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# RESEARCHING SOUTH-SOUTH / SOUTH-EAST MIGRATION

## TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONS OF CAMEROONIAN MUSLIM MIGRANTS

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Mots-clés: South-South / South-East migration · Transnationalism · Cameroon · Gabon · South Africa · United Arab Emirates

Michaela Pelican

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This article presents selected findings from an ongoing research project on the transnational relations of Cameroonian Muslim migrants<sup>1</sup>. It highlights two aspects, namely the asymmetries and complexities of communication between migrants and families left behind, as well as migrant realities in Gabon and the United Arab Emirates.

The project centres on South-South and South-East migration, thus challenging and complementing the focus on South-North migration prevailing in academic and policy-related research. It traces changing patterns and perceptions of mobility, explores migrants' experiences in «foreign lands» and their reflections about «home», and engages with migration regimes as well as migrants' responses to regulatory mechanisms.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The project focuses on Cameroonian Muslim migrants, particularly members of the Fulbe ethnic group. While many Fulbe have had historical and contemporary experiences of pastoral mobility, international labour migration is a relatively recent phenomenon for them. My focus on the Fulbe is based on two considerations: the surfacing of novel trends in their physical and social mobility and my deepening

familiarity with pastoral Fulbe society in northwest Cameroon (Pelican 1999, 2006). However, I have been careful not to limit my study to Fulbe migrants alone, but to adjust the unit of analysis to the specificities of each research site.

During a pilot study conducted in collaboration with Cameroonian colleagues and research students in Cameroon in 2007 (Pelican 2008a, 2010; Pelican and Tatah 2009), three places were identified as popular destinations in the South and East: neighbouring Gabon, which due to its wealth in natural resources has attracted migrants across Africa and beyond; post-apartheid South Africa, whose political and economic transformations have earned it the label «the US of Africa»; and the United Arab Emirates, in particular the city-state of Dubai, which due to its liberal business and immigration policies has gained currency among business people and labour migrants across the globe. While Cameroonian migrants in Gabon are mainly low-skilled entrepreneurs, South Africa and Dubai are favoured by Cameroonians of varied educational and professional backgrounds, often as an alternative or springboard to their desired destinations in the West.

Due to the project's primary interest in migrant transnationalism, research was conducted both in migrants' home and host countries. A total of twelve months was spent in Camer-

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on investigating NGO and government approaches to international migration as well as changing local perceptions and patterns of mobility. Moreover, in order to capture the processual and dynamic character of migrants' experiences, I opted for relatively short but repeated visits to migrant destinations, each lasting between two and four weeks. Travel was mostly organised from Cameroon and, when applicable, conducted in collaboration with Cameroonian research students, allowing me to participate in the migrant experience first-hand.

With regard to qualitative methods, I opted for a micro-level approach, taking established trust relationships between me and migrant families in Cameroon and abroad as a starting point. Moreover, in my attempt to study transnational communication and exchange relations, I adopted a somewhat interventionist approach by proposing the exchange of video messages between relatives at home and migrants<sup>2</sup>. These approaches were complemented by key anthropological research methods such as participant observation and interview techniques.

On a more general level, my research has been informed by a number of issues common to transnational migrant studies. These include the practicalities of multi-site fieldwork and the task of working with people in legally precarious situations or engaged in illicit activities (Falzon 2009; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). However, these predicaments are also part of migrant realities and bring us closer to their experiences and perspectives.

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND FAMILIES LEFT BEHIND

In his recent article «The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism», Carling (2008) analyses asymmetries in transnational relations between migrants and non-migrants using case material from Cape Verde and the Netherlands. As he argues, there are intrinsic asymmetries in their relationships, which can be a source of frustration for both sides. Moreover, since transnational relations are multi-faceted, these asymmetries tend to generate uneasy conditions of vulnerability and ascendancy affecting both migrants and non-migrants.

Carling's findings were confirmed in most of the transnational relationships investigated in my research. This became evident in the video messages exchanged between migrants

and their non-migrant kin in Cameroon, which testified to the many opportunities for miscommunication, misconception and disillusionment inherent in such asymmetries.

In several cases, relatives had lost contact with migrants living abroad and were anxious to learn about their well-being and imminent return. This situation mainly applied to Fulbe migrants in Gabon who had left with the intention of making a fortune and investing back home. When many of them realised that their dream was difficult to achieve, they reduced communication with Cameroon, hoping that they would soon overcome the difficulties they had encountered, such as adverse immigration regulations and business insecurity. While focusing on daily coping strategies, some kept postponing telephone calls and visits back home for years, until relatives in Cameroon believed them lost forever. As illustrated in the video exchange between J., a Fulbe migrant in Gabon, and his elder brother and sister-in-law in Cameroon, the latter interpreted J.'s lack of communication as disinterest and neglect of familial obligations. Meanwhile, J. had been reluctant and ashamed to inform them about his misfortunes and was struck when confronted with his relatives' emotional reproaches on video<sup>3</sup>. In consequence, J. made a conscious effort to reconnect and visited the family the following year.

As this and other examples illustrate, communication and negotiations between migrants and their non-migrant kin require a fair degree of interpretation, imagination and trust to make them work. Moreover, the longer migrants stay away, the more difficult it becomes for both sides to assess each other's situation, as individual experiences and expectations may gradually change. While modern communication technology has greatly facilitated long-distance relationships (Vertovec 2009), it cannot fully replace face-to-face exchange. As confirmed in several instances, communication via mobile phone and Internet creates new forms of interaction that are accessed and interpreted differently by the parties involved. For example, much of the phone communication observed during my research was aimed primarily at asserting social relations and only secondarily at exchanging information. And while relatives at home generally appreciated migrants' effort and concern, the latter wished for more meaningful and effective communication. In this vein, a Fulbe migrant based in the UK opted for text message communication with his literate brothers in Cameroon in order to organise their elderly

<sup>2</sup> On the basis of such video exchanges, I have composed a short documentary entitled «Face to Face: Cameroon - Gabon - Dubai - Geneva», accessible at <http://www.ethno.uzh.ch/aboutus/people/michaelapelican/publikationenmichaelapelican.html#facetoface>.

<sup>3</sup> «Face to Face: Cameroon - Gabon - Dubai - Geneva» (Pelican 2008b): Message to J. (2:36-3:55 min.).

mother's welfare. Yet, as he soon came to realise, such short and straightforward messages were likely to be misunderstood as impolite and bluntly authoritarian, thus causing mutual discord and offence. For many migrants, being part of «two worlds» – two different realms of experience and practice – can have a highly alienating effect, requiring familiarity with new media as well as caution on the part of both sender and recipient.

## MIGRANT REALITIES: PARALLELS AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS FIELD SITES

While migrants' social profiles and living conditions vary considerably across the different field sites, there are striking parallels regarding their economic and political status. For example, both Gabon and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), particularly the city-state of Dubai, can be characterised as rentier states with economies based either on the extraction of natural resources or on revenue generated from trade, tourism and real estate. Both places host large numbers of foreign workers whose contributions are indispensable to the countries' economic functioning. Legally, however, they are defined as aliens with limited or no access to citizenship or political rights. This is particularly pronounced in the case of Dubai, where foreign residency is tied to temporary labour contracts and a sponsorship system.

While Dubai's indigenous Arabs amount to 5-10% of the total population, the majority is made up of labour migrants from the Middle East and from the Asian and African continents. Cameroonians constitute a tiny proportion of the latter, as their migration to the Gulf States is a recent phenomenon and closely tied to African traders' exploration of global markets (Marchal 2001; Pelican and Tatah 2009). Many work in the informal sector, catering to the needs of African merchants and visitors; a few have found formal employment, mostly in the security, health or construction domains. Two concerns overshadow Cameroonian migrants' living and working conditions in Dubai: exorbitant housing costs and the vagaries of the UAE immigration system.

For many nationalities, entry into Dubai is a question of money rather than «merit» (as in the EU system). The fees for visas and residence and work permits as well as penalties for overstay create significant revenue for the Dubai government. Thus migrants are seen not only as a source of labour but also of state and private income, since they require the services of local sponsors and middlemen to legalize their entry and stay. At the same time, the UAE government denies them all citizenship and political rights.

The official discourse of the Dubai authorities is shared by established academics such as Christopher Davidson, who characterises labour migrants from India and Pakistan as «essentially opportunistic», whose «employment was entirely voluntary», who came with a good understanding of working conditions in Dubai, and who «returned to their home country much wealthier than hitherto» (Davidson 2008: 186-187). Obviously, Davidson has never spoken to any of the labour migrants he writes about, as he denies them a voice of their own. On the contrary, Cameroonians – much like Indians, Pakistani, Filipinos and other migrants – do have strong opinions about their entitlement to decent living conditions. They draw attention to dismal housing arrangements, as most migrants are compelled to share accommodation with some ten to twenty roommates, a system known as «bed space». They highlight the curtailment of religious and political freedoms as well as exclusion from local Arab society. Many question the worth of material benefit in exchange for social deprivation and political non-personhood.

Unlike Davidson's perspective, the migrants' point of reference is not so much a sense of lack of opportunity in their place of origin, but of exclusion and disempowerment within the context of hyper-modern Dubai itself. Hence, many Cameroonians look forward to moving on to Europe or the US, where they envisage a better life not only financially but in terms of citizenship and social recognition as well.

In Gabon, migrant realities are somewhat different. Here, we find more unexpected aspects, since scholars, policy makers and migrants themselves tend to perceive spatial mobility within the continent as fluid and historically embedded. However, as the Cameroonian example illustrates, border experiences also differ within the African continent. Travelling or migrating to Nigeria or Congo is a different story from going to Gabon or Equatorial Guinea. Whereas the former exercise nearly no immigration control, the borders of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea are sites of fierce contention. The past two decades have seen a number of forceful expulsions of West and Central African migrants, leading to public protest and diplomatic friction.

Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Chad are members of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, in French *Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale* (CEMAC). The CEMAC has its roots in the mid-1960s as a customs union, and it transformed into an economic and monetary union in 1994. Its primary goal is regional integration through the harmonisation of its

member states' policies and legislation. In particular, it aims to create a common market via the free circulation of people, goods, capital and services.

The ideal of free circulation, however, is far from reality for Cameroonian migrants in Gabon. Due to its natural resources and low population density, Gabon is a small, but relatively wealthy country. It hosts a considerable migrant labour force that accounts for approximately 20% of the population. The government aims to control immigration through administrative requirements such as entry and exit visas and residence permits. Gabonese political and public discourse has been characterised by the occasional upsurge of xenophobia, reflected in the popular phrase «le Gabon pour les Gabonais d'abord» (cf. Gray 1998).

By extension, Cameroonian migrants express a feeling of exclusion and discrimination, as they are constantly reminded of their status as unwelcome guests. This generates an experience of what de Genova (2002: 437) calls «the internal revolving door». One has entered a new location, but entry is never complete. The ordeals of entry and re-entry are the permanent condition of the transnational migrant. These experiences were brought home to me when I was travelling by road from Yaoundé to Libreville with my Cameroonian assistant I. As he later wrote:

«Just out of town I saw a signboard showing 635 km to Libreville. At first I thought we would cover the distance in 7 hours, as the road was good, the taxi in good condition and the driver experienced. When by 2 am we were still 300 km away from Libreville, and were being harassed at police checkpoints again and again, I knew I had been proven wrong.

«At each of the 16 checkpoints between Bitam and Libreville, we had to put 2 000 FCFA [CHF 4.-] in my passport and give it to the officer, despite the validity of the required papers. In many cases, particularly at night when police controls are intensified, we were asked to step out and explain ourselves. As our co-passengers and drivers supported our resistance, these protracted negotiations turned into tugs-of-war over time, money and persistence.

«I am obliged to pray five times a day. The tedious nature of the journey, however, did not allow me [to] perform my prayers, but only made me think of reaching Libreville as the sole objective. I suppose that, if we were given the chance to return to Cameroon in less than no time, we would have quickly done it.» (Extracts from the research report of my assistant I. S., 2008)

In conclusion, this report has touched on the particularities of South-South and South-East migration, its political and social complexities, as well as the communicative affects of migrant and home communities. As my preliminary findings suggest, migrant histories and experiences are necessarily personal. At the same time, and despite considerable variation across field sites, similarities in migrant realities and communication patterns can be observed. While I have been interested in the impact of mobility and migrant experiences on the home community from the onset of this project, I wish to further investigate and theorize the connections between migrant transnationalism and social transformation both in individual and collective perspectives.

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