FRONTIERS OF MOBILITY, LIMITS OF CITIZENSHIP: POLITICAL MEANINGS OF MOBILITY FOR SOME FULANI GROUPS IN MAURITANIA

This paper analyses the political meanings of mobility for some pastoral Fulani groups of south-east Mauritania. Anthropological literature has traditionally attached a "culture of mobility" to Fulani peoples because of their nomadic origins. Nevertheless, contemporary practices of mobility are not related to pastoral life any more. They rather correspond to a strategy for dealing with the state. For example, mobility could represent a form of rejection of political authorities (i.e. a refugees' escape from "ethnic cleansing" in 1989) or a tactic to bypass the state (i.e. urban-rural and transboundary mobility). But in some cases, national and international mobility of these marginal groups is extremely restricted. In this sense, their practices of mobility are linked to political logics of inclusion and exclusion from formal and substantial citizenship.

This paper discusses this topic in relation to some current crucial dynamics:

- the impact of political decentralisation and "glocal" ethnoscapes in producing ideologies and practices of neo-traditionalism;
- the creation of a "Transboundary region" in the Karakoro river basin between Mauritania and Mali, with the support of ECOWAS;
- the exclusion of the Mauritanian Fulani refugees in Mali from the plan of repatriation announced by the new "democratic" regime;
- and the exclusion of Fulani groups form transnational networks of solidarity in comparison to other neighbouring groups, such as the Soninke, that have historically gained from international migration.

Introduction

In the last decade, anthropological literature on Africa and elsewhere has paid particular attention to mobility. One of the reasons for that is the relevance that migration, especially towards Europe, has assumed in the public debate. Numbers of studies on contemporary forms of mobility have allowed a deep reflection on meanings and practices of transnational migration and networks (BAUBÖCK, 1995, 1998, 2006; GLICK-SCHILLER, 2005). One of the most important theoretical contributions of transnationalism studies is the analysis of the relationship between mobility and belonging, focusing in particular on logics of inclusion and exclusion to citizenship (ONG, 1999; HANSEN et STEPPUTAT, 2005;

ONG, 2006). With this paper, I will try to give a different point of view on transnationalism and translocality, that is their impact on those communities which are almost excluded from those transnational networks which are closely linked to social and political capitals on the local basis. Thus, these communities' immobility, rather than mobility, turns out to be the symptom of social and political marginalization.

The paper is partly based on ethnographic and historical evidence, which I collected during a 13 months fieldwork in Mauritania (CIAVOLELLA 2008). In particular, I studied the relationship of a pastoral Fulani group (the Fulaabe) with the State in the south centre region of the country, near the border with Mali. This group has nomadic origins and mobility has always been at the core of their cultural and political dynamics. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, their incorporation and than marginalisation into the Mauritanian state provoked a dramatic change in their practices of mobility, constraining these communities to increasing forms of immobility. Stemming from an analysis of FulaaBe's culture of mobility from an historical and emic point of view, this paper aims at studying cultural and political meanings of contemporary immobility for a group which is characterized, by definition, by a culture and an history of movement, displacement and migration.

Historical and emic perspective on FulaaBe Mobility

In recent years some scholars found it necessary to avoid considering contemporary migration towards Europe as an exceptional phenomenon for African societies, as Western medias can sometimes suggest. Mirjam de Bruijn for example (de BRUIJN et al., 2001), has demonstrated that mobility is not only a widespread practice in African societies over time, but that it also represents one of the most important element in building social relationships. Thus, for Hahn and Klute, the historical dimension of mobility and his relevance in African social and political dynamics even fostered the emergence of what they call "cultures of migration" (HAHN et KLUTE, 2007).

These considerations immediately suggest to me a reflection on what the example of the FulaaBe could bring to this debate about "old" or "new" forms of mobility. If we are talking about "cultures of mobility" it seems quite self-evident to take into consideration practices and meanings of mobility for a pastoral Fulani group whose history is widely shaped by transhumance, movements, displacements and migrations.

My first standpoint stems from the following idea: despite their pastoral and nomadic "cultures of mobility" which still endures in the emic way in which FulaaBe represent space and movement, contemporary practices and meanings of mobility but also of immobility have

dramatically changed in the context of a complete incorporation of these communities into the state. Before the 1980s, mobility was a successful strategy aiming at avoiding state integration and preserving political autonomy. Since then, mobility is rather a strategy for survival in a social and political context where the state control the mobility of people. This means that in the contemporary context, the limitation of these communities' mobility is intimately related to their social and political marginalization.

Anthropological literature on nomadic peoples in Africa has stressed the intimate relationship between mobility and economic activities, as transhumance is a necessary practice for pastoralists. However, in this paper I take into consideration the cases in which mobility represents, rather than a necessity dictated by pastoralism, a political resource in order to flee political and socio-economic disruption.

Historicizing ethnography is a difficult task in the case of a society, such as the Fulaabe, which has never produced any written document about its history, which has been spared by anthropological and historical analysis and which has always escaped from administrative control. If we cross oral history and colonial archives evidence, we can suggest that in the 19th century, they were scattered in the Senegalese Ferlo. At that time, this region constituted an African "frontier region", as Igor Kopytoff put it, where they could benefit from the « relative political vacuum at the peripheries of large polities or wedged between them » (KOPYTOFF 1987, p.28) (such as the Fuuta Tooro in the north, Bundu in the East, Fuladu in the South, Sine Saloum and wolof states in the West). At the beginning of the 20th century, they flew French occupation, regional political disruption, and ecologic crises. They directed themselves towards the right bank of the Senegal River valley in what was becoming the French territory of Mauritania. That is why in the 1940s, FulaaBe moved again to north-east and settled into what is now called the Karakoro basin, in the border region with the former French Sudan[1]. For the first decades of the XX century, Fulani could still protect their political autonomy by taking refuge in the interstices of the colonial administration concentrated in the towns or by migrating to some other isolated lands beyond colonial control. In this new "frontier region", they found conditions for basically continuing their nomadic life in a regime of relative autonomy even from the colonial state.

[1] In the Karakoro region, the Fulaabe found a favourable context because of the lack of any extended and centralized political entity. Even the French army and administration found it difficult to penetrate in this region and to subject it to a tight control. The only part of this region where the FulaaBe found it difficult to settle down was the narrow corridor of 5 kilometres that constitutes the Karakoro River banks. Because of its fertile lands, this zone was occupied since the XVIII century by some farmers groups, such as the sedentary Fulani (ModynallankooBe) and the Soninke.

The concept of "frontier" as I borrow it from Kopytoff (1987) could seem a simple category applied by an external observer. However, in the Fulaaɓe language we can find emic categories that, in a way, could evoke similar meanings. The concept of "frontier" seems to correspond partially to the Fulaaɓe concept of "ladde", generally translated into French by the term "brousse", the "bush". Ladde is a complex and ambiguous emic concept. On the one hand, the bush is the place of non-human forces, the domain of danger. In this case, mobility in the bush, both as transhumance or migration, is a heroic experience. On the other hand, it constituted the most important resource for pastoral economy and for political autonomy, representing the possibility to escape from political centralizations or internal conflicts. In this sense, the ladde constituted a free space, a space of "frontier", meaning by that a "pioneer front", a territory for conquest and free expansion. Mobility in the bush became the best political resources: thanks to the ladde, FulaaBe could flee centralized political entities as the colonial regime, escape their control, avoid taxation, circumvent their territory.

What is particularly interesting in the historical trajectory of the FulaaBe is that this condition of relative political autonomy in frontier regions continued even after Mauritanian independence. Despite the efforts of the national elite for a complete nation-state building on the whole territory and on all the Mauritanian populations, FulaaBe could still benefit from their high mobility in order to escape the embryonic administration which was settling in the countryside.

This situation changed with the dramatic sahelian droughts of the 70s and 80s, when the state multiplied its efforts to deploy itself in the countryside, while thousands of Mauritanians left their rural villages and settled in regional towns and the capital city. From now on, the FulaaBe's situation is characterised by sedentarisation, urbanisation and an increasing state control on peoples' movements with administrative census and state control of lands distribution. If we adopt the Fulaabe's point of view on their own history, we see that the Fulaabe mark out an historical rupture in the 80s, which represents a distinction between two main periods. The earlier period is referred to as the *uncounted years*, a time that becomes simply *hanki* - the past that predates the present. For the Fulaabe, this is the time of *adaaji* or traditions, i.e. of a genuine pastoral life based on honour and stability. This vision seems an idealized opposite of the contemporary urban life. What changed with the shift from an idealized *past* to a dramatic *present* – a time that the Fulaabe now call "modernité" – is the possibility to recur to mobility in order to flee political, economic or ecological disruption. FulaaBe's recourse to mobility in the *ladde* in order to preserve their political autonomy

ended up. With this ecological and economic crisis, the Fulaaɓe could not recur to mobility in the *ladde*. They said: *waawi caaru ko dogu* (what destroys the cattle's plague is the flight; and this time, Fulani do not flee" (p. 51). Thus, the time of the bush was over.

As soon as they were incorporated into the state, the FulaaBe became the principle victims of ethnic persecutions by state authorities in the region. In 1989-1991, some Mauritanian authorities, under the *baathist* banner of the Arab identity and of a Moor "ethnic" exclusiveness of the country, persecuted tens of thousands of "Negro-Mauritanians" citizens. The FulaaBe became victims of a history of elite ethno-political competition which they had never taken part to. Hundreds were literally displaced to Senegal by the army. Almost half of the communities flew to Mali escaping persecutions while those who remained on the Mauritanian territory became one of the most marginal group of the country.

With the 1989 "events", the Fulaaɓe tried to circumvent or "to disengage from" the State, taking again the way of the bush. In their oral accounts, the crossing of the border with Mali corresponds to an old idea of fleeing political centralizations, in this case the Mauritanian state. Displacement to Mali seemed a renewal of an ancient history of fleeing political disorders and economic deterioration[2]. However, this idea of continuity of flight and displacement as a political "frontier" strategy, should be somewhat tempered. A new element was there, irrevocably changing the space of the bush: the territorial border between the two countries. While entering the Malian territory, and not simply the bush, the FulaaBe "traditional" *migrants* turned out to be also "modern" political *refugees*.

Culture of mobility against Politics of Immobility

The historical and ethnographic analysis of FulaaBe's practices and meanings of mobility is useful if we want to understand that, in the contemporary context, having a "culture of mobility" doesn't directly imply that these groups can benefit more easily than others from new forms of mobility such as international migration.

Since their progressive marginalisation within the Mauritanian state in the 1980s, pastoral and nomadic life are no more possible economic activities as they were before and the FulaaBe have to recur to new forms of mobility in order to cope with the new context. Some youngsters decided to migrate in the *ladde* again, but this time mobility was completely different from the pastoral one. They moved alone, leaving their communities in their fix

[2] In 1989, the majority of the Fulaaɓe had already experienced a migration and a change of their context of life, under the pressure of climatic crisis (1942, 1971 and 1983) and of administrative control (colonial regime and Mauritanian administration)

Mauritanian villages, and went to places where previous transhumance had never leaded them to. Little groups of FulaaBe migrated to Libya crossing the Sahara by foot, attracted by the Libyan economic development and Khadafi's projects. As the few pilgrimages made by some FulaaBe to the Mecca since their islamization in the 1950s, this experience marked an important moment for the whole community as it introduced the idea of belonging to larger imagined communities, such as "Africa" or the muslim "Umma", but in practice this affected only a small minority of people. The majority of post-pastoralist youngsters rather decided to leave their villages and settle in marginal slums of Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital, inaugurating an assiduous rural-urban mobility, which is literally perceived as a migration, Nouakchott being still considered as "ladde". Speaking of the FulaaBe still settled as refugees in Mali, they succeeded in building social and spatial networks spreading out on the two sides of the border, despite their exclusion from any recognition of Mauritanian citizenship rights and the international border representing this exclusion. Some refugees even know how to take advantage from some favourable economic activities, such as cross-border smuggling, which are possible in a trans-boundary context such as the Karakoro borderland. But the majority of the refugees have no other choice than raiding cattle on the two sides of the border, against "local" populations both in Mauritania (Moors and Soninké) and in Mali (Soninké and FulBe).

These new forms of mobility don't represent any success story for the FulaaBe. International migration to Libya, rural-urban mobility and refugees' cross-border smuggling are nothing but a strategy for survival and for coping with their dramatic living conditions. Mobility is not an *exit strategy* as it was at the time of the *ladde*, because the state is there as an entity which they inevitably have to cope with. Mobility is only a *tactic* sometimes to circumvent the state, other times to get from the Mauritanian or the international context what they can offer to marginal populations. Actually, the new translocal settings in which the FulaaBe communities live don't turn out to be the context of large and powerful transnational or translocal networks: translocal communities are too small and suffer from a lack of social, economic and political capitals.

This turned out to be deeply prejudicial for the FulaaBe in comparison to other Mauritanian groups with which they have to compete on the social and political scene, both on the local and national level. Since the 1990s, local and national politics in Mauritania is particularly exposed to the influence of political and economic networks of migrants' communities, associations and lobby groups organized on a translocal basis between rural villages and the capital city or between Mauritania and countries of the diasporas. Actually,

local and national political elites in particular can compete in politics only by transforming their translocal networks into social, political and economic capitals.

This dynamic is closely linked to the question of what Peter Geschiere calls "autochtony" (BAYART et al. 2001; GESCHIERE and NYAMNJOH 2000): the predominant relevance given to discourses and practices of belonging to villages and communities of origin. Nowadays, autochtony is spreading in Mauritania as elsewhere in Africa, under the impact of decentralization, land reforms and local development projects. All of these governance policies are affecting local politics by over-stressing the importance of local belonging and promoting reforms which can produce "immobility" of communities in their "villages of origin": for example, the politics of land entitlements, the investment of migrants' remittances to their sole communities of origin and not to the whole local district, the promotion of agricultural exploitation against pastoral movements. What is striking in this logic of stressing locality is that, at the same time, those who governed this process are the local elites who can benefit from translocal networks and employ, on the local level, all the resources coming from the supra-local national and international context, such as internal and international migrants' remittances, NGOs and other development agencies' investments and even state funds. As Peter Geschiere and others demonstrate, autochtony is a contradictory phenomenon where the claims for locality and belonging are nourished by translocal and even global dynamics. Inside local administrative entities, this means that local notables have the power to divert exterior resources only to their villages and not to participate to the development of the whole local community. In fact, the FulaaBe and other marginal communities, such as the former Moor slaves, remain excluded from local power and resource redistribution.

Even a new huge governance project concerning the entire borderland region between Mauritania and Mali in the zone where the fulaaɓe are settled seems to reproduce the same logics. This new institutional project, created in June 2007, aims at establishing a transboundary region in the Karakoro basin. This project is part of a broader West African transboundary integration project (WABI) created in 2003 and carried out by ECOWAS on different international boundaries (with the Karakoro region, south Senegambia, Mali/Ivory Coast/Burkina Faso and Niger/Nigeria in the "Hausa country")[3]. After the decision of the

[3] The experts' meeting on border issues organised by the AU on 4 and 5 June 2007 demonstrated the Union's interest in border dynamics fostering integration. The group of experts consisting of representatives of AU member States, regional economic communities as well as intergovernmental organisations discussed and amended the AU Borders

European Union to finance the project, "*ECOWAS Foreign Affairs Ministers met on 14 June 2007 in Abuja and agreed on a regional approach to the management of migration, particularly within the region and to Europe. This approach highlights the importance of facilitating movement at intra-regional borders, depicting mobility as a development actor".* That is to say that the regional cross-border mobility must represent a substituted strategy for West African migration towards Europe. But the main paradox is that the transborder integration project insists on relying on the same governance policies that, until now, have produced immobility rather than mobility. By assuming a depoliticized approach to local dynamics, governance policies neglect the political situation of Mauritanian Fulani refugees, which are not recognized the right to participate to NGOs and formal decision-bodies. The WABI in Karakoro does not address this problem even if the refugees represent the sole effective transboundary social network. Furthermore, by concentrating on agricultural exploitation governance projects hamper pastoral transhumance that was the only consolidated transboundary practice, as recognized by the WABI partners themselves. And finally, co-development has generally been diverted to little-scale communities of migrants and not on medium-scale institutional entities.

The question of migrants' remittances can be a good example of how this governance dynamics works in producing immobility and autochtony. In the Karakoro region where the FulaaBe are settled, some NGOs introduced a new strategy of local development aimed at mobilizing local resources without the intervention of state development policies. The preferred strategy to mobilize local resources is to employ financial resources coming from international migration. South-east Mauritania is in fact part of the Upper Senegal River region which is traditionally one of the most important and enduring zones of origin of West African migrants in Europe – i.e. the Soninke migration in France. The exploitation of migration income opened to new strategies of international cooperation that allows to avoid state implication, such as decentralized cooperation and what is now called co-development. Evidence from the field shows that the NGOs efforts in order to divert these remittances collide with the migrants will to keep on converting their resources in personal prestige. On the political level, this means that the Soninké can benefit from the migration remittances to impose their leadership among villages and then compete locally for the control of local politics with those groups, such as the Moors, that are rather hegemonic on the national level.

Programme's report and draft declaration before its submission to Ministers (Conference of African Ministers responsible for border issues on the topic, "Preventing conflict, promoting integration", held 7 June 2007 in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia), www.afriquefrontieres.org.

In this context, it's impossible for the FulaaBe to participate to the political competition as they don't benefit from any transnational networks and they cannot even plan to build it as migration has become impossible for them.

The FulaaBe occupy the same prejudicial position on the national level for the lack of any transnational networks. Even in comparison to other groups which endured social and political persecution from the state in 1989, as the "Negro-mauritanian" communities of the Senegal River valley, the FulaaBe seem to be excluded from all the advantages which these populations could benefit from thanks to transnational networks. For example, the Negro-mauritanian elites who were expelled from the country in 1989 in the name of the Arab identity of Mauritania could build large social and political networks in the exile, their status of refugees being recognized by the international community. On the contrary, no FulaaBe has ever being recognized this status, except few dozens of people. This explains why all the refugees in Mali lack of any power of lobbying on Mauritanian authorities from the exile and remained excluded from the new plan of repatriation, which concerns only the refugees of the Middle Senegal River Valley.

In this situation, the FulaaBe don't remain inactive and try to cope with their marginalization. In particular, they try to create some urban association, which imitates translocal lobby groups of other communities, claiming for a "tribal" solidarity under the influence of political discourses on autochtony. A group of a dozen of migrants in Western country is even trying to build up a formal transnational association in order to reinvest migrants' remittances in their villages of origins. Anyway, all these strategies are lacking economic and political capitals. Coming to the conclusion, the contemporary marginality of Mauritanian FulaaBe shows that contemporary translocality and new forms of mobility are only partially linked to African "cultures of migration" and that they rather depend on the logic of inclusion and exclusion to formal and substantial citizenship.