Material and immaterial circulations in the Global South: Revisiting “globalisation from below”

Introduction

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1 In the social sciences literature on interconnections within the Global South, the focus has long been on the study of human mobility rather than material and immaterial circulation. Research has therefore focused on the actors and on the routes of "globalisation from below", and some of the resulting interpretations have been reductive or miserabilist. Commodity chains, economic sectors, the movement of techniques, know-how, and ideas, and infrastructures have all been relegated to the background.

2 This special issue of *Anthropologie & Développement* takes a new look at the many facets of globalisation through the lens of circulations in the Souths, with a particular focus on their material and immaterial dimension.

3 Some will say, not without good reason, that these issues have been at the heart of the "global turn" for thirty years. Globalisation has attracted the interest of historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and anthropologists since the 1990s, and the ethnography of circulations can be traced back to the works of Malinowski (1922) on the Kula Ring, or even to diffusionism (Hahn, 2008). By choosing to work on globalisation in and by the Souths (see also Lombard et al., 2006), and by taking the circulation of objects, techniques, and ideas as its starting point, this issue seeks to contribute to a renewal of these approaches.
What is circulating (in this issue)?

This issue of *Anthropologie & Développement* offers an empirical and interdisciplinary exploration of several different dimensions of the circulations that cross the Global South, drawing on works of anthropologists, geographers, and urban planners. Before we present its contents, we need to clarify what we mean when we use the word "circulations". We prefer it to "flows". This term has either a relatively precise meaning in economics and statistics, and refers to efforts to measure and quantify, the difficulty of which is evoked in several contributions (Blundo, Doron, Le Borgne, Mininel), or a metaphorical meaning that is not the best way of describing what we observe in the field. In fact, the view of globalisation as regular flows that spread like an oil slick and are based on stable connections is largely outdated. On the contrary, globalisation's translocal and transnational links and routes are mobile, random, and subject to constant change (Knowles, 2014; Hulme, 2015). Instead of flowing, the “global” "hops", connecting certain spaces and excluding others (Ferguson, 2006: 47), or moves forward by "friction", gushing out of intercultural contacts and the barriers that infrastructures, rules, or actors put up against the circulation of people and things (Tsing, 2020). And while improved transport and communication technologies give the impression of a shrinking world, this varies considerably depending on locations and societies (Inda and Rosaldo, 2008:6).

The notion of circulation more closely resembles the contours of a qualitative approach that is mindful of the rhythm, speed, and itineraries of movements of things and ideas (Blaszkiewicz, 2019). It also enables better characterisation of non-linear, jerky movements, changes in trajectories and pathways, and unscheduled temporalities and processes.

We are well aware of the pitfalls and limitations of the "circulatory prism" (Vauchez, 2013). Behind this catchword lies a variety of conceptualisations from numerous disciplinary and thematic areas. In this issue, we take up the polysemy of the term. The term "circulations" refers here not only to objects or concepts in movement (goods, minerals, tools and know-how, skills, models and frames of reference, and capital), but also to the infrastructure that supports movement (such as ports and borders) and things that are mobile by their very nature (such as motorcycles and boats). Finally, it makes reference to the journeys undertaken by the researchers who track, trace, follow, and accompany people and things.

This volume presents empirical data gathered in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the “leaps” of the global, the Souths are in fact far less marginalised than it may appear. Although globalisation is neither recent nor a synonym of Westernisation, as global history (Stanziani, 2018) has demonstrated, and while economic relations between Africa and Asia go back to the first millennium before our era (Norel, 2011), the first twenty years of the 21st century, which began with China joining the WTO, saw the start of new forms of polarisation around an "East-South turn", a sign of a "global rebalancing" (Pieterse, 2011). There can be no doubt that the interactions and interconnections within the Global South expanded, became more complex, and spread out in relation to emerging political and economic poles. At a macropolitical level, the new millennium has seen countries like China, India, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil make a lasting impact on the economic, political, and cultural landscape of the African continent. In 2023, the BRICS business group gained two new African partners, Ethiopia...
and Egypt, and the African Union joined the G20. At an individual level, the opening up of African countries to globalised markets, and in particular the significance of their economic dealings with Asia, is profoundly changing consumption patterns, cultural styles, business practices, and development models.

All the contributions in this issue are therefore dedicated to the circulations that are a part of global circuits and chains that are no longer defined by a North-South axis alone, but also by a South-East axis (Africa – China – Southeast Asia). The authors take as their starting point either globalised goods (motorcycles, clothing, gold, and vaginal products), globalised locations (markets, borders, and ports), or social engineering models and experiences of activism that are exported internationally. The regions that are predominantly represented here are the Maghreb, Sahel, Central Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, China, and Latin America.

The first three articles (Blundo, Le Borgne, and Doron) focus on the methodological and epistemological aspects of an ethnographic study of various globalised circulations of goods based on multi-sited fieldwork, but operating at different levels of observation: global in the case of the Sino-African motorcycles chain that links China and West Africa; regional in the case of unsold textiles imported into the Gulf of Guinea; and local and cross-border with regard to a network of Tunisian markets connected to Asian trading places. The following two articles (Mininel and Traoré) document the circulation of know-how and the goods and tools associated with them, based respectively on a study of the marketing and use of sex-related products from various places in Ghana and Togo and on the example of the rules and skills associated with gold panning in Mali and its neighbouring countries. Kopf, on one hand, and Valitutto, Simonneau, and Denis on the other offer very contrasting cases of circulation or transfers of models and reference frameworks of public action in terms of both geographical anchorage (the border between Senegal and Mauritania in the former case and Latin America in the latter) and the actors involved (an agency of the United Nations and a network of activist associations). Lambertz and Sylvanus bring the volume to a close by addressing the question of the material and spatial conditions of circulations and the technologies and infrastructures that enable or hinder them. They start out from diametrically opposed objects: artisanal infrastructures like the whaleboats on the River Congo and a large, high-tech port such as Lomé. As we will see later in this introduction, this brief presentation in no way exhausts the wealth of the research avenues and perspectives offered by the studies collected in this issue.

The three approaches to global ethnographies

Global ethnographies have taken three different directions: they have studied the local impact of "global forces"; they have looked at globalist projects and the transnational actors who lay claim to being global (Tsing, 2000); and they have documented human, material, and immaterial circulations and the connections to which they give rise.

The first of these approaches corresponds to what Marcus (1995) has called "ethnography in the world". Here, the reference to a global system serves to clarify local dynamics. Ethnography classically focuses on a certain defined area while also revealing what links it to other parts of the world. The Manchester School’s extended case method was one of the first attempts to link local social situations to the global colonial system (Berger, 2013). This stance was masterfully developed by Nash (1979) in...
her study of Bolivian mining towns and more recently by Piot (1999) in his work on the “remotely global” existence of the Kabye people of Togo. A number of APAD researchers have also contributed to this literature on globalisation at the village level with the objective of understanding the local dynamics of reaction and adaptation to globalisation (Mazzocchetti and De Lame, 2012; Bréda et al., 2013).

12 The second approach was constructed around what Abélès (2008) calls "global politics". It offers an empirical account of the ideology and practices of supranational and transnational actors who complement or even replace the States in their regulating role of economies and societies. These works explore the behind-the-scenes activities of international organisations such as the WTO (Abélès, 2011), PNUD (Atlani-Duault, 2005), UNHCR (Fresia, 2010; Scalettaris, 2022), and the networks of transnational globalised elites invested in the promotion of democracy and good governance, such as international and local NGOs and private foundations (Jackson, 2005; Guilhot, 2005; Pétric, 2012; Blundo, 2012).

13 The third approach is at the heart of the ethnographies presented in this issue. It focuses on transnational connections, movements, and circulations. It studies globalisation processes through what characterises them: that is, the acceleration and intensification of human, material, and immaterial circulations; the growth of interdependencies and connections at a global level; and an increased awareness of these interrelations, and therefore the advent of an experience of belonging to the “global” that is both individual and shared. We owe to Marcus (1995) the first systemisation of an approach that looks directly and empirically at flows and circulations of the globalised modern world. In his renowned text on multi-sited ethnography, the American anthropologist encouraged us to literally "follow" individuals, objects, metaphors, intrigues, histories and allegories, biographies, and conflicts.

14 While the first two approaches are somewhat static, the third is in line with a "mobile ethnography" (Büscher et al., 2010). The study of circulations stands at the confluence of several "turns": global, mobilities, and materialities. It has proved to be particularly fruitful, on several fields of research: the phenomena of migrations and diasporas; commodity chains and supply chains; the history and anthropology of the circulation of techniques; and "travelling models".

Revisiting the distinction between globalisation "from above" and globalisation "from below"

15 The distinction between globalisation "from above" and globalisation "from below" crosses through all three of the approaches to the anthropology of globalisation. If it has given rise to numerous studies, it is time to re-examine it in a new light.

16 A number of new proposals have emerged in the ten years that have followed the earliest theoretical works on globalisation. They were put forward by anthropologists and sociologists, and suggested that globalisation has not simply been the work of formal supernational institutions that are at once the drivers and guardians of a world order, such as the constellation of organisations in the United Nations system or the powerful multinationals of the agroalimentary and defense industries. Globalisation has also been constructed through the day-to-day activities of a myriad of individuals...
and communities who have crossed the borders of nation states and have undertaken journeys across continents to flee danger or poverty, to trade, to work, or to travel as tourists. Authors such as Appadurai and Portes have suggested that we should take an interest in these forms of "grassroots globalisation" or "globalisation from below". The initial formulations of this concept were quite open in terms of the social phenomena they referred to. While Appadurai referred above all to the transnational NGO networks battling the excess of global capitalism (Appadurai, 2000: 15), Portes developed this notion in 1997 to describe the economic and political networks woven by Latin American and Asian transnational businesspeople and traders who had settled in the United States (Portes, 1997). It was Portes' proposal that hit the target and gave rise to a rich vein of research whose common denominator was an interest in the economic practices of the segment of humanity that had been left on the margins of the liberal globalisation. Tarrius (2002) saw globalisation from below as the backdrop of the Euro-Mediterranean circulatory territories, Ribeiro (2009) described forms of non-hegemonic globalisation, and Mathews and Yang (2012) compared "high-end" and "low-end" globalisation by studying transnational African businesspeople in China and Hong Kong. In the view of Mathews and Alba Vega (2012: 1), "globalization from below' is globalization experienced by most of the world's people. It can be defined as the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, often semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with the 'developing world' but in fact apparent across the globe". This research area has led to pioneering works, in particular on Africans in China (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007) and Chinese in Africa (Giese, 2013). However, the fact that they focused on actors located in the terminuses of circulations of goods (hawkers, suitcase traders, "nomadic" businesspeople, intermediaries, etc.) accentuated the analysis of these processes as economic exchanges "between the poor" (Tarrius, 2022: 67) and encouraged accounts of the "globalisation of the poor" (Choplin and Pliez, 2018) that overestimated the underground, illegal, or informal nature of these globalised transactions. What is more, these studies concentrated on the actors involved in transnational trade, and failed to pay the same attention to the goods that were the subject of this trading, thereby paradoxically leading to ethnographies of merchants with no merchandise. Finally, although one of the most influential authors in this area of research has recalled that "globalisation from below is not an independent circuit from hegemonic globalisation (...). At various times, they intersect and form a symbiotic relationship" (Alba Vega, 2011: 109), one still has the impression that juxtaposing – and sometimes even opposing – the globalisation of the powerful with that of subalterns has contributed to reifying them. Thinking about them separately results in losing sight of their interdependence and the dynamics it generates.

Following "what circulates" to capture the complexity of connections in the Souths

A first significant correction to the corpus of works on globalisation from below was made by geographers, at a time when "the routes of transnational exchange (...) once confined to regional frameworks, often North-South interfaces, (...) [have been] connected to each other and have become fully global" (Choplin and Pliez, 2015: 3). They proposed a focus on the spatial dimension of these "inconspicuous globalizations"
by travelling to minor cities, industrial clusters, and global marketplaces in order to reveal globalisation’s backroads (Knowles, 2014) and the apparently peripheral and neglected circuits of globalised trade.

18 The studies published in this work make a complementary, but different, contribution. While they share the ethnographic entry point of the works on globalisation "from below", they are more nuanced when it comes to the typologies that reify and simplify more complex and fluid processes. To do so, they rely on ethnographies of "what circulates". This approach makes it possible not to pre-judge the nature of the channels and circuits that are followed, or the actors who make things circulate, or the scales of observation of these phenomena, or the level of formality or informality. Behind a good, a standard, a model, a technique, or an infrastructure there are institutions that regulate and govern, political and economic actors, and specific forms of design, production, distribution, as well as reception and consumption that are embedded in cultural or social organisation models. If one adopts this perspective, the above and the below, the hegemonic and the subaltern, and the high end and the low end are no longer separate worlds. They are dimensions that are both unchallengeable and inextricably linked, within a global supply chain or throughout the intercontinental journey of a standardised model of social intervention.

19 Lumping economic circulations in the Global South and opaque and informal transactions together is a shortcut that is a relatively long way from the realities we see in the field today. While Adrien Doron's study of Tunisian markets undoubtedly confirms the hypothesis of the importance of informal circuits in South-South circulations of goods, the same commodity chain can reveal very different supply circuits, as Nicolas Le Borgne discovered when he looked at the chain of unsold textiles originating in Asia, Europe, and the United States. On the one hand, there is a small-scale circuit that circumvents tax and customs regulations and is structured around diaspora networks in Europe, while on the other hand there is an industrial chain operated by African businesspeople who declare their imports and that links West African markets to trading places scattered across Southeast Asia, the United States, and Europe. The balance between formal and informal practices can also vary depending on the stages of circulation of a product. Giorgio Blundo's investigation reveals that some of the motorcycles that are formally imported into Togo from China and declared to be in transit to Burkina Faso are sold tax-free in the dry port of Cinkassé and smuggled into neighbouring countries. However, the "fraud" is no more than a stage in the process of accumulating the working capital required to convert to "legal" trade (see Scheele, 2011, on trans-Saharan trade). In Togo once again, an importer of Chinese motorcycles can act as the formal representative of a giant global motorcycle manufacturer while also distributing models produced in factories that specialise in copies and counterfeits, thereby simultaneously being a part of "petty commodity chains" (Haugen, 2018: 308) and more conventional supply chains.

20 Secondly, placing the emphasis on the weak economic status of the "worker ants" of globalisation prevents us from acknowledging that certain of them “rule portions of the market, own factories, and dominate commodity chains” (Röschenthaler and Jedlowski, 2017: 7). The globalisation of the poor also produces success stories from time to time that go well beyond that of the Nigerian cement manufacturer Aliko Dangoté, who has become Africa's richest businessman thanks to the "grey gold" (Choplin, 2020). The Chinese and African motorcycle trade has also made some
considerable fortunes in the industrial cluster of Chongqing and in Lomé and Ouagadougou for people who lead enterprises that do not ignore local and international tax, trade, and industrial regulations (Khan-Mohammad, 2016; Blundo, 2022).

21 Thirdly, transnational trade is only one of the various dimensions of the globalisation processes in which the Souths take part. Aid-dependent countries (Lavigne Delville, 2017) also see circulations of governance techniques, public action tools, management models, international standards, and financial flows that serve a globalised social engineering driven by international aid or regulation organisations (see Kopf). Equally, the practices and circuits of transnational businesspeople adapt to and depend on new forms of economic and industrial collaboration in the Global South. The lively interest generated by the "New Silk Roads" on the African continent and the related process of modernising major transport and communications infrastructures are just the most visible dimension of this phenomenon (see Sylvanus). In addition, although the mass importation of Asian industrial products may represent the most obvious example of these processes, the intensification of interconnections "from below" also gives an impetus to cultural productions like the Nollywood videos that have proliferated across sub-Saharan Africa, and later in Europe and the United States (Jedlowski, 2013). The democratisation of high-speed Internet connections and 4G mobile telephone systems also enables the rapid, mass, and uncontrolled spread of information – and rumours – beyond national borders.

22 Shifting the focus from human mobility towards material and immaterial circulations opens up new avenues for understanding everyday, banal manifestations of globalisation in the Souths and the social, political, and cultural changes that accompany it. This change of perspective is not totally new of course, but its translation into empirical research is far more recent, especially with regard to the Souths.

**Thing-following studies: ethnographies of global supply chains**

23 Several of the articles in this special issue document the economic, social, and cultural life of objects of different types and from different places: motorcycles, unsold clothing, everyday consumer items, sexual products, gold, dredgers, crushers, and German and Chinese motors, to name only the most important ones. They are mostly of industrial origin, and circulate along transnational and transcontinental supply chains. Each in their own way, therefore, the authors of these ethnographies tackle a relatively important corpus of "thing-following studies" (Hulme, 2015). This is not the place to attempt to provide a summary of this body of literature, even an extremely partial one. Thirty years separate the publication of *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz, 1985), a pioneering study of the social history of sugar inspired by the reflections on the supply chains begun by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986) in the 1970s from the recent, innovative *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing, 2015), in which the trials and tribulations of a Japanese delicacy, the *matsutake* mushroom, lead to a multi-species anthropology of globalisation that examines the current changes in capitalism. Between the socio-economic approach of Global Value Chains (Gereffi, 2018), which underestimated the sociocultural processes that contribute to creating the value of a
commodity (Foster, 2006) and the Anglophone "radical" geography works that have attempted to "de-fetishise commodities, re-connect consumers and producers" in order to "thereby provoke moral and ethical questions" (Cook et al., 2004: 642), it is above all anthropology (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Marcus, 1995) that opened the way for studies that "humanise" (Knowles, 2014) or "repopulate" (Blaszkiewicz, 2019) commodity chains. The issue here is to follow the journey taken by a good from the place where it is produced to the places where it is consumed in order to understand the links and connections created by this movement and the transformations in the meaning and value of the good while it is circulating.

Most of the global ethnographies that cover the entirety of a supply chain – that is, "any arrangement connecting producers and consumers of commodities" (Tsing, 2015) – have explored the circulation of goods between the North and the Souths. In these exchanges, Africa exports agricultural products such as green beans (Freidberg, 2001), shea butter (Chalfin, 2004), and khat (Lesourd, 2019) to Europe and the United States and imports industrial products that are often used, like old clothes (Hansen, 2000) and second-hand cars (Rosenfeld, 2017) from the same region. The reconfiguration of global supply chains through India and China has stimulated studies on commodities whose trajectories blur the former bipolarisation and design new globalised spaces of trade. Today, the supermarket city of Yiwu supplies both North African jeans sellers (Pliez, 2007) and London's "pound stores" (Hulme, 2015). At the same time, China is waking up to wine and importing grape varieties and winemaking know-how from France (Pétric, 2022).

Ethnographies on commercial, cultural, and technological exchanges in the Global South, especially in "Chindiafrica" (Boillot and Dembinski, 2014), are relatively more recent. The tribulations of Indian rickshaws in Egypt and the DRC (Tastevin, 2015), the global chain of flip-flops split between Kuwait, South Korea, the Southeast of China, and Ethiopia (Knowles, 2014), the circulation of wax-printed textiles between the Netherlands, Togo, and China (Sylvanus, 2016), and the chain of fashion jewellery between China and Ghana (Haugen, 2018) are rare examples of studies on commercial and relational worlds that have hitherto remained largely unknown. Armelle Choplin's (2020) very original book on one local production chain in Africa – cement – is also worthy of mention.

In this issue, only the research presented by Giorgio Blundo is a part of the group of studies that attempt an ethnography that embraces all the various stages of a South-South commodity chain. He outlines the progress of an investigation that extends from motorbike factories in China to their local use in Togo, including their commercial flows and their technical biographies.

The social life of globalised goods: appropriations, innovations, and hybridisations

The remaining contributions in this issue are based on ethnographies downstream of global supply chains. They focus on phases of the circulation process that correspond to the marketing/distribution and the consumption/reception of the "things" they study. A significant body of anthropological literature on consumption has demonstrated that the act of consuming is neither passive nor a terminal moment in
the life cycle of a commodity. Far from it: it is a "source and site of value creation" (Foster, 2006: 289). In this issue, we see Chinese agricultural engines powering boats in the Congo (Lambertz), Asian medicines and cosmetics transforming the sexuality of couples in West Africa (Mininell), unsold clothing being given a new life in the coastal towns of the Gulf of Guinea after being classified as industrial or commercial waste (Le Borgne), and "low-cost" motorcycles becoming symbols of success and upward mobility (Blundo). It is not just their monetary value that changes; it is also their social meaning and uses.

28 The intensification of the trade between Africa and Asia (especially China, the world's factory and workshop) has generally been analysed as an opportunity for African societies to enter an age of mass consumption accompanied by the emergence of a new material culture (Kernen and Khan-Mohammad, 2014). This observation, which we share, must not allow us to forget that Africans were consumers of imported manufactured goods long before the mass upsurge in Chinese products of the past twenty years, and even before the colonial era: as Trentmann (2017: 125) reminds us, "Africans did not need imperial masters to teach them how to become consumers". Rather, it was the colonial powers that restricted access by indigenous peoples to Western styles of consumption, fearing that it might translate into hopes for emancipation (Trentmann, 2017: 136), all the while strengthening the legitimacy of their domination and civilising mission by means of technologies and infrastructures that caused wonder and intimidation among their subjects (Larkin, 2008).

29 Such reminders are a helpful way of discussing the processes of appropriation of global goods (Hahn, 2004), some examples of which can be found in this issue. The origin of an imported product, whether perceived or real, plays a central role in evaluating its qualities and in its appropriation. A stroll through any West African market is enough to reveal the importance that sellers and consumers attribute to the authenticity of a product, contrasting what is "original" to what appears to be a "copy". Generally speaking, items that are manufactured in the West and that are available in African markets in the form of second-hand goods, or goods that are new but restricted to the purchasing power of the elites are considered original, and therefore authentic. Classification as a copy broadly impacts "Chinoiseries", which are, of course, suited to the pockets of the majority of consumers but are reputed to be nor prestigious neither durable. In order to conceal the origin that devalues them in this way, Ghanaian traders engage in what Alena Thiel (2016: 355) has termed "technologies for mobilising authenticity" by changing their labels or packaging to fabricate a European origin. Le Borgne observed similar strategies in his investigations into unsold new clothing in Benin and Togo.

30 Stopping with this observation, however, prevents us from understanding the complexity of the ongoing processes and from looking at the social life of these products, which are too quickly relegated to the status of "cheap tat" (Racaud, 2018), symbols of access to a "second-class modernity" (Chappatte, 2014: 30). Investigations that have looked seriously at merchandise have stressed the diversity of the trajectories of appropriation of Asian products in Africa, especially when adopting a historical perspective (Ferme and Schmitz, 2014). Faced with the proliferation of Chinese copies of wax-printed textiles and counterfeit of prestigious brands, female Togolese consumers have developed a kind of sensorial know-how that enables them to judge the quality of the fabrics and establish new hierarchies of copies (Sylvanus, 2016; Sylvanus, 2016).
see also Röschenthaler, 2020, on Cameroon). Equally, over twenty-five years of motorcycle imports from China have totally blurred the boundary between originals, copies, and counterfeits, as Khan-Mohammad (2020) and Blundo (2022 and in this issue) have shown. On the one hand, the act of copying does not necessarily exclude innovation, and indirectly adds value to the brand that is being copied. On the other, some models go from being "copies" to taking on the status of an "original", and acquire a flattering new brand identity, a sign that China's image is also evolving in local representations and imaginaries. In addition, a study of these processes makes it possible to understand the agency of transnational economic operators (Pairault et al., 2023). Instead of restricting themselves to flooding African markets with anonymous industrial products, they intervene upstream – at least in certain sectors – directly during the manufacturing phase, thereby giving rise to the import of "Made in Chinafrica" goods that satisfy the tastes and desires of local consumers. 

Alongside objects whose possession or use confers a certain prestige, there are also other globalised products that contribute to the emergence of frugal forms of technology and innovation in both urban and rural settings, as the contributions by Lambertz and Traoré remind us. In DRC, the artisan whale boats that ply the waters of the Congo River "ally (...) different local traditions of craftsmanship and navigation with South-South transnational technology transfers" (Lambertz: 177). These boats are driven by separately-mounted Chinese single-cylinder engines known as dakadaka. They are less reliable than traditional multi-cylinder diesel-powered marine engines, but easier to repair, and the fact that they are available separately means that it is not necessary to stop using the boats if one breaks down. In Mali, the mechanisation of artisanal gold panning has largely been facilitated by a "local assembly engineering" process that manufactures dredgers by adapting imported engines (from old threshers and Mercedes 190 motors) or by obtaining supplies from Chinese welding workshops in gold-mining areas. 

Finally, the multiplication and interlinking of supply chains encourages product appropriation forms that are the result of cultural hybridisation. Francesca Mininel followed the trajectories of Asian industrial substances (such as aphrodisiacs and sexual stimulants) in Togo and Ghana that are transformed into secrets of the *ars amatoria* and tools of domination and bewitchment by playing with multiple cultural references such as Islam, representations of white or Asian women, and figures from the voodoo pantheon. Chinese products are "domesticated" by associating them with protective oils from the Christian or Muslim traditions, while others that are destined for uses conceived in far-off cultural contexts are adapted to the contemporary changes in gender relations and sexual practices in West Africa.

The material and immaterial conditions of circulations: infrastructures and travelling models 

It would not have been possible for this publication to neglect the topic of infrastructures, "matter that enable the movement of other matter" (Larkin, 2013: 329). Larkin's minimalistic definition initially enables us to think about the issue of support for the circulations of people, goods, and ideas, ridding ourselves – as Peter Lambertz invites us to do – of the modernist image of "hard" infrastructures so that we can expand our gaze to "all material mechanisms that have the objective of accomplishing a
task that makes it possible for another activity to function” (*Lambertz*: 170). From this perspective, his ethnography can be linked with Nina Sylvanus’s study on the port of Lomé. This port, which is now West Africa’s leading container port and one of the seven African ports "that have become millionaires in twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU)" (Aurégan, 2023: 30), represents a more global rationalisation, modernisation, and internationalisation movement for port infrastructures. It is as much a symbol of the African continent’s increasing participation in globalised circulations of goods as the privatisation of its ports through the intervention of global maritime capitalism (Chauvin *et al.*, 2017). In DRC, the collapse of the road and rail network and the reduction in the number of navigable river routes have encouraged the emergence of "artisanal infrastructures", episodic but regulated assemblages of human, mechanical and hydraulic forces that enable the whale boats to function. Conversely, Lomé represents a project – one that has not been completed in Africa up to now – to completely automate infrastructure, which would therefore move away from human intervention. The example of the Congo demonstrates how despite a lack of modern, fixed infrastructures, circulations and mobility are still ensured, albeit at rhythms and speeds that are light years away from those required by globalised supply chains. It recalls Blaszkiewicz’s (2019: 41) invitation to give equal consideration to constraints on circulations, their decelerations, and the moments when they come to a halt.

In addition, aside from a purely technical dimension, all infrastructure is supported by a political ideology and project, as Nina Sylvanus demonstrates when she sheds light on the development of the port of Lomé through the turbulent political history of the small entrepot-state. As infrastructures embody social and political projects, they are both the support of circulations and the tools for framing and controlling them. This is the case with borders, which are the subject of Charline Kopf’s article. She carried out her research in locations on the border between Senegal and Mauritania involved in a programme run by the International Organisation for Migration. Her study is at once an analysis of a model for controlling cross-border circulations "by communities" and an ethnography of certain phases of its circulation as a "standardised travelling model" (Olivier de Sardan, 2021). In line with the doctrine of the migration-security-development nexus (Derrière *et al.*, 2020), the "porosity" of the borders is viewed by the UN agency and its Sahelian state partners as a factor of fragility in the face of multiple threats (trafficking of all kinds, disasters, and terrorism). The IOM programme combines the materialisation of the border through the creation of state and community infrastructures, with awareness-raising activities for the local populations involving theatre performances, comic strips, and crisis simulation exercises of various kinds. The objective of all these activities is to produce an internalisation of the border in the minds of actors who are accustomed to crossing it on a daily basis and who literally do not see it. Charline Kopf’s study focuses on the moment in the lifetime of this travelling model that Olivier de Sardan has called the "test of the context" (2021: 49 et seq.): that is, its implementation in a specific context. Kopf points out the inconsistencies in an intervention that claims to lead to a rapid local appropriation of a "border control culture" while also relying on standardised mechanisms that are virtually identical reproductions of those used in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Tanzania.

The story related by Irene Valitutto, Claire Simonneau, and Éric Denis, on the other hand, unfolds "a long way from national and multilateral political arenas, development
aid experts, and decision-makers” (p. 146). It discusses the circulation of the model of mutual aid housing cooperatives (CLAM), which were created in Uruguay in the middle of the 1960s and gradually spread into a dozen Latin American countries. In contrast to the standardised social engineering intervention described by Kopf, the modalities by which this experience circulates are slow, supple, and horizontal (in the sense that they rely on exchanges among inhabitants and between inhabitants and networks of associations, and have even kept this means of transmission up at a time when, decades after they were created, they have acquired a transnational dimension). The researchers are less interested in the "model", which is now supported by donors, who belatedly discovered the network, than they are in the forms of circulation of a frame of reference – the representation of a problem and its underlying solutions to the formulation of a public policy (Lavigne Delville, 2018) – that is established across all of Latin America and beyond as an innovative "counter-frame of reference" in the area of affordable housing.

The fields of circulations

36 To different degrees and at different levels, all the contributions to this volume share the practice of transnational fieldwork by using a multi-sited approach. We will now look at the main issues these ethnographies of material and immaterial circulations raise. They are tackled head-on by the first three articles and run right through the issue, bringing consistency and unity to what is at first sight a collection of sui generis case studies.

37 As Blundo reminds us in his essay, multi-sited ethnography has sometimes been wrongly equated with the multiplication of survey locations for the purposes of a comparative approach. For example, the Africanist anthropology of development has taken hold of the multi-sited notion in the context of collective inquiries (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997) where the issue is to "make comparisons among localised sites "in contrast to an experimental ethnography that can be somewhat pretentious and deliberately "anti-localist" and argue in the name of a form of globalisation that is broadly conceived as deterritorialisation" (Olivier de Sardan, 2008: 320). It should be remembered, however, that the intuition of the co-author of Writing Culture has precisely been to suggest that things, people, and ideas circulating amongst social and geographical spaces should be tracked in order to understand the meaning of the connections they establish.

38 All the studies presented here have adapted this general framework in their own way depending on their disciplinary background, the nature of the "things" in motion, the fieldwork and the hazards it presents, the time and resources available to them, and the research issues. Blundo took the decision to abandon his initial project to shadow transnational traders in order to follow the route taken by Chinese motorcycle brands to the places where they are produced in China, and chose “ethnographical hubs” where goods, producers, resellers, and consumers interface. Doron and Le Borgne have preferred to "follow the route" of commercial circulations (Choplin and Lombard, 2010), and to travel with traders and visit markets and depots. In particular, Doron suggests a type of methodology that makes it possible to understand the spatial dimension of structured social networks through the connections that punctuate a supply chain. Mininel discovered the places where vaginal products are distributed by
following the leads provided by the consumers of these substances. Traoré has combined a multi-sited approach by reconstructing the circulation of gold-panning techniques, tools, and standards across several gold-producing sites in Mali with a longitudinal study that tackles certain issues in depth at a single site. Lambertz adopted "the engines' point of view" (see also Lambertz, 2023), travelling aboard whale boats between various provinces in the DRC, while Valitutto, Simonneau, and Denis followed the spread of a housing cooperative model in Latin America by means of interviews and taking part in meetings organised by this network of actors.

39 Following a commodity, a technique, a model, an idea, or a repertoire of collective action parcels out the terrain among a vast range of actors, agents, and situations belonging to transcultural and transnational social, cultural, and political spaces. This has implications for various dimensions of ethnographic studies.

40 In the first place, if one simultaneously dedicates attention to the materiality of exchanges and circulations, to the actors involved in circulations (who lead or regulate them, whether individuals or collective) and to their spatial dimension, multiple skills (linguistic, cultural, historical, disciplinary, and technical) that are rarely found in a single researcher must be deployed and considerable investments in time and financial resources must be made. This undoubtedly explains why the global ethnographies published in this issue focus on circulations from a limited area, at a country or cross-border level, and look in depth at a particular segment or phase of a global chain. At least two of the studies – by Traoré and by Valitutto, Simonneau, and Denis – are the outcome of a collective project that follows the current trend of creating forms of collaborative research to compensate for a lack of time, money, and skills (Baby-Collins and Cortes, 2019; Matsutake Worlds Research Group, 2009). Only one study, by Blundo, attempts to embrace an entire global chain, but it makes no claim to being exhaustive in any way. As Doron rightly observes, "one never studies more than an already complex portion of a broader whole that is also made up of other places and based on other temporalities" (p. 73).

41 Secondly, we also see that the "followability" of things in circulation varies depending on their type and itineraries. There are "unfollowable things" like garden gnomes (Hulme, 2015) or the plastic beads used at the Mardi Gras Festival in New Orleans (Redmon, 2015) whose origins are lost in the countless industrial workshops of the Middle Kingdom. There are also consolidated sectors, like that of Chinese motorcycles, which are more apparent if one can manage to gain the trust of some economic operators. Often, the “inconspicuous” nature of global chains is above all that shown by the business operators, who cultivate confidentiality and guard their "circulation secrets" (Le Borgne) jealously to make sure that their transnational business will continue. In all these cases, this type of study brings researchers face to face with the challenges of multipositionality and ethical and deontological dilemmas when they become caught up in a game that involves concealing and revealing their professional identities (Le Borgne, Blundo).

42 Thirdly, by avoiding the trap of presentism that often awaits the literature on globalisation processes, several of the contributions to this work have adopted an attentive approach to historical dynamics and variations of scale: Valitutto, Simonneau, and Denis by reconstructing over half a century of collaborative experiences in Latin America; Lambertz, who situates the rise of the whale boats in the light of a history of
river transport that goes back to the colonial era; and Sylvanus, who retraces the role of the port of Lomé since the time of German colonisation.

Conclusion

At a time where it has been said that "the global does not consist merely of a series of flows floating above or between national spaces or sets of interconnected sites, but rather refers to emergent problems – from climate change to sustainability design to religious reform – that unevenly permeate relations on a planetary scale" (Rudnyckyj and Whittington, 2020: 1043), we have made a more modest attempt to reopen the file on globalisation "from below" by placing the accent on the dimension of material and material circulations, on "what circulates" in and through the Souths, separating the "circulatory prism" from the "migratory prism", as it were.

This objective has been pursued in a resolutely eclectic way by considering the entire polysemic dimension of the word "circulation": the circulation of objects, merchandise, models and experiences, know-how, the researchers who often undertake mobile ethnographies, the infrastructures that frame the mobilities and their iconic locations, and the moving things themselves.

Inevitably, numerous incomplete or unexplored avenues remain. We would have liked to be able to document the journey of a cultural production over the long term, study the entrepreneurial models or lifestyles that emerge from these globalised interconnections, and analyse the political and economic practices and imaginaries of the actors who are attached to transnational circulations. We would have liked to learn more about the Chinese welding workshops in Mali, the factories in Asia that produce sexual products, and the true impact of simulations of crisis situations on border populations, among other things. But as with all research, albeit to a greater degree, opening up multiple paths without being able to look at them all in depth is a feature of these studies. Global ethnography must give up the idea of total ethnography and renew itself by opening up to forms of collaborative research. But that is certainly a theme for a future special issue...

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NOTES

1. This issue brings together a selection of papers submitted to the 13th international symposium organised by APAD and the University of Lomé’s Department of Anthropology and African Studies in the Togolese capital between 29 November and 3 December 2021. The event coincided with APAD’s thirtieth anniversary, and was scheduled to take place between 23 and 26 June 2020, but it was postponed twice because of the healthcare crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The symposium was supported by the Agence française de développement, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, the Institut de recherche pour le développement, UNPD, and the Service de coopération et d’action culturelle (SCAC) of the French Embassy in Togo.

2. More classifications of ethnographic approaches to globalisation can be found in Inda and Rosaldo (2008).
3. Among the many works that offer a summary of this issue, see Abélès (2008) and Eriksen (2014).
4. Readers are referred to Themann (2022).

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