

# ARRANGING MOBILE LIVES: MARGINALISED MOROCCAN MEN IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACE

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## ABSTRACT

### **Arranging Mobile Lives: Marginalised Moroccan Men in Transnational Space**

The article traces, by means of extended ethnographic participant observation, the cultural construction of a particular type of male marginal mobility, namely that of economically marginalised Moroccan migrant men. For these men, the departure from Morocco as irregular migrants to Europe appeared as a means to escape a life without a horizon. They faced lethal dangers during their journeys across the Strait of Gibraltar in small open boats, and Spain appeared unwelcoming to them, since the traditional sector of migrant labour, industrial work, could no longer absorb them. These men had very few other options than to invest in transnationalising the distinctive ethos of *dabbar*, i.e. 'arranging' survival strategies and social relations in the unregulated and lowest echelons of the labour market in Spain. For a large number of these Moroccans, permanent EU residence and citizenship turned into means of broadening the sphere of *dabbar*. Many of these men currently engage in transnational trading activities of second-hand goods, including small electronic devices, shoes and clothes and household utensils.

KEYWORDS: transnational mobility, irregular migration, Morocco, survival strategies, economic marginalization

## IZVLEČEK

### **Urejanje mobilnih življenj: Marginalizirani Maročani v transnacionalnem prostoru**

Članek s pomočjo obsežne etnografske raziskave opazovanja z udeležbo zasleduje kulturno konstruiranje posebnega tipa moške marginalne mobilnosti, in sicer mobilnosti ekonomsko marginaliziranih Maročanov. Kot ilegalnim migrantom jim odhod iz Maroka v Evropo pomeni beg od življenja brez perspektive. Med potjo preko gibraltarske ožine se na majhnih odprtih čolnih srečujejo s smrtonosnimi nevarnostmi, v Španiji pa, kjer jih tradicionalni sektor migrantskega dela v industriji več ne absorbira, se ne počutijo dobrodošle. Ti možje niso imeli druge možnosti, kot v transnacionalizacijo vložiti posebne vrste etos, imenovan *dabbar*, tj. v »urejanje« preživetvenih strategij in socialnih vezi v nereguliranih in najnižjih ešelonih španskega delovnega trga. Za večino omenjenih Maročanov sta stalno bivališče v Evropski uniji in državljanstvo postala sredstvo za razširitev sfere *dabbarja*. Mnogi med njimi so trenutno angažirani v transnacionalnem trgovanju z rabljeno robo, *khurda*, ki vključuje malo elektroniko, čevlje, oblačila in gospodinjske pripomočke.

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KLJUČNE BESEDE: transnacionalna mobilnost, ilegalne migracije, Maroko, strategije preživetja, ekonomska marginalizacija

## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on extended ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1998 and 2012 in Northern Morocco and in various migrant contexts in Spain. The project, which began in the province of Larache on the Northern Atlantic coast of Morocco, led me over the years to the suburbs of Barcelona and Madrid, to greenhouses in El Ejido and Nijar and to bars and cafés frequented by Moroccans throughout Mediterranean Spain. Like the men whom I studied, I engaged in circular but loosely patterned travel with frequent stopovers in order to exchange information and search for contacts. Just like my interlocutors, I made constant visits back to the original “home community” in Larache. My aim in this article is to construct an ethnographic narrative reflecting the ways in which my interlocutors generated, through their everyday practices, a specific type of marginal mobile lifestyle.

The increasingly restrictive migration and border policy in the EU, together with the economic recession beginning in 2008, have had far-reaching consequences on the patterns and the cultural logic of transnational mobility in the transnational space between Morocco and Spain. It has become difficult to conceptualise these Moroccan men’s mobile lifestyles in the conventional analytic terminology of migration and mobility studies. Instead of ‘migrants’, my ethnographic material speaks of various types mobile figures: hawkers, drifting street vendors, migrant smugglers, refuse collectors, contraband dealers, petty drug dealers, occasional agricultural labourers, all of whom are constantly on the road in order to survive. Some men, like Aziz, a 26-year-old petty cannabis dealer whom I met in Tangier in June 2012, had been deported from EU territory twelve times. He was once again ready to test his luck crossing the Strait of Gibraltar hidden in a passenger ferry, simply because he thought it is better to beg in Europe than in Morocco.

The characteristic features of these men’s lives are the constant movement back and forth between the continents and the readiness to explore of new worlds while making only occasional visits to the home community in Morocco. In the post 9/11 climate, Spain appears to them to be an increasingly securitized and unwelcoming society, while on the other hand EU passports and the Schengen area have opened new opportunities to broaden their economic opportunities for survival.

The term ‘marginal mobility’ is appropriate to describe the life-worlds of these men, not only because of their constant movement and survival on the margins of the economies in Spain and Morocco, but because of their cultural uprootedness and specific feeling of *ghurba*, ‘foreignness and alienation’, in both Morocco and Spain (see e.g. Juntunen 2002: 70–85). What we have at hand is a mobile lifestyle of people who are highly critical of their assumed social position as “underclass” in Morocco and as “migrants” in Europe. Their reaction to alienation is to ‘arrange’, i.e. *dabbar* their lives as best as they can in the fluid transnational space. Mobility for them is not a rational career choice but a response to the fact they are not willing to put up with sedentary life in Morocco or in Spain.

Below I will first familiarize the reader with the social and cultural context of migrant smuggling in which my interlocutors were first introduced to the circuits of transnational mobility between the years 1995 and 2000. Then I will offer insights into their experiences of travel, mobility, work, and sociability as irregular migrants Europe. Finally, I will trace the ways in which obtaining an EU passport (which in the case of most of my interlocutors occurred between 1998 and 2004) widened their possibility to engage in transnational survival strategies.

## LARACHE: A COMMUNITY SHOT THROUGH WITH MIGRATION

When I began my field work in 1998 my initial aim was to learn about the lives of the prospective candidates for irregular migration, namely young economically marginalized Moroccan men. Larache, a town of 120,000 inhabitants on the Northern Atlantic coast of Morocco, some eighty kilometres south of the Strait of Gibraltar which separates Morocco from Spain, proved to be an ideal setting. The province of Larache had experienced a rapid increase in the number of cases of migrant smuggling to Spain since the mid-1990s. In fact the area was known according to popular Moroccan stereotypes as part of the 'Land of Migrant Smuggling' (*Bilad Harraga*), the coastal area stretching from the Northern Atlantic shores of Kenitra to the easternmost points on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco.



Figure 1: Youngsters from the Hayy al Jadid quarter in Larache, Morocco (Photo: Marko Juntunen, 1998).

A large majority of the men whose transnational lives I ended up following for over a period of fourteen years represented the first urban-born and fully literate generation in their families, who traced their history to the rural areas surrounding the town. They had taken up employment in their early teens as apprentices in garages, workshops, small industries and construction sites, but in 1998 they all faced either extended periods of underemployment or unemployment. Most of my interlocutors were bachelors between 20 and 33 years of age, who still resided in their parental households in quarters in which "every household has a migrant in Europe" as Muhsin, one of my first acquaintances, characterized the research setting. The few married men whom I came to know occupied sheet metal huts attached to their parental homes. The majority survived off petty street commerce, occasional manual work and by providing a variety of services and know-how to neighbours and kin. Many were also engaged in serving as middlemen for migrant smugglers or did occasional contraband trafficking of household goods and small electronic goods from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta to other locations in Northern Morocco.

Whether prospective or actual migrants, these men shared a highly homogenous view regarding the surrounding social and economic realities on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. When talking about the labour market in Europe and Morocco, bureaucracy, migrant regimes, local politics, and economic strategies of survival, the men conveyed an image that for young men the only possibility to make their living required the ability to 'arrange' (*dabbar*) their livelihood as best as they could. "In these times, money is everything", or "Who thinks about morals anymore? Everyone is just after their own interests" were idiomatic expressions which I heard repeated dozens of times as I engaged in the first discussions with my interlocutors.

In addition to *dabbar*, another notion was constantly present in our everyday conversations. They spoke about their *duruf*, or 'circumstances and general conditions of life'. It is characteristic of the underclass, they told me, to live in *duruf* which are always "unsettled", which sometimes "ascend and other times collapse". When referring to the more affluent migrants or members of the community in Larache, their *duruf* in contrast often appeared as characterized by attributes such as "settled" or "preferable" or "open to multiple options" or perhaps "good", "improved" or "relaxed".

In this setting both men and women spoke of 'my *duruf*', however in a highly gendered manner. A woman's *duruf* always emerged directly linked to a man's ability to provide. It was the man's responsibility to provide a living for his wife and to ensure that the women of the household are protected. In the urban underclass context, women's wage work outside the home did not itself compose a threat to a woman's reputation. However, both men and women perceived that certain jobs by definition indicated that a woman's *duruf* did not protect her from possible physical interventions by her male superiors. Working as a cleaner, housemaid, or agricultural labourer not only made a woman vulnerable – it in fact indicated that her *duruf* is in such a state that she has had to take such a job in the first place. In short, the less respected were seen so because they had to *dabbar* their living by methods which are considered to create a stigma. In some jobs, the young men perceived, it is impossible for a woman to preserve her honour (*sharaf*). For these reasons single women migrants were very often perceived as morally lax. Their economic success was perceived in a very different manner from that of successful young men. For a young man wealth gained through migration was seen as a proof of his masculine capabilities to provide; in a similar situation young women were usually assumed to have engaged in stigmatizing professions (such as housemaids, bartending or prostitution). In fact, single women migrants in the late 1990s in the context of Northern Morocco were usually widows, divorcees or orphans (Ramírez: 1998).

The engagement of young men in transnational mobility by means of irregular migration in this cultural context was an attempt to arrange one's *duruf* in a single blow. These themes – *dabbar*, *duruf* and *Harraga* (irregular migration) – as I came to understand, proved to be extremely important notions when attempting to get to grips with the ways in which these men were to construct a specific form of mobile masculine lifestyle over the following years. Studying irregular migration thus required a gender-sensitive perspective. First of all, irregular migration seemed to follow a very patterned ritualized plot, which was to a great degree organized around male bodies. Migrants boarding open boats for Spain were predominantly young, socially marginal and unmarried men (*shabab*), not quite complete men (*rijal*). They were expected to return with signs of material success – in cars packed with gifts for family members and friends. Young men very often aspired to turn the wealth gained through migration into capital in the sexual arena. I witnessed how over the summer holiday period a number of cafés in the centre of L'araish turned into central meeting points between the migrant young men and the resident women of the town. For some, migration and access to economic resources was soon followed by marriage, establishing a family and building a house – a landmark of the individual success story – in L'araish.

Abdel Ali, back then a 29-year-old unemployed construction worker, expressed the close interrelation between masculine subjectivity, socioeconomic conditions, the ability to arrange his life and international mobility:

[Your] mother gives you that "look". Not because she feels hatred but because she wants to see you being a man and helping your father. What does she say? She says, 'Other people's sons have all migrated and arranged for themselves [dabbaru 'ala rashom] but you are still here with us.' So you feel pressed and bothered because your mother said these words. You say (to the mother), 'Dabbar the money for me so that I can go with the migrant smugglers.' But you do not find enough money to go. And this fact creates the knot in yourself and these words remain recorded in your memory like on a cassette.

## THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the urban spaces in Northern Morocco witnessed tremendous social and economic changes, largely resulting from migration and particularly the smuggling of migrants to Europe (Al-Qabab: 1998). New economic opportunities were made available to thousands of young men thanks to the growing social influence of migrant smuggling and other forms of international migration. Numerous economically marginalized men began to serve as middlemen for migrant smugglers, to arrange official or forged documents for prospective migrants, to offer translation services, to provide links to civil servants and the security forces and to serve as vehicles of information concerning opportunities to migrate. Migration also brought about vast changes in the housing sector, construction, real estate and the land market all over Northern Morocco. As migration became ever more difficult to realize towards the turn of the millennium and required more courage, physical stamina and determination, it created new competition for material wealth and social prestige.

This new mobility was largely detached from the destinations and the logic of movement of earlier generations of Moroccans in Western Europe (Ogden 1991: 305). Instead of targeting France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, all popular destinations among the labour- and chain migrants of the 1960s and the 1970s, the new migrant men perceived the booming construction and agricultural sectors in Spain as preferable destinations (Lopez Garcia 1996: 73). Citrus farms in Alicante and Murcia, greenhouses in Almeria and construction sites in Catalonia attracted thousands of Moroccans, particularly from the north of the country. The migration routes were part of a shared social memory distributed through informal networks. It is common in Morocco that the migration flows of neighbouring regions and even towns find largely different destinations (see e.g. Salih 1996). In this reality, informal social networks offered the only means to contact migrant smugglers and to acquire the essential official or forged documents that were necessary for international mobility. The market connected with migrant smuggling expanded rapidly in the area throughout the 1990s and constructed a new social and economic linkage reaching across the Strait of Gibraltar (see e.g. Driessen 1998; Sørensen 2000).

The smuggling of migrants across the Strait of Gibraltar was based in Larache on flexible and constantly changing networks of male 'boat owners' (*mul*), professional 'captains' (*rais*), and intermediaries (*semsar*), as well as a number of 'subcontractors' (*mdabbar*) whose main responsibility was to 'arrange' (*dabbar*) deals between potential candidates for migration and the smugglers. Over the years I came to know several men who occupied different roles in this underground economy: Abdessalam from Larache's historic centre, an experienced fisherman, began to organize three to four migrant smuggling trips annually from the coastal areas around Larache to Barbate south of the Gulf of Cadiz in Spain. His captain L'arbi was known as a skilful and trusted seaman. Mustafa, a construction worker from Tangier, offered occasional lodging for prospective migrants outside of the province in his brother's house in one of Larache's many shantytowns.

The men's individual experiences varied greatly with regard to actually embarking on the journey to Europe. Those who financed their journeys with family members' or relatives' financial help rarely left without informing their households, while it was not uncommon to hear of men who simply left without notice when a promising opportunity appeared.

Family, kin and neighbours with their social networks often facilitated migration by providing economic possibilities and the necessary social contacts to smugglers and their middlemen. Members of the family, kin and quarter (*hawma*) also often provide the first accommodation and opportunities for wage labour in Spain. Yet there was no fixed pattern to these forms of aid and assistance. Family and kin in the context of irregular migration were domains loaded with expectations, differing interests and competition for economic and symbolic capital. Throughout the years of my fieldwork, the international L'araishi community and its composite families were by no means free of tensions – on the contrary, the lack of a common incentive was often its most audible element, at least in discussions with young men still waiting for their chance to cross over to Europe. Irregular migration generated new expectations, demands, disagreements and disputes within the family and kin. The patterns of help facilitating actual migration between Morocco and Spain seemed to “radiate” from elder brother to younger brother (or half brother) or to unmarried and divorced sisters, from husband to his wife and children to his sister’s husband and to a man’s own parents. In the case of more distant relations the favours usually required money. One of my informants, ‘Abdel ‘Ali, had asked for financial help several times from both his paternal and maternal uncles and cousins residing in Spain and Italy in order to finance his irregular migration, but they had continuously refused their help. ‘Abdel ‘Ali assumed that they were afraid that a newcomer would prove to be a more successful worker than the older migrants. They, he explained, “always have to stay above you”. He assumed that if he just managed to arrive in Spain the family members simply could not refuse their help.

Some of my interlocutors made three to four extremely risky and costly attempts (up to €2000) to reach Spain; with migrant smugglers, hidden in passenger boats thanks to their contacts with personnel in Tangier’s harbour, underneath tourist buses, or hidden in lorries conveying agricultural products. While some had exhausted their financial resources and given up their hopes of migration, others with more luck and economic success kept the illusion of migration alive.

If the open wooden boats (*pateras*) used by the local smugglers were intercepted by the Spanish or Moroccan Coast Guard, the owners such as Abdessalam could always claim that their boats had been stolen. Often, the captain received his share of the profit only after bringing the boat safely back to home port. Several men indicated that after reaching the Spanish shore the boat had been abandoned on the shore and the captain had joined his clients and begun to organize his journey further. It was often impossible to make a categorical separation between smugglers and smuggled (and victims and exploiters), as in many cases the young men were offered a free trip or a considerable discount after working as a subcontractor for a particular middleman.

In Spain, the chances of the migrant men reaching their desired destination depended largely on their social relations with fellow Moroccans in Spain. After reaching the Spanish territory people began to arrange transportation in order to continue their journeys. Those with better resources managed to purchase costly “package deals” in Morocco and were transported by Moroccan smugglers operating in Spain to Almeria, Madrid, Barcelona and further. Others had agreed to contact relatives and friends in Spain after the arrival and were in many cases picked up by private cars from the roadside along the southern coastal areas. The fortunate ones reached their target destinations relatively securely and had accommodation and work waiting for them. The most unfortunate were those who mistakenly travelled underneath trucks or buses in the opposite direction to the intended one. Many had no other choice than to hitchhike and walk hundreds of kilometres in order reach their target destinations; the greenhouses of Almeria or citrus farms of Valencia and Murcia. Thousands were caught hitchhiking on the roadsides by the Spanish Guardia Civil and deported to Morocco. Some of my interlocutors told me that they were handcuffed and brought back to Morocco on an ordinary passenger ferry. At the Spanish – Moroccan frontier in Ceuta they were handed to Moroccan authorities who led them to a court hearing in Tetuan. The men routinely received a fine of €50 to 100 and it was not exceptional to hear of those who had to beg for money in order to return home.

## IN SPAIN

The newcomers in Spain lived in constant fear of deportation. One had to remain mobile and to participate in public spaces in order to find work, yet it was understood to be risky. Many men I met had been stopped dozens of times by the police or the civil guard. Regardless of the constantly changing legal conditions regarding their deportability, the men knew that they had to improvise new strategies for reducing the risk of deportation; at the turn of the millennium the Moroccan men I met in Barcelona and its vicinity told me that it was preferable to claim to be Algerian, since no forced returns were carried out to the war-torn country.

Without exception the men took precarious jobs in the lowest echelons of the Spanish labour hierarchy in agriculture, refuse collecting, street vending, restaurants and construction sites and street maintenance work. As an irregular migrant it was simply obligatory to remain mobile and accept nearly any opportunity for wage work. My contacts included some men with university degrees who told of having had to take the same jobs as illiterate and unqualified men.

Rachid Nini is a highly acclaimed Moroccan journalist with personal experience as an irregular migrant in Spain in the mid-1990s. In his autobiographical novel *Diario de un ilegal* he views the general disregard – in both Morocco and Spain – of the young men's academic qualifications in the following manner: "If you happen to obtain a PhD in Morocco you can wipe your ass with it in a public toilet. Those who never studied decide your fate in the parliament. [...] Your certificates have no value if you do not learn how to make pizza. Pizza is more important than PhD" (Nini 2002: 68).

Some men told of spending several days without food or money and turning to charities and churches for shelter. Others had no choice but to resort to drug dealing, begging, pick-pocketing and shoplifting for survival. Those without family members in Spain sought housing in squats or resorted to fellow Moroccans with residence permits and officially rented apartments. In Terrassa in Catalonia, many Moroccan newcomers I encountered lived with up to six to seven others (usually young men from their town, often from the same quarter) in a flat rented by a Moroccan tenant with a residence permit.

Their travel trajectories were largely shaped by the necessity to find work and income. The men were armed with popular knowledge distributed by fellow Moroccans regarding places and areas under surveillance of authorities and considered "difficult", and thus to be avoided.

## DABBAR IN A TRANSNATIONAL SETTING

The experiences of the men during their first years in Spain had numerous shared features. The precarious labour market position and deportability constructed a social world characterized by mutual competition for jobs and shelter (see e.g. Yaghmaian 2005). Once again, individual success was largely dependent on the ability to *dabbar*. A number of themes were constantly repeated in the men's narrations concerning work: the bosses are self-centred and utilize open employment contracts for their own gain, while the workers have to endure hard conditions (*duruf*) and have very little to say concerning the content of the work.

The nature of the relation between the bosses and the workers is captured very well in a common sentence used frequently by my interlocutors. The worker either accepts the terms set by the bosses or has to leave and "arrange his life in whatever way" (*dabbar rasu b-ayy tariqa*).

However, during my various periods of field work in Larache, in Almeria's greenhouses and in Barcelona's and Terrassa's migrant quarters, I noticed that such a bleak image – the harshness of the *duruf*, and the greed of the wealthy – was only the first surface level of the men's narrations concerning work. Only later did other aspects become clear: it is important that the ability to endure the harsh working conditions, to take punches honourably and to gain recognition through one's toughness and thus ascend towards a more respected male image are vital and constantly repeated tests of manhood (see e.g.

Vale de Almeida 1996; Gilsenan 1996). The ability to withstand hardships is translated into a source of personal integrity and honour – this also at least partly explains why the working conditions of migrant men are described as “inhumane”. Taking punches honourably becomes a source of prestige.

Another issue became gradually clear: the men created mechanisms of social arrangement to counter the unfair exchange between the bosses and the workers (or any master-subordinate relation). This is to a large extent what *dabbar* was about. Under closer scrutiny, however, the men seemed to attach three clearly different sets of contextual meanings to the concept of *dabbar*. First, the term refers to finding flexible and mobile methods (often occasional) for making money outside of the formal economy. In this sense the concept is morally neutral. For example, on many occasions when we talked about youngsters who engaged in the transnational trade of drugs or pick-pocketing, my companions would explain that these people “have no option, they have to ‘arrange themselves’ (*dabbar rasu*) because of their *duruf*.” Secondly, the notion referred to providing connections, goods and capital, services and contacts for others. One can, for example, ‘arrange work for a friend’ (*dabbar lu khedma*) but also occasional female company (*dabbar lu bint*). Thirdly, *dabbar* referred – in a clearly negative sense – to utilizing publicly condemned methods to gain material benefits (e.g. tricking, stealing, lying). Due to the openness of the concept, *dabbar* appeared as an object of constant contextual negotiation. One’s own conduct was very unlikely to be translated as the third type of *dabbar*.

There is something that unifies all three different sets of meanings: they are all based on rhetorical skills, on imposing one’s interpretation of reality on the other party. Cunning and trickery are often expressed by economically marginalized men as part of the national character of Moroccans, and the notion is widely present in numerous works of the popular writers of realistic fiction in Morocco, such as Mohamed Choukri, Larbi Batma and Mohamed Zifzaf. On one occasion, ‘Umar, a car painter, declared that the Moroccans have “cleverness that no other nationality can challenge”. Similarly, Muhammed, a second-hand dealer, told me one day that “there is work everywhere, even in Mozambique. A Moroccan can *dabbar* work anywhere he wishes.” The mobile migrant men had clearly transnationalised the notion of *dabbar*.

## MOBILE LIFE WITHOUT PAPERS

The years without papers inside the Spanish territory was a period full of social tensions not only between bosses and workers but between fellows sharing similar dreams for the future and the everyday struggles for survival. In the men’s narrations, morality related to the equality of distribution, the fairness of exchanges and generosity. I was repeatedly told that it was extremely difficult to escape the vicious circle; everyone was in many ways indebted to others after receiving information, shelter and money for food and cigarettes from others. As soon as a young man managed to find more permanent work and was prepared to send money home to elders and family members he was immediately surrounded by increasing expectations to assist his fellows in need.

These conditions did not allow the formation of durable group formations or cooperative initiatives among the men. These men were characteristically highly indifferent towards coordinated political group action to further their causes. Established civic organizations such as *Asociación de Trabajadores Inmigrantes Marroquíes en Espana* (ATIME) were generally seen as reflections of Moroccan political culture, and run by more prosperous migrants detached from the social reality of the irregular migrants.

Largely because of the precarious situation on the labour market, the constant mobility searching for periodic work, the insufficient work conditions, the discipline and discrimination exercised by the employers, together with the tensions related to reciprocation of help, there was a high emotional readiness among the men to try one’s luck elsewhere. Whether the meetings took place in Larache, Almeria, Barcelona or somewhere else, I was surrounded by men whose dreams for the future rested in Germany or the Scandinavian countries, while others thought that life in London or Montreal would work out bet-



ter. One of my interlocutors, Hasan, offered me some pages of his diary entries written during his years without papers in Spain in the 1990s. He described his feelings: “I have travelled 1000 miles to better myself to find a suitable environment to escape the psychological illness that exists in my society. I wish to find an island where people cannot reach, to be a friend of elephant and rabbit, to build a bungalow to live there forever. I’d like to be a star – far from human harm.”

## REGULARIZED MIGRANTS

After a strenuous bureaucratic struggle, nearly all of my interlocutors managed to legalize their stay in Spain in the national regularization processes which occurred between 2000 and 2005. By 2004 the smuggling of migrants on *pateras* had slowed down considerably and the migration market was largely frozen as the Spanish – Moroccan frontier had become increasingly technologised, monitored and enclosed. With this development, the required documents in these processes, such as work and residence permits, transformed into marketable goods. In the summer of 2004 several Moroccan owners of small construction businesses in Terrassa returned to Larache and began to sell work contracts, demanding up to €4000 per document. In a similar vein, Spanish tenancy agreements were transformed into valuables and objects of *dabbar* for opportunists, for which individuals facing difficulties with immigration officials had to pay several thousand euros.

After gaining official residence, some men found more or less stable work opportunities in the booming construction sector in Catalonia, which limited the sphere of their mobility within the region. Some of my interlocutors commuted after work between the cities of Tarragona, Girona and Lerida and made frequent returns to Morocco. They routinely engaged in small import activities of household goods and small electronic goods. Many returned to get married in their home community in Larache, yet often the economic conditions in Spain did not allow the establishment of households in Spain. In many cases, I observed that the wives and children remained in Morocco.

The economic recession of 2008 forced the men expand their sphere of movement again. Some returned to agricultural work and street commerce. Those women who had joined their husbands in Spain often returned to Morocco while the husbands began to search for job opportunities in different



Figure 2: Spanish-Moroccan second-hand dealer in a street market in Larache (Photo: Marko Juntunen, 2012).

parts of Spain and engaged in the cross-border trade of second-hand goods (*khurda*). These activities often involved the beneficiaries of unemployment and other benefits and these returns occurred outside the knowledge of the Spanish authorities.

## ARE THESE MEN RETURN MIGRANTS?

At present, a highly individualized ethos marks this social world; it consists of individuals who interact, get together, yet are only linked through the fact that they share the same ethos, sentiments and motives of being mobile. Much like the Algerian suitcase traders described by Michel Peraldi, these men form emotional communities – rather than communities with shared values and norms (see Peraldi: 2005). They are united by the similar dreams of winning personal liberty, gaining autonomy to make decisions and to settle in emotional and existential terms. All these sentiments became particularly clear as the Arab Spring approached.

The spirit of protests and mass demonstrations was widely spread all over Morocco when I was carrying out fieldwork in the province of Larache once again in 2012. Thousands of internet news rooms, Facebook pages, blogs and pro-democracy organizations together with sporadic street demonstrations and standoffs sent a similar message; Moroccans displayed a growing determination to construct a more open space for political expression. I met several of my older acquaintances who had come to Morocco from Spain in order to escape severe economic difficulties. The men nearly unanimously still expressed the sense of ‘double absence’ familiar from my earlier fieldwork. Spain no longer had anything to offer them, yet they expressed feeling increasingly “humiliated and ripped off from personal dignity” in Morocco and not willing to put up with life in a society run by a “lobby of thoroughly corrupted elite of thieves” where “laws exist only for the poor”. The men routinely preferred to take a less direct role in the public demonstrations, stating that they personally had “nothing to do with Morocco” or alternatively that “the Moroccan state did not have any meaning for them”, expressing their alienation from Morocco as a nation-state and as a political and economic system. When talking about their demands, people idiomatically expressed simply wanting their just ‘share’ (*haqq*) of the society in economic, social and moral terms, saying that the current order deeply violated their ‘personal dignity’ (*karama*).

## FINAL NOTE

By the fall of 2011 the total number of interceptions in Spanish-Moroccan-Algerian waters had reached its lowest figure in more than two decades, indicating that irregular migration on *pateras* had turned into a page in the history of Spanish-Moroccan relations. In the meanwhile the Spanish economy was facing an increasingly severe crisis. In Catalonia, in areas that had attracted thousands of irregular Moroccan migrants for more than a decade, the unemployment rate among Moroccans reached 55% in 2011.

The Moroccans who chose to leave Western Europe were conceptualised simply as *returnees*. While a once and for all return may be true in some cases, we must not overlook the fact that the struggle of the uprooted and alienated Moroccans involves constant back and forth movement between the continents, in ways that force us to critically examine the applicability of conventional concepts of migration studies.

The ways in which these men lived through the times of rapid change, the appearance of particular type of irregular migration, *harraga* and the way in which it paved the way to the emergence of a marginally mobile lifestyle is to be understood as ongoing battle between socially marginal groups and the increasingly globalized power structures. This article aimed to highlight the fact that the nature of the struggle could hardly be grasped in any other way than by observing over an extended period the ways in which the subjects themselves act out and verbalise what they are struggling for.

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