paradox that excluding people from the legal right to move across borders while promoting a normative sedentariness is what actually degrades their ability to stay put and further foments their aspiration to emigrate. If movement across borders were to become freer, perhaps it would alleviate these young men’s burdensome thoughts of emigration and leave their fantasies freer to explore other possibilities, such as what freedom to stay means.

Placing Immobility in Migration

In fact, while focusing on bush-bound young men in Sabi has given us glimpses of a different image of migrant West Africa, it has also led us to consider the possibility of an analytics of mobility based on fixity. Views from Sabi do more than recast a world that scholars have grown accustomed to representing as being on the move; they show how sedentariness is woven into the thread of migration. What may appear from the outside as old agrarian institutions resilient to change in the face of contemporary global flows, have in fact been shown to be core elements of such mobilities. There is, *stricto sensu*, no beginning of migration in Sabi, for the village was itself a product of complex mobilities unfolding in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in what we too often forget was one of the cradles of economic globalization. Sabi was created on the expanding groundnut-growing basin partly so that the opportunities of long-distance trade and commercial agriculture could be seized. The intensification of outmigration in the second half of the twentieth century has built on past mobility patterns, but also on the villagers' capacity to continue producing emplacement. Far from being antithetical, mobility and immobility are mutually intertwined in the social organization of everyday life in Sabi. I have therefore described the village, its households and their farms as 'moorings' (Urry 2003: ch. 5; 2007) or 'actual permanences' (Harvey 1996: 38), socio-material infrastructures that sustain mobility by preparing men to undertake a search for money away from the village, and enabling them to do so by taking care of those they leave behind, cultivating their reputation when they find their bounty and bring it back home, and offering a safe port to return to when the turbulent waters of the global political economy disrupt their journeys.

Bringing a historical and anthropological sensitivity to a growing field of migration and mobility studies, I have characterized (im)mobility as a geo-social field. Positions and relations in this field spanning local and national boundaries are associated with specific values and abilities whose cultural underpinnings I have tried to capture through the lens of age and gender. Following the life course of young men until early adulthood has meant tracing the moments and circumstances in which stillness becomes socially valuable as a form of immobility that sustains and is sustained by mobility. Farming, for instance, serves as a pedagogical tool for turning children and boys into *hustlers*. When the time for *hustling* arrives, young men continue to accept agriculture as a way of contributing to family subsistence, but they also feel alienated by farm work for, unlike working for a salary, it earns them no money and thus they have no possibility of

meeting the financial demands of manhood. Going to the bush to farm becomes important to men again when they assume a leading role in their households by managing subsistence and in turn educating their sons, and those of their migrant brothers, in the fields.

Through the local notion of *taaxu* or 'sitting', this book has analysed the process of creating, inhabiting and experiencing sedentary positions in the relational field of (im)mobility. While both the relational field and the positions in it evolve, often in rapid and unforeseen ways, 'sitting' has been shown to be a dynamic process that defies any definition of immobility as an innate or residual state of sedentariness. This is evident among the young men who are striving to earn a living in Sabi and in the Gambia. For them, opportunities are seldom readily available and instead must be looked for or even created ad hoc by mobilizing the support of migrant relatives. Even where positions are established and lasting, notably in the case of household heads, becoming established as a 'sitter' or stayer involves tactical manoeuvring on slippery grounds. In a neoliberal regime of chronic economic precariousness, 'sitting' depends to a significant extent on attracting flows of resources from abroad, not simply money remitted by migrants but also the children of the migrants, for example, who are sent back to be reared in a rural, family-oriented environment. Becoming established in Sabi implies, in other words, making a strong claim for 'sitting' for the very sake of travel and travellers. As other ways of urban 'sitting' have emerged, however, these combine as well as compete with Sabi, reshaping the geography of the moorings of mobility, and with it the distribution of resources needed to substantiate the position of the 'sitters'.

A spectre of bare immobility consequently looms over 'sitting'. Most evident among the unemployed and visa-less young men 'just sitting' through the day in the dry season, this abject mode of immobility also surfaces in the various forms of hesitancy, alienation and 'confusion' with which they experience more socially rewarding sedentary positions. They seek to avert the spectre of bare immobility in several ways other than by simply emigrating. In addition to *hustling* in the Gambia and 'sitting at home', they adapt multiple cultural imaginaries from both home and away to rethink their position as youth and young adults in Sabi, and even to recast the terms in which sedentary manhood is understood and achieved. They make a virtue out of necessity by framing their stay in the Gambia in relation to a religiously sanctioned temporality of possibility which concomitantly gives them hope and a purpose for continuing to strive in the present. They bear the burden of permanence not only as individuals but also as groups, whether by socializing with their age mates or by mobilizing them to lift the village out of underdevelopment and civic decay.

Certainly, we should be wary of using celebratory overtones to describe ‘sitting’ as yet another form of African creativity, while being oblivious to the wondrous economic and legal-political constraints that force the young men of Sabi to constantly reinvent their sedentary lives. Nevertheless, if scholars of migration ever needed to be convinced of the analytical usefulness of studying immobility in processual terms, the energies channelled into contemplating, fashioning or merely despising a settled life in a migrant-sending place like Sabi are compelling evidence for it. Although the increasingly popular use of the term ‘(im)mobility’ in academic writing indicates growing attentiveness to the relational character of mobility and immobility, in practice human mobility still claims the lion’s share of scholarly work on the subject. Strands of research nevertheless exist that, often prior and parallel to the mobility turn in the social sciences, sanction the need for straddling analytically the divide between stillness and movement. West Africa has been, in this respect, an observatory of how displacement and settlement occupy centre stage in the history and memory of its rural dwellers, and how combining agrarian and migrant livelihoods is not only a matter of survival but also an issue of social organization and cultural identity. On these foundations, *Bush Bound* has made a strong case for placing immobility more firmly in the empirical and conceptual purview of migration and agrarian studies. By exploring the dynamics of ‘sitting’, it has shown that immobility can be studied as a set of subject positions whose geo-social ambit must be delineated through inquiry rather than be assumed a priori to be a category of already formed subjects – the left-behind – on whose lives emigration impinges.

Trailing on

Recentring attention on the bush has done more than provincializing (Chakrabarty 2000) Eurocentric narratives of migrant West Africa and analytical positions in migration research. As Jeffrey Cohen (2004: 150–51) has remarked in his study of migrant-sending communities in southern Mexico: ‘Understanding migration in rural Oaxaca begins by understanding its households and communities. To jump to the United States is to lose that foundation and to miss the profound forces that frame and organize the very processes we hope to explain’. Beginning an ethnographic inquiry of migration with the migrant-sending village is not a nostalgic return to the local and the ethnic in anthropology; it is to begin with the concerns and histories of the people who have decided to embark on worldwide journeys in order to remain peasants. A

fuller appreciation of migration requires, I have argued, considering travel also as an extension of the social and moral order surrounding the bush, complete with its ways of attributing value to people, places and activities (cf. Munn 1986; Chu 2010).

Through the notion of permanence I have identified the concern, latent in the dynamics of 'sitting', with the continual spatial and temporal extension of the agrarian world. Making stillness valuable in migrant Sabi implies to some degree stilling the social and cultural tenets of rural life by making it, in an apparent paradox, mobile. The bush is turned into a travel-bush through semantic extrapolation but also especially by making it a built-in regulatory mechanism of conduct for it to be transportable to other locations while at the same time anchoring the traveller in the life-world of the village. On this extendibility or mobility of agrarian institutions depends, as noted, the subsistence and prosperity of the households and 'sitters', who, however, represent themselves less as mere recipients of remittances than as the source of the traveller's success. 'This is where it all began', say the villagers. In their view, the ability of expatriate men to reap good harvests in the travel-bush literally stems from the bush, that is, from the social and ethical virtues cultivated in the farms as well as from the blessings that honouring the conviviality and reciprocities of domestic rural life channels to expatriate household members from the river of the patrilineage, which they too are expected to refill.

At the same time, the enormous amount of social work put into 'making things stick' (Barber 2007) concomitantly reveals the profound anxieties surrounding the viability of rural permanence. Over the past few decades, extending the social order of Sabi has also become a way to recapture the diaspora. In a valley where peasants are increasingly dispossessed of their means of subsistence, household heads, among others, mobilize moral arguments in order to claim a sizeable share of the harvests in the travel-bush. In so doing, they implicitly acknowledge the fact that the material bases of their power and of social reproduction at large are now found away from the village. Their entitlements must be therefore balanced against other aspirations, of both those living in Sabi and those living abroad. Migrants acquire fame and secure their future by investing no longer solely in household and development projects in the village, but also in properties and new homes in the cities. Even the most committed and least ambitious young man who 'sits' in Sabi must reckon with the imperative of looking for money, and therefore of looking for markets in which to sell his capacity to labour, acquired as a boy in the bush.

Already in the mid 1970s, while migration from the Western Sahel to France was still flourishing, Claude Meillassoux (1981) had warned against the long-term corrosive effects of the cash economy on the

agrarian community. No doubt inspired by his research among the Soninke as much as by dependency theory, Meillassoux viewed labour migration as a form of exploitation through which industrial capitalism extracted the workforce from rural communities whilst sustaining its permanence on the land; in so doing, the cost of social reproduction of the workforce could be borne by the peasants. While the articulation between capitalist and domestic modes of production allowed the agrarian social order to thrive, this Faustian contract of regeneration would eventually lead to dangerous doldrums. Following his mentor Balandier (1961: 19), Meillassoux acknowledged that the migrants' 'sociological investments' would neutralize the disruptive power of money earned outside the farms controlled by the elders; nevertheless, in his view, monetization, combined with the double impoverishment or precariousness of peasants and migrant workers, led to a trend of privatization of savings that undermined the collectivistic logic of domestic units, thereby creating an 'uncertain future' for the agrarian community (Meillassoux 1981: 130–31).

Certainly, the French anthropologist did not do enough justice to the longevity of labour migration among the Soninke (Manchuelle 1997), let alone the importance of trade migration, which turned some Sabi villagers into capitalists of sorts. In addition, although the notion of articulation is still useful in certain domains of analysis, several elements of the peasant society, such as the agrarian ethos of Soninke migration, reveal a greater interpenetration, even a synthesis, of the economic systems at play (see also Galvan 2004; Guyer 2004; Shipton 2009). One should also give credit to the many Gambians who remark on the Soninke's obsession with money whilst admiring their ability to keep their large families spread across the world so united. Yet, forty years after the publication of *Maidens, Meal and Money*, echoes of Meillassoux's lucid analysis reverberate in Sabi men's complaints about the inability to obtain money by either earning a salary or by receiving a share of their brothers'. While considering the villagers as agents in their navigation of the unequal terrain of the global political economy, I have also shown how the Sabinko have participated in creating the very conditions in which they have since become trapped (Chalcraft 2008): once extended and locked into the capitalist circuits of trade and labour, the seeds of contradiction have thus been sown.

The uncertain yields of rural permanence are addressed in Sabi through neither cultural immobilism nor a radical departure from 'our fathers' path'. In West Africa, in a neoliberal moment in which 'traditions' that allegedly no longer serve to mediate state sovereignty are increasingly left 'rotting away in the villages' (Piot 2010: 163), people have embraced new

futures and sometimes neglected their pasts. In Sabi, young men have been responsive to new social models but have generally used them to preserve and bring new life to 'tradition'. As we saw, *Sunna* or reformist Islam, which is often depicted as a firm departure from traditional forms of religiosity, was used by young men to revitalize the age groups, an almost rotten institution of local governance. It was indeed the resulting youth committee that emerged in the late 2000s as the most articulate, collective attempt to deal with the contradictions of monetization and inflationary trends in social exchanges. By simultaneously acting within the bounds of social seniority and pushing them further, Sabi young men sought to trim the outgrowths of a moneyman model no longer at hand and prepared the ground for the seeds of a more viable bushman model to be sown. In an ongoing attempt to strike a balance between cooperation and individual autonomy, stability and change, *maarenmaaxu* and *faaba-renmaaxu*, young men thus cultivate the field of 'tradition' while at the same time experimenting with new cultural techniques and crops.

This brings us back, at last, to the question of possibilities. Anthropology, Michael Carrithers (2005: 434) has suggested, should consider not only certainties but also possibilities in the societies under investigation. This book has been first and foremost an ethnographic depiction of young peasants in contemporary West Africa, and the ways in which they explore the possibilities and impossibilities of creating and inhabiting agrarian futures. While the problem of producing a viable future is not new in Africa (Weiss 2004a), it has assumed ominous proportions for many African youths from the 1990s onwards. For them, permanence often means living in a state of permanent 'waithood' in which the long-walked paths to social adulthood seem to be no longer viable (Mains 2011; Honwana 2012). Zooming into the *ghettos* where young men just sit and wait has given us a flavour of the gravity of this experience, temporal as well as spatial and kinaesthetic, of stalled social reproduction. However, a 'waithood' perspective alone has limited purchase in Sabi both because it obscures *ghettos* as sites of production of alternative spatialities and temporalities (Masquelier 2013: 475), and especially because it limits social analysis to the present. As Beth Buggenhagen (2012) has shown, understanding everyday life in times of economic hardship and volatility requires investigating not only short-term coping strategies but also the long-term modalities through which Africans create and preserve value by investing in assets as well as in people. A focus on men projected towards adulthood and seniority has thus served to show us how, against all the odds and despite the contradictions, rural dwellers strive to make paths to male emancipation and respectability still possible. That is to say, permanence is not only a burden; it is also a bonus.

In Antonio Machado's poem, an excerpt from which features as the epigraph to the introduction of this book, the paths of human life are impermanent. Like trails ploughed across the sea, they disappear behind us and with us. Yet, while everything passes, everything also remains. No doubt young men 'sitting' in Sabi often perceive their wanderings on agrarian grounds as leaving barely visible traces compared to the larger avenues made by migrants and moneymen in the travel-bush. Upper River people are nevertheless rarely lone wayfarers; in this region, 'path' (*kille*) serves also as a metaphor for moving together, especially along the trails of the patrilineage, the household and the village community (see also Jackson 1989: 36; Wooten 2009: 146–47; Pelckmans 2011; Kea 2013: 109). What remains is therefore the imperative to keep trailing on, for 'the trail is made by walking', as Machado writes. What stays is the onus of walking, if not uniquely on 'our fathers' path', then in the same direction as them. And in Sabi, young men keep walking and making trails, trails bound to the bush.

GLOSSARY

Note: The plural version (in brackets) is provided only for those Soninke terms which are used both in the singular and the plural in the text.

Ataya: Sugary green tea

Babylon: (In the context of migration) Europe and North America

Barake: Blessing, state of grace

Biraado: Means of Subsistence

Dimbaya(nu): Approx. Nuclear Family (a person's spouses, children and eventually parents)

Faabarenmaaxu: Being of the same father; rivalry between agnatic brothers

Fish money: Daily allowance for buying food supplies

Follake(-u): Section of the *ka*

Ghetto: Meeting and socialising place for male youths

Gunne: Bush, farming area

Hanmi: Concern, ambition

Hoore(-o): Noble

Hustle: To work, make a living, look for money, to migrate

Hustler: Off-farm worker, migrant

Juula: (Muslim) trader in Mande languages

Ka(nu): Household, family compound

Kaara: Home place (i.e. father's *ka*, village, home country)

Kagumaaxu: Leadership of the *ka*

Kagume(-u): Head of the household (*ka*)

Kille: Path, way, migratory route

Kingide (also: kinŋu): Hearth of the *ka*

Kome(-o): Slave, slave descendant

Kora (also: koranlenme): Seating platform

Kunda: A suffix meaning either 'the household/compound of' or 'the settlement of'

Laada: Custom, tradition

- Lappe:** Group of male age mates
- Lumo:** Market, market place
- Maarenmaaxu:** Being of the same mother; unity, solidarity
- Madrassa:** Islamic school
- Maisi:** Upper Quranic school
- Mande:** A group of related languages and people distributed over a large area of Sahelian West Africa (the centre being Mali)
- Marabout (Soninke: moodi):** Islamic specialist and teacher typical of Sufi Islam
- Nerves syndrome:** Longing for travel, distress about inability to travel/lack of opportunities (see also: *hanmi*)
- Nyaxamala(-o):** Casted artisan
- Sappa:** Association, grouping; usually village-based
- Sappanu:** Age groups system
- Semester:** Migrant to the West, especially one associated with consumerism and sophistication
- Senbe:** Force, strength
- Soninkaara:** Homeland of the Soninke
- Strange farmer:** Also: stranger farmer; seasonal migrant farmer in commercial groundnut cultivation (known as *navétan* in Senegal)
- Sunna:** Usually: words and deeds of the Prophet, in Soninke, also: Islamic reformism
- Sunnanke(-o):** Follower of *Sunna*, Islamic reformist
- Supporter:** Helper
- Taaxu:** To sit, to take office, to become settled
- Tanpiye:** Hardship, fatigue, suffering
- Taxaana:** ‘Sitter’ or ‘stayer’, person who does not travel
- Teraana:** Traveller
- Tere:** To travel, to walk
- Terende:** Travel, approx. international migration
- Terenden-gunne:** lit. Travel-bush, foreign land or travel destination
- Travel-bush:** *Terenden-gunne* (author’s translation of)
- Tunña:** Foreign place, travel destination, land of exile
- Vous:** Meeting and socialising place (especially in urban Gambia)
- Wulliye:** Awareness
- Xabila(-nu):** Descent group
- Xalisi:** Money
- Xalisi mundiye:** Quest for money
- Xaranyinmbe:** Basic Quranic school

