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**STATENESS AND BORDERNESS IN
MEDIATION: PRODUCTIONS AND
CONTESTATIONS OF SPACE IN THE SAHEL**

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PRODUCTIONS AND CONTESTATIONS OF SPACE
IN THE SAHEL**

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Stateness and Borderiness in Mediation: Productions and Contestations of Space in the Sahel

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Introduction

This paper explores forms of production, engagement, and subversion of space and territoriality in the Sahel. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which the Tuareg have particularized space in the pursuit of self-governance. In order to substantiate my argument, I review the various articulations of the 'territorial' in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1960s and 1990s as well as the recent attempt to institute the Tuareg independent state of Azawad in 2012.

While a good number of conflicts on the continent, from the Casamance to Malian and Nigerien rebellions, tend to be motivated by state-making as a central claim, most African conflicts also tend to be the result of state-making.¹ Scholars of the African state are often quick to point to the fact that colonially drawn borders have rarely been contested in postcolonial Africa. However, this observation is not only informed by a deeply state-centric perspective, it squarely disregards dynamic practices of (de)territoriality that coexist and interact with state forms. The colonial and postcolonial state's hegemonic writing of spatial order not only obscures the complexity of spatial practices in dominated societies. It has also undermined the full development of competing forms of space production that prevailed in pre-colonial Africa and continues to structure the perspectives of minority groups.

Conceptually, I draw on an ideology of nomadism that (in)forms actual and imagined possibilities within territorially contested logics. I do so specifically in relation to Deleuze and Guattari (1980) who reflected on the value of statelessness as a radical mode of self-governance and as an alternative to statehood. In addition, following Lefebvre, I am keen to rethink space and temporality in rethinking territory and mobility as correlated processes. I do so in two ways: firstly, by re-interrogating a conventional notion of territoriality as statization; secondly in revisiting Tuareg rebellions as instances of a struggle over the definition and control over space as both meaning and practice.

This paper seeks to make the following two arguments. The first is that space is always related to mobility. It is also strongly linked to political and cultural survival. In this very sense, reterritorialization trends at work in the Sahel since the 1990s can be understood as a strategy for dealing with spatial precariousness and social marginalization. The second argument is that in the 'territorial turn' of the Tuareg autonomist movement in particular, one can see a shift from an identitarian to a transactional principle. This shift can be understood as having to do with 'spatial survival' and therefore cultural survival.² More fundamentally, the shift reflects the multiple and contingent nature of spatial production. This seems like a common argument and, in fact, many studies of Tuareg rebellions do tend to point to this factor.³ However, from my point of view, the salience of space as politico-cultural resource has not been treated as an excruciating enough question that articulates, albeit differently, the way we are meant to understand new forms of opposition to state power. Therefore, this paper seeks to offer an interdisciplinary contribution to the literature on non-statist and other alternative conceptions of space and territoriality.

1 Ayoob (1988) makes a similar argument.

2 Here, survival is understood not just in terms of territory but also as survival of culture, language, values, beliefs, and other modes of interaction.

3 Lefebvre (1991) and Tuan (1977) both make this point very strongly.

The sources that inform this paper are both contemporary and historical. The paper draws from the rich secondary literature on Sahelian-Saharan socio-political history, particularly from studies on the ecological social-history of nomadic societies (c.f. Bernus 1981; Bourgeot 1995; Casajus 1987; Claudot-Hawad 2000; 2002; Lecocq 2010). The paper is divided into three sections. The first is an overview of the implications of an ideology of nomadism for conceptual and political possibilities. The second section successively explores statist and non-statist approaches to territoriality. The third engages articulations of the territorial in the successive Tuareg rebellions. In drawing on historical and contemporary processes in the Sahel, the paper seeks to stress the significance of a discussion of nomadism—as both ideal and practice—for rethinking identity as a productive mode at the margins of the state without falling into a reductive dichotomy between stateness and statelessness as antagonistic political forms.

I Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations

For many years, geographers debated the value of spatial conceptions which are exclusively place-bound. They have taken to task views of space as given, namely the idea that space is a container for social experience. More than anyone else, Henri Lefebvre has pushed for a broad perspective that takes into account the materiality of space. Lefebvre contends that “space [is] both a material product of social relations (the concrete) and a manifestation of relations, a relation itself (the abstract)” (Gottdiener 1993, 130). Lefebvre rejected binary and often inevitably static views of Marxist dialectics, preferring a view of space as something that is “perceived, conceived and lived” (ibid., 131) a tripartite that brings home the extent to which space intervenes in social relations. For Lefebvre, space is constituted by a physical environment that can be perceived. Space is also a semiotic abstraction that underpins people’s engagements with their (material) surroundings. Thus, space is a means through which bodies enter into action, that is, in relation to other bodies.

The particular dialectical relation of the social and the spatial that emerges out of Lefebvre’s reflection is simply that a society produces a spatial framework that befits its meaning-making processes and patterns of formation of social relations. This is precisely the sense in which I seek to explore Tuareg conceptions of space as the product of interactions between *event* and *place*, and more specifically, the function of space in the community’s needs and social relations. In colonial and postcolonial times, the Tuareg struggle consisted of contesting state production of space through transgression and insurgency. The requirement of recognition of and respect for the spatial limits imposed by state borders has often conflicted with the Tuareg capacity to maintain control over people and trade and therefore to produce wealth.

A Rethinking Statelessness and Territoriality

Theorists of the state, including classical liberal philosophers such as Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke, have generally paid little attention to the relation between state and mobility in relation to freedom. A notable exception has been a discussion of European migration to the Americas in the context of early colonial conquests and territorial seizures. According to Mongia and other authors, the lack of scholarly interest in the interactions between mobility and terri-

tory is less an omission than an indication of a view, widely held until the 19th century, that state interference in conditions of peaceful migration was but an exceptional and unjustifiable demonstration of sovereign power (Mongia 2007, 400; cf. Dummet 1992; Kleinschmidt 2003). This position seemed at least to reflect a scholarly consensus prior to the development of “new understandings of danger, protection, and security” that set the parameters for the scope of sovereign power in addition to informing “the general discourse underwriting state authority in monitoring migration and in reconfiguring the definition of state sovereignty” (Mongia 2007, 402-403). Despite the existence of numerous examples where the contradictions between space and movement should inspire new conceptions of space and mobility (Sahel, Palestine, refugees, nomads, environmental migrants etc.), little has been done to rethink the sedentary bias inherent in social scientific approaches to space and mobility (Kleinschmidt 2003). One consequence of the state-centered approach to mobility has been the exclusion of a variety of non-state societies from the realm of the *political*.

In the Sahel two prevalent types of conflict are inherently linked to fundamental questions of mobility and are therefore space-dependent. The first one concerns recurrent clashes between transhumant and sedentary groups and among transhumant groups. The second form relates to rebellions that have come to be shaped by claims of rights over land. Between 1960 and 2012 Tuareg rebellions have congealed into an autonomist movement that has put forward strong claims for territorial autonomy as sine qua non to self-determination. This shift not only redefines the baseline conditions of cultural experience but also the material structure that seems to matter in the fulfillment of the autonomization project. Both critical geopolitics and philosophies of movement (discussed below) can help to shed light on this shift. Critical geopolitics in particular usefully explores the multiple functions of borders as opposed to conventionally limited outlooks (Dalby 2010).

B Philosophies and Practices of Space

(1) The Nomadist Ideal as Framework

Nomadism tends to be conceived as a ‘cultural ideal’ both by purists and those attached to an idea of a Tuareg identity and a notion of Tuareg personhood as intrinsically nomadic. Thus, nomadism organizes the conceptual life of actual, historical and ‘cultural’ nomads and enthalls their imagination. It also informs person-conceptions and social relations. Therefore, tensions inevitably emerge among different Tuareg groups, those sedentarized groups being considered *less* Tuareg than others still engaged in pastoralist activities, i.e. in the case of Kel Ewey (Rasmussen 1992). The nomadic ideal should not merely be taken as a metaphorical ideal or a rhetorical imagining, but rather as the specific content of Tuareg subjective consciousness, something akin to what Lydia Liu calls “a grammar more fundamental than [Tuareg themselves]” (1990, 152) that at once enables and constrains Tuareg imaginings: thus, one can ‘cease’ being Tuareg—for instance by adopting a sedentary lifestyle—but nomadism will not cease to define what it is to be Tuareg. Therefore, one easily understands how responses to structural changes in political and economic configurations, namely the erosion of the nomadic power base more generally, can elicit cultural reconstructions and symbolic (re)enactments.

Philosophical nomadism—particularly the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1980)—extols the virtues of anti-statism and anti-conventionalism, and the creative dimensions of a nomadic life oblivious to the requirements of ‘modern’, contained, and bounded structures. However, this

approach to nomadism as deregulated stateness can only be of use if it is ridden off its inherent eurocentrism. The focus on individualistic choice, the distinction between nomadism and sedentism as opposing socio-economic modes, mutually exclusive, and the conceptual isolation of categories in fact undermine their extensive applicability to contexts in which social subjects do not think of themselves in these terms. Nomadism is associated with an idea of an itinerant territoriality. As such, its transformation under the policy of sedentarization bears a number of consequences on the manner in which nomadic groups conceive of themselves and construct a living on the basis of shared beliefs and values. Consequences of sedentarization include, but are not limited to, the restructuring of social life through fragmented categories and the cohabitation of agriculture and cattle-farming in places where a pastoral mode had previously prevailed. At any rate, if the bare-bone thematics of the dichotomy nomadism/sedentism are well-known and often reflect opposition and complementarity, their underlying logic is inherently polarizing. On one hand, Yi-Fu Tuan among others makes a distinction between space and place that I find useful for my purpose here. Tuan contends that “place is security, space is freedom: [people] are attached to the one and long for the other” (1977, 3). Such a notion of ‘place’ points to the fact that local commitments to particular moral, cultural, and intellectual ideals underpin an ecological imaginary. Where one can envisage an interaction in the way the nuances speak to spatial practices of freedom. However, the division between ‘sedentarians’ and ‘nomads’ obviously does not map well onto the complex frame of bonds that have constituted and continue to define communities over centuries. On the other hand, Rasmussen discusses an increasing diversification of activities (gardening, caravanning, herding and trading) among the Kel Ewey of Niger in a context of diminishing resources that have translated into limited pastures and economic pressure for groups to sedentarize for survival. Yet, the Kel Ewey are strongly attached to an idea of being nomad and to an idea of status articulated on the basis of social stratum and segment rather than occupation (Rasmussen 1992, 352).⁴ Therefore, the nomadic imaginary becomes a refuge in a context of cultural distress and economic duress.

Claudot-Hawad has also usefully repurposed a postmodernist view of nomadism as an oppositional force to centralizing tendencies. However, where post-modern nomadology is seemingly stuck in a global and cosmopolitan logic, it tends to disregard the life-worlds of actual nomads pushed to the peripheries and only resurface where they can inform Western theory. Thus, Claudot-Hawad reinvigorates the concept by deploying it for the purpose of explaining the ethics of nomadic life forms as both philosophy and way of life. In doing so, she calls into question preconceived ideas about the nature of change in the 21st century Sahel and the premises of life at the margins of the Global South.

Broadly conceived, the space of nomadism enables particular forms of cohabitation and facilitates particular forms of interaction, for instance *le droit de passage*,⁵ complementary forms

4 This goes contra Lovejoy and Baier’s (1975) treatment of social class and ethnicity as resulting from commercial transactions.

5 Modes of mobile and territorial engagement, and the sustenance of livelihoods for Tuareg were historically defined by regimes of *droits de passage*. The latter are “a customary institution [that] regulates a distinctive form of engagement with the land and its use that differs from the classical right of property and land tenure” (Strazzari 2015, 2). The institution of the *droits de passage* is embedded in a system of interaction and mutual exchange among various nomadic and sedentary societies alongside tributary and clientelage systems. Therefore, it functions in a distinctive understanding of territory as open space traversed by networks of exchange. These arrangements were jeopardized by forced migration due to famines, droughts, and climate change, political marginalizations following sedentarization policies (i.e. Saharatownns), etc. (Lecoq 2010, 113). Also, see Dumont (2012) on the effects of sedentarization and development policies in northern Mali.

of resource management and productive activities, clientelist and vassalage relationships and so on. When one problematizes ideal conceptions of nomadism against the history of nomadism, the contradictions brought to bear by divergent practices reveal the very dynamism and contingency of space production.

(2) Nomadism as Practice

Whereas the nomadic ideal relies upon an abstract understanding of space and its functions, nomadism as practice relies on a social experience of space or what Lefebvre refers to as social space (i.e the everyday lived experience of spatially mediated social experience as opposed to an imagined frame of space). In their stories of origin, the Tuareg are “marcheurs de l’univers” (wanderers of the universe) who view time and space as infinitely stretchy, the life cycle in constant movement and therefore immobility as social death (Claudot-Hawad 2002, 15-16). Independence however consecrated the double marginalization of the Tuareg. Firstly, pastoral nomadism was ruled out as a productive or useful sector of the modern economy. Secondly, the nomadic way of life has been rendered obsolete because of having little contribution and being dispensable under the centralized nation-state; in addition to being perceived as a potential source of tension by governants. The postcolonial regime of codification of access to and use of land and other natural resources remains vague, if not silent, with regards to ‘the pastoral domain’.⁶

Here like elsewhere, the organization of space now responds to the defining powers of resource extraction and securitization. Thus, the Sahel has become not only an enclave that no longer belongs to Sahelians exclusively but also a framework for “an ethnographic form of military administration that both implicitly and intentionally revivifies the precepts of colonial and imperial administration” (Khalili 2014, 25). Heir to colonial administrative traditions, the postcolonial state has failed, alongside development and modernization projects that have taken on the responsibility of ‘integration’, to see Sahelians as political subjects and not merely as ‘objects of administration’ (Pitts 2010, 220). For both private and external state actors to provide the resources for ‘stability’ to Sahelian states is to participate in a semblance of ‘normalcy’ by keeping superficial sovereign control over the Sahel. This image of ‘normalcy’ seems to be more important than any other consideration.⁷

In recent times, control over routes of smuggling and crossroads has become an important resource for organized networks, especially in the context of the transnational drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe. For trans-border entrepreneurs in particular, territorial control easily translates into control over vital exchanges. This becomes an important junction when one considers the crystallization of Tuareg political claims articulated on the basis of identity in the 1960s and the 1990s to a demand for sovereign statehood in 2012 (Bach 2014). In fact,

6 Demographic pressure and the plurality of customary regimes with regards to resource use are also factors that cohere in making nomadic pastoralism both unproductive and one of the most marginalized activities in the Sahel. In fact, the postcolonial state merely entrenched restrictions against pastoral nomads instituted during the colonial area, namely by passing laws that require pastoral nomads to carry a permit with them, restricted access to wells (*police des puits*), prohibited weapons, etc. A French strategy to undermine Tuareg capacity to produce space consisted in ‘freeing’ slaves and setting up ‘freedom villages’; they surmised that the best way to “reduc[e] the Tuareg race to nothing” was to liberate slaves and disrupt hierarchies and divisions of roles and labor (Clarke 1977, 42).

7 AREVA, the uranium multinational, is regularly accused of aiding the Nigerien government in repressing rebellions in its territory.

political claims—whether couched in the ethnic, religious or nationalist language—have become more salient and competitive as demonstrated by the resurgence of crisis since 2012. Since the 1960s, Tuareg rebellions have been characterized by an oscillation between variations of regional autonomy on one hand and access to state power on the other hand (cf. Ag Yousouf & Poullton 1998; Maiga 1997). At stake now are disproportionate revenues that can be made from smuggling as opposed to traditional nomadic activities. From a governance and security perspective, smuggling poses a crucial problem of legality and a threat to state order. According to Scheele however, Sahelians involved in smuggling related transactions apply a moral rather than a legal code and understanding to their practice. From this standpoint, no conceptual distinctions between cocaine trade, smuggling of banned goods, regular trade and human trafficking are possible. Therefore, cross border smuggling has to be considered within broader regional trade dynamics in so far as local debates are strictly framed by moral considerations about *frud al haram* (illicit trade) vs. *frud al-halal* (licit trade) (Scheele 2013).

II Statist Productions of Space

A The Colonial State

Grémont relates to an obscure colonial policy that carried grave repercussions for later conceptions of and claims on land ownership and rights in postcolonial Mali. In the 1950s, Henri Leroux, a French administrator, undertook the registration of land located around the river valley. He specifically recorded ‘rights of usage’ based on intelligence gathered from customary chiefs. Thus, Leroux indicated names of people who were located next to plots of land in a given area without indicating what the measurements for those plots were. Beneficiaries were given an original copy of their registration and later the latter became ‘proof’ for claiming ownership. However, either by natural suspicion towards administration or lack of understanding for the potential implications of the initiative, Tuareg chiefs were not involved in the operation and were naturally denied these ‘proofs’ of land usage (Grémont 2005, 263). A similar process of exclusion also led to restricted right of access to the river. This and many other examples show a direct intrusion of colonial authority, in fact a microcosmic regulation of land-based relations (*rappports fonciers*), land related rights, and inter-group interactions in the Sahel. The imposition of sovereign authority over communal land since colonial times has therefore led to the delegitimization of nomads and other peoples deemed backward and unproductive. Furthermore, the taxation of populations (i.e. head tax) caused flight into peripheral zones and British territories (Asiwaju 1976). So did many other mechanisms to serialize, enumerate, individuate and identify colonial subjects (Comaroff 1998, 330). The French strategy to dealing with the Tuareg in particular was to restrict their capacity to navigate the desert by attacking contingents of camels and caravans, poisoning wells, executing prisoners, confiscating land, and exiling dissidents. The French also tied alliances with sedentary groups (Tuareg and non-Tuareg) as well as nomadic groups as proxy agents. By and large, colonial production of space fits into a unidimensional and linear scheme of ordering; in other words, it was an approach meant to render productive, to exclude, to discipline subsistence economies to service centralized authority. Furthermore, the colonial encounter was foundational in the crystallization, the naturalization, and the inscription of ethnic identities in territorialized structures. Colonial strategy consisted in containing cultural rebellion and every form seen as disrupting the colonial order; this policy was maintained, as will be described in the next section, in post-independent Mali.

B The Postcolonial State

The Tuareg became forcefully incorporated into the French colony when French troops entered Timbuktu on 28 December 1893 and took possession of the town, provoking a fierce and sustained resistance until 1917. However, the Tuareg became truly deterritorialized with independence in 1960. If up to the 1990s Tuareg territorial attachment might have been elusive, in the aftermath of decentralization and following the roll-out of sedentarization policies, the Tuareg invested both temporary and permanent, mobile and fixed settlement strategies in the articulation of claims of rights over land and a discourse of homeland (*akal*). For even the most temporary territorial attachment entails a renewal of vital goods (*akh iddaren* or 'living milk'), a combination of symbolic, blood, status, and material rights that ensure access to a tent as both a sociological metaphor and territorial marker for group members (Claudot-Hawad 2004, 62).

For a long time, nomads have been seen as material threat to the coherence of the state, to the latter's capacity to incorporate and sedentarize, to control and surveil, to tax and render productive (or even exploit). However, enforced sedentarization as a political means to control nomadic populations by states often resulted in the systematic enclosure of mobile populations who inhabit *vacuum dimicilim* (empty spaces) in designated reservations. The regulated settlement of nomads ensured their dependence on state authorities and subsequent incorporation into nation-building strategies. As a matter of fact, the cooptation of different political formations, of both former Tuareg aristocrats and former dependents, was motivated by a desire to turn them into politically 'useful citizens'. The Kel Tamasheq in particular experienced their political marginalization in postcolonial Mali as a form of recolonization given constraints imposed upon their social organization, namely a recurrent government attempt to restructure lineages and hierarchies, state intrusion therefore into the structuring framework of their livelihood, at times in the name of decentralization.⁸

Far from being antithetical however, centralization and decentralization mutually complement each other. In areas of northern Mali where decentralization was implemented in the early 1990s, conflicting understandings of the new governance regime soon emerged. On the one hand, there was an expectation that the state would diffuse conflicts and empower minorities under a democratization framework. However, the state pursued clientelistic politics and maintained customary structures in places where these were still strong (e.g. Ouelleminden). On the other hand, instead of providing a template for an operational framework on the path of transition to democracy, decentralization turned out to be a mechanism for extending the negative effects of centralization by proxy rule.⁹ In other words, decentralization further cemented old hierarchies rather than loosening the grip of the central state.

Tuareg's engagement of spatial frames as political resources (which will be further described in part III) can be contrasted with state production of space. State thinking, to borrow from James Scott, is best understood as a regime of enclosure. Therefore, it is not surprising that the state privileges certain kinds of human rights that do not undermine its prerogatives. It does so by allocating rights and privileges to citizens (in the abstract); hence the significance of sedentarization (occupation, fixation), tax-levying (production, exploitation) and registration (documentation) policies.

8 In the process 'nobles' were pinned against former dependents which promoted conflict over limited pastures, water, and rangeland (Claudot-Hawad 1987; Boiley 1999). In reference to similar processes concerning the Roma of Europe for instance Barany (2002, 93).

9 Without the necessary arrangements for resolving land – related disputes, such as land courts.

Since the implementation of a sedentarization process by national governments in the early 1980s the valley of the Niger River has become the site of intensified tensions and conflicts over access and use of its resources, namely water and pastures. Historically, a movement of rotation enabled pastoralists to navigate changing seasons by alternating temporary settlement along the river valley and pastoral zones in Mali, also across Niger and Burkina Faso. With increased seasonal instability and water scarcity, transhumant herders from other regions—so called ‘allochtons’—now have to stay longer periods in the valley, sometimes on a semi-permanent basis. The new ‘zones of refuge’ have arguably become crowded, which leads to frequent clashes between ‘residents’ and ‘strangers’. If the disruption of deferred modes of exploitation of natural resources, both in time and space, puts greater burden on wells and fields of wild grain (e.g. *fonio* and *cram-cram*) on which depend both autochthonous and visiting groups, many other factors intervene in the transformation of previous social arrangements. Some of the conflicts have become recurrent and often require the intervention of customary and/or judiciary authorities. Reasons for conflict range from the disregard for tacit and explicit rules about usage of pastures and wells by visiting groups, the lack of administrative control over compliance (e.g. visiting groups are asked to carry a pass card or ‘carnet de transhumance’), a limited number of refuge-zones available to herders in times of drought, intensified agricultural exploitation, and more fundamentally perhaps the lack of technical jurisdiction (*maîtrise foncière*) over space by residents and users (Keita 2010, 33-34).¹⁰ This situation is compounded by stress caused by resources extraction and the intrusion of global capitalism into local economic logics in general.¹¹

III Tuareg Production of Space

A The Socio-Political Aspects of Tuareg Conceptions of Space

Tuareg production of space primarily responds to an environment characterized by great seasonal variation, which results, for instance, to a need to gain access to pastures in dry seasons and to salt plains in arid regions. Furthermore, a nomadic lifestyle entails both territorialized space production to allow flexibility in mobility and the maintenance of ties with sedentary communities, not least in order to complement their diet with grains and vegetables. As a matter of principle, the right of access to land, pasture, water and other resources had to be negotiated among groups with similar claims or needs. A notion of *recognition* of rights was therefore central but this recognition was made problematic by the precarious and unstable nature of places and statuses.¹² Alliance was not only crucial to one’s survival; it defined individuals and groups’ rapport to land, for the right

10 In Niger, this incongruence is mitigated by the fact the customary leadership was recognised a number of prerogatives over land affairs (Mohamadou 2010).

11 In the Sahel, as in other parts of Africa, the deepening internationalization of the state has entailed the adjustment of state policies and response to public demand for welfare to the imperative of competitiveness in the global capital market (Cox 1993).

12 See Goering’s useful discussion of the Bedouins of Palestine; their survival across centuries of nomadic migration was made possible by the enforcement of implicit rules of recognition (by those with whom they interacted), and non-interference with their right to free movement and access to grazing pastures and water points for their flocks etc. (Goering 1979, 3).

of access to vital resources was never definitive or permanent but rather subject to the shifting dynamics of power. Thus, Tuareg capacity to produce space fundamentally depended on both a hierarchical social order and a division of labor based on lineage, noble/slave, protector/dependent statuses, or particular skills.

In pre-colonial times, Tuareg modes of subsistence consisted of a combination of trade (i.e. the Trans-Saharan trade in salt, slaves, feathers and hides), raids on sedentary populations and caravans in transit, passage tolls and tribute-taking from vassal and dependent groups. More than for any other group, the kind of relations the Tuareg are able to contract with other groups becomes crucial to their capacity to sustain a life. Tuareg political rule was informed by a capacity to lay control over *people as resources* and to navigate a vast expanse of territory on the basis of their need to secure resources and pastures. Thus, clans clustered into larger groups such as confederacies (tighmawin, tegéhé).¹³ Their framework of mobility expresses an oscillation between negotiation and use of violence, alliance and dissidence, but also a capacity to transcend space-dependent logics. Therefore, one argument of this paper is that Tuareg conceptions have always oscillated between a conception of *space as place* and *space as freedom*.

Whether seasonal, circular or forced, migration has always been a strategy for copying, of extending resources and/or mitigating various kinds of stress brought to bear by ecological change and encounter with the centralized state (taxation, census, sedentarization, 'development', 'modernization and so on) as well as the intrusion of capital in the form of extractive industries and their impact on the lives of Sahelians. Tuareg also had to travel far afield to fulfill a marriage project or support families left behind. A consequence of this migration has been the emergence of the *teshumara* (from *ishumar* or unemployed), a movement that questioned the hierarchical and unequal basis of Tuareg society and advocated a revolutionary, insurgent form of nationalism (Lecoq 2010).

Where mobility has become further constrained and sedentarization the default refuge against poverty, a notion of *home* as territorial anchoring has become ever more hypothetical. Political usefulness under the decentralized regime has come to be understood as *a capacity to produce territory*. In fact, leaders of former political formations such as confederacies (e.g. Ouelleminden) have had to convert into client networks with the central government in Bamako and participate in partisan politics in order to preserve a modicum of authority and relevance.¹⁴

13 Claudot-Hawad maps a bodily metaphor onto Tuareg sociopolitical organization: "the society can be viewed as a body, each part representing in its turn some kind of body in miniature, built according to the same structure as the bigger one. The smallest social unit, *aghiwen* or 'encampment', is placed within *tawsit*, a term meaning both 'tribe' and 'wrist'; this unit itself finds its place within a confederation of tribes called *ettebel* in the Ahaggar; *ettebel* refers to the commanding drum, while in the Aïr, it is called *taghma* and means also 'thigh'. At last, this unit is included in a *tegehé*, a federation of confederations, a term meaning 'hips'. The gathering of 'hips' makes up *temust n imajaghen*, that is the Tuareg society at large, and this notion is associated with the anatomic image of the 'chest', which is the seat of identity (*temusa*; same linguistic root as *temust*)" (Claudot-Hawad 2004, 61). *Temust* is a community of reference, a country or roof that constitutes a protective layer over an individual's life. In fact, the Tuareg see a close connection between a unique competence (i.e. their intimate knowledge of the desert and its life forms) and a sense of community. The 'invasion' of the desert by various forces is thus perceived as a form of dispossession of both an intellectual skill and a right to difference (Claudot-Hawad 2002, 18).

14 In the 19th century the most important Kel Tamasheq community was formed by the Iwellemeden Confederacy before its demise at the hands of French colonizers in the early 20th century. There were other confederacies of secondary importance such as the Kel Gress, the Kel Ahaggar, the Kel Aïr, etc. These fought the Imajeghen and others. If in theory therefore the Iwellemeden were the predominant group in the region, theirs was not an absolute monopoly over political rule and the distribution of resources. In postcolonial Mali, the leaders of the former Ouelleminden confederacy competed for national elections and fared rather well in the 1979/1984 and

Here, the language of identity becomes the conditioning script of self-narratives. However, its limits are apparent in the constraints put to bear on the parameters of daily endeavors. If language and social imaginary denote both cultural anxiety and social aspiration in the face of two major fundamental challenges, namely the *state* and *ecological distress*, it narrates a social imaginary filled with evocations of a nomadic life that is no longer viable, neither economically, nor politically. A condition that justifies Rasmussen when she identifies “different aspects of Tuareg identity [namely social stratum and occupation, that] neither exactly coincide with nor stand as mutually exclusive. Consequently, Tuareg face a double bind arising from contradictions between cultural values and economies” (Rasmussen 1992, 353)¹⁵

Linked to the above, the notion of space-resources combines ideas about social hierarchy, for instance in the sense that Tuareg populations conceive of territory as that space occupied by the entirety of the Imajeren; in other words, the entirety of the groups, ethnic and otherwise, that depend upon the confederation’s political jurisdiction. This conception of territoriality is a close reference to a political space (Bernus & Poncet 1993, 35-36). It is a territoriality marked by the waning authority of customary leadership heavily contested in the public domain by former social dependents (e.g. youngsters) and political clients.¹⁶

B Insurgency and the Production of Space

Looking at ongoing territorial-political engagements in the Sahel, three geopolitical tendencies seem to emerge. Current trends predominantly relate to territorialization and re-territorialization in parallel and competing ways (Appadurai 1996; Brenner 1999).¹⁷ Broadly speaking, there are statist, secessionist and transnational tendencies.¹⁸ More fundamentally, there are two factors that frame the field of transformations concerning territorial and political struggles over access and use of resources. On the one hand, there is a process of state-formation in Mali and Niger that is still subject to an uneven formulation and deployment (i.e. reterritorialization). On the other hand, increased privatization of the economy impedes the possibility of, say, communal control over land or unlimited access to natural resources (water, land, pastures), specifically for pastoral and nomadic groups (i.e. deterritorialization). The oscillation between these two

1989 elections within the single party system under the Democratic Union of the Malian People (UDPM) and later under a multi-party system.

15 See Casajus (2000) on the social function of language among the Tuareg.

16 The case of *bellas* (Songhay), also *iklan* (Tamasheq) or *bouzou* (Hausa) is worth reminding; these former dependents and groups in similar rapport of clientelage with Tuareg have come to power as tables have turned in their favor. For instance, *bellas* and former dependents groups constitute a majority within the Union Malienne pour la Démocratie et le Développement (UMADD) and important factions within the Rassemblement pour le Mali (RPM) between 1992 and 2002. A similar process applies to *Ishumar* youth as internal dissidents within the social categories that have spawned them. Issues of discontent concern lack of equality and recognition; prevalence of rigid hierarchy and lack of political motives of discontent and opening for social dependents.

It is also said that transnational networks of smugglers recruit new members among former dependents based on an ethos that ignores all forms of social reputation, structured hierarchy, family affiliation or prior status.

17 Brenner (1999) critiques a notion of deterritorialisation that ignores parallel, rescaled reterritorialisation processes; Appadurai (1996) points to a key aspect of economic and financial deterritorialisation, which is the fact that ongoing delocalization and restructuring are underpinned by the exploitation of nationally-bound conditions without which circulation and flexible production processes would not be possible in the first place.

18 See Strazzari (2015) for an extensive discussion of the various implications for territory of these trends. He uses a statist / secessionist / jihadist configuration as three competing modes.

tendencies pulls the state in different directions. However, the consolidation of the modern state structure and the privatization of the economy are framed by a legal system that has both 'modern' and 'traditional' dimensions that often result in conflicts. In Mali for instance, access to, and use of land is regulated by the *Code domanial et foncier (CDF)*. For various reasons such as the implementation of the trappings of the modern state and the recent history of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), the modern legal system favors the 'domanialization' and by extension the privatization of land. In contrast, the traditional system is informed by the principle of the inalienability of natural resources and communal control over land. The juxtaposition of the two had led to much confusion over interpretation and legal adjudication in a context of a sketchy and uneven decentralization (Keita 2010: 34).

A fundamental question posed by nomadism as social mode is the legitimacy of *the linkage between territoriality and political rule*. Where the latter has to be conceived in terms of the possibility of a framework of rule that ensures the domestication and enclosure of identities, state logic is to pursue ontological security without delinking the state's territorial bounds from its political function (Mitzen 2006). In their "Treatise on Nomadology" (Plateau 12) Deleuze and Guattari (1980) develop a notion of the nomadic which has been widely adopted across the humanities.¹⁹ They contend that the retreat into statelessness by dissenting groups or groups pursuing an alternative life mode can be read as an attempt to disembody territory from political rule. In Tuareg political theory and cosmogonic narratives, the world operates as a cycle and a dynamic order made of successive steps that lead, eventually, to the original steps (Claudot-Hawad 2000).

Here, two conundrums are raised in relation to conceptions of space as a political resource more generally. As Anthony Appiah has pointed to, culture may not matter in absolute terms but people matter and culture matters to people (Appiah 1992). If we admit that identity was never, historically and sociologically, self-contained, but that it was always relational and marked by relationality, then we can only talk about it and understand its dynamics in relation to a series of relationships, that is people, objects, ideas, beliefs, processes, institutions and so on. Therefore, my argument is that the ontological dependence of identity to a variety of fields, objects and structures should warrant an examination of its operating mechanisms in various fields. This results in the important question, which I borrow from Cheyfitz, namely: "how does one translate ideas of place grounded in conceptions of communal or social labor into ideas of place grounded in a notion of identity?" (1997, 57-58).

IV Inflections of Territoriality in the Different Tuareg Rebellions

(a) The 1960s Rebellion

The first post-independence rebellion was mainly confined to the Adrar of Ifoghas, namely Kidal and Menaka, the political seat of Tuareg aristocracy. Main causes included deeply held grudges against continued military rule in northern territories; forced sedentarization and territorialized governance; restricted access to open pastures and water resources; privatization

19 For a useful review see Bogue (2010) .

(establishment of ranches). The Tuareg rebellion demanded the maintenance of the ‘special’ status and (the colonial) privileges of the *Amenokal* within a unitary Malian state. In lieu of a satisfaction of their political demand, a main outcome of the insurgency was state repression, targeted anti-Tuareg discrimination, and massive flight of Tuareg to Libya and Algeria.

(b) The 1990s Rebellion

The 1990s rebellion broke out in a context of continued Tuareg resentment and memory of repression of the 1960s rebellion carried through previous decades. In addition, the mass expulsion of Tuareg refugees from the Algerian Guezzan and decreased support of Qaddafi led to the return of Tuareg fighters and migrants. Among other things, the Tuareg demanded more internal autonomy and more ‘development’ (roads, schools, health services), the demilitarization of northern Mali and the withdrawal of ‘Malian’ administrators and, not least, the implementation of multipartism. The Tamagansett Accord of January 1991, followed by the National Pact signed in April 1992, put an end to the conflict. The Accord stipulated the recognition of internal autonomy, broader decentralization, *special status* granted to northern territories, a number of privileges accorded to Tuareg leaders as well as the integration of over 3000 Tuareg troops into security and administrative institutions. Following the Accord, the first ever local elections were organized. However, internal disputes and disintegration of the movement into several splinter groups along clan lines undermined its continuity and coherence. In addition, anti-Tuareg sentiment was associated with increased inter-community tensions and pogroms, specifically with the creation of the Patriotic Movement of the Ganda Koi (MPGK) with which a separate peace deal had to be signed.

(c) The 2006 Rebellion

The 2006 uprising was arguably the swiftest and shortest-lived episode in the history of Tuareg conflicts. It erupted in March 2006 and was led by the Alliance for Democratic Change (ADC) and the Kel Adagh. They did not specifically demand for separation but rather for more autonomy and more development.²⁰ However, unlike in previous times, the dynamics of the conflict had changed with the presence of Al Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb (AQMI). The Malian state was prompt to sign a peace deal in Algiers (the Algiers Accords of July 2006) in order to stem the ‘islamist threat’.

(d) The 2012 Rebellion

The most recent rebellion is by far the most complex. It emerged in a Sahelian context that had dramatically changed. Various factors entered into play, namely fierce competition over the control over transit routes and therefore tolls, smuggling and illicit trade (drugs, weapons, cigarettes, and people); the death of Muammar Qaddafi and subsequent disintegration of Libya; therefore, the return of armed Tuareg youth to Mali; the consolidated presence of AQMI and radicalization of militantism; the non-respect of the 2006 Accords, namely around decentraliza-

²⁰ Specifically, this meant more autonomy and development for Kidal, the eighth and farthest region of Mali.

tion, development, solutions to diminishing pastures for herders; and, finally, the increased securitization and militarization of the Sahel under the War on Terror (WoT). Led by the MNLA, the Tuareg movement declared the independent state of AZAWAD and the immediate withdrawal of Malian state and western forces from northern Mali—a point which I will develop below. The global and regional context had also changed drastically, with AQMI heavily recruiting among former political dependents and lower classes (i.e. artisans and ‘slaves’). Furthermore, the stakes were particularly high and they related to tensions inherent to defining borders and controlling transit points. The Bamako Peace Accord (15 May 2015) put an end to the formal conflict. French intervention, Operation Serval, was followed by Barkhane and a transnational, multidimensional intervening force (UN Mission in Mali or MINUSMA).

From the above, three approaches to territoriality, with regards to different articulations of autonomy and cultural specificity, can be seen at work. The first one is *conservative* and it is attached to original values and claims of the self-determination movement; its core argument is the need for the *recognition of Tuareg cultural specificity* with the understanding that such recognition could take various forms including limited territorial autonomy. *Its core requirement has been the displacement of colonial political geography/topography and its normalization by the postcolonial state.* The second approach is *militant* and it advocates a rupture with the secular movement and an alliance with islamist groups, particularly AQMI which for many succeeded in providing a collective presence and a sense of group identity in the absence of the state in the northern regions of Mali. The third approach is *integrationist* in the sense of a rapprochement with Bamako. In the aftermath of Operation Serval for instance, many former Tuareg insurgents joined the French and the Malian armies in combats in the northern territories.

An often marginalized aspect of the Tuareg question is the perspective of Tuareg populations and other northern minorities (Songhai, Fulani, Dogon, Moors) on the conflict. These minorities often supported the rebellion against national governments, especially in times of crisis. In the rebellion’s demand for statehood, many saw a legitimate form of contestation against sedentarization; state reorganization of their space through decentralization and development was seen as a direct intrusion into the mechanisms of social power and, therefore, an attempt to disintegrate the particular time and space of a nomadic framework (Harvey 1990, 255). If the successive revolts were underpinned by calls for a reformation of the conceptual framework of the state itself, they also posed the question of the deconstruction of the representation of dissimilar populations boxed together in a unified territorial unit under the control of a state that is only unevenly and partially committed to a recognition of pluralism within its borders.

V. Political Dissent, Self-Determination and Territoriality

A broad point that emerges from the above is that strategic change in the nature of political claims in successive Tuareg uprisings has been a function and manifestation of conjectural change of both conceptions and practices of space. The revival of colonial stigmatization of nomadic groups as unproductive and their mode of life as harmful to fertile lands and ‘organized’ society is at the roots of ongoing intellectual opposition to Tuareg rebellions, both in

Mali and in Niger.²¹ Concretely, the displacement of vital spaces (*espaces de vie*) forces many groups to seek to (re)construct control endowed with some form of legitimacy. Often, this is performed under conditions of indiscriminate violence. For this reason, the emergence of variants of transient hyperboles provoked by the realization that Sahelians deploy specific modes of governance has sparked a rethinking of the value of dissentive activities such as ransoming as alternative modes of governance (Niang 2014). In reality though, the structuring frames of latent conflicts are, by and large, antithetical to moral pressure as an imperative of aspiration.

Now, a spectacular change that has marked the recent history of the Tuareg movement is an explicit and forceful demand for statehood.²² In 2012, following the near collapse of the Malian government, the independent state of Azawad was announced. In the strict sense, Azawad refers to the extensive zone between the North of the Niger River, Timbuktu and Bourem. For the various movements that have been involved in rebellions, it has come to mean more loosely the space where Tuareg and Moors dwell, in other words, the Northern regions of Mali and Niger (Grémont 2005, 272). As far as political demands go, the claim for territorial secession by a nomadic group that has historically articulated self-determination as a restoration of agency as capacity to transcend arbitrarily erected state borders may at first seem something like a contradiction (Strazzari 2015, 2).

The idea of Azawad (or a Tuareg nation-state) is a dream deferred of a Tuareg homeland, a place that gathers all the ‘lost souls’ of the desert. Historians trace the origins of the idea to the 15th century Tuareg displacement due to encroachment by the Songhai Empire (15th–16th C). But the recent articulation of the idea of Azawad goes back to the end of the 19th century following the forceful incorporation of Tuareg in the Malian colony and their separation from other Tuareg groups then attached to Niger, Algeria and other colonies. For those however that want the Sahel-Sahara to remain a free zone of circulation, Azawad remains an obstacle to this design; thus, some of the jihadists that were involved in the 2012 crisis were against the idea of Azawad as a closed unit potentially threatening their version of freedom. The jihadist movement is secessionist not in the sense of a requirement for separate territorial autonomy but rather as a requirement for unimpeded freedom of circulation and action; the basis for this claim is a conception of tariffs and duties as *haram* or illicit. Here, borderlessness becomes an ideological framework for thinking a different kind of exchange, one which is not regulated by the legal regime of the nation-state but rather by the requirements of an unimpeded model of governance of mobility and exchange.

Therefore, the idea of Azawad is to embed the dream of wandering nomads in a defined territory. The new extractive economy in turn modulates new forms of limited engagement; in fact it promotes extractive forms of social engagement. At the same time, the control of key smuggling routes and passages has become a field of contestation in the conquest of the Sahel/Sahara region (Bach 2014). According to Strazzari, “the control of borders cutting across drug routes has come to represent a material resource of primary importance and an essential part of

21 In fact, parallels can be drawn between colonial texts and anti-Tuareg intellectual discourses, particularly the pronouncements of the Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koy through *La Voix du Nord* [Archives *Voix du Nord* (1992)].

22 The notion of an independent region or territory that would be a land of refuge and emancipation from the oppressing grip of the state was first aired at the Tripoli Congress in 1987 and spelt out in a document entitled “we, Tuareg of Mali” (Boiley 1999, 479-482). In fact, one would find the name ‘Azawad’ included in the names of the various movements that took part in the rebellion, namely the Mouvement Populaire de l’Azawad (MPA), le Front Islamique Arabe de l’Azawad (FIAA), l’Armée Révolutionnaire de Liberation de l’Azawad (ARLA) and le Front Populaire de Libération de l’Azawad (FPLA).

interpreting the dynamics of competing political claims in northern Mali” (2015, 9).²³ The radical turn that led to the proclamation of the independence of Azawad as a sovereign territory can therefore be understood in this context.

The transactional principle, I argue, consecrates the ‘territorial turn’ of the independendist movement as a distinctive political feature and strategy as one cannot effectively discuss the question of sovereignty in relation to mobility and territoriality without fully appreciating the effects of privatization and economic capitalism as deployed in relation to modes of governance and strategies of survival. This trend goes hand in hand with new forms of mobility and economic activities that allow social mobility in parallel to clan and other conventional structures and the construction of spaces where new legitimacies could be elaborated in order to transcend an incongruence between the ‘pays legal’ and the ‘pays reel’ (Mahamadou 2010, 105). People inhabit worlds that are not always articulated around the premises of their conceptions of self and freedom.²⁴ For Sahelian populations in particular, the context of access, use and distribution of resources has changed. So have the modalities of appropriation of resources as subjectively integrated in life-forms and in forms of interaction and exchange between different groups. If, historically, resources were central to exchange between different linguistic and cultural groups, their alienation has come to constitute the basis of differentiated and unequal access to power. In addition, the shift from a principle of the inalienability of natural resources to their privatization in the postcolonial state has further entrenched a rift between the appropriation of resources and the social use of resource value (Grémont 2005, 269).²⁵ Therefore, the scramble for a variety of resources at the expense of the preservation of livelihoods, the collective management of shared resources, and the protection of fragile ecosystems have led to increased instrumental violence in the acquisition of resources.

23 Also see Judith Scheele’s beautifully written account of modern smuggling across border focuses on al-khalil or ‘asima ta’l frad’ (capital of illegal trade) in the northern Malian desert. The phenomena that frame dynamics in the Sahel are not limited to migration for the economic vitality of border towns such as al-khalil point to overlapping dynamics “if we believe in statistics, the Sahara is perhaps the fastest changing, most dynamic, and wealthiest region of the African continent. Urbanization has been rapid over the last decades, as has demographic growth, caused by in-migration rather than high birth rates, and the Sahara contains some of the world’s largest known resources in oil and natural gas. As a result perhaps, governments in the Maghreb especially have made considerable efforts to integrate their Saharan territories into the nation-state, an effort that in many cases has paid off” (Scheele 2012, 7-8).

24 As Asad pointed out long ago, “the idea of self-constitution is not merely a historiographical option but a liberal humanist principle that has far-reaching moral, legal, and political implications in modern/modernising states” (Asad 1993, 15)

25 The Malian state released an ‘ordonnance’ on August 1, 1986: “si la terre ne pouvait au début faire l’objet d’une appropriation privative absolue, c’est l’administration elle-même qui a multiplié les octrois de titres qui défendent le concept de propriété privée. Cela a poussé le législateur en 1986 à légaliser ces pratiques. Ainsi l’ordonnance malienne du 1ier Aout 1986 consacre le droit de la propriété” (Keita 1998 in Grémont 2005, 269).

Conclusion

The Sahel poses conceptual challenges to both a bordered and a borderless sovereignty model. It is not so much the immensity of the territory which poses a problem. Rather it is a dilemma of governance and the regulation of different logics of mobility and territorial attachment. Unregulated transborder mobility calls into question the perceived irrelevance of non-state actors such as nomads and rebels for the reconfiguration of political borders and for international politics more generally (Mackay et al. 2014, 102). In fact, where nomadism as stateless identity is articulated as an existential question worth dying for, instrumentally directed registers of identity in a context of predatory economic practices have emerged as a defining feature of contested politics. A main concern of this paper has revolved around the examination of a notion of governance that intersects with ways of apprehending and of practicing identity, specifically ways of apprehending the Sahel that do not assume 'ungovernance' as the only language capable of capturing nomadic forms.

As an ideal and mode of life, nomadism performs a specific purpose, that of aligning an abstract model that has retained only a faint substance of possibility with an incongruous socio-economic form that conflicts with state (centered) normativity.²⁶ However, often scripted as powerless, in reality, nomadic populations possess tremendous resources of adaptation when it comes to negotiating precariousness and escaping direct forms of rule. The mobile, itinerant mode creates conditions for relative *disorder* that enables transborder dynamics to promote cultural crossings which posit themselves as antidote to centralized rule in its institutional and historical forms. In this configuration, the importance of territoriality resides in a necessity to preserve social infrastructures. As a result, every deterritorialization strategy involves a reterritorialization process.

Furthermore, there are cross-cutting forms of sovereignty (such as community; nation; NGOs; Capital; mercenaries; rebels; economic and religious entrepreneurs; social movements); there are also crosscutting forms of belonging, of community that require that we go back to Carl Schmidt's understanding of sovereignty as absolute authority without which all else collapses. Tuareg longing for a Sahelian ensemble linked together by a single authority (Azawad) could be just that. *The idea that there has to be something sublime about power.* However, both scholars of nationalism and postcolonial thinkers have pointed to the 'obsolete' nature of the statist attachment. On the one hand, Tuareg demand for a nation-state seems outdated when every trend, every recent development elsewhere seems to suggest that autonomist groups are looking for alternative forms of sovereignty. On the other hand, for a group that has most eloquently argued for a stateless model of government as the most adequate and the most compatible with their lifestyle and culture, a state project would seem like a contradiction in itself. The paper suggests, however, that this contradiction is merely a reflection of the contingent and diverse nature of spatial production.

26 It might seem almost aberrant to remark that nomads and other wandering categories always wander aimfully and for a specific reason, and therefore never purposelessly. However, this evidence flies in the face of an ideational reference without which experiential forms must seem to be reduced to epiphenomena.

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