

Migration, Immobility and Youth
in a Malian Soninke Village

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Introduction

In Mali, there is a saying that, “*Soninke have migration in their blood*”. For generations, men belonging to the ethnic group Soninke have left their families in search of profit that they would invest back home¹. From the 8th century, the Soninke residing in the Upper Senegal River Valley of West Africa were involved in the trans-Saharan trade, and went on itinerant trading expeditions. In the 18th century, they participated in the Atlantic trade with Europeans. From the end of the 19th century during French colonial rule, they worked as labour migrants² on peanut plantations in the Gambia and Senegal, and were employed as indigenous sailors (so-called “*laptots*”) in the French Navy. Increasingly from the 1960s, Soninke villagers have migrated to France, where they constituted eighty-five per cent of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in 1968. Migration is central to the socio-economic reproduction of Soninke society. Moreover, Soninke migrants have thrived on their well-established trans-national networks, which have facilitated their travel, employment, and transfer of remittances: Usually, a Soninke migrant and his male relatives in France finance the arrival of a younger brother. This youngster might replace a migrant higher up in the generational hierarchy, who then returns to the village to act as household head.

Mali is rated the fourth poorest country in the world (COWI 2005), and in the Kayes region, where most Soninke villages are located, subsistence farmers’ main problems include the lack of access to water, unstable rainfall and frequent droughts, and the approaching Sahara desert (Azam & Gubert 2002, GRDR 2007). Soninke villagers are therefore highly dependent on the remittances they receive from their migrant family members, residing mainly in France³. However, with the increased tightening of French (and generally, Western) immigration policies, the migratory strategy of the Soninke is eroding. Young prospective migrants therefore face an incompatibility between their migration aspirations and abilities. This paper seeks to explore the significance of the resulting “involuntary immobility” (cf. Carling 2002) to the lives of young men in a village in Mali’s Kayes region. Migration has constituted a sort of rite of passage for young Soninke men in the process of attaining social and economic autonomy and hence, adult status. This

¹ This brief historical overview of Soninke migration is based on the writings of Manchuelle (1989 and 1997) and Chastanet (1992).

² This migration is known as the “*navétanat*”, and constituted one of the most important migrations in the modern history of West Africa (Manchuelle 1997:53).

³ The yearly amount of money sent by Malian emigrants exceeds 100million Euro, of which at least 50million Euro is sent by Malians who reside in France (Muurling 2005:178). In Malian households with members in France, between 30-70%, and in extreme cases 80% of the budget is covered by migrant remittances (Daum 1995:13).

intergenerational progression has now stalled, as the young men's migration plans have been obstructed or never materialised.

First, I will briefly elucidate the socio-economic significance of migration in Soninke society, based on data gathered during five months of anthropological fieldwork in a Malian pre-dominantly Soninke village in the Kayes region. On this background, I will present case-material I collected on young "involuntarily immobile" men in the village. This will illustrate the new strategies for identity construction they apply, as they negotiate their social becoming. The first example shows how young men are establishing a "youth culture" in the village, appropriating modern values and urban forms of socialisation in their re-invention of the traditional age groups. The second case deals with the dilemmas of non-migrants, who face the pressure of the dominant narrative that links migration and manhood, as they turn to an alternative subsistence strategy by learning a trade and making a living in the village. In the conclusion, I will sum up with a few remarks on immobility, globalisation, and social change.

Migration, Economy and Social Life in the Village of Kounda⁴

Reciprocity in Soninke Families

At the onset of my fieldwork in the village of Kounda, I was adopted into an aristocratic⁵ family and re-named Hatoumata Doucouré, signifying my new clan membership. My host family provided me with a small room in their mud-brick house, and I ate my three daily meals with the old grandmother and her favourite grandchild, and whoever else joined us in the family's court yard. The men of the household regarded me as their sister, and they became my assistants and main informants. Despite their obvious lack of money, they refused to receive any payment for their support, and instead only accepted the occasional gifts that I gave them. Our consumption needs were covered by subsistence farming, and when the granary was empty, my host would phone his two brothers in France, who placed an order of groceries in the nearest city 130kms west of our village. A few days later, we would track up to the tar road and fetch the heavy bags of rice, maize, and millet.

⁴ To ensure the anonymity of my informants, I have replaced all names with pseudonyms.

⁵ The nobles and the marabouts constitute the aristocracy, and they hold the political power in the village. Traditionally, they held slaves, and descendants of former slaves still reside in their own neighbourhood in the village. Apart from these social classes, there are the artisan castes, *nyaxamala*, who were traditionally the clients of aristocratic patrons, who supplied them with gifts and protection in turn for their services and products. Today, these distinctions have little economic significance (cf. Pollet & Winter 1971; Conrad & Franck 1995; Manchuelle 1997).

The economy of the village of Kounda can be described as “assisted self-sufficiency”, as farming is complemented by migrants’ remittances (Quiminal 1991 in Whitehouse 2003). There is rarely any economic surplus in the households, yet the inhabitants’ basic consumption needs are covered, and most families have easy access to drinking water, and are supplied by electricity for five hours during the evening; they also benefit from other social infrastructure, including a school and a health clinic, all financed by migrants in France. Some families even live under relatively favourable conditions in brick houses constructed by migrants, who may have installed solar panels, and bought a TV and motorbikes for the family members.

An ethos of gift-giving defines the social relations between villagers. This implies an obligation to share one’s resources with the extended family. Since the patrilineal Soninke households are endogamous, most villagers in Kounda are somehow related, thus rendering the local economy an “economy of affection”⁶. Apart from its socio-economic advantages, this system has the effect that a young man cannot accumulate economic capital in his native village, because he is obliged to share all resources with his family. Informants therefore held the common view that, “*You cannot succeed in the village of your father*”. In fact, making a local income was considered unappealing, even humiliating, because it meant that you profited at the expense of your relatives. Abdoullaye, a man in his early forties, said that, “*To succeed, you have to be wicked*”. Abdoullaye was an entrepreneurial villager, and was known as the best tailor in the village, yet he struggled to make a living. “*I have a soft heart*”, he explained, implying that he could not get himself to ask money for his services. So when his wife had to be hospitalised during her pregnancy, he spent days tracking up and down the winding roads of Kounda to ask people to pay back their longstanding credits. Luckily, his brother in France eventually sent him 50,000CFA⁷.

This system placed the young men in a dilemma. The impeding webs of obligation imposed by their families prevented them from earning a profit that they could save up, which would allow them to establish their own household and liberate them from their dependence on their senior relatives. This created a sense of inhibition, which the young men expressed by claiming that their relatives

⁶ Vigh uses this notion of an “economy of affection” in the context of Guinea Bissau. He borrows the term from Hydén 1983, who defines it as: “*a network of support, communication and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities, for example religion*” (Heydén in Vigh 2006:104).

⁷ 50,000CFA equals approximately 75 Euros.

were keeping them down, destroying their luck, and even applying the use of “*fetich*” to ruin their success⁸. Oussy, a young poultry farmer, lost all his stock during a minor epidemic, as he had not vaccinated the animals. He and his friends assured me that it was “egoists”⁹ who had applied occult means to ruin his business. For young men in Kounda, migration was the accepted strategy for exiting the impeding gift economy, in order to accumulate an economic surplus.

Meanwhile, the young men also felt indebted to their families. Although virtually all my young male informants had explicit desires to migrate, *all of them* expressed an ideal of returning to their natal village, because “*this is where your family is*”. The young men wanted to follow the migrants’ examples by constructing houses or financing projects in the village. This would not only enhance their social status in the village. It would also allow them to “repay” their family, who had reared them¹⁰; indeed, these were not only exchanges of affection, but were tangible, materialist expectations of Soninke families. Several of my young male informants claimed that, “*if you don’t have money, even your own mother does not love you*”¹¹. Giving money was part of the relations that ensured an intimate tie to one’s mother. Rather than being biologically determined, motherly affection depended on maintaining an active relationship of exchange (cf. Carsten 1995). To qualify as sons, the young men were expected to assume a position as givers rather than takers in the family. Migration would enable the young men to reposition themselves as providers rather than passive consumers, hence subverting the exchange relations in the family and endowing the men with the status of mature adults. In this sense, migration constituted a rite of passage for young Soninke men.

The above analysis considers youth and kinship as a process of becoming¹². In Soninke society, social identity is closely linked to one’s intergenerational position. These positions are constantly

⁸ The belief in fetish is forbidden in Islam, and therefore not publicly accepted in the village, where the Muslim faith is prominent.

⁹ An “egoist” is in emic terms, someone, who does not want somebody else to succeed, and who will apply the use of witchcraft (“*fetich*”) to this end.

¹⁰ This completes the cycle that Sahlins (1972) refers to as “generalised reciprocity”, where mothers, who nurture their children, are “repaid” at old age, when their children support them. Soninke migrants might also consider themselves indebted in another sense: Their remittances could be seen as a “reimbursement” to the relatives, and generally the villagers, who have built up the trans-national networks that facilitate the migration of Soninke men.

¹¹ Part of the explanation for this is the rivalry between co-wives in polygamous Soninke families. Women wanted their sons to succeed in order to outdo their co-wife, and hence gain the attention and affection of the husband.

¹² Cf. Carsten (1995) on this processual perspective on kinship, and Vigh (2004 and 2006) on youth as a process of social becoming. This analysis explains how I, as a foreigner, could come to be conceived of as a family member, since I partook in the social and economic exchanges that make up everyday social interaction (cf. Carsten 1995:234).

redefined according to the socio-economic exchange relations that exist between relatives. These exchange relations are the foundation of belonging in Soninke society; and through exchange relations with migrants, the local village maintains its integrity and coherence (cf. Olwig 1999). Despite their physical absence, Soninke migrants maintain ties to their spouses and offspring, and thus are socially and economically present through their remittances, phone calls, and visits. Therefore, they are conceived of as full members of the local society. In the words of a Soninke villager: “*The migrants complete us*”.

Youth and Immobility in the Village

In 1974, the French government took measures to stop the arrival of new foreign workers. The restrictions limited the rotation of members of the same family; lengthened the stay of migrants abroad; and resulted in the development of family emigration with children and wives, which made return less likely (Chastanet 1992:145, Quiminal 1994:65). Forced repatriation, increased border controls since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the recent passing of a bill favouring “selective immigration”¹³ in France, constitute further obstacles to West African migrants. The common strategy of attaining socio-economic autonomy and hence, adult status, is therefore no longer viable for the majority of young Soninke men. Boubacar, a twenty-five year old villager, said about his age-mates: “*They all want to go, but they do not have the means and all the roads are blocked*”.

During the heyday of migration to France, youth was not a prominent group in the village society: Being youth meant being away. Today, the youth of Kounda is rather a “generation-in-waiting” (Schulz 2002)¹⁴ – not only waiting to obtain the visa, but also, awaiting the passage to adulthood that was traditionally secured by migration. As these young men sit and “wait”, they socialise in groups that resemble the traditional age groups. The youth in Kounda seems to be turning into an intra-generational category in the village, a kind of sub-culture with its own dynamics¹⁵.

¹³ This, in the West African context, much detested policy, referred to as “*migration choisie*”, was proposed in 2006 by then French Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, who is now the French president.

¹⁴ Schulz (2002) refers to urban Malian youth as a “generation-in-waiting: “*they wait not only for achieving a status of adulthood, but for parental support and for the state’s creation of the very conditions that would enable them to become full grown members of the social and political community*” (ibid:806).

¹⁵ Cf. Vigh (2004) on the analytical distinction between youth as a distinct social category (intra-generational position) vs. youth as a process of becoming (inter-generational position).

Re-Inventing Youth Culture

In Kounda, age groups (*īre*) have existed since pre-colonial times. In the 1960s, Pollet & Winter (1971:263) observed that, although the *īre* still existed, villagers did not consider their public function significant. One of the main purposes of the *ire*, which is still relevant, was that the groups could be mobilised by the village chief for communal purposes (eg. to dig a well, construct buildings or roads, or put out fires). Agricultural working groups¹⁶ have *not* traditionally been based on these age groups but rather, were organised in the patrilineal families (Pollet & Winter 1971:377). The *īre* (at least since the 1960s) is mainly a form of socialising, characterised by egalitarian relations and mutual help and solidarity of the members (termed *mɛlɛmme*). Pollet & Winter (ibid:261-265) write that the *īre* would form when boys were nine to ten years, as they settled with their friends into their own, separate chambers. Members spanned all social classes; age and sex were the only criteria for joining. The group nourished a team spirit and on significant occasions and ceremonies a man would always be surrounded by his group. Members confided each other their secrets, and remained loyal to each other throughout life.

The increasing migration to France since the 1960s probably reduced the significance of the *īre*: Members were separated by large geographic distances for very long periods of time, and means of communication and transport were lacking. Middle-aged men in Kounda said that generally, most traditions practiced by the youth stopped in the mid-1970s. This was partly due to the great drought of 1969-1974¹⁷, they explained, because many traditions that defined the youth were connected with food items¹⁸. However, in 1989, Kounda witnessed a revival of the traditional age group, with the introduction of “*Mickey Black Paul*”. This was a group founded by young villagers, who had spent time in urban milieus, and who were inspired by the kind of male socialising, known today all over Mali as the *grin*¹⁹ (cf. Schulz 2002). The modern *grin* is centred on leisure and consumption: Men meet to drink tea, listen to music, play cards, and discuss. In Kounda, elderly villagers, as well as visiting migrants (often rather conservative) saw the *grin* of the youth as a space of delinquency

¹⁶ The members of the same youth group often organised to work together in a specific field, but this work was usually remunerated by the proprietor, who paid them each about 1,500CFA (circa 2.3 Euros) a day.

¹⁷ Migrations to France probably decline during drought. Findley (1994) argues that spontaneous famine and drought-related migration from the Sahel borders is not directed to international destinations like France, since such a move is expensive and requires planning. Rather, these migrants have moved for short durations to the cities of the Sahel.

¹⁸ Stealing and preparing food, and using animal hides for musical instruments all went to the pleasures of the youth. For example, girls could sneak into peoples' houses and milk their goats, and boys were allowed to steal chickens, maize and sugarcanes, which they shared with their friends when they were partying or socialising.

¹⁹ Schultz (2002: 811 n.31) argues that the *grin* does not have a rural equivalent in Mali, but my data (and, I would argue, the observations by Pollet & Winter on the *īre*) contradicts this claim.

and laziness. They decried the activities of the youth in these groups, which they claimed caused the youth to become disobedient, wasting money, and being more concerned with consumption than productivity.

Rap, Romance, and Rebelliousness: The Grin Culture

Right from the beginning, the *grin* culture was in opposition to the local authorities and tradition. Three of the founders described their introduction of the new practices in the conservative village:

“In 1989 we put up a flag to announce the grin. There was the name (Mickey Black Paul) and messages written on it, like, ‘all we want is peace’, and ‘foreigners and villagers are all equal’. The old complained that the flag should be pulled down. Sekou Samba was chief then. He had just come back from France, and was the youngest chief we had ever had. He was cool. But he was gone during the events, and his substitute, BaMoullah, was very much against the young. He summoned us at the village council, and we couldn’t convince him and the old people that the things we had written were harmless. So we had to go and take the flag down to show them. The old were constantly complaining about us. We started out being eight people in the grin, but with all the trouble, there were eventually only four of us left. Every two weeks we used to be taken to the chefferie (chief’s council) (...) Our group was the first one that had a name. We were the first who held really big parties, where all the youth from the surrounding villages paid to get in. ‘Moghole’ was the traditional way of dancing at the time, but our grin was the first to introduce the reggae and rap dance. We were also the only ones in the village who used to go to Kayes and Bamako. At the time, if you went to the big city it was to look for the visa, and then you didn’t come back. But we went back and forth. Our girlfriends were the daughters of civil servants, so they also knew more about the urban life”.

Today, there are more than forty of these *grins* in Kounda. I interviewed members of eleven different *grins*. They had between seven and eighteen members, at the ages of eighteen to twenty-five. Most young men had never attended school, or had dropped out after a few years. On average, about half of the *grin* members were away from the village, either having emigrated to another country, or left for Kayes or Bamako for a longer period, usually to “look for the visa”. The *grin* normally resides over one or two bedrooms, where the members sleep every night. Hip hop and reggae was particularly popular in the *grins*, and the walls of the sleeping chambers were decorated with posters of Afro-American music and film stars, which sometimes had poems or expressions printed them, for example, “*Life with money is sweet*”. Indeed, the young men were highly obsessed with money and consumption of modern items (eg. hip hop style clothes, cigarettes, food and drinks not produced locally, Western music, modern transport like motorcycles). Migrants in France often spoil their younger brothers with gifts or pocket-money, which increased these youngsters’ prestige amongst their peers.

The young men in Kounda often expressed a sense of restlessness and said they wanted to make “fast” money. Mamoudou was a twenty-six year old who only knew the first half of the alphabet and who had already passed the age when a young man should leave the village and start making a living. One evening as we sat talking, I told him that getting a career and saving up takes time. Mamoudou got up restlessly, shook his body and looked at me saying, in Soninke: “*I don’t have a calm spirit! I think too much of money. Of BIG money*”. A local salary could hardly meet the consumerist desires of these young villagers.

Some *grins* in Kounda were more famous than others. Even in neighbouring villages, they were well-known, if their members had certain talents or a reputation, and if they threw big parties. Kounda’s most prominent *grins* were “Jamaïque”, “Ambience”, and “Chicago”, all located in the nobles’ quarter, where I lived. When itinerant musicians (*griots*)²⁰ visited the village the *grins* would gather money, and announce the name of their *grin* to the *griot*, who would then “praise” them at the village concert. Some of the *grin* members had nick-names that they had taken from famous rap stars, such as “2Pac”, “Snoop Dogg”, or “Puff Daddy”. At parties, they performed with innovative dance moves or self-composed rap music. I attended some of these village youth parties. We would sit on benches and chairs in a big circle, watching people, who took turns dancing energetically in the centre to loud drums that were played by two or three hired musicians. At a certain moment, the rhythm of the drums would change to a particular slow beat. At the first party I attended, this prompted my companion to ask if I knew how to “dance rap”. When this “rap music” started to play, the fit young men got up from the benches where they had been sitting watching young women do the traditional twirls and steps. Wearing big baggy jeans and very long shirts, heavy boots, bandanas and caps, the young men showed off their moves that they had either practiced with their friends in the village, or learnt in the city.

When the *grins* were partying or playing music at night, young women often showed up and sneaked into one of the bedrooms with a *grin* member, to have a quick intimate moment, while we sat outside holding guard. Most girls had a secret boyfriend, but these relationships became very complicated when the young girls were married, usually at the age of fourteen. Young men’s rivalries over girlfriends often became violent; moreover, an increasing number of young, unmarried girls had recently become pregnant. The village chief was concerned about this situation,

²⁰ The term *griot* refers to endogamous groups of West African musicians, public speakers, and oral historians. Cf. Skinner (2004) for an analysis of the globalisation and migration of West African *jeliw* (a form of *griot*).

and as he took office in 2006, he therefore decided to ban *all music* in the village – even at weddings or baptisms. Yaya, a twenty-year old man, commented on this decision:

“The youth is too bothered here; even the cocks are better off! We can’t play the tam-tam (music), the chief is against everything that the young people do. Before he was installed a year ago, everything was better. Now if you party, even in secret, and someone sees you, they will go and tell, and then they come and stop the party. I am really annoyed! I don’t even want to stay one more hour here!”

I discussed this with a few men in their early thirties. They said the youth would normally organise to protest such outrageous decisions by the chief; but the youth of Kounda were not mobilised, they bemoaned. Indeed, it was more friction than collaboration that marked the relations between the different *grins* in the village. Some fights were rather innocent, like when the “*benjamin*” (youngest) of my Doucouré-brothers, a skinny fourteen year old, ventured out at night, after proudly informing me that he and his *grin* were ‘going to look for someone to beat up’. This was tolerated by his father, who later said:

“In the old days, two men would beat up each other, then they would settle their dispute by discussion, or the village chief would resolve the conflict. Today, the traditional authorities have not got such power. Today, the one who is hit will go straight to the authorities – either the sous-prefet or the gendarmes - and the small affair between two youngsters now becomes a problem of justice”.

The young men had little respect for the traditional authorities, and fights could therefore become rather severe. I was told that some young men received teargas from their brothers in France, which they used against their rivals. Towards the end of my fieldwork, one young man stabbed his cousin to death in broad daylight. Drama of this scale had never been witnessed before in Kounda, and the entire village, many of whom were related to the young men, attended a big public prayer held just before the funeral.

While the youth generally blamed this tension on the influence of conservative villagers, some villagers in their early thirties saw the problem as due to boredom and a lack of cohesion. One of them was Checkne, who had returned to the village after an adventurous decade in Ivory Coast. There he had sold pirate copied books and performed as a rap singer, until he was chased by the secret service, when the civil conflict escalated in 2002. He taught some of the young villagers in Kounda to write and perform rap music. His dream was to restore the historical reputation of his

noble clan, and reintegrate the dispersed members of his patrilineage, so they could all live as one big proud family. He had expressed this in his lyrics, and upon his return to Kounda, he performed this music, which his friends told me, made his audience cry. Another man, Oussy, managed to mobilise the village youth in December 2006, and led a procession to the village chief, demanding the un-banning of music. Cissaro was elected the “chief of the youth”, and I interviewed him in this capacity. He explained:

“The youth of today are not properly organised, so the chief succeeds in destroying their initiatives. But the youth will follow the law of Mali, not of the chefferie (the chief and his council). The law of Mali does not forbid music, and if there are any conflicts now, we will go to the sous-prefet to complain about the chefferie. The chief has said he accepts our demand, as long as the youth is willing to work for the collective (...) Today there are more young men in the village than before, youngsters who cannot go on adventure. They are hanging around, bored, because there is nothing to do. The rain usually does not last more than three months. There are no industries here where the youth can work. The government has done nothing here! If the French do not want us to go there, then they must come here and help us. We have to find the means for the youth to work. The youth is the misery.”

Making a Living as a Non-Migrant

Local Perception of Non-Migrants: the “tenes”

Despite the common view that, “*You cannot make money in your father’s village*”, there were a few young men who were attempting to do so, by learning a trade that would enable them to make a living for themselves in Kounda. However, villagers’ general perception of men, who chose not to migrate, was entirely degrading. Such a man was referred to with a derogatory term, “*tenes*”, a Soninke adjective that means ‘being stuck like glue’, ‘unable to move’. In the mid-1990s, two women broadcast a song about the “*Tenesy*”, which denounced non-migrants as parasites with nothing to offer their families, and undesirable to women. The dominant narrative on migration as integral to Soninke society is often conveyed through music that villagers listen to, sing, and compose themselves. The majority of villagers in Kounda are illiterate, and music is therefore a powerful medium, shaping and transmitting discourses on migration. The lyrics of the *Tenesy*-song are as follows²¹:

*Tenesy, stay in your country or in your house.
Your couscous will find you there,
your couscous with that good sauce.*

²¹ The original Soninke version was translated by informants into French; this is my own English translation.

Tenesy cannot go to France,
Tenesy cannot go to Bamako.
Your appointment was not good
And your name has been taunted

Tenesy cannot go on *aventure* [migration].
Leave me in peace if you cannot go on *aventure*.
The son of a bad woman cannot build his country.
Tenesy cannot go on *aventure*.
If you cannot go on *aventure*,
do not come here and take the money from my bed.
Tenesy cannot go on *aventure*.
The *aventure* was not good, and your name has been shattered.
Tenesy, if you cannot go on *aventure*
do not come here and take the money out of my hearth,
do not throw cement on my fire.
The son of a bad woman cannot build his country.

Tenesy left for Kayes, but *Tenesy* has returned.
They have given a wife to *Tenesy*.
Tenesy cannot go on *aventure*.
Leave me in peace, I am doing my sweeping.
If you cannot go on *aventure*,
they will give you the couscous without sauce.
Tenesy left for Kayes.
He thought about the couscous,
the couscous with the good sauce,
and he returned.
The *aventure* did not take place
And your name has been shattered

The song emphasises the strong link between manhood and migration, characterising non-migrants as immature, cowardly, lazy, and selfish. Non-migration is construed as an immoral choice. This strong narrative on migration meant that Soninke villagers were often unable to imagine viable alternatives to migration that were not shameful and humiliating. However, the perception of non-migrants in the village has changed in the past ten years. When the *Tenesy*-song was popularised, the village chief forbid the derogatory use of the word *tenes* and fined villagers who sang the song. Today, “*tenes*” has become a vernacular term denoting non-migrants, and its connotation is more joking than humiliating. When I asked women about their view on immobile men, they saw their situation as pitiful rather than immoral. Hence, non-migration is now conceptualised as an involuntary, forced condition; this however, does not make it more attractive.

The young mechanic apprentice

Hamedi was a twenty-two year old mechanic apprentice, one of the few young Soninke men in Kounda, who was learning a trade. This could secure him financially and facilitate his social mobility. Yet, he was not entirely excited about the future scenario of earning a meagre income in

his natal village, and abandoning the prospect of migrating. The narrative that linked manhood and migration made his career seem like a poor compromise. *“If you stay here in the village you will not progress, but always be the same person, even in ten years”*, he told me one day, as we sat talking at his workshop under a big tree, while he was fixing a radio. *“If I find the occasion to go, I will hand you this radio and be on my way!”*

One late evening, Hamedi came around, as I sat listening to a tape in *grin* Jamaïque. The musician playing was the prominent Soninke *griot* (a traditional bard), Ganda Fadiga, which I had asked my friends to put on for me. As an itinerant musician, Ganda Fadiga travels the world to meet and praise Soninke migrants, who have attained great wealth and success on their adventures abroad. He spent twelve years on his apprenticeship in the region surrounding Kounda, studying the history of various families and clans. His tapes are well-known by the young men in Kounda, who told me it gave them “courage” to migrate. Yet, I had been warned by a member of *grin* Jamaïque that, *“the guys in the grin do not want to listen to this music too often; if you cannot go on aventure (migration), it will make you very upset. The moment people do not have the means to go (on migration), they must stop listening to it”*. I could therefore have anticipated the reaction of Hamedi, as he stopped to listen to the music: *“This music really motivates you to go. But when you cannot go, you will die here in shame. And then this music will drive you crazy. That music is no good! If you listen to it, it will make you cry”*.

The other young men in Jamaïque disagreed: *“We have listened to this music since we were small. It gives you courage to fight in life, to be courageous and not be lazy. Ganda Fadiga says that « a poor man is someone who does not work ». The music gives you the desire to achieve something, it gives you the desire to travel. But of course, it can be difficult hearing of others’ success if you cannot go on aventure (migration)”*. My assistant then translated a piece: *“He sings, “un grand homme est rapide”. This means a “big man”, someone successful and wealthy, is someone who does not waste time. Ganda Fadiga says his students must follow these big men. We, who listen to Ganda Fadiga, are his students, whom he is giving advice. We should not waste time if we want to become big men too”*. Hamedi had squatted on the ground next to us, but suddenly, he jumped up and cried out, while frantically pointing to one of the loudspeakers: *“Hear that! He says, “If God does not love you, he does not grant you success”. These words are terrible! It means that, those who can’t go on aventure, God does not love. This music is really bad, it is very bad to listen to it!”*

The next morning, I found a tired looking Hamedi, sitting by his workshop on a wiggly wooden bench next to the other apprentice. Their employer, a Peul²² mechanic, was napping in a broke-down car, while the two apprentices were making tea. *“Here, there are too many problems”*, Hamedi exclaimed, *“Sometimes, I feel like killing myself. This is why I don’t like Ganda Fadiga. He gives me too many worries. When we listened to it last night in Jamaïque, I did not sleep that whole night because I was thinking of what Ganda was singing. Especially the things he says about money: when you are born as a boy, you have to earn money”*.

A young man stopped by on his motorcycle. *“He has just received money from his brother in France, and now he is going to blow²³ them”*, Hamedi explained. *“When you have money, you can do anything. I can’t do that. I have too many problems, Wallahi! I can’t even start to tell you”*. Hamedi’s father was a tailor; he was dumb, and divorced from Hamedi’s mother. He had never left the village, and he wanted Hamedi to go on *aventure*. Hamedi had gone to school for three years. *“Back then, I didn’t know that school was a good thing or that it could help me in life; but now, I have regretted leaving”*. When he left school he had nothing to do, and he did not want to ask his relatives for money all the time. Since then, he started doing mechanics. *“The other boys here can count on their brothers in France to send them things, so they are not working. My brothers send something once in a while, but that cannot continue. If I keep asking them, one day they will say “merde!” and they will be fed up”*.

Hamedi recognised that his chances of going abroad were so slim, he had to opt for another career: *“This is what we have realised today, that you have to learn a trade. I don’t try to go on aventure (migration), because I do not have the means”*. I asked him, why the other young men did not think this way. *“We don’t have the same idea. They just want to go abroad. The guys at Jamaïque are bandits. They are doing their “business”, they smoke lots of cigarettes and ganja, and drink alcohol”*. The other apprentice then added: *“This boy does not stay too much at that grin. He is sleeping at home now. He and the other boys are not the same. Hamedi is like a baby. In the evening he sits with the shop keeper next to their house, and already at 8pm, he goes to bed”*.

²² “Foreigner”, like this Peul man, were the main generators of money in Kounda. Of the forty-two shopkeepers in Kounda, only five are native to the village.

²³ This is my own translation from French, but Hamedi actually said *“il va les bouffer”* – lit. ‘he is going to eat the money’. This was the villagers’ standard expression for spending money.

However, Hamedi was also quite the ladies' man, and I often met him at night as he was either returning or going to see one of his girlfriends in a neighbouring village. Although he did not have the prospect of making fortunes like the French migrants, for the time being, he made significantly more money than his age-mates. *"I prefer this work rather than working in the bush. There you work so hard and you only earn about 1,500CFA a day. When I do mechanics, I can earn between one- and five thousand CFA a day. The girls prefer guys with a lot of money..."*

Conclusion

The dominant narrative on migration in the Soninke village links geographic mobility to social mobility. Young Soninke men have applied migration as a strategy to exit the local gift economy, thus enabling them to accumulate a capital they could use to establish themselves as providers and independent household heads. In the contemporary context of immobility, the *grin* culture somehow reflects this strategy: The youth distance themselves from their local society, by denouncing traditional authorities and turning to modern ideals like democracy and romance. Unable to travel, the *grin* becomes their substitute for the migration experience, as the members appropriate Western popular culture and pursue a level of consumption that cannot be met with local means. However, although these practices attest to the agency of village youth, it does not necessarily set them free (cf. Appadurai 1996:7). Most of the young men do not denounce the ideal of migration. Doing so would entail abandoning the socio-economic exchange relations that define and integrate Soninke society. Hence, with immobility, the liminality of youth becomes a permanent condition of waiting.

In this paper, I have shown how young Soninke men experience life globally, as their everyday is defined by both transnationalism and immobility. In anthropological studies of globalisation, the focus is often on the experience of those that are part of global webs of interconnection, not on people and places marginalised from global processes (Inda & Rosaldo 2002). A few authors are however pointing out the disconnection (or "abjection") and immobility that accompanies contemporary forms of globalisation (Bauman 1998, Carling 2002, Ferguson 2002)²⁴. Jørgen Carling (2002) describes our times as 'the age of involuntary immobility': *"one of the most striking aspects of today's migration order, compared to the recent past, is the degree of conflict over mobility and the frustration about immobility in many traditional countries of emigration"* (ibid:5). Despite this significant observation, little of the literature on Soninke migration deals with

²⁴ Of these authors, only Ferguson is an anthropologist. Carling is a geographer, and Bauman a sociologist.

immobility²⁵. Rather, it tends to emphasise how migration is integral to Soninke history and identity (eg. Chastanet 1992, Manchuelle 1989 and 1997, Whitehouse 2003); and discuss the role of Soninke migrants' remittances in local development (cf. Azam&Gubert 2004, Daum 1995, Martin et al 2002). These writings reflect the popular narrative on Soninke migration, which is now being challenged by immobility.

Until now, the Soninke do not appear to have questioned their migratory strategies²⁶. Their experience of migration contrasts with the experiences in the South African Lowveld, where I have previously conducted fieldwork. There, labour migration of black villagers, particularly since the 1960s, constituted a (traumatic) uprooting, as men were separated from their families, and invented new forms of sociality, eg. on the mines (cf. Moodie 1994). The migrant labour economy created tensions and inequalities in the South African Lowveld, resulting in an escalation of witchcraft (Niehaus 2001). On the contrary, Soninke migration has been a conservative phenomenon, integral to and reproducing the traditional system²⁷. But the confrontation with involuntary immobility might constitute an historical moment of rupture in the village of Kounda.

In this context of immobility and social change, new social imaginaries are taking shape (cf. Gaonkar 2002). For example, Cissaro's mobilisation of the *grins* to confront the village chief shows how youth, by drawing on democratic principles, constitutes itself as a new social category with agentive potential. A new social imaginary is also evident in the mechanic apprentice Hamedi's discourse, when he says, "*This is what we have realised today, that you have to learn a trade. I don't try to go on aventure, because I do not have the means*". Today, many Soninke men opt for education rather than migration. However, in the village context, as Hamedi's case shows, this strategy is both controversial, and economically difficult.

Finally, I befriended a young man in the village, Elhadji, who stood out as an exceptionally pious Muslim. Unlike his peers, he was dedicated to studying, and refused to smoke cigarettes or drink tea, because it was "to ruin the money". Withdrawing from consumerism and turning to esoteric interests, such as spiritual or intellectual immersion, rendered him aloof from the local economy and

²⁵ Chastanet 1992, Findley 1994, and Quiminal 1994 briefly touch on the subject.

²⁶ This is explicitly stated by Chastanet (1992:145), but is implicit in most of the writings on Soninke migration I have come across.

²⁷ Significant social change has rather been a result of disappearing means of livelihood, including the end of the slave trade and the drought of 1969-74, and now, immobility.

impeding exchange relations. Although Elhadji appeared to be a unique case, his example shows the potential of religion as an identity building strategy for immobile young Soninke men.

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