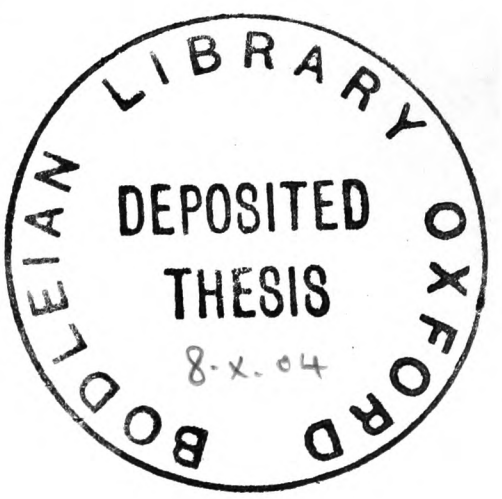
Singing like Wood-birds:
Refugee Camps and Exile in the Construction of the Saharawi Nation

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Development Studies

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Trinity Term 2003 [ie 2004]

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has taken several years to be completed and a number of journeys across Europe and West Africa. During the different stages of this study, help and support have come from a large number of people and in many different forms, and these few lines can certainly not express my gratitude and debt to all of them. While it would be impossible to name and thank all of them here, this study would not have been possible without their direct or indirect help.

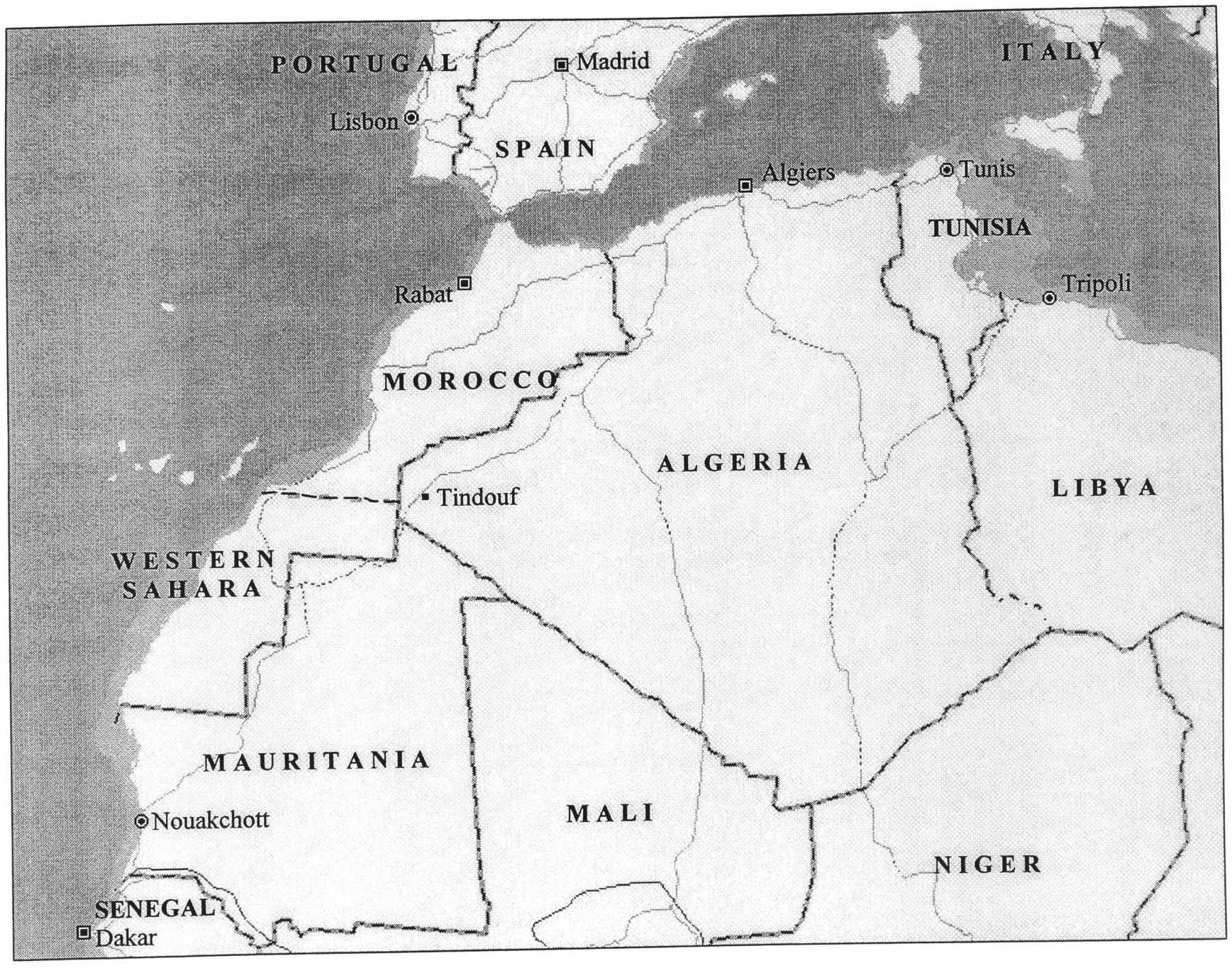
I would like to thank, in particular, Elio and Giulia Cozza, my parents. They have believed in my research and have constantly supported it more than what I could have asked. I also feel a profound debt to Dawn Chatty and David Turton, who have taught me with their suggestions and corrections, as much as with their example, their patience and devotion to their work.

My deep gratitude also goes to all those people in Nouadhibou and in the Saharawi refugee camps who have welcomed me in their homes and in their lives. For various reasons, their names do not appear in this thesis. Nevertheless, their words and actions, their encouragement and criticism have been essential to the development of this study.

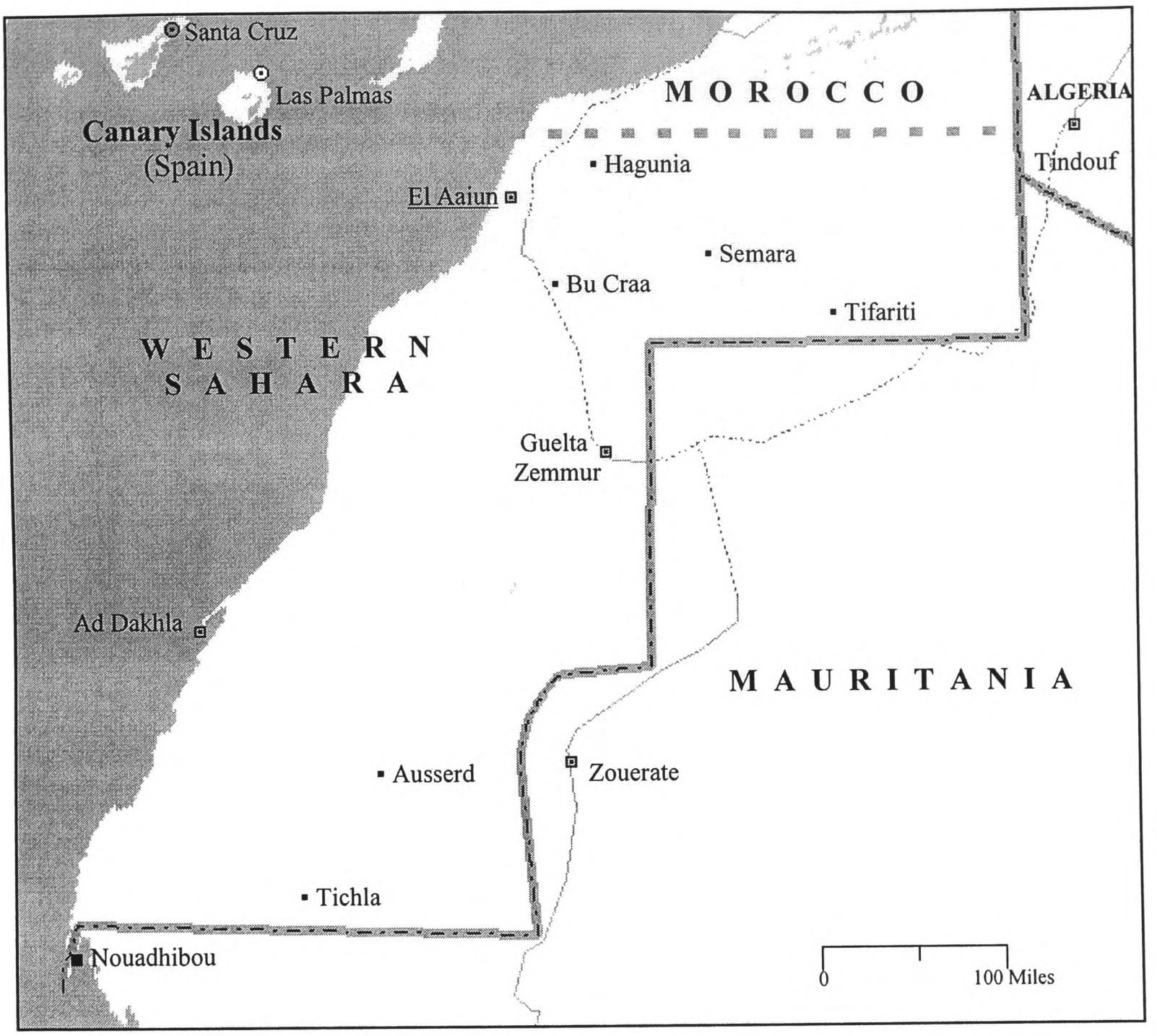
I would like to thank Pat Turton, Sean Loughna and Randa Farah for their encouragement and support, their helpful suggestions and critical insights. Also, I am grateful to Anne Deighton and to Gina Crivello, Rosemary Fennell and the staff of the Refugee Studies Centre and of Queen Elizabeth House (University of Oxford). Last but not least, I would like to thank Hikaru Izumiya, Rosa de la Puente, Andrew Mugadu, Leticia Delgado Godoy, Denis Minayev and Gerineldo Márquez. Without their company, sense of humour, support and understanding there would be a lot missing in my life.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUCOCO	European Co-ordination Conference for Help to the Saharawi People
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAR	Forces Armées Royales (Morocco)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ILO	International Labour Organization
MINURSO	United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OAU	Organization for African Unity
Polisario (Front)	Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro)
PUNS	Partido de la Union Nacional Saharaui (Saharawi National Union Party)
SADR	Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic
SNIM	Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (Mauritania)
SPLA	Saharawi People's Liberation Army
UMA	Union du Maghreb Arabe (Arab Maghreb Union)
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNTAG	United Nations Transition Assistance Group



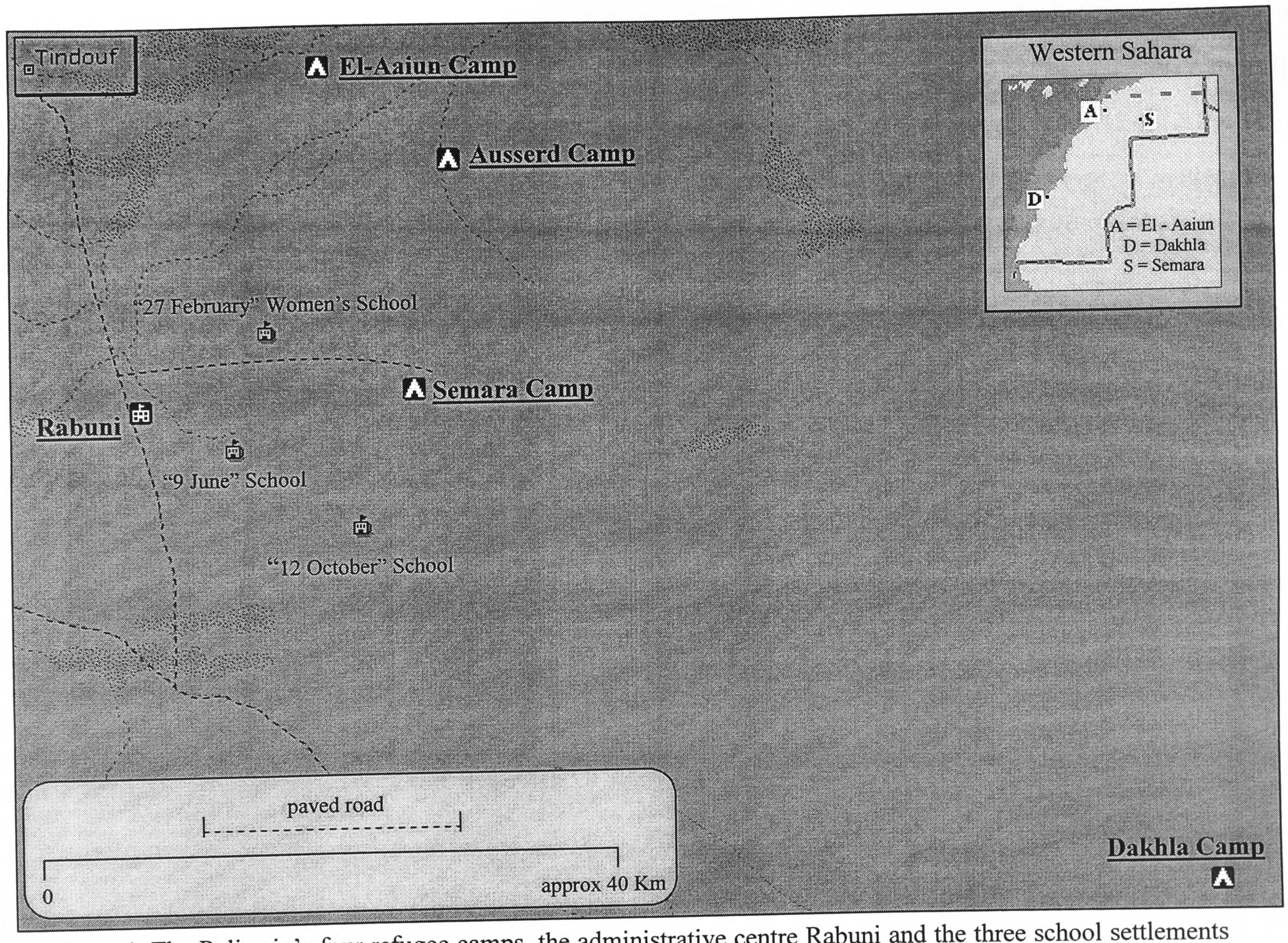
Map 1. North-western Africa and southern Europe.



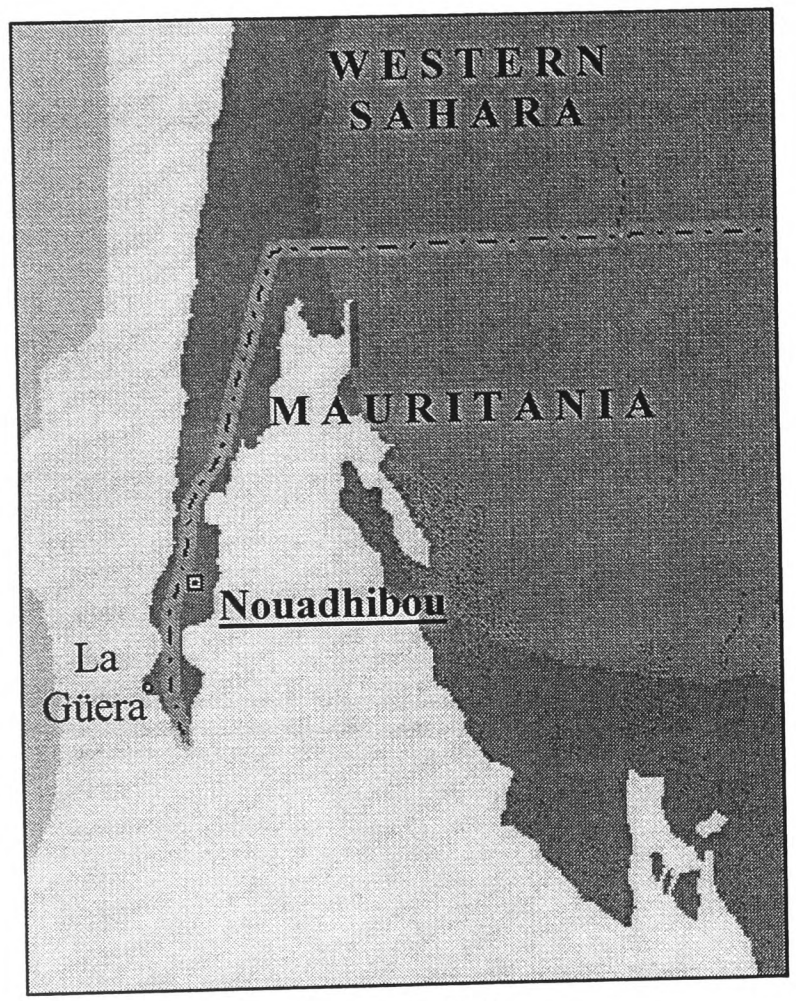
Map 2. Western Sahara



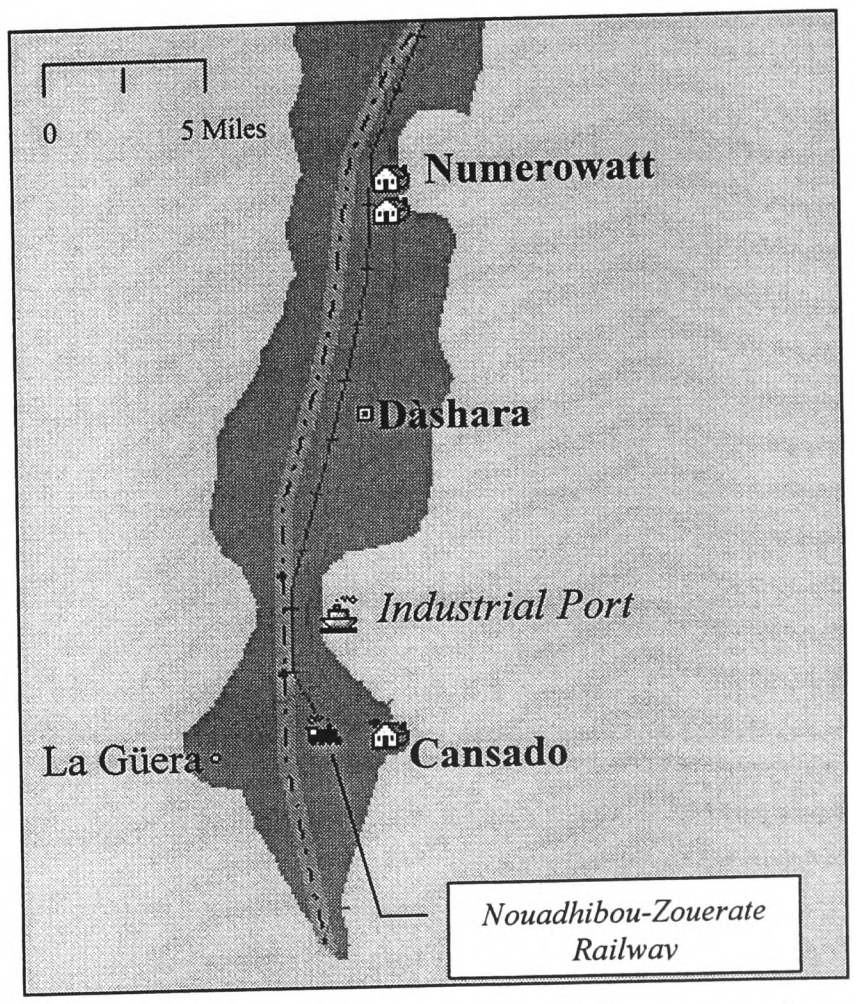
Map 3. Mauritania



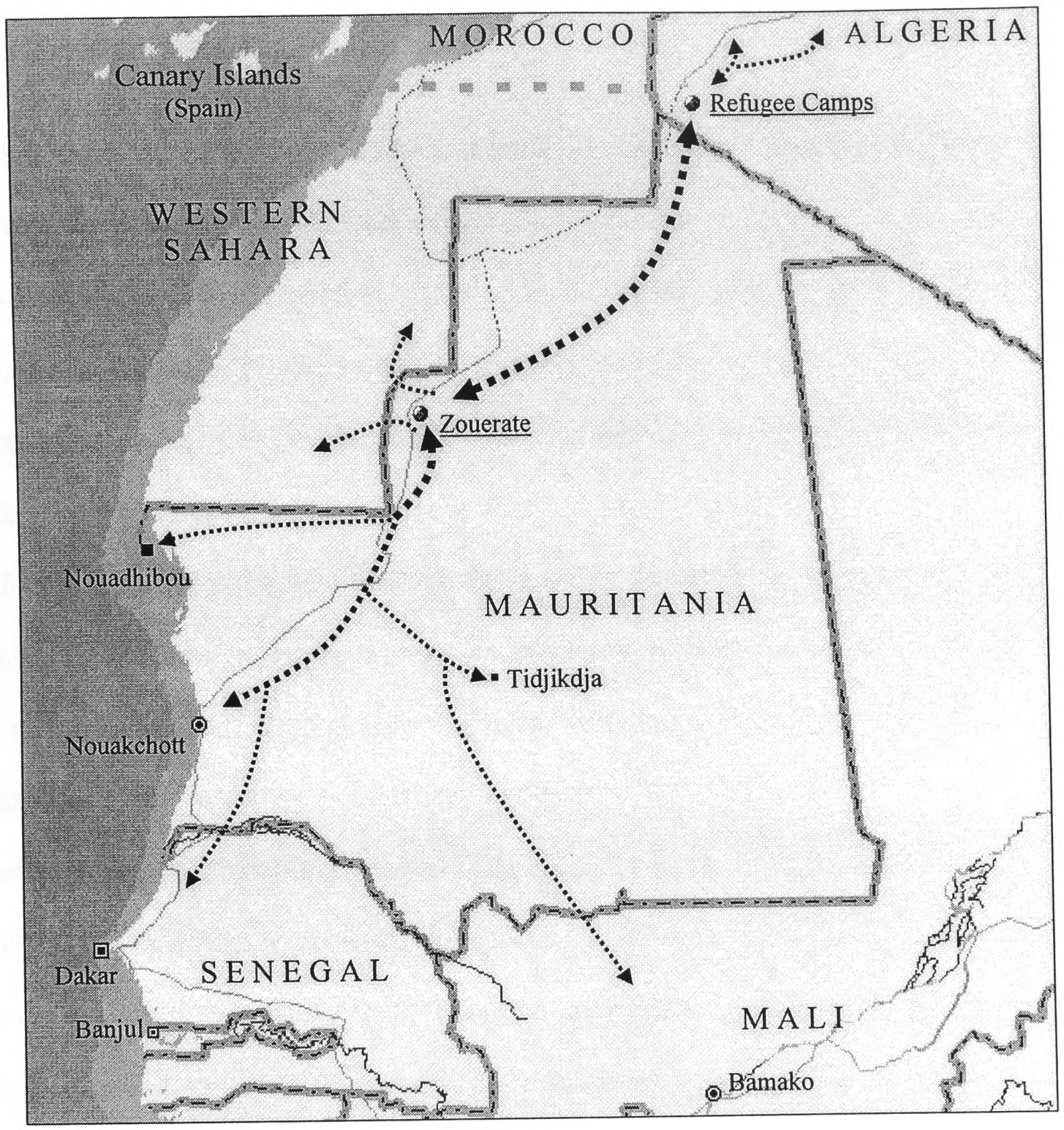
Map 4. The Polisario's four refugee camps, the administrative centre Rabuni and the three school settlements in south-western Algeria. (Note the "mirror image" effect between the area of the camps and Western Sahara)



Map 5. Nouadhibou.



Map 6. Nouadhibou (three main quarters).



Map 7. Main commercial flows of *el comercio*.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On the twentieth of May 2003 nearly four hundred people from several countries of Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, gathered in the barren Algerian desert, in an area which is unnamed in conventional maps of north-western Africa. Mostly members of parliament, diplomats, representatives of non-governmental organisations and journalists, they joined the celebrations for the thirtieth anniversary of the Polisario Front, the political and military organisation that has led the struggle of the Saharawi people for an independent state in Western Sahara. For the occasion, a large parade of soldiers, tanks and missiles of the Polisario's army was held in the proximity of the refugee camp of Ausserd.[1] This is one of the four settlements under the control of the Polisario where Saharawi refugees have been living since late 1975, when Moroccan and Mauritanian troops began their occupation of the Spanish colony of Western Sahara.

After thirty years from its foundation, nowadays the Polisario Front presides over a full-grown state (the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, SADR) which has been officially recognised by more than seventy countries across the globe. The citizenship of the SADR has been constituted by Saharawi refugees, while the territorial jurisdiction of this state has coincided with the area surrounding the Saharawi refugee camps: a small portion of the western Algerian desert which the government of Algiers has temporary ceded to the Polisario Front.

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[1] Cf. Sahara Press Service, press release of 20 May 2003, available at http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-30an.html. See also http://www.arso.org

The development of the Polisario's state in the Algerian desert has been coupled with the emergence and consolidation of the Saharawi nation as a community of refugees struggling to achieve the independence of their "fatherland", Western Sahara, whose greater part has remained under Moroccan control since 1975. Nowadays the Saharawi nation is widely regarded as a long-standing and successful reality. In particular, the literature on this nation has consistently praised it as a united and committed community of refugees which has achieved outstanding results. These have included exemplary social and organisational accomplishments in the Saharawi refugee settlements and, apparently, the overcoming of past tribal divisions and antagonisms among the camp population (Harrell-Bond 1981, Firebrace 1987, Cistero and Freixes 1987, Perregaux 1990, Hodges 1991, Sayeh 1998, Ministry of Information of the SADR 1999).

This thesis examines some major political, social and economic changes that have taken place among Saharawi refugees, and evaluates the role of these changes in the development of the Saharawi nation and of refugees' tribal ties. Until a few decades ago the people now called "Saharawi" were nomadic pastoralists of the Sahel, the Atlantic side of the Sahara. Like the majority of the population of this corner of Africa, they moved with their herds in the vast western expanses of the Great Desert. Their social organisation was based on tribes (or, more accurately, on a segmentary lineage system: real and fictive blood relations determined one's tribal ascription and influenced inter-tribal relationships). At present, though, pastoral activities employ only a small minority. The greater part of the "Saharawi" population is now settled outside the frontiers of Western Sahara, especially in the refugee camps of the Polisario and, to a smaller extent, in northern Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and Spain. Over the years, a Saharawi national identity has emerged, fostered by the Polisario Front and its struggle for an independent Western Sahara. A central objective of this research is to understand the development of

the Polisario's state in the Saharawi refugee camps and, in particular, how this development has affected the social construction and relevance of "the Saharawi nation" and of tribal ties among the refugee population.

Being one of the most protracted "refugee crises" of contemporary history, the case of the Saharawi refugees has drawn the attention of numerous commentators and analysts. But while a large literature is now available on the ongoing dispute between the Moroccan Kingdom and the Polisario's state over the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, there are still remarkably few in-depth studies of Saharawi nationalism.[2] From these, Saharawi nationalism emerges as the result of Spanish colonial policies before the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and, above all, as the consequence of the refugees' endeavour to organise themselves in the camps of the Polisario and to fight against their communal enemy, the Kingdom of Morocco. These studies are in line with a largely prevailing view, according to which the Saharawi nation is now a homogeneous and united community of camp refugees, and one which has successfully freed itself from its tribal heritage –as if tribes were a burden of the past.

In significant contrast to such an established portrayal, this thesis will show that tribal ascription now bears great social relevance among Saharawi refugees and that tribes have been made to play a central political, social and economic role in the management of local support for the Polisario's state and for its national programme. The interrelated centrality of "nation" and "tribes" among Saharawi refugees has been a complex phenomenon, affected by several events and processes. While these will be examined in detail in the following chapters, here it is important to stress the role played by international humanitarian assistance and by the refugees' confinement in the

[2] A particularly interesting analysis is provided by the doctoral research of Barona Castañeda (1998), which focuses exclusively on the period between 1958 and 1976. Other important contributions to the study of Saharawi nationalism can be found in Harrell-Bond (1981b), Hodges (1983 and 1991), Hacene-Djaballah (1985) and Pazzanita and Hodges (1994). These studies will be considered in more detail in the following chapters.

Algerian camps. In the next two sections I present some introductory reflections on these two important factors of social change among Saharawi refugees. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the research methods I adopted, and with an outline of the following chapters.

'Humanitarian emergencies': the merging of global influences and local processes

The end of the Cold War was initially accompanied by widespread optimism: in the eyes of many, humankind appeared about to enter a new era of international peace and stability. Unfortunately, these hopes were soon shattered. The years that have elapsed since the end of the Cold War have witnessed the continuation of several of the armed conflicts previously regarded as "proxy wars" of the super powers, while an unexpectedly large number of new wars and forced migrations have dotted the international scene.

In this context, a significant change in development discourse and policy has taken place. In particular, so-called "complex humanitarian emergencies" have been turned into a major concern for numerous international actors devoted to the cause of development, from United Nations agencies to governmental and non-governmental organisations. Mostly portrayed as forms of social breakdown and regression, or failures of development, "humanitarian emergencies" have been increasingly targeted by these actors under agendas which have prioritised the need of fostering and managing local social change.[3]

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[3] I use the phrase "(complex) humanitarian emergencies/crises" with reference to man-made disasters: situations characterised by high, if varying, degrees of political, social, economic and physical violence which are predominantly represented as grave deviations from agreed international standards of democracy

This considerable shift of focus and resources from development programmes to humanitarian assistance has been coupled with an unprecedented increase in the literature on man-made disasters. Numerous staff of international organisations, journalists and scholars –as well as the media and the publics of rich capitalist countries– have become increasingly concerned about the human consequences of civil wars, forced migrations and famines. Generally labelled as "emergencies", these complex socio-political processes have often been portrayed as requiring one common treatment above all others: the urgent and generous provision of international humanitarian assistance and, increasingly, of humanitarian intervention.[4]

Of course, some different approaches have also emerged, these typically denouncing the teleological and evolutionist assumptions behind dominating development and humanitarian discourses. In particular, a body of literature has been established in which the present regime of humanitarian intervention (with its forms of "true" knowledge and its sizeable resources) has been represented as a crucial aspect of a powerful system of global governance: one which has readily upheld, and struggled to implement, dominant liberal frameworks of social, political and economic organisation in contexts labelled as "dangerously deviant" and "under crisis" (Harrell-Bond 1986, Sachs 1992, Harriss 1995, Malkki 1995b, De Waal 1997, Duffield 2001).[5]

Drawing on this body of literature, and using the material collected during my fieldwork among Saharawi in north-western Africa, I shall argue that international humanitarian and political assistance to the Polisario's refugees has critically contributed to shaping local social, political and economic geographies both directly, by fostering and legitimising certain forms of state and social organisation, and indirectly, by being

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and of dignifying human life. Civil wars, forced migrations of large groups and widespread failures of accessing food have been frequent instances of such "humanitarian emergencies".

[4] On this topic, see Allen (1996 and 1997) and Keen (1996 and 1997).

[5] For similar arguments concerning development discourse and practice, see Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (1995).

incorporated into individual and group strategies. In particular, international humanitarian assistance to the Saharawi refugees will emerge as a critical factor in the development of the Polisario's state, of its policies and claims, and as a central element shaping the Polisario's management of both external and internal support for its national programme. Dominating forms of knowledge and legitimate agency, coupled with the mobilisation of large amounts of humanitarian resources, have empowered certain local actors and processes. They have colonised, transformed and extended certain networks, certain local nodes of authority and power, while contributing to marginalising and de-legitimising others.[6] The Saharawi "humanitarian crisis" and the development of the SADR –the Polisario's state– well illustrate the deep social changes that can derive from the interaction between international interests, concerns and resources on the one hand, and local innovative strategies on the other: a clear case of "the blending of the global in the local" (Jackson and Penrose 1993, 12).

As Mark Duffield has recently highlighted, there are still relatively few studies of the role played by international humanitarian assistance in providing resources and legitimacy to rebel movements, and to the state-like structures that such movements may set up. More of these studies are needed to understand better how, particularly during "humanitarian crises", legitimacy and support for externally-sponsored institutional reforms are locally constructed and managed, and how local claims and strategies (at both collective and individual level) are transformed through the interaction between international actors, state elites and local populations (Duffield 2001, 140).

In the case of the Polisario Front and the Saharawi refugees, the existing literature has paid remarkably little attention to these aspects, thus leaving important questions pending. In particular, little attention has been given to how the leadership of the

[6] Cf. Gordon (1980) and Malkki (1995).

Polisario has attracted and administered international assistance and expectations, and how humanitarian resources have been used locally in order to manage both external and internal support for the Polisario's state and for its national claims.[7] The analysis of inter-state relations and international law –which has dominated the literature on the Moroccan-Polisario dispute– has not taken these aspects into adequate account. Such a focus, in fact, has largely overlooked the more local level where emerging political elites have been negotiating popular support, and where the implementation of externally-sponsored institutional and social changes has been interwoven with new opportunities, tensions and innovative developments.

With a view to overcoming some of the limitations found in the literature on Saharawi refugees, my research focuses particularly on the close interaction between international assistance, the agency of the Polisario leadership and local social change. As will be argued, the dynamic of this interaction, mediated by the socio-political geography of the Polisario refugee camps, has lain at the heart of the construction and development of Saharawi national and tribal identities.

Saharawi refugees, Polisario camps and social change

In conformity with the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, and with its Protocol of 1967, I use the phrase "Saharawi refugees" to indicate people who are outside the national borders of Western Sahara (the country to which they claim a unique and legitimate attachment) and who are unwilling or unable to return to it for the well-founded fear of being persecuted by the Moroccan state, the political and military

[7] See Hacene-Djaballah (1985), but also the significant insights of Thomas and Wilson (1996) on Saharawi refugees' dependency/self-sufficiency.

organisation which has controlled most of the territory of Western Sahara since the late 1975. It is important to stress that such a definition can only constitute a first approximation to an understanding of who "the Saharawi refugees" are. As will be discussed at some length in the following chapters, there is an ongoing, unsettled international dispute over who can legitimately claim to be a Saharawi, while at a more local level "Saharawi-ness" is far from being a clear-cut, unambiguous category.

In line with this working definition, the largest concentration of Saharawi refugees (currently 170,000 people) has been living in four refugee camps located between twenty and a hundred miles to the south of Tindouf town, in south-western Algeria.[8] The relationship between these settlements and the Saharawi refugees has been a deep and complex one. As will be argued, the present existence of Saharawi refugees and of a Saharawi nation-state in exile, and the social relevance of these refugees' national and tribal ties, have been inextricably bound up with the foundation and development of the camps controlled and run by the Polisario Front.

For one thing, these refugee settlements have played a crucial strategic role in the conflict between the armed forces of the Kingdom of Morocco, the *Forces Armées Royales* (FAR), and the military arm of the Polisario, the Saharawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Moroccan forces have always refrained from attacking the Saharawi camps in Algeria, fearing the reaction of the larger and better equipped army of their neighbour. In this context the refugee camps have provided the SPLA with safe rear bases, in addition to growing numbers of new recruits and other vital resources (Hodges 1983, Hacene-Djaballah 1985).

No less important, the humanitarian settlements have fostered and made possible the prolonged concentration of a large and traditionally nomadic population into stable

[8] See maps 1 and 4.

encampments. Having lost most of their livestock before and during the flight to the refugee camps, and having enjoyed only limited contacts with the sparse, non-camp population of the region for years, it is clear that the inhabitants of the Polisario's settlements have gradually become a distinctive community of people sharing the same environmental and social conditions, the same humanitarian resources and, more generally, some characteristic ways of living.

The following chapters will examine these processes in more detail, but it should be underlined from the outset that the development of the camp population into a *national* community has long been a paramount objective of the leadership of the Polisario (Benani 1979, Hacene-Djaballah 1985, Briones *et al.* 1997). Pursuing this goal, and because of the control that the Front has maintained over the refugee settlements and their resources, these camps have been turned into the breeding-ground of Saharawi nationalism. There are several indications of this process, but perhaps the most evident is the fact that the camps have become, in effect, the Saharawi state-in exile. These refugee settlements have been turned into a detailed miniature of a future, independent Saharawi state of Western Sahara, with "the same" regions and towns as in the fatherland, and with all the usual institutions of a modern state, such as a presidency, a government, ministries, magistrates' courts, a national parliament and an army. Nowadays the camps are the Saharawi Republic of Western Sahara in exile, and the refugees are its citizens. As will be shown, this symbiotic development of the refugee camps and of the state has provided the Polisario with some crucial advantages, including control over a protractedly enclosed population, access to sizable humanitarian resources and enhanced international visibility.

The development of the Saharawi refugee camps into national settlements and, more generally, their centrality in the national struggle of the Polisario Front, may not come as

a surprise. In effect, the literature on "complex emergencies" has provided several examples of the use of humanitarian assistance by political elites in their pursuit of individual and collective goals.[9] For instance, refugees from Rwanda (particularly those who, fleeing from the genocide of 1994, settled in the large camps around Goma, in eastern Zaire, near the Rwandan border) became *de facto* hostages of political and military groups which had been among the main perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. For these so-called *génocidaires* the Goma camps became a safe shelter from which they could easily cross the border and stage armed attacks against the new government of Rwanda (Prunier 1995, Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda 1996). Due to the short-sightedness (when it was not connivance) of other African and western leaders, and of various relief organisations, the *génocidaires* managed to maintain thorough and prolonged control over the camps and the humanitarian resources intended for the refugees. It has been reported that:

> "Relief workers were in no position to confront them [the camp elites]. Tents at Goma were grouped by *secteur*, *commune*, *sous-préfecture* and *prefecture*, in a mirror image of the administrative organization of the country the refugees had just left. The presence of the former leaders of Rwanda amounted to a government in exile" (UNHCR 2000, 247).

Needless to say, there are many substantial differences between the Saharawi living in the Algerian camps and the Rwandan refugees escaping from the genocide of 1994. Nevertheless, the example of the Goma camps illustrates a tendency which several other cases confirm: namely, that refugee settlements are structures prone to become key

[9] The armed conflict in Biafra is a case in point. In the late 1960s, the Biafran authorities skilfully managed to attract sizeable amounts of international humanitarian supplies, and to use a large part of these to purchase weapons and provide other assets to the pro-Biafra armed forces, eventually prolonging the Nigerian civil war and dramatically increasing its death-toll (Allen 1997). Other remarkable examples of strategic abuses of large amounts of humanitarian supplies by political elites have come, for instance, from the analysis of Sudan in the second half of the 1980s (Keen 1994 and 1998), from the study of the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85 (Duffield 1994, de Waal 1997), from the analysis of the relationship between Khmer Rouge forces and Cambodian refugees in Thai camps in the late 1970s and 1980s (Reynell 1989) and from Angola (African Rights 1994), Somalia (de Waal 1994) and Mozambique (UNHCR 2000).

factors in the pursuit of individual and collective objectives of political and military elites (Harrell-Bond 1994, Black 1998), particularly when these elites pursue their goals through the mobilisation of the camp populations along national or ethnic lines (Reynell 1989, Long 1993, Malkki 1995 and 1995b).

The following chapters will examine how, and to what extent, the Saharawi refugee camps have provided military, political and economic advantages to the leaders of the Polisario in their pursuit of national (and personal) objectives. But if these advantages emerge as critical factors in the construction and development of the Saharawi nation, on the other hand some innovative social, political and economic developments among the camp population have proved no less important. My investigation into the different strategies adopted by Saharawi refugees in order to face changing socio-political conditions and to take advantage of new opportunities, will show that these developments have also played a paramount role in shaping the local relevance and meanings of "nation" and "tribes".

In other words, the Polisario's effective control over the refugee settlements, over their population and their humanitarian resources (coupled with the Front's necessity to manage both international and local support) has deeply affected the socio-political objectives and strategies of this nationalist organisation, and has strongly conditioned its achievements. But while these processes have had a considerable effect on the refugees' understandings of "nation" and "tribes" and on the social relevance of these categories of ascriptions, a non-secondary role has been played by the Saharawi refugees themselves. Both the agency of the Polisario Front and the social responses of the refugee population have shaped the Saharawi nation and the Saharawi tribes through complex processes of collective negotiation, social revenge and economic utility: processes which constitute important objects of analysis in the following chapters.

Methodological considerations

This study reflects interests and concerns which are common to various social disciplines. Its main focus –namely processes through which national and tribal (or ethnic) identities have been constructed, challenged or apparently "resurrected"– has been the object of numerous contributions from historians, political scientists and social geographers, let alone sociologists and anthropologists.[10] Building on such a varied academic production, this research exhibits a multi-disciplinary character. While it primarily draws upon insights, methods and analyses which are part of the heritage of cultural anthropology and, to a lesser extent, of political economy, this study also benefits from the contribution of other academic disciplines such as history, international relations, social geography, political science and sociology.

Apart from the disciplinary divide, the bulk of the literature I have reviewed could be separated into three interrelated areas. One is directly concerned with Western Sahara, from its pre-colonial past to the ongoing dispute between the Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco. A second area deals with complex humanitarian emergencies: it includes, in particular, analyses of armed conflicts, forced migrations and communities of refugees. A third body of literature which I have surveyed in some detail focuses on nationalism and ethnicity: forms of group identities which have acquired growing importance in the context of modernity and globalisation-localisation processes. Contributions from these three connected areas provide important points of reference and stimuli to discussion in the course of the following chapters.

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[10] Please note that I will use the term "tribe" much more often than its synonym "ethnic group". I am aware that nowadays "tribe" is not a popular term among many scholars. It has often been stressed that "tribe" is imbued with unjustified but well-established negative connotations and pre-modern characterisations, and so the modern phrase "ethnic group" is usually preferred (cf. Christie 1998). But this said, Saharawi refugees themselves translate their *kabila* as "tribu" when they speak in Spanish or French, and they attach to it certain historical and family connotations (explored in the following chapters) that, in my eyes, the modern (and, arguably, more neutral) phrase "ethnic group" is less able to convey, at least in this context.

Besides the reviewed literature, an essential aspect of this study has been a prolonged period of fieldwork among Saharawi refugees in Mauritania. At an early stage of my research (between March and April 1999) I spent twelve days in the refugee settlements of the Polisario Front in south-western Algeria. On that occasion I visited the four camps and was able to interview briefly the President of the SADR (who is also Secretary-General of the Polisario), three ministers and a few refugees whom the Front had selected for me. No less important, during this short stay, I obtained permission for extensive fieldwork in the camps: Bachir Mustapha Sayed, then Minister of Interior, authorised it for the year 2000. Nevertheless, this permission was later withdrawn when, in November 1999, Bachir Sayed left his ministerial office. Due to the reluctance of the Polisario authorities to grant me a second permission, I took the decision to carry out my fieldwork in the Mauritanian city of Nouadhibou, whose population has included the largest concentration of Saharawi refugees outside the Polisario camps. I lived in Nouadhibou for ten months between January and December 2000.[11]

The methodology used during my fieldwork in Mauritania was borrowed from cultural and social anthropology. Known as participant observation, this research method entails observing people in the contexts and situations of their daily life, living with them for a protracted period of time and participating in a number of routine activities. It is a method which offers several important advantages to the researcher. In particular, it allows one to develop some familiarity with the social settings and processes one is investigating, to gather first-hand data and to achieve a deeper understanding of certain local realities, of their complexity and of the range of meanings and feelings with which they are locally imbued.[12]

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[11] To the best of my knowledge, so far the Polisario has never given permission for extensive fieldwork of more than a few weeks to any individual scholar.

[12] On participant observation, see, for instance, Nachimias (1992) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).

Of course, like all methods of social research, participant observation cannot claim absolute objectivity and impartiality. There is nothing "neutral" about observing and participating. To some extent, the presence of the researcher inevitably modifies the social environment that he or she is investigating. On the same lines, the first-hand data that are gathered can be affected by several factors often beyond the researcher's control: from his or her gender, age, place of origin, knowledge, preconceptions, expectations and interests, to the personal agendas of local informants. Furthermore, the researcher tends to generalise certain information and analyses obtained through participant observation and questioning: a process which, once again, is affected by the researcher's biases and is susceptible to error.[13]

Participant observation is nevertheless a long-standing and firmly established method of social research.[14] It has proved an unlimited source of first-hand information and of precious insights and analyses. A key strength of this method has lain in the personal relationship of trust that usually develops between the researcher and certain "locals". Establishing trust and building confidence tend to require prolonged residence in "the field", but this process allows the researcher to gain remarkable insights into numerous aspects of individual and social life which are not usually accessible to outsiders.[15] Also, and importantly, this relationship of trust often leads the researcher to question many of his (or her) assumptions and preconceptions. As Gupta and Ferguson have underlined, participant observation can "serve as an extraordinarily useful corrective to the

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[13] Cf. Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Ahmed and Shore (1995, especially chapter 2 by Grimshaw and Hart, according to whom : "Ethnographic truth is always partial. It combines the poetics and politics which are intrinsic to all human endeavours. The ethnographer is a social agent with an imagination, and this should be explicitly recognised", p. 54).

[14] Between 1914 and 1920, during his research in Melanesia, Bronislaw Malinowski was among the first scholars who adopted this method.

[15] As Robert Chambers put it, "Village residence may mean risks of overgeneralising from the particular village. But the depth and richness of insight often more than compensate for that by penetrating personal, historical, economic, social and political relationships and trends." (Chambers 1983, 59). Nowadays, this comment can be extended to cases in which participant observation assumes forms which are significantly different from the more classical one of "village residence". Cf. Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Olwig and Hastrup (1997) and Moore (1999).

Eurocentrism and positivism that so often has afflicted the social sciences" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 36).

In the course of the following chapters there will be several occasions to comment on certain weaknesses and strengths of my fieldwork, and on other relevant aspects of it (such as the physical and social settings in which it took place, key informants, the range of social interactions I was involved in and the languages I used). So leaving these methodological reflections aside for the moment, here I would like to consider other important facets of my fieldwork, beginning with the collection of narratives, interviews and other dialogues.

Verbal interactions

By the end of my residence in Nouadhibou I had gathered a sizeable body of notes on conversations and numerous transcripts of interviews. Questioning and interviewing took many different forms, depending on the people who were present during the exchanges, and on the place and time when these occurred. Also, both the contents and the forms of these interactions changed substantially as the months of my fieldwork passed by. Initially I gathered information and observations on a rather heterogeneous variety of topics (from the town layout to local species of fish and industrial activities) mostly through casual conversations and informal interviews. These exchanges occurred in settings as diverse as markets, shops, small factories, eating places and private houses, and could usually involve up to five people of different background, age and gender. These conversations provided me with a range (often unsolicited) of contributions which

helped me to become more familiar with the social environment and increasingly aware of certain issues that I would later investigate in more detail.

While casual conversations and informal interviews remained frequent throughout my fieldwork, they gradually gave way to more focused group discussions and semi-structured interviews. After a few months in Nouadhibou, with the help of some key Saharawi informants, I began to organise small meetings of between three and five adult Saharawi refugees who shared certain interests and experiences. During these focus group discussions –which typically took place at my home or in somebody else's house– I collected information and observations on topics such as individuals' networks of relationships, daily life in Nouadhibou and in the Polisario refugee settlements, perceived differences between these two locations in terms of health and educational services, diets, socio-economic opportunities and, at a later stage, inter- and intra-tribal relationships. I found these conversations particularly useful for investigating both broader issues and more specific topics in some detail, and for comparing and checking information. Furthermore, these exchanges helped me meet new and valuable informants, whom I later interviewed in more depth.

It was mainly during the second half of my fieldwork that I carried out individual interviews with adult Saharawi refugees of different ages and gender: people whom, more often than not, I had come to know before they agreed to be interviewed. These exchanges usually took place in private houses and were often attended by one or more other people. The person I interviewed –especially when it was a woman– often asked for, or arranged, the presence of one or more relatives or friends during the exchange. At times I felt that this presence was imposed on the interviewee and strongly affected his or her answers, but on the whole it seemed more normal and socially acceptable to talk in front of two or three people. On other occasions, though, the interviewee made it clear

that nobody else should be present during the exchange, which then usually acquired a more confidential character.

Concerning confidential material, it is important to underline that in some of the following analyses I use information which is regarded as particularly sensitive among Saharawi refugees.[16] My access to this information should be understood in the context of the relationship of trust and familiarity developed between a few informants and me during my residence in Nouadhibou. I discussed with them (as I generally did with all the people I interviewed) whether I could use this information in my research. They gave me their informed consent on condition that I guaranteed their anonymity.

I have resorted to various expedients in order to respect the privacy of all my informants and not to impair their security. In particular, throughout this study I use pseudonyms when referring to people I met in Mauritania or in the Polisario refugee camps. On the same lines, informants' physical traits may be modified in the text when it is deemed appropriate. Nevertheless, in some cases anonymity might not be a sufficient guarantee. The Polisario Front and Morocco have a wide network of informants on the territory and instances of "disappearance", "punishment" and torture against Saharawi are not infrequent. In this context, there is some relevant information which I have decided not to use in this thesis.

During individual interviews I usually did not have prepared questions but a check-list of topics I wanted to investigate in more detail, such as family networks, experiences of forced migrations, patterns of movement, economic activities, hopes and expectations. No less important, it was through analogous formal interviews that I collected several histories and life histories (about twenty-five in total) of adult and young adult Saharawi refugees, both men and women. When I was given permission, I tape-recorded the whole

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[16] "The 88" (Chapter five) and "*el comercio*" (Chapter six) are the main cases in point.

interview or part of it (I was frequently asked not to record certain sentences). Soon after, I translated it into English, often with the help of a key informant who had been present at the interview. When I could not use the tape-recorder, I was normally allowed to take notes. In effect, during pre-arranged interviews, tape recording and note-taking generally were not a problem. But when the exchange was a more casual and informal one, often I could not write more than a few brief sentences. Later in the day, I used these as memory prompts that I expanded into more detailed notes.

Throughout my fieldwork I did not focus on a particular category of Saharawi refugees of a certain age, gender, provenance, tribe or status. Rather, I emphasised "listening to all comers" and gathering information on a wide range of different experiences and points of view. In the end, I spent relatively more time with young Saharawi men, but numerous people of other age and gender groups proved no less valuable informants, and I usually spent time with some of them on a daily basis. Last but not least, I had interesting and useful conversations and interviews with non-Saharawi people, including African and European long-term residents in Nouadhibou and staff of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

This wide range of informants and interviewees makes it necessary to stress certain limits I have imposed on my research. I have focused on collective processes which have shaped the social relevance and understandings of nation and tribes among Saharawi refugees: processes which have largely passed unnoticed in the literature. Pursuing this research objective, there have been several important and interesting dimensions of refugees' social and private lives which I could not investigate, or could explore only marginally. Intra- and inter-household relations, the social construction of children's sexuality, gender relations and homosexuality –to name only a few– are important and

challenging aspects of the social environment which would certainly reward dedicated investigation. I am convinced that specific research on these and other aspects could yield valuable insights also into the social construction of nation and tribe as local categories of ascription. Nevertheless, due to obvious limitations of time and resources, these aspects could only be given limited attention, if any, in this research.

Trust, tribes and bias: assessing interviewees' information

Before examining the relationship between "the field" as circumscribed geographical location and the trans-local nature of the social processes studied, I would like to comment on some important methodological aspects concerning the information and observations which, during my fieldwork, I gathered through interviews and participant observation. In particular, it is important to stress that the sensitive nature of part of the information that I collected (especially as regards "the events of the 88" and "*el comercio*" examined in chapter five and six) demanded the development of a relationship of trust and confidence with local informants. Building trust through long-term relationships proved a challenging and time-consuming endeavour, but also a particularly rewarding one. This approach, in fact, played an essential role in allowing me to access important information which has been carefully hidden from outsiders and, significantly, has been largely missing in the literature on Sahrawi refugees.

While access to important and sensitive information has been a crucial strength of the approach adopted, building trust through long-term relationships has proved to have a number of limitations which need to be taken into consideration when assessing the reliability of the information collected. In particular, during my fieldwork I could

develop a close relationship with only a limited number of Sahrawi refugees: eventually, my main informants in Nouadhibou were three young men, one young woman, two adult men and two adult women. The inevitably small number of these key informants has implied that I could not rely on a wide range of sources with reference to important and sensitive aspects of my research. In this context, the advantages stemming from building trust and long-term relationships with a few Sahrawi refugees had to be assessed against the limited sources I could count on in order to access sensitive information.

Besides the relatively small number of key informants, an additional limitation of the methodological approach chosen has stemmed from the difficulty of developing close relationships with members of different (and sometimes rival) tribes. The large majority of the Sahrawi refugees who live in Nouadhibou are members of the Ould Dlim tribe, while the second largest group is constituted of members of the Reguibat tribe. During the first months of my fieldwork I spent most of my time among Ould Dlim: at that moment I did not know the relevance of tribal ascription among Sahrawi refugees. Only at a later stage in my research I realized that, given the enduring antagonism between the Reguibat and the Ould Dlim tribes, my close relationship with some Ould Dlim hampered my rapport with members of the Reguibat (known as "Reguibi" people). Despite my efforts, in the end there were no Reguibi among my key informants: six were members of the Ould Dlim tribe, one was from the Skarna tribe and one was a member of the Techna. Set in this context, it can be assumed that, to some extent, the information I collected during my fieldwork may be biased against the Reguibat tribe and then against the leadership of the Polisario Front. As will be shown, in fact, this leadership has mostly been constituted of members of the Reguibat which, as mentioned, is a major rival tribe of the Ould Dlim and then of the majority of my key informants.

Conscious of the anti-Reguibat and anti-Polisario bias of some of my Ould Dlim sources, whenever possible I tried to discuss key sensitive events with members of other tribes. Although during my stay in Nouadhibou I could interview relatively few people from the Reguibat tribe, I had a number of relevant and useful conversations with members of the Reguibat and of other non-Ould Dlim tribes after my fieldwork, when I went back to Europe and, later, when I visited the Sahrawi refugee camps in early 2004. These exchanges confirmed the existence of a wide consensus among Sahrawi refugees on the nature and relevance of a number of highly sensitive historical developments related to "the 88" and "*el comercio*". Nevertheless, these conversations also revealed that members of the Reguibat tribe tend to provide alternative explanations of "the events of the 88" when compared with non-Reguibi. In particular, during informal conversations with several camp refugees from the Reguibat tribe, these stressed that "the 88" took place in the context of bitter fighting between the Polisario and the Moroccan Kingdom: in fact, armed clashes continued until the end of the 1980s. They strongly emphasised that the vast majority of the members of the Reguibat tribe were shocked and bewildered by "the events of the 88" and were certainly nor responsible for what happened. Instead, the "paranoid degeneration" of a few "war-strained" leaders (who, incidentally, happened to be Reguibi) was presented as the root-cause of "the 88" and of what they called "the return of the tribes among refugees".[17]

Without doubt, further research is required to better understand how members of different Sahrawi tribes may have dissimilar understandings of controversial developments (notably "the 88" and "*el comercio*") which are commonly related to the Reguibi leadership of the Polisario Front. Still, given the sensitivity of these topics, and considering the refugees' strong reluctance to talk with outsiders about virtually all

[17] The relevance of these alternative explanations will be clearer in the light of the analyses developed in chapter five and six.

aspects of present tribal relations, building trust and long-term relationships with Sahrawi refugees is likely to remain a necessary, if not fully satisfactory, approach for most outsiders interested in accessing this kind of information.

Fieldwork and trans-local processes

A final, but important methodological issue I would like to consider is related to the concept of "field". As mentioned, apart from a short stay in the Polisario camps my fieldwork took place in Nouadhibou: this is the location where I collected my first-hand data. However, my analyses, and the conclusions which I shall draw, are not strictly circumscribed to the Saharawi population of this Mauritanian town. Rather, they tend to embrace most Saharawi refugees in the region.

One key reason for adopting this degree of generalisation stems from the object of my research: social, political and economic processes of a collective (and trans-local) character. These processes appear to have concerned (and connected) a few hundred thousand individuals scattered over a vast area and who have all shared the condition of calling themselves, and being called by others, "Saharawi refugees". Beyond all doubt, among these people there were important differences related to gender, age, wealth, education, social status, individual capacities, experiences and geographical location. Nevertheless, it also appears that Saharawi refugees have all been affected –if in different ways and to varying degrees– by certain collective processes which, more than others, have shaped the relevance and meanings of Saharawi tribes and nation. These processes have had a clear trans-local character: as I shall argue, they have stemmed from the interaction between non-Saharawi and Saharawi, and from the inter-play between

refugees living in different locations, from the Polisario camps in Algeria to the Mauritanian urban centres of Nouadhibou and Zouerate.

This said, a certain tension remains between the analysis of trans-local processes of identity construction and the choice of Nouadhibou, a circumscribed location, as "field" for such an analysis. This tension reflects a wider, ongoing debate about the epistemological implications of "field" and anthropological fieldwork as a basis of scientific knowledge in contexts increasingly affected by trans-local processes and connections (cf. Olwig and Hastrup 1997, Gupta and Ferguson 1997). When compared with previous periods, the last decade and a half has witnessed a growing number of scholars paying attention to trans-local processes. In particular, distance and the movement of people, goods and ideas have been increasingly seen to play a key role in local social change under conditions of modernity (Harvey 1989, Giddens 1990, Cohen 1997, Van Hear 1998, Fuglerud 1999). This increased attention to trans-locality has proved a challenging endeavour for the social sciences, especially for those which, like anthropology and social geography, have traditionally focused on territorially circumscribed communities. Appadurai clearly made this point a few years ago with reference to processes of identity construction.

> "The landscape of group identities –the ethnoscapes– around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or cultural homogeneous" (Appadurai 1991, 191).

Facing this challenge, an interesting and rewarding way to investigate trans-local processes has passed through a redefinition of the characteristics and borders of the "field". In particular, mirroring the dynamics of the new social landscapes, field-work has been made explicitly to incorporate trans-locality: ceasing to coincide with one

community in one geographical site, the field itself has been turned into a de-localised or multi-localised setting. Along these lines, the fieldworker may choose, for instance, to follow the movements of certain peoples and goods across long distances, or to reside in one or more circumscribed areas where relevant actors usually converge. In any case, it will be the known or supposed characteristics of the trans-local processes being considered which guide the choice of an appropriate "field": *a priori* there is no reason to prefer a multi-sited fieldwork to residence in a more circumscribed geographical area.

Set in this wider debate, I believe that the adequateness of Nouadhibou as research field for processes of identity formation among Saharawi refugees stems, above all, from three characteristics of the Saharawi population living in this Mauritanian town. First, the Saharawi settled in Nouadhibou constitute the largest refugee population living outside the camps of the Polisario Front. Consisting of a wide range of individuals, belonging to different gender, age, wealth and tribal groups, this population may be regarded as a sufficiently representative sample of the whole Saharawi refugee population.

Second, the vast majority of Saharawi refugees lived in the camps of the Polisario until a few years ago. The first significant outflow from the camps took place in the late 1980s. This was followed by a much larger group in the aftermath of the ceasefire that the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front signed in 1991.[18] Among those Saharawi camp refugees who headed for Mauritania, the majority went to Nouadhibou. Many chose this town because they had close relatives already living there, while others were attracted mostly by employment opportunities and by the chance of finding a passage on a fishing boat to the Canary Islands. In any case, Saharawi refugees in Nouadhibou (just like those living in any other non-camp location) have constituted a relatively recent population. During my fieldwork I met only a few refugees who had

[18] No official data are available concerning these outflows of camp refugees from the Polisario settlements. As will be shown (see chapter five), officially they never took place.

been living in Nouadhibou for more than ten years, while the large majority had spent between five and seven years there.

A third feature of the Saharawi population in Nouadhibou –and a particularly relevant one– concerns its relationships with other Saharawi. Since the early 1990s there has been a constant and sizable flow of Saharawi refugees between Nouadhibou, the Polisario camps and a few other locations, such as Zouerate and Nouakchott in Mauritania, and Algiers and Oran in Algeria. A large part of this flow has been constituted by Saharawi traders, who –as I shall argue– have been playing a crucial role in connecting refugees settled in different locations and in shaping the present relevance of Saharawi tribes. But in addition to traders, many adult Saharawi inhabitants of Nouadhibou –most likely the majority of them– still have close relatives living in the Polisario camps and in other locations of the region: relatives with whom they keep in contact, and to whom they usually pay (or from whom they receive) a visit at least once a year. Due to this sizeable and constant movement of people, I could often spend time with refugees living in the Polisario camps who were visiting their relatives in Nouadhibou, and with other Saharawi who had just come back from a visit to close relatives settled in the camps or in other locations.[19]

In this dynamic context, an essential part of Saharawi refugees' lives in Nouadhibou appeared to gravitate around concerns, events and processes which were not centred in Nouadhibou. Rather, these would be better represented as belonging to a sphere which has included Saharawi living in Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, Spain and, most of all, refugees settled in the Algerian camps of the Polisario Front. In other words, the Saharawi refugees I met appeared to be engaged in a major, continuous effort to

[19] The continuous exchange of visits and the movement of people and goods should not be regarded as an unusual state of affairs due to the condition of being refugees. Rather, migrations, mobility and trans-locality have been essential aspects of social life in this corner of the Sahara for generations (cf. Hernandez Moreno 1988).

recompose a large part of the events of their lives into shared, collective processes embracing all Saharawi refugees, regardless of their geographical location. Saharawi in Nouadhibou may have been relatively "far" from certain other refugees, but this has not prevented them from being "present" in (and part of) a transcending whole.

Of course, this is not to say that refugees settled in distinct geographical locations have not developed some peculiar social characteristics that would deserve focused attention: in reality, they have done so. Nevertheless, it appears that these differences have not yet weakened (in fact, they may have strengthened) the relevance of those wider processes of identity formation which constitute the main object of my research.

Outline of the following chapters

After a survey of the ethnographic literature on the tribes of Western Sahara, the next chapter provides an analysis of the period of Spanish colonisation of the territory. As has often been the case, in Western Sahara ethnographic knowledge and colonial rule have been interwoven in a number of ways. In particular, the prevailing anthropological model of Saharawi society deeply influenced the administrative system that the Spanish authorities imposed on their "Saharan citizens". Having investigated the development of this system of indirect rule in some detail, I examine the main internal and international tensions which, in late 1975, led to the military occupation of Western Sahara by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops and, soon after, to the end of Spanish colonisation in the region. Finally, the last section looks at the period between 1975 and 1991: the years of armed conflict between the Polisario Front on the one hand, and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on the other.

International efforts to bring the dispute over Western Sahara to a close constitute the main theme of chapter three. The signing of a ceasefire between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan Kingdom in 1991 was achieved on the basis of a peace-plan of the United Nations (UN) whose focal point was the holding of a referendum on self-determination. The intention of the plan was to allow Saharawi people to choose between independence and integration into Morocco. More than a decade since it was originally scheduled, the referendum has not yet been held and negotiations are still taking place between the Polisario, Morocco and the United Nations.

Although the prolonged involvement of the international community has not led to a settlement of the dispute, international diplomatic efforts have nevertheless played an important role in shaping the terms of the contention for Western Sahara. In particular, the UN peace-plan has made a top priority of the thorny issue of identifying an electorate for the referendum (i.e. defining who is and who is not a "true Saharawi" and who, therefore, can legitimately vote). After considering the predicament of the identification of voters, the chapter ends by examining the main regional and international dimensions of the Moroccan-Polisario conflict. Apart from the unanimous international support for the UN-led peace-process, it will be shown that important regional and international actors have *de facto* taken sides in the dispute as a means to safeguard and expand their economic and political interests in the region.

The fourth chapter focuses on the refugee camps of the Polisario Front in south-western Algeria. A first analysis of the layout and internal organisation of these settlements reveals a high degree of homogeneity and uniformity. More generally, it appears that a considerable effort has been made to turn the area of Algerian desert under the control of the Polisario into a model-in exile of the Saharawi nation-state. The camps have been organised as a mirror image of Western Sahara, while the Polisario's state has

provided its refugee-citizens with all the most necessary goods and services. No less important, livestock has been removed from the human settlements and all references to refugees' tribes have been formally banned. In effect the Polisario has long maintained an official representation of tribes as a danger to its programme of national unity and undivided commitment.

Set in this context, it will be argued that the organisation of the camp space and of the inmates' lives has played an important role in shaping Saharawi refugees' representations of nation and their understandings of the degree of innovation and unity that "being a nation" requires. But a closer look at the social geography of the Saharawi refugee camps discloses a more complex picture. The apparent national homogeneity and uniformity of the refugee settlements have hidden social differences of importance to the Saharawi refugees: differences which have mostly boiled down to tribes. By examining this "tribal geography" of the Polisario camps in some detail, the chapter introduces what will be a central theme of the following analysis: namely the complex interdependence between Saharawi tribes and nation.

Pursuing this topic further, chapter five focuses on a critical period in the history of the Polisario Front, and one which has largely passed unnoticed in the present literature. In particular, this chapter looks at certain events of the late 1980s which Saharawi refugees now widely regard as the origin of the present social, political and economic relevance of their tribes. Following an account of these events, it is argued that the leadership of the Polisario Front actively promoted "the return of the Saharawi tribes" as a means of overcoming strong internal opposition to its rule. Unprecedented clashes between camp inmates and the authorities of the Polisario's state were managed mostly through a "tribalisation" of the internal politics of the SADR, a process which has gradually affected also other important spheres of social life. It is important to underline

that "the return of the tribes" has been regarded as confidential knowledge: something which has concerned Saharawi refugees alone. The last part of the chapter examines this confidentiality, arguing that it needs to be considered in relation to local representations of nation and to refugees' understandings of international expectations about the Polisario's state and the camp community.

"The return of the tribes" in the internal politics of the SADR has been coupled with other significant changes including, notably, the development by Saharawi refugees of an extra-legal, trans-border trade in humanitarian resources. The sixth chapter provides an analysis of this commerce and of its main economic, social and political implications. In particular, it argues that the flow of commodities from and to the camps has developed mostly along tribal networks, and that the expansion of this trade has played a crucial role in forging the present socio-economic relevance of tribes among Saharawi refugees living in the camps and beyond.

The political consequences of the development of this commerce in humanitarian supplies should not be underestimated. On the one hand, the new socio-economic relevance of the refugees' tribal networks has contributed to legitimising and sustaining the Polisario's state and its "tribalised" internal politics. No less important, the refugees' trade has given a new centrality to the camps of the Front in the aftermath of the 1991 ceasefire: the humanitarian settlements have become, in effect, an important source of commodities and a centre of commercial activities. Only recently this economic centrality of the camps has shown some signs of decline due, paradoxically, to the considerable success of the refugees' trade. This commerce, in fact, has contributed to reintegrating the Saharawi refugees into the regional and international economy. In this context, refugee-traders have seen the development of new opportunities for trade,

investment, employment and profit far from the camps, in several urban centres of Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Spain.

Drawing some conclusions from the previous analyses, the last chapter underlines the different strategies and developments through which the leadership of the Polisario Front has managed external and internal support and legitimacy. The image of a committed, united and non-tribalist national community of refugees has been presented to the "outside" with considerable success. Internally, since the late 1980s the Polisario's administration of popular support and legitimacy has relied, above all, on a new social, political and economic relevance of tribal networks, achieved also through the development of a sizable trans-border trade in humanitarian resources.

The analysis of these processes reveals the critical role that international humanitarian assistance has directly and indirectly played in conditioning the objectives and achievements of the Polisario Front and in shaping local social change. Coupled with the agency of local political elites, external assistance has provided resources and models of equal distributions which have critically affected local representations of "proper" nation and of international expectations. No less important, access to humanitarian supplies has sustained the efforts of the leadership of the Polisario to manage internal discontent and opposition through a "re-tribalisation" of political and social life among its Saharawi refugees.

CHAPTER TWO

The genesis of Western Sahara and of its post-colonial conflict.

An historical analysis

With the object of providing a background for the following analysis, in this chapter I review some aspects of the history of Western Sahara. In particular, I focus on three main themes: the ethnographic model of local tribes and inter-tribal hierarchies; the period of Spanish colonisation of the territory; and the emergence of the post-colonial, ongoing dispute over Western Sahara between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front.

Developed mostly between 1890 and 1960, the body of ethnographic knowledge on the tribes of Western Sahara provides an interesting introduction to the complexity of Moorish society, and to the colonial period. This knowledge has affected the relationship between Spanish colonial authorities and local populations in various forms. In particular, the colonial establishment has used ethnographic analysis as a means of governance: a tool that has shaped the organisation and administration of the colony.

The historical review of the colonial period will underline the efforts of the Spanish authorities to incorporate local tribes into the colonial administration. Furthermore, this review will show Spain's developmental efforts and its plans to create a post-colonial state in Western Sahara: a state that would formally be independent while maintaining strong ties with its colonial motherland. These plans eventually failed under the pressure of Moroccan irredentism and of Spain's delicate transition to democracy after Franco's death in November 1975. Since then, the conflict over Western Sahara between Morocco

and the Polisario Front has been shaping the social and political geography of the region.

Western Sahara: a geographical overview

Often portrayed as "one of the most inhospitable places on Earth", the territory known as Western Sahara comprises 97,344 square miles (252,120 square kilometres –a figure that has led many to compare it with the slightly smaller United Kingdom). Located in north-western Africa, Western Sahara is bounded by Morocco to the north, Algeria to the northeast and Mauritania to the east and south (see map 1). The western border of the territory is drawn by the Atlantic coastline, which is characterised by rugged cliffs. The rocky coast is backed by a wide alluvial plain, which only in the south is covered by great sand dunes that extend inland over 155 miles. Virtually all the territory appears as a vast flat surface, with occasional sandstone ridges that break the plateau and, at times, reach 600 feet in height. Apart from these, there are only a few isolated mountain ranges, which rise above 1,700 feet only in the case of the Zemmour massif (2,700 feet), in the centre-east of the country. It is from the Zemmour massif that the only important river (the Saguia el-Hamra) flows, crossing the northernmost part of the territory. In Western Sahara there are no permanent streams, and also the Saguia el-Hamra flows only seasonally, generally after autumn rains.

In spite of the Atlantic winds, mean annual rainfall generally ranges only between 50 mm and 100 mm and –as Mercer put it– "If rain is a curse by its absence, the wind is a plague all too present" (1976, 36). In this environment, vegetation is limited to the white-spine acacia, and to "a smattering of shrubs, thickets and small bushes" (Hodges 1983, x). The whole region experiences a desert climate, with inland temperatures reaching 135

°F in the middle of the day in summer, and freezing point on winter nights.[1]

Concerning the population of Western Sahara, the most recent census was carried out by the Moroccan government in 1994 and gave a figure of 252,146 people (The Middle East and North Africa, 2000). This number may give an idea of the population living in the area of Western Sahara which is currently controlled by the Moroccan government (i.e. the westernmost two thirds of the whole territory). Nevertheless, a large fraction of those who claim a special attachment to Western Sahara (as first approximation here called "Saharawi") have not been included in this census since they live outside the area controlled by Morocco: mostly in the easternmost third under the control of the Polisario Front and in Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Europe (especially Spain). Official figures are available only for the refugee population in Algeria: 165,900 people from Western Sahara were said to be living in Algerian refugee camps in 1999 (UNHCR 2000). According to unofficial sources, up to 25,000 Saharawi may at present be living in Mauritania, mostly in the northern towns of Nouadhibou and Zouerate.[2]

The largest concentrations of settled population in Western Sahara are in the urban centres of El-Aaiun, Dakhla and Semara (see map 2). Since the early 1960s El-Aaiun – the capital town– has grown constantly, both in number of inhabitants and infrastructures. One important reason for this development has been the exploitation of the phosphate mines of Bu-Craa, located about eighty miles southeast of El-Aaiun. With its over 1.7 billion tons of ore, Bu-Craa is one of the largest known deposits of phosphate in the world. Its exploitation is made particularly profitable by the very high grade quality of the ore and by its location: only a few meters below the surface (Morillas 1988, 251-268).

Apart from the phosphate ore, the territory of Western Sahara is also endowed with

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[1] See Mercer (1976, 31-48) for a study of climate, vegetation and fauna in Western Sahara.
[2] This figure was provided to me by the Polisario representative in London and his colligue in Mauritania,

significant deposits of iron, vanadium and other minerals. In addition, the existence of relatively large deposits of petroleum has recently been confirmed, engendering much speculation about the geopolitical relevance of the territory. This said, at present none of these resources is commercially exploited (Mercer 1976, 184-195; Hodges 1983, 122-134; Damis 1983, 4).[3]

As far as non-mineral assets are concerned, the Atlantic waters off the coast of Western Sahara have long fuelled the interest of some European and African governments: these waters are amongst the richest fishing grounds in the world. Till present, they have been object of lengthy negotiations on fishing rights between the Kingdom of Morocco and the European Community (Thompson and Adloff 1980, European Commission/Eurostat 2001).

The birth of the Moors

Western Sahara has not always been a corner of the Great Desert. Geologists now agree that the gradual process of desertification of the savannah that once covered the whole region began about three thousand years ago, at a time when Negroid populations were the only permanent inhabitants of the territory. Berber nomads arrived in the region much later, during the first millennium B.C. Their iron technology and their use of horses allowed them to spread quickly and thrive through most of North Africa. Later –towards the first century B.C.– it was the introduction of the camel in the region that gave them a new, extraordinary means of adapting to, and taking advantage of, the Great Desert. Under these circumstances, the Sanhaja (who became camel-herding nomads in the

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and was confirmed as the generally accepted figure by MINURSO personnel in Nouadhibou.

[3] Concerning the deposits of petroleum in Western Sahara, see United Nations Security Council

southern regions of the Sahara) and the Zenata (who lived further north) became the dominant Berber groups in north-west Africa (Mercer 1976,49-68; Hodges 1983, 3-4).

The first gradual arrival of Arab populations in the north-west of the continent took place towards the end of the VII century, and led to the partial assimilation of Islam by local Berbers. Islamic religion at times became an important mobilizing and uniting force in the history of the region. In the XI century, for instance, a preacher named Abdallah Ibn Yacin "gradually succeeded in recruiting a loyal band of [Sanhaja] followers, who came to be known as *al-murabitun*, the 'Almoravids'" (Hodges 1983, 6). Fuelled by religious zeal, this coalition of Sanhaja tribes conquered large areas, from Ghana to Muslim Spain and western Algeria, before intertribal conflicts and divisions –and the emergence of a new coalition of Berber people, the Almohades– put an end to their domination, in mid-XII century. A few decades later, at the beginning of the XIII century, divisions among the Sanhaja tribes were still felt when new, more intense migrations of Arab people spread through the whole north of Africa, and could not be controlled or stopped by any of the Berber groups in the region (Diego Aguirre 1994,101-103).

Among other Arab nomads, the Maquil –of presumed Yemeni origin– reached the northern Atlantic coast by the beginning of the XIII century. It was a branch of the Maquil, a group of tribes collectively known as Beni Hassan, that began to move southwards into the territory that now would include Western Sahara and beyond. Their migration began in the late XIV century and continued until the end of the XV (Norris 1962). It was particularly during this period of time that the so-called "Arabisation" of most of the Berber populations of the region is said to have taken place. As Harrell-Bond put it, this could be regarded as an "assimilation of 'Arab blood and culture'" (1981, 3). Berber genealogies were slowly modified to introduce elements of "Arab blood". The

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S/2002/161, 12 February 2002.

Berber language gradually disappeared in most areas, being substituted by Arabic, the language of the Koran, which was not to be translated (Diego Aguirre 1994, 104-107). About these processes, most scholars now agree with Hodges that:

> "Gradually, groups of Beni Hassan defeated or allied with, submerged or vassalized, or fused and intermarried with the Sanhaja, to give rise to a new Arabic-speaking people, known to us today as the "Moors", a people of mixed ethnic origins —Arab, Berber and, due to miscegenation with slaves and their descendants, black African too— who lived as pastoral nomads over a vast swath of the Sahara, from the Draa River in the north to the banks of the Senegal and the bend of the Niger, and from the Atlantic seaboard to a series of almost impenetrable dune zones, the Erg Iguidi, the Erg Chech and the Majabat al-Kubra, in what is now eastern Mauritania" (Hodges 1983, 8-9).

The long and complex interaction between the Beni Hassan and the Berbers living in the area now known as Western Sahara, Mauritania, southern Algeria and western Mali led to the emergence of *el-beidàn* –the Moors– as a distinctive social grouping that has included a large and varying number of tribes. The origins of this group of tribes, and their relative social status within *el-beidan*, have attracted much speculation among Western and African historians. Nevertheless, these have widely agreed to use the term "Moors" to designate a group of people that they have been able to identify as existing since the end of the XVII century: Hassaniya speakers, who have also shared a number of other important socio-economic traits (such as certain social traditions and patterns of movements).[4]

[4] Concerning Hassaniya –the language of the Moors– this derived its name from the Beni Hassan, and some modern linguistic studies have reached the conclusion that it shares a 72% of its core with the main forms of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb: a percentage that is usually more than enough to make it a distinctive language (Diego Aguirre 1994). See also Direccion de Promocion del Sahara e Instituto de Estudios Africanos (1975, 24-25).

Traditional tribal hierarchies

A number of monographs have been dedicated to the description of traditional social order and hierarchies among Moorish tribes, particularly since European soldiers and explorers began to roam the whole region in the XIX century.[5] Several ethnographers and scholars have suggested that a turning point in the construction of past and, to some extent, present tribal hierarchies within *el-beidàn* was the signing of the agreement of Tin Yefdad in 1674. This put an end to the war known as Shar Boubah between Arab and Berber tribes. Following this agreement, some tribes of Sanhaja Berber origins were forced to abandon all armed struggles and the use of weapons, and to dedicate themselves to the study and teaching of the Koran. For this reason, it is believed that the important difference between warrior and non-warrior tribes within *el-beidàn* emerged mostly from the agreement of Tin Yefdad (see Hodges 1983; Diego Aguirre 1994, 105; Direccion General de Promocion del Sahara e Instituto de Estudios Africanos 1975, 12).

Inter-tribal hierarchies

There has been an ample consensus among scholars on the status that Moors have attributed to their different tribes during the past four centuries. From an axiomatic point of view, the traditional social structure of inter-tribal relationships within *el-beidàn* has been represented as moulded on four levels. At the very top of the social pyramid there would be three groups of tribes: the *chorfa* (singular *sherif*), the *ahel mdafa* and the *zwaya*. Tributary tribes would occupy a lower level, followed by *iggauen* and *malemin*

[5] See, for instance, Flores Morales (1946), Molina Campuzano (1954), Caro Baroja (1953 and 1990), Munilla Gomez (1974), and Hernandez Moreno (1988).

(blacksmiths and singers) on a third level, and by slaves at the lowest level (see adjoined chart).

The term *chorfa* has been used to designate tribes regarded as stemming from a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed. This allegation has had a double character: claiming to be descended from the Prophet has clearly involved the valued claim to Arab origins. The tribes that have been regarded as *chorfa* are the Ulad Bu Sbaa, the Filala, the Toubalt and the Ahel Ma El Ainin (Molina Campuzano 1954, 37-50). Also two more tribes, the Reguibat and the Arosien, have often been included in this group.[6]

Ahel mdafa ("people of the gun") is the phrase used to indicate the warrior tribes. Also called *Arab*, these tribes have been regarded as direct descendents of the Maquil – the group of Arab tribes that migrated into the region from the XIII century (Caro Baroja 1990; Norris 1962; Hodges 1983).

The most numerous *Arab* tribe has been the Ould Dlim. Other *Arab* tribes – numerically much inferior– have been the Chenagla and the Scarna (see Molina Campuzano 1954, 25-27).[7] The warrior and religious tribes have borne the highest status and consideration in the social order of *el-beidàn*, a position that has been further strengthened by their claims to Arab origins.

Almost on the same level with *chorfa* and *arab*, there are the *zwaya* tribes, also known as *ahel ktub*. These tribes have commonly been regarded as having Sanhaja Berber origins. While said to enjoy a certain social respect and consideration from other tribes, some of these *zwaya* ended up requiring the skills of militarily stronger tribes in

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[6] The fact of recognising a real or imaginary common ancestor as founder of a tribe has been common practice within *el-beidan*. Also, it is very often the case that the name of the tribe derives from the name of its founder. So, for instance, the Reguibat, which is generally regarded as the most numerous tribe among Saharawi, is said to stem from Sid Ahmed Reguibi, a holy man that appears to have arrived in what is now known as Western Sahara in 1503. See Lopez Bargados (1992), and Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 254-257).

[7] Some other tribes have claimed to be *arab*, such as the Reguibat and the Izarguien. The fact that scholars do not share these claims appear to stem more from the influence of those who first wrote about it, than from any available evidence on the actual degree of intermarriage and mixing between Arab people,

order to protect themselves from the attacks of others. When this happened, they had to pay a tribute, the *horma*, to the tribe that would defend them. This would generally lead

"Traditional Inter-tribal Hierarchies" among *El-beidàn*

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Arab or Ahel mdafa
("people of the gun",
warrior tribes)</td><td>Chorfa
(descendants of the
Prophet)</td><td>Zwaya or Ahel ktub
("people of the Book")</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Znaga
(tributary tribes)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Iggauen
(singers)</td><td colspan="2">Malemin
(blacksmiths)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Haratin
(former slaves)</td><td colspan="2">Abid
(slaves)</td></tr>
</table>

to a loss of status, to the point that, in many cases, the *zwaya* tribe would be addressed as *znaga* ("tributary" and non-Arab) by the dominant ones. Changes in status and in alleged historical origins often accompanied shifts in the political, military and economic fortunes of a tribe.[8]

This traditional representation of the social order among *el-beidan* has adopted the

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Berbers and other human groups. See Mercer (1976, 132)

[8] The tribes that have been regarded as tributary (Foicat, Imeraguen, Lamiar, Meyat, Menasir and Ulad Tidrarin) have been numerically very small if compared to the average size of *chorfa* and *arab* tribes (Caro

concept of tribe as a paramount category. Being member of a tribe has usually been regarded as an essential aspect in the social construction of individual and collective identities among Moors (Hernandez Moreno 1988). Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that some groups of people have taken part in this social order not as members of any tribes, but as providers of goods and services. These people have worked for –and have accompanied– one tribe or another depending on the circumstances. They have been the *malemin* (blacksmiths) and *iggauen* (singers), and have been portrayed as people occupying some of the lowest levels within the social order of the Moors (Caro Baroja 1990, 46-47).

People belonging to the categories that have been introduced so far have been regarded as *ahrar* ("free"), whatever their social status (and that of their tribes) may be. Below them in the chart, there are the *haratin* (freed, former slaves) and the *abid* (slaves). Their lower socio-economic position has been usually justified by reference to their different "racial" origins: not Arabs, not Berbers, but Black Africans.

A brief note on this common portrayal of the social order amongst Moors is now necessary. This model has emerged from a review of the existing literature on the topic. Particularly during the second half of the XIX century and the first half of the XX, some soldiers, explorers, traders and scholars went to great lengths to classify and report certain aspects of the social environment that they observed and heard of when they visited the region. Some of them produced detailed charts of different *kabael* ("tribes", singular *kabila*) and of their sub-divisions, and gave details of their genealogies and of their most common pastoral areas (see, for instance, Flores Morales 1946, Molina Campuzano 1954, Caro Baroja 1990 and Mercer 1976). By doing so, they also reported on the internal structures and institutions of various tribes of *el-beidàn*, eventually proposing a portrayal that could suit all local *kabael*. Afterwards, many scholars came to

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Baroja 1990).

agree that "All Moorish tribes shared the same hierarchical structure" (Thompson and Adloff 1980, 41).

What some of these soldiers, explorers, traders and scholars could probably not foresee was the fact that their efforts produced an ethnographic model that has shaped the meanings and "working" of local tribes. In fact, their model of typical *kabila*, and of customary inter-tribal relations, was soon used as means of "understanding the locals" and became an important element shaping colonial action and policy. It can be argued that, through the ethnographic model (and especially through the military and administrative interventions that it inspired), tribes and their hierarchies were objectified and so modified. They were interpreted as long-standing historical truths that deserved great respect in the irreverent form of preserving them from all changes but supervised ones. And so one of the achievements of the colonial administrations was using the proposed ethnographic model and, for instance, preventing people from changing tribe – although the possibility of switching one's tribe through the celebration of a ritual pact called *asaba* had also been an important aspect of the local social order.[9]

The 'tribe' in Western Sahara

Moorish tribes have usually been presented as divided into a number of "fractions" (or "sections" –*afkhad*, singular *fakhd*). Each of these fractions is said to stem from a close descendant of the founder of the tribe. Moorish tribes have had a patrilineal system of descent that has been maintained from the male founder of the tribe to the male

[9] The Reguibat tribe offers the best known example of this process, one that took place from the XIX century until the elaboration of definitive lists of tribe members by the Spanish colonial administration in the second half of the XX century. As Mercer put it, "It is said that nine out of ten of the large Reguibat tribe are the result of *asaba* entrance" (1976, 129).

founders of the different tribal fractions, and down to the single living member of the tribe. Each fraction is usually further divided into a number of "sub-fractions" (known as *afra*, singular *fara*), which again are said to have a male founder. The single family (*ahel*, plural *ehal*) appears at this level, as a component of a certain sub-fraction.

These internal divisions –or "segments"– of each tribe have been portrayed as all sharing certain essential characters, as if they all mirrored the structure of the typical tribe as a whole. In other words, it is as if all fractions and sub-fractions were small versions of the tribe. For instance, just like the tribe as a whole, fractions and sub-fractions have generally had one or more heads (*chej*, plural *chioukh*). Literally a "notable", the *chej* has been described as a respected figure of the sub-fraction, fraction or tribe who has customarily carried out certain socio-political functions and roles. Generally, the *chej* has been an adult man whose personal qualities have been recognised, appreciated and respected (such as his knowledge of traditional rules of the tribe, and of decisions taken in the past in order to solve disputes and conflicts). As Hernandez Moreno suggested:

> "The authority of the *chioukh* is weak, it derives from his prestige and good judgement, although in reality he does not have any power to impose his decisions and their execution. His authority derives from social recognition. [...][He] speaks in the name of the community but decisions are taken by the community itself" (1988, 102).[10]

The Weberian distinction between power "as the ability to elicit compliance against resistance", and authority "as the right to expect compliance" (Cheater 1999, 2) can be of some use here. Rather than power, the *chej* has enjoyed a degree of authority, which itself has depended more upon his recognised personal qualities than upon his institutional position.

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[10] My translation. See also Thompson and Adloff (1980, 41-44).

Another institution that could be found at all different levels of intra-tribal segmentation (i.e. tribe, fractions and sub-fractions) is the *yemaa* (also spelt *djemaa*). This has generally been described as the "assembly of the *chioukh*" of a tribe, fraction or sub-fraction. But in addition to the *chioukh*, other members of the tribe, fraction or sub-fraction could generally take part in it (all male heads of families and their adult sons could at least try to participate; see Hernandez Moreno 1988, 103).

It has been at the *yemaa* where *chioukh* have been elected. Also, the *yemaas* have generally had legislative, governmental and juridical functions. For instance, at the level of the tribe (or even of a particularly numerous fraction) the *yemaa* has "established its own body of laws, the *orf*, to complement the basic Islamic judicial code, the *sharia*, and [has] appointed a *qali*, or judge, to administer justice" (Hodges 1983, 14).[11] Decisions taken by the *yemaa* of a tribe, fraction or sub-fraction have generally had a compulsory character for all members of the relevant group, and disobedience could lead to the expulsion from the tribe or segment (Caro Baroja 1990, 23-24).

The "ghazi" and social change

For the nomadic tribes of *el-beidàn*, herds of camels were "the key to survival" (Hodges 1983, 13). They were the main means of production, providing milk, meat, leather, wool and hair for the weaving of the *jaima*, the nomads' tent. Also, the camel was essential for travelling, transporting, trading, attacking and escaping, and for the limited agricultural activities. It seems that the search for pastures for the herds shaped not only the directions, length and timing of displacement of the Moorish tribes (Hernandez Moreno 1988). It also affected the characteristics of each encampment (or

friq). As Hodges put it:

> *Except in time of insecurity it was rare for a whole tribe to gather together in one place.* The limited and dispersed pastures required migrations in much smaller groups, so tribes were usually spread over huge distances in a large number of scattered encampments (*firqan*, singular *friq*). Outside times of war, political and judicial decisions were likely to be made at the level of the fraction or subfraction, rather than the tribe" (1983, 14; emphasis mine).

This said, "time of insecurity" appears to have been very frequent until the forced pacification achieved in the late 1930s by Spanish and especially French troops. Until then, in fact, the so-called *ghazis* were very frequent. The *ghazi* was an expedition of armed men with the aim of obtaining revenge, or looting, an encampment or a commercial caravan crossing the traditional desert routes (see Caro Baroja 1990, 342-347). The *ghazi*, its preparation and its results, affected the community that organised it in many ways. In particular, it involved the use and mobilisation of networks and of the limited resources of the tribe, particularly at the level of the "fraction" (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 189). Furthermore, the *ghazi* played a crucial role in shaping inter-tribal relations. As Caro Baroja put it:

> "Through these conflicts [*ghazis*], through these continuous fights that have taken place in the desert since the XVI century until today, it is how the social structure of which I have talked to you about and that we found, really emerged" (1990, 79).[12]

In this context, the forced pacification carried out by the colonial authorities was – together with the elimination of the *horma* and of the *asaba*– an important factor in making the ethnographic model stable. The main factors of tribal change and re-shuffling were, in effect, eliminated. The *ghazi* was ended, while the indigenous population was

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[11] See Caro Baroja (1990, 439-442) for some reported examples of *orf*.
[12] My translation.

counted and identified according to the (now stable) tribal and sub-tribal categories provided by the ethnographic model.

Spanish colonisation

The territory now known as Western Sahara began to attract the interest of Spanish and Portuguese seamen and traders during the XV century. In this period, boats from the Canary Islands began to fish the Atlantic waters off the coast of this territory, exploiting its richness, and having only occasional contacts with the nomadic populations of this strip of the Sahara.

It appears that from the XV to the XIX century the indigenous populations of the region had only a few exchanges with European seamen, traders and explorers. It was only during the second half of the XIX century that this state of affairs changed. At this time, in fact, the Spanish authorities showed a new interest in supporting explorations along the coast of Western Sahara. Under the pressure of influential entrepreneurial groups and of a new lobby of "Africanist" in Madrid, Spain wanted to play a role in that European "scramble for Africa" which the Congress of Berlin began (Hodges 1983).

After the founding of a fishing and trade post in 1881 in the area now known as Dakhla, in 1884 the Madrid authorities declared a "protectorate" on the coast from Cape Blanc to Cape Bojador. The shape of the new colony was drawn during diplomatic encounters between the two main colonial powers in the region, France and Spain. These encounters gave birth to four conventions (in 1886, 1900, 1904 and 1912 respectively). The last one proved to be definitive –at least until today– and put Western Sahara on the world map with its present borders.

By the time the last convention was signed, France was achieving control over Tunis, Algeria, Mauritania and the northern part of Senegal, but it still had to face frequent attacks from nomadic groups in the Sahara desert. Indeed, the conflict between these groups and the French troops in the region went on for decades, from the first years of the XX century until 1934 (Hernandez Moreno 1988, 24-33; Mercer 1976, 103-122). From this point of view, Spain was the object of much less armed opposition against its few, small settlements along the coast. Spain did not even try to control the interior of the colony, until the French had effectively put an end to virtually all armed hostilities from local populations.

For decades, French troops remained under the threat of fast and effective *ghazis* organised by different Moorish tribes and inter-tribal groups. The colonial control of the territory was made particularly difficult by the very mobility of the local opponents and, in particular, by their use of those arbitrary borders that France and Spain had previously drawn. As Hodges noted:

> "the centre of anti-French resistance shifted across the border to the unpoliced Spanish Sahara, from which long-range raiding parties could set forth to harass the French to the south and the tribes that had allied with them" (1983, 55).

In this context it proved essential the ability of the French authorities to secure themselves the active support of some local tribes, to complete their take-over of southern Morocco and to develop a multi-focal, cross-borders military strategy against the hostile groups. This strategy consisted in the organisation of "a unified Algerian-Moroccan military command" in 1930 that could mobilise the necessary troops required to control and pacify the border regions of southern Algeria, southern Morocco and northern Mauritania. The strategy was successful, and when in 1934 the Spanish authorities eventually decided to occupy the interior of Western Sahara, their troops met

no resistance from local populations (Hodges 1983, 63-65).

In spite of the achievement of a relatively tighter control on the territory through the creation of some military posts in the interior, for decades after 1934 the Spanish authorities maintained little interest in the colony. In Spanish eyes, the major economic resource of the territory remained its Atlantic waters, which were exploited by fishing fleets from the Canaries. The inland areas remained of very marginal importance until the beginning of the 1960s.

This said, certain social changes in the "way of life" of the nomadic people in the territory began to take place in colonial times also before the development of a wider and more thorough colonial administration in the 1960s. The forced pacification that accompanied the creation of European colonies in the region, had significant consequences on the tribes of *el-beidàn*. As mentioned, these had been largely disarmed and after 1934 their inter-tribal *ghazi* almost disappeared. At the same time the Spanish authorities made constant efforts to abolish the possibility of changing tribe through the *asaba*, and to eliminate the *horma* (the payment of tributes from one tribe to another for protection). Regarding this as a form of taxation, the Spanish authorities made the *horma* an illegal practice, and offered protection to those tribes that would refuse to pay it. Coupled with other administrative interventions during the 1960s, these changes eventually brought an unprecedented stability in tribal membership.

According to Molina Campuzano (1954, 7-9), also the patterns of displacement of many tribes were modified by the pacification carried out by the colonial armies: in particular, the location of many tribes became more stable. This process, Molina suggested, was fuelled by the creation of *Oficinas de Asuntos Indigenas*. Scattered on the colonial territory, these offices provided some assistance and aid to those nomads that

registered themselves with it.[13] Molina was rather confident of the potential of these Spanish offices:

> "the recently adopted policy of ascribing certain tribes to each Office [*Oficina de Asuntos Indigenas*] is a good guess. Coupled with the attraction of the settlements for other reasons (health, commercial etc. needs), in the future it can be possible to fix or to make more precise the areas of distribution of the population by tribe or *kabila*" (1954, 8).[14]

Other administrative initiatives also deserve some attention. The forced disappearance of the *horma* and of the *asaba* mentioned above was accompanied by a process of bureaucratic objectification, and administrative utilisation, of certain tribal institutions. Using some ethnographic accounts and studies (from Flores Morales 1948, to Molina Campuzano 1954 and Caro Baroja 1990[1955]), the colonial authorities began to design a new administrative architecture of Spanish presence in Western Sahara. These efforts would later lead to the elaboration of a system of "indirect rule" in which certain tribal institutions would be called to play an official role under the supervisions of the Spanish authorities.

From Spanish colony to Spanish Province

After losing its Moroccan protectorate in 1956, Franco's Spain intended to consolidate its colonial presence in northern Africa. In 1958 the Madrid authorities decided to upgrade their Saharan colony to the status of Spanish *Provincia*. On January 10 this edge of the Great Desert formally became part of Spain, just like the Canary

[13] In the early 1960s, there were *Oficinas Gubernativas* (which included *Oficinas de Asuntos Indigenas*) in Al-Ayoun, Daora, Hagunia, Bojador, Smara, Hausa, Mahbes, Tifariti and Echdeiria (this only since 1967) for the northern area; for the southern area, they were in Dakla, Aargub, La Guera, Tichla, Aguenit, Bir

Islands, or like Catalonia and the Basque Country on the Hispanic peninsula. A few years before, in 1955, Spain had signed the UN Charter, according to which UN members who had colonies would eventually make an effort to develop them into self-governing entities with free political institutions. Nevertheless, Franco Caudillo's Spain showed that it did not have a problem with watering down the Article 73(b) of the UN Charter, and in November 1958 it could inform the UN about its position:

> "Spain possesses no non-self-governing territories, since the territories subjected to its sovereignty in Africa are, in accordance with the legislation now in force, considered to be and classified as provinces of Spain".[15]

International mild pressures to decolonise, and emerging anti-colonial feelings in the whole region, had to face Spain's growing interest in the economic resources of its Saharan territory.[16] Apart from the well-known richness of its Atlantic waters, the desert began to look different after the first geological and mineralogical investigations into its deeper layers. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the existence of sizable deposits of phosphates, iron and (to a smaller extent) petroleum was corroborated (Mercer 1976, 184-195). In this period the Spanish authorities made plans for the intensive, industrial exploitation of the large deposits of phosphates in Bu-Craa, which required substantial long-term investments in infrastructures (Morillas 1988, 251-310).

These large investments and anti-colonial pressures called for a new degree of security, of improved control over the people and the territory. Transforming the colony into a province of Spain was a way of putting aside (at least for some time) any idea of

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Gandus, Bir Nazaran and Auserd. See Barona Castañeda (1998, 212).

[14] My translation.

[15] Quoted in Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 361).

[16] The 1950s witnessed the emergence of the Army of Liberation, a Moroccan anti-colonial movement that gathered considerable popular support. After the achievement of Morocco's independence in 1956, the leaders of the movement encouraged and supported the emergence of a wider, regional anti-colonial struggle. Some clashes also took place in Western Sahara. In 1958 a Franco-Spanish military campaigned brought the movement under control (Hodges 1983, 73-84; Mercer 1976, 219-224).

decolonisation, and a means of justifying a tighter administrative and military presence. At the same time, the colonial authorities could show Franco's renowned engagement in the pursuit of civilisation and development of that territory and its people. For instance, just like all other Spanish provinces, the Saharan one would have its representatives (initially four, later six, and all of them "Spaniard Saharawi") in the Francoist Parliament, the *Cortes* of Madrid.

The layout of the new provincial administration was drawn through various legislative acts.[17] These resembled the legislation in force for the "normal" Spanish provinces. Nevertheless, they also took into account the "special character" of Western Sahara. The newly created provincial administration was to incorporate institutions unheard-of in mainland Spain.

In 1967 a new provincial assembly was set up with the name of *Yemaa General del Sahara*. Initially, this was meant to be a consultative body: it could present its suggestions and recommendations to the adequate Spanish authorities in matters of general interest for the inhabitants of the province. Five years later, the Spanish authorities began to envisage the possibility of upgrading the *Yemaa General* to a sort of parliament by conferring it real legislative power over some internal affairs. As will be seen, the political and military developments of the first half of the 1970s impeded the realisation of this plan.

In spite of its consultative status, it can be argued that the *Yemaa General* had an

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[17] In particular, the Decree of December 14, 1961 and the Decree of November 29, 1962 set the foundations of the new bureaucratic structure of the territory. For these two Decrees, see Yanguas Miaravete (1965, 492-496 and 544-558). The complete collection of Spanish Laws and Decrees on Western Sahara can be found in Yanguas Miravete (1965) for up to the year 1964, and in Lazaro Miguel (1974) for legislative acts promulgated between 1965 and 1973. See also Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (1975, 215-221) for a list of the most relevant Yemaa resolutions and the main Laws and Decrees related to the Saharan province, up to the first months of 1975. It is very interesting to read how such acts were presented to the inhabitants of the Spanish province (and which news about the province were chosen and how they were reported). To name two examples, one at the beginning and one at the end of the life of Western Sahara as a Spanish province, see the monthly *Africa* (No. 234, June 1961, pp. 2-5) on the new juridical system of the province, and the daily *La Realidad* (August 10, 1975, p. 3) on some new

important social and political function. It was representative only of the indigenous, non-Spaniard population. Its members were exclusively "Saharawi" (initially 80, from 1973 their number was increased to 100), with the only exception of two non-voting Spaniards. A large number of its members (nearly half of them) were renowned tribal *chioukh* (Balaguer and Wirth 1976, 24-28). In the *Yemaa*, each major tribe had a predetermined quota of representatives that was roughly proportional to its relative size.[18]

With the intention of including the nomadic, unsettled population into the provincial administrative structure, other bodies (which also mirrored tribal institutions) were set up. For instance, in 1961 tribal fractions were given the status of legal and representative institutions with the name of *Fracciones Nomadas* ("Nomadic Fractions"). They were incorporated in the colonial administration apparently without major changes. In particular, the customary rules and competences of their *yemaas* were meant to remain substantially untouched by their brand-new legal status.

Looking at the administrative structure of the new province, one can clearly appreciate the importance that the *yemaa* was given by the Spanish authorities in their "civilising mission". These were pleased to have found an indigenous form of "natural democratic representation": a sort of modern parliament in a society that did not know much about British history of the XVII century, or about the French Revolution. In the introduction to the new rules for the *yemaas*, the Decree of April 30, 1973 stated that:

> "[T]he Yemaa [...] has demonstrated and keeps on demonstrating not only a recognised

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ministerial rules about navigation and fishing, and on a resolution of the General Yemaa about Koranic justice.

[18] The seats were initially allocated as follows: 45 to Reguibat, 9 to Izarguien, 12 to Ould Dlim, 5 to Arosien, 4 to Ould Tidrarin, 2 to Ahel Cheikh Ma el-Ainin, 2 to Ait Lahsen, 1 to Ait Moussa Ou Ali, 1 to Filala (cfr. Mercer 1976, 200 and Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 116; see also annexe to Decree of April 30, 1973). Behind these numbers, one can see the long-lasting, constant efforts of the Spanish colonial authorities to identify and quantify the population on the defined territory, using the objectified and stereotyped structure of the tribes and its tribal labels. For an outstanding example, whose results were used to determine the tribal quotas in the *Yemaa General del Sahara*, see Alonso del Barrio *et al.* (1970). This study was affected by the monumental work of Caro Baroja (1990), but most of all it found great

efficiency in the solution of the problems that each community requires, but also that it is in line with the most exigent democratic structure. It is the voice of the people that manifests itself in any situation that affects the community" (see Lazaro Miguel 1974, 641).[19]

Elected Institutions of the Saharan Spanish Province

Name of the Elected Institution (year of legal constitution; year of first election)	**Territorial or No-Territorial Unit of Reference** (**T** or **NT**)
Yemaa General del Sahara (1967; 1967)	*Provincia del Sahara Espanol* (**T**) (province)
Cabildo Provincial (1961; 1963)	*Provincia del Sahara Espanol* (**T**) (province)
Ayuntamientos (1962; 1963)	*Terminos Municipales*: Al-Ayoun and Dakla (**T**) (two main towns)
Juntas Locales (1962; 1963)	*Entidades Locales Menores*: Smara and La Guera (**T**) (two main smaller settlements)
Yemaas de Fracciones Nomadas (1962; 1963)	*Fracciones Nomadas* [20] (**NT**) (tribal "fractions")
Yemaas de Unidad Familiar (1973; 1973)	*Subfracciones* (**NT**) (tribal "sub-fractions")

The incorporation of these assemblies into the Spanish administration was preceded

inspiration in Molina Campusano's book (1954).

[19] My translation.

[20] The *Fracciones Nomadas* were renamed *Unidades Sociales* by the Decree of April 30, 1973, which established new rules for all *chiuj* and *yemaas* (see Lazaro Miguel 1974, 641-642).

and accompanied by a discourse of respect for Saharawi customary rules: officially, these traditions did not need to be changed, as they already bore the seeds of democracy and modernity.[21] Nevertheless, some changes did take place, in particular in the composition of these assemblies. Once the *yemaas* officially became part of the provincial administration, their membership became legally limited to "representatives and delegates": "elected" or otherwise "chosen" people, and virtually all of them *chioukh*.[22] Eventually, this bureaucratisation of tribal institutions engendered an administrative elite of tribal "notables" who gave a rather stable support to Spanish authorities in the territory.

It can be argued that –even more than the *yemaas*– the *chioukh* were made into the key institution in the relationship between the colonial authorities and the indigenous population. As mentioned above, ethnographers had shown that an adult man could be a *chej* of a whole tribe, of a tribal fraction or of a sub-fraction. Traditionally, the *chej* had little real power *per se*: it was his personal authority and his capacities that could give him more or less weight in all sorts of social issues within the tribe or one of its segments.

But this said, the Spanish administration wanted a figure that, in its eyes, was more clearly representative and authoritative. To this end, the institution of the *chej* needed

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[21] A confidential report of the General Government of the Province of December 25, 1969, titled "Short-term expectations for the Sahara" stated in its section VI, 3/b that: "This system of political pyramid [the various *yemaas*] allows the direct intervention of the people and gives the best guarantees. For one thing, this mechanism has the potential to develop by itself, without the necessity of the intervention of the Spanish administration and will end up making disappear if not the form, the essence of the tribal spirit, as these representatives that now people choose for reasons of family prestige and the like, in the near future will be chosen for their own personal qualities. The day this happens, one will be able to say that the tribal system has lost its negative aspects, as it will mean the emergence of a change of mentality that will open the opportunity of further improvements in the sphere of traditional institutions". The document was found in Section "Ñ" of the Fondo Documental de Sahara, personal archive of Rodriguez de Viguri y Gil. My translation.

[22] The only exception could be found in the *Yemaas de Unidad Familiar* ("sub-tribe" level): necessarily, they could not be all *chiuj*, as each "sub-fraction" has only one *chej*. Nevertheless, the members of the assemblies at "sub-fraction" level were all "designated by the legally documented adults and all belonging to the families of the same *Unidad Familiar* ["sub-fraction"]" (Decree April 30, 1973, section "*Reglamentacion de las Yemaas*", art. 1; see Lazaro Miguel (1974, 641).

some thorough regulation. This was provided by the *Reglamento del Chej* in the Decree of April 30, 1973.[23] These acts reflected the attempts to foster a "professionalisation" and politicisation of the *chej* through the introduction of some new official connotations: the attribution of democratic representation to this traditional institution, its monthly pecuniary remuneration, and the ascription of some newly established rights and duties to it.

It can be argued that the case of the *chej* is emblematic of Spain's colonial policy and attitude towards its "Saharan province". Just like the *yemaa*, in the case of the *chej* a tribal institution was given a role in the Spanish administration. This happened once the legislation had reshaped some of its traditional functions and connotations, so to make the customary institution "actually representative" of a population, evidence of its unity and working for it under the reassuring supervision of the Spanish authorities. The segmentary structure of the tribes, and certain tribal time-honoured institutions (*yemaa* and *chej*), became instrumental to guarantee that, legally and officially, the indigenous population was democratically taking part in the administration of the territory.

In this context, it is useful to report Bontemps' words on the new administrative system of the Saharan Spanish Province:

> "It is possible to analyse the overall reform as an attempt to enclose the whole Saharawi population within a sort of administrative reserve, artificially preserving the traditional institutions while modifying them enough to maintain the control" (1984, 66-67).[24]

The incorporation of certain tribal institutions into the system of governance of the province was a way of achieving a degree of control over the nomads that would probably have been more difficult to attain through entirely new bodies. Instead of

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[23] See Lazaro Miguel (1974, 639-640).
[24] My translation.

creating completely new institutions, the Spanish authorities induced the tribal, existing ones to incorporate new rules and responsibilities, and to assume a new political and administrative relevance within the system of Spanish "indirect rule".

Through this administrative architecture, while the Spanish authorities were recognising the importance and democratic character of certain tribal institutions (their "modernity", one may say), they were "entering" them. The colonial power effectively tried to reshape such institutions and to make the colonial presence thorough and perceivable there where certain forms of authority were traditionally felt and represented. Indeed, one may argue that it was a way of controlling and absorbing some of this diffuse "traditional" authority, and a way of giving it new meanings and responsibilities. Previously "weak" tribal elites were brought together in assemblies with new responsibilities and functions, and were upgraded to permanent representatives of groups of people whose shared character was, above all, their subjugation to Spanish presence.

Identifying Spanish Saharawi and providing goods and services

Particularly during the first decades of Spanish colonisation, constants efforts had been made by outsiders to "understand *el-beidàn*" through the representation and classification of tribal membership, tribal structures and institutions. Later, the administrative use of these categories led to the construction of the concept of "Saharawi" and "non-Saharawi" tribes.[25] While each Saharawi was identified as member of a tribe rather than as an individual under Spanish colonial sovereignty, the emphasis was put upon each tribe being Saharawi or not. The idea of a certain tribe being "Saharawi" and not being Mauritanian, Moroccan or Algerian, emerged during the last

decades of Spanish colonisation. Western Sahara was given the shape of a colony of tribes, rather than a colony of citizens: being a Saharawi was mediated by the fact of belonging to one of a given group of tribes (cf. Alonso del Barrio *et al.* 1970, i).

The setting up of a system of "indirect rule" including *yemaas* and *chioukh*, and the professional efforts of Spanish demographers (which culminated in the census of 1974, to which the next chapter will refer), were coupled with other relevant administrative, social and economic interventions. In this context, it is relevant to note the colonial monopolisation of legitimate violence, and the provision of infrastructures, services, social security, relief and employment. Thanks to Spain's developmental efforts, by 1970 important changes in the social geography of the territory were already clearly visible. As Hodges suggested:

> "its social physiognomy was transformed. The small towns rapidly expanded as thousands of Spanish workers arrived from the Canary Islands and most of the Saharawis abandoned their precarious way of life to look for jobs, relief or education" (1983, 122).

The supply of water grew fifty-fold in the 1960s, with the discovery and exploitation of new water sources throughout the territory. [26] In the same period, the electrical generating capacity was more than tripled. Various roads were built, so to guarantee access to and fro the main ports, airports and civil settlements (see Hodges 1983, 128-129 and Barona Castañeda 1998, 215-223).[27] In the main towns, beside various new

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[25] On this see also next chapter.

[26] It is interesting to note that, in the area near Dakla, an oil-exploration team came across a fresh-water lake with an extension of twenty-three hundred square miles. Being possibly the largest ever found on the whole globe, it has led many to hope that, one day still to come, it may be exploited for intensive, large-scale agriculture (see Hodges 1983, 128, and Mercer, 1976).

[27] As early as 1963, one could read satisfied descriptions of the main towns as the following: "The capital of the Sahara [Al-Ayoun] has wide paved roads, white shining buildings; two churches, three banks and one more will be opened soon; good shops of all kinds, well furnished bars, running water service, which is like a miracle in the desert, a magnificent cinema called "Las Dunas", various public houses and meeting centres and even an institute of secondary education, recently built. On its roads, "last model", flaming cars circulate, both taxis and private. [...] In Al-Ayoun life is, then, perfectly bearable" (*Africa*, October 1963, n. 262, p. 28 from the text reported in Barona Castañeda 1998, 217).

buildings (some only for the Spaniards and some others only for the Saharawi), primary and very few secondary schools were set up. An effort was made to guarantee access to formal education to the nomadic Saharawi, through the so-called "nomadic schools".[28] Another area of concern for the Spanish authorities was the provision of health services.[29] According to Barona Castañeda (1998), the main priority was the prevention of epidemics, followed by the provision of hospital assistance. To this end, the number of medical centres and staff was substantially increased during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Other colonial policies included the re-organisation of justice and the development of means of mass communication. From being an exclusively military tool, since the early 1960s the radio quickly became an increasingly popular means of information in Western Sahara, with news including weather forecasting and the updated positions of the main nomadic groups on the territory. This news was transmitted both in Spanish and in the vernacular language Hassaniya.[30]

These changes were regarded by the Spanish authorities also as means of fuelling a process of sedentarisation of the nomadic population in the few main Spanish settlements. During the colonial period, many nomads settled in the main towns of Western Sahara for the first time. The statistical information available gives a clear picture. According to the data of the Spanish census of the inhabitants of Western Sahara –held in 1974– by this year the 58 percent of the whole counted population was living in one of the four main settlements: El-Aaiun, Dakhla, Semara and La Guera. Between

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[28] The "escuelas nomadas", set up in tents, were 16 in 1967 for an estimated population of just 1,800 pupils (see Barona Castañeda 1998, 249).

[29] The information and data presented in this section have been taken from the work of Barona Castañeda (1998). For the educational services, see pp. 245-274; about health services, see pp. 274-281; for justice see pp. 282-288, and pp. 288-313 for radio, television and the press.

[30] In 1966 television programmes began to reach the Saharan province from transmitters located in the Canary Islands (Mercer 1976, 214). Apart from radio and television, some newspapers were edited in Western Sahara during the last two decades of Spanish colonisation. Beginning in 1958 with Tercio Sahariano, from 1963 this was followed by the weekly Sahara. Special mention should be given to the daily La Realidad: first published in 1975 and edited in both Spanish and Hassaniya, it became the main source of information about the discussion that was taking place at that time at the United Nations and at

1967 and 1974 the population of El-Aaiun and Semara more than tripled, while that of Dakhla grew twofold. Another indicator of this process and of its extent can be found in the sizable increase in the number of buildings on the territory from 1960 onwards (see tables below).

The phenomenon of sedentarisation was not limited to the case of the Spanish Saharan province alone. During the same period several thousand drought-stricken Reguibat and Ould Dlim settled in the Mauritanian towns of Zouerate and Nouadhibou, attracted by the possibility of employment in the iron-mining and fishing industries and by trade opportunities. Also, thousands of Reguibat were induced to settle in the region of Tindouf by the Algerian government, which carried out a sedentarisation programme providing relief and developing agricultural skills (Hodges 1983, 132; Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 405).

Apart from the various Spanish efforts to sedentarise the nomads, other factors contributed to the whole process. In the period considered here, the region was hit by two severe droughts, in 1959-63 and in 1968-74 respectively. Both of them greatly reduced the number of livestock (Hodges 1983, 131). The process of sedentarisation of a very large part of the pastoralist population took place in this context. It was affected by the generous provision of drought relief, and by the supply of medical and educational services by the Spanish authorities, there where they were. No less important, sedentarisation was encouraged by the increased availability of paid employment created by the provincial administration, in particular in the construction of roads and infrastructures and –to a smaller extent– in the police and military corps. [31]

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the International Court of Justice at The Haya about the past and the future of the territory.

[31] Interestingly, Saharawi wage earners tended to be young men. Analysing the data of the 1974 census, it emerges that certain jobs were carried out mainly by young men. This is the case of the employment in the police and military corps: 46 percent of the Saharawi working in them were aged between 20 and 29. This figure reached 56 percent in the case of drivers, and 41 percent for the workers in the construction of roads and other infrastructures. On the opposite side, herdsmen are on average older people, with only 19,5 percent of all herdsmen being between 20 and 29 years of age. Nevertheless, the

Growth of the Urban Saharawi Population

	1967	1974
El-Aaiun	9,701	29,010
Semara	1,916	7,280
Dakhla	2,364	5,370
La Guera	-	1,299
Total	13,981	41,959

Sources: Hodges (1983, 131); Gobierno General del Sahara (1974, 44).

Growth of number of buildings

Built	1953	'54	'55	'56	'57	'58	'59	'60	'61	'62	'63	'64	'65	'66	'67	'68	'69	'70	'71	'72	Tot.
Houses	13	14	7	4	7	3	20	157	289	84	102	202	1070	996	758	446	146	587	48	92	5045
Misc.	3	5	6	0	4	2	24	99	25	15	28	46	23	21	71	53	-	51	11	14	501

Source: Mercer (1976, 209).

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data also show a large number of children and young teenagers in this category. Finally, merchants emerge as having a rather uniform distribution for age group. See Censo 1974 (Gobierno General del Sahara 1974, pp. 77-78). Nevertheless, those who settled in the towns belonged to all age groups and to both genders. Indeed, according to the data of the 1974 census, age and gender did not significantly affect the pattern of sedentarisation. At least from this point of view, the town population did not significantly differ from the still nomadic one.

The increased opportunities for trade and smuggling in the growing urban markets appear to have played a similar role as other forms of employment, attracting part of the nomadic population towards the few towns while also inducing an intensification of cross-border exchanges. Scholars have showed little interest in extra-legal commercial activities in the territory, with only very few, almost anecdotal exceptions. In particular, in an interesting passage of his book, John Mercer noted that:

> "Smuggling, long a major occupation, flourishes on the same wave of material prosperity. Cargoes about to enter Morocco and Mauritania illegally, such as cigarettes and luxury goods, are organised quite openly in Spanish Sahara. A few nomads have become rich on trading and smuggling" (1976, 173).

In a more colourful fashion, Mercer wrote again on this topic:

> "Single or in little groups, silent and purposeful Mauritanians pad into the main street [of La Guera], usually making for the "Bazaar Brahim". Each fills a sack with boxes of cigars, cigarettes and other high-duty merchandise. Then, in the dusk, the figures pad away again across the cooling sands. The goods go to Nouadhibou, Atar and Zouerate" (Mercer 1976, 208).

Tony Hodges also briefly acknowledged the existence of extra-legal trade in Western Sahara when he suggested that:

> "Saharawi put their age-old commercial skills to use by setting up shop in the growing towns as traders, taking advantage of the expanding urban markets and also of the opportunities, due to Western Sahara's status as an extension of the Canary Islands' special customs zone, to smuggle such goods as household electrical appliances, cigarettes and building materials at virtually duty-free prices across the long unpoliceable frontiers into Morocco, Mauritania or Algeria" (1983, 130).

As will be shown (cf. Chapter six), nowadays Saharawi extra-legal trade plays an important economic, social and political role.

Saharawi Workers in Spanish Sahara (1974)

Categories of Saharawi Workers	Number of Saharawi Workers	As Percentage of Total Saharawi Working Population
Herdsmen	7,959	33,1 %
Infrastructure / Construction	5,424	22,6 %
Police and Military Corps	1,341	5,5 %
Merchants	958	4 %
Drivers	705	3 %

Source: personal elaboration from data of the Censo of 1974 (Gobierno General del Sahara 1974, 78).

Colonial plans for independence

The tension surrounding the issue of decolonisation of Western Sahara grew considerably within the "Spanish province" also as a consequence of the social changes that the colonial authorities fostered. In particular, the process of politicisation of the indigenous population as a community of tribes with its own representative, territorial institutions (such as the *Yemaa General* and its *chioukh*), gradually contributed to give meanings, relevance and "reality" to the concept of "Saharawi" as a distinctive socio-political category. Also, the growing sedentarisation that accompanied the availability of waged employment and the supply of services such as health and educational ones in times of drought, led to a rising awareness of, and sensitivity to, the degree of Spanish

control over people and local resources and the extent of the dependency of the non-Spaniards (Sayeh 1998).

These developments did not come as a surprise for the colonial authorities. During the last years of its presence in Western Sahara, the Spanish government became more eager to actively develop and increase the relevance of "Saharawi" as a distinctive social category associated with a national and 'independent' political project (if always within the framework of an unique and privileged relationship between the indigenous population and Spain). According to the official view, Western Sahara could have been led to maintain a tight bond with the colonial motherland, even though it had to be eventually decolonised under the growing pressures in this direction.

It was clear that an independent Western Sahara would still need to rely heavily upon Spain for technical assistance in a number of fields (such as the working of a state bureaucracy and of the phosphate industry). At the same time, Spanish economic interests in the territory would have been safer under an independent Saharawi state than in the case of integration of Western Sahara with a neighbouring country such as Morocco, which already had its own sizable and well-developed phosphate industry (see Hodges 1983, 168-169).

In this context, the Spanish colonial authorities began a process aimed at the achievement of self-government and independence for their Saharan province, a process which culminated in a statute of autonomy: the *Estatuto Poilitico* of 1974. According to this, the *Yemaa General* would have been upgraded to a truly legislative assembly and would have ceased to be tribally-based. Also, a Governing Council would have been set up as a means of transferring executive power to the Saharawi.

To this end, the Spanish authorities decided to create a political party, the *Partido de la Union Nacional Saharaui* (PUNS), which was officially registered in February 1975.

Led by a group of young Saharawi loyal to Spain, the PUNS was designed as an all-Saharawi party that would drive the territory towards independence while guaranteeing Spain's tight supervision on the whole process and its aftermath. It was hoped that the PUNS would attract the younger educated Saharawi, many of whom had shown a growing support for a recent anti-colonial organisation named the Polisario Front. Despite these efforts, the plans contained in the *Estatuto Politico* were never implemented. As Pazzanita and Hodges put it:

> "The statute's endorsement by the Djemaa in July 1974 was followed by the Spanish government's announcement on August 21 of plans to hold a referendum on independence in the first six months of 1975. However, both the statute and the plans for the referendum were postponed and later abandoned because of Moroccan protests and pressure" (1994, 142).

The birth of the Polisario Front

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro –better known as the Polisario Front– was founded on May 10, 1973. Since 1975 it has been a major actor in the social, political and military history of Western Sahara. Its founders were a group of anti-colonial activists, students at the Moroccan university Mohammed V in Rabat. This group was headed by El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed, a young man who would become the first secretary-general of the Front at its first clandestine congress. On that occasion, it was announced that:

> "The Polisario Front is born as unique *expression of the masses*, opting for revolutionary violence and the armed struggle as the means by which the Saharawi Arab African people can recover total liberty and foil the manoeuvres of Spanish colonialism".[32]

[32] Quoted in Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 162-163). Emphasis mine.

The Front initially obtained some support from Libya. Nevertheless, it has been the Algerian government that, from 1975 onwards, has been the most supportive and faithful ally of the Polisario. This rapidly bloomed from a clandestine, anti-Spanish group of activists, to a nationalist movement with an ample popular support. The first time such a support became manifest was in May 1975, when several thousands of Saharawi demonstrators flooded the streets of El-Aaiun waving Polisario flags, and impressing a United Nations Visiting Mission that was travelling through the Spanish Saharan province.

The last years of Spanish colonisation in Western Sahara

Since the early 1960s, pressures to decolonise Spain's Saharan province were coming from both the international community and the neighbouring North African states, with Morocco actively leading the claiming group. In particular, since 1963 the issue of decolonisation of Western (or, at that time, "Spanish") Sahara began to be discussed at the United Nations (UN).[33] The first of the numerous resolutions of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on this topic was passed in 1965. It stated the right to self-determination of the indigenous population of Western Sahara and called on the Spanish government to take all necessary steps to implement it.[34] One year later, a second resolution was more explicit. With it, for the first time the UNGA put forward the idea of a referendum of self-determination (an idea which emerged long before the appearance of any "Saharawi" nationalist claim or group in Western Sahara). This second resolution stated that:

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[33] For the developments of the issue of decolonisation of Western Sahara at the UN before 1975, see Damis (1983, 46-50).

> "[The General Assembly] invites the Administering power to determine at the earliest possible date, in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of Spanish Sahara and in consultation with the Governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party, the procedures for the holding of a referendum [...] with a view to enabling the indigenous population of the Territory to exercise freely its right of self-determination"[35]

By this time, the future of the Spanish province had become an important aspect of the foreign policy of all those states in the region that had vested interests in the territory: Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania. But it was the Moroccan Kingdom, in particular, that made the issue of Western Sahara a crucial internal matter (Von Hippel 1995). The Moroccan authorities had shown a clear interest in Western Sahara since 1956, the year of Moroccan independence. At this time, the nationalist *Istiqlal* party began to support the notion of "Greater Morocco" that his leader Allal el-Fassi had elaborated. Based on the pre-colonial empire achieved under the Alawite dynasty, it claimed for Morocco such territories as "Bechar, Tindouf, and the Gourara-Touat-Tidikelt oases in Algeria, the whole of Mauritania, the northwester tip of Mali, including Timbuctoo (on account of its brief capture by a Moroccan army in 1591), and even Saint Louis du Sénégal, as well as Spanish-ruled Western Sahara" (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 189).

In the aftermath of Moroccan independence, King Hassan II's father (King Mohammed V) had endorsed such claims to prevent the nationalists outpacing the monarchy, and in order to consolidate his authority. Following his father's steps, since the early 1970s also Hassan II began to support the idea of the "Greater Morocco". Clearly, this King did not "invent" the issue. He endorsed the nationalist claims after the emergence of considerable internal hostility to his rule. Particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, political opposition parties and groups of university students had often tried to make their voices heard against the monarch and the dominating oligarchy. The

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[34] UN Resolution 2072 (XX). See Suppl. 14, UN Doc. A/6014 (16 December 1965), pp. 59-60.

discontent was widespread also within the army: in two occasions (July 1971 and August 1972), Hassan II managed to escape the military coups organised against him by high members of the armed forces (Hodges 1983).

There is a wide consent among scholars about the reasons behind Hassan II's support for the idea of "Greater Morocco".[36] In this common view, the King aimed at emerging as a nationalist leader, gathering social and political support around himself. Backed by an intense propaganda hinged on patriotism and devotion to the monarch as *amir al mu'minin* ("commander of the faithful"), the launching of a Western Sahara national crusade was very successful in boosting the prestige of the monarchy.[37] Particularly since 1974, Hassan II managed to see the nationalist claims that he endorsed backed by all the main political parties as well as the military. Furthermore, from then onwards the army was kept busy in the Moroccan southern regions, at first with military preparations and, since November 1975, with a long armed conflict.

Apart from these political considerations, it has often been suggested that economic interests in Western Sahara's phosphate wealth and fishing grounds played an essential role in motivating Morocco's ambitions on the territory. Nevertheless, it is clear that since 1976 Morocco's involvement in Western Sahara has meant a huge financial burden which has outstripped all benefits that Morocco could gain from the richness of this part of the Sahara (Hodges 1983, 175; Damis 1983, 25-29). In this context, political objectives can better explain the perseverance of the highest Moroccan authorities in their Western Sahara campaign.[38]

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[35] UN Resolution 2229 (XXI). See Suppl 16, UN Doc. A/6316 (20 December 1966), pp. 72-73.
[36] See, for instance, Hodges (1983, 85-99); Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 207-216); Damis (1983, 14-25).
[37] About the so-called "sacralisation of Hassan II's regime", see Mohamed Tozy, "Le roi Commandeur des croyants", in *Edification d'un Etat moderne, le Maroc de Hassan II*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1986, p.52.
[38] Recently, Karin Von Hippel has suggested another interesting explanation. Using insights from psychology, she put forward that Moroccan obstinacy can partly be explained by the "sunk cost effect": "a flowed decision-making process in which investments are based on irretrievable past expenditures, rather than on potential future gains, [...] a tendency to continue an endeavour once an investment in money, effort or time has been made, even though continuing the behaviour may well be [economically] illogical".

In the summer of 1974, Hassan II launched the crusade for the recovery of the territories that the map of "Greater Morocco" identified as the lost southern provinces. In the early months of 1975, Hassan II tried to achieve control on Western Sahara by proposing an agreement to the Spanish authorities. These refused, reaffirming their intention to hold a referendum for independence in the following months, in accordance with the UN directives. Openly opposing such a solution, the Moroccan government tried to gain time by submitting the "Western Sahara dispute" to the International Court of Justice at The Hague (ICJ).

The "dispute" was presented as involving three states: Spain on the one end, Morocco and Mauritania on the other.[39] The resulting advisory opinion was made public in October 1975. In its ruling, the ICJ was clear in reasserting the precedence of the principle of self-determination over historic rights. It stated that:

> "[T]he Court's conclusion is 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 a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonisation of Western Sahara, and in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory".[40]

Nevertheless, the ICJ's advisory opinion had a somewhat ambivalent wording. As Joffé pointed out, "although [the ICJ] did deny that the legal ties of allegiance [between Western Sahara, Morocco and Mauritania] which it identified constituted ties of territorial sovereignty, it did, nevertheless, accept that such ties did exist" (1987, 16).

See Karin Von Hippel, "Sunk in the Sahara: The Applicability of the Sunk Cost Effect to Irredentist Disputes", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Summer 1996, pp. 95-96.

[39] Worried about Moroccan irredentist claims, since the end of the 1950s the Mauritanian authorities had put forward mild counterclaims to Western Sahara. Such claims were based on the evidence that the so-called Saharawi were people of *el-beidan*: they were Moors just like all the "white" and Hassaniya speaking population of Mauritania.

[40] International Court of Justice, *Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975*, The Hague, 1975, p.68.

This gave Hassan II the opportunity to publicly interpret the ICJ's ruling as an authoritative confirmation of Morocco's historic rights on Western Sahara.[41]

It was in this context of euphoric patriotism that the so-called Green March into Spain's Saharan province was organised. Presented as the expression of the "unanimous will" of the nation to re-take control of the "lost Moroccan territory",[42] the impressive march consisted of about three hundred and fifty thousand Moroccan volunteers, recruited throughout the Kingdom. Provisionally sheltered near the border between Morocco and Western Sahara, after various delays on the sixth of November 1975 the marchers were given the sign to cross the Moroccan frontier and enter the territory.

Since mid-October 1975 the Spanish government was aware of the plans of a massive march of Moroccan civilians into Western Sahara. It reacted to this threat by presenting formal complaints to the UN Security Council, and by accelerating its negotiations with the Polisario Front. This drastic change of attitude of the Francoist regime towards the anti-colonial organisation was due to two main factors. On the one hand the degree of popular support achieved by the Polisario Front in the Saharan province could not be ignored anymore. In May 1975, during the visit of a UN mission of inquiry in Western Sahara, the size of pro-Polisario manifestations impressed both the UN officials and the local Spanish authorities (and, perhaps, the leaders of the Polisario as well).[43]

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[41] This interpretation of the ICJ's ruling has remained the official version until today. Interestingly, it has not been challenged by Moroccan historians. See, for instance, Larbi Essakali (ed), Le Memorial du Maroc, Rabat, Nord Organization, 1985; Abdallah Laroui, Esquisses historiques, Rabat, Centre Culturel Arabe, 1993 and Mohamed Boughdadi, Le Passé et le present marocains du sahara, Casablanca, Editions Maroc-Soir, 1998. Also, there is little doubt about the fact that Moroccan claims find a very wide support among Moroccan citizens. On this topic, see, for instance, Abdallah Laroui, *Les origins socials et culturelles du nationalisme marocain*, Paris, Maspero, 1977 and the interesting study of Mounia Bennani-Chraibi, *Les representations du monde des jeunes Marocains*, Paris, IEP 1993.

[42] Hassan II, *Discours de S.M. Hassan II, La lutte pour le parachèvement de l'integrité territoriale*, 1975, quoted in Hodges (1983, 211).

[43] See the very clear Report of the United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, 1975, in *General Assembly OfficialRecords*, 30th Session, Supplement 23, UN Document A/10023/Rev. 1. The document also includes interesting chapters on the opinions that the mission received from authorities of Algeria, Morocco and Polisario on the "decolonisation of Spanish Sahara".

On the other hand, it was hoped that Spain's new attitude would smoothly lead to the independence of the Saharan province in a way that would guarantee Spain's privileged relationship with a future Saharawi state. By this time, it was clear to the Spanish authorities that such process could not be hinged upon the official *Yemaa general* and the pro-Spain PUNS party, but had to be centred on the Polisario Front. This view of the internal political situation of the province at that time was clearly expressed by the governor-general of the Spanish province, Gomez de Salazar, who explained that: "In the end, the Polisario Front represented the Saharawi people. The Djemaa had lost prestige and it was Polisario which shaped the Saharawi people's politics".[44]

The Moroccan threat of the Green March accelerated the whole process. On October 22, the governor-general of the Spanish province met the highest leader of the Polisario, El-Ouali, to finally agree on the gradual transfer of powers from Spain to the Saharawi organisation. Independence would have been granted to the new state after a transitional period of six months from that day.

When, on November 6, the Moroccan Green March into Western Sahara eventually began, the Spanish troops on the territory (by far more numerous and better equipped than the Moroccan troops which accompanied the marchers) did not intervene. The Spanish army had already begun to withdraw from the smaller outposts of the province, many of which had soon been fallen under the control of the Polisario.

Meanwhile, it was a delicate moment in Spain. In Madrid, Franco was in grave condition: a mechanical respirator was keeping him breathing. On November 14, while Franco was undergoing a third operation, representatives of Spain, Morocco and Mauritania unexpectedly reached an agreement, which was later called the Madrid Accords. Six days later Franco Caudillo passed away.

Until then, the Spanish authorities had appeared firm in their intention of holding a

[44] Testimony in the Comision de Exteriores del Congreso, 1978, quoted in Hodges (1983, 212).

referendum of self-determination and of opposing the occupation of their Saharan province by any of the neighbouring countries, with Morocco on top of the list. But Franco's critical condition and the Moroccan Green March had changed the situation. The Madrid Accords were a surprise, also for some of the highest Spanish officials in Western Sahara.[45] The agreement was kept secret and it was not disclosed to the public. Still, there are no doubts about its content: Spain would terminate its powers, responsibilities and presence on its Saharan province by February 1976. Also, the Spanish authorities would help "institute a temporary administration in the territory, in which Morocco and Mauritania [would] participate in collaboration with the Djemaa and to which [would] be transferred all the responsibilities and powers".[46]

No reference was made to the referendum previously proposed by both the UN and Spain. The rather imaginative official declaration that followed the Madrid Accords stated that:

> The three countries involved [...] arrived at the forgoing conclusions in the highest spirit of understanding and brotherhood, with due respect for the principle of the Charter of the United Nations and as the best possible contribution to the maintenance of international peace and security".[47]

Some clashes between the Polisario's forces and Moroccan troops had already taken place. Nevertheless, it was after the Madrid Accords that the armed conflict entered into full swing. Since then, the dispute has constantly remained on the UN agenda.

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[45] Interview with Don Riuz de Viguri in Madrid, in February 2001.
[46] Sentence from the "brief declaration of principles" that was made public after the Madrid Accords, reproduced in Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 260-261).

Genesis and development of the armed conflict in Western Sahara

A few days after the signing of the Madrid Accords, Moroccan troops occupied Semara, the "holy town" of Western Sahara. In the following months –and often only after overcoming the resistance of the Polisario's fighters– the armies of Mauritania and Morocco achieved control over the main settlements and routes in their respective, agreed shares of Western Sahara. The economically richer areas were all included in the Moroccan slice, which consisted of the northern two thirds of the former Spanish colony. The rest –the southern third– was the Mauritanian share: mostly a slab of desert.

Formally, the Spanish authorities made it clear that the Madrid Accords of November 1975 did not mean the transference of sovereignty on Western Sahara from Spain to Mauritania and Morocco. Sovereignty –they underlined– stayed with the Saharawi, who maintained their inalienable right to self-determination. The Madrid Accords only entitled the transference of administrative authority on the territory (Damis 1983, 67). To this end, an interim tripartite administration was set up in Western Sahara, headed by Mauritanian, Moroccan and Spanish officers. As far as the Saharawi were concerned, it was decided that their voice would be heard through the assembly of their representatives, the *Yemaa General.*

Both Mauritanian and Moroccan authorities tried to make good use of what was left of the *Yemaa* when the time had come for the dissolution of the tripartite administration, on February 26, 1976 (the day when Spain officially terminated its presence in Western Sahara). On that same day, 57 members of the 102 that composed the *Yemaa General* unanimously voted for the integration of the territory into Morocco and Mauritania. Nevertheless, both the UN and the Spanish government refused to recognise this vote as

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[47] *Ibid.*, p. 261.

a legitimate and valid act of self-determination.[48]

Most of the *chioukh* of the *Yemaa General* had already shown their support for the Polisario. The leaders of the Front had made continuous efforts to obtain the backing and cooperation of the tribal *chioukh* (particularly of those who had a seat in the *Yemaa*) as a means of symbolically uniting Saharawi from all different tribal and political affiliations (Hacene-Djaballah 1985). They had a first success in this direction on October 12, 1975, with a conference held at Ain Ben Tili. Still now, this date is remembered and celebrated by the Polisario as "the day of unity".

The Front achieved a further success about one month later, on November 28, with a conference that took place in the Western Saharan town of Guelta Zemmour. On that occasion 67 of the 102 members of the *Yemaa General* signed a proclamation that announced the dissolution of the assembly. The explicit intention behind this decision was to avoid the utilisation of the *Yemaa* as a means of legalising the occupation of Western Sahara by Mauritania and Morocco. With the proclamation of Guelta Zammour, its signatories also declared their "unconditional support for the Frente Polisario, the sole and legitimate representative of the Saharan people",[49] and established the Provisional Saharan National Council.

A few months later, this provisional body proclaimed the birth of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), as "a free, independent, sovereign state ruled by an Arab nationalist democratic system of progressive unionist orientation and of Islamic religion".[50] This happened on February 27, 1976, one day after the formal termination of Spanish presence in Western Sahara. Since then, the SADR has been the state of Polisario's Saharawi.

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[48] For the UN position, see the Report of the Special Committee, *General Assembly Official Records*, 31st Session, Supplement No. 23, UN Document A/31/23/Rev. 1, Vol. II, p. 215.
[49] Quoted in Hodges (1983, 235).
[50] Quoted in Damis (1983, 75).

During the first months that followed the Madrid Accords, and until about the end of April 1976, the Polisaro's troops were engaged on two fronts. First, they put up armed resistance against the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces that were taking control over the main towns of Western Sahara. But even more pressing was their second task: offering assistance to tens of thousands of people who were fleeing Western Sahara under the threat of violence from the Moroccan-Mauritanian armies. The large majority of these refugees found shelter in the camps of the Front, which were (and still are) located in the proximities of the Algerian town of Tindouf, a few tens of kilometres across the border with Western Sahara

Large movements of people began after the signing of the Madrid Accords, in November 1975, and continued during the following months. In January 1976 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) announced that 40,000 Saharawi had escaped from the western areas of the former Spanish province. The ICRC reported that half of them were scattered around remote zones of Western Sahara, while the other half had reached the Polisario's camps in Algeria (Hodges 1983, 232). According to the Saharawi Red Crescent, the number of refugees in the camps of the Polisario Front had grown to 100,000 by June 1976. Nevertheless, when in October 1976 the UNHCR received an appeal from the Algerian government, this had put the figure to 50,000 Saharawi camp refugees.[51]

Once the majority of the people fleeing the areas under Moroccan-Mauritanian control had successfully been settled in its refugee camps, the Polisario Front could entirely devote its increased military personnel to the armed conflict. Mauritania was by

[51] As it has generally been the case throughout the globe, the number of refugees has remained a highly sensitive and political matter. In the case of Western Sahara, the figure was going to grow substantially after 1976, as members of Saharawi tribes from southern Morocco and northern Mauritania joined the Polisario's camps and struggle. In 1981, the Algerian government put the figure of refugees in the Tindouf camps at 150,000 people (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 365). Since then, the official number has only slightly fluctuated around the figure of 165,000 camp refugees (UNHCR 2000).

far the weaker and easier target for the Polisario's troops, and so it was made into the primary object of their armed attacks.

The military weakness of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was coupled with the high economic burden that the conflict meant on its state budget. It was in this context of severe military and economic hardship that in July 1978 a group of army officers successfully staged in the capital Nouakchott a bloodless coup to depose President Ould Daddah. After a year of negotiations and hesitation, in August 1979 the new Mauritanian military government signed an accord with the Polisario Front. Known as the Algiers Agreement, it put an end to all claims of the Nouakchott government on Western Sahara.

Hassan II's cabinet did not waste the new opportunity. While Mauritanian troops withdrew from the areas of Western Sahara they had previously occupied, Moroccan forces took their place. Since then, the parties directly involved in the conflict over the former Spanish colony have been just two: Morocco and the Polisario Front.

The two armies that have been fighting each other in Western Sahara and southern Morocco have been very different in terms of number of personnel, equipment, mobility, motivation and overall strategy. Morocco's *Forces Armees Royales* (FAR) grew from 56,000 men in 1974 to 98,000 in 1979 (Hodges 1983, 293). By the end of the 1980s, the FAR numbered more than 192,000 soldiers, of whom at least 120,000 were stationed in Western Sahara (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 149). As far as military equipment is concerned, the FAR's endowment has come mainly from the United States and France, and it has constantly been superior to the equipment available to the Polisario's forces, both quantitatively and qualitatively (Damis 1983b, Sayeh 1998). Furthermore, Morocco has counted on an air force: something that has never been available to the Polisario's militia.

As for the military wing of the Polisario Front –the Saharawi People's Liberation

Army (SPLA)– this has been regarded as "one of the largest, best-equipped, and most sophisticated insurgent armies in the world" (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 398). Supplied mainly by Algeria, but also by Cuba, Iraq and (until 1983) by Libya, it has done extensive use of large amounts of FAR's weaponry it captured during armed attacks. This said, not only has the SPLA's military equipment constantly been much inferior to that of the FAR, but also the number of its soldiers has been a small fraction of the Moroccan army. According to some estimates, the SPLA "consisted of approximately 15,000 fighting men, of whom about 4,000 were in the field at any given time, the rest being rotated out of the field for spells of a few weeks or months" (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 398).[52]

Factors such as the number of soldiers and the available weaponry have never been favourable to the SPLA. Instead, Saharawi fighters and refugees have very often maintained that their motivation, their reasons for fighting have made the difference. From them, it has been common to hear comments such as the following:

> "the Moroccan soldier is interested in his pay, his rank and his own safety; the Saharawi soldier is fighting for liberty with no fear for death and a willingness to be martyred if necessary. [...] I wouldn't call ours a guerrilla war but yes, our main military goal is to do as much damage as possible rather than to gain territory. We are aiming to sap the Moroccan strength and morale. We are a peace-loving people. But when it is a question of dignity and sovereignty over our own land we have no option" (*The New Internationalist* 1997, 23).

In spite of its much inferior military equipment and number of soldiers, the SPLA has counted on well-organised hidden bases (often underground) in Western Sahara and has had the essential strategic advantage of safe rear camps in Algeria. Apart from one known occasion at the beginning of the conflict, Moroccan forces have never pursued the Saharawi into the territory of their neighbouring country.

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[52] This said, in different occasions I was told by various SPLA officers and soldiers in Tindouf and in

Another important asset has been the remarkable knowledge of the terrain available to the SPLA. Created and accumulated by nomadic pastoralists and traders, this knowledge was expanded by its military use. It has greatly facilitated the SPLA's capacity to move, hit and hide in the vast areas of desert between Western Sahara, Algeria and Mauritania. Mobility –coupled with the flexibility of quickly organising *ghazi*-like raids with varying numbers of small troops– greatly helped to inflict severe damages to the Moroccan forces, which have generally been waiting in their fortified positions.

Armed confrontations went on for fifteen years, until the ongoing cease-fire was achieved in 1991. The pattern of the military conflict has largely been one of static entrenchment of the elephantine Moroccan army, with its tanks and radars. And then hit-and-run guerrilla attacks by fast, small fleets of SPLA's Land Rovers, with their rockets, their machine-guns and their AK47 (Hacene-Djaballah 1985).

This pattern was eventually imposed upon the conflict by the construction of the "*berm*" (Saharawi refugees also call it "*rapt*"): the most dangerous and visible of all the borders that cross this corner of the Great Desert. Built between 1980 and 1987, the berm is a system of defensive "walls" that now stretches for more than 2,000 kilometres between south-eastern Morocco and the very south of Western Sahara. Sand, gravel and rocks have been used to make a continuous double line of embankments, a few meters apart and reaching about four meters in height. In front and behind it, various kinds of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines have been laid –waiting, just like the Moroccan soldiers, for attacks from SPLA troops.

This remarkable defensive system has meant an extraordinary burden on Morocco's state budget, both for its construction and for its maintenance. Nevertheless, it has been ultimately effective in drawing a closed line between the area of Western Sahara under

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Nouadhibou the figure of 25,000 Polisario soldiers at the peak of the conflict.

the Polisario's control and the much larger one under Moroccan sway.[53] Clearly exposing his view on the berm, Mohammed Abdelaziz (Secretary-General of the Polisario since 1976) said:

> "We [Saharawi] can consider the wall [the berm] an advantage because, since it is static and very long, the Moroccan soldiers are obliged to be in a static position. So it allows our freedom fighters to attack those points where and when we want, and to determine before an attack what we want to achieve"[54]

Nevertheless, it was the Polisario which, at the end of the 1980s, wanted to halt the armed conflict. Under the pressure of internal political turmoil, the Front announced an unilateral truce in the early months of 1990. On September 6, 1991, the Polisario and the Moroccan government signed a UN-sponsored cease-fire, which has remained in force until today.

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[53] Saharawi refugees –and whoever has sympathised with them– have called the areas under Moroccan and Polisario control respectively "liberated" and "occupied zones".
[54] Quoted in Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 111).

CHAPTER THREE

Who are the Saharawi? The regional and international dimensions of the peace-process in Western Sahara

In the dispute over Western Sahara, the decade of the 1980s witnessed much more than the mere continuation of the conflict between the armed forces of Morocco and those of the Polisario. In this period the dispute became apparently better known and certainly more heard-of outside the region, particularly throughout Africa and southern Europe. No less important, during the 1980s the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN) began to play an active role in the pursuit of a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Since the involvement of these organisations has had far-reaching consequences on the dispute over Western Sahara, the present chapter examines in some detail the emergence and development of international efforts to bring the conflict to an end. My interest in these efforts is not merely historical. The search of a diplomatic solution has significantly contributed to shape and sharpen the ongoing dispute over who is a Saharawi, and to turn this question into a focal point of the contention between Morocco and the Polisario.

The whole peace-process for Western Sahara has been hinged on the political principle of self-determination. Set in this framework, it seems that it has been impossible to imagine a solution to the dispute without a previous, clear identification of "the self" at issue. All international diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict have so boiled down to the endeavour to achieve a clear definition of who is a Saharawi, and then

compile a list of people who would fulfil such definition. This tenacity in defining who are the Saharawi –and so who can legitimately decide the future of Western Sahara– has contributed to polarize the terms of the conflict and to turn it mostly into a dispute over identity, over "true vs. false" Saharawi. In effect, the definition of "Saharawi" has become the main diplomatic and political concern of the two official parties in the conflict.

In addition to the critical relevance of the internationally-supervised peace-process in shaping the current dispute over Western Sahara, this has also had other important regional and international dimensions. In particular, regional rivalries, Cold War politics, interests of various western states as well as voiced humanitarian concerns have also crucially contributed to the development of the ongoing conflict. And so the last section of this chapter will examine at some length the sphere of inter-states relations, focusing on the economic, political and humanitarian involvement of some important international actors, such as Algeria, France, Spain and the United States.

"Saharawi": blood, land and word-games

In order to address the question "who are the Saharawi?" –and, no less important, in order to better understand why this question has been formulated in the first place– it can be useful to consider first the origins of the word "Saharawi". The available literature has paid little attention to the genesis of the Spanish term "Saharaui", from which the English "Saharawi" (or Sahrawi) and the French "Sahraoui" appear to have derived. It seems to be a relatively recent term also in Arabic Hassaniya (the language of the Moors). There

are consistent indications, in fact, that the word was coined during the last decade of Spanish colonial rule in Western Sahara.

In the vast majority of the Spanish colonial literature I read, the term "Saharaui" does not appear at all. It is not mentioned even in Caro Baroja's *Estudios Saharianos* (1990 [1955]), despite the great interest and precision with which the Spanish anthropologist introduced a large number of Hassaniya words. The earliest publication in which I found the term is an official one: a decree issued by the Presidency of the Government of the Province of the Sahara on May 11, 1967, numbered 1024.[1]

Of course, the expression may have been used before. Nevertheless, it was far from common even in later publications of the 1960s and of the early 1970s, when the term "natives" was still generally used. In this period, moreover, when the word appeared it did so under various spellings, such as "Saharagui" and "Sarhauhi": this may be further evidence that the term was at the beginning of its fortunate and extensive published record (which now ranges from reports of the UN Secretary-General and official declarations of the SADR, to articles in renowned newspapers).

As far as some "Saharawi" people are concerned, according to various elders of the Ould Dlim and Skarna tribes that I interviewed in Nouadhibou (Mauritania), the term has become common since the beginning of the armed conflict between the Polisario, Morocco and Mauritania. Initially the term was not well known –they told me– but it quickly became so. Nevertheless, some other elders disagreed, saying that the word always existed.

It is also interesting to note that when "Saharaui" was used in official declarations of the *Yemaa General* in the early 1970s, it was followed by an explanation, or rather a territorial specification: "Saharaui –Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro", that is the names of

[1] The decree was published in a special issue of the Buletin Oficial de la Provincia del Sahara, no. 134, June 5, 1967.

the two regions of the Spanish Saharan province.[2] Moreover, the word does not appear but on remarkably few occasions in early documents of the Polisario.[3] When the Front's Republic was proclaimed, in February 1976, it was named *Saharan* Arab Democratic Republic. Only later the term "Saharan" disappeared in virtually all official documents of the SADR, being fully replaced by the word "Saharawi".

Something similar emerges also from the analysis of early public speeches of the leaders of the Polisario. On some important occasions –such as El-Ouali's discourse of May 20, 1976– the term "Saharawi" (or its variations) was not used at all (see Briones *et al.*, 1997, 285-291). In other occasions, if the word was used, it was explained as "*the Arab people of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro*": always with reference to the territory whose frontiers were established by France and Spain at the beginning of the XX century.

In sum, the evidence available suggests that the word "Saharawi" was forged –or, at least, it came into use– only during the last years of Spanish presence in Western Sahara. The colonial authorities did not give the term an exclusively territorial connotation. In effect, the territorial aspect was always coupled with a tribal one. Following the available lists of nomadic tribes on the territory, for the Spanish authorities "being a Saharawi" also required "being member of a Saharawi tribe". Only later the word came to be used by *chioukh* of the *Yemaa*, and by the leaders of the Polisario, as a mainly territorial specification, avoiding the unnecessary act of including and excluding certain tribes. As will be seen in more detail later, the Polisario has remained strongly attached to this territorial –rather than tribal– connotation of the term.

The UN peace-process (examined in the following pages) significantly contributed to give shape and social relevance to this creeping "inconsistency": the Polisario's

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[2] See the various annexes (especially the annexe no. 11) of the section "Ñ" of the *Fondo Documental del Sahara*, private collection of Luis Rodriguez de Viguri y Gil.
[3] For early documents, speeches and reported conversations of Polisario leaders, see Briones *et al.* (1997).

territorially-defined Saharawi, and people of Saharawi *tribes*, have increasingly been treated by the UN as separate (if partially overlapping) categories. At the same time, defining what "Saharawi" exactly means has become the core of the whole peace-process. In this context, the "inconsistency" between "Saharawi as person from Western Sahara" and "Saharawi as member of a Saharawi tribe", has acquired a critical social relevance and has come to be felt not only throughout the UN-led peace process but –one might say– everywhere: among refugees and in the Polisario itself.

From the UN to the OAU, and back to the UN

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1966 the General Assembly of the UN (UNGA) adopted its second resolution on Western Sahara, urging Spain to hold a referendum of self-determination. Later, a large number of other UNGA resolutions concerning the territory have followed (at an average rate of one per year during the past three decades and a half). Virtually all these acts have restated the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination through a fair referendum, held under the auspices of an international organisation of states, be it the UN or the OAU.

Even before 1966, Western Sahara –coupled with the Spanish enclave of Ifni, located in what is now southern Morocco– had already drawn the attention of the UN. Passed in December 1965, UNGA resolution 2072 called for "the liberation of the Territories of Ifni and Western Sahara from colonial domination".[4] These statements were in line with the general policy of the UN on decolonisation as it emerged from article 73 of the UN Charter and, more explicitly, from resolution 1514 (XV) of December 1960 (better

[4] In *General Assembly Official Records*, Twentieth Session, Supplement 14, UN Document A/6316, p. 72.

known as the "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Territories and People"). This landmark resolution stated that:

> "Immediate steps shall be taken, in Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories or all other territories which have not yet attained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations, in accordance with their freely expressed will and desire, without any distinctions as to race, creed or colour, in order to enable them to enjoy complete independence and freedom"[5]

Therefore in 1966 (or, in more general terms, in 1960), at a time when the terms "Saharawi" and "Saharawi people" were being coined by the Spanish colonial authorities, in New York precise rights were attributed to a group of people which was generally identified on the basis of a colonial presence that, in the dominating view, had hindered its independence. Only about a decade later, these people would explicitly call themselves Saharawi, recognising in the right of self-determination the claim that had haunted generations.

Resolution 1514 made direct reference to the right to self-determination of the people under colonial rule. It identified the "self" as emerging from the colonial experience and its territorial markings, as opposed to a "self" defined as an ethno-cultural, historical and pre-colonial entity (Neuberger 1986). In particular, the paragraph six of the Declaration explicitly denied the acceptability of nationalist claims to self-determination based upon historical, pre-colonial titles.

In 1964 also the OAU Cairo Declaration adopted this definition of the collective "self" as a "colonial-born" one. Affirming the unquestionable legitimacy of the colonial frontiers was regarded as a means of avoiding –or at least reducing– the development of conflicts based upon competing territorial claims in Africa. In this view, the risk of

[5] UN General assembly Resolution 1514, quoted in Hodges (1983, 104).

border disputes was made likely in the continent by the great ethnic heterogeneity brought together by the inevitably artificial colonial frontiers. Also –as Neuberger (1986) suggested– the colonial and territorial definition of the "self" was adequate according to the widely shared idea that the colonial state (and, later, the post-colonial one) had been the main actor in the construction of African nations, and had been doing so with reference to the territorial boundaries that it had previously established.

Following the example of the UNGA, in 1966 also the OAU adopted its first resolution on Western Sahara, it too calling for the granting of independence by the colonial power. Again, during the following decades similar OAU resolutions were adopted, at a rate of about one a year. Only between 1975 and 1979 there were no official declarations in favour of independence. During this period two conflicting views emerged within the African organisation. On the one hand, there were the majority of the OAU states, which supported the referendum of self-determination and the recognition of the Polisario's state (the SADR) as a full member of the organisation. On the other hand, Morocco was standing with a group of allies against such a position (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994).

At the twentieth OAU summit, held in November 1984 in Addis Abeba, the Polisario's Republic achieved the important diplomatic success of taking its seat as a full member. On that occasion, the Moroccan Kingdom withdrew from the African organisation.[6] But the prevailing attitude within the OAU remained clear, so much so that in 1985 the president of the SADR, Mohammed Abdelaziz, became one of the OAU vice-presidents.

By 1984, more than sixty states from the five continents had officially recognised the SADR. It can be argued that, from many points of view (including diplomacy, internal

[6] For an analysis of the whole process, see Pazzanita and Hodges (1994, 318-326) and Damis (1992).

organisation and the military), the Polisario's state-in-exile had achieved a certain "maturity". It generally complied with the expected standards of modern, liberal states. It had proved itself and other similar organisations to be "fit for consideration" (Duffield 2001, 7) –and would continue to do so.

The Moroccan withdrawal from the African body in 1984 greatly reduced the role that the OAU could play in the search for a solution to the conflict in Western Sahara. But the opportunity was not lost and since the following year the UN has been directing the pursuit of peace and security in the region. In 1985 the UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar began a round of separate talks with representatives of the Moroccan government and of the Polisario Front. These consultations led to a peace-plan that the parties accepted with reservations in August 1988. The proposal provided for a cease-fire, for the establishment of an electoral roll of the population of Western Sahara based upon the Spanish census of 1974, and then for the holding of a referendum of self-determination to choose between integration with Morocco and independence (Damis 1992; Hodges 1991). On September 20, 1988, the UN Security Council approved this plan with its resolution 621, asking the UN Secretary-General to work at a more detailed report.

The MINURSO and the 1991 UN plan

In June 1990 the UN Secretary-General submitted a new report containing more details of a peace-plan for Western Sahara. The Security Council approved it in its resolution 658. The new plan included the establishment of the MINURSO, the French acronym of UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. This mission was given

the task of implementing the various elements of the peace-plan. In particular, the MINURSO was to supervise the ceasefire, the repatriation of Saharawi refugees, the exchange of prisoners of war, a "substantial reduction" of FAR and SPLA troops and the confinement of the remaining military units into established areas. But the most important duty of the mission was the ballot: to identify and register voters, to conduct the referendum of self-determination and to supervise all its phases (Damis 1992; Pazzanita and Hodges 1994).

In order to carry out its mandate, the plan established that the MINURSO would be composed of three units (civilian, military and security) summing up to 2,270 people: 275 civilian officials, 300 police and 1,695 soldiers. According to the initial schedule, the whole operation was to take 42 weeks from the beginning of the ceasefire. In April 1991 the UNGA officially created the MINURSO with its resolution 690. In June, also Morocco and the Polisario accepted the new peace-plan of the Secretary-General. Although the armed conflict had already come to a halt a few months before, the ceasefire formally took effect on September 6, 1991. According to the original schedule of the MINURSO, the referendum of self-determination in Western Sahara was to be held in January 1992. More than ten years later not only has the referendum never taken place, but there are grave doubts whether it will ever be held at all.

At this point, it can be useful to introduce some observations on the MINURSO. This UN mission was designed as a very ambitious peacekeeping operation. It can be regarded as a good example of the so-called "second generation" operations that had been envisaged by the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his *An Agenda for Peace* (1992). As such, the MINURSO was designed as a "multi-dimensional" mission: its tasks went well beyond the mere monitoring of the ceasefire to encompass a wide range of so-called "peace-related activities".

Even when compared with similar peacekeeping operations, the mandate of the MINURSO was particularly wide. A useful term of comparison is provided by the UNTAG.[7] The United Nations Transition Assistance Group was set up in 1989 to supervise Namibia's transition from colonial rule to independence through a referendum of self-determination. Like Western Sahara, Namibia was another outstanding case of decolonisation. Both the MINURSO and the UNTAG were designed as multi-dimensional (or multi-task) missions with two main and interrelated duties: the monitoring of elections and the supervision of a referendum of self-determination.

Nevertheless, while a referendum has never been held in Western Sahara, and the territory has remained split in two areas controlled by the FAR and the SPLA respectively, the story of Namibia and of the UNTAG is widely regarded as a successful one. In accordance with the agreement signed in New York in December 1988, most South African soldiers left Namibia by the end of November 1989, a few weeks before the holding of the referendum. Following the vote, in March 1990 Namibia officially became an independent state (after seventy years of South African colonialism and twenty-four of guerrilla warfare).

The differences between the cases of Namibia and Western Sahara are considerable, particularly in the social and colonial histories of the two territories. The analogy drawn here should be regarded as a means of pointing out two critical peculiarities of the MINURSO. The first one concerns the policing powers of the UN mission in Western Sahara, which have been great on paper. The maintenance of "law and order" is a complex political task that UN peacekeeping missions have generally shared with local security forces (Goulding 1993). This was the case of the UNTAG in Namibia, for instance. It was never the case of the MINURSO, though. This, in fact, was mandated

[7] The process of decolonisation in Namibia has often been mentioned in the literature that has directly or indirectly dealt with Western Sahara. See, for instance, Pazzanita and Hodges (1994) and Goulding (1993).

with all and exclusive powers for the maintenance of law and order during the *transitional period* (spanning from the enforcement of the ceasefire to the announcement of the results of the referendum). Accordingly, the special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara was to have "sole and exclusive" responsibility over the territory. In particular, he or she was attributed the power to suspend all local laws which were detrimental to a free and equitable referendum.[8]

In other words, the MINURSO's mandated powers have been greater than those of many similar peacekeeping operations, but most of these powers have remained just spots on paper. As mentioned, initially the transitional period was to last only 42 weeks, but since it started it has never ended. The mission never enjoyed the great powers it was given during those first 42 weeks, let alone in the period since then. On "their" Western Sahara, the Moroccan government and its large army have decided not to delegate much to supranational good will: arguably, just as much as they have considered either convenient or unavoidable.

This brings us to a second important peculiarity of the peacekeeping operation in Western Sahara: it has been implemented in spite of the impossibility of gathering unanimous support for a comprehensive settlement plan that could be in line with the international law of the time. In other words, the policing powers that the UNGA officially conferred on the MINURSO seem to have been as great as the lack of consent among the parties in conflict.

A characteristic aspect of MINURSO-like type of missions is that they are set up and become operative only after the conflicting parties having agreed on a comprehensive settlement plan (Goulding 1993). Also from this point of view, the situations of Namibia and Western Sahara differed substantially. Before the deployment of the UNTAG, South

[8] See the plan approved by the UNGA in June 1990, in UN Doc. S/21360, 18 June 1990, paragraphs 8-10.

Africa had already agreed to withdraw from Namibia, openly renouncing any territorial claims to the territory. Instead, neither the Moroccan authorities nor the Polisario have ever envisaged withdrawing from Western Sahara. The peace-plan of June 1990 was not –and could not be– a very detailed one. It dealt only superficially with important issues over which the two parties have maintained differences that have so far proved impossible to be settled (Damis 1992, Sayeh 1998).

It has been argued that the UN plan and the MINURSO were intentionally set up prematurely. According to this argument, it was hoped that the achievement of a general, if weak, agreement and the establishment of a special UN mission would foster confidence and dialogue between Moroccan and Polisario authorities (Durch 1993). In effect, the very lack of detail has appeared as an important reason why both parties could give their support to the peace-plan instead of merely agreeing to differ. Furthermore, at the time when the UN plan was proposed both Moroccan and Polisario authorities were aware of being unable to reach a final military solution, if they wanted one (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994).

As for the Polisario, during the last years of the 1980s the Front was particularly willing to reach a ceasefire and to involve the UN more actively (and possibly also the OAU) as a consequence of the political and social situation that the Polisario was facing in the camps and in its army. This situation will be analysed in detail later on (Chapter five). Here suffice it to say that political and social turmoil in the camps and among SPLA soldiers made a ceasefire with the Moroccan government a rather pressing internal need before it was achieved, and a pleasant relief after. As far as the Moroccan authorities were concerned, at that time these were aware of the Polisario's willingness to pursue its goals through non-military means. Moroccan authorities knew they had a chance to gain "attack-free" time, and that they could count on the relative diplomatic

strength of their state in order to try to delay and condition the peace-process at any later stage (Damis 1992). And so, in the late 1980s accepting the UN peace-plan appeared as a good option for both states directly involved in the conflict.

As is usually the case with peacekeeping operations, in order to carry out its mandate the MINURSO has remained dependant upon the continuing consent of the parties officially implicated. In the case of Western Sahara, the fulfilment of this general condition has not been sufficient for allowing the UN mission to successfully perform its tasks. The whole official peace-process has been constantly slowed down, when not interrupted, by the numerous disagreements between Moroccan and Polisario representatives concerning the interpretation and implementation of key aspects of the referendum plan (Chopra 1993). True, the official consent of the parties to the UN arrangement –or rather to its gist– has never been withdrawn. Nevertheless, the rather generic character of the plan, coupled with the particular political, economic and military context, made it also very prone to engender lengthy negotiations. These have extraordinarily delayed the MINURSO's schedule and have required frequent adjustments of its operational arrangements.

In spite of its limitations (but also due to them), the 1991 plan for Western Sahara has remained the basis of the ongoing peace-process and of the dialogue between the Polisario and Moroccan authorities. On the one hand, through their highest representatives both states have kept on claiming their indisputable right to sovereignty and jurisdiction over the contested territory and its people. Also, each state has been claiming that *it* is what the people of Western Sahara want. On the other hand, though, the old UN idea of making people's voices heard through a referendum (supported by the Polisario since 1974) has eventually been accepted also by the Moroccan state (Damis 1992).

With the UN plan it has been agreed that people's voice will be allowed to produce two possible verdicts when passed through the ballot: independence or integration with Morocco –in practice, either one state or the other. This "winner-takes-all" formula has clearly emphasised the polarised character of the conflict between the two states: it has made it into a zero-sum game with no possible positive-sum outcome, to use the language of game theory. Put in these terms, the referendum as solution has been designed as a simple and unarmed representation of a classical two-sides war, rather than as an actual political and economic compromise. As Chopra suggested:

> "since the options for the referendum –sovereign independence or integration with Morocco– are mutually exclusive, the parties appear unwilling to enter the process unless each is assured success. Currently, this is determined by the adoption of one or another definition of the electorate" (1993, 2).

In this context, the definition of the electorate, and then the achievement of an agreed electoral roll for the referendum, have become the most critical aspects of the diplomatic conflict since the cease-fire and the peace-process began, in September 1991.

The dispute over voter eligibility

The definition of the electorate for the referendum has been the main contentious issue in the ongoing peace-process. No other aspect of the UN plan for Western Sahara has proved so prone to manipulation by the parties and so popular topic of conversation among "Saharawi". Also, no other issue has been so time-consuming for the UN mission either.

According to the plan of June 1990, the Identification Commission of the MINURSO was charged with:

> "[implementing] the agreed position of the parties that all Western Saharans counted in the 1974 census undertaken by the Spanish authorities and aged 18 years and over will have the right to vote, whether currently present in the Territory or outside as refugees or for other reasons".[9]

On paper, this agreed position was simple. Nevertheless, it was easily transformed into a Pandora's box of negotiations, delays, intimidations and opportunities that many would not like to see close again.

The 1974 Census

The Spanish census of 1974 has been the main point of reference throughout the whole process of identification of voters for the referendum of self-determination. The definition of an electoral roll was the main reason why the Spanish authorities had decided to carry out this census in the first place: as will be recalled, they too had envisaged the holding of a referendum. Between the middle of September and November 1974 (including the period of Ramadan), a team of 30 bilingual, young Saharawi (mostly students) carried out the interviews, filling in "family cards" with pieces of information such as place of residence, tribe, fraction, sub-fraction, year of birth and occupation of the members of each "family" which the team managed to meet and interview. Because of the characteristics and size of the Saharan territory, and due to the geographical

[9] In UN Doc. S/21360, 18 June 1990, paragraph 61.

distribution of the population, on as many as three occasions it proved necessary to use a helicopter (Gobierno General del Sahara 1974, 3-4).

Although it was the result of a serious and committed work of many people in the Saharan province and in Madrid, the Spanish census had a number of shortcomings. In particular, its aim was to count the indigenous population within the official colonial borders with symbolic reference to the date of November 31, 1974: for the scope of the census, these would be the Saharawi (Gobierno General del Sahara 1974, 3). A large number of the nomadic populations of Western Sahara had settled in the few new towns since the late 1950s and, therefore, was relatively easy to meet and count. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a large-scale sedentarisation had taken place years before the census of 1974, as a result of social, economic and political changes fostered by the Spanish presence, and facilitated by serious droughts. To some extent, things had changed compared with the period when Flores Morales could write:

> "In the Spanish Sahara there are no properly called towns or large settlements like in the north of Morocco. The large expanses of land and the scarcity of water cause their inhabitants to be nomads and their home to be the "jaimas" or tents, made of camel or goat skins, that they quickly erect and dismantle in their movements" (1946, 87).[10]

Nevertheless, the process of sedentarisation did not displace pastoral activity. The census of 1974 reported that it was still the most popular economic occupation in the province with 7,959 "herdsmen", followed by construction workers (5,424) and soldiers (1,341) out of a "total Saharawi population" of 73,497 people.[11] In spite of the droughts and of the Spanish presence, camel herding was still largely practised, and it involved constant movements of people and animals from one corner of the territory to another, and across the largely un-policed colonial borders. Furthermore, October and November

[10] My translation.
[11] See table A.8.A of the Census (Gobierno General del Sahara 1974, 83).

–the months chosen for the interviews– have generally been months of moving. In this context, there has been no doubt that a large and unknown number of people were not counted in the Spanish census just because they were temporary outside the colonial territory, or because they were not met by the interviewers in their movements across the province, or yet because they were unwilling to cooperate (Harrell-Bond 1981).

Furthermore, the process of sedentarisation of the nomadic pastoralists had not affected the Spanish province alone, and people that would normally have roamed the territory of Western Sahara with their herds, had settled for the time being also in neighbouring countries. As Hodges reports:

> "sedentarisation among the Ahel es-Sahel, the *qabael* with historic migratory, pastoral traditions in the belt of the territory roughly encompassed by Western Sahara, had proceeded on as large a scale in southern Morocco, northern Mauritania and southwestern Algeria as within the Spanish colony" (1984, 131).

For instance, about 20,000 people of the Reguibat (the largest tribe of the Spanish census and the one that has given the Polisario all its secretary-generals) had settled in the area of Tindouf since the late 1950s as a consequence of their participation in the anti-colonial Army of Liberation (which was crashed by a joint Franco-Spanish offensive) and, later, in response to Algerian efforts to assist and settle them (Hodges 1984, 132; Joffé 1996, 111). Moreover, as Harrell-Bond pointed out:

> "The province of Tan-Tan in Morocco is almost entirely Sahrawi and the [Moroccan] 1978 census there counted 81,900. In 1977 Mauritania gave the figure of 47,000 for the two regions bordering the Western Sahara and most of this population is thought to be Sahrawi. There are also Sahrawi among the population of the Algerian *wilaya* of Bechar [which includes Tindouf]" (1981, 1).

The Spanish census aimed at counting the indigenous population with reference to a colonial notion of "territory". At the same time, the census listed such a population using a system of grouping based on a revised indigenous concept of *kabila*: the tribe, represented as a structure with its fractions and sub-fractions. Indeed, throughout the 1974 census the categories of tribe and fraction were used constantly.

In defining who the Saharawi were for the scope of the census, the Spanish authority adopted a mixed "ethnic-territorial", or "tribal-territorial", definition.[12] The territorial aspect was determinant: the people included in the census were those met and interviewed within the colonial (and present) borders of Western Sahara. But then, these people were selected and divided according to their affiliation to a "Saharawi" tribe: such affiliation was made an essential factor in establishing one's right to vote. In fact, those who were in the territory but did not belong to a Saharawi tribe were listed under national categories, such as Mauritanian, Moroccan, Algerian, Malian, Senegalese and a few others. Finally, those people that were met and interviewed within the colonial territory but that did not belong to a Saharawi tribe and did not have a stated nationality either, were put into a residual category named "Saharan [not Saharawi] origin" (see Gobierno General del Sahara 1974). In other words, in the Spanish census the concept of "person of a Saharawi tribe interviewed within Western Sahara frontiers" was treated as a national category, as evidence of being subject to Spanish jurisdiction and being a potential voter in the referendum to come.

Adopting the classification elaborated in the 1970 *Codigo de las Secciones Registrales* (Alonso del Barrio *et al.* 1970) with only minor changes, about one hundred and ten tribes were recognised by the Spanish census as "Saharawi".[13] The seven most

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[12] About the use of "ethnic-territorial" definitions of the indigenous populations in Western Sahara and in other areas of Africa, see Neuberger (1986).

[13] The 1970 *Codigo* identified eleven groups and assigned to each of them a letter: A to K. The group "K" included all people "resident in the Sahara of African origins": by exclusion, all those who were not

numerous tribes (identified with the letters from A to G) counted for the 85% of the whole census population. All the others were grouped together under three letters: H, I, and J.[14] The main seven tribes were all well known to the Spanish administration, and many of their *chioukh* were members of the *Yemaa General del Sahara.* Nevertheless, it is important to note that the seven main Saharawi tribes (and many of the smaller ones too) had, and still have, very sizeable parts of their membership living in the three neighbouring countries: Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria.

Furthermore, for the Spanish authorities identifying voters was not a straightforward issue. Rather, it was perceived as a complex, political matter and doubts always remained about who should, or should not, be included in the electoral roll. These difficulties were typified through the construction of two cases of problematic circumstances. First, there was the case of people of Saharawi tribes that were not resident in Western Sahara, but were still very close relatives of "natives" already included in an earlier census (e.g. fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters) and could also have relevant economic interests within the Spanish province. Secondly, there was the case of a large number of "true or false" members of Saharawi tribes that were regarded as having Moroccan proceeding, and therefore could have affected negatively the expected result of the referendum by voting against Spain.

These difficulties clearly emerge from the analysis of internal and confidential material circulating within the General Government of the Sahara at the time of the census.[15] In these documents it was repeatedly pointed out that it would be convenient to include in the census (and then in the electoral roll) not only the Saharawi who were

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members of tribes recognised as "Saharawi". This "K" group was dropped in the 1974 census, that replaced it with various nationalities of countries of the region and with the group "Saharan origin".

[14] During the peace-process, the so-called "contested tribes", whose right to vote in the referendum has generally been supported by Morocco and denied by Polisario, were listed under the letters H, I and J.

[15] This material is part of the *Fondo Documental del Sahara*, personal archive of Rodriguez de Viguri y Gil. It is contained in section "L", titled "Politica Interior".

resident in the territory, but also those resident in mainland Spain and many of those in Mauritania: they were likely to support Spain in the referendum. On the other hand, those "true or false" Saharawi who were resident in Marocco were not to be included in the census, as the prospect of Spain's victory in the referendum could have been negatively affected by:

> "[the case that] Morocco would make go to the ballot-box Saharawi people who are established to the south of the Uad Draa (about 2,500 people) [in southern Morocco] but increased by other elements supposedly not Saharaui (the 25,000 that they say are inside their frontiers)".[16]

This been said, the 1974 census of the Saharawi population remains the most precise one available, also according to all parties in the UN peace-process. Furthermore, it has the quality of having been commissioned by Spanish authorities, which are extraneous to the present dispute. Nevertheless, the Spanish census is accepted only as a minimal list of people that will be entitled to vote in the UN referendum. The dispute goes on about who else should be entitled too: only the descendents of those listed in the Spanish census, or also other people belonging to one of the one hundred and ten "Saharawi tribes" spread over the whole region? So many are "Saharawi" in northern Mauritania, southern Morocco and southeaster Algeria: probably the majority of the Moors can say they are Saharawi. It depends on the way one wants to define the category, and there are a few definitions available. For instance: would having only one parent from a Saharawi tribe be enough to be regarded as Saharawi by the MINURSO? Accepting a broad definition, some Saharawi are refugees and others are Mauritanian, Algerian or Moroccan. Yet many others are both things: proud Mauritanians and yet Saharawi refugees from Western Sahara, for instance.

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[16] *Ibid*, "Informe sobre la Situacion del Territorio", October 12, 1974, p. 3.

Morocco vs. Polisario: history, colonial boundaries and voter eligibility

The negotiations of the UN peace-process have been centred round the agreed position that the Spanish census of 1974 is an acceptable starting point for the identification of who could vote in the referendum of self-determination. This foundation has given mutual intelligibility and actual competitiveness to the different arguments of Polisario and Moroccan authorities. In spite of their differences, both parties have regarded the colonial period as one of negation of their claimed rights, and then the census as the evidence of the existence of a relatively vast African population long subordinated to a foreign power.[17] But this said, the two parties have also maintained substantially divergent positions concerning voter eligibility. These positions can be summarised as "historic" for Morocco and "ethnic-colonial" for Polisario.

As seen in the previous chapter, Moroccan authorities have sustained that the whole Western Sahara was an integral part of the "Alawite empire": a pre-colonial entity that was progressively dismantled by the French and Spanish establishments through four agreements at the beginning of the past century. Therefore –the argument goes– Morocco can now claim its "historic rights" on Western Sahara, which are part of the irredentist claim to the much more extensive area of "Greater Morocco".[18]

On the other side, the Polisario's line of argument has entirely been based upon the heritage of the colonial past of Western Sahara, and then upon the right of self-determination attributed to "colonial people". On a different and inferior level of

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[17] See, for instance, Benani (1979) and Sayeh (1998).

[18] It is interesting to report the opinion expressed in December 1994 by a former Algerian justice minister, Boualem Ben Hamouda, about Moroccan historical claims: "Does Morocco demand the Sahara because some Moroccan traders transited through it to buy gold and slaves in was what then called the "Soudan"?" "In this hypothesis, the Saharawis have the right to demand Morocco and Spain because their ancestors the Almoravids departed from this territory in the eleventh century to spread their authority over the whole region and Andalucia." Quoted in Hodges (1984, 195).

argumentation, the Polisario has also underlined the ethno-cultural differences between the Moors and the Moroccans as means of weakening the Kingdom's claims.

From a merely legal point of view –which unfortunately tends to dominate the academic production on the Western Sahara dispute– this is usually presented as a case of unresolved decolonisation. For this reason –it is said– it is the UN body in charge of colonial matters (the fourth Committee of the UNGA) that has mainly handled the dispute (Von Hippel 1995). Given the primacy of the principle of self-determination and integrity of colonial frontiers (as stated by the UN Charter, by the UNGA resolution 1514 of 1960, and by the OAU Cairo Declaration of 1964), international law is on the Polisario's side, and the Front obviously keeps on underlining it. From this point of view, in fact, the terms of the dispute were legally defined and "solved" when the International Court of Justice at The Hague solemnly testified (with its advisory opinion of October 16, 1975) the legitimacy of the Polisario's claims to a referendum of self-determination.

This said, during the peace-process the Moroccan authorities have implemented their "historic" argument by presenting to the Identification Commission of the MINURSO more than one hundred thousand Moroccan citizens for consideration. They began in August 1991, when the Moroccan government submitted to the UN mission a list of 120,000 additional names to the 1974 Spanish census of 73,497. Morocco's official position has been that these Moroccan citizens are "Saharawi", in the meaning of members of Saharawi tribes. They were not counted in the Spanish census just because they were outside the artificial colonial frontiers, but they are Saharawi and therefore eligible to vote in the UN referendum. As part of this strategy, in 1991 the Moroccan authorities began to move a large number of their (supposedly Saharawi) citizens into Western Sahara.[19] It is clear that –given the circumstances– Morocco has preferred and

[19] About this massive transfer of population, see Hassan II's "Letter to UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar" of September 15, 1991, quoted in Chopra (1993, 13).

supported an ethnic, or tribal, definition of who a Saharawi is, since beyond all doubt many Moroccan citizens may claim to be members of one of the numerous tribes that the Spanish authorities defined as Saharawi.

Polisario's reaction was foreseeable: it demanded a rigorous adherence to the Spanish census of 1974 as the only reliable source of undoubtedly authentic Saharawi, so as to avoid the inclusion of Moroccan citizens into the electoral roll. The Front accepted the obvious necessity of updating the 1974 census in order to remove from it the names of people who have since died and to include the descendents of the Saharawi listed in the census. Nevertheless, the Polisario has also continued to oppose strongly all Moroccan attempts to broaden the electorate as much as possible.

The UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali clearly summarised the terms of the dispute over voter eligibility when he underlined:

> "the fundamentally divergent positions of the parties on the establishment of the electorate, one party [Morocco] wanting to make all persons who are Saharans eligible to participate in the referendum, and the other [Polisario] wanting to limit the electorate so far as possible to those counted in the Territory in 1974 so as to avoid the inclusion of individuals it regards as foreign to the Territory"[20]

Set in this context, it is clear that the Polisario has always preferred a territorial definition of "Saharawi-ness" based upon the fundamental (if untold) operational rule of the Spanish census ("Saharawi = person of a Saharawi tribe interviewed within Western Sahara frontiers"). Morocco, instead, has insisted on a tribal definition of the voter as "person of a Saharawi tribe", again accepting the same definition of Saharawi tribe adopted by the Spanish census of 1974.

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[20] UN Doc. S/1994/283, 10 March 1994, Annex I, paragraph 10.

Therefore, within the dispute over voter eligibility, *the issue of tribal affiliation* has become the major impediment to the holding of the referendum.[21] In particular, Moroccan authorities have strongly supported the position according to which the MINURSO Identification Commission should also consider applications from members of three Saharawi tribes (coded as H41, H61 and J51/52, but better known as "the contested tribes") that were not included in the Spanish census. The vast majority of the membership of these tribes has been living within Moroccan frontiers for decades, and has Moroccan citizenship.

For the Kingdom, it has not been very difficult to convince the UN that the members of the "contested tribes" should be considered by the Identification Commission. Nevertheless, this is not even the main point. Moroccan authorities know well that even if the members of the "contested tribes" would not be regarded eligible as voters, the inclusion of their applications (more than one hundred thousand) would enormously increase the work of the Identification Commission. This, coupled with diplomatic and bureaucratic expedients, would be liable to jam the whole process of identification of voters.

After many delays and periods when the work of the Identification Commission had to be halted, in September 1997 Moroccan and Polisario representatives signed the Houston Agreement. In addition to agreeing on matters such as refugee repatriation, presence of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and troops confinement, at Houston the parties accepted that they would not present a global list of individuals from the three "contested tribes". The process of identification of voters could then be resumed.

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[21] On the opposing views about this issue, see UN Doc. S/25170, 26 January 1993).

But despite this new agreement, the work of the MINURSO Identification Commission has remained slow and difficult, mainly as a consequence of various forms of Moroccan harassment and attempts at manipulating the selection of the electorate (see Ruddy 1995, Sayeh 1998). To give an interesting example, in 1998 the Moroccan Interior Ministry set up "ethnic workshops" intended to prepare the Moroccan applicants. There they would learn how to behave and present themselves during their interviews with the Identification Commission in order to qualify for the referendum.[22] The short course included lessons in Saharawi traditions, tribal structure, basic Hassaniya vocabulary and Moorish traditional clothing.[23]

More than a decade has elapsed since the beginning of the process of identification of voters, which, according to the original schedule, should have lasted just a few months. After interviewing 198,500 applicants –of whom about 86,000 were accepted as voters– the MINURSO Identification Commission has recently begun the delicate phase of hearing of more than one hundred thousand "appeals" of those whose applications were turned down: most of them are from the "contested tribes" (UNHCR 2000).

In this context, it should be noted that among many observers there has been the clear conviction that through the years the UN has been much more sensitive to Moroccan pressures and interests than to the Polisario's ones.[24] Indeed, this *is* what emerges, and the recent UN proposal of reducing to about a third the already stretched staff of the Identification Commission can only confirm such a conviction. But again, in this dominating view Moroccan and Polisario interests are presented as opposite, and

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[22] See the letter written by the Interior Ministry Driss Basri, "Lettre du ministre d'Etat à l'Interieur à MM. les Walis et guverneurs des prefectures et provinces du Royaume. Objet: Ateliers de formations des postulants à l'identification en vue du referendum confirmatif de la marocanité du Sahara", Rabat, Ministère de l'Interieur, Cabinet No. 84/CAD, 22 January 1998, *available at* http://www.arso.org/01-2-53.htm

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] This opinion is very common in journalist and humanitarian publications. See, for instance, *The New Internationalist*, No. 297, December 1997; *Campaign Update*, No. 15, Spring 1997, issued by the British NGO War on Want; *Orbit Magazine*, first quarter 1997; the Spanish magazine *Sahara*, July 1999; various issues of *El Kerama* and *Newsletter* of the NGO Western Sahara Campaign UK.

Polisario as the loyal, committed and unlucky victim of a diplomatically stronger and unfair enemy that has no respect for justice and the law. Far enough from the floodlights of the international, diplomatic battlefield the situation appears much more complex and dynamic. Before beginning to look into these political complexes, the well-lighted high table that accommodates some international leading figures awaits attention.

The regional and international context: rivalries, vested interests and influences

It has already been pointed out that Hassan II endorsed the irredentist claims to "Greater Morocco" –and particularly the claims to Western Sahara– for a number of reasons and considerations that were more clearly political than economic. Through this firm nationalist policy, the King managed to consolidate the political, military and popular support for the monarchy (Von Hippel 1995). In the post-independence period the crusade for the recovery of the "amputated Saharan provinces" of the Kingdom has easily recruited all Moroccan political parties, from right to left, and it has been an important element in the social construction of the Moroccan nation among its citizens. No less important, the crusade has found in the high ranks of the FAR enthusiastic and devoted followers, some of which have obtained important financial benefits from extra-legal trade activities indirectly related to their contribution to the nationalist cause. As various scholars have noted (e.g. Benani 1979, Damis 1990, Joffe 1996), after the military occupation of Western Sahara there have been no more coups organised by FAR officers against the monarch (while before the occupation there had been three failed coups).

From the point of view of state official budget, Western Sahara has not been that extraordinary economic asset that some writers foresaw. Rather, it appears to have been a tremendous economic burden for the Moroccan Kingdom due to high military expenses related to the conflict (Von Hippel 1995). Nevertheless, this aspect may change before long, as the benefits produced by the fishing and phosphate industries may soon outweigh military expenditures. Furthermore, during the year 2001 it was reported the signing of an agreement between the Moroccan government and some oil companies (such as Total Elf Fina and Kerr-McGee) for extensive oil explorations off the coast of Western Sahara.[25] In the light of recent developments, there are good chances that the Moroccan authorities could soon count on more oil revenues (in addition to those provided by the recent discovery of oil deposits in Morocco's mainland).

Apart from these more internal Moroccan dimensions, the Western Sahara dispute has shaped (and has been shaped by) the relationships between the states of the region (particularly Algeria and Morocco) and between these and other powerful actors of the international community of states. The following pages will introduce an account of some of these facets of the conflict, with no intention to present more than a brief note on some relevant aspects of inter-state relations.

The Western Sahara dispute and Moroccan-Algerian relations

The policy that Moroccan authorities have endorsed with reference to Western Sahara has long affected the diplomatic relations between the Kingdom and the Popular Democratic Republic of Algeria (see Joffé 1993). Since the beginning of the occupation

[25] Concerning these recent oil explorations in Western Sahara, see United Nations Security Council, S/2002/161, 12 February 2002.

of Western Sahara by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops, the Algerian authorities have firmly criticised this military action and have supported the Polisario in a number of ways. To be more precise, Algerian support for the Front began even before. Evidence of this came from an UN Mission of Inquiry on Western Sahara which visited the Algerian town of Tindouf and the surrounding region in May 1975. On this occasion, the staff of the mission met Polisario leaders and observed that the Front had already been allowed to establish military camps in the proximity of Tindouf –in the same area where, a few months later, the Saharawi refugee settlements would be established (Hodges 1983, 193). Algeria has shared twenty-five miles of its frontiers with Western Sahara, and the area where the Polisario's (at first military and then also refugee) settlements have been located is just thirty-five miles away from such border.

In addition to the essential, strategic asset of safe rear bases, since the early 1975 the Algerian authorities have also provided the Polisario Front with a wide range of supplies: from weapons to means of transport and military training (see Hacene-Djaballah 1985). No less important, the Algerian government has provided stable and committed diplomatic support for the Polisario and for its demands for a referendum of self-determination. This support has been offered at all levels: from the regional one, to the level of international organisations such as the OAU and the UN (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994).

But why has Algeria supported the Polisario to such an extent? Apart from their significant ideological and political differences, the states of Morocco and Algeria have had a shared history of border disputes that began in the early 1960s. In particular, the region of Tindouf (where Polisario's refugee camps are now located, incidentally not far from some large iron ore deposits) was the object of military confrontations between the armies of the two neighbouring sates in 1962, when some Moroccan troops occupied the

area but soon had to withdraw. The whole border dispute between the two states was formally settled in 1972 with an agreement that Algeria ratified in the following year, while Morocco waited until March 1989 (i.e. one month after the creation of the *Union du Maghreb Arabe*, UMA, also known as the Arab Maghreb Union). Set in this context, Algerian support for the Polisario and its struggle has had the implicit effect of keeping Morocco's irredentist territorial claims (the "Greater Morocco") in check, preventing them from advancing and being easily fulfilled. Through the Polisario's struggle, the Algerian state has benefited from Morocco's apparently failed opportunity to reshape the political map of the region in its favour (Zoubir 1997).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the creation of the UMA, and the efforts to achieve better regional co-operation and integration within the Maghreb, were coupled with an improvement in the diplomatic relations between Morocco and Algeria (Joffé 1993, Zoubir 1996). At the same time also Moroccan-Polisario relations got better: looking back, it was the period of most fruitful and successful negotiations between the two parties.

One may argue that the ideological dimension of the Moroccan-Algerian rivalry may have waned with the end of the Cold War and with the alleged discrediting of left-wing revolutionary ideals. Nevertheless, even if this was the case, it was clearly not enough to achieve a new, durable change in the attitudes of the two states towards each other and towards the Western Sahara dispute. In spite of the end of the Cold War, the idea and practice of a regional hegemonic struggle between the two neighbouring states did not fade away. Following several incidents and complex political developments in Algeria, since 1992 the diplomatic relations between Morocco and its neighbour have steadily worsened.[26] At the same time, the conflicting parties in Western Sahara have managed to

[26] Various "diplomatic incidents" happened in the early 1990s, and were mainly related to Algerian internal vicissitudes that brought unprecedented levels of violence in the country. For instance, Hassan II's publicly

carry on and implement the agreement achieved with the 1991 UN plan only with great difficulty –when there has not been a complete stalemate in their negotiations.

From this portrayal, it appears that the competitive nature of Moroccan-Algerian relations has been instrumental to the emergence and development of the Western Sahara dispute. It has been a major factor in motivating and fuelling the constant and committed Algerian support for the Polisario. It is difficult to overestimate the importance and extent of this political, diplomatic, economic and logistic backing. One could argue that, without Algerian support, the Polisario would not have been able to become the important regional actor that it is now, and its struggle would have had to assume a very different form (if any at all). In this context, also Hassan II's favourite definition of the Polisario as "a bunch of secessionists sponsored by Algiers" has its own, understandable logic. Not only does this definition show all the reluctance of the Moroccan authorities to regard the Polisario as a legitimate and independent actor in the conflict. Also, it clearly illustrates a very common Moroccan representation of the Western Sahara dispute as one between the Kingdom and the Republic of Algeria (Zoubir 1996).

This said, the regional dynamic, based upon competitive state ideologies and regional rivalry, has been only one, if essential, facet of the Western Sahara dispute. As noted above, Moroccan internal politics has been another very important dimension. The same can be said of the emergence of a Saharawi nationalism, which timidly developed under Spanish colonisation and has then acquired increasing popular support under the flag of the SADR. If, on the one hand, Saharawi nationalism could not have gathered momentum and grown without Moroccan opposition and Algerian cooperation, on the other hand its dynamic has also been greatly affected by other important factors. These have included, for instance, the considerable international political backing and the

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criticised the Algerian military for cancelling the democratic elections of December 1991, which saw the victory of the Islamists of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS). Also, in 1994 the Islamists were blamed for a bloody armed attack on tourists in a hotel in Marrakech. See, for instance, Esposito (1994).

military and humanitarian assistance that has been granted to the Polisario for its claiming the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people. No less important, the Western Sahara dispute, with its pre- and post-Cold War decades, has taken part in larger geo-political visions and strategies drawn by influential international actors.

Set in this context, any attempt at limiting the conflict to an exclusively regional dispute between two (or three, including the SADR) states –although rather common as it has been– would reiterate the limitations of state-based analytical frameworks. These can indeed be useful, but more so if they are regarded as active elements in the construction and maintenance of dominating forms of knowledge and understanding. These frameworks should be regarded as powerful means of shaping and eventually formulating local claims and aspirations: means of governance. In other words, state and nation-based analytical frameworks are part of what should be explained, part of what shapes the complex political dynamics of both "peace" and "war" and the very meanings of these two terms. What would be particularly interesting to analyse is how these frameworks become operative, how they penetrate local social geographies, shaping them, and being shaped too.

In the case at issue, the whole dispute over Western Sahara could be easily illustrated through its most common representation: a state occupying and claiming sovereignty over a territory and its people, while some organised "natives", supported by a neighbouring state, ask to exercise their right to self-determination. Strictly speaking, this is correct. What is missing, though, is that those "organised natives" used to be "great nomads" a few years before, with no attachment to any bounded territory or idea of "their" nation and state. More clearly, what is missing are complex social, political and economic dynamics.

The emergence of the "Saharawi", of their nationalism and of their state-in-exile – and their becoming refugees by settling in fixed camps and becoming dependent upon humanitarian assistance– are processes that show the merging of the local and the global. They are evidence of the local elaboration of internationally acceptable frameworks of self-understanding and self-representation that clearly mirror state-based, dominating analytical frameworks. One could call it the merging of global governance into the local. In this context, state-based analytical frameworks acquire a new relevance as essential means of this merging, particularly through the political, social and humanitarian resources that they can mobilise.

Processes of this kind refuse to be represented through any simple model of cultural, political and economic assimilation. Particularly at local and regional levels, these processes generally combine conflicting aspects of both assimilation and rupture, modernity and tradition. The political, social and humanitarian resources that penetrate local social geographies bring dominating forms of knowledge that not only participate in the re-vision of the past in nationalist terms, but also open new opportunities that originally shape the present and the future. These observations will become particularly relevant in the following chapters.

Geo-strategic alliances and the dispute on Western Sahara

The conflict in Western Sahara has kept a relatively low international profile, in spite of the considerable economic and strategic interest that various states and influential international actors have maintained in the region. In this section, I would like to examine the involvement of some of these actors in the dispute.

Morocco and Algeria have been important economic partners to various European countries, such as France and Spain, and strategic allies in the political dynamics of the Cold War (Zoubir and Volman 1993). The two neighbouring African states have represented two different political systems whose ideological dimensions have roughly coincided with the Cold War divide. There is no doubt about the considerable military and economic support that the two so-called super-powers, the United States and the former Soviet Union, respectively granted to Morocco and Algeria. Nevertheless, the Western Sahara dispute has never been regarded as a mere extension of superpower rivalry, but as a conflict that has rather been rooted in local and regional developments. This position seems confirmed by the fact that the end of the Cold War has not promoted any substantial move towards a resolution of the conflict –as was the case in Namibia, for instance.

As far as the Polisario is concerned, the Soviet Union appears to have never been a direct provider of arms and other support for the Front, is spite of the socialist ideology of this organisation. The Polisario's Soviet-made weaponry has stemmed from Algeria, Cuba and (until 1983) from Libya: three states that used to receive substantial amounts of military assistance from the Soviet bloc. Nevertheless, this Soviet support has had important consequences for the Polisario. Apart from the military material that the Front has indirectly received, the substantial and continuous military assistance that the Soviet Union provided to the Algerian state has given this an overwhelming military superiority over Morocco. This military difference has affected Morocco's military strategy against the SADR. In particular, Moroccan troops have always refrained from launching cross-border operations against Polisario troops into the Algerian territory, and this has greatly contributed to make the Tindouf military/refugee camps a safe place (Zoubir 1987).

As for the Moroccan government, this has received continuous and sizable military and financial support from the United States, including arms sales, military training and intelligence information. Also the construction of the *berm* –the defensive "wall" across Western Sahara– was greatly assisted by the US, from its design to its equipment. The two countries have enjoyed very good relations for decades, and since the 1950s Morocco has been one of the US most important allies in the Arab world (Zoubir and Volman 1993; also Thmopson and Adloff 1980).

There are various reasons for this. One is the strategic location of the Kingdom. Bordering both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean coast, it can control the Straits of Gibraltar. Also, Morocco has provided access to port and base facilities for the US Navy and Air forces directed to the Middle East. But in addition to these military considerations, the Kingdom has been valued by the US also for the stability of its regime and for its pro-Western stance on regional and international issues, including Morocco's relatively accommodating attitude towards Israel. Furthermore, since the early 1990s the rise of the so-called Islamic fundamentalism in the neighbouring Algeria, and Hassan II's open opposition to it, have reinforced the commitment of the US to support the stable Moroccan monarchy. This been said, officially the US have always backed UN initiatives to settle the Western Sahara dispute, and have fully endorsed the UN peace-process. In effect, this has been the shared official attitude of all the most influential actors of the international community that have been more clearly concerned about the dispute: from France and Spain, to the European Union, Algeria, other Arab states and Cuba.

France, in particular, has been regarded as exercising an important degree of influence on both Morocco and Algeria. It has been so because of its past colonial presence in the region and because this has been part of the so-called francophone world.

Furthermore, France has remained one of the most important trading partners and a leading aid donor state to the whole region (Balta 1986, Sayeh 1998). While the European state has sustained good relations with both Algeria and Morocco, it has also adopted a strong, if unspoken, stand in favour of the Kingdom in the Western Sahara dispute. This clearly emerges from the very sizeable and constant financial and military support that French authorities have made available to the Moroccan establishment. For instance, during the armed conflict in Western Sahara, French sales of armaments to Morocco amounted to more than 2 billion US dollars: about half of the total foreign military assistance to the Kingdom in that period (Zoubir and Volman 1993, 156). Two more aspects should also be underlined. First, the SADR has represented a Spanish-speaking fracture in that otherwise entirely francophone region. Second (and no less important), the dispute over Western Sahara has been a factor that has negatively affected French efforts to promote increasing regional integration and economic cooperation in northwestern Africa under the auspices of France.

The role played by Spain in the dispute over Western Sahara is also relevant and interesting. The official attitude of the Spanish authorities towards the conflict has been one of support for the UN negotiations and the peace-process –just like all the other states considered here. Nevertheless, more than in any other country, in Spain there has been a strongly felt dichotomy between the posture of the state authorities and that of large part of the civil society. The Spanish monarchy and governments have long fostered good diplomatic, political and economic relations with the neighbouring Moroccan Kingdom. Shared standing interests and issues (such as trade, Spanish investments, fishing, immigration and drug trafficking) have made co-operation with Morocco an important and necessary priority for the Madrid authorities (Zoubir and Volman 1993). Furthermore, good diplomatic relations have been fuelled also by the

desire to maintain Spain's control over the two enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, located on the Moroccan northern coast (Damis 1983).

All this has made the attitude of the Spanish authorities towards the Western Sahara conflict a particularly delicate issue, not only, and not so much, because Algeria has been a major oil and gas supplier for Spain, but also and especially because the Polisario enjoys a very large support among the Spanish population. In Spain there is a vast and widespread public opinion that explains the conflict over Western Sahara as largely due to the irresponsible withdrawal of Spanish presence from the Saharan colony with the signing of the Madrid Accords. In this view, the Spanish authorities of the time are considered co-responsible for the acts of violence perpetrated against the people of the former Spanish province by Mauritanian and Moroccan troops: this violence could have been avoided by a stronger commitment of the Madrid authorities.

The great relevance of Spanish humanitarian support for the Polisario will be examined in more details in the next chapter. Here suffice it to say that the large majority of the Spanish population appears to be well informed about the conflict, which has been closely monitored by the media (Sayeh 1998). In Spain there are hundreds of grass-root associations entirely dedicated to cooperation and so-called cultural exchanges with the Tindouf refugees, and hardly a month elapses without at least one large public event being organised in support for the Polisario. Furthermore, Spain is by far the non-African country that hosts the largest population of Saharawi immigrants and citizens of Saharawi origins.

If in Spain a certain dichotomy between political and humanitarian concerns has been deeply felt with reference to the Western Sahara dispute, this rupture has been present in other contexts, in particular at the level of the European Union (EU). Just like Spain, also the EU has provided large amounts of humanitarian resources to the

Polisario: indeed, together with the UNHCR and the WFP, the EU has been a major provider of humanitarian relief to the Front.[27] Furthermore, also the EU has continuously reiterated its support for the UN efforts to bring peace to Western Sahara. The European Parliament has passed yearly resolutions in this direction, under the pressure of the European parliamentary inter-group "Peace for the Saharawi people". In addition, the European Parliament has regularly condemned violations of human rights in mainland Morocco and in the part of Western Sahara controlled by the FAR.[28]

At the same time, though, the European Union has substantially supported the Moroccan state in a number of ways. For instance, it has provided very large amounts of development funds to the Kingdom, which has received, on average, "eight times more EU aid per head than Bangladesh and Ethiopia".[29] Through the years, Morocco has been regarded as a privileged partner by the EU. This has seen in it an essential participant in the establishment of an European-led Mediterranean free trade zone, which since 1996 the so-called Barcelona Process has been preparing for the year 2010.[30] Also, the EU has provided considerable financial and technical assistance to the Kingdom in exchange for extensive fishing rights for EU member states in Moroccan and Western Saharan waters.[31] Once again, economic and political interests have had to be balanced against voiced humanitarian concerns, and the provision of assistance to the Saharawi refugees has been a common way of doing it.

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[27] This emerges from the data contained in various reports of the yearly meetings of the EUCOCO, the *Conference Europeenne des Comites de Soutien au Peuple Saharaoui.*

[28] See, for instance, the "Resolution on the Western Sahara", B4-0045/99, European Parliament, Strasbourg, 14 January 1999. See also *Journal Officiel des Communaites Europeennes*, various issues.

[29] *The Independent*, 28 January 1999.

[30] See the "Proposal for a Council and Commission Decision on the conclusion of a Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their Member States of the one part, and the Kingdom of Morocco, of the other part", Commission of the European Communities Document, COM(95) 740, 20 December 1995, Brussels.

[31] See Commission of the European Communities Document, COM(92) 296, 8 July 1992, Brussels. See also European Commission/Eurostat (2001).

In sum, the Moroccan authorities have received sustained military, economic and diplomatic support by all Western states with vested interests in the region. Humanitarian aid to the Polisario for the Saharawi refugees –as well as political support for the UN peace-plan– has been just as common, if more limited.

As far as non-Western states are concerned, mainly Cuba, Libya (until 1983) and, first of all, Algeria have provided the Polisario Front with military, economic and diplomatic assistance. As for other Arab states, the Polisario has achieved only weak results. The Arab League and most Middle East states have sided with Morocco (Balta 1990). Conservative regimes, such as Jordan and the Gulf monarchies, have unsurprisingly favoured the Moroccan Kingdom. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has offered substantial funds to it: up to one billion dollars per year during the 1980s (Zoubir and Volman 1993). Even governments of a more radical character, like Iraq and Syria, have tended in favour of the Moroccan state (probably in order to maintain a certain coherence with the attitude adopted towards their own ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds).

Having explored at some length the main historical, regional and international dimensions of the dispute over Western Sahara, the following chapters will take a closer look at the complexities of more local aspects of the conflict, focusing in particular on the Saharawi refugees and their nation-state.

CHAPTER FOUR

The refugee camps as a place of revolution: the humanitarian state

The camps of the Polisario in south-western Algeria have been much more than a place where refugees from Western Sahara have survived and sheltered from Moroccan troops. These settlements have become, in effect, a local and international symbol of the Saharawi national struggle for an independent Western Sahara. More generally, the refugee camps of the Front appear to have played a paramount role in the construction of a Saharawi state and of a Saharawi nation, and this is the perspective from which I look at these camps in the present chapter.

Following an account of my visit to the Saharawi settlements, I will examine the layout of the refugee camps and their administrative organisation. Above all, I will focus on some features of the settlements which appear to have been particularly influential in the development of an "imagined" national community, such as the physical similarity and homogeneous organisation of the four settlements, and their construction as an accurate reproduction to scale of Western Sahara.

Moreover, it will be argued that the refugee camps have played a no less significant role in hiding and –at least apparently– marginalising certain aspects of social and economic life, such as livestock and tribal affiliation. Tribes, in particular, have long been regarded by the leadership of the Polisario as a dangerous, "anti-national" reality, and then as something that should not find any space in the national settlements. The relationship between the Polisario, its refugees-citizens and tribes is a complex issue which will be examined at length also in the following chapters. Here, it is important to

acknowledge the existence of a hidden geography of tribal resistance in the Front's settlements. It will be shown, in fact, that the officially marginalised Saharawi tribes have been constantly present in the camps, among the refugees, in a number of ways.

Recalling Foucault's terminology, I will then propose a portrayal of the Polisario's camps as a "technology of power": a device intended to shape its inmates' relationships and their understandings of themselves and of others. The introduction of this concept will allow to highlight the symbiotic relationship between the *national* camps and the *international* political environment that has surrounded and supported them. This relationship will be further investigated through the representation of the Polisario's Republic as a "humanitarian state": that is as a political-territorial entity which has been entirely dependent upon humanitarian assistance, and then upon the management of external support and expectations. Caught between its dependency upon other states' cooperation and the need of managing its citizens' support, it will be argued that the "humanitarian state" has bridged the international level and the local one through the administration of its humanitarian emergency.

Destination Tindouf

I was in Oxford when I began to prepare my journey to the Saharawi refugee camps. It was November 1998, a time when the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly advised its citizens against entering Algeria: a large number of Algerian civilians and foreigners had been killed during the previous months. I remember thinking that reaching the camps would probably take days and that it would not be easy to obtain the Algerian

visa, nor the permission of the Polisario to enter the territory under its temporary jurisdiction, in south-western Algeria.

Fortunately, I was wrong. A phone call to Kamal –one of the two representatives of the Polisario in London– dissolved almost all my fears. I could choose between flying directly to Tindouf (the small Algerian town about 25 miles to the north of the closest Saharawi refugee camp) from Bologna, Rome or Naples, or from any of the main Spanish cities. Special charter flights are organised each year in March and October, when a few European NGOs hire planes of the Algerian Airline. On these occasions scores of Saharawi and thousands of European citizens fly to Tindouf and then spend a few days in the refugee camps. Alternatively –Kamal added– I could buy a standard ticket to Tindouf via Algiers. It would be more expensive, but I could choose on which day I would fly.

I decided to buy a charter ticket on a plane leaving from Grand Canary (Spain) in March 1999. From London Kamal faxed my name to the Polisario representative in Las Palmas of Grand Canary. This put my name on the list of passengers, to whom the local Algerian consulate granted a collective visa. I would get my ticket at the new airport of Grand Canary on the day of the flight, in the early afternoon –Kamal told me. A few months later I was pleased to see that he was right: there I received my ticket and the assurance that I had a visa to enter Algeria and could embark with the other passengers, who were either Saharawi or Spanish (or both things at once). It was my first experience of the renowned organisational efficiency of the Polisario.

The flight took about seven hours. Going straight from Grand Canary to Tindouf would take less than two hours, but it would require entering the air space of Western Sahara, and that was not possible. A helpful Spanish doctor in her third trip to the camps

explained to me that many passengers were Saharawi, and Morocco does not allow any planes carrying Saharawi to enter the air space of the Kingdom.

The Spanish doctor was going to Semara, one of the four refugee camps. An unexpectedly friendly and relaxed, if at times sleepy, atmosphere quickly filled the plane. Later, I realised that the majority of the passengers knew the refugee camp they were going to. The Saharawi were going to the camp where they or their closest relatives had their tents. The Spanish knew their camp destination too: most of them would be guests of the parents of the children to whom they gave hospitality during the summer vacations of 1998 or of previous years. Each summer, between seven and ten thousand Saharawi children leave the refugee camps for two or three months, and are guests of European families. The young refugees take a plane in Tindouf. Most of them land in Spain, but many others go to other European countries, such as Italy, France or the United Kingdom.

Also the Saharawi woman seated beside me knew her destination. After having spent five years on the Spanish island of Fuerteventura, she was now going back to Dakhla camp for a few days to show her baby to her husband's parents. She explained to me that her husband and she lived in Fuerteventura, which is the Spanish island closest to Western Sahara: just seventy kilometres of Atlantic Ocean from El-Aaiun. With its sands and dunes, among the seven Canary Islands Fuerteventura is the most similar to the Sahara desert and thousands of Saharawi live and work there, she told me. Many are employed as construction workers, but many others look after herds of camels: European tourists love to ride them through the sandy and volcanic landscapes of the island.

From Grand Canary the plane went northward, keeping the Moroccan Atlantic coast at a distance. After three hours it was flying across the south of Spain, then turned south-eastward and landed in Oran (north Algeria) for refuelling, under the surveillance of

many well-armed soldiers. It was night when, about three hours later, we landed in Tindouf. Three trucks with three different route signs were waiting for us: one for Semara camp, one for El-Aaiun and Ausserd camps and one for Rabuni, the administrative centre. There was no truck going to the fourth camp, Dakhla: being more than one hundred kilometres of desert away, it was too far from Tindouf to try and reach it by night (map 4). Those who wanted to go to Dakhla had to spend the night in Rabuni: some Landrovers would take them to the furthest camp in the morning.

Together with a few NGOs staff, I had to go to Rabuni too. There I would be under the responsibility of the "Protocol Office": the reception office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The Protocol Office had organised a touring program to fit my own needs. These, I later discovered, included a Landrover with driver. Kamal, in London, had already faxed them the details of what I was there for.

When I first arrived at the official reception centre in Rabuni, it was three o'clock in the morning. The few of us got off the truck, left our luggage in a big military tent and went for a frugal meal of bread and fried eggs in the visitors' canteen. Immediately after the meal, the other visitors went to sleep. I sat outside, near a man who subsequently offered me a cigarette.

Mansour is a twenty-six-year-old Saharawi working for the Protocol Office. He is tall and very skinny and has slight difficulty in walking (consequence of the hardship he suffered as a baby during the flight from Western Sahara –I was told). Among Saharawi, Mansour is one of "*los Cubanos*", the Cubans. His fluent Caribbean Spanish (which now and then bursts into his Hassaniya Arabic with spicy tones and worn words) leaves no room for doubt: like many thousands of young adult Saharawi he spent almost a decade in Cuba, where he obtained a technical baccalaureate. Then he had to return to the

refugee camps on a direct flight from La Havana to Algiers. Back in Africa, he began to work for the Polisario, obviously for free: no public job is paid in the camps.

Nevertheless, on that first occasion we did not talk about Cuba, Europe, Morocco or the camps. Instead, we talked about the cigarettes we were smoking. They are called "President" and are the cheapest on earth. Most leaders of the Polisario smoke these cigarettes, and all the soldiers too: they have them for free. "But be careful" Mansour said grinning at me, as if sharing a secret joke, "some people say that the Polisario put something into it, so that the soldiers don't think about... sex..." Then he whispered: "the stuff in the cigarettes keeps them calm...!" We both laughed. I told him I really needed another cigarette and then we kept on joking and laughing.

Later, Mansour asked me how long I was going to stay there, in Rabuni, and whether I was going to visit the camps. I told him just a couple of weeks and, puzzled, I said that of course I wanted to visit all the camps (I kept to myself the thought that, obviously, I already was in the camps). "You won't have time to get accustomed then", he said. "It takes six months, more or less, to get accustomed to the camps and their water". He then told me about a town, one thousand kilometres to the south, where it had rained a few days before, so now it was green and many nomads had gone there with their herds. "It's beautiful..." Mansour said and his voice sounded nostalgic to me, "there you can live as we, Saharawi, used to live... sleeping watching the stars and drinking fresh milk... If you have time, you have to go: there are cars going there very often". I was tired and ready to go to sleep. Before leaving, I greeted him in Hassaniya: "wedd'năk el mulăna, Mansour". "Pinga...Wedd'năk el mulăna... hasta mañana", the exiled Cuban replied. A few hours later I would see the camps for the first time.

In the early morning, a bus waits for those visitors who, like me, spent the night at the reception centre in Rabuni and are going to one of the near camps. Walking towards

it, the bus looked eerily familiar, too familiar to me. I almost immediately recognised its shape and its pale orange, and then the noise of its automatic doors, and I remembered its chipped wood seats and its cracked, striped black plastic floor. I ran up the few steps with my backpack and looked at the framed poster hanging from the thick glass behind the driver's seat: it was there! It was a timetable of bus stops, a list of roads and places that I still know by heart. It was my school bus: the bus I used to catch almost every single day to travel between home and my primary school, both in Modena, in Italy. It was now a still glorious but old bus, and the Modena City Council had sent it to the Algerian camps as "a gift from all the citizens of Modena" –me included, I guess. I reached my seat, on my school bus, which began to move at the pace of its own rhythmic metallic noises, as usual, but this time with a more exotic destination than school: the Polisario's refugee camps. On that day I believed in destiny.

Camps, gardens and other 'miracles'

The four refugee camps are located in a mostly flat, open sweep of the Sahara desert. Three of them were founded between the last months of 1975 and the first half of 1976. Ausserd camp was set up much later, in 1985. Their foundation was not directed or supervised by any international humanitarian agency: it was the effort of the first Polisario, assisted and supported by the Algerian and Libyan governments.

Nowadays, the Saharawi refugee camps look like four large areas of flat desert, each one evenly covered with a few thousands *jaimas*, the nomads' tents, orderly set up in rows. From afar, the camps appear to the visitor as a very homogeneous sequence of golden sand and white, black, blue and brown material. No architectural barrier other

than the endless, open desert circumscribes the camps. Nevertheless, before entering a camp, every person, it does not matter whom, must pass through one patrolled gate, located a few hundred yards from the first tents.

I asked the well-educated Minister of Information about the use of the gate when, on one occasion, he accompanied me from Rabuni to a refugee camp in a white Toyota Land Cruiser with a SADR number-plate. He was not wearing a military uniform like the one that top-ranking leaders of the Polisario normally use. Instead his plump figure was wrapped in a spotless, white *dara*: the distinctive male tunic of the Moors. Apart from being a minister, he was also a good driver (just like most Saharawi drivers I know).

He explained in fluent Spanish that the camp gates had not been primarily set up for the sake of security: the whole area is under permanent military control. Rather, the gate was a necessary step meant to accustom the nomads to respecting common regulations about the use of space. "At the beginning" he told me, "it was difficult: the nomads went straight into the camps. But not now... No matter what directions they come from, they know they must pass through the gate". The car veered and slowed down as it approached the gate. The minister waved his right hand at one of the few soldiers, who eagerly nodded in reply.

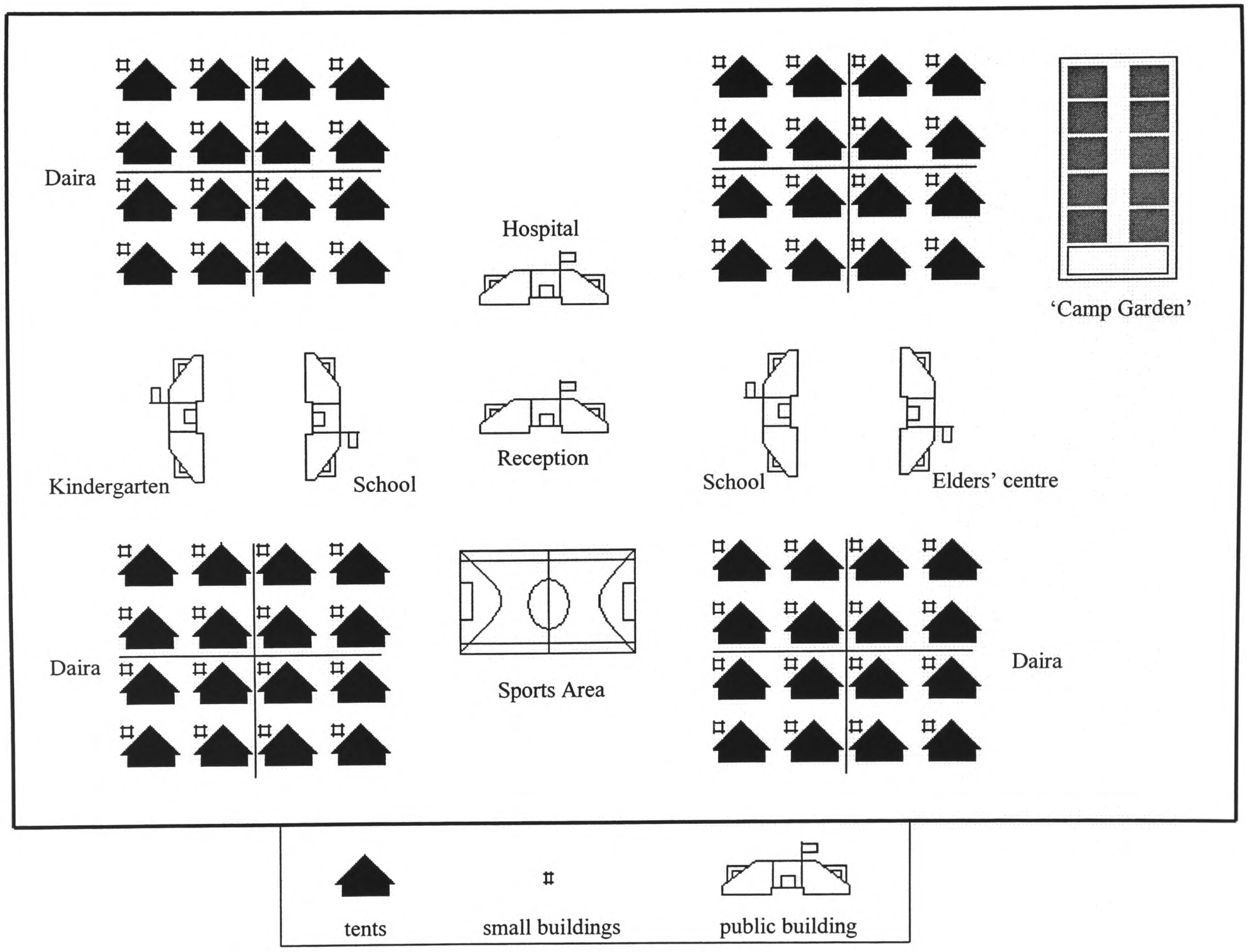
Past the two red-brick columns that make up the gate, one begins to see seemingly more permanent constructions. At a few yards from each large tent there is a small sand-brick structure, which is a lavatory. In addition, almost every tent has one or two larger buildings beside it. Their walls are also made of sand-bricks, like their flat roofs. They consist of one or two rectangular rooms, and are relatively recent constructions. Most of them date from the late 1980s and early 1990s: a period of turmoil and change in the camps.

Looking above these short and earthy one-storey buildings, a few sun panels, many television aerials and some satellite dishes make the view more surprising and unfamiliar to the "humanitarian tourist". Also, near tents and buildings it is frequent to see four-wheel-drive vehicles. Many are old Landrovers, others are much more recent ones: Mitsubishi Pajeros or powerful Toyota Land Cruisers. Many vehicles have a SADR plate (either a governmental or a private one). This too is a novelty of the early 1990s: there were virtually no private cars in the camps before then.

Within a short walking distance from the tents and their buildings, some higher and much larger constructions (some made of red bricks, others of mud bricks) have been erected. They are public buildings and flags of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic fly over them. In my eyes, the pattern of alternation between public buildings and private tents (with their small constructions) appears as one of the most prominent architectonical features that the landscapes of the four refugee camps have in common. In the middle of each camp there are the reception centre, the camp social centre for large meetings, various administrative and ministerial offices and the camp hospital. Around this core of higher, bricks buildings, each camp is divided into separated areas called *dairas* (singular *daira*), which are regarded as the different districts that compose the camp (see picture).

Also each *daira* has its own administrative structure and its own public offices and buildings, such as primary schools and infirmaries. This is the level at which needs are evaluated, and goods and services supplied, whenever possible. If a refugee requires a public service, such as medical treatments, she must present herself first to the competent office of the *daira* where her tent is. From the *daira* bureaux to the Ministries in Rabuni, the hierarchical order of all public offices has been carefully respected.[1]

[1] See Cistero and Freixes (1987) and Barbier (1982, 206-208)



Layout of a Saharawi refugee camp. Source: Cistero and Freixes (1987, 119).

On one side of each camp, the striking fresh green of the palm, fig and acacia trees of a plot of land under cultivation (known as "the camp garden") glistens and gives my eyes a sort of immediate relief. It became my point of reference when wandering through the camps, always inevitably accompanied. On various occasions I spent some time in the green garden of Semara camp. An elderly man, who I always found bent down working at the garden, told me that in 1977 he was the first to begin to grow vegetables in the camps. Initially he had no experience of agriculture at all: he was a fisherman before coming to the camps. He explained to me that great advances have been made in agricultural production in the camps since those early years, and that the present achievements show the great potential for agriculture in the future, in an independent Saharawi country.[2] He confessed all his enthusiasm for the idea: "Western Sahara will become one big garden!"

In 1977 the Polisario began to support attempts to grow vegetables in the camps, despite the particularly arid and harsh environment of this corner of the Sahara. In 1985 the Front officially made agriculture its first development priority (Firebrace 1987, 34).[3] The leaders and representatives of the Polisario I have met, have often portrayed the camp gardens as further evidence of the commitment of the Saharawi state and of its people, who have been able to make even this inner region of the Sahara desert bloom. Their words did not come as a complete surprise: virtually the whole literature on Saharawi refugees and Polisario's settlements seethes with enthusiasm and complacency about the Saharawi and their model camps.

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[2] On the "camp gardens" see Zreik and G/Egziabher (1992).

[3] Nowadays, about 150 acres in total are under cultivation, providing tomatoes, onions, carrots and a few other vegetables similarly resistant to the high degrees of salinity of the soil. Still, the gardens look like small green spots in the wide Saharan expanses that surround them. On the whole, agricultural production in the camps provides about the five/eight percent of the camp population's annual consumption of vegetables. Under the coordination of the London-based War-on-Want project, various European non-governmental organisations have contributed by providing financial and technical support for "the garden project" (see Firebrace 1987).

In the non-Moroccan material available on Saharawi refugees and the Polisario, one is likely to find that these people are portrayed as sincere, united, committed, self-reliant and well-organised African realities: authentic, long-suffering refugees and their devoted organisation, engaged in a committed struggle for their land, driven by the legitimate and confirmed unshakeable will of the nation to being independent. If something does not work properly in the camps –that is if some services do not fulfil the expected standards of the author or of the politician interviewed– then the reason for this is generally one or a combination of the following: lack of adequate humanitarian assistance; extremely severe and disadvantageous environmental conditions; and the excessive length of time that the refugees have spent in the camps consequent upon the incapacity of the international community to impose the just solution to the Moroccan-Polisario conflict, that is the referendum of self-determination.[4]

In providing evidence for the correctness of this long-standing and popular portrayal, many journalistic and humanitarian publications have spread the news of the gardens and of other such "miracles" of Saharawi commitment and self-help, when coupled with some support from international donors. After underlining the extremely severe environmental conditions that the camps enjoy, they have usually acknowledged and celebrated achievements such as the camp educational and healthcare systems, the constant (and compulsory) participation of the refugee population to the running of the settlements and, more generally, the very good level of organisation.[5]

More than a decade and a half ago, in her book *Imposing Aid* Harrell-Bond wrote:

> "Algeria has permitted the Sahrawi complete autonomy in the areas where they have settled; there are no outsiders living or working in the camps. The success of this community in

[4] See, for instance, *The New Internationalist* (1997), the magazine *Sahara*, Hodges (1991), Firebrace (1987), *Western Sahara Campaign UK Newsletter*, *The Guardian* (9 February 1999), *Time* (1 February 1999, 43-45), *Africa Confidential* (September 1991) and *The Observer* (6 December 1998).
[5] For a rare and valuable exception see Thomas and Wilson (1996).

> mobilizing its own resources to cope with its problems despite its dependence on capital inputs from outside the camps, suggested that perhaps the "dependency syndrome" observed among refugees elsewhere was the result of the way in which aid is managed by humanitarian agencies" (1986, 3).

With an earlier report published in 1981 Harrell-Bond was one of the first Anglophone scholars to visit, and to write about, the Polisario's camps. On that occasion, she pointed out something that has later become common knowledge when thinking and writing about the Saharawi. In her words, the camps were about:

> "[...] an unique social experiment being conducted by *a nation in exile*, refugees struggling not only to exist but also to create the preconditions for a model African society — *self-reliant, egalitarian, and unified*" (Harrell-Bond 1981, 1-2; emphases mine).

When Harrell-Bond visited the settlements of the Polisario, she found clear indications of the camps being much more than a place where refugees could survive and shelter from armed violence and its immediate consequences. By 1980 the camps were already part of a future in the making, and they would arguably continue to be so. In other words, the camps were already collectively organised, and represented by political leaders, many other refugees, donors and other "external observers", as a necessary stage in the construction and achievement of an independent Saharawi nation-state in Western Sahara.

The next section will focus more closely on the social geography of the refugee camps. In particular, it will investigate the roles that certain features of the organisation of camp space, and of the development of public activities, appear to have played in the Saharawi national revolution.

A landscape for the revolution

Among Saharawi, when expressions such as "the camps", "the refugee camps" and "Polisario" are used to indicate a location, they refer to an area of a few hundred square kilometres in the desert. Saharawi know that this area includes four refugee settlements, as well as three national "schools" (called "the 27 of February", "the 9 of June" and "the 12 of October") and one administrative centre, Rabuni (see map 4).

In maps that some Saharawi refugees drew for me, the whole area of "the camps" was consistently placed very near the Mauritanian town of Zouerate when compared with my map, printed in the United Kingdom. This fact often elicited my question: "But it is not in Mauritania, right?". One common answer I received to such a question was that of course no, it was not in Mauritania: the area belongs to the "Sahara", and is between the south of Algeria and the north of Mauritania. Throughout most of my fieldwork, common definitions of spatial locations proved a great challenge to me, and then also to many of those Saharawi who patiently tried to explain them to me by making the unseen visible.

The capital Rabuni and its branches

Saharawi call Rabuni "the capital". It is an area of about a score of square kilometres where almost no Saharawi refugee actually spends the night. The governmental and ministerial buildings, the parliament and "the national hospital" are spaciously scattered over this area.[6] Their sizes are unparalleled in the whole region under the Polisario's

[6] I found the biggest public library of the SADR in one big room at the ground floor of the building of the Ministry of Information. Among books, official publications and videotapes there are also two computers

control. In Rabuni there are also the offices of the Saharawi Red Crescent, of the MINURSO and of the UNHCR. Rabuni is where all the most important political decisions are taken (it is an actual capital). It is the place where important international guests are received and NGOs staff are housed. Also, it is the only area under the Polisario's control that is directly connected to Tindouf (the near Algerian town) by a paved road. Water, petrol, electric energy and telephone lines arrive in Rabuni directly from Tindouf, and then some of these lines carry on and reach certain other places in the rest of "the camps".

Rabuni is also where all aid supplies are received and stored before being redistributed to the refugees. Within walking distance of the SADR Presidency, on a flat area many thousands of large metal cargo containers are lined up in three double rows, which are laid one upon the other. They form the impressive and monumental, tight perimeter of a vast space where all aid is delivered to and stocked up. Access to this space is under close, armed supervision. Among Saharawi, calling it "the first wife of the Polisario", "the Polisario's *hasi* [well]" or "the bank of the Polisario", are old jokes still rewarded with silent, if ironic, smiles.

During the past quarter of a century, containers have come from all over the world, filled with many sorts of humanitarian supplies and weapons. On some containers one can still read the names of their senders: often Spanish, Italian and other European NGOs, as well as UN and EC agencies. Located only a few hundred yards from this fortress-like aid store, an open-air military museum has an assortment of looted weapons of the Moroccan army. Anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, automatic sub-machine-guns and more machine-guns, cockpits of crashed Moroccan jet fighters and many different

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with colour screens, a television with tape-recorder and a wonderfully working system of air-conditioning. From the same building the official radio of the SADR broadcasts its programmes in Hassaniya and Spanish all over the desert around: one can pick it up in Western Sahara, southern Morocco, southern Algeria and in northern Mauritania (Nouadhibou included).

types of tanks are on show as a sample of the enemy's weaponry collected during the conflict. On some of them one can still read the country of production: generally the US or France, but also Italy, the USSR and the United Kingdom.

Rabuni, the capital in exile. The construction of a separate area exclusively designed to host the highest civil and military state institutions has been portrayed as a relatively common practice in the Middle East (Eickelman 1989, 105). Arguably, there are many more examples of similar architectonical solutions throughout the globe, particularly in refugee camps and settlements. Here, in fact, it has been rather common to find areas exclusively devoted to administrative activities and stable military presence (Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1995 and 1997b).

Nevertheless, there is something obviously unique about Rabuni. It is not part of a camp and is not a camp either: it is "the capital" of the whole area under the Polisario's temporary jurisdiction. As a governmental capital, it bears numerous signs that are easily recognisable and shared by refugees and others alike. From the ministerial buildings to the Presidency, and from the parliament to the offices of international organisations (all with their respective flags), Rabuni is a spatial projection of state authority, sporting symbols of this authority. It is a display that leaves no room for doubt to the visitor: this must be a sort of state place. If the Saharawi nation-state could be portrayed as a conceptual abstraction, as an "imagined" reality, then Rabuni can be seen as the clearest architectonical materialisation of this abstraction.[7]

Rabuni is a social space that lends itself well to representing not only the Saharawi state, but also the relationship between the camp refugees and the SADR.[8] Let alone

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[7] Cf. Anderson (1995) on "imagined communities".

[8] Also, "the capital" appears to occupy a central role in the collective imagination and representation of power relations among Saharawi: closeness, contacts and relationships with the capital are all liable to confer certain degrees of social, political and economic "weight" to the individual. One can notice this also in the fact that children (and most refugees and soldiers too) do not have anything to do in Rabuni, of course, unless they are ill and need medical treatment at the national hospital of the capital, the biggest and

sentries and foreigners, nobody sleeps and permanently lives in Rabuni, and this fact emphasises a certain independence that the Saharawi state has achieved in relation to its citizens.[9] Nothing in Rabuni belongs to any single refugee: rather, the capital is a sort of collective, national property, if any. It is as if Rabuni had achieved a certain autonomous life. Its different existence is not just local, but also visibly international: it belongs to both levels. Indeed, Rabuni appears to be the main node between the camp refugees and a certain outer, non-Saharawi and non-refugee world: a bridge between the local and the international.

Everything seems to pass through this "bridge" before reaching the refugee camps. Everything comes through or from Rabuni: food, water, petrol, electric energy, telephone line, paved roads, decisions, news and foreign visitors. All humanitarian aid is stored in Rabuni. Important decisions come from a meeting of well-known politicians held in the capital, or they originate from far other places, such as New York or Geneva, but pass through Rabuni. It is from the radio on the top floor of the Ministry of Information in Rabuni that pieces of "national and international news" are poured throughout the region in Hassaniya Arabic and Spanish, for Saharawi and Moorish ears.

This social centrality of the capital in exile has been constructed and maintained also through the capillarity of the network of bureaucratic offices that have gravitated around the capital and that have had to refer to it in their everyday working. Those big brick buildings that the ministries of Rabuni are, branch out into the four refugee settlements with their ministerial sub-offices: also these are brick constructions, but are much smaller versions of their headquarters in Rabuni.

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best equipped in the whole area of the camps. Or unless the children come with a relative to make, or to wait for, a call at the public phones of Rabuni: this is how they keep in contact with their parents abroad or with the European families that gave them hospitality during one or more past summers.

[9] But also the other way round is arguable: the independence of each refugee in relation to Rabuni.

As mentioned above, this ordered network of state presence on the territory has its own hierarchies and standard procedures, and camp refugees have learned them well. Generally, the inmates have to present their cases to the closest and smallest governmental offices (at the level of the abovementioned *daira*, or at the smallest administrative camp fraction where their tent is, usually named with a Spanish word: *barrio*). Failure to do so will result in their cases being remitted for consideration to the appropriate, competent offices. Depending upon the importance and urgency of the refugees' cases, these will gradually be put to the attention of bigger offices with wider territorial competences, and even up to one of the national ministries in Rabuni, when such an extreme measure proves necessary.

For all the refugees' convenience (and sparing of movement), in the camps the public brick buildings of the governmental offices are located in a central position within the areas under their administrative competence, be it the whole camp (*wilaya*) or one of the main camp fractions (*daira*; cf. Cistero and Freixes 1987, 118-136).[10] The spatial centrality of the public brick buildings, and their relatively remarkable sizes, constantly remind and make one appreciate the magnitude of the Saharawi refugees' public, collective achievements. Just like the miracle of the gardens (to whose mixed soils of desert sand and "humanitarian" European humus many varieties of vegetables now stand rooted), the brick buildings make constantly visible and present the central, permanent and successful character of the public and of the collective, of what belongs to every refugee, and to none of them. In this small and now famous corner of the Great Desert brick buildings and rows of trees have acquired a distinctively "collective-as-national" nature.

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[10] It is a strange combination of names: "*wilaya*" and "*daira*" are terms borrowed from the Algerian official system of territorial administrative division, but the general name of the smallest unit, the "*barrio*", is a Spanish everyday word: one more example of how Spanish is often made to make a difference with everything else, everything not Saharawi, around.

This said, more than the public buildings and the gardens *per se*, the feature of the camp landscape that is underlined here is the alternation between public buildings and private tents. Like their nomadic relatives, all refugees have been living in *jaimas*, traditional tents of one "room" for almost all purposes. Instead, state and humanitarian services have required many hard, brick constructions with several rooms dedicated to specific, previously unimaginable activities, according with rules of public hygiene, of scientific wisdom and of bureaucratic rationalities. From outside, the *jaimas* of the refugee camps are just like those still used by the nomads and still adequate to the nomads' movements and to the desert climate.[11] In the camps, the *jaimas* contribute to create a sense of place and tradition, of continuity with a nomadic past that has been left only a few miles away. The SADR brick constructions, instead, appear to underline the collective effort for change, its successes and the visible advantages of an awaited modernity.

These are important appearances that also contribute to make "the Saharawi refugee" all that she is. *Jaimas* and the SADR brick presence in the camps appear to share a prominent role not only in Saharawi eyes, but also in international and humanitarian images of the Saharawi camp refugee as caught between traditional misery and endangered modernity. Those same *jaimas* that contribute to make the refugee camps a place of ancient and familiar shapes to the inmates are taken by some visiting others as evidence of misery, poverty, underdevelopment and still inadequate humanitarian standards. Those same public brick constructions that, among the refugees, are evidence and reminder of collective commitment and shared successes, are taken by some others as evidence of the refugees' good will and self-help, but also of their naivety: evidence of

[11] Although inside of the camp tents one can find many differences with the nomads' *jaimas*, especially in the quantity of goods, of carpets, pillows and other pieces of furniture.

the eternal inadequacy of the refugees' own forces and knowledge to fulfil their own needs, which then loudly call for more and urgent humanitarian intervention.

The exiled land

It seems interesting to dwell a bit longer on what is chosen to be represented in the camp landscape, as well as on who proves to have a certain power to make such choices, and to plan and shape the landscape. Since the social environment always contributes to channel meanings, history, movements and relationships, the analysis of the uses of space can tell us much about social dialectics, power relations and about the various forces and actors involved.[12]

Space is an essential and complex social phenomenon in which forms of domination and asymmetrical power relations are inevitably embedded, just as much as practices of social resistance and challenge are. In particular, the organisation of public space plays an important role in affirming certain shared, often implicit understandings, and in extracting and strengthening collective and individual approval of dominating socio-political arrangements. At the same time, the social ductility of space (that is, the wide range of meanings and feelings that space can always carry) makes the environment also a powerful medium of resistance. If one takes this approach into the analysis of the Saharawi refugee camps, some relevant observations may emerge.

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[12] Cf. Don Mitchell: "Culture wars do not take place only in the field of representation. [...]Culture wars are often about how meaning is made manifest in the very stones, bricks, wood and asphalt of the places in which we live" (2000,98). And indeed "one of the chief functions of landscape is precisely to *control* meaning and to channel it in particular directions" (*ibid*, 100). Cf. Harvey (1989), Castells (1997), Foucault (1991; in Gordon 1980, 63-77; in Rabinow 1991, 239-256) and Jackson and Penrose (1993). But also Hobsbawm (1997).

It has already been suggested that, in the Polisario's camps, the erection of public brick buildings as the core of the settlements (and of their administrative sub-divisions too) has underlined the centrality, permanence and modern character of the "collective-as-national". This superiority in size, durability and strength over suddenly humble, fleeting *jaimas* has been stating the success of the Polisario and the victory of its citizens' national commitment and sacrifice. This architectonical pre-eminence of the collective (coupled with the miracle of the "green gardens") has also demonstrated and reminded a certain moral and mental superiority of the modern nation, and then of the citizens who proudly collaborate and of their leaders. But apart from these visible, at times monumental, national structures, the camp landscape has also "hidden" as much as it has paraded. In particular, two critical aspects of social life appear manifestly missing from the camps: livestock and tribes.

The very few animals that the refugees still own have been excluded from the camps. They have been kept in separate areas, at a hygienically reasonable distance. There, for the first time, the livestock has spent the day and the night far from the *jaimas*: a change that has firmly remained in the memory of many older refugees. With the livestock, a deeply rooted aspect of social life, history and tradition has been kept outside the Polisario's camps, marginalized by the modern national revolution.

The need to defend, feed and then move the livestock has long faded away, just like the large herds of the past. Because of the Polisario and the war, most refugees lost almost all their livestock along their exodus to the camps. More precisely, those who still possessed some animals at the time of the flight, had to give them to the Polisario: their milk and flesh were necessary to feed the soldiers in the desert, while the camp refugees could count on humanitarian resources. No more than very few (if any) camels and possibly some goats remained to each household of camp settlers. Such a loss can be

regarded as an important phase of the Polisario's national revolution. In fact, in the long run those differences in social prestige and wealth that livestock customarily shaped and made manifest were inevitably eroded. The Polisario's programmes of national equality and social homogeneity have been achieved also though violence, shared dispossession and communal loss.[13]

Apart from this "deposition" of animal husbandry, this loss of livestock and then of private means of production, social reproduction and movement, other critical social features have been no less actively "hidden" and marginalized in and through the refugee camps. In particular, this is the case of tribal ascription.[14] The official social devaluation of tribes has taken place at various levels of representation. First of all, tribes have been made to play a very marginal role in the Polisario's modern history. From the point of view of public, official memory, the Front's national revolution has been portrayed as a new beginning of history. In this new, national era the ancient tribes have been shelved as relics of a past of disunity and underdevelopment. Set in this "historical" context, tribal ascription has then been fought with the imposition of a total (if quietly leaky) public silence. Saharawi tribes have been excluded from the camp classrooms, from the SADR constitution and from any other public acts. More generally, in the refugee camps any public reference to the *kabila*, the tribes, has been strictly forbidden and severely punished (Hodges 1983; Briones *at al.* 1997).[15]

Even more than the livestock, officially the tribes have not been given space in the geography of the camps. For instance, the usual large meetings among members of a

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[13] Cf. Keen: "One of the most effective ways to control civilians is to destroy their economy and to force their migration into areas where they can be closely observed, supervised and perhaps fed. Such destruction and mass migration is not so much the unfortunate consequence of conflict as an intended component of it" (1998, 34).

[14] It seems very reasonable to believe that the greatly reduced role of animal husbandry in the refugees' lives may have appeared also as means to underplay the relevance of tribal ascriptions.

[15] According to Article 48 of the SADR Constitution of 1999: 'Il est une obligation sacrée pour chacun de: Défendre la patrie et participer à sa libération ; *Défendre l'unité nationale et combattre toute velléité d'appartenance autre que l'appartenance au peuple*' (emphasis mine).

same tribe or tribal fraction have long been impossible. Similarly, all periodical tribal celebrations have become just unthinkable in the camps. Furthermore, no buildings or public areas have been named after tribal figures. Only the Polisario's national history, with its celebrated dates and martyrs, has been given the relevance and authority to engender public names. Beside places named after national dates, and beside governmental buildings named after great national martyrs, in the camps all other places have been given unobjectionable names of locations, sites, and towns of Western Sahara. This said, in order to begin to appreciate the actual social relevance of Saharawi tribes among the Polisario's refugees, it is necessary to investigate a bit further this aspect of camp toponymy.

Since their foundation in the Algerian desert, the Polisario's camps have been a mirror image of Western Sahara, as well as the prototype of the future Saharawi Republic. The four refugee camps are named after the four main towns (and four administrative provinces) of Western Sahara: El-Aaiun, Semara, Dakhla and Ausserd. Each camp is divided into several *dairas*. Each *daira* is named after a locality of Western Sahara that belongs to the town/administrative province giving the name to the refugee camp where the *daira* is located. So, for instance, the *dairas* of El-Aaiun camp are named after the main localities of the province of El-Aaiun in Western Sahara: Bu-Craa, Bojador, Daora, Edchera, Guelta Zemmur and Hagunia.

Listening to Saharawi refugees talking about locations can easily be deceiving. For instance, during my early weeks among Saharawi camp refugees in Nouadhibou, I heard about the *unusual* journey of a friend's cousin who had left La Guera to go and visit some relatives in Tifariti. A fascinating trip -I thought- since Tifariti and La Guera are on opposite sides of the *berm*: I did not know that one could cross the Moroccan *berm*! Of

course, there was something wrong with my understanding. That friend's cousin had left the *daira* of La Guera in Dakhla *camp* to go to the *daira* of Tifariti in Semara *camp*.

From this point of view, not only the names of the places, but also their relative and approximate distances, are the same in the camps as in Western Sahara. For instance, both in the area of the camps and in Western Sahara, Dakhla is the most far away from El-Aaiun and Semara. These last two are relatively near each other and are well connected between them and to the outer world. Instead both Dakhla and Ausserd are deeper in the desert. Only Ausserd, the camp built almost ten years later than the others, has partly spoilt this otherwise perfect spatial symmetry between the camps and Western Sahara. In other words, moving within the area of the Polisario's camps is like moving in a virtual Western Sahara, with the obvious difference that days of travelling in Western Sahara become minutes in the camps, and weeks generally shrink to no more than half an hour (see map 4).[16]

From the Polisario's settlements, Western Sahara (and its modern national history) seems to boil down to the camps. These, as a socio-spatial device, as a "true fiction", appear to have played an important and effective role in making the Saharawi nation "imaginable" and real (cf. Anderson 1995). The representation to scale of Western Sahara in the camps has contributed to the development and consolidation, among the previously nomadic population, of a socio-spatial model of belonging that has been inherently national in character. Coupled with protracted enclosure and disruption of pastoral economy, this reproduction to scale has contributed to make national frontiers real and meaningful, and has made Western Sahara more of "a normal home". After all,

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[16] Forms of reproduction of the "matherland" in refugee camps has certainly not been an uncommon phenomenon. See, for instance, Renee Hirschon (1989) analysis of the "cognitive mappings" of Turkish refugees in Greece. Here, it may be interesting to note that Saharawi refugees have become very bad at using our standard measures of space, such as meters and kilometres, in any "objective", absolute meaning. When they talk about "two hundreds meters to go here, but five hundreds to go there" they are using these numbers to give an idea of *relative* distances between two points in space, and almost never *absolute* distances.

the camp refugees have constantly lived between El-Aaiun, Semara, Ausserd and Dakhla (*camps*) for almost three decades now.

As noticed above, this reproduction to scale of Western Sahara has emphasised the beginning of a new historical era in which the past, with its ancient names of geographical localities, has found a new start and has been erected on new, independent grounds. Also, the camps have been constructed and imagined by its inmates as a scale model of a *future*, independent (that is, Saharawi, non Moroccan) Western Sahara. After decades in the humanitarian hothouse, the Saharawi Republic in exile has long been ready to be rooted up and be transplanted into the near fatherland. Not much change would be necessary: just an adjustment of scale. The camp administrations would just have to be transformed into provincial administrations, the *daira* administrations into urban ones, and Rabuni would change name and place but would still be "the capital": the same Presidency, the same ministerial offices, the same parliament and then the offices of international organisations. Now, this two-ways mirroring effect between the camps and Western Sahara (the camps reflect the Western Sahara that the refugees had to leave behind, but the camps also represent the anticipation of what the future Western Sahara will be) can also shed some light on the social relevance of tribes among Saharawi refugees.

It took me some time (a few months) to understand the reason why there was something *unusual* with that abovementioned journey of a friend's cousin from La Guera to Tifariti: unusual enough to talk about it at all, for a few minutes, at more than one thousand kilometres from where it happened, and about ten days later. Clearly, what made the journey worthy of any consideration was not the fantastic crossing of the *berm*, as I initially thought. Instead, the Saharawi reason proved to be a much more interesting one to me. I had come across not the impressive, defying and resistant Moroccan *berm*,

which can easily be spotted from a small hi-tech plastic window on an intercontinental flight. Instead I had come across an invisible and so present, exclusively Saharawi frontier of resistance: here I felt a very privileged beholder.

As mentioned above, between the end of 1975 and the first months of 1976 three refugee camps were established: Semara, Dakhla and El-Aaiun (Ausserd was set up only in December 1985; see Pazzanita and Hodges 1994). These names were chosen because everybody knew them, and because they provided an easy way to distribute the refugee population between the three camps. Simply, the refugees were sent to one camp or another according to the area of their provenance (e.g. those coming from the region of Semara in Western Sahara were sent to Semara camp). Nevertheless, after the first months the refugees have been allowed to move their tents within each camp and between the camps as they wished, after communicating their decision to the appropriate camp authorities.

Quite quickly a clear pattern emerged in the distribution of refugee households among the three camps. Just like the areas of Semara, Dakhla and El-Aaiun in Western Sahara have generally been regarded as "the places of", respectively, the Reguibat, the Ould Dlim and the Techna tribe, so this same tribal pattern has been reproduced in the refugee camps.[17] And so, Dakhla has been the camp of the Ould Dlim tribe, Semara the camp of the Reguibat, and El-Aaiun the camp of the Techna.[18] In other words, if talking about tribes was severely forbidden and punished in the Polisario's camps until the early 1990s (and is still avoided in all state-related acts and documents and when refugees deal with non-refugees), yet the camp inmates have "resisted" this imposed silence by carefully choosing where to set up their tents: typically, beside those of certain other

[17] These three tribes (Reguibat, Ould Dlim and Techna) make up the vast majority of all the Saharawi, and almost the totality of the camp refugees.
[18] The most recent camp, Aousserd, is more of a mix, and no clear-cut tribal pattern is recognised there.

refugees, and far from the tents of still other inmates.[19] The refugees' language, Hassaniya Arabic, helps to make the meaning of this choice clearer. People have chosen their *karìbe*, a word that has two sets of meaning: "near" and "neighbour", but also "cousin", or "person from the same tribe". In this second meaning, the word was publicly forbidden in the Polisario's camps until the early 1990s. The refugees have chosen their "cousins" as "neighbours", so eventually reproducing in the camp space what was publicly prohibited: tribes.[20]

A first glance (and a few others too) to the Saharawi camps gives the sensation of great homogeneity between the settlements. Nevertheless, if all the camps have been set up and organised according to the same logistical pattern, to the same ordered sequence of state buildings, *jaimas*, and "camp gardens", and in line with the same criterion in the attribution of names to places, still the camps are not all the same. Rather, each camp is very different: the people who live in each camp are different, and the position of each camp in the social and political geography of the Saharawi nation in exile is different. And all these locally meaningful differences boil down to one category: the tribe. The great national enemy has managed to become embedded in, and to socially differentiate, the camps. And this in spite of all official efforts to construct an egalitarian and non-tribal national community through forced citizens' equality, spatial homogeneity and the imposed public omission of the tribes.

Set in this context, the whole geography of the camps acquires some new and unexpected meanings. In particular, distances and connections gain more vivid tones. For instance, that Semara is the nearest camp to Rabuni, and that it is the only settlement to

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[19] Cf. Goffman: "it is central to closed restrictive institutions that apparently minor satisfactions can come to be defined as great ones" (1961, 274). "We always find the individual employing methods to keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified" (*ibid*, 279).

[20] The emergence of this pattern in the camps is certainly not unique to the Polisario's refugees. As Eickelman pointed out: "The analysis of settlement patterns in many Middle Eastern cities suggests the continued importance of residence grouping heavily influenced by sectarian identity, religion, and tribe" (1989, 114).

be connected to "the capital" by a paved road, are facts that are particularly meaningful among the refugees. Actually, their meaning seems obvious: Semara camp belongs to the Reguibat, and the Reguibat tribe has maintained a dominant presence and influence in the Polisario at all levels. This is why the Reguibat tribe obtained the nearest and best-connected refugee camp.

Analogously, Dakhla belongs to the Ould Dlim, and is the furthest camp from Rabuni. The distance is really considerable, and there is no road between Dakhla and Rabuni: just over one hundred kilometres of desert. The Ould Dlim is known to be a warrior tribe of the strongest kind and the main rival of the Reguibat. Since the Reguibat have controlled the Polisario, the Ould Dlim tribe obtained the furthest and worst-connected refugee camp. The Ould Dlim has been kept at a distance, so to be more easily controllable and less of a threat. Also, the Ould Dlim has been kept as far as possible from the place where humanitarian resources have been stored: in "the bank of the Polisario", in Rabuni.[21]

The *unusual* aspect of the journey of that friend's cousin may now be clear. Going from La Guera in Dakhla camp to Tifariti in Semara camp, he simply crossed the most felt among the various spatial/tribal lines that have traversed the Polisario's camps: the invisible boundary between Dakhla/Ould Dlim and Semara/Reguibat. All this shows that, in the Saharawi camps, tribes have been eradicated from public life and official space, but only to re-emerge in every silence and in the meanings of possibly every distance.

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[21] But again, nearness, distance and patterns of spatial connection are rich in meanings, and prone to acquire new ones of changing tones. So, for instance, the camp of the Ould Dlim is the furthest away from Rabuni, a position that represents the successful effort of the dominant Reguibat to reduce the political presence of the Ould Dlim in state activities, decisions and access to humanitarian, state resources. But the very isolation of Dakla has given this camp a certain unique relationship with the desert and its positively invasive purity. This emerges in a number of features that, among Saharawi, are attributed to Dakla camp and to its people: the most beautiful women, the healthiest and whitest people, and a way of living that is closer to the traditional, nomadic one. The social geography of the camps has contributed to make Dakla a special place, and one where Polisario faced its most difficult challenge, in 1988. See the next chapter.

Here the themes of multiple interpretations of space, and of space being a medium that unites differences as much as it supports challenges, reappear. In particular, the humanitarian camps have represented the nation, have made it imaginable, and have made the state a central and essential social actor and provider of necessary goods and services. The camps have offered a view of homogeneity, collective sacrifice and commitment that has permeated the inmates' lives, and has filled the eyes of the humanitarian visitor and of the political supporter. Nevertheless, hidden under these same eyes, the settlements have also represented and renewed the tribes, have made them newly present and imaginable, with their tensions, compromises, alliances and bitter struggles, all united in shared, acquainting silence by the very sight above them, and by its strange, valuable and seductive generosity.

The Polisario's camps, 'technology of power' and 'circuits of profit'

In the previous section I have suggested that the "tribalisation" of the camp geography provides a relevant example of resistance in a social environment that has been both tightly organised and closely supervised. More generally speaking, it seems important to underline that virtually any social landscape can encompass forms of resistance to dominating socio-political arrangements. As Foucault put it:

> "one should still take into account –and this is not generally acknowledged– that, aside from torture and execution, which preclude any resistance, no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings" (in Rabinow 1991, 245).

Although they may be carefully hidden in the environment, these aspects of social relationships should not be underestimated. One reason is that they emphasise and remind the dynamic and dialectic character of all social life. Furthermore, while they often pass unnoticed, these forms of "resistance, disobedience and oppositional groupings" may then suddenly emerge as unsuspected, and yet paramount, factors shaping the development of local struggles.[22]

This been said, from the previous section it has also begun to emerge that the Saharawi refugee camps have been a privileged place for state agency. The presence of the SADR, of its bureaucracy and symbols, has become manifest and embedded in the whole social geography of the settlements. This pervasiveness of state presence has been carved in the very details of the camp landscape and in the structuring of individual and collective time. Apart from public buildings and gardens, disappeared livestock and omitted tribes, the state has firmly entered the household. It has provided standardised resources to all the inmates, such as the tent and a safe place where it can be erected, and then food, cutlery, crockery and blankets. These assets have entered refugees' everyday lives accompanied by carefully monitored standards of hygiene and nutrition that the inmates have learned.

Also, the state has actively intervened to shape both generational and gender differences.[23] There has been a time for everything: for the old age with its specially-assisted needs, a time to be either soldier or refugee, a proper age for one's first state-sponsored marriage, a time for youth's studying and then a time for their leaving the

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[22] Commenting on Scott's work [Scott, J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press] Cheater suggested that: "disempowered people subvert dominating structures and relationships and come some way towards achieving their goals precisely by *not voicing* their resistance to hegemonic power openly, but by exercising some other capacity or resource" (1999, 5). In the case at issue, the tribal social geography of the camps played an important role in "the 88", which was "Polisario's biggest crisis". The quite resistance of tribal ascription in the camp space also anticipates the "secrecy" of tribes that has accompanied the "post-88" period. See next chapter.

[23] For a celebration of the national commitment of Saharawi refugee women see Comision Obrera (1986), Consejeria de Educacion (1995) and One World Action (1993).

schools. Moreover, there has been a place for everybody in the exiled nation-state: women and the elders in the camps, men to the war, youth in the boarding schools, infants in the kindergartens. In the long run, the uniform organisation of the inmates' lives according to age and sex, and then the standardisation of spatial and social distances between generations and between genders, have also contributed to construct a reservoir of shared experiences and characteristic patterns of life among the SADR citizenship.[24]

From these and previous observations, "the refugee camps" emerge as a complex (but not incomprehensible) device characterised by physical enclosure, by the meticulous public organisation of collective and individual uses of space and time, as well as by state administration of all, standardised goods and services available to the inmates. Set in this context, the camps can usefully be portrayed as an example of what Foucault named "*techne*" or "technology": "a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal" (in Rabinow, 1991, 255). To be more accurate in the use of Foucault's terminology, the Polisario's camps can be regarded as a "technology of power": that is an apparatus governed by the conscious goal of ordering clusters of human relations through the development of a specific body of knowledge about (and among) its inmates.[25] In other words, camps can be described as a device aimed at shaping and regulating refugees' social relationships through the production of certain "discourses of truth": categories of

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[24] It seems that the state has successfully shaped generational and gender relations by remoulding customary roles in accordance with humanitarian and military priorities and concerns. So most men, armed and more mobile, have gone to the front (or, since the cease-fire, have undertaken commercial trans-border journeys), while women, unarmed and generally more sedentary, have largely remained in the camps. These previously nomadic people have successfully settled in the refugee camps for decades also because the SADR has substantially respected the different clusters of relationships that the various genders and age groups customarily entertained with production, mobility and also with obedience. The vast majority of the camp population has been constituted by the economically more dependent, by the less nomadic and by those more accustomed to obey among the traditionally nomadic population: respectively the elders, women and children. Once more, customary social relationships, state concerns and humanitarian and military imperatives have all been playing an essential and combined role in shaping social change during and through the so-called emergency.

[25] On a particularly insightful characterisation of refugee camps as a "technology of power" see Malkki (1995b; but also 1995). See also Schmidt (1998): in my eyes, hers is a particularly interesting and relevant article.

understanding and meaning that are common and authoritative among the very inmates (Foucault 1991).[26]

This perspective allows emphasising that the Polisario's camps have been a means of ordering the multiplicity and diversity of the refugee population –or, in other words, a means of shaping the inmates' relationships with other inmates, with non-inmates and with the whole environment surrounding them. Furthermore, such an approach permits stressing that the ordering of inmates' lives and relationships has been pursued also through the development of a body of "true" knowledge (one according to which Saharawi individuals are equal citizens, and the Saharawi largest collective is the Saharawi nation).

The adoption of this perspective of camps-as-technology provides one more, critical advantage: it highlights the importance of the whole environment surrounding the refugee settlements. Simply, no technology can exist in a vacuum: what takes place within a "technology of power" is constantly related in a number of ways to what occurs outside and around it. In particular, the "truth" that a "technology of power" strives to develop and impose among its inmates is deeply affected by the "truths" and by other "power apparatuses" that surround it. To make direct use of Foucault's words, "technologies" are "*machines of power allowing circuits of profit*, which in turn [re-inforce and modify] the power apparatuses [surrounding them] in a mobile and circular manner" (Gordon 1980, 160; emphasis mine). In other words, considering refugee camps as a "technology of power" forces one to pay attention to the "circuits of (political and ideological) profit" in which camps and their "truths" inevitably take part. In what remains of this section, I intend to develop a bit further this aspect, analysing the roles

[26] According to Foucault: "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is , the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (in Gordon 1980, 131).

that regional and global influences have played in shaping and sustaining that "technology of power" that the Saharawi refugee camps are said to be here.

As suggested in the previous chapter, the Polisario's struggle has benefited from Moroccan-Algerian rivalries. It is clear that the camps could not have been set up and maintained for decades in the region of Tindouf without the permission and active support of the Algerian authorities. From an Algerian perspective, this policy towards the Front and its settlements has certainly been rewarding: the camps have been a major factor in the Moroccan-Polisario conflict, providing the anti-Moroccan Front with soldiers, safe rear bases, refugees, visibility and resources. More generally, the camps have successfully fostered the development of a Saharawi nation-state that has kept Moroccan irredentist claims and regional ambitions in check.

From a more international perspective, the Moroccan-Polisario conflict may well have been a source of some concerns. Nevertheless, the setting up of the refugee camps and the transformation of the Polisario's guerrilla into a Saharawi nation-state has offered considerable international guarantees. In effect the SADR has proved to be a "wise" user of its means of violence; to be sensible in its employment of means of conflict resolution when sat at the diplomatic tables; to be effective and dependable in its use of means of governance in the camps; and then to be able to construct and maintain popular support and legitimacy among its refugees-citizens. In sum, the camps-as-technology have made a long conflict possible, but they have also proved essential for shaping this conflict into a classic, clearly intelligible and relatively safe struggle between two states.

These observations suggest that the refugee settlements have not only been means of shaping and achieving the diverse purposes of the Polisario's elite and of other SADR citizens. At once, the camps have also been means of attaining a number of objectives of other regional and international actors. In effect, the success of the Polisario's refugee

settlements as a technology appears to have greatly depended upon these "circuits of profit" that the camps have guaranteed to other actors (eventually strengthening and widening the "regimes of truth" of such actors). In particular, as a "technology of power", the national "truth" that the Polisario's refugee camps have contributed to forge among its inmates has mirrored and reinforced dominating "discourses and regimes of truth" –here identified with national frameworks of understanding, belonging and agency that have long surrounded and supported the camps.

In this context, humanitarian assistance emerges as an essential strategic factor. One reason is obvious: "the camps" could not have existed as we know them without international humanitarian support. This has been the vital lymph for establishing and maintaining this "technology of power". But these humanitarian resources have stemmed (for the most part) from those dominating regional and international actors that have benefited in a number of ways from the existence of the Polisario's camps-as-technology, and from the emergence of the Saharawi nation-state in exile. Indeed, humanitarian resources can be portrayed as the main channel through which these regional and international actors have shaped and supported this "technology of power" in its struggle to forge a Saharawi citizenship and a local "national truth".

It is interesting to note that the bulk of this support has not been provided in the form of monetary resources, but in the form of more typical humanitarian assets, such as food, schools, hospitals and other infrastructures.[27] There are various political and economic reasons for this choice. Nevertheless, what I would like to underline here is that the provision of this kind of humanitarian assistance appears much more profitable to the political economy of a "national technology of power" like the Polisario's camps than any supply of equivalent monetary funds.

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[27] See the yearly reports of the EUCOCO (European Co-ordination Conference for Help to the Saharawi People).

In effect, from the analysis of the uses of humanitarian resources in the Saharawi camps it clearly emerges that the committed international pursuit of adequate humanitarian standards in the refugee camps has been, at once, the struggle to construct, impose and improve modern state services. Indeed, there have not been any major contradictions between the international humanitarian effort to improve camp refugees' standards of living, and the economic, political and social strengthening of the Saharawi state. Rather, active humanitarianism has been an essential factor in gradually shaping the first settlements into organised national camps, where the inmates' state has become able to provide all necessary goods and services.

In other words, external assistance to camp refugees in the form of selected types of humanitarian resources has been an important factor shaping the characteristics and extension of state institutions and their agency. In the case of the SADR, this process is particularly evident since humanitarian intervention aimed at improving refugees' living conditions has taken place almost exclusively through the bureaucratic structure of the Polisario's Republic. Virtually all humanitarian resources for the camp refugees have been handed in to the SADR, internationally recognised as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi refugees. The Polisario's state has then directly carried out the distribution of such resources.[28] In this context, humanitarian support and the agency of the SADR have fuelled one another. Any distinction between humanitarian assistance to the Saharawi refugees and support to the SADR has become merely rhetorical. Similarly, any distinction between humanitarian projects and policies of state- and nation-building has become very vague, if not futile.

[28] Only in very few cases humanitarian organisations have implemented humanitarian projects in Polisario's camps without the active presence of Saharawi staff. In all cases, anyway, the authorisation of the SADR has been indispensable, while constant and close supervision of all phases of a project by SADR staff has been inevitable.

An example. Thanks to apposite humanitarian resources, through the years the SADR Ministry of Education has set up a rather efficient schooling system that has extirpated illiteracy among the young generations of male and female refugees. Having been regarded as one of the most advanced educational systems ever established in refugee camps so far, it has been the pride of the SADR. It has won international recognition for the social commitment of the SADR, and has been a source of renewed, enthusiastic international support. In the national boarding schools, young refugees have learned standard Arabic, Spanish and Saharawi history: from the nomadic past to the colonial era, and from inspired revolutionary Saharawi songs to the struggle for a modern, independent state.

Compulsory primary and secondary education in the camp boarding schools has contributed to strengthening national frameworks of understanding and belonging among the camp population.[29] Now and then there are healthy riots in the schools, some Saharawi friends told me: inflamed students want to leave the institutes to go and fight the Moroccans. Teachers intervene to calm them down and tell the students that there is a time for everything, and that for the time being their duty is to study: this too is an essential part of the Saharawi struggle, and many martyrs have died to give them not only the food the students eat, but also the chance to study.

Set in this context, international humanitarian assistance and the local state in exile can be regarded as two critical and interwoven ingredients of one process: the forging of a Saharawi nation-state and the emergence of a Saharawi citizenship. In the following section, I will take a closer look at the SADR as caught between its dependency on external support, and the objective of implementing its model of national social justice among the refugee population.

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[29] On the camp schooling system, see Velloso de Santisteban (1993) and Perregaux (1990).

The SADR as 'humanitarian state'

Since its foundation in 1973 as an anti-imperialist movement by a small group of university students in Rabat, the Polisario Front adopted a socialist and modernist agenda (see Hodges 1983; Briones *et al.* 1997; Hacene-Djaballah 1985). This was explicitly aimed at transforming what in the eyes of those male students from poor Saharan families was a still underdeveloped Saharan society, and at bringing equality, social justice, education and healthcare. Nevertheless, the project of creating an independent Saharawi state was not developed until a few years later, under circumstances such as Spain's new interest in an independent Western Sahara, the Moroccan-Mauritanian military occupation and Algeria's logistic, military and political support for the Front.

The very concept of unity of the Saharawi people showed a similar development in the Polisario's political programmes. Initially, the idea of unity of the people of Western Sahara and that of active solidarity among Arab Muslim populations in the region were clearly formulated in non-conflicting terms: local unity and regional solidarity were merged in one anti-imperialist struggle. During this initial period, the Polisario found some enthusiastic political backing also in the Moroccan and Mauritanian governments, to the extent that the leaders of the Front made plans for the annexation of the Spanish province to Morocco first, and then to Mauritania (Hodges 1983).

Two years later, following the Madrid Accords and the beginning of the armed occupation, the initial anti-imperialist thrust (which had sustained the Polisario's search for a wide regional support against Spain) was redirected against the new invaders: Morocco and Mauritania. It was at this time that the Polisario's leaders began to talk explicitly about an independent Saharawi state. The idea of creating a state in exile, the SADR, on the day following the date of the official withdrawal of the Spanish authorities

(February 27, 1976) came from the interaction between Polisario and Algerian authorities, these having much more experience than the early Polisario in international law and diplomacy (Damis 1983b).

Obviously, it was one thing to set up a state in exile with the support and counselling of the Algerian authorities, and something significantly different to see a Saharawi nation emerge. But in order to better understand the process of nation-building, it is important to investigate what kind of state the Polisario has established. As will be argued particularly in the following chapters, the sort of state that the SADR has been has significantly affected the social construction of the Saharawi nation and of tribes among its citizenship.

When I talked about the early years of the camps to some of the top-ranking leaders of the Polisario, such as the SADR President Mohammed Abdelaziz and Bashir Mustapha Sayed (brother of El-Ouali, the founder of the Polisario and its greatest martyr), I felt that those conversations did not help me at all to clarify the historical processes behind the emergence of a Saharawi state in exile. I just felt I was asking the wrong questions to the wrong people, and I probably was. Nevertheless, at a later moment, something they said proved relevant and rather interesting.

I was told that the first leadership of the Polisario was astonished by the extent of political and humanitarian support that the SADR and the Saharawi refugees were granted. True, the first Polisario had successfully gathered many thousands of recently settled and nomadic Moors of Saharawi tribes in the area that the Algerian government had provided. With Algerian support, the Front could even set up a formally independent state, the SADR. Furthermore, Polisario leaders knew they could count on rather sizeable provisions from the Algerian government. Nevertheless, nobody in the Polisario could anticipate the large amounts of humanitarian and other resources that were later put in the

hands of the Front, year in year out. Here, some observations about these humanitarian resources may be useful to the following analysis.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, since the proclamation of the SADR Algerian diplomacy has been committed to ensuring official recognition of the Saharawi Republic by those states with which Algeria maintained good relationships and, later, by the OAU. Following official recognition, these states have provided resources directly to the SADR (Damis 1983b, Sayeh 1998). In addition to this, humanitarian assistance has been supplied by international agencies such as the UNHCR and the World Food Programme, by the European Community and by a large number of mainly European NGOs.

This said, not only has the SADR controlled the resources provided by other states, but has also directly managed virtually all humanitarian goods and services aimed at the camp refugees (with only very few, limited exceptions). In this context, the Saharawi Red Crescent (the humanitarian arm of the Polisario) has played a crucial role in gathering international humanitarian resources and in putting them under the control of the Front. It appears remarkable that, following Algerian advice, the Saharawi Red Crescent was founded at a very early stage, in October 1975, when the flow of refugees from Western Sahara had just begun and five months before the foundation of the Saharawi Republic. It was the first official "Saharawi" organisation, and a cornerstone of the future state in exile.

No statistics are available to thoroughly quantify the humanitarian resources that the SADR has received and has been managing. There are various probable reasons behind this state of affairs. One is that humanitarian resources and the very number of camp refugees have remained delicate and highly political issues, with important military connotations.[30] Another reason behind the absence of data is that most humanitarian

[30] The demographic data about the camp population provided by the SADR and by Moroccan authorities are likely to be respectively over- and underestimated. Accordingly, these organisations have generally

resources have been delivered by states and humanitarian organisations to the SADR (directly or through the Saharawi Red Crescent) as goods and services for which no monetary estimations are available.[31]

The numerous difficulties in attributing monetary values to humanitarian supplies add up to an actual impossibility when one tries to track down what these assets actually are and their sources. The Polisario's own network of cooperative humanitarian organisations is too wide to allow any organisation (except, maybe, the Saharawi Red Crescent and the SADR Ministry of Economy) to make up this information. It is an international, inter-continental network that also includes a few hundreds NGOs. Some of these organisations have cooperated with the SADR authorities constantly and for decades, and a number of them have exclusively been set up to provide support and solidarity to the Polisario and the Saharawi refugees. Other NGOs have supplied humanitarian resources only on one or few occasions.

In this context, for the Polisario Front a major diplomatic and economic achievement has been the organisation of a yearly "European Co-ordination Conference for Help to Saharawi People" (EUCOCO) which, since 1985, has been gathering representatives of many NGOs. One of the objectives of these international meetings has been to enhance knowledge of, and solidarity with, the struggle of the Saharawi refugees. These conferences have been organised in a different European city each year, and for the occasion a number of relevant public events have been held.

Other objectives of the yearly conference have included the creation and facilitation of cross-cooperation among the NGOs themselves, as well as providing each organisation with the chance of showing to others its commitment and the quality of its

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portrayed humanitarian assistance to the refugees as being respectively still insufficient and excessive, but have not been able to provide approximate monetary values or relatively complete lists of delivered items and services that would support their judgements.

[31] For instance, it has not been possible to monetarily quantify the camp refugees' requirements of gas and petrol, which are satisfied by the Algerian authorities completely free of charge.

political and economic involvement with the Saharawi struggle. The final reports of these conferences provide an idea of the variety of resources that, each year, have been made available to the refugees through their state. Nevertheless, generally no monetary values are provided in these reports, and the NGOs that have attended the EUCOCO meetings have remained a small minority of those who are part of the Polisario's humanitarian network.

As the SADR does not provide comprehensive official data on humanitarian and other resources either, the only reliable information remains what has emerged through interviews with leaders of the Polisario and of its state, the SADR. For instance, in an interview of 1989 Mohammed Habibulah –at the time President of the Saharawi Red Crescent– stated that:

> "International aid to the Saharawi people can be estimated in hundreds of millions of dollars per year within the framework of cooperation with friendly states, governmental and non-governmental organisations, in addition to the committees of support and solidarity" (*Sahara Libre*, November 1989, no. 350, p. 7; my translation).

During my interviews with some leaders of the Polisario, this amount was confirmed and updated to no less than five hundred millions US dollars per year at the end of the 1990s, for a refugee population that the Polisario officially put at 170,000 people.[32] When compared with the *per capita* average income available to the non-refugee population of the region, each SADR citizen emerges as entitled to a considerably higher income.

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[32] That is about 2,900 US$ per refugee per year (or 240 US$ per refugee per month). This amount appears to be particularly high when compared with the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of the neighbouring countries. For instance, the GNI per capita for Algerian, Mauritanian and Moroccan citizens has been quantified in, respectively, 1,590 US$, 370 US$ and 1,180 US$ for the year 2000 (The World Bank 2002, 232-233). Therefore, the yearly humanitarian resources per capita for the Polisario's refugees (2,900 US$) have amounted to *respectively* the 182%, 784% and 246% of the per capita GNI for the citizens of the three neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the number of Saharawi refugees used here (170,000 people) is the official one given by Polisario: it is likely to be over-estimated.

This said, since its foundation the Polisario's state has had a population of citizens (the refugees), a territory (a large area of Algerian desert that includes the four refugee camps) and growing humanitarian resources to gradually set up, justify and give actual responsibilities to a relatively large and comprehensive state bureaucracy. Given these conditions, the SADR has progressively provided more and better camp services, ranging from delivery of food and water to cleansing and refuse collection services, from healthcare and education to the supply of a tent, food for the party and other requirements to each new married couple of refugees.

Having no other real wealth but the lives of the refugees, no other undisputed entitlement but the internationally recognised right to self-determination of the Saharawi people, and having no access to any public revenues other than those spontaneously made available by other states, international organisations and NGOs, the SADR can usefully be portrayed as a "*humanitarian state*".

This is a state (with its written constitution, its legislative, juridical and executive powers, its ministries, bureaucracy and its army) that is constantly and entirely dependent upon the support of other states and on resources provided by the international system of humanitarian assistance. It is a state that was born in and through a "humanitarian emergency" and whose structures and activities have been thoroughly permeated by its primary, vital task: *managing* the emergency. Its strength has lain in inter-state rivalries as much as in diplomacy. It has constantly developed its capacity to maintain visibility and actual support for its political and humanitarian causes. Among its top priorities it has quickly discovered the need to "prove fit" to be a modern state: well organised, socially committed, responsible, serious and just against the odds and in spite of great adversities. More than most other states, this "humanitarian" one has heavily relied on

that particular aspect of the politics of representation that concerns the *images of itself* that such state gives out to the international community.[33]

From both an economic and political point of view, this "humanitarian state" is an organisation that simply cannot exist without external support. The SADR has maintained a tiny citizenship, a tiny army and a tiny budget when compared with Morocco.[34] A military solution favourable to the SADR has remained extremely unlikely, to say the least. In spite of the centrality of increasing camp refugees' demographic growth in the Polisario's policy and political economy, the number of Saharawi refugee-citizens has remained extremely exiguous when compared to the thirty million Moroccans. This relatively scanty number has always been liable to easily devalue the relevance of the Polisario's struggle from the point of view of so-called *realpolitik*. This helps explain why the Front's high politics has almost inevitably been one of non-negotiable demands: a politics of high principles, hinged on the non-negotiable and inalienable nature of the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people.[35] In this context, managing international support has been vital to the political and economic survival of the SADR, and has required the constant pursuit of certain forms of *state excellence*.

For instance, the SADR has eagerly taken part in international meetings when invited. It has maintained a strict compliance with decisions and directives of the UN,

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[33] Indeed, "what *nsara* [Europeans, literally Christians] would think" is a constant worry not only for Polisario politicians, but also for other camp refugees in general. The same sentence from parents' mouths haunts lively camp children, whether *nsara* are around or not.

[34] This is a comparison based on absolute quantities. The result would be rather different if one compares relative quantities, that is absolute quantities divided by the respective population of each of the two states. But absolute quantities do matter in a number of situations and contexts, particularly in international politics and economics and in armed conflicts.

[35] This aspect also contributes to explain the diplomatic intractability of the Morocco-Polisario dispute over Western Sahara and the constant, sheer difficulties met during negotiations between the two official parties in conflict. Not many concessions are compatible with the defence and upholding of the right to self-determination. Indeed the very difficulty of the negotiations and the lack of concessions appear as means to restate the seriousness and commitment of each party when dealing with its own nationalist claims, and with their enemy. But the international community has managed to keep the negotiations open, in spite of the very limited successes achieved so far.

and a serious and committed involvement with the OAU since it was accepted as one of its member states. Diplomacy has been a constant political and economic priority. Considering the size of its citizenship, the Polisario's SADR has kept a very large number of diplomatic representatives throughout the globe, from Algiers to Madrid, Rome and London, and from New Delhi to Sidney. As mentioned above, this diplomatic organisation has played an essential role in creating and maintaining the Front's own worldwide network of governmental and civil, political and humanitarian support.

In line with these political and diplomatic efforts, the SADR has carefully respected undisputed international rules, such as those concerning the treatment of war prisoners. And so it has allowed representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross to periodically visit Moroccan prisoners in the camps and to write positive reports about their living conditions in captivity.[36]

Also the military behaviour of the Saharawi state has been irreproachable: there have been very few reported casualties among Moroccan civilians directly due to SPLA's military operations, and the Polisario has always avoided and openly condemned a strategy of terrorist attacks (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994). Unsurprisingly, the Front has publicly regarded armed violence as an unfortunately necessary evil, and its legitimate use by the soldier-refugees as the most concrete sign of the reality and depth of the nationalist commitment of the Saharawi people (Hacene-Djaballah 1985).

From a more inward-looking perspective, this "humanitarian state" appears to share a number of relevant features with the so-called welfare state. According to Scruton's dictionary of political thought, the welfare state is one that "makes substantial provision through law and administration for those in need: e.g. the sick, poor, elderly, disabled and indigent" (1996, 585). The SADR has certainly fulfilled this condition. Just like the

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[36] See, for instance, the "Update 00/01 on ICRC Activities in Algeria", available at http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/57JQRX?OpenDocument&style=custo_final

general model of welfare state, the SADR has assumed the responsibility of ensuring that *each of its citizens* (which are all camp refugees: people in need by definition) has had access to certain "essential" goods and services. These have typically included food, water, health and educational services, and then also public programmes particularly aimed at the sick, the elderly and the disabled among the refugee population.

Just like the welfare state, the humanitarian one sustains an ideal and practice of social justice hinged on state agency. In both cases it is the state that readily bears the burden of guaranteeing that all citizens enjoy equal opportunities of access to certain essential goods and services. In both cases, the state justifies its constant, maybe invasive, presence among its citizenship on the grounds that no other social agent or mechanism could guarantee such a social justice as the state does. The welfare state has typically affirmed its supremacy over the "free market" and its injustices, and has intervened to "regulate" the fluctuations of demand and supply of certain critical markets, first of all those of labour and capital (Griffin 1989). The humanitarian state, instead, can assert its superiority over other local agents and social mechanisms that it regards as a threat to the legitimacy of the state and to the unity of the nation.

In the case of the SADR, the leadership has constantly sustained the primacy of its state model of social justice over its most elusive national enemy: the Saharawi tribes. The Polisario's humanitarian state has constantly tried to show that, through its national egalitarianism, it can guarantee to each citizen more than what each tribe could ensure to its members. Indeed, as a state the SADR has had access to economic, political, military and spatial resources, and has been able to provide goods, services and weapons (along with new valuable opportunities –see chapter six) well beyond what any Saharawi tribe could ever do.

As will be argued further in the next two chapters, the large amounts of external resources managed by the SADR have been used in ways that have shaped local understandings of nation as being more rewarding than tribes, while nation and tribes have been officially constructed as antithetic, conflicting realities. In particular, in its refugee camps the SADR has implemented a model of egalitarian, state-led national justice. It has been able to do so thanks to its capacity to attract external resources and to re-distribute them locally on the principle that all citizens have equal rights. In so doing, the SADR has constantly tried to sustain the superiority of its model of just, egalitarian nation over traditional forms of tribal social justice hinged on exclusive tribal reciprocity.[37]

To sum up, it appears clear that the emergence of the SADR as a "humanitarian state" has fulfilled several important objectives at once. It has satisfied the Polisario's initial socio-political purposes, namely equality, social justice, education and healthcare. Also, it has successfully attracted large amounts of external resources, and has established an institutional context in which these resources could be used and distributed in ways that have strengthened both local and international legitimacy of the Saharawi state.

The success of the humanitarian state appears to lie in this capacity to fulfil several layers of expectations at once, bridging the gap between the international and the local. The humanitarian state needs to attract and maintain the support of international donors and of other states, just as much as it needs to ensure itself the support of its own citizenship. The humanitarian state achieves all this through the management of its humanitarian emergency. It can grow stronger (politically, economically and socially) by

[37] In addition to these local effects (which will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter), the pursuit of such a social justice has internationally been appreciated as one important facet of state excellence. This pursuit, this strong public commitment to equal access to goods and services, has appeared particularly appropriate to a state in exile like the SADR, whose citizenship has been constituted by refugees: traditionally all needy people requiring assistance.

filling the gap between political and humanitarian concerns and resources at the international level, and the political economies and social dynamics of the local level. In this context, the humanitarian state bears a critical part of the burden of filling the gap between dominating regimes of national "truths" at the international level, and its need to forge and sustain meaningful national frameworks among the local population.

But while this gap can constitute an ideal soil for the emergence and development of a humanitarian state, it may even become an excessively comfortable gap to fill. In other words, the humanitarian state (coupled with a large part of its citizenship) may find easier and more profitable to manage the emergency than to actively pursue the attainment of a permanent solution to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

'The 88' and the return of the tribes

The Saharawi refugees who I know appear to have no doubt about the great relevance of tribes in their lives and in those of their compatriots. But they also know that this has not always been the case. They generally explain the present economic, political and social relevance of tribes as the result of a relatively recent process of "awakening". They conveniently call this process "the 88" since it began in October 1988 with some violent demonstrations which shook the whole Polisario and "awoke" all the camp refugees.

This important development in the history of the Polisario and of its refugees has largely passed unnoticed in the literature on the Western Sahara dispute. The main reason for this state of affairs appears to be that "the return of the tribes" and "the 88" have been considered by Saharawi refugees as a restricted, exclusive knowledge: something about which the least said to non-refugees the better. The fact that some refugees voluntarily shared this knowledge with me should be understood in the context of the friendship and familiarity which developed between us in the course of ten months of participant observation.

The chapter begins by setting the scene for the following analyses: it starts with a description of Nouadhibou and of my daily life in this Mauritanian city. It goes on to introduce my close friend Ahmed and report on a revealing conversation I had with Aziza, who is Ahmed's aunt. Both Ahmed and Aziza proved important, key informants for me.

The chapter then reaches its core theme: an account of the historical process known as "the 88". This account raises several issues, some of which are investigated in the last two sections of the chapter. First, the analysis focuses on the processes through which the present relevance of tribes among Saharawi refugees appears to have been constructed. While I argue that the Polisario's leadership has played a critical role in fostering "the return of the Saharawi tribes", the role of certain historical conditions of a local and super-local character is also taken into account. Secondly, I examine the relationship between Saharawi tribes and the Saharawi nation, suggesting that keeping quiet about "the 88" has been a way of concealing the incongruity between the two concepts.

Nouadhibou. Anthropological fieldwork in the economic capital of Mauritania

Nouadhibou is the Mauritanian city where I did most of my fieldwork: the place where I lived for ten months, between January and December 2000. This section provides a description of this urban centre: its main economic activities, its layout and its social geography. Most of the sections of this chapter and of the next one are derived from conversations, interviews and observations gathered during my fieldwork in Nouadhibou.

It may be useful to underline, once more, the meanings of some local terms that are often used in the following pages. *El beidàn* literally means "the white ones" in Arabic Hassaniya: it refers to the so-called Moors as a whole, that is Hassaniya speakers of claimed Arabic origins, whatever their nationality. *Nsara* (singular *nasràni*) is a term that can be literally translated as "followers of the Christ of Nazareth", Christians, but is

widely used to identify, first, all Westerners (Europeans and North Americans) and then most non-Muslim people.

The economic capital of Mauritania[1]

The city of Nouadhibou is located on the eastern coast of a strip of sandy and rocky desert (see map 5). As a Malian elder once told me, this strip is like a toe (thirty miles long and a few miles wide) of the Sahara, which teases and tickles the crabby Atlantic. While the eastern side of this long and narrow strip of desert is part of Mauritania, the western side officially belongs to Western Sahara. Just opposite Nouadhibou, on the western coast of this low headland there are the ruins of the Spanish town of La Guera: once a major economic port of the Spanish Saharan Province, since the Mauritanian invasion of 1975 it has been a ghost town. From Nouadhibou, the border with Western Sahara is just a few minutes away by car. From there, and for thousands of miles, the desert is divided at first by invisible mines (which now and then blow up unfortunate camels) and then also by the *berm*, the defensive wall of the Moroccan army.

Nouadhibou is the largest city of Mauritania after the administrative capital Nouakchott. The last census of the Mauritanian population was taken in 1976 and

[1] I must acknowledge the difficulties that I have met in finding updated statistical and demographic data on Mauritania in general and on Nouadhibou in particular. Since the end of French colonisation in the territory and the proclamation of an independent state in 1960, Mauritania has constantly been counted among "the least developed countries of the world" in the literature on development (see United Nations 1999 and 2001b; World Bank 2002b). Being permanently included in this category has not made Mauritania a popular object of international concern and of scholarly pursuits. This state of affairs is reflected in the relatively small number of academic studies that the country has inspired, and in the poor quality and quantity of the statistical information on Mauritania that the United Nations and other international organisations have provided. Indeed, even when compared with other "least developed countries", statistical and demographic data on Mauritania have remained particularly scarce and discontinuous (see, for instance, UNCTAD 2002, FAO 2002 and ILO 1998). In particular, no updated official figures seem to be presently available concerning the number of inhabitants of Nouadhibou and of other urban centres. Analogously, official data on major economic activities, such as those related to the fishing and mining industries, are scarce and fragmentary, and are available only for the country as a whole (see Annexe 1).

updated official data do not provide figures of the population of each major urban settlement (see tables A.4, A.5 and A.7 in Annexe 1). Nevertheless, common semi-official figures put the number of the inhabitants of the capital Nouakchott at no less than one and a half million people. Nouadhibou is said to have about one hundred thousand residents, although its actual population is probably double this figure.

Saharawi refugees from the Polisario's camps constitute a small but significant percentage of the population of Nouadhibou. Again, there are no official figures, but a seemingly correct semi-official one estimates their number to be about ten thousand people. The number of "Mauritanian" inhabitants of Nouadhibou, who are members of Saharawi tribes but who have never visited the refugee camps and who often openly deny any allegiance to the Polisario's state, is certainly much higher: hardly less than twenty thousand people. The majority of these "non-Saharawi-Mauritanians" from so-called Saharawi tribes are Ould Dlim (cf. Chapter three).[2]

Nouadhibou is often called "the economic capital of Mauritania": it is the administrative and commercial centre of the two main industrial sectors of the country, fishing and mining. Despite its privileged economic position, the incidence of poverty in Nouadhibou appears to be largely in line with the official data available for Mauritania as a whole. About 80 percent of the Mauritanian population is reported to live on less than two US dollars a day, while at least 40 percent lives on less than one US dollar a day (see table A.8). Also in respect of formal education and literacy, the population of Nouadhibou seems in line with the rest of the country, whose adult literacy rate was officially estimated to be 40 percent in the year 2000 (see table A.9).

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[2] The number of Saharawi refugees in Nouadhibou and the number of other members of Saharawi tribes residing in the city were provided by the representative of the Polisario Front in Nouadhibou, and were substantially confirmed by many other residents, and by a high-rank officer of MINURSO. According to confidential information provided by this UN officer, the total number of Saharawi in Mauritania who have officially asked the UNHCR for repatriation in the case of a referendum of self-determination in Western Sahara is 25,000 people.

The economic capital of Mauritania sports the only industrial port in the country and hosts the main offices of the national maritime authorities, to which all boats fishing in Mauritanian waters must refer. In the rich Atlantic waters off the coast of Nouadhibou at least 90 thousand metric tones of fish are caught every year by boats that fly mostly Spanish, Russian, Dutch, French and Korean flags (see table A.2 and A.14). While most of these fish catches never reach the Mauritanian shore, the still sizable part that is landed at Nouadhibou is immediately processed in small local factories and is then exported. Since the early 1980s a still flourishing fishing industry has developed in the city.

Apart from this, the other major economic activity of the urban centre is related to the exploitation of the iron ore of Zouerate. Every year more than seven millions metric tones of iron-bearing ore (see table A.3) leave Zouerate and arrive in Nouadhibou by what is said to be the longest train on earth: two and a half kilometres of ore and goods wagons, followed by two passenger coaches bare of any furniture (see table A.16). Starting in Zouerate, the journey ends in the well-equipped industrial port of Cansado, which is the southernmost quarter of Nouadhibou. There the iron ore is, at once, removed from the wagons and loaded on tankers. All Mauritanian iron ore is exported.

As for its layout, at first glance Nouadhibou looks like many other Saharan urban centres: a low city, spread over a large area. There are only a few buildings of more than two floors, and virtually all of them belong either to the government or to large commercial enterprises. The majority of the buildings of Nouadhibou are made of concrete and have one floor, with few but large rooms and a flat, useful roof. A thick perimeter of small dormitories of tin sheets and wood boards surrounds the whole city, sometimes forming its own peculiar sub-quarters (the largest of them being "*crà budu*", the "foot of the cockroach", mainly inhabited by "black" people: mostly low paid migrant workers of the fishing industry and their families).

Nouadhibou is divided into three zones, which look like three large, scattered developments along the main paved road, the *Avenide Mediane*, built under the French colonial authorities. As a few miles of bare desert separate one development from the other, the population of the city is "stirred" and mixed together by the numerous old but resilient green taxis, made in Sartre's France.

The three zones of Nouadhibou are called (from south to north) Cansado, city centre (*dàshara*) and Numerowatt (see map 6). Each of these three developments is visibly different from the other two: each one has its characteristic architecture and its distinctive urban geography. Cansado, the southernmost quarter, has the most linear layout. It was designed by French architects in the early 1970s as a residential district for the families of the workers of the *Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière* (SNIM), the state-owned enterprise that has held the monopoly of extraction and exportation of the iron ore of Zouerate. SNIM still owns all the houses of Cansado and rents them, first to its workers, and then to whoever can afford the rent. This area of Nouadhibou is the only one to be right on the coast, beside the ocean. In Cansado, roads are paved, houses are small and white and in ordered rows, public spaces are almost green gardens (with a few trees and even some flowers) and public services and facilities are better than those available to the rest of the city. Cansado is also the quarter where the MINURSO has its local office.

The urban landscape changes completely after a few miles of desert to the north of Cansado. The city centre (called *dàshara*) is an apparently chaotic mix of a few dusty, larger streets (four are paved) and of numerous dark, long and narrow, serpentine roads. Centred round its lively, square market, *dàshara* seems seriously engaged in a struggle against the Great Desert and the Atlantic Ocean: as if it were stating the centrality of its bricked, blackened corners in face of the planetary abundance of sand and water everywhere else. Almost all of the few buildings of more than two floors are here, beside

lower constructions, coloured in white, blue, light brown and green shades, or not coloured at all. And so *dàshara* is a resistant aggregate of colours, smells and languages: Arabic Hassaniya, French, Pular, Wolof, Portuguese, and even rare, spicy bits of Gambian English, here and there. Spanish is virtually absent from the streets, but successfully contends against French all along the telephone lines of the fishing and shipping enterprises.

A few miles of desert to the north, Numerowatt begins. This is the largest and most populated of the three zones of Nouadhibou. This is where I spent most of my fieldwork. At first, it looked like the most intricate, overwhelming and absurd labyrinth of tin sheets, dark shops, faces peeping out from invisible doors, more shops, low buildings, rare chalets and open mosques, all tangled up and tied together by a reel of narrow paths, suddenly opening out into empty spaces. Cut in two by the *Avenide Mediane*, this chaotic homogeneity hides a never-ending aggregate of enclaves. In the darkness of the night, it is the distinctive, alternating amalgams of smells and sounds of the enclaves that guide you back home. Here, also the different species of domesticated animals become talking signposts. I knew I was only a few meters away from home when I could distinguish the pungent odour of Vl-vl: the thoughtful male donkey of one of my neighbours, waiting beside its cart.

In spite of the great variety of individuals that live in each of the three zones, there are common local stereotypes about which groups, or categories, of people make up the majority in each area. Cansado, for instance, is regarded as a place for both "black" and "white" Mauritanians who are "workers of the SNIM": a categorisation that tends to overshadow the relevance of other social features when talking about this area. As far as the city centre is concerned, this is commonly regarded as a place where "black" Mauritanians and "black" foreigners live. But there is one exception to this rule: it is "*crà*

nasràni", the "foot of the European". Many of the richest people of Nouadhibou (mostly people of *el beidàn* but also a few Lebanese families and some European fish merchants) live in this sub-quarter of the city centre.

Terms such as *el beidàn*, *nsara*, "white" (either *nsara* or from *el beidàn*), "black" (either "black" Mauritanians or African foreigners) and *el pulaar* ("black" people whose first language is not Hassaniya) are all widely used markers in the social imagery and its geography. Especially in the quarter of Numerowatt these terms are translated into (sometimes tiny) social enclaves and are all copiously represented in the social geography of this area. Indeed, Numerowatt is not only the northernmost and largest development of Nouadhibou, it is also the most socially heterogeneous one, and is locally regarded as such.

While there are Saharawi refugees residing in each of the three areas of Nouadhibou mentioned above, most of them live in Numerowatt, where they have set up their most populated enclaves. When compared to the Polisario's camps, the urban environment gives great visibility to the sharp differences in wealth that exist among Saharawi refugees. For instance, in Nouadhibou some refugees are entirely dependent upon the support of their relatives and are forced to live with them, sometimes moving from one relative's home to another's. On the other hand, there are refugees who own some of the most beautiful and expensive chalets of Numerowatt and of the whole city. Also, a few Saharawi families live in *crà nasràni*, the affluent sub-quarter of the city centre: some of them are counted among the wealthiest families of Nouadhibou and of the whole country.

Differences in wealth among Saharawi refugees residing in Nouadhibou, as well as differences between these refugees as a group and the other inhabitants of the city, can also be seen in the ownership of immovable property other than houses and in commercial activities. Despite their relatively small number, the Saharawi refugees living

in Nouadhibou now constitute a clearly distinguishable group within the social geography of the city, and this fact appears mostly due to their entrepreneurship and to certain commercial opportunities exclusively open to many of them (a topic that will be developed at length in the next chapter).

A very high percentage of shops in the city centre and in Numerowatt either belong to, or are run by, Saharawi refugees. For instance, out of the 128 relatively large shops (not "boutiques" –see later in this section) that I have counted along the *Avenide Mediane* in Numerowatt, 92 shops (more than the 70 percent) either belong to Saharawi refugees, or belong to others but are run by refugees. In these shops they normally sell building materials, furniture and clothes imported from the Canary Islands (Spain), or food coming from the Canaries and from the Polisario's refugee camps.

Days in Nouadhibou

I arrived in Nouadhibou in January 2000 on a direct flight from Grand Canary (Spain). After spending a few days in a small "camping" in the city centre, I moved into a nearby flat that later proved to be excessively expensive, large and luxurious. When I rented it I thought that, although not cheap, the flat was very near the central market: a good starting point, I believed. So I rented it, but only for two months. Then, I moved into a much smaller flat in Numerowatt, where I spent two more months. Finally, I moved into an even smaller flat, again in Numerowatt, which I eventually rented for six months.

This last flat had a number of advantages. It was the cheapest one among the flats I saw. Located at the very end of Numerowatt, its position was discrete and unpretentious,

but also easy to find, even late at night and in spite of the virtual absence of public illumination. Also, its size and style were very convenient for me: located beside a new mosque, it was small and recently built, and had a good toilet. In the toilet room there was even a shower with warm water, although I soon found that I had to share it (and my one, huge bottle of scented shower gel) with my closest friends: those who had helped me to find the flat in the first place.

Apart from me, it seemed that only one more *nasràni* was living in Numerowatt at the time I was. This was an Italian woman in her early fifties married to a Mauritanian man. She has been living in Nouadhibou for twenty-nine years now. Alessia and her husband have three daughters, live in an enormous "Italian-looking" chalet in the heart of Numerowatt, and own a renowned hotel in the city centre. During my fieldwork in Nouadhibou, my Italian friend was the only woman with whom I shook hands and smoked in public. Also, she was the only person I could talk to about local merchants, exchange rates, ancient Rome, Chianti and "Che" Guevara while eating her delicious spaghetti with Bolognese sauce.

My days in the economic capital of Mauritania seemed to move round three centres of gravity: teas, meals and "boutiques". In one way or another, conversations, chats, jokes, interviews and explanations hardly ever took place without waiting for, or preparing, tea, or without waiting for, eating and digesting a meal, or without being on the way to a "boutique", inside a "boutique", or returning from a "boutique".

In Nouadhibou small shops are called "boutiques". The vast majority are very small rooms, dusty and filled with shelves of chipped boards nailed up. They are places of (mostly pleasant) draughts, of sleepy afternoons and creased cigarettes, and of long nights of male chat, tea, missing cards, radio and squeaky silences. In the "boutiques" they sell foodstuff, and many other goods such as cigarettes, soap, incense or nappies

(by the unit, multiples or fractions, down to half an onion, one glass of bleach, a handy spoonful of oil and, finally, *haatìni màlboro*, i.e. "give me one cigarette"). These public places are, first of all, for relatives, neighbours and other intimates, and then for people that (like me) have time and an interest in becoming good customers. Finally they are for people passing by who cannot wait to reach one of "their" "boutiques", and feel like running the risk of reshuffling their social networks a bit by stepping into an unknown and already familiar shop.

While there are only very few "boutiques" in the southern quarter of Cansado, the city centre and the quarter of Numerowatt seethe with these hubs of business. Here, virtually everyone has a more or less stable network of "boutiques", where one can (or at least can try to) buy, take, give, lend and borrow, find a relative or a friend, learn to read the Koran or show how well one has learnt, drink tea and chat. These "boutiques" are regarded as a *beidàni* thing: the other merchants tend to stick to the central market. But everybody else, everybody not from *el beidàn*, seems to learn easily and quickly how to use them: they are very customer friendly, as long as you have time on your hands and can pay on the spot, at least initially.

My days in Nouadhibou often started and finished in "boutiques". In the early morning, after an updating chat in the "boutique" where I bought milk and *emburu u zèbde* (bread with butter), I went back home and prepared breakfast: I knew my friend Ahmed would soon arrive, alone or with a friend of ours, to eat something together, listen to some music and chat. After an hour or two we moved on: normally to the market in the city centre, to a friend's home or to a friend's "boutique". If Ahmed did not turn up in the morning, it meant that I would probably not see him on that day. At lunch time, I had a meal wherever I was invited (be it a home or a "boutique") or with a friend in one of

the many small restaurants run by Senegalese women. But if Ahmed was around, then we normally had lunch at his uncle Aziz's home, or at his aunt Mariam's place.

After-lunch I normally watched television or played cards wherever I was, if I did not fall asleep as this was normally "nap time". I often spent part of the afternoon at my home, having tea and talking to friends. Later, I normally went out again: to friends' homes or to some "boutiques". I ended up having dinner wherever I was invited, or at my home. After dinner, on a quiet day I prepared tea while talking to whoever was visiting me. If I knew them well, we listened together to the Polisario's radio station with inevitable comments, jokes and discussions. Later we would tune in to "Radio Havana", which broadcasts news in Spanish and Caribbean rhythms from Cuba (to pick it up, Ahmed and I set up, on the flat roof, a fifteen meters long aerial of our own making). Otherwise, after dinner I stayed at a friend's home, at a "boutique" or with Ahmed on the road, to see who we could find to talk to, before ending up in a "boutique", again. The day always ended late, tired of talking or of note taking, or of both.

Apart from "boutiques", larger shops and other people's houses, my home gradually became a good place for conversations. It proved very useful that my last Mauritanian "*dar Nicolassa*" (Nicola's home) was within a short walking distance from the houses of Ahmed's closest relatives, and of many other Saharawi: it was located between two large Saharawi enclaves in Numerowatt. I believe that this location helped to make my house a safe and relaxing place for my Saharawi guests.

Ahmed proved a very special informant for me throughout my fieldwork. Also, his encouragement to persist in my research was as essential as his critiques of my hypotheses and observations. I spent much time with him (often whole days), and with his relatives and friends. It was only in the second half of my fieldwork that I felt the need to make some distance from Ahmed, although we have maintained a close

friendship. I took this decision for the sake of his own security, because certain aspects of my research seemed incompatible with, or marginal to, Ahmed's perspectives and because I felt that certain issues were more difficult to pursue in his company.

Introducing Ahmed

I met Ahmed for the first time ten days after my arrival in Nouadhibou. On that occasion, I met him in a house where I had lunch with some people who I thought were Saharawi. It turned out that they were not. They just pretended to be Saharawi in front of me, but they were Mauritanians, as Ahmed later explained. Ahmed is a Saharawi refugee, of the Ould Dlim tribe, fraction of Ould Tegheddi: a tribe of great warriors and undisputed Arabic origins. The majority of Saharawi living in Nouadhibou are members of this tribe, and I was often told that Nouadhibou belongs to the Ould Dlim, if one considers its history...

Ahmed is twenty-five year old and not married. His thin body always felt very weak when I pushed and punched it during our friendly fights, but his punch was fast and strong. Also, he could handle a knife skilfully. He learnt this in Cuba, during the daily compulsory work in the fields, cutting sugar cane with his machete. During our fights, Ahmed could have slit my throat with my penknife, had he not been proficient in the use of blades.

Ahmed was born in the desert of Mauritania, not far from Nouadhibou. But soon after his birth he was carried on a camel to the refugee camps of Tindouf, where he grew up with most of his family. Ahmed was born in a time of war. Soon after his birth, Ahmed's father, mother and most members of his family were rounded on by Polisario

fighters in the desert and obliged to join the camps and their peculiar way of living: the armed soldiers eventually explained that joining the camps was necessary for their own safety. (Later on during my fieldwork it became clear to me that a very large number of Saharawi refugees joined the Polisario's camps in this way). On that occasion, the soldiers also took most of the family's camels. They would have taken all of them, had Ahmed's grandfather (on his father's side) not managed to convince the soldiers to let him and his wife leave with twenty camels: he promised to join his family in the camps after a few weeks. Eventually, the grandfather went to the camps, but only twenty years later, well after the signing of the UN-sponsored ceasefire and the official opening-up of the Algerian-Mauritanian border.

Ahmed's grandfather is a nomad of the Great Desert, and is an Ould Dlim. I met him and his wife in Nouadhibou on two occasions. He explained to me that he did not like the refugee camps at all: "always obeying other people's rules... that is not good! [*almost shouting*] ...Ahmed, listen... do you know if your friend understands a thing? ...What did he write?" When he went to the camps to meet his sons, daughters and grandchildren after twenty years, he soon wanted to leave, and indeed he left the camps after one month. He went back to his camels which, from the twenty left by the soldiers, have now grown into a large herd. Nobody ate them, as most of his family was in the camps, and he sold only a few male camels.

Ahmed's grandfather explained to me a couple of things that proved to be valuable insights for my research. He told me that the refugee camps were just like a *hasi* (a well): "it is good to go there... but if you stay... you are dead... dead!" Like other nomads I met, he did not like to say much, and the Polisario and "its Sahara" were not among his favourite topics. His words were sharp and clear: "I am not a Saharawi... I am not a

Mauritanian... I am Spanish, you understand?" "He still has his Spanish documents", Ahmed whispered to me without interrupting his grandfather.

When Ahmed was twelve years old, he was sent to Cuba where he completed his secondary education. After eight years in Cuba he went back to the camps but only to find that much had changed and many had left the camps, including his father. Ahmed's father had left the camps soon after the cease-fire and had gone back to herding camels in the desert. A few months after his return from Cuba, Ahmed also left the camps: he went to Nouadhibou, looking for Aziz, his father's youngest brother.

Since then, five years have elapsed. During this time, Ahmed has been living in Nouadhibou with Aziz's family: Aziz and his wife Aziza, their sixteen years old son Ahmed Baba, and their four younger daughters Falla, Schaba, Fatimetu and the two year old Daha. Apart from Aziz and Aziza's home, Ahmed has also spent many nights at Mariam's place, also in Numerowatt (Mariam is Ahmed's aunt, his mother's sister). A few times a year Ahmed goes to the desert and spends one or two weeks with his grandfather and grandmother. On these occasions, Ahmed tries to help his grandfather with the camels. "When you go to the desert, it purifies you" –he says, like many others. "One drinks milk and eats camel meat, puts on some weight and gets "more white". Also, every year Ahmed spends the summer months in the refugee camps, where his mother and his grandmother (on his mother's side) live. When he leaves the camps, on his way back to Nouadhibou he pays a visit to his father, who moves about the "liberated" areas of Western Sahara, looking after his camels.

Ahmed speaks Spanish fluently, with a distinctive Caribbean accent. This is the language we generally used between us. As he did not work, he had time to give me lessons in Hassaniya. We used to spend at least a couple of hours at Aziz's home virtually every day. There, I used to have long, generally serious conversations with Aziz

and less serious ones with Aziza and her daughters, during the slow and sleepy hours following lunch or in the sparkling time after dinner. I used to bring small gifts (cakes, biscuits, dates) for the kids on Friday, and to teach some English to Ahmed Baba and Falla.

As mentioned above, very often Ahmed and I went for tea, meals and chats to relatives' and friends' houses or "boutiques", and especially to our "headquarters": Mansur's tiny boutique. Mansur is another "Cuban" Saharawi, and a very close friend of Ahmed: they studied together in Cuba. To a great extent, my observations and information stem from conversations and encounters with Ahmed, Aziz and his family, Mariam and her daughters, Mansur, other of Ahmed's friends and numerous *karibe* ("cousins").

Other than with Ahmed, I did not have many occasions to speak Spanish, and I generally spoke in Hassaniya and/or French. For everyday purposes (e.g. going to the market, greeting, presenting myself), my Hassaniya worked well quickly, and after a few months I began to have short but rewarding conversations in the local language. Nevertheless, it was only during my last few months in Nouadhibou that I could have longer conversations and informal interviews in Hassaniya without relying heavily upon French, Spanish or Ahmed's translations.

'We are all Saharawi': a case of cinematic homogeneity?

The material I have read about the Saharawi leaves little room for doubt: Saharawi tribes are consistently portrayed as belonging to the remote past. The present is described as a time of commitment and unity: the present is a Saharawi nation. Nobody seems to

doubt that this has been the "present" for more than two decades now. Also, everybody appears to agree that "the Saharawi" are refugees, and that the Saharawi refugees are *camp* refugees: those people living in the well-organised camps of Tindouf. In a special issue of *The New Internationalist* dedicated to Western Sahara and its refugees, one reads that: "Saharawi society is at present one of the most homogeneous in the world" (No. 297, December 1997, p. 28). A few months later, an article in the *Forced Migration Review* gave more details:

> "As Cecile Bizouerne, a psychologist working for Santé Sud, has noted: "the basis of their identity, namely the clan and the tribe, has been eroded by the cause and the drive for national unity and self-determination". Social differences have been ironed out by the common cause and by life in the camps, where everyone receives the same quantity of food, lives in a tent and has a role in camp society" (No. 2, August 1998, pp. 19-20).

When I visited the Polisario's refugee camps and, later, when I first went to Nouadhibou, I carried with me this well-documented conviction: that Saharawi tribes are a thing of the past, and that the most interesting question is how the tribal past led to the national present and, in particular, what part the refugee camps have played in this process.

My visit to the refugee camps and my first months in Nouadhibou reinforced this belief. I was told a number of versions of what proved to be a standard collective history of past "tribalism" and present Saharawi national unity. In Semara refugee camp a *chej* of a large fraction of the Reguibat tribe (and one of those *chioukh* who have been working for the MINURSO) explained to me that: "tribes are not important, not anymore... It is good to know your tribe: the Koran wants you to know your fathers... your ancestors... Also, it is necessary for the referendum, for the UN... But in everyday life... you see...

we don't need the tribe now... it is the past". In the camps, other *chioukh* and refugees told me the same.

Also during my first months in Nouadhibou I was often told that "tribalism is past" when asking about local tribes. For example, during my first conversations with Aziz (Ahmed's *ammu*, paternal uncle) he also told me that tribalism was past history and that it was not relevant anymore: all Saharawi were now united for the independence of Western Sahara. Not long afterwards, I asked Aziz about something I had heard: "Why do some people say that the Reguibat control the Polisario?" "Those who are more capable get the place", he very quickly answered, as if mine was the most common of all questions, "...whatever their tribe is... and then there are so many Reguibat in the camps... they are the majority and it is normal that more Reguibat work for the Polisario". To my surprise, he knew very well not only the names of most past and present ministers of the SADR, but also their tribes (and very often their tribal fractions too). Almost three months after those first exchanges with Aziz, at the end of March, I had a conversation about tribes and the Polisario's camps with Aziza, Aziz's wife (later on I ended up calling her *ummi*, "my mother", in private settings).

It was early afternoon, after lunch. Ahmed and I lay down to watch television. My friend fell asleep instantaneously. Only news about wars and other disasters, Palestinian fighters, Saddam Hussein and images of America's dreadful spy-aircraft have the power to keep him awake in the early afternoon. "Much better than your Venezuelan soap opera!" –he would say.

Aziza entered the room, which was in dim light and was also the coolest place on that hot afternoon. She picked up a couple of large cushions near the television and threw them back to their usual places, against the wall. The heavy cushions flew across the room as if they were weightless and reached their places perfectly. Then, she teasingly

kicked Ahmed on one side and slowly lay down beside him to watch television. Ahmed moved a bit, murmured something about his aunt's big stomach and kept on sleeping between Aziza and me.

Both Aziza and I used to enjoy the popular Venezuelan soap opera after lunch, but for different reasons. Aziza found it very amusing, especially because in her eyes Venezuelan women looked funny showing their tanned legs. As for me, my mind was uplifted by those images of the luxuriant vegetation of a Venezuelan *hacienda*, and by the thought of delicious fruit: mangos, papayas, guayabas and even *toronjas*. Ahmed ate so many *toronjas* while he was in Cuba that their acid juices eventually eroded most of his front teeth.

Aziza laughed at one scene of the Venezuelan soap opera that the two of us were watching. She ended her laugh by wiping her mouth with the edge of her *melfa* and then she dropped her arm back to her side. I did not laugh. I did not get the joke. Aziza suddenly asked me what was wrong with me. "Nothing", I quickly replied while keeping my eyes on the screen.

She went on: "Right! Don't you like television? ...*Nsara* like cinema a lot!" That sounded a bit harsh to me: obviously, she was up for a fight.

"*Nsara*?" I replied half-joking, "I don't know... I am not a *nasràni*... I am a Saharawi now".

She laughed: "Ah, ah, ah... my Nicolassa... I thought you were an Ould Tegheddi!" [a section of Ould Dlim and the tribal section of Aziz's family].

"Ould Tegheddi is Saharawi!" I said, showing the palm of my right hand while turning my head towards her.

She replied: "Who says that?"

"Everybody says that... Everybody always tells me "tribes are history... tribes are past" and "we are all Saharawi... we are all Saharawi"... Even Aziz told me "Ould Dlim is Saharawi".

"I know... I know..." Aziza replied.

We both turned our heads back towards the television and its green images. I took out my small notebook and pen and began to write something. After a few silent minutes Aziza sat up straight and began to swing her trunk slowly, backward and forward. I turned my head and watched her: she looked down and began to pick at invisible particles of sugar from the blue carpet. Then, with a low and slow voice, she told me: "Nicolassa, listen... *Nsara* like cinema a lot, you see? ...Remember, son: if you can, always give *nsara* what they want... If they like cinema, then they get cinema... do you understand?"

She looked unusually serious. When I told her that I did not understand, she snorted at me with badly disguised impatience. Then she slowly shook Ahmed's shoulder to wake him up. She wanted Ahmed to help me to understand using his Spanish: "Ahmed... Ahmed, teach your brother!" Ahmed did not want to wake up. Eventually, Ahmed jumped up, went to the toilet, came back and slipped into his place. His head was wet and still dripping, and his face looked congested. "What?" he firmly asked.

I watched Aziza as if asking for permission, and she nodded back: I could write. We could go on. Ahmed translated. The idea that Aziza wanted to share with me was not directly about Nouadhibou, but about the refugee camps. She told me that the Polisario's camps were like a movie made for the *nsara*, or like a dream. Accordingly, the camp refugees were like either actors or dreamers.

Aziza described the camp refugees as people who, in the past, became "stopped" and "still" (or rather "suspended") in a dream-like state: they seemed to be awake, but

actually they were not. Rather, they were "all the same... silent... like dead". When refugees eventually woke up, they understood that being "Saharawi" was just like a dream: it was not so "true", not so real. That is why, at that point, many of them felt that they had been fooled. But the camp refugees also understood that they would be better off pretending that nothing had changed, acting for others' eyes *as if* they were still dreaming.

So the now wide-awake refugees, after having been like dreamers, became like actors. Accordingly, the refugee camps became like a movie, made first of all for the *nsara*. I had to be careful, she warned. What people had told me about tribes and Saharawi unity was part of the movie: partly, it was a fiction. The problem, she concluded, was that when people dream for too long, once they wake up some can still confuse dream and reality: "it is like dreaming while watching a movie... dreaming with your eyes open... do you understand?"

While translating, Ahmed became increasingly irritated by Aziza's account: he finally said that she should not tell me this kind of stupid things. Aziza smiled at me (the following day she told me that she was very happy that she had told me all that). Ahmed stood up and, murmuring, left. I quickly said goodbye to Aziza and left with the intension of calming Ahmed down.

Eventually, the two of us ended up at Mansur's "boutique" (as mentioned above, Mansur is "a Cuban" and one of Ahmed's closest friends): it was four o'clock, the time when the "boutique" becomes more interesting, as students begin to pour out from school. There, Ahmed, Mansur and I used to have a great time watching the puzzled faces of young students coming to that tiny, dusty boutique, located in a corner like a thousand others in Numerowatt, and finding a rare example of a *nasràni* on the other side of the counter talking to them, asking them what they wanted to buy. And he even asked

it in a strange language that they later recognised as their Hassaniya! Many students would just watch Nicolassa opened-eyed for a while, as Ahmed told them that Nicolassa was an Ould Dlim, section of Ould Tegheddi: his father went to Spain and married a Spanish woman, and now Nicolassa was back to meet his grandparents. Actually, quite a convincing story: after all Nicolassa's skin was white but not all that white, some immediately noticed.

Back to Aziza's account, I found it as interesting as it was obscure and challenging. It proved a valuable starting point: Aziza and I discussed issues related to that account on several occasions afterwards. In my understanding, through her narrative Aziza meant to reveal the existence of another layer of reality: a reality behind the "dream/fiction" of Saharawi homogeneity. Such a reality was depicted as somehow "more real" and as having an intrinsically exclusive character: shared by the "Saharawi", it was not meant for the *nsara*.

Much later I understood Aziza's account as being an event full of consequences. Because of the exclusive character attributed to a certain knowledge concerning the refugee camps and its inhabitants, her decision to share part of it with me was a way of challenging my being a *nasràni*. More precisely, it was a way of forcing me into a different set of relationships with much of the social environment around me. Aziza's narrative was a clear act of will: it implied her decision to assume a certain social responsibility by beginning to make me see the "fictional" aspects of the category "Saharawi", and by affirming the "real", superior value of the category "tribe". In my eyes, from various points of view it was a revolutionary moment: one that marked a turning point in my relationships with Saharawi and other Moors, and not just with those living in Nouadhibou. I believe it meant the beginning of a sort of change of status for me: the beginning of a process that later led to Aziza wanting/accepting to be called

ummi, "my mother", by me. Also, it was the beginning of a wider process. Eventually, I would not be addressed anymore as *nasràni* by those who knew me. Nor would I be told any more that tribes were just past history.

Through Aziza's words the camps began to emerge as central and critical elements in the dramatisation of refugees' national unity, commitment and organisation, and in the scenic blurring and negation of their "real" tribal differences and actual, if partial, social disarray. Aziza used the metaphor of the cinema/movie in her portrayal of the Polisario's camps. Following refugees' awakening –she explained– the camps became like a Saharawi movie, that is a conscious representation of Saharawi unity for the *nsara*, and so a means of outwitting them.

But any form of "outwitting" implies and requires an understanding of the "other" and of its expectations. The "Saharawi" believed that what certain important others –the *nsara*– expected was the continuity of a nationalist "dream", from which most refugees have already woken up. So, after their "awakening", the Saharawi refugees have collectively interpreted *nsara*'s expectations. To use Aziza's words, the refugees have given *nsara* what these have wanted: "they like cinema, and they get cinema". Following Aziza's argument, and considering the degree of unity and homogeneity that has been attributed to the Saharawi refugees in all sorts of publications, the representation of oneness for others' eyes has been undoubtedly effective and successful.

In retrospect, Aziza's account brings to mind some of Anthony Cohen's observations. Cohen has clearly suggested that forms of egalitarianism and social homogeneity can become:

> "a rhetorical expression of the integrity of the community. It is the presentation to the outside world of the common interests of the members of the community. [...] When a group of people engages with some others, it has to simplify its message down to a form and generality [e.g. committed, nationalist camp refugees] with which each of the members can

identify their interests" (Cohen 1998, 35). This said, "Conformity is thus often an illusion; at the very least, it is only part of the story" (*ibid.*, 37).

Indeed, unity and certain forms of conformity may be collectively and individually regarded as an effective and even necessary strategy when dealing with certain others. This is an idea on which also Jackson and Penrose have insisted when they suggested that:

> "It is this sense of "necessary fiction" that is implied in the idea of "strategic essentialism" - something chosen, despite its faults, for the positive political [and, why not, economic and social] purchase it offers" (1993, 18).

Aziza's understanding of Saharawi unity lends credibility and relevance to these comments, at least in this specific context. But she also used the metaphor of the actors/dreamers in describing the camp refugees. In my understanding, such an image is particularly suggestive. The pair actor/dreamer can be understood as a synthetic and extreme expression of a very common tension: the effort to understand and manage the relationship between Saharawi nation, refugee camps and tribes. On the one hand, the refugee-"actor" is *consciously playing his/her part in the "we are all Saharawi" fiction*: he is imagined as sharing an exclusive and hidden, but also very real and conscious understanding in which Saharawi camps, national unity and commitment are the strategic, "rhetorical expression" of tribal networks and individual interests. For the refugee-"actor", the camps, that "Western Sahara in exile", are an advantageous and very real dreamland, whatever the future will bring.

On the other hand, the refugee-"dreamer" is imagined as *part of an unreal scenario that he cannot distinguish from reality*: it is his reality. For the "dreamer", the phrase "we are all Saharawi" is not a fiction at all –it cannot be– just as the camps are not a movie

made for the *nsara*: rather, they are the magnificent expression of deep nationalist conviction and commitment. The "dreamer" is the "true" nationalist: the "true" refugee as well as the national martyr. For him, the dreamland is an independent Western Sahara: the refugee camps are just a means, a long and difficult path to the bright future of independence.

The best refugee-"actor" is the politician: the clever, enriched one. The most soundly asleep refugee-"dreamer" is the "true" refugee: both cheated fool and bravest soldier. For most Saharawi, the awakening took place with "the 88", when the dreamers of unity became actors of unity.

October 1988: the awakening

The social construction of 'my 88': some notes

Nadia is a young woman who is not yet married. She is twenty-four years old and is a Saharawi: an Ould Dlim, section of Ould Bahamar. Nadia is one of Ahmed's friends and, just like him, she has been a refugee. She came from the Polisario's camps to Nouadhibou in 1998 in order to visit her mother's sister. But, once in the city, she decided to stay with her aunt. Soon after, Nadia found a job in Nouadhibou as a qualified assistant in a small centre for chemical-clinical analyses. For Nadia it was not difficult to get such a job: after finishing her course of study in the refugee camps, the Polisario sent her to Algiers, where she became a qualified nurse after studying for four years at a well known public hospital there.

Nadia and I became close friends. I learnt her boss' daily timetable so as to be able to visit her at work when he was not around and we could talk more freely. Nadia was the first person to tell me about "the 88". It happened by chance, almost five months after my arrival in Nouadhibou. While asking her about the refugee camps, she told me that she went to Algiers in 1988, when she was just twelve years old. When she went back to the camps, almost five years later, she found that "everything had changed... people had changed... You know... the tribalism..." No, I did not know. Nadia quickly explained to me that "everything changed after "the 88" (that is 1988). That was "the year of the Polisario's biggest problem... its biggest crisis". But she did not know much about it, she said, only what every Saharawi knew: that "the 88 was the year of the return of the tribes... when everybody began to talk about tribes again... before nobody dared talk... [Whispering] *ssssh*... shut up, or the Polisario comes and cuts your tongue out". We laughed. Then she added that I should ask Ahmed about it but that I should be careful as people do not like to talk about it at all: "people think that it is an issue only for us... among the Saharawi".

When I asked Ahmed about "the 88" he was surprised at my question. Then he explained to me that he left the refugee camps in 1987 to go to Cuba and returned only eight years later, in 1995: he was not in the camps in 1988. At the time he left for Cuba he had never heard words such as Ould Dlim, Reguibat or Techna, and he did not hear them until his return to the Polisario's camps. When he went back, "everything had changed, man... then I began to hear the names of Ould Dlim, of Reguibat... I did not know about all this... In the camps people pulled our legs because we, the Cubans, did not know anything about Ould Dlim... about Reguibat... My mother told me the name of my tribe, the Ould Dlim, only later... Only later, and then when I came to Nouadhibou, I was told everything... all that shit that had happened in October, at the end of 1988...

After that, all this began... all this talking about tribes... of Ould Dlim, Reguibat, Techna... but I don't know the entire story... I will find someone for you, someone who knows it well and can tell you what happened".

A few days later, Said, a close cousin of Ahmed (son of the sister of Ahmed's father) who knew me well, joined Ahmed and me for tea after dinner in an isolated house on the periphery of Numerowatt. Over that tea I was told for the first time what had happened in "the 88". Ahmed explained to me that Said knew it well as he had lived in the camps until 1997.

By the end of my fieldwork I had collected nine accounts of the events of "the 88": four from young adults in their twenties, two from adult women and three from adult men. During the interviews, it seemed evident to me that my informants regarded themselves as knowledgeable on "the 88", if some more than others. I believe that it is important to underline that all of them are people who knew me well long before they told me about "the 88".

Apart from the nine accounts mentioned above, on several occasions I had the opportunity to discuss some aspects or specific events of "the 88" with other people. Most of the time I was the one who carefully began to talk about it. "The 88" is a topic that was immediately recognised, often with embarrassment and resentment. It certainly is a frequent topic of conversation among Saharawi, but almost nobody seemed eager to talk about it with me spontaneously. Nevertheless, this attitude generally changed quickly during conversations: eventually most people had much to say about the whole issue once it was clear that I already knew about it and could defend my opinion.

While in Nouadhibou, I could not remember reading in any book or article about particularly important events that took place in 1988 in the Polisario's camps. Back in Oxford, I checked and came across three references to "the 88". Pazzanita and Hodges,

writing about Omar Hadrami (the pseudonym of Mohammed Ali Ould El-Ouali, a former Polisario leader who played a decisive role in the events of 1988 and who is now a high ranking functionary in the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior), pointed out that:

> "Later, Omar Hadrami would claim that this period [the second half of 1988] was marked by near turmoil within the Polisario leadership and within the refugee [...] camps in the Tindouf area of Algeria, *necessitating frequent changes in personnel*" (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 315; emphasis mine).

A Saharawi refugee, Ismail Sayeh, wrote much more about it: a few hundred words under the title "Événements de 1988" in his book *Les Sahraouis* (1998, 104-106).[3] As a member of the Polisario since its foundation and a long standing SADR politician, Sayeh must have been very well informed about the "events of 1988". Unfortunately, he decided not to report those events in his book but to sum them up as a mere quarrel within the political elite of the Polisario: the Political Bureau *versus* the Executive Committee.[4] Sayeh suggested that this internal conflict was eventually solved through a change in the Constitution of the SADR in 1991, when a new body –the National Secretariat– took over the role of both the Executive Committee and the Political Bureau.

The third reference to "the 88" that I found is in a report of Amnesty International. In a section titled "human rights abuses by the Polisario authorities in the refugee camps" "the 1988 events" seem to emerge as a turning-point in the history of the Polisario, although they are not described. This section of the report, which can be found at Annexe

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[3] It is relevant to note that Sayeh wrote about it in the form of a sub-section of a very short part dedicated to the relationship between Polisario and *human rights*: he related the "events of 1988" to an unspecified number of detentions for political reasons.

[4] In Sayeh's words: "Au cours des événements en question, les cadres, dont plusieurs membres du Bureau Politique, ont voulu surtout manifester leur réprobation face aux abus d'une instance dirigeante, le Comité exécutif en l'occurrence, dont le comportement de certains membres posait problème. Ils y voyaient *le développement d'une élite dans le sens oligarchique du terme (disposant du pouvoir en exclusivité)*" (Sayeh 1998, 104 ; emphasis mine).

2, constitutes the most explicit published material I have seen concerning the grave human rights abuses that are mentioned later in this chapter.

The following account of "the 88", of its aftermath and of its consequences, is entirely based upon the information I collected during the second half of my fieldwork, and not upon the very limited published material available on "the 88". It is an attempt to write one more short history of the Polisario's camps. This history is incomplete and selective but, in my experience, it has become particularly relevant to the Saharawi "themselves": it has acquired the authority to prove or challenge forms of local understanding of what has been happening to "them".[5]

'The 88': tribes, mafia and secret services

The period of war against Morocco was generally remembered during my fieldwork as a time of entrenched and claustrophobic, impassioned and blind unity. The period began with the exodus from Western Sahara in 1975 and the establishment of the refugee camps. It ended with "the 88", "the return of the tribes" and the signing of the cease-fire...

Throughout the war everybody was still revolutionary: all the refugees and soldiers had left their tribes aside (or, at least, this is what many thought and everybody said). The war, the common effort and the massive loss of livestock, coupled with the Polisario's military and camp discipline, brought all the people together. Everybody understood that in order to defeat the Moroccans and to gain an independent Western Sahara, people

[5] There appeared to be a clear consensus amongst adult Saharawi I met on the main events and processes of "the 88", and on the individual and collective motivations behind them. For this reason it seems appropriate to use the form of a single account in order to convey the material. On the other hand, the degree of actual, "positive" change that the Polisario's elite has achieved as a result of the critical events of "the 88" appears to be a particularly disputed issue (see last section of this chapter and next chapter).

needed to be united, like the Algerians and other nations. Also, everybody knew that in order to be like a nation it was necessary to leave tribes aside: national unity meant no-tribes, by definition. It was necessary to forget the tribes so that they could become the past of a new, independent and modern nation.

That was why the Polisario had prohibited talk of tribes, sections and "cousins": even naming them was forbidden and severely punished. At that time, people had complete trust in the Polisario: if the Polisario said that your father had done something wrong and that he deserved to go to jail, you too would be against your father. Like war, the revolution was no joke.

During the 1980s, and especially since 1982, a large number of new people arrived in the camps. Many of these were said to be Moroccan and Mauritanian spies, or to have done other anti-revolutionary things (such as talking about tribes, criticising the Polisario or other prohibited things), and so the Polisario imprisoned them. It was only much later that people realised that many of these newcomers had not only been arbitrarily accused and imprisoned, but many had also been brutally tortured, killed or made to "disappear".

The victims of the Polisario's abuses were typically men, and they were from all tribes. Obviously, nobody knows exactly how many the victims were, but then nobody seems to doubt that, on the whole, they must have been many, certainly hundreds. If all tribes had their share of the Polisario's victims, nevertheless these shares varied greatly from one tribe to the other. It is common knowledge that the majority of those imprisoned, tortured, killed and disappeared were from the Ould Dlim and other so-called "minor tribes", while only relatively few were members of the Reguibat tribe.

Although the newcomers were the most persecuted, they were not the only ones. Any refugees who talked too much, or were too clever, could easily end up in prison. Then, after being brought to a large and isolated military barracks that the highest leaders of the

Polisario cynically called "the national hospital", the prisoner could be tortured or killed. There, and in other such places, limbs were slowly amputated during tortures, eventually causing death by haemorrhage. The bodies of the allegedly guilty ones were often marked with various types of scars on the limbs, and especially on the right leg. Often the scars derived from cicatrised, severe burns, which were inflicted using cigarettes or burning sticks, and sometimes also through electric shocks. Many people had Arabic letters ("like those for the camels", which have traditionally been branded with distinctive tribal and family marks), words or even whole sentences written across their legs with white-hot, sharpened metallic "pens". The most common word was "spy". The most common sentences were "Polisario or death" and "Reguibat or death".[6]

If the "dangerous" person was a soldier, he could be killed anonymously on the battlefield. Many were forced to accept impossible assignments or were killed by other Saharawi soldiers during fighting against the Moroccans. Only in a few "exemplary" cases was the "dangerous" soldier publicly executed for treason.

Apart from normal camp refugees and soldiers, committed and particularly clever politicians were not spared either, but at least they could count on a much more comfortable form of punishment. During the years of war, many among the most intelligent and "alert" politicians within the Polisario were sent abroad as diplomatic representatives. The leadership of the Polisario either felt threatened by these individuals or it just wanted to keep all power for itself. Thus, many of the most capable politicians were kept far away from Rabuni, far from the leaders of the Polisario and their deeds, far from the camps and from the battalions.

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[6] Back in Oxford, I looked for material that could confirm or challenge the accounts I collected about grave abuses committed by the Polisario's authorities before "the 88". As mentioned above, I came across a report of Amnesty International that seems to confirm the accusations of abuses, while it also refers to "the 1988 events" as a turning-point. What seems the most relevant part of this document is presented in Annexe 2.

In that period of unity and war, of revolutionary zeal, military discipline and fear, only a few knew (or dared to know) about such forms of violence. Had Omar Hadrami not talked, these facts would have probably remained unknown to the public conscience of the camps, of the army and of all Saharawi.

Having been one of the founding leaders of the Polisario and a permanent member of its political bureau, Omar Hadrami maintained a very high profile within the leadership of the Front for almost two decades. In October 1982 he became head of the Polisario's secret services: a very delicate and important position that he maintained until August 1988. Hadrami was the one who ordered the secret police to imprison, torture or kill someone. Nevertheless, he did so only after receiving specific orders from above: namely from the supreme body of the Polisario, the Executive Committee.

In August 1988 the Executive Committee dismissed Omar Hadrami from his post. The news was leaked that the leaders of the Executive Committee suspected even him of pro-Moroccan inclinations. That was too bitter a pill for Hadrami to swallow. He wanted people to know the truth of what had been going on. In September, soon after his removal from office, he made public the real reason behind it: he had denounced and criticised a "*mafia of the Reguibat*" within the Polisario leadership. This, he said, had cost him his job and his career in the Polisario, even though he was a Reguibat himself and a long-standing, top-ranking leader of the Front. The Executive Committee reacted promptly to these accusations: in early October 1998, Omar Hadrami was imprisoned with three other alleged dissidents, two of whom were well-known politicians and members of the Ould Dlim tribe.

Before being arrested, Omar Hadrami managed to explain that it was not a mere coincidence that the highest and most delicate political, military and civil positions had always firmly remained in the hands of the Reguibat tribe. There was a tight, tribal,

mafia-like political elite at the very top of the Polisario, headed by the two most influential politicians of the Executive Committee and of the whole Front, both members of the Reguibat tribe: "Bachir" Mustapha Sayed (brother of El-Ouali, the founder of the Polisario and its greatest martyr) and Ibrahim Ghali Ould Mustapha (the top military commander of the SPLA and responsible for the Polisario's defence portfolio since the very founding of the SADR). According to Hadrami, these and a few other top politicians had set up a Reguibat elite aimed at establishing and maintaining complete control over the most relevant economic, political and military resources and decisions. So this was what was really going on, Hadrani convincingly pointed out: a powerful "mafia of the Reguibat" controlled the Polisario, in spite of the fact that those very leaders involved in "the mafia" had played an essential role in defining the Polisario's anti-tribalist, revolutionary strategy, and in spite of their most devoted public commitment to Saharawi national unity.

By using their authority and power to assign the most delicate and strategic positions to trusted members of the Reguibat tribe, these leading politicians had set up and controlled a powerful network of Reguibat. Whoever denounced, criticised or seemed to threaten the interests of this "mafia of the Reguibat" was suspected of pro-Moroccan and anti-revolutionary tendencies. "Bachir" would then give order for Omar Hadrami to imprison and deal with the "deviant" and "dangerous" refugee. If it were not a refugee but a soldier, then Ibrahim Ghali would often take care of him directly, through Ghali's faithful military commanders.

People's awakening and the Polisario's tribal twist

Omar Hadrami's denunciation had far-reaching consequences. Immediately after Hadrami's accusations, ten Ministers of the SADR government resigned from their offices in protest against the "mafia of the Reguibat". When the news of Hadrami's denunciation and of his arrest (together with two Ould Dlim politicians also suspected of pro-Moroccan leanings) reached, and spread through, the far Dakhla camp (the settlement were most Ould Dlim lived), violent riots broke out there.

Later, there were demonstrations also in Ausserd and El-Aaiun camps, but they were not as big and fierce as those in the far Dakhla. Here the refugees, who were almost exclusively women, nearly destroyed the whole Dakhla camp shouting a stream of invective against the "mafia of the Reguibat". The whole camp was flooded with women who held pictures of their dead or disappeared relatives in their hands. SADR flags and numerous tents were slashed. Pictures of El-Ouali and of President Abdelaziz were torn and burnt. The telephone line that permanently connected Dakhla camp with Rabuni was cut. Some say that even a few Moroccan flags were raised during the demonstrations, and that if the refugees had had weapons, "they would have turned even the stones of Dakhla into water". The camp was reduced to almost nothing, nearly destroyed.

The Executive Committee reacted by sending one thousand soldiers to Dakhla camp. When these arrived, the women tried to make the military understand, talking especially to those soldiers who, like almost all the demonstrators, were members of the Ould Dlim tribe. The women explained to the soldiers that they were protesting against the existence of a "mafia of the Reguibat" and against the terrible treatment reserved for whoever was perceived as a threat by that tribal, greedy elite. Nevertheless, the soldiers remained

faithful to the Executive Committee. There were violent crashes between the refugees (mostly women) and the military, and a few camp inmates were eventually shot dead.

In the meanwhile, the Algerian government intervened, asking President Abdelaziz to solve the problems in the camps immediately, saying that what was happening was very grave and serious. The Algerian government had always trusted President Abdelaziz and the leadership of the Polisario. From this point of view, the "mafia of the Reguibat" had fooled even the Algerian government, which did not knew about the existence of the "mafia".

Eventually, the uprisings were quelled. The few male refugees who had taken part in the riots were sent to one of the Polisario's jails. The thousands of female refugees involved were put into a special prison, which looked just like another camp, but smaller, set up near Dakhla camp. President Abdelaziz said that the women would be freed and allowed to go back to, and rebuild, their camps if they apologised in public. Many women laughed at such a presidential proposal: whatever happened, they were determined to leave the Polisario's camps for good, as they did not trust the Polisario and the SADR government anymore.

Nevertheless, after several days, the women accepted the deal of the President, but on one condition: Abdelaziz would have to explain publicly what had happened to all those who had been imprisoned by the Polisario and had died in jail, or had disappeared. Also, Abdelaziz would have to clarify why only relatively few of those imprisoned, tortured, killed or disappeared were members of the Reguibat, while so many were members of the Ould Dlim or of other much less numerous tribes.

At that point, the most distinguished and respected male members of the Ould Dlim tribe in the camps were selected by Polisario politicians and summoned to a meeting with President Abdelaziz. Their officially assigned duty was to act as intermediaries between

the other members of their tribe and the Polisario. It was the very first time since 1976 that meetings of tribal representatives had been officially convoked. It was the first official step of a process that eventually brought Saharawi tribes back into everyday political life. All this would have been unimaginable just a few weeks before. In fact, until then the Polisario's leadership had firmly denied (and punished) all accusations of "tribalism" laid against it with the same vigour and alacrity with which it had opposed and punished all talk of tribes and "cousins" for over a decade. But Hadrami' denunciations, and the popular and violent character of the unprecedented camp demonstrations that followed, induced a considerable change in the Polisario's social and political strategy. Tribes were now going to be more and more tolerated.

Through these male intermediaries of the Ould Dlim tribe, the President let the confined women know that it accepted their counter-proposal. In particular, "Mohammed" promised to hold a General Congress where the issue of the "mafia of the Reguibat" and, more generally, Hadrami's accusations could be publicly discussed. Such a Congress was eventually held during the last days of October 1988, in the school-camp named "9 of June".

It was "the congress of the apologies". Hadrami made a public apology for having indirectly caused those bloody camp demonstrations.[7] The demonstrators apologised for their most violent acts, and the army for its tough repression. The ten members of the government who had resigned returned to their posts, saying that they did so out of a sense of duty towards the Saharawi martyrs and their nation, which was facing such a

[7] Hadrami was later freed from jail and named Polisario's ambassador in North America. It was clear that, after what had happened, Hadrami wanted to leave for good, so Polisario gave him the opportunity to do so. A few weeks after his arrival in the United States in June 1989, Omar Hadrami defected to Morocco. King Hassan II welcomed him with some generous gifts: a big and beautiful chalet in Rabat, money, a car and a well-paid, high-rank job in the Moroccan Ministry of Interior. On several occasions Hadrami talked on the Moroccan radio about Polisario and its mafia, uncovering more details. Those declarations were followed with great interest and attention by the refugees in Polisario's camps and by Saharawi living in the "occupied" zones of Western Sahara and in Mauritania. To date, Hadrami remains the highest-ranking Polisario leader to have ever defected to Morocco.

delicate moment. Finally, President Abdelaziz apologised for what he called "the grave injustices perpetrated by certain people that we all know". This was eventually regarded as a more than clear reference to Bachir and Ibrahim Ghali, and to the other leaders of the "mafia".

With the congress, the truth of Hadrami's allegations remained definitively proved, and many prisoners were freed immediately after the end of the assembly, including all the women of the "prison-camp". "The mafia of the Reguibat" was officially ended, while its past existence and deeds were definitively confirmed. During the congress it was agreed that a Saharawi court would judge those high politicians responsible for "the mafia of the Reguibat" only after the achievement of the independence of Western Sahara. Leaving the crimes of the "mafia" unpunished and those high-ranking politicians free until the independence was understood to be in the interest of the Saharawi struggle, and to be necessary to maintain Saharawi national unity. In fact, putting them in jail might have caused a violent reaction by many members of the Reguibat, which has been by far the largest tribe in the Polisario's camps.

Looking back, it is clear that the mobilisation of large numbers of refugee women against the "mafia of the Reguibat", an their determined challenge to the Sahrawi army, played a key role in shaping the socio-political response of the leadership of the Polisario. The extent and vigour of the women's protest increased confusion and tension among the soldiers and opened a wide debate among the whole camp population. In this context, the questioned political leadership could not resort anymore to its habitual internal mechanisms for managing popular grievances and tensions, such as the reshuffle of posts among its long-standing politicians or the imprisonment and torture of dissidents. A more complex response was required to secure new credibility and popular support for the Polisario leadership. If this was perceived as unjust and arbitrary by a

large part of the refugee population, tribes could now be turned into a new source of order, security and guarantees.

The lasting consequences of 'the 88'

The consequences of "the 88" are still seen in many important spheres of private and public life. If the Polisario's army and camps were the first to be affected, the consequences were later felt much further afield, wherever Saharawi have gone…

Hadrami's accusations, now proved, caused growing mistrust within the army, and dangerous tensions that could have caused violent acts of revenge between soldiers of the Reguibat and soldiers of the Ould Dlim and other "minor tribes".[8] After all, the very head of the SPLA (the Polisario's army) since its foundation, Ibrahim Ghali, had been proved to have been member of the "mafia". In this context, the lives of non-Reguibat soldiers in general, and of Ould Dlim in particular, did not seem to be in safe, trusted hands. It was difficult for them not to resent the deaths of so many soldiers and the constant risk to their own lives. They felt fooled by those very leaders that had so loudly condemned and punished all "talking about tribes" for years, and who were actually "tribalist" of the worst kind.

At the same time, many Reguibat soldiers felt threatened by their non-Reguibat colleagues. Clearly, the SPLA could not have kept on fighting under these conditions of disunity and lack of trust. The Polisario's leadership immediately began to look for a cease-fire with Morocco, launching unilateral short truces. Armed clashes were gradually but substantially reduced while diplomatic meetings between high UN officers and

[8] As Hacene-Djaballah noted: "The bulk of the guerrilla force [of the Polisario] is formed by the main tribes in Western Sahara: the Reguibat and the Ulad Delim" (1985, 80).

Moroccan and Polisario representatives became more and more frequent (see Pazzanita and Hodges 1994). Nevertheless, almost three years elapsed before the implementation of the formal cease-fire, in September 1991.

After the events of "the 88", among both refugees and soldiers a large and growing number of people wanted to leave the Polisario, with its lies about unity and equality. Nevertheless, leaving was difficult (but not impossible) until the end of 1991: that is until the UN-sponsored cease-fire was implemented and the Algerian-Mauritanian border was gradually re-opened. It was now impossible for the Polisario to halt a huge outflow. Thousands and thousands of soldiers and refugees left the SPLA and the camps, and went to Mauritania, while fewer went to Algeria. From Mauritania, thousands returned to Western Sahara or went on to mainland Morocco after passing through the Moroccan consulate in Nouadhibou. Morocco attracted many by handing out valuable rewards: such as a paid job, a considerable sum of money proportional to the importance of the returnee, free accommodation, highly subsidised food prices and no income taxes for all those who remained in Western Sahara.

The exodus from the Polisario's camps was massive. Entire tribes and whole sections of others left, saying that there was no place for them in the Polisario. Such an outflow of people was easily understandable, and not only because of the Polisario's past abuses which emerged during "the 88". After so many years, a very large number of soldiers and refugees wanted to leave the barren Algerian desert. Many had bitterly resented the way they had been forced to join the Polisario's struggle and then the long years of anxious and frightening zeal. For all these people, "the 88" provided a long-awaited, collective opportunity that was indispensable to publicly "wake up", to come out and act according to their "own, true and hidden desires".

Clearly, it was a very difficult period for the Polisario –its "biggest crisis". Following "the 88", the public, official face of the Front did not need many changes: it was already known and respected. National unity and fervent commitment maintained their official roles (if more obviously rhetorical ones, from an "internal" point of view). Indeed, from "outside", the Polisario remained substantially the same: nobody knew about "the 88" or the extent and real character of the new exodus.[9]

Nevertheless, the actual, internal changes were deep and substantial. Behind the solemn, straight face, the internal working of the cogwheels of the Polisario and of the political life of the SADR was radically transformed by "the 88". Now, the movement relied on a different, if hidden, battery: not a nationalist, but a tribal one. Following "the 88" and the discovery of the "mafia of the Reguibat", the Polisario's leadership understood that, if serious internal conflicts and more massive outflows of people were to be avoided (or at least minimised), all tribes ought to have some members seated in the highest institutions of the SADR and of the Front. In other words, after "the 88" the Polisario wanted to make its soldiers and refugees feel that "their tribes" were represented in the leading bodies of the Polisario and of its SADR. If it wanted to survive, the Polisario had to find the way to keep its soldiers and its refugees. Strong external support alone was essential but not enough to keep the movement going.

Therefore, since "the 88" the Polisario has been assigning political posts in such a way as to maintain a certain "balance" between the various tribes represented in the camps, and first of all between the three most numerous ones: Reguibat, Ould Dlim and Techna. In order to achieve and maintain such a balance, the Polisario's highest political

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[9] The "external" picture of Polisario Front even gained a thicker shade of wisdom: a further pinch of democratic essence was added in 1991, in the form of enlightened amendments to the SADR Constitution, while the signing of the cease-fire confirmed the achieved maturity of the anti-colonial, nationalist movement. Indeed, it was rather strange that the Moroccan authorities did not make much of an effort to let the international community know about "the 88", so to damage Polisario's reputation. But very few have seemed to believe the Moroccans anyway whenever they have talked about "their" Western Sahara and "the rebels sponsored by Algeria".

bodies have selected and proposed lists of candidates, while these have tried to ensure themselves strong support within their respective tribes. When elections have been held, people have normally voted for those candidates who were members of their own tribes. If there was more than one candidate from the same tribe, people typically voted for that candidate who was a closer relative or who was known to have helped members of his own tribe in the past.

Nevertheless, in the internal working of the movement, elections have only played a marginal role. The highest political posts, and most positions "that really count", have been assigned not through elections, but according to internal political and economic manoeuvres apart from (and in addition to) the maintenance of the "tribal balance".

The Polisario has maintained a rapid turnover of some of the highest, non-elected political staff (typically the Ministers, who have very visible positions). This practice was meant to show that the period of the "mafia" was truly ended and that nobody has his (or sometimes her) seat guaranteed anymore just because of his (or her) tribal affiliation. However, these high political positions have been filled from a very limited pool of candidates, the same individuals rotating over and over again, year in and year out.[10] This rapid turnover has been widely looked upon by Saharawi refugees as nothing more than a smokescreen, forms of political and economic, extra-legal collusion and complicity being regarded as the norm. In particular, the "juiciest posts" have not been affected by rapid turnover. They have never entered the electoral process.

Thus, the post-"88" political life of the Polisario and its SADR has hinged on the unofficial principle of "tribal balance". This meant a revolutionary change from the pre-"88" period, which was largely characterised by entrenched nationalist zeal against all actual or suspected forms of tribalism. As an antidote for the "mafia of the Reguibat", the

[10] This pool was substantially refreshed after "the 88", but since then it has been made up of mostly the same seventy-odd people.

introduction of the principle and practice of "tribal balance" was crowned with only partial success. It is true that it put an end to that tight tribal "mafia" of "Bachir" and Ibrahim Ghali. Nevertheless, a few powerful tribal networks have replaced it, including a Reguibat network (which is said to be the most powerful and the dominant one) at the highest levels of the Front and of its state.[11]

Given these changes in the Polisario's political life, it is clear how "the 88" was essential in paving the way for the present, UN-sponsored, referendum process (which the UNGA had first proposed in 1966, more than two decades before). In fact, the Polisario could now accept, and even strongly support, the referendum, the MINURSO and its identification of eligible voters since "talking about tribes" was no longer a problem. "The 88" made the Polisario inclined to accept a thorough tribal identification of the whole "Saharawi population", carried out by the UN mission. But before "the 88" nobody could have imagined the Polisario's leadership accepting and supporting a public classification of the SADR citizenship according to tribal and sub-tribal criteria.

The shift from nationalist, anti-tribal unity to a thoroughly tribal classification of the citizenship was coupled with another, parallel change. The Polisario's leadership stopped talking about war and the revolution, and began to focus on the referendum for self-determination. Before "the 88", military effort and nationalist commitment were put above everything else. But after "the 88" the primacy of the war was replaced by the primacy of the referendum. Saharawi seem absolutely unanimous on this.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the depth of this change is the different way soldiers were treated before and after "the 88". Before "the 88", all soldiers

[11] I have found these allegations very interesting. Following them, I have tried to pursue the analysis of the internal distribution of strategic posts within the SADR/Polisario, as I thought it could shed light on networks that have remained substantially invisible to the literature on the Saharawi Republic. My investigation in this field is reported in Annexe 3, with a list of top-ranking posts of the SADR held by members of the Reguibat tribe at a certain point in time. Clearly, further investigation on these issues is necessary.

were treated with great respect and social consideration whenever they went back to the camps. So much so that a soldier and a woman could get married without having to care about tribal or economic considerations. In other words, a marriage was possible even if the soldier's tribe was of a much lower status than that of the woman. No parents could have refused to give their daughter to a soldier because of the soldier's tribe. One could not even have hinted at such a refusal without arousing the suspicion that one was a betrayer of the revolution. After "the 88", soldiers have become less and less popular. Now they constitute a sort of marginal or "residual" category (unless they are high officers), and the Polisario provides only a bare minimum of support to the new couple and for the ceremony. Tribal and economic considerations are newly paramount in making a marriage possible or not.

'The 88' as 'return of the tribes': a critical analysis

This account of "the 88", of its causes and of its consequences, contributes to a more thorough historical analysis of what was a crucial period in the history of the Polisario and of its refugees, and a period that has largely passed unnoticed in the literature on the Western Sahara conflict. It should be underlined, however, that this account has not been introduced merely to show "what actually happened". Rather, "the 88" is here regarded as an historical account that should be analysed critically as evidence of the *present* relevance of tribes among Saharawi refugees.[12] In other words, what seems more relevant here is to underline that "the 88" can contribute to illustrate the critical role that "tribes" now appear to play in the social construction of some shared (and socially important)

[12] As Peter Wade suggested: "It is possible to juxtapose and discuss different versions of events and identities and to take those versions as political agendas with political effects that can be debated" (1997, 117).

understandings of "the past" and of "the present" among Saharawi refugees. In what remains of this chapter, "the 88" is therefore considered from this point of view: above all as an account that, when critically analysed, can contribute to an understanding of the context in which "the 88" has been used.

Instrumental returns

Among Saharawi refugees, "the 88" is consistently portrayed both as "the Polisario's biggest crisis" and as "the return of the tribes". This "return" is interesting because it shows a certain local understanding of "the tribal nature" that finds clear parallels in part of the literature on ethnicity. Through "the 88" –but see also Aziza's account– tribes emerge as an inevitable, natural force that had temporary gone into a sort of hibernation and was then ready "to wake up" and re-take its prominent role in the lives of all Saharawi refugees. It seems as if it was just a matter of time: as if since "the 88" the Saharawi "tribal nature" has eventually re-emerged, victorious, after thirteen years of immersion in the realm of private whispering, where indeed it had survived but shrunk into half a word to the wise. Completely forgotten by the youth at birth, the refugees' "tribal nature" has been imagined like live charcoal lurking under a layer of cold ash on the day it suddenly blazed up, in October 1988.[13]

This local understanding mirrors the "deep freeze" view of tribal (or ethnic) identities: the view that there is no escape from one's "tribal nature", even if this can be latent and provisionally forgotten. Expressed in different forms, this view has been supported by scholars of the so-called "primordialist" stream, such as Shils (1957),

[13] It is relevant to note that, in this local understanding of "tribal nature", tribes emerge as "more essential", "truer" cosmological coordinates in the collective mapping of time, change and permanence (cf. Connor 1994).

Geertz (1963) and, to an extent, Van den Berghe (1981). Furthermore, this view has gained considerable backing in a number of journalistic works (such as "The Coming Anarchy" of Robert Kaplan, 1994) and, also recently, in political discourses in the West and elsewhere.[14]

If these essentialist portrayals of tribal (or ethnic) identities are still widespread, it is even more necessary to be suspicious of any claim of an inevitable return to atavistic identities. While many have strongly opposed such claims, it seems that Foucault was particularly clear about them. In his words:

> "one should totally and absolutely suspect anything that claims to be a return. One reason is a logical one; there is in fact no such a thing as a return" (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991, 250).

With reference to the Saharawi refugees, this suspicion about the return of tribal identities makes it necessary to supplement the account of "the 88" with a new question: why and how has "the 88" emerged as "the return of the tribes"? In other words, through which processes has "the return of the tribes" been socially, politically and economically constructed and maintained? Clearly, these questions hinge on some assumptions concerning tribal identities. In particular, these questions imply that tribal (or ethnic) identities are here regarded as relational realities that are socially constructed. As such, they are considered to be essentially malleable in their meanings and in their social, political and economic relevance: both their meanings and relevance can considerably change through time and space as a result of forces of a cultural, economic, environmental and political character.

When coupled with other observations, the very account of "the 88", of its causes and of its consequences, provides some elements of an answer to the above questions.

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[14] On this topic, see Duffield (2001, 109-113).

Obviously, Hadrami's denunciations of grave abuses committed by the Polisario authorities led to such widespread and unprecedented camp demonstrations because of deep social tensions that had built up among the entire refugee population. These tensions led the demonstrators to target, above all, the Polisario and other *symbols of the state* by, for example, burning SADR flags and raising Moroccan ones, by tearing up and burning pictures of the SADR President Abdelaziz and of the founder of the Polisario El-Ouali, by destroying camp infrastructure and by cutting the telephone line with "the capital" Rabuni.

It is certainly plausible that there were "tribal" elements in the responses to the events of "the 88". Indeed, various historians of the region have underlined that, in the past, periods during which there was a vacuum of political power and widespread social conflict were usually understood with reference to the segmentary structures of Saharawi tribes.[15] In these contexts, the mobilization of people along tribal lines may provide a valuable source of physical, psychological and economic security, as well as an effective means of conflict management (Dresch 1986).

Nevertheless, something more was needed in order to turn the camp demonstrations of 1988 into "the return of the Saharawi tribes". In particular, it appears that the Polisario actively fostered an official representation both of the past abuses of the state leadership and of the violent demonstrations of the camp population as having an inherently *tribal* character. Other readings of the events were possible, but were discounted and avoided by the Polisario leadership.

For instance, from a politico-institutional perspective, it may well be argued that the public discovery of the leadership's abuses could have led to public trials and the punishment of those who were judged responsible. In this case, "the 88" would have

[15] See Caro Baroja (1990) and Hernandez Moreno (1988).

been dealt with in a more obviously "nationalist" way: the public punishment of the leaders judged responsible would have provided an opportunity to restate and confirm the national unity of all Saharawi and their entrenched opposition to any form of "tribal deviation".

Instead, following the camp demonstrations, no trials of the accused were ever held.[16] What eventually happened looked much more like a *de facto* "de-criminalisation" and "normalisation" of the offences committed by the leadership, than a juridical process. The past behaviour of the leaders was officially portrayed as a particular kind of moral act: the consequence of allegiance to their own tribe, a sort of worrying but understandable leakage of their unavoidable "tribal nature" in the fulfilment of their national duties.

In other words, what is argued here is that –far from being a mechanical and inevitable reaction to Hadrami's accusations– "the return of the tribes" has required specific efforts by the state apparatus. "The return" has been a relatively long process which still requires careful maintenance. There have been several important stages in this process of turning the 1988 events into "the return of the tribes". At first the political leadership reacted to the refugees' riots by deploying a large number of soldiers. But as soon as the uprisings were quelled, for the first time since 1976 the Polisario's leadership looked for male tribal representatives, who were summoned to an official meeting with President Abdelaziz. Later, the past abuses were officially explained in "the congress of the apologies" as the deeds of a "tribal mafia", as the result of some politicians' tribal allegiance. The solution prescribed was not the punishment of those politicians, but the confirmation of their rightness: in fact, the proposed solution was the immediate beginning of a distribution of political, military and governmental seats on a tribal basis,

[16] It is so if one does not consider "the congress of the apologies" as a peculiar form of juridical-institutional process.

that is the forced "tribalisation" of the internal politics of the SADR. A tribal solution to a seemingly tribal problem.

It is important to note that, while all this was taking place, the Polisario's leadership halted all armed operations. Later, in 1991, it signed a UN-sponsored cease-fire with the Moroccan authorities. With the halting of all the operations of the SPLA, the Polisario's military forces were greatly reduced. According to the data available, the SPLA was at least halved in the aftermath of "the 88", from about 15,000 soldiers during most of the 1980s to 6,000-8,000 at the end of that decade (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 398) –that is, well before the signing of the 1991 ceasefire. Thousands of soldiers handed in their weapons, and then the exodus began.[17] A large number of these soldiers were allowed to leave the camps, with only a few relatives, if any, remaining. It could be argued that the massive outflow of soldiers and refugees in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1988 also contributed to managing the social tensions that still existed among the SADR citizenship. Those who were willing (and able) could take the "exit" option (cf. Hirschman 1970), which also meant that more humanitarian resources were available for those who remained.

Two more developments appear to have played a critical role in the construction and management of "the return of the tribes" among Saharawi refugees, and both required the active support of the Polisario in order to take place. The first one has been the development of an extra-legal trade in humanitarian resources intended for the camp refugees. This trade will be analysed in detail in the next chapter. Here suffice it to say that the emergence and development of this extra-legal trade appear to have greatly contributed to maintaining the economic centrality of the Polisario's camps during the

[17] It should be noted that, officially, there was no exodus from the camps at all. See the official numbers of refugees given by the Polisario's and the Algerian authorities, in UNHCR (2000, 311-312 and 314-315).

cease-fire period and, importantly, to have provided considerable economic resources for the emergent tribal networks.

The other important development has been the MINURSO's identification of voters for the referendum on self-determination. In the aftermath of "the 88", the leadership of the Polisario has constantly and strongly supported the work of the MINURSO, its sifting of the entire refugee and non-refugee local population and then its handing out of official "white papers" in which each person's tribe, section, sub-section and family are authoritatively stated, under the emblem of The United Nations. In this exercise, every SADR citizen had to brush up, or learn from scratch, his or her "tribal features", so as to be recognized by the MINURSO as a Saharawi. Tribes officially ceased to be a forbidden topic and became a compulsory one: once labelled as anti-national and anti-revolutionary, the knowledge of one's tribe, section and sub-section became a national duty.

From these observations, it emerges that the Polisario leadership responded to the contestations and demonstrations of 1988 by explicitly fostering a tribal U-turn. Through various stages (including the identification of tribal leaders to act as intermediaries between the Polisario and the demonstrators; the official tribal reading of "the mafia" and of "the 88"; the solution of the "tribal balance"; the cease-fire; the opening up of the frontiers; the development of an extra-legal trade in humanitarian resources; and the MINURSO's identification), the previously marginalised "tribes" have gradually acquired a new political and economic relevance and a new authority to provide shared explanations of some critical aspects of "the past" and of "the present".

With "the return of the tribes" social tensions and antagonisms among the refugee population have gradually been controlled by the new but known restraints of inter-tribal rivalry. Through these processes, the Polisario/state has tried to manage social

antagonism by deflecting it from the state, and its national project, onto the tribes. Through these means the Polisario/state has eventually acquired new legitimacy as a "neutral arena" governed by the principle of "tribal balance": as an institutional container of inter-tribal rivalry in which tribal networks have effectively competed for access to, and control of, the "seats" of the SADR and the considerable resources of the "humanitarian state".

Tribal 'revitalisation' beyond the role of political elites

So far this analysis has emphasised the role played by the Polisario's state leadership in fostering "the return of the tribes". As a case of tribal "revitalisation" actively promoted by a state elite, the "return of the Saharawi tribes" appears to be a further illustration of what the literature on ethnicity and social conflicts has proved to be a widespread tendency. There is, in fact, a whole body of literature that has provided compelling evidence of the critical role that political elites of modern states have played in fostering processes of ethnic revitalisation and inter-ethnic rivalry in different regions of the Earth: from Central America to the Balkans, and from Scandinavia to the Horn of Africa.[18] In particular, it has been shown that modern political elites –clearly not just the Polisario's leadership– have often proved able to gain new popular support, legitimacy and economic advantages through the "tribalisation" of their claims and aspirations and through the "tribalisation" of the internal politics of their states.

This said, it should be clearly underlined that I am not arguing here that the political elite of the Polisario "invented" the tribes out of nowhere. Obviously, it did not. What I

[18] See, in particular, the work of Castells (1997), Connor (1994), Eriksen (1993), Ignatieff (1993), Keen (1994), Moynihan (1993) and Prunier (1995).

am arguing, instead, is that the state leadership's efforts proved essential in the construction of the present political and economic relevance of the refugees' tribes. But in addition to the efforts of the Polisario's elite, turning the 1988 events into "the return of the tribes" has also required specific historical conditions that need to be taken into account. These historical conditions may be divided between those more directly related to the refugees' local social environment and those more clearly stemming from super-local processes.

As far as the more immediately local conditions are concerned, it is clear that terms such as Ould Dlim, Reguibat and Techna were ancient names long before the foundation of the Polisario Front and of its state-in-exile (see D'Almonte 1914). In spite of having been marginalised in the camps and in the army during the years of war and national revolution, these categories of ascription and understanding have constantly been part of the refugees' and soldiers' social environment in a number of ways. In other words, tribes were never completely erased by the national revolution of the Polisario Front.

For one thing, before "the 88", tribes had officially remained among SADR citizens as the "national enemy", a forbidden topic. But, as argued in the previous chapter, tribes have also remained inscribed in the social geography of the camps as an important factor shaping the refugees' choice between one settlement and another. And also, although there appear to be no studies of this topic with explicit reference to Saharawi refugees, it seems reasonable to believe that tribes (although strongly marginalised) also remained inscribed in the social environment as elements in remembered histories, in certain explicit narratives and in certain implicit notions held by the Polisario's refugees and soldiers.[19]

[19] Cf. Eickelman (1989). See also A.D. Smith (1986).

In addition to the efforts of the Polisario leadership and to this more local social material, "the return of the tribes" has also required other historical conditions that are related to the international context in which the Polisario's state has developed. In fact, this international context appears to have played a critical role in making "the returned tribes" what they are by providing specific resources and opportunities of a cultural, political, economic and spatial character.

Here it may be useful to introduce a brief analysis of some of the numerous scholarly contributions to this topic. Indeed, the relationship between super-local processes and ethnic revitalisation has been an essential area of research in the literature on ethnicity and social conflicts.[20] Eriksen, for instance, has clearly underlined this relationship.

> "An important insight from anthropological research has been that ethnic organisation and identity, rather than being "primordial" phenomena radically opposed to modernity and the modern state, are frequently reactions to processes of modernization" (Eriksen 1993, 9). "Contemporary ethnicity, or "tribalism", is not, in other words, a relic of the past but a product of modernization processes leading up to the present" (*ibid.*, 88). So much so that "ethnic "revitalisation" may be an inherent feature of modernity" (*ibid.*, 158).

In this context, the diffusion of processes of modernisation across the globe (i.e. "globalisation") and the proliferation of local ethnic differences (i.e. "localisation") have not appeared as two unrelated phenomena, nor as necessarily opposite ones. Rather, as Turton has suggested: "Globalization and localization are inextricably linked, but they are not simply reflexes of one another: globalization is a *precondition* of localization" (1997, 26).

If there is such a relationship between "globalisation" and "localisation", then what are the general processes through which the former may cause the latter? Two main

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[20] See, for instance, Barth (1969), Brass (1985), Castells (1997), Christie (1998), A.P. Cohen (1998), Connor (1994), Hutchinson and Smith (1994 and 1996) and A.D. Smith (1986).

arguments appear to be more often put forward to explain how modernity may induce processes of ethnic revitalisation.[21] The first one is hinged on the idea of a local reaction to modernity. Among others, also Giddens has underlined:

> "the sheer *pace of change* which the era of modernity sets into motion. Traditional civilisations may have been considerably more dynamic than other pre-modern systems, but the rapidity of change in conditions of modernity is extreme." (Giddens 1990, 6).

Arguably, such a characteristically modern "pace of change" is prone to cause complex forms of reaction and resistance. In this context:

> "Ethnic classification can then be seen as a practical way of creating order in the social universe" (Eriksen 1993, 61). "Ethnic identities, which embody a perceived continuity with the past, may [...] function in a psychologically reassuring way for the individual in times of upheaval; they seem to tell people that [...] there is an unchanging, stable core of ethnic belongingness which assures the individual of a continuity with the past" (*ibid.*, 68).

While this first argument stresses the "psychological reassuring function" of ethnic identities in modern times of "extreme rapidity of change", a second common argument emphasises how localisation and ethnic revitalisation can be rewarding strategic responses to the diffusion of the modern state across the globe. Indeed, there seems to be a broad consensus that: "While ethnic attachments are surely pre-modern [...], it is the *modern* state that seems most eager to *reward* ethnicity" (Moynihan 1993, 55). In particular, it has been shown that the local relevance of tribal or ethnic groups, their internal organisation and their "public face" can greatly change according to these groups' relationship with the unprecedented political, economic and environmental resources that the modern state has centralised, according to their relationship with state territorial boundaries and according to their relationship with state efforts to define

[21] Obviously, this does not mean that there have not been other important arguments. For an analysis of some of these see, for instance, Eriksen (1993), Connor (1994) and Christie (1998).

citizenship and legality (Castells 1997). In other words, ethnic or tribal groups have proved able to adapt –also in extreme ways– in order to take better advantage of economic, political and military opportunities directly or indirectly stemming from the modern state.

Clearly, one argument does not exclude the other, and both may contribute to a better understanding of specific instances of ethnic revitalisation in conditions of modernity. In any case, the relevant literature seems to have left little room for doubt: "returned" tribal (or ethnic) groups are now generally regarded as social realities cast in modernity, in spite of the fact that they may be perceived by many of their members (and by many others) as ancient living realities, as "natural" atavistic identities.

Set in this context, it seems that "the returned Saharawi tribes" must be deemed a modern phenomenon. But one may at least put forward the following questions: what are the most distinctive features of these "returned" tribal groups? Can these features be regarded as inherently *modern*? Why? Do the two common arguments mentioned above provide a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between modernity and "the return of the Saharawi tribes"?

It seems to me that there are two distinctive features of "the returned Saharawi tribes", and both appear to be fundamentally related to modernity. These two features could be called *objective differentiation* and *actual similarity*. It seems that "the returned Saharawi tribes" are both more categorically differentiated and yet also more similar among themselves than "the Saharawi tribes" of the pre-Polisario ethnographies.

The first feature has been mentioned above several times. The "returned Saharawi tribes" have been thoroughly objectified in official lists of members by the MINURSO. The UN has provided the financial and human resources necessary to do this. With the help of the UN, the Polisario and the Moroccan governments have achieved what the

Spanish colonial authorities could not: listing all "Saharawi" according to their tribe, section, sub-section and family, and then sending a copy of the list to all certified Saharawi households living in the refugee camps or elsewhere.

From this point of view there seems to be no room for doubt: this official classification has differentiated each "returned Saharawi tribe" from all the others much more thoroughly, authoritatively and objectively than had ever been the case before. Nowadays each "returned tribe" is distinctively branded with the internationally certified history of its uniqueness. Also, tribal boundaries now look definitively clear and closed. Not even the *asaba*, the institution through which an individual or a group could become a member of a tribe (see chapter two), can now force a way through the locked files of official tribal genealogies, approved by the Polisario and saved on the hard-disks of the MINURSO's personal computers and on the UN's mainframe in New York. The social and political relevance of this objectification should not be underestimated. As Eriksen noted:

> "ethnic identities must seem convincing to their members in order to function –and they must also be *acknowledged as legitimate by non-members of the group*" (1993, 69; emphasis mine).

The second most distinctive feature of "the returned Saharawi tribes" has been their amplified "actual similarity". What is meant by this phrase is that the objectified "returned tribes" have acquired an unprecedented similarity in their most important sources of economic resources and in their ways of accessing such resources. In effect, their main economic resource has become the relatively sizable budget of the "humanitarian state", and their main way of accessing it has become tribal networking centred round the politico-bureaucratic structure of the Polisario's state. The "tribalised" political economy of the SADR will be analysed in detail in the next chapter. But here it

seems necessary to anticipate one implication of the following analysis: the great similarity of "the returned tribes" has consisted, above all, in their shared present condition of "certified" groups competing for the same "seats" and for the same economic resources within the same institutional context, that of the Polisario's "humanitarian state".[22]

There are various reasons why these two distinctive features of "the returned Saharawi tribes" should be regarded as inextricably interwoven with super-local processes of modernisation. One may argue, for example, that "objective differentiation" has played a "psychologically reassuring function in modern times of upheaval" while, of course, it has required sizable financial resources provided by the UN (i.e. by rich, industrialised states). Also, the "actual similarity" has grown from –and has accommodated itself to– the institutional architecture of the Polisario's state and its economic resources (both also provided by rich, industrialised states). Last but not least, it may be argued that the development of both "objective differentiation" and "actual similarity" has required an intensive use of modern technology, from the MINURSO's personal computers to the Red Crescent's transportation of humanitarian goods.

There is one more fundamental reason for regarding these two features of "the returned Saharawi tribes" as characteristically modern: they are related to a typically modern "use of history". In particular, these features stem from the penetration into the local of a characteristically *modern historical consciousness*. They derive from the local diffusion of a global mapping of time, space and people: a process that typically culminates in the historical authentication and objectification of local "present" in modernity (see Giddens 1990). The individual Saharawi cannot now escape his (or her)

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[22] Cf. Turton's emphasis on "the concentration of political power at the state's center, which provided an "arena" within which ethnic groups became, in effect, competing interest groups" (1997, 6). Also, cf. Barth: "A political confrontation can only be implemented by making the groups similar and thereby comparable, and this will have effect on every new sector of activity which is made politically relevant" (1969, 35).

condition of being placed in a certified history. His existence is now part of universal history: it is a modern existence. In particular, each Saharawi is now part of a distinctive history that makes him both unique and small: a history that legitimises his unique claims and rights in the eyes of the whole world while it also makes him look infinitely marginal to universal history.

Each modern state needs history to authenticate its claims to people, territory and resources (arguably more so in the case of a state at war like the SADR). Unable to defeat the Moroccan army, the Polisario's national revolution needed a recognised tribal history to authenticate and legitimise itself and its claims against Moroccan demands. The Saharawi citizen has become a tribal man or woman in order to become a national man or woman: proving one's tribal credentials is *the* condition of being a Saharawi. But the game of history is always liable to engender new mirror-like games. If a man or a woman is Saharawi because of his or her tribal credentials, if he or she is the recipient of sizable resources, given by unknown and far away people because of his or her certified history, then this history may well also legitimate tribal claims to state resources. From this perspective there seem to be no compelling reasons why the tribes should not claim for themselves what the nation claims for all.

In other words, "the return of the Saharawi tribes" appears to be an inherently modern phenomenon, also because "the return" is hinged on a distinctively modern condition: the individual's conscious participation in history as the foundation of his or her exclusive, internationally recognised right to a territory and to a community (and thus to international assistance). From this point of view "the return of the tribes" is a victory of modernity. It is an example of the local "mythification" of history as the foundation of unique rights to a present and to a legitimate (if marginal) future, in the universal history of the Earth. "The return" is a victory of modernity because it is the evidence that the

Saharawi refugee has become a modern human being, one that is finally forced to celebrate the slaver that feeds him, his own slice of the cake of universal history.

The secret 'return': tribes, nation and expectations

The above section has investigated the processes that have contributed to "the return of the Saharawi tribes". This section considers the "return" from a different point of view. In particular, I try to examine the relationship between "the return" and the Saharawi nation. In my experience, this relationship is locally perceived as particularly problematic and uncomfortable.

I have mentioned above some of the difficulties that I had in obtaining, recognising and understanding information about "the 88" and its consequences. I have also noted that the academic and journalistic literature on Western Sahara did not prove useful on this topic. A sort of conspiracy of silence has surrounded "the 88" and the present political, economic and social relevance of tribal networks among Saharawi refugees. Indeed, I believe that it would not be improper to talk of a deliberate secrecy (or exclusive knowledge) that Saharawi have been maintaining on these themes.

In my view, the reason for this secrecy has been the perceived incongruity between local reality and external expectations, between the "return of tribalism" and the precious unity (that so many outsiders have been acclaiming, with one, deafening voice) of the Saharawi nation and of its state. While this secrecy is accompanied by a certain social and political malaise and uneasiness among "the Saharawi", it has helped to hide (at least superficially) this incongruity. In this section, I examine these issues in more detail. I

believe that their social relevance can hardly be overestimated in an analysis of the local meanings of nation and tribe among Saharawi refugees.[23]

The Polisario's Saharawi have learned (or rather, have constructed) the meanings of "nation" through their exposure to humanitarian discipline and to a hierarchically organised, state guerrilla. The Polisario's "humanitarian state" (coupled with its army, the SPLA) has provided much more than a regionally and internationally very successful example of a welfare state at war. It has also played a critical role in the local construction both of a moral model of nation, and of the perceived external expectations about the Saharawi nation-state.

In order to appreciate this moral model, this dominant understanding of "proper nation" among Saharawi, it seems necessary to refer to the Polisario's ideal and practice of national justice. The Polisario's anti-tribal, national revolution was founded on the egalitarian principle of equal treatment for all citizens.[24] In the camps and in the army, equal treatment and egalitarianism were implemented in the standardized and compulsory assignment of civil and military duties to everybody, according to criteria of gender, age, capacity and revolutionary maturity.

Also, the principle of national egalitarianism was shown through the constant effort to eliminate (or, at least, conceal) all differences in wealth among soldiers and refugees.[25] Initially, during their "assisted" exodus from Western Sahara, the neo-citizens were dispossessed of the livestock that accompanied them. From then onwards, standardised goods were distributed (ranging from the same tent for every household, to the same *melfa* for all women and the same military uniform for all soldiers). In the camps, as in

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[23] Some of these themes (particularly those concerning the relationships between humanitarian assistance, external expectations and local realities) will be further investigated in the next chapter.

[24] Following Roger Scruton, egalitarianism is here understood as "the belief that there are no relevant differences whereby one person can be supposed to have a greater inherent right to some benefit than another" (Scruton 1996, 158).

[25] Cf. Goffman: " It is by suppressing external social distinctions that a total institution can build up an orientation to its own scheme of honour. [...] It should be noted that in thus suppressing externally valid differences, the harshest total institution may be the most democratic" (1961, 112).

the army, no wages were paid and no taxes were collected. Indeed, money did not circulate at all among the Polisario's citizens until the early 1990s: all goods and services were provided by the "humanitarian state". At least until the UN-sponsored cease-fire of 1991, all citizens' private wealth was either wisely kept far from the camps, or proudly handed over to the Polisario for the revolution.[26]

Through these practices (which were carried out with the zeal and rigour peculiar to a militarised social environment), the Polisario explicitly fostered the social construction of a local, moral model of nation based on citizens' equality, and on the conviction that true national solidarity was not compatible with manifest differences in wealth, particularly in times of war. Such a model was also inherently anti-tribal: it openly denied the moral admissibility, within a nation of equal citizens, of any differential social treatments and rights stemming from "past" differences of tribal status and ascription.

The official and meticulous practice of egalitarianism as a supreme form of national justice and solidarity was made particularly pervasive, not only by the spatial homogeneity of the camps and by the shared routines of military and camp life, but also by aid. In fact, national justice and solidarity seemed to culminate in the public distribution of humanitarian resources on a strictly *per capita* basis, year in year out. From this point of view, it is clear that the Polisario's national egalitarianism suited very well not only the anti-tribal revolution of the Front, but also the dominating western norms of humanitarian justice. In fact, as suggested by Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold:

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[26] For instance, those refugees or soldiers that received a Spanish military pension did not collect it for years, or found a way to delegate relatives living in Mauritania to collect it. Similarly, those who still owned livestock because they had left it with relatives who did not join Polisario, obviously had to leave it there and wait for better times. The fiction of citizens as individuals with no wealth differences between them was made (at least temporarily) "true" by the imposition of strict limitations to movement. The cease-fire and the opening of the Algerian-Mauritanian border greatly contributed to ending this apparent uniformity.

> "Representatives of the donors usually impose their norms of distributive justice, which for western society is an abstract principle of "fairness" of distribution (Rawls 1972). In this context, such an approach supports the model of donation on a "*per capita*" basis which in theory guarantees equal opportunities to all" (1992, 208).

I would like to emphasise a bit more the relevance of this convergence between the local moral model of nation (hinged on egalitarianism), and dominating models of humanitarian justice and practice (based on *per capita* distribution). In particular, it should be noted that the Polisario's citizens themselves seem to have strongly perceived this convergence between their "moral nation" and humanitarian assistance, if in their own terms. In fact, among Saharawi the international political and diplomatic successes of the Polisario's Republic, and the imposing amounts of precious humanitarian resources that the Saharawi nation-state in exile has been granted, have clearly appeared as warranted much more by national moral excellence and reputation (let alone donors' own interests) than by refugees' actual need. In other words, such remarkable humanitarian and political results have mostly been ascribed to the fact that the Polisario's state and the Saharawi nation have internationally been recognised as especially honourable and praiseworthy moral entities. In particular, the relatively abundant supply of humanitarian resources has been taken as clear evidence that the Saharawi state and nation have been meeting external expectations of unity, solidarity, commitment and just claim.

Set in this context, it may now appear clearer how "the 88" has constituted a particularly serious and complex challenge to the whole nation-state. As argued above, the crisis of "the 88" was gradually overcome through the establishment of a new socio-political regime of state legitimacy, founded on a "resuscitated" tribal solidarity and cohesion. A sort of tribal U-turn eventually allowed the Polisario's leadership to overcome what has been its biggest crisis to date. Nevertheless, the "post-88" Saharawi

nation-state appears to have been consistently represented by its citizens as defective, when compared with the original egalitarian model of nation. In particular, "the return of the tribes" and the "tribalisation" of state politics have been seen as a grave betrayal of national egalitarianism, a betrayal of the moral model of nation, and of external expectations.[27]

Among the Polisario's citizens, this "betrayal" of the moral model of nation has been perceived as a critical threat to the international reputation of the Saharawi nation-state, and as a major menace to its access to humanitarian resources. Indeed, it is understood that "the 88", "the return of tribalism" and the present political, economic and social relevance of the "tribes", reveal a critical flaw in the Saharawi nation-state. It is as if the SADR, the Polisario and all the Saharawi would be seen to fall short of the world's expectations, thereby putting the politically indispensable and economically precious external support at great risk, if the world learned what all Saharawi discovered through "the 88".

To sum up, since "the 88" and "the return of the tribes", the Saharawi nation has been brought together much more by individual interests and tribal reciprocity than by that national/humanitarian egalitarianism which still constitutes the core of external expectations. This is why secrecy about the present relevance of tribes has seemed indispensable in order to preserve international political and humanitarian support for the Saharawi nation-state. Secrecy has been seen as crucial for concealing what the world would obviously regard as an inadmissible "national sin": that the revolutionary,

[27] Such a "betrayal" of the moral, egalitarian model of nation has become more and more manifest after the 1991 cease-fire and the opening-up of the Algerian-Mauritanian border. As the next chapter will argue, since then the development of extra-legal trade on tribal bases across such border has constantly accentuated differences in wealth and opportunities within Polisario's nation.

nationalist and eminently praiseworthy Saharawi could actually kill each other on tribal grounds and use their networks to pursue their private interests.[28]

[28] At least, this is what will be argued in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Between the trading tribes and the egalitarian nation: the political economy of the Polisario's state

In the aftermath of "the 88", the signing of the UN-sponsored ceasefire by the Polisario and the Moroccan governments was soon followed by the official lifting of the refugee camp gates and by the actual re-opening of the Algerian-Mauritanian border. Under these new circumstances, the Saharawi refugees could quickly developed *el comercio*: a form of extra-legal trade in humanitarian goods which, in effect, has re-integrated the Saharawi refugees into the regional and international economy.

The present chapter is dedicated to the analysis of such commerce in humanitarian supplies since –as will be argued– this has become an important factor shaping economic, social and political relationships among Saharawi refugees. Following an introductory section in which I investigate the presence of humanitarian goods in Nouadhibou, I will provide a description of the main features of *el comercio*. Then, this trade and its consequences will be analysed by focusing on three central aspects: the relationship between *el comercio* and the refugees' tribes; the relationship between *el comercio* and local understandings of gift and humanitarian aid; and finally the relationship between *el comercio* and the political economy of the Polisario's state.

As for the first aspect, it will be shown that the refugees' trade in aid has hinged on commercial networks of a predominantly tribal character. Tribes, in fact, have become an integral aspect of *el comercio* as a means of reducing malfeasance, of facilitating trust and of constructing closed clusters of traders. No less important, it will be argued that the

merging of trade and tribes has been a crucial means for constructing and managing networks of popular support for the politicians and high bureaucrats of the Polisario.

I will then consider refugees' prevailing understandings of gift and humanitarian aid, and the relationship between these understandings and *el comercio*. This second main aspect is important since it allows one to investigate a particularly problematic character of the refugees' trade: its capacity to transform aid into merchandise, inalienable and national goods into alienable and personal ones. This transformative capacity of *el comercio* has made it a sort of "national sin": something that stands in some opposition to the prevailing, egalitarian model of the Saharawi nation and to donors' expectations (and, hence, something to be concealed from non-refugees).

Finally, the analysis of the relationship between *el comercio* and the political economy of the Polisario's SADR will show that –so far– the refugees' trade in aid has been largely beneficial to the Saharawi state. This trade has been instrumental to the management of the economic centrality of the camps of the Front and essential to preventing most refugees from leaving the settlements in the post-ceasefire period. While it will be argued that the Saharawi trade has played a crucial role in the management of popular support for the Polisario, nevertheless it will also be shown that *el comercio* has more recently become a creeping threat to the SADR.

The desert routes of Mauritanian sardines

The Atlantic waters off the coast of Nouadhibou are rich in a variety of species of fish and shellfish. Also, these waters seethe with Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Korean, Japanese and Mauritanian ships. Among these, there are also "factory ships" whose

length can exceed 100 metres. In Mauritanian waters, the majority of these large ships are specialized in sardines: the small fish are caught, brought on board and immediately processed. In a few minutes of sharp twists, the fish's entrails are cut away; its most edible parts are cleaned, slightly salted and then preserved in small tins, in oil, in brine or in plain water.[1]

In Nouadhibou, one can find small and large tins of sardines in virtually every "boutique". They come in two kinds. The first one is the "original" type: coloured tins imported from the Canary Islands (Spain). The second kind is the "normal" one: just plain tins of canned sardines. Beside the common "made in Spain" phrase written in relief, the second kind is also marked with "Cruz Roja Española" (Spanish Red Cross) or with "ECHO" (acronym of European Community Humanitarian Office).

This "normal", plain tin is at least a 20% cheaper than the "original", coloured type. Amused by my curiosity, Ahmed explained to me what was different about the cheaper kind. "Look..." –he said– "This fish comes from the sea of sand, you understand? ...From the desert, not from the ocean". Seated on the floor of our most patronized "boutique" for a round of Chinese tea, Ahmed had a joke with the two shop-keepers and me while staring at a dusty heap of "ECHO" tins. "You see... I feel at home here" – Ahmed said– "...just like in the camps: the same bloody tins all my life! I grew up on these! Come on... this is not food: it is a persecution by the *nsara*." We all dutifully laughed.

The "normal", plain tins of sardines are just one of a large variety of products that are delivered to the Polisario Front as humanitarian assistance for its camp refugees. Many of these products can easily be found at most shops in Nouadhibou and in many other Mauritanian urban centres such as Zouerate, Atar, Tidjikdja, the capital Nouakchott and

[1] See European Commission/Eurostat (2001) for statistics on the various species of fish and shellfish in Mauritanian waters. See Negedly (1990) on sardine processing.

Rosso: settlements which are located hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from the camps of the Polisario. Among local traders, nobody doubts that the same products also reach many Algerian towns (above all, Tindouf), the Senegalese cities of Dakar and Saint-Louis, and even some major urban centres in Mali (map 7).[2]

Apart from canned sardines, popular products "from the desert" include: Neapolitan lentils "La Palma" (my favourite home food in Mauritania), which come either in tins or, dry, in small plastic sacks; 1 or 5 kg. packages of Italian rice and spaghetti "Cooperazione Italiana"; 50 kg. sacks of "ECHO" rice; 50 kg. sacks and 1 kilo tins of "ECHO" sugar; tins (of 125 or 500 grams, net weight) of Spanish tuna; 1 litre bottles and 5 litres tins of Spanish olive oil "La Española"; 5 and 10 kg. plastic sacks of various Spanish brands of powdered milk, such as "Miluc", and of one Italian brand named "Anita"; Spanish and Italian tins of tomatoes, peas, chick-peas, beans and sweet corn; various types of Spanish and Italian biscuits; and also other, inedible goods such as bars of soap, bottles of shower gel, white towels of various sizes and greenish or brownish blankets.

There appear to be two main (and often interwoven) channels along which humanitarian resources reach Nouadhibou from the refugee camps of Tindouf: what may be called a "family route" and a commercial one. When Ahmed goes to the camps to spend the summer months with his mother, on his way back to Nouadhibou he carries one sack of rice, sugar or lentils with him. Ahmed's mother gives him the sack, which she has been saving for her sister Mariam (Ahmed's aunt in Nouadhibou). Unfortunately, Ahmed cannot carry much, for various reasons. First, his mother does not have that much food to spare. Second, Ahmed does not have a car. On his way back from the camps,

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[2] Nouadhibou is said to receive a considerably smaller amount of humanitarian goods when compared to Atar, Chinguetti, Tidjikdja, Nouakchott and Rosso. These Mauritanian urban centres are well connected by road to Zouerate (the town where all aid from the camps arrives at -see later in this chapter). There is no continuous paved road between Zouerate and Nouadhibou.

Ahmed goes to the desert to see his father and then finds a lift to Zouerate, where he catches the train to Nouadhibou. The two passenger coaches of this train are always overcrowded and one can hardly find a seat on the floor. Travelling in these difficult conditions makes it virtually impossible to carry more than one sack of food per person.

Some other Saharawi refugees living in Nouadhibou are luckier than Ahmed. Maya, the very first person I met in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, is a case in point. An Ould Dlim of the section Ludeichat, she is twenty-six years old and is not married. She lives with her mother, a younger sister, a ten years old brother and Fatu, a long-limbed black girl who works as a maid in the large, well-finished and always tidy house of the family, in *Cra Nasrani* ("the foot of the European", the area where many of the richest families of Nouadhibou live). Maya's father lives in the Polisario refugee settlements with his oldest son. Maya explained to me that her father has to live in the camps: it is his duty. He is a *chej* of tribal section and works in the refugee camps with the MINURSO on the identification of voters for the referendum.

Maya's family can certainly be regarded as a wealthy one in Nouadhibou. Her father owns a number of camels (I was given the round figure of one hundred). Also, he has three houses in Nouadhibou: the large family house and two smaller ones nearby, which are rented. Furthermore, one of Maya's three brothers, Abdullah, has been living and working in Barcelona (Spain) as a shop assistant. He has been able to send some money to his family almost every month.

In addition, Maya's family relies extensively upon humanitarian supplies. Once every three months Maya's father and his oldest son leave the refugee camps and go together to Nouadhibou by car, where they spend about two weeks with their family. Before leaving the camps, they fill their Land Rover with "ECHO" sacks of rice and sugar, with a variety of tins and with other humanitarian goods that they are given in the

camps. The quantity of foodstuffs that they carry is sufficient for feeding Maya's family in Nouadhibou during the following three months: so this family only needs to buy relatively few fresh products in the local shops.

Ahmed's and Maya's families are examples of how humanitarian goods can be shared within families whose members are divided between the Polisario's refugee camps and a Mauritanian urban centre like Nouadhibou. Nevertheless, it is clear that this phenomenon cannot explain the wide availability of humanitarian products from the camps at most "boutiques" of Nouadhibou and at many similar shops in other Mauritanian urban settlements. The constant presence of aid goods in these shops should rather be attributed to the commercial entrepreneurship of traders like Dih.

Dih is an Ould Dlim, of the Ould Bahamar section. He has been living in the Polisario's Dakhla camp with his mother and his two sisters. His father, a soldier in the SPLA (the Polisario's army), died in 1997. He left his family an old Land Rover and two flats in Nouadhibou, which have been rented. Dih's father managed to buy the car and the two flats with his Spanish pension. Like thousands of adult Saharawi men, for several years before his death Dih's father received a Spanish pension of 50,000 pesetas per month (about £167: three times the average monthly wage in Nouadhibou) for having been a soldier in the army of Franco's Spanish Sahara.[3]

Dih is twenty-eight years old. During the period of my fieldwork, he was still single but was soon to marry Fatima, a witty and good-looking woman. Fatima's father,

[3] I could not establish the exact number of Saharawi who have been receiving a Spanish military pension, even in spite of the kind and generous support of Don Luis Rodriguez de Viguri (the last General Secretary of the Spanish Sahara). I tried to obtain such information in Madrid, but a it is still regarded as "reserved and confidential": it should become available in February 2024. It seems that there are still thousands of recipients of such pensions, also because when the former soldier dies, his wife maintains the right to receive half of the husband's pension. The Spanish pension for these former soldiers varies between 30,000 and 120,000 Spanish pesetas per month (about 100 and 400 British pounds respectively), depending on the rank achieved and on the years of service in the Spanish Army. Even the lower amount remains considerable in local terms, and well above the average monthly wage in Mauritania. The exchange rate between British pound sterling and Mauritanian ouguiya I have used throughout the chapter is: 1 pound=300 ouguiya. This was the average unofficial exchange rate during my fieldwork in the year 2000, at the time when the monetary values reported here were obtained.

Mohammed, is Dih's "cousin", being also an Ould Dlim of the Ould Bahamar section. Mohammed is one of Dih's main commercial partners in Nouadhibou. Dih brings humanitarian food from the refugee camps to Nouadhibou and Mohammed buys most of it for the two "boutiques" that he owns in the city.

Dih's business requires constant travelling. He buys humanitarian goods from a few "cousins" who live in the Polisario's camps of Dakhla and Ausserd. When he is in the camps, he also sells some goods that he has carried from Zouerate or Nouadhibou, such as *melfa* (women's dress), *darra* (men's tunic), shoes, perfumes and pieces of furniture. Having sold these goods, and having bought humanitarian goods from camp refugees, he then goes back to Zouerate or to Nouadhibou, where he sells the humanitarian goods and buys more products to be sold in the camps.

Each time Dih leaves the refugee camps to go to Nouadhibou or Zouerate, he generally takes 15 sacks of "ECHO" rice and/or "ECHO" sugar, and between 200 and 300 tins. In Zouerate he sells each sack for 3,000 Mauritanian ouguiya, and each tin for 40 ouguiya. The average proceeds of the sale of these humanitarian goods amount to 53-57,000 Mauritanian ouguiya (about £177-190). In Nouadhibou, prices are slightly higher than in Zouerate, reaching at least 3,500-4,000 ouguiya per sack, and 45 ouguiya per tin: here, Dih's average proceeds rise to 61-66,000 Mauritanian ouguiya (about £205-220). In one full "commercial circuit" between the refugee camps, Zouerate (or Nouadhibou) and back to the camps, he makes an average net profit of 30-40,000 Mauritanian ouguiya (about £100-133).[4] Completing this circuit takes about seven days if Dih stops in Zouerate, and eleven days if he stops in Nouadhibou.

Furthermore, Dih often manages to increase his profit by up to a 40 percent through speculative currency exchanges between Mauritanian ouguiya and Spanish peseta (the

[4] The average wage in Nouadhibou is between 15 and 20,000 Mauritanian ouguiya *per month*, or between £50 and £67.

Euro since January 2002).[5] When Dih is in the camps, he buys from other refugees as many Spanish pesetas as he can at an exchange rate of 1 Mauritanian ouguiya for 1 Spanish peseta. When he is in Zouerate, he again tries to buy Spanish pesetas, but this time the exchange rate is 1,1-1,2 Mauritanian ouguiya for 1 Spanish peseta. Finally, when Dih is in Nouadhibou he sells all his pesetas where he can easily get 1,4 Mauritanian ouguiya for 1 Spanish peseta. In other words, by selling his pesetas in Nouadhibou Dih gains a profit equivalent to 40 percent of the monetary amount he exchanged in the refugee camps, and 17-27 percent of the amount he exchanged in Zouerate.[6]

In order to buy and sell humanitarian and other goods and currencies at convenient prices, and as quickly as possible, Dih relies on a number of "contacts" in the refugee camps, in Zouerate and in Nouadhibou. These are camp refugees, as well as other Saharawi and Mauritanian traders, owners of "boutiques" and of other shops (such as the above mentioned Mohammed in Nouadhibou). The majority are members of Dih's tribe: they are his "cousins".

On various occasions Dih explained to me that he trusts his "cousins" more than "non-cousins". He made it clear that the reason does not lie in the fact that he "knows" his cousins better, since he can know only a few of them well. Rather, the reason is that his "cousins" have much more to lose if they cheat him. "You can always trust your cousins more than other people" –he explained. "If a cousin is a *comemierda* [literally "shit-eater" in Spanish], if he cheats you, he knows you will say it around for sure… He will get into troubles! …Other cousins will look down on him and will avoid him. If he

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[5] It seems that the introduction of the Euro (a stronger currency than the old Spanish peseta) has significantly increased the profit earned from currency exchanges.

[6] The availability of Spanish pesetas (the Euro since January 2002) among camp refugees stems from four different sources: the Spanish pensions; remittances from relatives who live in Europe; gifts sent by Spanish families to the children they hosted during the summer holidays; and money left behind by "humanitarian tourists" (who are mostly Spanish), either as gifts or when they buy food and souvenirs in the camp shops.

did it badly and people know it, he will lose his face! You know how the people of *el beidàn* are: that is like a suicide... a social suicide". "But if you are cheated by a Reguibat... well, then you can be sure, my friend: he will laugh at you with all his cousins! ...They will kill a goat and have a party together, with your money ... [*laughing*] and you will be their goat! ...Be careful, my friend!"

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Dih does not trade at all with people who are not his "cousins": he does, and he needs to. As far as Saharawi refugees are concerned, he often trades with a few Techna and "even" with several Reguibat. Dih explained to me that he trades with these people because they are his old schoolmates and camp neighbours. They are people with whom he grew up: he knows them and their families very well.

In addition to these Saharawi refugees who are not "cousins", when Dih is in Zouerate he also trades with Mauritanians, as most Saharawi merchants do. In fact, there is said to be a tacit agreement between the Polisario and the Mauritanian government that obliges Saharawi traders to do business with Mauritanian merchants in Zouerate. The agreement is that Saharawi refugees can cross the Algerian-Mauritanian border and carry their aid from the camps into Mauritania, but only up to Zouerate. From Zouerate onwards the trade must be in the hands of Mauritanian merchants alone. Mauritanian police try to ensure that this agreement is respected by checking the nationality of those traders who leave Zouerate with humanitarian goods. They must have Mauritanian papers, or they will have to give a large bribe to the police.

Nevertheless, Dih does sell aid in Nouadhibou. He can do this because, in addition to his Polisario identity card, he also has Mauritanian documents. Whenever the Mauritanian police stop and check him somewhere on his way from Zouerate to

Nouadhibou, Dih shows them his Mauritanian identity card. If the police complain, despite his Mauritanian papers, Dih knows they are looking for a bribe.

Dih is not an uncommon or exceptional case. Although I could not quantify the precise number of Saharawi traders who normally sold humanitarian goods from the camps in Nouadhibou while I was living there, a rough estimate is possible. According to Dih and other Saharawi traders and owners of "boutiques", there are at least 40 to 50 Saharawi merchants like Dih in Nouadhibou, while the number of Mauritanian traders who buy aid in Zouerate and sell it in Nouadhibou is said to be between 50 and 60.[7]

These are a small fraction of the number of Saharawi traders who operate between the refugee camps and Zouerate, and of Mauritanian and Saharawi merchants who trade between Zouerate and other Mauritanian urban centres. I could achieve an approximate figure of the number of these traders thanks to the collaboration of Ahmed and of a few other informants. During the months of July and August 2000, Ahmed worked in a "boutique" in Zouerate. Before going, he agreed to collect some information for me. According to his observations, during the months he spent in Zouerate, a minimum of 160 cars and 60 trucks arrived daily in the town from the refugee camps, loaded with humanitarian supplies. These numbers are in line with the data provided by other informants. The average proceeds from the sale of aid are no less than 50,000 ouguiya per car, and 110,000 ouguiya per truck. This leads to an estimate of at least 14,600,000 ouguiya (about £48,600) for the local commercial value of the humanitarian goods that reach Zouerate every day, or 5,329,000,000 ouguiya (£18 millions) per year.

Clearly, these amounts are reported with the only aim of giving a very rough estimate of the camps-Zouerate trade: they may well be over- or under-estimates. This said, it should also be taken into account that these amounts are calculated on the basis of

[7] Again, this also is a rough estimate, which is reported here because it can be useful to give an idea of the amounts exchanged and of the dimension of the aid-trade business in Nouadhibou.

particularly low wholesale prices: in this context, all *monetary amounts* tend to greatly underestimate the *quantities* that are actually traded. Given that the camp-Zouerate journey takes, on average, 30 hours and since completing the camp-Zouerate-camp commercial circuit takes no less than 7 days, at the very least there must be 1,320 vehicles constantly doing this commercial circuit. Considering that each vehicle carries at least 2 people, there must be no less than 2,640 Saharawi refugees *directly* involved in the only transportation of merchandise between the camps and Zouerate at any one time. Again, these amounts have a strong speculative character and are likely to be underestimated (also because of seasonal factors: fewer people work in the hot summer). In the case of non-Saharawi Mauritanian merchants, I could not reach an estimate at all. Simply, they are consistently said to number "thousands".

Dih confided to me that he has long been saving money and making plans to change his commercial activity. He regards his trading in aid and other goods as profitable but he does not much like the idea of selling humanitarian goods. Moreover, he thinks that such trade has a rather uncertain future. He explained to me that nobody can guess what may happen to the Polisario and its camps: the future is a misty battle zone that requires both great prudence and anticipation. In his eyes, it is as if the aid trade may well end overnight: it all depends on how the situation develops between the Polisario, Morocco, Algeria and the UN. It seems irrational to him to ignore this state of affairs and to believe that the aid trade is here to stay, even thought it began as early as 1990. And so, Dih wants to do something else, using the aid trade as a springboard for a new commercial activity, like Ahmed Salem did.

Ahmed Salem is a Saharawi refugee of the Techna tribe who traded in humanitarian goods until 1995, in close cooperation with another Saharawi called Sida: not a "cousin", but a close camp friend. Once they had saved enough money, the two set up a shop in

Nouadhibou. Now this shop has become one of the largest stores in the city selling construction materials, which they import from the Canary Islands. In addition to this, Ahmed Salem has also been investing in housing: he builds or buys houses and then rents or re-sells them. (One day he showed me two of his most luxurious flats when I was looking for a place to rent in Numerowatt.) He is now regarded as a very rich man in Nouadhibou, the glaring evidence of his wealth being a large mosque that he had built beside his chalet in Numerowatt. Having started as a trader in humanitarian goods just like thousands of other Saharawi refugees, he is now regarded as a model of the successful trader-entrepreneur.

The three dimensions of '*el comercio*'

"*El comercio*" means "the trade" in Spanish. This phrase is commonly used among Saharawi refugees to refer to all trade in humanitarian resources which are intended for the Polisario's camps. By extension, this same phrase has come to include also other commercial activities that Saharawi refugees have developed alongside their trade in humanitarian goods. In this and the next section I examine some of the main features of *el comercio*, focusing in particular on the social networks which underpin it.

Before going further, it is important to underline that *el comercio* is a form of "extra-legal" trade. In other words, it can be portrayed as an ensemble of activities of a predominantly commercial character which are not subject to formal state regulations and which –on the whole– remain unrecorded. There seem to be no published data or information on *el comercio*: this phenomenon appears unknown to the academic and

journalistic literature on Saharawi refugees.[8] More interestingly, the existence of *el comercio* is denied by the Polisario and its SADR, which officially treat it as marginal illicit activities carried out by a few camp refugees acting separately. Formally, the refugees' trade in aid outside the camps is an *illegal* activity: a criminal misuse of strategic resources of public utility.[9] According to the Constitution of the SADR, the development of a market economy and of private enterprise will be allowed only after the achievement of an independent Saharawi Republic in Western Sahara (Article 45 of the SADR Constitution of September 1999).

The existence of this form of extra-legal trade may, however, cause little surprise. It is well known that camp refugees in all continents have often developed extra-legal activities in an effort to improve their living conditions (see, for instance, Harrell-Bond 1986; Keen 1992; Long 1993; Malkki 1995).[10] The official and academic "non-existence" of *el comercio* may not be a startling revelation either. Despite the considerable social, political and economic relevance that forms of extra-legal trade have commonly proved to have, the official and academic silence about them has remained the general rule (Duffield 2001).[11] This has often been justified on the grounds that investigation into extra-legal activities may be dangerous for researchers, since they may be seen as a serious menace to certain prevailing interests. By the same token, it has often been argued that researchers may find it especially difficult to gain a deep insight into extra-legal commercial activities: a variety of private and public subjects may have a

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[8] To the best of my knowledge, at present the literature only provides some references to the opening of several shops privately run by refugees in the Polisario's camps (see Michael Bhatia, "Western Sahara under Polisario Control: Summary Report of Field Mission to the Saharawi Refugee Camps (near Tindouf, Algeria)", *The Review of African Political Economy*, No. 88, August 2001).

[9] This is the representation of the refugees' trade that a high functionary of the Ministry of Interior of the SADR gave me during an interview which took place in November 2000 in his large house in Nouadhibou. Numerous other Saharawi refugees consistently confirmed this official attitude towards *el comercio*.

[10] "In fact all available studies on refugees in camps [in Africa] show that they leave no stone unturned to earn an income either to supplement their diet, or to make up for the things not included in the aid package or to make material progress" (Dr Giam Kibreab 1985, quoted in Keen 1992, 55).

[11] Table A.13 in Annexe 1 reports some official data which highlight the considerable size of the so-called informal sector in various countries of West Africa.

vested interest in researchers' failure to access and disseminate crucial information about the "underworld" of a so-called "shadow" or "black" economy.

These worries may sometimes be well-founded. No doubt researchers have repeatedly met with considerable (at times insurmountable) methodological difficulties in gathering information and observations on extra-legal activities (Meagher 1998). Manuel Castells has clearly summarised the terms of this *impasse* with reference to research on criminal networks. But he has also proposed what I believe could be a sensible way forward.

> "[The] phenomenon [of criminal networks] is largely ignored by social scientists, when it comes to understanding economies and societies, with the arguments that the data are not truly reliable and that sensationalism taints interpretation. I take exception of these views. If a phenomenon is acknowledged as a fundamental dimension of our societies, indeed of the new, globalised system, we must use whatever evidence is available to explore the connection between these criminal activities and societies and economies at large" (Castells 1998, quoted in Duffield 2001, 144).

These considerations seem appropriate also for the more general case of research on extra-legal activities –which are not necessarily "criminal" *tout court*. Above all, they seem appropriate for *el comercio*. Despite the sheer difficulties in quantifying the exact volumes exchanged and in directly observing the whole range of social and commercial practices that are said to characterise this trade, *el comercio* is a phenomenon that cannot be hastily ignored. Rather, sharing Castells' view, I believe that the social, political and economic relevance of *el comercio* among Saharawi refugees justifies talking about it and trying to analyse it, despite the shortcomings of the information presently available on this topic.[12]

[12] These limitations are mostly related to the impossibility of collecting first-hand observations of a larger sample of economic transactions over a wide area spanning various international borders and, above all, to

Bearing these reflections in mind, the following analysis of *el comercio* relies (to a large extent) on Dih's, Ahmed's and a few other informants' descriptions and understandings (some arguably more informed than others) of the phenomenon. As for my direct observations, these were necessarily limited to a small part of the wide range of social and commercial practices that appear to constitute *el comercio*. I hope that further research on this form of extra-legal trade will overcome the limitations of the present analysis.

'Polisario', 'upper' and 'lower' trade

Saharawi refugees' trade in humanitarian goods started –according to all my informants– between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s: that is soon after "the 88" and the halting of virtually all armed clashes between the Polisario's SPLA and the Moroccan FAR. Following a tentative start, *el comercio* is said to have expanded greatly in the aftermath of the formal ceasefire of 1991 and to have rapidly reached its present volume of exchanges.

Nobody knows the exact amounts of humanitarian goods that, since 1991, refugees have been selling outside the Polisario's camps. Nevertheless, among Saharawi refugees, two phenomena are commonly taken as clear indicators that not only has *el comercio* involved consistently sizeable amounts of goods, but also that the aid trade has deeply transformed the refugees' economy and other important aspects of their lives.

The first of these phenomena is the huge growth of four-wheel drive vehicles privately owned by camp refugees. Once an utter rarity, these private vehicles are now a

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constraints on time and financial resources available for my research. And so most of the material collected stems from formal and informal interviews with Saharawi informants.

common sight in the Polisario's camps. They are expensive to buy and to maintain for local standards of income.[13] Only the wealth engendered by *el comercio* (and the fact that cars and trucks are as essential to this trade as the goods exchanged) is said to explain the great increase in the number of vehicles owned by Saharawi refugees.

The expansion of Zouerate is the second phenomenon commonly taken as an indicator of the sizeable dimensions of the Saharawi trade. During the late 1970s and all the 1980s Zouerate was a small settlement inhabited by a few thousands people: mostly miners, other workers of the SNIM and their families. But during the first half of the 1990s this state of affairs visibly changed: with the development of *el comercio*, in a few years the Polisario's refugees transformed the town. Nowadays Zouerate is the largest urban centre in northern Mauritania with at least 20-25,000 inhabitants. A large proportion of these are said to be Saharawi from the Polisario's camps.

Among Saharawi refugees there seems to be no doubt about it: Zouerate is now the refugees' main commercial centre outside the Polisario camps. It is as if Zouerate had come to life with *el comercio*: now it seethes with people, goods, exchanges, shops, stores, cars and trucks. Emerging from the sands after a thirty hours journey, everyday scores of loaded cars and trucks arrive in Zouerate from the refugee camps, following the new commercial arteries of this corner of the Sahara.

It is clear that, in the wake of "the 88" and of the ceasefire, *el comercio* has developed into a complex and dynamic reality. Nowadays behind this Spanish phrase there are extensive webs of social, political and commercial relationships; there are continuous exchanges, constant gains and losses, opportunities, marriages, movements of people and of vast amounts of resources; there are the actions of a large number of men

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[13] On the local market an old Land Rover costs no less than 60,000 ouguiya (£2,000): that is as much as a standard concrete house in Nouadhibou or a good house in Zouerate. Also for this reason, the ownership of a vehicle certainly contributes to mark a refugee's social status (not an uncommon phenomenon; cf. Long 1993, 64).

and women: camp refugees, camp aid-store directors, Polisario politicians, Algerian and Mauritanian traders, European NGOs, trans-continental solidarity networks, the ECHO and UN agencies.

In an attempt to understand better its main present features, *el comercio* may be represented as a multi-layered system. In particular, according to the information and observations presently available, *el comercio* could be portrayed as constituted of three different, if interwoven, circuits of social and commercial relationships. For the sake of clarity, in the following I will name these three circuits "Polisario trade", "upper trade" and "lower trade".

The "Polisario trade" is that part of *el comercio* which is said to be directly controlled by leading Polisario politicians and by high SADR bureaucrats. It allegedly involves sizable *undistributed* humanitarian resources which trusted Polisario workers – usually select "cousins" of the politicians and bureaucrats involved– transport from the central aid-store in Rabuni ("the capital") to Zouerate by vehicles of the SADR government.[14] Once in town, these humanitarian goods are sold to a small number of rich Mauritanian and Saharawi merchants who own large warehouses in Zouerate and in other Mauritanian urban centres. The proceeds of this trade contribute to the monetary obligations of the Polisario's state. Such obligations include, above all, the payment of the soldiers' monthly salaries and of "martyr's compensation" (i.e. monthly sums given to thousands of families of so-called martyrs of war living in the refugee camps).[15]

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[14] In the following, the phrase "*undistributed*" humanitarian supplies refers to those humanitarian resources which have already been received by the SADR but that have not yet been distributed to the camp refugees. Obviously, "*distributed*" humanitarian supplies are, instead, those humanitarian resources received by the SADR and already distributed to the camp refugees. Concerning the "Polisario trade", it should be noted that there is said to be also another commercial circuit within this dimension of *el comercio*. Humanitarian goods shipped to the Port of Oran (Algeria) are made to "disappear" during their long journey to the Polisario's camps. To do this, high Polisario politicians supposedly rely on their close contacts with Algerian politicians, bureaucrats, military and business men (such as Katri Amar, who is both director of the Port of Oran and a close relative of the SADR President Abdelaziz; see Annexe 3).

[15] These payments were introduced after "the 88" and the formal ceasefire. The victims of "the mafia of the Reguibat" are officially treated as martyrs of war and so also their families receive the "martyr's

Because of the official illegality of *el comercio*, formally the "Polisario trade" does not exist. One would be given a hard time asking the politicians and bureaucrats allegedly involved to account publicly for the humanitarian goods traded and for the profits earned. This absence of accountability has remained substantially unchallenged, due perhaps to understandable fears but also to the fact that a large number of soldiers and refugee households have directly or indirectly benefited from the "Polisario trade" and from other aspects of *el comercio*. In this context (it is commonly believed) leading politicians of the Polisario and high bureaucrats of the SADR have been able easily to embezzle large amounts of the proceeds of the "Polisario trade".[16]

The "upper trade" is that branch of *el comercio* which is said to be centred upon directors and workers of the camp aid-stores. These civil servants of the Polisario's state allegedly purloin significant quantities of the *undistributed* humanitarian resources under their control. Generally, they do not directly trade such goods. Rather, they hand on these humanitarian supplies to a relatively small number of trustworthy refugees: normally their relatives, other "cousins" and trusted friends. These refugees transport and then sell the merchandise in Zouerate or in other towns. Back in the refugee camps, they hand on the greater part of the proceeds of the sale to the civil servants who gave them the humanitarian supplies in the first instance.

The "upper trade" is known as a particularly lucrative business for the civil servants involved. This seems to be the main reason why governmental appointments related to the storage and distribution of humanitarian supplies are now among the refugees' most longed-for state positions. At the same time, these appointments are said to be

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compensation", which is a constitutional right of the citizens of the Polisario's Republic (art. 40 of the SADR Constitution, modified during the tenth National Congress of 1999).

[16] This source of funds is commonly said to account for the better part of the great personal wealth that some Polisario leaders –often of very humble birth– have achieved after the cease-fire. For instance, the Polisario leader Bachir Mustapha Sayed is known to possess several chalets and flats as well as scores of taxis in Nouadhibou. Also, he now controls the distribution of Toyota and Hyundai cars in northern Mauritania. Nevertheless, "his parents were extremely poor, especially after they settled, in semidestitution, in Tan-Tan" in 1958 (Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, 62; see also Briones *et al.* 1997).

particularly valuable for leading politicians and high bureaucrats as a means of constructing and maintaining their personal networks of support among the refugees. To do this, politicians and bureaucrats usually distribute these (and other) governmental positions to close relatives and other "cousins". In this context, support for a certain politician or bureaucrat is said to stem not only from the gratitude of those who directly benefit from such appointments. Also, popular support indirectly derives from the politician's or bureaucrat's reputation for being one who helps his (sometimes her) "cousins".

The case of Dih, mentioned in the previous section, is an example of the third dimension of *el comercio*: the "lower trade". This mode of exchange is the most common and visible branch of the commerce in humanitarian supplies, and the one that occupies the majority of the refugee-traders. At this level, the merchants involved are ordinary Saharawi refugees who buy from other camp inmates part of their rations. And so the "lower trade" typically concerns *distributed* humanitarian supplies which refugee-traders buy in the camps and then sell in close by Tindouf or across the border, in Zouerate and in more distant towns.

During my fieldwork I was given consistent indications that the sale of humanitarian goods between ordinary refugees usually follows a "tribal" pattern. The refugee who sells part of his or her ration and the refugee who buys it are, in most cases, members of the same tribe. The buyer visits the seller in his or her tent: it is seldom the latter who visits the former. In any case, there is not a public marketplace for this sort of exchanges: they take place in the welcome shade of the refugees' tents, while sipping tea and talking also of other matters. Just as in many other aspects of *el comercio*, in this "lower trade" personal human relationships appear to play a critical role.[17]

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[17] Competition for sellers is said to be keen in the camps and a good buyer is careful in maintaining good relationships with his networks of "cousins"/sellers. To be more precise, what is exchanged is part of the

It is important to stress that distinguishing between "Polisario", "upper" and "lower trade" is a conceptual operation suggested here for analytical purposes and for clarity. One is likely to find that, in practice, these three dimensions are interwoven with one another. For instance, many Polisario's workers who take part in the "Polisario trade" frequently transport and sell other humanitarian supplies which they have personally bought from other camp refugees. Dih provides another example of the flexibility of *el comercio* and of the variety of its commercial forms. Dih's business has been presented as a clear illustration of "lower trade" in *distributed* humanitarian rations. Nevertheless, in addition to his more usual merchandise, Dih occasionally transports and sells on commission sacks of food that come directly from the camp aid-stores (as in the "upper trade"). Obviously, Saharawi refugees' trade remains, in practice, a complex and dynamic reality.[18]

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humanitarian supplies that a refugee *household* has received, rather than the ration of an individual refugee. The decision to sell these goods, then, affects the whole household in a number of ways. In my eyes, this is a topic that deserves and would reward further investigation.

[18] One more note. My dividing *el comercio* into "Polisario", "upper" and "lower trade" emphasises the alternative ways in which the humanitarian resources exchanged can be obtained: in other words, it stresses the "supply-side" of this form of extra-legal commerce. It does so because this is the main aspect on which the following analyses will focus. Nevertheless *el comercio* is now more than selling humanitarian supplies. As mentioned in the previous section, *el comercio* is a two ways trade: it involves not only a sizable outflow of humanitarian resources from the refugee camps, but also a constant inflow of other merchandise and resources into the settlements. Furthermore, *el comercio* is not only about trading goods: also speculative currency exchange has become an important and profitable aspect of it. Two more aspects are also noteworthy. First, *el comercio* and its proceeds have fuelled various forms of consumption and investment that have engendered new, previously unimaginable opportunities for many camp refugees (see last section in this chapter). Second, various "illegal" and particularly profitable activities have been developed thanks to new opportunities and to material and human resources that *el comercio* has made available. Such activities include, above all, the smuggling of large amounts of American-made cigarettes into Algeria. Also -but I could not document this- some smugglers are said to run many sorts of weaponry of the Polisario's SPLA into Mali and Senegal.

Trade, trust and tribes

In the above analysis I have repeatedly used the words "cousins" and "relatives": two terms which are commonly employed by Saharawi refugees when talking about *el comercio*. These words draw attention to an essential facet of this form of extra-legal trade, namely the embedded-ness of mercantile exchanges in wider networks of personal relationships. Here, I intend to examine this aspect more explicitly and in more detail.

The management of dependable relationships –or "contacts"– is a dominant theme of *el comercio* which continuously re-appears in refugees' descriptions and analyses of this form of trade. Among Saharawi refugees it seems to be widely agreed that it is through "contacts" (and especially through "cousins") that one can gain access to undistributed and distributed humanitarian supplies, and quickly and profitably sell such resources outside the refugee camps.[19]

In the "Polisario trade", for instance, leading politicians and bureaucrats count on trustworthy Polisario workers and on relatively few rich merchants to have undistributed humanitarian supplies transported and sold without problems or delays. For the same reason, the civil servants at the top of the "upper trade" rely on relatively few, trusted collaborators. As for Dih and other similar entrepreneurs of the "lower trade", these painstakingly construct and maintain their personal networks of refugee-sellers and of non-camp merchants.

More generally speaking, from the information and observations presently available it emerges that "contacts" play a crucial role in *el comercio*. They are a major factor shaping one's economic opportunities and success, a prime force moulding the scene of

[19] More generally, a wide web of dependable contacts seems able to procure nearly everything for a skilful, entrepreneurial refugee: from money and cars (also on loan), to merchandise and solvent buyers in Zouerate and in other towns. In this context, dependable contacts are often portrayed as more valuable, more useful and more necessary than nearly anything else.

el comercio and one's space in it. No merchant can dispense with them: from the most affluent refugee-merchants to the most modest ones, all traders are likely to need reliable connections to maintain and increase their wealth. In this context, it is no wonder that one's "contacts" are object of much, but also customarily veiled, attention.

It can be argued that, to some extent, this centrality of dependable relationships in *el comercio* comes down to a common, general phenomenon: namely the importance of *trust* in most commercial activities –in fact, in most aspects of human social life. As is now largely agreed, trusted relationships play a varying but crucial role in all complex economies, including the "disembedded" ones of so-called advanced capitalist societies (see, for instance, Dilley 1992, Evans 1996, Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 1993).[20]

Nevertheless, this general and valuable argument cannot fully account for the relevance of "contacts" in *el comercio*. While trust is a crucial variable in most commercial activities, yet there are certain distinctive features of the refugees' trade that have significantly increased the need for dependable commercial partners and the value of "contacts". In particular, the relevance of reliable relationships appears to have been deepened by two main factors: the extra-legal and trans-border character of *el comercio*, and its non-liberal nature.

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[20] Following Giddens, *trust* is here understood as "confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles" (Giddens 1990, 34). Dependable partners are necessary for most transactions, at least for those where the parties involved are to fulfil their respective, agreed obligations at different moments in time and not just on the spot. On the complex and critical topic of trust (and on the difference between this and "confidence") see also Giddens (1990) and, especially, Seligman (1997), in whose words: "Promise-keeping [...] is what allows the constitution of a moral community, in fact of society *tout court*" (1997, 15). Also, many anthropologists have long stressed the importance of trust. For instance, talking about complex forms of economy, more than half a century ago Lévi-Strauss set an example by underlining the apparently simple but very important concept that: "Generalized exchange always contains an element of trust" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 265). This argument has then been strongly supported by the "substantivist" stream in Economic Anthropology during the so-called "formalist/substantivist" debate (see Scott 1966; Cancian 1966; Kaplan 1968; Rhoda 1985; Barry 1993).

Discouraging malfeasance and improving profitability: the role of 'contacts' and 'cousins'

The formal illegality of the refugees' trade in aid, and the fact that this commerce has involved the constant crossing of various state borders and of different state jurisdictions, has contributed to making state institutional arrangements mostly irrelevant to the merchants' everyday business. As mentioned above, officially *el comercio* does not exist except as sporadic, disorganised and illegal trafficking. From a juridical perspective, the commercial agreements that form the backbone of the aid trade are illicit acts. As such, they are not legally enforceable in the event of a breach of contract.

In this context, the traders of *el comercio* have been unable to rely on state, legal means to have their commercial agreements upheld in case of malfeasance. Obviously, this does not mean that the states with a stake in *el comercio* (above all the SADR) have not played any role in this trade. As will be argued particularly in the last section of this chapter, these states have been a paramount factor shaping the refugees' commerce. But their role in enforcing agreements between traders has, so far, been irrelevant.

If state institutional arrangements have not provided any guarantee against malfeasance, there have been other –and no less effective– means of reducing opportunistic behaviours and of inducing compliance with undertaken commercial agreements. In this sense, a crucial role in *el comercio* has been played by the traders' "contacts". Making deals with certain people and not with certain others, trying to build trusted connections offering reliability, embedding commercial transactions in networks of personal relationships and reciprocity: all these are means of fostering trust and of guarding against malfeasance which have been common practice among Saharawi refugee-traders. And the evidence available on *el comercio* and on several other forms of

extra-legal trade (see, for instance, Granovetter 1985 and Platteau 1994) suggests that these strategies have been effective in limiting opportunistic behaviours. Had they not been so, the considerable size and duration of the refugees' trade could hardly be accounted for.[21]

This said, some relevant questions arise. In particular, how are traders' "contacts" and networks constructed? More precisely, are there identifiable patterns in the ways refugees have developed their networks of dependable commercial relationships? And if it is possible to identify these patterns, how have they facilitated trust and discouraged opportunistic behaviours?

Trying to answer these questions, one is confronted (once more) with the complex and dynamic character of *el comercio*. In effect, from the analysis of the information and observations presently available it clearly emerges that good "contacts" can derive from a variety of situations and relationships. For instance, dependable commercial connections sometimes stem from relationships of camaraderie and friendship (e.g. fellow-soldiers, schoolmates and camp neighbours). In other cases good "contacts" result from a mixture of reputation (i.e. trusting individuals whose correct conduct is publicly known) and personal experience of previous transactions (cf. Platteau 1994; Moore 1994).[22]

Without intending to deny or reduce the relevance of this range of possible sources of dependable relationships, still the analysis of the refugees' commercial networks

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[21] In other words, *el comercio* –this complex and dynamic ensemble of individuals, networks, Land Rovers, barren desert, European tins and sacks of staples– can be better understood through the lens of the "embeddedness argument". In Granovetter's words: "The embeddedness argument stresses the role of concrete personal relations and structures (or "networks") of such relations in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance. The widespread preference for transacting with individuals of known reputation implies that few are actually content to rely on either generalised morality *or* institutional arrangements to guard against trouble" (Granovetter 1985, 490). In this context, "densely knit networks of actors [...] generate clearly defined standards of behaviour easily policed by the quick spread of information about instances of malfeasance" (*ibid.*, 492). As for norms of generalised morality, these clearly play a marginal role in *el comercio*. In the present, post-"88" period –characterised by "the return of the tribes" and inter-tribal tensions– norms of generalised morality generally appear insufficient to guard against opportunistic behaviours.

[22] Also in *el comercio*, experience emerges as an important source of trust. This seems partly to confirm the argument that Moore, among others, has put forward. "Market order" –Moore has suggested– "can be produced incrementally through the experience of market transactions themselves" (1994, 824).

shows the existence of a different and prevailing pattern. There is compelling evidence suggesting that the Saharawi refugees' commercial networks have a predominantly *tribal* character. More precisely, one's dependable commercial partners or "contacts" are –more often than not– one's "cousins", that is to say members of one's tribe.

If this is so, how has this tribal pattern of "contacts" proved valuable in *el comercio*? More precisely, how have "cousins" facilitated trust and discouraged opportunistic behaviours? It can be argued that tribal membership can help reduce malfeasance in various ways, but tribal meetings and reputation seem to be the most influential ones.

Meetings between members of one tribal fraction or sub-fraction have become normal practice outside the refugee camps, in urban centres like Zouerate and Nouadhibou.[23] At such meetings, instances of malfeasance between "cousins" can be brought forward. In this way the news of opportunistic behaviours can be quickly spread among many "cousins", while the affected parties can ask for the intervention of leading personalities of the tribe (typically men of well-known reputation) who will try to settle the difference. Generally the complaining parties take these measures only when they have suffered a significant loss –or believe they may do. Nevertheless, the common availability of these means of enforcement can facilitate trust between "cousins" by discouraging opportunistic behaviours and by contributing to the spreading of relevant information.

Furthermore, malfeasance between members of the same tribe is generally reduced by the fact that –using Dih's words– if a cousin "cheats you, he knows you will say it around for sure... He will get into troubles! ...Other cousins will look down on him and

[23] It seems that such meetings do not take place in the refugee camps but in a more informal fashion and with much fewer people taking part at every single time. Instead, in Zouerate and Nouadhibou (and, it seems, also in other Mauritanian centres) these meetings are commonly held and many people take part in them. During my fieldwork in Nouadhibou Aziz, for instance, used to attend a local meeting of members of the Ould Dlim tribe, fraction of Ould Tegheddi, at least once per month and whenever extraordinary events took place, such as a grave illness or the accidental death of a member of the fraction.

will avoid him. If he did it badly and people know it, he will lose his face!" In other words, reputation mechanisms appear to work better among members of the same tribe. In particular, the behaviour of "cousins" is more thoroughly patrolled through the spreading of relevant information, and instances of malfeasance between members of the same tribe are more likely to be penalised.

Another advantage of dealing with one's "cousins" concerns the territorial reach of tribal means of enforcement. *El comercio* is a long-distance trade: the merchandise is transported over hundreds and often thousands of kilometres, across the territorial boundaries of various state jurisdictions –usually those of the SADR, Algeria and Mauritania. Disputes between traders may arise very far from where their agreements were initially reached. In this context, dealing with "cousins" reduces the relevance of *where* a commercial agreement was finalized and of *where* it was allegedly broken: what counts most is *who* concluded it. It is the *who* –and not the *where*– that defines the rules of the game. In particular, tribal means of inducing compliance with undertaken agreements (such as reputation and tribal meetings) tend to maintain their effectiveness and availability independently of the location of the arguing "cousins".

The fact that tribal membership has acquired considerable relevance in *el comercio* is not an unusual phenomenon: tribal (or ethnic) ascription has often played an important role in forms of extra-legal and trans-border trade. As Duffield has highlighted:

> "[non-formal economic activity] often adapts and draws on resources and networks based in some way on locality, kinship or ethnicity. These social networks, moreover, inscribe their own forms of legitimacy and regulatory codes on the shadow economy" (2001, 156).

In the case of *el comercio* tribal membership has provided some of these "regulatory codes" or, in other words, some additional means of reducing traders' exposure to malfeasance. But one should not assume that Saharawi tribes have been a haven of

solidarity, correctness and smooth relationships between all "cousins": they certainly have not. For one thing, a close friend is normally regarded as a better –i.e. more dependable– commercial partner than an unknown "cousin". True, tribal "regulatory codes" can contribute to reducing the risk of malfeasance, so increasing the probability that a "cousin" could also be a good "contact". But, obviously, shared tribal membership does not eliminate malfeasance.[24]

More importantly, preferring to deal with one's "cousins" has been a common way of creating and maintaining tight groups of traders: a means of establishing relatively closed "clusters of cousins". Within such clusters profitability has been increased through selective membership, through preferential treatment given to the components of the network and, therefore, through discriminatory practices against all other merchants – against, that is, both other "cousins" and "non-cousins". In other words, the general preference for "cousins" as commercial partners has led to the widespread tendency to prefer *certain* "cousins" to all others –whatever the tribe of these others may be. Again, Duffield's recent work can be useful here. In his words:

> "the shadow economy is not a transparent system. Sectarian criteria based on local, kinship, ethnic, religious or political considerations frequently shape its organisational modalities. In other words, socially bounded or politically closed communities usually control networks. [...] While strategic collaboration is an important and necessary feature of shadow networks, profitability depends on maintaining differences and discrete forms of control" (2001, 158).

These considerations appear particularly relevant to *el comercio*. Here, collaboration between certain "cousins" and discrimination against other merchants have been –as it

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[24] Also, tribes are not all the same. "Cousins" from certain tribes (notably the Arguellin tribe and certain fractions of Techna) are widely regarded to be more helpful, correct and trustworthy towards each others, and so also more likely to prefer to deal with "cousins". Here, several variables can come into play. For instance, the existence of some leading tribal personages who are particularly respected by all "cousins" can make their intervention in solving disputes more effective, so facilitating trust and discouraging malfeasance between "cousins".

were– two sides of the same coin. The need for dependable commercial partners and the careful management of ones' "contacts" have been coupled with the tendency to form and maintain rather closed and stable networks of refugee-traders –and, above all, of "cousins". In order to appreciate better the importance of tribal membership and "clusters of cousins" in *el comercio*, it is now necessary to include them in the wider, socio-political context of the "post-88" Polisario.

Beyond malfeasance and commercial profit: el comercio and the 'return of the tribes'

Acknowledging the importance of tribal membership in a long-distance trade like *el comercio* is likely to sound out of tune with much of the present literature on the Polisario's refugees. As mentioned, such literature has usually presented the Saharawi as a committed, nationalist and camp community which has successfully overcome its remote tribal past. But in the light of the analysis of the previous chapter –focused on the so-called "return of the Saharawi tribes"– it is perhaps not surprising that tribal membership would have acquired such a crucial commercial relevance.

From my investigation into "the 88", in fact, tribes have emerged as currently bearing a primary importance among the Polisario's refugees. It has been argued that – through various processes which can clearly not be reduced to a solely local dynamic– the "returned tribes" have become an important factor ordering and shaping refugees' experiences. "Tribes" have been made to play a pivotal role in producing shared understandings of critical past events (such as "the mafia" and "the 88") and in constructing the shared intelligibility of important aspects of the present.

Following the Polisario's "tribal U-turn", the "tribalisation" of the internal politics of the SADR and then MINURSO's identification, the "returned tribes" have been able to make a significant difference in many spheres of the refugees' lives. Access to most political and high governmental posts of the SADR has been regulated in such a way that a certain (at least formal) "tribal balance" could be achieved and maintained. Tribal membership has become the main basis of popular support for politicians and high bureaucrats, and a critical factor in electoral competitions. In accordance with these developments, in the "post-88" period, leading politicians and prominent civil servants have usually built and managed popular support by according favours and by assigning civil posts and other jobs to "cousins": that is, by establishing and managing networks of a tribal and patron-client character.

Humanitarian supplies have here played a critical role as the most important (and often the only) economic resources on which leading politicians and high bureaucrats have been able to rely. In particular, in the "post-88" period prominent public personages have generally used their preferential access to humanitarian resources both for increasing their personal wealth and for establishing and managing their tribal-based networks of support. In view of this, it is perhaps not surprising that, among Saharawi refugees, *el comercio* is known to have started in forms analogous to what I have named "Polisario" and "upper trade". Not ordinary refugees, but leading politicians and high civil servants are said to have begun the trade by first giving undistributed humanitarian resources under their control to some of their "cousins", who then sold such goods just outside the refugee camps, in nearby Tindouf.

Whatever the "true origins" of *el comercio* may have been, what is relevant is that the wider socio-political context in which the refugees' trade has developed has played a paramount role in forging the tribal character of *el comercio*. Merchandising

humanitarian resources has been much more than an effective and profitable economic strategy: it has also been a critical factor in the management of local, popular support for the Polisario's elite in the "post-88" period. In this context, the tribal character of *el comercio* has been an inseparable facet of the wider process of the "return of the tribes" in the Polisario and among its refugees. In particular, tribal membership has provided the main link between the commercial sphere and the political one.

On the one hand, the "returned tribes" have emerged as important commercial realities. They have been able to make a difference to *el comercio* by providing a means of reducing traders' exposure to malfeasance and, importantly, by improving commercial profitability through the discriminatory practices of "clusters of cousins". On the other hand, commercial partnership between "cousins" has been a means of establishing and managing tribal-based networks of support centred round prominent names of the Polisario and of its state. More generally, the commercial importance of tribal membership has both mirrored and strengthened the "tribalised" character of the internal politics of the Polisario and of its state in the "post-88" period.

Aid, charity or gift?

So far my analysis of *el comercio* has focused on the refugees' networks of commercial relationships. After showing that these webs of "contacts" have developed mostly along tribal lines, I have suggested that the new commercial relevance of "cousins" has been an integral part of the "return of the tribes" in the "post-88" period. There is, however, a different and equally important aspect of the refugees' trade which has not yet been considered. This concerns the ways in which *el comercio* has been

related to donors' expectations and to the moral model of the Saharawi nation. As starting-point for the following analysis, it should be underlined that the conversion of humanitarian resources into merchandise is not an unproblematic, straightforward process. Despite the long duration and the present size of the refugees' trade in aid, the transformation of humanitarian supplies into commercial goods is a local practice which is imbued with contrasting feelings and is accompanied by social and political tensions. The three anecdotes that follow are intended as an introduction to these strained reactions. Also, they are a means of raising some relevant issues about gift and humanitarian aid which will be addressed afterwards.

Ahmed's shirt, Nicolassa's lentils and Nashua's tea

As we had agreed the night before, Ahmed came to my place one morning for breakfast. While we were sharing the meal of hot milk and warm, buttered French loaf, Ahmed told me that he would take a long shower. "Today I'll finish your scented soap" he added, smiling. Ahmed was in the shower when I chose from my shirts an ironed one that I liked but had hardly ever used. While he was getting dressed, I showed him the shirt. "Ahmed", I said, "Look, this is for you... Do you like it? It's yours... well... if you think you will use it". He asked me to repeat what I had just said. And so I did, adding that if he did not like that shirt and was not going to wear it, then he should tell me and refuse it. I was thinking of the times I had given him a gift which he had soon given to someone else. I wanted him to take the shirt, but only if he would wear it and would not give it away.

"Well!" –he rancorously replied– "Keep it!".

"Why? What's wrong now?", I asked.

Ahmed began. "…'*It's yours if you use it*!' …How many times have I told you?! …You must forget it! …I explained it to you: here it is different! Nobody asked you for anything. If you want to give me something, then do it and forget it… You'd better throw it on the floor and leave it there! But don't tell me 'if you use it': whatever I do with it is none of your business! If *you* give me something than that is *mine*: I can throw it away or burn it if I want to… When one gives something he knows it is not his anymore, right? Otherwise he just keeps it!"

It was not the first time Ahmed and I had argued about a gift, nor would it be the last. During my fieldwork in Nouadhibou the issue of gift-giving reappeared on several occasions, and not just with Ahmed. In particular, the concept of gift was often brought forward in conversations concerning the humanitarian goods that refugees sold.

One late afternoon, for instance, after having had tea at a common friend's home, Dih and I were walking together in Numerowatt. At one point I told Dih that I wanted to buy some food for my dinner, so we entered the first "boutique" we found. Unsurprisingly, after a couple of minutes spent talking to him, Dih discovered that he knew the owner of the shop: an adult Saharawi man and former Polisario fighter. In that moment we were his only customers and the owner offered us tea. Dih and the Saharawi man seated themselves. They were talking to each other while I was searching the shop for a can of lentils and some fresh vegetables. But suddenly, Dih shattered that calm atmosphere. When he heard the price written on the can of Neapolitan lentils that I had chosen, Dih became upset, stood up and strongly complained to the owner. "How can you sell that tin of lentils for 245 ouguiya?" –Dih uttered. "You must have bought it for 40 in Zouerate! …Or better still, you got it for free in the refugee camps!"

It was clear that Dih was not just bargaining. In Dih's eyes the price of 245 ouguiya was not just too much: being almost six times the wholesale price in Zouerate, it was "immoral for a Muslim". "Immoral? How do you talk? I'm a better Muslim than you!" – the owner of the "boutique" promptly replied. Then the owner went on: "that tin is my gift, you understand? ...And I can do what I want with it! And if I want... you know what... now that tin costs 1000 ouguiya! Understood?" Still visibly upset, Dih added a last sentence while heading for the door: "Your tin is food for refugees... and is from Italy! ...like my friend! ...let's go, Nicolassa, and leave him his tin".

My third (and quieter) anecdote concerns Brahim, a close friend of mine in Nouadhibou, and Nashua, his mother. Those who knew Nashua had no doubt that she was a "true revolutionary". In 1976 she left her Mauritanian husband in Nouadhibou and went to the camps of the Polisario with their four children. She was warmly welcomed there and just a few months after her arrival in the camps the Polisario assigned her a political post. Since then Nashua has always been a strong supporter of the Polisario, but now she has four grandchildren and does not work for the Front anymore. At present she lives in Nouadhibou, in the house that her late Mauritanian husband left to their son Brahim. Attached to the house there is a small "boutique" where Nashua sells sardines, Neapolitan lentils and other such food "from the desert".

I interviewed Nashua twice and spoke to her on several other occasions. One afternoon Nashua, Brahim and I were seated in their "boutique". Very unusually, Nashua decided that she would prepare the tea –an activity that she habitually left for someone else. As she turned the gas on, Nashua began telling me about her life in Egypt, where for six years she worked as a Polisario co-representative. After a few minutes Brahim intervened: "You know... she is a true revolutionary, and a true politician too!" –he told me. Then he added: "...I know she would die fighting the Moroccans, but first she would

kill many of them, you can be sure! ...And yet, [*laughing and pushing his mother*] here she is... selling the food of refugees!" Nashua smiled, at first. Then she assumed a tone of reproach. "Eh! –she told her son– "Take care! ...This food is for me, it is my gift, you understand? ...I sell it because I want to!" Brahim kept on laughing, if much more quietly. And so Nashua went on, but in her own way. Without saying a word she passed me three glasses of tea. Then, smiling, she explained to me that *one* glass was for "that stupid friend" of mine whose name she had forgotten... her son Brahim.

The Saharawi gift

The exchange of gifts is a common practice among Saharawi refugees residing in Nouadhibou, and between these and other Saharawi living in the camps of the Polisario and in other locations of the region and beyond (such as Canary Islands and Europe). Close relatives, other "cousins", partners and friends (but also rivals) generally exchange gifts. The situations in which such gift-giving takes place can vary greatly: from marriages and religious events, to birthdays and more ordinary, everyday occasions. The reasons for exchanging gifts can be many, and as diverse as gratifying a friend, insulting a commercial rival or showing amorous attraction to someone. But despite this wide variety of situations and motivations, there are certain features that appear common to virtually all instances of gift-giving.

Generally speaking (well beyond the case of Saharawi refugees) the gift is a fundamental and powerful social means of creating, maintaining and changing social relationships, between both individuals and groups. The exchange of gifts can make friends or enemies. It can allow one to become member of a group or to lose its

membership. It can make one find, keep or lose a spouse, a partner, a patron or a client (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Gregory 1982). Behind the complexity and variety of its possible forms and uses, the gift is, above all, a universal social devise which confers a certain "shared nature" on the parties that exchange it while it creates a "bond in time" between them (Mauss 1969).

These general considerations well apply to the exchange of gifts between Saharawi refugees. But in addition to these, it is possible to identify a particular attitude towards gifts that appears to be widely shared among Polisario's refugees, and among other people of *el beidàn*. To some extent this attitude has already emerged from the three episodes reported above, and in particular from Ahmed's words. To put it more explicitly, gift-giving among Saharawi refugees (or, for convenience, the "Saharawi gift") appears clearly characterised by the fact that the giver retains no control over the recipient's future uses of the given object. In other words, the *object* exchanged is free from virtually any expectations of the donor and is fully available to its receiver who can use it as he or she prefers with virtually no interference from the giver.[25]

A certain, almost ritual form in which the "Saharawi gift" is normally exchanged tends to underline this important feature. Through his (or her) behaviour, the giver habitually takes care to show a certain indifference to the object that he (or she) is giving. Moreover, this attitude is usually accompanied by the physical separation of the giver from the gift before the object actually arrives in the recipient's hands (e.g. the giver lays the gift on the floor or, intending to pass the gift to its receiver, gives it first into the hands of someone else). By adopting such behaviour, the donor reveals that what is taking place is different from an ordinary commercial transaction. No less important, indifference and previous physical separation contribute to emphasising that, with the

[25] There are, nevertheless, some minimal expectations concerning the behaviour of the receiver towards the gift (e.g. the gift should not be destroyed in front of the donor; the receiver of the gift should not give exactly the same object as a gift to its original donor).

giving of the gift, the donor abandons all expectations concerning the future uses of the object and surrenders all physical relationship with it.[26]

Considering the main literature on gift-giving, this interruption of the relationship between the giver and the object in the "Saharawi gift" appears rather unusual.[27] In particular, it is in some opposition to Marcel Mauss' classic contribution to the study and understanding of the exchange of gifts.[28] In his ground-breaking work, in fact, Mauss criticised the sharp separation between people and objects. The latter –he suggested– should not be regarded as inert things, but as bearing something of their owners: objects have a "force", a "spirit", which is passed to them by the persons who possess them. It is as if objects were an extension of their owners, who tend to identify themselves (and to be identified by others) with the objects that they possess and exchange (Mauss 1969).[29] As Parry has clearly put it:

> "The general principle [...] is the absence of any absolute disjunction between persons and things. It is because the thing contains the person that the donor retains a lien on what he has given away and we cannot therefore speak of an alienation of property; and it is because of this participation of the person in the object that the gift creates an enduring bond between persons" (1986, 457).[30]

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[26] Obviously, to say that the giver has no control (and does not claim any) over the future uses of the gift, is far from saying that such an exchange does not produce effects on the relationship between the parties involved. The giver has no *expectations concerning the use* of the gift, but certainly has a range of *expectations about the effects of the gift on the relationship* with the receiver. Moreover, the absence of the giver's control over the future uses of the gift does not mean that what is actually exchanged does not count and that anything would do. Rather, what is argued here is that the relational effects of the gift-exchange are substantially independent of how the gift will be actually used by those who receive it.

[27] It is important to underline that this character of the gift appears common throughout the Middle East. Gift in the so-called "Arab world" is deeply affected by the concept and practice of charity in Islam: *zakat* (alms giving) requires no recognition of the giver, nor appropriate use or behaviour of the receiver (cf. Rosen 1989).

[28] But the "Saharawi gift" shows points of similarity with the case of the Brahman's gift considered by Mauss (1969) and especially with that kind of Indian gift called *danadharma* (see Parry 1986, 461).

[29] Mauss' most clear and famous example of this has remained the Maori's '*hau*' of the gift. From a different perspective, also in the field of the so-called anthropology of consumption various scholars have explored ways in which goods are made to bear social identities. See, for instance, the fascinating studies of Miller (1995) and Stirrat (1989).

[30] In a similar (if more mechanical) fashion, Gregory suggested that "commodities are *alienable* objects transacted by aliens; gifts are *inalienable* objects transacted by non-aliens" (1982, 43), and that "things are anthropomorphised in a gift economy" (*ibid.*, 45).

Nevertheless, this "general principle" (which –incidentally– stems from Oceanic ethnography) does not seem to fit well the case of the "Saharawi gift". Here, in fact, the item given becomes completely separated from its donor. Once exchanged, the gift-object is entirely alienated and becomes fully available to the receiver. The receiver knows that his (or her) relationship with the donor will not be affected by the way he (or she) will use the gift-object: the recipient is free to consume it, to trade it, to give it away as gift or, also, to destroy it.[31]

Underlining this peculiarity of the "Saharawi gift" is important for various reasons which should become clear later in this section. Here suffice it to say that the "Saharawi gift" can be regarded as the "other" of aid: as a frame of reference in the social construction of humanitarian assistance among the Polisario's refugees. But before considering the prevailing attributes of aid among Saharawi, it seems useful briefly to recall some common features of donors' assistance.

Donors' aid...

Humanitarian support is a complex modern phenomenon which directly affects a considerable proportion of the world population and which absorbs vast amounts of socio-economic resources. Such assistance is influenced by moral and ethical concerns, but is also deeply shaped by geopolitical strategies and by economic and commercial

[31] This feature of the "Saharawi gift" is perhaps less surprising if one takes into account that, until recently, the vast majority of the population of the region was constituted of nomadic pastoralists who moved with their herds. The number of goods that they regularly carried with themselves was relatively small when compared with more sedentary people, and also their attachment to most objects appeared much less pronounced (Caro Baroja 1990, Hernandez Moreno 1988). In this sense, such weaker attachment might show some similarity with a rather common, "careless" attitude to objects in the "affluent society" of hunters-gatherers (cf. Sahlins 1972).

imperatives. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed analysis of these processes –which, by the way, several scholars have recently investigated with outstanding results.[32] Still, in view of the analysis that follows, I would like briefly to introduce some thoughts about this topic.

There appears to be a clearly prevailing attitude to, and understanding of, humanitarian aid among those numerous communities and organisations that have been calling themselves *donors*. In particular, humanitarian aid is commonly represented as bound up with concepts such as charity and "pure gift": as resources that are given to usually unknown "people in need" without expecting anything in return (except, perhaps, for gratitude).[33]

With reference to this common representation of humanitarian assistance among so-called donors, there are two observations on which I would like to draw attention here. The first concerns the idea of "pure gift". One of the most valuable insights that Marcel Mauss' work has provided us with consists in the suggestion that an entirely disinterested gift is, as a rule, a misrepresentation of certain forms of exchange.[34] Behind the concept of "pure gift", in particular, there appears to be a typically Western and modern tendency towards "disembedding" economic relationships from the whole social fabric (cf. Polanyi 1944). Again, Parry's work is useful here.

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[32] See Duffield (2001). But also De Waal (1997), Harrell-Bond (1986), Harriss (1995), Keen (1994 and 1997), Richards (1996) and Turton (1997).

[33] "Pure gift" is understood as donation without an expected counterpart from its recipient. Here and in the following, "charity" and "pure gift" are treated as equivalent terms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, as a rule, "charity" tends to have some religious connotations that are not necessary present in the phrase "pure gift". For an analysis of the differences between these two expressions see Gregory (1982) and Weiner (1992).

[34] This emerges, in particular, from Mauss' discussion of Malinowski's idea of "pure gift" as being that between spouses: for Mauss, rather being entirely disinterested, such "pure gift" is better understood as a kind of *mapula* (see Mauss 1969). On this topic see also Lévi-Strauss (1969).

> "The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of purely interested exchange. [...] The whole ideology of the [pure] gift, and conversely the whole idea of 'economic self-interest', are our [Western] invention" (1986, 458).[35]

Clearly, the fact that humanitarian aid is habitually represented by its self-appointed donors as charity and "pure gift" does not necessarily mean that this is just what it is. And –more importantly– it does not mean that aid is perceived as a "disinterested gift" by the people who receive it. In other words, not only may our category of charity/"pure gift" be often a blatant misrepresentation of humanitarian assistance, but such category may also prove entirely irrelevant and extraneous to those whose lives humanitarian aid is supposed to uplift.

Pursuing this argument a bit further leads to a second relevant observation. In spite of being commonly portrayed by its "donors" as charity and disinterested gift, the giving of humanitarian aid usually incorporates and engenders a number of expectations and conditions that its receivers must fulfil –at least if they want to preserve their access to such resources. As Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold have clearly put it:

> "Unlike the exchange of gifts, charity as an idea entails giving with no strings attached; yet, in the context of humanitarian aid practices, charity becomes redefined. It implies giving to a deserving or worthy recipient, being fully aware that such an act can never be reciprocated through material means. An interesting paradox thus arises. The donor borrows from the idea of charity the concept of non-reciprocation [...] and, in turn, uses it in order to impose a condition on the donations: desert or merit which is construed in terms of absolute destitution on the part of the recipient" (1992, 207).

Humanitarian assistance habitually requires its receivers to be *certain* kind of people (at least in donors' eyes). What is more, such assistance typically impels its recipients to

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[35] Similarly, it has been noted that: "The radical opposition which so many anthropologists have discovered between the principles on which gift and commodity exchange are founded derives in part, we believe, from the fact that *our* ideology of the gift has been constructed in antithesis to market exchange" (Parry and Bloch 1989, 9).

use the given goods in *certain* ways. As a rule, aid is accompanied by donors' expectations and conditions concerning both *by whom* and *how* humanitarian resources should be used. It is clear that such "requirements" can vary from one donor to another. And, importantly, the expectations and conditions of those who provide aid may well be substantially different from what receivers believe them to be. But one finds that humanitarian aid is hardly ever free from bearing a range of obligations that its receivers must fulfil.

Donors' conditions concerning both by whom and how their humanitarian resources are to be used, badly fit the romantic idealisation of aid as "pure gift", as something given on the strength of disinterested solidarity and of respect for the recipients' freedom to act. This bad fit appears rather clear when receivers of aid do not use it in the ways donors believe they should and, above all, when recipients sell humanitarian resources. This common practice is still habitually treated by aid donors as evidence of the recipients' ingratitude, unfairness and even slyness: as if selling their "charity" were an obvious injustice.[36] As will soon become clear, these considerations are particularly relevant when analysing the attributes that Saharawi refugees commonly ascribe to humanitarian supplies.

...and 'Saharawi aid'

During formal and informal interviews with Saharawi refugees in Nouadhibou, on several occasions it was explained to me that international humanitarian assistance is "*chained*" wealth. In the eyes of the refugees I was able to interview (but it would seem

[36] In the words of Steven Hansch reported by David Keen: "Many food donors view food sales as indicating a lack of need, or an act of bad faith by the recipients" (Keen 1992, 62). On this topic see also Malkki (1997b).

that this is a widespread, general attitude) there seems to be little room for doubt: humanitarian aid is something that refugees should not use as they please. It appears evident that humanitarian resources have a range of donors' expectations and recipients' obligations attached to them. Foodstuff, it is said, ought to be consumed only by Saharawi refugees, and above all by those who permanently live in the camps. As for other humanitarian supplies, these should be entirely used to maintain and improve the camp services provided by the SADR. This is how it *should* be.

For convenience, in the following I will use the phrase "Saharawi aid" to indicate this prevailing local understanding of humanitarian assistance as goods and services generally bearing certain donors' expectations and refugees' obligations. Because of its character as "chained" wealth, "Saharawi aid" is far removed from the "Saharawi gift" that I mentioned above: the two are understood to be subject to different, if not opposite, regimes of exchange.

The "Saharawi gift" can be used by its recipient with virtually no interference from the giver. But "Saharawi aid" is different. Unlike the donor of the "Saharawi gift", those who provide "Saharawi aid" are assumed to have a say in the ways receivers use the goods given to them. Furthermore, it is commonly believed, failure to comply with the aid-donors' expectations would negatively affect the relationship between such donors on one side, and the Polisario and its refugees on the other. In particular, the misuse of aid could preclude further assistance in the future and could engender donors' hostility towards the Saharawi refugees.

In other words, whatever donors may think of their humanitarian support, in the eyes of the Polisario's refugees *humanitarian aid is not a gift*. "Saharawi aid" is regarded as "chained" wealth, while the "Saharawi gift" is entirely available to its recipient, who is free to use it or alienate it as he or she pleases. If Saharawi refugees consider

humanitarian goods and gifts as two different issues, then what is peculiar to humanitarian assistance? What makes aid subject to such a distinctive regime of exchange?

Unlike the "Saharawi gift", aid is ideally inalienable (i.e. "chained" wealth to be used only in certain ways and by certain people) because it is not thought of as the exclusive property of the individual refugee who receives it. Rather, it is as if aid belonged, first and foremost, to the nation, and then to the Saharawi refugees as citizens. In other words, "Saharawi aid" has acquired a sort of public nature. It has come to be understood as part of a public, national sphere that is governed by its own rules –above all by the moral principle of egalitarianism and equality among all refugee-citizens.

It has already emerged from the last two chapters that humanitarian assistance has become an essential factor in the construction of the Polisario's state and of the Saharawi nation. A brief reminder may be useful here. First, when the SADR was portrayed as a "humanitarian state", it was argued that international support has been a primary force moulding the organisational structures and institutional objectives of the Polisario's state. Humanitarian resources have been essential to construct a modern state bureaucracy, and to provide the refugee-citizens with a range of goods and services without precedent: no other local organisation has ever been able to provide such a quantity and variety of supplies year after year. In sum, for the Polisario/SADR, aid has been a critical means of attaining both external and internal support and legitimacy.

Later, when discussing the "secret of the 88", it was suggested that the continuing *per capita* distribution of aid by the Polisario has contributed to the emergence of an egalitarian model of nation. More generally, I argued that Saharawi refugees have come to markedly feel a *convergence* between humanitarian assistance and their nation. International aid has been widely understood as granted to the Polisario because of the

moral excellence and the good reputation of the Front and of the Saharawi nation. Prolonged humanitarian assistance has come to symbolise the fact that the Saharawi people and their state have been meeting external expectations of national unity, commitment and just claims. Set in this context, "the 88" and "the return of the tribes" have appeared as a "national sin" to be concealed from donors and other non-refugees: as a betrayal of national unity and of external expectations, and then as a threat to refugees' access to humanitarian resources.

These observations help highlight the centrality of aid in the construction both of the Polisario's state and of the Saharawi nation. In this process of state- and nation-building, humanitarian goods have acquired an important symbolic character. In particular, aid has become a powerful symbol of the nation: a sort of international prize that the Polisario's refugees have earned as a nation. It is as if humanitarian supplies were something that Saharawi have had to deserve as a united, egalitarian (and anti-tribalist) community: "just" being refugees from Western Sahara could not have been (and would still not be) enough to guarantee access to those precious humanitarian resources. In other words, aid has been turned into the symbol of a certain collective achievement. "Saharawi aid" has become a prerogative of the nation and certainly not a right of the individual stemming from his or her condition as a refugee.

It is in this context that the inalienability of aid may be understood. Such inalienability is the expression of a distinctive moral value that has been ascribed to aid and which has placed humanitarian resources in a different category from all other goods. In particular, humanitarian aid has come to be perceived as an integral part –and a powerful symbol– of a public, national sphere which eludes and, at once, engulfs the single refugee and his or her relations. There is, as one might say, a "force" now embedded in "Saharawi aid". It is something moral and collective: something one may

call "national". It is a "force" that makes the act of consuming "Saharawi aid" also a moment of participation, and the act of selling aid also an instance of negation.

Such reflections may be useful to understand better why, as noted above, among the Polisario's refugees it is commonly assumed that a Saharawi *should not* use aid as he or she pleases. In effect, using the "chained" aid correctly has come to mean using it as part of a collective. Analogously, deserving "Saharawi aid" has implied being part of the Saharawi nation.

Turning 'Saharawi aid' into merchandise

Although non-humanitarian goods have come to make up a significant proportion of *el comercio*, humanitarian resources have remained by far the most important part of such trade. Having discussed at some length the main characteristics of the refugees' commerce and, then, the connotations of "Saharawi aid", it may now appear clearer why the development of *el comercio* in the "post-88" period has been a source of tensions and conflicts among the Polisario's refugees.

The contrast between "Saharawi aid" and *el comercio* is, in effect, remarkable. Aid, I have argued, has become a symbol of the Saharawi nation. It has been commonly assumed that humanitarian supplies have derived from the international reputation earned by the refugees as an egalitarian, united and committed nation. *El comercio*, on the contrary, has been the realm of tribal networks, of clusters of "cousins" and of preferential, unequal access to international humanitarian goods. In addition, such trade has been regarded as the main cause of a growing lack of solidarity, and as a major source of manifest and increasing economic disparities among the Polisario's refugees.

To put it more explicitly, while "Saharawi aid" is meant to be national and egalitarian, *el comercio* is mostly tribal and clearly sectarian. While "Saharawi aid" is "chained" wealth, *el comercio* constantly brakes this "chained-ness". The trade in humanitarian goods subverts the moral value ascribed to aid by opposing against national-humanitarian egalitarianism the (economically and politically rewarding) practice of tribal favouritism.

And so the contrast between "Saharawi aid" and *el comercio* mirrors and strengthens the dichotomy between nation and tribes, between international expectations and local practice, between what "should be" and what actually is. In this context, *el comercio* – just like "the 88" and "the return of the Saharawi tribes"– has been perceived as a sort of "national offence" and has been subjected to the same treatment. Since the refugees' trade has appeared as a serious challenge to the international reputation of the Saharawi (and then as a threat to further humanitarian assistance) every effort has been made to conceal it from donors and from other non-Saharawi.[37]

But the conflict between "Saharawi aid" and *el comercio* has not affected only the relationship with non-refugees: it can often be perceived also in interactions among Saharawi. For instance, the critical remark of "being a Saharawi who sells *aid* intended for refugees" is not uncommon and , as the anecdotes of Dih and Nashua illustrated, it usually elicits the reply that what is sold is nothing but one's own *gift*. I believe that this seemingly common exchange between refugees carries great significance. It synthetically expresses the difference between "Saharawi aid" and "Saharawi gift"; it conveys the

[37] As noted above, trade in aid is a rather common practice among camp refugees world-wide. And also the "immorality" attributed to such trade by refugees is clearly not exclusive to Saharawi. Malkki, for instance, noted "the implication that commerce of this kind was dangerous *specifically* for refugees, that being a refugee naturally suggested, even demanded, certain kinds of social conduct while closing off others. Being a refugee entailed prescriptions and prohibitions, duties and moral responsibilities" (Malkki 1995, 217). In other words, "commerce was seen to demand the abandonment of [camp refugees'] categorical loyalty and purity" (*ibid.*, 218) among Hutu refugees living in the Tanzanian camp of Mishamo.

unresolved conflict between the national "chained-ness" of the former and the full availability of the latter.[38]

Such exchanges ("you sell refugees' aid" vs. "what I sell is my gift") also emphasize the powerful, transformative character of *el comercio*. The refugees' trade changes, in effect, aid into gift, inalienable into alienable, "chained" wealth into movable assets. Through *el comercio* what is national, for the camps and unmovable is transformed into resources which the individual can use to construct and maintain his or her personal –and mostly tribal– networks. In other words, *el comercio* transforms humanitarian, national aid into the vital sap that nourishes tribal networks. Furthermore, the trade in aid turns humanitarian resources for mere in-camp consumption into personal wealth that can be accumulated (normally outside the Polisario's camps). Through *el comercio* the individual (or, perhaps better, the refugee household) attains full control over humanitarian goods and can use them to improve his or her economic, political and social positions.

The social and political importance of defining what is alienable and what is not can hardly be overestimated. The social definition of alienability/inalienability constitutes a paramount factor shaping social, political and economic relationships within a group, and between this and other communities (see, above all, Weiner 1992; but also Gell 1992). Also, such definition lies at the heart of most attempts at maintaining and challenging dominant social orders.[39]

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[38] The internal conflict about *el comercio* also (and importantly) derives from the fact that not all the refugees manage to take advantage of the trade: a large proportion does, but a large proportion (commonly the most vulnerable and less mobile among the camp refugees) does not. Those who do not take part in *el comercio* have seen their rations markedly reduced in the past few years. Such reduction is commonly regarded as stemming from the unequal, preferential access to undistributed supplies that those who take part in the "Polisario" and the "upper trade" have enjoyed.

[39] In the case of the construction of the Saharawi nation, the egalitarian distribution of inalienable aid has been accompanied by other similar egalitarian and "national" practices. This is the case, above all, with marriage among the Polisario's refugees. There are clear indications that in pre-colonial and colonial times marriages were mostly within the tribe. Inter-tribal marriages were discouraged (but not impossible), while a man could not married a woman belonging to a tribe of higher social status (Caro Baroja 1990,

By changing "Saharawi aid" into "Saharawi gift" and merchandise, *el comercio* has contributed to transforming the socio-political centrality of the national, egalitarian project into the centrality of tribal networks and into differential accumulation of personal wealth. It would be grossly inaccurate, however, to believe that *el comercio* is merely disruptive of the Saharawi nation. As will be argued in more detail in the next section, the refugees' trade has played a more complex political role. Like "the return of the tribes", *el comercio* has been a "national sin", but one that has been essential to the management of local popular support for the Polisario in the "post-88" period.

El comercio in the political economy of the SADR

It has already been mentioned that a significant portion of the refugee population has been actively involved in *el comercio*. In effect, following "the 88" and the cease-fire of 1991, the trade in aid has quickly become the refugees' most important economic activity.[40] Nowadays the net proceeds of this trade are substantial, particularly in local terms. An average refugee-trader earns no less than double (and usually much more) the

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Hernandez Moreno 1988). As part of its national revolution, the Polisario Front effectively changed this traditional pattern of marriage among its camp refugees. Before "the 88", in fact, all unmarried Polisario women were potentially accessible to all Polisario men for marriage. In the camps, the Polisario eliminated the dowry and nobody could have refused the marriage of a daughter with a certain man because of his tribe. The national –"egalitarian"– "alienability" of all women was an effective means of challenging tribes by making alienable the most important inalienable wealth of each tribe: its women. With "the 88" and "the return of the tribes" the dowry has also returned, as well as the relevance of tribal membership in making "the giving of a daughter" possible or not. And so now "women" are again inalienable wealth, just as tribal membership has returned to be acknowledged as a socially important and inalienable condition. To put it more blatantly, it is interesting to note that the national inalienability of aid has accompanied the full "national alienability of women" through marriage; *el comercio* and the full alienability of aid have been part of the "return of the tribes" and have accompanied a renewed "tribal inalienability of women".

[40] The trade in aid is the most important economic activity if one does not consider the running of the SADR and of the camps, which, of course, can be regarded as economic activities, but are non-market and state-led ones. No data are available on the number of refugees who directly or indirectly take part in *el comercio*. But it would seem that the majority of the economically active refugee population is involved.

normal wage of a full-time worker in Nouadhibou.[41] It clearly appears that the proceeds of *el comercio* have represented the most important component of the refugees' monetary incomes, although other sources (above all Spanish military pensions, remittances, rents and livestock) have been acquiring a growing economic relevance.

In the aggregate, it is perhaps obvious that part of the refugees' monetary income has been consumed while another part has been invested. Common investments have consisted, above all, of the prime costs of commercial activities: purchasing and maintaining vehicles, buying merchandise and paying collaborators. In addition to this, other less frequent but still recurring investments have included: buying houses, stores, "boutiques" and other commercial enterprises in Mauritania and Algeria (more rarely in Spain); purchasing livestock (mostly camels); and then acquiring Mauritanian or Algerian passports, European visas or non-legal passages to Europe. Needless to say, the profits stemming from these investments have been, once again, either consumed or invested (see graph).

If *el comercio* has been playing a crucial role in shaping the refugees' economy, it has also produced no less important socio-political consequences. For one thing, it has already been argued that *el comercio* has decisively contributed to the construction, widening and management of those tribal networks through which Polisario politicians and high bureaucrats have gathered and administered their popular support in the aftermath of "the 88".

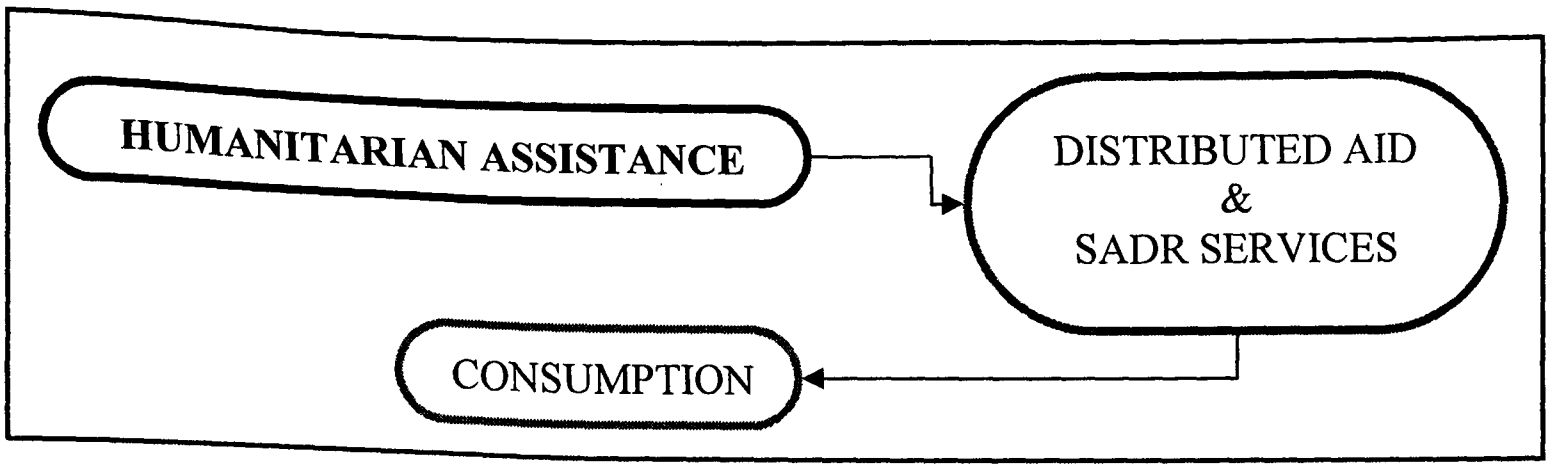
But the socio-political importance of *el comercio* cannot be reduced to this (still fundamental) aspect. In particular, it is important to underline that the development of the trade in aid in the post-ceasefire period has provided the numerous former soldiers of the

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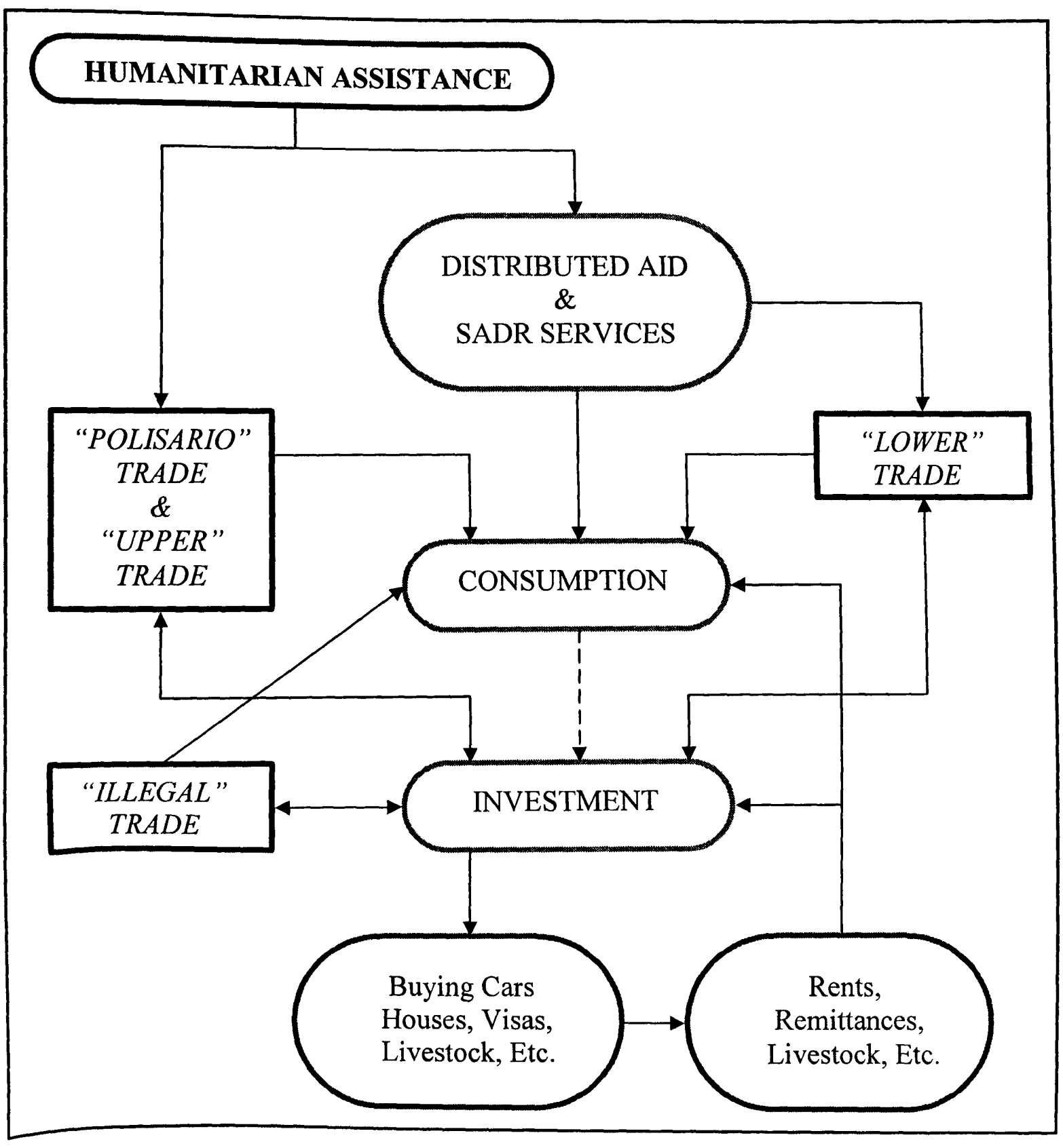
[41] The refugee-trader also enjoys another important advantage. Usually at least part of the members of his/her household live in the camps where, having access to distributed aid, do not need to buy much food or other goods. And so the refugee-trader can save and invest a far larger share of his/her income than an average full-time worker in –say– Nouadhibou.

'Keynesian' analysis of economic flows applied to the SADR and its citizenship

Before "the 88" and the ceasefire



After "the 88" and the ceasefire



Polisario's army with opportunities to improve their economic and social positions. It is true that thousands of them left the Polisario's settlements with their families (particularly in the first years following "the 88"). But those who remained soon discovered that being based in the camps could offer even better economic prospects than leaving for Algeria, Morocco or Mauritania.

In more general terms, it can be argued that the development of *el comercio* in the post-ceasefire period has played an essential role in increasing and then maintaining the economic centrality of the Polisario's refugee camps. Thanks to the trade in aid, in fact, remaining a camp refugee has not necessarily been an economically unfavourable option: it has not inevitably meant having fewer economic opportunities and being worse off than those who left the camps. Rather, the opposite appears to have often been the case.[42]

The previous analysis of "Saharawi aid" demonstrates another important socio-political consequence of *el comercio*. As mentioned above, selling aid has been regarded as a sort of "national offence": something to be hidden from non-refugees in order to maintain external support. In this context of "nationally deviant" practices, the Polisario and its state have seemed indispensable in the effort to maintain a sort of "proper image" of state/nation in the eyes of the donors and, in general, of the international community.

While *el comercio* has been dependent upon humanitarian supplies, "the international community continues to channel its developmental [and humanitarian] efforts through state institutions" (Duffield 2001,178). Such institutions remain essential to access external assistance and, therefore, are indispensable to a trade like *el comercio*. It is clear that –in this context– the Polisario and its state have provided a framework of legality, organisation, unity and just claims necessary to maintain international support and refugees' access to humanitarian assistance (despite their "national sins").

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[42] In this sense, those who left provided an useful term of comparison. It is relevant to note here that a number of those who had left are said to have later returned to the camps.

While officially denying the existence of *el comercio* and formally punishing the "few" refugees who tried to trade in aid, in practice the Front has protected and fostered *el comercio*. Without such protection, without this state mediation between the "illegality" of refugees' trade and the "legality" of donors' expectations, access to humanitarian supplies would have been seriously undermined. And so a "national offence" has made the Polisario's state even more useful and necessary. Such a rewarding "sin", in fact, could not be committed without the backing of an internationally recognised state.

In sum, while *el comercio* has been perceived as something distinct from the Polisario's state, it is also clear that the refugees' extra-legal trade and the Front's SADR have been related in a number of important ways. In effect, commercial networks hinged on tribal membership have also provided channels for the management of popular support for the Polisario's politicians and high bureaucrats. Furthermore, the development of *el comercio* has been crucial in shaping the economic centrality of the Front's camps, and so in discouraging many refugees from leaving the settlements in the post-ceasefire period. Last but not least, the profitable trade in aid has made the Polisario's "humanitarian state" even more necessary in order to conceal and protect *el comercio* from non-refugees' eyes, while also guaranteeing continuing access to humanitarian supplies. Once again, Duffield's recent work seems relevant here.

> "[Rather] than being independent of the state, the shadow economy intersects the state at many levels. State actors have developed complex relations of dependence, complicity and control in relation to the non-formal economy" (2001, 156).

A final observation, however, is necessary. If *el comercio* has been a crucial means of managing popular support for the Polisario in the "post-88" and post-ceasefire period,

more recently it has also represented a creeping threat to the Front's state. As noted above, the proceeds of the trade in aid have usually been invested in goods (e.g. houses and camels) and in several economic activities (such as "boutiques" or a relative's passage to Europe). The large majority of these investments and accumulated wealth have been located outside the refugee camps –usually hundreds and often thousands of kilometres away. In the long term this refugees' use of commercial earnings can reduce their economic dependency on the trade in aid, on the Front's humanitarian supplies and on the camps.

Furthermore, the many years of *el comercio* have helped to forge commercial and social networks of a strongly trans-national character. While necessary for the trade in aid, these webs of relations have also facilitated the emergence of rewarding alternatives to the commerce in humanitarian supplies. In other words, *el comercio* has been playing a crucial role in reintegrating the Polisario's refugees into the regional and international economy. And such reintegration now begins to threaten that economic centrality of the Polisario's camps which *el comercio* itself had produced in the first instance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: humanitarian assistance, global connections and local strategies

The first Saharawi refugee camps were set up in late 1975 in south-western Algeria. Poorly equipped, these settlements were intended as a provisional shelter for people fleeing Western Sahara. Almost thirty years later the camps are still there, but much has changed. During the past three decades the settlements, their inhabitants and the socio-economic environment surrounding them have undergone a number of important changes including, notably, the transformation of the refugee camps into a state-in exile.

The development of a Saharawi Republic and of a Saharawi national community in the camps of the Polisario has been the primary focus and concern of this thesis. The objective of this last chapter is to bring together the main findings of the previous analysis, underlining the role played by three interrelated processes in the development of the Saharawi nation-state: international political and humanitarian support, externally-sponsored institutional changes and the individual and collective strategies of refugees.

The first section will present a broad picture of how the leadership of the Polisario's state has achieved and managed both external support and local legitimacy. In particular, it will be argued that the Front's considerable successes in this respect have rested on two markedly different strategies: an official one of national commitment and unity, and an internal, post-88 policy of "tribal balance" and trade in aid.

The second section will look more closely at the circular relationship between international support and state institutional development. Also, importantly, it will stress the critical role played by such innovative local processes as the "return of the Saharawi

tribes" and *el comercio* in shaping social, political and economic arrangements within the externally-sponsored institutional framework of the Polisario's Republic. The chapter will end by acknowledging the multi-dimensional and dialectic character of the development of the Saharawi nation-state, a development in which modern institutional reforms have required, fostered and protected the present growing centrality of tribal ascription among Saharawi refugee-citizens.

The refugees' state between international backing and local support

Since its foundation in 1976, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) has been a state-in exile. Thanks to the support of the Algerian government, the SADR has maintained *de facto* control and jurisdiction over a vast area of desert that now includes four refugee camps, three "school settlements" and an administrative centre named Rabuni (the provisional "capital" of the Republic; see map 4).

The SADR has long been the main provider of humanitarian goods and services for its refugee-citizens. In effect, by far the major part of international humanitarian assistance to the Saharawi camp refugees has been channelled through the SADR, which has commonly been regarded as the refugees' state. Humanitarian supplies have constituted the bulk of the budget of the Saharawi Republic, while the main responsibilities of this state have largely coincided with those usually attributed to international and regional humanitarian actors.

In accordance with the populist orientation of the Polisario Front (but also in line with liberal-democratic paradigms and with prevailing models of humanitarian justice), the Saharawi Republic has maintained the equality of its refugee-citizens as one of its

most fundamental principles (Hacene-Djaballah 1985; Briones *et al.* 1997), and the uniform per capita distribution of state-humanitarian resources as a crucial aspect of its *modus operandi*. It was in this context that the Saharawi nation emerged as an egalitarian community of refugees from Western Sahara. Apart from the per capita distribution of state-humanitarian goods, several other factors appear to have contributed to the development of an egalitarian model of nation among the Polisario's refugees. These have included: the widespread, generalised loss of refugees' property (especially livestock) before and during the flight from Western Sahara; the concealment of differences in wealth among camp inmates; the routines of military and camp life; the prolonged collective effort against the Moroccan enemy; the elimination of tribes (formally portrayed as a major threat to the Saharawi nation) from all official activities and spaces; and the homogeneous "national geography" of the refugee camps.

I have argued that the construction of the SADR as a "humanitarian state" and the development of the Saharawi nation as a united and egalitarian community of refugees, have played a central role in the management of *both* international *and* local support for the Polisario, for its state and for its programme of national independence. For over a decade –during the armed conflict against the Moroccan FAR– the Polisario's state proved effective, overall, in pursuing the two critical objectives of international and local support without major, open conflicts between the two. In this period the Saharawi Republic was officially recognised and assisted by a large number of states and humanitarian organisations (Zoubir and Volman 1993; Pazzanita and Hodges 1994). The Front's SADR proved able to attract and manage increasing amounts of humanitarian supplies, and then to provide all its refugee-citizens with more and better goods and services than any other regional and local organisation (tribes, previous Spanish colonial administration and neighbouring states included).

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The synergistic convergence between the management of international backing and the administration of local support was shattered by "the events of the 88" –events which, arguably, had the most far-reaching social and political consequences among Saharawi refugees since the foundation of the camps to date. "The 88" has not affected international political backing for, and humanitarian assistance to, the SADR (as a matter of fact, this critical period and its important consequences have remained largely unknown to non-refugees). Despite "the 88" the Polisario's Republic has maintained –if not improved– its international reputation for being a caring state, one entirely committed to pursuing the wellbeing of its citizens.[1] But from a more local perspective, "the 88" has deeply changed the relationship between the Polisario/SADR and the Saharawi refugees. In particular, it has led to a major transformation in the Front's management of local popular support.

In October 1988 the discovery of a "mafia of the Reguibat tribe" led by the highest political elite of the Polisario, and the public revelation of its grave abuses against a large number of Saharawi refugees and soldiers, were followed by extensive and violent camp riots against the Front. The political establishment eventually managed to quell the uprisings and to overcome the crisis of legitimacy that hit it. I have argued that this result was achieved mostly by halting all military operations against Morocco, by lifting the camp gates and –above all– by fostering a tribal understanding of the grave abuses for which the Front's leadership was held responsible. While critically contributing to turn "the 88" into a tribal question, the leadership of the Polisario implemented a tribal solution to it: a *de facto* "tribalisation" of the internal politics of the nationalist Front and of its state. Since "the 88", in effect, the large majority of political and governmental high posts of the Polisario/SADR have been assigned so as to maintain a certain "tribal

[1] See, for instance, the EUCOCO yearly reports of 1992, 1993 and 1994. See also *The New Internationalist* (n. 297, December 1997).

balance", principally among the three most numerous tribes represented in the camps, the Reguibat, the Ould Dlim and the Techna.

The "return of the tribes" among Saharawi, and the refugees' new support for an "internally tribalised" Polisario, have been complex processes that I have tried to explore in some depth. Among other factors, I have stressed the important role that the UN has played in facilitating this "return of the tribes". In particular, it has been argued that the MINURSO's thorough identification of voters for the referendum on self-determination has meant an authoritative attribution of a (documentary) tribal identity to every certified Saharawi. More generally, the MINURSO's effort has legitimised and strengthened the representation of one's tribal ascription as *the* condition for one's being a Saharawi. Despite having constantly been portrayed as a major enemy of the Saharawi nation by the Polisario Front,[2] in the aftermath of "the 88", tribes have become, in effect, the internationally acknowledged foundation of such a nation, its unquestioned roots.

No less important, the "return of the tribes" and the refugees' new support for the Polisario in the post-88 period have been crucially sustained by the development of *el comercio*. It has been particularly through this trade, in fact, that tribes (or, more accurately, tribal networks) have become increasingly able to make a difference to refugees' lives by providing their members with preferential access to state-humanitarian resources and to valuable commercial opportunities. As argued in the previous chapter, in the aftermath of "the 88", *el comercio* has been the means of turning international aid into a vital stimulus to the Saharawi refugees' tribal networks: a major factor in the mobilisation of existing webs of relationships and in the construction of new ones (cf. Gell 1992, Weiner 1992 and Connor 1994).

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[2] Formally, the Polisario Front still regards tribes as a danger to the Saharawi nation. See, for instance, article 48 of the new Constitution of the SADR, adopted in 1999.

I have presented *el comercio* as a form of extra-legal trade based on state-humanitarian resources that refugee-traders have accessed mostly through their networks of tribal "contacts". This close relationship between state, aid, tribes and trade has deeply shaped the present socio-economic relevance of tribes among Saharawi refugees and has critically strengthened the value of the participation of tribes in the Polisario's state. It is clear that the Front's leadership has significantly benefited from the development of *el comercio*: in terms of commercial profits and local support, and also from the important standpoint of demographic control. In effect, the trade in aid has given a new economic centrality to the Polisario's settlements and new reasons for refugees to remain in the camps, despite (or thanks to) the ceasefire and the opening of the camp gates and of the Algerian-Mauritanian border.

In sum, the Polisario's humanitarian state and the Saharawi egalitarian nation of camp refugees have maintained a fundamental role in the Front's management of international political backing and of its access to humanitarian supplies. As for internal support, in the aftermath of "the 88" this has been administered by the Polisario above all through a tribal U-turn in the context of a "return of the Saharawi tribes" as central categories of ascription and as dynamic economic realities.

Set in this perspective, nowadays many Saharawi refugees appear to perceive a sharp dichotomy between "nationalist" expectations and local "tribal" practices, between the way things "should be" (at least for donors' and to other non-refugees' eyes) and the way they actually work. This dichotomy –I have argued– is now a problematic and important element permeating several spheres of local social life. It can be perceived, for instance, between the evident national homogeneity of the refugee camps and the web of tribal boundaries that invisibly crosses the settlements (Chapter four); or between the national-collective character of "Saharawi aid" and its use as "gift" and merchandise in *el*

comercio (Chapter six). Also, it is the same dichotomy a key informant referred to when she distinguished between "dreamers" and "actors of unity"; and the same felt inconsistency that has made "the 88" a "national sin" which Saharawi refugees have confessed to themselves but have had to conceal from all others (Chapter five).

Aid for change. The merging of externally-sponsored institutional reforms and local strategies

The case of the Saharawi refugees' state clearly illustrates the profound and lasting effects that international assistance can have on local public institutions. The analysis of this case suggests, in fact, that the processes of institutional engineering and reform which have turned the SADR into a "humanitarian state" have not only required ample external support, but have also been motivated –to a large extent– by the objective of attracting, managing and increasing such support over a prolonged period of time.

Also –and no less important– the case of the Polisario's refugees confirms that external backing can indirectly foster other local changes of great consequence (such as the "return of the tribes" and *el comercio*) which, arguably, the large majority of international supporters would regard as both unexpected and undesirable. These social changes are evidence of the resourcefulness of refugees, of their ability to incorporate international assistance and expectations into individual and collective strategies in ways that are complex, innovative and mostly successful.[3] I now put forward some closing

[3] This process is particularly clear in the case of the Saharawi trade in humanitarian goods, but such incorporation also emerges from the unintentional support that the UN/MINURSO has granted to the "return of the Saharawi tribes", for instance, or from the use of state institutions to construct and manage the Polisario's "tribal balance".

reflections on these two important and related aspects of external assistance to Saharawi refugees: namely its effects on state institutions and its incorporation into local strategies.

International assistance and institutional reforms

The Polisario's state has achieved wide international recognition as a fully grown political organisation. In accordance with its constitutional charter, this republic-in exile has come to encompass a comprehensive range of state institutions and symbols: a president; a government; a bureaucracy (with its sizeable diplomatic service); a judicial system; an army; a flag; a provisional capital; a small-scale version of its motherland; and a refugee citizenship which elects the members of its parliament. Furthermore, the Saharawi Republic has exhibited a democratic orientation and a clear social attitude. In particular, it has been internationally recognised as a "caring" state: one that, from several points of view, resembles a western "welfare state". It seems important to underline, once more, this marked social inclination of the SADR. In addition to its republican structure, this attitude has crucially contributed to the Saharawi state gaining the approval of numerous individuals and organisations (including its most committed donors: the Popular and Democratic Republic of Algeria and a large number of European NGOs).

It is perhaps not surprising that the development of the SADR as a modern and democratic state has been coupled with sizable and growing inflows of humanitarian resources for this republic of refugee citizens. As various scholars have noticed, long-term humanitarian assistance may be significantly hampered where donors do not find official or otherwise representative organisations that can act as acceptable local

interlocutors. On the contrary, long-term humanitarian assistance tends to flow more abundantly and consistently –although not necessarily more efficiently– when it directly involves conventional local governments, ministries, national health services, officially certified associations and other similar local organisations (Edwards and Hulme 1995; Herriss 1995).[4] In the case of the Saharawi Republic this general tendency has been reinforced by the fact that a top priority of the Polisario's elite has constantly been the gathering and management of external humanitarian supplies for its camp refugees. In this context, the SADR bureaucracy, its internal organisation and its working have been developed in ways that have facilitated the pursuit of the crucial priority of accessing aid by both promoting and supervising external humanitarian endeavours in the Polisario's refugee camps.

This positive reaction to state-national frameworks of democratic representation, organisation and action is not an exclusive feature of international humanitarian assistance. An analogous reaction is evident when one considers external political support. International relations have largely been dominated by states and by multilateral actors, and one of the most effective ways of gaining visibility, legitimacy and political support on the international scene has remained the establishment of an allegedly representative, democratic state. In the case of the SADR, it is clear that the Polisario's struggle for an independent Western Sahara has achieved decisive political and diplomatic successes precisely by the development of an independent Saharawi state, with a democratic orientation and a firm commitment to international law.

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[4] Clearly, the acceptability of certain local interlocutors is ultimately judged by donors themselves. The developmental and humanitarian discourse of "empowerment" appears to have given new impulse to channel aid through local associations that are usually related with governmental institutions or that explicitly sustain programmes of democratic institutional reform (cf. Escobar 1995; Sachs 1992; Ferguson 1990; on the relationship between developmental assistance and democratisation in Africa during the 1990s, see Goldsmith 2001). This is another, crucial way in which international humanitarian assistance pursues its mission of social and institutional transformation (see Duffield 2001).

In sum, there has been a strong and circular relationship between humanitarian and political international backing on the one hand, and the institutional development of the SADR on the other. The creation of a Saharawi Republic and its development into a "humanitarian state" have played a paramount role in granting the Polisario and its refugees sizeable and continuing humanitarian resources as well as strong political support and enhanced international visibility.[5] The overall effect may be described as a "virtuous cycle" –to use an expression particularly popular among economists. In effect, the capacity of the Polisario's elite for using international resources in order to develop a republican structure, to provide its refugees-citizens with goods and services and to manage local support, all this has been increasingly rewarded by a number of international actors with further humanitarian and political assistance.

This said, it is clear that the Front's elite, and the Saharawi refugees in general, are conscious of this positive dynamic. They know that, so far, they have been "doing well" both in terms of political-diplomatic stance and in terms of camp services and organisation. And they appear clearly conscious that these results have critically contributed to their favourable international reputation and to their long-term access to external assistance. In other words, both the Polisario's leadership and its refugees seem to have developed a clear understanding of what their international supporters expect from them as a collective, and to appreciate the advantages they have been gaining from fulfilling such expectations.

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[5] The fact that the Polisario and its state have made a crucial difference in accessing international humanitarian and political assistance appears to be largely confirmed by the comparison between the case of the Saharawi refugees and other instances of prolonged settlement in camps where no cohesive political elite has emerged and where no state has been developed (such as in the cases of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia and Afghan refugees in Iran). In effect, it seems that in relation to such other cases –and considering the relatively small size of the Saharawi refugee population (officially 170,000 people)– a significantly larger number of humanitarian organisations and of international political actors have positively answered the appeals of the Saharawi Republic.

Beyond institutional development: investigating innovative local responses

The case of the Polisario's Republic has attracted the attention of a large number of commentators and analysts. Many of these have highlighted the steady development and the considerable achievements of the SADR, to the extent that the acclaimed political, institutional and organisational successes of this state-in exile have contributed to the overshadowing of other local changes of great social relevance among Saharawi refugees.

The literature on Saharawi refugees is largely about the Polisario/SADR and its achievements or about international relations: the non-institutional, non-state level is virtually absent.[6] The visibility and appeal of the institutional level, nevertheless, have been crucial in shaping and fuelling the more occult dynamic of local change, while this change has been essential to the local management of the state-institutional level.

A major objective of this thesis has been to investigate some important but neglected local processes (such as the "return of the tribes" and *el comercio*) and to examine their relationships with other, better documented developments. What emerges from this approach is the need to pay thorough attention to social changes of a more local (and yet often trans-national) character in order better to understand the development of externally-sponsored institutional reforms and the management of local political allegiances.

Clearly, this is a general argument that several scholars have endorsed, and one that could be traced back at least to Nietzsche's understanding of "development".[7] In his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche emphasised the need to pay more attention

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[6] Cf. Cistero and Freixes (1987), Firebrace (1987), Damis (1990), Pazzanita and Hodges (1994), Briones *et al.* (1997) and Sayeh (1998).

[7] See, for instance, Nugent (1994), Gupta (1995), Hart (1988), Castells (1997) and Aihwa Ong's chapter in Moore (1999).

to the complexity and non-linearity of social processes, avoiding the common tendency to confine our understanding of social change to a progression towards predetermined targets.

> "The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ [and –I would add– of a nation-state] is therefore certainly not its *progressus* towards a goal, still less is it a logical *progressus*, taking the shortest route with least expenditure of energy and cost. Instead it is a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subjugation exacted on the thing, added to this the resistances encountered every time, the attempted transformations for the purpose of defence and reaction, and the results, too, of successful countermeasures" (1994, 55).

The analysis of *el comercio* and of the "return of the Saharawi tribes" in the post-88 period has highlighted the need to question the common discourse on the exemplary development of the Saharawi from a nomadic population into a committed nation of settled citizens with a fully-fledged state. Such a discourse constitutes –so to speak– a familiar foreground which has crowded out important aspects of the more complex, dynamic and unexpected picture of which it is a part. In particular, it has blurred innovative changes which have had profound and lasting consequences on the whole Saharawi refugee community, deeply affecting its social, economic, political and geographical arrangements.

I am not suggesting here an absolute primacy of focus on more local processes over an analysis of state-institutional changes. Rather, the case of the Saharawi refugees shows that the two levels can be inextricably interwoven and mutually dependent and, therefore, that both levels deserve careful consideration. In the case at issue, in fact, externally-sponsored institutional reforms (the development of the SADR) and local innovative responses (the "return of the tribes" and *el comercio*) have affected and have fed into each other. The development of the refugees' state and its access to international

support have been playing a crucial role in the "return of the Saharawi tribes" and in the development of *el comercio*. At the same time, the trade in aid and the "tribalisation" of the Saharawi community have been crucial to the Polisario's management of local support for its internationally recognised SADR.[8]

Trying to place these considerations in a wider context, an interesting question arises. Is it possible to identify some prevailing, general traits of local responses in contexts of prolonged international assistance and externally-sponsored institutional reforms? While providing a satisfactory answer to such a question remains beyond the scope of this work, the case of the Saharawi refugees can, nevertheless, provide some valuable insights in this direction. In particular, the analysis of the "return of the Saharawi tribes" and of *el comercio* allows us to emphasise three recurrent traits of such innovative local responses: namely their non-linearity, their capacity for engendering actual development, and their frequently trans-national dimension.

First, local responses can lead to unexpected combinations of characteristically modern changes and "returns" to the past. The analysis of the Polisario's refugees well illustrates this point. The colonial use of tribal customs was followed by a prolonged period of marginalisation of the Saharawi tribes in social, political and economic life. The committed national and anti-tribal unity, achieved under the flag of the Polisario's Republic, has eventually given rise to a "return of the tribes" as critical factors in the management of local support for the Saharawi state and for its national cause. Obviously, this "return" cannot mean re-living the past, but it confirms that pre-modern forms of social aggregation and organisation may –under old names and new meanings– be

[8] Ironical as it may seem, local support for externally-sponsored institutions has been managed also through processes of "tribalisation" and of commercialisation of aid: that is through processes which most donors would still regard as undesirable and harmful forms of local deviation. In other words, the fulfilment of the political and developmental expectations of international supporters has also required the local "improper" use of a large part of external assistance.

required, fostered and protected by typically modern institutional structures of governance.

Second, innovative local responses can substantially increase people's socio-economic opportunities and networks, and then the local creation of –and access to– wealth. By using also state-humanitarian resources, these responses may achieve results that would be unthinkable for traditional state-humanitarian endeavours. In the case of the Saharawi, the development of *el comercio* has provided a large proportion of the refugee population with unprecedented opportunities of economic gain, accumulation of wealth, investment, movement and new social relationships. The trade in aid has multiplied the economic and social weight of Saharawi refugees –of some much more than others– in the whole region and beyond, leading to their inclusion in wider socio-economic activities and processes.

Third, among people living in contexts characterised by continuing international assistance and externally-supported institutions, trans-national networks and activities may emerge to an extent not found among other local groups. From this perspective, the case of the Saharawi refugees also appears instructive. Humanitarian assistance has reached the SADR from all continents. Through *el comercio*, these external resources have become the fuel of Saharawi refugees' commercial networks, giving a vital impulse to new socio-economic opportunities in the region and beyond.[9]

In addition to the trade in aid, the development of a world-wide network of Polisario/SADR representatives and of supportive organisations has also contributed to increase refugees' trans-national connections and opportunities. In this sense, the most eloquent example is, perhaps, that of the several thousands of young Saharawi students

[9] While refugees' access to consumable humanitarian supplies has been central to the development of trans-national networks, a no less important role has been played by refugees' access to means of transport (which have mainly been provided by European NGOs as humanitarian assistance, or by the Polisario's allies as military equipment).

who each year spend part of their long vacation in Europe (especially Spain). This topic would certainly reward further investigation.[10] The rather limited information now available reveals that these "summer exchanges" often lead to the establishment of long-term relationships between the young refugees' Saharawi families and "their European families". It seems frequently the case that long-term monetary and other support is granted by the European families to their Saharawi counterparts, while it is not uncommon for a young camp refugee to return to Europe after a "summer exchange" in order to continue his or her studies there, as guest of an European family.

For the Saharawi, being a camp refugee has meant having more opportunities to be part of trans-national and trans-continental networks and activities than other inhabitants of the same area. But while the case of the Saharawi refugees may be particularly clear on this point, it is certainly not an exception. In fact, it appears to be a recurrent feature of protracted "humanitarian crises" that considerable segments of those local inhabitants who live through such complex situations achieve access to a wider range of socio-economic opportunities than other people in the region. And these opportunities often play an important role in shaping forms of local association, political allegiance, resistance and movement.[11]

The relationship between external assistance, changing institutional structures and local innovative responses (with their trans-national dimension, their capacity for engendering socio-economic opportunities and their non-linearity) confirms a well-known truth: the analysis of social change during so-called "humanitarian emergencies" is constantly challenged by the complexity (or dynamic interrelation) of the processes involved, of which the analysis itself becomes an integral part. In this context, social

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[10] At present (Summer 2003) a research team led by Dr Dawn Chatty (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford) is examining also this topic in the context of its wider research concerning the effects of prolonged armed conflict and forced migration on children and adolescents living in Saharawi and Afghan refugee households.

[11] See, for instance, Long (1993), Fuglerud (1999), Van Hear (1998), Cohen (1997), Richards (1996).

research can only gain in depth of insight and influence from a more committed effort to bring together international, regional and local dimensions within a multi-disciplinary approach. In particular, research on historical material, international relations and political organisation can greatly benefit from the perspectives and models of political economy and from ethnographic methods of investigation and analysis.

In this multi-disciplinary endeavour, issues of identity and allegiance are likely to remain central. In effect, the relationship between prolonged humanitarian intervention and identity issues appears so relevant and consistence that one may usefully draw a comparison with Foucault's understanding of the effects of "confession" on human sexuality.

> "What I mean by confession, even though I can well see that the term may be a little annoying, is all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject itself" (Gordon 1980, 215-216).

It may be argued, in a similar fashion, that humanitarian assistance has usually incited its target subjects to produce new discourses of truth about distant and near "others" and about themselves, contributing to shaping their world-views and their forms of individual and collective ascription.[12] In other words, if Foucault's "confession" has induced the production of truths on proper and sinful sexual practices, humanitarian assistance has often stimulated new local representations of belonging, of expected behaviours and of ethnic/national "sins". Both "confession" and humanitarian assistance are processes through which the parties involved are induced to define, construct and assert certain mutual differences, expectations and roles, and to elaborate specific aspects of their self. "Confession" fosters an understanding of the self as individual with a moral

[12] Cf. Malkki (1995b), but also Schmidt (1998).

conscience and member a community of sinners. Humanitarian assistance, on the other hand, incites to produce understandings of the self as individual with certain privileges, rights and duties stemming from his or her belonging to a recognised national group.

ANNEXE 1

Economic and demographic statistics on Mauritania

Table A.1

Gross National Income (US$ million)									
1970	**1980**	**1990**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**
196	672	1,076	974	1,015	1,060	1,045	962	925	909

Source: World Bank (2002) *Global Development Finance*, Washington DC, The World Bank, p. 368

Table A.2

Fish Catches (thousand metric tones)									
1987	**1988**	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**
99.4	97.6	92.6	80.5	86.7	93.9	100.4	85.0	90.0	85.0

Source: United Nations (1999) *Statistical Yearbook*, New York, The United Nations, p. 376

Table A.3

Iron-bearing Ores (thousand metric tones)								
1991	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**
6,660	5,743	6,890	7,526	7,000	7,384	7,605	7,410	7,475

Source: United Nations (2001) *1999 Industrial Commodity Statistics Yearbook*, New York, The United Nations, p. 10

Table A.4

Estimates of mid-year Population (thousands)									
1990	**1991**	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**
2,026	2,036	2,142	2,148	2,211	2,284	2,351	2,461	2,529	2,598

Source: United Nations (2001) *1999 Demographic Yearbook*, New York, The United Nations, p. 120

Table A.5

Population of capital cities and cities of 100,000 and more inhabitants (*latest available year*)	
Nouakchott (*1976*)	134,986

Source: United Nations (2001) *1999 Demographic Yearbook*, New York, The United Nations, p. 222

Table A.6

Expectation of life at birth for each sex (*latest available year*)
(*1995-2000*)
Female: 55.1 years
Male: 51.9 years

Source: United Nations (2001) *1999 Demographic Yearbook*, New York, The United Nations, p. 509

Table A.7

Percentage of population residing in urban areas								
1990	**1995**	**2000**	**2005**	**2010**	**2015**	**2020**	**2025**	**2030**
43.5	51.2	57.7	62.8	66.3	68.6	70.7	72.6	74.4

Source: United Nations (2001) *Compendium of Human Settlements Statistics 2001*, New York, The United Nations, p. 210

Table A.8

Incidence of Poverty				
Year	**Share of population living on less than US$ 1 a day** (percentage)		**Share of population living on less than US$ 2 a day** (percentage)	
	Household-survey-based estimates	National-accounts-consistent estimates	Household-survey-based estimates	National-accounts-consistent estimates
1988	40.6	37.6	78.9	76.1
1993	49.4	42.7	81.9	78.1
1995	31.0	32.7	70.8	72.4

Source: UNCTAD (2002) *The least developed countries Report 2002*, New York and Geneva, UNCTAD, p. 46

Table A.9

Indicators of education and literacy								
Adult literacy rate (percentage) Estimated year 2000			**School enrolment ratio** (percentage of relevant age group) Year 1997 or latest year available					
			Primary			Secondary		
Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
51	30	40	84	75	79	21	11	16

Source: UNCTAD (2002) *The least developed countries Report 2002*, New York and Geneva, UNCTAD, p. 25

Table A.10

Total population, agricultural population and economically active population (in thousands)					
Year	**Population**		**Economically Active Population**		
	Total	Agricultural	Total	In agriculture	% in agriculture
1990	1,992	1,100	893	493	55.2
1995	2,275	1,230	1,013	546	54.1
2000	2,665	1,408	1,180	624	52.8

Source: FAO (2002) *FAO Production Yearbook Vol.54-2000*, Roma, FAO, p. 20

Table A.11

Structure and evolution of the labour force in Mauritania							
Labour force		**Labour force participation rates**					
Total (thousands) (1997)	Annual growth rate (1980-97)	Total		Men		Women	
		1980	**1997**	**1980**	**1997**	**1980**	**1997**
1,100	2.3	48.1	46.0	53.5	52.1	42.8	39.9

Source: ILO (1998) *World Employment Report 1998-99*, Geneva, ILO, p. 217

Table A.12

Distribution of total labour force by sector in Mauritania (percentages)							
Agriculture		**Industry**				**Services**	
Total		Total		Manufacturing		Total	
1980	**1997**	**1980**	**1997**	**1980**	**1997**	**1980**	**1997**
71.5	43.9	6.7	13.1	4.0	7.8	21.8	43.2

Source: ILO (1998) *World Employment Report 1998-99*, Geneva, ILO, p. 221

Table A.13

Informal sector employment in West Africa				
Country	Year of survey	**Urban informal sector employment as a percentage of total urban employment**		
		Total	Male	Female
Benin	1992	47.9	52.5	41.4
Cameroon	1993	57.3	---	---
Côte d'Ivoire	1996	52.7	37.3	73.3
Gambia	1993	72.4	66.1	82.7
Ghana	1997	78.5	---	---
Mali	1996	71.0	---	---
Morocco	1988	28.2	---	---

Source: ILO (1998) *World Employment Report 1998-99*, Geneva, ILO, p. 285

Table A.14

Fish catches in Eastern Central Atlantic (tonnes live weight)			
Country	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**
Germany	29,165	23,141	26,678
Greece	5,085	5,917	5,939
Spain	315,161	358,297	251,999
France	62,972	66,744	62,098
Italy	6,090	5,193	5,845
Netherlands	100,969	124,475	123,937
Portugal	22,542	18,209	14,219
Japan	14,934	15,820	16,086
North Korea	20,810	22,509	32,809
Russia	312,524	341,413	286,179

Source: European Commission/Eurostat (2001) *Fisheries Yearbook 2001*, Luxembourg, European Communities, p. 34

Table A.15

Some Main Economic Indicators									
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)		**Value added** (as % of GDP)			**Merchandise trade** (millions of US$)		**External Debt**		**Official Development Assistance** (US$ per capita; 1999)
Millions of US$ (2000)	Average annual % growth (1990-2000)	Agriculture (2000)	Industry (2000)	Services (2000)	Export (2000)	Import (2000)	Total (millions of US$; 1999)	Present value (% of GNI; 1999)	
935	4.2	25	29	46	400	340	2,528	169	84

Source: The World Bank (2002) *World Development Report 2002*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 237, 239

Table A.16

Indicators of Transport and Transport Networks
(year 1999)

Road Networks			**Railways**				**Civil Aviation**			
Total Km	Paved %	Density (Km/1,000Km²)	Network Km	Density (Km/1,000Km²)	Freights (mill.ton/Km)	Passengers (mill.pass/Km)	Freights (mill.ton/Km)		Passengers (thousands)	
							Total	International	Total	International
7,660	11.3	7.5	650	0.6	16,623	7	13.9	13.7	187	103

Source: UNCTAD (2002) *The least developed countries Report 2002*, New York and Geneva, UNCTAD, p. 259

ANNEXE 2

'Human rights abuses by the Polisario authorities in the refugee camps in southern Algeria'

"Human rights abuses in the refugee camps were reported to have been widespread up to 1988, and included prolonged arbitrary detention, torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings of known or suspected opponents of the Polisario Front.

Scores of people were detained and accused of plotting against the Polisario authorities on behalf of enemy countries, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s. Many of those who had been arbitrary detained for up to several years were released after widespread protests in 1988 about the political repression in the camps. Detainees were often tortured and ill-treated and were not allowed contact with their families. Although the human rights situation in the camps is said to have improved after the 1988 events [sic], Amnesty International has received reports of human rights abuses, including torture and ill-treatment of detainees, up to 1992. Those detained in the late 1980s include Khalif Laroussi Zaougai, who was detained in 1987 upon arrival in the camps, and Salama Khbaou, who was detained at the end of 1989, three months after he had arrived in the camps. They were both reportedly detained until mid-1991.

Some detainees died in custody, reportedly as a result of torture and ill-treatment. Among them was El Mehdi Othman Souayah, who was reported to have been detained in 1976 and to have died in detention in late 1977, and Mohamed Moussa ould Mokhtar, who was reported to have been detained at the beginning of 1983 and to have died in custody in subsequent years.

To date the Polisario authorities have failed to provide any specific information about detentions, torture and ill-treatment and deaths in custody. Since the early 1990s, the Polisario authorities have acknowledged that human rights abuses had taken place in the past. They have stated that all victims of human rights abuses are granted the same recognition as victims of war and are entitled to the same reparation, and that steps have been taken to prevent human rights abuses from recurring. In response to some of the

specific cases raised by Amnesty International the Polisario authorities have stated that the individuals concerned had never been detained, and that others had died in combat or as a result of illness. They have not, however, provided full details of these cases or of other cases of victims of human rights abuses, or of any concrete steps taken to investigate such abuses and to ensure that they do not recur.

Some former Polisario figures who held positions of responsibility in the Polisario security apparatus, and who are alleged to have been responsible for human rights abuses in the refugee camps administered by the Polisario authorities in the south of Algeria, have since left the camps and are now in Morocco [Hadrami?]. Under the Convention against Torture, Morocco has an obligation to investigate anyone suspected of committing tortures in Morocco or in another country, and, if enough evidence is found, to arrest and prosecute them or extradite them to another country. However, to date the Moroccan authorities are not known to have taken any steps to bring these individuals to justice.

Despite assurances from the Polisario authorities, it is not clear what measures have been taken to ensure the removal from positions of responsibility of any other individuals who were responsible for committing human rights abuses and who are still in the refugee camps. Such measures are necessary to ensure that human rights abuses do not recur."

Amnesty International (1996) "Morocco/Western Sahara. Human rights violations in Western Sahara". Report of Amnesty International missions in Morocco and Western Sahara, 18 April (AI Index MDE 29/04/96-DistrSC/CO/GR), pp. 13-15.

ANNEXE 3

Tables of some top-ranking military and governmental posts of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) held by members of the Reguibat tribe at 30 March 1999

Military apparatus	
*Name**	*Position held*
Gazwani	Commander of the First Military Region
Brahim Beidella	Commander of the Second Military Region
Eyoub Awba	Commander of the Third Military Region
Nih Alem-Belale	Commander of the Fourth Military Region
Abdallahi Lehbib	Commander of the Fifth Military Region
Bena Baha	Commander of the Sixth Military Region
Hama Selama	Commander of the Seventh Military Region

Note: Since the 1980s the area of Western Sahara under the control of the Polisario's army has been divided into seven "military regions". (*) Please, note that the reported names are those generally used among Saharawi refugees to indicate known people: they are "revolutionary" names and not necessarily the original names at birth.

Government apparatus	
Name	*Position held*
Mohamed Abdelaziz	President of the SADR and Secretary-General of the Polisario Front
Bachir Sayed	Minister of Interior
M. Lemine Bouhali	Minister of Defence

Boulahi Sayed	Minister of Economy, Trade and Agriculture
Larabass Joumani	Minister of Equipment
Salek Bebih	Minister of Education
Sidahmed Batal	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Interior
Lahssen Mohamed Ali	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Agriculture
Ahmed Mostapha	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Equipment
Rais	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Health
Boulahi (son of M. Abdelaziz's paternal uncle)	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Information
Mohamed Salem Abdelwahab	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Education
Abdullah (close relative of M. Abdelaziz)	Secretary-General of the Ministry of Justice
Daf	Secretary-General of the Presidency
Mohamed Ali Sidi Bachir	Joined President of the SADR Parliament
Salem Lebsir	President of the Saharawi Red Crescent
Elyazid	Director of the Saharawi Red Crescent
Abdelkany (close relative of M. Abdelaziz)	Secretary-General of the Saharawi Red Crescent
Hamad Ahmed Yahya	Representative of the Saharawi Red Crescent abroad
Walaad Moussa	Governor of Smara Camp
Moustapha Sidi Bachir	Governor of Aousserd Camp
Mohamed Isslem Meless	General Director of the Agricultural Project (funded by the UNHCR)
Mouloud Didi	Head of the Services of Public Expenditure to the Presidency
Haj Bedaty (close relative of M. Abdelaziz)	Director of the Warehouse of the Stocks of Vehicles

Brahim Ghali	Polisario Representative in Spain
Khalil Sidi Emhamed	Polisario Representative in Algeria

Other relevant non-SADR positions	
Name	*Position held*
Katri Amar (close relative of M. Abdelaziz)	Director of the Port of Oran (Algeria – port of passage of all non-military foreign aid for the SADR)

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Approximate Number of Words (excluding Bibliography): 97,610