

Il volume è stato finanziato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione Giovanni Maria Bertin - Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna, Studio di Fattibilità F. A.R.B Linea 1 progetto "Mobilità senza confini. Migrazioni interne e dinamiche sociali in Europa" (coordinatore prof. Bruno Riccio).

# FROM INTERNAL TO TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITIES

Bruno Riccio Ed.



# Index

From Internal to Transnational Mobilities. An Introduction <i>Bruno Riccio</i>	7
The Role of Mesoscopic Structures in Nineteenth-Century French Migrations <i>Paul-André Rosental</i>	19
Migration in Britain: an Analysis of Internal Migration Flows in Britain 2000-2010 <i>Tony Fielding</i>	39
Internal Migration in Italy and its Links with International Migration <i>Roberto Impicciatore</i>	57
International and Internal Migrations within Europe <i>Russell King</i>	83
The Changing Face of "Integration" in a Mobile Europe <i>Adrian Favell</i>	101
The New Italian Mobility in Europe <i>Maddalena Tirabassi and Alwise del Pra'</i>	111
Internal and International Mobilities in the Alps <i>Pier Paolo Viazzo</i>	137

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ISBN: 978-88-6680-203-7

I libri di Emil  
Via Benedetto Marcello 7 - 40141 Bologna - [www.ilibridiemil.it](http://www.ilibridiemil.it)

Finito di stampare nel mese di Luglio 2016  
da GESP - Città di Castello (PG)  
per conto di Odoya srl



Landscapes of Mobility of EU and non-EU Migrants Living in Italy. A Layering of Internal Movements <i>Francesca Alice Vianello</i>	155
Internal and International Migrants Navigate Italy's South-North Border <i>Selenia Marabello</i>	177
West African Mobility Networks. A Reflection on Past and Present Perspectives <i>Giulia Casentini</i>	193

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## From Internal to Transnational Mobilities. An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

### The Internal-International Nexus in Migration Studies

Within migration studies, it is common to encounter the distinction between internal and international migrations. The first is used to indicate individuals who move within the borders of a single country, such as circular rural-urban migration for instance, whereas the second is defined as the act of moving across international boundaries (transnationally) from a country of origin to a country of destination. Although migration scholars are careful to acknowledge that these two forms of mobility are somehow related, the study of these processes constitute domains of research that have been developed as distinct fields. Only rarely has the nexus of internal and transnational migration been explored. For instance, in the most widely-read handbooks on migration studies such as Castles and Miller (2009) Samers (2010) or Brettell and Hollifield (2015), to name just a few, migration refers exclusively to international migration (see King in this volume). However, as some scholars have been reminding us for decades (King 2002; Pugliese 2002; King, Skeldon 2010) migration scholarship should transcend this division between internal and international migration theories and methodologies.

Although we should not underestimate the important historical leg-

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## West African Mobility Networks. A Reflection on Past and Present Perspectives

### Introduction

In this brief essay, I shall propose an analytic observation of West African networks of mobility, both in current times and in historical perspective. The red thread I shall use is represented by the nodes of this network, their role as transit points, both in a practical and symbolic sense. The use that local societies are doing of these nodes in managing historical and contemporary flux of migrants is crucial, especially in understanding the role of migrants and strangers in the host societies in the West African context. Network, transit and mobility, together with the complex definitions of territory, belonging and integration, shall be examined and conceptualized through the case of the *zongos*, migrant enclaves historically present in West Africa, which represent the nodes of the Hausa mobility network in the region. The case study is provided by my anthropological research in the Northern Region of Ghana, where these enclaves are still present and maintain a crucial role as active interlocutors for mobile groups and individuals in the area.

Mobility is a particularly relevant aspect in a historical migratory context like Ghana and the surrounding region; it has been a crossroad of pre-colonial trade and a crucial node of political and social changes that had historically attracted numerous merchants and Muslim clerks (Clarke 1982; Levtzion 1968; Goody 1967). It is widely demonstrat-

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ed indeed that all these linkages between different cultures in transit (Wilks *et al.* 1986) shaped the contemporary characteristics of local political systems, but also influenced the religious landscape and cultural references, especially through the introduction of Islam and written Arabic language. The relation between hosts and strangers, indeed, is part of a *longue durée* process in West Africa: this cultural crossbreeding has often determined a high level of integration and geographical/spatial fusion, but has likewise created a certain degree of separation, that must be negotiated on an everyday basis.

My analysis seeks to examine the historical socio-political role of the *zongos*, with the aim at understanding whether and how these enclaves, by hosting strangers, migrants, traders, can still represent today a significant catalyst of mobility processes. The final objective, indeed, is to discuss continuities and discontinuities inside the process of construction of migrant identities in West Africa, which today is a category that cannot leave out of consideration the migration routes toward Europe. The latter is a route that most of the times is not successful, that often requires a deep reconsideration of the imaginary and the expectations produced "at home". Nevertheless, this is a route which has a profound meaning in shaping the current concept of mobility in West Africa: from one side it represents an hypothetical and almost mythological process, from the other side it is an experience that acquires a deep meaning thanks to the theoretical and practical importance of the transit phase, which is often more significant than the actual arrival in an alleged fixed final point (Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou 2008).

I will take here the theoretical direction offered by Mirjam de Bruijn, who suggests that new mobilities in West Africa should be viewed in an analysis of mobility as an old strategy; indeed, social transformations have always been largely informed by mobility (De Bruijn 2007: 110). Mobility and travelling cultures, as conceived by James Clifford (Clifford 1992), are privileged analytical frameworks in which reading the human experience in West Africa: movement, travel, mobility can appear, therefore, as deeply constitutive of the aspects of local culture and political formations.

Therefore, the all process shall be historicized, by using the meaning of the experience of mobility in history as a paradigm to explain old and new practices and cultural adaptations. Allen Howard insists not only on the need of the historical approach when we want to explore mobility and the plurality of its forms, but also on the necessity of using the network approach while investigating migration processes in Africa (Howard, Shain 2005). "Node" is a crucial concept in the network approach: it indicates here a place where the process of social, commercial and political networking between different households, families and trade groups, takes place. Nodes are interconnected places, and they should be considered in terms of synergistic processes (Howard, Shain 2005: 47).

Our case study, the *zongo* in West Africa and the Ghana case, is exactly one of these nodes.

### The Zongo network: research methodology and the state of the art

*Zongos* are physical spaces, specific areas inside a town, which geographically and conceptually embody the process of transit, and the political discourse on the inclusion/exclusion of migrants and strangers. Today, *zongos* are present in various West African cities. They still function as hubs for migrant routes, and for trade necessities. I have conducted my fieldwork in Tamale, Northern Region of Ghana, where the presence of two *zongos* gives the opportunity to investigate the contemporary role of these historical nodes. The research methodology includes both fieldwork (conducted so far mainly in Tamale Metropolitan Area) and archival research (conducted at PRAAD, Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana in Accra; NRG, Northern Regional Archives of Tamale; The National Archives, London, UK) in an attempt to combine anthropological and historical approaches.

The institution of the *zongo* appears in Ghana before colonization and has originated from trade necessities. The word "zongo" comes from the Hausa "zango", which means "temporary settlement". Initially

this word was used to describe the areas or the fringes of towns where traders – at the beginning they were especially Hausa coming from present-day northern Nigeria – would stop to rest and manage their own trade. These settlements are still present in many modern West African countries, especially in Ghana, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria and still represent places inhabited by “strangers”, often identified with Islam, the religion followed by the majority of Hausa traders (see Yusuf 1974, Casentini 2016 forthcoming).

I have analyzed the identity construction process while developing into a transnational collectivity, following the interpretation of Peggy Levitt. A strong way of defining themselves but also intervening in the socio-urban sphere is identified by Levitt in the system of practice brought by migrants (Levitt 1998). The concept of stranger shall be developed (Shack, Skinner 1979; Amselle 1996) with the aim at defining and understanding the variability and constant challenges of the *zongo* people's condition.

Spatial and network analysis (Howard, Shain 2005) has been conducted with the aim to connecting different *zongos* in a transnational perspective. The most relevant – with respect to political and trade influence – *zongo* communities were born in those towns and villages that represented, especially during pre-colonial period, the “nodes” of a flourishing trade network. Hausa merchants were the most prominent in developing this trans-Saharan trade, in establishing *zongos* settlements and also in outlying relationship – economic but even cultural, political and religious – between different trade nodes. In contemporary Ghana, this trade network developed during Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries because of the Hausa interest in the sale of kola nuts, that were produced in the forest areas of Asante (Wilks 1966; Levzion 1968; Lovejoy 1971). As Lovejoy stated, «kola was a particularly important luxury in Muslim areas because of the prohibition on alcohol and the acceptance of kola as a stimulant that was not proscribed by Islamic law or custom» (Lovejoy 2005: 3). This trade necessity gave rise to a bigger commercial network that involved the all region, where markets flourished and key commodities like kola, salt, textiles, currency

and slaves were exchanged. Islam provided a framework within which long-distance trade could operate (Lovejoy 2005: 155), permitted to maintain ties between dispersed trade settlements (Wilks *et al.* 1986: 170) and consolidated stranger communities (Cohen 1969). Indeed, the Sahelian and pre-Sahelian regions of West Africa have a long history of connection with Islam, and *zongo* communities have represented, especially in the 1970s in the Ghanaian context, the “quietest” path of accommodation with surrounding Christian and animist communities gained after centuries of negotiations. The present-day role of *zongos* in host societies has been defined and challenged by the presence and the constant change of Islam tendencies (see Kobo 2009, 2010).

*Zongos* in Ghana have been studied essentially from perspectives of internal politics (Arhin 1973; Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1985, 1991), of space and urban anthropology (Harvey, Brand 1974; Schwimmer 1980; Pellow 2002), and of inclusion/exclusion of migrant communities (Skinner 1960; Peil 1971). The centrality of trade and traders, and the perspective of socio-economic history of labour migration in *zongo* communities have also been addressed (Agier 1980, Ntewusu 2012).

The contribution of my research revolves around the possibility of tracing a social history of some *zongo* communities observing them as integral parts of the urban landscape, even if they are often physically separated. The study of urban changes that are determined by migrant networks can help to better conceptualize the crucial role of migrant communities in modifying and determining social and physical spaces. Following Yusuf's suggestion, I seek to use a perspective that conceives urbanism as a process that involves movement, migration, growth, and/or transformation of individuals (Yusuf 1974: 205). Urbanism must be analyzed as a way of life, that contains elements of process, and elements of condition (Yusuf 1974: 206). In this sense, *zongo* people shall be considered as active producers of urban practices and identities, with the aim at involving them in the creation of new solutions for urban integration.

As I discussed elsewhere (Casentini 2016 forthcoming), the approach of the postcolonial state of Ghana and of the local authorities towards

these migrant settlements must also be discussed. *Zongo* people, indeed, should be viewed as active interlocutors in the production of a shared memory and of a history of migrant communities. At the same time, migration shall be considered both as a dynamic and driving factor inside hosting societies, where migrant communities often act as catalysts elements of political change and social transformation, and offer challenges to the citizenship rights model (see Nyamnjoh 2006).

### The case study: migration networks and *Zongos* in Ghana

My research revolves around the historical meaning of *zongo* areas for current inhabitants and migrant communities, but also the contemporary relation between *zongos* and the state institutions of Ghana. I shall present here some preliminary reflections on the topic, through the analysis of Tamale *zongos* in history and in current times.

How was the *zongo* born? Which is, historically, the socio-political place of its inhabitants?

Although Tamale developed significantly after World War II, with the expansion of trade due to the central geographical position of the city (McGaffey 2006-2007: 120) and the weak colonial attempt to develop the north, the establishment of the British headquarters in 1907 gave a new commercial role to the city. Numerous colonial documents written during the 1910s and 1920s (ADM 56/1/141, Accra) bear testimony of *zongo* settlements as already presents in the urban space. Moreover, the rent that “*zongo* people” were asked to pay monthly to the colonial authorities was lower compared to other “non natives”, highlighting the fact that they already occupied a special recognised place because of their historical relation with local authorities.

Tamale today is home of two *zongos*, one that had been historically founded by Hausa communities probably during precolonial times, and the second one which had been established to settle Mossi people, moving southwards during colonial times to join the Gold Coast Constabulary and become soldier (see Casentini 2016 forthcoming).

Historically, Hausa and Mossi chiefs or spokespersons used to settle in the area by asking permission to occupy a piece of land to local chiefs and earth priests (*tindana*), which in this area belong to the Dagomba group. Dagomba authorities granted them permission to settle and carry on their economic and social activities, by recognising them a specific role as traders who bring new objects and knowledge in the area, and as mediators, both in cultural and political sense. Today, Hausa and Mossi *zongos* are deeply interrelated with local life and local authorities, by keeping their identity but also developing a strong role of managing trade and the arrival of various migrants in the area. They not only function as “home” for traders temporarily passing by and carrying out their activities, but also as places where migrants, coming from other *zongos* and/or from other countries, can refer to find a place to stay and a “transnational” community to identify with.

An important aspect related to the vital nature of this “system of migration” (Mabogunje 1972) concerns its adaptability. Commercial nodes can become political centres, or can act as social services. In this specific case, the network of Tamale *zongos* proves to be particularly effective in absorbing war refugees coming from abroad, through the establishment of a semi-spontaneous system of reception and relocation of people. Indeed, the ability to create a support network for migrants coming from abroad is frequently commented on by the people I talked to: many migrants from Mali, having fled the ongoing conflict, would come to the Hausa chief and spokesperson seeking assistance and a place to stay (F. M., Tamale; Mr. S., Tamale).

The high degree of adaptation and ability in coping with migrant fluxes which have interested the area in the last years, is strongly evident also today, with respect to the contemporary phenomenon of the trans-Saharan mobility to arrive in Libya and, eventually, reach Europe. The most recent fieldwork I am conducting in the area (started in 2015), reports about a strong role of the *zongo* model in the migration towards Libya. Ghanaians moving northwards often use the same trans-Saharan networks which were used in colonial and precolonial times, where places like Gao, Agadez, Tamanrasset are still central

nodes. The system of managing their passage and their transit period is very much comparable to the *zongo* system, revealing the high degree of adaptability of these structures of mobility. Tamale *zongos* are very important in this sense: they host many returnees coming back from Libya, especially those who could not make it to Europe. Often they are originally from the *zongo*, but some of them establish there once back to Ghana. Their social identity, indeed, is no more the same. They are represented by their community as people who are no more completely here, who have embodied a new identity by having being abroad, who are, somehow, strangers (R. F., Tamale). It is important to note that, in this case, we are not talking about success migrants, who come back home with a certain amount of money and a success story.

Returnees in the *zongos* are currently important reference points for whoever decides to take their same route: they provide information on the network system to reach Libya, they “translate” their experience in locally comprehensible social terms.

During my research, I have tried to understand whether the state of Ghana is today including and using the *zongo* experience to better understand and manage migratory issues, and consequent urban problems. The first outcomes present a situation which is in between the common “informal” shared knowledge (and stereotypes) concerning these settlements, and the lack of real awareness about the socio-political role played today by the *zongos*, and their potential. Despite the fact that the vast majority of state officials, town planners and social workers are perceiving and representing *zongos* simply as “slums and deprived areas”, it is undeniable that their actual role, and the identity played by their inhabitants, are portraying a different reality, more complex and multifaceted.

### The Zongo and the Notion of Stranger

The *zongo* is an ambiguous category. It has gone through numerous changes in history and it has proved to be a fluid but persistent social structure, that continuously represents an important node in the West

African migration trajectories, not only for Hausa people but also for many different groups of migrants (Mossi, Fulani, Yoruba, Dyula, only to mention the most numerous). Besides, the *zongo* is still an enduring stereotype in Ghanaian society, where critical environmental and infrastructural conditions, and the diffuse criminality, are linked to the presence of “strangers”. These “strangers”, however, could be actually settled in town since generations, challenging both the notion of ‘stranger’ itself and the local discourse on migration (Casentini 2016 forthcoming).

*Zongo* people, in fact, are still perceived and represented as “strangers” even if they have a recognized Ghanaian citizenship, and/or they were born in the country. This everlasting condition of uncertainty is analyzed following the theoretical framework proposed by Shack and Skinner (1979) in their seminal work on strangers in Africa: being a stranger in this cultural and political context does not necessarily mean to be excluded from the society, rather it can define a prominent person in the host society, an individual who can hold an important economic position and who is perceived as complementary to the economic and political development of everyday life. The authors started their reflection from George Simmel’s essay entitled *The Stranger*. «In the strict Simmelian sense of the term, strangers are not aliens. Strangers are not found at either end of the alien-citizen continuum; they are betwixt and between, as Simmel said. Through their involvement in sundry social, economic, and quasi-political activities, strangers symbolically mediate between society and the state» (Shack and Skinner 1979: 4). It is interesting, though, to realize how this condition is normally expressed in terms of liminality: the stranger can easily change his social position, and can suddenly become the scapegoat of a tense or conflict situation.

The process of group identity construction in a migrant community is obviously built in a constant confrontation with the hosts, who are main active subjects in this inclusion/exclusion dynamic. As suggested by Tiryakian (1973), the concept of stranger itself must be conceived in dynamic terms, precisely because it is continuously thought and rewritten following the fluid relation between strangers and hosts. Shack and Skinner themselves critically discussed the definition of “stranger”,



taking into consideration his own socio-economic influence and his position, that can be positively elevated to become a mediator, a translator of different issues at stake in the host society. As Jean-Loup Amselle demonstrated in his comparison between the concept of stranger in contemporary Mali and ancient Greece, one must pay attention to the fact that the notion of stranger is always an ambiguous one: people are “strangers” only in relation to somebody else. Indeed, being “stranger” is a performative and social action that can be positive or negative depending on the case (Amselle 1996: 758).

Migrants are however actively included in the host society, even if they strongly maintain this “stranger” status, due to their mobile origins. Indeed, the issue on their own identity as “*zongo* people” revolves around the concept of migration and mobility: the contemporary inhabitants of the *Zongo* have a transnational way of being a community. Their identity appears explicitly in the constant maintenance of the network ties between different *zongos*. The commercial system used by them is properly constructed following the linkages between the extended family of every individual, which is normally spread among *zongos* in different countries.

### Transit and Nodes

The so called transit is a fundamental aspect of the migration experience across West Africa. And it is well known that, for the vast majority of contemporary African migrants, this transit phase occurs inside the continent (Adepoju 2004). I propose here to reflect upon *zongos* and their socio-political role from the perspective of contemporary migrant journeys across the Sahara, with the aim at highlighting their potential as hubs for mobile people and consequently, places where the migration process is shaped, re-considered, often changed.

Schapendonk and Steel (2014) conceptualize inherent problematic points of reflection in the concept of transit, by encouraging the researcher to broadly connect the contemporary migration process to the

network system and its historical roots. They argue that the attention towards the transit is quite recent in anthropological and sociological studies: normally we used to consider migration taking as crucial nodes (not only geographical but also conceptual) the fixed points of origin and destination (point A and point B). Consequently, the mobility experience was rarely conceived as a process, but was mainly reduce as a residual “in-between” two different fixed points, from a static point to another one (Schapendonk 2012: 38; Schapendonk, Steel 2014: 262).

The perspective of transnationalism has deeply contributed to deconstruct this fixed notion (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1995; Portes 1998). By focalizing on multiple relationships that migrants maintain while crossing geographic, cultural and political borders, transnationalism tends to locate migrants in two places simultaneously. Mobility – Immobility, though, appear now to social scientists not as two disconnected opposed conceptual frameworks, but two deeply correlated effects (Schapendonk, Steel 2014). This means that we have to pay great attention to the role of the networks (both historical and contemporary), the hubs and the routes in considering the migration process, but we have to take into consideration also the presence of period of stagnation, of intersection, of stopping the mobility.

Which are the geographical locations of this transit phase? Where are the so called hubs (or nodes) of the migratory process in West Africa? We are actually facing two different but related notions of transit, which are the historical one, and the present one. The two are not necessarily the same thing, but they are often conceptually and geographically overlapped. Historical *zongo* migration nodes, and the contemporary hubs of the trans-Saharan route towards Libya, can be the same, and are very often crossing one another.

This “encounter” between different historical processes occurs not only from a geographical and territorial point of view, but also from a cultural perspective. These nodes, indeed, represent and reproduce a model of experiencing the transit, and of managing and comprehending the process of migration and the production of new identities and social roles. I argue that the *zongo* network, is used today not only as a

commercial transnational system of movement, but represent also an important reference point for mobility in the area, included the migration routes that connect West African migrants to Libya. The *zongo*, indeed, offers a model of conceiving mobility, in terms of movement and identity, that proves to be viable in managing the contemporary migration process. Being mobile, and the plurality of its forms, are essential in the shaping of Africa (De Bruijn 2007). This is evident in the choices of contemporary trans-Saharan migrants who chose the *zongo* model to rely on when they move from one node to the other.

### Citizenship and Integration

In the context here described, *Zongo* people should be viewed as active interlocutors in the production of a shared memory and of a history of migrant communities. At the same time, migration shall be considered both as a dynamic and driving factor inside hosting societies, where migrant communities often act as catalysts elements of political change and social transformation, and offer challenges to the citizenship rights model.

*Zongos* represent exactly some of the hubs where the encounter between different migrant trajectories, lives and expectations crossed each others; they are places where “transmigrant” memory is shaped. The «sense of consciously belonging to a group that lives in two settings» (Levitt 1998: 931) – or in more than two settings – allows these migrant groups to produce hybrid social forms which meet the needs of their communities, often bypassing the government.

The historical cultural influence, together with the contemporary role as connectors of migrant fluxes, demonstrate their active function as political actors. *Zongo* people assert a sort of “transmigrant citizenship”, which is only partially recognised by the Ghana government.

*Zongo* model shed lights on the possibility of thinking about a flexible belonging to a nation, in the West African context. *Zongo* people hold a Ghanaian citizenship, can be part of the political environment

as mediators and translators for other “strangers” living in their community, but they are not asked for homologation. They can, or better, they have to maintain their own cultural features as “non natives”, while this condition does not prevent them to be integral part of the society they live in.

When Achille Mbembe critically examines the evolution of the concept of territoriality in Africa as defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it (Mbembe 2000: 261), he is also warning the researcher not to rely upon the simplistic notion that regional integration is already taking place “from below”. In his critique, he stresses the fact that to understand the crucial importance of the connection between citizenship, territoriality, boundary demarcation and integration, we must investigate the imaginaries and autochthonous practices of space (Mbembe 2000: 262). The *zongo* model, here, can help to conceptualize how, practically, local communities are using and re-shaping places and spaces of mobility.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to connect the *zongo* experience to the present-day Ghanaian mobility challenges. The inclusion/exclusion paradigm and the notion of stranger have been discussed, providing both ethnographic and theoretical evidences, with the aim at observe which could be possible solutions. Of course, central in this analysis is the question of citizenship, and which kind of citizenship can be achieved in contemporary African countries (see Geschiere 2009).

The contribution of Francis Nyamnjoh to this debate provides useful insights for this reflection. In the context of Southern Africa, the author addresses the limits of building a sense of belonging that «ignore historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient states» (Nyamnjoh 2006: 320), criticizing the fact that «the tendency has been for citizenship thus inspired to assume the stature of a giant compressor of, especially, cultural differences» (Nyamnjoh 2006: 241).

Here I have tried to discuss the West African experience of *zongo* life as a model that could extensively contrast the challenges reported by Nyamnjoh, producing a different model by sharing the urban space and capitalizing on the common historical background.

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