

INTRODUCTION



From Ploughing the Sea to Navigating the Bush

Everything passes and everything remains,
but our task is to pass,
to pass making trails,
trails on the sea.

Antonio Machado, *Proverbios y Cantares*
(my translation)¹

Exodus is among one of the all-time favourite tropes invoked to narrate epochal events, whether historical or mythical. In 2006, an upsurge of undocumented boat migration from the coasts of Mauritania, Senegal and the Gambia to the Canary Islands took Europe by surprise. Images of dramatic arrivals and rescue operations on the high seas flooded the European media, spreading moral panic about invasion as well as humanitarian pleas to improve the conditions of young men allegedly so desperate as to gamble their lives in pirogues originally built for coastline fishing.² No sooner had European and West African governments begun to deploy hard and soft power to prevent migrants from taking to the sea than skyrocketing food prices in the world market exacerbated the fears of more departures, especially from communities surviving in a barren ecology and a long-neglected agricultural sector. The governments of Senegal and the Gambia, among others, responded to this double crisis by offering the prospect of return to

the land for youth who had allegedly become disaffected towards farming and enchanted by the dream of Europe as a kind of Eldorado. Moreover, believing that improving food security would contribute to securing borders, the European Union and some of its member states have since financed several projects in West African agriculture to provide youths with an alternative to emigration. As a result, curbing or managing migration from Africa to Europe became partly wedded to a rhetoric of stemming the exodus from the African countryside and improving the lot of the rural poor, thus echoing the increasingly popular belief among donors and development organizations that, depending on the viewpoint, either agriculture will save young people or young people will save agriculture (Sumberg et al. 2012: 2).

Amidst such growing political and popular concerns, scholarly work has attempted to recast the premises on which the relation between West African youth and migration is assessed. While some scholars have unveiled the ‘inconvenient realities’ behind the ‘myth of invasion’ of African migration to Europe (de Haas 2008b), others have moved further ‘beyond exodus’ as a narrative of migration ‘by repositioning the analysis on Africa’s side’ (Bellagamba 2011: 12, my translation). Historical and ethnographic research has proved especially useful for retrieving the background of migration to Europe (Schmitz 2008), as well as that of many other, often more significant, travel routes chosen by West Africans in order to craft and supplement their rural livelihoods.³ Even where the aspiration to leave for Europe appears to express directly the plight of young people dispossessed of a dignified future, empirical studies have revealed despair and dreams of Europe to be too simplistic an explanation for making sense of their fantasies, let alone their practices, of travel.⁴

Highlighting the historical depth and social pervasiveness of mobility in West Africa has done much to recapture it as a properly West African trajectory. However, in addition to describing what sets young people on the move, the present circumstances call for an explanation of why and how they stay at home. The growing agrarian agenda in Europe’s migration management meets and revitalizes concerns with a rural exodus that have periodically haunted West Africa, at least since colonial times.⁵ Albeit largely rhetorical in nature, this governance discourse betrays a will to normalize stasis (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013: 184), acting as if rural dwellers had no willingness or no power to manage emigration on their own terms and were therefore in need not simply of better resources but also of external tutelage in order to persuade their young people to remain farmers. And this is despite the fact that in many places where leaving for greener pastures has become a default option, more young people still persist in living on the land than the bewildering economic and ecological conditions of agricultural production and survival

would lead one to believe. If scholarly research can help in redressing distorted views of exodus and, more importantly, regaining a fuller picture of migrant West Africa, one possibility is therefore to begin by asking not what makes young people jump on a boat to plough the high seas but whether and how they will stay put and manage to navigate the vagaries of the savannah.

This book tells a different story of West African migration, one that begins not with departures and arrivals but with permanence. It seeks to bring a different perspective to public and especially to scholarly debates on migration by describing how young men stay put in a Gambian village. The village is Sabi, a Soninke-speaking community of about five thousand inhabitants in the upper Gambia River valley, a place of bygone agricultural prosperity and momentous but forestalled international emigration. In Sabi, men grow up with a herd ambition to travel, to work in the West and do business in a number of other countries across the world; they dream of making money and sending it home, and of cosmopolitan discoveries in foreign cultures. As the legal right to travel to the outer world has, however, become highly restricted in recent decades, fewer and fewer of them manage to emigrate. Excluded from the circuits of global mobility, and pressurized by daunting economic prospects at home, Sabi's young men neither venture out to sea nor enthusiastically embrace the Gambian government's clarion call to go 'back to the land'. Many would rather 'sit' (*taaxu*) in the village and seek recognition as 'stayers' by holding the fort while their brothers and relatives are away. As this ethnographic study shows, therefore, far from being solely en route to elsewhere, young men in Sabi are 'bound to the bush' in a double sense, as they are farming in lieu of travelling and are under a social and moral injunction to continue being farmers and villagers.

By shifting attention from sea- to bush-bound young men, this book sheds light on the creation of stillness amidst movement. Too often have scholars been solely preoccupied with explaining emigration and following the migrants, thus relegating stayers to the background of social analysis and taking their settled lives for granted. In a context in which men's livelihoods have been so peripatetic and village life so permeated by flows originating from elsewhere, staying in Sabi has little of the flavour of a bucolic attachment to place; nor can the sedentary lives of young men be thought of as a normal state of being, as if it were prior, external and diametrically opposed to migration. By contrast, this study suggests ways in which we can conceive of and investigate sedentary livelihoods as an integral element of migration. It disturbs the received views of immobility as a static, natural or residual category and instead shows how movement and stillness combine to animate social life.

At stake in the making of sedentary life is the very foundation of rural life-worlds. Since the 1990s, scholars have registered unrelenting rates of de-agrarianization in Africa, whereby peasants facing economic and ecological insecurity have opted for off-farm occupations, including labour migration (Bryceson and Jamal 1997). In Sabi, constraints on mobile livelihood strategies raise the opposite concern; namely, how subjects who would have normally left for foreign countries become, in contrast, involved in reviving the peasantry. Through the lens of immobility, age and masculinity, *Bush Bound* places social reproduction at the centre of its anthropological inquiry. It shows how the young generations of rural dwellers follow the bush trails walked by their family and village predecessors, striving to create agrarian futures in a space and time where the resources for renewal are increasingly found and diverted elsewhere.

This ethnography consequently provokes reflection on the meaning of being and becoming a migrant and a peasant in twenty-first century West Africa and in the world at large. Upon hearing the title of this book, a colleague wittily confessed that she thought of George W. Bush and the way his politics constrained the lives of young West Africans. In a way, she was right. The former President of the United States is the iconic figure of the post-9/11 world order, the leader of a war on terror whose majority of victims have been ordinary Muslims living in poor countries rather than shrewd terrorists. The securitarian paranoia emanating from the neo-con circles in Washington was eagerly taken up by European governments, and eventually appeared in spectacular form both off and on the coasts of Senegambia when the EU decided to bring boat migration to a halt. The fieldwork for this book was mainly conducted between 2006 and 2008, during the peak of boat migration and the rhetoric on normative agrarianism. In the vicissitudes of young men living in a globally remote village in West Africa, one can vividly sense the powerful forces directing this historical moment. Sabi young men forge their trajectories in a system in which free-market capitalism coexists side by side with illiberal restrictions on the right of movement. In this Janus-faced scenario, they discover that as farmers, they are poor competitors in a world market dominated by corporate capital, and as migrants they are second-class world citizens unworthy of being issued a visa to the West on suspicion of wishing to overstay their allotted time. The implications of this global edifice of power of which the Bush administration was an architect might not be felt, however, solely in the form of exclusion and marginalization. In the bewilderment of young men who remain in Sabi one sees the less visible mechanisms that strain sedentary life as a constitutive element of migration. Sabi was never the recipient of an agricultural project from the EU, nor the main target of any other concrete means of persuasion to

remain on the land. Yet families organized, in largely autonomous ways, both movement and stillness to the extent that, as will be shown, some members might have to withhold their dreams of emigration in order to stay. Paradoxically, therefore, together with arrivals, the global politics of mobility also curtails and overburdens self-managed modes of creating and maintaining rural permanence.

Soninke Migration and the Young Men Who Stay Put

To the reader familiar with the region, associating Soninke men with non-migration might sound like an oxymoron. For centuries, people of Soninke ethnicity have been represented as eager travellers with a flair for long-distance trade. Soninke speakers featured prominently among the itinerant Muslim traders (*juula*) who travelled between the lower Gambia River and the Niger Delta, connecting the Atlantic and the trans-Saharan commercial systems, during the age of the slave trade (sixteenth to nineteenth century), forming settlements along the Western Sahel–Sahara frontier, in the upper Senegal River valley and later in the upper Gambia River (Bathily 1989; Manchuelle 1997). ‘The Serawoollies [Soninke]’, wrote British explorer Mungo Park (1816: 62), the first European to travel to the interior of Senegambia at the end of the eighteenth century, ‘are habitually a trading people’. Numerous British and French travellers echoed Park’s observation over subsequent decades, variously describing the Soninke as ‘a trading nation’, ‘the peddlers of West Africa’ or even as the ‘Jews of West Africa’ (see Pollet and Winter 1971: 111–13), the last one being a label which has curiously remained over time and is occasionally used by contemporary Gambian Soninke as well. Little of the stereotypical image of the rooted, static African so recurrent in colonial accounts was reserved to the Soninke, whom some Europeans and autochthones alike sometimes depicted as a distinctive *ethnie migratrice* (cf. Amselle 1976: 19; Jónsson 2007: 9).⁶

Although anthropologists have since disputed essentialist representations of Soninke ethnicity and migration, mobility has remained at the heart of scholarly research on the Soninke (but cf. Adams 1977, 1985). As one of the first and largest sub-Saharan immigrant groups in France, the Soninke from Upper Senegal, a borderland between Mauritania, Senegal and Mali, have been one of the most thoroughly researched case studies (see, among others: Quiminal 1991; Timera 1996). In his comprehensive historiography on Soninke labour diasporas, François Manchuelle (1997) showed Soninke migrants to be not mere pawns pushed by poverty and pulled by industrial capitalism but willing subjects building on a century

of labour migration. By travelling, Soninke men have found the money to support their families, together with opportunities to achieve maturity and find new cultural experiences (Timera 2001a). So tight is the relation between migration and male emancipation that some scholars have described emigration as a rite of passage for Soninke young men (Konate 1997: 8; Timera 2001a: 41; Jónsson 2007: 50).

The situation in Sabi strikes one as no particular exception to what has been observed in other Soninke-speaking milieus. France is not as popular a destination as it is among the eastern communities, but trade and labour migration to other European and worldwide destinations has been equally ongoing for decades. From the rice the villagers buy with remittances, to the brick houses in which they sleep, to the schools and clinics that migrant associations have developed, most aspects of everyday life have a faraway origin. Boys grow up in households where grandparents, parents and elder brothers have been or still are dispersed across Africa, Europe and North America. Before their eyes are the success stories of diamond traders, African art dealers and businessmen selling Asian products, as well as of hundreds of men who work for a salary in Europe and the United States. Virtually all young men wish to follow in their footsteps, and in their daily lives spend much time thinking about how they can reach, or who can help them to reach, the *terenden-gunne* (lit. travel-bush), as the elsewhere is sometimes called, rather than about farming in the actual bush (*gunne*).

To be sure, regardless of ethnic background, migration has been historically a well-worn livelihood option along the Gambia River. In addition, desires of migration have percolated through Gambian society since the 1980s, as both rural and urban dwellers, poor and elite families, have responded to a spiralling economic and political uncertainty by sending their children to study and work abroad. But in the eyes of many Gambians, few other inhabitants of the valley have matched Soninke men's degree of commitment to international travel. Stories of Soninke who, despite lacking any formal education, make headway in Western countries, run complex transnational enterprises and manage assets worth thousands, if not millions, of Euros, circulate in the Gambia as simultaneously compelling and puzzling examples of the cosmopolitan spirit and economic acumen of this prosperous and pious minority who make up only 8 per cent of the population and are known by Gambians as the Serahule.⁷ With the exception of business, very few young adults in Sabi have indeed opted for professional careers in the Gambia. Raised as farmers and as Quranic students until they were strong and sensible enough to embark on a quest for money abroad, they have no hope, let alone ambition, of joining the civil service or doing white collar jobs.

Due to the extent to which survival, prosperity and respectable manhood rest on journeying away from the village, the current restrictions to the right of movement have posed a severe threat to Soninke livelihoods and masculinities. In her study of a Malian Soninke village with a long-standing history of migration to France, Gunvor Jónsson (2007, 2012) has given voice to young men who, weaned on a culture of migration but unable to secure a Schengen visa, fail to experience progress along the path to social adulthood. Those who remain at home can even be stigmatized as being lazy, immature and cowardly.

In the light of such findings, how can one then possibly speak of ‘staying put’ as a dynamic process? As in Mali so too in the Gambia, Soninke men certainly mourn their lack of opportunities to reach the travel-bush (*terenden-gunne*); for them, staying in the village is often an existence dominated by unemployment and abject immobility (Chapter 4). But this is only one, albeit important, perspective on immobility. Understanding the ‘bush’ or ‘full house of variation’ (Ferguson 1999: 78) of the practices and experiences of staying behind in rural Soninke settings requires decentring outmigration as the sole horizon of possibility and gaining a broader and deeper understanding of what forging a settled life has meant in a context simultaneously founded on roots and routes (Clifford 1997). Men’s migratory aspirations tell us what they want to achieve, and eventually what they want to leave behind, but not what else they actually do and attain at home. In Sabi during the late 2000s, going to the village bush included farming as well as a plethora of activities, relations, affects and ethical sensibilities that organized social life around agrarian livelihoods, and which in turn sustained and were sustained by travellers. In the absence of migrant brothers, young men looked after the family, kept an eye on their wives and taught their children to respect the elders and to become good Muslims and hard-working farmers. They kept in touch with household members abroad and reminded them to send money when supplies were short, while they worked harder when things were tough abroad. Indeed, staying often actually involved spending a few months of the dry season away from the village in order to bring back some cash. Remaining in Sabi meant participating in the etiquette of greeting and gossiping, of visiting and spending time with kith and kin, and thus weaving the fabric of local sociality that was extended to members in the diaspora.

My point is not simply that there is more to men’s lives than migration, but that there is more to Soninke migration too. It would be reductive to dismiss what non-migrant young men do in their villages as activities and roles into which they were simply born and raised. Equally unsatisfactory would be to view them as the residual element of a highly selective

emigration process, as if it involved no active stance on the part of those who remain home. What rather emerges from narratives and practices of emplacement in migrant-sending Sabi is a plurality of trajectories that draw on both consolidated and novel ways of organizing an agrarian life *within* migration.

‘Sitting’: Creating and Inhabiting Immobility

In conversations about *terende* (travel) – which is generally understood as journeying away from the home village and, more specifically, from the home country – Soninke speakers often use the verb *taaxu* to refer to staying behind or to stopping travelling, as when a man returns from abroad in order to settle at home. Literally meaning ‘to sit’, *taaxu* has a wealth of other figurative meanings. In its transitive form (*taaxundi*), ‘to sit’ refers to the founding of a settlement, in particular of a village or a household. Other meanings of *taaxu* include a more metaphorical sense of becoming established in a social position; a chief succeeding to the throne, a state president swearing the oath of office or a man becoming a household head are all said to be ‘sitting’. There is probably a correlation between this meaning of *taaxu* and the vital significance of sitting – as an act of taking a seat – in social life. Visitors to the region must certainly have noted the seating platforms at street corners or under mango trees, where male elders spend time chatting and settling palavers. Similar platforms are found in or around family houses, where women and the younger men gather to socialize. No conversation usually begins until people are invited to take a seat. Offering a chair or a place on a mat to a visitor is an act of hospitality and respect, the acknowledgment of the social presence of the guest and the first step towards establishing or continuing a social relation with him or her. Various aspects of everyday and ritual life – negotiations, ceremonial proceedings, storytelling and gatherings of various sorts – similarly involve sitting, and sitting together (*taaxu doome*), as an embodied form of social participation and production (cf. Cooper 2012).

The semantic plasticity of the verb *taaxu*, or ‘sitting’, constitutes a precious meta-analytical resource for investigating the different ways of staying put as a young man in a migrant-sending place like Sabi. It conveniently echoes the Latin root of sedentariness, the verb *sedere*, which has both spatial and social connotations: to sit, occupy an official seat, preside, be fixed or settled (*Online Etymology Dictionary* 2014). Its meaning also ranges from becoming spatially emplaced to becoming socially established or acknowledged, and so I use *taaxu* to refer to staying put as an act

of positioning oneself in a field of (im)mobility and the process of inhabiting that position. To 'sit' in Sabi is to establish relations with both close and distant people, and to strive to be socially recognized as someone who is staying put for a legitimate purpose. By exploring the polysemy of 'sitting', this book seeks to unravel the 'multiple modalities' and 'valences' of stillness (Bissell and Fuller 2010: 6, 11) that constitute social life in a valley of rural permanence and emigration. It seeks to capture the powerful forces that shape not only movement but also settlement, and compel young men to understand their lives in sedentary terms. Attending to the meaning and experience of 'sitting', I unearth complex trajectories of their becoming stayers, not necessarily as definitive accomplishments, but as positions endowed with particular qualities of being, relational potentialities and capacities to act.⁸ The chapters in this book document this process of positioning in different spheres of social life in which men's abilities as 'sitters' are variously inculcated, elicited and harnessed as well as doubted, despised or simply disregarded.

This book therefore diverges from most accounts of migration and mobility, for by foregrounding 'sitting' it concentrates attention squarely on immobility. It focuses (primarily) on immobility in relation to international migration roughly in the same way that it dwells on *taaxu* in relation to *terende*. While this focus on mobility across national borders stems from empirical considerations, namely the salience of *terende* for Sabi young men, I do not necessarily subscribe to typological distinctions between forms and scales of migration. On the contrary, I often use the term migration in a loose fashion, for, as I purport to show, similar sociocultural logics often undergird different spatial behaviours in Sabi, and even straddle the divide between sedentary and mobile livelihoods (Chapter 2). Immobility denotes, in this respect, not an absolute but a relative condition: absence of international movement does not exclude mobility in different circuits and scales, some of which are analysed in this ethnography (esp. Chapter 3). However, my objective is not to describe all possible forms of mobility and immobility in Sabi, but rather to develop analytical tools for investigating 'sitting' in a context polarized by international travel, something which requires us to clearly delineate the conceptual ambit of immobility and hopefully to make it a viable framework for the study of migration and mobility more generally, international or otherwise.⁹

Immobility and immobile subjects have until recently remained a rather neglected and under-theorized aspect of migration (Hammar and Tamas 1997: 1; Carling 2002: 5–6).¹⁰ In 1997, in a volume that sought to bring the theme of immobility within the purview of migration studies, Hammar and Tamas complained that 'almost all attention has up to now

been given to those who actually migrate' (Hammar and Tamas 1997: 1). Hammar and Tamas wrote this at a time of growing awareness in the social sciences that people do not necessarily perceive sedentary life as a natural condition of being (Malkki 1992), and consequently that migration should not be a priori considered an anomaly in need of an explanation (Klute and Hahn 2008: 8). Seizing upon the growing speed and volume of global flows, a veritable 'mobility turn' in the social sciences has since brought mobility, or better, multiple mobilities, to the centre of social research and theory, and to the detriment, in particular, of narrow definitions of migration as linear and unidirectional movement (Sheller and Urry 2006: 208). 'Mobility', geographer Tim Cresswell has noted, 'has become the ironic foundation for anti-essentialism, antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism' (2006: 46). And yet, the debunking of sedentariness from received epistemologies in the social sciences has hardly resulted in more studies of people staying in their place in spite of the thrust of contemporary mobility. Ten years after Hammar and Tamas' plea for a study of immobility, Toyota, Yeoh and Nguyen (2007: 158) had to remark once more that 'given the focus on migrants and the somewhat narrow ways in which migration processes have been defined, the migration literature can be said to have thus far "left behind" the "left behind"'.

The images of boat migrants and the less spectacular reality of Sabi young men unable to obtain visas constitute a powerful counterpoint to optimistic accounts of global unfettered movement and bring immobility back into the picture in compelling ways. In the widening gap detected by Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 3) between 'the global and extraterritorial elite and the ever more "localized" rest', one is forced to see not only the enduring foundations of state sovereignty but also the fact that its caging techniques have themselves become mobile. While people, goods and ideas move at an increasing speed across borders, flows are being securitized in such ways that spurious elements are filtered out (Walters 2006). Along the flow, poor citizens of developing countries are typically warded off, confined and removed. In contrast to depictions of a world on the move, Jørgen Carling (2002) has therefore argued that impediments to mobility constitute the veritable hallmark of the contemporary world. In many places in the global south where there is a long history of emigration, people are witnessing a widening gap between aspiration and the ability to migrate across national borders, a juxtaposition which Carling calls 'involuntary immobility'. Building on Cape Verdean examples, Carling includes in involuntary immobility factors other than policies that constrain movement, such as economic liabilities, lack of contacts and individual characteristics (gender, education, age, etc.) that affect the possibility of overcoming legal restrictions to free movement. I draw

on Carling's toolkit to shed light on the social forces that shape the trajectories of 'sitting'. Far from simply offsetting desires of migration against legal/political barriers, in this book I show how the international politics of mobility add to the home-grown modes of regulating movement that emanate from social organization (cf. Rogaly 2003).

At the same time, this study reaches beyond an approach to immobility that is primarily centred on obstacles to movement, and rather views mobility and immobility as 'an outcome of a relation' (Adey 2010: 18). In anthropology, as in other social sciences, increasing dissatisfaction is being expressed with regard to a conceptual lexicon that pits movement against stasis (Rockefeller 2011; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Clearly, the diverse practices summoned up by 'sitting' cannot be analytically subsumed within a notion of im-mobility narrowly conceived in binary terms as an absence or negation of mobility (McMorran 2015). They rather suggest that stillness can be 'thoroughly incorporated into the practices of moving' (Cresswell 2012: 648). West African communities like Sabi have evolved amid commercial and human flows powered by regional and global systems as ancient as the trans-Saharan trade and the Atlantic slave trade. To imagine social life in these settlements to be the sole result of a localized peasant tradition is, I argue, to significantly misunderstand the imbrication of the Soninke and other West Africans in these wider systems (Piot 1999). Consider, for instance, the role of agriculture, the emblem of sedentariness. Claude Meillassoux (1971), probably the first anthropologist to demystify mobility as an essential trait of Soninke culture, showed that Soninke precolonial short- and long-distance trade depended on agricultural production and on the exploitation of slave labour as well as on the fact of occupying a geo-ecologically strategic position along the Sahara–Sahel frontier. Historian François Manchuelle (1997: 102–6) subsequently drew on Meillassoux's insights to show that commercial agriculture remained an important basis for Eastern Soninke migration even after the advent of free labour migration at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth (on the Gambia, see Swindell and Jeng 2006; Gaibazzi 2012b). Since the 1960s, the agricultural base of Soninke mobility has deteriorated, forcing greater numbers of villagers to leave for Europe and elsewhere in order to support their families at home (Weigel 1982; Quiminal 1991; Findley and Sow 1998). Yet in the Senegambia and the Western Sahel, labour migration has not so much uprooted peasants and turned them into permanent urban proletarians; it has rather encouraged them to maintain a base in their place of origin, to which industrial capitalism could conveniently outsource the costs of social reproduction of the migrant workforce (Meillassoux 1981; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). In Soninke

communities, agriculture has accordingly retained a crucial cultural and pedagogical role in sustaining transnational connections and bringing up future travellers (Whitehouse 2009; 2012a; Chapter 2).

As commercial nodes, labour reserves and homes of a worldwide diaspora, localities like Sabi can be thus viewed as ‘moorings’ (Urry 2003: ch. 5; 2007) or ‘actual permanences’ (Harvey 1996: 38) that both presuppose and enable flows of people and resources. With reference to contemporary mobilities (human, material, virtual, etc.), sociologist John Urry (2007: 13) has pleaded for the investigation not only of movement and movers but also of the socio-material infrastructures (or moorings) that make mobility possible: airports, roads, service stations and, moreover, ‘ticketing, oil supply, addresses, safety, protocols, station interchanges, web sites, docks, money transfer, inclusive tours, luggage storage, air traffic control, barcodes, bridges, timetables, surveillance and so on’.¹¹ Likewise, contemporary human (im)mobility is patterned by systems like information technology, transport infrastructure, passports and visa systems.

The focus on socio-material systems bespeaks Urry’s (2000) call for a ‘sociology beyond societies’. *Pace* Urry, I bring to the study of (im)mobilities an anthropological perspective that still prioritizes social relations and cultural practices which organize and confer meaning on (human) immobility (cf. Lindquist 2009; Nyíri 2010; Salazar 2010; Salazar and Smart 2011).¹² Accordingly, I build on anthropological literatures on migration which describe the social and cultural organization of long-distance flows from the point of view of migrant-sending contexts (Gardner 1995; Cohen 2004: ch. 5).

The importance of social and cultural dynamics becomes especially evident against the backdrop of the historical thrust of (im)mobility in West Africa.¹³ Even though, as epitomized by the scholarship on the Soninke, immobility and sedentariness have seldom constituted the primary object of analysis in the ethnography and historiography of West African migration, the pervasiveness of human mobility across the region has spawned scholarly reflections on movement and stillness in a number of lateral ways. In West Africa, relations of belonging and claims to the land are often traded in local histories of migration and settlement (Kea 2010; Lentz 2013), while most societies have adopted a number of institutional arrangements, from hospitality to child fostering, to sustain and regulate the movement of people and goods (Amselle 1976: 24–28; 1977; Agier 1983; Brooks 1993; Hashim and Thorsen 2011). Furthermore, scholars monitoring the increasing diversification of rural livelihoods in the West African countryside have shown how new socio-economic demands are often met by combining mobile and sedentary lifestyles in old and novel ways (de Haan 1999; Rain 1999; Whitehead

2002; Ellis 2003). Commenting on the nomadic livelihood of the Fulbe in the Western Sahel, de Bruijn, van Dijk and van Dijk (2001: 72) draw, in this respect, an interesting parallel with Urry and other authors writing along similar lines:

Their hotel lounges and airports, to paraphrase Clifford, are local and regional markets or watering points for the livestock. They do not communicate by mobile phone or e-mail but through an immense network of kinsmen, acquaintances, hosts and traders who transmit messages in code.

In a similar vein, rather than on ultramodern systems of mobility, I focus on the bush (*gunne*) exploited not only through basic technologies but also through complex social arrangements that invoke and simultaneously sustain the travel-bush. Instead of airports and hotel lounges, attention is focused on families and age groups that distribute resources, people and activities across space. Protocols of conduct are sought not in international regulations and logistics but in specific predicaments and compartments thought to support men in their mobile livelihoods but the acquisition of which requires a degree of emplacement. As Clapperton Mavhunga (2014: 17–18, 25–27) has pointed out, analysing such socio-cultural arrangements does not simply add ‘social context’ and ‘culture’ to concepts of mobility primarily designed for advanced capitalist settings and high-tech transport technologies; it rather provides a starting point for contextualizing and rethinking them.

It is in this sense that building on the Soninke notion of *taaxu* or ‘sitting’ allows me to capture the twofold process of dwelling and becoming established in a relational field of (im)mobility. Following the dynamics of ‘sitting’ implies an analytical move from the question ‘Why do people stay?’ to the one ‘How do people stay?’. ‘Sitting’ is far more than the outcome of domestic decision-making that sorts people into travellers and stayers, as in a household economics model of migration (Stark and Bloom 1985). Much as emigrating involves laying one’s hands on finances, garnering moral support from relatives and proving one’s worth as a traveller prior to departure, so crafting a sedentary life involves plotting and navigating (Vigh 2006, 2009a) within a translocal and often rapidly shifting field of resources and scarcities, solidarities and frictions, obligations and entitlements. Staying put involves assuming both a social position and an active stance towards it (Reeves 2011). It means to be *put* in a place and a role that might not be of one’s making and choice within the hierarchies of gender, age and status that govern village and migrant life (cf. Cresswell 1996: 97ff). At the same time, while positions and relations associated with staying put may be normatively sanctioned, they are

fundamentally brought into being by reflective human action (Giddens 1984: 17). As an act of ‘actual permanence’, ‘sitting’ involves wielding a capacity ‘to stay’, in the obsolete sense of ‘to support, sustain, strengthen, comfort’ (*Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2014) movement and movers. ‘Sitting’ is therefore also a willed action which commands fortitude and responsibility, a transformative experience that shapes configurations of (im)mobility and the social positions therein. In short, a man is not born a ‘sitter’ or stayer – a farmer, householder, businessman or civic activist; he becomes one.

Viewing immobility as both position and process sheds greater light on the implications of the international politics of mobility for Sabi men. What will emerge in the course of this ethnography is that the legal and economic barriers to free movement do not simply prevent outmigration; they also affect the relational field of (im)mobility, in particular by placing pressure on the capacity of the village to accommodate an increasing number of people as stayers.

‘Sitting’ contains no simple teleology: in spite of every effort to become established, Sabi men may, as it were, fail to stay put. They may only reach a precarious abode, or they may perceive their position not to be fully acknowledged or made viable by other social agents, including their migrant relatives. Mapping the field of (im)mobility therefore means identifying the exit points where ‘sitting’ becomes ‘just sitting’, and immobility is reduced to what I call bare immobility (Chapter 4). For the men living in Sabi, their anxieties over immobility and their desires for emigration can only be understood, I argue, in view of this spectre of failure that hovers over their sedentary lives. The ambition to emigrate is thus entangled with the failure to ‘sit’, as if these men were suspended between moving and staying.

The presence of devalued forms of ‘sitting’ alerts us to a final crucial point; namely, that not all stillness is subservient and functional to mobility. In an important corrective to the relational approach to (im)mobility, Bissell and Fuller (2010) have argued that immobility, as a dialectical referent of mobility, is but one modality of stillness. There are other modalities and valences of the still which escape and exceed their valorization by, in particular, a capitalist system. However, when stillness does not sustain movement or, worse, obstructs the search for ever greater speed and volumes of exchange in the current world system, it often becomes an ‘abomination and *uncommitment*’, a non-purposive and morally bankrupt element to be removed or re-mobilized (Bisser and Fuller 2010: 7, italics in the original). Bissell and Fuller thus invite us to pay heed to the ways in which the still becomes bridled and harnessed by a given system of valorization. As an example, they recall the passenger, a paradigmatic

figure of postmodernity, who in order to travel must be kept seated and docile by administering comfort, food and entertainment to him or her. Although I once again turn away from Eurocentric figures of late modernity, I build on Bissell and Fuller's insights to describe how sedentariness becomes immobility; that is, how settled lives become lucid and viable as acceptable ways of staying put in a context permeated by travelling and the possibility of living a mobile life. To ask how people stay is, therefore, to ask: how does stasis acquire value and purpose, or on the contrary, generate crisis and bewilderment? When is it a virtue and when is it a vice? Under what circumstances can one purposefully stay, and when is one instead othered and marginalized?

To begin answering these questions it is therefore necessary to analytically zoom out from immobility as such and to bring into focus stillness or permanence at large. Whereas agrarian institutions have been shaped into moorings of mobility by the political economy of migration, permanence in Sabi is 'neither reducible to [a] strategy of neo-capital governance, nor a productive ally in pursuit of accumulation' (Bissell and Fuller 2010: 10). There are clearly more men in Sabi than would actually be needed to hold the fort, as it were; and yet, while many of them palpably sense the spectre of failure, fewer than expected fall irrevocably into its abyss. A more nuanced understanding of how value is accrued to 'sitting' requires an appreciation of rural dwelling in its own right and how migration emerges from it. In other words, it involves contemplating for a moment the possibility that migration does not arrive in Sabi as a global force that creates new relationalities of (im)mobility, but rather emanates from it as the village seeks to reproduce and extend its agrarian social order in space and in time.

The Onus of Rural Permanence

But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*

In her study of the island of Gawa in the Melanesian Massim, Nancy Munn (1986) has employed the term 'spatiotemporal extension' to describe a process of value production and preservation in which the here and now of the island is transcended in both spatial and temporal terms. Gawa islanders engage in meaningful acts and exchanges, like the famous *kula* ring, that create social relations beyond the perimeters of the island and

in view of a near or distant future, thus enabling people to spread their fame and, collectively, to maintain the viability of the island community over time. Drawing on Munn's insights, Julie Chu (2010) has described migration in the Fuzhou countryside (China) as a form of spatiotemporal extension whereby the ongoing appeal of international travel, in spite of the hazards the villagers incur along the route, stems from their desire to inhabit Chinese, rather than foreign, modernity. In Fuzhou, migration is a technique of emplacement most visible in the high-rise houses built in the village by migrants, with architectural features reminiscent of metropolitan China.

In a similar vein, I view Soninke migration as a mode of spatiotemporal creation and extension of value that turns the bush into the travel-bush. Certainly, the growing economic insecurity heralded by structural adjustment, combined with ecological uncertainty, have played an enormous role in emigration from Sabi; but the pressure to acquire and redistribute wages and profits earned away from the village also stems from well-worn strategies to produce durable forms of social value whose meaning is essentially place-bound (Buggenhagen 2012; cf. Berry 1993). Far from solely being the product of dispossession (Cross 2013), economic emigration among Soninke men has been fuelled, as noted, by a long-standing preoccupation with autonomy and prestige in the village community (Manchuelle 1989; cf. Iliffe 2005). The housing frenzy so noticeable in Soninke villages demarcates, in this respect, one of the main arenas in which, over the past few decades, this race for big-manship has taken place (cf. Melly 2010). Moreover, migrants have extended the village in the sense that its social hierarchies and solidarities have often served as blueprints for organizing diasporic and transnational life in immigrant settings (Quiminal 1991; Timera 1996).

Like other dynamics of migration, immobility must be seen as an element of this broader process of emplacement through spatiotemporal extension, or what I prefer to call permanence. I use the term permanence to evoke both spatial fixity (staying) and temporal continuity, together with a sense of preservation. In fact, whereas in Chu's ethnography migration is a way of projecting the village community into an urban, infrastructural cosmopolitanism and thus shedding the peasant past in which many Chinese are loath to remain stuck, Sabi villagers are committed to reproducing the agrarian institutions, sociality and values that make life and outmigration meaningful and acceptable. There is no denying that migrants' mansions dovetail with a modernist vision of infrastructural progress and rural development. On the other hand, as in other regional settings, the inhabitants of Sabi, or Sabinko, are concerned with balancing the pressure to change and to vie for heroic affirmation with a

search for stability and cohesion, mainly achieved through, as it were, the stilling of social values and norms (Bird and Kendall 1980; Wooten 2009; Kea 2010, 2013). By building big houses, migrants do not simply make a name for themselves and leave non-migrant men in the shade; theirs are also ‘sociological investments’, as George Balandier (1961: 19) would call them: investments that both accrue status to the investor and contribute to legitimizing and reproducing the social relations and institutions on which fame is based. To put it in plain words: buildings are not built in just any place, but in family compounds and for household members; they are collective properties underscoring the communal ethos pervading domestic units, express loyalty to those left behind and embody the willingness to keep following ‘our fathers’ path’. Consequently, migrants’ ties and investments have underlined the value of sedentary activities and of an agrarian identity. In many ways, emigration has allowed rural Soninke not only to offset a declining agricultural production, but also to continue to stay in their villages and be farmers.

In Sabi, villagers are not solely under a ‘customary imperative’ to face up to the challenges of rural life by stubbornly sticking to their peasant tradition (Davidson 2009). Rural permanence has instead become a necessity because, whether for survival or for fame, by mediating incorporation in regional and international circuits of labour and capital (cf. Bolt 2013), it has eventually bound people to the bush. John Chalcraft (2008) has argued that continual (labour) migration does not necessarily follow a design made by the dominant classes (the capitalists), nor does it merely stem from exploitation, nor from an alignment of migrant communities with the values and subjectivities promoted by capitalism; it can rather be the unintended consequence of participation in labour markets. Following Weber (see epigraph), Chalcraft has suggested that as people actively seek to reproduce their values and codes of honour through instrumental and temporary participation in capitalist markets, they progressively become caged in its mechanisms in order to keep producing social and personal progress, thus having to continue migrating even when the conditions at their destination are no longer favourable. With regard to Sabi, the declining rural economy has further entrenched villagers in a system of externalized reproduction, whereby producing subsistence and prosperity has meant relying to an unprecedented degree on global markets and especially on labour migration to the West. Insofar as villagers attribute their capacity to foster mobility to continual rural permanence, however, it is not only the pressure to emigrate that persists in spite of adverse policies of international mobility; it is also the importance of catering to the agrarian foundations of village and diasporic sociality, notwithstanding a barely sustainable rural economy.

At the same time, by becoming wedded to capital's expanded reproduction, rural permanence has been loaded with tension and ambivalence. The staking out of social reproduction to domains which villagers do not control exposes them to the whims of global markets as well as to the risk of becoming victims of their own success. At least two critical factors of destabilization will surface throughout this ethnography. Firstly, the 'price' of fame in Sabi is the thrust of money in social exchanges and as a measure of masculine potency, which compels men to acquire and distribute cash by selling either goods or their labour while bringing them face to face with the reality of a largely demonetized agriculture (esp. Chapters 3 and 4). The second factor is the emergence of alternative modes of emplacement, the most pervasive form of which is found in the urban areas along the Atlantic coast of the Gambia as a showcase of migrant investments and success and, worse still, as a new home for a small but influential pool of wealthy returnees who have transferred to the city the social and cultural functions normally fulfilled by the village (esp. Chapters 2 and 5). While simultaneous emplacements can and do exist, today Sabi finds itself in the delicate position of extending its social and moral order in an attempt not only to aggrandize itself but also to stem this centrifugal tendency and to reinstate its primacy as the pulsing heart of the diaspora (cf. Whitehouse 2012a).

It is in the light of these contrasting forces and experiences that I delineate rural permanence as an onus. On the one hand, the Sabinko are under an injunction to honour presence and continuity by 'sitting'. 'Not everybody can leave', they maintain; some must forego their ambitions of mobility in the name of a collective effort to maintain the village as a social and moral community and 'to refill the river' of the patrilineage. On the other hand, the material bases and the shifting geo-social aspirations of permanence cast doubt on the viability of rural dwelling in the long run. The onus of permanence can thus be lived as a burden, an invisible cage, a sacrifice matched by no guarantee of reward.

By bearing the onus of 'sitting', young men explore the possibilities and limits of agrarian presents and futures, the value system that both creates and disrupts spatial and temporal permanence in Sabi. More than other dwellers in Sabi, male youths and young adults are subject to contrasting expectations, from becoming mobile, productive and money-worthy to remaining put, assuming collective responsibilities and expressing maturity in ways other than by acquiring wealth. I use the lens of gender analysis to bring into view how the benefit and burden of permanence emerge through different ideals, practices and experiences of masculinity (Miescher and Lindsay 2003), and how, through 'sitting', young

men respond to the pressures to inhabit such predicaments of the self (cf. Mahmood 2005).

Furthermore, by introducing age into the analytical scope, I monitor the different stages at which permanence becomes an onus in men's life-course. From childhood to eldership, men come to terms with different demands of emplacement, but it is perhaps when they approach adulthood that permanence and its discontents become especially salient.¹⁴ This is when young men marry and progressively assume family roles and collective responsibilities, which in turn increase the pressure on them to become established either at home or away. In this study, I thus especially foreground the trajectories of men entering maturity, covering an age range between the mid twenties and the late thirties, or even later. It is however important to note that in Sabi, as in the rest of Africa, age is generally defined in social rather than biological terms (Durham 2000: 116–17). In Sabi, the meaning of youth, and hence of maturity, is indeed negotiated at the crossroads between local hierarchies of seniority, state policies, international civil society initiatives and global youth cultures (Chapters 4 and 6). Since aging and age relations both structure agrarian sociality and serve the villagers as a metaphor for linking past to future, focusing on the fraught process of becoming a mature, sedentary man reveals the expectations and reinventions of rural permanence.

This book is, in other words, about subjects enlisted for the regeneration of the social order (cf. Cole and Durham 2007: 17–18). The 1990s, a period of turbulent and at times violent transformations in which young Africans have occupied centre stage, has prompted scholars to highlight the role of youth as either makers or breakers of the social order (Honwana and De Boeck 2005). Besides looking at young soldiers, vigilantes and pro-democracy activists, scholarly work has mostly focused on *urban* youth and their use of global imaginaries and alternative societal models to address a socio-existential impasse caused by failing 'traditional' as well as 'modern' paths to emancipation to which postcolonial history had consigned them (e.g., Weiss 2009; Mains 2011; Newell 2012; Janson 2013). By focusing on youth and young adults for whom agrarian life and extended families are still important (Chauveau 2005), the line of inquiry I pursue in this book goes partly against the tide of this literature.¹⁵ Rather than viewing youth as bearers of new patterns of 'consumption, leisure activities, and stylized resistance', I frame the inquiry in terms of conformity: 'why [and how] do so many young people strive to conform to the expectations and promises of one or another of various interlocutors...?' (Amit and Dyck 2012: 10), where families and fellow villagers feature as the main interlocutors. This is not to deny the importance of novel imaginaries and avenues to manhood which, as will

be shown, constitute important resources for reimagining the viability of ‘sitting’ vis-à-vis a wider horizon of life possibilities. But in lieu of rupture, or even anomie, young men in Sabi foster change in ‘the very act of consolidating tradition’ (Barber 2007: 26; cf. Galvan 2004; Wooten 2009: 17–18; Gomez-Perez and LeBlanc 2012). Youths at the doorstep of manhood are arguably less concerned than younger men with the clothes they wear and the music they listen to; in the absence of desirable exit strategies from the impasse, they craft their lives by complying with expectations of permanence and trying to negotiate their position within bounds which they thus help to reproduce.

On Bush-bound Ethnography

Documenting the trajectories of men who ‘sit’ in Sabi certainly confers a ‘vintage’ outlook on this ethnography (Ciavolella 2010: 27). Themes so dear to early ethnographers of Africa – kinship, age groups, male authority, etc. – feature prominently in the pages that follow. Nonetheless, by no means does this signal a return to stable structures and functions, nor a search for equilibriums, nor even less an attempt to salvage a disappearing peasant culture. On the contrary, studying permanence holds up, to paraphrase Sayad (1999), a mirror to society, making it possible for us – scholars, observers and, most importantly, West Africans – to see the modalities of change and continuity in the savannah, complete with their dysfunctions, contradictions and conflicts. While reiterating the importance of looking at the global from an out-of-the-way village (Piot 1999), Charles Piot (2010: 16) advocates a change in perspective and attentiveness to new ethnographic objects and sites in order to capture West Africa’s post-Cold-War political culture in which ‘tradition is set aside’ and ‘futures are replacing a past’. Although I endorse and admire Piot’s project, this book clearly shows that village ethnography can still be an analytical conduit to larger transformations of West Africa in the wider world. Sabi is a very small place in a very small country, but one that has definitely been *in* the world (Wright 2004). As noted, reflected in the mirror held up to Sabi are the powerful forces restructuring ‘the world out there’ in late modernity, the way it is both open and closed, both travelled by and yet moved further away from West African citizens.

In this respect, ‘sitting’ has also been a powerful methodological strategy to capture the changing realities of the West African peasantry. Taking place over an aggregate period of seventeen months in 2006–8 and in 2012, the fieldwork for this book required undertaking an apprenticeship in Sabi’s life-world. As a man of around thirty years of age at the

beginning of my stay, I was encouraged to mingle with men in my age group. Becoming acquainted with my peers entailed, however, more than just understanding where they wanted to travel to and why and following them in daily life, including when they went to the Atlantic coast during the dry season to work and trade; I also had to know where they came from, socially and geographically. To be able to contextualize my interlocutors' life trajectories, I had to acquire and exchange knowledge of their kinship and domestic background. I therefore decided to conduct an oral historiography of the village and its families, and then to work with colonial sources to supplement the interviews.

In Sabi, participating in the everyday life of young men meant going to the fields with them and acquiring calloused hands, as a gesture towards becoming more 'like them'. It meant becoming a member of age groups, helping in their activities. Assisted by a handful of young men in their thirties, I spent much time with their friends and other age mates of theirs, engaging in petty transactions and taking part in the long tea-drinking sessions at youth gatherings. Although these were events with little apparent informative value, which wasted a lot of time and where taking out the field book or the tape recorder was not always appropriate, they nonetheless led me to an experiential understanding of their everyday village realities. Without such involvement, I would have hardly come to appreciate the significance and complexity of 'sitting'.

Overview of the Book

By following the sedentary lives of young men in Sabi, this ethnography analyses the social construction and ambivalent experience of rural permanence. The chapters broadly proceed along the age scale from boyhood to manhood, and from individual to collective forms of 'sitting': settling in a village, farming and rural dwelling, generating income, being unemployed and static, heading a household and participating in age groups. Chapter 1 traces the history of Sabi from its foundation at the beginning of the twentieth century through to the present, illustrating continuities and discontinuities in the patterns of migration and sedentariness. Immobility as known today to Sabi's young men stems from the progressive decoupling of agricultural and migrant livelihoods since the late 1960s. Whereas the Sabinko previously combined trade and labour migration with agriculture, momentous emigration and the decline of the rural economy have driven a wedge between travellers and farmers, paving the way for rising costs and restrictive policies of international

migration to exacerbate the duality between mobility and immobility that characterizes the current generations of Sabi men.

Having delineated the field of (im)mobility in contemporary Sabi, Chapters 2 to 4 subsequently explore different experiences of 'sitting' in young men's attempts to earn a living. Chapter 2 disputes analytical dichotomies between migration and sedentariness by analysing how young men prepare for *hustling*, as migration is called. Far from being solely a site of botanical growth, the bush is viewed by the Sabinko as a terrain for the physical, social and moral maturation of individuals. Through farming, boys are turned into hard-working, resilient and compassionate men, able to endure life and work in the travel-bush. The agrarian virtues of masculinity are thought to be adaptable to migrant work, especially to unskilled occupations in the West, a rationale shared by the migrants who foster their children to rural families for these to 'sit'-dwell in the life-world of Sabi peasants. Having cultivated crops and virtues, during the dry season young men head for the cities in order to look for money as labourers and petty traders. Whereas seasonal rural-urban circulation further illustrates the interplay between mobility and immobility, Chapter 3 shows that many of these young men experience it as a form of spurious rather than proper *terende* or travel. Unable to make significant progress with the money they make through working in the city and farming in Sabi, young men try to exit the loop of circular migration by finding support from relatives to either migrate abroad or become established as businessmen at home. Through the case study of two friends, the chapter describes the twists and turns that the quest of money and support entails, eventually leading young men to reconsider 'sitting' in Sabi instead of migrating.

While they are prone to *hustling*, however, widespread youth unemployment in the Gambia forces many young men to spend large parts of their days 'just sitting' and waiting for better times to come. Chapter 4 describes this condition of inactivity and inertia as bare immobility, a most abject form of being and sociality, stripped of the qualities associated with more valuable forms of immobility. Bare immobility translates a cultural kin-aesthesia of 'just sitting', as young men experience, through their stilled bodies, the inability to remain peasants. In response to this impasse of personal life and social reproduction, young men resort to temporal and moral strategies. Hardship is framed within a theological discourse that commends patience as an Islamic virtue and envisages the possibility of change, thus casting permanence in the Gambia in a more positive light.

However, patience does not necessarily reward young men with remunerative off-farm occupations. The last two chapters of the book focus on respectable modes of 'sitting' that are based on assuming positions of

responsibility. Chapter 5 describes young adults who become household heads in migrant families. As some men in the household migrate for work and trade, they entrust the well-being of the household to those who stay behind, thus making the domestic unit a vital mooring of mobility. In addition to filling and managing the granaries, 'sitting at home' involves social work to maintain domestic conviviality and relatedness. A complex system of interdependencies link migrants and stayers, but in a context where migrants build homes in the city and multiple claims are made on redistribution from abroad, domestic authority does not simply stem from holding office. Young household heads find themselves in the difficult position of having to ensure cooperation between householders and having to prevent conflicts from escalating into schisms and the diversion of resources.

Chapter 6 shows that young men defend the role of the village as the cultural centre of the diaspora not only by resisting change but also by directing it. In a surge of civic activism, in the second half of the 2000s, Sabi youth became more vocal in community affairs. They revitalized the withering institution of age groups, and by responding creatively to different discourses on youth empowerment and active citizenship promoted by state and non-state actors, including hometown associations, they advocated civil change and tried to stem the rising ceremonial costs in life-cycle rituals. The chapter chronicles the events that animated this phase of age politics in the village, by discussing the role of age groups in framing the position of sedentary young men as social cadets in society, and consequently the possibilities of transforming the very rules by which maturity is achieved and expressed.

Finally, the epilogue returns to the question of stillness in a world allegedly on the move. It weaves together the threads of immobility in Sabi, in an attempt to understand what it means to continue staying on the land in twenty-first century West Africa. In addition to contributing thoughts on the study of human mobility by elaborating on the complex nature of 'sitting', the epilogue thus concludes with a reflection on temporality, whereby the experience of young men who bear the onus of reproducing a settled life serves as a reflection on how agrarian societies in West Africa face up to the many challenges of the future.

A Brief Note on the Gambia

Its size (the smallest country in continental Africa), stable political situation and relative marginality in the world economy mean that the Republic of The Gambia is seldom seen in the international headlines.

Indeed, on communicating my place of ethnographic research, I sometimes receive responses like: ‘Pardon, did you say Zambia?’ Before I present my ethnographic material, therefore, I feel it may be useful to outline briefly the main features of the country.

The Gambia would almost be an enclave of Senegal, were it not for the Atlantic coast. It is basically made up of narrow strips of land on each bank of the Gambia River for about 460 km from the river mouth to the eastern border. The climate is tropical and marked by a wet season (June–October) and a dry season (November–May). The country is mostly flat with only the gentle slopes of the laterite hills rising at some distance from the riverbanks. The environment becomes drier as one moves from the Atlantic coast to the Upper River, where the average rainfall is roughly 850–900 mm per annum. Sparse baobabs and other large, tall trees stand out in the savannah panorama, which is covered mostly by cultivated fields or low scrub vegetation and bushy areas left to grow back after many years of farming. Most villages are located within walking distance of the Gambia River or its tributaries – year round or seasonal streams. During the rainy season, streams swell and form swamps or small lakes, which may last for some of the dry months. Along the banks of the streams or on flood-recession swampland, more flourishing vegetation appears, and inhabitants take advantage of the availability of water and wetlands to grow orchards of mango, palm and papaya trees, as well as horticultural gardens.

The Gambia River has been one of the most important commercial routes in West Africa. During the Atlantic slave trade, European slavers would navigate the river throughout the year to meet African Muslim traders (the *juula*) supplying slaves and goods from the interior. With the demise of the slave trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, trade continued in other goods and the valley eventually became a groundnut exporting area. The Gambia has continued to export groundnuts up to the present, although commercial agriculture has suffered from climatic and marketing constraints over the last four decades.

Before colonization, the north and south banks of the river were divided between a number of Mandinka kingdoms – an offshoot of the Mali Empire – which ruled the valley from the fourteenth century (Quinn 1972). Colonization found the Gambia River valley in turmoil, with Mandinka (pagan) rulers fighting against Islamic movements (the so-called ‘Soninke’–Marabouts wars), and the southern banks of the upper river valley changing to Fula rule in 1867. The 1889 Anglo-French agreement established the boundaries of contemporary Gambia. The Colony of The Gambia proper consisted of little more than two islands, St. Mary (Bathurst) at the mouth of the river, and MacCarthy in the central river

valley, whereas the rest of Gambia became a British Protectorate in 1894 (after 1901 in the Upper River). Colonial presence in the rural areas was scarce and budgetary resources were limited, especially in the first three decades of administration (Gailey 1964; Bellagamba 2000). Boosted by entrepreneurial Gambians, migrant farmers and European merchant capital, the colonial economy thrived on commercial groundnut cultivation (Swindell and Jeng 2006). After the Second World War, a series of constitutional changes paved the way for independence, which the Gambia achieved in 1965 under the leadership of Dawda Jawara, the colony's leading veterinary officer. His party – the PPP – was mainly made up of Mandinka people, though it soon afterwards absorbed other groups and patronized rural dignitaries across the country (Hughes and Perfect 2006). State patronage and tactical alliances allowed the Jawara regime to hold sway for thirty years and survive a coup in 1981. Gambian politics remained, however, a relatively plural democracy.

In 1994, four young soldiers turned a protest concerning a pay rise and mistreatment into a coup d'état, thereby toppling one of the longest-serving Presidents in Africa; Jawara fled the country (Wiseman 1996). Military uniforms provoked some anxiety among Gambians, but the bloodless overthrow bred hopes for change in a population plagued by economic hardship and that had grown disaffected with politicians. Two years later, elections turned the military junta into a civilian government, giving birth to the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) under former lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, a thirty-year-old man from the Jola ethnic minority. Reorienting the population has also involved a degree of authoritarian rule, with the suppression of civil liberties and freedom of the press (Saine 2009). Due to external constraints and internal fragmentation, the opposition has been defeated by Jammeh in all subsequent presidential elections until the time of writing. In the 2000s, Jammeh persistently concentrated decisional power in his hands. At the local level, however, the state still relies on local institutions and traditional forms of government, such as chiefs, dignitaries and elders (Bellagamba and Gaibazzi 2008).

According to international standards, the Gambia represents one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2012, the Human Development Index ranked it 165th out of 186 (UNDP 2013: Table 1). Development policies have historically focused on the urban areas, with the Upper River Region being one of the most marginalized areas in the country. In the past fifteen years, however, the APRC government has invested in infrastructural development in the rural areas too. The national economy is mainly based on agriculture, the re-export trade and the tourist industry (mainly along the Atlantic Coast). Accounting for about 60 per cent of

the active population, agriculture is the main employment sector (IMF 2009). Since the late 1960s, however, droughts and marketing problems have gravely affected the sector. Due to the country's economic woes in the context of neoliberal reforms, un(der)employment is severe, especially among the youth (Lahire, Johanson and Wilcox 2011).

The Gambia is generally characterized as a country of immigration, international emigrants being estimated to be only around 4 per cent of the population (de Haas 2008a). However, qualitative research and survey work suggest substantially higher emigration rates and widespread aspirations to emigrate, at least within the Soninke-speaking milieu (see Table 1.1). In contrast to neighbouring Senegal, the Gambia has not developed a fully fledged institutional apparatus to reach out to the expatriate nationals and favour their political inclusion,¹⁶ and migration-related issues feature much less frequently in the media.

Sabi is the fourth largest village (5,035 people) in the Upper River Region, the easternmost Local Government Area of the Republic of The Gambia. It is located in the Fuladu East District (in the Basse constituency) near the border with Senegal, on the main road connecting the regional capital Basse Santa Su (eleven thousand inhabitants, about 9 km away) and the Senegalese town of Vélingara (twenty-one thousand inhabitants, about 15 km away). According to the 2003 national census, the Upper River Region (URR) hosts the majority of the Gambian Soninke (known as Serahule in the Gambia), who constitute the largest ethnic group here (39 per cent), followed by the Mandinka (31 per cent) and the Fula (27 per cent) (Gambia Bureau of Statistics 2006). In contrast, the Soninke account for only 8 per cent of the overall Gambian population,¹⁷ comprising a recent and small community originating from Guinea Conakry (the Badagulanko) and settled mainly in the Dippakunda town of the Serekunda municipal area. Upcountry Soninke (the Kambianko), the protagonists of this book, have few relations with this minority of the Gambian Soninke population.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Luis Villoslada Soberón for introducing me to these verses.
2. For a chronicle of undocumented boat migration and ensuing governance interventions, see among others: Tall (2008), Willems (2008), Choplin (2010), Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2011), Streiff-Fenart and Kabwe-Segatti (2012) and Cross (2013).
3. Several studies in Africa conceptualize mobility as a widespread livelihood option to respond to uncertainty and opportunity, and even as a cultural fea-

- ture of certain groups (de Haan 1999; de Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001; Ellis 2003).
4. With regard to West Africa, see among others: Fouquet (2008), Schmitz (2008), Bordonaro (2009), Vigh (2009b), degli Uberti (2011), Graw and Schielke (2012) and Willems (2014).
 5. In Africa, colonial and postcolonial governments, as well as development organizations, have promoted various forms of sedentarization, particularly to manage nomad populations and emigration from the countryside (Randall and Giuffrida 2006; Bakewell 2008; Gary-Toukara 2008: ch. 6).
 6. As Amselle (1998: 18) has shown, colonial ethnological discourse has tended to classify Mande populations as ethnicities corresponding to archetypical social form and culture, and some of their taxonomies have gained social currency. Such considerations invite us to acknowledge the constructed nature of Soninke ethnicity (cf. Fabietti 1998), and especially warn us against assigning essential characteristics to this category, the significance of which has assumed highly ideological hues throughout history.
 7. The Soninke are known by a plethora of ethnonyms by other regional ethnic groups. ‘Serahule’ (from Wolof) is a common one in the Gambia, and was adopted (as ‘Serahuli’) by the colonial and then postcolonial administration (French writers often used ‘Saracolets’ or ‘Sarakolé’). Gambian Soninke are also used to referring to themselves as ‘Seranxulle’ or ‘Saranxulle’, the Soninke version of Serahule. In Gambian history the term ‘Soninke’ applied to precolonial pagan rulers. In this book I have chosen to follow the convention of the academic literature and adopt the term ‘Soninke’ to refer both to the language and to the ethnic group.
 8. I draw on Bourdieu’s (1985: 197) notion of social field here as ‘a multi-dimensional space of positions’ in which each position denote types of capital (economic, cultural, etc.) and orientations to act available to social actors; in the context of transnational migration the spatial dimension is crucial (Levitt and Schiller 2004). At the same time, I do not necessarily see fields in static terms or governed by clear-cut rules of the game (see Vigh 2009a; Chapter 3).
 9. It may be argued that the term ‘immobility’ misleadingly suggests an absolute condition of stasis. Although I use alternative terms such as ‘permanence’, ‘stillness’ and ‘staying put’ to frame the complexity of ‘sitting’, I believe that for comparative and theoretical purposes defining the scope of immobility in precise analytical terms is more useful than introducing new terminologies.
 10. There are nevertheless early studies of the impact of emigration on non-migrant population in Africa (see Richards 1939).
 11. Hannerz (1996) and Clifford (1997) also discuss the importance of hotels and airports as mobility hubs.
 12. The term ‘immobilities’, in the plural, may be used to encompass different modalities of immobility. Since I mainly deal with one type of immobility – namely immobility vis-à-vis international migration – I prefer to use the term in the singular form. That being said, I consider immobility inherently plural at the empirical level; I therefore qualify it each time according to the object of investigation.
 13. No attempt is made here to review the vast literature on mobility and migration in West Africa. Recent publications that specifically engage with the ‘mobility turn’ include: Schapendonk (2013), Boesen and Marfaing (2014) and Boesen, Marfaing and de Bruijn (2014).

14. 'Young man' literally translates as *maxanbaane* in Soninke. This term, however, applies usually to the very young, the 'boys' (late teenage, early twenties). *Lenmine* means child; *yugo* means both male and man; *xirise* means elder or senior. All such terms are semantically elastic depending on the situation (see Chapter 6).
15. This is not to build a dichotomy between rural and urban youth (see Chauveau 2005: 27); although Sabi is the primary location, most village young men also spend periods of time in the city (Chapter 3).
16. This is also due to the success of the opposition parties in rallying support in the diaspora, particularly in the United States. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only recently expanded so as to include 'Gambians Abroad'. The first consultative meeting with the 'Gambians Abroad' was held in January 2012 apparently as a sign of reconciliation between the diaspora and the regime. For some commentators, however, it led to more questions than answers (Jallow 2012).
17. Out of a population of about 1,360,681 in 2003, the main ethnicities were distributed as follows: 35 per cent Mandinka, 22 per cent Fula, 14 per cent Wolof, 11 per cent Jola (Gambia Bureau of Statistics 2006). The preliminary results of the 2013 census do not provide data for localities and ethnicities, but do confirm a sustained growth of the national population, now estimated at 1,882,450 (Gambia Bureau of Statistics 2013).