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Missing migrants: The absence of women in the history of migrations from Mali to Senegal

(Abstract)

This paper examines the invisibility of female migration in the historiography of Mali and Senegal (1900-1946). It is an attempt to deconstruct the concept of “labour migration” – based on the binary opposition between “wage-paid jobs” and “domestic work” – to demonstrate how it contributed to a gender-blind description of African migration. The colonial analysis of migration took the maleness of the labour force for granted and assimilated women’s work to family labour. Women were mainly described as those left in rural areas, while men were absent migrants with wage-paid jobs in urban centres. Several case studies will reveal the misconception of these colonial and androcentric assumptions.

Previous scholarship on migration from Mali to Senegambia particularly insisted on seasonal migration of young single men. However, this specific migration did not only involve young single men but also entire families, and therefore women, who started settling permanently in the peanut basin in the early 1910s. Female migrations were also always intimately linked to marriage. The analysis of court cases demonstrates how women had to activate specific networks to eventually leave their husband and start new lives elsewhere. Furthermore, as the androcentric colonial administration was obsessed by controlling male labour, female migration was never properly registered.

It is actually the focus on male labour migration by both the colonial administration and African historical scholarship that has excluded the diversity of the migratory movements experienced by Upper Senegal at this time. These assumptions resulted in complex migration patterns being assimilated into a simplified pattern of labour migration, entailing a homogenization of views over both male and female African migrations. In order to make female migration visible again, it is important to interrogate the centrality of “labour migration” to this question and to abandon gender dichotomies, which fundamentally prevent an analysis of the mobility of African women.