# Introduction

> The Saharan oases constitute for most observers an opaque and paradoxical universe, whose inhabitants appear as sometimes tightly shut off from the world and fixed on their "ancestral" practice, sometimes as part of complex relationships with other populations that might be very far from them, both geographically and culturally. The intensity of relations would even seem proportional to their physical isolation … This leaves us with the question as to how these outside relations can be articulated with local terms of technical and social organisation, without finally undermining their specificity and autonomy. (Guillermou 1993: 121)[1]

It is very cold in al-Khalīl, and there is not much to eat. Even water has to be brought by large tankers that cross the border from Algeria to Mali and carry it over the fifteen kilometres that separate the town – if this is what it is – from its Algerian twin, Bordj Badji Mokhtar. The nearest cities on the Malian side, Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, are all more than a day's drive away, on unforgiving mud-tracks that carefully circumvent all human settlement, and where teenage drivers practice at night with no headlights.[2] The Sahara is far from pretty here, no rolling dunes or palm gardens, just a vast flat plain with no protection against the constant wind and sandstorms, the beating sun, and the emptiness of a distant horizon. Men spend their days huddled near their trucks or shops, their faces covered with indigo veils, wearing thick leather jackets and Algerian army boots over their long shirts and baggy trousers,

[1] All translations from French and Arabic are my own, unless stated otherwise. Names have been changed where necessary.
[2] For the location of all places mentioned in the introduction, see Map I.1.


MAP 1.1. Algeria and northern Mali.

playing cards, boasting, shivering, smoking and drinking tea: life is fast in al-Khalīl, but the days are long, and are best described, in Spanish-inflected Algerian Arabic, as utter *miseria*. The few women in al-Khalīl are of little virtue, and are always hungry, with the exception of local Tuareg women married to Khalīlīs whose husbands have bought them generators so that they can watch Jackie Chan videos. There are few children, all smoking incessantly. As the evening draws in, people gradually get up, stretch, adjust their veils, and begin to load cars and trucks, fill tanks, and check their satellite phones. Customers arrive from the other side of the border: a bad-tempered Algerian soldier, haggling over a car,

kneading his cap between his sinewy hands and twitching fearfully on his spindly legs at every sound of steps behind him; several well-nourished and rosy-cheeked Algerian traders crossing over from Bordj with "good business" and a pronounced interest in such improbable items as the latest Mauritanian fashion in Moroccan upholstery for the wife back home; a small and skinny Mauritanian, bent with age and moral doubt, waiting for the appointed time to carry some camels across the border, and meanwhile trying to find food and to keep control over his teenage apprentice; the pony-tailed drug-smuggling neighbour from Chad haggling over a secondhand satellite phone and inviting people for dinner; a group of rather nervous youth from Gao, waving their AK47s while looking for a spare tire; the inevitable West African migrants, grey with fatigue and visibly bearing traces of repeated stints in Algerian prisons.

Although al-Khalīl is marked on no map, every child in the area knows it: it is *'āṣima ta'l-frūd*, the capital of illegal trade in the northern Malian desert, and it is booming. Its oldest permanent house was built in 1993; at that time, it served as a store for arms for the separatist rebellion of the early 1990s.[3] Fifteen years later, al-Khalīl has developed into almost a town, with shops, restaurants, hostels and call-centres. Its scattered habitations – several hundreds of them, with at times a score of inhabitants each – stretch far into the surrounding plain; at its outskirts, *coināt* or "corners" of future buildings stake out claims to further construction sites as far as the eye can see. All construction material is imported from nearby Algeria, and manual labour is usually provided by sub-Saharan migrants. There are two mosques; a primary school is under construction; there is a health centre and the remains of a gendarmerie. Houses, however, are rare: most people live in what they call *gawārij* (sing. *garāj*), from the French *garage*: large courtyards capable of holding several trucks, enclosed by high concrete walls and protected by solid iron gates, with two or three rooms in a corner serving as a shop, storage place, kitchen and shelter for the night. True Khalīlīs are always on the move, and al-Khalīl is never the same two days in a row. People travel through, stay in a *garāj*, and leave the next day: in the unlikely event of a raid by Malian security forces, little would be found there but a ghost town. All traders who come to al-Khalīl are necessarily connected to one

[3] Since national independence in 1960, northern Mali has been shaken by a series of rebellions and droughts, mainly turning on questions of regional and local sovereignty, and the role of and access to the state; on the 1990s, see Maiga (1997) and Ag Youssouf and Poulton (1998); for a more nuanced appraisal of the sociopolitical context, see Grémont et al. (2004).

*garāj*, where they sleep and eat for free, and can pass the night undisturbed, protected by the owner's arsenal of guns, fierce reputation, and sturdy doors. In exchange, they conduct all their trade in the *garāj* and rarely change allegiance.

Al-Khalīl exists because of its close connection to Bordj Badji Mokhtar: it is primarily a transhipment point for smuggled goods of all kinds. Flour, pasta, and petrol come down from Algeria on small jeeps, on antique trucks, or even on the backs of camels and donkeys. Livestock and cigarettes come up from Mali, the former on the hoof or on the back of trucks, the latter on relatively new Toyotas. Veils, perfumes, jewellery, incense, and furniture arrive from southern Morocco and Mauritania, places at the forefront of feminine fashion with harbours wide open to Chinese imports; these commodities are often traded by women, who travel themselves, in jeeps, or who send their drivers. Narcotics arrive from Mauritania via the Western Sahara, or from the Gulf of Guinea, and travel around the southern tip of Algeria through Niger and Chad to Egypt, and thence to Israel and Europe. Arms come up from long-standing crisis zones, such as Chad, or are unloaded in the large ports of the Gulf of Guinea and are sold throughout the area. Four-by-fours of dubious provenance are supplied with Mauritanian paperwork to avoid the costly customs clearance that they would otherwise be subject to throughout West Africa. Passengers travel up and down, perching on the top of heavy loads, tending livestock, or paying dearly for secret passage: temporary labour migrants from Mali, women with new babies on their laps visiting relatives on either side of the border, sub-Saharans on their way north, freshly turned back by the Algerian security forces or temporarily resident in al-Khalīl. Although al-Khalīl owes its existence to the vicinity of the Algerian border, it has by now in itself become a point of attraction, and sometimes drivers make considerable detours to take advantage of the relative security, efficient infrastructure, and various services it offers to those who have friends or family there: car repairs, spare parts, currency exchange, paperwork, credit facilities, and information.

Rather than as a town, al-Khalīl is thus perhaps best understood as a truck-stop – as a node in various overlapping networks that derive their power and standing from the outside and that have little to do with each other. Every *garāj* stands for a set of trade networks that it can draw on in times of need. These networks in turn bind local residents more closely to friends and relatives scattered throughout the Sahara on either side of the border than to their next-door neighbours. "If something goes

wrong," people say, "you need to have friends – friends and guns – but you can hire guns, you cannot hire friends." On closer inspection, the various institutions that might turn al-Khalīl into a town turn out to be optical illusions. The health centre, constructed by the Red Cross in a brief spurt of interest in the border region fifteen years ago, is still waiting for the doctor, a "Bambara" (the local shorthand for southern Malian) who "got lost" on his way. The primary school is far from finished, and there is no teacher – and very few children, in any case, and these are more interested in learning about trucks than alphabets. The gendarmerie post is similarly empty, and here everybody knows what happened: "the government built this post, a nice building, you can see, and then they sent soldiers with guns, *suwādīn* ('blacks,' that is to say people from southern Mali) who were already shaking with fear when they arrived. They lasted two days: on the second night, we stole all their guns, and we never saw them again." The two mosques were constructed with private funds, but even they can hardly be taken to represent "Khalīlī society." At least one of them, people say, was built by a notorious drug dealer, to show off his wealth and perhaps even to buy his place in paradise, but nobody ever goes to pray there – quite simply, because nobody ever prays in al-Khalīl: for al-Khalīl is a place of corruption, and their prayer would wither on the tongue.

Al-Khalīl is a place of corruption, and this, from a local point of view, is the true reason why it cannot be a town. People forget truthfulness and religion as soon as they breathe its air; they act like animals when they get there: it therefore remains beyond the bounds of "civilisation" and part of the *bādiya* (steppe, wilderness). This is why "proper" women should never live there; conversely, because there are no women and hence no families, it is impossible for men to lead a "good life" here. Crouching over their tea and numbing their empty stomachs with cigarettes, young men might like to boast of their freedom, which implies the absence of mothers, wives, and table manners as much as, or even more than fast cars, heroic deeds, and familiarity with the vastness of the desert. Most Khalīlīs are young men, and the atmosphere in the *gawārij* oscillates strangely between a school trip and a cowboy film, with frequent casualties. However, they know that in actual fact women, and the "civilisation" women represent, are indispensable to al-Khalīl, inasmuch as women are pivotal to the various social networks that allow it to survive. Every Khalīlī dreams about leading a "real life," which means getting married and investing in a house elsewhere, ideally several hundred kilometres further north in southern Algeria, where the amenities

of "civilisation" – a fridge, satellite TV, running water – are most easily come by. Successful traders are those who own houses in large Algerian towns, Adrar or Tamanrasset, staffed by one or several wives, in addition to livestock and real estate in northern Mali and perhaps even Bamako, the Malian capital in the south of the country. Conversely, it is only the "immoral" business of al-Khalīl that allows the traders' wives and families to live a "modest" life back in the civilisation of Malian or Algerian towns, a life of scholarship, prayer and female leisure and seclusion. Both in the economic and the social sense, and on the level of aspirations, al-Khalīl therefore remains a half-world that, by the revenue it generates, helps to make and maintain place elsewhere, while remaining tributary to the various outside places and routes it represents.[4]

This is equally true where relations to regional states are concerned. The vicinity of the Algerian state is crucial to the functioning of al-Khalīl: it creates and maintains the international border without which smuggling would be meaningless; it has long subsidised Algerian production of staples, leading to considerable price differentials – and hence profits – either side of the border; it provides the necessary infrastructure, water, food, and well-maintained tracks; last but not least, by all accounts, state officials are deeply involved in all aspects of transborder business. Nonetheless, the residents of al-Khalīl take great delight in insisting on their statelessness and total independence. But even here, images of the state remain central to all assertions of autonomy: *kull garāj dawla wāḥida* (every garage is a state in itself), as people like to boast. Algerian soldiers are the stereotypical "other" and are described as "worse than dogs"; and people laughingly claim to belong to the "popular and democratic republic of al-Khalīl," echoing the official title of Algeria. Past stints in prison are frequently invoked, and life in al-Khalīl is described as their antithesis, as the only way in which men can be men. But again, manliness *à la Khalīl* requires guns, friends, and fast four-wheel-drive Toyotas, and thus considerable means. These are best acquired through properly illegal traffic, which in turn, it is commonly alleged, is not merely organised by state officials, but also run just like a state. People say that the "mafias" that organise such traffic have "ministries," "delegates," and "security services," all managed with the strictest discipline, and that recruitment is made on an exclusively individual basis that pays no heed to prior family

[4] The term "half-world" is taken from Chapman's (1978) analysis of the "Gaelic vision" in Scottish culture, which he describes as a necessary part of a larger opposition that serves to define both "Scottish" and "English" traits, and which hence cannot be understood on its own.

or other social ties and obligations. Despite the constant boasting of their exploits, bravery, and courage, most drivers I spoke to were painfully aware of their dependence on the *patrons* – very few among them own their own cars – and of the fact that they are risking their lives to make other people rich. Al-Khalīl, then, might look like a bastion of autonomy, but it remains in fact a necessary part of something larger, to which it is always tributary: it makes no sense on its own, but it needs to be understood with reference to the various networks, outside connections and power relations that make it what it is.

Harsh, cold, unstable, and bearing all the trappings of "modernity," al-Khalīl hardly brings to mind images of immutable Saharan oases sheltered by shady palm gardens supplied by camel caravans, images of, say, the fabled trading towns of Timbuktu in northern Mali or Ghadamès in contemporary Libya. Khalīlīs themselves, however, like to stress continuity over change: al-Khalīl is, according to them, but the "child" of the more historical trading posts in northern Mali, such as Kidal or Gao. Al-Khalīl is "the same as" the Sahelian quarters that grace all southern Algerian cities: it is just another visible manifestation of what has always been going on in the area. Much of this is rhetorical, of course, but al-Khalīl's intrinsic and very visible outside dependency, as well as its brutal cosmopolitanism, fake autonomy, immorality, and adaptability to change might indeed provide clues for understanding the area more generally. As a place in the making, al-Khalīl forces us to question preconceived notions of Saharan settlement, exchange and regional unity, and to develop a new conceptual framework that can grasp it not as an exception but as an indicator of lasting features of Saharan life: this is what this book attempts to do.

## THE OTHER FACE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Al-Khalīl is not alone in its economic vitality: if we believe in statistics, the Sahara is perhaps the fastest changing, most dynamic, and wealthiest region of the African continent. Urbanisation has been rapid over the last decades, as has demographic growth, caused by in-migration rather than high birth rates, and the Sahara contains some of the world's largest known resources in oil and natural gas.[5] As a result perhaps, governments

[5] Figures on urbanisation are mainly available for Algeria (see Côte 2005), where 80 percent of all Saharans now reside in cities or towns, and Libya (Pliez 2003, J. Bisson 2003). 95 percent of all exports from Algeria and Libya are crude oil or gas, accounting for 30 percent and 60 percent of GDP, respectively. Libya ranks ninth in worldwide proven oil

in the Maghreb especially have made considerable efforts to integrate their Saharan territories into the nation-state, an effort that in many cases has paid off. Southern Algeria, for instance, sports modern cities with urban facilities, relatively efficient transport networks, numerous universities, almost nationwide Internet and telephone coverage, strictly imposed national security, and rates of schooling comparable to many European countries (Côte 2005). Libya, for its part, has revivified Saharan agriculture through heavy investment in mechanised irrigation and deep wells, as a showcase of the victory of man over sand (Pliez 2003, J. Bisson 2003). This means that urban structures have changed. Although a strong case can be made for the structural outside dependency of Saharan cities (Pliez 2003, Bensaâd 2005a), the past variety of external sources of investment is now marginalised by the economic and political power of Maghrebi states, whose oil-fuelled financial resources have dwarfed any revenue that might be made from agriculture, causing people to abandon outlying oases in favour of administrative centres and their immediate hinterlands. In Niger and Mali, meanwhile, ecological and political changes have led to new patterns of residence and economic exploitation (A. Marty 1993), and even here, state revenues and development aid have become central to local power struggles and livelihoods, alongside booming cross-border trade (Nijenhuis 2003, Giuffrida 2005a). If images of a uniquely Arabic- and Tamasheq-speaking Sahara of taciturn camel herders have little or no historic underpinning, they certainly falter when confronted with the observable multilingualism of contemporary Saharan cities and oases – that house Chinese workers, Middle Eastern teachers, Malay migrants, Pakistani preachers, European tourists, Mauritanian traders, Malian tailors, Cameroonian builders, Nigerian fraudsters, and Ghanaian barbers, alongside national in-migrants from the north (Boesen and Marfaing 2007).

Although these developments and the growing importance of transnational connections are increasingly visible in scholarship on the Sahara, conceptual frameworks that would allow us to integrate them into Saharan history and society more generally have been slow to develop. On the one hand, there are in-depth studies on Saharan localities, mainly produced by geographers, anthropologists, and historians, and mostly published in French, many of which speak of urbanisation, "modernisation,"

reserves, and Algeria sixteenth – tenth in natural gas reserves. Prospecting for oil is underway in northern Mali, while Niger and Mauritania have just started exploiting their own, in the former case to supplement a more longstanding extraction of uranium.

agriculture, and the state. Southern Morocco is especially favoured here (Bencherifa and Popp 1990, Alaoui and Carrière 1991, Bellakhdar et al. 1992), as are Tunisia (Attia 1965, A.-F. Baduel and P. Baduel 1980, Bédoucha 1987, Morvan 1993, V. Bisson 2005) and, to a lesser degree, Mauritania (Leservoisier 1994). Others provide excellent studies of the ecology and sociopolitical history of pastoral groups, in particular in Mauritania (Ould Cheikh 1985, Bonte 2008) and the countries of the Sahel (E. Bernus 1981, Casajus 1987, Bourgeot 1995, Grégoire 1999, Grémont 2010). The scant literature on the Algerian Sahara reproduces similar divisions between more or less sedentarised nomads (Ben Hounet 2009), analyses of urbanisation in the northern Algerian Sahara (Côte 2005), and anthropological works that focus on "traditional" oasis towns in the Touat (Moussaoui 2002) and the Gourara (Bellil 1999–2000). But most of these studies pay relatively little attention to comparative questions or even regional connections, which they relegate to the footnotes, or, at best, treat as tangential and subsidiary to the "real" matter at hand. Even a book (J. Bisson 2003) that purports to review the Sahara as a whole and provides a broad bibliography and far-ranging series of case studies makes little effort to elaborate a regional or even truly comparative framework.

Transregional mobility, on the other hand, is at the heart of the perhaps most popular – and certainly the best-funded – topic of contemporary Saharan research: trans-Saharan migration.[6] Here, mobility is key, to the point where the more sedentary inhabitants of the Sahara, as well as local socioeconomic particularities, become almost invisible. This is problematic on two accounts. Although, in fact, most researchers point to the statistical insignificance of truly trans-Saharan movements and the importance of regional logics and developments (Brachet 2009, Choplin 2009, Marfaing 2010), it adds to the visibility of trans-Saharan migration, thereby helping to create it as a "problem" whose

[6] The recent literature on trans-Saharan migration is too large to be summed up in a footnote, but see, for instance, Bensaâd (2002, 2005b, 2009), the relevant chapters in Marfaing and Wippel (2004), Pliez (2004, 2006), Bredeloup and Pliez (2005), Ba and Choplin (2005), Brachet (2005, 2009), Streiff-Fénart and Poutignat (2006, 2008) and Choplin (2008, 2009); for a complete bibliography, see de Haas (2007). Most scholars working in the area are well aware of the political implications of their studies and themselves stress the importance of Saharan logics and concerns and the detrimental impact of EU migration policy; nonetheless, the fact remains that although the study of trans-Saharan migration prospers, little to no work has been conducted on migration systems internal to the Sahara, and even less effort has been made to link such questions to larger issues of mobility and regional interdependence.

more subtle underpinnings are rarely heeded by the international media, nor by students drafting research proposals. More importantly, perhaps, these studies lack in historical depth, and thereby implicitly postulate a break between contemporary realities and the past, between mobile and sedentary Saharans, immigrants and locals, towns and villages (but see Brachet 2009). Migration and mobility hence appear as exceptional solutions to a crisis, rather than as longstanding requirements. If connections are drawn with the past, these tend to be either rejected out of hand – and for good reasons, such as refuting direct parallels between contemporary migration and the historic slave trade. Or else, they are hinted at rather than demonstrated (see, e.g., Pliez 2003). In much the same way, local specificities are often flattened out, and one gets little sense of how regional migration relates to contemporary Saharan societies more generally.[7]

History seems to be much better equipped to deal with longstanding and far-reaching connections: after all, the study of trans-Saharan trade has long been central to historical research on the area (McDougall 2005).[8] And indeed, trans-Saharan trade, in particular as seen through local archives, has been the subject of a series of excellent recent studies that invariably hint at the close interaction between trade and agriculture, mobility and sedentary societies, thereby potentially providing a long-term perspective on more contemporary developments. Paul Pascon (1984), after a careful study of the accounts of a leading religious family in southern Morocco, shows the close interdependence between regional and international trade, from the 1840s onwards. Ghislaine Lydon (2009a) traces the commercial and kin connections established by the Moroccan Tekna in the nineteenth century throughout Mauritania and beyond. Pierre Bonte (1998a, 2000) describes local trade in grain, dates, and cattle as the mainstay of Mauritanian commercial fortunes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ulrich Haarmann (1998) shows the regional involvement of Ghadamsī merchants from southern Libya, and their combined trading in trans-Saharan and Saharan goods, from the eighteenth century onwards. Dennis Cordell (1977) indicates the investment in regional trade and agriculture by the Sanūsiyya Sufi order, in Libya and beyond, whereas Stephen Baier and Paul Lovejoy (1975) describe a regional "desert-side economy" in Niger, based on the exchange of local

[7] Boesen and Marfaing (2007) is an exception here.

[8] For classic examples of studies of trans-Saharan trade, see Newbury (1966), Bovill (1968), Miège (1981) and, more recently, Austen (1990, 2010). On the importance of trade for early modern European fantasies of the Sahara, see Mollat de Jourdin (1984).