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Sticking around or fading away: water patronage and value in Chad

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Abstract

This article explores trajectories in the politics of water patronage in N'Djamena, Chad. Water appears as a malleable and elusive commodity, at once ubiquitous and somewhat overlooked. Drawing on ethnographic field research in peripheral N'Djamena, I argue that relational distance is skilfully handled by water patrons for monetary rewards and influence. Such handling swings the making of water value in contradictory directions unaccounted for in much of the existing literature on water patronage. Present or absent, hidden or on display, funders or profit makers, patrons may leverage water supply through material, symbolic or entrepreneurial labour that places them in conflicting spaces. Ultimately, these leveraging processes based on the manipulation of relational distance create a multifaceted water valuation. The various positionalities of the water patrons and their use of relational distance point to the existence of multiple water values, rather than a single one. Therefore, I argue that water may have either a 'distant value' or an 'anchored value', depending on the relational distance strategy implemented by the patron who provides it.

Résumé

Cet article explore différentes trajectoires de patronage dans le domaine de l'eau à N'Djaména, au Tchad. L'eau apparaît comme une marchandise malléable et insaisissable, à la fois omniprésente et négligée. En m'appuyant sur des travaux de terrain ethnographiques dans les quartiers périphériques de N'Djaména, je soutiens que les patrons manient habilement la distance relationnelle en vue d'obtenir des bénéfices monétaires ou en terme d'influence locale. Ce maniement engage la production de la valeur de l'eau dans des directions contradictoires, et qui sont passées sous silence dans une grande partie de la littérature actuelle sur les logiques de patronage. Présents ou absents, discrets ou triomphants, débiteurs ou créditeurs, les patrons sont susceptibles de tirer profit de l'adduction en eau à travers un travail symbolique, matériel et entrepreneurial qui les place dans des espaces contestés. En dernière analyse, ces processus de rentabilisation fondés sur la manipulation de la distance relationnelle produisent une valorisation de l'eau aux multiples facettes. Les nombreux positionnements occupés par les patrons de l'eau et leur usage de la

distance relationnelle indiquent l'existence de plusieurs types de 'valeurs hydrauliques' plutôt qu'une seule. Ainsi, je distingue la 'valeur distante' de la 'valeur ancrée' que l'eau est susceptible d'avoir en fonction des stratégies de distanciation mises en œuvre par les patrons qui se chargent de son adduction.

Resumo

Este artigo explora as trajectórias da política de patrocínio da água em N'Djamena, no Chade. A água surge como um bem maleável e esquivo, simultaneamente omnipresente e algo negligenciado. Com base numa investigação de campo etnográfica na periferia de N'Djamena, defendo que a distância relacional é habilmente manipulada pelos patronos da água para obterem recompensas monetárias e influência. Essa manipulação faz oscilar a criação de valor da água em direcções contraditórias que não são tidas em conta em grande parte da literatura existente sobre o patrocínio da água. Presentes ou ausentes, ocultos ou à vista, financiadores ou geradores de lucros, os patronos podem alavancar o abastecimento de água através de trabalho material, simbólico ou empresarial que os coloca em espaços contraditórios. Em última análise, estes processos de aproveitamento baseados na manipulação da distância relacional criam uma valorização multifacetada da água. As várias posições dos patronos da água e a sua utilização da distância relacional apontam para a existência de múltiplos valores da água, em vez de um único. Por conseguinte, defendo que a água pode ter um 'valor distante' ou um 'valor ancorado', dependendo da estratégia de distância relacional implementada pelo patrono que a fornece.

Introduction: selling it or funding it

'*Oui, chef de carré*? Yes, block chief?'

With these few words, Abakar[1] had revealed the identity of his interlocutor when he picked up the phone. On that day in February 2019, Saradoum, my research collaborator, and I were sitting on a bench in Boutalbagar market (District 7, eastern N'Djamena) in front of a water tower. We listened to Abakar describe his livelihood: an established businessman of the district, Abakar owned the only private water source in the market and sold water to porters, shopkeepers and private end users. Around us, the market was bustling as people were going about their business. Water porters were filling their cans at the tower; shopkeepers were talking and bantering. After hearing Abakar discussing the craft of water trade and investment that he seemed to command masterfully, I had taken it for granted that he was just an entrepreneur.

'He's talking to his subordinate,' Saradoum told me. 'As a delegate, the block chief is under him and reports to him.'

I had seemingly misapprehended the range of Abakar's roles in local politics. Who was sitting on that bench in front of Saradoum and me? A water tower owner, a market administrator, a local community leader? Or, more likely, all of the above? Abakar's official title, I learned, was market delegate. This placed him as a constitutionally recognized notable, responsible for overseeing the day-to-day

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[1] For safety reasons, pseudonyms have been used.

running of the market. Of course, this did not prevent him from doing business; setting up a water source in a market, a place where people crucially needed water, could be a profitable endeavour. Abakar's service was required in an area where the Société Tchadienne des Eaux (STE – Chadian Water Company – the national public water corporation) could not operate because of its limited network.

Months later, I met a professional politician whose goals and businesses were very different but who engaged in activities reminiscent of Abakar's: water patronage. This politician, Saibou Ali, was an elected member of the Chadian parliament. He had donated money to buy hand pumps in his constituency. Continuing my investigations into the logics of water patronage in N'Djamena, I interviewed managers of the Munazzamat Al-Dawa Al-Islamiya (Organization for the Islamic Call), known simply as Al-Dawa. This is a long-established charity active in the water and sanitation sector as well as in healthcare and education. Thanks to its charity work, the organization is able to strengthen its influence. The fact that Al-Dawa is a faith-based organization matters significantly in a country where religious dynamics remain crucial in social and economic change.

The relational distance between power brokers and citizens is a central element in local politics. Local rulers subtly handle their relations with their fellow constituents to fulfil competing interests in line with their own agenda in an evolving, uncertain socio-political order. While anchored chiefs-cum-entrepreneurs may need to repeatedly appear in the field to raise awareness about or publicize their actions and policies, renegotiate their authority and oversee their businesses, recognized politicians carefully select the relevant moment for them to appear. For example, they may set a clear distinction between election periods, when appearing in the spotlight is required, with moments of fierce tensions when remaining temporarily in the shadows is preferable. For patrons involved in water supply and access, the political and financial gains from fading away or sticking around are contingent upon the relational distance strategy they attempt to implement.

In this article, I understand relational distance as a constant, repeated effort to simultaneously manage distance and proximity (Mair 2015). The notion of relational distance partly overlaps with those of detachment and disconnection, secrecy or autonomy. Patrons may use all of these (especially, for example, secrecy or autonomy) to establish or handle relational distance, which specifically involves the ability to create or negotiate relationships in a context of both physical and symbolic distance. The literature has highlighted that detachment, disconnection or distance does not necessarily mean the absence of relationships. Detachment is sometimes a way of forming and maintaining relationships through an 'ethics of care' (Neumark 2017). In that sense, distancing can paradoxically be a way to get closer to others (*ibid*.). Similarly, autonomy is not valued as a way of isolating oneself from relatives, but as a relational ethic, a process through which 'detaching can be a way of attaching' (*ibid*.: 750). In northern Chad, remoteness and disconnection from political centres are a source of power and provide economic opportunities, such as the ability for traders to profit from 'external fears, anxieties and disruptions' (Brachet and Scheele 2019: 168). In such a context, disconnection becomes 'a special type of relation' (*ibid*.: 162), a way of celebrating economic independence and wealth, glorifying lavish, conspicuous consumption.

Drawing on ethnographic field research conducted in N'Djamena's peripheral and working-class neighbourhoods between 2019 and 2023, this article argues that these divergent paths depend on relational distance strategies devised by power brokers that ultimately lead to differentiated valuation processes relating to water: elected officials and charities reap political benefits through the 'distant value' of water while chiefs make money from the 'anchored value' of water. Here, relational distance between the constituents and the patrons operates as a central force through which the latter manage to gain from water supply. Engaging with the existing literature on water and politics in global South cities, the article proposes to understand water as a complex, multifaced and relational substance that may be used in contradictory ways.

The point of this article is not to define overarching patterns pitting wealthy, powerless, traditional chiefs against penniless, powerful, modern elected officials. Nor does it intend to generalize features of chiefdoms and elected officials, or to revive simplistic tradition/modernity binaries to draw culturalist conclusions about the role of chiefs or parliamentary officials in the contemporary African state. Classical scholarship has shown how views of tradition are constantly reinvented and intersect closely with changing notions of modernity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Rather, the emphasis of this article is on concomitant circulations of water, money and power. The article posits that the management of relational distance between patrons and water end users enables such circulations. Ultimately, the handling of relational distance reveals the plural values of water.

The rest of the article begins with situating the water leveraging strategies of patrons in N'Djamena within the broader scholarly literature on water patronage. I locate these leveraging strategies within existing debates about the moral economy of water and neopatrimonialism by showing how the emphasis on relational distance offers an alternative understanding from norm-based or clientelist analyses of water supply systems. I then introduce my three case studies – Abakar, Saibou Ali, and the work of the Al-Dawa charity. Then I examine the handling of relational distance and secrecy by patrons and how this enables the generation of money and power. Finally, I discuss how this process helps put into relief the dyadic values of water, highlighting the existence of 'anchored value' and 'distant value'.

Leveraging water for money and power in N'Djamena

N'Djamena is the capital of Chad, a landlocked republic in Central Africa with a population of roughly 16 to 18 million. Stretching across the Saharan–Sahelian strip, Chad covers an area of 1.2 million square kilometres and has a very diverse hydrography and climate. N'Djamena lies on a flat Sahelian plain on the banks of the Chari River in the west of the country. Its climate is semi-arid, with a generally long dry season from October to May and a shorter rainy season from June to September. The city was founded in 1900 as a tiny military post in the wake of French colonial expansion in West and Central Africa. Like other French colonial capitals, it was broadly structured around three main areas organized in concentric circles, from the colonial core to the 'African city' and the periphery (Ngaressem 1998). In 2019, only a third of the inhabitants of N'Djamena were directly connected to the STE's piped network (Madjigoto 2019). Many water end users relied on a combination of boreholes, hand pumps and other means to access water, particularly in the periphery

of N'Djamena, which now accounts for the main bulk of the urban growth of the capital and is expanding rapidly to the east. District 7 is the largest of the city's districts and includes much of N'Djamena's periphery. Created in 1999, this district incorporates large swathes of rural land. It has very limited infrastructural networks and socio-economic facilities.

Much scholarly research has examined the quotidian practices of accessing, monitoring and manipulating water flows and how water can be harnessed to leverage political or economic power in contexts of scarcity (Barnes 2014). In particular, cosmological beliefs and values contribute to shape the social arrangements and hierarchies associated with the control of water (Strang 2016). Water gifts are fundamental to establishing local political prestige: in contexts of scarcity, water frames neighbourly relations and commitments based on donor–recipient patterns and moral frameworks (Zug and Graefe 2014). As a fungible substance in multiple social realms where it is indispensable, water provision is routinely monetized or converted into influence and popularity. Conversion, defined as a 'transaction where a fundamental incommensurability is recognised and preserved' (Guyer 2012: 2215), requires specific labour and skills: patrons involved in water provision orchestrate a series of material and symbolic performances to benefit from water.

A broad literature has analysed how these performances have contributed to the historical formation of state power. For example, centralized despotic entities have risen through the control of water supplies for irrigation, among other purposes (Wittfogel 1957). These 'hydraulic empires' included Ancient Egypt, China and Mesopotamia. Likewise, Worster (1992) analyses the taming of the water supply by Mormons during the conquest of the American West in the mid-1800s. He highlights how such taming has given rise to modern hydraulic societies. Worster's and Wittfogel's analyses have been met with both praise and criticism. Polities and political authority can be built on water, seen as an ancestral gift that binds the nation state together.

More recently, the moral economy framework has loomed large in the literature. Moral economy dynamics are premised on social arrangements between subalterns and power holders that define the conditions of production, exchange and consumption (Scott 1976; Siméant 2015; Thompson 1991). This framework has been widely used in the analysis of water supply and access in the global South, for instance to account for claims to justice and shared access to this essential resource. Another line of thought has concerned technopolitical relations mediated by hydraulic infrastructure, which carve out different subjectivities and point to the capacity of populations to negotiate their citizenship, particularly in the urban global South (Anand 2017). Drawing on these different bodies of literature, this article provides an original narrative on the making of water value. This narrative is as follows: as water appears as an essential and extensively malleable resource, patrons can employ various strategies involving symbolic, entrepreneurial and material labour to tame, and ultimately benefit from, its production and distribution. These benefits are sought through contradictory routes involving both money and power. Patrons can spend money on water for political gain, or use local influence to generate profit. The standard Maussian perspective establishes a dichotomy between gift and exchange economies. Conversely, this article shows that patrons manipulate relational distance

to produce water value through convoluted, complex processes. These processes ultimately create different water values. Thus water moves simultaneously from a 'distant' to an 'anchored' value, depending on the relational distance strategies implemented by water patrons. Examining the ways in which patrons utilize relational distance is therefore crucial to understanding the different valuation processes of water.

As an indispensable and sometimes inaccessible commodity, water is simultaneously sold and gifted (Zug and Graefe 2014). This simultaneity, together with the multifaceted nature of water supply systems, may lead to a reconsideration of the relevance of the gift–commodity conundrum. In a context of 'infrastructural coexistence' (Furlong 2016; Maazaz 2021), where piped networks do not have a monopoly on water supply solutions, the relationships between patrons and end users are crucial for water allocation. Not only do relational distance and proximity have implications for brokers involved in hydraulic issues, but the manipulation of relational distance also creates differentiated waters. The water used by Abakar for monetary gain contrasts strikingly with the water used by Saibou Ali or by Al-Dawa charity officers. Or, more precisely, the same water displays and embodies different values. The potential and the opportunities offered by water have attracted many actors to the craft of water provision. These include politicians and chiefs, who both attempt to increase their influence.

Water is value in motion; it circulates, it is shared and valorized in shifting forms in order to accumulate prestige or obtain position and power. Since the 1960s, anthropological theory has devoted much room to the conceptualization of value. Generally and quite paradoxically, the singular 'value' can refer to the commodification of labour, while the plural form of 'values' often corresponds to 'what is ultimately important in life' and cannot be converted into money (Graeber 2013: 224). Imagination plays a fundamental role in the determination of value, as 'it can only be realised in other people's eyes' (ibid.: 226). Classical structuralist anthropology, following Louis Dumont (1970), identified cultural systems of meaning as hierarchical arrangements of values and ideas (Robbins and Sommerschuh 2016: 3). Later on, Nancy Munn (1992) focused on value-generation processes as a result of human action, and Terence Turner (2008) translated the Marxist theory of use value and exchange value into non-commodities-producing systems as a general organizational framework, in some ways departing from the structuralist emphasis on ideology and systems of meaning.

These debates have taken place against the backdrop of broader philosophical discussions about value pluralism versus monism in the same society. A recent line of research has argued for the reconciliation of these two theoretical approaches to value (Robbins 2013). For this theoretical endeavour, water offers a valuable entry point for the study of value formation, a complex flow of power and money that is shaped by complex 'regimes of value' (Appadurai 1986) that fluctuate with temporalities, places and people. Indeed, 'the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another' (Kopytoff 1986: 64). In some contexts, for example, end users may assign different values to surface and groundwater, ultimately resorting to differentiated sharing or management regimes (Walker 2019). The valuation process at play in the waterscape is imbued with, and ultimately shaped by, cultural dynamics (Baviskar 2003). Its circulation is contingent upon particular

'hydrosocial cycles' that rework the entanglement between society and water along spatial and temporal lines (Linton and Budds 2014: 179). The handling of relational distance allows patrons to enshrine different values in water, which can be both *anchored* (in the case of chiefs or charities) and *distant* (for elected officials). This dichotomy between anchorage and relational distance highlights the uniquely multifaceted character of water and its shifting material forms.

The handlers of water's relational distance

Multiple patronage figures exist and embody different ways to benefit from water provision. The plurality of value processes was highlighted in the early stages of my fieldwork in the periphery of N'Djamena. On February 2019, I met Saradoum in the eastern neighbourhood of Boutalbagar, in District 7. The big men and patrons in such neighbourhoods tend to have more flexible interactions with district and other public authority entities. The remoteness and difficulty of access from central N'Djamena to District 7 make it a 'political enclave' (Gomez-Temesio 2020). In such enclaves, local brokers have considerable opportunities to experiment with local strategies for political and economic gain. Although Chad is a centralized state, in practice the authorities' access to much of the territory remains difficult, including in the rural or peri-urban areas surrounding the capital. This has paved the way for the growing role of neo-customary authorities such as delegates or block chiefs (N'Dilbé 2015).

Saradoum took me to Boutalbagar market. In the centre of the market is a water tower, where several water porters are stationed, waiting for orders from customers. A man was sitting on a bench facing it, flanked by several observers. He was holding the arm of someone. I realized he was handling a needle, injecting some medicine into the patient's arm. The man, whom I assumed was a sort of nurse or medical practitioner, a *tradipracticien* (traditional healer), then turned his attention to us and we began talking. His name was Abakar. I gradually realized that he was not *just* a healthcare worker.

Abakar Abdulkarim was born in 1980 and raised in Am-Timan (Salamat province, eastern Chad). A former farmer, he had four wives and nine children in Boutalbagar. His family businesses were diverse and included maize and groundnut oil, which he sold at the Karkandjé market in District 5. Despite these endeavours, he considered himself a humble man. He would often remind me: '*Gurus mafi*!' There is no money. Many years ago, he met the man he now calls his boss, an established landowner who owned plots in the area. Realizing that Boutalbagar and the whole of District 7 were growing rapidly but had limited market space for shopkeepers, Abakar and his boss came up with the idea of creating a new market in 2013. Abakar went to an official to confirm the plan and to obtain legal documents. He had a good working relationship with the district mayor, which facilitated the initiative. The district approved the plan and supported his appointment as a delegate to oversee all market activities, a source of opportunity, prestige and authority over public areas such as a market. The very first facility they built was the water tower and its borehole. Boutalbagar market grew because this water tower was one of the few stable sources of water in the area. This strengthened Abakar's legitimacy, both as a local leader and as an entrepreneur. He emerged as a clear example of the intersection between business and politics and

exemplified one of those 'direct associates of members of the political class with whom they collaborated in the recycling of prebends' (Bayart 2010: 97).

Abakar's approach to the tradition–modernity conundrum was dynamic and ambivalent. He was not born with a chieftaincy title. Instead, he had negotiated his delegation with the municipal district and thus represented a 'mutation of traditional authority made possible by intermittent state power' (Das and Poole 2004: 14). Chad's republican constitution recognized his position and left him free to engage in business. Abakar's knowledge of traditional medicine, which he developed in his early years in the Salamat region, was well known and allowed him to treat various diseases through bloodletting, for which patients visited from every corner of N'Djamena. He charged 6,000 FCFA (about £8) per consultation, a pricey fee that amounts to 10 per cent of the monthly local minimum wage.

After a few visits to Boutalbagar market, Abakar began to get used to our presence and we had warm exchanges. We spent time shadowing water porters who delivered water to shops and homes in the neighbourhood and talked to their customers about their water consumption habits. In March 2019, Abakar invited Saradoum and me to the circumcision ceremony of his son. Sitting on blue and green carpets in front of his houses, we relaxed with guests while waiting for the meals. Most relatives did not live in the area. One cousin lived in Sudan[2] and other guests were local chiefs and notables. Few guests seemed to belong to the working class and they were obviously from a very different background from the water workers I saw Abakar with every day.

Circumcision and its symbolic purification of the body recall the important role of water in Chadian personhood and social stratification. In contrast to cleaning, which acts only on the surfaces that 'water washes away' (Illich 1985: 26), purification is 'the manifestation of something deep inside' (*ibid.*: 25). Water can be used for both cleaning and purification. Water has multifarious meanings and usages. It provided a source of income to Abakar, the porters and the water tower managers. It also framed the temporalities of their life and work. Likewise, repeated cleaning was an important bodily practice through which water porters delineated their social group and mediated themselves and others (Masquelier 2005). Paradoxically, I heard Chadians from southern Chad dismiss water work as 'unclean', even though water workers' abundant access to water enabled them to clean themselves throughout the day. Understood as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002: 36), dirt highlights distinctions between existing social orders. However, well managers and water porters disrupt these orders by resorting to constant cleaning. As such, their position within the working class was not as clear as for other informal workers, like moto-taxi drivers or security guards, whose line of work involves constant contact with dirt and dust. This ambivalence helped to counteract the negative perception of porters as unclean by some sections of Chadian society.

As a local broker, Abakar simultaneously embodied established traditional authority and free enterprise, combining 'egalitarianism, [and] rights-based concerns with the hierarchical political authority of traditional leaders and patriarchs' (James 2011: 319). Water workers who had a commercial relationship with him and his staff sometimes challenged his management. Among various issues, one conflict pitted

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[2] It is common for families in eastern and central Chad to have kin on both sides of the border.

them against 'his' porters over unionization. When asked about his views on water workers organizing by electing a president or treasurer, he laughed and said he was in charge (Maazaz 2023). There was no doubt in Abakar's answer that he was in charge of everything around him, running the water tower like a god or a patriarch. He felt that his authority should not be challenged, and ownership of the facility gave him rights. It also allowed him to accumulate wealth. Water tower trading could be a profitable business for a manager, and there is evidence that Abakar was better off than most market users. Abderrahim, a water porter in the market, angrily rejected Abakar's management of the water tower as a patriarch. The local water porters' union had been dissolved in 2013, thus reducing the porters' room for manoeuvre. In theory, Abakar was not the porters' boss, just their main business partner. In practice, however, Abakar wanted to keep control of his business and could ask porters to leave if they caused trouble. Customers were also under the spell of Abakar and his management. One manifestation of this was taxation. Shopkeepers paid Abakar 2,000 or 3,000 francs a month for market space. Nevertheless, the shopkeepers were able to generate 'relational wealth' (Winchell 2017) from their interactions with Abakar. I saw several of them engaged in long, playful conversations with him. When their income shrank, they had to negotiate delays or discounts to keep their place in the market. Keeping on good terms with the delegate was therefore essential.

Abakar's case contrasts with other forms of water patronage that manifest themselves through charities and donations. 'Have you thought about Islamic charities?' Dr Saleh Bakary asked immediately when I told him about my research. Charities play an important role in the provision of basic services in N'Djamena. I picked up Dr Bakary one day in August 2019 near a recognizable location in Boutalbagar and we drove west towards Am Riguébé (District 5). The headquarters of Munazzamat Al-Dawa-Al Islamiya (Organization for the Islamic Call, henceforth Al-Dawa) that we entered looked like one of those N'Djamena villas rented to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The house was moderately wealthy, with a courtyard, a garden and several furnished rooms equipped with computers. Some men in their forties and fifties, dressed in elegant bubus, welcomed us warmly and gave us a tour of the office, giving us some historical data about Al-Dawa. This Islamic charity funds health, education and water and sanitation projects in Central and West Africa (Cameroon, Chad and Central African Republic). It originated in Sudan, where it is widely known as a charity funding health centres and mosques. Religious charities and NGOs have developed extensive patronage agendas in Chad. In the 1990s, when the Chadian branch was established, Chadian society and politics were moving closer to the Arab Islamic world (Bennafla 2000). Al-Dawa has a long and rich history. Although technically an NGO, it contributed to the spread of Arab Islamic culture in line with Sudanese foreign policy priorities at the time (Kaag 2008; Grandin 1993). Gaddafi's Libya largely funded the organization in the 1990s, but the Saudis gradually became more involved (Kaag 2008: 9). Al-Dawa was part of a first wave of transnational Islamic NGOs from Libya, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to settle in Chad. It is a foreign organization whose donors have no direct links to the beneficiaries they serve. In addition, there was a relational distance between these beneficiaries and Al-Dawa's staff, who were mostly of Sudanese origin and did not necessarily visit the fields where the charity worked.

Professional politicians and Islamic charities fund water infrastructure and works in peripheral and working-class neighbourhoods. They are usually not looking to operate the structures they fund. As a result, local steering committees take them over and are responsible for maintenance and daily use.

Saibou Ali was born in 1958 in Adré (Ouaddai region, eastern Chad). He grew up in the popular neighbourhood of Moursal (District 6). He recalled how, during his childhood, his family struggled to get water as it was distributed from afar and in very poor conditions. He trained as a high school history and geography teacher before joining the civil service, where he held a number of administrative positions in the Ministry of Education. In 2011, he stood as a candidate in the parliamentary elections. A senior official had asked him to submit his application to the party and he was selected, against his own expectations. During the election campaign, his party made water and sanitation a top priority. Since then, he has held several prominent parliamentary positions and was rapporteur or deputy rapporteur of several commissions (Francophonie, Communication Technologies, General Affairs, Cooperation and Development). Since 1964, he has been living in Moursal, where he owns a small house. He constituted his political base in this neighbourhood, until his election run in 2011. However, part of his family lived in Gassi (District 7), in the far east of N'Djamena, and he spent much of his time there. Gassi is one of the newer neighbourhoods where land remains more affordable. He was able to build a bigger and more comfortable house there for his family.

Neo-customary officials such as Abakar take different paths. They bargain and negotiate their positions and interests with political centres of wealth, property and production (Boone 2003) in ways that enhance their local leverage. Officially, district authorities regulate the taxation of pushcarts (which, for example, are required to carry number tags) as well as other legal provisions at the private water tower in Boutalbagar. However, water workers report that checks by local authorities are rare. This gives leeway to neotraditional actors, who remain important in land acquisition and management (N'Dilbé 2015: 359). This leeway enables Abakar and other local big men to benefit more easily from water facilities.

Importantly, clients of water patrons are not passively submitting to them. They use their agency to navigate the range of services offered through the patronage relationship. For example, I observed shopkeepers in Boutalbagar negotiating with Abakar or his fountain manager to access some water for free or for a discounted price. Likewise, water end users living in Saibou Ali's constituency expressed their need to access more water and clearly implied that they would likely vote for someone addressing the lack of water and sanitation services in the area. One of the questions raised by the politics of water patronage is whether patrons are somehow 'filling a void' left by the inability of the STE to address water access and supply in N'Djamena, or whether they are actively creating this void by preventing the provision of public services. Such provision conventionally precludes profit making, at least when pushed to the extent of patrimonial accumulation. Open access to necessary amenities defines public service, and such amenities could be seen as 'goods and services perceived by a large majority of users as a social necessity' (Olivier de Sardan 2014: 400). However, the notion of public service is contingent upon specific legal traditions, making it difficult to apply international comparisons. This leads many authors to prefer more neutral terms such as 'essential services' (Jaglin and Zerah 2010: 2).

The complexity of the local waterscape enables delegates such as Abakar to play a part in the provision of essential services such as water supply. This is reminiscent of a variety of contexts in Africa and beyond, which are characterized by a high diversity of water supply and access solutions (Bakker 2003; Maazaz 2021; Jaglin 2005; Furlong 2014).

The dialectic of distance and proximity

Water patrons are involved in a constant back and forth with their clients: they constantly assess and adjust their distance from water end users. This appeared clearly during a fieldwork stint around August 2019. I accompanied municipal officials to meet local community leaders and residents in Zafaye East (District 8) in east N'Djamena as part of a water and sanitation development project delivered by the town hall. On the way, we chatted about the results of the meeting and discussed preliminary findings from my fieldwork. I mentioned the case of Abakar, explaining that he ran a private water tower in Boutalbagar, and expressed my doubts about the origin of the water, based on the contradictory accounts I had been given. Did the tower pump water through a borehole? Or was it connected to the STE supply system?

'That's fraudulent,' one of the municipal officers replied, 'without a doubt. He's hijacking STE water.'

Abakar later confirmed to me that his tower was connected to a borehole and powered by a generator. The hostile response from municipal officers also revealed the city's perception of this type of business venture. Many public authorities saw these entrepreneurs as fraudsters and unfair competitors who were hindering the implementation of development projects. This was also reflected in the behaviour of tax collectors, who harassed porters, well managers and local shops (Maazaz 2023). In fact, the municipal officer might have been even more upset if I had told him Abakar's official title and the exact location of his business. He was a constitutionally recognized delegate whose family owned a water tower right in the target zone of the very development project promoted by the town hall and aimed precisely at strengthening the public water supply network!

I was convinced that it was in Abakar's interest to keep the origin of 'his' water a secret. Part of his power and prestige seemed to be based on this secrecy. Straddling several universes, he maintained a relational distance from the central political authorities, while usually appearing accessible to the local people who brought their complaints to him. For power brokers, relational distance and proximity appear to be essential variables, subtly manipulated to ensure dominant influence or financial gain.

Local rulers assess the opportunity of appearing in public – or not doing so – before making decisions. Sometimes it is necessary to be openly visible in order to demonstrate hierarchy and wealth. At other times, hiding or disappearing is the most profitable move for brokers. In a place known for instability linked to state repression, brokers sometimes have limited interest in being associated with official authorities. Indeed, local big men are deeply ambivalent figures. They may be brokers, 'sons of the soil' (Gomez-Temesio 2016), who use water to build formal state recognition for their community and improve the local water infrastructure network. In Senegal, Gomez-Temesio notes that these 'sons of the soil' who originate from a particular

village hold positions of power within the ruling party. They then use such positions to attract funding for their rural community and to build waterworks, in a process described as a moral economy. At the same time, this recognition sometimes requires entering a grey area of semi-legal practices, like those of the water patrons in N'Djamena. For instance, this grey area manifests in the ambiguous relationship between patrons and water workers, as the former may attempt to prevent unionizing or self-organization of the porters in order to keep control of the supply system (Maazaz 2023).

Dealing with relational distance and secrecy is one of the translation tasks undertaken by water promoters. This work became clear to me when I was investigating the donations of hand pumps by local politicians. I was with Maurice, a barber in the Paris-Congo neighbourhood. We talked about the hand pump in front of his shop, the end users and the pump manager. But Maurice insisted that I would be interested in another waterwork in the area. A popular and respected constituency politician, whose name was on a plaque, had paid for it and for several other waterworks in Moursal and Paris-Congo.

His name was Saibou Ali. The hand pump was self-service and the residents took care of maintenance and repairs. 'Neighbours would collect money for maintenance whenever it was needed,' Maurice said, 'and no one was specifically in charge.' This system differed from other water systems I knew about in community squares, where residents had to pay for the water. A leaseholder, who was responsible for overseeing the water supply and collecting fees, would then pay the water bill. Nothing of this kind existed for the self-service pumps funded by Saibou Ali.

In May 2019, Saradoum and I returned to the neighbourhood to investigate these self-service hand pumps. We spoke to workers in a metal workshop who were resting in front of the hand pump. One of them confirmed that the hand pump had been installed eight or nine years earlier, and that it was freely accessible. The nearby cafés were important users. A shopkeeper named Dieudonné explained to us:

> Saibou Ali paid for the hand pump and insisted that the neighbours run it alone. All the neighbourhood uses it. Even some people who have water at home – sometimes it is cut. When there's a fault with the hand pump, I go knock door by door to collect money and call the technicians in charge of the maintenance.

He worked with three technicians who were part of the same maintenance company. The company, Hydrothéque, was located in Klemat (District 2) in the city centre.

Saibou Ali was not the only benefactor in an area where other wealthy people had built waterworks. We passed another hand pump, donated by an important anonymous resident, which, according to the locals, had been installed four or five years earlier. It served as a regular source of water for some and as a popular backup when the STE supply was disrupted.

About a week later, I was meant to meet Saibou Ali in the neighbourhood, but I learned that the situation was delicate. The police had intervened in a heated argument between two young men. After receiving a bribe from one of the two, they took the other into custody before beating him to death, for unknown reasons. This sparked an uprising the following day when angry friends of the deceased threw

petrol bombs at the police station. The Groupement Mobile d'Intervention de la Police, the elite riot police, deployed in force in the next few days in Districts 6 and 7. The funeral of the victim was about to take place and the situation was very tense. As a result, Saibou Ali and other public figures based in the area had to keep a low profile until things cooled down: it was out of the question for them to appear in public in the district, especially in the company of whites. The member of parliament (MP) had a house in his constituency, but he lived elsewhere, and he could not make a public visit; he had to use back doors and be careful. He could not meet me as planned and I had to wait.

A few days later, I received a call from an unknown number. It was Saibou Ali. He politely offered to meet the next morning but not in a public place to avoid attracting attention. I joined him in his car, parked behind his daughter's school, where he had just dropped her off in Moursal. In March 2022, I interviewed Saibou Ali again at his home and he gave me additional and updated information.

In Chad under Idriss Déby, the parliament was far from being a strong institutional body. Elections were often rigged, freedom of speech and association were disregarded, and the security apparatus maintained its grip on society (Marchal 2016: 4). As such, Saibou Ali never had any substantial prerogatives beyond the prestige attached to his position and remained a rather powerless official. This tendency worsened after the death of Idriss Déby in April 2021, when parliament was suspended and Saibou Ali's mandate was de facto revoked. Nevertheless, he remained an MP in the eyes of his constituents, who continued to seek his support for local initiatives. His funding of the hand pumps played a role in his local popularity. This 'logic of sponsorship' (Bierschenk 2006: 551) seemed to be expected by the electorate. Saibou Ali had made the decision to build hand pumps in his constituency in the context of the 2011 legislative elections. He promised to build eleven boreholes. However, funding was more limited than expected and he managed to build only six: four in Paris-Congo and two in Moursal, where he grew up. But his constituents kept asking for more pumps. 'There's no money left, I told them,' Saibou Ali said. Interestingly, he went on to say that his patronage contribution was not part of his work in the parliamentary system. For example, he did not participate in the environment commission of the Chadian National Assembly, which was responsible for issues including access to water. His interest in water was separate from his activities as a professional politician. As far as he knew, he was the only member of parliament working on water and sanitation. There was another MP, he explained, who was also a wealthy businessman from District 3. When he ran for parliament, he provided a lot of goods, such as tricycles for recycling and waste management, and dug some boreholes. The initiative was different in many ways, Saibou Ali explained, because he had provided all these things before he was elected. Instead, Saibou Ali made it clear to his constituents that he would dig boreholes only if he was elected. The hand pumps and the billboards that advertised them were a source of pride for him in Moursal and Paris-Congo. After funding the hand pumps, he supported a small committee of local people and tasked them with responding to the needs of their constituents. The voters consistently ranked water as their top priority.

However, Saibou Ali did not want to get involved in the day-to-day running of the waterworks he had financed as a public figure. The MP was often absent from his constituency, especially during times of tension and conflict. He knew little about

waterwork management and insisted that the neighbours who used the hand pumps should take care of them. Therefore, they had to be self-reliant and involved in fundraising to maintain the hand pump under the leadership of Dieudonné, the hand pump manager and shopkeeper.

When I met him, Dieudonné insisted on how autonomous the hand pump project was. I asked him:

Have you established pump steering committees in the neighbourhood?

No, there's nothing like that. I manage it alone … I settled in Paris-Congo some five years ago. I work hard, from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. My brother used to live here and ran a shop. Now he is in Walia [District 9]. Before he was in charge of the shop and the water pump.

Dieudonné's business was a combination of shopkeeping and water management. He was a clear example of 'straddling' (Bayart 2010) between different jobs and positions. The plaque symbolized the presence of the MP, even though he was rarely physically present. Patronage and its material traces allowed politicians to make their actions visible and compensate for their absence in their constituency.

Further interviews and informal conversations with voters confirmed that Saibou Ali was a popular benefactor in the area. Many described him as generous and sincere, although he was not a frequent visitor. He had no interest in becoming a water entrepreneur and admittedly knew little about the maintenance or repair of waterworks. Yet he was genuinely curious about how his constituents were managing their pumps. He still considered District 6, Moursal and Paris-Congo his political turf. Although he lived in Gassi, he remained aloof from local politics. When I asked him in Gassi if he had spoken to the local block chief, he replied, smiling, 'I don't know who is the *chef de carré* here.'

Logically, his physical absence from District 6 was exploited by his political competitors within the ruling party: 'They say, "He's not in the *6ème* any more, he's there." But I reply: "Better off being there and doing something in here."'

The case of Saibou Ali illustrates the ambivalence of elected officials. They have to maintain local roots while trying to be 'here and not here'. Locally, people would often say '*Il n'est pas dans le coin* [He's not around]' to refer to this state of remoteness or distance of public figures. To this end, donating useful waterworks that materialized their presence seemed a particularly rewarding strategy. Unlike the case of community leaders, the legal framework probably prevented Saibou Ali and other politicians from running a water business and making money from their donations. Saibou Ali therefore preferred to use water to address issues in his constituency and gain popularity that could prove valuable at election time.

Al-Dawa developed a similar strategy by associating announcement efforts with sets of religious values and beliefs. Considered in the literature as hybrid or semi-development organizations (Clarke and Ware 2015; Clarke 2006), faith-based charities have exhibited original rationalities derived from religious and moral principles rather than standard development objectives. The proliferation of faith-based Muslim NGOs in Africa has been linked to the 'hollowing out' of the state in the context of neoliberal globalization (Tok and O'Bright 2017). The Islamic obligation of *Zakat*

(almsgiving) motivated the implementation of projects in critical areas such as water or education, where needs were very high. In Sudan, under Omar el-Bechir, the Islamist regime sought to take control of *Zakat* to fund water services through the Zakat Chamber (Abdalla 2017). International Islamic NGOs offered innovative ways to connect more broadly with the *umma*, the community of believers (Kaag 2011).

At Boutalbagar market, Abakar was a very different character from Saibou Ali. A well-known local character, he could often be seen wandering around the market, wearing a quirky sun hat and chatting to traders. He ran the water tower built by his cousin as a family business. Often on the road, he would stop for only a moment at the bench in front of the water tower, a sort of makeshift office, where Ba Haroun, his trusted eyes, worked as manager of the well. Ba Haroun would assist him and carry out many tasks on his behalf. Shopkeepers and customers in the market would come to Abakar with service requests and complaints about their daily struggles. They complained about the high market fees and the lack of space to store their goods. A quick-witted man, Abakar worked with his deputies, the block chiefs, to address these issues. His many visits and appearances were a show of force; he would parade around, demonstrating that he was there and keeping an eye on his market.

Therefore, the cases of Saibou Ali and Abakar highlight how patrons can leverage water for power and money by relying on back-and-forth, subtle moves from distance to proximity. Patrons assess local situations to decide whether they should appear or not, and when. This relational distance is at the core of the strategies devised by patrons and frame their relationships with their clients. Likewise, it is important to add that such clients are not passive subjects who submit to the manipulation of distance. They are also agents who influence the relationship with water patrons.

Relational distance in the production of water value

Not only do patronage figures embody various ways to handle relational distance; their actions also create different forms of water value. As noted above, the moral economy framework has been widely used to define norm-based arrangements for water supply and access. By looking at water-sharing practices, this framework has analysed 'norms of reciprocity, an aversion to inequality, and a commitment to justice' (Beresford *et al.* 2022). This article offers an alternative interpretation: it explores the physical and symbolic relational distance between patrons and constituents. Such relational distance is crucial in shaping local waterscapes by generating different values. Analysing the circulation of water in this context helps overcome the gift–commodity conundrum that has constrained the anthropology of value. In this way, water acts as a basis for the circulation of values and can follow territorial claims recognized by patrons. Ultimately, this points to the existence of different circuits that simultaneously build on the leveraging of water.

Both physical and symbolic relational distance are factors in the formation of anchored or distant water values as produced by the patrons of N'Djamena. Disconnection is here interpreted as a strategy to cultivate 'honour and strength' (Brachet and Scheele 2019: 166). As such, the physical relational distance or discretion associated with the value of relational distance does not preclude increased indirect engagement. A 'form of detachment' (Neumark 2017: 760) may allow individuals to establish relationships, such as patron–client relationships. In such cases, water can

mediate relationships based on relational distance, respect and asymmetric information, such as those between voters and elected officials. Indeed, existing evidence suggests that effective symbolic pervasiveness requires the physical absence of water patrons: staying at a distance while overseeing activities from afar may only allow patrons to evade criticism by rivals. Likewise, this can enable patronage structures to retain symbolic power.

This is evident in the case of the Al-Dawa charity. Its planned waterworks across the country involve limited manpower but have a concrete material and symbolic impact. The value generated by these waterworks requires physical relational distances from the field. Funding sources for water projects are remarkably distant from Central Africa. As the Al-Dawa project manager explained, 'Some people contact the charity because they want to donate to a particular cause.'

Indeed, most patrons will never meet the potential beneficiaries, but their donations are presented as being guided by a moral framework defined by a set of religious beliefs that are central to the relational distance/presence conundrum. Controlling the cycles of water patronage allows patrons to maintain a spiritual presence that is associated with the value of relational distance. For example, the Muslim calendar enshrines water development work in Islamic temporalities in rhythms that do not require the physical presence of workers. As the Al-Dawa project manager explained, 'We intervene a lot during Tabaski.'[3]

Paradoxically, many of the beneficiaries of Al-Dawa's water or education programmes are not Muslim. This further highlights the relational distance between benefactor and beneficiary within this framework, which is associated with the distant value of water. The moral framework of development interventions during religious events replaces the physical presence of water patrons. Similarly, the symbolic prestige of Saibou Ali, associated with electoral politics and reinforced by water patronage, requires him to measure his presence and adapt it to local perspectives and events. Such a valuation of water donations generates indirect spin-offs that materialize in voter popularity, a prerequisite for repeated electoral success, as in the case of Saibou Ali, or geopolitical influence, as with the Al-Dawa charity.

Conversely, the anchored value of the water that Abakar sells is based on his continuous presence in Boutalbagar market and is inherently linked to profit making. There are limited symbolic rewards that Abakar can derive from his continuous monitoring of the water tower and the associated water-trading activities. In fact, his constant presence and micromanagement of the water trade, along with other market duties, has made him unpopular with water workers, shopkeepers and customers (Maazaz 2021). However, he may be able to offset some of the negative effects of profit making by cultivating his status as a constitutionally recognized chief and traditional healer. His physical presence is accompanied by an air of mystery about his true identity, sources of income and legitimacy, which also foster respect and honour among his constituents.

Hence, water patronages may produce different value types. The manipulation of relational distance by patrons and clients influences the territorialization of water value. The dialectic between distance and proximity gives birth to anchored value

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[3] 'Tabaski' is a Wolof term used in West and Central Africa to refer to the Islamic celebration known as Eid al-Adha in the rest of the Muslim world.

when patrons choose to overtly appear in their neighbourhood to closely monitor their water business. This is notably the case in Abakar's constant roaming of the Boutalbagar market. Conversely, professional politicians and charities may remain distant from the area and pick the right time to appear, thereby producing distant value.

Conclusion: water patronage makes water values

Patronage in Africa has often been approached through broader analytical categories such as big men and the moral economy. While these categories have been useful to analyse the provision of basic services such as water, they have also been criticized as fixed or normative. Instead, this article proposes to understand water patronage as a dialectical movement between distance and proximity. Water patrons adjust their (in)visibility to the demands of the field and their client constituencies, thereby constituting forms of relational distance. Thus, water patronage is not synonymous with a one-sided systematic availability of patrons to constituents. Drinking water, as a particular substance, is produced, exchanged and consumed according to modalities that are largely defined by sets of embedded socio-political relations. This article has focused on contrasting three figures of water patronage: the elected professional (the MP), the traditional chief (the delegate) and the religious charity. They all have recourse to the establishment of water patronage relationships.

Much of the existing literature has emphasized how water can be used to leverage money and power. Extensive work has also been devoted to the naturalization of water scarcity or social justice claims, for example through the moral economy framework. However, the proximity and relational distance of the patrons who seek to make water accessible have tended to be glossed over. I argue that such relational distance influences the value of water and the material or symbolic benefits that can be derived from it.

This article does not aim to define a general model. Nor does it argue that money and power are antithetical, as both remain part of overlapping dynamics. Rather, it shows how money and power can be associated with different strategies of relational distance devised by patrons that ultimately define the value of water. Water patrons establish different temporalities and territorialities. While elected officials establish patronage by building hand pumps before legislative elections, chiefs balance their water business with market-regulating duties or other positions. Although N'Djamena's chiefs use water primarily to accumulate wealth, it also serves as a tool to build their local power. Chiefs demonstrate their influence through ceremonies to build support beyond their patronage.

This ethnographic research in peripheral, working-class N'Djamena not only highlights this multiplicity of water patrons; it also, and more importantly, demonstrates that water has a multifaceted value contingent on relational distance and beyond the gift–commodity conundrum or the norm-based arrangements implicit in the moral economy framework. Approaching water through the lens of value sheds a refreshing light on the social life of water. This anchored–distant dichotomy invites us to consider (dis)connection as a particular relationship that changes the value of water itself. This line of inquiry can open up new opportunities for research on reciprocity, money and power.

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