

WHAT FATE FOR TOWN-KSOUR SOUTHWESTERN ALGERIA?

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ABSTRACT

At each reflection we carry on the small towns and villages of our region(south western Algeria), a question arises: what future is there for these compact sets of old buildings, which are a part integral of these small towns that too call ksour ?In what follows we make a modest contribution to the overall reflections on their urgent interest in these ksour through the context in which these entities are evolving, local, national and international awareness planned through involving national and international institutions (the Ksour Road Project by the PNUD for example) or spontaneous initiatives by local populations interventions. Finally, we present three recommendations from which it will focus the efforts of the various stakeholders in order to make them an integral and complementary part of the sustainable development of these small towns-ksour.

Keywords: *interventions, ksour, small town, stakeholders, sustainable development.*

RESUME

A chaque réflexion que nous portons sur les petites villes ou villages de notre région (le sud-ouest Algérien), une question s'impose à l'esprit et est la suivante : quel avenir pour ces ensembles compacts de constructions anciennes, qui font partie intégrante de ces petites villes, et que nous appelons ksour. Dans ce qui suit nous apportant une modeste contribution à l'ensemble des réflexions qui traduisent l'intérêt renaissant vis-à-vis de ces derniers ; à travers le contexte dans lequel

évoluent actuellement ces entités, la prise de conscience locale, nationale et internationale dans le cadre d'interventions planifiées impliquant des institutions nationales et internationales (le projet de la route des ksour), ou encore spontanés initiées par les populations locales. Enfin nous présentons trois recommandations à partir desquelles il s'agira de canaliser les efforts des différents intervenants dans le but de les rendre solidaires et complémentaires dans le cadre d'un développement durable de ces petites villes-ksour.

Mots clés : interventions, ksour, petites villes, intervenants, développement durable.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the interest that we should have in the ksour, that is to say these ancient occupations of the hostile regions of the South of Algeria, is no longer in doubt. The Saoura, like the entire region, contains a significant number of these ancestral buildings. This interest is all the more important when we know that they have been there for centuries (eight, or even more for some of them). These latter remain interesting for more than one reason.

We will cite here, among others, the most important:

- The location and the implementation in relation to the immediate environment, otherwise the optimal choice of sites,
- The distribution, in the form of a string, across the territory,
- The urban and architectural characteristics which integrate perfectly with the climatic hazards of the region.

The Saoura, like all regions of the world, is experiencing unbridled urbanization that is juxtaposed with these ksour and in different forms of extension with all the panoply that accompanies urbanization with its new rules and modes of occupation and use of land. However, with hindsight, both the local populations, most of whom have abandoned the Ksar, and the specialists in the field (architects, urban planners, engineers, sociologists, ...etc), agree to recognize that the Ksar responds better, at least until now, to human settlement in these regions where the Oases (the ksar and its palm grove) constitute the most suitable place to live in these regions. The ksour, currently used partially for profit, particularly in tourism, are generally neglected and are increasingly deteriorating, despite the rehabilitation attempts initiated by the State. Serious and rigorous attention and reflection must be given to prevent these age-old witnesses from falling into oblivion. And it is in this context that our present and modest article is written.



Figure 1 : Taghit, a kind ind of ksar in Saura.
Source : iStockphoto Entreprise (site d'images libres de droit)

METHOD OF APPROACH

Exploration of the study area is based on a descriptive approach as a research method. It consists in observing and describing the context of the “small ksour towns”, given its geographical context considered as particular, as well as its unprecedented mode of evolution which breaks with the past, passing from a traditional context materialized by the Ksar to a “modern” context materialized by the appearance of new urban entities foreign to the known and recognized ancestral modes of occupation. The aim is to provide an accurate, detailed account of the vicissitudes experienced by these “secular witnesses”.

This description, and subsequently our questioning of the place and future of the “old” in relation to the “new”, stems from the observations of many years of work in the field of urban planning in the southern region of the country, the context in which these ksour evolve.

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The church of Ksour and Zaouiate (Muslim sects) of which the origin of saints (13th to 15th century), is built specifically for commercial shipments to Sudan, passing through south western Algeria and through Saoura from the city of Sidjilmasa, the first Muslim capital in the north of Africa.

In the 19th century, the French colonizers installed forts and redoubts around the *Ksour*, colonial villages and group-housing with the accompanying equipment, this forming the first core of small towns now known as *Ksour*.

After independence, some towns ksour are hoisted to the rank of chief places where the public service sector (administration, commerce and services) predominates other sectors including agriculture. On the other hand, several luxury hotel infrastructures in Bechar, Taghit and Béni-abbés are emerging, alongside other accommodations such as hostels or campsites.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT: A DIVERSE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Saoura region is located south of the Saharan Atlas. It is part of the Algerian Sahara, which covers over 80% of the territory of the country and is one of the largest and one of the most exciting deserts in the world. The region alternates between landscapes of rocky plateaus (the Hamada), stone plains (the Regs) and oceans of sand (Ergs) from which spring oases and palm trees, and mountains which occupy a small space compared to remaining geomorphological formations.



Figure 2: The location of Saoura. Source: Atals of Algeria.



Figure 3: Ergs and Regs. Source: Atals of Algeria.

As for the climate, it is an arid desert, monthly rainfall is very erratic, temperatures are characterized by considerable variation, sunshine with a maximum of about 14 hours in Summer and a minimum of 9 hours in Winter. Winds blowing in all directions, but sometimes causes storms especially towards the end of Spring.

The fauna and flora are rare but do exist and are adapted to a landscape where Biorhexistasy persists. Species persist despite this hostile environment such as: Talh (Acacia raddiana and Acacia seyal) and Tamarixin particular.



Figure 4: Flora (Acaccia) Source: Brahimi A, 2013.

There are also shrubs, including Sbatin Erg, and other varieties of plants, including the most famous is the "truffe" which is a kind of wild mushrooms in the area. Vegetation is limited to rivers beds and wet low lands in natural grass lands. However, the proliferation of agricultural areas in the framework of the APFA (accession of agricultural land) could be more plant tissues and landscaped communal areas and especially near cities and towns.

As for wildlife, different species live in the region, especially camels, gazelles, foxes, various birds such as ostriches, ravens and different species of reptiles.



Figure 5: Fauna (Lizard) Source: Brahimi A, 2013.



Figure 6: Fauna (Camel) Source: Brahimi A, 2013.

BIRTH AND RAPID DEVELOPMENT OF KSOUR TOWNS

As their name indicates Ksour Towns are small towns and villages that developed near **Ksour** in south-western Algeria and especially in the Saoura, Twat and Gourara.

In the Post-independence period, and particularly during the last four decades we have witnessed fast and frantic urbanization, which affected all cities regardless of their rank in the urban framework across the country.

The Saoura Ksour Towns have not escaped the urbanization especially with small towns growing to become a capital district and county town of dairas.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by self-construction and subdivision social housing programs, including rural housing and supporting ambitious programs in terms of equipment. And more recently, urban renewal operations have affected all **Ksour**, particularly in roads and other networks. These small Ksour Towns there for provide local populations with the necessary basic services.

Populations were gradually moving Ksour to these new villages, seeking comfort from their former habitat, the Ksar built with "toub"⁽¹⁾, there for vulnerable to the vagaries of nature (rain, floods, etc). Stronger constructions, technic amenities at hand and al soother benefits, but such comfort is very relative and sometimes even bound by both the economic and the social situation.



Figure 7: A town-ksar grow near the old ksar. Source: Brahimi A, 2024.



Figure 8: A town-ksar grow around the old ksar. Source: Brahimi A, 2024.



Figure 9: A town-ksar grow away from the old ksar. Source: Brahimi A, 2024.

But, this exodus is inexorable, and Ksour suffer the consequences because they are abandoned, partially or totally, and some are now in a very advanced state of decay where rehabilitation operations are likely to be expensive or even impossible.

Note also that the SEPT S/O (South-West 2030 regional planning scheme) consolidates these small towns in recitals as small towns, small towns basic or intermediate cities, where prospects are opening, strengthening of infrastructure and services, to the administrative and economic framework of local populations.

Finally, remember that these small Ksour Towns feature, since the 80s, PUP (Provisional Urban Planning), then PDAU (urban development master plan) in the mid-90s, which are currently experiencing studies revision affecting all municipalities, as well as studies of POS (land use plan) that affect a particularly small Ksour towns and chief towns of districts (commune).

However, these instruments of urban planning and management are rather outdated and do not meet an overall development vision of integrating the old with the new.

In fact, the Ksar was found abandoned by both local people as well as decision-makers and actors in the field of urban planning in general, with the exception of recommendations and guidelines for safeguarding of heritage generally.

WHAT FUTURE FOR KSOUR?

For some years we have seen the interest again in Ksourian constructions. Reinvestment of Ksour is taken under the local, national, and international safe guarding of historical and cultural heritage worldwide. In this specific context of partial rehabilitation of some ksour under taken by the State to the years 2004-2005-2006, the result is rather mixed. This intervention also comes under the United Nations Programme for Development in Algeria: " The project, which includes the ancient roads of trade caravans of the Sahara offers the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism in the southern Algerian as an economic alternative for the region, able to fight effectively against the precarious situation for local people and to safeguard the cultural heritage and local natural. It implements throughout the various stages of implementation, the actions to strengthen conditions of tourist activities. Ksourian rehabilitation of constructions and land tourist accommodations preserve the environment and safeguard the tangible and intangible heritage are the essential actions. "

Moreover, the "Eco-tourism" project, which comes in the same vein, an initiative of the Agenda 21⁽²⁾ (Franco-Algerian), was born of the awareness of the problem of the extreme fragility of the ecosystem in a desert environment, and embodies their commendations adopted at the United Nations Conference

in Rio in June 1992. It addresses, in Article 12, the problem of desertification instating that relates to a sixth of the world's population. Hence its efforts to protect all the attractions of Ksour Towns.



Figure 10: A ksar abandoned (Mazzer-Igli). Source: Brahimi A, 2013.

However, this safeguard action seems inseparable from the development of tourism. Indeed, the current interest of the local populations is not simply motivated by the purpose of the backup, but goes beyond to enrol in an economic vision of profitability in this niche. This is especially true for the youth, through associations in particular, which support the rehabilitation of these structures in order to pirate as tourist reception structure, with the consent of the owners and in the framework of an agreement between both parties.



Figure 11: A ksar restored (El-ouata). Source: Brahimi A, 2024.

A first observation is instructive: the rehabilitation Ksourian constructs supported by the local population successful, unlike rehabilitation operations is

undertaken by the State. Because the exclusive use by local people, materials previously used in old buildings, and of course the periodic maintenance operations, while in the case of-State operations once the work is completed, constructions undergo the rigors of nature.



Figure 11: A ksar inhabited (Béni-abbés). Source: Brahimi A, 2013.

However, the saturation of the land and the anarchic development of small Ksour Towns is not without impact on the Ksar undergoing urban growth in different forms. A first case where urbanization is near the Ksar, the second with urbanization around the Ksar all which stifle it, and the third with urbanization far from the Ksar "new websites" that risks enclaving more traditional constructs. Indeed, the organic link that exhibits such public places of new urbanism, all of which are in place with many cases of spatial extension of the festivities, departure or arrival of the latter and meeting place of excellent usability.

We believe that the « Ksour Roads » project is the tool by which a balance will be reached between the development of new sites (new villages) and the revival of Ksour. To do this, the involvement of the people is the condition for the success of the overall project. The «Ksour Road» would be the tool to reconcile the «modern» and the «traditional».

Indeed, if these small towns offer Ksour essential to resident and tourists services, they also provide recreational areas and scenery for these Ksour, these palm groves and help us dive into ancestral places and unpublished landscapes. This project would promote socio-economic and / or strengthen the dynamic between all Ksour of the region through countless tours that can be created between them and where Ksour constructions or their immediate environment can be converted into stops (haltes), gites steps (gites d'étapes)....etc. Ksour would then be binding complementarity and non-addictive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reform of existing tools (PDAU, POS...etc) for research and development of more efficient tools and otherless restrictive both in terms of the development at the level of implementation, and to help facilitate decisions, knowing that any urban design project is dependent on the capacity of the natural environment inwhich it operates.

- The pipeline of local interventions which are more efficient than State interventions especially for rehabilitation of Ksourian constructions.

- The implementation of local policies even allows a balance between the administrative and service vocation tourism and an agricultural vocation (palm trees and food crops), and craft to a lesser degree scale in small Ksour Towns aimed for the economic, social and environmental development, which are the three dimensions that underlie any prospect of sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

The urbanization of small towns, having as their initial cores the Ksour, in all its different forms from the latter, is an inevitable and irreversible phenomenon. But this fatality must not engender another which results in the disinterest towards these historical monuments that are the ancient ksour.

In our opinion, in addition to local or international interventions which emerge at fairly long intervals of time, more localized operations should be undertaken regularly in concert with the populations - old, young, women and children - by making use of the experience of some, the possible contribution of others and the preparation of generations in the case of children. If all contributions in terms of knowledge and know-how are welcome, the future of these entities that are the ksour depends first and foremost on the "heirs", that is to say the local populations, of these buildings which still fascinate by their presence which has lasted for centuries.

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(1). *toub*: bricks made of local material (clay+lime+straw).

(2). See Chapter 28 (Agenda 21) of the planetary Rio Conference (1992), which urged the actors (decision makers and managers) to build local programs based on the principles of sustainable development in relation to the realities of their territories.