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"We Are Suffering Here"

Mobility, Belonging and Distinction in Contemporary Liberia

Maarten Bedert | ORCID: 0000-0002-5899-0663
Department of Infectious Diseases, Amsterdam UMC,
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
bedert.maarten@gmail.com

Abstract

Liberia is a state built on a history of migration. From the transatlantic slave trade to its contemporary generation of transnational citizens, images of elsewhere have always informed this West African country's local and national discussions of integration and exclusion. This paper shows how historical imaginations and representations of 'here' and 'there', of 'suffering' and 'escape', inform contemporary discourses of belonging in Liberia. I argue that the imagination of civilisation – *kwii* – and distinction plays an important role in the ways distance and mobility are perceived and articulated, both from a physical point of view and a moral-social point of view, at transnational and local levels. Rather than being merely tied to a national elite, the imagination of mobility is, I demonstrate, linked to an ethos of suffering articulated at all levels of society, informed by the experience of structural violence and crises over time.

Keywords

Liberia – mobility – suffering – belonging – civilisation

Résumé

Le Liberia est un État dont l'histoire repose sur la migration. De la traite transatlantique des esclaves à la génération actuelle constituée de citoyens transnationaux, des images de l'ailleurs ont toujours nourri, dans ce pays de l'Afrique de l'ouest, les débats locaux et nationaux au sujet de l'intégration et de l'exclusion. Cet article démontre comment les imaginaires et les représentations historiques de 'ici' et 'là-bas', de la 'souffrance' et de 'l'évasion' nourrissent les discours actuels sur l'appartenance au Libéria. Je défends

l'idée que l'imaginaire de la civilisation – *kwii* – et de la distinction joue un rôle prépondérant dans la manière dont la distance et la mobilité sont perçues et articulées à la fois d'un point de vue physique que d'un point de vue moral et social aux niveaux transnational et local. Sans être uniquement liée à une élite nationale, l'imaginaire de la mobilité est, comme je le démontre, lié à une éthique de la souffrance articulée à tous les niveaux de la société, enrichie par l'expérience de la violence structurelle et des crises à travers le temps.

Mots-clés

Libéria – mobilité – souffrance – appartenance – civilisation

During a short field trip to the north-east of Liberia in August 2017, I was enjoying a cup of tea in a local shop when a young man came up to me. We had crossed paths before, on several occasions in the city of Karnplay. He narrated how he had recently attempted to cross the Mediterranean to get to Europe. He travelled by car, and hid in a trunk for several days before he was held captive in Libya, where all his money and belongings were stolen from him. In the end, he decided to return home but was convinced that he would soon attempt another migration, despite the hardship he had encountered the first time around. When I asked him why, and whether he had considered what would be waiting for him once he crossed, he simply replied that there was nothing 'here' for him, nothing worth investing in. He was stuck, without any prospects or opportunities. His statement made me reflect on the implications of moving or being stuck in a marginal border town. Away from a highly centralised state, people in this town have experienced structural violence due to exclusionary national politics. They have further experienced multiple violent and devastating crises such as the civil war between 1989 and 2003, and the more recent Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2015. In addition, there is general economic hardship due to the country's reliance on the extraction of mineral resources.

From the vantage point of those who are 'stuck' and feel left behind, I reflect on the way a collective ethos of suffering connected to a locality inspires imaginaries of mobility towards (but also beyond) the West. Immobility is a topic that has received disproportionately little attention in migration studies. Whereas (the desire for) migration is considered the norm in a neoliberal and globalised world, immobility is associated with (national) boundaries imposed from the outside, and with more pronounced exclusionist policies or xenophobia (Glick

Schiller and Salazar 2013). Instead, immobility should be considered as a "process with determinants of its own" (Schewel 2020: 329; see also Coulter, Ham, and Findlay 2016; Gaibazzi 2015; Salazar and Smart 2011). Rather than the opposite of mobility, Paulo Gaibazzi (2013) has demonstrated how an agrarian ethos enables both a sedentary and a migratory lifestyle in rural Gambia. As suggested in the introduction (Ménard and Bedert, this issue), social imagination plays a central role in bringing together physical mobility with the achievement of (upward) social mobility. Migration, then, is imagined as being inspired by loss, on the one hand, and a desire for transformation and change in an attempt to escape structural violence, on the other hand. Anthropological reflections have likewise stressed the metaphysical dimensions of mobility and migration. Ghassan Hage, in conversation with Dimitris Papadopoulos, has argued that the desire for symbolic upward mobility is "an intrinsic feature of how we experience our humanity" (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004: 112). People feel they are 'going places' but without necessarily physically moving to new locations. Others have framed this desire through the trope of hope (Kleist and Thorsen 2016), new horizons of possibilities (Graw and Schielke 2012), or in-depth studies of the existential questions of migrants living on the margins (Lucht 2011).

Throughout Liberia, physical (im)mobility also forms an integral part of a paradigm of personal and collective development, an expression of desire to belong to a larger, modern world (Ferguson 2006; Simone 2001). In Liberian English, this is articulated through the emic notion of civilisation, or *kwii* (Bedert 2018; Moran 1990; Brown 1982; Tonkin 1981). *Kwii* constitutes a semiotic register (Bedert 2018; Agha 2007). Meanings attributed to this notion are both situated and relational, and are based on specific markers and practices like religious affiliation, clothing, eating habits, and economic activity. Mobility is not so much an 'extra' marker of the civilisational process, as one that exists parallel to these other markers. Physical mobility is often implied in the act of achieving a new social status: if people want to do better for themselves, this must happen elsewhere, whether it be in the United States (US) or in the next town. *Kwii* is opposed to *country* which stands for everything that is being considered localised, primitive or backwards. For instance, Christianity and Islam are considered *kwii* religions. Working as a civil servant, the wearing of western-style clothes, or the eating of western cuisine are contrasted with working as a farmer, the wearing of country cloth, or the eating of local produce. Formal education is an important marker of *kwii*-ness. Still, even small gestures or habits like using a spoon or hands to eat can provoke comments related to pretending to be *kwii* or *country*. These are more than oppositional, static categories. The notion of the semiotic register, a collection of performable signs that are recognised by sociohistorical communities (Agha 2007), implies that the use of both

concepts, *kwii* and *country*, is contingent and dependent on their users' self-definition. Throughout Liberian history, the meaning of *kwii* has proven fluid and dynamic. Still, the transition from *country* to *kwii* implies both advancement and loss at the same time, as sacrifices must be made to become *kwii*. People self-identifying as *kwii* would stress their advancement, while those who identify others as *kwii* would highlight those persons' disconnection, their loss of local belonging and authenticity.

In the case of Liberia, locality and (im)mobility are characterised by an *ethos of suffering* (Kohl and Schroven 2014; Bledsoe 1990). Suffering is inherent in the desire to move up, and to move out. In an apparent contradiction, however, the experience of structural violence (Farmer 2004; Shaw 2002; Bledsoe 1990) and the articulation, in comparison with those who left, of being 'here' as entailing suffering, create the basis for solidarity and collective identity. It is loaded with a sense of authenticity that characterises an identity that is locally emplaced. I follow Schroven and Kohl (2014: 4) who base their take on suffering from Kleinman (1997: 320) and consider it a social process that results out of "the transpersonal engagement with pain and misery." For many Liberians whose lives are marked by structural violence and exploitation, the experience of suffering becomes, I argue, a source of legitimacy (Lagrou 2011: 283). One that has a value ascribed to it in the articulation of membership in an imagined community. For many living in contemporary Liberia, suffering has turned into a trope (Højbjerg, Knörr, and Murphy 2017: 5–7) standing for exclusion, inequality, lack of access, and dispossession in their relationship with others. The significance of suffering is expressed linguistically in common expressions like "this is suffering me" or "I suffer for you," indicating that everyday life, here and now, is characterised by hardship and difficulty. In this paper, I detail how this ethos of suffering informs contemporary subjectivity through (a) historical experiences of state formation in Liberia, including the role of the transatlantic slave trade and early colonisation, (b) practices and meaning of mobility in the fields of education, labour, trade, or localised areas like 'town' and 'bush', (c) and intersectional status categories recognised in Liberia, such as the distinction between *kwii* and *country*.

Data for this contribution were collected during doctoral fieldwork between 2011 and 2013 in the northeast of Nimba County, close to the border with Guinea and Ivory Coast, and via subsequent short-term follow-up visits to the area between 2015 and 2017 (see figure 1). Most of the data was collected using participant observation, complemented by informal and semi-structured follow-up interviews. The research focused on the politics of integration and exclusion following the civil war. Discourse and practice surrounding the notion of *kwii* and attitudes towards 'strangers' were central to my project. Both were

FIGURE 1 Map indicating the site of ethnographic fieldwork in North Eastern Liberia

observed and discussed in everyday practice, in public and private settings, during ritualised ceremonies like funerals and weddings, and at moments of conflict, such as in dispute settlements or judicial settings.

The majority of the data presented throughout this paper were collected in and around Karnplay, a small regional centre with about 7000 inhabitants. It is a town where Dan speakers claim autochthonous firstcomer status. Considering the proposed link between physical and social mobility, locality becomes an important concept. Large parts of Nimba, including Karnplay, are both geographically and socio-politically remote from Monrovia, the Liberian capital. Despite its earlier (economic) relations with the coastal region and empires to the north, the region has been effectively incorporated into the Liberian state for about a century (Ford 1990, 1992). Founded by so-called Americo-Liberians (freed slaves relocated from the US), the Liberian state can be considered an autocratic settler regime whose power was, for a long time, concentrated in the coastal regions (Sawyer 1992; Liebenow 1969). For many groups in the so-called Hinterland, the nation-state has not always been the primary frame of reference for identity, trade, or mobility. Nevertheless, ideas of (self-)development and suffering are infused by the experience of violence and by its relation to the metropolis. Today, even the smallest locality has ties with kin or professionally with larger urban centres in the country of the wider West-African region.

In this article, I first provide a number of ethnographic snapshots that demonstrate the divergent attitudes to and experiences with (im)mobility, and how they relate to aspirations for advancement. Second, I explore how social imagination relates to patterns of mobility by tracing diasporic entanglements between Liberia and the United States. The centrality of the US in people's imagination is further linked to the development of a national identity by a political elite of settler origin. Local imaginaries, I demonstrate, emphasise the centrality of mobility and development in ways that go beyond either the US or the west in general. My third and final section reflects on immobility and the implications of being stuck based on the metaphor of the "bush" and the experience of crisis.

1 Those Who Stay: The Experience of Suffering, Precarity, and Belonging

Since the civil war in Liberia, many have left the country through third-country resettlement programs. Numerous Liberians today have relatives living abroad, and diasporic remittances are economically significant in the lives of many individuals. Socially, having access to relatives abroad becomes a source of great pride and status. It is a way of achieving *kwii* status for people who are themselves unable to move. However, for those who have relatives abroad but who do not derive material or other benefits from their relationship, life is frustrating. To illustrate this I present the experience of Kpose, a middle-aged woman who is married to a high school teacher but who makes a significant contribution to the family's livelihood as a travelling saleswoman going from market to market (cf. Moran 1990 on gender and prestige). Kpose and her husband enjoy respect because of the work they do; playing an active role in politics, their church, and not shying away from their responsibilities towards their kin and community. Realising full well their role as public figures, the maintenance of a good reputation is important to Kpose and her husband. This is something she has often struggled with when her children misbehave in town, if she feels people betray her trust, or if people speak ill of her in the market. Based on her achievements and status, and compared to many of her neighbours in the community, Kpose would identify as *kwii*. As Hage would put it, she is convinced that she is "going places" without actually migrating (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004: 112). Still, the relativity of her positioning is clear in the way she perceives those who managed to escape the locality.

One night, we sat down under a bright full moon and Kpose suddenly became nostalgic as she reminisced about the period immediately prior to the

war: "I was looking beautiful back then, and one man really loved me." With her husband away fighting in the war, she was tempted to follow this man but never acted on it. "Life was sweet then," compared to today. She declared that it was the war that meant that, today, "we are suffering here," lamenting the deplorable state of her house, her inability to fund the higher education of her daughter, and the burden put on her by other family members. She mentioned how her husband's brother was 'lucky' enough to have made it to the US, but this only aggravated the situation. "Since he is there, we can't hear from him any more," she complained. Once, after a long absence, he forced himself to come back to Liberia to see his family members. The reunion got off to a rough start, as the man brought hardly any gifts for his relatives. He did not even have a house in which he could stay, and she was forced to put him up for the duration of his visit. She even had to ask her own children to leave her house during that time. It was inexplicable to her that a Liberian person living in the US would not build a house in Liberia to which he could return to, or provide housing for children who had stayed behind. During her brother-in-law's stay, Kpose said, she had also had to "work as a slave," preparing his food, bringing him mineral water, and washing his clothes.

Three elements shine through in Kpose's reminiscences. First, the focus on her own situation as one of suffering, compared to people who have the chance to leave. Her husband's brother behaved like a *kwii* – advanced but disconnected from local reality. He was not identifying with local manners and practices but, instead, distanced himself by demanding "special" treatment. Several years after this conversation, her husband had the chance to make a short-term visit to the US: she was rather upset that he came back. She would have preferred him to stay in the US illegally under precarious conditions. It was her expectation that her husband would arrange for their children to travel to the US, rather than for him to come back home to the life he knows and enjoys. She expected him to suffer for their children's future.

A second frustration that shines through in Kpose's account is her inability to profit from membership in a transnational network. For those who find themselves unable to move and migrate, access to networks of migrants provides alternative ways to achieve a sense of distinction and *kwii*-ness. John, for instance, is a local businessman who has his feet in several businesses throughout the region. He built a new house of multiple stories – not a typical sight in the neighbourhood. He has a shop along the town's main road, selling everything from toothbrushes to raw building materials. One day I walked in, and found him talking on the phone to his sister who resides in the US. He later explained that many of his projects became possible because of his sister's financial support. He built two guesthouses which were rented out to NGOs or

turned into a children's day care. His standing within the community grew as he leased motorbikes to young men who put it 'on traffic'. These motorbikes allow young people to be (self-)employed and mobile. By transporting passengers, they get to see other places and bigger cities, to experience stories of traders and prominent residents. In this case, John enables physical mobility for young people while, at the same time, upgrading his own standing. He did express, on several occasions, that he has no intention to travel himself: in fact, he openly questioned the purpose of entering an insecure lifestyle abroad if that meant abandoning everything he has built in his hometown. Instead, he relies on the 'next best thing', the condition of being in the place where he knows 'his' people, where he can establish himself as a big man, albeit of the small kind. Such persons are described by Utas (2012) when he highlights the significance of networks in facilitating the development of big men in contexts where governance is organised beyond the state.

John's narrative is only one of many examples of people who have been able to build lives and economic livelihoods based on the connections they have abroad. People have received chainsaws, welding machines, goods for petty trading, cars for the transport industry, to name but a few examples. The social position for many on the receiving end of these streams of goods and finances continues to be relatively precarious. As they are merely a node in a network, the connections on which they rely can easily be broken. One of the mechanics in town received money for a generator from his sister in the US. She clearly stated that he would not be getting anything beyond this gift and was supposed to put it to good use. He takes care of his generator as if it is his most precious possession and lives in fear day in and day out just in case something would happen to it. This machine provides the opportunity to sustain his lifestyle, but not to further develop himself or escape the more structural conditions he finds himself in. Despite appeals from others, he stubbornly refuses to call his relatives who reside in the US with further requests or demands. He fears being cut-off completely.

Returning to Kpose's narrative, a third frustration can be heard in the way she talks about how her husband's brother travelled to the US. Her biggest frustration was not only that he did not send anything home, but also that he had 'luck'. During the war, Kpose and her husband's brother were all residing in refugee camps abroad when he was selected for resettlement by one of the humanitarian aid organisations. In conversations with others, this way of travelling was often labelled as 'easy', given that international organisations 'carried' these beneficiaries away. In the popular imagination, this process meant that migration was made easy for them. They did not have to suffer for their benefits, which were just presented to them. Everybody shared the collective

experience of the war and had, at some point or another, to seek refuge whether within Liberia itself or abroad, in Guinea or Ivory Coast. But whereas for some, suffering resulted in a simple return home after the war, for other it presented the opportunity to travel elsewhere.

A similar narrative can be found when it comes to playing – and winning – the Diversity Visa or the Green Card lottery (Batema 2019; Piot and Batema 2019; Piot 2010; Piot and Pommerolle 2006). One of my interlocutor's fathers had participated and won the green card lottery. He ended up travelling to the US. When people narrated this story to me, it was not only jealousy that could be heard but also envy; envy at the ease with which he was 'picked up' from his local home and 'carried' away. Talking to his son, he described the arduous process his father had to go through, but this reality is not considered by the outside observer. This experience stands in stark contrast to that of the young man's attempt to cross the Mediterranean, described in the vignette at the beginning of the article.

The experience of suffering among those who stay behind is not only about loss or defeat, but also concerns the sense of belonging based on toughness and authenticity. The embodiment of this toughness came out during my fieldwork, when people asked to see and feel my hands. The softness of my skin was compared to the hardened skin on their palms, and this served as an indication of how hard their life was. "On that side," that of the West, "people don't know hard work." Contrastingly, in Liberia "we are suffering, we can brush a whole farm with our bare hands. You wouldn't be able; your hands would bleed." Similar conversations occurred about food: would I, as a westerner, be able to eat their *country* rice or their pepper, or even to drink their local water? Would my stomach be tough enough to handle it? This community's discourse on suffering creates a sense of belonging that is highly localised. Suffering becomes a way to articulate distinction in the negative sense, where one is not 'more cultured' but rather 'more raw', and therefore more authentic.

Suffering as a trope not only serves as a way to capture local precarity and insecurity but also creates a localised sense of community for those who stay. Still, discourse on distinction and development, based on the imaginary that elsewhere is better, continues to inform (trans-)national and local migratory patterns. This dynamic between mobility and immobility results from historical patterns of migration and governance that require a more detailed look.

2 Civilisation, Suffering and Historical Patterns of Migration

2.1 Kwii-*ness and Diasporic Entanglements*

As illustrated by Kpose's experiences, the US, as 'a better elsewhere', holds a special place in the imagination of many Liberians. Relations between the US and Liberia have been established by migratory movements in both directions. These movements are key to understanding the structural violence that informs contemporary imaginations of mobility, suffering and distinction.

The first of these key movements was the transatlantic slave trade, which brought Africans to the US forcefully to work on plantations (Jones and Johnson 1980). Subsequently, in the nineteenth century, a branch of the abolitionist movement envisioned the return of freed slaves to Africa (Clegg 2004; Fairhead et al. 2003; Liebenow 1969; Gershoni 1985). This group of resettled slaves would come to be called the Americo-Liberians: they are considered the founders of the Liberian state. Between the 1950s and 1970s temporary waves of migration back and forth to the US linked Liberians to new business and educational opportunities. Then, with the outbreak of the civil war in Liberia in the 1980s, involuntary or forced migration due to violence led to a "conflict-generated diaspora" (Lubkemann 2004; see also 2015; Pailey 2016; 2018). Finally, since the transition to peace, a group of Liberians who are able to travel back and forth to America and to maintain ties with both places has emerged. Reilly (2014: 38) refers to this phase of circular migration by Liberians who are active both in their homeland and in the US as the "era of the transnational citizen."

Because of the historic links between the two countries, the US continues to be Liberians' ultimate Elsewhere. It is the country that is the most distant and difficult to reach, but it is also, for many Liberian people, the land ultimately most associated with potential success. Lubkemann (2016: 209) identifies the existence of a "transnational social field" between the two countries.[1] He alludes to the significance of imagination and presentation in identity discourse. Drawing on historical (the 'back-to-Africa' movement for freed slaves) and contemporary examples (forced migration as a result of civil war), he argues that aspirations for betterment are not only expressed in temporal terms but are also spatialised and closely associated with physical relocation:

1 I focus here on the United States because of its historic connections with Liberia. There is a significant Liberian diaspora throughout Europe, Australia and other parts of the world as well, mainly due to the civil war. Nevertheless, the US continues to play the crucial role in Liberian social imagination.

> Diasporan identity narratives thus come to imply that the journey of the self from an undesirable condition of structural violence to a desirable alternative in which authenticity is realized cannot occur without spatial relocation.
>
> LUBKEMANN: 2016:79

He acknowledges the experience of exclusion and suffering as a ground upon which the better elsewhere is imagined. Freed slaves experienced continued oppression in the nineteenth century US (Fairhead et al. 2003), whereas more recent waves of migration involved refugees who were physically under attack during the Liberian civil war.

The intense connections that Lubkemann describes demonstrate that not only is the US not conceived as radically different from Liberia in the social imagination of Liberians, but also that for many this conception has become emplaced and localised (Ménard and Bedert, this issue). The local emplacement of the US has its roots in the Americo-Liberian elite's construction of Liberian national identity, one that is today being reconstructed by members of the diaspora under different terms that reclaim the centrality of the US as a naturalised extension of Liberia (see also Pailey 2018, 2016).

2.2 Kwii-*ness, National Identity and Local Suffering*

The Americo-Liberian elite adopted a rather narrow and specific interpretation of *kwii*, as it set them apart from the autochthonous populations of the so-called Hinterland. The freed slaves that arrived from the US in the first half of the nineteenth century were settled on a small piece of land obtained through the coercion of a local chief. Contact with the interior happened under the motto of 'civilisation and Christianity', in an attempt to 'develop' the indigenous populations. Their reduction of *kwii*-ness to their civilising mission became hegemonic, and even entailed biological and racial overtones. Fairhead et al. (2003) describe the disdain of early explorers towards indigenous peoples. In travel reports, racial hierarchies were described that put Americo-Liberians at the top, Muslim traders and clerics one step below, with animist indigenous populations placed at the bottom of the scale. These politics of distinction reproduced the racial politics that settlers had encountered in the US (Bedert 2018; Moran 1990). Over time, the settlers developed a highly oppressive and exclusionary one-party state that limited citizenship, rights to own land, and the right to vote to Americo-Liberians, or to those who had become 'civilised' or *kwii*. The main avenue towards becoming *kwii* and thus assimilated to the ruling class was through education. Socially, their idea of civilisation influenced politics of mobility. Access remained tightly regulated and required the denun-

ciation of 'traditional' values, habits and (religious) practices. Proficiency in English, a job as a civil servant or even food and clothing habits were indicative of membership among this elite. Physical mobility and residency patterns were an important aspect of the path towards civilisation. *Kwii* was associated with an urban lifestyle (Fraenkel 1960) set apart from rural life. It comes as no surprise that Americo-Liberians favoured a career in politics, as a preacher or a teacher, and showed disdain for agriculture.

Rather than being directed inwards, the creation of national identity for Americo-Liberians was oriented outwards to their 'homeland', the US. Several markers and idioms still refer to this hegemonic idea among the Americo-Liberians.[2] The national motto for Liberia reads "for the love of liberty that brought us here," firmly inscribing the link with the US across the Atlantic. The national emblem represents a ship and a shovel in the sand. Whereas the first refers to the boats on which the Americo-Liberians arrived, the shovel refers to the technical and agricultural development they brought. The constitution of Liberia is largely modelled on that of the US, where the first ten Liberian presidents were born. The capital city is named after US President Monroe, the nation's flag resembles that of the US, and Liberians often refer to their country as being the fifty-first state. The intense connection to the US could be observed during the civil war, when people started laying down the bodies of their dead family members and friends in front of the American embassy: they were *expecting* the US army to come and resolve the conflict.[3]

In terms of policy, a physical border was maintained that separated the 'coastal' settlements and the so-called 'Hinterland'. Everything beyond the forty-mile boundary constituted the interior and was governed by different rules and regulations (Tonkin 2010: 113). One of the main strategies to overcome spatial separation was the practice of fosterage, in which children physically left their homes to live with Americo-Liberian families in urban areas. Americo-Liberians were very concerned about their genealogy, so as to ensure the social reproduction of their elite status. Nevertheless, male settlers were known to have affairs with indigenous women and would take the children into their homes, working them into the family genealogy by giving them their family names and allowing them to become civilised. In fact, many of these children operated as a (domestic) labour force for these families (Moran 1990: 92). Even if these foster children eventually returned to their homes in the hinterland, they occupied different social positions.

2 Many of these markers are contested as they point to the problematic history of exclusion and elitism in Liberia.

3 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3084771.stm, last accessed 01/12/2020.

When collecting settlement histories, elders who had spent considerable time with *kwii* families were not considered to be appropriate orators, as they are not authoritative on local histories and kin relations (see Bedert 2017). John was one of the elder siblings belonging to the founding lineage in Karnplay. At the age of eleven, he had gone to Monrovia to live with his aunt, and to attend school there. Even though he returned to Karnplay episodically, most of his education took place in urban areas. He ended up at a vocational school, landing a job at LAMCO, an international iron ore company where he worked for over twenty years and attained senior positions. When the war broke out, he was forced to leave Liberia, and when he returned in the mid-1990s he decided to focus on furthering his education in Karnplay, becoming president of the parent-teacher association. Since his return, he has lived in seclusion on a hill and has developed a nostalgia for 'normal day' Liberia, where education was valued and produced 'decent citizens'. John's long-term absence and his educational and job experience made it difficult for him to readjust to local practices. He is perceived (and perceives himself) as civilised because of the experiences he gained elsewhere and therefore cannot (or does not desire to) articulate tropes of suffering that are constitutive of belonging to a local community.

2.3 *A Better Elsewhere beyond "The West"*

The premise of physical mobility as the way to achieve *kwii*-ness is not limited to the discourse and practices that surround Americo-Liberian hegemony in the nation's history and diasporic entanglements. It is the result of a complex interplay between local patterns of migration and patterns of social integration and exclusion that have been, and continue to be, reproduced over generations. Mobility and migration have always been significant themes in Liberia's past before they became associated with the imaginary of the nation. Elisabeth Tonkin claimed that "civilization [...] got to Liberia before the Liberians" (Tonkin 1981: 310; see also Moran 1990 chapter 3). I have elaborated elsewhere how the very notion of *kwii* predates the foundation of the Liberian state, and that today it is associated not with Americo-Liberians but rather with a more elusive urban elite (Bedert 2018). Still, even at a local level, structural violence and exclusion continue to inform the ethos of suffering, and the imagination of a better elsewhere.

Warren d'Azevedo (1962: 533–536) goes as far as to identify mobility as one of the key features of the local political culture in this West Atlantic region. In a diffusionist analysis, he demonstrates how historical patterns of migration and co-existence between groups produced a political economy based on the distinction between landlords and strangers, and an associated sense of cultural homogeneity and mutual inter-ethnic recognition: this is based on shared,

inter-ethnic, regional adherence to the landlord-stranger conceptual pairing (see also Murphy 2010). He understands that mobility is key to processes of social differentiation between first settlers in a territory and those who settled in the same territory at a later stage (McGovern 2012; Højbjerg 1999).

Bledsoe and Murphy (1987) have shown that kinship and territory are two crucial elements around which local belonging is articulated (Bedert 2016). Migration and settlement patterns act as pivotal moments around which the oral history of a community is built. These migrations are often guided by episodes of suffering and exclusion. Oral histories from the region (cf. Bedert 2017), for instance, are rife with examples of how migration is linked to cathartic moments in individuals' and collectives' lives. In these narratives, there is mention of warriors, as leaders of families and followers, who are forced to leave their original home because of a falling out they had with family members, because they were accused of adultery, or because they killed family members, any one of which incidents might have made their presence untenable. In some cases, they were chased out of their original settlements by rival warriors. Their wanderings to a new home are, often, also chaotic and difficult.

This focus on migration in relation to ethnogenesis is well-described in the work of Igor Kopytoff (1987), who details how so-called frontiersmen would leave their original settlement in search for political and economic freedom. However, their political and moral values would be taken from where they left, so there was never a complete break with the past. This process is, to a certain extent, still ongoing (O'Kane and Ménard 2015). As I have written elsewhere (Bedert 2016: 40–42), new villages are still being formed by people trying to move away from communities that are overbearing, in which social control is too strong, or in which social and economic opportunities are experienced as too limited. In other words, the 'here and now' for these actors is characterised by a sense of suffering, frustration and hardship.

Moving out, thus, allows people to escape the mental, social, political or economic suffering they encounter in their everyday lives. To be the first new settlers in a new territory promises power and authority, as those who are first would be the landowners and gain political control. In that sense, 'elsewhere' entails the promise of development. Still, the road towards this new goal is equally characterised by insecurity and difficulty. During fieldwork, I stopped at one man's farm where he had built a small temporary settlement from mud and sticks. He elaborated that life was made impossible for him where he lived. He hoped to, over time, develop his own village in this remote land where he is now making his farm. To achieve this, he would soon invite some young men to work on the farm with him. As he becomes the landlord of this settlement, he sees it as his task to treat his residents well and to create an environment

that is suitable for them to settle more permanently. For this farmer, the elsewhere that is envisioned as better is not a major urban centre but a remote, undeveloped area of farmland. As with Koptyoff's frontiersmen, he hopes to establish and develop a community that is better than the one he left behind. However, in order to achieve this, the farmer expects to suffer through hardship and deal with the initial loneliness, in a situation where there is no guarantee of success. This combination of the aspiration for betterment in a new locality with an ethos of suffering echoes the narratives on *kwii*-ness as articulated in processes of transnational migration.

3 On Being Stuck – *Kwii* and Immobility

3.1 *"The Bush" as a Metaphor for Backwardness*

The distinction between being or becoming *kwii* and being considered *country* has a geographical connotation that is articulated discursively. In the Dan language, the notion of *blɣ* (translated as 'the bush') stands for backwardness and primitiveness. When working on a project that involved collecting data in rural communities, the team of local researchers that we trained expressed concerns about the stays in Kakata and Gbanga that their job entailed. These are the capital cities of Margibi and Bong County, two places that might be considered as urban and where all necessary provisions are available. Still, they wanted reassurance that clean water would be made available. This was a necessity as they were 'going to the bush', a place they had worked so hard to escape.

Before deciding on Karnplay as the place where I would stay for my doctoral research, my host in Sanniquellie, Nimba County's capital city, was confused and worried about my plan to go and sit down 'in the bush'. Later, when I was collecting oral histories and visiting nearby villages in the district, people in Karnplay laughed when they saw me going 'to the bush'. As I was staying in those very villages, residents often were out 'in the bush' as they were working on their farmlands. Finally, since the farm is still cultivated, the uncultivated forest serves as the ultimate bush. Among Dan speakers, the common expression "*ɣ gɔ blɣ*" can be translated as meaning 'you come from the bush', but is mostly used metaphorically to indicate that someone is considered backward or primitive in his or her behaviour, language use, clothing style, and so forth. Such expressions serve as insults or reprimands.

The notion of the bush figures prominently in relation to migration and development in various parts of West Africa. However, the meaning attributed to the notion of the bush tends to vary. Maybritt Jill Alpes describes the practice

of 'bush-falling' among aspiring migrants from Cameroon, where the bush symbolises the West, the wilderness that needs to be conquered and from where trophies can be brought home (Alpes 2012: 91). Paolo Gaibazzi notes how young men in Gambia, whose ambitions to migrate are curbed by increasing restrictions and regulations, are therefore "bound to the bush." They are forced to "sit down," making life work as farmers rather than travellers (Gaibazzi 2015: 3). The distinction between the village/town and the bush in the Liberian context shows the situated and relative meaning ascribed to both locations. This corresponds to what Bill Murphy (1980, 1981) has written about the distinction between the village and the forest as one between order and disorder, between safety and danger, and between open-ness and secrecy. This distinction is not self-evident but is articulated, rather, in moments of interaction that reproduce power relations between individuals and groups (Murphy 1981). The bush, whether as a physical demarcation or as a social attribute, is conceived as something that needs to be conquered and transcended, and as requiring, therefore, active interventions by those seeking to better themselves. This intervention, as in the practice of fosterage, inherently entails suffering. At the same time, people who are too *kwii*-like are considered out of touch and unable to live or survive in the bush: this represents a 'coming back' to the sense of authenticity and belonging that is associated with suffering and locality.

Many of those resident in Karnplay move to the city to escape the locality of the village. Monrovia, the country's capital, is referred to in Dan as *kwiipleu*, literally 'the home of *kwii*-people'. One of the most important means with which to achieve a *kwii*-status and to escape the locality is through education, to which discourse on *kwii* is explicitly related. For instance, *kwii* is often translated as 'book'. *Mɛ-kwii* are people who 'know book' and *kwii-ben* means to write a book. In small localities, many of young people invest heavily in attending high school in Karnplay. They leave their village, often to live with strangers for whom they work in return for a room and, occasionally, some food. Such circumstances are difficult – that is, people suffer through them – but are considered a necessity to get away from home. High school graduation ceremonies are often celebrated as end points of suffering and as an escape out of the locality. For many young graduates, however, the high school degree is the highest level of learning they will achieve, as opportunities are limited in rural areas. Eva Harman (2014), in a brief reflection, has indicated the significance of continuing with school during the Ebola outbreak. Even in times of crisis, the drive to continue education so as to realise the potential of *kwii*-ness trumps the increased risk of sickness and even potential death.

3.2 (*Im*)*mobility During Moments of Crisis*

Having addressed the link between structural violence and the desire for distinction by considering the *longue durée* in both the transnational and local imagination, (im)mobility also has a generational component, not in the least for young people who were mobilised into the Liberian civil war (1989–2003). Mats Utas (2008) has explicitly linked the taking up of arms with the search for alternative pathways to the achievement of a civilised, *kwii*, status. For Utas (2008: 112), "the enlistment of young Liberians in rebel armies follows an analogous logic with earlier labour and educational migration inside as well as outside the country." With the development of plantations for the production of rubber and other cash crops, many young Liberians had, up to the 1970s, the opportunity to go and work as wage labourers. Their remittances were often used to develop family farms at home (Utas 2008: 116). After the economic collapse of the 1980s, however, many young men saw their pathway to development and modernity blocked. They were in search of alternative ways to achieve this status when the war broke out in the late 1980s. For many of them, violence became the answer to their questions, and they adopted anti-social personas, "selfish – almost like the white man", which fitted well "with a cultural concept of the amoral hero" (Utas 2008: 120).

Since the end of the war, many ex-combatants have found themselves back in the same social position as before the war. Their enlistment into rebel armies did not deliver on the promise of achieving a civilised status. However, divergent pathways to development and civilisation are still being discussed and negotiated. This is illustrated by a brief excerpt from a research stint in Voinjama, Lofa County, where I spent three months in 2006, investigating the position of young ex-combatants. Their narratives stressed the tension between the desire for betterment and the frustration of 'being stuck'. Especially interesting is the group of young men who refused to partake in the official disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration (DDR) programmes. DDR programmes were set up by the international community in order to ensure the smooth reintegration of former fighters in their respective communities. As in the case of formal education, former fighters were promised the tools and the means to become 'men' in their own right. Their discourse on the lived experience of DDR was somewhat different. During fieldwork, I heard rumours of an elusive place referred to as the 'ghetto', where former combatants mostly spent the day. Hidden in a dark corner at the edge of town, the ghetto was a makeshift building made from corrugated sheets. In one of their get-togethers, one man defended his denunciation of DDR programmes by saying that "they send you from one workshop to another." He lamented that there was no prospect for proper 'development', and that young men were, again, put in a waiting room before being consid-

ered as responsible adults. This young man took pride in the fact that he was taking responsibility for himself and that he found a job as a security guard with a local company. Meeting in the 'ghetto', both geographically and socially a marginal place within the town, these young men suffer through their exclusion in an attempt to find ways out of their dire predicament. By abstaining from the formal DDR program and seeking one's own trajectory towards integration (for example by working as a security guard), alternative pathways to civilised status were explored.

The experiences of young people meeting in the ghetto corresponds to broader narratives of mobilisation of young people during the war in Sierra Leone. Peters and Richards (1998), for instance, highlighted the frustration of young people as they lacked concrete educational opportunities (see also Peters 2011). Elsewhere, Paul Richards (2005) has referred to the hardships that life under gerontocratic rule entailed for many young people. Their subsequent mobilisation was the result of the forced division of labour in rural areas. As such, young people were denied access to land, marriage, and ultimately adulthood. Their turning to violence was considered a way out from under these restrictive conditions.

Henrik Vigh (2009, 2010) has written extensively on the notion of social death and the social moratorium to describe the context many young people in West Africa find themselves in, in the aftermath of the crises they have encountered and lived through. Much of his empirical evidence has been collected in urban contexts (see also Hoffman 2007, 2011), which is different from Richards' argument outlined above. Vigh describes the way youth must navigate (another reference to mobility) a highly insecure and fluctuating landscape in order to access very scarce opportunities.[4] They find themselves in a situation where their pathways to social becoming are severely restricted. This makes them easy targets for those who would see them mobilised into war. Vigh's concept of navigation refers to an almost tactical moving of subaltern subjects in disadvantageous surroundings: this recalls Michel de Certeau's (1984) work on the practice of everyday life, and many studies on bricolage and the bricoleurs who operate as entrepreneurs in an ever changing environment, for instance in rapidly urbanising surroundings.

Both of these examples, youth mobilisation during civil war and the navigation of young urban residents, are lessons in how the imagination of upward (social) mobility is reproduced as a way out of a context that is characterised by suffering and limited opportunities. Throughout West Africa, examples can

4 Again, geography in relation to mobility.

be found of how upward mobility is imagined. These indicate that those who lack physical mobility, or who find pathways to modernity and a civilised status restricted, place value on tropes of suffering as a way in which to articulate belonging to a local community and to add value to 'being stuck'. At the same time, despite finding avenues to civilised status blocked, they seek alternative pathways to achieve that status. Beyond international or transnational migration patterns, these examples demonstrate the significance of social imagination linked to mobility. Therefore mobility in general is not only a matter of physical movement but also the possibility and envisioned freedom of movement.

3 Conclusion

Studies focusing on migration and mobility have highlighted both physical displacement and the desire for (upward) social mobility in contexts where physical mobility is restricted. Against this background, I have used an in-depth ethnographic approach to deconstruct the regimes of mobility that are, in today's Liberia, being reproduced on the basis of a history of migration, and on the politics of betterment and advancement. The complex interplay of historical and contemporary experiences occurred not in a geographically isolated context but in a relational and globally connected manner. Whereas Liberia has a long historical relationship with the United States, consisting of flows in both directions, I have shown that the imagination of a better elsewhere is also grounded in local patterns of migration and settlement strategies. In this light, the US is not to be seen as a radically different 'elsewhere', but as one that is emplaced in a localised continuum of mobility and betterment.

To understand the significance of the US, however, it is necessary to recognise the hegemonic role of the Americo-Liberian settlers who cemented notions of distinction and differentiation in which space played a central role. Inspired by their experiences in the US, these settlers put in place in Liberia a system of exclusion towards the autochthonous population. As the result of forced migration due to civil war, the US has become an attainable destination for many Liberians. The result has been that the notion of civilisation is no longer controlled by the Americo-Liberians, but is now informed by a more elusive and diverse urban elite. What has not changed, however, is that, for those who stay, the social imagination linked with mobility, both physical and social, continues to be linked to an ethos of suffering. Other African states have had different colonial and post-colonial trajectories, but have still experienced similar dynamics of mobility and immigration. Understanding the importance of

the social imagination in motivations to migrate (or not) are crucial if we want to understand patterns of mobility from a comparative perspective.

This ethos of suffering as it links to mobility is articulated as part of a localised political culture manifested in settlement patterns and the determination of local hierarchies, in recent episodes of violent conflict with the mobilisation of young men, and is translated amongst those who stay behind. I have shown how migration and mobility are implied in the desire to achieve a higher social status. The other side of this coin is that the lives of those who stay are characterised by an experience of suffering. This sense of suffering contributes to local integration and the creation of a collective identity, one which stands in contrast to those who made it 'out'. Rather than being only negative, it becomes a source of legitimacy indicating that those who stay are – or have to be – strong enough to face the suffering they live through.

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