Introduction

Dûgili dutti šii gôyindik. (We can see the lion but [as we are afraid of him] we only trace his footprints).[1]

There is a likelihood that, throughout the North Africa past, one was always someone's puritan or heretic, much like one was always someone's nomad or sedentarist. And maybe also someone's 'Arab' or 'Berber' …

(Berque 2001 [1954]: 168)

Inside the *parc* Faya, the mud-walled courtyard where passenger and freight transport to Faya takes its point of departure from the Chadian capital N'Djamena, air does not circulate much, and the general immobility of the people waiting there seems to increase the stuffiness. That and the smell of kerosene and grease. Any movement might signal departure, nobody seems to be quite sure, nobody knows. In November 2011, as we were on our way to Faya for the first time, a vehicle finally showed up after three days of waiting. It seemed oddly under-equipped for any kind of travel, let alone fully loaded off-road travel in the Sahara. Our suspicions were widely shared by potential fellow travellers, who hummed, hawed, complained, but then seemed to resign themselves. It is difficult to get to Faya – unless, that is, you have your own four-wheel-drive jeep and know the way through the Bahr al-Ghazāl and the shifting sand dunes of the Djourab, or you have privileged connections to the army and can hitch a lift. Otherwise, the only option is to wait. There are no regular services, but private drivers often stop by to take some additional load or a few paying passengers. The thousand-kilometre journey, all but the first eighty of which is off-road, can take anything from forty-eight hours to six days.

We finally set off, not to Faya directly but to Moussoro, the largest town in Bahr al-Ghazāl (Map I.1). On our arrival in the early hours of

---

[1] The proverbs cited as epigraphs throughout this book are taken from Allanga (2006) and Bolobo Maïdé (2009).

1
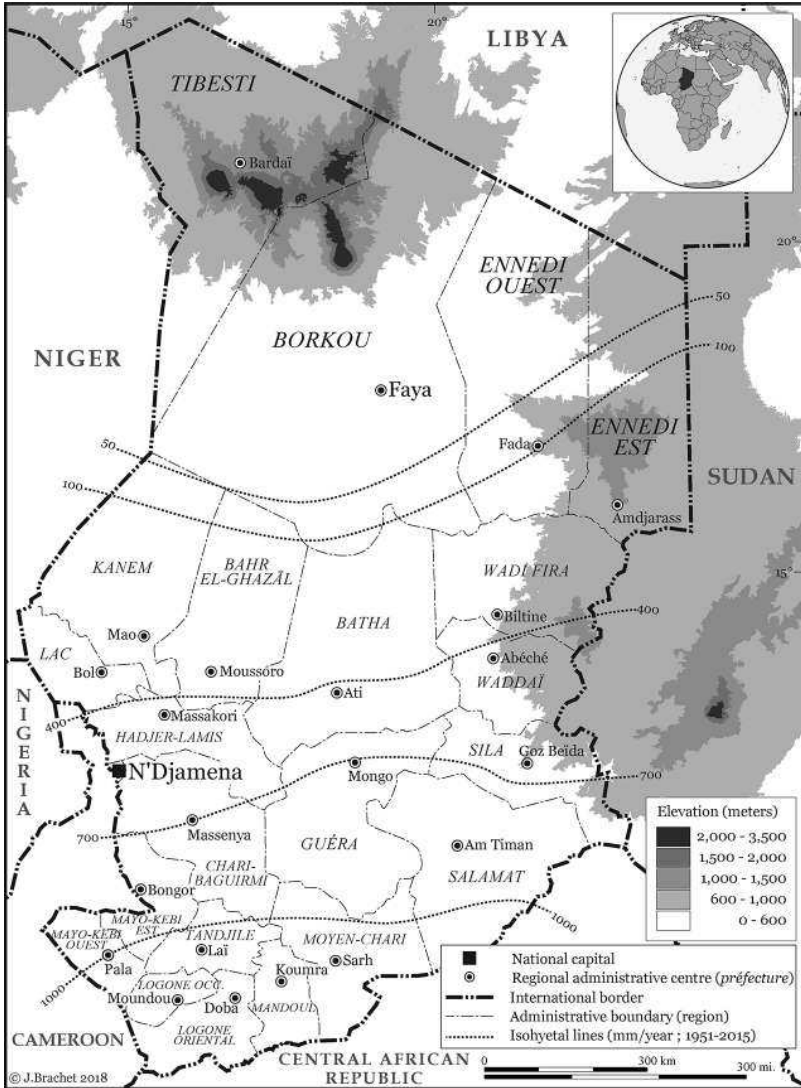
Map I.1 Chad: administrative regions and isohyetal lines

the next day, Moussoro was eerily quiet. For a week now, it had been
the scene of an important demobilisation campaign of the Chadian
army and security forces presided over by the Chadian president Idriss
Déby himself. 'Nobody knew', people whispered, 'he just called them
all to a meeting and then told them they were sacked. He has to sneak

up on them like this, otherwise they will organise a coup first.' This was not the first time this had happened, but this time, the president had 'cut deep', and struck several thousand men off the rolls. The atmosphere was tense; the ex-soldiers were disappointed and frustrated to have been made redundant, often after decades of service. We were to travel onward to Faya with twenty of them, cramped together on the back of an ancient pickup truck. Voices were raised, nobody had eaten anything since the day before, everybody was impatient to leave. One bought a pair of sunglasses from a street vendor but 'forgot' to pay, looked at his fellow passengers, and shrugged his shoulders. He was still wearing his uniform; nobody would pick a quarrel with him. Most of our travelling companions were of a certain age and bore visible traces of former fighting. Scarred faces, missing fingers, a limp. They all still wore the khaki turban, sign of their military status, and most had not surrendered their weapons, or at least not all of them. After the first bumps on the road, we could feel shotguns under boubous, revolver butts in our backs, in addition to the knives that are part of the normal outfit in much of northern Chad. Our suspicions regarding the vehicle quickly proved right, moreover: day after day, either stuck in the sand without any equipment to dig us out or else waiting for the engine to cool down, our fellow passengers grew hungry, tired, then irritable.

On day five, we all finally abandoned the vehicle and its driver thirty or forty kilometres outside Faya, and finished the journey on the back of a freight truck. Two hours later, Faya came into view, at the bottom of a vast sandy depression: greyish bushy date palms as far as the eye could see, crumbling mud-brick houses, rubbish heaps, an impromptu market run by refugees from the Libyan civil war, scavenging goats, a camel caravan, wrecks of desert-going tanks (Photos I.1–I.3 and Map I.2). Men in patchwork uniforms met the truck and its passengers, staring at our passports held upside down and barking out orders without visible effect. Our fellow travellers quietly disappeared. They hardly stood out in a town that looks like a ruined garrison anyway.

Faya, then, seems truly remote, a desert outpost inhabited primarily by what Mazrui (1973) once called the 'lumpen militariat'. This remoteness is reflected in its invisibility to academic and popular knowledge. Colonised late and only half-heartedly by France, the scene of almost continuous armed conflict since the late 1960s, the oasis and its surroundings are the subject of very little published research. Even from a Chadian point of view, knowledge of the region tends to be

Photo I.1 Faya seen from the north

Photo I.2 Camel caravan in Faya

Photo I.3 Main street leading to the central market, Faya

based on myth rather than experience: it is declared 'impossible' of access, an impossibility that goes beyond the difficulties of transport to include intimations of an alien and dangerous sociality. Our suggestions that Chadian colleagues from the University of N'Djamena might join us there for collaborative research were thus met with the kind of embarrassed laughter reserved for foreigners ignorant of local fact. This seems strange for a place that otherwise appears to be at the heart of the Chadian political system; that has, over the last forty years, been crucial for the trajectories of three presidents (all of whom have come to power in a coup d'état); that has been of strategic importance to three armies, Libyan, French and Chadian; and that is seen, by most Chadians also, to be central to contemporary politics. This lack of knowledge combined with a surfeit of more abstract external interest has led to a portrayal of the region as unknowable and uncontrollable: Faya, with its atmosphere of slow but ineluctable decline, of despondency and inattention, is a place where much happens without ever being contained in a historical narrative, even of intelligible resistance.

Ardener (1989: 211–23) suggests that 'remoteness' is not a geographical given so much as 'a position in topological space', the result of a structural mismatch between local self-definitions and the definitional power of others. Remote areas are those that have not yet been fully 'realised' within the dominant imagination. Hence they might look inaccessible from the outside, but feel open and vulnerable from the inside: they are full of strangers, their rubbish and ruins, because their connectivity with the outside world is not fully controlled. This is why so much seems to happen there: 'event richness is the result of the

Map I.2 Faya town centre (2012)

weakening of, or probably the continuous threat to, the maintenance of a self-generated set of overriding social definitions' (Ardener 1989: 222). Yet where in the cases cited by Ardener (Scottish islands, parts of Cameroon), this leads to a feeling of 'excessive vulnerability', in Faya it seems to have resulted in vulnerability's opposite (or perhaps its complement), a trope of permanent aggression, based on the local endorsement of negative external stereotypes. From the outside, the inhabitants of Faya, most of whom define in some way or another as 'Tubu',[2] are seen to be archetypical raiders, thieves, and predators; untrustworthy, suspicious, and uncouth; outside history, unaware of its logic and divine purpose. They are described in fact through terms that have long defined civilisation and its opposite throughout the region. From the inside, people concur in these descriptions to a surprising degree, insisting on their own disorder, unpredictability, and violence: 'our mentality here is for jostling'.[3] This endorsement of alterity grants northern Chad a particular place in Saharan history, geography, and ethnography, where the most ordinary and seemingly universal constraints seem to be inverted. It has led to types of sociality that partake in larger regional connections, but predominantly, it seems, in negative terms. Reviewing the few available works on the region, and situating them within the broader literature on the Sahara, this introduction sketches out the particular patterns of knowledge and invisibility that have contributed to making Faya and its region what it is. Faya is remote in a specifically Saharan way.

The Sahara and Its Double

Over the last few years, there has been growing academic interest in the Sahara. Much of this is due to the wider context of regional conflict and foreign military intervention.[4] Some of it, however, reflects more

---

[2] The term 'Tubu' is an external ascription, and there are no local terms that fully correspond to it (see later). We will nonetheless use it throughout this book to refer to speakers of Tedaga (Teda) and Dazaga (Dazagada or 'Gorane' in Chadian Arabic), as both recognise some kind of cultural affinity among them, as both languages are mutually comprehensible, as this is the term most widely used in the literature, and as all other terms would require needless circumlocution.

[3] Interview with Djimi, Faya, 27/3/2012.

[4] Most noticeably, French military intervention in Libya (with NATO) in 2011 and in northern Mali from 2013 (with the African-led International Support Mission to Mali). Arguably, this partakes in a larger development that includes

profound changes in scholarship. 'Undoubtedly', as Lydon (2005: 299) notes, 'the most significant development in African historical method-ology in recent years has been the growing use of untapped sources written by Africans themselves,' especially sources in Arabic. This is not so much because these sources have only recently been 'dis-covered' – Pascon's (1980, 1984) and Saad's (1983) earlier publica-tions show this is not the case – but it indicates a deeper shift of perspective. As Ann McDougall (2005: 370) puts it, rather than treating local sources primarily as 'references within a conceptual framework rooted in knowledge produced, by and large, externally', researchers are now 'deliberately seeking out products of Saharan knowledge with which to re-shape their own'. Most notably, this has translated into a rejection of images of the Sahara as an empty space that needs to be crossed – 'vastness, emptiness, that is, bareness, poverty', said Braudel (1966: 158) – in favour of conceptualising it as an internally diverse region capable of producing history in its own terms. We seem to have moved from a predominantly 'trans-Saharan' perspective based on external sources to a vision drawing primarily on local manuscripts that portrays the Sahara as a number of independent sub- or even micro-regions.

   The effects are most pronounced in studies of trade (but see also de Moraes Farias 2004). Hence Lydon (2009) traces a network of com-merce based on southern Morocco, with few ties beyond the Senegal River and southern Algeria; the same network is analysed in different terms by Ann McDougall, who points to the way in which commerce of all kinds 'reflected local social and political structures and influenced them' (2005: 378). Focussing on the Nasiriyya Sufi order, Gutelius (2002) describes the rise and decline of such a 'region' in the Dra' valley, also in southern Morocco. Haarman (1998, 2008) analyses correspondence describing Ghadāmis's commercial hinterland, in what is now south-western Libya, southern Algeria, and northern Mali. Scheele (2012a) describes the border region between Algeria and Mali in terms of a series of pastoral, ecological, and social sub-regions, where commercial and transport infrastructures were strengthened through repeated marital alliances, in such a way that they still exist

the US as well as other European militaries, and that started in the early 2000s: see for instance Keenan (2005, 2009, 2013), A. McDougall (2007), Lecocq and Schrijver (2007), Bourgeot (2011), and Andersson (2016).

today. Brachet (2009) gives a comparable example of trade and migration networks between northern Niger, southern Algeria, and southern Libya. Far from commercial preoccupations, Moussaoui (2002) and Warscheid (2017) describe the creation of spiritual and intellectual regions in the Algerian south. Put together, these and similar works indicate that 'the notion that the Sahara has "two shores" [northern Africa and the Sahel] ... masks the complexity of the interconnectedness of its various oases and frontiers, and ignores local geographical lexicons' (Lydon 2015: 22). Henceforth, Lydon argues, we should appropriate 'trans-Saharan' to mean 'multidirectional movement among the region's many deserts, mountains, plateaus and shores, to describe not a field of study but a research method transcending previously contained epistemes' (Lydon 2015: 22; see also Scheele and J. McDougall 2012).

Such a micro-regional approach has its own academic history, in particular within Francophone scholarship. In 1968, Monod suggested a division of the Sahara into three areas of interaction divided from each other by truly arid zones, each area being dominated by one linguistic group: Hassāniyya-speakers in the West, Tuareg-speakers in the centre, and Tedaga/Dazaga (Tubu)-speakers in the East (Map I.3).[5] Between these are zones of more extreme aridity, sheltering dangerous spirits and highway robbers; zones that are described in local languages using terms which echo our own notion of 'desert': *serir*, *tanezrouft*, *ténéré*, *awi* (Capot-Rey 1961: 25–6, C. Le Cœur 1950: 68). Thirty years later, Retaillé (1998: 72) made much the same argument, rephrasing it in terms of 'meridian regional units' based on exchange with places beyond the desert – a division also assumed by Baier and Lovejoy (1975) when they speak of a 'desert-side economy' relying on access to different and complementary ecologies (see also Pascon 1980, 1984). This sub-regional approach applies well on the ground, hence its longevity and popularity among researchers whose work has a strong empirical base. Nonetheless, it seems never to have quite 'stuck', which is why it can still appear as a paradigm shift in progress almost fifty years later.

[5] The map does not represent all linguistic groups in the Sahara, but only those mentioned in the caption. It excludes, for instance, main sedentary languages (such as Songhay and Kanuri), other dialects of Arabic, and the many other languages that are now commonly spoken in Saharan cities.
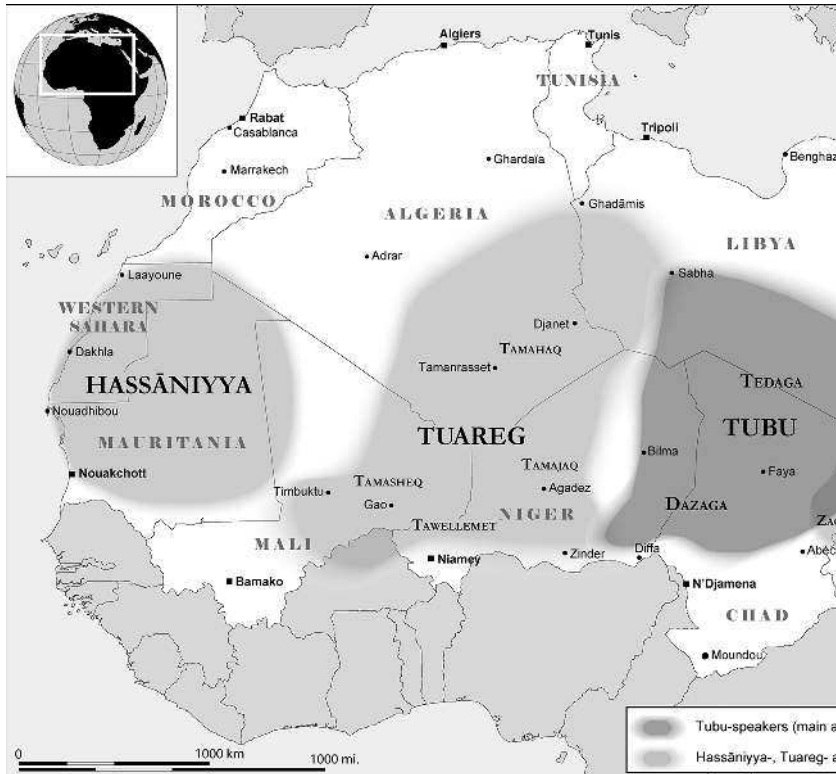
Map I.3 Sahara: main areas of settlement of Hassāniyya-, Tuareg-, Beri-, and Tu