



Salem Ouakari, *Ṣināʿat al-Intimāʾ: Dirāsa fī Milkiyyat al-Arḍ fī al-Mujtamaʿ al-Ṣaḥrāwī (Āyt Oūsā 1600-1958)* [*The Manufacturing of Belonging: A Study of Land Ownership in the Sahrawi Community (the Ait Oussa Tribes 1600- 1958)*] (Doha/Beirut : ACRPS, 2023), pp. 488.

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Land is central to the lived world of the Sahrawi tribes of southern Morocco and to their historical, social, economic, and cultural dynamics. It has generated and sustained forms of interaction, production, solidarity, and conflict, and therefore offers a valuable lens through which to understand these tribes' conditions, transformations, disputes, and forms of belonging.

Within this framework, Salem Ouakari's *The Manufacturing of Belonging: A Study of Land Ownership in Sahrawi Society (Ait Oussa, 1600-1958)* examines the relationship between people and space through the specific case of the Ait Oussa tribe's connection to land. In so doing, it addresses a complex subject in which the social, the historical, and the cultural intersect across time, patterns of thought, and human action. The book's central question concerns the ways in which land-related issues contributed to the formation of the social structures of the Sahrawi society under study. Ouakari approaches this question through three dimensions: the material-technical, the relational-social, and the symbolic-cultural.

Ouakari uses land as an entry point for understanding the tribe's social order, livelihoods, and collective identities. Land is not treated merely as a means of production; it is a decisive factor in creating belonging, a strategic resource in the construction of tribal identity, and a source of social hierarchies shaped by ownership and the extent of real estate wealth. It may also operate as a mechanism of exclusion, as in the case of women within the tribe.¹ This multidimensional role of land becomes especially visible when Ouakari turns to the mechanisms through which access, ownership, and use of land are regulated.

The study sees land as both the axis around which social relations revolve and the object of economic and political wagers. Land gives rise to multiple forms of ownership, exploitation, and access, often accompanied by force and violence. Whenever individuals and groups seek to acquire it, particularly pastoral land, they encounter regulatory mechanisms designed to frustrate such claims, generating various forms of violence and social conflict.²

¹ Salem Ouakari, *Ṣināʿat al-Intimāʾ: Dirāsa fī Milkiyyat al-Arḍ fī al-Mujtamaʿ al-Ṣaḥrāwī (Āyt Oūsā 1600-1958)* (Doha/Beirut : ACRPS, 2023), p. 170.

² Ibid., p. 212.

Ouakari shows that land ownership lies at the heart of both the livelihoods and the problems of the Aït Oussa tribe. It is, in his words, “a blend of patterns and systems that may lead to either social cohesion or conflict and competition”.³ Among the Aït Oussa, individual land ownership varies depending on whether the land is located in an irrigated oasis (*wāḥa masqiyya*) or a rain-fed one (*wāḥa būriyya*). In the former, land acquires memory and meaning through its proximity to the *qasr*, a fortified residential complex common in the oases of southern and south-eastern Morocco and built using local techniques and materials. In the latter, land carries less symbolic weight in the consciousness of the settled oasis inhabitants, and is valued chiefly for its capacity to secure an abundant harvest and manage associated risks.

In irrigated oases, land ownership expresses social stratification and reflects the distinctions that have emerged among oasis inhabitants. Ouakari notes that ownership is concentrated among those who enjoy political prestige and accumulated means of production.⁴ This has produced broad landless social strata, partly because local custom subjects individual ownership to shifting forms of social and legal exchange. Faced with structural constraints and the volatile modes of exchange – whether Islamic legal, customary, individual, or collective – oasis communities have sought to protect land by endowing it to religious institutions. This has served as a legitimate means of safeguarding individual and family property from transfer and disputes.⁵

Collective ownership, by contrast, is embodied in both agricultural land and the pastoral domain. Since the beginning of their settlement, the Aït Oussi have sought to expand their spatial and demographic control over these lands through the triad of invasion, expulsion, and defence. Despite the changes to customary tenure systems since the colonial era, this strategy has remained central to their identity and to the foundations of their material and symbolic existence. Alongside customary law and Sharia, designed to resolve various intractable disputes,⁶ written documents increasingly came to be regarded as the strongest basis for defending land ownership, providing concrete evidence of a party’s right. This shift began under colonial rule, when traditional mechanisms underwent profound transformation and more official and administrative instruments emerged.

Beyond legal and customary arrangements, Ouakari also examines how land is embedded in everyday ecological knowledge and productive rhythms. Given the strategies devised by the Bedouin to adapt to their environment and make the best possible use of the land, the tribe’s social and cultural ecologies are closely intertwined. The local farmer’s production of the agricultural landscape is grounded in a temporal system comprising three elements, each reflecting a specific experience of time. First, “ecological time” structures decisions through the temporal fields of the *manāzil*, the zodiac signs⁷ and the seasons. The *manāzil* is a term used in Bedouin and rural settings to refer to the timing of planting, harvesting, hunting, and climatic conditions more generally. This informal order informs decisions about ploughing, date-palm pollination, and crop harvesting, all of which depend closely on climate, a fundamental regulator of the farmer’s temporal rhythm.⁸

Cultural time, meanwhile, is linked to values and symbols that enable the peasant to perceive temporal domains and use them in productive practice; folk proverbs, in this context, express the peasant’s awareness of ecological time.⁹ While cultural time is perceptual and psychological, lived time reflects the practices

³ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

⁵ Ibid., p. 444.

⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

⁷ Ibid., p. 226.

⁸ Ibid., p. 228.

⁹ Ibid., p. 230.

that organize daily life in the oasis. According to Ouakari, lived time for peasants is structured around three rhythms: pastoral-agricultural practices; housework and tasks related to tending livestock; and biological rest, namely sleep.¹⁰ Despite the precision and balance of this temporal order, the continuity of the productive practices associated with it depends on the stability of their material foundation: the land.¹¹

While oasis agriculture reveals one dimension of the Aït Oussa relationship to land, pastoral mobility reveals another: an expansive and adaptive use of space shaped by climate, insecurity, and tribal strategy. Pastoral activity is the lifeblood of Aït Oussa tribal existence, and nomadic grazing is practiced on a wide scale. The tribe's movements across migratory territories are influenced by several factors, including environmental and climatic conditions that demand skills of adaptation to a harsh landscape. The inhabitants of the southern Moroccan Sahara are known to guide their herds deep into the desert in search of grass and water, relying on unique forms of spatial perception.

Migration routes and the use of nomadic territory are also determined by insecurity and the prevalence of raiding, a practice associated with certain tribal groups in the Sahara. Consequently, the Aït Oussa's reliance on nomadic practices has therefore been shaped by political strategies intended to confront neighbouring tribes and protect herds from looting and robbery. One such strategy is the *farīk*: a cluster of tents pitched together in a specific location for migration and the pursuit of pasture. These tents move collectively from one place to another in search of grazing and water, and their organization varies according to climate, security concerns, and the condition of grazing and pasturelands.

Ouakari's discussion of pastoral space also examines how nomads symbolically domesticate the places through which they pass. Place in these regions carries a deep anthropological load, particularly in people's representations of the land as a powerful, symbolic, and sacred presence, almost equivalent to honour itself.¹² "Nomads envision every place where they pitch their tents as inhabited by jinn and evil spirits, whose harm must be warded off through blood sacrifices and offerings."¹³ To this end, they serve the ritual *ma'rūf* meal, an offering shared in Moroccan village settings within particular cultural contexts, to expel any evil forces that may dwell there. Such cultural practices reproduce and reclaim pastoral space, with the *ma'rūf* functioning as a cultural mechanism for drawing symbolic spatial boundaries. Through the slaughtered animal, a previously unsettling landscape becomes anthropologically "lived in"; a space marked by the imprint and identity of the tribal group, where an eerie geography is transformed into a familiar social world.

This symbolic organization of space also appears in the meanings attached to different directions and regions. Ouakari highlights that the Bedouin hold distinct perceptions of the regions to which they travel. For example, the south has positive associations: it is a source of trade, a homeland of men who work to expand the tribe's base, a source of camel herds that may be looted, and a place of fertile pastures. It is therefore desirable and coveted.¹⁴ By contrast, the North, specifically the Anti-Atlas, is seen as undesirable because grazing is limited by agricultural holdings and mountainous regions. Herds are also poorly adapted to its humid air, which is considered harmful to animals accustomed to the arid desert climate. There is also a belief that anyone who abandons tribal territory for the north will never return; in their cultural perception, it is a space that "devours men".¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 233.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 445.

¹² Mohamed Bouzenkad, "*Ḥiyāzat al-Arḍ fī al-Ṣaḥrā' Bayn al-'Urf wa-l-Fiqh*," in: Rahal Boubrik & Ahmed Joumani (eds.), *al-Ṣaḥrā': Amkinat al-Tārīkh wa-Faḍā'āt al-Tabādul* (Rabat: Publications of the Centre for Saharan Studies, 2019), p. 139.

¹³ Ouakari, p. 448.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 418.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 419.

The characterization of Saharan lands in terms of property raises a number of conceptual problems, reflected in the terminology used to describe it. Scholars fluctuate between “ownership” (*mulkiyya*) and “tenure” (*hiyāza*), as does Ouakari, who often uses the terms interchangeably. Yet the two concepts convey distinct meanings. In a desert region where the Bedouin live and seek out grazing lands, the defining components of ownership are effectively nullified. What is described as “ownership” is often incomplete and may be limited to usufruct rights, which are accurately captured by the term “tenure”.¹⁶

Given the difficulty of delineating property boundaries in the desert, pastoral tribes of the southern Moroccan Sahara, including the Aït Oussa, exercise usufruct rights over grazing land resources without monopolizing them or preventing others from using them. In this context, usufruct rights, especially grazing and watering, are synonymous with tenure. Given the social history of the Aït Oussa and the violence involved in land acquisition through invasion, expulsion, and defence, tenure here is closer to usufruct and territorial dominance than to full ownership as understood in sedentary societies. It should nevertheless be emphasized that the oasis-centred character of Bedouin life among the Saharan tribes of southern Morocco differs somewhat from the oasis life in central and south-eastern Morocco.

Since pastoral land does not qualify for full ownership in this context, its status differs from that of livestock, which is fully owned among pastoral tribes. Camel herds, for example, constitute the foundation of the property system within nomadic pastoral societies, whose survival depends on migration and the search for grazing land. Anthropological studies indicate that these distinctions are historical in nature. As Jacques Berque observes in his work on the Western High Atlas, ownership of cultivated land in village communities enjoys greater importance than ownership of one’s dwelling.¹⁷

These observations are intended only to broaden the scope of engagement with the book. Overall, Ouakari’s study provides fertile ground for bringing together different specializations in the study of land and its significance to tribal groups in southern Morocco.

¹⁶ Jacques Berque, *Les Seksawa: Recherches sur les structures sociales du Haut-Atlas Occidental* (Paris: PUF, 1954), pp. 354-355.

¹⁷ Ibid.