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Migration, Anthropology, and Voice

Notes on a West African memory

Knut Graw
University of Erlangen-Nuremberg/University of Leuven

ABSTRACT | One of the most striking features of contemporary migration to Europe and elsewhere is the almost complete anonymity of its protagonists. The most immediate effect of this anonymity has been the emergence of the figure of the 'migrant' in public consciousness with little attention for national and personal backgrounds. A related effect of this anonymization of migration has been that, without personal identity, the individuals concerned also seem to have no history, leading to a rather dehistoricized view of migration in the public debate. The present text attempts to counter these tendencies by focusing on an individual narrative of migration between West Africa and Europe, dating back to the late 1980s. On a more theoretical plane, by reflecting on an individual account the article reflects on the question of voice as one of the most central problems of ethnographic representation, both in migration studies and more generally.

Keywords: Anthropology; migration; dialogue; voice; listening.

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Introduction

For the last thirty years migration from Africa to Europe has been largely associated with the attempts to reach European territory by means of boat passages. This form of migration can be traced back to the arrival of a small vessel at the beach of Los Lances, a beach close to the town of Tarifa, situated on the southernmost tip of Spain, in 1988 (Graw 2012: 26-29). It has changed many times in terms of the routes being taken and the size of the boats being used, but it has nevertheless remained a constant feature of migration in the African-European border-zone. While between North Africa and Italy larger vessels continue to dominate, smaller vessels are sometimes used as well. In the summer of 2013, for instance, boat migration experienced a largely unexpected change featuring the use of cheap rubber boats, designed to be used at the beach for pleasure, but suddenly used for crossing over from Morocco to Spain. This move was motivated by the necessity to avoid the high sums asked by Moroccan traffickers for passages by motorboat and made the prices for these otherwise cheap vessels skyrocket in the Moroccan markets.

Since its beginnings in 1988, boat migration has been perceived and covered in different ways in the media and in public debate. On one hand, there has been widespread concern for the high death toll these journeys provoke not only because of the capsizing of boats, but also due to the dangerous crossing of the Saharan desert by car, a passage that for most West Africans migrants precedes the later passage by boat. On the other hand, concerns have been voiced in relation to the security of European borders and the consequences of undocumented migration for the social security systems of the member states of the European Union and for social cohesion more generally. Despite the public interest in this (and, of course, other forms of migration), critical, individual accounts of how the process of migration is viewed and experienced by its protagonists have remained surprisingly rare and, where they exist, have kept a rather documentary and humanitarian character. This is also reflected in the increasing number of documentary films that follow migrants across the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in literary accounts written by migrants themselves or with the help of journalists (see also Ireland and Proulx 2001). What is often absent from these accounts is the fact that migration to Europe did not always look this way and should, therefore, not only be described and analysed as the result of contemporary events or developments, but as a process which already in its present form has a history of at least three and a half decades.

The account of a migratory passage presented in this article responds to both lacunae by allowing an individual person to tell his story and by reminding us of the history and the unchanging personal significance of these migratory endeavours. Drawing on an interview with one single person, the picture that emerges will necessarily be incomplete and provisional. The text does not provide statistics, nor does it claim to be fully representative in any other way. At the same time, and apart from the fact that many of the details and thoughts appearing in this interview have later reappeared and been reconfirmed by many of my interlocutors, a longer account by a single person may gain in depth what it may appear to lose in statistical validity. The article draws upon a long interview with

Alphousseyni Mangal, who was in his late thirties at the time of the interview and who, when I asked him, told me to use his real name rather than a pseudonym. The interview took place in June 2003 in Serekunda, the largest urban agglomeration in the Gambia, situated south of its capital Banjul. I was not doing specific research on migration at the time but had worked with different diviners in the area to understand the techniques they were using and to learn how these divinatory consultations were experienced by their clients. Mangal lived nearby the compound where I had been staying and when I heard that he had travelled to Europe several times, I asked him whether he would be willing to tell me more about his experiences. He agreed and we met for three consecutive evenings during which he gave me a detailed chronological account of his journeys. The interview was conducted in Mandinka and French and facilitated by Aziz Diatta who helped as a translator (from Mandinka to French). The translation into English is mine. Due to reasons of space, the article only reproduces and reflects upon the first of his three journeys to Europe between the end of the 1980s and the late 1990s. Although Mangal spoke French well, he preferred to give his account in Mandinka, verifying the translations given by the translator throughout the interview. Only at the very end of the interviews (not reproduced here) did the conversation take place directly in French.

The focus on a single account, as well as the decision to reproduce the translation of the first part of the original interview at full length which characterizes this article, is not just a stylistic choice but motivated by a certain unease with the representational logic of the social sciences which tend to reduce the voice of the subject to a source of information from which single passages, sentences, or expressions can be taken without having to justify this process of selecting, cutting down, and making fit that which has originally been expressed. This problem is not limited to the topic of migration but concerns most ethnographic accounts, reflecting the unresolved tension between, on one side, both the ethical and methodological demand for the incorporation of the voices of those whose actions and experiences form the object of social scientific inquiry, and, on the other side, the demands put upon ethnographic representation to satisfy certain preconceived notions concerning the production of social scientific texts in terms of empirical and representational validity, including the incorporation of theory. This problem is of course not new and in fact informed much of the debate concerning the dialogic nature of ethnographic research and the possibility of a truly dialogic anthropology in the late 1970s and early 1980s, promoting a form of anthropology in which the fact that ethnographic descriptions originate in a setting that always involves a dialogic relationship between observer and observed is not foreclosed by auctorial modes of writing but is brought out into the open, addressed and problematized. Although the modes of writing that were proposed as alternatives to the conventional regimes of scholarly text production by anthropologists such as Kevin Dwyer (1977, 1982), Vincent Crapanzano (1980), or Johannes Fabian (1983) never succeeded to replace the modes of writing they criticized, the theoretical and ethnographic works that were written at the time remain relevant as they remind us of a series of problems within social scientific method, ethics, and epistemology that remain unresolved to the present day. In other words, neither the fact that these questions have been addressed before, nor the fact that academic social scientific writing has continued to favour non-dialogical, auctorial modes of writing means that the problems to which these authors pointed have ceased to exist. While this is most visible in quantitative and other external approaches, it also holds true for qualitative modes of ethnography that, explicitly or implicitly, took the critique of auctorial modes of writing into account and were informed by them; be it by the authors already mentioned, be it by earlier, parallel, or later critiques of representational modes of writing in postcolonial theory (especially in the critique of orientalism made famous through the work of Edward Said (1978), feminist anthropology, or the body of works associated with the Writing Culture debate triggered by James Clifford and George Marcus through the eponymous edited volume published in 1986.

The Writing Culture debate sensitized anthropologists to the fact that academic texts were at least as much the result of literary models and conventions as they were the result of direct ethnographic observation and anthropological analysis. However, due to the call for more experimental modes of writing voiced in that volume, during the last three decades, anthropological writing has arguably (and perhaps ironically given the general thrust of their critique) become rather more than less shaped by rhetoric and literary conventions and techniques. A good example of this is the current dominance of narrative openings in academic articles, openings that in their attempt to draw the reader into in an unfamiliar cultural world through the telling of a story echo Malinowski's famous opening in the *Argonauts of the Pacific* where he encourages the reader to imagine their arrival 'suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight' (Malinowski 1922: 4). As much as they seem to replicate the now omnipresent television format of on-camera reportage in which the viewer is virtually taken by the hand by the journalist-explorer who is constantly in view, conducting interviews, travelling to new locations, or recording video messages in the isolation of his hotel room, both authorizing his or her own account, as well as mediating the realities in question as if they would escape any direct representation or were too complicated to be directly comprehended by the viewer. Another telling example for the seemingly inevitable grip of literary conventions on the way we write are the bi-partite titles of most academic articles, preferably quoting a vernacular expression in the first part and some theoretical notions in the second, preferably embellished using alliterations, a figure of style that is not limited to titles but can also often be found in the phrasing of analytical passages.

These examples illustrate that although the onset of the theoretical debates around dialogic anthropology, the impact of stylistic writing conventions on ethnography, and the problematic interplay of ethnographic authority and cultural representation date back to the 1980s, the problems of ethnographic representation they addressed (and which now form part of most if not all anthropological curricula) have by no means been resolved and still necessitate continuous attention by those engaging in the production of ethnographic texts. The perhaps most common way of dealing with this situation has been to add a few ethnographic vignettes and updating one's bibliography with a few critical references to show that one is aware of the problem, and then to move on. However, the use of narrative openings, bi-partite titles, and alliterations illustrate that this way of handling the problem does not necessarily resolve it, leading instead to new but in themselves no less conventional forms of writing, reflecting an almost unchanged status of ethnographic authority that remains deeply problematic.

Returning to my preference to reproduce the first part of the translated interview verbatim rather than provide inline quotations or indirect speech, it is obvious that *verbatim* or word for word does not mean that the text presented here is identical to the original, nor that it captures the original conversation in all its textual or contextual detail, a claim to authenticity that, if scrutinized, even the most technically elaborate forms of verbatim transcriptions cannot live up to (for a detailed discussion of the limits and representational implications of even the most technical forms of verbatim reproduction see Inoue 2018). Instead, I intend to present the interview, and especially the account of the migratory journey it contains, in a form that remains as faithful to what was said during the original interview as a translation allows. No attempt has been made to evoke the atmosphere of the setting or to add ethnographic colouring. My aim has been to present the interview in a way similar to how a newspaper would present an interview with a writer, an artist, or other persons whose thoughts and points of view are considered of interest to the reader, rather than their accent, appearance, or surroundings.[1] Concerning the format of the interview, it is interesting to note that while interviewing forms an important part of anthropological research methodology, interviews themselves seem not to form a self-sufficient anthropological genre of anthropological writing (unless the interviewees are anthropologists, of course).

The First Journey

'When did you go to Europe for the first time? What year was it?'

'The first time I went to Europe was at the end of 1988. When I left home, I first went to Dakar, and from there I went to Paris. I went by plane with a direct flight. In Paris, I stayed one week, and then I continued towards Spain. In Spain, I stayed three years and a half before returning to Africa. Yes, three years and a half, then I returned. After my return, I stayed home for about a year. At that time I wanted to get to know other parts of West Africa.'

'At the moment you left, did you plan to go to Spain or just anywhere in Europe?'

'No, at that time, my intention was to go to France. It was that what I had in mind. Well, at that time, I was very young. It was I had just come of age. At the airport (in Paris), those who were older than I was, they were not allowed to enter the country. They were refused entrance and deported. But when they looked at me, at that time, I was still very young, they, well, I was lucky and they let me in. However, at that time, the person I was supposed to join in Paris was not any longer there. It turned out that he had left towards Spain.'

'How old were you at that time?'

'I was 22 years old.'

‘When you decided to embark upon that journey, had you prepared for that for a long time or did you just get up one day and left?’

‘Well, (the idea of going to Europe) that was something that had slowly come to my mind. When I saw those of my friends who were coming back from Europe, that what they were telling about Europe gave me the courage to go to Europe as well. When I left, my parents had no idea about that. It was only after my arrival in Spain that I called them and told them that I was in Europe.’

‘What did you do in order to go to France? Did you have a visa?’

‘No, at that time you did not need a visa in order to go to France. At that time, you just had to have a sufficient amount of money with you (in order to prove to have a sufficient travel budget). (Due to this) Even when I left for Spain, I got on the train without asking anything about this. But the conductors who were checking the tickets, they asked for my passport. I showed it to them. They told me that I would not be allowed to enter at the border without a Spanish visa. It was at that moment that I asked them: Where can I obtain a visa when I am already on the train? They told me to get off at Perpignan. I asked for the Spanish consulate and found it. They gave me a visa. The same day, I continued towards Spain. Perpignan is not far from the Spanish border.’

‘And when you arrived in Spain, how did you manage to find your friend?’

‘That was a bit difficult. It was during the month of December. It was very cold. When I got off the train, people did not respond to me because I could only speak French. Finally, I found someone (who spoke French). He told me, let’s go, once we find another African, we will ask him. While we were still walking, we saw an African man entering a phone cabin. I went and met him there. When I approached him in Mandinka, we understood each other because he, too, was from the Casamance region. He was from Sunna Karantabaa. At that moment, it was about 7 pm. He then took me with him and we went to the ‘hotel’ where he stayed. I spent the night there. I asked him where I could find my friend. He gave me the name of someone whom I should meet in Mataró and I should ask him whether my friend was not staying there as well. He told me to go to Mataró and then to take a taxi to where his friend lived. He gave me his address. The street was called Florida Blanca. Once you get there (he told me), he will bring you to your friend as he knows the area over there. Mataró is not far from Barcelona.’

‘And did you find your friend?’

‘Yes, I found him.’

‘Did he know that you were coming?’

‘No, I surprised him. He could never have imagined that I was coming.’

‘What did he say when he saw you?’

‘He was just very happy. He asked me, how is Africa doing? He asked me about his relatives. He was just happy.’

‘So, once you had arrived in Mataró, what happened next? How was your first week, your first month, your first year over there?’

‘Well, once I had arrived I asked my friend: How is it here? He told me that it was difficult due to the cold weather which could be quite severe and also because of the kind of work they were doing which was in the field of gardening. He told me that was what I had to do. Because you cannot sit around doing nothing. You don't leave Africa and come here in order to do nothing. So I started to look for work. I looked for a job. Already on the first day I started looking around for work I found work in a garden. I worked there for two weeks but the cold tired me so much that I quit it.

Two weeks later, I started to look for work again. Thanks to God, there where I found work then, the work was fine as they were working in the field of flowers. There, you do not work outdoors. On top of that, they were using some kind of heating to warm up the place because these flowers do not support cold temperatures.

The man who employed me, had never employed a black person before. He had seen Africans working elsewhere but I was the first to be employed at his place. At first, I thought, I would not stay there for a long time but thanks to God all his sons liked me and I stayed there until the year I went back.'

'And at the time, you had left for Europe, how had you expected Europe to be?'

'First, well, according to me, those who had been there, that what they were saying, I wanted to see that with my own eyes. Secondly, someone who leaves his country, if you go elsewhere, that is because you want to obtain something. That's why I went, in order to earn money.'

'And what you had imagined and that what you found over there, how did these two things compare? And what about your decision to return home?'

'Well, as I told you, when I went I was very young. I went there in search of money and I can say that I earned money. Alhamdulillah. Well, as to what concerns my return, I missed my parents, those who had born me, so that I had to return so that I would see them. After that, I would see what to do next.'

'Did you hesitate between staying in Spain and returning home?'

'What I had in mind when I decided to travel to Europe was this: I go there in order to see how it is there. I never had in mind to stay there. I was young at that time. I wanted to see how things are, look for money if God would grant that to me. Then, I came back in order to see my parents. It is for these things that I did what I did.'

Reflections

In many regards, this interview speaks for itself. Any attempt to explain or theorize what is being said may seem unnecessary and, indeed, we would not expect reflections or comments of the interviewer at the end of an interview if it were published in a newspaper or a magazine. In this regard, it is not my aim to analyse or comment on Mangal's account but to allow it to speak mainly for itself *and* to reflect on the significance of word for word accounts as a counterbalance to overly auctorial modes of ethnography. Part of the difficulty in arguing for such a counterbalance lies in the fact that most strands of contemporary social and cultural anthropology today would agree that ethnographic accounts and anthropological analyses should not only be based upon the ethnographer's observations, participant or not, but should draw equally upon direct accounts by 'those who (to speak with Edward Said) are having the experiences' (Said 2004). As noted above, the usual way of complying with this methodological imperative is to insert translated quotes or certain vernacular notions or expressions into the ethnographic account. More radical, dialogical approaches have favoured longer verbatim excerpts if not the reproduction of whole conversations or first-hand accounts or narratives from which the interviewer's questions have been removed and in which the interviewed persons appear more and more as the authors of their own stories. None of these approaches is unproblematic.

The quoting approach can be seen as problematic, for instance, in that it may appear selective rather than descriptive, marginalizing both the capacity of the persons concerned to speak for themselves, as well as the capacity of the reader to draw his or her own conclusions from a given account. Dialogical approaches, in turn, seem to find their limit in the difficulty of finding a balance between the verbatim reproduction of personal accounts and the analysis of the realities at stake in so far as any response to a verbatim account seems to impose a kind of discursive hierarchy that seems to work against the non-hierarchical epistemological position they try to establish. This problem exists in all ethnographic accounts but becomes especially acute in relation to topics that are politically or culturally controversial or which concern situations of marginalisation, exclusion, or repression. This is so because in these cases the personal experience of a given situation or practice, as well as the underlying motivations and corresponding ideas, form inextricably part of the topic itself. In consequence, migration accounts are particularly sensitive in relation to this as they involve both aspects of socio-political contestation as well as personal experiences that cannot be separated from the topic as such. Interpretations or analyses of such accounts that go further than paraphrasing run the danger of appearing to relativize precisely the ability and right of the persons involved to speak for themselves which a verbatim account is meant to respect. Obviously, the problem is equally pressing in relation to a multitude of ethnographic settings and social situations regardless of whether the situation is caused by sociocultural, political, judicial, economic, or military factors. In fact, one could argue, that in so far as hardly any social setting today, as well as in the colonial and postcolonial past, is not marked by some degree of precarity, inequality, or exclusion, it would be difficult to think about an ethnographic setting or context in which the tension addressed here between giving full space to a person's account and the urge of the social scientist to analyse does not arise.

Realizing this, it becomes also clear that the problem of the relation between ethnographic account and analysis is not just a problem of form or content but of representation and authorship. As I will argue throughout this text, the ethical, methodological, and analytical problems that we face here, and which have been characteristic for the tension between more structural and more agency-oriented approaches in the anthropological study of social realities, ultimately relate to the question of voice which, I would argue, forms the invisible or disavowed core of most of the methodological debates in the discipline.

Without pretending to resolve this problem, the present text gives more space than usual to the verbatim reproduction of the account of migration given in a single interview in order to find a middle way by giving equal space to both account and analysis, whereby the analysis is not so much an analysis of the account itself but of the importance and status we attribute to it for understanding the conditions and issues that emerge in it. At the same time, the account of migration given in the interview is not meant to just serve as an occasion for a more theoretical reflection. Rather, the account represents precisely the reality to which the article's theoretical and analytical concerns have to relate, perhaps in a similar way as one has to reply to someone in a conversation or to respond to a letter, instances which are both marked by the necessity to respond and relate to what has been said, but which also create an open space where the respondent may add on to what has been said, enlarge certain themes or speak for him- or herself. In other words, the present text is an attempt to maintain the impetus of dialogical approaches to give more weight to direct voice and, at the same time, to resist the tendency of dialogical anthropology to withhold from responding to what has been said. In this regard, the question that poses itself here is not just one of adequate representation but whether the anthropological enterprise should not be much more considered within the dialogical frame in which it unfolds, so that the presence of voice may not appear as impeding comments but as requesting a response. Following this line of thought, and without addressing the full range of the epistemological problems involved here, it may be constructive to reconsider anthropology not so much as an exercise of describing, reading, or translating culture but as an exercise in listening.

Listening to Migration Accounts

In this regard, the very last sentence of the first part of the interview is very telling. Having explained his motivations and retold the story of his first journey to Europe in chronological order, Mangal says: 'It is for these things that I did what I did.' The insistence on authorship could not be greater. At the same time, the final sentence closed the conversation for the time being, almost impeding any further questions. However, the sentence was not meant to stop the conversation. In fact, afterwards, the conversation continued for another hour and was continued the day after. Furthermore, Mangal told me that he had never told this story to anyone before. This is not to say that no one knew that he had been to Europe but that, following a culture of discretion very widespread in the Senegambian context, only very few of his family members or friends would know any of the details he had told me during our conversation. In this regard, quite a few things could be said about the very factual and chronological style of his narrative and the almost complete absence of personal details concerning his own emotional state during his journey, both of which are typical traits of Mandinka narrative registers. However, this ethnographic contextualisation is not *conditio sine qua non* for understanding his account. It can stand on its own. The picture changes, however, if we compare this account with many of the ideas concerning African-European migration both in public and in academic discourse. It is not that his account would falsify or confirm all the existing views on migration. It is rather that his account helps us to put things into perspective. In fact, while his account may not need much comment in itself, it can serve as a useful antidote to all too quick assumptions and theorizations of migratory praxis, its reasons, dynamics, and consequences. This becomes even clearer in the accounts of his second and third journey, and the changes of the migration regimes to which they pay witness and comment upon, but already the account of his first journey may serve as an important commentary on what migration is, both historically and individually, even if the underlying motivations may be more complex and ambivalent than his account may suggest.

However, it is important to first take his account as what it is, that is, the account of a journey, of an endeavour, an enterprise, motivated by the wish to venture out of one's own immediate life world in order to see if it is true what others are telling, to see whether one is able to achieve the same, and, above all, in order to earn money. What is important here is to realize, that although the wish to earn money and to gain access to the possibilities money seems to entail, both for oneself as well as for one's family, plays a key role in what motivates a person to leave, it is not so much some kind of generalized state of poverty or economic deprivation as such that triggers migration but the wish to overcome this situation (Graw 2012). In this regard, his account is very telling, as he does not flee a particular situation but *decides* to leave, consciously and planned (an important point in understanding migration already emphasized by Edouard Manchuelle in 1997). It is this wish for personal achievement and experience, usually not just for oneself but also for one's parents and siblings, that dignifies an enterprise in which the protagonists are all too often too simply portrayed as the victims of inhumane border regimes, or as perpetrators of border violations. His account is also telling in that it does not, at least not at this stage, involve any human smuggling or the undocumented trespassing of borders, no police arrest, and no repatriation, all of which are elements that will be featuring prominently in the accounts of his second and third journey. What is striking here also, is the chronology of the events. Mangal's account starts in December 1988, the same year that witnessed the capsizing of a boat of migrants from Morocco at the beach of Los Lances, an event which, as mentioned above, is an important year marking the beginning of boat migration towards Spain, even if there may well have been earlier attempts and arrivals before that which perhaps escaped public attention. Apparently, there were times that one did not need a visa to travel from Africa to Europe (at least not from Senegal to France), times when a Senegalese traveller coming from France could simply ask for a visa when he wished to travel to Spain, while at the very same time others saw no other possibility than risking their lives by crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in an open vessel. In a similar vein, Mangal's account is striking as, at a certain moment, he decides to leave Spain again without being forced to do so, a turn of events rather unexpected for those used to reports of involuntary and forced repatriations or, at least, used to listening to the never-ending call for such repatriations in certain political milieus. We can see here to what extent we have become used to consider the current realities of control, exclusion, and expulsion as a perhaps regrettable but nevertheless somehow normal state of affairs. It seems normal because it's what we see day in day out, month after month, and year after year, and what we see is taken as what is normal and real. In such a perspective, the almost total absence of administrative conflict marking this account must appear an abnormality, while in reality it shows precisely that much of the conflicts around border crossings and refugee camps we daily witness are actually the result of relatively recent regulations, legislations and international agreements.

In light of this, one understands the likening by Giorgio Agamben of migrants detained in modern detention camps with the figure of the *homo sacer* and the characterization of the camps themselves as zones governed by states of exception (Agamben 1995, 1998, and 2003) in so far as these states are, as Agamben has shown, precisely not states outside of but created through and within the judicial realm. And it is in this regard that it is important to understand that under the present conditions, and in contrast to the earlier situation described in Mangal's account, the reduction of a person to a state of 'bare life' is not the result of the absence of state involvement. Instead, the migratory condition as a situation of bare life is precisely the result of the migrant becoming the target of and being subjected to a plenitude of regulations and procedures largely directed towards his or her exclusion. Agamben's notion of 'bare life' is, thus, not a quasi-biological condition but a powerful metaphor for the judicial limbo to which the person without a legal title granting entry to the respective state's territory is relegated. A metaphor also that resonates with the notion of biomedical governmentality developed by Michel Foucault (2004), a complex notion which, again, does not refer to biological interactions but the de facto results of administrative processes in which the citizen becomes the object of a politics that disavows or simply denies its political motivation by presenting itself as neutral, oriented towards 'real' matters such as security, health, or transport. The deeply disturbing effect of Agamben's notion is that it reminds of us the fact that state violence is not restricted to dictatorial regimes but also operates in the seemingly more benevolent political forms of control exerted by democratic nation states and supranational organisms and this on all three planes of power – the legislative, the executive and the judicial. Why that is so and how it can be dealt with is another question, and not only a practical one but a question that leads directly to theoretical questions such as the nature of the political, of citizenship, and of the effective status of human rights, all of which are far from being resolved. Leaving these questions for a moment aside and returning to Mangal's account of migration reproduced above, one wonders, however, why the possibility of less exclusive border regimes has disappeared from public discourse, or only enters it in the form of a seemingly unrealistic image of a world without borders. How did, what was already a reality at a certain moment, turn into a political utopia and what has caused this loss of memory?

Memory, Narrative, and Voice

Inquiring into the reasons of the loss of memory concerning former, more open and permissive border regimes, several reasons come to mind. One reason may be that an unresolved or ongoing historical process such as migration may in fact foreclose a closer view of the past, almost as if the digging into the past can only start once past events and conditions seem to appear in a distance remote enough to appear as history, and not as an integral part of the present. The impression of having to do with a current rather than with an historically continuous situation is further intensified by the presentism mode of representation characterizing news reports, journalistic reportage, and policy reports alike, all of which tend to reduce reality to a series of unfolding events of urgency, requiring coverage and political measures more than remembering or reflection. In relation to African-European migration this is at the least misleading as the current form of migration from Africa to Europe already started in the late 1980s (see above), and in many ways continues earlier forms of labor migration in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. A second reason why times in which it was possible to travel from Africa to Europe without a visa are forgotten may be that such a historically sensitive perspective may make it necessary to consider current migrations in the context of earlier colonial and postcolonial constellations relating to questions of historical responsibilities for situations of inequality that the successors of both former colonial and formerly colonized states may prefer not to have to address outside of the more or less routinized realms of public commemorations and stately visits. And yet another reason may be precisely the absence of personal narratives such as the one presented here from public discourse, narratives that would perhaps allow subaltern memories to re-emerge and contribute to a larger, shared historical consciousness from which they are otherwise excluded (on the question of subaltern memories see also Rodet and Reinprecht 2013). However, it is important to understand that the problem of the anonymous character of migration is not just a problem of lacking identification of its protagonists by name but, again, fundamentally a problem of voice, as it is only through the process of voicing and listening that what is not already known or forgotten can re-emerge and be recovered. In this regard, voice is not identical with personal narrative or testimony but the very site in which expression becomes possible. In other words, and in line which much of the philosophical literature addressing the question of voice from Aristotle through Hegel to Heidegger and Agamben, voice is the very site where consciousness realizes itself, not just its outcome (Agamben 1982).

While Agamben's reflections on the philosophy of voice may at first sight appear of little relevance for understanding processes of migration, they are methodologically and epistemologically crucial because they allow us to understand that the question of voice does not exhaust itself in questions such as how many quotes a text needs, of how many people, verbatim or not. Instead, voice is crucial as an originary site of confrontation that can never be fully contained by the methodological requirements of social scientific inquiry. As an original, generative site of subjectivity, memory, and thought, voice exceeds these requirements, appears excessive, and it is, I would argue, precisely because of this that within the context of social scientific or journalistic representations voice tends to be represented only in a shortened and edited way. Noticing the excessive nature of voice, however, we also start to understand why the attempts to develop textually dialogical forms of ethnography in the 1970s and 80s had ultimately to fail. Once taken seriously and moving out of the demarcated space relegated to voice as a mere source of quotes or information, dialogical ap-proaches were in fact challenging the very epistemological basis of objectifying observation and auctorial textuality on which social scientific research had been built and continues to rely upon. By giving primacy to voice instead of representation, these attempts were exploring and approaching the very limits of the discipline of anthropological text production they were trying to reform, providing not just a space in which the subaltern could speak (Spivak 1988) but also a form that revealed the tendency of the conventional anthropological text to subjugate its subjects and to, ultimately, reduce them to subjects without speech. Consequently, even if their merit of bringing the voice of anthropology's interlocutors to the forefront could not be denied, the kind of texts resulting from the attempts to write dialogical anthropology were perceived as problematic, not because they were not interesting or engaging but because they refused to satisfy the demands for objectified description, analysis, and theoretisation the social sciences rely upon and from which they derive their authority as scientific endeavours. From such a perspective, a verbatim text without comment does not qualify as a scholarly text even if it's testimonial and archival value may be acknowledged without a problem. Somehow there seems to be a divide between a text consisting of a verbatim reproduction of what a person has to say and a text considered a scholarly article that cannot be fully bridged, causing methodological problems that seem to have no solution, forcing authors and readers to return to precisely those formats of scientific text production that they realized and know to be problematic. At the same time, ignoring the dilemma or addressing it only by up-dating one's stylistic repertoire seems not be a sustainable solution as the voice of the other seems to have a similar tenacity as nature which, as Horace wrote (Epistles 1, 10, 24) and Lacan liked to remind us in his seminars (eg. Lacan 1991), the more it is suppressed, the more it returns galloping. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the question of voice is not contemporary with the Writing Culture debate but was already addressed by Aristotle who distinguished the voice of human beings from that of animals, referring to the human voice as *logos* and the voice of animals as *phoné*, whereby *logos* was seen as bearing sense while *phoné* was mainly an acoustic sign, expressing only joy or pain, and it is to this distinction that modern political philosophers such as Agamben and Rancière refer back to in order to reclaim the importance of voice for being recognized as a political subject (Dressler 2014: 29). Tracing the history of this notion, it becomes easier to see why the question of voice is so central to anthropology and the social sciences. As logos, voice is not something that can simply be used to provide information or data. Instead, a person's voice is the expression and bearer of personal thought, ideas, opinions, and experiences and needs to be acknowledged as such as long as we want our interlocutors to recognize themselves in what we write, or at least to see that we did not ignore them. That a few quotes here and there may just not be enough becomes even clearer if one remembers the role of voice in the Roman categorization of tools, conceiving of slaves as speaking tools (*instrumentum vocale*), simple, manual tools as silent (*mutum*), and animals as a half-speaking go-between (*instrumentum semi-vocale*) (cf. Anderson 1974: 24-25). This Roman categorisation of slaves as tools that speak shows clearly that a merely physical or formal recognition of voice as the ability of speech is by no means sufficient to provide a relationship in which a person would be able to feel being recognized as an equal.

In the context of migration studies, this problem of ignoring the voice of those whose actions and experiences in fact constitute the object of inquiry, that is the practice of migration, has as far as I can see been addressed most directly by Liisa Malkki who criticizes humanitarian organisations and projects for their tendency to present refugees as ‘speechless emissaries’ (Malkki 1996). Looking back at years of ethnographic research on refugee camps in Tanzania and the work of different humanitarian agencies she writes that: ‘What was con-spicuously absent from all the documentary accumulation generated in the refugee camps was an official record of *what the refugees themselves said about their own histories and their present predicament*’ (Malkki 1996: 384, my emphasis). I would argue that Malkki’s critique holds equally true for most accounts of migration, in anthropology and elsewhere, and this despite the fact that the debates on Writing Culture, representation, and ethnographic authority have been with us for more than 25 years now (Starn 2015), and despite of individuals efforts to find more balanced and less ‘homophonic’ (Clifford 1988: 50) modes of ethnography (cf. for instance Jackson 2013, or Cabot 2016).

Conclusion

John Berger once wrote that reality always outdates writing. In this regard, writing migration is impossible as its realities are always more complex than a textual representation would be able to convey. While personal accounts and memories may form an important antidote to the non-ethics of auctorial representation, they do not escape this contradiction. Any account, any memory can only be partial, too, and it has rightly been emphasized that memories and personal accounts are also always necessarily constructed, the result of selections, subjective perceptions, and experiences, notoriously unreliable, subject to change, and, thus, as incomplete as an auctorial descriptive text. What the notion of voice reminds us of, however, is that while these are important lessons, memories are deeply significant for the person who remembers, not just because they are personal, intimate, painful, or comforting, but because memory represents an equally originary site of subjectivity as voice itself. Like voice, memory, in other words, is the person and the person is memory. Following this line of thought, and expanding upon Husserlian phenomenology through its own vocabulary, one could almost argue that the phenomenological subject is as *retentional* as it is intentional, as much constituted by the holding on to something than by reaching out. Brought back to the question of migration, these reflections remind us of the fact that what preceded a departure is as important as what results from it. While the urgency of migration is, of course, real, and must be accounted for, we should not forget that this urgency does not exhaust itself in the present but equally reaches into the past and, ultimately, the future. Voice is hereby not a simple remedy and remains ambivalent. At least in its written form, voice also signals an absence, that which cannot be heard any longer, the person that is not present, always reminding us of the fact that we are still reading, not listening. Listening, strictly speaking, can only take place in the present and it is there that it must be achieved.

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Notes

1. Following this line of thought, I have not taken up the idea of the editors to include the transcript of the interview in Mandinka and its French translation. Although the notion of voice has important links to linguistics, this article is not concerned with language as such, nor with its social use. Because of this, no attempt has been made to use a linguistically more detailed form of transcription or contextualization. In other words, this article is not concerned with voice as an object of inquiry but, as we will see, with voice as an original site of subjectivity and agency. This does not mean that anthropology does not lack venues for the publication of original versions of firsthand ethnographic accounts or for more multilingual theoretical reflections. The monolingual orientation of contemporary 'international' anthropology is problematic indeed, but it is not central to the argument of this article.

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Knut Graw
Center of Advanced Studies-Erlangen (CAS-E) -
'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective'
Kussmaul-Forschungscampus D3
Hartmannstr. 14
91502 Erlangen
Germany
knut.graw@fau.de
knut.graw@soc.kuleuven