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# **Constructions of territoriality in the Sahara: the transformation of spaces of transit**

**Julien Brachet**

## **Abstract**

In the Sahara, African migrants on their way to Libya or Europe develop a specific form of territoriality based on their apprehension of the 'otherness' and the 'exteriority' of the geographical environment they transit. The territorial constructions which are the result of this contribute to the transformation of the way such spaces of transit work as much as the activities that take place in these oases and the infrastructures that emerge in response to the increased trans-Saharan traffic. The analysis of the construction of the territoriality of migrants during their arrival and stay in Agadez and during their subsequent passage through the erg of Ténéré thus allows to study how the migratory streams going through the Sahara leave their socio-spatial imprint on oases of transit.

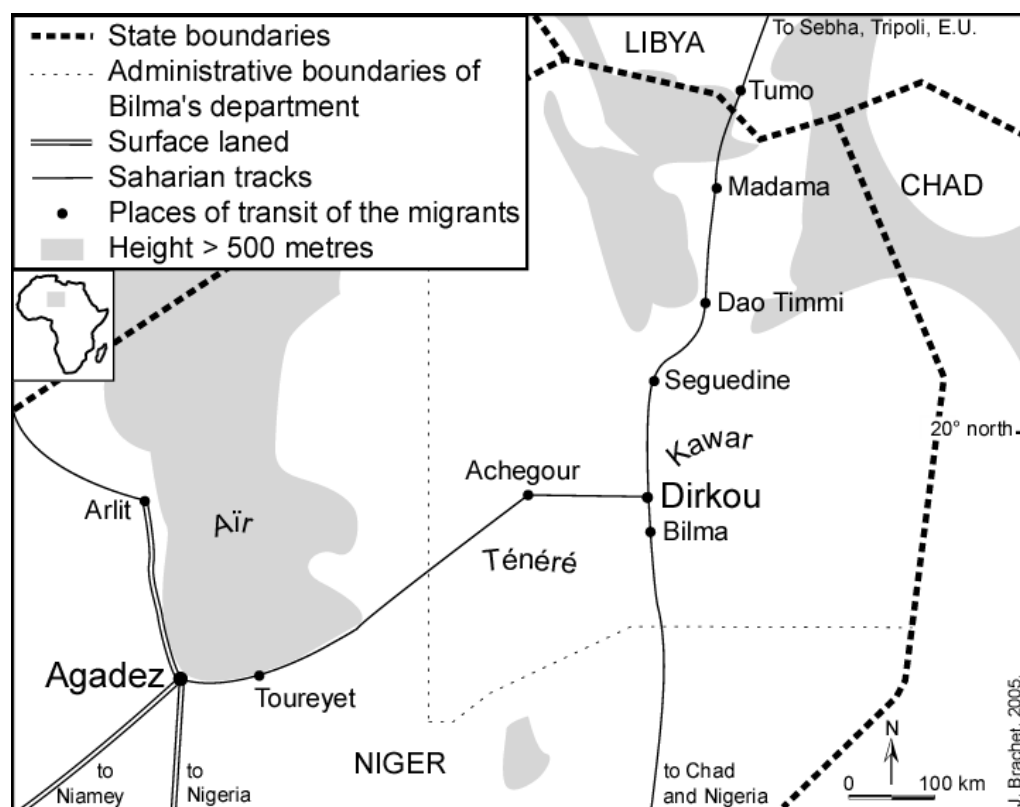
## **Introduction**

Since the official opening of the Nigerien-Libyan border at the beginning of the 1990's the number of migrants passing through Niger from sub-Saharan Africa and bound for Libya and Europe, has massively increased. Since then, several ten thousand migrants cross the Sahara along the axis connecting Agadez with the Libyan Fezzan each year, making this route one of the main of transit routes through the Sahara.<sup>1</sup> As a corollary, networks specialised in the transportation of the migrants through the desert have emerged since. They not only support this human traffic, but also reflect the importance of transit migration. At the same time, the Nigerien authorities increased the number of agents (soldiers, gendarmes, policemen, custom officers) present in the zone, officially to control the movements of people passing this way. However, in spite of the presence of State officials and the development of specialised transportation networks, the Saharan route

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<sup>1</sup> Although the migratory streams passing by this way seem to have decreased since 1999, several thousand of migrants still use this route every year. However, due to the "undocumented nature" of the flows and the absence of any monitoring mechanisms, it is difficult to quantify this secret human traffic.

among Agadez and Libya is still particularly hard and dangerous and is dreaded by migrants en route.



Map 1: Routes of trans-Saharan migrations in Niger

In a general context marked by increased exchanges and the pervasiveness of political and geographic constraints on movement, the question of the dynamic links between the migratory traffic and migrants' changing relationship to their new environment seems particularly interesting. Aiming at a global understanding of the Euro-African migratory space, the article focuses on the formation, the emerging structural features and the functioning of the transit spaces situated along the migratory routes of the Sahara.

Since the beginning of the 1990's, the permanent presence of numerous migrants in certain "relay-oases" of the Central Sahara, such as Dirkou's [cf. map 1], strongly contributed to the spatial transformation of these places. The specific notions of territoriality which migrants develop during the Saharan stage of their journey, which in turn is based on specific understandings of the natural and human environments they cross, has a

profound impact on the way these oases are organised and re-organised in response to migration as spaces of transit. The article thus seeks to analyse the evolution of major oases as places of transit. It does so under the perspective of the territoriality of migrants, in order to shed light on the various relationships between migration and space. In so doing, it addresses a major gap in research on spatiality and territoriality, which usually focuses on the point of departure and/ or countries of reception of migrants.<sup>2</sup>

I will focus on the impact of trans-Saharan migratory movements on the functioning of oasis as spaces of transit by first analysing the mechanisms of construction of the territoriality of the migrant populations at Agadez, an important crossroads and the first stage of the trans-Saharan route. Then I will go on to analyse the second stage of the journey - the trip through the Ténéré desert – and will investigate the particular constructions of territoriality in Dirkou, an oasis halfway through between Agadez and the Niger-Libyan border region. Then, I will analyse how migrants' way of life and their original territorial constructions influenced the evolution of Dirkou and its structurization as a space of transit. Finally, the various linkages between the various territories which make up the oases will be analysed.<sup>3</sup>

### **Territoriality of migrants in the Sahara : construction and specificities**

Many sub-Saharan migrants on their way to Libya or Europe pass through Agadez city<sup>4</sup> as the last stage before crossing the Sahara. They generally arrive on this South bank of the Sahara using regular means of transport

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<sup>2</sup> "Dans l'étude de la circulation migratoire, les Anglo-saxons mènent l'analyse du point de vue du pays d'origine alors que la plupart des chercheurs français l'abordent à partir des migrants installés définitivement dans leur pays d'accueil, et qui circulent entre leur pays d'accueil et d'origine." [MA MUNG, HILY, DORAI, 1998, 2].

<sup>3</sup> This work is based on elements resulting from empirical researches made in Niger between 2003 and 2005. The main places of study were the city of Agadez, the oases of Dirkou, Bilma and Ségédine, and the main means of transport (pick-up and lorries) for crossings of the Ténéré. Information provided by migrants on French was translated by Mr Joseph Vallot and the author.

<sup>4</sup> Agadez's population was estimated at 49 424 inhabitants in 1988 and at 78 289 inhabitants in 2001; but several districts of the city were not listed during the last census (RGPH on 2001).

(taxis and buses) and often are indistinguishable from other passengers. Nevertheless the foreign origin of migrants<sup>5</sup> may at times be more obvious. More visible migrants are often treated differently from other passengers by the police or by carriers at their entry into Niger or at during their transit through Niamey or Tahoua, but in a less marked and less violent way compared to the treatment migrants may be subject to in Agadez:

"You go back at five o'clock in the evening to the auto station of Niamey. Here in Niamey you ask people for the fare: "how much is it"? You get the fare from here [Niamey] to Agadez. I paid the gari, two Lahda's cups [powdered milk], the twenty-litre tins and a small one of five litres. At the auto station people say, that in Agadez it's the desert, that there is no water over there. You must pay for the tin. It doesn't take fifty minutes in Niamey, you pay for the ticket, the fare for Agadez is FCFA 11,250.<sup>6</sup> We slept in Tahoua. At five o'clock in the morning the car left. We travelled all day. Before entering Agadez, there is a big "visa" signboard, it's a police camp. Small policemen come. There were two Senegalese in the car, me and another Senegalese, plus three Ghanaians, and some Nigeriens. The policemen stopped us, they searched our shoes for pistols and knives. They said we each had to pay FCFA 10,000 and the driver was told to continue. In the beginning one refused but they said by force he would pay. Then we paid and we returned into the city. It's not far to the coach station, it's three kilometres. We got off from the vehicle. As for me, I had another FCFA 10,000 left. 10,000 there... I wanted to phone. In the coach station people of Agadez said that if your money is finished, you must phone to your parents because here there is no work, you can't earn enough money to continue to Libya. You can't."

Badio Fati, Senegalese - Niamey, on December 17, 2003.

### **Foreign being and traveller in Agadez**

When migrants arrive at the checkpoint of Agadez city, they are tracked down by the policemen who order them to get off from the vehicles and take their identity cards to control them. To recover their documents and to enter the city, they have to pay a (negotiable) sum ranging from some

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<sup>5</sup> In Niger, migrants are generally called *exodants*, *passagers* or *rakab* (deriving from the Arabic root *rakib* indicating those that take a mode of movement). Frequently, also the expression *yan tafia* (in Hawsa language "those leaving") is used .

<sup>6</sup> Franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine (XOF). 10,000 Franc CFA are approximately € 15.

thousands to more than 20,000 FCFA. The level of the bribe, however, does not directly depend on whether individual was in an irregular situation or not:

"When you are a foreigner in Niger, you are a nuisance, even though you have your papers, even though you respect everyone, you are charged and searched and people raise money from you and take it from you... it isn't fair. Sometimes even you get hit..."

Comment of a migrant of the Ivory Coast - Agadez, on November 23, 2004.

"In Cameroon there are many *Nigériens* without papers and they make their business quietly, and are left alone. But here if you are a foreigner it's another story, you are treated as if you were nothing..."

Comment of a Cameroonian migrant - Agadez, on December 31, 2004.

Once migrants have paid their "entry tax" to the policemen, they are immediately followed by *coxers*<sup>7</sup> also waiting for them near the checkpoint to the city or a little farther around the bus station. In this town unknown to them, they will then be allowed to steer towards one of the *agences de courtage*<sup>8</sup> specialised in the transport of people between Niger, Algeria and Libya. Surrounded by *coxers*, the migrants have to indicate to the drivers and the director of the agency where they wish to go, choose the preferred type of vehicle (lorry or pick-up) and negotiate the fare. The departure of a vehicle is always promised to be soon or "tomorrow or the day after, insha Allah". The foreign passengers are tired after their long journey on the road, the heated discussions in which everybody speaks at the same time and in which always the same topics (the travel documents required, the dangers of the desert, the necessary preparations for the journey, where to stay in the city while waiting for departure...) are debated. These are the factors that lead migrants to quickly pay their fare to the director of the agency who, once the money is paid, is sure he cannot lose the traveller to his competitors. Those migrants who can afford it, then pay a relatively expensive<sup>9</sup> sum for their transport; those who can hardly afford it look for

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<sup>7</sup> Term describing the bus-boys charged with finding passengers and taking them to the transport agencies.

<sup>8</sup> Official name of agencies taking charge of the transport of the migrants towards the Arabic countries of the border zone

<sup>9</sup> Price for the transport from Agadez to Dirkou by lorry: FCFA 10,000 to 20,000, and by pick-up from FCFA 20,000 to 30,000. Price for the transport from Agadez to Sebha by

work in Agadez or contact their family to ask for help, and sometimes pay only to go to Kawar, a region situated halfway between Agadez and Libya. Then the waiting for the departure begins, which will last for some days for the most fortunate, for several weeks when there are only few passengers or even several months for the most deprived. During this period, migrants are accommodated either directly in the garages from where vehicles start, or in one of the city's *ghettos*,<sup>10</sup> or in the premises of an employee of the brokerage agency with whom they are going to travel. Renting out of rooms to migrants has become an important source of income for many people in Agadez which are connected to the transportation professionals. The migrants' conditions of life during this period obviously depend on their financial resources, but even for migrants with more financial resources, can still be very hard. There are many who eat little and badly and whose weakened physical appearance becomes quickly apparent. It is also a period of impoverishment (except for those that receive the help of a friend, or find a job) as waiting for extended periods was not anticipated and thus not taken into account in the journey's budget.

"It took me two weeks to come here from Douala and now I have no money left. I quit. I want to go back home... I would like to go to bed here this evening and wake up in my bed in Douala. [...] I called my family so that they send me some money, but that's only promises."

Comment of a Cameroonian migrant - Agadez, on November 20, 2004

From their first moments in Agadez migrants are perceived as potential sources of income, rather than individuals. The stigmatization they are subject to, the moral and financial pressures which they undergo because of their status as foreign migrants, their community life and their insulation from the autochthonous population often mark the beginning of a transformation of their identity which is accompanied by a transformation of their relationship to their human environment Migrants share an

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lorry: FCFA 30,000 to 60,000, and by pick-up to FCFA 80,000. These prices are variable according to the number of people, periods and political climate, and are lower for the occasional migrant possessing a Libyan visa.

<sup>10</sup> In Niger the term *ghetto* is used to describe the areas in which foreign migrants are accommodated, generally separated by nationality. In Agadez some ghettos belong to ancient migrants (Senegalese ghetto), others to Nigerians working for brokerage agencies (Cameroonian ghetto.)

adventurer's identity, which grows stronger in reaction to the suspicious attitudes towards them by the non-migrant population.

### **From the apprehension of the desert...**

However, they have all seen images of desert areas in the media or have got an idea of the experience of crossing the Sahara thanks to stories narrating the difficulties of life in the desert, the suffering of travellers crossing it, or the disastrous epics of the lorries regularly getting astray, which are sometimes discovered with dozens of dead passengers. Thus, the desert is depicted as a space of danger and death, where there is nothing, neither water nor life. Yet, this fear of the desert is often mixed with a feeling of discovery, and an urge to continue a risky adventure; many migrants feel that their adventure just cannot stop there. In their view, the period spent in the wilderness is a necessary part of the journey, an almost indispensable stage of the adventure,<sup>11</sup> which, with the support from God, will have a happy ending.

"I think that's all very well, things ripen, it grows into making you feel bigger, you feel able to do many things and even though it's hard, it is all very well to cross these stages in which you discover many things which you didn't know... Some people left Cameroon by plane to enter France, and me, who went by road, maybe I will fly back from Cameroon to France...., nevertheless, I have the feeling that I am superior to those taking a flight ... and I still want to spend some time in the wilderness, to experience that... just to see how that happens... I don't only want to listen, I've always been told that the desert is too cold, and sometimes too warm, that you may shiver with cold, that people die from cold... That there are gangsters who fight you, search you, some who even rape you (each in turn) and I'm not frightened by anything but that. I have faith in God, I really have faith in God... he is really with me because during my travelling up here nobody has attacked me, I haven't been assaulted, nor hastened, nothing, nothing, nothing... If one was able to take my money, I gave him of my own will, that's part of the adventure... One must try, some always succeed..."

Lili, Cameroonian, speaking about her *adventure* - Agadez, on November 24, 2004.

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<sup>11</sup> It would be interesting to compare the travel-adventure of trans-Saharan migrants with Saharan nomads' conceptions of travel, as studied by Claudot-Hawad's. Cf. CLAUDOT-HAWAD H., 2002 - "Voyager nomade", in Claudot-Hawad (dir.) *Voyager d'un point de vue nomade*, Paris : IREMAM-Paris Méditerranée, pp.7-10.



When the time of departure is finally announced, it is necessary to get ready, to buy food for the journey and to fill the tins with water. The traders of Agadez, in order to sell more goods, constantly warn that once migrants have left Agadez "it's finished", "there won't be anything anymore", inciting the migrants to protect themselves more than necessary against the risks of their journey, and at the same time reinforcing their apprehension of the desert.

### **... to the litmus test of the crossing**

The crossing of the Ténéré's erg among Agadez and Dirkou (650 km) is the first truly hard stage of the Sahara crossing. The crossing generally takes between two and four days depending on the season and the type of vehicle used. Sometimes it may even take much longer because on this axis vehicles frequently break down. Often more than 30 and sometimes up to a 150 passengers are crammed behind in the back of a lorry. They leave Agadez in a state of apprehension of the foreign world which they are going to cross. This feeling will keep strengthening on the road.

On leaving Agadez another tax to the policemen parked at the exit barrier is to be paid. Migrants pay yet again 80 km off the city, at Toureyet's checkpoint, which once more characterises the uncertainty of their situation and their vulnerability vis-à-vis Nigerien authorities.

Past the very dusty first 200 kilometres of the journey, the sand desert begins. The horizon soon becomes a simple 360° straight line, which migrants contemplate, while becoming increasingly tired as the time they have spent in the uninviting and harsh climate of the desert (which can be extremely warm during the day and/or very cold at night, and is always very dry and windy) increases.

"Anyway, adventure is like that, it's life or death, you don't know... Me, I'm not afraid of dying... God is here, God is with me... When I was on the lorry to come here, I fell ill, I had a fever, I vomited, I spat blood, really I thought this was the end, I thought I was going to die in the desert. When I felt the blood in my throat, I knew it was the end for me... I knew the hour came for me to die in the desert. But I am still here... God is with me."

Yemalo F.P., Beninese - Dirkou, on December 20, 2004.

Their material conditions of travel do not facilitate their confrontation to the exhausting and alarming nature of the desert. Crowded in the back of the vehicles where each had grabbed a seat, they remain there "perched" till the end of the journey. They disembark only during short breaks for meals, taken in small groups, or from April to October, for lengthier breaks in the warmest hours of the day during which vehicles have to stop. Thus, life is organised on the vehicles and in their vicinity.

"I had seen the desert on TV and then in Lagos people had spoken to us about it... we then knew that it was difficult... we were even told that people would die in the desert... And now I can see it myself... It's hard, it's really hard, but if you go for it, you must make it... God is great."

Tomsy, Nigerian - Achegour's well, Ténéré, on December 2, 2004.

On the way, the migrants develop a specific form of territoriality, which could be described as a "territoriality of fear", based on an acute sense of distance (otherness / exteriority) vis-à-vis the environment they cross, which is strange to their world and which is perceived as hostile and dangerous. This perception engenders a unique socio-spatial construction: during their crossing of Ténéré, the migrants transform the space of the vehicle into a social space detached from the environment they are crossing by creating a mental border all around the vehicle. The vehicle, then, becomes a place where the group of the travelling migrants temporarily form a distinct group, physically united in the space of the vehicle, but also sharing an identity as adventurers. The intellectual, physical and symbolical distance between individuals is considerably reduced to the point of vanishing altogether. On the one hand, this space is enclosed as everything which is outside is projected into an "infinite" distance. On the other hand, this space is mobile; nevertheless, migrants 'travel in the social space created inside the vehicle until their arrival rather than through the space they cross.

### **The spatial transformation of oases?**

The territoriality of mobile individuals leads us to consider both migrants' spatial practices and the multiple relations the travellers maintain with the lands they cross. Informed about the nature and the forms of the socio-spatial constructions of the migrants, we are now able to study the emergence and the performance of an oasis as a space of transit.

### The birth of a transit place

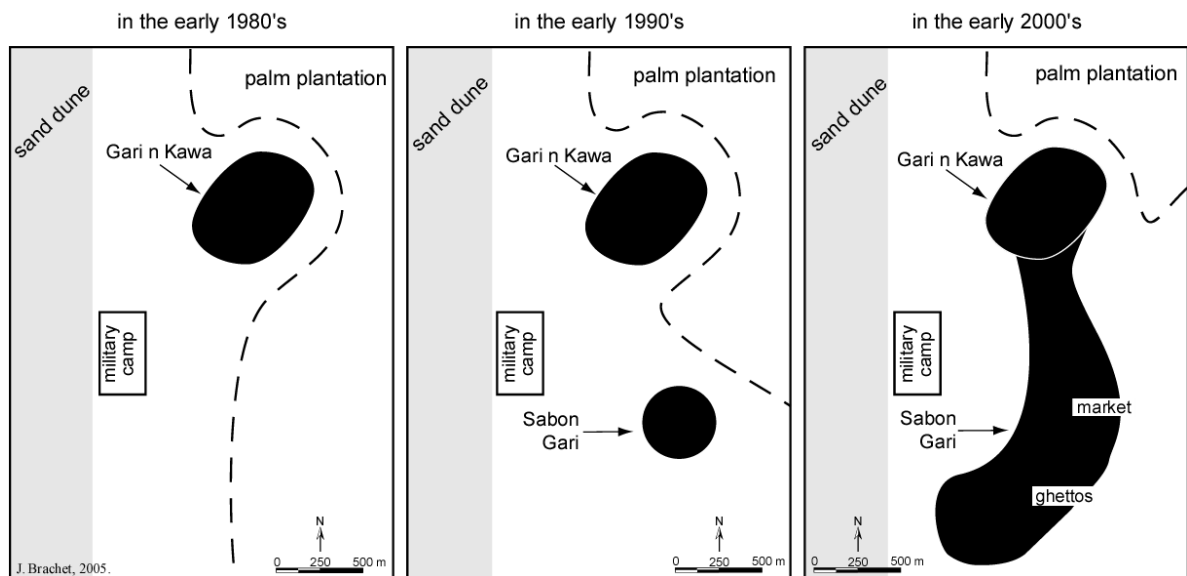
In a territorial logic based on the apprehension of the natural and human environment, Sub-Saharan migrants have arrived at Dirkou since the beginning of the 1990s. Dirkou serves as an important way station, where migrants take a stopover and get fresh supplies after crossing the Ténéré. During the rebellion in northern Niger, lorries went to and from Kawar in convoys of a hundred vehicles, escorted by soldiers. If a driver missed the departure of a convoy, he had to wait with the passengers for the next one, which in some cases, only left one month later. Migrants thus found themselves blocked in Dirkou. Yet also migrants spending only a few days in Dirkou, experienced the place in a similar vein - as a *blockage* and temporary space: They did not settle down in the village; nor did they settle in areas close to the village but rather aside, some kilometres away in the shadow of the palm plantation. The population of the village came to sell various goods, including pieces of palm-sheet used as a protection against the sun. Later clay brick compartments were built to be used as dwellings. The stream of migrants crossing through Dirkou did not stop, on the contrary, some of those "blocked" had to stay for several months due to the lack of financial means to continue their travel. Over time, local storekeepers started to settle near these rudimentary camps and constructed small, permanent shops. Numerous other activities directly connected to these migratory movements developed, finally leading to the emergence of the biggest market<sup>12</sup> in the entire region and giving birth to a new district which in Hausa language is named "Sabon Gari" ("new village") - [Cf. Plan 1].

The development and the organization of " Sabon Gari" (alternatively also named new Dirkou " or "Dirkou 2") was shaped by the constant and significant numbers of migrants passing through Dirkou<sup>13</sup> as well as by migrants' own constructions of territoriality through their daily practices upon arrival.

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<sup>12</sup> The migrants coming back from Libya sell a part of the goods which they bring back and presented at small temporary markets

<sup>13</sup> Based on own data collected in 2003-2004, the population of Dirkou can be estimated at between 7 000 to 10 000 people , with the share of migrants oscillating between 10% and 20%.



Plan 1 : Geographical Development of Dirkou since 1980s.

### The Migrants' life in Dirkou: social relationships and insulation

From the moment migrants arrive at Dirkou, they are closely supervised by armed policemen. After leaving the vehicles, migrants are taxed at the police station (around FCFA 1,000 per person), sometimes by force; finally their identity cards are confiscated.

To retrieve their documents, migrants have to pay a fee of several thousand FCFA. Also here, the legal status of the migrants, that is, whether they are in an irregular situation or not, is unrelated to the amount of taxes which they have to pay.

"On arrival here at Dirkou I paid CFA 2,000. Then I was told to enter the police station. There we were asked to pay 5,000. Me, I said I didn't have 5,000. It was 4 pm, at 7 pm I was still there. They said 5,000, it's the last price. I slept there, it was the first time I spent a night in a police station, the first time. In the morning another one came to see us, he told us to bring 1,000 francs. Someone gave him the money and he went out. [...] Really, adventure, it's not easy. When I left Cotonou I didn't know that it was like that... if one had told me that it was so much suffering, I would not have left, I would have stayed at my parents' home. Over there I was well, I didn't lack anything, but here oh ... It is the first time that I come to Niger, in the desert like that, but it is also the last one... the first and the last time, I swear to God... on the return from Libya, I am going to return by flight. If I can I'd never want to come back here [...]."

Yemalo F. P., Beninese – Dirkou, on December 20, 2004.

State agents, by way of violence, belittlement and extortion contribute to the impoverishment of migrants and to the precariousness of their situation. Like in Agadez, migrants are accommodated in so-called concession “ghettos”. Each is composed of several rooms and every room in turn accommodates several migrants of the same nationality or speakers of the same language. In addition to these social divisions within the “ghetto”, what catches the attention of the observer is the extreme isolation of the site: on the horizon, only the cliff of Kawar stands out from the monotony of the erg of Ténéré. The effects of isolation make themselves felt in everyday life. Thus, the socio-spatial constructions of migrants – notably the distance from the surrounding environment that already characterised their journey from Agadez to Dirkou, are reproduced. Through migrants’ daily practices, the “ghettos”, and more generally, the quarters in which ghettos are found, turn into a space, which forms a territory quite apart from the remainder of the oasis. Houses, dresses, religious practices, entertainment, languages spoken by migrants and the music they listen to are but the most important features distinguishing this territory from the other territories that make up the oasis. Not only can one easily identify migrants roving around Sabon Gari,<sup>14</sup> but in so doing, they always remain close to their ghettos. Their interaction with villagers is so limited that after many months in Dirkou most are still not aware of the historical village (*gari n kawar*, “salt village”), even though it is only one or two kilometres away from where they live. This absence of any linkages between the migrant populations and the native population is reinforced by the practice of the latter: Few Kanuri and Tubu villagers from the historical village ever visit Sabon Gari themselves. Most avoid “these foreigners” who, in their view, symbolise moral decay and depravation (i.e. prostitution, alcohol, etc.). Only some young people of the village visit Sabon Gari out of curiosity, while some storekeepers do business on the market, as do some women who – once in a while – go there to make extraordinary purchases.

Migrants spend their days in Sabon Gari amidst groups of fellow migrants, discussing the life before leaving for the “adventure” as well as “the

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<sup>14</sup> for example by their dresses : trainers, t-shirt, jeans, their way of circulating in a group, and their modes of greetings denote a generally urban identity which distinguish them from the other inhabitants of the oasis.

adventure" itself. In their conversations, migrants thus talk about the life in the big African cities from which many of them originate; they tell stories about festivities and of a life that seemed to be happier, at least in migrants' memories. Songs and dances are performed and watched, zouglou and soukouss on one hand, ndombolo, coupé-décalé and mapuka on the other; during many long hours, migrant compare the nights in the oasis to those in Abidjan, Cotonou, Dakar or Douala, Lagos, Kinshasa or Accra, no doubt, to better forget those of Dirkou:

"Here there is nothing, it's dead, before 10 p.m. already there is nothing left to do, and you don't know, on Saturday and on Friday... you don't even know which day it is... In Cotonou on Friday and Saturday, it's too hot, we paint the town red..."

Beninese migrant from Cotonou - Dirkou, on December 5, 2004.

In their conversations, however, migrants also voice their hope of attaining a good fortune in Libya or a better life in Europe; they talk of the work which they would like to do, the money which they hope to earn, and the friends which are waiting for them somewhere over there on the other side of the desert or the sea. While being apprehensive of the difficulties of their companions they are still convinced of their own success, keeping their faith in God, the last imaginary refuge which keeps their hope alive:

"A human being can disappoint, but God can never disappoint... God is with us, with God you can do everything..."

Nigerian migrant going to Europe - Dirkou, on December 4, 2004.

Solidary acts of mutual aid, through which those lacking the financial means to pursue their migratory projects are supported, are frequent. At the same time, the numerous requests better-off migrants are permanently confronted with also leads to more individualistic, often self-protective behaviour. Thus, migrants often seek and maintain friendship for purely instrumental reasons or understate the amount of money at their disposal in order to avoid having to refuse a request for help too openly. These practices are widely known and sometimes engender a certain bitterness among those who have, in their view, all too readily helped others since their arrival in Dirkou, when they still had the means to do so, but do not

experience the same kind of solidarity later when they would need it in turn.

"Here, if you have money, you'll have many friends, everybody is going to be kind with you, people are going to come to see you, but if you are poor, if you have no more money, you are going to remain alone. It's like that here."  
Lynda, Nigerian - Dirkou, on December 5, 2004.

The length of the stay in Dirkou varies greatly. Some manage to pursue their journey towards Libya after spending only a few days in the oasis; others find themselves blocked for several months, because they simply lack the financial means to continue. But for all, the stage in this oasis is particularly rough, both morally and physically and strongly marks their migratory adventure. Stranded amidst the desert and without any possibility of communicating with the outside world<sup>15</sup>, migrants feel at loss and experience intense feelings of distraction and isolation; on the other hand, the harsh climate, the hard work they do for the rare jobs they can muster as well as malnutrition contribute to their physical exhaustion.

Directly and indirectly the presence of migrants in Dirkou, as well as their way of life and the relations they maintain with their social and natural environments, has effectively changed this oasis. As shown above, numerous activities directly linked to transit migration have developed there. Apart from the market and the newly emerged living quarters for migrants, there is also a growing number of restaurants and bars, "hairdressing salons", bureaux de change, garages and fuel sale points, phone shops equipped with satellite telephones, a police station, a ranger station and a customs office (in addition to the military camp created at the colonial time). Recently the village was electrified by Nigelec<sup>16</sup>; a network of water pipes with potable water was inaugurated in October 2003 with the support of the international NGO "Action Contre la Faim". Finally, a bus

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<sup>15</sup> A *Thuraya* (satellite phone) shop opened in Dirkou in November 2004, thus putting an end to the total absence of public means of telecommunication in the oasis, and to the impossibility for the migrants to communicate with their families (the prices of communications, ranging from FCFA 310 to 510 for 30 seconds, remain dissuasive, however).

<sup>16</sup> Société Nigérienne d'Electricité

line now operates between Agadez and Dirkou.<sup>17</sup> Thus, several providers of public services as well as various private operators and civil servants settled down in Dirkou, transforming this small oasis into a regional centre.

This development of the village was accompanied by an unprecedented population growth,<sup>18</sup> which had a massive impact on the local labour market due to the large supply of cheap and easily exploitable labour. The massive arrival of migrants' also led to price rises on the land and housing markets. In particular, rents rose enormously and are sometimes above those in the big cities of the country.<sup>19</sup> Another consequence of the permanent presence of migrants is the emergence of brothels and a considerable sex industry. HIV infection rates among prostitutes in Dirkou are significant and may be as high as of 50% according to a study by the NGO Care International, carried out in 2000.

Clearly, transit migration has transformed the oasis in a very cosmopolitan place. At the same time, it also profoundly impacted on the spatial dynamics of the oasis and its territorial structure. As this contribution has shown, transit migrants develop distinct notions and forms of territoriality based on the apprehension of the natural and human environment during their journey. Transit migration leads to a specific territorialisation of spaces of transit and produces places and finally territories which are not, or barely, in touch with the other territories of the area in which transit migration takes place.

The analysis of the built environment in Dirkou shows a spatial division in several successive territories: clear demarcations are visible when one passes from the old village (*gari n kawa*) to Sabon Gari's market, or from the district of the ghettos (in Sabon Gari) to the vast military camp. While the

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<sup>17</sup> Organised in early October 2004 on orders from the government this bus service is administered by the company SNTV (*Société Nigérienne de Transport de Voyageurs*). However, it does still not operate on a regular basis. Little used by the migrants because of the high cost of the tickets (FCFA 20,000), the bus service allows the numerous storekeepers as well as governmental agents to travel more easily and more quickly between Agadez and Kawar.

<sup>18</sup> The population of Bilma district was estimated at 7,409 in 1977, 8,928 in 1988, and 14,115 in 2001, while the population of Bilma village decreased by 0.4 % between the last two censuses, from 2,421 inhabitants in 1988 to 2,300 in 2001. The demographic growth of Bilma district (which became a *département* in 2004) thus is linked with an increase of the population in Dirkou.

<sup>19</sup> In Dirkou single rooms of 10 m<sup>2</sup> can be rented for up to FCFA 6,000 per month, or rooms of 15 m<sup>2</sup> with a small hovel at FCFA 10,000 per month.



wider area first appears to be made up of adjoining territories, a detailed analysis of the limits of these territories shows that they are not clearly adjoining: they sometimes overlap; at times they do not have direct linkages yet; in general, boundaries are fluid both temporally and spatially and they change according to circumstances and human agency: during controls and the levying of tolls and other taxes when migrants arrive or depart as well as during discussions and negotiations between migrants and carriers, migrants and locals enter in a relationship; then short-lived "bridges" can appear: common places where exchange is made possible. These temporal exchanges put various levels of territory in vertical contact to each other – the resulting territorial construction could be described as "foliated" space. Other, similar exchanges also put migrants in connection with non-migrants and thus create linkages between various "levels" of territory. However, this is still very occasional, as for example on the market or in the case of prostitution.

Within only a few years, Dirkou has turned from the simple village of Kawar to an important small regional centre of transit and has since become more important than Bilma, the administrative centre of the *département*. Dirkou thus is an example of the urbanisation taking place in the Sahara in response to transit migration and commercial trans-Saharan networks which are partly linked to the former.

However, the specific form of territoriality migrants develop in the desert, leads to territorial constructions which are hardly connected with other forms of territoriality in the oasis. This reorganization of the territorial structure of spaces of transit raises important questions in regard to the specific form of the integration of Dirkou into the euro-African migration system, as well as in regard to the relationship between these spaces of transit with other migratory spaces. Perhaps the most intriguing question is whether the specific forms of transit migration – notably the cosmopolitanism and the "detachedness" of migrants from the surrounding environment, can be read as an expression of a specific autonomous, "transnational", migratory space engendered by transit migration.

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