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From Assistance to Empowerment: the life and survival trajectories of Malian refugees in Burkina Faso

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Résumé

Cet article étudie les logiques d'autonomisation impulsées par les réseaux locaux d'entraide et de prise en charge des réfugiés maliens au Burkina Faso. Cette réflexion met l'accent sur la représentation collective de la ville comme espace fonctionnel et/ou légitime de gestion des crises, d'accueil des exilés et de sécurisation potentiellement plus durable. Elle analyse les trajectoires et les conditions de négociation de l'accès à la ville par les réfugiés maliens tout en éclairant les tensions et oppositions entre d'une part, les injonctions de l'Etat et des intervenants humanitaires et d'autre part les besoins des réfugiés. Ce contexte particulier incite les réfugiés à développer des stratégies de contournement et/ou d'alliance avec les acteurs humanitaires dans le but de se maintenir en ville.

Mots-clés : réfugiés, encampement, insertion, autonomisation, solidarités.

Abstract

This article studies the empowerment logics driven by local networks of mutual aid and assistance for Malian refugees in Burkina Faso. This reflection emphasises the collective representation of the city as a functional and/or legitimate space for a more sustainable potential management of crises, exile reception and security. The article analyses the trajectories and conditions of negotiation for access to the city by Malian refugees, whilst clarifying the tensions and oppositions between the injunctions of the State and humanitarian actors on the one hand, and on the other hand, the needs of refugees. This particular context encourages refugees to bypass and/or develop alliance strategies with humanitarian actors in order to stay in the city.

Keywords: refugees, internment, integration, empowerment, solidarity.

From Assistance to Empowerment: the life and survival trajectories of Malian refugees in Burkina Faso

In 2012, Burkina Faso received a massive influx of Malian refugees, who settled in cities, camps and outside of camps, and this trend continues to this day. The UNHCR recorded 138,391 displaced Malians according to data from April/May 2019, 25,171 of whom were in Burkina Faso. Since 2015, the host country has itself experienced internal population movements, having suffered attacks from armed groups in the north of the country, but also in the capital, Ouagadougou. The effects of these forced mobilisations can be seen at the internal level, with 219,756 Burkinabe citizens currently registered as displaced¹. This context illustrates the multi-directional nature of population movements, and the blurred lines between the categories of displaced persons and host populations. In the case of Mali, these population movements have also been influenced and reactivated by a succession of political and security upheavals since 2012, namely: the rebellion in the North, the military coup, political agitation, transition and the subsequent intervention by the French military, the elections in 2013, and enduring instability and uncertainty. The departure of these displaced Malian citizens is part of a long history. The displacements of the Tuaregs, for example, have been studied as part of a nomadic lifestyle which has been the subject of controls since the colonial period. This particular context is illustrated by the division of space through the establishment of borders for the colonies (Boilley, 1999).

The successive Tuareg rebellions in Mali (1963, 1990, 2006, 2012) also contributed to these population movements, which have taken on a cyclical and repetitive form. Over the course of our study, we identified several cases of refugees from the north of Mali who were going back and forth between Burkina Faso and Mali. Initially registered as refugees in Burkina Faso in the 1990s, some declared that they had returned to Mali, only to flee to Burkina Faso again when conflict broke out, often from fear of political and social violence. In their narratives, this violence included the fear of brutal acts by the Malian military, clashes between armed groups, and the fear of reprisals and rejection by the population. For the most part, refugees who identified as Fulani, Dogon and Bambara declared having fled either from conflict zones in the north, or from areas in central Mali where conflicts have intensified since 2015. Displaced Malians primarily justified the choice of Burkina Faso with reference to its geographical proximity, followed by other aspects involving cultural and family ties. In sub-Saharan Africa, refugees are most often confronted with policies of internment in camps. The alternatives to camps are not widely known or used (Bakewell, 2014). Major early works have highlighted the abuses of power inherent to internment and its dehumanising effects on refugees (Arendt, 1958; Foucault, 1979).

¹UNHCR data: <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/70401>. Accessed July 2019.

Yet it has only been since the 2000s that refugees in cities have been the subject of increased attention in research focusing on the differences between camps, cities, villages, and the forms of socialisation that make a camp rural or urban (Agier, 2001; Agier and Lecadet, 2014; Bakewell, 2014; Corbet, 2014; Fresia, 2006; Malkki, 1995). The nature of the connections between urban spaces and camps shows that mobilities transcend the borders of the camps (Dorai, 2008; Fresia, 2009; Scalettaris, 2009).

This article examines the tensions and oppositions between, on the one hand, State injunctions and humanitarian actors, and on the other hand, the needs of refugees. It analyses the trajectories and conditions of negotiation for "the right to the city" by Malian refugees in Burkina Faso. The article is based on the results of a qualitative field study carried out in Burkina Faso with Malian refugees, State officials, the National Commission for Refugees and the High Commission for Refugees in the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso in April 2019. It involved studying the logics of empowerment for refugees beyond the camps, in the cities, in the absence of support from the State or from members of the "humanitarian government"². To this end, we examined the existence and structure of community social systems (associative, family, and community networks) in the role of providing protection and material assistance for refugees. This line of questioning enabled us to explore the logics of urban integration by Malian refugees, based both on social networks and on the implementation of survival strategies in Burkina Faso. We will begin by addressing the central place assigned to internment by the Burkinabe State and by humanitarian actors. The latter are confronted with criticism and questioning of the camps by certain Malian refugees. The majority of refugees that we met in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso had had an initial experience in the camps, for periods ranging from three months to five years. This experience was repeatedly characterised with reference to its restrictive dimension, whereas the choice of the city was often justified in terms of opportunities to access multiple resources. We will then demonstrate the influence of the interrelations between communities of Malian refugees in urban areas in Burkina Faso, and the conditions for the structuring of their collective action in the context of insecurity in Burkina Faso. Finally, these different elements will enable us to shed light on the trajectories of Malian refugees who often resort to mobility as an empowerment strategy.

Internment: the cornerstone of Burkinabe policy for the reception of refugees

Asylum policy in Burkina Faso favours internment, with the "right to the city" being reserved for a minority of refugees. At the time of our study, Malian refugees numbered 24,666 individuals³, of whom 14,720 were split between Mentaou camp, near Djibo, and Goudoubo camp, near Dori, 9,416 people were in villages in the provinces of Soum and Oudalan (Sahel region), and 530 individuals were in urban areas (Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso).

² This concept is used by Michel Agier, see Agier, 2004.

³ According to UNHCR estimates from March 31st 2019.

The majority of our survey sample was made up of refugees settled in cities, who identified as Tuaregs (80%), with the remaining 20% identifying as Fulani, Songhai, Dogon, and Bambara.

In Burkina Faso, the State has delegated refugee reception to the National Commission for Refugees (CONAREF). CONAREF is defined by its responsibilities as a government body, created in 1988 to manage all aspects pertaining to refugees. The Commission receives reports on the arrival of asylum seekers, either from refugees or from State officials. It then intervenes, in collaboration with the UNHCR, to determine the status of the refugees. Refugee rights in Africa and the conditions of this partnership are governed by the 1951 Geneva Convention, and subsequently by the OAU Convention of September 1969, which encourages close collaboration between the UNHCR and the member states of the African Union. In the case of Malian asylum seekers, the Burkinabe State implemented a policy of *prima facie*⁴ recognition of refugees in response to the influx of Malian citizens from 2012. Unlike the logic of individual recognition, this procedure involves a collective recognition of refugee status as a function of belonging to a group. This identification phase, characterised by strong logics of refugee governance in Burkina Faso (Bardelli and Yéré, 2018), is followed by the registering of refugees. In the end, refugees are systematically transferred to the Mentao and Goudoubo camps. Other temporary camps were set up in 2012 in response to the massive influx of Malian refugees, such as the Sag-Nioniogo camp, located 18 kilometres from Ouagadougou, and the Wobi Stadium camp in Bobo Dioulasso⁵.

The majority of the refugees that we met in the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso had had one or several experiences in these different camps. Nevertheless, some had been able to break free of these spaces of internment, without losing their refugee status, by means of various different strategies. In the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso, Malian refugees often defined the camp as a space that produced both resources and restrictions. As Abou expressed it⁶:

"In 2012, I was registered at the border as a refugee and once I got to town, I was taken to the stadium where there were already several refugees. I found my aunt there. We spent eight months in the stadium and we were taken care of by the UNHCR and Action sociale. They gave us tents and food. I really suffered in that stadium under those conditions because it was my first time being a refugee"⁷.

He was describing the reception for Malian refugees who had taken the roads from Mopti, Ségou, and Sikasso to come to Bobo Dioulasso. Once they had been registered with the UNHCR, they were placed in Wobi Stadium, which was turned into a refugee camp between 2012 and 2015. During his years of internment, Abou, like other refugees, made a living as a paid volunteer for the UNHCR and the NGO CREDO (a UNHCR partner for Malian refugees). Recourse to refugee volunteers has become fairly common practice for the UNHCR since 2014.

⁴ UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection n°11: Prima Facie Recognition of Refugee Status, June 24th 2015, HCR/GIP/15/11, available online at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/555c335a4.html>

UNHCR, Guidelines on Temporary Protection Stay Arrangements, February 2014, available online at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/52fba2404.html>

⁵ Originally a stadium, that was transformed into a refugee camp.

⁶ As per their request, the first names of our respondents have been anonymised.

⁷ Interview with Abou in Bobo Dioulasso on April 15th 2019.

This "putting to work" of refugees has been defined as a particular form of invisible, precarious labour (Drif, 2018). According to Abou, his volunteering mainly consisted of hygiene activities and cleaning work around the camp. He also worked as an intermediary between international organisations and "young" refugees.

2015 was a turning point that illustrated the tension between the interests of the Burkinabe State, those of the UNHCR and those of Malian refugees. It was during this period that the UNHCR decided to move the camps located in urban areas to rural areas, and to get rid of food aid for refugees settled in the cities. Our survey sample was made up of refugees who were opposed to this resettlement operation, which was justified in various ways. UNHCR and CONAREF officials in Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou explained it as the result of a strategic decision taken in response to cohabitation difficulties between refugees and local populations in the cities. One CONAREF representative in Bobo Dioulasso specifically mentioned the fear of the conflicts that may arise between local populations and refugees during refugee food distributions. According to her, this was one of the main reasons that the Sag-Nioniogo camp was moved to the Sahel region. In response to the resettlement project for refugees in the two main camps of Mentao and Goudoubou, several hundreds of Malians⁸ chose to disperse themselves in the city of Bobo Dioulasso, despite being warned by UNHCR officials of the financial restrictions that would be brought about by this decision. Malian refugees saw these arguments as demonstrating the limits of humanitarian aid, which they had often associated with a lack of financial resources from sponsors of international aid. By avoiding the camps, these Malian refugees therefore took the risk of sacrificing their access to camp resources in order to empower themselves and gain access to other opportunities.

Whispers and critical discourses amongst refugees about the camps

In the context of the regrouping of refugees in camps far removed from urban areas, Malian refugees resorted to numerous strategies aimed at guaranteeing their protection and preserving their interests. As Ansary stated: "everyone had to work things out on their own"⁹. This new situation first required them to negotiate their exit from the camps without losing the privileges of legal refugee status. This status was considered by the refugees as a kind of insurance which protected them against any risk they may encounter. This was evident in the systematic recourse, by some, to asylum seeking, even if they did not meet the criteria of fear of persecution, oppression, imprisonment or other similar threats¹⁰. This was the case for Fatima and her father Abdallah, for example, from the Gourma-Rharous cercle (Timbuktu region), who identified as Arabs. Abdallah had been living in Burkina Faso for sixty years but he had never obtained Burkinabe citizenship. Fatima was born in Bobo Dioulasso but she did not have Burkinabe citizenship either since both her parents were Malian. Upon reaching adulthood, she left Burkina Faso to live with her husband in Timbuktu, Mali.

⁸ UNHCR estimates from March 30th 2019 recorded 403 refugees in Bobo Dioulasso and 127 in Ouagadougou.

⁹ Interview with Ansary in Bobo Dioulasso on April 16th 2019.

¹⁰ These criteria are set out in the principles that make up the basis of the OAU Convention on the status of refugees in Africa.

Following her husband's death in 2011, she returned to Bobo Dioulasso to live with her father. When conflict broke out in 2012 in Mali, they both played the role of *jàtigi*¹¹ (or hosts) for a number of immigrants from the Timbuktu region:

"We welcomed everybody who was coming from Mali and we didn't differentiate between them: some we knew, but others found us through the intermediary of people we knew, or they had heard that there was a family that came from Timbuktu. My father has a big house here and we hosted them all there, we also did our best to feed them. Later the UNHCR took over and registered them as refugees. As a result of this sacrifice, the UNHCR also invited us to register as refugees ourselves"¹².

More than other criteria, community affiliation and the role of *jàtigi* seems to have facilitated obtaining refugee status in this case. From the point of view of Malian refugees, this status allowed them to avoid forms of violence and abuse that they had identified in the home and host countries. As Mohamed-Ali stated:

"We benefit from respect from the authorities when we show our refugee card. It allows me to escape the Malian and Burkinabe customs racketeering, during my many visits to Mali"¹³.

Thanks to this status, Malian refugees were also spared the work ban that was imposed on other refugees (Bardelli and Yéré, 2018)¹⁴. Certain refugees seized this opportunity to negotiate with the UNHCR for their place in the city, which was seen as the most propitious setting for their professional activities. These complaints had an even better chance of being heard in light of the observed developments in terms of UNHCR intervention amongst refugees in urban areas. Since September 2009, the United Nations agency had changed its policy¹⁵ with regard to refugees living in cities, adopting a policy known as the Urban Refugee Policy¹⁶, which aimed to provide protection and assistance for refugees in urban environments in the same way as for refugees in camps (Doraï, 2016). Specific provisions were also made to guarantee the rights of refugees in urban environments, namely through the commitment to "upholding the social and economic standing of refugees, particularly by means of education, vocational training, livelihoods promotion and self-reliance initiatives"¹⁷. Nevertheless, in Burkina Faso, we observed more of a tendency to dissuade refugees from settling in cities on behalf of CONAREF and UNHCR officials. The Malian refugees who were able to bypass these logics claimed that they were eventually able to benefit from support for their children's education, first aid training and driving lessons financed by the UNHCR.

¹¹ In the Bambara language, *jàtigi* means the landlord. The concept has been defined as a tutor figure or benevolent host who provides accommodation and protection (Schmitz, 2008). It has been the object of a number of works (Bredeloup, 1994; Timera, 2000) and is treated as one of the pivotal figures in West African migration and mobility (Pian, 2008).

¹² Interview with Fatima in Bobo Dioulasso on April 18th 2019.

¹³ Interview with Mohamed-Ali in Bobo Dioulasso on April 20th 2019.

¹⁴ According to the author, Malians are allowed to work and reside in Burkina Faso independently of their refugee status. This is due to a series of bilateral agreements and the presence of legal instruments at the subregional level.

¹⁵ Before this period, the United Nations' agency's policies were solely focused on the camps.

¹⁶ The implementation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas, Document accessed on May 6th 2019: <https://www.unhcr.org/516d658c9.pdf>

¹⁷ UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas, 2012. Document accessed online on July 10th 2019: <https://www.unhcr.org/516d658c9.pdf>

It was therefore based on these forms of support that the UNHCR justified its role of socio-economic protection for urban refugees. A head of an association for refugees¹⁸ in Burkina Faso nevertheless considered this protection to be almost non-existent¹⁹. In the case of Malian refugees, they were able to make up for the loss of camp resources and stay in the cities thanks to the support of existing solidarity networks.

Solidarity links and the influence of refugee networks in access to the city

In the towns of Burkina Faso, the networks of mutual assistance and solidarity for Malian refugees were first built on the basis of criteria of persecution against Malian groups who identified as Tuaregs or Arabs. The solidarity links between individuals who identified as members of the same persecuted group occupied an important place in the urban integration of Malian refugees in Burkina Faso. These multiple, overlapping solidarity links developed on several levels (close or distant family ties, neighbourhood ties, tribal ties, etc). In Bobo Dioulasso, the urban integration of Tuareg and Arabic refugees, who mainly came from Gourma-Rharous (Timbuktu region) was foremost strengthened by neighbourhood ties from the area of origin, then by the influence of family and friendship ties. Most justified the choice of Burkina Faso as a country of exile with reference to the presence of their male relatives (fathers, brothers or uncles) and friends who had lived there for a certain number of years. These relatives and friends, who usually had refugee status themselves, initially organised their accommodation before referring them to the UNHCR. As stated by Mohamed-Ali, who identified as an Arab, came from Gourma-Rharous and was the president of a collective of Malian refugees in Bobo Dioulasso: "No refugee has any serious job. We survive. We don't know ourselves how we live. The social element helps us to get by". This associative leader justified these social ties as follows: "The social element is, I'm going to see Aboubacrine when times are hard to ask him for help; when things are bad with him, he can count on my support too. It's mutual assistance, the sharing of food and family support"²⁰.

Beyond family and friendship ties, the shared experience of exile strengthened the connections between these refugees around a collective memory built by conflict and persecution against Tuaregs and Arabs over the last few decades. Unlike other groups, the refugees who identified as Tuaregs and Arabs had a longer experience of exile in the political history of Mali. They were able to count on the support of pre-existing networks before and after the Malian crisis in 2012. This experience was often narrativised through a shared feeling of insecurity and fear of persecution in the wake of the rebellions:

"I left Kati on April 5th 2012 because I received death threats on several occasions from the inhabitants of Kati. After the coup, I tried to put up with it and stay there, but as time went by, I saw that the situation was getting worse and I was then advised by close friends to get out, which is how I left.

¹⁸ Of all nationalities.

¹⁹ Interview with Clément, president of a collective of refugees in Burkina Faso, in Ouagadougou on April 11th 2019.

²⁰ Interview with Mohamed-Ali in Bobo Dioulasso on April 20th 2019.

My aunt, who I was living with in Kati, left before I did, but since I was working for a company, I wanted to stay so that I would not lose my job, but alas (silence). Even some of my own friends who I had lived with for a long time threatened me, jokingly, but then I was afraid they would take it out on me"²¹.

The conflation between Tuareg people and rebel groups by part of the Malian population contributed to feeding this collective memory, which also took shape in relation to other Malian citizens:

"One day, the army came to get me in my house. I didn't have a problem because I went to see them with my friend who is a policeman. After that, I decided to follow my mother to Mopti. She was the one who helped me understand that they didn't like me. She told me one day, "Listen, as long as your skin is that colour, those people won't like you""²².

The narrativisation of experiences of alterity and differentiation in Mali not only consolidated the links between the ethnic Tuareg and Arabic groups on the basis of specific criteria of exclusion and rejection, but also justified the importance of the solidarity links between individuals who had been victims or threatened as a result of their affiliation to these groups. In the face of the threat, solidarity networks played an important role in group cohesion, as well as providing protection and material assistance for refugees.

In the context of asylum in Burkina Faso, these solidarity links extended to other ethnic groups, as we were able to observe during the course of an interview with Alhassane, a 58-year-old who identified as a Tuareg, and a marabout²³ by profession. On the day of the interview, Alhassane's villa's courtyard was full of a dozen refugees who identified as Tuaregs and were gathered under a tent drinking tea. I was able to see how he played his role of *jâtigi* since, as I learned later, Alhassane had asked for a sheep to be slaughtered for our meeting, and once this ritual for welcoming strangers was completed, he did not wish to exchange another word with me. Alhassane, who was from the Timbuktu region, had only been to Qur'anic school. He came from a family of sharifs who were recognised as Qur'anic masters in the region. He claimed to have fled for the first time during the repression by the pro-government militia in the north of Mali in 1990, which also coincided with the outbreak of a Tuareg rebellion. At the time, he was hosted by acquaintances in Bobo Dioulasso, before being placed by the UNHCR in the Boromo camp (Boucle du Mouhoun region) for two years. In 1993, he was transferred to the Sag-Nioniogo camp, where he claims to have lived for seven years. Following the ceremony of the peace flame in Timbuktu in 1996, marking the symbolic end of the conflict, the UNHCR launched a repatriation programme for Malian refugees. Alhassane decided to go and live in Nara (Koulikoro region, Mali), where he earned his living as a marabout.

As a result of the conflicts in Mali in 2012, Alhassane had to go back to Bobo Dioulasso, where he made a new request for refugee status and was housed in the Wobi Stadium camp. He did not spend long there because "those who could afford to got their houses"²⁴. He decided to settle in a villa in Bobo Dioulasso with a former Malian Tuareg minister who was also a refugee in Burkina Faso.

²¹ Interview with Abou in Bobo Dioulasso on April 15th 2019.

²² Interview with Mohamed-Ali in Bobo Dioulasso on April 20th 2019.

²³ In the respondent's own words. He explained this by the fact of dispensing remedies and making written or verbal blessings for his clients. He derived his income from his knowledge of the Qur'an.

²⁴ Interview with Alhassane in Bobo Dioulasso on April 16th 2019.

The choice to live in a city is not a given for all refugees. It requires people recently arrived in Burkina Faso, often without their belongings, to have the financial resources and means of subsistence to meet their and their families' needs, whether their families are present or still in their country of origin. Just like the international organisations, Alhassane identified himself as the "focal point"²⁵ for several refugees in Burkina Faso, whom he supplied with temporary accommodation and food. He was able to fulfil his role of *jàtigi* thanks to his function as a marabout, which conferred material and social resources. For example, during the course of my enquiry, he claimed to be living free of charge in one of his disciples' villas: "I am living in the house of one of my disciples who is Fulani, and who has welcomed me in his home, and I myself host an incalculable number of people". In his case, mutual assistance took on an ethnic and interethnic dimension thanks to the interactions and solidarity links developed with other groups of Malian refugees. Connections existed between different Malian groups that identified as Tuareg, Fulani, Songhai, Bambara or Dogon. In Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso, for example, they most commonly interacted in the context of associations for Malian refugees that benefited from support from the UNHCR and that were subject to great influence by UNHCR and CONAREF officials who wanted to unite their spokespeople. The groups were spaces for the creation of interethnic links between refugees who were easily able to identify each other in the city and who carried the cause of Malian refugees together. Finally, Alhassane's example showed that refugees, rather than being considered as simple beneficiaries, can be seen as active purveyors of support for other refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). His commitment to mutual assistance for refugees from the same region as him was often justified by its religious and humanist character, but beyond that, he showed how conflicts can be at the root of solidarities which provide social and symbolic resources (Lardeux, 2009).

The question presented itself in a different way in the trajectory of Amadou, a 39-year-old who identified as Fulani, and came from the Mopti region. He arrived in Bobo Dioulasso in 2013 with his wife and children, at the time of the French intervention in central Mali. Unlike Alhassane, he claimed that he chose the city without having the necessary resources to provide for his family. He therefore lived in a state of precariousness which he attempted to overcome with his job as a transporter of merchandise. He was able to stay in the city thanks to a Burkinabe citizen from his home area who sublet him rooms for 10,000 FCFA per month. The difference between these two trajectories can be attributed to the degree of network formalisation. Unlike the Fulani, Dogon, Bambara and Songhai, the Tuaregs and Arabs have had a longer experience of asylum in Burkina Faso and can count on better-organised and more influential networks to facilitate their urban integration. In Amadou's case, he did not benefit from protection or material assistance from pre-established solidarity networks in the city. He did not have the possibility of being housed for free to begin with by a close or distant relative. Settling in the city required him to be in a position to pay rent, food, etc. This lack of family networks for refugees who identify as Fulani, Dogon, Bambara and Songhai can be explained by the recent nature of their forced displacements to Burkina Faso.

²⁵ This is an expression borrowed from international organisations.

Most of them arrived in the wake of the intensification of the conflicts in central Mali from 2013. In the context of their settling, they often benefited from temporary help from Burkinabe citizens who facilitated their access to accommodation, as expressed by Bintou, from Sofara (Mopti region):

*"Rents are quite high. People accommodate us though, because they rent us rooms for 10,000 FCFA. That's Providence, they see the conditions that we arrive here in and they help us out"*²⁶.

Hence, beyond the influence of networks and interethnic solidarity links, this urban integration of Malian refugees was also dependent on the kinds of relations and interactions that they were able to build with the local Burkinabe authorities and citizens. Moreover, Malian refugees did not have a fixed vision of urban integration or of integration in Burkina Faso. The majority of refugees that we met in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso were engaged in a process of cross-border circulation between Burkina Faso, Mali and Mauritania.

Mobility and empowerment strategies by refugees in cities

The settling of refugees in cities enabled us to see how they developed mobility strategies and escaped the control and supervision of their movements by the State and by actors of the humanitarian government. These movements can first be defined in terms of circulations between the camp and the city. This was the case for Lalla, for example, from Timbuktu, who worked as a craftswoman with her husband in Ouagadougou: "I am told when there's a distribution of donations at the camp, at the end of every month, I go to Djibo to get the donations which I bring back here"²⁷.

This mobility allowed for access to camp resources from the city. We also observed other forms of mobility, based on economic and family logics. Indeed, in spite of the intensification of conflicts and the alarming security context in central and northern Mali, several refugees maintained their ties to their home areas by making frequent round-trips to see their families who had remained in these areas or in the capital, Bamako. Their movements were truly "beyond borders" inasmuch as, to get to the north of Mali, some of them undertook long journeys of several days by way of Niger to access Gao and Timbuktu, for example. Others took the direction of Mauritania where their wives and children lived. Far from being returns to their home countries or migrations towards neighbouring countries, these movements enabled Malian refugees to maintain their cross-border activities and their links to their transnational families (Basch, Schiller and Blanc, 1994). In this context, transnationalism gave power to refugees over immobilism.

In Mohamed's trajectory, for example, he resorted to cross-border mobility in order to further his economic integration in Burkina Faso. Mohamed, who was 37 years old with few qualifications, dropped out of school at the secondary level. He arrived in Bobo Dioulasso in 2012. Unlike other refugees who lived in the camps to begin with, he was hosted by his brother, who he said he then started working for as a car park attendant in 2015.

²⁶ Interview with Bintou in Bobo Dioulasso on April 19th 2019.

²⁷ Interview with Lalla in Ouagadougou on April 13th 2019.

As he explained: "I make a lot of trips in the subregion, to Benin, Togo, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and even Mali, always as part of my business with vehicles and sometimes as a chauffeur. I bring cars for people and they pay me for that"²⁸.

This job conferred a certain financial stability which enabled him to provide for his niece and nephew, whom he was raising with his Burkinabe wife. It also allowed him to gain a degree of autonomy from humanitarian organisations.

Indeed, before 2015, Mohamed's possibilities for economic integration were highly dependent on humanitarian workers. In 2013, he was able to get his first paid job as a volunteer for the NGO Terre des hommes, a UNHCR partner. This work involved the census-taking of Malian refugees and a role as an intermediary for communities, and paid 35,000 FCFA. After six months of volunteering, he was able to get another similar job for a year with another NGO partner of the UNHCR. Although these different jobs enabled Mohamed to become a representative and associative leader in his community, they involved him living in a degree of precariousness where he was highly financially dependent on the temporary jobs given to him by humanitarian workers. During our study, we met a number of refugees like Mohamed who worked as volunteers for NGOs in the specific field of community mobilisation invested by the UNHCR in Burkina Faso²⁹. Yet when we compare Mohamed's different trajectories since 2015, we can see that it was his financial emancipation from the control of actors from the humanitarian government that enabled him to succeed in his economic integration and achieve a certain financial stability. Nevertheless, in spite of this stability, as he stated, Mohamed continued to be involved in activities with associative networks for refugees, so as not to miss potential opportunities that may arise from humanitarian workers.

²⁸ Interview with Mohamed in Bobo Dioulasso on April 16th 2016.

²⁹ UNHCR Global Appeal document, accessed online on July 12th 2019.

<https://www.unhcr.org/publications/fundraising/528a0a272/unhcr-global-appeal-2014-2015-burkina-faso.html>

Conclusion

This article has shown the nature of humanitarian transitions and the tensions at play in refugee reception in Burkina Faso. The measures developed by the State and by humanitarian actors are not sufficient. They are increasingly contested and called into question by the refugees, who demand alternatives to the camps. The strategic choice of the city enables them to bypass their dependency on humanitarian actors and internment measures, without giving up the advantages and resources that go along with them. Access to the city also enables refugees to establish their own empowerment strategies based on logics of networking and transnational mobility. This mobility takes place in a context of conflicts in the home country, to which there is little thought of returning, but also in a context of control and resistance on behalf of African states with regard to freedom of movement for refugees. In the face of these multiple restrictions, those refugees who do manage to implement empowerment strategies are those who are able to accumulate the social, material and symbolic resources necessary for their local and transnational activities. Since the first Tuareg rebellions in Mali, these refugee networks have been built up in Burkina Faso, on the basis of family, friendship, religious and interethnic ties. Connections have also been established with other Malian communities of different ethnicities, as well as with Burkinabe groups with whom alliances and tensions often develop.

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