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Migration and the Transformation of Modern African Society: Introduction

by Wim M. J. van Binsbergen & Henk A. Meilink

I. THE 1977 CONFERENCE

Having established, over the past decade, a significant tradition of annual conferences, the Afrika-Studiecentrum in Leiden decided to devote their 1977 conference to the theme of 'Migration and Rural Development in Tropical Africa'¹⁾. This decision was related to the fact that since 1974 a multi-disciplinary research team of the Afrika-Studiecentrum has been engaged in research into migration²⁾ and rural development in the Lower Casamance, southern Senegal. Having returned from the field early 1976, the conference would provide an excellent opportunity to confront the team's research findings, in an advanced stage of analysis, with a wide range of empirical studies from other parts of Africa, as well as with theoretical studies dealing with migration and development in general. More was aimed at, however, than simply creating an opportunity for discussing the centre's research. The Casamance research had ambitions beyond the mere regional and descriptive level: it intended to provide a series of empirical applications, and empirical tests, of neo-marxist approaches to African migration and development that have recently emerged as alternatives to the more established approaches to these subjects pursued by anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, demographers and economists since the 1950s (Meilink et al. 1978). The conference aimed at bringing together representatives from all current approaches to migration in Africa, including the neo-marxist approach, in an attempt at mutual evaluation, formulating basic theoretical positions, making explicit their underlying assumptions, trying to find tentative solutions for the unsolved problems the various approaches continue to pose.

For several reasons such an exercise, however necessary and timely, is bound to yield only very partial and inconclusive results.

A considerable number of different academic disciplines are involved in the study of migration and rural development in Africa. On the one hand this may make this combined subject eminently suitable for that integrated approach currently known as 'African Studies'; and in fact, migration in Africa features

¹⁾ We wish to express our gratitude to the following people whose contribution has helped to make this conference a success: K. de Jonge, who initiated the conference, was a member of the organizing committee, and in an initial stage assisted in the preparation of the present volume; A. Kuyt, on the same committee, who took care of all administrative and logistic aspects of the conference; the secretarial staff of the Afrika-Studiecentrum, who typed some and duplicated all the papers, under the usual pressure of time; the staff of the Eysingahuis, Leiden, who offered us hospitality during the conference; G. Grootenhuis, the Afrika-Studiecentrum's managing director, for advice concerning the organization of the conference and the publication of the present volume; and all participants, including the many whose papers could not appear here, for helping us to make this conference a stimulating intellectual exchange.

²⁾ Throughout this volume, by migration is meant modern migration in the sense in which this term is used by Amin (1974).