

## Statement of Research Interests

My goal as an anthropologist is to explore the ways human beings construct their social worlds and find meaning in their lived experience. What interests me most is the relationship between identity and territory, and I see my research as part of a broader effort in the social sciences to study the interactions linking human mobility, cultural identity, and economic development in the contemporary world. My work engages with the study of transnationalism, specifically investigating how people retain significant social, economic, and political ties with places in which they no longer reside. Through the ethnographic study of a particular population of transnational migrants who originate from the West African Sahel and move to many points around the globe, I aim to understand how the construction of cultural identity is conditioned by such factors as geography, economic activity, and religious ideology. My core interests can be encapsulated in a few basic questions. How do migrants manage to construct themselves as being “from” a particular place if they no longer live there? How can they foster these constructions in their children and pass them on from one generation to the next? Finally, why in a globalizing world do so many people find it preferable, even imperative, to reproduce identities so closely linked with territory? These questions get to the heart of ongoing discussions about state immigration policies as well as debates over migrant incorporation (and the lack of it) in countries around the world.

While much of the literature on transnational migration examines the upper levels of these processes of social reproduction, concentrating on the roles of governments and hometown associations in promoting ties between migrants and their homelands, my own analysis is situated within a small but growing number of studies which consider a crucial but often overlooked arena at the micro-level: households and kin groups. I am especially interested in how migrant parents tackle the problem of instilling their cultural capital and “home values” in their children born abroad, and how children growing up abroad negotiate the difficulties of an ambiguous or dual cultural identity. In my doctoral fieldwork, conducted among Muslim West African migrants in Brazzaville, Congo, I crafted a micro-level approach using extended participant observation and interviews, integrating this perspective with a broader focus on the production of ethnic, Islamic, and national identities in the migrant community. I also analyzed the ways religious and cultural difference helps perpetuate a status of “strangerhood” for migrants abroad. I found that through a number of different modes of transnational domestic organization, many migrants were able to establish businesses and acquire property in the host society and transfer these assets to their children over the long term, while at the same time ensuring that their children were enculturated in their communities of origin; in this manner, members of this population were able to defy the expectation that their enduring presence in the host society would lead to their inevitable assimilation. Currently I have two articles drawn from this research under review for publication, and over the coming year I plan to edit my dissertation into a book for publication by a university press.

Continuing with the anthropological examination of population issues, I have recently begun looking into women’s experiences of infertility in Nigeria. This is the subject of postdoctoral work which I began in the summer of 2007 as part of a small team consisting of one other American anthropologist, a Nigerian sociologist, and a Danish demographer. Working closely with my colleagues, I spent nearly three months carrying out ethnographic and survey research in two southern Nigerian communities. Presently I am learning techniques for analyzing quantitative data and integrating their analysis into ethnographic projects, and preparing article manuscripts for conference presentation and eventual publication. This

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interdisciplinary endeavor has opened up exciting new methodological horizons for me. I hope to combine the qualitative features of my previous fieldwork with the quantitative tools I have acquired through this experience in my future research.

I anticipate that my primary research trajectory will expand the focus on the multi-local Sahelian population I have studied. There are many potential places this research may lead me, and many potential topics I may explore. I can transfer the cultural knowledge and linguistic skills I have developed over more than four years in Africa to other Sahelian immigrant communities, from New York City to Western Europe to East Asia. I want to learn whether inter-generational transmission of transnational ties can be found in migrant populations outside the African continent, and if so how this process may be altered by different host-society contexts, cultural discourses, and state policies. I want to learn more about the ways migrants employ Islam in various settings to maintain group boundaries, and how their sense of being Muslim is altered by changes in geographic, social, political, and economic factors. And I want to study how this population's integration into the global economy has affected family structure, marriage and especially the practice of polygamy. Given the increasing mobility of the earth's human population, questions such as these have never been more significant for social scientists and for humanity at large.