Africa is often portrayed in both contemporary and historical accounts as a continent of people on the move (de Bruijn et al. 2001, IOM 2005). Great migrations figure in the myths of origins for many ethnic groups: for example, the Bantu expansion from central Africa, the ‘Hamitic myth’ of migration from north to south, and even the Voortrekkers ‘Great Trek’ in South Africa. While some of these migrations may be little more than hypotheses and lack any historical basis, they all serve an important function in the (mythic) construction of Africa and its people in the modern world (Bilger and Kraler 2005). Today, new ‘myths’ about African migration are serving to shape contemporary perceptions of Africa. For example, such modern myths suggest that all Africans crossing the Sahara are in transit to Europe or that the trafficking of women and children is the most common form of migration within and from Nigeria.

The chronic lack of data about African migration has helped to perpetuate such myths. The UN Population Division uses census data to estimate the number of international migrants, but across Africa such census data is often of poor quality or lacks any migration questions. As a result, 19 of the 56 countries in Africa have either no data or just one census providing any information on migrant stock from the 1950s (Zlotnik 2003: 3). Moreover, most of the border crossings are over land frontiers that are passed with minimal if any formalities. As a result there is only limited knowledge about the forms and patterns of migration across large parts of Africa.

It is these movements within the continent that forms the vast majority of African migration (Sander and Maimbo 2003). Although there is some evidence that migration from Africa to industrialized states is growing, it is important to recall that only a small fraction of international migration originating in Africa results in journeys to Europe, the Gulf, the US and beyond. As we will see, the conventional
focus on migration out of Africa conceals the existence of several migration sub-systems centred on continental migration poles such as Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Gabon and South Africa. Such a poor understanding of the nature and magnitude of intra-African migrations has skewed perceptions of migration within, from and towards the continent and allowed the development of these pervasive migration myths.

The aim of this chapter is to give a more balanced overview of migrations within and beyond the African continent. This is a risky and perhaps pretentious endeavour, given the huge size of the continent and the complexity and diversity of migrations found there. In the space available, we can only highlight some general migration trends and do not claim to offer a complete picture of African migrations. The following sections briefly summarize the evolution of migration patterns in different regions of Africa. Of course, these crude divisions between North, South, East and West are problematic, especially with reference to migration that cuts across such borders. Nevertheless, they will have to serve for the purpose of this broad overview. We conclude by outlining some of the recurring themes that are echoed across the continent and analyse the main research gaps.

North Africa and the Sahara

The pre-colonial population history of North Africa has been characterized by continually shifting patterns of human settlement. Nomadic or semi-nomadic (transhumance) groups traveled large distances with their herds between summer and winter pastures. Besides age-old patterns of circular migration, conquest and conflicts between tribal groups over natural resources and the control over trade routes were associated with the regular movement and resettlement of people. Throughout known history, there has been intensive population mobility between both sides of the Sahara through the trans-Saharan (caravan) trade, conquest, pilgrimage, and religious education. The Sahara itself is a huge transition zone, and the diverse ethnic composition of Saharan oases testifies to this long history of population mobility.

In all north-African countries, colonial intrusion occurring as of the mid nineteenth century has triggered processes of urbanization, settlement by colons (colonialists) and substantial rural-to-urban migration. However, colonialism was only associated with substantial