Dalla città diffusa al *land grabbing*:
territori urbani tra consenso e conflitti a Nouakchott

*(From Urban Sprawl to Land Grabbing: Urban Lands between Consensus and Conflicts in Nouakchott)*

Summary

• Since its foundation as capital of Mauritania, Nouakchott largely increased. In 50 years it passed from a small village to a 1m. inhabitants’ city thus causing illegal settlements (*kebbe* and *gazras*) and allowing political control of the urban territories distribution.

• After a decade of belief in economic development (thanks to oil sources) and in new urban models (vertical city and satellite towns), crisis now causes a new interest in urban territories. Poor city areas have become a way to ensure power to President Abdel Aziz by assigning land parcels to politicians, officials, ulemas and imams, the last actually giving their support to the government as never before.
Nouakchott’s foundation: 1904 and 1957

Nouakchott became the seat of the first autonomous Government of Mauritania in 1957 and capital of the country after independence (1960). President Ould Daddah created the new city close to a small village built in time next to the French garrison, built in 1904 and enlarged in the 1920s.
From village to urban sprawl

(Nouakchott 1961, from “Nouakchott, Capitale de la Mauritanie. 50 ans de défi”, Sépia, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>about 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>17,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>40,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>200,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>400,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>800,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
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</tbody>
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(30% of the total Mauritanian population)

(expected 8,000 - 16% annual growth rate)
From village to urban sprawl

In half a century Nouakchott increased a hundred time its population and about thirty times its total area.

- 1957: about 500
- 1965: “ 17,500
- 1970: “ 40,000
- 1980: “ 200,000
- 1990: “ 400,000
- 2000: “ 800,000
- 2013: “ 1,000,000

(30% of the total Mauritanian population)
Illegal settlements: *kebbe* (or *kébé*) and *gazras*

Illegal settlements started in the late 1960s and increased especially from mid 1970s due to desertification.

In the 1980s-90s, the government planned assignments of land parcels and relocation for other settlers who moved to new peripheries. This made Noukachott bigger and bigger.

(Tarhil, 2005, ph.: Noorinfo.com)
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Assignments of land parcels and creation of residential areas became a way for government to enjoy support from upper and middle classes. Poorest people cannot built houses on land parcels, then they sold them to the rich and moved to peripheries thus creating new *kebbe* and *gazras*. 
Urban spaces and ethnical distribution

Settlers usually occupied illegally lands close to the principal routes connecting Nouakchott to other major cities and regions, which they came from. This gave Nouakchott its 4-pointed star form. Moreover, it caused a spatial distribution that in a certain way reflects the different ethnicities living the country.

Richest Arabs live northwards in Tevragh Zeina, Arab middle classes eastwards, poorest black Mauritanians and Haratines southwards.

Haratines (former slaves and slaves descendants) are the majority in Cinquième and Sixième, ancient kebbe born in the 1980s and now central districts of the city.

(dir. Rosso  (ph. G. Maimone from exhibition at Centre Culturel Française of Nouakchott)
Urban spaces and ethnical distribution

Tevragh Zeina’s Villas

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(All photos by G. Maimone, 2013)
Urban spaces and ethnical distribution

“Capitale”

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Riyadh

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Urban planning and real estate speculation

SOCOGIM (*Société de construction et de gestion immobilière*) was created in 1974.

In 1975-85 it assigned about 16,000 land parcels and 12,000 civil residences in districts such as Socogim PS and Socogim K. Last decade was created Socogim Plage, a new residential area close to the sea coast. It is also called *Maaouiy City* from the name of the president of that time, Ould Taya. It is still a work in progress.

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Dreaming a vertical city

“Il y a les enrichissements liés au pétrole, on va voir de belles choses se costruire grâce à la manne pétrolière” (Hasniould Didi, mayor of Nouakchott in 2006)
Dreaming a vertical city

President Abdallahi in 2007 decided to demolish the *Bloc Manivelles*, residential buildings built in 1959-62 for civil servants in the administrative area. A hotel, a commercial center and ministerial buildings were originally expected. After his coup, Abdel Aziz decided to allow private investments in the area to build three skyscrapers. When illusion of oil sources went down, the project came to a stop.
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Going northwards: A satellite city

- Ribat Al-Bahr: A new town for richest people

(Ph. by www.ribatalbahr.mr)
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A project for upper classes and/or just speculation?
Urban lands: Speculation and conflicts

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- As a consequence of speculation, some ancient poor urban areas now increased their value. They saw the intervention of ADU (Agence de développement urbain) that assigned land parcels with preference to imams, ulemas, politicians, and officials (see blue areas).
Protests and claims

- The land grabbing of parcels occupied by the poorest people of Sébkha (moughataa) of Toudjounine, Kandahar (Arafat) and Dar el-Beida (El-Mina) started in June 2014 after presidential election. Abdel Aziz facilitated assignment of urban lands to religious middle classes of the most popular districts, who supported its campaign for presidency and especially against Biram Dah Abeid, his competitor in election.

- Moreover, other social events – like the Mohamed Ould Mkhettir’s affair, a young man accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death – saw successful protests promoted by the Tawassoul islamic party and the salafist preachers. Abdel Aziz decided to support their protests to ensure his power.

- As a consequence, protests were directed against imams, preachers, the Minister of Habitat and Urbanism, and president Abdel Aziz.
A political protest?

- A popular case was that of the Colletif des familles Lar (Liaison entre Arafat et Riyadh) 1 et 2, a group of families who hardly protested against the Hakem (prefect) of Arafat. Finally he had to admit to have been obliged by the presidency. Another case saw people arrested after destroying walls built by an Imam on a land he received after elections. Other people in Sebkha (Toujounine) accused Abdel Aziz to be the author of their relocation, because of the proximity of their lands to a new president’s property in the area.

- In mid 2015, an enquiry at the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism revealed the illegal assignment of about 5,000 land parcels for commercial purpose to people in relation with power.
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• Finally, people expose the political value of the spoliation of their lands, used to ratify the new political alliance between the political power and a new emerging group, that of the religious middle class.
Thanks for your attention.

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