
Ouled Saïd, a Gourara Palm Grove: Local Development and the Reproduction of a Traditional Society

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Abstract

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In the Gourara, palm groves survive as well as they can thanks to their peasant community resistance, to their persistence and their culture, besides solid public help.

The guidelines of this text centered on the Ouled Saïd oasis, are firstly to analyze the agricultural land division and secondly to understand the geographical changes of the diverse local countryside, and thirdly to try to put the stakes into the context of a small rural traditional society which reproduces itself by using modern State institutions with an aim to manage its municipal territory ensuring local development leaning strongly on public aid and a search to improve the social conditions for the resident population. In effect a series of planning actions were undertaken as early as the beginning of the 21st century, among which must be emphasized the patrimonial material rehabilitation (foggaras, ksour, environmental protection etc.). Furthermore a social structure recombination enabled some social groups to be implicated in local politics, in order to manage municipality business. This local development certainly improved the Ouled Saïd inhabitants' way of life, but it also raised the dual question of the oases local agriculture future and the hastened preference for a consumer mode.

Keywords: Ouled Saïd - traditional society reproduction - foggaras - consumer mode - municipal management.

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Résumé

Ouled Saïd, palmeraie du Gourara : développement local et reproduction d'une société traditionnelle

Dans le Gourara, les palmeraies survivent tant bien que mal grâce à l'endurance de leur communauté paysanne, à la persistance de leur culture et à l'aide de la puissance publique.

L'idée directrice de cette recherche, centrée sur l'oasis d'Ouled Saïd, est d'analyser en premier lieu le terroir agricole, en deuxième lieu de comprendre les changements géographiques des divers paysages locaux et en troisième lieu, de tenter de situer les enjeux d'une petite société rurale traditionnelle qui se reproduit en utilisant les institutions modernes de l'Etat en vue de gérer son territoire communal en assurant un développement local. Celui-ci s'appuie fortement sur l'aide publique et sur la recherche de l'amélioration des conditions sociales de la population résidente. De fait, une série d'actions d'aménagement ont été entreprises dès le début de ce millénaire, parmi lesquelles il est à souligner la réhabilitation du patrimoine matériel (foggaras, ksour, protection de l'environnement, etc.). Par ailleurs la recomposition des structures sociales, a permis à quelques groupes sociaux de s'impliquer dans la vie politique locale en vue de gérer les affaires de la commune. Ce développement local améliore certes, le cadre de vie des habitants d'Ouled Saïd, mais il pose aussi la double question relative au devenir de l'agriculture oasienne locale et au penchant recherché du mode de consommation urbain sublimé.

Mots-clés : Ouled Saïd du Gourara - Reproduction de la société traditionnelle - Foggaras - Mode de consommation urbain - Gestion communale.

Resúmen

Ouled Saïd, palmeral del Gourara: desarrollo local y reproducción de una sociedad tradicional

En la región de Gourara, los palmerales se mantienen más o menos gracias a la resistencia de la comunidad campesina, a la persistencia de su cultura y a la ayuda del poder público.

La idea directriz de esta investigación, centrada en el oasis de Ouled Saïd, es analizar en primer lugar la tierra agrícola, en segundo lugar comprender los cambios geográficos de diversos paisajes locales y en tercer lugar, intentar situar los desafíos de una pequeña sociedad rural tradicional que se reproduce utilizando las instituciones modernas del Estado con el fin de gestionar su territorio municipal asegurando un desarrollo local. Éste se apoya fuertemente en la ayuda pública y en la búsqueda de mejora de las condiciones sociales de la población residente. De hecho, una serie de acciones de ordenación se han iniciado desde el principio de ese milenio, entre las cuales cabe señalar la rehabilitación del patrimonio material (foggaras, ksour, protección del

medioambiente, etc.). Por otra parte, la recomposición de las estructuras sociales, ha permitido a algunos grupos sociales implicarse en la vida política local con objetivo de gestionar los asuntos del municipio. Este desarrollo local mejora ciertamente, el marco de vida de los habitantes de Ouled Saïd, pero plantea también la doble cuestión relativa al devenir de la agricultura del oasis local y la tendencia a buscar un modo de consumo urbano sublimado.

Palabras claves: Ouled Saïd de Gourara - reproducción de la sociedad tradicional - foggaras - modo de consumo urbano - gestión municipal.

ملخص

أولاد سعيد، واحة نخيل قورارة: التنمية المحلية وإعادة تشكيل مجتمع تقليدي

يعود الفضل في استمرار وجود واحات النخيل في القورارة بالدرجة الأولى إلى المجتمع الريفي وصمود ثقافته وكذا تدخل القوى العمومية.

تقوم الفكرة الأساسية لهذا البحث، التي تدور حول واحة أولاد سعيد، على معايشة الإقليم الزراعي، ثم فهم التغيرات الجغرافية لمختلف المشاهد المحلية، وفي الأخير، محاولة موقعة رهانات مجتمع ريفي تقليدي صغير يصنع نفسه من جديد عن طريق استخدام المؤسسات المعاصرة للدولة من أجل تسيير إقليمه الجماعاتي، وذلك من خلال ضمان التنمية المحلية. وتقوم هذه الأخيرة بشكل كبير على مساعدة الهيئات العمومية التي تعمل على تحسين الظروف الاجتماعية للسكان المحليين. ومن ثمة، سعى القائمون على الأمر إلى وضع عدد من الإجراءات التمهيدية منذ بداية هذه الألفية، ونذكر من بينها إعادة ترميم التراث المادي (الفقارة، القصور، حماية البيئة، الخ...). كما سمحت عملية إعادة تشكيل البنيات الاجتماعية بالمشاركة في الحياة السياسية المحلية بهدف التسيير الحسن لشؤون البلدية. صحيح أن هذا النمو المحلي يسمح بتحسين الإطار المعيشي لسكان أولاد سعيد، ولكن أيضا يطرح السؤال المزدوج المرتبط بمصير الزراعة الواحاتية المحلية والميل إلى طريقة استهلاك حضري جذاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أولاد سعيد - قصو قورارة - إعادة خلق المجتمع التقليدي - الفقارة - طريقة استهلاك حضري - التسيير البلدي.

Set in a naturally harsh and arid environment, the traditional palm groves of the Gourara have certainly suffered a serious, years long, agricultural decline because of real operating constraints; but over the last decade, the area has changed tremendously, and any knowledgeable observer could take note of those transformations. Ouled Saïd, the main oasis in the commune, is the typical case of a small palm grove in the Gourara with its unique structure of small ksour scattered across the agricultural landscape (Map 1).

Beyond the classical study of a Saharan oasis inhabited by a peasantry with age-old know-how (working the land, maintaining the foggaras, building networks of seguias, rural crafts, protecting the land, building a habitat adapted to the climate, etc.), the guiding principle of this research is twofold. Firstly, to try and understand the practices of a small traditional society that has felt neglected by central political power for decades. The second is to identify the rather conflictive local strategies.

Those strategies had been developed to persuade the public authorities to take better care of them, while gradually using modern public institutions (Communal People's Assembly, political parties) to take charge of their own communal economic and social affairs. This is probably the trend adopted by the oasis dwellers of the Gourara and *Touat* ksour, whose rural character, still strongly asserted, is rooted in the diversified local culture, based both on the Muslim religion and on the maraboutic practices, certainly still vivid, but perceived here and there as stamped by an archaic and colourful tradition.

Since the tenth century, history has sedimented the physical features of Ouled Saïd and shaped social behaviours, reflecting a palpable rurality (Bellil, 2000a). Even though colonisation had opened the region up to the rest of Algeria, rural society ended up asserting a kind of social “ksourian” resistance typical of traditional societies under attack. The post-independence period was even more memorable for a population that felt abandoned by the Centre, and as a result kept low profile in the face of local authorities who perceived this society as historically outdated, in terms of its social structures, its dignitaries, its architectural buildings, its agriculture, its farming techniques, its foggaras, its functioning, etc.

After decades of waiting, this small rural society had finally understood the overwhelming power of the central government, its economic priorities and its hierarchical institutions. In this context, the two questions asked can be summarised thus: how did the peasant society of Ouled Saïd, a palm grove nestling at the foot of the *Grand Erg Occidental*, manage to survive on its meagre agricultural resources and

the income of its migrants, while waiting for public aid to equip it? How did this society, perceived as archaic, adapt so as to integrate modern institutional and legal structures (national political parties, local elections, associations, etc.) thereby succeeding in managing its municipal affairs and consequently its economic and social development?

The palm grove of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu: terroir, dispersed ksour and society

The population of Ouled Saïd: slow growth and demographic consolidation within the administrative centre

Created at the time of the administrative division of 1985 from the break-up of the commune of *Timimoun*, the commune of Ouled-Saïd has been experiencing steady demographic growth since 1977, as the data from the 1977, 1987, 1998 and 2008 population and housing censuses show, with estimated figures of 4990, 5898, 7538 and 8223 inhabitants (tab.1). As elsewhere in Algeria, the trend towards gradual population consolidation remains regular (60.6% in 1977, 65.2% in 1987, 71.3% in 1998 and 71.9% in 2008). However, in 2008, its municipal grouping is well below the average recorded in the wilaya of *Adrar* (92.6%).

Table 1: Recent population trends in Ouled Saïd by sector and distribution 1987-2008

Years	Type	Population			Growth Rate	
		1987	1998	2008	1998/ 1987	2008/ 1998
Ouled Saïd	ACL	712	2904	3357	13,3	1,5
Ighzer	AS	561	664	706	1,5	0,6
Hadj Guelmane	AS	1031	1232	1191	1,6	-0,3
Ifka	AS		575	661		1,4
Ouled Saïd II	AS	1533				
Scattered area	ZE	2061	2163	2308	0,4	0,7
Total Commune		5898	7538	8223	2,2	0,9

Source: ONS, 2010¹.

As for the geographical distribution of its population, the 1998 population census highlighted the merger of the two conurbations (Ouled-Saïd I and II) into one, called Ouled-Saïd chef-lieu communal (2,904 inhabitants in 1998) and the emergence of the secondary conurbation of *Ifka* (575 inhabitants). Overall, this merger shows a very high average annual growth rate (13.3%) during the 1987-98 intercensal period for the main town; however, this growth stabilised at 1.5% between 1998 and 2008. In fact, the municipality lost more population between 1998 and 2008, as its growth rate (0.9%) was well below the rate of the previous decade (2.2%) and the average for the wilaya of Adrar, estimated at 2.6%. Finally, the reader must distinguish between the commune as an administrative management territory and the main town of the same name, which is the subject of this research.

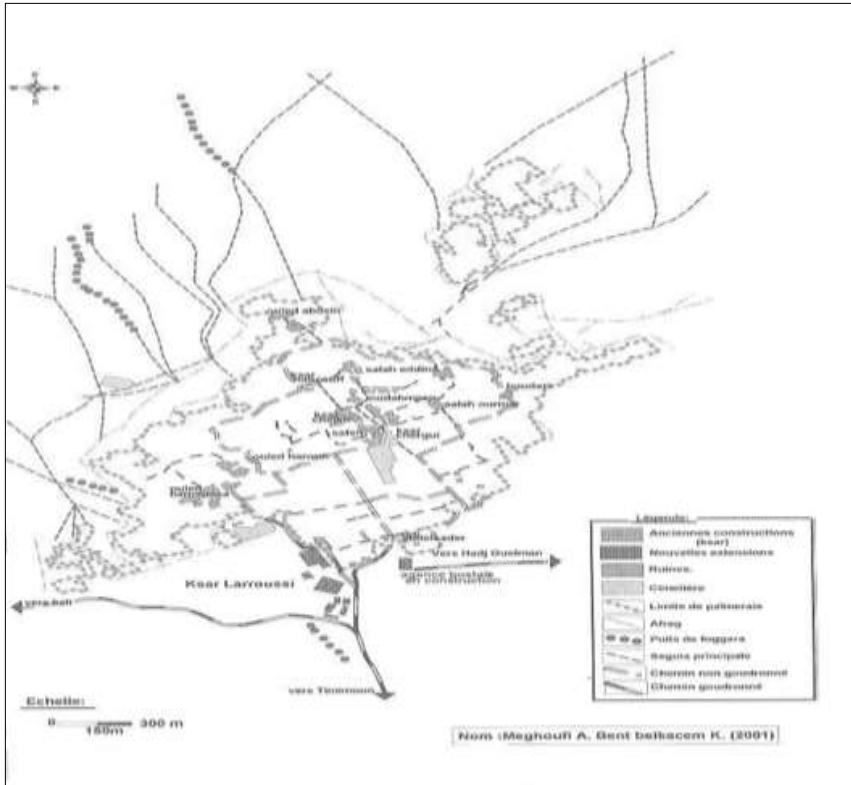
The terroir of the Ouled Saïd commune, exploited by the population of around ten ksour dispersed the palm grove

According to municipal data, the commune of Ouled-Saïd is made up of 14 *ksour* (pl. de *ksar*): Ouled-Saïd chef-lieu, Hadj-Guelmane, Kali, Ighzer, Feraoun, Semouta, Tiliouine, Tindjelet, Arhlad, Tigharet, Baba Idda, etc.). These centuries-old human settlements are each made up of a hamlet and its own agricultural plot plan. Because of its particularity, this article focuses mainly on Ouled-Saïd, the main town in the commune, which is an agricultural area in the shape of a rough diamond with a dozen or so small *ksour* (Map 1); these *ksour* are inhabited clusters scattered around this Saharan agricultural plot. Apart from the recent fragment of Laaroussi grafted onto the road, these scattered *ksour* (Ouled Abdelli, Ouled Bamoussa, Ksar Echergui, Ouled-Haroun, Es-Saffah, Boudara, Salah- Eddine, Salah-Ouamar, Ksar Eccheikh, Badaha, etc.), some of which were created in the 10th century, currently have populations ranging from 400 to 70 inhabitants per hamlet.

All these human settlements are located within the palm grove, and only Laaroussi appears to be a recent nucleus, whose buildings and functions are in complete contrast to the rest. Following the classic pattern of the State as a developer of large steppic spaces and Saharan areas, the main community facilities for this commune (town hall, post office, school, health centre, stadium, communal workshops, etc.) were built along the tarmac road, which was created in 1985.

¹ Fusion of Ouled Saïd I and Ouled Saïd II.

Map 1: map of the site of the Ksour in the palm grove of Ouled Saïd



Water and land between social constraints and modest agricultural production

According to the data provided by the municipality (local authorities), the palm grove of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu covers a useful agricultural area of 130 hectares out of which 90 are irrigated; the number of recorded *fellahs* would be about 260. The oasis counts 26400 date palm trees out of which 91.5% are productive.

Typical of an oasis, the rural landscape offers an appearance of greenery in great contrast with the golden colour of the Grand Erg Occidental; the knowledgeable observer would find evidence of the recent work within the plot plan (dividing walls between farms, protection of plots, etc.) as well as outside the perimeter of the palm grove (*afregs*), which extends mainly and progressively to the north-east. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many plots of land within the terroir lie fallow for a variety of social, legal, cultural and even anthropological

reasons; on the farms we visited, we estimate that more than a third of the land is unworked. While the fellahs we interviewed said that this was due to a lack of qualified farmers as well as the lack of attractive and guaranteed salaries. What is unusual is that none of the farmers complained about the unavailability of water.

The ingenious system of collecting water over several kilometres (Bisson, 1957), by means of *foggaras*², is still used by the oasis inhabitants who have skillfully taken advantage of the fact that their palm groves are located at the foot of the southern slope of the Grand Erg Occidental, which is known for its large water table. This explains the presence of 15 living *foggaras* whose flow varies from 0.2 l/s to 12 l/s. The colossal efforts made by man over the centuries to bring the water to the palm groves gives an idea of the traditional know-how of these sedentary populations who are now trying, albeit with great difficulty, to maintain a proper flow in the *foggaras*. The preservation of the hierarchical network of *sequias* and the maintenance of the *kesrias* (water distribution combs) is a clear evidence of their owners' desire to maintain this patrimonial instrument. However, the system appears somewhat outdated given the rate of its flow compared to the amount of work required to achieve it. The public authorities understood the limits of this water source when they financed a specific borehole to supply drinking water to the population of Ouled-Saïd. There, agriculture remains traditional, and both yields as well as production remain clearly low.

Here, the social organisation as a whole is based on the appropriation of the water of the *foggaras*, a sustainable resource indeed but important and costly than the land. In the Gourara, the *foggaras* and the land which are part and parcel of the local culture ensure the functioning of the economy and the permanence of the social structures despite the changes they have been through since Independence. This evolution could explain, at least in part, the deterioration of the relations between the local dignitaries and the central political power for decades on end.

The three modes of agricultural exploitation within the terroir of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu

Within the 12 ksour surveyed in the palm grove of Ouled-Saïd chef-lieu, the survey carried out in the different types of farms (Meghoufi & Bentbelkacem, 2002) revealed three farming methods.

In *Ksar Echeikh*, seven families farm their property directly, using the water from the *foggara*, while in *Ksar Es-Safah*, the land is worked by

² Foggara: underground gallery tunnelled and for the capturing of the water destined to the irrigation of the oases.

young people guided by their older brother, a teacher at the Timimoun Institute of Agricultural Technology; this would explain the good management of this other undivided landholding, characterised by a traditional water supply (2 foggaras, 2 reservoirs known as *madjens*) and a modern water supply (a well equipped with a motor pump and a cemented reservoir). The third type of farming practised, that of Ksar Haroun, is applied on a small farm, irrigated from a foggara and with a *madjen*; a third of the area is dedicated to cereals, a third to market gardening (onions), aromatic herbs (coriander) and pulses (lentils); the rest lies fallow. At Ksar Haroun, the indirect form of tenancy practised is *khemmassat* (sharecropping by the fifth); this third form of tenancy “exists in a large number of gardens in the oasis”, as the two authors point out. As elsewhere in Algeria, *khemmassat* was revived after it was banned by the Agrarian Revolution Ordinance (1971). In the Gourara, different forms of *khemmassat* are practised, probably because of the demand, since “the landowner provides the water, manure, seeds and tools... we come across harratines who are *khammès* of landowners living in the ksar” (Maghoufi & Bentbelkacem, 2002, p. 61).

In the Gourara, the forms of land ownership remain highly complex: collective land in joint ownership, Habous³ land, owners living in neighbouring palm groves (as here at Hadj-Guelmane, Kali, etc.), and land temporarily ceded to relatives, etc. In addition to this tangled legal situation, there has been the migration of young working people attracted by the city and salaried employment, and the liberation of the black serving population of the harratines (plural of *hartani*) when agrarian reform was applied. These people possessed a formidable know-how in digging, maintaining foggaras and working the land, because in these Saharan areas, it is customary for landowners not to work the land. All this explains, to a large extent, the widespread practice of sharecropping and, as a result, the large number of unworked plots in the Ouled-Saïd oasis.

While there is no shortage of water, there are significant losses due to the irregular maintenance of the *seguias* and earthen tanks and the silting up of the foggaras. Date production for the entire commune, estimated by the local authorities at 8,000 quintals, is widely commercialised.

Cereal yields are apparently low, with an average of just 5 quintals/ha, and.

³ *Habous*: wealth granted to religious institutions.

“maize is only grown on a few plots... these irrigated crops are a mere supplement to local consumption...; on the 30 farms surveyed, the farmers seem more concerned with crop diversity and rotation than with yields” (Meghoufi & Bentbelkacem, 2002, p. 51).

As for market garden produce it is varied in winter (carrots, broad beans, turnips, onions, garlic) as well as in summer (courgettes, watermelons); market garden produce is consumed locally, although some is sold on the Timimoun market. “The amazing development of the (Saharan) towns has resulted in a large and ever-growing number of consumers” (Bisson, 1987, p. 43). This is true, for example, for Timimoun, which counted less than 3,000 inhabitants in 1950, but had gathered more than 33,000 in 2008!

Their deeply rooted bond to their land throughout history, the relative improvement of the land labour visible in the maintenance work of the landscape, the search for a more or less qualified labour force, and the timid opening up onto the local market are as many indicators of the will of the local populations to give their century-old oasis a second life.

Discontinuities in the actions for local development initiated by the public authorities and space transformations

The identity and territoriality of a peripheral oasis which has remained opened onto the national and regional space

Ouled-Saïd may have lost its economic opening onto the Saharan Atlas since the introduction of the automobile, but it certainly did know how to, both protect its physical environment against silting and progressively extend its little farming plot thanks to a rural know-how which has turned sustainable development into a perennial way of life... However, if Ouled-Saïd is located in a peripheral position because of its territorial setting at the foot of the Grand Erg Occidental, it is nevertheless connected to the rest of the Gourara through a tarred ramp attached to the National Transversal Road 51 linking the Central Sahara to the *Valley of the Saoura*; which means that the commune remains open onto the national space as well. During the colonial period, the different ethnic populations of the Gourara lived in extreme poverty while reproducing their social and cultural lives under the distant control of the French administration. Under such difficult living conditions and the very low incomes of a population steadily growing, the improvement of the

trails, followed by the construction of the road linking Timimoun to Ouled Saïd have undeniably paved the way for the migration of young and not-so-young workers. The road is, in this case, the escape route for those seeking their livelihood somewhere else. The colonial army understood the situation very well when it carried out census-taking operations in Ouled Saïd itself.

In fact, according to viva voce information provided by Jean Bisson, those registered were to be recruited by the end of the 50^s in the oil sector of *Hassi Messaoud* where oil deposits had been discovered a few years earlier. Moreover, according to a survey carried out by this author in the Caidat of Hadj Guelmane, the inhabitants of Ouled Saïd had started their first migrations right after the First World War in 1922. Labour migration continued in the period between the two wars and intensified after the Second World War in the years 1946-50 with favoured destinations being Mascara (factory workers) Oran (agriculture) and small towns in the Oranie (Perrégaux, actually Mohammadia, Saint Denis du Sid, actually Sig, Mostaganem, Tiaret, Aïn Sefra, Mecheria, etc.).

Even today, the migrants of the Commune of Ouled Saïd keep heading for the Oran area cities as well as towards the Oil Zone and the M'zab for work; however, these new national migratory destinations should not divert our attention away from other social and economic relations of regional importance. Thus, in 1952, J. Bisson noted the arrival in Ouled Saïd of caravans coming from the High Steppe Plains and the Saharan Atlas, *led* by the tribes *Amour* of the Atlas, of Mecheria (tribes of Hamyanes) and of Géryville (tribes of Trafis, of Krama, of Ouled Hadj Bahous, etc.); the routes they followed took after the oueds flowing down the Mounts of Ksour and Djebel Amour, ending up in the Grand Erg Occidental then Tinerkoug, and finally in the Gourara. Those relations kept going and.

“In 1970, a large part of the palm trees of Ulad Saïd (about 1500) in Gourara belonged to tribes of the Southern area of Oran (Ain Sefra) who still come every year for the harvests” (Marouf, 2010, p. 179).

Even if, today Ouled Saïd have somewhat altered their economic relations with the populations of the Saharan Atlas, it appears that cultural bonds and confraternal ones are still maintained across the vast *Grand Erg Occidental*. In the Gourara and all the other ksour likewise, the social community of Ouled Saïd has, throughout its rich history, shaped social structures dominated by the owners of the water and of the

land, allied with the holders of religious knowledge who generally belong to the confraternal “zaouias” of varied scope. Like other oases of the Touat and Gourara, Ouled Said has maintained an undeniable religious activity and is still imposing itself today as a milestone in the religious festival of the S’boue⁴ moves which round the ksours of the South-West Sahara.

Discontinuities in the public action over the last third of the century and their side-effects on society

As for all the Saharan oases and because of the priority granted for the reconstruction of state institutions, Ouled Said saw very little change in its development for at least two decades after Independence, with the exception of the effort made for education, and the repair of the trail linking it to Timimoun. The most remarkable change in local life came with the promulgation of the Ordinance of an Agrarian Reform and its social repercussions. Today structures of the oasisitic society appear to have been simplified, allowing all the different socially constituted groups to access the modern way of life prescribed by political discourse. A little more than a third of the century ago,

“the social oasisitic structures made of landowners and crop holders, chorfas⁵ and merabtines⁶ on the one hand and harratines⁷ of serving condition, in charge of the maintenance of the foggaras and the land work on the other hand”, have been strongly disturbed by the “agrarian reform implemented in 1971 by the central power of H. Boumediene’s regime, responsible for the overhaul of the social relations within the oasisitic society” (Bendjelid & al., 1999, p. 46).

This reshaping of the agrarian structures had profound implications for the social groups as the harratines were, in theory, freed from their

⁴ S’boue: etymologically derived from the seventh day of the week of religious festivities celebrating the Prophet Mohamed’s birthday. This regional festive event starts in Ben Abbès in the Saoura and ends in the Gourara. It is an expression of the bonds of solidarity among the inhabitants of the ksours and is considered locally as part of the intangible heritage; in this sense it is the landmark of a well territorially defined cultural identity.

⁵ Chorfas: persons belonging to families of noble descent and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁶ Mérabtines: religious men, learned in the sacred.

⁷ Harratines: black serving populations, who were employed in the farming works and upkeeping the foggaras for centuries.

condition. On the ground, the measures for nationalisation “remain rather timid in the Touat. It seems that they were confronted by resistance from the owners”, and that the harratines, out of sheer solidarity probably, did not want it” (Marouf, 1980, p. 239).

Great numbers of harratines left for new urban or rural horizons close enough to allow them to put their ancestral know-how into practice. Thus, small plots financed by the state, coupled with clusters of planned rural habitat or the construction of a socialist village constructed nearby, have been the landing spots for the freed harratines. A case in point for this quite successful action is *Mguiden's settlement* located along National Road 51 towards *El Golea*. These new and small plots of farm lands became laboratories for irrigated plots which later were expanded with the extension of development areas occurring in the framework of the Law of Access to Agricultural Landowning promulgated in 1983. Nevertheless, the loss of this qualified labour force negatively affected many oases, including Ouled Saïd, for the land and water owners did not know how to work the land, maintain the foggaras, or trim the palm trees. Once they became land workers paid per day, some harratines demanded, in addition to their salaries, more advantages (lunch, land produce) to ensure the upkeep of the foggaras and the dates harvest in the oases; much later, as in Ouled Saïd, some of them became tenant farmers.

Broadly speaking, the upheaval in social relations, the maintenance of complex land tenure systems, the widespread access to schooling in the palm groves and the migration of young workers provide a comprehensive understanding of the neglected aspect of the palm groves' agricultural landscape, as it was reported by the end of the 1990s. The real change began after the creation of the Ouled-Saïd commune, in 1885 from the break-up of the Timimoun commune, as local management was now possible on the spot. The inhabited fragment of *Laaroussi*, which had become the centre of municipal power, established the first administrative and social facilities along the road (town hall, municipal works company, school, health centre, etc.) and consequently created jobs. As is the case everywhere in the Sahara, the road here was a formidable urbanising power, especially when public authorities decided to use it.

At the start of the 1990s, the relationship between the central authorities and the former local dignitaries, the latter becoming less stigmatised, began to improve. This was probably due to the opening up of the Algerian political arena to political parties, Saharan development and the new vision in which the successive governments beheld these large and still peaceful areas. According to some technicians and local

dignitaries, these relations improved when the sectoral programme decided by Mohamed Boudiaf's new government was launched in 1992. Focusing its efforts on agricultural growth, this programme also implemented its vision for safeguarding the Saharan heritage, including the rehabilitation of foggaras with a programme authorisation valued at 40 million dinars for 35 foggaras located in the wilaya, revival of oasis activities, drilling, soil studies and restoration of the ksour. In the wilaya of Adrar, this action also involved the launch of a Major Works Programme to rehabilitate palm groves, such as maintaining windbreaks, opening routes, consolidating irrigation channels, clearing undergrowth, etc. The gradual establishment of trust between the central government and the local landowners, who were now given greater responsibility, was reflected in the provision of a substantial and direct aid for agricultural production through the numerous financial funds on the one hand, and in the creation of a number of "agricultural funds", and in a radical change in attitude on the part of the decision-makers on the other hand, insofar as palm groves, foggaras and vernacular buildings were then considered to be an integral part of the national heritage and, as a result, logically subject to public protection.

In Ouled-Saïd, the operation to rehabilitate the foggaras, launched in 1992, was greatly appreciated by the owners of the foggaras, who had been waiting for a third of a century and had set up several associations for this reason; the most active of these, the Ouled Saïd Foggaras Owners' Association (chief town), is made up of eleven people and has undertaken to rehabilitate the *Tighezza* foggaras, which had been blocked for decades.

The visit of researchers from Oran and Amiens⁸ was a unique opportunity for this team, who witnessed and filmed the colossal work carried out by the members of this association when this foggara was opened in the spring of 2000 (Marouf, 2010).

Most of the work to restore the Tighezza foggara was carried out manually by the owners, assisted by a number of local authority employees and technical service staff. The municipality of Ouled Saïd provided a mechanical shovel to dig up the collapsed tunnels and backfill them. Finally, it should be pointed out that the State provided initial funding of 250,000 dinars for this operation to remove the sand from the irrigation water galleries, with the intent goal of increasing the flow of that foggara.

⁸ This ground research was part of the inter-university cooperation project n°. 99. MDU. 412 (1 999-2 002) signed between the Université de Picardie (project leader: Pr. Nadir Marouf) and the CRASC (project leader: Pr. Abed Bendjelid).

Following this remarkable action, five requests for the rehabilitation of the foggaras located in Ouled Saïd were awaiting completion in the early 2000s. The financing of agriculture by the FNDRA (National Fund for Rural and Agricultural Development) is part of the same process, responding to the expectations of the oasis peasantry and new agricultural entrepreneurs. Furthermore, in March 2010, the mayor informed us that a development aid initiative had been launched at the beginning of the decade by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), which had financed the cleaning of 13 out of the 33 foggaras in operation in the municipality, at a cost of 1.8 billion dinars; to make that contract a reality, the associations interested in the maintenance of the foggaras demanded a commitment under contract with a company equipped (mechanical shovel, lorries, qualified personnel) with pipes for the circulation of the water responding to norms.

Reproduction of the traditional society and communal management: a look at the city

Reproduction of the traditional oasis society through its integration into State modern structures

In a country where social history, rather than geography, plays a significant role, this micro-society oasis, structured like all the Gourara palm groves, retains a memory of the mistrust nurtured for decades after independence, towards the Centre which, at times, had regarded it as an archaic if, not an anachronistic, ensemble (social structures, foggaras, Ksourian buildings, cultural practices). Despite the liberation of the servile Harratines population, which was felt as an uprooting by their owners, following the implementation of the 1971 agrarian reform, this political distance was maintained until the beginning of the 1990^s.

However, this situation has not prevented the society of the Ouled Saïd oasis from remaining steeped in local culture (language, folklore, poetry, ahellil-type songs, rites, ziaras, crafts, religious practices, etc.), based as it is on a strong identity founded on religion, austere social customs and a harsh natural environment. Despite all the constraints, rift and overhaul held against the central power, the local society first took note of the administrative division, raising Adrar to the rank of wilaya chief town in 1975, then Ouled Saïd to the rank of commune chief town in 1985. This interest might have enabled this small oasis society to reposition itself in order to better contribute to its local development, as Timimoun was a long way off before 1985; all this pushed it to develop strategies for participation in the management of its communal affairs, in

the face of a central power endowed with sizeable institutions and resources. In the Gourara, Touat and Tidikelt, elections are said to be guided by the religious brotherhoods, which elsewhere are assimilated to a tribalism often perceived as “structural in the social body, even within the political parties” (Yalaoui, 2008, p. 265).

In 1985, the newly elected Municipal People's Assembly of Ouled Saïd was led by the National Liberation Front (FLN). Nevertheless, following the political convulsions induced by the strong advance of the Islamic Salvation Front in the first round of the legislative elections in 1991 and the dissolution of the Algerian municipalities in 1992, the municipal management was temporarily entrusted to a Municipal Executive Delegate affiliated to the same party. In the local elections of 1997, 2002 and 2007, the political parties competing presented their lists of candidates for the municipal elections. The change is clear: the presidency of the Communal People's Assembly is now held by an activist from a new party, the Democratic National (RND), which was created in 1997. In this small rural community, the openness and above all the commitment of individuals to political parties can be seen as a sign of acceptance of the modern political game, which puts an end to the mistrust vis-à-vis the Centre. The most obvious question to ask relates to the relations, if any, exist between the members of religious brotherhoods of the *zaouïas* and the militants of various political parties wishing to stand on the party list for communal elections, since both ultimately aspire to manage the population's affairs in the best possible way. This daunting question is characterised by an extreme circumspection expressed by local personalities who attest to the fact that these relations are hushed up and, as a result, under a seal of secrecy. For example, the mayor elected in 2002 was a member of the brotherhood of the *zaouïa* of Ighzer, a *ksar* in the Ouled Saïd commune. In short, this means that the local traditional society has managed to adapt to modern political institutions without much difficulty.

The redistributive action by the State improves the lives of the inhabitants of Ouled Saïd

Ouled Saïd, the *chef-lieu*, was an oasis characterised by a strong and assertive rural character and the classical landscape of a Gourara oasis. While it was going through difficult times from an agricultural point of view, a series of actions – planned to equip and develop the area, rehabilitate the *foggaras* and begin to improve the *Ksour* houses – have ignited the sparks of change in its built landscape and boosted its agricultural production, even though the local society had jealously

preserved its social and cultural traditions and customs. In addition to the national development programmes, we can give an overview of the needs expressed by the municipality in order to improve the daily life of its constituency by concentrating efforts on equipment.

The case in point concerns the local management of projects financed by the PCDs (local development plans); in 2007, 2008 and 2009, these PCDs, worth 212 625 000 dinars (equivalent to 2 200 000 euros), have made it possible to renew and rehabilitate infrastructure, such as improving drinking water supply; constructing water towers; carrying out road maintenance and various improvements of public spaces in the ksour, construction of health centres; playgrounds, providing public lighting in hamlets; completing architectural studies for a new town hall headquarters, and the acquisition of major rolling stock for the municipal fleet.

On the whole, funding for the local development of the Saharan communes gained momentum with the creation of the FDRS (Saharan Regions Development Fund)⁹ in 1998; set up

“by the Finance Act for 1998, the Special Development Fund for the Regions of the South, which is funded by a 2% levy on the annual oil taxes, is intended to help the economic take-off and promote the sustainable development of these regions” (MATE, no date, p. 131).

The implementation of these projects has been accompanied by an effort in the social field, particularly the creation of jobs; even if precarious. The employment of young workers has come in the wake of a series of actions decided by the Centre. This is the case, for example, with the introduction of an IAIG (Allowance granted for Works of General Interest) paid to young workers. The amount allocated may be symbolic (3 000 dinars/month), but it has allowed the creation of 28 jobs for young and not-so-young people working on the maintenance of roads, protection areas and public spaces within the municipality. This financial support is complemented by the grant of an AFS (Lump Sum Solidarity Allowance) paid to elderly and disabled people on insufficient incomes.

⁹ These funds, exclusively dedicated to integrated programmes, established and proposed by the eligible wilayas, aim to improve the living conditions of the population, boost local resources, protect heritage and ensure inter-sectoral and sustainable development. Assessed by the wilayas and communes, they are studied by committees made up of the presidents of the elected local assemblies, chaired by the wali. These proposals are then submitted for approval to an inter-ministerial council, chaired by the Prime Minister.

In other words, a whole system of financial redistribution of public money, set up throughout the country, has been strengthened in our area by the introduction of the Fund for the South. This underlines the importance of the aid provided by public authorities to lessen local poverty and improve the austere living conditions. In addition, the income of temporary and seasonal migrants goes into the relief of their families who had remained back home; according to local authorities, more than twenty working people travel to Timimoun every day, while another twenty or so migrate regionally every year, whether to work in the *Mزاب* as farm labourers or in the construction industry, and to Hassi Messaoud, in the oil industry.

Recent changes in the oasis landscape and progress of a rural habitat oriented towards urban consumption trends

The palm grove landscape, which has undergone little change within the territory, reflects the fact that not enough young people are being put to work, as they have little interest in the land. This work remains precarious and is only undertaken by older men and women, in addition to a few salaried workers engaged in what we call weekend farming.

Nevertheless after the liberation of the workers from servitude, all the oases suffered and continue to suffer from this loss of know-how, as agricultural work has now become valuable. The colonisation of new plots of land to the north-east, outside the plot plan, has enabled farmers to reclaim those covered by silting, as has the installation of local active workers in the new small development perimeters located in the commune (Tinhanou, Semouta), or even further afield, as in Badriane. It is true that the agricultural works attest to a reasonable level of upkeep of the plots worked, along with the repair of the water system and the repair and extension of the *afregs* (curtains protecting the agricultural area); however, it must be acknowledged that a study of the real impact of this agriculture on the local economy has yet to be carried out.

In less than a decade, the built landscape of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu has undergone a significant transformation. If the very first steps towards rebuilding houses date back to the early 1990^s, thanks to funding from the National Rural Housing Programme, the structure of the palm grove in fragmented ksour, as well as the proximity of agricultural plots, have forced self-builders to build their homes right next to their old homes. In reality, the public support for rural construction varies from 500 000 to 700 000 dinars, depending on the type of work involved. In recent years, this subsidy has significantly changed the structure of the palm grove, with houses being built along the tarmac road that winds its way through

the oasis. In terms of architectural layout, morphology and construction materials (bricks, stone, earthenware, decoration), this new housing clearly follows the typical urban pattern. Even more, the renewal of residential housing in this rural municipality was supplemented by the installation of traditional urban commodities (toilets: 96.1%, kitchen: 93.1%, bathroom: 88.1%); in addition, the installation of various networks attests to the efforts made (ONS, 2010) within the municipal space (electricity: 97.4%, drinking water supply: 39.8%, sanitation: 4.5%, natural gas: 0.7%). In short, in 2008, households in Ouled Saïd owned a wide range of household appliances: televisions (87.0%), fridges (80.4%), satellite dishes (53.4%), telephone lines (22.2%), air conditioners (18.8%) and computers (02.8%). This data is clear evidence of the deep-rooted appeal of urban consumerism in the imagination of local officials, rural dwellers and oasis dwellers, thanks to the perseverance shown by the various Algerian political regimes in favour of the city and its way of life. In every possible scenario, the rurality hidden in the countryside seems to be fraught with dangers, since the Saharan city is, today, incapable of producing wealth!

The new route towards Timimoun

This urban consumerism certainly turns its back onto agricultural and rural life, but on the ground, it also materialises in the construction of costly means of communication infrastructures that bring the ksour very close to the town. This is in fact the case with the new road linking Ouled Saïd to Timimoun, which was built by a company from Batna and inaugurated at the end of 2009. In reality, this new road is virtually useless, even if it does reduce the distance between the two locations by 14 kilometres. The old track, paved in 1992 and winding through various Ksour villages (Azekour, Badriane, Ighzer, etc.) alongside the Timimoun Sebkha, retains a pastoral and touristic character that is more open to the rural oasis world of this part of the Gourara. This poses a problem in terms of prospective and regional planning, insofar as this new road will barely be used to market oasis products (dates, vegetables, handicrafts), but will rather boost the mobility of rural dwellers towards the city through the use of converted vans, pick-up trucks and private cars. Employment is already derisory in the oasis studied, then what could one say about the human overload brought to a small town, in this case Timimoun, where employment is just as problematic?

From the palm grove of Ouled Saïd to the materialisation of the city's new image

The profusion of public spending is such that the image of the town has imposed itself on all the institutional and private bodies involved. This anachronism will remain vivid as long as public authorities generously allocate their money, even if, in this case, this outpouring may appear legitimate, the repercussions could be serious for such oases as Ouled Saïd as the local return in terms of agricultural production remains rather poor. With the rural housing programme underway, many families have left their *toub* (clay bricks mixed with straw) homes to live in houses modelled according to urban standards. In addition, the catastrophic floods of 2004 in the wilaya of Adrar had allowed the municipality of Ouled Saïd to benefit from funds allocated to construct 150 housing units between 2005 and 2008. The emergence of various residential programmes (rural self- construction, housing estates, a civil servants' housing estate with 20 dwellings, a flood resettlement programme, etc.) together with the construction of public facilities (the newly planned headquarters of the local People's Assembly, a health centre, a youth centre, a craft centre) financed by public authorities have, since 2009, produced an urban morphology that is a complete break away from the traditional Ksourian habitat!

Arriving from Timimoun into Ouled Saïd chef-lieu, in 2010, the observer would have found himself entering a small town in northern Algeria, encountering its first expressway at the entrance of the town, its beautiful pavements with red and white painted kerbs, its cast-iron street lamps from the early 20th century, its housing estates, etc. Then, further on, he will access the palm grove with its gardens, palm trees, foggaras and original ksour, and finally the dunes of the Grand Erg Occidental.

Conclusion

The transformation of the landscape of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu, which occurred over the past twenty five years, is evident in this peaceful palm grove, which had over the years turned into a small town offering now a quite urban image. The same is true of its small, strongly rural society, which is striving to open up onto the modern world, despite its social and religious conservatism, deeply rooted in its permanent and asserted cultural heritage.

These changes, which date back to 1985, the year in which this commune was created as a separate entity from Timimoun, have allowed this territory to receive its first community facilities and basic

infrastructure, symbolised by the building of the town hall and the paved of the country road which used to wind along the Sebkha of Timimoun linking the various ksour (Badriane, Ighzer, etc.). Beyond ensuring relative autonomy, the creation of Ouled Saïd as a separate commune had, above all, put an end to the local stalemate by allowing various social community groups to manage their administrative affairs through the integration of the modern institutions of the State through integration into the political parties. For groups accustomed to being guided by the zaouïas, this undoubtedly represents definite progress demonstrates the ability of this rural community to understand the importance of the issues involved in managing their resources, equipping their area and improving their harsh living conditions.

Furthermore, the everlasting religious and cultural issue is still at stake in Ouled Saïd, a thousand-year-old oasis, rooted in a variety of ethnic, linguistic and cultural contributions, which have allowed it to forge links with the tribes of the Saharan Atlas and Touat, and beyond with Black Africa. This symbolic anchorage is felt as a source of pride by this population, which asserts its identity through its culture and insists on its permanence. Despite the convulsions of history, to which various disturbances have been added, including the liberation of the serving population (the harratines) at the beginning of the 1970s, the dilution of agricultural and hydraulic know-how, the ageing of landowners and the mass schooling of young people, strongly attracted by the jobs opportunities of the city and the oil industry, would largely explain the modest agricultural production provided by a surviving peasantry who is exploiting the land of Ouled Saïd. Indeed, the work of the land is there, the business mainly of older workers that completes, as in many Oases of Gourara, a weekend farming increasingly practised by civil servants in education, health, services rendered and administration.

Although the rural character of Ouled Saïd chef-lieu is still firmly asserted, the considerable dependence on the aid provided by the public authorities has undoubtedly improved the living conditions of the population (housing, subsidies, servicing networks, rural transport, etc.). However, this distributive practice has also turned this rural population into a population of pensioners, as one local authority official rightly points out! In short, we are now faced with the real fundamental question, related to the future of the oasis agriculture and the search for new sources of economic revenue.

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