

West African non-migrant youth in the wake of migration and transnationalism

Review by Serah Shani

Bush Bound: Young men and rural permanence in Migrants in West Africa

by Paolo Gaibazzi

Berghahn Books, 2015

In the wake of unprecedented global migrations, and heightened concern in the countries which receive increasing numbers of immigrants, Paul Gaibazzi sheds light on what it means to stay in one's country and not migrate. Immigration research has mostly taken a binary view of countries of emigration and those of immigration. This view neglects the intertwined relationships and dynamics that exists between the sending and receiving countries. Research on immigration has also mostly focused on people that migrate. However, *Bush Bound* focuses on those that stay, "stayers," as an integral category of the whole immigrant phenomena, who are affected by both the country of origin and the country of destination. The book is based on ethnographic field work conducted in The Gambia, in a village known as Sabi, among the Soninke-speaking youth between 2006-2008. The author focuses on local Sabi men to elucidate how political, historical and ecological explanations influence people's decision to migrate or to stay.

According to the author, in a patriarchal society like Sabi, men are viewed as bread winners and boys are socialized to hustle, to navigate "the bush", and to prove their masculinity and prowess by acquiring monetary resources for their family. Growing up in Sabi, therefore, young men are socialized to view migration as the fastest and most viable means to social and economic mobility. Young men are taught the ethos of hard work, self-reliance and perseverance - virtues achieved through "hardship and frugality" (p.78). Thus, as young adults, men are assumed to be able to vigorously navigate the

economic terrain.

Moreover, the author portrays mobility and immobility as being mutually intertwined and dependent on one another. For example, those who migrate to developed countries are expected to assist those left behind to also migrate and eventually join them abroad. Due to difficulties acquiring visas and the unpredictability of travel, young men who one day hope to travel are forced to stay and be supported through remittances from the diaspora. These stayers, however, are not dismissed or in a static position. Rather, they are continually engaged in planning, fantasizing, working, nursing ambitions, raising families and having symbiotic interactions with Diasporic relations. Those who manage to travel entrust stayers to care for their immediate and extended families making it easier for those who migrate. Those who migrate act as constant reminders and role models of an ideal achiever, “Young men openly admit that the houses and other investments of migrants give them the ambition (hanmi) to go and look for money so as to emulate their achievements” (p.70). Consequently, the hopes and challenges of migration are central to young men's daily discourses, creating more ambition yet restlessness. Thus, according to the author, the study of stayers illuminates the dynamics embedded in daily social realities of young men in Sabi who while not moving are impacted by unpredictable broader processes.

The complex situation between Sabi stayers and travelers is also tied to their agricultural economic base. The fluctuations of world markets and the unreliability of subsistence from local agricultural production forces youth to diversify their sources of income in order to become admired bread winners. Traveling is a prestigious activity and a person who has traveled is considered to be more exposed and knowledgeable especially when these activities are associated with economic mobility. Children, especially male, are therefore socialized to understand the importance of travel--a quality that signifies their very masculinity.

According to the author, while all children in Sabi are socialized to work hard on the farms, gendered expectations make men more likely to think of alternative means of acquiring wealth, especially since agriculture may not be entirely reliable. The youth then focus on immigration which in turn becomes elusive. The author demonstrates the precarity involved in setting hopes on the economic benefits of migration--hopes determined by a plethora of gate-keeping blocks such as; the unpredictability of support from the Diaspora to help relatives immigrate, ecological and political changes, and the

continuous push to excel in a masculinized economy. Given these gate-keeping blocks, many youth negotiate their masculinities by remaining in their country, revitalizing youth groups, developing rural villages and taking part in political activities.

From a historical perspective, the author shows that mobility is not new to The Gambia or one of its local villages, Sabi. According to the author, people move to many neighboring countries during dry seasons to supplement their agricultural activities and to earn more cash. Therefore, migration to Western countries is sometimes an end result of a stepped-migration to other parts of Africa. Movement to other African countries is less strenuous and more affordable than migrating abroad. Moreover, the networks in Africa tend to help the exchange of ideas, job search and accommodation.

At a macro-micro level, this timely book exposes global transformations found in current capitalist global market economy and sheds light on the influences of these transformations as actualized at local levels. Modern transnational processes such as technological advances, cyclical processes of borrowing, diffusion, inventions, and competition for resources all impact rural areas like Sabi. Being and becoming actors in these arenas means a person is capable of influencing deeply engrained tradition such as religion, in The Gambia. Travelers to the Middle East, which is not a major or desired destination in comparison to Western countries, can be seen as appropriating Islam as it becomes a mechanism for legitimizing the actions and imaginations of those staying. Men actualize their belief by entrusting their future success to higher powers which control their struggles and success.

In sum, market and capitalist economies restriction on movement, fluctuation of markets in agricultural products and global marginalization of movement in western countries, exacerbates anxieties about relocating or staying. These precarious conditions, among others, create both stayers and mobile groups that revitalize social and cultural conditions in rural Sabi, further creating spaces to stay and reproduce social and cultural norms for a continuous community. A community that is both local and transnational hence “organizing an agrarian life within migration” (p.8). This is done not only through imagination and efforts to migrate but through remittances and transnational travels by the Diasporic community, development of new business in Sabi that sustains the community even during economic hardships and reliance on higher powers. In the end, these experiences answer the question “how do people stay?” (p.13) in the midst of a precarious immigration and patriarchal economic ideals.

Serah Shani is an assistant professor of anthropology at Westmont College. Her research interests lie broadly in exploring the social life of cities, and more particularly the informal and innovative strategies by which different ethnic and racial urban residents claim their rights to the city. Her current research looks at urban migration, transnational movements, identities and the sociocultural economic adaptation for recent African immigrants to the United States. Dr. Shani graduated from Columbia University and did her fieldwork among African immigrants in New York City. Her research has been published in Harvard Educational Review Journal and in a fourth coming book in 2018 with Lexington Books. Her research in Africa seeks to examine how market economies influence parenting strategies among marginalized and indigenous groups and how these strategies inform children's future economic trajectories. Dr. Shani is also conducting research on elite formation among indigenous groups in East Africa.



© 2017 Serah Shani