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‘White gold’: Cultivating salt and saline spaces in Senegal

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Senegal is the largest salt producer in West Africa, mining nearly half a million tons each year. Small-scale harvesters are responsible for about a third of all production in rural inland and coastal areas, many of whom previously relied on agricultural production for their livelihoods. In *Le sel, une roche sédimentaire cultivée au Sénégal*, Cheikh Ahmed Tidiane Faye provides a sophisticated analysis of the intertwined socio-economic and ecological processes that have led to the emergence of widespread artisanal salt cultivation and its complex socio-spatial implications for rural societies. Faye focuses in particular on the High Saloum region, a center of salt production situated towards the end of the expansive Sine-Saloum Delta. The delta, covering roughly two hundred thousand hectares, is increasingly characterized by intensifying salinization,[1] a result of the lack of permanent river flow caused by the Sahelian drought and famine of the 1970s[2] alongside a globally changing climate that continues to accentuate the phenomenon.

As of now, more than a million hectares of land have been affected by salinization and acidification in Senegal, and the consequences of salinization for the inhabitants of the delta have been as numerous as they have been severe. Over the past few decades, salinization has led to the large-scale decline in cultivable land, the aggravation of poverty, disparities between villages and increased migration towards urban centers. The degradation of ecosystems has also led to the disappearance of multiple plant and animal species, the salinization of groundwater, the drying up

[1] The process by which water-soluble salts accumulate in the soil and groundwater.
[2] Although Faye does not go into detail on the origins and causes of the Sahelian drought, it has been widely documented that the drought and resulting famines were rooted in over-cultivation and degradation of ecosystems that would have otherwise withstood long periods of reduced rainfall. The exploitation of West African environments in particular that led to the drought was rooted in European settler colonialism, extractivism, and colonial policies that prevented African farmers and herders from managing the environment in a way that would have avoided the large-scale (and continuing) socio-environmental crisis (e.g., Ball 1978).

of fresh water sources and increasingly scarce rainfall. Since the 1980s, farmers in the delta region have struggled to grow traditional crops, and in some places any form of agricultural production has been rendered entirely impossible. Fishing, which was the second primary activity after agriculture, entirely ceased due to the over-salination of the river and the disappearance of fish. Farmers, faced with land too salty to cultivate or graze livestock, have turned towards the cultivation of a new resource in plentiful supply: salt.

Since the colonial era, the Sahel region, and Senegal in particular, have confronted accelerated environmental degradation and its socio-economic consequences. More recently, programs funded by the Senegalese government and international development organizations have attempted to reverse, or at least control, the yearly advance of salinization throughout the country. Yet, these efforts have largely failed to impede its progress, and have been similarly unsuccessful in improving the lives of those who are immediately affected by it, namely, small-scale farmers and producers who depend on the productivity of the land. While the state and international organizations see salinization as a risk that requires intervention, Faye argues that the inhabitants of the delta have transformed the environmental crisis of salinization into strategic economic opportunities. In this vein, salt, seen on the one hand as a sign of underdevelopment and environmental decline, has been converted into a source of economic prosperity and a symbol of hope by rural inhabitants.

Farmers initially turned to salt farming as a supplementary activity they could turn to during the long dry season. Due to the persistent climatic drought, salinization and acidification - what Faye refers to as the 'saline dynamic' (*dynamique saline*) - the exploitation of salt has not only become critical to the survival strategies of the rural population, but has also become a lucrative source of income that has far surpassed agricultural production. Moreover, salt farming has transformed the socio-economic and spatial organization of delta villages that were once exclusively agro-pastoral. This triple process of change, at once societal, spatial, and environmental, is profoundly reconfiguring the social and economic dynamics of delta societies. Faye details the ways in which the widespread cultivation of salt and the abandonment of agriculture has led to new ways of perceiving rural space and new forms of production that have generated wealth while at the same time disrupting normative social relations. These far-reaching changes have included new forms of land use and ownership, shifting gender relations, and inventive forms of political organization.

Additionally, the cultivation of salt has not only allowed farmers and their families to improve their socio-economic conditions, but is has also led to the valorization of salt as a source of prestige, offering the enhancement of social status and personal financial autonomy, and therefore, emancipation from previous social hierarchies. This is especially true for women, who have been able to earn significant income from trading salt with foreign merchants and have established their own trade organizations seeking broader representation in political life. Throughout the delta, salt is viewed as the 'white oil' of the region, giving rise to aspirations for lifestyles now attainable

through its extraction. The dazzling rise of salt production has not gone unnoticed, and more and more migrants arrive each year hoping to cultivate their own salt farms in the pursuit of economic promise and social mobility.

Throughout, Faye demonstrates through vivid detail the contradictions of the High Saloum landscape; characterized by both constraints and risks alongside opportunity and hope. Moreover, the study demonstrates how environmental decline can, in turn, become a catalyst for new dynamics, offering the potential for social and political change in the most unlikely of the places. In thinking through these processes of crisis and disruption that give rise to opportunity and change, Faye invokes a notion of 'creative destruction' – a process of destruction that leads to restructuring and transformation. At the same time, the rise of the salt trade has motivated rapid growth of coastal towns, accompanied by strong pressures on other resources in limited supply, leading to new social tensions and repercussions on an already fractured environment. In this vein, Faye highlights not only the slow violence (Nixon 2013) of environmental degradation, but also the cycles and contradictions of environmental decline that, while offering opportunities, raises questions as to the long-term sustainability of these new modes of survival born from crisis.

In order to grasp these complex environmental and socio-spatial issues, Faye mobilized multi-scalar analysis, skillfully weaving together diverse forms of data (e.g., hydrological, geophysical, surveys, interviews, observations, archival sources) and phenomena separated by temporal and geographic distance. In the first chapter, Faye details the geomorphological history of the area, climatic variables, and anthropogenic factors in the dynamics of agricultural land degradation, illustrating the complex processes and historical roots of the ongoing social and ecological transformations. These dynamics are covered in remarkable detail, with the additional provisioning of extensive maps, tables, and illustrations to demonstrate the historical depth and contemporary extent of these interconnected events as well as their scalar problematics. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of physico-chemical and socio-spatial transformations of delta societies, and includes an expansive discussion on the process and practices of salt production in addition to a history of artisanal salt exploitation in West Africa and the Mediterranean region. The final chapter draws connections between the events over the *longue durée* that led to the degradation of rural socio-economic and environmental systems to the widespread emergence of the small-scale salt cultivators and the dynamics of socio-spatial change.

Overall, the study responds to key questions relating to the interconnected processes of environmental decline and social change around the world, as well the entangled links between colonialism, globalization and anthropogenic climate change. As such, the discussions here would be particularly useful to those interested in environmental anthropology, global supply chains, the production of space, studies of global climate change, and changing forms of extractivism.

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Emilia Groupp is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. Her dissertation research focuses on large-scale solar energy production, transnational energy infrastructures and emergent energy geographies. Her research is funded by the Social Science Research Council, the American Institute for Maghrib Studies and the Stanford King Center on Global Development. She is also a Research Fellow at the Organization for Identity and Cultural Development, and co-editor of the Anthropology Book Forum.