

SAHARAN SEDIMENT NATION FORMATION, URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND ALTER-IMAGINARIES IN THE DESERT OF MAURITANIA

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Abstract

This article details the relationship between the Sahara Desert and the prominent national imaginary of Mauritania as “bridge”. It highlights four sedimented layers of this relationship. Firstly, the Sahara Desert provided the architects of the Mauritanian state with a means of insulating themselves from competing secessionist demands prior to independence. Secondly, the urban development process that was initiated in the capital of Nouakchott is conditioned by the city’s desert environment. Thirdly, this urban expansion is today driven by hierarchical social relations which embody the modern national imaginary while reproducing the Sahara’s more antiquated social systems. Lastly, the desert environment provides those on the urban margins with the narrative means of conveying experiences that nuance and reframe the Mauritanian national imaginary.

Keywords: Mauritania, imaginaries, Nouakchott, Sahara, migration.

Résumé

Cet article interroge le rapport entre le désert du Sahara et l’imaginaire national de la Mauritanie comme « trait d’union ». Il en expose quatre niveaux imbriqués. D’abord, le Sahara a fourni aux fondateurs de l’État mauritanien les moyens de se protéger des revendications sécessionnistes avant la déclaration de l’indépendance. Deuxièmement, le processus du développement urbain est formé par le milieu du désert de la capitale de Nouakchott. Troisièmement, cette expansion urbaine est aujourd’hui poussée par des rapports sociaux hiérarchiques qui incarnent à la fois l’imaginaire national moderne ainsi que des systèmes sociaux plus anciens du Sahara. Finalement, le désert fournit aux habitants des marges urbaines les moyens narratifs de relayer des expériences qui nuancent et recadrent l’imaginaire national mauritanien.

Mots-clés : Mauritanie, imaginaires, Nouakchott, Sahara, migration.

It has become something of a cliché to describe Mauritania as a “bridge”¹ between two otherwise distinct “Arab” and “African” worlds. This trope captures both Mauritania’s demographic features and its geographic location. Sitting astride the Sahara Desert’s Atlantic coastline, Mauritania’s ethno-linguistic composition consists of, on the one hand, speakers of the *hassâniyya* dialect of Arabic, who collectively identify as “Moors”—or *bidhân*²—and, on the other hand, Afro-Mauritanian speakers of Fula, Wolof, and Soninké³. The former group has historically been structured around two elite social pillars: a warrior class whose origins lie in cumulative migrations to the region of a nomadic tribe from the Arabian Peninsula called the *Bani Hassân*, and a clerical class of primarily *Sanhâja* Berber origin, named the *zawâyâ*. Beneath these two dominant groups is a tributary class of diverse economic activity, consisting of pastoralists (*aznâga*), artisanal workers (*m’aalmîn*), and poets, musicians and storytellers (*îggâwen*). In addition, precolonial *bidhân* society consisted of slaves and darker skinned *harâtîn* (free slaves), who were each charged with domestic and agricultural labour. While there was overlap between the two, these classes are not reducible to one another. (Ould Cheikh 1995; Stewart 1973). On the middle Senegal River Valley, the precolonial Fula kingdom of Futa Toro also contained a clerical elite—the *toorodBe*—artisanal and agricultural tributary classes, and slaves (Kane 2005; Robinson and Curtin 1972), while the Wolof-speaking Waalo Kingdom (Barry 1972) consisted of a free nobility (the *gêér*), an artisanal stratum (the *nyeenyo*), and an enslaved class (the *dyaam*).

The “bridge” trope gives pithy expression to this “Mauritanian mosaic” (Schmitz 1994). But as a national imaginary, it also obscures the contextual contingencies of its historic origins, and in particular the formative role played at this moment by the Sahara Desert, in which roughly three-quarters of the contemporary Mauritanian state is located. This is unfortunate, as the Sahara in this light risks once more becoming a mere screen onto which political actors can project images and agendas that befit their interests. Indeed, notwithstanding its topological and ecological diversity—spanning seasonally inundated basins to arid mountainous plateaus, and highland grasses, shrubs, and woody plants to vast sand sheets and dunes—the Sahara Desert has long served as a blank canvass for colonial fantasy and ambition. Its nine million square kilometers have historically provided ample space for the manichean

¹ “Trait d’union”, in French.

² *Bidhân* is the word used in the *hassâniyya* dialect of Arabic to describe the dominant group within the Arabo-Berber populations of Mauritania. It is often translated in French to “Maure” (Moor). At origin a colonial term, “Moor” has been thoroughly appropriated colloquially in Mauritania. Nonetheless, given that “the Moors” are historically quite an ill-defined group, I use the *hassâniyya* term—*bidhân*—for reasons of analytical clarity.

³ Of course, these categorical boundaries are not fixed in time or space, with spaces of ethno-linguistic overlap and indistinction being common (Leservoisier 2012).

binaries of the European imperial imagination to play out; civilisation and barbarity, conquest and defeat, heroism and villainy, have all found their vessels to fill in this space (E.A. McDougall 2007; Scheele and McDougall 2012). At the same time, however, the Sahara Desert environment has figured just as prominently within the imaginaries of its *bidhân* inhabitants, emerging as a liminal yet domestic space within the narratives of certain pre-colonial Mauritanian religious nobles (Ould Cheikh 2016), while also being more generally embedded in the lexicon of the *hassâniyya* dialect of Arabic (Taine-Cheikh 2013). The Sahara Desert has thus figured within regional collective imaginaries long before the birth of the Mauritanian nation-state (cf. Blalack this issue).

As regards the national iteration of this Saharan imaginary, the Mauritanian “bridge” trope is inextricably linked to the capital city of Nouakchott. Indeed, being situated roughly halfway between the state’s northern and southern borders, Nouakchott can be viewed as the spatial expression of this national imaginary. Covering some 1 000 square kilometers, it is today home to over one million inhabitants, residing within three administrative regions that are each host to three departments. When it was being mooted as capital city in the 1950’s, however, Nouakchott scarcely numbered 500 people (Ould Cheikh 2006: 141). Prior to independence, its social life revolved exclusively around a cluster of mudbrick houses in the quarter of Le Ksar, before expanding with “Place Capitale” where the administrative affairs of the budding capital could be accommodated. Habitation soon spread north and south of Le Ksar and “Capitale”, primarily in the form of shacks and shantytowns. What is today the gilded upper class neighbourhood of Tevrehg Zeina has its roots in such informal settlements north of the centre, which were eventually uprooted and relocated to the newer districts of Sebkha and El-Mina (Ould Mohamed Baba 2006). It has been primarily in this fashion that the city has expanded ever since, with real estate property speculation and informal slum dwellings each pushing the city limits ever farther into its desert environment (Choplin 2006, 2014). As a result, Nouakchott is a barrage of aesthetic opposites: goats and donkeys meander the streets alongside brand new deluxe 4x4 vehicles; informal tents and shacks lie nestled between lavish and ornate villas; concrete footpaths and tarmac roads intermittently devolve into dust tracks and sand paths. While characteristic of urban capitalist modernity in general, such inequalities and oppositions are all the more stark in the case of such a young capital city erected from scratch in the Sahara Desert.

For this reason, the Sahara Desert is an underlying element of not just the Mauritanian national imaginary, but also of the city of Nouakchott which serves as its spatial expression, the urban development process that was initiated in this city, and the social relations and contestations that drive this development today. There are, in other words, four sedimented layers of this relationship between the desert environment and the Mauritanian national

imaginary, which this article will detail in turn. Firstly, the Sahara Desert provided the architects of the Mauritanian state with a means of insulating themselves from competing secessionist demands in the run up to independence. Being located roughly halfway between the incipient state's contested southern and northern borders, Nouakchott's Saharan location provided a geopolitical compromise between these divergent secessionist claims. Secondly, the urban development process that was initiated in Nouakchott was immediately conditioned by the city's desert environment, which forced nomads whose livelihoods had been destroyed by drought to relocate to informal settlements on the peripheries of the city. Thirdly, this urban expansion is today driven by the hierarchical social relations which embody this national imaginary, in the form of an exploitative relationship between *bidhân* property owners, on the one hand, and Afro-Mauritanians, *harâtîn*, and migrant workers, on the other. As we will see, the Sahara and its social systems mediate and give form to this exploitative dynamic. Lastly, the desert environment also provides migrant workers and marginalised Afro-Mauritanians with the narrative means of conveying experiences of labour exploitation and forms of ethnic identity which nuance and reframe the Mauritanian national imaginary. As such, the urban desert environment serves as a repository of an alter-imaginary, made from the margins of the "official" Mauritanian one.

How to bring these sediments of the Mauritanian national imaginary to life, in theoretical and methodological terms? Cues in this regard can be obtained from Juantia Sundberg's (2008) analysis of the "intimate frontiers of geopolitics", which she discerns in the discarded belongings of migrants who have crossed the US-Mexico border via the Sonoran Desert (cf. Squire 2014). Such a perspective not only draws attention to the role of the natural environment in the production of geopolitical boundaries of national inclusion and exclusion; it also highlights the intimate, everyday narrative and spatial practices by which these boundaries are challenged and disrupted. Applied to the four sedimented layers of the Saharan imaginary of concern here, it becomes clear that this national imaginary is less stable and fixed than the geopolitical calculus of its origins might have hoped. Indeed, as we progress from its macro-level geopolitical origins to its meso-level embodiment as urban social relations, the "bridge" trope appears less effective in preventing internal fragmentation and contestation along ethnic and class lines. By the time we arrive at the "intimate" micro level of everyday life in the urban informal economy, we will see how such geopolitical imaginaries and their attendant national ordering of things (Malkki 1995) come apart through the creative use of the Sahara Desert environment by migrant workers and others on the urban margins.

This "intimate" perspective is facilitated by 11 months of field research I carried out in Mauritania over the course of 2017 and 2018, which entailed

prolonged ethnographic investigations of labour pick up areas in the informal economy of Nouakchott and other urban centres. It is within such sites that the social relations and ethno-national identities posited within the Mauritanian national imaginary are embodied, challenged, and, as I later argue, made anew. Firstly, however, let's turn to the mid-XXth century geopolitical dynamics that gave rise to this national imaginary.

Desert as Geopolitical Compromise: the Birth of a Saharan National Imaginary

In the years leading to independence in 1960, the territorial integrity and national identity of the incipient Mauritanian state were increasingly called into question by divergent secessionist territorial claims. At one end, there were demands that the entirety of Mauritania be absorbed within a 'Greater Morocco' whose borders would extend as far south as the Senegal River. Pushed by Allal El-Fassi of the Moroccan *Istiqlal* party, this Greater Morocco proposal also had the staunch backing of King Mohammed V, who in 1958 laid claim to the territories of the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania (Marchesin 2010: 95). The Greater Morocco proposal also found domestic support in Mauritania in the form of political figure Horma Ould Babana. Originally elected as a deputy to the French parliament in 1946 representing the Mauritanian section of the Senegalese SFIO party, he lost his seat in 1951 to the UPM, a new Mauritanian domestic faction that would increasingly dominate the political scene in the run up to independence. Seeking to recoup his losses, Babana and his entourage curried diplomatic and professional favour in Morocco, lending his explicit support to the Greater Morocco proposal in 1956 (Pierre 2010: 3). Pro-Moroccan sentiment in Mauritania would gain further traction in 1958 with the formation of the *Nahda el Watanya el Mauritanya* party. Emerging from a youth movement aimed at countering the perceived tepid and conciliatory stance of the UPM vis-à-vis the French coloniser, the Nahda movement party took a more vociferous anti-imperialist stance, albeit one perceived by many to pander to Moroccan territorial claims over Mauritania (Marchesin 2010: 105).

Meanwhile, the southern border of the nascent Mauritanian state proved no less controversial. From the perspective of many residents of the Senegal River Valley, the territorial line drawn by the French coloniser along the Senegal River at the turn of the XIXth century represented a callous partition of a previously contiguous social and cultural space. A Fulani political constituency emerged in the 1940's to articulate these regional interests (Jourde 2004). At the time of its establishment in 1946, the UGOVF (*L'Union des originaires de la vallée du fleuve*) sought to give expression to Fulani interests on both sides of the Senegal River, with the specific aim of countering the perceived dominance of a Wolof elite in Senegalese politics.

Within a period of eleven years, however, the group would shift the focus of its operations exclusively to the Mauritanian arena (Jourde 2004: 74). In rebranding as UOMS (*L'Union des originaires de la Mauritanie du Sud*), they paradoxically validated and undermined this legislative arena, insofar as they used the Mauritanian sphere to campaign to secede and “reunify” the Senegal River Valley. So, while there was a drive to redraw the southern borders of the Mauritanian state, the UOMS strategy to achieve this entailed a greater degree of engagement with this state than had been the case under the UGOVF. This shift inflected opposition currents with an ethno-national flavour, which would accordingly influence the national imaginary to be claimed upon independence.

These local ethno-national pressures being exercised upon the embryonic state from the north and the south also had wider regional refractions. Faced with a rapidly evolving political landscape and the discovery of new material interests in the Sahara, France proposed a new regional framework for its Saharan territories on 1 August 1955. Dubbed the *Organisation commune des régions sahariennes* (OCRS), this short-lived project was intended to economically integrate a vast arid region whose mineral worth was just beginning to be realised by France at the twilight of the colonial era. Southern territorial challenges also acquired a broader regional dimension in 1958, following the UOMS’s association with certain disaffected *bidhâni* groups connected to Senegalese political circles. The emergent grouping—UNM—demanded that any independent Mauritania be part of the Mali Federation, a regional governance project that had been set up in 1959 (Pierre 2010: 4), which set relations between Mauritania and Mali on the rocks from the moment of independence (Ould Daddah 2003: 426). As such, the UNM acted as a southern regional counterpart to the perceived pro-Moroccan and Arab chauvinist sentiment of *Nahda* (Marchesin 2010: 106).

As the political formation that took the helm of the Mauritanian state, the UPM was no passive victim of these regional territorial pressures. On the contrary, the national imaginary of the independent Mauritanian state was irreducibly shaped in opposition to them. France’s OCRS proposal, for instance, was vocally opposed by the UPM under Sidi el-Mokhtar Ndiaye, on grounds that it served as a vehicle for political ambitions masquerading as economic cooperation (Désiré-Vuillemin 1997: 605). As a result, Mauritania was declared exempt from the regional initiative in 1957. The UPM was equally recalcitrant in the face of the UNM’s Mali Federation initiative and the Greater Morocco proposal. Not only did the UPM strongly riposte El-Fassi’s expansionist agenda, but so too did *Entente mauritanienne*, Ould Babana’s erstwhile political faction. Even tribes in the northern Adrar region, whose geographic proximity and historic links to the kingdom formed part of El-Fassi’s justificatory narrative, proved averse to Moroccan encroachment

when it took the form of incursions and raids on their holdings by the Moroccan armed liberation movement (Marchesin 2010: 99).

By the time of independence in 1960, Mauritanian president Mokhtar Ould Daddah and his ruling UPM party were thus well versed in the neutralisation of these divergent ethno-territorial claims. The most relevant neutralisation strategy, for our purposes, was the 1957 decision to make the small fishing village of Nouakchott the unlikely capital of the independent Mauritanian state. Numbering only 200 people in 1944 (De Chassesey 1978), this was far from an obvious choice for capital city. Ould Daddah and the UPM, however, wished to extricate Mauritanian politics from the orbit of Senegalese affairs (Marchesin 2010: 103), while keeping a safe distance from the Moroccan kingdom's territorial ambitions. Neutral by virtue of its peripherality (Frérot and Ould Mahboubi 1998: 35⁴), the new capital of Nouakchott was spatially insulated from the competing secessionist claims emanating from the north and the south, as well as their broader regional dimensions. This is the geopolitical compromise underpinning what is today the Sahara's only capital city.

Of course, the geopolitical state of play at this particular moment in time was not set in stone⁵, but it had a symbolic and material effect that long outlasted the particular context from which it arose. At the symbolic level, it is at this historic moment that a core aspect of the Mauritanian national imaginary emerged, namely the now common trope of Mauritania being "a bridge" between Arab and black Africa. Indeed, this now ubiquitous trope that depicts Mauritania as a unifying link between two otherwise distinct geographical, cultural, and racial spaces was produced and actively disseminated by the UPM at this time, serving as a justification for the shift to one-party rule that was initiated in 1965 (De Chassesey 1978: 290). Moreover, as we will see in the next section, the ethno-national quality of these divergent secessionist claims soon manifested in Nouakchott itself, meaning that the city became uniquely associated with the '*trait d'union*' trope, as it served as a rhetorical counter to both internal and external challenges. Ould Daddah said as much himself during his first address to the independent state of Mauritania in November, 1960: "Nouakchott is the indispensable expression of the affirmation of Mauritanian national unity." (Ould Meymoun 2011: 11)⁶. Viewed in light of the local ethno-national pressures and regional geopolitical ones outlined above, the city of Nouakchott is thus the spatial expression of this national symbolic imaginary.

⁴ Cited in Boulay (2006).

⁵ Indeed, Ould Daddah eventually staved off Morocco's expansionist ambitions by pandering to them in the Western Sahara following the Spanish withdrawal from the territory in 1976.

⁶ Translated from French.

At the material level, the decision to make the unlikely locale of Nouakchott the capital city of Mauritania had consequences that far outlived the historic moment from which it arose, and which are still unfolding on the city peripheries today. In the following section, we turn to examining how the urban development process that was initiated in Nouakchott reproduces and reshapes the social relations that embody the Mauritanian national imaginary. Crucially—though perhaps unsurprisingly—as this national imaginary becomes embodied as urban social relations, it fragments along ethnic and class lines, indicating that it has not been as successful in neutralising internal pressures and contradictions as it has external ones. As we will see, the Sahara has proven equally crucial to this ambivalence between the consolidation of the national imaginary's spatial expression, on the one hand, and the urban tensions and polarisations that undermine it, on the other.

The Imaginary Embodied: Saharan Urban Development and Social Relations

In the years following Mauritanian independence, Nouakchott ballooned outward from its meagre beginnings, adjoining older social structures to a new urban environment, while also producing entirely novel ones (Choplin 2009). The diverse ethno-linguistic identities encompassed within the Mauritanian national imaginary became henceforth embodied in the Saharan urban environment of Nouakchott (cf. Marfaing 2012). Challenges would soon arise in the task of governing the nation's constituent groups and their respective interests in the shared space of Nouakchott, however. Having been highly represented in administrative posts during the colonial era, and as a consequence politically elevated during the early years of independence, Afro-Mauritanian Fula would become gradually side-lined, as a *bidhân* to Afro-Mauritanian representative ratio rule of $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ began to informally structure government ministries (De Chassesey 2014: 196; cf. Antil and Lesourd 2012). This trend of "Arabisation" can be further seen in a ministerial decree passed on 13 January 1966, which made Arabic a compulsory subject in school. In response, Afro-Mauritanian groups organised rallies and strikes, to which Ould Daddah responded by imposing a curfew and deploying the military (N'Diaye 2018: 47). When embodied as urban social relations, the national imaginary of Mauritania as a "bridge" does not play out as smoothly, notwithstanding the nominally neutral location of Nouakchott in which these tensions manifested.

This fragmentation of the national imaginary's embodied social relations plays out along class lines in addition to ethno-linguistic ones, a process compounded by the fact that Nouakchott expanded at a much greater rate than anticipated by its architects. While planners had projected the population of Nouakchott to stand at 8 000 by 1970, it had, in reality, reached 70 000 by that

date (Choplin 2006: 72). The ecological vicissitudes of the Sahara Desert were crucial to this urban explosion, which was accelerated by a series of droughts in the late 1960's and 1970's that decimated rural nomadic livelihoods and pushed increasing numbers of former nomads into the cities. As a result, the urban population more than doubled between 1977 and 1988, jumping from 303 819 to 763 915, while the nomadic population fell by more than half over the same period (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2015: 10)⁷. By 2013, the urban population stood at over 1 million, representing 48 % of the national population, of whom just 1.9 % were still nomadic (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2015: 10)⁸. This unwieldy urbanisation has generated novel social polarisations in Nouakchott between property owning elites and the multi-ethnic disenfranchised inhabitants of the city's peripheral shantytowns, whose strategies of occupying and consolidating plots of illegally squatted land have made them a potent political force, acting at times as a source of contestation and at others a base for co-optation (Choplin 2014; McDougall 2021; Vium 2016).

Within these new urban dynamics and relations, West African migrant workers also figure increasingly prominently. This presence is in part a result of the labour supply gap that stemmed from a rapid urbanisation unfolding on a territory in which the majority of the residing population were either nomadic pastoralists or subsistence farmers (Bensaâd 2008; Choplin and Lombard 2008). By 1988, there were 51 330 foreign nationals residing in Mauritania, 81.6 percent of whom originated from Senegal, Mali and Guinea Conakry, representing 2.75 percent of the residing population (Di Bartolomeo *et al.* 2010). An illustrative example of how these predominantly West African migrant workers have slotted into the urban social landscape in Mauritania can be found in the example of a *bidhân* tribe named the *Awlâd Bousba*'. At the moment of independence, those members whose families had been engaged in intra and trans-Saharan trade formed part of a regionally dispersed commercial network which proved highly adaptive to a nascent capitalism in the country (McDougall 2012: 49). A legacy of such historic trade relations, this capacity for regional mobility has worked to the advantage of what Ali Bensaâd (2011) describes as "globalised tribes" such as the *Awlâd Bousba*'. Equally crucial to their business model, he observes, is the role of West African migrant labour within it. In order to handle maintenance and distribution aspects of their affairs, the *Awlâd Bousba*' often turn to Senegalese mechanics. Within the Le Ksar area of Nouakchott today, one can find a bustling district of shops dealing in the sale and repair of car parts, overwhelmingly staffed by Senegalese migrant workers.

⁷ From 487 334 in 1977 to 225 238 in 1988 (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2015: 10).

⁸ This is not to say that urban expansion has swallowed nomadic life whole. On the contrary, as Sébastien Boulay (2006) has shown, Nouakchott's residential architecture innovatively integrates elements of nomadic material culture.

This relationship between *bidhân* owners of capital and West African migrant labourers is replicated across numerous sectors of the Mauritanian economy, and it is in many ways epitomised in the construction sector. Indeed, Senegalese migrant labour became a defining feature of the construction sector at the very moment of its increasing informalisation in the 1970's (Theunynck and Widmer 1987: 15), when the drought-induced sedenterisation detailed above generated a proliferation of shantytowns on the city outskirts. In this sense, there is a clear overlap between the conditions of West African migrant labourers in Nouakchott and those of the “internal” rural migrants who fled a rapidly deteriorating nomadic milieu to settle on the city's outskirts. Underlying the collective experience of each is a Saharan ecological crisis which swelled the urban margins, generating a new urban class position shared between nationals and non-nationals, thereby undermining the inclusive and exclusive boundaries of the Mauritanian national imaginary. Furthermore, informalised urban development and expansion occurs at the upper echelons of the property ladder in addition to its bottom rungs (cf. Choplin 2006). And at this level too, migrant workers and the Mauritanian urban poor are equally implicated, as is the Saharan context in which this expansion occurs, as we will now see.

The Saharan Mediation of Social Relations and Tensions

Just west of Nouakchott's central market, at a hectic junction named Clinique, cars, carts, and rickshaws each nudge and vie their way through the four-way intersection. On the footpaths framing Clinique junction and flanking the streets that lead away from it, there unfolds an expansive informal vending-scape (Eidse *et al.* 2016). Here one can purchase mobile phones, sim cards, sunglasses, clothes, and perfumes, to name but a few of the items on sale. Circulating in a relatively young urban environment, these consumer commodities are invariably wrapped up in the social transformations outlined above. Sim cards for sale at places like Clinique are but one iteration of a series of modern consumer commodities that have emerged over time on the urban informal vending-scape, cumulatively transforming the streets of Nouakchott from mere functions of urban space into places of social interaction (Boulay 2011). These relatively new forms of urban habitation do not, however, wholesale replace their rural nomadic forebearers, but rather reproduce them in novel form (Boulay 2006). For alongside modern consumer items, street vendors here also specialise in the sale of all manner of “traditional” goods, such as mint, couscous, the *miswak*, the tooth brushing twig favoured by nomadic populations and recommended by the Prophet Muhammad, and *tejamakht*, a drink made from the powder of the baobab tree.

In addition to informal street vendors, the pavements of Clinique junction become crowded from the early hours of the morning each day with people gathered in the hope of finding construction work. Here, people hang around

individually and in groups waiting for potential employers to pass, sometimes brandishing an object, such as a paint brush or an electric cable, to signal their particular trade niche to them. Like the majority of street vendors at Clinique, those clustered at the labour-pick up site are typically either West African migrant workers, from Senegal, Mali and Guinea, or Mauritanian nationals of *hartâni* or Fulani background. Of course, the Fula have an internal hierarchy of their own (cf. Kane 2005) and are increasingly represented across diverse echelons of Mauritanian social strata, as are the *harâtîn* (Wiley 2018). But within the context of the labour-pick up at Clinique, it is primarily Mauritanians of these backgrounds that figure alongside migrant workers, a combined legacy of the historic marginalisation of the Fula and the exclusions that inhere in the transition to a post-slavery society (Ciavolella 2010; McDougall 2021; Wiley 2018). On the other hand, the Mauritanian *bidhân* usually only enters the scene as the owner of one of the many formal boutiques lining the footpath, or as a prospective employer. The national unifying conceits of the “bridge” trope are thus challenged at places like Clinique, where certain disenfranchised Mauritanian day labourers share a clear material footing with migrant workers vis-à-vis employers⁹.

While thus undermining the conceits of the national “bridge” trope, material conditions at Clinique also drive the development of the city which serves as this imaginary’s spatial expression. Indeed, it is at places such as Clinique that the labour required for Nouakchott’s urban expansion is sourced. Workers here relayed numerous experiences to me of being recruited to work as bricklayers, plumbers, tilers, or painters on the sites of the many extravagant villas that have long been an aesthetic feature of the district of Tevregh Zeina and certain upscale quarters in Le Ksar. A young Malian named Ousmane¹⁰, for instance, spoke of working for a Senegalese foreman on the construction site of a wealthy *bidhân* property owner in Tevregh Zeina. The fact that Ousmane, a recently arrived migrant from Mali, was working for a more established migrant foreman from Senegal reflects internal hierarchies within the migrant community in Nouakchott, similar to those which structure many other urban contexts in the region (Scheele 2012: 202). Ousmane’s job proceeded at an intolerably slow and erratic pace, however; he would often come back to the Clinique labour pick-up to find alternative opportunities, as

⁹ This is not to suggest that all *bidhân* belong exclusively to the employer and business owner class. On the contrary, many of Nouakchott’s peripheral slums are populated by *bidhân* whose family fled drought, as noted above (cf. Vium 2016). There is, however, a curious absence of *bidhân* within the specific employment niches of brick laying, plumbing, and associated construction and manual labour jobs.

¹⁰ All names of people in this article are pseudonyms.

work was repeatedly halted because of a lack of financial resources on the part of the *bidhân* property owner¹¹.

Workers at Clinique are also recruited to real estate developments that are pushing the frontiers of the city farther north into the desert, underscoring the Sahara's role within the city's ambivalent relationship to the national imaginary. This is well illustrated in the residential quarter of Sukuk, an investment initiative of the Mauritanian company FCI and its real estate subsidiary "I'mar". Located on the city's northern outskirts, and therefore lacking any physical barriers to expansion thanks to Nouakchott's desert location (Choplin and Franck 2010: 7), the Sukuk development provides ample room to channel the Gulf capital that the I'mar project is charged with attracting. Like many other international construction projects in the city, this urban desert project is constructed on the ground by the same conglomeration of migrant workers and disenfranchised Mauritanian nationals which, as suggested above, belie the conceits of the Mauritanian national imaginary. Having furnished the Mauritanian national imaginary with a physical location that dampened external geopolitical pressures, the Sahara Desert thus also mediates the social relations by which this imaginary in practice fragments.

This mediation applies not only to Nouakchott's physical urban expansion, but also to construction sites farther beyond the city peripheries, and the broader constellation of social relations in Mauritania that such sites represent. Another young man from Mali, for instance, told of how he and three others were brought to work on the site of what he described as a huge house outside Nouakchott, halfway to Rosso, which was—as he put it—in the middle of the desert. The house belonged to a minister and was, according to the young Malian, even bigger than his primary residence in Tévrehg Zeina. Such connections between remote desert sites and political elites in the capital of Nouakchott are an expression of the spatially dispersed nature of political power in the country, as Clément Lechartier (2005) has shown. While political power may be concentrated in Nouakchott, it does not emanate outward to neglected rural peripheries. Rather, the presence of extravagant villas in such remote desert locations are but one element of a broader suite of far flung assets that include wells, herds, religious centres, etc., which collectively form centres of power in their own right (Lechartier 2005). This spatial dispersal of power thus transcends rural-urban divides, connecting desert villas to upscale neighbourhoods of Nouakchott, and consolidating a social hierarchy between political elites and a multi-national workforce on the urban margins.

¹¹ This tendency for construction in Mauritania to proceed in a piece-meal fashion in accordance with the owner's financial resources is not confined to the *bidhân* elite. Within the *harâtîn* communities Katherine Ann Wiley (2018) has written about, houses are also built in stages while being inhabited, the remaining sections being built when the financial resources become available.

Just how the Sahara meditates this relationship between the city of Nouakchott, the Mauritanian national imaginary, and the urban social schisms by which it fragments can be illustrated with reference to E.A. McDougall's (2012) reflections on the condition of being Saharan. Being of the Sahara, in this reading, includes being enmeshed within the hierarchical strata of the region's labour systems, which were defining features of Saharan social life throughout the XVIIth, XVIIIth, and XIXth centuries. The presence of a multi-national urban informal day workforce in the capital today illustrates "the adaptability of Saharan labor systems to the changing realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Ibid.: 51). Amongst such "changing realities" might be counted the emergence of urban capitalist social relations, the substantial presence within this urban milieu of a migrant workforce, and the gradual but secular dissolution of slavery as a social institution. On the other hand, the specificity of a Saharan labour system which transcends these features can be discerned in their reproduction of a social hierarchy organised along conspicuously racialised lines, in which light-skinned *bidhan* property owners and commerçants rely upon and exploit the labour of darker-skinned manual workers. This set of relations is neither static nor permanent, as evidenced in the addition of migrant workers into the XXth and XXIst century iterations of this Saharan labour system, but this very addition allows it to structurally mimic more stringent, anterior relations of bondage and servitude.

It should be stressed, however, that the exploitative relationship between property owners of the ruling elite and informal migrant workers in Nouakchott is not absolute. Indeed, the dynamics of the labour pick up at a given moment may be such that workers can simply refuse to take up an offer of employment. On several occasions at the labour-pick up in Nouakchott, I observed workers declining to take up a construction job being offered by a property owner, because it was too far outside the city. After a negotiation between one prospective employer and a Malian migrant worker ended without agreement, for instance, the latter said to me: "They live too far away. It's on the road to Nouadhibou but far! There's too much sand out there".

So, while the contemporary schism between the urban poor and the property owning elite refracts more antiquated labour systems of the Sahara, this power arrangement is no more stable today than it ever was. Indeed, another feature of the condition of being Saharan highlighted by McDougall (Ibid.) is the negotiation and rearrangement of power structures that have long characterised social systems in the region (cf. Cleaveland 2002). In the final section, we turn to examining how migrant workers and others on the urban margins in Nouakchott make innovative use of the desert environment to interpret and internally navigate their social position. In doing so, they further nuance and reframe the national imaginary born of the mid-XXth century geopolitical compromise detailed in the first section.

Desert as Repository of an Alter-Imaginary

East of Clinique, at another labour pick-up colloquially named ‘the Church’ (figure 1)¹², I met a young migrant worker named Hakim. Originally



Figure 1. Workers gather by the Nouakchott labour-pick up known as ‘the Church’.
Photo by author.

from Guinea, Hakim had spent two years in Nouakchott working in the dyeing component of the city’s garment industry, hand-dyeing the women’s *malahfa* and men’s *dara’a*¹³ associated with Mauritania’s vibrant dress culture. His descriptions of the division of labour within this component of the sector further illustrates the peculiarity of the Saharan labour system that mediates contemporary experiences of labour exploitation at the lower echelons of the social hierarchy: “The white Moors, they bring the money, but they don’t know how to do it. It’s only us who know how to do it,” he claimed, suggesting the wealthy *bidhân* to occupy the role of attracting capital, as distinct from the class of migrant workers, *harâtîn* and women who typically carry out the

¹² Due to its proximity to the city’s primary Christian Church.

¹³ These are the *hassâniyya* names of the dress conventionally worn by women and men, respectively, in Mauritania.

manual tasks of dyeing and sewing. In this light, contemporary urban social relations appear to draw from more deep-seated racialised and gendered stratifications, which are, however, also reshaped through contemporary usage of Mauritanian dress (Wiley 2019). As business slowed following Ramadan, Hakim lost his contract with the “white Moor” owner of the dyeing shop in which he worked. For this reason, he came to the labour pick-up point at the Church, where we met.

Here too, he soon found himself slotted within a familiar set of hierarchical social relations, which were not without their moments of tension and contestation. He told me of going to work beyond the peripheries of Nouakchott, on the construction site of another *bidhân* property owner. According to Hakim, this property owner was a member of the gendarmerie, “a white Moor”, and “*un grand patron*” (very rich). Another worker who already knew this *bidhân* gendarme had arranged for Hakim to come to his construction site. But Hakim wasn’t happy with the contract he had negotiated. They were meant to be there for three days, but ended up on the site for eight. They spent the extra five days there because the Mauritanian *bidhân* gendarme wanted them to do an additional job which, according to Hakim, hadn’t been discussed originally. Now, they were effectively being denied the money for the first two agreed-upon jobs if they refused to do this one too. The odds seemed stacked against him; he couldn’t go to the police because as a non-citizen he felt he would be discriminated against. Moreover, the fact that they were out in the desert beyond the capital meant he was dependent upon his employer to bring him back to the city once the work was completed.

In order to help me understand the contours of this dispute as we were talking, Hakim hunched down on his knees, and began tracing lines and boxes in the sand with his finger to indicate the terms under which he took up the job, the new terms that were thrust upon them afterwards by the employer, and how this resulted in the impasse that he experienced on this desert construction site. While the desert environment arguably compounded his experience of labour exploitation, it also subsequently afforded narrative and communicative utility in relaying this experience. This is far from an isolated example. Indeed, at the Church, the sandy terrain on which informal workers spend the day often serves the purpose of a canvass or a flipchart, which orients conversations and debates around anything from negotiating tactics at the labour pick up, to how to best circumvent the Spanish-Moroccan border fences at Ceuta and Melilla, or the right moment in life to get married.

It was, for instance, in this fashion that another Mauritanian worker, named Moulaye, chose to describe his background to me. Gregarious and brimming with opinions, Moulaye was a regular feature of the social scene at the Church. His particular trade niche was not construction, however, but the washing of cars. In addition to being a labour pick-up point, the laneways next to the

Church serve as a site in which informal car washing and window tinting services are offered, services for which Nouakchott's dusty streets and open glaring skies create ample demand. Having spent four years doing informal car washing at the Church, Moulaye was well versed in the tricks of the trade when we met. He had even, he claimed, taught many others how the job worked, providing informal apprenticeships to companions on the urban margins. Within this informal car washing operation too, those buying the service are usually, though not exclusively, Mauritanian *bidhân*, while those providing it are invariably either West African migrants or Mauritanian Fula and *harâtîn*.

In order to explain how he fit within this multi-national ethno-linguistic patchwork, Moulaye also turned the sand underfoot into canvass while talking to me. He is from a region on the Mali-Mauritania border, he explained, with one parent born on the Mauritanian side and the other on the Malian side. Both, however, are of the Fula ethnicity. To convey these nuances of his identity to me, Moulaye kneeled down and traced a line in the desert sands to represent the international border separating the two countries in which his mother and father were born, and then gestured to how their ethnic parentage sits astride it. It is fitting that Moulaye chose the medium of sand underfoot to show how his Fulani ethnic background straddles this territorial border. Itself little more than a line in the sand when it was drawn by French authorities in 1944 (Jus 2003), one of the explicit objectives of this colonial border was the incorporation of as many "Moors" as possible within the colony of Mauritania (Antil 2004: 54), so as to delimit and order space in accordance with the ethnic groups that were perceived to inhabit it (Jus 2003: 51)¹⁴.

This colonial conflation of ethno-racial categories and proto-national ones would soon find expression in the independent Mauritanian state (Villasante Cervello 2006, 2007). Indeed, while geopolitical dynamics at the moment of independence informed Nouakchott's spatial location, the symbolic "bridge" trope represented by this location was also a means of rhetorically reconciling an ethno-racial cleavage between "white Moors" and "blacks" that had been ramped up during the colonial era (Ould Cheikh 2004; Ould Saad 2004; Robinson 2000). As we have seen, this reconciliation was ultimately undermined, as Mauritania increasingly turned in the 1970's toward a process of "Arabisation", which elevated the *bidhân* to the apex of the nation-state's structure and, by extension, its national imaginary. While upon independence, Nouakchott served as the spatial expression of this imaginary, the urban social

¹⁴ There were, of course, additional logics and objectives at play in the drawing of this particular border. Depending on the precise location and moment in question, these varied from budgetary considerations, the containment of religious figures and movements deemed troublesome, and separating warring tribal factions from one another (Jus 2003: 85, 86). The ethno-racial template for territorial demarcation did often, however, have a pride of place within colonial boundary calculations.

relations that have since driven its expansion demonstrate this imaginary to fragment along ethnic and class lines in its embodiment.

In the process, West African migrant workers such as Hakim and Afro-Mauritanian Fula like Moulaye have been relegated to the national and social margins where, by virtue of this position, they furnish the labour that drives Nouakchott's urban desert expansion. For Hakim, the sand underfoot offered a medium for relaying the contours of labour disputes that drive this urban desert expansion, and which embody these abstract ethno-national categories. Moulaye, meanwhile, problematised these neat ethno-national categorical assumptions, by simply drawing another line in the sand to illustrate how his ethnic belonging does not align with the colonially inherited assumption of linearly demarcated national identities. In this sense, within the desert sands of Nouakchott can be found an alternative collective imaginary, one drawn at the everyday, intimate, frontiers of the geopolitical dynamics that informed the national imaginary claimed by the state upon independence.

Of course, this is a far less stable imaginary. After all, the communicative traces that Moulaye, Hakim, and so many others draw in the desert sand in Nouakchott are ephemeral. They last no longer than it takes for a gust of wind to blow, the tyres of a car to pass, or the footfall of workers to scramble over them in the rush to haggle with an employer. The ephemeral quality of these



Figure 2: The new footpath and fence around the square at the Church. Photo by author.

communicative traces is further sharpened by the very urban development process in which those in the informal economy are swept up as reluctant participants. As can be seen in figure 2, the public square at the site known as ‘the Church’ was being redeveloped during my fieldwork period in Mauritania. Eight months before this photo was taken, the road and the square were separated by nothing but a sandy track. Now, a concrete footpath had been laid and a wrought iron fence erected atop it. This construction process thus effaced some of the sand canvass in which migrant workers’ ephemeral communicative traces are drawn, replacing it with a concrete footpath. Of course, there is much more sand canvass to be used in this particular site, but this development might also be viewed as a microcosm, or at least a metaphor, of the dynamics underpinning Nouakchott’s urban desert expansion. For once a given construction site or urban development project is completed—be it this footpath, a villa, or a new shopping centre—the labour exploitation and contestation that is a necessary component of the process becomes objectified, reified, and, as such, rendered invisible by it.

In this light, notwithstanding their physical ephemerality, the communicative traces drawn by migrant workers and the urban poor in the sand can be seen to posit an alternative imaginary to the national one claimed by the state at the moment of independence. This is so because they preserve in narrative memory and visual expression what is swallowed in the urban development process, namely the lived experiences of labour exploitation and social marginalisation that is innate to this process. As we have seen, these experiences are a feature of the social relations by which the Mauritanian national imaginary fractures along ethnic and class lines, and which drive the development of the city that serves as this imaginary’s spatial expression. By giving voice to the tensions and conflicts that are rendered invisible in the urban development process, and by conveying family lineages that problematise the colonially inherited ethno-national logic claimed by the Mauritanian state upon independence, these communicative traces thus represent an alternative imaginary. Given the medium in which it is conveyed, the desert is just as key to this alternative Saharan imaginary as it is to the official Mauritanian one and the social relations that embody it.



The Sahara Desert has been a formative aspect within the elaboration of a Mauritanian national imaginary, the social relations that embody this imaginary, and the urban development process in Nouakchott that serves as its spatial expression. As demonstrated, Nouakchott’s otherwise impractical Saharan location made it an ideal location as capital city of Mauritania, as it provided a geopolitical compromise between secessionist demands emanating from the north and the south of the newly born Mauritanian nation-state. This

trope proved less successful, however, when the ethno-national quality of these external secessionist claims manifested within the boundaries of Mauritania, and in Nouakchott itself. The imaginary's fragmentation along ethnic lines soon became apparent in the process of "Arabisation", while its class fissures manifested in the city's exponential expansion into the desert, driven by informal shantytowns at one end of the property spectrum and international real-estate developments at the other. In the latter regard, Nouakchott's symbolic role within the national imaginary is further challenged by the presence of a multi-national pool of informal day labourers that drive this urban expansion. The city displays, in other words, an ambivalence between being the spatial expression of the Mauritanian national imaginary, on the one hand, and the site of the urban disparities that fragment this imaginary, on the other. Being the locus of a social system that precedes these XXIst century processes of urbanisation and capitalist development and which mediates their unfolding, the Sahara undergirds this stark ambivalence.

At the same time, the desert sands offer fleeting means to narrate experiences of urban labour exploitation and to reframe the ethno-national identities in which they are couched. The urban development process attempts to dominate and swallow up the desert environment, replacing its sands with concrete. Migrant workers, Mauritanian *harâtîn*, and Afro-Mauritians are caught up in this process, by virtue of their peripheral positioning within the Mauritanian social structure and its attendant national imaginary. In this light, their practice of tracing communicative lines in the sand can be seen to posit an alternative imaginary to that forged from the geopolitical compromise that gave birth to the Mauritanian one. And more generally, the practice of drawing communicative lines and images in sand stretches deep into human history, acting as a technological precursor to acrylic paint, and is widespread across the world, being a medium for Tuareg writing of Tifinagh (Claudot-Hawad 2005), Navajo ritual drawings, aboriginal sand paintings, and Tibetan sand-mandalas (cf. Boulay and Gélard 2013)¹⁵. In the context of Mauritania, while the state's national imaginary was born of the geopolitical compromise furnished by Nouakchott's Saharan environment, this desert environment also offers a means by which this national imaginary can be made anew on the urban margins.

¹⁵ Regarding the latter, the very ephemerality of the medium of sand in fact forms a crucial part of the ritual itself (LaPoint 2016).

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