

Migration, Gender and Pugkeenga: A Re-interpretation of Change in Family Farming on the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso

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In the West African Sahel, mobility has been a significant livelihood strategy to mediate risk and respond to variability. In Burkina Faso, and particularly among the Mossi of the Central Plateau, out-migrations have been a widespread strategy particularly during the 1970's and 1980's prolonged droughts. The positive effects of migration include alleviation of land pressure and remittances. However in recent years, some clear drawbacks of migration are becoming visible, spanning environmental and land access issues in areas of destination. This is starting to draw attention to the complex contributions of migration in environment and development studies in arrival areas, but also in sending places, which is the concern of this paper.

In the Plateau Central, some families lost up to 2/3rd of their members on migration, with significant implications for production strategies of agrarian communities. Among important changes are a transformation of gender ratios and the loss of labour capacity. This is particularly relevant in a context where farming strategies are articulated around family-based institution for the allocation of fields and labour. This paper examines such implications for the patriarchal Mossi institution of pugkeenga that characterises communal farming. Recent research in the region has found that there is a considerably lower rate of out-migration within families who farm communal fields (pugkeenga). This has been explained in terms of the kind of moral economy promoted by these families whereby migration is discouraged because of the loss of labour it incurs. However, the hypothesis may well be formulated the wrong way around; what if on the contrary it is migration, and the loss of workers, which causes pugkeenga fields to disappear? The paper proposes to answer this question, drawing on research that combines a questionnaire survey, and more in-depth information from family histories and individual farming strategies, collected during a 3 months stay in the village. I conclude by drawing the implications of findings for a more informed appraisal of the role of migration as a source of resilience in the Sahel, and I point particularly to the significance of social and institutional change in Sahelian family farming dynamics, particularly in the domain of gender relations and the monetisation and individualisation of livelihoods.