

APRIL 2021

“GEN PLIS CHEF SOU LANME A PASE LATE A ”*

The ecosystem of actors and the dynamics
at the margins of legality

* « There are more heads in the sea than on land »



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CONTEXTUALIZATION

As part of the project “Supporting vulnerable migrants in Haiti through improved protection”, funded by the European Commission’s Directorate General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has implemented a pilot maritime border monitoring activity entitled “Blue Border Monitoring”. In this framework, IOM seeks to examine and understand the migration flows observed in the North and North-West departments to establish migration trends and better understand the drivers of migration. This study provides information on observed migration flows, types of movements, the socio-economic profile of migrants as well as their main vulnerabilities, in order to better guide the protection interventions of IOM and its partners.

This document presents the main characteristics of the trafficking networks that organize the clandestine transport of Haitian migrants to foreign destinations. The information provided below is based on the results obtained from field analysis through interviews with key informants, such as representatives of State institutions, civil society leaders and actors involved in the organization of this type of trip (migrants, boat captains, sailors, canvassers, etc.). This study was conducted in the North (Cap-Haitien, Limbé, Limonade) and North-West (Port-de-Paix, Jean-Rabel, Saint-Louis-du-Nord, Anse-à-Foleur) departments between March 1 and April 31, 2021.

The data collected allowed us to (i) understand the structure behind this type of trip; (ii) describe the role of each actor involved in the chain; (iii) present the different types of boats used and the means of navigation; (iv) estimate the prices and costs of a trip and the distribution of profits.

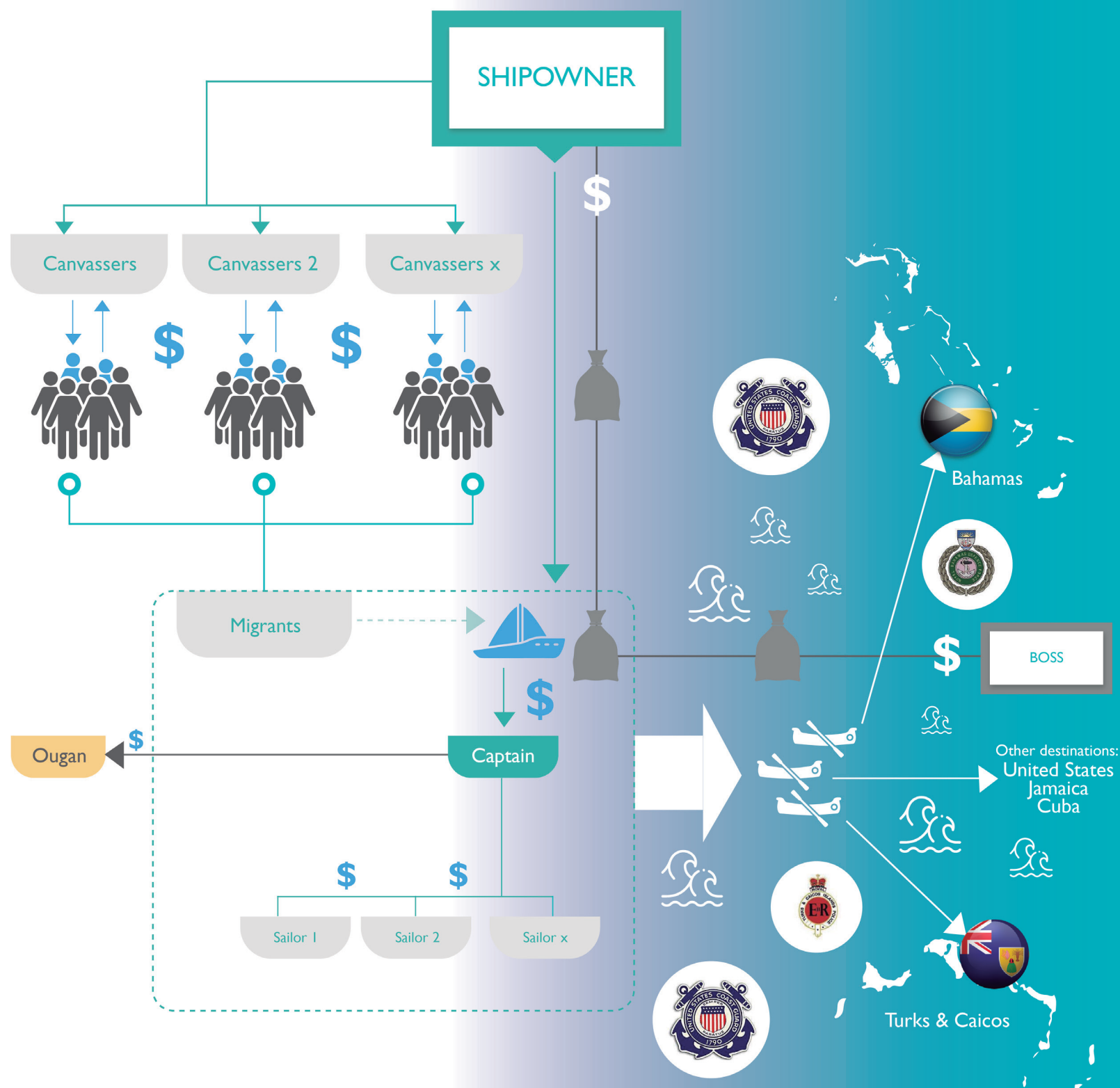
These results are to be considered as “trends” and not as factual data.

THE ECOSYSTEM OF ACTORS ON THE FRINGE OF THE LAW

The chain of actors involved in organizing this type of irregular travel by sea can be classified as a transnationally structured trafficking network. In some cases, the heads of the operation live outside of Haiti. The organization relies on local contacts who manage the network at the local level, especially the logistics and the recruitment of candidates for irregular travel.



Apart from the “clients” themselves, six main types of actors interact in the informal organization of boat migration: (i) the **shipowner** who finances the construction or acquisition of the boat; (ii) the chain of **canvassers** who look for potential candidates for departure; (iii) the **captain** who leads the embarkation, accompanied by his crew; (iv) the **sailors** who make up the crew; and (v) the vodou priest who interprets the supernatural signs that are conducive to (or not) the voyage in preparation. Finally, (vi) the **boss** intervenes rarely and very discreetly.





SHIPOWNER

“Amatè a pa konnen ayen nan lanmè a, li pa menm konnen naje”

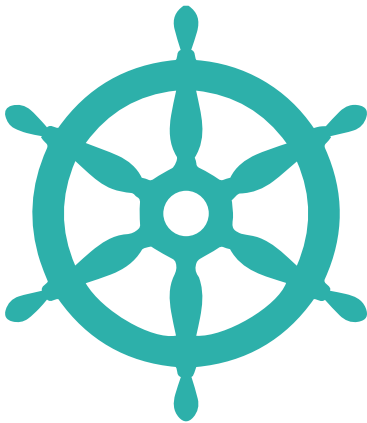
[The shipowner knows nothing about the sea, he can't even swim!]

(Maccene, captain - Port-de-Paix, 2021)

L'Amatè, in Creole, is the main organizer of the trip. The entire chain actors depends on him. The professionalism and care he puts into the choice of his captain, the quality of the boat's equipment and the services offered during the crossing, make the reputation of the shipowner.

His business is based on the quality of the trips he offers - *vwayaj korek* (correct trip) - and on the percentage of trips that reach their destination - *vwayaj siksè* (successful trip).

The number of shipowners can be as many as four for a single vessel. They co-invest, share the financial risks, and pocket the profits according to the capital invested.



CAPTAIN

“Here nobody talks about human trafficking. Here the captains are considered heroes!”

(Representative of the General Directorate of Civil Protection in Port-de-Paix)

«Until now, we have never heard that a Haitian court has managed to judge and then condemn a single *kaptèn'n* batiman in charge of organizing the dangerous clandestine travels of Haitians to the Bahamas, Florida...yet, it is written that human trafficking is condemnable, and Haiti has signed international treaties and conventions.»

- Bahamas court news - <https://rezonodwes.com/2020/12/25/un-tribunal-des-bahamas-rejette-lappel-interjete-par-un-haitien-en->

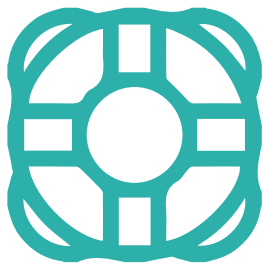
The captain is a key actor in this type of clandestine journey. The lives of hundreds of people, his reputation and his profits all depend on his experience and navigation skills.

He generally considers himself an expert navigator and a deep connoisseur of the waters over which he sails. Even if the means he uses are not technologically advanced (mainly compass, and GPS at best), he trusts his interpretation of the elements (winds, tides, stars and sea floor) and the goodness of the *Lwa* (Haitian vodou deities).

The captain is recruited directly by the shipowner who entrusts him with the boat, its maintenance and its crew, in addition to the passengers. This is why the selection of the captain is crucial.

The captain is also the one who risks the most during clandestine voyages:

- It can happen that the boat sinks before reaching its destination and in this case, he will not be paid for the journey made;
- He may come across the coast guard and if they identify him as the captain, they will arrest him for human trafficking and violation of maritime borders. He risks several years in prison and heavy fines;
- And finally, he can lose his life in various maritime accidents.



SAILOR

Sailors are selected by the captain (or in some cases by the shipowner). Generally, the crew is composed of a captain and three to six sailors depending on the size of the boat and the number of passengers. Sailors are selected for their experience at sea but also for their relationship with the shipowner or the captain.

Their main tasks are as follows:

- Ensure order and security throughout the journey;
- Control passengers at the time of boarding to prevent the introduction of weapons or dangerous objects;
- Limit and calm conflicts;
- Protect the most vulnerable passengers;
- Distribute and ration food and water;
- Rescue passengers who fall ill;
- Ensure a minimum of hygiene in the boat and among the passengers;
- Assist the captain in the most complicated maneuvers and in the maintenance of the boat.



CANVASSERS

“Everyone knows them, even the government!”

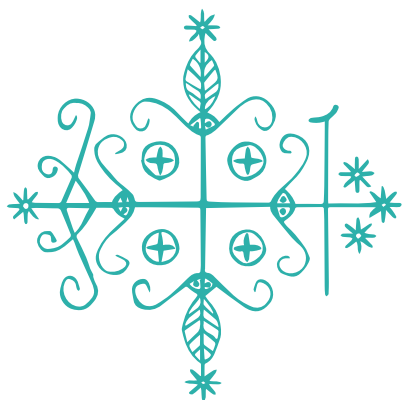
(Cit. Head of the local office of the Brigade of Protection for Minors)

The *demachè*, in Creole, is the commercial agent of the network.

The chain of canvassers is infinite and covers the whole country. They are all over the country, and are present in all departments. To get in touch with them is very easy.

In the past, the same canvassers used to travel all over the country by improvised means, convincing potential candidates to leave by various stratagems.

Today, communication networks facilitate their work and, very often, it is the candidates themselves who contact the intermediary through word of mouth or simply by telephone. When professional canvassers offer their services, they must entice potential migrants to commit to paying the highest price for a safe journey. This involves touting the number of successful trips, vouching for the experience and expertise of the captain, the quality of the vessel and the reputation of the owner... and, without doubt, testifying to the effectiveness of the *djab* (Vodou spirit) with whom their *Ougan* has made a personalized contract to protect and guide the trip and the travelers, which is essential for a successful crossing.



OUGAN

“It is the Ougan who sets the date of the expedition and blesses the boat in the name of the spirits”

(Jamaica, Boat Captain. Port-de-Paix, 2021)

The *Ougan*, the highest priestly figure of the Vodou religion, intermediary between the human and the super-human, plays a fundamental role in the organization of the voyage.

Without the will expressed by the *lwa* through the ougan, the captain does not set sail.

Before the voyage, the captain consults, during several sessions, the trusted Ougan who builds the program of the voyage on the basis of the advice and suggestions of the *Mèt Agwe* (Vodou deity, protector of the sea).



BOSS

“There is someone you don’t see and don’t know who is organizing all this”

(Head of the Directorate for Immigration and Emigration (DIE) in Port-de-Paix)

These very lucrative clandestine businesses sometimes take on an industrial dimension of a transnational nature: it is possible that the organization of trips is prepared in coordination between the Boss (Chief) in Haiti and the Boss abroad (mainly in the Bahamas and Miami). Generally the figure of the Boss appears when the main business by sea does not consist in the transport of irregular migrants but in the trafficking of illegal goods.


















Irregular migration by sea through human trafficking, although violating human rights and refugee law, is used as a cover for the transport of narcotic substances such as marijuana (from Jamaica) and/or cocaine (from Colombia) to the United States, via Haiti and the Bahamas.

The identity of the boss as well as that of the shipowner is not public. Even the captain does not know the boss’ real name and it may even be in his best interest not to know.

THE BOATS

Legend:

- ✓ = Used
- ✗ = Not used
- = Possibly used

Type of boat	Characteristics	Navigation techniques	Main destinations	Average duration of the trip
 <p>Sailing boat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Material: wood Average length : 40 feet Propulsion: sail Average manufacturing cost : 6 000 USD Average rated capacity: 15 people Average capacity used: 100 people Manufacturing location: Haiti Average fare per passenger: 350 USD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compass ✓ GPS ✗ Radar ✗ Telephone ---- Satellite radio ✗ Natural elements ✓✓ Mystical elements ✓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Bahamas (85%)  • Turks & Caicos (10%)  • USA (5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 2 to 6 days From 2 to 3 days From 5 to 7 days
 <p>Motor Vessel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Material: wood covered with fiberglass Average length: 30 feet Propulsion: 45HP engine Average manufacturing cost: 6 000 USD Average rated capacity: 10 people Average capacity used: 80 people Manufacturing location: Haiti Average fare per passenger: 450 USD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compass ✓ GPS ✓ Radar ✗ Telephone ---- Satellite radio ---- Natural elements ---- Mystical elements ✓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Bahamas (60%)  • Turks & Caicos (33%)  • USA (7%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 5 to 10 hours 2 days 3 days
 <p>Yacht</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Material: fiberglass Average length: 17 feet Propulsion: motor Average manufacturing cost: 12 000 USD Average rated capacity: 7 persons Average capacity used: 30 persons Manufacturing location: USA/Bahamas Average fare per passenger: \$1,500 USD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compass ✓ GPS ✓✓ Radar ---- Telephone ✓ Satellite radio ✓✓ Natural elements ---- Mystical elements ✓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Bahamas (50%)  • Turks & Caicos (25%)  • USA (25%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 hours 5 hours 13 hours
 <p>Cargo</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compass ✓ GPS ✓ Radar ✓✓ Telephone ✓✓ Satellite radio ✓✓ Natural elements ---- Mystical elements ✓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Bahamas (25%)  • Turks & Caicos (1%)  • USA (50%)  • Others (24%) 	

The information and figures in this table are estimates based on directed interviews with key stakeholders (during the course of the study).



SAILING BOAT

The *batyman*, in Creole, is a type of wooden boat rigged with a lateen sail and a jib, assembled in Haiti along the north and northwest coast. The manufacturing price varies according to the dimensions from 1,000 to 10,000 USD, from 30 to 90 feet. It can carry up to 500 passengers. The basic services are limited to the distribution of dry rations (salted crackers) and water in bags. There are never enough life jackets for everyone. Sometimes, this type of boat is equipped with a small motor in case it is impossible to take out the sail. The women sit on benches while the men sit on the ground as best they can.

Once they arrive at their destination, the captain, with the authorization of the shipowner, gives the order to sink the boat, to prevent the Coast Guards from spotting them. This type of vessel is generally not registered. In addition, this type of construction is rarely adapted to the conditions of offshore navigation.



MOTOR VESSEL

The *Chaloup*, in Creole, is a wooden and fiberglass boat made in Haiti. The boat is generally of limited dimensions: between 15 and 40 feet. It can carry up to 150 passengers and its manufacturing price is around 6,000 to 7,000 USD, depending on the size.

It generally operates with 2 outboard motors of 45 horsepower each. An estimated 150 liters of gasoline is required to reach the Turks and Caicos Islands if both motors are used at the same time. The duration of this trip is on average 7 hours and the cost of gasoline for the shipowner is around 700 USD per trip. Life jackets are often not provided.

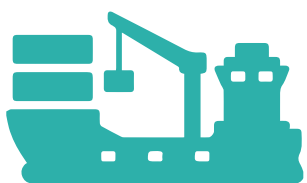


YACHT

The Yacht is an integrated motorboat, manufactured in fiberglass mainly abroad (USA/Bahamas). The price varies depending on the quality of the material used, the technology installed and the age of the boat. Generally, a yacht costs at least 8,000 USD. This type of boat is also used to transport illegal goods such as drugs (cocaine and marijuana) and firearms. The owners of these yachts are often foreigners (USA/Bahamas). The cocaine is of Colombian origin and enters Haiti via the southern coast of the country, travels overland to the north, and is then shipped to the USA via the Bahamas.

Marijuana from Jamaica is transported to Europe via the Turks and Caicos Islands. This type of boat is also used for human trafficking to maximize profits. The price of the clandestine journey is much higher than other alternatives, because of the privileged conditions, the guarantee of reaching the destination without too many obstacles and the comfort. Those interested can pay up to 3,500 USD. Usually the boat is legally registered.





CARGO

The Cargo, is another means used by migrants to leave the country. Although very rare, cargo ships offer the possibility to embark up to ten passengers through irregular migration but on a boat that travels legally. The stowaways can embark from Turtle Island, secretly and without being registered. Alternatively, they can replace the sailors who have visas, passports and sailing licenses, travel on their behalf while they remain on land, and upon arriving in Miami return to the United States legally, and return the papers to the captain who will take care of returning them to the legitimate owners.

Traveling by this means can cost up to 7,000 USD (information based on interviews with key actors).

MEANS OF NAVIGATION

“Nou pa gen mwayen : Bondye pwoteje nou, lwa yo ban nou direksyon”

[We have no means: God blesses us, the lwa give us the direction]

As shown before, the means of navigation used, especially in small makeshift boats, consist of a compass and a GPS (more common in recent years). There is almost no prior consultation of the weather, maritime charts, winds or currents. The crew navigates by guiding themselves with the stars and the birds, looking at the color of the water to understand the depth of the sea floor...but mostly by consulting the spirits.

THE MYSTIC ASPECT

Haitian maritime migration and American maritime policing have emerged in tandem since the 1980s. During this period, many Haitians began to assume that migratory journeys are successful only through ritual exchanges - in particular, transactions between migrants and non-human beings who cross the sea. “Cosmographic depth, while not unique to these spaces, is made visible in the set of entities, forces, and moral sensibilities that comprise them. The cosmographic view highlights this depth, which is often rendered insignificant by the dominant bureaucratic registers of border security.” Kahn, J. S. (2019). *Islands of Sovereignty: Haitian Migration and the Borders of Empire*. United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press. Since then, travel by boat has been considered a journey entirely at the will of the Mèt Agwe, Lasyen, and Legba (the spirits who control the sea, winds, and currents). By collecting testimonies, one quickly understands that the most effective means of navigation is found in the spiritual rituals that the captain (to whom the Ougan has lent his powers) must perform during the crossing.

To guarantee success, the captain is responsible for steering the ship to its destination, managing the wind, protecting the passengers, and avoiding the surveillance of the coast guard.

This will only be possible if the advice of the Ougan (intermediary between humans and spirits) is taken literally.

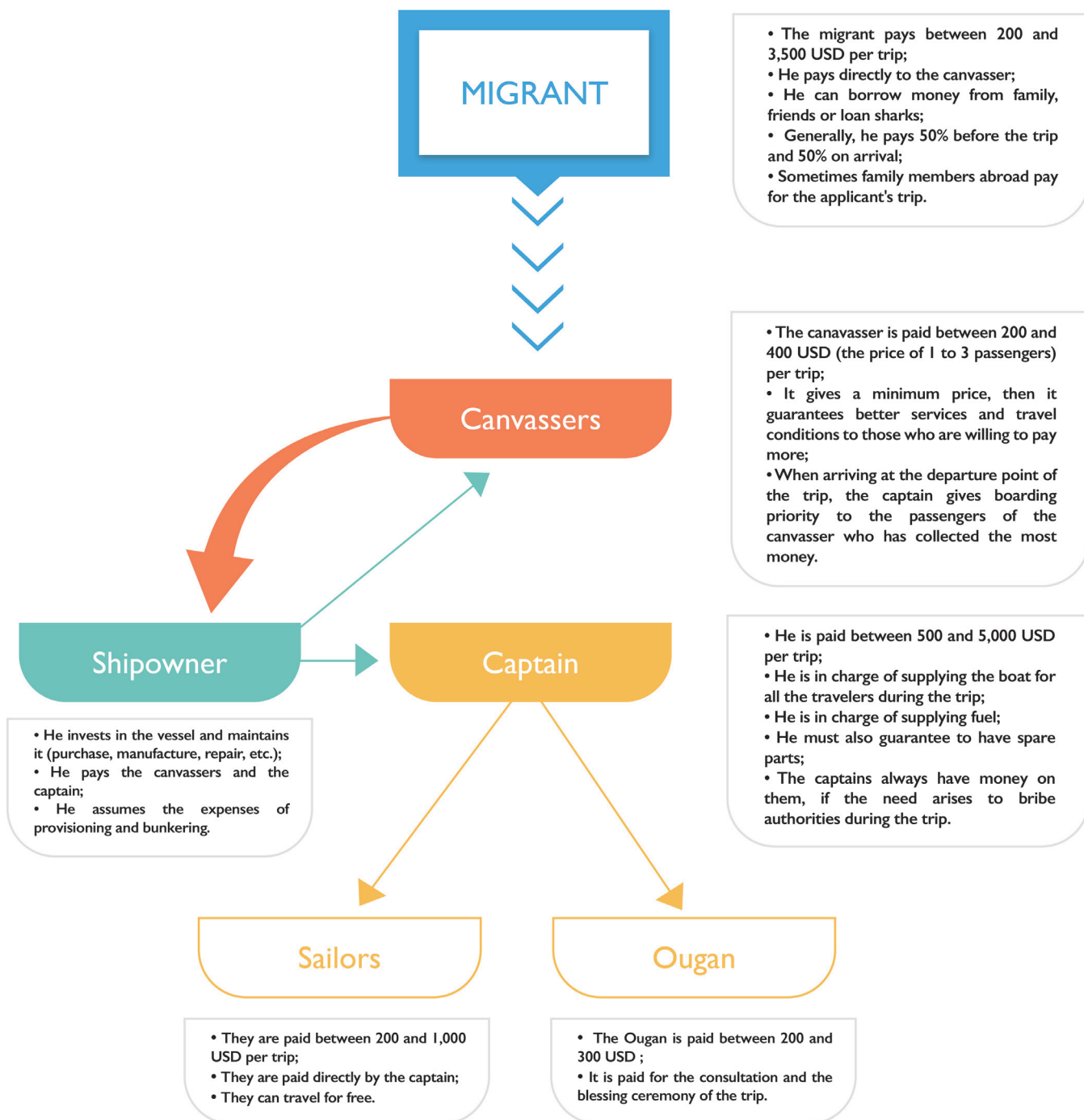
- **“Nap achte van !”** [We'll buy wind!]; through an object called a *kalbas van* [wind calabash]. Its purpose would be to magically create wind to propel the ship and stormy weather to conceal it from the Coast Guard. The verb to buy is used properly to describe the captain's obligation to make a sacrifice to the spirits as a price for receiving wind in exchange.

- **“Pijon blan”** [Dove]: This one would have the function of fixing the course of the boat and also to carry out reconnaissance of the zone to inform the captain of the position of the boat of the Coast Guard.

- **“Mouchwa”** [Tissue]: It is tied with a double knot to the mast to allow them to escape the Coast Guard, which pursues unauthorized and irregular departures. Then, when the captain sees the motorboat approaching, he slams the handkerchief on the transom, causing a sheet of water and a downpour that would make them invisible to the pursuers.

DISTRIBUTION OF PROFITS

The earnings from an irregular sea voyage vary depending on the number of passengers, the price paid per passenger, the number of crew members and the type of vessel used. However, an estimate can be made based on an average number of passengers (90) and an average price per passenger (400 USD). In total, the costs of organizing the trip must be deducted, including: the cost of purchasing or building the boat and its maintenance; the cost of personnel (canvassers, captain, sailors and crew) and the cost of food and gasoline. In conclusion, the shipowner easily arrives at net earnings of about 20,000/25,000 USD per trip.





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« Rive, arete ou mouri »

(Trad. “Arrive, get arrested or die”)



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