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Leaving West Africa never easy: the trans-Saharan escape



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Should I stay or should I go

- A trade-off between what they have
 - Poverty, but even worse no possibility of progress
 - Uncertainty, but also possible improvement
 - That is if one can endure the hardship along the trans-Saharan escape
 - For some, but clearly not all – the road of uncertainty seems more attractive than the stability of staying

The trans-Saharan escape

- Passes through an area of remoteness and isolation, but also of increased geopolitical significance due to the "war on terror"
- A site of informalisation, but also increased criminalisation: illicit transportation of cigarettes, drugs, arms and people
- Global jihad in the form of AQIM as well as ordinary bandits, and Tuareg rebels in Northern Mali and Northern Niger
- A violent and dangerous borderland, definitively not a comfort region



The first escape: leaving "home"

The "traveller" may be everywhere, eager to leave from any forlorn and forgotten place

Making the great escape from the place of no opportunity to something else, something possibly better



The journey: boat, motor bike, bus, car and walking



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The second escape: on the road

- to uncertainty, but also utilising networks and resources along the way
- If our "journyman" starts from somewhere in Liberia or Sierra Leone – the first part of the trans-Saharan escape is to make it to a place where the crossing can be arranged
- One such place is Gao in Mali, strategically located at the bend of the Niger River at the very border of the Saharan desert
 - Gao is increasingly becoming an important regional informal hub along this route – can be reached by bus, car and boat
- Only to make it this far our "journyman" must gather considerable knowledge and resources to navigate (to paraphrase Henrik) an uncertain terrain.

The third escape: Kidal - into the unknown

- Kidal – formally a part of Mali, but in reality something else
 - The state of Mali stops where the road ends in Gao
 - The 350 kilometre track through the sand from Gao cuts across a borderless limbo between the Algerian and the Malian state
 - A place lost in time and space
- Kidal is marginal
 - But also a place of prime importance
 - at the forefront of several Tuareg rebellions, and
 - Increasingly a centre for trade and transportation (legal and illicit)

Towards the final border of the Mediterranean

- From Kidal to Tamanrasset and beyond
 - On the old routes of trade and commerce
 - Renewed relevance due to a combination of
 - Increased border control on easier routes, and
 - Technological advances, e.g. GPS, satellite phones, cell phones and the 4x4 car
 - Travelling on the unmarked roads
 - The dry riverbeds and the camel paths
 - Reaching Tamanrasset in about a day, that is if everything goes well.

The sea: the final frontier

- The sea is the final frontier and it is not only difficult, but also contain danger, but this is where we leave our "traveller"
- In order to make it this far our traveller has
 - Crossed vast and unknown territories
 - From his "home" somewhere in Sierra Leone or Liberia, across different zones of
 - Language
 - Culture
 - Climate
 - And by a range of different means of transportation, that each and every one of them comes with a price, a cost that must be paid
 - Thus implying that
 - Resources must be available – money, skills to negotiate and navigate and networks
 - Europe is perceived as opportunity, but as this travel illustrate it is only the most resourceful and entrepreneurial who can manage this journey into uncertainty.