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# Routes, places and strategies of transnational business between Casablanca (Morocco), Nouakchott (Mauritania) and Dakar (Senegal)<sup>1</sup>.

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## Introduction

- 1 With their displays of Chinese, Moroccan and African products, the variety on shopkeepers' stalls in Casablanca, Dakar and Nouakchott raises the question of the growing interconnectedness of regional trade relations. Despite weak official figures for import-export (OECD/ CSAO, 2014), small and large-scale traders and hauliers from Morocco, Senegal and wider west Africa and their goods are increasingly mobile, contributing to the strengthening of intra-regional economic ties.
- 2 This regional trade is not new, as demonstrated by P. Bonte's work (2000) on trade by North African people between the Senegal Valley and the western Sahara between the 19th and 20th centuries, or that of EA McDougall (1990) on the salt routes of the 19th century. What is new is the speed and the regularity of certain trade flows, the diversification of the products traded, sometimes at industrial volumes (as is the case for Moroccan agricultural products) but also the players involved in these exchanges and the present-day strengthening of the coastal route in relation to the more eastern routes of Adrar and Algeria (cf. Lydon, 2009, Scheele, 2011).
- 3 The current dynamics, which are the subject of this article, can be understood above all in the urban space, via the growing power of the marketplaces, which have become hubs of all kinds of regional traffic. They echo the ancient movements of people and

the cultural, familial, religious, political, migratory and economic exchanges which played a strong role in structuring this space, before the colonial period and subsequently, after independence (cf. also Abou el Farah, 1997; Marfaing and Wippel, 2004; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005; Peraldi, 2011, 2012; Mokhefi and Antil, 2012). In this context our observations allow us to propose the hypothesis of a new stage in these movements in an increasingly globalised environment. In the early 2000s, studies of Senegalese traders in Casablanca (2005, 2009) by Anaïk Pian already showed a close link between planned migration towards Europe and the running of small street businesses in Morocco aimed at funding the rest of the journey. According to Pian, Senegalese traders who were permanently based in Morocco to do business seemed to be in the minority, or in any case appeared scarce twenty years ago. Our analysis of the commercial sphere and its different forms (commercial spaces, the transportation of goods, key players) allows us to demonstrate that changes have taken place since those studies were undertaken. The small street traders are certainly still present in the streets of Moroccan cities, but many other business people are now permanently established there and have built proper transnational business strategies between Morocco and west Africa. These developments should however also be considered alongside a change in the political and state context in Morocco, linked in part to tougher European policies on migration and the closing of the borders of the European Union<sup>2</sup>. The country has pivoted towards Africa, profoundly changing its relationship with the sub-Saharan population, a section of which is now regularised and resident (Ait Ben Lmadani *et al.*, 2016). This change in direction is also economic, based on a globalised development model or a regionalisation, indeed a continentalisation of relations, which are at the heart of the Moroccan economic and political implementation strategy (Mareï and Ninot, 2018 ; Mareï and Wippel, 2020). In this context, between the practices of state players and firms on one hand and those of individuals, diasporas and entrepreneurs on the other, we examine the type of macro-region under construction between these countries, which are intimately linked by movements of humans and trade, that is the *“social and spatial multi-state structure which results from the intersection of the practices of players of all kinds and on every level”* (Mareï and Richard, 2020). Does the consolidation of business and operational links favour stronger official relations between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal? Or do the operational and official aspects of the region develop in different, parallel ways? How do the political strategies of state players and the economic strategies of transnational businesses interlink?

- 4 In an attempt to untangle the complexity of this developing regional space, and the actions of the key players at work, a qualitative, multi-site and pluriannual approach was favoured. It is chiefly based on observations, sometimes as a participant<sup>3</sup>, carried out alone (Mauritania, Morocco) or as a pair (Senegal, Mauritania) between 2017 and 2019<sup>4</sup>. Around sixty interviews were also carried out. Some of these interviews took the form of informal, quick discussions, held with regional business players in situations where they were waiting (the ferry crossing at Rosso-Senegal and Rosso-Mauritania, the Senegalese Garage in Casablanca) or during business exchanges in the markets we studied (in Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, Dakar and Nouakchott). However, most of the interviews were semi-directed, sometimes a few hours long, and some were repeated. They were carried out with traders, hauliers and market managers, or with local political and administrative leaders, in several places which functioned as crossroads

along the trans-Saharan coastal route: in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangiers in Morocco, in Dakar and Rosso in Senegal, et in Rosso in Mauritania<sup>5</sup>.

- 5 The different places studied – markets, border crossings, streets or neighbourhoods known for their shops selling imported products, car parks which serve both as places to rest and to do business for those travelling further into West Africa along the route between Morocco and Senegal – are considered as ways into (Brenner 2004) and specific anchor points for the understanding of the movements of humans and trade (Pliez, 2007; Choplin and Lombard, 2010). In doing this, we are using the “flexible” concept of route, proposed by A. Choplin and O. Pliez (2015) which allows us to understand and analyse the network-like aspect of trade, both from the spatial point of view (that of the road as transport infrastructure, and as an entity which links places of business with specific functions) and from the point of view of the socio-economic structure of business movements and relationships (Doron 2022). The stopping places and crossroads we investigated along the route made the flows visible by concentrating and redistributing them. Although our investigations can give the impression of a sustained phenomenon and continuous mobility, it should be stressed that this commercial activity and international mobility along the Tangier-Nouackchott- Dakar corridor remains a diffuse and tenuous phenomenon, just like Maghreb’s relationship with its southern neighbours (Mokhefi and Antil, 2012)<sup>6</sup>. Our observations and interviews thus home in on an inconspicuous phenomenon which is undergoing change and re-forming. They enable us to highlight the transnational practices and strategies of the key players concerned and to understand the organisation of trade (what types of products are exchanged, developments in modes of transport, the functions of marketplaces, etc.) between the different places studied.
- 6 We will thus compare, in two stages, the top-down construction of a transnational commercial space, motivated by diplomatic issues and state narratives about globalised economic development, and the bottom-up approach by the actors of “small” transnational business, developing their activity across the vast space between Maghreb and West Africa. Our analysis emphasizes that top-down and bottom-up developments are simultaneous, and, moreover, that part of these transnational trade networks preceded any institutionalization or political project. Finally, along this coastal axis of trans-Saharan relationships, we will discuss the territorial and social transformations brought about by these urban, political, economic and transnational dynamics.

## 1. A political and economic approach by Morocco towards the southern Sahara

- 7 Large-scale projects are appearing between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (ports, corridors, but also on-site urban transport systems, different activity zones, etc.) supported by private funds or state funds such as the Programme for Infrastructure Development (PIDA) of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). This upgrading to international standards of infrastructure in the south benefits large international firms, who are encountering fewer and fewer obstacles in developing their business strategy (Hugon, 2002). The example of the Moroccan advance towards its south via “very large investments in Western Sahara” and the provincialisation of that territory (Cote, 2014) but also via a diplomatic onslaught towards West Africa,

shines a light on the ongoing political and economic issues at stake in this western zone of trans-Saharan relations, to use the terminology of Théodore Monod (1968).

### Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal: a formative, yet fragile axis

- 8 The implementation of Morocco's Africa policy can thus be understood in the light of the globalised development challenges advocated by international institutions (The World Bank, 2009; Van Hamme *et al*, 2010). Since the accession to the throne of King Mohammed VI, this has resulted in a form of "continentalisation" of political and economic exchanges based on a global, liberal and international development strategy (Mareï and Ninot, 2018). The king has travelled in Africa more, to emphasise the cultural and religious links between Morocco and West African countries, and to sign numerous commercial agreements with a view to consolidating links which were mainly symbolic up to that point (Sambe, 2012). This diplomatic and commercial campaign is directly visible in the Moroccan balance of trade, with a fivefold increase in exports and a doubling of imports with sub-Saharan countries between 2000 and 2010, (OECD/ CSAO 2014). Agreements have been set up in all strategic sectors of Moroccan industry (fishing, agriculture, mining, construction) but also in service industries (banking and finance, thanks to the international development of several Moroccan banking groups, transport, telecommunications and tourism). This Moroccan advance into the southern Sahara affects mainly west African countries; the bilateral relationship with Senegal is one of the most privileged (Machrafi, 2012). Despite these current dynamics, it should be recalled that intra-African trade remains very weak compared to intra-regional commerce in the other great regions of the world (in particular Europe, Asia and north America) and in relation to African trade with the rest of the world (Europe and China in particular). The axis we studied is fully in line with this general configuration: Mauritania has strong connections with the United Arab Emirates and China and weak connections with its neighbours; Morocco, on the other hand, is one of the main suppliers to Senegal and Mauritania of strategic products such as phosphate, iron ore and electric cables for industry and construction, thus confirming the formative bilateral dynamics for this sub-region, even though the balance of trade is largely in Morocco's favour<sup>7</sup>.
- 9 The place of sub-Saharan countries in these south-south relationships should not be neglected, in particular Senegalese diplomacy in Morocco, which is based on business networks present in the country. The objective of the economic mission of the Senegalese embassy in Morocco is to sell Senegal as a destination on every level, to approach Moroccan entrepreneurs who want to invest in Senegal, to formalise agreements, to put economic relations on an official footing, and also to prevent instances of fraud which occur on both sides. For example, it works with the Senegalese agency for promoting exports (ASEPEX), an agency which reports to the Senegalese Ministry of Trade, and whose role is to organise producers who wish to develop their activities abroad, to supervise them and help them to certify and export their products. It also helps promote Senegalese products by attending international trade fairs (such as the *Salon International de l'Agriculture* in Paris). Incentives in the form of micro credits are also offered by the Senegalese consulate to finance the micro-businesses of Senegalese women based in Morocco. Projects which have been financed and encouraged are the opening of shops and hiring premises to open hair salons and restaurants. Previously, some of these women worked on the street, selling their goods

on makeshift stalls. This measure has made it possible for their activity to be made official, even if some critics judge the sums insufficient, considering the price of commercial rents in Casablanca.

- 10 Multilateral relations in this western trans-Saharan zone are nevertheless frustrated by claims on Western Sahara, which are strongly represented in regional diplomatic circles (Côte, 2014) and more widely by the Mauritanian question. The country holds the regional balance, firstly between its Moroccan and Algerian neighbours, particularly because of Western Sahara<sup>8</sup> (Antil, 2002); then between sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, since Mauritania was one of the founding members both of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU, 1989) and of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, 1975) – an economic community which it eventually left in 2000, before re-applying for membership in 2017<sup>9</sup>. Western Sahara, which is integrated administratively with the southern provinces of the Moroccan kingdom (Hibou and Tozy, 2020), is still currently a sensitive area in the region studied, and one of the last Saharan border conflicts (Côte, 2014). It has been considered by Morocco as an extension of its territory since the departure of the Spanish in 1975 (Boulay, Correale, 2018), but their sovereignty is not universally recognised. The UN describes it as a non-self-governing territory whose status is yet to be determined by a self-determination referendum, planned since 1991. Western Sahara is also claimed by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (*République arabe sahraouie démocratique*, or RASD) declared by the Polisario Front in 1976<sup>10</sup>. Western Sahara is thus a focus for claims and tensions between neighbouring countries (Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania) but the tensions also go beyond that (Morocco-United States and Morocco-Spain). Morocco left the African Union in 1984, as a result of heightened political tensions around the subject of Western Sahara. Its return to the union in 2017 and its negotiations to integrate ECOWAS are also linked to certain African countries taking a more neutral stance regarding the conflict.
- 11 Because of the political context – a fragile balance and status quo – anyone leaving Morocco and entering Mauritania must travel through a no-mans-land zone south of Guerguerat. The 4km buffer zone formed part of the ceasefire agreement signed in 1991 between Morocco and the Polisario Front and is known for its lack of security. There are recurrent tensions there because of the strategic and economic importance of this border post. Political stability in this territory would speed up the north-south regional exchanges and avoid problems at the Guerguerat border crossing, where several dozen articulated lorries were stuck for three weeks in the autumn of 2020, causing food shortages in markets in Mauritania and Senegal. The political tensions around the sovereignty of the western Sahara have also been an obstacle for many years to the tarmacking of the road axis linking Morocco and its sub-Saharan neighbours. After several interruptions linked to tensions with the Polisario Front which had led to repeated disruption of the movement of goods, Morocco finally finished the resurfacing in early 2021 and further increased the militarisation of the zone in order to “secure” the trade flowing south. This militarisation of the border with Mauritania was also accompanied in March 2021 by a new extension of the “separation wall”, also called the “safety belt”, erected by Rabat since the 1980s to “contain” the Polisario Front. The new 14km extension of the sand wall now stretches as far as the Mauritanian border and aims to “prevent” any new blockage of the trans-Saharan route. (Carayol and Gagnol, 2021).

- 12 As far as the next part of the route is concerned, crossing Mauritania is a real problem for traders and hauliers who follow the Tangier-Nouakchott-Dakar route: they may not generally be held up at the border, apart from during periods of intense diplomatic crises between Morocco and the Polisario Front, but many small business owners and hauliers reported in our interviews the difficulties of and numerous impediments to their transnational business from this Mauritanian link in the chain, as did the larger Moroccan and Senegalese entrepreneurs. The poor state of the road, particularly the stretch between Nouakchott and Rosso, was also mentioned very often by the stakeholders interviewed as a cause of accidents, breakdowns and subsequent delays for deliveries and business trips, particularly because the buffer zone road was little more than a track at the time of our investigation<sup>11</sup>.
- 13 These travel conditions, often further complicated as much by political tensions as by practical difficulties, do not however prevent the running of transnational trade traffic from the north towards the south of the Sahara and in the reverse direction, along the only current fully tarmacked trans-Saharan axis. Regional trade channels between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal are thus being established, run and organised by stakeholders of different sizes.

### **Routes and channels of macro-regional trade along the Morocco-Mauritania-Senegal axis.**

- 14 The balance of trade along the Morocco-Mauritania-Senegal axis is strongly tipped in Morocco's favour. From the interview carried out on October 26, 2017 with one of the managers of the Rosso (Senegal) border crossing, we can calculate the customs revenues at 5.1 billion CFA francs for the year 2016, equivalent to around 7.6 million Euros, of which 80 % resulted from the entry of Moroccan agricultural products on refrigerated articulated lorries (Bouhali *et al.*, 2018). Moroccan citrus fruit was found in all the Mauritanian and Senegalese markets that we visited in the autumn of 2017. In the winter of 2019, Moroccan potatoes and onions flooded the same markets, before being replaced by watermelons in the summer. Morocco is thus increasingly taking on the role of vegetable garden and orchard of choice for its sub-Saharan neighbours.
- 15 The launch of these fruit and vegetable channels by road is relatively recent and the tarmacking of the Nouadhibou-Nouakchott axis was an essential step in bringing that about (Antil and Choplin, 2003). The entire axis is tarmacked, with the exception of the Rosso ferry over the Senegal river – the last significant break in the trade route. Other modes of transport are also employed for other channels. Volumes and types of products vary significantly according to the mode used: trade via suitcases on planes continues between Morocco and Senegal (for cosmetics, synthetic hair extensions and some food products) thanks to the strong regional network of Royal Air Maroc, while maritime links were recently strengthened between Morocco and its southern neighbours (Mareï and Wippel, 2020). A large proportion of the containers originating from and heading to West Africa pass through the Tanger-Med port. Inside this hub some companies, such as Decathlon, are located in free port zones which they use as macro-regional redistribution platforms (Debrie and Mareï, 2019). The large-scale retail sector, which is expanding in this region, is very much structured around this upgrading of major infrastructure and the consolidation of transnational networks. This largely benefits international firms who are organised in this way, between

production in China and distribution towards European and emerging markets. Morocco is ideally placed: the strategies of these firms help strengthen its position as the interface between Europe and Africa. Many of the Moroccan entrepreneurs and hauliers encountered during our investigations were gambling on this positioning between north and south, which they considered “an opportunity” despite “the difficulties of the African market”, “the time taken up by customs procedures during transit”, “the cost of transport” and “competition, including with the informal sector”<sup>12</sup>.

- 16 So we can clearly see the establishment of a regional framework based on international-level infrastructure, on transnational business networks (already created in the 1990s and 2000s, by, among others, the large Senegalese and Mauritanian wholesalers travelling through Asia or to Dubai to do national or regional business (Rosander, 2005; Bertonecello and Bredeloup, 2009a; Lesourd, 2014) and on international firms’ more recent strategies, facilitated by the operation of Tanger-Med. This western trans-Saharan axis, forming part of international networks, is sufficiently fluid and integrated into globalised trade, despite problems at certain points along the route likely to hinder trade by road.
- 17 To continue this study of an ongoing regional reconfiguration, we wish, secondly, to deepen the analysis by looking at how those considered “small players”, that is, ordinary business people, benefit from these dynamics and also play a part in them with their business strategies. They may have “limited access to legal provisions and mechanisms of official state cooperation” as B. Sambe (2012) highlights, but they create tangible links between the north and south Sahara and can even be one step ahead of the progress of politics and diplomacy.

## 2. Locations and links of transnational strategies along the trans-Saharan route

- 18 Professional and ad-hoc traders, hauliers and forwarding agents weave connections between the different marketplaces strung out along the trans-Saharan route via their movements and the movements of the goods and capital they exchange. These connections, although tenuous, have become stronger over the past decade and are increasingly visible from Morocco’s large cities, Nouakchott in Mauritania, Dakar in Senegal and also at the border between Mauritania and Senegal, from both banks of the Senegal River, which creates a break and a pause in regional commercial traffic. These small players seize available opportunities within a transnational space still under construction, adapting to various administrative and legal obstacles which punctuate their route (photograph 1). These north-south or south-north movements are focused on, and intersect in, markets of different sizes, some of which we have been able to investigate: wholesale and retail markets at the heart of the biggest cities in the region – Tangier, Rabat, Casablanca, Agadir, Nouakchott and Dakar – frontier zones, but also simple parking and rest areas along the route which can become places of trade. The trans-Saharan route between Tangier and Dakar is thus a major formative axis of this transnational space, which enables the movement of people and goods, at an acceptable cost (Antil and Choplin, 2003).

Photograph 1. Line of trucks exiting the Rosso ferry, Senegal, on the road to Saint-Louis and Dakar



Mostly refrigerated trucks and others carrying industrial cables. These trucks were waiting for police control, because of a failure of the inspection gantry located a little further on the road.

© N. Mareï, October 2017

### Inconspicuous crossroads on the trade routes

- 19 Some places provide inconspicuous vantage points, which give us an insight into both the intensification of movements of trade and the interconnection between distant territories: often towns which are both consumer markets and supply points. There are widely differing types of commercial activity connecting the commercial networks at different levels, from the local level – the marketplace – to the international level – the flow of merchandise originating from Europe or south-east Asia – by way of the regional level – the flow of Moroccan, Senegalese and more widely west-African products.
- 20 The twin cities of Rosso, which face each other on either side of the Senegal river, one on the Senegalese bank, one on the Mauritanian bank, linked by a ferry, constitute one of these transnational, commercial and globalised features. This border post is one of the main crossing points between Mauritania and Senegal<sup>13</sup>. The most important influx comes from the north, for example second-hand European cars driven from Europe by Senegalese people “from abroad” – ad-hoc business people capitalising on their return home for the Tabaski holiday, when we conducted our interviews in November 2017 – and also professional business people. Both private and commercial vehicles carry everyday consumer goods (soap, argan oil, clothes, leather shoes, etc.) which will be sold along the entire route, or on arrival in Senegal, thus funding part of the journey (photograph 2). This was the case for a 30-year-old French-Senegalese man, who arrived with a car registered in France, who we spoke to by the Rosso ferry while he

waited to go through the customs clearance procedures on the Senegalese side<sup>14</sup>. The young man, a regular traveller between France and Senegal, had come from Nantes. He was accompanied by a Franco-Senegalese friend who had taken a week's holiday from his regular job as a social worker to take the trip, sharing the driving to cover the distance as quickly as possible. The vehicle was due to be sold in Dakar and the two drivers then planned to return to France by plane. Every inch of the vehicle's interior was crammed with what the main driver described as "personal items" which were, therefore, theoretically not liable for taxation on entry into Senegal. However the items were more likely to be "*arrivages*" (deliveries), that is, second-hand products, bought either in France before they set off, or during the Moroccan leg of the journey, which the two men would also sell to help pay their travel expenses.

Photograph 2. Customs officer checking the contents of a truck arriving from France at the Rosso ferry, Senegal



The trunk is filled with luggage and "*arrivages*" headed to Senegal

© N. Mareï, October 2017.

- 21 An entire border economy has established itself on both sides of the river to service a large passing trade. There are two highly significant markets located outside the gates of the national border posts of Mauritania and Senegal respectively, which offer various services to travellers (telephone services, money transfer, accommodation, catering) but also everyday items (clothes and shoes), made in China or made in Mauritania, bought by traders in markets in Dakar or Nouakchott, depending on the opportunities and prices they encountered on their journeys (Bouhali *et al*, 2018) (photograph 3).

Photograph 3. Top: A display of shops in Rosso, Senegal, along the road leading to the ferry. Bottom: Shops in the market in Rosso, Mauritania, located at the exit of the border crossing



© A. Bouhali, October 2017.

- 22 The commercial interconnections between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal can also be observed in even more low-key locations. For example, a shop display at the “Emira” crossroads in Nouakchott (named after the hotel opposite) on the road to Nouadhibou, which is known for its regular “*arrivages*”. It started out as a simple car park, 200km by

road and several hours' journey from the border, used by travellers as an overnight stop before continuing on the road to Rosso (Mauritania). But this small crossroads – well placed on national route 2, which crosses the country from North to South – has become a small commercial hub, thanks to the initiative of a few Mauritanian entrepreneurs. It offers basic catering and hotel services to travellers, but also a shop selling new and second-hand imported products: Moroccan, European or Chinese, for a local clientele keen to get hold of well-priced products with a guarantee of decent quality. The day we carried out our research, the shop stocked products from all sorts of different sources. Treadmills, a second-hand double mattress which arrived the day before our visit and was sold straight away to a regular client of the shop, women's shoes bought in Spain, counterfeit leather goods from Italy and even flat-screen televisions and gas cookers bought in France and Morocco.

- 23 The “Senegalese Garage” in Casablanca is a more visible and formal example of a crossroads on the trade route. It is a car park, opposite the former medina, (photograph 4) where west African and Moroccan traders and hauliers have developed a market mainly aimed at an African clientele.

Photograph 4. The 'Senegalese garage' in Casablanca



Its many vans from Morocco, Europe and West Africa, and a Moroccan parking attendant in charge of collecting parking fees.

© A. Bouhali, February 2018

- 24 Whoever stops there must pay the Moroccan market pitch managers a license fee, part of which is kept by Casablanca city council. Casual and established business people from Europe, Mauritania, Senegal and other west African countries all meet in this car park. Among them was a young Gabonese woman studying purchasing and logistics whom we met in Casablanca one morning in February 2018, and who funded her studies at a private school with her small mail order business of cosmetic products (soaps and

bleaching creams) which she bought straight from the wholesaler's lorries in the car park and sent by road to her clients in Gabon. There are also many hauliers who pause there before shuttling between Casablanca and Dakar, just like R. (box 1) or between Casablanca and the big cities of west Africa (box 2) One can also meet a lot of delivery drivers, who distribute the merchandise to Casablanca's west African traders.

**Box 1. R., Moroccan haulier and businessman who travels between Casablanca and Dakar.**

Interview carried out on February 15, 2018, by A. Bouhali

I meet R. at the back of his lorry, where he receives customers who have come to buy Moroccan cosmetic products (plant oils, soaps, etc.). Some are west African students who have set up a small business between their current place of residence and their home country. R. is a haulier and retail-wholesale dealer in his early 40s who works between Casablanca and Dakar, travelling regularly between the two cities. He comes from a large family in the Marrakech region and speaks Berber, Arabic, some French and Wolof.

In his haulier role, he exports food and cosmetic products from Morocco to Senegal for the commercial company he works for in Dakar, but also for a Moroccan restaurant and additionally for the shop of a Moroccan neighbour, who also specialises in Moroccan products. He also takes packages for Senegalese clients who need to send parcels to their home country. In the opposite direction, coming from Senegal, he transports Senegalese food, which he delivers to traders in the Senegalese market. R. also trades in Moroccan cosmetics in the car park where the interview takes place. He buys cosmetics from a factory in Casablanca which delivers directly to the wholesalers in the garage in the mornings. R. then sells these products on as a middleman to local street traders, but also further afield, to Africans of various origins who run businesses to their home countries and send products via hauliers, or sometimes privately (although this is rarer).

**Box 2. Portrait of an Ivorian haulier who has set up a business between France, Morocco and Ivory Coast.**

Interview carried out on February 15, 2018 by A. Bouhali

I met this man via the carrier R. who had just sold him a few boxes of soap. This Ivorian small businessman works in partnership with his brother, a Franco-Ivorian lorry driver who settled in France around twenty years ago. The brother had arrived the day before our interview from the Paris region after two days at the wheel of an articulated lorry which he had bought second hand from the small ads website "le Bon coin". The driver had parked the lorry at the Senegalese Garage in Casablanca, where his brother was waiting for him, and returned to the Paris region by plane, leaving his brother to take over driving the lorry to Ivory Coast. The lorry was loaded with packages when it left Paris: parcels that Ivorians in France wanted to send home by road. The second brother was due to drive the lorry from Morocco to Ivory Coast, deliver the merchandise and then sell the lorry. He supplements the cargo by buying Moroccan products, either directly from wholesalers at the car park (cosmetics just bought from R., for example, which sell

very well with Ivorian women customers) or by approaching wholesalers in the Derb Sultan or Derb Omar districts during longer stays in Casablanca, when he has time to visit Moroccan suppliers. He then sells these products in his home country for three times the price, because the route is long (8,000km) and costly: he must pay all the customs duties at each border and pay for fuel. The Ivorian businessman therefore needs to make a substantial margin if he wants to break even. He also buys merchandise while travelling through Western Sahara, particularly at Laayoune, where he stocks up on Moroccan clothes (boubous, babouches, etc.) but also at the big market in Agadir. He set up his business three years ago; he manages to make a living, but barely more than that. He makes the journey alone and it will take him two weeks to get to his destination – it would be ten days if he had a smaller lorry. Border procedures and red tape are the main time-consuming aspects; with a semi-trailer, it easily takes two days for each border crossing. But the road is quite safe.

### Interweaving trade routes at regional level: markets which are both sources and receivers of trade flow

- 25 These few cases demonstrate the operating links woven between the more remote marketplaces: hubs which both send out and receive trade traffic. Different levels of trade flows are interwoven in these markets: regional scale and a global scale movements, since these markets are also the entry point for European and Asian networks via the region's major ports (Casablanca, Dakar, Nouakchott and Tanger-Med) and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (Buoli, 2014; Bentaouzer, 2019; Goeur, 2020).
- 26 Supply chains intersect in the markets of Nouakchott and Dakar, demonstrating the interconnectedness of business links between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, and further afield with Europe and Asia. In Dakar, the big Sandaga cloth market was cited by several Nouakchott and Casablanca shopkeepers as their source for supplies of bazin and wax fabrics. The Allées du Centenaire market (Diop, 2009) – longtime “historic shopping area” of the capital for semi-wholesale or wholesale products made in China entering via the port of Dakar (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2009b) – is still a commercial space where different supply routes intersect, even if the market has lost a lot of its dynamism in the last ten years in favour of other commercial districts of Dakar<sup>15</sup>. You can still find local Senegalese traders there and those who are based in Morocco, as well as Mauritanian traders, whereas the shops on the Rue Mohamed V, at the heart of the Plateau business district, are historically supplied by Moroccan channels. These shops basically sell Moroccan products alongside Turkish products imported from Morocco and re-exported to Senegal. Nouakchott's links with Morocco and Dakar are visible in the city's main markets. In the Capitale market, located in the very centre, as in the Cinquième market, there are a lot of European-style men's clothes which have come from Morocco by road<sup>16</sup>, whereas certain Chinese products, such as women's shoes, were bought in Dakar. Other channels also directly supply the wholesalers of the Sixième market with Chinese goods from the port of Nouakchott, often via the port of Dubai, as our research in that market in November 2017 showed.
- 27 There is a very strong Senegalese and more widely west African presence in Morocco linked to transnational commercial activity. Our research has allowed us to identify a

diversification in the form that presence takes, from a migration thought of as temporary, with Europe as the ultimate goal (Pian 2005, 2009) to transnational travel in order to do business. The small street traders in the markets of Tangier, Casablanca and Rabat are often still “adventurers” (Bredeloup, 2008) looking to fund their route to southern Europe by selling small items on mobile display stands in unofficial street markets which are more or less tolerated by the city authorities and nearby shopkeepers. But the traders who are based in the so-called “Senegalese” market in the Casablanca medina, opposite the Senegalese Garage, form part of real transnational strategies. Their shops, supplied by road by hauliers from the garage, or by small traders using suitcases on planes, offer west African food and cosmetic products, services (restaurants, hairdressing) aimed at an immigrant or migrant west African clientele and increasingly at a Moroccan clientele (photograph 5). Some of these shopkeepers also have a shop in Dakar, run by a member of their family or a trusted employee, where they sell Moroccan products, or those imported from Turkey or Dubai via Morocco, which allows them to move money around between these countries despite the barriers put up by states.

**Photograph 5. A customer in front of a shop in the Senegalese market run by a Senegalese woman trader**



The shop sells food products for the West African diaspora (Maggi cubes, rice, peanut oil...) and cosmetics of all kinds (moisturising creams, skin lightening products, hair strands...).

© A. Bouhali, February 2018.

## A trade flow that encounters some obstacles: “traveling skills” between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal

- 28 The movement of goods does not always flow smoothly at the regional level and business people encounter problems in moving certain types of merchandise because of strong administrative and legal constraints which hinder business between Morocco and west Africa.
- 29 One of the major problems of all these transnational activities remains, above all, the flow of money. Morocco controls its currency tightly and international money transfers are limited. In order to meet the needs of the traders, but also of all those who want to send money to west Africa, there are numerous unofficial “bankers” – major financiers but also small business people – working between Morocco and Senegal at the Senegalese market in Casablanca, who offer international money transfer services (*wari* in Wolof<sup>17</sup>). The money is initially deposited with these unofficial “bankers” in Moroccan dirhams in their shop in Casablanca. Using the WhatsApp mobile application, the “bankers” then inform their partners in Senegal that a client will come and withdraw that amount in CFA Francs, a service they provide in exchange for a small percentage taken from the sum transferred. From Senegal, the partner can then, if necessary, transfer that money to other countries in the CFA zone, using more traditional networks, such as *Orange Money*. These Senegalese networks operate in collaboration with parallel Moroccan networks, allowing easier circulation of money. As the transfers from Morocco to Senegal are bigger and more numerous than those going from Senegal to Morocco, this sometimes causes cash flow problems for the Senegalese “banker”. When cash runs low in the Dakar shop, the shopkeepers buy CFA francs from their Moroccan colleagues, who also work between Dakar and Casablanca. Because bank usage is not common in this population, these unofficial fund transfers, which depend on trust between the participants, are very widespread on the continent and have been helped by the rise of mobile phones and social media.
- 30 There are other goods which are difficult to bring into the Moroccan market, due to national legislation. This is particularly the case for beauty products from west Africa or China imported via west Africa, such as cosmetic products used for lightening dark skin, or synthetic hair extensions, which Morocco had banned from being marketed at the time of our research in January and February 2018. These products, which nevertheless sell very well to west African and Moroccan customers, were present in most of the shops in the Casablanca Senegalese market, or on the tables of the west African migrants selling on the streets in the various official and unofficial markets of Rabat, Casablanca and Tangier. Hauliers and business people use various methods and tricks to get these products into Moroccan territory: concealing the goods underneath other, legal, items in boxes carried by road hauliers shuttling back and forth; or small batches concealed in the hold baggage (rarely checked) of Senegalese students or young professionals travelling from their home country, who are paid to do so by traders from the Senegalese market.
- 31 In this way traders implement effective strategies to circumvent various obstacles, which attests to real “traveling skills” between Morocco and west Africa. Through this flow of goods and capital, and thanks to regular movement, they are participating in a small way in the construction of a transnational trading space which can be observed in the number of stand-alone trading places located between Dakar and Tangier.

## Conclusion: Regionalisation at the intersection of state strategies and ordinary transnational movements

- 32 By studying the key players in the everyday consumer goods trade between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, we can highlight the links between retail and wholesale trade, regional mobility and local economic development, while forming the hypothesis that these relationships favour a bottom-up regionalisation process. There are two movements working together: on one side, a policy and development of economic openness led from above on Morocco's initiative (which has increased its influence in west Africa in the last few years and is targeting new markets in the southern Sahara) and on the other side, the bottom-up consolidation of a transnational space, which is certainly old, but whose links have been transformed and intensified over the past decade. The trans-Saharan route from Tangier to Dakar, both as an example of transport infrastructure and as a factor which creates a network of places and people (Choplin and Pliez, 2015) has strengthened the movement of trade at a regional level, and has contributed to a spatial, social, economic and political reconfiguration from Morocco to Senegal, with expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea and towards the more isolated Sahelian countries (Mali, Burkina Faso). The consolidation of this north-south axis is not unconnected to the European Union's tougher migration policy, which has transformed the role of Morocco within the African continent, compelling it in some ways to negotiate different relationships with its southern neighbours. Morocco is thus increasingly asserting itself as an African regional power and as an essential link in the relationship between Europe and Africa, as was demonstrated recently by Spain's recognition of the plan of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty for Western Sahara, after several months of a migration crisis at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla.
- 33 This largely functional regionalisation process, supported by the movement of trade and people, benefits from a dynamic in favour of the strengthening of trade and political relationships, which aims to create a more official integration, led by Morocco's initiative. The way in which the "small players" grasp and adapt to persistent territorial constraints enables us to examine the different forms of regional integration by taking a constructive approach to the latter, in line with the *new regionalism approach* (Hettne and Söderbaum, 1998; Mareï et Richard, 2018). This approach also enables us to question the other form of globalisation which is playing out every day and everywhere (Choplin and Pliez, 2018) with regional trade movements regularly connected to commercial traffic on a global scale, mainly coming from Asia and China, but also from Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Comparison with the observations and analysis undertaken by the sociologist A. Pian in the 2000s highlights two major changes over two decades. Firstly, A. Pian mentioned the supplying of small Senegalese sellers with Asian products directly from the large trading posts of south-east Asia, whereas today Morocco has itself become a platform for re-exporting products made in China or Turkey towards west Africa. As the shopkeepers do not have the financial resources to go to Dubai (Marchal, 2001), Istanbul (Pérouse, 2002) or Yiwu (Belguidoum and Pliez, 2015) they stock up straight from the regional wholesale markets. Consequently, the changes in the type of African presence in Morocco and in particular the type of Senegalese presence are notable, even if the figure of the

economic migrant has not disappeared. Nowadays there are many, clearly visible, small and large Senegalese and west African traders and hauliers who have built transnational economic activity in the market places which punctuate the regional development axis between Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal. In this way an almost commonplace transnational mobility determines the life choices of the business people and entrepreneurs we encountered all along the route and in the markets, even if regional geopolitics still remains an obstacle to further regional integration.

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## NOTES

1. This English version has benefited from the financial support of the IRD's Federation of Southern Social Sciences (F3S).
2. As F. Mourji *et al.* point out, "European policies that drastically restrict immigration do have an impact: they partially divert migration flows when there is a substitutable objective," with Morocco now becoming a "final destination for the vast majority of sub-Saharan migrants" (Mourji *et al.*, 2016).
3. In the context of repeated and extensive investigations in the Senegalese market of Casablanca especially, where we had the opportunity to help two traders on several occasions: rough translations between French-speaking Senegalese traders and Arabic-speaking Moroccan clients, participation in the bookkeeping of a "tontine" (traditional cooperative banking system), guarding the store for a few moments, etc.
4. The duration of the fieldwork was uneven depending on the countries and cities investigated. Investigations in Morocco were carried out during several short missions from 2017 to 2019 and a longer mission of two months in early 2018, allowing us to investigate several Moroccan cities, while the duration of the survey in Rosso, on the border between Senegal and Mauritania, was about ten days. The fieldwork in Dakar and Nouakchott was shorter and therefore more focused on markets.
5. The fieldwork benefited from the financial support of LabEx Dynamite (ANR-11-LABX-0046), within the framework of the "Investissements d'Avenir" program, Sar-Dyn project, Logistics Metropolization in the South: Production, Exchanges and Circulations. It has also received support from the LMI Movida: Mobilities Travels Innovations and Dynamics in Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa (IRD action).
6. By way of example, the 2018 customs revenue collected at Rosso border post, Senegal, was 6 billion CFA francs, which is a little less than 1% of the country's total customs revenue according to the Senegalese Customs General Directorate. See Senegalese Customs press release of January

29, 2019 available online: <https://www.douanes.sn/ndn1262/> page accessed on February 10, 2022. This figure is, moreover, higher than the figures obtained during our investigations in Rosso in November 2017 (5.1 billion CFA francs).

7. For more information on foreign trade in the three countries discussed in this article, see <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/MR/le-commerce-exterieur-de-la-mauritanie> for Mauritania, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/2018/05/17/le-commerce-exterieur-du-senegal-en-2017> and [https://www.wto.org/french/thewto\\_f/countries\\_f/senegal\\_f.htm#statistics](https://www.wto.org/french/thewto_f/countries_f/senegal_f.htm#statistics), and <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/MA/profil-du-commerce-exterieur-du-marocfor> Morocco. Pages accessed on February 18, 2022.

8. See in particular: Alain Faujas, "Why Mauritania is torn over the question of Western Sahara," *Jeune Afrique*, April 24, 2017, page accessed January 10, 2022.

9. This request is still pending today. See: Nina Kozłowski, "ECOWAS: Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania stuck in the waiting room," *Jeune Afrique*, September 15, 2021, page accessed February 11, 2022.

10. The Sahrawi people are still today "organized in two territories: a territory "borrowed" from Algeria, the region of Tindouf (...); a territory disputed with Morocco, the Western Sahara" (Côte, 2014). Translation by the authors.

11. When we passed through in early November 2017, the road had been completely stripped of its asphalt surface over a very significant portion and vehicles, semi-trucks, 4x4s or shared cabs, had to drive either on the side of the road or on the bare roadbed, which made for a rather chaotic ride. Construction equipment was waiting to cover the road with a new layer of asphalt, but had not yet begun work. This road rehabilitation, funded by the European Union, was completed in 2021.

12. Extracts from interviews conducted by N. Mareï in the port activity zones in Casablanca and Tangier in 2018 with transporters and independent entrepreneurs involved in trans-Saharan trade.

13. Before the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of the Senegal-Mauritania border in March 2020 by the Senegalese authorities, Rosso had about 100 border crossings per day. Source: <https://www.iom.int/fr/news/ligne-de-defense-les-garde-frontieres-se-mobilisent-contre-la-covid-19-en-mauritanie> page accessed February 17, 2022.

14. Interview conducted on November 27, 2017, in Rosso, Senegal.

15. This dynamism has shifted particularly in the HLM market, located near the port of Dakar. See the article by Laurence Marfaing, 2018.

16. A part of these goods comes from the production of the Moroccan textile industrial sector, while another part is actually a re-export of products made in China and increasingly of products made in Turkey.

17. Wolof: language spoken in Senegal, Mauritania and Gambia.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article analyses the dynamics of economic, social, and political linkages on a West African axis between Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal, focusing on the commercial sphere and its modalities (commercial spaces, transportation of goods, actors). Combining analyses of the strategies of institutional actors (in particular the role of the Moroccan state) and those of

transnational trade actors (migrants, entrepreneurs, transnational firms), we examine the type of macro-region that is under construction between these countries, which are strongly bound by human and trade flows. To understand the dynamics of regionalisation underway, a multi-sited and pluri-annual qualitative approach has been favoured. The different places we studied - markets, border crossings, streets or neighbourhoods known for their boutiques selling imported products, parking lots serving as both resting places and trading areas - are all specific entry points and anchors for understanding regional geopolitics and the strategies at work among economic and political actors along the trans-Saharan route that connects Tangier to Dakar.

L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser les dynamiques de renforcement des liens économiques, sociaux et politiques sur un axe ouest-africain entre Maroc, Mauritanie et Sénégal, en privilégiant une entrée par la sphère marchande et ses modalités (espaces commerciaux, transport des marchandises, acteurs). En croisant analyses des stratégies des acteurs institutionnels (en particulier le rôle de l'État marocain) et celles des acteurs du commerce transnational (migrants, entrepreneurs, firmes transnationales), nous nous interrogeons sur le type de macro-région en construction entre ces pays historiquement liés par des flux humains et marchands. Pour comprendre ces dynamiques de régionalisation en cours d'accélération, une approche qualitative multisituée et pluriannuelle a été privilégiée. Les différents lieux étudiés - marchés, postes-frontières, rues ou quartiers connus pour leurs boutiques de produits importés, parkings servant à la fois de lieu de repos et de commerce - sont autant de portes d'entrée et d'ancrages spécifiques pour saisir la géopolitique régionale et les stratégies des acteurs économiques mais aussi politiques à l'œuvre le long de la route transsaharienne qui relie Tanger à Dakar.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** commerce transnational, mobilités intra-africaines, géographie politique, régionalisation par le bas, route transsaharienne, stratégies d'acteurs

**Keywords:** transnational trade, intra-African mobilities, political geography, regionalisation from below, trans-Saharan road, actors' strategies

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