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La ruée vers la terre

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World Heritage and Sovereign Nostalgia in Yemen’s Soqatra Archipelago

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NOTE DE L’ÉDITEUR

Cet article est également publié en français dans ce même numéro.

- In January 2011, during the same week that the climactic ousting of longtime Tunisian President Zine El Abine Ben Ali captivated the globe and catalyzed the subsequent wave of revolutionary demonstrations and protests throughout the Arab world that would come to be referred to as “the Arab Spring,” in Soqotra, the largest and most populated island of Yemen’s Soqotra Archipelago, pastoralists and town-dwellers alike had been expressing to me their anxiety about Soqotra gaining a measure of political “independence.”¹ Having recently heard that the archipelago was to soon be governed by an island-wide “Socotra Authority” (Ar.: *hai’a*) – a condition of its having been recognized by UNESCO as a “natural” World Heritage Site in 2008, but having only begun to be established through the Socotra Governance and Biodiversity Project, a joint Government of Yemen (GoY) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiative – Soqotrans were vocally grappling with the meaning of this new form of “local” but nevertheless supranationally-mediated sovereignty. Indeed, Soqotran friends and acquaintances whom I had known since 2004, but whom I had not seen since my previous return visit to Soqotra a year prior, were eager to discuss what many of them considered just another and yet more concentrated extension of the kind of “transnational governmentality”² they had experienced from 2001-2008 when the former UNDP project, the Socotra Conservation and Development Programme, had acted as the *de facto* governance structure on Soqotra. Their skepticism, moreover, was buoyed by uncertainty: what would this Authority do? Who would “own” it? And why couldn’t the archipelago be designated a [conventional] Yemeni governorate (Ar.: *muhâfaza*), instead?

Soqotrans, at the start of the "Arab Spring," it seemed, were asking for more state control or, at least, for less transnationally-regulated "autonomy." What could this mean?

- 2 For the past fifteen years, Yemen's Soqotra Archipelago has attracted a disproportionate amount of state funding and international aid earmarked for conservation-and-development programming aimed at conserving its exceptional biodiversity. Not only have these ascendant projects transformed Soqotra's place-in-the-world – from a relatively obscure and seasonably inaccessible Indian Ocean island to a "globally" recognized World Heritage site – but also they have sought to transform, through zoning technologies and pedagogical persuasion, every inch of its territory as well. This article examines Soqotran responses to their island's environmental and political enclavization by focusing on Soqotran anxieties with regard to the proposed new governance structure, which many viewed as just the latest form of several visitant regimes having been imposed upon them by outside forces, and Soqotrans' oft expressed nostalgia for a Schmittian form of sovereignty – one ruler, personified and indivisible – as opposed to the "shared" or "overlapping" sovereignty that, in practice, attenuates their own political access and cultural independence. This exploration of Soqotra's political transformation enables us to reframe their questions above in slightly broader terms, to ask: what transformations in state sovereignty emerge in the transnational governance of spatial enclaves set apart for their globally-significant "nature" or "culture," or "heritage"? In order to approach this question, let us first consider the topology of modern sovereign (state) power.

Enclaves, and the Topology of Sovereignty

- 3 Scholars have long argued that sovereignty and territoriality, once considered theoretically coterminous with one another, have become increasingly uncoupled by the "global" circulations of capital, bodies, and ideas³. Yet, this apparent disarticulation of (state) sovereignty and (national) territory has not prevented them from continuing to explore the *spatiality* of sovereignty, its performances and its effects. On the one hand, this renewed interest in sovereignty and its "spatializing practices"⁴ may stem from the capacious scholarly and popular use of "globalization" as a spatialmetaphor illustrating how states and nations are being besieged by the planetary spread and expansion of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international corporations, multinational agencies, global capital, and restless bodies. Indeed, this metaphor is so very powerful that even its correctives offer spatial alternatives; for example, James Ferguson who convincingly argues that "the 'global' does not 'flow' [...]; it hops instead"⁵ nevertheless draws our attention to the "spatial enclaving"⁶ that globalization engenders. On the other hand, the national identity and security crises fomented by increasing (or "illegal") migratory movements, the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "Global War on Terror" have shifted scholarly attention to both the fortification of political borders and the spatial quarantining of "foreign" migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers⁷. Much of this literature has been influenced by political theorist Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of the constitutive relationship between sovereign power and bare life, the banned and abandoned "sacred" life (*homo sacer*) that is included in the politico-juridical order only by virtue of its exclusion⁸, and his related analysis of the modern "state of exception" through which the suspension of the law in times of crisis has created "a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations –

and above all the very distinction between public and private – are deactivated”⁹. Agamben’s own reliance on distinctly spatial metaphors – the zone of indistinction between inside and outside, exclusion and inclusion, exception and rule; the threshold of indeterminacy between anomie and law, logic and praxis, democracy and absolutism; the (concentration) camp as the localization of the state of exception – has inspired many of his readers to look for today’s “homo sacer” or “state of exception” in “negative” spaces of exclusion, like internment camps, detention centers, and border zones, a point I will return to shortly.

- 4 These two broad strands – the examination of overlapping sovereignties and scattered enclaves, and the inquiry into sovereign exception and spaces of exclusion – converge in Aihwa Ong’s work on “neoliberalism as exception”¹⁰. With a nod to Carl Schmitt, who famously defined the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception”¹¹, and a narrow reading of Agamben’s treatment of the (sovereign) exception as applying solely to “excluded” groups who are denied legal protections, Ong posits the (neoliberal) exception as “an extraordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well as to exclude”¹². In Ong’s formulation, *neoliberalism as exception* describes the state’s calculative use of market-driven interventions in countries where neoliberal (market-based) policies are not the norm with the aim of optimizing a specific group’s marketable skills or a select area’s global competitiveness. At the same time, *exceptions to neoliberalism* may be deployed by liberal states to “exclude populations and places from neoliberal calculations and choices,” whether for the purpose of “protecting social safety nets or for stripping away all forms of political protections” for noncitizens¹³. Together, Ong argues, these neoliberal exceptions – neoliberalism as exception and exceptions to neoliberalism – are reconfiguring the relationship between sovereignty, territory, and citizenship within national boundaries and beyond; for example, citizenship-like benefits may be extended to mobile individuals valued for their expertise, while being retracted from citizens without such human capital. Although the neoliberal exception does then produce exclusions of various kinds, Ong endeavors to direct our attention primarily to the “positive” exceptions: the “neoliberal decisions” that, Ong argues, “have created new forms of inclusion, setting apart some citizen-subjects, and creating new spaces that enjoy extraordinary political benefits and economic gain”¹⁴. These spaces include special economic, administrative, developmental, ecological, “technopreneurial,” and “expert” zones – that is, enclaves – subject to diverse degrees of the “overlapping,” “graduated,” or “variegated” sovereignties that emerge from the amalgamation of (formal) state rule and (de facto) corporate-, multilateral-, or NGO-governance of the territory.
- 5 Ong’s work is thus extremely useful for framing and interrogating an environmental, developmental, and heritage enclave like the Soqotra Archipelago, which, since the late 1990s, has been progressively demarcated as a “space of exception”¹⁵ while at the same time being increasingly encompassed, politically and administratively, by the Yemeni state¹⁶. In 1996, the still newly unified Government of Yemen ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity, declared Soqotra “a special natural area in urgent need of protection”¹⁷, and commissioned the EU-funded Master Plan for the development of the Soqotra Archipelago. These actions and interests opened the door to the implementation of several UN-managed integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) in Soqotra: the Socotra Biodiversity Project (1998-2001), which focused heavily on biodiversity research and documentation, and was extended until 2003; the Socotra Conservation and Development Programme (2003-2008), which worked more specifically

on community development and its integration with biodiversity conservation; and, in 2009, the Socotra Governance and Biodiversity Project (2009-2013), which is currently “mainstreaming” biodiversity management on Soqotra by, in part, establishing the island-wide Authority mentioned above.¹⁸ These projects (hereafter referred to, collectively, as the ICDP), which were funded at different stages by multilateral organizations such as the Global Environment Facility and the United Nations Development Program and bilateral donors such as the governments of Italy, the Netherlands, and Yemen, along with several small grants from other bilateral donors and transnational NGOs earmarked for specific sectors, will have injected over sixteen million dollars during this fifteen-year period into the “conservation” and “development” of the archipelago. This may seem like a paltry amount, but given the anemic state of Soqotra’s local governance structure – which, since the passing of Yemen’s “decentralizing” Local Authority Law in 2000, consists of two local district councils with nominal resources and minimal fiscal control – it was, in many cases, the ICDP which served as the proxy government on Soqotra.¹⁹ Indeed, Soqotrans often viewed the ICDP – or “the Environment” (Ar.: *al-bi’a*) as they called it – as the island’s (newest) regulatory regime.

- 6 Soqotrans were thus introduced and made subject to a palpable form of “shared” or “overlapping” sovereignties, under which “the state retains formal sovereignty, [while] corporations and multilateral agencies frequently exert de facto control over the conditions or living, laboring, and migration of populations in special zones”²⁰. Such overlapping sovereignty in special zones results not only or primarily out of territorial conflicts between sovereign states and quasi-state authorities or from a state’s inherent “weakness,” but also and increasingly from the state’s own neoliberal decision to temporarily relinquish control over areas attractive to international investment and expertise²¹. In other words, overlapping or shared sovereignties develop in the spaces or enclaves that emerge when states deploy what Ong terms a “graduated sovereignty,” adjusting their governmental techniques and rule over varied areas and populations according to the dictates of the global market²². Applied to the Soqotra Archipelago, Ong’s argument illustrates how the Yemeni state – which has been regularly depicted as being “weak,” “fragile” or “on the verge of collapse” by policy makers and pundits, and even by the Soqotrans who lament its “retreat” – may have been deliberately implementing a policy of “graduated sovereignty” with regard to this enclave whose internationally-funded “eco-development” substantially secures its greater political and economic integration within the Yemeni nation-state.
- 7 Fundamental to Ong’s concept of “graduated sovereignty” are the zoning technologies and strategies deployed by sovereign states to facilitate these gradations in governance. “Zoning technologies” demarcate certain spaces within the national territory in order to profit from their specific characteristics and setting while also establishing transnational connections between such sites, thereby creating “an archipelago of enclaves”²³. For Ong, these “zoning technologies” are examples of the “positive” exception that not only create opportunities (for some), but also could represent “an economic detour leading to broader political integration”²⁴. In Soqotra, one of the first and greatest accomplishments of the ICDP was the drafting and implementation of the conservation Zoning Plan, ratified by Presidential Decree in 2000. Under this plan, which mapped the entire archipelago into five categories of natural resource management and conservation – resource use reserves, general use zones, national parks, areas of special botanical interest and nature sanctuaries – every meter of Soqotran territory was defined and demarcated *spatially* (by

maps and through signboards posted at the geographical borders between areas) according to its increasing or decreasing "conservation" or "development" potential. Indeed, the very "nature sanctuaries" which were required to be preserved "in as undisturbed a state as possible"²⁵ were soon tapped and targeted for global ecotourism, their "protection" a promise of profit. Moreover, it was this widely celebrated but nevertheless practically unfeasible delimitation of spaces and "their" appropriate activities that eventually paved the way to the archipelago being recognized by UNESCO, in 2003, as a Man and Biosphere Reserve and being inscribed, in 2008, on the World Heritage List. Yemen's Soqatra Archipelago, once one of the country's most impoverished and isolated regions, had thus found its place among the planet's most privileged of archipelagos: globally marketable and networked World Heritage sites.

- 8 As applicable as Ong's formulations here are, it will be helpful to return briefly to Agamben's theorization of the exception, which Ong characterizes solely as a "negative" exclusion, but which Agamben defines more broadly as a "zone of indistinction"²⁶. Although Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" is perhaps most cited with regard to the internment "camp" – a space that Agamben describes as "the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West"²⁷ – he also identifies the exception in at least two other arenas: (1) in the burgeoning medical indistinction between biological life and death and (2) in the enduring development imperative to eradicate the distinction between "the People" as political body and "the people" who are poor and needy by eliminating their exclusion²⁸. It is in Agamben's admittedly brief treatment of "the people" and their "development"/exclusion that we might find a hint of what Ong would call a "positive" exception. But is it really a question of which exceptions – which exclusions or enclaves – can be deemed "positive" or "negative" ones? Or would we then not be missing Agamben's larger point, borne out by Ong's own examples, that the exception is always inclusive: a way of capturing bare life or "the people" within the political order through their very exclusion? If this is true, then Ong's claim – that by temporarily ceding its full sovereignty over its "bankable" enclaves, the state ultimately may be able to integrate or encompass them more broadly²⁹ – would seem less novel or even "positive." Enclaves are by definition inclusive exclusions: zones of indistinction between inside and outside, exception and rule. It is important to remember, then, that Agamben's own description of such spaces is not topographical, but *topological*, identifying "thus not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another"³⁰. Given this essential *structure* of the state – or space – of exception, the enclave is more analogous to the camp than one at first might think.

"A World Apart"

- 9 In March 2005, an American employee of the United States Embassy in Sana'a visited one of Soqotra's newly established protected areas (according to the Zoning Plan, a "nature sanctuary") in which the ICDP had set up a rudimentary campground. This and the growing number of ICDP-funded campgrounds on the island were the project's version, and vision, of what Paige West has called "conservation-as-development"³¹, their goal being to attract and accommodate international "ecotourists" whose expenditures would fund the local communities' conservation-driven "development." Having been informed by her tour guide about the area's impressive level of botanical diversity and floristic

endemism – the Soqotra archipelago boasts 307 (or 37 %) endemic species, seven of which are native to this protected area alone – the embassy employee reflected on her initial confusion upon arriving on the island. “We are used to talking about endemic corruption and endemic poverty; we talk about this everyday,” she told me, referring to the problems plaguing Sana’a and the rest of mainland Yemen. “So I was surprised to come here and hear everyone talking about ‘endemic’ in a positive sense,” she laughed. She was surprised, in other words, to find in Soqotra the exception.

- 10 Long before tourists started visiting its protected areas or before these zones had been mapped out – long before the archipelago had been rendered an “enclave” – Soqotra had been characterized as both an exceptional place and a place of exception. Valued in early antiquity for its aromatic resins and aloes, Soqotra entered the historical record through the Roman historian Pliny the Elder (5th century BC) as the origin of the sacred phoenix; through the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BC) as a utopist commune; and through the anonymous Greek author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (1st century CE) as an exotic emporium of great reptiles, tortoise shells, cinnabar and frankincense. Arab and European historians writing in the Middle Ages, including al-Mas’ûdî, Marco Polo, and Ibn Battuta, reported on its astonishing Christian population, and their notorious reputation as pirates and sorcerers³². Although Soqotra had fallen under Mahri (South Arabian) control by the mid-fifteenth century and continued to be ruled by the Mahra-based Bani ‘Afrar sultans until 1967, Portuguese colonizers managed to occupy it briefly from 1507-1511. Their chroniclers were enchanted by the traces of Christianity they encountered there, as were the later Christian missionary visitors to Soqotra, including St. Francis Xavier and St. Ignatius of Loyola, who followed. Even then, signs of Christianity on the island had become regarded as a curious relic, with Soqotrans as their primeval custodians. For example, in 1541, Portuguese admiral Dom Joao de Castro admired the Soqotrans’ vestigial devotion and similarity of spirit – “Socotrans revere the Gospel. [...] have the same names as we have, Pierre, Jean and Andre; the most common name for their women is Marie. [...] Almost all of them wear crosses” – while noting also their radical, animalistic difference: “They live like wild beasts, without any political life or legal organization”³³. In short, Soqotra was long represented as a place apart: an Edenic garden, an outpost of marooned Christians, a home to mythology and magic, and a place of danger and degeneration.
- 11 If early chroniclers were most captivated by Soqotra’s exotic nature, then later visitors seemed especially taken by the notion of the Soqotran as a noble savage: a charming likeness of their own pre-civilized (or post-degenerate) selves. After the archipelago had reverted to Mahri rule, the next maritime power to briefly “colonize” Soqotra was the British, which nominally “governed” Soqotra as a British Protectorate from 1886 to 1967. In 1834, twenty-six year old Lieutenant J.R. Wellsted led a scouting expedition to Soqotra to determine its viability as a coal depot for the British Indian Navy (five years later, the British Government occupied and settled Aden instead). Wellsted was intrigued by Soqotra’s “primitive” yet peaceful mountain-dwelling “aborigines” (or “Bedowin”) whom he greatly preferred to the “zealous” and “indolent” coastal-dwelling “Arabs”: “Tall, with strong, muscular, and remarkably well-formed limbs, a facial angle as open as that of the Europeans...[the Bedowin are] a remarkably good looking people, distinct and removed from any of the varieties of the human race seen on the shores of the continent on either side”³⁴. More than one hundred years later, Douglas Botting – who similarly at the young age of twenty-two led an expedition to Soqotra, this one “scientific” – expressed an

analogous fascination with the autochthonism and distinction of Soqotran Bedouin. "Until now, the Bedouin of Socotra have been among the most isolated and least known people in the world," Botting writes, engrossed by the idea that they might be the descendants of the "original inhabitants of Arabia," yet disdainful, nevertheless, of their "strange, poor, primitive life"³⁵. Yet, for Botting, it is the Soqotran Bedouin's very "isolation" that renders him less noble than primitive. Describing a Bedouin's "fearful," "dirty" existence – an existence that elsewhere in the text he describes as "a world cut off from the rest of humanity for countless centuries, hemmed in, absolutely remote and unreal, living out its own strange and incommunicable life"³⁶ – Botting casts the "Bedouin" as an unworldly troglodyte: "He had always been there, he would always be there, he knew of no other world, he was interested in no other world"³⁷. Similar conjectures about the Soqotrans' radical insularity and apartness continue to be voiced today. For example, contemplating the Soqotrans' ostensibly provincial lives, a U.S. journalist visiting Soqotra writes, "I was tempted to ask our guide, if he could travel, what in the world he wanted to see. But I refrained; the question would have meant nothing to him"³⁸. Soqotran "Bedouin" need not read Burdick's recent travel essay – with the somewhat predictable byline, "the prehistoric island of Socotra is a world apart" – to know that they are considered not just isolated, but also insular. They do not need to read these or other sensationalist accounts³⁹ of their alleged stagnation because they decipher it already in the gifts sent to them by their émigré relatives living in the prosperous Arab Gulf States, in the visits of their foreign-born nephews who clearly consider their Arab upbringing and education superior to that of their Soqotran relatives, in the language of various "training" courses and "awareness" campaigns implemented by European students in their early twenties, and in the photographs that tourists frame. The trope of noble-savage – today, unworldly indigene – remains ever so alluring, despite the various transnational connections and communities grounding the majority of Soqotrans' lives⁴⁰.

- 12 Although many Soqotrans do believe that their island is, by its very nature, "exceptional," they would thus likely take issue with its (and their) ostensible "apartness," arguing instead that Soqotra is, in fact, at the very center of the world. Indeed, it is through this perspective that, until 1967, the Bani 'Afrar sultans constituted their territory and delineated the threshold of the Soqotran community, using their sovereign privilege to ban thieves and witches *from* the islands to the continental hinterlands of the Arabian Peninsula. And yet, with its gradual encompassment by the Yemeni state – starting in 1967 with the claiming of the archipelago by South Yemen's National Liberation Front and accelerating in the late 1990s and early 2000s under the "unified" Republic of Yemen – this center-periphery perspective was reversed as the respective states executed policies that hinged on the archipelago's geographical and symbolic detachment from the mainland. Under the socialist regime of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the Soqotra archipelago was governed as a "military zone of restricted access"⁴¹, obstructing not only the travel of Soqotrans from the islands, but also the departure of the mainland citizen-prisoners who had been banished to Soqotra to there live out their sentences and lives. While this "state" of exception was lifted in the early to mid 1990s under the unified regime, it was soon replaced by the reconfiguration of the archipelago as a "place" of exception, effecting its swift transformation to "enclave" from "camp." It is not, however, simply its "exceptional" nature (literally) that defines Soqotra as a place of exception, but rather its topological restructuring as a "place" both inside and outside the Yemeni state and its law. Free of the wide-ranging political and social conflicts that have bedeviled much of mainland Yemen (and absent of the weapons, too), Soqotra, as it is now defined,

is well placed to (re)capture the international tourism and capital fleeing Yemen "proper."⁴² In other words, despite the U.S. employee's lexical confusion, her initial bewilderment reveals much more; Soqotra, the site of *endemic* flora, is showcased by the state as a screen to the *endemic* conflict and corruption "at home." As Soqotrans are well aware that the archipelago's geographical and symbolic "apartness" functions as the inclusive exclusion that only facilitates its broader economic and political encompassment by the sovereign state, their skepticism regarding the newest governing exception – the proposed "independent" Soqotra Authority – is not that surprising, after all. It is to this exception that we now turn.

Conceiving the (Soqotran) Exception

- 13 Despite Soqotra's recent but precipitous "opening" to domestic immigration, international development, global environmentalism, global tourism, and the world heritage industry, the archipelago continues to be characterized, as noted above, as other worldly, forgotten, and virtually unreachable: as Yemen's "ultimate frontier"⁴³. It is as if, even or especially now – with its protected area status – Soqotra "had a protective barrier"; and yet, as in other "remote" areas, "from the inside outwards, there was an almost exaggerated contrary sense of the *absence* of any barrier to the world – a particular sense of excessive vulnerability, of ease of entry"⁴⁴. As if to highlight this vulnerability, this *exposure*, Soqotrans tend to narrate their political history as a periodization of entries or incursions: first the Sultans "entered," then the British, then the Party (i.e., the socialist regime), and then *al-wahda* (the post-unity government). Moreover, it is not only these political entries that are counted as foundational shifts or junctures. Like the succession of states that are said to have entered Soqotra *min rinhem* (Soq.: from [across] the sea) – or rather, as the flotsam and jetsam that washed up on its shores, as it were⁴⁵ – the more recent ICDP "entries" are often characterized by Soqotrans as invasive, as well: invasive *and* visitant. That is, in Soqotra, this sense of "ease of entry" is accompanied by a distinct awareness of the ease of departure, too. States, regimes, and projects have come and gone. In the meantime, however, Soqotrans are called upon to "host" these various ventures "from the sea" and continue to do so tentatively with the conviction that another regime or project – potentially better or worse than the current one – will inevitably arrive someday and take its place.
- 14 It is with this sense of apprehension that my former Soqotran neighbors, friends and acquaintances were discussing, in early 2011, the proposed establishment of the "Soqotra Authority." Three years earlier, in an attempt to bolster its bid for Soqotra's World Heritage Status, the Government of Yemen endorsed five cabinet decrees prescribing the improvement of the conservation and development of the archipelago. One of these decrees called for the establishment of a "national entity responsible to plan and coordinate all developments, investments and economic activities" pertaining to the archipelago to "ensur[e] the achievement of the sustainable development of the Socotra Archipelago, while conserving its unique environment, biodiversity, and natural landscapes that are the basis for its WHS nomination"⁴⁶. Within a week's time, the UNDP and two European ambassadors to Yemen drafted letters affirming their continuing support of the ICDP's work in light of this new governance structure.⁴⁷ This move toward creating a special, "independent" authority in Soqotra to "facilitat[e] the continued and expanded collaboration among all relevant agencies of the Government of Yemen, and

the international community" – especially in "technical and financial terms"⁴⁸ – must have convinced the World Heritage committee of the government's commitment for, in July 2008, the archipelago was declared a World Heritage site.⁴⁹ That same month, representatives of two government ministries and the UNDP signed off on the current GoY-UNDP project, the Socotra Governance and Biodiversity Project (SGBP). Aiming to ensure that "biodiversity management considerations are mainstreamed effectively into the current process of 'decentralizing governance for development' on the Socotra archipelago," the SGBP's first and primary task is to support the development and implementation of the island-wide Authority. The fact that Soqotrans were animated about this in 2011 – and not, for example, in 2010 when I visited, too – has a lot to do with the SGBP's delayed progress; although the SGBP officially commenced its work in June 2009, it had virtually no presence on the island until the spring of 2010 and, even by early 2011, it had not yet run workshops informing Soqotrans of their plans. Soqotrans were speculating, though. Would the *al-hai'a* (the Authority) be just an extension of *al-bi'a* (the Environment, e.g., the ICDP)? (The "Environment" was fine, my interlocutor hastened to assure me, albeit "a little lacking" [Ar.: *nâqis shwayya*] in its development outcomes.) Would it be under the dominion (Ar.: *mulk*) of one person or tribe? And who would select the five people they had heard would constitute its governing body?

- 15 From an "eco-development" perspective, the Soqatra Authority made good sense. It would be the "positive" – dare I say, "neoliberal" – exception to Yemen's normative governance structure through which the bulk of the "planning, budgeting and implementation responsibilities" are maintained at the regional (governorate) level, which operates and mediates between the central government and Yemen's 333 local districts⁵⁰. Currently, Soqatra's two local councils must vie with 29 other regional districts for support and services from the Governorate of Hadramawt, the largest of Yemen's twenty-one governorates. The proposed Authority, in contrast, would be authorized not only to oversee all conservation and development activities on the island, but also to liaise directly with the central government while receiving and managing the international donor monies given to the Soqatra Archipelago. Modeled after the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, "an administratively and fiscally autonomous institution responsible for the management, regulation and development of the [Aqaba Special Economic] zone,"⁵¹ the Soqatra Authority/Special Zone would similarly work to capture global capital within Yemen's national boundaries and state territory⁵². Moreover, it would also benefit the international community, providing, according to the SGBP document, the "UNDP with an opportunity to pilot the newly consolidated local governance structure"⁵³. Instead of being an "independent" or even local, "Soqotri" institution, then, the Soqatra Authority would merely facilitate the more effective deployment of the "shared sovereignty" negotiated between the GoY, UNDP and UNESCO already during the earlier stages of the ICDP.
- 16 From many Soqotrans' perspective, however, the proposed Authority represented a step away from strong, centralized and presumably effective rule. Hamdan, a middle-aged pastoralist living in one of Soqatra's protected areas, stated that he and other Soqotrans would prefer that the archipelago be redistricted as Yemen's twenty-second governorate so that all of its allocated state and donor funds would reach its elected council(s) directly. Although his desire for a streamlined disbursement is in fact one of the rationale for establishing the Soqatra Authority, Hamdan suspects that – under this new, externally implemented and conceivably still-"visitant" regime – the moneys allocated to Soqatra

would continue to be "eaten" (embezzled) along the way. Marwan, another middle-aged pastoralist, reiterated Hamdan's concerns that the Authority – in his eyes, simply an extension of the ICDP – would continue to "eat" from the funds allocated to Soqotra as (as many Soqotrans believe) the ICDP did, as did the state offices and bureaucrats standing between the central government or the international donors and the local district committees. And yet, more specifically, Marwan preferred that the archipelago become a territorially integral *muhâfaza* (governorate) instead of an administratively exceptional *hai'a* (authority) so that in Soqotra more government – as opposed to privatized – employment opportunities would arise; "there would be a lot more teachers hired and more projects and more help from the government," he surmised. In other words, in his eyes, if Soqotra were to be governed in a normative sense – *not* as an exception – then the government would actually have to step up and strengthen its social safety net, rather than abandon the archipelago to the vicissitudes of these visitant and, now, market-governed regimes. While it may be true that their, and other Soqotrans', apprehensiveness regarding the proposed Authority was based not only on its alleged extrinsic and transient form, but also, in large part, on the general lack of communication between the SGBP and the community – leading Soqotrans to speculate about rumors and foment their worst fears – their concerns were based also legitimately on their post-socialist experiences of the "eating" and simultaneously "retreating" state. This "exception" – the suspension of state subsidies, welfare, and employment – has engendered a widely shared nostalgia in Soqotra for a time in which the archipelago was not yet governed by this neoliberal rationale.

Sovereign Nostalgia

- 17 "Shall I tell you, or not, what Soqotra once was?" Othman Abdullah Othman Baidobah asked the all-male crowd of men and young adults pressed into the primary school courtyard. It was the opening night, in December 2008, of Soqotra's first public and now annual poetry contest, "The Festival of the Soqotran Poet," a metacultural performance that features contestants from around the island voicing their oral compositions in front of the audience and a panel of "expert" judges. "Shall I tell you," Baidobah began, before launching into his vivid verse on "the past," a verse that would contribute to him being named the "Poet of Soqotra" in 2008. Baidobah went on to describe a time familiar and dear to most everyone in the audience, even the large majority of school-aged boys who remember this "once" only through narratives such as his: *This was a past when there were no roads in Soqotra, or even proper schools, he continued; when Soqotrans had no rice or (basic imports like) tomato paste, not to mention radios or tape recorders; when there was no electricity and there were no airplanes landing in Soqotra; when Soqotrans depended solely on their livestock or on the fruits of the sea; when they slept (in caves and) on goatskin rugs; when they had no plates but rudimentary clay vessels and stones; and when they relied on cauterization or herbs (in place of pharmaceuticals).* And, yet, this was a time, Baidobah declared, *when God acted upon the people; when the Soqotrans would pull each other into their houses insistent on slaughtering their best goats for one another; and moreover, when there was only one leader, who had the last word, as opposed to today's climate of clientage and corruption.*
- 18 My rather liberal rendition of Baidobah's poem notwithstanding, two widely-held Soqotran perceptions punctuate what is otherwise a litany of hardship. The first is the memory of generosity and hospitality, in spite of such adversity. This was a time in which

Soqotrans perceive themselves to have had less and yet to have, themselves, given more: a clear indictment of the present emphasis on market-driven “development” and “modernization” projects. The second is the memory of the al-Afrari Sultanate of Mahra and Soqotra that ended in 1967, the “one leader” being an explicit reference to the last Sultan, Isa bin Ali (d. 1976), a Carl Schmittian ideal type of sovereign: the “sole architect,” personified and indivisible⁵⁴. His was a period of authoritarian and even autocratic rule, and yet, the Sultan is nevertheless perceived as having been “one of us”: a clear indictment of the present-day “unity” government fractured by patronage networks, corruption, and northern Yemen domination.

- 19 It may be tempting, and would not be entirely inaccurate, to read this dual perception – of a past governed by unconditional hospitality and by a singular, decisive sovereign – as an expression of structural nostalgia.⁵⁵ Yet, what my conversations with Soqotrans in January 2011 lead me now to believe is that theirs may be better termed a *sovereign nostalgia*: the nostalgia for a non-graduated, unshared sovereignty embodied in the autonomous host – the host who is sovereign in his own home – as in the sole (sovereign) Sultan. This sovereign nostalgia, expressed not only in Baidobah’s poem, but also in several other poems presented during the 2008–2011 contests, is not just past-oriented. That is, it articulates a longing not so much for a return to Soqotra’s era of despotism and deprivation as it does a longing for a decisive, pastoral state in the present. In other words, sovereign nostalgia is a rejection by Soqotrans of the “shared” sovereignty that dilutes the state’s accountability and obscures their access to it, while maximizing international involvement in their affairs and accelerating their encompassment by the (still) sovereign state.

Conclusion

- 20 As recently as fifteen years ago, the Soqotra Archipelago was inaccessible for five months of each year because of the southwest monsoon that sweeps across its shores and “locks” the sea. This state of semiannual isolation – a seasonal recess, not a temporal rupture – changed dramatically with the “discovery” of the archipelago as a biodiversity “hot spot” and the subsequent “opening” (Ar.: *infîâtâh*) of Soqotra, its largest and most populated island, to new forms of economic liberalization and environmental regulation. Albeit sponsored by the Government of Yemen, these changes were implemented mainly through a multilateral integrated conservation and development project (ICDP), which, between 1997 and 2008, sought to transform the entire archipelago into a national protected area supported largely by international ecotourism, and between 2009 and the present, aims to establish the archipelago as a whole as a special administrative zone governed by an independent Soqotra Authority. As a result of these initiatives, UNESCO recognized the Soqotra Archipelago as a “natural” World Heritage Site, a move that many Soqotrans have perceived as their territory being appropriated by the global community with an explicit and narrow concern for its biodiversity, but not for the preservation of their distinct cultural heritage. This territorial appropriation has not resulted in their dispossession by multinational corporations, as has been occurring in places like Indonesia where rural communities have been displaced by logging companies⁵⁶, and is grounded in the preservation rather than the exploitation of Soqotra’s natural resources. Nonetheless, Soqotrans have similarly been experiencing a form of the increasingly globalized shared sovereignty that benefits both governments and international actors,

but is rejected by the Soqotrans, themselves. If Soqotrans express nostalgia for an individual, decisive sovereign, this does not imply that they simply long for a more authoritarian state or that they support the current instantiation of the Yemeni regime. Indeed, in Soqotra, too, there were demonstrations in the late spring and summer of 2011 calling for the departure of President Ali Abdullah Salah. What many Soqotrans do desire is their political inclusion in a strong, pastoral state characterized by good governance and accountability toward all its citizens. In this, they reject also their enclavization, which, in delineating and marketing their "apartness," ultimately renders them even more vulnerable to and restrained by supranational forces "from beyond the sea."

NOTES

1. The fieldwork on which this essay is based took place over a 15-month period between 2004 and 2006, followed by brief return visits to Soqotra in 2007, 2009-10, and 2011, and was generously funded by the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program, the American Institute for Yemeni Studies, Wayne State University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and New York University in Abu Dhabi, respectively. I am ever grateful to my Soqotran hosts and interlocutors; those who appear on these pages have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.
2. FERGUSON J. and A. GUPTA, « Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality », *American Ethnologist*, 2002, 29(4): 981-1002.
3. APPADURAI A., « Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography », in P. Yaeger (ed.), *The Geography of Identity*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1996, p. 40-58 ; SASSEN S., *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York, The New Press, 1998 ; but cf. HANSEN Th. B. and F. STEPPUTAT (eds.), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.
4. ONG A. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2006 : 18; FERGUSON J. and A. GUPTA op. cit.)
5. FERGUSON J., *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006 : 47
6. FERGUSON J. op. cit. : 43
7. For an overview, see De GENOVA N. and N. Peutz (eds.), *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.
8. AGAMBEN G., *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. by D. HELLER-ROAZEN. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.
9. AGAMBEN G., *State of Exception*. Trans. by K. ATTELL. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005 : 50
10. ONG op. cit.
11. SCHMITT C., *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. by G. SCHWAB. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985 [1922] : 5
12. ONG op. cit. : 5, emphasis added
13. ONG op. cit. : 4
14. ONG op. cit. : 5

15. ONG *op. cit.* : 20
16. ELIE S., « Soqatra: The Historical Formation of a Communal Polity », *Chroniques Yéménites*, 2010, 16 : 31-55.
17. EPC (Environment Protection Council). *The Republic of Yemen. Conservation Zoning Plan of Socotra Islands*. Prepared by the UNDP-GEF Project Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Biodiversity of Socotra Archipelago (Socotra Biodiversity Project) YEM/96/G32. Sana'a, Yemen, Environment Protection Council. Available at: <http://socotraproject.org/userfiles/files/Zoning%20plan%20information.pdf>, accessed 1 September 2001 : 14
18. The official names of the respective project phases listed above are as follows: the "Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Biodiversity of Socotra Archipelago" (but generally referred to as the Socotra Biodiversity Project, or SBP), the "Sustainable Development and Biodiversity Conservation for the People of Socotra Islands, Yemen" (but generally referred to as the Socotra Conservation and Development Programme, or SCDP); and "Strengthening Socotra's Policy and Regulatory Framework for Mainstreaming Biodiversity" (but generally referred to as the Socotra Governance and Biodiversity Project, or SGBP).
19. The project document for the SGBP reveals as much, claiming, "by virtue of its superior implementation and delivery capacity and the fact it has been the main vehicle for donor support for the past ten years, the EPA [Environment Protection Agency] has become the proxy local governance structure on Socotra" (RoY (Republic of Yemen) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), *Strengthening Socotra's Policy and Regulatory Framework for Mainstreaming Biodiversity*. Project Document. Atlas Award ID : 00049646. Sana'a, Yemen, 2008 : 7. Available at: http://www.socotraproject.org/userfiles/files/SGBP_Project_Document.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011). Although the local branch of the Government of Yemen's EPA was one of the managing partners for these projects, its own budget and resources were extremely limited during the majority of these project years. To say then, that the EPA "has taken on service delivery" (RoY and UNDP, *op. cit.*) is really to say that it was the ICDP, working with the EPA, which performed this role. This sense is supported by the numbers: in 2005, in the midst and at the height of the ICDP's "governance" of Soqatra, the Hadiboh district Local Council's estimated budget for "goods and services" was approximately US \$86,000, and the EPA (which at the time had no budget) was expecting to receive approximately US \$12,000 per annum from the national government (interview with local council member and EPA/SCDP liaison, Hadiboh, January 2005).
20. ONG, *op. cit.* : 19
21. ONG, *op. cit.* : 77-78
22. ONG, *op. cit.*
23. ONG, *op. cit.* : 102-04 ; see also FERGUSON J., *op. cit.* : 42-49)
24. ONG, *op. cit.* : 116.
25. EPC 2000, *op. cit.*: 5.
26. AGAMBEN G., 1998, *op. cit.* : 37.
27. AGAMBEN G., 1998, *op. cit.*: 181.
28. AGAMBEN G., 1998, *op. cit.* : 179 ; see also HANSEN TH. B. and F. STEPPUTAT, 2005, *op. cit.* : 18.
29. ONG *op. cit.* : 78, 116
30. AGAMBEN 1998, *op. cit.* : 37.
31. WEST P., *Conservation is Our Government Now: the Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2006.
32. NAUMKIN V., *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra*. Trans. by V. A. EPSTEIN. Reading, UK Ithaca Press, 1993 : 22-34.
33. KAMMERER A., *Le Routier de Dom Joao de Castro: l'exploration de la Mer Rouge par les Portugais en 1541*, trans. and commentary, Paris. 1936 : 38-39, cited in Naumkin 1993 *op. cit.* : 47-48)

34. WELLSTED, J.R., « Tour on the Island of Socotra. », in J.R. WELLSTED, *Travels to the City of the Caliphs, Along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean*, London, Henry Colburn Publisher, 1840, Vol. II. : 305-306.
35. BOTTING D., *Island of the Dragon's Blood*. New York, Wilfred Funk, 1958 : 218, 211.
36. BOTTING D., 1958, *op. cit.* : 173.
37. BOTTING D., 1958, *op. cit.* : 213.
38. BURDICK A., « The Wonder Land of Socotra, Yemen », *T Magazine: The New York Times Style Magazine: Travel*. 2007 March 25 : 146. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/travel/tmagazine/03well.socotra.t.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed 1 September 2011.
39. e.g., CARTER M., « The Land that Time Forgot », *The Observer: the Observer Escape*. Sunday 16 April 2006, p 1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2006/apr/16/yemen.observerescapesection>, accessed 1 September 2011 ; CRAWFORD A., « Now, this is remote », *Sydney Morning Herald: Travel*, Saturday 8 september 2001. Good Weekend section, p.32 ; « Journey to the Secret Kingdom of Socotra », *NBC Today Show*. M. VIEIRA, R. ENGEL, National Broadcasting Company, New York. 07 October 2010. Television. Available at: <http://www.nbc.com/news-sports/today-show/journey-to-the-secret-kingdom-of-socotra/>, accessed 1 September 2011.
40. PEUTZ N., « Bedouin 'Abjection': World Heritage, Worldliness, and Worthiness at the Margins of Arabia », *American Ethnologist*, 2011, 38(2): 338-360.
41. RoY (Republic of Yemen), *Socotra Archipelago: Proposal for Inclusion in the World Heritage List*, UNESCO. Prepared by National Commission of UNESCO, Yemen ; Environment Protection Authority, Yemen; Socotra Conservation and Development Programme, UNDP, Yemen ; Socotra Conservation Fund, Yemen, 2006 : 64. Available at : <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1263/documents/>, accessed 1 September 2011.
42. In fact, this is how I first came to conduct my graduate research in Soqotra starting in March 2003 when, due to the bombing of Iraq and the precautionary country-wide travel restrictions imposed on all foreigners in Yemen, Soqotra was, for a short while, the only part of Yemen deemed safe enough for foreign visitors.
43. ELIE S., « The Waning of Soqotra's Pastoral Community : Political Incorporation as Social Transformation », *Human Organization*, 2008, 67(3) : 336.
44. ARDENER E., « 'Remote Areas': Some Theoretical Considerations », in A. JACKSON, ed. *Anthropology at Home*. London, Tavistock Publications, 1987 : 42.
45. I am grateful to Miranda Morris for this formulation.
46. Cited in RoY 2006, *op. cit.* : 1529.
47. The cabinet decrees (n° 45-49 of February 12, 2008) and these letters were included in the nomination for World Heritage Status (see RoY 2006, *op. cit.* : 1517-1538).
48. RoY (Republic of Yemen.), Letter of Intent : « Call to Action for the Establishment of the Socotra Authority », 18 February 2008. Prepared by the Ministry of Water and Environment, Yemen; Environment Protection Authority, Yemen ; Socotra Conservation and Development Programme, UNDP, Yemen. Sana'a, Yemen, cited in RoY 2006, *op. cit.*: 1535.
49. Additionally, the proposal for an "independent," island-wide authority conformed to the government's slow but incremental administrative and financial decentralization process, promulgated through the Local Authority Law of 2000 and institutionalized through elected Local Councils charged with the "expansion of popular participation in decision-making and management of local concerns in the spheres of economic, social and cultural development" (RoY (Republic of Yemen), *Law N° 4 of 2000 Concerning the Local Authority*. Sana'a, Yemen, Ministry of Legal Affairs & Parliamentary Affairs. : Art. 4). For more on the Local Council system in Soqotra and how also this administrative reform serves, "in practice," as "a mechanism for external supervision," see ELIE S., 2010, *op. cit.* : 46-48.
50. RoY and UNDP , *op. cit.* :7.

51. <http://www.aqabazone.co/>, accessed 1 September 2011. The Aqaba Special Economic Zone is a private trade zone in Jordan established in 2001 for the sake of attracting foreign investment and creating local jobs. See also KARDOOSH M. A. *The Aqaba Special Economic Zone, Jordan: A Case Study of Governance*. Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung (Center for Development Research), Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2005. Available at: http://www.zef.de/fileadmin/webfiles/downloads/projects/politicalreform/The_Aqaba_Special_Economic_Zone_.pdf, accessed 1 September 2011.
52. HOLLOWAY J., « Global Capital and the National State », *Capital & Class*, 1994,18 (1) : 23-49.
53. RoY and UNDP, *op. cit.* : 10.
54. SCHMITT C., 1985 [1922] *op. cit.* : 47.
55. Structural nostalgia, as Michael Herzfeld defines it, is the “collective representation of an Edenic order – a time before time – in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human” (HERZFELD M., *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge, 1997 : 109).
56. LI, T. M., *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007 ; TSING A. L., *Friction : An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

RÉSUMÉS

In January 2011, during the same week that the fervent revolts against multiple Arab regimes captured global attention, in Soqotra, the largest and most populated island of Yemen's Soqotra Archipelago, pastoralists and town-dwellers alike were anxious about their island gaining a measure of political “independence.” Having recently heard that the archipelago was soon to be governed by an environmental Authority – a condition of its having been recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2008 – Soqotrans were grappling with the meaning of this new form of “local” but nevertheless supranationally-mediated sovereignty. For the past fifteen years, Yemen's Soqotra Archipelago has attracted a disproportionate amount of state funding and international aid earmarked for conservation-and-development programming. Not only have these ascendant projects transformed Soqotra's place-in-the-world – from a relatively obscure and seasonably inaccessible Indian Ocean island to a “globally” significant World Heritage site – but also they have sought to transform, through zoning and pedagogy, every inch of its territory as well. This essay examines Socotran responses to their island's environmental and political enclavization by focusing on (1) Soqotran anxieties with regard to the proposed new governance structure, which many viewed as just the latest form of several visitant regimes imposed upon them by outside forces, and (2) Soqotrans' expressed nostalgia for a Schmittian form of sovereignty – one ruler, personified and indivisible – as opposed to this “shared” sovereignty that, in practice, attenuates their own political access and cultural independence. It argues that such « sovereign nostalgia » is rejection by Soqotrans of the increasingly globalized form of « shared » sovereignty that dilutes the state's accountability and obscures people's access to it, while maximizing international involvement in their affairs and accelerating their encompassment by the (ever still) sovereign state.

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