

THE PHANTOM MENACE: FEAR, RUMOURS AND THE ELUSIVE PRESENCE OF AQIM IN SOUTH- EASTERN MAURITANIA¹⁾

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Abstract

Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (between 2001 and 2012), this article investigates how the intensifying regional insecurity is perceived and (re)acted upon by people inhabiting the frontier provinces of south-eastern Mauritania. It is argued that armed insurgencies and the emergence of nebulous assemblages such as the AQIM (Al-Qaeda Organisation in the Islamic Maghreb), must be analysed as constitutive elements in a complex convergent crisis which is currently undermining local livelihoods in multiple ways. In Mauritania and much of the Saharan and Sahelian regions, crisis has become chronic, and while people exhibit tremendous capacities to anticipate the uncertain and navigate a disequibrated natural and political environment in general, a new kind of protracted fear is spreading. This article establishes how the AQIM is enacted locally as a phantom menace, which asserts itself through a form of omnipresent fear, nurtured by an inherent opaqueness. As this fundamental fear progressively permeates the nomadic landscape, it engenders a recasting of mobile strategies among the nomadic pastoralist groups who inhabit the interstitial desert spaces.

1. Dark territory: The fabrication of fear on the fringe

I was standing with Sidi,²⁾ the local commander of the small garrison in the remote outpost Oualata, well beyond the fringe of the Sahara desert, literally gazing into the unknown. The oppressive heat and the whirling dust gave the light a soft character, which enveloped the monotonous landscape on this particular day in early February 2012 in the south-eastern frontier lands of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

This is dark territory [*territoire sombre*]. We cannot see what is out there ... We know something will happen, and we know it will happen soon ... They are already among us. Waiting to strike.

Sidi's coarse voice pierced the ominous silence as he pointed towards the invisible horizon. Here, at the margins of the Mauritanian national territory, a state of 'endemic paralysis' was becoming apparent, as the fear of nebulous assemblages such as the AQIM (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) proliferated. A severe drought affecting the entire Sahelian region was in motion and armed conflict had erupted only weeks earlier in nearby Northern Mali, as Tuaregs previously loyal to the recently assassinated Colonel Muammar Gaddafi had orchestrated a series of coordinated attacks on strategic cities and towns. The dormant conflict between rebel Tuareg and the central government in Bamako had been reinvigorated, and destitute Malian refugees were crossing the border into Mauritania in the thousands as the conflict escalated. The low-intensity conflict lingering on the margins was intensifying (cf Goïta 2011: 1) into what appeared to be the culmination of a decade of mounting fear and insecurity in south-eastern Mauritania. The air was thick with rumours and anxiety and I too was beginning to sense the presence of the 'phantom menace', which seemed to permeate the frontier despite its elusiveness.

Through the course of 10 years of intermittent fieldwork in the south-eastern frontier provinces of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, I have had first-hand experience of a growing concern over the phantom-like presence of AQIM and other illegible assemblages which, rumour has it, were operating more actively in the vast and isolated desert zones (Vium, forthcoming). Despite the relative infrequency of actual attacks, compared to the neighbouring country of Algeria, and more recently also

in Mali, the nomadic pastoralists with whom I primarily work have gradually internalised a protracted sense of fear of the latent danger of the phantom menace AQIM. This ontological uncertainty affects their room for manoeuvring as the mobility so central to the pastoral economy becomes increasingly constrained. The incessant circulation of rumours — insubstantial accounts of 'unidentified vehicles', relentless mentioning of the threat of the AQIM on the radio and, of course, the occasional kidnappings and direct attacks on military personnel and representatives of the government disturbed people. Until now, concrete instances have been rare, but nevertheless very effective in engendering anxiety, as the words of Sidi illustrate.

Following the so-called Arab Spring in North Africa in 2011, and in particular the demise and death of the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, a long-term ally of Mauritania, President Hassan Ould Abdel Aziz sought to strengthen his withering autocratic grip on power, cracking down on public demonstrations and 'cleaning up' within the military ranks. His proclaimed war against terror — among the primary legitimisations of his seizure of power in a *coup d'état* in August 2008 — was proving complicated, as insurgent groups such as the AQIM were relatively successful in stirring up turbulence and fear across the national territory, in spite of the limited operations and attacks they actually carried out.³⁾ Faced with rapidly escalating food prices (Bauer and Ndiaye 2012; Gamli and Aïnina 2012), a severe nation-wide drought (Gamli and Aïnina 2012; IRIN 2011), and mounting political opposition (Jourde 2011: 5-6), the despot seemed desperate to contain the situation in the lead-up to the 2012 presidential elections. To make matters worse, on 17 January 2012, heavily-armed and well-coordinated groups of Tuareg fighters, reportedly loyal to the late Gaddafi, descended from Libya where they had been enrolled in the army, on northern Mali. Using heavy artillery, they executed a simultaneous attack on five strategic cities, thus catapulting the volatile Sahel-region into further instability. In the days, weeks and months that followed, Nouakchott and much of Mauritania were saturated with rumours about the ramifying implications of these attacks, as the rapidly escalating armed conflict in neighbouring Mali added intensity to the converging catastrophe in southeast Mauritania (Nuttall *et al* 2005).

This article is about intangible fears, rumours and the way in which the threat of terror infiltrates the everyday with the potential to undermine the fabric of society in the south-eastern frontier provinces

of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Through a series of empirical cases based on ethnographic fieldwork in and around the outpost city of Oualata, it is demonstrated how rumours play a pivotal role in the production, enactment and maintenance of fear and anxiety. I argue that so-called terrorist groups such as the AQIM are hybrid structures, which are particularly illegible, perhaps even unintelligible, due to their mutable and vague configuration. While AQIM is showing signs of a growing operational capacity over an extended area (Alexander 2010, 2011; Goïta 2011: 1-2; Jourde 2011; Keenan 2004, 2007), as the recent events in northern Mali and Algeria display, I contend that it still exists primarily as a phantom menace, that is, a nebulous force in the minds of the local population in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, as opposed to a tangible threat. Whereas manifestations of fundamentalist presence in cities such as Timbuktu and Gao in northern Mali have become evident and, indeed, concrete to the inhabitants, this is not entirely so in Mauritania. Consequently, the effects of AQIM are best understood by attending to the multiplicity of rumours, which enact and maintain this elusive assemblage. My material indicates that it is exactly this nebulous and phantom-like presence which makes it a significant menace to society. Akin to a malignant cancer, it spreads subtly through an epidemic of rumour permeating and undermining solidarity and trust, the moral and ideological fabric of social life.

By proceeding through an ethnographic analysis of popular narratives — rumours — which are by their very nature ambiguous, distorted, decentred, anonymous, indeterminate and inter-subjective, I describe a volatile context of emergency, what Michael Taussig (1992: 1-10) calls a "Nervous System" in which the fragility of the social world we inhabit is made apparent (cf Das 1998: 126). In such a state of chronic disorder and disruption, everyday life arguably becomes a continuous attempt at anticipating, navigating and negotiating unknown elements that coalesce (cf Robben and Nordstrom 1995: 1-24; Vigh 2008: 6; 2009: 420). In attending to ways in which people attempt to come to grips with a life increasingly 'under siege' and AQIM's subtle but effective orchestration of fear and disorder, I subscribe to Allen Feldman's argument (1995: 227) that "(i)t is from the historically necessary descriptive *inadequacy* of conceptual footholds and the historical excess of terror-ridden experience that ethnographic exploration must begin, and we can expect no linearity or continuous paths through the ethnographic state of emergency". As will become evident, the phantom

menace of AQIM cannot easily be isolated from a larger complex of converging crises currently affecting large parts of the Saharan and Sahelian regions.

This article, then, does not provide a political analysis of contemporary Mauritania on a national level. Rather, it represents an attempt at conveying an ethnographic analysis of the emergence of new forms of uncertainty in the south-eastern frontier provinces of the country. Evoking the notion of a 'phantom menace' in the title stipulates that the real threat of groups such as the AQIM resides in their elusive presence, rather than their actual capacity for violent destabilisation, let alone political revolution. As indicated above, the ethnographic data upon which this argument rests have been collected during recurrent fieldworks in the period between 2001 and 2012.

2. Escalating turbulence: Emergency at the margins of the state

Literally situated at the edge of the vast *Tanezrouft*, 'the desert of deserts', a particularly hostile environment reputed for its innumerable dangers,⁴⁾ and frequented by a fluctuating population of highly mobile collectives of nomadic pastoralists, the remote town of Oualata (with a population of approximately 3 000) in several ways epitomises a critical juncture at the heart of the so-called 'corridor of terror' (cf Goïta 2011: 3; Jourde 2007: 86). Here, at the extreme margins of the state (cf Das and Poole 2004), a truly bewildering complex of actors, rumours, conspiracies and conflicting interests collapse to form a volatile outpost aggregating all sorts of illicit flows. Indeed, throughout modern history, places such as Oualata have been considered part of an uncontrollable 'frontier land' by the sedentary government (cf Jourde 2007: 82; Ould Cheikh 1985; Marchesin 1992; Vium forthcoming); a deviant topology inhabited by nebulous assemblages, anarchic 'ungovernable' subjects: nomads, bandits (*pillards*), smugglers, and 'terrorists' engaged in a plethora of clandestine activities. For centuries, the vast frontier area has been a zone of intense passage and informal exchange (Marret 2008: 547; Toupet 1977; Marty 1920-21). Here, political entities are not delimited by geographical boundaries but by "... an imbrication of multiple spaces constantly joined, disjoined and recombined" (Mbembe 2006: 263), thus forming what I have elsewhere termed a 'turbulent

topology' (Vium forthcoming), that is, a radical nomadic landscape (cf Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 387-467; Lechartier 2005: 256-293; Pedersen 2003, 2009; Retaille 1998) enacted through a plethora of shifting itinerant trajectories and mutating power constellations. Arguably, the observable patterns of increased transnational crime in the area over the past years are "symptoms of regional vulnerabilities" (Aning and Aubyn 2012: 4), facilitated by corrupt governance, weak law enforcement structures, porous state institutions, poverty, drought and uncontrolled borders.

What emerges on the frontier, then, is a volatile kaleidoscope in which foreign politics and economic interests perforate local and national worlds, creating conflated constellations composed through incessant friction (Tsing 2005). Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005: 3-21) have coined the term 'global assemblage' to designate "... abstractable, mobile, and dynamic" global phenomena which transcend and rearrange 'society', 'culture', and 'economy' and become articulated in assemblages which "define new material, collective, and discursive relationships". (Ong and Collier 2005: 4). Arguably such distorted phenomena proliferate in the desert in various guises, and AQIM can be seen as representing a quintessential example of such a global assemblage, aggregating global 'brands' like *Al-Qaeda* and *Ji-had*, as well as local populations in remote corners of the globe through modern communication technologies, media and traditional religious teachings. But who, what and where is the AQIM? The difficulties in answering these questions testify to this nebulous assemblage's ability to be nowhere and everywhere, absent yet present, hence my use of the affix 'phantom menace'.

At present, the most malignant component in this 'landscape of defiant topologies' is arguably the 'hybrid structure' of AQIM (Pham 2011: 252). It evolved out of the Algerian "Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat" (GSPC) when it adopted the global brand name of "Al Qaeda" at the beginning of the millennium, following the terrorist attacks in the United States (US) on 11 September 2001. Operating mainly in Algeria, AQIM has over the past decade strategically extended their operations south into the vast and isolated Sahel region, carrying out kidnappings, smuggling operations, and direct attacks on, in particular, government institutions. AQIM, whose size in active members is virtually impossible to define, can be likened to a fungible structure with multiple identities, which thrives in the interstitial and largely un-

governed spaces of the Sahara and the Sahel. Increasingly engaging in strategic collaborations with bandits, rebels and other criminal elements, and not least government and security officials, AQIM is considered to be augmenting its tactical and operational capabilities across the region (Goïta 2011: 2; Jourde 2011: 3; Pham 2011: 253). Thus, it appears that a limited core of hard-line terrorists engaged in *jihad* is associating a spawning assemblage of disparate affiliates engaged in various forms of (transnational) crime, threatening to destabilise entire areas from within, as can be observed in Northern Mali at present, where Goïta (2011: 4) quotes a council of local leaders in the Kidal region stating that "the Salafists control the area better than anyone". By cultivating and strengthening bonds with local groups (nomadic and sedentary), as well as local political authorities through inter-marriages (Goïta 2011: 3), AQIM appears to provide economic and humanitarian support (Aning and Aubyn 2012: 7). At the same time it fuels speculative anti-state discourse (Goïta 2011: 2-7), while coordinated attacks and kidnappings are escalating (Alexander 2011; Goïta 2011; Marret 2008). By disguising and clouding their true motivations (Jourde 2011; Pham 2011: 253), AQIM appears increasingly adept at permeating the Sahelian and Saharan border areas. As Sidi, the commander whom I introduced at the beginning of this article, explained:

The situation is very complex right now. A war is going on and we cannot secure our territory. There are too many unknown factors. (...) These malignant elements have agents at the heart of our people who guide them, who help them. They are in our midst [*au sein de nous*], and we know, but we don't know who they are.

We were sitting in the sparsely furnished office decorated with an outdated map of Mauritania on the crude wall. Sidi, the commander of the small garrison in the remote desert outpost Oualata, looked troubled as he explained how he felt that AQIM was becoming an 'omnipresent' factor in the desert. He was faced with a rapidly ramifying amalgam of largely illegible threats: Each day, rumours emerged, adding to the dynamic complex of fragmented information he was desperately trying to navigate. A thin Moor in dark green military clothes, Sidi almost disappeared into the enormous hooded winter jacket he was wearing. He cleared his throat and moved forward on the chair.

The people who kidnapped the soldier [*gendarme*] in Adel Bakrou

were wearing official military uniforms, just like mine, and they came along a track that you can only find and know if you are a local. It is a difficult track to find and follow. That is the problem — they have infiltrated our society and many of them are Mauritanian ... you can't tell the difference.

One week earlier, a young *gendarme* (soldier) had been kidnapped in the nearby town of Adel Bakrou on the border with Mali. A video had been issued, showing the trembling young police officer reading out the demands of the masked kidnappers and begging for his life. The kidnapping was the most recent in a series of actions perpetuated across the national territory, as well as in the neighbouring countries (cf Alexander 2011; Goïta 2011; Pham 2011). Sidi was constantly checking his red Nokia mobile phone, and one of his subordinates was attending to the satellite radio in the only Land Cruiser they had at their disposal. The handful of soldiers inhabiting the small garrison did not at all look at ease. How would they ever counter any serious attack, I thought to myself. According to my assistant Hassan, an entire platoon of soldiers from the city of Nema, 120 kilometres to the south, were hidden in an adjacent compound, waiting to be deployed if anything was to happen. Like most of the stories I heard throughout my fieldwork, this rumour was never verified, adding to the suspicious atmosphere that reigned in this isolated town. It is no secret — and no surprise — that the Mauritanian military, as in any other Saharan state, have great difficulty in controlling its vast frontier areas, these "landscapes of dissidence" (*Siba*) from clandestine operations (Goïta 2011: 1; Jourde 2007: 92-93).⁵⁾ However, in my 10 years of doing research in Mauritania, I had never before heard a high-ranking local military officer admit to the incapacity of the army. Sidi's recognition of the shortcomings of the state army and the apparently well-developed capacity of the AQIM to infiltrate not only groups in civil society, but also the military, was a reason for concern.

In the relative absence of actual state control, Sidi was commanding an insignificant contingent of badly equipped soldiers, which represented little more than a symbolic effigy of the state at its ultimate margins (Das and Poole 2004: 3-34). Sidi was entrusted with the thankless mission of upholding some kind of illusion of control, and this was no easy task. His most important function was keeping himself oriented through continued dialogue and collaboration with the local population.

In particular, the widely dispersed and highly mobile collectives of nomads in the surrounding desert were important, as they had an intimate knowledge of the vast desert areas which were considered the primary nesting ground for clandestine terrorist activities and encampments. The nomads, quite literally, composed an advanced frontline. As disclosed in Sidi's narrative above, the inherent porosity of the informal socio-political institutions regulating life on the frontier constituted a growing concern to the state authorities. Nebulous assemblages such as the AQIM were, it appeared, increasingly successful in infiltrating society, making it difficult to counter their clandestine activities (cf Pham 2011: 248). One of the examples Sidi relayed to me during our conversations was that military uniforms often 'disappeared' from garrison depots, and came into the hands of insurgents who used them to disguise themselves, posing as emissaries of the state, while they were, in fact, the opposite. The recent kidnapping of the young *gendarme* was but one example of this. While still very rare, raids on isolated outposts, such as the one in Adel Bakrou, represented a growing problem as these enabled affiliates of AQIM to procure not only weapons but also occasionally military vehicles, which they used in their operations. These classical *ghazzia* tactics of offense and surprise (*Karoual-ffar*), which combine sudden attack with rapid disappearance (Marret 2008: 546) are notoriously difficult to anticipate, and have always been an ideal means of spreading anxiety and fear in the Saharan terrain. Sidi explained how one of his main concerns was that whenever the military prepared coordinated efforts at countering the phantom menace of AQIM through so-called 'secret missions' in the desert, the alleged 'spies' or corrupt informers operating within the military would warn off AQIM. In addition, the order of command within the military was not flexible enough effectively to combat the imperceptible operations of the enemy. Virtually everything had to be cleared by authorities higher up in the hierarchy, many of whom had little embodied knowledge of the local terrain: "We are under the command of the commandant in Nema, and we can do nothing without his authorisation. There is a code of command and it has to be respected", he told me at our last meeting. "There are too many unknowns ... We are in a state of endemic paralysis (*un état de paralysie endémique*)".

While somewhat dramatic, Sidi's framing of the frontier context as being suspended in a state of endemic paralysis indeed seemed to capture the particularly volatile situation, governed as it was by a plethora

of opaque configurations. In the following section, I demonstrate how the threat of the phantom menace permeates the livelihoods of the local inhabitants through an 'epidemic of rumours' that nurtures anxieties and fear.

3. Nebulous assemblages: Constrained mobility, dried-out wells and suspicious vehicles

At the well of *Ain al-Argoub* in the dry riverbed (*oued*) on the fringe of Oualata, growing numbers of nomadic pastoralists and their herds were congregating around the scarce water resource, as a severe drought gained momentum across the entire Sahelian region and large parts of southern and western Sahara. One fourth of the national population was in danger of an immediate food crisis, and in the Hodh ech Chargui province, estimates put the figure at nearly 40 per cent (Gamli and Aïnina 2012: 7). The recent reinvigoration of armed conflict in neighbouring Mali, the epicentre of which was the so-called Azawad region a few hundred kilometres into the desert east of Oualata, was causing what could be termed an obstruction in the natural mobility flow so crucial to the pastoral economy, as herders were reluctant to migrate south with their herds to more fertile pastures in Mali. Because of their light complexion, Moors were easily mistaken for Tuaregs, and could thus be subject to the ethnic violence, which arose in the wake of the turmoil in Northern Mali.

One day when I was busy working at *Ain al Argoub*, an old nomad friend, Ishmael from the Edmaghratt faction of the Hamonat tribal confederation, and his son Hassan appeared at the well with their herd of camels. I was happy to see them, but struck by how Ishmael had aged, as he explained how life had become increasingly difficult due to the proliferation of multiple new exposures (climatic, social and political), which had emerged and converged in the area since I last saw him in 2006. While Ishmael was occupied mainly with calculating his choices in the face of the climatic stress — drought — and the subsequent scarcity of food, forage and water, he was growing increasingly uneasy in the face of the circulating rumours about AQIM insurgents active in the area.

Ishmael: We see more and more unfamiliar people around here these days. People we don't know. It makes us uneasy.

Christian: Why do you think these people come here?

Ishmael: Me, I think they are smuggling contraband. I don't know. What else would they be doing here? ... They have fast cars and they use old routes that only people familiar with this area know. I have heard that they pay well.

Christian: What do you mean? Who do they pay?

Ishmael: People who know the area. They pay them to guide them. A lot of money. That is what people say. I think it is true. How else can they find their way here?

Christian: I see. But who are they?

Ishmael: How would I know? All I can say is that I hear a lot of different stories. That they are not from here; that they are terrorists, bandits, smugglers ... I don't know.

As our conversation continued, Ishmael confirmed many of the disconcerting rumours and stories I had heard from nomads throughout the frontier provinces over the years. As navigation in this desert region is contingent upon an intimate familiarity with the environment, its paths and water points, insurgent groups largely composed of foreign nationals have become known increasingly to recruit guides from among the local population (cf Pham 2011: 252). These guides are remunerated vast sums relative to their poverty. Many nomads told me that they feel that, as a result, the military has become suspicious of them. The current conflict in neighbouring Mali further exacerbated this precarious situation and heightened suspicion in an area known for its fluid, boundless and circulating features (cf Lechartier 2005; Mbembe 2000; Retaille 1998; Vium forthcoming). Ishmael complained that passage into Mali was anything but safe given the armed conflict and, in addition, distant pastures such as those he frequented during periods of severe drought had become entirely inaccessible due to the destruction of wells. When I asked him why the wells had been destroyed, he explained that he had heard that it was the military that did it to discourage the construction of 'terrorist camps' in the remote desert areas. The military, it seems, had systematically destroyed a number of permanent deep bore wells in so-called 'strategic areas'

within the 'corridor of terror'. Despite the obvious problems this posed to herders like Ishmael, he stressed that this was just part of the problem. He explained how he sensed that people in general were starting to distrust each other: "Solidarity is waning. This is something new, and it is very strange. If we can't trust each other, life will become even more difficult".

This latter emerging consequence of the progressive entanglement of droughts, insurgent activities, rumours, paranoia and uncompromising militarised state responses deeply worried him. Survival in the nomadic landscape is profoundly predicated upon bonds of solidarity (*Assabiya*), trust and general hospitability towards strangers (cf Bonte 2006: 108-109). Ishmael felt these features were beginning to disintegrate. But what was he supposed to do, he asked rhetorically. Never had he considered more seriously the possibility of abandoning life in the desert altogether, but to do what? His herd had diminished considerably over the past five years, and as a consequence of the drought, his animals were weak and had little economic value. Adding to this the rising food prices, he was, for the time being, arguably in the worst possible position to recast his livelihood strategies. The emergence of new threats had engendered a sense of emergency, which left Ishmael confused. Never, he assured me, had he ever felt so incapacitated.

What I want to retain here is the fact that the current context of uncertainty in the frontier provinces of south-eastern Mauritania, must be understood as a complex multiplicity of ecological and socio-political constellations, incessantly figured and reconfigured by the interpenetration of multiple novel emergencies (Vium forthcoming): Political insecurity, insurgency, droughts, suspicion, rumours and conspiracies are mutually interrelated components whose composition (and intensity) — and herein lies the main challenge to the local population — continually mutate and fluctuate. The following case further examines how rumours from disparate and largely opaque sources exasperate the fragile social fabric on the frontier in a most intimate way.

* * *

As usual when darkness descended upon Oualata, I was watching television and talking with my assistant Hassan at the small *auberge* where we were staying. The satellite dish on the roof relayed a never-

ending stream of confusing fragments dominated by grainy images from the civil war in Syria and the armed conflict in Northern Mali. It had been a long day, and rumours of at least one unidentified, and thus per definition suspicious, four-wheel-drive were circulating among the groups frequenting the well. Sidi had warned us to let him know of our whereabouts and plans around town. The danger of kidnapping was imminent according to both the commander in Nema and Sidi at the Garrison in Oualata, and Hassan was growing increasingly nervous in my company. As he said, news travels fast in the desert, and my presence would surely attract attention from the AQIM.⁶⁾

The people of the desert love talking, you know we call it 'the Arabic telephone'. They ignore the dangers and if someone with bad intentions asks them if they have seen a white man, they will tell them where you are. In particular if they are offered money. We have to be very vigilant, I tell you.

Ever since my initial arrival in Nema, where I had been hidden at the garrison and subsequently transported in disguise to Oualata weeks earlier, we had been facing obstacles and the incessant flow of rumours of unidentified vehicles, mobilising terrorists, spies and so on. Contrary to my initial arrangements with the local authorities, I had been told that any undertakings, indeed my entire presence beyond the immediate confines of Oualata, would not only be inadvisable, but more importantly, my failure to follow their recommendations would be considered a serious offense. Hassan continued: "These days, it is better to remain vigilant ... you never know what might hap(...)", he was interrupted in the middle of his sentence by his cellular telephone ringing: "Ah, it is my wife. Please excuse me. I have to let her know all is well".

Hassan's wife, who was with their children in nearby Néma, had been uncomfortable with the fact that Hassan accompanied me, a Westerner, further out unto the fringe, and she would call him often, just to check and make sure he was alright. From the sheer volume and intonation of her agitated voice on the other end of the scratchy line I could tell something was wrong. The two exchanged a series of rapid sentences, with Hassan obviously trying to calm her down. He asked to speak to his youngest daughter and he assured her all was okay and told her not to be worried before hanging up. Rumour had it that yet another suspicious four-wheel-drive had just been sighted in

a small town between Nema and Oualata. According to what Hassan's wife had heard, the car came along the same unmarked path which was used in the kidnapping of the police officer in Adel Bakrou mentioned earlier. Hassan had to verify this rumour with Sidi and tried to reach him on his cellular telephone. No luck. He tried again and finally managed to reach him. Sidi hadn't heard anything.

We directed our attention to the small television set, and Hassan shook his head, as yet another Al-jazeera report on the siege of the Syrian city of Homs was unravelling. "It is unbelievable ... Extreme ... all over the Arab world, we have very serious problems", he muttered to himself and lit another cigarette, switching the channel to the national broadcaster *Television Mauritanie* (TVM). The evening news was on, and today's main story was, not surprisingly, the conflict in Mali. Images of veiled men in camouflage clothes were posing with their Kalashnikovs atop Toyota pick-ups armed with heavy machine guns, as the news presenter in the studio provided a mechanical update. Apparently, the nascent political cum military organisation MNLA (*Mouvement national pour la Libération de l'Azawad*, that is, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) was consolidating its position, while rumours had it that another, more nebulous grouping, *Ansar al-Dine* ("The Defenders of the Faith"), led by a prominent leader of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, were simultaneously manifesting their presence. Then, a clip from the growing refugee camps outside Fassala on the frontier with Mali some 200 kilometres south southeast, displayed masses of destitute Malian Tuaregs seeking refuge from the conflict and the drought. Over the past weeks thousands had arrived daily (cf Associated Press 2012; BBC 2012a and 2012b; Le Monde 2012; RFI 2012), and a spokesperson from the country office of The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed concern at the prospect of even more arrivals and an indefinite continuation of the conflict (cf UNHCR 2012). Once the news ended, the screen was occupied by images of marching Mauritanian soldiers accompanied by dramatic choir music. A special report on the national anti-terrorist activities containing re-enactments of military missions combating drug traffickers ensued. Hassan shrugged his shoulders: "More rumours. More confusion. What is the use? Where will this bring us? If there is one thing I have learned, it is not to trust everything I hear".

The clarity of this reflection was immediately negated by Hassan's reinvigoration of one of his favourite topics of conversation: the alleged

pressure that the Mauritanian government, in collusion with its Algerian counterpart, was putting on the French government which was mediating in the conflict between the Malian government and the MNLA over the conflict in the North. Hassan believed to know that Mauritania and Algeria were supporting the Tuareg because, as he said: they were possibly the best safeguards against transnational terrorist activities in the entire region. Surely, the Malian government had shown its incapacity to contain the malignant elements, but as would become evident in the ensuing months, the reliability of the MNLA was by no means evident.

In all of the cases presented above, widespread notions of growing disorder manifest themselves in a collective concern that intensified insecurity on the frontier. These notions are hinged primarily on the perception that solidarity, the moral fabric of society in the desert, is progressively eroding due to the mounting suspicion and fear of others, including of local people, that these rumours bring about. In the following section, I analytically unpack this complex constellation of uncertainty, rumours, fear and potential societal erosion, by engaging in an anthropological theorisation of these mutually inter-related components that figure so centrally in people's narratives.

4. The phantom menace and the production of fearful subjects on the fringe

As demonstrated in the previous empirical case stories from Oualata, a sense of increasing uncertainty nurtured by the proliferation of rumours and a pervasive fear of the unknown currently permeate the frontier and engender a fertile climate for the malign operations of ill-intended groupings epitomised by the AQIM. Based on my empirical findings, I consider rumours to be central catalysts for the enactment of what I call 'the phantom menace' because they attribute significance to nebulous assemblages such as the AQIM affiliated groups, arguably uncorrelated with their actual operational capacities. As can be deduced from the empirical examples mentioned here, groups such as the AQIM are characterised by a particularly powerful form of absent presence which, so to speak, enable them to be simultaneously 'nowhere' and 'everywhere', thus figuring prominently in the hearts and minds of people inhabiting the fringe. Fear is indeed a powerful and effective instrument, particularly when it is elusive, invisible and in-

determinate (Green 1995: 105-106).

In his book, *Liquid Fear* (2006), Zygmunt Bauman provides the following definition of fear, which may serve as a constructive point of departure for analysing the mechanics of emergency operating in the south-eastern frontier provinces of Mauritania:

Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause, when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. 'Fear' is the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done* — what can and can't be — to stop it in its tracks — or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power (Bauman 2006: 2).

In a context of uncertainty, rumours are important vehicles through which people apprehend their surroundings, and try to order those elements they do not understand (cf George 2004: 44; Finnström 2009: 67-68; Kirsch 2002: 57; Turner 2004: 228, 237), and as such they say something profound about lived realities and provide a source of knowledge about how people not only make sense of, but also produce the environment they inhabit (Finnström 2009: 62). Although ambiguous, treacherous, open to interpretation and speculation, and notoriously difficult to verify, rumours compose knowledge in this opaque territory and they are among the only sources of information available to the inhabitants. While rumours are obviously manufactured, the task of identifying by whom, why and when is particularly challenging in times of protracted crisis (Simons 1995: 43) as the chronic polyphony of rumours emanating from the mass media, sightings of unknown and suspicious cars, stories about kidnappings, attacks and strangers operating in the desert creates a contagious form of oxymoronic social distortion.

The effect of the murky economy of rumours (Simons 1995: 53) in Oualata is one of rampant reproduction and escalation, as rumours constitute compelling narrative frameworks for people to experience perceived threats and unknown aspects of the everyday while at the same time providing a narrative form for expressing or interpreting concerns about these fears (Kirsch 2002: 57). According to Veena Das, the essential grammatical feature of rumour is that it is conceived to spread, and "its lack of signature, the impossibility of its being

tethered to an individual agent" may facilitate a progressive "transformation of the world into a 'phantasmagoria of shadows, of fleeting, improvised men'" (Das 1998: 125, quoting Lacan 1993; see also Turner 2004: 240). Certainly, I experienced that the more uncertain people became, the more they would resort to rumours so as to attempt to figure out the supposed threat, fixing it in some form or image upon which they could (re)act. In other words, rumours constitute concrete attempts at articulating intangible fears and, through a form of "perlocutionary force", where words come to do something by saying something (Das 1998: 117), they paradoxically both reflect and reproduce the fear and crisis which define the moral premises upon which people act on the frontier (Das 1998: 116). In fact, I argue that people inadvertently produce the very effect they seek to combat through the production and circulation of rumours, and it is perfectly obvious that the phantom menace AQIM thrives on these rumours.

A salient feature of the production of insecurity on the fringe is that the perceived threats are largely "faceless entities" (cf Risør 2010: 468). As is apparent in the case of the pervasive rumours of suspicious four-wheel-drives in the desert, a widespread reaction among the population in the face of the unknown threat is to invent concrete figures upon which to hinge their fears (cf Turner 2004: 238). They, so to speak, project their fears onto the strangers traversing the region, and the suspicious cars become "markers by which otherwise elusive criminal characters are given a form that can be symbolically acted upon" (Risør 2010: 469). Nancy Scheper-Hughes, too, has discussed this objectification of fear in her analysis of organ transplantation rumours, where mysterious cars rumoured to be used for kidnappings figure prominently in the imagination of people (Scheper-Hughes 1996).⁷⁾ However, as Sidi's examples of AQIM's cunning tactics to undermine local institutions illustrate, there is an important element of infiltration at work on the frontier at present. As a consequence, identifying the actual enemy is complicated, and this inevitably produces a permeable and endemic fear, which threatens to paralyse society as people act with heightened distrust towards one other.

5. The Nervous System: An accumulative effect of terror?

In his conceptual dissection of terror, Taussig (1992) conjures up the image of "the Nervous System" as a permanent state of exception and emergency, where terror and fear reign. This strikes me as a pertinent metaphor for the troubling context of "ordered disorder" (Taussig 1992: 2), which pertains to the south-eastern frontier provinces of Mauritania. This type of "low intensity conflict", "whose leading characteristic is to blur accustomed realities and boundaries and keep them blurred" (Taussig 1992: 22), is an environment in which trust is increasingly undermined and paranoia becomes social practice (Taussig 1992: 21). The fundamental socio-political institutions are increasingly affected by the invisible infiltration of "a nomadic war machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 387-467), whose salient feature lies in its deterritorialised imperceptibility, mutability and supposed all-pervasiveness. Arguably, this infiltration is central to the workings of "the Nervous System" shot through as it is with conspiring factors and converging forces which engender escalating turbulence (cf Taussig 1992: 19).

By cultivating the obscure rumours, paying locals, infiltrating and attacking institutions, and generally disguising their identity, AQIM has succeeded in positioning themselves at the centre of the volatile economy of rumours which largely regulates life on the frontier. As Ishmael mentioned, *Assabiya* (solidarity), the quintessential fabric binding together the nomadic landscape of socio-political factions and mutable collectives (cf Bonte 2006) is weakening in the face of the external element of fear promulgated by the phantom menace. This is particularly problematic in the contemporary context, where customary forms of ordering are becoming increasingly obsolete, following decades of political instability and negative state intervention in the region. Terror, here understood in its obscure form, rather than as actual attacks, represents a highly amorphous element which escalates the already turbulent topology stirred up by the "Nervous System". As Bauman (2006: 94) writes, "What we are *not* able to manage is 'unknown' to us; and the 'unknown' is frightening. Fear is another name we give to our defencelessness".

There is little in the way in which the state handles the 'frontier problem' which may lead to a resolution. On the contrary, as indicated

by both Hassan and Sidi, and as I alluded to in the contextual analysis, the President Hassan Ould Abdel Aziz seems to be fuelling the conflict rather than containing it. As Henrik Vigh notes, "crises, by definition, involve conditions in which people, including the state's agents must improvise with the elements of their social and political technologies and cope with a variety of unexpected disruptions and opportunities". (Vigh 2008: 11, referring to Greenhouse 2002: 8). One example is how Aziz makes use of the state-controlled media as a technology for spreading rumours about not only his own power and benevolence, but equally about the danger of terror threats from in particular AQIM (cf Jourde 2005, 2007). He, too, enacts the phantom menace, arguably investing this nebulous assemblage with extensive capabilities, thus ironically empowering the very enemy he proposes to combat. While beyond the scope of this article, a political analysis of the ways in which international and national discourses on terror become entangled would surely prove interesting.

In this article I have proposed a series of empirical case examples from the south-eastern frontier lands of Mauritania, in particular the outpost of Oualata, demonstrating how AQIM is conjured up as what I call a 'phantom menace' through the proliferation of rumours that translate into anxiety and fear of a largely intangible 'other'. I have argued that the distinctively nebulous nature of the AQIM and the way 'it' produces terror in the minds of the local population represents a — if not the most — significant threat, which may progressively undermine the fabric of society itself. Describing and analysing the increasing political instability in the region, I have shown that a multitude of factors converge, conflate and become entangled in producing a particularly turbulent topology, in which new radical subjectivities and assemblages emerge. With reference to the reflections of my local interlocutors, I have stressed that this intermingling of ecological, political, economic and social elements cannot readily be dissociated. Rather than seeing AQIM as an isolated phenomenon, it is best conceived as forming part of a much more complex constellation — although the phantom menace is rumoured to be everywhere and nowhere, at one and the same time.

What emerges from this state of emergency (cf Bhabha 1994: 41; Taussig 1992) is a form of friction (Tsing 2005: 269) emanating from the convergence of poverty, drought, political instability, armed insurgency, nebulous assemblages, rumours, suspicion and eroding

moral economies. This friction, or perhaps rather turbulence, I argue, generates a continuous reconfiguration of power relations and the production of new radical political subjects, such as the itinerant insurgent bodies and imperceptible nomadic war machines (cf Deleuze and Guattari 2004), operating in the midst of new forms of regulatory authority in the desert areas (cf Roitman 2005: 419, 433). What remains to be seen is how encompassing this transformation process will be. After all, even the most good-hearted are susceptible to corruption under the right amount of pressure, and the turbulence on the frontier is nearing boiling point.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on recurrent fieldwork in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania between 2001 and 2012. I primarily draw upon material collected during a six-week field trip in the south-eastern frontier regions of Hodh ech Chargui and Hodh el Gharbi in January and February 2012. The author acknowledges the generous support of the European Research Council in funding fieldwork in 2009-2010, 2011 and 2012. This article is based on a presentation given at the workshop "Exploring the Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in the Sahel" in Accra, Ghana 28-29 June 2012, jointly organised by the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC), the Nordic Africa Institute and the Australian Government. It has greatly benefitted from the comments of the participants. In addition to acknowledging the organisers of the workshop, the author wishes to thank Karen Waltorp and Mattias Borg Rasmussen, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions.
2. All names of persons have been changed by the author.
3. The number of actual attacks carried out by AQIM and similar groups is infrequent and rare compared to neighbouring countries. The most significant episodes in the last years have been a number of kidnappings of foreigners (tourists and aid workers) in December 2009, the killing of a French family in Aleg in 2007, an attempt at detonating a number of bombs in Nouakchott in January 2011, as well as a number of attacks on military camps and garrisons, such as the suicide attack in Néma on 25 August 2010 and a larger armed confrontation between military and extremists in the Wagadou forest near the town of Bassikounou across the Malian border on 24 June 2011.
4. The most frequent term associated with the Sahara is *khle* or *khalye*, which denotes a deserted place, connoting a link to the mysterious and feared *djiin*, desert devils collectively known as *ehl lekhlé* (lit. the dead people) who have the capacity to destroy all life. Indeed, the verb *khle*

- signifies perishing, dying or emptying out.
5. Even an advanced and well-equipped army would face substantial difficulties in patrolling the frontier, given the isolation and harshness of the environment.
 6. My position in the field was a sensitive question, given the deteriorating security situation. Since 2007 in particular, I have experienced how long-term qualitative fieldwork in the more remote frontier regions of Mauritania has become increasingly complicated. Not only is there a potential danger of kidnappings, but also the bureaucracy surrounding official permission to conduct research is becoming difficult. However, this author finds it paramount to conduct qualitative fieldwork in precisely these times, where information about such remote areas is scarce and rarely based on first-hand impressions and actual time spent with people 'on the ground'.
 7. In Africa too, these urban myths of mysterious cars and kidnappings proliferate. See for example Chris Abani's novel *Graceland* (2004) set in the slums of Lagos, Nigeria.

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