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Blinded by security

Reflections on the hardening of
migratory policies in central Sahara

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
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Abstract

This working paper offers a local perspective on the dynamic nature and recent transformations of the Saharan migration system, showing how such policies affect those who live or travel through these areas. An illustration of the historical significance of intra-African migration systems for the economic development of North-West Africa is followed by an analysis of new patterns of migrations that have emerged since the 1990s throughout central Sahara, and by a critical appraisal of media and government fears about human trafficking and smuggling in the region. A brief outline of the externally driven legal and institutional frameworks that govern the movements of people in this area is provided, followed by a discussion of how people succeed in crossing the borders between Niger, Algeria and Libya, highlighting how state representatives deal with (and partake in) local migration systems. The various strategies adopted by migrants and facilitating agents to cope with hardened migration policies are presented in light of their possible local impacts in central Sahara.

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Keywords

migratory policy, intra-african migration, border, trade, development, Sahara, Niger

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Contents

Introduction	4
1 Intra-African migration systems and economic development: the case of central Sahara ...	5
2 Overlapping institutional frameworks: an analysis of migrants' rights.....	6
2.1 The limited efficiency of international commitments.....	7
2.2 National legal frameworks	9
3 Crossing Saharan borders: from the unofficial to the clandestine	10
3.1 How to get from Niger into Algeria	10
3.2 Niger to Libya: variations on the theme of illegality	11
4 The security of some is not necessarily the security of all	13
Bibliography	16

Introduction

The central Sahara region has a long-standing history of migratory movements as a mode of livelihoods. Movements from the Sahel to Algeria, and later on to Libya, for seasonal employment emerged in the 1950s; and by the early 1990s concerns over migratory movements in this region became translated into an important arena of competing interests over livelihood and security. Despite human-made obstacles in the form of predatory practices of local representatives of the Nigerien state on the one hand, and the hardening of North African migration policies on the other, tens of thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa travel each year to North Africa via the city of Agadez in northern Niger. These migratory movements have become an important factor in international relations in multiple directions: between sub-Saharan governments and between North African and European governments. The emphasis placed by the media and by European and North African governments on migrants who intend to travel on to Europe has meant that virtually all sub-Saharans travelling in the Sahara are redefined as intercontinental economic migrants. In a context of hardening identity politics and xenophobia, such an emphasis strengthens the fear of an illusory 'threat of migration' to the northern shore of the Mediterranean, while obscuring the complexity and diversity of people's movements within the Sahara itself.

Yet this emphasis works hand in hand with the idea of 'common' management of migration flows between Africa and Europe as expressed in the re-launch of the '5 plus 5 dialogue' in Lisbon in 2001 and the recurrent declaration by European governments that they intend to 'step up and make more efficient the fight against illegal migration, both in transit and in sending countries.'¹ The notion of 'common management' focuses primarily on security measures and border protection. This paper demonstrates how the tightening of European migration policies has led to the externalization of the control of migrants, by moving security checks southward from Europe's and Africa's Mediterranean shores to the Sahara. Through bilateral or multilateral agreements, European governments have gradually 'encouraged' their North African counterparts to increase the surveillance of their borders, on land and sea, in an attempt to detect all kinds of trans-Saharan migration as early as possible. A rhetoric of fear and control has contributed to a distorted understanding of the equivalence established between trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean migrations, built on an inaccurate and superficial appreciation of realities on the ground.

Based on long-term fieldwork, and focusing on how such policies practically affect those who live or travel through these areas, this paper offers a local perspective on the dynamic nature and the recent transformations of the Saharan migration system.² It will first illustrate the historical significance of intra-African migration systems to the economic development of northwest Africa. This is followed by an analysis of new patterns of migrations that have emerged since the 1990s throughout the Central Sahara, and by a critical appraisal of media and government fears about human trafficking and smuggling in the region. A brief outline of the externally driven legal and institutional frameworks that govern the movements of

¹ Ministerial Conference on migration in the Western Mediterranean, Tunis, 16-17 October 2002.

² The following text is based on more than two years of fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2009. I thank Judith Scheele and Thanh-Dam Truong for their comments and suggestions.

people in this area is provided, followed by a discussion of how people succeed in crossing the borders between Niger, Algeria and Libya, highlighting how state representatives really deal with (and partake in) local migration systems. The various strategies adopted by migrants and facilitating agents to cope with hardened migration policies are presented in the light of their possible local impacts in the Central Sahara.

1 Intra-African migration systems and economic development: the case of central Sahara

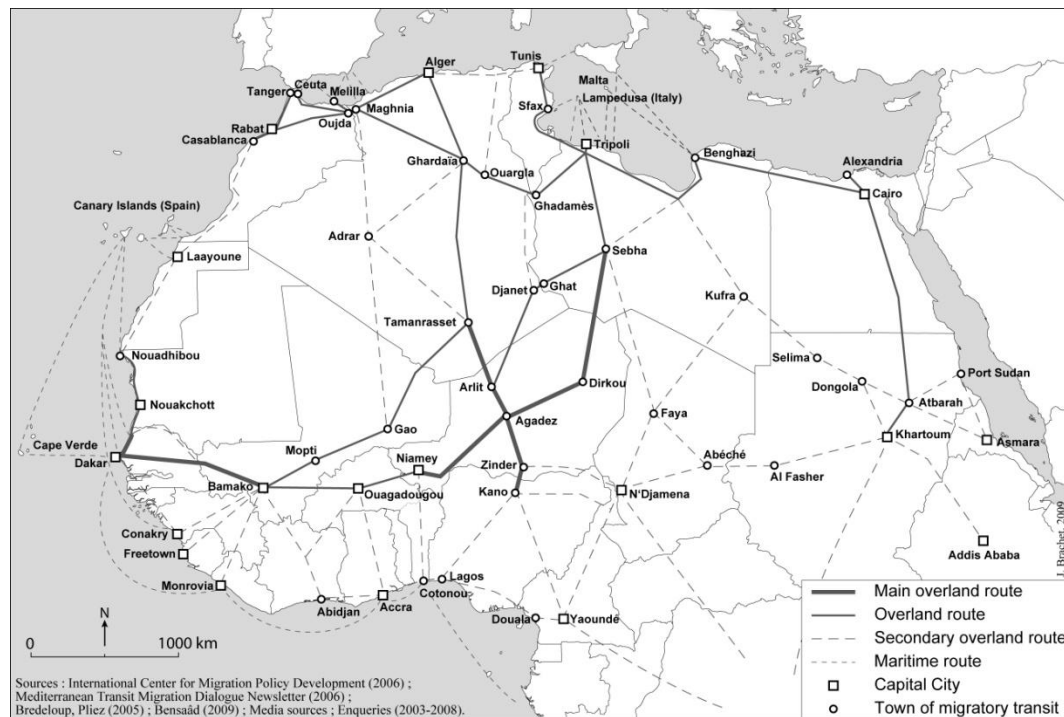
Trade and travel within the Sahara and across it goes back to the dawn of history. Yet in the Central Sahara, economic migration as we know it today mostly took off at the end of the 1950s, notably with the arrival of low-skilled Sahelian workers in In Ekker and Reggane in southern Algeria, where the French had set up nuclear bases. During the 1960s, following Algeria's independence (1962) and Libya's sudden wealth due to the discovery and exploitation of oil deposits, the leaders of these two states set up development policies for the Saharan regions of their countries. The large-scale development projects that followed created high demand for low-skilled labour, notably in the agricultural sector, that could not be met locally or even nationally. Thus foreign labour was needed. Meanwhile, serious droughts in the Sahel (1960 to 1973) led to famine and a severe crisis of pastoral economies. This accelerated and often also instigated migration to the Algerian and Libyan Sahara. At first, this migration mostly involved the relatively young men from the Sahelian and Saharan zones of the states of the Sahel belt, and until the 1980s, the numbers of people migrating and the organization of their movements changed only gradually. During the 1990s, however, migrations increased, including more and more migrants, from an ever wider range of countries of origin.

On their way to the Maghreb, migrants spend some time in the villages and towns of the Nigerien Sahara that they travel through. In this way, they have participated for several decades in the economic vitality of the Sahara. Cities such as Sebha in Libya or Tamanrasset in Algeria have been shaped by foreign migrants, as much with respect to urban development and economic activities, as with regards to the sociocultural practices that they allow (Nadi 2007, Pliez 2003, Spiga 2005). In Agadez, a Nigerien town that, with a population of about 100,000 inhabitants is of a comparable size, these transformations are more discreet. They are mainly visible in the development of transport companies, the construction or refurbishment of temporary lodgings, and in particular by the injection of ready money into the local economy. As I have shown elsewhere (Brachet 2009a), migrants further introduce several billion francs CFA every year into the local economy through their participation in economic activities as well as through the taxes that they are obliged to pay to local officials.

In a smaller village such as Dirkou, with less than 10,000 inhabitants, changes are even more visible. Over the last few years, this small oasis, a contact point between the Nigerien and Libyan migration networks, has grown considerably. A new district named *Sabon Gari* has developed, completely devoted to the transport of people and goods between Niger and Libya. Today, it is more densely populated than the old village. The resulting international road traffic has become indispensable both for the export of salt and dates from the oases of north-east Niger to the south, and for the import of basic supplies. Caravan trade has thereby become secondary in most oases situated near the main tracks. Trade and exchange

on various levels are interwoven: regional and cross-border trade that supplies people in the north of Niger with foodstuffs and some manufactured goods have been revitalized by trans-Saharan migrants and their demand for transport. Thus, many freight carriers supplement their earnings by escorting migrants on all or part of their journey. Such mixed transport of migrants and goods, that tends to be very profitable but that has become less common because of the hardening of migration policies, shows most clearly the long-standing interdependence of trade and migration in the Sahara.

Map: International migration routes to and through the Sahara



2 Overlapping institutional frameworks: an analysis of migrants' rights

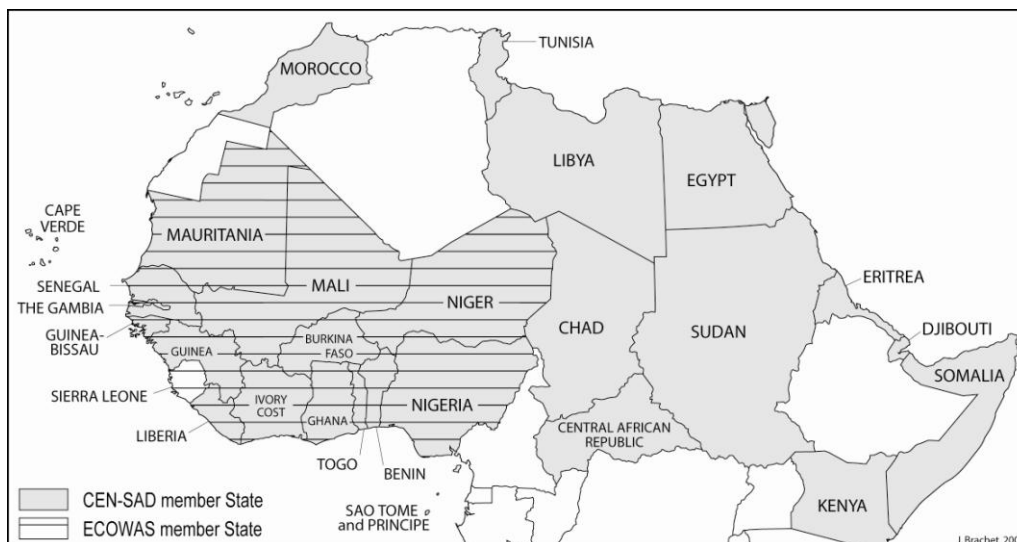
Analysis of policies and legislation on international migration reveals a tension between state sovereignty and migrants' rights (Dauvergne 2008), as international migration has been treated in two different and interdependent ways. On the one hand, there are principles and norms that derive from the notion of state sovereignty (the right to protect national borders, to admit or to refuse foreign nationals, and so on), and that can be explained on the level of relations between states. On the other hand, there are notions derived from what could be called the human rights of people who migrate, that are recognized on the international level in various conventions, that do not necessarily deal with the question of migration as such (such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights, or the right to work). The diversity of texts (laws or non-binding conventions) and their various levels of applicability (national, bilateral or international) makes the interpretation of the rights of migrants extremely complex. This is certainly the case with the Central Saharan migration system, where various institutional and legal frameworks that protect migrants and govern international migrations overlap.

2.1 The limited efficiency of international commitments

In addition to the UN conventions that they have ratified, Central Saharan governments are implicated in several supranational institutional frameworks concerned with migration. Situated in the heartland of Saharan migration, Niger belongs to various inter-governmental organisations that aim to further liberate movement between nationals of member states, such as the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The principle of free movement between states that are members of the CEN-SAD is regularly emphasized by African leaders since it was cited in the constitutional charter drafted in 1998 in Syrte, birthplace of the Libyan president, Mu'ammar Ghaddafi, who was its driving force. In 2000, the Libyan government temporarily abolished the necessity to obtain a visa for nationals of member states of the CEN-SAD employed in Libya. In 2007, however, visas were re-established for all foreign workers, with the exception of nationals from Arab countries (Perrin 2008). Nevertheless, even at times when migration from African countries was tolerated or even encouraged, migrants were generally denied full legal status, as their arrival on Libyan territory is only rarely legalized by the Libyan authorities. In this way, the Libyan government attempts to maintain a minimum of legitimacy vis-à-vis its African partners, while deporting foreigners by force. Yet nobody is fooled, as a Nigerien journalist noted after the deportation of several hundreds of his co-nationals: 'this radical deportation of sub-Saharaners seriously questions Ghaddafi's interpretation of the African Union (UA) and the Community of Sahelo-Saharan countries'.³

Map: CEN-SAD and ECOWAS member States



³ *Le Républicain*, 7-13.10.2004 (www.republicain-niger.com).

After the end of the UN embargo against Libya in 1999, the Libyan government, in need of international respectability, found that the issue of migration could constitute an important stake in international negotiations. Border control and the deportation of illegal migrants have become central elements in the relationship between Libya and the European Union. By agreeing to increase its border controls and to accept illegal migrants caught in Italy and who are supposed to have travelled via Libya, Colonel Ghaddafi has officially recognized Libya as a transit country for African migrants on their way to Europe – in exchange for considerable development aid. Nonetheless, Libya, like Morocco and Algeria, refused to sign an agreement of readmission proposed by the European Union in the name of all of its member states.⁴

‘We don’t need a visa in Africa, we are at home here, we can travel just like that, like you in Europe, you can go from one country to the next with the Schengen visa.’ (Congolesse migrant, interviewed in Agadez, 15 April 2003)

While the principle of free movement proposed by the CEN-SAD remains an intention and not much else, the ECOWAS has indeed implemented a protocol of free movement, ratified by all of its member states since 1979. This means that many migrants can travel to Niger, that is to say, all the way up to the southern borders of Algeria and Libya, without any administrative problems. However, irrespective of the migrants’ nationalities (ECOWAS member-states or non-member-states) and affiliated travel documents, the conditions of travel are all the same: they can all travel around Niger, but they are all taxed in an illegal fashion at every security checkpoint (Brachet 2009a). Thus, although all migrants state that it is ‘easy to travel without a visa’ as there is no need for official papers to cross borders, they inevitably have to pay a ‘tip’ to get through the checkpoint. In other words, instead of paying a visa fee to the state, they pay a fee to border controllers.

In January 2008, the heads of state of the ECOWAS adopted a ‘common approach to migration’, that aims to improve their management of migratory movements within and between regions. Largely inspired by the Euro-African meetings of Rabat and Tripoli in 2006 about migration and development, and therefore deeply influenced by the European representations of West African migrations, this text clearly states that the fight against ‘illegal emigration’ is one of its main objectives. This legal condemnation of individuals based on their alleged intentions rather than on their actions is not only absurd but also overrides article 13.2 of the universal declaration of human rights, which states that ‘everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own’, showing the violence iniquitous in such attempts to control migration. In addition to the obvious criticism of the notions used, the principle of combating ‘illegal emigration’ shows profound changes in ECOWAS policies. ECOWAS no longer aims merely to facilitate free movement of people within its territory, but it now also attempts to control migrations directed beyond this territory. Meanwhile, European rhetoric and fears of migrants are transferred to West African elites, who no longer consider migration primarily as a means of development, but instead agree to participate in the fight against illegal emigration to Europe.

⁴ Panapress, 11.03.2009 (www.panapress.com).

2.2 National legal frameworks

National legal frameworks do not necessarily reflect the *de facto* migration policies of Saharan states, as the gap between political discourses, international commitments, national legislation and the practical implication of state representatives on the ground can be considerable. Nonetheless, recent legal reforms in Algeria and Libya reflect changed perceptions of, and reactions to, migration that are clearly different from the situation in Niger.

For several years, legal changes in the Maghreb have been the result of a 'transposition' of European migration laws, and seem to correspond to Euro-Mediterranean agreements rather than to Sahelo-Saharan realities. Algeria, which is not part of the international organizations mentioned above, has long seen itself as exclusively a sending country. Foreigners can enter the national territory and travel freely after obtaining a standard consular visa. Although on the ground, Algeria has fought against illegal immigration for several decades, the Algerian government established an official migration policy only in 2008, by drafting a convention that fixes the conditions of entry, stay and travel of foreign nationals, and that in turn is based on an ordinance dating from 1966 (Perrin 2009). This new legislation increases sanctions against illegal migrants and those who helped them enter the country, live there, or leave it (Zeghib 2009). In 2005, a similar law was promulgated in Libya, followed in 2007 by the obligation, for all foreign nationals apart from those from Arab countries, to obtain a visa. As a founding country and driving force of the CEN-SAD, erstwhile proponent of Pan-African solidarity and free movement, Libya now takes an active part in the general toughening of North African migration policies.

In Niger, international migration is not considered as a problem that needs to be solved, and no explicit policy on migration has developed. From a legal point of view, beyond the international agreements ratified by the government and implemented with more or less success, only one law about the status of refugees is concerned with the presence of foreign nationals in the national territory (law 97-17, promulgated on 20 June 1997). There is, in fact, a lack of migration policy and official guidelines, and a passive resistance to pressure from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the European Union (EU), who want to co-opt West African states in the fight against 'illegal migration' that is supposedly primarily directed to Europe. (The IOM and the EU have successfully co-opted North African governments by exerting such pressure.) (Gnisci 2008).

However, the impact of state involvement in migration depends less on official policy than on the ways in which policy is translated into practices on the ground. Hence, although Niger has no real migration policy (apart from specific inter-state agreements on free movement), travel within the country depends on the good will of state security agents. In addition, the recent tightening of Algerian and Libyan migration policies also hampers the operation of migration networks. Together, these developments change the ways in which migrants can travel in the Sahara, especially with regards to the southern borders of Algeria and Libya, where 'illegal migration' has become much more dangerous and risky than in the southern Sahara.

3 Crossing Saharan borders: from the unofficial to the clandestine

3.1 How to get from Niger into Algeria

Algeria has been a country of seasonal migration for people from the Sahel looking for employment in agriculture, construction works and increasingly also in other sectors. To many sub-Saharan Africans, Algeria is nothing more than a station on their way to Europe that can easily become a country of retention for those who do not have the means or possibilities to continue further north. In their different forms, migrations to and through Algeria are a vital part of the current transformation of this country, and especially of the economic development of its Saharan regions, although nationwide, unemployment is on the rise and non-qualified labour little in demand (Fargues 2005).

Unofficial immigration, long limited to the south and hence of little concern to most Algerians, has attracted government attention since the early 1990s, leading to an inquiry by the National Bureau of Statistics whose results remain unpublished (Spiga 2005: 88). Subsequently, as migrants started to travel and settle throughout the national territory, the issue of migrants started to attract general attention, as reflected in the national press, where sub-Saharan migrants are often represented as the source of all evil. Such reports indirectly supported outbursts of xenophobic violence, such as in Oran in September 2005, when local residents 'took over the hotels used by Black Africans to "send them home". Their personal belongings were thrown out into the street and burned' (*Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 6 September 2005).

Such outbursts of violence against foreigners by civilians fortunately remain exceptional. On the national level, the Algerian government has had to cope for several years now with European pressures concerning the management of migratory flows. As a result, the Algerian government approaches the question of migration today as a problem, and publicly states its readiness to fight against unofficial migration towards and through its territory (Labdelaoui 2005). Yet increased border controls and checks within the country have by no means stopped migration towards Algeria; it has merely changed the ways in which migrants attempt to cross the border between Algeria and Niger.

For nationals of countries south of the Sahara, to obtain a visa in one of the Algerian consulates in the Sahel is virtually impossible. Those who attempt to do so in their country of origin or in the Algerian consulate in Agadez are questioned about the reasons for their journey, and have to show documents that are generally impossible to obtain (an official letter of sponsorship, or a hotel reservation, a bank statement, insurance...). Furthermore, if their application is successful, the visa granted only allows a short stay on Algerian territory. Hence, at the border post of In Guezzam, only two kinds of migrants tend to enter Algeria legally: students or professional athletes who are hosted by an Algerian university or club, and nationals of countries who have an agreement of free movement with Algeria, such as Guinea and Mali.

Thus, most migrants enter Algeria illegally. While, some years ago, certain Algerian smugglers could still corrupt Algerian police officers in In Guezzam in order to take illegal migrants through on the official track, this is no longer possible. All illegal migrants have to cross the border secretly, relying on migration networks that take them directly from Agadez and Arlit to Tamanrasset or Djanet.

It takes one or two days to reach Tamanrasset from Niger, depending on the place of departure and the track chosen. One or two days during which the up to thirty migrants packed on each four-wheel-drive pick-up hardly ever get off the truck. As the ground is flat for most of the way, these trucks are easily seen, even from far away, hence drivers prefer to avoid stopping, if only for food and rest. Trucks stop several kilometres before reaching their destination, to unload their passengers who continue on foot.

To journey to Djanet takes longer, three to five days, and is more dangerous. First of all, as for all illegal border crossing in North Africa, migrants risk getting caught. The efforts made by the Algerian government to stop illegal border crossings were mainly concentrated in this region (*El Watan*, 20 April 2006), where they were indirectly supported by the US as part of their wider fight against international terrorism and especially against organizations present in central Sahara (such as Al-Qâ'ida in the Islamic Maghreb). Then there is the constant risk of vehicle breakdowns that can become lethal to migrants if they cannot be repaired there and then. As drivers rarely take the same route twice, they never know whether they will be found by another truck that can help them before it is too late: they usually only carry water for several days. Hence most journeys on this route are undertaken in convoys. 'To go to Djanet, you never go on your own: you go through the desert, if a truck on its own breaks down there, you are going to die. You need two or three cars... sometimes even ten Toyotas, loaded with foreigners' (Tuareg people smuggler, Agadez, November 2004).

There are dangers that are more particular to this route, namely those of robbery and abandonment. Trucks carrying migrants are often attacked in this area, which is remote and badly controlled by the Algerian and Nigerien security forces. Local robbers know that each day, tens of migrants come this way, who have enough money to finance their trip. All they have to do is wait at certain key points on the road, such as one of the few wells in the area. Robbers and smugglers sometimes collaborate to stage an 'attack' in a spot they agreed on beforehand, and then share the loot. In these attacks, passengers are robbed of all their money and objects of value (watches, jewellery), sometimes with much violence. Yet most migrants finally do arrive at their destination. The greatest danger facing them is to be abandoned by their drivers in the middle of the desert. In fact, certain drivers leave their passengers between the mountains of Aïr, Ahaggar and Tassili n Ajjer, telling them that within a couple of hours of walking they will reach Djanet. Although such behaviour is publicly condemned by all members of migration networks, whatever their role and wherever they are based, it is far from exceptional.

3.2 Niger to Libya: variations on the theme of illegality

Sub-Saharan migrants cross the border between Libya and Niger in ever-changing ways, depending on variations in Libyan migration policies. At times open, at times partly or totally closed, the *de facto* status of this border is constantly modified by the Libyan authorities, to the point where transporters in the border area base their activities on concrete practical possibilities rather than on official decrees. Therefore, while in the eastern Sahara the closure of the border between Libya and the Sudan in 2003 has put an end to trans-border movement (Drozd and Pliez 2005), this is not true of the Nigero-Libyan connection, where traffic has never quite come to a halt, even when the border was effectively closed.

Apart from the few migrants who travel legally, that is to say who own a passport with a Libyan visa, most people who travel do not have the necessary documents. Hence, the

Saharan migration networks have developed two ways of crossing the border, to cope with Libyan vacillations concerning immigration. On the one hand, migrants cross the border on the official track, relying on the tolerance of the Libyan government and the possibility to corrupt border police at the Libyan border post at Tumo; on the other hand, people cross secretly, away from all official controls, to the intended destination. People-smuggling networks use these two kinds of border crossing, depending on whether the border has been declared closed or open by the Libyan authorities. The status of the border does not alter the fact that all border crossings are illegal: they are merely carried out in different ways. Until the early 2000s, the moments of closure never last for a long time, and most trans-border transport networks can rely on their social capital to function efficiently. Since then, at times of prohibition, personal ties with border police means that they might tolerate immigration.

Since 2002, however, the Libyan government has decided to effectively control its borders, at first in exchange for Italian support when negotiating the end of the European arms embargo (hence allowing with the provision of sufficient weaponry to Libya to survey its borders), then more generally as part of Libya's return to international diplomacy. While it remains at times possible to negotiate with border police, the latter's tolerance and readiness to 'be persuaded' has clearly diminished. Fewer and fewer people smugglers seem to have the ability to negotiate the unofficial entry of migrants into Libya. Henceforth, secrecy becomes the cheapest and the most efficient way to carry out their lucrative business. Yet risks have become greater, as, due to the lack of agreement with Libyan border police, any arrest results in imprisonment for driver and passengers, with seizure of the truck and all the goods carried. Many traders who used to carry both passengers and goods between Agadez and Sebha have thus decided to concentrate on the haulage of goods from Niger to Libya, and only rarely carry migrants and only those who have obtained the necessary paperwork, which they carefully check before departure. Passenger transport thus has become the domain of underground networks, whose drivers know the ground and its smuggling tracks extremely well.

Libya, with its wealth derived from oil, needs foreign labour in order to carry out the large-scale development projects planned by the government, and in order to staff various sectors of its economy, in particular agriculture and construction works. Hence, while Libya negotiated its comeback to international diplomacy by accepting funds for increased border controls and for retention camps for illegal migrants, the Libyan government had no qualms about openly encouraging black African migrants to come to Libya (Pliez 2004). Further signs of openness towards sub-Saharan Africans include the publicity made for the Libyan company Afriqiyah Airways, that links Tripoli and Benghazi with several African capitals, and the development of Pan-African organizations such as the CEN-SAD. These contradictions in Libyan rhetoric, depending on the times and the person talked to, and its practical application, show Ghaddafi's ambiguous position towards migration, and the difficulty of defining an African policy after the end of the embargo, independently of other geopolitical concerns.

The tightening of migration policies has led, in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, to a change in national legislation and stricter border controls and internal security checks which make travel and life for sub-Saharan migrants more and more dangerous and expensive. Detention and deportations of migrants become increasingly frequent, often in deplorable

conditions, that trample all basic principles of human rights whose advocate the European Union so passionately claims to be. The impact of these policies on the overall number of migrants seems to remain rather limited. An analysis of migrations between Niger, Algeria and Libya shows that rather, the routes and means chosen are adapted to the new circumstances, indicating the adaptability and dynamic nature of migration networks. Migrants continue to enter Libya and Algeria illegally, but increasingly also clandestinely (last fieldwork at the end of 2009). Local forms of tolerance, that tend to disappear to varying degrees in both countries, let us redirect our attention from the question of the necessary means for border surveillance to that of the willingness and of the interest displayed by local actors (political elites, state representatives, local residents) concerning the control and the restriction of trans-Saharan migrations.

Under pressure from their European neighbours, Lybia and Algeria have accepted several kinds of aids in exchange for collaboration. Sporadic arrests and collective deportations seem to correspond to ways of 'managing' the presence of foreigners in their countries, despite various international conventions, rather than to an attempt to put an end to migration altogether. In Libya even more so than in Algeria, the flagrant contradictions in official rhetoric on migration, according to the moment and the interlocutor, show the country's ambiguous position vis-à-vis (trans-)Saharan migrations. They also indicate the difficulty Libya experiences while trying to reconcile international pressures with incompatible local histories, nationalist with Pan-African logics, economic with political interests, and a Euro-Mediterranean partnership based on the control of migrations with the construction of an African Union and areas of free movement on the continent.

4 The security of some is not necessarily the security of all

Recent Euro-African meetings dealing with unofficial migration between the two continents – involving at times representatives from dozens of countries and international organizations – have declared the Sahara into a priority zone in the fight against unofficial African immigration. Yet although it is true that some migrants who arrive illegally in Spain, France or Italy have in fact crossed the Sahara, only a minority of those who travel through the Sahara continue all the way to Europe, and most people move within this region for reasons related to their livelihoods. Regional migration has long been a way of dealing with economic and climatic insecurity in the region, while seasonal labour migration is central to the region's economy. Further, contemporary migrations are indispensable in local transport, trade and supply networks, and 'transit' migrants have, by the cheap labour they provide, become an important element in local economic growth, on either side of the border. To cite but one example, the severe crisis that Niger lived through in 2005 could be met locally by enhanced regional seasonal labour migration, that generated remittances, while decreasing temporarily the demand on local food resources (Oumarou 2008). While mobility has always been part of life in the area, migration within the Sahara is increasingly one of the many strategies of diversification that are necessary for survival in the Sahel belt, especially since the political crises and subsequent economic breakdown in Côte d'Ivoire, the former regional pole of attraction.

Hence, the European and increasingly also North African tendency to conflate all forms of migrations in the Sahara with migration aimed at Europe, largely incapable of putting a halt to unofficial immigration into Europe, has a potentially devastating effect on local

economies. This tendency has been reinforced by the media and government reports or statistics of uncertain origins, thereby constructing an illusory 'threat of migration' that acts as a justification for restrictive migration policies and security measures, often under pressure from the EU. Foreigners from southern countries are construed as a problem, a risk or a menace (Valluy 2008). This is why Europe, aiming to fight against illegal migration from sub-Saharan Africa, encourages the countries of North Africa and more recently also those of the Sahel to drastically control or even to stop all Saharan migration (Perrin 2008, Rodier 2009)⁵. The EU position towards Saharan migrations contradicts its own principle of mobility within its own territory, which sees the circulation of people as a positive factor in its own process of cultural integration and economic development (Makaremi and Kobelinsky 2008, Balzacq 2007). By intervening beyond its own borders to control migratory movements into its territory, the EU disturbs ancient intra-African migration systems, which have long been an important factor of economic development in Northwest Africa, and has been historically little concern to Europe.

An approach to Saharan migration that is not based on careful studies on the ground cannot do justice to the infinite variation of migratory practices in the area, or to the role they play in human survival and livelihoods. In fact, migration systems are inherently sensitive to political changes on all levels, and need to be understood from the bottom up, at the conjunction between international pressures and policies and local realities and contingencies. Hence, in the Sahara regions of Niger, migrations have led to the establishment of very active transport companies that function within internationalised networks. They are managed on the one hand by transport agents who might still be linked to trading elites who control modern forms of commerce, and on the other hand to people of nomadic tradition who draw on their technical expertise as travellers, and act as guides or drivers. While these migrations revitalise legal and illegal trade, they also have lent new life to other kinds of activities, such as accommodation and telecommunications, as well as offering cheap labour, thereby transforming local labour markets. Through these economic activities, both formal and informal, and through the fees migrants have to pay local state representatives, migrants import a large amount of hard currency into the regional economy of Agadez (Brachet 2009a). Migration thus has to be understood as an essential and constitutive part of local economies. These effects, however, can easily be reversed, if migratory flows change direction for any political or economic reasons.

At the same time, the intensification of migrations within the Sahara has been accompanied by toughened migration policies in North Africa, and by an increase in the number of check-points on Sahara routes. Hence, far from the open and unlimited space of the free men of the desert sold by travel agencies, the Sahara is becoming increasingly 'broken up', finely combed by the various surveillance systems that hinder free movement, make it more

⁵ It is very difficult to evaluate the volume of these migratory flows because the figures produced by official state services are very approximative and often incomplete (as unofficial migrants are by definition excluded). In order to deal with this problem, researchers need to produce their own data, by attempting to quantify the flows observed, and then providing estimates according to various criteria. Comparing my own results with those of other researches, and with official reports and media sources, we can estimate the number of sub-Saharan African who cross the Mediterranean illegally each year at a few tens of thousands. This figure remains very low for any migratory flows between two continents, and in comparison with other migratory flows to Europe.

expensive and dangerous, slow it down and sometimes even manage to stop it. This break-up of Saharan space is the result of the remodelling and multiplication of acting borders, that might be stable or temporary, lines, zones or points in space, fixed or mobile. At the same time as borders are opened to let through material and immaterial goods, they are increasingly closed to inhabitants of the poorest countries, thereby officially 'putting under house arrest' most inhabitants of the African continent. Far from being a paradoxical effect of globalisation, this establishment of a worldwide hierarchy that decides the individual's right to move is on the contrary crucial to it.

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