

American cars in Cotonou: culture in African entrepreneurship and the making of a globalising trade*

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ABSTRACT

Traders in Cotonou (Bénin), a prominent hub in the Euro–West African second-hand car trade, traditionally sold cars imported from Europe. Since the 2000s however, more and more cars are being imported from the US. Anthropological study of one group of entrepreneurs active in this new business, traders from Niger, reveals an African entrepreneurship at work that follows a distinct social pattern: traders are groomed in close kinship ties in West Africa and then develop new social ties with overseas migrants. Their trade thus becomes embedded in more globalised networks, yet at the same time it loosens and that works against profitable business. Close analysis of their careers reveals a cultural pattern that compels entrepreneurs to become traders, economic opportunity notwithstanding. Whether this is representative of Africa's changing place in the global economic order remains to be seen; however, this article suggests how culture in entrepreneurship may be key to understanding that.

INTRODUCTION

Second-hand car markets in Cotonou (Bénin) experienced a major change starting around the year 2000. Whereas previously this

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prominent hub in West Africa's second-hand car trade received cars mainly from Europe, since the turn of the millennium more and more cars are being imported from the US. Standing out from their European cousins by virtue of their size and chrome, cars imported from America have become prominent in Cotonou since then. This is also evident in Cotonou car traders' conversations. There is much talk about the market situation in the US, and traders discuss the practical challenges in sourcing and shipping cars from there. This article discusses how these changes in the imported car stock reflect a globalising trade network, and it explores the place therein of African entrepreneurship.

It is easy to see in West Africa's globalising second-hand car trade the triumph of neoliberal market thinking, but that is not the message of this article. Placing considerable confidence in African entrepreneurs' responsiveness to incentives for new business, neoliberal observers emphasise how the dismantling of barriers to trade under structural adjustment programmes since the 1990s opened up African economies to global financial and trade flows. That created new economic opportunities for business-savvy African entrepreneurs, they argue (Taylor 2012). Consequently, African entrepreneurs more readily found their way to the world market, thereby no longer restrained by an interfering state, with the result that trade accelerates and often also becomes diversified (Fick 2002). Although that may be true in general, the entrepreneurship studied in this article shows a more heterogeneous pattern in which profitmaking exists alongside financial losses, casting some doubt on conventional, neoliberal interpretations.

Equally problematic are critical interpretations stressing how African entrepreneurship does not automatically follow the rhythm of globalising markets but depends on other unconnected political-economic realities. For instance, observing that new forms of trade to the African continent typically originate in overseas migration hubs, proponents of this view often link trade to the subordinate position that African migrants occupy in the global economic order, wherein they beef up meagre wages from low-income work with the occasional export of (second-hand) consumer items (Stoller 2002; see also Tranberg-Hansen 2000). Although there is considerable truth in the assertion that trade follows migration, the observations in this article point to a more complicated reality. The studied traders are linked to overseas migration networks, yet the money that they invest in business is usually not generated in peripheral wage labour but often originates either in the car trade itself or in other forms of trade.

In sum, whereas the article agrees that political-economic structures (economic reforms, international migration) present important realities for second-hand car traders, it also shows that their entrepreneurship depends on, but is not determined by, them. To better understand this aspect of the globalising second-hand trade, I propose to adopt an anthropological perspective on entrepreneurship, in particular one that looks at social relations. The significance of the social permeated through fieldwork as it was consistently observed how African car traders draw on their social networks: to obtain a spot under the sun, to procure money and information, and to coordinate their trade across the complexities of a globalising business. A salient point that became clear is that their social relations management is neither straightforward nor uncontested. Social relations present a core problem with which the car traders discussed in this article constantly grapple because there are contradictions locked inside them. The article shows how these social contradictions place a break on reaping the potential benefits of running a global business.

Before further elaborating this discovery, the article continues with a short review of the anthropological literature on African entrepreneurship, looking specifically at its cultural meanings. This is followed by a discussion of the extended career history methodology, designed to unveil the complex relations between culture, social practices and entrepreneurial decision making. Placing the studied trading careers in empirical context, the article then offers a short description of the research setting: the world of second-hand car trading in West Africa, specifically focusing on the main actors (traders, financiers, transporters) and their organising practices. Next follows the presentation of an extended career history of one of them, a young car trader from Niger called Ahmadou.¹ The analysis of Ahmadou's career unveils how it follows a social pattern that is structured by a cultural force that compels one to become a trader. The wider implications for Africa's place in the world are discussed briefly in the conclusion.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Looking at social relations has a long pedigree in the anthropological study of (African) entrepreneurship. Pioneering work by Fredrik Barth (1967), John Iliffe (1983) and Andrew Beveridge & Anthony Oberschall (1979), followed by a subsequent wave of anthropological

contributions (e.g. Forrest 1994; Kennedy 1988; Warnier 1993), mainstreamed the idea of the social embeddedness of African entrepreneurship: the coordination of African entrepreneurs' economic decision making in networks of on-going social relations (see Granovetter 1985). Yet, whether these relations are obstacles or springboards for profitable business remains an as yet unresolved issue (Meagher 2006; Walther 2014). In the study of Africa's globalising economies, a few trends are discernible that resonate with this issue and that are therefore relevant for our case.

One strand situates new forms of African entrepreneurship in the continent's rising middle class. These comprise educated professionals, often with MBA degrees, who make a living as managers in middle- and large-scale enterprise. They are truly 'business globalists', i.e. members of a cosmopolitan business class who travel as a matter of routine not only in the African diaspora but also across the world (McDade & Spring 2005: 17). Analysis of their social background suggests that they are typically supported by a long pedigree in African elite networks, in many cases going back to colonial days (Daloz 2003). However, as I shall demonstrate, the type of entrepreneurship discussed here is of a more modest nature. It involves ordinary Africans who acquired some wealth by local standards but who often command little symbolic capital in the form of an international education or the prestige of national elite networks to propel them into the global economy. Nonetheless, the contribution of these globalist studies is that they point to symbolic capital and social prestige as major forces in the structuring of African entrepreneurship – themes that are important in our case too.

Another strand looks at the social capital of business relations as an important precondition for the rise of a global African entrepreneurship. Proponents of this thesis argue that running a business between different parts of the world is a logistically complex and therefore risky affair: there are different administrative regimes to consider, money must be transferred from one end of the network to the other, and different, disparate, market situations must be monitored and responded to (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). Navigating these successfully requires dependable social ties (many of the studied businesses are informal), and much of the evidence suggests that common ethnic and/or religious ties promote that (Diouf 2000; Quarles van Ufford & Zaal 2004; for a critique, see Platteau 2009). Hence, the rise of new forms of African entrepreneurship is seen as associated with particular social networks.

The presented material corroborates the assertion that African second-hand car traders' operations on overseas markets build on globalising social networks; however, it does not find that ethnicity and religion feature therein as ubiquitous forces. To come to terms with that reality, the article finds inspiration in a strand of anthropological inquiry looking at culture in African entrepreneurship. Its proponents situate entrepreneurs' practices in webs of meaning, and it follows that entrepreneurial decisions do not so much ensue from deliberate reflection, weighing up options, but rather because they are considered the natural thing to do (van Donge 1992; Andersson 2006). For the case studied, it will be shown how this takes the form of socially shared expectations esteeming trade, which directs aspiring entrepreneurs to the business of buying and selling.

EXTENDED CAREER HISTORY METHODOLOGY

This discovery gradually emerged during long-term anthropological fieldwork in various locations. Beginning in Brussels (a major car-trading hub in the EU), Cotonou and Niamey as part of my doctoral research, the early stages of the fieldwork acquainted me with the world of Euro–West African second-hand car trading. One group of traders, those from Niger, stood out in particular as they appeared not only to be active in the Euro–West African car trade, but also to command a sizeable trade in second-hand cars from the US. After my doctoral fieldwork ended in 2005, I maintained contact with several of them. Their mobile lifestyle included occasional trips to Europe and that made it possible for me to continue data collection. Also, I continued to make occasional field trips to Brussels and could hence regularly update my picture of this important car-trading hub. A short fieldtrip to the US in 2013 gave me further information about the global networks discussed in this article. In this way, I gradually reconstructed essential parts of several Nigerien car traders' career histories and could ground therein a more abstract understanding of their social practices and entrepreneurial decision-making (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Empirically, the article hinges on the presentation and analysis of an extended career history of one car trader. This requires careful reflection on the claims that can be made with this article, as one cannot generalise statistically from a single case (Flyvbjerg 2006). Admittedly, there are many more Nigerien car traders who followed a pathway similar to that of Ahmadou, but the purpose of the analysis is not to infer a general principle of African entrepreneurship that can explain the

totality of their careers. Instead, detailed examination of one career may promote the discovery of elements of African entrepreneurship beyond what has already been reported in the literature. Thus, learning from a single case (Becker 2014) benefits from social proximity, and the friendship that evolved between Ahmadou and myself over the years allowed me to closely observe, and make inquiries about, his social practices. Direct observations were especially important as the studied traders rarely explicitly articulate the entrepreneurial culture discussed here, and reliance on their statements offers limited entry into understanding it. How my findings resonate with a broader community of African entrepreneurs, including those originating from Niger, presents a salient problem for social research; however, it must be resolved with other, more statistically oriented, methodologies.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WEST AFRICA'S SECOND-HAND CAR TRADE

Cotonou saw the emergence of a large-scale market for second-hand cars during the early 1990s (Beuving 2004). This is remarkable, as Cotonou is not a major town in West Africa and, preceding the second-hand car boom, it had a limited reputation for international trade. The rapid and unexpected establishment of the Euro–West African second-hand car business in Cotonou followed from the interlocking of three political-economic processes: (i) a regional history of economic integration through migration and cross-border trade (Igué & Soulé 1992), (ii) economic reforms during the 1990s following the end of the Kérékou dictatorship (van de Walle 1994) and (iii) an increased importance of entrepreneurship in (West) African economic life (Leys 1996: 164–187). Today, Cotonou boasts the largest second-hand car market in West Africa (over 100 hectares in area), reportedly importing around 400,000 to 500,000 cars per year in recent years, mostly on their way to a final destination in Nigeria.

In the early stages of the Cotonou market's rise, the cars mainly originated in European trading hubs, particularly those in the car-trading belt delineated by Essen (Germany), Utrecht (the Netherlands) and Antwerp (Belgium). Originally shipped in reefer ships returning empty to fruit-producing regions of southern Africa, since the late 1990s the cars have been shipped in specialised Roll-on, Roll-off (RoRo) boats. Since about 2003, an increasing trade flow has been coming from the US, mostly shipped through the eastern ports of Baltimore, Jacksonville and Savannah. During fieldwork in 2003, I observed how Buicks, Chevrolets and other American cars, their original

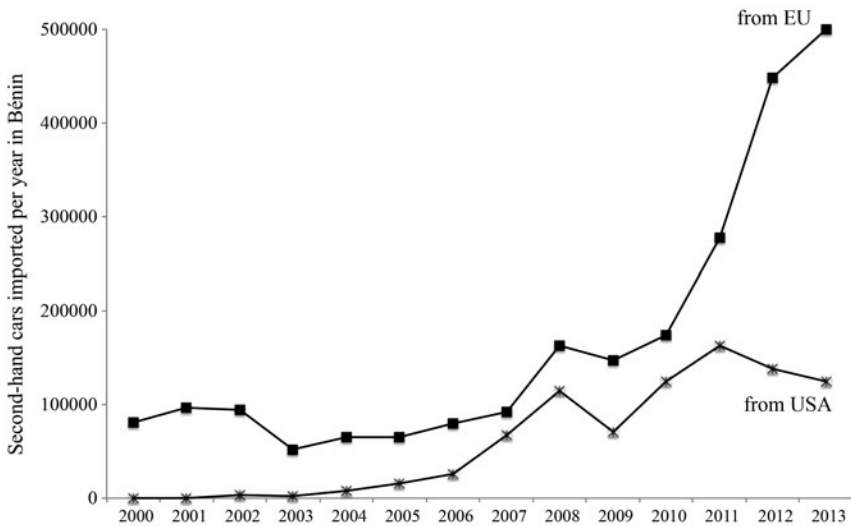


FIGURE 1

Second-hand car imports to Cotonou from the EU and US, 2000–2012.

Source: Comtrade, August 2014; data prepared by author.

number plates still attached to them, began to arrive in Cotonou. These appeared to be sourced from across the US, mostly from auto auctions and garages, but, facilitated by the internet, also from private individuals. The trade received an impetus following a drop in car prices in the wake of the credit crunch, making them more affordable for export to Africa. Although still considerably less than car imports from Europe, trade statistics suggest that car imports from America account for around 100,000 cars per year today (see Figure 1; see also Herod *et al.* 2013).²

The organisation of this new trade flow is interesting too. Trade between the US and West Africa was negligible for decades, but it picked up after the signing into law of AGOA – the African Growth and Opportunity Act – by the Clinton administration in 2002. It built on an older textile trade, presenting an essential trade network on which the second-hand car trade could establish itself (Schneidman & Lewis 2012). The first cars were transported in containers, as specialised car-shipping facilities were lacking. Pioneers of this era complain how it presented a costly mode of transport and that the sea trip took a long time, often exceeding three months. Later, Lebanese and European RoRo shippers, many already active on Euro–West African shipping routes and also prominent in financing the trade to West Africa, opened direct lines between the east coast of the US and Cotonou, making transatlantic sea transport for second-hand cars cheaper and faster.³

To sum up, the world of second-hand car trading in and around Cotonou saw considerable changes in the sourcing, transporting and retailing of used vehicles during the past three decades, as it became a more global enterprise. To shed some further light on how that works out in the lives of ordinary second-hand car traders, the article now turns to a presentation of the career history of one of them, businessman Ahmadou Hamidou. In short, Ahmadou began his career in the Euro–West African trade, but he diversified into trading cars from the US, a business that he eventually abandoned. A more detailed discussion of this professional arc follows below.

EXTENDED CAREER HISTORY: EL HADJ AHMADOU HAMIDOU

(i) *Early stages: from taxi man to car retailer (1987–1996)*

Ahmadou Hamidou is a man in his early forties self-identifying as ethnic Zerma-Songhai. He was born into a wealthy, cattle-trading Sunni Muslim family based in Niamey, Niger, and, being the eldest son of four, Ahmadou left school in 1987 at an early age in order to help his father with the trade. His father, Taybou, was well placed to set Ahmadou up in the business as he commanded an extensive personal trade network in the West African region, knowing many of the regional trading centres from previous experience. With profits from the cattle trade, this network enabled Taybou to diversify the business, first into foreign currency and gold, and later, once Ahmadou had obtained a driver's licence, into transportation. Initially operating in and around Niamey, Ahmadou and his father soon moved into the more profitable Cotonou–Niamey route that had gained in importance since Cotonou developed into a regional economic hub starting in the late 1970s (Igué & Soulé 1992).

With the expanding taxi business, their visits to Cotonou intensified, and they gradually built up a set of local business contacts. This coincided with the creation of the first second-hand car markets in Cotonou in 1992–3, a process in which Nigerien businessmen played a key role. One of them, a controversial business tycoon called Issa Salifou, negotiated a special deal with the Bénin government to create small trading spots in the port, demarcated by rows of sea containers. This area came to be known as 'NiTra', short for Niger Transit, where the car retail trade directed at Niamey took place (Bio-Sawe 1995). The closure of the port for car trade by early 1997 marked the creation

of two new car markets: Bateau Materiaux (BM) Niger (situated at the edge of Cotonou's Zongo) for the sale of passenger cars and Consulvit (near the port) for lorry trade. In 1998, a string of new car markets, the so-called *bande de 200 mètres*, was created alongside, soon becoming the largest cluster of markets for Nigerien traders.

Drawing on their newly acquired relations, Taybou and Ahmadou succeeded in getting a foothold on NiTra, where they began to buy second-hand cars for export to Niamey, which they seamlessly integrated into their earlier transport practices up north. Ahmadou at first specialised in driving the cars to Niamey, but increasingly took charge of the buying operations in Cotonou. This he regretted at first, because it relegated him to the less profitable part of the business (the profits are made on selling the cars); but later he came to appreciate his new position. Life in Cotonou, which he enjoyed, presented him with a diversity in social relations extending well beyond the usual comfort zone of persons from a similar socio-ethnic background. Further, he began to appreciate that he was becoming part of the second-hand car business at a time when it was emerging from its infancy; increasingly, he came to be seen as a knowledgeable trader in what many felt was a good business.

(ii) The first Cotonou years: the car boom begins (1996–2003)

Initially, Ahmadou shared a cheap hotel room with his father during their travels to Cotonou, but, as he became more integrated into Cotonou society, he moved to a modest rented house in a part of town where many migrants live (called Godomey). In the wake of the take-off of the second-hand car boom in Cotonou in the mid-1990s, Ahmadou's business began to prosper. Initially, he bought cars from Lebanese wholesalers who came to dominate the business after it was first established and resold them through his Cotonou–Niamey network; but increasingly Ahmadou shifted to selling the cars to Nigerian car buyers, who emerged as the single most important group of car buyers in Cotonou from the late 1990s on. Ahmadou's prospering business is evident in several ways. In 1999, he undertook a – for Muslims important – pilgrimage to Mecca, thus acquiring the honorific prefix *El Hadj* (his wife followed suit a few years later). He further succeeded in purchasing his own car (earlier Ahmadou had depended on his father's car for transport), a handsome Mercedes 190, dubbed 'V-boot' in Cotonou society: an important and visible marker of business success.

In these years, Ahmadou developed several new contacts on which his later business built. His friendship with Soumana was one of them. Roughly of the same age, their relation originated in Niamey where they both operated taxis. However, unlike Ahmadou, Soumana worked for a boss, a Nigerien businessman. Soumana eventually succeeded in arranging a marriage with one of this man's daughters, solidifying their relations; and when his now father-in-law moved into trading cars, Soumana became a logically dependable overseer of their operations in Cotonou. The relation between Soumana and Ahmadou is such that they frequently step in for each other, giving either of them the possibility to travel for business without having to worry about their car business in Cotonou.

Ahmadou's social circles are not, however, limited to former Niamey contacts that happened to have come with him to Cotonou. Being a sociable person, Ahmadou gradually extended his contacts into other social circles. The contact with Hadj Mamani presents a good example of this. A Hausa from Zinder (southeastern Niger), Mamani arrived in Cotonou in the early 1990s. Initially working for a sheep-trading paternal uncle, he tried his hand at reselling cars in 1993. He became acquainted with Ahmadou at the port, where there were few traders working in those days, and eventually they became friends. A major dip in the sheep business that reduced Mamani's trading capital, plus a series of technical problems with cars that turned out to be bad buys, forced him out of the car business. Mamani went back to Niger where over the course of the next few years he built up a profitable textile trading business, throughout staying in touch with Ahmadou. In 2000, through a college-educated relative, Mamani was selected for a USAID-sponsored study tour in the US that was part of an American–African trade promotion under AGOA. After the conference ended, Mamani overstayed his visa, and through a local network of African migrants succeeded in landing a succession of factory jobs that he combined with trading consumer items, including cars, to Cotonou.

A final key contact was Ahmadou's junior brother, Siddo. Being the only member of the family who completed secondary education (he studied at a prestigious French–Arabic Lyceum in Niamey), Siddo was sent by his father to Belgium around 2001 where he filed a request for political asylum. He was denied this on the grounds that Niger was not a politically sensitive area in the early 2000s, but, through personal contacts built up while awaiting the outcome of his asylum procedure, he then tried his luck in the Netherlands. There, he was more successful (the wrist bone scan used to check his age

mistook Siddo for an underage person), and halfway through 2010 he obtained Dutch citizenship. A few years earlier, Siddo had secured a temporary job in a cheese-packaging factory near the Dutch town of Gouda, which was made permanent once he obtained Dutch citizenship. For Ahmadou, Siddo's stay in Europe turned out to be of key importance for conducting overseas business.

Around the time of Siddo's departure, Taybou grew increasingly wary of buying second-hand cars from the Lebanese in Cotonou, sensing that they sold too expensively because of their almost complete trade monopoly. He suspected that purchasing the cars directly in Belgium would be more beneficial, a line of business he began to explore with aid from a textile-trading cousin who had been venturing into European markets for about a decade.

(iii) Overseas trips to Brussels (2003–2008)

In June 2003, Ahmadou visited Brussels for the first time, with his father. During that trip, he got in touch with Mohammed AbuZeid, a Lebanese business tycoon who occupies a central place in the Brussels world of second-hand export car trading. He began business as far back as 1984, but resigned from active service in 1996, when his son Danny assumed the position of the company's CEO. The company initially specialised in car trade, but in Danny's hands it increasingly diversified into the service sector that has surrounded the Euro–African business since the late 1990s. Thus, AbuZeid now issues invitation letters to West African visa applicants; handles the cash transfers that travel in the opposite direction of the traded cars; offers accommodation in the Brussels 'Gare Midi' area where car trading is concentrated; and organises sea-transport, mostly through a related shipper.⁴

Whereas Ahmadou's father enjoyed a direct link with Mohammed AbuZeid dating back to the time when the second-hand car-trading community was small in size, Ahmadou himself had no direct relation with Danny AbuZeid. They politely greeted each other in passing, but to conduct business in Brussels, Ahmadou dealt with a small circle of distant Lebanese relatives who brokered between the markets and the company – of course in exchange for a handsome fee. It was difficult to work around them, as Ahmadou depended on the company for essential services: his father sent trading capital to the company's bank account, and Ahmadou's visa application ran through AbuZeid's office. However, as Ahmadou gained more practical experience in Brussels, he began to see that the Lebanese's brokerage constituted

an expensive service, and he developed a desire to find alternative ways, of course without compromising the important relation with AbuZeid.

In an attempt to reduce his dependency on this Lebanese trading-services complex, Ahmadou tried his hand at conducting business via the internet. A noted problem, however, is that this requires computer literacy, and, because Ahmadou hardly went to school, he did not have this skill. Contacts with Nigeriens in Brussels became important, therefore, in shaping Ahmadou's next steps. Most of the Nigerien young men that played a role in this period were connected to Siddo. Unlike Ahmadou, Siddo had the benefit of having spent some time in Brussels, and he had standing contacts with peers. Several of these were Siddo's former classmates from the lyceum in Niamey who had migrated to Belgium. Few were in a regular job, and they were keen, therefore, to help Ahmadou by scouting out suitable cars elsewhere in the region, but also to accommodate him – of course in return for some money. Abdoukader Abdoulmoumouni was one of them. A bachelor, he lived in a crammed, cheap one-bedroom apartment close to the Brussels Midi train station, his room dominated by a large television set and a desktop computer connected to the internet.⁵ It was here that Ahmadou increasingly resided and from where he conducted his business.

In Cotonou, Ahmadou developed as a landlord around this time in the sense implied by the anthropologist Abner Cohen (2004): hosting and helping (mostly Nigerien) migrants, both Zerma and non-Zerma speaking, coming from Niamey. During the visits that were part of the fieldwork in Cotonou, either at his home (he moved uptown to the *Etoile Rouge* area in 2004) or at his trading pitch, I noted how he was always surrounded by Nigerien young men. These were often former taxi contacts from Niamey, such as his close friend Soumana. During this time, Ahmadou further hosted several dinner parties during Id-al-Fitr in which he spent a small fortune on guinea fowl, the Nigeriens' esteemed culinary speciality for religious holidays. Further, Ahmadou's father commissioned the building of a small mosque at the car market, a common practice by established Nigerien businessmen that is locally seen as contributing to their symbolic capital. For Ahmadou, this had the added advantage that it functioned as an informal meeting point, bringing together many different contacts.

Around this time, Ahmadou began to consider venturing into the US for car business. This idea was not his invention. In 2003, several of his former Niamey contacts – Mamani being one of them – had already migrated to the US. Those who had made it had begun sending

second-hand cars to Cotonou. Ahmadou knew some of them from his Niamey days, and, by virtue of his landlord role in Cotonou society, he came to occupy a special part in this new export. In many cases, he handled their consignments, went to the port to fetch the cars, and put them up for sale at this trading pitch in the market. Although his father was aware of this new development, car imports from Europe were down around this period, and he decided that the new business did not interfere with his own. This experience taught Ahmadou many useful things about the American export cars. His knowledge further deepened once several of his Nigerien contacts returned from the US – Mamani in particular – and Ahmadou had a chance to discuss this new trade with them, both at home, where he accommodated several of them, and around the small mosque, customarily a suitable place for private discussion.

(iv) Stay in the US: Greensboro and Harrisburg (2008–2011)

It took a while before Ahmadou's first interest in moving out materialised into a trip to the US in 2008. There were practical problems to resolve. First, the American consulate wanted proof of a business administration before issuing him a business visa. What is usually required for that are hard copies of sales receipts and a bank account showing a positive balance plus regular transactions. His being a mainly informal business and Ahmadou a sloppy bookkeeper, he had to creatively redirect financial flows to comply with the American visa demands. A second reason was that Ahmadou had to wait for an invitation letter. He was to receive that from Abdul, a young Nigerien man previously figuring in Ahmadou's Cotonou circles and a close friend of Mamani. Abdul had recently landed a secure factory job that would bring him a green card, a necessary prerequisite for making overseas invitations. In 2008 this was finally completed, allowing Ahmadou to travel out.

Initially, Ahmadou settled in Greensboro, a small city located in the state of North Carolina. Here, more than 20 multinational companies have been established and have been operating production facilities since the 1980s, attracting large numbers of migrant workers – many West Africans included. Demographic evidence suggests that a sizeable community of Nigeriens settled in the state of North Carolina, starting to grow in numbers around the early 1990s. Although Ahmadou depended on them initially, it was not with the purpose of getting into factory work. He arrived with sufficient funds for business, notably to purchase second-hand cars for overseas exportation. He remembers

life as expensive, much more than he had anticipated, but, by capitalising on his symbolic capital as a landlord that extended into the American Nigerien community, he succeeded in arranging cheap accommodation by staying with several of his Nigerien contacts. To further cut costs, through his local contacts he succeeded in availing himself of the company-sponsored staff restaurant, providing basic – but especially cheap – food. Hence, Greensboro presented a logical starting point for him.⁶

Unlike many of the Nigeriens working in the factories, however, Ahmadou did not limit his movements to the Greensboro area. Most of the factory-working Nigeriens also traded cars but, because of their working schedules, limited their activity to the vicinity of Greensboro. Competition for desirable cars was stiff in the immediate environment, and Ahmadou felt compelled, therefore, to transfer his buying operations to out-of-state urban conglomerates. Aided by a distant relative whose husband had obtained a green card several years earlier, he came across the city of Harrisburg, 500 kilometres northeast of Greensboro. Hosting several private car markets and ‘auto auctions’ that sold affordable cars which flooded the market in the wake of the credit crunch, Harrisburg had the added advantage of being located near the port town of Baltimore. West Africa-going ships frequently sail from there, and several agencies specialising in sea transport are staffed by Africans. The drive itself is around an hour and a half, making it possible for Ahmadou to drop off a car and return the same day.

Ahmadou’s relocation to Harrisburg notwithstanding, business did not go as well as Ahmadou initially had hoped. As he had correctly surmised, the large, jazzy American cars fetched higher prices in Cotonou than European cars, and they were not particularly expensive to purchase. However, the cost of sea transport turned out to be considerable, and the trip itself takes much longer than that from Europe, reducing available capital. Shipping arrangements further complicated profitmaking. The Euro–African second-hand car business thrived in part because of the possibility to pay for sea transport after selling the car in Cotonou, called *fret payable à destination*; this considerably reduces capital requirements for the business. American shipping companies were not familiar with this practice and initially did not want to adopt it, as transporting second-hand cars did not comprise their core business. This meant that a large sum of money was locked-up in transport for a long period of time. A further complicating factor was the availability of capital. Cash transfers from West African banks to American ones are

notoriously expensive, and American border authorities consistently check African migrants for excess cash they might bring. As a final impediment, the distant relative and her husband were struggling to make ends meet (depending often on food coupons), and they proved to be of little help in furthering Ahmadou's business projects.

(v) *Return to Cotonou and Niamey (2011–2013)*

As if these practical problems in tandem with disappointing profits were not yet sufficient, around mid-2011 the United States Homeland Security became stricter about issuing business visas to West African applicants. That was the outcome of the 2009–10 anti-terrorism act, putting many West African countries including Niger on a temporary blacklist. As a consequence, Ahmadou did not succeed in having his business visa extended. Not wanting to overstay the visa for fear of being expelled as an illegal immigrant (a shameful situation with potentially dire consequences such as incarceration), he travelled back to Cotonou. Privately, he talks about his return to Africa with a sense of relief: it enabled him to step out of a chequered business adventure without having to lose face. As he noted: '*Faire du business là-bas, c'est vraiment compliqué; personne ne t'aide!*' These days, Ahmadou continues to import cars from Brussels, with the help of Siddo and his local circle of Nigerien contacts; and he is still a prominent figure for Nigeriens living in the US sending their cars to him. That does not mean, however, that a return to the US is not on his mind: he professes it to be a good deal, especially now that he has learnt that the practice of allowing transport costs to be paid upon arrival in Cotonou has been adopted by Lebanese shippers now operating the Baltimore–Cotonou line. Through his overseas contacts, he is frequently updated about visa requirements, and publicly expresses a wish to pursue yet another American business trip in the near future.

ANALYSIS

The entrepreneurship that we see at work in Ahmadou's professional career appears to be at variance with established interpretations of it. For instance, it seems difficult to align Ahmadou's life history with the image of a victim of globalisation: he is not toiling in a foreign-owned factory on the margins of which he pursues some ancillary trade. Instead, he can be said to make use of new global structures: the case points to an export trade that appears to function increasingly

autonomously. Neither does Ahmadou's career history corroborate the image of the African entrepreneur as a victor of economic globalisation. A money- and time-consuming project was eventually abandoned, resulting in unrecovered losses. Another interpretation is needed therefore, and the adopted anthropological perspective suggests grounding this in the first place in a detailed analysis of Ahmadou's social relations.

Analysis of social relations: A loosening trade network

In Cotonou, Ahmadou initially depended on close kinship ties, in particular those of his patrikin. In Ahmadou's case, the relation with his father symbolises this; in other cases, it has been observed how paternal uncles and grandfathers have been influential for young traders. Once Taybou set up the cross-border enterprise and was no longer present daily, Ahmadou achieved some room for manoeuvre, and that allowed him to renew (non-kin) friendships originating in Niamey. Nigerien car traders in Cotonou approach friendships with some caution as the patriarchal nature of kinship ties causes eyebrows to be raised if business is conducted outside the circle of paternal relatives. Case in point: Taybou was never aware of Ahmadou's informal, mutual-care arrangement with his friend Soumana. At the same time, life in Cotonou presented new challenges too. Paternal relatives, Ahmadou's father included, consider Cotonou a convenient place to get rid of unruly relatives. More than once, Ahmadou complained about how a younger cousin was sent down to him and he was supposed to take care of this person.

A different pattern of social relations emerged once Ahmadou ventured into the Brussels part of the second-hand car business. Here, he got a taste of dealing with non-Africans, in particular with the Lebanese. Ahmadou initially benefited from the set of relations that Taybou had previously established, but this turned out to be a *cadeau empoisonné*. Since Taybou first became acquainted with Lebanese car traders, their social organisation had become more stratified. Interpersonal relations that drew on a shared history as early entrants were gradually replaced with more impersonal, weaker social relations revolving around profit maximisation. Note how Ahmadou failed to develop a friendship with Danny the way Taybou had succeeded in doing with Mohammed AbuZeid, and how he entered a competitive relation with a circle of Lebanese middlemen who had carved out a monopolistic niche in the world of Brussels car trading.

Brussels also marked Ahmadou's rapidly increasing dependence on social ties originally crafted by Siddo. Although that helped Ahmadou to work around the Lebanese middlemen, there were several problems too. First, by virtue of his background, Siddo lacked the trading experience of his older brother, and neither did he have his hands-on overview of the Cotonou market. Several times I witnessed how Siddo proposed to buy a car, which Ahmadou rejected straightaway, and with visible dismay. Second, Siddo does not live in Brussels; from his hometown of Rotterdam, it is about a two-hour drive to the local car markets. Privately, Siddo confided in me that he found Ahmadou's trading trips to Brussels a nuisance, because he was expected to join his brother – even when this conflicted with his own plans or work schedule. He therefore avoided going whenever his brother was not around. Third, many of Siddo's contacts, in addition to the work they carried out for Ahmadou (finding cars on the internet in particular), had other commitments too. For instance, the aforementioned Abdoukader was reunited with his Niamey-born wife in the following months, so that, during a next visit, Ahmadou depended again on accommodation provided by Danny AbuZeid. In short, the Brussels visits show a pattern of constant social manoeuvring that often consumes more time than the actual trade in second-hand cars.

In the US, Ahmadou depended mostly on a loose configuration of social ties. These ties were recruited from two different circles. Some of them originated in Cotonou, such as for instance Abdul and Mamani. The advantage of these ties was that it gave Ahmadou a good sense of what he could expect of these persons once he went overseas, but the majority of his contacts were with young Nigerien men whom he had never met before. His reputation as a *grand commerçant* carried some symbolic weight in these new circles, but, as Ahmadou quickly noticed, this weight was considerably less than it had been in Brussels and Cotonou. He was regarded by many of the Nigerien factory workers as one among many, especially as it was not uncommon to find other *Hadj* pilgrims inside the factories, Mamani included. This impeded Ahmadou's business in several different ways.

First, lacking dependable, strong contacts made it more difficult for Ahmadou to wire to the US the money needed to buy cars. Ahmadou thus needed to carry large sums of cash into the country, making him vulnerable to the increasingly strict border checks (he was apprehended once by border patrols and lost a sizeable sum). Second, he drove the cars purchased in Harrisburg single-handed to the port of Baltimore, meaning that he had to limit the search for more cars, instead spending

time on the road. Nonetheless, he preferred this over teaming up with a fellow Nigerien whom he felt could not be trusted sufficiently to hand the keys of a car to him. The distant relative could have been a possible exception, except that her potential was curbed by practical problems (difficulties in making ends meet). Third, he conducted many of the buying operations independently, but that implied that he needed a better command of English than he actually had. Several of the business transactions that he expected to be a done deal bounced, leaving him empty-handed.

On reflection, then, the genesis of Ahmadou's globalising network may be summed up in four points: (i) Ahmadou's US–African trade emerged out of his earlier Euro–African trade practices, (ii) this emergence followed a social pattern, i.e. particular trade relations were carried into new spheres of trade: from Cotonou via Brussels to Greensboro; (iii) this social pattern moved in the direction of a loosening of his social network in which weaker social relations prevailed; (iv) this loose network was at odds with the greater logistical demands of a globalising trade, which, in Ahmadou's case, worked against profitable business. A final question to resolve is why Ahmadou's network developed in a direction that was not necessarily favourable for profitable business. The adopted anthropological perspective suggests considering cultural aspects of his entrepreneurship, to which the article now turns.

Cultural force: Compulsion to be a trader

From the case material it can be gleaned that a cultural force that compels (young) men to trade is key to Ahmadou's entrepreneurial decision making. This often begins at an early age and, as Ahmadou's career history shows, it usually takes the form of running errands in older patrikin's business operations, gradually evolving into being taken along by close male relatives on business trips. Thus, Taybou drew on a well-established pattern when he took Ahmadou down to Cotonou to assist in the budding second-hand car enterprise, and introduced him into his trading circles in Brussels later on. When prompted for an explanation about this, Ahmadou shrugged and explained how this constitutes a natural thing to do by saying that: '*Chez nous on fait comme ça: les vieux nous emmènent partout!*'

In this particular culture of entrepreneurship, trade is associated with a mobile lifestyle, and overseas travel features prominently in the prestige of a businessman, therefore. To travel is to be seen as a successful entrepreneur. Not all travel commands equal prestige and, in reality, a

hierarchy of destinations prevails: destinations further away are esteemed more, the EU and America in particular, but also other, newer, global trading hubs such as Dubai and China. It is interesting to see how the association between business success and overseas travel is reproduced socially in everyday life. For those in Ahmadou's circles, it was customary to visit him after a trip and make polite inquiries about his overseas adventures, but this intensified the more and the further Ahmadou travelled. As Ahmadou moved up in the world of business, gradually his return trips to Cotonou developed into proper social events attracting scores of visitors.

It is interesting also how the cultural compulsion to trade travels with the widening business circles of which Ahmadou became part. There seems to be a paradox at work here: although Ahmadou's social network evolved towards a looser configuration, older ties were not severed. Throughout, Ahmadou maintained his contacts in Brussels and Cotonou while spending time abroad, and the association between entrepreneurial success and trade did not stop after he had moved out of the direct purview of his closer contacts. That is not a necessary pattern: culture is situated. In the case of West African migrant traders in Brazzaville, for instance, it has been observed how geographic distance promotes a weakening of social relations (Whitehouse 2012). And for West African migrants in Europe, it has been established that avoiding ties with those back home is a common, remittance-minimising, social strategy (Poeze 2010).

The culture of entrepreneurship studied here travels through particular networks, and it is of interest that the traders' increasing usage of the internet, in particular Facebook, presents a growing influence therein. The Facebook pages of the studied traders, Ahmadou included, feature as a bulletin board onto which news flashes, but also the latest Islamic sermons are posted. Yet, in the pictures section of their Facebook, one often finds photos of the traders with the cars they trade (or aspire to trade). Ahmadou's Facebook page, for instance, displays several pictures of him leaning prominently against shiny cars in car markets in Harrisburg, Brussels and Cotonou. Ahmadou thereby makes use of a style of imagery that appears on many more of the Facebook sites of those within Ahmadou's network. Such images send a powerful message of the relation between being mobile and entrepreneurial success. And they enter the conversations of younger car dealers who discuss Facebook imagery in appreciative terms, such as in the often-heard statement: *'il a bien fait, regarde-lui avec ses grosses voitures!'*

These internet-circulated pictures thus function as a symbolic vehicle that further propagates and perhaps strengthens the compulsion to trade. This effect extends beyond the locality of Cotonou: the pictures appear on mobile phone displays and on computer screens in Brussels and other prominent hubs in the trade too. Facebook (but also other social media) thus reinforces a pattern of expectations in a network of actual, but also aspiring, businessmen. This latter category is of special relevance as their exposure to the imagery circulated through Facebook fuels the globalising trade studied here: it inspires expanding groups of entrepreneurs to making investments in overseas trade.

The cultural force outlined here may be compelling, but it is important to emphasise that it is not inescapable. Remember that Ahmadou eventually withdrew from the American car trade and thus acted in an opposite way. It is worth briefly considering how Ahmadou communicated the ending of his American adventure to his social circles. Although privately relieved – he confided in me that he never thought it a good idea to begin with – publicly he told another story. Rather than presenting the difficulties he faced in managing a business in the US as a reason to abandon the adventure (denoting personal failure), he took refuge in a factor that he felt confident that those around him would immediately accept as being beyond the purview of an individual trader: the vagaries of the American visa authorities' bureaucratic machinery. Many of his fellow trader friends at some point during their careers have experienced difficulties with visa procedures (or heard stories about it), and they generally feel sympathetic towards those who fail to negotiate these. For Ahmadou, it enabled him to pull out of it without having to lose face. That is important, as withdrawing from trade goes against the grain of this culture and does not attract a premium.

CONCLUSION

The analysis exposed in this article suggests that the logic of economic opportunity, or of exploitation, is of limited relevance in explaining new, globalising patterns in the second-hand car trade in Cotonou. Instead, to more fully grasp its dynamics, the analysis brings to the fore cultural forces internal to African entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are pulled into the car trade as that holds considerable prestige. Whether this is representative of Africa's changing place in the global economic order remains to be seen. The sprawling services sector (finance, repair, transport) in major hubs of West Africa's second-hand

car business suggests a larger diversity in entrepreneurial pathways than trade alone. Clearly, additional research is needed to offer a more final statement about the complex relation between Africa's globalising markets and entrepreneurship. Yet, as this article has tried to show, advances in academic thinking can be expected from acknowledging the force of the cultural.

NOTES

1. A summarised version of the early stages of this man's business career appeared in Beuving (2006a: 363). The additional material collected since then forms the mainstay of the extended career history presented in the current article.
2. Second-hand car imports from the US were pioneered by West African entrepreneurs, followed in their wake by Lebanese businessmen (see Beuving 2006b). To the drop in transport prices must be added: (i) the effects of growing competition with Bulgarian, Romanian, Polish and other 'new' traders who took up second-hand car trading following the 2007 extension of the European Union and (ii) increasingly strict environmental legislation in the EU, complicating the transport of household appliances in the shipped cars to recoup the transport fee.
3. A survey of company websites suggests that the Norwegian shipper Hoeghs began a bi-monthly route in 2006, quickly followed by the Italian company Grimaldi's launching a weekly route; in 2008, the Lebanese shipper Abu Mehri Lines began its operations (author's data).
4. In this area, also known as 'Rue Heyvaert', new traders established themselves with the purpose of selling and transporting cars to Africa (Vuille 1993). Trade was originally concentrated in the neighbouring town of Anderlecht, but this developed into unregulated roadside selling during the late 1980s when second-hand car exports from Belgium began to increase rapidly (Couvreur 1992).
5. Others who acted as Ahmadou's car scouts and occasionally offered accommodation were Karidjo Ayouba, who lives in a suburb of Antwerp, and Boubacar Soulé, a paternal cousin living in Brussels.
6. The presence of Nigeriens in the US probably dates as far back as the great droughts that swept the Sahel during the 1970s (Stoller 2002). Their numbers remained small, but during the 1990s several thousands of them obtained official US resident permits (US Citizenship and Immigration Service, Statistics 2002 Yearbook: Immigrant Tables: <http://uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm>) – probably accompanied by a similar number of unrecorded migrants. About 2,000 of them arrived in the state of North Carolina during the early 2000s (CNNC 2003), settling in urban areas.

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