Here and There: Presence and Absence among Hausa migrants in Belgium and Urban Niger.

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Throughout Niger, the anthropologist willing to be introduced to a village chief, the male head of a household or any other promising informant is constantly confronted with these words: *il a voyage* (he has traveled) which possibly means that the absent is traveling to a nearby weekly market, visiting relatives in the capital city, flying to Paris or has been working abroad for the last six months.

Through his absence, our missing informant embodies an astonishing degree of mobility in the Sahelian Niger. Due to the interplay of economic migration, long-distance trade, and Islam, Southern and Central Niger witness intense population movements, at both transregional and transnational levels.

Besides human displacement, money, media and various material goods circulate through the same channels. As a result, urban and rural spaces are not only deeply connected but are also filled with material, visual and discursive fragments of 'distant elsewheres' as West African cities, Europe, North-America, Middle-East and, increasingly, Asia.

Beyond the processes of local appropriation, we have to analyze such dynamics through a ethnography that tracks the ties connecting distant places, persons and communities.

The data discussed here are parts of an ongoing doctoral research on contemporary dynamics of Hausa identities. In Niger, research has been conducted among Hausa and Tuareg migrants in the main urban centers: the capital city, Niamey and Maradi the commercial hub of Niger. Research has also been conduced and in rural areas from which some of those migrants originated, essentially in these central area. Fieldwork has also been carried out in Belgium among the Nigerien Diaspora.

Transnational Ethnography

In recent years, global cultural flows have been put in the forefront of social sciences. Since the 1960's, the accelerating circulation of migrants, commodities, technologies and media have made the core objects of anthropology (social identities, communities, cultural dynamics) seemingly non-localized, situated at the juxtaposition of multiple spaces. This increased deterritorialization of cultural processes has induced the burgeoning field of transnational studies and the rise of multi-sited ethnographies.

While diasporic studies have provided insightful ethnographic accounts about uprooted communities, their focus on permanent settlement, however, does not really capture the vibrancy of the relentless back and forth movements that define the Nigerien systems of mobility. As Lillian Trager has observed, in her work among Yoruba migrants, the migrant's very condition rests on « multilocality ».

As we shall see, migrants, despite distance and absence, continue to be active in their homelands through flows of gifts, money, information, and strategies of land occupation. Concurrently, abroad and through similar mediations, the daily life-worlds of migrants are pervaded by their hometowns, at emotional and cognitive levels.

Furthermore, until very recently, transnational studies have tended to reproduce a long-standing « West vs. the Rest » model. For example, « African modernities » have essentially been studied as the African understandings and appropriations of cultural flows originating from the West. Such a focus leads to overlook the intense cultural flows that take place within and between non-Western countries. Non-Western locations shape Nigerien imaginations, practices and landscapes as much as the West does.

Circulations

We should also avoid the idea that cultural flows and human mobility are byproducts of Western technological advances, such as road or air transportation. It seems that Sahelian spaces of Niger have always been shaped by circulations of people, goods and ideas, i.e. semi-nomadic displacements of herders, migrations due to droughts and food shortages, or networks of the Transsaharian trade through which slaves, merchants, kola nuts and Islamic notions were circulating.

Asia

Nigerien landscapes are increasingly fashioned by flows of people, goods and images emanating from Asia as illustrated by the huge popular success of Indian films, the establishment of Chinese and Korean trade communities, and the subsequent opening of « Chinese stores ». Nigerien markets and stores are filled with Chinese commodities such as green tea, motorcycles and those Chinese enamels bowls that, nowadays, are highly culturally invested since they are a central part of the bride 's dowry and have become a keystone in the female economies of social distinction.

Imagining the Middel-East

Besides Asia, the Middle-East, as imagined world of both economic prosperity and Islamic morality, is nowadays central in Nigerien popular culture: corner stores and barber shops

called *Dubai stores* or *Al-Qaida*, brand new Mosques funded by Saudi-Arabia or the somewhat generalization of the Saudi-like *Hijab*.

Furthermore, a material culture of the Islamic display is becoming the main aesthetic in Nigerien cities. Such artifacts are sold in specialized *boutiques*, along with Wahhabi literature, prayer rugs, alcohol free perfumes or the audiotapes that loudly broadcast sermons throughout the cities.

These commodities materialize a recent « Islamic turn » in the Hausa dynamics of identity. While Islam has been associated to Hausa people for centuries, it has been recently put in the forefront of « Hausaness », to the extent that being Hausa nowadays is said to mean firstly being a true Muslim, namely a conservative one. This Islamic revival is exemplified by the enforcement of Sharia law in the Hausa states of Northern Nigeria in the late 1990's, and in Niger by the rise of *Izala,* a reformative Islamic movement close to Saudi Wahhabism.

Such identity shifts are largely shaped by the flows of people linking the Niger to the Middle East. Since the 1970's, Hausa theologians have been increasingly associated to their Arab counterparts by intellectual exchanges. Moreover, thanks to cheaper air transportation, wealthy Hausa merchants have increasingly gone on pilgrimage to Mecca whence they returned with the prestigious title *Alhaji*.

Besides piousity, this title is closely linked to trade as it embodies wealth and success in business. Pilgrims have to materialize their new status by flows of goods and gifts brought back from Mecca: Keffiehs, *Hidjabs* other clothes imported from Arab and Asian Islamic countries*,* decorated hanging walls of the Great Mosque as well as expensive brand new mobile phones, laptops, DVD or MP3 players.

These dynamics highlight how closely Islam and trade have been, and still are, interrelated in Sahelian Africa. Merchants and traders are actually particularly efficient in spreading reformist Islam. While they are promoting a lifestyle, they are also importing and selling the commodities which permit to enact it.

Nigerien Islamic revival also highlights how cultural forms and ideologies may circulate along with artifacts to materialize them, and with people to sell them.

The Exodus

Hausa people are closely associated to the activity of trade to the extent that, in many parts of Africa, any Sahelian merchant is called « Hausa », regardless of whether he does or not speak Hausa. Hausa people are well know for having shaped vast diasporic networks of trade-oriented communities throughout West Africa and, more recently, and at a lower level, in Europe and North-America.

The *Zongo*, the Hausa enclave in foreign cities, such as those of Ibaban, Lomé, or even New York City, is a quite familiar anthropological object.

The specificity of the Hausa mobilities, however, does not lie so much in these permanent settlements as in seasonal and circular movements. The *zongo* is the material and social infrastructure that allows the back and forth circulation of migrants.

Let's now turn towards this highly prominent form of Sahelian mobility : the circular labor migration, know as l'*exode* in Nigerien french.

These migrations are based on the periodicity of Sahelian agriculture: in late October, at the beginning of the dry season after the crops are harvested, thousands of men and women leave their village to work in West African cities. They come back between May and June, at the beginning of the rainy season. This close relationship between farming and migration periodicities tends nowadays to fade since the *exodus* becomes longer. Besides the main cities of Niger, Hausa migrants' destinations are Kano (the Hausa metropolis of Northern Nigeria), or coastal cities such as Lagos, Abidjan or Lomé.

It seems that this system of mobility dates back to the early years of the XX century and had partly begun as a response to the European colonial rule.

Except among the Bororo, or bush Fulani herders, the exodus has always been an essentially masculine practice. Recent years however have witnessed its somewhat feminization, notably with the intensification of pilgrimage to Mecca. Young women may take the *Hadji,* a permissible female mobility, as an opportunity to live and earn money in Mecca or Dubai, working as prostitute or domestic employee for a couple of years.

Abroad, the first order of business of newcomers is to find other Nigeriens and, then, fellows from their hometowns, or extended families. Migrants need to be integrated in social networks through which information about job and lodging opportunities circulates, and through which they can meet wealthy Hausa merchants willing to establish patron-client relationships.

These networking dynamics explain the ethnic and regional specialization of migrants' destinations and livelihoods. Years after years, the *exodants*' material worlds remain unchanged: the very same neighborhoods, where they build straw-houses in unoccupied spaces, and the very same economic activities, such as night guard, sale of clothes, cigarettes or tea, coffee and breakfast from street tables for the men, and food preparation, millet pounding, sale of milk or prostitution for the women.

The *exodus* is rationalized as a means of « seeking money » and « eating the dry season », that is to conserve food supplies in the village where the money saved in the city is sent back and

invested in agriculture. Due to the decline of West African economies, however, few *exodants* are actually able to accumulate savings. Besides economical strategies, the *exodus* is closely associated with issues of personal desire, agency and identity. *Exodants* leave their villages because they feel that « *One cannot become someone there, there is no work and nothing to do in the village. You can just sit in the dust and wait* ».

For the young men, the *exodus* is an opportunity to shape and enact desired identities through the accumulation of material, social and religious capital. When abroad, most of the *exodants* experience difficult material conditions and very low social status. These feelings of privation and devalorization are, however, understood as transitory since their desires and life-worlds remain oriented towards their home, and shaped in anticipation of their return.

The road home is rendered possible by the accumulation of financial resources and material goods that have to be displayed and distributed. The savings are not so much invested in the agriculture than spent to fulfill obligations towards relatives, neighbors and village aristocracy and to buy gifts such as radiocassettes, CD or MP3 players, clothes, shoes, perfumes, or jewelry. Such goods, circulating in the village, shape their owner's prestige and social status.

Without such materialities, the *exodant* may feel too shameful to take the road home. The *exodants* may also choose to stay abroad for years, if their business is particularly successful. Such settled migrants maintain close relationships with their villages through visits from family and friends, through return trips, and through flows of gifts and money.

Through such circulations distant locations are brought into close juxtaposition. In the village, these distant cities are rendered present through the flows of goods, money and narratives which originate from them. They become integral part of the local social lives and mental landscapes. Those left in the villages, such as wives, children or elderlies, may project their desires on the imagined realities of prosperity carefully constructed through the migrants' narratives.

Social shifts, or disruptions, may also follow the trails created by the *exodants'* seasonal movements, such as those tensions resulting from the introduction of Wahhabi conceptions and practices in rural areas by migrants who had returned from Northern Nigeria. Mobility may also mediate identity strategies. For example, among the Tuaregs, seasonal migration concerns essentially young men from the lower social classes, who are considered as slaves. The seasonal migration may become a means of passive resistance against the domination of aristocracy, mediate attempts to acquire a better social status.

Nigerien Presence in Belgium

In the last 20 years, due to cyclic droughts, periodic food shortages, economic and politic disruptions Nigerien mobilities have spread towards Europe. Nigerien migration to Belgium is a quite recent and marginal phenomenon. According to the estimations of migrants'organizations, the Nigerien community in Belgium is essentially located in Brussels, roughly made out of 1000 people whose 75 percent are men.

Two groups have to be distinguished: a minority of students, those stay is channeled by academic networks, and a majority of migrant workers, that is asylum seekers in process or refused asylum seekers who have chosen to stay illegally in Belgium.

Two Nigerien migrants'associations have shapes networks of social and financial networks of solidarity. They organize also cultural events, parties and provide administrative help in the legal procedures towards regularization. Since the Nigerien migration to Belgium is a quite recent phenomenon, however, the Nigerien associative world is weakly organized and less active than the ones of other African communities.

Besides organization, the Mosque may constitute an important locus of socialization for migrants and a shelter against loneliness

The Nigerien presence in Brussels shows an ethnic polarization. The Hausa networks spread towards different neighborhoods and livelihoods than the Tuareg and Fulani ones, oriented towards the sale of craft. Tuareg and Fulani migrant tends to develop close relationships with Europeans whereas Hausa have little, if any. As we shall see, their life-worlds are essentially oriented towards West Africa.

The circulation of people and goods towards Niger is a prominent concern in this Hausa Diaspora in Belgium, particularly among illegal workers. None of them seems willing to settle permanently in Belgium. They seek regularization to allow the back and forth dynamics of circular migration to spread towards Europe.

Their aspiration is to return home as soon as possible, that is with enough savings to launch an economic activity in Niger, such as a bush taxi business. They actually feel trapped in Brussels: due to expensive living costs and lack of real economic opportunities, they are unable to save as much money as expected. Furthermore, due to European immigration politics, a short return trip is not an option. Migrants are aware that they will never be allowed to return to Europe, if they ever go back home. They therefore extent their stay in Belgium for years. Some, too embarrassed not to have succeeded, had chosen to cut loose all the connections linking them to their homes and families. Such cases remain rare however.

Illegal migrants workers tend to reproduce West African patterns of migration in Europe. Some of them humorously tell that their very first concern in Brussels was to find someone

with black skin, and to ask him where Muslim Nigeriens are to be found. After a first night usually spent sleeping at the railway station, they are eventually oriented towards the neighborhood where the Nigeriens Hausa live and work.

Whereas migrants depict their cities and villages as places of vibrant social life, endless chatting among friends and dense networks of solidarity, they describe Brussels as a cold succession of people locked up in their houses or rooms. While this view reflects indeed an idealization of home, it also captures something of the migrants' everyday life, due to disorienting public spaces and lack of social interaction migrants experience very small worlds. The Hausa migrants' cognitive map of Brussels is strikingly limited, event after several years of stay. For most of them, livelihoods, lodgings and social life are confined to a few streets of southern Brussels, where they hang around a Mosque, a Nigerien restaurant that opened two years ago, a weekly open-air market, and the garages and warehouses where they work.

This neighborhood is the hub of a used Europeans car traffic to West Africa, in which Nigerien Hausa merchants play an important role. The Belgian trips of these Alhazai are limited to a few weeks and to business purposes. The used cars are not neither the only nor the main source of financial income. The cars are filled with used goods to be sold in Nigerien markets and boutiques: used mattresses, old televisions, Hi-Fi equipments, or domestic appliances such as fridges and ovens. For most Hausa migrants in Brussels, economic and social success depends on having links to those Nigerien merchants and positioning themselves as middlemen in their trade networks linking Brussels and Niger.

Whereas most migrants, due to their material conditions and irregular situations, cannot afford to use the legal money transfer system, the back and forth movements of the car trade offer them the opportunity to send money and gifts home. Through relentless circulation of people, goods and information, these migrants' daily life-worlds are literally covered with Sahelian dust. Their identities are neither in Belgium nor in Niger but in the very channels connecting them. Most of them actually live in warehouses they rent to store their commodities, that is they live surrounded by goods about to be sent to Niger.

Distributions

Due to displacement, migrants have to shape new material relationships to those left behind.

In Belgium, Nigerien migrants send roughly 30 to 45 % of their monthly financial income to Niger. Besides the basic needs of the household, much of these remittances are used to fulfill solidarity or social obligations, such as participation to marriage, baptism, or funeral ceremonies. These remittances are social investments to keep up a network of social relations.

They are also ascribed with powerful affective meanings and values. Requests for money are integral part of migrants' everyday lives. Due to unrealistic visions of the West in rural Niger, they are imagined as bridges to endless material wealth.

The most well-off migrants may also mediate their presence by strategies of land occupation. Throughout Niger, rural and urban spaces are filled with empty houses built by natives settled abroad or in another city. Officially built for retirement, these houses objectify their owner's personhood and, by their size or luxury, materialize his wealth and social efficiency.

These empty houses are also means of social control since they are not so empty. They may be used to maintain, over distance, a network of dependents, such as those unpaid guards whose families are allowed to inhabit the yard, or those relatives facing difficulties to whom the house is lent. These « not so empty » houses may also be used to host prestigious guests and strangers, such as urban or Europeans visitors. While doing fieldwork in a rural area, I was myself host in the empty house of a former Prime Minister, a native of the town who has settled in the capital. The house was of an impressive size and its walls were ornamented with effigies of its owner. Except for a living room wealthily equipped, it was totally empty. The yard was occupied by several mud brick rooms where young single men were living. They were not allowed into the main house and were working for the owner in exchange of the free lodging.

In Belgium, migrants express painful feelings of uprootness, loneliness and lack of close relationships. For those who can afford it, e-mails, e-chat and cell-phones, are intensely used to fight these feelings. Facing uprootness, migrants may also invest emotionally their identities in material objects that become fragments of their homelands, objectifications of their beloved ones. The fabric of certain clothes, the taste of some meals, the sound of Hausa tracks or the use of the mementoes that their wives gave them, are means of re-enchanting the everyday. Migrants use them to act on their own cognitive dispositions in order to shape an intimate sphere that reproduces the taste, the sound and the touch of their homes.

Experiences of displacement – as migration, exile or Diaspora – strengthen the power of objects to embody personal and collective memories, and to mediate cultural identities.

This material culture circulates continuously through networks of exchange. For the Nigerien settled in Brussels, any departure for the country, i.e. a fellow returning back home, a merchant or an inquisitive anthropologist – is an opportunity to pack and send parcels of jewelry, perfume, cosmetics, cell phones or money to those left behind. Symmetrically, the reverse movements permit to fill the migrant's everyday life with photos, decorative artifacts, audiotapes, Hausa records and movies, or spices and aliments. Besides the survival strategy

cliché, these transnational channels of migration allow the circulation of an economy of leisure, intimacy and attachment.

Conclusion

Hausa mobilities highlight the extent to which cultural landscapes are shaped by the circulation of people and objects. The dynamics of Hausa identities have never been confined to their « Hausaland » in what is now Northern Nigeria and Southeastern Niger. They are located in the diasporic communities spread throughout West Africa, in the *exodants*' back and forth movements, and scattered all along the *Haji* route to Mecca. They are also located at the vending tables of the Harlem market, in the circulation of Saudi capitals filling the Sahel with brand new Mosques, and in the flows of used cars, electronic appliances and mattresses linking Anderlecht and Niamey through the ports of Antwerp and Cotonou.

Experiences of migration highlight how local realities and identities cannot be understood without taking into account the mediated presence of other places. A rural household's house, an urban yard, or an individual room bring into close juxtaposition distant locations. These spaces are the locus towards which many other times, places, and agencies converge. Symmetrically, these local sites are themselves multilocals and distributed around in time and space. As anthropologists facing such dynamics, we need more than a multi-sited ethnography, we need to understand how the sites are actually connected through material relationships. The French social theorist Bruno Latour has recently advanced, in a semi-metaphorical sense, that we have to re-assemble the social by following the vehicles that are shaping it. In regard to the astonishing degree of mobility throughout Nigerien landscapes, I would like to take Latour's statement literally and stress the need for an ethnography of the social trails left by donkey carts, automobiles, bush taxis, import-export trucks or *Hadji* airplanes.