

On the Edge of Existence: Malian Migrants in the Maghreb

By Line Richter

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Malian migrants and migration brokers in Mali, Algeria, Morocco, and France, this article investigates life in exile on the edge of Europe. Zooming in on the experiences of interlocutors in Morocco and Algeria, the article will explore the experiential dimensions of living in an extended liminality. Anthropologically, life in so-called places of transit, such as the Maghreb countries, has often been dealt with through the lens of liminality. In this article my aim is to build on the insights from such endeavors, and re-orient the focus by illuminating what this specific type of permanent liminality entails. I posit that a more suitable term to call this is 'limbo'. This, I argue, consists of three main features. First, the motivation for leaving Mali is for most migrants embedded in the lack of opportunities for social mobility: the Malian youth who end up leaving, are in Honwana's words, stuck in 'waithood' at home, in what many argue is a liminal social position. Second, social and political structures are not absent in the Maghreb, rather they are quite discernable and can be seen as continuations and mimicking of existing structures. Third, experiences of dramatic ruptures with humanity and morality are key characteristics of life on the edge of Europe.

Keywords: Migrants, Maghreb, Mali, Liminality, Limbo

Introduction

“On n’as pas le choix, qu’est-ce que on va faire, on peut pas retourner”

On the Moroccan hills behind the Spanish town of Melilla, I met a group of sub-Saharan migrants waiting for their chance to enter Europe. A young Malian man quickly took in the scene and said, "We don't have a choice, what can we do? We can't go back". The lack of choice referred to his continuous attempts to cross the border into Schengen territory. He did not see returning to Mali as a possibility and therefore was in the hills on the borders of Europe. The destituteness of the place is hard to conjure: small rudimentary tents (*bunkers*) are set up under the pine trees and provide little shelter for the, at times, harsh climate here next to the Mediterranean Sea. Most of the young men are dressed in worn-down and dirty clothes. Some are playing checkers on homemade boards with bottle caps for game pieces; others are huddled around a small bonfire. Everyone I talk to tells me that life is very difficult.

This article addresses liminality in a specific type of exile; that of migrants en route to Europe. Many anthropologists have analyzed Sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb countries through the lens of liminality. Their works lead our attention to the extremely marginalized positions that the migrants, who often wish to enter Europe, hold in political, social and economical terms. Victor Turner's (1979) seminal work on the structure of the 'rite de passage' has become somewhat of a Rosetta stone used to analyze the social trajectories of young migrants, claiming that they leave behind a state of youth, and pass through a liminal phase in order to finally enter a state of adulthood. Scholars have applied the term in order to explain the marginalized state of migrants, who they see as being in a liminal or liminoid state, which they seek to move on from (Sargent and Larchanché-Kim 2006). The youths who leave their country of origin are seen as motivated by a desire to escape the social state of youth.

This article takes a similar yet re-oriented focus. It looks at the way Malian migrants in Algeria and Morocco live an everyday life literally on the edge of Europe, as described in the case above, and uses this as a key to understanding what so-called liminality may mean as 'experience' (Szokolczai 2009). This article argues that the liminality these migrants inhabit, by virtue of the Maghreb being a place of 'in-between'-ness, does not limit itself to being an inter-structural phase in their lives (Turner 1979) but becomes a type of permanent liminality. I wish to show how this is characterized by three main components: *First*, the underlying motivation for leaving i.e. the experience of being socially stuck in Mali, *second*, a continuation (or mimicking) of social and political structures, and *third*, experiences of dramatic rupture with humanity and morality. In doing so, it is my intention to move beyond the focus on the "in-between" and beyond the classical scope of placing this type of migration, i.e. irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe through North Africa, within the 'liminal' state, and I suggest the term 'limbo' as a

better conceptualization of the existential experiences of Malian migrants in the Maghreb, many of whom live in this more or less permanent liminality.

Methodology

This article is based on a total of 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mali, Algeria, Morocco and France from 2013 to 2015, where I have followed a loosely structured network of young migrants from Mali along points on the road to and in Europe. The overall aim of the project has been to understand the positions, practices and prospects of migrants as they seek to move from Mali to Europe. Starting out in Mali and following the trajectories of young Malian men through North Africa and into Europe by 'snowballing' my way through the loosely organized networks/affiliations of the migrants, I have worked my way into a field that opened up to me as I went along. The interlocutors that I engaged with in Mali were either close to departing and trying to gather the funds for the journey or were talking about leaving in a more distant future.

From Mali, many migrants, and specifically the group I have worked with, enter Algeria. Many of them go there to earn money and do not have specific (pronounced) ideas about leaving for Europe. For many, this idea is somewhat faint, but will grow as they encounter other migrants and hear of successful crossings into Europe. The difficult living conditions for irregular workers in Algeria are also a factor in the desire to leave. From North Africa, there are currently two main routes into Europe: through Libya, and through Morocco. In Algeria, I connected with migrants who were, for some reason or other, waiting to enter Morocco, from where they would try to enter Europe. Many of the migrants worked in gardens where their Algerian employers would provide them with shelter and a modest salary (between 10 and 20 euro/day – with no guarantee of regular work). In this setting, I became close to migrants who intended to leave soon, and to some of the middlemen who were involved in arranging their journeys. The latter and former groups of people cannot easily be distinguished from each other, as the organizers themselves also try to go to Europe, and some of them occasionally also work as day labourers to make ends meet.

Nonetheless, the emic French categories of *anciens* and *passagers* provide a useful distinction for these social groups, where *anciens* are those migrants who have been in Algeria for a long time, and who have themselves tried on several occasions to enter Europe, and *passagers*, those migrants who immediately try to make their way into Europe. In Morocco, it is hard(er) for migrants to find work, and the migrants who are there are mostly either looking for a way to enter Europe or involved in arranging these journeys. As in Algeria, I talked to both groups, *anciens* and *passagers*. In France, I connected with some migrants I had met during former fieldwork projects and other newly arrived migrants, who had mainly undertaken the journey through Morocco. I also connected with former *anciens*. The female

perspective has not purposefully been excluded, but as I quickly came to realize, Malian women do not travel in the same way as the young men through the treacherous desert and into Europe clandestinely, therefore they are not part of the present study.

The article relies mainly on empirical material generated in Morocco and Algeria intermittently from February to June 2014, but I also draw in some examples from my fieldwork in France (from September 2014 to February 2015), in terms of migrants' retrospective accounts of their time in the Maghreb. All names of people and places have been changed or disguised in order to secure the anonymity of my interlocutors.

The article commences with a discussion of the key concepts of transit and liminality before laying out the pillars of the argument in three sections, which deals with 1) motivations for leaving, 2) the continuation of political and social structures, and 3) the migrants' experiences of dramatic ruptures with humanity and morality. Finally, the conclusion points to the use of 'limbo' as a conceptual framework for understanding this specific type of exile.

Transit

Ethnographic work on sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb countries tends to focus on the journey and the transitory nature of the area – stressing that the North African countries are transit places through which migrants pass to reach Europe (Baldwin-Edwards 2006, Barros et al. 2000, Bredeloup 2012, Collyer 2006, 2010, De Haas 2005, 2008, Hammouda 2008, McDougall and Scheele 2012). More recent works also focus on the mobile/immobile nexus of the trajectories of the migrants (Schapendonk 2012), re-iterating that not all people are equally mobile and many migrants who wish to move are unable to do so. They hereby still emphasize the migrants' movements – or prospects thereof – over other aspects of their lives. Whether the localities are transit spaces, or whether they become sites of dwelling, few works focus on the existential dimension of the migrants' lives in these sites, in the way experiential ruptures are configured in social structures that resemble familiar ones. Instead, there tends to be an emphasis on how to categorize these types of movements or im/mobilities. By insisting on this focus, the 'in-betweenness' of places of transit is reiterated. Some scholars nuance this by stressing that these places become places of 'stuckness' or immobility (see e.g. Pian 2008, Hage 2005). In this article, I wish to step aside from discussions regarding what type of places these settings are in terms of voyages taken or not taken, and instead focus on the way these sites create particular existential experiences of ruptures with humanity and morality in what we may call 'everyday life' in migration.

The Malian migrants find themselves in a pinch. They are literally at the edge of Europe, which they can see in the distance from where they are, but are not sure they will make it there. "It is a matter of chance," many tell me.

Liminality

Turner's work on the liminal phase of rituals stresses that it is not a state, but a phase or period. The liminal period is, when neophytes are excluded from social life, an inter-structural period between two states: "We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured," he claims (Turner 1979: 236). This entails the complete suspension of social hierarchies for neophytes (those transitioning). The experiences in the liminal period are "felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte" (ibid.: 239). Since it no longer adheres to cultural rules and creates ambiguity between inclusion and exclusion and life and death, Turner claims that this is a "realm of pure possibility" (ibid.: 236).

Even though young Malian men leave Mali in order to, as one of my interlocutors in the Maghreb phrased it, "look for my own, to look for a good life", the time spent searching for this is not 'essentially unstructured', as Turner claims is characteristic of the liminal phase. Rather than a realm of pure possibility, such migrant communities quickly configure in structures that resemble or mimic political organizations elsewhere, creating recognizable frameworks for social life.

Looking for Life - Motivations for Leaving

Lucinda Honwana conceptualizes a young generation in Africa that is unable to move into a state of adulthood and proposes the term 'waithood' to designate an inauspicious youth: "I use the notion waithood, a portmanteau term of "wait" and "-hood", meaning 'waiting for adulthood', to refer to this period of suspension between childhood and adulthood,"(2012: 20) she writes.

The notion that young people in Africa are unable to move into adulthood resonates with much earlier anthropological work in West Africa (Utas, Vigh, and Christiansen 2006). As Vigh argues, migration can be a way out of this state: "Migration is seen to provide means of escape from the 'social death' (Hage 2003) that characterizes the lives of young men in Bissau" (Vigh 2009: 93-94). This is a very recognizable portrait of the situation for youth in Mali who wish to 'become someone'. Like in Bissau, young men in Bamako leave in order to escape these situations of 'waithood' and 'social death'. Even though the journey can be seen as a transitional phase where the youth exits one state in order to enter a new one (on the other side) most authors agree that this, for migrants, does not always entail successfully re-entering social life on the other side of the liminal phase. Becoming a man, rather than a boy (or youth), free from the shackles of being stuck in waithood, is for many not the outcome of migration, as Lucht states: "[the migrants] often appear less as agents of change and travel, working both sides of the border, than as stuck in a negative zone, recognized neither legally nor socially" (2012: 17). They become stuck in this so-called liminality, as they, in spite of having entered this transitional

phase, cannot move on (Hage 2005). As one interlocutor I talked to in Morocco poetically phrased his endeavours to reach Europe: “I am looking for my life over there”.

Building on these insights, in the following section I wish to sharpen our understanding of what living in an extended liminality entails by zooming in on the structures as well as the ruptures of the experiences of Malian migrants in Morocco and Algeria.

Continuations of Political and Social Structures

In Algeria and Morocco I did fieldwork in the Malian migrant communities of a number of towns, which are renowned for being hubs for irregular migration, contraband and smuggling. Here, I interviewed and talked to a range of migrants particularly from the Wassoulou region of Mali (due to my research design), but also from elsewhere in Mali. The migrants live in tent camps or in small houses (like huts) provided by their employers in the agricultural sector. Many of the migrants in the Maghreb are unable to move on due to financial and political circumstances. As mentioned earlier, Malian migrants can roughly be divided into *passagers* and *anciens*. There are many overlaps in these two groups, and people can move from one to the other quite quickly. The *passagers* live mainly in disturbingly shabby tent camps in the woods, on dried riverbeds, or in urban spaces (in poor neighbourhoods, on the more or less abandoned grounds of a university campus etc.), and are waiting for an opportunity or for money to arrive from their families, enabling them to move closer to their much desired Europe. They are sometimes also termed *clandestins*, by members of the *anciens* or themselves. The lengths of their stay vary greatly, but many end up staying for quite a while (as long as five years), often moving between different places in North Africa. Journeys between these points are erratic and migrants’ decisions to move to another location are taken ad hoc, in situ, based on the latest rumours about new entry points into Europe, about employment opportunities, or new political circumstances, such as the new ‘regularization’ arrangement in Morocco that was installed in 2014 (but later more or less abandoned), where migrants who could show proof of having lived in Morocco for at least 5 years could obtain paperwork that allowed them to live and work legally in Morocco for at least a year. This gave some migrants hope of finding work in the country, or getting papers, which could eventually lead to other and more desired paperwork or statuses (such as asylum, visas, or scholarships in Europe or elsewhere).

During all of my fieldwork (from Mali in 2013 to France in 2015), I have been struck by the fact that I rarely met anyone who had a clearly defined route they wished to follow before embarking on their journey. To undertake adventure (*faire l’aventure*) in Mali is synonymous with going far away – migrating (legally or illegally) – in order to make a better life for oneself and one’s family. Adventure is not

just about seeking thrills as popular narratives convey; rather the migrants' adventure denotes dislocation in order to find something new and better, facing the unknown and being constantly vigilant (Bredeloup 2008).

In these places, a wide range of nationalities from sub-Saharan Africa are represented. They are primarily from West and Central Africa, often with the largest groups coming from Mali, Nigeria, and Cameroon. My interlocutors are part of the Malian communities, which are divided into *ghettos*, an emic term that denotes groups led by different leaders – *Thiamen* – who are responsible for housing members of their group. Each national group has its own organization (with a few exceptions). The term *Thiaman* comes from the English 'Chairman', and was introduced by Anglophone migrants, who are said to have set up this quite structured organization of the communities (Pian 2008, Schmitz 2008). A ghetto has its own government including a president, cashiers, police and several council members. There is a *law of the ghetto* and members of the community pay a *ghetto tax* the first time they enter. Some members of government are involved in the facilitation of border crossings, which starts with transporting people illegally across the border between Algeria and Morocco, from where they try to move on into Europe. Although there are differences in the political landscapes of Morocco and Algeria (the main issues being that the access to work is easier in Algeria, and that the state security apparatus is experienced as more impeding by migrants than in Morocco) I choose here not to explore these differences. This is first and foremost in order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors and secondly, as the structures of the migrant communities are similar across the borders, and the ghetto structure, with *Thiamen*, police and governments is in place across the Maghreb where transnational links to colleagues are common, and the migrants' experiences resonate across countries, these differences do not alter the argument of this article.

It is here worth briefly mentioning the puzzling and almost comical mimicking of international political symbolism and structures in the migrant organizations. In one of the migrant communities, government meetings are held in a large tent constructed of sticks and blue tarpaulin ironically dubbed "the white house" and the different (particularly West African) nationalities are united in what they – always with a smile – call the CEDEAO (Communauté Economique des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest – also known as the ECOWAS). In this respect, the migrant communities not only resemble local West African organizations, they also mimic them and other power structures in comical and what we may call, borrowing from Achille Mbembe, obscene and grotesque ways (Mbembe 1992: 3). These frameworks, nonetheless, only support certain aspects of life as it is known: substantial ruptures in humanity and morality are experienced by practically all of my interlocutors, and they are examined below.

Experiential Ruptures - At Odds with Humanity and Morality

An animal life

A large part of the migrants I met in the Maghreb expressed experiences of 'dehumanization'. This dehumanization seemed to be the kernel of their experience in the Maghreb and they would compare their lives to those of animals.

The following is a clipping from the written travel account of an interlocutor, Ali, whom I met in Paris through a loosely structured network of young Malian migrants. He writes about his time in Gorogo (a forest in Morocco next to the Spanish town of Melilla) in this way:

The emigrants live in Gorogo like animals:

1. We live in the woods, always under the rain
2. We always eat from trash cans
3. We are always worn down by the military, by the police, by assailants, by sickness.

Death is always close to us.

Being without shelter, finding food in trashcans and being haunted by authorities, assailants and sickness is what for Ali creates an "animal life". A life that is not human. The way he frames the experience in Gorogo in the three indexed items tells the story of how Ali sees animal life as the negation of a "human" one, defined by having a roof over your head, being able to eat without having to succumb to digging through thrash, and being safe from external threats.

Many other Malian men in the Maghreb linked their experiences to those of animals. One Malian man, Mamadou, working in an Algerian olive garden weeding between trees, told me that there are actually machines that can take care of this type of work. But they are expensive. "Here *we* are the tractors. We are like donkeys. They treat us like animals," he said. Such statements are numerous in the empirical material and do not only tell the story of hardship, but also of an essential aspect of life for sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb: being stripped of their sense of humanity. Some migrants linked this experience to human rights, dreaming of a Europe where "there are human rights" as opposed to this place, where according to them, there "are no human rights".

To place this into a larger context, one could turn to Hannah Arendt's established critique of the functioning of modern nation-states. Her argument is that they create citizens, whom the rights of man apply to, as well as "minorities" to whom no rights apply (Arendt 1951: 150,155). In many ways, the migrants' experiences resonate with Arendt's work. Whether migrants were living in tent camps on the fringes of Europe, or whether they were working in the gardens of Algeria dreaming of a better place, the notion of an absence of rights was a common denominator that marred their experiences in the Maghreb. They could not seek or count on help from the

states in question, because their very presence in particular places is seen as not just illegal (because this is a grey zone), but outside the law. In an insightful discussion on the 'commonsense' way of ordering the world into rooted national entities, Lisa Malkki, inspired by both Turner and Arendt, shows how Hutu refugees in Tanzania do not easily fit into 'the national order of things'. She claims, "Refugees, liminal in the categorical order of nation-states, thus fit Turner's famous characterization of liminal personae as 'naked unaccommodated man' or 'undifferentiated raw material' (1967: 98-99)" (Malkki 1992: 34). In much the same vein, sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb, stripped of humanity, become naked, unaccommodated and undifferentiated raw material. The Arendtian view provides ample perspectives to the extremely precarious status of undocumented migrants in the world today, as also pointed out by Lucht (2012), de Genova (2002) and Krause (2008) to mention only a few. Importantly, migrants do not live this 'animal life' outside structured life altogether, but are integrated into distinctive political realms (the migrant *ghetto* system) as shown above, which nonetheless do not grant them full access to a human life. The concept of *limbo* stems from the Latin *limbus*, which denotes edge or border, and in the case of the migrants living in the Maghreb this may be more fitting than liminality. They are stuck in a place defined by the borders nearby, which they cannot transgress: they are literally at the edge of Europe, outside the life they are looking for.

Stuck en route

Moussa, one of my close interlocutors in the Maghreb, held a position as 'police', and sometimes as middleman, in a Malian ghetto. During our time in the Maghreb, he was in a pinch. One day I walked into the living room of Moussa's house, and found the usually animated Moussa sulking on the couch. I asked him what was bothering him, and he said that his father had just called him and told him to come home, because his family needed him mainly in the form of financial support, which he could not currently provide. He did not want to go back to Mali, partly because he was doing fine where he was and because the dream of making it big (here or in Europe) still lived in him. In the Maghreb, Moussa is a kind of "big man", (the concept of 'big man' has been widely discussed, but in this context it suggests that he holds a powerful, yet unstable position that is dependent on the relations he has and his ability to extend solidarity. This position is as Utas notes, "in part measured in status symbols and the ability to fill that big man role according to social criteria" (2012: 7) see Utas 2012 for a further discussion of bigmanity); he fools around with a handful of women, helps other migrants with food and money and holds a prominent position in the community. Exemplified by a comment made by a Malian who lived in one of the nearby tent camps, when asked how he got by, paid for food etc. "these guys help me," he said, pointing at Moussa who had accompanied me there. This day on the couch he was in distress, as his father threatened to evict his mother from the house if he did not return. He hoped that his father would calm down, and

told me there was no way he could return to Mali at that time. Since Moussa had been gone from Mali for 4 years without advancing his social position at home, he would be set back, at the age of 27, to being an unmarried son in his father's house. At the same time, he was acutely aware that his position in the Maghreb was of a more temporary character, like when he was telling me that he was not done trying to get to Europe, and that his last attempt was only a year or so ago.

The following is from an interview we did a few days after my arrival:

Line: But when you think of Europe, what do you think about?

Moussa: When I think of Europe it gives me courage again to go there.

Line: What do you think?

Moussa: I think... over there?

Line: mhm

Moussa: I think that if I get in I will find a better life there. Because there I will find work [...] like that I won't need money from my parents anymore [...] even now my parents [/kin] ask me to return there. But when I return again it will be the same thing. It will be them who will take care of me. Because in Mali, to find work it is very difficult, and the heat [chaleur] too – it's too much... so it is not viable... I say I will return, but they [the kin] have to give me 1 month–2 months, like that.

Moussa's story draws our attention to the inherent temporariness of migrant life even as he has climbed the social ladder and become part of the government of the Malian ghetto. He cannot return to Mali because it will be the same as before if he returns, his parents will have to take care of him, which would be too belittling an experience to endure. Moussa cannot go back and has so far been unable to move forward. The paradox of what Moussa is expressing is that in terms of his current situation, he is doing quite well. Nonetheless, he is unable to make plans for the future and unable to move on socially, resonating with Honwana's term 'waithood' discussed above, as well as Vigh's notion of a 'social moratorium' (Vigh 2006). On another day, one of Moussa's close friends, Issa (an *ancien*, but not part of the government or the business of border crossings) told me that even though Moussa generates income from the business of migrant journeys, he often asks Issa for money, as his own money quickly dries out. Issa says it is because Moussa spends it all on women and partying. But being part of the government also means having to take care of other migrants in town, and being a big man entails keeping up appearances with fashionable clothes, jewellery and a fancy telephone, all costly affairs that keep him stuck here, unable to provide for his family in Mali or establishing a family of his own. He is still to this day in the Maghreb, with the hope of one day leaving.

Shameful living

As well as being stripped of humanity, many migrants are struggling with a sense of shame and of being at odds with morality in the Maghreb. This became especially clear one day when I visited a group of young Malian men in Algeria, in a small

garden house where they lived on the premises of their work site – an olive garden. My contact, a young man from the Southern part of Mali (like the other men in the house) had already told me that I couldn't take any photos when we got there. I assumed it was because of the range of illegal activities, from working without permits to the sale of drugs, or the business of smuggling that took place there or nearby, but this notion was quickly challenged by a young man, Sul. He asked me if I hadn't brought a camera. I said yes, but I left it in town as I was told I wasn't allowed to take any pictures. He said "yes, we don't want our parents to see us like this. That is shame (*c'est la honte*)". The men lived under very hard conditions and had certainly not reached their goal of making it big outside of Mali, which they desired.

Sul emphasized the unexpected and very difficult circumstances he found himself in. He has a degree in accounting from Mali and left because he could not find any work in his home country. At that time (and still to this date) he was working, on the days he could find work, in the fields. By accentuating the shame in being seen in this condition, he pointed to an experience of being outside a moral life. His very way of living was shameful. It is a life, but a life at odds with morality. For *les anciens*, experiences do not always have the same tone of dehumanization and demoralization. Nonetheless, they echo this shift and gap in social and moral life. The movements between social categories do not necessarily imply a movement into a more existentially "secure" world.

To be or not to be 'good'

Spending most of my time with migrants in the group of *les anciens* gave me an intimate view into the everyday life of long-time migrants, some of whom have risen to privileged positions in the Malian migrant communities. It also made me aware of the constant moral evaluation that was inferred upon themselves and others. Many of the *anciens* had some kind of business with local Moroccans or Algerians, and many of them spoke a bit of Arabic. The everyday language of Bambara and French was often strewn with Moroccan Arabic glossary. A couple of terms kept recurring; like *nishān*, which is a way of indicating the direction straight ahead, and *hikihiki*, explained to me as zigzagging from side to side. When talking to someone about a common acquaintance of ours, it was quite common to hear the sentence "Him, he is not *nishānnishān*, he does like this" while my interlocutor would first show his hand moving up and down, and subsequently move his hand from side to side, thereby showing that he does not "do things right". Often they would assert themselves as being *nishān*. A few people would even say about themselves "here one has to be like this" and move the hand from side to side: *hikihiki* they would say.

Oumar, one of the men in charge of a Malian community became a close interlocutor of mine. One day as we were talking about life there, Oumar once again told me to trust no one there. Whilst reminding me constantly of the opacity of social

relations, he also hinted at his own transgression of the boundary between good and bad:

Some people say Oumar, he is good. Other people say Oumar, he is not good. It is not good if everyone thinks you are good and it is not good if everyone thinks you are not good. Here, you fall down the hole. Even me, I have fallen into the hole.

He often told me that I am a good person. I told him that so is he. To this he usually replied, “No, *you* are good,” thereby underlining his (in his own perspective) more pragmatic engagement with good and bad. Oumar’s own assessment of having to be both good and bad in this place underscores the way he thinks he has to act here, in what he calls the ‘hole’, thereby accentuating his metaphorical fall from grace, or moral distortion.

Conclusion: On the Edge of Existence

The lack of options and possibilities for creating viable lives in Mali is most often the driving force behind the migrants’ departure for Algeria and Morocco. Many are stuck in a social state of youth, or what Honwana terms ‘waithood’, and they leave Mali in search of a life of their own. This departure often leads to prolonged stays en route, which create a specific type of exile.

Anthropologically, this move and particularly life in so-called places of transit, such as the Maghreb countries, has often been dealt with through the lens of liminality. In this article my aim has been to build on insights from such endeavours and re-orient the focus to understand what this specific type of permanent liminality, which in a more suitable word can be termed ‘limbo’, entails. In addition to the motivation for leaving as mentioned above, this limbo consists of two main aspects. Firstly, there is the continuation and mimicking of familiar and recognisable social political structures. Migrants are organized in structures that resemble other well-known political structures (although different in nature), which simultaneously borrow from international political symbolism in grotesque and obscene ways. The ghettos, the *anciens*, their ‘governments’ and the evocation of powerful political symbols such as the construction of a rickety tent known as *The White House* are examples of this.

Secondly, migrants experience extreme ruptures of life as they know it. Ruptures with the very essence of being human – dramatic experiences of dehumanization, and the notion of living an animal life – were widely repeated. Morality was also being ruptured. Being ashamed, not wanting to reveal to your closest kin the real conditions of your life, was an intrinsic part of the experience here. Having to compromise with one’s own notions of being good or bad was another rupture of morality that was specific to this place.

Ultimately, the article argues that liminality conveys a transitional phase of ‘neither/nor’, etymologically stemming from the Latin *limen*, which means *threshold*

or *entrance*, but the concept of limbo, from the Latin *limbus*, which means *edge* or *border*, can also help guide our attention to the fixity and dead-ended-ness of migrant life on the move.

Line Richter is a PhD fellow at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology. Her research investigates the lives of Malian migration candidates, migrants and brokers on their way from Mali through North Africa and into Europe. Contact: line.richter@anthro.ku.dk

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