

Becoming Xerophile

COOKING SECTIONS

More than any other region, Africa stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of "absence," "lack," and "non-being," of identity and difference, of negativeness—in short, of nothingness.

—Achille Mbembe, *On The Postcolony* (2001)

Deserts for nondesert people are nothing but lack, absence, nonbeing—in sum, nothingness.¹ Stereotypical Western representations of desert regions commonly depict them as dead or empty landscapes—impossible to contain, with little or no vegetation and lack of access to water, suitable only to keep nuclear secrets. Who on earth would want to inhabit them? Even the verb “to desert” in several European languages refers to the act of leaving and being disloyal when most needed.

In Western discourse, the limits of the desert, permanently in flux, are also perceived negatively. Historically, these landscapes have been problematized through conquest and contention. Yet political scientist Wafula Okumu remarks that parts of the desert in African societies were conceived and maintained as active buffer zones of separation between different peoples prior to the arrival of European colonial regimes.²

The causal relationship between desertification and deforestation has been recorded in written form from the time of Aristotle.³ Around 1850, the British Empire realized the irreparable damage it had wrought on Indian forests, leading to the exhaustion of tropical timber. As a result, more accurate knowledge on the relationship between forest protection and the containment of the desert had to be developed.⁴ In the 1860s, the Royal Geographical Society thus became the leader in globalizing a new discourse on desiccation and conservation, for the sake of the Empire's economy. By the 1920s, the new phenomenon of “desert-spreading” was being popularized in journals and periodicals. The resource-rich areas at the threshold of the desert were recast as famine-ridden territories that needed European help in order to push growing British colonial interests in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and South Africa.⁵ As more scientific studies appeared, it began to become clear that the desert's advance was the result of desiccation and climate change, the root cause of which was human misuse of resources.⁶

French forester André Aubréville coined the term “desertification,” in its current sense, after World War II to refer to the anthropogenic causes behind the movement of deserts.⁷ Desertification soon became a powerful political tool to mobilize action based on the propagation of fear. After the experience of the 1930s Dust Bowl in the US—which resulted in impoverished farmers migrating to California en masse—anxiety

about the black population taking over white colonial enclaves grew among the colonial ruling classes. The fear of desertification began to be deployed as a rhetorical mechanism to keep the rural racially segregated from the urban. It also ensured a constant flow of research funds to the many researchers who “discovered” desertification throughout Africa, Asia, and even southern Europe.⁸ In particular, the Western institutions imposing “development” needed a problem dramatic enough to legitimize their paternalistic strategies to mitigate famine.⁹

1. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, 2001), p. 4.

2. Gbenga Oduntan, *International Law and Boundary Disputes in Africa* (London and New York, 2015), pp. 80–81.

3. Eduard Brückner, “How Constant is Today's Climate,” in *The Sources and Consequences of Climate Change and Climate Variability in Historical Times*, edited by Nico Stehr and Hans von Storch (Dordrecht, 2000), p. 74. Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 67.

4. Richard Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400–1940* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), pp. 34–35.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Edward P. Stebbing, “The Encroaching Sahara: The Threat to the West African Colonies,” *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 85, no. 6 (June 1935), pp. 506–519.

7. Jeremy Swift, “Desertification Narratives, Winners and Losers,” in *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment*, edited by Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns (Oxford, 1996), pp. 73–90. James C. McCann, “Climate and Causation in African History,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32, 2/3 (1999), pp. 261–279. See also Rosetta Elkin, “Desertification and the Rise of Defense Ecology,” *Portal* 9 (2014), p. 4.

8. Richard Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400–1940* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 35. See also David S. G. Thomas and Nicholas J. Middleton, *Desertification: Exploding the Myth* (Chichester, 1994).

9. Another example of desertification being used as a tool of control is the ban against the foraging of wild za'atar in the Palestinian territories. See Laleh Khalili, “Banning Taste: Boycotts, Identity, and Resistance,” in *Cooking Sections, The Empire Remains Shop* (New York, 2018).

It is only in the past decade that scientists have been providing evidence that desertification does not necessarily happen because farmers and herders destroy the forests which they live off of, as was long thought to be the case. Desertification is, rather, a process attributable to globally interconnected human actions, whereby small farmers on the margins of deserts are actually the victims, and not the perpetrators, of ecocides.¹⁰ For example, residents of the Sahel have been wrongly blamed for decades for land misuse; major corporations, building on this, have been green-washing their environmental damage through forest restoration and carbon-offsetting programs in the region. The desert has thus become a new frontier for climate-related investments; the capital flows materialize in the enclosure of vast areas of land to protect the environmental guilt of citizens in the Global North.

Inhabitants of arid regions did not suffer from aridity; they knew how to adapt, migrating on the basis of desert seasons and adjusting their food practices accordingly. It was once their mobility stopped, owing to modernization and colonization, that the desert started becoming a problem.

The Bedouin in the Arabian Peninsula do not refer to their living space as a “desert”—they call

it simply *البار* (*al barr*, “the land”)—as do many other peoples whose homelands are arid.¹¹ Societies living in these ecosystems have historically reduced their challenges through diverse mobility and cultural strategies, which were effective thanks to a vast reservoir of symbiotic knowledge. Bedouin interactions with botany reflect the necessary role of plants for living with the desert and its climate beyond the current geopolitical borders that separate them. This approach is ingrained in what Burkinabè scholar Joseph Paré refers to as “*sahelité*,” a term he coined in 1994 after the prolific debate on *africanité* and *créolité* to understand the nonlinear space inhabited by the peoples who share the challenges of the Sahelian climate.¹²

Over the centuries, numerous classical Arabic dictionaries have referenced to botanic compilations that could show ways of inhabiting arid space.¹³ Deeply rooted in the utilitarian character of desert flora, the great majority of plant names and categories used today in the Arabian Peninsula are virtually identical to those from a millennium ago.¹⁴ In modern times, an interesting outsider figure researching desert knowledge from a Western perspective was James P. Mandaville. He worked for the Arabian American Oil Company in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, negotiating with herders over the value of camels lost in oil field sumps. Those contested encounters with desert dwellers led him to write one of the few treatises in English about Bedouin ethnobotany in the region. Notably, he used the term “plants” almost exclusively for wild desert flora, reflecting the fact that other staple foods in the Bedouin diet—such as rice, onions, coffee, tea, and sugar—were purchased from towns and thus not considered “living entities.”

The entangled relationships of people, plants, and desert configure a unique environment with a lot to decipher. Patterns and microclimates that are created around plant species in arid climates can provide new clues to nondesert peoples on how to see the desert as a thriving ecosystem. Recent studies have identified how desert plants organize themselves collectively in order to decide where to grow and where not to, so that water scarcity is optimized through geometric formations that reduce the frictions of water-soil systems.¹⁵ As rainfall decreases,

sparse vegetation increases, following specific geometries whose density humans are only now beginning to understand. The spotlike or labyrinthine spatial patterns of plant clusters in shrublands, or the different forms of halophyte associations, for example, also act as early-warning indicators—they make it possible to predict a drop in groundwater reserves in the near future. Conversely, they might help to identify signs of recovery after a drought. Thus, the fragility and sensitivity of the patterns that plant populations use to inhabit (or vacate) desert space show a way to understand extreme ecological adaptations.

After the severe drought in California of 2011–17, new policies began to restrict the irrigation of turf lawns. Unanimously approved by the California Water Commission in 2015, the new regulations mandated a shift toward drought-tolerant plants, effectively limiting the amount of turf grass around newly constructed homes to 25 percent of the landscaped area. This has worked to such an extent that “drought-shaming” has become part of social awareness. Vigilantes have “drought-shamed” reprobates who maintained verdant lawns, outing celebrities’ lawns through aerial images or tweeting photos of their neighbors’ sprinklers.¹⁶ The recent drought has thus introduced brown lawns (or no lawns at all) as a new canon of beauty, which has led to a shift in the shared

understanding of what a garden should ultimately look like. Slowly, California suburbs are learning to become xerophile (from Greek *xēros*, meaning “dry,” and *philos*, meaning “loving”). They have ripped up their ill-accustomed green grasses to plant Mojave Desert plants instead. Through the appreciation of watering without water, a new cultural imaginary is being put in place.

Learning from aridity and appreciating the desert in times of water scarcity are ways to consider desert plants not as a menace—as the discourse of “desertification” entailed—but as possible ornamentals. The idea of desert ornamentals should no longer be an oxymoron. Quite the opposite: desert ecologies can bring in utilitarian approaches to urban space and introduce new models of watering without water. Besides the already used *ghaf* tree—the national tree of the United Arab Emirates that inhabits the arid zone stretching from Turkey to India—there is a lot of potential in introducing desert ecological knowledge in cities of the Gulf region to prepare for more extreme and more unpredictable weather events there and elsewhere. Accelerated human-induced environmental transformations ask us to become xerophile, to safeguard precious groundwater in times when soil salinity is increasing and the water table is going to face major fluctuations.

10. James C. McCann, “Climate and Causation in African History,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32, 2/3 (1999), p. 273.

11. James P. Mandaville, *Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World* (Tucson, 2011), p. 27.

12. Christopher Wise (ed.), *Introduction to The Desert Shore: Literatures of the Sahel* (Boulder, 2001).

13. See Lucien Leclerc, *Histoire de la Médecine Arabe*. See also Gholam Reza Montazeri and Yaddollah Sepehri, “The Evolution of Botanical and Herbal Medicine in Islamic Civilization,” *Open Journal of Ecology* 9, no. 3 (2019), pp. 35–42.

14. James P. Mandaville, *Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World* (Tucson, 2011), p. 3.

15. Richard M. Bailey, “Spatial and Temporal Signatures of Fragility and Threshold Proximity in Modelled Semi-Arid Vegetation,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 278 (2011), pp. 1,064–71.

16. Rory Carroll, “Sod It: Californians Turn Back to Grass Lawns as Drought Shaming Ebbs,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/02/california-drought-lawns-grass-sod> (last accessed August 30, 2019).