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Climate change and instability in the Sahel band

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Índex

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Introduction	7
Herdsmen against farmers	9
Boosters of conflict	12
<i>Slavery</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Colonization</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Decolonization</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Religious differences</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>The influence of foreign States on the Sahel</i>	<i>21</i>
Conclusions	23

Climate change and instability in the sahel band

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Abstract

The Sahel is the scenario of conflicts stretching from one end of that strip to the other: 'Boko Haram' in Nigeria, Burkina-Faso, Niger and Chad, the 'touareg' in Mali and Niger, the Séléka' in Central Africa, the 'Janjawid' in Darfur, the never-ending civil war in South Sudan, 'Al-Shabab' in Somalia... The list is endless.

It is common to label these conflicts as 'ethnic' or 'tribal' conflicts, or simply link them to the global rise of Islamic terrorism. It is important to note that these ethnic and religious rivalries are largely born out of historical competition for scarce economic resources (arable land) and that ongoing climate change will make them even scarcer. On this initial reason, the course of history has added new factors that boost this basic conflict: the consequences of slavery, the legacy of colonization, the processes of decolonization, Islamist radicalization, discovery and exploitation of natural resources, the influence of foreign States on Africa and the fall of Gaddafi.

Key words

Sahel, climate change, tribe, ethnic conflicts, colonization, decolonization, Islamic terrorism, slavery.

Introduction

The Sahel is the scenario of conflicts stretching from one end of that strip to the other: ‘Boko Haram’ in Nigeria, Burkina-Faso, Niger and Chad, the ‘touareg’ in Mali and Niger, the ‘Séléka’ in Central Africa, the ‘Janjawid’ in Darfur, the never-ending civil war in South Sudan , ‘Al-Shabab’ in Somalia... The list is endless. All these conflicts are different and have their own internal logic. However, it is hard to believe that such a concentration of conflicts in a given area of the planet is coincidental.

A relatively common explanation to the complex interrelationships between Sahel communities is to label conflicts as ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ conflicts or simply link them to the global rise of Islamic terrorism. And indeed, those reasons are present. However, it is important to note that these ethnic and religious rivalries are largely born out of the historical competition for scarce economic resources (arable land) and that ongoing climate change will make them even scarcer. On this initial fact, the course of history has added other factors that boost this basic conflict.

North Africa in general - and the Sahel in particular - are mainly agricultural-based areas. Consequently, the rainfall regime is an essential factor to understand the performance of local economies and, as a direct derivative, the rate of social stability: in most cases, the recurrent ‘political’ revolts are actually ‘revolts of hunger’ and usually happen after a time of poor harvests . It cannot be a surprise that the current climate change process is of enormous importance to those human groups whose livelihoods are entirely climate-dependent.

The Sahel is an undefined band of terrain, of colossal dimensions, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It is a climatic transition zone between the Sahara Desert (to the North) and the rainforest (to the South). Between these two extreme ecosystems, across the Sahel band the aridity decreases from North to South, resulting in intermediate ecosystems, among which the savannah stands out. The boundaries of the Sahel have been varying in different periods of history, in line with changes in rainfall regime: at certain times, the rains allowed to develop crops far North, in areas that are nowadays in the middle of the desert, while in others periods the desert advanced to the South, forcing the exodus of inhabitants from previously prosperous areas.



Abéché (Chad). In 1850 the Sultan of Ouara moved his capital to Abéché, describing it as ‘a city located in a dream meadow.’ Today it is a semi-desert area, which does not allow crops. The old capital, Ouara (60 km north of Abéché) had to be abandoned when the water sources dried up.

These different ecosystems have given rise to different ways of life among the human groups that inhabit them: to the North, the Sahel is populated by nomadic tribes dedicated essentially to herding, an activity that frequently co-exists with the Trans-Saharan trade, but also with banditry. Further to the South, pastures increase, and areas that allow agriculture appear. In the same way that the wealth of the land increases, further to the South the population also increases, and sedentary population centres appear.

The mobility of the Sahel tribesmen derived from the rainfall regime makes the Sahel a zone of permanent conflict: when the desert moves South, nomadic tribes lose their traditional pastures, so they take their cattle further South seeking the cultivated lands, which irretrievably confronts them with the farmers living there. The present and past history of the Sahel is therefore a permanent conflict between the nomadic tribes of northern herders and the sedentary tribes of farmers further South. This is a conflict as old as History itself, which was born with the Neolithic Revolution, more than 10,000 years ago. In addition to this scenario of centuries-old conflict, a certain number of new factors appear, such as climate change, which expands the desert to the South, but also other elements of crisis, some of them quite recent, and some others much older: the consequences of slavery, the legacy of colonization, the process of decolonization, the radicalization of Islam, the discovery and exploitation of natural resources, the influence of other States over Africa and the fall of the Libyan dictator, Gaddafi.

Herdsmen against farmers

The climate in the Sahel is characterized by high temperatures, and by the existence of two weather seasons, one dry (which roughly coincides with the European winter) and one rainy (summer in Europe). Recently, the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH) published a study on rainfall in the Sahel: analyzing rainfall data in the area between 1982 and 2016, the study features a steady increase in the number and violence of major storms. These storms can have extensions of up to 100,000 km² (the size of Portugal) and reach levels in the atmosphere higher than 15 km, being able to discharge 250 l/m² of water in a few hours. Nowadays, during the rainy season there are up to eighty major storms per year, while in the early 80s the average of large storms was only twenty per year: the frequency of these rainfall episodes has increased fourfold. In addition, for a few years, these types of storms represent practically the only rain received in most of the area. The rest of the year, it hardly rains, with frequent episodes of extreme drought. This change in the rainfall regime is particularly stressed in West Africa.

The main consequence of torrential rains is the erosion of fertile soil, essential for agriculture; during periods of drought, plants dry up and their roots cannot retain soil; when storms arrive, torrential rains drag the ground, leaving only the stony bed. The continuous repetition of this cycle get thinner the arable layer of the land and dries the pastures, affecting decisively the ability of the land to sustain any economic activity.



Storm in the Sahel. The episodes of extreme rains have multiplied by four in the last thirty years.

The consequence of this major change in the rainfall regime is the progressive disappearance of pastures and crops on the northernmost part of the Sahel band.

As we have noted before, the disappearance of their traditional pastures forces nomadic populations to take their cattle further South, invading the lands of sedentary

farmers. As an example, conflicts between *Fulani* or *Peul* herders and *Dogon* farmers (in Mali) or *Banda* (in Central Africa) come from this competition for fresh pastures.

Conflicts between herders and farmers date back to the apparition of agriculture, and have always followed the same pattern, in places as distant apart as China or West Africa: herdsmen tend to be less numerous than farmers, but they live concentrated in groups (a behaviour rooted in the need to control their livestock), have great mobility (usually travel on horseback or on camels, and their source of income – their livestock – is also mobile); on the contrary, farmers are more numerous (agricultural surplus allow for a much higher population growth), but they live dispersed on small farms (their scarce means of transportation do not allow them to live far from their farms, and the low yield per hectare does not allow to sustain large villages) and have little mobility (few of them can afford to maintain horses: a horse eats and drinks like ten people, which is prohibitive for a rudimentary agricultural production). As a result, sharing the same technological level, herders very often defeat farmers: they take advantage of their local numerical superiority to prevail in combat in front of isolated farmers' communities, and the superior mobility provided by their mounts allows them to shy away from combat if they face larger groups of enemies. Thus, relatively small and backward nomadic tribes managed to impose themselves on very advanced agricultural societies (case of the repeated invasions of China by the Mongols) cycle already described in the 12th century by the Hispanic-Muslim Ibn Khaldun in his *Book of Evidence*.

This description seems to indicate that herders will always seize the victory when fighting farmers. This may be true in local and short-term wars: in the long run, sedentary societies allow for greater technological development and greater wealth, which translate into engineering works that reduce the advantages of shepherds (with fortifications such as the Chinese Great Wall), in more advanced weapons (gunpowder, vehicles, armour...) and in the constitution of more competent armed forces. In the long run, sedentary agricultural societies have always overrun nomadic pastoral societies, and there is no reason to think that, today, the outcome will be different in the Sahel band.



Armed shepherd, somewhere in the Sahel.
The way of life of the shepherd tribes gives them advantages in combat over the farmers.

Another relatively common historical development is that nomadic herders end up adopting a more sedentary way of life, along with an economic system based on the conquest and exploitation of its rival farmers and/or shepherds or the extortion of its (unconquered) less powerful farmers or shepherds neighbours, a situation that is at the root of the birth of the sultanates which dominated the Sahel band until the arrival of European colonizers, but common also in Mongolian China or in the Tataric Central Asia.

The description above may lead to the idea that there are two 'sides', one of shepherds and one of farmers. In reality, this is not the case: in addition to this confrontation between two forms of economic organization, there is a myriad of tribal clashes between different tribes of herdsmen (cattle thefts were - and continue to be - very common among tribes of shepherds or between clans within the same tribe) or between ethnic groups of farmers for the control of arable lands.

In the period between the expansion of Islam in the Sahel band (circa 16th century) and the arrival of European colonizers, the tribes of shepherds created small kingdoms and fiefdoms, located around cities and developed an administrative structure. Their economy was based almost exclusively on the predation of agricultural societies located to the South. The economy of these small kingdoms was maintained by slavery and by the tributes paid by less powerful political entities, creating 'predatory societies', with a caste of warriors and merchants (the former nomadic shepherds) and a mass of slaves, both simply captured or obtained as a tribute from the agricultural tribes of the South. A very interesting and much more detailed study of these societies is that of Stephen P. Reyna, *Wars without End: The Political Economy of a Precolonial African State*, 1990. The arrival of the European colonizers wiped out these small kingdoms, and forced the nomads to return to cattle breeding. However, even the shepherds do not forget their 'glorious past' (a quite mystified era, largely by the oral transmission of history), nor farmers their (relatively recent) status as 'potential slaves'.

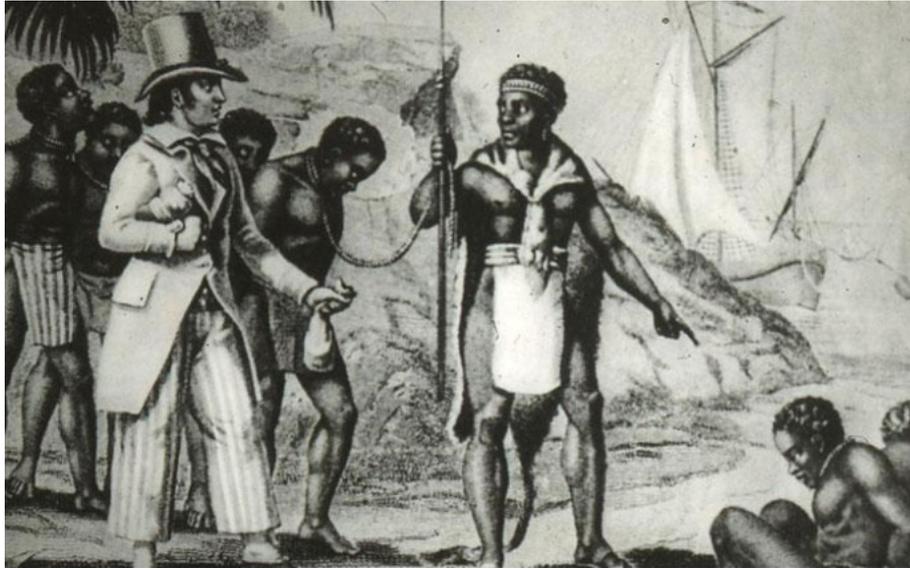
Boosters of conflict

On the basis of this immemorial conflict between two conflicting ways of life, some other factors exacerbating this basic conflict overlap in the Sahel, but often also disguise and blur it. Among these factors, some of them are historically rooted, such as slavery, how colonization was performed, and how decolonization and religious differences took place. Together with these ancient factors, some others are more recent, such as the radicalization of some Islamic communities, the discovery of new mining resources, the foreign influence on several African states, and the fall of Libyan dictator Gaddafi.

Slavery

Slavery and its memory is a factor that still today has a major influence on the Sahel strip. The main destinations of the slave trade were initially in the Arab-Muslim world (from VII century or even earlier), joined from XVII century by colonial America. In both cases, the main source of slaves were the agricultural populations located in the southern side of the Sahel strip.

The demand for slaves from the Arab-Muslim space provided an economic incentive for the populations of nomadic herders living in the northern part of the Sahel: farmers in the South, became not only rivals for pastures, but they turned out also in potential goods to be sold to the North. Thus, for more than a thousand years, slave markets were established in the northern part of the Sahara Desert (such as Timbuktu's) where the nomadic tribes of the northern part of the Sahel and the desert sold the slaves captured in the southern part of the strip to Arab merchantmen. When Europeans began the slave trade into colonial America, these same tribes of shepherds established meeting places on the coast for the sale of captured slaves. Neither the Arabs nor the Europeans captured slaves by themselves: they merely bought them from some of the nomadic tribes, who, at certain times, set aside their traditional herding-based way of life to devote themselves almost exclusively to the slave trade. Islamic cosmology divides the world into two parts 'dar-al-Islam' ('home of submission', lands dominated by Muslims) and 'dar-al-Harb' ('home of war', lands populated by non-muslims). Significantly, in the small Sultanates of Chad and Sudan, devoted to slavery, the 'dar-al-Harb' became the 'dar-al-abid', the 'home of slaves'.



European traffickers buying slaves on the African coast, in the s. XIX. Europeans bought slaves from herder tribes, who kidnapped their neighboring farmers for sale.

Slavery is, in a general sense, an episode of the past. However, some of its consequences are still alive today. On the one hand, in the ‘collective memory’ of many of the farmers’ tribes lives the fear of the herdsmen. This enduring feeling of fear translates, for example, into a low combat morale when members of these farmers’ tribes have to face armed gangs coming out of the tribes of shepherds . On the other hand, members of the herdsmen’s tribes tend to consider themselves superior to those of farmers’ tribes, and, even today, feel disdain for the farmers, who, in the end, they are no more for them than ‘potential slaves’ . As we will see later on, the process of European colonization in many cases reinforced these feelings of superiority in one side, and of fear in the other, while that of decolonization was also affected (in various ways) by these same feelings.

Colonization

The colonization of each of the African territories was different, depending on many factors, such as geography, demographics or the particular policy of each metropolis on the topic. However, there is a relatively common trait: the colonizing power used to seek the support of at least one of the tribes present in the colony, in order to dominate a comparatively much larger population with the always limited contingents of troops devoted to the control of the colony. In this sense, the tribes of shepherds were the ideal partners for the colonizing power: they were militarily more competent, they had a certain ‘ascendant’ over the farmers’ tribes (who feared them), they were less numerous (and therefore cheaper to content with bribes and other advantages) and the alliance with the colonizers granted them a position of political dominance, along with access to money, preferential access to pastures and numerous other economic and material advantages. Consequently, the European powers tended to rely on the

tribes of herdsmen for the organization of the colonial administration and the security forces of these colonies. As an example, in the French colony of Chad, members of the *Tama* and *Zaghawa* tribes, two of the one hundred and three tribes living in the country, each one counting for less than 1% of the total population of the territory, occupied the vast majority of the low and middle posts of the colonial administration, and provided almost all of the indigenous troops. Even with the selective participation of local staff, the colonial administration remained tightly controlled by the different metropolises, which provided almost all of the key staff. As an example, at the time of the independence of the Belgian Congo (the present Democratic Republic of the Congo), there were only sixteen indigenous university graduates throughout the country.



German colonial troops (askari) in the colony of Cameroon. The colonial powers relied on the warrior tribes, integrating them into the colonial forces and giving them training and weapons, to subdue the majority tribes.

This way of organizing the colonies allowed members of the shepherds' tribes to occupy positions (albeit minor ones) in the civil and military administration of the colonies, and, as a consequence, they received the necessary education to perform them. Thus, the middle and low posts in the administration, the posts of non-commissioned officers and those of the troops of the colonial forces were allocated mostly to members of these tribes. Consequently, the support of the colonizing powers to the shepherd tribes (providing organization, education and modern weaponry) consolidated their position of dominance.

However, the needs of the civil and military administration of the colony also affected the internal structure of the shepherd tribes: the colonial powers needed low-level officials and troops. Therefore - with many limitations -, they promoted members of the tribes that supported them to the positions that they needed to cover. Therefore,

the 'aristocracy' of these tribes rarely agreed to hold the subordinate positions that the colonizers assigned to the natives. Thus, the denial of the members of the upper castes of the tribes to enter the colonial administration meant that only the members of the lower and / or intermediate castes of the dominant tribes held positions in the colonial administration, which would have important consequences during decolonization

The difficult living conditions in the most desert areas caused the colonizers to place their administrative headquarters in areas with better access to water. Thus, the colonists moved the traditional seats of power from their previous positions (normally located in the lands of the shepherd tribes that dominated the territory) to new places, located further South, on the regions previously occupied by farmers (this is the case of Chad, where, before the arrival of the French, the political power resided in the 'Sultanate of Ouaddaï', based in Ouara; the French moved the seat of the colonial administration to the new city of Fort-Lamy, now N'Djamena). This displacement cut power from traditional tribal elites, and resulted in indigenous officials (belonging mostly to those tribes of shepherds whose territories were far away) being somewhat 'foreigners' in their own country.

Colonization also marked major changes in the local economy, which changed the internal economic structure of the territories. The traditional trade routes of the Sahel were heading towards the Arab and Muslim world, towards the Maghreb and the Nile Valley. However, the colonizers created new production units – mines and plantations – and directed their exports to the Atlantic or Indian Ocean facades, in order to ship them towards their respective metropolises. In addition, Africa's distribution among rival European powers fragmented the territory, thus closing out traditional trade routes: Nile Valley (with Egypt and Sudan in British hands) ceased to be accessible to West African trade (under French rule), while the Maghreb (also a French colony) was closed for trade with British-dominated East Africa. These changes implied that traditionally rich regions became impoverished as a result of the cessation of their traditional trade, while others, previously not so prosperous, thrived, as new economic engines were set into motion (agriculture or mining) or new trade routes were open. Overall, these changes benefited agricultural regions to the detriment of shepherds' tribes, main traders along desert routes. This change in the 'hierarchy of regions' implied also important changes in the distribution of the internal wealth and political power within the colonies. Linked to this new economic and political structure, the colonial powers focused their efforts on the construction of those communication routes needed to move the natural resources of the colonies to their metropolises, leaving virtually isolated the rest of regions without direct economic utility. Most of these (then) forgotten regions were in the northern part of the Sahel. And, without means of communication, the administration's action on these areas was virtually non-existent.

An important aspect of colonization was the imposition of a forced peace by European powers: the 'raids' of the shepherds' tribes on the lands of farmers or the fierce independence of the nomadic tribes were vigorously fought by the European metropolis. Thus, the tribes of shepherds had to restrict banditry or looting, or running

the risk of attracting the reprisals of the better trained and equipped colonial armies. This repression of banditry, together with the policy of co-optation of the European powers on important sectors of the shepherds' tribes, led to a great reduction in the level of overall violence, and also to a change of habits in the nomadic tribes (reduced now almost exclusively to herding or stealing livestock among them) and to further population growth.

Decolonization

If colonization altered the course of history in the Sahel, even more so did the process of decolonization. It is almost common place to highlight that decolonization was based on the administrative divisions of the different colonial powers, demarcations that did not respond to any historical or ethnic reason. Thus, artificial states emerged from the process of decolonization, with borders dividing homogeneous ethnic groups, while forcing peoples who had nothing in common, or, worse, openly rivals, to live under the same administration, as citizens of the same state. This effect was even more important in the tribes of nomadic herders, whose way of life clashed head-on with the concept of a state based on border-limited territory (for example, the traditional pastures of the nomadic *Fulani* are divided between Mali, Burkina-Faso, Cameroon, Chad and Central African Republic).

The European powers undertook decolonization quite hastily, pressed by the changes in the world after Second World War. The result of this was a mostly unplanned process, which resulted in most cases in just leaving the colonial administration, and especially the military, in the hands of the indigenous personnel present at the time of the departure of colonial administrators. Thus, in most cases, the colonies came under the power of the local armed forces, the ultimate source of real power. And, in the case of the Sahel, the armed forces were generally composed of personnel from the shepherds' tribes. Not surprisingly, the process of decolonization in many cases led to dictatorial regimes, more or less disguised as formal democracies, where the levers of power resided mostly in members of one or two of the herdsmen's tribes. However, taking into account the refusal from the members of the local aristocracies to enter the colonial administration, those in power at the moment of decolonization were not the traditional leaders of these tribes, but belonged to humbler social layers within them. However, those leaders who had thrived thanks to the support of the colonizers were very reluctant to cede their new and powerful status to the higher castes of their own tribes. Obviously, these new rulers were well aware of their obligations to their tribe of origin, but were rarely willing to accept orders from 'traditional' tribal hierarchies. The influence of socialist ideas (it is important to remember that decolonization took place in the midst of the Cold War and resolutely supported by the Soviet Union), reinforced the discredit of tribal hierarchies. This situation triggered frequent internal conflicts within the ruling tribes, that resulted in more or less widespread civil wars.

In other cases, facing growing discontent (both in the colonies and also in the respective metropolises) with the living conditions in which the African population was maintained (European public opinion started to worry about the situation of the Africans mainly after World War II), the European governments tried to ‘democratize’ their colonies by introducing some system of representation for the local population, and by extending education and health-care system. In specific cases they changed their alliances with the minority tribes and tried to attract the majoritarian ones (these were the cases of Rwanda or Congo, for instance), but these reforms arrived too late, very close to independence, and, after the departure of the Europeans, the new rulers had a very short time to consolidate their power.

On the other hand, Soviet support to pro-Communist political and guerrilla movements in all the colonial Africa led also to the emergence of ‘socialist’ insurgent movements that continued their activity after the independence of most of the former European colonies, creating a situation of continuous civil wars and instability in most of the new States surged from the decolonization process.

In any case, the States within the Sahel strip that came out of decolonization are characterized by very weak power structures, and by amalgamating a short number of tribes (complete or part of them) of shepherds in the North, along with a majority of the population belonged to farmers’ tribes in the South. The tribes of northern shepherds consider themselves as ‘superior’ to the tribes of ‘potential slaves’ that inhabit the South. And, as it has been cited, at the beginning of the decolonization process, these tribes of shepherds also have in many cases the levers of power. As a result, the Sahel States tend to bring together a majority of the population belonging to the farmers’ tribes, along with a minority from the tribes of shepherds, who, in some cases (Chad, for example), control the armed forces and the administration. They are weak states with artificial borders, and a poor national identity: part of their population does not feel identified, especially in border areas, with their supposed State of citizenship. In most cases, the identity framework of the inhabitants of the Sahel is not their State, but their tribe or ethnic group. This situation tends to change progressively, given the erosion of the tribal system, as a result partly of the continent’s rapid urbanization process, but in the medium term it is still the case.

Even today, the capacity of the Sahel States to provide a minimum of public services is very limited. In fact, in most of the territory, the presence of the State administration – if any – is merely testimonial: some officials are deployed in the main population centres and in the main villages, there is sometimes a small military or police garrison. The lack of communication infrastructure providing cohesion to the territory, especially in the northern part of the countries, greatly limits the ability of administrations to provide services in large areas of their territory. This lack of state structures and services further makes it difficult for the population of much of the territory to identify themselves as citizens of their (theoretical) State, and keeps alive traditional power structures and ancient ways of life. It cannot come as a surprise that the political entities created after the decolonization of the Sahel are, for the most part, ‘failed states’ and that they occupy the lowest places in human development statistics.

This limited State presence is even more so in areas far from power centres, which generally coincide with the former colonial seats. Due to the displacement of the local capitals carried out by the colonizers, this State presence is virtually zero in the northern part of the Sahel strip. This makes the inhabitants of these areas feel abandoned by their new State, with which, in any case, they have very weak links. As a result, it is no coincidence that rebel movements usually originate in the northern part of the Sahel States, and that the capitals of the States (and the majority of the population) are in the southern part of these States.

The weakness of the different levels of the local administrations has allowed the reappearance of banditry and insecurity, especially in those areas farther away from the centres of power. In some cases, these criminal activities are more or less tolerated by State authorities (especially in those States controlled by tribes of herdsmen, mostly responsible for these levies), which further discredits the State authority and legitimacy, but, in most cases, respond to the State's inability to enforce the rule of law. This enduring insecurity encourages the creation of armed militias, which can be used by the tribesmen both to defend themselves or to practice banditry, or even 'to rent' them to be used in foreign conflicts. As an example, the 'Séléka' rebels who overthrew Central African President Joseph Bozizé in 2013 included significant Chadian and Sudanese contingents. Many of them knew quite well the terrain, since they were regular participants in illegal hunting 'raids' in the Dzanga-Ndoki, Manovo-Gounda St. Floris and Bamingui-Bangoran National Parks...

The numerous conflicts on African soil have forced frequent intervention by the international community. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, these foreign interventions have sought to resolve local tensions by imposing democratic regimes. However, democracy in most African states, given the characteristics of their society, has just degenerated into a variety of 'ethno-democracy'. In its African version, each political party – despite its name suggesting a political position or ideology – represents in fact a tribe, an ethnic group or a faction within them. Thus, the demographic weight of each ethnic or tribal group determines the distribution of power: each voter grants his vote to his tribe. Consequently, and given the structure of society in the Sahel States, in local democracies power lies in the end on the more numerous farmers' tribes and where, given its sedentary nature, it is possible to establish a reliable census of voters.

These African 'ethno-democracies' have many unintended consequences:

- The traditionally dominant tribes (those of shepherds) are in fact just a minority, so the adoption of a democratic system deprives them of their position of privilege. Consequently, they will oppose any intent of imposing a democratic political system. Their aforementioned dominance of the levers of local power puts them in a most favourable position to impose dictatorships or, where appropriate, to distort election results. In any case, they will be very reluctant to hand over power to tribes traditionally considered 'inferior', usually opposing by force any intent in that sense.

- Majorities tend to use the power received at the ballot boxes as a weapon to institutionalize the majority ethnic group's dominance over minorities.
- In many cases, the majority tribes try to 'settle scores' with the tribes considered 'oppressors' (generally, the minorities of herdsmen). The case of the rwandan genocide in 1994 is an extreme case of this trend: the traditionally dominant – but minority (9% of the population) – *Tutsis* pastors had collaborated with the colonizers, but they lost power to the majority *Hutu* farmers shortly ahead of independence, out of the desire of the Belgian colonizers to 'democratize' the colony. Successive Hutu rulers exercised a policy of 'revenge' against the *Tutsis*, who, in turn, created a guerrilla political movement – the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) – which sought to regain power by arms. The conflict culminated in the 1994 genocide, in which the *Hutus* tried to completely exterminate the *Tutsis*...
- They also cause the loss of confidence in the democratic system by the minorities, since the application of the rules of universal suffrage implies that political power and international legitimacy will always end up in the hands of their traditional rivals.
- Feed distrust in vote counting systems: in the area inhabited by each tribe, only the party of that tribe is voted on; if the final result gives victory to other party, it is easy for losers to interpret that there has been fraud in the count, because, in the areas of minority tribes, no one knows anyone who voted for the winning party.

As a result, the establishment of 'simple' democratic systems (without institutional balances that guarantee the rights of minorities) tends to exacerbate conflicts rather than resolve them.

The intervention of the international community in African conflicts has also had other consequences: armed contingents from various multinational organizations (United Nations, European Union, African Union...) have been frequently deployed, with debatable effectiveness, and more or less forced peace agreements have been imposed, which have often included 'security sector reform' (SSR) processes. In most cases, these agreements have involved taking 'disarmament, demobilization and reintegration' actions (DDR – Disarmament, De-mobilization and Reintegration). The 'reintegration' part seeks the return of the fighters to civilian life. However, the difficulties inherent in providing civilian jobs to personnel used to fighting from their childhood often means that 'reintegration' includes the integration of some of the 'rebel' armed personnel into the regular armed forces of the State they fought against... These processes, however beneficial they may be from the point of view of the peace agreements, generate internal divisions and lack of cohesion in the armed forces, fundamental problems that add up to their material deficiencies, organizational, training and Doctrine. The result is that local armies are unable to fulfil their functions of keeping peace (and, in many cases, not even public order, a task often falling on the armed forces), internally divided (and even internally confronted), scarcely docile to

civilian power and who act frequently outside of legality. And, considering that these armies are often the only State presence in vast areas, the lack of means of the local political powers to make their governing action felt in large areas of their own territory is even more marked.

Religious differences

Another factor of division in the Sahel is religion. The nomadic tribes in the North have been in contact with the Arab-Muslim world for more than a thousand years. As a result of this contact, most of these tribes have adopted the Islamic religion, and, as a consequence, they are strongly influenced by the religious evolution of the Arab world. In opposition, among the sedentary tribes in the South there are some of them practising Muslim religion, but the bulk of them practise a mixture of traditional (generally animist) beliefs with Christian influences acquired during the period of colonization. As a matter of fact, the sedentary nature of the agricultural tribes of the South made easier the evangelizing action of the missionaries, who built churches, hospitals, schools (until the arrival of the independence, most of the education system in Africa was controlled by churches) ... The Christian religion (especially Catholic religion) overlapped local religions, creating different mixtures in each particular area.

Throughout the colonial period, religion was not a particularly significant source of conflict. However, coinciding with decolonization, the emergence of 'political Islam' occurred in the Arab world. This movement sought the creation of societies whose political structure was based on the Islamic law and values. In line with the emergence and evolution of this movement, there has been a progressive radicalization of the Islamic religion (to which the spread of Saudi-driven Wahhabism is no stranger). Both movements (the extension of the Islamic religion to the political world and its radicalization) have affected the Muslim tribes of the Sahel.

The radicalization of Islam and the conflicts arising from it have created enormous instability in North Africa, while strengthening ties between the most radical groups of Islamic believers. Thus, warring Islamist groups have appeared throughout North Africa, groups that also have frequent interactions, support or rival each other and receive international support (especially from Persian Gulf countries). In the Sahel and Sahara, these groups come up from the nomadic tribes and take advantage of their knowledge of the terrain and their acclimatization to the difficult desert conditions. In a certain way, they just keep alive one of their traditional habits: banditry and pillage over sedentary farmers' populations. This 'breeding ground' of instability and violence has fostered the emergence of groups of Muslim fighters willing to fight in one area or a distant one, depending on the changes in local situation and the possible economic benefit they can get. Thus, the same fighter may fight some time alongside *Al-Shabab* in Somalia, later on with the *Séléka* in Central Africa and continue afterwards supporting the MUJAO in Mali or *Boko-Haram* in Nigeria, with some occasional participation in the 'raids' of Sudanese illegal hunters in Kenya's or Uganda's Natural Parks,

to get ivory... In all these cases, tactics and procedures are quite similar, since the actors are essentially the same ones...



The radicalization of Islam has given rise to the appearance of 'Islamist fighters' operating throughout the Sahel.

Religion is not, in principle, one of the causes of conflict in the Sahel, but it has allowed Northern Muslim tribes to obtain a feeling of identity not provided by the artificial States born out of the decolonization process, and, moreover, to receive substantial international support (in money, weapons and fighters) that they would not have obtained were it not for the religious component and for the conflicts created by the radicalization of Islam. For these tribes, the adaptation to this fighting environment of continuous mobility and rapid and violent actions is simple, for it is only the return to a way of life characteristic of many of these tribes for centuries, only interrupted by the brief parenthesis of colonization.

The influence of foreign States on the Sahel

The Sahel's economy is mostly agricultural. However, colonization promoted the search for mineral deposits useful for the advanced industries located in the European metropolises. Thus, during the period of colonization, European colonial authorities undertook an active policy of exploration, in search of mineral deposits and attempted to build infrastructures that could allow the export of the continent's natural resources. While African mineral resources are important, technical difficulties in exploiting them caused mining activity to be relatively reduced during the period of colonization. The opening of markets brought about by decolonization and technological advances have turned African mineral deposits into a huge source of potential wealth, attracting the attention of all major powers, and, especially, China. Due to the whims of nature, in the Sahel, most of these deposits are located in the southern part of the strip, where the agricultural tribes settle.

The intervention of foreign powers attracted by the mineral wealth of the Sahel has distorted internal relations between the ethnic groups of each State. Foreign powers competing for these resources have supported different ethnic groups within each of the Sahel States, seeking to gain control of mineral deposits. This competition has led to more instability and more conflict. In those States where minority tribes retain power (the case of Chad, for example), revenue from mining exploitation has enabled the local government to have access to advanced weaponry, strengthening their power. On the other hand, in those States where a democratic system has been established (and, then, where the sedentary tribes are in power), competition between foreign powers has been greater and more violent, taking advantage of the discontent of nomadic tribes to encourage them (by supplying weapons and money) to gain de facto control of the deposits, even actively fighting local governments and armies. As an example, in the Central African Republic, the *Séléka* rebels (a coalition made up of members of the nomadic tribes of the North, on the border with Chad, and supported by Muslim Chadian and Sudanese fighters) have occupied the centre of the country, rich in mineral deposits and populated by tribes of Christian and animists farmers. The *Séléka* are forcing local people to work in the mines, whose production is mainly exported to China.

The secession of Sudan and the creation of South Sudan is perhaps the most obvious example of the effect of the emergence of mineral deposits in an environment with as many internal fissures as that of the Sahel, but it is a quite common situation throughout the strip, from Mali to Sudan.

In addition to external intervention linked to competition for mineral deposits, the Sahel has been subject to external influence on ideological grounds. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the socialist bloc pursued a vigorous policy of expanding communist ideology throughout the Third World. In the communist cosmology, the survival of the capitalist economic system (which, according to Marx, should be at the brink of collapse, due to its 'internal contradictions'), was due to the exploitation of colonial empires. Consequently, decolonization should lead to the definitive fall of capitalist powers. In order to provoke the collapse of the European colonial empires, the Soviets pushed for different actions, from the creation of armed anti-colonial movements of communist ideology, to the education of African elites in Soviet educational institutions (especially military elites). Soviet influence continued after decolonization, seeking to impose 'socialist' governments on the new States arising after the withdrawal of European powers. While Soviet influence is an issue of the past, many of its consequences are still alive: the extension of socialist ideology (even if limited to certain elites, actually) attacks the traditional tribal structure of society, and has an important influence even today, especially among military officers educated in Socialist countries.

The second main external ideological influence comes from political Islam. The Persian Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, maintain today a policy of extension of Wahhabism, a version of Islam that is replacing traditional (and much more moderate) African Islamic beliefs. Other Gulf States (Iran, Qatar, United Arab Emirates,

Oman...) also engage in proselytizing activities on African Muslim ethnic groups, supporting them with money and weapons. Consequently, on the one hand, many of the Muslims in the Sahel are becoming radicalized, being more and more belligerent to impose their radical interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, Islam acts as a binder that provides a sense of community to the different local tribes – a feeling of identity that clashes with the national identities fostered by the new States – and lastly, the economic support received from the Gulf countries have allowed these radicalized Islamic groups access to modern weaponry. As an unintended consequence, the rivalries of their distant ‘masters’ are reproduced among the mosaic of armed Islamist groups of the Sahel, generating a complex picture of conflicting actors whose relations are not always easy to understand.

Finally, the fall of Libyan dictator Muammar El Gaddafi has been another booster of conflict in the Sahel: Libya was one of the most armed countries in the world, and the collapse of the regime left out of control Gaddafi’s immense arsenals amassed during his forties years of dictatorship. The warring militias in Libya and in most of the Sahel strip had access to these arsenals. In addition, the Libyan dictator relied on the nomadic tribes of the Touareg to enforce his rule. In reality, the Libyan dictator was but a prominent member of one of the minority tribes that constituted the fragile Libyan state, so he relied on a bellicose tribe (the Touareg) to keep rival tribes at bay. To do so, he paid lavishly his *Touareg* allies. The fall of Gaddafi meant that the bellicose *Touareg* were now ‘unemployed’ and had to return to their traditional way of life, based on smuggling and banditry between the Sahel and the Mediterranean coasts. The loss of Gaddafi’s patronage made the well-armed Touareg vulnerable to the tempting offers of other ‘employers’: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State...

Conclusions

The Sahel has been a zone of conflict since the dawn of History. On the basic confrontation between shepherds and farmers, dating from the Neolithic Revolution, other factors have been overlapping, but these additional factors are not the reason for the conflict, even if they boost it. Without an adequate understanding of the root causes of conflict in the Sahel, it is very difficult to address any effective solution.

As it has been cited, a relatively common reasoning for explaining the complex interrelationships between Sahel communities is to classify these difficult interactions as ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ conflicts, labels that simplify their complexity and which, to some extent, carry the idea that they are atavistic and unavoidable behaviours. Without ruling out the factor of ethnic rivalries, it is important to note that these rivalries are mainly born out of competition for scarce economic resources (arable land) and that ongoing climate change will make them even scarcer.

In the context of this competition between herders and farmers, it is important to note that the well-meaning Western efforts are far from having a ‘neutral’ effect on

the different human groups that populate the Sahel. Indeed, the imposition of formal democratic systems and the strengthening of the capacities of States (the goal of UN missions – MINUSMA, MINURCAT... - or the EU missions in Africa, such as the EUTM-Mali and EUTM-RCA), involves increasing the power of farmers' tribes with a cost to those of shepherds. Not surprisingly, opposition to local governments and international efforts to shore up the Sahel States comes from nomadic tribes, tribes that, circumstantially, are Muslims. But they would probably oppose these efforts with the same tenacity without the religious factor. They would simply lose much of their external support, which is one of the key factors that allow them to keep the fight with their government rivals.

The historical legacy (slavery, colonization, decolonization...) allows to understand where and when many of the current rivalries were born, and they are factors to take into account when addressing current problems, but, like all historical facts, they have a very difficult 'solution' (if any).

The Sahel is a complex environment, and its situation of conflict does not allow for straight solutions: the imposition of 'simple' democratic systems, which do not take into account the power relations between the different ethnic groups and that do not guarantee the rights of the minorities can lead to an increase in conflict, not a reduction in violence. Similarly, without a major change in the economic structure of the strip – which would require significant investments and a deep understanding of the 'human landscape' of each one of the different areas of the Sahel –, the rivalry between herders and farmers will last for long years, and climate change will only exacerbate it. In the absence of these reforms – which are quite unlikely – and, despite current international efforts, the Sahel will continue to be a frontier characterized by recurrent episodes of violence.

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