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From Commercialised Species to Smuggled Object: Red Coral in Algeria

Tarik Dahou

The beginnings of coral exploitation date to Classical Antiquity, where it was incorporated into Mediterranean commercial circuits in Asia for export to India and China. Initially, coral was intensively exploited in the northern parts of the Western Mediterranean. However, over time, these areas lost their precedence over southern regions of the Mediterranean and became secondary centres of production. Over the course of centuries, El Kala (the eastern most coastal region of present day Algeria) acquired the reputation for being the most fertile Mediterranean region for coral and became subject to an intensive coral rush from several different kingdoms and empires¹. These, locked into different conflicts with each other, had also been engaged in changing relationships with the Ottoman Empire and its vassals in Barbary². Starting from the fifteenth century onwards, eastern Algeria was at the centre of disputes among different European powers (French, Spanish, Italian and British) over coral exploitation (Masson 1908: 30-40 and 70-80). Early in the history of El Kala, the market for coral became internationalised. During the sixteenth century, these kingdoms, which distributed the opportunities for trade to their internal political supporters to increase their external political influence, played a central role in encouraging these initiatives and this led to their prosperity (Masson 1908: 30-80). Trade monopolies started to develop through commercial concessions on the Mediterranean coasts. In the sixteenth century, France formed an alliance with Barbarossa (Barberousse), a pirate from Algiers representing the Ottoman Empire, to counter Spanish and Italian forces in the Mediterranean (Heers 2001: 90 and following).

At that time, close ties existed between private and public networks in these maritime spaces. Since private companies were also the armed representatives of the Kingdom of France, they were able to appropriate resources in faraway places and bring them back to French ports, the terrestrial spaces of French sovereignty. Therefore, the modes of access to coral were transformed from competitive concessions to spatial monopolies over maritime spaces and vice versa. The negotiations on agreements passed between the representatives of the Ottoman Empire (their vassals in Barbary) and the European commercial companies were shaped by international alliances, as the European powers sought to cultivate privileged trade relationships with the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman Empire's central government) to undermine their competitors.

From the sixteenth century, maritime trade and coral mining was at the heart of these unstable relationships. These international commercial relationships, defined by force, gave way to coral fishing concessions, where the boundaries between the public and the private were dependent on the interactions between private and public capital as well as on the political rationalities of the state(s). The commodification of coral stemmed from state concessions for a long time and was mainly due to the internationalisation of its exploitation. Even today, the concessions for coral fishing in El Kala intertwine public and private interests in Algeria and across borders.

This chapter traces the history of these patterns of coral exploitation through different periods, precolonial, colonial and contemporary, to show the continuity in the different forms of concessions and the links between this Algerian coral fishing zone and distant regions. This analysis will also help to understand how the privatisation of this resource, tied to state logics, came about, and the inherent difficulties impeding its conservation in globalised markets. Long distance relationships have always been at the root of coral commodification and the different

¹ The violent competition over the appropriation of marine resources and commercial routes has been considered akin to a "rush", since pirates and privateers of different nations were involved in looting different areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

² This region of North Africa was called "Land of Barbarians" (Barbary) until the nineteenth century.

regimes of nationalisation of its value (according to economic and heritage criteria) have always been bypassed by international markets and mobilities, from privateering times to the current global era.

From an Object of Commodity “Rush” to a Means for Population Settlement

From the thirteenth century, the eastern parts of today’s Algeria became territories of coral exploitation for the Genovese, who started to impose their presence against that of Arabs (Heers 2001). In fact, the etymology of the name given to this region (El Kala) comes from the French *La Calle*, which is a borrowing from the Italian *cala* (Eng. cove) replacing the Arabic name, “pearling port” (Arabic sources of the eleventh century describe the coral trade in this region). El Kala was a Genovese trading post, a concession, in fact, set up for the exploitation of the entire bay area by boats from Liguria. The coral was fished with a Saint Andrew’s Cross, a tool used in the Western Mediterranean for centuries (Gourdin 1990). Nets were attached to the end of the cross which was then dragged over rocks to collect coral branches. During the sixteenth century, as a favour granted by the Ottomans, France implanted a trading post in the bay.

Coral exploitation was governed by the Regency of Algiers, which had strengthened its sovereign powers over this maritime territory and granted concessions to foreign powers. With the agreement of the Sublime Porte, *La Compagnie d’Afrique*, a company from Marseilles, took over the coral fishing concession in La Calle from the hands of the Genovese. This concession, which dates to 1561, was the result of the agreement signed with the Dey (Collective-Encyclopédie méthodique 1783: 641-651) of Algiers. By granting this concession, the Dey was able to claim revenues from this maritime space, whereas the French company from Marseilles obtained access to rich coral deposits (Collective-Encyclopédie méthodique 1783: 643).

Thus, *La Compagnie d’Afrique* was able to settle in the bay but faced numerous military assaults, at times even from forces sent by the Regency of Algiers, which was seeking to destabilise the commercial companies operating there in order to increase its benefits. Notwithstanding, France was able to continue to exploit the coral through the company despite the intricacies of the changing power relations tying it to the Ottomans and the Regency of Algiers. This concession allowed France to maintain a very lucrative monopoly (Masson 1908: 100 and following).

The seventeenth century opened with a significant twist for the French coral economy, as the French bastion was destroyed by an Algiers privateer attack, although France managed to negotiate the reconstruction of its fortifications with the Regency. Following this event, the French coral company resettled a few miles further from the bastion, in La Calle, from where the English had just been chased (Encyclopédie méthodique 1783: 643). While during the sixteenth century, the royal support for the company was limited to economic backing, in the seventeenth century, armed conflicts intensified and required military support from the French Empire. Even though an agreement had been signed to maintain coral exploitation and the French stronghold in this location, the company had to pay a much heavier tribute demanded by the local pirates from Algiers at the expense of the *Sublime Porte* (Julien 1994: 663-666). Despite successive agreements, conflicts and extorsions became common and started to affect coral fishing (Masson 1908: 100). It was only at the end of the seventeenth century, when a new treaty was signed with the Regency of Algiers, that France obtained the exclusive and permanent right to coral exploitation from the Dey in La Calle.

During the eighteenth century, the French settlement in La Calle was again assaulted by pirates from Algiers but a new agreement spared it from destruction. After this, however, the lucrative monopoly of coral in La Calle remained in the hands of the French. The coral was sent to Marseilles, a city which would raise in importance in the manufacturing and trading of coral (Lacaze-Duthiers 1864: 297). However, questions were gradually raised about the privileges that

the French King had granted to the company³. These were in fact abolished following the Revolution (Lacaze-Duthiers 1864: 298), a period of indebtedness for the French colonial state, leading to the rapid decline of the Company.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French lost their control over the Province of Kasantina in Algeria to the British Empire, during which privateering also came to a halt. The French only took back control of this territory after the conquest of Algeria. During this century, Italian fishermen benefitted also from the departure of the Provence fishermen. They started to exploit the coral in La Calle and sell it to manufacturers in the regions where they originally came from, in Livorno and Torre Del Greco (Napoli). Following the Algerian conquest, the Italians continued to collect coral in exchange for fishing fees in what had become French waters. At least 200 Italian ships used the Saint Andrew's Cross. The French conquest and control over maritime spaces would facilitate Italian immigration to the region. The French colonial administration in Algeria tolerated these coral fishing practices as it was more preoccupied with establishing a territorial governance on land rather than on sea.

Concerned by populating the Algerian territories with French settlers, France encouraged Italians to stay in La Calle for coral fishing and considered a more permanent Italian presence for the processing of coral in La Calle to promote local jewellery production⁴. The French colonial administration wanted to create the conditions that would allow European settlers to develop a long-term economic commodity production. Coral exploitation was seen as an extractive activity supporting commodity production similar to forestry extraction in Algeria. Renewing the quantities of coral exploited within a certain period of time was key to the profitability of this commodity production and also an indirect source of revenue for the state and useful for increasing the number of European settlers. Scientific studies in La Calle (Lacaze-Duthiers 1864) triggered the implementation of management measures. Colonial scientific research on coral supported a regulated access to coral extraction, especially through a fallow system in order to preserve the reefs which reproduced at very slow rates and were subject to destructive fishing techniques (Lacaze-Duthiers 1864). Yet it was decided that the management and organisation of coral exploitation activity were more appropriate measures. Fishing by larger sail vessels anchored far from the coast was restricted, since these vessels were less dependent on terrestrial resources. At the same time, the extraction of smaller sized reefs continued to be allowed. A fallow rotation system was not deemed suitable during a period where increasing numbers of European settlers continued to arrive. Efforts were therefore concentrated in promoting coral fishing by building houses and shops and by establishing medical centres and lending agencies.

The freedom to exploit coral and the abolition of extraction fees for settled French fishermen were considered the best incentives for the development of a local industry for the processing of coral in view of European jewellery production (at the time, the transformation of coral was done almost entirely in the cities of Livorno and Torre del Greco). The sailors who migrated to the French colony consisted mainly of Italians. Especially after 1860, fishermen from the region of Napoli came to settle in eastern Algeria.

The Saint Andrew's Cross remained the only means to fish coral in La Calle during the nineteenth century and beyond. Its use was specified by the Decree of the 22nd November 1883 on coral mining which authorised only a wooden Saint Andrew's Cross⁵ and was further strengthened by the governmental decision of 1832 prohibiting the use of a cross made from iron⁶, allegedly more damaging to the reefs.

³ The end of the eighteenth century corresponds to the end of the privileges and renewed peace agreements among European powers. This also meant a progressive decline in the support granted by the different states to their companies in international negotiations.

⁴ Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) 80 MIOM 1558 1&2.

⁵ Collection of laws, ordinances, decrees, decisions and circulars of Algerian Law (1830-1895) http://www.e-corpus.org/notices/104432/gallery/928198_image_486 (consulted on July 2013).

⁶ Article 15 of this decision lays out the principles for the use of engines susceptible of destroying coral reefs. ANOM 80 MIOM 1558 1&2.

The modes of exploitation that required the payment of fees to foreign fishing captains for every coral collection expedition continued throughout the colonial period. Besides, the colonial administration also attempted to nationalise, or at least indigenise, coral fishing. But these efforts were not successful⁷. The debates at the time concentrated on the number of foreign sailors on board the ships, since many were looking to avoid the payment of fees, alleging the national origins of the fishing captains⁸.

With the decline in world coral prices starting from the 1860s, fishermen started to alternate between coral exploitation and fishing. In particular, the Italians started to invest greatly in fishing along the eastern coast of Algeria. The fishermen settled permanently in La Calle and adopted French citizenship following naturalisation laws passed in 1889. The increased number of naturalisations was prompted by a law adopted a year earlier, which gave the fishing rights in French and Algerian territories only to French nationals (Boushaba 2008: 5). By the 1920s, around 20 coral fishing ships continued to exploit coral in La Calle (Gruvel 1926), which experienced a slight increase in local production following a period of lower demand. Prior to the independence of Algeria, coral fishing appears to have been so marginal that the fishing reports do not even mention it.

Coral Exploitation Concessions and Conservation

Coral exploitation would pick up much later, during the 1970s when the Algerian State became interested in coral. In the 1950s, extraction by diving was imposed on the entire Mediterranean as it was considered a more intensive and selective method. In the Mediterranean Basin, the Corsican and Italian fishermen were the first coral divers. The Algerian Fishing Office became responsible from regulating this activity, since it was also mandated with rendering maritime resources productive. It was only in 1987, following the development of coral processing workshops that diving would become mandatory in El Kala.

The Algerian National Agency for Fishing, which replaced the Fishing Office, started to train Algerian divers and in exchange, retained ten percent of the revenues from the production of coral. But this did not last long, no doubt due to a lack of insurance and medical measures required by this risk prone activity (Derbal 1996). However, Algeria's move towards privatisation starting from the end of the 1980s also played a part. It was at that time that coral exploitation was liberalised by granting concessions to entrepreneurs. This new regime of coral exploitation was regulated by a decree passed in 1995 (Decree 95-323, 21 October 1995) establishing a quota of one ton of coral per year to each concession holder. The law made it possible to obtain the concessions in exchange for the payment of a fixed fee for the use of the territory and an additional fee that varied according to the quantities extracted. The increased yield and the requirements concerning the preservation of underwater resources facilitated the expansion of diving as a primary technique for coral extraction.

The concessions were granted to Algerian coral extraction operators which relied on their foreign partners, not so much to reduce their equipment costs (ships with decompression chambers) but for their specialised technical knowledge (Raveneau 1999). For this expertise, it was primarily the Italian divers who were sought after, a choice that was shaped by the historical links tying the El Kala peninsula to Italy. Italian divers were arriving to El Kala to work with Algerian entrepreneurs. As the laws only permitted Algerian Nationals to get the concessions, these *joint ventures* were necessary.

These types of concessions made the collection of coral dependent on the Algerian State and its discretionary power of opening or not its maritime territories to exploitation. Initially, a dozen of concessions had been granted to Algerian operators partnered with Italian divers in El Kala, totalling *ca.* twenty active concessionaires at the end of the 1990s. These concessions constituted a sustainable form of coral fishing since they were based on a fallow system and were limited by a

⁷ ANOM 80 MIOM 1558 1&2.

⁸ ANOM 80 MIOM 1558 1&2.

fishing quota. This principle of conservation of resources (not of biodiversity) for concessions run by private operators was established at the end of the 1980s (Derbal 1996). The specifications of territorial concession contracts clearly stated that only the extremities of the coral branches should be collected as it was important to ensure the renewal of the species. During this time, coral collection was taking place at a depth inferior to 50 meters, which showed the abundance of the resource.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Algerian State prohibited coral exports since a great portion of the coral was diverted to Torre del Greco at the expense of local processing businesses. Since local markets were very limited, the coral was directed to Italian markets. Only a few small-scale jewellery businesses existed on the Algerian coast. As a response to this situation, the Algerian state decided to take measures to re-appropriate the profits from the coral. A total ban on unprocessed coral export was instituted through a governmental decision in 1992. However, with the intervention of the National Agency for the Development of Fisheries, the Ministry of Commerce instituted an exemption allowing these exports to continue. The regulations concerning the concessionary regimes were readjusted by an executive decree (No. 95-323, 21 October 1995). This decree introduced the right to control (by Algerian authorities) the quantities of coral extracted from Algerian waters and legalised the participation of foreign divers in the coral fishing business. The exploitation rules were further fine-tuned: the concessions were deemed to be precarious and revocable, especially with regards to zoning plans and fishing quotas, which were supposed to be controlled by fishery services, coastal guards and the customs officers when ships came in from the sea (Cazalet & Alliouche 2010).

In the 1980s, Algeria became the leading producer of coral in the Mediterranean, providing almost half of the production in the whole Mediterranean Basin (Santangelo *et al.* 1993). These statistics on coral production levels indicate a massive export of Algerian coral to Italy, where the main processing workshops were located. On the other hand, conservation statistics indicate a decline of coral stocks in the Northern Mediterranean and in the quantities extracted (from 400 to 40 tonnes) (CITES 2007) which also implies an increase in prices. Despite the Algerian government's profuse socialist discourse, coral exploitation remained a rentier activity with no significant economic impact on local commodity production chains. The concessions granted to the Algerian operators benefitted national investors in Algiers and in the surrounding region of El Kala.

At the turn of the millennium, the situation started to change as Algeria re-engaged in the process to better integrate the Mediterranean region with an attending series of regional policies. An integrated marine policy and the Blue Plan, an intergovernmental organisation in charge of the implementation of the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean, became part of national public policy. In this multilateral process where Algeria was now also a party, biodiversity conservation now occupied an important place. Algerian law now promotes conservation principles accepted by and put in place in other countries of the region. Through a decree adopted in 2001 (Decree No. 01-56, 15 February 2001) to preserve its marine ecosystems, Algeria ended the concessionary regime for the exploitation of coral, in addition to passing fishing laws brought in line with responsible fishing as promoted by the FAO (Boushaba 2008:138-143). The Algerian holders of concessions in El Kala shifted their activities to fishing or to commerce, while coral divers left the Algerian coast. Even though coral fishing methods are not completely destructive, and all countries of the region continue to exploit coral, it is surprising to see the Algerian government pass such a decree, unique in the Mediterranean region. What is even more surprising is that a ban on coral exploitation was preferred to a stricter management of extraction. The discovery of massive illegal exports of coral could have led the Algerian authorities to preserve the resource. However, official documents do not mention overexploitation.

Instead, these documents claim that the decision was taken to prevent the disappearance of a slow growing species (one centimetre per year) with low fertility rates. This argument served to

legitimise the moratorium placed on coral fishing. It was also highlighted that this facilitates the evaluation of the availability of the resource for its management in the future, which will be more adapted to extractable quantities of coral. The moratorium decree took effect while “awaiting the results of the studies that would evaluate the exploitation of the resource”, but it did not specify a duration. Together with the interruption of concessions, the use of a Saint Andrew’s Cross has also been prohibited by fishing laws. In sum, these conservation measures are the result of the convergence of existing fishing laws with international laws (Boushaba 2008). Even though international conventions and regulations have a conservation objective per se, they do not forbid coral exploitation which converges with the idea of moratorium.

This decision to halt coral production is also unique in the Mediterranean region, since region-wide legal norms, incentives or codes of conduct limiting coral extraction do not exist, while diving is the main method adopted because it is selective. Only the Bern Convention (the Council of Europe’s Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats), adopted on 19 September 1979, mentions coral among the list of species whose exploitation is regulated, but this convention has had no effect on the Europeans exploiting coral in the Mediterranean. As it has been intensively exploited for jewellery production, coral is presently collected in depths between 80 to 100 metres and more. For example, in Corsica, coral fishing at less than a 50-meter depth is prohibited to help with coral regeneration. However, even though international conservation lobbies have been pressuring nations to regulate coral exploitation, to date, this regulation is left exclusively to the initiative of the states themselves. There is no doubt that given coral’s slow growth, its intensive fishing in the Mediterranean compromises its regeneration. This has led some states to attempt to regulate coral fishing, including France and the United States of America, as well as conservation NGOs, who have also played a leading role in the tentative inclusion of coral in the CITES Convention (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). However, in 2010, the tentative addition of coral to Annex 2 of the CITES Convention was dropped due to opposition from Mediterranean states intent on protecting coral exploitation and their jewellery industries. All countries reserved the power to regulate (or not) coral exploitation, ranging from a total lack of regulation to the adoption of conservation-oriented management measures.

The total ban of coral exploitation in Algeria can be interpreted as a will to preserve a resource that is starting to be perceived as heritage. Different events and plaques in the National Parc of El Kala refer to the historical legacy of the exploitation of this resource in terms of territorial identity. However, local representations of fishers are still ambiguous, sometimes insisting on the natural and historical dimensions of the coral heritage and other times on the economic dimension of its value. Finally, the unilateral governmental decision of Algeria, the biggest producer in the Mediterranean, has immediately led to the emergence of smuggling activities, drawing the coral commodity chain in El Kala into illegality. Thanks to production networks oriented towards Italy via Tunisia, coral fishing has acquired a renewed energy and is carried out through small boats and the use of a Saint Andrew’s Cross.

The Rationalities of Coral Smuggling

Coral smuggling reached significant levels starting in 2005. The number of articles in the Algerian press as well as the increase in the numbers of registrations of pleasure crafts as opposed to professional ships are indicative of this rise. From the mid-2000s on, the number of small ships doubled (Chakour 2010) and the number of pleasure crafts exploded. These numbers are a good indicator of the increased traffic of coral fishing, especially when local fishing for other resources continues to stagnate (Chakour 2010). For coral exploitation, light motorised fibreglass boats are used. These boats allow the extraction of coral by only two people, using a Saint Andrew’s Cross; these crosses are first hidden under the water and, later, retrieved with the help of small buoys placed just below the sea surface and localised by the means of GPS equipment. While one person drives the boat, the other uses the cross to scrape off the rock cavities.

This is carried out not only by fishers who invest in illegal coral exploitation, but also by other operators interested in this lucrative commodity chain. Former fishers, discouraged by low revenues, especially from bluefish, also engage in this activity. However, a good number of unemployed youths from El Kala and sometimes other young people from neighbouring areas engage in this practice as well. In average, 500 grams of coral are obtained in each outing, generating at least 300 euros of revenue, and a whole coral tree can bring much more. The estimates for the annual revenue of the coral extraction sector at the local level reach two to four million euros. Young people, in search of economic opportunities to achieve their personal goals, are quickly integrated in these networks. The attractiveness of coral exploitation networks is such that fishing boat captains find it difficult to recruit sailors. One of the reasons why young people can so easily seize these opportunities without any initial capital is the existence of a variety of actors willing to acquire and equip pleasure crafts, such as the merchants of El Kala or even public servants who have enough means to buy a small boat and a motor. Even the members of the Fisheries' chamber, public servants as well as the representatives of fishers, participate in coral exploitation. The engagement of different parts of the administration in this parallel economy and the degree to which this type of investment is considered to be commonplace among them, is proof that different segments of the local bureaucracy take advantage of smuggling and allow it to continue.

This overview of the actors engaged in the coral commodity chain would be incomplete if one left out the role played by coastal guards in the exponential increase of illegal coral exploitation during the last ten years. Even though an important fisheries law was elaborated in 2001, the public institutions responsible for fisheries were given only a minor role in the monitoring of activities in the maritime space. The powers of the Fishing Service are limited to the control of boats arriving to the shore, something that is not even practiced in El Kala, and the Service relies on the support of the Fisheries chamber for educating the fishers about the regulations in the fishing laws.

This Fishing Service is, therefore, not endowed with any significant institutional powers, in particular when it comes to monitoring maritime spaces and their use. Even though a corps of fishing inspectors has been created and legal texts mention the necessity of cooperation between the Fishing Service and the Algerian Coast Guard (Cazalet & Alliouch 2011), in practice there is no such form of collaboration. According to national legislation, the only authority that has the powers to determine what constitutes a violation of fishing laws in the seas is the Coast Guard and these powers derive from their responsibilities over the protection of national maritime territories and the maritime public domain. This responsibility is not subject to any civil society control, as the Coast Guard is part of the national army which is placed directly under the orders of the President. The government has, therefore, no right to interfere in the actions of the military. The Coast Guard is the guarantor of the respect of the national maritime borders and fishing areas, as well as of public marine resources and, hence, maintains an exclusive control over fishing law infractions. It is, therefore, the only one who can control the fishing boats that embark in El Kala and that has the power to oversee the fishing methods, the zonal restrictions, the materials used for fishing and the quantities of catch even though it is not specialised in these areas.

Therefore, despite these prerogatives and the means that they have under their control, the coast guards have very little, if any, role in the surveillance of coral smuggling. A review of newspaper articles published between 2008-2011 on seized coral indicates that almost all of it was seized on land by the gendarmes and not at sea. Coral fishing at sea seems to carry on with impunity. The majority of fishers stress the corruption of the coast guards, who are able to extract a profit from smuggling by imposing a tribute on the coral collectors. The corruption is widespread and takes place at sea and on land, allowing smuggling activities to avoid any and all legal penalties.

Since fishing provides limited employment opportunities, the actors situated at the bottom of the smuggling ladder seek to accumulate profits in a context where the redistributive policies of the

Algerian State have failed. Furthermore, fishermen complain constantly about their precarious status, in particular concerning retirement benefits, and insist that the government's plan for reinvigorating fishing has not benefitted the artisanal fisheries in the port. These discourses are also related to power discrepancies that have been created in the new context of liberalisation. The methods of governance linked to this context have eroded the mechanisms of state protection. However, they have also led to the paradoxical result of reinforcing the means of state control, especially through international security policies that encourage the control of international maritime borders. As this analysis of the structure of coral commodity smuggling suggests, the local actors find ways of accommodating to this situation by circumventing it through different mechanisms. Yet, since smuggling actions take place outside of the state's judicial and legal framework, the mechanisms of circumvention continue to operate at the margins of state institutions, incorporating only certain parts of the central state or its local branches, as was the case in the past. More than ever, smuggling influences greatly the state rationalities of action. It allows not only to circumvent the state's legal framework, but also simultaneously, to mobilise state materials and institutional support. In the functioning of this illicit economy, different facets of the state are involved. These range from bureaucratic as well as security institutions to local authorities. Nevertheless, the illegal character of the coral commodity chain needs to be questioned, not only because the number of actors who are invested in it is significant, but also because the fishermen constantly shift between legal and illegal activities. During the French colonisation of Algeria, the colonial government included the *beylik* domain, the Bey's possessions granted for exploitation, in the public domain. One can still appropriate resources according to political circumstances, or rather, through deception. Coral reflects the ambiguities of such an appropriation: as part of the territorial domain (of the ruler), coral will always be susceptible to become an object of concession. Today, a similar political dynamic can be observed at play not only in the complicity of customs officers who let smugglers go, but also in other practices, such as the use by the unemployed of public finances generated by micro-enterprises (the ANSEJ system) to buy equipment for boats and motors to fish coral. The coral commodity chain is structured around different actors with different statuses as well as different interests that shape the ambivalence of coral as revealed by ethnography (Dahou 2018). Even though local representations of fishermen towards coral are still characterised by an enchanted relation to nature, coral is also valued as a way to access power and to escape the dependency of fishing and social relations. The fishermen find in it a means to escape the burden of the demanding fishing industry and a way to achieve their social projects. The ubiquity of coral (its symbolic and material dimension) proceeds from the encounter of local and international processes of valuation. The influence of the processing markets in Italy and the importance of the coral reefs in Algeria work together to deconstruct the moratorium, which was imposed to promote conservation against the commercial exploitation but ended up by increasing the local value of the coral through an increase in its monetary value outside Algeria.

Conclusion

The present regime of exploitation of coral could only be qualified as illicit concession as far as the illegal practices continue to shape the relations between public and private actors, with the agreement and the blessing of the central state. This oxymoron used to define coral exploitation fits also very well into the differential and changing applications of conservation norms. Despite the juridical rules that prohibit the fishing of coral, its exploitation is carried out in the open and with the agreement, even the active participation of different public bodies. The persistence and the intensity of these practices can be explained by the actions of the state. While previously exploitation was carried out in such a way as to ensure the regeneration of the stocks through concessions, the ban on coral fishing has revived the interest in capturing this illegal profit among a variety of actors involved in different ways in this commodity chain, from agencies responsible for regulating the fisheries sector to those responsible for maritime policing. Coral exploitation

has taken such a dimension that coral's status as an object of national heritage has disappeared and left in its place a commodity to be transported to distant places through transnational illicit networks.

This case study illustrates the continuities in the modes of appropriation of coral. With the exception of the short period of state-controlled exploitation between the end of the 1970s until the 1990s, these modes of appropriation have been shaped by international markets over the long term, working towards limiting the opportunities for the development of a local jewellery industry while enabling the continued fishing of coral. Except for this brief period, a concessionary regime established by the central state and functioning in favour of operators oriented towards the export of coral remained in place from the period of the privateering to the colonial period and up to the present, where this concessionary regime has been recreated at the margins of legality, through a technique prohibited by law and despite a prohibition on coral exploitation. Currently, this form of intensive and visible exploitation continues to be dependent on the lenience of the coast guards, who are also the indirect beneficiaries of coral smuggling. Today, the access rights to coral continue to be based on an exploitation regime that has little regard for the sustainability of the species. The imposition of diving as a fishing method and the adoption of coral fishing quotas suggest that conservation criteria need to be integrated into its modes of exploitation. However, given the long history of the use of coral in these maritime territories, such measures remain ephemeral. Ironically, it is only when state laws re-institute coral as a public resource, interrupting its private exploitation to ensure its conservation, that past forms of private appropriation resurface. In this process, the coral commodity chain and its international organisation continue to exert a strong influence over the modes of appropriation of this resource.