ABSTRACT
This article examines how irregular migrants from Central and Western Africa stranded in Morocco forged tenuous but essential relationships in the face of hostile and violent border politics constraining their mobility and resulting in systematic infringement of their rights. I examine the basis of trust amongst migrants in Morocco, who called themselves ‘adventurers’ on a quest for the ‘objective’ (e.g. ‘finding their lives’, usually through getting into Europe). Although most of them had embarked on individual journeys, they regularly needed to cooperate in order to face arduous living conditions and attempt crossing the border into Spain. The article demonstrates how trust was entangled not only with hostile migration politics but with regular moral conundrums as migrants needed to manage a balance between collaborating with other migrants and reaching their own ‘objective’.

KEYWORDS Irregular migration; trust; adventure; Morocco

Introduction
When Roméo, a Cameroonian migrant in his early twenties, returned weary from his shift at a construction site, I hurried to wish him a happy birthday.1 It was a hot summer evening in 2013, in the middle of Ramadan. Roméo’s friend and roommate Alain, another young Cameroonian, was cooking for the evening’s party. Alain gave me an awkward look and swiftly whispered that the ‘party’ he was organising would be in honour of Roméo’s sister who had recently passed away in Yaoundé. Over thirty sub-Saharan migrants, mostly young men from Cameroon who had been in Morocco for a few years like Roméo and Alain, joined us in the heart of a very densely populated neighbourhood of Rabat called Douar Hajja – a medina of red bricks, grey concrete, and corrugated iron. Three-to-four-storey buildings, adorned with satellite dishes, stood on an unstable terrain; construction works often happened at night for lack of planning permissions. On the outskirts of the neighbourhood,
littered with rubbish due to scant public services, skinny cattle grazing provided a reminder of the rural origins of the Moroccan families established in one of the capital’s most marginal neighbourhoods.

The party started in the building’s larger flat occupied by another group of Cameroonian migrants with a charismatic and well-spoken friend of Roméo leading a moment of quiet recollection in memory of Roméo’s sister. He highlighted how migrants, regardless of their religion or nationality, needed one another in Morocco to face their precarious predicament together. Then, the mood brightened as people started to eat and drink. Throughout the evening, many described the assembly of migrants as ‘a family’; they were ‘doing things like home, like in Cameroon.’

Alain often called Roméo his ‘brother’. They lived in a tiny room (circa five square metres) with another two Cameroonian men and shared a bathroom (i.e. a dingy hole and a flimsy tap) with the other Cameroonian living in the building, as well as with the Moroccan proprietor’s uncle, a drunken elderly man who constantly argued with the tenants. Roméo and Alain mostly kept to themselves, sharing food and making plans to cross to Spain together. I had known Alain, a stout man with a jovial smile, for a year. We met in a Cameroonian ‘ghetto’– as migrants often called the derelict buildings they rented for an extortionate rate – nicknamed ‘L’Ambassade’ (the Embassy) where a large number of (mostly Cameroonian) migrants were living without electricity or running water, under the threat of eviction. Alain moved somewhere else with Roméo shortly before the police shut L’Ambassade in 2012.

Almost a year after the party, in Spring 2014, I visited Alain in Tangier’s Boukhalef district, a residential area in the city’s periphery where migrants occupied empty apartments built by Moroccan emigrants in Europe, sometimes after having signed bogus contracts with phoney estate agents. Alain and Roméo had moved there to be closer to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta.² Roméo was no longer there when I visited. Alain explained there were tensions after some money he had entrusted Roméo with had gone missing:

I do not trust him with money. I will continue spending time with him to discover his mentality. […] You need to save yourself because you have a problem? It won’t disturb me. But you are incapable of explaining me where the money is? Then, there’s no point. It was four hundred dirhams [circa 35 euros]. Had it been two hundred euros, then knives could have been drawn.

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In this article, I explore issues of trust amongst irregular migrants from Central and Western Africa in Morocco. More than highs and lows in my informants’ friendship, the events described above – to which I return throughout the article – sheds light on how migrants forge tenuous but essential relationships in the face of hostile and violent border politics constraining their mobility. Exploring issues of trust illustrates the tension in migrants’ journeys between individual projects and collective endeavours. My informants, most of whom were regularly attempting to irregularly cross into Spain, often needed to collaborate with one another to be able to mbeng, that is, to successfully reach Europe.³ They discussed how trust and relationships were based on sharing ‘the right mentality’, that is demonstrating strength and courage in the face of arduous living
conditions and violent border regimes. Yet, displaying this right mentality also set limits to those fragile relationships as migrants could find opportunities to cross alone and often faced moral conundrums as a result.

In dominant discourses over the so-called ‘migration/refugee crisis’ unravelling in the Mediterranean region, considerations of trust, which is often linked to notions of risk and uncertainty (see Misztal 2011), have been mostly limited to depictions of migrants as deceptive bogus asylum seekers whose motives for emigrating are dubious at best. A focus on mainstream visual representations, which relies heavily on clichés and distortions, reveals the dominant depiction of migrants as either criminals or passive victims without agency (Köhn 2016: 32). There is little concern for how migrants make sense of long, perilous journeys undertaken individually and collectively as well as the associated moral dilemmas. Diego Gambetta argues that trusting someone entails believing that the person whom we trust is unlikely, if and when the opportunity arises, to behave in a way that is damaging to us (1988: 219). Such issues are salient to migration and refugee studies as illustrated by Eftihia Voutira and Barbara Harrell-Bond’s examination of mutual mistrust between ‘helpers’ and refugees in refugee camps (1995). Besides interacting with state authorities, NGO practitioners, (often ill-defined) smugglers as well as researchers and other figures, those embarking on such perilous journeys frequently must decide whether to trust each other. How did migrants such as Roméo and Alain forge and sustain relationships when their everyday lives were marked by violence and systematic infringement of their rights? How did they manage the tensions between pursuing their individual journeys and collaborating with one another?

Through a focus on the issue of trust, this article contributes to the growing body of ethnographic work exploring how migrants in southern Mediterranean countries such as Morocco and Turkey maintain, transform and create social relationships (e.g. Alioua 2011; Belloni 2016; Escoffier 2008; Goldschmidt 2002; Kastner 2010; Pian 2009; Schapendonck 2011; Stock 2012; Suter 2012) with family and friends as well as other migrants travelling together. Such studies have highlighted the complex organisation of migrants, mechanisms of mutual help as well as tensions. Through a focus on trust, this article shifts the analysis of migrants’ fragile relationships by examining how the latter are entangled not only with migrants’ mobility bounded by hostile migration politics but with moral conundrums amidst people travelling together and alongside one another to achieve what they called ‘the objective’ (usually articulated as to mben, to get into Europe).

Collyer (2007) demonstrates the vital importance of the social networks created and maintained with other individuals met en route by migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Morocco, even though he notes that most of them travel alone. Roméo, Alain and my other informants spent most of their time with other migrants who experienced similar conditions of violence and precariousness, and were an important source of support and information. These relationships are crucial since support and assistance for irregular migrants from non-governmental organisations is limited. Also, as explored by Stock (2016), maintaining relationships with distant relatives in home countries is difficult while relationships with the ‘host’ population can also be fraught with tensions.
(Alioua 2007). Although links to relatives and ‘host’ populations are also important, this article focuses on examining relationships amongst migrants themselves.

Scholars have explored how the constrained and non-linear journeys of migrants are marked by a number of ‘migratory stages [étapes migratoires]’ (Alioua 2011) in marginal spaces (e.g. peripheral urban neighbourhoods, forests camps) appropriated by migrants to circumvent hostile migration politics and transnational cooperation at borders which impede their mobility. In these peripheral spaces which connect both places and experiences (Pian 2009), migrants have mobilised themselves, carved economic opportunities, set up structures to organise their lives and fight for their rights, and developed tactics to cross guarded borders and pursue their journeys despite violent repression. Building relations with other migrants undertaking journeys that cross similar spaces is vital to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for avoiding perilous obstacles and for seising opportunities. In contrast to studies of migration in Morocco which have focused on one nationality such as Senegalese (Pian 2009) or Congolese (Goldschmidt 2002), this article draws on research focused on migrants from across sub-Saharan Africa living in a marginal neighbourhood of Rabat (Douar Hajja and Maadid). Focusing on one neighbourhood was crucial to better explore migrants’ links to place in a context of dis-placement (Lems 2016) as well as to examine social organisation and political mobilisation which were not limited to national ties.

Although precariousness and violence have not thrown migrants in a Hobbesian war of all against one, we must also account for ‘network failures, disconnections and social frictions’ (Schapendonck 2015: 818). For instance, Alioua stresses that the marginal spaces in Maghrebi cities are places where migrants meet and cooperate but also avoid one another and argue (2007: 42). Pian (2009) vividly demonstrates that common experiences of precarious living conditions and violent repression against migrants engender both solidarity and exclusion. My informants were often reluctant to describe their journeys, limiting themselves to ominous euphemisms about ‘having seen things.’ The hardship and violence endured by migrants from smugglers, border guards and other migrants is well documented in published accounts by some who have crossed into Europe (see Traoré and Le Dantec 2012; Yene 2010) and describe how migrants would travel along the same routes.

Collyer notes that collective action amongst migrants in Morocco is limited because bonds remain tenuous within ‘spontaneous social networks’ (2007: 682) whilst Collyer is right to point out precariousness, labelling such networks as ‘spontaneous’ obscures the fragile processes by which trust was established – and how it remained liable to be broken – amongst migrants. Scholars have highlighted how social relationships amongst migrants are highly mutable and dynamic in the context of dangerous and fragmented migratory trajectories. The relationships forged by migrants require maintenance and may collapse (see Schapendonck 2012). As illustrated in the ethnographic vignette above, mutual help and cooperation exist alongside betrayal. It is crucial to examine more closely how relationships forged by people are constantly being achieved as well as failing (see Han 2012). Through a focus on trust, this article recalibrates the exploration of migrants’ fragile relationships by examining how the latter are deeply entangled with the tension between
individual migratory journeys and collective endeavours necessary to face violent and hostile border regimes.

**Irregular Migration in Morocco**

Images of migrants along razor-wire-topped fences, ‘uncannily reminiscent of Europe’s “darkest hour”’ (Köhn 2016: 4), have become recurrent features of contemporary narratives about an unfading and seemingly unstoppable ‘migration crisis’. By conveying ‘a general sense of rupture that demands a decisive response’ (Redfield 2005: 336), talks of crisis in the Mediterranean legitimate structural violence (Cabot 2014), obscure how systematic failure in border controls equates lucrative opportunities for some (Andersson 2016), and conceal a growing divide between the happy few and the unhappy many. Spanish photographer Jose Palazon’s ‘viral’ photograph, depicting migrants climbing the fences around the Spanish enclave of Melilla and overlooking people playing golf on the other side, illustrates how migrants at the southern borders of Europe are stuck between ‘the pleasures of the wealth and the desires of the poor’ (Badiou 2008: 38).

Across the Mediterranean, migrants face an acephalous ‘migration apparatus’ (Feldman 2012) deployed by the European Union to manage and control movement. Europe’s hostile ‘politics of mobility’ (Squire 2011) has grown along with the increasing dismantling of EU’s internal borders as part of the Schengen process. With migration increasingly interpreted though a security lens (Bigo 2002), there is a strong emphasis on ‘protecting’ the EU’s external borders (Cross 2009). Through forums such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), cooperation with non-member state countries, often with poor human rights records, has become the cornerstone of EU policies of migration and asylum focused on a range of issues such as joint border control, readmission agreements in exchange for financial incentives, plans for offshore migration centres, and capacity building for local border enforcement authorities (Betts 2006). By enforcing a ‘global apartheid geopolitics’ (van Houtum 2010: 973), migration politics across and beyond Europe isolate the undesirable from the desirable, with the former often reduced to the figure of the ‘illegal migrant’ (De Genova 2002) to be kept as far away from Europe’s shores.6

Morocco, with its long history of circular migration to Europe (De Haas 2007), is an important partner for the EU and its member states. As noted by Mohamed Berriane, Hein de Haas and Khatarina Natter (2015: 515), since the 1990s and as a response to the gradual closure and militarisation of Europe’s southern borders, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly travelled through Morocco in order to attempt entering Europe.7 Sub-Saharan migrants – mostly from Western and Central Africa – usually reach Morocco from Oujda near the Algerian border. They attempt to either climb the fortified fences around Ceuta and Melilla, or embark on unseaworthy rubber dinghies to the Spanish enclaves or the mainland, only fourteen kilometres away and visible from the Moroccan shore to migrants who often take years to manage the crossing.8

Morocco is one of the main countries towards which the EU, through political pressure and funding, has striven to outsource the management of its borders and the execution of its ‘policy of containment’ (Cherti and Grant 2013: 13). Yet, despite
repeated negotiation rounds, Morocco has yet to sign a readmission agreement with the EU (El Qadim 2015). Although numbers of irregular, sub-Saharan migrants remained low, Morocco adopted repressive legislation (Law 02/03) shortly after the Casablanca terrorist attacks (Natter 2014). A number of deaths following police brutality during a mass border-crossing attempt in 2005 sparked international outrage in the face of ‘a war against migrants’ (Migreurop 2007: 3).

This has led some to denounce Morocco’s acting as the ‘gendarme of Europe’ (Belguendouz 2005: 178), although recent changes illustrate both how Moroccan migration politics is entangled with wider geo-political issues (Cherti and Collyer 2015) and the extent to which Moroccan civil society has been able to foster changes in policies of migration, notably thanks to advocacy work between national NGOs, international networks such as MIGREUROP and migrants’ own organisations (Üstübici 2016; Bachelet In Press). The signature of a mobility partnership agreement between Morocco and the EU in 2013 occurred at a time of intensified repression against migrants and increased mobilisation amongst activists and NGOs. Large-scale attempts at crossing the border into Ceuta and Melilla increased in the face of heightened police brutality. NGO reports highlighted appalling living conditions, regular infringement of migrants’ rights and regular acts of violence and racial discrimination (MSF 2013 and HRW 2014). Although ongoing transformations point to Morocco’s transition as a country of immigration (Cherti and Grant 2013), in this paper I focus on a group of migrants for whom settling within Morocco was not (as yet for some) an option; even though many were likely to remain in Morocco indefinitely.

**Adventure and ‘Looking for One’s Life’**

At Roméo’s party, conversations often turned to border-crossing attempts, which migrants nicknamed ‘the shock [le choc]’, in reference to the physical and mental scars they sustained when they were cut by the razor-blades atop the fences and beaten by Spanish and Moroccan authorities. Some of the guests left early to get on a bus bound for Tangier, with hand-made paddles, life-jackets and a zodiac tightly wrapped-up in bin bags. We wished them good luck. Like many in Douar Hajja, they had been saving up money to try crossing into Europe for the umpteenth time. As they left, an inebriated young Cameroonian man mistook me for an EU official, accusing me of erecting fences around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. He shouted that migrants were prepared ‘to eat the fences.’

My sub-Saharan informants in Rabat often depicted border crossings as perilous battles undertaken by fearless heroes. They did not call themselves ‘irregular migrants’. Rather, they used the word ‘adventurer’. The term, which transcends dominant dichotomies such as political refugee versus economic migrant, was widely used amongst irregular migrants in Douar Hajja, mostly unmarried men travelling alone, in their early twenties and from Central and Western Africa. They defined adventure as an epic journey for a better life in which adventurers courageously faced obstacles to widen opportunities. In her exploration of adventure amongst Senegalese migrants, Pian (2009: 89) also stresses the heroic aspect of this trans-African odyssey. The
adventure was marked by violence, precariousness, and uncertainty, but also resilience, resourcefulness, and hope. Sub-Saharan ‘adventurers’ insisted on the need to ‘sauter les frontières [jumping borders]’ to escape a range of socio-economic and political issues in home countries. They often explained that adventure amounted to ‘reaching for the objective [l’objectif]’, loosely defined as ‘looking for one’s life’ (chercher sa vie) or ‘looking for one’s self (se chercher). Adventurers strived to be the actors of their own destiny (see Bredeloup 2013).

Illustrating the shortcomings of the prevailing terminology which divides countries according to origin, transit or destination, my informants such as Alain were keen to stress that the ‘objective’ entailed improving their lives (‘being comfortable’) and not a specific location. In contrast to Pian’s discussion of Senegalese adventurers’ attempts at reaching Europe ‘no matter the cost’ (2009: 11), my informants often stressed they were not looking for Europe per se (though many were actively trying to reach it). Alain often explained to me he would consider staying in Morocco if the conditions were right. He was an orphan and had stopped going to school before the baccalaureate to work in a TV repair business. Upon losing his job, he decided to leave to provide for his siblings. Alain’s ‘fragmented journey’ (Collyer 2007) to Morocco took several months as he stopped on the way to work and decide where to go next, eventually deciding to try Europe. My informants from across Central and Western Africa discussed the need to ‘exit’ in order to emancipate themselves from constraints and carve opportunities for themselves. If the ‘outside’ (le dehors) they were trying to reach could be in Europe, sometimes described as a land of ‘honey’ (Traoré and Le Dantec 2012: 278) in adventurers’ accounts, Europe was not necessarily a ‘destination’ from the onset.

Yet, the lives of my informants in dilapidated ghettos bore little resemblance to the epic tales in which migrants portrayed themselves as heroic tricksters deceiving border guards and facing dangers. Adventurers’ everyday life, rhythmmed by fear and boredom, was far from glorious. My informants regularly lamented wasting their time and lives as well as ‘going in circles’. In Douar Hajja, sub-Saharan adventurers were planning on going (or returning) to the forests near the Spanish enclaves. Job opportunities were usually limited to casual, low-paid manual labour (usually 70–100 MAD [5–8 GBP] a day for the most arduous tasks) on construction sites in more affluent neighbourhoods. Migrants waited for work all day on the outskirts of Douar Hajja despite regular police raids and the threat of deportation to the Algerian desert. They described the jobs as ‘forced labour’ and denounced their racist treatment by contractors who sometimes refused to pay them.

Assaults against migrants were common in Douar Hajja’s tortuous and narrow alleyways, which were infamous as a hub for drugs, prostitution and violence, although many Moroccans argued the place was improving.12 Taxi drivers also often described it as the ‘African quarter’. The neighbourhood hosted poor and modest Moroccan families as well as a visible, but relatively small, number of sub-Saharan migrants. Relationships between the two populations were complex and ambiguous. Casual chatter between sub-Saharans and young, unemployed Moroccan men – some of whom were often idle and smoking hashish on the street – could turn into violent assault and racist slur. 13 Yet, young Moroccans and sub-Saharans shared dreams of
a life ‘more comfortable’ in Europe. Sub-Saharan migrants did not live in autarky from the other inhabitants of Douar Hajja. They were an important source of income for shopkeepers and property owners, but my informants often complained of being swindled. Some more positive, yet equally precarious, relationships – beyond the focus of this article – developed between migrants and Moroccans. Although circulating within the neighbourhoods was still dangerous, in 2012–2013 migrants enjoyed greater mobility within those peripheral neighbourhoods and across the city than only a few years earlier (see Pian 2009; Alioua 2011).

Having to endure what adventurers euphemistically referred to as ‘the conditions’ (e.g. violence) was inherent to adventure. In L’Ambassade, the Cameroonian ghetto where I met Alain, there was graffiti in the staircase reading ‘la souffrance est une école de [la vie]’ (suffering is a school of [life]). Using the French term, adventurers discussed learning in terms of ‘débrouillardise’, that is to cope, to make do with meagre means. Some even claimed to be seeking out hardship and suffering. Roméo insisted that he preferred to live in Douar Hajja rather than move into a less marginal neighbourhood of Rabat. Echoing Malkki’s descriptions of hardships as teaching and empowering in the Tanzanian Mishamo camp (1996: 381), Roméo explained that ‘suffering gives you the heart to do what you cannot do. You think about how to [...] shock.’

‘We Suffer the Same, We are Together’

Conversations on the streets of Douar Hajja amongst my informants often started with ‘Morocco is hard’ (le Maroc, c’est dure) and usually ended with ‘we are together’ (On est ensemble). Having to face difficult living conditions provided a collective sense of identity amongst migrants of diverse nationalities who lived together in derelict ghettoes and collectively attempted to ‘shock’ the border. Like during Roméo’s party, they often asserted that all sub-Saharan adventurers were ‘a family’, they were ‘all blacks’ and ‘suffered the same.’

As argued by Malkki in her discussion of the contingent processes of re-working categorical identities amongst Hutu refugees in Tanzania, displacement prompts the questioning of ‘culture, society, and community as bounded territorialised units’ (1995: 2). In adventure, migrants usually divided themselves in ghettoes according to nationalities. For instance, migrants in L’Ambassade where I first met Alain were mostly (francophone) Cameroonians. However, there were also some migrants from the Central African Republic as well as francophone Nigerians. Although there were often tensions between central and western Africans, some lived together in Douar Hajja ghettoes. Mobilising one’s ‘social capital [...] in purposive actions’ (Lin 1999: 35; original emphasis) was essential for migrants who often appealed to a wide range of ties such as ethnic group, nationality, language, region on the African continent, having travelled together, or simply stressed that in adventure, ‘blacks’ were ‘all the same’. They often claimed that the pre-existing tensions and conflict in home countries (whether along ethnic lines or party allegiances) did not matter.

Here, I am examining ‘adventurer’ as an emic term and not reifying it as a magical state whereby migrants ‘escape national, ethnic, and cultural rootedness’ (Grillo 2007:
Besides frequent fighting with Moroccans, migrants were occasionally involved in violent (and sometimes lethal) fighting between different sub-Saharan nationalities despite stressing that they were ‘all the same’. There were also tensions along ethnic lines (e.g. against Bamileke amongst Cameroonians). Adventurers did not form a straightforward group that transcended ethnic, national, linguistic or religious boundaries.

In exploring relationships amongst migrants through the emic term ‘adventure’, I follow Anthony Cohen who, in his discussion of the symbolic construction of ‘community’, seeks ‘not lexical meaning, but use’ (1985: 12). Adventure did not imply an ex novo, utopian cosmopolitan identity nor the simple reinforcement of existing ties. Rather, it provided a space for débrouillardise where sociality amongst ‘black’ migrants could be re-negotiated in the quest for the ‘objective’. For instance, many of my informants were known by multiple (nick)names, some acquired during the journey, such as Muslim names amongst Christian migrants hoping to be better treated in Morocco. Some informants pointed out that they were not even sure that the names they knew others by were the real ones. Alain who was known by other names always insisted he wanted to share his ‘real’ name with me. He stressed he shared his name with people with whom he was close, people he trusted. When asked how he decided whom to trust, Alain stressed one needed to stay close to ‘people with the right mentality’.

**The ‘Right Mentality’**

When I asked Alain why he was giving money to another migrant begging in Rabat while he himself had little, he replied: ‘Because I know his situation. He suffers like me.’ Sub-Saharan adventurers in Douar Hajja often justified help in terms of sharing arduous ‘conditions’. Solidarity and cooperation were not limited to financial help but included communal meals, sharing information about jobs and border-crossing opportunities. Yet, some of my sub-Saharan informants stressed that adventurers were untrustworthy criminals who had fled their countries to escape justice, that adventure brought the worst out of people. In contrast, Alain argued that whether migrants were selfish or showed solidarity with others in adventure was a matter of ‘education’ and not because of adventure. Alberto Corsin Jiménez observes that ‘trust and social crises are presented as natural enemies, the former rushing out when the latter draw in’ (2011: 177). Migrants did not live in a world of constant suspicions and betrayals, nor did they become radically new moral agents because of adventure. Nevertheless, issues surrounding trust were closely linked to migrants’ disrupted mobility.

As Alain put it to me, he needed to discover Roméo’s ‘mentality’. According to Gambetta, trust is a process that requires one to remain open to evidence, that is ‘acting as if one trusted’ (1988: 234) until trust can be more firmly established. My informants in Douar Hajja often discussed the need to stay close to people with the ‘right mentality’. Depending on the degrees of constraint, risk and interest, trust is not always needed for people to cooperate (Gambetta 1988: 220). Migrants did not trust everyone with whom
they lived in the overcrowded ghettos, nevertheless remaining close to people whom
you could trust was important, especially for border-crossing ‘attacks’.

‘Having the right mentality [mentalité]’ was loosely defined as being prepared to
overcome difficulties and uncertainty rather than giving up. When discussing the
quest for the objective, adventurers stressed success depended on migrants’ relentless
determination, displaying ‘courage and force [strength]’. Rather than breeding passivity,
adventurers’ hope to reach a life ‘more comfortable’ was akin to what Mary Zournazi
and Ghassan Hage call ‘hope on the side of life’, that is ‘a bodily principle of hope,
which drives us to continue to want to live, no matter what’ (2002: 151). However,
hope is ultimately dependent on ‘something else’ (Crapanzano 2004: 100). Adventurers
in Douar Hajja often stressed that to reach the objective, one needed to ‘tenter la chance
[try one’s luck].’ Chance could not be ‘forced’ but adventurers would not succeed if they
remained passive. In their discussions of adventure, sub-Saharan migrants simulta-
neously emphasised the importance and the limits of their own agency. As many
adventurers, both Muslim and Christian, explained, chance was ultimately granted by
God. However, as Fabien, another Cameroonian migrant and one of Alain’s former
L’Ambassade roommates, explained to me: ‘you don’t just wait in bed here until God
picks you up and nicely deposits you on the other side of the fence [along the
Spanish border]’.

‘Having the right mentality’ amongst migrants referred to acknowledging that
obstacles impeded adventure’s epic quest and that its success was uncertain and ulti-
mately dependent on greater forces, while simultaneously stressing that it was up to
adventurers and their heroic efforts to show their worthiness in overcoming such
obstacles. Adventurers’ own ‘structure and agency’ dilemma had dangerous ramifica-
tions as upholding the ‘right mentality’ was a thin line to tread. Alain shared with
me his fear of ‘becoming mad’. Maintaining the ‘right mentality’ in the face of repeated
failures to cross the border and hazardous everyday life in Morocco was challenging. My
informants pointed at homeless migrants known as having ‘lost their mind’ and who
wandered around Douar Hajja, haggard and dressed in dirty clothes, talking to them-
selves and searching for food through the large trash bins along the main avenue.

It was essential for adventurers to stay close to people with the right mentality. One
way of finding out about the mentalities of others was through shared experiences.
Guido Möllering stresses that the point of departure for trust is ‘the experiencing
(Erleben) of our life-world’ (2001: 412). Amongst adventurers, trust stemmed from
living together in urban ghettos or forest camps, from experiencing hardship collec-
tively and, crucially, observing how others coped. It was common to find migrants
from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa living together in ghettos or smaller accom-
modations after having shared various perilous ordeals. ‘Sharing the same mentality’
was crucial to ensure trust. A recurrent example was when informants highlighted
that it was necessary to attempt crossing the Mediterranean on an inflatable boat
with people you ‘trusted’, people who had ‘the right mentality’. In concrete terms,
this referred to people who would not give up paddling in the middle of the sea or
panic and risk everyone’s lives by capsizing the boat.
'You Don’t Waste mbeng Because of One Person'

As noted by Elizabeth Colson, ‘trusts rests on reciprocity’ (2003: 5). Migrants living together were expected to share what they had, especially those living together in cramped rooms. However, the special bonds forged amongst migrants were precarious and did not prevent people from moving on, or in the case of Roméo and Alain, from breaking mutual trust. As argued by Gambetta, trust is a device to ‘cop [e] with the freedom of others’ (1988: 219). This is especially salient to irregular, sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco for whom adventure was strongly associated in their (often boastful) discourse about adventure as the freedom to pack up their bags and go as they pleased. Trust is relevant, as Gambetta puts it, because of ‘the possibility of exit, betrayal, defection’ (ibid 218). Alain often stressed that migrants never fully knew one another and needed to remain vigilant. Drawing on Georg Simmel’s analysis of trust (1950: 318), Möllering claims that that trust requires suspension, that is ‘the bracketing of the unknowable’ (2001: 417). Amongst adventurers, making the ‘leap’ to trust another adventurer on the basis of a shared ‘mentality’ could prove ill-advised.

Somehow anticipating criticism of his own future behaviour with Alain, Roméo explained to me the meaning of the phrase ‘to shock one’s percentage [choquer son pourcentage]’, an expression often heard in Douar Hajja:

If something is good or bad, it is for yourself. You and others leave the country together, but at some point, you have to split. Not because you want to. God splits you. The money you have in your pocket cannot be enough for three people; you are obliged to leave alone. You can come together, but to each one their route [chacun sa route]. You have the same goal but each one is obliged to find their way.

For him ‘adventure means first the foremost [l’aventure c’est d’abord le d’abord]’:

We have discovered the d’abord here in Morocco. We are ten travelling together as a commando [in the forest but] three get lost, they walk slowly. You arrive [at the border’s fence] and have the possibility to cross. You are not going to say ‘we have to wait for the three’. You are obliged to mbeng [enter into Europe]. You need people with strength, warriors, those with energy. You have got all the material ready, but three got lost. The forest is not a place for sleeping. Each morning created by God the police turn up. You have to shock mbeng or you get caught. You don’t waste mbeng because of one person.

As illustrated by Roméo, adventure implied cooperation; however, relationships based on trust amongst migrants were precarious since one had to think of oneself and one’s objective: to go mbeng, to enter Europe. The ‘right mentality’ (e.g. displaying courage and strength in the face of hardship) set both the basis and the limits of cooperation and trust amongst migrants since in the face of opportunities to overcome hardship alone, one should grab them, even if that means leaving people behind. Similarly, Cameroonians often used the word pontiac, a Cameroonian street term my informants defined as meaning ‘personal’, ‘what is not to be shared’. Migrants often shared scarce resources, but when they could not or did not want to share something, they called it pontiac.
‘One Should Not Spoil Somebody Else’s mbeng’

Adventurers in Rabat discussed the need ‘not to waste mbeng’ but also highlighted the moral imperative of ‘not spoiling others’ mbeng.’ As mentioned in the introductory vignette, Alain pointed out things could have been much more serious with Roméo if the sum of money had been greater. Alain stressed that ‘one should not spoil someone else’s mbeng [Il ne faut pas gâter le mbeng des autres].’ This is where migrants in Douar Hajja drew the line of what was morally permissible in adventure. As mentioned above, the imperative not to spoil your own mbeng set the limit to cooperation amongst migrants. Regardless of the bonds forged with others, one might have to continue alone. However, as illustrated below, spoiling someone else’s mbeng was described as immoral for adventurers and amounted to a dangerous breach of trust.

When I met Alain in Tangier, he showed me the building where Cédric, a young sub-Saharan migrant, fell from the top floor and died in December 2013, an incident which sparked tensions in Tangier between Moroccans and sub-Saharan migrants. He said Cédric had been pushed by the Moroccan police during a raid. While angry with the police, he was also upset by the behaviour of Brice, another migrant who had also moved from Rabat to Tangier. Alain saw Brice leaving Cédric’s building with a package one evening, just before Cédric realised his inflatable zodiac was missing. Alain was certain Brice had stolen it. He went over the most likely course of events had Brice not stolen the zodiac:

Cédric would have crossed to Europe or he would have been caught and been deported. He would have stayed in Douar Hajja to rest and not been in Tangier during the raids. Because Brice stole his zodiac, he stayed. Now he is dead. If [Brice] is a man, it is going to weigh on him [ça va le juger].

Breaching trust and endangering others could have dramatic repercussions for migrants. If pontiac was deemed acceptable, migrants in Douar Hajja resented the figure of noka, Cameroonian slang for ‘traitor’. Another recurrent expression was ‘boxer le polo’, whereby boxer means spoiling, or destroying, and polo designates a favourable situation or place in Cameroonian street slang; polo was also used by sub-Saharan migrants to designate a hideout. As mentioned by Alain, migrants were attentive to others’ ‘acts’ and ‘mentality’. In Douar Hajja, calling someone a noka often referred to actions which endangered other migrants and signalled that person as untrustworthy. In his analysis of contemporary practices of witchcraft, Peter Geschiere notes that as intimacy entails both comfort and danger, ‘trust can never be an ontological certainty’ (2013: ix). In forest camps and urban ghettos, migrants lived within enclosed spaces. In the midst of enforced intimacy amongst migrants, the twin-possibility of trust and betrayal loomed large and with potentially deadly consequences.

Constantin, another Cameroonian migrant from L’Ambassade, who had for some time acted as ‘chairman’ of a ghetto in Maghnia, the Algerian town sitting opposite the Moroccan city of Oujda, discussed how dangerous breaches of trust could be. He explained how in 2007 a group of hundred migrants living in a forest camp near Melilla discovered two nokas. After a series of failed crossing attempts and violent
reprisals by Spanish and Moroccan authorities in suspicious circumstances, Constantin and the other migrants looked for ‘traitors’. They discovered two young Cameroonian men had communicated details of ‘border attacks’ to the Spanish Guardia Civil in exchange for the promise of a future safe passage to Spain. Constantin outlined the situation:

We proceeded to the judgement. […] We had to tie them up because people’s lives were in danger. People get shot [at] the fence. One was weak and confessed. […] The other one did not want to speak. We beat him up. We found the same number in [his] phone, but he kept lying. We […] made a fire and burnt his feet […]. In the end, he confessed. […] We kept the phones and freed them.

Constantin’s tale of betrayal and ‘justice’ in self-organised forest camps highlights how breaches of trust amongst migrants could have dire consequences. However, my informants stressed this kind of ‘judgement’ was something of the past; a time when life in urban ghettoes and forest camps was strictly regulated by chairmen and chiefs (see Pian 2009), which for the most part was no longer the case when he recalled the story to me in 2012.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the fragile relationships amongst irregular migrants from Western and Central Africa stranded in Morocco. I examined how issues of trust and deceit were deeply entangled with migrants’ individual migratory projects, which regularly necessitated collaborations with other migrants to ensure success in border-crossing attempts but also merely to cope with precarious, living conditions. Being irregular migrants at the doors of Europe did not entail the disappearance of trust and mutual help. Relationships amongst migrants from Western and Central Africa stranded in Morocco were fragile yet crucial to enable adventurers to reach what they referred to as ‘the objective’: that is, to find their lives and their selves through arduous and uncertain journeys during which their mobility was bounded by hostile migration politics across the Mediterranean region and beyond.

Having ‘the right mentality’, that is showing courage and strength in the face of the hardship of adventure, was the basis of trust for migrants who needed one another to ‘try their luck’ by paddling unseaworthy dinghies (zodiacs) across the sea or climbing up the fortified fences around the Spanish enclaves. Yet, the very basis of trust also set the limits to those fragile relationships since being able to face hardship meant finding opportunities to leave and cross alone. Although adventure did not turn migrants into new moral agents, it came with its own set of moral dilemmas. If one could not waste their mbeng, one should not spoil others’ mbeng and endanger fellow migrants’ chances of reaching the objective.

Through an examination of the mechanisms of trust amongst migrants which ‘set[s] aside a picture of all-or-nothing social bonds’ (Han 2012: 234), this article contributes to the body of ethnographic research exploring how migrants at the borders of Europe create and maintain relationships. While beyond the focus of this article, examining such bonds also requires paying close attention to ambiguous relationships with, for
example, relatives in home countries or neighbours in the ‘host’ country. Examining the moral conundrums amongst migrants who take dangerous journeys is crucial for a more in-depth understanding of the consequences of hostile border politics. Moreover, exploring how migrants build and sustain fragile relationships of trust contributes to opposing dominant, reductionist narratives that depict migrants as helpless victims, scammers and scroungers. One of the main contributions of anthropologists to current debates over migration has been to highlight how those who embark on perilous journeys in defiance of hostile border regimes are not ‘entirely the subject of power imposed from above’ (McConnachie 2014: 32). Besides negotiations with figures of authority such as UN agencies and states, there is a need for closer ethnographic engagement with how displaced people forge relationships, however ambiguous, with one another. Exploring those fragile relationships enables us to go beyond dominant representations of migrants which have often been limited to bird-view depictions of a threatening mass or close-up portrayals of anonymous suffering. In contrast to oversimplifying narratives at the heart of discourses over a so-called ‘migration crisis’, this article demonstrates and explores moral complexity amidst extreme circumstances.

Notes

1. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I have swapped my informants’ names for pseudonyms.
2. Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish autonomous cities in North Africa which are disputed by Morocco. Sub-Saharan and Moroccan migrants have entered Europe via Ceuta and Melilla for decades by climbing the fences around the two enclaves or sailing in rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats.
3. Mbeng was a word used amongst francophone sub-Saharan migrants as a verb (to enter into Europe) or a noun (a synonym for Europe). Some informants claimed it originated from Cameroonian ‘street slang’ and initially meant ‘to enter’.
4. Beyond images, a report focused on British media highlights how most stories silence migrants’ voices and experiences by mostly portraying them as either ‘villains’ or ‘victims’ (Crawley, McMahon and Jones 2016).
5. I conducted participant observation in Douar Hajja and Maadid, two marginal neighbourhoods in the Moroccan capital with a growing population of migrants from sub-Saharan countries, from June 2012 to September 2013 I returned for a short follow-up trip to visit informants in Rabat and Tangier in spring 2014. After meeting a few young Moroccans and migrants from those neighbourhoods in a theatre workshop, I started spending with migrants walking around the neighbourhoods and sitting in the derelict, self-organised houses (nicknamed ghettos) and smaller accommodation they shared. Initially accompanied by the leader of a migration association, I quickly ventured by myself and developed a network of contacts amongst migrants. I spent most times in a building nicknamed L’Ambassade (home to mostly Cameroonian), a place called Le Consulat (where the ground floor was occupied mostly by Ivoirians), and smaller accommodations hosting migrants from Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. I conducted most semi-structured and informal interviews with a core group of around thirty migrants (mostly male and in their twenties) who had been in Morocco for one to two years and were regularly going back and forth between Rabat and the borderlands.
6. Because of the highly contested term of ‘illegal migrant’, throughout this article I use the adjective ‘irregular’ to refer to sub-Saharan informants who had entered Morocco without the required documents or had overstayed their visa. As such terminology is not fully satisfying,
throughout the article I also put the emphasis on the emic term used by my informants to describe themselves and their journey – ‘adventurer’.

7. The main sub-Saharan countries of origin (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo) identified in studies such as AMERM (2008) and Cherti and Grant (2013) matched my own observations in Douar Hajja. My informants were mostly francophone migrants from Cameroon and Ivory Coast as well as Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea. I had limited access to some, especially Anglophone, migrants who were suspicious of my motives. Also, although I had little access to them as a male researcher and numbers were limited in my specific field site, other scholars note the increase in female migration from Western and Central Africa (Escoffier 2008). While this article focuses on the relationship between Alain and Roméo and engages with notions used by my Cameroonian informants, the issues raised were similar amongst my informants from other Western and Central African countries in Douar Hajja and Maadid.

8. While it took a few days on average to cross the border in the 1990s, the AMERM (2008) study reported migrants taking an average of thirty months. By the end of my fieldwork, most of my informants had not managed to cross and had been in Morocco for about eighteen months. Many took several more years to cross. A few went home and some are still in Douar Hajja, actively trying to cross to Europe while monitoring the changing situation for migrants in Morocco.

9. As noted by Cherti and Collyer (2015: 594), estimates until 2013 have varied between ten and fifteen thousand. Figures of irregular migration are notably unreliable.

10. A significant strengthening of Morocco’s ties to the rest of the African continent is illustrated by its rejoining of the African Union in 2017. In September 2013, after a period of characterised by brutal repression against migrants, King Mohamed VI announced a radical change in politics of migration. Regularisation processes as well as the promise of new asylum legislation have been welcomed by civil society, although there have been setbacks (Bachelet 2014). This article focuses on the period of heightened repression against migrants in the two years before the royal announcement.

11. A zodiac is a rubber raft unsuitable for high sea often used by holidaymakers that migrants sailed to cross to the Spanish enclaves or the mainland (‘Grande Espagne’).

12. The administrative name of Douar Hajja is Hay El-Farah (i.e. the neighbourhood of joy). Sub-Saharan informants called it ‘the neighbourhood of machetes’ (le quartier des machettes) – in reference to the regular attacks with knives and machetes targeting them but also other Moroccans.

13. Racial discriminations against sub-Saharan migrants have to be read against the complex dynamics of race in Morocco – which has traditionally been portrayed ‘as a racially and ethnically homogenous nation’ (El Hamel 2013: 2).

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