When Tilo Grätz arrives at one of his research locations, it’s likely to be deserted. Once, in Burkina Faso, he traveled 250 kilometers over rough dirt tracks to reach the site of a gold miners’ encampment that, a year before, had been teeming with life. The place bustled with the coming and going of nearly a thousand miners, traders and bar owners, the vast majority of them men. When he came back, however, all that remained as a reminder of the brief existence of this township in the middle of nowhere were a few huts, their straw-covered roofs already dilapidated. A few undaunted individuals still labored to claw the remaining shards of precious metal from the earth. But the majority of the gold seekers were long gone, heading another 300 kilometers northwest, where the soil promised greater riches.

Tilo Grätz rode after them: “Sometimes my research seemed like more of a hunt,” says the social anthropologist. Given the subject of his attentions, that comes as no surprise. Grätz is studying the gold-prospecting communities of West Africa. They are a model of mobility. Not only do the gold miners shift camp every few years in search of more promising veins of gold, but their communities themselves are a prime example of migrant groups in which newcomers are integrated rapidly and without major difficulties. The lure of gold draws young men from every conceivable country and a wide variety of ethnicities. The first question a newcomer must answer is not where he is from, but what he can do. As mobile communities, the gold miners experience the problems inherent in a voluntarily or involuntarily mobile life. In a worst-case scenario, when they pitch their camp, they may be regarded as land thieves. At best, they are looked on as rough and brawling adventurers. When they come to town to squander their earnings, they are considered showoffs—which does nothing to ease the problem of acceptance.

The reluctance of old-established populations to welcome newcomers with open arms is a common phenomenon encountered by those who lead mobile lives in one way or another. Whether gold diggers, nomadic herdsmen or migrants who see Europe as an escape route from poverty—the resulting conflicts are the subject of research by scientists in Günther Schlee’s Department of Integration and Conflict at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. “Only by better understanding the situation in which these migrants live can we possibly resolve these conflicts,” explains Schlee.

Tilo Grätz has been studying how the gold diggers deal with conflicts of immigration in their micro-societies. And there are plenty of conflicts in the encampments. Sometimes over sand or rocks bearing traces of gold, sometimes over stolen tools, and often over who gets to dig where. The gold diggers form small groups to work a shaft. If it yields little, they are not averse to secretly hacking into the rock being worked by a neighboring team. If the prospectors catch a thief, there is trouble. Often it is brutal, for these men are not squeamish. And yet it is accepted that the odd bit of stealing or cheating is allowed. “There are no innocents among these gold diggers. Everyone, even the bosses, takes what they can find if it makes them better off,” says Tairou, a prospector from the Atakora region of northern Benin. “You just can’t overdo it, you have to respect the rights of others. That way, you don’t start any unnecessary fights.”

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Confl icts with the inhabitants of neighboring villages are not always so easily settled. Particularly when the village chiefs themselves send young men into the mines to increase their assets. As locals, they then sometimes demand certain privileges. The boss of a mine near the settlement of Tchantangou, south of the provincial capital of N’Djamena, a man named Jules had to deal with a such a situation in 2001. His team was the only one in this would-be El Dorado to fi nd any gold in their shaft. Not only the other pit bosses, but also the village chiefs of Tchantangou were envious. The community had run out of money and was un- able to fl nish building its new school. Jules found himself unable to argue either against the arrogant, or im- mous responsibility of the other pit bosses: First the gold diggers mined enough to pay for Tchantangou’s school, then the other teams helped themselves.

Morals between Solidarity and Petty Theft

“What was I supposed to do? there were just too many of them. Maybe my mistake was not handling over enough in the fi rst place,” Jules ex- plained. That, at least, was the opinion of the other gold diggers and the vil- lage community. It’s alright for each man to keep his own advantage in mind, but not exclusively so – soli- darity characterizes the ethos of the gold diggers just as much as their toler- ance of petty thievery. “I’ve found out that, when need be, the prospec- tors stick tightly together,” says Gritz: “In the past it was always said of these miners that they would happily beat each other’s heads in.” Above all, they stick together against the local population, not to mention the local police. In contrast to the miners, it makes a big differ- ence to the resident population where these workers come from. In the A- taka region of northern Benin, for example, people from neighboring Togo are anything but welcome: “All the Togolese want is to grab the gold here and take it home. But that doesn’t help our village,” bemoans an inhabitant of Kwanja, which lies not far away from Tchantangou.

From time to time, the police in the area gear up to take action against the diggers or perhaps they use this as a pretext to pocket their share of the pro- fits from the mines. Once, in November 2000, they asked the as- semblage gold diggers if there were any foreigners among them, but no one said a word: “They can’t force out the Togolese,” says Rastou, a gold digger from northern Benin. “They’re our friends. What are you supposed to do if someone takes your friend away and you’re left behind?” In- stead of betraying their comrades, the pit bosses negotiate a price with the police to leave the gold-mining community alone.

The problems are not so easily re- solved if, instead of a few village po- licemen, it is the military who take on the gold diggers. Benin’s Ministry of Mines repeatedly sent soldiers to shut down the illegal mines in the Atakora region and drive away the workers. They maintained that the work is too hazardous, and that the prospectors weren’t exploiting the gold deposits effi ciently enough, with the result that much of the precious metal is lost. However, it is more likely that the government itself had already intimi- dated to profi t from extracting the gold. So the Ministry sought out an inves- tor to mine the deposits in the Atokara region in return for a fee. In the end, they came up with a small US outfit called Oracle.

The boss of this company then de- manded resolute action against the small-scale gold miners. And the government complied. But the au- thorities did not go as far as the company would have liked. They strictly refused to fi re on the mine workers. This was not consistent with the po- litical culture in Benin, the Ameri- cans were informed. But the constant raids and the explosive changes dropped down mine shafts achieved something that no period of poor yields and previous fl ights had ever brought about: they drove the alliance that had persisted between the gold diggers for years and fi nally split the community apart. Some now work for Oracle, even as supervisors, while others secretly work for their own account. Many have given up the search for gold altogether.

In the end, however, the boss of the company not only incurred the ha- tred of the gold diggers, but he also got on the wrong side of representa- tives of the Ministry. Not only was he arrogant, but the mining operation also yielded too little for the govern- ment. And the expected jobs did not materialize. Accordingly, relations with the man became distant: He continued to demand action against the illegal gold diggers, some of whom actually worked in his mines. The Ministry responded that, since what he paid was so poor, it was no wonder that the workers needed to earn something on the side.

The experience of the gold diggers of northern Benin is common to al- most all of those who lead a mobile life. They fi nd themselves in confl ict with the authorities, they have to con- tend with established populations, and they are separated from their homes. “Often the migrant families are torn apart,” says Günther Schlee. But for most of those who abandon their homes, this life offers the only chance to escape from poverty. Most want to return home as soon as pos- sible, once they have “made it.”

This is also the pretext on which many young men leave their villages before ending up among the gold diggers. Some actually do stick to their plan, but many begin to identi- fy with the lifestyle of the gold dig- gers and develop a certain pride in the face of those who lead a different un- usual life: “Those who say bad things about us gold diggers – what do they do? Could they even do a job like this?” asks Adulla, who works at the mine near Kwanja. Many also enjoy the dissipation that the gold diggers in- clude in their five to seven-day work cycle, that, too, is a reason why they iden- tify with the migrant lifestyle.

The Nomadic Life – A Simple Necessity

However, for the majority of those who live on the move, it is a mat- ter of simple necessity. Take for ex- ample the Fulbe clans of nomadic herdsmen. For centuries, the Fulbe have driven their sheep and goats over one pasture to another and have, in the process, spread across all of West Af- rica. “In their search for fertile grass- land, the fi rst Fulbe stayed from Burkina Faso and, over a period of decades, advanced through Mali to the Ivory Coast,” says Youssouf Diallo, who worked at the Max Planck institute in Halle until two years ago and then traced the routes. Word reached western Burkina Faso, the starting point for the fi rst nomads who set out on their wander- ings in the 1950s, that the Fulbe had found good grazing for their cattle at the end of their journey of several hun- dred kilometers. More groups fol- lowed in the 1970s and 80s, this time taking the gold diggers with the result that tens of thousands of Fulbe now live in the north of the Ivory Coast.

Newcomers Who Can Do No Right

The farmers who lived in the region were less than welcoming to the new- comers. Not so the government of this West African state – at least at fi rst. It was hoped that these cattle breeders could support the country’s cash crop of cotton and milk. The government was simply concerned that the nomads were so mobile. “Many people regard this kind of lifestyle as backward,” says Diallo. “More particularly, the government is unable to control their migration.” In- stead, the government tried to get the Fulbe to settle down on the neigh- borland for their herds. This led to mut- terings among the indigenous farmers – an increase in the number of nomads above all their cattle, were competing with them for the limited supplies of water. The fact that the herds stripped the soil and land further upset the water balance.

To off-set this problem, political re- presentatives responded with projects intended to control resources. How- ever, in resolving the confl ict, they neglected to integrate the former nomads into their plans. Nor have these projects had any effect on the attitude of the indigenous farmers who con- tinue to reject the immigrants. “Since they are nomads,” says Diallo, “you can hardly get anything out of them. Only Youssouf Diallo. And the nomads continue their wanderings, albeit mainly on a seasonal basis and with- out their children and grandparents. Only the younger family members drive a part of the herds into the bush during the dry season.

The fact that their families remain behind while the young, active and mainly male members of the group

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seek their fortune elsewhere is something these nomadic herdsmen have in common with other migrants. Often people are driven to flee as a result of adverse political developments. That need not always mean civil war as in Sudan, Somalia or the Republic of the Congo. Sometimes groups such as the Fulbe in Ivory Coast leave in order to evade a failed settlement policy. In Ghana, it is an educational policy that is driving young people out of the country because it is too successful. When Ghana became independent in 1957, the government was betting on an imminent industrial revolution – in a country that had traditionally exported agricultural products, such as palm oil and cocoa, and as a result already had a sound economy.

An Uncertain Future For Young People

The politicians reasoned that, in the industrial age they assumed was to come, the country would need plenty of well-trained workers. Consequently, they established a well-ordered educational system. But the industrial upswing didn’t come. On the contrary, in the 1970s, Ghana slid into an ever-deepening economic crisis. Skilled young people found that there was no work for them – certainly none that would bring them the social status for which they believed themselves to be qualified.

Although the country needs doctors and nurses, their earnings are meager, forcing them to leave to seek work in Europe. Many other relatively well-educated individuals make the same choice. “According to some estimates, 20 percent of the population has left the country,” says Boris Nieswand of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. “I believe it to be less than 10 percent, but there are no reliable figures.”

Kojo Yehasie is one of the emigrants. He is a trained teacher, qualified to work in secondary schools, the top tier of the Ghanaian school system. When, however, in the mid-1970s, he was no longer able to earn a living as either a teacher or a trader, he left the country and, after a two-year sojourn in London, found his way to Berlin. He was employed by a construction company for a few years. Then, after 1990, there were so many houses in the east of the city awaiting renovation that he set up his own building company. At times he had to pay five people working for him, but he was forced to give up the business 14 years later. Still, during his time in Europe, he earned enough to build three houses in Ghana and support some of his many relatives. In Ghana, he is now set for life, while in Germany he is fighting for survival.

“This paradox of status is quite typical for Ghanaian migrants in Europe,” says Nieswand. “Doctors have it relatively easy, but you can find engineers working as taxi drivers.” It is not just that migrants generally find it harder to access highly qualified jobs. “At least in non-English-speaking countries, the Ghanaians’ educational capital is pretty much worthless,” says Nieswand. Yet the money they divert from their earnings in the low-wage sector of the European economy and send back home has since become Ghana’s richest source of foreign currency.

Nevertheless, many Ghanaians take a reserved attitude toward these benefactors from afar. Those who work hard abroad in order to attain middle-class status back home are known as “burgers.” “The name probably derives from Hamburg, which is home to Germany’s largest Ghanaian population,” believes Boris Nieswand. It is certainly not meant as a compliment – burger has a jumped-up ring to it in Ghana. “A common accusation might be, ‘Over there you clean the floors, and here you act like you’re a big man’,” adds the scientist.

European politicians concerned about immigration are probably not fond of the bargers either – they are transnational, living a life split between two nations. This prevents them from fully integrating in their host country. “In all likelihood, we will have to abandon this take on integration,” says Nieswand. “Globalization enables people to participate in two societies simultaneously, even if not in equal measure at the political, social and economic level.” This, in turn, requires a change in our concept of society. In the past, the term meant a self-contained social structure with a limited number of members. Politicians in Europe with a focus on domestic policy objectives may be reluctant to abandon this view. However, their counterparts with an interest in development policy see transnationalism as an opportunity. Take Armin Laschet, for example. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, he heads the Ministry for Inter-Generation and Family Affairs, Women and Integration; as a representative of the CDU party in the European Parliament, he was long concerned with development policy. His Ministry recently hosted a conference on the future of Africa, at which discussions also focused on the significance of the aid provided by migrants for development in their home countries.

Earn Abroad – Invest at Home

“It is striking that China and India account for the largest share of the money that migrants transfer and invest in business undertakings back home,” reports Nieswand. These countries’ economies are growing rapidly, but not so much as a result of these investments. “In fact, it is rather the reverse. Migrants invest at home because the economy is booming.” The situation in Africa is different, as representatives of these countries and of the development organizations can confirm. In Africa, foreign currency is often spent on consumer goods – because the conditions for investment are poor. In Nieswand’s view, “It is possible that this foreign currency has no sustainable effect on growth. If the remittances stopped, the boom might collapse.”

Nevertheless, there are some Ghanaian emigrants who put their savings into restaurants, hotels or even poultry farming, which currently promises sizeable profits in Ghana. The German development organization GTZ is keen to encourage migrants to use money earned abroad to set up businesses back home, and is therefore considering projects to communicate the necessary knowledge and business skills.

Ghana’s government, too, is aware that the country can benefit from both the migrants’ experience and their money: it has long complained that Ghana is losing its best people. In the meantime, however, even President John Agyekum Kufuor himself has begun to emphasize the migrants’ economic, as well as social importance. It is a topic he returns to every time he travels abroad, where meetings with his fellow countrymen living in diaspora are frequently on his agenda.