

Urban Informality and the Boundaries of Belonging

Notes on Ethnicity, Nationality and Class in Nouakchott, Mauritania

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Abstract: This article presents ethnographic commentary on the dynamics between different ethnic and national communities in Nouakchott's informal sector. It first gives some background for this analysis by briefly reviewing the history of ethnic and national identity construction in Mauritania, focusing on how these different logics of inclusion and exclusion have informed policy and practice from the colonial era up to the present day. Ethnographic field data is then contextualised through a discussion of the role played by ›the informal‹ in Mauritania's political economy. The analysis reveals that informality in the context of Nouakchott should simply be understood as urban social relations in practice. This analytical lens is then deployed to evaluate how the axes of nationality, ethnicity, and class play out in this setting. Nationality supersedes ethnicity as a mode of inclusion and exclusion in the informal economy. Ultimately, however, these lines of differentiation are dissolved by the overall structural position of those in the informal sector.

Keywords: Mauritania, urban informality, ethnicity, nationality, migration

How do ethnicity and nationality interact in African urban settings? In what ways do particular lines of differentiation acquire salience at a given moment in time? This article addresses these questions through an analysis of the informal sector in Mauritania's capital city of Nouakchott. It proceeds in two phases: first, it traces the spatial and embodied boundaries of the Mauritanian nation-state from the colonial era up to the present day. This historical overview also touches on processes of urban development and the rise of the informal economy in Nouakchott. I argue that the overwhelming prevalence of ›the informal‹ at all levels of society suggests that urban informality in this context should be analysed simply as social relations in practice. This historical overview and analytical lens together lay the foundation for the article's second objective, which is to present ethnographic commentary on the dynamics between Mauritanian nationals and West African migrants who are semi-employed and unemployed in Nouakchott's urban informal sector. This means paying attention

to which ethnic and national groups are present, their interactions with employers and state authorities, and the contestations over public space that often result from these interactions. The paper then turns to analysing the role of nationality in creating psycho-social cleavages between Mauritanian nationals and West African migrants in the informal economy. The potency of national distinction is illustrated through a discussion of how it manifests itself within ethnic groups that exist across national borders. The national imaginary also cuts through the commonality of experience associated with the socioeconomic realities of the urban informal sector, resulting in the familiar scenario of a national/other divide bisecting a common class position. The paper concludes with a reflection on how the structural position of those within the informal sector nonetheless ultimately transcends these national fragmentations. First, however, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical approach.

The »place-specific and embodied setting« (Novak 2017) of the informal economy has a key role to play in the processes by which nationality is superseded by structural position. This consideration necessitates a theoretical perspective that takes into account the contingent character of sociohistorical categories. Such a perspective can be found in the situational turn in social anthropology. In response to the rigidity of early 20th century structural approaches, theorists began to take into consideration the manner in which individual behaviour was conditioned not only by overarching social structures, but also by contingent situations and scenarios which constitute said structures (Gluckman 1940). Taken further, this perspective helped illuminate »the way in which individuals actually handle their structural relationships and exploit elements of choice between alternative norms according to the requirements of any particular situation« (Van Helsen 1967: 148). This emphasis on the situational corresponded to shifts in the analysis of ethnicity away from the naturalisation of ethnic groups, and towards considerations of the fluidity of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). Okamura (1981) made this link explicit in his discussion of »situational ethnicity«. These conceptual frames have since facilitated shifts from discussions of »ethnic conflict« toward »ethnically framed conflict« (Brubaker 2002), they have highlighted the power role played by external categorisations in identity construction (Jenkins 2003), and they have underscored the various ways in which ethnic boundaries are constructed, challenged, and rearranged (Wimmer 2008). Such constructivist perspectives were also soon applied to theories of nations and nationalism (Gellner 1983), with scholars such as Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawm (1983) respectively discussing the nation as an »imagined community«, and the role of »inventing tradition« within the national project. The brief historical overview of ethnic and national identity construction in Mauritania below draws on and corresponds to these perspectives. Moreover, the

ethnographic analysis that follows illustrates the ongoing relevance of the situational approach.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN MAURITANIA

The roots of modern ethnic and national group identity in Mauritania can be found in the colonial era. The territories of what would become the nation-state of Mauritania were first given cartographical expression in an 1899 plan for French colonial expansion north of the Senegal River. The area delimited in the plan was named *la Mauritanie Occidentale* (Coppolani 1999), in what Ould Mey (1996) believed to have been a nostalgic allusion to the Roman Empire's province of Mauretania. By naming this territory with reference to its Arab-Berber inhabitants — »the Moors«¹ — the colonial administration formalised the narratives of its own knowledge production, which tended to depict distinct modes of religious practice in operation on either side the Senegal River: a »black« Islam to the south and a »Moorish« Islam to the north (Robinson 2000). This conception also reflected balances of power and spheres of influence at the turn of the 19th century. At this point in time, the Senegal River had come to represent a dividing line in the minds of colonial administrators, between »black« colonial subjects to the south and »Moors« to the north who were yet to be pacified (Ould Saad 2004: 97). It should come as little surprise, then, that following the establishment of a protectorate in the southern territories of modern-day Mauritania in 1902, the French government decreed that the line formed by the river was to create the territorial demarcation between the administrative zones of Senegal and Mauritania.

The implementation of a racialised, linear model of territoriality in a region characterised by intense levels of internal mobility would bring about its own administrative difficulties for colonial administrators. Following the drawing of the border, there was a chronic outflow of black African Haalpulaar populations² from the administrative territory of Senegal to that of Mauritania, where the tax regime was somewhat

1 | Throughout this text, the term »Arab Moor« is used to refer to a group of people of Arab and Berber origin that gradually came to constitute Mauritania's upper class. The term »white Moor« is also used, in accordance with how ethnic identity is colloquially expressed in Mauritania, to further distinguish between the dominant group in Moorish society and the formerly enslaved »black Moors«, or Haratin. Slavery still afflicts many of the rural poor in this group.

2 | The Haalpulaar are a black African ethnic group present across much of West Africa.

more lenient. The solution to the resulting labour shortages was found in a further classification of racial categories. In December 1905, the colonial administration decreed that all »*indigènes* of the black African race residing in Mauritanian territory« (Colonial Administrator's Report, quoted in Leservoiser 1994: 62) would henceforth be subject to the same tax regime as that of Senegal. From the point of view of the colonial administration, then, cleaving a racial distinction within its Mauritanian territory appeared to be the most efficient means of extracting a surplus from its subject populations. According to this decree, the Haalpulaar based north of the Senegal River were deemed effectively tax resident in Senegal, despite their physical residence within the territory of Mauritania. This racialised exclusion of black Africans from the proto-nation-state of Mauritania would resurface in dramatic form over seventy years later, during the 1989 border conflict with Senegal, when thousands of Afro-Mauritanians were deported from state territory alongside Senegalese nationals. I will return to this point below.

Postcolonial national sovereignty

While the political significance of independence from colonialism cannot be underestimated, it necessarily entailed an institutionalisation of the very rationalities that were introduced under colonial rule in the first place. The years following the implosion of colonial authority in *l'Afrique Occidentale Française* saw the introduction of a new national identity card across the region in 1949. As Gary-Toukara (2009) has observed, by specifying the »race« of the card bearer, this new ID card would reproduce the colonial imperative of dividing populations into ethnic subgroups (14). Mauritanian nationality was established by Law 61-112 in June 1961, one year after the country gained independence. The law set out the conditions of what would constitute a Mauritanian national and the criteria for obtaining Mauritanian nationality in detail (Di Bartolomeo/Fakhoury/Perrin 2010). Therefore, as with so many other post-colonial contexts, independence from European colonialism would paradoxically be asserted by means of what Agamben (1998) highlighted as the defining contradiction of European modernity, namely the collapsing of natural life into the construct of the nation-state, via the institution of citizenship. The exclusionary boundaries that this model necessarily entails were given legal expression in Mauritania four years later, with the passing of Law 65-046, which stipulated that foreign nationals who entered the country irregularly would be punished with a two-month to two-year prison sentence.

There were, however, two principal ways in which this exclusionary potential has been mitigated in practice. The first was the establishment in 1973 of the Economic

Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which triggered a regional impetus supporting an area in which goods and persons could circulate freely. A range of bilateral agreements have since been put in place to this end, and visa controls for citizens of the participating member states were abolished in 1993. Mauritania withdrew from ECOWAS in 1999 but maintained many of its bilateral agreements pertaining to free movement. As such, in Mauritania, »nationals of the 15 member states, especially Senegalese and Malians, continue, to varying degrees regulated by bilateral agreements, to have privileged rights of access and residence« (Choplin/Lombard 2014: 71). The second mitigating factor has been the fact that for much of the history of the Mauritanian nation-state, migration has been largely left to regulate itself informally, with very little state oversight (Bensaâd 2008). Given the greater degrees of proletarianisation in neighbouring colonies, inward migrant labour flows in the decades following independence responded naturally to shortages in multiple nascent urban industries, such as the fishing, mining, and transport sectors (Cross 2013). Much of this labour was sourced and regulated by informal networks rather than official contracts. Thus, while migrant »illegality« existed on paper since 1965 in Mauritania, the aforementioned legal and structural factors meant that it only acquired a stringent national exclusionary function much more recently, for reasons that will be discussed shortly.

The lack of a substantive form of migrant »illegality« at this time of course did not mean that other forms of discrimination and exclusion were absent from the Mauritanian postcolonial landscape. In the years immediately following independence, the state was principally led by those Arab-Moor tribal factions that had previously acquiesced to colonial rule. Significant portions of the state bureaucracy were, however, also occupied by members of black African communities, whose deeper integration within the colonial administration meant that their level of linguistic competence exceeded that of many of their Arabic speaking compatriots (Marchesin 2010). By the 1970s however, an elite-driven trend of »Arabisation« meant that greater sections of the state and upper ranks of the armed forces would come to be occupied by Arab Moors. Educational policies also began to side-line the French language in favour of Arabic (De Chassesey 1984). Measures such as these served to exasperate the sense of marginalisation amongst Mauritania's black African populations, particularly amongst those who, due to their traditionally nomadic pastoral lifestyle, had always existed at an administrative and social distance from the state, such as the Fula (Ciavolella 2011).³

3 | The Fula are a subgroup within the Haalpulaar, distinguished from the sedentary majority by their traditionally nomadic lifestyle.

These identitarian schisms provided a readymade framework within which processes of land expropriation that had been taking place in the 1980s in the Senegal River Valley could be interpreted and acted upon (OECD 2010). In 1983, a new land law abolished customary rights, and effectively facilitated the expropriation of many Afro-Mauritanian groups living in the region in favour of large agricultural cooperatives, mostly run by Arab Moors whose presence there had grown following successive droughts in the 1970s. Tensions were further heightened in 1987 following an attempted coup by Afro-Mauritanian members of the armed forces affiliated with a self-described »multi-ethnic« black African separatist group. Grievances came to a head in 1989, when what started out as a dispute over grazing rights between Mauritanian Fula herders and Senegalese farmers quickly escalated into a series of ethnically framed attacks and reprisals across Senegal and Mauritania. Over the course of what would come to be termed »the events«, »between 80,000 and 100,000 Mauritians were expelled from Senegal, and at least 70,000 Senegalese and other blacks were expelled from Mauritania« (Tempest 1989: 3). The Mauritanian government denied that its own citizens were among those deported, but the UNHCR claimed otherwise (Parker 1991). An Afro-Mauritanian civil society leader described to me how his mother and sister were deported to Senegal during »the events«, after being accused of being Senegalese, despite their being in possession of Mauritanian papers (interview, 7 March 2018). In such cases, accusations of being Senegalese served as a rhetorical proxy for being of black African descent, which in turn was grounds for expulsion beyond Mauritania's territorial borders. Most of the Mauritians expelled were ethnic Fula. While the representation of the Senegal River as an ethnic dividing line had initially been introduced during the colonial era, it was at this point firmly implanted within postcolonial social structures.

The state's spatial and embodied boundaries were further hardened by circumstances in 2006, when the Atlantic coast of Mauritania provided the setting for a brief chapter in the ongoing crisis of European borders. In response to increasing numbers of Sub-Saharan migrants leaving the northern port city of Nouadhibou for the Canary Islands, the Spanish Government launched a military operation off the coasts of West Africa, with the oversight of Frontex and in cooperation with Mauritanian authorities. This »cooperation« ended up resulting in the greatest number of expulsions from state territory since »the events« of 1989, with 11,637 people being expelled from Mauritania over the course of 2006 (Di Bartolomeo/Fakhoury/Perrin 2010). Having succeeded in stemming the flow of undesirable people onto European shores, a reconceptualisation of migration and border security took place in Mauritania. An elaborate border management regime has since been developed, including the new designation of 45 exclusive legal entry points into the country and the training of

Mauritanian security personnel by international experts (Frowd 2014). So although a linear logic of territoriality has informed the spatial demarcations of the Mauritanian state since its colonial inception in the early 20th century, it is only now in the 21st century that significant technological and practical resources are being devoted to enacting this territorial integrity.

This hardening of the physical border is also apparent in its embodied form, as evidenced by the introduction of a biometric identification system for citizens and a concomitant residence permit for non-nationals in 2012. The biometric system has opened up old wounds in Mauritanian society, with an Afro-Mauritanian group, *Touche Pas à Ma Nationalité* (Hands Off My Nationality), claiming that the exclusionary nature of the enrolment process amounted to a continuation of »the events« by other means (Dia 2015). The residence permit for foreign nationals has been no less contentious, as it has served as a new means by which the state can deport foreign nationals from its territory (Dialtabé 2012) — which it has since been doing on a regular basis.⁴ From the point of view of the state, all of this represents a modernising development. At a talk on the dynamics of migration in Mauritania delivered at a regional trade union conference in Nouakchott, a state official admitted to being proud of the recently installed biometric and residence permit systems, because »now, no one is targeted because they are such and such. It's because they haven't respected the law« (16 February 2018). Migrant community associations, however, claim that the lengthy list of paperwork demanded of residence permit applicants effectively pushes it out of reach for the vast majority of migrants in Mauritania. They also point out that it is exclusively Sub-Saharan Africans who are subjected to raids and deportations (interview, 26 February 2018). This would seem to indicate that older lines of ethnic demarcation have not gone away, but have rather been disguised within the putatively indiscriminate framework of a bureaucratic migration management system.

Whether by accident or design, the net effect of the biometric ID and residence permit has been to situate many — both Mauritians and non-nationals — outside of the state's purview. Before moving on to a discussion of ethnographic data, this observation necessitates a further contextualisation of this informal space — in which

4 | It is difficult to come across recent statistics regarding deportations. Peregil (2015) stated that the number of deportations carried out in 2014 was 6,463. Di Bartolomeo, Fakhoury and Perrin (2010) put the number deported in 2007 at 6,634. A 2017 report produced by a coalition of regional NGOs stated that 78 Senegalese citizens were deported in the month of July 2015 alone (Boulama et al. 2017). When I was in Rosso, a customs official and a Senegalese policewoman both said that deportations occur on a daily basis.

the protagonists of our discussion find themselves — and specifically this space's relationship to the urban environment of Nouakchott.

»The informal« in Nouakchott: urban social relations in practice

Nouakchott was a small fishing village of 200 people when it was chosen as the budding nation's capital city in 1958. In subsequent decades, however, Mauritania would undergo a series of drastic interconnected transformations, which often saw the state lagging behind seemingly self-perpetuating social processes. Between 1962 and 1975, the population of Nouakchott »grew from 7,750 to 103,483. By 1976 only 27 per cent of the [Mauritanian] population were still nomads compared with 78 per cent in 1959; 31 per cent were urban dwellers compared with 6 per cent in 1959« (Bennoune 1978: 46). These rural-urban migrations were further accelerated by devastating droughts during the 1970s and 1980s, the result of which was huge growth of informal shantytowns on the periphery of the city (Choplin 2009). By 2015, the urban population had grown to over 1 million, representing 48% of the national population, of whom just 1.9% were still nomadic (République Islamique de la Mauritanie 2015). Within a remarkably short timeframe, then, the social relations and structures of a modern urban society emerged from communities long characterised by nomadic pastoralism and sedentary agriculture.

The transformative effects of these local climatic and social processes of urbanisation and sedentarisation were further impelled by the global economic context of the 1980s and early 1990s. Structural adjustment programmes implemented by the Mauritanian state under the tutelage of the World Bank and the IMF entailed recurring currency devaluations, the opening up of numerous sectors to foreign international investment, and the general rolling back of the state (Ould Mey 1996). Cross (2011) argues that this »neoliberal economic reform rapidly projected Mauritanian populations into the monetary economy and gave rise to a strong informal sector« (832). As has been illustrated in other African contexts, deeper integration into global economic processes can occur in conjunction with the marginalisation, subordination, and outright exclusion of local workers (Meagher/Mann/Bolt 2016). This informal sector remains the primary feature of the Mauritanian labour market today, with the Office of National Statistics reporting in 2017 that 91.5% of those employed in the non-agricultural private sector are working informally (République Islamique de la Mauritanie 2017). While it is difficult to come by reliable statistics regarding the proportion of migrants employed in this sector, it is widely acknowledged that the vast majority work informally (IOM 2009: 16; République Islamique de la Mauritanie 2010: 29). A similar prevalence of »the informal« can be observed in the domain

of urban property, which Choplin (2006) describes as a »rationalised informal sector« (p. 90). This characterisation describes how social codes and networks which are informal nonetheless operate according to discernible principles, facilitating new patterns of wealth accumulation in Mauritania.

Given its sheer ubiquity as well as its manner of reflecting and reproducing power differentials, it may be useful to think of informality in the context of Nouakchott simply as urban social relations in practice. Such a definition corresponds to McFarlane's conceptualisation of formality and informality as practices, insofar as it also strives to analyse informality »taking place not above or in advance of urban life, but within its unfolding« (McFarlane 2012: 101). It also draws on Scott's seminal critique of the modern state project, which he argued to be inherently and fatally incapable of fully integrating the »illegible« forms of local knowledge and practice onto which it is superimposed (Scott 1998). The following ethnographic analysis, however, should illustrate that informality in the context under consideration is best viewed neither as a practice in itself, nor as an outlier of an otherwise seamless state surveillance system. Rather, it is the material site in which the historically endowed categories and social hierarchies discussed above are reproduced and, at times, recast, on the ground. This analytical lens will now be deployed to assess the interplay between ethnicity, nationality and class position in this setting.

NATIONALITY, ETHNICITY AND URBAN INFORMALITY IN NOUAKCHOTT

A word on method

The data presented in the following section of this article was conducted within the framework of doctoral field research. All exchanges, observations and interviews cited here took place between October 2017 and August 2018. The majority of these were in French, although some also occurred in the Mauritanian dialect of Arabic known as Hassaniya. All exchanges and quotes cited emerged within the context of ethnographic field observations. This methodological approach immediately appeared most appropriate to researching the informal economy for two principal reasons. First, it offered an opportunity to directly observe dynamics between authority figures and workers in the informal sector, as well as that among different communities in this setting. This first-hand perspective would not have been available had I chosen to conduct interviews with participants elsewhere. Secondly, as the son of a Mauritanian national of »White Moor« background, my presence in the various

sites of the informal economy would often initially elicit inquiries about whether I was looking to hire workers. Undoing this perception and establishing an alternative perspective seemed imperative for both ethical and methodological reasons. In this regard, leading individuals away from the sites of the informal economy to conduct a formal interview elsewhere would, in my judgement, have done the research process more harm than good.

Notes on Nouakchott's informal economy

In a dusty public square in the upper-class neighbourhood of *Tevregh Zeina* in north-central Nouakchott, people shelter themselves from sun and sand as they wait out the days in search of sparse and precarious employment. The high, barbed-wire-adorned walls of the French embassy loom behind a roundabout on the west side of the square, a permanent, ominous fixture for those based here. The square is also flanked on the north by a large expensive apartment complex — home mostly to international military and diplomatic staff — and a newly constructed hotel. Numerous people here have recounted to me in detail how the owner of the hotel enlisted the police and the municipality to clear them out of the square while he was constructing it in 2016. Several were deported to Rosso-Senegal during these raids. The building was then left empty and unused for over a year, seemingly forgotten by its owner. But the mass expulsion he instigated is still fresh in the minds of everyone here, serving as a turning point in their relationship to this particular place. As illustrated by other examples of the struggles of Nouakchott's urban poor (Choplin 2014b, 2014a; Vium 2016), the crux of antagonism between the state and the disenfranchised here lies in the contestation of public space. On the south side of the square is the walled-off perimeter of Nouakchott's only church, in whose shade many of the unemployed pass the hours of the day. To those in the informal economy functioning here, the square and its surroundings is simply known as the Church.

As a labour pick-up point, the Church offers insight into the schisms between those with and without resources in Mauritanian society. Those who are gathered here are principally Malians, Guineans, and Mauritanian Fula and Haratin. The only missing component of the *mosaïque mauritanienne* (Schmitz 1994) is the »white Moor«, who only ever makes an appearance in the capacity of a prospective employer or the occasional wandering street vendor. When cars periodically pull up looking to hire someone, a large crowd will gather, with people often pushing past one another to get into it to haggle prices. This is typically how people find employment as domestic workers in Nouakchott. The vast disparity between supply and demand in this economy means that the majority remain unemployed on each occasion. However,

the desperation born of this disparity can also result in the employer driving away empty-handed, a frustrated reaction to the chaotic scenes that his presence inevitably brings about. Alongside those waiting in hope of winning the scramble to get a job as a domestic worker are those who come to the Church to wash cars and tint windows. They typically spend the day standing at the roundabout under the austere gaze of the embassy walls, brandishing their materials at passing cars. When they succeed in attracting a customer, they direct them around the corner to an alley behind the south wall of the church, the site of their informal car washing operation.

Before the property owner deployed the authorities of the state against these migrant workers, they were free to carry out their business in the square itself. Cheikh, a Guinean Fula, recounted to me how things were a lot easier before the police pushed them out of the square. He was among those deported to Rosso-Senegal at this time, but he found his way back within a few days, thanks to the unorthodox business practices of Rosso border police. »If you have money you don't have a problem«, he explained. »The police down there are looking for money. They're men of the law but they do business as well.« At this point, Karim, another car washer, chimed in: »They look for money illegally. We're trying to get money legally and we're worn out!« The zone of indistinction between formal and informal business practices to which Karim alludes here is further underscored by the fact that bribes and unofficial charges at Rosso — and other border crossings in Mauritania — are typically referred to as »les formalités«. This ambiguity between »the formal« and »the informal« also arises in relation to the state's initial act of clearing out the public square at the request of a private property owner. The question of why »some instances of informality are designated as illegal and their inhabitants criminalised while other land transformations appear to be protected and formalised to enjoy state sanction or even endorsed as practices of the state« (MacLeod/Jones 2011: 2452) thus appears to be of interest here. This conundrum is resolved, however, once we view informality as nothing other than the practice of urban social relations, with all of the power dynamics that they entail.

Like most other people here, Cheikh is working to provide money for his family back home in Guinea. Here, Mauritanian nationals and migrant workers alike have family connections in rural areas of their respective regions. Talk of the family back home in »the village« is common. Informality notwithstanding, then, this urban pocket of economic activity plays a role in sustaining livelihoods in diverse parts of West Africa, both within Mauritania's borders and further abroad. It also generates further economic activity in the locale of the Church itself. Migrant women from various West African backgrounds come here each day to serve lunch in the

form of a plate of the Senegalese rice dish *Thiéboudienne* for 400 ougiyas.⁵ Gendered social roles and relations are thus reproduced in the informal economy. The day is also punctuated at regular intervals by the regional delicacy of mint tea. All of this is facilitated by people — both migrants and Mauritians — who come to the Church each day to set up shop in response to demand from workers here. Informality thus produces further informality, from which social rituals and networks inevitably emerge. These are at times disrupted by municipality officials, who arrive to confiscate cleaning materials and insist that people take their business elsewhere. Where exactly this ought to be has never been made clear. During the time I spent here, such disruptions never reached the intensity of the fabled 2016 raid. At moments of high frequency, however, they can push the cost of services up. Around the time of the 2018 African Union Summit in Nouakchott, for example, car washers told me they had begun charging customers 1,000 ougiyas instead of 500, due to the near-constant pressure from the municipality.

Further examples of urban social relations in practice play out on a daily basis roughly 2 km south of the Church, in an area known as *Clinique*. The majority of workers I encountered here are from Senegal. They assemble on both sides of the road leading to *Clinique's* hectic intersection, calling out to passing potential employers. The shops on each side of the road deal mostly in construction, plumbing and electrical supplies, which are also the areas in which the unemployed multitude attempt to find work as day labourers. Sharing the crowded pavement with them are numerous street vendors hawking clothes, sunglasses, jewellery, headphones, and traditional drinks and snacks. Some have resorted to this form of *petit-commerce* in frustration at the chronic unemployment within the construction and domestic work sectors. This was the case for Boubacar, a Senegalese Fula who had been seeking day labour as a painter when I first got to know him. One day I arrived in *Clinique* to find that he had swapped his paintbrush and roller for a small selection of perfumes, which he had laid out in a display on the curb. He explained that after finding no more than 3 days' painting work over the space of a month, he opted to switch to street vending. This proved to be a risky decision, however.

Just as car washers by the Church need to be ready to hide their materials to avoid them being confiscated by the municipality, similar contestations over public space unfold on a daily basis in *Clinique* and other parts of the city centre. It was a common occurrence to observe gendarmes forcing people selling products to pack them up and move on. The very fact that this is a more or less daily routine illustrates that

⁵ | Ougiya is the local currency in Mauritania. 400 ougiyas was roughly equal to 1 euro at the time of this research.

it fails manifestly in its stated purpose of permanently clearing the streets of *Clinique* of street vendors. It does, nonetheless, produce a deeply disruptive effect in the lives of people here, rendering business at times impossible, and thereby increasing the precarity in which they live. Street vendors have told me that they believe a new shopping centre development just north of *Clinique* to lie behind the increased hostility of gendarmes in their regard of late.⁶ The urban African struggles observed by Cooper (1983) between migrant labour, capital and the state, and their consequences in the domains of public space and migrant life, are thus very much in play in this context. If street vendors refuse to pack up their materials, or even if they fail to do so quickly enough, the products will be confiscated. This had already happened to Boubacar on a number of occasions in the short time that he had been in this business. For him, the stark survival choice was between idle invisibility in unemployment or throwing himself into the crosshairs of the municipality.

This is a situation in which many, both national and non-national, find themselves in Nouakchott. Notwithstanding this commonality of position amongst Nouakchott's multinational urban poor, however, there are cleavages among those on the margins of the state.

Urban informality and national fragmentation

One day I was sitting in the alley behind the Church chatting with two car washers: a Malian *Soninké* called Yousef, and a Mauritanian Fula named Moussa. The two agreed that Mauritania is a hostile place to be poor, but opinions diverged when Moussa claimed that black Mauritians were disenfranchised by »White Moors«. Yousef was sceptical about the plight of Afro-Mauritians, claiming that »they're not real Mauritians«. In doing so, he reproduced the same racialised exclusionary conception of the nation that underpins black Afro-Mauritanian grievances against the state. While Yousef and Moussa identify with separate ethnic groups, it is clearly nationality that constitutes the point of antagonism between them, since true membership of the Mauritanian nation is what is at stake in the exchange. A similar theme emerged on another occasion, when I observed a disagreement between a Guinean Fula named Ahmed and a Mauritanian Fula called Khaled. Ahmed was telling me about the difficulties of life here, saying that things are very hard for foreigners. »Not just for foreigners!« Khaled angrily interjected, and protested that Mauritians had difficulties too. The insinuation that hardship was the exclusive domain of migrants

6 | Local media have reported on similar disputes between market workers and municipality officials over the same shopping centre development (N'Diaye 2017).

in Nouakchott had sparked indignation in the Mauritanian Fula. For him the root of their situation was not a matter of simply being ›foreign‹. Evidently, the fact of Ahmed's and Khaled's shared ethnic identification did not preclude nationally-based differences from arising between them.

A conversation with Boubacar, the Senegalese Fula painter turned street vendor, may further illuminate how nationality cuts through ethnic affiliation. After an Afro-Mauritanian walked away from his perfume display without buying anything, Boubacar returned to leaning on a car beside me, complaining about the Fulas in Mauritania:

»They're worth nothing here. They're behind. And they always give foreigners a hard time. They say that foreigners have ruined the country. They say that this is their country, but it's not their country! They only collect rubbish and that type of thing. And they give us a hard time.«

When I inquired if they give him a hard time because they themselves are also having a hard time, he responded that yes, »they are having a hard time«. He then continued to decry their attitudes to foreigners. »But you speak the same language, don't you?« I asked. »We're brothers!« he affirmed, »but they give us a hard time.«⁷ Boubacar's words indicated the extent to which the colonial administrative decision to draw a territorial border between people living on opposite banks of the Senegal River has resonated in psycho-social terms up to today. Such sentiments have been echoed to me from the ›national‹ side of this divide as well. Youslem, a Mauritanian Fula, told me how he used to earn between 60,000 and 70,000 ougiyas a month as a domestic worker when he first arrived in Nouakchott from his home region of Kaedi. Now, however, domestic workers only earn between 25,000 and 30,000. He blamed migrants for this. They work for nothing, he argued, and as a result, »they have ruined everything«.

Boubacar's observations about the structural position of the Fula in Mauritania is not without basis in fact, and it may offer some insight into what underlies these antagonisms. Ciavolella (2010) chose the Fula ethnic group as his object of study in what he termed an »anthropology of the margins« of the Mauritanian state. For him, looking at the state from the perspective of its peripheral groups could provide unique insights into its very nature. From our point of view, the fact that certain Mauritanian nationals face systemic marginalisation alongside migrant labourers speaks to a lack of what Brubaker (2010) has referred to as »substantive citizenship« in Mauritania. Some may also even lack the »formal citizenship« with which he juxtaposes it, as

7 | Originally »Ils nous fatiguent« in French.

suggested by those Afro-Mauritanian groups that claimed the biometric ID system was intended to strip them of their citizenship (Antil/Lesourd 2012). The gravity of such a relegation to the periphery of belonging, and the meagre distribution of resources that exists there, goes some way to explaining antagonisms between nationals and non-nationals in the informal economy.

The familiar, tragic irony of this situation is the similarity of experience that unites those who blame one another for their condition. At separate instances, both Youslem and a Malian named Bakar recounted to me the exact same feelings of frustration, isolation, and powerlessness associated with domestic work. Both spoke of feelings of emasculation due to having to take orders from children, and both said that without patience, you can't last in the job. If the employment of domestic workers facilitates status reproduction for employers, as Bridget Anderson (2003) has observed, the status of the worker is also certainly reproduced in the process. Yet this common class position and its experiential bonds are fractured by the national/other divide. It must be emphasised that this subjective psychological identification with the »imagined community« of the nation (Anderson 1983; Finlayson 1998) takes on a concrete, material form here. Youslem once sat beside me in a bad mood after trying his luck in the crowd that had gathered around a car at the Church. »The guy said he doesn't hire Mauritanians,« he told me dejectedly. His begrudging of foreign nationals is therefore grounded in his experience. And from the point of view of migrants, in addition to the exclusionary function of the residence permit, a recent series of national ring-fencing measures has meant that it is no longer officially possible for them to obtain formal employment in sectors such as transport and fishing (Diop 2013; Undercurrent News 2017). The formal sector is further closed off by the fact that work permits can only be obtained if the job to which one is applying cannot be filled by a Mauritanian national (République Islamique de la Mauritanie 2010). Such policies further expand the pool of informal labour, pushing wages down and thus raising the potential for antagonistic social relations in this arena.

State coercion and social cohesion

Considering these policy-forged cleavages between those on the peripheries of the state, it is worth concluding with a reflection on why there is not *more* antipathy here. After all, competition is an iron law of the labour market, all the more so — one might expect — when it is an informal one. What one finds just as often, however, is a solidarity of necessity. There are at least two reasons for this. At the most fundamental level, the daily social interactions and exchanges around mint, sugar, tea and cigarettes in the various sites of the informal economy make up the strands of social

fabric that ensure a minimal degree of coexistence. In the context of West Africa, such social interactions are facilitated by what Whitehouse (2012) has referred to as the system of inter-ethnic joking relationships that exists across the region. Mauritania's geo-cultural location may thus provide some explanation as to why the phenomenon of »strangerhood«, which Whitehouse uses to describe the position of West African migrants in Brazzaville, Congo, has not manifested itself as profoundly between migrants and nationals in Nouakchott. Everyday mundane exchanges such as those identified by Whitehouse can be linked to the routines that Purcell (2003), drawing on Lefebvre, identified as constituting an alternative mode of urban belonging, which he describes as »inhabitation«. It is the very fact of »inhabitation«, in his view, that justifies the right to the city, rather than the exclusionary income-based model that dominates urban settings in which capitalist private property relations prevail. Evidently, Nouakchott is one such setting, which means that the informal economy is anything but immune to this overarching capitalist framework. Indeed, car washers have on occasion lamented to me the lack of organised unity among them, which can result in wage undercutting. Nonetheless, such practices do not preclude what Whitehouse (2012) calls the »pattern of ritualized informal ties« (p. 16), which arises from daily social interactions in a shared urban space.

Secondly, the hostility of state authorities toward those in the informal sector adds impetus to the solidarity of necessity identified here. Amidst rumours of an impending police raid at the Church (which ultimately never materialised), car washers banded together, passing their water cans to one another and hiding them behind the wall of another empty property so as to avoid them being confiscated. And in Clinique, *petit-commerçants* will often warn one another when gendarmes arrive to perform a sweep and confiscate belongings. The manner in which this positioning vis-à-vis state authority forges social cohesion may be further illuminated through an exchange with Alex, a Mauritanian Fula car washer at the Church. Like so many others, he was telling me about how foreigners have ruined the labour market here. When I responded to his assertions with surprise, by observing that everyone at the Church seemed to get on rather well, he replied that

»Yes, everyone gets on with each other, because if you have a good heart and you behave yourself you won't have any problems. But if we come here and fight amongst ourselves, then that will bring problems with the police and all of that.«

According to Alex, then, there is a collective self-interest in maintaining a degree of social cohesion, as anything less would jeopardise the security of all. To put this in situational terms, the sociohistorical structures of ethnicity and nationality certainly

offer rhetorical formats of exclusion and frameworks of resentment to individuals in the informal economy. However, their capacity to constitute substantive social barriers between workers is checked by the relationship between those in the informal sector and the state. What appears anomalous according to what one might expect from the exclusionary structures of ethnicity and nationality is explainable by reference to the relationship of the municipality and the police to individuals in the informal economy. As Papadopoulos and Tsianos observed, »where migrants and precarious workers meet is in sharing the same urban spaces« (2013: 189), and in this case, in the state repression to which this sharing of urban space exposes them.

It is crucial to acknowledge that in the abstract, the line between national and other is manifestly evident in the form that state reprisals may take, insofar as non-nationals are »deportable« (De Genova 2002), while nationals are not. In practice, however, the persistence of ethnically based modes of discrimination means that Mauritanian Fula and Haratin are not immune from arbitrary arrest and discrimination. And on the other hand, an undocumented migrant may avoid deportation at the cost of a bribe to police, as several respondents attested to me. Moreover, a corruption scandal in Nouakchott's migrant detention centre in 2016 led to a temporary lull in migrant detention and deportation (Sileyé 2016). These considerations indicate that the extent to which the line between »deportable« non-nationals and »non-deportable« citizens manifests in practice depends on contingent contextual factors. This further underscores the situational nature of nationality and ethnicity. Furthermore, while the similar experience of certain Afro-Mauritanians and West African migrants regarding the biometric ID card and residence permit may serve to sharpen antagonisms between those on the margins of the state, it could equally heighten a sense of collective exclusion, which can in turn foster a shared sense of grievance, if not identity.

CONCLUSION

Created *ex nihilo* in 1958 (Bensaâd 2008), Nouakchott today serves as the setting for a daily cyclical routine, in which gendarmes, police, and municipality officials, tasked with arranging urban space in the image of capital and the state, are set against migrant street vendors and workers trying to eke out an existence in this same urban space. The collective survival impulse of the latter is the ultimate operating principle of those segments of the informal economy discussed here. This is a world that people have entered having travelled, either internally or across borders, in the hope of gaining a living. Cheikh summed this up when speaking to me about continuing to work with the threat of their materials being confiscated: »everyone does what they

can to survive.« As Locatelli and Nugent (2008) stated in relation to other African urban contexts, the strategies that arise from this survival impulse should be understood »as capacities built upon people’s perceptions of their own status and experiences of their daily life« (4). The universally informal nature of the social networks and economic activity discussed here, as well as that of the state disruptions to which they are subject, indicate that what is often labelled ›informality‹ can equally be described in Nouakchott as urban social relations in practice. The historical baggage of national categories and identities can and does provide the content for situational displays of identity in this urban context. However, it is superseded by the position of those within the informal economy, who are internally bound together by social rituals and patterns of communication, and externally by a shared structural antagonism. This makes the informal economy, for the moment, a more immediate and tangible alternative mode of belonging.

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Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies

Vol. 4, Issue 2/2018

ISSN 2509-8322

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