



WESTERN SAHARA

THE REFUGEE NATION

PABLO SAN MARTÍN



WESTERN SAHARA
THE REFUGEE NATION

PABLO SAN MARTÍN

IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Western Sahara

Series Editors

Professor David George (Swansea University)
Professor Paul Garner (University of Leeds)

Editorial Board

David Frier (University of Leeds)
Richard Cleminson (University of Leeds)
Lisa Shaw (University of Liverpool)
Gareth Walters (Swansea University)
Rob Stone (Swansea University)
David Gies (University of Virginia)
Catherine Davies (University of Nottingham)

IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Western Sahara
The Refugee Nation

PABLO SAN MARTÍN



UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS

CARDIFF

2010

© Pablo San Martín, 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any material form (including photocopying or storing it in any medium by electronic means and whether or not transiently or incidentally to some other use of this publication) without the written permission of the copyright owner except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Applications for the copyright owner's written permission to reproduce any part of this publication should be addressed to the University of Wales Press, 10 Columbus Walk, Brigantine Place, Cardiff, CF10 4UP.

www.uwp.co.uk

British Library CIP

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7083-2205-5 (hardback)
978-0-7083-2380-9 (paperback)
e-ISBN 978-1-78316-118-8

The right of Pablo San Martín to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77, 78 and 79 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A María, por todo

Contents

[Series Editors' Foreword](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Introduction: 'If you ever arrive at a wide white land ...'](#)

[Chapter 1: From Cuba to Villa Cisneros: The Construction of a Spanish Neocolonial Space in the Sahara](#)

[Chapter 2: From the Spanish 'Peace' to Armed Struggle: The Emergence of Saharawi Nationalism](#)

[Chapter 3: From Refugees to Citizens: Exile and Nation-building in the Saharawi Refugee Camps](#)

[Chapter 4: From Soldiers to Shopkeepers: Nationalism, Development and Social Change in the Saharawi Refugee Camps](#)

[Notes](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Series Editors' Foreword

Over recent decades the traditional 'languages and literatures' model in Spanish departments in universities in the United Kingdom has been superseded by a contextual, interdisciplinary and 'area studies' approach to the study of the culture, history, society and politics of the Hispanic and Lusophone worlds – categories that extend far beyond the confines of the Iberian Peninsula, not only in Latin America but also to Spanish-speaking and Lusophone Africa.

In response to these dynamic trends in research priorities and curriculum development, this series is designed to present both disciplinary and interdisciplinary research within the general field of Iberian and Latin American Studies, particularly studies that explore all aspects of **Cultural Production** (inter alia literature, film, music, dance, sport) in Spanish, Portuguese, Basque, Catalan, Galician and indigenous languages of Latin America. The series also aims to publish research in the **History and Politics** of the Hispanic and Lusophone worlds, at the level of both the region and the nation-state, as well as on **Cultural Studies** that explore the shifting terrains of gender, sexual, racial and postcolonial identities in those same regions.

Acknowledgements

This book would never have been possible without the contributions, help and encouragement of many people. First, I wish to thank all the Saharawis who trusted me, opened their houses and *jaimas* and shared their stories of lack and desire with me. Thanks to all the Frente Polisario and Saharawi Republic (SADR) officials and diplomats for their invaluable assistance and to the countless refugee-citizens who shared with me their thoughts and concerns in the refugee camps of Tindouf. There, my friends and hosts Malainin Lakhal, in Rabuni, and Mulayahmed Abderrahman and his family, in Smara, deserve a special word of gratitude. The determination, strength and hope in the future of Tutu, Mulayahmed's little sister, was a lighthouse in an ocean of uncertainty. Thanks also to all my academic colleagues, whose comments, suggestions and ideas were indispensable to the writing of this work. Joanna Allan's exhaustive readings and constructive comments on the drafts and final manuscript were much more helpful than she thinks. I have also benefited from the constructive comments of the external evaluators of this work. The process of nation-building explored in this book, as one anonymous reader of the final manuscript rightly points out, needs also to take into account the key role of the Saharawi diaspora in Mauritania and the relations between the Saharawis from the territories under Moroccan occupation and the refugee camps. Both issues deserve a more detailed attention than I can devote to them in this work. But I take note and accept the challenge for the future. This book is not a closed work but just a point of departure that, far from attempting to produce a final and closed panorama, aims at suggesting new lines of enquiry into the Saharawi story. Finally, I would like to thank all the institutions and funding bodies that made this book possible; the pilot fieldwork of this venture was carried out thanks to a small grant from the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, further fieldwork was funded by the British Academy, and the main stages of fieldwork, analysis and writing were only possible thanks to one year of

sabbatical leave co-funded by the University of Leeds and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

All translations from Spanish are the author's unless otherwise stated.

Figures

[Figure 1: Western Sahara map](#)

[Figure 2: Everyday life in Smara refugee camp](#)

[Figure 3: Smara refugee camp map](#)

[Figure 4: Photo essay 'The story of the Saharawi people'](#)

[Figure 5: Saharawi children's drawings about 'My country'](#)

[Figure 6: Shops in Smara refugee camp and Rabuni](#)

[Figure 7: Commercial Street in one of Smara's markets](#)

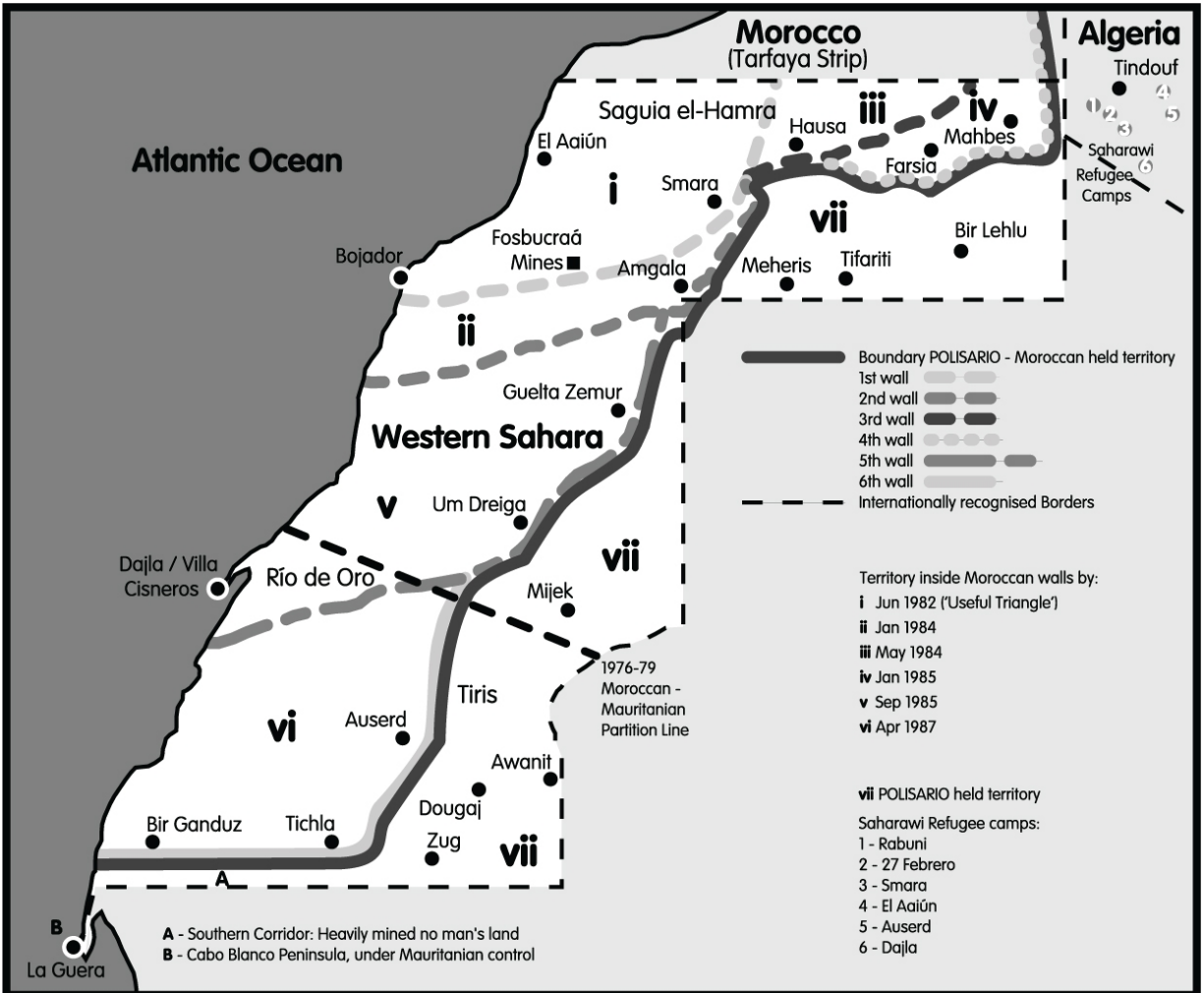


Figure 1: Western Sahara map

Introduction

‘If you ever arrive at a wide white land ...’

My first image of the Western Sahara dates back to the early 1980s, when I was only a child. I was watching TV, the news, and I remember the presenter saying something about a war in a former Spanish territory, which looked very different from the exuberantly green and perpetually wet northern Iberian valleys of my childhood. But what really captured my attention were the images of guerrilla fighters with yellowish turbans, waving their Kalashnikovs and departing defiantly for the battlefield, crowded in the back of old open Land Rovers. I also recall Land Rovers reconverted into sorts of artisan assault vehicles, with machine guns fixed to their tops. Those images were, at least as I evoke them now, whitish and blurred, probably because of the collusion of the sirocco of those distant wide white lands of the greatest desert on earth and the black-and-white TV of my sitting room.

Whitish and blurred also describes some of the last and most powerful images that Liman can evoke from his homeland. It was the end of 1975, when, with his family, he had to flee the city of El Aaiún, capital of the then Spanish Sahara, to seek refuge in the desert. Spain, with dictator General Franco moribund in hospital, had hastily abandoned its colony without organizing the self-determination referendum that the United Nations (UN) had been demanding for over a decade. Taking advantage of Spain's weakness, Morocco from the north and Mauritania from the south sent their armies to occupy a deserted territory inhabited by fewer than a hundred thousand Saharawis, but with immense natural resources. The UN officially opposed the occupation but did nothing to prevent it and the still-young Saharawi liberation movement, the Frente por la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario), which had been fighting against

Spanish colonialism since 1973, was unable to stop their much more powerful expansionist neighbours. That the native Saharawis overwhelmingly supported the independence of the territory was palpable, as a UN's visiting mission had just confirmed. The Moroccan and Mauritanian troops were not precisely welcomed as 'liberators' from European colonialism but, on the contrary, they encountered unexpectedly stiff resistance. For the new occupying powers virtually every Saharawi immediately became suspected of being a 'secessionist' and within a few months, many hundreds of Saharawis had been killed or had disappeared and approximately half of the total population had been displaced. It all happened under the passive and indifferent gaze of the international community.

Liman was a child then, just a few years older than me. With hundreds of Saharawis coming from all corners of the territory, in late 1975 he and his relatives arrived in Guelta, at an improvised refugee camp set up by the Frente Polisario in the depths of the desert. He remembers how the children received classes in underground refuges, but he was not conscious of what exactly was happening. One day he heard aircraft approaching, Moroccan war planes, and he 'ran out of the [underground] shelter to see the planes coming. My mother was desperately shouting at me ... and I was there, outside, in the middle of everything, amazed, observing how they descended towards us. I liked them; I didn't know what was going on.'¹ Hours after the attack, the surviving refugees left Guelta. It was night time, and Liman will never forget the desolated panorama that the Moroccan attack, with napalm and white phosphorous, had left behind: 'We left at night; in a Land Rover, and I remember that in the darkness of the night, with the lights of the car, you could see how all the landscape was burned ... it was all whitish, burned and covered by a white dust.'²

When Liman shared with me these images of his childhood, I could not help but think of Colonel Bill Kilgore, brilliantly played by Robert Duvall, in that memorable helicopter attack scene of *Apocalypse Now*, terrible and quasi-comic:

– *Kilgore*: I want that line bombed! ... Blow them into the Stone Age, son!'

– *Aircraft pilot*: 'Right, One-Three, We're fixin' to fuck with 'em ...

[Minutes later, after the bombings]

– *Kilgore*: ‘Napalm, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. I love the smell of napalm in the morning. You know, one time we had a hill bombed for 12 hours. When it was all over, I walked up. We didn’t find one of them, not one stinking dink body. But the smell – You know, that gasoline smell. The whole hill smelled like ... *victory*.

In the Western Sahara, as in Vietnam and many other places, somebody took the decision and gave the orders to ‘blow them into the Stone Age’. Somebody thought that the burned remains of the Saharawi refugees who had gathered in Guelta and Um Dreiga would smell like victory in the morning. But no Francis Ford Coppola has ever made a film about the conflict that for years and years has devastated the white wide lands of the Western Sahara. It has been, even in fiction, one of many forgotten conflicts. And the official education system of the former colonial power, Spain, did not help either; I do not think I ever had a single lesson about the Western Sahara. The chaotic and failed decolonization and the symbolic identification of the Africanist enterprise with the Francoist dictatorship (Franco had in fact forged his charisma in the African wars) made by the new democratic Spanish forces controlling the institutions and the new curriculum prevented the uncomfortable truths of the Zemla massacre, the Green March and the bombings of Guelta and Um Dreiga to be confronted ... or even named. Memory entails responsibility.

The praised and peaceful transition to democracy required forgetting very quickly what was going on in the territory that had just ceased to be the Spanish province number 53. Only the long guerrilla war of attrition launched by the Frente Polisario against the new occupying powers, Morocco and Mauritania, kept the desert conflict resurfacing, now and then, in the news. If my generation received any information about the Western Sahara during the 1980s it was because of these scarce war reports and because of the stories told by uncles, older brothers or neighbours about their military service ventures in El Aaiún, Villa Cisneros or Ifni. However, these were very personal tales, anecdotes and disconnected events not inscribed in a wider historical narrative, not connected to a wider picture. The plot linking all those little pieces, all those scenes, particular memories or battle reports, was missing. In Spain, the late 1970s and the 1980s were

years of collective amnesia in which only the embrace of ‘European modernity’ seemed to matter. But the little pieces were there, floating like a haunting Lacanian *real*, showing the impossibility of constructing a Spanish social and political history of the twentieth century without incorporating the African colonial adventure and the subsequent uncomfortable and chaotic postcolonial *truths*. This work emerges precisely in this gap; as an attempt to craft and plot, in a single historical narrative, a series of stories, anecdotes and events about Africa’s last colony enunciated by very different voices and from very different positions and historical contexts.

The late 1970s and 1980s were years of open war between the Frente Polisario and the expansionist neighbours. The military analysts had wrongly predicted that the Saharawi guerrillas would be unable to maintain a meaningful resistance for very long. But the developments in the field soon confirmed exactly the contrary. By 1979, Mauritania, cornered and unable to prevent the continuous Saharawi raids into its own territory, had pulled out, signing a peace accord with the Polisario and recognizing, later, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SARD), the Saharawi state founded by the Saharawi nationalists in February 1976, to fill in the institutional void created by the hasty Spanish departure. By 1982, the Saharawi guerrillas, or Saharawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) in the terminology of the Saharawi Republic, had the effective control of most of the territory initially occupied by Morocco. Rabat had complete control of only the so-called ‘useful triangle’ in the north – where the phosphate mines and the city of El Aaiún are located – and a number of posts and towns scattered along the desert but under the constant harassment of the Saharawi forces. It was then that King Hassan II of Morocco designed a new strategy to extend his rule over a larger part of the territory. Between 1982 and 1987, the Moroccan armed forces erected six military walls, more than 2,700 kilometres of defensive structures (the Berm), dividing the territory from north to south in two parts. Nowadays, to the west of the military wall lie the territories controlled by Rabat, which comprise approximately 75 per cent of the total Western Sahara, including the phosphate mines, the main cities and towns, as well as access to the coast and its very rich fisheries. On the other hand, the Frente Polisario and the Saharawi Republic administer the eastern part of the territory and the refugee camps in the bordering Algerian region of Tindouf, where approximately 175,000 Saharawis live.

The erection of the military walls was successful in preventing the constant attacks of the Saharawi guerrillas on the main cities and economic engines of the territory but, at the same time, it also contributed decisively to the division of the territory in two sealed areas under the de facto administration of the two contending forces. Therefore, by the early 1990s the conflict had reached a sort of negative equilibrium: after more than a decade of war, neither had Morocco been able to control militarily the entire territory it claimed to be *its* Southern Provinces, nor could the Frente Polisario liberate militarily the whole territory of the Saharawi Republic.³

It was in this context that in 1991 the Polisario and Morocco signed a ceasefire, brokered by the United Nations and inspired by a previous plan delineated by the Organization for African Unity (OAU). The central element of the UN proposal, known as the Settlement Plan, as the name of the deployed peacekeeping force clearly illustrates (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara, known as MINURSO by its French and Spanish acronym), was the organization of a self-determination referendum to decide the future status of the territory. According to the doctrine of the UN, and as has been repeatedly restated over the years by a long list of General Assembly documents and Security Council resolutions, the Western Sahara is the last non-self-governing territory (that is, colony) in Africa; the sovereignty of neither the Moroccan kingdom nor the Saharawi Republic has ever been recognized by the UN.⁴ But, as the years evaporated without any progress, but only fruitless negotiations and endless delays, it progressively became clear that the UN would never fulfil its mission, given its unwillingness to confront Rabat's continued obstructionist strategy. The main obstacle to the implementation of the Settlement Plan was, from the beginning, the census of voters for the referendum. While the Polisario supported a list of native inhabitants of the territory based on the 1974 Spanish census, Rabat attempted to introduce into the list vast numbers of Moroccan settlers, many of them from tribes with some presence in southern Morocco and in the transition *Tekna* zone. In 1997, the former United States secretary of state James Baker III was appointed by the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, as his personal envoy to the Western Sahara, with the aim of getting the stagnant peace process back on track. As a result of his mediation, the Houston Accords

(1997), and later amendments introduced in 1999, defined in detail the practicalities of the future referendum, including the conditions of eligibility to vote. Finally, after a tortuous process, the UN's Identification Commission published in January 2000 a definitive list of 86,381 persons eligible to vote, out of the 198,469 candidates interviewed.

However, Rabat did not accept the list (more than 90 per cent of the rejected candidates came from Morocco or the territory under its control), and instigated the presentation of more than 120,000 appeals in an attempt to block the process once more. As James Baker pointed out afterwards in a interview,

when we got right up to having identified the people who were entitled to vote, the Moroccans then walked away from the plan. Why did they do that? You'll have to ask them but I would assume it was because they were worried that they wouldn't win the vote ... The closer we got to implementing [the plan] the more nervous I think the Moroccans got about whether they might not win that referendum.⁵

The appeals could have been resolved in a short period of time. In fact, most of them came from already rejected candidates who did not include any new evidence in their appeals and, therefore, did not even need to be re-evaluated. Nevertheless, the Moroccan manoeuvre was successful and in February 2000 the UN Secretary General, unwilling to impose a census not accepted by Rabat, admitted that the original Settlement Plan was in terminal crisis and asked the parties to negotiate a new peace proposal. Since then, no significant progress has been achieved and the process remains dangerously stagnant. The first attempt to unblock the process was known as Baker Plan II, which was unanimously endorsed by the Security Council in July 2003, stressing that it was an 'optimum political solution'.⁶ In the words of the Secretary General, if the previous proposals had failed because they were 'zero-sum games', the Baker Plan II, through a combination of elements from various proposals, provided 'each side with some, but perhaps not all, of what it wants'.⁷ At first glance, however, the plan appeared to be clearly in favour of Rabat. It consisted of a transitional period of four to five years of autonomy under Moroccan administration, followed by a referendum. The voters for the election of the transitional Saharawi Authority would be the 86,381 persons of the Identification

Commission list (UN's list), who are expected to vote massively for a Saharawi nationalist government, controlled by the Polisario. However, the list for the 'self-determination' referendum (in which there would be three options: integration, autonomy and independence) would be the result of the sum of three lists: the UN's list, the list of residents in the territory before 1999 (which doubles the numbers on the UN's list) and the refugees inscribed in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' repatriation list in October 2000 (whose number is unknown). Therefore, the plan gave Morocco two crucial gains: the legal title of administrator of the territory in the first instance, followed by a toned-down referendum in which the settlers entitled to vote would outnumber the Saharawis. However, Rabat rejected the Baker Plan II arguing, in a crucial change of strategy, that the inclusion of the option of independence in the final referendum – upon which the negotiations of the previous thirteen years had revolved – was unacceptable since it put into question the 'territorial integrity' of the kingdom. The process was once more blocked, under the impotent gaze of a UN reluctant to put pressure in one of the West's closer allies in the region.

Hence, since such a decisive shift in Rabat's approach the UN's sponsored peace process has remained completely stagnant, given that the Polisario has made it absolutely clear that it will not accept any solution in which the *option* of independence was not part of the final formula. The decision of the UN to step back, airing officially its reluctance to impose a solution and calling the parties to 'enter into negotiations without preconditions ... with a view to achieving a just, lasting and *mutually acceptable* political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara' under its patronage, is a very illustrative example of not only the failure but also the underlying unwillingness of the international organization to bell the cat.⁸

However, some events suggest that the panorama may have started to change slightly in 2009. Several mass-media and diplomatic sources have been speculating about a possible change in Washington's approach to the Western Sahara conflict, whose implications are still difficult to see. The late-Bush policy on the Western Sahara was to support, more or less openly, Rabat's strategy of annexation, endorsing explicitly the plan presented by

Morocco in April 2007 to create an ‘autonomous’ region in the ‘Southern Provinces’ – under Moroccan sovereignty – as a way to solve the conflict. However, as some analysts have recently argued, President Obama’s strategy may be departing, perhaps significantly, from that of his predecessor. In a highly symbolic move, the statement of Susan Rice, US ambassador to the UN’s Security Council, regarding the extension of MINURSO in April 2009 (Resolution 1871, 30 April 2009), included no mention of the Moroccan autonomy plan. But the alarm bells had already rung in Rabat by that date. It is well known that Rabat was not pleased with the designation in January 2009 of American diplomat Christopher Ross as the UN Secretary General’s new personal envoy to the Western Sahara.⁹ In fact, Moroccan diplomacy aired concerns about Ross’s designation for months, questioning both his background (‘pro-Algerian’) and his methods (‘intention to depart from Van Walsun’s legacy; the only *realist* way forward’). At the end of June 2009, Ross made a trip to the region to prepare the ground for a new negotiation round and, in Rabat, he was not received by Mohamed VI; a symbolic gesture that some Moroccan press (*As Sahra Al-Ousbouiya*, 6 July 2009, for example) interpreted as an expression of the king’s discontent with Ross’s new proposals. A few days later, two American publications (*World Tribune* and *Middle East Newslne*) published articles announcing that ‘the administration has returned to the pre-Bush position that there could be an independent Polisario state in Western Sahara’.¹⁰

Such speculation about the new strategy of the Obama administration provoked a real panic attack in Rabat, which in addition coincided with a cycle of high mobilization of the Saharawi Human Rights and pro-independence movements in the areas under Moroccan de facto administration. Rabat responded with an escalation of violence and repression in the territory under its control, which had its symbolic peak with the deportation to Spain on 13 November 2009 of internationally known Saharawi Human Rights activist Aminetu Haidar on her return from the USA, where she had just been awarded the 2009 Civil Courage Prize of the Train Foundation.¹¹ The crisis created by Haidar’s deportation was followed in late December by other defiant moves by Rabat, such as organizing military excercises – including fighter jets – close to the Berm

(thus violating the terms of the ceasefire), in what seems to be a desperate attempt to show its muscle and its determination to ‘preserve its territorial integrity’. But, as most observers have noted, the recent escalation in the repression of the Saharawi nationalists in the cities and towns west of the Berm has neither contributed to improving the credibility of Rabat’s autonomy plan internationally nor helped to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the native population of the territory. On the contrary, Morocco’s position seems much more eroded and weak at the start of 2010 than two, five or ten years ago. Will the Obama administration bring a new air to the stagnant process? Will the USA push for a referendum in Africa’s last colony? Will they seriously consider the option an independent Western Sahara state as a ‘realist’ scenario? Only time will give us the answers to such crucial questions.

In the meantime, 2009 has already ended and the Saharawi refugees are still witnessing, frustrated, how their lives fade away in the middle of no-man’s-land, in a situation of neither peace nor war that seems not to have an end. As Saharawi poet Luali Lesham mourns,

Time keeps on, always keeps on
leaving calluses in the hands
of history.

Years plummet
like the beads of a rosary
over the long-lived memory
of exile.

Providence carves
our footsteps of tomorrow
in a path without limbs,
without flowers on the edges,
and without you on the horizon.

Time keeps on, always keeps on
dragging the scars of the universe
towards a splendorous north.

Days fly over, silently,
like birds of prey,

the roof of this rootless home,
the nest of our children's dream.

Time keeps on, always keeps on.¹²

However, the situations of crisis, of social dislocation, of conflict, lack and want also have positive and constructive consequences, as the fresh and innovative poetry of the Saharawi *Generación de la Amistad* exemplifies symbolically.¹³ The forced displacement of half of the native population of the Western Sahara to the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, where they have been living for over three decades, has opened the space for the development of a complex process of nation-building. The refugee camps became much more than temporary settlements for a passive and displaced population waiting to return to their homeland whilst surviving on international humanitarian aid. The Saharawi refugees became more than simply refugees; they became citizens of a state in waiting, of an exiled Saharawi Republic built upon the solid foundations of lack and desire. And here is where this work emerges, as an attempt to explain and understand the complex and dynamic historical, social and political processes of construction of the modern Saharawi identity that emerged in the last decades of Spanish domination and has been solidly naturalized, sedimented and reproduced in the context of exile. But my narrative has not been articulated solely for the consumption of a Western academic reader. On the contrary, my narrative aspires to become a flexible surface of inscription that will (at least partially) make sense of and, in Freeden's words *decontest*, a whole array of life stories, anecdotes, documents, report, analysis, battles, famines, laments, hopes and desires of the protagonists of this tale: the Saharawi people.¹⁴ They are the ultimate *tribunal of truth* that has to judge this work.

This book was possible precisely because of the willingness, support and enthusiasm of all the Saharawis who, in the Tindouf refugee camps, the 'liberated territory' and European exile, shared their stories, analysis and concerns with me. The cooperation of the Frente Polisario and Saharawi Republic authorities was vital. They facilitated all the necessary permits to stay in the camps and the areas under their control, helped me with the logistics and, most crucially, allowed me to do my work in complete

freedom and without any interference or censorship. Since I began working on the Western Sahara in 2003, I have done fieldwork in Spain, the refugee camps and the ‘liberated territory’ on numerous occasions, spending relatively long periods of time there. In the camps, I always talked to whomever I wanted to, went where I wanted to go and, in places such as the Saharawi National Archive in Rabuni, for example, checked the documents I wished to check. I have to admit that sometimes I was even surprised by the freedom that I experienced in the camps; ‘I could be an academic *funded* by Rabat, looking for some dirt to damage the Polisario’, I thought at times, ‘don’t they care?, aren’t they going to “check” what I am doing, who am I talking to, the difficult questions and issues I am raising ... *just in case?*’ Life in the refugee camps is definitely not easy; there are social tensions generated by the sudden and radical economic changes that the camps are experiencing, discontent about the stagnant political situation, frustration among the younger generations because of the lack of employment and opportunities in general, criticisms of the lack of efficiency of the state institutions, a nascent but growing social inequality and some gender tensions. In fact, nothing very different from what I could have found in any other African society and the Polisario cadres know that. But they also know that without lying blatantly I will not be able to write that I have found a single refugee that would not vote for independence in a future referendum. If James Baker considered that Rabat rejected his plan because ‘they were worried that they wouldn’t win the vote’, exactly the opposite could be said about the *relaxed* attitude of the Saharawi nationalists. If it ever takes place, no one is in any doubt about the result of a just and fair consultation.

My research methodology is interpretative and subject oriented, aiming at understanding and interpreting the socially produced meanings that organize the experiences of the subjects in particular historical contexts. In broad terms, I follow the path initiated in my previous work *La Nación (im)posible*, in which I attempted flexibly to articulate a set of ideas, concepts, logics and analytical tools inspired mainly in Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, and the deconstructive and Lacanian traditions, to explore the process of emergence of a peripheral Spanish nationalist movement.¹⁵ Attending primarily to the voices of the colonized, and in the initial parts of

this work also to that of the colonizers, my research strategy integrates different sources of data collection from the humanities and the social sciences, which range from ethnographic participant observation to personal in depth interviews, from archival work to pictorial and photo graphic materials.¹⁶ I treat this range of linguistic and non-linguistic resources as meaningful practices and, therefore, I analyse them as if they were ‘texts’ to read and interpret. In other words, I understand the field of *the social* as meaningful articulations of myths, ideas, imaginaries, events, places, practices, et cetera, in discourses that attempt to provide coherent narratives that arrest the flux of meaning, try to hegemonize the discursive field in which identities and subjectivities are constructed.

Hence, given my decision not to look for underlying truths and universal laws outside the ‘texts’, I was left with nothing but the complicated mission of crafting, from my academic position of enunciation (which, obviously, is also ideological), a plausible narrative where I could articulate all the materials in hand. I have structured the text in four parts that, nevertheless, can be taken by the reader as arbitrary and even contingent stops to facilitate a journey that otherwise would perhaps be too exhausting. This book is an expedition that stretches from the search of new horizons in the decadent Spain of the late nineteenth century to the emergence of a Saharawi exiled nation, built upon the foundations of lack and desire almost one hundred years later.

In the [first chapter](#), ‘From Cuba to Villa Cisneros: the Spanish neo-colonial space in the Sahara’, I analyse the origins of the Spanish colonial adventure in the Sahara in the context of the loss of the Latin American and Pacific possessions and the subsequent ideological crisis of the Spanish nation, and the first steps in the slow and hesitant process of construction of the colonial space. For decades, the Spanish Sahara was Spanish only on the maps and the desert continued, almost unaltered, its life to the rhythm of the passive pace of camels and Bedouins.

In [chapter 2](#), ‘From the “Spanish Peace” to armed struggle: the emergence of Saharawi nationalism’, I explore how everything started to change in the second half of the twentieth century, in the light of the economic changes in the territory and the sudden process of urbanization, sedentarization and proletarianization of the Saharawi native population. It

was in this new context that the Saharawi nationalist movement emerged, rearticulating dynamically old and new elements, delineating the frontiers of inclusion and exclusion and launching a campaign against Spanish colonialism that cannot be understood without reference to the colonial technologies and strategies of control.

In [chapter 3](#), ‘From refugees to citizens: nation-building in the Saharawi refugee camps’, I analyse the rise of the Frente Polisario to become the main political and social movement in the territory and the consequences opened by the Spanish decision to abandon the territory under the Moroccan and Mauritanian pressures. I investigate the new conflict and the unexpected effect that the massive displacement of native Saharawis to the refugee camps of Tindouf in Algeria had, opening the space for the development of a dynamic process of nation-building.

Finally, in [chapter 4](#), ‘From soldiers to shopkeepers: nationalism, development and social change in the Saharawi refugee camps’, I study the processes and mechanisms by which the Saharawi nation and the idea of Saharawi citizenship are hegemonized, naturalized and reproduced in the refugee camps. This process of normalization has also facilitated the emergence of processes of social change, tensions and social inequalities generated by the development of a market economy in the camps that poses new challenges for a Saharawi state marked by the precariousness of exile. What the Saharawi institutions are facing does not differ very much from the social, economic and political questions that haunt other African states of the region. However, they have to confront these questions in the hardship of the Algerian *hamada* of Tindouf, in the context of a borrowed no-man’s-land where nothing has foundations and nothing grows, but the desire to overcome the restrictive situation that does not allow the Saharawis to be fully themselves.

The book ends without an end, without conclusions. But from this very instant I invite readers to reflect critically about the future and to draw their own conclusions. When the conflict began very few could imagine that it would still be bleeding and haunting the future of the whole region today. More than three decades after the beginning of the conflict, the smell of the morning is not that of victory yet, but a persistent stink of rotten opportunities and hopes. But, as Saharawi poet Ali Salem Iselmu reminds

us in a wonderful poem to the white wide lands of the region of Tiris,
adored, mourned and constantly present in the Saharawi imaginary,

If you ever arrive
at a wide white land
coupled with immense black statues
and the passive pace of camels and Bedouins,
remember that there exists a land without master and owner,
mirror and soul of all innocent beings.^{[17](#)}

Chapter 1

From Cuba to Villa Cisneros: The Construction of a Spanish Neocolonial Space in the Sahara

The end of the Spanish Empire ...

1898 was ‘more than a year in Spanish history’.¹ The ‘Disaster of 98’ was the turning point that symbolically marked the loss of the position that Spain had held for the last four centuries as a major global power. The progressive decadence of the Spanish Empire had started almost a century before with the Latin American wars of independence and the loss of the mainland possessions during the first decades of the nineteenth century. However, the Spanish political, social and military elites resisted the idea of the end of the empire, considering it ‘as only a temporary setback. There was a widespread belief ... that the cultural and ideological ties binding Spain and Spanish America were so strong that their erstwhile American subjects would eventually return to the fold.’² In fact, Spain made several unsuccessful attempts to recover, or at least to keep a privileged patronage, over parts of mainland Spanish America between 1840 and 1860, culminating in the temporary annexation of Santo Domingo in 1861.³ On the other hand, the three key remaining possessions – Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines – were gradually incorporated ‘into the economy and the politics of the Empire with much more intensity’, in what Josep Fradera has identified as an attempt to shift from an old-style imperial system to a new, and more efficient in economic terms, neocolonial system.⁴

However, despite the ‘temporary setbacks’ of the beginning of the century, in 1870s the list of Spanish possessions across the world was commensurable with that of the emerging colonial powers and still considerable:

Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean; the Philippine Islands and a sprinkling of other ... islands in the Pacific, the Marianas, the Pelew islands, and Carolines. [The] old historic possessions of Ceuta and Melilla on the northern coast of Morocco and the Canary Islands off the coast of north-west Africa. [T]he protectorate of Ifni in Southern Morocco, the two small islands of Fernando Poo and Annobon in the Gulf of Guinea off the west coast of Africa and the small coastal enclave of Rio Muni opposite them, through which trade with equatorial Africa passed.⁵

The rise of the independence movements in Cuba and the Philippines in the following decades was not considered as a serious threat by the Spanish political elites until very late on. In fact, even at the beginning of the Cuban War in 1895, there were very few Spanish intellectuals and politicians who anticipated the final outcome of the conflict. However, in 1896, one year after the beginning of the revolt, despite the promises of the Spanish government to finish quickly with the insurrection and the strategy of ‘total war’ under the command of General Valeriano Weyler, the situation was far from sorted out and had become much more complicated than before. ‘The prolongation and extension of the colonial conflict were unequivocal symptoms of the failure of the political strategies employed to its possible resolution.’⁶ Despite the theoretical superiority of the Spanish army and some significant and symbolic setbacks for the insurrectionists, such as the death of rebel black General Antonio Maceo, the war became a slow but unmanageable drainage of Spanish soldiers and economic resources. More than 200,000 troops were sent to the Caribbean island, most of them poorly trained and equipped reservists, which generated agitated debates in the press, demonstrations of soldiers’ relatives who opposed the distant war and a general climate plagued with doubts as the months passed without a clear prospect of victory. The popular support for the wars in Cuba and the Philippines decreased dramatically as the number of Spanish casualties increased. In Cuba alone, more than 60,000 soldiers died, according to most accounts. Of them, fewer than 5,000 were killed in battle, or as the military

would put it at the time ‘with honour’. The rest, probably more than 55,000, died as a result of diseases, principally cases of yellow fever, which increased the exotic images (in this case in negative terms) of the overseas possessions as a sort of undomesticated, uncivilized and unmanageable territory and, in many respects, acted as a moral justification for the ‘dirty war’ developed by the Spanish military against a non-conventional enemy in a non-conventional environment.

In April 1898, the declaration of war on Spain by the United States, under the pretext of supporting the Cuban and Philippine insurrectionists, was the definitive turning point in the conflict. By December, Spain had been defeated by the American army and forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Paris, by which Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines were ceded to the United States. Soon afterwards, Spain was also forced to sell the Pacific island of Guam to the United States and the rest of the Micronesian possessions – the Northern Mariana, Caroline and Pelew Islands – to Germany. In a time when the power and wealth of nations seemed to be measured in terms of their capacity to construct domains of influence in other continents, the loss of the Caribbean and Pacific territories was met with dismay, frustration and anger by the Spanish cultural and socio-political elites.

The Disaster exposed as a terrible delusion the belief that Spain was at least a middle-ranking world power, a belief that was a central component of the national culture. The loss of the remnants of the Empire provoked a severe post-imperial crisis among sections of Spanish society ... Spain’s political system, its national character, and Spanish nationhood itself now began to be widely questioned.⁷

But, despite the catastrophe and the mixture of pessimism, nostalgia and resentment that it provoked, neither the Spanish government nor the Restorationist political system collapsed directly as a result. In fact, as José Varela Ortega argues, the effect of the Disaster could be interpreted precisely as the opposite in some respects. Due to the way in which the war with the United States was managed and lost in such an overwhelming and unquestionable manner, the general perception tended not towards linking the Disaster to the failure of a particular government but to ‘understand[ing] [it] as a *national problem*’ with deeper roots, as a ‘national issue’ more than

a problem related to the incompetence of ‘some politicians’ in particular.⁸ The problem, as the intellectuals of the influential Generation of 1898 insisted, was *Spain itself*. Therefore, what was necessary to rethink and rearticulate was Spain, her national character, her history and her destiny, in the changing context of a *fin de siècle* marked by ‘a global process of colonial redistribution in a new era of expansionism’.⁹ And, as in any time of crisis, characterized by dislocation, and by the collapse of the discourses and social imaginaries that had been hegemonic until then, the horizon was one of uncertainty, ambivalence and radical openness; a space when ‘the horror of *indetermination* has manifested itself’.¹⁰ Spain and its position in the world needed to be re-inscribed in a new narrative in order to make sense of the present, to connect coherently with the past and to create a ‘new space of representation’ for the future.¹¹ In this context, several contending alternatives emerged attempting to occupy the void opened with the confrontation with *the Real*, in Lacanian terms.¹² If, on the one hand, some sectors of the Spanish elites adopted an escapist strategy, rejecting the imperial past and trying to find the Spanish essence inside the wide Castilian fields, on the other hand, the Disaster in the Caribbean and the Pacific reactivated the desire to explore new colonial horizons.

... And the new African adventure

In this new context, Africa emerged as a new space of possibilities for some sectors of the wounded Spanish elites and especially for the colonial military struggling to find a new strategic position.

If something was clear [after the Disaster] it was that only in Africa ... was it possible to consolidate possessions and positions. Neither in the Asian southwest nor in postcolonial America was it possible to compete with the interests of the European Powers or the United States ... Africa was the place, the space where the mirage of a new kind of colonization could take place after the new defeat of 1898.¹³

As Sebastian Balfour points out, the ‘new venture [in Africa] was a direct result of the insecurity felt by the Spanish political elites after the Spanish–

American War'.¹⁴ Since the 1870s one of the main areas of competition of the European powers had been the 'Dark Continent', and Spain, despite being a decadent power, was in some respects well positioned to take part in the scramble for Africa. In addition to the cities of Ceuta and Melilla and the Canary Islands, under Spanish rule since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, current Equatorial Guinea (Fernando Poo/Bioko Island and Rio Muni) had been ceded from Portugal to Spain in 1778 and had been a protectorate since 1885. In 1860, Spain had also been granted control of the Sidi-Ifni enclave (an old Spanish coastal possession between 1476 and 1524 called at that time Santa Cruz de la Mar Pequeña) on the southern Moroccan frontier, which had been obtained after the African War the previous year.

The African War of 1859 had been triggered by the attack on a defensive fort under construction on the outskirts of Ceuta by members of the Anyera tribe. In response, 'the Spanish army ... marched out ... to seize Tetuan and bomb Tangier [in the Rif region, in northern Morocco], forcing the sultan [of Morocco] to accept humiliating terms for peace in the following year'.¹⁵ The African War, which was very popular at the time, was seen as a demonstration of the military might that Spain still maintained after the loss of mainland Latin America. Also called 'the Romantic War', this victorious operation renewed, on the other hand, the interest of the Spanish elites in the unknown but close continent, and was used to symbolize the position of Spain as an international player that had to be taken into account. As writer Benito Pérez Galdós noted with irony in one of his acclaimed *Episodios Nacionales*: 'the Spanish went to war because they needed to show off ... in Europe and to provide public sentiment at home with some healthy and restoring food' aimed at creating 'some patriotic dogmatism for the souls in need of discipline and to be made more docile to political action'.¹⁶

In addition, in the aftermath of the 1898 Disaster, Spanish interests in Morocco were favoured by the contending and at the same time coincident interests of France and Britain in the area. On the one hand, Britain was worried about a French-controlled northern Morocco which could challenge British strategic position in the Strait of Gibraltar and, therefore, considered the Spanish presence in the area as a good alternative; on the other, France saw Spain as a suitable ally with whom to share the North African cake

without really putting in any danger its hegemony in the area, given Spanish structural weakness.¹⁷ Therefore, in the *entente cordiale* of 1904 between France and Britain, it was agreed that Spain would have a sphere of influence in northern Morocco, later formalized in the Algeciras Conference in 1906 and the Treaty of Fez in 1912, when the Rif, a mountainous region stretching over 300 kilometres along the Mediterranean, officially became the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco.

The Western Sahara had been recognized as a Spanish possession years before, in the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, although its limits were not clearly established until 1912 and the effective control of the whole territory did not take place until the 1930s. As we shall see, the control of the Western Sahara was limited during the first decades to a few coastal enclaves, stretching from Cape Juby (current Tarfaya) to Cape Blanco. In the post-Disaster era, the Spanish colonial efforts in north Africa were directed initially to the much better-known (although in general terms still unknown), close and strategically important territory of the Spanish protectorate in northern Morocco. But between 1909, the year of the first campaign, and 1927, the year when the protectorate was definitely ‘pacified’, the new Spanish colonial adventure faced stiff resistance from the Rifian *cabilas* (tribes), commanded by leaders such as El Rogui and Mohammed Amezian during the first years and by the charismatic Abd el-Krim during the 1920s war. In fact, Abd el-Krim managed to control most of the Spanish protectorate (and also part of the French areas) for several months in 1925 instituting an uncomfortable Rif Republic free from effective Spanish and French control and infringing humiliating and highly symbolic defeats to the nascent Spanish African army. For example, in the Mount Arruit and Annual disasters, several thousand retreating Spanish soldiers were massacred by the Rifian guerrillas.¹⁸ The new colonial adventure soon proved to be a very demanding enterprise and sank the army into a brutal conflict that would end up redefining the contours of the wounded post-1898 Spanish military and creating the new class of Spanish Africanists, among whom a young and successful general called Francisco Franco began to stand out. The Rifian campaigns created the bases of a new colonial army, driven by ‘a spirit of compulsive revenge’ against Abd el-Krim troops, and ‘unleashed a wave of racism in the media’.¹⁹

As the [Spanish] troops recaptured ... positions they were deeply distressed by scenes of massacre and devastation left by the retreating enemy. Amid the putrefaction of the rotting bodies, it was clear that many Spaniards had been killed after surrender and many had undergone savage torture.²⁰

The practice of beheading prisoners became common among the advancing Spanish African army, little difference was made between civilians and insurgents and bombings with chemical weapons, such as mustard gas, devastated large areas of the Rif countryside. The colonial adventure in Morocco developed into brutal confrontation and vicious repression, justified by the new Africanist army because of the ‘uncivilized’ nature of an enemy with whom the moral standards of warfare among ‘civilized enemies’ did not fully apply. The decadent armed forces of the nineteenth century, after almost two decades of war, were progressively transformed into an ‘excellent operative force, led by an elite of special troops, conducted by competent officials and armed with the most modern means of combat’.²¹ However, the Africanist officers, although highly professional and well trained, were in general terms ‘profoundly conservative, if not reactionary’, and inherited from past military failures a feeling of ‘bitterness, frustration and distance from the rest of society’, as well as a deep lack of trust in civilian authorities and democratic institutions.²² The Africanist mystique, linked to the idea of restoring Spanish grandeur through sacrifice (a sacrifice that only the military were prepared to accept, as opposed to the decadent and essentially inactive bureaucrats and politicians), was a central element in the articulation of nationalist discourses that led to the 1936 rebellion against the Second Spanish Republic. As General Franco acknowledged later, ‘[w]ithout Africa, I can hardly explain myself to myself, nor can I explain myself appropriately to my comrades in arms’.²³

Tracing the boundaries of the new Spanish territories

The Africanist enterprise, in any case, cannot be understood exclusively as a military venture. In fact, the military Africanism introduced in the

previous section emerged in the specific historical context of confrontation with the Rifian tribes, at a time when the Spanish military, after the 1898 Disaster and the rise of anti-militarism in some sectors of Spanish society, felt an overwhelming desire to recover its lost pride, under the attentive and critical gaze of both internal public opinion and the rest of the European powers. But the contours of Spanish neocolonial Africanist discourses, from which military Africanism later developed, were initially more linked to the creation of geographical societies, the influence of the romantic ideologies and writings in vogue during the second half of the nineteenth century that combined a fascination about the unknown and ‘uncivilized’ with a paternalistic ‘civilizing’ mission, and the pragmatic vision of opening new ‘protected’ markets in unexploited territories.

In what became known as the scramble of Africa, with France and Britain quickly strengthening their strategic positions in the continent, ‘intellectuals, geographers, the military and a reduced number of capitalists ... rang the alarm bell’ and ‘created geographical and colonialist societies from which they promoted studies and exhorted the government to proceed to occupy those territories over which Spain could assert historical claims’.²⁴ The first formal initiative was the Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid (SGM), created in 1876 by Colonel Francisco Coello, a military engineer and geographer with extensive knowledge of north Africa, who had travelled for the first time in 1844 with a French army expedition to the Algerian interior of the desert. The SGM combined from its foundation an ideological ‘concern for the international prestige of Spain’ with a pragmatic effort ‘to exert influence on government policy by proposing different courses of action’.²⁵ The SGM promoted exploration and travel, organized numerous congresses, conferences and published a journal, *Revista de Geografía Colonial y Mercantil*, through which it endeavoured to disseminate its ideas, but it also developed specific projects of colonization and promoted the creation of other colonialist associations, such as the Asociación Española para la Exploración del África, also founded by Coello in 1877. The aim of this new group was to explore the western African coast and, especially, its rich fisheries, well known by the fishermen of the Canary Islands (at that time, between thirty and fifty Canary fishing boats, with over 1,000 fishermen, worked in the Saharan

waters). In 1883, the SGM organized the first Spanish Congress of Colonial and Mercantile Geography, where again special attention was devoted to the Canarian-African fisheries. In fact, two years earlier, there had been an unsuccessful attempt to create the so-called *Compañía de las Pesquerías Canario-Africanas*. One year later, in 1884, a new initiative, the *Sociedad Española de Africanistas y Colonistas* established as its purpose the ‘protection’ of Morocco (understood as a civilizing mission based on the promotion of commerce, communications and education) and the exploration of the African Atlantic coast south of the domains of the Moroccan sultan.

In October of the same year, the Spanish government asked Emilio Bonelli, an adventurous Aragonese lieutenant who spoke Arabic, to organize – with only five days’ notice! – an expedition to the Sahara coast, co-funded by the Spanish government and two private companies, the *Compañía Hispano-Africana* and the *Compañía Transatlántica*. As Tomás Bárbulo rightly points out, the rush of Spanish President Antonio Cánovas to organize the expedition was justified by two complementary reasons. Two British companies were at that time exploring the possibilities of exploiting the fisheries of that area, following the construction in 1877 in Cabo Juby, by a Scot called Donald Mackenzie, of a commercial factory under the name of North West African Trading Co. Although there is little information, it also seems probable that around that time another British expedition had attempted to occupy the Río de Oro peninsula, according to José Ramón Diego Aguirre.²⁶ The second and related reason was the immediacy of the Berlin Conference (due to start in November 1884), where the European powers would decide their ‘areas of influence’ in Africa. Cánovas wanted to go to Berlin with ‘irrefutable proofs that Spain had [already] occupied the region’, to secure at least that part of the African cake and, therefore, protect the Canary Islands from the growing appetites of the British and French.²⁷

On board the schooner *Ceres*, Bonelli set sail from Las Palmas de Gran Canaria towards the Saharan coast in November 1884. The expedition landed in the peninsula of Río de Oro, where they rapidly built a small wood hut, erected a mast and raised the Spanish flag, without any initial resistance from the coastal tribes. Bonelli managed even to convince some

chiuj (tribal chiefs) from these tribes to sign an accord accepting the sole protection of the Spanish king. 'Taking into account the documents signed by the independent tribes of this part of the coast, which on several occasions have asked for and obtained the protection of the Spanish, the Spanish government officially declared the establishment of a Spanish protectorate, stretching from Cape Bojador to Cape Blanco, through a Royal Order dated on the 26th of December 1884.'²⁸ The other European powers gathered in Berlin had been warned: the western coastal region of the Sahara desert was Spanish, and so it was ratified in the conference.

However, in 1885 the limits of the area under the 'protection' of Spain were not clearly established. The Spanish documents, accepted by the rest of the powers congregated in Berlin, defined the northern and southern limits of the new Spanish possession, between Cape Bojador (parallel 26° 8' N) in the north and Cape Blanco (parallel 20° 51' N) in the south, but failed to specify the inland boundary. It seems, however, that the eastern limit was located around the line traced by the meridian 8 degrees west of Greenwich, encircling a significant part of current Mauritania, as appears for example in the maps traced in 1894 by Luciano María Bremón.²⁹ In fact, the second Spanish expedition to the Sahara, commanded by Álvarez Pérez and Julio Cervera in 1886, reached Idyil and the Adrar, signing with tribal *cheij* Ahmed uld Mohamed uld El Aidda a treaty of 'protection' that affected most of present Mauritania (between the Tropic of Cancer, parallel 18° N and meridians 8° and 13° W). But the Spanish government, for unknown reasons, neither officially endorsed Cervera's treaty nor notified the other European powers about it, facilitating French claims over the area. In the Franco-Spanish Convention of 1900, the southern line was redrawn, dividing the peninsula of Cape Blanco into two halves northwards at the parallel 21° 20' N (therefore granting all control over the Bahía del Galgo to France) and then turning eastwards to the meridian 13 degrees west of Greenwich. The inland border was drawn from the meridian 13° W in the south towards meridian 12° W, but tracing a strange curve that aimed at leaving the mines of the Idyil region under French control. Most of the territory included in Cervera's treaty was therefore lost to France. On the other hand, in secret negotiations carried out in 1902, the northern limit was clarified. This significantly extended the territory under Spanish influence.

The new boundaries stretched from Cape Guir in the coast (Agadir was, therefore, within the Spanish area), eastwards towards Taghbalt and southwards towards Tindouf and Bir el Abbas. But only two years later, in further secret negotiations, this northern area was reduced southwards to the area of the Wadi Massa, north of the Sidi-Ifni enclave and westwards to the meridian 8° 40' W. The negotiations of 1904 also introduced for the first time a distinction between the territories south of the parallel 27° 40' N, where Spain was recognized as having full sovereignty, and the area north of that line, which for unclear reasons was considered to be linked to the Moroccan sultanate. Finally, the Franco-Spanish Convention of 1912 delineated the definitive contours of the new Spanish possessions, moving the northern border further to the south towards the *uad* Draa (Draa valley) and dividing the territory into two definite entities with different political status: the Southern Moroccan Protectorate, between the parallel 27° 40' N and the Draa valley in the north, and the Spanish Sahara colony, under full Spanish sovereignty.³⁰ In 1966, the Instituto de Estudios Africanos (IEA) still referred with perplexity to such division as an artificial territorial amputation, naming the territory north of the parallel 27° 40' N as a 'strange area: *supposedly* a Moroccan protectorate'.³¹

The new north African possessions amounted to more than 300,000 square kilometres, of which over 20,000 corresponded to the Northern Moroccan Protectorate, 26,000 to the Southern Protectorate (that is, the Tarfaya strip, south of the Draa valley) and the coastal enclave of Sidi-Ifni, and over 266,000 to the Spanish Sahara colony, also initially called Spanish West Africa. The Africanist literature of the time, always concerned about Spain's being the 'weaker' of the current powers despite the fact that 'for colonialist tradition and historical legacy [Spain] ha[d] more rights than any other to be' a colonial power,³² welcomed the recovery of positions in respect to other European competitors regarding what some authors called the 'coefficient of colonial power',³³ which, as Antonio Jaén noted pompously in 1926, situated Spain as the eighth world power in 'territorial expansion' and the ninth taking into account the number of inhabitants 'protected'.³⁴

However, this was all just a fantasy. Most of the territory which in the maps appeared as 'Spanish', was in fact not under the de facto control of

the Spanish administration. For several decades, most of the Spanish Sahara, the Tarfaya strip and Sidi-Ifni were Spanish only on the maps. The strategy followed in the Saharan territories was completely different from that of the Moroccan protectorate in the north, which we have briefly delineated before. While the colonial policy in Morocco confronted the rebellious Rifian tribes right away and attempted to establish an iron grip over this mountainous region, only minor attention was paid to the deserted territories of Spanish West Africa for decades, and no serious attempts were made either to confront the bellicose tribes of the Sahara or even systematically to explore the territory. The colonial policies designed for the Moroccan protectorate and for the Saharan territories were different, in fact completely disconnected from each other from the very start, since the Spanish administration always considered both possessions as completely different entities and, therefore, never judged it appropriate to delineate a single and coherent colonial approach for both territories.

In early Spanish Africanist literature, the southern borders of the sultanate of Morocco were never situated south of the Draa valley, that is, in the northern part of the Tarfaya strip, as a systematic analysis of the works published between 1880 and 1934 unmistakably shows. Emilio Bonelli, the explorer who in 1884 landed in the peninsula of Río de Oro and raised the first Spanish pennant in the territory, manifested vehemently on his return in a conference at the Geographical Society of Madrid that the ‘Spanish dominions [in the Sahara] could extend northwards until Santa Cruz of Agadir, true limit of the Moroccan empire, as it is currently constituted’.³⁵ In 1887, after a few more expeditions inland and a better knowledge of the tribes who inhabited the territory, Bonelli reiterated the same ideas in the first monographic study on the Spanish Sahara. The Spanish possessions were inhabited by tribes who ‘do not know any sort of authority and make a show of a brutal independence’.³⁶ This territory, ‘populated by a significant number of inhabitants, fanatic Muslims in an inconceivably savage state, without authority or government which they formally respect, organizing themselves in nomad tribes in constant struggle against their neighbours’,³⁷ stretched ‘from the cape Uer [Guir], true limit of the domains of His Royal Majesty [of Morocco], or from the river Draa, where this sovereign pretends to have jurisdiction, to the frontier determined by the possessions

that our neighbours from the other side of the Pyrenees [France] exploit'; that is, from the 'western limit of the [lands controlled by the] Moroccan emperor, to the French dominions of Senegambia'.³⁸

In 1914, the explorer Enrique d'Almonte, whose description of the Spanish Sahara was very influential at the time, in addition to once again tracing the frontier between the lands under Moroccan influence and the independent tribal territory of the Western Sahara around the Draa, gave very illustrative advice for future expeditions to the desert, still mostly unknown in the 1910s. He recommended bringing Arabic translators from the north, from the newly acquired Moroccan protectorate, as a precautionary strategy to avoid the feared double-games, if not betrayals, which translators and guides usually inflicted on European explorers. According to Almonte, the lack of connection, trust and mutual respect between the Moroccans and the inhabitants of the Sahara desert was a safe conduct to guarantee the loyalty of the Moroccan translators. In his own words, 'the little or non-existent reciprocal esteem between the more civilized moors from the north of Morocco and the backward peoples of the Sahara, demonstrated the advantage of having one or more moors from the Spanish Garb, who only with great difficulty would enter into any secret dealing with the nomads'.³⁹ One decade later, in 1926, Antonio Jaén yet again insisted that the frontier between Morocco and the Sahara was 'formed by the river Draa',⁴⁰ and, six years later, José Guillermo Sánchez clarified that 'although [the Sahara tribes] respect the Sultan of Morocco, they do it because he is a descendant of the Prophet, not because they have any intention of becoming his subjects'; as all the Africanist writings of these decades illustrate, the tribes of the Spanish Saharan dominions have always 'live[d] with a savage independence, [and] without a supreme chief'.⁴¹

Furthermore, Major Galo Bullón, writing in 1945 about his experiences in the desert, emphasized the differences between the inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara and the subjects of the Moroccan sultanate. As an example, he tells us two anecdotes in which he was himself involved. The first one is the story of Salah uld Beirut, a friend of his and a loyal member of the native Nomad Troops of the Spanish army who had just been promoted to lieutenant. As a reward for his dedicated services, Major Bullón sent him on

a mission to the north, to the Moroccan protectorate, so that he could see the cities and enjoy the ‘luxuries’ of the sultanate. After wandering with different assignments in Larache, Tangiers and Ceuta, Salah reproached Major Bullón angrily:

What have I done to you to be arrested or confined here? ... [N]othing more do I have to do here. I am not interested in the cities that I have visited, nor do I admire the waterfalls of Xauen, or feel comfortable in these mountains. If I have not committed any fault, send me back as soon as possible to my country, with its plains and its camels.⁴²

The second story is very similar, in this case involving a talented silversmith whom Major Bullón also sent from the Sahara to the north to work in the Fine Arts Directorate of Morocco. One year later, the Saharawi silversmith returned on leave to see his family, ‘whom of course he did not want to bring with him to Morocco’, and asked Major Bullón not to be sent back to Tetuán, arguing he could not live there any longer: ‘The peoples from the North ... have delicate and clean clothes, but on the inside they aren’t clean, while on the contrary, we, the nomads, are dirty on the outside, but we have a golden heart’.⁴³

The beginning of colonization

The new Spanish Sahara (and the Tarfaya strip, artificially amputated on the maps due to the Franco-Spanish manoeuvres of 1904 and 1912) appeared to be a vast, deserted, desolate and inhospitable territory inhabited by bellicose and fiercely independent tribes; not a very good panorama for the declining Spanish colonial administration, stretched to its limits first in the Caribbean and Pacific wars and later in the Rif campaigns. For decades, the Spanish Sahara was Spanish only on the maps, treaties and documents of European colonialism, as we have noted before. Until well into the new century, the only Spanish outpost was a fortified factory built by Bonelli in 1884–5, in the bay of Río de Oro. It was ‘pompously called Villa Cisneros’ [Cisneros Town], although for many years it was very far from qualifying as something that remotely resembled a town, as the engineer and colonial bureaucrat Francisco del Río Joan protested after visiting the settlement in

the 1910s.⁴⁴ Villa Cisneros, the capital of the Spanish Sahara, was composed of a Spanish fort known as La Factoria, surrounded by ‘a series of tents which the Arab nomads inhabit[ed]’, del Río tells us, until ‘I had the honour to collaborate with the ... Ministry [and] managed to get a credit to build masonry houses, and approximately twenty were constructed, [and later] donated to the indigenous peoples who have given the best services to the fort’.⁴⁵

The colonial strategy during the first years was entirely commercial. The objective was to establish a series of fortified settlements along the coast that would serve as trading points with the inland tribes, focal centres to attract the caravan routes from Senegal to the Mediterranean, as well as safe ports for the Canarian fishermen and the steam vessels travelling to Equatorial Guinea. As Bonelli explained, ‘it was necessary to establish links of close association between the savage tribes of the desert and the commercial establishments that will be built on the coastline’.⁴⁶ La Factoría would try to sell clothes, food, knives, rifles, bullets, gunpowder, mirrors, raw steel bars, green tea, animals such as donkeys and horses, et cetera, to the nomads, and to buy from them camels, gazelle furs, ostrich feathers, Arabic gum, gold, et cetera. But the business never took off and the Spanish plans languished for years, under continuous harassment by tribes such as the Ulad Delim, who launched continuous minor *ghazzis* (raids) on the Spanish outpost during the first years, killing several soldiers and creating a climate of constant fear in the isolated Spanish garrison. Bonelli very soon realized that ‘Spain had landed in a minefield of explosive people, distrustful and ready to fight because of any misunderstanding’, and so he reached the conclusion that to stay in the Sahara, with the very limited manpower and equipment that he had under his command, ‘it was necessary to leave them in peace, not to intervene in the [internal affairs of the] *cabilas* [tribes] and to act with great diplomatic ability’.⁴⁷

The initial impressions that Bonelli, Cervera and the rest of the early explorers had about the inhabitants of the desert, connected with the traditional narratives of the Canarian fishermen about the unfortunate sailors who had been in contact with the tribes of the Sahara desert. As Bonelli recalls, the Sahara was ‘one of the regions where most aversion to the European race is harboured’.

The entire Sahara region has been, from the earliest times, a theatre of horrible crimes, impressive revenges and always justified cause of fear for the sailors. Unprecedented events are told and retold, perhaps exaggeratedly: shipwrecked sailors have been, in general, victims of those ferocious savages, being fortunate those ones who could be rescued after ten or fifteen years of slavery or captivity. These circumstances contributed more and more to the barrier that never should have existed between the desert tribes and our compatriots from the Canaries.⁴⁸

Knowledge about the inhabitants of the Sahara desert was very limited in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The encounters had been few, usually hostile and sporadic. Therefore, most of the images projected by early Africanist literature simply replicated the clichés in vogue, creating images of courageous, rebellious, free, cruel, disorganized and arrogant savages, through a romantic combination of positive and negative stereotypes. Most authors were unable to perceive the complex social organization of the Saharan tribes, the internal mechanisms of power, the economic logic of their nomadic life or the socio-political meaning of the *ghazzis*. In the nineteenth century perhaps the only one who demonstrated some limited understanding of the social structure of the desert was Emilio Bonelli, as is suggested by a few paragraphs in his work. He traced the clear differences between the inhabitants of the coast and the inhabitants of the interior of the desert, which in fact corresponded with the basic division between the tributary tribes of the coastal areas and the warrior tribes. This is, in his own words, how he classified the inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara:

We could divide the inhabitants of our Saharan region into two classes: those who live on the coast, almost exclusively dedicated to fish, and those who form tribes, in constant struggles with their neighbours, [who have] large ... herds. The first ones eke out a miserable existence ... The indigenous peoples from the interior [of the desert] present a better appearance. Slightly better dressed, lean but of strong musculature, as indolent as those of the coast, sombre to the extreme, with long shocks of hair, which in some cases cover their shoulders, since they lack scissors to cut them, arrogant and haughty like wild beasts, hardened in battle, since their existence is the continuous war between tribe and tribe, with double-barrelled shotguns ..., they always arrive with their camels, the only means of transport in the desert ...⁴⁹

Such social division was one of the first issues that General Francisco Bens, who replaced Bonelli as head of the Spanish presence in the territory, noted with surprise and indignation. In his memoirs, published in 1947, he remembered how, just after taking possession of his new post in the Sahara, he ‘felt humiliated to know that the small population [of Villa Cisneros] – most of them employees of the Fort, the Factory and some fishermen – had to give part of what they earned, as well as their food, to a gang of bandits from the desert that subjected them to such an ignominious tribute’.⁵⁰ When Bens arrived in 1904, the only area under effective Spanish control was the Fort and its immediate surroundings. The soldiers never ventured very far away from the garrison. In fact, the other side of the bay would not be completely explored until as late as 1907! Bens, a hardened veteran of the Cuban War born in La Havana in 1867, immediately realized that the so-called ‘colony was only a warehouse and a flag, far from Madrid and abandoned on its own. Everything was to be done ...’⁵¹ The ‘historical mission’, the ‘universal and spiritual task’ of fighting ‘without dismay for faith and civilization’, to use the nostalgic and panegyric words of General José Díaz de Villegas, director of the Sahara office in the 1940s, had barely begun two decades after the Berlin Conference.⁵² But Bens was a master diplomat. He stayed as governor of the Spanish Sahara for twenty-two years, from 1904 to 1925, becoming a living myth in the desert, setting the foundations for Spain’s progressive peaceful penetration in the Sahara, gaining the respect and admiration of his soldiers and building, over the years, solid bridges of trust with most of the tribes of the territory.

When he arrived, with only thirty-one infantry soldiers under his command, he found a territory where, in addition to the system of tributes that we have already mentioned, slavery was still a common practice. This, in particular, connected with the memories of his childhood in Cuba, where he remembered how ‘the owners of the “ingenios” bought the slaves as if they were animals’.⁵³ His initial image of the inhabitants of the Sahara was definitely not very positive, but on the contrary was linked to the traditional narratives about unknown and uncivilized inland tribes with a terrible lust for blood. Another passage from Bens’s memories perfectly exemplifies the fears, based partly on the Canarian fishermen stories, which haunted the

Spanish soldiers during the first decades in the territory. In one of his first expeditions through the desert, Bens suddenly saw

that some moors were sitting down around a big fire. When I approached the light, I noted with surprise that close to the fire there was a human head. I thought: Anthropophagus! ... The moors that were with me, realizing I was nervous, were laughing. – What is this? – I asked watching that head poking out of the sand – Why have they buried this man? – Don't worry 'reise' – a moor told me. I wanted to dismount the camel to stop the monstrosity and save the unfortunate man. One of my companions insisted: Don't worry 'reise'. That man that you see there is being cured from rheumatism. – Rheumatism? – Yes, 'reise', soon he will go out of the hole completely cured. – Ah! I thought they were cooking him to eat him. The moors all laughed.⁵⁴

However, Bens very quickly learned how to treat the inhabitants of the desert, as Alejandro García explains:

He learned to speak Hassania and to build a position of prestige within that world. Mixing with everybody, learning the laws of respect, doing favours and being generous he managed to become a Chej Nasrani (Christian Chief). He profusely practised the law of the desert, the hospitality, he made himself known ... he invited the *cabilas* to a banquet that he offered in Dahla [Villa Cisneros] and his invitation was accepted by a multitude that he regaled by killing 200 lambs. In 1906, after convincing them, he transported in a schooner several ... Chiujs ... and brought them to the Canaries for a party in honour of ... [King] Alfonso XIII. These were gestures that he executed masterfully to get what he wanted: to be a charismatic man in the Sahara. This allowed him to travel to the interior, even when the open war with France [in Mauritania] had the territory in tension.⁵⁵

As his contemporaries commented, 'the current politico-military Governor ... gaining the friendship of the natives of the country, joining them in their way of life and exploring in their own company the territory under his command, has made pleasant the name of Spain among those peoples'.⁵⁶ In 1916, Bens occupied Cape Juby, in the north of the Sahara, which had been abandoned years before by Mackenzie, and established the second Spanish permanent settlement in the territory (renamed Villa Bens, years later, in his honour). In 1920, there followed another post in La Güera, in the Cape Blanco peninsula, with the aim of opening a new 'factory' in the south to serve as the base for the exploitation of the rich Saharan fisheries. In 1926,

one year after Bens's retirement, the dominant opinion among Spanish colonialists was still that of limiting 'the coastal occupation strictly to the necessary, providing [the Spanish settlements] with civilizing elements, ... to maintain because of strategic prevision, the name and sheen of Spain'.⁵⁷ More than four decades after Bonelli's landing, the advantages of advancing towards the interior of the desert were, despite the good relations with most of the tribes, strongly questioned from an economic point of view, which seemed to have been the major element under consideration until the 1930s. As an ideological and political tool, the name Spanish Sahara printed on the maps was enough, but the Spanish colonial administration could not risk a new focus of instability such as the Rifian War. At the end of the day, what had the desert to offer?

What is its value? What is the value of these territories of three hundred thousand square kilometres where it can only be said that there is a population of one hundred thousand inhabitants ... and, in addition, no one talks about either their agricultural or their mining value; regions with an immense desert, with a relatively mild climate ... because of the nearness to the sea, from which only the best panegyrists affirm that 'there is nothing healthy about Río de Oro', because there ... with the deplorable hygienic conditions that the indigenous inhabitant has in his 'jaima' [tent], the wind from the north-west razes everything, and what it doesn't raze, is burnt to ashes or destroyed? One sole advantage is obvious, on which all agree: the 'fisheries', which could be the best or almost the best without comparison in the world.⁵⁸

The control of the desert

It would not be until the 1930s that it became an aim to control the whole territory. Two main factors converge to explain the shift in the colonial policy developed until then: on the one hand, the 'pacification' of the Moroccan protectorate in the north, with the end of the Rifian War and the consolidation of the Spanish African army; and, on the other hand, France insisted on a major control of the colonial frontiers and demanded from Madrid the end of the safe haven that the territory under theoretical Spanish administration had been until then for the *cabilas* confronting the French

army in neighbouring Mauritania. The French penetration in the Mauritanian and Algerian desert was completely different from the first Spanish steps in *its* part of the region. In current Mauritania, the French encountered stiff resistance, especially in the northern areas, where some *cabilas* followed a fatwa against the French presence issued by Cheij Ma el Ainin, the charismatic religious (and political) leader (*marabout* in French, *morabito* in Spanish) who had founded Smara, the only pre-colonial city of the Spanish Sahara, in 1898.

Cheij Ma el Ainin was a crucial figure in the nineteenth-century Sahara, whose legend is still alive today. He had been born in a religious family, based in the Hodh area of current southern Mauritania. At a very early age he was sent to study in Marrakech, where he became close to the Moroccan ruling Alawite family, with whom he would maintain a constant but changing and problematic relation for the whole of his life. After a pilgrimage to Mecca in the late 1850s, he settled down in the Adrar region, became influential among some tribes and eventually ended up creating his 'own' *cabila*, the Ahel (family) Cheij Ma el Ainin. During the 1870s he became concerned about the increasing interest and presence of Europeans in the region and, with the assistance of the sultan of Morocco, he promoted opposition to the French presence in the Sahara desert. Initially, he also seemed to have opposed the Spanish, instigating some attacks against La Factoría of Villa Cisneros and the expedition of Cervera to the Idyil.⁵⁹ But he soon focused his interest on the French, who practised a much more aggressive policy than the Spanish. In fact, the difference was probably reduced to the fact that while, from the beginning the French attempted to control the vast Mauritanian and Algerian territories, Spain restricted itself to the perimeters of three fortified factories along the coast and did not seriously attempt to influence the life of the desert for decades. When Bens left the Sahara in 1925, there were only 739 Spanish soldiers in the whole territory: 121 in Villa Cisneros, 423 in Cabo Juby and 195 in La Güera. Cheij Ma el Ainin died in 1910, but the clashes of different tribes with the French troops in Mauritania continued with some intensity until approximately the mid-1930s. For decades the *cabilas* launched raids against the French columns and garrisons from the Spanish Sahara, forcing

on some occasions even the French to intervene in Spanish territory, under the passive gaze of Madrid.

It is in this context that in 1934 the French and Spanish governments signed an agreement in which Spain promised to control effectively the confines of *its* desert. Then, the Rif mountains in the northern Moroccan protectorate had already been ‘pacified’. In the following years, the Spanish military presence in the Sahara increased substantially, securing routes between the coastal settlements and moving inland. In 1934, the very same year of the Franco-Spanish agreement, the Spanish troops reached the highly symbolic city of Smara, without resistance from the *cabilas*, and established there what would be the first post in the interior of the desert. In 1938, Captain Antonio del Oro founded El Aaiún, a small settlement 30 kilometres from the sea that would become the future capital of the Western Sahara. This progressive move inland, which included the creation of several small garrisons along the territory, was accepted by the Saharawi tribes, some of whom even welcomed the Spanish presence as a guarantee of no French interference in their pasture lands, after the decades of attrition and instability of the social life of the desert caused by the continuous cross-border raids and skirmishes with the French army. As Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja said in 1965, ‘the nomad knows how to appreciate the peace that was given to him ... In all the conversations that I’ve had ... it was unanimously acknowledged that the fact of having a durable peace had been a relief for them and a decisive change’.⁶⁰ The Spanish administration promised some degree of stability, combined with a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the internal affairs of the *cabilas*. This is how an old Saharawi nomad related his encounter with a Spanish column in 1935:

I was in Hagunía in the year 1935 when [Spanish] Captain Capaz faced for the first time a group of 40 Saharawi ... Before, I had heard about the Spanish, but I had never seen one. Capaz told us: ‘ask what you want’. We ... established four conditions: The Islamic Shaaria to be the law in the territory, not to force anyone to abandon arms and to give a licence to keep those arms we have now, that the slaves will continue under the command of their owners and that the owners could decide what to do with them in their own way ... and not to give to Spain any recently pregnant camel nor any castrated camel for transport. We demanded these

conditions ... to be sure that they would not do the same as the French ... The Spanish fulfilled their promise.⁶¹

The Spanish colonial administration proceeded to militarize the territory, strengthening the control of the strategic routes and areas, while allowing the *cabilas* to continue with their nomadic way of life with little attempt to interfere, as long as they did not challenge the hegemonic position of Spain. In the exploration of the territory that led to the control of the desert, the Spanish administration relied heavily on native soldiers incorporated gradually into the Spanish army from 1926 onwards, when the Tropas Nómadas (Nomad Troops), a camel corps indigenously staffed but with Spanish officers was created to patrol the desert, and also to the Policía Territorial (Territorial Police), created in the mid-1950s as a paramilitary police force, also staffed by natives but under the command of Spanish officers. Numerous Saharawis found in both the Tropas Nómadas and the Policía Territorial a way to secure an income for their families in a time when the old *ghazzis*, against each other and against the French, were no longer acceptable in the new order.

In this new context, the scientific expeditions to the inland areas of the territory increased significantly. The first detailed collection of anthropological and sociological studies of the population of the Spanish Sahara date from the 1940s, although there are also some interesting works from the previous decade. The flourishing literature on the Spanish Sahara includes titles such as José Guillermo Sánchez's study *El Sahara Occidental* (1932), Galo Bullón's *Notas de Geografía Humana* (1945), Manuel Mulero Clemente's *Los Territorios Españoles del Sahara* (1945), Ángel Morales's *El Sahara Español* (1946), Miguel Molina Campuzano's *Contribución al Estudio del Censo* (1954) and the seminal work by Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos* (1955), as well as the numerous geographic, geomorphologic, botanic and zoologic al analyses of Manuel Alia Medina, Francisco Hernández-Pacheco, Eduardo Esteban, Emilio Guinea or Eugenio Morales, published both as monographs and in the pages of the bulletin of the Instituto de Estudios Africanos (African Studies Institute) and other journals.⁶² Through the pages of these works, the social system of the indigenous population started to be progressively unravelled, to the benefit of a colonial administration always keen on using its

knowledge of the tribal attachments, equilibriums and internal system of hierarchies as a tool for the management and control of the native population.

One of the main problems that the vast deserted territory under Spanish administration posed for the desires of the reinvigorated colonialists was precisely the nomadic character of the indigenous population. Nomadism was represented in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular Western imagination as a transgressive practice, as a barbaric negation of the *polis* that threatened civilization from the outside (and, therefore, it might also be argued, as its condition of possibility). Nomadic societies were conceptualized as a danger to settled societies (societies associated with the territorialization of power, that is, with the development of the state) not only as mobile ‘war machines’ against the power and ambitions of an external state, but principally as a mechanism to avoid the emergence of a territorialized structure of power in those very nomadic societies. And, in addition to this, they were a threat to the very nature of power and the state:

[T]he nomad also acquired a moral quality that made him dangerous to civilization because he represented a barbarity or lethargy from which civilized man liked to think he had freed himself in the course of history. Nomadism became a metaphor for the animal within the civilized man.⁶³

While the development of civilization was understood to be linked with the progressive ability to control, influence and modify nature, the nomadic social economy, read simplistically as a system that ‘followed’ nature and rejected the attempt to master it, was an uncomfortable reminder of what was thought to be a previous stage in human development. The theorization of nomadism as a threat justified the neocolonial policies and practices of racial superiority that led to the marginalization of and, in some cases, attempts to eradicate several pastoral and hunter-gatherer societies on the African continent. In the case of the Spanish Sahara, the desert was thought to have few valuable natural resources to offer and, consequently, the effort to build an economically efficient settler structure was very limited, allowing the nomadic societies to continue their desert wandering after the clouds with little interference, at least for some decades. But even

acknowledging the lack of interest – and also incapability – of the Spanish colonial administration to build an economically oriented settler society, the nomadic character of the indigenous peoples of the Sahara represented a significant challenge to Spanish hegemony.

The territory was explored in some depth and ‘pacified’ only in the 1930s and 1940s. The Spanish officials could finally reach the confines of the desert, the parallels and meridians that marked the borders of the Spanish Sahara, but how to administer, to govern, such vast territory? It was necessary to establish mechanisms of control and classification, and the most basic of them all was to conduct a census of the mobile indigenous population. As Epifanio González Jiménez stated in 1930, ‘without the census, or with a badly done or incomplete one, we govern blindly, and it’s not possible to do anything right’.⁶⁴ It was, therefore, necessary to decide the basis on which to classify and control a population not territorially settled, according to the colonial technology of knowledge.

Traditional Saharawi society

The indigenous traditional society described by the colonial writers was divided along tribal lines and internally stratified in four social groups or ‘castes’ (according to the terminology of authors such as Galo Bullón and José Enrique Alonso), clearly segregated from each other.⁶⁵ The tribal system can be divided into two broad categories: on the one hand, what the colonial authors identified as the free or independent *cabilas* (Chorfa, Aarab and Zuaia tribes, as well as the Tekna) and, on the other, the tributary or dependant *cabilas* (Znaga). ‘Chorfa ..., Arabic plural for Cherif, ... is given to all persons who descend from the Prophet and therefore are considered as of saintly lineage’ and, obviously, also of Arab origin.⁶⁶ The most important Chorfa group is the Erguibat tribal confederation, descendants – according to the tradition – of Sidahmed Erguibi who arrived in the Sahara in 1503. The Erguibat are divided into two branches, the Erguibat Guasem or Charg (eastern) and the Erguibat Sahel (western), each formed by several fractions (*fahed*), such as Musa, Saad, Ulad Chej, Taleb, Fogra or Boihat, which also comprise several sub-fractions and families (*ahel*). The Erguibat

confederation was very soon recognized by the Spanish colonial administration as ‘the most powerful in the territory’:⁶⁷ ‘the large fractions of the Erguibat confederation [are] the most numerous of all of them, ... each fraction is as large as any of the other main tribes as a whole, both in terms of population and in terms of livestock’.⁶⁸ In 1950, for example, it was estimated that of the 31,855 camels of the territory, the Erguibat owned 14,300, that is, almost the same amount of livestock as all the rest of the tribes put together.⁶⁹ The Erguibat, more than a tribe, as I have already mentioned, were a sort of wide and open confederation, which ‘adopt[ed] all those who want[ed] to join, being for that reason very large’.⁷⁰ As Mahayup Salek explains,

[a]s the Ergueibat gave Horma (protection) and did not ask for tribute, many families and tribes associated them, and became to consider themselves as Ergueibat, although they had nothing to do with Sidahmed Erguibi. This explains the extraordinary growth of this cabila, which two centuries after the death of Erguibi was the most powerful and largest of the Bidan ... But when they become numerous they had to start seeking (new) land for their people ... The need of (pasture) lands forced them to confront other cabilas.⁷¹

The Erguibat combined a religious origin with a history of successful wars against other tribes, such as Ulad Bu Sba or the Tayakant, which made them also *Ahel Emdafe* (warriors, or literally ‘men of the rifle’) and, therefore, strengthened their social and political prestige in the desert. Other Chorfa tribes include the Arosien, the *Ahel* of Chej Ma el Ainin and the much smaller Ulad Bu Sba, Filala and Toubalt.

The Aarab (also Hassan) are tribes whose genealogy can be traced back as well, according to their own genealogical narratives, to the wave of Arab invasions of the Ben Maquil that arrived in north Africa in the thirteenth century. The Ulad Hassan (sons of Hassan) were the Maquil fraction that moved into the Western Sahara, displacing most of the Berber tribes (Sanhaya) of the region and becoming progressively hegemonic. The Aarab, therefore, consider themselves to have a pure Arab lineage. They were warrior tribes par excellence, whose main *cabila*, the Ulad Delim, was well known for its bellicose character and its devotion to the politics of the *ghazzi*. In 1885, Emilio Bonelli, showing a complete lack of understanding of the meaning of the *ghazzis* as a deeply rooted social institution, said that

the Ulad Delim were ‘famous for the number of thieves that they have’.⁷² Baroja, on the other hand, recalled with some irony after his visit to the territory in the 1950s that the Ulad Delim was the only *cabila* without a particular mark for their livestock; any mark could be an Ulad Delim mark! The Ulad Delim was one of the first tribes to ‘encounter’ the Spanish, with whom they signed an agreement in 1886 (the Cervera expedition). They also accompanied Bens in some of his expeditions to the interior of the desert.

Zuaia are the tribes ‘dedicated to study and religion that do not come from a *cherif* lineage, and are not of Arab origin either’, according to Diego Aguirre.⁷³ The word Zuaia, in fact, derivates etymologically from the term Sanhaya that refers to the Berber population who inhabited the desert before the Arab invasions. The Zuaia, also called *Ahel Lectub* (‘people of the book’), renounced war and devoted themselves to study and the teaching of religion, jurisprudence, Arabic grammar and literature, gaining the general respect of the other *cabilas* of the desert. The Spanish called them *morabitos* (*marabouts* in French). They were also traders, possessed livestock and, in some cases, owned wells and the scarce cultivable land around them. Although most Zuaia *cabilas* were independent, some small groups paid a tribute for their protection to stronger warrior *cabilas*, becoming ‘Zuaitas in the shade’. In the Spanish Sahara the main Zuaia *cabilas* were the Ahel Berikalah, Tendgha and the Ideigob, none of them very significant in numeric terms.⁷⁴

Also derived etymologically from Sanhaya are the Znaga *cabilas*, which occupied the lower position in the hierarchy of the tribes of the desert. Znaga were the tributary *cabilas*, dependent on other tribes to whom they had to pay for their protection, usually because they were demographically weak or because they had lost a war against another more powerful tribe. Most of the small Znaga tribes lived in the coastal areas, some of them dedicated to fishing, which was considered a second-class economic activity in the social hierarchy of the desert. The initial contacts of the Spanish colonizers were established with these coastal fishing tribes, such as the Lamiar, Foicat, Lemenaser, Moyat or Imeraguen, which were also the ones with whom the Canarian fishermen had had more contact in pre-colonial times. The main Znaga tribe was the Ulad Tidrarin, tributary of the

Arosien until the end of the eighteenth century and since then ‘protected’ by the Ulad Delim, but one family – the Ahel Taleb Ali – kept its independence. However, during the twentieth century the Tidrarin experienced a very rapid growth, especially after the definitive suppression of the tributary system following the ‘pacification’ of the territory in the 1930s, to become a very rich and demographically strong *cabila* of traders and herdsman. According to 1950s estimates, the Ulad Tidrarin then owned more camels than the Ulad Delim (5,173 against 3,200) and in the 1974 census there were almost as many members of the Tidrarin *cabila* registered as Ulad Delim (4,842 against 5,364). As we will see, the effects of the colonization changed progressively, but decisively, the social order of the desert.

Finally, the tribes known as Tekna constitute a relatively heterogeneous category with no common ancestor. In fact, Tekna is the name of the lands around the Draa valley and north up to, approximately, the Assaka river, and serves to designate a group of *cabilas* whose origins are located in this frontier area between the desert in the south and the lands under the control of the Moroccan sultan in the north. The origin of these tribes was considered to be in the fusion of Berber semi-nomads with groups of Arabs from the Maquil invasions of the thirteenth century. These *cabilas* were organized in two sort of alliances: the Ait Yemel, on the one hand, where the Arab ‘element’ would be predominant and the Ait Atzman (also Atman), on the other, where the Berber ‘elements’ would be more visible, according to Diego Aguirre.⁷⁵ Spanish colonial literature always expressed concern about the origins of these tribes ‘from the north’, which were not perceived as purely ‘Saharawi’, the new term coined to refer to the indigenous inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara. For instance, José Enrique Alonso stated in his detailed study on the Tribes of the Sahara in 1973, undertaken in the context of the work for the census that would serve as the base for a self-determination referendum under the auspices of the United Nations, that ‘[t]he only Tekna *cabila*, which is authentically Saharawi, with the exception of some families that remained in the area of the Draa, is Izarguien’, whose ‘traditional ambit of movement [was] between the river Draa and the Tisletín Sebha, north of Bojador’.⁷⁶ According to Alonso, none of the Ait Atzman *cabilas* were ‘Saharawi’, although some of their members could be living in the territory, and he even expressed some

doubts in respect of two Ait Yemel *cabilas* with a relatively significant presence in the Spanish Sahara, the Ait Musa Ulad Aali and the Iaagut or Yagut. About the latter, he said plainly that it ‘is not a Saharawi tribe, despite some of its components living in the Sahel’.⁷⁷ Decades before the census, Galo Bullón, in his important study, had already traced a clear difference between the Tekna tribes and the rest of the tribes from the territory, locating what he called ‘the country of the tecnas’ north of the river Draa and stating that ‘a majority of these tribes, more than nomadic are transhumant, moving periodically from north to south and vice versa’, while south of the Draa, ‘the tribes are totally nomad, and their migrations are large and not periodic’.⁷⁸ In any case, the presence of Teknas in the Spanish territory, especially from the Izarguien and the Ait Lashen groups, was very significant in the northern areas around El Aaiún, where the centre of gravity of the colony had been displaced to since the 1950s.

In addition to this tribal structure, there were three social categories, or ‘castes’, formed by persons who, although an integral part of the social economy of the *cabilas*, were not part of their lineage and were, therefore, considered not members of the tribe in strict terms but aggregated persons. They constituted relatively closed and usually endogamic groups, who travelled and lived with the nomads but occupied the lower social positions within the tribe with which they worked. The first category is that of the *maallim* or *mealmin* (called *majarreros* by the Spanish) and was constituted by the artisans who constructed all the artefacts required by the nomads: from swords and knives to cooking pots, from mounts for the camels to bracelets and necklaces for the women. The *maallim*, relatively small in number, were present in almost all the tribes. According to some stories, they were considered to be the descendants of converted Jews, which in part explained their marginal position. Another caste was formed by the *iggawen*: musicians and poets that exalted the triumphs of the *cabila* that paid them. They were very rare among the tribes of the Spanish Sahara, but abundant in Mauritania, where the existence of several emirates and the hegemonic role of a few number of *cabilas*, generated a number of centres of power – courts, we could even say – where the laudatory arts flourished to the glory of the emirs.

The lower positions of the nomadic social structure were occupied by the black slaves (*abid*), considered the personal property of their owners, and the freed former slaves (*haratin*), who generally continued living within the family of their former masters, and could even become members of the group. The slaves were not considered property of the *cabila* or *ahel*, but personal possessions and could, therefore, be inherited, sold or freed. There were two categories of slaves: the *nama*, those who were born within a given nomadic family (that is, those whose parents were already slaves of a given master), and the *terbia*, who were those bought from another master (or obtained in a *ghazzi*). The children of a black female slave with a white nomad, acquired – only if recognized by the father, obviously – the category of the father, independently of his or her skin colour. Slavery was a relatively strong institution among the tribes of the Spanish Sahara, although not as rooted as in the *cabilas* of current Mauritania. ‘Within their world [the world of the tribes], all the arbitrariness was tolerated, while the most minimum insubordination against Spain was not tolerated.’⁷⁹ This attitude, in practical terms, meant that the colonial administration not only turned a blind eye to the practice of slavery, but also tolerated and protected it in some cases: ‘as part of *friendly* policy, the Spanish authorities even reached the point of sending soldiers to recover the servants of some loyal notables’.⁸⁰ The number of slaves was reflected in the 1974 census under the category of ‘adopted persons and poor relatives’, showing the astonishing figure of 3,018 persons.⁸¹ Taking into account that the total number of Saharawis included in the census was 73,497 persons, the black slaves (and perhaps also *haratin*, who also occupied a very marginal social position) represented a shocking 4.1 per cent of the total native population.

... And the construction of the new colonial space

According to most of the early colonial writers, in traditional Saharawi society, ‘there was not a true political organization’, but a collection of *cabilas* ‘independent from each other, as [wer]e the families from each other’; they were also ‘without fixed place and without any sovereignty over them ... all the desert [wa]s theirs, mounting the tents at any point,

without any other title of property than their constant ride through the immense plains'.⁸² The government of the tribes 'was composed of a chief and an assembly of notables',⁸³ called the *Yemaa*. But, as José Guillermo Sánchez noted in the 1930s, 'the chiefs or sheik d[id] not have other authority than the one that the yemaa or assembly of the kabila wants to give them, and in such assembly both the powerful sheik and the herdsman have the same kind of seat'.⁸⁴ In the 1940s, the idea of *chiuj* projected by colonial literature was that of a prestigious person – because of his 'courage, virtue, generosity, culture, eloquence, et cetera'⁸⁵ – invested by his fellow tribesmen with a symbolic but limited authority, which consisted mainly in leading and mediating in the discussions of the *Yemaa* and in checking and ensuring that the pacts and agreements reached with other *cabilas* or fractions – usually regarding the use of the pasture lands and the trade routes – were respected. In Mulero Clemente's words,

[t]he main obligation of a Chief of fraction is to preside the Yemaa, in which he has not any effective authority, in the same way that he hasn't got any authority over the fraction. His authority is simply moral; when he is granted the title of Chief, he is not invested with any sort of function; it is an acknowledgement, a testimony of public estimation that does not oblige those who acknowledge him to obey him in any way. His word is listened to and his advice respected, but in order to take any decision that affects the group it is necessary to go to the assembly.⁸⁶

The Yemaa ... had the judicial power and it could also be said that it had the legislative, since when it judges it establishes with its criteria ... a sort of jurisprudence. It decides all the important questions that affect the fraction, just as that the reunion of the Yemaas of the diverse fractions of a tribe discusses and decides the matters related to the tribe, as well as war and peace.⁸⁷

A decade later, Caro Baroja, in his seminal anthropological work *Estudios Saharianos*, insisted once again on the idea that the power of the notables, that is, of those persons 'respected because of their age, courage, knowledge or wealth', should be defined 'as diffused, [having] its expression in assemblies celebrated sporadically; long, turbulent and not always efficient assemblies'.⁸⁸ There was general agreement among colonial researchers in establishing the supremacy of the tribal, fractional or

familiar *Yemaas*, over the more symbolic power of the *chiuj*, whose authority originated in fact from, and could not be understood without, the assembly. For the colonial administrators, however, it was much easier, and effective from their point of view, to deal directly and exclusively with the *chiuj*. The traditional *Yemaas*, precisely because of their ‘turbulence’ and perceived lack of ‘efficiency’, were considered part of the problem. And, in addition, the idea of a representative institution did not fit at all with the hegemonic reactionary discourses of the Spanish Africanist army that progressively took control of the new territories.

The implantation of the Spanish colonial administration throughout the vast deserted territory was in fact limited to a military presence for many years.⁸⁹ The Spanish Sahara, from 1934 onwards became in many respects a large military garrison; an immense prison and the new playground of the Africanist army forged in the Rif campaigns, especially after the independence of Morocco in 1956, when most of the troops stationed in the north, including the legion and the infamous disciplinary batallion of Cabrerizas, moved to the Sahara. As Tomás Bárbulo, a Spanish journalist who lived in El Aaiún between 1968 and 1976, points out, the Spanish

military historiography has systematically hidden one of the basic features of the Sahara: its use as a prison. In 1897, the Barcelona anarchists were sent there. In 1932, those involved in the *Sanjurjada*. In 1936, the leftists from the Canaries. But the list did not finish there ⁹⁰

In a report written in 1911, Francisco Bens had openly recommended not only the suitability of the territory as a prison, but also insisted that this was one of the only two realistic possibilities of ‘obtaining positive results’ from the colony until ‘the day the African railway crosses’ the territory.⁹¹ The other one was the fisheries.

In my opinion, I think that two things could be done with the Río de Oro Peninsula: either what I say about the fisheries in my memorandum of the past 17th of April, or *to install all the Spanish prisons*, since the climatologic conditions and the configuration of the terrain are matchless for this purpose; in addition, the construction of buildings would be exceptionally cost-effective, first because of the abundance of stones and, secondly, because of the low cost of labour.⁹²

The Law of Defence of the Spanish Republic, passed on 2 October 1931, included the possibility of deporting to overseas territories those detainees who were considered to be a threat to the stability of the new political regime. Under this law, the status of Villa Cisneros as a penitentiary was ‘officialized’, and it received three significant groups of political deportees between 1931 and 1936. The first one, which arrived in January 1932, was a group of over 150 anarchists and miners who had participated in the anarchist insurrection of the High Llobregat, in Catalonia. According to some accounts, it included well-known anarchist leaders such as Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso.⁹³ This group stayed in the Sahara just for a few months, until the failed *coup d’état* of August 1932, known as the *Sanjurjada*. Then, some of them were freed and some were transferred to a penitentiary in Fuerteventura (Canary Islands), because the Republican government had decided to deport to Villa Cisneros a group of 161 high-ranking military officers and civilians who had taken active part in the aborted rebellion. The conservative journals *ABC* and *La Nación* developed an intense campaign against the fate of what they called ‘the knights of Villa Cisneros’, contributing to the image of the Saharan colony as a penitentiary.⁹⁴ The last significant group of political deportees arrived in Río del Oro in the summer of 1936, and was comprised of thirty-eight Canarian Republican politicians from Tenerife who had opposed the July rebellion against the Second Republic. As Pérez notes, the stay of this group

was not ... comfortable. Confined in the heat of the ‘jaimas’, they were not allowed to open the fabric windows or to approach the doors. From the first day they were forced to do several tasks, such as to dig the ditch that would act as a toilet or to build the road around the plain of the peninsula. In the fort, they had to suffer not only the waving of the royal [Spanish] flag, but also the close presence of a Nazi flag.⁹⁵

Three decades later, in 1968, an internal memo of the Ministry of Information talked about a leak to the press of the brutal conditions experienced by the young soldiers, students and workers sent to the disciplinary battalions in the Sahara, explicitly acknowledging the presence in such battalions of several students detained for promoting the clandestine Democratic Union in Barcelona, Malaga, Valencia, et cetera.

The third *Tercio* of the legion based in El Aaiún and the fourth *Tercio* based in Villa Cisneros, as well as the battalion of Cabrerizas, all had disciplinary platoons. The latter one, created in 1956 in Melilla, was sent to the Sahara one year later, to participate in operations to crush a native rebellion that had engulfed the territory for some months during 1957 and 1958. Once the conflict was over, the battalion stayed in El Aaiún, until 1962 when it was again redeployed inland, after an incident in which a legionnaire who had been sent to Cabrerizas months before shot dead and injured from a nearby roof several officials who were dancing at what was then the Casino de Oficiales. Those unfortunate soldiers and political prisoners sent to Cabrerizas and the disciplinary platoons of the legion, had to work mainly in the construction of roads between the different military garrisons. This is how the Ministry of Information internal memo described the disciplinary battalions in the Sahara:

The conditions of existence in the punishment platoon are infernal ... The platoon [Cabrerizas] is under the command of a Nazi, who proudly wears the Hitlerian Cross on his uniform. They are forced to work while marching for thirteen hours a day with only a few minutes to eat, which also must be done whilst simultaneously marching. It is prohibited to talk, smoke and receive letters. They sleep on the floor, without mattresses. Beatings are frequent. The guys are forced to march with sand sacks tied to their backs with wires.⁹⁶

The Spanish Sahara was in some respects a huge garrison in which almost the whole weight of the colonial administration rested upon the shoulders of the reactionary African army forged by Franco. Despite the mainstream narrative of Spain's 'friendly' colonialism – promoted intentionally by both the Saharawi and the Spanish historiography – the society that resulted from the progressive occupation of the territory was deeply segregated, to the benefit of a small settler population of merchants, civil servants and military personnel, attracted by the higher salaries of the overseas territory. It is true, however, that repression of the colonized population never reached the levels of neighbouring territories under French control; that the colonial presence in the territory was limited until the 1960s; that the general policy was informed by a laissez-faire attitude about the 'internal' affairs of the Saharawis as long as they did not challenge the Spanish hegemony; and also that the rapid economic development of the

late 1960s and early 1970s situated the Saharawis in one of the best positions in Africa, according to all social and economic indicators. But the Saharawis were relegated to a subordinate position and became an underclass in their own territory. The ‘friendliness’ of the Spanish strategy in the Sahara is, as is any justification of Western colonial past, an ideological operation, a fantasy, aimed at inscribing the past in a historical narrative acceptable from our present position.

The strategies of control of the colonial administration relied heavily upon the construction of an organized system of favours, economic incentives and corruption of which most of the Saharawi *chiuj* were an integral part, to their own benefit and social prestige. The Spanish administration reinterpreted the traditional Saharawi social structure, investing a number of *chiuj* and ‘local notables’ with a power that, in fact, they never had, according to the anthropological analysis produced by the Spanish colonial researchers. The traditional system of election of *chiuj* was heavily influenced, if not modified, through the development of a ‘special relationship’ between the colonial administration and certain native families in order to promote the prestige and influence of the loyal Saharawi ‘notables’. On the one hand, the Spanish colonial administration channelled most of the social benefits through a network of loyal *chiuj*, elevating them to a central position within their *cabilas*, *fahed* and *ahel* that no native notable had had in the past. In exchange, they signed wholeheartedly almost any document the Spanish administration asked them to support, and reaffirmed, whenever they were asked to, the loyalty to ‘motherland Spain’ of the tribes they were supposed to represent, according to the Spanish colonial administration. This system was coherent with the ideological coordinates of the Francoist dictatorial regime, in which there was no direct and free suffrage but a purely formal system of representation in which ‘notables’ sent by different organizations organically associated with the regime had the possibility of ratifying what had already been decided at higher levels. Under Francoism, in fact, the basic social institution was the family and the sole representative of that unit was the ‘head of family’. The tribal structure of the Sahara and the central role with which a number of selected notables, or heads of ‘extended families’, were invested by the Spanish administration could in fact be interpreted as an orientalist and

colonial variation of the underlying ideological Francoist assumptions, efficiently implemented by the Africanist army.

The problem with this approach might be the emergence of a powerful notable or small group of notables able to challenge Spanish hegemony. The strategy of control deployed by the colonial administration to prevent this from happening was through the promotion of a system of limited competition between the *chiuj*, balancing their power and managing their rivalries to prevent the creation of a single centre of power. As Bárbulo explains,

[e]ach time a *chej* received a higher quantity [of anything] than the others, the disputes started. A memo of the General Government of the Province dated on the 25 of December of 1969 ... reported the emergence of a strong rivalry among tribal chiefs: '[When they travel to El Aaiún] they try hard to meet with all the governmental authorities to obtain some benefit that was denied to them in their [territorial] office. They ask for some honorific title and, above all, to increment their personal prestige.' 'As a consequence – concludes [the memo] –, a climate of anxiety is created amongst the rest of the *chiuj*, who will not stop until they manage to be received [and treated] equally, not to be considered less important by their people.'⁹⁷

At the time this memo was written, a growing discontent among wide sectors of Saharawi society with the manoeuvres of the 'loyal' *chiuj* crystallized rapidly into a nationalist movement led by Mohamed Bassiri. Then, the young Saharawi nationalists linked their anticolonial struggle with a decided criticism of tribalism for the first time. The ossified *chiuj*, invested with a power they had never had before by the Spanish colonial administration, represented domination and control and acted as active deactivators of the potential mobilization of the changing Saharawi society. Years later, the new colonial powers that followed the Spanish retreat from the territory would continue with the same strategy of domination. The role given to some *chiuj* by the Moroccan administration and the creation in recent years, for example, of 'advisory' bodies such as CORCAS are examples par excellence of the persistent belief in the old Francoist recipes of control.

Chapter 2

From the Spanish ‘Peace’ to Armed Struggle: The Emergence of Saharawi Nationalism

‘Soy vecino de Aaiún’: economic development and social change in the Spanish Sahara

Lieutenant Colonel Alonso del Barrio, in collaboration with Captains Jorde and Izquierdo, were commissioned in 1973 to undertake an updated study about the changing Saharawi social structure. The study was conceived as a sort of pilot analysis for the planned census of the population, which would be carried out the following year. In the study, entitled *Las Tribus del Sahara*, the authors acknowledged that the hypothesis on which their whole study had been based – that the main principle organizing Saharawi social structure was descent and kinship – was collapsing very rapidly. ‘In these times’, conceded Alonso del Barrio, ‘to talk about tribal civilization is linked to underdevelopment, to secular backwardness, to levels of illiteracy, and ... the voices of the young [Saharawis] resonate in an attempt to eradicate such a social meaning’.¹ In a context in which ‘around 40 per cent of the population ... has become sedentary’, and many *chiuj* were seen as collaborators of the Spanish administration, ‘[m] any young people, when they were asked to which tribe and fraction they belong, responded politely, but proudly, that they were residents of Aaiún, with address in street x, number x’.² In other words, they openly challenged the colonial system of classification, denying that any relevance should be given to descent and

kinship and, therefore, refusing to identify themselves with any particular *cabila*.

The Spanish Sahara of the 1960s and 1970s was very different from the territory described and imagined by Bonelli, Bens, D'Almonte or Bullón in previous decades. As Caro Baroja noted at a conference in 1965, 'the living conditions [in the Sahara] have changed significantly, and my experiences [based on fieldwork done in the 1950s] can be considered to belong to an *almost remote past*',³ 'commerce has increased, bitterness (among the *cabilas*) has softened ... Thus, with the progress of industrial prospections and the increase of the Spanish population ... the nomad has opened his eyes to the exterior'.⁴ Diego Aguirre explains that during the second half of the 1960s 'nomadic society enters into a true crisis', for two main reasons.⁵ First, as I have already mentioned, 'the political institutions, the *chiuj* and the Yemaas, have been distorted by the colonization for its own designs ... the *chiuj* followed and supported the action of the Government, being more concerned about its own wealth than collective interest. They were then discredited.'⁶ Secondly, there was a 'significant economic transformation and an incipient industrialization that essentially modified the social structure' of the Spanish Sahara.⁷

Several factors overlapped during the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s that account for such economic transformation. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, after Moroccan independence, some of the Spanish troops stationed in the northern Moroccan protectorate were relocated to the Spanish Sahara. In addition, the revolts of 1957 in the enclave of Sidi-Ifni, the Tarfaya strip and parts of the Spanish Sahara, which we will see later, contributed to this growing militarization of the territory. Such an increase in the military population implied a parallel boost in the size of the Spanish civil population. And the political status of the territory also changed; it became, by a presidential decree dated 10 January 1958, a Spanish province, with the same politico-juridical rank of any other Spanish province and a system of government inspired by that of the Canary Islands. As the Institute of African Studies remarked pompously in 1966, with these changes '[t]he Sahara joined the national community with the same rights as its peninsular brothers of the oldest Hispanic lineage'.⁸

In addition to the military, the presence of Spanish settlers in the territory grew significantly, attracted by higher salaries in the expanding public administration and a system of tax benefits similar to the neighbouring Canary Islands. The Sahara became a 'tax free zone' that acted as a bridge between the Canaries and western Africa. In fact, the Spanish Sahara became the door to Africa for many Canarian merchants and entrepreneurs. One of the main businesses consisted in importing all sorts of products (from radios to tobacco) from the islands to the Spanish Sahara. Then they were sold not only to meet the growing local demand in the markets of El Aaiún or Villa Cisneros, but also to be traded or smuggled into neighbouring countries. The first but not the last stops for these goods were the markets of Tan Tan in the Tarfaya strip, Zuerat and Nouadibou in Mauritania and Tindouf in Algeria. Although this economic activity was originally dominated by Spanish merchants, many Saharawis also successfully participated in this lucrative commerce, very quickly becoming a new economic elite in the territory. In this new context of economic growth and 'fast and easy' money, a very significant number of Saharawis left their traditional nomadic and pastoral way of life during the 1960s and early 1970s to settle around El Aaiún, Villa Cisneros, Auserd, Smara, La Güera and other minor Spanish posts. In addition to business and job opportunities in the nascent industry, many also found employment in the Spanish administration, both civil and military. According to the 1974 Spanish census, over 60 per cent of Saharawis had settled in the previously mentioned towns, mainly in El Aaiún, where 38 per cent of the total population of the province were concentrated.

This process was facilitated and accelerated by a series of droughts during the 1960s and early 1970s that decimated the livestock of the nomads all over the Sahara and made life increasingly difficult for the 'sons of the clouds'. For some years, there were simply no clouds to follow, neither in the Spanish Sahara nor in the bordering Sahel regions.⁹ As Jeremy Keenan explains in his seminal study of the Kel Ahaggar, this was also one of the key factors that accelerated the 'destruction of the Tuareg way of life' in the Ahaggar massif of south eastern Algeria.¹⁰ In his words,

the plight of the Kel Ahaggar during this period has arisen as much from an act of God as an Act of state – in the form of drought, or to be more specific, a combination of factors centring

around the cumulative effect of several years of inadequate rainfall and overgrazing.¹¹

Of course, long periods of insufficient rain, in which pasture was not able to regenerate and the herds became skeletal or died, were nothing new in the region. Both the Saharawis and the Tuaregs of the Ahaggar massif were used to dealing with such episodic adversities. These periods of difficulty had always been part of the experience of the nomadic and mobile pastoral people of the Sahara. The problem, however, was ‘not so much that it [was] unusual or unexpected’, but that this time ‘the nomadic pastoralists [were] confronted by new constraints and situations that inhibit[ed] their traditional responses’;¹² responses such as the diversification of livestock holdings, raiding, confrontations over access to scarce available pastures and migration to other distant regions. Under the new colonial context, the business and wage-earning opportunities offered by the expanding Spanish administration to the Saharawis became the most appealing temporary response to the crisis.

The 1974 Spanish census clearly reflects these changes.¹³ Although the most common profession assigned to the 38,336 Saharawi men included in the census was still ‘herder’ or ‘nomad pastoralist’, they represented only 19.5 per cent of the total (7,488 in absolute numbers). That is to say, according to colonial statistics, less than one-fifth of the Saharawis listed as ‘economically active’ were mobile pastoralists, while the rest – four-fifths – had already settled around towns and military posts to seek, at least temporarily, waged employment or other business opportunities. The census showed that 6,058 Saharawi men (15 per cent) were classified as construction or industrial workers. Most of them (5,404) were unqualified workers mainly employed in the construction of roads, housing and other basic infrastructure, which had been one of the priorities of the colonial administration since the mid-1960s. As the Institute of African Studies stated propagandistically,

[t]he development of a vast plan of Public Works recently acquired an intensive rhythm, particularly in respect of the improvement of terrestrial, aerial and maritime communications ... The harbour of Villa Cisneros has been completed; the pier of El Aaiún is close to being completed ... The airports of El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros have been enlarged and modernized ... and runways have been built in Smara, La Hagunia, Auserd, Argub, Birenzarán, La Güera,

Anech, Agacha and other places. Among the primary, secondary and other minor roads, there are 5,200 kilometres in total, which amounts to a considerable network by desert standards.¹⁴

A crucial factor, perhaps the main one in fact, in explaining this renewed interest of the Spanish government in the Sahara was the discovery of some of the largest and highest-grade deposits of phosphate ore in the world. The presence of phosphates and other minerals, including oil, had been strongly suspected since the first scientific expeditions to the interior of the desert in the 1930s. During the 1940s, a series of expeditions led by geologists Francisco Hernández-Pacheco and Manuel Alia Medina produced the first detailed geological surveys, which showed very encouraging results.¹⁵ By 1947, Alia Medina had already produced data suggesting the existence of a very large deposit of high-grade phosphates near the Uad Bu Craá, about one hundred kilometres south-west of El Aaiún. In 1950, he published a short article presenting his findings in the journal *Africa*.¹⁶ Alia Medina's article immediately rang alarm bells among the Francoist elites. General Franco himself visited the territory in October that year: one of his first meetings in El Aaiún was with Alia Medina, who informed him personally about the findings of what he believed to be the world's largest phosphate deposits, which overall might amount to more than ten billion tons of minerals of exceptional purity (around 75–80 per cent against the 68–75 per cent found in Morocco's deposits, for example). Alia Medina's discovery was a crucial turning point in the history of the Western Sahara.

The Spanish government then commissioned the public company ADARO to carry out a systematic geological survey of the territory. The works commenced in 1952 and lasted for ten years, until the deposit of Bu Craá was demarcated. Then, on 4 July 1962, the Spanish National Institute of Industry (INI) created the company ENMINSA (National Mining Company of the Sahara), which was commissioned to complete the necessary works in order to start exploiting the immense Bu Craá phosphate deposit. During the following decade ENMINSA also did some drilling in search of exploitable oil reserves, through another subsidiary state firm called Ibérico de Sondeos. The Francoist government had regulated the possible exploitation of the Saharan oil deposits, both on land and offshore, with a new Law of Hydrocarbons passed in March 1959. One year later, the territory was divided into 108 rectangular blocks and several drilling

concessions were granted mainly to Spanish companies. In 1966, the public company CEPSA joined forces with giant GULF to begin drilling offshore. Petroleum deposits were found in several locations both on land and offshore. However, no company decided to make the necessary investment to start their exploitation, given their low quality, the low prices of the petroleum at that time and the lack of appropriate infrastructure.¹⁷

The phosphate deposits were undoubtedly more promising than those of oil. In only six years, ENMINSA invested 13,450 million pe setas in Bu Craá. In August 1969, once the deposit was ready for exploitation, the INI constituted, with an initial capital of more than 5,000 million pesetas, a new firm to handle the mining work: Fosfatos de Bu Craá (known popularly as Fosbucraá). The investment in Bu Craá included the construction of a colossal 98-kilometre-long conveyor belt to transport the mineral from the mines to the Atlantic across the desert. The belt, which cost \$72 million, was the longest in the world. Once at the coast, the phosphate was treated and washed in a plant with a capacity of more than 300,000 tons. Since there was no natural harbour in El Aaiún Playa, where the belt met the Atlantic, a 3-kilometre-long pier into the sea was built to load the vessels that would finally transport the mineral to the international markets. In 1975, Fosbucraá had 2,706 direct employees, of whom 954 were Saharawis, and had become

the powerful train that forcefully pushed the economy of the colony. The water-desalination plant of the company was responsible for providing water to El Aaiún, and the electric plant, with 55 million Kw/h, guaranteed electricity for the whole colony ... The houses built by the company increased employment opportunities in the construction sector and its salaries animated the commercial sector like never before.¹⁸

In 1974, 956 Saharawis (2.5 per cent of 'active' men) were self-employed merchants and traders in the bustling towns, especially in El Aaiún, the capital of the territory since it had become a province in 1958. There were 703 Saharawis (1.8 per cent) working as drivers, mainly for the colonial civil administration, but also for military and private firms attracted by the economic prospects of the territory. In addition, 1,338 Saharawis (3.5 per cent) were enrolled in the native corps of the Spanish army, the Policía Territorial and the Tropas Nómadas.

Among the younger Saharawi men registered in the census, the most frequent occupation (4,574) was ‘student’, although this represented only a minority of approximately one in five (18 per cent) Saharawi males aged 0–24 (25,534). The situation was even worse amongst Saharawi females. Of the 23,900 females aged 0–24 listed in the census, only 1,153 were classified as ‘students’, that is, only 4.8 per cent. Therefore, only 11.5 per cent of the total Saharawi population under twenty-four years of age was enrolled at that time in the new institutionalized system of colonial education, which comprised four primary schools in El Aaiún, one in Smara and Villa Cisneros and thirty smaller rural schools scattered across the territory, as well as two institutes of secondary education (in El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros).

Despite the pompous proclaims of the Francoist regime about ‘brotherhood’ and ‘fraternity’ between the Spanish ‘residents’ and the Saharawis, colonial society was very segregated and the system of education clearly mirrored such social division. The Saharawis constituted the necessary cheap labour for the development plans of the territory delineated during the 1960s, whose main beneficiaries would primarily be a small number of Spanish ‘residents’ – to use the terminology of the time – and companies. They had a subordinated social status and limited access to services provided by the colonial administration, which had mainly been designed to serve first and foremost the needs of the Spanish expatriate community. This segregation between Spanish and Saharawi populations was clearly reflected in the pages of *Sahara: Semanario de la Provincia*, the only weekly newspaper published in El Aaiún between 1963 and 1971. It was written only in Spanish, and references to Saharawis are surprisingly scarce. An uninformed reader who checked such a publication today would have the impression that the territory was almost exclusively inhabited by peninsular and Canarian Spaniards. *Sahara* offers a very detailed picture of the social, cultural and political life of the province; an inside glance that clearly shows the segregation between the two communities. Even when discussing the future of the territory, which had been on the decolonization agenda of the UN since the mid-1960s, the voices of the Saharawis were systematically excluded from the debate, with the only exception being a limited number of loyal *chiuj* who, from time to time, featured in the pages of *Sahara* praising effusively the official Francoist position.

The very decision not to include in *Sahara* any section or text in Arabic and/or Hassania offers no doubt about the audience to which it was addressed, since at that time only a minority of Saharawis could read Spanish.¹⁹ According to the 1974 census, only 8,009 (13 per cent) Saharawis could read and write in Spanish, out of a total population of 61,202 Saharawis aged over five. The number of those able to read and write in Arabic was double this, at 16,273, approximately 26.6 per cent of the population.²⁰ In total, the literacy rate in the Spanish Sahara in 1974 was 28 per cent, which in fact does compare very favourably with the surrounding countries. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the levels of adult literacy during the 1990s in Chad (13.6 per cent in 1991), Burkina Fasso (12.2 per cent in 1993) and Mali (19 per cent in 1997) were significantly lower than that of the Spanish Sahara during the 1970s. Niger reached only 28 per cent in 2005, Morocco 41.6 per cent in 1994, Algeria 49.6 per cent in 1987 and Mauritania 51.2 per cent in 2000.²¹ Despite the segregation of Saharawis under Spanish colonial rule, it is necessary to note that most of the indicators usually taken into account by international organizations to measure the level of ‘development’ situated the Western Sahara in a very strong position in its regional context during the early 1970s. To give another example, out of the 7,927 buildings inscribed in the land registry in 1974 (51.5 per cent of which belonged to Saharawis), 56.3 per cent had running water, 64.4 per cent were connected to the public sewerage network or had septic tanks and 73 per cent had electricity.²²

This considerable – and, of course, unevenly distributed – quality of life and economic wealth in the Spanish Sahara was noticed in the bordering countries, especially by the members of the *cabilas* mainly based in the Spanish province but who were then living in neighbouring Mauritania, Algeria and the Tarfaya strip. In the words of Bachir Mustafa Sayed, one of the future leaders of the Polisario, who had emigrated with his family in the late 1950s to Tan Tan in the Tarfaya strip,

[i]n the south of Morocco the image that we had of the [Spanish] colony was that they were very rich. Their level of living was also envied in Mauritania. The prosperity was palpable, especially at the beginning of the seventies. It was thought that under Spain everybody had a wage, even without working. For the young, the Western Sahara meant the cigarettes that were

brought to the territory, the radios, the good stuff. The El Aaiún radio station publicized such a variety of products ²³

El Aaiún, which ‘just a few years ago had been a group of houses scattered in the desert’,²⁴ ‘only a village with a few isolated houses that timidly attempted to form a few sandy streets’,²⁵ grew overwhelmingly, ‘breaking all predictions’,²⁶ and became ‘an amazing reality’ in the African context.²⁷ According to World Bank statistics for 1975, the gross national income (GNI) per capita in the Spanish Sahara was an amazing \$2,550, in comparison with \$180 for Mauritania, \$270 for Morocco and \$430 for Algeria.²⁸ In fact, the Moroccan GNI per capita in 2005 was only \$1,740, a figure significantly lower than the one reached in the Spanish Sahara three decades earlier!²⁹ In the early 1970s, El Aaiún was definitely a place full of opportunities, as Bachir, a young Saharawi in his twenties at that time, recalls:

The most important thing was that there was employment, there was plenty of money in circulation, and anything could be bought. In every house there was a washing machine, black and white television, a fridge, a radio. The traders went to the Canary Islands to buy merchandise. I worked in Fos Bucraá and in 1974 I went on to Las Palmas (in the Canary Islands) on holiday. Most people had a Land Rover and some households had two cars. The Seat 600 was very fashionable amongst the young, later on came the Seat 127, which also became very fashionable. Young people went to bars and discos; we bought good clothes and smoked Marlboro. We got Raiban glasses. In El Aaiún there was a group of hippies and they were really into Jimi Hendrix.³⁰

Ahmed, from Villa Cisneros, was eighteen in 1975. He was not really into Jimi Hendrix: he preferred The Beatles and the Spanish protest singer-songwriters in vogue at the time. ‘When the war started I was studying in Spain’, he remembers,

and I immediately came back to join the Polisario. I returned with only three things: a few Joan Manuel Serrat cassettes, a Federico García Lorca book and a Neruda book ... I spent the next 16 years at the battlefield ... I have not seen my mother or sisters for the last 28 years. They stayed in Villa Cisneros, but now I talk to my mother over the phone. She has kept my room as I left it, as a sort of museum. On one of the walls there is a poster of The Beatles. On the side table lies a Che Guevara book and my bell-bottoms are still hanging in the wardrobe ... When

I think of my hometown, I think of my childhood friends, many of them Spanish. In many ways, I also felt Spanish then. I studied in Spanish; my parents had Spanish identity documents ... When I think of my hometown, I think of the smell of fried fish at my grandmother's house. I think of the cinema, the Westerns and all the children clapping when the cowboys chased the Indians ... it was only later that I realized that we [the Saharawis] were the Indians in this story.³¹

Ahmed belongs to a small coastal tribe from the south, but his childhood friends were from a variety of *cabilas*. Young Saharawis from the Ulad Delim, Tridrarin, Arosien, Ait Lashen, Ulad Chej, Imeraguen, Berikalah, et cetera, studied and played together in the streets of Villa Cisneros. At school there were no differences between them, as there were no differences between the sorts of jobs and salaries of their parents and older relatives. The economic revolution of the territory dramatically undermined the traditional social structure and displaced descent and kinship to a secondary role as a principle for the organization of social life, as Enrique Alonso del Barrio recognized in the quote that opened this chapter.

With Spain there were neither better nor worse *cabilas* ... there were only more or less numerous *cabilas*. For the Spanish employer ... what was the difference between an Erguibi, a Tidrarin or a Maharrero? They were all waged employees, they earned the same salary and there was no privilege in the treatment ... In the firefighters' station of Villa Cisneros, proud Ulad Delim and Imeraguen pariah worked together ... In the Tropas Nómadas there were soldiers from all the *cabilas* together under the command of Spanish officers. In Fosbucraá, the tribal origin was not asked, and Chorfás, Arab and Znaga did the same sort of jobs. It could be the case that a haratin occupied a better-paid post than someone of nobler origins. Access to education broke with the cultural specialization of the *cabilas*. At university, there were Ulad Tidrarin, Ergueibat, Izarguien, Ahel Chej Ma el Ainín and even haratin.³²

However, it would be wrong to assume, following García and Diego Aguirre, that with these profound changes the centrality of the *asabiya*,³³ understood as a sort of cohesive force of the group, as mutual solidarity and the capacity for collective action – a sort of organic solidarity in Durkheimian words – was replaced by a new 'capitalist'³⁴ and 'urban'³⁵ individualism, as they suggest in certain passages of their works. What really changed were the foundations upon which the *asabiya*, the social

cement that held the community together, was organized. The crisis of traditional society created the conditions for the emergence of new forms of collective solidarity and action. ““With Spain we are all Znaga (tributaries)” (of the Spanish), mourned an elderly to Caro Baroja.’³⁶ It was this context that created new forms of solidarity and opened the possibility for the emergence of a

class-consciousness among the workers ... The tribal consciousness is substituted by a national consciousness that unites all these nuclei [workers, merchants, soldiers, civil servants, et cetera.], who will confront, first ideologically and later actively, the colonial power and its creations, such as the *chiuj* ...³⁷

Technologies of control: towards the census

The economic revolution of the Spanish Sahara, perfectly exemplified in the bustling streets of El Aaiún, opened the space for new forms, discourses and movements of resistance. However, as Juan Carlos Gimeno and Mohamed Ali point out, the ‘analysis made of the conditions and effects of the modernization of the Spanish Sahara by the Spanish civil servants (and the majority of intellectuals)’ was so inadequate that it

prevented them from seeing, or giving enough value, to what on the other hand the colonial services of intelligence were insistently documenting: the emergence and consolidation of a movement of resistance, which was expanding, and whose focuses of dynamism were related to those Saharawis who represented precisely the new ‘modern’ Saharawi space.³⁸

Gimeno and Ali illustrate the deep changes in Saharawi society during the 1960s and 1970s, giving as an example a literary dispute between two groups of Saharawi poets about the number of rounds of the tea ceremony, a central element in Saharawi social life. The first group of poets argued in favour of four rounds of tea, following the tradition that linked each round with one of the four Muslim Caliphs and Sacred Books. The second group of poets, argued in favour of only three rounds, breaking with tradition, therefore, since

new obligations have given rise to the need of new forms of measuring and using time. One of [the poets] related in a poem: 'The law we are subjected to only allows us to prepare three rounds of tea and ... we can not oppose it.' The author when he refers to 'law' is making a reference to the new system of life that many Saharawis adopted when moving to the cities to work in companies and state institutions established in the Spanish Sahara. The debate ... shows us the drastic changes that took place in the Saharawi cultural conceptions. The new situation and context should be accompanied by changes in the conception of space (the cities as the points of reference, as settlement places and places of work, against the nomads' movement in the desert) and time (a new imposed law that they had to accept), which established new rhythms in the organization of everyday and ritual life no longer referred to ... the cycles of nature, but linked to the requirements of waged employment and the space of opportunities ... of the colonial enterprise.³⁹

The colonial administration overlooked these changes, or at least refused to integrate them into its discourses of control, and remained obstinately attached to an exotic, orientalist and tribalist conception of Saharawi society that Caro Baroja had already acknowledged in 1965 as belonging to 'an almost remote past'.⁴⁰ This tribalist perspective permeated profoundly the strategies of control that were implemented. These strategies can be clearly explored by looking at the design of the administrative structure of the Spanish Sahara once it was given the status of province, and in the efforts to census and classify the native population of the territory.

In 1958, the Spanish government reorganized the politico-juridical structure of what until then had been called Spanish Western Africa, which comprised three different territories: the Western Sahara, the Tarfaya strip and Sidi-Ifni. The Western Sahara and the enclave of Sidi-Ifni were then conferred the status of Spanish provinces, by a presidential decree dated 10 January 1958. The territory between the Uad Draá and the parallel 27'40 (that is, north of the Western Sahara), was ceded to the Moroccan kingdom by virtue of the Cintra Accords, signed in Portugal on 1 April 1958. This territory, which we have called the Tarfaya strip, had been attributed to Morocco in a clause imposed by France in the Franco-Spanish Treaty of 1912 that delineated the definitive possessions of Spain in north Africa. The territory was given the status of a Spanish protectorate, linked to Morocco, although in fact the Moroccan sultanate had never had either sovereignty or any other territorial right or actual control south of the river Draá, as the

International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 1975.⁴¹ The historical evidence examined by ICJ demonstrated that in pre-colonial times the lands south of the Draá were neither de facto controlled by the sultan of Morocco (territories called Bled el Majzen or Land of the Majzen) nor considered by the sultanate to be under its authority despite not being able to control them de facto because of the continuous state of insurrection of the tribes of the area (called Bled es Siba or Land of Insurrection). Bled es Siba's southern frontier was the Uad Draá. In other words, the Draá marked the frontier between the territories claimed by the Moroccan sultanate in precolonial times – although not under its de facto control – and the deserted territory completely out of its control inhabited by Tekna and other Bedouin tribes such as the Erguibat. As Ruiz Miguel rightly argues, the division of the territory south of the Draá into two different entities imposed by France in 1912 – the Tarfaya strip given the status of a sort of southern Moroccan protectorate, on the one hand, and the Spanish or Western Sahara, on the other – and the definitive cession of the Tarfaya strip to the new Moroccan kingdom in 1958, 'had and still has very serious consequences', as we will see.⁴²

The structure and organization of the new Spanish Sahara province created in 1958 was initially delineated by a law passed in April 1961, which was reformed in November of the following year to give the province its definitive administrative form. The highest authority of the Spanish Sahara was the general governor, who acted as 'the representative of the Government of the Nation in the Sahara Province, all the other authorities and civil servants who ... serve in the territory being subordinate to him'.⁴³ The governor, directly named by the Spanish government in Madrid, was also the chief of staff of the Sahara military sector, which was part of the Canary Islands-Sahara Unified Military Command. Therefore, both the civil and martial authority was concentrated in the hands of the governor of the territory. Under his direct command was a general secretariat, in charge of the civil administration of the territory. It was structured in a series of technical offices and directorates of areas such as finance, education, urbanism, infrastructure, mining and industry, public health, et cetera. The general secretary was the second-highest authority of the province and acted as governor in the absence of the general governor.

Also under the direct command of the governor was the Service of Interior Policy, in control of two crucial areas: public order and internal security. The Service of Interior Policy coordinated the actions of the three police corps present in the territory: the Territorial Police (formed by Saharawis but with Spanish officers), the Governmental Police and the Armed Police. In addition, the Service of Interior Policy was also responsible for the Census Central Service and the Registry of Native Population. Finally, the administrative structure of the Spanish Sahara was completed by three territorial governmental delegations: the North Region Delegation (whose central offices were in El Aaiún), the North-east Region Delegation (with its headquarters in Smara) and the South Region Delegation (with its headquarters in Villa Cisneros). The role of these delegations was limited to the coordination and implementation on the ground of the policies developed at higher levels by the general governor, the general secretary and the chief of the Service of Interior Policy. Needless to say, none of these posts was nominated or elected by the population of the territory.

Although all the effective power rested in the hands of these military officers and civil servants directly chosen by the Francoist authorities in Madrid, the politico-juridical structure of the province was completed with a series of formal administrative institutions that theoretically represented the voice of the native population. At the scale that would correspond to the local level in other Spanish regions, the Sahara province was structured into *councils*, *minor local entities* and *nomad fractions*. There were only two local councils, El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros. Both were led by a native mayor, who was always a loyal *chej*. They were also representatives of the province in the Francoist courts in Madrid. El Aaiún council had twelve councillors and Villa Cisneros eight. Half of them were theoretically elected by the ‘heads of family’ and half by the representatives of the associations of commerce, industry, culture and liberal professions. These ‘elections’, unsurprisingly, were entirely controlled by the Service of Interior Policy and the governor’s office to ensure the presence in both councils of only the loyal ‘notables’. In the smaller towns and settlements, local assemblies formed by a president and four members were established under the name of minor local entities. Again, the Francoist authorities selected for these local symbolic posts (symbolic because their effective power was actually non-existent) what they considered to be a balanced representation of loyal

chiuj from the tribal fractions with a higher presence in the area concerned. The map of ‘local’ power (emptied of any decisory power, but important as a vehicle for distributing favours) was completed with the creation of the so-called nomad fractions. With this move, the Francoist government attempted to institutionalize the Saharawi tribes as the arena for the representation of the native population of the province. According to Francoist rhetoric, the nomad fractions were necessary not only to represent the significant sectors of the native population still living as mobile pastoralists in the desert, but also because they were the institutions that most accurately represented the traditions and customs of the native population of the desert. Each nomad fraction was represented by a *chej* or notable, chosen (indirectly) by the Spanish authorities. Therefore, a self-interested and distorted reading of the traditional tribal structure – collapsing at the time – was translated by the colonial administration into a sort of de-territorialized local level of government and representation of the indigenous population and a selected network of *chiuj* who were given a political status similar to that of the mayors in mainland Spain. In other words, in the changing context of the 1960s and 1970s, marked by the rapid process of sedentarization and urbanization, the crisis of the traditional social structure and the emergence of a new form of *asabiya*, the tribes ‘acquired the status of legal and representative institutions’.⁴⁴ As I have said, the Spanish administration showed with these moves its incapacity (or unwillingness) to read the deep social changes that were taking place to the extreme point of claiming that with the new system ‘the position of “chej” was revalorized (especially because of the) acknowledgement of its role of spokesperson to the authorities of the needs, aspirations and desires of the persons they represent’.⁴⁵

At provincial level, two representative political institutions were formed: the *Cabildo* and the general assembly or *Yemaa*. The provincial *Cabildo*, corresponded to what in the rest of Spanish provinces was called *Diputación Provincial*, but had adopted the name of *Cabildo* following the tradition of the Canary Islands. It was a sort of regional government theoretically in charge of certain issues within the areas such as beneficence, sports, agriculture, health or education, although the budget was very limited and the actual areas of action more of a symbolic nature. It

was composed of a president and fourteen councillors, elected by the local councils, the minor local entities, the nomad fractions and the professionals association. The system, therefore, was conceived to reproduce the symbolic power held by the network of loyal *chiuj* who occupied the posts at the lower levels of government. In 1967, the political structure of the province was completed with a general assembly, also called the *Yemaa*, in a final attempt by the Francoist authorities to provide a more democratic façade for the colony and, therefore, legitimize the unwillingness to decolonize the territory as the United Nations began to demand insistently. The *Yemaa* was composed of 102 parliamentarians: the president of the *Cabildo*, the mayors of El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros and one more representative selected by these councils, forty representatives of the tribal *chiuj*, forty representatives of the ‘heads of families’ and sixteen representatives sent by the associations of workers, artisans and other professionals. The result was obviously a trustworthy institution (from the Francoist perspective) that would never dare openly to confront the decisions of the Spanish government and its representatives in the territory. In fact, the *Yemaa* was conceived as a sort of advisory council with neither legislative nor executive powers. Its functions were:

1st To examine and produce an advisory opinion about the issues of interest for the territory ...

2nd To be informed of the ... laws or decrees that affect the territory [and to] formulate observations and suggestions ...

3rd To propose to the Government, by its own initiative, the adoption of juridical measures and norms required for ... the implementation of the Laws of the State.

4th To inform the General Governor of the needs and aspirations of the Saharawi people. With this aim, a Political Council integrated by five representatives of the Assembly, which will be selected by the Governor, will be constituted. This Council will have a permanent and deliberative character.^{[46](#)}

As we have seen, the whole system of representation of the native population of the Spanish Sahara was designed based on the assumption that the tribes were still the main social institutions organizing the social life in the province and delineating the identities of its indigenous inhabitants.

The effort to undertake a census of the population was also inspired by the same underlying assumptions. The first serious attempt to register the population of the territory dates back to the mid-1950s, in the context of an increasing control and militarization of the desert. However, as Miguel Molina noted in his seminal *Contribución al Estudio del Censo de Población en el Sáhara Español*, it was a very difficult task given the nature of the territory and its inhabitants:

[t]he significant size ... of the country has not made the control of the population easy, and the fact that the latter lacks a fixed settlement, is nomadic, and shows great imprecision about figures when giving information has made the task even greater.⁴⁷

Molina's analysis introduced the key ideas upon which the first attempts to carry out an exhaustive census of the population were based. He had travelled to the Sahara in the early 1950s, with anthropologist Caro Baroja. In fact, Baroja wrote the prologue of Molina's book, published in 1954, just a few months before his influential *Estudios Saharianos*. The approach of both works was very similar, not to say identical, but the objectives were very different. While *Estudios Saharianos* was an academic anthropological study concerned with the systematic description and analysis of a traditional nomadic society, Molina's work was an attempt to apply such knowledge and to produce a practical guide for the registration and classification of the population of the Spanish colony. Baroja's gaze was more concerned with the past than the future; more concerned with the social stratification of the nomads, their traditions, customs, myths, values, economic practices, et cetera than with the social changes that the Sahara was at that moment starting to experience. Molina's gaze followed this approach and articulated a methodological guide for the census inspired by what he called 'the indigenous procedures', which elevated the *cabilas* to the centre of colonial discourses of classification and identified agnation as the main principle of social solidarity and cohesion in the territory.⁴⁸ Hence, based on 'all the material collected', the point of departure of the census should be the preparation of a detailed 'tribal map':⁴⁹

[O]nce we knew well the so-called, by the Administration, fractions and sub-fractions [of each *cabila*], it is not very difficult to determine at least the number of heads of family, or what is

the same, the number of tents or homes. [Consequently], first of all, for the calculation of the population it will be of fundamental help to elaborate the schemas particular of each fraction within each *cabila*.⁵⁰

In addition, this strategy was very helpful for the Spanish colonial administration since the power given to each loyal *chej* would be partly determined by the estimated demographic weight of the *cabila* they theoretically represented. Molina himself acknowledged the limitations of this approach in the very first pages of his work, but the ball was already rolling. He noted that the end of the *ghazzis*, and of the resulting ‘perennial lack of tranquillity’ imposed by the colonial administration, was generating two complementary effects. On the one hand, the mobility of the *cabilas*,

sometimes disproportionate because of the fights, has diminished greatly, being limited to the strict mobility required for shepherding. The need and convenience of the natives to accept ... the protection of the Offices of Indigenous Affairs, is contributing ... to their relative ‘localization’ within the areas of influence or jurisdiction of each [office]. ... The other effect ... has consisted in the achievement ... of a better coexistence among the *cabilas* ... [T]oday, the practice of ... amalgamation [of different *cabilas*] when travelling and, in many cases the establishment of heterogeneous camps (‘frigs’) can be observed⁵¹

The censuses of 1950 and 1960 registered only the Saharawis settled in or around the towns, villages and military posts scattered along the desert. It was not until 1967 that, following the route opened by Mulero and Baroja in the previous decade, there was a serious attempt to register the whole Saharawi population. In addition to those settled and fully incorporated into the colonial economic circuit, a significant part of the mobile pastoralists have also fixed their areas of mobility, usually taking as a point of reference the Spanish posts that could provide them not only with services such as health but also a temporary and supplementary income, as well as opportunities for trade and barter. The main problem, of course, was how to reach what was defined by the colonial administration as the ‘purely’ nomad population, who were not registered with any territorial Office of Indigenous Affairs.

In a first phase, research teams combed exhaustively for a period of three months every one of the sixteen demarcations into which the province had been divided for this purpose, registering and interviewing the entire

population of the *frigs* they found. The result was a final ‘censual sample’ of 26,325 persons (including those settled), which would constitute the base for the next stage. Based on this rich information and on the extensive knowledge about the traditional social structure, the researchers selected 176 ‘censual units’, considered to be representative of the rest of the population. Six teams revisited these ‘censual units’, and collected more exhaustively all the possible information about the members of these *ahel* (families), their sub-fractions and fractions, as well as their areas of mobility. The final estimate was of 46,546 persons living in the Spanish Sahara, of which 22,485 were members of the Erguibat confederation. The most common occupation among those classified as ‘active’ was still nomad pastoralists (6,176 persons), but it was already followed very closely by the construction workers, which was the declared occupation of 3,957 Saharawis.⁵² The drought in the desert was just beginning and Fosbucráa had not yet started the extraction of phosphate ore, but the signs of change were already unequivocal in the Spanish Sahara.

Seven years later, in 1974, and pressured by the UN to organize a self-determination referendum to decide the future of the territory, the Spanish administration carried out the definitive census of the population. This time, there could be no estimations since the objective was not to have approximate demographic information in order to design policies, but to have an exhaustive and comprehensive list of voters for a referendum. With this aim, a more ambitious plan to search and scrutinize the whole territory was designed. The strategy of the previous censuses, based in part on estimates about the number the members of each tribal fraction, sub-fraction and *ahel* considered to be based in the territory, was neither appropriate nor necessary. The knowledge of the social structure, networks, areas of mobility, et cetera of the traditional nomadic society would be of precious value for locating and registering the remaining mobile pastoralists. But the census was not, and could not be under any circumstance, a tribal register of the members of *cabilas* with a presence in the Spanish colony. It was a census of the people with the right to vote in the self-determination referendum that should put an end to a century of Spanish colonialism. And, as in the rest of Africa, the right to vote should be restricted to the natives (that is, non-Europeans) based at that particular

historical moment within the colonial borders of the territory in question. Therefore, in order to find and register every nomadic *frig* located in the Spanish Sahara, ten research teams with several Land Rovers and supported by military helicopters, travelled all across the territory for months in search of the ‘pure’ nomads not based around any of the growing urban centres and military posts. After they had travelled more than 60,000 kilometres over several months and bearing in mind that in the desert news travelled very fast (needless to say, the teams used the ‘snow ball’ methodology), it is unlikely that a very significant number of nomads escaped the Spanish research teams. It also has to be taken into consideration that the nomad population of the desert was not, and in fact never had been, very numerous because of the hardship of the environment and the scarcity of natural resources. The final census included 73,497 Saharawis, of which only 35,909 were seventeen years old or more (and, therefore, would be eligible to vote a year later in a self-determination referendum). This list, as we have said, included only those Saharawis living within the internationally recognized borders of the Spanish Sahara, either settled (60,246) or nomad (12,428).

This information, which I consider fairly accurate, could have been presented in several ways. The strategy of organization, classification and dissemination of the censal data was mediated by the (ideological) election of the social characteristics considered to be more relevant for the knowledge and understanding of the analysed population. And the gaze of the Spanish colonial researchers and administrators was still fascinated by the romantic image of a mysterious desert populated by proud tribes. Therefore, not surprisingly, one of the main variables chosen to classify and present the information collected was the tribal affiliation of each native living in the territory. As we have stressed, it was not a census of the members of the tribes a majority of whose members were based in the Spanish Sahara (or with some kind of presence in the Spanish Sahara), but a census of the actual native inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara. Obviously, no attempt was made to include in such a list those Erguibat, Izarguien, Ulad Delim, et cetera living in the neighbouring areas of Mauritania, Algeria or the Tarfaya strip. The map of postcolonial Africa has not been drawn following any hypothetical cultural, ethnic or tribal borders (always contested and open to discussion anyway, as is also the very concept of

ethnic group, tribe and so on), but founded on a scrupulous respect for the frontiers inherited from colonialism. But the legacy of D'Almonte, Bullón or Mulero (with their 'anthropological' fascination for the *cabilas*) and the need to legitimize the role given by the colonial administration to a number of selected loyal *chiuj* as 'representatives' of the people of the territory, determined the way in which the information was classified and presented. This strategy of presentation, directly based on Francoist strategies of control, opened and facilitated the way for future debates about who should vote in the self-determination referendum, which Rabat embraced with all its love and passion in order to boycott any democratic solution to the future of the Western Sahara.

1957–8: The roots of Saharawi anti-colonial resistance?

Rabat's interest in the lands south of the Bled es Siba dates back to 1956, when the leader of the Istiqlal Party, Al-al El Fassi, formulated the idea of Greater Morocco, which he claimed to be the legitimate heir of the Almoravid Empire of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Greater Morocco extended from the Strait of Gibraltar to the River Senegal and comprised the Western Sahara, most of Mauritania, part of Mali and the eastern part of the Algerian desert, stretching from Tindouf to Bechar. France put an end to its Moroccan protectorate in March 1956 and Spain followed the French steps one month later, ending its presence in the Rif. Two months later, in a speech in Tangiers, a euphoric El Fassi, situated the 'historical' southern border of the new independent kingdom in Saint Louis, Senegal. In July, *Al-Alam*, the newspaper of the Istiqlal Party, published the map of Greater Morocco.^{[53](#)}

In the second half of the 1950s, winds of change were blowing in the whole Maghreb region. Spain strengthened its presence and control of its Saharan possessions. But France, the main colonial power of the region, was facing mounting problems in the territories under its control. In Tunisia, after years of confrontation, France agreed a status of internal autonomy for the territory in 1955, with only foreign affairs remaining in the hands of Paris. Autonomy lasted for only one year, and in 1956, just a

few months after Morocco, the Republic of Tunisia formally gained its independence. Algeria at that time was on fire, sunken in a brutal war between the Front of National Liberation (FNL) and the French army. The war cost over one and a half million lives between 1954 and 1962, the year of Algerian independence. Two years earlier, Mauritania had also achieved its independence, under a chorus of protests aired vehemently by a new Moroccan nationalist political elite fascinated with the idea of ‘recovering’ an imagined historical empire, a golden era distant in the deep past. For an entire decade, Rabat would keep at the UN its formal claim over the Mauritanian territory, not officially recognizing the new republic until 1969. Algerian western borders were not recognized by Morocco’s nationalist elite either. In September 1963, only one year after the signature between France and the FNL of the Évian Accords that put an end to the Algerian War and paved the way for the independence of the last French territory in the region, Moroccan troops crossed the colonial frontiers and occupied several positions in the strip of Algerian desert that stretches from Tindouf to Bechar. The Algerian army, with Cuban and Egyptian military aid, managed to repel the Moroccan offensive. Confrontations along the border continued for some months, until February 1964 when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) brokered a formal ceasefire that put an end to the War of the Sands. But the tensions along the Algerian frontier have not yet ceased today. Moroccan propagandists still continue to assert Rabat’s ‘right to claim the vast territory of the Sahara which included Touat, Tidikelt, Gouara and Tindouf’, areas they still consider ‘to be Moroccan territory although they had been annexed by French Algeria by unilateral decision of France in 1912’.⁵⁴ Mohamed Cherkaoiu, in his bizarre reading of the War of the Sands, goes as far as to say that the confrontations ended because ‘[t]he Moroccans pushed for kindness ... to the point of handing over some disputed territory’,⁵⁵ while Algeria, on the other hand, ‘never had the slightest intention of handing over to Morocco one inch of territory inherited from the colonial era’!⁵⁶ In any case, in the mid-1960s, with Mauritania and Mali independent since 1960 and Algeria since 1962, it became clear for the aspirations of the new nationalist Moroccan elite that the *weakest link* in the region, the only remaining part of the imagined

Almoravid/Cherifian Empire whose international status could still be questioned was the Spanish Sahara.

The first Moroccan attempt to intervene, discreetly, in the affairs of the Spanish colony dates back to 1957. According to Briones, Limam and Salek, one year before that, a delegation of *chiuj* from some tribes based in the Spanish Sahara and neighbouring regions travelled to Rabat to congratulate Mohamed V on his return from exile and on the liberation of his country, the first in the Maghreb region to become independent. At the meeting, the *chiuj* asked the new Moroccan king for advice and support to liberate the Sahara from colonialism, but stressed that they would not wish to offer 'in exchange the compromise of loyalty to the King of Morocco'.⁵⁷ They handed in a written petition in which, as Muslim peoples under European colonial rule, they requested help to liberate the Saharawi territories occupied by France: the strips of Tindouf in current Algeria and Um Laashar, Bir Um Grein, Efdeyrek, Chum and Nouadhibou in Mauritania. The petition reads that, regarding Spain,

although it occupies a part of our land, we do not wish to make war against it, because it did not enter by means of force and arms, but through an agreement with the Assembly of the *Ait Arbain*. Therefore, what we want now is the French to leave; after that, we will not have any problem in achieving an accord with the Spanish.⁵⁸

Mohamed V expressed his support for their anti-colonial enterprise, on the condition that they would not challenge the French presence in Moroccan territory, where they still kept a considerable military presence well after independence. But nothing specific was agreed. On their return journey to the Sahara, the notables met in the Uad Nun with Ben Hamu Mesfioui, the Rifian leader of the so-called Liberation Army (LA). However, according to an article published in 1976 in *Sahara Libre*, the official bulletin of the Frente Polisario, the first contacts with Ben Hamu and the LA were established in Guleimin by Saharawi merchants, who 'gained knowledge of the struggle of resistance and (decided) to participate in the Yihad'.⁵⁹ The origins of the LA were in several small guerrilla groups, especially from the Rif, the Middle Atlas and south of Morocco, which had been in existence since the summer of 1953, when the French sent Sultan Mohamed V into exile. The coordination of these partisan groups gave rise to a well-

organized anti-colonial force that would become a threat not only to the French and Spanish armies, but also to the future Moroccan king. When Mohamed V returned to Rabat, large parts of Morocco were under the effective control of the LA, which had attracted large numbers of tribesmen from rural areas (many of them from Berber areas), from the Rif and the Nun-Draá frontier territory in the south. As an antidote to the potential challenge that the LA (whose leaders considered independence to be just a fiction given the continuing presence of thousands of French soldiers) might represent,

King Mohamed, assisted by French officers, founded a new regular army, the Forces Armées Royales (FAR), on May 14, 1956 ... [T]he FAR did succeed in attracting approximately 10,000 former members of the Army of Liberation who were induced into laying down their arms by the end of 1956. But thousands more remained, and they were a particular problem for the new Monarch in areas south of Agadir, which his regime still did not effectively control ... King Mohamed ... distrusted the Army of Liberation and interpreted its refusal to join the FAR as a personal affront ...⁶⁰

Commander Ben Hamu, in his meeting with the group of Saharawi notables and/or merchants in the Uad Nun, asked them to join the Liberation Army and to spread the anti-colonial struggle to all the remaining territories under European control in the region, to the Spanish Sahara and bordering areas of Mauritania and Algeria. The Saharawis initially rejected the offer to extend the conflict to Spanish territory, but agreed on the need to fight the French. The first military campaigns of the guerrillas in the region targeted French outposts along the Algerian frontier and in Mauritania, using the Spanish Sahara as transit territory and safe haven, but avoiding direct confrontation with the Spanish army. In fact, since the emergence of the first partisan groups in 1953, the Spanish authorities had followed a passive, not to say permissive or supportive, strategy. Since the attacks focused initially only on the French-controlled areas, the Spanish colonialists believed erroneously that the LA would only undermine French hegemony in the region, without affecting the Spanish possessions. In fact, the Francoist press of the time demonized the French colonial practices in the Maghreb, while projecting the image of a peaceful and non-problematic 'colonial

protection' and brotherhood with the natives in the territories under its administration.⁶¹

However, at the end of November 1957, the LA, whose partisanship had grown exponentially, attacked the Spanish enclave of Sidi-Ifni.⁶² This marked the beginning of what was known as the 'Forgotten War' by Spanish historians.⁶³ Once Spain had been thrown into the equation, the skirmishes moved quickly to the south, first to the protectorate of the Tarfaya strip and later to the Spanish Sahara. Although most, not to say all, of the commanders of the LA were of Moroccan origin, many of them Berbers from the Rif whose parents had fought the Spanish in the 1920s, the soldiery quickly became composed mostly of Saharawis, to the point of being renamed by the Spanish the 'Saharawi Liberation Army' (SLA). The anti-colonial fervour of the Rifian experienced guerrillas spread like fire in the region, especially among the Tekna and the Erguibat tribes, in whose collective social imaginary the memories of the old *ghazzis* were still fresh.

A group of twenty Saharawis, after some training with the liberation army, returned to Saquia el Hamra and Uad Dahab (Río de Oro). They convinced the population of the need to combat colonialism. Our compatriots responded (positively) to their call ... Therefore the base of the liberation army was Saharawi, while the command was Moroccan 100 per cent.⁶⁴

Once the confrontations had moved to the lands south of the Bled es Siba, the Moroccan nationalist elite began to see the LA with more positive eyes. Although Mohamed V never officially recognized its support of the rebel forces that stormed the Spanish territories, Spanish intelligence had no doubt at the time about the logistic support given by Rabat to the rebels in this phase of the conflict. The *ghazzis* of the SLA forced Spain to retreat to the coast, abandoning most of the military posts scattered along the desert and concentrating its forces in the defence of El Aaiún, Villa Cisneros, Villa Bens (Tarfaya) and a limited number of coastal enclaves. For some months, the guerrillas roamed virtually unchallenged across large parts of the Spanish Sahara and the neighbouring Mauritanian and Algerian desert. But the situation changed radically at the beginning of 1958, when the French and Spanish armies launched a joint operation, mobilizing 5,000 French and 9,000 Spanish troops against the LA guerrillas, supported by seventy French and sixty Spanish military aircraft. The joint campaign, known as

‘Ecouvillon’ by the French and ‘Huracán’ or ‘Teide’ by the Spanish, managed to disband the guerrillas in less than a month and recover control of the whole territory.

The year 1958, known as the year of the ‘peace of the graveyards’, is not considered a positive year in the Saharawi social imaginary. Hundreds of Saharawis died in the *Operación Teide*, the livestock was if not decimated at least significantly diminished in some areas, many wells were damaged and several hundreds of guerrillas moved – at least temporarily – to neighbouring areas in fear of Spanish retaliation. The LA and the 1957–8 war are not interpreted retrospectively as the point of departure in the Saharawi narrative about the anticolonial struggle. On the contrary, they are generally understood as a disarticulated series of (old-style, in many ways) *ghazzis* against the Spanish and the French (and also the Moroccans at the end), contextualized in a wider-ranging narrative of Saharawi bellicosity, but not understood as part of a modern Saharawi national consciousness. ‘The elderly’, remembers Ahmetu Suelim, ‘distrusted the Djir Tahrir [LA] from the very beginning; my father never gave them anything and he advised his friends not to get involved in it. Its leaders were unknown and its objectives were not clear, they were adventurers.’⁶⁵ The 1957–8 conflict, in fact, is commonly interpreted as the first sign of a well-designed Moroccan double-game, in a context of anticolonial fervour in the whole Maghreb, whose underlying aim was to annex the Western Sahara in the long term: ‘[t]here are still many questions about the conduct of the liberation army ... The answers are still in the hands of the command of the liberation army ...’⁶⁶ Once the LA focus moved to the territories south of the Bled es Siba, to the territories of Ifni, Tarfaya and the Spanish Sahara, as well as the surrounding Algerian and Mauritanian desert, the anti-colonial guerrillas became once again well regarded by the Moroccan nationalist elites. On the one hand, the actions of the LA were seen as an ideal opportunity to destabilize the Spanish presence in the region. On the other, since the LA recruited a large number of Saharawi fighters, especially from the Tekna and Erguibat tribes, the war was also perceived as a chance to undermine the military capacity of the *cabilas* based south of the Draá, which might represent a serious obstacle for a future expansionist policy. Therefore, while, on the one hand, the LA received logistic support from

the nascent FAR in the first months of the conflict, on the other, part of the Spanish and French military aircraft that crushed the rebels took off from the Moroccan city of Agadir. In addition, because of the

treacheries and manipulations within the core command of the liberation army ... the combat units were ordered to retreat towards the north, further away from Tan Tan. Such a retreat was explained because of the need to regroup the army ... [But] in Guleimin, the Saharawi combatants were arrested and tortured [by the Moroccans]. ⁶⁷

However, perhaps the most excruciating consequence of the conflict was the cession in April 1958 to Morocco, as a reward for its collaboration in the last phases of the war, of the Tarfaya strip (the area between the Uad Draá and the parallel 27'40 that had been given the status of Spanish protectorate linked to Morocco in a clause imposed by France in the Franco-Spanish Treaty of 1912, despite never having been part of the pre-colonial Moroccan sultanate). This cession is interpreted in the Saharawi nationalist narratives as an amputation of their historical territory, as the first chapter of the Moroccan–Spanish betrayal that would culminate years later in the Madrid Accords. Disbanding groups of the SLA opposed the attempts by the FAR, which had quickly moved into the Tarfaya strip, to disarm them in the months that followed the cession of the territory. The discontent exploded when hundreds of Saharawi guerrillas assaulted an armoury in Tan Tan and clashed with Moroccan troops in Eshbeika. The clashes lasted until the end of the year. But then, the Tarfaya strip had already been internationally recognized as Moroccan, '[a]nd with Tarfaya, all its population'.⁶⁸ One of these people was Bassir Mohamed uld Hach Brahim uld Lebser, known as Bassiri, then sixteen years old. He had been born in Tan Tan in 1942 into an Erguibat Lemuadenim family, when the northern frontier of the Spanish Saharan possessions was still the Uad Draá. Years later he would become the symbolic point of departure of the Saharawi anti-colonial struggle. And the first martyr of the revolution.

Now, however, it is necessary to turn our attention back to the group of notables who, according to Briones, Limam and Salek, met Ben Hamu in the Uad Nun. They came not only from the Spanish Sahara and the Tarfaya strip, but also from Tindouf and Mauritania, and they discussed the possibility of liberating *their* territory from French and Spanish colonialism.

To what territory were they referring? As we have seen, following the gaze of Spanish colonial literature, the Western Sahara (in geographical terms) was populated by a series of tribes, independent of one another and often in conflict over the best pastures and routes of trade. The colonial literature, which we have explored in detail, insisted upon the fragmentation of the structures of power in the region and provided an image of chaos and constant tribal conflict. However, as the Polisario stated in a memorandum to the Decolonization Committee of the UN in 1975, there was also a sort of supra-tribal ‘council of war that is formed each time that there is an external danger that threatens the security of the tribal confederation’, known as *Ait Arbain* or Council of the Forty.⁶⁹ The *Ait Arbain*, solidly present in the collective imaginary of the Saharawis to this day, was an assembly of representatives of different *cabilas* that convened only in very special circumstances: in times of war, to prepare *ghazzis* or to arbitrate in conflicts among the *cabilas*. If the *Yemaas* were internal assemblies within *cabilas* (and in the case of large *cabilas*, such as the Erguibat, within fractions and sub-fractions), the *Ait Arbain* was a sort of supra-tribal *Yemaa*, in which only certain *cabilas* of the western part of the Sahara desert (again, in geographical terms) participated. This space was delimited by what is called in Saharawi tradition the *Jat al Jaof*, which could be translated as ‘line of fear’ or ‘line of danger’. This space was situated within a wider cultural area known as Trab el Bidan, or Land of the Whites (as opposed to the Lands of the Blacks, the Quar, in the south of current Mauritania). The Bidan basically corresponds with the Hassania-speaking territory that comprises the Tekna zone, Tindouf, Western Sahara, Arab Mauritania and a corner of north-west Mali. The *Jat al Jaof* would be the line encircling the territories within this Bidani cultural and linguistic space that are located to the south of the Bled es Siba claimed – although not effectively controlled – by the Moroccan sultanate, and to the north and west of the Mauritanian emirates. In other words, in Saharawi tradition, the *Jat al Jaof* marks the external frontier of the tribal territories free from the spheres of influence and power of the Moroccan sultan and the Mauritanian emirs. This was the territory stormed jointly by ardent parties of Izarguien, Erguibat or Ulad Delim in the obscure 1957–8 conflict.

In the following years, with the ‘pacification of the territory’ – to use the colonial terminology – ‘began the period of effective colonial occupation. In the case of the Sahara under Spanish colonial control, it is from then onwards that a progressive impulse to the exploitation of the territory and to the settlement of the Saharawis in the colonial cities takes place’, as we have already seen in some detail.⁷⁰ In the words of Juan Carlos Gimeno, ‘only from then, from the decade of the 1960s onwards, does it make sense to name this region Spanish Sahara, and only then do colonial frontiers start to be real, for the Saharawis as well as the Spanish’.⁷¹ During the 1960s, the progressive collapse of traditional social structures and the emergence of a new ‘class’-consciousness – ‘we are all *znaga* (tributaries) of the Spanish’ – circumscribed to the colonial frontiers, paved the way for the emergence of new identities and forms of resistance. The *Jat al Jaof* moved progressively back towards the lines that demarcated the Spanish Sahara colonial borders. The threatening (and hence constitutive) outside was no longer the Uad Draá, the Bled es Siba or the emirs of the Adrar, but the new independent and expansionist states of Morocco and Mauritania. Therefore, the 1957–8 conflict, although inscribed in Saharawi historical narratives as part of a combative tradition, was a different story. As celebrated Saharawi national poet Bei Ebbuh explains:

Saharawis are those who lived in the Western Sahara, Saquia el Hamra and Río de Oro (although there are always differences between the political and the cultural frontiers). The Saharawis are sons of the war. We were born into the war and we are a brave people who love our homeland ... and we have given everything to defend it ... Since I was a kid, in the 1920s, I have heard of the battles won against the French, in Mauritania. After the division of the desert between the Spanish and the French, in the Western Sahara, the Saharawis signed accords with the Spanish, who had initially entered into the territory through commercial agreements. The peace with the Spanish lasted until 1973: on the 20 May the first armed action of the Saharawi nationalist movement took place, when a Spanish military garrison in the desert was stormed by Saharawis.⁷²

The emergence of Saharawi nationalism: Bassiri and the movement of 1970

In the first room of the SADR War Museum in Rabuni, one of the walls is decorated with a long and colourful mural painted by Fadili Yeslem, a renowned Saharawi artist. The mural is divided into three parts, whose focal points are the portraits of three leaders of the Saharawi revolution, surrounded by symbolic elements that represent the context of the national struggle in these successive three phases. This visual narrative of Saharawi resistance against colonialism opens with a portrayal of martyr Mohamed Bassiri (inspired by his last known photograph, after being detained by the Spanish army in July 1970), encircled by elements (*jaimas* and camels, for example) that symbolize the traditional Saharawi life that was then starting to collapse. Martyr Luali Mustafa Sayed, founder and charismatic leader of the Frente Polisario, killed in combat in 1976, occupies the second – and central – part of the triptych. But as Bachir Mustafa Sayed, Luali's younger brother and also one of the leaders of the Polisario since its early days, explains resolutely, 'Bassiri's movement was the beginning of everything; the point of departure'.⁷³

Born in Tan Tan in 1942, when the Tarfaya strip was still Spanish, Mohamed Bassiri studied in Marrakech, Rabat and Casablanca, where he finished his baccalaureate. The context of the late 1950s was marked by the failure of the Liberation Army and the cession of his hometown to Morocco, which was interpreted by most Saharawis, including himself, as a reward for the role of Rabat in the last phases of the conflict. His native Tan Tan was then learning to live under a new power that, according to Mauritanian historian Ahmed Baba Miske, immediately showed its cards:

Very soon, the brutality of the Moroccan occupation and repression made one remember [with nostalgia] the Francoist administration and army. What was an exception and a form of intimidation with them [the Spanish], became a common practice of method of government with Morocco; robbery, pillage and summary executions.⁷⁴

Hence, it is not by chance that, as military historian and former chief of intelligence of the Spanish Army in the Western Sahara José Ramón Diego Aguirre points out, both Bassiri's and Luali's groups 'came from this area artificially surrendered to Morocco in 1958', which soon developed into 'a focus of irredentism, agitation and [Saharawi] nationalist propaganda'.⁷⁵ In 1961, Bassiri – then nineteen years old – joined with twelve Saharawi

friends also studying in Marrakech to form a secret group to debate the future of the Western Sahara, whose northern frontier they considered to be the Uad Draá. Soon the group grew to almost twenty members, many of them from Tan Tan and Tarfaya, including a *chej* called Brahim Salem. Salem returned to Tan Tan in 1962, but rumours about the nascent organization spread by other *chiuj* reached the Moroccan police. Salem was quickly detained, interrogated and threatened. Fearing for his life he abandoned Tan Tan and the movement was temporarily neutralized. But the seed of discontent was already too deeply rooted among the Erguibats and Teknas of the Tarfaya strip. Two years later, when in 1964 Morocco created a Ministry for the (Spanish) Sahara and Mauritania in an attempt to send a clear sign to the international community about its expansionist determination, some *chiuj* based in the Tarfaya strip protested vehemently and the discontent spread very quickly again. Forty of these protesters were imprisoned for six months in 1965: ‘ineptly, the regime of Hassan II, instead of attracting the Saharawis, repel[led] them in their inner self’.⁷⁶

One year later, Bassiri returned to the Maghreb from the Middle East, where he had gone to study journalism. During his stay at the universities of Cairo and Damascus, he came to know at first hand the pan-Arabist and socialist ideologies of the Baaz Party and Nasser and started to articulate his intuitions and raw ideas about the liberation of the Western Sahara with the series of more complex political concepts that would progressively give form to the resistance discourses that Bachir Mustafa Sayed earlier referred to as ‘the point of departure’. El Luali and Bassiri seem to have met in the summer of 1966, in Guleimin, and the articulate, sophisticated and complex language and political discourse deployed by Bassiri captivated the young and fervent Luali. Bassiri decided to stay in Casablanca for some time, working as a journalist for two newspapers *El Assase* and *Al Chomoa*, where he published several articles, sometimes under the pseudonym of ‘The Saharawi’, demanding the decolonization of the Spanish Sahara. As Ahmed Baba Miske points out, ‘[i]t was possible to talk about the liberation of the Sahara, under the condition of not specifying its nature and objectives, and also of taking special care in not mentioning the word independence’.⁷⁷ The red line drawn by the Moroccan authorities was clear. Bassiri crossed this line once, with an article entitled ‘The Sahara for the

Saharawis', and *El Assase* was immediately suspended for four days.⁷⁸ Under growing suspicion and pressure, he decided to escape clandestinely to the Spanish Sahara, via his native Tan Tan, in December 1967.

On 23 December, just three days after crossing the frontier, he was detained for entering the territory without documents, jailed for a few days and then 'deported' to the Tarfaya strip. But he crossed again a few days later and managed to reach the holy city of Smara, homeland of mythical Chej Ma El Ainín, the home of a significant part of his extended family, the *Ahel Lebsir*. Bassiri was an undocumented newcomer there, a foreigner in some ways, but his deep knowledge of the Koran and humanistic education helped very quickly to build him a good reputation among relatives and friends. With the help of his family, Bassiri managed to get a residence permit from the Spanish authorities in March 1969. He could then open a school of Arabic for adults, which in fact became a focus of nationalist ideas. A small group of Saharawis also started to meet regularly for tea in the house of Brahim Liman, where Bassiri was living. The animated debates about the future of the Western Sahara would last more often than not entire nights. Progressively, Bassiri emerged as the unquestioned intellectual leader of the group. In fact, he was at that time the only Saharawi with a university degree in the whole of the Spanish Sahara! In December 1969, amid a growing frustration because of the dubious and contradictory position of the Spanish diplomacy and the suspicion of a possible deal to divide the territory between Morocco and Mauritania,⁷⁹ they decided to create a nationalist and anti-colonialist political party: Harakat tahrir Saquia Al-Hamra wa Ued Ad-Dahab (literally, Liberation Movement of Saquia el Hamra and Río de Oro), known in Spanish as Organización de Vanguardia para la Liberación del Sáhara (OVLS) or Organización Avanzada para la Liberación del Sáhara (OALS).⁸⁰

Bassiri was a new breed of leader who challenged the traditional system. '[W]hat would have been traditional, [was] the consecration of a religious chief or a chief of war', but he was not an admired fighter, a respected *chej* or *morabito*, he was an intellectual.⁸¹ Harakat tahrir (OVLS), in fact, although it managed to attract some pro-Spanish notables such as Jatri uld Said uld Yumani or Mohamed Mulud, questioned the representative role given by the Spanish administration to the *chiuj* and articulated a new

concept of ‘people’ that undermined the whole tribal structure. In fact, a note by the Spanish intelligence about Bassiri in 1975 argued that the Harakat tahrir (OVLS) had initially used ‘its attempt to break with the tribal traditions and the authority of the Chiujs as a curtain, although it is known that it was an independence movement’.⁸² The report of Bassiri’s interrogation after his detention on 17 June 1970 leaves no doubt about his personal view on the *chiuj*. The anonymous Spanish official who wrote Bassiri’s declaration, stated that ‘on the issue of the the Chiujs, [Bassiri considers] that they do not think about anything but being paid, and certainly not in working’.⁸³ Another report about the Harakat tahrir (OVLS) by the Spanish Information Services goes even further, stating that

[e]verything suggests that the initial and even the ultimate aim [of the organization] is the destitution of the current Chiujs and the renovation of the Assembly (at least this seems to be the way to allure their members). It could be that this would not only be directed against the persons who currently occupy the posts, but also against the institutions that they represent, since the young have difficulty in accepting the survival of a tribal organization that leaves very few possibilities of progress for them ... The essential aim of the party ... is to achieve in the shortest possible time what they call ‘Interior Independence’ ... and they want to stay with Spain until they can opt for total independence. The idea of giving the territory the status of State has penetrated very deeply into the Saharawis, especially as they consider that this will provide them with absolute security against outside attacks.⁸⁴

Despite an initial overemphasis on keeping the organization secret, only accepting new members who were well known and trusted by those already affiliated, the party’s growth and support surprised everybody. In March 1970, Harakat tahrir (OVLS) had already recruited almost 5,000 members. From its stronghold of Smara, it spread rapidly all around the Saquia el Hamra. From Tifariti to El Aaiún, from Daora to Hagunía and Bu Craá to Mahbes, hundreds of soldiers of the Tropas Nómadas and the Policía Territorial, civil servants (drivers, translators, et cetera working for the Spanish administration), construction workers (especially those working on the construction of roads) and students joined the movement. Made up of the growing *cabila* of settled and waged Saharawis, the membership of the Harakat tahrir (OVLS) was an unequivocal reflection of the changing social

structure in the Spanish Sahara that the colonial authorities resisted seeing.⁸⁵

The programme of Harakat tahrir (OVLS) was an attempt to articulate a set of ambitious social and political objectives with a series of pragmatically moderate strategies. Their demands were summarized in an 'Open Letter to the General Governor', made public in June 1970. The tone and the language were very conciliatory. It started by praising the efforts of the Spanish government to 'build and urbanize', to 'protect the Saharawi people from any foreign enemy' and, in sum, to work towards 'the line of civilization in the twentieth century'.⁸⁶ After stressing that the Saharawi people had always kept their 'sovereignty' and 'freedom', and that it was through an agreement that the Spanish protection had been accepted, the letter affirmed that

[w]e strongly reject the annexation to any nation, or neighbour, be it from the north or the south, the east or the west, since we are a people with freedom in everything ... we are totally different from the peoples that pretend that we are part of their geography ... with the countries that argue that the only element that links us is that of Islamic religion ... We ask ... the Spanish Government that in due course and of common accord with the Saharawi people, it will grant us the right to govern by ourselves. Doing it in a progressive form, as the father does with the son ... We also ask the venerated Spanish Government ... not to abandon us.⁸⁷

Harakat tahrir (OVLS)'s intention was to negotiate and to reach an agreement with the Spanish authorities for a progressive 'devolution', leading first to an 'internal autonomy', then to a status of 'associate state' that would finally culminate in total independence in ten or fifteen years' time. Spain would maintain a 'privileged' relation with the new independent state and participate in the exploitation of the natural resources of the territory: '[w]e want ... the Spanish nation ... to help us to discover the wealth of our country, as well as the better and worse places of exploitation, and for helping us to promote our land'.⁸⁸ But this process of progressive devolution would also entail a redefinition from scratch of the whole system of political representation that the Spanish authorities had entrusted to the network of loyal *chiuj*. In a further letter to the Spanish government dated July 1970, crafted in a much more belligerent tone, the OVLS certified the death of the system of tribal representation, stressed the

unity of the Saharawis and affirmed its position as the legitimate representative of the people.⁸⁹ The message was strong and left little room for interpretation:

To the mentioned Yemaa, as of today, the Yemaa's interference in any problem of our homeland will be prohibited, because the time of its validity, of its game, has finished. Now is the time of the people, who have repudiated the Yemaa due to their lies to the people and to the Spanish Government. They are also repudiated because of their lack of efficiency, since they have not contributed a single grain of sand to the Mother Country, nor to religion, nor to life, they are like a stone that if no one moves stays in the same place, and we would like them to move even if for that it would be necessary to shake them up! If the Chiuuj is of the people, the people disregard them, and if the Yemaa is of the people, the people dissolve it and send it to rest, and if they constitute another thing, the people [will] finish with them, since they are a parapet that has obstructed the way of the people and the consecution of their hopes, and for that reason they are advised to be careful with us.⁹⁰

The intentions of the Spanish authorities, however, were very different. The earlier mentioned report about the OVLS by the Spanish Information Services, proposed three possible lines of action. First, 'direct action against the members of the party and especially against its visible leader'. Secondly, 'indirect action' that could be of two types: either 'based on the use of force, but carried out in secret', or to spread defamatory rumours aimed at 'discrediting the organization'. The third possibility, based on the acknowledgment of the growing nationalist fervour and the progressive collapse of the traditional structures of control,

[c]onsist[ed] in the creation of a new [political] party. Naturally, it would be the Government that would create it. It would be organized by natives that would give the Governor a petition asking for an authorization and acknowledgement by the Government. The statute and programme of this party would be made by our Government, which would decide the direction to follow in every moment. We think that a party of this type, well organized, would be an instrument of priceless value for our Government, which would count with a non-official means to influence the native population and, in this particular case, with an extraordinary means to eliminate the clandestine party.⁹¹

But the creation of a puppet party would have to wait for some time. Just five days after the earlier mentioned memo was written by the Spanish

Information Services, the tension in the streets of El Aaiún reached an unprecedented peak that would catch the colonial authorities by surprise.

[T]he Spanish authorities call, for 17 July 1970, for a massive (public) event with the aim of demonstrating, with the presence of personalities, the *chiuj*, the population and the international press invited to the act, the adhesion of the Saharawis to the *mother country* [Spain], as a display that all favour the Spanish design of the future of the territory, its province 53.⁹²

The OVLS decided, despite the initial reservations of an always cautious Bassiri, to call for a counter-demonstration. In the days that preceded the event the party came to the surface for the first time and the leaders organized meetings to inform and mobilize the militants and supporters all around the Saquia el Hamra.⁹³ Early on the morning of 17 June, the first groups of Saharawis began to arrive in the suburb of Zemla (known as Jatarrambla in Spanish). At noon, only a few hundred had congregated at the official event in the Plaza de Africa, and most of them were either Spanish or the well-known loyal Saharawi *chiuj* with seats in the *Yemaa*, the *Cabildo* and other colonial institutions. At the very same time in Zemla, over 5,000 Saharawis chanted slogans demanding the independence of the territory and chatted animatedly in the *jaimas* that had been mounted for the Zemla counter-demonstration. Emissaries of the Spanish authorities, among them some loyal *chiuj*, asked the demonstrators to join the official celebration with the promise of granting them an audience at the end of the event with the Spanish general governor, Pérez de Lerma. But the spokespersons of the OVLS rejected the offer, demanding on the contrary a visit of the governor to Zemla to listen to their demands in person.⁹⁴ Once informed, Pérez de Lerma accepted, in an attempt to save the fiasco of the official event, and went to Jatarrambla, as he used to do on his own and without protection. After listening to their demands and taking the letter, he insisted again upon the invitation to the demonstrators to join the Plaza de Africa's official celebration and asked them to dissolve the counter-demonstration. But again they refused. At 5 p.m., a high-ranking governmental official called López Huertas, this time accompanied by sixty members of the Territorial Police, tried again to dissolve the concentration but were received with a rain of stones. The tension was growing

progressively, and half an hour later four pro-Spanish *chiuj* were stoned by the demonstrators. At approximately 7.30 p.m., a *tercio* of legionnaires under the command of Captain Acocha arrived in Zemla with the unequivocal order to dissolve the gathering by any means. The legionnaires also met a rain of stones. But they advanced towards the Saharawis and opened fire, first in the air and then into the first rows of demonstrators. As the first bodies fell down, dead or injured, the panicked mass ran confused in all directions.

There are confusing accounts about the number of people killed. The official Spanish figure is two dead and twenty Saharawis injured by firearms. Most credible estimates raise the number of dead to around ten and the injured to several dozens. The repression that followed was systematic: the leadership and hundreds of militants of the OVLS were detained and imprisoned over the following days. Bassiri was detained at approximately 3 a.m. that same day, without offering resistance. Initially, he was held in the central jail of El Aaiún with the rest of the detainees. After several sessions of torture, carried out according to some accounts, by a special team of ‘interrogators’ sent over from the Spanish peninsula, his physical state was deplorable, according to some witnesses. And, then, Bassiri simply disappeared. The official Spanish version was that he had been deported to Morocco on 27 June, ten days after his detention. However, it was confirmed by several Spanish soldiers and by the same general governor, Pérez de Lerma, to a Polisario commission during the 1980s that Bassiri was executed by the Legion and his body buried somewhere along the range of dunes that stretch from El Aaiún to El Aaiún Playa. In the collective imaginary of the Saharawi nationalists, Bassiri is not only the ‘point of departure’ of the anti-colonial struggle but also the first martyr of the revolution. The ‘Zemla massacre’, as it is known by the Saharawis, and Bassiri’s disappearance were ‘the major stupidities of Spanish colonialism in its ninety years in the Sahara’.⁹⁵ He was ‘not a revolutionary agitator, but a theoretician of Arab liberation with a pacifist character’ and he could have been an invaluable ally of the Spanish government in leading a progressive and peaceful decolonization process.⁹⁶ After Zemla, the Saharawi nationalists realized that negotiation with Spain was not possible and that the only possibility was armed struggle, following

the example of several other countries on the African continent. Three years later a group of young nationalists led by El Luali Mustafa Sayed founded the Frente Por la Liberación de Saquia el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario). As his brother, Bachir Mustafa Sayed, explains,

the point of departure [of the Polisario] was the Zemla demonstration. I remember that we were listening to Radio Nouakchott ... realizing what was happening. My brother started to call people immediately ... what was happening there was not only happening to the people in Zemla, they were a minimum representation of the Saharawi people. But we all suffered that. I would say that not a single hour was lost before organizing a new movement.⁹⁷

All the young wanted independence. Mauritania was independent. Algeria was independent ... We wanted the independence of the Sahara and we peacefully asked Spain for it in 1970: 17 July 1970. And there was a massacre. And from that moment, the Saharawi people, the young, we formed the Polisario to fight, to fight against the Spanish army and win our independence.⁹⁸

The beginning of armed struggle: from Tan Tan to El Janga

The second, and central, part of the mural that decorates the entrance room of the SADR War Museum in Rabuni is a portrait of El Luali, against a background of Kalashnikovs, explosions and barbed wire representing the beginning of armed struggle in the Western Sahara. El Luali was born in the spring of 1947 near Bir Um Grein, within the Mauritanian borders of the *Jat al Jaof*, and spent his first decade of life travelling with his nomad family in the north of the Spanish colony. After the conflict of 1957–8, and at a time marked also by the beginning of a severe drought in the desert, Luali's family settled in Tan Tan. Initially, they lived in one of the improvised *frigs* on the outskirts of the town and, from the early 1960s, in a mud-brick house constructed by Luali's older brother Labbat in Tan Tan.⁹⁹ Their father, an Erguibat Tahalat called Mustafa Sayed, was a strict and hardened Bedouin skilled in the old desert art of the *ghazzis*. He considered himself more a 'man of rifle' than a camel or goat herdsman. In the words of Luali's younger brother, Bachir,

[m]y father was a severe man, like the warriors of old times. But he was especially tough. He did not leave any livestock to the children; he had never cared about those things, it was more important for him to handle the rifle. But the old stories about the warriors of passed times, about their achievements, about the battles in which they participated, about the actions of our relatives in the wars, were told every day in our family. The remarked poverty of our home was compensated for by the emotion that the words we heard from our elders caused us. It was our food, our university.¹⁰⁰

Luali went to school for the first time in the academic year 1959–60. The school had been especially built by the Moroccan government for the Saharawis of Tan Tan (most of them displaced from the Spanish Sahara, who had arrived after the 1957–8 conflict), as part of a plan to Moroccanize ‘its Saharawis’. At school, Luali would develop a close friendship with some of the future leaders of the Polisario. Among them were Lehebib and Hametu Jalili, two Saharawi brothers born in the south-east of the Spanish Sahara, whose nomadic family had also moved to Tan Tan at the end of 1958. Hametu Jalili would take on the *nom de guerre* of Mohamed Abdelaziz after the founding congress of the Frente Polisario in May 1973, and has been since 1976 the secretary general of the movement. He is the third leader represented in the mural at the entrance to the SADR War Museum.

In 1963, Luali went to Marrakech to continue his secondary studies in a boarding school called Ibn Yusuf, funded by a grant from the Moroccan government. But two years later he was expelled after a confrontation with the school director about the grants of the Saharawi students. There were eight Saharawis in Ibn Yusuf and Luali had spontaneously emerged as their spokesman and leader. He continued his studies in the city of Tarudant, in the Uad Sous, and finished the baccalaureate in Rabat in 1970. After an agitated summer in Tan Tan, marked by the shocking news about Zemla and his unsuccessful attempts to contact the members of the Spanish *Yemaa* and convince them to express their rejection of Spanish repression, he returned with a new grant to Rabat to study political law at Mohamed V University. The faculty contained approximately thirty-five Saharawi university students. Some of them came, like Luali, from poor families who had been displaced from the Spanish Sahara to the Tarfaya strip after the 1957–8 conflict. The rest were from affluent families of Saharawi notables and

merchants. Luali stayed for two years in Rabat, more dedicated to his political campaigning in favour of the decolonization of the Spanish Sahara than to his university studies. Moroccan universities in the early 1970s were hotbeds of leftist and republican opposition groups to the monarchy, in a context marked by the rapidly diminishing legitimacy of the royal institution. Luali published a few articles, gave speeches and established contacts with the alternative Marxist-Leninist left and also with the mainstream parties, including the Istiqlal. But the reception was always disappointing and characterized by a deep lack of trust. Although his emphasis at the time focused on the need to organize armed resistance against Spanish rule in the Sahara, without projecting a clear postcolonial scenario (of either annexation to Morocco or independence), no Moroccan movement was willing actively to support any adventure in the Spanish Sahara that had not been designed and was not entirely controlled by them. As Bachir Mustafa remembers, at that time

we did not talk about the type of solution [once Spain had been expelled], but we always emphasized that the decision should be taken by the Saharawis ... All the letters, all the pamphlets of that time reflect this concern. The concern about others speaking in the name of the Saharawis. The concern about others deciding in our place ... [And] the Moroccans tried to decide for us, to occupy our place ... For example when in 1973 they sent a group of policemen to Algeria to occupy our place ... It was called the 'Movement of the Blue Men' ... and was a group sent by the Moroccan Ministry of the Internal Affairs ... All our neighbours claimed to represent the Saharawis in those years.^{[101](#)}

It was during this time in Rabat that Luali and a small circle of Saharawi students, once they had realized that Rabat, far from being willing to support the Saharawi anti-colonial struggle, was willing only to occupy its place, delineated the pillars of a loosely organized group that they would later call the Embryonic Movement for the Liberation of the Saquia el Hamra and Río de Oro. The year 1972 was a turning point. Luali came back to Tan Tan and with a group of university students from Rabat and secondary students from the local schools organized a series of anti-Spanish demonstrations. The first one took place in March and ended up with nine people being detained by the Moroccan police, among them Luali. The second one took place in May, coinciding with the celebration of the

Muggar, a yearly fair that attracts people from all around the Trab el Bidan. It was during these demonstrations that the name of the Embryonic Movement was openly mentioned for the first time. During the May demonstrations, more than forty Saharawi students, including Luali once again, were detained, beaten and then imprisoned, most of them for just a few days but some for up to two years. Sidahmed Batal, a long-time member of the Polisario who was present at the Tan Tan protests considers that those

demonstrations and Zemla were one and the same. In the Tan Tan demonstrations of 1972, we carried banners asking for independence. It was the same as Zemla ... and the Moroccans acted identically to or even worse than the Spanish against the demonstrations. The pacific route was closed. We were compelled to contact our base, in the [Spanish] Sahara, in the south of Morocco [Tarfaya strip], in Mauritania ... in all places where there are Saharawis, to convince them of the necessity of an *armed* movement.^{[102](#)}

Soon afterwards, over twenty students met secretly on the outskirts of Tan Tan to discuss the next steps, which Luali seemed to already have very clear in his mind. The only option according to his analysis was to start the armed struggle to liberate their homeland, the Spanish Sahara, right then and without any delay. Only a few participants supported him without any hesitation in that assembly. Many others from the so-called ‘Tan Tan group’ either were still in jail or would join them soon. In the following months, the young nationalists travelled incessantly around the Spanish Sahara and the surrounding regions, to establish contacts with other collectives and explore the possibility of launching an armed struggle. They made contact with young Saharawi students from the bustling towns of the Spanish colony, with the Saharawi communities in Algeria and Mauritania, with numerous members and sympathizers of Bassiri’s disbanded movement, and even with some pro-Spanish *chiuj*.

By then, most of the Saharawis detained during the Zemla demonstration had already been freed.^{[103](#)} Brahim Ghali was one of them. A relative of Bassiri and also a leader of the OVLS, Ghali had spent almost a year in the prison of Bir Nazarán, near Villa Cisneros. Once free, he tried to reorganize the movement but was detained again and imprisoned for a further three months. It was then when, with some companions from

Harakat tahrir, he decided to escape to Zuerat, in Mauritania, where the founding congress of the Polisario would soon take place. In Zuerat, which in fact was located within the Saharawi *Jat al Jaof* and had initially been assigned to Spain in the scramble of the Sahara that took place at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a very significant Saharawi community. In addition to the members of the Saharawi *cabilas* who had settled there, attracted by the economic activity generated around the nearby mines of Idyil, the market town had also received refugees from the 1957–8 conflict, such as Emhemed uld Zeiu, and from the Zemla events, such as Ghali. In the early 1970s, it was a centre of nationalist ideas, more connected in some respects with the interior of the Spanish colony than the Tarfaya strip. Zuerat was the hub that connected several groups and individuals that would form the base of the new anti-colonial movement. In fact, the nascent movement would emerge from the convergence of the so-called ‘Zuerat group’ that linked together remnants of the Liberation Army and the movement of 1970 with the ‘Tan Tan group’ led by Luali. The connection between the two groups was a student from El Aaiún called Ubeid Lucháa and the founding congress started on 29 April 1973, in the house of Ahmed Caid Saleh, a trained guerrilla of the Liberation Army and a militant of the OVLS who had been expelled from the Spanish colony to Mauritania after serving a one-year sentence in the Canary Islands.¹⁰⁴ On 1 May 1973 the meeting came to an end with the creation of the Frente Popular por la Liberación de Saquia el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente Polisario) and a slogan: ‘Con el fusil arrebataremos la Libertad’ (With the rifle we will seize our Freedom).¹⁰⁵ Brahim Ghali was elected secretary general of the new liberation movement.

The first armed action took place on 20 May. A party of seventeen guerrillas, including Luali and Ghali, had crossed into the Spanish Sahara from Tindouf. In need of water, Luali and a guerrilla called Abdi Bubut departed from the group towards the well of El Janga, near a Spanish post of the same name. But they were soon discovered and detained by a Spanish patrol of the nearby fort, whose garrison was composed only of six Saharawis of the Territorial Police. The following night five Polisario guerrillas stormed the post of El Janga to liberate their companions by surprise. They did not need to fire a single shot, but when trying to open the

stuck door of the cell with the butt of an old carbine an accidental shot hit the wall. This is, according to most accounts, the story behind the first shot fired by the Polisario guerrillas. The liberation war in the Spanish Sahara had begun.

Chapter 3

From Refugees to Citizens: Exile and Nation-building in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

1973–5: The rise of the Polisario

After Zemla the movement was repressed and the remaining members were forced to act clandestinely, the movement was dead ... until 1973, when the battle of El Janga took place. They were only seven men. And from then on the movement started to grow. [The Polisario] began to attack the Spanish patrols, to watch over the ... military posts of the interior. In 1974 there were some historical battles, with significant losses, in both material and human resources ... And it was then when the population started to unite and the support began to grow and grow. Because it was then when it started to be clearly seen what until then had been an undercover reality: the support of the people for independence.¹

Since Zemla we had no doubt that we had to fight to snatch away what was ours, although we didn't have any means. At the beginning of the armed struggle, the objective of the attacks was not to cause lots of deaths, to either the Spanish or to the Saharawis (enrolled in the Spanish army). The objective was to bring the message to the population; the message that there was a resistance. And that the option to fight to reach the objective of independence was available. For example, we didn't want to plant explosives and to kill people, as Morocco had done in Mauritania and Algeria when they became independent ... due to the Moroccan ambition for a Greater Morocco. Our objective was to spread the message that there was a resistance. At the beginning we didn't have any external support. We didn't have arms ... We didn't have anything. But very soon the people started to help us and support us, for example, giving us some of their goods, even camels, to go to the frontiers and buy arms.²

In the months that followed the attack on El Janga, the Polisario guerrillas, barely armed at that time, managed to carry out a chain of attacks against the minor Spanish posts scattered along the interior of the desert. Mahbes, Echderia, Tifariti, Hausa and Amgala all witnessed clashes between the Spanish troops (in many cases, the Tropas Nómadas and Policía Territorial) and the guerrillas. Many of these attacks were limited to a just few fire shots against the walls of the posts under the cover of the night, and avoided direct confrontation with the Spanish army. But the tension escalated dramatically. The Spanish military command launched the first large operation against the Polisario in March 1974, using for the first time armed helicopters to fight the guerrillas.³ But the desert was already on fire and to the surprise of most observers the guerrilla tactics of the Polisario were proving very effective against a more numerous and much better-armed and trained force. ‘The guerrilla in the desert, considered an impossible formula by the specialists and even by the revolutionaries, was revealed as a workable means of anti-colonial struggle.’⁴ Many veteran combatants still proudly remember how they ‘defied the logic of war and proved that with our knowledge of the desert we could also “move like fish in the water” in the sands. We know the desert; we don’t need maps and GPS.’⁵ Very soon, the Polisario became a capable force, equipped with automatic arms mainly captured from the Spanish army, able to launch rapid harassment operations and then disappear into the depths of the desert towards its bases on the Mauritanian and Algerian frontiers.

Since 1974, when the Algerian authorities began to accept the legitimacy of the Polisario as the Saharawi liberation movement after some dubitative initial moves, Tindouf had become one of the safe havens for the guerrillas. It was a traditional Erguibat territory within the *Jat al Jaof*, and many of the Bedouins based in the area joined the Polisario struggle from a very early stage. In fact, it had been one of the stops of El Luali in the tour to raise and test the support for armed struggle that immediately preceded the founding meeting of Zuerat. Raba Mohamed, a veteran militant of the Polisario and native of the Tindouf area, remembers how the Algerian frontier immediately became a nucleus of Saharawi nationalism.

Just after the constitution of the first cells of the movement, we started to participate in the revolution from [t]here. I began carrying messages around to different places, not only [t]here

in Tindouf but also to other places. Later, I was assigned military training: how to use arms, the ways of moving, hiding ... Then, I asked the Frente to be sent to the front to fight, but I was not allowed. At that time, it was not allowed for women to go to the first line. I was ordered to stay in the rear lines, with other *compañeras*, patrolling and guarding the camps (in Tindouf, later in Mahbes and then again in Tindouf).⁶

The role of women in the dissemination of ‘the message’, the main objective of this first phase of armed struggle, as Ahmed Badda explained above, was crucial. As anthropologist and gender studies scholar Dolores Juliano has pointed out, Saharawi women ‘rebelled against Spanish colonialism and were the first to join the struggle and form groups, and they responded to the call to fight against colonialism, and almost all the cells, at the beginning, were formed by women’.⁷ The revolution, in the words of Diego Aguirre, ‘was rooted principally among a numerous collective until then silenced and marginalized: the women’, mainly in the new cities and towns where a significant number of the former nomads had settled during previous decades.⁸ For many Saharawis this was possible precisely because of the central role that Saharawi women had traditionally played in nomadic life; a central role watered down by a new colonial order that reserved for women a very marginal and secondary position in society that did not correspond with their traditional sphere of power. But women were not the only ones, continues Aguirre; by the end of 1974 the Polisario had penetrated ‘all layers of the population: workers, students, employees of the Government, clerks, health workers, soldiers and officials of the Tropas Nómadas and the Policía Territorial’.⁹ When, on 26 October 1974, the guerrillas sabotaged the Fosbucraá conveyor belt that transported the mineral from Fosbucraá to El Aaiún Playa harbour – interrupting production for several weeks and causing significant economic losses – the Polisario was already well rooted in El Aaiún, Smara, Villa Cisneros, La Güera and all the rest of the towns and posts scattered along the territory. At the beginning of 1975, the number of guerrillas did not surpass two hundred, but ‘the message’ dominated the streets of every settlement and the long conversations during the three rounds of the (modernized) tea ceremony in every *jaima* and *frig*. ‘What I had to do was to talk to other women, to explain to them what it was to be a Saharawi, why we should work for independence’, explains one of the first female Polisario

campaigners.¹⁰ In the background, and largely unnoticed by the clumsy Francoist colonial authorities, women played a crucial role in spreading the revolutionary message. ‘We had to inform to get the unity of the people, to compel them to fight for independence. But that was not all. It was necessary to fight also for the rights of the people. *Because we are all equal.*’¹¹

The message of the Polisario was not only a nationalist one. Building on the anti-tribalism developed by the Harakat tahrir (OVLS), with its profound criticism of the *Yemaa* and the way in which the Spanish colonialists had bribed and used most Saharawi ‘notables’, as well as on the new emancipatory rhetoric inspired by the revolutionary writings of the time (from Cabral and Fanon to Guevara) and the trail of other liberation movements (from the Mozambiquean Frelimo to the Angolan MPLA), the discourse of the Polisario advocated a radical social change. The political discourse articulated by the Polisario in its early stages was clearly inscribed within the Marxist-inspired emancipatory tradition. The revolutionary proposal to eradicate tribalism and to banish from the vocabulary of the territory the word *cabila* spread out like fire among the growing numbers of waged and settled or semi-settled Saharawis. As Bachir Mustafa recalls, ‘the first internal documents ... put a special emphasis on the concept of “the people” ... Identity is everything: it is the base, the axis, the foundation of everything.’¹² The ideological operation of the Polisario required the elevation of the elements that created a feeling of equality among the inhabitants of the territory to the central position in emancipatory discourses and, on the other hand, the exclusion from the new language of those elements which might suggest difference and division. But, in addition to the marginalization of the Saharawis within the colonial borders of the Spanish Sahara that contributed to create a new sort of ‘class-consciousness’ (‘we are all Znaga [tributaries] with the Spanish’), there was also a threatening constitutive outside that gave visibility to the lines in the desert that decades before had only been traced in European maps and, therefore, contributed to the plausibility of the new discourses of equivalence and difference.

To convince the people, in our explanations, the external blunders were very significant. The Spanish mistreated us ... But also the Moroccans, the Algerians and the Mauritians ... They

all mistreated us, here and there ... and this contributed a lot to the generation of a consciousness.¹³

The publications and internal documents of the Polisario in the first years talk insistently about the ‘masses’ who had been exploited by the colonialist and imperialist forces and who were ‘alienated’ by colonialist hegemonic discourses. ‘Sectors of the masses still live in the colonialist and reactionary propaganda, despite some parts of our beloved homeland walking swiftly towards the struggle’, reads the editorial of the first issue of the internal bulletin *El Pueblo*, subtitled *Toda la Verdad para las Masas*, that was published in October 1974, two months after the second congress of the nascent organization.¹⁴ This congress, held in August 1974 in Ybeilat el Bid, could be considered in many respects the founding congress of the Polisario. If the first congress had launched the anti-colonial armed struggle, it was at the second congress when the ideological contours of the movement were delineated in some detail. It was also at this congress where the flag of the Polisario (and the future Saharawi Republic) was designed and the national anthem chosen, and where El Luali was elected Secretary General of the Polisario in place of Brahim Ghali. The National Action Plan designed and adopted in this crucial summit identified the frontiers of inclusion and exclusion and articulated the basic elements of the social model that would be abruptly and unexpectedly (regarding the timing) implemented in the refugee camps less than two years later.¹⁵ This action plan, according to the Training Committee of the Polisario, had been born

in the worse circumstances, marked by colonialist-reactionary plots with the aim of mystifying the will of the people, of melting the gains and swallowing them (internal autonomy) – and then the Referendum, the Moroccan claims, and the propaganda campaigns in the interior and the exterior, [with the intention of] blocking the revolution at both levels, and the joint plan to liquidate it [the revolution] and to create an Emirate of notables (‘chiuj’) of the Ocean, or that the reaction of the neighbours will occupy the place of colonialism, in case of incapacity of the latter ... [O]ur programme saw the light in a moment in which the enemies (colonialism and the Moroccan reaction) developed their colonialist-reactionary plan of action to copy our revolution and maintain the interests of their owners, the imperialists.¹⁶

For the Polisario there were three black beasts that prevented the freedom and independence of the Saharawi people. Spanish colonialism was obviously the first one: an ‘archaic colonialism supported by military power and destruction, without the minimum rights for the colonized people. Its second characteristic is that during the last ten years it has taken the character of a very dangerous colonialism of [re-]population.’¹⁷ The second characteristic refers to the influx of Spanish settlers to the territory, accelerated over the previous decade. Linked with this process of demographic change and urbanization, the Polisario would denounce in its early writings a process of ‘corruption’ (identified broadly with westernization) of Saharawi society, which is repeatedly illustrated by reference to what they called *Hipismo* (the look and way of life of the hippies). In the same fashion as other liberation movements of the time, the early Polisario criticized this process of westernization as linked with the selfish *carrerismo* (careeroriented) attitudes and consumerism that alienated the Saharawi youth and prevented them from participating in the national liberation revolution. In addition, if the economic development of the territory was, on the one hand, an element that alienated the population, on the other, it was also the ultimate example of colonial oppression, given the uneven access to both the resources and the benefits of such economic growth between the colonizers and the colonized. The Saharawis constituted the necessary cheap labour force for the exploitation of the ‘maritime [fisheries] and subterranean [natural] resources’¹⁸ of the territory and offered a market for the remnants of the markets of the metropolis: ‘Spanish colonialism, [always] hungry, has made of our land a marketplace for selling its products and those of the imperialists owners, once invalid [in their home markets]’.¹⁹ Along these lines, the ‘alienated’ Saharawis who were enrolled in the Spanish army and police, who were asked ‘not to fight the revolutionaries’,²⁰ were addressed by the Polisario as follows: ‘you who enrol [in the Spanish army] to make a living; colonialism recruited you to die, colonialism doesn’t care about your interests, but it is only interested in the transformation of your physical energies [for] the protection of its own interests’.²¹

However, as the Polisario denounced loudly, following the trail opened by the OVLS, this exploitative colonial system was possible only because

of the collaboration of a number of *chiuj* loyal to the European metropolis. *Chiuj* who could be easily bribed by the Spanish colonialists with what the young nationalists would call with bitter wittiness ‘sugar vouchers’. They were the second *bête noire* of the Polisario, since they were the ultimate incarnation of the tribal order that had prevented the union of the people until then. According to the new analysis of the nationalists; they meant tradition and division. They meant colonialism. As we have seen, the system of colonial control had rested to a great extent on the alliances with a network of Saharawi loyal notables. Therefore, the process of ‘internal autonomy’, boosted by the creation of the *Yemaa* at the end of the 1960s, was, for the Polisario, little more than a new façade for the same old methods of colonial control that had privileged a limited number of Saharawis unilaterally elevated by the Spanish to the position of ‘tribal representatives’. The progressive (and controlled) process of devolution towards independence that the OVLS had seen in a positive light just a few years before, for the new movement, would lead only to an associated and/or independent puppet state – called pejoratively ‘the Emirate of the Ocean’ – under the indirect control of the imperialist forces through the same intermediaries as before; the loyal *chiuj*. However, it is also true that the Polisario recognized in its publications of 1974 and 1975 that not all the *chiuj* were responsible in the same manner or to the same degree. On the contrary, the very fact that the Spanish administration had invested only certain notables with power, while marginalizing or giving only secondary roles to others, generated deep contradictions and tensions within this collective of influential Saharawis.²² These contradictions between loyal and more independent (‘nationalist’) *chiuj* could and should be pragmatically exploited to show the inconsistency of the system and henceforth its collapse. During the first phases of the liberation struggle, one of the objectives of the Polisario was precisely to ‘isolate colonialism’, ‘by distancing the nationalist *chiuj* from it and by pushing the contradiction between them and the buffoons [the loyal *chiuj*]’.²³ In sum, the programme envisaged by the new nationalist leaders implied a radical change that ‘attempted to transform a Bedouin society towards equality, distributing the wealth and putting an end to privileges’, stresses historian Alejandro García.²⁴ And this ultimate aim implied the abolition ‘of all forms of

exploitation, [to put] an end to slavery and to [stop] the payment of tributes from one person to another'.²⁵ Along this line, as the Polisario action plan established, '[t]he social and political rights of women will be *re-established* and all perspectives will be open to them, participating in armed struggle as do their sisters of Palestine, Algeria and Guinea Bissau'.²⁶ As Agaila Mohamed said before, 'we are all equal'.

When the Spanish colonial authorities saw for the first time the power of mobilization of Bassiri's nationalist movement in 1970, the security services recommended the creation of a puppet political party to fight back this nationalist fervour, which was mainly spreading among urban-based young and female Saharawis (that is to say, among those excluded from the traditional networks of power). The party would have the objective of complementing the influence of the traditional tribal structures of power, channelling and controlling the nationalist demands of other sectors of society increasingly divorced from the *chiuj*. The party was finally created in 1974 under the name of Partido Nacional de Unión Saharawi (PUNS) (National Party of Saharawi Union) and under the leadership of a young and ambitious Saharawi student based in Madrid, Jaliheña uld Rachid. That the PUNS was a creation of the Spanish security services and received direct orders (as well as funding) from the Spanish colonial government has been repeatedly recognized and explained by the Spanish former colonial authorities, who have narrated openly in several forums how they designed the strategies of the party and regularly briefed Jaliheña and his collaborators about what to do. The strategy was exactly the same as that of the 'sugar vouchers' followed in the case of the traditional notables, but with the aim of targeting the younger and more vocal sectors of Saharawi society. Not surprisingly, the PUNS was the first and only political party allowed to exist and develop its activities openly during the Francoist dictatorship (in addition to the official Francoist Movimiento Nacional, of course). In other words, despite the fact that Francoism was a one-party dictatorial system that had repressed systematically all forms of political opposition, Jaliheña uld Rachid had the dubious honour of being the first 'opposition' political leader to be 'allowed' openly to develop his activities without suffering any sort of persecution. Obviously, this was only possible because he was part of the system. Pablo Ignacio de Dalmases, the Spanish

journalist who directed Radio Sahara and the newspaper *La Realidad* in El Aaiún – mass media created by the Spanish colonial administration to control information in the territory, although they ended up developing an independent editorial line – is very illuminating about the control of both the mass media and the PUNS by the colonial authorities.

I arrived at El Aaiún in October 1974, contracted by the General Government of the Sahara to direct the local radio station. Therefore, under the orders of the Secretary General of the Government, Colonel Luis Rodríguez de Viguri, Radio Sahara became an adequate channel to broadcast true and credible information, with a growing acceptance by the native society, whose aspirations we attempted to interpret and channel. Viguri, an atypical serviceman (he had a BA in philosophy and another in law), understood that the informative task carried out by the radio had to be complemented with a printed media. Therefore, [Colonel Viguri] proposed to launch a newspaper that should focus on the interests of both the readers in Spanish and in Hassania.²⁷

At the end of every day I went to talk to him [Colonel Viguri]. As no human being is immune to error, Viguri made one: the creation of the PUNS, a puppet party, which had an unhappy ending with the treason of its leader, the so-called Jalihehna Rachid or Jalihehna Sidi Enhamed Mohamed, who deserted [from Spain] to Morocco, with the money that the [Spanish] Government had given him to set the operation in motion.²⁸

The PUNS never managed to connect with Saharawi society and hence by no means represented any threat for the Polisario, as was clearly demonstrated upon the arrival in the territory of the visiting mission of the United Nations in May 1975. It was obvious for most Saharawis that it was just a colonial ‘operation’, to borrow Dalmases’s words. In May 1975, the Spanish colonial authorities attempted to stage demonstrations by militants and sympathizers of the PUNS for the eyes of the UN’s international mission, in order to create the false impression that the puppet party was the leading nationalist movement in the territory and, therefore, the representative of the native population with whom to negotiate the stages of the decolonization process.

However, the emptiness of the project behind the PUNS and the profound inability of Jalihehna uld Rachid to attract any significant support were revealed in all their crudity as soon as Simeón Ake (from Côte d’Ivoire), Marta Jiménez (from Cuba) and Manoucher Pishva (from Iran)

landed in El Aaiún on 12 May 1975. As military historian Diego Aguirre – then chief of the Information Services of the Spanish government in the territory – remembers, when the UN mission arrived,

[L]ots and lots of flags with the colours of the Polisario, red, green, white and black, were raised, and the very few Spanish or PUNS (blue and yellow) flags disappeared immediately; the militants and sympathizers of the Polisario had made a very good move, both against the [Spanish] Administration and the PUNS.²⁹ The mission was literally flooded by a wave of demonstrators, amongst which women abounded, who left no room for any hesitation about what the population was crying openly for: ‘Spain out’, ‘total independence’, ‘neither annexation nor partition’, ‘not to Morocco, not to Mauritania’, ‘we are Saharawis, not Moroccans, Mauritians or Algerians’. Perhaps never before during the international actions of the UN had a plebiscite *viva voce*, so spontaneous and conclusive, whose guarantee of authenticity no one could ever put into question, [with results] against the will of the dominant authority in the territory, taken place.³⁰

Jalihena uld Rachid defected to Morocco as soon as the UN mission arrived in the Western Sahara, carrying with him the generous funds that the Spanish colonial authorities had entrusted him with for the PUNS enterprise. The Spanish strategy had been clearly revealed as a failure. The *chiuj* and the colonial institutions such as the *Yemaa* were discredited and the official party had lost the battle against the young revolutionaries of the Polisario to channel and represent the growing anti-colonial fervour. The report of the UN visiting mission, published on 15 October, stated that it

did not encounter any groups supporting the territorial claims of neighbouring countries and consequently had no way of estimating the extent of their support, which appeared to be submerged by the massive demonstrations in favour of independence.

... Owing to the large measure of cooperation which it received from the Spanish authorities, the Mission was able, despite the shortness of its stay in the Territory, to visit virtually all the main population centres and to ascertain the views of the overwhelming majority of their inhabitants. At every place visited, the Mission was met by mass political demonstrations and had numerous private meetings with representatives of every section of the Saharan community. From all these, it became evident to the Mission that there was an overwhelming consensus among Saharans within the Territory in favour of independence and opposing integration with any neighbouring country ... The Mission believes, in the light of what it witnessed in the Territory, especially the mass demonstrations of support for one

movement, the Frente Polisario ... that its visit served as a catalyst to bring into the open political forces and pressures which had previously been largely submerged. It was [also very] significant to the Mission that this came as a surprise to the Spanish authorities who, until then, had only been partly aware of the profound political awakening of the population.³¹

The Polisario had won the battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the native population of the Spanish Sahara and the colonial authorities, less than five years from Zemla, would have no choice but to acknowledge it and accept the Frente Polisario as the main political actor in the Western Sahara.

The unfinished (de)colonization and the new conflict

The UN mission mentioned above had gone to the Western Sahara in response to the campaign instigated by Morocco and Mauritania to stop the self-determination referendum that the Spanish government had announced on 20 August 1974. The idea of Greater Morocco launched by Al Fassi had been officially accepted by the new King Hassan II in a speech given on 10 August 1961, as Villar has pointed out in his seminal work.³² Over the following years, Moroccan diplomats attempted to link the future of the Western Sahara to that of the territory of Sidi-Ifni, located in the blurred Bled es Siba to the north of the Tekna zone and also under Spanish control but widely accepted in both diplomatic and political circles as an issue affecting the territorial integrity of Morocco. Rabat’s aim with respect to the Western Sahara was to annex the territory without consulting the population at all, as had been the case of the Tarfaya strip and would be the case of Sidi-Ifni in 1969. However, as Carlos Ruíz Miguel explains, the United Nations slapped Rabat’s face for the first time in December 1966, when, by virtue of Resolution 2229 (XXI), the ‘United Nations General Assembly [proclaimed] that ... the Western Sahara [was] a territory that should be decolonized through a self-determination referendum since it was not part of the “territorial integrity” of Morocco’.³³ The dossiers of Sidi-Ifni and the Spanish Sahara were, therefore, given different consideration by the UN, against Rabat’s wishes. From 1966 to 1974, numerous additional resolutions reaffirmed that the Spanish Sahara was a colonial territory whose

decolonization did not affect any other country,³⁴ and both Morocco and Mauritania – whose president had also laid territorial claims to the Spanish Sahara in 1963 – seemed to accept the inevitable referendum of independence. During these years, Rabat had completely failed to promote a pro-Moroccan anti-colonial movement in the Spanish Sahara, despite several attempts.

However, the official announcement by Spain in the summer of 1974 that it was finally ready to start the preparative works for the UN long-demanded self-determination referendum rang alarm bells in Rabat and Nouakchott. The reaction was immediate, and '[on] 20 August 1974 ..., Hassan [II] declared his total opposition to an independent Western Sahara, and expressed his willingness to take up arms to prevent it'.³⁵ In October, during the seventh summit of the Arab League held in Rabat, Moroccan diplomats obtained the support of the majority of Arab governments for its territorial claims, while Hassan II held secret meetings with Mauritanian President Moktar uld Daddah to plan a future division of the Western Sahara. In September, the Moroccan king had declared his intention to ask for the opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) about the historical links of sovereignty between the Moroccan sultanate and the Western Sahara, arguing that it had historically been an integral part of Morocco artificially separated and divided by the European colonial powers. Mauritania, lured by Rabat, joined the petition, and with the support of all Arab states (including Algeria, which at the time had not yet firmly decided its stance towards the Western Sahara), managed enough votes to pass on 13 December the UN's Resolution 3292 (XXIX), which solicited the opinion of the ICJ. The resolution also decided to send to the territory the visiting mission previously mentioned, as part of its renewed efforts to review the situation of the territory. The postponement of the Spanish planned referendum, for which an exhaustive census had already been prepared in 1974, was, therefore, formally requested until the pronouncement of the ICJ.

As we have seen, the UN mission left the Spanish Sahara with the certainty that the native population opposed the integration of the Western Sahara into any of its neighbouring countries and that the Polisario was definitely the main social and political movement in the Spanish colony.

The colonial authorities also took quick note of the display of strength exhibited by the Polisario and decided to change their strategy, accepting El Luali's movement as interlocutor and (non-official and non-exclusive but, most important, *de facto*) representative of the Saharawis. Both the Polisario and the Spanish military refer retrospectively to the beginning of the summer of 1975 (approximately in June, just a few weeks after the visiting mission left) as the date in which a tacit ceasefire agreement between the two sides was agreed and enforced. From this point onwards, the Polisario would cease its attacks on Spanish garrisons. The last assault took place on 14 June, when a group of guerrillas with the collaboration of a significant number of the native soldiers of the Policía Territorial took control of not only the military post but also the whole settlement of Guelta. At that time it was already clear to the Spanish military officials that a significant part – not to say almost all – of the Saharawis enrolled in the Policía Territorial and the Tropas Nómadas supported the Polisario either actively or at least passively. The same day as the Guelta attack, Spanish diplomat Emilio Cassinello commenced a round of negotiations with the Polisario in Algiers that would last until 10 July. In August and September the negotiations continue and the Spanish minister of foreign affairs, Cortina y Mauri, met El Luali. During this period, marked by better relations between the Spanish colonial administration and the Polisario, which some describe as a 'frustrated honeymoon', the colonial authorities progressively freed most of the Polisario militants imprisoned, and the Polisario for its part liberated all the Spanish soldiers who had been captured over the previous months.

However, the tension and the violence in the territory did not decrease, as the tacit peace between the Polisario and Spain coincided with a campaign by the so-called Front de Libération et de l'Unité (FLU). The FLU was a paramilitary organization created by Rabat to 'liberate' the 'Moroccan' territories under Spanish occupation: the Western Sahara and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, where they planted several bombs to put pressure on Spain. The FLU mercenaries clashed with both the Spanish army and the Polisario guerrillas on several occasions during 1975, on the northern border of the territory. It also planted bombs in El Aaiún and other settlements as well as landmines close to Spanish military garrisons in the desert, causing the death of a (still unknown) number of Spanish and

Saharawi soldiers (of the Spanish army).³⁶ At the beginning of June, the month of the peace between the Polisario and the Spanish government, the regular Moroccan army also crossed into the Spanish Sahara and attempted to take a small post close to the frontier. The Spanish army was forced to intervene in order to deter the operation, which in fact was a test of Spanish intentions to defend the integrity of the Western Sahara. Forty-six regular Moroccan soldiers were captured inside the Western Sahara in that operation by the Spanish Legion. But the defence of the territory from the operations launched since the summer of 1975 by Morocco, by both paramilitaries and uniformed Moroccan soldiers, devolved progressively upon the hands of the barely armed Polisario guerrillas, as the Spanish colonial administration decided gradually to abandon some of the small military posts of the interior of the desert.³⁷ The legion and Spanish regular army left most of the interior posts under the exclusive protection of the native members of the Policía Territorial and Tropas Nómadas, who during those months started en masse to join the Frente Polisario. As an old combatant remembers,

[f]rom September onwards, after the exchange of prisoners with the Spanish, the Spanish began to leave a series of posts in the interior, without prior warning. And we started to occupy them and to guard them, principally at night. We knew that the Moroccans would enter at some point. And very soon (in October) the first Moroccan columns started to enter, to check the resistance that was there.³⁸

Little by little, the black, white, green and red flag of the Polisario began to hang in some of these isolated forts abandoned by the Iberian colonialists. In this final period of Spanish presence in the Western Sahara, the Polisario reached the certainty that the real *bête noire* was the ‘reactionary Moroccan regime’, and a cornered Hassan II who saw in the Western Sahara an opportunity to ‘pacify the new situation that his throne endured and the rebellion within its army, which threaten[ed] to knock over its regime’.³⁹ In fact, the presence of the Spanish army was considered by many Saharawi nationalists as the only element that could prevent the much feared Moroccan military invasion.

October was a crucial month, dominated by an anxious wait for the report of the ICJ and the report of the UN visiting mission. The situation

was marked by a radical openness and uncertainty, where the only conviction of the still-young Saharawi nationalist movement was that the Spanish presence would not last for very long. In fact, the Spanish authorities had already decided secretly to organize the repatriation of the 'European residents' in the territory.⁴⁰ It is in these moments of crisis and radical indetermination, of dislocation in Laclaudian vocabulary, when the old hegemonic frontiers of inclusion/exclusion, the old identities and social imaginaries, collapse, opening the space for the emergence of new political subjectivities. In this context, all the relevant social and political actors in the Spanish Sahara tried to reposition themselves in the new scenario. At the beginning of October, the general assembly or *Yemaa* held several meetings involving some members of the Polisario and remnants of the injured and discredited PUNS. Despite some disagreements about the role of Spain in the process and timing, the general view among the old tribal groupings was clearly in favour of independence. A few days later, El Luali called 'all those who had some meaning in the Sahara' for a meeting in an isolated location in the desert close to the Mauritanian frontier known as Ain Ben Tili.⁴¹ The objective was to seal a pact of unity of all sectors of Saharawi society around the basic principle of independence. On 12 October the members of the *Yemaa* and other colonial institutions such as the *Cabildo* and the councils of El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros, numerous *chiuj* from small *cabilas* and fractions who had not participated in the run for the colonial 'sugar vouchers', and the remnants of the PUNS, met with the leadership of the Polisario in what would be later called by the poets the Day of National Unity. In Ain Ben Tili the old tribal elite of the territory accepted the leadership in the struggle for independence of the young nationalist organization that had already become de facto hegemonic among the Saharawi population. In many respects the traditional elite did not have any choice, since in recent decades its power had rested precisely on their role as intermediaries and chains of transmission between the colonial administration and the Saharawi population. Without the Spanish colonial power and taking into account the deep changes that the Saharawi society had experienced in the two previous decades, their real power and social legitimacy was fatally damaged.

Nevertheless, the support for the Polisario expressed by a very significant majority of ‘all those who had some meaning in the Sahara’ was crucial from a symbolic point of view. The Polisario in less than two years had passed from being a small Guevara-style guerrilla *foco* in the desert to lead a wide national mobilization encompassing all sectors of Saharawi society. This rapid growth of the Polisario, according to most of its historical leaders, required a rearticulation of discourses and strategies, gaining some distance from the Marxist rhetoric developed until then. In the following months, as the events precipitated a massive exodus of Saharawis and the Polisario found itself suddenly in charge of thousands of refugees from very different backgrounds, this dynamic was accentuated. As a high-ranking official of the Saharawi Republic commented rhetorically, ‘how could we possibly be Marxists in a society that was at the time still half-Bedouin? It was, in general, a very traditional society ... the Marxist language of the first writings would have been incomprehensible for most, only generating rejection.’⁴² ‘The Polisario was always a nationalist movement, not a Marxist movement. There were always Marxists within the Polisario, but also many other tendencies. The Polisario was, and is, a national liberation movement not a single-ideology political party’, adds another historical nationalist leader.⁴³ Bachir Mustafa Sayed explains very plainly the vision shared by most historical nationalist leaders about those years:

The Polisario was a leftist revolutionary movement ... But leftist [was only, in fact,] the nucleus of intellectuals that were promoting it ... The population was a different story. The boat was leftist, but the ocean, the sea, was a different thing. And when the boat arrived at the shore, with the exodus, with the administration [of the camps], with the challenge of the new reality, the challenge of providing the population, of governing ... the initial leftism ceded its chair to a very realist nationalism, very linked to the state, to the idea of building a Saharawi nation. When the marriage Polisario–Saharawi People took place ... Then, the initial leftist ideology was lost; ideology ceded its place ... 1973–4 was a time of ideological tension within the Polisario, but after 1974, with the demonstrations, the arrival of the UN, the support of the population and the acceptance by the people of all this, the leftism of the books of the time disappeared.⁴⁴

On 16 October, the ICJ finally published its conclusions, after analysing the copious documentation presented by the parties, Spain, Mauritania and Morocco.⁴⁵ The court had to give its advisory opinion on two questions:

I. Was Western Sahara (Río de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)?

If the answer to the first question is in the negative,

II. What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?⁴⁶

Again the result of the deliberations represented a slap in Rabat's face, as were the decision of the UN to consider separately the cases of Sidi-Ifni and the Western Sahara, and the report of the UN's visiting mission to the territory, published then. The answer given by the ICJ to the first question was negative, stating that 'Western Sahara ... at the time of colonization by Spain was not a territory belonging to no-one (*terra nullius*)'.⁴⁷ Regarding the second and crucial question,

the Court's conclusion [was] that the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such nature that might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through a free and genuine expression of the peoples of the Territory ...⁴⁸

In other words, the ICJ rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian claims that the Western Sahara was an issue related to their territorial integrity and that, therefore, the process of decolonization should consist of the reintegration of the territories to their original states or political entities. On the contrary, since the issue had nothing to do with the territorial integrity of any pre-existent state, the decolonization should consist of the expression of the opinion of the peoples of the Western Sahara through a self-determination referendum, as established in previous UN's resolutions. The announced referendum, for which a year earlier Spain had carried out a comprehensive census of the colony's population, should, therefore, be completed. The court, on the other hand, also acknowledged in its opinion that, although not

affecting the issue of the sovereignty of the territory, there had been at the time of colonization some ‘ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in the territory’, as there were also some ‘rights, including some rights relating to the land, which constituted legal ties between the Mauritanian entity ... and the territory of Western Sahara’.⁴⁹ That some, but not all, of the Tekna tribes of the north, whose routes of mobility penetrated into the Bled es Siba, had had some ties – although without temporal continuity – with the Moroccan sultanate was rather obvious, as it was that some of the tribes whose areas of mobility were closer to the Mauritanian ‘entity’ had also had links with Mauritanian emirs. But the question that the ICJ had in hand was of a different nature; the aim of the ICJ’s analysis was to determine whether there were any legal ties that ‘may affect the policy to be followed in the decolonization of Western Sahara’, given ‘the claims of Morocco and Mauritania to have had legal ties with Western Sahara involving the territorial integrity of their respective countries’.⁵⁰ The conclusion of the court was crystalline and unequivocal in that it did not find any ties of ‘territorial sovereignty’ that ‘might affect ... the principle of self-determination ... of the peoples of the Territory’.⁵¹ However, the future of the Spanish colony was at the time being secretly decided, and what the UN, the ICJ and the ‘peoples of the Territory’ had to say seemed to matter very little to those around the furtive negotiation tables. Hassan II had not announced in vain on 20 August 1975 (that is to say, two months before) that, whatever the result of the ICJ’s report, ‘Morocco will liberate its Sahara, whatever the price’.⁵² According to Jacob Mundy’s excellent account of the crisis, ‘Hassan secretly initiated preparations for the Green March at that time ... and eventually moved himself and his military staff to Marrakech on 9 October, where he also ran the 1963 border war with Algeria’.⁵³ The decision had already been taken and there was nothing that the International Court could have said ‘that would have changed Hassan’s mind’.⁵⁴

The day after the publication of the ICJ’s report, in an example of political manipulation par excellence, Hassan II appeared on Moroccan TV and radio exhorting his subjects to recover the ‘Moroccan Sahara’: the ICJ had confirmed this fact, he said, and it was then necessary to put pressure on Spain to achieve the unification of the national soil.⁵⁵ ‘To that end,

Hassan announced that he would personally lead 350,000 Moroccan civilians, armed only with Qur'ans, on a peaceful march to seize the Western Sahara from Spain within ten days.'⁵⁶ Everything was in place for this 'peaceful invasion' and within a few days thousands of Moroccan volunteers had already been concentrated near Tarfaya in an operation planned well in advance with the knowledge and complicity of the United States. In fact, the active support given behind the scenes to Rabat by the Ford administration, and especially by secretary of state Henry Kissinger, was a crucial element that decanted the balance in Morocco's favour during the crisis. The Spanish government, with Franco terminally ill (in fact, he was comatose during the last weeks of the crisis) and mounting internal demands for democratization, wanted to avoid at any cost an unpopular colonial war with Morocco that would have added an unmanageable pressure to the already moribund and anxious dictatorship. The Security Council called the parties (Morocco and Spain) to avoid the escalation of tensions (Resolution 379, 2 November) and 'deplored' the march, urging the Moroccans to withdraw from the frontier (Resolution 380, 6 November), but honouring its long tradition of rhetoric emptiness it was blatant that it would not go beyond chapter VI of the UN's Charter to deter the Moroccan 'invasion'. The diplomatic pressure behind the scenes was on Spain to reach a negotiated solution with Morocco, which would allow, on the one hand, Rabat to 'recover' its Sahara and, on the other, Madrid to abandon the territory through some sort of face-saving agreement, under the legal umbrella of the UN.

Since the summer of 1975, Moroccan troops, disguised most of the time under the FLU mask, had been crossing into the Spanish Sahara, but at the end of October these 'tests' had given way to a full-scale military invasion that involved several thousand regular troops. All along the north-eastern part of the territory, the Moroccan troops began to fight against the Polisario guerrillas and the Saharawi members of the Spanish army (all discharged from their posts a few weeks before and enrolled en masse in the Polisario), for the control of the posts abandoned by the Spanish. The 'pacific' Green March, on the north-western frontier, was a display staged largely for the internal Moroccan public and, especially, for the international mass media, at the very same time as Rabat and some sectors of the Spanish government

negotiated the future of the colony. Some accounts suggest that, in fact, Franco and Hassan II had already reached some sort of secret understanding about the Western Sahara in the early 1960s, according to which Spain had guaranteed a ‘controlled’ decolonization process favourable to Rabat’s interests in the cases of both Sidi-Ifni and the Western Sahara. The failure of Spanish strategies to control the colony through the traditional network of notables and the *Yemaa*, the inability of the PUNS puppet party to attract the younger generations and the emergence of the Polisario as an independent force, would explain in part the precipitation of the events that lead to the October–November crisis between Spain and Morocco.⁵⁷ Several questions still remain unanswered about these crucial months. What is clear is that Rabat, despite the rhetoric condemnation at diplomatic levels, received (active or passive) support from most Western states and especially from the United States and France. On the one hand, the fact that Hassan II had linked his personal prestige to the ‘reunification’ of the ‘Southern Provinces’, meant that a failure in the Saharan adventure could most probably trigger the collapse of his cornered monarchy, which was at the time one of the closer allies of the West in the Maghreb and the Arab world. On the other hand, in the context of the Cold War, the idea of a new state in Africa, where a Frente Polisario that the Western intelligence agencies quickly identified as a ‘revolutionary movement’ open to the influence of Algeria and the Soviet Union, was received with anxiety in Washington and other European capitals. The geopolitical balance pointed towards a pro-Moroccan solution and the last Spanish Francoist government was fully aware of the situation. It was in this context that a secret accord was reached in late October to hand over the territory to Rabat and Nouakchott. The Green March finally crossed the Spanish Sahara frontier on 5 November, but it had already been agreed that it would penetrate only a few kilometres into the colony and then it would return, while the Spanish troops would wait behind a ‘dissuasion line’ 12 kilometres inside the territory.

At this time, it was clear to the Saharawi nationalists that Spain would abandon the territory very shortly, leaving them in the hands of a new occupying power. On 18 October Spain had launched the so-called *Operación Golondrina* to evacuate more than 20,000 ‘European’ residents

from the Sahara and since 30 October it had concentrated all its military forces around the cities of El Aaiún, Villa Cisneros, Smara and La Güera. In these cities, the Saharawi and European neighbourhoods were separated by barbed wire and the European perimeters surrounded and protected by the legion. In this context, '[w]ith Mauritanian and Moroccan delegates present, the final talks [about the future of the Spanish Sahara] got underway on the 12 November in Madrid', and 'the basics of the accord were released to the world two days later'.⁵⁸ The Madrid accords did not transfer the *de jure* administration of the territory from Spain to Morocco and Mauritania; nor did they establish the partition of the territory. On the contrary, it stated only that the creation of a '*temporary* Administration in the territory in which Morocco and Mauritanian will participate in collaboration with the *Yemaa*'. Such accords would never be officially recognized and endorsed as legitimate by the UN.⁵⁹ The end of the Spanish presence in the territory, and with it the tripartite administration, was agreed to take place 'before 28 February 1975'.⁶⁰ The declaration also stated that the 'opinion of the Saharawi population will be respected, expressed through the *Yemaa*'.⁶¹ In other words, some sort of 'expression of the will of the population' was necessary to legitimize the annexation of the Spanish Sahara, but the accord attempted to substitute the long-demanded self-determination referendum in which all the inhabitants of the colony would have had a voice for a consultation with the decadent and disbanding, but still considered as controllable, *Yemaa*. However, less than two weeks later, on 28 November, sixty-seven of the 102 members of the *Yemaa* met in the town of Guelta, then under the control of the Polisario, and signed unanimously a declaration stating that

1st. The only form to consult the Saharawi people is to allow it to decide its destiny and to obtain its independence free of any foreign pressure and intervention. In consequence, the General Assembly [*Yemaa*], which has not been elected democratically by the Saharawi people, can not decide the self-determination of this people. 2nd. To avoid any utilization by the Spanish colonialism of this institution and as a consequence of the manoeuvres attempted by the enemies of the Saharawi people, the General Assembly decides, by the unanimity of its present members, its definitive dissolution. 3rd. The only and legitimate authority of the Saharawi people is the Frente Polisario, recognized by the UN, according to the conclusions of the visiting mission of the United Nations. 4th. Within the framework of a solution with

regards to national unity and free from all foreign intervention, the provisional Saharawi National Council is constituted.⁶²

In other words, more than two-thirds (65 per cent) of the members of the Spanish *Yemaa* rejected the possibility of staging a captive ‘self-determination consult’ in the general assembly as delineated in the Madrid Accords. It was just one more in the long list of miscalculations of the Spanish authorities, since at this point they even proved unable to control any longer the network recipients of ‘sugar vouchers’ who had been so loyal in the very recent past. Over the following weeks, numerous *chiuj* would follow this route, such as a group of eighty-five who on 16 December announced en masse in Algiers that they were joining the Polisario. At the beginning of 1976, the majority of those 226 Saharawis classified in the Spanish census as *chiuj*, which nevertheless was a rather arbitrary classification, had already ‘defected’ to the Polisario. On 26 February 1976, two days before the deadline established in the Madrid Accords for the tripartite administration, Rabat attempted to organize a meeting with the remnants of the *Yemaa* to ratify and legitimize the division and occupation of the territory, but managed only to obtain the support of fewer than forty notables. Some of them, such as Banahi Sid El Bachir, would say later that some of them were ‘captured’ and ‘forced’ to sign against their will.⁶³ That same day, 26 February 1976, the last Spanish soldier departed from the territory and so Spain abandoned its responsibilities as *de jure* administrative power of the Western Sahara, leaving behind a territory on fire.

The ‘unusual refugees’ ... and the Saharawi citizens

After the Madrid Accords, the Moroccan troops commenced a rapid incursion from the north, with the blessing of the last Francoist government and to the disgust of large sectors of the Spanish colonial army that considered the hurried exit deeply humiliating and felt betrayed by Arias Navarro’s cabinet.⁶⁴ But the legionnaires followed the orders and ceded progressively the control of the posts and towns still under their control to

the advancing Moroccan army. Smara was abandoned on 27 November and the first Moroccan troops arrived in El Aaiún on 11 December. The day before, Mauritania had initiated its penetration into the Western Sahara from the south. The Frente Polisario tried to stop the advance of the new occupying powers and showed from the very beginning its determination to offer a stiff opposition. The Moroccan troops were initially repelled along the line that stretches from Hausa to Echederia and Farsia, and the Polisario kept control of the town of Mahbes. In the south the Mauritanian army struggled to overpower the Saharawi guerrillas from the border town of La Güera, needing the help of Moroccan soldiers to control the Río de Oro Peninsula where Villa Cisneros, renamed Dajla in Arab, is situated. It was evident to the Polisario from these very first moments that Mauritania was the weakest link, and from December the Saharawi guerrillas decided to extend the conflict to Mauritanian soil, attacking the train that connects the mining area of Zuerat with the port of Nouadhibou.

However, the new occupying armies managed progressively to control the main cities and towns of the Western Sahara, while the desert quickly became the theatre of the new colonial war. In those few months from the end of October 1975 to the end of February 1976, thousands of Saharawis left their homes to seek temporary refuge in the desert. As the historian Alejandro García points out ironically, ‘Hassan’s army didn’t exactly enter the city [of El Aaiún] in a friendly manner, it being more of a military than a fraternization campaign. For the hardened professionals of the RAF [Royal Armed Forces of Morocco] all the Saharawis were collaborators of the “terrorists”’.⁶⁵ ‘In Echederia, a Moroccan soldier ordered me to say “God save the King”. I did not. And he sprayed my eyes with smoke, like the smoke of the planes’, a helpless Saharawi woman with burned eyes related to one of the few TV crews that witnessed the Saharawi exodus in early 1976.⁶⁶ ‘I came from Farsia’, continued another woman, ‘my two sons died on the way and I arrived here [at the refugee camps] alone. My husband was taken to jail because he had a photo of the martyr Abderrahman Abdalahi and an issue of *Sahara Libre*.’⁶⁷ Agaila Mohamed, a member of the Polisario since 1973, remembers with sadness: ‘There was a feeling of total confusion, of indecision among the people ..., the majority

of us decided to escape when the Moroccans came ... but we didn't know where to go. All those who were able to walk tried to flee.'⁶⁸

The panic produced by the Moroccans was so overwhelming that there was a psychosis to escape at any price. [W]hen [we] saw the tanks and the deployment of the enemy forces in the streets, [we] escaped with nothing ... We thought we were going to be away for only a few days. We left with nothing. We left behind all that we had. We closed the doors of the house and put the keys in the bag.⁶⁹

Initially, the Saharawis who fled the cities and towns gathered in a series of camps in areas of the desert under the control of the Polisario, such as Guelta, Um Dreiga and Mahbes. At the time of the Green March and the Madrid Accords there were already hundreds of internally displaced Saharawis wandering desperately through the desert, and by early December the figure had increased to thousands. Glaiyiha was one of the refugees who gathered in Um Dreiga. She was just a girl and her memories are blurred, but she will always remember the day when the Moroccan planes bombed with napalm, causing the death of dozens of refugees and injuring many of the terrified survivors. Glaiyiha was lucky, she and her brothers survived. But her parents died: 'I remember how I cried and cried, I only knew I had lost my parents.'⁷⁰ The survivors of Um Dreiga and Guelta, the two largest camps, continued their desperate escape through the desert, to Mahbes, where the Polisario had organized the sort of provisional administration that would form the basis of the future Saharawi Republic, whose immediate precedent was a Provisional Saharawi National Council created soon after. Poet Liman Boicha recalls how, after the bombings of Um Dreiga and Guelta, when the escaping Saharawis heard or saw planes approaching, '[we] froze immediately like statues, opening our arms wide to the sky, hoping the Moroccan pilots would mistake us for trees'.⁷¹ It worked. But the terrified Saharawis were soon to discover that there was more than the sky to fear. Weeks after the Um Dreiga massacre, Glaiyiha stepped on a landmine. She lost a leg. It happened at the beginning of 1976, before her arrival in Mahbes. At the same time, in the cities and towns the new Moroccan and Mauritanian authorities had decided to cut Saharawi nationalism at its root as soon as possible. During the first months of the new conflict, several hundreds of Saharawi nationalists were

‘disappeared’.⁷² Besides, thousands of Moroccan settlers – up to 25,000, according to sources from the Spanish military – moved into El Aaiún and other towns in the first months, building entire new neighbourhoods and occupying many of the properties that the escaping Saharawis had left vacant.

At the beginning of 1976, the growing numbers of refugees concentrated in Mahbes ‘finally fled to the Tindouf region of western Algeria where the women, children and old men found sanctuary, while the able-bodied men returned to the Western Sahara to fight’.⁷³ The number of refugees increased very quickly, from 9,000 in late 1975 up to approximately 70,000 in July 1976 and more than 100,000 at the end of that year, according to some estimates. Other estimates, more consistent with the population of the territory according to the census, put the figure at around 40,000.⁷⁴ José Ramón Diego Aguirre notes that ‘those who manage(d) to reach Algeria ... present[ed] a horrifying picture: most of them were exhausted, many were mutilated and some others were covered in burns of napalm and white phosphorus’.⁷⁵ In Tindouf, they were safe from the Moroccan planes, but there was nothing in that inhospitable part of the *hamada* and very soon they realized that their stay was not going to be only ‘for a few weeks’, as they had initially thought.

The immediate problem that the refugees faced was simply to survive, under the very hostile circumstances of the winter, exhausted after the exodus, crowded in improvised lines of tents, with only one doctor for the whole refugee population during the first months and very little food. The conditions were so terrible that the two medical teams – one from Médecins sans Frontières and another one sent by the Cuban government – who arrived in 1976 could do nothing to stop a measles epidemic that caused the death of more than one thousand children in a very short period of time during the spring. There was no organized and systematic aid from any international or transnational organization until 1977, when the World Food Programme and, later on, the UNHCR provided funds to cover the needs of approximately half of the refugees for a period of one year. As Briones, Liman and Salek point out, half literally and half metaphorically, during the first months of exile, ‘there were not enough men [in the camps] to dig the graves that were needed’.⁷⁶

However, from the early days in the Tindouf camps, the Saharawis, according to Sven Lampbell, a field representative of the League of Red Cross Societies, ‘seemed to be *the most unusual refugees* he had known in all his years of work with such groups. He recalled early food distribution operations where there was not enough to go around and noted that he saw no fighting, no pushing, no theft, no corruption.’⁷⁷ What surprised him, as well as many other commentators, was the refugees’ level of social organization, the level of solidarity and co ordination of displaced persons from very different backgrounds. In Tindouf, there were students from El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros-Dajla, workers from the Fosbucraá mines, former soldiers of the Spanish army, rich merchants from the new cities and nomads who had had a very limited contact with the colonial administration, members of the Erguibat, Izarguien or Ulad Delim *cabilas*, influential *chiuj*, *majarreros* and former slaves. Very soon, as well, these refugees displaced from the Spanish Sahara, were joined in Tindouf by a small group of Saharawi immigrants and students who had been based in Spain and, more importantly, by groups of relatives from the Algerian border region of Tindouf, the Tarfaya strip and Mauritania. Besides being marked by the lack of almost everything, the panorama in the emerging refugee camps was very plural and diverse. But, as Lampbell noted with surprise, instead of disordered crowds, there were ordered queues.

In this respect, many observers point out that far from the usual images of refugees as helpless, desperate and scared ‘subaltern subjects’ who survive thanks to a new ‘colonialism of compassion’,⁷⁸ the Saharawi refugee camps are an ‘admirable example of social engineering, of how the humanitarian aid can be successfully administered’ by the refugees themselves;⁷⁹ an example of participatory governance and, since the late 1990s when a limited cash economy was introduced in the camps, also an example of an imaginative social entrepreneurialism. Tindouf is, indeed, an important crossing point for some trade routes of the Sahara and the refugee camps have become in recent years one of the main ‘tourist’ destinations of Algeria, as we will see later. Even Alejandro García, a historian who is very critical of the Polisario, praises the social achievements in the camps. In his words, the Saharawi refugees managed to generate

unknown levels of human development in the African context ... The Camps became an educative experiment with spectacular results: 100 per cent of the population has access to education. ... Cuba has fostered, educated and given a university degree to more than 5,000 Saharawis, including 200 doctors. With a rate of one doctor to every 800/1,000 inhabitants, the Tindouf camps have an optimum level of medical care ... And moreover, the Polisario offers its medical services to all those who need them, Saharawi or not. [Polisario's] clinics and military hospitals, distributed along the territory east of the wall [that divides the Western Sahara], have become centres for the assistance of thousands of Mauritanian, Algerian and Malian nomads ... No one is denied medical assistance ... Definitely, the Camps are a focal point that expands a progressive and cosmopolitan logic in the enigmatic life of the deep desert.⁸⁰

Despite their explicitly provisional nature, persistent lack of material resources and the dependence on external humanitarian aid, the Saharawi refugee camps became cities like any other city in any other state. In fact, the camps are cities where the hegemonic myths and social imaginaries that organize social life are more progressive, secular and open than in most of the surrounding contexts, which are dominated, in general, by more traditional and conservative norms and values. In the camps, the previously clandestine message of Polisario's revolutionaries – 'we are all equal' – was elevated to the centre of the new hegemonic social and political discourses. As Harrell-Bond notes enthusiastically, the Saharawis 'actively used their time in exile to build a twentieth-century democratic nation, women's equality being one of the strongest features of their social organization'.⁸¹

This perception explains in part the mythical attraction that the camps played and still play in the area, as Omar story's clearly shows. Omar, a black Mauritanian from Nouadhibou, arrived in the refugee camps around 2003. When he decided to commence his journey to the refugee camps, he had lost his job and was terribly disaffected with the general political situation and the opportunities for a young uneducated black people like him in Mauritania. He had very few (and not very close) relatives in the camps, but his family in Nouadhibou had always been strong supporters of the Polisario struggle. He recalls how when he was a child and there was news on the radio about the Western Sahara conflict all the members of his family ran to the radio and kept quiet, listening attentively until the reports from the camps or the battlefield finished. His family identified with the

ideas of the ‘Saharawi revolution’ and saw in the camps a model of society. So he decided to ‘emigrate’ not to Europe but to the refugee camps with the idea of being part of the ‘Saharawi project’. Currently, he speaks reasonably good English, which he studied at Salam English School in Smara refugee camp, where he lives and works as a trainee English teacher. He has also been collaborating with a British collective in a photographic project – called the Sora Project – which seeks to empower refugees through the use of digital photography and video. In 2006, he had a sort of temporary ‘resident permit’, issued by the Interior Ministry of the Sahara Republic, which allows him to stay in the camps, and in the future he hopes to apply for the ‘full Polisario card’; that is, Saharawi nationality and, therefore, to become a citizen ‘like any other in the camps’.⁸²

As Brahim Motjar, a high-ranking Polisario official, points out, the camps represent the materialization of ‘a *normal state* within an immense abnormality’.⁸³ The state he is talking about is the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). On 27 February, the day after the departure of the last Spanish soldier and one day before the supposed end of the temporary ‘tripartite administration’ established in the Madrid Accords, the Provisional Saharawi National Council formed by Polisario leaders and some former members of the *Yemaa* proclaimed the birth of the SADR in Bir Lehlu, a small town in the north-west of the territory that has remained under the control of the Polisario and Saharawi Republic ever since. With the new republic, defined as ‘Arab, African [and] Non-Aligned’, the Saharawi nationalists wanted to fill in the legal void created by the Spanish withdrawal from the territory.⁸⁴ In August the founding constitution of the Saharawi Republic was approved at the third Polisario congress, dedicated to El Luali, recently killed in action in Mauritania. By the end of the year, the new country had already been recognized by eleven states, mainly African.⁸⁵ The hospitals and clinics mentioned in the previous quote from García’s work are not run by foreign doctors from Médecins sans Frontières, but by Saharawi doctors and nurses working for the SADR Ministry of Public Health. From the early days of exile, the Frente Polisario organized health, education and food distribution committees not merely as a temporary management strategy for the camps, but primarily as a political and ideological strategy for progressively establishing the basis of a future

Saharawi state: a state able to provide, among other things, free and universal education and health care to all its citizens. Harrell-Bond observes that despite being ‘totally dependent for survival on aid – even water and fuel (bottled gas) which has to be transported to them from outside the area’, in the camps ‘[t]here were no humanitarian agencies present. When asked why, the response was, “[w]e do not want “experts” in our camps. It would diminish our sense of responsibility for ourselves”.’⁸⁶

The plan to establish the basic administrative and political structure of the Saharawi state started to take shape not after the official creation of the Saharawi Republic in February 1976 but well before the establishment of the refugee camps in Tindouf, as Saleh Nafe, a Saharawi official and intellectual, points out.⁸⁷ In 1975, as we have just seen, months before the Spanish administration formally withdrew from the territory, several thousand Saharawis had already been displaced from the cities and towns by the advance of the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. They sought refuge in the desert, setting up provisional camps in Guelta, Tifariti, Um Dreiga, and other places. At that time, the general belief of both the internally displaced Saharawis and the Polisario cadres was that they would return to their homes within a short period of time. However, the aim in these camps was not just to survive temporarily, but to start building the structure for the future independent Saharawi state, creating health and education committees, implementing the policy of radical social equality that marked the ideology of the Polisario until the 1990s and starting to plan on fields that given the circumstances, might appear to be futile, such as, for example, the curriculum of the future Saharawi national primary education system. Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, now poet and diplomat, was a teenager then. He had won a poetry contest in El Aaiún just before the conflict began and spoke excellent Spanish. In December 1975 he was appointed teacher of Spanish in Tifariti camp. This is how he remembers those first moments of the Saharawi exile:

Spain withdrew in February 1976, but the exodus started in November 1975 ... The army of the Polisario was at that time very small, and in addition to trying to stop the two invading armies, it had the extra duty of saving the civilians and creating settlements for them ... I remember when I arrived at the beginning of December, I and other teenagers were sent to Tifariti ... the idea was to set up schools there ... There had been an important meeting, I think

that it was at the end of November 1975 in Gleibatifula, where – before the proclamation of the Saharawi Republic – administrative organisation took place. At the meeting it was decided what the teaching [system] would be like. It was called Commission of Education and Teaching: there were only two Saharawi teachers who had graduated in Madrid. There were other ones with COUs [the equivalent to A levels in the Spanish system], some with other degrees ... and from the Arab [speaking] world there were others, some of them with degrees from Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania ... [It was established that] to become a teacher it was necessary to pass a sort of exam. They told you the topics, you looked for some books, you revised and, if you passed the test then you became a teacher, in either Spanish or Arabic.⁸⁸

After the temporary camps in the Western Sahara were attacked, the Polisario guided the refugees to the Algerian *hamada*, where this new Saharawi education system definitively took shape. Tindouf, therefore, provided the temporal and spatial continuity to develop the project that had already started to be implemented in the Western Sahara territory, in the underground caves mentioned by Liman El Jalil (quoted in the Introduction to this book), months before the formal Spanish withdrawal from its colony. It is significant, in that respect, that the word that Mohamed Ali uses to refer to the exam set up by the Commission of Education and Teaching in November 1975 in order to become a teacher was *oposición*, which in Spanish refers *only* to the process of selection to obtain a civil servant post, that is, to become an employee of the state. A new African state was emerging under the cold of the winter and the smoke of the battles.

A new space for a new society

Fiona Terry's idea about the advantages that refugee camps may offer to elites who seek to generate mobilization in a certain group, although analytically helpful and, in general terms, accurate according to my opinion, needs some adjustments in the Saharawi case, taking into account what we have just illustrated. According to Terry, in the camps 'refugees have protected status under international law from which combatants illegally benefit by mixing among them'; in addition, 'refugee camps attract humanitarian assistance that provides guerrillas with an economic resource

independent of external patrons'; and, more importantly, 'refugee camp structures provide mechanisms through which a guerrilla movement can control a population and legitimise its leadership'.⁸⁹ The underlying idea is, therefore, that the infrastructure of the refugee camps – the modern administrative technology used to govern the camps – facilitates the elites' attempt to control and mobilize the displaced population in pursuit of a certain goal such as, for example, the development of a nation-building process.

This logic seems entirely plausible in the Saharawi case not because of the three reasons mentioned by Terry, but because of the sudden experience of displacement and the abrupt formation of the first temporary settlements – under the protection of the Polisario and without any international presence – opened a symbolic empty space that had to be filled with a new communitarian discourse, the discourse of the Saharawi revolution intrinsically linked with the idea of an independent state. Between the autumn of 1975 and the summer of 1976 the refugees were protected by neither international law nor the presence of any international organization (although this is not to say that they were not protected at all) and they received an insignificant amount of international aid. In this situation, marked not by modern administrative technologies (and especially not by a certain degree of stability and security, which is what Terry seems to point out) but by emptiness and uncertainty, the Polisario was thrown into a process of nation-building that it had not planned to start developing so early and with such a lack of material resources. What the more stable situation of exile in Algeria provided was the necessary space and means to continue implementing such a process. Therefore, it is analytically helpful to trace a difference between two different, although complementary, dynamics. On the one hand, the need and the desire to create a new collective project, opened by the crisis that marked the first months of exile (partly still in the Western Sahara territory), and, on the other, the opportunity opened during the following years in the more stable Algerian camps to develop, naturalize and reproduce such a project. Using a Discourse Theoretical terminology, the first moment would be the moment of *the political* and the second the one of *the social*, or *politics*, in a more Lacanian fashion.⁹⁰

Terry's hypothesis captures the moment of *politics* but misses *the political* moment and its constitutive effects.

From the late 1960s onwards, the creation of an independent state was obviously the ultimate goal of the Saharawi nationalists. After Zemla, the Polisario emerged with the conviction that the only way to trigger the decolonization of their homeland was by putting military pressure on the decadent Spanish administration. However, according to their internal documents, the Saharawi nationalists seemed to be still considering the scenario of an independent Western Sahara, and especially the process of institutional nation-building, as a relatively distant (in temporal terms) possibility as late as in 1974, just one year before the beginning of the exodus. The National Action Programme, adopted in the second congress of the Frente Polisario, and published in October 1974 in the bulletin *El Pueblo*, talked of

two different but interlinked phases (the phase of national liberation that we are currently experiencing – a phase that comes before the people conquers power – and the phase of nation-building, a phase that comes after conquering power). The one phase makes progress to the next possible, but to reach the second it is necessary to finish the first successfully.⁹¹

In the *20 de Mayo*, the internal bulletin of the Polisario, this programme was explained in more detail. In the 'short term', the objectives traced at the second congress were to 'politicize, organize and affiliate the masses in the structure of the F.Polisario', to generate a 'continuous mobilization of the masses', to 'reinforce the links between the popular revolution [in the Western Sahara] and its allies at the Arab, African and world level', 'reinforce the internal front', 'create a national equilibrium', and to gain the support of the 'neighbouring countries'.⁹² It was only as a 'long-term' aim that the Polisario had planned to attain 'national liberation' and 'complete independence', to 'build a national republican regime with the effective and active participation of the masses', to 'reach an authentic national unity', to 'guarantee the fundamental liberties of the citizens', to 'create a complementary national economy', to 'distribute wealth fairly and to erase the differences between the cities and the rural areas', to 'eradicate any form of exploitation' and to 'guarantee dignity to all people', to 're-establish all the social and political rights of women and to open for them

all perspectives’, to ‘generalize compulsory and free education ... for all people’, and to ‘fight diseases, build hospitals and [introduce] free treatments’.⁹³ However, as we have seen, a few months after adopting this programme of action, the cadres of the Polisario found themselves with the double duty of not only ‘saving the civilians’, but also ‘creating settlements for them’, as Mohamed Ali pointed out above. It was precisely the convergence of, on the one hand, the void gradually left by the Spanish administration and, on the other, the Moroccan and Mauritanian incursions in 1975 which precipitated the beginning of the ‘second phase’ of the revolutionary project, overlapping with the first. They were, in other words, thrown into the second phase before the first was finished. Both phases, in fact, overlapped when the displacement was still internal. What the Algerian camps provided was the possibility of developing in parallel both processes, creating the conditions of security and stability necessary to implement the second one.

The structure of the refugee camps in Tindouf was inspired in many respects by the traditional spatial organization of the nomadic camps (*frigs*). The camps – mainly inhabited and run by women for more than a decade, as most of the men were on the battlefield until the ceasefire of 1991 – also connected with the mythical narratives of the old *ghazzis*, which were reinscribed in the emerging nationalist imaginary as symbols of the Saharawi secular resistance against any sort of domination. But the camps also departed from tradition in some crucial ways. The old *frigs* had a tribal base, with only members of the same family and fraction of a tribe travelling and living together. The structure of the camps, however, does not replicate this lineage structure, but on the contrary was planned precisely to weaken such traditional identities and alignments, since tribalism was always perceived by the nationalist elites as a challenge to Saharawi national identity. In the camps, ‘a society without classes emerged’ and, in this society (inspired by the emancipatory programme outlined in the ‘second phase’ mentioned above),

one of the first concerns was to ... make the old institutions and situations disappear: thus, slavery was abolished ... the institution of the chej as chief of a fraction; the category of majarreros [artisans] and free slaves ... the subordination of women, who began to occupy a prominent and directive role in the camps; at the same time as traditional education based on

the Koran was transformed ... [and] in the same way, regarding public health, traditional medicine was attacked, being substituted by a permanent assistance ...⁹⁴

The new hegemonic ideology, by banning tribalism and, consequently, the whole social structure associated with it, favoured a new idea of Saharawi family: ‘the concept of a nuclear family, of the Western type’.⁹⁵ And this new reduced familial institution, composed of the two parents and their children, became the basic unit constituting the camps. The way of naming the families also changed. The fact that the camps were run by women, while most men were in the front, explains only in part that these new nuclear families are referred to by the name of the mother instead of that of the father. The new familiar units, associated with a *jaima* (tent) in particular (that is, with a fixed address), are named for example as Nina Mohamed’s family, Kabara Ahmed’s family, et cetera, and, therefore, break symbolically with the patrilineage of tribal society. This profound change would only be possible as part of a wider hegemonic project that in many ways redefines from its very foundations the contours of Saharawi society. The name of the mother in the geography of the Saharawi refugee camps is the equivalent of the house number and/or house name in the UK. An address could be, for instance, ‘Mohamed Brahim [name of the person in question], Maimona Abderrahman’s family [family’s name], Barrio 3 [district], Tifariti [“town” within the refugee camp], Smara [name of refugee camp, also called “province”]’. Besides, arranged unions and marriages within the same extended family (those of very close relatives through which in the past the families ought to strengthen the wealth of the group), almost disappeared. The camps, in this and many other aspects, symbolized, therefore, a clear rupture with the nomadic and tribal tradition.

However, as I have mentioned before, the (meaning of the) camps did not arise from a discursive vacuum, but connected to a series of traditional narratives of violence that facilitated the integration of the dramatic circumstances of the exile in a new coherent historical plot, constructed around the central idea of the Saharawi nation; an *absent* nation, threatened, occupied and violated by new colonial powers. Set up in an inhospitable environment where there was nothing, and everything had to be done, the camps were a blank slate on which to write a new historical narrative based on the desire for an independent nation-state. If, on the one hand, the camps

represent the ultimate impossibility of the present, on the other, it is that very impossibility (of a territory, of a 'normal state', of peace, private property, material wealth, et cetera) that generates a radical desire for the better future incarnated by the Saharawi state. The camps, although connected in some ways with (narratives of) the past, are basically a projection for the future.

In that sense, the development worker Jean-Claude Bruffaerts noted after a visit to the camps in 1984 that 'the [Saharawi] struggle is based on a plan for a future society ... Unceasingly, the discussions one has with the Saharawis have to do with what will follow the war, the projects of reconstruction that they must prepare for'.⁹⁶ The struggle in the camps was not only for survival. The camps provided the (temporal) spatial fix of where to develop a social revolution and build a new state, based on the new revolutionary principles of the Saharawi nationalism launched by Bassiri and El Luali. In fact, most Saharawi refugees recall the first years in which the camps took shape as the time of the 'Social Revolution' or beginning of the 'Saharawi Revolution'. 'The ... focus on projects for education and technical training for all Saharawis, the experience of working together as equals, the training provided in self-management and self-expression, have all been part of their nation building.'⁹⁷ James Firebrace emphasized, among the factors explaining what he considered to be the 'success of the Saharawi community in exile', that the 'Saharawi leadership consciously developed a political ideology emphasizing political unity and a new social order' and that '[t]here is a total orientation [in the camps] to a future in which *Saharawis are no longer refugees but citizens* in their own land'.⁹⁸

This is probably one of the main reasons why the Saharawi exiles in Tindouf became, in the words of Lampbell, 'the most unusual refugees'. The Tindouf camps cannot be dissociated from the political project of the SADR and the narratives of desire fostered by the war and the forced displacement. The aim of the camps was not only to provide temporary shelter to the displaced civilians and logistical support to the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army (SPLA).⁹⁹ On the contrary, as I have mentioned, they were planned as a scenario in which the creation of the new Saharawi subjectivity that emerged out of the ashes of the former pre-colonial and

colonial identities could be explored. From the Zemla massacre in 1970 to the proclamation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in February 1976 and the death in action against Mauritanian troops of Polisario's leader El Luali four months later, the inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara faced a dramatic overlapping of critical events that contributed decisively to the collapse of the former collective identities (both tribal and supra-tribal – that is, the diffuse identity of the Hassania-speaking people of the Trab El Bidan) and, therefore, the opening of a discursive space for the emergence of a new political subjectivity. Times of storm, crisis and radical social dislocation have negative and positive effects. If, on the one hand, they threaten and destroy former sedimented identities, they also generate the need for new forms of identification, opening the space for the emergence of new communitarian projects.

The nationalist project of the Frente Polisario, led by a young generation of militants influenced by 'the ideological movements of the time (Nasser, Cabral, Guevara, Mao Tsetung, etcetera.)', envisaged not only an independent future but also a 'democratic, egalitarian and *new society* ... abolishing slavery, eradicating inequality and eliminating tribalism',¹⁰⁰ and the camps became the spatial fix in which to implement such a political communitarian project. The Polisario enforced, from the early days of the exile, the creation of an 'ordered society' (against the expectations of fighting, pushing and disorder of the development worker mentioned before), that replicated the structure of a projected Saharawi nation-state, mainly inspired at the beginning by the Libyan and Algerian revolutions and the fashionable readings of the time. As Brahim Mojtar acknowledges, 'all [the young leaders of the OVSL – Bassiri's group – and the Frente Polisario] read Frantz Fanon and *Ché Guevara*' and were influenced by the anti-colonial and revolutionary experiences of Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, Cuba, Vietnam, et cetera.¹⁰¹ Although, as most of the Polisario leaders emphasize, their project was never strictly socialist or communist. The result was a nationalist project that, integrating some ideological elements from the leftist revolutionary traditions, envisaged (and implemented the policies towards) a society based on the principles of radical communitarism, social equality and group loyalty.

The Polisario was much more than a political party or a national liberation movement, it was a state, an exiled state that assigned a particular role to everyone, decided the place of residence, took care of the children, provided medicines and gave food, clothes and shelter. All the [refugee] population lived at the rhythm of its slogans and dictums. Such a uniform and closed world comprised the optimum conditions for attempting the new mode [of society] that replicated politically, according to the interpretation of the FP [Frente Polisario], the classic lines of the revolutionary left: primacy of collectivism over individualism, and democratic centralism, *Markasía Demokratía*.¹⁰² A central element of the new order was its emphasis on equality, although in fact it came naturally. In the camps, due to the circumstances, more than equality there was a radical communism: all ate the same, they lived in identical tents and no one had money. 'For 15 years there was no money ... When from the 90s onwards money started to circulate again ... we didn't know either the value of things or the notes ... There were young people who at the age of 20 had never used a note.'¹⁰³

But, on many occasions, the contours of this new social order collided, in the words of Fadel Ismail, with the beliefs of a 'society that was still fundamentally conservative'.¹⁰⁴ One of the main clashes was

the radical decision of the Frente Polisario of eradicating tribalism. In everyday life it was necessary to create a new language and to develop a new and artificial behaviour. It was prohibited to mention the name of the father because that would inform about the tribal origin. 'I don't have father, I have a people' ... 'Who are you? Ahmed. Son of ...? Son of the Saharawi people. What tribe are you from? From the Saharawi people.'¹⁰⁵

The form of naming as 'son of (*uld*) ... son of (*uld*)' – for example, Mohamed *uld* Mulay *uld* Abderrahman, meaning Mohamed son of Mulay son of Abderrahman – disappeared and was substituted by two names, the name of the father acting as the only surname but without being preceded by *uld*. However, as Diego Aguirre rightly explains and as I could also check in the camps, 'on many occasions [the name of the fathers] were modified to avoid identification', eliminating any reference to the father and, therefore, to the tribal origin.¹⁰⁶ According to the interpretations of some influential leaders, the role of the war during the first decade and the need to keep a cohesive society against the threatening radical 'other' incarnated by Morocco, prevented any criticism of the radical changes implemented in the camps and, to some extent, even legitimated the purges

of those perceived to be a danger to the revolution (and ‘tribalism’, for instance, was considered for several years a punishable crime). However, as García explains in his polemical and interesting work, most of these purges seem to have been related to internal power struggles among the leadership of the Polisario and were used as a strategy to deactivate or challenge potential competitors.^{[107](#)}

At the end of the 1980s, however, the social tension that had been growing in the camps exploded, generating, according to some accounts, demonstrations, protests and the open questioning of the direction that the Saharawi revolution had taken, the role of a number of leaders and the excessive authority of the small and powerful Political Bureau of the Frente Polisario. Although internal dissent had been persecuted in the name of safeguarding national unity, the new order had also encouraged the political (and mainly administrative) participation of the refugees in the public life of the camps. They were not only displaced persons depending on external aid but also citizens, members of political cells and education, culture, health or food administrative committees. As citizens they had the in-group legitimacy to put into question some of the principles of the revolution. What the refugee camps witnessed during the late 1980s was a *revolution within the revolution* – a ‘Saharawi perestroika’, in the words of journalist Toby Shelley^{[108](#)} – that redefined the basis of the Saharawi state in waiting. This Saharawi *transition* coincided with the negotiations that preceded the ceasefire and the peace plan brokered by the UN in 1991 (known as the Settlement Plan). With the pause in the armed hostilities, a new phase opened in the everyday life of the camps. The storm, the time of war, the fear of bombardment, the time of waving of flags when the fighters returned to the camps and paraded Moroccan prisoners and weapons captured in the last battle had finished, at least temporarily. The first phase of the 1974 action programme had not finished yet, but the conditions for the development of the second one were already in place. History is sometimes surprising.

The calm ... and the normalization of everyday life

After the signature of the Settlement Plan in 1991, morale in the camps was high, despite a lack of trust in the diplomatic route among significant sectors of the Saharawi military. Most refugees expected that, after concluding the identification of the eligible voters in a period of approximately six months, the self-determination referendum – the central point on which the peace plan was based – would take place and they would return to the Western Sahara no more than one to two years later. However, the identification of the eligible voters soon became the major obstacle to the implementation of the plan. While the Frente Polisario provided a list of native inhabitants of the territory, based on the Spanish census of 1974, Rabat attempted from the outset to introduce large numbers of settlers.¹⁰⁹ Disagreements over the census initiated a new period in the Western Sahara conflict in which confrontation was no longer on the battlefield but around negotiating tables. The role of the military became defensive, as the new ‘fighters’ returning to the camps with victories (or defeats) were the network of Saharawi diplomats, bureaucrats and politicians. In this respect, during the 1990s, the (strategic) tension that had always existed between the structure of the Frente Polisario, as a movement, and that of the Saharawi Republic, as an institutional structure, seems to have been partially resolved in favour of the latter, although in fact it is almost impossible to trace a clear dividing line between the two. The situation of ‘neither peace nor war’ that began with the ceasefire contributed to a normalization of life in the camps. It facilitated the relaxation of the social codes imposed during the previous years (allowing, for example, some degree of ‘tribal revival’, although the issue of the tribes is still not ‘politically correct’ nowadays) and the strengthening of the political and administrative structures of the Saharawi state that had been set up during the previous decade under very different – and much more difficult – circumstances.

The following story, which I experienced in April 2004 whilst undertaking fieldwork in the refugee camps, illustrates some of the changes in the Tindouf exile since the ceasefire and the opening of the diplomatic phase of the conflict. In Rabuni – the political and administrative centre of the camps – I had a very interesting conversation with a Spanish man who was visiting the camps. He had come to the camps for five days to visit ‘his child’; a Saharawi boy whom he and his family had fostered during the

previous summer in Spain under the auspices of the cooperation programme *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace) that we will explore in the next chapter. This is the story that he told me: on the last day of his stay in Smara camp, he went with his host Saharawi family to one of the new commercial districts of the camp to buy some crafts. The shopkeeper spoke little Spanish, so his Saharawi ‘guides’ (‘his boy’ and some relatives) did the translation and the negotiation. The final price of what the Spanish man wanted to buy was 27,000 dinars. He thought that it was a little bit expensive, but as he was looking into his wallet and trying to calculate how much it was in euros, his Saharawi companions told him to pay with two (Algerian) notes of 1,000 dinars. He did not understand, but he gave the shopkeeper the two red notes on which ‘1,000’ was clearly printed. To his surprise, he was given back some coins by the smiling merchant. He was confused. “I’ve paid him with two notes of 1,000 dinars ... but the price was 27,000 dinars ... and he gave me some change back ...,” he told his companions helplessly. His confusion increased even more when he was told by his companions: “Oh, no! Forget about the ‘1,000’ written on the note, it is part of the design; it’s only a drawing. The red notes – ignore what is printed on them – are worth 20,000 dinars.” The Spanish visitor let the matter drop, thinking to himself that he did not understand the transaction but that, if it was a ‘con’, he did not really mind as it was only a few euros anyway and they needed them more than he.

He was relieved when I explained to him that everything had been a misunderstanding about the currency. The Saharawis were talking in Saharawi dinars, but the physical notes they were using were Algerian dinars (euros are also widely used in the camps). The printed value – 1,000 – was that of the Algerian dinar, but the exchange value in the economic context of the camps was that of the imagined Saharawi dinar, usually also called Saharawi peseta and *Uguia* (whose value, based on the old Spanish peseta, is approximately twenty times less than the current Algerian dinar). There is, of course, nothing new about the value of money being socially constructed. But this anecdote goes further than being simply an example par excellence of the socially constructed character of money, in as much as the nominal value of the notes used by the Saharawi refugees is not even printed on the notes. There is no visual reminder of how many units of currency they had agreed to symbolize by ‘the red notes’. The exchange value

is explicitly imagined, explicitly constructed at the symbolic level. As for Saharawi coins, the only ones that exist have been coined in very limited numbers to commemorate certain events of recent Saharawi history.¹¹⁰ They are not used in everyday exchanges, but kept as symbolic reminders of the will to have a 'proper' Saharawi currency. Thus, the coins and notes that are used in everyday life are the 'wrong' ones.

The Saharawi (revolutionary) subjectivity that emerged during the 1970s, the nationalist identity and the concept of citizenship associated with it, is sedimented in the everyday life of the camps in a whole range of symbols, spaces, practices and stories. National currencies have traditionally been a very important symbol of the sovereign nation-state and play a central role in the routinization of identity as an unnoticed remainder of belonging to a certain socio-political community. The Saharawi currency is a marker of the political identity promoted by the Polisario's nationalist project and incarnated in the Saharawi Republic. The Saharawi state, in that respect, is a state like any other. However, the situation is not, as Mojtar has already explained, of 'normality' but of an 'abnormal normality' which is defined by the context of exile, conflict, dependence on external aid, displacement and deprivation. This leads us to another crucial point illustrated by the currency story: the Saharawi's 'borrowed' notes exemplify not only the scarceness of material resources and means, but also the provisionality of the spatial fixation of the state. In other words, because circumstances do not permit the construction of a 'normal' state, it is built more explicitly at the symbolic level.

The problematic relation between the signifier and the signified (note versus value, sign versus meaning) is broken and even, to some extent, subverted. In other words, the socially constructed and agreed value of 20,000 Saharawi dinars is represented through a 'wrong' signifier (whose hegemonic meaning in the surrounding contexts is a different one; '1,000 Algerian dinars'). In that way, what the Algerian note represents in the camps is not only 20,000 Saharawi dinars but the absence of Saharawi printed notes. The Saharawi currency is, therefore, through the presence of its (physical) absence, elevated to the place of an object of desire for the refugees. There is a continuous tension between the process of nation-building, carried out in the camps through the symbolization of identity, and

its inherent impossibility. The note, for instance, represents the achievement of a national currency (at a purely discursive level) while at the same time symbolizing its very impossibility, thus signifying that the materialization of the Saharawi currency will not be possible until circumstances change. And it is precisely that routine encounter with the impossibility that generates the desire to change the situation. This is probably what one senior Polisario member meant when he spoke of a ‘normalization of [everyday] life without losing the will’.^{[111](#)} In a more Lacanian fashion, I would call it *Saharawi founding desire*.

Chapter 4

From Soldiers to Shopkeepers: Nationalism, Development and Social Change in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

The reproduction of the nation in times of waved and unwaved flags

In the period that was opened up by the 1991 ceasefire, in which the role of the Saharawi refugees in Tindouf was reduced to waiting patiently for the celebration of the promised referendum, the leadership of the Polisario acknowledged the need to create the conditions in which, as Brahim Mojtar remarked,

these people, who have suffered so much ... can live a little bit better. It is necessary to create the minimum conditions for a dignified life ... We should provide education for their sons and daughters, health care for everybody. It is necessary to create all the conditions of a modern and decent life in a free, independent and sovereign country.^{[1](#)}

This aim to ‘normalize’ life and improve the conditions of living in the refugee camps has had two major consequences. On the one hand, it has led to the expansion and reinforcement of the public sector, that is, of the institutions of the Saharawi Republic and the public services it provides for the refugee-citizens. As anthropologist Juan Carlos Gimeno explains, the 1990s

[w]ere times in which to develop and strengthen the structures of the state, which needed to be prepared for the public management of the definitive peace. [T]he structures of the state were

developed; new Ministries were created, as well as new departments within the existing Ministries ... There was much to do with regards to health, the experimentation of agricultural [possibilities], the political promotion at an international level of the Saharawi cause, cooperation work, and in many other fields ...²

On the other hand, the decade of the 1990s has also opened the space for the development of a cash economy and a flourishing private sector in the camps. As journalist Toby Shelley observed in 2004,

[i]n the camps the relaxation has brought the development of petty commerce and some artisan work. Small shops selling basic groceries and household goods have sprouted, as have rudimentary repair sites for private vehicles, the number of which has increased enormously. Jewellery and leatherwork, much aimed at the solidarity and NGO market, is made and sold locally. There are some basic restaurants. Families own livestock. An estimated 4,000 young men have left the camps for migrant work in Spain. Their remittances, pensions from those employed by Spain before 1975 (and donations from Spanish families and organisations), allow many of the mud-brick houses that supplement or replace the tents to have electricity generated by solar panels.³

This development of the public and private sectors was captured visually by the refugees. As part of my research on everyday life in the camps, I gave cameras to a group of fourteen refugees, and asked them to take photos of whatever they liked about their own lives or about life in the camps in general. My explanations did not contain any hint of what I was looking for; they were just asked to explain with images, instead of words, what it meant for them to be a Saharawi. In broad terms, the photographs that they chose to take can be grouped in three main blocks (see [figure 2](#)).⁴ The first group (top row) focuses on family life and social relations: the members of the family, the house and its contents, the tea ceremony, guests, leisure activities (including children's games). The second set of photos (middle row) portrays the sphere of labour, mainly through portraits of Saharawis performing different jobs and activities. These photos represent both the private and the public sector, comprising pictures of shopkeepers or builders as well as nurses, doctors and teachers working for the Saharawi Republic. The third group (bottom row) comprises photos of official buildings of the Saharawi Republic: schools, administrative centres, hospitals, food distribution centres, et cetera.

The general and first impression that one gets when looking at this series of images is that the life of the refugees is relatively ‘normal’, although within an exceptional context. This normality, as some Polisario senior members concede, might imply that the situation of exile ‘could become acceptable in certain circumstances’ and, therefore, damaging for the Saharawi struggle.⁵ But, in the words of a Saharawi Popular Liberation Army senior officer, ‘this is not normal, this is the exile, this isn’t our land and nothing will be normal until we manage to return to our homeland’. Therefore, ‘the sense of temporality should always be kept; people can’t accept this situation and act as if this was forever ... Everybody knows this: this is only a borrowed land, we can’t build foundations here; nothing here is really ours.’⁶ But for many young refugees the camps are to some extent ‘their homeland’. As Fadala ment Mahammud admits, ‘[a] child of the exile? Yes ... But I have been born here and I’m from this world. Yes, I like it, life is not so bad ... as in any other place ... The camps are a place like any other.’⁷ ‘Well, I’m from the camps, I’ve grown up here ... I’ve never been to the Western Sahara, my friends are here ... in many ways I’d say I’m from here’, reflects a young female refugee from Smara camp.⁸ The first and second rows of images seem to illustrate this sort of ‘normality’ in the everyday life of the camps, normality that has positive and negative consequences in the life in the camps, as we will see later.



Figure 2: Everyday life in Smara refugee camp

However, what is surprising is the number of photos of official buildings, of buildings of the Saharawi Republic. Why did they decide to take photos of schools, medical dispensaries, food distribution centres, state kindergartens, et cetera? According to their own explanations, there are two main reasons. On the one hand, it is because they (or their friends and relatives) work there. In addition, these buildings allocate some of the basic services in the camps (the very services that contribute to the normalization of life). Hence such sites are part of the everyday life, routines and itineraries of the refugees, as both workers and users. But, on the other hand, the authors of the photo essays also spoke insistently of how proud they were of such ‘achievements’. These official buildings, they told me, represent all that the Saharawis were able to accomplish despite the negative circumstances of war and exile; they symbolize the existence of the Saharawi state and their ability to manage their own affairs independently. Thus, these images might be interpreted as a statement of political citizenship made by the refugees as members of the Saharawi

Republic. The photos were not taken by the refugees for internal consumption. On the contrary, they were explicitly produced as a research material for a foreign researcher who was investigating the life in the camps. In that respect, the choice of images responds to a certain discourse that this particular sample of refugees wanted to project about themselves, about what they are and, especially, about how they want to be seen by others. This is why the official buildings acquire a special significance. It is not only that they are important in their everyday life, but also that they want me – as a researcher – to be aware of the centrality of the state; to be aware of the fact that they are not merely refugees living thanks to the new colonialism of compassion. Consequently, it seems plausible to think that what became accepted – sedimented and routinized in the everyday life of the camps – is not the situation of exile (which continues to be unacceptable and restrictive), but a Saharawi political identity based on the desire to overcome such restrictive circumstances.

This centrality of the state in the life of the camps is also reflected in the landscape of the camps. In [figure 3](#) we can see a map of Smara camp sketched by a young teenager, where the well-ordered and rectangular urban fabric can be clearly appreciated. Each of the four camps (Smara, El Aaiún, Auserd and Dajla) is a *wilaya* (province), containing several *dairas* (towns), with names such as Tifariti, Bir Lehlu, Mheris, Farsia, Echederia, Hausa and La Güera. Both the provinces and the towns are named after actual localities and places in the Western Sahara territory. Hence the names act as a constant reminder of their occupied homeland, a physically distant homeland continuously present through its absence. In turn, each *daira* is divided into four *barrios* (numbered from one to four). In the middle of the four *barrios* there is a sort of open central space or plaza. The *dairas* have a rectangular grid and both the borders of the *dairas* and its *barrios* are marked by roads and main streets (the space separating two *dairas* being wider than the space dividing two *barrios*).

At the main entrance of each camp there is a police control post (number 1, on the map), which officially marks the border of the *wilaya* or province. These entrance checkpoints are policed by the Saharawi National Police, which is the security body that enforces the law of the Saharawi Republic inside the perimeter of the *wilayas*. There is a second police force, called National Gendarmerie, whose function is to patrol outside the perimeter of

the *wilayas*: in the roads and sand trails that connect the camps, the administrative centre of Rabuni, and all the rest of the Saharawi institutions under the control of the Polisario/Saharawi Republic scattered in the area around the camps, as well as in the liberated territories. While the National Police is more similar to the Spanish Policía Nacional (a more ‘urban’ and ‘community’-oriented police force), the National Gendarmerie would be the equivalent of the Guardia Civil, having a more military structure as well as competence over roads, transport (including traffic controls and the fight against smuggling, for example) and security in vast desert areas.



Figure 3: Smara refugee camp map

In the landscape of the camps the main landmarks are the official buildings, usually located at the exterior border of the *dairas* or *barrios* (or close to the central plazas and open spaces), acting as visual points of reference that can be seen from many points. The Saharawi boy who drew the map stressed the location of the schools in his area (a and b), most possibly because from his perspective these were the most representative

buildings. The centre of the camp also appears displaced to the lower right of the map, and his *daira* – Bir Lehlu – acquires a more central position, displacing the geographical centre. We can see, however, the central quarter of the camp – situated below the garden (which is also a public space) – where many of the main official buildings are concentrated. It is the area named *wilaya* on the map, which, although it appears as a single element, is in fact a complex of several constructions linked to each other or very close, comprising several sections and departments of the Saharawi Republic administrative structure. The *wilaya* comprises the headquarters of the provincial government, where it is possible to talk to the *wali* (governor) and sort out different bureaucratic and administrative issues such as, for example, filling in the paperwork to apply for planning permission to open a shop in the camp (2). Very close to the *wilaya* is the central hospital (3), a sort of small museum (4), the old telephone point (5),⁹ the provincial court of justice (6), the visitor's reception centre (7), a police station (8), a centre for disabled children (9) and the first primary school of the camp (10). On the right and left sides of this 'central administrative district' stretch the two main markets (*mercado*) of Smara (11a and 11b), where most of the new small shops and businesses are located. This central space, where the public administration and the private commercial initiative meet, is the 'visual hub' of the camp, not only where the main roads and streets converge, but also a nodal point in the social, political and economic life of the camps.¹⁰ This is a place marked by the presence of the Saharawi Republic, by the presence of its edifices and the unwaved flags that hang (or are painted in the walls) everywhere, silently reminding the refugees of the nation-state to which they belong.¹¹

Flags are the near-sacred symbols that dominate demonstrations, parades and official ceremonies. They are the symbols that are saluted by soldiers on days of national commemoration. 'The passionately waved flags are conventionally considered exemplaries of nationalism. [On the contrary], routine flags – the flags of our environment – slip from the category of "nationalism"' in most studies, and do not receive attention.¹² However, they are as important as the waved flags, since they point precisely towards the way in which the nation is routinely reproduced and sedimented. The unwaved, unsaluted (and usually dirty) flag that hangs unnoticed on the

flagpole or wall of an official building is the clearest example of what Michael Billing calls ‘banal nationalism’: the ideological habits and routines which enable nations to be reproduced. That is, the daily practices through which ‘the nation is indicated, or “flagged”, in the lives of the citizenry’.¹³ The unwaved flag corresponds to the moment of sedimentation of an ideology, a nationalist ideology in our case. It is the moment when the nationalist myths about the frontiers of inclusion/exclusion become the hegemonic social imaginary that informs the collective identity of a group. The time of ‘neither peace nor war’ (negative peace) that started with the ceasefire of 1991, with the relaxation of the revolutionary social codes and the improvements in living conditions (provided largely by the state, although dependent on external aid) created the (banal) conditions of possibility for the sedimentation of the Saharawi nationalist project. It is the time of *the social* (or *politics*, in more Lacanian terms) as opposed to the times in which *the political* emerges dramatically challenging and rearticulating the sedimented field of *the social*.¹⁴ But the times of apparent calm are as important as the times of storm, fervour, martyrs and great battles for the reproduction of a national identity. In fact, they are vital since they point precisely to the success in organizing the life of a given community along the new lines of inclusion and exclusion that emerged in the times of crisis and social dislocation.

One further photo essay deepens this idea of the sedimentation of the Saharawi nationalist project through everyday life and the tension of this process with the situation of exile. It was produced by a man in his early thirties who studied economics in Cuba and now works as a Spanish teacher in Smara. Salek, according to his own explanations, tried to develop two complementary ideas in his photo essay (see [figure 4](#)). The photos were taken in March 2006, just after the February torrential rains that had destroyed up to an estimated 40 per cent of the buildings and basic infrastructure in Smara and other camps. Many families lost their precarious mud-brick houses, whose walls – constructed without foundations – could not resist the floods and crumbled like wet sugar. Many of the contents were also lost, since the camp had to be evacuated very quickly, with time to save almost nothing in some of the most affected *barrios*. Only after several days in the surrounding hills, waiting for the rain to stop and

helplessly witnessing how their few possessions vanished under a torrent of muddy waters, could the Saharawi refugees return to the camp. A significant number of the constructions had completely collapsed or were seriously damaged. Since many kitchens had been destroyed, numerous families had to build provisional ones in improvised tents. This gave the opportunity for Salek – who would have liked to study film-making, instead of economics, in Cuba, but did not get a place – to construct an elaborated story about what is to be a Saharawi. He tried, in his own words, ‘to tell the story of the Saharawi people through the evolution of the kitchens in the camps’.¹⁵

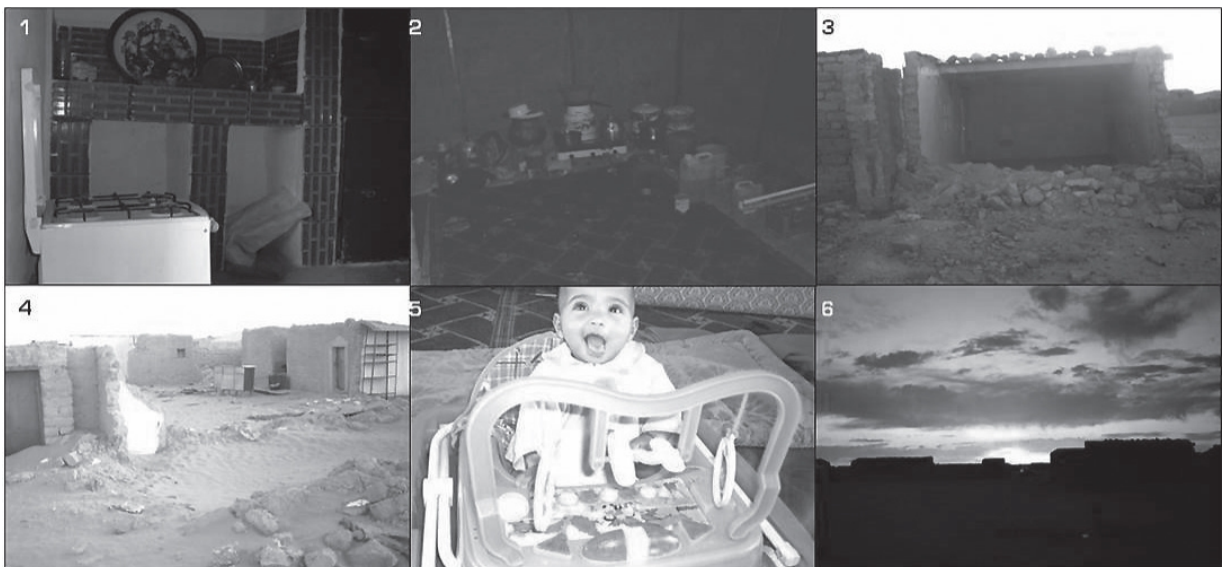


Figure 4: Photo essay ‘The story of the Saharawi people’

At the beginning, there were no mud-brick rooms, but only tents. The kitchens were outside the tent, in a sort of smaller tent made up of fabric remains, to protect the kitchens from the sand and the wind. But since they were made of fabric, they burned down very easily. They were very dangerous ... it was not unusual to see at night the flames of a kitchen-tent that had caught fire. Progressively, the kitchens became more solid, with metal sheets, some wood ... until the current mud-brick rooms with metal roofs evolved, much more secure against fire ... I have taken some pictures of one of the current kitchens [1], with one of these modern gas cookers where you can cook standing up ... I have also taken a photo of an old style kitchen [2], with a small cooker on the floor, in a kind of tent. It’s my neighbour’s; the rains destroyed their modern kitchen, so now they have to cook provisionally in an old-style kitchen that

reminds me of my childhood ... Now kitchens don't burn down; like everything in the camps they are better, more modern and developed ... more practical ... But anyhow, they are still very precarious, because everything is precarious here. The rains have just shown that. The new kitchens may look good, but with a bit of rain they collapse. I took some photos of destroyed and damaged buildings to show this precariousness [3, 4] ... This is all provisional ... But we will build the kitchens and our houses again, and again and again, if necessary. We have survived thirty years here and we will survive more, because we have the determination ... In fact, the houses and material stuff is not the most important thing. We're stymied here in the camps. But we're determined to go on. And there is something that no one, no torrential rain, no Moroccan king ... will ever manage to steal from us: the beauty of life and our future. This is why I have taken lots of photos of the stunning sunrises in the desert [6] and one of the youngest baby of my family (my nephew) [5] ... These things will always be ours.¹⁶

Salek's explanation highlights many of the elements that I have previously introduced and explored. The evolution of the kitchens illustrates the tension between the need to create a basic infrastructure of some quality to make the life of the refugees easier and the permanent temporality that mediates any attempt to build anything solid in the provisional landscape of the camps. The rain is a sort of Lacanian *real* that resurfaces from time to time to remind us painfully of the ultimate impossibility of our social fantasies.¹⁷ It is a cruel way of reminding the Saharawi refugee-citizens that, although the camps may look on the surface like an African city 'like any other', they are not and never will be 'normal' cities. In the Algerian exile nothing has foundations and, therefore, everything is precarious. The desolate geography of the *hamada* is a restrictive geography that opposes the collapsing houses with a horizon of stunning sunrises and the smile of a child who will be forced to discover that 'we're stymied here' if the situation does not change. In other words, what Salek tried to capture with his camera was a geography of desire; the will of 'my people' to have a 'normal' life, only prevented by what began with the 'the Moroccan Black March'.¹⁸ 'The Moroccans arrived committing many atrocities: killing, raping, torturing ... and because of that the Saharawi people had to escape from its own territory', added another young Saharawi teacher, called Sidahmed, when asked how he would commence a summary of the Saharawi history to his pupils.¹⁹ That was the point of departure, without which the current situation of exile and

precariousness cannot be understood. The constraining geography of the camps acts as a surface of inscription of the Moroccan invasion that prevents the normality of *the social*. Nationalism is always about desire, about a lost ‘Golden Age’, about foes and about bridging an (imagined) glorious past with a future of plenitude in which the current restrictive circumstances that prevent the nation from fully being itself have been ultimately overcome. Hence, the precariousness and provisionality of the kitchens constitute just one more banal reminder of the contours of the Saharawi nation which is encountered unnoticed everyday, just like a dirty flag hanging silently from an official building or a patriotic mural faded by the sun.

‘First education, then liberation’: forging Saharawi citizens

One of the main strategies for being ‘ready for the (desired) future’ is precisely through education. Many Saharawis have stressed to me the need to have an educated citizenry; without enough teachers, doctors, engineers, journalists, architects, et cetera it will be impossible to be ‘truly independent’ in the future and to perform all necessary tasks to keep the economy and administration of an independent nation running. ‘First education, then liberation’, was one of the first slogans launched by the Polisario in 1973. ‘Why do we want the control of our land and natural resources, of the phosphates, ... if we don’t have the skills to take advantage of them?’, a young Saharawi engineer rhetorically asked himself.²⁰ The problem, he continued,

is that now we have the technicians but we still don’t have control over our natural resources ... and therefore the technicians don’t have anything to do here in the camps ... At least the doctors and nurses have a job but we’re unemployed! We’re teaching, working as administrative staff in Rabuni, saving to open a shop ... but we can’t develop our skills here.²¹

As we will see later, Saharawi exiled society is currently suffering in some respects the consequences of the success of the educational programmes implemented in the camps, since large numbers of graduates cannot be absorbed by the public administration, and the ‘private sector’ is still

nascent in the camps (and inherently limited precisely because of the very situation of exile). But the emphasis on the need to provide a good education for the young generations of refugees has not diminished over the years. In fact, education is one of the main, if not the main, sphere where the nation is reproduced, and the Saharawi Republic and Polisario leaders are well aware of this. As a Saharawi teacher stressed, ‘children are the future of the world and we have to teach them to read, write, to educate them ... because they are the future soldiers of my nation. We have to show them the path to follow.’²² From the very early days of exile, when the displaced Saharawis were still in camps in the Western Sahara, the Polisario cadres made a very significant effort to create a system of compulsory public education, appointing teachers, debating about the national curriculum, et cetera, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter. Juan Carlos Gimeno indicates that this ‘effort in education is one of the central pillars of the egalitarian social revolution’ launched by the Saharawi nationalists.²³

The importance given to the educative process as base of this social revolution was central and is clearly expressed in the names given to the schools. From the first moment, the Frente POLISARIO made an effort to build schools to get together the Saharawi boys and girls and to protect them from the horrors of the war, whilst simultaneously educating them. The first schools were given the names ‘9 July’ (the date of the commemoration of the death of the leader, El Luali) and ‘12 October’ (the date of the cession of the authority of the tribes to the POLISARIO). To these (schools) the school for (adult) women ‘27 February’, the date that commemorates the constitution of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), was added. All these are dates that correspond to the creation of a new time that (illustrates) the new referents in the new life of the Saharawis. Against the ecological time in which the Saharawi nomadic tribes lived ... and the colonial time mentioned in the ‘new law’ to which the poets of the colonial cities referred to [in the polemic about the number of rounds of the tea ceremony that exemplified the economic development of the territory during the last years of Spanish rule], the time of the revolution is a time made of commemorations of foundational moments ... and represents a radical change against the previous notion of time ...²⁴

Through education the Saharawi children would, therefore, not only be trained in all the necessary areas to keep an independent nation ‘running’, but they would also be socialized in the new historical narratives that form

their national identity. In his seminal works, historian Hayden White has stressed the hegemonic role of the narrative style for the construction of historical knowledge, as opposed to other forms such as annals or chronicles.²⁵ A history (and a story) requires a narrative of events not only ordered but also interlinked so that they appeared as forming part of a structure, as embodying a given order of meaning that a mere sequence of events does not have in itself.²⁶ Narratives are constructed through a process of selection, of exclusion of certain events and the elevation of others in order to naturalize a particular truth. The plotting operation attempts to structure events, places, dates, people, et cetera, in such a way that they became part of a particular history/story and acquire their very own meaning only as part of that narrative, as David Campbell insists.²⁷ The significance of historical events always ultimately depends on the way they are narrated, articulated, plotted with others, in order to project a coherent discourse through which to give meaning to an everyday life that otherwise does not have an inherent and objective meaning.²⁸ The Saharawi exile, the war, the hardship of the Algerian *hamada*, are all inscribed in a nationalist narrative, structured around the central and founding desire for independence, truncated by the Moroccan invasion. The new time, as Gimeno points out, is neither the old tribal time nor the more recent time of colonial economic development and urbanization, but the new time of the Saharawi nationalist revolution. And the events elevated to a central position in such a historical nationalist narrative are precisely those that best embody symbolically the cornerstones of the liberation process: the Day of National Unity (12 October, which represents the end of the old tribal order and the emergence of 'the Saharawi people' as a conscious collective actor), the Day of the Saharawi Republic (27 February, the date of proclamation of the SADR, which represents the materialization of the collective will of independence), the Day of the Martyrs (9 June, the day of the death in combat of Saharawi leader El Luali, which represents the determination of the people to fight for the national liberation until the end), and the Day of the Armed Forces (20 May, the day of the first armed action of the Polisario, representing with 9 June the determination of the people to combat colonialism). The name of the official bulletin of the Polisario is '20 May'. As I have mentioned, 12 October, 9 June and 27 February are the

names of three schools – two secondary boarding schools and a women's training centre. This geography of education reproduces the nationalist narrative and the schools become constant reminders of the cornerstones that 'unlock' the plot, the meaning, of the collective Saharawi story in which the rest of the events, places, persons and, in sum, the everyday life of the Saharawi refugee-citizens, acquire sense and direction.

Currently, in addition to the two mentioned large boarding schools, there is also a network of primary schools in the camps, whose construction was initiated during the 1980s and expanded during the 1990s. The first of these schools – one per *wilaya* – had names of martyrs, but as new schools were progressively built in every *daira* during the late 1980s and 1990s, the new educational centres took the names of the foreign bodies that funded their construction. After the ceasefire, there was a boom in the cooperation and solidarity programmes in the camps, mainly from Spanish organizations, both NGOs and public administrations. Many of the schools in the camps were funded or co-funded by Spanish autonomous communities, for example. The two primary schools closest to my house in Smara are called Escuela Valencia and Escuela Castilla-La Mancha, after the two autonomous Spanish communities that contributed economically to their construction, creating a sort of geography of international solidarity with the Saharawi cause, which acts as a constant reminder that 'we are not alone, we have many friends; especially the Spanish people are our friends ... not the government ...', as a young teacher clarifies.²⁹ The first phase of Saharawi public education in the camps is formed by a network of public kindergartens, aimed at children aged three to five. There is usually one per *daira*, located in the administrative building of the municipality. This is a non-compulsory stage of the education system and targets mainly the children of mothers who work (in most cases for the state, as teachers, nurses, or in the *wilaya*). At the age of six, compulsory primary education begins, which comprises six academic courses. Currently, the network of primary schools comprises one per *daira*, located, as I have said, in the external sites of the municipality's geographical borders, close to main roads and hence clearly visible from several points in the camps. The white colour of the walls also differentiates them from the surrounding context of brownish mud-brick constructions and greenish *jaimas*. The number of

pupils in each school varies, but most schools in Smara, where I have done the majority of my fieldwork, have about 700–900 students, with a number of students per class that usually ranges from twenty to thirty.

In the morning, the children gather at the entrance of the school or in the internal patio; then at the call of the teachers the pupils form lines according to level and group and enter their respective classrooms, marching and, in some cases, singing patriotic chants. The teaching lasts from approximately 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a break in the middle in which the students return home to have lunch. During the morning session, the schools provide breakfast for the students, sometimes only for the younger ones, consisting of milk and biscuits. The whole Saharawi education system is mixed, with boys and girls studying together in the same classes, sharing desks and the scarce learning materials. The teaching staff is also mixed, with a relatively similar distribution of male and female teachers in most schools, although overall there are more women employed in education. There are more women teaching the Arabic sections of the curriculum than men. On the other hand, since a higher number of men went abroad to be educated in Spanish-speaking countries, especially in Cuba, they are over-represented among the Spanish-language teaching staff.

The Saharawi education curriculum is bilingual, with Arabic as the vehicular language for the teaching of all the ‘content’ subjects and Spanish as compulsory second language from third grade (eight years) onwards. As a Smara teacher explains,

Spanish language forms part of the Saharawi identity. It is our second language and it also symbolizes the Saharawi people ... I’m not sure if we can say that the Saharawi people are strictly ‘Hispanic’, I don’t think so ... but they definitely have very strong connections with that world ... We have more links with Hispanic countries than with Arab countries ... The children need to speak Spanish. It is part of our history (we have Spanish as the Algerians and Mauritaniens have French as a second language) and also our way to connect and communicate with the Western world.^{[30](#)}

Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, cultural representative of the Polisario in Spain, poet and former director of Spanish teaching in the Ministry of Education, develops the same line of argument in more detail:

We knew from the beginning that to have a Western language is nowadays fundamental ... All the neighbouring countries had French as co-official language. The Saharawi tradition of one hundred years of Spanish colonialism and such a need of a second language determined that there wouldn't be any doubt about the need to continue with Spanish in the schools. And, as time passed, Spanish became part of the (new) Saharawi identity. What differentiates a Saharawi and a Mauritanian? Amongst other things, there is a key issue and it is that technical words in Saharawi Hassania are in Spanish, while in Mauritania they are in French. There are many other things differentiating us, but [the linguistic influence] is something that stands out. And popularly there are no signs of resentment in the Saharawi people against the Spanish peoples. There was never any opposition against Spanish as a colonial language. In fact, many Polisario publications (20 May, et cetera) were always published in Spanish, in addition to Arabic. The radio has always broadcasted in Spanish ... And on the other side of the wall, on the part occupied by Morocco ... it is true that the people couldn't continue studying Spanish, but it is still something linked to their patriotism. Some months ago, one of the human rights activists of the occupied territories – he studied with me, by the way, but he did not leave El Aaiún and he has always had many problems with the Moroccans – ... was tortured, imprisoned ... during the *Intifada* ... And when he was brought to court, he said that he did not understand them: that if they want him to understand them, they should talk to him in Hassania or in Spanish ... and he said that to the [Moroccan] court in Spanish!³¹

Over the years, the Saharawi Ministry of Education has developed its own learning materials in Spanish, including official textbooks and reading books for each level of study.³² But these course books are more than language manuals. The frontier between the so-called 'content' modules (such as history, geography, mathematics, et cetera) and the 'language' modules (Spanish in this particular case) is always more than blurred. The Spanish learning materials reproduce the same hegemonic ideology as the rest of the subjects. The historical narratives, the frontiers of inclusion and exclusion, the enemies of the nation and the ideals of the good citizen in which the Saharawi children are educated and socialized also permeate the 'languagelearning' materials, as a brief analysis clearly shows.

In unit 13 of the Level 3 readings book, a boy called Mohamed asks a girl called Fatma, in the conversation activity, 'Where does your father work?', to which she replies that '[m]y father is a combatant'.³³ 'What is the name of your country?', continues Mohamed. 'Fatma: My country is called Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic'.³⁴ 'Mohamed: What is your

flag like? ... My flag is very beautiful ... It has four colours’, explains Fatma in a box situated to the left of a Saharawi flag.³⁵ And ‘[w]ho is el Uali Mustafá? Fatma: El Uali is a martyr. Mohamed: Do you love el Uali Mustafá? Fatma: Yes, I love el Uali Mustafá Seiyed ... Mohamed: What is 20 May?’, and so on.³⁶ ‘Construct with the letters (s, l, a, ...) the names of two cities of the SADR’, one of the activities in unit 22 invites the pupils.³⁷ Ten units later, below a headline that reads ‘[t]he SADR is my homeland’, another activity requests the students to ‘[c]onjugate the verb “to be” in this phrase: “To be Saharawi”’.³⁸ In the next section, the phrase to be conjugated is ‘To militate in the Frente Polisario’.³⁹ The texts, along the same lines of the rest of the activities, demarcate with fervour the contours of the Saharawi nation, defining the good citizen as the one who does not hesitate in defending the homeland:

I am a combatant of the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army. The Saharawi Popular Liberation Army is the one that guarantees the freedom and independence of my people. The Saharawi Popular Liberation Army is the first guardian of the homeland. Discipline and respect are my commands. I am a combatant and I have decided to give everything to the homeland, as our glorious martyrs have done.⁴⁰

My homeland is the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, for which many brave brothers have fallen in the field of honour. Since I am a good pioneer, I will defend my homeland, I will follow the example given by the martyrs, those who have given everything for the homeland, for our people to live freely and with dignity ... The good pioneer is the one that defends the Revolution under all circumstances.⁴¹

The Saharawi family represented in the textbooks breaks completely with the traditional extended familiar units of the tribal and colonial times and stresses the new nuclear family against the larger kinship groups or *cabilas*, which in fact are not mentioned in any Saharawi textbook in either Spanish or Arabic. As is stated plainly in the first unit of the Level 4 readings book, ‘[t]he Saharawi family is composed of the father, the mother and the children’.⁴² And the role models are those who work for the cause and the community: ‘[m]y brother and my uncle are guerrillas. The aunt of Mohamed Ali is a nurse.’⁴³ Obviously, the martyrs – that is, those who have fallen during the liberation war – are elevated in these narratives to a central

position, as ultimate examples of the sacrifice for the homeland.⁴⁴ Polisario's founder and first charismatic leader, El Luali, 'martyr of freedom and dignity', killed in combat against Mauritanian troops on 9 June 1976, is the greatest role model to follow (and to commemorate).⁴⁵

Therefore, the duty of every pupil is 'to study and thereby be useful to our country. Each one should fulfil his/her national duty, as our martyrs did. The ones who do not work are useless and do not deserve our respect.'⁴⁶ One of the units of the sixth-grade reading book is devoted to 'popular campaigns', in which the Saharawi refugees participate in communitarian projects. 'In the popular campaigns everyone participates. Each person has a task. Everybody works hard because the result of the work is for the benefit of all', states the textbook.⁴⁷ The idea of a strong and cohesive community is reinforced constantly throughout the textbooks, both in Spanish and Arabic. And this idea of community is linked explicitly with the Saharawi Republic: they are citizens of a state, whose administrative structure protects them and provides them with the basic services. Unit 7 of the fourth-grade reading textbook is devoted to 'The Wilaya', explaining under an image of a sort of patio surrounded by buildings with several doors with signs that read 'Wilaya', 'Education', 'Public Health', 'Justice' and 'Red Crescent', that 'the administration resolves the problems of the people'.⁴⁸ In the conversation section, Mohamed asks Fatma '[w]hat are you doing in the Wilaya?', 'I want to sort out a business', she responds.⁴⁹

However, despite this projected image of 'normality' and harmony, of a cohesive Saharawi society, of citizens dealing with a public administration that sorts out their problems efficiently, the textbooks also stress the situation of exile in which the Saharawis live, the division of the territory and the occupation of part of their homeland by Morocco, the northern neighbour. The *wilayas* where the Saharawis 'resolve their problems' are not the authentic El Aaiún, Smara or Auserd. The year 6 history book constructs a narrative that begins with Spanish colonialism, and is centred around the conflict opened in 1975: the emergence of Saharawi nationalism in the 1960s, the Spanish abandonment of the territory and the Moroccan military invasion (with several photos of Saharawi children injured and mutilated during the Moroccan bombardments), the exodus to Algeria where the camps were set up and then, on the one hand, the war against

Morocco and, on the other, the foundation of the Saharawi Republic on 27 February 1976 and the process of nation-building in the camps since then. And the geography book for the same year group reproduces not only several maps of the Western Sahara, but also an official map of MINURSO in which the pupils can see the division of the territory in two parts and the Moroccan military wall separating the areas under the control of Morocco and the Saharawi Republic.⁵⁰ Every Saharawi child from the camps knows about the wall and the occupation of part of the homeland that appears in the maps they study: they all know that El Aaiún, capital city of the SADR, ‘because of its greatness and beauty’, and the ‘important phosphate deposits of Bu-Craa’ are under a new colonial domination.⁵¹ ‘The SADR is one of the richest countries in the world, which is why colonialism and invasion do not want our independence’, states one textbook.⁵²

These nationalist narratives were reproduced visually in a series of drawings that I asked two classes (years 4 and 6) from Castilla-La Mancha Primary School, in Smara, to do (see [figure 5](#)). I invited the pupils, sixty in total, to do a painting about ‘their country’, being very careful not to specify what country I was referring to but leaving the matter open to the understanding of the young Saharawi students (they were all aged between nine and eleven). No student seemed to need clarification as to what country I was talking about and their artworks powerfully reflected the strength of the key symbolic elements forming the Saharawi nationalist discourse. In fifty-four out of the sixty drawings, that is in 90 per cent of cases, there was at least one flag of the Saharawi Republic. In most of these cases, the flag was the centre of the design or occupied a very prominent position. When I enquired why they have painted ‘that thing’, the incredulous students explained to me that because it was the ‘Sahara flag’, of course!

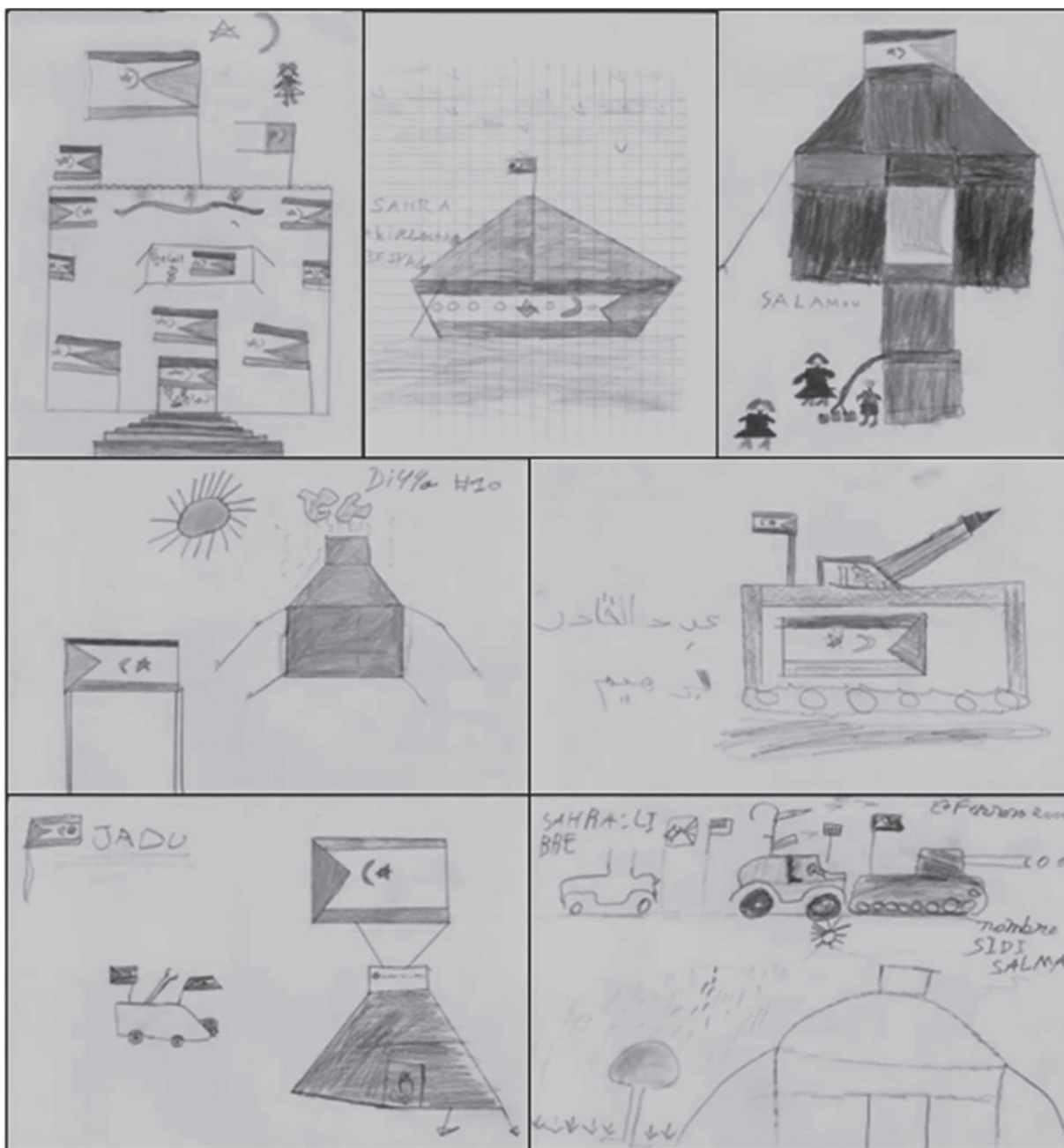


Figure 5: Saharawi children's drawings about 'My country'

The second most popular element was the typical greenish *jaima* of the refugee camps, included in twenty-five (45 per cent of the total paintings, that is, almost half) compositions. In the conversations after collecting their works, the students again explained to me almost unanimously that 'that's where we live'. When enquired if 'this' was the Sahara, they again conceded that it was the Sahara, but 'not the real one; this is Algeria', 'we

live here because in the *real* Sahara is Morocco’, an eleven-year-old girl explained to me. The third most popular element was military vehicles and tanks, painted by eleven (that is, by almost one in five) pupils. Why the tanks and military vehicles (in all cases also with flags of the Saharawi Republic)? According to them, ‘because they defend *the Sahara*’. Therefore, these three elements form the symbolic anchor points upon which the communitarian narratives and the frontiers of inclusion/exclusion are constructed, sedimented and reproduced. The flag represents the Saharawi nation, the community. The *jaima* corresponds to the situation of exile, to a Sahara that is not exactly the *true* Sahara. And the military vehicles, with their guns pointing to the sky, embody the need to defend the Sahara, to fight and ‘give everything to the homeland’ as their parents and grandparents have done; to fight for what Morocco prevents them from having.⁵³ One student drew a ship with the colours of the Saharawi Republic flag and wrote on one side: ‘Sahara has plenty of fish’. What separates the exiled *jaimas* from an Atlantic sea full of fish and wealth is clear for all the young Saharawis. Morocco is the obstacle in the middle of the road towards a future of prosperity.

‘Don’t comb your hair in front of the elders!’: tradition, modernity and social change

In May 2006, the girl who drew the ship, who happened to be one of the children of ‘my family’ in Smara, was very nervous. At the end of the month all the year 6 students of Smara would undertake a final exam organized by the Saharawi Ministry of Education to evaluate their overall primary school performance. The marks of these final exams would determine not only whether they would pass and could, therefore, progress to secondary school, but also where will they go if they did pass, which is decided on a competitive basis. The best students are offered a place abroad to continue with their education. Currently, most students go to Algeria. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, thousands of students were also given places to continue their studies in other countries such as Libya and, especially, Cuba. In some cases, the students went to these countries even

before finishing primary school, at ages as young as eight. Tutu performed very well in the exams and obtained one of the top marks. She was offered a place in a boarding school near Oran, in Algeria, where a group of almost one hundred Saharawi girls study along with several hundred Algerians. With a lower mark she would have been offered a place at the 12 October School, one of the previously mentioned boarding schools that the Saharawi Republic has in the area of Tindouf, some miles away from the camps. Everybody in the house was happy with the results and the place that Tutu got in Algeria, although they would have preferred a school closer to Smara so that they could see her more often. In fact, two older sisters had already gone, first, to secondary school and, later, to college in Algeria, graduating in education and informatics. An older half-brother studied in Cuba, graduating in Hispanics and a younger brother was also at that moment in the Caribbean preparing his access to university. They are more or less an average Saharawi refugee family. None of them is illiterate and all the younger brothers and sisters attend one of the primary schools in the camps, where 100 per cent of the children have access to education.

The first groups of Saharawi students were sent to Libya, Algeria and Cuba at the end of the 1970s, but it was not until the next decade that these programmes became fully institutionalized. Both girls and boys participated equally in the programmes from the beginning, since education was conceived as the main means to build a new equalitarian society that eradicated the old social structure associated with tribal and colonial times. But the opportunity to study abroad, thanks to the help of ‘friend states’, was also a strategy promoted consciously with the additional

intention of removing [the children] from the effects of the war ... No children went to war, and apart from the dramatic news from the battlefield and the dramatic death of some more or less closer relatives, the boys and girls were protected against direct contact with the war effort. The exhibition of arms in the camps was prohibited ...⁵⁴

The ties with Libya were very strong in the earlier years, but from the mid-1980s onwards educational cooperation diminished dramatically due to Gaddafi’s changing position and his sudden approach to King Hasan II. Groups of Saharawi refugees also went to study in other countries such as Syria, Spain and even West Germany and Austria, as well as to several

countries of the former Eastern Bloc. But the number of Saharawis who studied in the latter (in the Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, and mainly in Tito's Yugoslavia, which in fact was a special case, marked by tense relations with the Soviet Union and positive connections with the West) was relatively limited and did not have the temporal continuity of other links. The cooperation with Syria, one of the very few Arab countries to recognize the Saharawi Republic in addition to Algeria, has been important and continues to this day. The connections with Spain were scarce during the 1980s and although they increased significantly during the following decade it was more due to personal links and particular programmes funded by independent NGOs (and targeted in most cases to special-needs groups) than to any official large-scale intergovernmental programme, which in fact never existed. On the other hand, Algeria, country of exile of the Saharawis and main international ally of the Polisario, has educated thousands of refugees in its secondary schools and universities. However, the most influential programme of education abroad has by far been the Cuban. Several thousands of Saharawi children and teenagers have undertaken their secondary and higher education in the Caribbean, growing up in Latin America and returning many years later to the desert with a university degree. This fruitful programme has been one of the main channels through which Spanish language has been kept alive (the majority of the Spanish teachers, for example, have been trained in Cuba) and also a way of introducing a whole array of new values and attitudes into Saharawi society. This has opened a door for social change, animating the cultural and artistic panorama in the camps and contributing to a process of 'Hispanization' of the refugee society. In fact, the impact of this life-changing programme has been so strong that, as some Saharawis joke, 'it has led to the emergence of a new tribe: the *Cubarawis*', or 'tribe C'.⁵⁵

The *Cubarawis* left the camps as children and returned a decade later as educated women and men with their own ideas and dreams, and social and cultural codes that soon clashed with a society that despite the revolutionary slogans was still very traditional in many respects. 'I was born here in the camps in 1980 and I went to Cuba in 1989. I had always lived in the desert, studying first in the camps and then in the 9 June and the 12 October boarding schools', remembers philologist Zrug Brahim, and in the

Caribbean ‘everything was new ... we had never seen cities, beaches, cars, buses ... everything was so new’.⁵⁶ Economist Nayim Chej, who went to Cuba at the beginning of the 1980s with one of the first large groups of Saharawi students, evokes the same feelings of discovery. Even the journey was something completely unimagined for him:

We went by ship (we were one of the few groups that travelled by sea, the following years they all went by plane) ... It was a Russian tourist ship ... filled with several hundred Saharawi children who had never been outside the desert, outside the camps. Imagine the situation! I did not know what a ship or the sea was. After boarding, I only realized that this ‘huge floating house’ was moving hours after departing from the harbour ... I had never seen such a huge amount of water! For a boy of the Sahara like me, it was a shock to be in the middle of so much water.⁵⁷

Once in the Caribbean, they encountered a whole new world, captured with effective beauty by Saharawi writer and poet Liman Boicha:

As children of the war, Cuba was – in our eyes – a green season. Wonderfully green. We came from the sad greyness of the Hamada and thousands of colours exploded before us. We tasted all types of fruits and in our palates sweet and bitter flavours bloomed. With total ignorance we ate indigestible fruits that we only stopped touching after the diarrhoea. And the Caribbean sea. At the beginning everything was like a long summer.⁵⁸

Mahafud Saleh, now a pharmacist, stresses that ‘in Cuba, I recovered my childhood, I recovered the years that I had lost because of the Moroccan invasion and the war ... I will never be able to thank Cuba enough for the opportunity that it gave us’.⁵⁹ First, the Saharawi boys and girls went to the Isla de la Juventud (Island of Youth), where they ‘met for the first time non-Arab students’, especially from developing countries, who like them had gone to study in Cuba.⁶⁰ Scattered along the island, dozens of boarding schools, with names such as Heroic Viet Nam or José Carlos Mariátegui, accommodated thousands of international students. For the Saharawis there were three centres: ‘exclusively for us ... only my year went to Cuba 811 or something like that. There were lots and lots of Saharawis.’⁶¹ More than seven thousand Saharawis have been educated in Cuba. This gives an idea of the demographic weight of the *Cubarawi* collective in Saharawi society (up to 4 per cent of the total camps population has studied for some time in

Cuba!) and its impact and influence, especially taking into account that they constitute a significant percentage of the young educated cadres of the Saharawi Republic. Currently, they still do not hold the highest positions in the administrative structure but they are called to play a central role in the future.

During the first months the memory of the family was very present. Little by little that image was fading away. Communication with the families was only by letter. Letters that in most cases were monotonous and idyllic. No one ever wanted to write bad news in a letter. Without noticing, we were distancing ourselves from the warmth of our families ... Their place was occupied with recent experiences with the friends in the boarding schools. The escapes through the dense vegetation of the forests, the trips on Saturdays to the city of Gerona, on Sundays to Colny Beach or Arenas Negras. The television, the films, the music, all kinds of music. The dance, salsa, merengue. All this *ajiaco*, as it is said in Cuba, or mixture, was making a big impression on our minds, our blood and hearts, during secondary school, high school and university. They were years of personal growth, of learning and assimilation. I always thought that one of the most transcendental things was the fact that we did not feel foreigners; in fact, we were ever more like Cubans, as we were Saharawis. The season of Cuba would radically change our way of seeing things. Education, even being Communist, was always very respectful of our customs and religion. But all the temptations were there, and we did sin. It was a unique and marvellous opportunity.⁶²

After several years on the Isla de la Juventud, those who managed to pass the access exams got a place in a university on the Isla Grande. Others went to technical intermediate colleges and some returned to the camps. A significant number, on the other hand, chose not to go to college or university but to join a military academy.⁶³ At college and university a new phase began for the young Saharawi students. 'It was a different life', reflects teacher Hamad Emberek, 'after years in a boarding school with other Saharawis, I moved to live with Cubans, Angolans, Latino Americans, Arabs from other nations ... University was *a world*.'⁶⁴ It was not like in the boarding schools, where the Saharawis were studying all together, there were Saharawi supervisors, classes of Arabic and Saharawi history, cultural events and competitions between the students from different *wilayas*. At the universities,

you managed your own life. You were alone in the world. You were in command. It was you and the world: I have to buy a pair of shoes, I have to revise for an exam, my friend is ill and I have to be with him, I'm going to a party, I go dancing, I'm looking for a girlfriend ... But all these things are *mine*; they have to do with me and my life.⁶⁵

As stomatologist Fatma Mahmud reflects, it was then when 'we really arrived in Cuba. I was in an international hall of residence ... and in my class, out of twenty-six students, we were six foreigners, two Saharawis, two from Angola and two from Guinea Conakry'.⁶⁶ 'In Cuba, we were part of the Cubans. We were like Cubans and we had to confront the same problems as Cubans, such as the *special period*' of shortages at all levels (from food to fuel) in the 1990s following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.⁶⁷ 'I was trained as if I was a Cuban, as if I had their blood. And I assumed their culture ... although I never forgot mine or my religion.'⁶⁸ But as Dr Saleh Lbujali clarifies, to be a Saharawi and to be a Cuban is and will never be the same:

We are in different [historical] periods. We are still in the revolutionary stage, fighting for a future for our people. We are waiting for the future in which they already are ... because they already have an independent country. That's the main difference. We know, when we graduate, that we'll return to a society in which we have to form the bases upon which to build later ... The Cubans are already independent and have different worries and concerns.⁶⁹

The first groups of Saharawi students in Cuba – as well as those in other countries – enrolled in subjects that were considered to be especially useful for the survival and struggle of their people in the barren *hamada*, such as teaching and health sciences (in addition to those who joined military academies, of course). But, progressively, the range of degrees was expanded to cover all the possible areas of expertise that a future independent nation would require: from humanities and social sciences degrees that would train citizens able to narrate and communicate 'the struggle of the Saharawi people' effectively to 'the world', to 'agricultural and industrial engineering, and chemistry, to make the exploitation of the large underground resources of the land occupied by the enemy possible, and even naval engineering, which would open up the possibility of developing the extensive Saharawi coastline potential'.⁷⁰ In fact, '[i]t is dif-

difficult to think of an African society better educated than Saharawi society', acknowledges Spanish anthropologist Juan Carlos Gimeno.⁷¹ Journalism, philosophy, computing, history, film-making, economics, literary criticism ... the range of degrees undertaken by the Saharawi students abroad was very diverse but in all cases they were considered to be in one way or another 'useful for the development of a future independent Sahara', although not all degrees had the same social status back in the camps.⁷² When Liman Boicha returned to the desert after thirteen years in Cuba, with a degree in journalism, one of his uncles asked him: 'and what can you do here with that degree?' Liman hesitated for a few seconds, and his uncle retorted sarcastically 'well ... at least I hope you'll know how to drive', to the dismay of the young graduate, suddenly confronted with the difficulties of the return to the camps.⁷³ The Cuban season had been a wonderful experience for most Saharawis. They had grown up and became young adults in the Caribbean, but, as everything back in the camps is, the Caribbean experience was only temporary.

After more than a decade, the time to return arrived. Everything in Cuba always had an expiration date. Our friendships. Our love relationships were founded upon fragile pillars, because from the beginning they had an expiry date. These relationships also substituted the familial absence. They were the family. Another family. They were the hand that caressed you if you had fever, or that brought you home, or that prepared you something to eat. The kiss. The hugs.⁷⁴

Most *Cubarawis* acknowledge that, on their return to the camps after so many years abroad, they all experienced a sort of transitional period that usually lasts for a few months, and even up to a year, before they manage to get used to the new situation. 'At the beginning, I never used to speak a lot ... I spent several months just listening, because everything was new for me ... although it was *my* culture.'⁷⁵

The change was abrupt, and in many ways understandable, but what we didn't expect was the coldness of the encounter with the families. We returned and there was between them and us a distance larger than the years of absence, larger than the sea that separates the desert from the Caribbean ... Innocently, we thought that they had also evolved. That they would accept our way of being and seeing the world. We returned extroverted, spontaneous, full of wittiness,

and with the desire to do lots of things, the desire to work, to have the world for lunch. But we were not conscious of our ignorance about Saharawi customs. It is as if we had been born in Cuba and now we had to learn the language and customs of a strange people, which at the same time was our own. What a paradox! And to do it when we were adults, and we were supposed to know what we wanted. In the middle of the heat, of discomfort, of knowing that we were lost, disarmed, without a compass.⁷⁶

As the Saharawi poet laments, in many respects they had to relearn how to be Saharawis, since many of the social skills that they had acquired and developed in their second exile clashed with some traditional values, taboos and customs that were simply unknown for them (since, in fact, they had more to do with a tribal and colonial time than with the revolutionary time that had marked their socialization). They even had to learn how to speak ‘proper Hassania’, since their ‘funny accent’ and the significantly higher number of Spanish words in their speech, was often the object of some mockery within their families. In fact, at the beginning many of them felt more comfortable speaking Spanish than Hassania. Hence Spanish became a sort of marker of their identity as members of the ‘tribe C’, or *Cubarawi* tribe, which they widely use when they are together. The continuous mixture of Caribbean Spanish and Hassania, shifts from one to the other and the constant linguistic borrowings have even created a new mixed linguistic code, known in the camps as *Hassañol*. But, more importantly, they introduced into their families’ vocabulary concepts unknown until then, to the shock of their elders.

The first months were very hard. Our friends were our family and they were not there. There was only the option of waiting, observing, learning, but we wanted to do it in our own way. The issue was that for the Saharawis many things were done in a quasi-automaton manner. Our point of view in a certain way was shocking, because for the first time we had introduced a verb that did exist, but that was very rarely used in some situations: *to question*. It was not a matter of questioning for the simple pleasure of doing it, but that many of us needed to be convinced of something to be able to do it. The whole system of values of a society was challenged, or more accurately only the things that did not have any logical foundation were questioned. One cannot use a brush in front of the elders, or comb one’s hair, or to listen to music, or mention sensitive topics such as the partner, love, et cetera.⁷⁷

The *Cubarawis* very soon made a name in the camps for their openness, even irreverence in some respects, as well as for challenging ‘traditions’ that otherwise would be taken for granted and reproduced without questions. ‘When we came back, our own people said that we were a bit ... complicated, very stubborn regarding our views’, confesses Hamad.⁷⁸ ‘They know that we are hard working and so on ... but they think that we speak too much and that we are not convinced by many aspects of this society, that we are more critical, more liberal and open.’⁷⁹ In addition, their general attitude towards religion is relaxed and in some cases this clashes with their relatives in some traditional households, generating tensions even among brothers and sisters educated abroad but in different cultural contexts such as, for example, Mauritania, Syria and Algeria. I have met *Cubarawis* who openly acknowledge their lack of faith, despite identifying themselves as ‘culturally Muslim’ and recognizing the central role of Islamic traditions in the configuration of the Bidani and Saharawi worlds. Others, however, stress that, despite being abroad many years in very different cultural contexts, they ‘have always followed the religious principles, because religion is a very important field, it is part of our identity, and we’re Muslims wherever we are ... but there are many forms of understanding religion and we want an open religion’.⁸⁰ Like Fanna, a young *Cubarawi* doctor who considers herself religious, most young educated Saharawis try to find a balance between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ things of the traditional system of values and beliefs, many of them related to religion, and to introduce changes progressively, instead of radically confronting its very foundations.

There are some issues that shock you, because they are taboos. For example, the fact that we cannot bring condoms openly and directly to the pharmacy. Religion does not allow premarital relationships ... but they exist! No one can deny it. The suggestion that if condoms are given openly, then relationships are promoted ... well, it doesn’t work that way. What happens is that your population will carry on having infections ... There are things that I disagree with in this society. But there are many other things that I like. This is a liberal society and it is not sexist ... In this hospital we have never had a case of domestic violence ... Saharawi women have lots of rights. I have full freedom. If tomorrow I want to get rid of the *mehlfā*, no one can stop me ... but I know that society will see me differently ... and perhaps the neighbours will

criticize me ... But men come into my room, I have male friends, they come to my house, I go to theirs ... and nothing happens ...⁸¹

‘We’re going to renew what can be renewed ... within certain limits, which we have to acknowledge. We will change everything that is possible to change.’⁸² Gender relations has been, in fact, one of the areas that, on their return to the camps, most surprised the young Saharawis educated abroad, especially in the Caribbean and other Western countries. Saharawi women have always occupied a central position in social structure: first, in the traditional tribal and nomadic society, later, in the anti-colonial struggle under Spanish rule, spreading the nationalist message and, after the exodus, building up the structure of the refugee camps and the establishing the foundations of the exiled state.⁸³ As Spanish feminist anthropologist Dolores Juliano has pointed out, one of the most reiterated statements made by the Saharawi women that she interviewed was precisely ‘we have always been very free!’.⁸⁴ This is also one of the issues that differentiates Saharawi society from the rest of Muslim peoples of the area, according to the hegemonic nationalist discourses in the camps. The statement mentioned by Juliano is usually complemented by others such as, ‘in Morocco and Algeria it is completely different, women there are subordinated to men’, ‘here there’s no such thing as domestic violence, it wouldn’t be accepted by society’, ‘if a man beats a woman here ... well, he will become an *outcast* and rejected’,

in other Arab countries women are dependent, not like here, you just have to see what happens to them when, for example, they divorce, they end up begging in the streets ... Here, in contrast, a divorced woman is very well thought of, because they have experience and are mature ... there is even a party to celebrate the divorce!

In fact, spaces, argues Juliano, have never been segregated, neither in traditional society nor in the camps. On the contrary, ‘[m]en and women share public and private spaces’,⁸⁵ and women have the autonomy to establish social relationships with both males and females who are not their relatives, although a woman with ‘too many’ male friends might still be considered by the conservative sectors of society as ‘not very serious’.⁸⁶ The fact is that, while open and flexible in general, relations between men

and women are generally mediated by a whole array of social codes and norms in which the young Saharawis who studied abroad have not been socialized, and this generates some misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts.

In Cuba ... I can talk to you as I can talk to an older person, and I can talk of any topic ... But not here. There are certain things that I talk about with my friends but that I cannot share with my father. Besides, the relations between men and women are different; it is much more open there. There you can talk with a girl, have a girlfriend ... Here on the contrary, if you have a girlfriend and it is not something serious people will look at you, it has to be a serious relationship ... Religion still has importance in this society. Therefore, if you're going to do something with a girl, it has to be with an agreement, with the agreement that you will marry her ... you have to talk to her parents and so on ... There in Cuba you can act with your girlfriend in front of her parents as in private, you can kiss her, for example in front of them ... and here you can't. Even after getting married, the 'romantic' things have to be done in private ... and all these things are shocking ... I would like this to be different, more open, more freedom in these things ... Yes, here women work, study, they have freedom ... the previous generation made all these changes ... but I would like these changes to continue deepening.⁸⁷

The 'slow rhythm' in these processes of social change is especially difficult for some young women, who consider that their freedom is significantly constrained by the burden of some 'non-logical' traditions reproduced as 'automatons' by the older generations. Traditions which, in fact, contradict the hegemonic political discourses that emphasize gender equality as one of the achievements of the Saharawi revolution. As a young Saharawi woman confessed, 'this society is still not prepared to accept certain things ... but at least we're on the right track'.⁸⁸

Many young Saharawis, in their twenties and thirties, find a space where they can escape from these social codes and constraints in Rabuni, the administrative centre of the Saharawi Republic. Rabuni is not a camp, but essentially the *capital city* of the Saharawi Republic. It is a place where within a radius of a few miles all the main administrative and political institutions of the Saharawi exiled state are concentrated: all the ministries' headquarters, the central hospital, the protocol centre, the central offices of several non-governmental associations and organizations (from AFAPRADESA, the association of relatives of disappeared and jailed

Saharawis, to UPES, the Union of Journalists and Writers), the Saharawi national TV and radio stations, the national archive, the presidential office, the Saharawi Red Crescent depots, et cetera. It is also the entry route for all cooperation and humanitarian NGOs, solidarity associations, journalists, researchers, et cetera to the camps and the liberated territories. Several thousand Saharawi civil servants and officials of the Polisario and the Saharawi Republic, as well as a good number of foreign humanitarian workers (mainly Spanish), work every day in hectic Rabuni. Many of the Saharawi workers do not travel to their respective camps of residence every day but spend the working week in Rabuni. Every institution has its own dormitories, kitchen facilities, et cetera for its employees. Hence, Rabuni from Saturday to Thursday evening (the Saharawi working week) becomes a bustling centre, with its own market, restaurants et cetera, inhabited by a young and cultured crowd. In many respects, the *Cubarawis* and other Saharawis educated abroad find a certain space of freedom there, far from the more rigid social control of the camps and their families. Rabuni, in some aspects, is a different world, where many of the social codes dominant in the camps can be ignored and transgressed.

Another issue that, on their return, also surprised the young generations of Saharawis who studied abroad was a certain reactivation of tribal identities. ‘When we left in the 1980s the linguistic norms were different ... the extended families could not even be mentioned at that time ... But now it is different and people talk about the *cousins*, although only at home because it is not correct to talk openly about these things’, acknowledges a Saharawi in his early thirties.⁸⁹ Thousands of Saharawis left the camps in a period in which to mention a *cabila* was a punishable crime. They returned a decade later to witness that, even though it is still a ‘politically incorrect’ issue, there has been a reactivation of the family networks, accentuated by the effects of the emergence of a cash informal economy in the camps, which in fact is the key to understanding all the current social transformations in Saharawi society, as Gimeno has rightly pointed out.⁹⁰ The general stance of most young Saharawis, especially those with higher education, is of a radical anti-tribalism that resembles the ideas of those young Saharawi nationalists who three decades before rejected the mention of their family affiliations to the Spanish officials who were conducting the

1974 census. ‘I’m from El Aaiún’ said many young nationalists proudly then and ‘I’m just a Saharawi, full stop’ say many young Saharawis nowadays, rejecting the acknowledgement of their ascription to any extended family. The *cabilas*, the old social divisions between artisans (*majarreros*, in Spanish), tributaries (*znaga*), *Chorfa*, *Aarab*, et cetera is, for significant sectors of Saharawi society, as ‘non-logical’ and old-fashioned as not being allowed to comb your hair in front of an elderly person. It is part of the past, of history, but it should not be part of the future. The earlier mentioned joke about the *Cubarawis* being considered a new tribe in the social landscape of refugee Saharawi society, in addition to their visibility as a different group, has a great deal to do with their questioning of this traditional social structure. It could be said that the identity of the new ‘tribe C’ is precisely to be a non-tribal group. A young Saharawi remembers how soon after his return to the camps, his father asked him one night if he had seen ‘anyone’ around.

I said no. And he asked me again, insisting ... until I realized that he was talking about the extended family, not the close family or ... he was talking about ‘the cousins’ ... But I insisted and just to challenge him I said: ‘No, I’ve seen no one. Well, actually, yes I’ve seen Sidahmed X’. And my father replied very surprised, ‘but he’s not from the family’. And I said ‘Yes indeed. He’s my friend. We grew up together in Cuba, he’s my true *cousin* and not those other people I don’t even know.’⁹¹

From the *wilaya* to the market: economic development, social inequality and the challenges of a precarious state

The aspect that most profoundly surprised the young Saharawis who returned to the camps from the mid-1990s onwards, after more than a decade abroad, was the nascent market economy developing in the camps, which, as we have mentioned, is one of the causes that explain the reactivation of the familiar networks of solidarity. ‘Everything changed!’, exclaims Fanna.⁹² ‘When I returned I found a market economy and a consumerist society ... perhaps the change was unavoidable ... but’, Mehdi admits hesitantly.⁹³ ‘This is becoming a consumerist society ... and it

doesn't make any sense in the current situation', Zrug openly criticizes.⁹⁴ As for Mohamed and Saleh,

[t]he camps have changed sharply. Before there were no buildings like now, there were no cars ... I was surprised that now people are very concerned about luxuries, money, about how to improve their situation ... the whole situation is more consumerist, and I don't like it at all in the phase in which we are. Although, on the other hand, this is also a good training for the day of independence, the day in which we will have to build our economy ... Now, society is more complex ...⁹⁵

Everything has changed so much! When I returned to Smara ... everything was different. Before, in fourteen or fifteen days you could easily see no more than a single car, and just by chance! Now there are lots of cars, plenty of movement, plenty of shops. Before, there was only one shop per *wilaya* and, of course, it belonged to the state, but now there is a shop in almost every tent! Consumption is too high in comparison to before. Now, this is a consumerist society. The situation has changed from a collective economy to a market capitalist economy ... and it was an abrupt change.⁹⁶

If the society delineated during the years of the open war had been a 'society based on the principles opposed to capitalism: a social economy that operated without money, based on the principles of internal redistribution, of reciprocity among the Saharawis ... and solidarity with the external world',⁹⁷ with the ceasefire and, especially, during the second half of the 1990s, everything started to change. Several factors overlapped during that decade, facilitating the progressive introduction of money in the camps and the development of a cash economy. First, after the ceasefire, hundreds of guerrillas started to return from the battlefield to the camps, if not permanently at least on leave for longer periods of time. And, in 1991, the Spanish government began to award pensions to the Saharawis who had served in the Policía Territorial and Tropas Nómadas, soldiers who had joined the Polisario en masse during the final months of Spanish rule. Many of the survivors started then to return to the camps, after sixteen years in the front. Hence, suddenly, some of the returning guerrillas found themselves with a salary that, although small in a European context, was very significant by north African standards. In the new situation of 'neither peace nor war', this was perhaps the key element that initially triggered the

reactivation of one of the most traditional economic activities in the desert: *trade*. In fact, there was nothing new under the sun, but just a reactivation – under very different circumstances – of the good old tribal and, more recently, colonial times in which many Saharawis had made a considerable wealth flooding the desert with products from the Canary Islands and elsewhere. Part of the incoming Spanish money was reinvested by the new Saharawi ‘pensioners’ in the re-establishment of some old ‘caravan routes’, as well as in the opening of new ones, between Mauritania, Algeria, Mali, the liberated areas of the Western Sahara and the new cities that had emerged over the last decade in the Algerian *hamada*, the Saharawi refugee camps. Progressively, the camps became crossing points in flourishing trade routes from, for example, the Mauritanian port of Nouadhibou (well connected with the Canary Islands) or the mining town of Zuerat in the interior of Mauritania.⁹⁸ From car parts to tobacco, food to clothes, radios and televisions to camels, goats, petrol and carpets, everything and anything, like in the good old times, started to flow again across the Trab el Bidan, now in Land Rovers and Toyotas.

However, the influx of money into the camps also boosted internal demand, creating the conditions for the development of small domestic markets. During the 1980s, there was only one state-owned shop per *daira*, but with the new decade a number of private small shops opened, selling food, houseware, clothes and fabrics. Initially, the shops were very informal and improvised, usually consisting of a family selling, in their own house, a very limited range of products: some *mehlfas* from Mauritania, some onions and tomatoes from Tindouf’s market. As a shopkeeper from Smara explains, ‘I started in 1995, selling products and food I did not need and, little by little, I managed to gather a sum to start a small family business in my tent. Now I sell stuff that we go to Tindouf to buy every week.’⁹⁹

In some respects, this initial process consisted of a monetarization and expansion of the previous system of barter existent in the camps during the previous decade. Saharawi families had always exchanged and redistributed products amongst themselves, although these exchanges were not generally mediated by money and the range of products involved was generally limited to the humanitarian aid distributed by the state. But this early informal trade consisting of just a few products, offered in front of a house

in rudimentary boxes was soon replaced by the construction of the first detached shops, in the central spaces of the camps until then occupied exclusively by the *wilaya* and other public buildings. 'If only you had seen the beginning of all this!', my young guide Mulayahmed used to exclaim.

The development of this internal market was accelerated by a second influx of money to the camps also coming from Spain, now via a cooperation programme called *Vacaciones en Paz* (Holidays in Peace). *Vacaciones en Paz*, which was launched in the mid-1990s, is a programme that organizes the stay of Saharawi children aged seven to twelve with Spanish families during the two summer months, July and August. At the beginning the places were awarded on a competitive basis, to reward Saharawi students. Currently, the programme is very large and offers between 7,000 and 10,000 places every year. This means that, on a rotational basis, every Saharawi child is given the opportunity to participate three or four times in the exchange, usually in consecutive years. In 2005, for instance, 8,977 Saharawi children participated in the programme, rising to almost 10,000 in 2007.^{[100](#)} In virtually every Saharawi house there is at least one person who has been to Spain under the auspices of *Vacaciones en Paz*. Some, who participated during the first years of the scheme, in the mid-1990s, are now married and will soon be sending their own children to Spain. *Vacaciones en Paz* is, in fact, one of the largest humanitarian and cooperation programmes in Spain and one of the central strategies to raise awareness of the Saharawi cause amongst the Spanish population. But it is also a channel of income and resources for the Saharawi families.

The programme is managed regionally by the delegations of the Frente Polisario in close collaboration with the regional associations of Friends of the Sahara, which in turn are coordinated with dozens of smaller associations and organizations that take part in it.^{[101](#)} There are associations of Friends of the Sahara in all the Spanish autonomous communities, provinces and major cities. The Spanish Coordinadora Estatal de Asociaciones Solidarias con el Sahara (CEAS-SAHARA), a federation that brings together over two hundred regional and local organizations, claims to coordinate a total number of almost 15,000 fee-paying members, and to have the capacity to mobilize almost 5,000 volunteers for key humanitarian campaigns.^{[102](#)} The figures are, indeed, impressive for an initiative of this

kind: the number of Spanish households which foster Saharawi children during the summer averages 9,000 per year, which means that an estimated number of 35,000–40,000 Spanish cohabit for two months every year with a desert refugee child.

Vacaciones en Paz emerged with the objective of offering the children the opportunity to enjoy the summer far from the war and the environment of lack and precariousness that dominates the landscape of the camps, especially in the summer months when the temperatures reach over 50 degrees Celsius and the children are more vulnerable. The Spanish foster families provide medical care for them, which usually includes not only general checks but also visits to the optician, dentist, et cetera. And, most importantly, the children experience the ‘Spanish way of life’, embedded in a family that in most cases has other children of a similar age to facilitate their integration, although it is also open to single-person households. For two months they do what the Spanish family does, from going to a demonstration on the Western Sahara to watching the newest Disney film in the cinema, from enjoying the local *fiestas* to going on holiday to a seaside resort, from visiting the grandparents in the village to attending support lessons with their Spanish ‘brothers and sisters’ in preparation for the next academic year, from learning to swim to watching television. According to the Saharawi hegemonic discourses, such an immersion into the ‘Spanish way of life’, into the banal routines of life in Europe, is part of the education of the new Saharawi generations. In addition to the obvious boost in the linguistic skills of the Saharawi children, which is a crucial effect of the programme, such a profound contact with Spain

will make them understand the West, their culture and society better, creat[ing] lasting bonds with the Spanish people and ... if there is this strong connection, well ... they have a Spanish family, Spanish ‘parents’ and siblings! ... This is a vaccine against radicalism, it’s a window to understanding the world.^{[103](#)}

At the end of the summer, the children return to the camps not only with a handful of (in most cases) interesting experiences, new glasses, vitamin pills and the latest Latin hit song on their lips, but also with a large suitcase full of presents – usually clothes and food – from the Spanish foster family and, most crucially, with a cautiously hidden envelope containing a letter to

the Saharawi parents explaining the behaviour of children, findings from the medical checks, et cetera and money. A huge majority of Spanish foster-parents send money to the camps, to help ‘their child’ and his or her family. The amounts vary from one family to another, ranging in most cases from 200 to 400 euros, but in some cases it is even more. ‘I couldn’t send any money last year’, conceded a foster-mother from Extremadura, ‘but this year ... some money that we’ve saved and some from the grandparents ... we’ll be sending almost 300 euros’.¹⁰⁴ ‘We sent the [Saharawi] family over 400 euros in total, including money that our friends gave us for her [the Saharawi girl], and she’s also bringing a twenty kilogramme suitcase full of food and clothes and a backpack with lots of food cans’, explains another foster-mother from Asturias.¹⁰⁵ As two volunteers from Burgos with over a decade’s worth of work the camps conceded, ‘we even know of some Spanish families who send the families of their children 1,000 euros! They are crazy! ... that’s too much ... and the effects in the camps are ... disastrous.’¹⁰⁶ These cases are very uncommon and in most situations the amounts are significantly lower. As a Saharawi housewife from Auserd camp explains, ‘we receive about 200 euros from the Spanish families’, but, she immediately clarifies, ‘we are fourteen in the house’.¹⁰⁷ ‘What they [Spanish families] gave us is irregular’, notes another housewife also from Auserd, ‘we receive approximately between 100 and 200 euros, and then, sporadically, twenty, 100’.¹⁰⁸ On the other side of the continuum, a young woman from Smara informed me that ‘three of my younger brothers and sisters went to Spain last summer and in total ... I think that their [Spanish] families sent us almost 1,000 euros’.¹⁰⁹ And a young *Cubarawi* admits that ‘in my house, the help comes principally via the programme Vacaciones en Paz for the kids, and also from when the [Spanish] families come to visit us’.¹¹⁰ Therefore, if we estimate an approximate average of 200 euros per child, this would mean that in a year with 9,000 participants in the exchange programme, the influx of Spanish money to the camps at the end of the summer could well be in the region of 1.5 million or 2 million euros.

In addition, the relations between the Spanish foster family and the Saharawi children’s family continues in some cases throughout the year, through phone calls and letters sent via the Spanish delegations of the Polisario or one of the many NGOs working in the camps. Many Saharawi

and Spanish families build a strong bond and the cooperation and help continues for years, developing a sort of *twinning* between them. Saharawi children usually stay with the same Spanish family for up to a maximum of four consecutive summers. And the cases in which, once a Saharawi children is too old to participate in the programme, the Spanish family continues fostering his or her younger brothers or sisters and hence keep the direct relation with the same Saharawi counterpart are not rare. These relationships become bi-directional, since a significant number of the Spanish foster families travel to the camps during the year to visit their ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ and their families. Twice a year, usually in December and during the Easter holiday, the Polisario regional offices in Spain in collaboration with the associations of Friends of the Sahara organize charter flights for the foster families to visit the camps. Between two and three thousand Spaniards go the refugee camps in each of these organized trips. In other words, the camps receive between four and five thousand visitors each year, in addition to a vast number of co operation and humanitarian workers and other institutional trips.¹¹¹ The visits organized for the foster families last for approximately one week, during which they stay with their children’s family in one of the refugee camps and are able to move freely within the *wilaya* with the guidance of the host family. The roles are, therefore, inverted and for a few days the Saharawi refugees foster the European visitors – including many children, the Spanish ‘brothers and sisters’ of the Saharawi children – and show them around the camps and the ‘Saharawi way of life’. This influx of visitors to the camps has also contributed to the development of the cash economy and commerce. First, the Spanish visitors bring presents both in kind and in cash. A significant part of the cash is immediately spent by the host Saharawi families buying presents for their guests, but that cash nevertheless enters into the economic circuit of the camps since it is spent locally. Hospitality is a crucial practice in Saharawi society and one of the elements that Saharawis highlight the most about their culture. Secondly, the presence of such a large number of solidarity tourists has also facilitated the emergence of a small craft industry orientated towards this seasonal humanitarian market (and to the more long-term cooperation workers). In some respects, it could be said that the refugee camps are a flourishing tourist destination in Algerian territory. In

fact, the camps receive a much larger number of foreign visitors than the area of the Western Sahara territory under Moroccan control.

The key third element contributing to the development of a cash economy in the camps are the remittances sent from the Saharawi workers abroad, principally in Spain, where the Saharawi community may well be approaching the figure of ten thousand, although there are no official statistics. Temporary migration to Spain has increased sharply since the late 1990s, helped in part since 1999 by the opportunity for all those who were registered in the 1974 census and have old Spanish documents to apply for Spanish nationality.¹¹² For the rest of the Saharawi refugees the path to Spain, since the SADR passport is not recognized by any European country, is through acquiring an Algerian (or Mauritanian) passport – which takes some time but is relatively easy – and then applying for a temporary visa, sponsored by any of the numerous Spanish organizations of support.¹¹³ Once in Spain, most Saharawis apply for naturalization, building their case on their origins in the former Spanish Sahara province. Therefore, the majority of the Saharawi community in Spain has *papeles* (documents) or Spanish nationality and, therefore, can work legally and move back and forth between the refugee camps and the former colonial metropolis with relative ease. In fact, the dynamic is in general of a great mobility: some time in Spain working and saving money, then a few months in the camps and back again to Spain afterwards. In some cases, the Saharawis move to Spain just to earn enough money to start a business in the camps. In others, they stay in Spain for longer periods and send remittances to their relatives in Tindouf, which are reinvested in businesses, in buying some goats or camels, or simply spent in the market to supplement the decreasing humanitarian aid given to the refugees in recent years. As Saleh explains, ‘if you have a relative in Spain, a son for example, and he sends you one or two thousand euros, with that money the family here can start some sort of business’.¹¹⁴ ‘To open a business like this’, acknowledges a car-spares store owner based in Rabuni market, ‘you need about 800,000 Algerian dinars [8,000 euros], ... so you need help from your family. In my case, the family I have abroad helped me.’¹¹⁵ The remittances sent off by the Saharawi community in Spain to the camps have definitely encouraged the expansion of a cash economy in the camps but, on the other hand, if it emerged in the

first place it was – at least partly – as an answer to the new consumption needs that have resurfaced in recent years.

Nowadays in the refugee camps, as all Saharawis acknowledge with resignation, it is necessary to have some income to live; an annoyed Polisario official told me:

the humanitarian aid is not enough ... and it is not good. Are we supposed to eat only the lentils they've given us? We will starve ... but if not even the goats like these lentils! You cook them for one entire day and they're still hard like stones.¹¹⁶

As anthropologist David de Juan points out, after the ceasefire and sixteen years marked by an almost subsistence economy orientated towards supporting the military efforts, 'the families directed their efforts to improving their [personal] situation'.¹¹⁷ Or, as Nina Abderrahman, a Saharawi housewife from Smara, put it plainly, 'we also want to live well, to eat well, to have a nice house ...; we are not different'.¹¹⁸ 'Now with the market situation, we can provide for the family needs', stresses a car-repair business owner.¹¹⁹ But the problem, according to the general view, is that 'it pushes the citizens to seek money rather than serving the cause'¹²⁰ and hence getting 'money is now the main concern of the citizens'.¹²¹ Most Saharawis with whom I spoke about this concur in estimating that nowadays a small family needs at least 200,000 Saharawi dinars (100 euros) per month to live on, an amount that increases for a larger family to up to 600,000 dinars (300 euros).¹²² But 'Saharawi society is not prepared for this; not now in exile', says one of the numerous critics of the new situation.¹²³ 'You don't have your homeland yet but you're already thinking about a car, your shop, your house! ... The sense of responsibility with the cause diminishes, sunken in all these other concerns ... The market breaks the social cohesion.'¹²⁴ 'Everybody wants to have what the neighbours have, so it's a vicious circle that feeds itself', complains a worried civil servant.¹²⁵

On the other hand, it is also true that the new economy has contributed to strengthening the connections of the refugees with the liberated territory of their homeland. In addition to the reactivation of trade, another traditional activity, deeply rooted in the Saharawi imaginary, was also relaunched after the ceasefire: *mobile pastoralism*. Part of the incoming

money was invested by the Saharawi families to buy goats and camels. Nowadays, virtually every family has a few goats in the camps, which provide daily fresh milk. But many families have also larger herds of goats and camels in the liberated territory, where the pastures are better than in the Algerian *hamada*. This requires some members of the family to be based permanently in the liberated territory, travelling after the clouds with their herds. The rest of the family stays in the camps, especially if there are children, since they have to attend school. But during vacation times, rainy seasons or in the summer, the whole family can move to the liberated territory to enjoy the ‘completely different’ landscape of their homeland for some time. In general, the mobility of the Saharawi refugees based in Tindouf is very high. As a guide told me once while travelling to Tifariti, ‘some of these Saharawis whom we’re seeing going to Bir Lehlu, Tiris ... don’t go because they have animals there; they go to visit relatives and friends. Well, in fact, they go on holidays! We like the desert ... and we also like to go on holidays ...’¹²⁶

Hence, when the young Saharawis who had gone during the 1980s to study abroad returned in the second half of the 1990s, they encountered a complex and very different society from the one they had left behind. In the new Saharawi society, ‘*the economy of redistribution* due to the situation of exile ... organized by the institutions of the SADR’, coexists now hand in hand with an ‘economy based on the circulation of money’.¹²⁷ The view of the central space of Smara is a perfect metaphor of such a transformation. The central area of the *wilaya*, which formerly hosted only the public institutions of the Saharawi Republic, is nowadays flanked by two large markets stretching on its left- and right-hand sides. In June 2006, the largest Smara market, stretching westwards from the *wilaya* to the *dairas* of Bir Lehlu, Tifariti and Hausa, had approximately 165 active shops and businesses (see figures 6 and 7).¹²⁸ The second market, stretching eastwards towards Farsia, Mahbes and Echderia, had approximately 150. In addition, there are some shops scattered here and there along the *dairas*, at least five per *barrio*, which makes an estimate of 144 shops outside the main markets, sprinkled around the residential areas of the camp. In total, the number of active shops and businesses in Smara may well be in the region of 450.¹²⁹ Taking into account that the camp has well over 40,000 inhabitants this

would mean that there is one business for every one hundred Saharawis living in Smara.^{[130](#)}

The visits to the market in the morning or at nightfall have become a central part of the routines and itineraries in the everyday life of the refugees, opening new spaces not only for consumption, and for the feeding of a new sort of desire, but also for socializing. These everyday journeys to the market are witnessed by the close gaze of the buildings that symbolize the state: the *wilaya* headquarters, the central hospital, the first school of the camp, et cetera. And, on the other hand, that very same view of the institutions representing *the public* gets distorted by the lines of shops, small warehouses, artisan workshops and businesses of all kinds spreading (with a certain order) at their side. These central spaces embody the complex meeting – not without tensions – of *the public* and *the private*, in a fashion not different from any other African city.



Figure 6: Shops in Smara refugee camp and Rabuni



Figure 7: Commercial Street in one of Smara's markets

However, they also represent the symbolic confluence of the spaces of equality and inequality in the camps, which some Saharawis seem to accept as being unavoidable: 'Yes, definitely, there are more inequalities now, but I think they are necessary inequalities. It is just one more step in the revolution. There are inequalities all over the world and we are not aliens, we can't avoid these dynamics', concedes a Saharawi in his late twenties.^{[131](#)} In this new context, marked by growing demands and the incapacity of the state to fulfil them, 'the domestic units have acquired an importance in the economic management of the camps [that was] previously reserved for the institutions of the SADR'.^{[132](#)} This growth of the domestic units in the life of the camps has led indirectly, as I suggested before, to the strengthening of the wider family networks, which explains in part the (limited) revival of tribal identities with which I closed the preceding section of this chapter. In fact, many businesses belong to two or more relatives, who join forces and

resources to launch commercial enterprises they would never be able to afford on their own.

This new situation presents a new challenge for the younger and older generations alike, including the numerous Saharawis educated abroad and the war veterans. In addition to contributing to the national cause – which is the key issue that gives sense to their life story – *in the meantime* (that is, whilst waiting in the context of ‘neither peace nor war’ for a resolution of the conflict either through a vote or the resumption of hostilities), they also have to contribute to fulfilling the needs of their families.¹³³ As a *Cubarawi* teacher explains,

when you arrive, you’re not on your own for any longer; you have a family, your brothers and sisters, your mother ... and you have to take responsibilities ... If they need a new pair of shoes, clothes, if you have to build a new room in the house ... You have to learn how to buy and sell, how to negotiate with money ... And you need money.¹³⁴

‘Without money you cannot even get married nowadays’, protests Mehdi Ali.¹³⁵ ‘In the past, marriages started from nothing’, he explains; ‘it was enough with the tent given by the state to start a new family’. ‘But now you need to build the house if you want to marry, and all the furniture and the mattresses and the blankets – why are twenty blankets needed? – and the food and celebrations for the wedding ... It costs 3,000 euros!’¹³⁶ This is precisely one of the crucial reasons why there are so many thirty-something Saharawis still single, according to the general view in the camps. This is a problem that has recently started seriously to concern the Polisario elites, since it puts in danger the traditional policy of demographic growth followed during the previous decades. Growing sectors of the Saharawi refugee-citizens simply cannot afford it. But the crucial problem underlying this new context is that ‘now that the market dictates, the government workers are at a disadvantage compared with the ones who leave and go to Spain or to work in the market privately. And this is an issue that threatens the very existence of the state.’¹³⁷ As we have seen, the Saharawi state is based on the voluntary work of the refugee-citizens. The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic has over the years managed to develop a complex institutional structure to provide all the basic services to the population: universal health and education, security, justice, food, et cetera. But, since

the Saharawi Republic is an exiled state with very limited resources, its vast network of civil servants and workers were until very recently unpaid. Only in recent times has a system of ‘incentives’ been introduced by the public institutions to reward in some way the effort and dedication of their workers. However, these incentives – which range from 135,000 Saharawi dinars (65 euros) for a teacher to 280,000 (140 euros) for a veteran soldier every three months – are very far from the 2,000,000 Saharawi dinars (1,000 euros) that a butcher can easily earn in one month, the 500,000 (250 euros) of a part-time taxi driver, the 600,000 (250 euros) of a small shop, or the 4,000,000 (2,000 euros) of a large food store or car-parts and repairs business. Hence, in this new context the coexistence of *the public* and *the private* sectors, in a situation in which the public is inherently constrained by the situation of exile and the chronic lack of resources, relegates those who work for the state to a marginal economic position. The consequence is that, as Gimeno has pointed out,

[t]he emergence of the new activities has modified the scales of the social value of work, and it has had as the effect of demotivating the youth from participation in the institutions of the State, which do not generate salaries or an income that contributes to the well-being of the family, while other activities, which often do not require any special qualification, contribute decisively to [generate income].^{[138](#)}

In addition, the public institutions’ lack of resources economically to motivate their workers overlaps with the perpetuation of the situation of exile without a clear horizon and the consequent impossibility of building a fully fledged state in an independent homeland. These restrictions constrain the manoeuvrability of the Saharawi Republic and significantly limit the initiatives and possibilities of action of the public institutions, whose work in many cases consists in managing a set of precarious and irregular resources ‘imposed’ by the international donors and friendly states (which, in turn, depends on the international political climate). In this context, to many young professionals it seems that they can neither realize themselves personally (professionally) nor contribute significantly to the revolution from their areas of expertise. As Mohamed explicates,

there are many professionals who could be doing so many things ... and their skills are wasted ... It hurts that so many well-educated professionals won’t have the opportunity to develop

their knowledge. I know engineers who have nothing to do! But despite all these problems there are many people who are putting everything into their work, without expecting anything in exchange, without expecting a salary or anything. It is a debt that they feel they have to pay to their people. In all institutions there are persons willing to put everything into doing their work as perfectly as possible, to give everything for the cause.¹³⁹

The crucial challenge for the young Saharawi exiled state is to articulate a solution to the frustration of the younger generations, and to manage this new context marked by the symbolic interweaving of *the public* and *the private* spheres in the central spaces of the camps, marked by the tension of a state with redistributing intentions and a free market that creates social cleavages and threatens the social cohesion.

The geography of the camps is a geography of desire, of (im)possibility, of lack; the geography of the guilt of those who are not able to contribute enough to the well-being of their families or to the future of their people. The subject emerges as a failed subject, a barred subject in Lacanian terms, whose contours are defined by the desire to achieve what it does not have, and it will never have in the current historical circumstances. Nothing can *fully* occur in the camps (neither the state nor the market, neither the citizen nor the consumer) because everything is inherently temporary and precarious. And the market, in its present form and with its present contours, is no exception. On the contrary, far from meaning that the exile is becoming ‘too normal’, or even accepted by the Saharawis, it just contributes powerfully to reinforce the hegemonic idea that nothing will be normal until the conflict is definitively resolved. And the overwhelming agreement in the camps, after more than three decades of war, exile, suffering, hope and nation-building in no-man’s-land, is that the only acceptable solution to overcome the current restrictive circumstances is independence.

Notes

Introduction: ‘If you ever arrive at a wide white land ...’

- ¹ Conversation with Limam El Jalil, Leeds, October 2007.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ The territory under Saharawi de facto administration measures approximately 70,000 square kilometres (25 per cent of the total Western Sahara). It is roughly the same size as the Republic of Ireland or Sierra Leone and larger than Denmark, Rwanda, Switzerland, Equatorial Guinea, Bosnia Herzegovina, Guinea Bissau, Belgium, Togo, Croatia, Latvia, Wales or West Virginia, to give a few examples.
- ⁴ In addition, neither the kingdom of Morocco nor the Saharawi Republic are officially recognized by the UN as *de jure* administrative powers of the territory they have under their respective control, although in practice they have been recognized as de facto administrative powers. In fact, technically, Spain would still be the official *de jure* administrative power of the territory. On the other hand, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic has been recognized by the African Union (previously Organization for African Unity) and is one of its full member states. It has also been recognized by over eighty states worldwide, mainly African and Latin American. No Western state has officially recognized the SADR or Rabat’s sovereignty over the former Spanish colony.
- ⁵ Interview with James Baker, *Wide Angle*, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)-TV, 19 August 2004.
- ⁶ Security Council Resolution 1495, S/RES/1495, 31 July 2003.
- ⁷ *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation concerning Western Sahara*, S/2003/1016, 16 October 2003.
- ⁸ Security Council Resolution 1754, S/RES/1754, 30 April 2007. At the time of writing this introduction, four rounds of official direct negotiations ‘without preconditions’ between the Frente Polisario and the kingdom of Morocco have taken place under the auspices of the UN in Greentree Estate in Manhasset, New York (the first one on 18 June 2007 and the last one on 16 March 2008). However, as the UN Secretary General acknowledged in his January 2008 report to the Security Council, ‘there [has been] hardly any exchange that could be characterized as negotiations’ (*Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation concerning Western Sahara*, S/2008/45, 25 January 2008).
- ⁹ Christopher Ross’s predecessor, Dutch diplomat Peter Van Walsum, had been removed from his post by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, on 21 August 2009. He had been appointed as personal envoy to the Western Sahara in 2005, following the resignation of James Baker III in 2004. Van Walsum’s mandate was ‘not renewed’ (mandates are automatically renewed) because one of the parties – the Frente Polisario – considered he had lost his neutrality as mediator and, therefore, officially asked the UN’s Secretary General to ‘take the necessary

measures'. Over the previous months, Van Walsum had expressed on several occasions (from meetings at the Security Council to interviews with some Spanish mass media) that the option of independence was 'not realistic' since, although international legality was on the side of the Polisario, none of the influential states was willing to pressure Rabat to accept a referendum. Thus, according to his analysis, the only 'realistic' way forward was to negotiate on the basis of the Moroccan autonomy plan. Van Walsum's cease was received with alarm by Rabat.

- ¹⁰ See, for example, 'Obama reverses Bush-backed Morocco plan in favour of Polisario state', *World Tribune*, 09 July 2009. Available online: www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2009/af_morocco0547_07_09.asp (last accessed on 27 December 2009).
- ¹¹ Accused of leaving blank the box for her nationality and of writing 'Western Sahara' as her address in the entry form (that is, of 'treason' and 'renouncing Moroccan nationality', according to Rabat's official communiqués), Haidar's travel documents were confiscated by Moroccan police and she was forcibly embarked in a plane to the Spanish small island of Lanzarote. The two Spanish journalists who were travelling with Haidar were also detained and expelled from El Aaiún. On 14 November, Haidar started a hunger strike at Lanzarote Airport terminal demanding her right to return to her home in El Aaiún and denouncing her forced deportation from the Western Sahara and her 'kidnapping' by Spain (which forced her to leave the plane against her will and did not allow her to take a plane back to the Western Sahara, arguing that she did not have travel documents). This was the beginning of a month-long crisis, which ended up causing an unprecedented erosion to Morocco's – already damaged – international image. Rabat's intransigence and repressive policies against Saharawi activists were visualized in all their crudity through an entire month of front pages in the written media and television headlines. On 18 December, Haidar was allowed to return to El Aaiún, following the intervention of the USA and France, without travel documents and, most importantly, without asking for the pardon of the king of Morocco (which had always been stressed by Rabat as the *sine qua non* condition for her return). On the contrary, on her arrival to El Aaiún Haidar declared defiantly that, because of all the disappearances, tortures and repression, Morocco's king, Mohamed VI, should ask for the pardon of the Saharawis. Despite some attempts to re-signify the crisis by the officialist Moroccan press, the most independent Moroccan media concurred in interpreting the outcome of the crisis as a debacle for Morocco.
- ¹² Lualí Lesham, 'Time Keeps On', in P. San Martín and B. Bollig (eds), *Treinta y Uno/Thirty One: A Bilingual Anthology of Saharawi Resistance Poetry in Spanish* (London: Ediciones Sombrerete & Sandblast, 2007), p. 81.
- ¹³ See San Martín and Bollig, 'Introduction: the new Saharawi resistance poetry', in San Martín and Bollig (eds), *Treinta y Uno/Thirty One*, pp. 7–19.
- ¹⁴ According to Freeden's morphological approach, ideologies are complex combinations of political concepts, at different levels, whose possible meanings are *decontested* or *fixed in a particular way*, which aim to generate a particular view about the organization of society (Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)). Along these lines, Laclau and Mouffe affirm that 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to ... arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre' (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 112). Consequently, the main research question should be 'what creates and sustains the identity of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its possible content?' (Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 87). In other words, what gives coherence, fixes or *decontests* the meaning of a plural array of elements that otherwise could mean something different.

- [15](#) Pablo San Martín, *La Nación (im)posible. Reflexiones sobre la ideología nacionalista asturiana* (Oviedo: Ediciones Trabe, 2006). See also Pablo San Martín, 'Is nationalism a political ideology? A critical reflection from the Asturian case', *Dissidences. Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 4/5 (2008), 1–30, and Pablo San Martín, 'A discursive reading of the emergence of the Asturian nationalist ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 7, 1 (2002), 97–111.
- [16](#) The archival work was carried out in the Saharawi National Archive in Rabuni, where I consulted Polisario documents and internal publications such as *Sahara Libre*, *El Pueblo*, *La Opinión de las Masas* and *20 de Mayo*, and in the Spanish National Library in Madrid, where I examined the African collections and in particular the colonial literature produced between 1884 and 1975. But the main sources of inspiration for this work have been the interviews, conversations and participant observation in the refugee camps. Over the years, I have filled in hundreds and hundreds of pages in my research diaries, not only 'recording' my observations and experiences but also reflecting on my own position as a participant researcher in the field. I have done forty-one (recorded) personal interviews, mostly in Smara camp and in the Saharawi Republic administrative centre in Rabuni, with a wide range of 'ordinary' refugees and Polisario/SADR officials. To ensure the anonymity of my informants, I have changed most of the names in the text. Therefore, the reader must note that, although I have generally chosen to use names instead of codes such as 'Interview 2', it was for narrative purposes. All names are false, except those of well-known politicians and high-ranking Polisario/SADR officials who talked to me with their institutional hats on. In addition to these more formal and semi-structured in-depth interviews, I have also had more informal conversations about key issues with a vast number of Saharawis. These interchanges were not recorded but annotated at the end and are cited as 'Conversation with ...'. The same strategy regarding the names as with the interviews applies here.
- [17](#) Ali Salem Iselmu, 'Tiris', in P. San Martín and B. Bollig (eds), *Treinta y Uno/Thirty One*, p. 101.

Chapter 1: From Cuba to Villa Cisneros: The Construction of a Spanish Neocolonial Space in the Sahara

- [1](#) Demetrio Ramos and Emilio de Diego, *Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas en la Perspectiva del 98* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1997), p. 9.
- [2](#) Sebastian Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898–1923* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.
- [3](#) See Cristóbal Robles Muñoz, *Paz en Santo Domingo (1854–1865). El fracaso de su anexión a España* (Madrid: CSIC, 1987).
- [4](#) Josep M. Fradera, *Colonias para después de un Imperio* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2005), p. 17. The development of the new and more interdependent economic system between the colonies and metropolitan Spain was in some respects grounded in an idea introduced by the liberal discourses of the Cadiz courts in 1809–10 about the overseas territories as an integral part of the nascent Spanish nation. Liberals such as José Canga Argüelles and Álvaro Flórez Estrada stressed that the Americans were ‘our brothers, formed one single Nation with us and should have the same laws’ and argued in favour of ‘the Aragonese, the Peruvian, the Mexican, the Andalusian, the Cuban, the Galician, the Indian and the Valencian form[ing] one single family united by the same interests’. José Canga Argüelles, quoted in Josep Fradera, *Colonias para después de un Imperio*, pp. 61–2. However, in practice, even the attitudes of the liberals who advocated the equality of Spanish and Americans were very ambivalent and did not seriously put into question the system of racial stratification and segregation of the overseas territories. In fact, the citizenship requisites established in article 18 of the liberal constitutional project excluded the descendants of African slaves (and, of course, the slaves), that is, approximately one-third of the total population.
- [5](#) Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 3.
- [6](#) Ramos and de Diego, *Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas*, p. 19.
- [7](#) Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire*, p. 49.
- [8](#) José Varela Ortega, ‘Del desastre y sus consecuencias’, in José Varela Ortega (ed.), *Imágenes y Ensayos del 98* (Valencia: Fundación Cañada Blanch, 1998), p. 262.
- [9](#) Sebastian Balfour, ‘Spain and the Great Powers in the aftermath of the Disaster of 1899’, in Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston (eds), *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.
- [10](#) Aletta Norval, ‘Social ambiguity and the crisis of Apartheid’, in Ernesto Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 133.
- [11](#) Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections in the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 61.
- [12](#) *The Real* is the situation in which the constitutive and ultimate impossibility of all object/subject emerges to the surface and challenges *reality*, that is, the order of things generally accepted until then. See Pablo San Martín, *La Nación (Im)posible. Reflexiones sobre la Ideología Nacionalista Asturiana* (Oviedo: Trabe, 2006), pp. 311–17.
- [13](#) Eloy Martín Corrales (ed.), *Marruecos y el Colonialismo Español [1859– 1912]* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2002), p. 10. See also Eloy Martín Corrales, ‘El Protectorado Español en Marruecos. (1912–1956). Una Perspectiva Histórica’, in Joan Nogué and José Luis Villanova

- (eds), *España en Marruecos (1912–1956). Discursos Geográficos e Intervención Territorial* (Lleida: Milenio, 1999), pp. 145–58.
- [14](#) Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.
 - [15](#) Ibid., p. 11.
 - [16](#) Benito Pérez Galdos, *Episodios Nacionales. Aita Tettauén* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1976), vol. 3, p. 1072.
 - [17](#) See Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, pp. 4–5.
 - [18](#) See Richard Pennell, *A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921–1926* (Wisbech: MENA Studies Press, 1986); Richard Pennell, *La Guerra del Rif. Abdelkrim el Jattabi y su Estado Rifeño* (Melilla: La Biblioteca de Melilla, 2001); José María Campos Martínez, *Abd el Krim y el Protectorado* (Málaga: Algazara, 2000); María Rosa Madariaga, *España en el Rif. Crónica de una Guerra Olvidada* (Melilla: La Biblioteca de Melilla, 1999); Federico Villalobos, *El Sueño Colonial. Las Guerras de España en Marruecos* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2004); Javier Ramiro de la Mata, *Origen y Dinámica del Colonialismo Español en Marruecos* (Ceuta: Archivo Central, 2001).
 - [19](#) Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, pp. 83 and 84.
 - [20](#) Ibid., p. 87.
 - [21](#) Villalobos, *El Sueño Colonial*, p. 279.
 - [22](#) Ibid.
 - [23](#) Francisco Franco, *Palabras del Caudillo 19 de Abril 1937–31 de Diciembre 1938* (Barcelona: Seix y Barral Hnos, 1939), p. 314.
 - [24](#) Federico Villalobos, *El Sueño Colonial*, p. 57.
 - [25](#) Joan Nogué and José Luis Villanova, 'Spanish Colonialism in Morocco and the Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid, 1876–1956', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28, 1 (2002), 5.
 - [26](#) José Ramón Diego Aguirre, *El Oscuro Pasado del Desierto. Aproximación a la Historia del Sáhara* (Madrid: Ediciones Sial & Casa de África, 2004), p. 329.
 - [27](#) Tomás Bárbulo, *La Historia Prohibida del Sáhara Español* (Barcelona: Destino, 2002), p. 35.
 - [28](#) Ministerio de Estado – Sección de Política, *Real Orden del 26 de Diciembre de 1884*, side 1, facsimile reproduction in *ibid.*, pp. 36–7.
 - [29](#) Luciano María Bremón, *Estados Españoles en el Sahara Occidental. Proyecto de Colonización* (Málaga: Tipografía de S. Parejo y Navas, 1894), p. 19.
 - [30](#) See George F. Deasy, 'Spanish territorial boundary changes in northwest Africa', *Geographical Review*, 32, 2 (1942), 303–6.
 - [31](#) Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara: Provincia Española* (Madrid: CSIC, 1966), p. 3, emphasis added.
 - [32](#) Antonio Jaén, *España extra-peninsular. Marruecos, Sahara-Rio de Oro, Guinea, Islas* (Sevilla: Imprenta y Librería de Eulogio de las Heras, 1926), pp. 19–20.
 - [33](#) See Francisco del Río Joan, *África Occidental Española (Sahara y Guinea)* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Revista Técnica de Infantería y Caballería & Ministerio de Estado-Sección Colonial, 1915), figure xii.
 - [34](#) Jaén, *España extra-peninsular*, pp. 13–14.
 - [35](#) Emilio Bonelli, *Nuevos Territorios Españoles de la Costa del Sahara – Conferencia pronunciada en la Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid el 7 de Abril de 1885* (Madrid: Imprenta de Fortanet, 1885), p. 14.
 - [36](#) Emilio Bonelli, *El Sahara. Descripción Geográfica, Comercial y Agrícola desde Cabo Bojador a Cabo Blanco, Viajes al Interior, Habitantes del Desierto y Consideraciones Generales* (Madrid: Tipografía de L. Péant é Hijos, 1887), p. xv.

- [37](#) Ibid., p. xi.
- [38](#) Ibid.
- [39](#) Enrique D'Almonte, *Ensayo de una breve descripción del Sahara español* (Madrid: Imprenta del Patronato de Huérfanos de Intendencia e Intervención Militares, 1914), p. 223.
- [40](#) Jaén, *España extra-peninsular*, p. 41.
- [41](#) José Guillermo R. Sánchez, *El Sahara Occidental* (Madrid: Librería y Casa Editorial Hernando, 1932), pp. 79–80.
- [42](#) Galo Bullón Díaz, *Notas sobre Geografía Humana de los territorios de Ifni y del Sahara. Conferencia pronunciada el día 4 de diciembre de 1944* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Geográfica – Imprenta Aguirre, 1945), pp. 48–9.
- [43](#) Ibid., p. 49.
- [44](#) Del Río Joan, *África Occidental Española (Sahara y Guinea)* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Revista Técnica de Infantería y Caballería & Ministerio de Estado-Sección Colonial, 1915), p. 261.
- [45](#) Ibid.
- [46](#) Bonelli, *El Sahara*, p. xv.
- [47](#) Alejandro García, *Historias del Sahara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Libros de la Catarata, 2001), p. 81.
- [48](#) Bonelli, *Nuevos Territorios Españoles*, p. 9.
- [49](#) Ibid., pp. 21, 22, 23.
- [50](#) Francisco Bens Argandeña, *Mis Memorias (Veintidós Años en el Desierto)* (Madrid: Ediciones del Gobierno del África Occidental Española, 1947), p. 40.
- [51](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, pp. 81–2.
- [52](#) José Díaz de Villegas, 'Prologo', in Bens Argandeña, *Mis Memorias*, p. 8.
- [53](#) Bens Argandeña, *Mis Memorias*, p. 21.
- [54](#) Ibid., pp. 56–7.
- [55](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 82.
- [56](#) Del Río Joan, *África Occidental Española*, p. 275.
- [57](#) Jaén, *España extra-peninsular*, p. 131.
- [58](#) Ibid., p. 104.
- [59](#) Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 252.
- [60](#) Julio Caro Baroja, 'Los Nómadas y su Porvenir: conferencia pronunciada en el salón de actos del CSIC en día 19 de febrero de 1965', *Archivos de Instituto de Estudios Africanos*, 78 (1966), 69.
- [61](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 83.
- [62](#) My reading of the Spanish Africanist literature between 1930 and 1960 is based on a comprehensive sample of forty-nine books, all included in the bibliography.
- [63](#) John K. Noyes, 'Nomadic fantasies: producing landscapes of mobility in German Southwest Africa', *Ecumene*, 7, 1 (2000), 49.
- [64](#) Epifanio González Jiménez, *Territorios del Sur de Marruecos y Sáhara Occidental* (Toledo: Imprenta del Colegio María Cristina, 1930), p. 91.
- [65](#) Galo Bullón Díaz, *Notas sobre Geografía Humana*, p. 33; José Enrique Alonso del Barrio, *Las Tribus del Sahara* (El Aaiún: Servicio de Publicaciones del Gobierno del Sáhara, 1973), p. 12.
- [66](#) Alonso del Barrio, *Las Tribus*, p. 41.
- [67](#) D'Almonte, *Breve descripción del Sahara*, p. 174.
- [68](#) Bullón Díaz, *Notas sobre Geografía Humana*, p. 35.
- [69](#) Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos* (Madrid: Ediciones Jucar, 1990 [1955]), p. 100.

- [70](#) Manuel Mulero Clemente, *Los Territorios Españoles del Sahara y sus Grupos Nómadas* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: El Siglo, 1945), p. 86.
- [71](#) Mahayup Salek, quoted in Alejandro García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 54. An excellent account of tribal wars can be found in chapter 15 of José Ramón Diego Aguirre, *El Oscuro Pasado del Desierto*, pp. 347–82.
- [72](#) Bonelli, *Nuevos Territorios Españoles*, p. 23.
- [73](#) Diego Aguirre, *El Oscuro Pasado del Desierto*, pp. 363–4.
- [74](#) These ‘religious’ *cabilas* are much more numerous in Mauritania: Ahel Abdelhay, Idauali, Idaybusat, Tinuayib, Ahel Chel Mohammed Fadel, Ulad Abieri, et cetera.
- [75](#) Diego Aguirre, *El Oscuro Pasado del Desierto*, p. 364.
- [76](#) Alonso del Barrio. *Las Tribus*, pp. 130–1.
- [77](#) Ibid., p. 141.
- [78](#) Bullón Díaz, *Notas sobre Geografía Humana*, p. 25.
- [79](#) Bárbulo, *La Historia Prohibida*, p. 48.
- [80](#) Ibid.
- [81](#) Gobierno General del Sahara, *Censo 1974* (Aaiún: Servicio de Registro de Población, Censo y Estadística, 1975), p. 26.
- [82](#) José Guillermo R. Sánchez, *El Sahara Occidental* (Madrid: Hernando, 1932), p. 79.
- [83](#) Ángel Flores Morales, *El Sahara español: Ensayo de Geografía Física, Humana y Económica* (Madrid: Alta Comisaría de España en Marruecos, 1946), p. 87.
- [84](#) Sánchez, *El Sahara*, p. 80.
- [85](#) Mulero Clemente, *Los Territorios Españoles del Sáhara*, p. 96.
- [86](#) Ibid., p. 97.
- [87](#) Ibid., p. 96.
- [88](#) Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, pp. 23–4.
- [89](#) Apart from the fishing industry in Villa Cisneros and other minor ports such as Bojador and La Güera, the economic activity in the rest of the desert was very limited (from the colonial perspective), until the mid1960s, when works in the Fos Bucraa phosphate mines were accelerated. In any case, the production of phosphates started only in 1973, just two years before Spain left the territory!
- [90](#) Bárbulo, *La Historia Prohibida*, p. 60.
- [91](#) Francisco Bens, *Por segunda vez España en el África occidental: Memoria descriptiva de la expedición al interior de los dominios españoles en el Sahara y posesión francesa del Adrar-Stemar/por el Comandante de Infantería S. Francisco Bens Argandeña* (Melilla: Tipografía del ‘Telegrama del Rif’, 1911), p. 28.
- [92](#) Ibid.
- [93](#) This group of deportees was visited in May 1932 by Ramón Franco Bahamonde, the adventurous and rebellious younger brother of Francisco Franco. Ramón Franco, whose political views varied significantly over time, had won a seat in the Spanish Congress as an Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) candidate the previous year. He campaigned for the liberation of the jailed anarchists in the press and wrote two interesting books about the deportations, which offer a personal and passionate view about the conditions of living in the Villa Cisneros presidium: Ramón Franco Bahamonde, *La Infamia de las Deportaciones ¡Villa Cisneros! Fin de Viaje* (Madrid: Suc. De F. Peña Cruz, 1933) and Ramón Franco Bahamonde, *Unos Días con los Deportados de Villa Cisneros. Afirmación de Solidaridad Universal* (Madrid: Tierra, 1933).
- [94](#) See also the accounts of Fernando García de Vinuesa, *De Madrid a Lisboa por Villa Cisneros* (Madrid: n.p., 1933), and Antonio Cano Sánchez-Pastor, *Cautivos en las Arenas* (Madrid: L.

Rubio, 1933).

[95](#) Guadalupe Pérez García, 'La Colonia Penitenciaria de Villa Cisneros. Deportaciones y Fugas Durante la II República', *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 7 (2002), 184.

[96](#) Bárbulo, *La Historia Prohibida*, p. 60.

[97](#) Ibid., p. 50.

Chapter 2: From the Spanish 'Peace' to Armed Struggle: The Emergence of Saharawi Nationalism

- ¹ José Enrique Alonso del Barrio, *Las Tribus del Sahara* (El Aaiún: Servicio de Publicaciones del Gobierno del Sáhara, 1973), p. 12.
- ² Ibid., p. 14.
- ³ Julio Caro Baroja, 'Los Nómadas y su Porvenir: conferencia pronunciada en el salón de actos del CSIC en día 19 de febrero de 1965', *Archivos del Instituto de Estudios Africanos*, 78 (1966), 61, emphasis added.
- ⁴ Ibid., 68.
- ⁵ José Ramón Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara* (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 1991), p. 43.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara: Provincia Española* (Madrid: CSIC, 1966), pp. 5–6.
- ⁹ On the 1968–73 drought in Mauritania, Mali and other areas of the Western Sahel, see Amartya Sen, 'Drought and famine in the Sahel', in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 113–31.
- ¹⁰ Jeremy Keenan, *The Tuareg: People of Ahaggar* (London: Sickel Moon Books, 2002), p. 212.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 214.
- ¹³ Gobierno General del Sahara, *Censo 1974* (Aaiún: Servicio de Registro de Población, Censo y Estadística, 1975), p. 78.
- ¹⁴ Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara*, p. 14. According to the official statistics, quoted in this publication, the public expenditure of the Spanish state in the territory in 1965 amounted to an average of 18,000 pesetas per capita, against an average of 5,420 in peninsular Spain (ibid., p. 26).
- ¹⁵ See Manuel Alia Medina and Francisco Hernández-Pacheco's key works in the bibliography.
- ¹⁶ Manuel Alia Medina, 'El descubrimiento de los fosfatos del Sahara español', *África*, 7, 97 (1950), 8–10.
- ¹⁷ Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Oxford, Toronto and Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 341.
- ¹⁸ Alejandro García, *Historias del Sáhara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2001), p. 88.
- ¹⁹ Hassania is the Arabic dialect spoken in the Western Sahara. It is also spoken in most of Mauritania, a corner of Mali, the Tarfaya strip and the Tindouf region in Algeria.
- ²⁰ Gobierno General del Sahara, *Censo 1974*, p. 101.
- ²¹ Figures taken from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 'National Literacy rates for youths (15–24) and adults (+24)', available online: stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=210 (last accessed 10 August 2007).
- ²² Obviously, these statistics had to be interpreted very cautiously, since they did not include the *frigs* (groups of tents) that settled on the outskirts of El Aaiún and other towns. Initially these

settlements consisted only of tents, but they started very rapidly to develop into shanty towns with constructions of corrugated metal, mud bricks and stones adjacent to the original *jaimas*.

- [23](#) Interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed, quoted in García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 91.
- [24](#) Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara*, p. 15.
- [25](#) Eduardo Munilla Gómez, *Estudio General del Sahara* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1974), p. 5.
- [26](#) *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- [27](#) Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara*, p. 15.
- [28](#) Figures taken from the *World Bank Atlas. 1976*, quoted in Javier Morillas, *Sahara Occidental. Desarrollo y Subdesarrollo* (Madrid: Prensa y Ediciones Iberoamericanas, 1988), p. 306.
- [29](#) World Bank, *Morocco Data Profile 2000–2005*, available online: devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPPProfile.asp?PTYPE=CP&CCODE=MAR (last accessed on 10 August 2007).
- [30](#) Quoted in García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 89.
- [31](#) Personal interview with Ahmed Fadel, Rabuni, April 2004.
- [32](#) García, *Historias del Sáhara*, pp. 90–1.
- [33](#) A term introduced by Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century to refer to ‘the social cement that held a community together’. J.J. Saunders, ‘Review Work(s): Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History, by Mushin Mahdi’, *History and Theory*, 5, 3 (1966), 343.
- [34](#) García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 90.
- [35](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 46.
- [36](#) García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 91.
- [37](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 46.
- [38](#) Juan Carlos Gimeno and Mohamed Ali Laman, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales en los campamentos de refugiados Saharauis al sur de Argelia (1975–2005)’, in Juan Carlos Gimeno, Olga Mancha and Ana Toledo (eds), *Conocimiento, Desarrollo y Transformaciones Sociales. Aproximaciones Antropológicas Contemporáneas* (Madrid: Sepha, 2007), p. 392.
- [39](#) Gimeno and Ali, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, p. 391.
- [40](#) Caro Baroja, ‘Los Nómadas’, 61.
- [41](#) See International Court of Justice, ‘Western Sahara. Advisory Opinion’, *Reports* (1975), paragraphs 96 and 120.
- [42](#) Carlos Ruiz Miguel, ‘¿Qué proceso de paz para el Sáhara Occidental?’, *Revista Internacional de Estudios del Sáhara Occidental/Internacional Journal of Western Sahara Studies*, 1 (2008), 2.
- [43](#) Munilla, *Estudio General del Sahara*, p. 202.
- [44](#) Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara*, p. 7.
- [45](#) Munilla, *Estudio General del Sahara*, p. 209.
- [46](#) *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- [47](#) Miguel Molina Campuzano, *Contribución al Estudio del Censo de Población del Sáhara Español* (Madrid: CSIC, 1954), p. 7.
- [48](#) Molina, *Contribución al Estudio del Censo*, p. 11.
- [49](#) *Ibid.*
- [50](#) *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- [51](#) *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [52](#) See Secretaría General del Gobierno General de la Provincia del Sahara, *Provincia de Sahara: censo de población, año 1967* (El Aaiún: Editorial Gráficas Sahariana, 1967).
- [53](#) A map of ‘Greater Morocco’ can be seen in Jacob Mundy, ‘Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara’, *The Journal of North*

African Studies, 11, 3 (2006), 280.

- [54](#) Mohamed Cherkaoui, *Morocco and the Sahara: Social Bond and Geographical Issues* (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2007), p. 15.
- [55](#) Ibid., p. 16.
- [56](#) Ibid., p. 15.
- [57](#) Felipe Briones, Mohamed Limam Mohamed Ali and Mahayub Salek, *Luali: "Ahora o nunca, la libertad"* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 1997), p. 38.
- [58](#) Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 38–9.
- [59](#) Anonymous, 'Algunos datos históricos sobre la historia del Sahara', *Sahara Libre*, special issue, March 1976, p. 10.
- [60](#) Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary*, p. 33.
- [61](#) See Lorenzo M. Vidal Guardiola, *Ifni. La Prensa y la Guerra que Nunca Exixrió. 1957–1958* (Madrid: Almena, 2006), p. 22.
- [62](#) According to some accounts, the 23 November attack on Sidi-Ifni had been preceded by a raid on the Spanish post of Bojador (in the Spanish Sahara), although the timeline of events is not entirely clear.
- [63](#) It is also known as 'the Secret War' or 'the War that never existed', because of the (partly successful) attempts by the Francoist administration to conceal from the media what in fact was the last Spanish colonial war. There is no agreement about the number of Spanish casualties in the war and the figures given by different authors range from 152 to 300 deaths, approximately 500 injured and between 52 and 80 missing soldiers. In the last decades, some studies have researched in some detail the Forgotten War, mostly from the point of view of military historiography. There are also a good number of soldiers' autobiographies. However, it still continues to be a neglected area of research in Spanish academia.
- [64](#) Anonymous, 'Algunos datos', p. 10.
- [65](#) Ahmetu Suelim, quoted in García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 93.
- [66](#) Ibid.
- [67](#) Ibid.
- [68](#) Briones, Limam and Salek, *Luali*, p. 43.
- [69](#) Frente Polisario, *Memorandum Dirigido al Comité de Descolonización de la ONU*, Section II: Estructuras Sociales Históricas, 2 May 1975.
- [70](#) Juan Carlos Gimeno, 'Resistencia y Revolución en el Bidan', *Studia Africana*, 16 (2005), 36.
- [71](#) Ibid.
- [72](#) Personal interview with national poet Bei Ebbuh, Smara refugee camp, April 2004.
- [73](#) Personal interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed, SADR Ministry of Education, April 2004.
- [74](#) Ahmed Baba Miske, *Front Polisario. L'âme d'un peuple* (Paris: Editions Rupture, 1978), quoted in Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 54.
- [75](#) Ibid.
- [76](#) Briones, Limam and Salek, *Luali*, p. 52.
- [77](#) Ahmed Baba Miske, *Front Polisario*, p. 118.
- [78](#) 'The Sahara has never been Moroccan. The Moroccan kingdom will never be able to justify that the Sahara was part of the Alauit kingdom. Through history, Morocco never sent any Moroccan governor to the Western Sahara, nor have the Saharawis ever pledged loyalty to any Moroccan monarch; there were only commercial relations between Saharawis and Moroccans', wrote Bassiri in *El Assase*, quoted in Campaña para conocer el paradero de Mohamed Basiri, '¿Dónde está Basiri?', available online: <http://www.desaparecidos.org/sahara/basiri/campa.html> (last accessed 10 September 2007).

- [79](#) Mauritania had also had territorial claims over the Spanish Sahara since 1963. Nouakchott's strategy was interpreted by most analyses as a defensive move against the Moroccan claims over Mauritania, aimed at creating a sort of buffer area in between the two countries preventing Rabat from extending its frontiers south of the railway that marks the colonial border between Mauritania and the Spanish Sahara. In addition, this railway connects the mines of Zuerat with the port of Nouadhibou and is of crucial strategic (and economic) importance for Mauritania.
- [80](#) Six persons took part in the founding meeting: Bassiri, Sidi Lebsir, Salem Lebsir, Salama Mami, Abdelhay Kaid uld Sidi-Emhamed and Ghali uld Sidi Mustafa.
- [81](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 55.
- [82](#) 'Basir Mohamed Uld Sidi Brahim Uld Embarc Uld Lebser', anonymous *Note*, Aaiún, May 1975.
- [83](#) 'Declaración de Bassir Mohamed U/Hach Brahim. Ergueibat, Lemuademin', Gobierno General del Sáhara, Policía Territorial, Primera Compañía. Aaiún, 19 June 1970. This is believed to be not the original report written during Bassiri's detention, but a modified report written after his disappearance and backdated to substitute the original one.
- [84](#) 'Informe sobre el partido clandestino saharaui denominado OALS', Gobierno General de la Provincia del Sáhara, Delegación Gubernativa de la Región Norte, Aaiún, 12 June 1970.
- [85](#) According to the report about the OALS mentioned before, there were four levels of membership fees, depending on the economic position of the affiliated person. The highest was 5,000 pesetas (71 US \$) for a joining fee and a monthly fee of 1,000 pesetas (14 US \$). The second one, 2,500 (36 US \$) pesetas for a joining fee and 500 monthly (7 US \$). The third one, 1,000 pesetas (14 US \$) initially and 300 pesetas (4 US \$) monthly. Finally, the students paid 500 pesetas to join (7 US \$) and 200 pesetas (3 US \$) every month. These membership fees are very illustrative of the socio-economic level not only of the sectors of society targeted by the OVLS but also of the Spanish Sahara as a whole, if we take, for example, into account that in peninsular Spain the net monthly salary of a teacher at that time was approximately 7,000 pesetas (99 US \$).
- [86](#) OVLS, 'Carta Abierta al Gobernador General', copy dated wrongly 4 January 1969. This open letter was written by Basiri in early June 1970.
- [87](#) Ibid.
- [88](#) Ibid.
- [89](#) Bitterly, the OVLS would ask rhetorically:

Since the Spanish Government entered into the national territory, the people trusted it and deposited all its hopes. But, what has the Spanish Government done for this people? ... The answer is: it hasn't done anything. Apart from guaranteeing the subsistence of its civil servants, collaborators and of those who accept their desires, silencing the people with sweets as is done with the children. (OVLS, 'Carta al Gobierno Español', Delegación Gubernativa de la Región Norte, official translation dated 29th July 1970)

- [90](#) Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
- [91](#) 'Informe sobre el partido clandestino saharaui'.
- [92](#) Briones, Limam and Salek, *Luali*, p. 76.
- [93](#) The OVLS had a significant presence only in the north of the Western Sahara. The Spanish authorities allowed in the first instance these propaganda activities with the sole aim of

collecting information about the leaders and militants of the party.

- [94](#) Bassiri was not there. They had apparently decided that it was too dangerous for him to be exposed in Zemla.
- [95](#) García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 107.
- [96](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 63. The OVLS considered the option of armed struggle, but only as a strategy to put pressure on the Spanish authorities to push for a negotiated solution. From March 1970 onwards, some militants enrolled in the Tropas Nómadas and the Policía Territorial started to smuggle arms and ammunition for the organization, which they hid in several artesian wells belonging to some militants from El Aaiún. The party also decided to invest 120,000 pesetas (1,722 US \$) to buy arms in Algeria, although it has not been confirmed that the sale ever took place.
- [97](#) Personal interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed.
- [98](#) Personal interview with Sidi Ibrahim Selama, Saharawi national poet, Smara, April 2004.
- [99](#) Briones, Limam and Salek, *Luali*, pp. 48–9.
- [100](#) Bachir Mustafa Sayed, quoted in García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 109.
- [101](#) Personal interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed. The movement mentioned by Bachir was the Mouvement de Resistance des Hommes Bleus (MOREHOB), whose ‘representative’, Eduardo Moha, went to Algiers in the spring of 1973 in search of Algerian support for his ‘Saharawi liberation movement’. The Algerian Department of Liberation Movements believed Moha’s story in the first instance and offered him support and even office space. However, in June, Mohamed Abdelaziz – acting as emissary of the Polisario – had a face-to-face meeting with Moha in which it was confirmed that the ‘leader’ of MOREHOB was not even a Saharawi. Moha did not speak Hassania, had a very limited knowledge of the geography of the Western Sahara ... and, as many refugees remember with amusement, in an attempt to show off his links and connections with the Saharawi nationalist students, Moha asked Mohamed Abdelaziz about the whereabouts of Hametu Jalili.
- [102](#) Personal interview with Sidahmed Batal, SADR Ministry of Information, Rabuni, April 2004.
- [103](#) A majority of them had spent no more than one year in jail, although some were imprisoned for up to three years.
- [104](#) Briones, Limam and Salek, *Luali*, p. 135.
- [105](#) According to most authors, and to Saharawi nationalist discourse, the date of the foundational congress of the Polisario was 10 May. This is because, although it seems that the meeting had finished days before, this was the date given to the press in the first communiqué of the organization, handed in to the Agence France Presse (AFP) in Nouadhibou. The communiqué, according to the transcription of Alejandro García, reads:

The Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saquia el Hamra y Río de Oro is constituted as the only expression of the masses, adopting revolutionary violence as the mean to guide the Saharawi Arab and African people towards the total freedom from colonialism ... It is part of the Arab revolution. It supports the fight of the people against colonialism, racial segregation and imperialism and condemns the latter for their tentative to maintain the people under its yoke, either through colonial domination or economic garrotte. (Quoted in García, *Historias del Sáhara*, p. 120)

Chapter 3: From Refugees to Citizens: Exile and Nation-building in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

- ¹ Personal interview with Maimona Said, Smara refugee camp, April 2004.
- ² Personal interview with Ahmed Badda, Smara refugee camp, April 2004. The reference made by this veteran Polisario combatant to the intention to keep to a minimum the number of casualties, is corroborated by a report of the Spanish Security Services, dated on the 9 April 1975. According to the report,

[a]fter more than one year of activities of the subversive bands ..., [i]n all the attacks that have been carried out against posts or garrisons, two things have been demonstrated in *all* the actions. 1. They did not want to cause casualties, neither to Europeans nor to natives (enrolled in the Spanish army). 2. The equipment for the attacks has always been poor (lack of mortars, hand grenades, et cetera.). In the encounters in which there have been casualties, it was *always* because from our side the situation was forced and we launched a pursuit operation that compelled them to cause casualties desperately and in self-defence. This reality [has made] our indigenous troops ... keen to avoid the encounters [with the Polisario], giving the impression that there is a tacit accord from both sides not to cause casualties. (Quoted in Felipe Briones, Mohamed Limam Mohamed Ali and Mahayub Salek, *Luali: 'Ahora o nunca, la libertad'* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 1997), 178).

- ³ It was called *Operación Barrido*, whose meaning could be translated as Operation Raze. In addition to three helicopters, it involved the participation of two companies of the Policía Territorial and two patrols of the Tropas Nómadas. As the tension escalated, the Spanish Legion joined the anti-guerrilla operations in the following months and, in November 1974, the Spanish army used for the first time ground-attack Saeta jet aircrafts against the Polisario.
- ⁴ José Ramón Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara* (Madrid: Ediciones ISTMO, 1991), p. 82.
- ⁵ Personal conversation with veteran Polisario combatant, Rabuni, November 2006.
- ⁶ Personal interview with Raba Mohamed, Smara refugee camp, April 2004.
- ⁷ Dolores Juliano, *La Causa Saharaui y Las Mujeres. 'Siempre fuimos tan libres'* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1998), p. 82.
- ⁸ Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 78.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Personal interview with Agaila Mohamed, Smara refugee camp, April 2004.
- ¹¹ Ibid., emphasis added.
- ¹² Personal interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed, SADR Ministry of Education, Rabuni, April 2004.
- ¹³ Ibid.

- ¹⁴ Comité de Formación del Frente Polisario, 'Editorial: El Congreso del Mártir Abderrahman Abdalahi. II Congreso del F.PO.LI.SA.RIO', *El Pueblo. Toda la Verdad para las Masas*, no. 1, October 1974, 2.
- ¹⁵ 'It is a programme that separates us from the enemies of the Saharawi people and clarifies our position against the colonialist-reactionary conspiracy ...', *ibid.*, 4.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁷ Frente Polisario, 'Entre la población y la asimilación', *20 de Mayo*, no. 6, April 1974, 7.
- ¹⁸ Spain, according to the Saharawi nationalists, was in the middle of a deep economic (and political) crisis and needed the natural resources of the Sahara, which offered 'the exploitation of enormous phosphate reserves (the first world deposit) and the huge quantities of fish ... in addition to the oil that has been discovered in "Fuem-El-Wad", natural gas, magnesium, copper, iron', Frente Polisario, 'Editorial', *20 de Mayo*, no. 23, September 1975, 3.
- ¹⁹ Comité de Formación Frente Polisario, 'Editorial', *El Pueblo*, 6.
- ²⁰ Frente Polisario, 'Editorial', *20 de Mayo*, no. 6, April 1974, 3.
- ²¹ Frente Polisario, 'Reclutamiento', *20 de Mayo*, no. 6, April 1974, 6.
- ²² In the Spanish 1974 census, 226 Saharawis were classified as 'chiuj'. All of them were male, 82 per cent were 40 years or over and 25 per cent were older than 60. The *Yemaa* or general assembly of the Spanish Sahara had 102 seats, out of which 40 were directly assigned to *chiuj* and the rest were notables 'elected' by the councils, the associations and the families.
- ²³ Frente polisario, 'Editorial', *20 de Mayo*, no. 6, April 1974, 3.
- ²⁴ Alejandro García, *Historias del Sahara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2001), 134.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- ²⁷ Pablo Ignacio de Dalmases, 'Sahara Español. Crónica de un abandono anunciado', *CLIO. Revista de Historia*, 50 (2005), 20.
- ²⁸ Pablo Ignacio de Dalmases, 'En la muerte de Rodríguez de Viguri. Un clamor en el Desierto', *Mundo Negro Digital* (Marzo 2005), available online: www.combonianos.com/mn/marzo/desierto.htm (last accessed: 27 June 2006).
- ²⁹ Aguirre refers here to the strategy of many Saharawis who had joined the welcoming demonstration, unbothered by the Spanish security, carrying rolled flags and banners which apparently had the colours of either Spain or the PUNS and pro-Spanish slogans, but only on one side. On the reverse, or hidden, there were Polisario flags and slogans reading not what the colonial authorities had wished. After the overwhelming wave of Polisario colours during the first hours of the mission in El Aaiún, which caught the Spanish Security Services by surprise, it was clear that the Polisario dominated the streets and that the PUNS had not delivered the expected results, despite all the official 'permissiveness' and funding. In these circumstances, the Spanish authorities reacted with caution by allowing both the Polisario and the PUNS to demonstrate openly during the rest of the UN mission journey through the territory.
- ³⁰ Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 86.
- ³¹ 'United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara', UN General Assembly, 30th Session, 1975, Supplement 23, UN Document A/10023/ Rev., pp. 64 and 59.
- ³² Francisco Villar, *El Proceso de Autodeterminación del Sahara* (Valencia: Fernando Torres, 1982), p. 80.
- ³³ Carlos Ruíz Miguel, 'El largo camino jurídico y político hacia el Plan Baker II. ¿Estación de término?', *Anuario Mexicano de Derecho Internacional*, 5 (2005), 448.
- ³⁴ UN Resolutions 2229 (1966), 2254, 2354 (1967), 2428 (1968) 2591 (1969), 2711 (1970), 2983 (1972) and 3162 (1973).

- [35](#) Jacob Mundy, 'Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 11, 3 (2006), 281.
- [36](#) It is unknown because the Spanish authorities, in an attempt to hide the climate of war in the Western Sahara from peninsular public opinion, classified as 'accidental' the deaths of numerous soldiers over that period.
- [37](#) The Polisario had started just a few months earlier to obtain some support from Libya and Algeria. A first group of Saharawi guerrillas had received military training in Algeria from February to June 1975 and, via Mauritania, Libya had managed to smuggle a first cargo of arms into the territory. But the Polisario was still at that time a nascent military organization with a weak structure in general terms.
- [38](#) Personal interview with Ahmed Badda.
- [39](#) Frente Polisario, 'Reclutamiento', *20 de Mayo*, no. 6, April 1974, 1. The early 1970s were years of unrest and uncertainty in Morocco, in which the king survived two *coups d'état* and assassination attempts. The Western Sahara adventure is interpreted by many academics and political commentators as a strategy promoted by the questioned monarchy to divert the attention of the population, launching a new unifying 'national cause' and creating a sort of playground far from Rabat where a military establishment that Hassan II did not entirely trust could be kept busy.
- [40](#) It was called *Operación Golondrina*.
- [41](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 93.
- [42](#) Personal conversation with high-ranking Polisario official, Rabuni, November 2006.
- [43](#) Personal conversation with high-ranking Polisario member and SADR Minister, Rabuni, April 2004.
- [44](#) Personal interview with Bachir Mustafa Sayed. This is obviously a retrospective narrative about those years, in which the leaders try to stress the 'historical moderation and pragmatism' of Polisario, which can be questioned in the light of the rhetoric used in publications such as *Sahara Libre*, *La Opinión de las Masas* and *20 de Mayo* well into the 1980s. However, it is also entirely true that, although the ideological articulation reflected in most of the Polisario's documents during the late 1970s and 1980s falls within what could be identified with the leftist tradition of thought, such an interpretation would be superficial. Polisario's thought can better be understood as a revolutionary Saharawi nationalism, as it is the idea of a Saharawi nation that is the unquestioned nodal point around which the whole ideological chain is organized and a plural array of elements mainly from leftist traditions of thought – but not only – acquire meaning. The fact that neither the Soviet Union nor any other European Communist state had ever recognized the Saharawi Republic is very illuminative in this regard. Only Tito's Yugoslavia, which in fact had resisted Soviet influence and cultivated cordial relations with the West, recognized the Saharawi Republic. In addition, it is remarkable that in the analysis that I carried out of a wide sample of the previously mentioned official Polisario publications (comprising approximately one-third of the issues published until 1990) no reference to the Soviet Union was found.
- [45](#) The ICJ can accept only documentation provided by UN member states, not by non-state actors such as, for example, the Frente Polisario or any other organization.
- [46](#) *Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion*, ICJ Reports, 1975, paragraph 1.
- [47](#) Ibid., paragraph 163.
- [48](#) Ibid., paragraph 162.
- [49](#) Ibid.
- [50](#) Ibid., paragraph 161.
- [51](#) Ibid., paragraph 162.

52 *Africa Research Bulletin*, August 1975, quoted in Mundy, 'Neutrality or Complicity?', 284.

53 Mundy, 'Neutrality or complicity?', 284.

54 Ibid., p. 285.

55 As Diego Aguirre explains,

one of the most significant aspects of the ... green march ... is the distortion that the Moroccan throne made of the terms of the [Court's] statement, [which was] clearly negative for the Moroccan aspirations. Hassan II went ahead of the events (hence his rush to appear in the mass media) and gave his version of the facts before the true [version] had been broadcasted, from that moment, no one in Morocco will dare to contradict the explanation of the king ... (Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 113)

The distorted reading of the ICJ's opinion is still today echoed mechanically by the Moroccan media, in textbooks, et cetera, as well as by all but a few (and generally exiled in Europe) intellectuals and academics.

56 Ibid.

57 Some sources argue that the defection of PUNS leader Jaliheña uld Rachid to Morocco during the UN's visiting mission to the territory was not in fact a defection but part of a plan agreed between Rabat and Madrid in order to show to the international community that the main native political movement was pro-Moroccan. It is necessary to remember that the strength of the Polisario took the Spanish authorities completely by surprise. Although it proved to be a complete failure, the plan of the colonial authorities had been to stage PUNS demonstrations all over the territory and to present the PUNS leaders as the main representatives of the feelings of the population of the territory. Had this strategy worked, the trip to Morocco of the PUNS leader during the UN's visit and his declaration of loyalty to the king would have represented an important point for Rabat's interest, contributing to the creation of the false impression that the anti-colonial movement was pro-Moroccan.

58 Mundy, 'Neutrality or complicity?', p. 289.

59 *Declaración de Principios de España, Marruecos y Mauritania sobre el Sahara*, Madrid, 14 November 1975, emphasis added. The UN simply 'took note' of the tripartite agreement. In addition, the Madrid Accords, according to the general interpretation in Spanish academia, have in fact never become legal since they were never published in the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (Official Bulletin of the State), which is the compulsory requisite for any law, decree or accord, to enter into practice. Therefore, the Madrid Accords can be considered only as a statement or declaration of intentions that was never sanctioned or validated following the standard routes established by the Spanish legal system.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Asamblea General del Sahara, *Declaración de Guelta*, Guelta, 28 November 1975.

63 Javier Espinosa, 'Los últimos de la Yemáa', *El Mundo*, 6 April 2000, available online: www.elmundo.es/2000/04/06/ultima/06N0141.html (last accessed: 25 November 2007).

64 In fact, as Ángel Luis de la Calle reported years later, 'a group of Spanish soldiers devised a plan to blow the Hotel Parador of El Aaiún, where the Moroccan dignitaries in charge of the

transition [of power] in the Western Sahara were staying, in 1975; a bombing that could have changed the course of what happened' (Ángel Luis de la Calle, 'Operación Voladura', *El País*, 25 February 2001), available online: www.elpais.com/articulo/domingo/OPERACION/VOLADURA/elppor/20010225elpdmg_19/Tes (last accessed 15 December 2007). See also Ricardo Ramos Unamuno, 'Epílogo a la Operación Voladura', *El País*, 14 March 2001, available online: www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Epilogo/Operacion/Voladura/elpepiopi/20010314elpepiopi_9/Tes (last accessed 15 December 2007). The bombing was aborted just a few minutes before the planned time for the detonation, at 7 a.m. on 20 November 1975. General Franco had been pronounced dead less than one hour before, at approximately 6.10 a.m.

⁶⁵ García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 159.

⁶⁶ Taken from the documentary *La Fuga del Infierno*, filmed by an unknown Algerian TV crew in late 1975 and early 1976 and restored in November 2004 by RASD-TV, the Saharawi Republic public television station.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Personal interview with Agaila Mohamed.

⁶⁹ Liha ment Emahmed, quoted in García, *Historias del Sahara*, pp. 160–1.

⁷⁰ Personal interview with Glaiyiha, Chehid Chreif Victim's Centre, Rabuni, November 2006.

⁷¹ Quoted in Pablo San Martín and Joanna Allan, 'The largest prison in the world: landmines, walls, UXOs and the UN's role in the Western Sahara', *Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos*, Colaboraciones no. 1641, April 2007, 2.

⁷² In October 2007, Spanish National Audience anti-terrorist 'super-judge' Baltasar Garzón opened an inquest into the possible genocide committed against the Saharawis by Moroccan officials during this period. The offences to be officially investigated by the Spanish National Audience will include the crimes of genocide, assassination and torture. Garzón, a very famous judge in Spain, is known worldwide for pressing charges of genocide against former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

⁷³ Anne Lippert, 'The Saharawi refugees: origins and organization, 1975– 85', in Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (eds), *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (London: Printer, 1987), p. 151.

⁷⁴ It is difficult to have an accurate estimate because, among other factors, the refugee camps receive displaced persons not only from the former Spanish Sahara but also from the Tarfaya strip and the neighbouring Mauritanian areas, where the conflict also spread quickly. In addition, as I have said, Tindouf, although on Algerian soil, was a deserted area inhabited by Erguibat, and most of them joined the struggle and moved to the camps with their relatives from the Spanish colony. In any case, it seems plausible to consider that approximately half of the native population of the Spanish colony was displaced to Tindouf.

⁷⁵ Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 144.

⁷⁶ Briones, Liman and Salek, *Luali*, p. 224.

⁷⁷ Lippert, 'The Saharawi refugees', p. 153, emphasis added.

⁷⁸ About the concept of refugees as 'subaltern subjects' and humanitarian aid as a new 'colonialism of compassion', see Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000) p. xvi. On the 'myth of dependency' regarding the experiences of refugees living in camps, see, for example, Gaim Kibreab, 'The myth of dependency among camp refugees in Somalia', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6, 1 (1996), 321–49.

⁷⁹ García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 331.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 331–2.

- ⁸¹ Barbara Harrell-Bond, 'The experience of refugees as recipients of aid', in A. Ager (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration* (London: Pinter, 1999), p. 156.
- ⁸² Personal conversations with Omar bih Behi, Smara refugee camp, March and May 2006.
- ⁸³ Personal interview with Brahim Mojtar, Rabuni, April 2004.
- ⁸⁴ Consejo Nacional Provisional Saharaui, *Proclamación de la Independencia de la República Árabe Saharaui Democrática*, Bir Lehlou, 26 February 1976.
- ⁸⁵ In 1976 the following states recognized the Saharawi Republic: Angola, Algeria, Benin, Burundi, North Korea, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Madagascar, Rwanda and Togo. By 2007, eighty-two states had recognized the Saharawi Republic. Some of these states have cancelled or frozen relations with the SADR. The number of these cancellations can be situated in the region of twenty or thirty, although the figure varies since some of these states have cancelled relations with the Saharawi Republic and later on re-established diplomatic relations, depending on the government in power and the pressures (and 'incentives') provided by Morocco. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in international law, once a state recognizes another one, this recognition is irrevocable and cannot be cancelled. Only the recognition of a government can be cancelled, but not the recognition of the state represented by that particular government.
- ⁸⁶ Harrell-Bond, 'The experience of refugees', p. 156.
- ⁸⁷ Personal conversation with Saleh Nafe, Rabuni, March 2006.
- ⁸⁸ Personal interview with Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, Smara refugee camp, March 2006.
- ⁸⁹ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 9–10.
- ⁹⁰ According to Ernesto Laclau, *the political* will be 'the moment of pure antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible', in opposition to *the social* which will be the field of sedimented forms of 'objectivity' (Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 35). In Lacanian terminology, *the political* will be the moment in which we experience an encounter with 'the real', that is, with a radical crisis, which 'marks the gap between one socio-political identification and the creation of the desire for a new one' (Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 75), while *politics* will be the 'antagonist fights as they take place in reality', that is, the sphere of what might be understood as everyday politics (Slavoj Žižek, 'Beyond discourse analysis', in Laclau, *New Reflections*, pp. 252–3).
- ⁹¹ Frente Polisario, 'Programa de Acción Nacional', *El Pueblo*, 1, October 1974, 3.
- ⁹² Frente Polisario, 'Programa de Acción Nacional', *20 de Mayo*, 11, 2, September 1974, 10.
- ⁹³ Ibid., 10–11.
- ⁹⁴ Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sahara*, p. 346.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid.
- ⁹⁶ Jean-Claude Bruffaerts in *Sahara Info*, quoted in Lippert, 'The Saharawi refugees', p. 163.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ⁹⁸ James Firebrace, 'The Saharawi refugees: lessons and prospects', in Lawless and Monahan, *War and Refugees*, p. 184, emphasis added.
- ⁹⁹ This is the name officially given to the Polisario guerrilla movement after the creation of the Saharawi Republic.
- ¹⁰⁰ Fadel Ismail Sayed, *El Primer Estado del Sahara Occidental*, electronic book: www.arso.org/lestadosaharaui.pdf, p. 54, original edition: Fadel Ismail Sayed, *La République Sahraouie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).
- ¹⁰¹ Personal interview with Brahim Mojtar.

- [102](#) *Markasia Demokratía* is Hassania for ‘democratic centralism’. It was one of the key Polisario slogans until the late 1980s.
- [103](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, pp. 241–3.
- [104](#) Ismail Sayed, *El Primer Estado del Sahara*, p. 54.
- [105](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, p. 240.
- [106](#) Diego Aguirre, *Guerra en el Sáhara*, p. 344.
- [107](#) García, *Historias del Sahara*, pp. 256–308.
- [108](#) Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa’s Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books, 2004), p. 179.
- [109](#) A detailed explanation of the early problems regarding the identification of voters can be seen in Erik Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), pp. 59–71. Erik Jensen served with the UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) between 1993 and 1998; from 1994 as head of mission. He is known for his generally pro-Moroccan views.
- [110](#) The first Saharawi pesetas were coined in 1990, with an equivalence of 1:1 with the Spanish peseta. Although the Saharawi peseta has not been officially recognized, it has already been assigned an ISO 4217 international currency code: EHP.
- [111](#) Personal interview with senior Polisario member, Rabouni, April 2004.

Chapter 4: From Soldiers to Shopkeepers: Nationalism, Development and Social Change in the Saharawi Refugee Camps

- 1 Personal interview with Brahim Mojtar, Rabouni, April 2004.
- 2 Juan Carlos Gimeno, 'Transformaciones socioculturales de un proyecto revolucionario: la lucha del pueblo Saharaui por la liberación', *Colección Monografías* (CIPOST, Universidad Central de Venezuela), 43 (2007), 31, available online: www.globalcult.org.ve/monografias.htm (last accessed 10 December 2008).
- 3 Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books 2004), p. 175.
- 4 The refugees were given between three days and one week to take the photos and were also asked to write a list of the photos they had taken. The photographers were seven young women and five young men and two middle-aged men. Three of the women had completed only primary education, two of them were single and did domestic work at their family homes and the third one had recently married (but was still living at her parents' home). Two of the women had secondary education and worked for the state, one was married with children and the other one was a single mother. One had lived in Spain, where she completed her secondary education, and then trained as a primary school teacher. She was single and worked in a school. One had also trained as a teacher in Algeria and was married without children and worked as teacher, in a primary school. Of the five young men, two had university degrees from Cuba, were single, Spanish speaking and worked for the state, one of them as a teacher. One was also university educated, but from Algeria, was single and worked as a civil servant in Rabuni. One had recently moved to the camps, from Mauritania; he had received vocational training in the camps and worked in a small business. One had not completed his secondary education, was single, and had a shop (he was also the owner). Both middle-aged men were ex-guerrilla fighters, now demobilized and living in the camps; one worked for the state and was Spanish speaking and the other one was a shepherd, who often travelled to the Western Sahara territory under Polisario control east of the wall. This is a small number of photo-essays, aimed more at checking the methodology for the future than at producing conclusive results. The refugees who participated do not represent comprehensively the plurality of social backgrounds of the Saharawis living in Tindouf. See also *The Sora Project*, an initiative promoted by the arts charity Sandblast that aims to give Saharawi refugees a voice through digital photography. A selection of photo-essays is available online: www.sandblast-arts.org (last accessed 20 December 2007).
- 5 Shelley, *Endgame*, p. 78.
- 6 Personal conversation with Saharawi Popular Liberation Army senior officer, Rabuni, November 2006.
- 7 Fadala ment Mahammud, quoted in Alejandro García, *Historias del Sahara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2001), p. 335.
- 8 Personal conversation with young female refugee, Smara, April 2004.
- 9 This was the first telephone point in the camp. Initially, it was a public service given to the refugees by the Saharawi state. Now, this public telephone point is closed since most refugee

families have their own mobile telephones and there are plenty of private 'taxi-phones' where one can make cheap international calls.

- [10](#) There is also a mosque in one of the borders of the market, so that this also becomes a central space from a religious point of view. Nevertheless, mosques are not as important in Saharawi culture as in other Islamic cultures. In fact, a significant majority of the religious Saharawis (and it is important to bear in mind that not all Saharawis are believers, although they are all culturally Muslims) prefer to follow the Saharawi tradition of praying outside, in the open, without the guide of any imam or religious leader and in small groups rather than inside buildings (be it a mosque or any other construction).
- [11](#) A small office of the UNHCR is also located in this central area, but the physical presence of the UNHCR and other international or humanitarian agencies in the camps is very limited. Their role in the management and organization of the lives of the refugees seems to pass almost unnoticed. This is probably due to the fact that in most cases these agencies do not deal directly with the refugees themselves. The Saharawi Republic – throughout the Ministries of Public Health, Education, Cooperation, et cetera – deals with the major agencies and with dozens of NGOs (mainly Spanish), managing the distribution of the aid to the refugee population and the implementation of the humanitarian and cooperation programs. The vast Spanish network of NGOs working in the Tindouf camps, which comprises up to 200 independent organizations, works alongside the Polisario representatives in Spain, providing aid and funding development programmes that are neither controlled nor dependent on any of the major international donor agencies. So important is the aid obtained through these channels in some fields that the Saharawi Republic has even opened coordination offices in Spain, such as the Saharawi Ministry of Public Health's Coordination Office based in Vitoria-Gasteiz. These channels of funding give the Saharawi Republic a certain degree of autonomy, despite its dependence on external humanitarian aid, and contribute to lowering the social visibility of the major international agencies and especially of the UN.
- [12](#) Michael Billing, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 38–9.
- [13](#) Ibid., p. 6.
- [14](#) See [chapter 3](#), [note 90](#).
- [15](#) Personal conversation with Salek Mohamed, Smara, March 2006.
- [16](#) Ibid.
- [17](#) See [chapter 1](#), [note 12](#).
- [18](#) He is referring to the Moroccan Green March, also known by the Saharawis as Black March.
- [19](#) Personal interview with Sidahmed Bachir, Smara, March 2006.
- [20](#) Personal conversation with Mahfud Abdalahi, Smara, November 2006.
- [21](#) Ibid.
- [22](#) Personal interview with senior primary school teacher, Smara, March 2006.
- [23](#) Gimeno, 'Transformaciones socioculturales', 25.
- [24](#) Ibid.
- [25](#) See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).
- [26](#) White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 16.
- [27](#) David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 35.
- [28](#) White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 24.

- [29](#) Personal conversation with Maimona Mohamed, Smara, December 2006. Since the institutions that fund these projects are mainly local and regional, the Saharawis establish a clear distinction between what they consider more ‘grass roots’ and closer to ‘the Spanish people’ institutions, and the central Spanish government, whose traditionally ‘hesitant’ stance shifted during Zapatero’s presidency towards an open pro-Moroccan position.
- [30](#) Personal interview with Hamad Emberik, Smara, March 2006.
- [31](#) Personal interview with Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, Smara, March 2006.
- [32](#) Surprisingly, most of these Spanish-language textbooks have been printed in non-Spanish-speaking countries, mainly in Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries. The Spanish central government has not funded any of these language-teaching materials. Despite repeated demands over the years by the Polisario, the Spanish solidarity movement and numerous cultural and artistic associations, the Cervantes Institute – the official institution, equivalent to the British Council, that promotes the Spanish language abroad – has rejected the petitions to open a centre in the refugee camps or the Western Sahara territory. In addition, the Cervantes Institute, which depends organically on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has actively vetoed the inclusion of the Saharawi literature in Spanish in its libraries and the participation of Saharawi writers in any of its literary and cultural events. Paradoxically, at the time of writing, the last large consignment of Spanish-language textbooks for the refugee camps has been funded by the Basque regional government, controlled by Basque nationalist parties.
- [33](#) Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Lectura 3er Curso* (RASD, no date), unit 13.
- [34](#) Ibid., unit 21.
- [35](#) Ibid., unit 22.
- [36](#) Ibid., units 23 and 24.
- [37](#) Ibid., unit 22.
- [38](#) Ibid., unit 32.
- [39](#) Ibid., unit 33.
- [40](#) Ibid., unit 38.
- [41](#) Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Lectura 5º* (RASD, no date), p. 26. By ‘pioneer’ the text refers to a sort of Saharawi ‘boy scout’ organization.
- [42](#) Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Lectura 4º* (RASD, no date), p. 1.
- [43](#) Ibid.
- [44](#) The concept of martyrdom in Saharawi hegemonic discourses has nothing to do with the religious jihad, but it is exclusively related to the ‘national Revolution’ and anti-colonial struggle. Nevertheless, it obviously has a religious meaning, since the martyrs are generally believed to be rewarded in the afterlife (despite their martyrdom being not related to any religious conflict), since they have been ‘good persons’ who ‘gave everything they had for the future of others’. In Saharawi tradition there are no martyrs of the religious jihad as such. In a very interesting conversation with a middle-aged Saharawi woman in Smara about the sacrifices that all Saharawi families were forced to make because of the conflict, she explained to me that the most precious thing that someone could give to the community was his or her life, since ‘*we only have this life* and to lose it fighting for your people instead of trying to live well and to accumulate wealth for yourself is the most generous gift one can make’ (personal conversation with Saharawi woman, Smara, March 2006), emphasis added. In addition to revealing her lack of religious beliefs, or at least her doubts about such as central concepts as heaven and eternity, she illustrated clearly how the concept of martyrdom is inscribed and

acquires meaning as part of a nationalist discourse that privileges the collective over the individual.

[45](#) Ministerio de Educación – RASD, *Lectura 4º*, p. 37.

[46](#) Ibid., p. 38. In addition, education is interpreted as an opportunity given to the new generations of Saharawis by the Saharawi Republic and the revolution that commenced with Bassiri and the Frente Polisario. As it is explained in one of the readings,

[i]n the times of colonialism, could all the children study as they do now? No, neither the children, nor the adults, and even less so women. Why?, asked Ahmed. Because colonialism promoted ignorance and backwardness in our population. ... Only with the Revolution could our popular masses have access to education. (Ministerio de Educación – RASD, *Lectura 5º*, p. 20)

[47](#) Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Lectura 6º* (RASD, no date), p. 7. During one of my periods of fieldwork, a new school was being built in Meheris, a new *daira* in Smara, and the workers of some Saharawi Republic ministries had one day per week off from their normal duties to collaborate in the construction of the school. As Mehdi Ali, a young worker of the Ministry of Information, explained to me: ‘it is not compulsory to use this day off to work in the school ... and, in fact, not everybody comes. But I prefer to come and help ... because if not ... I could be like others and go to earn some money, as a taxi driver or selling things ... but here I’m contributing to society’ (personal conversation with Mehdi Ali, Smara, March 2004).

[48](#) Ministerio de Educación – RASD, *Lectura 4º*, p. 13.

[49](#) Ibid., p. 14. The original Spanish (‘solucionar un asunto’) in that precise context refers clearly to some paperwork, some bureaucratic or administrative matter.

[50](#) Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Geography 6º* (RASD, no date), p. 20.

[51](#) Ministerio de Educación – RASD, *Lectura 6º*, pp. 9 and 11.

[52](#) Ibid., p. 11.

[53](#) Ministerio de Educación – RASD, *Lectura 4º*, unit 38.

[54](#) Gimeno, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, 24. The exhibition of arms in the camps is still prohibited and it is extremely rare even to see the members of the National Police or the National Gendarmerie with firearms. The large military parades, where both light and heavy armoury and vehicles are publicly displayed, take place only during special commemorative events and anniversaries, such as 27 February, the Polisario congresses, et cetera, and in recent years they have always been organized in the liberated territory of the Western Sahara under Saharawi control, where the Saharawi Popular Liberation Army is stationed. This strategy is aimed at both continuing with the tradition of avoiding the exhibition of arms in the camps and, more importantly, the affirmation (internally and externally) of the sovereignty of the Saharawi Republic over that part of the territory.

[55](#) Personal conversation with group of *Cubarawis*, Rabuni, June 2006.

[56](#) Personal interview with Zrug Brahim, Rabuni, June 2006.

[57](#) Personal conversation with Nayim Chej, Algiers, February 2004.

[58](#) Liman Boicha, ‘Las estaciones de nuestro exilio’, unpublished paper, 2007.

[59](#) Personal interview with Mahafud Saleh, Smara, March 2004.

[60](#) Personal interview with Zrug Brahim.

- [61](#) Ibid.
- [62](#) Boicha, 'Las estaciones'.
- [63](#) A very significant number of the Saharawi Liberation Army officials have been trained in the military academies of 'friendly states', mainly in Cuba and Algeria, but also in Libya during the early 1980s and in the former Eastern Bloc, in countries such as Yugoslavia, during the same decade. In addition, the Saharawi Ministry of Defence runs its own network of military academies and training centres for the new recruits.
- [64](#) Personal interview with Hamad Emberek.
- [65](#) Personal interview with Salek Mohamed, Smara, March 2006.
- [66](#) Personal interview with Fatma Mohamed, Rabuni, June 2006.
- [67](#) Personal interview with Zrug Brahim.
- [68](#) Ibid.
- [69](#) Personal interview with Saleh Lbujali, Smara, March 2004.
- [70](#) Gimeno, 'Transformaciones socioculturales', 28.
- [71](#) Ibid., 29.
- [72](#) Ibid., 28.
- [73](#) Personal conversation with Liman Boicha, Leeds, May 2006.
- [74](#) Boicha, 'Las estaciones'.
- [75](#) Personal interview with Salek Mohamed.
- [76](#) Boicha, 'Las estaciones'.
- [77](#) Ibid., emphasis added.
- [78](#) Personal interview with Hamad Emberek.
- [79](#) Ibid.
- [80](#) Ibid.
- [81](#) Personal interview with Fanna Imam, Rabuni, March 2006. The *mehlfa* is the traditional Saharawi women's dress.
- [82](#) Personal interview with Hamad Emberek.
- [83](#) See, for example, Christine Perregaux, *Gulili. Mujeres del Desierto Saharaui* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 1993), and Dolores Juliano, *La Causa Saharaui y las Mujeres* (Barcelona, Icaria, 1998). An alternative reading of Saharawi women's position can be seen in Joanna Allan's excellent and path-breaking work 'Representations of gender in Saharawi nationalist discourse(s)', Masters by Research Dissertation, University of Leeds, 2008.
- [84](#) Juliano, *La Causa Saharaui*, p. 54.
- [85](#) Ibid., p 50.
- [86](#) In fact, although the Saharawi descent system has some of the most visible elements of patrilineage, such as the children's taking the father's name as surname and belonging to his kinship group, it also combines some crucial elements of matrilocality, such as, for example, the fact that in most cases recently married couples stay with the bride's family for a variable period of time (in many cases until they have the first child and, more recently, until the new couple can afford to build their own 'house').
- [87](#) Personal interview with Salek Mohamed.
- [88](#) Personal interview with young female *Cubarawi*, Rabuni, March 2006. Two key issues that illustrate these tensions and contradictions are the status of homosexuality and the pregnancy of single women. In a recent conference about the Western Sahara in Madrid, a Spanish humanitarian worker with wide experience of work in the refugee camps, asked one of the Saharawi speakers, El Aaiún's *Wali*, Omar Mansur, if it would be possible for the Saharawi homosexuals to create an association in the camps and to go public. Mansur's answer stressed that there was nothing in the statutes of the Polisario or the constitution of the Saharawi

Republic banning homosexuals and, therefore, it would be perfectly possible for any association in defence of the rights of homosexuals to be legally created in the camps and to go public. However, he clarified, no attempt in that direction had been made up until then, and he thought it was not foreseeable in the near future, because society was not yet prepared. What is legally and politically possible is a very different thing from what is socially acceptable. Another difficult issue is the pregnancy of single women, which is prohibited in Saharawi law – which tries to combine a civil code with many elements from the religious tradition. Single pregnancy is illegal, and single women are judged and usually given ‘sentences’ of up to two years in a detention centre close to the camps. Once the babies are born, these ‘sentences’ can be immediately suspended if someone marries the woman; these marriages are usually arranged with relatives or friends to get them out and then followed by divorce once they are back in the camps. According to the explanations of some Saharawi Republic officials, in contrast to what a Western observer might think, one of the main ideas behind this approach to single pregnancy is precisely to ‘protect women’, since if they are not ‘taken from society until they have the baby’ their families will probably force them to abort illegally with the help of a traditional matron or ‘healer’, with a high risk for their health, to avoid the ‘dishonour’ that a the pregnancy of a single daughter represents for the family. Therefore, if, on the one hand, there is no doubt that this approach is safer for the pregnant women in terms of health, on the other, it also entails a very humiliating process of public prosecution that marks the social status of the judged women.

[89](#) Personal interview with young male *Cubarawi*, Smara, December 2006.

[90](#) Gimeno, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, 34.

[91](#) Personal interview with young male *Cubarawi*, Rabuni, June 2006.

[92](#) Personal interview with Fanna Imam.

[93](#) Personal interview with Mehdi Mohamed, Smara, December 2006.

[94](#) Personal interview with Zrug Brahim.

[95](#) Personal interview with Mohamed Zein, Rabuni, March 2006.

[96](#) Personal interview with Saleh Lbujali.

[97](#) Gimeno, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, 24. In fact, it is not strictly true that there was no money in the camps during the 1980s. As one Saharawi pointed out to me,

there was always money here. Don’t let anyone lie to you. That’s a myth. The families were different before arriving to the camps ... some of them brought some money with them and those ones always had some sort of privilege because they could buy things outside. Others had relatives abroad who sent them money ... Limited, it’s true, but there was always some circulation of money. There was never and never will be full equality. Full equality only exists as an idea. It doesn’t exist in Cuba and it is a socialist regime! Not even among the Brazilian *Sem Terra* Movement is there equality ... (personal conversation with young Saharawi professional female, Rabuni, March 2006)

[98](#) Some Saharawis even opened routes of illegal trade, mainly the smuggling of cigarettes, through the Moroccan defensive military wall, under the passive gaze of the low-waged and easy-to-bribe Moroccan soldiers.

[99](#) Personal interview with Saharawi woman shopkeeper, Smara, December 2006.

- [100](#) There are similar programmes with other countries, but the scale is not comparable with the Spanish programme. Every summer, Italy receives between 400 and 500 Saharawi children and France about 200. The USA and the UK have recently launched pilot programmes, receiving about twenty Saharawi students. The Italian programme, second in significance after the Spanish not only in numbers but also because of its continuity over time, differs from the Spanish in a crucial aspect: the Saharawi children go to summer camps instead of families. These programmes do not have the economic effects of the Spanish one.
- [101](#) The funding for this programme, mainly consisting of dozens of charter flights from Tindouf to the different Spanish regions, is covered in part by the associations of Friends of the Sahara and, principally, with grants from local and regional governments. In addition to the large amounts provided by the regional, provincial and large local governments, even many small local councils contribute, in many cases with amounts related to the number of children who will be fostered in their municipality. In any case, the sources of funding are plural and, most importantly, are not controlled by a single and central agency or government body, which helps the programme to be less dependant on the decisions taken by the Spanish central government, whose strategic decisions are likened to the difficult and variable relations with Morocco.
- [102](#) See CEAS-SAHARA's website for detailed information about their activities: www.saharaindependiente.org/principal.htm.
- [103](#) Personal conversation with senior Saharawi Republic civil servant, Rabuni, March 2004.
- [104](#) Personal conversation with Spanish foster-mother, Extremadura, July 2006.
- [105](#) Personal conversation with Spanish foster-mother, Asturias, August 2006.
- [106](#) Personal conversation with Spanish volunteers, Smara, March 2006.
- [107](#) Personal interview with Saharawi housewife (family of fourteen members), Auserd, December 2006.
- [108](#) Personal interview with Saharawi housewife (family of twelve members), Ausend, December 2006.
- [109](#) Personal conversation with young Saharawi woman (family of thirteen members), Smara, May 2006.
- [110](#) Personal interview with Saleh Lbujali.
- [111](#) This is in fact a further issue that has helped the development of a cash economy in the camps. Over the last decade, there has been a sharp increase in the number of NGOs working there and the cooperation projects carried out. Most of these projects, mainly from Spanish organizations (and to a lesser extent Italian), are aimed at improving the living conditions of the refugees and range from agricultural projects to create vegetable gardens and a hen farm, from health and education projects to technical support to build a modern national archive, from the creation of a pharmaceutical laboratory to produce locally a range of basic medicines such as paracetamol, to the building of houses in the 'liberated territories'. The work in the camps of dozens of associations and NGOs requires the support of an infrastructure which includes both the services of local workers (in many cases workers of the Saharawi counterpart public institution) and the provision of materials and services. Therefore, the presence of NGOs, in addition to the significance of the cooperation initiatives implemented, has become an income-generating activity in itself.
- [112](#) See Carlos Ruiz Miguel, 'Nacionalidad, igualdad y descolonización', *Revista Española de Derecho Constitucional*, 56 (1999), 251–78, and Carlos Ruiz Miguel, 'Nacionalidad española de ciudadanos saharauis: Secuela de una descolonización frustrada (y frustrante)', *Revista General de Derecho*, 663 (1999), 14235–46.
- [113](#) Based on humanitarian reasons, Algeria gives passports to the Saharawi refugees to allow them to travel to countries that do not recognize the Saharawi Republic. These passports,

which are identified through special numbers, do not entail the recognition of Algerian nationality.

[114](#) Personal interview with Saleh Lbujali.

[115](#) Personal interview with car-spares store owner, Rabuni, May 2006. The initial investment required for opening a business in the refugee camps is relatively high by local standards and, without the help of a pension or remittances from abroad, requires a significant effort. One of the entry routes for many young Saharawis into the 'business ladder' was to make mud-bricks for the construction of houses, an activity that requires a minimum initial economic investment (mainly the water) but is especially demanding and extenuating physical work. Although there is not a formal banking system in the camps, it is also possible to borrow the money to open a shop or launch a commercial enterprise. Usually, the money is borrowed within the family networks. For example, the initial investment to open a butcher's shop lies in the region of 1,000,000 Algerian dinars (10,000 €), for food and clothes shops and restaurants it ranges from 200,000 Algerian dinars (2,000 €) for a small one to 600,000 (6,000 €) for a larger one. A car for working as a taxi driver may cost approximately 340,000 Algerian dinars (3,400 €).

[116](#) Private conversation with Polisario senior official, Rabuni, May 2006.

[117](#) David De Juan Canales, 'Oigo una voz caminando', in Juan Carlos Gimeno Marín, Olga Mancha Cáceres and Ana Toledo Chavarri (eds), *Conocimiento, Desarrollo y Transformaciones Sociales. Aproximaciones Antropológicas Contemporáneas* (Sherpa: Málaga, 2007), p. 429.

[118](#) Personal conversation with Nina Abderrahman, Smara, November 2005.

[119](#) Personal interview with car-spares and repair business owner, Smara, December 2006.

[120](#) Personal interview with Saharawi woman shopkeeper, Smara, December 2006.

[121](#) Personal interview with Saharawi male butcher, Smara, December 2006.

[122](#) The isolated geographical location of the refugee camps and the fact that most products are not produced locally but brought from distant locations through long desert routes explains the relatively high prices of many goods. For example, in June 2006 one bread baguette cost 200 Saharawi dinars/pesetas (EHP) (0.1 €), one bottle of water 1,000 EHP (0.5 €), 1 kilo of tomatoes 1,600 EHP (0.8 €), 1 kilo of bananas 3,000 EHP (1.5 €), 1 kilo of camel meat 5,000 EHP (2.5 €), 20 litres of unsalted water for tea 15,000 EHP (7.5 €), one pack of four yogurts 1,200 EHP (0.6 €), one goat 150,000 EHP (75 €), *mehlfa* – women's dress – between 8,000 and 18,000 EHP (4–9 €), a pair of sandals 16,000 EHP (8 €), three-metre long *el zem* – male turban – 6,000 EHP (3 €), TV 300,000 EHP (150 €), radio-cassette player 160,000 EHP (80 €), large car battery 70,000 EHP (35 €), small car battery 40,000 EHP (20 €), mattress 30,000 EHP (15 €), large solar panel 600,000 EHP (300 €), small solar panel 460,000 EHP (240 €), 100 bricks for construction 16,000 EHP (8 €), one taxi *journey* from Smara to Rabuni or Tindouf 1,000 EHP (0.5 €), and a one-dish lunch or dinner in a restaurant 2,000 EHP (1–1.5 €).

[123](#) Personal interview with Zrug Brahim.

[124](#) Ibid.

[125](#) Personal conversation with Mehdi Ali, Smara, March 2006.

[126](#) Personal conversation with Saharawi guide, liberated territory of the Saharawi Republic, November 2005.

[127](#) Gimeno, 'Transformaciones socioculturales', 35.

[128](#) This figure rises to approximately 225 if we include the commercial buildings that were apparently inactive at that particular moment.

[129](#) This estimate concurs with the estimates of some consulted Saharawi officials, although it has to be taken with caution as with any other estimate. The registry of businesses of the *Wilaya*

was in the process of updating its records at the time of my last visit to the camp, but seemed to point towards the direction of the given estimate.

- [130](#) This does not include the taxis, a very common income-generating activity in Smara and 27 February because of their vicinity to paved roads that connect them to Rabuni and the Algerian town of Tindouf. These businesses can be grouped as follows: food stores (from butchers selling goat and camel meat to ‘supermarkets’ selling vegetables, fruits, soda drinks, canned food, et cetera); clothes and fabrics (*melhf*as, *derr*as, sandals and Western-style fashion, carpets, et cetera); artisan workshops (metal, leather and woodwork, from knives to tobacco pipes or children toys, also repairs); electrical gadgets and equipment (televisions, radios, batteries, solar panels, mobile phones, et cetera); automobile spares and repairs (including petrol); taxi-phones (privately managed ‘phone booths’, offering cheap calls abroad); restaurants (especially in Rabuni, because of the large number of workers in the public institutions concentrated there for the week, but recently also in the camps); construction (on the one hand, stores selling building materials and, on the other, builders working in the construction of houses or making mud-bricks for self-building). There are other shops offering diverse services (from hairdressing to music cassettes). Finally, the taxis are also worth a mention as a significant type of economic activity.
- [131](#) Personal interview with Saleh Lbujali. Such inequalities, although not yet very marked, are clearly visible in the improvements made to the houses. The tents that for two decades dominated the landscape of the camps are now dots in a brownish sea of mud-brick constructions. The house of each family unit usually consist of a tent, kept among other reasons as a reminder of both the temporality of the stay there and as a symbol of their nomadic origin, closing a circle delineated by several brick constructions (one or two rooms, kitchen, bathroom and storage room). The various rooms are usually connected and enclosed by an external brick wall, forming an internal patio in the middle. Therefore, the separation of the public and private spaces is more clearly defined than in the past, as is also the delimitation of public and private property. The structure of the new houses looks on to the patio, hiding from the surrounding streets and neighbours behind the walls the televisions, parabolic antennas, solar panels et cetera. From the streets, the economic differences can be easily guessed, however, by the size of the houses and the use, or not, of cement to cover and protect the walls of the buildings, among many other details.
- [132](#) Gimeno, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, 35.
- [133](#) ‘To earn money to sort out the family needs’ was the answer that was invariably and almost with identical words given by all the traders, shopkeepers et cetera, with whom I talked about their motivations to start a business in the camps (which includes ten in-depth personal interviews, in addition to several informal conversations).
- [134](#) Personal interview with Salek Mohamed.
- [135](#) Personal conversation with Mehdi Ali.
- [136](#) Ibid.
- [137](#) Ibid.
- [138](#) Juan Carlos Gimeno, ‘Transformaciones socioculturales’, 37. This new scale has contributed to the rise in the cases of absenteeism from work in key sectors such as education and health, where some workers took with ‘greater flexibility’ days off when required for performing other seasonal activities considered a priority at a particular moment.
- [139](#) Personal interview with Mohamed Zein.

Bibliography

This bibliography is not exhaustive; it mainly includes the works cited in this book. A comprehensive bibliography on the Western Sahara can be consulted in Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara*, pp. 457–521.

Alia Medina, Manuel, *Interpretación de algunas estructuras petrográficas del Sahara Meridional Español* (n.p., 1941).

———, *Notas de una Expedición Geológica a los Territorios del Sahara Español* (Madrid: Investigación y Progreso, 1941).

———, ‘Notas de una segunda expedición geológica por el Sahara español’, *Boletín de la Real Sociedad Española de Historia Natural*, 41 (1943).

———, *Datos Geológicos de la Zona Septentrional del Sahara español* (Madrid: n.p., 1944).

———, *Notas de una tercera expedición geológica al Sahara español* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Española de Historia Natural, 1945).

———, *La Posición tectónica del Sahara español en el conjunto Africano* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Geográfica, 1946).

———, *La Geología del Sahara Occidental* (Tetúan: Imprenta del Mazjen, 1948).

———, *Contribución al conocimiento geomorfológico de las zonas centrales del Sahara español* (Madrid: n.p., 1949).

———, ‘El descubrimiento de los fosfatos del Sahara español’, *África*, 7, 97 (1950).

Allan, Joanna, ‘Representations of gender in Saharawi nationalist discourse(s)’, Master by Research Dissertation, University of Leeds, 2008.

- Anonymous, 'Algunos de los históricos sobre la historia del Sahara', *Sahara Libre*, special issue, March 1976.
- Almagro Basch, Martín, *El Arte Prehistórico del Sahara español* (Barcelona: Diputación Provincial de Barcelona, 1944).
- , *Prehistoria del Norte de África y del Sahara español* (Barcelona: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1946).
- Alonso del Barrio, José Enrique, *Las Tribus del Sahara* (El Aaiún: Servicio de Publicaciones del Gobierno del Sáhara, 1973).
- Baba Miske, Ahmed, *Front Polisario. L'âme d'un peuple* (Paris: Editions Rupture, 1978).
- Balfour, Sebastian, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898–1923* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
- , 'Spain and the Great Powers in the aftermath of the Disaster of 1899', in Sebastian Balfour and Paul Preston (eds), *Spain and the Great Powers in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- , *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Bárbulo, Tomás, *La Historia Prohibida del Sáhara Español* (Barcelona: Destino, 2002).
- Bella Gasulla, José, *Cabo Jubi. 1958* (Madrid: Editorial San Martín, 1991).
- Bens, Francisco, *Por segunda vez España en el África occidental: Memoria descriptiva de la expedición al interior de los dominios españoles en el Sahara y posesión francesa del Adrar-STEMAR/por el Comandante de Infantería S. Francisco Bens Argandeña* (Melilla: Tipografía del 'Telegrama del Rif', 1911).
- Bens Argandeña, Francisco, *Mis Memorias (Veintidós Años en el Desierto)* (Madrid: Ediciones del Gobierno del África Occidental Española, 1947).
- Billing, Michael, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).
- Boicha, Liman, 'Las estaciones de nuestro exilio', unpublished paper, 2007.
- Bonelli, Emilio, *Nuevos Territorios Españoles de la Costa del Sahara – Conferencia pronunciada en la Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid el 7 de Abril de 1885* (Madrid: Imprenta de Fortanet, 1885).

- , *El Sahara. Descripción Geográfica, Comercial y Agrícola desde Cabo Bojador a cabo Blanco, Viajes al Interior, Habitantes del Desierto y Consideraciones Generales* (Madrid: Tipografía de L. Péant é Hijos, 1887).
- Bosque Goma, Alfredo, *Guerra de Ifni. Las Banderas Paracaidistas. 1957–1958* (Madrid: Editorial Almena, 1998).
- Bremón, Luciano María, *Estados Españoles en el Sahara Occidental. Proyecto de Colonización* (Málaga: Tipográfica de S. Parejo y Navas, 1894).
- Briones, Felipe, Mohamed Limam Mohamed Ali, and Mahayub Salek, *Luali: 'Ahora o nunca, la libertad'* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 1997).
- Bullón Díaz, Galo, *Curso sobre África Española: Notas sobre Geografía Humana de los territorios de Ifni y del Sahara* (Madrid: S. Aguirre, 1944–5).
- , *Notas sobre Geografía Humana de los territorios de Ifni y del Sahara. Conferencia pronunciada el día 4 de diciembre de 1944* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Geográfica – Imprenta Aguirre, 1945).
- Campbell, David, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- Campos Martínez, José María, *Abd el Krim y el Protectorado* (Málaga: Algazara, 2000).
- Cano Sánchez-Pastor, Antonio, *Cautivos en las Arenas* (Madrid: L. Rubio, 1933).
- Caro Baroja, Julio, 'Los Nómadas y su Porvenir: conferencia pronunciada en el salón de actos del CSIC en día 19 de febrero de 1965', *Archivos del Instituto de Estudios Africanos*, 78 (1966).
- , *Estudios Saharianos* (Madrid: Ediciones Jucar, 1990 [1955]).
- Cherkaoui, Mohamed, *Morocco and the Sahara: Social Bond and Geographical Issues* (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2007).
- Comité de Formación del Frente Polisario, 'Editorial: El Congreso del Mártir Abderrahman Abdalahi. II Congreso del F.PO.LI.SA.RIO', *El Pueblo. Toda la Verdad para las Masas*, no. 1, October 1974.

- Contijoch, Joseph M., *Sidi Ifni 57. Impresiones de un Movilizado* (Valls: Cossetània, 2002).
- D'Almonte, Enrique, *Ensayo de una breve descripción del Sahara español* (Madrid: Imprenta del Patronato de Huérfanos de Intendencia e Intervención Militares, 1914).
- de la Calle, Ángel Luis, 'Operación Voladura', *El País*, 25 February 2001, available online: www.elpais.com/articulo/domingo/OPERACION/VOLADURA/elppor/20010225elpdmg_19/Tes (last accessed 15 December 2007).
- Deasy, George F., 'Spanish territorial boundary changes in northwest Africa', *Geographical Review*, 32, 2 (1942).
- Diego Aguirre, José Ramón, *Guerra en el Sahara* (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 1991).
- , *La última guerra colonial de España. Ifni-Sáhara (1957–1958)* (Málaga: Algazara, 1993).
- , *El Oscuro Pasado del Desierto. Aproximación a la Historia del Sáhara* (Madrid: Ediciones Sial & Casa de África, 2004).
- Español Coll, Francisco, *Misión Científica de E. Morales Agacino, Ch. Rungs y B. Zolotarevsky a Ifni y Sahara español* (Madrid: Instituto Español de Entomología, 1943).
- , *Nuevos datos para el conocimiento de los tenebriónicos* (Madrid: Instituto Español de Entomología, 1944).
- Espinosa, Javier, 'Los últimos de la Yemáa', *El Mundo*, 6 April 2000, available online: www.elmundo.es/2000/04/06/ultima/06N0141.html (last accessed: 25 November 2007).
- Firebrace, James, 'The Saharawi refugees: lessons and prospects', in Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (eds), *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (London: Printer, 1987).
- Flores Morales, Ángel, *El Sahara español: Ensayo de Geografía Física, Humana y Económica* (Madrid: Alta Comisaría de España en Marruecos, 1946).
- , *El Sahara Español* (Madrid: Publicaciones Españolas, 1954).

- Fradera, Josep M., *Colonias para después de un Imperio* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2005).
- Franco Bahamonde, Ramón, *La Infamia de las Deportaciones ¡Villa Cisneros! Fin de Viaje* (Madrid: Suc. De F. Peña Cruz, 1933).
- , *Unos Días con los Deportados de Villa Cisneros. Afirmación de Solidaridad Universal* (Madrid: Tierra, 1933).
- Franco, Francisco, *Palabras del Caudillo 19 de Abril 1937–31 de Diciembre 1938* (Barcelona: Seix y Barral Hnos., 1939).
- Freeden, Michael, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
- García, Alejandro, *Historias del Sahara. El Mejor y el Peor de los Mundos* (Madrid: Libros de la Catarata, 2001).
- García de Vinuesa, Fernando, *De Madrid a Lisboa por Villa Cisneros* (Madrid: n.p., 1933).
- García Pérez, Antonio, *Ifni y el Sahara español* (n.p., 1940).
- Gimeno, Juan Carlos, 'Resistencia y Revolución en el Bidan', *Studia Africana*, 16 (2005).
- , 'Transformaciones socioculturales de un proyecto revolucionario: la lucha del pueblo Saharaui por la liberación', *Colección Monografías* (CIPOST, Universidad Central de Venezuela), 43 (2007). Available online: www.globalcult.org.ve/monografias.htm.
- and Mohamed Ali Laman, 'Transformaciones socioculturales en los campamentos de refugiados Saharauis al sur de Argelia (1975–2005)', in Juan Carlos Gimeno, Olga Mancha and Ana Toledo (eds), *Conocimiento, Desarrollo y Transformaciones Sociales. Aproximaciones Antropológicas Contemporáneas* (Madrid: Sepha, 2007).
- Gobierno General del Sahara, *Censo 1974* (Aaiún: Servicio de Registro de Población, Censo y Estadística, 1975).
- Gómez Moreno, Pedro, *Rutas de Sahara* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1958).
- , *Pozos del Sahara* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1959).
- González Jiménez, Epifanio, *Territorios del Sur de Marruecos y Sáhara Occidental* (Toledo: Imprenta del Colegio María Cristina, 1930).

- Guarner, Vicenc and José Guarner Vivanco, *El Sahara y sur marroquí españoles: su problema militar y político, geografía, historia y demás características de nuestro Sahara y de Ifni* (Toledo: Imprenta Rodríguez, 1931).
- Guinea López, Emilio, *Aspecto Forestal del Desierto: la vegetación leñosa y los pastos del Sahara español* (Madrid: Gráficas Reunidas, 1945).
- , ‘Catálogo Razonado de las plantas del Sahara español’, *Anales del Jardín Botánico de Madrid*, 8 (1947).
- Harrell-Bond, Barbara, ‘The experience of refugees as recipients of aid’, in A. Ager (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration* (London: Pinter, 1999).
- Hernández-Pacheco, Francisco, *Rasgos fisiográficos y geológicos del territorio de Ifni y Rasgos fisiográficos y geológicos del Sahara* (Madrid: n.p., 1944).
- , *Los Pozos de Agua en el Sahara Español e Hipótesis de su Construcción* (Madrid: Investigación y Progreso, 1945).
- , *Las costas del Ifni y del Sahara español: rasgos fisiográficos y geológicos* (Tetuán: Imprenta del Majzen, 1948).
- and Eduardo Esteban, *Sahara español: expedición científica de 1941* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Madrid, 1942).
- and Manuel Alia Medina, *Nota Preliminar de una Prospección Geológica reciente en el Sahara español* (Madrid: C. Bermejo Imprenta, 1942).
- and Eduardo Esteban, *El Sahara español: estudio geológico, geográfico y botánico* (Madrid: CSIC, 1949).
- Hyndman, Jennifer, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- Ignacio de Dalmases, Pablo, ‘En la muerte de Rodríguez de Viguri. Un clamor en el Desierto’, *Mundo Negro Digital* (March 2005). Available online: www.combonianos.com/mn/marzo/desierto.htm.
- , ‘Sahara Español. Crónica de un abandono anunciado’, *CLIO. Revista de Historia*, 50 (2005).

- Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *Sahara: Provincia Española* (Madrid: CSIC, 1966).
- International Court of Justice, 'Western Sahara. Advisory opinion', *Reports* (1975).
- Ismail Sayed, Fadel, *El Primer Estado del Sahara Occidental*, electronic book: www.arso.org/lestadosaharaui.pdf; original edition: Fadel Ismail Sayed, *La République Sahraouie* (Paris: L'Harmattan 2001).
- Jaén, Antonio, *España extra-peninsular. Marruecos, Sahara-Rio de Oro, Guinea, Islas* (Sevilla: Imprenta y Librería de Eulogio de las Heras, 1926).
- Jensen, Erik, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).
- Juan Canales, David de, 'Oigo una voz caminando', in Juan Carlos Gimeno Marín, Olga Mancha Cáceres and Ana Toledo Chavarri (eds), *Conocimiento, Desarrollo y Transformaciones Sociales. Aproximaciones Antropológicas Contemporáneas* (Madrid: Shepa, 2007).
- Juliano, Dolores, *La Causa Saharaui y Las Mujeres. 'Siempre fuimos tan libres'* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1998).
- Keenan, Jeremy, *The Tuareg: People of Ahaggar* (London: Sickle Moon Books, 2002).
- Kibreab, Gaim, 'The myth of dependency among camp refugees in Somalia', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6, 1 (1996).
- Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections in the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).
- and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).
- Lippert, Anne, 'The Saharawi refugees: origins and organization, 1975–85', in Richard Lawless and Laila Monahan (eds), *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (London: Printer, 1987).
- Lozano y Rey, Luis, *Las pesquerías del Sáhara español* (Madrid: Vicente Rico, 1934).
- Madariaga María, Rosa, *España en el Rif. Crónica de una Guerra Olvidada* (Melilla: La Biblioteca de Melilla, 1999).

- Martín Corrales, Eloy, 'El Protectorado Español en Marruecos. (1912–1956). Una Perspectiva Histórica', in Joan Nogué and José Luis Villanova (eds), *España en Marruecos (1912–1956). Discursos Geográficos e Intervención Territorial* (Lleida: Milenio, 1999).
- (ed.), *Marruecos y el Colonialismo Español [1859–1912]* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2002).
- Martínez Santa-Olalla, Julio, *Los Primeros Grabados Rupestres del Sahara español* (Madrid: n.p., 1941).
- , *El Sahara español anteislámico* (Madrid: Comisaría General del Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1944).
- Ministerio de Educación y Enseñanza – República Árabe Saharaui Democrática, *Lectura 3er Curso* (RASD, no date).
- , *Lectura 5º* (RASD, no date).
- , *Lectura 4º* (RASD, no date).
- , *Lectura 6º* (RASD, no date).
- Molina Campuzano, Miguel, *Contribución al estudio del censo de población del Sahara Español* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1954).
- Morales Agacino, Eugenio, *Mamíferos colectados por la expedición de L. Lozano en el Sahara* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Española de Historia Natural, 1934).
- , *Mamíferos colectados por la expedición L. Lozano en el Sáhara Español* (Madrid: Real Sociedad Española de Historia Natural, 1934).
- , *Grabados e Inscripciones Rupestres de la Alta Saguia El Hamra, en el Sahara español* (1944).
- , *Algunos datos sobre ciertos mamíferos del Sahara occidental* (Madrid: n.p., 1945).
- , *Algunos datos sobre ortopteroides del Sahara occidental* (Madrid: Instituto Español de Entomología, 1945).
- Morillas, Javier, *Sahara Occidental. Desarrollo y Subdesarrollo* (Madrid: Prensa y Ediciones Iberoamericanas, 1988).
- Mulero Clemente, Manuel, *Los Territorios Españoles del Sahara y sus Grupos Nómadas* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: El Siglo, 1945).

- Mundy, Jacob, 'Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 11, 3 (2006).
- Munilla Gómez, Eduardo, *Estudio General del Sahara* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos, 1974).
- Nogué, Joan and José Luis Villanova (eds), *España en Marruecos (1912–1956). Discursos Geográficos e Intervención Territorial* (Lleida: Milenio, 1999).
- , 'Spanish colonialism in Morocco and the Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid, 1876–1956', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28, 1 (2002).
- Norval, Aletta, 'Social ambiguity and the crisis of Apartheid', in Ernesto Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994).
- Noyes, John K., 'Nomadic fantasies: producing landscapes of mobility in German Southwest Africa', *Ecumene*, 7, 1 (2000).
- Oro, Antonio del, *Algo sobre el Hassanía o dialecto árabe que se habla en el Sahara Atlántico* (Tánger: F. Erola, 1940).
- Padraz Marcos, Azucena, *Quimeras de Africa. La Sociedad Española de Africanistas y Colonistas. El Colonialismo Español de Finales del Siglo XIX* (Madrid: Polifemo, 2000).
- Pazzanita, Anthony G., *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006).
- Pennell, Richard, *A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921–1926* (Wisbech: MENA Studies Press, 1986).
- , *La Guerra del Rif. Abdelkrim el Jattabi y su Esyado Rifeño* (Melilla: La Biblioteca de Melilla, 2001).
- Pérez Galdos, Benito, *Episodios Nacionales. Aita Tettauen* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1976).
- Pérez García, Guadalupe, 'La Colonia Penitenciaria de Villa Cisneros. Deportaciones y Fugas Durante la II República', *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 7 (2002).
- Perregaux, Christine, *Gulili. Mujeres del Desierto Saharaui* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 1993).

- Ramiro de la Mata, Javier, *Origen y Dinámica del Colonialismo Español en Marruecos* (Ceuta: Archivo Central, 2001).
- Ramos, Demetrio and Emilio de Diego, *Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas en la Perspectiva del 98* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1997).
- Ramos Charco-Villaseñor, Aniceto, *Del Sahara español: Río de Oro* (Toledo: Asociación de Huérfanos de Infantería, 1935).
- Río Joan, Francisco del, *África Occidental Española (Sahara y Guinea)* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Revista Técnica de Infantería y Caballería & Ministerio de Estado-Sección Colonial, 1915).
- Robles Muñoz, Cristóbal, *Paz en Santo Domingo (1854–1865). El fracaso de su anexión a España* (Madrid: CSIC, 1987).
- Rodríguez Esteban, José Antonio, *Geografía y Colonialismo: La Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid (1876–1936)* (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1996).
- , ‘Las Sociedades geográficas y el proceso colonial’, in A. Díez Torres (ed.), *Ciencia y memoria de África, Actas de las III Jornadas de “Expediciones científicas y africanismo español. 1898–1998* (Madrid: Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, 2002).
- , ‘La Era de las Sociedades Geográficas’, *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica Española*, 20 (2005).
- , ‘La Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid’, *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica Española*, 20 (2005).
- Rubió i Tuduri, Marjà, *El Sahara para la paz* (Barcelona: Barna, 1959).
- Ruiz Miguel, Carlos, ‘Nacionalidad, igualdad y descolonización’, *Revista Española de Derecho Constitucional*, 56 (1999).
- , ‘Nacionalidad española de ciudadanos saharauis: Secuela de una descolonización frustrada (y frustrante)’, *Revista General de Derecho*, 663 (1999).
- , ‘El largo camino jurídico y político hacia el Plan Baker II. ¿Estación de término?’, *Anuario Mexicano de Derecho Internacional*, 5 (2005).
- , ‘¿Qué proceso de paz para el Sáhara Occidental?’, *Revista Internacional de Estudios del Sáhara Occidental/International Journal of Western Sahara Studies*, 1 (2008).

- Sáez Martín, Bernardo, *La Primera Expedición Paletnológica al Sahara español* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1944).
- San Martín, Pablo, *La Nación (im)posible. Reflexiones sobre la ideología nacionalista asturiana* (Oviedo: Ediciones Trabe, 2006).
- and Ben Bollig, *Treinta y Uno/Thirty One. A Bilingual Anthology of Saharawi Resistance Poetry in Spanish* (London: Ediciones Sombrerete and Sandblast, 2007).
- and Joanna Allan, ‘The largest prison in the world: landmines, walls, UXOs and the UN’s role in the Western Sahara’, *Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos*, Colaboraciones 1641 (2007).
- Sánchez, José Guillermo R., *El Sahara Occidental* (Madrid: Hernando, 1932).
- Santamaría, Ramiro, *Ifni-Sáhara. La Guerra Ignorada* (Madrid: Dyrsa, 1984).
- Sanz Echeverría, Josefa, *Notas sobre ofolitos de peces procedentes de las costas del Sahara: primera parte* (Madrid: C. Bermejo Imprenta, 1943).
- Saunders, J. J., ‘Review work(s): Ibn Khaldun’s *Philosophy of History*, by Mushin Mahdi’, *History and Theory*, 5, 3 (1966).
- Secretaría General del Gobierno General de la Provincia del Sahara, *Provincia de Sahara: censo de población, año 1967* (El Aaiún: Editorial Gráficas Sahariana, 1967).
- Sen, Amartya, ‘Drought and Famine in the Sahel’, in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- Shelley, Toby, *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa’s Last Colony?* (London: Zed Books, 2004).
- Stavrakakis, Yannis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- Tabernero Chaconbo, Hermenegildo, *Legislación de A.O.E.: Recopilación legislativa por orden cronológico de Africa Occidental española (Territorios de Ifni y Sahara)* (Madrid: Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias, 1947).
- Terry, Fiona, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002).

- Varela Ortega, José, 'Del desastre y sus consecuencias', in José Varela Ortega (ed.), *Imágenes y Ensayos del 98* (Valencia: Fundación Cañada Blanch, 1998).
- Vidal Guardiola, Lorenzo M., *Ifni. La Prensa y la Guerra que Nunca Exixrió. 1957–1958* (Madrid: Almena, 2006).
- Villalobos, Federico, *El Sueño Colonial. Las Guerras de España en Marruecos* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2004).
- Villar, Francisco, *El Proceso de Autodeterminación del Sahara* (Valencia: Fernando Torres, 1982).
- White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- , *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).
- , *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).
- Yanguas Miravete, José, *Antecedentes históricos, organización político-administrativa y legislación de las provincias de Ifni y Sahara* (Sidi Ifni: Imprenta Editorial Ifneña, 1960).
- Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
- , 'Beyond discourse analysis', in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).