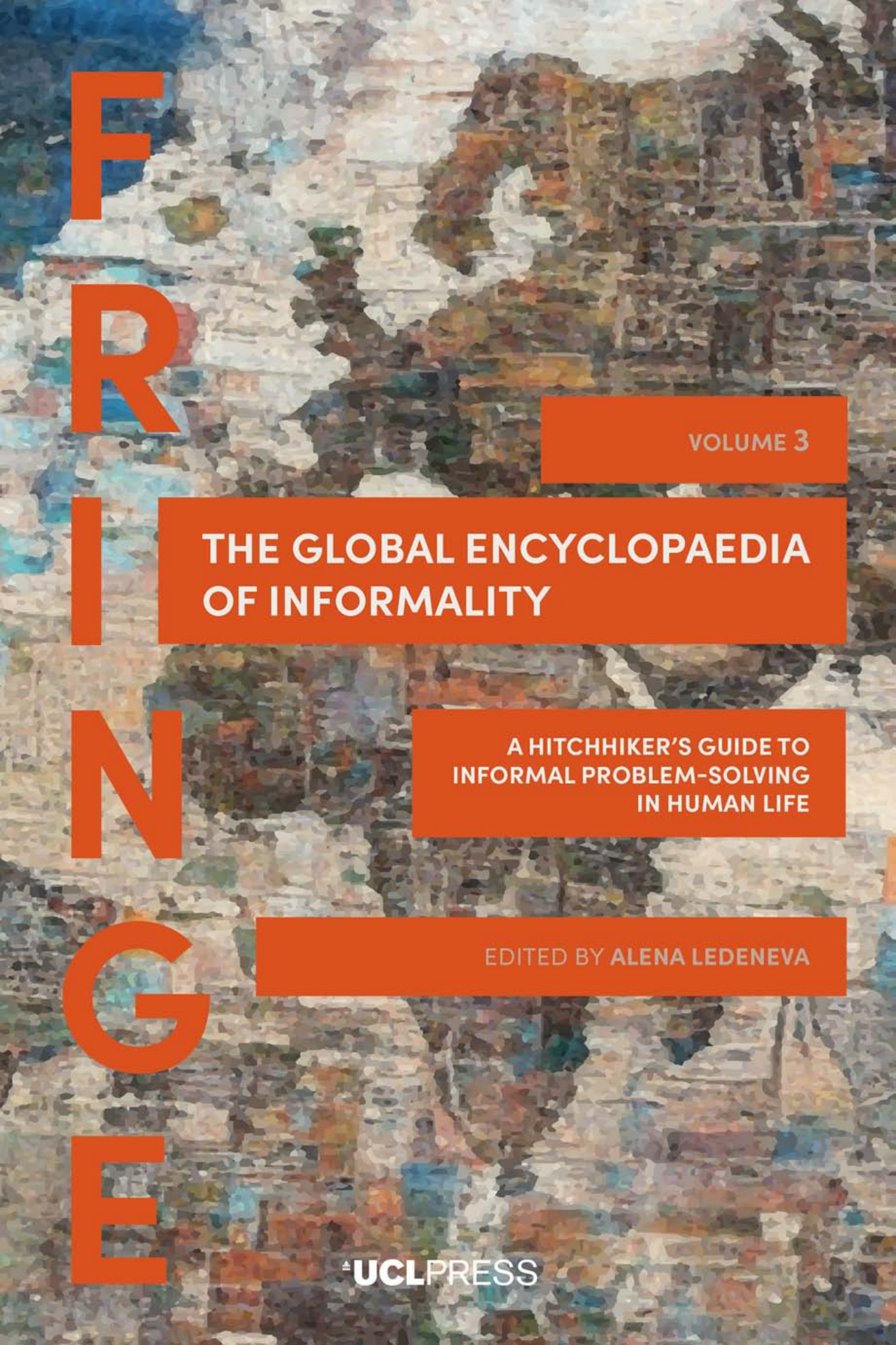

FRINGE

VOLUME 3

THE GLOBAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF INFORMALITY

A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO INFORMAL PROBLEM-SOLVING IN HUMAN LIFE

EDITED BY **ALENA LEDENEVA**

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FRINGE

Series Editors
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The FRINGE series explores the roles that complexity, ambivalence and immeasurability play in social and cultural phenomena. A cross-disciplinary initiative bringing together researchers from the humanities, social sciences and area studies, the series examines how seemingly opposed notions such as centrality and marginality, clarity and ambiguity, can shift and converge when embedded in everyday practices.

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The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality

A hitchhiker's guide to informal problem-solving in human life

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Edited by Alena Ledeneva

with

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and Malika Toqmadi

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who have entered the workforce in the host country, or those who have reinvented their careers, or others determinedly taking career breaks by choice, and what this entails for the outcome of spousal gender equality.

10.5 ***Mulas*** (Cuba)

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Mula (plural: *mulas*) in Spanish denotes a person who profits from travelling abroad and buying goods to resell informally in Cuba. *Mula* translates into English as 'mule', the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse, all known for their heavy-duty carrying ability, but also used to describe the appearance of someone travelling with heavy bags or smuggling illegal goods across the border (drug mule).

Albeit the term resonates with the concept of smuggling, *mula* in Cuba refers to neither selling drugs nor any other role in illicit cross-border activity, such as money circulation, like *hawala* in Pakistan and Bangladesh (see 5.40 Volume 1). Instead, the term has a distinct meaning associated with a nuanced set of practices that emerged under Cuban socialism characterised by material scarcity and ideological constraints, exacerbated by the US trade embargoes launched against the island from 1958 onwards. Endemic factors that nourish the variety of informal practices encompassed by the *mula* system include: (1) ineffective distribution of goods and shortages of almost every product one needs for a daily life, (2) poor quality and little diversity of circulating commodities on the official market, defined as 'frustrated consumption' (Pertierra 2007), (3) restricted possibility of travelling freely anywhere in the world, which makes it more difficult for common citizens to travel and purchase the goods for themselves and (4) lack of access to e-commerce platforms.

In the 1970s, the term *mula* was colloquially used to allude to a form of kinship-based commodity circulation. It referred to those Cubans who imported goods to the island while living abroad, bringing all kinds of products on request and selling them for profit, thereby covering their travel. This practice, common to most countries with a socialist past, is still active in Cuba. In fact, it constitutes a substantial part of the flow of goods and circulation of items between Cuba and predominantly the US. The scale of the practice is estimated at 50 per cent of remittance transfers, which also points to the strength of the

Cuban diaspora ties for the island's entrepreneurship (Hansing and Orozco 2014).

However, in the last two decades, two factors have stimulated a level of professionalisation of this informal practice. First, the flourishing of small businesses such as private restaurants, beauty salons and stores generated an increased demand for scarce materials. Second, the so-called 'Grandchildren Law' (*Ley de Nietos*) that was operational between 2007 and 2011, gave descendants up to the second generation the right to apply for Spanish citizenship and expanded the possibilities to travel (Israel 2009; Sánchez and Cuesta 2017). According to a 2009 report, during its first two years, nearly 200,000 Cuban applicants claimed this right. Thus, the term *mula* came to acquire another meaning, indicating a *broker*, a dealer and a boss (*negociante*) who moves groups and organises stays in foreign countries where the goods in high demand could be purchased cheaply.

The goods in short supply ordinarily comprise clothes, shoes, household appliances, nail polish and other beauty products. Latin American countries, such as Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela are ideal shopping destinations for both being the neighbouring countries and for granting travel rights for Cubans holding Spanish passports. Mexico and Puerto Rico, which host a considerable number of Cuban migrants, also feature a considerable presence of *mulas*. Other key destinations include Russia and Guyana, where Cubans can travel without visa restrictions, as well as Haiti and Martinique.

A complex coordination network between stores, hotels, hostels and rental houses targeting Cuban *mulas* is operational in the receiving countries. The groups of informal couriers have become the main suppliers for both small businesses and common citizens. *Negociantes* take care of the whole process, from soliciting visas, if needed, to arranging all aspects of *mulas*' stay in a foreign country, such as accommodation and transport to and from the airport. They buy or rent seasonal clothes for their team of *mulas* so that they can travel without personal items and use their luggage allowance for business instead. Being a *negociante* involves not only an investment of substantial financial capital, but also a mastery of equally substantial *confianza* (trust from familiarity), the *negociantes*' social capital.

Opinions on profiling *mulas* differ significantly. In the author's research, *mulas* tend to be women, while Cearns emphasises the role of young men, who start as *mulas* with the intention of becoming *negociantes* (Cearns 2019: 888). Similar to the discussion of gender roles in post-socialist shuttle trading around *chelnoki* (see 5.26 Volume 2), the roles that require mass border crossing involve women, while *negociantes*, the *mula*-bosses who are in charge of organising the trip and protecting the team members, are more likely to be men.

Mulas can import only a limited amount of goods into the country (up to 120 lbs each) and must pay import tax on arrival. Once imported, these goods find customers informally in all classes of society and are sold without income tax or regulation of price, quality or quantity. The connivance of the state with these forms of 'unreported economy', as the Cuban scholar Mayra Espina defines them, is paradigmatic in the way the government exploits the *mula* system (Espina 2010). By collecting heavy tariffs, the government directly profits from this system of importation. Indirectly, the government benefits from the fact that people's needs, which the government is not capable of satisfying formally, are being satisfied informally. By allowing the importation and turning a blind eye on reselling the US-embargoed goods on the shadow market, the state is able to overcome some of the limitations of the restricted access of its citizens to the international market (Russo 2018).

The international circulation of goods put in place by the *mula* system has been compared to the *kula* ring (Malinowski 1922) 'as a lens onto strategies of creating personhood and expanding social worlds through transnational circulation networks of material items' (Cearns 2019: 873). Observing these informal practices offers an opportunity to understand how peripheral economies work (Portes 1983). Indeed, the *mula* ring, as Cearns defines it, not only affects the circulation of commodities in Cuba, but also has a moderate and sometimes considerable impact on the receiving countries too, thus challenging the idea of Cuba being an isolated country. For instance, almost one thousand Cubans travel to Guyana each week, and they purchase goods for the estimated annual amount of GYDD400 million (2 million USD), producing a large impact on the local economy (Semple 2016).

Albeit the crucial role *mulas* play in imports, they are also involved in export activities. The latter include transporting artefacts and other paraphernalia connected with Santeria rituals. Santeria rituals are an Afro-Caribbean religion counting several practitioners in Cuba and in the US, Mexico and Puerto Rico, essential to the embedded nature of the Cuban informal economy (Holbraad 2004). The *mulas* also export tobacco, rum and local *artesania* (craftsmanship), such as a typical Cuban rocking chair made of wood, or wood-carved sculptures, which have come to constitute a distinctive sign in the houses of Cuban diasporas.

The ‘transnational networks’ (Tilly 2007) put in place by the *mula* system play an important role not only in the constant negotiation between the socialist state and its citizens about the value and distribution of commodities, but also in corroborating the representation of Cuban material identity outside the country.

10.6 ***Simsar, samsara*** (Middle East and North Africa)

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In Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa, *simsar* (also *samsar*, female *simsarat*) is an intermediary between the buyer and the seller (Hassan 1986: 255). *Samsar* derives from the Arabic verb *s-m-s-r*, which means ‘to act as a broker or middleman’ (Lamprakos 2017: 167). A *simsar* is an actor who ‘facilitate[s] the transactions between other actors lacking access or trust in one another’ (Marsden and Lin 1982: 202). For most, being a *simsar* is a full- or part-time occupation, albeit unregulated. The extensive contacts and abilities of a *simsar* enable transactions that would be otherwise difficult or impossible. Some *simsars* (the correct Arabic plural form is *samasira*) specialise in specific types of goods, such as cars or residential property; others deal with any type of resource. ‘[T]his kind of man possesses nothing, has nothing, he is always listening to the world around him, and his place of work is simply the outside, the city, the people. [The city] is where the business takes place, and it is definitely his place’ (Majdalani 2005: 14).

In the pre-Islamic period, traders in the region were called *al-samasira* (Hassan 1986). In the mediaeval Islamic world, *simsars* were itinerant peddlers, as evident from the documents certifying their existence in the Middle East and in North Africa in the eleventh century (Shatzmiller 1993: 96). The modern profession of *simsar* shares similarities with the commercial brokers who were present in the trading hubs around the Mediterranean and the Indian and Atlantic oceans (Rothman 2012: 36). The Italian noun *sensale* (‘a mediator or intermediary in a deal for a fee’, Hoepli 2015) and the archaic French noun *censal* (‘a broker in the Levant’, Dictionnaire Littré 1878), both deriving from the Arabic *simsar*, support this hypothesis (Schacht 1982; Cortellazzo 1989). In the Middle Ages, *samsara* (meaning ‘brokerage’, also known also as *funduq*, *khan* or *wakala*, depending on the region) was the name of the commercial venue where international and wholesale traders met local buyers