Introduction to Part 3

The chapters grouped in this section concentrate on various arenas, from the theatre of conflict in the Sahel to postcolonial debates on language policy. What they have in common is a firm empirical grasp of the complexities of conflict and tensions in contemporary (and future) Africa. Conflict and antagonism, however, should also be regarded as forms of futuring, even if their consequences usually come at the expense of those already on the fringe.

For instance, in her opening chapter, Mirjam de Bruijn observes that in the Sahel, the past has overtaken the present, with yesteryear's confrontations clearly feeding into an immediate future of turmoil and profound insecurity, with digital channels having taken up the role of the erstwhile trans-Sahara trade routes. As the future of the new power entities operating in the region is uncertain at best, de Bruijn argues in favour of placing more emphasis on the new connectivities that have emerged from the ashes of the old ones.

Next, Ulf Engel asks whether or not the arrival of COVID-19 on African shores could have been foreseen. He takes a closer look at the institutions and think tanks that set the scenarios for policy-makers and describes how the professional future-makers acknowledged the likelihood of a widespread epidemic, yet framed it as a security risk and political threat. The question remains of why policy makers failed to heed these early warnings, even although a number of institutions for dealing with outbreaks of infectious disease were already firmly in place.

In their contribution Clement Chipanda and Tom Tom home in on the challenges Zimbabwean youths face in gaining access to land. Despite however the ongoing land reform, youngsters are unable to profit from it. Both formal and informal access pose obstacles of their own, but overall, the authors conclude, gender, seniority and existing relations throw up barriers in their quest for food and livelihood security.

Land also features prominently in Kennedy Agade Mkutu's analysis. His chapter takes us to northern Kenya, where the Kenyan government is lending its support to various large-scale infrastructural development projects, which, promoted by local and national elites, are further marginalizing the rural poor, and turning fundamental disagreements into potential sources of violent conflict.

The fifth contribution to this section is by Katrien Pype, who eloquently discusses how the inhabitants of 'Digital Kinshasa' try to come to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on their rejection of racist stereotypes and their understanding of global power imbalances, their online activities concerning

the pandemic are best understood as social commentaries and as attempts to implement political change, at times holding local decision-makers accountable, at others reversing the saviour narrative.

Sixth and finally, Inge Brinkman stages a confrontation between two monuments of African literature, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Their voices, along with those of others, lay bare the complexities of the postcolonial debate. For too long, Brinkman argues, postcolonial theory has been stifled by a reliance on decontextualized abstraction. A closer look does, indeed, reveal the messiness of colonialism; it also warns against the facile dichotomies of the present.

Connected Sahel-Sahara in Turmoil: The Past in the Future

Mirjam de Bruijn

1 Introduction

This essay is about a confrontation surrounding the political transformation of the Sahel in recent decades. As a regular guest of good friends in the region, to which I had been travelling since 1987, I thought that I was well-informed about and familiar with the local culture and the people's sentiments, so it has been a shock to see the region in such turmoil. Witnessing the local people, especially the pastoral groups, turning to another interpretation of the world has made me question my former assumptions. However, the research in which I have been engaging in recent years has yielded some insights into the present situation (de Bruijn and van Dijk 1995). Deep inequality in Sahelian society, the semi nomadic population's difficult relationships with neighbouring groups, and their marginal position vis-à-vis the national state, have had economic and political ramifications. In an attempt to understand the links between the pastoral nomads' present position and their possible future in the Sahel, I present a view of the troublesome situation in the Sahel from the local players' perspective, with 'communication and connectivity' seen as important to socio-political change and as contributors to the 'violence' in the Sahel today (Laurie and Shaw 2018). There are of course many other factors at play. Climate change, changing livelihood conditions, the fact that it is a war over resources, and the geo-political interferences of France and China are also important, but here my focus is on communication and connectivity as central elements in the violence.

The Sahel-Sahara region is back at the centre of world politics; it is making history, particularly in the light of the region's partial subjugation by jihadi groups who oppose the current postcolonial administration and want to establish an Islamic state. Islam has a long history in the Sahel and local scholars have often been central to the various debates between different forms of Islam. Not all social groups, however, followed these religious undercurrents. For instance, similar to former slaves, the nomadic groups were long denied access to Islam, and it is only in the last few decades that they have become actively involved in joining Koranic schools and becoming Muslim scholars and marabouts, and they tend to be especially open to 'new' radical ideas. Muslim

radical groups based in Algeria and Syria influence and support the Sahelian Muslim jihadi groups and leaders engaged in the Sahel upheaval. International and locally-based Muslim groups organize through different means of communication, including mobile phones and social media to get their messages across and to recruit new followers and supporters. Many (mainly) men from pastoral groups from the Sahel have joined their ranks and the Sahara Desert is now a sea of supportive connections between them.

In this short contribution, I attempt to relate this new history to the region's previous history and thereby lay the groundwork for imagining its future. This is a narrative about modernity and counter-modernity, a narrative in which pre-modern times are idealized through the physical revival of trans-Saharan routes, and the imposition of a rule of order through Islamic law. Yet, at the same time, it is critical of the modern state for having absorbed hierarchies established in medieval times. In this regard, memories of the past play a contradictory role and inform different possible roads to the future.

2 The Trans-Sahara Routes and Empires

The Sahel-Sahara conjures up a contradictory picture: it is both an untamed world without boundaries and a provider of wealth to the empires that control the trans-Saharan routes. The region was once central to the economic, political, and social dynamics that defined the world, as evident from the large empires established during its 'rich' Middle Ages – Mali (1230–1600), Songhay (1464–1591), Segu (1640–1861), Kanem (700–1380), and Bornou (1380–1893). These empires depended on the routes crossing the Sahara Desert and their rulers collaborated with the nomadic pastoralists (Monroe 2013; Wolf 1982: 25–31) trading in goods such as gold, salt and slaves: in fact, slavery was an integral part of the economic and social organization of the region (Evans and Robinson 1995). These empires were also partly driven by the elite ideology of Islam (see van Dalen 2016), but with the decline in the trans-Saharan trade in the seventeenth century, with the exception of Kanem–Bornou, they eventually petered out. Then, when the trade routes were reoriented towards the coast, and the large Saharan cities of Timbuktu and Gao fell to the Almoravids' destructive accession to power, the trans-Sahara trade could no longer sustain the empires and they gave way to smaller kingdoms and chaos. Nonetheless, the racial and hierarchical structures of these empires endured and continue to colour socio-political relations in the Sahel (Hall 2011).

3 Islam as an Ideology of Power and Organization

In the early nineteenth century, a new phase in empire-building began when Fulani jihads assumed power in the Sahel. The Hausa-Fulani, or Sokoto, Empire was established in 1804, with the Adamawa Emirate, which extends into what is now Chad comprising its outer eastern part. In 1818, the Macina Empire was established in what is now central Mali. In 1850, the jihad of Al Hajj Umar Tall was launched (from the west, in Senegal) and gradually conquered the Sahel (Hanson 1996), taking over Macina in 1862. For these empires, people were again an important form of wealth, and the economy was largely dependent on slavery. Islam became the foundation of social organization and culture in these empires, where sharia law was applied and where dancing and drinking alcohol were forbidden. In particular, Macina is described as having been a piously ruled empire (Sanankoua 1990), but rebellions against the power-holders were never strong enough to dismantle their power (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2001).

The expansion of the Fulani jihad ended in a confrontation with the French, who had succeeded in establishing colonial rule by the beginning of the twentieth century. Colonial rule, unfortunately, did not end the socio-political hierarchies established during the early and later empires; instead, the hierarchical structures continued in the racial ideology and economic division of labour (Hall 2011). The colonial project included a reorientation of trade towards the coast of sub-Saharan Africa, which effectively lost the Sahara Desert and Sahel its place in the world. Despite its rich pre-colonial heritage – both venerated as ideal and contested for its deeply engrained social inequalities – it lost its own agency.

4 Turmoil in the Sahel

Over the past two decades, violent conflicts in the region south of the Sahara have been attracting international media attention. These include the Darfuri crisis in Chad and Sudan that began in 2003; the refugee crisis in central Africa resulting from the conflict in the Central African Republic that began in 2013; the arrival (around 2009) of Boko Haram, the jihadi group controlling the Lake Chad area and northern Nigeria; and the rebellion that broke out in Mali in 2012 after the fall of Gaddafi, which jihadi groups soon hijacked. The relative peace since the 1990s, which followed a period of unrest after independence, has ended and the Sahel has seen a gradual breakdown in law and order. Regular armies and nation-states have lost control and large sections of the population

have ceased to recognize their authority. Ethnic violence, excessive killings by armies, and the emergence of all kinds of armed militia have become part of the conflict landscape and of daily life for the local populations. This chaos, not to mention lack of security, is probably the main reason why people accept the militant groups. In the northern Sahelian regions, these groups are ideologically committed to jihad and are affiliated with international jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda, AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and Islamic State. In the southern Sahel, the militant groups that arose from a perceived need to oppose the jihadi groups operating in areas where the state had lost control are now in charge. One such group is Dozo, a secret society made up of traditional hunters and found in various parts of West and central Africa. It is set up to assure the security of its communities and, in this role, it has the support of the local population.

5 The Past in the Present

Forgotten and unforgotten pasts inform the present (Trouillot 2015) and help us imagine the future. Can the present cast light on former Sahelian empires? The importance of the past operates at two levels. First, stories and images from the pre-colonial era provide people with the collective memory they use to exert power in the present. Second, remembering the past plays a role in establishing a person's identity, and it does not need to be a conscious process (de Bruijn and Both 2018; Stoler 2016). This leads to two further points, namely (a) how the re-establishment and reimagination of the Sahel-Sahara as a space for communication and economic activity is seen as an important source of wealth for empire; and (b) how the pre-colonial past is remembered informs both the leaders of the 'counter' movements and the population and citizenry at large of the new power constellations of the present.

6 Reconnecting the Shores of the Sahel to the North

In their seminal article on communications between north and south Sahara, Walther and Retailé (2008) have shown how communication networks have affected the Sahel-Sahara for centuries. Caravan routes, with their caravanse-rais, have provided a grid along which to introduce modern communication technologies like transport routes and mobile phone networks. Of course, with the insecurity in the region, these have also assumed other forms, but the basic principle of connectivity and the Sahara as a sea of connections

remains unchanged. Furthermore, nomadic pastoralists are still the guardians of these routes, albeit with trucks now instead of camels. Despite changes in the intensity of the movement along these routes, they have always been used by salt caravans travelling through the desert from Tripoli to Darfur, by labour migrants moving from Chad to Libya, and by migrants on their way to Europe, not to mention the illegal traders who ply the less-recognized, more concealed routes. Walther and Retailé argue that these were already communication routes, but that the introduction of new communication technologies has merely updated them with Orange and MTN antennae positioned along various nodes in the Sahara/Sahel network. How do these new links across the Sahara affect the present-day situation?

When Gaddafi fell in 2011, the Tuareg troops serving him returned to Mali where they formed the core of a rebellion that broke out there. Jihadi groups partly based in Algeria soon hijacked the rebellion and, by forming a coalition with locally-based jihadi groups, have since established their rule in parts of the Sahara. I suggest that the entry of these external jihadi groups into the Sahelian region – where they joined locally-based Muslim leaders, were able to reorganize local (Muslim) communities, and came close to establishing an Islamic state – is also a consequence of their old Sahara-Sahel connections, which new communication technologies now facilitate. That they use old transport routes to fuel the war, old traffic and other routes to earn money to feed into the war (often involving people smuggling and hiding in oases), is but one indication of the historical antecedents of their communication history. In addition, one detects a certain pride in their propaganda that they are the masters of the Sahara.

In March 2017, an alliance between international and Sahel-based Muslim radical groups was announced. The Macina Liberation Front, a Fulani-based group led by Hamma Koufa, joined Ansar Dine, a Tamacheck-based group, AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun (formerly the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), and the support group for Islam and Muslims, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin. A video declaring their unity and common goals, and reaching out to all social media channels, accompanied the announcement. Without the trans-Sahara networks to facilitate communication and economic advancement, a jihadi war in the Sahel would be impossible. In a number of ways, therefore, we are back in old times.

7 Mobility of Ideas: Communication Routes

The routes are not just traffic points or nodes; they are connections or linkages through which ideas and messages once carried by people on camelback are

shared with the communities they encounter on their way. While the travellers may include Muslim scholars and non-religious thinkers, the important factor is that their ideas and norms also accompany them on their journey (see de Bruijn et al. 2001) and that the spread of ideas in this manner is part of culture. Travellers and travelling scholars are a normal phenomenon in the Sahel, and their words are heard when they are offered food and a place to stay. This is how new ideas and philosophies travel and have done since time immemorial. Similar dynamics are evident in the recent spread of new Muslim ideologies, though now in a modern format: today they travel not only physically, but also on mobile phones and over the social media. For example, Hama Koufa (Galy Cissé 2019) makes specific historical references in his sermons to establish the glory of the Fulani conveyed over the new communication networks, which is characteristic of Sahel culture.

Specific ideologies linked to the present-day jihad, such as Salafism or orthodox Islam, were already circulating in the region before the arrival of this 'new' jihad. Most researchers and observers were unaware of the phenomenon because it travelled largely unseen through rural areas and families. These were travellers hosted by communities on the fringes of the Sahara. Today 'travelling' strangers, like those in the past, have strong messages about jihad and sharia law and are guided by translators who speak to the local communities.

8 Messages Reviving the Past: Of Inequality and Anti-Western Sentiments

The European colonial powers did not change the hierarchical structures of the society inherited from the Middle Ages and nineteenth century. Moreover, the recent politics of decentralization imposed on national states has not brought more equality; instead, corruption has been installed as part of culture and society. The racial hierarchies of the olden days have also been perpetuated (Hall 2011). Master–slave relations, and memories of the slave trade are still very present in discursive practice – in oral traditions, rituals, material relations such as labour relations, and access to resources. In general, these relations seem to have evaporated with modernity; however, in many Sahelian societies they are still visible for those with the perspicacity to see beneath the surface (Pelckmans 2011). The references to these pre-colonial powers are an example of reformulating the past to fit a present-day ideology. For instance, people who live in Macina currently formulate their wish to return to the Diina, the theocratic rule of Seeku Amadou (Macina Empire 1818–53), by comparing the rules of the new jihad with those of former times. Their hope is to

be able to end the unfair treatment they have experienced under the rule of the Malian state.

The preachings of Hamma Koufa that circulate through the Sahel by means of mobile telephony give an explanation about the marginalization of certain groups in society and a call for a campaign against corruption, with strong anti-Western (colonial powers) rhetoric and advocacy for a better, more just society. In this regard, he refers specifically to the time of the Macina Empire (Galy Cissé 2019). This is a message that one can also read from the videos circulated by the leaders of Boko Haram. In these narratives we hear a pronounced respect for former times, and we see a call for the subjugation of the population to a new regime of sharia law. They preach a new (restored) caliphate as the ideal future. The population in the Sahel is receiving these messages, and it is clear that they resonate with the structural grievances of many Sahelians, who have seen a degradation of their livelihood and who have experienced no positive support from the state.

The other side of the story is that other groups (those enslaved in this era) remember the earlier times as a period of fear and chaos. Reliving old master–slave relations, fearing nineteenth-century jihadists, and internalizing racist relations based on colour, all play a part in the inter- and intra-group violence. The modern ideology of democracy and the view that people are equal because they can vote, does not negate the persistence of the hierarchical relationships of old, for they have never really disappeared. The present-day violence in the region should be read through a lens that takes the past seriously; only then can the attacks on Fulani villages, and the fear in the eyes of the Dogon, become an understood reality (as witnessed during interviews with refugees in Bougouni and Bamako, Mali).¹

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media reinforce the ideologies of mobility and travelling. Communication has power, and through access to ICTs people gain political agency (Castells 2013; Dafoe and Lyall 2015). The messages that travel over the digital media reach large numbers of people and, since the Sahel and Sahara are strongly connected, certainly influence their ideas and are one of the reasons why they are joining vigilante groups and no longer shying away from using violence. On these mobile phone tracks from Senegal to Chad, similar messages are received and processed in the minds of the often young people who access these media.

¹ www.nomadesahel.org.

A background of duress, coupled with these digital influences, informs the choices and actions of today's youth.

9 Past Connecting the Imagined Future

The future promises a networked Sahel-Sahara in which power is defined through the connectivities created in religious settings, commercial exchanges, and ethnic social relationships. These in turn are derived from a shared distant past and, because it seems to inform the future, the distant past has now become the recent past. How will the powers controlling the trans-Saharan routes affect the Sahel? Will the violence of today play out in future generations? Will the newly created powers fall apart in much the same way as those of the old empires? Will the social media that now create unity among certain groups also create a network of resistance to the central powers? Will such resistance create new power centres and finally sweep away the power of the corrupt nation-state and, in the process, readapt the conscious or unconscious narratives and practices from a violent past?

The outcome is highly uncertain. To understand the future, we have to delve deep into how new connectivities relate to the connectivities and ruptures of the past, and we also have to understand how far they follow old lines of reasoning and sociology. The unfolding world of the future might not be a socio-political paradise. Most interventions in the conflict by international agencies and national governments fail to consider the deep history of the region. The government of Mali's recent attempts to negotiate with the jihadi groups in the Sahel are probably the only hope, but they are certainly no guarantee of a 'good deal'. Reliving past hierarchies is not really what the people of the Sahel want, although they perhaps feel more listened to and heard by these jihadi groups than by anyone else (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2019). While the example of the Taliban in Afghanistan is not comparable, in that it has profoundly changed the Afghan socio-political and cultural space, we can certainly draw lessons from it.

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