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ABOUT TWO TRAINING SESSIONS OF THE CLIMIGRAFORM PROJECT IN SUDAN

(March-October 2021)

Learning Fieldwork Under Uncertain Conditions

Yacine Khia¹ - Hager Hassan² - Rayan M-Tom³

CliMigraForm, “Training in participatory inquiry on climate and migrations in Sudan” (2020-22), is a collaborative project between University Paris 8 and the University of Khartoum, in the frame of the ADESFA (Aid to the Development of French Higher Education in Africa)⁴. It aims to offer to French and Sudanese students an intensive training in qualitative methods of research in Sudan at the intersection of two issues: the relationship between human groups and their environments, and migration dynamics, at regional and international level, in a context of accelerated climate change and increasing mobility of individuals and groups. In this frame, a first question put forward the value of a micro-scale qualitative approach, focusing on the diversity of local experiences, perceptions and strategies to cope with environmental changes and mobility trajectories, going beyond the macro-scale quantitative models for reading the two phenomena. A second question aimed at unfolding wider political factors which are often neglected by visions conceiving climate change as essentially “naturally-based” and migration as unidirectional and mainly “economically-based”. The project was articulated in two training sessions: the first (March 2021)

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4 Based on a longstanding partnership between the two universities, the project also included, as teachers as well as students, members of the University Paris 1 and CNRS. For more details on the pedagogic team and participants see also www.climigraform.org

in an urban context, Burri (Khartoum), a neighborhood on the west bank of Blue Nile. The second (October 2021) in a rural context, the agricultural village of Sharafa Barakat (Jezira State). Data collected during the two sessions will be used to feed a final symposium in Paris (June 2022).

In order to grasp the issues connecting environmental changes and migration trajectories, the project was centered on an interdisciplinary approach. The team was composed of students and teachers in anthropology, sociology, geography and linguistics. Students had the opportunity to learn various techniques of data collection to seize complex dynamics of human relations with environments and mobilities through different ethnographic tools (interviews, life stories, observations, genealogies, sociolinguistic questionnaires and cartography). They were briefed about modes of data collection by the teachers-researchers, then a collective discussion on the activities took place at the end of the day. The project also involved actors from the civil society to make them participate in the production of knowledge and to develop reflexivity about the categories used for dealing with the focused topics. Three associations participated to the training: CartONG, a French NGO bringing its expertise in terms of participatory mapping; OSAE (Observatory of Food Sovereignty and Environment), a Tunisian association specialized in training on agricultural and environmental issues in the Souths, and Sos Sud-Soudan, a French-Sudanese association focused on the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and status. These partners tried to establish a bridge between the academic world and civil society actors, considering respondents as co-producers of the research. By resuming the main steps of the two sessions, we wish to stress how some health and political realities, appeared during the project implementation, brought organizers and participants to adapt to unforeseen constraints, which raised questions about doing fieldwork in times of multiple uncertainties.

The first training session was held in March 2021 in Burri neighborhood, east of the capital, Khartoum. The first interview took place in Burri Kuria, with the local *lajna al-taghir wa al-khidamat* (Committee for Change and Services), an institution created after the 2019 Sudanese Revolution to replace the previous regime's *lajna sha'abiya* (Popular Committees) and to manage daily issues enhancing the quarter's people participation. The choice of this actor for a first group interview was linked to its importance in building a new way for dealing with local issues: the long discussion about recent Nile floods in Burri (Winter, 2020) showed us a vision of "natural disasters" as linked to political issues (like disrupting urbanization and corruption) and faced by people through solidarity networks emerged after the revolutionary process. A second group interview was led in Burri Sharif with members of the Ashraf. Claiming descent through the Prophet, the Ashraf are one of several Sufi brotherhoods in Sudan, established in Burri at the beginning of the 20th century. Their historical pres-

ence as an elite in the neighborhood (a rural village before Khartoum colonial expansion), and their status as land owners made important for us to get their vision of Burri social life, given by the discourse of a local historian and of a member of the religious group. The team was also guided to visit the buildings of the Ashraf brotherhood and then their *juruf* (agricultural plots cultivated through Nile seasonal floods): here the meeting with a farmer provided us with an insight both on the dynamics of group mobility (tribal groups, farmers, nomads) and the impact of urbanization on this form of urban agriculture, revealing “environmental” changes as affected by a mix of land policies and ethnic divisions rather than natural causes.

While the dynamics of collective work was going on, taking care of some minor problems (like the adaptation of French participants to high temperatures or the problem of translation for non-Arab speaking), Covid-19 cases within the group brought to rearrange our program. The isolation of the affected participants brought us to privilege observations to interviews, and the early departure of part of the French team pushed us to continue fieldwork in two daily surveys in Burri Lamab (the most ancient quarter of the locality) with former cultivators. Their life stories gave us a complementary vision of how family strategies, land access and political powers, are merging at the micro-level drawing a better understanding of the intersection between changing environments and people mobilities.



Listening to the Committee of Change and Services, Burri Kuria
16th March 2021 (source: CliMigraForm)



Preparing the interview with the Ashraf, Burri Sherif, 17th March 2021
(source: CliMigraForm)

The second training session of the project took place in October 2021 in Sharafa Al-Barakat, a village in Jezira State, one of the most important agricultural regions of Sudan. This choice was made not only for comparing an urban with a rural context (composed of farmers, seasonal workers, and pastoralists) but also because Sharafa is the founding place of the Ashraf we already met in Burri. The session has been prepared by two surveys led by one French and one Sudanese teacher. Between the two sessions, meetings at the University of Khartoum with Sudanese students and two French students, zoom meetings and an intermediate workshop in Paris reflected about the link between objectives and methods of first and second session.

As a starting point of this session, we made a visit to Sharafa market to have a first contact with people and introduce ourselves. At this moment we knew that a military coup had just seized the power in Khartoum. This unforeseen event opened another space of uncertainty about the development of the project's session, made particularly difficult by the black-out of all communications in the country and worries not only about the security of the team but about wider effects on the country. As we were anyway forced to stay in the village until the military unblocked routes and bridges to Khartoum, we kept our collective first group interview with the Ashraf in Sharafa, that was important to seize both their history of relation with the kin group in Burri (and the historical mobilities of both) and a strong, although different, link of this Sufi brotherhood's section with access to land and labour organization in the village. This allowed us to continue with another crucial step, a walk in

the agricultural lands of the village. A long interview on the fields with two farmers brought us to the core of our topics: the intermingling of issues of environmental resources exploitation, ethnicity, access to land and labor, mobility, perceptions from below of “climate changes” parallel to shifts from family to commercial agriculture. Finally, a third day was consecrated to the interview with an old woman from an agricultural group. This showed us the value of classical ethnographic methods (biography, genealogy and marriage patterns) as an entry point for seizing at the micro-scale the embeddedness of family strategies on more generations, land uses, environmental change, and small scale mobility. As for the first session, the political context pushed to shorten the program: back in Khartoum, we continued the work of data elaboration with the group who remained in Sudan after the repatriation of some French members, and we also carried out two short (2 days) additional surveys.



Interviewing two farmers in the fields, Sharafa, 26th October 2021
(source: CliMigraForm)



A walk at the cemetery, near the fields, Sharafa, 27th October 2021
(source: CliMigraForm)

Different elements need to be underlined in this experience, which continues to be discussed and elaborated by the participants. The first is the interest of a bottom-up approach to climate change and mobility: putting in stand-by grand theoretical models and favoring qualitative fieldwork give suggestions for dealing with these issues outside a “catastrophic” vision of environmental crises and a “pathologic” vision of migrations. Situated experience of local actors shows that “natural events” are often conceived in link with political and historical elements, and comparison of urban and rural contexts may reveal plural perceptions of phenomena – like “floods” seen as a threat in Burri but as a benefit in Sharafa. The second is the reflexivity enhanced by putting together, in a pedagogic frame, students and teachers from the North and the South: beside exchanging on varied academic patterns for teaching fieldwork, we could question not only our respective categories about “natural events” and “people mobility”, but also the difference of status (beside the common one as students and teachers) when faced to ethical or professional dilemmas in the two “emergency situations” (Covid-19 and Coup d’Etat). The third is the difficulty of building effective “participatory approaches” in short-time projects: more than in reason of the sessions’ schedules shortening, this objective would have needed a longer and deeper process for creating a dialogue between the academic side (teachers and students) and civil society or local actors, with their different backgrounds, languages and positions. Finally, the shared experience of managing the complexity and novelty of these two unforeseen events during the sessions, opened up for all a lively reflection and exchange about how to deal, as researchers on the field, with multiple uncertainties that are far beyond the ones we aimed to analyze during this project.⁵

⁵ More pictures of the project CliMigraForm are available in the central part of the volume (cahier photos).