Sub-Saharan African migration towards the European Union (EU) belongs to one of the most stigmatised forms of migration of the 21st century. For this reason some contextualisation is necessary to avoid Eurocentric discourses with strong apocalyptic connotations of an “African exodus” or “invasion” (de Haas 2007). First and foremost it is important to note that mobility is, and has always been, a vital component of social life in sub-Saharan Africa (de Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001). Contemporary migration from this region towards the EU must therefore rather be seen as an extension of age-old mobile and multi-local lifestyles than a complete new phenomenon (Hahn and Klute 2007, Bakewell and de Haas 2007). Secondly, it is worth mentioning that the bulk of contemporary African international migration takes place within the continent and does not reflect the iconic picture of migrants moving to “the West.” Sub-Saharan migration to developed countries is in fact marginal. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that in 2004 some 7.2 million African migrants were officially identified in the OECD member countries.¹ This figure represents 13% of total immigration to OECD member states originating from non-OECD members. The slight majority of this 7.2 million people (3.8 million) originates from North Africa while an estimated number of 3.4 million migrants comes from sub-Saharan countries (Gnisci 2008). These figures strongly put into perspective the notion of an “African exodus” directed to the West. Even for West Africa, the region where migration is believed to be highly oriented...
towards Europe, the majority of international migrants move within this specific region. Moreover, there is a strong diversification of destinations in the context of African migration (Adepoju 2000, 2008). South Africa and Libya have developed into important destinations for migrants from West and Central Africa. Next to Europe, the Middle East, the United States and China are important extra-continental destinations for sub-Saharan African migrants. Thus, although regional, historical and linguistic linkages provide some axial routes, these factors are far from composing a complete picture of contemporary sub-Saharan African migration. Migration has generally become more spontaneous (Adepoju 2008) or “turbulent,” as Papastergiadis outlines:

The diversity of paths, and the complexity of forms of migrations, have meant that it is now almost impossible to map movement with a series of arrows, on a flat two-dimensional representation of the world. There would be a greater number of arrows going in multiple directions, and also the time scale would have to be so contracted and irregular that the map would lose its objective of representing movement (Papastergiadis 2000: 23–24).

**Stepwise Journeys in the Age of (Im)mobility**

As the paths of African migrations multiply, several researchers observe that “Europe” is increasingly present and becomes deeply rooted in collective representations concerning social success within African societies, especially amongst youngsters in urban areas (e.g., Riccio 2005, Prinz 2005, Jónsson 2008, Barten 2009). Consequently, African migration towards the EU must not only be analysed in terms of the traditional economic and political push factors. The more cultural explanations concerning social status and the opening up of African societies in terms of global interconnectedness and hence the growing fascination for “modern lifestyles” gain importance in the field of international migration from South to North (Appadurai 1996, Ferguson 2006). Several media show images of Western luxury to African juveniles contributing to their “imagined worlds” (Appadurai 1996). The “bright lights”2 do not merely come from African metropoles, but also from music downloaded from the internet, information communicated by mobile phones and movies seen on television. In this context it is interesting to note that “adventurism” has always been

---

2 This is a reference to what is called the bright lights theory of Gulliver emphasising that the excitement of urban life attracts young would-be migrants (see also du Toit 1990).