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Refugees yesterday, migrants today,

The step-by-step construction of a transsaharan territory of circulation

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Abstract

Today the Sahara has again become a space of movement of migrants and goods between Black Africa and the Arab World. These migrations are generally depicted as recent movements or as movements in continuity with the trade caravans. It is however necessary to reverse the perspective and to question ourselves on the manner and the methods according to which the movement makes territory during the 20nd century. The installation of colonial and then national territories in the Sahara was accompanied by new shifts in population, those of the forced migrants and the refugees of the 1970s and the 1980s, which are at the origin of the territories of the movement of the sub-Saharan migrants of the 1990s. During these few decades, one notes indeed that in Libya, Chad, Niger and Sudan, the refugees and the migrants of the contemporary Sahara contribute to the formation of migratory, transborder spaces, spaces of proximity. This process is reinforced by the transnational dimension of cities created by the states.

Résumé

Le Sahara redevient aujourd'hui un espace de circulation des migrants et des marchandises entre l'Afrique noire et le Monde arabe. Ces migrations sont généralement dépeintes comme des mouvements récents ou bien en continuité avec le commerce caravanier. Il est pourtant nécessaire de renverser la perspective et de se questionner sur la manière et les modalités selon lesquelles le mouvement fait territoire durant le 20ème siècle. Car la mise en place de territoires coloniaux, puis nationaux, au Sahara s'est accompagnée de nouveaux mouvements de population, ceux des déplacés forcés et des réfugiés des années 1970 et 1980 qui sont à l'origine des territoires de la circulation des migrants subsahariens des années 1990. Durant ces quelques décennies,

on constate en effet qu'en Libye, au Tchad, au Niger et au Soudan, les réfugiés et les migrants du Sahara contemporain contribuent à la formation d'espaces migratoires, transfrontaliers, de proximité et au renforcement de la dimension transnationales de villes créées par les Etats

Introduction

Since the 1990s, the Sahara has become again a space of movement of migrants and goods between Black Africa and the Arab World. The press reports facts which are seemingly distinct to each other: the presence of natives of Black Africa in the north of Morocco, in particular around Tangier and in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Mellila; migrants trying to reach Libya found dead in the desert of Ténéré (Le Monde, 20-21.05.2001) and many other Saharan areas; riots and violences against the black immigrant workers in Tripoli in September 2000, etc.

It is in Libya that the sub-Saharan migrants are most present today. They exceed even the number of Arab immigrants, who largely dominated since the 1970s. According to the census of 1995, one counts officially in Libya nearly 100.000 Sudanese and 40.000 sub-Saharans, against 5.000 and a few hundreds twenty years before. And these figures underestimate the real presence of the Subsaharan migrants on the Libyan territory. Estimates given by the Libyan leaders indeed evaluated the number of natives of Western and Central Africa to approximately 1.5 million people in 2000 (The Baltimore Sun, 26.10.2000) and nearly 600.000 in 2004 (Washington Post Foreign Service, Thursday, March 11, 2004). Thus, in spite of an important decrease, they are still numerous there.

Libya is indisputably the most spectacular example of the increasing arrival of sub-Saharan migrants in North Africa. But the research reports (e.g. Barros 2002) and the figures and the facts collected in the press show that all the states are concerned. Since ten years, the small cities o the Saharan tracks and roads which connect the Sahel in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, ave changed into crossroads and relays for migrants, and in the capitals of these states it has become impossible to bar the migration doors to Europe.

These migrations are generally depicted as recent movements. But from that point of view it seems surprising that migratory systems involving several hundreds of thousands of people can be set up quickly. In addition, by initially pointing to the dramas of these trans-Saharan migrations, the journalists especially insisted on the

brittleness of the dies. On the other hand, these last were seldom seen like durable constructions.

It is however necessary to reverse the perspective and to question the manner and the methods according to which the movement makes territory, and not only focus on the migratory event. However, if one plans to speak about territory of circulation in the Sahara, it is advisable to remove several obstacles, in order to make the matter more coherent.

First, it is necessary to define what one understands by territory of circulation. This is generally the work of sociologists or anthropologists. They provide the essential keys for reading and understanding the changes in contemporary migratory flows. However, they leave the geographer alone with his object: the spatial dimension of the territory. For a long time, the opposition 'territory versus network' prevented researchers from considering that movement can be at the base of territorial constructions. Territories were only considered in a situation of stability, parallel to the rural regions of the sedentary peoples.

This conception, however, recently developed into two directions. On the one hand, new studies appeared on the nomads' territories in the Sahara (Retaillé 1989). These researches reminded us that the division of the Sahara between several territories of states was done to the detriment of a nomadic conception of the territory. And this shift involved many problems, for example the insertion of the nomadic populations into the states, or the control of the borders in empty spaces.

On the other hand, a shift occurred also within the framework of a reflexion on the migrations in the contemporary world. For a long time, one could reduce migratory flows to the relationship between a starting place and a place of arrival, summarized by the couple emigration-immigration. But since about twenty years, the movement of the migrants has taken a step beyond the traditional forms of movement (Tarrius 2000). Individuals build their own route according to professional opportunities and gradually lose their exclusive relation with their place of origin. They live in a territory that is increasingly complex to apprehend because it is made of distant places (districts of cities, markets, or villages of the families) which only make sense in an individual trajectory.

How then to explain the building of new territories by the migrants who cross the Sahara and especially to describe their spatial dimensions? This question has often been tackled using large maps representing the Sahara as the "other Mediterranean sea", referring to the well-known expression of the French historian Fernand Braudel (recently used by Cote 2002). Accordingly, the Sahara was for a long time thought as a space of circulation organized around the meridians, the "fuseaux" of Theodore Monod.

But the colonial period in the 19th and the 20th century, and later the independence of the African states in the 1950s and the 1960s, definitively partitioned the desert in just as many portions of state territories. Any other shape of territory became illegitimate and thus marginalized. Obviously, one thinks of the nomads of the saharo-sahelian region.

In this context, the report that the Sahara was again crossed by migrants and trucks of goods could only lead to the conclusion that the Sahara joined again with the maritime metaphor, since it had become again a space of circulation, the modern caravans being the trucks. And the migrants or the refugees were, in a sense, the descendants of the slaves forwarded to the ports of the Mediterranean. However, to make territory, one needs a historical weight, which is based on human groups forming communities and relating to other places. One needs also different kinds of exchanges: matrimonial, commercial, cultural… registered voters in the long term. Thirdly, one needs spatial marks in the places crossed. The view that the new territories are based on a continuity between the caravaneer trade of yesterday and the contemporary flows of today is appealing, but it does not make it possible to understand how territories specific to the migrants have emerged.

What is ignored in this view is the period at the end of the 20th century which separates the decline of the trade caravans and the appearance of transsaharan migratory flows. Generally, this period is presented as one in which an old space of exchange quickly broke down. However it is precisely during this period, at the rythm of the crises that shook the Sahara, that appeared the first marks of the contemporary Saharan networks, initially based on the dispersion of the concerned Saharan populations. Thus, one cannot be satisfied any longer by the somple idea of continuity of secular transsaharan exchanges. Because the establishment of colonial and later national territories in the Sahara was accompanied by new shifts in the population, it is the forced migrants and the refugees of the 1970's and the 1980's which are at the origin of the territories created by the movement of the sub-Saharan migrants of the 1990s.

Forced displacements of the 20th century contribute to new forms of territorialities

The crises that shook the central Sahara during the 20th century are at the origin of displacements of population between the different Saharan states. We will take the example of three of the most significant groups: Touaregs from Mali and Nigeria towards Algeria, Sudanese Zaghawa towards Khartoum, and Chadians Toubous

towards Libya. This enumeration is obviously not exhaustive, but all these groups have in common that they take part today in the construction of a migratory space connecting two banks of the Sahara, i.e. the Sahel and North Africa.

Malian and Nigerian Touaregs in Algeria

Concerning the Malian and Nigerian Touaregs in Algeria, those who fled from the Sahel during the 1980's were sedentarized under dramatic conditions, in the periphery of the Saharan cities or in refugee camps on the borders of the Algerian Sahara (In Guezzam, Bordj El Mokhtar, Tin Zawaten, Timiawin, Adrar, Tamanghasset), or in Libya (Oubari, Ghat, Ghadamès and more generally Fezzan and oases of Koufra). What a beautiful example of exclusion, indeed! But in less than one decade, these outcasts of the small cities of the Sahara formed part of the local economy. They developed workplaces for smithery, fed the urban market with cattle conveyed from the Sahel and were reconverted into oasis agriculture (Bisson 2003). Beautiful example of integration in the local society! However, in the 1990s, the districts in which these refugees settled became places of transit on the roads taken by the sub-Saharan migrants who tried to emigrate towards the north of Africa, and, why not, Europe! This development is not accidental. It reveals on the contrary how Touaregs, refugees, sedentarized and consequently marginalized, could, in less than one generation, mobilize or take part in networks of transnational exchanges, within an ethnic framework, and become actors of the new forms of territorial circulation in the central Sahara. Far from remaining marginal people in towns built by the state, they added transnational functions and created cosmopolitan societies in cities, which became links of a national urban network in the periphery of vast states.

Chadian Toubous in Libya

From this point of view, the waves of refugees, then migrants, in the administrative center of Sebha (Pliez 2003), in the Fezzan region, in the South West of Libya, make it possible to understand how a new city in the Sahara is built - on the one hand on the initiative of the authorities and on the other hand on that of the migrants - and which are the consequences of this type of growth, on the level of the urban morphology as well as on its social composition.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the administrative and military center of Sebha becomes the receptacle of the rural migration from the whole of the Libyan Sahara. Quickly, the settlement of rural migrants from the oases of the area involves an extension of the habitat and a growth of the villages of the palm plantation. The arable lands disappear

quickly, and soon, a city is formed where the newcomers gather according to their geographical origin. Following a settlement plan from 1966, this agglomeration is organized like a first urban crown. Sebha is structured around a central road axis, which crosses the agglomeration right through. This model of growth continues until the 1980s and is even encouraged by the public authorities, which plan the extension of the urban fabric on a community base. But the massive arrival of Touareg and Chadian refugees constitutes a rupture. Thousands of refugees (there are mentions of 30.000 Toubous coming from Chad) settle in Sebha. This settlement is quite easy for the Libyan "repatriates", i.e. descendants of those who had fought the Italian troops in the 1930s, and had to exile themselves from the Sahel after their defeat and the colonization of the Libyan Sahara. These repatriates settle in the center of Sebha, where the authorities allot land to them and give them jobs. But the vast majority of the refugees are Toubou nomads, fleeing the drought and the war in Chad. They settle in periphery of the city and cause a spectacular expansion with tents and informal settlements. For fifteen years, these new under-integrated districts have been created. Tents, enclosures and luxurious residences (e.g. that of the Chadian consul in Sebha) neighbourly share the same ground.

The rise of the migrations of the sub-Saharan people since the 1990's reactivates, and even increases division between the Arab city-centre, where the Libyans and the other Arab migrants live, and the periphery. The city is well-structured thanks to the plans of settlement. The informal districts, on the other hand, with black-African settlers, extend in periphery from Sebha. This cleavage is at first sight an academic case of the opposition between Arabic and Blacks, between the populations who are served by Libyan public policy and city planning, and those that are excluded from it.

But this urban duality has also two consequences. First, there is a process of appropriation of the space, which can be recognized by the place names on the initiative of the refugees and the migrants. One building is called Bardaï, referring to a mountain in the north of Chad from which the inhabitants of the building are originating. A commercial street is called "Rue Quarante", which is also the name of an avenue in N'djamena. Slums built to accomodate the migrants in transit are called "ghettos", probably because of their function of hosting people on a national or ethnic base, and also their poor living conditions.

The urban duality also leads to the creation of downtown areas on the initiative of the communities of migrants. In Sebha the Egyptians, the West-Africans, the Sudanese and the Chadians created their own city-centres. And the functions of these centres are multiple today. They are meant to organize trade, of course, but also to facilitate the

reception and the transit of the migrants who arrive from the Sahel by truck and settle in Sebha or continue their road towards the north of Libya.

Today, however, these centres are less and less seen to belong to only one community. On the contrary, they are gradually becoming part of the town of Sebha. They become places where sub-Saharans as well as Libyans sell or buy imported or agricultural goods, meet their friends, or practise activities which are prohibited in the Arab city, such as consuming alcohol and visiting African prostitutes. Such places, which are common in the contemporary Sahara and in the capital cities at its borders, recall that if the authorities are actors of urban production, the inhabitants are too, though of a different kind.

Sudanese Zaghawa in Khartoum

The last example takes place in a vast area between the West of Sudan and Khartoum, the capital of the state. After the drougts of the 1980's, the Zaghawa of North-Darfour, a Western Sudanese community of pastors and nomads, found in the border trade new sources of income to replace the traditional activities of cattle breeding (Lavergne 1999). In the wake of the flow of repatriates settling in Omdourman, these tradesmen managed to develop the transborder commercial zone into a long road which extends from Abéché in Chad to Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. After the seizure of power by Islamists in 1989, the like-mindedness between the Libyans and the Sudanese is marked by the signature of an agreement on freedom of movement in 1990. Territorial exchanges between the two states increase quickly. The Zaghawa tradesmen become the actors of a network of circulation stretching for several thousands of kilometers from *the souk libya* of Omdourman in Khartoum to Tripoli. The tribe is dispersed in communities which have settled at the same time in Sudan, Chad and in Libya. Organised as such, they develop their competences to help the migrants and the goods to pass the borders. On the margins of the vast Sahara, in a state which is defined often only by its instability and the suffering of its populations, communities like the Zaghawa, stigmatized by the wars and the famines, are, however, the actors of a transnational network for trade and migration.

One thus notes that displacements contributed to the decline of an old territorial form, the Sahara of the nomads. But they found their place in the new territorial form the Sahara had taken after its accession by the various coastal states that had gained independence: the Sahara of the States.

These flows of refugees and migrants are legitimately perceived as uprootings, the manifestation of the accelerated end of the wandering way of life in the Sahara, the

formation of communities in exile. But what is then neglected are the consequences of these flows of migrants on the territorial structures of the Sahara-Sahel area.

However, while being dispersed, the wandering populations of the Sahara created Diasporas because they maintained bonds with their areas of origin, at the same time matrimonial and commercial. The latter are rather modest, but they contribute to the control of vast spaces and especially of the roads which cross them.

The movement builds territory

The examples above enable us to return to the initial question: do the refugees and the migrants of the Sahara-Sahel area build territories? The answer is that they indeed contribute to the development of new territories.

First, there is the formation of migratory spaces, transborder spaces, spaces of proximity. The principal groups who are dispersed between the Saharan states (Touaregs, Toubous), following an often dramatic history, are the key actors of the contemporary migrations between two banks of the Sahara. Whether they are migrant seasonal workers, environmental refugees, political refugees or "adventurours", their displacements and their attachment to their community of origin have contributed to the building of vast migratory territories, which coincide with the cities and the roads created by the modern states.

Second, they reinforced the transnational dimension of the cities created by the states. Generally, the cities of the Sahara are seen as recent creations, and, in consequence, artificial. But it also should be stressed that flows of refugees, then migrants, nourished this urban growth and anchored the cities in the transsaharan networks of circulation. The example of Sebha, in the Libyan desert, shows how the cities of the Sahara are dual constructions, consisting of an official and a non-official part. Processes of appropriation of the space can be observed in all the places that belong to the network of circulation; for instance:

- Markets are named after the origin of the provisions: *souk libya* obviously, but also *souk soudania* or *souk dubaï* and others. This phenomenon is not typical of Libya, but is common to all the districts of the saharo-sahelian cities where refugees settled. The refugees express their attachment to their origins by adapting the places where they live, by transforming the habitat and by allotting names referring to places that make sense to them but not to the natives.

- Moreover, the centres that appear where the migrants live, in the periphery of the planned city, have functions which gradually exceed their initial utility. From places of transit that mark out a trans-Saharan migratory system, they become plain urban places, giving rise to an urban society in the cities of the Sahara.

The refugees of yesterday, while forming part of the local economies and by mobilizing networks of circulation between frontiers, adapted their competences to that of circulation, within a spatial framework redefined by the states. Faced with the seeming obstacle of the national borders, they mobilized the tribal transborder networks as spaces of mobility. On the roads of the national networks of the Sahara, they redrew transsaharan roads. In the cities created by the states, they added the facet of the crossroads, thus joining again with the function of the cities of the caravan trade.

These facts go against a still widespread vision. The authorities indeed regard the refugees and the migrants as disturbing elements to the national policies of settlement of the Sahara, allegeing that they impoverish the Saharan cities where they settle. On the other hand, these cities had known for two decades a deceleration of the official intervention. The revival of the migrations and the commercial exchanges contribute to dynamise some saharo-sahelian cities and the areas in crisis.

Although it is legitmate to mention of migrant territorial constructions in the Sahara, it should be added that the territory created by those who move in the Sahara is discrete. It is indeed never likely to cut across official constructions, materialized by roads, cities, or agricultural projects. But since about thirty years, the refugees of yesterday and the migrants of today weave a territory in the form of networks. At the same time they fit into the cracks in the state territories and are in continuity with the pre-colonial wandering territories.

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