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Economy and Decision: How Economic Factors Influence the Journeys and Destinations of Trans-Saharan Migrants in Oujda, Morocco

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Economy and Decision:
How Economic Factors Influence the Journeys and Destinations of Trans-Saharan Migrants in Oujda, Morocco

Sign at the Moroccan-Algerian Border, 15 km from Oujda. Since the closing of the border in 1994, migration to Morocco through Oujda has become significantly more expensive and dangerous for irregular migrants, who often include refugees, people fleeing war or political upheaval, and the impoverished. Photo credit: Newspress.com

Morocco: Migration and Transnational Identity
Spring 2016
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Abstract

This paper discusses how economic factors impact the journeys and destinations of irregular trans-Saharan migrants who enter Morocco through Oujda. Though many may choose either to return home or settle in Morocco and eventually receive status, migration policies continue to view virtually all immigration into Morocco through the lens of transit migration—it assumes that all migrants in Morocco are en route to Europe. The reality, however, is that the majority of trans-Saharan immigrants into Morocco will never have the means to reach Europe. Thus, this paper aims to fill the gaps in our understanding of immigration to Morocco—not simply as a stage on the journey to Europe, but as an experience being lived by individual migrants.

Migrants who enter Morocco are faced with difficult decisions regarding where to go next. Through conducting eight unstructured and semi-structured interviews, both with migrants from three distinct social groups, and with the organizations, individuals, and associations that work with these migrants, I have discovered that the journeys and aspirations of individual migrants are largely impacted by economic factors, such as migrant access to money, or the ability to find a job. As a result, the experiences of Arab refugees from the Middle East, Francophone immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, and Anglophone Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa differ greatly. These differences, which affect socio-economic status in Morocco, are the main factors that help migrants determine their trajectories and final destinations.

All in all, this study serves as a reminder that migration experiences in Morocco are complicated by outside factors, which are not accounted for in the overly simplified statistics and depictions of migration routes. Rather, understanding key issues, such as the affects of migration policies, predicting the routes of migrants, and building infrastructure to aid migrants in Morocco, is tantamount to understanding the experiences of individuals based on a more nuanced grasp of their experiences with socio-economic status.
Key Terms

For the purpose of this paper, key terms are defined below. Many of these definitions are not necessarily pre-established or universally accepted, but are instead meant to give context into how these terms are used in this paper and research. This is because there is great confusion surrounding the vocabulary of migration in the North African region. These terms clarify what I am studying and more clearly define the population being interviewed.

Because Oujda is located at a land-border, which has been closed since 1994, the vast majority of migrants are *irregular migrants*. Jordan and Duvell (2002) have defined irregular migration as crossing borders without proper authority, or violating conditions for entering another country. While everybody I interviewed was at some point an irregular migrant in Morocco, there is a distinction between *irregular entry* and *irregular stay*. Globally, in the vast majority of cases, migrants enter a country legally and overstay their visas. However, in the case of overland migrants to Oujda, the vast majority participates in irregular entry because of the closed border and may later receive status, either as refugees, or as part of Moroccan regularization policy. Thus, status as a regular or irregular migrant is constantly in flux, and a tricky label to place on individuals.

Further, *transit migration* is a term that is often incorrectly confused with irregular migration because many transit migrants enter Morocco illegally. Transit Migration is important to this paper because it is the framework through which all migration in Oujda is viewed. According to IMISCOE and COMPAS (2008), transit
migration “refers to certain forms of supposedly temporary immigration and to migrants who keep moving from country to country, either intentionally or in response to changing conditions, rising pressures and new incentives.” They further elaborate that transit migration is “an umbrella term that embraces very different categories such as refugees and labor migrants and applies generally to mixed flows, and regular and irregular migration, and temporary immigration”. Because of the term’s ambiguity as well as other reasons that will be elaborated upon in the literature review, I have intentionally avoided referring to research participants as transit migrants, opting instead for the term trans-Saharan migration. Nonetheless, because my interest in this research topic stems from a direct interest in challenging the framework of transit migration in Oujda, it is important to understand the meaning of the term.

Finally, **Trans-Saharan Migration** is more broadly used to refer to people who traverse the Sahara Desert by land to reach countries in the North of Africa, referred to as the Maghreb region. Migrants often make use of historic trans-Saharan caravan routes to reach their destinations. Much like transit migration, the trans-Saharan journey is generally made in several stages, and might take anywhere between one month and several years. The map on the next page shows some common trans-Saharan migration routes. In recent years, trans-Saharan migration to Oujda from Syria and Yemen has increased, however.

In the context of Oujda, I have broadly categorized trans-Saharan migrants in three groups, based on their country of origin: (1) refugees from the Middle East, including Syrians and Yemenis, (2) migrants from Francophone sub-Saharan countries,
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including Burkina Faso, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Mozambique, and Ivory Coast

and (3), Anglophone sub-Saharan migrants from countries including Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.
**Background Information: Oujda as a Migration Hub**

Oujda is a city located in the far Eastern region of Morocco, fifteen kilometers from the Algerian border. Traditionally, it has served as a hub for transport and trade between Algeria and Morocco, but since the closing of the Moroccan-Algerian Border in 1994, its economy has slowed. Nonetheless, in recent years, Oujda has become known for the smuggling petrol and other goods across the border, as well as for its popularity as a hub for trans-Saharan migrants en route to Tangier or Melilla. Duvell (2008) recognizes Oujda as a “hub for transit migration” and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (2013) has called Oujda “one of the main migratory crossroads in North Africa”.

While this same report claims that thousands of migrants have crossed the Algerian-Moroccan border and transited through Oujda in the past decade, interestingly, because of the irregular nature of migration in this region, nobody can be certain of exactly how many migrants pass through Oujda, or where exactly they go next. Hassane Amari, a volunteer that has worked with migrants across several organizations and associations in Oujda over the past two decades estimates that hundreds of people enter Morocco through Oujda every year. Because Oujda is the only city on the Algerian-Moroccan border that is geographically paired with an Algerian sister city across the border (Maghnia is only 26 kilometers away) a majority of trans-Saharan migrants reportedly enter Morocco through Oujda, by foot. Despite recent efforts by both Moroccan and Algerian authorities to curb migration by erecting a fence and digging
trenches, the numbers crossing the border are continually growing (Anitta Kynsilehto, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

As a result, to best understand the experiences of trans-Saharan migrants who come to Morocco, it is necessary to study migration in Oujda, specifically. This city is the receiving point for most trans-Saharan migrants, who later scatter as they head to destinations ranging from Rabat, to Tangier, to Libya. Oujda is at the source of migration into Morocco, and, thus, I have chosen to interview migrants in this city, in order to shed light on what factors shape transitory journeys for migrants upon entering the country.

*Fence along the Algerian border erected in 2014. Despite the new obstacles, migration into Oujda continues to grow. Photo credit: migrantsaumaroc.wordpress.com*
Introduction

This project aims to explore how economic factors influence the trajectories and destinations of trans-Saharan migrants entering Morocco through Oujda. Instead of relying on broad depictions of migration into Morocco, this study will shed light on how nuanced differences in socio-economic class shape the trans-Saharan journey.

I came to be interested in this topic through a roundabout process. I started with an interest in understanding migrant agency. In popular media, migration throughout the North of Africa and into Europe is depicted by large unidirectional arrows drawn on maps, implying influxes of crowds of immigrants into Spain, Greece and Italy. In recent years, under the pressure of the European Union and in line with this understanding of transit migration, Morocco has adopted a migration policy that assumes all those entering the country have intentions of crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe. As a result, irregular migrants (and often documented, legal migrants, as well) are rounded up from Forest camps in the North of Morocco and forcibly displaced to the south of the country, a place that is seen as further from the ultimate destinations of these migrants (Asticude Association, personal communication, March 17, 2016).

Thus, I began my research by attempting to understand whether the vast majority of trans-Saharan migrants truly aim to reach Europe, or whether they have varying aspirations for their migration journey. I felt that the currently accepted understanding of transit migration precluded understanding the choices and agency of migrants, and that policy was based on broad assumptions regarding migrant motivations.
Problematically, as I began my research in Oujda, I discovered that every person I interviewed came to Oujda with the intention of crossing to Europe. Nonetheless, Hassane Amari, a volunteer that has been engaged with migrants in Oujda for more than twenty years, and has kept in touch with countless trans-Saharan migrants as they continue their journeys beyond Oujda, estimated that about 35-40% of trans-Saharan migrants eventually make it to Europe. While this number seemed shockingly large at first, I still wondered where the other 60-65% of trans-Saharan migrants went, when they did not successfully reach their final destinations. After conducting several more interviews, I discovered that there were significant socio-economic factors that contributed to where migrants went. This proved an interesting, and heretofore never studied topic that sheds light on the agency, motivations, and outcomes of migration for many who come to Morocco.
Review of Literature

Transit Migration Terminology and Its Difficulties

As discussed in “key terms”, the terminology of “transit migration” has come to refer to a plethora of migration experiences. Worse, the term has been politicized, and consequently it has become more difficult for the public to consider solutions to the concerns that accompany migration. As a result, academic discourse that centers on the terminology of “transit migration” cannot be neutral. Though the framework of transit migration has expanded the amount of research done on the migration experience, this work has mostly been fragmented by geography or particular “stages” of migration, in relation to the ultimate destination—Europe. This inherently silences the experiences of those who never aim for or reach Europe. All of these reasons highlight the need for more concise, and less politicized language in the discourse about migration, and affirm my decision to instead use the term “trans-Saharan migration” in my personal work.

In the first place, the term “transit migration” is problematic simply because of its ambiguity. The term has been used to refer to all types of migrants, from labor migrants to asylum seekers. It also includes both people who constantly move from country to country, by crossing borders daily, either intentionally or unintentionally, and to people who may settle for years in a supposedly temporary situation. Determining who is in transit is even more problematic, because certainly everybody who enters a “transit zone” on the way to Europe does not have the means or even the intentions to cross the Mediterranean. “Transit Migration” thus refers to migration that occurs in stages, and can involve forced interruption of journeys, forced onward migration, and more
Several academics, including de Haas, Düvel, Papadopoulou, and others have defined transit migration simply as “entering a country in order to travel on to another” (as cited in Schapendonk, 2009). Still, this definition does not clarify whether transit migrants simply need to intend to travel to another country, whether or not they are likely to succeed, or how long one must settle in a third party country before no longer being considered a migrant. In this regard, the academic discussion around transit migration, while appearing complex, is much too far reaching to allow for meaningful study of specific migration experiences.

Additionally, I feel strongly that the term “transit migration” should be avoided in an academic context because it is politically loaded. The concept, which emerged in a European context during the 1990s, originally referred to migration from Eastern Europe into Western Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Balkan Wars. As a result of the “illegal” nature of such migration, “transit migration” has been used almost interchangeably with the term “irregular migration” (Schapendonk, 2009, p. 3).

In a modern context, transit migration has also been used to refer to an “influx” of “masses” and “waves” of migrants that are depicted as overrunning Southern European shores. As a result, European organizations, such as the European Union and even agencies of the United Nations have identified transit zones and countries, which then become targets of a larger European policy of migration control. Indeed, according to COMPAS, “identifying a country as a ‘transit country’ is an act laden with political consequences” (2008), because such countries then enter a “migration control
partnership” with the European Union. Though such countries are said to benefit from increased aid and other incentives, the reality is that migration policy shapes political relations of subordination and domination between countries. As a result of the political history and implications of this terminology, academics who want to study trans-Saharan migration should carefully consider the implications of using a term with such a weighted history.

Nonetheless, “transit migration” is not a completely useless term, and its study has indeed impacted the research being conducted in migration studies. Academically, for example, according to Akcapar (2010; as cited in Schapendonk, 2012a) the term has worked to undermine the classic dichotomies studied in migration research, namely emigration/immigration, sending/receiving, and regular/irregular migration. As a result, countless stories that would otherwise have been lost in the gradient between two dichotomies have been brought to the forefront of migration research efforts. Still, the concept is problematic because it assumes that all migrants who enter a transit zone are attempting to reach Europe, and overlooks the fact that the number of destination countries is increasing. Indeed, according to Castles, (2003; as cited in Schapendonk 2012a), countless migrants settle in transit zones like Morocco, Turkey, or Mexico, without ever even intending to make the jump to the assumed final destination country. Further, though research has focused more on the journey of migration than on the necessary starting and ending points, the attempt to lump countless migrant motivations
and means of moving into one umbrella term (nonetheless one that is politically weighted), has hindered, rather than aided the understanding of migration experiences.

While I personally disagree with the rhetoric around transit migration, all of the research previously done on migrant motivations and trajectories in Oujda stem from its study, and thus, this information is key to learning about migration in Morocco.

Understanding Trans-Saharan Migration Through Social Networks and Mobility

To date, little research has been done on what affects migration routes for individuals traversing the Sahara, specifically. Nonetheless, within the Moroccan context, two main authors have studied irregular transit migration in an attempt to understand the impacts of recently developed Moroccan Migration control policies. Michael Collyer (2007) discusses how social networks impact trans-Saharan migratory routes. Meanwhile, Schapendonk (2012a) works to depict migration as an ever-evolving route, which accounts for the mobility and immobility experienced by migrants.

In the first place, Collyer (2007) discusses how social networks, through the use of Facebook, telecommunications, and other technology, have “opened up transit spaces” and aided migrants in overcoming the obstacles of increased migration control policies in recent years. Mainly, migrants are more easily able to receive warnings of police raids, and conditions in locations they plan to journey to. In his paper, Collyer chalks up social networks to the “means and motivation for continued movement.”

While this paper is certainly enlightening in exploring an important feature of the journey for many migrants, it fails to truly take into consideration migrant agency,
instead opting to elaborate on the blasé argument of chain migration, which states that migrants are likely to move to the places where they know people and have resources available to them. Even further, in a country like Morocco, where migrants are present in an increasing number of places, this argument of social networks fails to answer the question of why individuals choose to go to specific cities after leaving Oujda.

Similarly, Schapendonk (2012a) discusses the “Im/Mobilities perspective” of migration, which argues that, within “transit migration”, it is not useful to discuss migrant intentions or delineate a clear cut time line for migrants in order to better define the term. Rather, instead of using migrant intentions as a starting point, researchers should consider their mobility. This would mean that researchers must take into account that certain migrants will experience less friction, while other individuals’ journeys will be “decelerated” or blocked altogether. For example, Europeans vacation in Morocco with ease, while others are not permitted to enter the country. Still, while this perspective contributes much to the understanding of transit journeys, Schapendonk does not address how exactly migrant trajectories are altered based on migrant mobility, or even what all the factors are that limit mobility. My research, which will discuss the impact of socio-economic status on migrant journeys will, in a way, elaborate on the previous work of Schapendonk, in this sense.

The Three Components of Migrant Journeys

Schapendonk (2012b) also discusses, in another paper, the three components of any trans-Saharan journey: motivation, facilitation, and velocity. In order to understand the
dynamics of any individual journey, and what affects them, one must understand each of these three components. First, the motivation for the journey discusses whether a move is voluntary or forced, and what the migrant’s aspirations and intentions are in moving. The second component, facilitation of the journey, discusses who has aided the migrant on the way. All migrants are dependent upon the people they meet in some way, and facilitators of journeys can include a family member, a border guard, a co-migrant, or even a stranger. The last component, velocity, is concerned with periods of rest, re-orientation, and long or short-term settlement.

In order to fully understand the dynamics of trans-Saharan journeys, we must understand what affects each of these three components of journeying. So far, little research has been done on factors that affect all of these three components. Thus, the information revealed in this project is vital in furthering our understanding of migratory journeys, since socio-economic status impacts each of the three components of migratory journeys.

The Stranded, Stuck, and Settled Migrants

According to Schapendonk (2012a), migrants generally experience three types of immobility—they can be categorized as stranded, stuck, or settled. In my research, I have found that migrants are more likely to experience certain types of immobility based on socio-economic opportunity, and place of origin. This highly alters their planned trajectories. In the first place, “stranded migrants” experience a sense of immobility in the direction of the European Union, because the borders are “blocked” to them.
“Stuck” migrants, on the other hand, feel a sense of immobility in every direction, including towards their own countries of origin. Finally, migrants who have “settled” lead fulfilling lives in countries outside of their originally intended destinations. It is vital to understand these three different experiences of immobility, in order to begin to understand the different impacts of socio-economic factors on mobility.

All in all, though there is much academic work done on transit migration in general, few people have focused on Oujda, as a hub for migration, and even fewer have addressed what factors impact migrant journeys and destinations. Though the journey has been broken down into several components and analyzed from different frameworks, scholarship has failed to gain a nuanced understanding of how individuals are impacted by socio-economic status in the context of migration.
Methodology

The final methodology for this study targeted two groups: (a) employees of NGOs, organizations, and associations who work closely with migrants and (b) trans-Saharan migrants currently in Oujda, themselves. These migrants were categorized into three subgroups, including (1) Refugees from the Middle East, (2) migrants from Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa, and (3) migrants from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Because I was interested in determining the trajectories of migrants after they entered Morocco, all of my research was conducted near the border of Morocco, in Oujda.

This study was conducted during a one-month time frame, which included academic research, and formal and informal interviews. I began by meeting with my advisor, Dr. Soumia Boutkhil, and explaining the ideas I had for my project. We discussed contacts in Oujda, and information about migration in the region. After our meeting, I eventually came to the conclusion that talking to professionals working with migrants, such as employees of organizations would be the most efficient way to study migration trajectories. This is because of the transitory nature of migration through Oujda, which limited how much time I had to meet with individual migrants. I began making contacts in Oujda through a well-known activist for migrants in the region, Mr. Hassane Amari.

Hassane Amari, who has worked with migrants in Oujda for twenty three years, and had contacts at every organization related to migrants in the city, helped me arrange interviews at three different organizations in Oujda, including Fondation Orient-
Occident à Oujda, which works primarily with refugees who come to Morocco to seek asylum, Association Internationale pour les Migrant/tes <AIM>, which works primarily with French speaking immigrants in Oujda, and Alarm phone, which works internationally to provide aid to those attempting to cross the Mediterranean. I then made contact with migrants through these organizations, which helped me to gain trust with the participants of the study.

I collected data through a series of interviews conducted in English or French with the aid of translators. For my interviews in Arabic, I relied upon English students from the University in Oujda to help me translate. For my interviews in French, Hassane Amari’s son and another English Speaking friend I met in Oujda helped to translate. Most of the interviews with organizations were structured, while my interviews with migrants were semi-structured. I chose to collect data this way because I judged semi-structured interviews to be the most effective method of eliciting qualitative data from migrants, since their stories and thoughts were vital to gaining an understanding of migrant agency, while still posing questions to better understand the participants' motivations and future plans. Still, I used structured interviews with the different organizations because my goal was to gain a larger understanding the situation of migrants in Oujda, in order to confirm or contextualize the stories I had heard previously from my interviews with migrants. The organizations I interviewed work closely with migrants and were able to confirm general patterns that they observed among this population. This helped me ensure that the experiences of my interviewees were not unique, but similar to the experiences of other migrants.
I obtained oral consent for interviews from all participants, and presented all of the information on a written consent form in their preferred language—either French, English (see Appendices). Participants generally preferred not to sign their own name, which was understandable because of their status as vulnerable, often undocumented populations. I also obtained oral consent to record the interviews, though two participants chose not to have their interviews recorded, in which case, I took hand-written notes, instead. Throughout the paper, I have changed the names of all participants, replacing them with pseudonyms picked by the participants, so that they may not be identified by anybody who reads this paper, though they will recognize themselves. The interview notes and participant information is preserved in my personal records.

Interviews took place in various cafes, parks or organizations at Oujda, based on where participants felt was most discreet or safe to meet. Still, some information was collected in informal settings, where it was not always possible to record conversations. For these conversations, I have written quotes and paraphrased explanations to either questions asked or information freely spoken by pre-consenting participants. In regards to compensation, I paid for any drinks or food purchased at the café for both my translator and the participants. I also offered to cover transportation costs to the participants.

Challenges

It is worth noting that I faced several challenges while conducting research in Oujda. The first has to do with the difficulties of meeting migrants. Originally, I intended
to meet participants more than once, in order to build a relationship before conducting the interview. Unfortunately, because of the transitory nature of the town, some people I wanted to meet were only in Oujda for a short time period, ranging from three to four days. As a result, I was completely dependent upon making contact with participants through organizations, as opposed to meeting participants through previous participants (the Snowball Effect). This method of meeting clients of organizations exclusively may have skewed my results in some way by limiting the pool of people I was able to interview. For example, I originally intended to interview both men and women, but discovered that women were much less visible both around Oujda, and in the organizations I worked with. Though I did not get to interview any women in the end, I was able to overcome the obstacle of transience in some cases by staying in contact with migrants through Facebook or SMS after they had left. I continue to receive updates on where some of the participants are today.

The next challenge I faced was with visibility of the general migrant community in Oujda. Previously, there had been a large camp near the law school of the University in Oujda that housed and aided migrants in the region. Unfortunately, the Moroccan authorities shut down the camp last January due to “concerns about public order”, according to Anitta Kynsilehto, (personal communication, April 12, 2016) another academic I was able to interview, who has done research in Oujda over the past several years. Since then, migrants have been forced to rent apartments and have become much less visible around the city, making it even more difficult to meet contacts on my own. As a result of this and time constraints, I was only able to interview a small number
of migrants. Still, I hope to have the opportunity to continue my research in the future, with a larger number of participants.

Another significant challenge was that, to my personal experience, the living situation for migrants in Oujda is hostile. During my time in Oujda, after meeting in public with two sub-Saharan migrants, I was followed by the police. In a similar vein, when I attended a meeting of the Association pour les Migrant/tes, once I arrived at the listed meeting location, I met a person who was waiting there to direct members to a different building, so that the meeting could not be interrupted by intruders or outsiders. We were told to split up and to take an indirect path to the new location. That same day, leaving a café where I had met with another migrant, the owner falsely accused us of “forgetting” to pay the bill. Fortunately, Anitta Kynsilehto had warned me of her experiences with the police and the hostility towards migrants, and advised me on how to best handle such situations.

**Positionality**

Still, my final, and most concerning challenge conducting research in Oujda was in my positionality while conducting interviews. When asking questions, I felt there was a palpable power dynamic, which I tried to eliminate by beginning interviews with conversation and directing my questions away from me and towards the experiences of participants. I also opened up space in the interview for mutual conversation. My most successful technique was to explain my interest in migration through my family’s experiences with migration in the United States, because interviewees tended to open up more with me, after that.
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Nonetheless, I was never entirely able to overcome this power dynamic, even with my best efforts to build mutual understanding and show interest in the experiences of my participants. This is due to the inherent power structures present, including nationality, race, education level, and other factors, which are present in every interaction I have. Conducting interviews, thus, was beneficial in helping me to recognize power dynamics and work towards addressing them. This is something I would like to become more adept at in the future, and possibly practice in an environment where I am less of an outsider.
Findings

“Although commonly portrayed as ‘destitute’ or ‘desperate,’ migrants are often relatively well educated and from moderate socio-economic backgrounds. They move because of a general lack of opportunities, fear of persecution and violence, or a combination of both.”
-- Hein de Haas (2006)

Socio-economic factors are one of the many overlooked elements of trans-Saharan migration that heavily impact experiences abroad. This became clear throughout my research in Oujda. In asking about participant aspirations and motivations, I confirmed, that, in line with popular belief, many people come to Morocco seeking economic opportunity. This, however, does not imply that all migrants are destitute, or desperate. Rather, people of all socio-economic classes come to Morocco, and the experiences of individuals depend highly on their ability to access and ascend structures of social class. As a result, migration trajectories are heavily impacted by class, nationality, and linguistic ability more so than previously studied factors of mobility like chain migration, social networks, etc.

Multiple Motivations and Mixed Classes Entering Morocco

In the first place, migrants have multiple motivations for wishing to move abroad. Though every migrant I spoke with in Oujda had, at some point, expressed a desire to go to Europe, his reasons for leaving home varied. In line with popular belief, every person wanted more opportunities. Still, their aspirations varied, from wanting to find a job, to wanting to complete University, to wanting to start a business, or simply escape political upheaval. Many of the Nigerians I met had left their countries because of
dangers they faced at the hands of Boko Haram, for example. Meanwhile others from Mozambique, Senegal, and Ivory Coast had left home to study in Morocco. These mixed motivations for migration prove that there are nuanced differences in why migrants enter Morocco. Still, there is one narrative of escaping poverty that overshadows our current ability to understand these nuanced experiences of migrants.

In addition to varied motivations for migration, it is important to note that, as confirmed by Hassane Amari (personal communication, April 18, 2016), “immigration into Morocco is mixed by [socio-economic] class”. This was confirmed in an interview I did with Razak, a young PhD candidate at the University in Oujda, originally from Mozambique. He states: “There are many students who come to Morocco from South of [the Sahara] legally, in order to study. It is a good place to come for college if you want to move to France, Belgium [or another French speaking country] in Europe.”

When asked about how Moroccans perceive him in Oujda, Razak confirms, “When strangers see me, walking in the street, some people treat me badly. I think people assume I am poor, or here illegally. That is [generally] the assumption.” (personal communication, April 19, 2016). Razak’s experiences show us that there is not a common understanding of the diversity of social classes entering Morocco. Many people are well educated or wealthy, while others are fleeing poverty, and lack schooling.

Nationality’s Impact on Social Class and Migration in Morocco

Though, as discussed above, within every group of migrants there is a variety of aspirations and social classes, once people enter Morocco, it is clear that their
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trajectories and access to social mobility are heavily influenced or at least correlated with factors of nationality and linguistic ability. This factors heavily to determine where migrants will head after coming Oujda, in their journey to seek socio-economic opportunity. In my interviews, I can identify three groups of migrants, including (1) refugees from the Middle East, (2) Francophone sub-Saharan migrants, and (3) Anglophone sub-Saharan migrants; in these next sections, I will discuss how economics have impacted the migration trajectories of these three groups.

Refugees from the Middle East

I was fortunate enough to be able to interview Said and Elias (personal communication, April 20, 2016), a father and son from Syria, who had come to Oujda, fleeing the war in their home country. They had reached Morocco several months ago, but decided to stay in Oujda, upon entering the country. When asked if they planned to continue the journey towards Europe, both agreed that they would want to go, “maybe someday”, but at the moment, they had intentions to stay in Oujda for the foreseeable future.

The reasons Oujda was attractive to this family were predominantly economic. In the first place, they both revealed that they had traveled to Morocco with their entire family, and thus needed to support not just themselves, but a mother and two younger daughters. As such, the low cost of living, and particularly the cost of housing was important to them.
In order to gain a larger understanding about Syrian migration, I asked whether they knew many other Syrian families in Oujda. The two revealed that there were not many Syrians in Oujda, specifically, but that other families they knew were spread in cities across the North of Morocco. Settling in Morocco was appealing, particularly for larger families with younger children, since younger children were able to attend school and integrate into the education system without many language difficulties. Access to educational opportunity, a huge factor in determining socio-economic class, was another enticing incentive to settle in Morocco for Syrian families, proving that trajectories are impacted highly by economic decisions.

I asked why Syrian families tend to concentrate in the North of the country, and both Elias and Said speculated that it was because there were more resources in the North of Morocco for refugees. Elias revealed that, because he was older than his sisters, but did not have a high school diploma or speak French, he could not attend school, and found it difficult to find employment. Both men in the family were heavily dependent on resources provided to Refugees, because they did not have high school diplomas or steady employment. Rather, these two men revealed that they felt stuck in Morocco due to the political situation in their home country, which keeps them from returning, and economic conditions in Europe, which prevent them from continuing forward.

Later, during an interview with Fondation Orient-Occident, an organization that primarily aids refugees, Souad Mehdaoui (personal communication, April 20, 2016), the organization’s Social Assistant confirmed that for refugees from the Middle East, many
concentrate in the North of the country because the region is wealthier than the south. For those who resort to begging (a commonplace experience for many Syrians), it is easier to support themselves, while still taking advantage of the low cost of living outside of large cities in Morocco. She further elaborated that this pattern was similar for Yemeni refugees, as well. The only difference, according to her, was that “most Yemeni refugees are single men, not traveling with whole families, so they may be more likely to stay in larger cities”, since they do not have to support so many people.

From my encounters with refugees from the Middle East and those who work most closely with them, this group is most likely to feel stuck in Morocco. Further, many cut short their journeys to Europe, due to socio-economic concerns.

**Francophone Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa**

I also had the opportunity to speak with Ibrahim, a thirty-three year old immigrant from Burkina Faso, who has lived in Morocco for the past six years. When we first met, and I asked him where he was from, Ibrahim smiled and said, “Morocco.” He later proudly showed me his Moroccan identification card, stating that he had just received citizenship. Much like the other migrants I interviewed, Ibrahim originally came to Morocco with the intention of traveling to Europe, in order to find a job that paid well. Similarly to the Syrian family, however, he decided to settle in Oujda, because he was unable to cross the European border, after attempting six times. He is now happily settled in Morocco. He states:

*This was back in 2006, when I first came to Morocco. At that time, when the police caught you, they would take you to Oujda and then bring you across the*
border, to Algeria. Every time I went to Algeria, I realized that I wanted to be in Morocco. I did not even care if I reached Europe. Morocco was better than Algeria, and it had a lot more opportunities for me than Burkina Faso. So I decided that it didn’t matter if I went to Europe. I could build my life here. Even though the police would harass us, every time I came to Oujda and had to walk back to Nador, I met the nicest people. I found humanity in Morocco. The people make the country, and Morocco is a special place. Algeria does have natural resources, but even without so much oil, Morocco has created a beautiful country. Morocco has the sea; it has resources. There are opportunities for me. The last time I crossed the border from Algeria, I decided to go during Eid, when everybody was breaking their fast, so that I would not get caught. When I made it to Morocco, at the first house I saw, the family invited me to Iftar. That was when I knew I wanted to stay in Morocco (Ibrahim, personal communication, April 24, 2016).

Ibrahim continued the conversation by describing how much economic opportunity he saw in Morocco. He described how easy it was for him to find work, because of the kind-heartedness of Moroccans. Now, after gaining his citizenship, Ibrahim has plans to start a business to bring Morocco’s developmental advancements back home, and create a cultural exchange for Moroccans to understand more about sub-Saharan Africa. He aims to, “be a model of African Integration”.

Indeed, according to my other experiences, I have found that French-speaking migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, like Ibrahim are most likely to settle in Morocco. I first met Ibrahim at a meeting of the Association Internationale pour les Migrants/tes <AIM>, an association that aims to help immigrants to Morocco integrate into society. Though the association was only started one month ago, at the time of the writing of this paper, the group aimed to provide Darija classes to French speakers, and help them network to find employment in Oujda(<AIM>, personal communication, April 23, 2016). The association was made entirely of French speaking immigrants and a handful of
Moroccan migration activists, proving to me that issues of settlement, integration and employment remain mostly relevant to those migrants who speak French.

Other members of the association confirmed to me that this was because “French speakers, who had previously been educated, had no problems coming to Morocco to find work.” Many French-speaking immigrants do not need a visa to come to Morocco, and though they face issues of discrimination, they face fewer problems with finding a job, especially if they have a diploma. Another member of the association, who prefers to remain anonymous, elaborated, “it is easy to live in Morocco, so long as you stay away from the Northern borders”. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why French speakers seeking economic opportunity might choose to settle in Morocco—this opportunity is more readily available to them than to other groups of migrants.

*Anglophone Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa*

To my surprise, my conversation with Kingsley, a twenty-four year old man from Nigeria, revolved around his plans to go to Libya, in order to reach Europe. Unlike Ibrahim, when he first entered the country, Kingsley had status in Morocco as a refugee, because he was fleeing violence caused by Boko Haram. As a result, he chose to leave, and went in search of economic opportunity. Kingsley admitted that his parents had financially supported his journey to Europe. While he was not motivated to migrate by poverty, according to him he is seeking opportunity that Boko Haram and “the corrupt Nigerian government” have denied him. Thus, Kingsley’s motivation for migration is indeed economic.
Kingsley dreams of going to school in Europe. He states, “I can go to school in Europe. When I go, I want to get a degree and bring my family back to Europe. I do not want to return to Nigeria, but I have to leave Morocco, because my path to Europe is blocked here.” (Kingsley, personal communication, April 25, 2016).

Interestingly, when I asked Kingsley about his feelings towards settling in Morocco, his response was the exact opposite of Ibrahim’s. He explained that it was impossible for anybody to find work in Morocco. Even though he had been here for nine months and had papers, there was no way he could go to school. Even worse, the path to Spain was also completely blocked for him, and thus, he was making plans to journey to Libya with a group of migrants. He felt stranded in Morocco—he had no chances or reason to settle in Morocco when language barriers limit his opportunities, and yet he could not continue forward.

Naji Ammari (personal communication; April 22, 2016) a volunteer with Alarm Phone, an organization that works internationally to aid people crossing the Mediterranean, confirmed that often, from North Africa, the people willing to make the most risky journeys are English speaking migrants, because they do not see an option to settle in other North African countries. As a result, English-speaking migrants will often traverse larger distances, and face harsher conditions in their journeys to Europe, much like Kingsley will probably face in his journey from Morocco to Libya, Anglophone migrants are much more likely to feel stranded, as if their journey to seek opportunities in Europe is blocked, than those who do not face the same language barriers, and have the option to settle in countries on their journeys.
Even further, Naji Ammari described that there were socio-economic factors that determined which cities people would head to next, on the way to Europe, regardless of countries of origin. For example, many people make it to Europe through the Canary Islands, but this is the most expensive journey because it involves traversing water twice. After the Canary Islands route, the “easiest” crossing is in Tangier, which is also quite costly for irregular migrants. As a result, the most dangerous and cheapest route is through Nador, especially because migrants are able to walk from Oujda to Nador without paying for transport. This is another of many ways that economic factors impact migration trajectories.
Discussion and Conclusion

All in all, during my research, it became apparent to me that economic factors do not simply motivate migrants, who seek opportunities, employment, or education, but alter the trajectories of their journeys. This is because migration experiences are complicated by outside factors, including socio-economic status. Within the context of Morocco, socio-economic factors are heavily influenced by employability, language ability, and thus country of origin. Even though immigrants to Morocco are mixed by specific motivations and socio-economic status in their countries of origin, economic factors cause many to experience mobility and immobility in similar ways, based on their native languages.

Thus, more specifically, refugees from the Middle East are more likely to experience immobility as feeling “stuck”, because they are unable to return home, and often cannot afford the journey or cost of living in Europe. Meanwhile, Francophone migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are most likely to settle, especially if they have diplomas from their home countries, because there is no language barrier, and it is not as difficult to find employment. Finally, English-speaking migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are most likely to feel stranded on their journeys to Europe. They have no opportunities for employment, and thus do not consider the options of settling. As a result, English speakers often traverse more countries and undertake arduous journeys in order to cross the Mediterranean.

It is also worth noting that, as countries like Morocco and the European Union adopt new migration control policies, the result is not to curb migration to Europe, but
rather to complicate those journeys by making them longer, more expensive, and more dangerous for migrants, especially the most economically vulnerable ones, as evidenced by the interviews I have conducted, particularly with Anglophone migrants.

Finally, this study reminds us that trans-Saharan migration experiences in Morocco are complicated by outside factors, which are not accounted for in the overly simplified statistics and depictions of migration routes. Through this research, it becomes clear that journeys across North Africa are in no way linear. They often include reorientation, and even long-term settlement in unintended destination countries. As a result, understanding key issues, such as the impact of migration policies, predicting the routes of migrants, and building infrastructure to aid migrants in Morocco, is tantamount to understanding the experiences of individuals based on a more nuanced grasp of their experiences. This means that, in the future, further research into the experiences of trans-Saharan migrants should focus on socio-economic class, as well as other factors, including race, religion, gender, or sexuality, which will help us gain a more nuanced understanding of migration experiences.
References


Appendices

A. Déclaration de consentement

L’objectif d’étude

Comprendre les motivations et les trajectoires des migrants trans-Sahariens à Oujda.

La durée et les éléments d’étude

Cette étude sera dirigée pendant une période de trois semaines. L’étude inclura les observations et les interventions des participants en incluant leur travail sur terrain.

Les risques

L’étude n’a aucun risque prévisible pour les participants. Cependant, si vous ne vous sentez pas confortable avec le procédé d’observation ou d’interview, vous êtes libre de terminer votre participation.

Compensation

La participation à cette étude ne sera pas compensée, financièrement ou autrement. Cependant, votre aide est considérablement appréciée par notre équipe de recherche.

Confidentialité

Tout effort de maintenir votre information personnelle confidentielle sera fait dans ce projet. Vos noms et toute autre information d’identification seront changés dans la description finale, et seulement connue à l’équipe de recherche.

Participation

Je soussigné,…………………………………………., confirme avoir lu les rapports ci-dessus et compris que ma participation à cette étude est volontaire tout en ayant la liberté de retirer mon consentement à tout moment sans pénalité.

_________________________________________  ______________
Signature                        Date

J’ai pris conscience que cette étude puisse comporter les entrevues et/ou les observations qui peuvent être enregistrées et transcrites.

_________________________________________  ______________
Signature                        Date

Team de recherche
CONSENT FORM

1. Brief description of the purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivations and trajectories of migrants in Oujda.

2. Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

a. Privacy - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.

b. Anonymity - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.

c. Confidentiality - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

Participant’s name printed                                        Participant’s signature and date

Dianne Kaiyoorawongs

Interviewer’s name printed                                       Interviewer’s signature and date