

## Cameroonians in Oran (Algeria): Migration Paths, Urban Integration, and Places of Sociability

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### Abstract:

*This research delves into the migration journeys of Cameroonians, tracing their paths from their homeland to Algeria, with a particular focus on Oran. For most migrants interviewed, Algeria—especially Oran—is perceived as a temporary stopover in a broader journey toward Europe. The migration routes they follow are complex and unpredictable, shaped by economic opportunities, legal barriers, and the migration policies of the countries they traverse. Algeria serves as a crucial juncture where migrants adapt to the challenges and opportunities they encounter, though the length of their stay in Oran may extend due to local political and economic conditions.*

*Algeria is primarily viewed as a transit space, but it plays a more significant role in the migrants' journeys than initially anticipated. The local context often necessitates a prolonged stay, which is seen as a necessary delay rather than a change in their ultimate goal of reaching Europe.*

*Unlike other Sub-Saharan migrants who might engage in circular migrations between their home countries and the Maghreb, the Cameroonians in this study exhibit a distinct migratory pattern. They do not typically return to Cameroon after reaching Algeria, underscoring a one-way trajectory. This behavior highlights the unique challenges and aspirations that characterize their migration experience, distinguishing them within the broader context of Sub-Saharan movements toward the Maghreb. Their journeys emphasize the complexity and determination involved in navigating the intricate web of regional dynamics that influence their paths.*

**Keywords:** Migration paths; Urban integration; Places of sociability; Ghettos; Informal networks.

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In this context, our primary objective was to understand how Cameroonians live and organize themselves in Oran. Beyond that, we sought to explore their journey from the southern part of their country, starting from their entry into Algeria at Tamanrasset, which is the first major city they encounter. The information gathered is then connected to their aspirations for the future and how they plan the continuation of their journey. This is because the community structures they establish in Algeria are deeply intertwined with their broader migration goals. The central question we posed is how the Cameroonian community organizes itself during migration and how this organization serves as a strategy to create a framework within a society perceived and experienced as hostile.

My fieldwork relied on the usual data collection methods in socio-anthropology, particularly participant observation and interviews. In addition to a quantitative survey conducted as a volunteer for the Caritas association in 2014-2015—which marked the beginning of my fieldwork—and six initial exploratory interviews conducted during that same period, the bulk of the interviews were gathered in 2016 and 2017, totaling 58 interviews (with 59 respondents, as one man and his partner were interviewed together). The sample included 37 women and 22 men. I favored qualitative interviews over questionnaires as a data collection method, despite being advised to use questionnaires by my supervisors during my time with Caritas. I believed that structured questionnaires would not adequately capture the subjectivity of the respondents, nor would they provide the depth needed to understand their experiences, journeys, and practices. All interviews were recorded with a dictaphone, with an average duration of 1 hour and 33 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 24 minutes, while the longest extended to 3 hours and 20 minutes. While the Caritas survey included women from various West and Central African countries, I later chose to focus specifically on Cameroonians (both men and women) as I had better integration within this group.

During two fieldwork stays in 2016 and 2017, I visited a total of 27 different types of housing, including apartments, small houses, and various other living spaces such as repurposed shops or garages, as well as 5 hotel rooms, and 18 informal bars-restaurants known as *maquis*, which serve as places of sociability and leisure. These locations were

primarily situated in the city center, but I also visited sites in the suburbs of Oran, including the Aïn Beïda and Amandiers neighborhoods, and I returned to some of these locations multiple times.

Between these field visits and after my final stay, I transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data. Out of the 58 interviews collected, 41 were fully transcribed word-for-word, while 17 were partially transcribed, focusing on the most significant or relevant portions for the study. Each interview was accompanied by a summary sheet that detailed my impressions during the interview, the profile and journey of the interviewee, and a summary of their responses to the main themes discussed. Additionally, a comprehensive Excel spreadsheet compiling summaries of all the interview data was created to facilitate easier classification and retrieval of information.

This thesis therefore examines the presence of Cameroonians in Oran, after tracing their migration paths, and details their integration into the city, a crucial stage of their journey. In a context where mobility is relatively restricted, migrants settle in Oran for periods determined by the opportunities they have to continue their journey. Through our exploration of how these migrants move, live, organize, and sustain themselves, we have shown that despite being marginalized by the state and society in Algeria, they are actively engaged in shaping their own lives and are not passive victims.

While most Sub-Saharan migrations to the Maghreb are regional and circular, this applies to only a small portion of the Cameroonians I studied. Only those who have temporarily or permanently abandoned plans to go to Europe, often because they have established profitable economic practices in Algeria, consider themselves settled in Oran and regularly travel between Cameroon and Algeria. These "veterans," primarily *feymen* (scammers targeting wealthy Algerian entrepreneurs) and *mères de maquis* (female owners of informal bars-restaurants), have very specific profiles and differ from those migrants who see themselves as merely "passing through" Oran, such as *filles-décors* (restaurant waitresses) and *chogoyeurs* (day laborers), though the boundaries between these roles are not always clear. For instance, we have observed a certain continuity in the paths of women, with former *filles-décors*

eventually becoming *mères de maquis*, thereby settling more permanently in Oran.

The scale of these migrations is dynamic, influenced by the political, social, and economic contexts of the countries of origin, transit, and destination. Recently, we have also observed a shift in the nature of these migrations, with an increasing presence of women, as well as more urban and educated migrants. Many of the Cameroonian respondents I interviewed fit these profiles. In Algeria, and within a regional context where immigration is criminalized, migrants tend to settle temporarily, particularly in large cities. Their inability to access any form of legal status, coupled with the mass arrests and deportations conducted by Algerian authorities since the summer of 2017, significantly shapes the nature of their presence. The media and political discourse also directly influence how Sub-Saharan migrants are perceived by the Algerian population. This stigmatizing political and societal context not only affects the migrants themselves but also poses challenges for researchers trying to access and conduct fieldwork in these environments.

An idealized vision of Europe and a strong desire for emigration among the Cameroonian population, common to several African countries and nurtured from the homeland, coupled with a political and economic situation perceived as hopeless, explain the high proportion of Cameroonians among the Sub-Saharan migrants present in Algeria. The increased proportion of Cameroonian women, compared to the last ten to twenty years, can partly be attributed to influence processes, particularly by returned emigrants, such as *mères de maquis* (women running informal bars-restaurants), who encourage young women to join them in Algeria, benefiting from their presence, which attracts more customers. Social media also plays a significant role, with emigrants in Europe or the Maghreb creating fictional portrayals of their lives, enjoying the symbolically elevated status of an emigrant. Departures from Cameroon, whether poorly organized for some or carefully planned for others, can lead to regrets, especially when individuals, who are inadequately or poorly prepared psychologically, realize that the journey does not meet their expectations and involves more hardships than they imagined, not to mention the deplorable living conditions in Algeria. Some turn back if they have the means, such as women who are terrified at the thought of

living in a *maquis*, while men often present themselves as more resilient. The migrants I surveyed, most of whom had jobs—often informal—before emigrating, were able to use their savings to fund their migration project, as the journey, especially through irregular routes, is costly.

Despite the risks and uncertainties, the adventure is often valued by migrants for its heroic dimension and the learning experience it provides; it also allows them to challenge the victimizing narrative often associated with migrants, presenting themselves instead as active agents in their migration journey. The routes they take are generally limited, usually following a Nigeria-Niger-Algeria axis. Once they cross the first border between Cameroon and Nigeria, migrants, particularly first-time migrants, become vulnerable. Their adaptability is severely tested as they find themselves disoriented, unfamiliar with local prices or customs, and often subjected to violence by those who exploit their vulnerability. Women, especially in the Saharan zone where dangers are amplified, are almost systematically subjected to sexual violence. From Niger onwards, and throughout their journey, the externalization of European borders, manifested through agreements with transit countries and the repression of migration flows, directly increases the dangers faced by migrants.

In the desert, migrants pass through key transit towns, the main ones being Agadez and Tamanrasset, where they live in migrant ghettos. In Tamanrasset, the first major city in Algeria after the border, these ghettos are formed based on national communities. Cameroonians find themselves in these precarious spaces, which are highly hierarchical and governed by strict rules. The leading figures in these places, such as the *chairman* and ghetto leaders, enforce these rules and punish transgressors. Migrants who have passed through such places, where living conditions and hygiene are extremely basic, often retain unpleasant, even traumatic memories. Nevertheless, these ghettos are necessary passageways for cash-strapped migrants entering Algerian territory. Migrants passing through feel both supported and constrained by these hierarchical figures, who, being established in Algeria, have a better understanding of the local societal codes than the newly arrived. Women without financial means rely on these figures: in exchange for transactional sexual relations, they may receive support for the next leg of their journey. Those without money or family or friends to take them

in the northern Algerian cities are subjected to financial transactions between ghetto leaders or the *chairman* and the *mères de maquis*, the latter willing to accommodate them, as the presence of girls increases their clientele and revenue. To leave Tamanrasset and head north, migrants must devise various strategies to avoid the numerous checkpoints along potential routes. In the current context, since the systematic raids and mass expulsions began in 2017, this northward journey from the south of Algeria has become nearly impossible.

Financially capable men, particularly the *feymen*, often form couples during migration. However, these relationships are generally precarious, despite the existence of officially married couples or those based on mutual love—though such cases are rare. More commonly, these arrangements are temporary, with both parties—men and women—finding certain advantages. For women, who have limited opportunities to earn money, these relationships offer material and financial security during their transit in Algeria, such as their partner paying for the next leg of their journey. For men, these relationships provide sexual services, domestic maintenance, and possibly a degree of prestige among their fellow migrants.

These semi-formal arrangements are often monitored by the Cameroonian community, where influential members, who witness these informal "marriages," can enforce the fulfillment of obligations by either party. For example, men who have the financial means are expected to provide their partners with a substantial amount of money, known as "discharging," if their companions request it, allowing them to continue their journey to Europe or return to Cameroon. The imbalance of power between men and women in these relationships is evident, and this dynamic creates a fertile ground for violence within the couple. Sometimes, men pressure their partners into pregnancy, as having a child is seen as a source of prestige.

Pregnancies in the migratory context are perceived differently by women, but many recognize the risk of increased vulnerability it represents, as giving birth in Algeria can delay or even terminate their migration plans. Additionally, due to concerns about their children's future—especially those born in Algeria—parents often strive to send them to Europe or Cameroon as quickly as possible.

Migration routes used after passing through Algeria have also evolved significantly between my last fieldwork trip and today (2020), three years later. The signing of agreements between the European Union and Libyan authorities has led to a westward shift in migration flows, making the Morocco-Spain route once again the primary path from Africa to Europe. The European Union's strategic and financial contribution to the control and repulsion of migrants further south makes it complicit in the atrocities committed against migrants, particularly in Libya.

The living arrangements and neighborhoods that Cameroonian migrants occupy in Oran vary widely: from relatively comfortable apartments to extremely dilapidated ones, repurposed old shops, hotel rooms in the city center, rudimentary houses, and converted garages on the city's outskirts. They live among the local population and maintain a range of relationships with their neighbors and landlords, marked by either open hostility or peaceful and cordial interactions.

Economic practices among Cameroonian migrants in Algeria can be observed through two key figures: the *chogoyeur* and the *feyman*. *Chogoyeurs*, typically young and viewing themselves as "transient," find daily employment on construction sites to meet their basic needs and save painstakingly for the next leg of their journey to Europe. With limited financial resources, they guard their money carefully, focusing all their hopes and energy on crossing the next border (either Libya or Morocco) and continuing their migration. On the other hand, *feymen*, who are usually older (though not always) and have been settled in Algeria for several years, sometimes earn substantial sums through successful scams. They spend a significant portion of their earnings to enhance their prestige within the community, often showcasing their success in specific venues such as local gathering spots or *maquis*.

The concept of "moral economies"<sup>1</sup> helps to frame their experiences, explaining both their violent actions and their distinctive traits, such as cunning or the rationale of the stronger party. While

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Banégas et Jean-Pierre Warnier, « Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir », *Politique africaine* 2001/2, no 82, pp. 5-23.

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chogoyeurs and feymen do not necessarily disparage each other's practices, chogoyeurs typically avoid the physical and legal risks associated with scams, while feymen dismiss the grueling physical labor and meager pay of construction work.

The "community," a term used by Cameroonian migrants to describe their national group, plays a crucial role in providing access to certain services that they cannot otherwise obtain through conventional means in Algeria. This community compensates for their lack of integration by offering insurance and loan systems, money transfers to Cameroon, networks for creating fake administrative documents, and an informal tribunal known as the "G10," along with a president to mediate disputes. These services help members obtain group support, bypass certain prohibitions (such as sending money abroad), access a façade of "legality," and resolve conflicts internally without resorting to police services, which are viewed as a threat that could penalize the entire group. Although this community organization is relatively effective in mitigating internal tensions and facilitating arrangements, it sometimes fails to resolve certain conflicts or sees influential members abusing their power. Such abuses can lead to frustration and resentment among those affected. Consequently, the Cameroonian community is viewed ambivalently by many of its members, who may find unwavering support against the perceived hostility of their environment but also face pressures to conform to established norms and principles within the group. These rules are strict and clearly defined, and deviation can result in reprimands, sometimes quite severe. This community structure, blending protection and coercion, extends from Tamanrasset to northern cities and has ramifications throughout Algeria.

In a country where Islam is the state religion and Christianity is practiced within a repressive legislative framework, the religious affiliations of the migrants I studied—predominantly Christian—are diverse. Some assert their Christian identity, while others, in multi-ethnic situations, identify as Muslim for the benefits it may bring or to defuse conflicts. Still others, though Christian, show a genuine curiosity and interest in Islam. Many interviewees note that "black skin" seems to create an insurmountable barrier between nationals and migrants, regardless of the latter's religion. In the precarious context of migration,

frequent references to God and fate help migrants cope with uncertainty, alleviate fear, and legitimize their presence in states where it is considered illegal.

The Francam, an urban Cameroonian language, regains its original cryptic function in migration, allowing communication among Cameroonians without being understood by outsiders, especially Algerians. Cameroonians are often addressed in the public space in derogatory, mocking, or insulting terms, sometimes reflecting a historical servility associated with Black foreigners, including both Sub-Saharan and North African blacks. Interactions between migrants and the local population are generally limited, though rare instances of friendship or relationships between Algerian women and Cameroonian men do occur. The reverse is less common due to the pervasive stereotype of the black migrant woman as a prostitute in Algerian society. The stereotypes frequently applied to black migrants and widely shared socially are sometimes reflected back at their originators by Cameroonians who experience racism in public spaces. The perception of migrants as undocumented and without rights leads some locals to attack them for theft; similarly, police officers or healthcare providers may exhibit discriminatory behavior. In the vulnerable public space of Algeria, both male and female migrants remain constantly alert, taking numerous precautions to avoid verbal or physical assaults.

In contrast, Cameroonian private spaces, particularly their leisure spots like the maquis, offer a respite where they can relax and unwind. These central social spaces, exclusive to Cameroonians with few exceptions for outsiders and Algerians, serve various functions. For example, maquis-ghettos not only function as social hubs but also as dormitories where residents, who are required to pay rent and for their meals like any other client, stay. The term "maquis" is reserved for places that sell alcohol and Cameroonian food and feature "decorative girls."

A detailed ethnography of the maquis reveals the unique dynamics within these spaces, where individuals are referred to in familial terms: the father and mother of the maquis, the children, the boys, and the girls. These terms reflect an ambivalent relationship characterized by both subordination and protection. The archetype of the "decorative girl" is typically a young, attractive newcomer to Algeria who is single, though

not all girls fit this profile. The presence of such girls is a significant asset for a maquis, helping to attract and retain clientele.

The archetype of the "maquis mother" is generally an older woman who is strict with her daughters, limiting their outings. However, some mothers maintain friendly relationships with their daughters, especially if they have known each other from Cameroon, and allow them relative freedom as long as they fulfill their daily responsibilities, such as cleaning or cooking. This creates a continuum of relationships between maquis mothers and their decorative daughters, ranging from genuine, balanced friendships to outright domination and coercion. In extreme cases, mothers may even compel their daughters into prostitution, although prostitution is not systematic in the maquis.

More commonly, the flirtations of the girls and the seduction of clients lead to forming relationships, allowing the girls to leave the maquis and be supported by their partners, who are usually also Cameroonian. Leaving the maquis, however, requires the mother's approval, and she may demand repayment of any debt the daughter may have incurred. The process of pairing off and repaying a daughter's debt is not the only way to leave the maquis. Some girls, who do not owe any money, are theoretically free to leave whenever they wish. Others, who have been at the maquis for a long time or are seen as undisciplined, may be pushed to leave by their mothers, who seek to refresh their "decorative" staff to attract new clients.

The "maquis boys," though relatively rare, are distinct from the ghettosards in that they are fully supported by the maquis in exchange for the services they provide to the managers. Their roles and statuses—such as guards, doormen, "handymen," cleaners, or trusted aides—vary significantly from one maquis to another, just as those of the girls do. The organization of the Cameroonian community is also evident in these roles and statuses within the maquis. It is here that couples are formed, hierarchical figures enforce their rules, and subordinates negotiate their positions.

Cameroonian parties and gatherings are marked by extravagance and a competitive quest for prestige. The feymen, who are the primary patrons of the maquis, display their wealth through ostentatious

consumption of alcohol, luxury clothing, enormous spending, and the company of women. These gatherings are venues where they assert their own value system.

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