

Conflict, Displacement, and the Paradox of Free Movement in West Africa

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Abstract

The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement represents one of Africa's most ambitious mobility regimes, yet everyday realities of conflict, border securitisation, and state sovereignty routinely undermine its practical operation. This article examines the disjunction between the legal promise of free movement and the political and social conditions that constrain mobility in West Africa. Drawing on African philosophy, political theory, and migration studies, it argues that movement in the region operates less as an enforceable right than as a contingent condition shaped by insecurity, inherited borders, and state interests. Using critical philosophical analysis of regional legal instruments and scholarly literature, the study shows how migration governance simultaneously affirms regional unity and reproduces forms of exclusion. It concludes by proposing a normative re-orientation of mobility understood not merely as physical relocation but as a claim to dignity, belonging, and political recognition. Framing movement as an ethical and political demand rather than an administrative concession offers a pathway for rethinking regional integration beyond formal commitments toward substantive inclusion.

Keywords: African philosophy; borders; displacement; ECOWAS; free movement

Conflits, Déplacements et Paradoxe de la Libre Circulation en Afrique de l'Ouest

Résumé

Le Protocole de la CEDEAO relatif à la libre circulation constitue l'un des régimes de mobilité les plus ambitieux d'Afrique. Pourtant, les réalités quotidiennes des conflits, de la sécurisation des frontières et de la souveraineté étatique en compromettent régulièrement l'application. Cet article examine le décalage entre la promesse juridique de la libre circulation et les conditions politiques et sociales qui la limitent en Afrique de l'Ouest. S'appuyant sur la philosophie africaine, la théorie politique et les études migratoires, il soutient que la circulation dans la région relève moins d'un droit exécutoire que d'une condition contingente, façonnée par l'insécurité, les frontières héritées et les intérêts étatiques. À travers une analyse philosophique critique des instruments juridiques régionaux et de la littérature spécialisée, l'étude montre comment la gouvernance des migrations affirme simultanément l'unité régionale et reproduit des formes d'exclusion. Elle propose en conclusion une réorientation normative de la mobilité, appréhendée non seulement comme un déplacement physique, mais aussi comme une revendication de dignité, d'appartenance et de reconnaissance politique. Envisager la mobilité comme une exigence éthique et politique plutôt que comme une concession administrative ouvre la voie à une refonte de l'intégration régionale, au-delà des engagements formels, en vue d'une inclusion réelle.

Mots-clés : philosophie africaine ; frontières ; déplacement de population ; CEDEAO ; libre circulation

INTRODUCTION

The question of free movement within West Africa is both a political project and a lived reality shaped by histories of colonial boundaries, regional cooperation, and ongoing crises of displacement. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment in 1979 with the ambitious aim of facilitating the unhindered circulation of people, goods, and ideas across member states¹. On paper, this legal framework embodies a profound commitment to regional integration, echoing broader global discourses that link mobility to freedom, development, and dignity. In practice, however, the implementation of this protocol reveals a series of tensions between aspiration and actuality²: border closures, xenophobic sentiments, security crackdowns, and the pressures of conflict-driven migration continue to disrupt the promise of a borderless region³.

Philosophically, free movement in West Africa cannot be reduced to a question of policy efficiency or economic rationality. Rather, it speaks to deeper questions of human freedom, the ethics of belonging, and the dialectic between mobility and constraint. Freedom of movement is often cast as a universal right, grounded in notions of autonomy and human dignity. Yet, in contexts marked by forced displacement, restrictive migration regimes, and political contestations over identity, this right is unevenly distributed and perpetually fragile. For many West Africans, mobility is not an expression of self-determination, but a necessity born of violence, poverty, or environmental degradation.

This paper seeks to critically interrogate the realities of free movement in West Africa from a theoretical and philosophical standpoint. It argues that free movement must be understood not only as a legal-political arrangement but also as an existential condition that reveals the complex interplay between freedom, vulnerability, and displacement. Drawing on traditions of African philosophy, postcolonial thought, and migration theory, the analysis foregrounds the ways in which the West African experience unsettles Eurocentric assumptions about borders, sovereignty, and human agency. By situating empirical realities within a conceptual frame, the study opens space for

¹ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), *Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment* (Lagos: ECOWAS, 1979).

² Hamadou, Temedt. 2020. "Free Movement of Persons in West Africa under the Strain of COVID-19." *American Journal of International Law* 114 (4): 738–44

³ Aniche, A. T., Iwuoha, V. C., & Isike, C. (2022). Whither the ECOWAS free movement protocols? *Political Geography*, 96, 102588.

rethinking what it means to be free in a region where mobility is both a promise and a peril.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

1. Examine the contradiction between ECOWAS mobility law and the lived experience of displacement in West Africa.
2. Interpret migration governance through African philosophical conceptions of dignity, belonging, and relational identity.
3. Develop a conceptual account of free movement as an ethical and political category beyond legal entitlement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical methodology grounded in **critical analysis**. Rather than employing empirical fieldwork, the research examines migration through systematic engagement with philosophical texts, legal instruments, and academic literature on displacement and borders in West Africa. The method is designed to interrogate not only institutional frameworks but also the ethical and political assumptions that structure migration discourse in the region.

Primary materials include regional policy documents such as the **ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment**, alongside African Union migration frameworks and international reports on displacement. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic literature in African philosophy, political theory, and migration studies. Textual analysis is applied to these materials to identify conceptual tensions between legal commitments to mobility and the lived realities of displacement, insecurity, and exclusion. Critical analysis guides the interpretation of these sources through three analytical dimensions. First, the study undertakes **conceptual clarification** by examining key categories such as free movement, sovereignty, displacement, and belonging. Second, it employs **normative evaluation** to assess the ethical implications of restrictive migration practices within African philosophical traditions that emphasise dignity, hospitality, and communal personhood. Third, it conducts **contextual interpretation** by situating migration policies within historical and socio-political conditions, particularly the continuing influence of colonial borders and postcolonial state formation.

The study does not seek statistical generalisation but aims for theoretical depth and philosophical rigour. Validity is achieved through coherence of argument, engagement with authoritative texts, and internal consistency of interpretation. This approach enables a critical understanding of migration as both a political process and a moral condition within contemporary West Africa.

Analytical plausibility is strengthened through triangulation across legal texts, historical scholarship, and philosophical sources, ensuring claims are grounded in convergent lines of interpretation.

RESULTS

The analysis yields conceptual rather than statistical findings. These results articulate tensions between normative ideals and lived realities and clarify how mobility operates simultaneously as promise and constraint.

1. *Freedom versus Necessity*

While the ECOWAS Protocol envisions mobility as an expression of **freedom**, many forms of movement in West Africa are driven by **necessity** rather than choice. The displacement of populations from northern Nigeria due to Boko Haram insurgency or from the Sahel due to insecurity illustrates mobility under compulsion⁴. Here, movement cannot be equated with freedom; it is instead a manifestation of vulnerability, challenging simplistic notions that mobility is inherently liberating.

Table 1. Estimated Number of Displaced Persons in Selected West African States (2023)

Country	Displaced Population (IDPs + Refugees)	Primary Drivers
Nigeria	1.2 million+	Boko Haram insurgency, herder-farmer conflict
Burkina Faso	2.0 million+	Jihadist insurgency, communal violence
Mali	400,000+	Armed groups, instability
Niger	370,000+	Cross-border conflict, desertification

Source: UNHCR (2024); IOM (2023).

⁴ Idemudia, Uwafiokun, and Klaus Boehnke (2023). "Insecurity, Forced Displacement and Migration Dynamics in the Sahel." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 61 (2): 199–219.

The data therefore indicate that “free” movement frequently takes the form of compelled mobility, structured by risk and survival rather than autonomous choice.

2. *Mobility versus Exclusion*

Free movement is celebrated in regional discourse as a marker of integration, yet practices such as Nigeria’s 2019–2020 border closure reveal the persistent primacy of **national sovereignty** over regional commitments⁵. Similarly, the case of Côte d’Ivoire demonstrates how economic reliance on migrant labour can coexist with xenophobic exclusion. These examples underscore the paradox that mobility may simultaneously open and foreclose avenues of belonging.

3. *Belonging versus Displacement*

The promise of ECOWAS is not merely about physical mobility but about fostering a sense of **regional citizenship**. However, political and social exclusions often produce the opposite effect. Migrant workers in Côte d’Ivoire, despite decades of contribution, faced exclusionary narratives that questioned their legitimacy, this demonstrates how claims to rights depend on political membership rather than mere presence⁶. In such contexts, movement does not produce belonging but instead entrenches **displacement and alienation**. This aligns with findings that mobility does not automatically translate into belonging in West Africa⁷.

4. *Normative Ideals versus Lived Realities*

The legal framework of ECOWAS, with its three-phase vision of free movement⁸, represents a normative ideal of integration. Yet the uneven implementation of the protocol highlights a profound gap between aspiration and practice. This disjuncture reveals how legal and policy frameworks alone are insufficient to guarantee meaningful freedom of movement without addressing the structural inequalities, insecurities, and political dynamics that shape mobility on the ground.

⁵ Aniche, Alexander T., Victor C. Iwuoha, and Christopher Isike. 2022. “Whither the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocols? Pandemic Nationalism, Borders, and Migration in West Africa.” *Political Geography* 96: 102588.

⁶ Arendt, Hannah. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

⁷ Schöffberger, Irene. 2022. “Migration, Mobility and the Crisis of Belonging in West Africa.” *African Affairs* 121 (484): 1–22.

⁸ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS 1979; ECOWAS 2020)

Table 2. Phases of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol and Implementation Gaps

ECOWAS Phase	Protocol	Legal Provisions	Implementation Reality
Phase I (Right of Entry, 1979)		Visa-free entry for 90 days	Inconsistent enforcement, border harassment
Phase II (Right of Residence)		Residence rights for migrants	Limited recognition, bureaucratic barriers
Phase III (Right of Establishment)		Right to establish businesses/professions	Rarely implemented, strong state resistance

Source: ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement (1979, 1985, 1990)

This disjuncture reveals how legal and policy frameworks alone are insufficient to guarantee meaningful freedom of movement without addressing the structural inequalities, insecurities, and political dynamics that shape mobility on the ground⁹.

5. *Regional lessons for Global Migration Debate*

The West African case complicates dominant global narratives that often frame migration as a “crisis” afflicting the Global North. Instead, it demonstrates that **mobility is a constitutive feature of life** in many parts of the Global South. This challenges Eurocentric perspectives and calls for a rethinking of migration not as an exception or emergency but as a **normative condition of human existence**. West Africa thus reframes migration as a constitutive feature of social life rather than an episodic emergency. This perspective unsettles Eurocentric crisis framings and repositions mobility as a normal condition of human existence, with implications for how sovereignty and borders are theorised.

DISCUSSION

The ECOWAS commitment to free movement stands as a landmark in African regionalism, yet its practical operation reveals a widening gap between law and governance. Border controls, security practices, and informal exclusions routinely disrupt legal commitments to openness. Free movement thereby appears less as a stable right than as a conditional privilege shaped by political calculation, ethnicized suspicion, and economic interest.

⁹ Hamadou, Temedt. 2020. “Free Movement of Persons in West Africa under the Strain of COVID-19.” *American Journal of International Law* 114 (4): 738–44.

Conflict is decisive in this contradiction. Insurgency, environmental stress, and political instability compel movement while simultaneously narrowing safe and lawful pathways. In moments of crisis, national security eclipses regional commitment. Displaced people thus encounter a paradoxical order in which they are formally entitled to move yet politically rendered suspects.

From an African philosophical perspective, this situation raises deeper questions about belonging and political recognition. Traditional philosophical accounts of African communal life emphasise relational identity, hospitality, and ethical responsibility to the other. Yet contemporary borders impose an opposing logic of exclusion. Migrants are increasingly framed as security risks rather than as individuals seeking continuity of social life and protection, and thus further reflect broader logics of state power that expose certain populations to heightened vulnerability¹⁰. Hence, this shift signifies not merely a policy limitation but a philosophical fracture between declared African unity and practised political closure.

Contemporary controls also extend colonial spatial logics. Borders imposed without social consent continue to structure mobility. The endurance of these lines illustrates how postcolonial sovereignty inherits and reproduces colonial technologies of separation, now legitimised through security discourse.

ECOWAS' institutional capacity remains uneven. Protocols exist, but enforcement tools and sanctions are weak. Selective compliance allows domestic politics to override regional obligation, turning law into symbolism and integration into performance.

Reduced to policy arithmetic, migration governance misses its ethical core. African philosophies of relational personhood recast movement as recognition and continuity of social life rather than administrative permission. Within this horizon, mobility functions as an ethical claim to inclusion.

Finally, the ECOWAS mobility framework reveals a broader tension between Pan-African aspiration and political fragmentation. Such aspiration echoes long-standing Pan-African visions of continental unity.¹¹ While the idea of Africa without borders remains politically celebrated, its institutional translation remains incomplete. Regional integration continues to operate symbolically, while national systems of

¹⁰ Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.

¹¹ Nkrumah, Kwame. 1963. *Africa Must Unite*. London: Heinemann

exclusion deepen. This contradiction weakens the transformative potential of African unity and reduces it to a rhetorical performance.

Reframing mobility as an ethical commitment rather than a bureaucratic concession opens political possibilities. Grounding regional integration in dignity and belonging provides a path from declarative unity to lived inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that although ECOWAS formally endorses free movement, the political conditions of conflict, securitisation, and inherited borders repeatedly negate its realisation. Mobility, therefore persists not as a reliable right but as a contingent opportunity shaped by security logics and state discretion.

A philosophical lens clarifies what policy alone cannot: movement is inseparable from dignity, belonging, and recognition. African traditions of relational identity expose the tension between proclaimed unity and practised exclusion, revealing the ethical stakes of migration governance. Colonial spatial inheritances and institutional fragility further explain why legal commitments remain weak without political will and enforcement.

For free movement to become substantive rather than symbolic, ECOWAS and member states must treat mobility as justice, not charity. Only by anchoring integration in ethical commitment and institutional resolve can regional mobility shift from deferred promise to lived reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on these findings, several recommendations can be advanced for both philosophy and policy:

1. **Deepen African-Centred Theorising on Mobility**

Scholars should continue to articulate migration frameworks rooted in African intellectual traditions, moving beyond dependency on European or global security paradigms.

A stronger dialogue between philosophy and policy studies can generate new categories for understanding belonging and displacement in African contexts.

2. **Reinvigorate Pan-African Commitments**

ECOWAS and the African Union should return to Nkrumah's vision of integration, treating free movement not as an optional policy tool but as a political and ethical imperative.

Strengthening supranational enforcement mechanisms could help prevent unilateral actions, such as Nigeria's border closure, from undermining regional commitments.

3. **Foster Inclusive Conceptions of Belonging**

States should complement legal frameworks for mobility with social policies that address xenophobia, promote inclusion, and recognise long-settled migrants as part of the national fabric.

Arendt's insight that rights depend on membership underscores the need for policies that secure both legal status and social belonging.

4. **Humanise Security Responses to Mobility**

While conflict and terrorism in the Sahel present real security challenges, securitisation should not come at the expense of migrants' rights and survival.

Mbembe's critique of necropolitics calls for balancing sovereignty with humanitarian responsibility, ensuring that border practices safeguard life rather than expose it to unnecessary risk.

5. **Embed Mobility in Communitarian Ethics**

Drawing on Wiredu, policymakers should recognise that mobility is not simply an individual right but part of sustaining community life and interdependence.

Community-based dialogues, cross-border cultural programmes, and shared development initiatives can reinforce the moral underpinnings of free movement.

6. **Promote Epistemic Autonomy in Migration Policy**

Following Hountondji, migration research and policy design should be led by African institutions and scholars, ensuring that frameworks emerge from African realities rather than donor priorities.

This requires investing in regional research centres, supporting local data collection, and cultivating homegrown theories of mobility.

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