

Western Sahara: Africa's Last Colony

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I WESTERN SAHARA: A COLONISED, ABANDONED AND, AFTERWARDS INVADED TERRITORY

The Western Sahara is a territory that was colonised by Spain between 1884 and 1975. During this period, the region saw a significant anticolonial resistance, not only against Spain, but also against France. In the context of independence that North Africa was undergoing, especially Morocco (1956), a new process of resistance emerged in the Western Sahara, which was, once again, contained. Against the grain of an international politics of decolonization during that epoch, Spain responded by making the territory of Western Sahara into a Spanish province. In this sense, the case of Western Sahara constitutes a paradox in relation to the contemporary world that was under construction towards the end of the twentieth century.

In 1975, Spain accepted Morocco's and Mauritania's administration of the Western Sahara (The Madrid Accords) in the context of Franco's crumbling regime and of King Hassan II's policy to promote a Green March over the territory that compromised the Spanish government and army. In February 1976, when Spain unilaterally abandoned the territory, the Saharawi people organized into the POLISARIO front. The POLISARIO Front waged war against Mauritania until the latter abandoned the war in 1979, and against Morocco until 1991, after a ceasefire was signed. This ceasefire called for a referendum to be held between the two remaining parties concerned (the POLISARIO Front and the Kingdom of Morocco). In 1991, the United Nations Mission for the Self Determination of the Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established to create the necessary conditions for a referendum to decide the self-determination

of the territory. Today the referendum is still unrealized and the Saharawi population has been divided into two: one part of the territory is occupied by Morocco and separated by a 2700 km wall [PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE WALL]. Another part of the population live in the territory managed by the POLISARIO Front in the liberated territories where a small nomadic population lives, but mostly in camps nearby the Southern Algerian city of Tindouf, where approximately 150,000 Sahrawis refugees live. In addition to these two groups there is a growing Sahrawi diaspora searching for livelihoods abroad as they wait for some kind of a solution to be reached over the conflict.

Figure 1: Contemporary Distribution of the Saharawi Population

Occupied Territories:

530,000 people (180,000 Moroccan soldiers (> 33%), 245,000 Moroccan settlers, 105,0003 Saharawis (≈20%), in the part of the Western Sahara that remains under Moroccan occupation.

Liberated Territories:

49,000 people. During the war, the POLISARIO Front managed to control a third of Western Sahara's inland desert territory. Much of this area is mined.

Refugee camps:

116,000 people. From 1976 onwards a large part of the Saharawi population had to flee from Moroccan occupation and persecution.



Diaspora: 50,000 people. Thousands of Saharawis have settled in other countries, mostly in Europe. The largest proportion of this diaspora is found within the state of Spain.

Source: IEPALA (2012).

2 WESTERN SAHARA: A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

Why has such a clear conflict of decolonization not arrived at a solution yet? To answer this question I wanted to share some reflections in these sessions about the endurance and the reproduction of the conflict first, and then go on to explain some of the ways in which we (in the anthropology department) are working with and recognizing the existence of a people in struggle (the Saharawi). The first set of considerations aims to understand why this conflict is being sustained over time and why there have been no mechanisms to arrive at its resolution. I depart from a series of reflections related to the degree of importance that this conflict is attributed in the political media, in international politics, within the politics of the European Union, and by Spanish governments.

First of all, I would like to mention the book by Kofi Annan (2013), who was the Secretary-General of the United Nations between December 1997 and 2006: "Interventions", which includes his memoirs of conflict resolution processes during this period, but does not devote a single page to the conflict over the Western Sahara. The scant attention that Kofi Annan's dedicates to the Western Sahara is all the more remarkable given that, in 2003, the conflict was never closer to being solved, after t James Baker, personal representative of the United Nation's Secretary General in the Western Sahara offered his peace proposal "the Baker II plan" in which he proposed a model of Saharawi autonomy within Morocco for a period of 4 or 5 years that would be followed by a referendum where the Saharawis people would decide on either integrating into Morocco or becoming an independent country. Morocco rejected the Plan, like so many other times in the process, with the endorsement of some of the members of the Security Council of the United Nations and of France in particular.

This exemplifies the little importance that the conflict has for the international community until this day. With regards to the European Union, the conflict over the Western Sahara is described as a "forgotten crisis" because the media scarcely covers it, the European Parliament's political parties barely pay any attention to it and international development agencies and actors now play a trite role within the conflict. The Sahara conflict does not

appear among the EU's priorities. Moreover, the EU's preferential agreements with Morocco, especially with regards to fisheries agreements, allow for the exploitation of the territory's resources despite the fact that they are the Sahrawi people's property. The EU is complicit with this exploitation in Morocco's benefit. This situation produces a series of tensions between different institutions of the European Union. Whereas the European Parliament is in favour of the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people, the EU's economic interests determine its policies overall, resulting in Morocco's privileged positions within these relationships. Finally, I would like to emphasize the scant importance that the Western Sahara's conflict has had for the political parties that have governed Spain since the country's political transition following the end of Franco regime. Both the Partido Popular and the PSOE have recognised the Saharawi people's right to self-determination when they were in the opposition, but once they have governed, they governed following the framework established by the EU and French foreign policy which abides by the principle of "good neighbourliness" with the Kingdom of Morocco, even if this means ignoring Saharawi people's legitimate rights in relation to the struggle over the territory of the Western Sahara.

Figure 2: Non-Self Governing Territories

| Territory | Included in the List | Administration | Surface area (km²) | Population¹ |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ÁFRICA | | | | |
| Western Saharal | Since 1963 | **2 | 266,000 | 586,000 |
| ATLANTIC AND THE CARIBBEAN | | | | |
| Anguila | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 96 | 15,700 |
| Bermuda | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 53.35 | 65,187 |
| Cayman Islands | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 264 | 58,238 |
| Falkland Islands ³ | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 12,173 | 2,500 |
| Turks and Caicos Islands | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 948.2 | 36,689 |
| Islas Vírgenes Británicas | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 153 | 28,200 |

| Territory | Included in the List | Administration | Surface area (km²) | Population¹ |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| US Virgin Islands | Since 1946 | United States of America | 352 | 105,080 |
| Montserrat | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 103 | 5,000 |
| Sant_Helena | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 310 | 5,765 |
| EUROPE | | | | |
| Gibraltar | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 5.8 | 33,140 |
| PACIFIC ISLANDS | | | | |
| Guam | Since 1946 | United States of America | 540 | 159,358 |
| New Caledonia | 1946-1947 y Since 1986 | France | 18,575 | 268,767 |
| Pitcairn | Since 1946 | United Kingdom | 35.5 | 39 |
| French Polynesia | 1946-1947 y Since 2013 | France | 3,600 | 271,800 |
| American Samoa | Since 1946 | United States of America | 200 | 55,170 |
| Tokelau | Since 1946 | New Zealand | 12.2 | 1,411 |

Source: UN (2017).

3 THE SAHARAWI PEOPLE, BELOW THE ABISMAL LINE

In my opinion, the case of the Western Sahara constitutes a situation in which people's rights are subordinated to economic and political interests of an order based on *realpolitik*, instead of one based on principles. This is possible because of the endurance of

1 Based on the estimates and census cited in the United Nations Secretariat working documents, published in 2016, UNdata (<http://data.un.org>). UNdata is a database that is updated by the Statistics Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

2 On the 26 of February 1976, Spain informed the Secretary-General that, from that date onwards, the country ceased its presence in the Territory of the Sahara stating: "Spain was thereafter exempt from all international responsibility in relation to the administration of the Territory, in view of the cessation of its participation in the temporary administration established over the territory". In 1990, the General Assembly reaffirmed that the question of Western Sahara was a problem of decolonization that had to be resolved by the people of Western Sahara.

3 There is a dispute between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland regarding sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (see ST/CS/SER.A/42)

what Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes as “abysmal thought”, that which allows for the differentiation between the rights and obligations of peoples and populations, between those who stand above and those who stand below the abysmal line:

Abysmal thought is a system of visible and invisible distinctions, where the latter constitutes the foundation for the former. Invisible distinctions are established through lines that divide social reality into two universes: the “this side of this line” of the universe and the “other side of the line” of the universe. The division is such that “the other side of the line” disappears as part of reality, becomes inexistent. In fact, it is produced as non-existent. (SANTOS, 2014, p.21).

The Sahrawi people have been historically situated below the abysmal line. Towards the end of the 19th century, they were considered a Bedouin, nomadic population, living in a disorderly or chaotic way, in ways that served to justify the European metropolises’ “civilization mission”. During the colonial period, Saharawi society was treated as a minor population in need for guardianship (11:00:05). Even though Franco’s regime exercised a “soft” colonialism and recognized the cultural characteristics of Western Sahara’s inhabitants, in particular moments, the regime was enforced through outright violence, as was the case with the demise of the independence leader Sidi Mohamed Basiri (in 1970) and after the National Movement of Saharawi Liberation he led tried to negotiate a moderate transition of the territory’s independence.

Finally, after 1975, the Saharawis became abandoned by the Spanish state. The law for decolonisation in 1976 stated that the Western Sahara, was not Spain and that Saharawis were not Spanish. To Saharawi women and men, the Law for Decolonization deprived them of their status as Spaniards. A population that was originally from Spain, born Spanish (bearers of a Spanish national identity documents), was stripped away of nationality and other categories of identification. They became violated and excluded.

4 I HEAR A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS, BUT DO I LISTEN WHAT IT SAYS?

The concept of abysmal thinking allows us to understand why the conflict in the Western Sahara is maintained over time and why the Saharawis constitute an invisible people, a people that is negatively visibilized; A people without a voice, in terms of post-colonial theories. When Spivak pointed out the subalterns who can not speak, who have no voice, she was referring to the fact, that no matter how much they speak, they are not heard. One of the questions we must ask in relation to the Saharawi conflict is whether or not we are listening to the voice of this people, whether or not we know how to hear their demands. This is a question that I raise in relation to my work in the Sahara. It was not until 2003, when I had the opportunity to travel for the first time to the Saharawi camps, that I became aware of the conflict in the Western Sahara. It was through a collaborative project with the Saharawi Youth Union (UJSARIO) that I was able to visit the camps for the first time.

I want to share an anecdote that exemplifies the kind of work we could carry out in the social sciences when we depart from a firm recognition of a people and of their rights. On the very first night of my first trip to the camps in 2003, one that I spent at “the Protocolo”, the residence where foreign aid workers reside in the camps, a group of us sat talking in the dark about the difficulties of international cooperation work. There was a group of ophthalmologists who complained that they could not plan their work because they lacked the statistics that told them how many Sahrawis suffered from eye health-related problems. During the course of that conversation, a Saharawi intervened, voicing: that we were there as collaborators. Our job, he said, was to support Sahrawis in the things that they needed. If we did not agree with such a principle, we were always able to opt out of the job. This conversation led me to reflect upon our priorities, as anthropologists, and people interests’ in the places where we work. 75% of conversations while doing fieldwork in the camps are dedicated to Saharawi interlocutor’s demands for self-determination, seeking the cooperation of those who come from outside in providing visibility to their cause. Only at the end of such conversations do these turn to the subject of the researcher’s investigations.

5 AN ANTHROPOLOGY BY DEMAND; COLABORATIVE RESEARCH

This situation is uncomfortable to us because it goes against our usual way of working. Usually, it is we, as researchers, who set the objectives for our enquiry and these tend to be defined prior to commencing our fieldwork. The experience of doing research in the Saharawi refugee camps made me think about our inability to develop an approach that would put replace our own interests (as researchers) with those of the Saharawi people (as a people in struggle). This has led our research team to develop an “anthropology by demand” approach to research (SEGATO, 2015), one that places the very interests of Saharawi society at the center of the research objectives, in order to make sure our research pursues these and not our own concerns and priorities. This entails, and I think it is very important to emphasize it, *giving up the practice of enunciating the first question*.

In research, the triggering question, the question that propels the research project in the first places is usually aligned with the interests of the researchers themselves, with their theoretical frameworks, with that which they consider in advance to be at the frontier of knowledge. A demand-driven anthropology renounces this privilege and focuses on the interests and questions of others, in this case, of the Saharawi population. In this way, with our colleagues from the University Autónoma de Madrid, we have carried out a series of projects in the camps that is always focused around Saharawi interests, specifically ones that focus on the problems of Saharawi youth in the camps and on the recovery of historical memory and oral poetry. These are investigations demanded by the Saharawis and their institutions, ones that are at the center of their interests. Our research is designed to accompany these processes; it suggests the use of our (anthropological) toolbox to respond to questions that have not been formulated by us, but rather from the interests of the Sahrawi people in their struggle for self-determination, and one that we carry out through a series of policies and life practices.

Our work in the refugee camps and with the Saharawi people is collaborative in the sense given by the Mexican anthropologist

Xotchil Leyva (“working” together) and it builds upon Rita Laura Segato’s understanding of a litigating anthropology demanded by institutions. This perspective has led us to maintain a series of relationships based on trust and to work at the pace of a long-term ethnography (BENSA, 2008). It is an ethnography that allows us to modify our research interests, aligning them explicitly with the interests of our research subjects, the Saharawi people. Our work in the context of the Saharawi camps, in the context of the Saharawi people living in them, and by this I mean their “jaimas” (households), I mean the life spaces where they undergo their every day practices, the topic of self-determination fades away. It is then that we begin to participate in the conversations that take place among the Saharawis in their jaimas in ways that allows us to appreciate the issues that are of interest to them.

Therefore, collaborative research is:

[...] that research that seeks to move towards the decolonization of the social sciences, one that departs from a situated knowledge and that allows for academics, political leaders, organizations and indigenous movements to work together on a shared agenda that is based on the principles of mutual respect, trust, and that pursues horizontal modes of dialogue and the re-valuation of indigenous forms of knowledge. An agenda where each party preserves its intellectual autonomy, where the tensions produced by collaboration are recognized and become a space for reflection that contributes to creating new relationships and a more complex and useful form of knowledge for the parties involved and for society in general (LEYVA, 2008, p. 198).

The Brazilian anthropologist Rita Laura Segato (2015) proposes to practice an *anthropology by demand*: reversing the classic epistemological and methodological approach. Allowing our “object of study” to interpellate us, telling us what we are for them and what they expect from us, demanding us to use our theoretical and methodological tools *to answer their questions*.

6 LEARNING TO LISTEN: THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

This type of work requires changing our listening skills. Like Carlos Lenkersdorf, it is useful for us to differentiate between “listening” and “hearing”. We listen in the camps through the language of others, we listen to the language spoken by the Sahrawis, but we listen through our own research interests and through our own theoretical frameworks. On the other hand, when we hear, we inscribed ourselves in the logic and in the language of the other, of the Saharawi people.

The difference between hearing and listening has consequences for translation. I have not had the opportunity to learn Hassaniya (the Saharawi language). I have always depended on the translation of my Saharawi companions. This has caused some limitations. Not being able to understand some of the things that Sahrawis want to communicate to you. For instance, when one of the poets who participated in our project, our friend the poet Badi, often expresses his grief to us because we cannot understand everything he wants to put across because we don't understand Hassaniya. Nevertheless, this has the advantage of forcing us to renounce the privilege of the last word. Many anthropologists who know the language of the cultures in which they work, listen to but they do not hear the central questions posed to them by others. We have renounced the possibility of speaking Hassaniya, depending on Saharawi translators to understand local life. In this way, we have never been able to exercise the privilege of the last word. In our case, the last word has always been said by a Saharawi person.

After living a long time with the Tojolabales, a Mayan people living in Chiapas, southern Mexico, in the book “learning to hear”, Carlos Lenkersdorf (2008) shares his conclusions about what it means to hear the Tojolabales people.

Among the Tojolabales, their system of communication makes no distinction between subject and object, rather subjects and objects are equally situated vis-à-vis one another. In Tojolabal, the expression “I tell you” demands the contemporaneousness of two interlocutors, interpellated as: “I say, you listen”. Without a listener, there is no possible communication. As we listen, we approach the other and we partner with him or her. In this way, the self merges

into the “we”. Through the act of listening, the other ceases to be a threatening stranger. Listening brings us closer to one another, it allows us to overcome prejudice, revealing the other as “fellow”.

Saharawis preserve manners, they are ceremonious. To be ceremonious is to be courteous to the other and respectful of one’s interlocutor, regardless of context. The Saharawis listen carefully and do not interrupt. This is something that is taught to children: interrupting the other – especially elders – when speaking is considered disrespectful. Respect here means listening attentively to the opinions of others, not engaging in the belief that one’s opinion need to prevail. Among the Saharawis conversation is not in danger of becoming a ruckus of voices. There exists an unwritten rule to avoid invading the words of others with one’s own.

Among the Saharawis, as among the Maya-tojolabal, the “we” leaves room for the self, as the latter is integrated into the former out of commitment. The “us” constitutes a single body in which everyone is respected and listened to, and in which everyone has a role to play in decision-making processes.

7 HOSPITALITY AS AN ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL CATEGORY

The work we have carried out in the Saharawi camps has been made possible out of a privileged relationship that we have established with Saharawis through time. This privilege is not one that emerged directly out of meetings organised around our research, but out of those situations that this research has provided: the possibility of becoming inserted into the life of Saharawi people, their practices, their problems, their interests. This is something that has to do with the acceptance of the relationships that are derived out of their hospitality: to accept the condition of being guests in their homes. The hospitality of the Saharawi people, we have realized, provides something that is of central importance to the question of accessing knowledge and to an understanding of the relational nature of knowing.

This is a topic that has to do with an ontology or onto-epistemology that is different from our own. As Enrique Dussel (2008)

pointed out in reflecting on his encounter with the desert (in Damascus), when a man dressed in a camel was coming and riding a camel: hospitality obliges you to invite someone into your home, not knowing if the person is friend or an enemy in advance. This entails a relationship between people, a “face-to-face” relationship, which is an ontological category that is different to the one we culturally establish in the West between individuals and nature. In the Sahara, there is a previous relationship between those two people who, without knowing one and another, are invited to share tea and to establish a relationship that was already determined by a previous relationship. What makes someone a friend or an enemy is belonging to a family network or tribe, in a broader social setting. This type of relationship, one that is established through hospitality, is ontologically different from ours and it produces a different epistemology, a different way of accessing knowledge. Among Sahrawis, this way of knowing is established around the tea ceremony in a horizontal framework among those who participate, where knowledge is shared. Of course there are social rules related to differences in Saharawi social structures, whereby the wisdom of elders is recognized and respected; but in which young people are also allowed to intervene. Facilitating sharing between generations, there is a saying among Sahrawis that “in terms of knowledge there is no difference between us”. Decisions are made horizontally, something which is represented through the semicircling movements of tea cups.

Inside the *jaima*, and around a tea table, are the spaces in which we have been able to do our research, sharing time with the Sahrawis, working together. It is from such encounters that the questions that have guided our research have emerged, such as the project to recover the historical memory of the Saharawi people through the recovery of their oral poetry. That would not have been possible departing from our previous perspective; it was a project that emerged out of our conversations with Saharawi male and female poets. This provided us with a different way of raising our questions and developing our research.

7.1 Beyond the “anthropological investigation”: living as guests, drinking tea

The life of the Saharawis has historically been nomadic; nomadism affords a historical space of experience, a way of being in the world. Nomadism means moving amongst men and women, living as a guest amongst them. The centrality of hospitality derives out of a nomadic way of life; Today you are a guest, tomorrow you are a host. The obligation of the host is to give without having been asked to give. The guest's obligation is to leave the place better than he or she found it. To the Saharawis tea is a symbol of hospitality and cordiality.

Preparing Saharawi tea is a ritual, and it takes time; Time to meet with family, friends and guests. It provides the opportunity to talk and enjoy company of others. Conversation allows for questions to be asked and answers to be delivered in a ritualized setting: the information that is provided (“lajbar”) is listened to with respect and reflected collectively enabling decision making (individual and collective). Thus access to knowledge in Saharan society corresponds to a relational epistemology characterized by its deep relation to context and a way of being in the world (its particular ontology, its worldview and knowledge), that valorises relations, the use of Hasaniya as a place of enunciation, the collective nature of all knowledge and the relational and ethical dimensions of questions and answers. Ideas and concepts are important here but the relationships that articulate them are even more so. Shawn Wilson claims that by being relational, the practice of research, the practice of finding answers to meaningful questions, should be understood as a ceremony. The tea ceremony enables the Saharawis to co-produce knowledge in a relational way. This is the cultural space of relationships where, as people (and researchers) we are invited to contribute to finding answers to one's significant questions.

8 RESPONSIBILITY: ETHICS AND THE POLICY OF COLLABORATION

Here I want to offer some final considerations regarding our role as researchers, the work we have done and the questions this raises in relation to anthropological practice. First, in practicing a

critical anthropology within the very history of the development of anthropology as a discipline entails establishing relationships of horizontality with those “others” who have been the discipline’s traditional objects of research. It requires, establishing relationships of recognition with such “others”, relationships based on the knowledge of learning how to hear (instead of just listen) that we spoke about earlier.

On the other hand, our Spanish nationality and European identity is aligned with a historical relationship with the outside world, and for the purposes of our own research, with the Saharawi world (27: 39: 06), that has resulted in marginalising Saharawis, abandoning them and disregarding their rights. My work as a researcher in Western Sahara has always coexisted with a kind of Stockholm Syndrome, with the recognition that one is part of the problem rather than the solution. This has led me to denounce the unjust situation in which the Saharawi people live and to attempt, through the practice of anthropology, to participate in all areas in which a litigating anthropology, an anthropology of denunciation that might contribute to expose the violence suffered by a people.

On the other hand, there are also a series of internal issues (regarding the dynamics of Saharawi society) that should also be considered. Knowing that the Saharawi society is a segmental society where, among other things, there is gender inequality, we cannot turn the fact that this people are victims of colonialism into an alibi, blinding us to a series of problematic and unjust issues that exist within the same society. Anthropologists know from ethnographic records the problems of gender relations is one that is present in all societies and this should lead us to position ourselves critically in relation to these issues.

Moreover, we are not alone in this positioning. There is a plurality of positions within the Saharawi society and our role in this is to facilitate dialogue with the most progressive positions within that society. Thanks to having established long-term relationships, thanks to the fact that our work is socially recognized among the Sahrawis, we can participate in these talks and give our own opinion, including providing professional opinions on such matters, in ways that might positively affect the society. In this way, in

contributing to expand the democratization of the Saharawi society, our work also has an internal dimension, one that may support the Sahrawis' own processes of social transformation.

Our project is an anthropological exercise in "co-laboring" with the Saharawi people to recover their memory and their poetry. As their guests we have acceded to the (violated) humanity of the Sahrawis, sharing our own humanity and this has produced very special and unique moments. The trust that has been established between us is the result of multiple encounters and meetings through the years, the negotiation of intimate, intersubjective and even political spaces between us. Our common trust has developed out of a long-term life commitment, motivated only in second terms by research outcomes.

For Segato (2015), the anthropological task is not to direct our gaze towards others in order to know them, but in search for the possibility of getting to know ourselves through the gaze of others, allowing their gaze to reach us and even invite judgement about us. In this sense, anthropology is a field of knowledge that needs to foster an ethics of collaboration, an ethics of encounter between "us" and "them", with research being an excuse to produce a shared work ethic that is based on the priorities of their own agenda. It is through this encounter that we forged a common "moral community" founded in accordance with the principle of peoples' self-determination.

Our participation in this project has been both touching and liberating and it has also fulfilled the objective of unloading our conscience. This is not a question of psychological relief, but a discharge that engines ethical and political actions that go beyond the question of the Western Sahara as an ethnographic place or research object, yet that is made possible precisely through this ethnographic relationship. It is a discharge of conscience that, when it comes to Western Sahara, also points critically beyond it and towards the very heart of the construction of Spain as a nation and of Europe itself as the locus of the civilization of human rights (GIMENO MARTÍN, 2017).