Ownership and command over resources in the Sahel town of Abéché

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Introduction

Around 1850, in an island situation far out in the Sahel, a town of 15,000 inhabitants had overexploited its life resources, soil and water, and thus had become uninhabitable. Its rulers decided to move the entire population to a place some 70 km away. Until today, after six generations, this is remembered as a traumatic collective experience, comparable to a cruel war, ruinous flood or a fatal volcano eruption. At the beginning of this century, the life resources of the new place – water and fertile soil – are again nearly depleted. However, today there is no alternative place offering sufficient resources for all of them and the people are asking themselves what to do instead.

This exemplary situation of a fairly isolated town and its poor hinterland of several hundred kilometers in radius made me stumble over a question which I feel is crucial for the use of life resources, but utterly neglected by planners and decision makers responsible for the future of our planet. It is the question of who is in control of the resources of livelihood and what are the rules in force: the question of real property and territorial sovereignty. My object of observation is exemplary, too, because it features the three (or four) successive stages of societal control over life resources: scattered autonomy, feudal division of labor and the present private-public dichotomy, respectively public-private synergy.

Small-scale flow-equilibrium in autonomous social units

For thousands of years, the steppe south of the Sahara desert used to be inhabited by people following basically two types of ways of life.

- Nomad groups of five to fifty families (30 to 300 people) wandered with their herds of bovines, cattle and camels seasonally over several hundreds of kilometers north and south, back and forth along more or less established routes (fig. 1).
- A more or less sedentary population of millet farmers lived in small hamlets of 100 to 1,000 people amidst their fields of a size and distribution just above their carrying capacity.

The resources for livelihood for both groups depended on the unreliable rainfall. There is a rich literature describing many variants of these societies that lived in a kind of symbiotic relationship. The common feature of these societies is the direct responsibility of each and every community for a specific territory on a continuous surface in the relentless circle of seasons. The rationale of this community subsistence is based on a very conservative use of land and water, and on a defensive position towards flora and fauna.[1] Any aggressive new frontier mentality of such units must have led to self-extinction or to a change of lifestyle towards ultimate sustainability. Analysts of evolution hold that even the aborigines when reaching Australia survived only after having caused a near-collapse of the local ecosystem and subsequently adapting to the new situation (fig. 2), now at an ecologically lower level.[2]

Sustainable cultures by definition follow a way of life that limits the number of people and domestic animals, and restricts consumption. Women are occupied with domestic functions keeping them busy from dawn to sunset interrupted by long periods of rest and entertainment. Hard work is reserved for men, who are occupied still more discontinuously. Thus the annual time budget reserved for reproduction is for both sexes roughly equal with peaks for the one or the other due to seasonal events such as migration or harvest. It is estimated at 1,500 hours per year.[3]

A common feature of these subsistence cultures is that there is no individual real property in the sense of excluding anybody else from touching it. But there is a strict control of life resources, especially the territory of a given community. This complies with the notion of sovereignty. Given a relative stability of the units through self-control, competition over resources is modest. Correspondingly, war technologies are

Fig. 1: Nomads' camel herds.

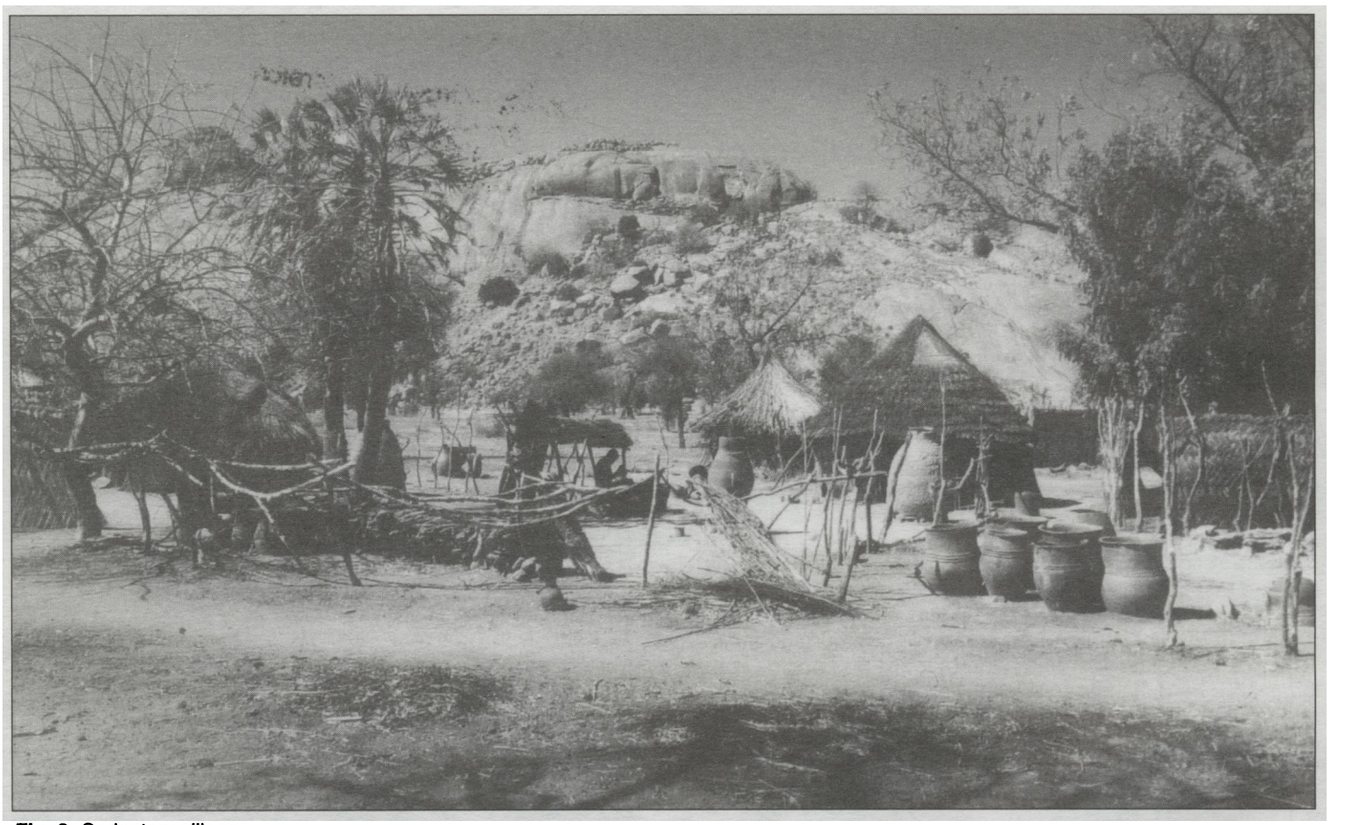

Fig. 2: Sedentary village.

Fig. 3: Rural settlement.

feeble. This makes these communities vulnerable in the encounter with cultures that have developed more effective weapons under conditions of a more vivid competition (fig. 3).

Feudal core-building and collection of surplus

In such a fabric of scattered communities it may happen that an outstanding individual, a military leader of one of the units, manages to assume control over several other units. As a feudal lord he makes these units transfer certain latent reserves, which they normally possess or produce beyond their needs, as a kind of security. Once this surplus reaches a certain level in quantity and quality, interest emerges for exchange with his peers, for trade. A network of collection and exchange posts living under feudal protection unfolds.[4] A helpful prerequisite for the running of such feudal units is a culture which provides the techniques of reading, writing and calculating greater numbers, a pattern for the (hierarchical) division of tasks and the spiritual legitimation for governing at all. Feudal units therefore cultivate religion and rituals. Based on this, feudal lords assume responsibility for what will be seen and understood as the riches of the community vested in him, embracing the local resources of subsistence and certain luxury commodities. Thus, the islamic Sahel has seen bigger and smaller "sultanates." The Sultanate of Waddaï founded around AD 1700 in what is now the northeast of Chad was one of them, linked up with already existing units such as Dafur (in the extreme West of Sudan) and with numerous kingdoms west of Lake Chad, such as Kanem-Bornu, Mossi, Massina and the Hausa Sultanates.[5]

While the settlement fabric and the corresponding time budget in such a feudal state does not change substantially in rural areas, it does so in towns. Women continue to bear the burden of everyday reproduction. Being now less supported in their daily reproduction by the male population their tasks include also (seasonal) labor in the fields, averaging 2,300 hours/year plus/ minus 500 hours field labor. The male time is devoted mainly to occasional building, repairing of houses and the like (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Traditional horticulture by irrigation.

Fig. 5: Ruins of Wara (siege of the Sultan of Adana).

Men, especially in the centers, are kept busy with other matters:

- First of all, the expanding trade demands extra labor and attention. The Waddaï, for example, dealt with ivory, ostrich feathers and slaves, all of which were in high demand in the Muslim countries around the Mediterranean Sea, offering weapons, iron, and jewellery in turn, much sought-after in the Sahel region. The trading network across the Sahara became intensified along the north to Tripolis/Cairo and east to Mecca/Cairo. It was run by import-export traders licensed by the Sultan and drawing from the local retail markets, also under the protection of the Sultan.
- Second, because of a growing population and increasing consumption, more and more men are needed as warriors to fight for new land or more water, or, if attacked by other feudal armies, to defend the status quo. Feudal states do not necessarily add up to a continuous plain as subsistence communities do, but consist of a core region surrounded by more or less dependent communities. The perspective of winning control over additional regions for exploitation is an ever-present temptation for feudal wars or raids. Since feudal units continuously fluctuate, they cannot be peaceful either towards the exterior or internally.

In view of these ongoing fluctuations which feudal units are exposed to, a substantial part of (male) time has to be devoted to building social communication and coherence. This means on the one hand administration and arbitration of internal conflicts, and on the other hand legitimizing the status quo through religious and worldly rituals and magnificent buildings and elaborate fine arts.

The residence of the Sultan of Waddaï, Wara, was built around an impressive palace with majestic brick walls (now a candidate for the Heritage of Mankind List).[6] However, after 150 years, around 1850, the groundwater had become exhausted and the soil rendered infertile through salination. The Sultan decided to shift the entire town to a place 70 km further south which offered more water. This new capital, Abéché, which still exists, was visited, in 1873, by the German explorer Gustav Nachtigal[7] (fig. 5).

The pattern he described is still in use in the region and is reflected in the field names of Abéché. Each *zaribe* with its garden for subsistence farming was populated by one extended family or, in the case of immigrants, by people of the same provenance. They formed the well-known "large household" governed by a chief in the patriarchic mode of near absolute power, the common pattern of running agrarian society.[8] Since the individual hamlets kept their cultural specificities, the town ended up in a kind of ethnic mix which required considerable administrative skill to keep peaceful.

Disregarding the nomads who continue (until now) to travel their routes on a kind of tacit consensus with the sedentary population, feudal societies usually organize the control of land, water, fauna and flora at two levels:

- the rights of use as "use-ownership" vested in the chief of concession who will pass it parcelwise to the members of his household according to their needs; and,
- the right of attribution, restriction and withdrawal of use-ownership.

The latter is seen as given by God, exercised by the lord as

"sovereignty" usually through a council on behalf of the people – without whom of course the riches could not be realized at all. On both levels there is, except in fully literate societies, no separation of person and office.

While use-ownership, normally exercised along the lines of subsistence economy, builds on the experience of countless generations, the handling of feudal units has always been a matter of trial and error. Many such errors are found in the Sahel, too.[9] In the case of Wara, the overambitious construction of the palace as a symbol of power was the cause for the area's ecological collapse. It demanded an ever-increasing number of burned bricks which in the end caused the cutting of the entire vegetation, so that the groundwater was exhausted and the soil rendered infertile through salination.

However unsustainable, compared to the monotony in rural areas, a town is attractive because of the multi-colored urban lifestyle and its stimulating culture and fine arts. Supported by some purposeful religious or non-religious indoctrination, a WE-identity is created in the core region, but not necessarily in the fringe regions. This identity includes the lord and his court. When the Abéchois recall the collapse of Wara and their move to the new place like a trauma they do not blame the Sultan and his overambition. "At that point of time WE had no choice, WE were forced to move," they say. And some analyze: "WE had overused nature."

Private-public dichotomy

The French after their conquest of the region in 1909 introduced an entirely different regime. Political power became vested in institutions such as the State and its bureaucracy and not in persons. Government was built on the people's material well-being as legitimation. The pacification of the countryside went along with the transformation of a discontinuous to a continuous plain of territories arranged as a territorial hierarchy of nation, province, district cantons and local communities. European technologies were introduced, above all, the truck and the water pump. The latter led to a considerable increase in agricultural production, the former brought the perspective of free movement of people and long distance exchange especially of mass products (fig. 6).

Abéché started to produce a great amount of vegetables, onions, okra and tomatoes grown under intensive irrigation and exported them to as far as the Congo River. In exchange it received and supplied its hinterland of 500,000 or more inhabitants with tea, sugar, textiles, metal tools and other commodities. The distance to other centers is up to now still important enough to leave the area in an island situation. Abéché grew, especially in the years from 1940 to 1960, to a population of 40,000 inhabitants or more. The density in the existing quarters grew and new ones became added. What used to be hamlets of extended families or condominiums of people of the same ethnic origin became multicultural quarters, one adjacent to the other to form a braid fabric of mud-structures. Each quarter contained at least a small well. Institutions and privileged consumers were supplied by a water tank fed by a borehole while for the rest of the people water delivery was arranged by means of donkeys carrying water bags. Public services such as refuse collection were introduced and infrastructure elements such as a hospital, a French-Arab high school and a bilingual teachers' training college installed. A town council of quarter chiefs was convened by the French to deal with those community matters that were put before them. In order to come to terms with ethnic conflicts, for example, they created a special structure between peace judge and tutor. This resulted in a special WE-identity with the Sultan, whose office had been cut down to a kind of local bishop, incorporated as an element of history and culture.[10]

The growing number of the population, rising consumption and increasing economic activities soon began to exceed the local carrying capacity. Most of the old gardens in the vicinity had been transformed into residential plots. Subsistence farming had to be performed on more and more distant fields. But these areas were not uninhabited. Their owners, understandably, let to the Abéchois-only land which was marginal. This could not stand cultivation in the long run. The soil and vegetation soon degraded. Signs of salination appeared now in the entire region. In Abéché the upper horizon of groundwater feeding the *zaribe* wells became depleted. The big tank of the

Fig. 6: Modern transport.

Fig. 7: Airview of Abéché.

borehole fell dry, perhaps because it had only tapped a bubble of fossil water that was now exhausted. A second horizon of groundwater found in some privileged fringe areas had to be exploited promulgating the donkey delivery. Altogether water became scarce and very expensive, especially at the end of the dry season when the consumption fell to 5 liter/person/day. A 30 km-long pipeline, financed and built by German aid, brought some relief. But in view of the deficit to recover and possible further growth, the relief was only temporary and, above all, connected with the risk of depleting the water resources of a wider area (fig. 7).

Trades and crafts offered less and less work. The hitherto constantly rising aspirations were met by declining potentialities. The majority of the people fell back into subsistence. The time budget connected with subsistence farming deteriorated further because of increasing distances to and decreasing yields from the fields. The time dedicated to the day-to-day reproduction rose to 4,000 hours/year for women and 1,000 hours/year for men. This meant the absolute maximum of work in the season for a minimum of yield. The personnel of the hospital and schools did not get their pay regularly which made them negligent in every respect. The refuse collection broke down. The streets many of which were cut schematically into the built-up fabric were left to decay. People started to leave for good and left their premises to dilapidation. "Unkept private property" posed problems to the neighbors and quarter chiefs. The analogy to Wara became obvious to any more sensible Abéchois.[11]

This state of affairs was not brought about by individual faults. On the contrary, every private actor had behaved as was expected by making the best use of his individual capacity and his private property. There was no exploiter such as the Sultan in Wara unintentionally had been. The State bureaucracy as its successor had more or less done its job in its role as actor by investing in infrastructure and profitable enterprises. But in its role as the one to give the rules, it had failed. The rules had, by not assessing the ultimate carrying capacity, set the pace for the overuse of the local life resources.[12] And it must be asked, at this point of the presentation, whether a State bureaucracy as agent intervening and rule-giving and, at the same time, authoritarian sovereign far away from local problems, is able to create sustainability at all.

Private-public synergy

The failure of the Chadian authorities and a number of other reasons made the State authority in Abéché completely fade away. The resulting de-facto autonomy led to an unexpected effect. The population, realizing that they had no other choice but to live on subsistence, started to use their dead season time for organizing themselves in exercises of development by launching their own collective actions for the common good:

- Refuse collection was organized by a group of young people in one quarter. Its rationale was local pride – requiring just a little backing by the GTZ for take-off (fig. 8).
- Alleviation from and protection against stormwater erosion threatening so many structures after heavy rains was introduced by concerned inhabitants. It required collective work for moulding the drainage appropriately in private and, especially, in public spaces. Such exercises start in one quarter and are replicated in other ones. "WE, said a quarter chief, have shown the way for the others!" (fig. 9).
- A group of brickmakers started with a tree-planting enterprise. They bought tree-seedlings, planted them on public land and built a fence around to protect them. They calculated that repeating this exercise for a couple of years would give a forest the careful harvesting which would one day feed their kilns and supply the population with firewood instead of continuing to deplete the vegetation of the entire region. Their vision was that the ecosystem of former times would re-appear. The brickmakers look forward: "We are showing how to transform the desert into a garden" (fig. 10).
- The local leaders cooperated to create a register of private property and a set of rules to maintain it for the sake of sustainability.[13]

All such enterprises have as a common denominator collective actions in the public sphere with the perspective of improving individual well-being in the long run. Private property is understood as a bundle of rights that depend on the common, i.e. public, domain while, at the same time, the public realm has to be controlled by the collectivity of the individual proprietors having an interest in durability and sustainability. This concept of synthesis suspends the meaning of the originally Latin word: "private" meaning "robbed" to replace it by the perspective of public-private synergy (which is not the same as public-private partnership!). In this concept sovereignty is not something descending from heaven, but being created and installed, the ladder of subsidiarity upwards. The precondition for it is a kind of collective autonomy in a geographically restricted area of a village, a town quarter, a town or a culturally defined region. The concept of civic "identity" and of "integrity" seems to play an important role, which means that any collectivity defines and develops itself, i.e. from inside.[14] Instead of destroying the commons they can be reestablished.

Concluding remarks

Obviously, there are two notions of "public":

- "public" as a level higher than and opposed to private endeavors, i.e. "government"; and,
- "public" as a communal sphere of solidarity or at least possible consensus.

Hidden behind this are also two competing concepts of "public" as a complex of cease-fire arrangements by competing parties (the Anglo-Saxon supposition) and as consensual togetherness (the Continental – and African – supposition).

These understandings are based on collective historical experience. Therefore, the presumption of an ubiquitous concept of private ownership and public control such as propa-

Fig. 8: Refuse collection team.

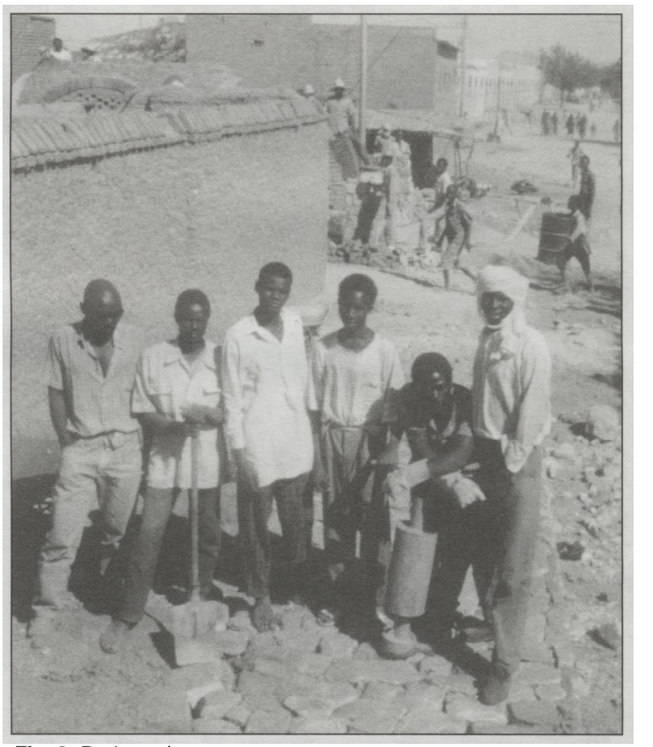

Fig. 9: Drainage/pavement team.

Fig. 10: Afforestation team.

gated by the World Bank and recently Hernando de Soto,[15] must be felt by all who do not agree from their own practice as a hegemonical challenge.

On the other hand, the historical evolution is blind, too, as shown by the example of feudal unsustainability. There is no way one should rely on collective subjects to learn from collective errors. Learning sustainability, as my example shows, can best (or even exclusively) take place in small socio-geographical collectivities. If this is so, the foremost precondition is not to kill spontaneous autonomy and integrity which small units have, but to encourage, to empower them.[16]

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