Shifting Sedentism in West Africa

Summary
Studies of past mobility in West Africa and beyond have traditionally seen sedentism and mobility as binary opposites, with sedentism as the stable option and mobility as an exception that needs to be explained. Additionally, archaeologists have tended to gravitate toward deeply stratified sites, while flat sites were often neglected, presumed to be ephemeral and of little interest. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, archaeologists across West Africa have been increasingly documenting a phenomenon that deeply challenges those assumptions: that of populations that are sedentary but whose settlements regularly “shift” or move short distances but keep the name, institutions, and networks of the community intact. Known as “shifting sedentism,” this pattern opens new theoretical and methodological possibilities as it demonstrates that lack of stratification does not necessary entail ephemeral occupations, nor insecurity or lack of social complexity. In fact, over the past few decades, shifting sedentism patterns have been documented archaeologically, historically, and ethnographically in a wide range of societies, from stateless groups to hierarchical empires, from cattle-herders to agriculturalists, and in the most diverse sociopolitical, cultural, and economic settings. Thanks to all these studies, it is now clear that shifting sedentism has been present in societies across West Africa, from Senegal to Cameroon, for centuries, but its importance is only now beginning to be understood.

Keywords
shifting sedentism, mobility, flat sites, horizontal stratigraphy, West Africa

Introduction
Since the early 20th century, archaeologists in West Africa have studied a wide range of periods, areas, and sites; ranging from settlement tells to funerary tumuli and megaliths. In the search for long chronologies and baseline sequences, however, flat sites have often been neglected. Assumed to be ephemeral (and therefore incapable of providing long sequences), notionally linked to “less complex” mobile societies and deemed “less informative” than their stratified counterparts, flat sites have remained relatively understudied. This pattern is gradually starting to change, along with the assumptions that underpin it, as archaeologists become increasingly aware of the complexity of past mobilities and their archaeological manifestations. As part of this process, we have learned that lack of stratification does not necessarily entail ephemerality or lack of complexity, and one pattern has been key to this conversation: shifting sedentism.
Shifting sedentism—also occasionally referred to as “serial sedentism” (Lawson 2003b, 18), “sedentary mobility” (Braudel 1981, 271), “long-term nomadism” (Hallaire 1962, 47), and “semi-sedentism” (Jones and Wood 2012)—is a settlement pattern by which towns, villages, and/or neighborhoods move short distances every few decades but keep the name, networks, and institutions of the community intact. This encompasses a wide range of phenomena with different cultural, social, and political implications but with one element in common: populations that are in almost every respect sedentary, yet produce an archaeological record that appears ephemeral.

**Shifting Sedentism Elsewhere**
Shifting sedentism is not a specifically West African phenomenon; it has also been documented elsewhere, both archaeologically and ethnographically. America has been particularly prolific in case studies, from 21st-century Yanomamö horticulturalists in southern Venezuela (Craig and Chagnon 2006), to the 8th–10th century Ancestral Puebloan from southwest Colorado (Kohler and Matthew 1988) and the 15th–17th century Haudenosaunee in the Northeast of the United States (Jones and Wood 2012). These studies, however, tend to see residential mobility resulting mostly—or even entirely—from soil degradation linked to extensive agriculture, and discussions about them often fall into environmentally deterministic arguments.

Beyond America, examples of shifting villages have also been reported for medieval Central Europe, where accounts describe “dwellings being moved to where the next job was or onto a patch of vacant land. Whole villages moved when the soil was exhausted or when they were threatened by enemy attack” (Jackson 1984, 94). This notion of “sedentary mobility” is also used by Braudel (1981, 271), who describes how in rural areas of medieval Germany and France “often, the centre of gravity within a given cultivated area shifted, and everything—furniture, people, animals, stones—was moved out of the abandoned village to a site a few miles away.” In these cases, village moves are generally presented as resulting from a combination of insecurity and degradation of soil fertility.

Despite their widespread presence across time and space, however, shifting sedentism patterns remain undertheorized. This probably is the result of a combination of factors, including the absence of a unifying term for the phenomenon, its low visibility, and the tendency to explain shifting patterns in environmentally deterministic terms, without exploring their links to sociopolitical structures. The most crucial element, however, are the limitations of the conceptual frameworks used by archaeologists to understand mobility until recently.

**Understanding Mobility**
Debates about mobility have a long history in archaeology, from the uncritical use of migration by diffusionist culture-historians as an all-explaining tool for cultural change, to its avoidance by processual archaeologists and the more recent “mobilities turn” (Sheller and Urry 2006), challenging both. While this is not the place to review this rich history in detail—and excellent reviews exist elsewhere (cf. Beaudry and Parno 2013 or Leary 2014 for global discussions and Ashley, Antonites, and Fredriksen 2016 for a specifically African one)—four
aspects of these debates require consideration here, as they are essential to understand shifting sedentism in West Africa and why it has been so heavily underresearched.

**Mobility: Sedentary versus Nomadic**

One of the great conceptual barriers that has often limited our understanding of past mobilities is the predominance of a sharp conceptual divide between mobile and sedentary populations. This presents two versions: the binary divide and the sliding scale. The binary version considers sedentism and mobility/nomadism as opposites, with occasional “anomalies” (such as transhumant or semi-sedentary groups) that require further explanation. The gradient approach, on the other hand, considers them as two ends of a spectrum, with optional intermediate “stages” in between. These two conceptualizations are often intertwined with socio-evolutionary classifications that link certain “types” of subsistence strategies with particular political institutions and social structures (Kelly 1992; Lindsay and Greene 2013).

Both of these approaches present multiple problems, but the central one is that the diversity of relationships that human societies have to movement cannot be encapsulated in either a binary opposition or a unidimensional scale: individuals and groups move different distances at various rates for completely different reasons, sometimes as part of the normal functioning of society, sometimes for extraordinary causes. Sometimes it is the whole society that moves, other times it is only certain members. Consequently, trying to categorize a society simply on the basis of its rate of movement is clearly misguided. Shifting sedentism is a clear example: these are societies whose daily lives and social structures are sedentary but whose archaeological footprint appears mobile. Societies with shifting sedentism therefore do not fit in traditional mobility classifications, whether binary or scale-based, and this in part explains why they are still badly understood.

**Migration and Movement**

Another key limitation of movement studies until recently has been the overwhelming focus on migration—understood usually as planned long-distance movements of large numbers of people—at the expense of small- and medium-scale, individual or household, and involuntary moves (Cameron 2013; Smith 2014). Luckily, since the 2010s there has been a widespread recognition that most human groups are not fixed and stable units, but fluid and ever-changing entities that rarely move in the clear directional manner implicit in many migration narratives (Ashley, Antonites, and Fredriksen 2016, 425).

**Movement as the Anomaly**

Central to these narratives is the (often implicit) idea that mobility is an anomaly that needs to be explained, generally as a response to a crisis; a difficult situation; or social, environmental, and political constraints. While this is indeed sometimes the case, mobility can also be a naturalized ongoing process that frames and shapes sociality; and until we stop treating it as an exception, we will not understand its importance and roles. For example, in the political domain, mobility has often been presented as a manifestation of insecurity and weak polities, but it can also be at the heart of a consensual political system that gives people the opportunity to “vote with their feet” should they disagree with the ruler’s approach (Ashley, Antonites, and Fredriksen 2016, 425). Similarly, shifting agriculture (which as we’ll see is often associated with shifting sedentism patterns) has often been treated as an
unsustainable response to disruptive environments as opposed to the highly sustainable and socially stable pattern it mostly is (Duvall 2007; Gallagher 2010). This “movement as the anomaly” approach has been largely superseded since the “mobilities turn” in the social sciences (cf. Sheller and Urry 2006), which advocates for a new understanding of mobility as an integral and multidimensional part of human societies, but it sadly still lingers in many archaeological discussions.

**Flat Means Ephemeral**

Finally, a key problem that has hindered the identification and understanding of shifting sedentism phenomena across West Africa is the implicit or explicit assumption that all flat sites represent ephemeral occupations, and that they are of less interest than stratified ones. While incorrect, this assumption is based on a genuine logistical issue: archaeologists in West Africa often work in areas where no or little prior archaeology exists and therefore need to generate chronological sequences from scratch. Such sequences are much more easily obtainable from deeply stratified sites, which as a result have been prioritized. In fact, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Thiaw 1999), the vast majority of documented cases of shifting sedentism come precisely from regions that did not have those deeply stratified sites, areas where researchers had no choice but to work on flat sites. Additionally, because of their very nature, flat sites are much less visible and more difficult to identify than their stratified counterparts. These logistical issues, combined with the theoretical limitations previously outlined, have led to a situation where shifting sedentism patterns are both underreported and misunderstood, often only present as passing mentions to “continuous scattered archaeological landscapes” or “high residential mobility” in archaeological reports. Fortunately, this has started to change in the early 21st century, and more and better instances of shifting sedentary practices are increasingly being documented and progressively understood.

**Case Study 1: The Senegambia**

The Senegambia is one of the regions with the best-documented shifting sedentism patterns, covering a wide range of societies, periods, and sociopolitical arrangements. In some cases, shifting sites coexist with more permanent ones (Thiaw 1999; Thilmans and Ravisé 1980); in others, they are the only type of settlement present (Canós-Donnay 2016a; Lawson 2003b; Richard 2005). Sometimes, they are part of the normal functioning of society (Canós-Donnay 2016a; Lawson 2003b), but they can also be a response to insecurity and violence (Thiaw 2012, 2020).

**Southern Senegambia: Kaabu & Fulaadu**

The first detailed description of shifting sedentism patterns in the southern Senegambia comes from the work of Amy Lawson (2003b, 18), who in her study of Iron Age settlements in the Gambia noted how according to elders in the Gambia, it is quite common for villages of up to 1000 individuals to relocate (usually less than 1 km away) if the village chief or lineage head dies, or if agricultural fields become exhausted. However, during the c. 50–100 years in which a particular locale is inhabited, substantial houses are erected and individuals are “sedentary.” This results in a settlement pattern in which a particular village sequentially locates itself in a number of discrete locales all within a relatively small area, a strategy which I am calling “serial sedentism.” Even though the sites themselves appear ephemeral, this does not mean that the communities that produce them are.
This pattern, she argued, applied also to the archaeological record, characterized by shallow deposits (except for some relatively deep rubbish pits) and short-term occupations. Lawson hypothesized this pattern of mobility could be connected with soil fertility and the need to move after fields have become exhausted (Lawson 2001, 35; 2003b, 192–193).

A decade later, a similar study in the Upper Casamance in Senegal (fifty miles south of Lawson’s research area), confirmed her initial observations and further explored this fascinating pattern. Survey, excavations, archival work, and oral traditions collected by Canós-Donnay (2016a, 2016b, 2022) and her team documented the presence and mechanics of shifting settlement patterns in their 40 x 30 mile research area for over a millennium (7th–20th century). Their research showed how in its most recent form (from the 19th century to the early 21st century) shifting sedentism results from the combination of two different movements: shifts (short-distance movements of whole settlements or of groups within them) and relocations (middle- or long-distance moves of family groups that abandon/join existing villages, and/or create new ones).

This combination of movements produces two parallel phenomena: a permanent landscape of stable yet shifting historical towns, and an ephemeral one characterized by the continuous creation and abandonment of minor villages. The reasons behind the moves are as diverse as the moves themselves: environmental changes, political alliances, community conflict, health issues, and/or opportunities elsewhere. Nevertheless, they all have in common the use of mobility (whether short- or long-distance) as a problem-solving mechanism, while maintaining a fully sedentary lifestyle and a strong sense of the importance of historical towns as permanent anchors in the landscape (Canós-Donnay 2016a, 2016b).

Archaeologically, the results from both survey and excavation in the Upper Casamance confirm Lawson’s hypothesis: shifting patterns are not a recent occurrence. The two sites excavated, Payoungou and Korop, were shown to have been inhabited for over thirteen hundred and eight hundred years, respectively, yet no single part of either site was inhabited for more than two centuries (probably less, but chronological resolution was limited; Canós-Donnay 2016a, 464). As for the nature of the shifts, it is clear that they were not linear (which is consistent with shifting patterns as currently known) and that reoccupation of previously abandoned areas was rare. Beyond the two excavated sites, survey confirmed this pattern was present across the region, as all of the remains of historical centers described by oral traditions and European texts as powerful towns were shown to be equally unstratified, and no tell sites were encountered elsewhere (Canós-Donnay 2016a, 461).

**Shifting Sedentism in the Southern Senegambia: Sociopolitical Implications**

It is relevant to note that while in other areas of the world (e.g., Craig and Chagnon 2006; Jones and Wood 2012; Kohler and Matthew1988), shifting settlement patterns have often been associated with stateless societies; in this case they are happening in the midst of two of the most powerful states in West Africa: the Mali Empire and its successor state, Kaabu. Annexed to the Empire in the 13th century, the southern Senegambia became part of the province (or more specifically banko, land) of Kaabu. Kaabu flourished over the following centuries, becoming an independent state after Mali’s disintegration in the 16th century and surviving until the mid-19th century, when a combination of internal turmoil and external attacks would cause its demise. The power void left by Kaabu was filled by a range of local
actors, including the short-lived state of Fulaadu, shortly before the colonial period (Lopes 1999; Roche 1985). Throughout its history, Kaabu was organized as a hierarchical federation, with three leading territories that took turns in power, and a range of others with varying degrees of autonomy. Each of those territories had a capital governed by a particular lineage with sacred connections to the land, and both historical records and archaeology demonstrate some of those towns existed continuously for centuries (Canós-Donnay 2022; Niane 1989).

Interestingly, shifting patterns continued after Kaabu’s demise in the 19th century, as demonstrated by historical and ethnographic observations. For example, Wright (1999, 415) describes how towns in the 19th-century state of Niumi (also a former Kaabu territory) moved “not frequently, but regularly” as a result of a variety of issues to do with land fertility, exhaustion of wells, and accumulation of residues, among other reasons. Historically documented “shifts” include the town of Essau (seat of the colonial government of the Lower Niumi District, and before that one of Niumi’s royal villages), that moved about one mile in the early 20th century; and Bakindiki, another royal town that moved twelve miles south in the late 19th century for security reasons (Wright 1999, 415).

Parallel to the shifting of key towns (Canós-Donnay’s first type of movement), we also have records of a substantial amount of village creation and abandonment (Canós-Donnay’s second type), particularly in the Upper Casamance. Fanchette notes, for instance, how in the year 1958, ten villages disappeared and thirty-four were created only in the canton of Patim Kandiaye (a region of about 25 × 12 miles; Fanchette 1999, 176). Fanchette interprets this readiness to move as a remnant of a nomadic lifestyle by the Fula populations (an ethnic group traditionally associated with nomadic pastoralism, but fully sedentary since at least the 19th century). While there are indeed multiple historical accounts confirming a greater readiness to move by Fula households (e.g., Bertrand-Bocandé 1849b, 58; Jobson 1999, 37), their moves seem to always correspond to the second type of movement (relocations). Relocations certainly contribute to the shifting of towns as households move from one settlement to another (sometimes creating/abandoning villages in the process), but does not by itself generate shifting sedentism patterns unless the first type of movement (shifts) is also present, guaranteeing the stability of towns and preventing their disappearance. In fact, the longest-lived shifting towns across the region always correspond to the Manding capitals of Kaabu (Canós-Donnay 2016a).

While archaeology in the area is still too patchy—both geographically and chronologically—to be able to unpick the multiple moves and patterns that result in the complex tapestry of evolving landscapes in the region, what we can assert with confidence is that the shifting towns of the Senegambia are not the result of a legacy of nomadism in certain groups, nor purely a matter of field exhaustion. They are the result of a complex and stable sociopolitical system, which we are only beginning to understand, and this has important theoretical implications. Kaabu and Fulaadu, the two states that have defined the political landscapes of the Upper Casamance for the last eight hundred years, fit the traditional definition of “state” at many levels: they were based around territories and strongholds with a defined regional hierarchy, a centralized system of tax collection, and a ruling aristocracy that controlled access to prestige goods (Lopes 1999; Niane 1989). Yet, as the previous discussion shows, both states were based on political landscapes with continuously shifting political centers and
moving populations, at odds with traditional conceptualization of states as static territorial entities.

**Further North: The Siin Salum, Waalo, and Falemé areas**

The existence of flat sites across Senegal was first documented in the survey undertaken by Martin and Becker (1984) in the 1970s, which identified a large range of plages areas of varying size, with surface finds but no elevation, in the region between Dagana and Matam, in northern Senegal (Thilmans and Ravisé 1980, 11). Unfortunately, these plages were assumed to be temporary campsites and not worthy of further discussion or analysis. Similarly, a survey by Susan and Roderick McIntosh in 1993, near the village of Rao (thirty miles southeast of Dagana) encountered “a continuous palimpsest of shifting occupation” (McIntosh and McIntosh 1993, 78), which led them to focus on the funerary tumuli instead. Nevertheless, another survey of the Rao area by MacDonald, Canós-Donnay, and Thiaw (2018) looked in greater detail at the settlement landscapes and found that surface materials do cluster in certain areas around slightly stratified settlement sites, in a landscape highly reminiscent of those described by Lawson and Canós-Donnay.

In eastern Senegal, the concept of plage has been refined in the work of Thiaw (1999, 2012, 2020). Working in the area of the former states of Gajaaga and Bundi in the Lower Falemé, Thiaw identified a large number of flat sites belonging to sedentary populations. In this case, it appears these plages are indeed seasonal or short-lived occupations, probably connected with the instability and violence of the Atlantic era slave trade, as indicated by local oral traditions and further supported by their rapid proliferation across the landscape in the 18th and 19th centuries (Thiaw 2012, 62–65).

Thanks to the work of François Richard, we know that these patterns also extend into the Siin Salum region, in central Senegal. Survey and excavations undertaken between 2001 and 2004 revealed a “dispersed habitat, made up of small-scale, shifting communities leaving relatively impermanent traces in the landscape, with no significant long-term accumulation” (Richard 2009, 103). Richard observed how in recent history, settlement patterns in the region had been characterized by a “logic of mobility,” with periods of stable residence lasting between 50 and 150 years after which villages relocated a short distance away. Like in Niani and the Upper Casamance, this posed important methodological challenges in terms of the generation of archaeological sequences, but Richard managed to string together a long chain of sites stretching for fifteen hundred years (Richard 2009, 10; 2018).

Consequently, although it is often hidden in footnotes and passing comments, there is strong evidence that shifting sedentism patterns may be more common across the Senegambia than previously thought, but have been traditionally disregarded (with the notable exceptions just discussed) in the quest for stratified sites and tumuli.

**Case Study 2: Burkina Faso**

Another well-documented and fascinating instance of shifting sedentism patterns comes from the work of Daphne Gallagher in southeastern Burkina Faso. Working in the Gobnangou region, along the southeastern border of the historic Gourmantche kingdom (13th–19th century), Gallagher documented fifteen hundred years (AD 700–1900) of shifting settlement patterns in an area of thirty square miles (Gallagher 2010, 2021). In some ways, the patterns
described are similar to the Senegambian ones: people would remain in the same location for a period ranging from ten to two hundred years, during which their lives would be to all effects and purposes sedentary, then move somewhere else in the vicinity. The result was an apparently paradoxical archaeological landscape: one of the longest documented occupation sequences in West Africa, but also one in which 90 percent of sites were less than twenty inches deep (Gallagher 2010, 8, 98–99). As in the Senegambia, this system appears to have been both stable and highly adaptable, surviving for centuries and through important sociopolitical changes.

In other aspects, however, the Gobnangou patterns are markedly different from the Senegambian ones. The first key divergence is that the majority of the sites are much smaller—around thirty to one hundred feet in diameter—and represent single household compounds and activity areas, as opposed to villages or towns (Gallagher 2010, 140). These compounds were spaced across the landscape: adjacent ones were very rare, and the minimum distance between compounds was generally around one hundred yards (often much more; Gallagher 2010, 172). This pattern matches the current settlement structure in the region, in which movement still occurs at a household level and relocations of whole communities are limited to major events such as natural disasters (Gallagher 2010, 14).

The second key difference has to do with the rationale for the moves, which in this case can be directly linked to farming practices. Historical and ethnographic records show how the Gourmantche practice shifting cultivation: they farm a ring of fields directly around their homes until it becomes exhausted, then move their primary residence elsewhere (Remy 1967). However, while linked to cultivation practices, these movements are not an ecological imperative, but a cultural choice (see section “Shifting Settlements Are a Cultural Choice”).

**Sociopolitical Implications**

Historically documented Gourmantche society was—and to a large extent still is—strongly hierarchical, with a dominant class who claim to have subjugated the original inhabitants at some point in the past (Cartry 1966; Madiéga 1982). This rigid hierarchy, however, has not stood in the way of a significant degree of mobility and household independence. As Gallagher (2010, 173) notes, individual households “have significant autonomy and flexibility in determining when and where they will move, provided they remain within the territory controlled by a group (kin-based, political, or ethnic) with whom they are identified.” This has implications also for group affiliation, as due to the moves, individuals—particularly those in isolated compounds—often have greater connections with people living far away than with their immediate neighbors. For example, Gallagher (2010, 15) observed that it was not unusual to encounter households that considered themselves inhabitants of a settlement over six miles away. While elements like identity and affiliation are difficult to trace archaeologically, the archaeological record does reflect a complex, economically integrated community with material culture similarities (including a pottery tradition that becomes increasingly homogeneous over time) despite the constant movement (Gallagher 2010, 8). When considered in the context of their social setting, the shifting patterns in the Gobnangou challenge some important assumptions about mobility.

**Mobility is Not the Result of Insecurity**

It is a widely spread assumption that areas featuring a combination of movement and sites with defensive potential (e.g., escarpments) are necessarily the result of insecurity in general,
and slave raiding in particular. Since archaeology in the Gobnangou features both shifting sites and a gradual movement toward the escarpment over time, insecurity has unsurprisingly often been cited as a key factor (e.g., Frank et al. 2001; Millogo 1993; Remy 1967). This interpretation, however, does not hold up to closer inspection, as a careful look at the archaeological record shows a very different picture. Firstly, even at the peak of site proximity to the escarpment (the 19th century), a large proportion of sites were still hundreds or even thousands of feet away from the canyons and ravines, and very much unsheltered (Gallagher 2010, 207). Secondly, because the 19th century is characterized by an increase in craft production (cloth and iron, specifically) and the escarpment was where the indigo dying pits were located, it appears that what characterized the 19th-century Gobnangou and encouraged the move toward the escarpment was not in fact greater insecurity, but an increase in craft production, probably connected with greater participation in regional trade (Gallagher 2010, 207).

**Shifting Agriculture Is Not Inefficient**

Agronomists have often been deeply critical of shifting cultivation practices because of their low yields and little attention to capital improvements to the land (e.g., Food and Agricultural Organization 1957; Nye and Greenland 1961). However, when we consider the archaeological evidence gathered by Gallagher and others, shifting cultivation in places like Gobnangou is among the most reliable, resilient, and efficacious of systems, being well suited not just to the environment, but also the cultural structures in which it exists, which explains its survival and success over the centuries and through many significant sociopolitical changes (Gallagher 2010, 87).

**Shifting Settlements Are a Cultural Choice**

Finally, explanations of shifting settlement patterns often rely on environmental determinism: limited soil fertility and/or other ecological factors force populations to move. As Gallagher’s work successfully demonstrates, both shifting cultivation and its associated mobility are the result of cultural choices, not environmental impositions (Gallagher 2010, 208). This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that neighboring groups in extremely similar environments have chosen completely different tactics. For instance, the Gourounsi in west-central Burkina Faso share the Gourmantche system of garden rings around the compound but are highly sedentary (Barral 1968); and the neighboring Bwa have developed a pattern of highly intensive agriculture that combines permanent fields around the village with semi-permanent fields further away. They are fully sedentary and some of their villages are continuously occupied for over a thousand years (Dueppen 2012). Neither sedentism nor mobility are thus ecological imperatives, they are both cultural choices that make sense in given cultural and sociopolitical settings.

**Beyond Shifting Sedentism: Settlement Cycling**

The third case study is somewhat different to the previous two and helps us to contextualize and understand the nature and limits of shifting sedentism. In his work on the archaeology and oral traditions of Ìlārè District, in southwest Nigeria, Akin Ogundiran (2001, 2002) observed how over a period of eight hundred years (ad 1200–1900) a single group was sequentially located in five different places, all within an area of approximately five miles in diameter, while preserving the name, institutions, and networks of the community. Thanks to the very rich and diverse tapestry of oral traditions in the area, Ogundiran was able to identify five apparently unrelated archaeological sites (Ìloyi, Òkun, Ogúntèdo, Ìloja, and Bàbá
Ilàrè Grove), as consecutive bases of the same community, known as Ilàrè. As shown in Table 1, the length of the occupations varied from sixteen to three hundred years, and the moves were always connected to changes in geopolitical power in the wider region.

The sequence of movements is as follows: according to oral traditions, the earliest locale of the Ilàrè community was at the site of (1) Babá Ilàrè Grove. In the 13th century, under the leadership of Ájalórún, Ilàrè ceased to be one among many autonomous villages and became the main site of a confederation known as Éka Òsun. This new role coincided with the first change in location to the new site of (2) Ijoyì, just over two miles to the north of the original one, whose foundation date has been confirmed by radiocarbon dating. Ilàrè stayed in the same spot for over three hundred years until it lost its hegemony in the 16th century, after the wars with its formerly vassal village of Ilèmùrè. As part of this conflict (known as the Òkipó wars), Ilàrè was destroyed and its inhabitants moved to the new site of (3) Òkun. Caught geographically between the two great 16th-century powers in the region (the Òyó Empire and Ilèsà), Ilàrè managed to keep its ritual independence and maintain a nominal but precarious authority over its territory, despite regular conflicts with its neighbors. Eventually, as part of one of these clashes with its northern neighbor Iláhún, an epidemic broke out in Òkun, attributed by oral traditions to the poisoning of its waters by enemies. This led to the abandonment of the site, which archaeology confirms took place in the 18th century. The Ilèsà community then relocated to the site of (4) Ilàrè-Ijéṣà, half a mile north of Òkun. This site was abandoned for a short period during the Kiríjì War (1872–1888), when its population relocated to the site of (5) Oguntèdo, four miles to the northeast; then reoccupied (6) after the conflict ended (Ogundiran 2001, 2002).

This pattern, which Ogundiran (2002) calls “settlement cycling” is interesting because it shares some of the key features of shifting sedentism—in particular the survival of a community and its institutions through multiple changes of location—but it also presents important differences. First of all, the moves are more irregular and less frequent, which sometimes (but not always) results in stratified sites. Secondly, rather than being part of the “usual” functioning of society, the moves tend to be associated with disruptive events of political and/or military nature. In this sense, “settlement cycling” could be interpreted under old paradigms as one more case of mobility being an “exception” resulting from “insecurity.” What this interpretation would miss, however, is that these moves are not considered by oral traditions as anomalies, but as “cycles”: central structuring principles of the community’s history. Even short-lived and archaeologically ephemeral sites like Oguntèdo thus represent centuries-old stable communities, whose sociopolitical continuity manifests itself though a palimpsest of former occupations across the surrounding landscape (Ogundiran 2001, 2002).

**Shifting Sedentism versus Settlement Cycling**
Shifting sedentism and settlement cycling thus share similarities but also operate at different scales and under different rationales. Where does one pattern begin and the other one end? How regular must the moves be and when is the rationale disruptive enough to be interpreted as one or the other? The answer is that it does not matter that much, as these are just practical labels/shortcuts we use to refer to much more complex realities. What’s important is the approach we take to understand past mobilities; as both concepts demonstrate, we
must look beyond ready-made societal packages that have sadly too often characterized archaeological interpretation in West Africa (and elsewhere) and limited our understanding of the relationship between past societies and mobility.

Conclusions

Shifting sedentism is a pattern by which villages and towns regularly move short distances while keeping the name, institutions, and networks of the community intact. As the previous review has shown, it is a very diverse phenomenon yet one that we are only beginning to understand. From the existing research, however, we can derive some important lessons for archaeology in West Africa and elsewhere.

First of all, it is clear that shifting sedentism is not connected to a particular subsistence pattern: while groups exhibiting shifting sedentism patterns sometimes also practice shifting cultivation, there are also others that rely on different strategies (e.g., the Fulbe of the Upper Casamance often practice animal husbandry). The reverse is also true: many groups that practice shifting cultivation have perfectly geographically stable settlements (e.g., the Gourounsi in west-central Burkina Faso). It is important to understand, therefore, that shifting sedentism, while sometimes connected to certain environmental factors, is in no way an ecological imperative; it is always a cultural choice.

Secondly, societies presenting shifting sedentism do not ascribe to any particular “type” of political structure or degree of hierarchization/centralization. While in the past “mobility” was often seen as a marker of noncentralized societies with limited political hierarchies (e.g., Prussin 1969), this view is now clearly outdated. As we have seen here, shifting sedentism patterns exist within a range of political structures, including powerful and highly centralized states like the Mali Empire. Additionally, the specific local articulation of each of those structures may vary, from the fully autonomous households of the Gobnangou region to the centrally controlled strongholds of Kaabu. In this sense, the study of shifting sedentism patterns is part of a wider trend exploring the multiple relationships between mobility and power, from itinerant kinship (Bernhardt 1993; Gronenborn 2001; Horvath 1969; Reid 1996) to multiple capitals (Canós-Donnay 2019; Haour 2005) and mobile cores (Colburn and Hughes 2010).

Thirdly, shifting towns are probably far more common than the current archaeological literature would suggest, both across West Africa and beyond. In the absence of historical evidence for the length of the occupation or preexisting dated ceramic sequences that could alert us to the multiperiod nature of a site, shifting towns can easily be misidentified as ephemeral settlements. It is therefore very likely—given the traditional focus of West Africanist archaeologists on tell sites—that many shifting sites have been misidentified as transient and overlooked, leading to an underrepresentation of the phenomenon in the literature.

In methodological terms, even if we overcome the conceptual problems and start recognizing the interest and importance of flat sites in general, and shifting sedentism in particular, their shallow nature still poses significant challenges. Flat sites are more susceptible to erosion; secure radiocarbon dates are often difficult to obtain due to surface disturbance, and relative dating of ceramics can be tricky without a long-stratified vertical sequence (Gallagher 2010,
Additionally, the fact that chronological sequences are spread horizontally across the landscape, rather than stacked vertically in a single spot, calls for new approaches and methodologies that pay greater attention to landscape dynamics. None of these problems are insurmountable (in fact all of the aforementioned case studies explored different solutions), but they require careful consideration and methodological adaptation.

Finally, the study of shifting sedentism demonstrates the need to embrace a new ontology of mobility, one that does not conceive it as an anomaly and recognizes its multilayered flows and nature. Archaeological studies of mobility have tended to focus on population mobility, rather than settlement mobility, and in doing so have missed an important dimension of the articulation of past human landscapes. Phenomena like shifting sedentism evince that distinctions such as occupation/abandonment, sedentism/mobility are not as absolute as often implied. They also show how movement is not necessarily a transitional response to moments of crisis, that it can also be an intrinsic and constant dimension of the articulation of social dynamics.

We are only beginning to understand the full complexity and reach of shifting sedentism across West Africa and much remains still to be known. What the existing case studies have demonstrated, however, is the importance of breaking away from outdated and rigid frameworks and typologies, and how much there is to be gained from understanding the relationship between past human groups and mobility in all its complexity and diversity, both across West African and beyond.

Further Reading

References


Table 1. Successive Relocations of the Ìlárè Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Reason for abandonment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bàbá ìlárè Grove</td>
<td>13th century</td>
<td>Polity expansion, administrative readjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iloyi</td>
<td>13th–16th</td>
<td>Destroyed in Òkipó war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Òkun</td>
<td>16th–18th</td>
<td>According to oral traditions, poisoned well led to high death toll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ìlárè-Ìjèsà</td>
<td>Late 18th century–1872, 1888–present</td>
<td>Kiríji war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogúntedo</td>
<td>1872–1888</td>
<td>End of war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table created by author based on information from Ogundiran (2002).