

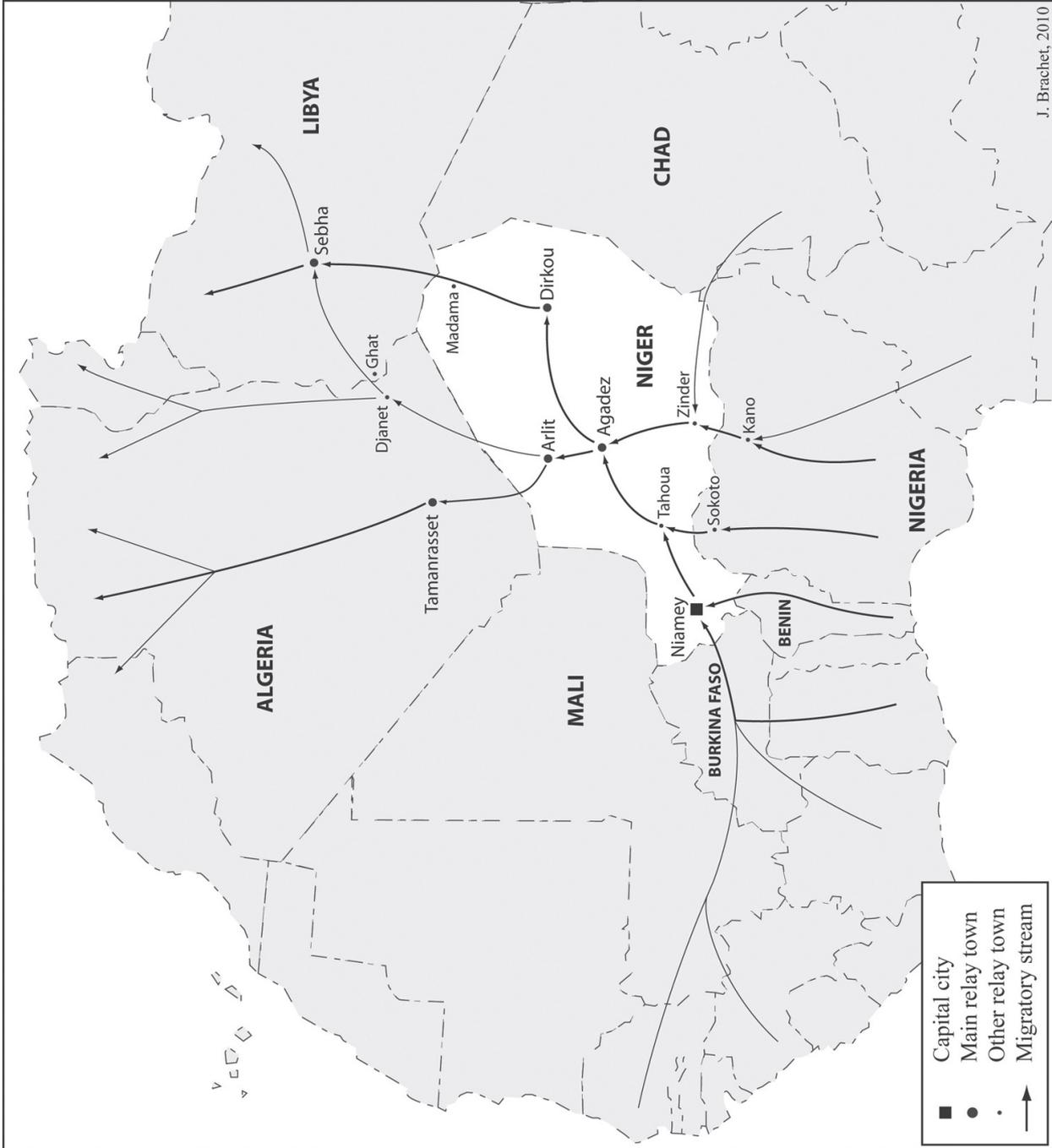
## *Chapter 5*

# **Stuck in the Desert**

## *Hampered Mobility among Transit Migrants in Northern Niger*

Julien Brachet

The Central Sahara has long been an area marked by travel and trade. Nonetheless, public transport networks only developed in the 1990s, thereby enabling and reflecting the intensification of migratory movement in the region. Ever since, tens of thousands of migrants from West and Central Africa cross Niger every year on their way to North Africa, where most of them work for a few months or several years before returning home (Brachet 2009, Bredeloup and Pliez 2005). Although at first sight, movement in and across the Sahara might appear as free and easy, when considering the experience of migrants, this general impression becomes all but relative. Indeed, various political, economic, and security factors hamper travel along trans-Saharan routes, thereby increasing the time that migrants have to spend in the towns on the way. Although some remain only a few days in the towns and oases of northern Niger, just long enough to rest and prepare for the remainder of their journey, others may be stuck for weeks or even months. These forced stopovers on the way to Algeria or Libya become central to the migrants' experience. Why and how what should be no more than a quick trip through Niger becomes more or less protracted, and to what extent is it still possible to refer to this as transit? Stuck on the fringes of the Sahara, what is the daily life of these migrants, how do they adapt to their new situation, and what are their strategies for leaving? This chapter, based on more than 30 months of field research in Niger (from 2003 to 2009),<sup>1</sup> describes the main aspects of this Saharan transit experience, in practical terms as well as with reference to the individually experienced changes in social status and sense of belonging that it engenders.



J. Brachet, 2010

Map 5.1 Main migration routes through Niger (1990–2010)



## BEING “IN TRANSIT”

### Straying Itineraries: From Mobility to Immobility in Northern Niger

Wherever they come from, Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to North Africa usually reach the edge of the Sahara quite easily. They take surfaced roads and use public transport (bush taxis or buses) common in these regions. Even when they no longer have the papers necessary to travel legally (passport, visa, ECOWAS Travel Certificate), relatively small bribes at border posts or the possibility to bypass official checkpoints altogether make travel relatively easy. But, once they have reached the “gates to the desert”—Agadez, sometimes Arlit for those going to Algeria, or Dirkou for those on their way to Libya—conditions change. Here, migrants are escorted to North Africa by specialized transport operators who use four-wheel drive vehicles equipped for crossing the Sahara (pickups, commercial trucks). The cost of transport increases with each stage (Brachet 2005b). Some succeed in pursuing their route rapidly, when the transport offer corresponds to both their expectations and their resources. Others, for different reasons, are forced to stay for variable amounts of time in the towns of northern Niger.

First among these reasons is the tightening of migration policies in the countries of the Maghreb. Encouraged in this by European states, who see trans-Saharan migrations as a first step to trans-Mediterranean migration,<sup>2</sup> nearly all North African states have in recent years reinforced sanctions against illegal migrants and those who facilitate their entry, stay, and exit from their national territories (Zeghib 2009; Perrin 2008a). These legislative changes made in 2005, then 2007 in Libya and in 2008 in Algeria, were accompanied by a reinforced surveillance of borders (and inside these countries) making it harder for illegal migrants to cross them. Although *refoulement* and expulsion of migrants are nothing new in these countries and do not discourage those who wish to go there, sanctions against transporters have reduced opportunities for trans-Saharan migration. To avoid arrest, incarceration, or confiscation of their vehicles, most Saharan traders have stopped carrying people alongside their merchandise from South to North, a common practice tolerated since the middle of the twentieth century. Now, the very lucrative trade of escorting migrants from Niger to Algeria or Libya is undertaken only by networks specialized in clandestine transport, with fewer, less regular rotations than for merchant goods.

Further, since the beginning of 2007, problems linked to the resumption of the Tuareg rebellion in northern Niger (Keenan 2008; Deycard 2007) led to the reorganization of security forces in the region, creating a general context of insecurity favorable to banditry. Faced with this situation, the government

of Niger decided to secure the main communication routes in this desert zone by organizing convoys under military escort. All vehicles to and from Agadez (towards Tahoua, Zinder, Arlit, and Dirkou) are now obliged to travel with these military convoys. Several such convoys are organized every week on surfaced roads (see map). Between Agadez and Dirkou, a single return journey under escort is organized once a month because of the higher cost and the duration of the trip, which lasts several days.<sup>3</sup> Hence, depending on when migrants reach Agadez, independently of all other factors, they may wait up to a month before transport becomes available. As the cost of living—food and shelter—is especially high in Agadez, this unexpected delay heavily weighs on their budgets.

The third form of constraint, linked to the first two, is economic. The increased risk of arrest when crossing a border, banditry, and the growing monopolization of transport has increased the price of cross-border Saharan transport significantly. In 2009, crossing the Sahara from Agadez to Algeria or Libya cost an average of XOF 80,000 to XOF 150,000 (US\$160 to US\$300) depending on the route, vehicle, and time, while in the first half of the decade prices ranged from XOF 50,000 to XOF 100,000 maximum (US\$100 to US\$200). To the taxes illegally demanded by Nigerien state officials on entering and leaving towns must be added the sizable cost of transport in the Sahara that puts a further strain on the budgets of some migrants blocked in those towns, unable to pay for the continuation of their trip:

When I reached Dirkou, they didn't even ask for my [ID] card, only cash. You don't need the card. In Agadez it's the same. One person can pay XOF 2,000 (USD 4), another pays XOF 5,000 (USD 10); it depends. But English speakers can pay XOF 10,000 (USD 20), someone else will pay 5,000. If you're lucky, you pay 2,000. When you leave Agadez you pay 5,000. (Bilma, Malian migrant, October 25, 2009)

All these factors mean that most migrants have to stay in northern Niger from a few days for the luckiest to several weeks or months for the most destitute. Here, we will mainly focus on those migrants whose transit *drags on*. First, for practical reasons, since they are the most visible and most accessible in the field. But also because transit is an experience whose importance for migrants and host societies increases with duration. And indeed, one might ask, is it still possible to refer to transit when mobility has all but stopped?

### **Migratory Transit: Social Dimensions vs. Spatial Dimensions**

Whether etymologically (the Latin word *transitus* meaning the “action of crossing,” “passage”), in the field of air transport (with respect to international

transit zones where travelers only pass through), or in commercial vocabulary, especially customs,<sup>4</sup> the term transit implies that there is little or no interruption of movement. In the field of migration studies, when the term is used to designate multiple realities, what is—sometimes quite intuitively—considered to be transit relates more to the fact of interrupting movement than movement itself. In order to go beyond what may first seem to be a paradox, migratory transit may be defined as an *instant* on a journey that is defined by the migrants’ project rather than by their actual practical mobility. The project is indeed what gives social meaning to the notion of transit migration since the fact of transiting, through a city for example, inevitably requires a certain amount of time—from a few hours to a few months—and physical interruption of travel. This means that transit cannot be defined only on the basis of spatial practices. What differentiates the transit town from a “default destination” is the conscious change in the project of the migrants staying there rather than specifically the duration of their stay. Thus, “transit areas” are characterized by the notable presence of migrants who intend to pursue their route toward a farther destination *as soon as possible* and maintain this intention during their stay, regardless of its actual duration. Hence the difficulty to understand transit objectively and the temptation to use the term too freely.

Given the context of a general stigmatization of foreigners and the tightening of migration policies in both Europe and Africa, referring to the migrants’ projects and intentions might be problematic. The official labeling of certain countries as “transit countries” housing “migrants in transit” is first and foremost political. It bears witness to attempts in recent years to criminalize migrants or to legitimize the involvement of countries in migration policies that are in actual fact of little concern to their own national interest. This terminology is already widely used in institutional, political, and legislative spheres to justify surveillance, control, and repression of migrants, along with the implementation of certain agreements between states on the outsourcing of controls and readmission. This type of representation of migrations has also brought about the legal aberration of the notion of “illegal emigration” to justify arresting individuals on the pretext of alleged intentions rather than acts. This goes against Article 13.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that “*Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*” Nonetheless, the notion has real effect in more and more countries in Northwest Africa, where individuals (nationals or foreigners) are arrested for supposedly seeking to reach Europe illegally. Since the beginning of 2010, such “upstream control” is also implemented in the Sahara in a quite different form. Two “transit camps,” funded by the Italian government and managed by IOM, have been set up in northern

Niger for the purpose of managing the return of people expelled from Libya and Algeria and for intercepting those alleged to be heading for Europe before they cross the desert to incite them to return home.

Nonetheless, although the notion of transit is thus largely exploited in the legislative, judiciary, and political fields, where it usually serves only to try to legitimize a law-and-order approach to migration, it remains of less heuristic value for the human and social sciences. Research might more usefully focus on the intended mobility and the logic of transit at a given time (without taking into account the future), since this can shed light on the different ways in which migrants settle in certain places and on the nature of the relations they create with the people they meet. The challenge is not to predict future migrations, but rather to understand fully present social relations.

### WHEN TRANSIT DRAGS ON: THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERRUPTION, WAITING, AND “BEING STUCK”

Some Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to Algeria and Libya via the Sahara are forced to slow down and even to stop in towns in northern Niger where they transit. In these towns, they must resort to the services of agencies specialized in cross-border transport of people in the Sahara to enter Algeria or Libya illegally across their southern borders. But because of the above-mentioned constraints, departures are not always very regular, and it can take several weeks before they leave. Moreover, not all migrants are able to pay the often very high price for these journeys. Consequently, some seek to complete their budgets locally. They realize that they cannot pursue their course as quickly as they had hoped and prepare themselves for stays of indeterminate length.

Like transport, providing accommodation for migrants in this region has become a well organized and lucrative activity. As soon as they arrive, most migrants are pointed to collective accommodation created for this purpose, called *foyers* by certain French-speaking migrants (from Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso) or more often *ghettos* by people from Niger and migrants of other nationalities.<sup>5</sup> These mostly group migrants by nationality of origin, who sleep on mats, 10 to 100 people living in one place, and without running water or electricity. The cost of such collective accommodation varies with time and according to whether the manager demands payment by the day or week, per person, or per room. On average, it costs a few hundred francs CFA per person per day.

The daily lives of migrants are structured by these newly developed social relations, with relations between individuals characterized by a constant

tension between certain forms of solidarity and the individual desire to travel on. Mutual aid is frequent and prized between “fellow travelers”; those with some resources assist the most destitute by paying for their food or accommodation. But all are mostly motivated by the necessities of individual survival. The many problems they encounter also encourage a pragmatic individualism: many play down the amount of money they have on them to avoid openly having to refuse requests for help or friendships motivated by self-interest. These practices are known to everyone and often lead to bitterness in those who gave a lot or too much when they were able to, and now, themselves in need, feel that they cannot rely on the same kind of solidarity:

Here, if you have money, you have lots of friends; everyone will be nice to you; people seek you out. But if you're poor, if you have no money, you're alone . . . . That's the way it is here. (Lynda, Nigerian migrant, Dirkou, December 5, 2004)

For everyone, this time of transit, this waiting period not foreseen in their initial budget, is one of gradual pauperization, simply because of the cost of living. Those who have the means to pay their transport to a town in southern Algeria or Libya can simply reduce their standard of living until their departure. They spend most of their time doing nothing but waiting, in their lodgings or in the coach station or the garage of the transporter with whom they plan to travel. Others, who do not or no longer have the means to pay for transport, attempt to earn money locally:

If you have money, it will be okay; you'll be able to travel, but the problem is money . . . We have no more money [. . .]. We don't eat properly; morning, noon and night we eat gari.<sup>6</sup> Then we get constipated [. . .]. We're tired. [. . .] When you have money, you can go by plane, but even if you go by road, everything will be easier [. . .]. We've had everything taken from us and now, we're stuck here; we can no longer return to Nigeria and we can't move on [. . .] We really suffer too much here. This country is too poor [. . .]. There's nothing here, only wind and dust. (Nigerian migrant, Agadez, November 29, 2004)

The job market in the towns of northern Niger is very limited, for foreigners in transit much as for locals. In this context of poverty and high unemployment, migrants have trouble getting hired regardless of their qualifications, and the rare jobs available to them are usually underpaid. Potential employers know that some of these foreigners are ready to work for very low wages, as they have no other option. Although some may use their professional skills by repairing electrical appliances in workshops or working in hair salons, most men are day laborers (making clay bricks, loading lorries) for daily wages of some XOF 1,000.

In Dirkou in particular, another type of job has also appeared in recent years: working as a domestic in wealthy homes. In this case, the employers are usually civil servants or traders who have understood the interest of taking advantage of the precarious situation of these foreigners in transit. They employ them to perform various domestic tasks (carrying water, house-cleaning, laundry, shopping at the market) and agree in exchange to pay for their transport to Algeria or Libya after a few months, a period never clearly defined at the start. Some of these migrants work only part of the day for specific tasks, while others work full time and are fed and housed by their employers. Such jobs without financial compensation are sometimes akin to “temporary bondage,” especially when the migrants themselves feel they are treated like “slaves”<sup>7</sup>:

I’ve been here for a month; I have no money to go to Libya; on the road, everything was taken from me. They take XOF 1,000 here, 5,000 there; now, I’m left with nothing. I came with friends who went on to Libya. Here, there is nothing to do [. . .]. I work here [in a policeman’s home] because it’s no good to do nothing [. . .]. But it’s all wrong: they demand too much, all the time, and they don’t pay me; they only give me enough to eat. (Nigerian migrant, Dirkou, December 24, 2004)

Because of the few available jobs and low wages, some migrants raise money by selling their clothes, shoes, watches, or jewelry. Second-hand shops specializing in such items have sprung up inside and in the vicinity of coach stations. Knowing the financial problems faced by migrants, prices are extremely low for goods that can be resold later for two or three times more.

Finally, prostitution in different forms provides some female migrants with the only way to make money during their journey.<sup>8</sup> Some engage in occasional prostitution in exchange for accommodation with no cash transaction. Others do so more regularly, as a complement to low-paid jobs, by for instance working as waitresses in bars that also function as brothels.<sup>9</sup> Others are under the control of people acting as pimps<sup>10</sup> and prostitute themselves permanently in certain parts of town (usually near *ghettos* and coach stations). The proportion of women in trans-Saharan migrations has increased in recent years and can be estimated to be at least 20 percent at present (Bensaâd 2009; Brachet 2009). Although it is impossible to know just how many female migrants work in prostitution, it seems that women as a whole, especially those from English-speaking countries, are increasingly perceived as potential prostitutes in northern Niger.

Thus, the possibilities for earning money locally are rather limited and do not always enable migrants to save enough. Hence those who are able to call on third parties to help them out. Mostly this is done through money

transfers through Western Union, which opened a local branch in Agadez in 2000. Transport agencies encourage migrants to ask for help from back home because they see this as the best way to ensure potential clients' solvency. Some transport agency managers go as far as to advance the cost of phone calls placed by migrants who promise to use their services (on condition the transport is already partly paid), accepting to wait for reimbursement until after the money order has been received. Thus, some *télécentres*<sup>11</sup> in Agadez and Arlit are permanently occupied by migrants who, having called their contacts to request aid, wait for a phone call to receive the code they need to obtain their money. They might wait for several days, since it takes time to gather the necessary amounts and since it is essential to be physically present at the *télécentre* when the correspondent calls back, as otherwise the reception of the money may be delayed:

So, it was very hard to get here [. . .]. Of course, I'll go on, but I think that it won't be the same in the future, because I've already been overly ransomed. All my money's been taken; that's when I called home to try to have some money sent to me to go on. That's what I'm waiting for now. (Migrant from Cameroun, Agadez, April 18, 2005)

Our families know. We called to ask for help, and now we're waiting. We're waiting for a phone call morning, noon and night. [. . .] But Western Union is expensive. When we're sent 50,000, we may actually get only 30,000. [. . .] Niger is too tough. For me, Agadez is a town I'll never forget. The three months I've spent here are like more than ten years. (Junior, migrant from Cameroun, Agadez, March 10, 2008)

In Dirkou, the situation is different because of the absence of banks or money transfer services within a radius of nearly 700 kilometers. Migrants circumvent this problem by receiving codes for prepaid phone cards from the two telephone companies present in the region.<sup>12</sup> They then sell these codes to civil servants and traders in the oasis at a discount. Hence, the installation of a mobile phone network in this isolated part of northeastern Niger has greatly increased the possibilities of obtaining money there. More recently, Dirkou moneychangers have also developed a kind of informal extension of the Western Union money order transfer system. It is now possible to have money sent to the Western Union counter in Agadez and have one of their correspondents from Niger retrieve them after having obtained the necessary codes by phone. The Agadezian correspondent then confirms reception of the money to his colleague in Dirkou, who hands over the sum to the migrant, minus a predetermined commission.

The money migrants can have sent to them is drawn from their own savings left with a relative back home to avoid theft or it is given or lent thanks

to the solidarity of their family or circle of friends. In both cases, migrants are never certain they will receive the aid they anticipate. "When I left, I went to see a cousin," says Liliane, a female migrant from Cameroun, "to entrust her with 90,000 francs that she was to send me when I arrived here. I got here, I called her and she had spent the money" (Agadez, November 24, 2004). Such surprises are often hard to accept, and the feeling of destitution is great. For others, it is simply inconceivable to ask for help from close relations remaining in their homelands: "You can have someone who has been here for two or three months [. . .]. It can even happen that, when they left the country, they had even stolen or sold something that wasn't theirs; they put their relatives in a difficult situation. If they call home, who will look at them? No one" (Migrant from Cameroun, Agadez, April 18, 2005).

The transit experience can vary greatly depending on the town where migrants are blocked for a time, their resources, their needs, and their resourcefulness. But for many of them, this time of forced immobility represents a crucial instant in their migratory adventure, a privileged moment in which they question their projects and develop new sense of belonging.

### **THE SLOW TIME OF TRANSIT THROUGH THE SAHARA: A SOURCE OF A NEW SENSE OF BELONGING**

Relations between migrants and local populations have been studied mainly for migrants who have settled rather than for transit migrants. The length of stay in a particular place has an important impact on the possibility of establishing social relations, much as the perception of permanence or transience shapes the subconscious role granted to others and the individual readiness to invest time and effort locally. In this sense, social relations in transit towns and the new solidarities they might lead to need to be studied in their own right.

In the transit towns of northern Niger, relations between migrants and permanent inhabitants are mostly motivated by monetary exchange, whether with actors in the migratory system who control mobility or provide transport or accommodation, or with traders and employers. Beyond this, foreign migrants have very few or no relations with the people of Niger. There are several reasons for this: migrants think of themselves as only travelling through and hence see no reason to establish permanent contact; northern Niger is only a transit area, never a "permanent destination." Moreover, there is the possible cultural and religious distance, the language barrier or simply the lack of interest and curiosity, and the fact that foreigners circulate very little inside towns and cities: they usually do not venture

beyond the immediate vicinity of their homes, markets, and places of transport. A transport agency employee went so far as to say that “the people of Agadez don’t even know these people are here; they don’t even know what they do at the coach station.<sup>13</sup> Only the people at the coach station know the value of that work, those who have agencies, those who have vehicles, the police and gendarmerie: they’re the ones who profit from all this” (Agadez, November 29, 2004).

Thus, it seems that the presence of foreigners, partly limited to areas where people mingle (markets, coach stations) and private places (*ghettos*, *foyers*, homes), is almost invisible for those who do not give it special attention. If only few inhabitants of Agadez, Arlit and Dirkou live directly or indirectly from the passage of migrants and even deal with them on a daily basis, more generally these towns seem neither “challenged” nor influenced by the presence of foreigners. On the whole, the inhabitants of northern Niger offer hospitality tinged with indifference, and the possible effects of the presence of foreign migrants in these towns of Niger on forms of sociability, living habits, and urban practices appear limited. Conversely, this proximity of social groups of different origins and of foreigners with native populations changes the nature and position of the boundaries between them and impacts the way migrants construe their own identity. Hence, the relations that develop among migrants during their transit in Agadez, Arlit, or Dirkou tend to be strong between them and weak with local populations, creating new forms of solidarity and belonging:

Niger is a very bad country; it’s the toughest country in all of Africa, other African countries are better. I know Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cameroun . . . in all Africa there’s no problem, but this kind of situation, our situation, is something I’ve only seen in Niger. And it’s because of the people of Niger. I don’t understand why the government of Niger doesn’t do anything; why President Tandja himself doesn’t say anything. They know lots of foreigners are heading for Libya and the road to Libya is very tough. Why don’t they do anything? (Nigerian migrant, Bilma, December 9, 2004)

Aside from those at the station, people are very difficult; people are weird. When we speak French to them, they answer in dialect, although they’re Franco-Arab. But they pretend they don’t even understand. So, you have to drop it because you ask for information and “wha wha wha.” You don’t understand what they say; you just move on. (Migrant from Cameroun, Agadez, March 10, 2008)

From the time they leave their hometowns to their entry in the territory of Niger, even when they must cross several countries, migrants do not usually suffer from specific stigmatization on the part of the state officials and

transporters they meet. Travelers among other travelers, their identity as migrants setting out for North Africa is not yet revealed, nor is it recognized. However, as soon as they enter Niger, especially when they head north, their status changes. In this country, not being from Niger and heading North means trying your luck on the other side of the Sahara, which implies switching from the status of simple traveler to that of migrant off to the Maghreb or Europe. Trans-Saharan migration is known to be expensive. Consequently, many state agents, players in the transport business, and tradesmen assume that migrants have large sums of money in their possession and use all possible means to take advantage of this.

Once migrants have reached the towns of northern Niger, where they lose their mobility, the stigmatization and moral and financial pressures to which they are subjected because of their status as foreign migrants become overwhelming. New collective structures are created in reaction to the perception and behavior of local indigenous populations with which they are in contact and toward whom a certain diffidence often appears, but also because of the relations that develop between them (especially in their accommodation). The social ties between migrants then rely in part on pragmatic solidarity that develops a feeling of common identity. Their new identity as “migrant” or “adventurer” is shared by many of those who find themselves stuck on the edge of the desert. It gradually asserts itself through a collective reordering of individual experiences and daily struggles. The sense of belonging to a “migrant community” with a shared destiny that transcends nationalities and individual legal status from the standpoint of both its members (migrants) and those who are not part of it (local people, state officials) gradually prevails over all other forms of belonging (national, ethnic, religious) without, however, being exclusive.

This multiple identity gradually developed by migrants speaks of a feeling of simultaneous belonging “back home” and to the present place. But such belonging is strictly social, not territorial: the “community of migrants” arises from a social experience but is not specifically associated with any geographically localized place. This social transformation originates neither in a common past nor in political territories, but they result from a temporarily shared experience. Migration, as a specific process of individuation, creates new individual and collective identities, inherently complex, and different from that of sedentary identities. In terms of political, social, and psychological construction, identity is constantly redefined through relations with the world, with otherness and exteriority. Within a constantly changing “world” (the context of migratory transit), individual identities caught up in processes of mobility are primarily characterized by an ephemeral solidarities, and opportunistic flexibility.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSIT THROUGH THE SAHARA: ROUGH TERRAINS AND SOCIAL LIMINALITY

Transit is viewed here as a migratory moment characterized by a mobility project that affects both individual daily social practices and physical mobility and that shapes social relations among migrants and with the more sedentary populations they have to contend with. Observing the organization and forms of transit through the Sahara in Niger shows indeed that the transit experience leads over rough terrain: the harder it is to circulate, the more important times and places of transit become for migrants, and the greater its impact, if only economically, on the societies encountered along the way. This experience of migratory transit, which results mainly from individual choice and often—but not necessarily—implies a break with the society of origin, is also an experience of liminality (Turner 1967, 1969). It corresponds to the crossing of a spatial threshold on leaving the country of origin and of a social threshold on relinquishing a prior status and adopting *de facto* a transitional status until one can acquire a more stable position in the host society, and then in the society of origin after returning there. In this preliminary phase of migration, whose length depends on the difficulties encountered on the way, the transitional status of migrants is marked by a kind of nondifferentiation of prior identity categories (by age, rank, or nationality) in the eyes of members of the host society with which they come into contact, thereby promoting the emergence of a new sense of belonging. Migrants do not lose their awareness of belonging to a national community; they maintain a social and cultural identity that refers to their place of origin, but the situations in which they are caught up incite and enable them to reach beyond prior social ties based on a permanent and exclusive order of identity. The journey temporarily creates plural identities as, through a change in social status, individuals come together in a Sub-Saharan “community of destiny” on its way to North Africa.

### CONCLUSION

In a general context of xenophobia, the focus by the media and European and African public authorities on migrations toward Europe has maintained the fear of illusory “waves of migrants” wanting to reach the northern shore of the Mediterranean. This oversimplifies and profoundly misrepresents the great diversity of migrations in the Sahara, the great majority of which remains intra-African (De Haas 2008; Bensaâd 2009; Brachet 2009). Attempting to check flows as far upstream as possible, the tightening of migration policy is increasingly felt in the Sahara, making travel in the desert more and more difficult, hazardous, and costly, if only for those deemed “undesirable” and

referred to as “illegal” (Dauvergne 2008) in order to legitimize their confinement. At the core of the process of global hierarchization of the right to mobility (Bauman 1998), between the two ideals, never sustainably attained, of smooth areas of total freedom of circulation and areas that are hermetically sealed, lies many a rough terrain whose accessibility varies with time and situation. In the case of the Sahara, the main factors of variation are political and economic, but they might as well be social or cultural elsewhere. This is why transit through the Sahara in Niger, which remained relatively fluid for decades despite the existence of established constraints, has now either temporarily ceased or has been taken over by clandestine travel that escapes all controls, social, and otherwise, mostly to the greater detriment of migrants.

## NOTES

1. During these stays, audio recordings were made in whole or in part of some 150 interviews (with migrants, transporters, and state officials). Most of the data presented here were obtained informally, however, from observation, census, and simple discussion.

2. The focus of the media and European and African public authorities on Sub-Saharan migrants who pursue their journey to Europe has led to assimilating population movements from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Sahara with intercontinental economic migration. Yet studies show that the great majority of migrants crossing the Sahara do not intend to leave the continent. (See Brachet 2009 ; Lessault and Beauchemin 2009b.)

3. Despite the surrender of the main Tuareg rebel movement MNJ (*Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice*) at the end of 2009, the convoy system was maintained because of persistent insecurity in the area.

4. When merchandise remains in transit for over seven days in a given country, it generally comes under the re-export regime.

5. The term *ghetto* is commonly used in Niger to describe concessions where foreign migrants can stay. This use of the term, which retains its accepted meaning by extension in French for a place where a minority is grouped and isolated from the rest of the population, probably comes from the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea—where many migrants come from—where the term *ghetto* is “attributed to places where young outcasts gather in cities; they can be found anywhere: an abandoned building, a popular film theatre, crossroads, near a market, under a bridge, even in neighborhoods recognized as “chic”” (Latour 2003, 171). The term is found all along migratory routes from the Sahel to North Africa.

6. Manioc meal, a very inexpensive foodstuff.

7. On contemporary slavery in West Africa, see in particular Rossi (2009).

8. Here, we do not evoke forms of sexual exploitation organized by Mafia-like groups, which belong to another register from female migrants’ financial needs to be able to travel.

9. In general, these waitresses work for no salary, living only on tips and what they earn by prostituting themselves with clients. The price for a “trick” ranges on average from XOF 2,000 to XOF 4,000.

10. As opposed to forced procuring, *“this type of procuring describes the attitude of someone who simply assists, protects or profits from someone else’s prostitution, without coercion or violence against the prostitute and without organizing its exploitation”* (Ouvrard 2000, 25).

11. Public phone centers.

12. There has been a *télécentre* in Dirkou since 2004 using a satellite telephone system (Thuraya) and, since 2006, a mobile telephone relay (Celtel), for making international calls for a few hundred francs CFA per minute according to the destination.

13. Coach station.