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Mobility, transnational connections and sociocultural change in contemporary Africa

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SAHARIAN “BORDERLINE”- STRATEGIES:

TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY OF TUAREG (ISHUMAR) BETWEEN NIGER, ALGERIA AND LIBYA

Ines Kohl

Mobility is nothing new for the Sahara. The Sahara exhibits a dynamic variety of historical and recent relations between Maghreb and Sahel and is characterized by the movements of people, goods and ideas over all decades (Marfaing, Wippel 2004).

Transnational mobility or transregional mobility as well is nothing new for the Sahara, as far as the whole area is the pasturing radius of nomadic societies.

The recent transnational mobility of Tuareg however is a relatively new phenomenon. It resulted not only from climatic crisis (droughts) and political and economically disastrous situation in their countries of origin, but also a consequence of a certain ideology, which encourages young people to break out their nomadic surrounding and head especially to Algeria and to Libya.

The recent transnational mobility of Tuareg is no cyclic “traditional” movement of nomads with their livestock, but deals with situational border crossings of “new, modern” nomads, who move within the Libyan-Algerian-Nigerian borderland without papers, passport or identity cards. The actors operate beyond national loyalties, cross state borders illegally and use certain strategies of avoidance in order to pursue their activities of trading, smuggling and migrating (Kohl 2007, 2008).

In the following explanations I will describe (1) the transnational mobility, I will (2) identify the several strategies Tuareg use in order to move freely in the borderland and I will point out (3) the changings in their conceptions of norms and values.

The group of Tuareg I am dealing with is called Ishumar. The term derives from the French “chômeur”, unemployed person, and describes those Tuareg who gave up their nomadic life and went to the surrounding neighbouring states, above all to Algeria and Libya, to look for a job. Today,

Ishumar refers to a generation of borderliners whose living conditions have created special strategies. “The anthropological term borderliner designates something entirely different from the borderliner syndrome in psychiatry. The psychiatric technical deals with a certain pathological symptoms in individuals. The anthropological term, on the other hand, designates groups of people, who live on state borders and who specialize in benefiting from crossing these borders on a regular basis” (Kohl 2008 i.pr.).

1. Transnational mobility

The unique form of mobility Ishumar undertake, can be summarized as following: “It can go in all directions, is temporally variable and adapted to individual taste. If one assumes an Ashamur in Sebha (Libya), he emerges in Ghat (Libya). Here he remains for several weeks or month before he turns to Djanet (Algeria), returns somewhat later again, moves to Agadez (Niger) and works finally for a couple of month in Tripolis or Benghazi (Libya). His property fits in a small bag. Accommodation he gets with other Ishumar who live in families or house-similar structures. His passion is satisfied by roaring music cassettes, whose e-guitar sounds deals with the Sahara, the isolation, the far away living love. He is coming and leaving without lare announcement, one day here, the other there.” (Kohl 2008:99)

The Triangle-Villages Ghat in Libya, Djanet in Algeria and Arlit in Niger are outstanding corners in the new created inner-saharian space of agency. All this three borderland-villages inherit a central position from which the “off-road” (*afrod*) routes begin and end. From a nation-state point of view, all three places are peripheral settlements on the edges of states. In the context of this recently emerged sphere of action, however, Arlit, Ghat, and Djanet move into a central position. The Toyota Station, a Toyota pickup setting forth on the journey across the Sahara fully laden with passengers, is characteristic of this traffic.

Starting point for the three to ten days trip through the Sahara is Arlit, a dusty artificially created settlement which was built up from nothing in the course of the uranium discovies in the 1960ies. In the first years of the uranium findings Arlit was called the “deuxième Paris” (the second Paris). Europeans trained the mine workers, Sahara tourists crossed the city, and so-called “stolen car dealers” hauling their old Peugeots across the Sahara to sell them in West Africa, contributed to the hustle and bustle in the city. Today there is little to nothing left of this flair. The Europeans have retreated from the mine, leaving trained Hausa engineers, individual Sahara tourism was redirected due to restrictions by the respective states. The inner-Saharan borders are no longer free and permeable, but instead they are now barriers blocked by EU sanctions in the fight against illegal migration.

Although Arlit is located in the middle of the traditional territory of the Tuareg, the majority of its population consists of Hausa who hold the entire administration of the city and are more likely to benefit from government subsidies. However, one activity exclusively practiced by the Ishumar which also allowed them to distinguish themselves is the *afrod* business in the inner-Saharan area of action and movement between Niger, Algeria, and Libya.

In the centre of Arlit, across from the “Gendarmarie Nationale“, there is a small mud house with a straw porch, from which a sign displaying “Arlit – Tibarakaten” is hanging. That is the *tasha*, the stop for the *afrod* traffic. In the windowless hut a completely veiled man is sitting at an old desk. A list with the current fares is glued onto the desk, neatly covered in plastic. From here tickets to Djanet or Ghat can be purchased, the amount paid, and one’s name is recorded in a book. Subsequently, one is assigned a driver, an *afrodeur*, whom one approaches at night and, together with 20 or 30 other passengers, one embarks on the trip to Libya or Algeria. The *tasha* came into existence to the knowledge of the local authorities to minimize fatalities in the Sahara. Particularly during the summer months, the poorly equipped and overloaded vehicles were accident-prone, so that many passengers died in the Sahara. In addition, there are some irresponsible *afrodeurs* merely interested in profit who make particularly sub-Saharan migrants get off long before the destination and make them continue on foot. Since the passengers are often only equipped with a five litre canister of water, many got lost and died of thirst en route.

This Trans-Sahara route is organized by Ishumar, who have the geographical knowledge of the region, who inherit more or less well equipped 4 wheel cars and who know how to deal with the national restrictions (we will speak of that in the second part). The borderland between Libya, Algeria and Niger became the new space of agency for Ishumar and refers to the mobility of men and women equally. Men are heading to Libya or Algeria in search of work, women cross the Sahara to visit their relatives, old women climb up a Toyota to stay in contact with their children in migration, and young boys dream of a better life in Libya.

But not exclusively Ishumar move in that area. Those Sub-Saharans who cross Libya with the aim of reaching Europe, rely on the ways and transportation facilities of the Ishumar. The fact that this new transit passage gains an ever increasing importance recently was noticed by officials of the European Union. The EU exploit Libya as a European guard in order to stop the illegal migration.

Here we reach a point the European Union ignores completely. The illegal migration to Libya concerns two completely different strategies and actors: Ishumar move for years without papers in the knowledge of the several governments through the borders. But in contrast to the other Sub-Saharan migrants they stay in Libya or Algeria and move just in their created borderland. So I would name their mobility as a “trans-regional” mobility and not a “trans-national” one. The EU however does not

differentiate between potential Europe-migrants and local borderliner. The consequences of that nonreflected and inconsiderated politic effects the strategies of Ishumar who cross the borders in order to get a better living opportunity away from poverty, repression and marginalization. (Kohl 2008:93f.)

2. Borderline - Strategies

I have already mentioned, that Ishumar have certain strategies in dealing with the illegal border crossings and in avoiding national loyalties. Apart from geographic knowledge, and a certain know-how how to survive in arid areas, I would like to mention 2 major strategies:

1. Use of kinship affiliation:

Ishumar can count on their tribal affiliations, on kinship and social and trade networks which have formed across ethnic boundaries, and nations (Giuffrida i.pr.). In crossing borders illegally they profit from information of several kins working as militaries, police men or border guards. They tell them when to go, which route to take, or just let you pass without papers, just because they are both Tuareg. Let me clarify this point with Aghalis words:

“The last time I came from Niger via Algeria to Libya, I walked the last kilometers to the Libyan border by myself, when Libyan border patrols seized me and asked me where I wanted to go. I told them that I was Targi, coming from Algeria and that I wanted to go to Libya. The officer asked me, if I had documents. I answered him that I didn’t, as this was my country, after all. The officer nodded – he had two badges on his shoulder! – and said in Tamasheq ‘yes, you are right’. He asked me to get onto his Toyota, brought me to the official border post, gave me water to drink and said good bye.” Aghali laughs, “they are also just Tuareg, who serve at the border!”

2. Use of national identities:

Additionally to kinship affiliations national identities play a major role. All of Tuareg inhabited countries (Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya) start to count their population and equip them with identity cards and passports with relatively little effort. Ishumar use that system widely and organize themselves in all of these countries id-cards, but: with different names, and varying birth dates. The increasing effort of the governments to integrate pastoral nomads in their state system is used by Ishumar for their object and meanwhile most Ishumar posses several citizenships and a wide variety of different identity-creating cards. Let me clarify this point as well by an example: Hamidan is born in Niger, working in Libya and married in Algeria. He has two Nigerian birth certificates with different names and dates of birth, a Nigerien passport, and a proof of Libyan Citizenship with another name. Depending on where he goes, he pulls the respective document out of his pocket. When he goes to Algeria, he leaves all papers at home, for “if the police catch you, it is better that they catch you without documents and deport you to wherever you want to go...,” Hamidan laughs.

Providing evidence of birth for a nomadic society born into the desert without exact references in terms of time and place, and recording an identity based on nation states and citizenship for people scattered across five nations and moving about these borderlands without documents, has become a necessity in an age of states, borders, and control. Yet, Ishumar move beyond this global system and transcend national loyalties, without destroying or undermining these (see Kohl 2007:167 et seqq.). However, Ishumar are not only those who circumvent national loyalties, but also those who supersede traditional standards and values. And that leads us to my third and last point:

3. Changing norms and values

One major characteristic of Ishumar is their dichotomy in their own perceptions: On the one hand Ishumar tend to identify themselves with a glorifying image like Ibrahim expresses: “We Ishumar are the only ones who still have freedom. We permanently move between Niger, Algeria, and Libya. Once you have got to know this life, you can’t go back anymore. We are free“.

On the other hand a negative perception of the Ishumar is gaining acceptance, which concerns men and women alike. Ishumar are those young people who are migrating and acting beyond the traditional norms and values. For the most part they refuse to work, live for the moment without being worried about their future, and completely forget their parents, siblings, and relatives. They are predominantly unmarried men and women, who do not need to take care of anybody, who do not have any responsibilities or plans for the future, and who spend their income, provided they have one, immediately on desirable beautiful things (Kohl i.pr.).

Moussa describes his generation like this:

“Ishumar, those are the people who are moving permanently (*tekle ras*). If it occurs to them to go, they shoulder their bag and they are gone. And nobody knows where they go. Ishumar are of no use (*wurelen faida*), they don’t have any work (*wurelen eshu’l*), always live alone (*yegawar rasnet*), forget their parents and siblings, and they are always chasing after women (*eran tjadoden woullen*). They are not included in the calculation of parents, marriage, and their people, they scrounge through life, only sit around the whole day, drink tea, and listen to tapes. The same applies to Tishumar, the women. They spend a few days in Tripolis, then travel to Ghat, and eventually you will find them in Sebha, where they are staying with friends or relatives. Their parents don’t know anything about them, weddings between Ishumar happen without their parents’ knowing and often without following Muslim customary law (*tamerkest*). The number of their illegitimate children increases and they don’t have any prospects for the future.”

An expression of this changing norms and values is their dress code. A correctly wrapped *tagelmust* or *eshesh*, the man’s face veil, is not only a sign of adulthood, a symbol of belonging to a cultural unit,

and a representation towards outside, but rather also an expression of social norms. The Chèch can be understood as a conception of social distance and degree of respect (Keenan 2004, Claudot-Hawad 1993:36). It is important that the Chèch covers the forehead, ears, and the mouth. In the past, men pulled their *tagelmust* in front of the mouth, so that only the eyes remained visible, and did not even take it off when eating and drinking. Today, this is only done by a few old men.

Particularly young Ishumar refuse the traditional way of wearing the Chèch. “In red, yellow, pink, or orange, combined with sunglasses, jeans, and leather jacket, casually worn around the shoulder, or boldly combined with hairstyles, the Chèch has become a fashion accessory of the new Ishumar generation” (Kohl 2007:152). The symbolic meaning of the *tagelmust* has disappeared. The Chèch serves them as an expression of attractiveness. “Men call the veil pretty and remark they feel more attractive to women when veiled” (Rasmussen 1991:108).

The changing ideologies of Ishumar is expressed by a certain kind of music: guitar. The Ishumar have discovered acoustic and electric guitars, synthesizers, and turntables and in this way have chosen a new form of presenting their identity. Their rhythmical texts express protest against the status quo, criticise the system, tell about old times, call for preserving one’s heritage, sing about the infiniteness of the Sahara, and pick their live-circumstances out as a central theme. (Kohl 2007:154). Being a guitarist, like the heroes of music Abdallah Oumbadougou, Kheddo, Hasso or the group Tinariwen, is the hope of lots of young Ishumar in order to escape their poverty.

The Ishumar’s way of life oscillates between tradition and modernity, and its hard to catch them in terms. Are Ishumar modern nomads, because they move irregularly and according to individual taste in the Libyan-Algerian-Nigerian-Malian borderland? Are they cosmopolitans, because they are diaspora people, exiles and migrants who are at the same time victims of modernity? Or are they simple Vagabonds, because of their lack of morals, norms and values? This is a question I will deal in a recently starting project. But one point is still clear: Ishumar use creative strategies in order to pursuit to partake in a globalized world and by their transnational mobility they embody a certain elite of society.

Conclusion

Let me come finally to some concluding remarks. With my Tuareg-Ishumar-Borderliner-example today I would like to emphasize that (see Hahn & Klute 2008:9ff.):

- Transnational mobility is not structured by push- and pull factors only and are just the result of socio-structural factors, but the movements are perceived as decisions of migrants themselves, who often embody a certain elite of society and incorporate cosmopolitan ideals. Transnational mobility is agency.

- Transnational mobility is not an exception in “normal” life and the opposite of sedentary ways of living, but becomes the “rule” and embodies “normality” – especially on the African continent, where mobility has a high degree. Transnational mobility is normal.
- Transnational mobility is not a disturbing effect like the EU indicates, but part of the “African” Cultures. One just has to distinguish between the different forms of mobility-strategies. Transnational mobility is culture.

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