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Author(s): Michaela Pelican

Source: *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, SPRING, SUMMER, FALL 2014, Vol. 43, No. 1/2/3, SPECIAL ISSUE: Global African Entrepreneurs (SPRING, SUMMER, FALL 2014), pp. 255-309

Published by: The Institute, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24643112>

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Urban Lifeworlds Of Cameroonian Migrants in Dubai

Michaela Pelican

Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology
University of Cologne

ABSTRACT: This contribution engages with urban lifeworlds and strategies of place making of Cameroonian traders and migrants in Dubai. It outlines their economic, spatial, and social imprint on Dubai's cityscape, and discusses migrants' self-understanding and transnational aspirations against the background of the UAE immigration system.

In recent years, Dubai has attracted large numbers of African traders and labor migrants who contribute significantly to the city's commercial development and social life. The streets of Deira, Dubai's historical business district, are populated by African merchants from all over the continent. Many Cameroonians who reside permanently in Dubai act as intermediaries for these merchants, facilitating their accommodation, purchases, and transport of acquisitions back to Africa. They tend to organize their lives around economic constraints and the caprice of immigration regulations. At the same time, they struggle to create social spaces of mutual comfort and support, for example, in the context of shared housing, church congregations, or aid and saving groups. However, reproducing social networks similar to those in Cameroon poses difficulties due to the migrants' insecure and often precarious legal situation.

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Introduction

Dubai is generally known as a city of extremes. In the 1970s, this historical port city began to engage in urban development on an unprecedented scale, which has resulted in a race for architectural grandeur and spectacle (Elsheshtawy 2010). Well-known icons of this urban development include the sail-shaped luxury hotel Burj Al Arab, the man-made palm islands, as well as the recently completed Burj Khalifa, currently the tallest building in the world. Furthermore, Dubai stands for elevated consumerism and the celebration of extravagance, as well as an ethnocratic regime that provides free services to its citizenry in a trade-off for political rights (Davidson 2008: 137-176; Longva 2000). These features go hand in hand with demographic extremes, namely the presence of a foreign labor force that by far outnumbers the local population. Current estimates assume that more than 90% of Dubai's population are expatriates, with the majority being from South and Southeast Asia (Elsheshtawy 2010: 212-215). These workers have commonly been associated with the downsides of urban development, namely the hardship of construction work, exploitative labor contracts, and dismal housing conditions in labor camps. Similarly, their female counterparts are seen in connection with domestic labor, high risk of abuse, and the absence of legal protection. Such portrayals are widespread in the local and international media, and have been sanctioned by human rights reports (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2006; 2007).

While acknowledging these extremes and their pertinence in public discourse, this contribution aims to shift the focus away from the spectacular to the more ordinary, and to illuminate the bandwidth of opportunities and alternatives in-between these extremes. I here draw inspiration from the social anthropologist Ahmed Kanna (2011) and the social geographer Yasser Elsheshtawy (2010), who in their recent studies of the city's cultural and urban development highlight Dubai's tran-

sient and forgotten spaces as well as the agency of its residents in appropriating and shaping these spaces.

While the majority of Dubai's foreign residents are from Asian, Arab, and European countries, there is also a sizable number of Africans whose presence has largely been neglected in academic research. The focus of this contribution is on the urban lifeworlds of Cameroonian migrants and traders in Dubai, most of them being relative newcomers to this region.¹ The term "lifeworlds," originally introduced by Edmund Husserl (1970), and a central concept in phenomenological anthropology (see, e.g., Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Jackson 2013), is here used in a more general sense to highlight the agency of the subjects under study in shaping their social and spatial environment, and to emphasize the dynamic and situated character of their experiences and perspectives. The characterization of these lifeworlds as urban is founded on Dubai's explicit urban trajectory and its striking contrast to most locales in Cameroon.

The second goal of this paper is to describe and analyze the dynamic, entrepreneurial, and transnational character of much recent African mobility within the Global South. The case study of Cameroonians in Dubai is an excellent example, as it gives us the opportunity to observe an incipient migrant network "in the making," with all the ups and downs, and successes and failures, reflected in individual experiences and amplified by volatile global markets and changing migration policies. These experiences also feed back into local perceptions of migrant destinations in Cameroon, the outlook for promising alternatives, and the establishment of transnational business networks. Finally, this contribution aims at analyzing the relationship between migrants' entrepreneurial orientation and the host country's vision of their transient integration, and to draw conclusions that may be applicable to the phenomenon of contemporary South-South mobility beyond the example of Cameroonians in Dubai.

Research Background and Methodology

This contribution draws on research conducted since 2007, which included extended periods of fieldwork in Cameroon as well as repeated visits to the United Arab Emirates, Gabon, and South Africa. While it is part of a larger project on transnational relations of Cameroonian Muslim migrants (Pelican 2011; Pelican and Tatah 2009), in this paper I focus on the fieldwork and findings that pertain to Cameroonian migrants in Dubai and to the overall theme of this special issue.

In terms of methodology, I have worked in close collaboration with Cameroonian researchers and interlocutors, allowing me to participate in the migrant experience first-hand. Moreover, in order to capture the processual and dynamic character of migrants' experiences, I opted for relatively short but repeated visits to migrant destinations, each lasting between two and four weeks. In addition, I have been in regular contact by email and telephone with key interlocutors both between and after my field visits. The research methods included participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews, as well as photo and video documentation.

A first field trip to Dubai was undertaken in October to November 2008 together with Tize Teri Deli, by then a doctoral student and today a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon.² At the time, the global financial crisis had just set in, but had not yet affected the livelihoods of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai. To maximize the data collection during our one-month field trip, both of us concentrated on different but interconnected networks of Cameroonian migrants. Initial contacts were established back in Cameroon before our coming to Dubai, thus emulating common strategies of aspiring migrants. On the basis of these contacts, we then explored the wider network of Cameroonians in Dubai, focusing on shared activities, popular meeting points, migrants' associations, and communal events. In total, Deli and I interviewed 32 interlocu-

tors, some of whom we met several times. Moreover, in order to get a good understanding of migrants' urban lifeworlds, we made a point to participate in our interlocutors' daily activities, accompanying them to their workplaces, homes, and leisure activities. Finally, we drew on methods of visual anthropology, in particular the use of photography and video in order to document migrant spaces, as well as to give our interlocutors the opportunity to tell their stories in their own images and words.³

A second field trip was realized in March 2011, when the effects of the global financial crisis were still tangible. This time, I went on my own but benefited from close collaboration with my key contact and host Murad, a Cameroonian with a university degree in geography and a self-employed businessman in Dubai.⁴ During this second field trip, I met with ten of my previous interlocutors, interviewed six newcomers, and updated my information on the current situation of Cameroonian traders and migrants in Dubai.⁵ Moreover, I made the acquaintance of two Emirati families in Al-Ain and Dubai who spent an entertaining day with me, a female European, and my male Cameroonian host, and also invited me into their homes. Although these encounters were rather short-lived and superficial (also due to the lack of communication skills in Arabic), they helped me to get a more nuanced perspective on the lives of local Emirati, and to critically reflect on the discourses and stereotypes shared by many Cameroonian migrants. Finally, I established contacts with Dubai-based academics and discussed the intricacies of researching possibly contentious issues. Their recommendations reflected the experiences of Elsheshtawy, who notes that "there are considerable problems in conducting field research in the Middle East, and in the Gulf specifically – plain clothes security are everywhere and I had several encounters simply for photographing people" (Elsheshtawy 2010: 218). Personally, I have been fortunate; but the threat of deportation (even if only imagined) seems constantly imminent, and

impacts the outlook of both Cameroonian migrants and foreign researchers, including myself. Moreover, working with people in legally precarious situations or engaged in illicit activities adds another set of practical and ethical considerations (see also Falzon 2009; Mac-Gaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). At the same time, these predicaments are also part of migrant realities, and sharing them brings us closer to our interlocutors' experiences and perspectives.

While the arguments and ethnography presented in this article are derived from my own fieldwork, I also draw on the writings of scholars of the Arab Gulf who have engaged with similar issues, and whose intricate knowledge of Emirati politics, society, and history helps to go beyond the migrant perspective and to provide a more encompassing and nuanced analysis.

The United Arab Emirates: A Burgeoning Field of Research

Lately, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and more generally the Gulf region, have become a burgeoning field of research. While there has been an established and long-standing scholarship on the history and society of the UAE (e.g., Heard-Bey 1982; Zahlan 1978), a stunning number of books and articles have been published in the past ten years, ranging from scientific publications to more popular accounts. Moreover, much research has been conducted by social scientists based at national and international universities in the Gulf States, which also mirrors recent developments in the region's academic landscape.

Most relevant to the subject of this paper are the numerous studies on labor migration to the Gulf States; a topic that has been dealt with since the 1970s. This body of literature comprises contributions from various disciplines, including

demographic and policy analyses as well as a multitude of ethnographic accounts that focus on different migrant communities, mostly from South and Southeast Asia (e.g., Gardner 2010; Kapiszewski 2001; Longva 1997). While many studies have focused on migrant communities as distinct from their host society, a few recent contributions have taken a more comprehensive approach, conceiving of migrants as part and parcel of contemporary cities and societies in the Gulf (e.g., Elshestawy 2010; Kanna 2011; Vora 2013). These studies question the dichotomy between “local Arabs” and “foreign migrants” that dominates public and policy discourse. They draw attention to the long history of the Gulf region’s interconnections with the Indian Ocean, and describe Emiratis’ current emphasis on Arab identity as a relatively recent phenomenon. Moreover, they argue that by internalizing this dichotomy, migrants equally sanction and contribute to the prevailing exclusionary discourse. Most importantly, they point out that neither Emirati nor migrant communities are homogenous units, and that ethnic, gender, and class differences shape individuals’ engagement with urban space and identity.

In analyzing the situation of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai, I draw inspiration from these later works whose elaborations are based on the long-standing and well-documented presence of residents of Persian and South Asian backgrounds in this region. Conversely, the relationship between Africa and the Arab Gulf is an incipient field of research that has already produced some stimulating insights. On the one hand, there is a growing body of historical research on Africans in the Indian Ocean region, including the Arab Gulf, which traces long-lasting economic and religious ties (e.g., Alpers 2000; Birks 1977; Campbell 2006; Hopper 2010; Khalifa 2006). On the other hand, there is a handful of studies that engage with current political and economic relations between Africa and the Gulf States. For example, the recent special issue on “Africa and the Arab Gulf” (Nyarko and Melitsko 2010a) includes the contributions of Afri-

canist historians and economists who paint a generally positive picture. They frame these relations as part of the “South-South trade” and emphasize their potential for strengthening Africa’s political independence and economic development. They also draw parallels to the relationship between China and Africa (see also Nyarko 2011). Finally, most relevant to the subject of this paper, is a recent article on the labor market experiences of Cameroonian migrants in the UAE (Malit and Oliver 2013), as well as the contributions of the political scientist Roland Marchal (2001; 2005), who studied the emergence of Dubai as a commercial hub for African traders in the 1990s. Many of his and the above authors’ findings will be integrated into my analysis of the urban lifeworlds of Cameroonians in Dubai.

Dubai: A History of Commerce and Transnational Relations

In order to have a good understanding of the complex ethnic composition of Dubai’s current population and the region’s linkages with Africa, a historical perspective is needed. The Arab Gulf has long been part of extended religious and commercial networks spanning the Indian Ocean. The city of Dubai emerged as a commercial center in the late nineteenth century, and today links the Middle East with Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Kazim 2010). Thus, Dubai’s history is largely a history of commerce and transnational connections extending to all continents, including Africa.

The origins of Dubai may be traced to the mid-eighteenth century, when it was still a small village and port under the influence of local tribal groups (Davidson 2008: 9-12). By the early nineteenth century, Dubai was described by an English traveler as a “miserable collection of mud huts” with an estimated population of 1,200 inhabitants. A few decades later, its population had doubled, and by the end of the century, it was

estimated at 3,000 people (Elsheshtawy 2010: 60-65). Dubai's rise and its emergence as a commercial center were largely due to British colonial intervention. In the nineteenth century, the British extended their sphere of influence to the Arab peninsula. They signed treaties with the territories' ruling families, thus creating the "Trucial States" on the basis of which the United Arab Emirates were later formed. Moreover, the British took control over the region's commercial networks by establishing a regular steamer service that linked the Arab Gulf with Europe and India. They made Dubai their port of call and the center for the import and re-export of British manufactures. The then ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid bin Maktum, sanctioned this development by abolishing custom duties, declaring the city a free port, and inviting the merchant community of Lingah (the region's former center of commerce) to move to Dubai. Their arrival in the 1890s vitally impacted the city's population, and engendered diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, and wealth (Davidson 2008: 71-76). Many of the immigrants were wealthy Arabian-Persian merchants from Bastak, a small town in Persia after whom the Bastakiyah quarter of Bur Dubai was named.⁶ Others were Indian financiers and moneylenders, formerly based in Lingah. They were followed by craftsmen, shopkeepers, clerks, and porters from Persia, South Asia, and neighboring Arab states (Kazim 2010: 78).

A second factor responsible for Dubai's rise in commerce and people was its vital involvement in the production and export of pearls (Hopper 2010; Kazim 2010). In the nineteenth century, the lower Gulf was home to various economic activities, including fishing, animal husbandry, re-export trading, and limited agriculture. Most relevant, however, was the pearl-diving industry, which later declined with the introduction of cultured pearls from Japan. At the time, slave labor played a crucial role, and many laborers were brought from East Africa, mostly via Zanzibar, and Asia. While the Arab Gulf looks back on a long history of slavery, the demand for slave labor peaked

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when there was high demand for pearls, and also dates, produced in the region and consumed in Europe, North America, and India. In 1905, British sources estimated that Africans accounted for 28% of the population of today's United Arab Emirates and for roughly 17% of the total population of the eastern Arabian coast under British protection (Hopper 2010: 158). As Aisha Bilkhair Khalifa (2006) argues, African slaves and their descendants not only played a significant role in the region's economy, but also contributed to Emirati culture. Their influence is reflected, for example, in musical and dance performances. However, in public perception and current scholarship, African-Emirati connections are largely ignored, which Khalifa attributes to historical and political factors. Firstly, most African slaves and their descendants integrated into the local society, adopting its religion and culture. They relinquished their African past and were granted membership in Emirati society. Secondly, as Khalifa (2006: 233) tells us, even today "descendants of slaves are still socially and to a certain extent financially attached to Gulf rulers. Therefore, historians fear that revealing the truth would jeopardise the groups' position and the religious, human, and civil rights image of Gulf countries." Khalifa's interpretation sheds new light on the historical relationship between the Arab Gulf and Africa, and its contemporary ramifications. Conversely, in the view of my Cameroonian informants, the historical and religious relations between East Africa and the Gulf are palpable even today, as reflected in the existence of "black" Emirati.

Dubai's history of commerce and transnational relations has continued in the twentieth century. Even after the decline of the pearl-diving industry in the 1930s, Dubai retained its position as a regional re-export center. Oil was discovered in 1960, but the reserves turned out considerably smaller than in other states of the region, for example, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. In 1971, the "Trucial States" became the United Arab Emirates, with Dubai

as one of its member states. Dubai's ruling Al-Maktum family decided to invest in the city's commercial infrastructure, and to encourage foreign investment via the establishment of free zones, the promotion of tourism, and freehold real estate (Davidson 2008: 99-135). Its corollaries, such as the Jebel Ali Free Zone, the sail-shaped luxury hotel Burj Al Arab, the man-made Palm Islands, and the world's tallest building Burj Khalifa, have become the city's landmarks and serve as a display of its aspirations to set the global standard for urban development (Elsheshtawy 2010: 133-170). Moreover, in recent years, Dubai's political and business elite opted for diversifying its economic strategies by turning to emerging markets outside of the Gulf, such as in Asia, Russia, and Africa (Kazim 2010: 87-88). This novel trend of Arab (and Asian) investment in Africa has also been noticed by my Cameroonian interlocutors as well as by Africanist scholars (e.g., Akyeampong 2010; Nyarko and Melitsko 2010b); yet its impacts are still to be observed.

As Dubai's economy flourished and diversified over the second half of the twentieth century, so did its population. The numerous building and investment projects generated a significant demand for external labor across all business sectors and employment levels. By 1968, immigrant labor accounted for 50% of Dubai's population (Kazim 2010: 81). According to data collected in 2005, 82% of Dubai's residents were foreign-born, with two thirds coming from India and Pakistan (Elsheshtawy 2010: 212). Recent estimates put Dubai's population at more than 2 million, with the local Emirati accounting for less than 10% (Davidson 2008: 190; Dubai Statistics Center 2014:2). As Kapiszewski (2006, 2007) argues, there was a general shift from Arab to Asian foreign labor in the Gulf States in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ While tacitly endorsing this shift, most Gulf countries instituted pro-Arab labor policies. For example, in 1980 the UAE signed labor agreements with Tunisia, Morocco, and the Sudan to strengthen the Arab presence in its workforce (Kapiszewski 2006: 8). However, these policy-attempts at "Arabization" (and

subsequently “Emiratization” [cf. Winckler 2009]) were never fully implemented; and today Asian and Southeast Asian migrants by far outweigh all other nationalities in the UAE labor force.⁸ According to Kazim (2010: 86-87), Dubai’s demographic diversity and global interconnectedness have significantly increased over the past 20 years, which he attributes to the multinational character of recent foreign investment and the re-emerging relevance of the Indian Ocean commercial system. Today, non-locals represent 200 different nationalities. Detailed information on the numbers and nationalities of African residents in the UAE is hard to come by. However, the Labor Force Survey of 2011, conducted by the Dubai Statistics Center, indicates 23,125 migrants from non-Arab African countries as salaried and self-employed workers in the Emirate of Dubai.⁹ The latest available data set for 2012 provides a breakdown of the workforce in percentages rather than absolute figures. It differentiates according to nationality groups and occupational

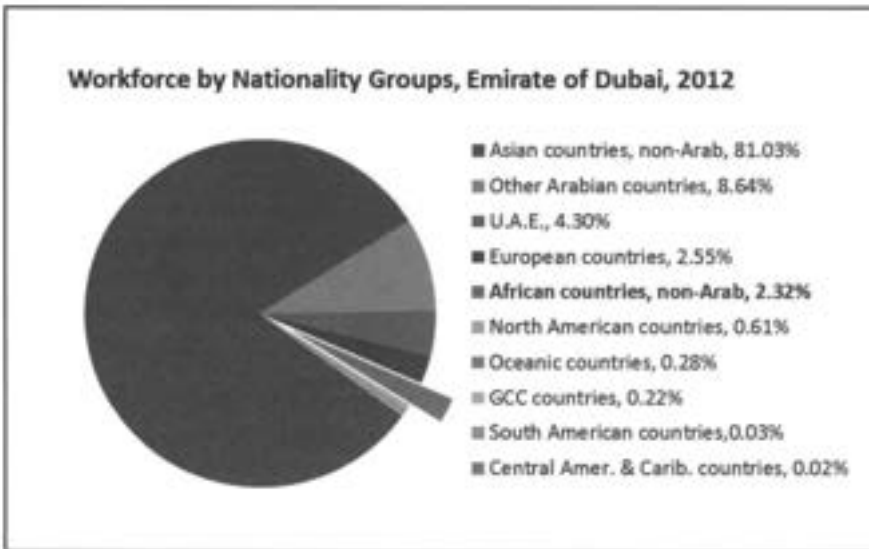


FIGURE 1. Workforce by nationality groups, Emirate of Dubai, 2012.

Source: Dubai Statistics Center, Labor Force Survey, Emirate of Dubai, 2012.¹⁰

categories. It shows that, while the percentage of the African workforce is rather insignificant compared to Asian and Arab workers, it comes close to the size of the European workforce (Figures 1 and 2).

Dubai: A Novel Destination for African Traders and Business People

While, in terms of residency and employment, Africans constitute a minor fraction of Dubai's population, the city has become a popular destination for traders and businesspeople from many parts of Africa. Marchal (2001; 2005) was among the first scholars to notice this development. At the beginning of the 1990s, the African presence in Dubai was still marginal and mostly confined to people from the Horn and East Africa. However, the situation changed rapidly, as African traders

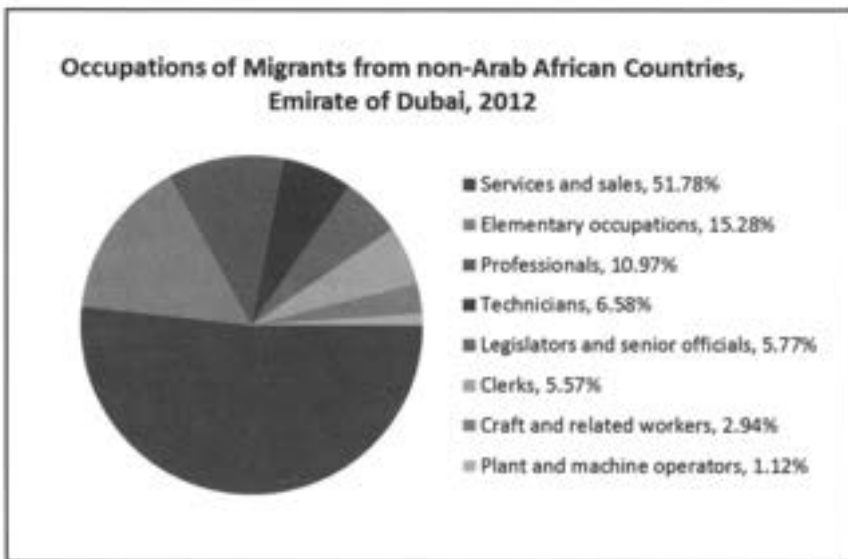


FIGURE 2. Occupations of migrants from non-Arab African countries, Emirate of Dubai, 2012.

Source: Dubai Statistics Center, Labor Force Survey, Emirate of Dubai, 2012.¹¹

from all parts of the continent increasingly ventured into Asian markets as an expansion of or an alternative to established commercial centers in Africa and Europe. As Marchal (2005: 103) argues, while historically rooted in Indian Ocean commercial networks, the recent advent of African traders in Dubai ought to be seen against the backdrop of economic and social transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. At the time, many African countries went through economic and political crises, which resulted in the rise of the informal economy and engendered a new class of economic actors with a decidedly business-oriented and outward-looking focus. These changes went hand in hand with new visions of economic success, and with the exploration of novel destinations and business trajectories. Let me illustrate this using the example of Cameroon.

Since the 1980s, Cameroon has undergone severe economic recession as a result of the country's economic and political liberalization. In line with structural adjustment programs, government employment decreased significantly, and with the devaluation of the franc CFA in 1994, local buying power was reduced drastically. Furthermore, the country's liberalization was accompanied by an increase in corrupt and illegal practices, leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the shallow democratization process. Concurrently, new imaginaries of making a successful future emerged. Until recently, government employment and white-collar jobs were deemed the preferred path to social recognition and economic success. As this trajectory suddenly diminished, disillusioned Cameroonian youths invested their energy and creativity into illicit activities and risky migrant ventures, thus creating new imaginaries of a successful future (de Rosny 2002; Förster 2010; Jua 2003). Two figures are representative of these new imaginaries: The *feyman* stands for the novel trajectory of making a fortune through large-scale fraudulence, cons, and scams, such as money-doubling, pretended investments, and Internet scams (Malaquais 2001; Ndjio 2008). The *bushfaller* represents the new transnational mi-

grant, driven by the desire for adventure and self-enrichment, and is associated with a continuous flow of remittances and regular home visits as a demonstration of his/her belonging and success (Nyamnjoh 2011; Pelican 2013). The two concepts are closely interlinked, as most successful *feymen* operate on an international level, and migrants' economic success may well be attributed to fraudulent dealings. It is important to note, however, that the moral judgment entailed in such allegations is not obvious but complex and subtle, as discourses of morality have changed in the context of increasing deprivation, poverty, and abjection. Both notions entail a strong business orientation, and ultimately culminate in the new role model of the "global African entrepreneur."

The second characteristic of this new category of economic actors is their exploration of novel destinations in the Global South, which is partly a corollary of Europe's restrictive immigration policies (Pelican and Tatah 2009). While many still envisage travelling to Europe or the U.S., commercial hubs, such as Dubai, Guangzhou, and Istanbul (explored in the contributions to this volume), offer services and economic opportunities that may well outweigh Western amenities.

Dubai's attraction to African traders may be attributed to its strategic investment in linking Asian and African markets (Marchal 2005). Firstly, the provision of visas easily accessible to Africans has been an essential feature. Dubai offers two-week business visas at a relatively cheap rate and imposes no restrictions on cash imports. This has been particularly relevant in view of Europe's tightening borders and its negative impact on business ventures. Secondly, Dubai's commercial infrastructure and business-friendly policies are appreciated by African traders, as they make for an affordable and smooth transport of goods and people. Moreover, easy communication adds to Dubai's attraction. The *lingua franca* is English, particularly among business people, most of whom are foreigners. Thirdly, the availability of varied goods of all provenances at attractive

prices has been a crucial factor in drawing African traders to Dubai. The goods they are most interested in include textiles, electronics, cars and car spare parts, gold and gold-plated jewelry, beauty products, and selected food stuffs. However, the range of goods varies a lot, depending on market fluctuations and the traders' specializations. For example, among the Cameroonian traders I met in Dubai, one was specialized in photographic equipment, another focused on textiles. A third trader catered for the needs of a highly selected customer elite; she filled a freight container with a car, first- and second-hand household equipment, kitchen utensils, bedding, selected garments, and shoes to be shipped back to Cameroon.

Following Marchal (2001: 92-93), we may distinguish three categories of traders: traders with a relatively moderate capital who go for a diversified range of goods; mid-range merchants specialized in selected export items whose capital may amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars; and large-scale businessmen, often public sector suppliers, who tend to negotiate directly with producers. Most of the Cameroonian traders I met belong to the first category. They come on a regular basis and enroll the services of broker-facilitators who often are their compatriots. A few have been wealthy enough to diversify their business trips and additionally explore opportunities in China, Thailand, Turkey, and Europe. Others had to stop coming to Dubai and fall back on markets in Africa (e.g., Cotonou, Lagos), as their limited capital did not allow them to generate enough profit to balance their expenses.

Marchal (2005: 106) identified two potential weaknesses that in the long run may affect Dubai's role for African traders. On the one hand, Dubai is not all that cheap, and it is true that in recent years, a growing number of traders have struck profitable business deals directly with producers in Asia, particularly China. At the same time, however, many traders cherish the amenities and the social and business networks available in Dubai (Keshodkar in this volume). On the other hand,

Marchal questions the role of intermediaries, and wonders if the more aggressive commercial policies of China, Malaysia, South Korea, and Japan may entice African customers away. Conversely, I argue that it is exactly this network of co-national broker-facilitators that many African traders appreciate, as it provides a familiar social environment, trust, stability, and a certain degree of control. Similar to the situation in Istanbul (Şaul in this volume), “cargo” is one of the prime occupations of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai, and will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Cameroonian Traders and Migrants in Dubai: Economic Imprints

My focus here is on the ways Cameroonians insert themselves in the formal and informal economy, thus inscribing their presence in Dubai.¹² As we will see, the general picture emerging is one of African traders and migrants with a strong inclination to engage in Dubai’s cargo business. Yet “cargo” is not understood in the conventional sense of warehousing and organizing the transport of merchandises, but includes a whole range of associated services, such as visa facilitation, business assistance, and money transfer.

Compared to Africans from East Africa and the Horn of Africa, Cameroonians are relative newcomers to Dubai. According to my informants, the start was made by traders who began to frequent the region in the late 1980s. Their need for intermediaries to facilitate their stay soon paved the way for more permanent forms of migration. Furthermore, in recent years, Dubai’s reputation as a global city with easy access has attracted many Cameroonians in search of business and employment opportunities. Cameroonians account only for a small fraction of Africans in Dubai. The nearest Cameroonian

embassy is based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and only a few of the Cameroonians we met in Dubai have made an effort to formally register with the embassy. Relying on the estimates of two well-established Cameroonians, the community may be estimated at one thousand individuals, though with a high fluctuation rate. It includes both men and women from various parts of Cameroon, yet with a high concentration from the Francophone western region and the Anglophone northwest. In Cameroonian public discourse, these regions have the reputation of producing individuals with an interest in education and business acumen, and are considered politically marginalized (Pelican 2013). While the majority of Cameroonians in Dubai are Christian, Muslims from northern Cameroon constitute a small fraction. As some interlocutors outlined, the latter are slightly better placed in the Muslim environment of the UAE than their Christian counterparts, as they enjoy more respect and may benefit from the opportunity of socializing with local businesspeople in the mosque. Yet while Cameroonians in Dubai are a rather heterogeneous group, they share in common a vision of the city as good for trade and business.

In terms of livelihood strategies, we may distinguish three overlapping categories of people with a focus on business, salaried work, or university studies. Yet boundaries are fluid, as individuals may combine several activities or shift between them over time. For the period under study, small-scale entrepreneurs clearly constituted the majority. Interviews conducted during my second field trip in 2011, however, suggest that more individuals have found access to qualified and well-paid jobs, a trend that may continue with better information networks and growing interest among Cameroonian professionals to live and work in Dubai. Also, student numbers may increase, as the availability of international university programs and bursaries will attract more prospective Cameroonian students.

The table below gives an overview of the interviewees, grouped by their livelihood strategies (Table 1). Besides Cam-

eronian migrants based in Dubai, it also mentions traders encountered during their business trip in Dubai. While the 2008 column states all Cameroonians that my collaborator Deli and/or I interviewed, the 2011 column considers only the new interlocutors whom I had not previously met in 2008.

TABLE 1. Interviewees categorized by livelihood strategies

	2008	2011	TOTAL
Traders Frequenting Dubai	2	3	5
Entrepreneurs #1*	14	1	15
Entrepreneurs #2**	8	0	8
Formal Employees***	6	2	8
Students	2	0	2
TOTAL	32	6	38

NOTES:

- * Freelance workers (cargo, catering, sales, facilitation of visas, import/export).
- ** Company managers (cargo, import/export, visa service, hotel, restaurant).
- *** Formal employees with Dubai-based companies (security, medical care, banking, sales).

Source data: Research of Michaela Pelican, 2008, 2011.

When Deli and I first went to Dubai in 2008, most of our interlocutors were relative newcomers who had arrived some months or years back, and were still struggling to make a decent living and navigate the UAE immigration and employment system. At the time, Dubai was being advertised by Cameroonian

travel agencies and migration brokers as a promising destination with easily accessible visas and abundant employment opportunities, a hub to continue to Europe or the US, and all that at an affordable price. Several aspiring migrants, desperate to leave the country after several failed attempts, went for this option and upon arrival were confronted with unforeseen obstacles. At the time, it was a common story to hear of Cameroonians who reached the Dubai airport and had to realize that the computerized visa they had been issued was fake. Only after negotiations with their local contact person or as a result of the benevolence of an immigration officer, and the issuing of a new visa, were they able to leave the airport and enter the city.¹³ Others had been promised accommodation and a decent job, but found themselves turned adrift and obliged to search for both on their own. Complaints about misinformation and exploitation by migration brokers have been a common theme, not only among Cameroonians in Dubai; they have also become the story line for the Cameroonian-Chinese video production *CHINA WAHALA 1 AND 2*, a comedy about the tribulations of Cameroonians in China (Pelican and Tatah 2009). During my second trip, these stories seemed to have diminished in number, probably because measures had been taken on the side of the UAE government to fool-proof its visa system, and because aspiring migrants were more alert to the possibility of misuse.¹⁴

The majority of our interlocutors had entered Dubai with a short-term trader, visit, or tourist visa. Accordingly, they had only a few weeks to find employment before their visa would expire. They came with the assumption that they would easily find a good-paying job in their field of specialization, for example, catering, tourism, or business administration. However, this turned out to be more difficult than assumed. As the recent study of Froilan Malit and Tchiapep Oliver (2013) confirms, Cameroonian and more generally African migrants face structural disadvantages in finding adequate employ-

ment. Firstly, they often experience “deskilling” (occupational downward mobility), because their educational certificates are not recognized or because they have no previous work experience in the UAE. Secondly, occupations tend to be associated with particular nationalities, both in general perception and in hiring practices. The “usual” occupations for Africans in Dubai are in security and frontline hospitality (e.g., doormen, reception staff, waiters, shop assistants); that is, jobs that are generally poorly paid and offer limited chances for professional advancement. Thirdly, the salary range is linked to the employee’s nationality, with Africans being located toward the bottom end, a practice perceived as racist or discriminatory by most Cameroonian interlocutors (Malit and Oliver 2013: 16-20). The prevalence of racial bias (not just among locals but Dubai’s residents in general, including white British migrants [Walsh 2010]) is reflected in hiring practices as well as daily encounters. Yet, as several authors (e.g., Mahdavi 2011; Nagy 2006; Vora 2013) have shown, it is the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and class that shapes migrants’ working opportunities and realities in the Gulf countries.

Against the background of these structural constraints, many of my Cameroonian interlocutors opted for engaging in informal activities, such as assisting traders in buying their goods, working as business touts for shop owners, selling African food and alcoholic beverages in private homes, operating rented cars as informal taxis, prostitution, etc. Several of these informal activities verge on illegality, and occasionally the police intervene. Thus by 2011, the private taxi and restaurant businesses were no longer feasible, as public transport had considerably improved and police controls had become more rigid.¹⁵ For several, the struggle to find a decent job and regularize their stay did not work out and they eventually decided to return to Cameroon. Others have persisted and focused on the cargo business, a strand that has turned out to be rather profitable and reliable thanks to the constant stream

of African traders frequenting Dubai. Also, several of the established Cameroonians serve as role-models, as there are at least four officially registered cargo companies managed by Cameroonians.

Immigration to the UAE and more generally the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council is regulated by a sponsorship system, also known as *kafala*. The system requires foreigners to have a local sponsor, usually their employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status.¹⁶ Similarly, company ownership is tied to business partnership with an Emirati citizen.¹⁷ In Dubai, a visa industry has developed that involves a variety of actors and institutions: the UAE immigration service, UAE nationals, companies entitled to issue visas, and intermediaries. Consequently, visa fees increase with each additional broker. For many Cameroonians, the visa industry is an attractive and easy source of income, as they gain a share on each visa they facilitate. Similarly, showing round traders and enabling business contacts generates remuneration from the client and the company, as well as follow-up tasks, such as facilitating the goods' export. All of these services are considered part of the cargo business and are the purview of both Cameroonian freelance workers and company managers.

Among the most successful and popularly known Cameroonians is a businesswoman who operates a hotel, a restaurant, and a cargo company (Figure 3). Jeanne has been based in Dubai since 2000. While trained in geoscience, she discovered a promising niche in African catering, and gradually managed to open a Cameroonian restaurant with the support of her husband, then based in France. The restaurant soon became popular with African customers, and with time, she expanded into other lines of business. In 2008, she took over a one-star hotel in Dubai's commercial district, Deira, which hosts her Cameroonian restaurant and is frequented mostly by Arab and African customers. She employs Cameroonian as well as Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Ghanaian, and Nigerian personnel so



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FIGURE 3. Advertisement leaflet for a Cameroonian-run hotel and cargo company.

as to attract a diverse clientele. Jeanne also provides services to fellow Cameroonians. Over the years, she has brought several young women over to Dubai to work in her establishment. She regularly visits Cameroonians in prison, often jailed for overstaying their visa or illicit activities, and attends to their needs, for example, providing phone cards or facilitating money transfer.¹⁸ Besides her professional career, she has managed to organize family life in Dubai, a rather expensive and cumbersome enterprise for non-nationals. Together with her husband, who later joined her, she has four children attending a private international school in Dubai.

There are many more Cameroonian businesspeople in Dubai, yet not all as successful as Jeanne. Some have been affected by the global financial crisis, for example, being prosecuted for bank loans they could no longer pay back. Others were able to absorb the losses by falling back on productive investments in Cameroon. By 2011, the situation had stabilized, but the number of African traders frequenting Dubai had been reduced; a development that Jeanne attributed not only to the global financial crisis, but also to fiscal changes in Cameroon and the growing presence of Chinese businesspeople and investors in Africa.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the cargo sector, with its many related activities, still counts among the most attractive options for Cameroonians in Dubai. It thrives on personal networks with African traders and Dubai-based companies, provides an instable but often lucrative income, and is accessible to everyone with suitable personal skills. The downside, however, is insecurity in terms of income and a regular stay, as residency in the UAE is tied to formal employment.

Buba, for example, is a young man in his early twenties from a well-placed family in northern Cameroon. He came to Dubai in 2006 with the intention to become a professional football player. Unfortunately, he lacked the necessary credentials and connections to be hired by a local team and ended up with no money and his visa being expired.²⁰ He then teamed up with

other migrants from Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire who were in a similar situation. For some months, they slept in public spaces, constantly on the watch for police control, which at the time was still relatively infrequent. At a later stage, a Cameroonian acquaintance integrated him in his cargo company as a guide to traders, yet on an informal basis. Moreover, he befriended an Arab woman and became reliant on sharing her accommodation. When I met Buba in 2008, he was desperate to visit his family in Cameroon, as his father had died a few months earlier. However, he was facing substantial financial and moral obstacles: Firstly, in addition to buying an air ticket, he was supposed to pay a significant penalty for overstaying his visa.²¹ Secondly, he was ashamed to return home empty-handed and face the judgment of his family. Three years later, Buba was still in Dubai and largely the same situation. His dream of becoming a professional footballer had long vanished, and as he explained, his life was all about eking out a living, going after girls, and avoiding the police. He believed that he could still become a successful businessman, just like his Cameroonian patron, and eventually return back home. Yet in the meantime, he had broken off contact with his relatives, as he could not stand telling them the truth. Buba's story is exemplary for the many migrants whose ambitions have failed and whose lives are characterized by irregularity and insecurity.

This leads me to the second category of livelihood strategies, namely formal employment with a Dubai-based company. Here, the major incentives are job security and a regularized stay, namely a work and residence permit. This is also where the UAE sponsorship system plays a role, as work contracts are tied to a sponsor, be it an Emirati individual or a Dubai-based company. Much has been written about the exploitative nature of the *kafala* system, mostly with regard to unskilled laborers and domestic workers, as it places them under the almost absolute control of their employers (e.g., Gardner 2010; Human Rights Watch 2006; 2007; Longva 1997; 1999). In the

case of Cameroonians, the situation is not as virulent, as they generally do not work in the construction²² or domestic²³ sector, where abuses of workers' rights have been most prominent. However, several interlocutors complained that they were urged to sign unfavorable work contracts, binding them to a company for three years without the option of resignation or change of employer.²⁴ This lack of flexibility, together with unsatisfactory work and salary conditions, has motivated two of our interlocutors to switch from formal employment to the cargo line, while others have tried to combine formal employment with informal activities.

We have met Cameroonians in a variety of occupations, depending on their qualifications and their stamina to keep searching for a suitable job. Several men and women ended up working in security. As we learned, the job offer was part of the initial arrangement with the migration broker in Cameroon. Yet when they arrived in Dubai and realized the nature and conditions of the job (low pay, long hours, and crammed accommodation), they had only two weeks to look for alternatives before the expiry of their visa. So, they eventually signed up with the security company so as to regularize their stay, hoping that they would soon find a better-paying job. Only gradually did they understand the rigidity of the *kafala* system.

Another interlocutor, also employed in security, was more fortunate. Being a professional boxer, he was enrolled as a bouncer at nightclubs and a bodyguard at rock concerts, and could thus supplement his income. Moreover, he succeeded in making contact with sports establishments and organizing the invitation of Cameroonian boxers to professional tournaments. When I met him again in 2011, he was still working in the same company, but had married a Russian woman with whom he had a small son, and was using his free time to give boxing lessons in an expat sports establishment.

As Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi (1999) have shown with regard to Arab and Asian migrants in the UAE, a suc-

cessful job search often hinges on the individual's endurance and resources. Esther, for example, was a practicing nurse in Cameroon before she came to Dubai in October 2007. Finding a job in her profession turned out to be a formidable challenge, as it took her ten months during which she had to rely on the regular financial support of her husband in Cameroon. Twice she went for a "visa change," then found a job with a bank, but soon had to quit, and again fell back on her husband's resources. Finally, she was enrolled with the City Hospital, a newly established South African-owned hospital in Dubai Healthcare City. Together with other nurses from Africa and Asia, Esther was placed in the maternity section, and received training in the usage of the station's modern equipment. When I first met her in October 2008, she was still under probation but already earned a monthly salary of 4,000 AED (then equivalent to US \$1,089). In addition, she was provided accommodation, and was looking forward to receiving generous tips from satisfied customers. In the end, Esther's stamina and her husband's ceaseless support paid off, as within a year, she was able to send home a car, electronic items, and other desired goods.²⁵ Furthermore, besides these material achievements, the family had gained substantial social standing. Esther's husband, a lower management employee in the rubber plantations in Southwest Cameroon, took much pride in his ability not only to support a polygynous family but also send his second wife to Dubai. In his view, the 4.5 million FCFA (US \$9,450) spent on Esther's dream to live and work abroad were well invested.²⁶ However, Esther's case is just one in so many successful or failed attempts to realize an adequate future abroad. The amount of energy, time, and money required to achieve this goal cannot be underestimated.

I end my exploration of Cameroonians' insertion in Dubai's economy by briefly considering the third category of livelihood strategies: participation in the knowledge economy. Admittedly, university students have played a minor role in

our sample of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai. What attracted my attention, however, was the insistence of one of our interlocutors to export consumer goods to Cameroon as a complementary activity to her university studies. Being the daughter of a well-placed Muslim family in northern Cameroon and being supported by her uncle, a Dubai-based businessman, she had no financial pressure to engage in the cargo business. Nonetheless, she considered it appropriate to make an effort to earn a living on the side and provide her mother with goods to sell, so as to prove her worth. Drawing on the studies of Heidi Haugen (2013) and Sylvie Bredeloup (in this volume) on African students-turned-entrepreneurs in Guangzhou (China) and Dubai, I believe that commercial centers will gain currency among prospective Cameroonian students who aim at combining educational achievement with business experience. Thus, alongside migrants engaged in freelance or salaried work, they represent the new category of global African entrepreneurs.

Africans' Spatial Imprint on Dubai's Cityscape

Closely linked to Cameroonians' economic activities is their spatial representation and imprint on the cityscape. Here I draw inspiration from Yasser Elsheshtawy (2008, 2010) and Jane Bristol-Rhys (2012), who, in studying social and spatial boundaries in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, have highlighted the vital role of migrant groups in shaping urban spaces. While they have focused mainly on Arab and Asian migrants, I will provide a complementary perspective by centering on African, in particular Cameroonian traders and migrants.

In his book *DUBAI: BEHIND AN URBAN SPECTACLE*, Elsheshtawy (2010) engages with the city's urban development from a social geographical perspective. He draws attention to the varied character of Dubai's urban spaces: on the one hand,

the city's megaprojects and shopping malls that have come to stand for the "Brand Dubai"; on the other, the transitory spaces inhabited by migrant populations that he considers the "hidden" but distinctive spaces of Dubai. In his analysis, he opposes the "spectacular" to the "everyday," and interprets their relationship as a struggle between planners and residents over shaping urban spaces. To illustrate his argument, he explores two sites of migrant appropriation of urban spaces: firstly, Dubai's informal retail landscape that is characterized by ethnic restaurants, ethnic markets, and the sales of counterfeit goods; secondly, migrant spaces of everyday life that include central gathering points as well as a variety of housing arrangements. Relating Elsheshtawy's findings to the case of Cameroonians in Dubai, I appreciate his notion of "transitory spaces" characterized by the absence of permanence and urban planning, and lived in by foreigners who themselves are in a transitory state (Elsheshtawy 2008; 2010: 241-244).

The city's oldest and most transient districts (Bur Dubai and Deira) are situated at the entrance to the Dubai Creek. They were the original commercial and residential quarters inhabited by Emirati families. Yet with the city's economic and urban growth, most Emirati moved away from the center to newly developed suburbs with more space and privacy. Their houses were supplanted by commercial buildings or rented out to foreigners. Today, Deira, Bur Dubai, and the adjacent Karama are the districts with the highest population density that host much of Dubai's working and middle class migrant population (Elsheshtawy 2010: 216). These are also the districts where African presence in Dubai is most tangible (Figure 4).

Compared to Arab and Asian migrant groups, African spatial imprints are rather discreet. Nonetheless, among African nationalities it is mostly those with a lasting history in the Gulf that have impacted public space and perception. In Deira, for example, a number of areas have informally been named after different nationalities. Most popular is Nasser Square, named



FIGURE 4. Main area of Cameroonian spatial representation in the historical business districts around the Dubai Creek.

Source Map: Dubai city detailed road map, © 2011 - 2013 Vidiani.com - Maps of all countries in one place; published under the Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 3.0 Licence.²⁷ Modification: Research data of Michaela Pelican, March 2011.

after the late Egyptian president. But there is also the “Sudanese *masjid*” (mosque), the “Somali quarter,” and the “Ethiopian street” with ethnic shops and restaurants. Yet as my host Murad outlined, these names often relate to historical linkages, such as the nationality of the *imam* who initiated a congregation or the first occupants of a quarter. Today, they may no longer strictly apply as a result of the quarters’ transient character.

The historical business district Deira, next to the Dubai Creek, is also where we find most Cameroonian traders and migrants. The area is characterized by a multitude of low-budget shops, markets, businesses, hotels, and restaurants

that cater to the needs of an international clientele. While most establishments are run by managers from South Asia, Iran, or neighboring Arab states, traders from Africa and Central Asia constitute a significant customer base. This is reflected in the response of an Indian hardware salesman to whom we talked in 2008. As he argued, many of the shops in Deira largely depended on African customers. If African traders were to shift their market, for example, because of the financial crisis, he and others would no longer have an income. Consequently, many restaurants, hotels, retail shops, and cargo companies make explicit efforts to attract African customers, for example, by naming their enterprises after African cities, by employing African salespersons and business touts to target African customers, and by distributing flyers, such as the above advertisement leaflet of the Cameroonian-run hotel and cargo company (Figure 3).

African presence shapes Deira's street picture in many ways (Figures 5 and 6). An increasing number of signboards and shops address an African clientele. We see Africans touring the busy shopping streets as well as the retail and wholesale markets, including the illustrious Gold Souk. And we find African women and men relaxing in street cafés and restaurants after a tiring shopping day.

Another domain of African spatial imprint is the hospitality sector. With the help of my host Murad, who has worked in cargo since 2006, I conducted a survey of the hotels in Deira that are frequented by African traders. We identified 52 establishments, the majority being one-star or ungraded hotels with an average size of 30 to 50 rooms. At the time (March 2011), six were under African management: three Somali, one Cameroonian, one Senegalese, and one Chadian. In terms of customer base, the majority was frequented by a mixed African clientele, followed by a predominantly Nigerian, West African (Mali, Senegal, Niger), Somali, Angolan, Cameroonian, and Comorian clientele. In several cases, hotels were adjacent to



FIGURE 5. Asian-run computer accessory shop, entitled “African Palace.” Photo by M. Pelican, 2011.

informal packing stations where Africans working in cargo were waiting for clients, thus populating the street.

Yet African traders’ ventures are not limited to Dubai’s historical business districts. The Chinese trading center Dragon Mart located at the city’s outskirts, the automobile businesses concentrated in the neighboring city Sharjah, as well as Dubai’s many trade fairs count as attractive destinations. Furthermore, they also explore Dubai’s sites of spectacle for commercial or touristic reasons, such as the famously themed shopping malls as well as Dubai’s architectural emblems. Highly popular are photographs in front of the sail-shaped luxury hotel Burj Al Arab or the world’s tallest building Burj Khalifa. Thus, responding to the needs of a middle-class business clientele, the Cameroon-based company MTA (*Messagerie et Tourisme pour l’Afrique*), with a representative stationed in Dubai, has developed an all-inclusive business cum tourism program that



FIGURE 6. Busy shopping street in Deira. Photo by M. Pelican, 2011.

includes a Dubai city tour, welcome tea in a luxury hotel, excursions to various shopping malls (e.g., Mall of the Emirates with an indoor ski slope, Dubai Mall with a giant aquarium, and the Egyptian-themed Wafi Mall), and a desert safari.²⁸

Cameroonian migrants largely frequent the same spaces as African traders, yet with a wider radius. Looking at their living spaces, the majority congregates in Deira, where they live in shared housing arrangements, also known as “bed space.” The houses are mostly apartment buildings, managed by real estate companies. For Dubai standards, these are often relatively old and dilapidated buildings. Moreover, rents are rather high because of their central location. In 2011, the average price for “bed space” was 500 AED (US \$136) per month, and it was common to find four to eight migrants (mostly of the same sex and nationality) sharing a one-room apartment with a small kitchen and toilet. As my host Murad explained, housing prices were soaring in 2008-2009 but went down by the end

of 2010. In the meantime, Cameroonians have expanded their radius to adjacent quarters, such as Al Baraha and Al Muteena, where the apartment buildings are newer, or to neighboring Emirates, such as the cities of Sharjah and Ajman, where rents are generally lower.

The majority of Cameroonians who do “bed space” are newcomers or those who work in cargo. Couples or individuals who prefer a bit more privacy tend to live in a different type of shared housing, namely old villas abandoned by their Emirati owners who have long since moved to the city’s outskirts. These villas are located in the neighborhoods north and northeast of Deira (Hamriya, Abu Hail, Al Waheda, and Hor al Anz). Officially, shared housing is not allowed in these residential areas, and only married couples and families should occupy a villa. At times, checks are carried out by the municipality police, and villas may have to be evacuated. Similarly, bed space is not officially sanctioned, but tacitly tolerated.

Comparing Cameroonians’ housing arrangements with those described by Elsheshtawy (2010: 206-236) for working and middle-class migrants, many similarities emerge. This is understandable against the background that Cameroonians have followed the example of earlier established migrant groups. However, two features are noticeably different. Firstly, in my sample of informants I have not come across Cameroonians living in labor camps, such as those featured so prominently in media and human rights reports (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2006; see also Gardner 2010). Even those with a labor contract that includes company housing often prefer to find their own accommodation for various reasons; for example, in order to be closer to Dubai’s city center, because they cherish more privacy, because they enjoy the company of African housemates, or because it enables them to save on the rent. Secondly, better-earning Cameroonians favor modern apartments in Dubai’s middle-class neighborhoods dotted across the city (e.g., Al Garhoud, al Nahda, International City, Dubai Ma-

rina). And the few professionals employed with international companies live in modern high-standard villas in the so-called New Dubai (e.g., Jumeirah, Jumeirah Heights). While this category of middle- and upper-class migrants has been neglected in Elsheshtawy's study due to his social geographical focus, I include them in my sample, so as to provide a comprehensive overview of Cameroonians' spatial representation in Dubai. I wish to emphasize, however, that this is a temporary account, since Cameroonians do not constitute a well-established but rather a fluctuating group, and as Dubai's urban development is generally highly transitory.

As a final point of this section, I will briefly explore the ways that African migrants navigate socio-spatial boundaries with regard to public spaces. In a recent article, Jane Bristol-Rhys (2012) outlines patterns of spatial and social segregation in Abu Dhabi, highlighting the perspective of Asian laborers, housed in labor camps. In the view of her interlocutors, access to the city is highly restricted due to physical and social hurdles. These include distance to the city center, lack of financial resources, as well as an unspoken rule that male laborers are not supposed to linger around public spaces. When Bristol-Rhys asked one of her Pakistani interlocutors if the parks in the city were for the public, he replied: "No, Madam, no, this is not the case because we are not people of the city, we live in the labor camp and are not public" (Bristol-Rhys 2012: 77). I find this anecdote telling, as it contrasts with my understanding of how Cameroonian migrants in Dubai engage with their public environment. Clearly, the crucial difference lies in the fact that the Cameroonians I met do not live in labor camps and are not subjugated to the all-encompassing control of their employer-sponsors. While they have been told similar informal rules, for example, that one should not challenge Emirati citizens who in turn may cause one's deportation, or that foreigners are not supposed to enter Emirati residential neighborhoods, several of my interlocutors defied these instructions. Emphasizing

opportunities over challenges, they argued that they would not easily be intimidated, or that too much precaution would deter them from productive encounters with Emirati citizens. Similarly, their engagement with public spaces has been rather relaxed. For example, I was twice invited to join Cameroonians in trips to the Al Mamzar Beach Park²⁹ north of Deira for a relaxing afternoon off, and accompanied several traders and migrants on their stroll through upscale shopping malls in the New Dubai. Thus, unlike the above-quoted Pakistani laborer, these Cameroonian migrants understand themselves as part and parcel of Dubai's public, and as entitled to enjoy its amenities.

Cameroonians' Social and Associational Life

As outlined earlier, most Cameroonians I met in Dubai have been involved in the cargo business in one way or another, be it their main occupation, an activity on the side, or for specific purposes. While they may work in different sectors and reside in separate parts of the city, cargo or trade relations between Africa and Dubai are where their interests converge and where loose networks of communication and exchange have developed. Beyond this, there is little they have in common, and there is little or no sense of a Cameroonian community with a shared identity and a mutual support network.

With the majority of my interlocutors being entrepreneurs, social life is closely intertwined with business activities. Concurrently, their social networks are mostly derived from work contacts and shared housing arrangements. Taking into account that cargo is largely an ethnic business and that most "bed space" arrangements involve people of the same countries or continent, many of my interlocutors mostly socialize with fellow Africans. Let me take as an example my host Murad, who, when asked about his network of friends, named the

following four individuals: firstly, two of his Cameroonian roommates who come from the same region in Cameroon as Murad and also work in cargo. As they share the same language and culture, he feels free to discuss or banter with them about personal things, such as marriage or homesickness. Secondly, his former boss, a Francophone Cameroonian who manages a cargo company and with whom he collaborates on a regular basis. This is the person he approaches in case of money or visa issues, and who has supported him several times. Finally, a Filipino migrant woman and Muslim convert whom he got to know through a work colleague. He considers her a good friend with whom he can discuss religious issues and on whom he could also rely when preparing for my visit.

Conversely, Cameroonians with formal employment tend to enjoy a wider range of contacts and leisure activities. Esther, for example, has posted several pictures on her Facebook page of joint social activities with her nursing colleagues, such as festive events in the hospital, as well as a visit to a beach and a night club.

Besides socializing with friends, some interlocutors also mentioned their engagement in religious networks from where they derive spiritual and social support. A number of Christian Cameroonians are members of Pentecostal churches, often run by African pastors. As these churches operate informally, they mostly hold their services in rented hotel space. Only a few mentioned attending services in St. Mary's Catholic Church, the oldest Christian congregation, with a large structure in Oud Metha. Muslim Cameroonians regularly go for prayers in one of the many mosques in Dubai. As all of my Muslim interlocutors outlined, they much appreciate living in a Muslim country and value the amenities and support offered to fellow Muslims. For example, in the mosque they have the rare opportunity to meet with Emirati citizens, some of whom may be sympathetic to their cause. Some also make a point to further their religious knowledge by frequenting Islamic centers and Quran classes.

Moreover, their being in Dubai offers them the opportunity to prepare for the *umrah* (lesser pilgrimage) or *hajj* to Mecca as well as to link up with transnational religious networks.

In a recent article, Laavanya Kathiravelu (2012) argues that although Dubai is popularly understood as an “uncaring place,” informal networks of aid and care do exist among its migrant population. Drawing on her research among low-wage migrants in Dubai, she describes spontaneous acts of care and friendship networks among fellow migrants, as well as charities and faith-based organizations that address migrants’ social welfare issues. Similarly, Pardis Mahdavi (2011: 148-184) has documented a number of organizations that step in where employers or the UAE government fall short of providing assistance, and that provide outreach to migrants in need, such as abused women, irregular migrants, or injured low-wage workers. She interprets these organizations as an expression of Dubai’s emerging civil society. And while the UAE government has not granted them formal recognition, many do collaborate with government services so as to attain their goal.

In the case of Cameroonians, support networks are feeble and an effective representation of their collective interests is hampered by the absence of a Cameroonian consulate in the UAE (Malit and Oliver 2013). There have been attempts to establish an association (*Association d’entraide des Camerounais des Émirats Arabes Unis*) to assist fellow nationals in Dubai, and to represent their interests vis-à-vis the Cameroon Embassy in Saudi Arabia as well as relevant government and business institutions in Dubai. According to Jeanne, the manager of the Cameroonian restaurant and hotel, the association was initiated by some well-established Cameroonians with the idea of providing assistance in case of severe accidents that require medical care or the repatriation of the deceased body, a situation that has repeatedly occurred, and where the association has made a positive impact. However, associational life in Dubai has been overshadowed by internal conflicts. In 2008, several

individuals distanced themselves from the Cameroonian association, as they feared its members' alleged involvement in illicit activities. By 2011, the promised backing of the Cameroon Embassy still had not materialized, and the association was dormant. Consequently, members have diverted to alternative, more individualized networks of support, such as informal aid and saving groups. Concurrently, Jeanne's restaurant still functions as a social meeting point for Cameroonians in Dubai. Compared to Cameroonian associational life in other locations, such as back in Cameroon, Europe, and the United States (e.g., Mercer and Page 2010; Page et al. 2010), Cameroonians in Dubai have not been all that successful, which I attribute to them being a migrant network "in the making." Moreover, the Cameroonian case is not representative for all African nationalities in Dubai, as the Sudanese, for example, have their cultural association with a building in Oud Metha.³⁰ We may thus infer that structural factors, such as the length of stay, size, and coherence of a migrant group as well as its diplomatic backing, play a crucial role in facilitating the establishment of an effective support network.

Cameroonian migrants in Dubai so far have failed to develop a community or diaspora identity. In this regard they differ from longer-established and socially more integrated groups, such as the middle-class Indian diaspora described by Neha Vora (2013). Nonetheless, several individuals have developed an attachment to the city that, in one way or another, has become part of their self-understanding, and has shaped their cosmopolitan and transnational outlook.

Migrants' Transnational Aspirations and Dubai's Imprint on Public Life in Cameroon

As several authors have argued, the UAE immigration model provides no permanent perspective for foreigners in

Dubai (e.g., Kathiravelu 2012; Longva 2000; Nagy 2006; Vora 2008). Every foreigner is a visitor, a guest worker, a transitory migrant. This situation shapes migrants' self-understanding, and is reflected in my interlocutors' perspective on their purpose and stay in Dubai. They generally agree that Dubai is good for business and attractive for its urban spectacle, but ultimately a transitory place. Over and over they see themselves reminded of their transient and precarious state, be it by the necessity to recurrently legalize their stay, or by UAE citizens' prerogatives vis-à-vis foreign residents in things as mundane as traffic. However, when it comes to the question of migrants' entitlement to political and civil rights, opinions are divided. Some are outspokenly critical. Others contend that Dubai offers a whole lot of freedoms, as migrants are generally left to themselves and can do what they want, as long as they do not disturb public order. They may mingle with all kinds of people, practice any type of faith, even drink alcohol, go to a nightclub, and visit prostitutes. What else (these interlocutors argue) do Cameroonians need to feel free? Others assert that Cameroonians have not come to the UAE to engage in politics and change the situation in Dubai, but to make an impact back home. Hence, those who wish to realize their civil rights and establish themselves in a long-term perspective should rather consider moving to Europe, Canada, or the United States. Conversely, those who see their primary goal in making money and investing in Cameroon may do well in Dubai, where business is the driving force. While these arguments may as well be part of a discursive strategy to make sense of Cameroonian migrants' precarious position, they largely resonate with those of the UAE government, as both define migrants' presence first and foremost in economic terms and see their stay as temporary.³¹

Many of my interlocutors adopted a rather opportunistic viewpoint, trying to make the best of their stay in Dubai, while focusing on investments back home and expanding their business network. Their ultimate aim is to establish a transnational

lifestyle that gives them the opportunity to combine working in Dubai with living in Cameroon, as well as linking up with family and business partners elsewhere. Several of my interlocutors have realized this goal in different ways. Murad, for example, returned to Cameroon in 2012, got married, and established a photocopy and documentation center in a thriving town in his home region. At the same time, he made sure to renew his residence permit and cultivate his business contacts, so as to visit Dubai at irregular intervals and continue his cargo business. Jeanne, on the other hand, seems firmly established in Dubai with her restaurant, hotel, and cargo company. In 2011, she twice went to Turkey to explore further opportunities, and settled on the import of diapers and curtains as a profitable business line. Moreover, she encouraged her sister to establish herself in Istanbul, so as to expand their family business network.

As I argue, these and similar aspirations for transnational networks and a lifestyle that spans several locations across the Global South are characteristic of the new category of global African entrepreneurs. They go beyond the example of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai, and are reflected in many of the migrant portraits presented in the contributions to this special issue.

In many ways, Dubai and other popular destinations have not only become part and parcel of commercial and migrant networks, but also entered public space and discourse back in Cameroon. For example, as Deli (2013: 147) describes, there is a *Marché Doubaï* in Cameroon's business capital Douala that comprises more than 100 shops specialized in electronic gadgets. The market came into life in the late 1990s when a few Cameroonian businessmen travelled to Dubai and brought back mobile phones that they sold at considerably lower prices than those imported from Europe. Consequently, others followed their example, and the market became known as *Marché Doubaï*. Similarly, in many towns of Cameroon you find shops

named after the city, many of which sell electronic gadgets or household equipment imported from Dubai. There have also been trends in Muslim fashion inspired by connections to the Gulf. For example, in recent years it has become fashionable for Muslim men to dress in an Emirati-style white gown (*dishdasha*), while some women have adopted a black, embroidered robe (*abaya*) as part of their outfit. Furthermore, Dubai's perception in Cameroon has been shaped by migrants' stories of failure and success, and more importantly, by the goods migrants have sent and their investments in business ventures. However, public discourse has not always been that favorable, as Dubai's capricious immigration system and the global financial crisis caused many to return empty-handed. Moreover, as Deli (2013: 208) reports for Douala, Dubai has lost its initial attraction of the early 2000s as a city of economic opportunities associated with modernity and the West. With so many traders shuttling back and forth, it has increasingly become perceived as an extension of Africa. I take these discursive and spatial engagements with Dubai as an expression of Cameroon's growing transnational connections across the Global South and as an indication of an emergent cosmopolitan self-understanding that embraces both Africa and the Gulf.³²

Conclusion

In concluding this article, I draw together my main findings with regard to African or Cameroonian migrants in Dubai, and outline the features I consider characteristic of the new category of global African entrepreneurs.

I started my explorations with a critical appraisal of the widespread fascination with Dubai's spectacle and squalor, and the plea to engage with its more ordinary sites. In this sense, I focused on the imprints of African traders and migrants on Dubai's cityscape, a population group that has largely been

neglected in both public discourse and academic research. As I have argued throughout this article, the historical and contemporary presence of African traders and migrants in Dubai has been significant despite their numerical feebleness, and is most palpable in the commercial district Deira. Moreover, the impact of African traders and commercial networks should not be underestimated, as they play a crucial role in linking Africa and the Gulf. Not only do they represent business and investment markets in Africa, but they have also paved the way for more permanent forms of African migration and economic insertion in Dubai. As I have illustrated in this article, the cargo business, with its many associated services, has become the prime economic niche for African migrants in Dubai and is an example of thriving ethnic entrepreneurship. Yet while my study has shed light on a specific group of Africans in Dubai, namely Cameroonian entrepreneurial migrants, there is much scope for more research to provide a more comprehensive and diverse picture of African establishment in and impact on the Gulf States both in historical and contemporary perspectives.

A second (subsidiary) aim of this contribution was to reflect on the distinctiveness of the Cameroonian case as compared to other migrant groups in Dubai explored in the literature. Here I have drawn attention to the fact that Cameroonians in Dubai do not fall into the category of low-wage laborers or domestic workers, whose situation has been described as characterized by spatial and social exclusion as well as their subjection to the control of employer-sponsors (Bristol-Rhys 2012; Gardner 2010; Longva 1997). Conversely, the majority of Cameroonians are self-starters who have explored unconventional and at times illicit avenues so as to cope with the limitations of the UAE immigration and labor system. Moreover, they have adopted a rather bold and self-reliant perspective on their role and entitlement as UAE residents, distinct from most low-wage laborers. At the same time, Cameroonians also differ from South Asian middle-class migrants who look back on a long history

of commercial connections across the Indian Ocean as well as recent forms of labor migration. As outlined in the literature, the South Asian middle-class have developed a diaspora identity and have claimed membership in the UAE through consumer citizenship (Kanna 2011; Osella and Osella 2007; Vora 2013). Conversely, Cameroonians constitute a migrant network “in the making” that lacks the historical depth of connections to the Gulf States, and whose orientation is largely focused on returning to and investing back in Cameroon. Nonetheless, there are emergent similarities, as several Cameroonians aspire to lead a transnational life that embraces both Africa and the Gulf; and as Dubai has also entered the mental map and purview of Cameroonians back home. While much research has been conducted on specific migrant groups in the Gulf, I believe we can still learn more about the intricacies of history, ethnicity, class, gender, and related factors in shaping migrant lifeworlds and strategies through comparative and collaborative research. I look forward to more research in this vein.

The third aim of this contribution was to draw conclusions that may be applicable beyond the Cameroonian case. In analyzing the economic imprint of Cameroonians in Dubai, the following features struck me as outstanding: firstly, the entrepreneurial spirit of African migrants and the fact that trade and migration have been closely interrelated; secondly, the emergence of ethnic business as a lucrative niche and of the informal sector as the main locus of activity; and thirdly, the highly volatile and rapidly changing character of African mobility as a result of shifting markets and changing immigration regulations. While some of these characteristics may be specific to Dubai, I believe they are indicative of current trends of global African entrepreneurship. As I have argued, much of contemporary African migration is directed to novel destinations in the Global South as a corollary of Europe’s restrictive immigration policies. Commercial centers, such as Dubai, Guangzhou, and Istanbul, have become particularly

attractive, as they seem more flexible to accommodate the aspirations of a growing African middle-class. They provide opportunities to combine entrepreneurial activities with professional and educational careers, and enjoy touristic attractions. Concurrently, the new category of global African entrepreneurs is not restricted to established businesspeople but entails a wide variety of actors, including traders and commercial networks, migrants engaged in freelance or salaried work, as well as students-turned-entrepreneurs. The Cameroonians, who have successfully established themselves in Dubai and on whom this article has focused, fall into this category. However, in assessing contemporary African migration, we should not forget the many others whose entrepreneurial ambitions have failed and who are equally part of today's global African entrepreneurs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article draws on research funded by the University of Zurich. I am grateful to Mahir Şaul and the anonymous UAS reviewers for valuable comments on an earlier draft. In particular, I wish to thank my Cameroonian host Murad, my collaborator Tize Teri Deli, and our interlocutors in Dubai for sharing their experiences and ideas with me.

NOTES

- 1 I am highly aware of the critical debate within anthropology in general, and research on the Gulf States in particular, on the ideological connotations of terms, such as "migrant," "worker," "expatriate," "foreigner," "resident," and "diaspora" (e.g., Bristol-Rhys 2012; Kanna 2011; Nagy 2006; Vora 2013). In this article, I opt for the term "migrant" to refer to Africans based in Dubai and to distinguish them from the category of African traders equally considered in this study.
- 2 In the meantime, Deli has completed his Ph.D. and has continued to work independently on the subject of African migration to Dubai

(Deli 2013). His ideas and contributions to our joint fieldwork have enhanced my understanding of migrant life in Dubai, and wherever applicable, I make reference to his work.

3 The exchange of video-messages between migrants and their relatives and friends back in Cameroon has been an integral part of my methodological approach throughout this research project. Several of these exchanges were facilitated with migrants not only in Dubai, but also in Gabon, South Africa, Europe, and the United States (Pelican 2008). Of the eleven video messages recorded in Dubai, five were addressed to family and friends, while the remaining six were general memos for aspiring migrants back in Cameroon.

4 For privacy reasons, all names of interlocutors have been changed.

5 I have kept in contact with several of my interlocutors both between and after these field visits.

6 In 2013, the Bastakiya quarter of Bur Dubai was renamed Al-Fahidi, a move that critical observers understand as part of official attempts to diminish Dubai's Persian heritage in favor of a more Arab-focused past. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this up-to-date information.

7 While "de-Arabizing" the workforce has never been an official policy, the shift from Arab to Asian workers was endorsed by Gulf governments who worried about the spread of radical social and political ideas by Arab migrants and favored Asian workers, as they were thought to be more manageable, obedient, and apolitical (Kapiszewski 2007). Similar discourses have re-emerged after the Arab Spring (information provided by the UAS anonymous reviewer).

8 With an eye on African representation in the UAE, it is only Egyptians (with 140,000) and Sudanese (with 30,000) who are mentioned in Kapiszewski's (2006: 10) compilation of major expatriate communities for 2002. Yet their numbers are minimal in comparison to Indians and Pakistanis, who together account for 1.65 million.

9 Kapiszewski (2001: 87) estimates that irregular migrants make up at least 10% of the total population or 15% of the workforce in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council States. Thus, the actual number of African migrants in Dubai may be considerably higher.

10 This diagram is derived from the following file: Percentage Distribution of Employed 15 Years and Over by Sex and Nationality Groups – Emirate of Dubai, 2012. http://www.dsc.gov.ae/Reports/DSC_LFS_2012_02_21.pdf (last visited March 22, 2014).

- 11 This diagram is derived from the following file: Percentage Distribution of Employed 15 Years and Over by Occupation and Nationality Groups – Emirate of Dubai, 2012. http://www.dsc.gov.ae/Reports/DSC_LFS_2012_02_25.pdf (last visited March 22, 2014).
- 12 For a detailed description of the motivations and activities of Cameroonian migrants in Dubai, see Deli (2013: 95-197).
- 13 Mahdavi (2011: 190; 2012: 87) recounts related stories for Nigerians stuck in the Dubai airport. Similar experiences are shared by low-skilled Asian migrants, many of whom have been exposed to exploitation and misinformation by recruitment agencies (e.g., Zachariah et al. 2003).
- 14 In her research on the strategies of aspiring migrants in Cameroon's Anglophone southwest, Alpes (2011) provides an insightful analysis of the role of migration brokers. Moreover, the relevance of intermediaries, networks, and agents has also been discussed by Osella and Osella (2012) with regard to Indian migration to the Gulf, as well as by Lindquist et al. (2012) with regard to transnational mobility in Asia.
- 15 During my first field visit in 2008, several Cameroonians allegedly were associated with money doubling and cheating wealthy Emirati, which, as informants argued, impacted negatively on their national reputation. By 2011, this issue seemed less relevant, although rumors about individuals' involvement in *feymania* (illicit dealings) still circulated within the Cameroonian community. Concurrently, I was told that many women engaged in home cooking and prostitution had been evicted in the course of police raids initiated shortly before *Ramadan*. We thus witness a cyclical downturn or increase of illicit activities, depending on the momentary rigidity or lenience of police intervention.
- 16 In this article, I cannot explore the *kafala* system in its depth, but will only refer to it from the perspective of Cameroonian migrants. An insightful analysis of its workings and effects has been provided by Longva (1997; 1999) with regard to Kuwait, while Mednicoff (2012) discusses policy makers' intentions in the regulation of migrant workers in the UAE and Qatar.
- 17 The UAE, and Dubai in particular, early on initiated a number of free trade zones to attract business investment by offering exemption of taxes and 100% foreign ownership of the enterprise; best known among them is the Jebel Ali Free Zone, launched in 1985 (Davidson 2008: 114-119). To my knowledge, the Cameroonians in our sample had no significant benefit from the regulations applying

to the free trade zones in Dubai. None of the few companies run by Cameroonians was registered in a free trade zone, and Cameroonian employees of enterprises based in a free trade zone (e.g., Dubai Healthcare City) were still dependent on their corporate employer to act as their sponsor.

18 According to Jeanne, about 100 Cameroonians were imprisoned in October 2008. While she did not exactly know the reasons for their detention, she assumed that most were caught without regular papers.

19 The profitability of importing goods from Dubai to Cameroon also depends on the taxation system and the competition between Dubai and Asian countries. In recent years, Cameroon's taxation system has undergone significant changes impacting traders' activities. Moreover, the growing presence of Chinese goods in Cameroon (both imported by Chinese businesspeople based in Cameroon as well as by Cameroonian traders venturing into production centers in China) affects the attraction of Dubai as an export center for Cameroonian traders. As I do not have detailed information on the trade relations between Cameroon and China, I cannot fully assess their impact on the export of goods from Dubai. However, based on my interlocutors' assessment, Dubai still counts as an important source for goods imported into Cameroon, as the goods from Dubai are generally considered to be of higher quality than those imported directly from China.

20 The UAE immigration and visa system is complex and has undergone several changes over the past few years (see also Mednicoff 2012). In 2008, we were told that most Cameroonian migrants entered Dubai with a two-month visit visa that could be extended by one month. After that, they were obliged to leave the country before being issued a new visit visa. Accordingly, a "visa change" industry had developed, with travel agencies offering cheap "visa change" trips to the Iranian islands Kish or Qeshm. A year later, however, the regulations changed, and a different type of visa was introduced that required visitors to spend at least one month out of the UAE before being able to apply for another visa. With this new regulation, "visa change" was no longer a feasible option, thus pushing some to return to Cameroon while urging others to overstay their visa.

21 In the UAE, overstaying comes with additional costs, as it not only bars the migrant from access to the formal labor market, but a fine of 120 AED (US \$ 32) for the first day and 25 AED (US \$ 7) for each consecutive day is charged, which has to be paid before the mi-

grant is permitted to exit the country. In 2007, the UAE granted a five-month amnesty for irregular migrants to regularize their stay or leave the country without penalty. About 340,000 migrants took advantage of this measure, which was repeated in December, 2012. This time, 61,000 irregular migrants made use of the two-month amnesty period (Nagraj 2013).

- 22 Unlike migrant workers from India or Southeast Asia, only very few Africans work as laborers in construction. As Cameroonian informants argued, construction work does not pay, and is beyond their ability and dignity. They would rather work in security or cargo where they are not so much exposed to physical work in Dubai's harsh climate, and where they envisage a higher income. Their perception is inspired by their expectations and investments in coming to Dubai, as well as their educational background and experience in the informal economy. There is also a slight racial judgment in this statement, as Cameroonians draw self-esteem from the fact that they are not at the absolute bottom of Dubai's social hierarchy.
- 23 While the domestic sector has largely been dominated by Southeast Asian female migrants, it has become a popular pathway for rural women from Ethiopia to work as housemaids in the Gulf (De Regt 2010; Fernandez 2010; Mahdavi 2011). While Gamburd (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis of the effects of Sri Lankan women's migration and employment in Gulf households on social and gender relations back home, similar studies with regard to Ethiopian or more generally African women are still wanting.
- 24 In January 2011 the length of labor contracts was reduced to two years, but with the same restrictions (see also Mednicoff 2012).
- 25 I visited Esther's family in Cameroon, and also met her during her first home visit in 2009.
- 26 This amount includes the expenditures on the migration broker as well as on Esther's stay in Dubai.
- 27 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.
- 28 In 2011, MTA advertised a one-week business trip to Dubai at the price of 1.15 to 1.55 million FCFA per person (US \$2,300 - 3,100), including visa, airfare, hotel accommodation (single or double occupancy), meals, and tourism program. While the company runs a website (<http://www.mta-dc.com/site/>, last visited January 1, 2014), the information about its Dubai program was circulated via the distribution of flyers and personal networks.
- 29 Al Mamzar Beach Park is a public park offering a variety of amenities for children and adults and charging a small entrance fee. By

- chance, we came across a Cameroonian who was working there as a security guard.
- 30 Mahdavi (2011: 148-149) also mentions an Ethiopian outreach worker who focuses on the needs of Ethiopian women and has been collaborating with the UAE government on training police officers and assisting the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children.
- 31 Cameroonians here differ from Indian middle-class migrants, as studied by Kanna (2011: 171-204) and Vora (2013), for whom Dubai is not just a place to travel through, but who have developed connections deeper than simple economic calculation. While they do not make claims to formal citizenship, they exert a kind of consumer citizenship that shapes their self-understanding as privileged foreigners and as being part of Dubai (Vora 2008). Different from Cameroonians, these Indian middle-class migrants look back on a much longer history and establishment in Dubai.
- 32 Cameroonians' framing of Dubai as an extension of Africa resonates somewhat with the ways the Koyas of Kozhikode consider the Gulf as part of Kerala (Osella and Osella 2007). Unlike Cameroonians, however, the Koyas can draw on a long history of commercial connections imbricated with more recent forms of labor migration to the Gulf States. This has resulted in an intensity of linkages, a frequency and ease of traffic, and an interpenetration of the Gulf and Kerala that is far more developed than is the case in Cameroon.

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