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Migration, identity and immobility 
in a Malian Soninke village

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Introduction

This chapter explores the local meaning of migration and experiences of immobility in a Soninke village in the Kayes region of Mali. In the village of Kounda, migration has for centuries been central to villagers’ livelihoods. Household heads have a long tradition of working as labour migrants in France and through a regular flow of remittances and communication they have retained strong bonds with their families in Kounda. Meanwhile, many of the young Soninke men living in Kounda are expressing a sense of ‘involuntary immobility’, aspiring to migrate, but unable to do so (cf. Carling 2002). This chapter examines the social structures and meanings that shape young Soninke men’s aspirations to migrate, and how their immobility affects their social interactions and social becoming, including their attempts to construct collective identities without migration.¹

While globalization has made it easier for most people to get insight into what is happening around the world, the possibilities for travelling and settling in other parts of the world are restricted to a minority of the global population (Bauman 1998; cf. Alpes this volume). Contemporary globalization contributes to creating migration aspirations in the global South, but also impedes international migration and, generally, the socio-economic mobility of people in the South. The abjection and immobility of the global South are an aspect of globalization which tends to be overlooked, not only in studies of migration but generally in the social sciences (cf. Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Ferguson 2006).

Experiences of abjection may be widespread in the global South, but involuntary immobility tends to be particularly felt in communities which have had a long tradition of labour migration to the global North, and where such migration has become embedded in society’s cultural values and meanings – sometimes referred to as ‘cultures of migration’ (Ali 2007; Kandel and Massey 2002; Cohen and Jónsson 2011; Carling 2002). Here, international migration is the norm and, usually for young men, a hegemonic ideal which puts them on the socially desired path
to manhood and independence. Being unable to migrate in this context is often considered a social and existential problem.

Migration is the distinguishing feature of Kounda, as well as many of the surrounding villages in the Kayes region, where large proportions of the local population have migrated and generally maintain ties to the region via various forms of transnational exchange. In this part of Mali, migration is inscribed into the landscape. Coming to Kounda, you drive along a tarmac road that connects the northern rural areas to the regional capital of Kayes. This is one of the few metalled main roads in the entire country and it is partly funded by the migrants in France. From this road, if you peek out of the heart-shaped windows of the rusty taxi that drives past the village, you can spot the big water tower as well as the four minarets of the grand mosque of Kounda. These were built entirely with funding from ‘les ressortisants’ – the migrants from the village. As such, they are the most significant monuments of the village, symbols of migration, which gives the village its raison d’être.

History of migration and change in Soninke society

In Mali, the Soninke people are popularly stereotyped as the country’s ‘ethnie migratrice’ – an ethnic group characterized by their culture of migration. There is a saying that ‘the Soninke have migration in their blood’. The Soninke sometimes refer to themselves as ‘commerçants’ (traders), since commerce is the economic activity with which they have been associated since the times of trans-Saharan trade. But since this occupation was always linked to migration, Soninke identity is inextricably associated with migration (cf. Whitehouse 2003, 19).

For nearly a millennium, people identifying themselves as Soninke have been settled in an area by the Senegal River near the south-western border of the Sahara desert, from where they initially conducted trading expeditions and fought wars, accumulating wealth and slaves whom they put to work on their farms. The beginnings of the modern migrations of the Soninke were linked to European commercial penetration in Africa in the 19th century. Already by the late 18th century, members of the Soninke aristocracy had started working as labour migrants, serving as indigenous sailors (laptots) for the French Navy on the Senegal River (Manchuelle 1997). In the mid-19th century, the Soninke also became involved in seasonal labour migration to peanut plantations in The Gambia (cf. Gaibazzi this volume) and, later, Senegal. This activity became known as the navetanat and was one of the most important migrations in the modern history of West Africa (Manchuelle
One of the reasons for this modern labour migration was the increasing need for money that was caused by colonial domination; many young Soninke men became navetans in order to raise the cash that their local economy could not generate (Kane and Lericollais 1975).

With the abolition of slavery in the early 20th century, former slaves gradually got involved in temporary migration as navetans and later they presented themselves for military recruitment in French West Africa. As veterans returning from the First World War they refused to live in the same dependence on their former masters. As former slaves turned into labour migrants, so did a growing number of young males of the Soninke nobility. By the 1920s, patriarchal authority in the Soninke homeland was increasingly contested (Manchuelle 1997). During slavery, the young men had not owned slaves of their own and, therefore, had possessed no independent means of accumulating wealth and power. When patriarchal family heads lost power over the family’s labour force (i.e. the slaves), they also lost their source of authority over the younger dependent males (Manchuelle 1989; Pollet and Winter 1971). This segment of society had for centuries been participants in seasonal migration, and when the slave trade ended they were ready to enter the West African labour market. Migration then in a sense became a declaration of independence, not just for former slaves, but for young males as well, who ensured their prestige and manhood by bringing back large sums of money that they presented as gifts to their families and clients, spent as bride wealth, invested in livestock, or used as capital to become traders (Manchuelle 1997).

With the completion of the Dakar-Bamako railway in 1923 the economic centre of Senegal moved entirely away from the Senegal River Valley into the peanut-producing regions, and commercial agriculture and river transport in the River Valley declined drastically (Manchuelle 1997). In the 1930s, Soninke migration lasted several continuous seasons or became permanent; flows shifted from rural-rural to rural-urban, and destinations covered a wider geographical area, including not only Mali and Senegal, but also the Ivory Coast, the Congos, and the ports of France. Former Soninke laptots were hired by French employers as sailors on international shipping lines and around 1930 many of these sailors started obtaining employment in the French port of Marseille.

After the Second World War, Soninke migration to France increased, as these unskilled labour migrants took part in post-war reconstruction. In 1960, this migration flow was spurred on significantly, both by the economic decline of the Soninke homeland and the need for manual labour in France. In 1960, France opened its borders to foreign labourers, which resulted in increased immigration, especially by
sub-Saharan Africans. The acute labour shortage in France resulted in a complete breakdown of official immigration control, and French companies ran their own recruitment drives abroad. Employment of migrants from former French West Africa remained legally unrestricted until 1963, and since the French companies wanted to avoid recruiting ‘illegal aliens’ they preferred West African workers. The availability of unskilled jobs, especially in construction and industries in France, was coupled with the creation of migrant worker hostels (foyers) in French cities. Here, the Soninke migrants lived – and still do today – in a more or less parallel society. Older Soninke migrants organized the arrival, housing and employment of new immigrants, introducing new employees to the French firms, which recruited along ethnic lines. This system of inter-ethnic solidarity and mutual help in the Soninke migrant community was advantageous to French employers, leaving them fewer social obligations than with French labourers (Kane and Lericollais 1975).

The efficient and well-established Soninke migrant networks and the French employers’ preference for these workers explain why, in 1968, the Soninke constituted 85% of sub-Saharan immigrants in France (Manchuelle 1997, 2). Since the late 1960s, the Soninke homeland has experienced several severe droughts, particularly in the periods 1969-1974 and 1983-1985. Since then, the typical Soninke household has not been able to grow enough food to support itself and the remittances that families receive from their migrant relatives have become indispensable to the local household economy (Findley 1994; Whitehouse 2003). By 1975, about one third of the active male population in the Soninke homeland had emigrated to France (Kane and Lericollais 1975, 177).

In 1974, the French government took measures to stop the arrival of new foreign workers (Chastanet 1992; Quiminal 1994). The restrictions on immigration undermined the networks which had facilitated the replacement of older migrants by younger migrants within the same Soninke family; it lengthened migrants’ stay abroad, and resulted in the development of family emigration with children and wives, which made return less likely (Chastanet 1992; Quiminal 1994). Illegal arrivals increased, and in 1976 the French State started to repatriate irregular immigrants, first by offering ‘assisted return’, which included an allowance and training for those who left voluntarily (Quiminal 1994). In recent times, more severe measures have been applied, such as arresting irregular immigrants, placing them on charter planes and sending them out of the country. Increased border controls since the 1990s, which have grown since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the policy of ‘selective immigration’ (immigration choisie) in France constitute further barriers to unskilled West African immigrants. The migratory system of the Soninke has therefore been
largely disrupted and migration to France has largely changed from a viable livelihood strategy into a clandestine business.

‘Stranger logic’ and the imperative of migration

With its past history of migration, it is safe to say that geographic mobility has been both a stabilizing and a productive force in Soninke society. Migration has therefore, for generations, been an inherent feature of life for people in this region. Historically, the Soninke have imported their labour force in the form of slaves, while they themselves have migrated to supplement local production. Even today, Soninke migrants from Kounda and elsewhere employ labourers to farm their lands in their absence. These labourers are themselves migrants, who, like the Soninke, have left their native villages to achieve social and economic mobility.

Several authors have pointed out the important and ambiguous role that ‘strangers’ have played in West African societies (Fortes 1975; Skinner 1963; Shack and Skinner 1979; Whitehouse 2007). Georg Simmel defined the stranger’s position as ambivalent, composed of certain measures of nearness and distance: “In spite of being inorganically appended to it, the stranger is yet an organic member of the group” (Simmel 1950 [1908], 408). According to Shack (1979), strangers in the Simmelian sense were marginal as well as integral elements of African social and political systems long before the beginning of colonial rule. In many African states, especially in West Africa, strangers as ‘liminaries’ often engaged in occupations disdained by the indigenous host societies in which they settled, temporarily or permanently.

In Kounda, strangers have an ambivalent position: They do not have the privileges and rights of locals; but this also means that strangers are not expected to adhere to the rules in the same way as locals, and this in itself becomes a privilege for the stranger. This is for example why foreigners in Kounda dominate local business, while the commercial activities of local entrepreneurs are impeded by an ethos of gift-giving. Virtually all the people who were earning money in the village were ‘foreigners’ who were not born and raised in the village. Of the thirty-four registered shopkeepers in Kounda, only five were native to the village. Apart from shopkeepers, almost all the bakers, the mechanics, the tailors, and the builders were foreign.

To understand this situation, one needs to look at the type of exchange relations that are practised amongst locals and strangers in Kounda. In Kounda, most villagers stand in a close personal relationship, and favours and gift-giving are prominent. In contrast to this generalized reciprocity and emphasis on giving, the common form
of exchange involved in commerce is payment, which is associated with immediate transaction and an impersonal contractual relationship between the partners exchanging (cf. Sahlins 1972). This type of exchange does not harmonize with the system of generalized reciprocity that defines local exchange relations in Kounda. Accepting payment from one’s kin is nearly taboo and, therefore, native villagers avoid conducting commerce in Kounda. Local Soninke informants held the common view that, ‘you cannot succeed in your father’s village’. In fact, making a local income was considered unappealing, even shameful, because it signified that you profited at the expense of your relatives.

Local Soninke traders in Kounda felt they could not refuse to give credit to their relatives because, ‘if relatives demand something from you, you are morally obliged to help’. But if the trader was a foreigner, the rules of balanced reciprocity came into force and at some point the creditor would demand repayment. But while their business was relatively profitable, foreigners in Kounda were marginalized from local infrastructure and decision-making. Affection and familiarity, more than wealth, determined whether the local Soninke villagers accepted a newcomer. Villagers who were not born and raised in Kounda were not considered part of local webs of solidarity and kinship.

According to my Soninke informants, this stranger logic that makes foreigners integral to yet marginalized from their host society applies not only to strangers within Kounda, but also to the Soninke themselves when they go abroad to work. When a Soninke man migrates, he himself becomes a stranger in another society and he adopts the ambivalent position that he associated with the strangers within his own society. As an immigrant, you become unfamiliar – something which my Soninke informants seemed acutely aware of. It should be noted here that since the fieldwork was not multi-sited, the focus of this analysis is on the perception of migration from the villagers’ perspective; I cannot elaborate on the actual extent to which Soninke migrants retain their ‘strangerhood’ in their host society. To the Soninke in Kounda, when a man migrates he does so in order to become a ‘stranger’. Moving to places where one has a strong social network does not constitute an ‘aventure’. On the contrary, the point of migrating is exactly to profit from one’s status as a stranger. Although the marginal position of the stranger may appear to be a negative factor, this is exactly what the aspiring Soninke migrant strives towards.

Abroad, the migrant is a stranger who has ‘no shame and no obligations’. This enables him to conduct the kind of economic activities that are not socially acceptable in his familiar, local society. My informants considered the hardship and low status associated with certain jobs easier to endure in a foreign environment where
people’s opinion did not matter as much as the profit one could make performing these jobs. The endurance of migrant labour is thus conceptualized as a necessary liminal phase in the lives of Soninke men. When leaving his familiar place, the Soninke migrant enters a place where he has ‘no social obligations’ and therefore, he is free to take part in commercial activities and accumulate wealth. On a symbolic level, the migrant who goes abroad exits the sphere of familiarity and affection, and enters one of interest.

The notions that informed the villagers’ ‘stranger logic’ were also invoked by the villagers to justify the presence of Soninke migrants in French society. This first of all meant that their only purpose as immigrants there was to earn money and later return to their place of origin. Aspiring migrants in Kounda emphasized the fact that they had no intentions of ‘bothering’ the French by staying there permanently. They just wanted to go there temporarily and later return to the village. Moreover, according to villagers’ stranger logic, France, like any society, needs strangers. Informants referred to the fact that immigrant workers helped to reconstruct France after the war and make it what it is today, and referred to the welcoming of guest workers in the 1960s; and especially the young men argued that there was a continued availability of unskilled jobs in service and construction. Informed by this logic, young men could not see why they should not be allowed to enter France: they needed to go there temporarily in order to generate what they could not obtain locally, and France needed its strangers and, therefore, the obvious thing to do would be to welcome the Soninke immigrants.

The local meaning of migration

The economy of the village of Kounda can be described as ‘assisted self-sufficiency’, as farming is complemented by migrants’ remittances (Quiminal 1991). The money migrants send to their relatives in Kounda is indispensable to the survival of most households in the village; migrant remittances cover half of the annual consumption of an average local household. Moreover, the communal projects funded by migrants have done much to develop the local infrastructure, including the digging of wells, construction of schools, a health clinic, town hall, a water tower and water canalization system, a communal system of electricity, and a local soccer stadium. The Malian government and NGOs are conspicuously absent in Kayes, where most development projects are partially or entirely funded by emigrants (Daum 1995; Gauvrit and Le Bahers 2004). Many of the villagers were resentful
of the State, which they felt had abandoned them. In Kayes, the migrants act as substitutes for the State.

The young men in Kounda wanted to follow the migrants’ example by financing projects in the village. As migrants, they wanted to ‘realiser quelques choses’, that is, achieve something in the village, by starting a project or constructing something. Generally, migrants’ communal projects in the village were not just white elephants; they had significantly increased the living standards and welfare of local villagers. Without their migrants’ money, the Kayes region would be as destitute as the rest of Mali, since the weak Malian State – one of the poorest countries in the world – has little capacity to make a difference for its rural inhabitants. In an analytical sense, the migrants in France could be considered Homerian heroes, who venture off to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their communities, as they accept the risks and hardships of migrant life. Migration is therefore related to a sense of moral responsibility towards the community where a young Soninke man grows up.

However, presiding over the means and the authority to define local development also endows migrants with significant local power. Migrants’ money transfers to Kounda were therefore perceived by some villagers as symbolic acts demonstrating the migrants’ wealth and power. Generally, the migrants preferred to determine themselves what they would finance. The division of responsibility was reflected in a local expression, where villagers said, “The migrants are the head, we are the arms”. This implied that the migrants would come up with the ideas and the financing, while the villagers supplied the necessary manual labour to carry out a project. This division of roles was not always beneficial. For example, although the villagers’ main priority remained the acute need for drinking water, the migrants were more interested in funding the construction of a new mosque. Migrants’ donations towards communal projects in Kounda thus contain the central paradox of gift-giving as both altruistic and interested (Levi-Strauss 1969; Bourdieu 1996; 1997; Sahlins 1972).

Villagers’ relations to the charitable migrants somewhat resembled a system of clientage. But even if some villagers saw migrants as sorts of dictators, who unilaterally determined local development, most villagers certainly benefitted economically from their position of dependency. Yet, as elderly informants pointed out, this dependency was not necessarily for ‘the greater good’ of the local society, especially in the current context of immobility. To the elderly men, migrants’ apparent disregard for the authority and self-determination of local villagers threatened to destabilize the power balance between the local community and migrants, giving migrants the upper hand in the management of village affairs. With increasing numbers of men
who are unable to migrate to France, Kounda’s symbolic status in the transnational exchange relations with migrants in France might change from that of an authoritarian elderly to a dependent minor. They will be alienated from local decision-making, which is relegated to the diaspora in France. Most of the young men in the village therefore maintained the hope of being able to emigrate, aspiring to attain this position of authority and becoming ‘community patrons’.

As a form of livelihood, migration is not just a matter of earning the daily bread, but relates broadly to the social construction of the ideal life (cf. Olwig and Sørensen 2002). Migration is considered to be central to the process of ‘social becoming’ of a young Soninke man, defined by Vigh as ‘a movement along an expected and desired life trajectory’ (Vigh 2006). In Kounda, migration has traditionally facilitated this process of social becoming and the village has constituted the centre around which the ideal life cycle of a Soninke man revolves. This ideal life trajectory can be illustrated with the following model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Adulthood</th>
<th>Old age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLACE</td>
<td>Village</td>
<td>Abroad</td>
<td>Village/Abroad</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
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Ideally, the oldest migrated son of a household is supposed to return to the village in old age and take over the position of household head from his father. In turn, the younger brothers in the village are then expected to leave on aventure, representing a new generation of migrant breadwinners to the local household. However, this system of replacement is disintegrating. A group of young men explained that their brothers in France were unable to return to the village, either because they had no money or because they were residing illegally in France: “Our brothers in Paris are so tired. They say we must come and replace them there; but we can’t go!” But despite their physical absence, migrants were conceived of as full members of the local family: Through their remittances, phone calls or visits, they maintained a social and economic presence, and by maintaining an active exchange relation with their family they remained members of it (cf. Olwig 1999). In the words of one villager, “The migrants complete us”.

In Kounda, migration is a socially sanctioned strategy, whereby a young man can detach himself from his family and become an independent, mature individual. Hence, to the Soninke villagers, being on aventure implies being on the path to adulthood, and migration can therefore be considered similar to a rite of passage.
for young men. Migrants residing in France overcome the liminal phase of youth as they ‘re-attach’ themselves to the local families in Kounda, making their presence felt through transnational bonds. Even if a Soninke migrant does not physically return to the village in his own life-time, the ideal life cycle may still be completed when the corpse of the dead migrant is transported from France back to the village.

Migration and, generally, mobility are integral to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in Kounda – the form of masculinity dominant in society, and which bestows power and privilege on men who espouse it (Morrell 1998, 607-608). In Kounda, hegemonic masculinity entails the freedom of mobility, and this is one of the distinguishing features between the two genders in the village. Soninke women are to a large extent fixed inside the household, while men are outside moving between the fields and other tasks, both within and beyond the village, and taking part in public life. Men who do not migrate and remain economically dependent on their kin are generally considered immature youngsters. Women expressed great contempt for non-migrants and referred to them by a derogatory term, _tenes_, which literally means ‘being stuck like glue, unable to move’. In the mid-1990s, two women from Kounda broadcast a song about the _Tenes_, denouncing non-migrants as parasites with nothing to offer their families and undesirable to women. By characterizing non-migrants as immature, cowardly, lazy and selfish, the song reproduced the conceptual link between migration and status as an adult male, and construed non-migration as an immoral choice. Today, _tenes_ has become a vernacular term denoting non-migrants, and its connotation is more joking than humiliating. The perception of non-migrants in the village has changed in the past ten years. When I asked women about their views on immobile men, they saw their situation as pitiful rather than immoral. Hence, non-migration is now conceptualized as an involuntary, forced condition. This however, does not make it more attractive.

**Being and becoming in the context of immobility**

The young men in Kounda apply various strategies to make meaning out of non-migration and to construct their identities without migration. On the one hand, they appear to be creating their own ‘spaces of freedom’ and trying to introduce new values by developing their own particular ‘youth culture’. Yet from another perspective, the activities of the youth seem to be mainly about imagining – imagining that one can afford the luxuries of a life with money, imagining a life in the city or abroad (on migration as an imaginary trajectory cf. chapters by de Boeck and Schielke this
volume). But experiencing such imaginary connectedness is not necessarily very fulfilling for these young villagers.

Schulz (2002) refers to urban Malian youth as a ‘generation-in-waiting’, observing that, ‘they wait not only for achieving a status of adulthood, but for parental support and for the state’s creation of the very conditions that would enable them to become full grown members of the social and political community’ (Schulz 2002, 806). Arguably, male youth in the village of Kounda also constitutes a ‘generation-in-waiting’ – some literally waiting to obtain a visa to go abroad, but also awaiting the passage to adulthood and economic security that was traditionally secured by migration. As these young men sit and wait, they socialize in groups that resemble traditional age sets.

Institutionalized age sets for adolescents (īre) have existed since pre-colonial times. They have always had their own quarters apart from their families, where the members would sleep. One of their main purposes, which is still relevant, was that the groups could be mobilized by the village chief for communal purposes, for example to dig a well, construct buildings or roads, or put out fires (Pollet and Winter 1971). The increasing migration to France since the 1960s probably reduced the significance of the īre. However, in the late ’80s, Kounda witnessed a revival of the īre and of youth culture. The first sign of this change was the introduction of a group (or grin) called ‘Mickey Black Paul’ in 1989. This date is not arbitrary, and was probably related to certain political events at the time: visa restrictions imposed by France in 1986 made it even more difficult for young Soninke men legally to pursue the path of migration; moreover, the political atmosphere in the wake of the transition to democracy in Mali in the early 1990s may have inspired village youth to contest the traditional authorities.

Mickey Black Paul was founded by young villagers who had spent time in urban milieus and who were inspired by the kind of male socializing known today all over Mali as the grin (cf. Schulz 2002). The grin refers to a group of male friends who meet regularly to socialize, often in a particular location, where they drink tea, listen to music, play cards, or discuss. The grin in Kounda is in many ways a re-invention of the īre. Right from its inception, the grin culture in Kounda was in opposition to the local authorities and older generations. Three of the founders described their introduction of the new practices in the conservative village:

In 1989 we put up a flag to announce the grin. There was the name [Mickey Black Paul] and messages written on it like, ‘all we want is peace’ and ‘foreigners and villagers are all equal’. The old complained that the
The grins that I observed would regularly throw parties and play music at night. On such occasions, young women frequently showed up and sneaked into one of the bedrooms with a grin member, to have a quick intimate moment. Most girls had a secret boyfriend, but these relationships became very complicated when the young girls were married, usually around the age of fourteen. The prominence of such intimate pre-marital relations was new to Kounda, and a modern discourse of romance set the youth apart from senior generations in the village. Young men’s rivalries over girlfriends often became violent and, moreover, an increasing number of young, unmarried girls had recently become pregnant.

The village chief was concerned about this situation, and as he took office in 2006 he therefore decided to ban all music in the village. The youth would normally organize to protest at such outrageous decisions by the chief; but the youth of Kounda were not mobilized. It was more friction than collaboration that marked the relations between the different grins in the village. While the youth generally blamed this tension on the negative influence of conservative villagers, some villagers saw the problem as due to boredom and a lack of cohesion. Towards the end of my fieldwork, a returned migrant in his thirties managed to mobilize the village youth and led a procession to the village chief, demanding the un-banning of music, referring to the law and democratic principles that overrode the chief’s decisions. This returned migrant was then elected the ‘chief of the youth’.

The grins had the capacity to provoke the necessary social transformation of youth into a consolidated social category with potential to develop agency. Here, young men practised their own version of youth culture and this set them apart from the surrounding local community. They often listened to hip hop and reggae music and the walls of their bedrooms were plastered with posters of Afro-American music and film stars. Some of the young men had nicknames that they had taken from
famous rap stars, such as 2Pac, Snoop Dogg or Puff Daddy, and at parties they often performed with innovative dance moves or self-composed rap music.

The space of the grin, the local youth parties, the practice of rap music and dance, the young men’s romances, and their appeals for democratic principles in the conservative village society are examples of what anthropologist Michael Barrett calls ‘spaces of freedom’: moments of freedom from the constraints of their elders, and places where young people can exercise certain types of agency that are at odds with, or lead to alternative versions of, personhood as understood by their elders (Barrett 2004, 32).

Yet, parallel to this portrayal of a brewing modern youth rebellion in Kounda, the local practice of youth culture might conversely be considered as an imaginary substitute for migration – a sort of ‘mental mobility’ towards the global horizon (see Graw & Schielke’s introduction to this volume). From this perspective, the young men’s involvement with Afro-American popular culture reflected their aspiration for community in an imagined world (cf. Appadurai 1996; Frederiksen 2002). Consumption, especially of products and styles related to urban life, was a prominent way in which young involuntarily immobile men took part in an imagined global community. The aspiration to consume above the local means was expressed in many ways, including a conspicuous form of consumption, where the display of consumer objects was valued just as much as the actual consumption of these objects.

Consumption may be an attempt to ‘hook on’ to the global community; but being part of an imagined community of global consumers is not necessarily the form of global connection these involuntarily immobile young men aspire to. In line with James Ferguson (2006), it could be argued that their ‘longing for goods’ signals a longing for membership of an imagined global community, where capital, people, goods and information flow freely and instantly across borders. As immobile villagers, they were cut off from the global community to which they aspired and their experience of globalization was confined to a local appropriation of urban and Western forms and practices (cf. Ferguson 2006). These cultural dimensions of globalization may not lead to the form of globalization that the young men most desire: to be unimpeded by international borders, to take advantage of the global economic market and, basically, to have the chance to create a livelihood that is not confined to a local subsistence life.

References


Notes
1 This chapter draws on my Master’s thesis (Jónsson 2007).
2 However, Manchuelle’s (1997) detailed historical research disputes many of the conventional assumptions regarding the link between colonialism and migration in West Africa, including the need to pay colonial taxes, which he claims was a far less significant impetus for migration than was the attraction of high wages and incomes, which provided a potential for social promotion within Soninke society (Manchuelle 1997, 91-92).
3 Villagers referred to them as *étrangers*, lit. foreigners – even if they originated from a neighbouring village.