

Gold Sellers in the Streets of Bachdjerrah: *El Houma*: Community Identity and Globalised Economic Territory

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Abstract

In Algeria, the informal dynamic experienced by the gold sector since the 1980s was accompanied by the creation of informal trading spaces, the most important of which are in Algiers and Oran. These markets play the role of intermediary between the various actors in the informal gold sector, in particular transnational networks for the supply and marketing of the precious metal. The latter is part of this non-hegemonic economic globalization which relies on adventurers of the new market capitalism. Its network spans from Italy, Dubai to Turkey, in particular the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. These transnational networks do not only concern the import of jewelry for consumption, but also the smuggling of gold from Algeria and this is also the case for used gold. In the paper we try to come back to the experiences of informal gold sellers in these transnational precious metal networks.

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Keywords

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Introduction

The economic and social repercussions of Algeria's transition to a market economy following the politico-economic reforms undertaken, in particular after the application of the structural adjustment plan (SAP) in 1994, accentuated by the misadventures and hardships of the democratic experience and the black decade, had prompted populations affected by poverty and the shrinking of the formal labor market, mainly young people, to enter the informal sector in order to emerge from their economic marginalisation (Medjoub, 2020: 91). These informal economic practices were made possible and reinvigorated following the advent of two complementary movements: 1 / the advent of economic liberalism, especially in the trade sector, 2 / the increase in oil prices towards the end of the 1990s. This is how the benefit of a financial windfall (export of hydrocarbons) reassuring enough to curb, however little, the contradictions of a system of economic policy which has reached its limits in the concealment of a national apparatus production and give free rein to a growing process of importation in both its formal and informal form. Thus was born a new transnational commercial dynamic, which rests on adventurers of the capitalism system and due to the absence of an inclusive economic policy (Mazzella, 2001: 35) and which had transformed the local economy into a big bazaar in the part of an economic globalization pulled from the bottom (Alba Vega, 2011: 105). Consequently, the street becomes the main theater of these market practices. Informal commercial practices that are organised and perpetuated thanks in particular to a socio-cultural and community logic of appropriation of the urban space articulated around a dynamic private and collective territory both jealously called *El Houma* (a physical space that takes shape in the neighborhood).

The economic practices of young gold sellers are also the expression of a positive dynamic of socio-cultural identity in the sense that the activities on which they are based for the purposes of social integration are carried out in terms of the cultural, territorial dimension and symbolic specificity of *El Houma* which culturally and religiously, imposes the imperative of women "invisibility".

As a result, the informal commercial activity of gold on the scale of *El Houma* becomes the basic link of large networks of this transnational trade and which go from Marseille, Tripoli, the Middle East and the Gulf countries to China and

Yiwu (Belguidoum, 2011: 1; 2015: 16). In this context, the work that we present takes shape, from a socio-ethnographical study of the community of *Dlala* (an informal trading space where new and used products are sold) of informal gold from Bachdjerrah in the South-East of Algiers, on a particular experience of street commerce where generations of young people from the working-class districts of Bachdjerrah meet. As we must also specify that this concrete case of study is opposed to the hegemony of the definition which tends to dominate the work on the street youth groups and to bind them, in one way or another, to the phenomenon of delinquency and violence.

In contrast to such a misleading conception, the young gold sellers who engage in informal trade in violation of the forms of regulation and organisation of the commercial act and the appropriation of urban space, demonstrate a process of resistance against marginalisation in all its aspects and this by seeking the means to ensure their social inclusion while the institutional order and the various public policies tend to abandon them. Thus for this group of young people, the fight against unemployment often pushes them to go beyond the territorial limits to be part of a logic of globalisation by going beyond country-level perspective. It is a global movement which marks the economic activity of a territory through the intensification of the diffusion of informal capitalist practices of commerce. Their actions aim to find ways and means of their social integration in the broader context of informal transnational activities. To this end, the empowerment strategies they implement challenge border barriers.

From there and starting from the fact of the extreme poverty of scientific studies on the theme of youth gangs in our country, our objective is, therefore, to show the mechanisms of the process of empowerment of these young people from Bachdjerrah in order to be able to describe how have they succeeded in reinventing the society by the margin (Lakdjaa, 2014: 234–255), through the transformation of their neighborhood space “*El Houma*” into a globalised economic territory. We will see, from a descriptive perspective, who are these young gold sellers? Why did they join the gold market? How these merchants relate their experiences and their daily life in the precious metal trade? What sens do they give it?

We will insist particularly on the role of socialisation in the working-class youngsters of Bachdjerrah, through their subsequent involvement in this trade, in order to try to find out explicitly how did they manage to get into that trading activity?, that is to say what were the multivariate conditions material, financial and human relationships to install safely their trade? And with no papers nor contracts, how did they join and adapt to transnational networks of the gold selling? How did they establish themselves in these networks? Also,

how do they negotiate with the police their daily presence in the street by setting up stalls which vary between 5000 and 50 000 Euro?

In order to outline answers to our questions, we have mobilised the tools of the qualitative interpretivist approach of investigation. This is to say that in order to highlight the actors' subjectivities, intersubjectivities, and motivations and hence do research *with them*. To do that, the fieldwork lasted seven months, between January and July 2017 and was based on qualitative data collection techniques, namely observation and life stories. Three main life stories (Ramzi, Adel and Rachid) were selected up and updated as part of the Transgangs project in 2019/2020.

Now, given the characteristics and sensitivity of the Bachdjerrah gold market, access was achieved through a young person from the neighborhood "*Wlad Houma*" as an intermediary. He in turn put us in touch with two gold merchants. Also, they represented for us a form of protection in the market especially since the investigator was a woman. Additionally, familiarisation with these intermediate men allowed for discussions around gold trading in this market and other merchants we were unable to interview.

The observation was carried out in two stages: First, and in order not to attract the attention of the merchants, a remote observation of the entire market was carried out, in order to perceive dynamics and the disposition of merchants. It was done through one to two visits per month for four months. As for the second phase, it was carried out closely and in interaction with the informal gold traders, during the conduct of the interviews (Beaud, 1996: 236). Obviously, the first names mentioned in the text are not their real names.

Thirteen interviews were carried out with gold merchants in the market during their activity (see the interviewees' main characteristics in the appendix). They have covered their trajectories from childhood to entering the gold market. The duration of the interviews varied from one hour to one hour and half. Another story was told to us concerning the history of Bachdjerrah and its people with one of the ancient inhabitant of the region who had witnessed the evolution of the region

1 The Internationalisation of the Informal Economy: Another Type of Trade Without Borders?

As long as economic and exchange acts were regulated and codified, informal practices have always accompanied economic activities undertaken in the course of the development of human societies. Today, an estimated 500 million people around the world – or 25% of the working population – live through

informal activities (Barr-Bouyoucef & El Andaloussia, 2017:90). This shows the important role that this sector plays in the economies of societies. Of course, its volume in the global economy depends on the degree of economic, social and cultural development and, as a corollary, the significance of the values of formalisation and standardisation of the economic act specific to each society. It will be noted that the designation of this type of activity is made by means of different denominations "... illegal economy, informal economy, non-observed economy, gray economy etc ..." but which all refer to the different economic activities and practices that take place in – outside the legal and fiscal framework decreed by the competent institutions (Mokhefi, 2012: 211).

In this context we will focus primarily on the economic activity of trade which in modern societies has taken on a considerable dimension as a result of the immense development of the means of communication and transport. However, the development of trade did not and does not take place without the emergence of an informal "appendix" which, as Tlemçani remarked, "... is associated with the development of capitalism ... [to the point where]... it is even today very difficult to dissociate neoliberalism from corrupt practices" (2008: 37). It is thus that the attraction of profit often incites to bypass the mechanisms of fair and regulated competition to pay into informal transactions, particularly in the lucrative domain of commerce, as long as the "formula" leads to access to informal markets of developing countries, in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

On the other hand, the intensification and normalisation of exchanges between societies which has led to a phenomenon of globalisation dominated by the most developed and richest countries, relayed by international regulatory structures: World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) dictate and impose the rules for the liberalisation of economic exchanges. However, these exchanges take place between countries which do not have the same development capacities or economic power supported by a high and efficient level of growth. So, unequal exchange relations are established between the countries of the North and those of the South.

It is following the profusion of exchanges in this context that the hidden, underground dimension of economic globalisation is highlighted and "... which involves transactions that are not very institutionalised, informal, sometimes "semi-legal" or illegal" (Alba Vega, 2011: 103). These are transactions that concern all types of merchandise, ranging from mobile phones to household items, clothing, and spare parts for vehicles to furniture (Belguidoum, 2011). One of the essential characteristics of informal transnational trade is that it takes advantage of differences in the level of profit by moving from an economic system to another as well as from one monetary system to another

without the “equivalences” between the national monetary systems are made. Importers of these goods tend to set up real prosperous market places (Market, Souk, Bazaar), the point of fall of informal international trade that Alba Vega Carlos rightly calls *globalisation from below* (2011), and which includes commercial transactions not carried out in accordance with the rules laid down by international trade bodies. This is the other facade of trade between nations and akin to a parallel economic globalisation obeying other “rules” that organise it.

2 From Large Commercial Places to Street Commerce

The development of this trade requires the establishment of a vast network of people who practice commercial mobility (Peraldi, 2016: 36). Most of them are young people who undertake a kind of shuttle between the supplier countries and the countries of destination, that Alba Vegas (2011) calls the *navetteurs*. These are young people, traders, who carry the suitcase or the shoppings' bag in an informal transaction system commonly called in the Maghreb the *trabendo*. In fact, informal trade is not limited to bringing in, among its luggage, products for sale, but it can take on a greater dimension when the movement is done using containers. In this specific case, very often the operations undertaken require the “support” of border control structures. However, the scale of these informal commercial operations is handled by individuals who are sort of “specialists” in the field, of the *navetteurs* (Alba Vega Carlos, 2011), who through their long experience have forged the networks of relationships necessary for this type of mission. Michel Peraldi, at the end of his numerous studies on the phenomenon, describes it as follows: “... most of the commercial circulation activities are carried out by individuals and individual logics. The great mass of those who engage in these business worlds is made up of adventurers, families, graduates, the unemployed, etc.” (2016: 45). We are led to understand through this description, that this very particular type of trade is above all the prerogative of unstable cliques, micro gangs, exiles, repressed, dissidents of lineage logics: divorced women, repudiated, single, cadets of the siblings, young people in particular, in need of social inclusion for economic reasons specifically. We can also understand that this work, which is linked to the difficulties of obtaining the necessary resources to ensure one's life (or one' survival), reflects the determination to run the risk, to draw a strategy, in order to be able to envisage an exit from the situation of instability and precariousness.

These are real “corridors” of this trade which are built between the cities of departure of the goods and those of destination. The sustainability and regularity of this flourishing trade are maintained thanks to the dynamics of informal networks of relationships between suppliers and buyers. Informality does not require a contract, better still, orality is required. The networks of relations helping in informal trade, it is often made use of the national or ethnic fiber of immigrants settled in European countries mainly to facilitate and develop informal transactions “between people who know each other”. In this context, Michel Peraldi (2007) reports that one of Istanbul’s oldest traders comes from Bab El Oued (a popular district of the city of Algiers). It is easy to understand all the facilitations, at all levels that this trader profile can provide to the Algerian and Maghreb community of *Trabendists* who get their supplies in Istanbul. In this regard, Peraldi described this cosmopolitan city, like the city of Marseille in France, as hubs and centers for migratory trade.

Like other countries and cities where gold merchants get their supplies in Algeria, the advent and development of these large particular commercial territories interests us in more than one way, given the place that they occupy in the informal trade of gold object of our paper.

It is by dissecting the logic and the mechanisms of the economic practice of informal trade that we are led to highlight the central role played by social capital (Portes, 1999), so that in the absence of a process of formal transaction, it intervenes, in order to establish the bases of the relationship of trust necessary for this type of exchange.

The end of informal commercial transaction processes is taking place, largely in street trading. Alba Vega calls it “... fundamental mechanism in economic *globalisation from below*” (Alba Vega, 2011: 115). It is also a phenomenon experienced by all societies to different degrees. For example, downtown Mexico City is reported to have at least 20,000 street traders, most of whom sell produce brought in from the United States of America. Street trading is also an economic, social and political phenomenon whose explanatory factors are both internal and external. Internationally, street trading is defined as a significant component of the dominant neoliberal economic system. At the internal level of societies, it enjoys an important place in the political regulation system (Alba Vega, 2011: 111; Lautier, 2003: 212), it is an effective tool, a safety valve against the difficult equation to solve: unemployment. However, if the street trade is presented as a palliative to the insufficiency in the job offer, its tolerance does not solve the problem of poverty and the precarious situation experienced by large layers of the population.

3 Algeria: the Challenges of Street Commerce

The late 1980s and early 1990s represent pivotal periods in recent Algerian history. This is the period of major economic and political reforms after the fruitless experience of the socialist era for a country which is a single hydrocarbon exporter. The political voluntarism displayed targeted an exit from the crisis by means of a liberalisation of the economy accompanied by a democratisation of political life. The planned structural changes were aimed at boosting the performance of the national economy, in particular through a gradual withdrawal of the state from the social front as well as its status as the main investor in the economy and the leading employer. We can see this also through the major decisions of economic policy and short-term policy which also imposed the liberalisation of foreign trade. However, the series of institutional reforms were not enough as a multidimensional answer to sediment national cohesion. Indeed, the major economic and political reforms carried out between the years 1985 and 1991 precisely, had the consequences of leading Algeria towards what is commonly called the *black decade* (1990–2000) and where the state absolutely had to apply “... the draconian directives of the structural adjustment plan (SAP) with disastrous economic consequences, imposed by international financial bodies” (Boucherf, 2019: 31).

As far as the youth category is concerned, structural changes and economic openness were and still are far from reaching the objectives set and we have, since, witnessed an exceptional development of the informal economy, particularly in its commercial aspect, and for good reason, the youth unemployment rate was around 26.4% in 2018 compared to the overall unemployment rate which was only 11.1% (Algeria ECO, 2018). Already in 2012, the informal sector of the Algerian economy employed 1.78 million people and accounted for 50% of the national economy (Mokhefi, 2012: 213–214). The weight of the informal sector is enormous in the national economy. In fact, in terms of employment, according to National Economic and Social Council (CNES), in 2004 this sector represented 17% of total employment (Barr-Bouyoucef & El Andaloussia, 2017: 91). All in all, and due to the fall in oil revenues which once allowed disguised unemployment to be enjoyed, the state was deprived of the privileged means of preserving the continuity of social peace. “For a long time and as long as the hydrocarbon revenues allowed it, the oil windfall has always been used to buy social peace” observed (Barr-Bouyoucef & El Andaloussia, 2017: 89).

Logical consequence of structural changes in Algeria and lack of substantial financial resources, the economic machine suffered a devastating breakdown which resulted, among other things, in an alarming slowdown in economic

projects. It was also during this period, that the practice of *trabendo* carried by thousands of people to ensure their survival, experienced a great development in order to supply the national market with goods otherwise unobtainable and more and more market places through the world has been conquered (Medjoub, 2018: 98). These are the consequences of structural changes and economic openness which, on the one hand, have introduced notions that were previously foreign to the world of work in Algeria, in this case: voluntary departure, early retirement, the contract fixed-term, pre-employment etc ... and other, have given rise to an increase in *commercial mobility*. (Peraldi, 2016: 36).

And because the informal economy is active outside the field of regulation of economic activities, particularly in relation to tax obligations, the state showed, for the years 2009, 2010, and 2011, a shortfall of around 155 billions of Algerian dinars to replenish the coffers of the national treasury (Mokhefi, 2012: 213–214). More than that, the imports operated by informal sector operators and which, in many cases, resemble counterfeiting, because they are much cheaper, and therefore highly competitive, tend to have a negative effect on economic results on small businesses. Thus, the attractive aspect of informal commercial practices tends to have a negative impact on this sector of the national economy (Prenant, 2002: 140) to the point where it cannot resist unfair competition (because it is subject to the weight of relative costs. taxes, rent of premises etc ...), traders often feel the need to join the informal sector because it is more profitable and less restrictive.

However, by virtue of the political stakes which result from the insufficiencies or even the ineffectiveness of the employment policy in Algeria, the decisions of tolerance of informal economic activities and more precisely informal trade, in reality only reveal the visible part of the iceberg. They embody the contradictions and inconsistency specific to Algeria's employment policy. Indeed, the significant weight of informal trade in Algeria is equal to the negative impact that this sector has on all commercial activities and hence on the national economy.

4 *El Houma, Community Identity and Economic Territory: the Case of Dlala of Gold in Bachdjerrah*

The locality of Bachdjerrah had suffered, as is the case in the various regions of the country, the consequences of the economic crisis and the insecurity that Algeria experienced in the early 1990s. As a result, the urban dynamic had slowed down and the town became one of the most disadvantaged areas. The unemployment and the housing crisis reflected deeply this period of crisis.

The emergence of the informal market, the proliferation of city slums and *El Harga* (illegal emigration) were a valve to socio-economic and spatial marginality. From the 2000s, the town revitalized and became a commercial hub *par excellence* with the extension of the municipal market, the construction of three shopping centers: *Hamza*, *Taiba* and *Chaoui*. The informal market, which started in the 1990s, remains one of the most important informal trading spaces in the city of Algiers.

The gold *Dlala*, which is located inside this informal market and between the neighbors of Bachdjerrah, is split into two sub-markets, the first and oldest of which is enclosed between two buildings. The second is open to other informal sellers. From the end of the late 1990s until today, Bachdjerrah's gold *Dlala*, which relies primarily on a visibly male workforce, unlike other informal gold markets in Algiers, has become an important informal gold space in the city. It is the most recent in comparison with those of *Oued Kniss* and Algiers down town. In these *Dlalas*, the price of gold is competitive with jewelry stores. This satisfies a social demand for gold from the lower classes of society, who sell their jewelry out of need or buy it in order to meet the demands of the marriage ritual. Indeed, the price of gold, which was affordable during the late 1990s and the difficulty of entering the formal labor market, even for the most educated, had motivated young people from working-class neighborhoods in Bachdjerrah such as *Les Palmiers*, *La Glacière* ... to get into the precious metal trade and have found in the profitability of this sector a solution to improve their economic and social situation (Medjoub, 2018). The majority of them entered the informal Bachdjerrah market at an early age before the sale of gold, which represents the top of social advancement in the informal Bachdjerrah market.

This informal gold space has around fifty merchants between the ages of 20 and 45. As an anthropological field, two generations of young people have indeed passed through this *Dlala*. The first category, the oldest currently, are between 30 and 45 years old. Most of them consider themselves to be pioneers in this market when they were young. The second category, the youngest, their age varies between 20 and 29 years.

Bachdjerrah's *Dlala* of gold merchants are therefore all *Wlid Houma* (neighborhood children). Since, they are principally from the popular districts of Bachdjerrah. The first neighborhoods of Bachdjerrah were during the colonial period *Haouch* (traditional housing) inhabited by Algerian Muslims. The region has attracted villagers from various neighboring regions who were forced to leave their land following the colonial policy of land dispossession. In so many examples blood ties were a refuge for these villagers. The name *Wlid El Am* (cousin) was very common among the inhabitants, especially after the first two rural exoduses during the colonial period and after independence.

Over time, *Wlid el Am* was replaced by *Wlid el Houma*. The term *Houma* designates “A feeling of belonging to a community identity of spatial proximity within the social space of the city, this proximity takes on the meaning of siblings and large family” (Bouaouina, 2006: 2). Where does the name *Wlid El Houma* (son of the neighborhood) come from? Such is the case of the merchants Bachdjerrah’s *Dlala*.

El Houma is perceived, according to these merchants, as a social territory which shelters all the working-class districts of the municipality of Bachdjerrah. It is a place of learning and sharing of a social experience marked by social marginalization and poverty, but it is also an economic territory of resistance and the search for social recognition through informal trade.

Consequently, from a theoretical point of view, one can say that *El Houma* is more than a physical space; it was never limited to this aspect. Rather, it becomes a border space (Mignolo, 2015, in Fexia & Sanchez *et al*, 2019) which indicates a counter-hegemonic social positioning in the sense that it opposes, socially, economically and culturally the center to the periphery. According to this main function and this status assigned to *El Houma*, the latter offers, in return, a diagram of sociability built on the process of representing what is proudly designated by “Us” and “Them” and by the same to legitimize the daily struggles.

4.1 *Socialisation and Influence of the Majority Model of Wlid Houma*

El Houma is an important institution for socialising and constructing the identity of informal gold vendors in their childhood. Belonging to the working-class neighborhoods of Bachdjerrah was manifested by the influence of the majority model of *Wlid Houma* and peer groups on dropping out of school, as well as the acquisition of the value of risk taking, the practice of Bachdjerrah’s violence and early access to the informal market: “The influence of the majority model of *Wlid Houma*, symbol of masculinity “*Erradjla*“, is demonstrated in working-class neighborhoods, by the violation of social norms, from noise in class, dropping out of school, selling on the market to illegal immigration, delinquency and drugs. However, practices within the framework of social norms, such as attending class, studying and avoiding imitation of delinquent neighborhood children are female practices in the eyes of peers (Medjoub, 2020).

This influence can be seen through their experiences of *Harga* (illegal emigration), like Rachid at the age of 21. He also has a number of criminal records for theft, fighting and harassment. Ramzi also has several illegal migration attempts in his register. The 24-year-old considers that the practice of violence, the use of physical force and having a strong personality are essential to protect oneself in working-class neighborhoods. These practices acquired from

childhood were essential for him, in order to reclaim an informal parking lot from a foreigner in the region or to protect his trade in gold at the market. This is how a member of the group describes the social environment in the working-class neighborhoods of Bachdjerrah: “The people of the neighborhood in which I grew up are badly brought up, all mafias; they fight with knives, with signal. Here when we catch a neighbor stealing, he is taught a lesson. This is what I got in return, a stab, stabbed in the back.” (Ramzi, 24 years old). One can understand from this reality of youngsters’ daily life in this neighborhood of the big city but like many other places in Arab countries certainly, that their thinking is made of a complex structure nearly paradoxical: They know very well that they come from a poor background, and on the one hand they feel that they live a bad socio-economique situation and that they have *to navigate* in order to adapt to the circumstances, when and above all “...it is precisely at the moment of marriage that young people leave their liminal condition behind and achieve the status of “adult” according to the social construction of the life cycle (Sanchez-Montijano & Sanchez Garcia, 2019: 223) and as a consequence, the majority of them hope to “win” a chance to live abroad, to emigrate by all means, because they suffer all aspects of inequality to make a living. On the other, in our case study, they are persuaded that the only chance to reach stability and security socially speaking is to take advantage of the solidarity network their market provides.

4.2 *El Houma, Economic Territory Favorable to Learning to Trade*

In the meantime, *El Houma*’s role is also manifested through the neighborhood as an environment favorable to the acquisition of business skills and values from childhood; given that Bachdjerrah has the largest informal market in the city of Algiers since the 90s, especially for merchants from poor families, this is the case for most merchants. Indeed, the precarious situation of Rachid’s family, for example, accentuated by the black decade (Algeria suffered from a harsh civil war during the decade 1990 – 2000), had pushed him to rely on himself from a young age and to contribute to his family’s expenses. In particular, during the celebration of religious holidays, which has a social significance and a special atmosphere in working-class neighborhoods, such as contributing to the purchase of the sheep of *Aid El Adha* or spending the month of Ramadan. In addition, the existence of this informal market and the easy gain it provides had replaced the role of school as a means of social success, besides Rachid’s dream was to become a trader. He said about it: “I started very young. I carried the water, the vegetables. I poured the water into the crates of vegetables. Was I given 30 da, 20 da, or 40 da in commissions? At 11 o’clock, I returned home.” (Rachid, 39 years old). In this context we find ourselves in a type of social logic where on the one hand the material conditions of existence, the type

of socialisation received and the influence of those around them tend to strongly limit the chances of upward social mobility among young people. At the same time, young people who succeed in their studies do not escape the sentence of contradiction revealed by their difficult economic situation when they are not prey especially to the phenomenon of university graduates' unemployment. On the other hand, the visible social success is totally convincing among the partisans of informal activities and easy gain, among who are the gold merchants.

It is the case, Ramzi, among others, who had grown up in a poor family in one of the most important working-class areas of Bachdjerrah, in this case the *Palmiers*, near the informal market. On his way to school, he had to pass informal merchants every morning. Once in college, he felt more inferior and different from his financially well-off peers. From then on, school was no longer attractive to Ramzi and only the market could allow him to buy designer clothes and go to Europe. This frustrating situation, he puts it this way: "When my father came to get me, he found me at the market, poor man; he thought he found me at school. I emptied my backpack of the books it contained, and threaded it with napkins and facial tissues that I sold at the market" (Ramzi, 24 years old). Consequently, it is strongly and firmly believed that the informal trading is the way *par excellence* which provides social mobility (Alba Vega, 2011: 104).

Following this tendency, life seems to be structured around a very dynamic and prosperous space called the market, as the experiences of Rachid and Ramzi tell it, was the only place capable of changing the fate of these merchants, especially in the face of the difficulty of finding a job. For some, it is a way out of poverty and social stabilisation. For others, the youngsters, it is a financial source that allows them to live their youth fully.

4.3 *Being Wlid El Houma an Asset to Start the Precious Metal Trade in Bachdjerrah*

Belonging to the districts of Bachdjerrah or having this community identity of *Wlid el Houma* is a sort of label to access the informal gold market, which is made up almost exclusively of *Wlid el Houma* (neighborhood children). The merchants have embarked on the jewelry business either through a friend who is also a *Wlid el Houma*, by the help of a relative, who is also a *Wlid el Houma* or by the spatial legitimacy which gives the right to the sale in the market situated in his neighborhood (*Houmtou*) where the *Dlala* of gold is located. The presence of gangs of thieves with violent practices, who are also from the working-class neighborhoods of Bachdjerrah and *Wlid Houma*, prevent foreigners from entering the *Dlala*. These gangs of thieves and delinquents usually take place in the gold submarket which is open to other informal sellers. In this part of *Dlala*, one usually finds the younger merchants, some of whom collaborate

with these youth gangs in the resale of stolen or counterfeit gold, which represent profitable but risky opportunities. As for the submarket which is between the buildings, the oldest, where the merchants are older or even more educated. The latter consider that the sale of gold, even in the informal sector, is a profession that allows them to ensure a decent life as well as for their families, and this is the reason why the interactions between the two submarkets are really rare, whose purposes are different. This spatial legitimacy provides access to *Wlid houma* in order to sell gold, however, continuity in the market depends on the groups of belonging in the *Dlala*, as well as physical strength (Medjoub, 2018). In the following lines, the merchant talks about the specificity of the area and the access to *Dlala* “My cousin brought me back here, I used to sell vegetables. He bought the goods for me. At that time, I had 60,000 da, he had bought me a chair, a scale, and a few gold coins. At first it seemed a little weird to me. Then I started to come and sit and watch. It was easy work. It didn’t require any effort. I started to like it. Now, I’ve been here for 11 years since 2006” (Rachid, 39 years old). Although it appears clearly that entry into the gold market is selective and only takes place through networks of various relationships, in particular family, kinship or neighborhood, acts which transgress codes of trust and ease that reign or should reign clearly shows the determining impact of the nature of the social context on this type of economic activity. Despite this, Ramzi did not hesitate to share his feelings about this, and wanted to specify the actual conditions in which they try to earn a living, by saying: “There are a lot of risks. In Bachdjerrah, there are a lot of thugs and they all carry knives like the neighbours of *Les Palmiers et La Glacière* ... Here, you need strength to impose yourself” (Gold seller, 24 years old).

Merchants, generally, share their stalls with a *Wlid Houma* partner. Rachid, as is the case with most of his colleagues in the market, even hides his merchandise in his partner’s house. The latter takes care of their stall while his partner goes to pray or have lunch. It represents for him a support during the negotiations with the suppliers and also during the police raids. Belonging to the popular districts of Bachdjerrah also allows the transmission of skills and values related to the gold trade for the new *Wlid Houma* merchants, as well as access to the various national and international gold supply networks. The various discussions between them on the models, the quality of the gold and the experiments in this field illustrate this transmission.

The Bachdjerrah region is not only home to the Gold *Dlala*. There are also women *Dellalates Bnat Houma* (daughters of *Houma*), who collaborate with merchants by selling jewelry in female spaces such as homes, hairdressers and Hammam (public Moorish bath) (Belhouari-Musette, 1998). Also, informal gold workshops, like *âami Ahmed*, an old, sympathetic and modest *Wlid houma*.

During a visit to his workshop, the majority of customers were Bachdjerrah merchants. They had free access to the room where he repairs the jewelry, despite the existence of a significant amount of gold. This shows the importance of the relationship of trust between the merchants and the craftsman.

In the Gold *Dlala*, there are no female vendors who display their jewelry in the street, despite the fact that the customers are predominantly women. The merchants deal with the latter in a great deal of gallantry, in order to retain them. They are all called by *Kh'ti* (my sister). Women cannot indeed install their goods in the Bachdjerrah market, unlike other informal gold markets in the city of Algiers such as *Dlala* of Ruisseau and Algiers down town, due to the presence of gangs of aggressors and thieves. Even foreign men in the region are afraid to come and sell gold here, as Rachid confirms: "They are afraid of Bachdjerrah. Here, if they carry their goods in their hands, they will not be spared, neither they nor their goods. Here even the men are afraid" (Rachid, 39 years old). All the more so, the *Dlala* is in *El Houma*. In this social space, which means *El Horma* (honor) (Dris, 2004), control over behavior is more important and sharing the *Dlala* with women is categorically rejected.

All in all, what should be noted at this level is the relationship of the practice of trading in gold to the gendered question. The role of women in this space is not explicitly perceived as subject to discrimination, it is rather a natural division of space, in addition to the safety issue, the informal nature of the space where she can exercise, eventually makes it prey to any type of inconceivable lust in a space where family relations, kinship, neighborhood and respect between its occupants reign. In addition, gold traders are aware that failure to master this essential issue is highly detrimental to the business itself.

4.4 *Gold Trade in Bachdjerrah: Informality and Perception of the State as "Enemy"*

As mentioned earlier, street trading is a risky way of life; the merchants of Bachdjerrah face police officers on a daily basis. Although the latter are ostensibly seen as the means used by the state to eliminate informal markets, it is seen as a form of urban violence. However, the relationship between gold merchants and the police is a special relationship, which can be analysed at two levels: on the one hand, the police officer is a symbol of the State, the common expression of the inhabitants at the police is "*Dawla*" or (the state). On the other hand, the policeman appears as a rational actor who can negotiate with the merchant to make a profit thanks to his professional status.

The merchants consider that the police are their first "enemy": it is the "state" in the person of the policeman responsible, according to them, for their economic and social marginalisation by its inability to offer them employment

opportunities. Their work in an illegal setting is inevitable and due to the incapacity of the state to improve their economic situation. In addition, it represents an obstacle to their livelihood, by the confiscation of their merchandise in the market. Traders believe they have a right to “the wealth of the country”, and it is the state that deprives them of their basic rights, and even prevents them from earning a living with dignity in the informal market. As Ramzi testifies: “When incidents occur, they are settled friendly between us. The only problem that arises for us are *Edawla* [the state]; that they leave us alone. Last year, God only knows the value of what was seized in this market, of which we have no signs since” (Ramzi, 24 years old). This significant assumption looks like the people’s political interpretation of economic liberalism in Algeria. This gives reason for the perception of the state by the merchants as their enemy, whom they should not respect, and which poses the crucial problem of trust between the state and the active categories in the informal sector and nourishes the feeling of injustice or oppression “*Hogra*”, in particular because it causes them considerable losses during the police raids.

The second reason for considering the police, the repressive instrument of the state, as an “enemy” is that the police, according to them, use their position to gain material advantage, whether through the confiscation of property of all kinds, from which they benefit from their status of policeman. This rational police’s behavior is to “negotiate” with the merchants to recover the goods, or to inform them before the raid, in return for material benefit. As a result, despite the gold merchants’ perception of the policeman as an enemy, they adopt rational behaviors to minimise their material losses, and attempt to establish a profit relationship with them through negotiation. Rachid describes this rather individual strategy as follows: “Some people pay bribes and they even provide pay to their acolytes. In the event of a seizure, they are immediately informed and therefore do not set up their stalls. Many people do this ... They will always find excuses to take time off, such as pretending to be busy, or having someone sick at home. A few hours later, the police come across us” (Rachid, 39 years old).

5 *El Houma*, a Globalised Economic Territory and Transnational Precious Metal Networks

The opening up of Algeria to the world economy has boosted *trabendo* practices or trade in shopping bags. The gold sector, for its part, was motivated above all by the cessation of the importation of gold by the State from 1984 until 2005, by allowing the setting up of circulation areas in Europe (France, Italy, etc.) and in Turkey (daily *el watan*, 2005). The introduction of a circulation visa for Europe and the

entry of Algeria into the Arab free trade zone in 2009 opened up new transnational territories for informal precious metal actors, which had repercussions even on the quality of the imported gold. Bachdjerrah's Gold *Dlala* is a good illustration of this transnational market dynamic. The jewels installed by the merchants of this *Dlala* come from different destinations namely: Italy, Turkey, and Dubai, in addition to the local gold or the massif, as Hamid put it: "Initially the gold came from Italy. Italian Jewelers have beautiful and solid models. Things got difficult which impacted the price of Italian jewelry. The merchants are therefore oriented towards Turkey and Dubai. These two destinations work with Italian machines. You can find Italian jewelry in Turkey or Dubai" (Gold seller, 32 years old). Consequently, we notice that the opening up, of the Algerian economic system to the world market, resulted in the creation in Algeria of a big and interesting market for foreign goods, in this case based on informal practices, and slowing down at the same time the blossoming of a national production tool, if not to make it disappear because of the conditions of a tough competition.

5.1 *Bachdjerrah's Gold Merchants: Adventurers of the Modern Capitalist System*

Bachdjerrah merchants generally rely on suppliers and local workshops. Some of them are self-supplying by relying on their own transnational networks, notably in Turkey. In addition to the opportunity of a social network acquired at the local and even international level, the value of the risk-taking received in the popular districts of Bachdjerrah had indeed motivated these merchants to try the adventure, especially since the experience in the field of gold allows them to better understand the needs of their customers unlike wholesale suppliers. The adventure requires capital, a good knowledge in the field of gold and a guide, often a merchant *Wlid houma* who transmits his roaming experiences to new adventurers, like Adel and his friend. One of them Lotfi, said: "First, they have money and know the gold business well. They are used to shopping and know what works and what doesn't. At the beginning, they go on tour, an opportunity to know the movement and see closely how the transactions unfold. Some money is spent, it is mandatory. Like Adel and his friend, who before starting their own business, they went to Turkey and visited the suppliers. The journey always begins like this with someone showing you the way, and the best buys to make. Some expenses are necessary. Little by little, things start to get easier, expenses are reduced and the first profits start to be made" (Gold seller, 24 years old).

The strategies of these adventurers of the capitalist system differ. Some of them, according to Lotfi, divide their merchandise at the airport between several people, including women who represent the invisible actresses of these

networks, or by agreement with other shopping bags carriers, navetteurs, so that each adventurer introduces a part of the goods on the other, or with the complicity of customs agents. Foreign traders can also ensure the passage of the jewelry by increasing the value per gram. The informal gold networks, in which Bachdjerrah merchants are involved, not only supply the local market with finished jewelry, they also export broken or used gold. A practice that Lotfi describes this way: “Yes, they share their merchandise among several people. A week ago, a merchant was arrested at the airport, he wanted to export 8 kilos of gold, the goods were divided between three people.” (Lotfi, 24 years old).

In Bachdjerrah's Gold *Dlala*, there are also merchants of precious stones; this trade is limited to a few specialists, like Madjid. This dynamic forty-something, who appears younger than his age, speaks several languages. He is often called upon by his colleagues in the market to verify the authenticity of the stones. The trade in precious stones according to Madjid is delicate because the stone must be intact and without scratches. Trade takes place, contrary to the gold trade, through an intermediary who facilitates transactions between the local and the foreign merchant. The network is described as follows: “There are people with experience in gemstones, one is from Italy and the other is an Iraqi living in Dubai. We always deal with an intermediary. He asks for the third when it comes to stones and he asks for a percentage when it comes to stones of bigger size, that is why it is impossible to process without this intermediary because they need him when it comes to large size stones. He sends us shipments every time there are interesting goods, to turn them to the market. The stone must be intact and without scratches, you check it in three ways, there is the one who verifies the authenticity of the stone through the gaze, the pen or by rubbing it with his teeth” (Gold seller, 42 years old). This process of informal world trade shows how the integration into international markets, within the context of globalization, is built on rational and risky processes, at the same time, and which integrate the necessary expertise to secure the high financial stake.

5.2 *Istanbul, Main Destination for Bachdjerrah Merchants*

The Istanbul network is the main source of supply for Bachdjerrah's Gold *Dlala*. Transactions between the two sides are essentially based on respect for codes of honor and the trust that is built over time. This *Dlala*, which has existed for more than twenty years, indeed has a good reputation in Turkey following the dynamics of its actors according to Ramzi and Lotfi, they describe it like this: “In Istanbul, they have workshops there and in Azmir. I'm bringing them gold from here. They have worked with us for a long time. If we ever run out of money, they won't hold us back. They trust us. They love Algerians because they are serious and dynamic” (Ramzi, 24 years old). And Lotfi to add: “We deal

with them without papers, in terms of weight and price. You gain their trust with seniority, they can sell you in credit, you can get supplies just over the phone ... hello, my friend will pass give him please such quantity such model but that over time, once you gain the trust of the merchants. You can receive your merchandise without you moving" (Gold seller, 24 years old).

In return, the Istanbul network, in particular the two Turkish merchants with whom most of the merchants deal and even the other *Dlala* of Algiers, in this case Oued Kniss and down-town Algiers, has succeeded in acquiring a good reputation in the Algerian market. According to the merchants, this network offers good value for money. Bachdjerrah merchants can buy on credit. In addition, this network even ensures the protection of goods at the airport. Merchants also have the possibility of choosing and receiving their jewelry without traveling to Turkey, in particular with the development of means of communication such as Viber and Whatapp. Adel and Lotfi describe their notoriety by saying: "They are very old in the gold business. You can't find a person who doesn't know them in Istanbul. Here in Algeria, everyone knows them. Go to the gold market in *Ruisseau* (Algiers) and ask if they know x the Jew?" (Adel, 28 years old). "He has a shop in Istanbul's *Grand Bazaar*, he even sells diamonds.... You find a lot of jewelers in the grand bazaar. He has another very secure place where he keeps his merchandise. For example, you order half a kilo of earrings and come back in the afternoon to collect your merchandise. Recently gold has been sold to the Kurdish merchant. We deal with him a lot. We import jewelry like we export broken gold, and you can choose the method of payment that suits you, either by check or by cash" (Lotfi, 24 years old).

The connection between these two nodes of this global system, *Dlala* in Bachdjerrah and the Istanbul network was an opportunity for these gold merchants, from working-class neighborhoods, to open up to the world and acquire new skills essential for transnational trade, in particular, languages. Despite the low level of education of the majority of them, there are merchants in the *Dlala* who speak French, English and even the Turkish language. As Hamid testifies: "Here they speak many languages. Look at my neighbor who is opposite, he speaks the Turkish language very well from traveling to Turkey and dealing with Turkish merchants, when he doesn't even know how to write" (Hamid, 32 years old). What should be born in mine, is that the globalization phenomenon doesn't cover only the economic dimension, rather it extends to the intellectual and cultural sphere in the sense that it brings together people from different societies (Istanbul being a very cosmopolitan city) which needs all the means of communication for whom language becomes a necessity to play an essential role. And this appears to be facilitated as well by the

historico-religious elements that tend to bring together the subjectivities and the economic activity.

5.3 *Hamid, First Trip to Istanbul*

Hamid is a 32-years-old merchant, who has more than 12 years of gold trading in Bachdjerrah. He tells in these lines his first adventure in Istanbul. In this story, he describes the details of this trip which does not seem to be different from a simple trip of relaxation to Istanbul, yet it is about the trading of shopping bags. The youngster of the popular districts of Bachdjerrah, is found for the first time confronted with a situation of questioning of its values. The reconsideration of certain values was necessary to integrate the transnational precious metal trade. He said:

I have been working in this market for twelve years; I had to go and see what is right for me. The retailer is not like the wholesale one. Whoever sells by piece knows best what works in the market. I was very happy to go to Istanbul for the first time. I was very comfortable with my friends, *Wledhoumti*. We had our visas and our money with us. We arrived at night. We visited the city the next day. You find a lot of Algerians there. You often hear the word *Ya khou* (my brother frequent name in Algeria and especially in Algiers). We contacted an Algerian taxi driver to guide us. The latter told us that the most important gold merchants here are Jews. As soon as we heard the word Jewish, we replied: but you are crazy. We never deal with Jews, they kill our Palestinian brothers! We had this pride in being a Muslim. He told us: but our prophet was dealing with Jews. I told him I won't even buy a gram from them, we are Algerians.

While walking in the grand bazaar, we found a Syrian jeweler. We were very happy, a religious-looking guy. We later realised that he wanted to rip us off. It's true that we are visiting Istanbul for the first time, but we know our area very well and we are Algerians. I said to my friend: and yet he is a Muslim! So we decided to visit the Jewish merchant. We went into his shop, he speaks arabic very well, and english too, he received us very well. We thought at first he wanted to rip us off. He served us tea; he started showing us the models. The prices were much cheaper than the Syrian. I said to my friend, that's why they only talk about him at home! What shall we do now? He replied: brother do as you want. Me, I liked the models and the prices are unbeatable. Three hundred meters from this shop, the Syrian wanted to rip us off. I told him too, and besides, our prophet dealt with the Jews. So we decided to go back to the Jewish merchant.

We bought about 800g of gold. He even offered to ensure the passage of goods at the airport with a percentage per gram. We decided me and my friends to share the goods between the three of us since our passports are clean. (Hamid, 32 years old).

Once again we are faced with an example which clearly shows the impact of globalisation on the perceptions of those who practice it. Globalisation is therefore this multidimensional process which, in many cases, tends to upset the system of values and beliefs of those who are its actors.

Conclusion

The case of the group of gold merchants of Bachdjerrah tells the story of a marginalised youth group that has managed to emerge from its economic exclusion and face poverty and unemployment, thanks to its local social system based on legitimacy spatiality given by the belonging to *El Houma*, a reflection of community social capital, as well as the socialisation of these actors in working-class neighborhoods. By taking advantage of the weaknesses of the state after its opening to the world economy, these young people were able to integrate their local *El Houma* territory into the globalisation system, from below. "An economic globalization [which] operates below States, in their flaws, their deficiencies [...]" (Tarius, 2002).

As a form of resistance in the face of this economic weakening and a sign of social ingenuity, these young people have succeeded in coming together around an informal economic project and transforming their protective space "*El Houma*" into a closed economic territory, including the majority of merchants who install their stalls are from the region. However, this territory functions as a node in this world system. It extends over Italy, Dubai and Turkey in particular the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, taking advantage of the relative ease in acquiring entry visas for Turkish territory as well as other socio-historical elements and cultural rapprochement. The latter represents one of the most important informal trade destinations for Algeria. The informal gold merchants who exhibit their jewelry in the streets of Bachdjerrah are also adventurers of this merchant capitalist, as Piraldi described well, saying: "[...] as much as knowing how to sell or buy, [it] is first and foremost a knowing how to transport and a knowing how to pass, precisely when the passage is difficult or impossible." (Peraldi, 2007: 2).

The experiences of Bachdjerrah's group of gold merchants in the street trade, in particular transnational trade and the acquisition of the profession of "gold merchant" which is not limited only to a know-how in the field of

gold, but also learning to roam and the codes of honor that structure these transnational networks, says a lot about this so-called informal way of life. It represents a form of collective and daily resistance to change their destiny, nourishes the risk-taking value that goes from setting up their precious jewelry stall in the street and confronting police officers to their involvement in the gold smuggling.

This risky trade is legitimised, in addition to the “easy” gain that it ensures, by the perception of the State as an enemy, a set of institutions which could not offer the minimum chances of social inclusion in it. And where we find, in the first place, the crucial issue of employment. It is then, with regard to the merchants, the source of their impoverishment, thus rejecting the respect of law by the respect of the codes of honor of this economic mondialisation, which is: “embedded in a local social, cultural and political system [...] based on a traditional social structure: the family [kinship] and social networks.” (Alba Vega, 2011: 117). In our case, *El Houma* which is based on socio-cultural mechanisms of community cohesion at the local level, is also set up as an essential link in the start of this globalisation from below, to go in a direction where institutional territories and boundaries are erased and ideologies are reconsidered but also as last link of a long and perilous process of migratory trade. It is also “cultural, and not only economic, and its actors are unexpected “ants” of international trade, which weave the web of innumerable networks [...]” (Tarius, 2002). In fact, the young Bachdjerrah gold merchants weave their strategy of empowerment in terms of a harmonious and pragmatic connection of the local space by pushing the limits of the border space in which they live a little further.

In addition, the negotiation strategies that merchants initiate with police and/or customs officers, although they facilitate their trade and minimize their loss, nevertheless it increases the feeling of social injustice and contempt for the state, considered as the source of their misfortune, and gives more legitimacy to their activity in the informal sector.

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Appendix

Presentation of the interviewees' main characteristics

Interviewees' first name	Age	Educational level	Residence	Family situation	Seniority in the informal market of Bachdjerrah	Seniority in the informal gold market of Bachdjerrah	Method of accessing the gold market
Ramzi	24 years	8th year average	Les palmiers	Single	Since childhood	3 years	From the neighborhood
Sofiane	39 years	8th year average	La glacière	Single	Since childhood	9 years	From the neighborhood
Rachid	38 years	3rd year of primary	Boumaaza	Married	Since childhood	11 years	Through cousin
Houcine	39 years	Senior marketing technician	Bachdjerrah 1	Single	Since childhood	13 years	Through brother
Adel	28 years	Master 2 in telecommunication	Les Palmiers	Single	-	5 years	Through neighbor's son
Lotfi	24 years	Law student	La glacière	Single	Since childhood	5 years	Through neighbor
Mouh	37 years	7th year average	La glacière	Married	Since childhood	7 years	Through friend
Hamid	32 years	9th year average	La glacière	Married	Since 2003	12 years	Through the children of the neighborhood

Interviewees' first name	Age	Educational level	Residence	Family situation	Seniority in the informal market of Bachdjerrah	Seniority in the informal gold market of Bachdjerrah	Method of accessing the gold market
Riad	27 years	7th year average	Bach djerrah	Single	Since childhood	6 years	Mother is "Dellala"
Madjid	42 years	3rd year secondary school	Boumzar	Married	21 years	12 years	Through friend
Abdellah	35 years	Senior computer technician	Oued Ouchaiah	Single	Since childhood	8 years	Through neighbor
Uncle Sid (historical tale of Bachdjerrah)	65 years	Seller in pizzeria	Les palmiers since 1952	Married			

Regarding the age of young gold sellers, there are three elements that must appear, very briefly in the socio-demographic description of this category in relation to the problematic we are dealing with.

- 1 In the description of the social category of young people, the age criterion is not an identifying feature that can be extrapolated to all societies. The notion of young person is a social construction which depends fundamentally on the socio-economic, cultural and anthropological conditions of any society.
- 2 Our subject of investigation concerns groups of young people, identified as such, and which are composed mainly of young individuals. However, by definition, young people represent a heterogeneous analytical category and thus the presence of "older" individuals in the group is not excluded. To this end one is forced in many cases to consider generations of young people in street groups.
- 3 For the purposes of dealing with the issue of our object of study, we are forced to synthetically reconcile the notion of a young person and that of a member of the group