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The proximity of the past in Mauritania

EU border externalisation and its colonial antecedents

Hassan Ould Moctar¹

Cet article évalue le processus d'externalisation des frontières de l'Union européenne (UE) en Mauritanie à la lumière de certaines transformations qui eurent lieu pendant la période coloniale. Il articule ces deux moments historiques en mettant l'accent sur trois transformations socio-spatiales produites sous le colonialisme, et il démontre comment elles ont été réaffirmées par l'externalisation des frontières européennes. Il s'agit de la délimitation territoriale, la mobilité des personnes, et l'appartenance collective. Cette analyse ne sous-estime pas l'agence des acteurs étatiques dans le processus d'externalisation. En effet, bien que le modèle linéaire de délimitation territoriale soit une imposition coloniale, il y a maintenant une convergence d'intérêts autour de son renforcement. En outre, pendant sa phase d'après-crise, l'externalisation est marquée par le désaccord et la contestation entre l'UE et les acteurs étatiques mauritaniens. Ces derniers cherchent à s'approprier les catégories et technologies de l'externalisation à leurs propres fins. Finalement, on verra que l'étendue de cette capacité d'action étatique reste conditionnée par la transformation coloniale de l'organisation socio-spatiale.

Taking as its backdrop certain transformations entailed by the colonial encounter, this article explores European Union (EU) border externalisation in Mauritania. It draws a parallel between these two historical instances by highlighting three socio-spatial changes brought about by colonialism, and then illustrating how they have been reaffirmed through EU border externalisation. These domains are territorial delimitation, human mobility, and collective belonging. Such a perspective does not remove the agency of state actors from the externalisation process. Indeed, while the linear model of territorial delimitation was a colonial imposition, there is now a convergence of interest around its reinforcement. Furthermore, externalisation in its post-crisis phase becomes characterised by disagreement and contestation between EU and Mauritanian state actors, as the latter appropriate categories and technologies of externalisation for their own purposes. Nonetheless, it will be shown that the scope in which this agency is enacted is ultimately conditioned by the colonial shift in socio-spatial organisation.

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Introduction

Colonial rule in Mauritania problematised and regulated the human mobility that was an organic part of nomadic social life in the Sahara. Just over 100 years later, European Union (EU) external border policy reframed migration which had previously played an undetected but structural role in Mauritania as “irregular”, and thus in need of management (Bensaâd, 2008; Choplin and Lombard, 2008). This serves as a window into deeper parallels between the colonial encounter and the EU border externalisation process in Mauritania. In particular, this paper highlights certain approaches to socio-spatial organisation whose origins lie in the colonial era, but which have been reaffirmed by the externalisation process. I argue that the colonial encounter was the foundational socio-spatial shift upon which border externalisation builds. In highlighting these colonial antecedents, the aim is not to posit a singular cause from which all else has since flowed. Rather, it is to point to the primordial conditioning by the colonial encounter. The word “antecedent” is thus used to draw out historical parallels with a contemporary phenomenon, without flattening out all that exists between them. It follows that state actors are not mere passive recipients of (neo)colonial dictates. Indeed, they actively partake in and uphold socio-spatial arrangements whose origins lie in the colonial encounter.

This focus on the *longue durée* is often absent from the literature on EU border externalisation. The reconfigurations of sovereignty entailed in externalisation policies have been highlighted (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014, 2015; Vives, 2017), but without reference to more deep-seated historical processes. This is also the case for analyses of asylum and refugee law and externalisation (Hyndman and Mountz, 2008; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012; Triandafyllidou, 2014) and ethnographic analyses of the EU border regime on the ground (Andersson, 2014). On the other hand, calls have been made to decolonise critical migration and border scholarship (Korvensyrja, 2017), by highlighting the agency of third country states in navigating the dictates of EU external border policies (El Qadim, 2014; Cassarino, 2018; Karadağ, 2019; Stock et al., 2019). Rather than viewing these approaches as mutually exclusive, this article follows the observation that “from colonial past to current European externalization politics, local partners are far from passive socialisees of external dictates” (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019: 3). From this point of view, the analytical means of discerning the scope of third country agency is achieved through an inquiry into the lasting constitutive effects of colonial encounters upon contemporary policies.

This paper adopts such a line of inquiry by first highlighting three transitions brought about under colonialism in the interrelated domains of territorial delimitation, human mobility, and racialised belonging. The second section then introduces the border externalisation process in Mauritania, before analysing this ongoing process through the lens of these three socio-spatial dimensions. To do this I draw upon eleven months of fieldwork in Mauritania (from September 2017 to August 2018), during which semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of officials working in the domains of migration and border management. I also draw upon analysis of the Mauritanian national migration strategy document (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010a). Externalisation emerges from this discussion not as a top-down imposition upon docile third country

actors, but as a process marked by appropriation and contestation on the part of state actors. Crucially, however, this state agency ultimately reaffirms the particular approach to socio-spatial organisation introduced by the colonial encounter.

The colonial encounter

Before emphasising the pivotal consequences of colonialism, it must be stated that this is not simply a rehashing of the worn-out claim that colonial rule imposed “arbitrary” borders in Africa. This claim often implies, as a solution, the redrawing of borders so that they more accurately enclose “natural” cultural realities (Zeller, 2011: 8), and therefore overlooks the artificial nature of all borders (Mamdani, 2005: 4). Furthermore, the colonial context represents just one, sometimes fleeting, moment in a much longer history of territoriality and boundary formation (Lefevbre, 2015). It is therefore essential to avoid inflating this moment out of proportion, in the process depicting the coloniser as the sole agent of history (Mezzadra and Rahola, 2006). Indeed, insofar as it was facilitated by local intermediaries (Bennoune, 1978: 36), this transformation in Mauritania was a co-constituted one, as in many other African contexts (Mamdani, 1996). But this fact of co-constitution does not mitigate the qualitative shift entailed by the colonial encounter within the three domains of socio-spatial organisation. As shall be demonstrated, it is not the drawing of the border *tout court* that is of consequence, but rather how this introduction of the linear mode of territorial division interacts with the domains of human mobility and collective belonging.

The creation of the border

The expanse of land comprising the present-day state of Mauritania was given cartographic expression in a plan for colonisation submitted to the French Ministry of Colonies in 1898. The plan mapped the territories to be brought under French control, which it named “*la Mauritanie occidentale*” (Coppolani, 1999). Seven years later, a decree issued on 25 February 1905 set out the first territorial demarcation of this administrative territory. This followed an allegiance to the French on the part of noble families in the Trarza region, for whom raids by northern tribes created an interest in alignment with France. The decree stipulated the Senegal River to form the dividing line between the colonial entities of Senegal and Mauritania, with the city of Saint Louis the designated departure point of this territorial delineation (Ould Saad, 2004).

As colonial conquest proceeded north and east into the Sahara, its logic of linear territorial division followed. The present-day line between Mauritania and Mali was created by colonial decree on 5 July 1944, significantly expanding the geographical scope of the colony of Mauritania into what had hitherto been French Sudanese territory (Antil, 2004). To the northwest, the question of where to draw the line between what were at the time the territories of the Overseas Province of the Spanish Sahara and the northern Saharan portion of French West Africa provoked low-level geopolitical contestation between these two powers. By 1957, an agreement had been reached which would see

the peninsula of Nouadhibou – measuring only around 6 km across – vertically bisected by a territorial dividing line.²

This cursory overview suffices to demonstrate that a linear logic of territorial division had come to dominate this space. This was a marked departure from the territoriality of the “Moorish” Emirates that had governed vast expanses of the area prior to colonisation. In a discussion of the legal and fiscal system of the Trarza Emirate, located in the south east of present-day Mauritania, Muhammed W. As-Sa’d (1989: 57) observes the inherent difficulty in pinning down the geographical extent and delimitation of the Emirate, due to a lack of any consistent demarcation of the Emirate’s frontiers. Cheikh S. B. Kamara and Olivier Leservoisier offer an insight into the nature of the juxtaposition between the territoriality of the Trarza and that introduced under colonial rule:

While for Moorish tribes, frontiers were open and subject to fluctuations according to the state of political relations, the French sought to impose another conception of space, which entailed the precise physical delimitation of territory. (Kamara and Leservoisier, 2000: 191)³

Having been introduced by colonial governance, the linear form of territorial division in Mauritania is sustained by contemporary EU border externalisation. The latter of course differs in many respects from the original colonial imposition of the border form, but in each instance, we see an outward projection from Europe of a particular model of territorial organisation. Both furthermore entailed radical re-regulations of pre-existing modes of human mobility.

Colonial regulation of human mobility

The colonial drawing of linear territorial demarcations immediately posed the problem of how to manage populations who crossed these new lines. This problem was particularly acute in Mauritania, where the vast majority of the colony’s residing population was nomadic. Indeed, in the aforementioned discussion of the Trarza Emirate (Map 1), As-Sa’d (1989) attributes the indiscernibility of frontiers to the nomadism of the Emirate’s inhabitants. Within these “kinetocracies” (Rossi, 2015), transhumance was a bedrock of economic and political governance. But these tendencies were reconfigured by the colonial endeavour; through the very act of naming and treating nomadic groups as populations related to delineated territories, the coloniser bestowed upon itself the mandate of statistically documenting all who resided within its territorial purview. This imperative presupposed a degree of spatial stasis on the part of the population.

² This would afford the Spanish access to the Western side and the rich fish resources of its Atlantic coast. The French, for their part, were ensured access to the coast from the hinterland zones of Idjill and Zouérat, where iron ore extraction operations were getting underway.

³ Translated from French by author.



Map 1. The linear territorial borders of the contemporary Mauritanian nation-state (<https://watchers.news/2011/07/27/worsening-drought-threatens-the-mauritanias-livestock/>).

Three efforts to reconcile nomadic livelihoods with colonial bureaucratic imperatives can be highlighted. Firstly, tribes and groups that moved to districts beyond those in which they had been registered were issued a *laissez-passer* document (Antil, 2004: 55), which allowed movement to be documented and places of residence to be recorded. Information contained in this *laissez-passer* included the chief of the encampment, the names of the chiefs of its constituent tents, the number of inhabitants of each tent, and the number and type of livestock attached to each tent. A second solution, applied in the Gorgol region in the south (Map 1), was the development of agriculture and property rights through the establishment of a land registry. The logic was that the incentive for individual private property would encourage sedentarisation and thus facilitate registration of residents of administrative territories (Kamara and Leservoisier, 2000: 191). A ministerial decree issued to this end on 24 July 1906 offered individuals the opportunity to convert their customary right to a given plot of land into a legal property right. Finally, efforts were also made to regulate the flow of people across the Senegal River following its conversion into a territorial border. Those who resided on one side of the river and cultivated land on the other now found themselves subject to two tax regimes – one imposed on residents of the colony of Senegal, and the other on crops cultivated in Mauritania (Leservoisier, 1994: 61). To avoid this double taxation, people began migrating to the north bank. In order to stymie this flow, the colonial government issued an order on 10 January 1905 decreeing that those who had not been engaged in agricultural activity on the north bank prior to colonisation but who were now crossing the river to work the land would be subject to both tax regimes.

These colonial measures aimed at controlling human mobility prefigure the logic of EU border externalisation, insofar as human mobility now represented a problem, whose solution lay in its institutionalisation and management. This is not to suggest that some form of regulation, or channelling (Vigneswaran and Quirk, 2015), of human mobility was not a feature of the precolonial era: mobility had always been channelled by those who controlled territory, with access to villages, wells, and oases often being granted upon a payment of tribute (Bennoune, 1978: 34). The difference, however, lies in the colonial problematisation of human mobility, and the administrative response generated by this problematisation. This created a path dependency in the realm of migration policy that would prove crucial to the process of border externalisation of a later period. Indeed, the waning of colonial rule in West Africa saw the replacement of the colonial *laissez-passer* document with a national identity card in 1946 (Gary-Tounkara, 2009: 13), the latter being a key mechanism by which the state could judge movement as legitimate or illegitimate.

Racialising territorial belonging

The measures discussed above had consequences beyond their specific administrative goals which became most apparent in the long-lasting racialised effects of the implantation of the border. As French colonial rule in West Africa advanced inland during the latter half of the 19th century, the Senegal River came to represent a dividing line between “black” colonial subjects and “white Moors” who were yet to be pacified (Ould Saad, 2004: 94). Colonial knowledge production contributed to this racialisation through the

depiction of distinct modes of religious practice in operation on either side of the Senegal River: a “black” Islam to the south and a “Moorish” Islam to the north, with the “Moorish” variant being viewed as the superior and more authentic of the two (Robinson, 2000: 77). According to Abdel W. Ould Cheikh (2004: 115), however, this racialisation of religious practice “corresponds more to the exigencies of border construction [...] than to sociological or doctrinal realities”. Such exigencies can be seen in the 1898 plan for colonisation, which was the first time the name “Mauritanie” was used in reference to this particular geographical expanse of territory. By naming this territory with reference to its Arabo-Berber inhabitants – or so-called “Moors” – the colonial administration endowed its racial imaginary with territorial legitimacy.

To understand what this meant in practice, we can return to the problem of regulating cross border migration flows from the southern banks to the north banks of the Senegal River Valley. Upon realising that the colonial order of January 1905 had failed to stem the migrations flows to the north bank, the administration adopted another approach. In December 1905, it was ordered that all “*indigènes* of the black African race residing in Mauritanian territory” would henceforth be subject to the same tax regime as that of Senegal (colonial administrator’s report quoted in Leservoisier, 1994: 62). “Black African” populations based north of the Senegal River were now deemed tax resident in Senegal, despite their physical residence within the territories of Mauritania. This now appeared the most efficient means of preventing the outflow of valley residents from Senegal and ensuring ongoing surplus extraction. But in effect, a novel link between race and territory had been created. The category of “black African” contained within the 1905 decree did not distinguish between ethno-linguistic groups living on the Senegal River Valley, such as Wolof, Soninké and Fulani. But the legacy of this racial polarisation would particularly afflict Mauritanian Fulani who, as Riccardo Ciavolella (2010) has shown, have been long marginalised by the Mauritanian state.

None of this is to say that racial distinctions between “white Moors” and “black Africans” were created by the colonial encounter. As James Webb (1995) has illustrated, Arabo-Berber pastoralists in the 17th century came to distinguish themselves from sedentary African farmers in terms of “white” and “black” peoples (Ahmed Salem, 2004: 17). Indeed, *Beydhane*, the word designating the “Moor” class in the Mauritanian Hassaniya dialect, is derived from the Arabic word *Abyadh*, meaning “white”. The idea of racial distinction between peoples based on geographical location thus precedes the colonial era in West Africa. The point here has been to highlight the origins of the assumption of a natural congruence between linearly defined territory and a particular racialised group. In other words, the pivotal nature of colonialism lies not in the fabrication of a racial divide, nor the instrumentalisation of an existing one, but in the insertion of this divide within an entirely novel territorial form. We now turn to how EU border externalisation has interacted with this arrangement.

EU border externalisation in Mauritania

“We’re here to export our system.” This was how a member of the *Guardia Civil*⁴ stationed in Nouadhibou, a port city in northern Mauritania (Map 1), explained their mandate (interview with *Guardia Civil* officer, Nouadhibou, 7 April 2018). While he had only recently arrived, the presence of *Guardia Civil* officers in the city has been a permanent feature of the urban landscape since the year 2006, when irregular arrivals on the Canary Islands from Nouadhibou dramatically increased (Carrera, 2007: 13). A formal request by the Spanish government in May 2006 resulted in the launch of the maiden naval mission of Frontex, the European border agency. The objective of Operations Hera I and II was the prevention of irregular migration to Spain. In the case of Hera I, this was done solely by identifying irregular migrants in the Canary Islands. Hera II, on the other hand, shifted the focus offshore, by seeking to dissuade boats from leaving the West African coastline. In order to process those detained in Spain and intercepted at sea, Spanish authorities converted an old school in Nouadhibou into Mauritania’s first migrant detention centre (Amnesty International, 2008: 22). Border externalisation in Mauritania was underway.

This was only the beginning of the project of “exporting the system”, however. Beyond its crisis phase, border externalisation in Mauritania has been sustained through the publication of a comprehensive national migration strategy (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010a). Drawn up by EU technical experts in 2010 and jointly published by the EU and the Mauritanian government, the national migration strategy is a perpetuation of border externalisation and an expansion of its remit. While it is intended to be “comprehensive”, its implementation in practice has been rather uneven. The strategy budgeted 12,900,000 € for projects, but only half of this has been released (interview with national coordinator of migration strategy, Nouakchott, 29 March 2018). This is because funding is only released on condition of satisfactory project progress and completion (interview with EU technical advisor who worked on the strategy, Nouakchott, 26 March 2018). In what follows, I discuss aspects of the strategy that have overcome this sense of inertia through the lens of the three domains of socio-spatial organisation that were traced in the first section of the paper.

In framing the discussion in such a fashion, the aim is not to suggest a singular colonial cause from which all else flows, but it is to suggest that contemporary policies and practices are necessarily conditioned by earlier ones. As we progress through each of these three dimensions, the locus of agency moves from the international to the nation-state level. At the same time, however, the conditions in which this agency is exercised will be shown to be those inaugurated by the colonial project. By the end of this narrative, the EU will have disappeared completely from the scene, with the Mauritanian state now

⁴ The *Guardia Civil* is a Spanish police agency organised under a military structure. Unlike other police bodies, they can be deployed overseas. They are under the authority of the Spanish Ministry of Interior when patrolling Spanish territory, and under the Ministry of Defence when deployed overseas (interview with *Guardia Civil* officer, Nouadhibou, 7 April 2018).

fully in charge of upholding these conditions. This thus resolves any tension between highlighting the ongoing relevance of the colonial shift and acknowledging the agency of post-colonial state actors.

Upgrading border infrastructure

Perhaps more than any other component of the EU migration strategy, the border infrastructure upgrade project has seen significant progress and coordination between actors in Mauritania. It emerged from the strategy's 4th strategic axis⁵ – “controlling migration flows” – and envisioned providing Mauritanian authorities with “the technical means necessary for better checks on flows of entries and exits on state territory” (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010a: 76). Following the efforts taken against irregular migrants attempting to reach the Canary Islands post-2006, the strategy document explains (*ibid.*), the Mauritanian government decreed the creation of 45 new mandatory entry points into the country. This would serve to better control entry and exit from state territory through the standardisation of data systems. Border externalisation has therefore paved the way for an infrastructural and technological fortification of the state's colonially endowed territorial borders.

A range of intermediary bodies have availed of EU funding to facilitate this endeavour, constructing and equipping some border posts from scratch, and revamping others. This involves coordination between the EU, which generally provides funds and coordinates logistics, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which works on project implementation in various pre-selected areas, and individual states such as Germany, France, and Japan. Such border management projects are the IOM's biggest area of intervention in Mauritania (interview with former IOM Mauritania head of mission, Nouakchott, 28 February 2018). This intervention can involve equipping border posts through the installation of the IOM's Personal Identification and Registration System (PIRS), a border management technology designed in-house by the IOM (Frowd, 2014: 10). Additionally, the IOM regularly organises border and migration management workshops and training for Mauritanian security forces, delivered by international experts (IOM, 2015). As a result of these efforts, according to one such expert (interview, Nouakchott, 21 March 2018), Mauritania now has the “most advanced” border management regime in West Africa, with 48 exclusive legal entry points into state territory.

While the asymmetries of the externalisation process are manifest in the border infrastructure project, the Mauritanian state has an active interest in it. The government has acted as the lead coordinator in the construction of 5 out of 48 new posts. In such cases, the coordinating state body has been the Borders and Land Affairs Board (direction des Frontières et Affaires foncières) within the Ministry of Interior. This body furthermore

⁵ Projects created by the strategy were grouped under four “strategic axes”: 1) the institutional framework for managing and measuring migration, 2) migration and development, 3) fundamental rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and 4) controlling migration flows.

determines the exact location of *all* border posts, beyond the five for which it acted as lead coordinator. This is because state officials have access to the information required to proceed with the upgrading of a particular post, such as whether the location hosts an electricity network, and whether there is a water source nearby (interview with Director of the Borders and Land Affairs Board, Nouakchott, 11 July 2018). In addition, the data entered at each post is run through the centralised system of the state police headquarters, the DGSN (direction générale de Sécurité nationale). Far from being an imposition from above, then, national and international interests have coalesced around this reinforcement of the colonially inherited linear border form.

This convergence of interest does not, however, mean that relations have always run smoothly. Evoking “the complexities of Mauritanian society”, a former IOM head of mission said “things take time here, and you need lots of patience and diplomatic skills and liaison skills, basically, in order to get things done” (interview, Nouakchott, 28 February 2018). For several EU officials, these difficulties are reflective of divergences from rule of law and governance norms, with experts on separate occasions referring to the Mauritanian state as a “military democracy” (interviews, Nouakchott, with EU technical advisor, 11 March 2018, and EU delegation official, 30 March 2018). In the eyes of the national coordinator of the strategy, difficulties in relations are a symptom of the disparity between the Mauritania government and what he described as “the biggest bureaucracy in the world” (interview, Nouakchott, 29 March 2018). Being reprimanded for failing to follow procedural protocol is particularly jarring for local civil servants when the source of admonishment is French: “Since we are a former colony of France, it is very poorly perceived” (*ibid.*).

The asymmetric relations enshrined by the colonial encounter are thus not far from the minds of many civil servants in Mauritania. At the same time, however, such divergences open up windows for state agency to be enacted. Indeed, the task of controlling irregular migration necessitates reinforcing certain instruments of state control, which states can use to their own benefit. The buy-in of third countries in externalisation’s struggle against the irregular migrant thus necessarily opens up a window for third-country state actors. We now turn to how this agency was enacted in this case.

Managing irregular migration

As the border spectacle (De Genova, 2002) on the Canary Islands faded, the task of preventing irregular migration gradually shifted from the international level to the Mauritanian state. The nature of this transition is encapsulated in the fate of the migrant detention centre constructed by Spain in Nouadhibou. Reports of abuse at the centre generated criticism by human rights groups (Amnesty International, 2008: 22; Association malienne des expulsés et al., 2008: 26), and European Parliamentary delegation missions (Panzeri, 2010: 11). The migration strategy document acknowledges these concerns, calling for dialogue so that “a consensual solution can be put in place concerning the detention centre in Nouadhibou” (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010a: 76). At the same time, it criticises Mauritania’s legal framework for managing migration, noting that “the

deterrent aspect of this framework is lacking" (*ibid.*: 19), and laments the "existing statistical production apparatus, which is totally deficient" (*ibid.*: 56). The ideal solution would thus better regulate and deter irregular migrants in Mauritania, while aiding in the production of statistical knowledge.

Just such a solution would emerge in 2012, a year in which the Nouadhibou detention centre was closed, and a new biometric residence permit was introduced for foreign nationals in Mauritania. The residence permit was brought into administrative effect on 13 May 2012 through a circular issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs to diplomatic agencies, international bodies, and community associations (Boulama et al., 2017: 17). It explained that the new residence permit fell within the framework of "controlling and managing migration flows" (Cridem, 2012), thereby sustaining the discourse of externalisation. At the same time, however, the state became the primary author of this aspect of externalisation, a role it adopted by imposing a 30,000 UM (75 €) registration fee and cumbersome list of documentation upon those hoping to obtain a permit.

Migrant community associations soon protested these conditions. On 9 September 2012, the Ministry of Interior announced that grievances had been heard; the fee would be lifted and documentation would now consist solely of a valid national identity card (*Alakhbar*, 2012). Migrant communities were told they had until 15 October to register for a permit, which would moreover be issued within 72 hours. Applications subsequently skyrocketed, but no permits were delivered after the 72-hour timeframe. Finally, on 13 January 2013, community representatives were told that the residence permits were now available to collect, but only upon payment of the original fee of 30,000 UM. When confronted with this change in promises, the governor of Nouakchott responded that the previous declaration that the permit was free was an "error in communication" (*Alakhbar*, 2013). Many within the migrant community now found themselves in the peculiar position of being statistically documented by the state while remaining physically undocumented themselves.

The outcome of this state manoeuvring was an effective illegalisation of the residing foreign population, embedding "deportability" (De Genova, 2002) within the country's major urban centres. In the months following the January consultation, patrols and raids in African neighbourhoods and workplaces became a regular occurrence. Local media reported people being arrested outside of restaurants, in migrant majority neighbourhoods and at informal labour pick-up points (Thiam, 2016). A Malian community representative indicated: "As soon as they saw a group, they rounded everyone up! They don't ask you anything, they round you up and take you to the commissariat" (interview, Nouakchott, 13 December 2017).

EU bordering interests have a perfectly coherent, if not directly causal, relationship to these developments. By enticing people to apply for a residence permit, the state acquired a numerical approximation of the number of foreign nationals residing in Mauritania, thereby addressing the statistical deficiencies identified in the strategy. And in framing the subsequent raids and deportations in terms of "controlling irregular migration", the deterrent aspect of the framework for managing migration could be said

to have been strengthened, as per the strategy's recommendations. At the same time, however, the speed and ease with which a campaign of deporting dark-skinned foreigners took hold suggest pre-existing racialised tropes aided this element of the strategy. Indeed, the biometric residence permit for foreign nationals was part of a broader state-led process, one that simultaneously revived racialised territorial exclusions and strained relations with EU agents of externalisation.

The biometric renewal of racialised belonging

The biometric residence permit for foreign nationals was introduced within the framework of a broader overhaul of the country's civil registry system. This overhaul was instigated on 27 June 2010, with the creation by decree of a new national civil registry body, the Agence nationale pour le registre des populations et titres sécurisés (ANRPTS). Unlike the analogue system it replaced, the ANRPTS uses biometric technology for the purposes of "registering and updating identification data of citizens and foreign nationals residing in or in transit through Mauritania" (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010b). This remit necessarily inserts the ANRPTS within the domain of migration control. Indeed, in the words of a member of the ANRPTS public relations team, "with the database we have been able to assist the state in managing migration flows" (interview, Nouakchott, 2 August 2018).

While the ANRPTS thus fits within the logic of externalisation, it also strained relations between actors invested in this process. An EU official who worked on the border infrastructure project described difficulties that emerged between the agency and the EU (interview, Nouakchott, 21 March 2018). He argued the ANRPTS had simply taken the entry-exit database that an international team of experts had been working on for the border infrastructure project and used it without prior agreement for its own national documentation purposes.⁶ This national appropriation of an externally created database resulted in a temporary suspension of cooperation with the Mauritanian government in the equipping of border posts. In the words of the same official:

We continue to construct border posts, but we don't equip them with software or materials or anything. Because this agency says it's going take responsibility, take it! And us, we're not going to help. (*ibid.*)

By using a ready-made database for national purposes without prior agreement, the ANRPTS strained the border infrastructure project, and thus contested the uneven relations of externalisation.

The ANRPTS provoked controversy amongst others as well. As noted, the biometric residence permit rendered many within the foreign national community "deportable". But within this particular postcolonial context, the parameters of biometric citizenship (Ajana, 2012) do not align precisely with those of national belonging. The civil registry centres at

⁶ As well as residence permits for foreign nationals, the ANRPTS issues such documents as birth, death, and marriage certificates, as well as passports.

which migrant communities gathered in 2012 were also sites of fierce contestation over what it means to be Mauritanian. Allegations of discriminatory practices at the centres became commonplace, with claims that those of Afro-Mauritanian background were being singled out as not entitled to national documentation (Antil and Lesourd, 2012). A campaign group called *Touche pas à ma nationalité* (Hands Off My Nationality) articulated these grievances, leading demonstrations which often resulted in violent police dispersals. It held that the biometric system was the latest in a long line of racist attempts to exclude Afro-Mauritanian groups from the national framework of belonging. Phrases such as “administrative deportation” (*Jeune Afrique*, 2011) and “biometric genocide” (Dia, 2015) voice this sentiment.

Insofar as they evoke a sense of racialised territorial exclusion, such phrases also have a deeper historical meaning. Indeed, they consciously refer back to “the events” of 1989, a period of racialised violence within and between Mauritania and Senegal (Fresia, 2009; Ciavolella, 2010). Over the course of the violence, approximately 95,000 black Africans were deported to Senegal. While most were Senegalese nationals, up to 25,000 Afro-Mauritanians were also expelled. The charge that Afro-Mauritanians were actually Senegalese nationals served as a widespread pretext for deportations during “the events”. And it has resurfaced with the ANRPTS and the discriminatory practices at its civil registry centres.

While by no means dismissing the factors that immediately preceded “the events” of 1989, this analysis has been concerned with the primordial conditions that make pushing members of a racialised group beyond the linearly demarcated territory of the state thinkable.⁷ And in this regard, the colonial conversion of the Senegal River into a racialised territorial border between the colonies of Senegal and Mauritania ought to be taken into consideration. In the words of the president of a Mauritanian charity (interview, Nouakchott, 7 March 2018) whose family was deported during “the events”:

You know, it was colonisation that made it that way – you know, a river shouldn’t be a border! That’s why all along the river you see the same families.

As mentioned above, what is new here is not the *invention* of racial groups; the *Beydhani* imaginary had long positioned itself in opposition to other darker skinned Africans before the coloniser arrived on the scene. What is unprecedented is the assumption of an immutable *association* between a linearly demarcated expanse of territory and these pre-existing racialised groups. Only with this confluence can the deportation of those deemed not to belong become conceivable, be they “illegal” migrants or Afro-Mauritanian citizens.

⁷ Thinkable, not operable. As far as the latter is concerned, the colonial encounter has less explanatory value, and the racist machinations of the post-colonial state become more salient.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted parallels between the colonial encounter and the process of EU border externalisation in Mauritania. It has done so by discussing three dimensions of socio-spatial organisation – territorial delimitation, regulation of human mobility, and racialised belonging – which can be discerned in both instances. The transformations during the colonial era within each of these domains amount to a qualitative shift in socio-spatial organisation. The more recent EU border externalisation process has drawn upon this shift and reaffirmed each of its constituent dimensions. This does not render state actors passive recipients of EU border prerogatives. On the contrary, border externalisation is characterised by appropriation and contestation on the part of the state. And at a more fundamental level, the very task of preventing irregular migration necessarily involves empowering instruments for state control. Ultimately, however, the racist parameters in which this state agency is enacted continue to be inscribed in antecedents laid by the colonial encounter.

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