

Au nord du Sud. Espace, valeurs et passion au Sahara atlantique

Claire Cécile Mitatre

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The work of Claire Cécile Mitatre, *Au nord du Sud. Espace, valeurs et passion au Sahara atlantique*, is a thorough and engaging ethnography of the Tekna of the Wad Nûn. Located just North of the Western Sahara, in Moroccan territory, the Wad Nûn is an oasis, carrefour of centuries of exchanges and connections, on which the author focuses to analyse the nexus between allocations of meanings and values, space, and emotions. By focusing primarily on marriage practices, Mitatre ushers the reader into the world of Tekna by exposing its multidimensionality and openness (of livelihoods, of languages, of origins) that expands beyond the oasis, and, simultaneously, the imperative tendency to conduct and classify this diversity in relation to the meaning attributed to cardinal points.

In the Wad Nûn, the author remarks that value is articulated and assigned in relation to the bynomin South/North, where the first, representing nomadism and Arab identity, is highly valued in opposition to the second, symbolising sedentarism and berber identity. The title hints at two dimensions of the core argument of the book: that cardinal points (North/South and Est/West) comprise local tendencies to allocate meanings to social practices and that these tendencies flourish over an intimate entanglement between what these cardinal points signify. In other words, one cannot be defined outside its relationship with the other.

In the constitution of the symbolic, material and affective world of the Tekna, these axes of orientation marks how alterity and semblance are embodied and integrated into everyday practices, choices and narratives. Alterity, as briefly hinted above, is structured on the North/South relationship, and semblance on the West/East. In this respect, for example, the author notices how female body-languages are imagined and carried out within the domain of similarity across the West/East relationship (of rhythm, of movement, of appearance). Cardinal points mirror the

interconnected and globalised socio-economic, cultural and political world of the Tekna, at the crossroads with the Atlantic and the Saharan spaces. Importantly, throughout her book, Mitatre reiterates how these axes of orientations are conceived and used by Tekna as vectors of local classifications and meaning-making, and not as neat and defined actual positions in space. For example, France is not associated with the North, signifier of sedentarism and berber identity.

Methodologically, Mitatre conducted eighteen months of fieldwork in the Wad Nûn (2003–2005) and integrated her data with interviews held in the same place and in other localities in the region, in subsequent years. Encompassing eight tribes, the Tekna of the Wad Nûn are both berberophone (Tachelhit) and arabophone (Ḥassānīya). In the majority they practised nomadic pastoralism and caravanning until the droughts of the 1970s and the war between Morocco and Western Saharan pro-independence Saharaouis. Since the 1980s, strong drives to sedentarisation in the cities and in the oasis have characterised people's lives in the region.

Such a great leap is explored through the lenses of genealogy and origins in the first chapter, which analyses how two lineages of Tekna assert their presence in the oasis. Mitatre advances an original reading of current patterns of belonging to the land: in the Wad Nûn allogeny is more valued than autochthony. By presenting the case of buying land as the founding act to own land by a lineage, Mitatre underlines how collective belonging to the oasis is inscribed into claims of being from an elsewhere, which is located in the South, or by omitting northern origins. Originally, her reading does not *per se* counter current anthropological understandings of collective belonging to a land through the prism of autochthony, but complements them by reflecting on the act of inhabiting a place by referring to a faraway, an elsewhere, which in return valorises the local.

In the second chapter, she carefully analyses the two opposite triads, South-nomadism-Arab identity/North-sedentarism-Berber identity, that constitute the prism through which cultural practices and belonging are ascribed in the Wad Nûn. She does not leave this analysis on an abstract level; rather she digs into how these triads are redefined and read locally due to current historical

processes, which, for example, hint at patterns of cultural degradation of the Southern culture in favour of Northern practices. However, when plunged into the daily lives of peoples, Mitatre underlines that such frontier between what the North and the South symbolise is impossible to draw and to fix once and for all.

In the chapter that follows, the conflict of the Western Sahara is analysed in relation to the North/South prism. Examining the political and socio-cultural shifts that have characterised the region, Mitatre shows the construction of a Saharawi identity, embodiment of the South, and claims that the conflict has heightened the polarisation of the North/South axes in Tekna's patterns of classifying and assigning meanings. She shows how the conflict finds alternative local meanings, for example through the case of forced sedentarisation and resettlement of Tekna's inhabitants of the Wad Nûn in Laâyoun (Western Sahara), at the beginning of the 1990s, by the Moroccan state for political purposes. In these relocations, Tekna strengthen their position between the Moroccan state and the Western Sahara conflict, continuing to value connections with the South and the Saharawi identity, icon of revolt and of southern values.

The following three chapters analyse marriage practices through the prism of the North/South axes. In the fourth chapter, cardinal orientations of marriage practices are analysed, showing that the circulation of women for marriage practices follows a counter-tendency to the circulation of values. In other words, married women hardly move from South to North; rather they tend to marry from North to South. Mitatre claims that such tendencies ('getting married with the further away') are influenced by the meanings that cardinal points provide, rather than direct interest in avoiding marriage with specific lineages or family, a novel reflection that the author puts in a dialogue with traditional anthropological theories of marriage, such as the alliance theory of Levi-Strauss.

The fifth chapter takes into consideration the practice of 'the arab marriage', a marriage between children of brothers, and suggests that such marriage is not an exception from normalised social practices. Hence, it does not permit accumulation of more social capital because, like the above-

mentioned marriage accomplished across the North/South axis, it retraces the normalised path of relationships. This is not the case for the ‘big wedding’, analysed in chapter seven, for which Mitatre means a marriage across families positioned on the West/East axis and with competitive relationships. This latter marriage is thus concerned with issues of competition, prestige and a re-evaluation of local hierarchies among families. It is generally associated with the emotion of love and madness as it involves a high degree of risk, ending up generally with divorce. Despite that, the *grandes mariages* are socially and politically relevant because they imply a questioning of social order and a reallocation of honour across tribes.

The last chapter shifts its focus to the issue of the descendance of slaves in the Wad Nûn and asserts their presence as an ongoing power that recentres all the cardinal-oriented fluxes analysed in the previous chapters back in the oasis. Despite being originally from the southernmost regions, the *‘abīd* (black slave descendants) are not symbolically referred to the South. Rather, with their presence and practices nested in the Wad Nûn, they are the sole inhabitants of the oasis whose origins in it are celebrated, being used as a cohesive force across all the Tekna’s of the Wad Nûn. By reference to milk connections or to an annual ceremony of the *‘abīd* in the oasis, which all Tekna’s attend, the slave descendants’ presence complements Mitatre’s North/South axes of values allocations by providing a centre too.

In conclusion, the nature of this book is compelling and original. It touches upon many traditional debates in anthropology, such as marriage practices or value, providing novel readings of them. At the same time, thanks to its fluent and well-turned writing style, the books never becomes redundant or too demanding for a reader not acquainted with such academic discussions, making it a potential read for non-specialists. Overall, Mitatre finds a different angle through which to portray the world of the Tekna of the Wad Nûn, a clear result of a thorough methodological, long-term and ethical approach to the study, which is definitely worth reading.

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