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**French-speaking geography of retail and consumption:
themes, issues and approaches**

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Inconspicuous geography of retail trade: reaching the Global South consumers

Armelle Choplin and Olivier Pliez

Introduction

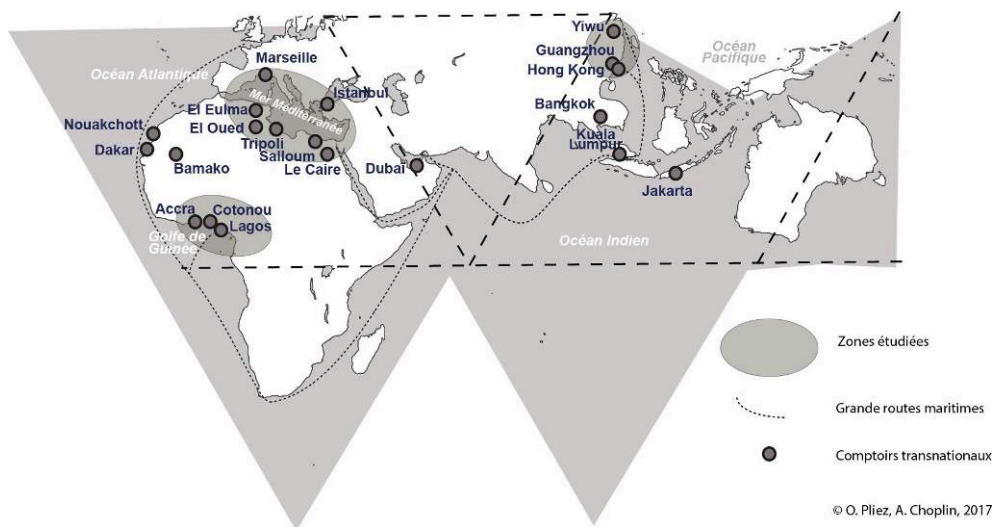
- 1 Flip flops, batteries, t-shirts and socks, jeans, lighters, laptop cases ... all these products can be found in the most unexpected and remote markets and spaces in the Global South. Our objective is to grasp these commercial circulations, along with the new geography of retail that connects spaces to others, transformed by what we call “inconspicuous globalisation” (Choplin and Pliez, 2014, 2018). This geography of retail shows that many people, trades and spaces encompassed in globalisation remain discrete, if not completely invisible. Trying to analyse this inconspicuous geography of retail, this paper aims to show the largely unknown roads and role of people which play a crucial role within the globalized economy. The circulation of goods shapes the lives and livelihoods of the millions of people, who are seen as a new frontier for expanding markets and therefore indispensable to globalisation of consumer markets.
- 2 For the last thirty years, transnational exchange routes have been profoundly transformed. They now connect the world’s workshop, mainly in China, with the so-called market of the poor¹. The poorest also has indeed money to invest very modestly in other sectors of consumption: housing, health, education, transportation. We propose to analyse the roads and crossroads that are underlying this inconspicuous retail trade and that reach these consumers, mostly localized in the Global South.
- 3 This paper relied on long-term field trying to investigate globalisation in the most “discrete” spaces of the global world, far from Wall Street and Davos, Amazon and L’Oréal. This other view of globalisation focuses, from a geographical perspective, on its less visible yet essential forms in interstitial spaces from Africa to China, through the Mediterranean and the Middle East. To understand these other “Silk Roads”, we

propose to take and follow these thousand and one roads to analyse another globalisation, from below (Mathews *et al.*, 2012) and the viewpoint of the different actors who are creating it.

- 4 In the first section, we propose to map this “other” globalisation, examining geopolitical reconfigurations, the type of traded goods, the growing role of economic actors such as entrepreneur migrants and diasporas, and the changing hierarchy among spaces. This inconspicuous globalisation is structured along rural centres, small towns, and paths that are not easy to access even for the stakeholders who operate in these regions. The links go beyond the North-South divide and reflect the growth of trade between the BRICSA, including China, and regions of the world hitherto marginalized in world trade. Secondly, we propose to look at the Mediterranean space, which has renewed its multiple networks and commercial nodes. In the last section, the analyse will focus on globalisation in West Africa, a space too long considered as peripheral and “late” in its integration into the world. Discrete spaces (roads, cross-border markets, urban peripheries) serve as the basis for the circulation and marketing of products, consumed massively by millions of “poor” people.

Inconspicuous geography of retail trade

Figure 1. Places of inconspicuous geography of retail trade.



Globalisation from below

- 5 The form of globalisation we describe concerns a plurality of actors and connections between places, at many different levels. The interconnections between the local and the global can be described through empirical approaches, taking as a starting point a localized and well-defined space – a market, a workshop, a factory – and then moving on to study this local place as part of a larger whole, or following a community, such like the transnational ones.
- 6 In response to the processes of globalisation, individuals have created communities that overlap national borders and, in a very concrete sense, are neither “here nor there”, but here and there at the same time. The economic activities that underlie these

communities are based precisely on the profitable differences created by the borders between them. In this respect, they operate no differently from multinationals, except that they emerge “from below” and their activities are mostly informal. Alejandro Portes (1997) proposes the formula “globalisation from below” precisely to analyse the transnational spaces constructed out of the bonds made within Hispanic and Latino American communities themselves. Portes’ works echo the research carried out in the Mediterranean metropolises. In France, Alain Tarrius (2002) has also used the expression “globalisation from below” to analyse the new economic mobilizations of transnational Maghreb communities. He observes “real networks of nomadic entrepreneurs [...] leading a global underground economy” – the renewal of a kind of cosmopolitanism in places where the State, “doesn’t expect them: in territories that escape it’s control and which it can’t manage”. The research undertaken by Portes and Tarrius echoes today the “other” economies (Mathews *et al.*, 2012) all around the world.

Follow the products, roads and markets

- 7 Far from The City in London, the “Grands Magasins” in Paris or Hong Kong in Asia, which are significant places of economic globalisation, the Futian Market in Yiwu, Belsunce in Marseille, Souk Dubai in El Oued in Algeria, the Alaba International Market in Lagos, or Missèbo in Cotonou ... are all examples of places and markets in which, even if little known, are nevertheless essential for globalisation. Usually, these places are distant from heavily trafficked roads, far from global cities and main marketplaces, and not visited by major companies and investors. However, in such places, a large number of transnational exchanges takes place, usually very informal and often poorly quantified.
- 8 Since the 1990s, faced with the emergence of a “world-system” (Wallerstein, 1974), voices were raised calling for a rethink of the social sciences’ methodological apparatus. Among those voices, the ethnologist George Marcus (1995) proposed the development of “multi-sited ethnographic research”. He suggested to “follow the goods or people”, in order to understand the discontinuities observable in any one specific place, but which generally unfold between several different sites. A few years before, Arjun Appadurai (1986) focused on understanding the social life of objects, analysing their “biography” to understand their uses and values. Following his theory, many works have adopted a “follow-the-thing” approach that traces the chain from the producer to the final consumer. These numerous works tell the political, the social and also the spatial life of globalized commodities, such as informal pharmaceuticals market (Quet, 2018), cotton (Çaliskan, 2010), milk (Ciavolella, 2019), luxury goods (Abélès, 2019), cement bags and concrete blocks (Choplin, 2023), second-hand cars (Rosenfeld, 2017), Chinese motos (Khan-Mohammad, 2016; Blundo, 2018), rickshaws (Tastevin, 2015) or jeans (Pliez, 2012). Most of these body of research needs to consider the commercial chain itself, which connects all stages and all sites of the manufacture of a product, from the supply of raw materials to consumption, through production and distribution, up to the final sale of the product but also what happens around it, even if that is all but invisible. This multi-site analysis is therefore not just about tracking the flows of goods or people, but about describing and understanding anchors, nodes, and links on a specific portion of the chain or on the chain as a whole, in following everyday objects.

Selling to the poor

- 9 Selling to the poor means identifying a market, or even creating it. Serious thought on this subject has abounded since the end of the 1990s. Coimbatore K. Prahalad (2002) generalized the use of the expression “bottom of the pyramid”, as part of an analysis of the lacklustre economic context of the early 2000s. On the one hand, a global economy that was gradually emerging out of the 1997 financial crisis, but whose growth remained weak and with increasing wealth gaps; on the other, the rapid growth of the economies of emerging countries – in particular the BRICSA – creating a global consumer market of hundreds of millions of consumers. In order to connect these two sides of the world-economy, Prahalad has issued a challenge to multinational firms, urging them to pay attention not only to the upper third of the economic pyramid, but also to the market at the bottom of the pyramid (the BOP market), made up of poor populations who earn less than \$2,000 a year – but who make up a large majority of the world’s population, at 4 billion people.
- 10 The “accountability” discourse underlying development policy advocated by Prahalad is criticised by many studies as Aneel Karnani (2007) who speaks of a “marketing mirage” at the bottom of the pyramid, warning against those who “romanticize” the poor as being microentrepreneurs, and end up putting them in danger. For the economist Esther Duflo (2015, p. 11), according to this neoliberal theory and “accountability” discourse, *“the role of the State is not to spend large amounts of money on poor people who are waiting passively for it. Its purpose should be to facilitate the emergence of functioning markets and a vibrant local democracy”*.
- 11 Multinationals, however, see the poor as a market to conquer, while developing discourses and products that promote development (the two not being mutually exclusive). Since then, projects were implemented by large global companies, attracted by this market full of promise and by the principle of enriching itself while helping the poor. Far removed from the debates on development aid and access to the poor’s access to consumer markets, the position of multinationals is already being challenged by the emergence of new product-and-supply-chain offers within emerging economies.

From the center to the margins

- 12 Focusing on the way in which globalisation and trading are rooted in unexpected places, and moving away from the usual, highly visible forms and processes (large-scale international institutions, high finance...), requires us to change our viewpoint. It requires to move from the centres towards the margins and settle in these variable places represented by the borders between countries, the peripheries of urban territories, along roadways which lead to market towns that have sprung up in the middle of nowhere.
- 13 In other words, it is necessary to go and observe unknown or ignored spaces – places that are “off the map”, to use Jennifer Robinson’s metaphor about cities in the global South (Robinson, 2002). Doing so means getting lost in the markets of Cairo, driving down West African highways between Ghana and Nigeria, sampling Arabic cuisine in restaurants in Yiwu, China, staying in Düsseldorf during its plastic fair, meeting wholesalers in Dubai, observing port agents receive, clear and store containers in the Bolloré terminal in Abidjan... In these unknown spaces, trading and making

transactions require only a few words in broken English, French, Arabic or Chinese, and a calculator (“the truly common language we all understand”, a rich Indian importer of Chinese products for West Africa confided to us). The provincialization of our perspective has made itself indispensable because the classical divisions – North/South, developed/developing countries, rich countries/Third World – are no longer sufficient to explain the complexity of the world.

- 14 Gradually, as transnational trade routes have become longer, they have diversified and intersected with geopolitical and religious questions. The new routes taken by transnational exchanges, more maritime than terrestrial, account for this decentring perspective. They have been subject to profound changes over the past thirty years and remain poorly known. At one end of these roads, one of these new centres, China, emerge and exports manufactured products to the entire world. At the other end, “Made in China” has become particularly visible for the market of the poor. Upstream, the gigantic supply centres have proliferated throughout the Asian continent, and downstream, a market of nearly two billion consumers is waiting for cheap products. But between these two extremes, the highways and their effects, the marketplaces connected, the plurality of stakeholders animating them, the imaginations they stimulate, the stories they develop remain all but unknown. The result is a multiplication of observation points where it is possible to analyse the direct or indirect effect of global production networks, to encounter large traders and small entrepreneurs.

Globalized spaces of retail: from Mediterranean to China

Bazaar economy along Mediterranean shores

- 15 The Mediterranean region, a major centre of exchanges for centuries, remains an intense trading area. Connections have nevertheless been diversified and have greatly been strengthened with the Middle East, especially Dubai, and at the end of the chain, with Asia, especially China and the trading post of Yiwu. These roads and spaces of exchange have been constructed over a fifty-year period, gradually linked up with Asia to form the pathways of a transcontinental exchange at an unprecedented level of intensity. Before, the intense trade linked primarily the ports of the two shores of the Mediterranean. The bazaar economy, to use the words of Clifford Geertz (1978) on the Moroccan market of Sefrou, was linked with the figure of the “ants” entrepreneurs described by Alain Tarrius (2002) and the “shopping-bag² carriers” (Peraldi, 2001). During the 1970s and 1980s, these figures were commuting between the big port cities of Southern Europe such as Marseille, Genoa and Barcelona, and the cities of the Maghreb where they resell the goods. The transnational activities of these immigrant communities, suffering from unemployment in a deindustrialized Europe that offers fewer and fewer unskilled or unqualified jobs, were more like a specific economic niche playing on price or income differentials or borders, within an ever broader “circulatory territory”. On the northern shore of the Mediterranean, a whole supply system was being built up to meet a growing demand for consumer products. At first operating at the regional and then national level, it quickly turned into a European affair. It created supply chains that brought together, for example, the refurbishment, trading and

transit of used vehicles and spare parts. On the southern shore, particularly in Algeria, in a context of import liberalization, the emerging demand for consumer markets was such that it was estimated that *trabendo* (slang contraction of the Spanish word *contrabando*, used in the Maghreb to designate the import of goods without a customs declaration) provided nearly 80% of the needs of the food economy at the end of the 1980s. Its scale stimulated the expansion of supply chains that relied on a growing number of supply sources, including wholesale, semi-wholesale and retail resale sites that irrigated every Maghreb state.

- 16 In the 1990s, the transition from “shopping bag to transport container” (Peraldi, 2001) led the changes in nature and volume of these transnational business activities. With them emerged new operators and new trading spaces. The figure of the “Trabendist” carrying his or her shopping bag, born in a post-Fordist context, gave way to the transnational entrepreneur. In France, which made its visa requirements more difficult starting in 1985, the Marseille trading post quickly lost its central role to Istanbul, which became the main source of supply in the Mediterranean. At the same time, in the Maghreb, activities related to transnational trade were structured and concentrated notably in Algeria. In the 1990s, the destinations diversified, and the flow of “suitcase” tourists intensified. Marketplaces emerged in places where other roads converged, often ancient, sometimes recent, as a result of geopolitical upheavals induced by the disintegration of the USSR and the 9/11 attacks in 2001, after which Arab traders said they no longer felt welcome in the US and Europe. During the 2000s, Istanbul (Turkey) and Dubai (United Arab Emirates) had become globalized marketplaces.

Dubai, Middle East trading post between North Africa and China

- 17 Dubai is particularly emblematic of this process (Marchal 2001) in which the trade routes of the Mediterranean, Middle East, East Africa, and Eastern Europe intersect. Asian, Iranian, Indian, but also African traders and pilgrims converged in Nasr Square, a neighbourhood in the heart of the city concentrating many trading service companies. Here, the close link between Islam and trade was more visible and opened new territorial horizons. Dubai entrepreneurs first developed the role of importing and re-exporting from Asia on a regional scale (to the Gulf, Iran, and Iraq in particular) and then on a continental scale (the Arab world and Africa). This influence has resulted in the multiplication of links with the main industrial districts of China, and the establishment of a growing number of Emirates trading companies in Yiwu and other Southeast Asian trading cities, to deal with wholesale markets evolving towards international trade.
- 18 Although the financial crisis has put Dubai’s pivotal role in perspective, the city remains a useful trading post and point of departure on the sea routes which, from East Asia, now connect with Mediterranean ports directly. Relying on Dubai and the air hubs set up by the other emirates in the region, during the 1990s Arab and African traders expanded their trading networks into Asia. Dubai was partially responsible for creating Yiwu, a commercial hub for Muslims from the Arab world, the African continent and the Middle East. The quest for “the source” was a constant preoccupation for transnational traders. It explains why Arab importers moved to the emirates and then directly to China, Guangzhou (Canton) and Yiwu, to directly reach “the source” of cheap products.

Yiwu: the largest wholesale market in the world

- 19 From the 2000s, intense trade has developed between Yiwu and Dubai operators, creating real interfaces between the Muslim worlds and China, which small importers attempted to circumvent by going directly to the source city. The large consumer market in the Middle East and North Africa, on the lookout for inexpensive products, offered a major outlet for Yiwu's exports. During the 2000s, China's exports to the Arab world increased considerably, as demand for consumer goods increased due to the explosion in oil prices. In 2005, the Sino-Arab trade volume was \$51 billion, nearly ten times that of 1995; it climbed to \$133 billion in 2008 and \$200 billion in 2011, the year of the Arab Spring.
- 20 Yiwu is a two-hour train ride south of Shanghai and a multimillion-dollar city which hosts at least 1.33 million migrants from all parts of China. It is a prosperous city with a per capita GNP of \$19,000 in 2014. Its success is the result of a three-step strategy. Between 1982 and 1991, Yiwu was a market for everyday consumer goods. The creation of the Yiwu wholesale market in 1982 came in the wake of the economic opening advocated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. After 1989, Yiwu became one of the marketplaces stemming from the reform of the Chinese distribution system, intended to facilitate the transition from a planned economy to a market economy by giving manufacturers access to new customers and to wholesalers the possibility of benefiting from prices 30% lower than those practiced outside such procedures. Since 1991, Yiwu has been the largest wholesale market in the People's Republic of China, specializing in the sale of small items and between 1992 and 2001, Yiwu became a national and then a global hub for wholesale markets in consumer goods with a total transaction volume of \$130 billion in 2014 (Li *et al.*, 2016).
- 21 The markets are ruled by the Zhejiang China Small Commodities City Group (CSCG), a privately held group, very closely associated with the local councillors. This group played a determining role in three directions: first, it broke with the collectivist "one village, one product" doctrine, which led to the formation of mono-specialized industrial districts. Yiwu has become the showcase for a growing number of products, numbering around 1.8 million today. Secondly, product exposure is an industry that has flourished in Yiwu as in other parts of China. The International Trade City, known as the Futian Market, with a total of about 50,000 stalls, often less than ten square meters in size, has provided a showcase of such a magnitude that 80% of commercial transactions in the city are concentrated there. Thirdly, the internationalization of Yiwu's specialized market has encouraged its promoters to continually search for new buyers. The high numbers of products sold offsets the low profits.
- 22 Thanks to political decisions taken at various levels and large-scale economic and geopolitical changes, Yiwu is positioned at the heart of transnational trading networks that connect different regions of the Muslim world. In all, in 2010, 70% of the 11,000 foreign residents in Yiwu were Arab, and 200,000 Arab buyers came to Yiwu, half of all foreign buyers visiting the city every year. Moreover, Yiwu is not only frequented by Arabs, but also increasingly by Muslims from across the whole world. An Arab neighbourhood, called "Exotic Street", has sprung up in the heart of New Silk Roads, grouping restaurants and shops where Muslim traders meet at the end of the day (Belguidoum & Pliez, 2015).

- 23 The “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) mega project, now known as “BRI”, for “Belt and Road Initiative”, launched in the fall of 2013 by Xi Jinping, is targeting the relaunch of transcontinental relations on an unprecedented scale (Bouhali and Chuang, 2019). The idea is not new. The OBOR project could be considered as the new version of the centuries-old fantasies of the Silk Roads. Paradoxically, in this new phase, states and international institutions are developing economic strategies that follow-up on the economic and cultural capital built by two generations of migrant entrepreneurs. However, as the anthropologist Magnus Marsden (2017) has pointed out, one might question the virtual absence of links between the institutional strategies and those of the actors already inscribed in the transnational networks. “Why sell the dream of a ‘new Silk Road’ when a multiplicity of Silk Roads (or perhaps nylon) already exists?” (Marsden, 2017, p. 23).

African global trades

- 24 The African continent, whose population is expected to double by 2050, is perceived as the last frontier of the global capitalism. This evolution invites us to grasp the changing geography of trading posts and transnational roads that connect Africa to the rest of the world, especially with China, according to a win-win policy that is supposed to generate diplomatic and economic benefits for both the Chinese and Africans. African trade posts are closely connected to the world and are interconnected among each other to form corridors of urbanization, circulation and consumption that are fed and driven by small traders, travellers, businessmen and migrants. These trading posts do not necessarily have to do with those created during the colonization period. Port infrastructures, major roads and warehouses give testimony to the intensity of exchanges and connections, which take on new forms. We propose to meet these Africans who live, move and consume along the urban corridor from Abidjan to Lagos, which corresponds to the largest urban concentration in Africa (35 million inhabitants in a 1000 km strip). Here on this thin strip of land wedged between sea and lagoon, men and women, but also consumer goods circulate intensively, as symbols of a globalized Africa.

Lebanese, Indian and Chinese diasporas

- 25 Along the African routes, soft drinks, biscuits, tomato paste, used cars, cement, concrete, tiles and so many other objects circulate, linking parts of African cities with Lebanon, India or China, revealing highly globalised relations. These global relationships and the presence of foreigners go back a long way: the Portuguese set up trading posts in the 15th century, followed by the Dutch in the 16th. The following centuries were marked by the triangular slave trade. Colonisation saw the establishment of long-term diasporas of Lebanese, mainly in French-speaking countries, and of Indians in English-speaking countries. Chinese migration to Africa began in the late 1950s. The Chinese, Lebanese and Indian diasporas continue to play an important role in the retail sector. More recently, West Africans who have settled in China are sending, accompanying or receiving these goods.
- 26 The Lebanese who have been present in the region since the early 20th century occupy an undeniably important place in the West African trade and retail market (Dubresson,

1989; Akyeampong, 2006; Arsan, 2014). The Lebanese diaspora straddles several West African countries, and can fall back on any one of them in case of crisis or conflict. It sets up production facilities, supplies markets and imports wholesale. The same goes for the Indians, who develop their activities between Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Ghana, importing everyday consumer goods, such as toothpaste from China, biscuits from Turkey, Gino tomato concentrate (Indian brands, but made with concentrate of Chinese tomatoes), wine from Spain.

- 27 While the Chinese are still few, their weight has increased in recent years in the African markets for consumer goods, textiles and building materials. The “China Town” in Lagos, as written at the entrance to the district, is a kind of fortified and museum-like village composed of about twenty shops, may be almost empty, but the Chinese are nonetheless present and lead many sectors. The same is true for household equipment, including sanitary ware and ceramics, which come from a district around Foshan City on the Pearl River near Guangzhou. We can easily find them at the Alaba International Market, a huge market located in the western outskirts of Lagos, about 40 kilometres from the Beninese border: the kingdom of tiling. Tiles are imported from China or produced in local Nigerian factories. Buyers come from very far away to buy sinks, faucets, pots of paint, and fabrics to adorn living rooms. Close to this vast warehouse of building materials and furnishings is the grand market of Western electronic products, where new and second-hand items are sold. The Alaba International Market is regionally known for being a huge market, with its adjoining landfill (e-waste), where computers, air conditioners and televisions from Europe are piled up and sold to be reused.

Fridges and cars... The second life of objects in Africa

- 28 On the other side of the Benin-Niger border, in the Zongo District, in the shadow of the large Cotonou mosque, refrigerators, flat-screen TVs, bicycles, motorcycle helmets, blenders, etc. are thrown together in giant piles. There are products recently arrived from Europe, but they are used or damaged for the most part. The sellers assure that, though they might be a little “worn down”, their products are of better quality than the new ones from China. This remark reminds that two supply channels exist and compete for products entering African markets: second-hand products, supposed to be of good quality, from Europe and new products, criticized for their low quality, from China. These two channels are not totally hermetic as some African traders operate in Europe as well as in China (Bredeloup, 2008; Bertoncetto and Bredeloup, 2009). Many academic works on China-Africa relations have shown that Asian products first arrived in Africa via African traders, before Chinese traders has established permanently in Africa since the 2000s (Bredeloup, 2008, 2012; Marfaing and Thiele, 2014; Giese and Marfaing, 2019; Kernén and Khan-Mohamad, 2020). This Chinese presence in African cities has sometimes been seen as significant competition for local African traders and a source of tension (Bourdarias, 2009).
- 29 Many objects, vehicles and clothing, considered as used in Europe, are offered a second life in Africa, where a potential clientele of several million people is waiting to consume. Trade in Africa, whether second-hand or new, is closely linked to trading networks that have built up over time, accompanying migrations (Peraldi, 2001). The Lebanese, but also the Hausa, the Igbos, and the Soninkes circulate widely to bring in

goods. This market connects a multitude of people of different backgrounds (Western exporters, migrants turned importers, small retailers, occasional customers) and joins unexpected places between Europe, Asia and West Africa.

- 30 The Zongo District in Cotonou recalls the neighbourhood of the same name in the nearby capital of Lomé (Agier, 1983). In West Africa, the zongo (from the Hausa term which means “place of lodging”) designates the neighbourhood where the Muslim traders coming from the north of the country, often Hausa, Fulani or Songhai, gather. These Sahelian groups have extensive experience in long-distance trade. This intense mobility can be explained by their pastoral way of life, which forces them to move constantly and to trade on both sides of the Sahara and the Sahel (Gallais, 1984; Retaillé, 1998; De Bruijn, 2007; Ciavolella, 2010, 2011; Brachet and Scheele, 2019). It’s not surprising therefore to find them in this second-hand import-export business. As Amandine Spire (2011) explains, “The zongos depend economically on the city and, at the same time, the zongos are inserted into a cross-linked urban system across West Africa”. A little further north-west, in the Sahel, the Soninké people, originally from the Senegal River Valley, straddle Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. Long-standing international migrants, they have deployed networks in Africa, Europe and the United States (Manchuelle, 1997; Schmitz, 2008). In Nouakchott, the boutiques in the “Arrival” district, the main second-hand market, are owned and supplied by Mauritanian Soninkés, who specialized in import export. Second-hand products come directly from the “Arrivals” from the port. The managers of these shops began by making round trips, every two or three months, between the Netherlands, Germany and France, where they live and get their supplies, and Nouakchott, where they receive the containers. Over time, they have expanded their markets by using family members who have settled abroad. One of them explains that they have stopped using containers coming from France, and specialize instead in the import-resale of Asian goods (electricity, plumbing, hardware, tires, furniture, batteries). He operates in Dubai, Shanghai and Canton, where there are many other west Africans.
- 31 The “Zongo” or the “Arrivals” neighbourhoods are mostly connected to ports, from which come the containers filled not only with bales of clothes, but also with fridges, hi-fi equipment and thousands of used vehicles. In Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin, everything from the latest models of new 4x4s, too old and rickety jalopies and tractors of another era are unloaded from ships coming from Antwerp. Benin acts as a “warehouse state” (Igué and Soulé, 1992) and acts as a “hub in the redistribution of vehicles in Africa” (Rosenfeld, 2017). At the edges of Cotonou, some 120 kilometres from Lagos, thousands of vehicles are parked in fleets. They’re waiting to be bought and put back into circulation in Nigeria. Just as they do with building materials, the Lebanese control this import-export sector: cars are first identified in Brussels by Lebanese, before being shipped by boat to Benin. Three weeks later, in Cotonou, they are received by other Lebanese, who take advantage of differences in customs, taxes and regulations.
- 32 At the same time, Beninese importers travel to Brussels to buy and export cars to Cotonou and gain access to the Nigerian market. This automobile market has completely reconfigured the eastern outskirts of the city of Cotonou, where Lebanese importers, Beninese mechanics and Nigerian buyers meet. At KP 10 (kilometre point located 10 kilometres from downtown Cotonou), in the giant parking lots, everything is done to accommodate potential Nigerian buyers. The lingua franca is the broken

English of Lagos, and Nigerian “Star” beer is the beverage of choice. The hotels are owned by Nigerians. A little “Naira land” (in reference to the Nigerian currency, the naira) has grown up in the heart of Benin. There are also Nigerians who earn their livings from the second-hand trade. Intense economic, commercial and social relationships link the populations along the Gulf of Guinea and contribute to the dynamism and urbanization of the region (Hertzog, 2020; Le Borgne, 2021).

Death and rebirth of clothes

- 33 In Cotonou, Missèbo market, the second-hand market in the heart of the city is visited by everyone from civil servants, students and businesswomen. Since the early morning hours, Nigerians have been opening up bales of clothes that have just come in from Europe, America and China. The bales contain thousands of pairs of jeans, bras, bodysuits for children, shoes and handbags of all kinds. This activity is linked to the containers on the streets of European cities, which collect used clothes donated by citizens who are tired of wearing the clothes that are cluttering up their wardrobes. Every major West African city has its second-hand market: Marcory (Abidjan), Missèbo (Cotonou), Makola (Accra), Front de Terre (Dakar), Hédzranawoé (Lomé), Sucupira (Praia), etc. Second-hand clothing tends to change its name when it travels: it is called *fègg jaay* in Senegal, *okrika* in Nigeria or *abloni* in Togo (derived from *obloni*, itself derived from *abroadi*, “those from the outside”, the name given to whites in Ghana, therefore, by extension, “white people clothes”) (Bredeloup and Lombard, 2008).
- 34 Despite the fact that it brings together many different intermediaries, places and large sums of money, the second-hand market is a profitable chain. An item can be resold no fewer than five times, from the moment it was donated in Europe, and then sorted and resold in an African street. In the West, the collection of used clothing largely rests, as it has since the beginning of the 20th century, on charity networks such as Le Secours Catholique, Caritas, l’Armée du Salut, Emmaüs, Le Centre Social Protestant. Today, the Relais chain of solidarity economy, a textile industry member of Emmaüs France, collects through its 17,000 containers scattered throughout France about 1,800 tons of clothing per week, 90,000 tons per year, of which 55% will end up in African markets³. At the head of the West African market, Igbos, from Biafra, in eastern Nigeria. They are importers and wholesalers. The famous “London” bales, arriving from England, are the most popular, but are also the most expensive, because they are judged to be of better quality. The other bales come from continental Europe (France, Spain), Canada and China. Nigerians store their goods in sheds or shops in the centre of Cotonou, in the immediate vicinity of Missèbo. Igbos wholesalers sell the bales for between 150,000 and 250,000 CFA francs (between 230 and 380 euros). They then open them directly to the market before the semi-wholesalers, often women and young men, who buy at least forty pieces, and who are the only ones allowed to inspect the merchandise up close.
- 35 The renaissance of second-hand clothing does not mean that the parallel market for wax print fabric disappear completely. Fabric continues to be widely worn in West Africa, especially on weekends, where you can see entire families wearing the same print. In fact, there is nothing specifically African about wax, despite it being perceived as the African fabric par excellence. Originally from Java in Indonesia, it takes its name from the wax that was used to make prints, and it was imported in the nineteenth century by the Dutch. They then distributed the fabrics, in particular via the Dutch

company Vlisco, which has just celebrated its one-hundred-and-seventy-year anniversary. The company dominates the fashion and luxury market by a wide margin. In all, 64 million metres are produced in Holland, of which 90% is then exported to Africa. Today, apart from this luxury market, wax fabrics are produced mainly in China, but also in Ivory Coast (by Uniwax) and Ghana (by Woodin). The new Vlisco patterns are immediately replicated in the Chinese and Nigerian factories, and these fabrics, known as fancy, are sold ten times cheaper. The Nana Benz women (Toulabor, 2012), who made their fortunes in the 1980s and 1990s by marketing all these printed fabrics, have been replaced by their daughters, who have had to adapt to globalisation. Some traders travel directly to China to stock up, like those African businesswomen who find in Yiwu other sisters settled there for several years. Globalisation has therefore opened up a new “wax print fabric” road socially mobile women and, with them, the opportunity for thousands of African men and women to wear counterfeit Vlisco patterns at lower prices. Thousands of tons of tissue circulate between China and Africa. And almost as many locks of hair.

- 36 In West Africa, these trading posts are connected by corridors of circulation and consumption and they are visited by small traders, travellers and migrants. Active members of diasporas or isolated individuals seeking to gain small margins on price differences connect trading places, products and actors, while creating spatial continuity within the discontinuity.

Conclusion

- 37 Using examples taken from China, sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean region, we have tried to follow some of those one thousand and one roads reaching the Global South consumers. This paper argues that globalisation is also apparent in less visible forms of exchange that take place in spaces usually held as marginal. Inconspicuous globalisations are labile and inventive, revealing the extent to which trade now knows no limits.
- 38 Whether they are confidential, or world-famous for a group of specific traders, or located in the interstices of large cities, these markets are nonetheless nodes of global networks that structure space with an intensity that never ceases to amaze, from wholesale to retail markets, in cities and in the countryside, and from the peripheries to the centres or the reverse. Constantly shifting, these inconspicuous globalisations and geography of retail trade are the mirror of our times.
- 39 This paper on the inconspicuous geography of retail trade is the result of extensive empirical research conducted between the Arab world, China and Sub-Saharan Africa between the years 2000 and 2020. We have tried to report here the main results, highlighting these little-known trading roads that link the spaces of production to the spaces of consumption, which include millions of poor people in the Global South, and the logistic chains between them (Blaszkievicz, 2019). The Covid pandemic in 2020 marks an important turning point in this geography of retailing: on a global scale, it has shown that whereas human mobility has been limited, goods have continued to move, enriching even the large logistics groups and GAFSA companies. At the same time, it has also shown that the circulation of certain goods has become difficult in the Global South. Restricting people’s movement, imposing lockdowns, has simply stopped the movement of certain goods that usually move with the people themselves. In a few

months, in the Global South, digital applications and platforms have also developed, inviting for further new research on the links between logistics chains, commodities and digital innovation in these inconspicuous spaces of globalisation.

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NOTES

1. If extreme poverty, defined by the World Bank as people living on less than \$1.90 a day, affects around 9.2% of the world's population, "At higher poverty lines, 24.1 percent of the world lived on less than \$3.20 a day and 43.6 percent on less than \$5.50 a day in 2017" (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>).
 2. Shopping bags or suitcases are synonyms and refer to the French term « cabas », a robust plastic bag used by the pioneers of this form of transnational trade. These "adventurers of the new market capitalism", as Peraldi (2007) called them, can be named as "suitcase tourists" or *trabendists* (but also *sacoleiros* in Brazil) as they are thousands to cross borders monthly to reach marketplaces where they buy retail goods at low prices.
 3. Source: <http://www.lerelais.org>
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ABSTRACTS

By analysing the inconspicuous geography of retail trade, this paper aims to reveal the largely unknown routes and people that play a crucial role in the globalised economy. For the last thirty years, transnational routes of exchange have connected the world's workshop, mainly in China, with the so-called market of the poor.

This paper is based on long-term fieldwork that attempts to investigate globalisation in the most "discrete" spaces of the global world. This other view of globalisation focuses, from a geographical perspective, on its less visible but essential forms in interstitial spaces. In order to understand these other "Silk Roads", we propose to take and follow these thousand and one roads in order to analyse a globalisation from below and from the point of view of the different actors that underpin it.

In the first section, we propose to map this "other" globalisation, examining geopolitical reconfigurations, the nature of the goods traded, the growing role of economic actors such as entrepreneurial migrants and diasporas, and the changing hierarchy of spaces, including rural centres and small towns. The links go beyond the North-South divide and reflect the growth of trade between the BRICs, including China, and regions of the world that have been marginalised in world trade. Secondly, we propose to look at the Mediterranean area, which has renewed its multiple networks and commercial hubs. In the last section, the analysis focuses on globalisation in West Africa, a region that for too long has been considered peripheral and "late" in its integration into the world (and thus despite centuries of slave trade). We demonstrate that discrete spaces serve as strategic places for the circulation and marketing of products that are massively consumed by millions of "poor" people.

En analysant la géographie « discrète » du commerce de détail, cet article vise à mettre en lumière les routes et les personnes méconnues qui jouent un rôle crucial dans l'économie mondialisée. Au cours des trente dernières années, des voies d'échange transnationales relient les ateliers du monde entier, principalement en Chine, au marché dit des pauvres.

Cet article repose sur un long travail de terrain qui a permis d'étudier la mondialisation dans les espaces les plus « discrets » du monde global. Cette autre vision de la mondialisation se concentre sur ses formes moins visibles mais essentielles dans les espaces interstitiels. Pour saisir ces autres « Routes de la Soie », nous proposons d'emprunter et de suivre ces mille et une routes afin

d'analyser une mondialisation par le bas et du point de vue des différents acteurs qui la portent. Dans une première partie, nous proposons de cartographier cette « autre » mondialisation, en examinant les reconfigurations géopolitiques, la nature des biens échangés, le rôle croissant des acteurs économiques tels que les migrants entrepreneurs et les diasporas, et la hiérarchie changeante des espaces, y compris les centres ruraux et les petites villes. Les liens vont au-delà de la fracture Nord-Sud et reflètent la croissance du commerce entre les BRIC, y compris la Chine, et les régions du monde qui ont été marginalisées dans le commerce mondial. Dans un deuxième temps, nous proposons d'examiner l'espace méditerranéen, qui a renouvelé ses multiples réseaux et comptoirs commerciaux. Dans la dernière partie, l'analyse se concentre sur la mondialisation en Afrique de l'Ouest, une région trop longtemps considérée comme périphérique et dont l'intégration au monde a été vue à tort comme tardive (et ce malgré des siècles de traite négrière). Nous démontrons que des espaces discrets servent de lieux stratégiques pour la circulation et la commercialisation de produits massivement consommés par des millions de « pauvres ».

INDEX

Mots-clés: géographie discrète, échanges transnationaux, Routes de la Soie, Suds Globaux

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