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A Sensory Seascape: Eco-aesthetics and Marine Toponymy in Imrâgen Fishing Communities of Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania

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The Imrâgen people of Mauritania – whose territory is encompassed by the Banc d'Arguin National Park, created in 1976 – have long constituted the only fishing community within the nation's chiefly pastoral Moorish society. Their fishing practices, conducted with little equipment and, up until the early twentieth century, without any type of boat, did not seem particularly disposed them to develop a specific form of control over the sea. However, this scarcity of materials seems to have broadened their modes of interaction with the milieu, prompting a wider variety of innovations and compensations in terms of the senses and body techniques. Key to this process of socialization of the sea has been the development of a toponymical vocabulary. Place names have emerged as a ways of gaining an effective hold over the sea, while helping to create a space of shared practices, perceptions and memories. To fully understand this process, and to perceive the ways in which toponymy cements the bonds between these communities and the sea, one must first decipher the logic of place naming. After a brief overview of the variety of ways of relating to the sea in the Banc d'Arguin area, I will proceed to such a toponymical analysis and explain in more detail how place naming enables effectual collective mastery over maritime space.

Controlling Maritime Space in Banc d'Arguin: Multiple Modalities

Typology of Maritime Mediations

The Imrâgen, mentioned in texts as early as in 16th century,¹ have, since the 20th century, given rise to an expanding monographic literature.² Yet despite this sustained scholarly interest, few authors have explored the complexity of their relationships with

the sea. Moreover, there has been a tendency to read the sea as a domain reserved to fishers, thereby overlooking the subtler but nonetheless significant participation of other actors in the socialization of maritime space. This assumption was no doubt reinforced by the fact that only fishermen can “enter the sea” (*dḥel lā-bḥar*); that is, come into direct, sensory contact with it. Yet warriors (*ḥassān*) and marabouts (*zwāyā*, spiritual guides) – for who fishing communities long constituted a subservient group – also obtain very tangible forms of control over the sea, defined by the respective roles attributed to each “order” (Bonte, 1987). Rather than a single type of human relationship with maritime space, multiple forms of domestication coexisted and interacted in close proximity.

Warriors engaged with the sea in two ways: through their control over and exclusive right to appropriate boats and any parts washing up on the coast (we will come back to this shortly); and through the taxes they imposed on various goods, notably on catches.³ (Artaud, 2010, 2018). Through these forms of interaction, warrior groups thus acquired a type of control over the surface of the sea comparable to the power structure of continental land ownership.

Marabouts related to the sea by exercising a hermeneutic power over the infra-maritime world, specifically through the ritual solicitation of maritime species that play an important role in wintertime fishing, conducted by foot from the beach (Artaud, 2012). Indeed, the presence of dolphins draws mullets towards the coast, making possible to catch them using this technique. Religious leaders intervene to attract dolphins using talisman (*ḥjāb*); each has his particular way of creating these out of diverse materials and utterances. The success of marabouts’ mediation depends on the cultivation of a close personal relationship with a specific set of dolphins.⁴ The third set of modalities of interaction with the sea in the Banc d’Arguin concerns Imrâgen fishing communities; they are the focus of this article. The sensory features of these interactions delineate a form of *eco-aesthesis*. By this I mean a way of connecting self and environment by adjusting, through the medium of the senses and of bodily dispositions, to the singularities of its terrain and natural environment. Several analytical entry-points can be used to read this *eco-aesthesis*: one of these is toponymy.

Mastering the Maritime Environment through the Mètis

Before moving on to a more detailed examination of toponyms, and of how these help shape a singular mode of interaction with the sea, a few preliminary remarks are in order. As mentioned above: while many authors have insisted on analysing the sea as the exclusive domain of Imrâgen fishermen, others have, conversely, been reluctant even to qualify these as fishing communities. The Imrâgen tend instead to be perceived as “shepherds temporarily resorting to ‘maritime hunting’” (Cheikh, 2002: 10), and as prone to viewing the maritime environment through the prism of more familiar continental models and hunting categories (Pelletier, 1981: 201). These communities have

thus long occupied a marginal position in the Mauritanian social landscape. Moreover, the rudimentary nature of their fishing techniques – their basic nets and, until recently, lack of boats – seemed to negate any special capacity to master the maritime environment. This lack of instrumental mediation did not, however, prevent them from forging relationships with the sea. On the contrary, it seems to have stimulated novel ways of relating, notably through bodily dispositions, as well as the refinement of a process of substitution; by pushing fishermen to find the means needed to reach their goals within the natural environment. Far then from seeking to refute technological minimalism as a core feature of Amrig (the singular form of Imrâgen) fishing practice, my analysis instead credits it with intentionality, reading it as an index of a specific form of domestication of the environment. This domestication can be captured by the notion of *mètis*. As Detienne and Vernant describe it, the *mètis* is a disposition that makes up for physical or material deficit and eludes assumed power relations. It makes it possible for “the weak, the frail, not [to] fight a losing battle” (1974: 33). It is through their very *lack* of the equipment, with which they might cross the sea or catch its resources in bulk, using only their wits, that the Imrâgen can master this space. This mastery depends on knowing and anticipating the behaviour of schools of fish; in other words, their instincts become the very medium of the fishing trap (Artaud, 2013). What material lack entails, then, for Imrâgen fishermen’s relationship with maritime space is a hyper-vigilance, closer attention to patterns in natural phenomena, as well as a search for ways of preserving these patterns and of introducing oneself as a minimal and discreet presence. This process of embodied learning, which inevitably creates a bond with the maritime environment, is expressed in a local adage: “to be Amrig, one must have neither shadow, nor footprint, nor smell.” Having little in the way of material support, fishermen come to rely more heavily on precise exogenous factors. For many, this lack also stimulates deeper knowledge of fish behaviour and of variations in the seascape. Toponymy is an indispensable tool precisely because it integrates these elements. By giving sailors fine-grained information enabling them to anticipate tricky terrain, or by telling fishermen where and with what techniques they should fish, toponymy guarantees the full efficacy of a form of interaction anchored in the *mètis*.

Constructing Toponyms and the Binary Logic of Socialization of Maritime Space

A remarkably wide array of toponyms is used in the Banc d’Arguin, across both land and sea. Maritime names are densest in the zone of mudflat complexes. Here, among the shallows that lie at the heart of the Park’s current boundaries, over a hundred toponyms can be identified.

This density is partly but not fully explained by the abundance of topographical features, as well as of plant and animal species in this zone. The number of surface and

underwater protrusions of the seascape do not account for the whole range of referents on which toponyms are based. Many maritime place names instead draw on a register of immaterial and purely memory-based elements such as events, personal or tribal names, and biographical itineraries. These constitute seamarks whose meanings are clear to the fishermen who move through this territory and lived here seasonally in the past, before national park regulations prohibited landing on its shores.⁵ This toponymy is not merely an eclectic and contingent set of names; it is structured as a coherent system. This system is worth analysing in depth, for it provides a window onto the models that inform local representations of the environment.

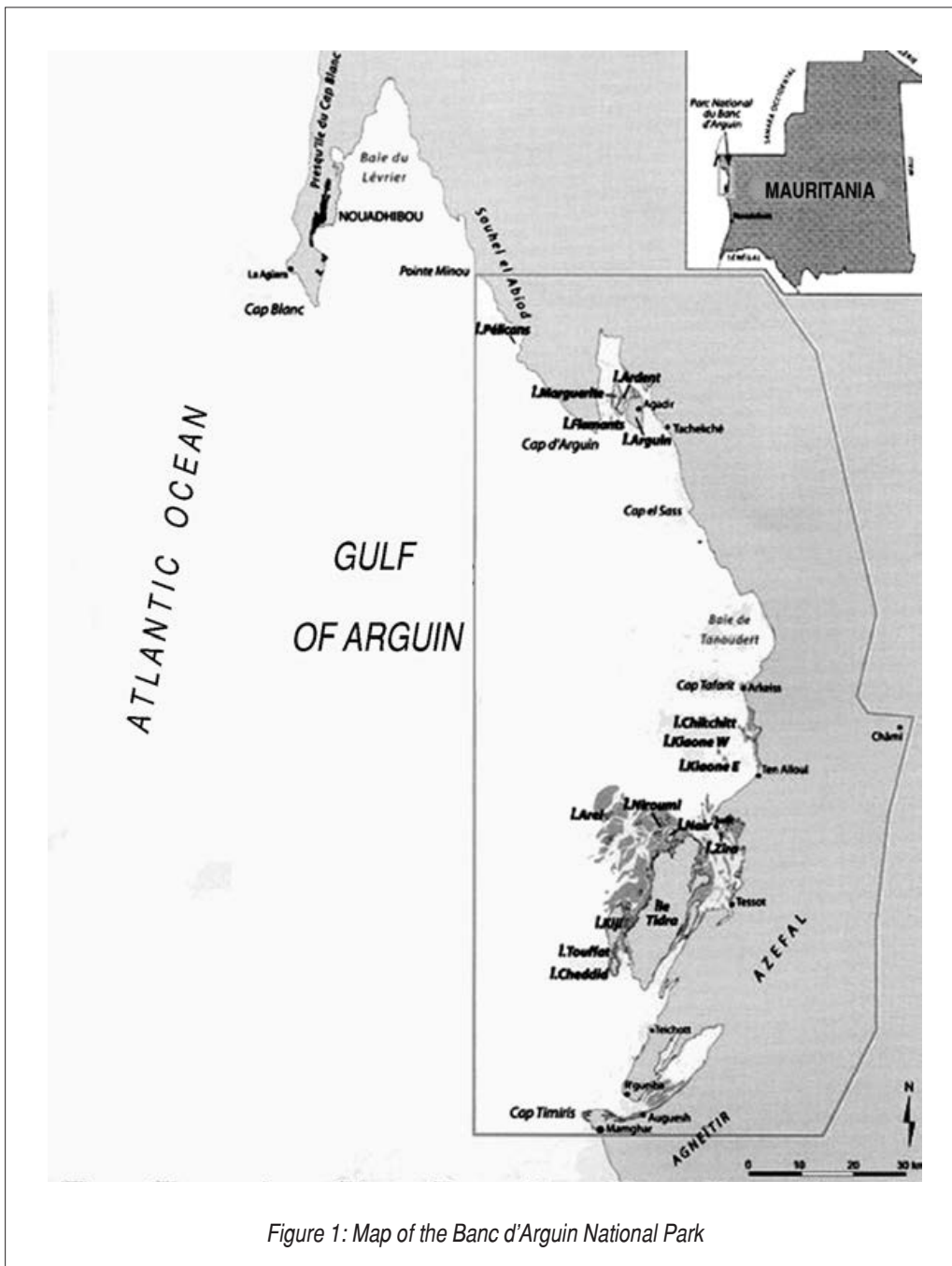


Figure 1: Map of the Banc d'Arguin National Park

The first step of this analysis is a formal decryption of the rules of toponymical structure. Although some toponyms contain a single term, such as the places called *enzuk*, *ejenjer* and *touivat*, the majority in the Banc d'Arguin zone are made up of a combination of two terms. In the sea, there are places, for example, known as *ʿayn Ekälbe*, *Täšäwzaz šavye*, *Tizigzag əl-medvaʿ*, *Ayun Tessot*, *Krāʿ eregdi*, *Zbāra Lekawret*, *Tāmätārət Mansour* and *Twkərt mgazi*. Such two-part toponyms are especially important for orienting the practice of those who move through these spaces, and in shaping representations of the natural and social environment – which the repeated process of naming anchors in memory. A striking feature of these binomial place-names is their stable and systematic formal structure. Each comprises a first lexeme, which describes a feature of the sea's surface or underwater terrain, while a second lexeme adds some dimension pertaining to the fisher's physical or emotional milieu, creating a more specific spatial reference. The analysis of marine toponymy, by attending to both the diversity of its repertoire and the consistent patterns in its typology, can render legible a perceptual syntax of the environment.

Analysing Toponymical Layers: The First Lexeme

Placed at the head of the name, the first lexeme describes a topographical feature, either typical or generic, of the seascape. The majority refer to underwater or surface protrusions in the Banc d'Arguin, as is the case of the terms *sagʿa*, *ʿayn*, *täšäwzaz*, *tāmätārət*, *Lbinker* and *Awkər*.

- *Sagʿa* is an islet that is partly or fully exposed at low tide; its bottom is carpeted by an eelgrass-type plant cover, shells or pebbles
- *ʿAyn* describes a relatively deep canal that is navigable at any time in the tidal cycle.
- *Täšäwzaz* refers to a smooth and gradual slope that is good for beach fishing (by foot).
- *Tāmätārət* is a spot defined by a distinctive ovoïd shape and soft sand; its sediments attract plenty of fish.
- *Lbinker* is a channel that is open on both sides.
- *Awkər* describes a barren landscape, devoid of plant cover; it is like a desert.

Other primary lexemes can be added to specify the main topographical variations within each of these core categories. Thus, there are several sub-categories of the type of islet called “*Sagʿa*,” such as:

- *Twkərt* is a *šagʿa* whose ground is white and particularly hard. Fishermen say they cannot drop their anchor there, for it hits the bottom without penetrating it.

- *Emetar*, in contrast with *twkərt*, is a *ṣagʿa* whose ground is loose and often dark due to a dense sea-grass cover.
- *Amojd* is a very long and narrow *ṣagʿa*. It can only be entered on smaller and lighter boats, and has a thick grassy cover (*eyšig*).

The type of canal referred to as “*ʿayn*” gives rise to the following sub-categories:

- *əjer*, a very deep *ʿayn*.
- *Krāʿ*, a dead-end channel that is smaller than most *ʿayn*.
- *Zigzag*, a small *ʿayn* that can be entered and exited.

Each broad type of seascape feature, as listed above, has topographical variations that are known to fishermen.

These first lexemes have several layers of meaning. While “*ʿayn*” refers, in terms of marine topography, to a relatively deep canal, its literal meaning in Hassaniya language is “eye.” This is true of most terms used in place names (*ragbe* means “neck,” *kra* means “foot,” etc.). Indeed, bodily references, both human and animal, are pervasive; they are constantly used as a key for deciphering the landscape. This is true beyond the sea: zoomorphic references are also widely drawn on in continental toponymy. Their use, however, differs quite strikingly between land and sea. Frérot’s studies in the Adrar region showed specifically how the camel’s body was given a geo-referential dimension, noting the emergence of homologies at territorial level. The topography of Adrar can thus, in a way, be read through the fixed anatomical prism of a “sturdy camel”: “Each prominence is considered as a living being of which *ras* (the head) is the summit; *ujeh* (the face), *ragbe* (the neck), *menhar* (the nape of the neck)...” (Frérot, 1989: 115). Unlike in Adrar, however, the use of animal references to the Banc d’Arguin’s seascape does not entail a projection of whole organisms onto the environment. Instead, analogies are based on a fragmented perception of various species’ bodies (these species may or may not be endemic in the area). Thus, zones called *vəṛəš*, “turtle shell,” are mudflats whose surface is slightly convex. Lemgarne, or garne, which means “horn,” refers to the narrow shape and slight pinching found at the end of some mudflats, while double-ended extremities are referred to as *tweygilel*, or *gilel*, which means fishtail.

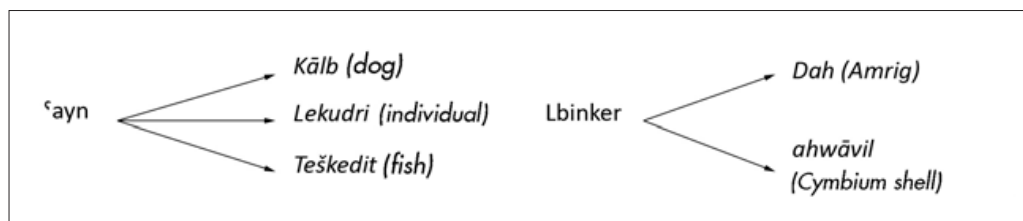
Fishermen are familiar with such analogies, which constitute a type of grid for reading the environment. Anthropomorphic references are also mobilized. Some are of a general nature, pertaining to both human and animal bodies, such as those listed above (*ragbe*, “neck”, *kra*, “foot”, *ʿayn*, “eye”). Others deploy more specific and subtle elements of the body to refer to the distinctive quality of a given seascape feature. Thus the term *ləḥnašīš* (“nose”) describes long and narrow *ṣagʿa* that divide, at the extremity, into two parts, like the bridge of the nose and the nostrils. Analogies also refer to specific elements such as *lemzeqqeb* (from *mzeqqeb*, “hairy”), which designates, through a vivid image, a place where sea-grass (which is thin and black) grows so

thickly it suggests a head of hair. *Temdel*, which refers to parts of the shallows where dense foam develops, can be linked to the Zenâga⁶ term “*temzel*,” which describes the voluminous and airy mass formed by hair after it is combed. Other elements are also used in topographical analogies, notably material objects. The fork, *šagəb* that “holds up” the stick (*bārā*) on which fishermen hang their nets (*šəbkā*) is, for example, used to describe the fork-like shape of some mudflats that seem to “hold up” the bay. “*Tiziyaten*,” the Zenâga term for a small leather bag closed by a leather string in which domestic utensils are kept, designates a deep, enclosed area.

The first lexeme, which provides topographical information on a given place, is thus revealed as a mutual embedding of corporeal and ecological analogies – it would be hard to say which came before the other. These typologies are encountered through the mediation of visual and/or tactile senses: for example, *əjer* is often sounded using a stick (*mouktheve*) and an oar (*migdava*), while *tāmātārət* is only perceptible to the eye. They can also be approached through empirical deduction, without experimentation: for example, every *kṛā*^c is blocked off by an *əjer*, or every *lbinker* ends in *udzi*, whose curved shape retains water and makes sailing possible even at low tide.

Second Lexeme

While the first lexeme conveys a general topographical picture, the second adds more specific detail to refine how places are perceived. This second term is not determined by the first; rather, they are linked in a contingent manner. The content of second lexemes is thus extremely diverse, as shown by the examples below:



Nevertheless, three well-defined categories tend to arise fairly systematically. In the first, the second lexeme refers to a place’s “objective” elements, that is, the animals, plants and rocks found within it. The second category evokes a “subjective” dimension that has become associated with a place over time, such as the name of people or of boats, or the memory of an event that happened there. Lastly, the second lexeme can mobilize a kind of “phenomenological” element, which refers to the quality of human or vessels’ relationships with a place. This type of lexeme describes how a place opens itself up or becomes perceptible to the senses of fishermen who pass through it, or how a place manifests itself to a boat as it enters a given location. While the first (“objective”)

category is fairly self-explanatory, the other two (“subjective” and “phenomenological”) require some elaboration.

The use of individual or collective names in toponyms follows certain patterns. Places are given the names of individuals reputed for their remarkable technical skill or for their acute sensitivity to the sea. Thus, for example, *twkərt Zaid* refers to the place where the fisher Salek Ould Zaid “who heard the rumbling (*rakiyu*) of the jewfish” obtained a miraculous catch. Similarly, the place called *krā Ahmed Lekebir* is where Ahmed Lekebir, who “knew exactly how to anticipate the speed of the winds and to predict it in order to make his way to a given location at the time of *itān* (a time that is good for fishing),” was in the habit of fishing. The use of tribal names in toponyms means, however, exactly the opposite: it highlights a group’s lack of detailed knowledge of the sea, or their incompetence in sailing or fishing in the interisland zone. These names thus commemorate inglorious events in a group’s history: when boats sank or were stranded in a specific spot. For example, the place named *Imissri Awlād ʿabd al-waḥīd* refers to a small channel where members of the Awlād ʿabd al-waḥīd tribe were stranded, apparently repeatedly so, because they lacked adequate knowledge of the shoals, which, in the interisland zone, protrude particularly prominently at low tide. Place names thus often crystallize and call attention to discrepancies in skills and knowledge within groups collectively defined as “Imrâgen.” Indeed, variable maritime abilities constitute a basis for differentiating between the communities of this whole. Amrig poetry suggests these differences were a salient issue in the interaction between communities – even well before Amrig identity became a significant institutional stake.⁷ They also served as criteria for discriminating among individuals belonging to the same group. Such differentiation regularly gave rise to debate and informal “challenges,” in which latent rivalries between fishermen from different localities could be expressed by setting riddles – a common form of challenge in Mauretania.⁸ Thus, individuals who best, or “most,” embodied Imrâgen identity could be discerned on the basis of their technical prowess (sailing and orientation), their mnemonic abilities (comprehensive knowledge of the area’s toponyms), their knowledge of fish species and the acuity of their senses.⁹

The use of names of boats in toponyms is more complicated. A distinctive feature of Imrâgen fishing communities is their late acquisition of vessels. Before this, the only boats in this area were of Canarian origin; these later served as models for locally built replicas. Canary Islanders used the *lancha*¹⁰ (called *lanche* in French) for coastal fishing, as a complement to larger schooners. When their load of fish was too heavy to bring back to the schooner, Canarian fishermen let these ancillary boats drift towards the coast. Once grounded, they were appropriated according to a strict tribal code. Some toponyms convey the memory of occasions when such boats ran ashore, indicating *where*, exactly, they were found. This information was, indeed, of particular significance in determining who could exercise legitimate authority over the *lancha*. As I pointed out above, warriors, marabouts and fishermen engaged in distinct modes of

socialization of the sea. Beached boat parts were hotly disputed among the coastal warrior groups who exercised control over the sea area. The location where these parts washed up determined which group could invoke “property rights” over them. Thus, toponyms simultaneously implemented and legitimated these rules of appropriation. Other place names referring to specific vessels celebrate particularly successful fishing expeditions. Thus *kṛāʿ saade* commemorates the *lancha* used to fish the most N’tod (*Sparidae aurata*, gilthead seabream) and *āzawl* (*Mugil cephalus*, flathead grey mullet) in a single day.

The last category, which I call “phenomenological,” encompasses toponyms that describe relationships either between the fisher and the maritime environment, or between the *lancha* and places through which it sails. As I noted above, human and animal body parts are prevalent in the first lexeme, incorporated in place names as keys or guides for reading the seascape. When placed in the second lexeme, however, such corporeal references are not intended as analogies for features of the maritime terrain. Rather, they are meant to describe how fishermen interact with a specific place in the sea. Take the emblematic, but not unique, case of the toponym *ʿa əl-ḥargve*, in which *ḥargve* means “hip.” Here, it indicates a shoal over which the water never rises above hip-level, and must therefore be sailed very cautiously. Another example of this third “phenomenological” category is worth mentioning. These are toponyms that consist of purely acoustic elements, of an onomatopoeic nature. This type of place name is interesting for various reasons, which I discuss in greater detail elsewhere (Artaud, 2016). In local Amrig tradition, as in many others, the “whispers of the world” give rise to spontaneous translations, which have well-known and widely shared meanings. Thus, the acoustic features of a milieu are associated with typical phonetic equivalents. Maritime toponymy offers a fascinating sample of such correlations, which are the basis for place names such as *Tizigzag Eketkat Teyshot, tentaz*” and *ʿayun eṣṣerṣar*. *Eketkat* is, fishermen say, the sound of water slapping the flank of a *lancha*, while *tentaz*, mimics the sound water makes just before it boils. In the toponym *ʿayun eṣṣerṣar*, *eṣṣerṣar* is the onomatopoeia for the sound of a *lancha* stirring up the layer of seashells that covers the seabed as it sweeps over it at low tide.

Toponymy: Foundation for a Shared, Shifting Seascape

The referents used to describe places are thus highly varied and heterogeneous; they can be topographical, ecological, affective and biographical. From the outset, toponyms present the seascape as a lived space, whose memories and potentialities are regularly reactivated by individual and collective journeys, both real and imagined.

Toponymy: a Performative Element in the Appropriation of Maritime Space

The remarkably dense concentration of toponyms in the Banc d'Arguin's maritime zone seems to work in specific ways for the Imrâgen community as a whole, including fishermen, warriors and marabouts. It operates as an effective means of mastering the environment; that is as a tool that is deployed to help navigate areas known to be tricky, by obtaining detailed information about one might encounter in such places. But it also works as a corpus of shared epistemological and perceptual referents, used to discern evocative features of the maritime environment and thereby build the foundation for a shared understanding of the sea. This construction of space is made possible and, in large part, held up by toponymy's binary naming structure. The indications conveyed by toponyms, and the memories they crystallize; these are what allow for the constitution a shared template of representations, referents and perceptions. As described above, the process of naming usually entails placing a first term pertaining to a place's topography at the head of the toponym, then linking it to a quality of another type, which relates to this place in an indirect, subjective way rather through a direct, objective connection. It is thus by situating or reactivating the memory of a precise event or sensation that toponyms simultaneously shape both the seascape and the collective sensibility and remembering through which it can be deciphered. The seascape opened up by toponymy thus emerges as a space of convergence between objective qualities of the natural environment, and subjective dimensions of sensibility and memory. Each toponym manifests this compromise between the real qualities of a place and its cultural contingencies. Toponymy is as much a descriptive and practical apparatus as it is a commemorative and sensory one; its key functions vary depending on whom – fishermen, marabouts, warriors or women – engages with it.

Shared Landscapes of Practice and Technique

Toponyms work, first of all, as performative statements. The naming of places provides fishermen with a means of acquiring greater material control over the sea. It enables them to anticipate physical obstacles and other navigational difficulties, and offers clues with which they can adjust their practice by selecting the most appropriate type of fishing technique for a given location. When, earlier, I pointed out the descriptive function of first-position lexemes, I did not point out their practical implications. The indications carried by the first lexeme do not merely define the topographical characteristics of a place. These can also produce a tangible effect on how fishermen and sailors interact with it. Toponyms may provide information about features of the underwater terrain (*Jedrejjer* is where the water grows deep, while *Edegien* is a wide plateau). They may

describe the shape of shoals (*Amojd* is a large shoal; *Wonkere*, a very long and very narrow shoal; and *Tamden*, a large shoal surrounded by channels). A place name can also signal the presence of distinctive natural elements (Binker *aǧuvāl* means the presence of seashells, and *kṛāᶜ leḥlach*, the presence of pebbles). In each of these cases, the function of the lexeme is to inform sailors as to the exact type of terrain they will encounter, and to tell fishermen about the type of technique they should use. In sailors, toponyms prompt the necessary precautions. Some places are known for causing the lancha to be *tmekte*, that is to sail through with difficulty, either because an opening is too narrow or because of the time at which it is entered, for many spots in the Banc d'Arguin become impassable at low tide. Some toponyms identify places where one can get stuck, as with the zone named *lemwugef*, in which the verb “*ugef/yugef*” means “to park.” Conversely, the name *twkərt mgazi* tells sailors they can safely enter this zone, for here the lancha is “carried” (*gazi*). The table below lists some of the main toponymical indications of this type:

| | | |
|---------|-------------------------------|--|
| Sailing | Place where one can get stuck | <i>Lemwugef</i> , from the verb “ <i>ugef/yugef</i> ” which means “to park.” The toponym tells the fisher a zone is hard to sail through. |
| | Place where one floats | <i>Twkərt mgazi</i> describes a zone where a boat is <i>gazi</i> : carried as if the surface under it was “solid,” while <i>kṛāᶜ regdi</i> characterizes a place that is so calm one could fall asleep (<i>regdi</i>). |
| | Place of disturbance | <i>Ten beygelat</i> means “one-footed hop.” It refers to a group of shoals among which a boat is constantly thrown off balance, while <i>Tagirwit temši</i> is a channel said to be so long that encouragement is needed to cross it: <i>temši</i> means “sail, sail.” |
| | Docking area | <i>Tarzit</i> describes deep waters that lie next to sand, where it is possible for a <i>lancha</i> to dock. |
| | Easy sailing area | <i>Tāmātārat lemoyshe</i> , from the verb “ <i>maše</i> ,” “to go,” which indicates that boats entering this zone can sail through effortlessly. |

Toponymy also guides fishing practice; it indicates what species can be found in a given area, and what techniques should be used. In many place names, the topographical description of the first lexeme is combined about specific information about prevalent species.

The zone called *krāʿ Tawnīt*, for example, indicates that white mullets (*Tawnīt*, *Mugil curema*) are plentiful, while *ʿayun tujuwan* is where young turtles (*tujuwan*) teem so densely they can be “caught by the feet.”

Other zones are defined not by the presence of a specific species but rather by the abundance and scarcity of any type of fishery resource. Thus, *Awoynit ten vader*, derived from the verb “*uve, yowve*,” “to finish,” signals that fish can no longer be extracted here; they have been completely exhausted. Conversely, *tiziyaten*, mentioned above, describes a place where fish are so abundant it is as if they are “enclosed” by it.

Indications for selecting fishing techniques are carried by toponymic information about both marine species and topographical features. Elsewhere (Artaud, 2011), I described how fishermen’s knowledge is based on associations between topographical typologies and fishing techniques. The highly varied underwater terrain of the mudflats complex results in a wide range of fishing techniques. Utilizing only a few basic tools, Amrig techniques have largely relied on an optimal exploitation of the specificities of marine topography, carefully adjusting their practice to a fluctuating seascape as tides make and unmake its features on a daily basis.

Several techniques are thus directly related to specific features of the underwater terrain, as the table below shows:

| Techniques | Topographical features |
|------------|------------------------|
| Tänäwräv | Egdawal- twkært |
| Tmarniš | Tabəlgīt |
| Rābṭ | ʿayn- krāʿ |
| Tänäkrä | Wonkere |
| Kaşra | Lbinker |

Such associations between technique and topography are what allow toponomy to have a direct impact on decisions about fishing practice. The technique known as *tänäwräv* is used in *egdawal*, a type of rocky cavity in which fish are “trapped” when the sea recedes, or in *twkært*, a stretch that is totally visible and dry at low tide. *Tmarni*, a technique known as “the drifting lancha,” can only be practiced in areas where a type of underwater hole, called *tabəlgīt*, is found; these are particularly numerous around the Saint-Jean Bay. The technique is used in springtime, when the fish *Tumvertel* (*Sarotherodon melanotheron*, Blackchin tilapia) begin to migrate. This species likes to “graze” on a type of plant (*ešil*) that grows in these holes. The lancha is positioned on

the lee side and set adrift. Upon reaching the holes, the anchor is suddenly dropped. The sound agitates the fish, which then fling themselves spontaneously into the nets. Some toponyms even specify the timing of fishing activities.¹¹ For example, the place called *tāmātārət eszri* or *eszri* refers to the last part of the night, suggesting this is the best time to fish here. The topographical information provided by the first lexeme implicitly tells fishermen about the most suitable type of technique for a place.

Many place names thus function as sources of *practical* guidance for fishermen. By pointing out places where boats have been stranded, or where access is difficult; places where they will be protected from the wind, or exposed; the knowledge in toponyms acts in tangible ways on how fishermen understand and master the natural environment. Previous experience sediments in the characterization of places, and is made available as an object of direct and collective appropriation. Thus toponymy enables distinctive forms of control and anticipation, which constitute, in Amrig thought, as we will see shortly, the only possible way of “appropriating” maritime space.

A Shared Sensory and Mnemonic Landscape

Constructed through subtle and partial discrimination of the maritime environment, toponymy also fashions a shared seascape, real and remembered, into a space of unified perceptions and sensations. This gives it considerable epistemological and symbolic efficacy. Place naming gathers and focuses, momentarily, the attention and sensibility of all fishermen towards the same signs. Many features, which are often very faint, would otherwise go unnoticed. Yet these very features form the framework through which the natural environment is understood. A good example of the type of subtle perception in which spatial descriptions are anchored is a place called *Tischimdiye*. This name refers to the unique brilliance of its surface, which is said to sparkle with uncommon intensity, like a mirror (*Tischimdiye*). If fishermen’s attention were not thus drawn to the quality of the water surface in this location, not only would they be likely to overlook it. They would also be missing the sensory and qualitative clues that mould their perception of the environment. Toponyms thus create occasions for bringing specific qualitative elements of maritime reality into focus. Together, they create a network of sensory clues that all fishermen are familiar with. Thus, toponymy gathers up sensibilities around the path of specific itineraries; these are then ready to be deployed in multiple directions, and to identify, on the basis of a diverse range of referents, specific features of the environment. By thus directing fishermen’s attention towards details of the seascape, toponymy spells out its constitutive phases and reveals the sensory and shared syntax of the world, as fishermen perceive it.

Another function of toponymy is thus to operate as a commemorative framework, under some circumstances. It thus constitutes a form of living collective memory. This

memory is not exclusive to fishermen. Among women, who do not practice fishing, some also know these commemorative names.¹² Most such names are associated with past events, or with the paths taken through the sea to travel from island to island during a *bu*.¹³ For these women, place names do not carry the same type of meaning as for fishermen. They are not tools for leveraging technical efficacy, but instead function as anchors of memory. Older women are familiar with toponyms such as *Lbinker kṛāʿ al-gārāb*, which commemorates the wrecking of a boat that washed up with goatskins. Two other examples are *tāmātārāt lbel*, which designates a very large shoal on which, at low tide, herds could stop off when fleeing raids, and *zbāra lekawret*, in which *kwarta*, refers to the wooden casks used by the inhabitants of Tidra Island, instead of traditional goatskins, in order to stock larger amounts of water. Most of the toponyms known by both fishermen and *Timrāgaten* women (the feminine form of Amrig) are transmitted through poetry. Poems are, indeed, an important medium for preserving the names of the Banc d’Arguin’s maritime zone. The poem below illustrates particularly well how place names imbue representations, giving them a role that is quite separate from that of procuring performative and practical efficacy for fishermen. It features a type of vessel used prior to Canarian lanchas that was built from assembled planks, and steered through the mudflats with an oar ().

أثلت نترات إلى تنكمم
وحده لقيم نتاتكيت
خمسة لنسيكي الأكم
وخلص انجي للتاگرويت

*When you travel between Teyshot and Rgeyba Tidra, you come
across a mudflat that is called “Ten kemen” and then across
another of the name of “Tatiyite,” and another “Nsäygi Lābkām”
“He said: Three oars bring me to Tātkāmmām
Another to reach Tatiyite
And five for Nsāygi Lābkām
Nine strokes of the oar brought me to Tegerwit.”*¹⁴

Similar poetic fragments are also found in the continental zone, where they help herders find their way. C. Taine-Cheikh, in “Poésies d’itinéraire et itinéraires poétiques chez les nomades sahariens” [Poetry as guide and poetic itineraries among Saharian nomads] (2006) notes that such stylistic motifs are commonly used for orientation purposes. Initially, these few verses may have functioned as a practical mnemonic and technical guide for navigation, notably through the metric instructions given for each given site (“An oar to reach Tatiyite, five for *Nsāygi Lābkām* (...).”). Over time, however,

as the poem was preserved and invoked beyond its original context, it seems to have acquired another type of efficacy, shifting from a technical to a symbolic and identity-defining role. The function of toponymical knowledge is thus as much epistemological as it is practical as sociological. It creates a fabric of referents that is common to all the group's individuals, no matter how diverse. Clearly, the homogeneity of perceptions and values – which results from shared knowledge of toponymy – works to help define and stabilize identities within communities, whose perspectives on and engagements with maritime space are otherwise deeply differentiated.

Toponyms: A Flexible and Changeable “Appropriation” of the Sea, which Unifies and Discriminates

Maritime place names are not fixed. Close examination reveals different chronological layers. Newer designations are sometimes brought in to complete, combine with or even replace pre-existing names. Clearly then, the knowledge carried by the toponyms of the Banc d'Arguin is not static. It is an unfinished and labile corpus, which is continuously reshaped by emerging dynamics. In some cases, name changes reveal a shift in collective representations, that is, in paradigms or cultural referents. The mudflat now known as *Nagete Seyidina Saleh* was once called *touïvat*, which fishermen say is a Zenâga term meaning “abundance.” It indicated that fish were always plentiful in this location, regardless of the season or phase of the tide. This has not changed: fishermen still find satisfaction here. This satisfaction, however, has since become associated with an equivalent but more orthodox connotation drawing on an Islamic reference. *Nagete*, which has been substituted for *touïvat*, is the name of the “She-Camel of Allah,” who gave the prophet *Saleh* milk for the entire Tamoudides tribe.¹⁵ Thus, this resource-rich mudflat is compared to the Koranic figure of the miraculous female camel that was able to provide for an entire tribe without exhausting her milk supply.

Similar examples of islamisation of toponymic references are quite common in the area. They sometimes take a subtler form, for example in altering the place name *tāmātārāt lebeydiye* to the more recent *tāmātārāt Mansur*. The first term, *tāmātārāt*, which tells fishermen about the locale's terrain, is unchanged. Only the second lexeme has been modified, giving the toponym a novel religious tone: *Mansur* is the name of a saint of the Awlād Delim tribe. Indeed, only the second lexeme is subject to such contextual modulations and substitutions. Unlike the first lexeme, its role is not to prompt acts of preparation by fishermen and sailors, but rather to link a place to a corpus of contingent referents whose memory is continuously reactivated by the act of naming. The essential vitality of the Banc d'Arguin's toponymy is thus expressed at the level of the second lexeme.

While toponyms constitute shared registers of practice and perception, they also operate as a means of differentiation. Earlier, I mentioned how place naming works to

delineate variations in aptitude within the *Amrig* collective. It also, perhaps now predominantly, distinguishes between older and more recent Imrâgen.¹⁶ All fishermen, whether they are exogenous to the zone or descended from Imrâgen fishermen, know a great deal of toponyms. Yet the nature and scope of this knowledge is variable. Toponymy underpins two distinct layers of memory. The first pertains to an ability to associate terms with their localization in the sea. This is the most widespread: even fishermen who are fairly new to the area know many place names. The second underlies the capacity to make the link between toponyms and their meaning. This type of memory is more exclusive, differentiated and dynamic. Those who join fishing crews, mainly from southern Mauretania, are taught place names on an on-going basis. Yet the meanings of these names do not seem to be included in this learning process. The transmission of toponymic meaning – the only possible foundation for any real appropriation of maritime space – thus remains strictly reserved to a limited circle of fishermen. The uncoupling of two depths of knowledge, two toponymical registers – one strictly nominative, the other deeply embedded in local history – thus works to set apart different forms of control over the Banc d’Arguin’s maritime space.

Conclusion

Analysing toponymy is a particularly productive avenue for grasping how communities in the Banc d’Arguin relate to the sea. Toponymy is not, for Imrâgen fishermen, a fixed and exclusive form of spatial delimitation. Rather, it upholds a flexible and dynamic knowledge of the sea’s specificities *via* their naming. This flexibility permits the occasional modification of place names, allowing for shifts and updates in their meaning. Still, a complex, systematic structure underlies toponymy; this chapter explored its efficacy. By offering contextual clues to actors, who in turn, through their real and symbolic journeys, preserve and update the meaning of place names, toponymy fashions a seascape that is alternately individual and shared, idiosyncratic and collective. Offering practical guidance to fishermen as a reliable support for both fishing and navigation, toponymy also represents, for fishermen and non-fishermen alike, a space of archiving and memory: a pathway along which local “events,” past and present, are simultaneously realized. ○

Notes

- 1 Cf. Cenival and Monod, 1938.
- 2 Lotte, 1937; Anthonioz, 1967, 1968 ; Maigret, 1984, 1990.
- 3 A detailed description of the highly complex classification of obligations and transactions operating on the coast, and varying from one warrior group to the other, is beyond the scope of this chapter (Artaud, 2011: 80-99).
- 4 Marine creatures solicited on such occasions have very specific names and physical characteristics. Among the hundred or so dolphins known by Imrâgen as emissaries of marabouts, the most famous

- are, for the Bu-derbâla family, of the Ahl Bârikalla, Mbarîk at-taysîr, a humpback dolphin, and for the Ahl al-Maqarri family, of the Tendgha of Ahl Bouhoubbayni, Bu-dhirwa, a dolphin with a shorter dorsal fin.
- 5 This prohibition, cited in article 10. aa of the National Park's Law 2000-24, provoked strong opposition among local communities.
 - 6 Zenaga, or Znaga, is a Berber language that was spoken before the introduction of Hassanya Arabic; it is still understood by about 200 speakers in Mauretania.
 - 7 The Park has indeed given exclusivity of use of its resources to "the Imrâgen." Previously stigmatized, this characterization as Imrâgen was suddenly given new value, stimulating an identification with this category (cf. AW. Cheikh, 2002).
 - 8 Riddles are, in Moorish society (Dubîé, 1947), commonly used to express the difficulties of daily life, whose solutions can only be found by individuals with exceptional capacities. They are also used to distinguish between several individuals' levels of practical intelligence. Fishermen swapped verbal challenges in which riddles figured prominently. These formulated a problem whose solution was found by selecting the right fishing technique, or the best nautical route for surmounting an obstacle.
 - 9 All great fishermen had remarkable sensibilities: Yora Ould Chekouti predicted the approach of fish merely by attending to the motion of waves across the lancha; Ahmed Lekbir navigated the mudflats by smell, and Salek Ould Zaïd, by sounding the bottom...
 - 10 Canarian lanchas, *nassranyat*, were introduced late to the Imrâgen technical landscape. Although a few local replicas, built by blacksmiths, existed under the name of *musilmât*, they long remained "fragile skiffs, difficult to handle, made of anything spewed by the sea." (Interview with Minetu and Soukeyna Mint Ahmed Alien O.Khlive, Rgueiba, 14/06/2008.)
 - 11 Amrig fishing mobilizes a very intricate temporal classification, which specifies times when fishing is prescribed or proscribed, and those when only certain techniques can be used.
 - 12 I specified above that only Imrâgen fishermen could "enter the sea" (*dḥal la-bḥar*). This rule also applies to women who inhabit the coastal periphery. There are various reasons for this marginality, but they seem for the most part to be related to a particular phenomenon, locally designated by term *dgeïmi* (agitation). Accounts collected from women over several periods of fieldwork agree that these are not permitted to enter the sea in the localities of Teyshot, Rgeyba and Mamghar. In the latter, the effects provoked by the transgression of this rule are taken advantage of on some occasions. To agitate the sea, when it is "holding up" boats due to a lack of wind or of favorable currents, "beautiful" women were asked to undress before it. What denies the access of *Timragâten* to the sea is thus not, as in the above-mentioned cases of warriors and marabouts, a social status that would be lowered by an infraction, but rather the nature of their ties to maritime space and to the identity that it is attributed locally.
 - 13 Annual journeying between islands that takes place during the summer.
 - 14 Poem transmitted by Muḥammâd Salem, Arkeiss (27/05/2008)
 - 15 Quran chap. VII verses 71 and up.
 - 16 The appellation "Imrâgen" is indeed traditionally associated with an "open" professional category: any individual who practiced fishing could, by their occupation, be identified as such. Unlike other professional groups in Moorish society, such as griots and blacksmiths, the openness that defines this class, its capacity to incorporate strangers, is one of its key defining features (Révol, 1937: 221). "It is remarkable that this class has never been a closed one, that access has remained easy for newcomers who have found their place by making themselves vassals of the coastal suzerains." Thus, the "Imrâgen" identity was not, as for other classes, inherited at birth and irreversibly attached to an individual. This meaning has changed significantly over the last few decades following the creation of an exceptional status associated with the "Imrâgen." A context of natural resources conservation has favoured acts of definition anchored in the selection of rather restrictive criteria of identity. Because of its implications for resolving questions about who should profit from the Park's resources and who can claim "autochtony," the Imrâgen identity has been delineated by increasingly firm boundaries.

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