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Ferry Crossing, Travelling and Change in the Northern Sudan

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, the transport infrastructure of Sudan has radically changed. New roads, transport hubs, or means of transport have had a significant impact on the culture of travelling, and many of the older institutions connected with the phenomenon are things of the past now. One of those dying out phenomena is ferry crossing on the Nile. It was not long ago that a ferry was the basic means of transport throughout the riverine area of Sudan. It was the way of transporting people and goods, both along the river and across it. Today, because of the new era of modern motorways and bridges, its time is coming to an end. What can we learn about the Sudanese travel practices from the perspective of the Nile ferry? This is a fundamental question I will provide an answer to. In the paper I refer to the field observations made in the Northern Sudan in the village of ad Ghaddar in 2013.

KEY WORDS: ethnographic research, ferry transport, Northern Sudan, spatial mobility

Introduction

In the context of Africa, much attention is devoted to a car infrastructure or cars as such (GEWALD – LUNING – VAN WALRAVEN 2009; HART 2016; GREEN-SIMMS 2017; BECK – KLAEGER – STASIK 2017, to name just a few). Rightly – these are phenomena with accelerating dynamics and significance, which, like in Europe or North America, can be combined with what sociologist John Urry (2008) called "automobility" (a system "dominated" by a car, which affects many aspects of the contemporary culture or society)

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(URRY 2008). Increasing the spatial mobility of people, goods, raw materials or services, the car has led in Africa to the emergence of new sources of wealth and to the correction of ways of economic competition. It led to the collapse of other means of transport or old caravan routes. In the post-colonial period, a car is connected with power and economic elites. Today, it is a first need "item" that shall be associated with nearly every aspect of African life. Without access to car transportation, work, food or medical care are more difficult to obtain. The car even transformed the ways of waging wars (GEWALD – LUNNING – VAN WALRAVEN 2009:6).

The "mobility turn," which we can also observe in African studies from the beginning of this century, is sometimes criticized for the exaggerated valorisation of only one means of transport – a car. Less noticeable, however, there are other ways of travelling and the accompanying material infrastructure (VANNINI 2009, 2012; SHELLER 2014:45-54). In their case, we can also ask about "cultural biographies of things" or about specific social spaces (like stations, hotels, airports, hubs, resorts, ports, etc.) that are immanently associated with mobility today. Finally, as with the "automobile culture," the key is the concept of "adaptation". Only thanks to the process of modifying and adapting to individual needs, a given means of transport can be included in the local system, both in a utilitarian and symbolic sense. In other words: "alternative mobilities" or other travel concepts are locally of great importance, and should be in the field of interest of researchers.

In recent years the Sudan's transport infrastructure has radically changed. New roads, transport hubs or means of transport, financed by Asian capital, have had a strong impact on the culture of travel, and have pushed many old institutions associated with this phenomenon straight into the past. One of such just disappearing institutions is the ferry crossing on the Nile. Until recently, the ferry has been the basic means of transport in the entire riverine Sudan. In this way, people and goods were transported, both along and across the river. Today, with the era of modern highways or bridges, its time is probably coming to the end. This, of course, is a great loss for cultural heritage of that part of Africa. It is an institution of great significance that goes beyond its basic, transportation meaning. A ferry is a material "thing" in which a significant richness of practices and interactions is hidden. What can we learn about travel practices in the Northern Sudan from the perspective of a ferryboat? This is the main question I will try to answer. This article is a voice in the discussion about transport that is a part of social-related activities. In my opinion, the travel practices are an extremely creative and multifunctional phenomenon: they are created, transformed or petrified. For me, just like for the authors of the "Making of African Roads," a transport infrastructure is not only physically, but also socially constructed (BECK – KLAEGER – STASIK 2017:3). All this is happening in the spirit of local culture dynamics; although the

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mobility in Africa, in spite of being derived from the outside world, is not a type of transplant, it is in many respects an original and unique variation of the global travel concepts. Travelling in Africa is often a collective practice that can be viewed from the perspective of the whole bunch of different practices: preparation for travel, loading and passengering and the travel itself. Each of these activities is combined with the processes of creating and negotiating space (WADELNOUR 2017:197-220). Each of them is also dramatized – it has its own stage, costumes, actors or spectators. Rituals and social performance rule here (ADLER 1989:1366-1391). Finally, all these elements are, more or less, noticeable when travelling by various means of transport, regardless of whether it is an airplane, a ferry or a bus.

Although this article has been prepared mainly on the basis of field observations made in the Northern Sudan in the village of ad Ghaddar in 2013 (these works were related to a research project entitled "Sudan as a multidimensional borderland" – 0151/NPRH2/H22/81/2012), it can also be considered here as an outcome of previous research trips to that part of Africa related to different research projects. In fact, a "ferry culture" has been the object of spontaneous, but conscious observations carried out for several years (actually starting in 2000). This included traveling the riverine Sudan. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation, numerous spontaneous interviews and ferry crossings visits. Hence this kind of experience can be defined, as it is often called, as "personal ethnology." I found the essayistic and impressionistic nature of this study to be the best way of presenting my thoughts.

Ferry Crossing

The river separates two areas that are intensively subject to human activity: farmlands and villages. In the Northern Sudan, man's life goes either on the right or on the left bank of the river. The ferry has been a link between these two parallel worlds for a long time. Its significance resulted from ecological conditions – the S-shape of a large fragment of the Middle Nile valley. For this very reason, generally there has been a constant need to cross the river by the ferryboats.

In the past, a simple raft from the acacia tree was used for conveying passengers and goods. Such a boat was operated with oars or carry a small square sail (HORNEILL 1942:1-17; OWEN 2016:174). At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, an iron ferry with a steam and later a diesel engine appeared on the Nile. A widely held assumption is that the British had special attitude to the Nile. This river was of primary importance for their presence in this part of Africa. It was one of the *raison d'être* of their economic and military policy. Therefore, modernization investments – including those of a transport character – were intensively concentrated in the area of the Nile valley. Interestingly, these activities were not

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entirely rational. Sudan is not Egypt. It is a truism which wasn't always clear for the British colonial authorities. Both countries have different ecological conditions. This is clearly seen on the example of the Middle Nile, which is neither easy to navigate nor the shortest transport route between North and South. In the times of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, there was an imaginary picture of the Nile – a paradise river that irrigated the land and guaranteed all harvest. For this reason, for the most part, the position of ferry shipping was unwavering. Even when motorisation came to Sudan (which, incidentally, led to the collapse of another long-term means of river transport – a steamer), not only did the role of the ferry decrease, but it increased even further. Due to the growing car traffic, an even larger number of ferryboats appeared at that time. Then, in the second half of the twentieth century, we can speak about the “golden years” of ferry shipping in Sudan. Today this period belongs to the past. The reason is the new, modern transport infrastructure of the Northern Sudan built thanks to the support of Chinese and Malaysian investors (GRAWERT 2010:250). In recent years, several permanent bridges have been built. Above all, finally, the road network connecting Khartoum with Wadi Halfa on the border with Egypt was finally completed. From 2018 on, an asphalt road runs on both sides of the river. This is where the traffic is focused right now. These are the main and the only routes for local and long-distance transports. As a result, ferry crossings only remained in places away from the bridges. One of such places is located near Old Dongola. The ferry connects two villages there: ad Ghaddar and al Gaba.

Ferry Morphology and Work Organization

The ferry operates from sunrise to sunset – it transports people, animals, cars and all movable human belongings. It is a huge, rust-etched structure. At the back there is an engine room, above lies the captain's bridge, and at the front there is space for cars and passengers. The ferry is operated by two men: the captain and his helper, dealing basically with loading, preparing a driveway for cars and collecting money.

Although the ferry operates every day, the increased traffic on the crossing prevails on market days. First, one way, then the other way. Whoever arrives first at the crossing will have a chance to reach the market first. And that's a good omen. It is believed that this will translate into the price of products. First come first served, although trade fair practice contradicts it. It is a well-known practice that prices are highest in the morning, while the lowest around noon. Anyone who does not have to does business in the morning. This is probably the

principle that operates in fairs, not only in Sudan, but also outside of it. Nevertheless, the best is to start each trip in the pale dawn – and finish before dusk.

Desert roads of Sudan are not usually physically marked. Each driver, like the ship's captain, sets the path himself in accordance with his experience and needs (WADELNOUR 2017:197). Individual trajectories cross parking places, security checks or ferry crossings. This is where the lives of people on the move are concentrated. Their needs materialize in the form of various infrastructures, of which I will discuss further on.

Waiting Room

A ferry always means a shorter or longer stop. A traveller cannot go onboard directly. He has to wait until it arrives from the opposite shore, and if it is night, he has to look for some accommodation. Even if he is lucky and finds a ferry on our side, it does not necessarily mean that it will be moving across the river in a moment. The ship – like most of the transport in Sudan – does not operate according to any fixed schedule. It starts when it is full of passengers or the captain decides that there is nothing to wait for any longer. Passengers are important, not time. The lack of a formalized and centralized ordinance is almost a universal feature of public transport in Africa. For this very reason, transport services are so strongly associated with social interactions (BECK – KLAEGER – STASIK 2017:1-24). Nearly everything is negotiable: from the beginning of the journey through loading to the final stop. The process is usually considerably extended in time.

The crossing slows down human mobility, periodically anchors “the traveller,” forcing travellers to do certain things, like conversation, observation or play. The very moment of embarking – slow and precise – favours the creation of an invisible bond between the people: “unity in waiting.” As German ethnographer Kurt Beck stated, it is by no means a time completely wasted or empty (BECK 2013: 426-445). In particular, the eyesight is activated. That is a unique “sociological achievement” (Simmel's term). As we know, relationships arise from looking at each other and interactions occur between individuals (URRY 2008:416, 417). What is more, while waiting for the crossing, travellers can make many interesting observations, for example: how the market promises to be or who comes home after a long absence. It seems that nobody and nothing escapes the attention of passengers who are just waiting to embark.

The waiting moment is a stimulus for the increased interpersonal communication. This is additionally favoured by various types of constructions – from simple, four branches and a

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roof (so called rakuba), to restaurants or night shelters. Travellers find a moment of respite in them or they can simply "kill boredom."

Waiting for the ferry boat is also a moment in which institutions important for the local cultural system may let themselves known, such as the law of hospitality – fundamental for every Sudanese Muslim. The form of hospitality can be a cup of tea or a roof over your head when it turns out that the nearest ferry will be the next day. I have had the opportunity to convince myself about it many times. It is not so difficult. Hospitality in these sites is ennobling. It is always noticed. It becomes a source of respect and even fame. Hospitality of certain people is simply legendary. In this sense – waiting for a ferry seems to be an inherent element of the journey for the Sudanese. Although mobility is accompanied by breaks everywhere, in Sudan this phenomenon seems to be brought to the extreme. A poor infrastructure means that constant repairs, breaks to supplement food or just when people need to rest are necessary. During the break, everyone knows how to behave: get out, "stretch the bones," look for a place to use the toilet, pray, finally talk to others. Like everything else, these are most often collective activities. They are made together. It is rather unusual for a person to stay in his place. It would be very inelegant in the first place. Probably a question would be asked why is he alienating? Across Sudan, an accusation is often behind such a question. A "normal", godly man should not avoid his fellow men. Likewise, a lonely man is someone who is suspected, a sick person, an evil, hiding some sinister secrets. Outsiderness is usually suspicious.

On the main routes, on and off, you can find various types of parking spaces, with better or worse infrastructure. Kurt Beck paid attention to these institutions as specific cultural creations. Among the other things he noticed that they are just used to cultivate relationships between people (BECK 2013:426-445). In Sudan – as in all of Sub-Saharan Africa – travelling was always a collective and mass activity. People used to group together while travelling. It was a matter of security, but also of a culture in which belonging to a community was a kind of dogma. At least in case of Sudan this custom still seems to be actual. In Sudan, despite the irrespective of the arrival of "modernity" and the presence of various means of locomotion, the ordinary people seem still to prefer travelling collectively. They share a common space and time – night and day, together, and the vehicle periodically becomes a home like a deep-sea sailing ship (BECK – KLAEGER – STASIK 2017:1-24). From that very reason basically the anchoring of the traveller at the crossing from his perspective seems to be something natural, integrally associated with the phenomenon of travel.

Loading and Passengering

Normally two, three cars and a few people can be on board. Firstly, cars drive onto the ferry. If they are parked properly, there will be even six of them; one next to another. It requires efficiency and organization. For this reason, the loading process does not always run smoothly. If things get complicated, micro-adventure breaks out between the drivers. It is all the greater when a car is scratched. Although none of the vehicles is not without spot or dents, even a small scratch is a reason for fussing. Harm is harm, no matter how big, it is damage to someone's reputation. And the Sudanese, as befits Muslims, are people of honour. So someone always has to play the role of the aggrieved party. Travelling – in particular being a passenger – means creating social roles (VANNINI 2011) or a whole branch of performative practices (Adler 1989). It is no different in this case when a large part of the local population – mainly men – will gather on a dozen or so square meters. Once all drivers are able to enter, people and animals move onto the ferry. Women on the stern, comfortably under the cover of the bridge, men next to their machines. In this way, at least the traditional division between men and women is preserved. A captain seems to be watching over everything, sitting on his bridge. His attitude to the world can be perfectly described by the inscriptions often placed on the steering wheel of ships: “Passengers are requested not to speak to the man at the wheel.” When the loading is finished, the captain soon gives a sign for unmooring; he hits something like a hammer against a metal element of the structure. First on the reverse (red string), then “full ahead” (black string). Even when the platform is raised, someone usually jumps on the ship. Nobody knows when the next cruise will be.

Cruise

The crossing lasts from ten to fifteen minutes. This time is used very often entirely for conversations. Not being particularly nosy, one can hear about grain prices, matrimonial announcements or politics – in a word, about the most important issues for the local population. The crossing is the first place where sensational messages are heard. It is also a place where messages are made or commented, where people pass on information that someone has just been born or died. It is here that rumour reigns on these several dozen square meters. The sight is maintaining the dominant position. Everyone is looking at everyone. For some, this is an inconvenience. Women are undoubtedly such a group, who are not accustomed to strangers' looks in particular. Not only that, the eyes of a stranger may have sinister consequences. If someone is afraid of the power of the “evil eye,” then the ferry is a place where they should be particularly watchful. Remember, however, that the ferry is also connected with some opportunities for women. A man is standing next to a woman.

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Glance for glance. These are the rules of the expressiveness of the human body. This is a place where a boy can look at a girl and even talk to her. Paradoxically, such conversations are favoured by the ferry engine's rush. Perhaps the spoken words will forever be the secret of these two. A look or even a conversation will not outrage anyone.

Passengers are the subject of the ferry crossing. They are not a permanent group. However, they share their emotions and for a moment, temporarily, become a relatively integrated whole. Such an episodic bond also has some consequences. The ferry is one of those spaces where conventions are relaxed. Various divisions are obliterated: our man-stranger, man-woman. It is open to social interactions. Using the conceptual tools of modern anthropology, the ferry can to some extent be called a non-place ("non-place of pre-modernity"). Perhaps the only difference that it is not a place completely foreign and indifferent. The opposite shore is a home or a world close to home. Long-distance travellers are rare here. As a result, passengers do not feel particularly alienated. Therefore, the ferry has usually a joyful, cordial atmosphere, and people are very eager to interact.

The situation is similar with visitors. On the ferry, rather everyone knows who is their own and who is a stranger. Regardless of this, it is a moment of communication even across rudimentary divisions. This can be seen in photographs from the colonial times. River crossing was the setting for many of them, hence we can talk about a certain group of performances: "ferry photos." And the reason? It was one of the few occasions when a European could take a good look at the natives and without a special discomfort immortalize this moment on the film. In Anglo-Egyptian Sudan the Europeans and the natives lived separately in different spaces that were supposed not to meet. In this sense, the ferry was a specific "place of contact".

Reflection, Metaphysics and Border

The ferry crossing disturbs the process of travelling, it reminds of its phased nature. We already know that before the era of asphalt roads, the journey through Sudan's wilderness was stretched in time, divided into many stages, filled with repairs, replenishment of supplies, or just rests. Even a simple crossing to the other shore has something of the sanctity, it is surrounded by the aura of uniqueness. I have already mentioned freeing oneself from the existing social structures, turning towards interaction or changing the way people feel time. The moment of crossing is also deeply reflective. By ferry, simply, it is possible to cross the river. Travelling to the other side, though short, makes one think about what is close and far away, makes you think about the nature of travel or the world described as yours. To leave home – or return to it – first you need to defeat the Nile – a type of a gate. This gate opens to

otherness – it also protects against it. Thus, ferries co-create the image of the Nile as a kind of border – a space that joins, but separates at the same time; a real barrier, which – to overcome – you must take appropriate actions, suspend certain norms or customs. All this is to safely reach the opposite shore (KURCZ 2016:85-119). The crossing is not an ordinary journey. It is always an experience that arouses anxiety. Water is an element of fear. Accidents happen despite the experience of people working there. (That's the reason one or two amulets (hijab) are commonly tied to the tiller of the boat). The river still surprises. It is simply unpredictable (the summer period is especially dangerous, then the river changes its level every day). The passage is, as one can say, a metaphysical experience. It often means a trip to orbis exterior (amazing, alien which, although analogically constructed, cannot be identical to ours). Already in the waters of the Nile, you can find evidence of the amazingness of the outside world. They are river angels or mermaids. They are part of the local folklore as the eternal inhabitants of the river depths. Neither bad nor good. They are also characterized by a truly human appearance. However, they are supernatural beings. Their main role seems to be to protect people during ground-breaking events, like birth or marriage. In the context of the river, taboos are obligatory. It applies especially to women – again – in crucial moments of life. Under no circumstances they are not allowed to travel to the other side. The ferry does not run at night, not only because of sailing difficulties, but also for magical reasons. Night is the time of ghosts, and of river creatures, which, disturbed by people, can harm them (KURCZ 2016:85-119). For this reason, no reasonable person will decide to cross the river at night or even approach it. It would be too dangerous, too frightening. Nubians are one of those African societies whose members still display a kind of “fear of the night,” a time-space-sparing quality different from the day. The day is the time of people, and the night – the ghosts.

Ferry crossing often crowns and begins a human journey. It happens that this movement brings a fundamental change with it. Someone comes back from a pilgrimage or embarks on a honeymoon. In each of these cases, the place of crossing becomes the scenery of solemn meetings, the joyful squealing of women, singing and animal sacrifice. To take someone to the ferry is the best way to say goodbye to him.

Conclusion

Ferry crossing is one of the manifestations of the mobility culture in contemporary Sudan. It is not only one of the elements of the transport system of this country, serving the satisfaction of transport or economic needs of its inhabitants. This phenomenon is fully integrated with the local culture and society, which has been given many rudimentary values and meanings

over a hundred years. Ferry crossing is a multifunctional phenomenon; it transports people, goods or vehicles, but also serves economic exchange, communication, nurturing social bonds or propagating religious ideas. It is also deeply rooted in the global, but also in the local reality. It is thanks to this that we can learn so much about the local concepts of travelling. It reminds us of its phases, complexity and related practices and customs. We can acquire knowledge of mystical geography – Nile semantics and border categories particularly or even of everyday institutions (such as the law of hospitality or the concept of honour). The iron ferry boats were strictly connected with the modernization changes in the 20th century: proliferation of car transportation and increase of spatial mobility in the first place. This means of river transport shows that local culture adapts to new technical environment and incorporates it entirely to the “traditional” system of values and practices.

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