

A Mobile Life Story Tracing Hopefulness in the Life and Dreams of a Young Ivorian Migrant

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Abstract

The analysis suggests an adaptation of the life history interview as a method in qualitative migration studies. By joining four analytical concepts into an overall methodological framework, the mobile life story is intended to guide the exploration of the subjective experiences of migrants at various stages of a migrant trajectory. The notion of 'mobility' evokes a holistic orientation in the study of migrant biographies; the unpredictability that characterises the social practice of migrants is captured through the concept of 'hopefulness'; the concept of 'vital conjunctures' is argued to provide a temporal delimitation and a focus for the organising of a life history interview; and the spatial dimension of the methodology is delimited through the concept of 'emplacement'. As opposed to a migration history, the mobile life story explores the significant transformations that have characterised the migrant's past and relates these defining moments to the broader migration history.

Keywords: Mobile life story; mobility; hope; vital conjunctures; emplacement

This paper suggests an adaptation of the life history interview as a method in qualitative migration studies, based on the insights of anthropological studies of African youth and migration. As an illustration of the proposed method of the *mobile life story*, I draw on my own material from Korhogo, a regional town in northern Côte d'Ivoire, where I have conducted qualitative interviews and extended participant observation in an attempt to understand the aspirations, decision making processes, and practices surrounding young people's mobility in the wake of the country's recent political crisis¹.

A Conceptual Outline of the Method of the Mobile Life Story

By way of delimiting the method of the mobile life story, this section considers four analytical concepts that are fundamental to the approach; mobility, hope, vital conjunctures, and emplacement. In conjunction, these concepts delimit an interview method that includes formal interviews, casual

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¹ Since the following is a conceptual and methodological argument, and due to the restricted space, I include very sparse information about the field site and the socio-political context of the study. A fuller analysis of young people's mobility in Korhogo would obviously require a more detailed account of such information.

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conversations as well as (participant) observations within the same methodology, with the goal of pursuing the subjective experiences of migrants, with particular attention to their migrant trajectories. The method further illuminates not only the retrospective, as inherent in the life history interview, but also the prospective; the potentiality of the present, projected into the future.

Mobility: Towards a holistic appreciation of migration

A central premise of the project that I am conducting in northern Côte d'Ivoire² is that ethnography of migrant aspirations and practices requires a thorough appreciation of the broader socio-cultural context within which these aspirations are formulated, and these practices prepared and initiated³. In this vein, a recent edited volume (Nyberg Sørensen & Olwig 2002) suggests a more holistic approach in migration studies, captured in the concept of *mobile livelihoods*, which considers not only the entire migration spectrum of aspiration-preparation-realisation-return but also the experiences and influences of those who stay behind when a migrant departs. The editors argue that '... mobile populations do not necessarily migrate to start a new life elsewhere, but rather to search out new opportunities that may allow them to enhance and diversify livelihoods practiced and valued back home (Nyberg Sørensen & Olwig 2002:1)'. Mobile livelihoods, then, may be seen to encompass more than merely wage labour and include the broader socially and culturally embedded project of creating a meaningful life, or what Lisa Åkesson (2004) has called *life-making*. 'People say that the meaning of their migration project is to *fazé um vida* (make a life)', Åkesson explains. 'Life-making is associated with livelihood, but it also signifies the transformation of an unfulfilling life into a potentially fulfilled one. The desire to migrate and make a life is therefore intimately connected with local notions of what constitutes a good life' (Åkesson 2004:22).

Thinking of young West Africans' migration as a mobile livelihood achieves a broadening of our inquiry, to accommodate our understanding of migrant biographies at various stages in a migratory process. Retaining this holistic approach, the concept of life-making in itself implies that an individual migratory project makes little sense without an appreciation of the social context within which it is formulated, prepared, and put into practice.

As the following incorporation of the concept of *hope* into the analysis will clarify, the underlying premise for the opening up of the conventional life history interview is that neither aspirations nor trajectories remain stable and

² I have, so far, conducted two fieldwork periods of four weeks in Korhogo, the regional capital of northern Côte d'Ivoire, as a part of a PhD programme in cultural anthropology at Uppsala University. An additional fieldwork period of eleven months is planned to begin in January 2010.

³ This has led me to formulate my research interest as a study of mobility rather than migration per se – an approach inspired by a recent literature with a similar subject matter (de Bruijn, van Dijk & Foeken 2001; e.g. Carling 2002; Lindquist 2002; see also Bjarnesen 2007; Langevang 2007).

predictable over time – and neither do the retrospective accounts of past stages in the migratory project.

Hope: Understanding aspirations in subjunctivity

When trying to understand the ways in which young people in Korhogo attempt to anticipate and influence their life trajectories, and how migration plans or practices figure into this broader project of life-making, the concept of hope might better capture the uncertainty and unpredictability that characterises these anticipations than, say, the notions of aspirations or agency, which tend to emphasise the capacity of the individual to steer a course through life; to envision a future and act in order to make it happen. As such, an attention to hope might better combine the active aspirations and practices of the hoper with the social (and metaphysical, cf. Crapanzano 2004:100) forces that are seen to influence the possible or past outcomes of specific hopes. In this way, an attention to hope aligns with Henrik Vigh's notion of *social navigation* which is inspired by the term "*dubriagem*" that young combatants in Guinea-Bissau used (see Vigh 2006:129) to express what was needed to manage in the difficult times that young people face in a country torn by war and poverty:

As we seek to move within a turbulent and unstable socio-political environment we are at the same time being moved by currents, shifts and tides, requiring that we constantly have to attune our action and trajectory to the movement of the environment we move through. Social navigation may thus involve detours, unwilling displacement, losing our way and, not least, redrawing trajectories and tactics. Social navigation in this perspective is the tactical movement of agents within a moving element. It is motion within motion (Vigh 2006:14)

Vigh's transfer of the navigational metaphor from the map, and the solid terrain it represents, to the constantly moving sea provides a framework that is sensitive to the force of external influences on the possibilities of the individual. In this way, it highlights the unpredictability that faces the agent in social navigation: an aspect that points simultaneously to the predicaments of migrant itineraries and the ways in which they may be seen as akin to the more general existential challenges of life-making. As Susan Reynolds Whyte argues, 'where people are negotiating uncertainty and possibility, subjunctivity is an aspect of subjectivity' (Reynolds Whyte 2002:174-75).

In this understanding, uncertainty is not just a momentary doubt, but a fundamental premise of social life – that inspires action as much as it constrains it; '...it is not just doubt, but hope for a better future that hangs on the ifs and maybes' (Reynolds Whyte 2002:177; see also Weiss 2004:14). Although this sense of potentiality is characteristic of social life in general, I would argue that both the promise and uncertainty of subjunctivity is acutely felt by people on the move and should therefore form a cornerstone in the

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research of migrant biographies. As subjective experience this double-sided uncertainty may be seen as expressed through the ambiguity of *hopefulness*; we hope because we are at once trusting and fearful of what is to come. Finally, we should note that hoping takes on several different forms, with varying temporal horizons and varying degrees of specificity⁴.

Having proposed a holistic orientation in the study of migrant biographies and argued for an attention to the underlying subjunctivity of a life-making project that characterises this broader context within which a migrant biography takes shape, I now turn to two concepts that might help delimit the investigation and orient the mobile life story. The first, the *vital conjuncture*, delimits a temporal dimension while the second, *emplacement*, suggests a spatial delimitation.

Vital Conjunctures:

Deconstructing the Life Cycle in Life History Interviewing

As a number of recent anthropological studies⁵ have argued, studying the social worlds of young people in Africa is a particularly illuminating prism for appreciating wider social dynamics, in part but not only because of the demographical dominance of people under the age of 25 years in Sub-Saharan Africa.

What these studies have shown is that being a young person in many African societies implies an inferior social status and a time of dependency and lack of influence. The anthropology of youth illustrates that achieving social adulthood is not a natural consequence of increased (biological) age but is rather related to the active achievement of social recognition (see Cole & Durham 2008:6 for an authoritative statement of this argument).

This understanding has methodological implications, since the use of the life history interview is in most cases – more or less consciously – structured chronologically, and in relation to the transitional landmarks of the life cycle, for example initiation, marriage, the birth of the first child, etc. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) found that, for her Cameroonian informants, this chronology of defining events in the life cycle could not be taken for granted and there seemed to be no significant overall correspondences in the sequence or timing of these events.

She argues instead that we think of a defining moment in a person's life as a *vital conjuncture*, which she defines as 'a socially structured zone of

⁴ This is illustrated by Darren Webb who outlines an entire taxonomy of different 'modes of hoping' (see (Webb 2007)).

⁵ Several edited volumes have been published in the past few years on this topic, (including Abbink & van Kessel 2005; Honwana & De Boeck 2005; Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006; Cole & Durham 2007), as well as a number of monographs applying a youth oriented approach to specific empirical fields, (e.g. Utas 2003; Vigh 2006). Furthermore, the anthropology of youth has been discussed in research articles, (most notably Durham 2000; Bucholtz 2002; Durham 2004; Cole 2005).

possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential' (Johnson-Hanks 2002:871). The significant point here is that the nature of these potential transformations cannot be taken for granted a priori, but are to be explored in each case. From a methodological point of view, a life history interview cannot simply fill in the blanks of a ready-made timeline but must explore which significant changes have characterised a person's life and what the nature of these transformations were.

It is here that the mobile life story may serve as a useful methodological tool for the study of migrant biographies. As opposed to a migration history, the mobile life story explores the significant transformations that have characterised the migrant's past and relates these vital conjunctures to the broader migration history. Some moves are often more significant, or transformative, than others and it requires the analyst's acute attention to appreciate these nuances – as opposed to simply mapping the various journeys or locations that have brought the migrant to the present moment. Furthermore, Johnson-Hanks' definition of a vital conjuncture should bring the previous discussion of the concept of *hope* to mind, since this latter notion is precisely suitable for analysing the subjunctive nature of social navigation. In this sense, both concepts point to the prospective; the *in potentia*; life in the making. They thereby open up the life history interview to include possible futures in a migrant biography.

Before proceeding to demonstrate the application of the mobile life story to a case from Korhogo, a final concept is necessary to specify the locus of vital conjunctures in migrant biographies, and to indicate a data collection technique that assures a sufficiently thorough appreciation of past vital conjunctures.

Emplacement: Locating Migrant Biographies

Conceptual discussions of the concept of place have dominated cultural geography and anthropology for the past two decades (cf. Casey 2001). In terms of methodology, this has made ethnographers uneasy about the delimitation of 'sites' in which to conduct fieldwork (see Gupta & Ferguson 1997) and about what significance to ascribe to the locality in which we encounter informants. In his (2002) article 'Ethnography after Globalism: Migration and Emplacement in Malawi', anthropologist Harri Englund suggests 'an approach to emplacement that discloses ethnographic subjects as *situated* in specific historical conditions that are as much embodied as they are discursively imagined' (Englund 2002:263). Drawing on insights from phenomenological anthropology, this approach challenges both the modernist conceptions of place as a bounded social unit and the strictly constructivist approaches that place all their emphasis on the ability of actors to imagine their position in the world, thereby neglecting the situatedness and historicity of these imaginations. Englund's solution to what he calls the 'ethnographic

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doubt about local-global distinctions' (Englund 2004:276) is to acknowledge 'the futility of disconnecting culture from place' (ibid.) and appreciate that the challenge of ethnography lies in focusing on the meanings ascribed to particular places and to further analyse the meanings ascribed to *the experience* of places, that is, to distinguish analytically between a place that the actor imagines and a place the actor is situated in.

In this way, Englund's appropriation of Edward Casey's (2001) concept of emplacement encompasses the dynamics between the everyday realities of the here-and-now, the imaginings of future life situations, and aspirations towards mobility, that characterise migrant biographies – in West Africa and probably beyond. When exploring migrant biographies through the mobile life story, we might therefore investigate the subject's account of *past emplacements*. This implies that, rather than simply mapping geographical locations, an appreciation of the migrant's subjective experiences requires us to probe the social contexts and individual emotions that characterised previous life situations.

Having outlined the four main concepts that orient the mobile life story, the following section illustrates its relevance to the study of migrant biographies by applying the method to the biography of an informant⁶, Moudi, whom I met in Korhogo and followed for one month in April/May 2008 and another month in November/December. The account is based on continuous interviews and casual conversations, as well as participant observation during this time; techniques that are all standard to the ethnographic method and necessary for the collection of a mobile life story.

Moudi's Mobile Life Story

A Mobile Life in Retrospect

Moudi lives in a house that his maternal uncle, 'Big Moudi', rents for 50.000 franc CFA⁷ per month in a neighbourhood called 'Quartier Quatorze (14)'. His mother lives in Abidjan where she sells vegetables at the market. His father is in France, where he has remarried and had two children, whom Moudi has never met. Big Moudi who rents the house, moved to Abidjan one year ago, following the bankruptcy of the cotton company that he was the regional director of. He does not seem to be planning a return to Korhogo but rather to be preparing to end the contract on the house. He now works for an Abidjan-based company that sells palm oil.

⁶ The case is chosen from a sample that, so far, includes ten informants with whom I have had regular contact since April 2008. The data include fieldnotes from participant observation and casual conversations and fifteen recorded qualitative interviews of between one and three hours' duration. The sample will be expanded during following fieldwork periods. Although the ethnographic method does not warrant statistical representativity, I feel confident in arguing that the case of Moudi is far from unique in the region and that his example illustrates a more general phenomenon.

⁷ Approximately 75 €.

When Big Moudi moved his family to Abidjan, he needed someone to look after the house in his absence. This task was given to Moudi, after a meeting between Moudi's mother and her older brother. Moudi divides his time between keeping the house in order and working as an apprentice at a nearby garage – a job that his uncle has ensured him as part of the agreement.

Moudi was born in the bété village of Kani, in the west. He never went to school – only Koranic school – because his parents did not want him to. Following the divorce of his parents, he was brought to his paternal grandmother in Gagnoa, with only him and another child in the family courtyard. His grandmother took good care of him, and helped him get an apprenticeship in a garage. She was the one who had encouraged him to take up that line of work, and she had meant very much to Moudi. When she passed away, he remained in her house in Gagnoa all by himself. He had no way of contacting his mother, and no money for the ticket to Abidjan, so he was stuck there for two years before he was able to save enough money for the ticket. The ticket was 3.000 franc CFA⁸ and he would put money aside, one penny at a time: when he earned 200 franc CFA at the garage, one coin would go into his savings.

His mother had been shocked to see him when he first arrived: he was so thin and wearing only rags. He had enjoyed life in Abidjan. His family had arranged a job for him, and he had his own money to spend on clothes and girls and having fun. When his uncle had told him about his wish for Moudi to come to Korhogo, a smaller regional town, Moudi had been very disappointed: “*Non, il y'avait un grand parti de moi qui voulait rester là bas, vraiment, je n'étais pas content, quo*”⁹, he told me. There was a great part of him that wanted to remain in Abidjan; he agreed to go but did not feel he had a choice in the matter.

Anticipating a Vital Conjunction?

Moudi's girlfriend, Cristelle, also lives in the house in Quartier 14. Moudi was hesitant to bring her, since they were all men living there, but her parents had insisted that she move when they found out that she was pregnant. She is due in June.

Moudi would have liked to marry Cristelle and take responsibility for the child, but with the ways things are it is too tough – ‘*c'est dur*!'; and he has no means of making it by himself. If he goes to Abidjan, he would want to take Cristelle and the baby with him but he probably wouldn't be able to take care of them on his own. If Moudi was able to decide he would remain in Korhogo and establish himself there. But he does not think that likely: if Big

⁸ Approximately 5 €.

⁹ No, there was a great part of me that wanted to stay there, really, I wasn't happy, you know.

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Moudi ends the contract on the house Moudi would have to move somewhere else and then he thinks he would prefer to go back to Abidjan.

During my stay in Moudi's house in Korhogo, Big Moudi gave word that he was preparing for Moudi to return to Abidjan to work in the same garage as before and eventually open his own when the time was right. Big Moudi would invest in the garage and Moudi would run it for him. Big Moudi would be ending the contract on the house in Quartier 14 within a few months. Moudi was told to send his ID papers to Abidjan by courier for renewal, and to be ready to leave when everything was ready.

Moudi's current emplacement in Korhogo was drawing to an end but his migrant trajectory remained uncertain until the last minute. Ahead of him were several minor and major moves; the journey to the capital to be installed as a mechanic under the continued patronage of his uncle or the move out of the house in Quartier 14, into a more independent but much less promising tomorrow – and several variations of these two basic alternatives over which he had some, but far from complete, influence. Both moves could potentially become vital conjunctures in that they could achieve a stable livelihood or the setting up of his own household, respectively. But by the time I rejoined Moudi in mid-November, his move to Abidjan had proved to be just another minor change in his life-making, since he had neither been able to begin work in the garage of his uncle nor to take responsibility for his girlfriend and their newborn son.

Conclusion: Tracing Hopefulness

Moudi's mobile life story reverberates with mobility, as well as with hopes and anxieties: his narrative is characterised by a sequence of emplacements that can be related to hopefulness, in the sense discussed above. When Moudi was suddenly left on his own in his grandmother's house in Gagnoa, he was forced to start articulating hopes for himself – in a sense an expression of his increasing maturity. It was the hope of seeing his mother again that kept him devoted to putting money aside over such a long time; an objective that needed no horizon beyond the point of its achievement. Reaching his mother in Abidjan seems to have been the end-goal of Moudi's hopes at that point in time – perhaps because of the destabilized social world he was emplaced in at the time¹⁰. It was only once this objective was achieved that he began to think ahead. His time in Abidjan gave him a chance to envision a more distant future, as he came to articulate his hope of making it on his own, possibly as the manager of a garage.

As we approach the present of Moudi's narrative, his hopes seem to centre on the patronage of Big Moudi. It is a more patient kind of hope that fluctuates between hoping that his uncle's promises will materialise on the

¹⁰ We could think of de Certeau's (1984) distinction between *tactics* and *strategies* here: the less resourceful a person is, the shorter his horizon of possibilities.

one hand, and that Moudi would somehow be able to free himself from that dependency on the other.

The notion of a mobile life story emphasises that we should see Moudi's story as a *life history*, in the sense of being a narrated ordering of his past from a particular standpoint, and that this ordering projects itself into his possible futures. Both Moudi's hopes for the future and his reflections on his past reflect his orientations in the present¹¹. As a *mobile* life story, Moudi's narrative is structured by significant moves; the move to his grandmother when his parents divorced; to Abidjan when he was able to save up money for the ticket; to Korhogo where he met his girlfriend Cristelle. In addition, another significant phase in Moudi's life story is marked by *immobility*, the time spent in his grandmother's house before he was able to leave. To put it differently, his vital conjunctures are characterised by moves and not by, say, when he left Koranic school; when he was circumcised, or initiated.

The mobile life story builds on existing approaches in cultural anthropology and related disciplines but is attuned to the detailed appreciation of migrant biographies. By tracing past and present emplacements in the lives of active or aspiring migrants, the mobile life story focuses the exploration of past and present moments of hopefulness, and projects them into possible futures. Such a holistic methodology requires a varied selection of data collection techniques, as well as the time and incentive to pursue the details that bring a migrant biography to life. The gain of such an effort is a richness of detail that allows for a more fine-grained and engaging analysis.

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¹¹ The methodological point here is that this ordering should not be understood as an unchangeable personal history.

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