

SETTLEMENT HISTORIES AND ETHNIC FRONTIERS

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One of the powerful conventional images of pre-colonial Africa is that of a continent of more or less immobile ethnic groups, living since time immemorial on their ancestral lands, steeped in their traditional cultures. In this image, Africa appears like a mosaic, with clear-cut ethnic boundaries, each sherd representing a different people cum language cum culture cum territory. Since a number of years, however, historians and anthropologists of Africa have insisted that this image is misleading. Most pre-colonial societies were characterised by mobility, overlapping networks, multiple group membership and the context-dependent drawing of boundaries. Communities could be based on neighbourhood, kinship and common loyalties to a king, but this did not absolutely have to include notions of a common origin, a common language or a common culture.

Our own research on the West African savannah has also shown the enormous importance of mobility. Among the societies of southern and southwestern Burkina Faso, for instance, which several projects have studied, there is hardly a single village whose history has not been characterised repeatedly by the arrival and settlement of new groups and the departure of others. In some cases, we can even speak of systematic practices of multilocality. People moved, and continue to move, in search of more promising hunting grounds, fertile farmlands and other resources, in flight of local conflicts, the attacks of slave-raiders or, in more recent times, the colonial imposition of tax and forced labour. This mobility has implied and still implies multiple encounters of different languages and cultural practices, of different political systems and religious beliefs. Sometimes, these encounters resulted in mutual assimilation and the erasure of difference; but we also find cases of emphasising difference, such as that between firstcomers and latecomers, and cases of the hardening of ethnic boundaries.

The papers of this section present case studies of such processes of mobility and settlement. They address the question how these mobile groups create local identities while at the same time supralocal networks and loyalties continue to be important. The papers look at the way in which mobility is being organised and how settlement processes are being negotiated, remembered and ritualised. They ask how ethnic boundaries are being constructed and – under changing historical circumstances – re-defined.

Richard Kuba presents findings from his research on the interaction between the Dagara and the Pwo in pre-colonial southwestern Burkina Faso. Pierre Claver Hien draws on material from the same region, but he concentrates on a period of hardening ethnic frontiers immediately before the advent of French colonial rule. Rainer Vossen and Andreas Dafinger present their research on the mandephone Bisa in southern Burkina Faso and address the methodological question of how to combine anthropological and linguistic approaches. Their paper is an illuminating case study on the relationship between ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Claude Nurukyor Somda's paper discusses the social organisation of mobility and settlement among the Dagara of Burkina Faso while Volker Linz analyses the religious networks which developed during these settlement processes, among the different groups moving from Ghana into southwestern Burkina Faso. Holger Kirscht and Katja Werthmann, finally, research into current processes of migration. Their paper compares the strategies of settlement and community building in multiethnic settings in southwestern Burkina Faso and the Lake Chad area of Nigeria.

It is not possible here to present a comprehensive summary of the many interesting points raised by the papers, but I wish to point to three aspects which I think merit our attention and which could be important for future research.

The first point concerns the methodological problems of research into settlement history and the making of local identities and ethnic boundaries. Particularly in stateless societies with scanty or no written sources on the pre-colonial period, we are often confronted with the shallowness of genealogies and historical memory. There is no official history, but an ensemble of fragmented and contradictory accounts of the migration of the different lineages. This is even partly true for centralised societies, as soon as we move away from the ruling groups with their court historians. The settlement histories which our informants narrate are not invented from nothing, but certainly they cannot be taken at face value. They condense and re-organise historical experiences, for instance, by importing images and clichés from the oral traditions of neighbouring societies. They are also shaped by their intention to legitimate present interests.

The papers in this section give us some suggestions how to deal with these methodological problems. Comparing the versions of the “winners” and the “losers” of settlement processes, for instance, can shed new light on the dynamics of the agricultural frontier. Using non-narrative sources such as ritual practices can elucidate interethnic and interlineage exchanges which straightforward settlement narratives sometimes ignore or even deny. The geographic distribution of certain clans can give clues to the history of their migrations even where our individual informants remember them only in part. Analysing the linguistic geography of an area can lead to new insights into settlement patterns and vice versa. Hans-Jürgen Sturm's findings on the relations between settlement history and agricultural parcs – presented in the section “Historical influences and their ecological and cultural effects in the Mande

regions of Burkina Faso” – opens up another valuable non-narrative source on the history of the agricultural and ethnic frontiers. In short: it is the combination of these different kinds of sources and a multidisciplinary approach which allows us to make headway.

The second point relates to one of the conditions of mobility implicit in many of the cases presented of this section, namely the existence of a core of shared cultural convictions about the earth or, more generally, nature and about the configuration between firstcomers and latecomers as well as strangers and hosts. It is this shared fund of ideas and norms which makes possible the multiple encounters between groups otherwise quite distinct from each other with respect to language and social organisation. This shared cultural core is not only the basis of mobility, interaction and mutual adaptation, but also of conflict and the drawing of boundaries. Conflict presupposes and helps to construct a partly shared ideological universe.

It will be interesting to take a closer look, in future research, at the construction and contestation of this settlement-related “core culture”, if I may call it thus, which seems to be fairly similar in many parts of the West African savannah. It would be particularly interesting to ask in how far segmentary and centralised societies share this “core culture”. The Pwo, Dagara, Dyan, Birifor and Lobi of southwestern Burkina Faso, for instance, came into conflict with each other over the right to occupy a certain space. But at least in the pre-colonial period, none of these groups sought to transform the control over land into the political control over people, and the displaced groups usually chose the exit-option, to use Hirschman’s term. The incursion of Muslim slave-raiders and, in the case of the Bisa, of groups of statebuilders such as the Mossi, with their ideologies of power and fertility linked to the figure of a ruler, brought new elements into the region. It will be important to study if and in which way this affected the cultural core of land-related concepts among the segmentary groups, or if the incoming groups were socialised, so to speak, into the prevailing local concepts.

This brings me to my third and last point. The paper by Werthmann and Kirscht points to the changes in settlement strategies brought about by the new concepts of territoriality, boundaries and landrights which the modern nation-states have introduced. This opens up a particularly fruitful area of research, with respect to the colonial and post-colonial periods. We need to study more closely the interaction between the indigenous notions and practices of the occupation of the space with these new European-derived concepts and prescriptions. In how far were the Africans able to transform the colonial boundaries, meant to be straightforward lines, into something quite different? And on the other hand, in which ways did the European idea of lineal boundaries, neatly dividing the space into contiguous homogenous surfaces, influence the indigenous concepts of earth-shrine territories? These are some questions for future research which the papers and discussions in the section on settlement history and ethnic frontiers have raised.