CHAPTER 6

Migration and Competition over Commercial Spaces: The Case of Songhay Migrants at the Kumasi Central Market, Ghana 1930–1948

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In the cities of Mali (Mopti, Bamako, Niono, Koutiala, and Sikasso), seasonal workers from the regions of the north are associated, in the last three decades, with the term koroboro butiqini (‘the small-shop Songhay’). This term has passed so much into common usage that small retailers belonging to other ethnic groups accept its use to designate their own trade, and they also accept the attribution to them of the patronymic Maïga, the most widespread Songhay patronymic.

In September 2003, during my research trip in the Timbuktu Region, the bus I was on made a stop of 40 minutes at Sévaré. I took a seat on the bench of a coffee seller, and I asked him which town he came from. ‘Rharous,’ he replied. He pointed to a long line of coffee sellers: ‘All these people are from Rharous.’ Indeed, the young ones come from the Rharous Cercle. In certain towns of this larger Cercle of the Timbuktu Region, to speak a foreign language is the distinctive sign of the new identity of ‘a man of the world’. For example, in the village of Samar, Ouolof is the language of communication for the youth who commute from their village to Senegal. Whoever does not understand it is considered a gaoua, an unenlightened one. These young migrants almost all work in the harbour at Dakar, where they sell coffee or meals.

In the towns of the south of Mali, the increasing number of these small shops and stalls, their quality, and the variety and prices of the products that

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1 The data used in this paper originates mainly from my investigations in Ghana for the writing of my thesis between 2001 and 2002 and from my postdoctoral research on migrations in the Gourma-Rharous region of Timbuktu in September 2003 and June–July 2004.

2 The term koroboro is used for someone who lives in a village—and, by extension, a town. His opposite is gandjiboro, someone who lives in the bush. One sees in these dichotomous terms an image of the two principal societies in the north, that of the shepherds or nomads who follow their animals in the bush, and that of the Songhay farmers who live in the towns of the valley and later the political centres that arose in the Middle Ages: Gao and Timbuktu. In reality, the Songhay call themselves issa boro, ‘the people of the river’ or those that exploit the river. One can assume that the terms koroboro and gandjibori appeared thanks to a political construction.
one finds there have become the major characteristics of the migrant koroboro that leave the regions of Timbuktu and Gao for the cities of Mali and those of the coastal countries (Dougnon 2014). Moreover, some among them do not hesitate to proclaim that the Songhay know nothing but trade—an identity previously granted to the Soninké, good farmers at home and good merchants abroad (Whitehouse 2003).

What strikes one are the prejudices that the city dwellers of the south have towards these migrant shopkeepers from the north: they are considered arrogant, have an appearance of laziness, are prone to making quick profits, have a taste for good cuisine, and have an instinct for grouping together on the basis of ethnicity. These labels are often at the root of relations of mistrust or of conflicts between the migrant traders of the north and their customers in the south.

The image of the migrant Maïga was enacted in a sketch which was shown on national television during Ramadan. Improvised with a view to moralizing about the prices of basic necessities, the sketch was played by two actors: a migrant shopkeeper named Mr Maïga and an anonymous customer. The latter comes to buy sugar at the premises of the former, who is saying his prayers in a loud voice. The customer finds that the shopkeeper has illegally increased the price of sugar and shouts into his face: ‘Do not pronounce the name of God, for you are taking advantage of Ramadan to cheat customers.’ Mr Maïga apologizes to him in recognition that he has acted against God and the law and returns the money to him.

However, field data prove that these prejudices are not based on any objective reality. The petty trade that is the preferred activity of seasonal workers and permanent migrants is not easy work or one that leads to wealth. There is a large divide between this stout-bellied Maïga shopkeeper depicted in a well-furnished shop and the migrant that engages in the trade of door-to-door selling or selling in a market, a divide that very few people succeed in overcoming. Several among those I interviewed never owned shops. They devoted themselves to various activities, from selling water to acting as security guards to extracting sand from the bottom of the river Niger. They engage in these activities just long enough to be able to buy some bags of provisions for their families at home in their village. Their mobility cannot be understood without taking into account the urgency and the necessity of returning to their homes.

It is the specific goal of this paper to place in historical perspective how such prejudices led to the expulsion of the Songhay merchants from the Kumasi

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3 Until recently, almost all citizens of the north, except the Tuareg, identified themselves as members of the Songhay ethnic group and asserted that they came from Gao or Timbuktu.