Cattle Raiding and Black Market :
from Sociocultural Practice to Subversive
Sociability in The African Postcolonial Context[1]

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Introduction :
The African Postcolonial Context

The problematic of the postcolonial State in Subsaharan Africa, with its paradoxes and ambiguities is itself rooted in the colonial political situation. This has been a challenge to African societies for several decades, forcing them to react through combined processes of adaptation and refusal to an order imposed from outside (Balandier 1982). The passage from the colonial to the postcolonial situation, which could be characterized by the "absence of clear ruptures and the weaknesses of the continuities" (Mbembe 2000, XVIII), leads us to reconsider the "crises" traversing African societies as revelatory of resistance points and, according to G. Balandier, "innovative behaviours born from the destruction of traditional social models" (1982, p. 6).

In a context where the postcolonial State monopolizes power and the institutions, drawing its influence from its position as mediator between the interior and the exterior to tap into economic trends (Médard 1990 : 28), it would be a mistake to take African societies at face value. In a logic where inauthenticity and the power of falsehood reign (Mbembe 2000), where the predatory aspect of the State is more manifest than a desire to maintain a social order and justice, each person, as an individual or part of a collective is constantly obliged to adapt their behaviour on two levels.

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[1] This lecture was given during the Conference "Issues of Pastoralism – zur situation der Hirtenvölker" at Leuphana University Lueneburg (October 24-25/2008), at the same time as a slide and video projection called "A Visual Investigation : Borders & Experiencing Frontiers – Switzerland / France" realized by a group of students of the CCC MA-research of the Geneva University of Art and Design. The research project of these students - Kasia Boron, Giulia Cilla, Eva May, Urduja Manaoag, Gaël Lugaz - presented different borders and ideas of borders as well as contemporary artists working on this huge problematic as a starting point for the collective to develop issues on Frontiers and Pastoralist Life. I would like to thank them for their contribution as well as Andrea Mason, from the University of Lausanne, for her help in the translation and correction of my text.

The first level is the official one, the level of the legalist and developmentalist discourse of the State. This is the level of formal "rules", of institutions and borders inherited from colonialism. The second level is that of social practices, unofficial economies, "informal" activities, networks of cooperation and solidarity between ethnic or religious groups and clans. It is possibly more on the second level than the first, this "grass roots" level – or "politique par le bas" - (Bayart et al. 1992), which allows us to see a pattern in the conflicts, the violence, subversive acts and political crises traversing African postcolonial societies. This grass roots approach to politics uses individual or collective behaviours as a starting point; behaviours which react against the ambivalence of a patrimonialized state (Médard 1990) in the hands of an elite, a party or a clan, with which the majority of the population cannot identify.

However, one should not be blinded by such a dualist approach, which opposes an omnipotent and often oppressive and violent State with suffering societies that fail to react. "Postcolonial venality and brutality is the marker of the political relationship between the governing group and the governed in a largely shared symbolic order[2]", writes A. Mbembe (2000 : XIX). It also occurs that the postcolonial State, in particular in remote regions and urban peripheries is marked primarily for its absence, abandoning populations to their fate and opening the door for war and chaos. But beyond spaces and places of power monopolized or abandoned by the State, there are political, ethical, cultural, symbolic, and material stakes, which are shared or disputed by forces which traverse and often surpass it, going so far as to transgress its codes, laws and borders. There are thus reactions which Balandier has qualified as "clandestine" and "indirect" (1982, p. 494).

In the first case, they are active: secret organizations, illegal trafficking, black market, theft, pillaging and embezzlement. In other cases, reactions are more passive: hiding of revenues and identities, refusal to participate or to use the official services proposed by the State, etc. These reactions are sometimes motivated by occult forces such as witchcraft (Geschiere 1995 : 16), practices for avoidance, domination and devouring, related in a more general way to a "politique du ventre[3]" (Bayart 2006) linked to multiple socio-political stakes. This "politique du ventre", implies a number of predation and accumulation activities, which open the way to upward social mobility in a world where the line between legality and illegality,

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[2] Our translation.
[3] "the politics of the stomach".

the visible and the invisible, "traditional" and "modern"[4] cultural practices is constantly changing and regularly crossed.

Subversive Sociability : A Definition

My personal experience in Sub-Saharan Africa dates from the beginning of the 1980's. I had made a journey of several months across North Africa, hitchhiked across the Sahara, lived for a while with the Touaregs in the Algerian desert near to Tamanrasset, then stayed in a village of sedentarised Peuls in the Douentza region in Mali, before finishing in a small enclave country of West Africa, which was called Haute-Volta at the time and later became known as Burkina Faso. At this time the area was living at the rhythm of the revolution, that of Captain Sankara and his government of Marxist-Leninist tendency, the CNR (Conseil National de la Révolution).

This is where I settled and started to work with young African artists as part of a graphic design and cloth dying workshop in the centre of the capital Ouagadougou. From my meetings with the populations, whether in remote desert regions of southern Algeria, in the small villages of the Malian Sahara or the popular quarters of Ougadougou undergoing the rigours of revolution, I understood the extent of their mistrust of the centralized power of the State and generally of anything representing the official and the law. But I should also point out the extraordinary way and with what cunning and perspicacity this same population managed to hide, lie, divert and imagine all kinds of schemes when faced with representatives of the State.

That is the reason why during the last two decades, my work in West Africa has led me to take an interest in certain types of social, economic or cultural behaviours practised by a large section of the population. These behaviours obviously entail a transgression of the law of the State, the family or the clan. I have observed, for example that the settlement of legal disputes linked to the inheritance of an asset belonging to a family in Burkina Faso only made use of the official justice system as a last resort even though certain parties would have benefited from such a procedure. Rather than initiating the State legal proceedings designed for such a case or going to a private lawyer, the rival parties belonging to the same family clan preferred

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[4] On the notions of "tradition" and "modernity" I refer in particular to the works of J. & J. Comaroff (1993), G. Lenclud (1994), P. Geschiere (2000).

to settle their dispute between themselves. To do this they resorted to methods that violate the principles of the law, for example using witchcraft, intimidation, theft or purposeful dissimulation of official documents, which at the same time made it impossible to resolve the dispute by legal means (Froidevaux 2004).

I have repeatedly observed this sociocultural phenomenon during my research. I consider this form of sociability as derived from ancient or traditional cultural practices, that have developed a new aspect and appearance in the context of the post-colonial State and the recent evolution of African societies. It is a sociability that I would characterize as "subversive" in the sense that it defies the dominant political order and the institutions that represent that order. Along the same lines, I would like to mention the incredible dynamism of the parallel or informal economy in Sub-Saharan Africa. This "make-do economy" or "black market economy" is characterized by very little or no State regulation and social protection. It favors religious codes, family or corporate ties, relying in large part on trafficking, fraud and the exploitation of young people, sometimes even constituting real mafia networks with influence over the State institutions themselves (de Villers et al., 2002).

I use the term 'sociability' in its wider sense, following the definition of the French sociologist of Russian origin, Georges Gurvitch. He defined sociability as "the way of being linked to the whole", meaning to society, the human group or more globally the "world" in which we live (2). This notion of sociability goes above and beyond the basic notion of a "social link" in that it includes power-production relations, nutritional and clothing codes, modes of communication, political institutions, mythology and collective representations. In this sense, sociability comprises a local and a global dimension. At the local level are the organization of the family, community or clan, the domestic economy, lifestyle, personal values, etc. The global level comprises the sociopolitical and historical context, the role of local government and international institutions, the movement of populations, economic and development policy, etc.

Obviously the local and the global levels are always interlinked in some way or another. Data and events which affect the daily lives of many people, both here in Europe and in Africa, may also produce consequences at a global level, just as events at a global level affect people's everyday lives. Ecology is one contemporary issue that forces us to realize the implications of an ordinary every-day action, such as turning on a light, going to work in the

car or using an aerosol, on the climate of the whole planet. Whether you sort your rubbish or not is already a way of being linked to the whole. It doesn't matter whether you believe in the efficacy of such a measure or not.

To be linked to the whole

The problems experienced today by the populations of Karamoja are rather part of the way in which they are themselves linked to the whole, to the rest of the world, even if they live far from centres of population. Presently, one of the ties that links the Karamojong to the rest of the world goes by the name of "AK-47". Raids, reprisals, cattle rustling and arms trafficking, etc. are perhaps stereotypes of the sociopolitical and geopolitical contexts of a region, but they are nonetheless some of the reasons why international experts and development agencies are now focusing on the Karamoja area. An old Karamojong man, interviewed in Stephen Keulig and Sacha Kagan's documentary "Land of Thorns", pointed out our own contradictory relation to this whole : "*What breeds bad things in Karamoja is the gun. The one, you the white man, is making*". This is certainly one way of being linked to each other.

The French Africanist Emile Le Bris (3) used the term of "subversive sociability" a few years ago, when he wanted to highlight the ability of migrants in post-colonial Africa to exercise different modes of legitimacy and representation (ancestral, modern, formal, informal). This attitude could be seen as subversive in that, at a particular moment and in particular circumstances, social value is lent to the breaking of rules rather than to the respect of them. This leads to the generalization of a form of communication and behaviour that employs false-pretence, dodging, double discourse and trickery.

Subversion as a cultural practice

It thus remains for me to show why the practice of cattle rustling became a form of subversive sociability among the pastoral populations of East Africa and specifically among the Karamoja. The specialists agree that the practice of cattle rustling or cattle raids is a relatively old one (Spencer 2000, Knighton 2005). In any case it dates at least from the time of the arrival of the populations that currently inhabit Karamoja, that is, the nineteenth century. Nothing seems to have prevented or caused the disappearance of this practice, which can be

qualified as ancestral in that it is closely related to the pastoral lifestyle. Traditionally, raids play a part in the organization and the economy of the society, in clan hierarchy, the marriage system, and even in the naming of young male children (Knighton 2005, 124). Here it is not only exchanges and alliances but also rivalry and competition that bind the community together. Cattle raids can of course be seen as a form of redistribution of economic resources between those who have accumulated a large holding of livestock and young people who must gather a herd of several animals before they can marry. It can also be considered a sort of insurance policy, a sharing of the risks linked to the climate, droughts and diseases that decimate certain herds but spare others. These different socio-economic justifications should not, however, overshadow the fact that the raids are part of the values which combine to form sociability in the wider sense, taking into account the complexity of social relations and their conflict dimension (Boileau 1995). Fighting for recognition, showing one's courage and one's difference from others are important notions inherent to any social life. Antagonism, competition and the desire for vengeance are, in certain cultures, factors that contribute to integration as much as division.

That said, if one believes what is written on the subject, in recent decades, the raids have taken on a distinctive dimension as a result of the proliferation of light semi-automatic firearms in the regions. This has had serious consequences for the safety and mortality of the populations. Our attention should focus on the fact that the Karamoja, a region long disregarded first by the colonial authorities then by the Ugandan central power, today appears in the United Nations Safety and Security reports. The notoriety of "The Land of Warrior Nomads"[5] has now become synonymous with a threat for world security. Consequently, we lump together pastoral life, cattle raiding, the black market for firearms and escalating armed violence in Karamoja.

A report by the "Small Arms Survey" research group of the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies describes the situation as follows (Bevan, 2008) :

- *"Most studies note that security has deteriorated in Karamoja since the 1970s. Violence associated with cattle raiding, in addition to banditry and general predation, has escalated lethality with the use of modern assault rifles." p. 21*

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[5] David Pluth, Sylvester Onyang & Jeremy O'Kasick, 2007. Karamoja, Uganda's Land of Warrior Nomads, Stäfa, Switzerland : Little Wolf Press.

- "Many news reports and policy-oriented publications suggest, first, that small arms are a causal factor in armed violence and, second, that the primary facilitating factor in the development of armed conflict is the pastoral mode of existence itself" p. 23

It should be noted that this study distances itself from such a perception of the situation.

- "It is clear that cattle raids have become more lethal, but there are many more reasons for instability in the region."

Among these reasons is the question of land reallocation, along with minimal State security provision, etc. However, one should also bear in mind that the region's violent reputation far predates the introduction of semi-automatic weapons to it. One has to admit that over time there has been a recurrent theme in Karamoja's reputation abroad. Of course my intention is not to play down the seriousness of the conflicts that characterize the Karamoja region, or to minimize the consequences of armed violence on the lives, the health and the safety of the region's inhabitants. A certain number of indicators show that a cultural practice such as cattle raiding, which I have just described in more or less positive terms, may in new circumstances and contexts acquire a new character. To cite another passage from the same report:

"Increasing competition over scarce resources, combined with the inability or failure of governments to intervene in disputes, often leads to downward spirals of crime and violence." p. 29

"Levels of violence escalate because crime – particularly on a large commercialized scale – leaves communities depleted or without livestock. Young men, left with little capital and social status, often become tempted into recompensatory crime." p. 29

What I presented earlier as belonging to the way of life and traditional values of a pastoral society now finds itself projected into a completely different category, that of criminality and instant profit. If we believe Kennedy Mkutu, today there are "commercial raids", orchestrated by entrepreneurs who exploit the poverty of the nomad warriors and contribute to the integration of cattle raids (becoming now synonymous of cattle rustling) into the free market (Mkutu 2007).

Who would have thought that the free market would one day conquer Karamoja via an ancestral cultural practice? Should we speak of a deviant manifestation of a sociability jeopardized by postcolonial history and the creation of artificial boundaries that do not take into account the freedom of movement of the nomad populations? Or is it more accurate to see the phenomenon more generally as a result, in a globalized world, of a State policy on the whole unsympathetic to pastoral life ?

The terms used by security experts and development analysts are to be taken with caution. The terms "commercial raids", "criminal activity" or an "outlaw country" refer more to our Western definitions of what is legal or illegal than to a consideration of the complexity of the situation of nomadic and pastoral life in Africa. The Karamojong, who continue to practice armed raids actually place themselves in a position of denial of an order that they judge illegitimate. Moral condemnation and military repression only increase the conflict between nomads and sedentary populations, and incite young warriors to turn to contraband or the black market. The difference between a criminal behavior and a subversive one is not always obvious. It is often merely a question of perspective. The same problem applies to the attitude of certain activist movements in the West. To what extent is the use of illegal methods justified to make a cause known or to further it, however worthy it may be?[6]

In Karamoja we are talking about a cultural cause : the defence of a lifestyle and a relationship to time and space that are proper to pastoral and nomadic life. The Karamojong do not claim any territory of their own, only the possibility to move freely and continue to practice their pastoral activity, which guarantees their existence as a cultural community. The problem is that this claim, although essential to the survival of a community, places that community – or some elements of that community - in a position of subversion not only toward the State order, but also toward the traditional order. Then the question is if the pastoral and nomadic way of life can survive to the tensions inherent in this antagonistic situation.

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[6] Just think about the actions of Greenpeace in the name of ecological values or the actions carried out by pro-Tibetan militant human rights groups before the Beijing Olympics.

Conclusion

Violence and the practices of subversion, whether active or passive, in postcolonial Africa have their roots in colonization's time, with the imposition from the outside and by force of institutions, laws and borders which did not usually take into account the socioeconomic realities and the complexity of the politico-ethnic structures of African societies. Violence always expresses a certain type of social relationship. It shows historic social contradictions, writes J.-B. Ouedraogo. It "expresses a profound transformation of the orders of values, understood as historically determined qualities of society (...)[7]" (Ouedraogo 1997, 13). Using as a starting point a case study of interethnic violence in 1995 in Burkina Faso between Fula (Fulbe) pastoralist people and the Karaboro farmers, the author explains how hatred of the other results from an inacceptable institution of social relations, for which the colonial and postcolonial administrations are largely responsible. "The violent confrontation of communities and social orders invites us to pose the question of the destruction of those around us as one of the historical characteristics of social evolution in Africa[8]"(Ouedraogo 1997, 227).

But is there not something inconceivable for us Westerners, who are sometimes incapable of seeing social relationships otherwise than in positive terms and particularly when the question of "development" is concerned ? Violence, epidemics, war and hatred of the other are the price to pay for the political, social and historic evolution of Africa. This is mainly due to the brutal entrance of African societies into a new cycle of values and economic trends at first from the Western world, and since replaced by the globalization of exchanges and the arrival of the most recent Asian or Arab investors[9] .

As J.-F. Bayart explains, the external relations of African societies play on their capacity to have a dual personality (Bayart 2006 : XXII on). A certain type of relationship with the other

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[7] Our translation.
[8] Our translation.
[9] Thus Kuwait, recently bought from Uganda a concession of farmland for 100 million dollars to anticipate a food shortage. The agreement of this "Dignity Livind Fund" was that the products cultivated on these lands be exported entirely to the monarchy of the Gulf (Le Temps 08/22/2008, p. 19). South Corea came to the same agreement on half of the arable land of Madagascar (Le Nouvel Observateur 12/23/2008 http://hebdo.nouvelobs.com/hebdo/parution/p2303/articles/a391458.html).

and with the world has its source in the relationship between the "legal country", unique interlocutor in an international setting, which seizes power and foreign capital, and the "real country" where there is a complexity of social exchanges, tensions and conflicts between the multiple powers. If, at the socioeconomic level, subversion, predation and exploitation of human or material resources are the conditions to the participation of Africa in globalized commerce, then at the cultural level it is a strange mix of local, Western, and Asian influences. Thus the combination of a the "politique du ventre" and strategies for trading internationally allow African societies to transcend ethnic, State and geographical borders to create a multilateral international relationship. It could be through this inconceivable idea of economic and social relationships based on violence, subversion and death, that postcolonial societies are finally able to stay linked to the world without necessarily renouncing themselves.

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