Connectivity and its Discontents: The Sahara – Second Face of the Mediterranean?

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Abstract: This paper argues that the Sahara can be approached as a region following Horden and Purcell's (2000) suggestions for the Mediterranean. Or at least, that this is true in economic and ecological terms. Internally, however, Saharan connectivity tends to be expressed in terms of genealogies, kinship and alliance, which implies moral evaluation of a kind that Horden and Purcell's model is less able to capture. This becomes especially apparent with regard to the classification of Saharan settlements. From an ecological point of view, it might be meaningless to describe them as either towns or villages. From a moral point of view and in terms of self-definition, however, their classification matters greatly, in practical as much as representational terms. Moral aspirations emerge as an integral part of human ecologies.
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> Clearly the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society. But when this is so, the temptation is to reduce the historical variety of the forms of interpretation to what are loosely called symbols and archetypes.... This reduction often happens when we find certain major forms and images and ideas persisting through periods of great change. (Williams 2017[1973]:415–16)

Fernand Braudel (1966:56) once called the Sahara 'the second face of the Mediterranean', a region that not only limited the Mediterranean to the south, but like it was marked by a history of connections. In the Sahara, however, these connections were on a 'colossal' scale that inverted the density of the Mediterranean:

> The overabundance of empty space condemns societies and economies to a perpetual movement, more onerous here than elsewhere. Man's extreme mobility, the range of pastoral movements, the old and powerful circulation of caravans, the activity of towns, everything is a reaction, an attempted reaction, to this imperative. Towns exhaust themselves. (1966:158)

Hence, Braudel continues, if abandoned villages are one of the characteristic features of 'the West', abandoned towns characterize arid regions. 'In a few years, sand and dunes cover a capital, its houses, its streets, its aqueducts'. Urbanity here is only a fleet-

ing achievement, resulting in what Braudel labels an 'anœkoumene' (1966:159). For Braudel, this was not merely a geographical observation. Towns, for him, were the indispensable motor of history. Their absence spelled not just rurality, but stagnation.

Horden and Purcell criticize Braudel's emphasis on towns, on 'roads and towns, towns and roads' (2000:89), in favour of a more agnostic approach to particular micro-regions and the way they connect with each other or 'coalesce' through time and space.[1] Nonetheless they echo Braudel's argument with regard to density: the Mediterranean, for them, is a 'zone of net introversion or involution' (Horden and Purcell 2006:735), of a particular density of features that also exist elsewhere, but here are particularly clustered and particularly connected. Conversely, they argue, the boundaries of the Mediterranean so conceived are situated where this density is reduced. The Sahara, by contrast, would appear as an area of 'net extraversion' (McDougall 2012), where communications are extensive and loose, growing in density only towards its edges. Saharan populations live by drawing on outside resources, in a permanent state of ecological disequilibrium. They are centrifugal, or rather, they have no centres, a sure sign of their intrinsic rurality (see Krause 2013:239). The recent spectacular urbanization of the area (up to seventy percent in certain areas), does not, on the face of it, contradict this assertion, as it is generally seen as an external phenomenon caused by the exploitation of mineral resources (oil, gas, uranium, iron), by state investment in industrial agriculture (Côte 2005, Pliez 2003) and by immigration related to either (Boesen and Marfaing 2007). But, as Raymond Williams reminds us in the epigraph, the opposition between rural and urban, country and city, and we might add *œkumene* and *anœkumene*, is always moral as much as historical or geographical. It is thus a distinction that changes with the perspective adopted. Seen from the inside, the Sahara is and always has been a region of cities *because* of its 'colossal' scale, which turns even the tiniest settlement into a trading post: whatever Timbuktu might really have been, it was not a village.

In this article, I start from the premise that, as I have demonstrated with greater detail elsewhere (Scheele 2012, Ch. 1), despite differences of scale and density, the Sahara can usefully be analysed by borrowing Horden and Purcell's (2000) approach in their work on the Mediterranean, at least in economic and ecological terms. As in the Mediterranean, Saharan connectivity is simply a fact of life. Once we pay attention to the ways in which this connectivity is experienced from an internal point of view, however, the emphasis shifts, from an idiom of ecological interdependence and reciprocity to one of kinship and alliance. An idiom, in other words, that is inherently moral, indicating both the need for human connectivity and the dangers inherent in it. Although Horden and Purcell point to the ambivalence of connectivity throughout, their overall approach, derived as it is from mathematics, at times runs the danger of lacking moral

1 Horden and Purcell are symptomatic of a renewed interest in the Mediterranean as a historical, socio-economic and cultural area in its own right: for more recent works by historians and anthropologists, see Greene (2010), Abulafia (2011), Ben-Yehoyada (2017), and Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot and Silverstein (eds. 2020).

and political depth (cf. Rossi 2015:9). The second half of the article demonstrates the implications of this for the applicability (or otherwise) of ideas about 'rurality' to the Sahara by revisiting the longstanding debate over the nature of Saharan settlements. Horden and Purcell are surely right that from an ecological point of view the distinction between villages and towns is meaningless, perhaps even more so in the Sahara than elsewhere. From an ethical point of view and in terms of self-definitions, however, it matters greatly, in practical as much as representational terms. Moral aspirations, in other words, emerge as an integral part of human ecologies.

The Corrupting Sands

Horden and Purcell's (2000) argument can be summarized as follows. In the Mediterranean, climatic and geographical conditions are such that seasonal instability has to be taken for granted and small areas tend to specialise. Historically, life hence depended on storage and exchange, or, in their words, on 'connectivity', a term they borrow from mathematics to denote the ways in which ecological micro-regions coalesced internally and cohered with one another across distances (2000:123). It makes no sense to think of places in isolation; rather, places (of production, habitation, and exchange) were made and maintained by regional interactions. In turn, such 'micro-regions' were not given, but developed through sustained communication. Given the high degree of mobility of Mediterranean populations and their occupational flexibility, these micro-regions were unstable over time. They could include places situated at considerable distances from one another while excluding neighbouring areas; they changed from year to year, and even from day to day. Similarities were not found in homogeneity, but rather in patterns of diversity and a high degree of adaptability. We are therefore justified in talking about the historical Mediterranean as a unity in terms of these patterns of diversity, of a 'continuum of discontinuities' (Horden and Purcell 2000:53).

Allowance made for clear differences in scale and complexity (Horden 2012), a similar set of conditions (ecological precarity, productive specialization and intensive resource management producing commercial interdependence; the organized and often violent mobility of people and commodities, of ideas and practices) can be seen at work in the Sahara. There is one caveat, however: whereas Horden and Purcell describe the Mediterranean as an area of 'net introversion', and indeed base their claims to Mediterranean specificity on this (2006:735, see also Purcell 2003), even when brought into focus, the Sahara is more probably marked by 'net extraversion' (McDougall 2012: 83; on extraversion, see Bayart 2000). While the edges of the Mediterranean are marked by slopes of declining connectivity, the density of communication increases as we near the Sahara's edges, and survival within it still depends on the ability to establish connections beyond its boundaries, however these might be conceived. Local socio-economic and political systems thus tended to straddle the boundaries of the Sahara proper;

Baier and Lovejoy (1975) speak of 'Tuareg firms', for instance, that, in the south-central Sahara, bound together productive systems situated in different ecological zones (see also Retaillé 1998; for further ethnographic examples, Vikør 1982, Fuchs 1983).

Similar logics are also at work further north. Saharan oases, necessarily created or at least maintained by human labour, are rarely self-sufficient. As the Moroccan geographer Paul Pascon noted:

> The considerable investments that are necessary to start the irrigation of the smallest plot of land, the cost of the development and the maintenance of intensive arboriculture in an extremely dry environment cannot be justified solely by their financial return nor even by general economy. Furthermore, we noticed very often that, for various reasons (political, military, demographic, and so on), oases decline long before they have finished paying back the initial capital outlay. We might thus be surprised by the optimism and the voluntarism of the founders of oases, or in other words by their naivety, if we only consider the economic benefit that they might hope for. Maybe there are other but financial rewards, other benefits, or maybe other obligations of a system within which the agricultural sector is only a necessary, albeit loss-making, part. (1984:9)

Although many parts of the Sahara are endowed with underground water tables, access to water is usually difficult, as springs or other spontaneously occurring surface water reservoirs are few, and often salty, due to high levels of surface evaporation (Bensaâd 2011). Few parts of the Sahara therefore permit permanent habitation in the absence of irrigation. Saharan mechanisms of irrigation were varied, complex and context-specific; in almost all cases, they were labour-intensive.

In the Algerian Tuwāt, for instance, a group of oases about a thousand kilometres south of Algiers where I carried out fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, irrigation had relied on underground water canals (*qanāt*, locally referred as *fagāgīr*, singular *faggāra*). In 1950, before extensive pumping of underground water reserves had reduced water-tables in the region (Bendjelid et al. 1999, Bellal et al. 2016:31), there had been more than 2,000 km of active *fagāgīr*, maintaining a population of 38,000 scattered in perhaps 150 settlements (Capot-Rey and Damade 1962). In 2015, of the 1,839 *fagāgīr* counted by local government officials, 714 were still in use (Remini 2019:287), some relying on electric pumps to make up for sinking water-tables (Idda et al. 2017).[2] In the past as now, *fagāgīr* were managed by local assemblies of stakeholders who carefully kept written records of their activities. These give us some indication of the costs involved. In 1962, the assembly of Tit in nearby Tidikelt spent 327,280 francs on the maintenance of their main *faggāra*: that is roughly € 9,000 today, for a population of perhaps three hundred. Between 1962 and 1972, they spent almost 2 million francs in

2 The available figures are highly variable. Bellal et al. (2016) speak of 1,385 *fagāgīr*, of which 909 are still in use; Idda et al. (2017) put the same figures at 2,000 and 722 respectively.

the same way.[3] If, by the 1960s and 1970s, much of this money was accounted for by salaries, for most of the history of Saharan oases, this kind of work had been the lot of slaves. The first census established by the French administration in the Tuwāt records 10 percent slaves, 43 percent *harātīn* or descendants of slaves and 47 percent 'whites'.[4] In certain *qsūr*, especially those with extensive irrigation and gardens, the proportion of 'blacks' reached almost 70 percent.[5] Unreliable though these figures are, they give an impression of scale; they also indicate the region's longstanding integration into trans-regional networks of predation and exchange, without which life in these areas would quite simply not have been possible. If, in relation to the Mediterranean, Horden and Purcell (2006:738) speak of 'the basic engagement of the primary producer with maritime connectivity', here the primary producer him- or herself was produced by (trans-)Saharan connectivity.

Despite all these efforts, as Pascon further noted, oases rarely seemed to have paid back the initial outlay. Most colonial and pre-colonial descriptions concur that local resources on their own were rarely sufficient to feed the local population (see, for instance, Martin 1908:306–8). This was already the case much earlier, at least according to the fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battūta:

> Then we arrived at Būda, which is one of the biggest villages of Tuwāt. Its land consists of salt and salt-pans. It has many dates which are not good … There is no cultivation there nor butter nor oil. Oil is only imported to it from the land of the Maghrib. The food of its people is dates and locusts. These are abundant with them; they store them as dates are stored and use them for food. (in Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:304)

More commonly, oasis dwellers relied on exchanges with pastoral nomads who bartered cereals obtained either near the Mediterranean or in the Sahel for dates and salt. As the Sahara is mostly too arid to allow for pastoral autarky of any kind, neither pastoral nor horticultural communities could survive independently. As a result, most Saharan trade, in terms both of bulk and value, was concerned with the basic exchange of pastoral produce against grain grown at the edges of the Sahara, and of grain exchanged for dates by nomadic pastoralists as part of their seasonal movements to the Saharan oases (Lovejoy 1984). Were these exchanges to fail (as seems to have happened in Būda at the time of Ibn Battūta's visit), people in the oases were left to starve, 'attempting to survive by hunting wild game in the desert', as Martin (1908:383) put it, apparently

3 According to the notebook of the assembly (*sijill al-jamā'a*) of Tit, courtesy of 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Karīm. This document is discussed in more detail in Scheele (2012, Ch. 5).

4 For descriptions of these categories, their link with labour and property relations, and their contemporary legacy in Algeria and elsewhere, see Granier (1980), Ruf (2000), and Ilahiane (2001).

5 'Population Census of the Touat', 1911, kept in the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, box 23H91.

without irony, after such exchanges were interrupted in the early twentieth century by the French military conquest.

Regional Connectivities

As a result, boundaries between 'lifestyles' were labile, and conversions from one to another were common. 'In the Shāti', writes Despois (1946:192) of the northernmost valley in the Fazzān (now in southern Libya), nomadic families 'often have such an intimate relationship with oasis dwellers that it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other'. Throughout the Sahara, sedentarists have long seized any possible opportunity to become nomadic, while pastoralists, grown wealthy through husbandry and trade, might well decide to finish their days in the comfort of urban living or renounce their pastoral ways for religious reasons (Bonte 2000, Cleaveland 2002). These blurred boundaries were reflected in property relations, as oases often acted as sites of investment for traders and pastoralists. In Ghāt, described by Eldblom (1968) in the 1960s, 80% of water was owned by Arab traders who resided elsewhere; in southern Algeria, traders belonging to the nomadic Awlād Sīdi Shaykh or Shaʿanba invested their profits in livestock, but also in water-rights in extensive palm gardens in southern Algeria and northern Mali. If in the Mediterranean hinterlands tended to stretch far and wide at times of extreme scarcity (Horden and Purcell 2000:113), in the Sahara, where extreme scarcity was the norm, hinterlands were always both extensive and fragmented. They could cross ecological, linguistic and political boundaries and, in the absence of central political powers, tended to be mediated either through property rights or marital alliances or both (Baroin 1986). And as in Horden and Purcell's Mediterranean, given the shifting and decentralized nature of exchange networks, central-place-theory contains little information of how these 'fragmented hinterlands' were internally structured. They are perhaps best thought of as regions of mutual dependence that covered distances corresponding to regular seasonal migration, or to ordinary caravan travel that put neither the travellers nor his camels' lives at risk and allowed for regular exchanges and the establishment of lasting social ties. Most ethnographies of pastoralist groups in the Sahara can be read as detailed descriptions of such fragmented 'hinterlands' and their changes over time (for instance, Bernus 1970, Spittler 1993, Grémont 2010).

Trans-Saharan trade was grafted on to this underlying infrastructure, but it was only one aspect of complex and far-reaching patterns of interdependence. The two forms of trade were, moreover, mutually dependent, to the point where distinctions between them are often difficult to make. On the one hand, specialized trans-Saharan traders were not necessarily primarily concerned with trans-Saharan goods (McDougall 2005). On the other, the fact that certain goods eventually crossed the Sahara does not always indicate the presence of trans-Saharan traders, as nomadic pastoralists, mostly preoccupied with procuring good pastures and exchanging dates for grain for

their own supplies, always also had some room for 'perfume, knick-knacks, jewellery, coffee, tobacco, cloths, ostrich feathers, incense and musk', which they peddled in the outlying Saharan settlements (Geoffroy 1887), thereby keeping transport costs low, or rather unaccounted for. Until the 1940s, when virtually all transport in the Sahara relied on pack animals, this regional structure of trans-Saharan trade is easily explained with reference to technical constraints: camels were bred as regional specialists and rarely crossed the Sahara in a straight line, but rather travelled from one oasis belt to the next. Trans-Saharan traders, who rarely owned their own pack animals, thus had to subcontract with regional pastoralists, changing their suppliers from one region to the next. Today, as most Saharan trade is carried by truck or jeep, these technical constraints have disappeared. The underlying regional patterns nonetheless persist, as, in a context where most Saharan trade has become illegal or at least extra-legal, their social and family connectivity provides traders with the necessary infrastructure and ensures their safety (for concrete ethnographic examples of this, see Clanet 2004, Scheele 2009, Kohl 2013).

Given this priority of social over technical constraints, it is not surprising that local emphasis is often placed on the movement of people rather than on the exchange of goods. Local history tends to be subsumed in genealogies (*tawārīkh*, singular *ta'rīkh*, the standard Arabic translation of which is 'history'). Genealogies, in turn, are recitals of past travel, through which known ancestors connect living people to others, and through them, to particular places, thereby mapping areas of mobility and social familiarity. Genealogies, however, are intrinsically ambivalent: although they imply radical equality (we are all descendants of the same person), they also describe a region-wide regime of inequality and exclusion (some people have more prestigious genealogies than others, or are better connected to them; others have ties only through the female line; others, like slaves, have none: El Hamel 2013). If, in other words, it is necessary to bind one's self to others and to stretch one's claims to relatedness as far as possible, not all relations are of equal moral worth (Bonte 1987). Marital alliances are fraught with risk. Decisions of reach versus containment constantly have to be made. Worse, in many cases, they can be made by others. Isolation is not an option, but excessive connectivity might result in loss: 'loss of blood, rank, status, even identity' (Caratini 1995:41). Menfolk sent out to trade might never come back, allured by wives taken elsewhere; children born to such unions might quite simply be 'out of control'; in-laws are always a danger, as they disrupt distinctions between here and there, inside and outside, public and private.

Witness, for instance, the following account, provided in 2008 by the now adult son of a prominent Algerian trader:

> My father was travelling along the road that then still went via Tabankort and then Bourem [in northern Mali], and he stopped in a camp, and it was there that a woman bewitched him. Real potent witchcraft: you know what the women are like in Mali. From one day to the next he forgot everything about us, his wife and

> children, and just lived with them in tents, tending his flock and drinking milk: he spent seven years like that, tending his flocks and drinking milk. And then one day suddenly, he woke up in the morning and remembered us, and he ran away. He met a cousin in Gao who brought him back: I still remember the day when he came back as if it was yesterday. We were living in Adrar in the house you know, I was coming back from school, and everybody was saying 'he has come back! He has come back!' You couldn't get through to the door, so many people were waiting outside to have a look – and there he was, as if nothing had happened… And then he set off again, but without disappearing again; but my mother was always fretting. We had been very poor while he was away, no money, nothing. He died when I was still very young, on the road. He must have been forty or so, not more.

Conversely, trading families live with the constant possibility that unknown children born to Malian or Nigerien mothers might one day turn up on their doorstep. Property similarly becomes vulnerable when left to the fickle marital choices of young mobile traders, thereby turning strangers into kin with claims to inheritance backed by Islamic law. The problem, here, is not so much 'hybridity' or 'métissage' (which is a fact of life), but rather the difficulty of maintaining difference and keeping things, wealth and people within bounds.

The City and the *Bādiya*

From the inside, then, Saharan connectivity is often expressed in terms of family or genealogical connections. And here as elsewhere, expressions of kin ties are never just that, but always also claims to equality and difference: they express moral aspirations and judgments. This brings us back to 'rurality', which Raymond Williams famously described in similar terms. Ideas of city and country, he wrote, are 'forms of isolation and identification of more general processes' (2016[1973]:418), tropes that render tangible a critical stance towards the present and its possible futures, and their moral evaluation. There is, in fact, a longstanding debate among Saharan specialists whether Saharan settlements were towns or villages. In the Sahara, 'rural and urban characteristics are mixed to such a degree', claimed the French geographer Capot-Rey (1953:239) before the oil-boom of the 1960s and 1970s, 'that one might hesitate to recognize towns'; even the 'most miserable settlement' has an 'urban cachet', while all Saharan towns 'betray rural affinities'. The only clear distinction, he continued, lies in the settlement's permanence, and its function: certain towns might have no agricultural base at all, but are inhabited uniquely by artisans, traders and transport specialists. Towns 'create the link between sedentary and nomadic worlds, and give tangible form to the solidarity that links them' (1953:245). But, as we have seen, this description applies to

all Saharan settlements, as does his definition through function and diversity – through connectivity, in other words. If there is a distinction, then, it can only be one of degree.

The local terminology does not help us much here either. From a local point of view, all kinds of 'traditional' settlements are referred to as *qsūr* or *qasab*, fortresses, unless they are *zawāyā*, religious strongholds, in which case they tend to be whitewashed but otherwise look the same. All are solidly built, with an emphasis on protection and storage: their fortifications 'call to mind the small European towns of the Middle Ages' (Suter 1953:443). They tend to be administered by local councils, which are also in charge of taxes and maintenance works; as already noted, all Saharan settlements rely on outside connections of one kind or another for their survival, and they often have very diverse populations living in segregated quarters. In absolute terms, they are all small – until recently, few would pass a definition of towns that fixes their minimum number of inhabitants at ten thousand people – but all are densely populated by regional standards. Their relative size, moreover, does not seem to matter where internal classifications are concerned; rather, these are carried out according to the kind and status of people who live there, the connections they maintain with each other and neighbouring populations, and, most importantly, their religious status. Perhaps, then, there is no need to distinguish between villages and towns, rural and urban forms of life, at all?

Horden and Purcell (2000), for one, would agree. They suggest that we should treat towns as micro-ecologies (or agglomerations of micro-ecologies) in their own right, rather than as something particular in themselves. Towns are not the bearers of an 'urban variable' that would make them stand out and grant them a different historicity from the surrounding rural landscape.

> Settlements in the Mediterranean, many of them extremely small, have slipped in and out of whatever category may be established to contain them – and it would be rash to assume that, in doing so, they have necessarily undergone some important transformation – across a qualitative frontier of, say, urban to non-urban. We should imagine them as being in flux from year to year, even from day to day… They are indeed, we suggest, the ultimate microenvironments, taking anthropogene effects on the landscape to their extreme conclusion, while remaining as fickle in their forms as any of the ecologies already encountered. (Horden and Purcell 2000:94)

This echoes the recent trend within ecology to study urban environments as ecosystems, although practitioners are divided over whether urban ecosystems, which are marked by a high degree of 'human effect', fragmentation, speedy succession, and a high percentage of alien species, are qualitatively or only quantitatively different from others (see e.g. Niemalä 1999, *contra* Trepl 1995). The Sahara might in fact provide an interesting test case here, because, as noted above, even the smallest oasis settlements are 'hyper-anthropised' (Bouaziz et al. 2018) and reliant on imported cultivars. Krause (2013:236), meanwhile, suggests that, instead of thinking in terms of a rural-urban

binary, we isolate features associated with either, and then examine how these might occur and interact in particular sociospatial formations.

Horden and Purcell are surely right that we should discard all notions of a particular 'urban variable' and hence approach both rural and urban micro-ecologies without moral prejudice. In particular, it is clearly absurd to ascribe different forms of historicity, or connectivity, to towns. The catch is that in much of the Sahara, people *do* have strong moral prejudices in favour of towns, or at least particular qualities they associate with urbanity (Krause's 'urban features'). These in turn shape not only internal classifications, but also spatial and ecological practices and the kinds of connectivities (and histories) people establish, imagine and live through. Horden and Purcell are aware of such local evaluations, but they dismiss them as too unstable and specific to form the basis for any long-term regional comparison (2000:93). Yet in the Sahara, the distinction between villages and towns, or rather between rural and urban life, seems to be sufficiently 'persistent' (to borrow William's terminology) over space and time to provide grounds for analysis. In fact, in an environment where, as Pascon noted, the establishment of oases necessarily forms part of broader cultural, spiritual or political projects, it seems impossible to separate the moral value accorded to urban life from other ecological factors. After all, as Capot-Rey (1953:304) concludes in his survey of Saharan urbanism, Saharan horticulture and settlement means 'deliberately breaking the rules of the game; it means rebelling against the laws of nature'. We thus have to turn towards the laws of culture to understand them; these are longstanding and belong to the Islamic tradition, which means they are never spatially contained.

Throughout the rich Islamic legal literature produced in the Sahara and on its edges runs a distinction between rural and urban life, between the *bādiya*, home to the *badū* or nomad, but also to small settled communities, and the *hadāra*, urban civilization. However familiar these Arabic terms might sound, in fact this distinction was often not so much one of geography or even livelihood than of conduct, which in turn depended on the kinds of institutions available to and dominant in rural and urban contexts respectively. From an urban point of view, these institutions were seen to be lacking in the *bādiya*, to the point where it was impossible to lead a fully Islamic life there, as all acts and transactions that one might engage in were, by definition, not so much illegal as extra-legal. The *bādiya* thus notionally overlapped with the *bilād al-sība*, an area perceived to be situated beyond the bounds of legitimate Islamic governance, and hence that of *sharīʿa* (Touati 1993:98). Thus, as they appear in fifteenth-century legal sources,

> the *huddār* are, of course, the inhabitants of fixed dwellings, but above all they are those who are most fully controlled by the central power and by the jurist who attempts to construct a normative structure that legally frames their life. The *badū*, on the other hand, are placed at the margins of this community as defined by the jurist. (Voguet 2006:149)

This 'community as defined by the jurist' was, in aspiration if not reality, an urban ideal; but it also determined, reciprocally, which settlement could truly be classified as

a town. These stereotypes persisted over time and informed conceptual geographies regionwide (see e.g. Touati 1996:110, Warscheid 2018), without, however, ever achieving agreement as to where exactly boundaries might be situated.

People who lived in the *bādiya* tried to shift these boundaries by governing themselves as best they could according to *sharī'a*. 'Urbanism' was thus a legal and ethical question, not one of population density or occupational diversity. The Algerian Tuwāt is again an outstanding example here: until well into the colonial period, local assemblies paid qadis, courts, scribes, schools, a religious elite and paper out of their meagre resources. By the late nineteenth century, according to French colonial sources, there 'was a qadi in every *qsar*' in charge of matters of personal status, property divisions and inheritance.[6] In the absence of a central government, this investment in Islamic law was costly in respect of both the payments required for legal training, functionaries and establishments, and the limits of sovereignty that this necessarily implied for local political institutions, local assemblies in particular. The tensions that arose from this inform the local legal literature, and diverse solutions were found for specific cases (Scheele 2010; see also Warscheid 2017:110), but there can be no doubt that throughout, assemblies willingly handed over much of their wealth in order to curtail their own sovereignty. This makes no sense in terms of 'power', but it does indicate an overwhelming collective moral ambition to turn the tiny Tuwātī *qsūr* (whose inhabitants were counted in the tens and hundreds rather than thousands) into Islamic cities, thus allowing their inhabitants to lead true Muslim, urban (*hadārī*) lives.

While it is beyond our capacity to decide whether Tuwātā succeeded in their urban aspirations, we cannot mistake or ignore their ambition: it is what turned their *qsūr* into the kind of places they were, if only by shaping property regimes, the circulation and distribution of wealth, outside connections and irrigation systems. And in some cases at least, this kind of urban aspiration did work: longstanding investment in Islamic scholarship, education and mobility literally put Saharan settlements on the map of the Islamic world. It turned Timbuktu into a place of fantasy and desire even for Europeans, to the point where the first eyewitness accounts of its small size, crumbling buildings and dusty streets were initially disbelieved (Heffernan 2001). On a smaller scale, it meant that a small market near what is today Kidal in northern Mali could proudly bear the name 'Tadmekka', like Mecca, because 'of all towns in the world [it] is the one that resembles Mecca the most' (al-Bakrī, d. 1094, in Levtzion and Hopkins 1981:85). Similarly,

> a miserable *qsar* like Shinguit [today in western Mauritania] is known throughout the Middle East, just because a few scholarly families settled there.… Some put it on the same footing as Fes. A mirage, one might say, an illusion maintained by the tradition of pilgrimage and brotherhoods, but one that shows to what degree

6 ANOM 22H56, Didier, 'Projet d'organisation du Gourara et du Touat', 5/05/1896.

> Islam has turned the Sahara into something other than an empty space. (Capot-Rey 1953:198–9)

We can see a revival of some of these ideas in contemporary jihadi movements in northern Mali. In 2012, before they were pushed back into the countryside by French military interventions, these were mostly concerned with the creation of truly Islamic cities, with a particular focus on Timbuktu ('the lighthouse of Timbuktu, gate to judgment by the *sharī'a*', as repainted road signs proudly proclaimed), whence they hoped to work on the local *bādiya*, 'an environment where people have been ignorant of religious principles for centuries' and 'act impulsively, according to their instinct'.[7]

Wilful Rurality

While the religiously inclined elite of the Tuwāt made an unmistakable effort to pull themselves out of their rural condition, others did not. Borkou in northern Chad, where I conducted long-term fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, is an area that, due to its favourable hydrological conditions (groundwater is accessible at a depth of one to three metres; palm trees can thrive without irrigation) could theoretically support a degree of urbanism, or at least permanent settled oases. But it does not, and by all accounts it never has. The French colonial geographer Capot-Rey put this down to a lack of connectivity:

> Borkou, just like Tibesti, seems to have been closed to outside influence by its distance from the coasts and the desert belt that surrounds it; it remained marginal to the great currents of trade and travel that used to go through Fazzān and Kawar or Darfur and Waddaï… [This] has prevented the development, on the desert edge, of market towns fulfilling the functions that elsewhere were fulfilled by [the Saharan towns of] Walata, Timbuktu or Agadez. … Nothing like this has ever happened in Borkou, where people move between sprawling palm-groves and tiny salt-pans on the one hand, and scattered nodes of settlement on the other. (1961:15–16, 130)

Even the few villages that do exist, Capot-Rey continues, bear no resemblance to the *qṣūr* found elsewhere in the Sahara. Instead, they are 'loose agglomerations, without walls, streets, squares; no public buildings; the mosque is a pad of sand marked out with pebbles' (1961:118). They are 'nebulae' of settlement, not towns.

Neither Libyan settlement (from the 1930s; see Scheele 2016), nor the construction of a French military garrison could durably change this. Hence, in 1948, according to a French colonial report:

7 AQIM, Imārat al-tanthīm, 20/07/2012.

> Urban centres. This term seems to be somewhat extravagant in the B.E.T. [Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti] because it does not really apply to [Faya-]Largeau [the largest settlement in Borkou], where the natives prefer easily dismantled straw tents to mud huts; all [military] constructions are already ancient, but one still cannot speak of urbanism. As for Zouar and Fada, these are military posts around which a few tents have gathered. They would probably disappear the day the posts were withdrawn.[8]

This is echoed in local memories: 'Faya, at the beginning, was not for Tubu. It was for Libyans, French, other foreigners, but there were no Tubu'.[9] And, again, after the end of Libyan military occupation and civil war in 1987:

> The extension of the urban centre of Faya, with its administrative and commercial functions, has created a new kind of life, especially during the presence of the French and Libyan armies, which were both important consumers and solvent. Now, urbanisation tends to regress. (Granry 1992:13)

Urbanisation, then, was the result of outside activity and investment; it sparked little interest locally and was therefore vulnerable to fluctuations in the regional context. This, of course, is also true further west, but in Borkou no architectural or scholarly ruse was contrived to give an impression of permanence.

This lack of palpable urbanization was not the result of a lack of connectivity, as Capot-Rey implied in the extract quoted above. Rather, it seems to have been a matter of choice. Tubu-speakers have never been excluded from neighbouring economies and political formations – indeed they have been central to them, and continue to be so (Brachet and Scheele 2019: 20–1). But they seem to have collectively constructed Borkou as a region where other rules apply, where the kind of 'urban civilization' put forward further West is defined as a minority pursuit, in a move that we might describe as 'wilful rurality'. In the Saharan context, rurality and urbanity, town and village, are always also (and perhaps primarily) archetypes, akin to Sahlins' historical anti-types: 'differentiation by competition… with the result that the major institutions and values in each society appear as inverted forms of the other' (Sahlins 2004:8, see also 69). Like their Mediterranean counterparts, Saharan settlements could pass from one category to the other, or even disappear altogether, with at time vertiginous speed: indeed, seen from the inside of Saharan town walls, the encroachment of the *bādiya* – its people, its sand, its aridity – was an ever-present possibility, a menace, that turned urbanity into a fragile good, an aspiration rather than an achievement. Conversely, the population of a place like Faya still quadruples or quintuples during the date harvest, putting its population well beyond even conservative estimates of minimum urban populations, without, however, adding 'urban cachet'. On the contrary, Faya never looks and feels more like a haphazard nomadic camp than during those few weeks, and this is pre-

8 Archives nationales du Tchad (ANT), N'djamena, W 20, 'Rapport politique', B.E.T., 2nd term 1948.
9 Interview with al-Hajj Moussa Khayrallah, Faya, 22 March 2012.

cisely what makes the date harvest quite to enjoyable. 'Rurality' of this kind thus does not represent an absence or the lack of particular 'urban features', but rather a cultural choice.

For those who identify with the *bādiya*, urbanization, and the larger economic, political, legal and military projects that underwrite it, can be experienced as a threat in itself. Staying aloof from these projects offered a wide range of opportunities, ranging from temporary employment to the demand for 'protection money' and raiding: ways of denying the burdens and obligations of the moral connectivity that the towns of the Tuwāt so eagerly endorsed. Borkou's hydrological wealth, although it periodically attracted the developmentalist projects of outsiders, on the whole seems to have discouraged rather than encouraged urbanization by allowing its inhabitants to lead far more dispersed and individually autonomous lives than might be possible elsewhere.[10] 'Wilful rurality'

> is thus first of all the natural product of a country where men have no great need for and no great fear of their fellow creatures. But this explanation is hardly sufficient. This is seen clearly in the Kawar [in northern Niger], when one takes in, with one glance, the scattered straw tents of the Tubu next to the huddled stone houses of the Kanuri towns. If the Tubu do not live together and subdued, it is because they do not want to. (Le Cœur 1988[1945]:195)

Hence Faya, with today more than ten thousand inhabitants, still struggles to define itself as a town; there are no local municipal efforts, few aspirations to permanence. The town remains primarily a garrison, with an extensive, non-irrigated palm grove attached to it, owing much or rather all of its urban features to external influence and investment – which might well be gone tomorrow.

Conclusion

I began this paper with Braudel's opposition between the Sahara, an 'anoekumene' where 'towns exhaust themselves', and 'the West', a world of abandoned villages. For Braudel, this opposition was indicative of different historicities, or even historical destinies. In this article I have argued that in actual fact the inherent connectivity of all forms of human life in the Sahara has not led to a lack of urbanization, but perhaps rather to its excess. In any case, it means that it is often difficult to distinguish between towns and villages in the Sahara, as all Saharan settlements are necessarily turned outwards and diverse, in their economic base as much as in their social make-up. Up to a point, this inherent connectivity can be analysed by drawing on Horden and Purcell's

10 Davis (1983) makes a similar argument about Kufra in southern Libya, blessed with comparable hydrological conditions and whose name some say derives from *kufara*, 'to be ignorant of religion'.

(2000) model of Mediterranean history. In both contexts connectivity is a fact of life, but it is also often experienced as a threat to moral integrity. 'Problems of scale and how to respond to them are intrinsic to social contexts of high connectivity' (Purcell 2003:24), both for those who live in them and for those who attempt to analyse them. However, whereas Horden and Purcell conclude from this that there is a need to approach towns and cities simply as instances of micro-ecologies that are no different in principle from their rural surroundings, it is important, in the Sahara at least (and from an anthropological rather than historical point of view), to try to understand the moral value attached to urbanization. Or, in Krause's (2013:236) words, if we look for a set of urban or rural features and their articulation, those features do not all have the same moral weight, and some should hence influence our classificatory exercise more than others. Otherwise, the very existence (or indeed, absence) of urban settlements in certain parts of the region makes no sense at all.

This is not to argue against Horden and Purcell's broader point, but rather to state that moral concerns ought be seen as part and parcel of micro-ecologies, wherever this is possible. Micro-ecologies are always also projects, and hence they entail human judgment, evaluation, domination and aspirations, as much as 'hard ecological facts' on the ground. Indeed, the two cannot be distinguished. To bear this in mind throughout makes it possible to integrate the political aspects of different forms of settlement and the formation of micro-ecologies. As Rossi (2015:41) notes, speaking of the Sahel: 'environmental conditions set constraints that everyone had to accommodate; but social and political institutions defined which opportunities were available for whom'. And, we might add, which political visions, projects and aspirations made sense from a local point of view, when and why.

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