STAYING PUT IN MOVING SANDS:
THE STEPWISE MIGRATION PROCESS OF SUB-SAHARAN
AFRICAN MIGRANTS HEADING NORTH

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Introduction

Traditionally migration related research has focused on the ending sides of migration. The general emphasis has been on the decision making process before migrating (the pre-migration phase) as well as on migrant’s adaptation and integration at the ending stage of migration. Paradoxically, migration as a process of moving has been understudied. This derives from the conventional understanding of migration being an unproblematic transition of a place of origin to a certain destination. However, a closer look at contemporary sub-Saharan African migration shows that migration processes are often more complex than this simple linear movement. Many migrants undertake lengthy and often dangerous overland journeys which contains periods of temporary settlement and subsequent movements (Collyer 2007). Others fly to relatively unknown areas in hope of reaching their primary destination from there, since they lack the means for reaching it directly.

It is important to note that sub-Saharan African migration, and trans-Saharan migration in particular, is not so European focused as it is often represented. Many sub-Saharan Africans1 are going to Northern African countries as their primary destination. In fact, there are estimates suggesting that more sub-Saharan Africans live in North Africa than in the European Union (de Haas 2007). The large scale regional migration and the reception of refugees in neighbouring countries prove that, contrary to what is often believed in the North, South-South migration is the dominant form of international migration in Africa (Adepoju 2008; Awumbila and Manuh 2008).

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1 Although most of my respondents came from West and Central Africa, I have chosen to use the broader geographical indication of sub-Saharan Africa.
Despite the dominance of intra-continental migration in Africa, migration to Europe (and Middle East, Asia and North America) is definitely rising (Baldwin-Edwards 2006). The explanation goes beyond the traditional push factors of political and economic instability of many African countries. The more cultural explanations concerning the opening up of African societies due to modern communication means and the fascination for modern lifestyles in Western areas gain importance in the field of international migration from South to North (Gebrewold 2007; Ros et al. 2007). “Adventurism” is also an important motivating factor in many cases (van Dijk, Foeken and van Til 2001; Kothari 2008). Hence there is a growing aspiration in African societies to emigrate to the North, especially among juveniles in urban spaces. However, these aspirations emerge in times of social and political closure of the European Union. The recent heightening of the fences around the Spanish exclaves Ceuta and Melilla, the numerous sea patrols and the strengthened visa regimes prove that indeed the fundamental human right of free movement is incomplete. Every person has the right to leave any country, including his/her country of birth, while at the same time states have the sovereign right to exclude newcomers in order to protect public interests (Singh Juss 2006).

An important consequence of the growing migration aspirations and the simultaneous closing of Fortress Europe is that many would-be immigrants attempt to enter Europe unauthorized. For the migrant, this requires a considerable sum of money, courage, the right contacts and some organizational capacity. Many individuals do not have the right mix of these ingredients resulting in a growing number of sub-Saharan African migrants waiting in European border regions for their chance to enter their ‘El Dorado’. There are considerable African ‘transit communities’ found in the Maghreb countries, Turkey and more surprisingly in countries such as Ukraine (Uehling 2004). From the European perspective, the accumulation of transit migrants at its borders is the main reason to regain its migration controls. And there we have the (self-)realization of a cat and mouse game in the liminal spaces of the Euro-African borderlands with, as we probably all know, serious humanitarian consequences.

Sub-Saharan African transit, or stepwise, migration is changing EU-African borderlands politically, spatially and socially. However, changes do also occur deeper in Africa. Tamanrasset in Algeria (Bredeloup and Pliez 2006; de Haas 2007) as well as Dirkou in Niger (Brachet 2005) have changed from remote desert towns to places of