



Centre de Recherche sur le Savoir Local

Programme Point Sud 2010-2011

**“Nomads and Migrants in the Sahara-Sahel Space:
Mobility, Resources and Development”**

26th - 29th January 2011

Report

1 Organisers

Dr. Laurence Marfaing, GIGA, Hamburg

Dr. Elisabeth Boesen, Luxemburg

2 Themes and Objectives

The aim of the workshop was to foster an interdisciplinary discussion of systems of mobility and resource utilization and of their recent transformations in the Sahara-Sahel region. West Africa and the Sahara-Sahel region serve as an excellent starting point for considering these issues and the related questions of local development and regional integration.

Mobility with the aim of opening up new resources and economic opportunities is a central aspect of the survival strategies of families and larger social groups in the Sahara-Sahel and is deeply rooted in the historico-cultural practices of the various populations. “Resource” is used here in a wider sense to include natural resources, technical and other forms of knowledge, social relations, and financial means. The workshop considered different forms of mobility, their similarities and their differences. Mobility was discussed in relation to various economic strategies, to the ways in which borders, territories and localities are perceived, and in terms of the socio-structural conditions and the modes of organization of movement. Equally important was the influence of environmental change and globalization and the possible new combinations of the types of mobility that the latter might produce.

Pastoral nomads have populated the Sahara-Sahel for many hundreds of years. They have created territorial structures that regulate the movement of various socio-political entities, from the family to the tribal group and the confederation. Their search for, and use of, pastoral resources (pastureland and water) took into account, and benefited from, the complementarity of the climatic and ecological zones. Apart from pastoral mobility, the combination of different economic activities – pastoral and agricultural, as well as urban activities such as commerce and services – is also characteristic of the region.

The circulation of people was often facilitated by the fact that families and ethnic groups represented translocal social entities which were reinforced by religious and/or commercial networks. This mobility, or rather the disposition and aptitude to use mobility in order to make the best of the resources available, can be considered a characteristic of the populations of this region, i.e. the “*condition sahélienne*” (Gallais).

Since the 1970s, ecological change and the growing influence of globalization have led to socio-economic situations in which mobility has become more and more a necessity and, at the same time, have improved the practical conditions of mobility in a number of ways. Looking for resources, migrants categorized as “sedentary” are constantly adopting new strategies of mobility, whereas many pastoral nomads lacking cattle are increasingly settling down in the cities.

Although the mobility of nomads and migrants seem to represent two distinct phenomena, we wanted to analyse both through the same perspective of “mobility for resources” in order to identify common characteristics. Also, the discussions should contribute to building up a new methodology which would improve the analyses of both the mobility phenomena in question and our understanding of the inter-linkages between these various forms of mobility activities in the Sahara-Sahel region.

3 Methodology and Results

The workshop brought together researchers from different disciplines who specialized in empirical and conceptual work on nomadism and migration on the sub-regional level. This multitude of perspectives allowed us to discuss the regional realities and different forms of mobility as well as the social and political means to organize them. While the perceptions of the migrants and nomads themselves and their modes of describing and qualifying these practices were at the centre of our reflections, these issues were supplemented by the contributions of scientists working on the daily life, the experiences, and the forms of organization of strangers in the cities of the region, as well as the consequences of their presence for the local populations, urban planning and administration.

Finally, taking into consideration that the space in question is part of politico-economic structures that favour and regulate these mobilities, we juxtaposed the academic work on mobility practices with contributions on legislation and with the official political discourse. Generally, we think that it is important to merge both perspectives – that of academic research and that of political decision-makers – and to reflect upon how we communicate the results of our research.

The workshop, which was mainly held in French with a few interventions in English, was organized around the following themes:

1. Mobility: Actors and concepts
2. Mobility as integration from below
3. Migrants in the cities
4. Local development
5. Regional integration: Economic and political structures and institutions
6. Migration as a subject of humanities and social sciences

Due to unforeseen circumstances, we were obliged to make some programme changes: First, the University of Bamako (FLASH) could unfortunately not participate in the way we had hoped. Second, due to international political problems (Mali being declared an “orange security zone” by the French government), Prof. Denis Retaille (geographer, University Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux 3) and Dr. Olivier Walther (geographer, CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg) were prevented from taking part in the conference. As both had sent in their papers, however, we were able to integrate their thoughts and ideas into our discussions.

As a result of our discussions, we would like to mention those issues that revealed themselves to be of critical importance for a better understanding of the mobility phenomena in the region:

1) Integrating different conceptual approaches

The discussions based on the presentations of empirical studies proved that it is necessary to strive for a more intensive combination of research questions and perspectives. This was particularly true for research on local development: In this domain, studies generally focus on economic aspects, such as the transmission of funds. It is necessary to deepen analyses on interpersonal relations, in the departure areas as well as in points of transit and in the destination areas. It is through these personal relations, through the fact of living together, that new forms of sociability and social innovations emerge which can induce change and development.

The discussions have not only revealed the importance of mobility in order to respond to economical and political unpredictability, showing that the resilience capacity of the population of the Sahara-Sahel region depends on their willingness and aptitude to be mobile. But they have also brought into question the general attitude which consists of considering sedentary life to represent normality and to be the only desirable mode of living. Concerning the territorial dimension, it has been underlined that it is necessary to abstract from state borders in order to understand migration strategies and to define “mobile territories” as well as the conditions of their emergence.

2) Conceptual questions

The growing complexity of the different forms of mobility represents a challenge at the conceptual level. One fundamental problem can be seen in the increasingly widespread metaphoric use of terms and categories (i.e. migrant, nomad). Although a standard conceptual inventory might not be necessary, it is, however, crucial to establish conditions allowing for continuous trans-disciplinary debate on conceptual issues, as was possible during the Bamako workshop.

3) Methodology

Along with conceptual questions, methods are at issue as well. The contributions to the conference have shown that the problem of possible forms of “mobile research” (discussed under the heading of “multi-sited fieldwork” for some time now) has led to different results: from travel (“accompanying travelling”) as a form of approaching those who are on the move, to the decision of focusing on those who are immobile while facilitating the mobility of others. Further interesting perspectives emerge from recent research on life-histories and biographies and from research on modern modes of communication.

Several papers have underlined the importance of historical analysis in order to understand current mobility phenomena. It is crucial not only to consider mobility as a factor of (individual or social) transformation, but to take into account the fact that mobile activities and a mobile way of living can, on the contrary, also lead to the preservation of cultural forms and social structures.

4 Sustainability of the Event

1. The workshop has contributed to consolidating exchanges between the following universities and research institutions:

- Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar
- Gaston Berger of Saint Louis
- L'IFAN of Dakar
- GIGA, Hamburg
- University of Luxemburg
- University of Hannover
- FLASH, Bamako

The involvement of the University of Bamako could be further enhanced by establishing modes of cooperation between the University and *Point Sud*.

2. The possibility of creating a trans-local teaching framework on migration-linked phenomena was discussed (inter-university network including universities from South and North).

3. Various publications are currently under preparation:

- a common volume
- a collection of several articles to be published in thematic journals

5 Participants

1. Dr. Elisabeth Boesen, anthropologist, Luxembourg
2. Dr. Laurence Marfaing, historian, GIGA Hamburg
3. Benjamin Acloque, anthropologist, LAS/EHESS, Paris
4. Dr. Mohamed Fall Ould Bah, sociologist, Nouakchott
5. Prof. Boubacar Barry, historian, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar
6. Andre Bourgeot, anthropologist, research director, EHESS, Paris,
7. Prof. Mirjam de Bruijn, anthropologist, University of Leiden
8. Dr. Sophie Caratini, anthropologist, research director CNRS, Univ. François Rabelais, Tours
9. Dialla Diallo, ISH, University of Bamako
10. Brema Ely Dicko, geographer, University Paris 7
11. Dr. Isaïe Dougnon, anthropologist, University of Bamako
12. Dr. Papa Demba Fall, geographer, IFAN, Dakar
13. Dr. Charles Gremont, historian, IRD, Marseille
14. Dr. Naffet Keita, anthropologist, University of Bamako
15. Prof. Harlan Koff, political scientist, University of Luxembourg
16. Prof. Georg Klute, anthropologist, University of Bayreuth
17. Dr. Jérôme Lombard, geographer, IRD, Paris
18. Dr. Joseph McIntyre, linguist, University of Hamburg
19. Dr. Harouna Mounkaila, anthropologist, University Abdou Moumouni, Niamey
20. Dalila Nadi, economist, ZMO, Berlin
21. Prof. Ursula Peters, sociologist, University of Luxembourg
22. Prof. Brigitte Reinwald, historian, Leibniz University, Hannover
23. Dr. Benedetta Rossi, anthropologist, Liverpool
24. Jean Louis Sanka, geographer, University Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux 3
25. Dr. Fatou Sarr, sociologist, IFAN, Dakar
26. Ndeye Fatou Sarr, sociologist, Dakar
27. Salimata Soumare, sociologist, Dakar
28. Dr. Mariam Sow, economist, Djamena
29. Dr. Aly Tandian, sociologist, Saint Louis
30. Mr. Ignace Brissi (FECAM)
31. Mr. Seydou Keita (Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
32. Mr. Abdoulaye Konate (CIGEM)