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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Dangers of Disconnection: Oscillations in Political Violence on Lake Chad

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ABSTRACT

Narrations on fragility and resilience in the Sahel paint a picture about the region's inherent ungovernability that lead to consider an endless state- and peace-building process as the most feasible governance solution. Everyday practices of violent entrepreneurship, coalescing with inter-community and land-tenure conflicts, now inform social relations and are transforming moral economies around Lake Chad. While competition over territory suitable for farming, grazing and fishing has intensified, dispute-settlement practices organised by community-level authorities have proven ineffective and lacking the necessary means to respond to the encroachment of a wide range of interests claimed by increasingly powerful actors. Meanwhile, communities organised in self-defence militias are undergoing a process of progressive militarisation that tends to normalise violence and legitimise extra-judicial vigilante justice, further empowering capital-endowed arms suppliers gravitating in the jihadi galaxy, such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

This article addresses the issue of violent governance in Lake Chad through the lenses provided by socio-spatial research (Massey 2005; Murdoch 2006) in an effort to disentangle the power dynamics and narratives that make a given space a fundamentally relational analytical category. A 'thick description' of the web of powers and (oft violent) income generators operating in the trans-border area of Lake Chad makes it possible to frame the latter in opposition to the images of marginality and backwardness that enjoy currency in Western policymaking circles and sensationalist media depictions.

This space is the object of a variety of projects that different actors (state and non-state; regional and international; trade and religious; violent and non-violent) carry out on the territory. Socio-spatial analysis offers a much-needed alternative to the 'territorial trap' so often lurking beneath the surface of many studies on political violence which take nation-states, or worse, the Westphalian nation-state, as a fixed container (Agnew 1994; 2017).[1] At the same time, this kind of analysis makes it possible to bypass the Othering practice more or less explicitly present in narratives about 'ungoverned spaces' and 'fragile states' as sources of threat, themselves driven by a spatial fetishism and "methodological territorialism" (Brenner 1999, 45), whose epistemological narrowness continues to link analyses of socio-spatial orders to Eurocentric views. A comprehensive look at the social

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[1]For an overview of the process of historicisation of territory and territoriality, see Elden (2013).

dynamics taking place in a given space requires an appreciation of the overlaps, connections and entanglements that so often defy static perspectives on spatial orders, and makes it possible to assess the increased relevance of processes of ground-up dialectics forming what scholarship refers to as "fringe regionalism" (Mattheis *et al.* 2019).

In accordance with such reasoning, the process of respatialisation and regionalisation 'from below' observed in Africa is evident in the dynamics of governance and political mobilisation (Mbembe 2002; Engel and Nugent 2009). A plethora of arguments have been mobilised to frame the notions of region and space. Mostly drawn from a radical re-elaboration of the various pitfalls present in the federalist, functionalist and integrative approaches to region-building,[2] they have resulted in a flexible, fluid and dynamic interpretation of the object of inquiry that accommodates the need to consider prominent non-state and globalising drivers, as in the "cross-border micro-regionalism" (Söderbaum and Taylor 2008) or "shadow regionalism" (Bach 2016) theories.

The latter appears to be keenly at work when considering boundary-straddling areas that also overlap geographical barriers, such as Lake Chad, an endorheic body of water that lies at the crossroads of sand dunes, mountain massifs, rivers and fertile clay-rich terrains. This environment has undergone radical transformations since the emergence, in 2015, of protracted violence linked to the jihadi groups known as *Boko Haram* (Thurston 2018; Zenn 2020) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Iocchi 2020). The proliferation of attacks and the ensuing micro-politics of abuses, violence and retaliations have come to blur the lines between victims and perpetrators. Governments in Niger, Chad and Nigeria have responded by imposing a state of emergency in the regions of Diffa, Lac and Borno, respectively, aimed at halting the insurgents' supply chain, which has instead empowered the latter as allies and enforcers of trans-local entrepreneurial networks.

This article argues that the role of Lake Chad as a historical node of connectivity to the Sahara and the Mediterranean has now been taken over by steering and violent regulative authorities. The insurgency and counterinsurgency on Lake Chad respond to concurrent globalising and de-globalising processes of re-territorialisation (Tuathail 1998), traced in the complementary dialectic of terrorism and counterterrorism operations. How can events and phenomena that are so glaringly local also be trans-local (if not global)? Which (violent) actors are the brokers of globalising and de-globalising forces on the ground? Do violent dispossession and land-grabbing allow these actors to establish themselves as income generators, thus forging new power regimes? How are their narratives produced and reproduced?

The article's central argument about the role of connectivity and disconnection turning Lake Chad into a conveyor of boundaries in a frontier landscape is laid out as follows. The first two sections, grounded in historical and political ecology scholarship, aim to trace the process of inclusion of Lake Chad at both the margins and the core of political powers, and the performative power of spatial narratives in shaping notions of boundaries. The third section looks at a popular narrative about the unfolding of jihadi networks of extraction on the Lake frequently heard in 2016 to re-examine the moral economy and the 'hard facts' that moulded the latter. The fourth and last section analyses how this jihadi-led

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[2]A valid entry point to the historical development of the notion of 'region' is provided in Mattheis (2014).

mobilisation intersected with migratory paths, as well as labour and class divisions, to create new patterns of territorialisation and violent extraction processes.[3]

Connection and disconnection on Lake Chad

A historiographical tradition whose main thrust, from Herodotus, Ptolemy and the Roman Empire, was to connote the Sahara as the southernmost edge of civilisation, represented the desert negatively as an unmastered space, where freedom translates into vulnerability or captivity. In a specular manner, Islamic jurisprudence called Berber-inhabited mountain ranges far from the urban centres of the Maghreb *bilād al-sība*, the land of dissidence (Touati 1996). As a juridical category, this meant positioning those lands beyond the realm not only of polity but of civilisation (Lydon 2009).

Surrounded by the Sahara Desert, Lake Chad's otherwise hot climate is partly mitigated by the Sudano-Guinean climatic zone, which gives rise to the complex ecological system of the wider basin. The Lake is both an agricultural outpost and a mobility hub *latu sensu* (Brunk and Gronenburg 2004) – a natural convergence point for humans and animals – whose cyclical evolutions influence relations between men and the land. Its fertile terrain makes it a natural stopover for migratory species, while the seasons give mobility a pendular movement between expansion and contraction, connection and disconnection. The Lake is an extremely vibrant space that can function as a refuge, a corridor and a multi-functional economic space (farming, herding, fishing), therefore evading static and univocal geopolitical narratives that predict irreversible decline as its only future.[4]

The Lake is a kind of natural barrier between the Islamic legal and moral definition of *ḥaḍāra* (civilisation) and *bādiyya* (wilderness): a space of Islam and *fiqh* (law), where a sultan is sovereign, in contrast to a space where *'urf* (local customs) and *jāhilīyya* (ignorance) reign. The emergence of the Kanem (700-1387) and, later, Bornu Empires (1380-1893) attests to how the development and prominence of the boundary between *dar al-Islam* (land of Islam) and *dar al-kufr* (land of disbelief) came to be equated with the political effort to domesticate, or civilise (Dewière 2017). The fact that the Kanem-Bornu polity geographically migrated southwest, conquering lands in present-day Borno State (Nigeria), is telling not only of the intermingling of ecological variability with politico-religious factors, but also of the pivotal role played by the mobility of social complexes in the construction of a Lake Chad *terroir*[5] (Braudel 1986). Advancing or simply changing the boundaries of the Sultan's and Islam's rule required a military effort

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[3]Extensive fieldwork for this article was conducted in the Lake Chad area (Chad) as part of the author's PhD project during 2016, and as a side project of a study on mobility in Niger in October-November 2018. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a round of fieldwork scheduled to take place in March-April 2020 had to be cancelled. The argument draws on a variety of interviews (30) and informal conversations collected during the previous fieldwork trips. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a wide range of actors: fishermen; herders; farmers; government officials from Niger, Chad and Nigeria; transport workers; trade unionists; and customary authorities. Respondents were selected through observation and 'snowball sampling', in which new informants are recruited via existing contacts. Respondents' identities, for security reasons, are anonymised.

[4]Needless to say, scholarly research has disproved the narrative about the disappearance of Lake Chad while providing a very balanced assessment of volatile climatic conditions as a variable in conflict dynamics (Magrin 2016; Vivekananda *et al.* 2019).

[5]The definition, borrowed from the work of Fernand Braudel, gives emphasis to continuities surviving in a region throughout changing historical periods.

that shaped – in significant but still not completely understood ways – the socio-spatial order and governance methods of this territory. Conquest domesticated the ecological landscape through tree cutting and the plundering of harvests, resulting in the manipulation of the environment to meet the economic needs of the conquering army. The anthropised landscape resulted in a specular strategic vision of the hunters and the hunted.[6] While *mai* (king) Idris ibn Ali (d. 1596) fortified the town of Damasak (present-day Yobe, Nigeria) with four gates, four gate-keepers and four army detachments, pagan populations in the Mandara Mountains (present-day Extreme Nord, Cameroon) relied on an extended and powerful defence system consisting in the fortification of villages with thorny plants.

For much of Lake Chad's modern history, the territorial codification by Kanem-Bornu rulers was constrained by a set of elements that their socio-spatial order was not able to master. The limits of the Sultan's power were physically represented by the Mandara Plateau, where horsemen could not pursue targets, thereby increasingly turning the area into a space of refuge for populations escaping *razzias*.[7]

Thus, the conceptual boundary around Lake Chad created by political powers overlaps with the natural (i.e. climatic) border represented by the hilly and mountainous zones connecting the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea through the Niger River. Lake Chad, a space open to the 'vast sea' of the Sahara, allowed diplomats, scholars, traders and soldiers to circulate naturally thanks to the wider connectivity provided by the desert with the Maghreb, the Mediterranean, the Nile Basin and as far as Istanbul. At the same time, the polities and rulers on Lake Chad relied on the ability to connect or disconnect the nodes thriving on external outputs, such as *ribāṭ, zawāyā* (Sufi centres for religious education), markets, trading hubs (Pliez 2011; Scheele 2012) and "garrison entrepôts" (Roitman 1998).

In more recent years, connectivity on Lake Chad has been radically restructured by a series of economic agreements between the government of Niger and foreign private companies that have separated and parcelled off vast areas, putting them on the market. The Chinese National Petroleum Company operates in the so-called Agadem block in the Diffa region, extracting fossil fuels since 2011, while vast arable areas in the same region were sold to the Saudi Al Horaish company in 2017 in what has been called a case of 'land grabbing' by Niger's civil society (Barma 2017). Such actions have resulted in a disconnection between the territory and society, between labour, centres of production/consumption and wealth, feeding a movement of de-territorialisation which, once again, has the frontier at its very core as a concept as well as a physical limit.

Narratives of borders, wealth creation and violence in the Lake Chad area

The drawing and redrawing of boundaries and the opportunities created by violent dispossession in Lake Chad's borderlands seem to be constants from the days of early polities until today. Mobility seems to be the key term, as it is the most common strategy for coping with the uncertainty of ecological developments. Denis Retaillé's (2005)

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[6]For a 'theory of the prey', that is, how political power determines the boundary between legitimate targets and the rest, see Chamayou (2010).
[7]A military expedition for slave trade is called *razzia: razzias* consist in raiding and pillaging and occur in the *dar al-harb* (land of war), during the 'hunting period' of the dry season (one-three months).

suggestion to consider the Sahel primarily as a "mobile space" refers to its suitability for semi-nomadic grazing (Bernus 1993), cross-border trading (Walther 2009) and seasonal labour (Rain 2018). Beyond those activities, the borders inherited by current regional states after the colonial era open up a wide array of dangers and possibilities. The relation between fiscal subjects, regulative authorities and wealth creation in this quintessentially frontier landscape has been widely studied in literature, focusing on highway banditry (Issa 2010) and cross-border wealth dispossession (Roitman 2005): wealth creation on Lake Chad, it would seem, directly evokes – along with opportunities of enrichment – danger and violence. In various ways, such scholarship dialogues with works of socio-logical history that trace the boundary between governed lands and the 'predation' bush (Sharpe 1986; Reyna 1990; Last 2016) within the wider context of trans-Saharan networks (MacEachern 2001; Lovejoy 2003) and the economics of slave-raiding (*razzias*).

On the other hand, Marielle Debos' (2013) ethnography on patterns of conflict and post-conflict has followed the various forms that the ordinary 'professions of violence' (*le métier des armes*) can take in the volatile post-colonial political landscape of Chad. Stathis Kalyvas' suggestion (2006) to critically engage with the inherent logic of violence allowed scholars to focus on the relational aspects of violence (Alimi *et al.* 2015), casting new light on "contentious politics" (McAdam *et al.* 2001), and thus making it possible to appreciate the importance of ethnographies describing social conditions in violent events (Behrend 2000; Lubkemann 2008; Utas 2012; Guichaoua 2012; Bøås 2015).

Drawing on such works, and in an attempt to attune to the "vernacular standpoint on security" (Luckham and Kirk 2013), this article looks into popular narratives to examine the relational dynamics of political violence. As practices of truth-seeking beyond the official truth, popular narratives express social anxiety and a community's feeling of vulnerability or fragmentation (Douglas 1966) and are a privileged field where to access vernacular history (White 2001; Pratten 2007). Rumours may eventually shape patterns of accumulation and circulation (Geschiere 1995) or be formulated in relation to trans-local or global phenomena (Scheper-Hughes 1996; White 1997; Israel 2009; Bonhomme 2012).

Borrowing from the toolkit provided by anthropological research on the diffusion of rumours and popular narratives in the post-colonial era (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; White 2001; Stewart and Strathern 2004; Bass 2008; Larson and Lewis 2018), the most common version of a rumour circulating in the Lake Chad area is used to capture discourses on moral economies and violent entrepreneurship. Such discourses are produced locally but are also inscribed in a global system, and their recounting of local, regional and global events in connection with the Lake Chad socio-spatial order shakes the foundations of any (politically charged) narrative about 'fragility'.

The United States' War on Terror, aimed at attacking networks of US enemies worldwide, has produced a complex discourse entangling Islam, terror and security. This has been appropriated and reformulated according to domestic needs by Muslim majority countries like Chad and Niger. Using empirical data collected in the field in combination with the conceptual instruments described, we can see how these global and regional paradigms – the war on *Boko Haram* in the context of the War on Terror – have been domesticated according to a vernacular understanding that goes beyond West-centred notions of local, regional and global. Muslim state actors enforce an official labelling (concerning terror and terrorists) that produces and circulates morally charged representations and, conversely, rumours about political violence. In the case taken into

consideration, such narratives are the result of the discursive malleability of the counter-terrorism security paradigm, the most powerful geopolitical construct of our time, which has triggered a re-negotiation of strategic alliances in the "political marketplace" (De Waal 2009) and led to a geopolitics of engagement, as in Somalia (Malito 2015), Chad (Iocchi 2018b), Mali (Bøås 2019) and Nigeria (Brigaglia and Iocchi 2020). This malleability permeates discourses produced at the grassroots level, unveiling a 'truth beyond the official truth' that mirrors the horror of neoliberal geopolitics for "ungoverned spaces" (Roberts *et al.* 2003).

Framing political violence on Lake Chad

The year 2015 was crucial for Lake Chad. At that time, the ISWAP – or, in its emic labelling, *Dawla* (lit. State) – appeared in the area, enmeshing with local productive networks (Iocchi 2016; 2020), upsetting the socio-spatial order (Iocchi 2018a) and exacerbating existing community conflicts (Abdourahamani and Mato 2019). Attacks in Bosso (Niger), Baga Sola and Bol (both in Chad) were the business cards presented to regional governments. That same year, following multilateral discussions at the Lake Chad Basin Commission in N'Djamena (Chad), the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was deployed to combat insurgency in this 'fragile area'. The governments of Chad and Niger then issued a ban on fishing activities and the forced removal of citizens living in the inner Lake. The state of emergency declared in both Niger and Chad banned motorised circulation in the Diffa (Niger) and Lac regions (Chad) during curfew hours; the export of goods to neighbouring Nigerian markets; the sale of fuel and petrol; and the use of any vehicle registered with Nigerian plates (Diori 2015). While the move was meant to provide a human activity-free space for the security and defence forces to be deployed, it had major effects on the counterinsurgency and the overall resource governance of Lake Chad: the displacement of thousands of people; the emergence of a 'humanitarian emergency' economy; the progressive hijacking of trading networks by the jihadi insurgents.

The forced removal of the Lake's inhabitants radically upset mobility and the social order. The Buduma people, by far the largest group living in the inner Lake, were relocated to hosting sites along the shoreline, where *chefs de canton* (local administrative authorities) provided them with land and, when possible, a shelter and access to water: "*pour ne les laisser pas à la belle étoile*" [to save them from sleeping under the stars].[8] Their arrival on the mainland prompted local authorities to work in tandem with international development agencies to set up *impromptu* relief activities: the construction of sanitation systems went hand in hand with the provision of informal schooling and psychological counselling, while the regular distribution of food and vouchers created a pattern of mutual dependency between development practitioners and recipients so well tested in other African settings (Autesserre 2014; Jennings and Bøås 2015). During this first period, Buduma newcomers were welcomed warmly: they were in dire straits, and the Sultan in Bol – labelled by some as *le père des Boudoumas* (Buduma's eldest) – worked hard in the face of a storm that few saw arriving, coordinating with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), exchanging files with government officials,

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[8]Interview with *chef de canton* in Bol, Bol (Chad), December 2016.

visiting camps and locations, and preparing the eventual deployment of an MNJTF battalion.[9]

Slowly though, people started to try to make sense of the violent happenings taking place in and around the Lake, setting in motion a circular flow of rumours that became mixed up with occult idioms about the presumed 'savagery' of the primary dwellers of the Lake, the Buduma.[10] These rumours coalesced in an almost fixed version of the events that had led jihadist commanders to the Lake, with the late *imam* Mamman Nur (d. 2018) mingling with the Buduma Budjia and Majagudjia chiefs. It went more or less as follows:

> An organised group of fighters led by an *imam* and accompanied by a *mai wa'azi* [master of sermon] was responsible for giving Buduma savages from some clans the permission for *coupage de routes* [acting as highwaymen], extracting money, pillaging animals and goods from the normal people which they call *kirdi* [unbelievers]. They train and hide all their material in a secret camp located in a vast archipelago of floating islands in a particularly difficult maze.[11] Their unlucky victims are dispossessed of their belongings, animals or herds, as well as mutilated or stripped naked. If people rebel, they meet death.[12]

Aided by scholarship on the African occult, these rumours may be seen as privileged terrain on which the contradictions of modernity, extractive violence and (counter-) hegemonic discourses, as well as moral economies come to the fore (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Moore and Sanders 2001; White 2001; Ranger 2007). They can be considered as: a) a discursive genre with connotations of moral intentions (White 2001, 30 ff.); b) a reconstruction of 'hard' politico-economic events entangled with socio-spatial and eco-systemic analyses; c) a "political unconscious" mediating between reality and its representation (Jameson 1984, 39-44). In whatever case, rumours represent a semi-fixed narrative in which the effects of violence are poorly metabolised and, rather, 'felt' in combination with existing symbolic powers.

The allegations conveyed by rumours circulating in the Lake Chad area alluding to the involvement of jihadists are explicit. They speak of a chain of events that brought to Lake Chad Salafi-jihadi scholar and experienced fighter Mamman Nur, a Shuwa Arab of Chadian heritage, who studied in Maiduguri (Borno, Nigeria), together with a Buduma *mai wa'azi*.[13] Through arrangements – some versions claim a marriage deal – Buduma youth started to train with weapons and study the Quran under Nur's guidance, hosting his fighting group in locations so deep inside the maze of islands that only a few Buduma trackers were able to drive fighters in and out. This version of the rumour highlights the propensity of the Buduma to support the rapacity of allochthonous 'vampires' (in this

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Traditional oral storytelling about the Lake and its hideous nature survives in the words of certain interlocutors. A Kanuri official from Diffa epitomised Buduma people as *sauvages*, moving from one *kirta* (floating island) to another, adamant, treacherous and prone to cheating, while a Fulani trader from Goulfei (Cameroon) and a seasonal Fulani Bororo herder both referred to the Lake and its inhabitants as the 'the wilderness' and 'the beasts' (fieldwork notes).

[11]I have heard two versions about the location of the camps: one, provided in Ngouboua, claims it to be located between the settlements of Gadira (Diffa, Niger) and Kaiga-Kindjiria (Lac, Chad) in the northern basin; a second one, provided in Bol, gives the camp location in a specific island that I was unable to identify with available maps.

[12]This is a collage of rumours that I heard during fieldwork in Bol and Baga Sola (and, later on, as far away as Niamey) in 2016 and 2018.

[13]The master of sermons is present only in some versions of the rumours reported. In other cases, it is represented exclusively as a 'comrade', a 'guide' or a 'learned Buduma fixer'. The *mai wa'azi* is specifically connected to the Salafi-inspired movement that, in both Niger and Nigeria, is popularly known as *Izala* and embodies the modern religious activist who challenges traditional Quranic masters (*mallamai*), especially those belonging to Sufi orders. On the *Izala* see Kane (2003).

case the jihadists), who have come to let the Lake slip into chaos while exploiting its precious resources.

One can read the story as an updated version of the long-standing *doxa* about the Buduma's presumed savagery. The socio-political Buduma space overlaps with what neighbouring groups call the wilderness (*bādiyya*). The equation between Buduma and *bādiyya* is entrenched in the imagery of Kanem-Bornu's border areas: repeated by colonial explorers and administrators, reverberated in the early 1990 rebellions,[14] today it is reframed in a rumour that views the Buduma as a group abandoning the civilised mainland and sabotaging efforts to build 'a modern country'. Such a developmental state-building narrative in defence of the land and against alleged fifth columns has been widely promoted through the chauvinist rhetoric of Chadian President Idriss Déby's government since the first terrorist occurrences in 2015, finding a fitting match in the characterisation of the Buduma as rebels.

Poignantly, the Buduma are portrayed as having metaphorically 'surrendered' their lands (and waters) to non-native marauders, betraying their fellow people of the Lake and putting the Sultan of Bol at odds with the central government.[15] This kind of narrative makes sense of the inter-group competition that began with the arrival of waves of allophone seasonal or settled migrants bringing in new techniques of economic extraction in the late 1990s (such as the so-called 'Malian' *dumba*, or fish fence), thus putting the responsibility for violence on the stereotypically-portrayed 'treacherous savages' (Buduma).

Moreover, this view reflects the imagery of the Chadian army, in accordance with regime-approved propaganda: the battalions sent by the government are the strong guerrilla-hardened forces whose combat techniques are deemed necessary by foreign powers like France or the United States to thwart 'terrorists' and win the War on Terror. Such rhetoric is favourably underpinned by the fact that the government can mobilise important capital-endowed players "like France, INGOs and other Western nations".[16] Such leverage establishes the discursive authority of the President and the state's legitimacy, but fails to acknowledge other elements of the partnership between N'Djamena and foreign powers: the diversion of public funds to the military at the expense of welfare and services; the fuzziness of the definition of 'terrorism'; the reinforcement of a discursive boundary between the Buduma (uneducated savages) and the rest of Chadians.

What is interesting about this kind of rumour and its performative power is that the nation's dependence on international patronage (from France, United States and financial institutions) is viewed as a necessary step to reinforce the boundary between civilisation and unrest – *ḥaḍāra* and *bādiyya* – and therefore the proximity of the majority Kanembu-speaking population to the central government and the powerful West. The factual evidence of this special relationship between N'Djamena and Paris – and the government's legitimacy and power – are the *bana Nasara* (gifts from the whites), that is the humanitarian emergency economy, with its food packages, tents, vouchers, material aid along with (informal) schooling, (small-scale) sanitation and psychological counselling.

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[14]During the early 1990s, for different reasons, the governments of Chad and Niger were both confronted with rebellions in the wider Lake area (see below in this article).

[15]As a consequence of rumours suggesting that the Sultan (and *chef de canton* in Bol) was protecting the Buduma and, by association, 'terrorists', the Sultan was removed from office in 2017, but later re-instated at the end of that year.

[16]Focus groups with young labourers in Bol (Chad), December 2016.

The delivery of humanitarian aid and the increased national and international attention for Lake Chad has generated a flow of millions of euros for the establishment of missions and the blossoming of NGOs and emergency-related projects. These agencies are usually headquartered in towns like Diffa, Bol and Baga Sola where the safety of the international teams can be guaranteed: five-meters tall walls with barbed wire and heavy gates are presided by guardians night and day, and the personnel only exits the structures to carry out the tasks of the day, with few if any interactions with the locals. In the case of Lake Chad, the edification of fortified bases by INGOs mirrors the century-long construction of the political landscape as a buffer zone of nodes that can connect or disconnect the territory to the rest of the region according to the political will of the regulative authorities of the moment. In an era of military and humanitarian interventions, the boundary line is the one drawn by the bureaucratic parlance in N'Djamena and Niamey: those within the waters are 'terrorists'; those who dwell in the camps dotting the shoreline are 'aid recipients'; those in the urban sites can continue to be neglected.

This engenders a boundary between rural aid recipients and urban dwellers that fosters mistrust and rumours along lines that bypass or overlap with community identities and class divisions. While the Buduma who refused to abide by the state of emergency and returned to their fishing and farming areas are regarded, not without reason, as associated with the 'terrorists' of the *Dawla* or *Boko Haram*, the same does not hold for the Fulani and (Fulani subgroup) Wodaabe, who followed the same pattern. Instead, urbanised Fulani traders residing in Bol or Bosso regard those Wodaabe youngsters who ventured into the 'interdicted Lake' for the transhumance as brave men who "care for their households, care for their people, care for their elders".[17] Implicitly, this view tends to corroborate the idea that identity (or ethnic-based) solidarity can be turned into an instrument to defend class structures and labour divisions: a meat trader like the interviewee would not make a living without the 'bravery' of the Wodaabe herders who drive their cattle in the perilous waters of the Lake and negotiate their passage and usage fees with the Buduma, with wealthy violent entrepreneurs and with the 'terrorists'.

On the opposite side of the rumour lie the unspecified individuals generally labelled as '*les fils de Boudouma*' (the Buduma youth), a vague stereotypical representation of turbulence that has many aspects in common with the vernacular idea of *sība* (dissidence), but which mostly refers to intermittent job activity, underpaid labour, informal employment, unemployment and *débrouillardisme* (fending for oneself). All these experiences are shared by the younger generations around the Lake – from Bosso (Niger) to Daboua (Chad) and from Doro Gowon (Nigeria) to Blangoua (Cameroon) – irrespective of community, religion or language.

The combined effect of the shrinking of the Lake in recent decades and the rise of a profit economy that has over-exploited fishing, herding and farming sites defying the traditional multi-usage techniques of governance led to the emergence of a cosmopolitan, precarious and disposable class of labourers. Attracted by the ease of access to resources, they soon became frustrated by the fierceness of inter- and intra-group competition that increasingly relied on violence. Faced with the impossibility of reaching and working on the Lake since 2015, some migrant fishermen – mostly single men in their thirties – set up *ad hoc* bands that went lightly armed with outboard-pirogues to fish in the inner waters.

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[17]Interview with Fulani trader and representative of the association of transport workers, Bol (Chad), December 2016.

'Youth' became synonymous with dissidence (*sība*). The antinomy emerged with *al-Dawla* (the Islamic State), which provided a frame, a scope and a goal to the many young men with intermittent relations to the job market unable to transition from a "waithood" period (Honwana 2012) to adulthood. *Dawla* provided young people from the Buduma, Kanembu, Kanuri, Kotoko, Manga and Kanembu Sougourti groups with micro-loans with which to open their own enterprises or buy motorbikes to transport goods – or impress young women.[18]

Community mobility and the uncertainty of armed labour

The diffusion of rumours and narratives seems to respond to a need to contextualise violent wealth extraction. Resource governance in the whole Lake Chad eco-system has been profoundly influenced by the combined dynamics of climatic variability, demographic pressure and political (re)positioning. The superimposition of these processes has paved the way for a radical transformation of the relationship between socio-economic groups and the territory via practices of violent networking and jihadi mobilisation. Anthropic pressure and connected violent disputations over resources relate directly to the contested issue of land tenure in and around the Lake. During the dry season, as water levels fall and fishery production shrinks, fishermen shift to agriculture seeking fertile plots of land or ponds for controlled fishing, the latter often being in areas already devoted to farming. Contestations and litigations have risen in correlation with the deterioration of the governance of the multi-activity lifestyle (farming, fishing, herding), and the emergence of ecological imbalances caused by development projects (Bertoncin and Pase 2012) and "market valorisation" (Tchangari and Diori 2016).

Fishing, the primary economic activity of the Lake, is a sector that is almost completely informal, resting on trust networks or associations whose scope and mandate are often fuzzy. Fluctuations in water levels during seasonal changes determine the economic potential for fishing and farming. Although the Lake's total annual production of fish may vary from 45,000 tons, as in 2005, to 13,000 tons, as in 2012, or the exceptional 80,000 ca tons in 2014 (Béné *et al.* 2008; Kiari Fougou and Lemoalle 2016), this does not affect the inflow of labourers and the expansion of related activities (descaling, de-gutting, transport, drying). During particularly wet years, the northern basin is a magnet for fishermen from throughout the Sahel (not only coastal countries, but also Burkina Faso and Mali), as well as for farmers engaged in so-called 'recession cropping'. The terrain is extremely fertile and full of humus, making it possible to harvest widely marketable vegetables like corn and *niébé* during the dry season without much water intake or fertiliser. Buduma cattle drivers herding Kuri cows also take advantage of this lushness, although in recent decades and especially after the major droughts of 1973 and 1984, herders from the entire subregion have come to graze in the area, moving thousands of herds through the easily accessible waters: Mahamid Arabs, Fulani, Fulani subgroups (Wodaabe, Bororo, Bokolodji), Dazaga Tubu.

While the droughts gradually drove many Buduma clans of the islands of the northern basin to migrate to more stable deep-water access in the southern basin, they also pushed the Komadugu-Yobe valley Kanuri-speaking Mober and Manga farmers to settle closer

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[18]Focus group with young labourers at the market, Bol (Chad), December 2016.

to the flooded shores and expand farming,[19] much like the Fulani, Wodaabe, Bororo and Bokolodji herders from the west and the south. The latter have increasingly employed the area for grazing or as a transhumance corridor, triggering competition for watering sources, pastures and land tenure litigations.

The settlement of Manga and Mober farmers closer to the shoreline and on the market islands of Gadira, Karamga and Boultoungour was formalised in the early 2000s as the *chef de canton* in Bosso nominated ward-heads (*bulama*) from these communities to administer the lands and allocate parcels to applicants, often Kanuri and Hausaphones. This prompted reactions from the Buduma community which was attempting to resettle there in the early 2000s, when water levels increased. They started to organise in order to claim the right to name a *chef de canton* and representatives of a *chéfferie*, but failed to find a consensus mainly due to the inherently transnational nature of the Lake which prevented a common agreement among different clans. The same early 2000s period saw the confrontation between the Buduma and the Mahamid Arab camel herders who, abandoning the increasingly dry land close to the Dillia valley, started to drive their herds into the basin seeking easier access to water. The Mahamid were confronted by competing groups of herders who, on two occasions, in 2001 and 2006, formally demanded political authorities in Niamey to issue a decree of expulsion against them, questioning their status as 'legitimate citizens'.

Since 2015, *Dawla* has become progressively enmeshed in existing trading networks, especially in the dried fish (*banda*) and red pepper trades. As increasingly capital-endowed businessmen lacked the manpower to secure the delivery of stocks to markets, armed youth trained by *Dawla* started to act as security providers in exchange for levies and shares of the product. The diminishing human activity prompted by state-enforced bans on circulation has given the *Dawla* leadership leeway to secure routes and thereby attract many of the displaced Buduma and Kanembu living in the camps. "Life is hard at the camp because there's nothing to do. We go with *mallam* L [a fish merchant, name withheld] to provide for the family", mumbled a fisherman originally from Bosso but residing in a camp close to Kaiga-Kindjiria (Chad).[20] He explains how he was hired by *Dawla* because of his knowledge of the route leading to Bosso and Kinchandi (Niger), where large markets are located. Starting from the individual fisherman who pays the equivalent of 35€ every two weeks for fishing rights, the fish supply chain right up to the market is now controlled by *Dawla*.

The ramifications of *Dawla*'s violent entrepreneurship do not spare other sectors: farmers engaged in recession cropping pay even more during the year, although, the fisherman added, "they can afford it".[21] Fish and cattle merchants, intermediaries and, even, landlords have for different reasons adjusted – willingly or not – to the fiscal regime offered by *Dawla*. First, *Dawla* allows them to keep doing business regularly, whilst security forces seize any products with the excuse of the state of emergency: "Soldiers there [on the western shore of the Lake] make lots of money from the confiscated goods."[22] Furthermore, the taxes paid by traders, farmers, herders and fishermen to *Dawla* are considered "fairer than before", a reference to the difficulty, for ordinary people, to navigate between different regulations, authorities and expenses.

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[19]Thereby attracting a diverse labour force also from distant locations.
[20]Interview with fisherman, Kaiga (Chad), December 2016.
[21]Ibid.
[22]Ibid.

As *Dawla* increasingly established its racket, other groups did not stand by and watch. In defiance of the state of emergency, many started to return to their lands, pastures, ponds and open waters. Among the first to profit from the virtual human-free space of the Lake were seasonal herding groups (Fulani, Mahamid Arabs, Wodaabe). Day-long missions were organised by the Fulani, relying on what survived of the self-defence militia structure that they had set up against the irredentist *Front démocratique pour le renouveau* (FDR) in the 1990s, to protect herdsmen and commuters, and provide a safe corridor for transport.[23] The appearance of armed men (with bows and arrows, artisanal pistols, machetes) was deemed necessary by authorities and leaders to claim back farm and grazing land whose usage fees were monopolised, according to them, by *Dawla* and the Buduma.[24] "Many years were tough, others were good, but since the war we had to organise ourselves. God willing, when peace will be established we will have the right to be here," commented the informal spokesman of a Fulani group who attended public school in N'Gourti.[25] A similar feeling was shared by a Mahamid Arab family (mother, father and child) driving their few camels in the outskirts of Baga Sola. The Mahamid do not seem to rely on armed groups to defend their right of transhumance in the Lake but seek solutions by talking to the *ardo* (group chief) of the Fulani or the *lamido* (group chief) of the Wodaabe, whose young people often carry machetes or bows: "After many years at war, we now have a common enemy. After this [enemy] will be wiped out, God will provide."[26]

Conclusion

Reframing the conflict against *Dawla* and *Boko Haram* around Lake Chad through a socio-spatial perspective makes it possible to see the wider role played by regimes of connectivity established by local stakeholders, violent entrepreneurs, regional rulers and international powers in determining not only the course of warfare but also the vernacular history of it, elaborated through narratives. Lake Chad has historically been a space both at the core and at the margins of ruling regimes – quite the contrary of a fragile or ungoverned space. More or less coercive actors have domesticated its environs, forging moral and social boundaries and inscribing the area in broader productive systems. At the grassroots level, the transformation of neopatrimonial regimes in the transnational Lake Chad space and their gradual assimilation into the neoliberal market has come in the guise of increasingly violent practices of dispossession and wealth creation which invest in exploitative businesses, disinvest from concerted multi-functionality, create an excess of norms and multiply disputes. The violent turn taken by community conflicts, vigilantism and social fragmentation corresponds specularly to the militarisation and intensification of economic predation.

At the other (governmental) end of the spectrum, the ruling regimes in Niger, Chad and Nigeria have effectively used the inherent ambiguity of the notion of 'terrorism' in the post-

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[23]In the early 1990s, Nigerien Tubu set up the FDR in order to advance their interests politically, economically and, eventually, militarily. The FDR was led by Issa Lamine (the present governor of the Diffa region) and clashed frequently with Fulani self-defence militias, which were in turn training and dwelling in areas offered in solidarity by Buduma chiefs. Nowadays, in the Diffa region, Fulani self-defence militias are tacitly approved by the government.

[24]Focus group with Fulani herders, Baga Sola (Chad), December 2016.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Interview with Arab herders, Dar Nahim (Chad), December 2016.

9/11 political marketplace as a device for developing an Othering process to be exploited for domestic needs, in order to consolidate their rule, extract wealth and put shared resources to profit according to a neoliberal script. The various agreements of Niamey with the Saudi firm Al Horaish (for the exploitation of the Komadugu-Yobe basin) and with the China National Petroleum Corporation (for the exploitation of the Agadem block), and of Abuja with its own initiatives through the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company leave no room for doubts as to what kind of future regional and international leaders envision for this space: a new "race to Lake Chad" (Hiribarren 2017).

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