

# BOOK REVIEW

**Paolo Gaibazzi. *Bush Bound: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa*.** Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015. xiv + 218 pp. Maps. Photographs. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. £85.00. ISBN: 978-1-78238-779-4.

*Bush Bound: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa* examines migration from the perspective of those young men who remain tied to rural ways of life in a village in the upper-river area of the Gambia. The main argument made by the author, anthropologist Paolo Gaibazzi, is that the time these men spend in their home village is what makes migration possible and ensures the continuity of community values. "Sitting," then, which translates the embodied metaphor in the Soninke expression *taaxu*, is in a close relationship of complementarity and symbiosis with "migrating," and is significantly more than the static opposite of movement. Despite the current popularity of perspectives on mobility in the social sciences, Gaibazzi's brave move is to concentrate on immobility and to justify this as one of the principal characteristics of a contemporary global world in which obstacles to movement constrain more and more people's existences.

Based on fieldwork in the Soninke-speaking village of Sabi, Gaibazzi's ethnography is well grounded in the histories of mobility that, during different historical periods, brought its inhabitants to other parts of Africa and beyond. Chapter 1 thus gives the reader a context to understand Sabi as a place in which men have historically been expected to move in order to find additional sources of income. The fact that this study concentrates on a Soninke community, a people whose migratory experiences have been well documented by scholars writing in English and in French, makes the book's perspective all the more intriguing. Chapter 2 presents the book's main argument, juxtaposing the key activities of those who remain in the village to farm with the struggles of those who leave to improve their situation. The idea that cultivation and migration share a similar ethos of hard work is proposed already by the title, *The Agri-Culture of Migration*, and is supported by the author's observations and participation in farming activities. The Soninke of Sabi do not simply practice farming as a means to obtain food, but they also use it to inculcate in the younger generation an "agrarian ethos," based on enduring suffering and practicing relatedness. This analysis is likely to resonate with the experiences of other ethnographers of Mande peoples, among whom similar ideas are common. But locally,

migration is not conceived of as a means to dodge toiling in the fields; rather, there is continuity between the two activities, and one demonstrates a readiness to *hustle* abroad through the performance of agricultural labor. Not by chance among the Soninke, as in other African contexts, is migrating associated with going to the bush.

Chapter 3 looks at the periphery of the migratory experience through a description of the conception and navigation of migratory projects, while chapter 4 looks at the negative aspects of immobility, “just sitting,” consisting of emotional stress and accusations of laziness for the young men who spend time making tea in informal gatherings during the dry season. The final two chapters deal with alternative ways of creating a role as a stayer in Sabi, as a household head who manages subsistence and authority within an extended family (chapter 5), or as engaged members of youth associations who try to promote social change from their village permanence (chapter 6).

This last chapter seems less successfully integrated into the main argument, perhaps because the connection with migration appears more as an outcome of the analysis than as an aspect of the phenomenon that it investigates. But aside from this, there are a few other issues that I feel could have received more attention. What of the shifting semantic field of the term “bush” over time, for example, and the connected ecological transformations that go hand in hand with it? Another even more important area of expansion pertains to gender, which as a theme stands out everywhere in the book, but yet did not seem to receive enough consideration.

Despite these questions, the book is an important piece of scholarship that demonstrates the continuing actuality and relevance of “bush ethnography,” which is not particularly fashionable today, as the social sciences seem to have a predilection for more newsworthy themes. In the tradition of the best anthropological work, it complicates our understanding of migration, highlighting the concept of permanence to counter both the Gambian state’s rhetoric on youths’ dreams of migration and the discourses of invasion by European populists. Thanks to its balanced mixture of historical documentation, quantitative data, and qualitative ethnography, this book will appeal equally to readers in migration studies and specialists of the Mande area.

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### For more reading on this subject, see:

Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2017. “Africa from the Margins.” *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.47>

Whitaker, Beth Elise. 2017. “Migration within Africa and Beyond.” *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 209–220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.49>