

PEOPLE AND PLACES

To Accompany and to Observe

Engaged Scholarship and Social Change Vis-à-Vis
Sub-Saharan Transmigration in Morocco

An Interview with Mehdi Alioua

Sabina Barone with Mehdi Alioua

Transcription by Fanny Robert; translation by Emilio Travieso

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Sabina Barone, Mehdi Alioua—Sociology Professor at the *Université Internationale de Rabat* (International University of Rabat), Morocco—reflects on the transformations that Sub-Saharan African migration has brought to Moroccan society over the last two decades, in particular with reference to identity and the denominations of the foreign others, the internal and regional dynamics of (im)mobility, and the challenges to social coexistence and national migration policies. He proposes conceptual categories such as “transmigrant,” “migration by stages,” and “migratory crossroads” to capture the complexity of the mobile experiences unfolding in Morocco. Based on his trajectory of engaged scholarship in favor of migrants and refugees, he calls for a renewed South-South and North-South academic collaboration and cross-fertilization through small scale, bottom-up research made possible by friendship among scholars.

■ **KEYWORDS:** accompaniment observation, identity, migration policy, migratory crossroads, Morocco, South-South academic engagement, Sub-Saharan transmigration, transit migration

Sabina Barone: I would like to begin our conversation by exploring the implications of the different terms used in Morocco for the foreigners who come from Sub-Saharan countries, namely, “Africans,” “African migrants,” and “Sub-Saharan migrants.” What do these terms imply and what do they tell us about Moroccan identity?

Mehdi Alioua: It’s hard to answer that question because it not only has to do with the issue of human migration, but also with the difficulty of naming Africa and its populations. For some, especially outside the continent, Africa basically means people with black skin. So, in Great Brit-

ain, North America, or the Caribbean, when one says African, one is referring directly to black-skinned people, and one thinks mainly about “Black” Africa, notably because of the history of slavery. One thinks of the African diaspora, then, as the descendants of slaves. If one reads the colonial literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Africa is a diverse whole, and Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia specifically are called North Africa. In France, at the beginning of the Maghrebin migration to France, people spoke about the North African workers or the immigrant workers from Muslim North Africa. Only later, they became known as Maghrebins, and then “Arabs.”

This region did not become Arab only because of Europe, or because the old empires (imperial, colonial, and slave-trading) used to distinguish between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, but also because of Africans themselves. There was a very clear break that occurred at the time of independence. For North Africa, Pan-Arabism is the dominant ideology that has enabled a sense of belonging and has given the populations convictions for anti-colonial resistance. Even today, that ideology is very present in different forms, notably Pan-Islamism. Suddenly, and this had not been the case before, Maghrebins or North Africans called themselves “Arabs.” When one looks at history, people did not use to call themselves “Arab” so systematically. When it was necessary to encompass the whole, one spoke more of the Maghreb, of the Amazigh tribes and of Arabs, and also of Islam; we were Muslims. Meanwhile, on the side of Sub-Saharan Africa (I do not know what else to call it: to qualify an immense part of Africa as “black” because the people may have somewhat darker skin makes no sense, but this image remains, notably because of slavery) there was Pan-Africanism. It came from Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American diasporas, and it created an image of shared Black identity based on the anti-racist model from North America.

However, during its anti-colonial struggle, and then after its independence, Morocco was very proactive in the political configuration of Africa. It promoted the Casablanca Conference (1961), which was at the origin of the Organization of African Unity. To be sure, it felt a sense of belonging in the Arab world, and it still had a foot in Europe—this is our geography and our history—but it had a strong pro-African vision.

What shifted this for Morocco was its departure from the African Union, due to the fact that Morocco wanted to recover a part of its territory that had been colonized by Spain.¹ In the name of the intangibility of borders, many African countries were opposed to this. From then on, it was as if Morocco turned its back on Africa. African history and geography were not taught at all anymore. Since the 1980s onward, people with formal schooling are incapable of identifying African countries on a map or even naming them. It is as if we had cut ourselves off from the continent. So, for many people in Morocco, we are basically Arabs, and Africans are the Other.

This background was important, but now let us come back to the migrants. There are migrants with diverse backgrounds in Morocco. The greatest number are still Europeans, even if this is changing. Counting is complicated because among the Europeans, there are very many Moroccan-Europeans, born of mixed couples or who have obtained a European nationality.

If we turn now to the populations who have arrived in Morocco by crossing several African countries and the Sahara, it is a small population that is linked to a particular migratory route. Many people want to reach Europe and many are looking for a better life here. For these populations, crossing the Sahara is a total and very powerful experience that forces them to adapt in the course of their mobility. The term “Sub-Saharan migrant” is problematic. I explain this in my work: it is a question of a specific population, and I even distinguish sub-categories among them, such as transmigrants, people who have lived for several months in at least two countries before arriving in Morocco. It is a population that is in movement, in mobility, and also wander-

ing. For some, it is a life choice, for others it is just survival, and for others it is actually aimless wandering, meaning that it was not their project, and they got lost on the way. Obviously, not all people who come from Sub-Saharan Africa belong to one of those categories. There are students, there are traders, and there are people who came on an airplane with a visa, and who began working immediately. Even if it is migration, we are not talking about the same migratory type.

So, the word Sub-Saharan is problematic, but in Morocco, the other terms people use are “African” or “Black,” and those do not work, either. There is no one word that allows us to name this population adequately. We could speak of African migrants, but if we say African migrants, we are supposing that the Algerians or the Tunisians who have come to Morocco have lived through the same situations. And yet, many Algerians in Morocco are not necessarily recognizable as such, because of the linguistic proximity. However, when someone arrives from Nigeria, who is a Christian, and does not speak Moroccan Arabic, and has a skin color that easily distinguishes them, they are immediately considered an outsider, especially if they do not have any money. It is hard to find a word that can signify the particular experience of these migrants in Morocco. Sub-Saharan seems to be the simplest.

SB: Experts on migration have debated about the specific characteristics of Sub-Saharan migration that goes through North Africa. Various notions have been advanced for understanding this migratory experience, such as “transit migration” or “fragmented migration.” You propose the notion of “migration in stages.” Could you please explain it?

MA: I am familiar with the work of Michael Collyer, who critiques the notion of transit and proposes the concept of “fragmented migration.” In 2004, I published an article in *Horizons Maghrébins*, and then another article in 2005, in the French journal *Maghreb Machrek*, where I point out that transit is a false notion. To me, transit is when, on a journey by air, you transit through an international hub such as Dubai or Frankfurt, and while you wait for the connecting flight, you check out the duty-free shops of globalization. In contrast, for my thesis research, I surveyed a sample of three hundred Sub-Saharan migrants, and they all told me about very long journeys in which the notion of transit makes no sense. I have never seen a person who has crossed Africa by foot who paused for a few days to rest before crossing a border. People stop for months at a time. Sometimes it is a choice, because they have to find resources before being able to cross the border: they have to work or wait for money to be sent. Sometimes it is not a choice, but rather that they are stuck: they have been attacked or robbed, and so they have to wait for more money. Sometimes, the police have blocked them, and the border is closed, or they were arrested by the police and deported to another country. Whether it is a matter of choice or circumvention strategy or external constraints, nobody gets to Europe after spending only a few days in Morocco.

Thus, the stages are more than just stopovers. The stage is a necessary mechanism for movement in space, and it has economic, anthropological, social, and political effects on the people themselves, but also on the places. The temporal and relational dimensions are key: it is a matter of the time needed to pass from one place to the other and to become adapted to the new place, while building new social and migratory connections with other migrants and with the Moroccan population. The stages in Morocco are essentially at the border and in the working-class neighborhoods in the peripheries of big cities, where the local populations have the same strategies. In other words, the local populations are Moroccans from remote towns or from rural areas, who have no ties to the city and who must relearn everything. It is as if what connects the

different populations is not only the place, but also their mobility. A new sense of social belonging, as well as a political process of integration, emerge from this phenomenon. At first, there was mainly a policy of violence, exclusion, and rejection. At the same time, it allowed for critical resistance to these exclusions, because one cannot reject everyone, even if they are clandestine migrants, “undesirables,” as Michel Agier puts it. Indeed, in eight years Morocco went from a policy of repression to one of integration.

I have called Morocco a migratory crossroads, since Moroccan society is also organized around mobility: there are 5 million Moroccan migrants living in other countries and the remittances they send are the primary source of foreign currency in Morocco. In an article from 2013, I explain that Morocco is in the midst of globalization from below. It is the term used by Alejandro Portes for Mexicans in the United States and by Alain Tarrius for Maghrebins in the Western Mediterranean. Morocco is inscribed in a type of economy that is linked to movement, and it is more than an economy of classic globalization, it is also an economy of resourcefulness, which I call “economy of the circulation of resourcefulness.” Moreover, there is an oasis dimension to this economy, that is, spaces and times for stopping where one has access to information, where one trades, sells, buys, gets one’s bearings, and then moves on. In turn, this globalization from below is progressively articulated to the neoliberal globalization from above, that which is intended by governmental strategies, and which poses many problems. So, the migratory stages take place in this socioeconomic context anchored in the oases, but undergoing change.

SB: After more than two decades of Sub-Saharan migration, how do you assess Morocco’s current migratory context: what social and political changes has migration brought, and what challenges remain?

MA: Between 2005, when Morocco became aware that there were migrants settling here and it put in place a policy of repression under European pressure, and 2013, when Morocco understood that it also needed a policy of integration, there is only a space of eight years. In reality, the decision had been made earlier, in 2011, while the Arab Spring was raging everywhere. In Morocco, there was the February movement, and one could have thought that Morocco had other urgent issues, but they included the idea that a solution was necessary for the migrant populations. The new constitution of 2011, which was won in the wake of the February 20 movement and a speech by the King of Morocco, and which is more democratic than the preceding constitution, recognizes the importance of human rights, including the rights of foreigners and migrants. It is only in 2013 that we got a new migration policy, and it takes time for a policy to work; it is still not working perfectly today, but since 2011, in the midst of the Arab Spring, it was already there.

We must ask why Morocco decided on this new migration policy. For many, it has to do with a strategy to turn back to Africa, because there had been the return to the African Union. For others, it was a way of continuing to play a policing role for Europe’s externalized borders, but in a more humane way. I think that these analyses are true but they only tell a part of the story. It may be a coincidence, but I think that there is an attempt to build a particular model of society from the model of Morocco as a crossroads with an oasis economy. Consequently, we cannot promote that economy of movement on the one hand, demanding that Europe treat Moroccans well, defending the link between migration and development for Moroccans, while simultaneously treating Sub-Saharan migrants as if there is no place for them, as if they are undesirables that should be chased away. That rhetoric was untenable. Therefore, an integration strategy was designed, based on that idea of economic and migratory crossroads: if people

obtain their residency, if we respect their human rights and their right to move freely in the national territory, people will inevitably manage on their own to find ways to live with dignity in Morocco.²

Nevertheless, not all Sub-Saharan migrants arriving in Morocco want to become part of that economy of circulation, nor is it capable of integrating all those who arrive. In 2016, at the International University of Rabat, we conducted a large-scale statistical study with data from regularization applicants from 2014. It revealed a new Sub-Saharan population, which had arrived in Morocco directly by airplane, and 62 percent said that they chose Morocco. It is a mainly urban population: 92 percent came from cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants. Thus, these are people who found it hard to become part of the middle classes in West Africa, who left for other cities in Africa to search for ways to improve their situation. This population had access to the residence permit; socially, that allowed them to really exist in Moroccan society. However, it did not enable them to achieve their economic integration. The residence permit did not enable them to find jobs and assert their socio-economic rights. The problem is that more social assistance is needed. The challenge today is to find a way for people to be able to gain much more access to social assistance programs. This is a challenge for both foreigners and Moroccans. The main challenge for Morocco is to become a welfare state. Thus, migration brings to light the future transformations of the state's social policy.

SB: You combine academic research on migration with active engagement in the defense of migrant rights through civil society organizations; what motivates you to do that? Would you say that migration researchers should be publicly engaged?

MA: My intention is not to be normative. My path is linked to my personal trajectory, inspired by researchers who did the same thing before me. Notably Robert Ezra Park, who wanted to help poor Polish, Irish, and Italian migrants in Chicago, but he sought to understand before acting. He studied with [Georg] Simmel, and he brought Simmel's ideas to the United States, where he founded the Chicago School. It is my school of reference, along with all the Chicago schools that followed it, with Erving Goffman, [symbolic] interactionism, or [Howard S.] Becker with *Outsiders*. When I set out to work, I had the same approach: I did not want to be a researcher; I wanted to be an educator specialized in acting alongside excluded populations.

Later, when I discovered the work of Alain Tarrius, who became my thesis supervisor, I began my fieldwork in Morocco in 2004 and during 2005 and 2006. Then, in October 2005, there had been those terrible events in Melilla with several Sub-Saharan migrants dying on the fences that separate Spain from Morocco, the border raids, and deportations to Algeria. There, I saw the emergence of political demands, and I told myself that I needed to participate, to enlighten the public authorities by showing them the reality. In 2006, several associations were created, notably those created by migrants themselves, and also GADEM, an organization of which I am a founding member. GADEM stands for *Groupe antiraciste d'accompagnement et de défense des étrangers et des migrants* (Anti-racist group for the accompaniment and defense of foreigners and migrants).³ It is a long name, but it describes a way of proceeding. I insisted on the inclusion of the terms "anti-racist" and "accompaniment." I am essentially part of the anti-racist movements, which are socialist, working-class movements for mutual social support and empowerment. For that, it is necessary to accompany people for a time, until they can manage on their own. In the end, we do not know if it is us, who are accompanying the actors in the field, or if it is they, who are accompanying us in our activism or research.

This personal journey, then, has guided my research. Even today, my first instinct is often activist and associative, and that is why I mix research and activism and I am not obsessed with citations. My goal is for the people I research, in Morocco or elsewhere in West Africa, to have a better life. In any case, what I show in my work enlightens decision-makers in theirs. To this day, that is what motivates me. It is not only an ethics, it is not only an ideological stance, it is also a methodological stance. I have called it “accompaniment observation.” “Participant” did not work for me because, no matter how much I participate, I cannot become a Sub-Saharan trans-migrant; my participation was more of an intermediation, thus accompaniment. This method has given me access to a comprehension of the social that I would not have had access to if I were at a distance. I do not mean that this should be the only way of doing research, but it is one of the most original and powerful ways to do it.

I am not against theory or against thought. Even though I participate in the *Ateliers de la Pensée* (Thought workshops) in Dakar with some incredible people, I do not come from thought; I come from activism. However, it is true that as I age, I see myself as more of a researcher and thinker and less of an activist. I turn more to thought, perhaps because I have read more, or perhaps because I have ended up finding other ways of doing fieldwork.

SB: You participate in MOVIDA,⁴ an international laboratory on the dynamics of mobility in Sub-Saharan and Mediterranean Africa that connects researchers from universities in Morocco, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, and France. What are the objectives of that initiative?

MA: The first objective is to connect people who work on the movements between West Africa, Mediterranean Africa, and the Western Mediterranean. Since I work on migratory networks, it is logical that I would also work as a networked researcher.

The second objective is to show that there is a relational consistency linked to movements between the aforementioned regions. This is not recent; these are very old routes that the colonization of the twentieth century disrupted. Yet, the migratory routes of which I speak, the Central and Western Mediterranean routes, are a lot more connected to West Africa than we think. In Libya, before the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, there were more than two million migrant workers, mainly Egyptians, who accounted for practically 1.8 million of them, but there were also many workers who came from West Africa, not only from across the border in Niger and Chad, but also people from Nigeria and further away. In Algeria, there are also many workers from Mali and Niger. They say there are between 200,000 and 300,000 of them, especially in the south. Ali Bensaâd’s work (2009, 2018) shows this very well. Tunisia and Morocco were much less affected because there is less wealth, but in spite of everything, we have seen these populations arriving there. It was necessary to work on this.

The third objective is to speak a lot more than we do about intra-African migration. Because everyone, starting with us, speaks about migration to Europe, but the overwhelming majority of migrants from ECOWAS⁵ countries, 78–80 percent of them, are on the African continent. We want to know what is happening in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, etc. All the big cities in West Africa have neighborhoods of African migrants, who are very dynamic, and who also experience exclusion and racism, or at least a form of racism, xenophobia. We forget to say it, but there is sometimes a lot of inter-community violence, which is always linked to the state. For example, Côte d’Ivoire expelled hundreds of thousands of Burkinabe people, and that created a war around the concept of *ivoirité*. Are there migratory systems being set up? Are there connections between the different types of migration? Are there types of migration that have escaped us?

The fourth goal is to foster the emergence of poles of excellence regarding African migratory questions in Africa. This cannot be done without mobilizing local researchers. Unfortunately, the concentration of skills and resources in the North makes it hard for local research to emerge. Even if MOVIDA is within the IRD (*Institut de Recherche pour le Développement*) in France, we mainly move around the continent, and the Europeans join us. We do “shared fieldwork”: people from different countries work together in new field sites. All of this, even if funding is scarce, is done on the continent, and we try our best to strengthen African research.

SB: In February 2019, the International University of Rabat launched the journal *Afrique(s) en Mouvement*. What is the specific contribution of this new journal?

MA: It will not necessarily be about migration only; that is the starting point. It is an old idea, originally pushed by Driss El Yazami, who was the President of the National Council of Human Rights⁶ and had previously been the President of the Council of the Community of Moroccans Living Abroad. He had himself been a migrant for a long time, and a political exile in France. He actively participated in movements that struggled for migrant rights in France, and he wanted to revive his ideas and practices in Morocco, while hoping for the creation of a Moroccan journal about migrations. But that did not come to fruition. I and some other colleagues, including Zoubir Chattou who is at the University of Meknès, had the same interest. Since I am stubborn, I did not give up on the project, and I told myself that we needed to create a larger journal that would analyze the social dynamics that move the continent, especially migrations, but not exclusively. My mentor, Alain Tarrus, had written a book entitled *Anthropologie du mouvement* (Anthropology of movement) (1989), and so the term “movement” is a term that interested me. At first, I thought of Morocco in movement, but it very rapidly became *Afrique(s) en Mouvement*. It is not an Africanist journal, nor a journal of migration studies, but something in-between.

SB: At the regional level, do you know what initiatives in favor of the rights of migrants and refugees are currently in place in African universities, and what gaps remain? What are the challenges?

MA: I know of some research initiatives that have been fostered for West Africa. To my knowledge, there are not many. What happens is that Europe is so obsessed by the migration of Africans over there that a lot of money has been mobilized, distorting everything. Often, they have financed studies through the International Organization for Migration in order to know if people were planning to go to Europe and if there was any way to dissuade them. Furthermore, the funds are not even spent locally; experts are sent from Europe. For example, they set up a Europe-Africa research consortium for the Horizon 2020 program in Brussels, and at the time we were evaluated with one of the highest possible scientific grades. But our proposal, which was for 1,700,000 € and brought together several countries, was not accepted because there were too many partners from the South. For Europe, it is fine that we have a university in the South, but North-South parity—our project had four partners from the South and four from the North—is not of interest. They told us that European money cannot finance African research. It was very violent.

There are many researchers in Africa who are isolated because they lack resources, and when there are resources, it is through a European prism and agenda. This poses a real concern about independence and epistemology, because it is the African researchers on the ground who can truly understand what is happening and how to handle the research. Thus, local initiatives are

hard to implement, but African nations are aware of this and try to organize their research. For example, Senegal has created a national observatory on migration, thanks to the initiative of Aly Tandian. In Côte d'Ivoire, they are doing research on both the Ivorian diaspora and the foreigners in Côte d'Ivoire. Morocco has proposed that the African Union create an African observatory on migration, but we do not know yet if it will be focused mainly on research or political action. We also do not know how it will be funded or who will be in charge. For me, the urgency is to have an African observatory on migration that is capable of funding local research to enlighten public decision-making at the African level and to have an African migration strategy. We still have a long way to go for autonomous African research.

SB: What would you recommend to colleagues in universities in other parts of the world who are working on university initiatives in favor of the rights of migrants and refugees?

MA: To me, there is a historical and geographic proximity with Europe that is our former colonizer, especially France and Great Britain. Thus, they have a historical duty to help Africa more than they do. And for that reason, we must accept that Africans can help themselves if they are given some resources to do that. I think the only way this can be done—this is my intermediary sociologist side—is on a small scale, among the researchers themselves, on the basis of friendship. Like the friendship that connects me to Sophie Bava (2018) in France, to Aly Tandian (2006; Tandian and Bergh 2014) in Senegal, or to Harouna Mounkaila (2004; Boyer and Mounkaila 2010) in Niger. It is through these North-South or South-South friendships among researchers that the networks will be made. I think that Europe, but also African countries, should trust us more, and take the risk of funding us with minimal constraints, a bit “blindly” if you will, instead of imposing unrealizable projects on us with predetermined strategies, and for which part of the money goes to them. I think that we must go back to cooperation, to the small scale, to the level of relationships between friends. In the medium term that will bear immediate fruit, and in the long term it will be really amazing.

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NOTES

1. Editors' note: While Morocco lays claims to this territory, which is currently known as the Western Sahara, the United Nations continues to designate it as a "non-self governing territory" which is pending a referendum for self-determination. A summary of the decision of the International Court of Justice vis-a-vis contested claims to the territory can be seen here: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/61/6197.pdf>.
2. As a result, Morocco has realized two massive migrant regularization campaigns, in 2014 and 2017, which have allowed a total of approximately 50,000 migrants to obtain their residence permit.
3. GADEM (Antiracist group for the accompaniment and defence of foreigners and migrants): <https://www.gadem-asso.org/en/home/>.
4. MOVIDA—*Mobilités, Voyages, Innovations et Dynamiques dans les Afriques méditerranéenne et subsaharienne* (Mobility, travel, innovations and dynamics in Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa): <https://movida.hypotheses.org/>.
5. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is composed of 15 countries, namely: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.
6. CNDH—*Conseil National de Droits de l'Homme* (National Council for Human Rights): <https://www.cndh.org.ma/fr/>.

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