Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

REINTERPRETING LABOR MIGRATION AS INITIATION RITE

“Ghana Boys” and European Clothing in Dogon Country (Mali), 1920–1960

ISAIE DOUGNON

ABSTRACT: This article reinterprets Dogon migration to colonial Ghana for European clothing as a phenomenon modeled on age group initiation practices on the Dogon Plateau. In initiation rites, young boys who were candidates for the prestigious Association of Masks were subjected to a test, undertaken in caves. Boys who underwent this initiation could only occupy the highest social hierarchy when they mastered the secret language of masks, the *sigi so.* Labor migration to Ghana in the early and mid twentieth century built upon and altered these social rites; with the rise to prominence of migration, mature men were reborn by migrating to Ghana, where they learned English and brought modern clothing back to their villages. Clothing and other imported items reproduced local institutions of social promotion and reinforced the hierarchical status of their age group. Thus, through migration, young men were initiated into Dogon society through the same processes emphasized by existing initiation rites: uncovering another world, acquiring new knowledge, and adopting new perspectives. For relatives who remained in the village, the human nature

---

Isaie Dougnon is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Bamako, Mali. From 1998 to 2003, Professor Dougnon conducted research on migration and labour from Dogon Country Mali to the Office du Niger and to Ghana. His book *‘Travail de Blanc’ ‘Travail de Noir’: la migration des paysans dogons vers l’Office du Niger et au Ghana 1910–1980* was published in 2007 by Karthala. He has published numerous articles and held Humboldt and Fulbright fellowships. He is completing a second book manuscript, tentatively titled *Lifecycle, Rites and Career in Modern Work*.

ISSN 0145-2258 / E-ISSN 2163-9108
© 2016 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

of migrants changed, as their modern clothing upon their clean bodies conferred upon them the image of men who had reached new social heights.

Introduction[1]

Most of the current anthropological studies on the relationships between migration and global consumption in Africa have been conducted in relation to globalization discourses of the 1990s.[2] Few *longue durée* approaches have been adopted to understand the cultural and identity formation in the African laborers' villages of origin.[3] However, it is possible even in the early twentieth century to see how young African migrants—through consumption of western items in their own villages—reproduced local institutions of social promotion. Reinterpreting labor migration as a rite of passage through an anthropological and historical perspective demonstrates the formation of "cultural heroes" through the transfer and consumption of European items in villages. For that purpose, I examine both migration for colonial wage work and the modern lifestyle of returnee migrants, while scrutinizing the symbolic relationship between the two. In order to do so, I base my analysis on what was known as the *Ghana boys:* an informal migrants' organization whose members have returned to Dogon country after a three years sojourn in the cities of the former Gold Coast (present-day Ghana). The term Ghana boys, which came into common use in Dogon Country after 1957, replaced the term *Kumasi boys,*[4] widely employed from the 1920s to the 1950s. The substitution occurred when Gold Coast gained its independence under the name Ghana. The more recent term will be employed throughout this paper; both titles imply the aspirations, labor, and consumption embedded within migration, and the only difference lies in the time period.

Of course, the Ghana boys were not unique; there were numerous other connections between Dogon society and the rest of the world. For example, compulsory military service during World War I was a key process in linking Dogon society to the emerging worlds of European empire in the first part of the twentieth century. Many informants highlight the importance of young soldiers returning from military service in brokering interactions with European and colonial cultures. Demobilized soldiers returned to the villages with uniforms and other goods acquired during their time abroad. In Dogon villages, they gave lengthy accounts about the modern technologies being used in Europe, particularly modern means of transportation. In the early stages of World War I, according to oral testimony, many Dogon

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

were skeptical of accounts of the first groups of returning soldiers describing European technology. The large number of men drafted over the course of the war, however, meant that after the war was over, the large number of returning veterans confirmed the accounts of the first cohort of military men. The accounts of these World War I veterans did a great deal to influence other young people into migrating into colonial cities, in order to achieve the same status of cultural hero accorded to returning veterans. Key among these migrants were the Ghana boys.

A study of the Ghana boys reveals that young Dogon men were continually shuttling between their villages and Ghana's colonial cities. It was a transnational, or trans-colonial, movement, since these young men were leaving one colonial empire for another. This migration demonstrates the appearance of a new form of organized society, which has three distinguishing features: (1) the ordeal of travel, (2) the experience of paid labor, measured by the acquisition of clothing and other luxury objects, and (3) the mastery of new languages, namely English and Hausa. The value placed upon these imported artefacts and the knowledge of foreign languages in Dogon society, and particularly by women, raised migration's profile among the young population as a whole. As these new cultural and material values began to pervade colonial and post-colonial Ghana, they were transposed and reinterpreted in Dogon Country. This article investigates how the stories and the memory of the Kumasi boys and the Ghana boys have served to ingrain migratory aspirations among the Dogon from the beginning of the twentieth century until now.

The Ghana boys analysis adopts an approach which seeks to understand how returning migrants attempt to reconfigure diasporic culture at home.[5] It is possible to see it as a meeting-point of several schools of thought arising from studies on modernization and globalization.[6] My analysis of the Ghana boys also draws inspiration from studies of cross-cultural consumption,[7] the sociology of consumption,[8] and from gender studies. There has been little research into the social and economic impact of migration in Dogon country; studying this phenomenon reveals a two-fold process of globalization, in the sense that young Dogon migrants in Ghana were making contact not only with Western culture but also with that of the Asante, the ethnic group which features most often in their discourse (not to mention the other migrant communities arriving from all over West Africa). At the same time, the engagement between Dogon migrants and "Western" or "colonial" culture needs to be examined with greater specificity. The principal destination was not Bamako, the capital of French Sudan,[9] but Accra, the capital of Ghana, more than two thousand kilometers away from Dogon Country. Similarly, the language that they valued was not French,

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

the language of their masters, but English, a foreign tongue. All in all, they were seeking "cultural" membership of the Anglophone world while at the same time remaining physically and legally a part of the Francophone world.

The men who converged upon this Anglophone world and transposed it into their villages of origin were cultural heroes, deities. Since the concept of "cultural heroes" is cental to the analysis that follows, it is worth explaining this concept in greater detail. To be a cultural hero, the migrant must foremost display a taste for adventure, a taste originating particularly from exposure to the accounts of those who returned from far and unknown countries. In familial conversations, they tell other young people about their particular sensations experienced while discovering other countries. They influence youth who stayed in the village into believing that the migrant participates in the creation of the country where he visits and works (as in, for example, the accounts of Malians and Burkinabe migrants on their role in the birth of "Ivory Coast," or the former Gold Coast, now Ghana). Thus, it is not enough for the migrant to solely have souvenirs. He must also expose these material goods to other men, to show them what he has brought back. For stories of migration to be complete, they must be accompanied by objects of prestige, as well as proficiency in foreign languages. These accounts also portrayed migration as a dangerous adventure, in which the return from abroad is constituted as a return from the wilderness and perceived as a victory. By stoically conquering all difficulties during his time spent in the wilderness, the migrant displays a form of courage that honors not only the migrant himself, but his parents as well. He becomes a role model for all the young people of his age. The foreign objects brought back—such as umbrellas, shoes, clothing, fabrics, and bracelets—were essential in proving this success, a success that could then become the basis of a social status that would be coveted by others.

I further argue that this cultural heroism suggests the need to conceptualize the Ghana boys through the insights of studies of masculinity in Africa. In particular, Stephan Miescher's study, centered on the relationship between masculinity and migration, helps us better explain the key aspects of the Ghana boys phenomenon. Broadly speaking, the author describes how the social status of migrants changes qualitatively once they return to their villages of origin. It was not the aim of Miescher's study to tell the life stories of the migrants, the "big men and women," but to analyze how Protestant Churches modified the notions of masculinity among the young, notions which had been shaped in school. This new "local elite" were known as the *young boys*.[10] The churches' objective, according to Miescher,

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

was to transform the "young boys into a new kind of men,"[11] namely clerks, teachers and ministers who would serve as a conduit to transmit Western modernity into the villages and hamlets of Africa. In *Making Men in Ghana* the spotlight falls upon a different social group, but the work is useful for my own purposes, for the following reason: the new values upon which the native educated elite's reputation is founded—appearance (uniform), personal hygiene (bodily cleanliness), work (places and times), education (the English language)—resemble those which accord superior status to the Ghana boys in Dogon villages, albeit on a different scale.

However, if I share Miescher's opinion that the emergence of both classes, *young boys* and Ghana boys, has resulted from the integration of the Dogon and the Asante in the colonial world, I diverge when it comes to a definition of the two terms. According to Miescher, the *young men* or *young boys* should not be taken as a group of people possessing common interests, but as individuals whose political and professional trajectories are dissimilar. In the course of this paper, I adopt the contrary approach: Ghana boys are a group of men exhibiting the same collective aspirations and the same identity values, through their use of foreign "luxury" goods that they have themselves introduced into their villages of origin. The other villagers venerated and mythicized both the objects and their creators. It is this social value attached by society as a whole to the objects that the migrants bring back which prompts me, through the term Ghana boys, to redefine labor migration as initiation rite.

The methodology adopted here follows that of David Howes, for whom the question at the heart of the anthropology of consumption is the following: "what happens to commodities when they cross cultural borders?"[12] In this field, sociology steals a march on anthropology because it deals with the product before it arrives at a given cultural border ("commodities at home"). In a rather exciting article, Colin Campbell reviews the intellectual efforts of researchers to create new sociological theories through the analysis of consumer culture. He refers primarily to Peter Saunders, who argued that the old Marxist analysis of class conflict should be replaced by an analysis of the essential conflict between producers and consumers.[13] Taking urban sociology and post-modernist theories as his starting-point, he shows how consumption stole the sociological spotlight from the 1990s onwards.

As we shall see, the symbolic role of European products in "remote" societies is the same as it is in the societies where they are produced. The European artefacts that the migrants bring back to their villages from Ghana—even if they undergo a change of use—inspire the same feelings of joy, prestige and importance. It is in fact the conceptualization of this

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

change in function which should, in Howes' eyes, constitute anthropology's new focus. On this subject, he writes:

> When one takes a closer look at the meanings and uses given to specific imported goods within specific "local context" or realities, one often finds that goods have been transformed, at least in part, in accordance with the values of the receiving culture.

In Dogon Country, in the days of the Ghana boys, the objects imported from Ghana were used to revitalize social ceremonies. The theoretical challenge faced by a historical anthropology of migration is to integrate customs and migratory aspirations in the same way that Colin Murray does in the field of political economy and the ethnography of labor. Referring to David Parkin and Van Binsbergen, he shows how migrants invest considerable amounts into matrimonial compensations and funeral ceremonies in Kenya and Tanzania.[14] Revitalizing customs by bringing in European products argues against Miescher's theory of the individualization of social life. This process of individualization is evident in the case of the scholars, "the local elite," but not in the case of the *big men,* in other words the migrants returning to the villages.

However, I am cautious that, when considering how imported objects are integrated into village customs, I must not lose sight of the individual prestige that the owner acquires among his family and friends. As I will point out below, the young women are the catalysts that push the young boys towards Ghana. They have invented two different sorts of songs which incite the men to migrate: the first glorifies those who go to Ghana and return with trunks full of clothing and other luxury goods, and the second discredits or even scorns those who hang around in the village and never go anywhere throughout their whole lives.[15] When such men wear European dress, the women ironically call them *yangananu,* literally "takes and puts on," a pejorative term meaning that the nice clothing worn by a non-migrant really belongs to a *Ghana boy.*[16] In their songs, the girls exhort the boys to go to Gold Coast and pick the fruits of the umbrella tree (which are used as parasols), the shoe tree, the blanket tree, the bracelet tree and the silver tree (for sisters or fiancées). This social stigmatization of youths who have never seen the road to Ghana shows the importance of migration's cultural connotations. Accepting this allows us to abandon the South-African paradigms based on what Thaddeus Sunseri called "the kraal to compound model," which has dominated the historiography of labor migration in Africa.[17] Taking a number of cultural factors into consideration makes it possible to redefine labor migration as initiation rite in societies that are removed, to a greater or lesser extent, from the colonial and post-colonial centers.

Cultural Factors of Labor Migration

> At the time, any youth who had not been to Gold Coast had no standing in his village [Abdoulaye Guindo, Accra, Madina].
>
> One day, in my village, I met up with my big brother's group. He and his friends were chatting in Dogon, but when I arrived they began speaking in English. From that day, I decided to go to Gold Coast to learn this language [Baba Yacoub, Nima, Accra].
>
> In my village, at the time, the youths who had come back from Kumasi would wrap themselves in a big blanket to go out into the square in the evenings. One evening I was crossing the square, and the girls who were there started chanting at me: "the young man who has no blanket must take the Kumasi road." Seized by shame, I decide to migrate and bring back just such a blanket [Amadinguin Guindo, Tindeli village].
>
> When I was still young, I always used to hear people in my village say that machines crushed stones on the Gold Coast. I wanted to see that with my own eyes. That is why I came. I found work in the same business. We built the High Court at Accra with the same stones [Baba Issa, Madina, Accra].[18]

These four testimonies clearly show the collective values associated with labor migration. Populations who were far removed from the African coasts had an image of Ghana as modern and marvelous firmly anchored in their minds. There were no mass media at the time nor any modern means of road transport. Nonetheless, the mirage of colonial and metropolitan cities invaded African towns and villages well before the era of electronic media. Toyin Falola, for example, describes his experience when he had to leave Ibandan in 1963 to go and continue his secondary studies in the suburbs. His departure was mocked by the *big boys,* the young semi-literate city workers of his family:

> To the big boys, it became a good joke, as they mocked me for going to the "interior," a sort of primitive backwater, instead for Lagos or London. Britain they knew inside out. American cities were becoming popular by 1963, and people knew about Chicago, New York, Atlanta, and Houston. As I was later to find out while living in the United States, Nigerians know more about the United States than the average American does.[19]

A similar dynamic marked the Dogon villages of the 1920s and 1930s, where it was believed that every young man should go to Gold Coast at least once in his life. The Gold Coast exerted a strong attraction for inhabitants of the Niger Inland Delta, notably Ségou, San, Mopti, and Bandiagara. The colony's principal occupation was agriculture. In Ashanti Country and Togoland, the natives grew cocoa for export. The sales revenue for this

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

product was used to import manufactured goods such as clothing, foodstuffs, bicycles, phonographs, motorbikes and other luxury goods, objects which became much more widespread over a period of several decades as a result of the Africans' contact with the Europeans. Margeret Peil gives an idea of the economic and political position of Kumasi, known as the "Garden City," in the 1960s. She writes, notably:

> With the coming of the railway line from Sekondi in 1903 and the development of cocoa as an export crop, Kumasi became a great marketing centre. Migrant workers on the gold mines and cocoa farms stop in Kumasi to purchase goods before returning to their homes all over West Africa. A popular saying has it that "he who has not been to Kumasi will not go to paradise."[20]

The town of Kumasi was considered the "mother" of Gold Coast in the Dogon Country of the 1930s. Question-and-answer songs such as these could be heard on a daily basis in the villages:

> Where do you come from? I come from Kumasi.
>
> Where do you come from? I come from Sokindé.
>
> Where do you come from? I come from Accra.
>
> Where do you come from? I come from Obuasi.
>
> Where do you come from? I come from Cape Coast.

Young people would get together in the evenings in the public square, after their hard work in the fields. The conversation often turned to the desire of one or the other to leave for Kumasi. If someone said, "After farming, I'm leaving for Kumasi," another would reply, "I'm leaving too," and so on, the virus taking hold of the whole group. The decision to leave must be kept a secret. The elders must not learn of it, for they might put a stop to the plan. Three generations of migrants followed after. The first wave (from 1910 to 1940) were the "pedestrians." They walked from the Dogon villages towards the Gold Coast towns. The second wave (1950 to 1980) travelled by car, and finally the third was the children born in Ghana.[21]

There was an important material component to Dogon migration, as the clothing that they brought back was displayed in public places such as markets and local festivals. From the very beginning of Dogon migration to Ghana, in the 1930s, migrants brought back garments called *massara* and *massadani,* Bamana words meaning "royal cloth." They would also bring back a pair of shoes called "Diallassagou white," Diallassagou being a village on the Plain. This clothing assumed an important role within local culture. A popular song of the Seno-Gondo, for example, showed how young

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

girls promoted the desire of European clothing among young boys. It is dedicated to a mythical woman who is at the origin of the introduction of foreign clothing to Dogon Country. This woman was apparently called Yasama, the youngest of a family of seven brothers. Yasama's reputation and importance stemmed from the fact that she appeared one day in the public square, draped in a beautiful *bubu* (African robe). Her songs and dances made the people who flocked to see her rejoice. She symbolizes the beauty of imported clothing and their display during dances and popular songs. This clothing was imported from elsewhere in West Africa. Similarly, people can often be heard to use the term *pulo tu,* literally the clothing of the Peul, when they refer to any item of clothing or fabric of foreign origin. This history challenges case studies which approach the adoption of Western dress in non-European societies in terms of colonial imposition.[22] Among the Dogon, we have a different scenario. In the context of a society less directly influenced by the European market, it is the youths themselves who, thanks to a "ritualized" migration, have played an active role in introducing European goods and linking them into local social life.

Ghana was not the only destination to which men traveled in order to obtain the rewards of migrant labor. Clothing and modern fabrics also motivated young men to travel from the Dogon region to the Office du Niger. Interviews with many former migrants who migrated to French colonial workplaces indicate that, as with their counterparts in British Ghana, European goods were an important source of motivation for their travels. El Hady Aly Dolo, a merchant in Nioro who left Sangha in 1945, said that young people migrated in search of money to buy shoes, umbrellas, and clothing. Former worker Amadou Pleyaba, known as Samassékou, confirmed Dolo's statement:

> The migration of young men from Dogon country to colonial cities between 1930 and 1940 had a single aim: to acquire very beautiful clothes and shoes. When I arrived in Markala 1936, there were more than 1500 young people from the Dogon region. They had come in search of modern goods.

Along with fabric and clothing, young men went in search of red, black, and white hats. Some of these goods were introduced before the colonial era—they weren't Western products—but colonization encouraged their proliferation. The district chiefs and their assistants, along with the few common people in rural areas who received salaries from the colonial government, often displayed these possessions on their parade horses. These lucky commoners also wore their hats to markets, where they were much admired. According to El Hadj Aly Dolo, young Dogon men sometimes stayed so long at the Office du Niger in search of these goods that they

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

started families there. Migrants themselves confirm this account. Amadou Djiguiba remembered going to the Office du Niger to purchase the famous red hat, known in local language as *goro ban*. B. Enne Dolo of Sangha said that he had encountered a large number of young Dogon workers at the Office du Niger, each one of whom was seeking a little money so they could make a triumphal return to their home village wearing a red hat.

Nonetheless, Ghana was the primary destination for those seeking the material rewards of migrant labor. The testimony which takes us straight to the heart of the key question of this article comes from this former migrant who moved to Accra in 1939:

> At this time, the young lacked nothing in Dogon Country, only clothing was missing. In order to celebrate in a worthy manner the ceremonies of *buro* and *dama,*[23] they had to leave in search of clothes on the Gold Coast [Abdoulaye Kodio, immigrant from the Dogon Plateau to Accra-Madina].

There is something breathtaking in the words of this peasant, who establishes a relationship between the highly symbolic and ritualistic local festivals of Dogon Country and the use of European clothing. Local costumes for these festivals existed prior to migration, of course, but they were discredited in favor of clothing imported from Gold Coast, which were formally displayed in local markets.

Labor Migration as Seasoning Process

In a colonial context where formal education was rare, migration was the school that all young Dogon had to attend if they want to complete their socialization process and join the *big men*.[24] Just as someone who does not go to school is perceived as ignorant in societies where education is institutionalized, the young Dogon man who did not migrate was considered akin to a toad at the bottom of the well, someone who only knows and talks about his own limited space, characteristics which demonstrate his ignorance. Thus, the way that young girls promoted European objects through songs and dances, the attraction of the town of Kumasi and of imported products, the expectations of the village communities, and competition between friends of the same peer group in their desire to acquire universal knowledge—in other words, to fight against ignorance—all made labor migration in the colonial period equivalent to social initiation.

In Dogon initiation ceremonies, the young male candidates for the prestigious Association of Masks submit to an ordeal which takes place in caves, away from women and children, ending in a solemn procession back to the village, which represents rebirth into true manhood. These boys will

occupy the summit of the social hierarchy only when they have mastered the secret language of masks, the *sigi so.* If a man matures as a result of the initiation ritual, he is reborn when he migrates to Ghana and brings back to the village a trunk full of modern clothes. He returns transfigured, and reappears among his own in a new outfit, like St Paul, sporting a new name.[25] This transition might be called a rite of passage in the sense used by Van Gennep.[26] The migrant is considered as one who has left on a long voyage in search of a new vision and knowledge of worldly things. During this time, he is symbolically considered to be a dead child. Upon his return to his natal village, he is reborn into manhood.

In the colonial period, as I underlined earlier, migrating, purchasing European clothing and speaking English were factors in the ascension of the individual that society reinterpreted and integrated into its local system of social promotion. Thus, to the first level of social promotion (the initiated) was added a new, second level: the prestigious circle of *fine boys,* that is to say the generation of Gold Coast migrants, and Ghana boys (as they were known after 1957). The "secret language" of this new "class" was the language of Shakespeare. It was practiced by its members as a distinctive sign of their "group," the *ine gana,* literally "new man" or "man born again."

There were two prerequisite conditions (ordeals) to be satisfied by any youth who wished to accede to the status of *ine gana:* (1) travel to the Gold Coast—a walk of more than thirty days, with all that demanded in terms of courage and human effort—and bring back to the village a trunk full of clothing and other luxury goods such as umbrellas, spears, knives and jewelry, and (2) learn to speak English. This language was the means used by members of the association of Ghana boys to exclude those who had never seen the road to the Gold Coast. European clothing, for its part, was appreciated for its color and its delicacy. The clothing was so highly valued that it was considered extraterrestrial: according to Dogon mythology, it was created by *yinrin,* or water genies, who were very gifted in the performance of miracles; the clothes were known as *yinrin soy,* literally "clothes of the water genies." Within this mythology, the whites possessed neither the technique nor the intelligence to make such materials. They obtained them from the *djinns* by means of the "silent trade": they would put some money beside the sea and the *djinns* would come out of the water with the fabrics. They took the money and replaced it with the merchandise. The following day, the whites would come back to pick them up and sell them on to the others. As this mythology suggests, migration took place within a deeply rooted cultural context. It is for that reason that we must look at the migration pattern of the Ghana boys with the same analytical scheme developed for initiation rites.[27] The departure of young Dogon to colonial Ghana

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

separated them (temporarily) from their villages. During their employment as colonial laborers, they existed in a liminal space. And finally, their return to the villages with trunks full of European clothing re-assimilated them to their communities as members of a privileged social group.

European clothing served as a ritual symbol of migratory initiation on two levels: first, in relation to its extraordinary beauty; and second, in relation to its meaning for the body. The beauty refers here to the brightness, the color, and the modern fabrication of European clothing. European clothing was supposed to express cleanness, i.e. the purified body of the Ghana boy. From the interpretation of migration as initiation rite, the concept of body "cleanness" can be seen as a complex one, for it includes the new nature of the returned migrant with a clean body, new spiritual strength, and dignity and honor for both living and dead generations of migrants. It also suggests the reward of having come back home with the knowledge of a new language, a new place, a new civilization, as well as the modern technology of labor. European clothing on a clean body represented the passage of the migrant from the customary state of social life to the supernatural state of purified life of return migration. In order to clarify what I mean by the symbolic meaning of European clothing, I offer an account of its ritual importance in a social space (village market) and how the migrant's body was seen under that clothing.

A few days after his return, those in the migrant's age group gather around him. They organize a solemn procession away from the village market. His sisters prepare millet beer. On market day, the migrant dresses in his most splendid clothes: long red or white socks, colored t-shirt, leather shoes, an umbrella held by his friend over his head and a large hat named "Degaule" (modeled on the one that Charles de Gaulle wore the day of his memorable call to France not to give up against Germany in World War II), and other accessories like bracelets, rings, and large handkerchiefs. His friends go before him into the marketplace and sit under a shelter which has been thoroughly cleaned for the occasion. The migrant arrives last at the market place and performs an honor lap. While walking slowly around, he sprinkles perfume[28] in the direction of the women. The latter start singing something like:

> You come from afar, you have brought many garments, the whole world sings your praises, the best clothes come from Accra, he who wears them is the best.

After he has completed his circuit of the marketplace, beneath the cries and chants of the women, the migrant rejoins his friends. Beer drinking begins forthwith. It is given to all those who come to give homage to him

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

or to contemplate him. Former migrants will speak a few phrases of English to him, and the discussion will turn to those colleagues who remain in Gold Coast, and to the availability of work. In the afternoon, the migrant leaves for the house, in order to change his outfit. The ceremony ends with a lavish meal, served on the following day. Former migrants highlight that those who came to greet them were not only looking at their clothing, but also their bodies, because according to a popular song, Kumasi was a clean town where the sun was forbidden entry. This was a climatic and hygienic condition that the villagers believed would have a positive influence on the body of the migrant: it would become cleaner and start to shine.

A migrant who returned from the Gold Coast was a new man not only on the symbolic level but on the physical one. The gleaming body of the migrants was the most striking and most lauded aspect. Annaye Doumbo of the village of Yugo Piri returned from Accra in 1939. When he reached his village, he sat down on the outskirts, with his trunk full of clothing by his side. The first peasants who saw him announced to the village the presence of a white man. The news travelled through the village and panic spread. He had to call over some other passers-by in Dogon in order to reassure them that he was one of them. According to Doumbo, his colleagues did not believe that one of their fellows could have such a clear complexion, such a clean body. At Accra, he explained, bodily cleanliness was compulsory for anyone who worked among the whites. Each morning, he and his friends would wash before leaving for work. A dirty man was sent home. Newcomers, arriving in Accra for the first time, stood out like sore thumbs, with their dirty bodies and Dogon clothing. The welcome ritual began with a soap bath, after which they were given Gold Coast clothing.

Conclusion

This article illustrates two important analytical elements of labor and migration: (1) the rituals of migration and labor to colonial centers was a prestigious, "initiatory," and value-giving experience,[29] and (2) migrants' use of the whites' clothing and the mastery of their language created a new, superior cohort within Dogon society. This new age group appeared as a constituent body during markets and festivals held to celebrate and revive links between the ancestors and their descendants; it combined the social with the economic. We see here the essential function of clothes and other objects imported from Gold Coast. They reproduced, so to speak, the local institution of social promotion: different age groups were organized thus into a hierarchy. Through the channel of migration, young men from Dogon country discovered another world, acquired new knowledge, and

learned new types of work. As far as his friends and relatives who remain in the village were concerned, the human nature of such migrants had itself changed: he was reborn and reached a higher grade. His marvelous clothes on a clean body lent him the image of a man who has reached the summit of perfection, which used to be the unique preserve of the water- and bush-spirits.

However, the prestige of the Ghana boys class had an ephemeral quality. Their status was short-lived. The promotional cycle lasted perhaps one or two years, and often only six months, depending on how many migrants were returning to a given village. Migrants dropped out of the system when the European objects that they brought back were no longer fit for their intended purpose and when they had forgotten most of their English. Their baton was thus passed to a new group of returning migrants, and so the process continued. The members of a former cohort gradually blended in with the other villagers. Even so, the sense of identity generated by migration and the use of "exotic" objects was not forgotten. Former migrants reawakened its memory under the *togu na,* the men's shelter, and in the marketplace. Despite the ephemeral nature of the social status linked to the use of European clothing, the study of it is particularly worthwhile, in that it gives us a better understanding of the process by which the global was integrated into the different domains of the local: economic, social, religious and political.[30]

Although the Ghana boys phenomenon had vanished by the end of the 1970s, one cannot grasp migration traditions in the *longue durée* without taking it into account. The Ghana boys are still considered the first pioneers and remain the main references for Dogon migration. In many villages there are a few Ghana boys veterans who are keeping alive vivid memories of labor and migration from colonial times. Adopting this historical perspective shows the different factors, be they cultural or ecological, which have caused the Dogon to change from migration as initiation rite to migration for survival.[31] This change in migration patterns also explains why migration which was initially centered on Ghana has extended to other African countries. Moreover, the boom in transport since the 1970s, making migratory strategies accessible to large numbers of people, has increased the spread of seasonal migration to the entire West African region, enabling migrants to engage in small-scale trade and casual jobs.

Over the last four decades the Dogon have been going through a period of transition in regard to migratory models. This has entailed a change from the old form of migration, which was to leave the village to go and work in Ghana with the sole aim of buying luxury items (clothes, perfume

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

and other modern items) or to seek out new horizons or cultures (colonial cities and learning foreign language) into a more complex form of mobility in terms of destination, work, duration and networks. Alongside these two forms of migration there have also been other types of displacement, which have led numerous Dogon families to settle permanently on more fertile lands in southern Mali or elsewhere. Overall, immigrant communities maintain certain aspects of their older forms of movement and display similarities in their present forms, enabling a fruitful comparison to be drawn between the present and the past.

University of Bamako

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

Notes

1. I would like to thank Zachary Kagan Guthrie for his help editing and finalizing this essay. A preliminary version was presented at the Cadbury Workshop organized by the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, Great Britain, May 19–20, 2006.

2. For further details, see, Angela Veale & Dona Giorgia, *Child and Youth Migration, Mobility-in-Migration in an Era of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). See also Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff, Crime, Consumption and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Mojubaolu O. Okome and Olufemi Vaugna, *West African Migrations, Transnational and Global Pathways in a New Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmilan, 2012); James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1994).

3. See Toyin Falola and Usman Aribidesi, *Movements, Borders, and Identities in Africa* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009).

4. The Gold Coast was known as Kumasi. The Dogon would refer to the town of Kumasi as Kumasi-Na, literally "Kumasi the Mother." The *Kumasi boys* were also called *Fine boys*.

5. James Clifford, "Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, 3 (1994): 302–338.

6. Peter Geschiere et al., *Readings in Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Charles Piot, *Remotely Global, Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

7. David Howes (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

8. David Miller, "Consumption and Commodities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 241–61.

9. It should be emphasized that Ghana was not the only destination: a significant number of young Dogon, after 1932, chose to go and find work on the construction site of the Markala dam on the Niger river.

10. During the colonial period, in the Dogon community of Ghana, the young migrants who had been in town for less than three years were called "young boys." This label meant that they were forbidden to have sexual relations with the Ghanaian women. Relationships with women were the primary reason for the young boys' failure to return to the village after the three-year cut-off date.

11. Stephan Miescher, *Making Men In Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 11.

12. Howes, *Cross-Cultural Consumption,* 1.

13. David Campell, "The Sociology of Consumption," in *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies,* ed. David Miller (London: Routledge, 1996), 96–126.

14. Colin Murray, "The Work of Men, Women and the Ancestors: Social Reproduction in the periphery of Southern Africa," in *Social Anthropology of Work,* ed. Sandra Wallman (London: Academic Press, 1979), 337–363.

15. In Soninké country, a song of this type compares a young man wandering round the village after the harvest to a hen pecking at the grains of millet falling from the mortar as the woman grinds it. By this they mean that he is gorging himself on what his colleague has fetched. Consequently, he is not yet a complete man.

16. The garments brought back were used "collectively" by all the young men of the same age as the migrant. They were borrowed for occasions such as visiting the in-laws, seducing a girl, travelling to markets in neighboring villages. This collective use meant that clothing and shoes did not last long.

17. Thadeus Sunseri, "Labour Migration in Colonial Tanzania and the Hegemony of South African Historiography," *African Affairs* 95 (1996): 581–598.

18. On the ethnic codification of labor on the Gold Coast, see Isaie Dougnon, "Peasant Migration and Labour Codification in the Colonial Era: Emigrants from Dogon Country in the Gold Coast 1910–1950," in *Globalization and its Discontents, Revisited,* eds. K.S. Jomo and Khoo Kay Jin (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2003), 73–83.

19. Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University Press of Michigan, 2009), 1–113.

20. Margeret Peil, *The Ghanaian Factory Worker: Industrial Man in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 1–7.

21. For more on this period of migration from Dogon country, see Isaie Dougnon, *Travail de Blanc, Travail de Noir: la migration des paysans dogons vers l'Office du Niger et au Ghana 1910–1980* (Paris: Karthala, 2007).

22. Jean Comaroff, "The Empire's Old Clothes: Fashioning the Colonial Subject," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities,* ed. David Howes (New York: Routledge, 1996), 19–33.

23. *Buro* is the biggest traditional Dogon festival. It is the harvest festival, celebrated to thank the gods for the year's good harvests and beseech them for those

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

to come. It often lasts for more than a week. The *dama,* or "end of mourning," is a funerary festival, celebrated three years after the death of one or more elders. Its purpose is to accompany their souls towards the heavens of the ancestors.

24. Migration can be compared to an educational institution, in the sense that if it is well organized, it introduces into village society values and social attitudes desired and sought by everyone. Another reason to support this thesis is that the individual's chances of failure or success depend on his moral and physical attributes, on his family or ethnic group and on the objective conditions of his place of migration/education. As Kate Skinner puts it, "The literate urban African was now conceived not as a major source of disruption to some imagined former condition of social harmony, but as a potential leader. He could be trained to use his knowledge to bring about improvements in his home villages." For more details, see Kate Skinner, "Meeting or Shaping Aspirations? Adult Education and Representations of Change in the Late Colonial Gold Coast," paper presented at the Cadbury Workshop organized by the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, Great Britain, 19–20 May 2006. See also Don Hossler, et. al., *Going to College: How Social, Economic and Educational Factors Influence the Decisions Students Make* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). This assertion can be applied directly to migration. From the 1950s to the 1970s, neo-Marxists stressed migration's negative side, and its devastating effects on African villages. Certain states deployed financial and legal means in order to limit migration. However, for the past two decades, it has been argued that migration is ultimately more useful than international development aid, and that it is the source of qualitative and quantitative changes in African villages.

25. Cherrington E. Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (New York: Free Press, 1958), 13–14.

26. Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage: étude systématique* (Paris: E. Noury, réédition, 1981).

27. Victor Turner, "Three symbols of passages in Ndembu circumcision ritual: An Interpretation," in *Essays in the Ritual of Social Relations,* ed. Max Gluckman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), 124–173. See also his "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in *Secular Ritual,* eds. Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 48–65.

28. Perfume, for a long time the preserve of the bush spirits, became a means of communication between the returning migrant and his fellow villagers. It served to announce his return. According to the religious code, the migrant could not enter the village without purification rites. So, to announce that he was on the outskirts of the village, he sprinkled perfume. The scent was smelled by the women who went to the well in the early morning, and they ran to warn the men that there are some Gold Coast migrants returning. The young girls could not resist these perfumes, which were possessed of a magic strength, irresistibly seductive. It is the complete opposite of the smell of an onion.

29. Jacky Bouju, *Graine de l'homme enfant du mil* (Paris: Société d'ethnographie, 1984), 1–193.

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016

30. J.M. Philibert and C. Jourdan, "Perishable Goods: Modes of Consumption in the Pacific Islands," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities,* ed. David Howes (New York: Routledge, 1996), 55–73.

31. Isaie Dougnon, "Migration as Coping with Risk: African Migrants' Conception of Being Far from Home and States' Policy of Barriers," in *African Migrations Today: Patterns and Perspectives,* eds. Todd Leedy and Abdoulaye Kane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 33–58. See also Isaie Dougnon, "Climate Change, Peasant Mobility and Rural Development: A Case Study of Timbuktu Region in Mali," in *Migration und Entwicklung, Neue Perspektiven,* eds. Ilker Atac, et al. (Vienna: Promedia Südwind, 2014), 133–152.

Downloaded from by guest on November 28, 2023. Copyright 2016