

SMUGGLING COMMUNITYS: A SOCIO-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY. ACROSS THE EASTERN BORDER OF ALGERIA

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Abstract: *This study addresses the issue of smuggling in the city of Tebessa, focusing on the socio-ethnographic characteristics of smugglers operating on the eastern border route (Algeria-Tunisia). The multidisciplinary approach used aims to build a model of deviance based on a research field limited to fuel distribution stations and the so-called strongholds of smuggling in the region. In other words, the smuggling phenomenon may be part of much wider social phenomena, where it becomes almost impossible to determine its specific causes and effects. The study revealed that smuggling activities, particularly fuel trafficking in the Tebessa district in Algeria, are not only a subject of investigation, but also provide significant indicators and dimensions for the local society studied. The research highlighted the role of various facilitating factors such as geographical location, standard of living, peer groups, culture, religious morality and tribal affiliation, which indirectly shape and influence the development and spread of smuggling.*

Keywords: contraband, crime, ethnography, social, deviance

1. Introduction

Crime is considered one of the major problems due to the scale and diversity of the factors involved in its existence. The complexity associated with crime is rather due to its systematic and analytical relationship with different interpretative paradigms, characterized by different epistemological foundations and theoretical positions. In Algeria, fuel smuggling is considered as an obvious and influential criminal activity, which exerts its influence in certain geographical areas that define its particular importance, notably the eastern border zones. Fuel smuggling in these areas has become a much more complex phenomenon. It is no longer simply an illegal commercial activity, but it has become an integral part of the region's social and cultural life. Based on this contextual consideration, this study aims to carry out a comprehensive survey of the phenomenon of fuel smuggling in the Tebessa region. Socio-ethnographic methods are used to identify the factors contributing to the expansion of the phenomenon under study, and to investigate its various aspects including the social, tribal, cultural and economic aspects of this complex issue. Smuggling is a pervasive criminal phenomenon faced by all countries, whatever their level of development, with varying degrees of severity. This widespread phenomenon poses a lasting challenge to the financial, economic and social structures of nations and societies, whether at national, regional or international level, and beyond the orientation and philosophical foundations of the system. The fight against crime and its various manifestations is one of the greatest challenges facing our country. In response to this, the Algerian authorities have implemented a wide range of important measures to ensure the safety of people and property. So, they are working to mobilize material and human resources. The aim of this study is to investigate the issue of smuggling. The aim is to study not only the nature of smuggling, but also the relationships and interactions that occur between the groups involved in this activity and the social environment. The emphasis is on understanding how these groups perceive the surrounding society, as formulated by (Assamari 1992: 92). The aim is to go beyond simplistic linear analyses based solely on institutional practices and media representations.

Despite the criminalization of activities such as smuggling through legal frameworks, this study reflects a deep understanding of social reality of smugglers involved, and is committed to examining their ongoing involvement in these activities. Furthermore, it acknowledges the adaptability of culture and recognizes that cultural dynamics can change in

response to perceived problematic phenomena (Leman, 2007: 229). Thus, the study reveals how cultural adaptation contributes to the survival and consolidation of deviant cultures embodied by smugglers leading ultimately to the formation of subcultures rich in distinctive behavioral norms. This study is based on a conceptual framework that integrates numerous theories, approaches and concepts that have already been used to elucidate similar or contraband-related phenomena. Within the field of deviance studies, which examine the sociological aspects of deviant behavior, this study explores the complex social and psychological processes as well as the rejection and exclusion that affect certain disadvantaged categories, as explained in detail. The mechanisms are discussed (Naim, 2011: 58). When studying group differentiation and the social mechanisms that lead to the exclusion and marginalization of particular segments, it is essential that researchers draw on the framework of subculture theory. As suggested by Becker (1985: 229), research on deviance focuses on group differentiation, and the resulting exclusion pushes certain factions to the margins of society or towards dissidents. In this context, this study draws on the concept of specific subcultures to explore how the social existence of groups involved in fuel smuggling occurs beyond the framework of the dominant culture and takes root in different contexts. Furthermore, it will be shown how these groups are able to form their own cultures and foster semi-independent worlds in which they exist semi-autonomously.

Depending on the context, the different cultures of these fuel smuggling groups range from traditional norms to deviant practices. As EL Kayal (1997: 103) points out, this scope is important for understanding how the needs of group members are met. The theoretical investigations and concepts used in this study aim to clarify these issues by attempting to recognize the particular within a broader general framework. The scope of explanation of these theoretical questions and concepts varies and includes structural or macro-sociological global aspects, as explained in Blau (1977: 26-54), deals with social events and their organizational dynamics. This macro-level analysis examines the wider social context and its structural influence on the smuggling phenomenon, in particular fuel smuggling across the eastern border, which is the focus of this study. At the same time, the focus is on understanding the social and psychological processes that lead certain categories or individuals to join marginalized groups as formulated by Howard Becker. This micro-sociological perspective addresses the complexity of the social and psychological dynamics that lead individuals to join groups involved in smuggling activities. This study falls in the field of criminal sociology, which is an aspect of social ethnography, a field of knowledge mainly dedicated to the study of phenomena in historical contexts. Contrary to certain theories that consider criminal behavior as a simple act of brutality treated at the individual level, this study is based on the paradigm of the normative model which has become predominant since the 1960s and is perceived as social behavior.

In addition, specific characteristics of smugglers, including their nature, socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender) considered as a variable in the study, will be the subject of in-depth analysis. This in-depth investigation seeks to provide a clear understanding of the various dimensions of criminal behaviour, in particular smuggling. Just as important is the analysis of cultural characteristics that shed light on prevalent stereotypical perceptions within society regarding criminal behavior, in particular smuggling. This analysis aims to identify cultural stereotypes influencing criminal behavior and contributing to the social stigmatization of smugglers within their cultural milieu. In addition, the study seeks to identify the subculture inherent in smugglers, constituting additional lens of analysis within the dysfunctional social structure. Adopting a functionalist perspective, this involves recognizing cohesive groups with their distinct customs, traditions and regulated practices, forming a subcultural context.

2. Methodology

The researcher employed an ethnographic method to reveal the contemporary context of cross-border smuggling and to complete the existential analysis of these groups, in particular

the smugglers' groups. The aim is to determine their socio-demographic characteristics, the nature of interactions between group members, and between them and individuals in society. This approach also aims to understand how smugglers perceive themselves and others as well as the specific language used in interactions with members of society (Djaber, 2016: 67).

The use of the ethnographic approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the methods and daily lifestyles within a society or group (Abouzid, 1978: 81). This encompasses knowledge of its members, their beliefs, values, behaviors and the results of their actions as well as an exploration of how they interact with these productions. This understanding is made possible by participant observation where the researcher immerses himself in the natural setting of life, as emphasized by Kaufman (1996: 112). The ethnographic approach ensures a rich, contextualized exploration of the subject since this research methodology is based on detailed observation and analysis of a subject emphasizing the meaning of words and phrases rather than relying on numerical data and statistical tables. This research method depends on the participation of the various stakeholders underlining the need to present their perspectives in a comprehensive and dynamic way. Consequently, the progression of the research and its investigations does not derive from the researcher's personal vision, culture or intellectual thoughts. On the contrary, the ethnographic researcher is expected to enter the field of study with an open cultural and cognitive mindset. His/her mission involves total immersion in the society studied through participant observation, actively exploring and documenting detailed descriptions of their observations, while gathering opinions, ideas, suggestions and perspectives from the field of study (Hamel, 2003: 84).

Using the ethnographic method, the process of gathering and interpreting information differs from the approach adopted in quantitative research. This approach is based on four distinct phases forming a coherent whole. The first phase focuses on gathering information followed by the organization and categorization of this data in the second phase. The third phase involves presenting the information, summarizing it and structuring it in the form of matrices and key concepts. The final phase focuses on extracting and presenting the results while verifying their coherence all within the adaptable framework inherent in the ethnographic method.

This adaptability gives the researcher the latitude to adjust the plan and design of the study, and even to revise his or her research questions based on observations in the field. Immersion, in particular, has the potential to inspire the formulation of new, more meaningful research questions than those initially envisaged (Diop, 2018: 140-157).

To achieve the goals of understanding the fundamental factors influencing social behavior, and discerning the aims and intentions behind them, the ethnographic researcher needs to establish a special social connection with the participants, gaining their trust and cooperation. This is achieved through the use of less formal methodologies such as participant observation, immersion and full integration into the daily lives of the groups studied.

Ethnographic research places the researcher as the primary instrument of information gathering adopting a holistic perspective on social behaviors and practices in the context of social, cultural, economic, political and organizational dimensions (Dominique, 1996: 177-179).

The study was carried out in the district of Tebessa which has deliberately been chosen for its distinctive features pertaining to the research subject and the problem studied. Located on Algeria's eastern border. This district which is a long history of smuggling problems, making it a valuable and relevant field worth studying. Significantly, the researcher resides in the region. This facilitates direct and effective communication on the spot (Angers, 2004: 197). The researcher's intimate familiarity with the study, acquired through day-to-day experiences, proves advantageous, especially as smuggling is almost ingrained as a norm in the region and is perceived as a legitimate practice.

Initially, the research focuses on service stations, recognized as centers where many smuggling groups converge. This approach allows the researcher to see first-hand the interactions of these groups without introducing distortions or alterations to reality (Stéphane,

1997: 288). It is important to point out that certain areas of the city may be perceived as restricted or off-limits to foreigners. Even security forces face challenges in gaining access to these high-risk areas.

The researcher conducted interviews and observations in the meeting places of smuggling communities to understand their diverse characteristics and perspectives (Beaud, 2010: 64). Likewise, conducting interviews with a range of community members, who represent other stakeholders in the phenomenon, helps to understand the stereotypes they hold about these deviant groups, particularly with regard to social characteristics such as place of residence, place of birth, age, level of education, occupation, overall social status, family type, size, etc.

The identification of cultural characteristics requires the analysis of features such as morality, predominant values, different behaviors, law, order, social control, common social customs, as well as the presence of traditions, values, customs, legal consciousness, morality, dominant subcultures and economic attributes (poverty, wealth, standard of living, type of housing, type of neighborhood, etc.). (Lebon, 1996: 123). In addition, the researcher relies on participant observation, a primary data-gathering tool in the study of individuals and human groups. Which is considered as of the most widespread and effective methods, particularly in ethnographic research. It is essential to recognize that interviewing is not a simple task; rather, it is a scientific and technical manner (Kaufman, 1996: 123).

The data of the study were collected through participant observation involving the researcher's active involvement in specific aspects of the smuggling communities' daily lives. Observations were carried out while these individuals were present at fuel distribution stations. The latter are locations for the subsequent discreet transport of fuel across the eastern border into Tunisia. In addition, interviews were conducted with various actors in the smuggling business.

In examining the groups involved in smuggling, conventional data collection techniques in the social sciences (Mohamed, 1983: 365), such as the use of statistical data or random opinion surveys, do not provide an accurate representation of the actual number of groups engaged in smuggling activities. The relations these groups maintain with society as a whole are truly indicative of a subculture at odds with the dominant culture in society (Abdelghani, 2006: 146). A predominant tendency among most smugglers is a lack of trust in representatives of the dominant society. This prompts them not to divulge their secrets and experiences to outsiders seeking information on the smuggling phenomenon.

When collecting data on the lives of individuals residing in a community and involved in competing illicit activities, ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, developed particularly in cultural anthropology since the 1920s (El Kayal, 1997: 37), are considered superior to quantitative methodologies. These methods require the building of solid relationships based on trust before plunging into personal and potentially sensitive investigations, ensuring the acquisition of authentic and meaningful responses (Kaufman, 1996: 129).

The ethnographer generally immerses himself in the communities he/she wishes to study establishing organic and lasting relationships with the individuals involved to ensure the acquisition of reliable data. The ethnographer transcends the principles of positivist studies by cultivating an "intimate" relationship (Tietze, 1997: 188) with the individuals and, consequently, with the object of study.

In pursuit of the predefined objectives, the researcher spent whole days at fuel distribution stations, fuel storage sites and in border areas of eastern Algeria such as Bouchebka, El Meridj, Morsot and Bir El Ater. This involved careful observation of the activities of smuggling groups.

Smugglers make multiple trips to Tunisia, the other party involved in this criminal activity. Interviews were conducted with guides known as "Eclaireurs". These are providing

smugglers with information on road conditions night and day, working for the smugglers in exchange for wages. Their mission is to monitor the movements of border guard teams. Along the various tracks and trails, the smugglers enlist the support of shepherds and unemployed young people, while on the roads. These logistical groups are equipped with cell phones with two SIM cards, one Tunisian and one Algerian. It should be noted that Algerian border guards often encounter obstacles from local residents.

Smuggling in the district of Tebessa is full of contradictions (Becquet, 1959: 104). Some of the people involved in this activity hold official positions and are paradoxically involved in smuggling. They use their personal vehicles to obtain fuel, which they then sell to smuggling chiefs. These leaders play a crucial role in collecting and storing the fuel in tanks and containers. Following this stage, other elements take charge of transporting these quantities of fuel to the border, where they are smuggled into Tunisia.

3. Results

Our study has come to conclude:

The perceptible correlation between declining economic prosperity within the social structure and the prevalence of fuel smuggling in the district of Tebessa.

High unemployment rates associated with a lack of employment opportunities prevalent in society in the district of Tebessa, particularly in border areas far from urban centers, specifically in rural areas and remote conscience isolated regions.

The weakness of religious morality, and the lack of respect for moral values in their formative association with fuel-smuggling communities in the city of Tebessa.

The considerable impact of geographical situations, in particular proximity to the Tunisian border, in increasing smuggling activities in areas close to the district of Tebessa.

The emergence of a new affluent social class justifying their aspirations to profit from the prevailing situation, both materially and socially, generally coming from a social background initially far removed from "deviance", has intensified the influence of notable financial assets on smuggling dynamics. This trend should assert a form of material authority over marginalized social classes driven by the desire to improve their economic situation. This is particularly remarkable given the substantial price differentials between subsidized fuel in Algeria and the comparatively high prices prevailing in Tunisia.

The carelessness of Tunisia's internal security forces in the face of fuel smuggling activities is visible, not least in the illegal sale of Algerian fuel along the arterial roads, particularly near border centers.

A widespread acceptance of the culture of fuel smuggling, encompassing both inbound and outbound activities, and sometimes its explicit approval, underlines the persistence of this phenomenon over time in the district of Tebessa.

The monopolization observed in specific fuel storage locations by wealthy barons with extensive networks positions them as crucial intermediaries in smuggling efforts for a variety of reasons.

The emergence of informal communications infrastructure and the adoption of a specific language and subculture within the smuggling community facilitates its integration in society, characterized by a "singularity" that defies established norms and societal conventions.

Legislative and security frameworks have proved insufficient to effectively eradicate, even partially, the phenomenon of fuel smuggling in border regions, particularly in the district of Tebessa where this illicit practice persists despite the considerable risks involved.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results:

The correlation between declining economic status and the proliferation of fuel smuggling perfectly illustrates Robert Merton's theory of anomie (N'Gahane, 2019: 171-175). According to Merton's theory of anomie and deviance, when social structure significantly impedes access to cultural goals through institutional means, it engenders deviant innovation.

Faced with a dearth of legitimate economic opportunities, individuals' resort to contraband as a means of achieving economic success.

The monopolization of fuel storage sites by a new affluent social class, and the emergence of a new prosperous group through smuggling, aligns with conflict theory (Alessandro, 1982: 1-22). This theoretical perspective emphasizes the concentration of power and economic resources in the hands of an elite, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and driving the underprivileged classes to engage in deviant activities in order to survive.

The weakness or lack of religious morality and the fragility of moral references, combined with an undercurrent of dominant culture within smuggling communities, serve as illustrations for Sutherland's theory of differential association (Dhanagare, 1963). This theory maintains that deviant behavior is acquired within intimate groups, where exposure to values conducive to deviance outweighs conformist influences.

The laxity shown by the authorities and the permeability of social acceptance of contraband activities echo social control theory (Hirshi, 2015: 289-305). This theoretical framework suggests that deviance emerges when the social bonds that normally encourage respect for social norms are weakened or absent. In the context of Tebessa, the widespread acceptance of smuggling and the ineffectiveness of institutional control mechanisms appear to diminish the obstacles to engagement in illicit activities.

The inadequacy of legislative and security frameworks to eradicate the smuggling phenomenon, as well as the stigmatization and isolation of smugglers, can be examined through labeling theory (Lacaze, 2008: 183-199). This perspective sees deviance as a consequence of social labels applied to individuals, who internalize these labels and then act in accordance with them. The failure of punitive measures may unintentionally reinforce deviant identities within border communities.

5. Conclusion

This socio-ethnographic analysis of smuggling in the Tebessa region, focusing on a specific group, has brought to light dimensions often neglected in statistical surveys, notably the critical historical aspects of social characteristics. This methodological approach facilitated appreciation of the constructive role of cross-border smuggling, amalgamating various previously identified dimensions which, when synthesized, contribute to the development of a comprehensive and culturally grounded analytical framework in a dynamic historical perspective for both individuals and social phenomena.

The study revealed that smuggling activities, particularly fuel trafficking in the eastern region of Tebessa, transcend mere survey subjects and serve as significant indicators and dimensions for the local society under examination. The main conclusions can be summarized as follows:

The phenomenon is undergoing both quantitative and qualitative historical changes, influenced by multiple factors, including security considerations.

There is a dynamic interplay between various forces impacting on the fundamental family unit of society in an evolving historical context, subsequently influencing the phenomenon of fuel smuggling.

Deviant culture and subcultures, an integral part of this societal milieu, help shape deviant patterns in the region, suggesting a degree of uniformity across diverse cultural contexts and signifying the enduring nature of these behaviors.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of fuel smuggling is linked to fundamental societal forces and cannot be examined in isolation. This interaction encompasses not only objective structural elements, but also cognitive constructs that exert an influence on these behaviors. Historical phenomena, such as ancestral beliefs, religious doctrines, myths, etc., contribute to the creation of conflicts and a perceptible void in subsequent generations, who internalize and manifest these influences through behavior in their reality.

The historical context is the main obstacle to conceptualizing and defining these phenomena in relation to reality, especially when it comes to studies at the individual level, as in the case of clinical analyses in criminology. Separating the phenomenon from its historical context poses a considerable challenge, as such an abstraction risk dehumanizing it. History is intrinsically linked to humanity, a species that has established structural norms and regulations which then evolve into inevitable binding forces.

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