TROPES OF SOCIAL BECOMING ALONG A HISTORY OF CIRCULATION WITHIN WEST AFRICA AND FROM THERE TO LATIN AMERICA

Tropos de devir social ao longo de uma história de circulação na África ocidental e de lá para a América Latina

Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga [a] iD

Abstract. Since the turn of the 21st century, the circulation of people from West Africa in and out of the African continent has intensified, turning Latin America into an emergent destination and transit zone. Drawing both from scholarly works and fiction, this article reflects on tropes of social becoming within a history of West African human movement that precedes present day circulation. By tropes of social becoming, I mean narratives around people realizing aspirations, in which scholars, storytellers, literary persons, and the media bring it into existence. While some of the tropes this article addresses seem to stretch to pre-colonial times, others are the product of colonial rule, and yet others emerge in times of structural adjustment. These tropes offer an entry point to understanding how present circulations of Africans in West Africa and Latin America relate to continuity and change.

Keywords: social becoming; West African movement; adventure; Latin America.

Resumo. *Desde a virada do século XXI, a circulação de pessoas da África Ocidental dentro e fora do continente africano intensificou-se, transformando a América Latina num destino emergente e numa zona de trânsito. Extraído tanto de obras acadêmicas como de ficção, este artigo reflete sobre tropos de devir social dentro de uma história do movimento humano da África Ocidental que precede a circulação atual. Por tropos de devir social, refiro-me a narrativas em torno de pessoas que realizam aspirações, que estudiosos, contadores de histórias, pessoas literárias, e os meios de comunicação social trazem à existência. Enquanto alguns dos tropos que este artigo aborda parecem estender-se aos tempos pré-coloniais, outros são o produto do domínio colonial, e ainda outros emergem em tempos de ajustamento estrutural. Estes tropos oferecem um ponto de entrada para compreender como as circulações atuais de africanos na África Ocidental e na América Latina se relacionam com a continuidade e a mudança*

Palavras-chave: *devir social; mobilidade da África Ocidental; aventura; América Latina.*

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[a] Universidad de Antioquia. Medellín, Colombia.

> Well before the arrival of the Whites, personal ambition was already a strategic motor that threw the most daring onto the great roads: war, long-distance trade, religious travel to find a better life, to increase their experience and knowledge. Mobility and individualism are old traditions[1]!

Introduction

This article is the product of historical questions around human movement in West Africa, which emerged from two interconnected research projects. The first project started in 2009 conducting ethnography among West Africans with limited legal status waiting to leave the African continent in Dakar, Senegal. The second project, conducted in Quito, Ecuador, followed the roamings of a Nigerian friend whom I met in the first project. Through him, I was able to interact with a community of West Africans that settled in Quito or waited to travel by road to the United States. In these two projects, I followed the journeys of people with different nationalities, ethnicities, and religious beliefs. They hailed from both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Most of them were young, but some were older. Most of them were men, but there were women as well. Most traveled alone and were single or left their spouses and children at home. Different circumstances such as limited economic alternatives and persecution (gender based, political, religious, ethnic) encouraged them to leave, but they shared aspirations to find dignity, peace, and wealth, when they settled. It was hard to know where their journeys would end and if what looked like a destination would turn into a stop on the way to somewhere else. These segmented movements exceeded the conceptual lens of migration and its focus on departure or arrival, on rational choice motivations, on national borders and national identity.

As the epigraph to this article shows, there is a connection between moving geographically and socially, which in the West African case, I argue, relates to concocting plans for leaving, and to stubbornly insisting until they come to fruition. The epigraph also points to social becoming, to how people in West Africa have not merely moved escaping war and poverty. Other aims infused with a sense of adventure have nurtured a vocation for movement. By social becoming, I refer to culturally configured narratives around realizing one's aspirations. Social becoming is tied to a sense of fulfillment in life that often signifies a passage from childhood to adulthood. Yet, this concept does not have fixed and universal boundaries: it stresses the fact that the ways of achieving fulfillment are constantly "in movement" (Christiansen, Utas, Vigh, 2006). Social

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[1] The original reads: "*Déjà, bien avant l'arrivée des Blancs, l'ambition personnelle était un moteur stratégique qui jetait les plus téméraires sur les grands chemins : guerre, commerce à longue distance, voyage religieux pour trouver un sort meilleur, augmenter son expérience et ses connaissances. La mobilité, l'individualisme sont de vieilles traditions!*" (De Latour, 2001, p. 178).

becoming results from the intersection of forces such as war, pilgrimage, trade (of material goods, as well as people), and a wish to thrive (through wealth and peace). As these forces intersect, they produce tropes, abstractions that discourses from scholars, storytellers and the media bring into existence.

The purpose of this article is to trace tropes of social becoming that are present in the history of human movement in and out of West Africa. Ethnography is the point of departure of this article, and the tropes that my interlocutors identified with or evoked are key elements of contrast. However, the main material of analysis is not ethnographic[2]. Rather, the article turns to academic works on the topic (which are not abundant), and to fiction (both novels and cinema), where tropes of social becoming appear more forcefully.

To build an account of past and present movements and their iterations, this article begins retracing routes and tropes from precolonial times to independence. Within this timeframe, transatlantic slave trade inaugurates a period of exchange and connections between Africa and the Americas that is useful when thinking of the current circulations. A second moment of the article weighs up the effects of structural adjustment policies on paths of social becoming. Here, the imperial forces, that built a transatlantic system, seem to return to both hinder (through multiplying sites and forms of border control) and incite human movement towards the metropoles (through spreading aspirations largely based on consumption of global goods). The article closes by describing circulation through the Americas at the turn of the 21st century, focusing on people from West Africa. To some extent, these waves of movement escape neocolonial forces (structural asymmetries but also subtle forms of power) that aimed to control them.

Past Movements

The region of West Africa has a rich and polyvalent history of movement. Precolonial times were marked by fluid borders between empires and kingdoms. There were ancient exchanges between the Sahel and coastal areas, circulations between East and West along a fluvial axis that linked the Niger, Volta, Senegal and Gambia rivers. Pilgrimage and trade encouraged Africans to travel towards North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Beginning in the 15th century, the opening of the Atlantic for trade expanded this orbit of movement bringing Africans to Europe and the Americas as its main merchandise. Later, European occupation of the African hinterland caused borders between colonial territories to proliferate, yet dynamics around labor and taxation encouraged Africans to cross them. Independence is a moment of flourishing connections that drift from the metropoles to Africa itself, yet neocolonial exploitation, corruption, arbitrariness and terror (Mbembe, 2002) have given rise to present waves of movement out of the continent.

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[2]   For the ethnographic insights that triggered the idea of this article, see Echeverri (2015) and Echeverri and Acevedo (2018).
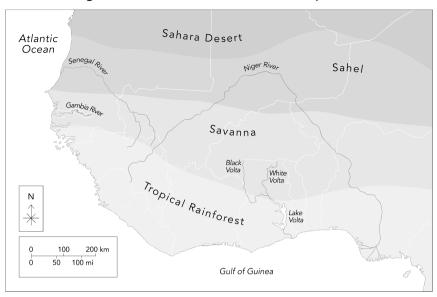
Figure 1 - Main West African rivers and ecosystems

Porous Precolonial Polities and Trans-Saharan Connections

Already before the 8th century, people and goods circulated between inland and coastal areas in West Africa, enabled by the complementarity between savanna, Sahel and rainforest ecosystems (Shaw, 1988, p. 469-470). Shea butter, yams, palm oil and palm nuts, kola nuts, cotton, cowry shells, gold, millet and fish were the objects that circulated in these exchanges. The Niger, the Senegal, the Gambia and the Volta rivers provided conduits for such exchanges (Barry, 2000).

Later on, beginning in the 8th century, the region became part of wider circuits. Trans-Saharan trade became the main source of exchange beyond the African continent until the 16th century, allowing the diffusion of Islam and the emergence of religious and economic networks encompassing the present territories of Senegal, Mali, Northern Ghana, Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria, Chad, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the articles traded in these exchanges were kola nuts, gold, copper, textiles, beads, bracelets, swords, horses and slaves (Shaw, 1988, p. 486). As an effect, Muslim states were founded south of the Sahara as early as the 11th century (Curtin, 1971).

Controlling this vast network of exchange contributed to the success of the Ghana, Mali, and Songhay empires. They protected Trans-Saharan trade and maintained porous borders that, until the 15th century, allowed waves of people from the Sahel and the savannah to move across the region, and concentrate around the main river valleys (Barry, 2000, p. 67).

Slave trade shaped patterns of West African mobility. It pinned people to restricted areas because it turned traveling into a dangerous pursuit – even between neighboring villages, and no matter how prestigious the traveler (Lefebvre, 2013). Yet to the extent that it implicates capturing people in one location and selling them in another far distant one, it intensified displacements across regions. It is important to note that under slavery, movement emerged as an asset of social becoming. In this context, the category "slave" was itself hierarchized, and enslaved subjects with a background of travel were able to attain more room to maneuver. This could potentially increase the value of an enslaved person and situate them among the upper ranks, e.g., as commercial agents (Lefebvre, 2013).
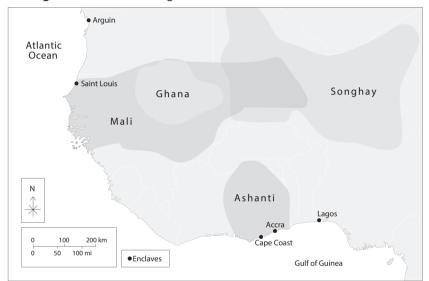
Figure 2 - Precolonial kingdoms and colonial enclaves in West Africa

Transatlantic Circuits

Beginning in the 15th century, the orientation of West African trade stopped being exclusively toward the North, and the Atlantic became a new space of transcontinental movement. Coastal enclaves such as Arguin, Saint Louis, Cape Coast and Accra emerged as sites to which transatlantic trade was brought and from which it was extracted (Barry, 2000, p. 67-68). From that moment on, capital started to concentrate on the coast, and some of these enclaves have become populous cities in present times. Portuguese, followed by Spaniards, Dutch, English and French, were pioneers in commercial exchanges creating a maritime axis of movement that followed the African coastline to the South reaching Cape Horn and opening a new route to the Indian Ocean.

Transatlantic slave trade triggered internal population movements within Africa and created economic and cultural links between Europe, Africa and the Americas. It not only brought Africans to the Americas but also to Europe from very early on. In Portugal and Spain, Africans did manual labor since the 15th century, and in the following century, they were established in London and different cities of France.

Four centuries of transatlantic slave trade (15th to 19th centuries) had disruptive effects within the African continent, affecting kinship relations, politics and economic life. This early form of global commerce soaked up human resources and located them out of Africa making the continent vulnerable to external powers. In addition, it caused the worlds on the two sides of the Atlantic to become entangled. Slavery required a captive labor force in permanent tension with flight (Boná, 2017). These two forces, captivity and flight, are crucial to think and connect past and present movements of Africans across the Atlantic.

In the Americas, since early in the 16th century, slave rebels escaped to forests and other remote areas and founded *quilombos* with different degrees of autonomy. Also, beginning in the 18th century, some individuals and families managed to buy freedom. Waves of return (willed and forced) from Europe and the Americas to Africa took place, which gave birth to colonial spaces like Sierra Leone and Liberia, and to categories of people like Agudás, descendants of slave traders and freed slaves from Brazil that arrived in present-day Togo, Benin and Nigeria during the 18th and 19th centuries (Izard, 2005; Guran, 2013).

Colonial Movements and Tropes

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, European occupation of the African hinterland transformed extant circuits of movement and trade. With the abolition of slavery, other ways of extracting labor force were established such as taxation, conscription in the colonial armies, labor migration and forced labor. This, in turn, recast extant circuits of movement. Colonial powers redrew and multiplied borders further turning coastal cities into hubs that concentrated capital and the hinterlands into reserves of cheap labor force (Barry, 2000, p. 73). This new economic and political configuration encouraged people to move within colonies and, at other times, across them (Cordell, Piché, 1996). For example, people from the present Burkina Faso traveled South to Cote D'Ivoire to work in cocoa farms within the French colonial space. However, when the differential of taxes was higher on the French side, people from the current Burkina Faso and Niger crossed the border into the British controlled Gold Coast (current Ghana).

Another example of intense flows within West Africa are the Peul[3] living in the Senegambia area. Before Europeans occupied inland territories, the kingdom

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[3] Peul, Fulbe or Fulani is a pastoralist ethnic group widely spread in West and Central Africa. Since early on, they spread across West and Central Africa and played a key role in the diffusion of Islam (Hill, 2009).

of Fouta Djallon extended north from the present territory of Guinea to the present territory of Senegal. French colonial rule drew an administrative border within this region. However, Peul movements toward Senegal continued as a labor force drawn to Senegal to work as *navetans* (Wolof term for rainy season laborer) in peanut plantations (Manchuelle, 1997), along with other ethnic groups like the Soninke[4].

Colonial rule intensified movements between West Africa and other African regions, and from Africa to Europe. It inaugurated the trope of the "African worker" with the Soninke as forerunners. During the last decades of the 19th century, the Soninke traveled to build the railroads in the Congo, and during World War I, they were massively hired as sailors in French harbors. They brought their relatives to France to join the labor force after that war, and by the second half of the 20th century they represented 85% of sub-Saharan Africans in France (Manchuelle, 1997, p. 215-218), a situation that would later change with the arrival of other ethnic groups. For a few decades after World War I, African immigrants to Europe were systematically associated with unskilled work. To succeed, they had to work for many years and maintain a careful balance between saving and spending (Malaquais, 2001, p. 14).

Another social becoming trope that emerged with colonial rule is the *Évolué*. In French colonies, it was someone who would ascend through the levels of formal Western education, and hence, between social and geographical hierarchies to assimilate to French culture and eventually gain access to government employment. The *Évolué* embodies the promise of civilization that justified colonial occupation, which cast education as a way of smoothly transiting from the hinterland to the colonial city, and ultimately from the colonies to the metropole. Colonial authorities treated *Évolués* in an ambiguous way: while during the 19th century they actively fostered them, by the eve of the 20th century, they were undermining them. During that period, colonial policies intensified the exploitation of primary resources, discouraged the flow of educated Africans to colonial capitals like Dakar (Nelson, 2007), and progressively restricted their arrival to Europe.

Yet another, more rebellious trope of social becoming that emerged under colonial rule derives from the "Sape"[5], a movement of young men ("Sapeurs") who challenged colonial domination through appropriating European apparel, taste and performance. According to Didier Gondola (1999), the origins of *Sape* can be traced to the first decade of the 20th century in colonial cities

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[4] The Soninke are a group with a vocation for trade and travel that dates back to precolonial times. According to Manchuelle, they were the first traders in West Africa (1997, p. 2). Like the Peul, the Soninke adopted Islam since very early on and contributed to its spread.

[5] It is an acronym for "Société d'Ambience et de Personnes Elegantes", and a French slang word for dressing.

like Brazzaville and Kinshasa when houseboys, encouraged by their European masters, started to use second hand European apparel and to imitate "civilized" manners. Eventually, a trend appears that defied Europeans through conspicuous consumption of brand-new apparel. In the following decades, fashion and musical genres like popo and cha-cha-cha that West Africans and other migrants brought, further encouraged this trend to take its own path. Congolese people traveled to Europe, and a diaspora of *Sapeurs* grew, for whom Paris turned into an imagined center of cosmopolitan production (Gondola, 1999). Sylvie Bredeloup points to the connection between *Sape* and adventure: a well-achieved *Sapeur* reaches Europe, spends time there and is able, after some years, to make a loud return (2013, p. 289).

Although *Sapeurs* are an early reference to adventure, it is among seasoned travelers like the Soninke that adventure appears nowadays as a culturally rooted ethics under the trope of the "Hustler". In the Gambia, the Soninke use this term to refer to someone who prepares for being a successful traveler through learning sedentary skills like hard work routines, and a morality of sharing and obedience to elders (Gaibazzi, 2013). The skills for going on adventure circulate between generations. As I will show below, my interlocutors identified with this trope, which they associated to boldly seeking to accomplish their goals.

The Pinnacle of Independence

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Atlantic, a cultural and political space (Gilroy, 2010) that had been growing in parallel to a transatlantic economy, built largely on enslavement, knew a moment of flourishing. Dreams and claims of emancipation and equality circulated between Africa, North America, and the Caribbean. African intellectuals and politicians of this period – a select group of *Évolués* – pursued studies abroad, built networks across the Atlantic and became the founding leaders of new African nations. Pan-Africanism, socialism and civil-rights were among the ideas Africans exchanged with descendants in the diaspora.

This flourishing lasted for a few decades, yet it deteriorated as the negative legacies of colonialism started to become visible. Independent African nations inherited an arbitrary territorial division between colonies that hampered their economic viability, and the influence of former metropoles persisted through neocolonial exploitation (Young, 2001, p. 240). At a local and everyday level, African nations inherited undemocratic forms of ruling largely based on physical punishment, corruption and arbitrariness, which accentuated after independence (Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 1996).

As early as the end of the 1960s, former metropoles imposed policies of structural adjustment on African nations that targeted agriculture, state infrastructures and local industries. African states had to reduce spending through privatizing state institutions; they eliminated subsidies, lifted taxes on importations

and foreign investments, and confided the building and maintenance of basic infrastructures to national and foreign private entrepreneurs. This intensified poverty, unemployment, and economic activities outside the purview of the state. If during its first decades, independence made Africans coalesce around ideas of nation building and Pan-Africanism, abuse of power and neoliberal policies progressively eroded these ideas to the point that, in the present, large and diverse numbers of people see themselves excluded from the national polities, such as peasants, the youth and certain ethnic and religious minorities. Discrimination, lack of economic opportunities and, in some cases, targeted physical violence trigger their exodus out of the continent.

Movement and tropes in fiction

Film and literature effectively picture vectors of movement and social becoming tropes before, during and after European occupation. The historical novel "Segú" is a remarkable example as it brings together movements of people, which occurred before and during colonial rule. Written by Maryse Condé (1998), this saga reconstructs three generations of the Traoré family. It starts at the beginning of the 19th century with Tiekoro Traoré, who leaves Segú seeking Islamic instruction in Timbuktou and Djenné. His brother Siga accompanies him in this journey, but ends up becoming a merchant in the Maghreb. Naba, a third brother is captured, enslaved and taken to Gorée and from there taken to work in the sugar plantations in Pernambuco, Brazil. There, Naba meets a wife and they have a son. He is judged and executed for rebelion, and after his death, his widow and son travel back to the West African coast to join a growing community of Agudás. Another of Tiekoro's brothers travels South from Segu and enrolls in the army of the Ashanti kingdom. The book ends in the wake of the 20th century, with another member of the Traoré family sojourning in England as part of Christian missionary instruction. These are some of the threads Condé weaves into a transgenerational story of human movement that depicts the pain of moving between cultures. Her characters relinquish a life in the compound and are compelled to embrace instead other cultures.

That estrangement is also present in Cheikh Amidou Kane's "The Ambiguous Adventure". This novel sharply shows the emotional toll of estrangement through the fool of the village (Kane, 2012). At some point in his life, this character travels to Europe, where he starts to obsess about the coldness of tiled city floors, and the impossibility of walking barefoot and feeling the ground. This unsettles him and makes him anxious. Eventually this character returns to the village, and an encounter, which was originally meant to be enlightening ends up producing a cultural shock that renders him mad.

While the adventure of the *Évolué* revolves around acquiring knowledge and culture of the dominant group, other trajectories can revolve around making

wealth to accomplish a passage to adulthood. Ancient circuits between the Sahel and the coast to trade goods, such as livestock and kola nuts, constituted a way to do this in West Africa. Young men often employed the yields from these journeys in their plans to marry, which entailed paying for a dowry upon returning home. Some of Jean Rouch's films like "Moi un noir" (1958) and "Jaguar" (1967) show how this culturally rooted practice transforms during the colonial period incorporating piecemeal work in colonial cities as another way of making wealth. Yet the virtue of such films is their ability to show the images of adventure that these journeys mobilize, such as daydreams of wild West heroes, luxury, and progress. It is possible to see common elements between these young men and *Sapeurs*, particularly because both aspire to reach Europe and when Rouch's characters arrive there, they engage in practices of conspicuous consumption similar to those of *Sapeurs*.

Jean Rouch's characters move swiftly, pull force from imagination, and constantly appeal to the side hustle, even in the midst of precarity. Their vitality contrasts with the feeling of suspension and disappointment in Ayi Kwei Armah's "The beautiful ones are not yet born" (1988). This novel describes the everyday imbued with stagnation of a railway's official. As he walks the streets of Accra to his job in the early morning, he reflects on the arrested hopes, "perennially doomed to disappointment," that permeated life less than a decade after Ghana's independence. In the following quote, this a nonymous official describes the operations of a financial institution before and after independence: "Yet the stories that were sometimes heard about it were not stories of something young and vigorous, but the same old stories of money changing hands, throats getting moistened, and palms getting greased" (Armah, 1988, p. 9-10).

From these characters, all connected in one way or another to adventure, the one that most resembles the situation that my interlocutors experience is Moki, the main character of "Bleu Blanc Rouge" (Mabanckou, 1998). After arriving to France and discovering hardship, disappointment, and suspension behind the bright depictions of his fellows, he is deported to the Congo and returns to Pointe Noire, but he does not seem to give up, obsessed as he is with the promise of fulfillment that Europe stands for. This persistence to cope with immobility resonates with that of my interlocutors, yet in present times routes and destinations are different. Unlike Moki, who took an airplane directly to Paris, my interlocutors need to make long loops before reaching the land borders of Europe or the United States. Since the 1990s, the externalization of borders causes their journeys to become more and more fragmented (Collyer, 2007), and they end up settling and waiting in different locations in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Social Becoming in Post-Adjustment Times

The processes of precarization that neoliberal reforms brought about, reframed fields of activity (like the stock market and Internet), and abilities (like entrepreneurship, performing wealth, and inclination to risk) as efficient and valued ways of realizing one's aspirations. Though these activities and skills seem to amplify earlier associations between mobility and adventure, in this new moment, the attempt to make sense of the movements of African people through the concept adventure has given rise to various debates.

Africanists have recently engaged with the theme of adventure in response to the widespread view that people in Africa do not travel to pursue aspirations, but rather, out of necessity and persecution. Today, some of the state and international institutions that enact mobility regimes at the national and global levels share this view. Individual ambitions, risk and other qualities that resonate with adventure have been excluded from their scope of view. With a sharp sense of irony, Ramon Sarró expresses this presumed incompatibility: "To say that Africans come to Europe 'for adventure' is not the same as saying that they come 'on vacation'"[6] (2009, p. 504).

Some scholars claim that adventure emerged with modernity in Europe during the 19th century and took root in Africa with colonialism and the growth of African cities during the second half of the 20th century (Bredeloup, 2013). On this view, adventure seems to be a very "modern" and very Western notion. However, its presence in judeo-christian and African mythologies, suggests that its genealogy is much older and its geographic origins are multiple (Sarró, 2009). As the previous sections of this article hint, adventure is rooted in African cultures. Throughout history, it appears in narratives of social becoming, where it is connected to an inclination to risk, willingness to dare, and dreams of elsewhere, which fuel desires for travel.

In ethnographic conversations, my English-speaking interlocutors evoked adventure when they defined themselves as Hustlers. They used this term to mean that they would resolutely take risks to better their social standing. Clifford, for example, a Ghanaian interlocutor in his late forties whom I met in Dakar, described a Hustler as someone who is persistent and willing to embrace uncertainty and adversity. Once I asked him about the term and his answer was this: "To my best of knowledge I can say, a Hustler is a person who is struggling, who is struggling to achieve something in life", a way of defining the term that younger interlocutors also used.

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[6] The full original quote reads: "*Conviene insistir que, contrariamente a lo que algunos críticos de mi texto podrán pensar, no estoy oponiendo aventura a 'necesidad,' y mucho menos a sufrimiento. Decir que los africanos vienen a Europa 'por aventura' no equivale a decir que vengan 'de vacaciones'*" (Sarró, 2009, p. 504).

Eclectic social thinker Georg Simmel conceptualizes adventure in a way that resonates with Clifford's definition of hustling, elaborating some elements and adding others. In one of his essays, Simmel points out that while adventure is an interruption in the continuity of life, something out of the ordinary, it relates to its core vital force (Simmel, 1971, p. 196). Simmel's view prompts us to think about the space and time coordinates of the experience of interruption, and to consider the way this indeterminacy is lived in the present, more than the past or the future. Adventure puts the ordinary between brackets and to that extent; it leans toward the world of dreams. Another aspect of Simmel's conceptualization that resonates with the movements of my interlocutors is persuasion. Simmel connects adventure with an attitude that conceives of fate as something knowable. The adventurer's "sleepwalking certainty" challenges non-adventurers' persuasion that fate is "unknown and unknowable" (Simmel, 1971, p. 193).

These attributes resonate, to a good extent, with the ethereal challenges of post-adjustment times. Until early post-independent times, the *Évolué* incarnated the "mythology of modernity", and the means to realize one's aspirations (Ndjio, 2008, p. 206). The *Évolué* is linked to ideas of civilization, to principles of certainty, rationality and fixity. In turn, social becoming in present times also requires a "sleepwalking certainty"; it inclines people toward risk, luck, and seizing of opportunity.

Feymen in Cameroon and Sakawa boys in Ghana are two post-adjustment tropes that fit these conditions, but they also rely on practices that double reality through strong immaterial components: fraud, witchcraft, and the Internet. These tropes do not depend on physical travel. However, as Dominique Malaquais (2001) affirms, locations abroad in which money abounds are sources from which they pull income, places they aspire to actually reach, and powerful images they employ to trick others. Feymen acquired renown during the 1980s and 1990s with the stunning international coups by master Donation Koagne. Feymen specialize in fake money, elaborate financial schemes, and travel-related fraud. They dupe all sorts of people, from African dignitaries, to Arabian sheiks, to ordinary citizens, including people on the move. They employ witchcraft in different ways: as rites of initiation to the trade, as a way of creating an allure of mystical power around them, and as a way of challenging inequality and claiming material power.

Ghanaian Sakawa boys share many traits with Feymen but they specialize in duping people through love schemes online. Wealth for Sakawa boys translates into expensive SUVs, brand apparel, expensive villas and beautiful girls. Sakawa boys acquired renown in 2009 through the film saga "Malam Issa kawa" by director Socrate Safo, in which the use of witchcraft to enhance material success is a central theme. The release of the film saga steered public outrage in Ghana because of the challenges to moral values that surround this activity. However, as

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong (2014) explains, Sakawa turned into a way of responding to the lack of horizons for young people in Ghanaian society.

Unlike the West Africans among which I conducted ethnography, Feymen and Sakawa boys move within the illegal realm and do not always seek prosperity through traveling abroad. However, there are some similarities: both are reactions to the practices of exclusion that neoliberal reforms brought about; a historically cultivated spirit of adventure motivates them; lastly, West Africans on the move sometimes turn to illegal transactions as a field of opportunities to continue their journeys.

Across the Atlantic

According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the Atlantic has been the "revolving door of major global flows over four centuries" (Trouillot, 2002, p. 845). In the Western World, it has also been at the center stage of economic, political and cultural exchanges that transatlantic slave trade sustained. Although it was abolished at the end of the 19th century, it continued in a clandestine way in countries like Brazil, during the first decades of the 20th century. Afterwards, it faded. The next wave of massive arrivals from Africa to the Americas is in present times.

Until the beginning of the 21st century, Europe and "Anglo-America" have exercised domain over the ocean and later, with the beginnings of commercial aviation, that control expanded to airspace, concentrating commercial routes and destinations in the North Atlantic. To fly between Africa and Latin America, people needed to stop in major air hubs in Europe and the United States, like London, Madrid, Paris, or New York. During this time, there were only a few airline routes, that connected Africa to South America, but they did not hold for long.

However, in the 21st century, horizons of travel for West Africans are diversifying. Routes have emerged, that lead to locations beyond the Atlantic, for example, to Asia; and within the Atlantic realm, to cities in Latin America (Minvielle, 2015). Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Quito have turned into major maritime and air hubs for West Africans. In the case of commercial aviation, in recent years, routes that connect Africa and South America without stopping in Europe have opened (for example, routes through Istanbul with Turkish Airlines or through Casablanca with Air Morocco).

What encouraged this change of horizons for people from West Africa? During the 1990s, economic downturn caused by neoliberal policies and civil war in different corners pushed people out of the African continent. Unlike Africa, Latin America, and especially countries like Chile, Argentina and Brazil lived a moment of economic prosperity; this attracted people on the move. In Brazil, the 2014 World Cup was a sign of economic prosperity. Many people from West Africa and other corners of the world traveled to Brazil both as spectators

and as labor force for the event's infrastructure; some of them ended up staying (Vargem, Malomalo, 2015, p. 12). One last factor that heavily influenced the arrival of West Africans to Latin America were multiplied visa requirements for entering the European Union and the United States as opposed to less strict ones for South American countries like Brazil or Ecuador. In the latter case, for a few years starting in 2007, waiving visa requirements for most nationalities, turned Quito into a prominent hub for travelers from the global South. This role accentuated with the economic crises in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. During the first decade of the 21st century, more African people moved through South America and sought to stay, often traveling alone, as I described at the beginning of the article. Many landed in Quito and traveled by land to North America. People from the Caribbean and Asia also joined them. Some had previously lived in South America and others came straight from their countries of origin.

These movements are recent and unsteady. What at some point might look like a destination, can turn into a stop; and what might seem a stop, can expand or even turn into a destination. Backgrounds, origins, and aspirations are very diverse. Over the years, the number of people from West Africa who cross the Atlantic grows and changes in terms of age, gender, family and nationality. These movements and routes are so recent that only few academic works and probably fewer films and novels tell their stories.

Conclusion

Analyzing the historiography concerned with African movement produced up until the 1970s, Jean Vansina (1992) found that historians dismissed movement as "accidental dislocations" and focused instead on the mores and history of sedentary groups that remained immobile. This attitude came from an aversion to movement that historians shared with colonial administrators. The latter perceived African's inclination to move as pervasive, random and backwards (Manchuelle, 1997).

The present article builds on this critique. It brought into view different movements of people and tropes of social becoming that partially overlap producing a complex palimpsest. For example, it retraced the precolonial and colonial routes that preceded present-day circulations of West Africans within the continent. My interlocutors who departed from places east of Liberia still use roads that follow the course of the major avenue for trans-Saharan trade, the Niger River to reach Dakar. This can also be observed in the railroad Bamako-Dakar, a colonial project that redrew preexistent routes.

This article also examined the ways in which colonial transatlantic trade set a precedent for 21st century waves of people from West Africa coming to Latin America. At both moments, labor force leaving Africa was exploited in the Americas. Although the forms of exploitation at stake remain incommensurable,

past tropes and movements inform the present and acquire shape through the tension between captivity and flight. Determination to do what it takes to find prosperity was common among my interlocutors in Quito, an attitude that resonates with flight and the trope of the Hustler. Yet sometimes, captivity is also present. At the outset of the 21st century, people from West Africa cross the Atlantic on their own will. At first, they did not converge toward a single destination. However, in the second decade, the United States began to attract a great portion of people. As they cross the borders of Latin American countries to reach this destination, some end up subjected to actors like smugglers who limit their autonomy.

As Cheikh Amidou Kane sharply pointed in his unsettling "Ambiguous Adventure," the movement of African people challenged technologies of population control as they could not be "checked by census, divided up, classified, labeled, conscripted, administrated" (Kane, 1972, p. 49). The present article also built on this critique, as it reflected on how colonial and neo-colonial powers have sought to control movement by creating physical obstacles through border controls, and by fostering movement through a narrow array of narratives for making aspirations intelligible. Yet, tropes like the *Sapeur* and the Hustler widen and transform the narrative scope. Neoliberal reforms replaced some of the values that colonial rule introduced. They fostered the digital world, entrepreneurship and inclination to risk. Feymen and Sakawa boys can be read as tropes that react to these transformations. They operate through fields and activities that double reality such as the Internet, scams, and the spirit realm. More recent tropes of social becoming, like those, emerging from present circulation throughout the Americas, are still in the making and will become more visible in the future.

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga, Antropólogo, Profesor asociado Departamento de Antropología Universidad de Antioquia. Email: jonathan.echeverri@udea.edu.co. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6776-9031.

Dossier editors

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