

A 'DESPICABLE SHAMBLES': LABOUR, PROPERTY AND STATUS IN FAYA-LARGEAU, NORTHERN CHAD

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People here don't work, there is nothing you can do about it. It's because of the dates, they have many dates and so they don't want to do anything. They are lazy. Today, the people who work in Faya come from the outside, and the Tubu just stand by and watch.¹

If somebody whispers today, one day he will speak out. Land problems in Faya are not over, real estate problems are not over, they will never be over, even in 2050 they will come out again. In Faya, these problems will never be sorted out.²

In 2006, 'war' broke out in the northern Chadian town of Faya-Largeau, as Kamaya agriculturalists and Anakazza nomadic pastoralists fought over access to land. As had often been the case in the last few decades, the nomads 'won', and their rights to land were reaffirmed by government officials mandated from the capital N'Djamena to solve the problem. Indeed, the 2006 conflict was but one, albeit a particularly bloody one, in a series of violent confrontations that still punctuate the agricultural cycle in the town and its suburbs. Described by some as conflicts that have their roots in slavery or other forms of unfree labour, and by others as disputes over property rights, the conflict seems to resonate with similar tensions in other Saharan post-slavery societies. From Mauritania to Sudan, former slaves or tributaries attempt to gain access to economic, social and political resources, often with little success. Where they are successful, this is mostly through modern education and involvement in government institutions. In Faya, however, this picture needs to be nuanced: it is difficult to qualify its inhabitants as living in a 'post-slavery society', as historically slavery was limited in the area, and the little that there was mostly came in the wake of foreign settlement and as part of externally imposed forms of production. Nor has there ever been a sizeable population of sedentary agriculturalists, at least not before the Libyan Sanūsiyya and, soon after, the French colonial army settled the area in the early twentieth century. In fact, distinctions between nomadic and sedentary

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¹Adoum Mahamat Yacoub, called Papa Adoum, Faya, 13 March 2012.

²Moussa Tiémoko, Mina *chef de canton*, Faya, 4 September 2012.

populations were and still are notoriously fluid. Education, meanwhile, is not highly prized in northern Chad, while relations with the central state are notoriously unpredictable.

As Ann McDougall has noted, the term ‘slavery’ and its derivatives have become rhetorical weapons that can be used by all: ‘To whatever extent a reality called “slavery” existed in Mauritania, it has long been obscured by various political agendas shaping the society in whose heart it lay’ (McDougall 2005: 957; see also Morice 2005). This is certainly also the case in contemporary Faya. But this is only part of the story, as political agendas are themselves shaped by the conditions that underpin allegations of slave origin and other forms of dependency. We therefore need to rethink the relations of production in northern Chad more generally, taking into account notions of property and possession, political dominance, access to vital resources, and the status of institutions – in other terms, the social forms of production in both their material and their ideological aspects (Graeber 2006: 72). In Faya, these social forms of production are not localized, but forcibly include outside relations and exchange. Nor do they ‘explain’ the status of the Kamaya; rather, they are inherently dependent on the latter’s existence, and on the status ambiguities that define it.³

THE 2006 CONFLICT

Although the lower Borkou has long been known to the populations of what is now northern Chad and southern Libya as particularly fertile, and although date cultivation in the area seems to go back several centuries (Capot-Rey 1961: 76), the town of Faya itself is largely a colonial creation. In 1904, the Libyan Sufi order Sanūsiyya started to set up irrigated gardens in the area, building, in 1909, a fortified *zāwīya* (a religious stronghold and agricultural centre; Djian 1996: 117; see also Triaud 1995). After several raids, the *zāwīya* and its surrounding gardens – or what was left of them – were taken over by the French army in 1913 (Ferrandi 1930). Acting primarily as a French military camp and as an administrative centre, Faya was settled from the late 1920s onwards by a growing number of Libyans fleeing the Italian conquest. Alongside the French army, these Libyan settlers were largely responsible for the construction of the town. They effectively introduced, in the wake of the Sanūsiyya, irrigated horticulture and mud-brick architecture, and turned Faya into an important centre for regional trade.⁴ Although Chadian independence was declared in 1960, northern Chad remained under French military rule until 1964. Since then, the town has been at the centre of many of the episodes of rebellion and civil war that have marked Chad’s recent history. It was the base of the Frolinat (Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad) in the late 1970s (Bodoumi 2010), and was

³This paper is based on twelve months of fieldwork carried out primarily in Faya in 2011 and 2012, during which we were granted access to the local administrative archives. Further interviews and archival research were carried out in the Chadian capital N’Djamena, in May, June and October 2012.

⁴On Libyan settlers, see the quarterly reports for the BET for 1928–1956, kept at the Archives Nationales du Tchad (ANT), N’Djamena, boxes W 18, W 19 and W 20.

occupied by the Libyan army from 1980 until 1987. It was practically deserted by the end of this period, and the current social make-up of the town dates from national and international reconstruction efforts carried out in the late 1980s, when Hissène Habré, a native of Faya, was president. Yet not everybody returned to the area even then, and probably the majority of people who identify in one way or another with Faya today live elsewhere, either in southern and central Chad, or in Libya and Cameroon. This is particularly the case for formerly nomadic families, but stories of mobility and exile are part of everybody's life, whatever their socio-economic origins.

Today, Faya is a booming market town with roughly 10,000 permanent inhabitants. Trade with Libya is brisk, especially after the 2011 war, and provides a livelihood for many. As the principal town in the Borkou and the BET (Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti, Chad's northernmost region), the town boasts a number of government institutions. Since the late 1970s, all Chadian presidents have come from the north and have had some connection with Faya (Buijtenhuijs 2001), and Tubu, the locally dominant linguistic group, are disproportionately represented in the country's armed forces (Debos 2013: 97). Although the Chadian state has little influence over what happens in the BET, state revenue and handouts are economically – and symbolically – of great importance, and networks of state governance feed into even the most intimate relations. More long-standing economic pursuits remain equally important, however, and supply regional and trans-border trade: camel husbandry, based on pastures to the south of Faya, date cultivation and salt mining. The date-palm grove in Faya in particular is continuously expanding, and new plantations indicate future directions of growth. Dates are produced for local consumption, but also for direct exchange against cereals imported, mostly on camelback, from central Chad. Some are exported to the Chadian capital by lorry and sold for cash. The majority of people in Faya speak Dazaga, one of the two mutually comprehensible dialects that outsiders refer to as 'Tubu'. However, the town has also attracted an immigrant population, mostly from eastern Chad, who work as petty traders, salt miners, builders and agricultural labourers.⁵ Since colonial times, the population has been divided into administrative units or *cantons*, each one under the responsibility of a *chef de canton*. In many cases, and despite the apparent democratization of the country, these *chefs* retain much influence and have the president's ear.

On 27 August 2006, sweltering conflicts over land between two of these *cantons*, Anakazza (stereotypically defined as 'camel nomads', although most by now are probably sedentary) and Kamaya ('sedentary agriculturalists'), broke out into open violence. A group of Anakazza had occupied several gardens owned by Kamaya, claiming a share of the harvest. The army intervened, and two Anakazza were killed and fifteen wounded. The same day, a group of Anakazza youth (or women – stories diverge on this point) killed a Kamaya in retaliation. After the Anakazza's funeral, fighting broke out between mourners and Kamaya in Tchang-Souss, the district of Faya where most Kamaya live. Again, stories vary: either the mourners, excited by the funerals and looking for

⁵In addition to this, there is a steady flow of foreign migrants on their way to Libya who often spend considerable time in Faya, accepting menial jobs in order to earn the money needed to continue their journey. This has made the need for locally recruited low-status labour less pressing.

vengeance, attacked Tchang-Souss;⁶ or else the inhabitants of Tchang-Souss attacked a group of mourners, mainly women and children.⁷ In any case, six Anakazza were killed and twenty-five wounded, with fifteen Kamaya wounded on the other side. Several days later, according to the prefect at the time:

There were cars everywhere, on all the roads leading into town. They had come from Massaguet, Massakori, N'Djamena, from everywhere, with Anakazza ready to kill the Kamaya – because even if, in Faya, the Kamaya are in the majority, overall, there are many more Anakazza, because the Anakazza are everywhere.⁸

Military roadblocks were set up around Tchang-Souss to separate the two groups, and a reconciliation committee was set up.

On 5 September 2006, a 'Memorandum by the Anakazza community about the re-establishment of intercommunity peace and peaceful cohabitation in Borkou Woun' was issued by the Anakazza *chef de canton*. It explained that the conflict about the palm grove in Borkou Woun ('lower Borkou', the precolonial name given to the Faya region) between 'the Anakazza community and their former Kamaya servants [*serviteurs*, a euphemism employed throughout the colonial literature to speak of slaves]' had developed over more than ten years. According to this memorandum, Faya belonged to the Anakazza whose ancestors discovered it in the year 1200. The Kamaya were the descendants of the Anakazza's servants (*serviles*), and 'through cross-breeding with slaves from other ethnic groups, each clan was able to possess their own group of Kamaya'. In 1800, the Anakazza turned from agro-pastoralism to fully fledged nomadic pastoralism and moved south, leaving the Kamaya in charge of the palm grove. But they did not relinquish claims to ownership: each year, they returned to Faya to collect their dates, which they 'shared' with their Kamaya 'guardians'. Since 'the arrival of liberties and democracies' in the 1990s, the Kamaya 'have in vain attempted to rewrite history, manifestly denying all values, habits, customs and social benefits of our community'.⁹ This had led to disputes and conflicts, based on the erroneous idea that uncultivated land did not belong to anybody, whereas in reality it belonged to the Anakazza. These conflicts were deliberately maintained, so the memorandum concluded, by the local administration.¹⁰

A week later, the official reconciliation committee drafted an agreement; however, this was never implemented, apparently because it was too favourable to the Kamaya.¹¹ In January of the following year, a government mission was

⁶H. K., Faya, 13 February 2012.

⁷'Mémorandum de la communauté Anakazza sur le rétablissement de la paix intercommunautaire et la cohabitation pacifique à Borkou Woun', 5 September 2006, document owned by the current *chef de canton*'s family.

⁸Y. M. B., former interim prefect, N'Djamena, 24 April 2012.

⁹The current Chadian president, Idriss Déby Itno, came to power in a coup in 1990. Although his style of government can hardly be described as 'democratic', he convened a 'sovereign national conference' to draft a new constitution in 1993 (see Buijtenhuijs 1998) and legalized other parties besides his own Mouvement Patriotique pour le Salut (MPS).

¹⁰'Mémorandum de la communauté Anakazza'.

¹¹We have been unable to obtain a copy of this agreement.

sent to Faya to find a 'definitive settlement' to the conflict.¹² Although the mission contained a few prominent Kamaya, such as the local MP, Idriss N'Délé Yayami, it was led by a militant Anakazza, Hissein Hamita, an 'illiterate warrior, riddled with scars, one-eyed', a familiar figure in all rebellions, 'sometimes Déby's [the current president's] *patron*, sometimes his subordinate'.¹³ In Faya, Hissein Hamita was mostly notorious for his involvement in a large number of property disputes.¹⁴ As a result of the government mission, a 'solemn session of reconciliation' was held almost two months later, on 5 February 2007, at the governor's residence, during which the Kamaya had to ask 'publicly and manifestly' for pardon. The settlement agreed upon on this occasion comprised several points: the limits of Tchang-Souss, the main Kamaya suburb, were to be redrawn; the government was to pay compensation (*diyah*) for the two Anakazza initially killed, and for the fifteen wounded; the Kamaya were to pay compensation (*ridah*) for the six Anakazza killed; and the Anakazza were to pay *diyah* for the one Kamaya killed. The Anakazza wounded were compensated, but not the Kamaya wounded, 'in compliance with the habits and customs of Gorane society and taking into account the great harm inflicted on the Anakazza by the Kamaya'.¹⁵

This settlement, which in most parts followed the suggestions put forward in the Anakazza memorandum, was clearly disadvantageous to the Kamaya. Not only did they lose part of their irrigated land, experienced public humiliation, and saw their *chef de canton* deposed, but they also received less compensation money per head than had the Anakazza.¹⁶ Moreover, the compensation paid by the Kamaya was referred to as *ridah* rather than *diyah*, as *diyah* would imply equality between the two parties in a way that *ridah*, an Islamic legal term that is rarely used in the region, does not. In this respect also, the settlement seems to have followed if not the letter than at least the spirit of the Anakazza memorandum, which described the Kamaya as a 'tiny minority endogenous to the Anakazza [who] have no links with the outside', and hence 'do not deserve to be considered enemies'. This

¹²Procès verbal sur le suivi et l'application des clauses du Procès verbal de conciliation du 13 septembre 2006 relatif au conflit intercommunautaire Annakaza et Kamaya', Faya-Largeau, 25 February 2007.

¹³See 'Qui est Mahamat Nouri?', *Le Blog du Tchad*, 12 May 2013, <<http://leblogdutchad.over-blog.com/article-tchad-qui-est-mahamat-nouri-117748181.html>>; Mahamat Ahmat, 'L'échange authentique entre le Général Hissein Hamita et le Général Idriss Déby', *Tchadactuel*, 4 June 2008; Hamid Kelley, 'L'échange authentique entre le Général Hissein Hamita et le Général Idriss Deby', *Waldari Wa Akhbaara*, 4 June 2008, <<http://waldar.over-blog.com/article-20167710.html>>.

¹⁴See, for example, 'Lettre du chef de canton Kamaya, al-Hadj Keleï Chahaïmi, au Chef de l'Etat Major Général 1er Adjoint de l'ANT à Faya, au Chef de Département du Borkou, au Com RMI, au Com Légion, au sous-préfet du Borkou et au Maire de la ville', 7 August 2000, unclassified document kept at the Archives de la Préfecture de Faya (APF).

¹⁵Procès verbal sur le suivi et l'application des clauses du Procès verbal de conciliation du 13 septembre 2006 relatif au conflit intercommunautaire Annakaza et Kamaya, Faya-Largeau', 25 February 2007. 'Gorane' is the Chadian Arabic term for the southern Tubu, who call themselves Dazagada.

¹⁶The Kamaya paid 6 million Francs CFA per head (36 million altogether), while the Anakazza paid 5.35 million Francs CFA. This is the amount fixed in a 2005 agreement: see 'Décision conventionnelle sur le paiement de la diya', 8 August 2005, APF. Although the difference in money is thus relatively small, although not negligible, it clearly matters symbolically.

further underlined the fundamental claim of the memorandum: namely, that the Kamaya were and always had been ‘under the tutelage’ of the Anakazza.¹⁷ Their blatant failure to secure a more favourable settlement could thus be read as a further confirmation of the Kamaya’s dependency, which is thereby made contingent on their inability to pull strings more effectively: they indeed did not have enough ‘links with the outside’, as the Anakazza *chef de canton* had proclaimed. Noticeably, the only demand put forward in the memorandum that was not heeded in the settlement was the *chef de canton*’s claim to ownership of all uncultivated land in the Borkou (of which more below).

UNPACKING ‘SLAVERY’

This sounds like a familiar story: another case of a post-slavery society, where former slaves who are now officially liberated still labour under economic and social dependence, and fail in their attempt to emancipate themselves fully.¹⁸ This impression of familiarity is backed up by the few historical sources on the region that interpret local realities in terms of a stark opposition between freedom and dependency, using a terminology that is easily recognizable throughout Saharan and Sahelian ethnography. ‘The word Kamaya expresses the idea of servitude,’ notes a 1934 administrative report. ‘They are the nomads’ former slaves who were settled by their masters in the palm grove and obliged to look after them.’¹⁹ For the French colonel Jean Chapelle, prefect of the BET in the 1950s and author of the only full-length monograph on the region:

All those who could obtain one or two slaves that were not needed for guarding and watering the herd settled them on an abandoned or uncultivated plot of land, either next to an already existing palm grove or on a new site. These slaves who were gradually attached to the land and mostly emancipated after a few generations have become the Kamaya, tied to their masters through a kind of contract of servitude. (Chapelle 1957: 195–6)

Although Chapelle is rather vague about the details of this ‘contract of servitude’, he notes that each Kamaya had to hand over one *moud* (12 kilograms) of cereals to his Anakazza master, and more than half of his date harvest (Chapelle 1957: 122). This same image of former slavery, or at least servitude, has been taken up in more recent research, where the Kamaya are described as ‘formerly *inféodés* to the Daza and nowadays largely emancipated’ (Baroin and Pret 1993: 5). In certain cases, these ‘quasi-feudal relations’ endure even today (Baroin 1997: 462).

This mix of terminology, drawing on slavery as well as ‘feudalism’, indicates a shift that can be observed in African ethnography more widely. As Chanock notes, in most if not all African societies, rights in people were logically prior to rights in things. It was only with colonial rule that the former were reformulated

¹⁷ ‘Mémorandum de la communauté Anakazza’.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Collins (1992), Seddon (2000), Klein (2005) and McDougall (2005). It is important, however, to heed Schmitz’s (2009: 86) caution that it is often through the maintenance rather than the severing of ties of dependency that former slaves achieve social mobility.

¹⁹ ‘Rapport trimestriel (monographique)’, 2nd term 1934, ANT W 18.

in terms of the latter as, in the Western tradition, ‘rights in things and rights related to persons are not negotiable in the same way’ (Chanock 1991: 66). While colonial administrations eventually – and in many cases grudgingly – abolished slavery as a legal institution, private property was a legitimate aim of colonial policy. Claims to other people’s work and produce were thus reformulated in terms of private ownership of critical resources.²⁰ Hence, in Masina, the French colonial administration, unable and unwilling to abolish slavery, redefined it as a tributary relationship grounded in land ownership: servile obligations were treated as rents (Klein 2005: 838). In Faya, too, with colonial rule, the notion of land ownership as central to Anakazza pre-eminence gradually gained ground, first in colonial reports, then (particularly after the 1980s) in locally produced documents, as witnessed in the Anakazza memorandum discussed above. As a result, in colonial documents, the Kamaya were primarily defined as landless labourers, a definition that had both positive and negative connotations. Economic ‘development’ needed labour, and the Tubu were otherwise decried as inherently lazy; yet labour was also a sign of low social status, if not servility. Conversely, here as elsewhere (Lund 2013: 30), distinctions between ownership (rights in land) and sovereignty (rights in people) became blurred, and the two concepts now easily blend into each other.

This overall narrative is not wholly satisfactory, however. Locally, the Kamaya are clearly distinguished from slave descendants. Although historically slavery was certainly known in the Borkou, by the time the French arrived, most of the few slaves that were unambiguously defined as such claimed to have come to Faya with the Sanūsiyya only a few years prior to the French conquest. The ‘slave quarter’ that the French established after their arrival was largely inhabited by people who used to be attached to Libyans, although they might originally have come from central or southern Chad.²¹ In contemporary Faya, descendants of these slaves, most of whom are still settled in the colonial *Quartier 8* (‘this is what you call it now, but its real name is “Slave Quarter”²²), are clearly identified, and even self-identify as such:

The people from *Quartier 8* are people of all races that were taken in raids ... We the people from *Quartier 8*, we are a set of people of all kinds: Hajarai, Sara, people from Wadaï, from all tribes and all classes, even from Cameroon. When the French took power in Faya, they gave them land, they put them on the land where we are now, the *Quartier 8*.²³

Others see the inhabitants of *Quartier 8* simply as ‘Bilti’, a generic term to refer to people from southern Chad and one that primarily implies that they are of no

²⁰This often created the legal notion of private property, in particular in land: ‘Property disputes dealt not simply with conflicts over ownership and value but with contention about the commodity status of things in particular circumstances’ (Chanock 1991: 86).

²¹See, for example, ‘Rapport trimestriel (monographie)’, 2nd quarter 1934, ANT W 18; ‘Rapport politique semestriel’, 2nd term 1942 and 2nd term 1949, ANT W 20. The German traveller Gustav Nachtigal (1881: 139), the only European to have visited the area before the French conquest, mentions a few slaves among other oasis dwellers, but they otherwise hardly figure in his account. This makes the Tubu in Borkou different from those described by Baroin (1981) in south-eastern Niger.

²²Z., Faya, February 2012.

²³Moussa Tiémoko, *Mina chef de canton*, Faya, 4 September 2012.

great consequence locally. They are also seen to be physically distinctive: '[If you meet somebody from *Quartier 8*], there is no need to ask them which clan they belong to, because you can see straight away that they are not from here.'²⁴ Marriage with them is frowned upon.²⁵ In both respects, *Quartier 8* residents differ from Kamaya. Although some Anakazza might make unfavourable comparisons between slave descendants and Kamaya – along the lines of 'today, the inhabitants of *Quartier 8* work but they are free, not like the Kamaya'²⁶ – nobody would doubt that the two categories are clearly different. And, paradoxically perhaps, where Kamaya and Anakazza are locked in struggles over land, people from *Quartier 8* are left in peace to cultivate their own plots, without paying dues to anybody.

There are dissenting voices, moreover, locally and in an older ethnography, that see the main difference between Anakazza and Kamaya to be one of lifestyle. The Austrian ethnographer Fuchs noted that the origin of the Kamaya was obscure, and that Kamaya described themselves as indigenous to the Borkou, although 'they have to admit that they have often accepted slaves among them' (Fuchs 1961: 170).²⁷ Their lower social status derived from their 'mixed origins', and from tribute payments that they owed to the Anakazza in order to get access to land. Otherwise, their relationship was based on complementarity: Kamaya owned camels that were herded by the Anakazza in exchange for garden produce. 'Only the transition to nomadism can free the peasant from his dependence – an opportunity of which many avail themselves' (Fuchs 1961: 160). Chapelle (1957: 122) similarly noted that 'Kamaya' could simply be translated as 'peasant' or 'farmer'; for Capot-Rey (1961: 88), 'Kamaya individuality is a social rather than an ethnic phenomenon'.

Kamaya themselves insist on ideas of complementarity. They say that their ancestors arrived in Faya before the Anakazza did, and decided to collaborate with them: one group became sedentary agriculturalists, the other nomadic pastoralists, and they regularly exchanged goods and services. They never paid any tribute, but exchanged gifts; they were friends, 'sharing blankets and meals like brothers'.²⁸ This is also echoed in another story, told by a young Anakazza who has built up a career in the capital, and whose material assets in Faya are limited:

When my grandfather was young, the Kamaya and the Anakazza lived together in the Borkou. The former were sedentary, the latter nomadic, and they were working together. But the Kamaya worked harder, and they were good gardeners, and good traders: they became rich, they bought many camels, and their numbers grew, to the point where

²⁴A. Z., Faya, 14 March 2012.

²⁵Marriage with somebody of slave descent is incongruous, but not unheard of (see also Baroin 1981: 339 on Niger). In contrast, marriage with *aza* (singular *eze*, praise-singers and blacksmiths) is simply impossible (Brandily 1988: 57). Even 'real slave descendants' can thus look down on other people even more despised, although there are hardly any *aza* in Faya, and *aza* are not associated with agricultural labour and hence Faya's particular relations of production in the way that slaves and Kamaya are.

²⁶A. Z., Faya, 14 March 2012.

²⁷This is still recognized today: 'when the French abolished slavery, we started to marry their [the slaves'] daughters into our families, to discreetly absorb them. You can't tell now, but we know' (General K. T., N'Djamena, 8 May 2012).

²⁸'Lettre ouverte de la population Kamaya de Borkou', 20 October 1996, APF.

the Anakazza started to get worried. They knew they could not beat them, so they had to come up with a ruse: the Anakazza were good hunters, and knew the desert to the south of Faya; the Kamaya did not hunt, but liked to eat game. My grandfather invited them to a gazelle hunt. All the Kamaya men came, and my grandfather led them into the desert. When they ran out of water, he said that he would go and fetch some, and returned to Faya as quickly as he could. All the Kamaya men died of thirst, and the Kamaya women had to ask for protection. This is why they were paying tribute when the French arrived.²⁹

Explanations of the Kamaya's contemporary status solely in terms of a history of slavery thus need to be nuanced.

LABOUR

Similarly, if we take a closer look at the two terms that, according to French colonial and local description, are historically at the heart of the low social status of the Kamaya – agricultural labour and property – both turn out to be problematic. There seems to be no real tradition of sedentarism in the Borkou. The German explorer Nachtigal, who travelled in the 1870s to the neighbouring oases of N'Gourma and Kirdimi, speaks of a limited population of 'slaves, half-free and poor immigrants' (Nachtigal 1881: 139), which he estimates, for the whole region, at 500 inhabitants (out of a total population of 10,000 to 12,000; Nachtigal 1881: 141).³⁰ Indeed, Nachtigal's description of the political situation immediately prior to the French conquest speaks of such devastation that it is difficult to imagine any permanent settlement at all:

The sedentary and nomadic population is reduced each year in number and wealth. The Awlād Sulaymān and the Tuareg have more than decimated the nomads or at least their large herds ... and the Borkou is periodically laid waste ... The extensive gardens in most valleys have been lying fallow and desolate for years, because who feels like working if the fruits of his labour will be harvested by the enemy? (Nachtigal 1881: 141–2)

There were no permanent constructions, as even the sedentary population lived in tents (Nachtigal 1881: 143). This was still the case in the middle of the twentieth century.³¹ As the French geographer Capot-Rey (1961: 72) noted, 'constantly populated and depopulated, the Borkou looks today like a region of recent settlement'.

As a result, perhaps, distinctions between nomads and sedentarists were fluid. The colonial officers and administrators never stopped complaining about the 'unfortunate tendency' displayed by agriculturalists to become nomadic at any possible occasion: 'the ambition of the sedentary Kamaya is to own camels to

²⁹A. R. M., Battan Jenné, 29 September 2012.

³⁰Compared with other Saharan societies, these figures are extremely low. More usually, as Retaillé (1998: 73) notes, 'even within nomadic societies, sedentarists are in the majority'.

³¹'Urban centres. This term seems to be somewhat extravagant in the B.E.T. because it does not really apply to [Faya-]Largeau, where the natives prefer straw-tents that can easily be dismantled, to mud huts': 'Rapport politique', 2nd term 1948, ANT W 20.

play at being a real nomad. As soon as he has any money, he will buy a camel or two and stop cultivating.³² In the 1950s, Kamaya thus eagerly offered themselves for employment on French government construction sites, leaving their gardens to go fallow.³³ Conversely, an earlier report sees sedentarism as a 'choice' made by former nomads, a choice that they should not now be able to reverse.³⁴ This indicates that colonial policy might have played a part in sharpening what used to be even fuzzier distinctions. According to Chapelle:

A whole range of combinations is possible, and the life of a family can develop or change completely in less than one generation, following a change in the make-up of the family herd that obliges them to move somewhere else, or after emigration that obliges them to change livestock. Camel-herds hence become cowherds, and goatherds leave the oases or mountains to move to the dunes, while former cattle owners return north to the *hād* pastures. (Chapelle 1957: 181)

This flexibility is exacerbated by the fluid structure of Tubu society, where, through bilateral descent and far-reaching exogamy, primary connections depend on personal preference to a great extent, and vary over time (Baroin 2009: 136).³⁵ Tellingly, the categories that Chapelle lists earlier in his book to describe the sedentary population – 'share-croppers, former slaves, widows, the poor and the old' (Chapelle 1957: 70) – describe lifecycle stages as much as permanent identities. This is borne out by more recent research that notes the over-representation of women and the high average age among the sedentary population of the Borkou (BIEP 1992: 14–15).³⁶

Agriculture is similarly limited. Water in Faya can be found between three and five metres underground, and most palm trees thus survive without irrigation. Neither are they trimmed, and little care is taken of them during the year, although some are fertilized. This means that their owners have to visit the oasis only during the harvest season, in July and August, leaving their trees to fend for themselves for the rest of the year. Such non-irrigated palm trees are much less productive, and bear smallish dates. The local reaction to this is to plant more trees rather than to invest more labour. This is a sound decision, as even development experts grudgingly conclude, in an area where land and water are abundant but labour is not (République du Tchad 1994: 23). It is important to note here that this 'absence of labour' is the result of cultural preference rather than population statistics. For Kamaya and Anakazza alike, work, and especially agricultural manual labour, has no intrinsic value; it tends to be seen as a temporary calamity

³²'Rapport politique', 1st term 1949, ANT W 20. In 1957, the 3,500 sedentarists in the area owned more than 2,000 camels (Chapelle 1957: 123).

³³'Bulletin mensuel', April–May 1957, ANT W 20.

³⁴'Rapport trimestriel', 2nd term 1928, ANT W 19.

³⁵Each nuclear family is attached to far-reaching criss-crossing relations of mutual aid that involve kin and affines, in such a way that it is both autonomous and bound to the others. This leads to a fluid social mesh, without centre or periphery, in which each Tubu is placed at the centre of his or her own personal network' (Baroin 2009: 136).

³⁶The average is over forty-five years, in a country where the average life expectancy is fifty-one years, and 65 per cent of the population are twenty-five or younger (BIEP 1992: 14). By now, enrolment in the army or a rebel group has replaced pastoralism as the culturally preferred economic choice for those who opt for mobility, although, of course, the two are by no means mutually exclusive.

rather than a necessity. This is well attested today in everyday conversation, as well as being insisted upon, with much moral outrage, in the colonial reports. Year after year, these reports say that harvests are bad because people refuse to ‘take rational care’ of their palm trees.³⁷ ‘It is absolutely necessary to carefully watch over the maintenance of the palm grove,’ in 1934, ‘and to force the natives who are naturally apathetic to plant new trees, or else the palm grove will be altogether lost to the wandering sand dunes.’³⁸ Or, ten years later, ‘the population of [Faya-] Largeau still show no enthusiasm for work. On principle, men do nothing, young women live more or less from prostitution, old women ... illegally brew millet beer’.³⁹ The result is a ‘despicable shambles’ in the stead of a palm grove.⁴⁰

As palm trees are not irrigated, horticulture is limited to the few permanently irrigated gardens that exist; this has long been so.⁴¹ Nachtigal (1881) does not mention irrigated gardens in the Borkou. All the plants needing irrigation that are cultivated in Faya today – with the exception of millet, which is rarely grown – were imported either from Libya, although it is mostly impossible to tell exactly when, or France. Even after prolonged efforts by Libyan settlers from the 1930s onwards, and by the French colonial administration, of the 2,000 hectares of palm grove in and around Faya in the 1960s, only 60 hectares were irrigated and their palm trees trimmed and tended throughout the year (BDPA 1962: 31). With the departure of Libyan settlers in the 1970s, this percentage decreased further, and Faya and its surroundings are now covered in abandoned, formerly irrigated gardens. What remains are extensive palm groves, a ‘type of cultivation that is very closely related to a gathering economy’ (BDPA 1962: 55), and which is best understood as one aspect of a predominantly pastoral economy (Granry 1992).

In such a setting, the need for settled agricultural labour is by no means a foregone conclusion. As a consequence, ‘labour’ does not seem to precede or create the category of ‘Kamaya’; rather, it is the presence of ‘Kamaya’ – in the sense of a sedentary population ‘unsuitable’ for nomadic life – that creates (the possibility of and need for) labour within forms of agricultural production imported from elsewhere.⁴² Tellingly, although both Anakazza and Kamaya historical accounts date the connection between settled agricultural labour and the category ‘Kamaya’ to precolonial days, salaried agriculture and share-cropping contracts clearly were imported to the area in recent times, first by the Sanūsiyya, and then, with a more lasting effect, by Libyan agricultural settlers, who set the

³⁷ ‘Bulletin mensuel de renseignements politiques’, September 1956, ANT W 22.

³⁸ ‘Rapport trimestriel’, 2nd quarter 1934, ANT W 18.

³⁹ ‘Rapport trimestriel’, 1st term 1945, ANT W 20.

⁴⁰ ‘Lettre du lieutenant Laboubée, chef du District du Borkou, au Gouverneur du Territoire du Tchad’, 13 October 1949, ANT W 22.

⁴¹ This is by no means the necessary result of easily accessible water tables: similar hydrological conditions have given rise, in eastern Algeria, to intensive horticulture (see Bisson 2004: 213–15).

⁴² This does not mean that the Sanūsiyya and the Libyan settlers of the 1930s introduced irrigated horticulture to the Borkou for the first time, but rather that there is no uninterrupted history of agricultural production in the area. A similar waxing and waning of irrigated horticulture has been documented for Kufra in what is now southern Libya (see, for example, Rohlf 1881: 268).

Kamaya to work in their gardens long before the Anakazza attempted to do so.⁴³ Despite assumptions to the contrary, by development experts and government officials alike, irrigated horticulture in Faya might thus be a historical contingency, belonging mostly to the period of Libyan settlement. This points to the distinctive possibility that these relations of production might shift again, potentially doing away with the mutually defining status of both 'Kamaya' and 'Anakazza'. Meanwhile, although rejection of manual – and especially agricultural – labour is at the heart of Anakazza self-definition, everybody knows that many Anakazza are poor, as poor or perhaps poorer than their Kamaya neighbours. They can avoid working at home but only at the price of migration to Libya, where they know that they usually have to join the lower ranks of the workforce.⁴⁴ The distinction between Anakazza and Kamaya in terms of labour therefore does not establish a direct link between labour and status, but is rather a statement about who can be seen to do what, where, and in which context. Indeed, the public emphasis put on the opposition between Anakazza and Kamaya in contemporary Faya often seems to hide less avowable but nonetheless highly relevant tensions between rich and poor, urban and rural, army personnel and others, those who have 'made it' in contemporary Chad and those who have failed.

This is also reflected in contemporary agricultural production. The little horticulture that exists today is in the hands of both Kamaya and Anakazza (and members of other *cantons* such as the 'semi-nomadic' Donza). Granry (1992: 15), a development expert sent to the oasis in the early 1990s, estimates that half of all gardens were then held by Kamaya, 30 per cent by Donza, and 11 per cent by Anakazza – figures that roughly reflect the composition of Faya's permanent population. Agricultural labour is procured in different ways, although it is difficult to see whether this is due to differences in wealth and connections or in *canton*. Today, poorer Kamaya who own a plot of land generally work it themselves with the help of their family, although it is common for farmers in this case to attempt to find an additional job in order to make ends meet and to establish the necessary political relations for the successful functioning of their enterprise. Poor Anakazza generally do not own irrigated gardens, but only palm trees in extensive palm groves, which they look after themselves. Wealthy Kamaya and Anakazza alike readily invest in gardens and irrigated horticulture, and ideally have these worked by sharecroppers. For Kamaya, these are mostly members of their own family, poor 'cousins' of some description, although, as everybody agrees, such relatives are often difficult to come by. Difficulties in finding sharecroppers are exacerbated for Anakazza, especially those who played an important role in the 2006 conflict. Prominent Anakazza either have to rely on the labour of their wives and poorer female relatives or pay immigrants from eastern Chad to work their land. The only example of 'traditional' sharecropping that we came across (but which is certainly not the only one that exists) was that of a Donza who still employs the same two Kamaya families as his father did in an irrigated garden initially set up by a Libyan settler. Although, conceptually, 'Kamaya' and irrigated horticulture are closely related,

⁴³'Rapport trimestriel', 1st quarter 1929, ANT W 18.

⁴⁴Little research has been carried out on Tubu migration to Libya, although it is numerically and culturally important: the one exception here is Clanet (1981).

and indeed used to be mutually defining, in practice the association between contemporary Kamaya and agricultural labour is thus relatively weak in a social environment where labour is scorned by all.

PROPERTY

Property relations are hardly more conclusive. Contemporary Anakazza claims to land are twofold: on the one hand, a general claim to eminent domain, as articulated in the 2006 Anakazza memorandum quoted above; on the other, individual claims to partial ownership of specific plots of land, in the name of prior occupation or labour carried out there. The former claim does not seem to have any historical roots, as the ownership of virgin land – on which claims to eminent domain rest – seems to have been a colonial invention (much like the office of the *chef de canton*); moreover, as all historical sources indicate, land simply belonged to the person who put it under cultivation (see, for example, Chapelle 1957: 200). ‘Ownership’, meanwhile, was vested in palm trees, wells or springs (Baroin 1997), but not land itself.⁴⁵ In contemporary Chad, private claims to eminent domain are legally void: since colonial times, all uncultivated land is state property; land brought under cultivation after the 1930s belongs to those who cultivate it.⁴⁶ Yet, on the ground, as Djikoloum (2004: 50) observes, the Chadian state, ‘entangled in its contradictions, and confronted with an eternal shortage of means’, finds it difficult to exercise its right to eminent domain in any practical way. ‘Custom’ thus prevails, and ‘traditional authorities’, who constitute an increasingly important parallel hierarchy to the regular administration (Néné Tassi 2000: 14), can easily arrogate themselves the right to distribute resources, to the detriment of state officials (Djikoloum 2004: 50).

This is clearly the case in Faya, where, from 1991 onwards, administrators posted to the Borkou complained about land grants made by the Anakazza *chef de canton*:

It must be noted that since 1989 and despite the presence of administrative authorities (Prefect, Sub-Prefect) plots of land are granted by the Anakazza *chef de canton* or his local representative, while the authorities mentioned above do not make the slightest gesture to stop him.⁴⁷

At first, most of these grants concerned property left vacant by Libyan settlers or the Libyan army after its defeat in 1987. By the 1990s, however, they included land everywhere in and around Faya, giving rise to a large number of complaints by Anakazza and Kamaya alike.⁴⁸ The fault lines here lie not between different *cantons*, however, but rather between the ‘traditional authorities’ and the civil

⁴⁵Until the arrival of the Sanūsīyya, Islamic law seems to have had little salience in the area, and its impact remains limited even today.

⁴⁶Here, as elsewhere, colonial law was carried into the independent republic with little change (Djikoloum 2004: 48).

⁴⁷Lettre du Préfet du B.E.T., Haliki Tideimi, au Ministre de l’Intérieur’, 12 June 1991, APF.

⁴⁸See, for example, ‘Lettre de Ali Bolobo, demeurant à Koukourou, au préfet du Borkou’, 14 November 2004, APF; ‘Gendarmerie nationale, procès-verbal d’enquête préliminaire’, 17 February 1993, APF.

administration. In 1993, after a prolonged dispute between the *chefs de canton* and the president of the civil tribunal in Faya, the Minister of Justice himself found it necessary to remind the *chefs de canton* of the limits of their prerogatives, and of the fact that ‘the law is the same for all citizens and the Borkou *notables* cannot be an exception to this’.⁴⁹ This was clearly to no avail, as, in 2009, the sub-prefect once more declared all land grants made by ‘customary authorities’ to be illegal.⁵⁰

The civil authorities objected to such land grants not on grounds of principle – claiming, for instance, respect for private property or state eminent domain – but rather for reasons of rivalry, as granting land seems to be understood as a general prerogative, and indeed a necessary condition, of political office of all kinds.⁵¹ From the late 1980s and especially in 1992, the sub-prefect of the Borkou and the prefect of the BET distributed a large number of plots of land and houses, some of which clearly already had an ‘owner’ of some sort. At the same time, army commanders freely handed out the same real estate to their officers; the archives are full of complaints by civil administrations against army personnel who refused to vacate property granted to somebody else – complaints that seem rarely to have been heeded. As a result, most plots of land in the town have a number of title deeds, often, but not always, conflicting with each other, and property rights are understood to be inherently fragile and dependent on the wider political context. Faced with this situation, prudent landowners seek written grants from as many authorities as possible, going at times as far as petitioning the Minister of the Interior in N’Djamena.⁵² Meanwhile, or so people say, it is sufficient to travel a certain distance from Faya in order to be able to occupy any land one chooses. This is why the area around Elleboye, relatively far from any traditional centre of power, is so popular with people of all *cantons* wishing to set up a new plantation (see also Rodriguez 1988: 62).

The Anakazza *chef de canton*’s claim to eminent domain is thus but one among many, and not necessarily always the strongest. Anakazza claims to individual property rooted in first occupancy are similarly contested and contextual; alongside brawls, conflicts related to such claims make up the majority of cases tried in the Faya tribunal of first instance (BIEP 1992: 27). In a property dispute of 1995, Tchou, an Anakazza who sued a Kamaya, Youssouf, for ownership of an irrigated garden, described the classic scenario. Youssouf had illegally occupied this garden for thirty-five years, Tchou claimed; the garden had been planted by his grandfather and ‘worked with his sweat’ – it was his personal inheritance. Youssouf’s father had been only its ‘guardian’:

This means that my parents looked after their livestock in the desert and he trimmed the date palms and even irrigated them and during the harvest he had his share of dates and in the garden he has his own plot: that is to say, the area where he plants new palm trees with his own sweat.

⁴⁹‘Le Ministre de la Justice au Préfet de B.E.T.’, 20 March 1993, APF.

⁵⁰Sous-préfecture rurale de Faya, ‘Note circulaire’, 23 December 2009, APF.

⁵¹This is very different from the ‘power-sharing’ arrangements that can be found in West Africa, where ‘traditional authorities’ hold spiritual rights over land that do not coincide with what is now defined as ‘property’ or ‘political sovereignty’; see, for example, Lund (2013: 17–18).

⁵²Lettre du chef de bataillon Abakar Inyat, au Ministre de l’Intérieur et de la Sécurité’, 21 June 1994, APF.

Youssef, on the other hand, claimed that he had no idea who Tchou was and that his father 'had never associated himself with anybody in a palm grove and had never been anybody's gardener'.⁵³

In these individual cases, claims are based on traces of former occupation and ownership, and on testimony; it is common for both parties to muster impressive numbers of witnesses who swear to contrary and mutually exclusive truths. History thus matters, and nobody would doubt that it holds the key to truth and justice; but even its most basic tenets are constantly open to debate, as there is no agreement, among groups but also between individuals, on its most basic outlines, nor even on the sources that one might consult to establish them.⁵⁴ Reliance on material traces is equally problematic, as Faya's houses and gardens are periodically swept by moving sand dunes that swallow up mud bricks, wells and palm trees alike. These sand dunes take about twenty to thirty years – one generation – to move on. Add to this the decades of civil war, population replacement and foreign occupation, and the grounds for historical claims become limited indeed. This seems to further encourage detailed descriptions of the few (and always ambiguous) traces of former occupation, while 'usurpers' are invariably accused of uprooting palm trees or of cutting them 'into mini-chunks', presumably to hide them more effectively: 'everywhere', as the Anakazza memorandum puts it, 'one finds relics of houses and fossils of fields'.⁵⁵ At the end, however, quarrels over ownership are generally decided by political expediency, particularly as there is always a danger that they might turn into larger conflicts, as happened in 2006. Private property is thus eminently political, inherently fragile, and generally understood to be both. Moreover, as it is mostly limited to cultivated gardens, it is dependent on prior labour which in turn (by definition at least) is the domain of Kamaya. Thus, unless Anakazza can claim rights over Kamaya labour on grounds other than those of land ownership, their claims easily appear to be hypocritical or simply absurd. In any case, no clear picture of Anakazza dominance emerges, and, in terms of practical occupation, Kamaya often seem to have the upper hand (as in Tchou's case), if only through passive resistance. State support, meanwhile, might go either way.

Despite their momentary show of strength in 2006, the Anakazza are in a potentially vulnerable position in Faya, as they are away for most of the year, either 'behind their camels' in pasture areas or employed elsewhere in Chad or Libya. According to one Anakazza resident in N'Djamena:

Today, Faya is inhabited by immigrants. All the people from Faya are here in N'Djamena. If we still have relatives in Faya, it's only because they got bogged down there, they cannot come. Or they are people of no account, or handicapped.⁵⁶

For poorer Anakazza 'bogged down' in Faya, the threat of 'Kamaya colonization' is thus all too real (particularly as they are well aware of their more fortunate

⁵³Gendarmerie nationale, *Enquête préliminaire*, 30 August 1995, APF.

⁵⁴There is a copy of Chapelle's book available in Faya's only public library, but it has been heavily annotated in red, with whole pages crossed out and rendered illegible.

⁵⁵Lettre du chef de canton Anakazza Abdramane Mahamat Djimimi au Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Sécurité, 7 January 1995, APF; 'Mémorandum de la communauté Anakazza'.

⁵⁶M. T. Y., N'Djamena, 15 June 2012.

cousins' disdain). This becomes especially visible when state officials promote 'development projects' of the kind likely to create even more 'Kamaya'. When, in 2012, the government proposed to dig an artesian well in Mardangai, an Anakazza suburb, the local population successfully petitioned against the project, fearing that it would redefine much of their extensive palm grove as 'agricultural land' and thereby open it up for Kamaya settlement.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, in the neighbouring suburb of Djiddi, a functioning artesian well now waters pastures for donkeys, as all potential settlers have been kept out, through persuasion or threat. This general feeling of (relative) Anakazza vulnerability can go some way towards accounting for the violence of the 2006 conflict, for the need, felt by local Anakazza, to clothe it in the most insulting and general terms of all – that of servility and age-old group opposition – and for the animation, passion and even hatred with which these events are discussed today, on both sides.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the 2006 conflict was settled in favour of the Anakazza not through local negotiation but through outside intervention, not by poor Anakazza whose livelihoods depend on their annual supply of dates but by high-ranking officials and army officers who otherwise barely ever visit the town. This clearly means that local Anakazza managed to describe one set of local conflicts in terms that were heard in the capital; yet it also indicates that the settlement of the 2006 conflict is perhaps best explained with reference to contemporary Chadian politics. Faya has long been seen as the fief of the Anakazza, 'brothers' to one former president, Hissène Habré, and in-laws to the current incumbent, Idriss Déby. To visibly lose control over their 'home', even though influential Anakazza hardly ever visit it, would be shameful and, in the volatile context of Chadian politics, potentially disastrous. After all, most if not all of Chad is governed through such notional 'fiefs' that determine political influence in the centre (Marchal 2006: 146; see also Brachet and Scheele 2015). Much like property rights, political influence in northern Chad is highly fragile and based on political showmanship – and it cannot be left to the Kamaya, whoever they might be, to call their bluff.

CONCLUSION

Even if the notion of the 'Kamaya sedentary agricultural labourer of slave descent' was a colonial invention, it was an invention that 'stuck' and still informs contemporary quarrels. Nor can there be any doubt that labour and property relations have something to do with the whole matter. Beyond this, however, none of the traditional explanations of slavery and unfree labour developed in anthropology and African history fit Faya particularly well. Much of this is probably due to the specificities of the case – as Cooper (1979: 106) remarked long ago, there is no reason to assume that there is such a thing as homogeneous 'African slavery', or 'African dependent labour'. Yet this can only be part of the answer. If slavery and dependency remain inherently slippery categories (Dottridge 2005: 690), the same can be said of labour, property and status, the notions

⁵⁷Groupement de Mardangai, 'Lettre au coordinateur Chidi', 5 December 2011, Office National de Développement Rural, Faya.

most commonly used to define them. Labour is perhaps the most obvious case: unless we agree that labour in and of itself creates a certain kind of servitude, slave labour can only be defined in opposition to ‘free labour’ (Moulier Boutang 2005: 1070) – and a definition of the latter term has been notoriously difficult to achieve (see Banaji 2003: 87). Similarly, it is difficult to explain slavery in terms of property, since, as an institution and in terms of practical possession, the latter begs as many questions as the former (Testart 1998: 34). Questions of rights in people and rights in things are of course often intimately related (Chanock 1991: 66), and distinctions between both might lie in unexpected places. But ‘property’ – like ‘labour’ – cannot just be taken for granted, or relegated to the ‘economic background’ that would somehow pre-exist social relations. Status, meanwhile, either depends on a general context of legal or quasi-legal conceptualizations, or it is all too easily subsumed into ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, especially if it is divided from the socio-economic realities that underpin it.

If this seems like a series of merely negative conclusions, there is one thing that the situation in Faya clearly indicates: one needs to be wary of taking allegations of contemporary slave origins or other past forms of dependent labour at face value. In Faya, social status is not the background but the subject matter of history (to paraphrase Cooper 1979: 111). It depends on the broader socio-economic context, including, in this case, the peculiar ecological and political situation of northern Chad, as well as on the local and regional mode of production, which cannot be stable over time (Graeber 2006: 63). If it is now recognized that, despite persisting images of ‘village traditions’, independent peasant production in many parts of West Africa was the result of the abolition of slavery and of the ‘cash-crop revolution’ (Austin 2009: 34), histories of dependency (and forced settlement) might be equally shallow. This, of course, does not make them any less violent and exploitative, as coercion can take many different forms. In Faya, in any case, the category ‘Kamaya’ seems to stand for a particular mode of production – agricultural and dependent, based on ‘labour’ and ‘property’ – of probably limited historicity, and with an uncertain future.

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ABSTRACT

Faya-Largeau, the largest oasis in northern Chad, seems to present a classic picture of Saharan labour relations and status groups. Colonial officers spoke of nomadic 'overlords' who used to exploit sedentary 'serfs' of slave descent, but indirectly favoured the latter; today, former status relations are renegotiated, at times violently so. Access to vital resources, and especially agricultural land, is the focus of much contemporary conflict. Yet, on a closer look, this picture becomes less familiar: local agriculture requires little labour, property rights are

uncertain, bilateral descent, exogamy and a high degree of mobility blur boundaries, while state involvement remains limited and ambiguous, and education little valued. Status, property and labour hence emerge as contextual categories that depend on as much as they constitute a historically specific and inherently unstable mode of production.

RÉSUMÉ

La plus grande oasis du Tchad, Faya-Largeau, semble présenter un tableau classique des études sahariennes en matière de relations de travail et de hiérarchies entre groupes statutaires. Les officiers coloniaux y décrivaient la présence de « suzerains » nomades qui exploitaient leurs « serfs » sédentaires supposés descendants d'esclaves. Aujourd'hui, les statuts des uns et des autres semblent en perpétuelle renégociation, parfois avec violence. Pourtant, en y regardant de plus près, ce tableau bien connu devient moins familier : localement, l'agriculture nécessite peu de travail, les droits de propriété sont instables et incertains, tandis que la filiation cognatique, l'exogamie et la grande mobilité des populations brouillent les limites des groupes sociaux. Dans le même temps, la présence de l'État reste limitée et ambiguë. Statuts, propriété et travail apparaissent ainsi comme étant des catégories intrinsèquement contextuelles qui à la fois reflètent et constituent un mode de production économique et social instable et historiquement marqué.