

New Diasporas in the Making: the Journeys of Sub-Saharan Africans to Europe

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Abstract

In the last decade the journey to Europe has become extremely difficult for sub-Saharan Africans with Europe's intensified efforts to tighten its borders. Nevertheless, prompted by civil wars, social unrest, and economic decline, illegal immigration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe has increased. Thus, while the numbers of undocumented Africans continue to rise, the borders are becoming tighter, the smugglers more aggressive, and the passage more dangerous than ever. The result is a large number of casualties. This study is based on interviews I conducted with sub-Saharan Africans both in Spain and Morocco in summer 2010, and they all represent a new diaspora in the making. In this paper I will focus on the voices of three immigrants who encapsulate three different examples of this sub-Saharan experience.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa, Illegal Immigration, Crossing Borders, African Diaspora.

Introduction

Few years ago, al-Shamal, a local Northern Moroccan newspaper referred to the invading waves of sub-Saharan transit migrants in the North of Morocco as “the black locusts.”¹ Although reprimanded by the authorities for the use of such language, this hostile statement reveals a growing fear in Morocco against the increasing number of sub-Saharan transit migrants who have started to settle in Morocco on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, as the passage to Europe has become extremely difficult with Europe's intense efforts on tightening its borders in the last two decades.² This situation is turning Morocco into an immigration country causing a reaction of fear and xenophobia in a place that is already infested with poverty and a high level of unemployment.³ This is also creating a crisis for the authorities who have to face a new set of issues, legal, social and economic that do not resonate with Morocco's self-image as an emigration country considering that Moroccans form one of the largest non-western diasporic communities in Europe.⁴

The number of sub-Saharan illegal immigrants to Europe started to rise in the mid 90s prompted by the rapidly changing political map of sub-Saharan Africa, causing people to leave to escape political instability and economic decline. Thus, while the number of undocumented immigrants is increasing, the borders are becoming more tight, the smugglers more aggressive, and the passage more dangerous than ever. The result is a large number of casualties. Unfortunately, the frenzy that accompanies Europe's intense efforts to reduce illegal immigration ends up sometimes jeopardizing human rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Spain is quick at times to return unauthorized immigrants to the Moroccan shores, and Morocco, on its turn, deports them to the Algerian border, leaving them to an obscure fate.⁵ The European Union's restrictive immigration policies have become even stricter since the terrorist attacks on Madrid and London classifying illegal immigration under the rubric of fighting terrorism.⁶

Many sub-Saharans travel for months and years in order to get to Europe. They cross the Sahara desert overland, and once they arrive in Morocco they cross to Spain in overcrowded flimsy boats or they jump the razor sharp fences to get to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coastline.⁷

¹ Al-Shamal Newspaper, September 12, 2005.

² See Fargues (2005)

³ For more information about the number of sub-Saharan Africans residing in Morocco both legally and illegally see Fargues (2005)

⁴ See Fargues (2005)

⁵ See Le Matin du Sahara et du Maghreb, December 3, 2005

⁶ To illuminate on Western Europe's questionable policies in fighting illegal immigration from the global South see Agamben (2005)

⁷ Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish enclaves on the Mediterranean coastline of Morocco. They are the only Spanish territories located in mainland Africa, and are linked to Spain by ferry services to Malaga, Algeciras and Almeria. Morocco considers them both occupied

Their journeys are full of danger and tragedy. Yet, every year thousands of sub-Saharanans cross illegally forging new diasporic communities in Europe. This study is based on interviews I conducted with sub-Saharan Africans both in Spain and Morocco in summer 2010. The persons I interviewed were men and women between the ages of 18 and 45. They came from various sub-Saharan destinations: Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana and represent a new diaspora in the making. I will focus on the voices of three immigrants who encapsulate three different examples of this sub-Saharan experience: 1) Emanuel Titti, who settled illegally in Morocco on a semi-permanent basis with his baby daughter (conceived in Morocco,) 2) BenokoDiabate, who succeeded in making the passage to Spain after 4 years of trying, and 3) B.B., a young Malian woman who preferred to not disclose her name, thus I will refer to her by her initials. B.B. also succeeded in crossing to Spain, and is now settled in Madrid with her 3 years old son. While the journeys of these individuals articulate violence, racism, and exploitation, they also communicate strength, willpower, and resilience. Europe is not necessarily the land of milk and honey they imagined it to be before they left Africa. Sub-Saharan communities face a lot of prejudice in Spain. Unable to find jobs, many are often forced to join African drugs and prostitution mafias. However, many feel that, despite the alienation and cultural marginalization, they have succeeded in providing a better future for their Children and that makes their experiences worthwhile.

In Morocco, sub-Saharan transit migrants are scattered in big cities and in camps outside the fences of Ceuta and Melilla. I had to talk to them hidden from the eyes of the authorities. Many have resolved to stay in Morocco, as the passage to Europe has become more dangerous and more expensive. The future in Spain (the first and main destination for most) also looked dim because of the economic crisis. While some were living of public charity, especially the newly arrived, others worked illegally and formed ties with the locals and other immigrant communities, and settled in Morocco on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. The Moroccan authorities, however, still view sub-Saharan immigrants as transit migrants, even those who have chosen to settle there.⁸ In Spain, I was introduced to sub-Saharan migrants through the Malian Association of Madrid.⁹ Most of them lived together in small crowded houses. Although many of them had asylum, they could not get jobs. Spain has been hit by a strong economic crisis and the rate of unemployment was very high affecting immigrant communities the most. I remember one newly arrived male from Côte d'Ivoire who was granted asylum but could not find a job. He used to be a taxi driver in Côte d'Ivoire, but the political instability made it impossible for him to drive his taxi without being stopped every few miles. This forced him to leave with the hope of finding a better source of income in Spain. He said to me: "what is the point of having asylum if I can't work. How can I provide for my family? It is like being in Côte d'Ivoire."¹⁰

In their journeys to Europe, there are two major challenges that result in the most casualties among sub-Saharan Africans: crossing the Sahara desert to get to Morocco, and then traversing the sea, or jumping the fences of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla to get to Europe. For sub-Saharanans who are used to the tropics, the journey across the large Saharan desert is unbearable. Many die of fatigue and dehydration, and others are forced to drink their own urine, and sometimes leave the dead behind with no energy or time to bury them. Being in the total mercy of smugglers, many experience physical violence, especially women who are raped frequently with no one to fend for them. Once they reach Morocco, many stay in encampments outside Ceuta and Melilla waiting for the opportunity to jump the barb wired fences. The passage by water can be equally dangerous in overcrowded flimsy boats. If the border guards in the Spanish shores are spotted, people are forced to jump the boat and continue the journey swimming. Under these conditions many drawn in the sea. The traditional route taken by most undocumented immigrants to arrive in Morocco is overland through Niger to Mauritania, to Western Sahara, or through Niger to Libya, to Algeria to Morocco.

territories and has been calling on Spain repeatedly to renegotiate their sovereignty. The left wing *Red Pepper* magazine referred to the two cities surrounded by barbed wire to deter illegal immigration as Europe's "wall of shame" with the image of sub-Saharan Africans dead and injured hanging from the razor-sharp fences. See "Ceuta and Melilla: Europe's Wall of Shame" at: www.redpepper.org.uk/Ceuta-and-Melilla-Europe-s-wall-of/

⁸ See Fargues (2005)

⁹ I would like to thank Tiemoko Dembele, Adamou Peteyap, and Kassim Traore, the president of the Malian Society of Madrid, for introducing me to some of the sub-Saharan communities in Madrid.

¹⁰ This is based on an interview I conducted with him in summer 2010. His name is Kone Lassna. He crossed illegally to Spain in 2008. When I met him, he was sharing a very small apartment with few other sub-Saharan Africans in Madrid. He was very depressed and concerned for his wife and son who were depending on him financially back in Côte d'Ivoire.

Once they are in Morocco, there are three possible passageways to Europe 1) overland by trying to get to Ceuta and Melilla by jumping the razor sharp fences that surrounds these enclaves, 2) by sea through the Northern Mediterranean shores of Morocco, or, 3) through the Atlantic from the Western Saharan Atlantic coastline. This latter route has become a popular passageway since Spain's intensification of its border control in the North.

Many transit migrants pay for their whole voyage beforehand, and others pay as they go along, often stopping in Libya where they are allowed to work as cheap labor in the oil industry, construction, or service sector. However, by the time they arrive in Morocco, many transit migrants have had most of their money stolen by smugglers and by the Moroccan authorities and have suffered enough brutality in the hand of both. With no legal status, they become stuck in Morocco with no means of saving money or making a living. Many choose to return to their homes, others prefer to stay in Morocco and work illegally. Despite the high level of unemployment in Morocco, the country provides a more stable environment for many sub-Saharan Africans who are escaping social unrest and civil wars. There are also those who decide to return to Libya and work for few more months to save the money before returning to Morocco to try again. One always recognizes the waves of newly arrived sub-Saharan transit migrants scattered around the markets, outside mosques and government building asking for charity. Many of them survive through public begging, which at times becomes their only option, as they have no right to work legally in Morocco. They are often helped by locals who are aware of the tedious journeys they have taken. They are given food, change, and clothes, and sometimes offered shelter. Yet, it is in the hands of smugglers and the Moroccan police that sub-Saharan undocumented immigrants suffer the most. This is a statement that I heard from all men and women I interviewed in Morocco and Spain.

1- Emanuel Titti

I met Emanuel Titti outside the main post office in Avenue Mohammed V in Rabat. He was asking for change outside my car window. I noticed that he was carrying a child on his back. I reached for the glove compartment to give him some change and that is how we struck a conversation. He could not speak French, but his English was very good, and we arranged to meet up the following day for an interview. To avoid the wondering eyes of the authorities we sat behind the post office in a small park. Emanuel told me first that his name was Ibrahim and that he is Muslim, but later on explained that taking a Muslim name makes his life easier in a country that is predominantly Muslim. Many Sub-Saharan illegal immigrants in Morocco take on Muslim names for the same reason. Emmanuel is from Ghana. He was 32 when I met him. He looked very weary. He had his daughter on his back, and in one hand he was carrying a small plastic bag stuffed with clothes that he said people gave him that morning. The first thing that Emanuel told me when I explained to him that I wanted to know about his journey was: "I suffered, I suffered, I suffered a lot." Emanuel left Ghana in 2003, and went to Benin, and from Benin to Niger, and from Niger to Libya. It took him two days on foot to cross the desert. He said that he saw many people faint and die. Once he arrived in Libya, he had no problem finding a job as he was trained as an electrician. There he worked at a satellite company for eighteen months to make money and pay smugglers to take him across the Libyan border to Algeria and then to Morocco. It was an expensive journey, or as he put it "I paid big money to get here."

In a foreign landscape, the first thing he did was to look for a sub-Saharan community to help him get his bearings before planning for his next step. He met a Nigerian girl who was also a transit migrant in Morocco. They moved together and started preparing for their passage to Europe. Emanuel did not resort to public begging at this stage. He still had the money he saved and his companion had relatives in Europe who wired her money. Emanuel's girlfriend got pregnant, and after she had the baby there was an unanticipated turn of events. The girlfriend who had ties with the Nigerian mafia was taken away to be forced into prostitution, and Emanuel was left alone with his baby. With no legal rights in Morocco, no network support, nor savings, Emanuel was forced to make a living by publically begging in the streets carrying his little daughter on his back. When I met him his daughter was 4 years old and was about to be registered in a state school the following fall, but she looked much smaller than her age. Emanuel was stuck in Morocco. He could not work because he was undocumented, and even if he could work illegally, as many do, he could not leave his daughter unattended. Whatever money Emanuel makes through public begging barely pays their rent and daily meals. It was clear from his interaction with his daughter that he was a proud, loving father. He said to me that he would do anything for her. It seemed to me that it was from this sense of fatherhood that he derives his strength and resilience. Emanuel never dreamt that his life could turn so upside down.

His hope was to save enough money to be able to take his daughter back to Ghana to live with his mother. He did not lose hope in crossing to Europe. He said he will make the journey again once his daughter is safe with his mother in Ghana. Until then, he will keep living of charity.

2- BenokoDiabate

I met BenokoDiabate in Madrid during the immigrants' mock world cup that was organized by the city council in June 2010. Benoko had a calm demeanor, and a very gentle smile, and when he started telling me about his journey I was amazed at his willpower and resilience. It took Benoko 4 years to cross to Europe. These 4 years were filled with unimaginable hardships, yet none of it showed on his face when he started telling me his story. Benoko welcomed the opportunity to share the event of his journey with me. He had a wonderful memory, and could remember the minutest details. I did not need to encourage him to talk. I just sat there with my digital recorder in hand listening to him and devouring each word. I was mostly intent to know why did it take Benoko four years—an awful amount of time—to cross to Spain. Benoko decided to leave Mali because he was poor and had no family ties. His parents were dead, and he could not see any prospects for himself in Mali. Benoko had to retrace his steps three times and that is why it took him 4 years to make it to Spain. The first time he went from Mali, to Algeria, to Morocco, to the border city of Oujda. From there he had to walk 5 days by night to arrive in Melilla. Once he got there and saw the barb wired fence, he realized that it was not going to be easy for him to cross to the other side. Benoko spent 15 days outside Melilla making inquiries about the best way for him to get to Europe, living off food from rubbish bins. He found out that the only other option he had was to cross by sea, which was going to cost him money.

Benoko travelled to Libya where he worked for 20 months as a mechanic, saved the money and resumed his journey back to Morocco, but he was caught in Algeria because he did not carry a visa, and was put in prison for 20 days before being deported to Mali. Once in Mali, he applied for a visa and re-entered Algeria legally this time. He worked in Algeria for 5 months to recover the money he spent since his detention, then made his way to Morocco. His plan was to get to the Mediterranean coastline of Morocco and cross by sea in a fishing boat. This was the most common passage used by transit migrants. When he arrived in the capital city of Rabat, hidden in a lorry with 30 other undocumented migrants he found out that the police were conducting a raid.¹¹ Everybody had to scatter and find a place to hide. Benoko spotted an elderly woman and asked her for shelter, but the woman said she would only help him if he were Muslim. Fortunately, Benoko is Muslim and could easily prove it to the woman by uttering his *shahadda* (declaration of faith) and reciting verses from the Quran to her satisfaction. After the police raid was over, Benoko realized that it would be better for him to choose a safer and less popular route: crossing to Spain's Canary Islands from the Western Saharan coastline. Again, he retraced his steps to the city of Laayoune in the Western Sahara. Although the sea passage to the Canary Islands was longer and more dangerous, there was less chance of being caught and harassed by the authorities. Benoko found another lorry to smuggle him from Casablanca to Laayoune. The journey was very long—about 555 miles. There were 36 people including Benoko in the lorry. Half way to Laayoune, and under the pretext of going and fetching them food and water, the driver disappeared with their money leaving them all stranded in the middle of the forest with absolutely nothing.

They stayed the night in the forest and the following day, while still waiting for their driver, they were attacked by a Moroccan gang of 20 males intimidating them with knives and throwing stones at them. Despite being tired, hungry and dehydrated, they were lucky because they outnumbered the gang members. Benoko remembered vividly one of his fellow travellers, only 18 being hit on the face with a stone that broke his teeth, and was in real agony. The news of the confrontation reached the authorities who arrived in the scene and took both parties to prison. In prison they were fed nothing except very salted inedible carrots. Benoko talked about that part of his journey with a lot of pain. After 10 days in prison, Benoko was deported to Algeria. Fortunately, Benoko had already paid for his passage to Europe by then. For the third time, he crosses the Algerian border again to get back to the Western Sahara. There, he spent 9 days in a camp waiting for his passage to the Canary Islands. He spent two nights and a day in the sea to arrive in Fuente Venturas, one of the Canary Islands. Benoko was one of the lucky ones who were given asylum. When I met him he had a work permit and was making a living working in agriculture.

¹¹ Morocco has been put under increasing pressure by the European Union to introduce more restrictive immigration policies since the 1990s. Bowing to this pressure, in 2003 Morocco implemented new restrictive laws further criminalizing illegal migration and instituting tougher punishment. For further details see Belguandouz (2005)

Since he arrived in Spain, he had visited Mali twice, gotten married and had a daughter. Benoko said he was happy in Spain because he could afford to have a family, something he could have never been able to do if he stayed in Mali.

3-B.B.

It was always harder finding women who were willing to talk about their journeys to Europe. This was a sensitive subject for them, mainly because they were almost all victims of rape, either by smugglers, the authorities, or their fellow male travellers. B.B. was one of the few exceptions who was willing to talk to me about her journey, because it was important for her to get her message across. B.B. however wanted to draw the line, and openly told me that she was not prepared to dwell into the experience of her rape. She used the plural “rapes” which made me conclude that she had been violated more than once. What I noticed in my interviews with the men and the women who succeeded in making the journey to Europe is that the sort of bravado expressed sometimes by the men in their description of their journeys was absent in women’s case. I attributed this to the sexual violence they were exposed to in their passage. For instance, B.B. told me that the hardest thing for her was to recover from the sense of betrayal she felt towards those who witnessed her being raped and did not do anything to stop it, because none of them wanted to jeopardize their passage.

I was introduced to the 29 years old B.B. in Madrid by a friend. She had a 3 year old son and worked in a fast food restaurant. I was impressed with how well she spoke Spanish. She said that she had attended a language center when she first arrived in Spain, then she added jokingly that she is a shatter box and loves talking to people and that is what helped her the most in learning the language. Before she left Mali at 22, B.B. was a second year student of medicine and worked full time to support herself. B.B.’s reasons for leaving Mali were not different from those of the men her age I interviewed: she wanted to guarantee herself and her family a better life. She and her family paid in advance for her passage to Europe through the Canary Islands. She took the voyage with men and women from Mali and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. They were thirty of them in total. They travelled overland from Mali to Senegal to Mauritania in buses and taxis. Once they reached Mauritania they were split into small groups in order not to attract the attention of the authorities, and started their journey across the Sahara by night. It took them more than 24 hours until they reached a camp where they had to wait for their passage. The journey across the desert was tedious and resulted in one casualty—a young male from Mali who died of fatigue and dehydration. Once in the camp, they joined hundreds of others who were waiting for their passage to Fuente Ventura, one of the main entry points for unauthorized immigrants.

The camp was a place of violence and desperation. Many women were being raped consistently, and people could stay there under the mercy of the smugglers up to two years waiting for their turn. Many were waiting for a second or third opportunity to cross because the boats that were carrying them the first and the second time broke. They were often left without food or drink for days at a time. The level of exploitation goes even further than that. B.B.’s group was made to build their own boat. They were taken to a house in the middle of nowhere in the desert and given wood to build the boat that was going to take them across the sea to Fuente Venturas. B.B. panicked because that was not the arrangement she and her family made with the smugglers who promised to take her in a fishing boat, but she knew at that stage that she had no choice, that if she did not choose to climb in that flimsy little boat she and the other travellers built with their inexperienced hands, she was going to be left behind to die in the middle of the desert. Worse, B.B. did not know how to swim. She had never seen the sea or even a river before in her life. She knew it was a life or death situation. Once the boat was ready, they had to sail at night to hide from the border authorities. To add to their existing trauma, the passengers were forced to leave all their belongings behind to the smugglers, except for the clothes they were wearing.

Once in the sea, what B.B. feared the most happened, the boat started to leak and they had to take turns to empty it. When she thought that things could not get worse, the boatman who spotted the border control escaped forcing them to jump into the water and face their fate. Fortunately, they were not too far from the shore. Those who knew how to swim helped the others who did not and they all reached safely. Wet and shoeless, they started to walk without direction until they reached the main road and there they were met by the Spanish authorities who took them to the refugee camp until a decision could be made about their fate. B.B. was one of the lucky ones who were not deported. When I asked her if the journey was worth it, she said that she could not say. She said that she was happy that her son was going to have the opportunities she could not have herself in Mali, but she wished that African governments could offer grants to youth like herself with opportunities to study abroad and see Europe.

This way they would not idealize Europe so much. She wanted young Africans like herself to be able to see the “real” Europe before deciding to take the risk of leaving their home countries. B.B.’s words resonate with the reality of many of those who crossed illegally to Europe. Clearly the journeys of these immigrants do not end with their arrival in Europe. Once they are in Europe, another journey of a different nature takes place. Europe is not necessarily the land of milk and honey that many sub-Saharan Africans imagined it to be before they left Africa. This leads me to the following questions, prompted by this study, that I would like to conclude with: What is the fate of these new African diasporas once they arrive in Europe? How do they adapt to their new economic and social realities? How do they fight cultural marginalization? And how can they forge new cultural connections in this new home away from home?

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