DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE

Saharan Imaginaries
An Introduction

Hassan Ould Moctar

Fellow in International Development,
London School of Economics and Political Science

Matthew Porges

British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, COMPAS, Oxford

The Sahara has long been conceived as an arid, empty space defined by its perceived geopolitical, ecological, and racial boundary functions. While rooted deep in human history (Sanders 1969), this conception of the Sahara has been nourished by colonial and neocolonial tropes, not least those of the global war on terror (McDougall 2007). Fortunately, such reductive conceptions of the Sahara are also coming under increasing challenge within scholarship on the region. This challenge has come in multiple forms, involving, for instance, a genealogy of this boundary conception of the Sahara (Lydon 2015); a methodological pivot toward trans-local archival research (Anderson 2021), which serves to transcend the parochial divisions of the discipline of Area Studies; a *longue durée* perspective on the world historic significance of trans-Saharan trade (Austen 2010); a social-economic analysis of the various roles played by mobility in the establishment of Saharan belonging (Caratini 2003, Scheele 2012); an emphasis on the intra-Saharan dynamics and processes that are no less constitutive of the region (Cleaveland 2002, McDougall 2012); and, relatedly, discussion of the connective social tissue that binds relations of kinship, trade, and exploitation both within and beyond the Sahara (Bonte and Ould Cheikh 2001, Scheele and McDougall 2012).

Notwithstanding the advances made within this emergent Saharan Studies research agenda, perspectives remain constrained in epistemological and methodological terms. Indeed, even questions of delimiting what, exactly, counts as the Sahara, or the "Saharan region," are embedded in larger discourses (Retaillé and Walther 2011). This has in part to do with the ongoing weight of the colonial era upon the present. While fleeting relative to the long history of Saharan social formations (Bonte 2004, Lefebvre 2015), European XIXth century colonialism set bureaucratic, territorial, and epistemological parameters which in many ways continue to structure analysis of the Sahara today (Anderson 2021: 8). Of course, the colonial archive provides a rich source of data with which to analyse ethnic, tribal and social structures in the

Sahara (De Chassey 1978, Désiré-Vuillemin 1997, Marchesin 2010). But the epistemological biases, analytical omissions, and even political interests underlying this archive can be all too easily transmitted into scholarship that draws exclusively from it. Erin Pettigrew (2016) offsets this risk by supplementing her analysis of colonial archival material with Saharan sources, such as locally produced colonial-era Arabic texts and interviews. Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (2014), meanwhile, has found in the history and present of Mauritania a useful vantage point from which to discuss the relevance of postcolonial studies to the region.

The analytical fruits of such interrogations have, however, been hampered by the recent re-emergence of the Sahel as an object of international security intervention (Lopez-Lucia 2020). Having long been a watchword signifying crisis and intervention (Bonnecase and Brachet 2013), the Sahel's elevation within the international security agenda over the past decade has rekindled resentment against neocolonialism across much of the region, while at the same time shaping the terms and spatial imaginaries of even critical research on the Sahara. Mauritania for instance, might find itself designated a Sahelian state when security interests are at play, while being at least partially located in the Sahara according to anthropological and historical perspectives on the region. For these reasons, it is imperative that critical scholarship refuse not only the terms set by policy interests which are often neocolonial in character, but also their more subtle epistemological, spatial, and methodological assumptions about research on the Sahara and the Sahel. This is precisely what each of the contributions in this issue seeks, in distinct ways, to accomplish.

July Blalack offers a close and contextual reading of Ahmed ibn al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī's 1911 *Kitāb al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājim Udabā' al-Shinqīṭ* ("The Reference Book of Shinguiti Literati"). Querying a tendency to project Mauritania's proto-national imaginary of Bilād Shingīṭ into the precolonial past, she illustrates that this imaginary was born in tandem with, and in many ways in opposition to, the colonial-era national identity of La Mauritanie/Mūrītānyā. The weight of this era upon the present is evident in her observation that "while there was not a well-known name or label which encompassed the entire Hassanophone sphere, written sources from the precolonial period also indicate that it was not seen as necessary to find one." In other words, it is only with the onset of colonialism and the counterveiling forces of Arab nationalism and anti-colonial Islam that territorially delineating the hassaphone region becomes a problem to be resolved in the eyes of its inhabitants. Rather than acting as a primordial precursor to the artificial colonial designation of La Mauritanie, Bilād Shingīṭ emerged as a proto-national imaginary at virtually the same moment as this colonial designation, as a means of countering it.

Amongst other insights, Blalack's contribution illustrates how the colonisation process and the territorial claims and counter-claims that flow

from it equally generate a politics of naming, a theme that dovetails with Mark Drury's ethnographic analysis of the disaggregated sovereignty in the Western Saharan city of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Employing an innovative method that treats the urban environment as a historical archive, Drury demonstrates how the legacy of an incomplete process of decolonisation in the Western Sahara, and the competing claims to sovereignty which ensue from it, together shape Laâyoune/El Aaiún's urban topography and toponymy. Of particular interest in this respect is the tendency for a given place name to evince at once the contextual contingencies and nuances of its birth, as well as the more general, large-scale political processes underpinning these details. For instance, the neighbourhood of Diridik (meaning "put your hands here" in the *hassaniya* dialect of Arabic) archives the historic shift from the Spanish colonial era to the Moroccan occupation with reference to how Sahrawis pushed through the doors of Spanish settlers during the Spanish withdrawal. Being the locus of numerous such expressions of the region's history of colonialism and occupation, Laâyoune/El Aaiún's urban topography and toponymy show how an unresolved decolonisation and its associated incommensurate claims to territorial sovereignty come to congeal in the urban landscape.

This intertwinement of urbanisation and decolonisation is equally apparent in Hassan Ould Moctar's investigation of the layers of the Mauritanian national imaginary and its relationship to the Sahara. Through a discussion of the historic juncture that gave birth to the national "bridge" trope in Mauritania, Ould Moctar illustrates how divergent secessionist claims emanating from the north and the south of the nascent state's territory helped forge a geopolitical compromise which unerpinned the decision on the capital city's location. When embodied as urban social relations in Nouakchott, however, this "bridge" trope comes up against the social tensions and inequalities that characterise this urban desert environment. This environment also provides migrant workers and Mauritanian nationals on the urban margins with a means of narrating the experiences of labour exploitation that drive the city's desert expansion. For this reason, Ould Moctar argues, the desert equally serves as a repository of a collective imaginary distinct from that which emerged with the birth of the Mauritanian state.

Mauritania's Saharan environment is an equally crucial element of Saquib Usman's ethnographic exploration of water dowsing practices in a village in the eastern Mauritanian region of Hodh. Through rich and immersive ethnographic engagement with a blind water dowser and religious leader named Muhammad Mahmud, Usman challenges a "horizontalist" bias within the discipline of geography, one that gives further life to an enduring romanticisation of the Sahara "as an arid, rugged, and impenetrable desert" (Lydon 2015: 4). Rooted in the standardised hydrological cycle, this horizontalist bias "elides the vertical circulation of water from rain into underground aquifers, and back up through boreholes and wells." (Usman, this

issue). By relaying Muhammad Mahmud's water dowsing practices and the Qu'ranic ethic underpinning them, Usman's ethnographic narrative circumvents this horizontalist bias, revealing in its place a more hydrologically holistic picture of the Sahara as one of the world's largest groundwater reserves.

A number of common threads run through these contributions. Usman and Ould Moctar each show that the natural environment shapes but does not determine the social conditions of the Sahara's inhabitants, and in doing so put forth alternative means of conceptualising the Sahara. Indeed, for Usman, "Where dominant perspectives of Saharan space see the natural environment as the primary cause of water insecurity, local understandings of abundance instead point at infrastructural and social determinants of water insecurity." Both contributions thereby provide a critical challenge to notions of ecological determinism, another trope prevalent in external perceptions of Saharan space. Blalack and Drury both demonstrate how the seemingly innocuous process of putting names to places is riven with the contested politics of colonialism and decolonisation, Blalack with reference to the national imaginary of Mauritania and Drury to the urban space of Laâyoune/El Aaiún. Ould Moctar and Drury each explore the relationship between urbanisation and decolonisation in the Sahara, showing how political aspirations, geopolitical calculations, and competing ethno-national territorial visions together find their spatial expression in the cities of the Sahara.

Above all, each of the contributions highlight how the modern national aspiration of congruence between people and territory plays out in a Saharan context in which sedentarization and urbanisation are late XXth century phenomena, formal decolonisation is an unfinished endeavour, and much wider transregional Islamic and ethnic identities compete with the nation for primary group affiliation. Having been smuggled into the region via the colonial encounter before being adopted wholesale in resistance to it, this modern national aspiration nonetheless remains on unsure footing in this Saharan context, for the reasons just outlined. The "national" is thus but one layer of the Saharan imaginary that appears in these contributions. This imaginary is neither an arbitrary external imposition nor an entirely endogenous and organic emergence. It is, rather, an ongoing reproduction of a multi-scalar encounter between ecological process, social relations, spatial transformations, and historical legacies. Its diffuse loci of enunciation, to borrow a phrase from Mignolo (2002: 61), include urban development projects, village wells, labour-pick-up points, manuscripts, population resettlement initiatives, and national independence struggles.

In locating Saharan imaginaries within these diffuse sites, each of this issue's contributions advance the emerging Saharan Studies research agenda outlined above. Further, they do so by expanding this research agenda's epistemological and methodological repertoire. In methodological terms, each

contribution repurposes existing methodological tools, such as ethnography and archival research, to undermine prevailing colonial frames on the Sahara, its inhabitants, and history. Blalack, for instance, through a contextual reading of the *Kitāb al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājim Udabā' al-Shinqīṭ*, highlights the location in the colonial era of what is often conceived of as a marker of precolonial authenticity in Mauritania. Drury, meanwhile, turns the methodological constraints that come with carrying out research in a heavily militarised environment such as Laâyoune/El Aaiún into an opportunity to dwell on the seemingly mundance features of the city's urban landscape, turning them into an archive of the city's history. Collectively, these methodological approaches help broaden the epistemological foundation upon which to research the Sahara; in distinct ways, each of this issue's contributions demonstrate how to read against the grain of a dominant frame that has cordoned off understanding of the Sahara, be it the perspective of the Sahara as arid and water insecure, the national imaginary of Bilād Shinqīṭ, the Mauritanian "bridge" trope, or the sovereign pretense of uncontested national territorial contiguity.

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