CRITICAL TERMS *for* THE STUDY OF AFRICA

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15 MOBILITY

Patrick Manning

People of the African continent are perpetually in movement. The stereotypical vision of the quiet African village, from which people rarely stray, lives on in the minds of some, but it is hardly relevant to the continent today. A more common and more realistic trope is the vision of the African marketplace. Whether urban or rural, African markets include great numbers of people, dressed in many different ways, exploring goods and interacting with each other. If people are on foot in the heart of the market, many gain access to it by taxi or motorbike. Nearby car parks, jammed with vehicles set to move in any direction, are crowded with passengers impatient to start on their voyage.

Where people are not moving physically, they are in conversation with others, now electronically. Telephones came fifty years too late to Africa. Neither governments nor corporations would invest in the land lines necessary to enable widespread communication, so that Africans were largely cut off from the most updated form of communication. But the rise of mobile technology, which involved small investment in mobile phones and only slightly larger investment in the technology of transmission systems, at last opened up communication for families and businesses all across Africa. Markets in oil-rich Nigeria display great quantities of mobile phones sold at various price points and targeted to a wide demography of consumers. Even in endlessly distressed Congo-Kinshasa, purchasers and users benefit from mobile phones by purchasing and exchanging small numbers of minutes.

Physical or geographical mobility endures, linking Africa's rural and urban regions. Social mobility is complex: one may rise up in social status by moving to the city to complete university studies or by moving from

the city to take a community title in the village. Less fortunately, children have been seized by paramilitary groups and turned into soldiers or camp followers in the rebellions of Mozambique, Uganda, and Nigeria. At a more privileged level, government officials are posted to stations throughout the nation or are sent to work in the bureaucracies of the African Union in Addis Ababa.

Mobility also extends to the new African diaspora, succeeding to and interacting with the old African diaspora. The recent stories of desperate migrations across the Mediterranean tell of the impoverished who seek short-term work at all costs; at another extreme are the young students, flying to enroll in universities overseas. In between are the Africans who find work abroad and send remittances to their families, often by using the services of Western Union. Remittances from Africans living abroad now form an important part of African national revenues. African-descended communities in Europe, Asia, and the Americas are sometimes distinct, sometimes mixed communities of the Old and New Diasporas.

Today's patterns of African mobility all depend on the realities of modern-day life, technology, and social organization. Yet today's mobility also relies on the size, shape, and dynamics of patterns inherited from the recent past of the colonial and post-independent years and from the more distant past of precolonial times.

Historical Mobility

Africa, as portrayed in textbooks and scholarly studies, still carries reflections of the era of colonization and the previous era of empires and slave trade. Virtually all of Africa was under European colonial rule from roughly 1900 to 1960. During that time, interpretations of Africa relied on European visitors who wrote their impressions. Brochures inviting tourists to Africa still tend to show animals but not people. Since 1960, African scholars have been able to write about their continent, but they must still contend with the remains of oversimplified interpretations.

Overseas views of African mobility—through colonialism, foreign schools and universities, foreign experts and their ideas—portrayed the continent as a backward region, populated by isolated populations of small families in villages. The old ideas live on. After people of African descent in the Americas began to question where their ancestors might have come from, they were still encouraged to think that they might have ancestors located in a particular village in one country. It did not occur to these

Americans that their African ancestors might have had families stretched over wide areas, or that oral or written communication would enable families to remain in touch over wide areas.

One useful experiment in thinking about African mobility is with music and especially drums. Drums of many sorts, made of different materials with different shapes and tones, have been manufactured and played all over the African continent. But one should not think that each type of drum remained in its own village. Rather, the drums that were popular for their own sound, or for their ties to innovative musical ensembles, were carried far and wide to appreciative audiences. That is, popular culture spread far and wide in precolonial Africa as it does today on every continent.

Yet European rulers of colonial Africa tended to envision Africans as limited in mobility, and commonly preferred to keep them so. Such colonial limitations on African mobility applied especially to women. As cities grew in the early twentieth century, colonial governments and European residents dominated the segregated central cities; African men were enabled to settle in surrounding neighborhoods as long as they were employed, but women were pressured to stay at home in the village.

The city of Léopoldville, capital of the immense Belgian Congo, had a population of just over thirty thousand persons in the 1940s; the great majority of its inhabitants were male. For girls in the city, the Catholic Church declined to allow confirmation or first communion until they had completed three years of primary school; this schooling emphasized domestic training aimed at marriage and domestic life. But after Congo became independent and the city retook its earlier name of Kinshasa, the population shot up, reaching 2.5 million by 1981—migration from the countryside had created a hurriedly built metropolis with a population that had become half female.

Even as the realities of life in Africa changed with many countries earning independence in the 1960s, outside of Africa there still circulated images and narratives of women and family that reinforced the old stereotypes about village life. These approaches, emphasizing submissive and subordinate roles for women, did not account for the active roles of female West African merchants, traveling widely to retrieve and sell their goods, nor did they account for Central African women's leading role in agriculture—planting, weeding, harvesting, and marketing.

Another key area of Africa mobility, today as in earlier times, is pastoralism. The grasslands of East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa

support large populations that live by tending herds of cattle, sheep, goats, and camels—sometimes on mixed farms, sometimes as pastoral specialists. Families move with their herds on a daily basis and a seasonal basis, then market some of their animals periodically. Now, as before, migrations to the best grasslands lead pastoralists across political borders and into occasional disputes with governments. Differences in the present era are that parents now communicate with mobile phones while children attend religious or secular schools.

The high level of African mobility may be surprising to some readers. History textbooks make little mention of African migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing instead on the worldwide migrations of Europeans and, to a degree, of Asians. These texts make it appear as if Africans migrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and not thereafter. Yet Africans in the past two centuries migrated widely within the continent, both on their own and as required by their colonial governments.

In sum, Africans, whether they are farmers or pastoralists, urbanites or rural dwellers, men or women, experience a great deal of mobility. One might think that the many migrations Africans undertake would erase the differences among Africa's regions. Yet every African region has people of diverse origins and who speak diverse languages—so, somehow, mobility reproduces variety while expanding similarities. The remainder of this essay explores African mobility in the past, arguing that Africa's mix of great variety and great mobility has been a common pattern over the centuries.

Large-Scale Migrations and Diversity

Human mobility in Africa has been a factor in the lives of *Homo sapiens* for the past two hundred thousand years and for the preceding hominid species. In the East African homeland, periodic shifts in the intensity of sunlight, brought by shifts in the earth's orbit, led to periods in which, alternately, either Northeast Africa or Southeast Africa was the most humid and productive region. As a result, humans developed a habitual tendency to migrate alternately north or south, building migration into human lifestyle as a slow but beneficial rhythm.

A new reason for migration emerged some seventy thousand years ago, as humans gained fully articulated language. The sharing of a common language brought communities together but the gradual divergence of

speech—into separate dialects and then distinct languages—also divided communities into distinct groups. The exchange of ideas and experience among groups brought occasional key innovations and spurred social expansion for those who benefited from them. All of Africa's language groups can trace their roots to Eastern Africa, but successive migrations across the continent have pointed in numerous directions. The Afroasiatic languages, which trace their ancestry to the valley of the Blue Nile, spread in all directions, for instance in the Holocene era over ten thousand years ago as temperatures and humidity rose. To the north, settlers in the Red Sea hills became Beja speakers, settlers in the lower Nile became Egyptian speakers, and groups branching off from the lower Nile became the Berber speakers of the Maghreb and the Semitic speakers of the Fertile Crescent. (It is likely in these cases that settlers from the Nile Valley moved in among local people in each region, but became dominant in language.) At much the same time, migrants from the Afroasiatic homeland moved west to settle and become the Chadic speakers of the Lake Chad region. In another twist, certain speakers of Semitic languages from South Arabia later moved to Ethiopia, and their language became widely adopted through trade: the Amharic language is the most widely spoken language reflecting this pattern.

In a parallel set of migrations, the Niger-Congo-speakers, with ancestors in the Nile Valley, settled in West Africa. The Niger-Congo languages gradually divided into many subgroups in the savanna and forest regions of West Africa. At the southeastern edge of this great language community, at today's Nigeria-Cameroon frontier, the Bantu speakers, a subgroup of Niger-Congo speakers, moved much more recently to the south and east, and became prominent over an immense region in the East African homeland and also in Central and Southern Africa. To a large degree, these were accumulations of small migrations rather than a few great expeditions. Thus the matrilineal system of descent, which encouraged married couples to start new households (rather than live in the father's household as in patrilineal systems), facilitated gradual migration into new territories.

Settlers from abroad have come to Africa in many times and circumstances. Two such settlements stand out. In the first, Austronesian mariners came across the Indian Ocean some two thousand years ago, settling along the East African coast, intermarrying with locals, and moving later to Madagascar. The material remains of their settlement include stilt houses, outrigger canoes, rice, and bananas. Cultural exchange went one or both directions: the discussion continues as to whether xylophones

went from Africa to Indonesia or the other way around. In a second and larger immigration, Arab migrants from Arabia launched their political, military, and religious takeover of Northern Africa in the seventh century CE. North Africans initially converted to Islam but kept their Berber languages. Then a still larger Arab migration into the Maghreb, from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, brought about a social and linguistic conversion making North African society dominantly Arab. Yet it may be remembered that Arabic, a Semitic language, had an ultimately African origin.

In addition to these apparently large-scale movements, probably more important were the many small-scale and local movements, in which merchants, hunters, artisans, and others moved from town to town, exchanging ideas and goods. This continental system of local links can be seen as an African network—not a single great trade route running between major centers but a series of paths leading in all directions. It has brought transmission of material goods and the exchange of culture throughout the continent. The *mbira*, a musical instrument of tuned iron keys amplified by resonation with gourds, came to be played all over the continent though it developed along the Zambezi River. Iron bells, developed for the ceremonies of monarchs along the lower Niger, had spread southeast to Zambia by 1500, in the course of a thousand years. Bananas, introduced to the eastern coast of Africa by mariners from Southeast Asia, soon spread into the highlands of East Africa, the lowlands of the Congo basin, and then to the coastal forests of West Africa. Thanks to the connections facilitated by the African network, Africa is at once the most diverse of continents (in genetics, culture, and social systems)—human societies have differentiated within its boundaries for a very long time—and also a region of remarkable commonality, as key innovations and systems of expression have spread steadily from one group to the next.

Enslavement, Emancipation, and Mobility

In the period from 1500 to 1900, migration was dominated by enslavement. Africa's northern and eastern coastlines, along the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, had long maintained regular links to regions across the waters. Slavery, slave trade, and other commerce had existed for two millennia in the Mediterranean and West Asia, and captives from Northeast Africa had been drawn into that enslavement along with captives from the Black Sea and other regions. Then, from about 1500 CE, the opening of

maritime connections for West and Central Africa brought change to all of Africa as to every other region.

The development of plantation agriculture, especially the production of sugar on islands of the Atlantic and in the Americas, brought a relentlessly expanding demand for forced labor, and the result was a steadily growing slave trade along Africa's Western Coast. By 1650 the export of captives across the Atlantic had become the majority of all slave trade from Africa, and from 1650 to 1850 Africa had more emigrants than any other continent.

African societies did not easily collect captives for export abroad, but underwent unexpected social change. The readiness of overseas merchants to pay substantial sums immediately provoked brutal decisions within Africa. Rulers, family leaders, and opportunistic individuals seized subordinates who were in any way unwelcome—or prisoners of war who would normally be ransomed—and sold them to slave traders. Especially along the Atlantic coast, the expanding sale of male captives left opportunities to turn females into domestic captives, and a new division of labor began to develop. Many other shifts in the social order emerged: for instance, Kru mariners, took jobs as crew members for ships sailing along the coast from Liberia to Angola, then paddled their canoes back along the coast to Liberia.

Large-scale enslavement began with coastal wars in Senegambia, Angola, and the Bight of Benin. With time, seizures in inland areas grew in what historian Joseph Miller has called a "ring of fire," a zone of heavy enslavement that moved gradually inland. In the early eighteenth century, populations in coastal West and Central Africa declined; by the mid-eighteenth century, the total population of West and Central Africa was in decline. Meanwhile, the numbers of enslaved within Africa grew to be as large as the numbers overseas.

From the late eighteenth century, the number enslaved grew rapidly in Northeast and East Africa—to satisfy growing demand for captives in the Indian Ocean, Egypt, and West Asia and also to feed growing domestic markets for servile labor. A boom in slave exports from Madagascar and Mozambique up to the 1840s led to the long voyage of captives to the Americas; thereafter, East African captives went in even larger numbers to Indian Ocean destinations. As a result, populations in nineteenth-century Africa declined, especially in Southeast Africa.

The remarkable expansion of enslavement throughout Africa—long after the 1807 British abolition of slave trade—is increasingly understood to be part of a phenomenon shared by the tropics globally. In the Americas, enslavement grew in the United States, Brazil, and Cuba. In Asia, enslavement grew throughout Southeast Asia, in India, and in West Asia. In Africa, we can now confirm that enslavement expanded in many regions even as slave exports declined. While some but not all of these slave populations were put to work in market-oriented work, there is a need to explain why the elites throughout the tropics turned so fiercely to enslavement during the nineteenth century. Global commerce had expanded since 1500, leading to enslavement and other forms of labor mobilization from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. In addition, the era of factory production (in New World sugar mills and in North Atlantic textile factories) and the rise of wage labor (mainly in the North Atlantic) appear to be related in some way to the "second slavery" throughout the tropics.

From 1850, steamship-borne migrants from Europe, India, and China joined in migrations that soon outnumbered the movements of Africans. Tens of millions of migrants, some voluntary and some under restrictive labor contracts, moved from continent to continent from the 1850s through the 1930s. Part of this process brought nearly a million migrants from Europe and nearly a million from South Asia into Africa. In light of the magnitude of these European and Asian migrations, a common impression is that African overseas migration simply halted as of 1850. In fact, slave exports from East Africa continued in large numbers to almost 1900. In addition, migration within the African continent continued at an active level—through enslavement, emancipation of those earlier enslaved, and migration of free people.

African mobility since 1900 has consisted mostly of the movement of free people under government constraint. In the years before and just after 1900, the great powers completed their sudden conquest of virtually the whole African continent. In the same era, the European powers and Japan became dominant in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In territorial terms, this was the high point in imperial rule. Britain, France, Germany, and other powers, with small colonial staffs and armies of local soldiers under European officers, quickly set up systems of taxation and administration. European rule of Africa, established at the peak of racial theory and practices of racial discrimination and segregation, emphasized the cultural denigration of African societies as well as political domination by the imperial order.

The conquering Europeans criticized the extent to which slavery had grown in Africa. Rarely, however, did colonial regimes abolish slavery and emancipate the slaves: Madagascar in 1895 was one such case. Still, the prohibition of slave capture meant that many were able to escape their bondage. Men especially were able to return and see if they could find their home community still in existence. Women, however, many with children, found it difficult to leave without giving up their children, who belonged by law to their owner or the father. Nevertheless, some enslaved women were able to negotiate a semi-free or free status or to escape. Colonial regimes set up "free womb" laws, applied earlier in Asia and the Americas, according to which children born to slave mothers would become free once they reached the age of majority. Even then, violation and neglect of these rules meant that many thousands remained in slavery in the 1930s and perhaps beyond.

As soon as colonial regimes abolished slave raiding, however, communities could emerge from hiding and seek to reoccupy the prime lands they had fled. Thus, at the opening of the twentieth century, the elements of an energetic peasant social order emerged in many parts of Africa. This peasant order combined those previously free, who were now able to rebuild their farms with little fear of attack, and those recently freed, who sought to return home or otherwise find a place to settle. These were now independent families, owning or renting their land, and active in agricultural and artisanal production. (This expansion of African peasantry, mostly in the twentieth century, matched the nineteenth-century pattern of the Americas, where free blacks and newly emancipated slaves combined to build peasant societies.) Families changed, as marriage became more feasible in the era after slavery. (In Africa, however, sorting out lineage and ethnic relations under these circumstances must have been complex.) Just as peasant communities in the Americas adopted Protestant and Catholic Christianity, so also did peasant communities of Africa adopt Protestant and Catholic Christianity and, in even larger numbers, Islam. The post-emancipation peasantries devoted themselves to self-sufficiency and then to commercial agriculture and artisanal work. In another parallel to post-emancipation life elsewhere in the African Diaspora, African communities experienced lively cultural renewal as they built their communities.

Still, the power of the former enslaving aristocracies had not fully faded in these post-emancipation days. Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn describe how leaders of the Muslim emirates of Northern Nigeria, as late as the 1920s, were able to send deputations to the regions where they had formerly captured slaves, and pressure the family leaders into yielding beautiful young women to be concubines in the emir's court.

Colonial rule changed mobility patterns of Africans. Rising taxation and forced labor for roads and bridges led many families or villages to move across borders and resettle. Labor recruitment for the gold and diamond mines of South Africa relied on specific contracts for workers, especially from Mozambique and Nyasaland (Malawi). For a time in the interwar years, this system infected the male workers with tuberculosis (as they moved from hot mines to cold housing), then sent them home at the end of their term, where they infected their families.

African urbanization proceeded during the colonial era and accelerated rapidly in postcolonial years. Cities grew mainly as a result of small-scale private investment rather than public investment. Ex-slaves were disproportionately numerous in urban populations, and for the same reason post-emancipation culture arose particularly in the music of the cities. Yet colonial regimes preferred to restrict access to the cities to recognized male workers. With independence, women and children were enabled to settle in cities, so that, for instance, the population of Kinshasa rose from fifty thousand in 1958 to two hundred thousand in the early 1960s.

In the 1950s and especially in the 1960s with independence, African social services expanded greatly, notably in public education and public health. Literacy—though normally in a second language—rose steadily in the late twentieth century. In retrospect and especially in demographic terms, one may argue that the 1940s represented a key turning point for African population and society. By this time, it appears that African societies had overcome much of the trauma of enslavement. Most people were free; orderly communities had been able to develop for some years. Death rates declined sharply in the 1940s, and rates of population growth shot up to a high level of 2 percent per year, remaining at those high levels for a full half-century. The steady strengthening of African peasant societies carried on from the 1940s through the 1970s; after the 1970s, the expanding urban sector captured most African growth.

Conclusion

What is the likely future of African mobility? The past several centuries have brought shifting regimes of mobility to Africans. What had been small-scale, community-level mobility patterns were gradually drawn into a global system of private-sector enslavement in which imperial

governments, overseas, encouraged enslavement of Africans from the fifteenth century into the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century brought a confusing system of continued enslavement and other restrictions under rapidly changing precolonial African governments. The first half of the twentieth century brought abolition of slave trade (but only slowly of slavery), plus the requirements and restrictions of penurious colonial government. Then came a brief post–World War II period of expansive colonialism followed by the Keynesian programs of public investment by post-independence African socialist governments until the 1970s. Thereafter, African societies have been weakened by domestic strife and by constraints of the world market and of international organizations.

One may argue that these shifting mobility regimes arise from a contrasting pair of underlying pressures for mobility. First is the mobility of people and influences in order to sustain Africa's domestic society and economy—this is the marketplace and the African network. Second is the mobility of Africans in response to overseas pressures: the demands of global empires, the world market for commodities, and, more recently, international financial organizations—this is globalization, and its effects may have been more negative than positive. A third factor, necessarily, is the interaction of African and global demands for mobility.

With time, African needs for mobility are becoming more influential. As African initiatives in mobility develop, one gains a clearer sense of the various dimensions of mobility, beyond the basic focus on labor recruitment that characterized the slave trade. That is, global demands for African mobility have focused on the extraction of labor to meet needs in production. African demands for mobility, in contrast, can be labeled to begin with as social, linguistic, cultural, and verbal mobility. In social mobility, people move up and down the social scale with education, inheritance, or misfortune. In linguistic mobility, Africans move across language barriers, as shown in the impressive book of M. E. Kropp-Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea*, which conveys the pleasure and functionality of multilingual exchange in Ghana's metropolis of Accra. Cultural mobility includes such patterns as the musical groups moving back and forth to Europe, performing as they travel. More basic is the mobility of personal communication through voice by mobile phone or text in instant messenger. Does this collection of means of interaction correspond to the emergence of an updated African network?

What should one look for in African mobility? Travel costs are high in Africa, yet people manage to move over short and long distances. Health

conditions for Africa are well below average for the world, but have improved sufficiently to expand greatly overall productivity. Communication, too, is behind that of other world regions but it has still greatly advanced. The distortion of family life by slavery, colonialism, and other elite restrictions has declined. It may be that the village is becoming a place to which one escapes, occasionally, from the city.

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