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► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Walther, Allen Howard, Denis Retaillé. West African Spatial Patterns of Economic Activities: Combining the ‘Spatial Factor’ and ‘Mobile Space’ Approaches. African historical studies, 2015, pp.10.1080/00020184.2015.1041286. 10.1080/00020184.2015.1041286 . hal-01177772

HAL Id: hal-01177772

<https://hal.science/hal-01177772>

Submitted on 17 Jul 2015

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West African Spatial Patterns of Economic Activities: Combining the ‘Spatial Factor’ and ‘Mobile Space’ Approaches

Olivier J. Walther

University of Southern Denmark and Rutgers University, ow@sam.sdu.dk

Allen M. Howard

Rutgers University

Denis Retaillé

University of Bordeaux and CNRS

Revised version submitted to *African Studies*, June 2, 2014

Acknowledgments: This research is supported by the National Research Fund of Luxembourg (CROSSTRADe Project C10/LM/783313 and WANETS Project MOBILITY/12/4753257). Olivier Walther and Allen Howard wish to thank the Center for African Studies and Division of Global Affairs at Rutgers University for support. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2012 African Borderlands Research Network Conference in Edinburgh.

Abstract: Over the last 30 years, two different bodies of literature developed by both U.S. historians and francophone geographers have moved toward similar conclusions regarding West African economic spatial patterns. Despite their different backgrounds, both the ‘spatial factor’ approach promoted by historians and the ‘mobile space’ approach developed by geographers view exchange centers as nodes of transnational trade networks *and* places in production territories, and perceive spatial dynamics as highly dependent on shifts of trade flows and production activities. The objective of this paper is to bring these two approaches together. We analyze the linguistic, disciplinary and geographic barriers that have separated them, and explain why and how these obstacles are being overcome. We then turn to what the two approaches have in common, notably their emphasis on actors in space, particularly traders, and where their differences lie. Finally, we show how a combined approach can make a significant contribution to the scholarly study of space in West Africa. We argue that continuing dialogue among fields can contribute to a reassessment of development policies.

Keywords: economic spatial patterns; spatial factor; mobility; trade; border markets; West Africa; Sahel; Sierra Leone

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, two different bodies of literature have come to similar conclusions regarding West African economic spatial patterns. Historians have developed an understanding of how spatial patterns of economic activities have changed over the past several centuries. Building on an analysis of the Sierra Leone-Guinea region in particular, and other regions as well, Howard and colleagues have developed the ‘spatial factor’ approach to African history writing (Howard 1976, 2005a, 2005b, 2010, Howard and Skinner 1984, Howard and Shain 2005). This perspective has contributed to integrating the social, material, and perceptual aspects of place and region. Over approximately the same period of time, francophone geographers developed a geographical approach from the analysis of the Sahel region that focused on the way contemporary West African societies interact with space (Retailié 1984, 1995, 2005, 2013; Retailié and Walther 2011). Known as the ‘mobile space’ approach, this perspective contributed to the development of a conceptual model which clarifies how traders have used mobility to counter the uncertainties they face (Retailié and Walther 2014).

The objective of this article is to bring these two approaches together. We are first interested in understanding how the two approaches have evolved, often in parallel ways. For sure, historians and geographers have long worked together in exploring trade networks. Forums and colloquiums have, for quite some period of time, brought together Africans, Americans, and Europeans, crossing French and English language scholarship around thematic areas of research. In each of the disciplines, the scholars writing in French have influenced those writing in English, and vice versa. But very few attempts have been made to build a comprehensive spatial analysis of economic activities that would incorporate history, geography, and other fields.

Despite their different backgrounds the ‘spatial factor’ and the ‘mobile space’ approaches share a number of points of convergence. Both see traders as highly capable of developing flexible spatial patterns that aim at benefiting from the structural and cyclical shortages of food and manufactured products that have characterized West Africa, while minimizing their exposure to climatic and political uncertainty. The two approaches also view exchange centers as both nodes of trans-regional or transnational trade networks and places in production territories. Focusing on a number of key exchange sites, they see spatial economic “development” as resulting from the combination of trade and production activities but also focus on the potential competition between these two forces.

We also examine certain important differences in the two approaches to spatial aspects of conflict, especially the ways in which the ‘spatial factor’ incorporates conflict, accumulation, and power into the analysis. Finally, we show that a combined approach of West African spatial patterns can make a significant contribution to the scholarly study of space, while also bearing on current economic policies. Bringing together the two schools of thought, we argue, focuses analysis on the centrality of social actors rather than on the demographic size of places, and redefines the space of action targeted by policies by identifying relevant functional regions that potentially cut across national boundaries.

Background to the ‘spatial factor’ and the ‘mobile space’ approaches

Spatial factor

The spatial factor approach has built upon works on West African trade by historians and historically oriented geographers but has attempted to apply spatial theory more explicitly than others have done and to incorporate the insights of social history. The major synthetic studies of African economic history typically have elaborated typologies of traders, looked at the interconnections of African and European commercial systems and the impacts of such connections for African “development,” and addressed questions raised by economists, such as how African traders met demand through horizontal and vertical integration, or expanded their scale of operation (Hopkins 1973: 58-62; Austen 1987: 81-102). Although some historians of commerce made reference to spatial concepts, such as central places or networks, they tended to do so in passing or in a metaphorical way (Curtin 1975). In a series of early articles, Howard and colleagues working on the Sierra Leone-Guinea region experimented with bringing historical cases and spatial theory together in a systematic manner (Howard 1976, Howard and Skinner 1984). The application of spatial tools evolved further when a number of historians and anthropologists, doing research on various questions in East, Central, and West Africa, exchanged ideas through papers and panels at meetings of the American History Association and the Social Science History Association. This collaboration resulted in the 2005 book, *The Spatial Factor in African History*, edited by Howard and Shane.

Beyond that, Howard (1997, 2007, in preparation) has attempted to combine insights from African social history with the analytic power of geographers, particularly John Agnew (1993) and Allan Pred (1990), in order to gain a deeper understanding of traders’ spatial strategies and the historical dynamics of the Sierra Leone-Guinea commercial system. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, that commercial system and its component parts were built, re-shaped, and destroyed through cooperation and conflict among traders, political power holders, and others. Traders – expressing certain forms of masculinity and operating in an ethnically fluid environment – accumulated and invested resources in their households and in social, political, and commercial centers and networks, thus shaping space. British and French imperial and technological intervention and corporate expansion profoundly altered spatial structures and modes of accumulation and investment. Understanding traders’ strategies and the dynamics of structures requires a multi-level analysis that moves back and forth from the local to the regional to the global, each level existing in many manifestations and exerting influence upon traders.

The spatial factor approach has also attempted to incorporate contemporary understanding of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class in West Africa and the continent generally, particularly as it pertains to place (Howard 2003, 2010). Various scholars have shown that aspects of identity and social position are – and long have been – fluid and both contested and represented in place. Towns and cities have been in the pre-colonial and colonial past and are today sites of struggle. Titled authorities, religious leaders, and power holders seek to assert their control over others through structuring palaces, schools, government buildings, social residences, and points of exchange. Others resist such control or seek to organize places in alternative ways. Or they try to ascribe

different meanings to places and events-in-places than the meanings intended by authorities and power holders (Babou 2007, F. Cooper 1983, Epprecht 2006, Howard 2003, Myers 2003, Nast 2005). Similarly, people contest gender, ethnicity, and class through networks, associations, and institutions – all of which have spatial extension (Hanson 2009, Simone 2004). People have given different shape and meaning to regions, regions that sometime overlap or are layered in the same physical territory (Cinnamon 2005, Shetler 2007).

Mobile space

Originally developed in the 1980s to describe the effects of droughts on the livelihoods of Sahelian peasants and herders (Retailé 1984, 1989, 1993), the mobile space approach has progressively been formalized to reflect the primacy of movement in the changing organization of space in Africa. As in the relational approach developed in human geography (Thrift 1999, Massey 2005, Merriman 2012), the mobile space perspective has led to the formulation of a model in which places are predominantly defined by the crossing of flows (Retailé 2005, 2009). Instead of identifying the elements that explain the structure of geographic space, such as points, lines and surfaces, and then trying to take into account how these elements can take new forms when flows intensify, the model starts by considering the various types of movements – divergent, convergent and intersectional – and shows how each of the movements result in the creation of different types of places and boundaries (Retailé and Walther 2011). The ‘mobile space’ approach has influenced a new generation of scholars, who have investigated how space was relationally produced in Mali (Grémont 2012, Lima 2005, 2013), Mauritania (Choplin 2009, Lechartier 2005), in the Sahara (Choplin and Pliez 2011, Gagnol 2011), and in West African borderlands (Walther 2009). More recently, the theoretical reconsiderations of the Sahelian experience developed in the mobile space model have been adapted to the globalized world, where mobility and uncertainty have become the foundation of social organization (Retailé 2013, Walther and Retailé 2013).

The debate on the ‘mobility of space’ by francophone geographers has also benefited from the work of Dutch anthropologists who have increasingly considered Africa as a mobile continent and examined how current patterns of mobility have been affected by the intervention of colonial and post-colonial regimes. In her work on pastoral societies, de Bruijn (2007: 110) for example, explicitly mentions “*the mobile spaces in which people from these areas [the Sahel] work and live*”. Building on a case study of the Fulbe from Mali, she argues that the French colonial regime repeatedly tried to contain the mobility of pastoralists by levying taxes or concentrating people and cattle into dedicated zones. In another paper, de Bruijn, van Dijk and van Dijk (2001: 65) developed the idea that certain Fulbe societies are mobile and that “*mobility has historically been embedded in Sahelian societies*”. There is a strong opposition, the authors contend, between the way West African social and economic actors and state actors conceive of space. Within West Africa people hold plural conceptions of mobility and of space generally.

Bridging the two approaches

Research in both history and geography has long shown that West Africa should be conceived of as a single space of circulation that transcends the forest, savanna, Sahelian and Saharan ecological zones (Baier 1980, Brooks 1993, McDougall and Scheele 2012). Scholars following the spatial factor and the mobile space approaches had been separately arguing that a zonal perspective that divides West Africa into homogeneous ecological or political entities should be replaced by more dynamic analysis reflecting the movement of people, goods, and ideas across formal regions (see Retailié 1988, Howard 2005a).

The integration of anglophone and francophone strands of literature, however, had been delayed by several factors, including the tendency for scholarly agendas to follow colonial, and, then later, national divisions. This has considerably changed over the last few decades. Today, a number of cross-cultural brokers, such as Barbara Cooper (1997), William Miles (1994), Paul Nugent (2008), and Adeline Masquelier (2009) on the anglophone side and Daniel Bach (2008), Boubacar Barry (1998), and Jean-Pascal Daloz (2002), on the francophone side can be found in the literature devoted to West Africa. Only a few of them, however, have dealt with trade.

Furthermore, disciplinary divisions have tended to become less and less relevant in the field of African Studies, and interdisciplinary research has long been recognized as a crucial approach for the cross-fertilization of science. Historians and geographers interested in the study of West African economic patterns increasingly exchange their views in international conferences, associations, and research networks, such as the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) or the African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE). These trends have helped bring scholars together and increased the likelihood of international and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The spatial factor and the mobile approaches have greatly benefited from collaborations and mutual influence between historians and geographers. Kwame Arhin (1979), Ralph Austen (1987), George E. Brooks (1993), Philip D. Curtin (1975), Anthony G. Hopkins (1973), Robin Law (1991), Paul E. Lovejoy (1980, 1983), Richard Roberts (1987), and Ivor Wilks (1975, 1992) among other English-speaking historians, wrote significant works in the 1960s through 1990s demonstrating that an understanding of pre-colonial and colonial era commerce in West Africa necessitated cutting across disciplinary, ecological, political, and linguistic (including Portuguese) boundaries. Several French historically and spatially minded anthropologists, including Jean-Loup Amselle (1998), Claude Meillassoux (1964), and Emmanuel Terray (1972), had significant influence upon English-speaking scholars of West Africa, many of whom also drew upon the important integrative scholarship of the historical geographer Raymond Mauny and other leading French scholars such as Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. Samir Amin (1973), Boubacar Barry (1998), Martin Klein (1968), Patrick Manning (1982), and others who were fluent in both French and English bridged disciplines and geographic zones with influential books addressing the economics of slavery, imperialism, and underdevelopment, topics that by definition had spatial dimensions.

In France, as well, a continuous dialogue has taken place between historians and geographers. Anti-colonial geographer Pierre Gourou (1947) imported the idea of ‘historical civilization’ developed by Fernand Braudel, his colleague and friend, and adapted it to include both material facts and social and political organization. The African scholar Jean Gallais is the true heir of this geographical approach. In his work on the Inner Niger Delta, for example, Gallais (1967) helped expand the concept of ‘cultural ecology’ by showing that the same geographical area could be used differently by various socio-ethnic groups. In addition to the notion of structural distance developed by Evans-Pritchard, Gallais identified other forms of distance, including the ecological distance that separate West African ethnic groups. Building on the distinction between several forms of distance, geographer Denis Retaillé (1989, 1993, 2005) has, since the late 1980s, contributed to understanding the tension between circulation and production systems, the former taking the form of routes and networks, and the latter being organized through areas and territories. Retaillé showed how the territorialization of state policies and the definition of regional specialization conflicted with the local spatial strategies of Sahelian traders and herders. From this interpretation, Retaillé formalized the ‘mobile-space’ approach in geography.

The convergence between the historical and geographical approaches has also benefited from the current ‘spatial turn’ in African studies, which considers space as an analytical concept (Engel and Nugent 2010). Acknowledging the state-centered perspective that permeates the field of African studies, the spatial turn devotes particular attention to informal activities that emerge at the margins of the state, notably in urban informal settlements and border areas. Of particular interest for the spatial turn is the analysis of social networks that can explain how local actors progressively build societies ‘from below’. The emphasis on networks has led scholarly literature to reconsider the importance of cross-border economic activities through the lens of the social actors involved in trade and not solely through the analysis of price differentials or merchandise flows (Walther 2012). This shows the limits of ‘methodological nationalism’ and the need to go beyond ecological boundaries.

Traders’ Spatial Adaptability

Both the ‘spatial factor’ approach in history and the ‘mobile space’ approach in geography emphasize that many West African traders, past and present, have demonstrated great spatial flexibility.

Traders and the ‘new spatial order’

In pre-colonial West Africa, traders were quick to explore new markets and adjust to changing economic opportunities and market conditions. As Lovejoy (1980: 44) argued about Hausa traders involved in kola trade between Hausaland and Asante, “*If tolls and taxes were excessive, merchants altered their routes and the exploitive town or state suffered. If commercial prospects were greater elsewhere, traders and residents strangers abandoned their old trade patterns*”. In the Western Sahara, Lydon (2009) has shown that traders during the 19th century shifted the direction of caravans as they

evaluated political stability, environmental conditions, changes in foreign and regional demand, and other factors that affected their success and ability to continue businesses.

Colonial conquest considerably altered West African spatial patterns by establishing new administrative centers, road and railways connections, and port facilities. Modern borders were imposed between the colonies, along with customs regimes and controls on traders, migrants, and nomadic populations. The colonial powers also favored the production of cash crops such as palm oil, coffee, cocoa, and groundnuts over production of food crops. In some extreme cases of a “zonal” policy, such as in Niger, colonialists established a northern limit of cultivation so as to prevent the geographical extension of agricultural pioneer fronts.

Despite such changes, the adaptability that traders demonstrated in the pre-colonial era survived during the colonial period, and some traders effectively adapted to the “*new spatial order*” brought by colonization (Howard 2005a: 105). After the French and British established a colonial border that bisected the Sierra Leone-Guinea commercial system, African traders tried to maintain inter-regional businesses by abandoning large caravans, re-orienting networks and travel routes, and skirting around patrols and customs stations. Some *juula* (professional long-distance traders) settled down in old towns that retained viability, or moved to the rising rail and administrative centers and forged new networks and commercial outlets. Where it was feasible, they used rails as well as older waterways (Howard 2007). In the Sahel, local traders developed new commercial routes that tended to avoid customs authorities. The French decision to create border posts between the Colony of Niger and Nigeria in 1915-1918 led to a decline of trade on the Nigerien side because local traders moved their activities south of the border. Conversely, the removal of border controls encouraged by local commandants in the 1950s led to a massive development of cross-border trade and smuggling activities over the Nigerian border (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996).

Today as in pre-colonial days, traders show a great ability to invest in commercial networks and routes. Drawing upon kinship, ethnic, and religious ties, their embedded business networks still help to reduce business risks, pool complementary skills, improve access to new markets, and safeguard property rights. According to Jalloh (1999), leading Fula (Pular-speakers) in Freetown have since independence invested in housing and transport, and entered new sectors, including diamond dealing, that might be risky but have potential for significant gain. Such figures operate both in arenas under the formal legal code and in an environment characterized by informal institutions. As some West African traders forge new alliances across borders and develop business networks with distant partners located outside of the continent, they both draw upon (often re-invented) kin and ethnic connections and rely on ties that are not exclusively based on cultural, linguistic or religious affinities (Quarles van Ufford and Zaal 2004). Traders implement complex networks to supply maritime and landlocked countries from the world markets, sometimes engaging in illegal activities (Grégoire 1992). Contemporary transnational traders also forge networks to move West African products, such as foods and clothes, to cities in the global North where immigrants create demand, and, vice versa, transfer electronics and other high value goods to West Africa (Stoller 2002).

Movement and fixed investments

Against this background, both approaches argue that West African traders have adapted to changes because of their ability to develop flexible mobility patterns and alliances that could cope with shifts in trade flows, production, and other conditions (Golub 2012). Generally speaking, traders value movement and circulation, unlike states and development agencies, who tend to conceive of territory as a resource that must be developed through fixed investments (Retaillé 2005). That is not to say that traders fail to invest, only that many of them spread investments in various places and, where possible, in spatially dispersed alliances, resulting in ramifying networks.

In some parts of the Sierra Leone-Guinea region during the 1800s, for example, there were no physical markets, and economic exchange happened in the compounds of settled traders and landlords (and also, along the coast, in shops of merchants and petty traders). As the commercial system became complexly inter-woven in the second half of the nineteenth century, exchange sites changed in their relative importance in response to changes in demand, technology, and power relations among political actors, all of which affected the decisions of traders and the flow of commodities. Key commercial activities were not rigidly fixed in place, and there was a competition among buyers and intermediaries in various places. Inter-regional traders (many of them professional *juula*) were able to take advantage of alternative roads, exchange centers, and commercial partners. Their mobility was critical to their business success. In that regard, they differed from those stationary traders who invested in fixed places and were not engaged in inter-regional commerce. Other stationary traders, however, combined local investment with the kinds of extensive investments that facilitated development of roads, promoted alliances with mobile traders, and created options for mobile traders (Howard in preparation).

In the Sahara, Lydon (2009: 160-205) has described in detail how the towns of the Wad Nun were the bases for several groups who accumulated and invested capital and also generated networks that spread widely in the Sahara, Sahel, and even more southerly places, with settlements in many exchange centers. Studies conducted in the present-day Sahel have reached similar conclusions. In an uncertain environment such as the Sahel, traders tend to avoid large fixed investments and prefer spreading their business over different places, often by maintaining an extensive network of kin or clients in different cities (Walther 2014). Mobile traders in much of contemporary West Africa concentrate on mastering the distance between places rather than investing heavily into territories of production organized around a central place.

The flexibility of traders has long been connected with a tendency for exchange centers to rise and decline in relative and absolute importance, although the largest and most favorably located cities have tended to maintain their high ranking over longer periods of time. Various internal and external factors explain shifts in the location of centers and the commercial functions in centers. In pre-colonial West Africa, trade centers rose and fell along with rivalries and wars among kingdoms, shifts in demand, and other factors. The city of Salaga in modern-day Ghana, for example, was ruined in the aftermath of 1873-74, when Gonja rebelled against Asante. As a consequence, Asante shifted trade away

from Eastern Gonja and favored the market place of Kintampo. Further west, the markets of Kong, Buna and Bonduku created by *juula* merchants, were destroyed by *Almami* Samori Touré in the late 1800s, whereas the city of Katsina, in present day Nigeria, declined because it was surrounded by unfriendly states, unlike Kano, which became the center for the 19th century kola trade (Lovejoy 1982). More recently, market places have experienced changes related to monetary policies and national regulations, such as, price differentials due to subventions, differences in exchange rates between currencies, differential taxes between countries, and bans of imports and exports (Walther 2014).

In many parts of contemporary West Africa, the spatial pattern which results from commercial activities is characterized by a large number of exchange sites whose size and functional position are roughly similar. Such centers are organized along commercial routes and remain weakly hierarchized because their primary role is to facilitate the circulation of goods, people, and ideas across ecological zones and political boundaries. As Retaillé and Walther (2014) have found in the Sahel, the centrality of places measured by their demographic size always remains unstable and highly dependent on the ephemeral intersections of commercial flows. A similar phenomenon has been observed by historians. Studying the Senegambia trading diaspora, Curtin (1975: 63-91, 135-136) also showed that the organizational flexibility and spatial mobility of local traders was maintained by not structuring themselves hierarchically. In the Sierra Leone-Guinea region, *juula* needed to be mobile and flexible as they shifted from route to route, depending on politics, perceptions of hazard and amenities, and market conditions. Their mobility was enhanced by the existence of numerous centers where roughly the same exchange functions were performed. Centers were differentiated functionally, but, except for Freetown, there was a rather low level of hierarchy when it came to inter-regional commerce (Howard 1976, 1997).

Centers as both nodes and places

The spatial factor and the mobile space approaches see centers both as nodes of inter-regional or transnational trade networks and places in production territories.

Two spatial systems

In West Africa, colonial rulers and firms created new spatial administrative and commercial systems that differed from the existing spatial systems. Especially because of the spatial practices of traders, the systems intersected in certain towns and other places, but often they existed tangentially. The systems imposed by the colonialists have, in many respects, been re-enforced by national governments and overseas development agencies. Centers derived their importance from being the sites of railway stops, the administrative apparatus, and services that originated from outside those places. People were drawn to such nodal features, resulting in a growth in the size of certain towns and re-enforcing their functional importance. Many traders responded to the demand generated in such centers and relocated there or, at least, re-oriented some of their networks. Those who have analyzed the colonial space order have tended to follow a central place model derived from the theories of Christaller (1966), according to which

places are hierarchically organized within urban national systems and markets are differentiated by measuring their influence over their hinterland (see Berberich 1974, Coulibaly 1995).

A contrasting spatial system had, in some instances, an origin in the pre-colonial period and, in other instances, was a response to forces of the colonial or post-colonial era, most recently to the weakening of the state in the era of neo-liberalism, or to smuggling and civil war. Traders epitomized that spatial order and often did a great deal to create it. They responded quickly to new opportunities that arose, for instance, along borders where smuggling was possible. That spatial order put a priority on flexibility and fluidity. Centers often rose quickly and then declined just as fast. That spatial system has been, in contrast with the former, much less hierarchical. Although higher level coordinating functions might be temporarily concentrated they were not necessarily located in the larger towns. As in certain pre-colonial situations, there often was not a strong correlation between the functional complexity of centers and settlement size (Howard 1976: 375).

Complementary or conflicting dynamics

In both the past and present, the two spatial systems of circulation and production might maintain complementary or conflicting relationships depending on the interactions between different kinds of traders, producers, and power holders and authorities.

Complex regions have developed as traders have combined production and exchange in new ways and partially integrated the two systems. Examining the early colonial period, Howard (in preparation) has shown that some cattle traders, for instance, moved into capital cities and larger towns to meet the consumption demand of people with relatively high incomes and to enter government contracts for supplying beef to military installations and the like. Other cattle traders remained much more mobile and were often engaged in transporting animals across the new colonial boundaries, where necessary foiling official patrols. Jalloh (1997, 1999: 31-151) has demonstrated that Fula cattle traders who acquired wealth in Freetown, tended, in the 1950s-1970s period of the city's growth, to invest it in houses and other forms of urban property, as well as in taxis, lorries, and other new spheres of commerce. Such figures became powerful leaders in the Freetown Fula and Muslim communities, and some were influential in urban and national politics. They represented a different masculinity than the western educated elite.

Another illustration of the complementarities between production and circulation is provided by the Asante state and its relationships with the Hausa traders who animated the kola trade. As mentioned above, prior to the Gonja rebellion, the city of Salaga, where Hausa merchants were obliged to buy kola nuts, became a key node in the network connecting Asante to Hausaland. Simultaneously, Salaga was also transformed into a central-place where slave labor, redirected into production, was concentrated to the benefit of the Asante state. A centralized political authority, with a central-place logic that contrasted with the decentralized organization of Hausa traders, Asante used the revenues of the kola trade to reinforce the power of the government treasury and buy slaves. According to Lovejoy (1980: 20), those slaves were "... *settled on plantations, produced gold, staffed the army, were used in personal retinues, or employed to gather*

kola”. In the coastal rivers and certain inland areas of the Sierra Leone-Guinea system, many exchange centers served local, regional, and inter-regional commerce. Production of crops and other commodities was in the hands of both small farmers and “big people” who headed large compounds and typically held slaves. Some of the latter hosted mobile traders or were traders themselves, engaging in various kinds of internal or overseas commerce – or both (Howard 1976, 1997, 2005b: 65). Studying the Middle Niger Valley during the 19th century, Roberts (1987: 61) reached the same conclusion when he noted that Marka traders “... *were sophisticated managers of complex production-commercial firms who constantly balanced commercial profit against investment in production*”.

A similar observation was made in the contemporary markets scattered along the Niger-Nigeria-Benin borders, where regional development depends on the combination of both circulation and production strategies (Walther 2012). Like any other markets, border markets are used as central places for both producers and consumers at the local scale. The proximity of the border generally provides an additional advantage to agricultural entrepreneurs wishing to invest in productive activities that can be exported. Rice, onion, fruits and tubers, for example, can easily be traded on either side of the border depending on the evolution of prices in the various border markets. Border markets also provide business opportunities to small traders who exploit border differentials at the local level by trading manufactured products between twin cities. Border differentials may in some cases be very small and yet profitable, thanks to the extremely low cost of labor and to informal settlements with customs authorities. At a more regional scale, border markets serve as hubs for the transnational circulation of people and goods, a status that sets them apart from other markets. From the ports of the Gulf of Guinea, major trade flows can either be imported illegally to urban centers located on the coasts, or be re-exported through a Sahelian country before being re-imported to their final destination in the north of coastal countries.

Circulation can also compete with production if revenues from long-distance trade are not invested in local production. The example of the clothing industry shows that some of the complementarities between local production and circulation were profoundly affected by the opening-up of the African markets in recent decades. In pre-colonial times, the Sahel region had a thriving textile and garment sector. Cotton was produced, woven, dyed and tailored locally, before being exported to distant markets, which contributed to both local production and trade. Today, however, the structural adjustment policies adopted by highly indebted Sahelian countries since the 1980s have reduced import restrictions. As a consequence of trade liberalization, the local clothing industry was suddenly in competition with cheap imports of second-hand clothes from the United States and Europe, and from cheap fabrics from China. Most local clothing industries, such as the state-owned Nigerien Sonitextil, the sole textile plant in the country, experienced a sharp decline in their activities or went out of business. In contrast, the business of importing second-hand clothes has benefitted a handful of private actors located in border markets, which have become important regional distribution centers; however, the link between such long-distance activities and local manufacturing activities has been destroyed. This doesn't concern only the clothing industry: the same could be said for the tobacco and the leather industries, which once provided ground for investment from local traders and which have been almost completely replaced with imported goods.

Power and spatial conflict

The spatial factor approach and the mobile space approach have both, with some differences, made the accumulation and spatial application of power and a wide range of resources a critical dimension of analysis. In the pre-colonial Sierra Leone-Guinea plains, Howard (1997 2005b) showed that titled authorities (some known as kings), “big men,” and settled “strangers” (some of them former *juula*) were able to accumulate resources through their control of labor, through trade and other exchanges, and through personal ties with peers and with clients and less prominent kin. They then invested some of those resources in space-shaping activities. Furthermore, they used their political and military power to shape space advantageously, by building up their own centers as sites of exchange, and weakening rivals who either did not trade or who sought to thwart those committed to regional and inter-regional commerce. By investing in particular sites and by safe-guarding major routes, commercially oriented power holders built centers and alliances that gave shape to a flexible spatial system which mobile traders were able to use. Mobile traders also helped to sustain the system through their repeated movements along certain roads, their partnerships, and their decisions about where to buy and sell (Howard 1997, in preparation).

Influenced by the work of Pred (1990: 9 ff.), the spatial factor approach has emphasized an inter-play between spatial structures and spatial dynamics, with traders and other social actors continuously being influenced by spatial formations while helping to pattern them. Such dynamics were apparent in the history of the Sierra Leone-Guinea system in the second half of the 19th century: structures temporarily came into existence through the actions of both settled and mobile actors and through struggles over centers and routes. Even though particular components of regional and macro-regional structures often changed, for periods of time the spatial patterns provided relative stability and conditioned the decision making of traders and other economic actors. Such actors, through cooperation and conflict, both shaped spatial structures and were shaped by those structures, which themselves were dynamic.

Given its historicity, the spatial factor approach also has called attention to how power-wielding colonial rulers fundamentally altered spatial patterns and, therefore, deeply affected the decisions of African traders and other economic actors. French and British imperialists destroyed the Sierra Leone-Guinea system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by installing and enforcing the colonial boundary between their two spheres. French patrols, in particular, altered patterns of inter-regional traders by diverting caravans away from existing roads that led into British areas. Both European powers established colonial capitals and planted administrative headquarters over their territories. They cut across African commercial networks by laying rail lines and opened the interior to colonization by large European firms that undercut African business people (Howard 2010: 21-30).

On the geographers' side, Gallais (1984) has focused on conflicts between nomadic and sedentary groups in the Inner Niger Delta and, more generally, between, on the one hand, nation-states and international aid agencies whose management of natural resources relied primarily on territoriality and, on the other, local societies who relied on mobility.

The subtitle of his 1984 book *Space-Time and Powers* make it very clear that space is a fundamental aspect of regional conflicts over resources. In the late 1980s, following Amselle's (1987) work on power relationships in Mali, Retaillé (1989, 1990) described the conflicts between civil servants and businessmen in the Sahel and showed how these two categories of actors struggled for control over state resources and external aid. The tension between different forms of spatiality has further been examined by Stary (1995) in his study of the conflicts between trade networks and state territories, and by Walther (2008) in his work on patron-client relationships in border regions. More recently, the development of criminal and terrorist activities in the Sahel-Sahara have highlighted the rise of conflicting spatial ideologies between Islamist groups wanting to impose Sharia law and control trafficking and Tuareg rebels seeking independence (Retaillé and Walther 2014).

Policy implications and research agenda

The mobility of traders and the shifting rank, even impermanence, of many exchange centers has important implications for present day policy.

The first policy implication is related to the comparative lack of interest of governments and development agencies in traders, despite their roles as suppliers of rapidly growing cities and as generators of functional regions. Sahelian merchants have been an important part of the restructuring of agriculture, food, and commerce that accompanied structural adjustments since the 1980s. Yet, they have rarely been consulted or built into policy decisions (Terpend 2006). Partly in response to that neglect and partly to take advantage of the democratization of Sahelian states, some important traders have become politicians or taken a more active role in politics at both the local and national levels (see Boone 2006; Kraus 2002; Walther 2009). The general principle emerging here is that, in an atmosphere of climatic, political, and economic uncertainty, governments and agencies should find ways to encourage the participation of traders in the design of economic development policies.

A related set of policy implications involves how, where, and on what scale to support the activities of traders. The current organization of traders can provide a starting point. Rather than developing policies on a national basis, or along lines of formal regions such as administrative districts, the idea would be to identify functional regions defined by the social interactions between traders. Governments would have to be prepared for the reality that functional regions could transcend national borders and their geographical extension could vary over time. Within functional areas, policy makers might identify a number of sites for support, based on their roles in promoting exchange, the flow of information, and other goals, rather than on their demographic rank. Policies aimed at a number of sites would recognize the tendency toward weak and fluid functional hierarchies.

The spatial approach also suggests that development agencies should not advocate policy or intervene without considering current struggles over power and policy and without being aware of their own spatial impacts. As Nugent (2002) has shown through his study of borderlands, borders are real and meaningful and are created by both state and local

actors. People on both sides of African national boundaries have generated border cultural practices and border zone identities out of their common experiences, networks, and interactions near to and across boundaries. Such identities and practices may have little to do with efforts of elites in capital cities to build a “national” identity, and the interests of border people may run counter to national policies. Government efforts to apply power have, in some instances, distorted commercial patterns and, in other instances, have failed, even causing governments to revise policies so that they better accommodate the interests of border people. Local and regional officials have found ways to cut deals with border people, sharing benefits of cross-boundary traffic (Nugent 2002). Programs of development agencies that are not sensitive to such spatial conflicts and to bargained arrangements among a variety of state and non-state actors may fail to locate entrepreneurs whose mobility and decentralized perspective enable them to take a role in generating spatial capital and new, if short-lived, functional regions.

Bringing together the contribution of both historians and geographers may also lead to interesting methodological perspectives. As we saw earlier, both traditions rely heavily on the concept of networks but have followed divergent paths for investigating and analyzing networks. Historians often lack the kinds of quantitative data that researchers into the contemporary period possess and they tend to be less precise in graphing networks. Yet historians usually draw upon qualitative sources that complement and enrich so-called “hard” numbers. Combining a more formal approach to networks with historical and biographical records would contribute to a better understanding of how networks really work. An increasing number of studies using a formal approach to social networks (Akoten and Otsuka 2007, Ishiwata et al. 2014, Walther 2014) have measured, graphed, and charted the structure of trade in a way that reveals social and spatial patterns.

This method provides an extremely rich data set on who is doing business with whom, on which places are important for trade, and on the type of relationships between social actors, but cannot explain the intensity of ties and the historical evolution of the network without referring to more qualitative data. Wealthy traders might very well occupy a structural position in a network because of their personal histories, migration patterns, political alliances with state authorities, or because of external forces that have influenced their businesses, such as structural adjustments, privatization, or regional integration policies, what Howard (2011: 1) calls the “*global forces of technology, capital and ideology.*” Biographies of contemporary traders would ideally complement formal network analysis and usefully contribute to documenting the factors that drive West African traders to leave their original areas and establish businesses in other regions, the patterns of such migrations, and the foundations of contemporary trade diasporas. Because they follow traders over time, biographies can also explain why their economic activity is particularly sensitive to certain political variables, most notably the boycott of ports, the closing of land borders, seizures aimed at traders, violence perpetrated on certain trading ethnic groups, and local and national political crises.

Conclusion

Nearly thirty years after having been first theorized, the spatial factor and mobile space approaches seem to have converged on certain key points related to the organization of West African economic activities. The methodologies and analyses presented here have general applications to other cases in Africa and can potentially contribute to understanding of the dynamics of African commerce in a globalized world.

First, in the past and present, traders have adapted to the constraints of their business environment by favoring social networks that enable them to move within dynamic regions. Social networks, sometimes anchored in trade diasporas, provide traders opportunities to invest in business relationships that transcend distance. Over time, economic activity can move from one place to another depending on the opportunities created by the opening of new markets and the constraints imposed by political entities or the environment. This spatial organization leads to a hierarchy of urban centers, which is more temporary than in the Christallerian model where central places primordially serve their hinterland. The actions, in sum, of mobile traders contribute to temporary hierarchies of centers, but by creating plural networks and by diversifying, rather than concentrating, their investments, those traders help to maintain the kinds of spatial dynamics that accommodate to shifts in regional and global forces. This aspect, which has been thoroughly documented for Western urban centers, remains largely neglected in the African Studies literature.

Second, centers created by social actors serve both as places for production and as hubs for trade. Production and circulation dynamics have maintained complementary or conflicting relationships in different places and at different times in history. West African traders make use of local agricultural and manufacturing production or supplies from regional and world markets, depending on social strategies and/or profitability. Third, traders and others have created, through cooperation, competition, and even violent struggle, dynamic regions composed of centers, routes, and networks; such structures, often short-lived, have influenced the decisions of traders. In the colonial and national eras, traders have taken an important role in creating functional regions that have integrated territories divided by boundaries. Traders have often gained additional returns by crossing a boundary because of the price and regulatory differentials between colonies and, later, nation-states.

This article suggests several avenues of policy research. The first one is related to the implication of informal economic actors in the design and implementation of development policies. Because local traders have a deep understanding of how African markets actually work, we argue that they should be more frequently associated with state and development agencies policies. The second policy implication deals with the space of action of development policies. Because West African traders have developed flexible spatial strategies that often rely on (cross-border) mobility, policies that aim at increasing regional integration should be based on relevant functional regions, rather than on preexisting administrative regions or country programs. Functional regions are internally cohesive and well-connected areas “*formed by the flows of people, ideas, commodities*” (Howard 2011: 2). Such regions have no rigid boundaries. Furthermore, development agencies could explicitly recognize that the spatial dimensions of commerce typically involve people exercising power and struggling along class, gender, and other dimensions

of identity and action. These issues are fraught with complexity. While agencies might want to draw on the experience of traders – notably those with extensive networks across national borders – when developing policies that are flexible and respond to changing functional regions, they would have to consider such factors as collusion between authorities and favored traders.

In sum, historical and geographic research suggests that policies aimed at boosting commerce should support the mobility, adaptability, and diverse activities of traders, all of which reflect the uncertain and contested nature of businesses – and of political and physical environments.

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