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4 The Blind Spot of Repression: Migration Policies and Human Survival in the Central Sahara

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4.1   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 Libya for seasonal employment emerged in the 1950's, and by the early 1990's concerns over migratory movements in this region translated into the important arena of competing interests over livelihood and security. Despite human-made obstacles constituted by the 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 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. This emphasis works in conjunction 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 manage-

ment' focuses primarily on security measures and border protection, leading to the externalization of border control, by moving security checks southward from Europe's territorial borders to the Mediterranean Sea, North African countries and the Sahara (Carling 2007; De Haas 2007; Fischer-Lescano/Löhr/Tohidipur 2009). Through bilateral or multilateral agreements, European governments have gradually encouraged their North African counterparts to increase the surveillance of their borders, both land and sea, in an attempt to detect all kinds of trans-Saharan migration as early as possible. Rhetoric of fear and control contributes to a misinterpretation of all trans-Saharan migration as trans-Mediterranean migration, built on an inaccurate and superficial appreciation of reality.

This chapter offers a local perspective on the dynamic nature and recent transformations of the Saharan migration system, drawing on information gathered during fieldwork undertaken between 2003 and 2007[2] to show 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 Northwest Africa is followed by an analysis of new patterns of migrations that have emerged since the 1990's 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 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

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

2   I am grateful to Judith Scheele for helping me to translate this text. I would also like to thank Thanh-Dam Truong for her comments on earlier versions of this paper.

various strategies adopted by migrants and facilitating agents to cope with hardened migration policies are presented in light of their possible local impacts in the Central Sahara.

4.2   Intra-African Migration Systems as an Important Factor of Economic Development in Northwest Africa: The Case of the Central Sahara

Trade and travel within and across the Sahara goes back to the dawn of history. In the Central Sahara, however, economic migration as it is today began largely at the end of the 1950's with the arrival of low-skilled Sahelian workers at *In Ekker* and *Reggane* in southern Algeria, where the French had nuclear bases. During the 1960's, following Algeria's independence (1962) and Libya's sudden wealth due to the discovery and exploitation of oil, 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 which could not be met locally or even nationally; and then serious droughts in the Sahel (1960 to 1973) led to famine and a severe crisis within pastoral economies. This accelerated and indeed instigated migration to the Algerian and Libyan Sahara. At first it mostly involved relatively young men from the Sahelian and Saharan zones of the states of the Sahel belt, and their numbers and organization only changed gradually through until the 1980's. During the 1990's, however, migrations increased, bringing more migrants from a wider range of countries (Bredeloup/Pliez 2005).

Owing to unreliable record keeping at checkpoints, and the clandestine nature of some journeys, it is difficult to evaluate the volume of these migratory flows. In the case of Niger – a known transit country – the figures produced by official state services, especially border police, are only approximate and often incomplete. The conditions in which checks occur at the border posts of Assamaka (between Niger and Algeria) and Dirkou (between Niger and Libya) together with the widespread corruption render official statistics unreliable; but the main problem with the statistics is the significance of 'irregular'[3] migration, which by definition, cannot be assessed. Although it is clearly important to have exact figures on migration between sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and Eu-

rope, the relevant authorities show no interest in producing them; nor in fact do they have the professional means so to do. Politicians rarely wait for social scientists to put forward numbers before they make decisions. Despite the unreliability of the figures produced the media make sensational news of them, befitting the political aims of the relevant authorities.

To deal with the deficiencies of national statistics researchers may come up their own figures in an attempt to quantify flows as they are observed. They produce estimates derived from various sources: the media, official statistics and – more importantly – field observations plus information provided by fellow researchers and reports produced by NGOs, local associations and international agencies. This method becomes more effective the more time the researcher spends in the specified terrain. In this way, the researcher can assess the magnitude in such a way that enables him to counter claims that have been made without the support of scientific research. After several years of research in Niger it is possible to estimate that there are approximately 50,000 to 100,000 migrants travelling to North Africa through Niger every year; judging by numbers of returnees by land, only 10 to 20 per cent seem to continue their journey to Europe (Brachet 2009b). Such a numerical range might seem too broad to be useful for policymakers. Nevertheless, calculations by other researchers show that the illegal migratory flows from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe are minimal compared with overall migration within the region, even according to the highest estimates (De Haas 2007). These alternative calculations are vital as they provide a reading different from the official ones, which are often based on extrapolations not backed up by actual observations. Such figures can be manipulated.

Imprecise head counts apart, statistics cannot reveal the exchange that occurs during and because of these migrations. On their way to the Maghreb, sub-Saharan migrants spend different amounts of time in the villages and towns through which they travel. For several decades, therefore, these migrants have participated in the economic vitality of the Sahara. Foreign migrants have shaped such cities as Sebha in Libya and Tamanrasset in Algeria as much with respect to urban development and economic activities as to socio-cultural practices (Nadi 2007; Pliez 2003; Spiga 2005). These transformations are less noticeable in

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3   The term *irregular migration* refers to crossing a border without a valid document and/or authorisation (Ghosh 1998).

Figure 4.1:   International migration routes to and through the Sahara. **Source:** Brachet 2009.
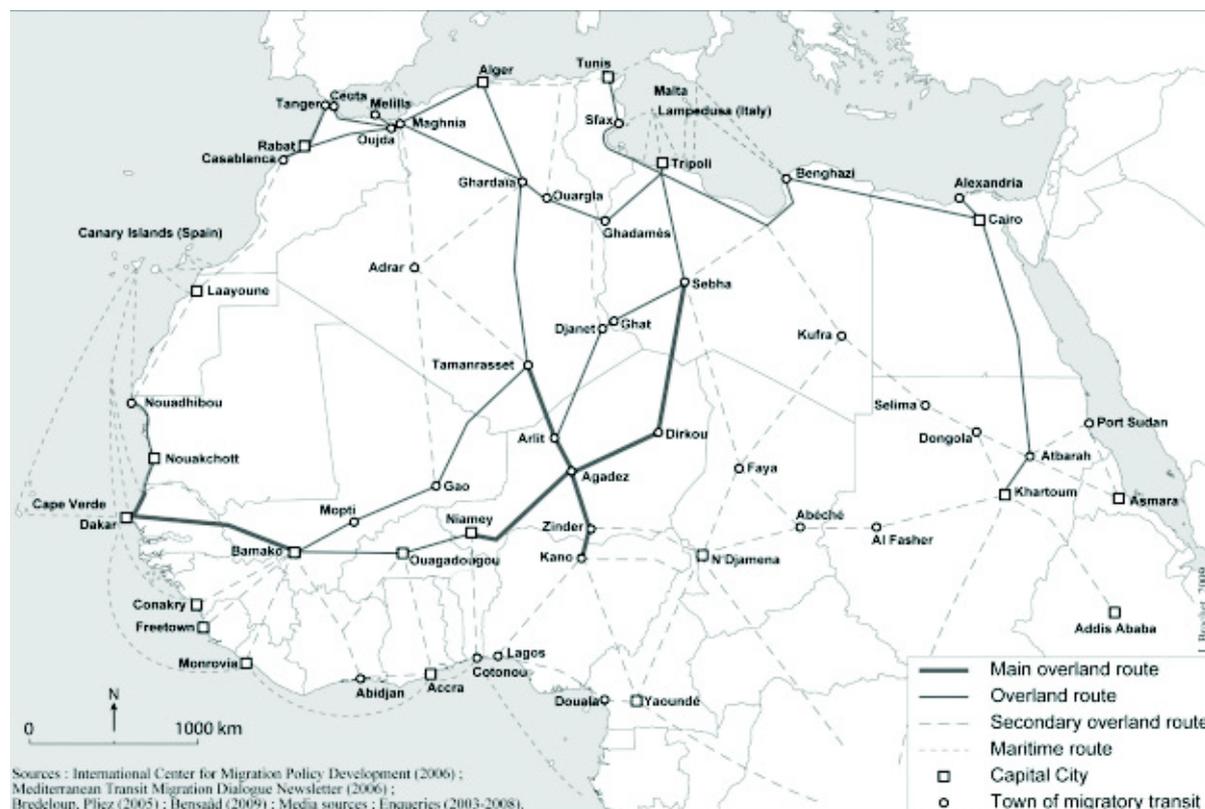
Agadez – a Nigerien town of comparable size (with a population of about 100,000 inhabitants). Changes are mainly visible in the development of transport companies, the construction or refurbishment of temporary lodgings and, especially, in the injection of ready money into the local economy.

As shown elsewhere (Brachet 2009a) migrants annually contribute several billion francs CFA to the local economy by their participation in the official economy and through the taxes they are obliged to pay to local officials. In a village such as Dirkou, with less than 10,000 inhabitants, changes are even more visible. Being a contact point between the Nigerien and Libyan migration networks, this oasis has grown considerably over the last few years. A new district named *Sabon Gari* ('new village') has developed where most activities are concentrated on the transport of people and goods between Niger and Libya; it is more densely populated today 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-Eastern Niger to the south, and for the import of basic supplies. Caravan trade is now secondary in most oases near the main tracks. Trade and exchange on various levels are inter-

woven: trans-Saharan migrants and their demand for transport have revitalized the regional and cross-border trade supplying people in northern Niger with foodstuffs and some manufactured goods. Many freight carriers supplement their earnings by escorting migrants on all or part of their journey. The practice of combining transport services for people and goods reflects the long-standing and profitable interdependence of trade and migration in the Sahara, but has now become less common because of tougher migration policies.

4.3   Overlapping Institutional Frameworks: Abstruseness and Patchiness Regarding Migrants' Rights

Analysis of legislation and policies on international migration reveals a tension between the concepts of state sovereignty and migrants' rights (Dauvergne 2008). At one level principles and norms deriving from the notion of state sovereignty – such as the right to protect national borders, to admit or refuse entry to foreign nationals – can be explained in terms of the

Figure 4.2: CEN-SAD and ECOWAS member states. **Source:** Brachet 2009.
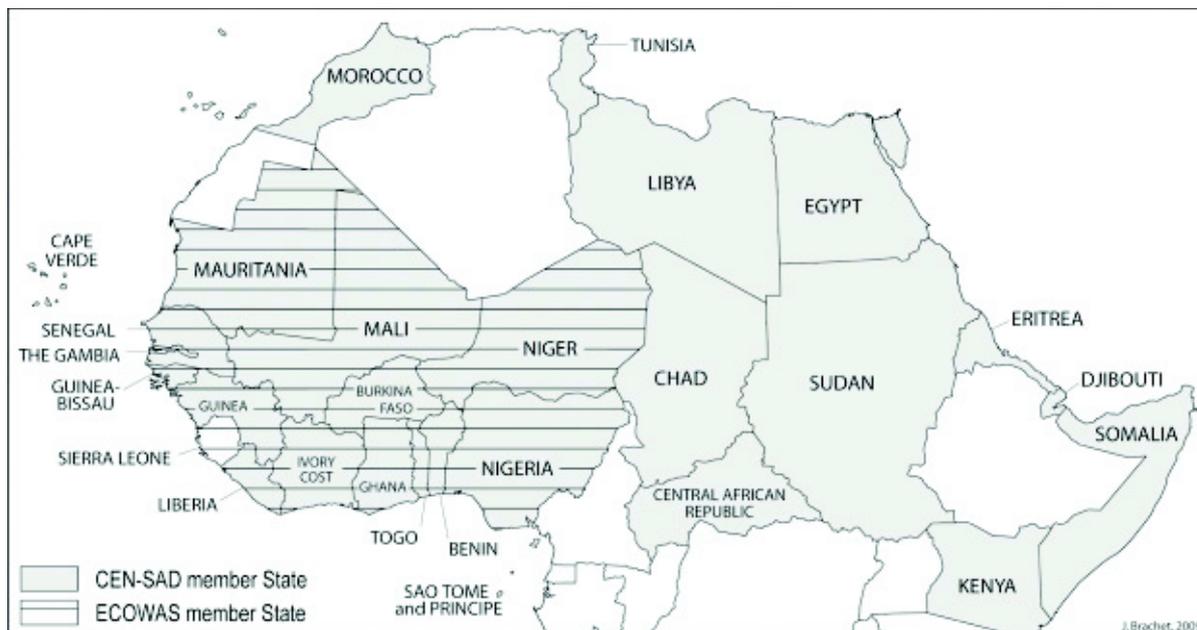
relations between states. At another level various international conventions recognize the rights of people who move across borders, yet the specific right to work and take residence, and other rights, are specified by a particular state according to the relationship it establishes with the migrant. The diversity of texts (laws or non-binding conventions) and the various levels of their applicability (national, bilateral or international) make 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 which protect migrants and govern international migration overlap.[4]

4.3.1   The Limited Efficiency of International Commitments

In addition to ratified UN conventions, Central Saharan governments have obligations in several supranational institutional frameworks concerned with migration. Being in the heartland of Saharan migration, Niger belongs to various inter-governmental organizations which aim to encourage free movement for nationals of member states, such as the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Since first cited in the 1998 constitutional charter drafted in Syrte (birthplace of the Libyan president

Mu'ammar Ghaddafi), the principle of free movement between CEN-SAD member states has been emphasized regularly. In 2000 the Libyan government temporarily abolished all visa requirements for nationals of member states who were employed in Libya. In 2007, however, visa requirements were re-established, with the exception of nationals from the Maghreb countries.[5] Even in times when migration from sub-Saharan Africa was tolerated or even encouraged, migrants were generally denied full legal status since Libyan authorities rarely legalized their arrival on Libyan territory. In this way the Libyan government attempted to maintain a minimum of legitimacy vis-à-vis its African partners, while deporting other foreigners by force. This fools no one however. After the deportation of several hundreds of his co-nationals, a Nigerien journalist noted "This radical deportation of sub-Saharans seriously questions Ghaddafi's interpretation of the African Union (UA) and the Community of Sahelo-Saharan countries".[6]

When the UN embargo against Libya was lifted in 1999 the Libyan government, in need of international respectability, found that the issue of migration could

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4   For the UN and ILO conventions, see Truong (2007).

5   See at: <http://terra.rezo.net/article770.html> (30 March 2010); Delphne Perrin, 2008: "L'étranger rendu visible au Maghreb. La voie ouverte à la transposition des politiques juridiques migratoires européennes", in: *Asylon(s)*: 4.

6   See at: at: <www.republicain-niger.com>, in: *Le Républicain*, 7–13 October 2004 (30 March 2010).

Figure 4.3: Advertisement for the ECOWAS travel certificate. **Source:** <http://regionswatch.blogspot.com/2007_09_01_
archive.html> (28 April 2010).
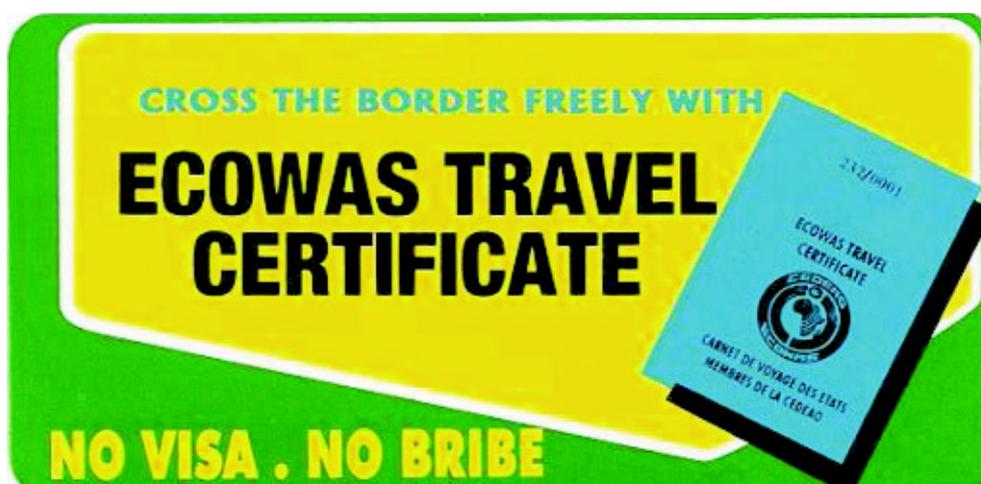
constitute an important stake in international negotia-tions. Border control and the deportation of illegal migrants have since become central elements in the relationship between Libya and the European Union. By agreeing to increase its border controls and to ac-cept illegal migrants caught in Italy (who purportedly had travelled via Libya) Colonel Ghaddafi has offi-cially recognized Libya as a transit country for sub-Sa-haran African migrants on their way to Europe, in ex-change for considerable development aid. But, along with Morocco and Algeria, Libya refused to sign an agreement of re-admission proposed by the European Union in the name of all CEN-SAD member states.[7]

> 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 (Congolese migrant, interviewed in Agadez, 15 April 2003).

Adepoju (2002) notes that while the principle of free movement proposed by the CEN-SAD remains an in-tention and not much else, the ECOWAS has imple-mented a protocol of free movement ratified by all its member states since 1979. This means that migrants can travel to and then through Niger all the way to the southern borders of Algeria and Libya without any ad-ministrative problems. However, irrespective of mi-grants' nationalities (ECOWAS member-states or non-member-states) and affiliated travel documents, the conditions of travel are the same for all: they can travel throughout Niger, but are illegally 'taxed' at

every security checkpoint (Brachet 2009a). Thus, al-though all migrants state that it is *easy to travel with-out a visa* as there is no need for official papers to cross borders, they inevitably have to pay a 'tip' to get through the checkpoints. In other words, instead of paying a visa fee to the state, they pay a fee to border controllers. ECOWAS would like to see this reality change and has initiated, and advertised, a travel cer-tificate (see figure 4.3).

In January 2008 the heads of ECOWAS states adopted a 'common approach to migration' to im-prove their management of migratory movements within and between regions. Largely inspired by the 2006 Euro-African meetings on migration and devel-opment held in Rabat and Tripoli and therefore influ-enced by the European representations of West Afri-can migrations, this text states that the fight against "illegal migration" is one of its main objectives.[8] Legal condemnation of individuals – based on their alleged intention – to pre-empt their actions is not only ab-surd but also overrides article 13.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulating that every-one has the right to leave any country, including their own. States apparently respect human rights only when they feel like it.

The combating of 'illegal migration' has since brought profound changes to ECOWAS policy on free movement, despite criticism of the notion used. ECOWAS no longer merely aims to facilitate free movement of people within its territory, but it now at-

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7   See at: <www.panapress.com>, in: *Panapress*, 11 March 2009 (30 March 2010).

8   See at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/2/41400366. pdf> (30 March 2010).

tempts to control migration directed beyond this territory. West African elites have adopted European rhetoric and fear of migrants, thus no longer considering migration primarily as a means of development. They have instead agreed to participate in the fight against 'illegal migration' to Europe.

4.3.2   National Legal Frameworks and the Bilateral Links with EU Member States

National legal frameworks do not necessarily reflect the *de facto* migration policies of Saharan states; the gap between political discourses, international commitments, a nation's legislation and the active engagement of state representatives can be considerable. Recent legal reforms in Algeria and Libya reflect changed perceptions of, and reaction 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 Algeria has, in reality, been battling illegal migration for several decades, the Algerian government established an official migration policy only in 2008 – drafting a convention that fixes the conditions of entry, stay and travel of foreign nationals, based on an ordinance from 1966 (Perrin 2009). This new legislation increases sanctions against illegal migrants and those who have helped them enter the country, live there, or leave it (Zeghbib 2009). A similar law was enacted in Libya in 2005 and was followed in 2007 by the obligation for all foreign nationals, apart from specific Arab countries, to obtain a visa. As a founding country and driving force of the CEN-SAD and an erstwhile proponent of Pan-African solidarity and free movement, Libya now takes active part in the general toughening of North African migration policies.

In Niger international migration is not considered a problem that needs to be solved, and no explicit policy on migration has developed. Legally, beyond the international agreements ratified by the government and implemented more or less successfully, only one law on the status of refugees deals with the presence of foreign nationals on the national territory (law 97-17 promulgated on 20 June 1997). There is, in fact, a lack of any migration policy or official guide-

lines, and a resistance of pressures exerted by the IOM and the EU to co-opt West African states in the fight against 'illegal migration' (allegedly towards Europe) in the way they successfully have co-opted North African governments (Brachet 2009b).

Yet the impact of state involvement in migration depends less on official policy than on the ways policy translates into practice. Thus, although Niger has no real migration policy (apart from specific interstate 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 hampers migration networks. These developments have changed the ways migrants can travel in the Sahara, especially across the southern borders of Algeria and Libya; 'illegal migration' has become more dangerous and risky there than in the southern Sahara.

4.4   Crossing Saharan Borders: From Unofficial to Clandestine Modes

4.4.1   Getting from Niger into Algeria: State Control, Migrants' Movements and Spatial Transformation

For many decades Algeria has been a country of seasonal migration for many people from the Sahel looking for employment in agriculture and construction – increasingly also now in other sectors. To a lesser number of sub-Saharans today, Algeria is nothing more than a station for on their way to Europe, but one which 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 unemployment is on the rise throughout the country and unskilled labour in little demand.[9]

Unofficial immigration, long limited to the south and hence of little concern to most Algerians, has attracted government attention since the early 1990's, leading to an inquiry by the National Bureau of Statistics – the results of which have remained unpublished (Spiga 2005: 88). When migrants started to travel and settle throughout the territory, the matter began to at-

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9   Fargues, Philippe (Ed.), 2005: *Migrations méditerranéennes. Rapport 2005* (Florence: Institut Universitaire Européen, unpublished)

tract public attention, as to be seen in the national press (which often represents sub-Saharan migrants as the source of all evils). The reports indirectly led to 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."[10]

Such outbursts of violence against foreigners by civilians fortunately remain exceptional. At 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, today the Algerian government approaches the question of migration as a problem and publicly states its readiness to fight against unofficial migration towards and through its territory.[11] Yet increased border controls and checks within the country have not stopped migration towards Algeria; it has merely changed the ways migrants attempt to cross the border.

For nationals of countries south of the Sahara, to obtain a visa in one of the Algerian consulates in those countries 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 and so forth). Further, if their application is successful, the visa granted only allows a short stay in Algerian territory. At the border post of *In Guezzam* generally only two kinds of migrants enter Algeria legally: students or professional athletes 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.

It is therefore the case that most migrants enter Algeria illegally. Until recently Algerian smugglers could bribe Algerian police officers in *In Guezzam* to take illegal migrants through on the official route. Today 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 route chosen. During the journey the migrants (who may be as many as 30 packed on each four-wheel-drive pick-up) hardly ever get off it. 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 even for food and/or rest. Trucks stop several kilometres before reaching their destination to unload their passengers who continue on foot.

The journey to Djanet takes longer, three to five days, and is more dangerous. Efforts by the Algerian government to stop illegal border crossings are concentrated in this region[12] and have been indirectly supported by the US as part of their fight against international terrorism in general but in particular against organizations present in the Central Sahara (such as Al-Qâ'ida in the Islamic Maghreb). There is a constant risk of breakdown, which can be lethal if the truck cannot be repaired immediately. As drivers rarely take the same route twice they cannot rely on another truck coming by, and they each only carry water for a few 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 and 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, author's interview).

Robbery and abandonment are other dangers specific to this route. Local robbers know that each day groups made of at least ten migrants of will travel through the area with enough money to finance their trip. All the robbers need do is wait at certain key points such as one of the few wells in the area. Robbers and smugglers sometimes collude in robbing the migrants at a predetermined place and share the loot. In these attacks passengers are robbed of all their money and objects of value (watches, jewellery), and sometimes are faced with violence. Yet most migrants finally do arrive at their destination. Their greatest danger is abandonment by their drivers in the desert. In fact certain drivers leave their passengers between the Aïr, the Ahaggar and the Tassilin Ajjer, telling them that within a couple of hours of walking they will reach Djanet. Although everyone involved in migration networks publicly condemned such behaviour, abandonment by drivers is not an exceptional occurrence.

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10 *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 6 September 2005.
11 Labdelaoui, Hocine, 2005: "Algérie: dimension politique et sociale des migrations", in: Fargues (see above).

12 *El Watan*, 20 April 2006.

4.4.2   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 it is open, at times partly or totally closed. The Libyan authorities constantly modify the status of the border, to the point where transporters in the border area base their activities on concrete practical possibilities rather than on official decrees. Closure of the border between Libya and the Sudan in 2003 put an end to trans-border movement there (Drozdz/Pliez 2005). This is not the case for the Nigero-Libyan connection, where traffic has never stopped, even when the border was ostensibly closed.

There are few migrants who travel legally – that is to say those who own a passport with a Libyan visa. Most people who travel do not have the necessary documents. The Saharan migration networks have developed two ways of crossing the border that cope with the vacillations in Libyan migration policy. One is to bring migrants across the border on the official route, relying on the tolerance of the Libyan government and the possibility to corrupt border police in the Libyan border post at Tumo. The other is to bring them into Libya secretly, away from all official control points, until the intended destination. The human smuggling networks use one or the other way depending on whether the Libyan authorities declare the border closed or open. The status of the border does not alter the fact that illegal crossings do occur; it just alters the way they occur. Until the early 2000s closures never lasted long and most trans-border networks could rely on their social capital to function efficiently. At the times of prohibition during the later years, personal ties with border police can facilitate a crossing.

Since 2002 the Libyan government has decided to control its borders effectively, at first in exchange for Italian support when negotiating the end of the European arms embargo (hence allowing Libya sufficient weaponry 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, their tolerance and readiness to 'be persuaded' has, however, clearly diminished. Fewer smugglers seem able to negotiate unofficial entry into Libya. Hence secrecy has become the cheapest and the most efficient way to carry out their lucrative business, but this is now riskier. In the absence of an agreement with the Libyan border police, any arrest results in imprisonment for drivers and passengers, with seizure of the truck and all the goods carried. As a result, many traders who used to carry both passengers and goods between Agadez and Sebha now concentrate on the haulage of goods from Niger to Libya. They rarely carry migrants, and then 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 terrain and its smuggling routes 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 also to staff various sectors of its economy (agriculture and construction in particular). Hence, while Libya negotiated its comeback to international diplomacy by accepting funds for increased border controls and retention camps for illegal migrants, the Libyan government had no qualms about openly encouraging labour migration from sub-Saharan Africa (Pliez 2004). Further signs of openness towards sub-Saharans include the publicity for the Libyan company Afriqiyah Airways, which links Tripoli and Benghazi with several African capitals, and the development of Pan-African organizations such as CEN-SAD. These contradictions in Libyan rhetoric and its practical application reveal Ghaddafi's ambiguous position towards migration, and the difficulty in defining an African policy after the embargo, independently of other geopolitical concerns.

In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya the tightening of migration policies has led to a change in national legislation and stricter border controls and internal security checks; these make travel and life for sub-Saharan migrants more and more dangerous and expensive. Detention and deportation of migrants has become increasingly frequent, often in conditions so deplorable that they quash all basic principles of human rights whose advocate the European Union so passionately claims to be. The impact of these policies on curbing the number of migrants nonetheless remains rather limited. An analysis of migrations between Niger, Algeria and Libya shows rather that 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. Local forms of tolerance – while diminishing in is varying degrees in both countries – indicate the need to take into account, in addition to the question of the necessary means for border surveil-

lance, the willingness and 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, Libya and Algeria have accepted several types of aid in exchange for collaboration. Sporadic arrests and collective deportations seem to correspond to ways of 'managing' foreigners in their countries, despite various international conventions, rather than to an attempt to end migration altogether. In Libya even more 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 in 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 within one continent.

4.5   The Central Sahara and the European Union: Security for Whom?

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 a priority zone in the fight against unofficial African immigration. While it is true that some of the migrants arriving illegally in Spain, France or Italy have first crossed the Sahara, only a minority of those who travel through the Sahara continue all the way to Europe, and most 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, as we have seen, 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. There is also the benefit of remittances to the communities of origins. The severe crisis that Niger experienced in 2005, for example, could be met locally by an enhanced regional seasonal labour migration that generated remittances, while decreasing temporarily the demand on local food resources (Ouma-

rou 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 necessary for survival in the Sahel belt. It has become the more significant since the political crises and subsequent economic breakdown in the Ivory Coast, the former regional pole of attraction.

The European and increasingly North African tendency to conflate all forms of human movement in the Sahara with migration aimed at Europe has a potentially devastating effect on the local economies, yet the control of unofficial immigration into Europe continues to be ineffective. Media and government reports or statistics of uncertain origins reinforce this tendency, thereby constructing an illusory 'threat of migration' which 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. This is why Europe, to fight against illegal migration from sub-Saharan Africa, encourages the countries of North Africa – and, recently those of the Sahel – firmly to control or even put a stop to all migration in the region.[13] The EU position towards Saharan migrations contradicts its own principle of mobility within its own territory, by which the circulation of people is seen as a positive factor in its own process of cultural integration and economic development. By intervening beyond its own borders to control migratory movements into its territory the EU is disrupting entire intra-African migration systems: ones which have long been an important factor of economic development in Northwest Africa while historically of little concern to Europe.

4.6   Conclusion

Approaches to Saharan migration not based on careful empirical studies in the field can obscure both the infinite variation of migratory practices in the area as well as the role they play in human survival and livelihoods. Migration systems are inherently sensitive to political changes on all levels and require understanding the conjunction of international pressures, poli-

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13 Comparing my own results with those of other researchers, and with official reports and media sources, we can estimate the total number of sub-Saharan Africans who enter Europe by maritime routes illegally in the low tens of thousands each year, at the most. This figure is very low in comparison with other migratory flows to Europe.

cies, local realities and contingencies, using an inductive method. In the Sahara regions of Niger migrations have led to the establishment of very active transport companies which function within internationalized 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 by people of nomadic tradition drawing on their technical expertise as travellers to act as guides or drivers. These movements revitalize both legal and illegal trade; they also give new life to other kinds of activities such as accommodation and telecommunications, and transform local labour markets with a supply of cheap labour. Through these economic activities, both formal and informal, and through the fees migrants pay to local state representatives, migrants import hard currency into the regional economy of Agadez, to an amount which has been estimated at several billion francs CFA annually (Brachet 2009a). It is vital to understand migration as an essential and constitutive part of local economies. Should migratory flows change direction, or borders be definitively closed, these positive effects could cease. Intensification of migrations within the Sahara in recent years has, though, been accompanied by toughened migration policies in North Africa and by an increase in the number of checkpoints on Saharan routes. The representation of the open and unlimited space of free men of the desert constructed by travel agencies does not reflect the current reality. The Sahara is actually becoming increasingly 'broken up', finely combed by the various surveillance systems which hinder free movement, making it more expensive and dangerous, slowing it down and even sometimes putting a stop to it. The 'breaking up' of Saharan space is the result of a remodelling and the multiplication of actively-controlled borders; these may be stable or temporary, mere points or lines or whole zones, and fixed in a 'space' which is mobile. Borders that are now being opened to let through material and immaterial goods are increasingly being closed to inhabitants of the poorest countries, thereby officially putting most inhabitants of the sub-Saharan region 'under house arrest'.