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Socio-Material Infrastructures of Mobility: Rethinking Migration and Circulation in African Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines the interconnections between materiality and circulation in African contexts as an introductory context for the Special Issue: "Acteurs, circulations et matérialités en Afrique / Actors, Circulations, and Materialities in Africa". Informed by the concept of migration infrastructures introduced by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), the paper explores the relationship between migration infrastructures and circulations through material objects, mobility practices and institutional arrangements as discussed in the contributions in the Special Issue. The main argument developed here is that mobilities and migrations are embedded in what we conceptualize as socio-material infrastructures of mobility, understood as an assemblage of objects, technologies, practices and forms of knowledge that shape mobility processes. This perspective moves beyond approaches centered on flows or transport infrastructures by emphasizing the relational and material conditions through which mobility is enacted and governed. Mobility and immobility are shaped by socio-material infrastructures that organize movement. The five contributions to this Special Issue illustrate how diverse material objects form complexes of meaning and shape interactions between mobile subjects and their social, economic, and political environments across diverse African contexts. They highlight the importance of grounding migration studies in empirical settings and of rethinking mobility through its material dimensions.

Keywords: Mobility, migration infrastructures, socio-material infrastructures of mobility, migration governance, materiality, circulations, Africa

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Socio-Material Infrastructures of Mobility: Rethinking Migration and Circulation in African Contexts

Elieth Eyebiyi & Johara Berriane***

Introduction

Research on migration in the social sciences and humanities has increasingly emphasized, on the one hand, the need to situate migration within the broader context of mobilities, or even circulations (De Bruijn et al., 2001; Bakewell and Landau 2018; Eyebiyi and Mendy 2019), particularly about movements in the Global South. On the other hand, it highlights the urgent necessity of decolonizing knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) by re-examining not only the categories that are produced and employed, as well as objects and materialities, but also and above all by giving voice to actors, field sites, contexts, and to history in the making. This involves undertaking a critical turn in the study of mobilities by decoupling it from the normative and conceptual frameworks previously used and imposed by a particular vision of migration. Such a shift is necessary to emphasize aspects that are in contradiction with Western assumptions.

Drawing on empirical fieldwork and ethnographic research across African contexts, and informed by perspectives from history, sociology, geography, and political science, this Special Issue places African perspectives at the center of migration and mobility analysis. Moving beyond the historically entrenched yet increasingly obsolete North–South divide, as well as purely flow- and risk-oriented approaches, it explores the material modalities, infrastructures, and technologies through which mobilities and migrations are enacted in African settings and the ways in which they contribute to change. This article argues that mobility and migration are fundamentally structured by socio-material infrastructures that go beyond transport systems to include heterogeneous assemblages of objects, practices, and forms of knowledge. By articulating the concept of migration infrastructures with a Foucauldian understanding of *dispositif*, we propose a framework for analyzing mobility as a relational and material process embedded in power configurations. In doing so, the paper contributes to decentering or re-centering migration studies by grounding analysis in African contexts and by foregrounding the material conditions through which mobility is enacted, governed, and contested.

The Limits of African Mobilities and Migrations Studies

From the 2000s onwards, the *mobility turn* is considered a major shift in research in the social sciences and humanities. It has served to rethink the links between mobilities and societies. Mobility has since become a key concept for analyzing economies and cultures in the context of globalization (Sheller and Urry 2006). The ability to move and to be mobile is regarded as one of the highest values, while freedom of movement is seen as a rare and unevenly distributed good (Bauman cited in Sheller 2017: 626; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013). The mobility paradigm has thus transformed the way scholars think about contemporary societies. At the same time, it has contributed to rethinking the relationship between societies and space (particularly urban space) and has highlighted the diverse ways in which space and society are interrelated (Sheller 2017). In other words, the *mobility turn* suggests both a relational analysis in space and a spatialized analysis of social relations. Although this turn was largely inspired by research conducted in the Global North, it has been far less frequently mobilized to study societies in the Global South. This limited attention to mobilities persists despite the long-standing historicity of spatial movements in these regions and the highly significant role that mobility and its reconfiguration play in shaping their societies and spaces. Moreover, this approach leaves little room for the things and materialities through which relationships are woven in contexts of mobility, nor for the spaces reshaped by these materialities because of mobility.

For its part, the renewal of studies on mobility in Africa has notably highlighted the migratory dimension of flows, and more specifically those directed toward the Global North, thereby aligning with dominant political trends in the treatment of the "migration issue". In doing so, it has tended to obscure intra-African migration dynamics and processes, as well as their interrelations with other forms of displacements although these make up the greater part of mobility practices. African migration to Europe, along with the political responses of states to these flows, have been at the centre of concern for both researchers and policymakers (Bakewell and Jónsson 2013; Flahaux and de Haas 2016; Faist 2019). These studies have focused on the role of European migration policies in shaping regional migration regimes (Kabwe-Segatti 2009). They have also described the processes through which, since the late 1990s, these regions have been progressively transformed into Europe's border zones, where the control and management of European borders have been externalized (Timéra 2009; Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Perrin 2018; Gazzotti 2021; Gaibazzi et al. 2017). This has contributed to redirecting migration routes and transforming regional migration systems (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Bensaad 2009; Brachet 2018) into forms that are increasingly difficult to grasp.

This focus on south–north African migration flows reify their supposed dangerousness for Europe by feeding an entire securitization industry, while simultaneously tending to obscure other migratory and mobility forms on the continent. Western European countries are indeed the main extra-continental destinations of African migration (Flahaux and de Haas 2016). Nevertheless, the majority of African migration flows take place within the continent itself (Zeleke and Smith 2024), even though they receive little attention from institutions. These historical and cultural mobilities are additionally articulated with other forms of displacements and circulation, which underscores the need to move beyond clichés about migration flows and to broaden analysis to the plurality and interweaving of different forms of mobility. Contrary to what the term *migration* may suggest in certain debates —namely, a unilateral, one-way movement—forms of movement are in fact multilateral and circular, involving a wide range of motivations, forms, aspirations, and practices. Africa's different regions are shaped by a wide range of mobility forms, operating both intra-regionally and inter-regionally (Robin 1992; De Bruijn et al. 2001; Flahaux and de Haas 2016; Kane and Leedy 2013). These include intra-African labour migration, circulations related to business, trade, education, and pilgrimage, as well as the reception of non-African migrants, sometimes referred to as "expats," and various forms of forced displacement.

Together, these mobilities have had and continue to have profound and lasting impacts on the social and economic configurations of the continent. Given its entanglement with other forms of mobility and its cultural embeddedness, migration should be analyzed within a broader framework of mobility. The pervasive presence of mobility in Africa (and elsewhere) makes it essential for understanding many African societies (De Bruijn et al. 2001: 1), societies characterized by migration and mobility cultures (Hahn et al. 2017) that must respond to the intensified bureaucratization resulting from European migration and border policies. For these reasons, this Special Issue opts for the term "mobility," as it encompasses not only the various forms of individual movement but also highlights their connections and articulations with other forms of circulation—of people, things, skills, or ideas. In other words, this issue adopts a broad perspective on the material dimension of mobilities. Mobility is not merely a movement of people, but a process structured by socio-material infrastructures that enable, constrain, and shape how movement unfolds.

The Missing Links between Materialities and Infrastructures

The Special Issue edited by Blundo (2023) on material and immaterial circulations in the Global South reminds us of the social sciences' neglect of material and immaterial circulations relative to human mobility. The issue seeks to show how the different facets of globalization have been studied in a rather reductive manner, without granting sufficient space to economic chains, the

movement of techniques, know-how, ideas, and infrastructures. It also takes up the challenge of offering empirical research to contribute to expanding knowledge on material and immaterial circulations. Despite the substantial literature on African mobilities and migrations, empirical fieldwork has remained fairly limited regarding the materialities generated by the various forms of circulation currently at play. The dimensions insufficiently examined through this articulation between materialities and infrastructures can be questioned both from a methodological and from an epistemological point of view.

The Methodological Prerequisite

The limited attention mobility and migration studies pay to materialities—and hence mobility infrastructures—reflects weak interdisciplinary collaboration. Rigid disciplinary and methodological boundaries in much existing research have not merely produced specialization in mobility studies. Rather, this has narrowed the analytical spectrum by foreclosing approaches that might capture what existing studies overlook. This lack of complementarity hinders the production of plural forms of knowledge. For instance, a purely quantitative approach to migration, as illustrated by many studies, does not allow for an examination of how mobility infrastructures are used. Nor does it enable proper engagement with local and regional contexts, still less international ones, despite their long-standing political and legal significance in migration research.

Moreover, this perspective remains focused on flows, deaths in the Mediterranean, and the counting of asylum seekers. It fails to show how materialities—both physical and institutional infrastructures—shape migratory trajectories and the physical, moral, and other resources deployed to realize mobility projects. At the same time, a conventional qualitative approach produces the opposite effect when it dispenses with long-term fieldwork. Yet, driven by the demands of various public policies and media prescriptions, few studies combine these two dimensions. Even fewer propose long-term ethnographies that follow objects and materials. These tangible elements can be physically touched and often structure the decisions of people on the move, including displaced people living in camps within their own country or in neighboring ones.

At the same time, this approach requires avoiding a circulation-centered prism (Blundo 2023; Vauchez 2013) and any culturalist reading of African mobilities. As we have seen, the limits of the literature have been partly addressed, but the methodological question is equally important. Indeed, as the close articulation of mobilities (and migrations) with infrastructures shows, this calls for methods that enable the (co-)production of data grounded in contextual knowledge, sustained engagement with actors, and analytical precision. We consider a rigorous qualitative approach (Olivier de Sardan 2008) essential for studying the material dimensions of mobility. At the same time, such analyses must be situated in the long term. This requires revisiting archival collections and historical sources and remaining open to critically grounded forms of systematic data production. These approaches make it possible to trace the origins of migration circuits, historical corridors of circulation, and the logics behind infrastructures whose histories intersect with the mobility of people and goods.

Enriching ethnographic work with a long-term critical perspective attentive to space (Grataloup 2005, 2007) and archival sources (Israël 2012) provides a methodological avenue for analyzing mobilities in relation to materialities. It is within this perspective that we situate the archival research conducted by Seck, the river journeys in whaleboats undertaken by Lambertz (2023), the combination of oral sources and interviews carried out by Ngassou and the historiographic work of Lingelbach. Our approach therefore calls for attention to mobility infrastructures through a threefold lens: the empirical depth of long-term ethnographic inquiry, the insights provided by archival analysis, and the dynamic perspectives of historical and spatial geography.

The Epistemological Question: Approaching Materialities within the Framework of Mobilities

The concept of materiality refers to what is made analytically tangible, what takes shape as matter in practice. It may therefore concern an object, but also a state of mind, a feeling, or a privileged moment. Linguists consider materiality to have two dimensions: object-based materiality, which examines the organization of space, objects, and their uses; and corporeality, or gesturality, which governs gestures, postures, facial expressions, prosody, and proxemics (Forest 2006; Taisson & Moro 2019). Building on this body of work, we mobilize the concept of materiality to study objects and their relations to space. We also examine bodily and gestural practices, as well as individual and social uses of objects and spaces inhabited or traversed by people and things in motion. This is even more important since these spaces are structured—indeed, sometimes produced—by these materialities. Far from being merely supports for mobility, they sometimes, or even often, condition migration strategies and the mobility options that actors privilege at a given moment. In other words, studying the materialities of mobilities and migrations amounts, in our view, to exploring the technical, physical, but also mental and circumstantial dimensions of the various circulations that animate human societies across time and space, as well as the meanings they convey.

We consider as materialities of mobilities and migrations the entire set of objects, processes, and concrete *dispositifs* through which the act of mobility or the migratory project comes to life outside of and around the individual involved in mobility or immobility. Through this lens, the focus also shifts toward an empirical description of the *how* of mobilities, that is, the infrastructures that enable them, within spaces of the Global South. By focusing on the Global South, the aim is not to fall into the trap of essentializing the materialities of mobilities and migrations, but rather to offer a situated analytical framework that could and should be replicated in any geographical and social space produced, affected, or defined by human mobility. Both hemispheres of the globe are therefore equally concerned.

This Special Issue focuses on African field sites, granting a central place to empirical research and critical distance in the analysis of the cases brought to light. Drawing on this descriptive model, it becomes possible to address the materialities of mobilities and migrations, first, by examining their object-based materiality. This is what Ngassou does in this issue by focusing on both the objects and engineering knowledge involved in motorcycle circulation in northern Cameroon, Lambertz et al. do by addressing both fluvial space and whaleboats in the DRC, Bikoi and Lingelbach by examining the governance of refugee camps or Seck does by addressing the vaccination booklets of *navétanes* in French West Africa. Added to this is the corporeality of these mobilities, evoked by Ngassou through the figure of motorcycle stunt riders in Cameroon and by Lambertz et al. in relation to the handling of whaleboats.

The Notion of Migration Infrastructures and Its Contribution to the Analysis of Mobilities

When it comes to mobilities or migrations, research has long tended to focus on the causes and consequences of these movements—that is, the motivations and aspirations that drive individuals to move, and the material, social, cultural, or even political consequences these movements generate for societies of origin and settlement. This bias once again reflects the conceptual weight of mobility research conducted in countries of the Global North in comparison with other regions of the world. Despite the natural and political obstacles that migrants and other mobile individuals sometimes must confront, and despite the specific resources, expertise, and know-how required by movement or circulation, scholarly interest in the conditions and modalities of movement is relatively recent (Düvell and Preiss 2023).

Our approach strongly encourages migration and mobility studies to decenter their gaze and to contribute concretely to *provincializing* (Chakrabarty 1992) migration and mobility research by de-Westernizing it. In our view, Western conceptual frameworks cannot remain the

sole reference point for defining, weighing, measuring, and comparing migration patterns and other displacements to qualify, valorize, or devalue them. If many studies (perhaps unwittingly) struggle to achieve this decentering, it is precisely because empirical openness and the multidisciplinary offer within African migration and mobility studies ultimately leave little room for genuine empirical research. This situation reinforces the coloniality of knowledge about mobilities, specifically fuels the reproduction of worn-out models of African migration, and contributes to the construction of a "migration problem" that remains far removed from the form promoted by European policies.

Indeed, the more movement becomes constrained, the more attention is paid to the modalities and the infrastructures mobilized in order to move. This connection between mobilities and infrastructures has, for example, been proposed in research on labor migration in China and Indonesia. Xiang and Lindquist suggest the term migration infrastructures to describe the arrangements put in place to both regulate and promote labor migration (2014). These infrastructures are composed of systematically interconnected actors, technologies, and institutions. They operate at commercial (recruiters), regulatory (state apparatus and procedures of documentation, authorization, training, etc.), technological (communication and transport), humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations), and social (migrant networks) levels.

Unlike migration industries, these infrastructures and their actors do not pursue purely profit-oriented goals. Their primary aim is to facilitate mobility, even if this sometimes produces effects contrary to those intended (Düvell and Preiss 2022). However, analyses of migration infrastructures remain largely centered on south–north migration and focus on the *how* of migration within a global context in which migration regimes are increasingly restrictive. Regarding intra-African migration or mobility more broadly, empirical research on the role of infrastructures is almost nonexistent.

The early signs of a growing interest in infrastructures and mobilities interrogate the effects of the externalization of European borders on people's mobilities and immobilities in Africa (Donko and Doevenspeck 2023; Kleist and Bjarnesen 2019). Drawing on empirical research on migration toward Asia, Europe, and transit spaces, Düvell and Preiss (2023) distinguish three types of migration infrastructures: actors (commercial actors, governmental actors, and civil society), material infrastructures, and digital infrastructures. According to them, the role of intermediary actors and social and interpersonal networks in mobility has received the most scholarly attention (see also Cranston et al. 2017). By contrast, material infrastructures—such as different means of transport (low-cost flights, Saharan convoys, etc.) and spaces (airports, shops, housing, charitable organizations)—which contribute through their technologies, actors, and networks to migrant mobility, have largely been neglected by research (Düvell and Preiss 2023: 91–92). In other words, perspectives have remained largely Western-centric and quasi-overarching, positioning the Global North—producers of restrictive migration policies—as the center of the game, while considering Global South as a mere supplier of migrants.

Privileges thus remain attached to the former, while restrictive control is applied to the latter. Cranston et al. (2023) argue that these privileges are ordered and disciplined by meso- and macro-level infrastructures, notably transnational organizations, higher education institutions, and governmental visa policies. This approach questions how public policies structure, regulate, and discipline human mobilities. These policies in fact produce elite, privileged subjects who benefit from advantages and facilitations to which other travelers have no access. In other words, these socio-material infrastructures of mobility, as we propose to call them here, organize the production of otherness through legal norms, material controls, and their implementation, forming a heterogeneous *dispositif* of governance in the Foucauldian sense. According to Foucault (1977) a *dispositif* is an ensemble of institutions, practices, and forms of knowledge that structure and regulate social life. Further he explains that "What I am trying to identify under this term is, first, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of

discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid." (Foucault 1980).

Furthermore, the figure of the elite migrant thus emerges from the global production of the migrant as a subject increasingly marked by a stigma: that of wanting at all costs to flee the South to seek sustenance in the North. Consequently, we propose to conceptualize mobility through what we call socio-material infrastructures of mobility, understood as the assemblage of material objects, technologies, practices, and institutional arrangements that enable, regulate, and constrain movement. This concept provides a heuristic tool for analyzing mobilities beyond flows and destinations.

By dedicating a Special Issue to the question of infrastructures, Müller and Tuitjer (2023) seek to reconcile migration and infrastructures to examine social change and related transformations. For these authors, the transversal dimension of migration serves as a pretext to question the forms infrastructures take along migration trajectories, the effects and roles they may have on routes of mobility and immobility, their role before, during, and after movement, and how these infrastructures "are co-constituted by actors and co-create social, spatial and physical settings" (Müller and Tuitjer 2023). Donko and Doevenspeck (2023) adopt a similar perspective by describing the ambivalent effects of border control technologies and policies implemented at the Kantchari/Makalondi border post on the Niger–Burkina Faso border in (im)mobilizing populations.

By calling for greater attention to infrastructures, these authors align with the core objective of this Special Issue, which advocates granting significant importance to the material dimensions of mobilities and migrations and shifting the analytical focus toward infrastructures in intra-African mobilities and immobilities. Accordingly, this dossier encourages an approach inspired by the anthropology of infrastructures, aimed at analyzing the relational, material, and political dimensions of roads, means of transport, and other technologies or objects that facilitate the circulation of goods, people, or ideas and enable their exchange across space (Larkin 2013: 328). These are physical forms that shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporality, and its vulnerability (ibid.).

Speaking of mobility infrastructures therefore also requires taking their political dimensions into account. While mobilities, by definition, involve voluntary or forced movements of populations, groups, or individuals, these movements not only rely on transport infrastructures (road, maritime, fluvial, aerial, etc.) but also—and above all—generate constant interactions throughout the journey with objects and structured or unstructured *dispositif*. The public policies put in place to govern mobility materialize through technical, material, and sensory arrangements that contribute to fixing in time and space different approaches to migration, as well as the migratory subject, even though mobility is its defining logic. Thus, while laws, decrees, and directives may be immaterial in form, they produce concrete effects on subjects as mechanisms of categorization, classification, and status definition (refugees, residents, migrants, undocumented migrants); they delineate the spatiotemporal framework within which materialization takes physical, concrete forms and organizes the spatialization of mobilities and migrations.

Infrastructures materialize practices of regulation and control overflows deemed "undesirable," such as those of refugees. This can be observed in the importance of camp technologies (Agier 2008; *see* Bikoi's paper on Cameroon and Lingelbach's paper on Uganda in this issue), which are used as primary *dispositif* of control and segregation of displaced populations. Camps serve to contain and manage new arrivals while isolating them from host populations; they freeze the figure of otherness in geographical, social, and political time and space. The camp thus appears *de facto* as a *dispositif* of confinement. Focusing on "new migration routes," Lassailly-Jacob (2010) already highlighted, as early as 2010, the emergence on the margins of transit countries of "buffer zones where migrants become stranded. In these

waiting spaces, new forms of social organization emerge, marked by ad hoc institutional creations in informal shelters and camps. This forced sedentarization may last several years, become permanent, or end in forced return" (Lassailly-Jacob 2010: 3). A case in point, for example, is with refugee camps established in conflict-affected countries or neighboring states to accommodate forcibly displaced people.

With their physical structures, functional and normative components, operating rules, subtle or overt *dispositif*, and arrays of actors with sometimes antagonistic logics and strategies, camps gradually cease to be specific of refugees or a conflictual face of humanitarian need, becoming instead central sites of contingency, disguised confinement, and storage of migrants halted along their journeys for various reasons. As sites of exclusion (Bouagga 2017), camps - across their multiple forms (hotspots, administrative detention centers, refugee camps, slums, etc.)—have become a kind of epitome of the migration trajectory and a primary tool for controlling flows, particularly by Europe, as described in Bouagga's collective work (2017). Although these control and exclusion technologies have undergone increasing sophistication, their origins lie in the colonial period, as Lingelbach demonstrates in this issue for the cases of Uganda and Kenya. They were also sometimes developed within colonial projects of territorial "valorization." Thus, the organization and control of migrant labor flows in French West Africa were established during the colonial period through new health infrastructures for migrant workers, as described by Seck's paper on the former colony Senegal.

This Special Issue on mobility infrastructures argues that mobilities and migrations are embedded in material dimensions that must be examined, as they form an integral part of the mobility process. Consequently, studies of African migration and global migration more broadly cannot afford to neglect attention to mobility infrastructures. Furthermore, these infrastructures are not limited to transport infrastructures alone. They encompass a variety of tools, objects, and *dispositif* whose circulation, driven by human mobility, gives them particular meanings, shapes space, and acts upon political and social relations, both locally and sometimes at a distance. The case studies examined in this Special Issue thus show how various material objects form complexes of meaning and contribute to shaping new interactions between mobile subjects and their material, social, economic, and political environments. The contributions address both public policies governing refugee camps and the technical modalities involved in the daily work of transport operators, cross-border goods trafficking, and, historically, the mobilization of migrant labor during French colonization.

By combining the contemporaneity and historicity of infrastructural issues within mobility studies, the Special Issue aims to contribute to a renewal of migration studies through interdisciplinary dialogue on the one hand and a multifactorial appreciation of mobilities on the other. Analyzing migration and mobility to understand their links with development requires greater attention to the historical globalization of circulatory phenomena as well as their contemporary dimensions and the interconnections they establish between multiple worlds, the new geographies they trace beyond previously existing physical, colonial, or intellectual borders. Existing studies pay little attention to the objects, materials, equipment, and technologies involved in any migration or mobility process, focusing instead either on norms or on individual or collective practices. By moving beyond the outdated North/South divide, as well as a narrow focus on flows and risks, and by privileging transdisciplinary approaches, this Special Issue seeks to question the material modalities and technologies through which mobilities operate in the Global South and how they influence development in Southern countries. To this end, it interrogates the various objects, techniques, and means that accompany and participate in human mobility.

Public Policies and the Materialities of Migration

Movements from the Global South to the Global North—and sometimes within the South itself—thus increasingly appear to be paced by the existence of these material *dispositif* of

contingency. They apply first and foremost to people who are denied the right to move freely, whatever the reasons may be, but sometimes also to those who possess all the required documents. In this latter respect, it is no secret that on multiple occasions travelers from the South—who were not migrating—have been arrested and sometimes wrongfully placed in detention centers at European airports, even when all their documents were in order.

Encampment (Agier 2011; Bassi 2022; Corbet 2014) has thus gradually become an ordinary instrument of managing migrant flows, while still retaining a strongly oriented character. Flows from countries of the Global South are heavily targeted, as are those that may come from Eastern European countries or less affluent states, toward Europe or North America. The use of the noun *flows* is itself a revealing semantic operation: it makes the subject invisible, erases the mobile person to treat them like a specter. Managing flows, rather than managing people in mobility, reduces the moral burden evoked by practices of containment, control, and surveillance that are sometimes pushed to extremes. Camps thus gradually cease to be places of refuge and temporary protection for forcibly displaced people and victims of deadly conflicts, becoming instead increasingly permanent living spaces, as shown for example by Fortin and Frelat (2024). Beyond their sorting function, as in the case of hotspots, Pollozek and Passoth (2019) show how, in the Moria hotspot, distinctions between "economic refugee" and asylum seeker are produced as part of efforts to organize what is described as chaos (Kalir and Rozakou 2016).

Similar forms of sorting are also enacted through other infrastructures, such as accommodation camps, slums, or so-called informal camps. These sites function as places of everyday life that may be precarious and ephemeral or, in other cases, relatively durable, but in any case, another face of concern over otherness. Migrants remain marked by the stigma of people who come from elsewhere—people other than oneself—to whom the possibility of settling without particular constraints is, by definition, denied. This Special Issue focuses on the analysis of know-how, material elements, and technologies involved in circulations across the continent. It pays particular attention to objects and their uses, such as boats, motorcycles, or vaccination booklets. It also examines policies of North-South and South-South (non-) transfer, as well as local adaptations and innovations, for instance in official and unofficial vehicles and transport means for goods. The Special Issue is also a matter of paying attention to local technologies of care and support for displaced people or people on the move. In that sense, the socio-material infrastructures of mobility provide a heuristic tool for analyzing mobilities beyond flows and destinations.

Composition of the Issue: Five Complementary Field Sites

Built around five field sites, the Special Issue opens avenues for an interdisciplinary study of materialities within the framework of African circulations, and it makes room for early-career researchers working in the Global South, notably based on ethnographic data as well as historical sources or archives. The work brought together concerns both francophone and anglophone Africa, West Africa as well as Central Africa, and crosses several perspectives. It examines the field of mobilities through the lens of materialities, showing the need for reflection on the objects involved in processes of migration and mobility, and it outlines methodological and epistemological pathways for such a study.

The first two papers offer fine-grained historical, anthropological, and sociological case studies of the material modalities of mobility in Africa. They propose, respectively, a study of whaleboats and transport operators in Kisangani in the DRC (Article 1), and an analysis of local motorcycle engineering in the city of Garoua in northern Cameroon (Article 2). Drawing on journeys conducted on whaleboats in the Tshopo region of the DRC, Lambertz, Makoka, and Yaaya conduct an ethnography showing how local shipowners have become transport operators in this part of the continent. They document the organization of river transport and the practices

through which these actors structure mobility. They combine technical know-how in the construction and technical improvement of whaleboats with business acumen that allows them to develop a local popular economy whose keystone rests on the circulation of materials, techniques, people, and know-how. These different sources of knowledge and these skills were built outside state public policies, testifying to actors' capacity to find solutions at small and medium scales.

The mobilization of local resources to build whaleboats, the use of engines derived from globalization, and the development of commercial strategies oriented toward people's needs have contributed to creating an ecosystem around river channels as mobility infrastructures and have impacted everyday activity. By reconfiguring fluvial mobilities through materialities and techniques, transport operators in Tshopo confirm that mobilities cannot be studied apart from the material and cognitive infrastructures that sustain and are reshaped by them. Similarly, Ngassou focuses on two-wheeled motorcycle taxis used to ensure the circulation of goods and people specifically between northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. The material object and the associated knowledge thus structure circulations between two bordering countries, shorten time, and above all produce a new space that often departs from routes traced on maps to follow alternative itineraries that remain within local stocks of knowledge.

Oral sources and interviews allow Ngassou to show how multiple practical knowledge is organized around the technical instrument of the motorcycle, transforming it into an everyday-use object: the motorcycle taxi. Beyond the mechanics of the motorcycle taxi, it is indeed a body of technical knowledge that guarantees its existence and ultimately facilitates the mobility of people and goods. Studying the materialities of mobilities here provides fertile ground for questioning technique and its materialization in diverse geographical, social, and economic spaces. Finally, considering something that bureaucratic *dispositif* erected on either side of the Nigeria–Cameroon border is discussed by Ngassou. Contrary to their local appearance, however, borderlands activities are embedded in material dynamics that connect them to globalization. Moreover, these exchanges unfold in reaction to existing public policies that regulate the circulation of people and goods. Recourse to rural tracks and the management of checkpoints to ensure the delivery of these consumer goods offer intriguing perspectives for the study of mobility infrastructures.

The following three texts bring together history, public policy, security studies, and political science to propose a contemporary analysis informed by the history of localized practices. These articles examine public policies and mobility control across the continent through several case studies: two historical analyses of labor mobilities and their links to sanitary control in colonial Senegal (Article 3); an examination of encampment practices and their genealogy in Kenya and Uganda (Article 4); and a focused analysis of Cameroon's policies supporting displaced people in the Gado Badzere camp (Article 5). Seck shows how, because of economic determinism, the colonizer organized seasonal labor mobilities in French West Africa and regulated them through a particular *dispositif*: the vaccination booklet. Alongside the encouragement of labor movement within a delimited space—aimed at exploiting colonial resources—there was also a strict will to control the spread of contagious diseases. The next text sheds light on the historical specificities of encampment policies by tracing and comparing the genealogies of encampment in Kenya and Uganda (Article 4).

Lingelbach highlights differences in refugee reception policies in these two East African countries from the colonial period onward. He shows that while in Uganda the first refugee camps were set up to accommodate Polish refugees (thus Europeans) and then citizens of the region during the independence struggles, in Kenya they initially served to host Ethiopian victims of the war with Italy before becoming internment dispositifs reserved notably for the Mau Mau, including after independence. In this region, the presence of camps reflects a mid-term global history in which objectives have gradually shifted, and the scale has become more regional. Moreover, in Uganda the positive perception of refugees to populate regions and

generate value is not without recalling Seck's text on the *navétanes* in French West Africa—except that the *navétanes* were not intended to populate Senegalese regions but essentially to work seasonally. In the first case, the camp remains the main *dispositif* through which public strategy is implemented; in the second, documents play a similar role. The camp in East Africa thus illustrates variations in mobility infrastructures—and in their underlying philosophy.

In a perspective more explicitly oriented toward public policy, Bikoi shows—through political analysis—that the action of supporting refugees is embedded in a conflictual context that is intensifying in Central Africa. It also takes the form of the establishment of displacement camps, which provide an opportunity to examine various mechanisms of public action as well as the actor games that unfold. Based on empirical research in the Adamaoua region in eastern Cameroon, she closely describes the material infrastructures and management *dispositif* of the Gado Badzere camp and depicts a multi-level system of public management involving not only local and state actors but also international actors, notably from Northern countries. This case study perfectly reflects the materiality of policies of encampment and mobility control observed in both the South and the North, as well as the "laboratory" role that Africa comes to play.

Conclusion

This article argues that mobility and migration are fundamentally structured by socio-material infrastructures that go beyond transport systems and shape and govern movement. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the *dispositif*, the article develops a framework that understands mobility as a relational and material process embedded in broader power structures. Its focus on African contexts contributes to a broader understanding of migration processes and their material conditions.

Taken together, the contributions to this Special Issue highlight the importance of examining mobility and migration through the lens of materialities and infrastructures. They demonstrate that movement is not simply a matter of flows and trajectories but is embedded in socio-material and historical arrangements that enable, constrain, and transform circulation. In doing so, they bring into focus the often-overlooked material and infrastructural conditions through which mobility is lived, governed, and negotiated, while also revealing how migration infrastructures may produce forms of immobilization and containment. Socio-material infrastructures of mobility enlighten relational, and material process embedded in mobility and migration governance.

The contributions also reaffirm the central role of infrastructural dimensions of mobility and migration, as well as experiences of immobility, to the historical and contemporary making of African societies. In this sense, the empirical study of African im-/mobilities is not only s:necessary for understanding African realities; it also offers important conceptual and epistemological insights for migration and mobility studies more broadly. Mobility emerges through socio-material infrastructures that enable and constrain movement. By foregrounding experiences, practices, and infrastructures that remain marginal in dominant scholarship, this volume contributes to ongoing reflections on how theories of mobility, circulation, governance, and social change need to be enriched through knowledge emerging from African contexts.

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