CHILD MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT
STRATEGIES TO BECOME ADULT
IN RURAL BURKINA FASO

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This chapter argues that children's migration is not solely an outcome of poverty. It is not the outcome of poor parents sending away their children to reduce consumption within the household or to receive much-needed cash from their children's labour, or of children being forced to migrate to meet their own needs because their parents are unable to do so. While much of the work underlying advocacy and international programmes seeking to eliminate child labour tends to see children as passive objects in their parents' coping strategies or as victims of poverty (UNICEF 1999, 2002, 2005), this study demonstrates that adolescent children make decisions about migrating not only for economic reasons but also to have more autonomy and to acquire new skills. Based on ethnographic material about independent child migrants from the Bisa region in south-eastern Burkina Faso who travel to rural towns in the region and to the capital, the chapter explores how adolescent children use migration to renegotiate their social position and accelerate the transition from childhood to adulthood.[2]

The view on child migrants as docile victims of their parents' poverty is embedded in a primarily western notion of childhood which constructs all children as dependent and non-working, who go to school and play the rest of the day. In addition to treating children as if there was no difference between a child aged 7, 12 or 17, this construction sets up children's economic activities as an anomaly in contradiction with their parents' fundamental duties to provide for and support their children's development (Ennew 2003, Hashim 2005, Nieuwenhuys 1996). Finally, the failure to see children as proactive decision-makers who pursue interests that may, or may not, coincide with those of their seniors, also ignores the formative aspects for the children of leaving home, working and earning an income (Myers 1999).

Although more nuanced views on childhoods have emerged within anthropology since the 1990s, the focus in the African context has mostly been on children and youth's positions in societies experiencing rapid

[2] The research was funded and carried out under the auspices of the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty at University of Sussex in the period October 2004 – September 2005. The material was produced in interviews with 70 child migrants (under 18 years of age at the departure) and 45 parents, as well as in casual conversations and repeated visits with a smaller number of them during four months in early 2005. Additionally, some of the material originates from field research that I carried out in one village in 2001-2002.

change, either due to armed conflict, HIV/AIDS or swift economic changes (de Boeck and Honwana 2002, Utas 2005). As a contrast, this chapter focuses on adolescent children's labour migration from quiet, remote rural areas where migration has long been an important source of livelihood and it explores the less visible elements of children's negotiations with their parents and other adults. The chapter thus aims at understanding children's migration beyond the usual economic rationale that explains children's mobility in terms of economic need. A second aim is to unpack the many indirect ways in which adolescent children may exercise agency, despite the fact that as a social category they hold little social and material power.

Negotiating Identities, Meanings and Preferences

Recent theoretical insights into notions of childhood and the adjacent social categories of 'adolescence', 'youth' and 'adulthood' have moved away from the idea of universal, chronological life stages towards much more fluid definitions that foreground the historically and culturally constructed qualities of such categories (Bucholtz 2002, de Boeck and Honwana 2005, Durham 2000, Ennew 2003). Although a certain level of universality is accorded to the categories of childhood and adolescence as opposites of adulthood, the meaning of these categories varies from one social setting to the other and even from one person to another. While childhood generally is understood as a phase characterised by dependence, marginal social positions and asexual identity, and adolescence is perceived as a phase of increasing independence, gradual learning of adult social positions and developing sexual identities, the interpretation of these characteristics differ (Durham 2000:115-16). The degree of dependence, for example, does not simply decline as a child grows up and becomes able to provide for him or herself, it may shift back and forth depending on the economic, symbolic and ritual situations in which children and their parents or guardians find themselves at different times.

The shifting nature of dependency and its implications for children's social positions as children, adolescents or adults is the focus of Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen's (2003) study of orphans' spatial and social mobility in Western Kenya. They found children adapted to being orphaned by taking up adult roles and inventing new strategies for survival, such as taking up paid work in the community, migrating to work for fishermen at Lake Victoria or in the mines, or moving to urban areas where they often worked for better-off kin. Shifting places and earning money meant a shift over to adulthood for the orphans. But, argued the authors, if these children were given the opportunity, for example, if an elder kin took the responsibility for

them, they returned to their social position as being children. While Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen make an important point about the different speeds at which children grow up within the same setting, their study also raises the significant questions of whether it is possible to jump between social categories at will, and how such positioning may be shaped by previous experiences.

Here it is useful to look at Durham's critical discussion of 'youth' as a social category. Earlier attempts to define youth refer to a period of early adulthood where individuals embrace many characteristics of adults but are still not accorded all the rights and responsibilities. This definition is problematic, argues Durham, because inclusion has depended on three slightly different demarcations. Accordingly, youth are:

> (1) those (either by their own claims, or by the impositions of others) who straddle kin-based, domestic space and wider public spheres; (2) those who have gained some level of recognized autonomy and take up public roles, but are still also dependents and not able to command the labour of others as superiors; (3) those who can be expected to act upon their social world and not just be the recipients of action (Durham 2000:116).

At the core of these demarcations is an evaluation and negotiation of *who* is included in the category and what it means to be youth, especially in relation to being adult. At the level of individuals, the evaluation often concerns the ability to take up particular social positions and with them bundles of responsibilities and rights within the family or in the immediate community, while at the general level, the evaluation aims at characterising youth as a social category in order to delineate who fits in and who does not. That is to say, in a given setting, evaluations at the individual level by youth and adults alike lean on the general views on what it means to be youth, views that in turn are shaped by the common practices at that particular time. A key point here is that such evaluations are not necessarily identical because they are made by several persons whose interpretations of the qualities ascribed to particular social categories and of the ability of the person in question to satisfy these qualities may differ. Evaluations are therefore part and parcel of negotiations over meaning, practices and individual strategies.

From this perspective, jumping between social categories at will -- be they childhood, adolescence, youth or adulthood -- requires a conscious casting by the individual as someone who, in his or her imagination, belongs to the desired social group. Whether the orphans in Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen's (2003) study slipped back into being children simply because they no longer needed to fend for themselves is uncertain.

Rather, I suggest, they *chose* to position themselves as children in part because it was an implicit precondition for being supported by seniors in the extended family, and in part because fending for themselves had been difficult and lifting some responsibilities off their shoulders would ease their everyday lives. Along the same line, I argue, the choice for an orphan of returning to childhood may only last as long as he/she feels better off materially, socially or emotionally than during the period of taking on adult social responsibilities. In other words, the experience of managing on their own enters in the children's repertoire and shapes how they respond subsequently to opportunities and difficulties, as well as to positioning themselves in other social categories.

The adolescent children in this chapter had migrated on their own to find work. Some of them worked in small food places and shops, while others tried hard to eek out an income from itinerant work such as shoe-shining and petty-trade. Among this group of young migrants, some were orphans of one or both parents, but none of them had been abandoned by their extended families. Hence the decision to migrate for all these children was shaped by their relationship with their parents or guardians, and by their own and others' evaluation of what would be in their best interest. Here their perceptions of the intergenerational contract, that is, of what obligations they had to their seniors and vice versa, were important elements in the decision-making.

The intergenerational contract as an analytical concept is based on feminist critiques of economic models of intra-household bargaining that flag up negotiations at the level of individuals. The critiques counter among others the methodological premises in the economic models of seeing negotiation as a two-person game. Instead they stress that negotiation is bound up with bundles of privileges and responsibilities of different household members in regard to one another, and that individuals take into account both immediate and future concerns, as well as past experiences when they make decisions (Whitehead 1984, 1991, 1998). While in most approaches the agency exercised by children, adolescents and youth is conceptualised at the macro-level, with the effect that the way young individuals' negotiate their everyday lives remains opaque, the intergenerational contract approach is valuable for understanding better the considerations that shape

the interests of both children and their seniors and therefore their negotiations at the micro-level.[3] In farming households and poorer urban households in the West African savannah, the intergenerational contract links labour needs, separate economic spheres, and long term concerns about social security.

> Children have to ensure, on the one hand, that they fulfil their obligations to parents and seniors, while, on the other hand, they wish to carve out the space to pursue their own personal endeavours, which is both in their material interest, and also an aspect of [constructing] their identity and others' perceptions of them as *"a good child"*. For their part, seniors need children's labour to secure subsistence, while at the same time ensuring they provide children with the time and means for pursuing their own endeavours (Whitehead et al. 2005:16).

The sometimes, but not always, overlapping interests of different generations allow some space for acting out choices that are not immediately palatable for the other part. In a study of children's migration in Karnataka, India, Iversen (2002 cf. Whitehead et al. 2005:4) argued that boys migrated without their parents' approval because they were dissatisfied with the way the intergenerational contract was functioning in their family, but neither the children nor their parents had an interest in terminating the contract. Firstly, the disregard of the parents' authority might be perceived as a minor offence, and secondly, for both children and parents it might be beneficial in the long term to maintain the contract. Although the parents did not agree to their children's migration initially, the children's proactive behaviour rarely had serious consequences for their relationships with their family. This raises the issue of how children negotiate with their parents to pursue their preferences, how their preferences are formed and to what extent children's interests are different from those of their parents.

While the notions of childhood, adolescence and youth are usually constructed as opposites of adulthood, they should not just be seen as liminal phases in the process of becoming adult. Each category 'involves its own distinctive identities and practices, which are neither rehearsals for the adult "real thing" nor even nec-

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[3] Most definitions of agency focus on the ability and inclination to make choices and act upon them in the pursuit of one's interests and objectives, which may target one's own well-being as well as concerns related to other's well-being, social relationships, moral precepts for appropriate behaviour and the pursuit of particular values (Fabienne 2003:17; Kabeer 1999:438; Strathern 1996:28).

essarily oriented to adults at all' (Bucholtz 2002:232). Being a child, adolescent or youth is, as the above discussion has implied, about creating, negotiating and renegotiating identities with adults in general, and with parents or guardians in particular, *as well as* with other children, adolescents and youth of a similar age and with those who are younger or older (Bucholtz 2002). So, even though the child migrants in part orientate their constructions of identities and decision-making to seniors, their peer group is an equally important reference group in creating aspirations to specific lifestyles.

While at face value running away, as the boys in Iversen's (2002) study did, is the outcome of a conflictual relationship between generations, I argue that the reason for such behaviour is more complex. In social settings – such as the one I describe in Burkina Faso -- overt expressions of feelings, preferences and decisions are restrained and often subdued by inequalities in power, hence children and other social categories holding little symbolic and material power cannot speak up against their seniors. Therefore, the exercise of agency happens mostly in indirect ways that can be difficult for an outsider to discern. This poses a methodological conundrum as to how we can discover and represent these not so visible forms of making choices and acting upon them. We must also not flatten out the differences in individuals' perceptions of their capability to act in certain moments, in their talents for strategising to meet their objectives, and in their courage to transgress boundaries or counter someone who is more powerful than they are. Abu-Lughod (1993:13), among others, argues that by stressing particularities and individual experiences, we may provide a window on social practice as well as on what different cultural habits and idiosyncrasies *mean* to the people who are living them.

Incitements to Migrate in the Making

Migration has long been a key source of livelihood for the rural population in Burkina Faso, which in 2002 comprised 83 percent of the entire population (UNDP 2004). Among other reasons, due to the prohibitive agro-climatic instability, people engage in a kaleidoscopic range of activities to meet their consumption and cash needs. Even before colonisation, mobility was an important characteristic of the population in the West African savannah, but the heavy taxation and labour conscription, especially in the French colonies, gave rise to two types of migration: the expansion into unoccupied nearby rural areas and circular labour migration to the cocoa and coffee plantations in the forest zones in the Gold Coast and Côte d'Ivoire (Breusers 1998, Cordell et al. 1996, Faure 1996). In Burkina Faso, moves into areas not yet colonised or to the Gold

Coast colonised by the British were popular strategies of resistance in the early 20th century. The proximity of the south-eastern region to the border made long-term resettlement in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast easier, because people could still participate in all the important rituals and thereby maintain their network of kin through visiting.

After independence, circular migration from all over Burkina Faso continued, now mostly to Côte d'Ivoire, since the cocoa economy in the Gold Coast had stagnated in the late 1950s. Migration had become inscribed in rural livelihoods both as a source of income to subsidise the fluctuating farm production, and as part of young men's transition into adulthood (Breusers 1998:182-3). Today, a significant part of the population lives outside Burkina Faso permanently, or at least very long-term, and even though women migrate less than men do, there has been a general shift in the migration pattern since the 1960s. Not only has the proportion of female migrants risen because married women join their husbands instead of staying behind with his kin, many of them have become migrants in their own right to urban areas or to Côte d'Ivoire (Cordell et al. 1996:237). The implication of the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly since it escalated in 2002, varies greatly. Burkinabè migrants were forced to leave the country in large numbers, but many also remained, either because they were too poor to return or because they had invested all their savings in property or businesses with a view to remaining permanently.

The accounts told by people in the Bisa region in 2005 revealed that, throughout the crisis, both men and women continued to travel to and from Côte d'Ivoire because the wage levels and income from trade were still considerably higher than in Burkina Faso, in spite of the deteriorating employment opportunities. Of those migrants who had returned from Côte d'Ivoire, many tried to make a living in Ouagadougou or in the rural towns, while a few had taken up farming and trade in their village. Becoming farmers and villagers under their seniors' authority did not fit with the return migrants' aspirations in life, in part because the social status accorded to being a migrant were much higher than being a junior in the village. Tied to these aspects of identity and social position were material concerns of earning higher incomes in the urban areas than in the village. Furthermore, they would have more control over their time and income if they remained migrants within Burkina Faso than if they lived in the village, where they as juniors would be helping to grow crops on their seniors' farms every morning while only having the afternoon to work on their own farms.

When adolescent children migrate, they follow in the footsteps of their parents and often also their grand-

parents, and, as has been pointed out in other areas of repeated cycles of migration (e.g. Camacho 1999, Castle and Diarra 2003), they often join a network of relatives at the destination. This aspect of children's independent migration has received very partial and somewhat negative attention in the advocacy to reduce child migration and eliminate the worst forms of child labour. Firstly, parents' experiences of migration in the past, and possibly of having spent the early years of childhood as a migrant or having lived with grandparents, uncles or aunts while the parents were away on migration, are rarely considered as an important influence on children's worldviews and on the aspirations they have in life. Secondly, the function of relatives at the destinations has been discredited in the national and international discourses on child trafficking, with the effect that relatives are now cautious about being publicly branded as intermediaries and/or guardians. And yet, the relatives operate within a cultural paradigm that defines their position as classificatory parents with the rights and responsibilities accorded to this position (for Mali see Castle and Diarra 2003; for Ghana see Hashim 2005; for Côte d'Ivoire see Jacquemin pers. com; for Burkina Faso, Terre des Hommes 2003). The first point especially is central to understanding the complexities of adolescent children's migration, while the presence of relatives at the destination may influence the likelihood of parents accepting their child's wish to migrate.

Competing with children's desire to migrate to pursue the opportunities that many others had pursued before them -- but in their own ways and often with the hope of doing better --- are their obligations to and sentiments for their parents and seniors. Meanwhile their senior's must balance their needs for the children's labour and company with their obligations to the children and other family members, and with their own aspirations at that particular moment and in the future. These are of course linked with how rural childhoods and children's positions in the family are conceptualised in the West African savannah.

Fortes (1949) described in great detail how Tallensi children in northern Gold Coast were gradually incorporated in the social spheres of adults through steady encouragement to participate in farm and household chores, and in social and ritual events where families and the larger network of kin came together. Progressively, the encouragement of voluntary participation changed to expectations that the child would carry out tasks appropriate to age and physical ability. The fundamental principles in Tallensi childhoods -- as processes of learning the necessary skills to sustain a livelihood and of being drawn into the interdependencies between different members of the household and extended family -- are very similar to the prevailing notions of childhoods in South-eastern Burkina Faso today, despite the fact that new technologies and ideas

have crept into the rural communities over the years.

From an adult perspective, having children is an important part of long-term happiness and security, since children are a means of gaining symbolic, material and ritual status within these rural communities. The wish and need for children's commitment to their parents is reflected in the way they are socialised into becoming cultured and gendered persons, just as in the past. One important change since Fortes' study of the Tallensi is the much higher frequency of long term migration, which means families are spread out over several locations. But even absent children -- young or adult -- contribute to their parent's status if they have regular contact and the parents are able to demonstrate this contact to others by showing letters, photographs or gifts.

In south-eastern Burkina Faso today, children are still incorporated gradually in farm and household chores, but some of them also go to school if the father *or* the mother can afford to pay the school fees and related costs.[4] While tasks like looking after a younger sibling or herding goats and sheep may be asked of a child aged 8-10, heavier tasks are not forced upon them though they are encouraged to participate in other activities if they show an interest. In those cases, tools like hoes and water containers are reduced in size to fit their physical strength. Even when they start being obliged to take part in agricultural work at the age of 12-13 years, children still gather fruit and leaves, they are asked to run errands with other children and they are given time to play. By expecting older children to participate in the farm work, they learn all the necessary skills by doing, but they are also important sources of labour for their parents both on the farm and in the house. To stimulate children from an early age to take up individual economic activities, they are given a small field of their own, or a hen, or are encouraged to sell the fruits they have gathered. Gradually as they grow up they are allowed more time to engage in their own activities, but are still required for household and farming tasks that are normally carried out by juniors. Adolescent children and youth are also given time to engage in various social activities. But while girls often are under adult surveillance, boys and young men have considerable freedom to explore the social and economic fields further afar. Parents rarely exert direct control on children's income but try to influence the way in which money is spent by encouraging certain

[4] At the national level, the net enrolment rate in primary school was 35% in 2001/02 (UNDP 2004), and the remoteness of most village schools in the Bisa region both in terms of the distance to school for the children and of retaining school teachers implies that the regional enrolment rate was lower.

purchases and expenditures while disapproving of others (Thorsen 2005).

Following the gradual learning of skills through the incorporation in dependencies, autonomies and interdependencies within the household and in the larger, extended network of kin, migration is just another step in the on-going acquisition of skills. What the child migrants learn by working and living in rural towns and urban centres, even when they work in low-paid and insecure jobs, increases their immediate and future opportunities for earning an income and for increasing their social relations and knowledge. In the remainder of this chapter, I follow closely the stories told by child migrants and their parents. The majority of these migrants were boys in their late teens who had left with or without their parents' knowledge. Although many of them spoke about their migration in material terms, it was clear from their ideas of how to spend their income and of what they gained by being away that they had left home for other reasons than destitution. They wanted to help their parents, not by meeting basic consumption needs, but by constructing nice houses for them some day in the future; they wanted more freedom and they wanted adventure. Their migration was however not motivated solely by their individual aspirations to a better life but also encouraged by their parents, who hoped the children would support them later in life and perhaps also bring wealth to the family. These stories reveal much about how intergenerational negotiations take place and also how migrant boys orientated their practices and identities to their peer group as much as to their seniors.

Paths to New Identities

Gradual integration into the adult social world, and thus into the interdependencies within extended households and kin groups, shapes children and young people's perception of themselves, and consequently the way they seek to position themselves in relation to their family and friends. Here the process of positioning should be understood as individual projects of constructing particular identities rather than as transitions from incomplete to complete persons. Children and young people are not simply copycats: their identities and practices are not aimed at preparing for one particular notion of adulthood, nor do they compare themselves to adults only (Bucholtz 2002: 532).

In rural communities in south-eastern Burkina Faso, with no electricity and a low level of literacy, the exposure to other people's actions and stories were still the main ingredients in children's imagination and identity-construction in 2005. Adult views on age-appropriate behaviour were important but by no means

restricted to the ideas held by the children's parents. Others sources of inspiration were close kin, other villagers, schoolteachers, health workers, other non-local residents or visitors in the village, occasional visits to the nearby town, Tenkodogo, and the radio broadcasts that children and adults alike listened to whenever they had batteries for the radio. But perhaps most important for children and young people's decision-making were the ideas shared by friends of a similar age, as well as individual reflections, on the repertoire of social positions that were worthwhile to pursue.

The significance of migration as a source of livelihood meant the experience of urban lifestyles in Ouagadougou, Accra or Abidjan often figured in the tales told by young and old, irrespective of whether they had actually lived urban lives or worked in plantations in the forest zone. With few exceptions the current generation of fathers had been migrants to Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire, as had many mothers. Especially for boys, migration had almost become a rite of passage to adulthood. For this reason, decisions rarely concerned *whether* to migrate but *when* to go.

Deciding to Leave Home

In 2002, Yao, whose father had died two years previously, had itchy feet; at the age of sixteen he was stuck working on his mother's farm while his two older brothers had migrated. The oldest had been working on a plantation in Côte d'Ivoire for four or five years, while the other was at secondary school in Tenkodogo, some 20 km away. Yao had dropped out of school some years earlier because the teacher often beat him. So when the harvest finished, he mostly hung out with one or two friends, catching bush rats which they roasted on a small fire while chatting in the shade of a tree. It was nice not having to slave away in the fields every day or invent ways to escape the work, but having nothing to do, no ways of earning a bit of money, was actually boring. A few weeks later he was gone.

Although his mother presumed he had gone to a cousin in Tenkodogo, she worried that he had gone further away. She now regretted having pestered him with angry questions ever since he sold the entire rice and bean harvest – the most valuable crops that *she* had counted on selling later on in the season. Yao had disastrously reduced her key savings and hence her security for the coming year, but she was actually more concerned that the money could pay for his transport for quite a distance -- at least to Ouagadougou. At

sixteen, she felt Yao was too young to migrate to distant destinations where he might suffer or get in the company of bad persons. Yao,[5] on the other hand, may have felt entitled to a share of the harvest because not only had he worked hard on his mother's fields, but other boys of his age had their own rice and sometimes also millet fields which they cultivated in the afternoons. Moreover, he had already shown that he was growing up when he had migrated to Tenkodogo in search of work during the previous dry season, although he had been unlucky with his employers and had not received any wage.

The conflict between Yao and his mother underscores that children and parents may interpret the bundles of rights and privileges in the intergenerational contract differently, and that their expectations and strategies do not always concur. This does not only relate to resources like land, labour and crops, though they are important. The way one father spoke about his son in Côte d'Ivoire gave an indication that parents are also concerned about their children's welfare and ability to cope with the conditions at the migration destination. Although Hamadou was already 21 years old, his father described how somebody in the village had arranged to *steal* his son because a relative of theirs wanted a child to work on a plantation. As the conversation went on, he revealed that his son had actually talked about migrating but, in the end, had left secretly because he had felt the boy was too young to leave home. Now he was worried that the boy would suffer because he was not skilled in growing cocoa and might not have the required physical strength, and ultimately he might not retain his job or get enough to eat because he could not keep up with the work. Several boys described how they had run off to Ouagadougou because they were convinced their parents would not permit them to go. Usually they sent a message with someone going back to the village to let their parents know where they were, or -- as Hamadou did on arrival in Côte d'Ivoire -- phoned an older brother who in turn acted as an intermediary in ironing out hurdles in the relationship with their father.

From the children and parents' stories, it is clear that intergenerational relationships are arenas in which both children and adults exercise agency. On the one hand, parents evaluate their children's maturity on a yardstick combining the responsibilities they feel their children are able to take on, their wish for shielding the children from hardship, and their desire to have the children around. On the other hand, adolescent children try to assert their identities as young adults by emphasising the characteristics they feel are central

[5] As Yao had left, I was never able to discuss this episode with him, so I only know his mother's version of the story.

to being a grown-up and which they think will convince their parents. Underlying the sometimes contradictory judgements made by parents and children regarding their maturity, are negotiations of the children's identities embedded in local ideas of age-appropriate behaviour, rights and duties. Yao and the other boys who had run away did not feel as immature as their parents judged them to be, and they wanted to prove themselves. Whether the decision about their migration was negotiated overtly or not, the parents had the upper hand because they were able to remove it from issues that could be discussed repeatedly. In these situations, some children would remain at home for another year or two, others might have tried to ask permission in different ways or asked other kin to mediate the negotiation with the father or mother. Yao, Hamadou and the other boys who left secretly may have tried these strategies too but, failing to get their parents' sanction, they defied their authority and ran away as a last option, knowing well that it was unlikely to backfire.

However, parents and children's assessments of whether it is appropriate for a child to migrate do not necessarily conflict. At the age of sixteen, after a cousin had visited from Ouagadougou, Xavier decided he wanted to try his luck. He told his father that he too wanted to earn money to buy nice clothes and his father granted him permission to go. His mother even brewed beer to give him money for the transport, though his father did not know about this gift. David, Pierre and Pascal had also asked permission before going to Ouagadougou in search of work. Wishing them success, their fathers gave them money for the transport and advised them to take the time to find proper jobs instead of being satisfied with low-paid piece work. They also told their sons to be polite, honest and well-behaved as they, the fathers, would not necessarily hear if their sons were in trouble. Finally, they stressed the importance of savings, however small they were.

Here the parents estimated that their sons were sufficiently mature to test out concretely their imaginations about being migrants. Having been migrants themselves, they knew what their sons were in for. The assistance with money, as well as the guidance on how to navigate in the urban setting, was in one sense an indication of the parents' support for their children's aspirations for getting new insights and adopting new social positions through which they would continue to construct their identities. On the other hand, the parents shifted negotiations from the decision of *when* to migrate to the implications for their children *of being* migrants. For the children, this shift amplified the future decisions to be made about maintaining family ties and meeting the expectations their parents had of them, while at the same time pursuing their own aspirations for the future. It opened an avenue for including new elements in their social positioning but

also for more binding obligations.

Renegotiating Social Positions: Asserting Identities

When child migrants return home, they are usually obliged to strategise regarding how they straddle potential social positions and towards who they aim their meagre resources that may increase their value in the eyes of others. The expectations of remittances are many but their means are limited, since in 2005 most child migrants earned 3-7,000 Fcfa per month (approx. £ 3-7).

Returning to the story of Yao gives us an idea of how children seek to renegotiate their social position in the family through migrating. Yao came back home after only a month. He told his mother that he had sold iced water[6] for his cousin, but when he was accused falsely of stealing from an elderly woman in the compound, he had decided to return home. As his cousin believed in his honesty, she had given him 7,000 Fcfa (approx. £ 7). He spent half the money on clothes and shoes for himself and gave the other half to his mother as a gift. Yao was imitating the practices of older return migrants. In a study of the Kasena in southern Burkina Faso, Hahn (2003) describes how, in addition to presenting a lump sum to the household head on their return, the success and social position of young migrants is embodied in the clothing and gifts they bring home. The money Yao presented to his mother was, for him, a claim to his success as an adult son, as a migrant and as willing to contribute to the family's common well-being.

When Aïcha briefly visited her mother who had fallen ill, she also followed the practices of returning migrants and brought her mother a present of two metal serving-spoons, two plastic bowls and 350 Fcfa to buy clothes for her younger brother. Although the gift was small and her mother sold some rice to buy a nice set of clothes for the brother, she was very proud of her 17-year-old daughter, who sold iced water in a town some 40 km away. While Yao and Aïcha opted for similar strategies when they returned to the village, the outcome was different. Aïcha's mother was delighted by her daughter's demonstration of responsibility through visiting her sick mother, saving up money and contributing to her younger brother's upkeep. She actively supported her daughter's correct behaviour by financially backing her gift to her brother. In contrast

[6] All over Burkina, it is very common to sell small plastic bags with cold drinking water, and sweetened drinks of roselle, tamarind and ginger for 10, 25 and 50 F_{CFA}. These drinks are either sold directly from the fridge in small shops along the road, from 'igloo' ice boxes tied on the back of a bicycle. Or they are chart wheeled around town or sold from trays carried around within the market place or the neighbourhood.

Yao's mother dismissed his purchases as 'having spent money on nothing', either because she perceived him as a messenger only bringing the entire sum of money from his cousin to her, because she wished to punish him for selling the rice and beans, or because she wanted him to invest the money in a goat, rather than spend it on clothing. These examples illustrate how children's success in enacting particular social positions is shaped by earlier choices and concrete acts.

Not all parents were as austere as Yao's mother in the judgement of their children's assertion of particular identities, even if the children had not listened to their advice. When David, Pierre and Pascal, whose fathers had urged them to find proper employment, returned to their village for a funeral after a less than a year in Ouagadougou, they were dressed up in new jeans and shirts, they had identical haircuts -- the hippest ever -- and flashy necklaces with a large scorpion as appendage. They had spent almost all their money on clothing to look like smart urbanites. The fact that they had not found a job during their stay in the capital and therefore had worked as itinerant shoe-shiners was erased from their appearance. They radiated success like every other migrant returning to the village. But with no money left to give to their parents or to buy presents, their construction of a migrant identity did not impress their fathers, who once again sat down to invoke a different set of priorities and repeat the advantages of having a good job. In this case, the parents' evaluation of their migrant children's maturity was about their understanding of the principles in the intergenerational contract and thus of the bundles of responsibilities and privileges that were inscribed in being successful migrants back in the bosom of the family.

Presumably the boys were more successful in convincing their peer group about their new identity, at least by installing a measure of envy of their smart clothes. Another avenue for young return migrants to stress difference from their rural peers is to be extravagant. Paul did not bring back many gifts from Ouagadougou because the uncle he had worked for had bought him a pair of jeans and then given him a lump sum only on the day he departed. The uncle thought he would give some money to his father and then buy goats or sheep as savings, but Paul chose to keep most of the money and treat his friends to snacks and drinks in the market. He was thus able to be a big person, at least among his peers, and he had a great social time until the money finished. While adults snigger at this squandering of money, young return migrants talk about how nice it is that their friends come along whenever they ask them. However, they also say that when the money ends, some friendships cool off too.

The new skills they learn while away are valued by child migrants as much for what they symbolise as for their practicalities. When Aïcha described what she had learned in the three years she had stayed with a cousin in a rural town during the dry season, she represented the narratives of most girl migrants. She stressed her ability to cook urban meals -- frying meat and using sauce ingredients such as oil, cabbage and Maggi cubes that were rarely used in the village -- implicitly magnifying the social status she gained by having these qualities. The boys, like Salfo who worked as a kitchen hand in a small restaurant and Ibrahim who was an apprentice mechanic, dreamed about opening their own businesses one day using the practical and economic skills they had acquired from their patron. Additionally, both boys and girls pointed to all the things they had seen and experienced while away that their peers in the village could not even imagine. To their peers they recounted their experiences in vivid, story-telling traditions, describing how urban people behaved and, in whispering voices, how they misbehaved. They thus set themselves apart from their friends who had remained in the village by describing their impressions but they also reoccupied some common ground by offering their interpretations of spectacular events or odd attitudes and relating them to a mutual set of moral references.

Alisetta, who grew up in Côte d'Ivoire and only returned to the village with her mother at the age of 14, did not share any of the common reference points with the girls of her age. 'The girls come around but they just sit without saying a word,' she complained. 'If only they would tell me about the things they know!' On the one hand, the other girls' stories would have helped her to clue in on how she in turn should tell her stories to position herself vis-à-vis her new peers. On the other hand, she did not give them much chance but left to work with a relative in a nearby town after less than a month in the village. Alisetta's story shows that the returning child migrant must refer to the local practices and moral order for their positioning to be effective, but as social mobility is a central element of migrating, their positioning may be oriented towards constructing identities that are distinctly different.

The high frequency of migration from rural communities means that the children's newly attained knowledge is not unique -- in fact most of their seniors are former migrants, often to destinations further afield. Hence, the migration experience itself is only a valuable asset in social positioning vis-à-vis juniors and age mates. Convincing parents and other seniors that it ought to bring a higher and more mature status and another set of rights and more freedom requires returned child migrants to demonstrate that they have taken on board some of the adult views on the kind of behaviour befitting rural life and livelihoods, rather than colourful

stories from the city.

Being in Transit

For rural children in south-eastern Burkina Faso, migration represents an avenue to pursue their own desires of earning money, being independent and seeing some of the world, while at the same time fulfilling the expectations their seniors have of them materially and socially through promises of gifts and remittances that partially make up for their absence in the day-to-day work. Becoming migrants entail being in a state of transit at many different levels. Not only does the spatial move imply a physical transit from one place to another, often it sets in motion a trajectory of moves from rural towns to the capital, and later to neighbouring countries. This trajectory also involves moves from one employer to another. Child migrants frequently change job because they have trouble claiming their wages or feel the working conditions are too exploitative, but they also constantly look for work that is better paid and offers higher social status. These forms of transit reiterate the on-going transition from being small children with few obligations and a limited say in decisions to being young adults with some responsibilities to their parents but also more opportunities to pursue their own interests. This chapter focused on the initial journeys and on the way in which adolescent child migrants use their newly acquired material status to renegotiate their identity back home vis-à-vis their parents and their peer group. What I have described is therefore just the first step in a long process of being in transit.

Looking at adolescent migrants' construction of identities through the lens of the intergenerational contract, and keeping in mind that the meaning of social categories is historically and culturally constructed and thus open to constant renegotiation, foregrounds the less visible elements of their negotiation and decision-making. In the West African savannah, the relationships between successive generations are shaped by the complex organisation of large households containing many layers of subunits.[7] The long-term security of the entire household is often the responsibility of the household head, while many of the immediate needs are met by wives and junior men. This is not to say that household heads are not concerned with everyday

[7] In the Bisa region for example, many households comprise extended families of up to four generations and include both biological and classificatory siblings at all levels. Even when a household consists of a monogamous couple and their children only, it is typically linked with other households through kinship, marriage or other social ties (Thorsen 2005).

welfare, or that wives and junior men do not look ahead, but that their decision-making is informed by the responsibilities associated with their social positions (Whitehead 1998:22-5). When adolescent children seek to assert their maturity, they do not aim at taking on substantial responsibilities but those linked with more immediate needs and with being young adults.

While parents and seniors have an obvious – and with age, an increasingly visible – need for sustaining a relationship with the next generation, the child migrant's interest are more ambiguous. In a study of street-working children and adolescents in Peru, Invernizzi (2003) pointed out that children's interests vis-à-vis their parents are relative to the protection they feel their parents offer, to the skills they gain by taking up independent economic activities and to the social recognition they earn. For the adolescent children in this chapter, the three concerns are linked with being in transit and with the dependencies, autonomies and interdependencies inherent in intergenerational relationships.

Firstly, in their search for more autonomy, the adolescent children do not always value the protection offered by their parents back in the village, at least not when they first leave. This may be at the root of diverging evaluations by the children and their parents regarding their ability to endure possible hardships at the destination. However, several child migrants returned home if they could not find a job, were not paid or experienced other difficulties. One boy exclaimed on his return that Ouagadougou was not for children. The reintegration of the adolescent return migrants in the household was similar to the orphans in Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen's (2003) study, but while they were slipping back into being juniors in their households, they continuously negotiated these positions. It was clear from Yao and his mother's conflict that she still saw him as a child, whereas he sought to assert himself as an almost adult son with the gift of money for his mother -- and as a child, when he 'escaped' the farm work. The important point here is that social categories are fluid and both children and their parents may shift between seeing an adolescent as a child and as a young adult, depending on the situation. Another important point is the protection offered by the family when things do not work out and the children return home without a penny to their name. All the children I knew were welcomed back, often they were given more advice and sometimes some money for transport before leaving again. The family thus provides a space for testing out concretely the imagined benefits of being migrants without detrimental costs.

Secondly, the child migrants gained practical, social and economic skills which in turn boosted their social

status and their ability to position themselves vis-à-vis both their family and their peer-group. The increased autonomy, especially if the child migrants were successful in acquiring material wealth, transformed their position when negotiating concrete matters as well as identities. While the way they invested their money was key to convincing others about particular identities, the ability to fend for themselves and endure the hardships experienced as young rural migrants in the urban areas changed their position in negotiations. Even if the seniors did not always approve of the adolescent migrant's social navigation as 'skills', they recognised the need to give their children some room for manoeuvre to test their ingenious pursuit of individual interests. Children as well as the antecedent generations were acutely aware of the options for leaving (again) on migration and for going to distant destinations, a knowledge that crept into negotiations as an asset for the adolescent children in strengthening their position.

Finally, the child migrants' interests were relative to the social recognition they gained through the demonstration of success by giving gifts, investing in resources for the future, showing off fancy clothes or commodities like bicycles and radios. While the desire to take responsibility for their own upkeep was a valid argument to obtain parents and seniors' permission to migrate, buying clothes was also a means to construct success as a migrant. However, their limited material resources pointed up the difficult challenge for young people of orientating their construction of identities towards both their seniors and their peer group. For most of the children it was almost impossible to straddle their seniors' ideas of what it meant to be a successful, young adult, i.e. to bring small gifts for the many family members and binding the money in animals, with their own ideas of the need to impress their peers in order to be seen as worldly, experienced and adult. If the clothing was too conspicuous, the older generation felt the children were too short-sighted and wasted resources that could have been put to a better use. Here they were not making claims on their children's means for their own use but sought to inculcate in their children the advantage of saving. But once the children are away from the village, it was difficult for parents to influence their children's spending.

In line with Iversen's (2002) study of migrant children in southern India, the patient guidance by parents to tie their sons and daughters into the interdependencies of successive generations make obvious the resilience and elasticity in intergenerational relationships that mean children can act out their choices, despite the fact that they cannot counter their seniors openly, for example by leaving secretly or by not following the advice they have been given.

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