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Tubali's trip: Rethinking informality in the study of West African labour migrations

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Résumé

Cet article porte sur le travail et les voyages de Tubali, un migrant de langue hausa originaire de la région de Tahoua, République du Niger. Dans le cadre d'un voyage qui a duré quatre ans et lui a fait traverser le Niger, le Nigéria, le Cameroun, la Guinée équatoriale, le Gabon et la République du Congo, Tubali a évolué dans des contextes généralement caractérisés comme « informels »: il a voyagé sans papiers ou permis de travail, et a été soutenu par des institutions qui échappent au contrôle de l'État mais donnent accès à des moyens financiers, une aide pour voyager et des possibilités de travail aux voyageurs qui ne peuvent ou ne veulent pas suivre les voies officielles. Ces migrants comptent sur des relations qui, dans le cas de Tubali, sont pour la plupart imprévisibles, formées sur la base de l'appartenance à la même ethnie, l'adhésion à la même religion ou des origines dans la même région. Cet article interprète le voyage de Tubali par rapport aux significations attribuées à cette manière de travailler et de voyager dans la société de Tahoua. Il examine les conséquences conceptuelles et politiques de la caractérisation des pratiques de ces migrants comme « informelles » et examine les alternatives analytiques.

Abstract

This article focuses on the work and travels of Tubali, a Hausa-speaking migrant from the region of Tahoua in the Republic of Niger. In a journey that lasted four years and took him across Niger, Nigeria, Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo, Tubali operated in contexts usually characterised as “informal”: he travelled without documents or work permits, and was supported by institutions that elude state control and yet grant access to financial resources, travel support and employment opportunities to travellers unable or unwilling to follow official avenues. These migrants rely on the operation of relationships that, in Tubali's case, are mostly impromptu, formed on the basis of shared ethnicity, religion and region of origin. This article interprets Tubali's trip in relation to the meanings attributed to this way of working and travelling in Tahoua's society. It investigates the conceptual and political consequences of characterising these migrants' practices as “informal” and discusses analytical alternatives.

Keywords: Tahoua; Ader; Niger; West Africa; Hausa; migration; informal economy

I. Introduction

This article focuses on the work and travels of a Hausa-speaking migrant, whom I call Tubali, who left his home in the Region of Tahoua in the Republic of Niger in order to find his brother in the Republic of the Congo, having lost contact with him during the Congo Civil War. In a journey that lasted four years, Tubali took up a number of jobs. His travels across Niger, Nigeria, Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of the

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Congo happened in contexts usually characterised as “informal”: he travelled without documents or work permits, and was supported by institutions that operate outside state control and yet grant access to financial resources, travel support and employment opportunities for travellers unable or unwilling to follow official avenues. Such migrants rely on the operation of relationships that, in Tubali’s case, are mostly impromptu, formed on the basis of shared ethnicity, religion and region of origin. This article investigates the conceptual and political consequences of characterising these migrants’ practices as “informal” and discusses analytical alternatives.

A large proportion of economic strategies in developing countries fall outside state regulation (International Labour Office (ILO) 2011a; International Labour Office (ILO) 2011b; Bacchetta, Ekkehard, and Bustamante 2009). The fact that people try to elude official requirements shows that policy does not make things easier for them. Their projects are aimed at pursuing specific ends. “Informality” ceases to appear as a defining characteristic of people’s projects as soon as one abandons the narrow viewpoint of official policy and tries to interpret these projects in their own terms. That their chances of success are higher if some official regulations are avoided is not a necessary attribute of these projects. Avoidance of state regulations is characteristic of a wide range of activities, from major business ventures to the trade of child hawkers. The term “informal” tells us less about the activities in question than about the particular interests and positions of analysts inclined to adopt this terminology. This article uses an extended case study to highlight the inadequacies of the concept of informality and rethink the type of questions that we should be asking. Frederick Cooper asks,

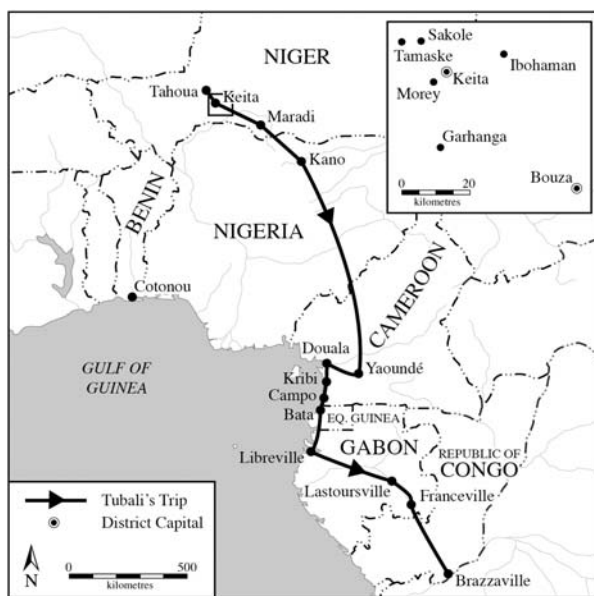
[w]hy indeed should informality be an economic variable? Some economists keep using this vague and euphemistic phrase instead of specifying what kind of economic structures exist in small-scale business, examining the limitations those structures pose for accumulation, and – most important – asking why the distinction between formal and informal means so much to policy makers. (1983, 41)

By emphasising everything that falls “outside the regulatory framework of the state” (Castells and Portes 1989, 12), the notion of informality glosses over differences of such magnitude that it has weak explanatory potential as an analytical concept. Recently, researchers working on informality have been increasingly interested in social networks. Building upon years of field-based research on informal trade practices in Nigeria, Kate Meagher argues that, “to break the black box of the informal economy, we must begin by breaking the black box of the social network” (2010, 26). Shifting the focus from the “informal economy” to “social networks” emphasises the networks’ internal functioning. But the notion of network in itself is as vague as the concepts it aims to replace. It is, indeed, another black box (for general critiques, see Nohria 1992; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; see Meagher 2005 for a defence of network research). It is not clear what a focus on networks adds to a thorough historical and socio-anthropological analysis of specific institutions. There are potentially endless types of network: trade diasporas managing particular types of goods organise their activities and control their membership differently from networks of labour migrants (for a typology of Nigerien commercial networks, see Grégoire 1993). These economic structures have names, functions and histories of their own – analysing them improves our chances of understanding what the actors involved in them are actually trying to achieve, and how they perceive the structures they willingly or unwillingly engage with.

This article looks at activities unfolding mostly outside the control of the state, and focuses on their meaning and import for the people engaged in them. In the course of his travels, Tubali relies upon codes of conduct shared by other migrants like himself. These actors do not necessarily perceive their activities as unified under the banner of

“non-state”. Of course, abstract categories (such as informality) can be used analytically to illustrate dynamics at work beyond the level of the actors’ individual motivations.¹ The point is not to deny the usefulness of concepts that facilitate analysis at the meta-level. The point is whether informality (or social network) is the best concept at hand. The concept of informality is not neutral. Policies that classify migrants as “informal” or “illegal”, as the case may be, behave like Bourdieu’s (1998, 75) *doxa*: they shape official definitions and represent a broad range of activities as external to state regulation, *ergo* informal, and possibly illegal. Just as we analyse the practices of migrants in relation to the historical and political context in which they took shape, so the notion of informality should be explained in relation to the historical and political context that generated it. This implies that, borrowing from Roger Brubaker on ethnicity, informality “is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with; it belongs to our empirical data, not to our analytical toolkit” (2002, 165).

Following this Introduction, Section II introduces Tubali’s personal travel narrative, which exposes the opportunities and obstacles encountered by Tubali at each step of his trip (Map 1). Focusing on the experiences of a particular migrant enables us to adjust our understanding to the perspective of Tubali and other migrants like him, and to ask whether “informality” provides an adequate interpretation of their activities. Section III contextualises Tubali’s trip in a range of economic practices that fall outside the state’s regulatory framework in the Tahoua region, also known as Ader. I discuss the economic and social significance of these practices for those engaged in them and their communities. Section IV discusses the purposes served by the informality paradigm in today’s global governance, in which both African international labour migrants and policy analysts occupy positions. It suggests that we can seek inspiration in Marxist analyses of African migrations, which developed a framework for interpreting the place of African migrants in relation to broader political processes. However, Tubali’s experience highlights questions that Marxist perspectives leave unanswered because they fall outside the scope of their concerns.



Map 1. Tubali’s trip; inset: Tahoua towns mentioned in the text.

The notion of informality is too closely intertwined with policy-making to provide a useful analytical tool. Marxist approaches can help us reflect critically on the implications of the informality framework. But they, too, run the risk of imposing static theoretical structures on the constantly evolving practices of migrants. This article does not attempt to substitute old theoretical paradigms with new ones. But, based on a detailed analysis of the activities of migrants from Tahoua who operate outside state control, it does problematise some current influential approaches and raises questions for future consideration.

II. Tubali's trip

I have chosen not to reveal Tubali's real name in order to protect his privacy, and particularly because – like many other migrants – he operated outside the legal requirements of the countries in which he travelled. Tubali is of Tuareg origin, but his native language is Hausa and he defines himself alternatively as Hausa or Tuareg. This section is based upon interviews I conducted on 2, 5 and 12 December 2008 in the town of Keita, capital of the homonymous district in the administrative region of Tahoua of the Republic of Niger. I chose to present Tubali's text in the third person, because I could not, as a result of space limitations, reproduce his entire testimony verbatim. However, I tried to remain as close to Tubali's own words as possible and to retain some of Tubali's colloquial expressions. My relation to Tubali extended beyond the interviews on which this article is based. In 2008 Tubali worked as my assistant in replacement of his cousin, who had worked with me in the past but was not available in 2008. Although I had not met Tubali before 2008, I had been conducting research focused largely on migration practices in Ader since 1995, and much of my previous work had focused on the town and neighbourhood from whence Tubali came. Therefore, I was well acquainted with the social and economic context of Tubali's migrations.

While I collected many testimonies of labour migrants from Ader, Tubali's story stood out in several ways. As Tubali worked with me every day for a period of about two months, I had a privileged insight into how his travels fit within his life experience. At some point during our collaboration, Tubali told me about the trip discussed in this article and allowed me to record his testimony for research purposes. These recordings were made at the end of a work-day, when we both had time, and were less formal than other interviews I carried out during the daytime. While he spoke, we drank the strong Tuareg tea until dusk. We interrupted the interviews for the evening, and agreed to continue on another day. Tubali's outstanding memory and remarkable oral skills allowed him to produce a detailed and vivid account, perhaps inspired by the genre of Hausa travel narratives (Lefebvre 2010), which attests to the historical centrality of travel in the Hausa-speaking societies of Niger and Northern Nigeria. The trip described in this testimony was neither the only nor the first migration on the part of Tubali, but its long duration and complex structure provides an extended case study that suits the purpose of this article.

Tubali was born in 1968. In 2008 he lived in Keita Ideoran, where he grew up as a child.² Before travelling outside the country for the first time, he worked for one of the directors of the "Keita Project",³ a man from Burkina Faso. Tubali's elder brother married a woman whose father was from Kano, but she had moved to "Congo Brazzaville".⁴ His brother had moved to Congo with his wife, and they had two children there. During the war⁵ in Congo Brazzaville, Tubali's family in Keita lost all contacts with his brother. When Tubali's employer ended his mandate at the project, before leaving Keita he urged Tubali to find out what had happened to his brother. He told him to go to Congo Brazzaville to look for his brother. Even if he found only his children alive, he could bring

them back to Niger. Tubali thought about this, and decided to leave. It was 6 July 1998 and he was 30 years old. From Keita he went to Tahoua, then to Maradi and, finally, Kano. He spent one week in Kano to arrange the remaining part of his trip. Then he left Kano for Yaoundé (Cameroun).

In Yaoundé he stayed in the Hausa neighbourhood of Bilkitri.⁶ Here, everyone speaks Hausa, and food is the same as in Niger. One finds the typical Hausa grilled meat, cooked the same way as in Keita. In Bilkitri, Tubali ran into a man who had met his brother only three months earlier. This lucky encounter gave him courage. Shortly afterwards he left for Douala, where he remained for seven months. In the first month he was financially supported by other migrants from Tahoua, who hosted him and fed him. After the first month, they gave him FCFA 10,000 and he left to find his own room. He found a single room, which he shared with two youths from Morey.⁷ The monthly rent of this room was FCFA 8500, to which they added FCFA 1500 for electricity. Tubali was the only one who had a mattress to sleep on. Then the three of them took charge of a fourth youth, who, like Tubali, came from Keita Ideoran.

While he was in Yaoundé, Tubali worked as a shoe repairer. In Yaoundé, most people from Tahoua work as shoe-makers, have a boutique or work in coffee shops. He worked until he saved enough money for the rest of his journey. After seven months in Douala, he left. He contacted a *jagora*,⁸ a man from Senegal or, as they are called in Cameroun, a “Westaff” (West African). He paid him FCFA 45,000 to arrange his travel. The amount only covered travel expenses, and Tubali had to provide for his own food. The *jagora* accompanied them to Kribi,⁹ then to Campo,¹⁰ where the *jagora* negotiated with the drivers of motorised pirogues and instructed them to bring the group to Libreville.¹¹ They changed boat and driver in Bata.¹² Eighty people were in the pirogue. Five of the travellers were from Niger, all from Tahoua: Tubali from Keita, and four from Bouza. Among the other travellers were people from Senegal, Mali and the Ivory Coast. There were also eight women, all from Nigeria. The second boat left them on the coast, at 12.30 am, 30 kilometres away from the city of Libreville. It was New Year’s Eve.

The boat drivers gave them directions on how to reach Libreville in Gabon, through the forest: “you see the lights down there, far, far away . . . that’s where you must go.” The group separated; people scattered in various directions and took different paths. Tubali walked with a man from Equatorial Guinea whom he had met on the boat. The man had no food with him. Tubali had some bread and two tins of sardines, and they shared his provisions. They walked in the forest and drank rainwater from ponds on the ground. After a while, his travel companion, exhausted, wanted to stop and rest, and continue walking in the morning. But Tubali encouraged him to go on. He thought that walking in the night would be safer because they did not have any documents and had to avoid police controls. They reached Libreville at around 6 am, and here they parted. Tubali had no money. He had to “invent something” (*cascader*). He found a taxi driver, and broke a deal (luckily, he said, the driver was a “Westaff” from Benin – like many taxi drivers in Gabon): Tubali was going to pay him FCFA 3000, and the driver would then put him in contact with a “Hausa” from Niger.

Tubali knew that, even if he did not know him personally or shared common acquaintances, a fellow “Hausa” would agree to lend him money to pay for his cab fare. He “knew”, he added, but could not be sure . . . “this is *cascader*”. They arrived in the Hausa neighbourhood of Libreville, called “Mbaklé”.¹³ The cab brought him to the “Cinema du Gabon”. When he arrived near the mosque (where they assumed they would find some Hausa people), Tubali asked a Hausa man in a coffee shop for someone from Keita, who worked in Libreville. He was told the man from Keita was not there, but the men in the

coffee shop agreed to pay his cab fare. Because Tubali had no identity documents on him, they made him wait in the mosque. At around 8 am, the people in the coffee shop went to look for Tubali's acquaintance from Keita. The man, however, was at work, so he asked them to make Tubali wait in the mosque until around 1.30 pm, when he would stop working for the period of prayer and come to see him. They brought Tubali to a room that belonged to the man from the coffee shop, where he could wash and rest after his long trip in the pirogue and the night walk in the forest. Tubali slept for a few hours and woke up at 1.00 pm in order to meet his acquaintance in the mosque. They prayed first, then thanked the coffee shop man, who refused to be reimbursed for the cab ride.

Tubali's contact in Libreville lived at "kilometre 5". He was an old man, and could not host Tubali at his place, but he found a place where Tubali could share a room with five other men, also from Keita, who rented the room at FCFA 25,000. One was a tailor, one an apprentice in a coffee shop, one an unemployed truck driver, and another worked in a boutique owned by a Lebanese. With Tubali, they were six in one room, all from different towns in the department of Keita (Tamaske, Garhanga, Ibohamane). After they spent the first night together, they gave Tubali FCFA 75,000 as pocket money to cover his initial needs. This, Tubali explained, is what *ressortissants* do for new-coming migrants from their region; they were all from the Keita department. He went to the market and bought some clean clothes. Life is very expensive in Libreville; it is one of the most expensive cities in West Africa. He found a job in a coffee shop, where he cooked and served meals: rice, sauce, spaghetti, yams and steak. The shop owner was a man from Cameroun, with whom Tubali agreed a salary of FCFA 150,000 per month. The agreement was that Tubali could take meals at the coffee shop, but had to arrange his own housing and defend himself should he become known to the authorities. All migrants working in coffee shops could eat the food they cooked but sometimes employers accept greater responsibility for the living expenses and security of employees whose status is irregular.

Two weeks after Tubali had started working at the Camerounian's shop, his acquaintance and patron learned that he had accepted this deal. He told Tubali that he should have been more careful: "If you are stopped by the police, they will put you in jail." Tubali did not have a residency permit or any other identification documents. According to Tubali, a residency permit would have cost him FCFA 750,000 and would be valid for two years. Renewing the permit was cheaper (although in Cameroun the fee was fixed). Tubali's "patron" told him that he should ask his boss to pay for a residency permit, or at least to give him FCFA 500,000, and he then offered to contribute the remaining FCFA 250,000. So Tubali went to see his Camerounian employer, who told him that the best he could offer was to pay the caution necessary to release Tubali from jail, if he got in trouble because he lacked papers, but that he would deduct this money from Tubali's salary. Tubali discussed this with his first contact (at this point in his narration, Tubali called him "*mon frère*"), who advised Tubali to change jobs. If he was arrested, he told Tubali, he would be in trouble, his parents would be unhappy¹⁴ . . . if the Camerounian would not help him, he should leave. Tubali was paid for three weeks' work, and left on good terms with the man from Cameroun. He went back to see his "brother" and showed him the money he had received, thanking him for his help. Tubali was ready to share the sum with him. But the "brother" told him he should keep all the money for himself, for the rest of his trip.

Tubali's "brother" knew a man from Sakole¹⁵ called Abdou, who was visiting from Lastoursville and was looking for someone to work in his coffee shop. Abdou would pay Tubali only FCFA 60,000 per month, but would help him to acquire a work permit and would host him at his place. Tubali would eat at the coffee shop – this is how it always

works when migrants (“*nous, les aventuriers*”) work in coffee shops. Tubali decided to take this new opportunity. He and Abdou, his new employer, travelled on the same train, but separately. The train ride was risky, because in Gabon the police check documents at the station and on the train. At the station, Tubali befriended a man from Gabon, who was also travelling to Lastoursville. He was a nice man, kind and polite, a “*bon samaritain*” [good Samaritan]. Soldiers in the station saw the two of them talking French together, looking relaxed, and did not stop them. Tubali asked the Gabonais to buy a ticket for him, and said that he would reimburse him. This he did to avoid interacting with the station personnel, who might have asked for his documents. The man bought tickets for both of them. When he gave Tubali his ticket, he asked him, “my friend, have you got any documents?”

Tubali told him he had no documents, so they started thinking of a way for him to avoid controls. As they reflected, they noticed two ladies. They started chatting with them. They agreed with these girls that the girls would distract the police. There were guards outside and inside the gates to the train platforms. The four of them entered together, and Tubali was able to pass without showing documents. He crossed the gate with his friend, while the girls talked to the police; his friend showed his documents, the girls showed theirs, and he was the only person who just walked in. Luckily, he was not stopped. When he had to board the train, he showed his ticket to the controller, who then wanted to see his documents. Tubali answered that his girlfriend had them, and that she was a bit behind; he promised to show them to him inside the train. Tubali and his three friends, the Gabonais and the two girls, all sat in the same coach. When the controller arrived, they all showed their tickets, and the three other passengers showed their documents. The controller wanted to see Tubali’s documents, but the man from Gabon pretended to get upset with the controller and told him angrily, “Hey, what more do you want? We showed you our tickets, we are together, why do you keep harassing us? He is with us . . .” The controller left them in peace. In order to avoid police controls on arrival in Lastoursville, he and his new friend from Gabon decided to jump off the train when it slowed down, before the station. Tubali found Abdou in a different coach and informed him that they would jump off the train before it entered the station. The Gabonese knew a Westaff from Mauritania who had a shop. They told Abdou to meet Tubali later at the Mauritanian’s shop.

Abdou picked up Tubali in a cab and brought him to his place, where Tubali was given a nice room with everything he needed: a bed, a mattress, a pillow and a stove. Four other people were staying there, each in a separate room; three from Maradi and one from Sakole. One worked in a shop (he was a “*boutiquier*”), one was a butcher and one took any job available. Here, Tubali earned FCFA 60,000 per month and also received, as part of their arrangement, FCFA 500 per day for his everyday needs, such as cigarettes; as he was fed and hosted by his employer, he had few expenses. Tubali wanted to save some money, so he asked Abdou to keep his salary for him. The work was good, but tough. He started work at 6.00 am, took a break between 1.00 and 2.00 pm, and then worked until he closed the business at 1.00 am. Tubali worked every day for three months. Then he decided to leave Lastoursville and to continue his trip to Brazzaville, where he hoped to find his brother.

Tubali collected his money, which now amounted to FCFA 180,000. He asked Abdou to send FCFA 100,000 back to his family in Keita, and he kept the rest to pay for the trip that lay ahead of him. Tubali’s next stop would be Franceville. A taxi driver picked up Tubali and Abdou at 3.00 am. At the station, Abdou and other friends went to buy a ticket for Tubali and escorted him to the train. Abdou dealt with the police. Tubali entered the train, and nobody stopped him. On the train no one checked his documents either, and he

arrived in Franceville at 5.30 am. At such an early hour, there were no policemen in the station. He went to the mosque, as he was sure to find some Hausa there. In the mosque, Tubali found an *almajiri*,¹⁶ and asked him if he knew any migrants from Tahoua. The *almajiri* asked Tubali, “You, now, where *exactly* are you from?”¹⁷ Tubali told him he was from Keita. The *almajiri* gave him directions on how to find a butcher from Sakole and, to Tubali’s great surprise, the butcher turned out to be his friend Abdulaziz, a school-friend.¹⁸ They were astonished:

T: Salamu Aleikum!

A: Amin, Aleikum salam. . . . Eh, what? Who am I going to see today? Is it Tubali? How did you find me?

T: No . . . it is an *almajiri* who showed me your place; is this your home?

A: Tell me, first, do you have any documents?

T: Oh, actually, in all truth . . . I told him everything.

Aziz was settled in Franceville, he had all his documents and immediately offered to host Tubali: “Follow my friend, he will accompany you home.” Abdulaziz lived with another man from Keita, called Ikka. Tubali spent five days with them; they provided all his meals and showed him around town. Then he asked them if they knew anyone who had been to Congo. They brought him to see a Hausa man who sold statues. Tubali was shocked; he never thought he would find a Hausa man selling statues: “Islam forbids this. Statues are fetishes, people who buy them make offerings to them, keep them at their place . . . some are bought by tourists, too, like in Niamey.” Tubali overcame his initial bewilderment and found out that the statue-seller had just returned from Congo Brazzaville, where he bought the statues he sold. He travelled by airplane and carried the statues on the plane with him. Tubali told him he was looking for his brother Abdulhamidu, a butcher, married to a woman from Congo, whose father was from Kano. The statue-seller knew his brother. He had met him just two weeks previously, because the statue-seller was married to the elder sister of the wife of Tubali’s brother, Abdulhamidu. He did not know if his brother’s family was back in Brazzaville – the wife and children had moved during the war – but he had just met his brother there. “Really,” said Tubali, “I am a lucky man.”

Tubali told the man, who, as he now knew, was an affine, that he was trying to go to Brazzaville, but could not go by plane because he could not afford the fare and had no identity documents. The man told Tubali that for this trip he would need about FCFA 100,000 or 120,000. If Tubali did not have this money, the statue-seller suggested, Tubali should stay here and wait until his [the trader’s] next trip to Brazzaville, when he could ask Abdulhamidu to advance the money for Tubali’s trip. But Tubali had FCFA 80,000, of which he had only spent 10,000 for the train.¹⁹ Tubali did not want the statue-seller to ask his brother for money; rather, he needed help to find a way to travel to Brazzaville. The wife of President Omar Bongo of Gabon²⁰ was the daughter of President Sassou Nguesso of Congo. She owned Iveco trucks, which she used to transport food, fuel and oil to Oyo, the native town of President Nguesso. Tubali and the statue-seller went to speak with the drivers of these trucks, who were all from Chad. The Chadian drivers agreed to bring Tubali to Oyo for FCFA 75,000. Tubali had already spent FCFA 50,000 in Franceville. He did not think that from Oyo he would have to travel far to reach Brazzaville, and assumed that he would not need a lot of money for the remainder of his trip. Once Tubali’s trip to Oyo was arranged, the statue-seller asked Tubali if he wanted him to inform Abdulhamidu that his brother was on his way. Tubali said no, and asked the statue-seller to only tell his brother – if he met him before him – that he had seen him (Tubali) in Franceville.

Sometimes, explained Tubali, people who had spent a long time abroad feared that visitors from back home would become a liability (*“ils ont peur que tu vas venir les encombrer”*).

Tubali agreed with the Chadian drivers that, if the police asked for his documents, they would say he worked for Elisabeth [sic] Sassou. The trip went smoothly and, arriving in Oyo, Tubali spent three days there just to get to know the city and its different neighbourhoods; he was curious. The chauffeur who drove him offered to host him at the house where he lived with his girlfriend. They were very nice and hospitable, and hosted him for three days in a separate room. When Tubali took a walk outside, a child accompanied him to show him where to go. He spent a bit of his money, of which very little now remained. He bought his ticket to Brazzaville for FCFA 10,000 at Sassou’s bus company, a bus company that connected President Sassou’s native town to Brazzaville. All that remained in his pocket was FCFA 15,000. But before the bus trip started, the police checked him out and found him without documents.

They told him to get off the bus, take his luggage and follow them to the police station. He spent the night there, but slept in a waiting room, not in jail; they did not put him in jail. They kept his luggage and a guard even accompanied him into town to get some food. The following morning the commissioner arrived and issued him some documents, for which Tubali had to pay FCFA 2500: “in Congo Brazzaville,” said Tubali, “unless your business is important, you do not need any other permit, just a form of identification, which costs FCFA 4500 at the gendarmerie, and only FCFA 2500 at the police. If you are African, this is all you need.” Tubali had almost no money left. The commissioner asked him how much he had with him, and he told him he was almost completely moneyless. So the commissioner helped him to recover the money he had paid for the journey that he could not complete the previous day. Tubali got his FCFA 10,000 back, of which he owed FCFA 2500 for the identity card. He gave FCFA 500 to the guard and FCFA 2000 to the commissioner who had been so helpful. The commissioner then accompanied him to a bus and told the driver that Tubali would travel with them. They left.

Half-way to Brazzaville, the driver stopped to make the passengers pay for the trip. Everybody paid. Tubali hoped that because the commissioner had accompanied him to this bus, they would not ask him for money. The ticket cost FCFA 7000, and he only had FCFA 5000 on him, and would need some money to buy food. His heart was pounding as the man collected bus fares. Then one traveller said in a loud voice: “Hey, this guy who was accompanied by the commissioner also has to pay.” The driver, who had forgotten about him, now expected him to pay. He tried to talk them out of this, saying that if they wanted money from him, they should have told the police commissioner. But they replied they could not care less if the commissioner accompanied him. He had to pay like everybody else. Meanwhile, without being seen, Tubali managed to fold FCFA 4000 in one pocket and to hide FCFA 1000, which would be his last resort. The man insisted that, if he did not pay, he would leave him on the road. Tubali begged him not to, saying this would be his death. But the man answered that he did not care if he died: “Everybody is dying all the time here; there is a war going on!” Commissioner or not, the man continued, they would be stopped along the way and they would have to pay at every stop to be allowed to continue the trip – so he did not care who introduced him. But they started talking, and they asked him where he was from. He was a Westaff – they thought he was from Mali, so they talked a bit in French; they asked him how much money he actually had, and Tubali said FCFA 4000. In the end, they agreed to take him for this sum, and told him that if they were stopped he should never reply or say anything. Even if people addressed him directly, he should just stay silent as if he were deaf and mute.

After a while, they reached a road-block where they were stopped by children with Kalashnikovs. Tubali had never seen anything like this – he had heard about it on the radio

and had seen armed children on television, but now he was seeing it for real. The children told them to stop. The driver went to talk to the (adult) boss, and gave him some money. But the armed children did not let them go. They wanted a separate share. They would get a percentage from the boss, but it would not be much. Whatever else they managed to get from each bus, by scaring travellers with Kalashnikovs, they would share amongst themselves, without telling the boss – this is why they wanted money from them. On the bus nobody said a word. The children ordered them to get off, but, following the driver's instructions, nobody moved, as if they did not hear. The driver came back and gave some money to the kids. Everyone was absolutely terrified: "these kids will not reason, they all smoke *banga*, it takes them nothing to fire, they don't need a reason to kill you . . ." The children took the money and let them go. The bus stopped and Tubali, tired and hungry, tried to buy some fruit with his last FCFA 1000.

They finally reached Brazzaville. Tubali found a cab. He had no money left, but he told the driver, who was from Cameroun, that he would get his fare at destination. The driver wanted FCFA 3000. Tubali did not know the distances and the prices, so he agreed; he would learn later that his fare should not have exceeded FCFA 300! He finally arrived at his brother's shop – what a surprise! The brother was happy to see him, and went to pay the cab fare. When the brother found out the amount that had been agreed, he told the driver that it was way too much, but the driver replied, "Eh! What do you want? I brought you your brother and you complain that you have to pay FCFA 3000?" So Abdulhamidu gave him the money, and the driver left. Tubali found his brother with two children.

Tubali remained in Brazzaville for three years, during which time two more children were born, a girl and a boy. They decided to send the first two boys back to Tahoua. They convinced the mother, and found a woman from Benin to accompany the children to Cotonou, where an elder brother of theirs, who had driven from Tahoua on purpose, picked the children up and brought them to Keita. The children met their grandmother, obtained Nigerien nationality and started studying in Tahoua. In Congo they had lacked "family education", and their father did not earn enough to pay for their schooling. In Niger, schooling was cheaper. Eventually, their mother joined them in Tahoua. When the children came back from school, their mother, who found a job in Tahoua, checked their homework. Her father, who visited from Kano, was overjoyed to see his daughter and two grandsons. In 2008 the children were still at school. When there was no school, one of the children was working as an apprentice and learning to be a carpenter, the other an electrician. They also followed Quranic school.

Tubali arrived in Brazzaville in 2000 and left in 2004. His main job was to cook and sell kebabs. His brother's children went to Tahoua in 2002. While for them it was better to be in Niger, for his elder brother, Abdulhamidu, Brazzaville still offered more profitable options. He could not have been a butcher in Keita as people would have looked down on him. But "in Brazzaville it is not a problem for him to have this job". Meanwhile, Abdulhamidu bought a house in Tahoua, thinking that if he returned, he could live in Tahoua, where he could be a butcher or work in the food business – only in Keita would he not do that. But in 2008 Abdulhamidu was still working in Brazzaville and supporting his family from there.

III. Tubali's trip in context: the meaning and function of labour migrations in Tahoua

Who travels like Tubali, who does not, why and with what consequences? With the exception of the availability of a few bureaucratic positions in the main towns, the majority of rural Ader's livelihood strategies are enacted outside the regulatory framework

of the state. Not all strategies are openly accessible to everyone. “Who one is” – in terms of ethnic affiliation, status and gender – influences how one can move and which activities a person can carry out, both within Ader and in the broader region navigated by Ader’s migrants. The same person can engage in multiple ways of working and travelling, provided that they are able to mobilise appropriate identities. The primary identity that is needed for participation in state-governed institutions is citizenship. But it is as members of institutions other than the nation state, and rooted in a longer history, that people in Ader are able to pursue their economic objectives.

Ader is a culturally-mixed region: it contains Hausa- and Tamasheq-speaking societies, with Fulani (or Peul) comprising a minority of the population. Historically, some sections of Ader’s Tuareg societies were primarily pastoralists, while most native Hausa-speakers practised agriculture. Hence, “Tuareg-ness” and “Hausa-ness” have been identified with distinct systems of production. Both societies contained groups of specialised traders active in local and long-distance circuits, and supported by ethnically-defined diasporic networks. If ethnic passing gave them advantages in particular aspects of trade and access to a broader range of networks, traders adopted the language and mores of another society and changed their ethnicity (the Agalawa and Kambarin Beri Beri are cases in point; see Dan Asabe 1987; Lovejoy 1973; Lovejoy 1986, Chapter 10). Just as one would seek to change or acquire a new nationality if a different citizenship provides access to desired opportunities, so being able to mobilise multiple ethnicities increases one’s options in relation to institutions that define access and participation in ethnic terms.

In the precolonial period, pastoralist transhumance often overlapped with trade: “while accompanying their herds on the journey to the savannah, Tuareg sold animals and desert products using as an infrastructure the network of rural estates and also urban communities of formerly servile people who acted as brokers and intermediaries” (Baier 1980, 590; see also Lovejoy and Bayer 1975). Pastoralists travelling in groups carried out different activities (trade and transhumance) in the course of the same trip, and some individuals belonged to two or more Tuareg networks and carried out multiple tasks in the same market place. Pure pastoralism has become increasingly rare following the Sahelian famines of the early 1970s and 1980s, and Tuareg long-distance trade declined in importance throughout the twentieth century as a result of the combined impacts of drought and colonial policies (Grégoire 1997). But neither of these activities disappeared completely. Social and economic connections between Tamasheq-speaking herders, traders and labour migrants are based on multiple ties, such as blood- or milk- kinship, former economic cooperation, or former dependence (Brock 1984, 89–98). Through his father, Tubali could identify as “Tuareg” and try to access these networks, but doing so would expose his relatively low status. Within a “Tuareg” network, one is never only “Tuareg”: place of origin and genealogy position one in hierarchies that are hard to climb.

Established networks of Hausaphone long-distance traders (Hausa: *fatakke*) are equally exclusive. Although such networks in Ader are less internally stratified than the networks of Kano-based traders, participation in them is easier for certain groups than for others (Dan Asabe 1987; see also Lefebvre 2009; Hamani [1975] 2006, 217–221). Ader’s Hausaphone long-distance trade involves the transport and trade of valuable goods across markets where trustworthy associates facilitate relations with potential clients (on Aderawa trade networks, see Grégoire 2003, 9–10). These trade diasporas are accessible to members from relatively close-knit groups. Each trade network is tied to specific localities where, historically, the network carved for itself a particular niche within local business and trade. For example, certain families from the Magorawa neighbourhood of Tamaske have important trade links with members who have been based in Jos (Nigeria)

for four or five generations. Tubali's background makes him an outsider in these networks, which, while not impenetrable, are more accepting of persons perceived as being of the same "kind" (*iri*) and who can mobilise a set of geographic and genealogical connections that Tubali lacks. Within these networks, the element of improvisation is reduced, and recruitment criteria are more exclusive than among networks of labour migrants (*yan bida*).

In Ader, long-distance seasonal labour migrations (*bida*) have been growing in importance since the 1920s as a consequence of colonial rule (Prothero 1957; Swindell 1984; Rossi 2009, 2014).²¹ They differ from the regional, narrow-range seasonal labour migrations (*cin rani*)²² practised by the poorest migrants, including women. *Cin rani* is aimed primarily at accessing food away from home in the dry season and preserving the harvest until the rainy season, when purchased food is most expensive. It is associated with social dependence, because it indicates vulnerability to hunger and destitution. Many of the women who are involved in *cin rani* accept work as domestic staff in exchange for food rather than a real salary – a condition reminiscent of precolonial slavery. Because *cin rani* migrations occur mostly within Ader, they often reactivate historical ties of dependence between two families or groups. The dependence that marks *cin rani* borrows from cultural institutions that evoke past slavery, and particularly the voluntary enslavement of persons exposed to hunger (*bayun yunwa*). By contrast, long-distance labour migration to foreign countries (*bida*) carries symbolic connotations of self-assertion, adventure and testing one's skills as an independent agent (on the notion of "adventurous" migrations, see Bredeloup 2008; see also Guillas 1984, 60).

Given his life-history, place of origin, social and genealogical background and the languages he knew, Tubali could claim only a limited range of identities. He introduced himself to me as the son of a "Hausa" mother and a Tuareg "Iwellemmeden" father. Mentioned in Keita, the ethnonyms "Hausa" and "Iwellemmeden" are too vague to be meaningful, suggesting that he would rather not provide details of his social background, which is of low status on the father's side. Given his ancestry, Tubali could not easily hope to ascend the ranks of specific Tuareg trade networks, wherein he would be identified with his father's status and treated accordingly. It would also be difficult for Tubali to penetrate established Hausa trade diasporas. Although throughout his trip Tubali frequently identified with other "Hausa" migrants, his strategies differed from those of the prototypical "Hausa" traders who operate alongside, and often interact with, circuits of labour migration. We should not conflate these phenomena only because migrants navigating these distinct networks circumstantially adopt the label "Hausa". This label does not always have the same meaning and practical implications, and it triggers different responses in different contexts.

Because of Tubali's perceived identity within Ader, not every "Hausa" network was accessible to him. In different sites, Tubali's trip required renegotiations of his identity: in order to mobilise support throughout his journey, Tubali had to pass as Hausa, Muslim or Westaff (West African). In most sites, upon arrival Tubali identified as Hausa and Muslim. These two characteristics sufficed to set in motion a predefined set of mutual expectations. Yet, *within Ader*, Tubali's putative "Hausaness" would not be taken at face value. Knowledge of Tubali's descent from his unspecified "Iwellemmeden" father would mark a dead-end in attempts to identify with groups like the Magorawa Hausa of Tamaske. Perhaps Tubali's "deficient Hausaness" would exclude him *a priori* from Hausa trade networks. Amongst the latter, Tubali and others like him *are not Hausa enough*. Because of his perceived outsidership, Tubali would have to work hard to climb through the ranks of the "Hausa" long-distance traders.

The cultural construction of long-distance labour migration (*bida*) provides a template for Tubali's way of travelling. In his four-year journey, Tubali lived and worked like a labour migrant. Unlike the poorest regional labour migrants (*masu cin rani*), however, Tubali rejected the mobilisation of ties of personal dependence and sought the greater economic mobility accessible through long-distance labour migration. And unlike the members of trade diasporas, who mobilise exclusive biographic or genealogical connections with members of established diasporas, Tubali mobilised a more generic set of identities. "*Les aventuriers*" that Tubali associates with are prototypical shape-shifters.

In contrast to other forms of mobility (Tuareg and Hausa trade migrations and *cin rani* seasonal labour migrations), Tubali's trip took place in a less-structured field of action. Encounters could not be planned in advance and identities were more fluid. His role often had to be improvised depending on which game presented itself and demanded to be played. The higher risks that came with travelling in potentially limitless directions required flexibility in adjusting his identity in order to cope with the unpredictability of encounters. In Franceville, Tubali met an Islamic student of whom he asked directions to locate other "Hausa from Tahoua". It transpired that Tubali was misjudging the degree of identification specificity he could provide for his interlocutor, who replied "Now, where *exactly* are you from?" and led him to Tubali's ex-schoolfriend, Abdulaziz. With Abdulaziz, personal biography induced an egalitarian relationship. Other relationships established in the course of his trip, such as his acquaintance in Libreville, were more hierarchical. Some people were not fellow migrants, but advisers and patrons. When biographic detail matters (as is always the case in established trade diasporas, and sometimes turns out to be the case for *yan bida*), it works as a double-edged sword: it gains one a place, and keeps one in place.

When biographic detail does not matter, generalised reciprocity²³ structures relations between labour migrants. To the Senegalese dealer in Douala (Cameroun), the Beninese taxi-driver in Libreville (Gabon) and some of his travelling companions in the truck to Brazzaville (Congo), Tubali was a Westaff like them, and thereby worthy of assistance. But the thinner the connection in an improvised network, the higher the risk that cooperation will not be forthcoming, especially in situations of extreme risk. On a truck in Gabon, surrounded by foreigners who presumably included a majority of non-Westaffs, Tubali's improvisation failed. His usual migration strategies were superseded by a different game, governed by different rules: "Everybody is dying all the time here; there is a war going on!" Where the risks involved are minor, generalised reciprocity obtains between strangers with hardly anything in common, as in the case of Tubali's Gabonese acquaintance (the "good Samaritan", in Tubali's words) and the two girls who helped Tubali on his train journey to Lastoursville. But when stakes are high, the logic of reciprocity becomes restricted to a small circle of individuals sharing multiple criteria of belonging.

Identity is adjusted as much as possible (and it is not always possible, nor equally feasible for everyone) in line with the requirements of particular institutionalised forms of migration. *Cin rani* regional migrations follow some of the formalities of the old master-slave relations. On the other hand, Hausa trade diasporas establish skewed individual reciprocity between senior traders and junior assistants and apprentices – a type of relation typified in terms of the dyad *bara* (servant) – *mai gida* (or *uban gida*, household head) specific to the world of Hausa commerce (Grégoire 1992; Nicolas 1986, 131, 207–232; Agier 1981, 258–259). Tuareg trade networks classify members in terms of descent and status. By contrast, relations and transactions in the field of international labour migrations (*bida*) are premised on generalised reciprocity among fellow migrants who share the same conditions of work and travel. Migrants often receive help they will not have to return to the same individuals who assisted them, but are expected to provide a similar kind of

support to other migrants in the future. This unspoken rule is what makes the system predictable, attenuating the risks implicit in improvisation – a practice so central in Tubali’s narrative that it acquires a specific name, *cascader*. As soon as Tubali joins a network of labour migrants on the basis of shared religion, geographic origin and generic ethnicity, Tubali receives money, hospitality and help in finding a job and making travel arrangements. We also see Tubali supporting other migrants, financially assisting newcomers from Keita Ideoran (Tubali’s own town and neighbourhood) in Yaoundé and sharing food with a stranger from Equatorial Guinea in the nocturnal walk to Libreville. While reciprocity structures relations between labour migrants (*yan bida*), it does not extend to representatives of the state in their official functions.

In travelling without documents (and sometimes without tickets) and working without work and residency permits, Tubali and others like him choose to operate outside state rules. This is not always a free choice: it may be one’s only option. Either way, state representatives pose a threat. Tubali’s collaborators repeatedly expressed concern about the trouble he would incur if his informal/illegal status were discovered. His patron in Libreville warned him, “If you are stopped by the police, they will put you in jail”; the “good Samaritan” and Tubali’s ex-schoolfriend asked if he had documents; Abdou, Tubali’s employer in Lastoursville, helped Tubali to obtain a work permit and escorted him to the train station in order to avoid complications.

The threat posed by confrontations with state representatives is overcome if public officials can be persuaded to collaborate. The train manager was confronted verbally and dropped his demands to see Tubali’s documents. The police officer in Franceville arrested Tubali, but ultimately helped him to resume his journey, knowing all too well that Tubali would not pay for his ticket. The bus company that smuggled Tubali into Congo was owned by the president’s wife. So-called “formal” and “informal” rationales are not mutually exclusive. They can be applied by the same person in different circumstances, as if they are playing two games with different rules simultaneously.

By focusing only on what is state-regulated and what is not, the formality/informality dualism conceals the positive meanings of strategies that follow different criteria. We need to understand how different forms of trade or labour migration work, which institutions they mobilise, what advantages they offer and at what cost. There are many reasons why men like Tubali work and travel as they do. Avoidance of state regulations may be one of them, but – from their perspective – it is not the only one. Migrants from Tahoua have a range of economic options. Depending on individual biography and genealogy, some options are easier to access and safer than others. Often state rules can be used selectively and instrumentally. When playing by official rules is impossible or overly taxing, migrants embrace alternative regulatory frameworks predicated upon the identification strategies discussed above. These identification strategies enable distinct categories of people to make claims on the resources and labour of others – not as citizens, but as kin, dependents, members of the same ethnic group or fellow migrants from the same village or region. To counter the grip of informality research, which represents every practice that does not fit its vision as generically “external”, this section suggested a tactical reversal of analytical priorities and focused on the options and perspectives of migrants.

IV. The informal sector as interpretative blank-slatting

Nigeriens do not need a visa to travel in countries belonging to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). In the framework of ECOWAS, a number of protocols have been agreed to

regulate the movement of persons across member countries. Article 1 of the ECOWAS Treaty adopted in Lagos on 28 May 1975 states that,

subject to the provisions governing police regulations and public safety, as well as the prescriptions of the sanitary rules, nationals of Member States are free to enter the territory of any of the Members, to travel, to stay, and to leave by simply showing a valid national passport, with no other formality, such as obtaining an entry or exit visa. (Ba and Fall 2006, 9)

While the bulk of regional regulation reiterates the principles of free movement of persons and goods and freedom of residence, ECOWAS countries have different employment legislations: some require foreigners to obtain resident status or work permits, or to demonstrate their capacity to support themselves financially during their stay (see also Aparid 2010). These requirements involve costs that many migrants cannot afford. Tubali travelled within and outside ECOWAS countries. The existence of interregional agreements that regulate the rights and duties of foreigners in the countries that Tubali visited was inconsequential to his strategies and those of other migrants. Not all rural Nigerien migrants possess the appropriate travel documents or other documentation required to exercise particular business activities at destination (Boyer and Mounkaila 2009). These migrants maintain a discrete distance from the law because they are aware that they are breaching it, and because they are the targets of exactions by corrupt bureaucrats and policemen, as well as by fraudsters who take advantage of their vulnerable position as foreigners. The corrupt practices of state officials contribute to eroding the relevance of official legal frameworks to the practices of migrant workers. Ader's labour migrants are exposed to corruption in the course of their migrations, within and outside ECOWAS spaces. Statements like the following recur in my field-notes:

Problems [in Abidjan] started in the times of President Guéi. People started not being happy about migrants ... a man just wants to work, does not want anything else, but officials follow you secretly, if you do not give them money, they do not leave you in peace. They take our papers, put them in their pockets, and if you don't give them everything you have, they beat you up or take your papers away. This happens in Abidjan now.²⁴

They have cars called sikos, every car of this type has a number on it ... they see you on the street, if they think you are a migrant, they take you in the car, they drive behind a corner into a small alley, they search you, and take whatever they find on you. If they don't find anything, they beat you up and leave you there. They take what you have, what they find in your pockets ... and you better have something if you want to avoid beatings.²⁵

Faced with hostile local institutions, most migrants rely on various types of network, which help them through the initial stages of residence at destination, and support them financially until they can support themselves independently. Transhumant herders, long-distance traders, international labour migrants and poor local migrants follow different conventions, and agents wishing to operate in any one of these fields must adopt appropriate strategies of identification. These different networks can, and do, interact – Tubali relied on the support of a Hausa statue-seller, who eventually led him to his brother. Moreover, if migrant and diasporic networks have internal rules, these are not the only regulated fields that migrants partake of: the results of the activities of returning labour migrants influence the migrants' positions back home, in hierarchies that follow separate rules.²⁶ A successful migrant can facilitate economic and social mobility for himself and his family in the village – but such mobility has to be negotiated in relation to local hierarchies that differ from the hierarchies encountered abroad. Boyer (2005), Bellagamba (2010) and Pelckmans (2011, Chapter 2) writing, respectively, on Niger, the Gambia and Mali, show that whatever the success of a migrant's career abroad, reintegration in one's village of origin often entails the frustrating experience of being put in one's place.

At any one time, migrants play multiple roles in fields governed by different logics. One such field is that of the global political economy, with its reductive binary view of the world in terms of “formal” and “informal” sectors. Labour migrants acting outside legal provisions and formal employment channels are often qualified as agents operating in the “informal economy” or “sector” (Hart 1973). In a retrospective reflection on the notion he introduced, Hart highlighted three main characteristics of the notion of informality: lack of “form” (fluidity, un-structuredness); exteriority with regards to state-managed national economies; and an awareness that this idea suited the imaginary of a particular class of actors “who could not grasp what the economic activities in question positively represented” (1992, 217). The notion of informality is instrumental to the apparatus that generated it. It fits a variety of practices within one signifier, with implications for policy. But it sheds little, if any, light on the practices it claims to describe (MacGaffey 1991, 5, Chapter 2).

The exact meaning of the notion of the informal has been shifting periodically, in response to changing policy approaches (Meagher 1993). In their reassessment of informality, Guha-Khasnabis, Kanbur, and Ostrom noted that, “informal does not mean unstructured and chaotic, and does not invite policy intervention on those grounds!” (2006, 7). It is sometimes accepted that “informal” practices may yield more efficient economic solutions to specific problems than “formal” ones and that – when this is the case – official policies should support them. However, even favourable assessments of informality operate within a normative discourse which essentialises informality in order to act upon it within a particular policy framework. In doing so, they contribute to the formalisation of activities that originated outside official regulations (Guyer 2004, 155–169).

The notion of informality unifies a vast array of different practices under a single heading, which defines what these practices *are not*: they *are not* state-controlled (see Castells and Portes 1989, 12; De Soto 1989; Harding and Jenkins 1989; Guha-Khasnabis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006, 4).²⁷ While policy discourse defines “the informal” as a category that (legally or illegally) “falls outside” its own net, by labelling certain practices “informal” it includes them in its sphere of intervention. “Informal” activities can be further qualified according to policy criteria (e.g. classed as negative or positive, legal or illegal), and acted upon (e.g. banned, persecuted or targeted by specific programmes). The international policy institutions for whom this notion was first coined operate in a way reminiscent of Ferguson’s anti-politics machine ([1990] 1994, 256): the structural side-effect of informality consists in *including* the practices it renames as “external” in a certain regulatory apparatus; and in depoliticising the relationship between international governmental institutions, the state and the “informal” sector. The under-determination of the notion of informality makes what falls within this label amenable to arbitrary reclassification and management on the part of national and international governance.

By defining practices only in negative terms, informality research conceals their meaning and consequences from the perspective of the agents who engage in them. And by classifying them as “falling outside” the state’s net, it downplays the extent to which official policy contributes to the growth of “informality”. In some countries, structural adjustment increased unemployment and decreased social security (e.g. Meagher 1995; Masquelier 1999; Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network (SAPRIN) 2004; Grande, Pes, and Quaregna 2006). People who lose their jobs in the formal sector and do not receive unemployment benefits, are forced to engage in various economic activities in order to meet their own and their dependents’ needs. Branding the unemployment created by liberalisation (indeed, a predictable outcome of such policies)

“informal” – and hence falling outside the reach of official policy – depoliticises unemployment and removes responsibility from those who supported the implementation of these policies in the first place. The unemployed are a political problem that requires political solutions. Instead, migrants in the “informal sector” are souls in limbo. Defined as “informal”, “unstructured”, “outside the system”, “un-measurable” – in short, blank-slates – they are amenable to being re-inscribed with characteristics that can be defined as the situation requires. The line between “informal” and “illegal” is thin: a migrant unable to produce appropriate identification is easily locked up and fined.

The informal sector is defined as operating outside the regulatory framework of the state, and this regulatory framework is influenced by the workings of national and global formations. How should the relation between (“informal”) migrant workers and the (“formal”) state-controlled order be conceptualised? About 40 years ago, Marxist Africanist scholars, following the seminal contributions of Wolpe (1972) and Meillassoux (1975), argued that a peculiarity of African labour migrations was that the reproductive costs of labour were supported by the rural countryside from whence migrants originated, and not by the urban forms of capitalist employment where migrants temporarily worked. The prevalence of return labour migration in Africa would thus tend to temper the potential for proletarianisation and class struggle, which in Europe followed the increasing exploitation of workers with no fall-back option in the countryside (see Cordell, Gregory, and Piché 1996, 17–20; see also Roberts et al. 1981).

Since these theories were first advanced, Frederick Cooper has shown that the collective resistance of workers in the form of organised strikes and political mobilisation is not absent from Africa’s twentieth-century labour history (1996). But, as this article shows, the least likely to mobilise politically are labour migrants in the informal sector. Political mobilisation (opting for the “voice option”, Herbst 1990) would require openly voicing shared discontents and requests. But migrants operating illegally must refrain from exposing themselves if they are to avoid fines and/or imprisonment.²⁸ Indeed, Tubali strives to avoid encounters with official state representatives. Tubali and his fellow migrants have no choice but to engage in “the politics of the informal people”, whom Bayat (1997) sees as connected together into “passive networks” occasioned by the sheer fact of sharing the same spaces, and the conditions that come with inhabiting such spaces (1997).²⁹

In the case of Tubali and Ader’s labour migrants, such spaces are of two kinds: first, their villages of origin in Ader’s countryside and domestic communities, which, according to Marxist approaches to migration in Africa, “carr[y] the burden of producing [the migrant’s] labour force through his non-productive childhood, as well as keeping him alive as soon as he leaves capitalist employment. The peripheral domestic communities thus subsidize the capitalist sector at their own expense” (Gerold-Scheepers and Van Binsberger 1978, 26); and second, the spaces navigated by migrants at their urban destinations, where logics of reciprocity operate in support of migrants in need of social services that make possible their continued existence and survival in the city (see Portes and Walton 1981).

Marxist studies of African migrations examine the relationship between returning labour migrants, their communities of origin and the city, in terms that highlight power inequalities more poignantly than does the distinction between “formal” and “informal” sectors. Yet, these studies possibly attribute too much power to the capitalist, urban or formal sector, as the case may be. They appear to suggest that “the persistence of African rural societies is entirely due to capitalist interests” (Gerold-Scheepers and Van Binsberger 1978, 26). They also tend to presume that migrants connect pre-capitalist and

capitalist orders, and that the former will eventually merge into the latter as migrants inevitably acquire the characteristics of a proletariat. But maybe other concepts would be better suited to the specific transformations that are occurring in societies such as Tubali's Ader.

Tubali navigates fields structured by multiple rationales. It is not clear which, if any, of the contexts in which Tubali acts could be characterised as capitalist. While internationally imposed liberalisation policies appear to have restricted the regulatory control of the African state on the economy, the privatisation of formerly state-owned functions has been shown to result less in actual state-shrinking than in protean transformations of the state, with the same elite factions continuing to control both major state functions and newly "privatised" business. Beatrice Hibou has aptly characterised this process as "privatisation of the state" (1996, 1999; see also Grégoire 1993, 99), whereby overarching factionalist logics turned state regulation and privatisation to their own ends. Is a "regulatory framework" still "regulatory" if social actors can use its rules as resources in alternative regulatory logics? Literature on the African state seems far from reaching closure on this point. This confusion complicates the adoption of simple state/non-state binaries and obfuscates their implications for the study of labour migrations.

The logics that structure social and economic relations in Ader and its diaspora are not simply local, nor can they be qualified in merely negative terms such as informal or non-capitalist; they should be studied in positive terms, and examined in relation to both local conditions and broader articulations with global processes. To do so, however, researchers have to venture beyond the familiar boundaries of Western social science and policy frameworks. Tubali's way of travelling derives its functions and meanings from Ader's institutions of production and trade, and from the hierarchical structures that define Ader's social relations. These structures and institutions are informed by Ader's regional history and by norms shared with other West African societies and mobilised by migrants in their travels as a common frame of reference, which in Tubali's case is Hausa and Muslim. Many questions remain unanswered: do the notions of informalisation and proletarianisation retain explanatory potential when applied to Islamic economic institutions? Murray Last (1979) noted that conversion to Islam was an economic strategy for non-Muslim Hausa traders wishing to expand their business, and Paul Lubeck (1981) argued that Islamic networks in Hausaland influenced the nature of the articulation between non-capitalist and capitalist institutions. Looking at Hausa trade networks, Emmanuel Grégoire suggested that the Islamic Izala movement operates in ways similar to Catholic Protestantism in facilitating the transition to capitalist behaviour in the Muslim world (1993, 91). These studies have an advantage in relation to studies that structure their questions in terms of the formal/informal divide: they prioritise the analysis of emic categories and institutions.

The point of departure for research on African labour migrations should be the detailed analysis of the migrants' strategies and working conditions. The formal/informal divide belongs to a particular discursive formation that, being regularly mobilised by contemporary policy institutions, has political consequences and cannot be included uncritically in our analytical tool-kit. Marxist structuralist scholars like Claude Meillassoux, Jean Copans, Jean-Loup Amselle and Pierre-Philippe Rey provided insightful interpretations of the connection between migrant labour and national and international regulatory institutions. Their studies strove to answer the question of how the articulation between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production occurs in Africa (for a review of this debate, see Foster-Carter 1978). No doubt, this question could still yield much productive research. Yet, just as "informality" is a product of a certain way of looking at society, so Structuralist Marxists are often more interested in the functioning of

their own models than in the question of how far these models provide accurate interpretations of the practices in question.

V. Conclusion

Rural villages in Ader's hinterland lack modern industries and employment opportunities outside the traditional fields of farming, herding and trade. While rural Ader's society is highly stratified, hierarchy follows pre-colonial criteria of status and wealth that emphasise ties of personal dependence: of clients upon patrons, commoners upon chiefs, slave descendants upon the descendants of former masters. The poorest groups are not alienated from the means of production, and the local elites cannot be said to represent a capitalist class. This system may well be characterised as pre-capitalist, but this presumes that at some point it will turn into capitalism, which – given the prevailing trends in Ader's twentieth-century history – is an unwarranted claim.

Should we think of Ader's society as fulfilling the structural role of a pre-capitalist, pre-industrial periphery that supports the reproduction of capitalism in African cities by covering the reproductive costs of migrant labour? Many migrants work for wages in urban industries when they reach the destination of their travels. But Tubali, and the other migrants from Ader whom he encountered on his trip, did not appear to be directly involved in capitalist relations of production. They obtained jobs through personal contacts, had flexible working arrangements and did not experience the separation between conception and execution of labour characteristic of the capitalist labour process (Burawoy 1978). Tubali, his fellow migrants and the members of Ader's diaspora who act as hosts and patrons are able to exert some control over their lives and labour. When Tubali considered the risks of certain work arrangements too high, as in the case of his coffee shop placement in Libreville, he opted out of them.

While Tahoua's international labour migrants are undoubtedly confronted with capitalist institutions and consumerist logics in their daily lives, they appear to remain capable of negotiating with these forces on their own terms. They also negotiate with official representatives of the state, who cross the formal/informal divide whenever it suits them. In these circumstances, what this divide stands for is a game of roles that broadens the range of strategies available to Africans acting as brokers. But if the "formal" is not actually "formal", and if capitalism is encapsulated in other logics of production and reproduction (rather than the other way round), we may have to rethink our analytical categories altogether. The case discussed in this article reveals the specific circumstances in which some West African migrants operate and the meanings their migrations acquire in the context of their recent history and contemporary social organisation.

Tubali and his fellow migrants play multiple roles: they support their families in Ader; retain ownership of the means of production back home, and hence resist proletarianisation; provide cheap and flexible labour to members of their diaspora abroad; elude official controls, and thereby contribute to undermining the regulatory capacity of the state; and enable the reproduction of ethnic and religious criteria of belonging that cut across local and national identities. The informalisation model cannot explain this complexity. Moreover, it reproduces the power structures inherent in this particular interpretation of reality. Tubali's trip shows us that we cannot presume that we already know what the best frameworks for making sense of the practices of Ader's migrants are, and how exactly they articulate with the world beyond them. We need to build frameworks that suit the empirical phenomena at hand. To do so, our first concern should be to make sure that our models match reality, not that reality matches our models.

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Notes

1. For a critique of methodological individualism, see Alavi (1973); for a discussion of the tension between the individual motivations of migrants and the structures that regulate regional migrations, see Amin (1974a, 1974b, 93).
2. The three main neighbourhoods of the city of Keita are Keita Lissawan (where the chiefly family of the Lissawan live); Keita Moulela (which used to be identified as the slave quarter and now hosts a mixed population); and Keita Ideoran (where the Asna [Hausa] “autochthones” were originally based). Ideoran expanded faster than other neighbourhoods and hosts a diverse population.
3. The official name of this important project aimed at fighting desertification in the department of Keita was *Projet de Développement Rural Intégré de l’Ader Douchi Majiya* (PDR/ADM). The Keita Project was financed by the Italian aid agency, and coordinated by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. It ran between 1983 and 2009.
4. Since independence in 1960 the country’s official name has been Republic of the Congo.
5. Tubali probably refers to the four-month conflict between the two camps of the then-acting president, Pascal Lissouba, and Denis Sassou-Nguesso. In 1997 confrontations between these two opponents wrought havoc in the country and destroyed much of Brazzaville.
6. Although there is a “quartier Haoussa” in Yaoundé, I have been unable to locate a neighbourhood named “Bilkitiri”.
7. Morey is a village near Keita.
8. The Hausa term *jagora* refers to the person charged with the organisation of a trip. Historically, the *jagora* acted as the guide in Hausa long-distance trade (*fatauci*).
9. Kribi, or Kirbi, is a beach resort and sea port at the mouth of the Kienké River, about 177 km from Douala.
10. About 80 km south of Kribi, on the northern shore of Rio Campo.
11. Libreville, on the estuary of Gabon.
12. Tubali did not know the exact fare charged by the boat drivers.
13. Nombakele, in the south-east of Libreville.
14. The ambiguous characterisation of this person, the higher status that his behaviour betrays, and his sense of responsibility toward Tubali may indicate that he could be a descendent of a family which had past ties of hierarchy/patronage vis à vis Tubali’s family.
15. Town in the Department Keita, to the west of Tamaske.
16. In Hausa, this term, of Arabic origin, refers to a pupil following Quranic education. *Almajirai* usually beg to cover their needs and those of their teachers (see Bargery 1951, 25).
17. Tubali reported the *almajiri*’s question in a tone that suggested that the *almajiri* found Tubali’s information (“someone from Tahoua”) too generic. In other words, even in Gabon, when talking to another Hausa from Niger, Tubali should have been more specific about the exact location he came from. The implication is that he could behave in Gabon as he would locally, in Tahoua.
18. Tubali completed the “cinquième” grade at school in Keita with Abdulaziz in 1984.
19. The accounts that follow are confused. Either Tubali had been unable to send FCFA 100,000 to his family, or he had earned money through activities that he omitted to mention. Either way, the expenditures mentioned here presuppose that Tubali had FCFA 180,000 left on him at this stage, and not 80,000 as stated.

20. Albert-Bernard Bongo became President of Gabon in 1967. In 1958 he converted to Islam and changed his name to Omar Bongo. He died in office in 2009. In 1990 he married Edith-Lucie Sassou Nguesso, the daughter of the Congolese president, Denis Sassou Nguesso.
21. The abolition of slavery and the eradication of Tuareg elite resistance allowed former dependents to take control of their movements. These groups, as well as people of free descent, engaged in seasonal migrations in order to access jobs paid in cash, which had become necessary to meet fiscal obligations. Some also left to avoid paying taxes or being recruited as forced labour. For a discussion of these dynamics, see Rossi (2009).
22. The meaning of the terms *bida* and *cin rani* varies across regions. Studies of migrations in other regions of Niger and Northern Nigeria highlight variation in meaning and usage of these expressions. David Rain's (1999) distinction between *cin rani* and *digga* or *bida* differs from the one outlined here. Rain attributes to *cin rani* many of the characteristics ascribed here to longer-distance seasonal movements (*bida* or *digga*) and characterises *digga* as "distress moves, driven by household food shortages" (ibid, 134). This is in contrast with my findings and those of other researchers, which suggest that *digga* and *cin rani* constitute, respectively, longer- and shorter- distance circuits, with *cin rani* emphasising food security and *bida* focusing on profit. This meaning is also mentioned by Prothero (1958, 17; 1957), Manvell (2005, 237), Lorimer and Karp (1960, 73) and Olofson (1985, 56). Ader migrants use the term *digga* rarely, as a synonym for *bida*. They use *bida* to refer to long-distance, almost exclusively male, seasonal labour migration aimed at accumulating wealth.
23. For a general discussion of various forms of reciprocity, see Sahlins (1972, Chapter 5).
24. Interview with group of migrants, village of Seyte, 28 November 2008.
25. Interview with group of migrants, village of Seyte, 28 November 2008.
26. See Elliott Skinner's classic description of the workings of Mossi diasporic hierarchies (1960, 395).
27. See, in particular, Castells and Portes' classic definition of the informal economy as "income generating activities that take place outside the regulatory framework of the state" (1989, 12); and Guha-Kasnobis et al.'s more recent reformulation: "outside the reach of different levels and mechanisms of official governance, and formal [ones] as being reachable by these mechanisms. This notion underlies many official definitions of 'informal enterprises' as those that are not registered and are legally outside the tax net. It also underlies many analytical investigations of enterprises and activities that operate illegally, in violation of formal state rules and regulations, even though informality and illegality are not considered to be equivalent in this notion" (2006, 4).
28. Dependency theorists would argue that they are forced into this peripheral position by the nature of their unequal (dependent) insertion in the world economy, and that it is not as a matter of chance that they are caught in the webs of "informality" – such webs are spun by a global capitalist formation that protects and advances its own interests (see Amin 1974b; Wallerstein 1974). But these conceptual frameworks fail to illustrate the link between the operation of overarching structures and the agency and strategies of differently positioned social actors (for a cogent criticism of these approaches, see Cooper 1981, 8–13).
29. "The fact is that these 'juxtaposed individuals' can potentially act together. But acting together requires a medium or network to establish communication. Illegal immigrants or tax strikers cannot resist state action unless they begin to organize themselves deliberately, since no medium like space brings them together. . . . Tenants, spectators, vendors, squatters, and the women described above, even though they do not know each other, may act collectively because common space makes it possible for them to recognize their common interests and identity – that is, to develop a passive network. What mediates between a passive network and action is common threat. Once these atomized individuals are confronted by a threat to their gains, their passive network spontaneously turns into an active network and collective action" (Bayat 1997, 64).

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