THE SILENCING OF UNIFYING TRIBES:

THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TRIBE AND ITS 'EXTRAORDINARY LEAP' TO NASCENT NATION-STATE FORMATION IN WESTERN SAHARA

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Abstract

Scholarship has glossed over an 'extraordinary leap' of Sahrāwī tribes to citizens of an exiled nation state in response to the threat to territorial sovereignty from failed decolonisation and invasion. The emergence of Sahrāwī nationalism has become entangled in problematic discourses of tribalism and been posited as an *a priori* result of detribalisation. This article examines the Spanish colonial construction of the enigma of tribe, showing how it has become misread and ossified in post-colonial overlays of scholarship. The Sahrāwī political vocabulary that has been obscured in the colonial records offers a more nuanced analysis of the silencing of unifying tribes and charts the move from a customary form of centralised political organisation to the contemporary nation state.

Key words: tribe, refugees, nationalism, North Africa

> The point is not that nomadism experiences no change. Rather, it is that nomads themselves experiment constantly and in a pragmatic manner with parameters of change, but so that the process remains under their control. (Bamyeh 2006: 33)

> If we fail to distinguish the different types of nomad arising in different historical conjunctures, we shall be reduced to representing an abstract social structure as the cause of totally different developments and [will be] faced with insurmountable contradictions. (Laroui 1977: 156)

Introduction

The notion of 'tribe' was once a *locus classicus* in anthropology, yet its sociological and anthropological definitions were varied and conflicting. Finding that societies classified as 'tribal' had in fact also been very diverse in their organisation, anthropologists contended that the term was so ambiguous that it should be abandoned by social science (cf. Fried 1967, 1975; Colson 1967; Godelier 1977; Southall 1970). This anthropological 'end of tribe' has had little effect, as the term still persists, trapped between political identity, citizenship and ethnicity. No longer moored to colonial science, the 'imperial technology of indirect rule' (Mamdani 2011, Said 1978) has been transferred from *les indigènes* to refugees in the contexts of war and displacement, remaining rooted in contemporary development policies and practices that seek to know and manage refugees.

For example, scholarship on the Western Sahara conflict has long been fascinated by the transformation of ancient 'anarchic' tribes (Sahlins 1961) and 'ungovernable' nomads (Khazanov 1984) into refugees, and of those refugees into 'modernising and civilising' citizens constructing a nation and a state.[1] But in this historiography are two stelae, the tribe and the state, in between which is a story of a journey *from* tribe *to* state (cf. Gellner and Micaud 1973; Khoury and Kostiner 1991). The fascination in this extraordinary leap centres on how Sahrāwī tribal nomads came to develop a national consciousness, captured in the scrutinising gaze of how the Sahrāwī perform this expected transition. Still today, the Sahrāwī have to face questions about tribe, tribalism and the 'awakening of tribes' from institutions claiming to represent 'the international community': journalists, political commentators, major United Nations and development agencies, and international NGOs (the latter two as year-round visitors to the Sahrāwī refugee camps).[2] This has become part of an insecurity discourse in the development context to measure Sahrāwī 'performance' hypercritically from inside the corridors of the nascent state. The transition is explained and accepted as a simple act: *de*tribalisation. If the tribes have been detribalised, then what or who is making nation and state? 'The citizen' is the correct answer.

However, I wish to offer a more nuanced examination of detribalisation – specifically *the silencing of unifying* tribes. This article will therefore intervene in debates over Sahrāwī nationalism and state formation, and it contributes to San Martin's (2010) and Zune and Mundy's (2010: xxxiv) efforts to look at its *motivating* characteristics and to correct analytical tendencies towards 'elision and romanticisation'. It steps back into the historical record to illuminate the 'problem of tribe' as a colonial construction in order to re-frame the post-colonial context of *de*tribalisation. I draw on San Martin's (2010) exemplary study of Spanish colonial records to demonstrate how 'tribe' became constructed and ossified into overlays of scholarship, from which to capture glimpses of very different interpretations of Sahrāwī political transformation that have been lost in analytical translation of the historical record. His work shows that they are a rich repository for further critical readings of Spain's colonial constructions and the Sahrāwī voices in those records.

I also highlight Jensen's treatise on the UN-led voter identification process (1994-1999), which drives home the analytical flaw of trying to translate what Sahrāwī tribes (*qabā'il*, sg. *qabīla*)[3] are supposed to look like 'on paper' (Jensen 2005; see also Zunes and

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[1] This article draws on two years of doctoral ethnographic fieldwork among the Sahrāwī, funded by an Emslie Horniman Award (Royal Anthropological Institute), a Frederick Soddy Award (Royal Geographical Society) and an E.O. James Bequest (All Souls College, Oxford).
[2] See also Villasante Cervello (2006) on Mauritanian 'disappearing' tribes and Ould Cheikh (1994).
[3] See Wilson's (2012) excellent ethnographic analysis of tribe in the contemporary life of the camps.

Mundy 2010: 191-203). For instance, this voter identification list was based on the last 1974 Spanish colonial census,[4] which had itself come from del Barrio et al.'s 1973 *Las Tribus del Sahara*. Attempts to count the Sahrāwī as if they were a 'tribe' have continued, as with the UNHCR repatriation 'census' (1998-2000), which sought out *male* heads of households (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 128). Such constructions of tribe have the effect of under-emphasising Sahrāwī engagement with modern war, international law and state formation.

Situated in a sentient war zone in the western Sahara Desert in North Africa, six refugee camps function as the military headquarters of the Frente Polisario, the liberation movement for Sahrāwī nomads who are waging an international legal battle for self-determination.[5] Following Spain's miscarried decolonisation, Morocco's 1975 invasion of the Spanish Sahara and its resulting war with the Sahrāwī nomads, these camps have been located safely in exile on sovereign Algerian soil ever since, out of reach of Moroccan attack. This is also where nascent nation-state building (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic SADR/RASD) has been underway, 'floating' as a template above the refugee camps in preparation for self-determination and the return to the homeland. The refugee camps serve as a fighting reservoir which links out across the *bādīya* (desert heartlands) to the widely dispersed Sahrāwī diaspora beyond.

Literature on the Western Sahara is best presented as falling into three interlinked periods. Spanish colonial social scientists produced the first studies of Sahrāwī social, economic and political organisation positioned firmly within the genealogical lens of tribe, such as Caro Baroja's (1955) seminal ethnography *Estudios Saharianos*, Morales (1946) and Gaudio (1975). English historians also took seminal interest, such as Mercer (1976), Hart (1962), Norris (1962, 1986) and Cabot Briggs (1960), while French studies in its neighbouring North African colonies subsumed fragmentary references to Sahrāwī under the aggregate French term 'Maures/Moors', render them mostly indistinguishable. The second period marks failed Spanish decolonisation, the 1975 Moroccan invasion and sixteen years of war, stimulating international curiosity with the new topics of international law and geopolitical science, and enshrining 'the Western Sahara question' and 'the last colony of Africa' (cf. Trout 1969; Mercer 1976, 1979; Franck 1976; Harrell-Bond 1981; Damis 1983; Hodges 1983, 1987; Bontems 1987; Lippert 1987, Firebrace 1987). The 1991 UN-led ceasefire opened up the battlefield to foreign observers and to an explosion of mainly English- and Spanish-language literature, films and journalism, as charted in the *Historical*

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[4] *Censo 1974: Gobierno General de Sahara*. Published 1975 by Editorial Gráficas Sahariana.
[5] See Arts and Pinto Leita (2007) on the annual United Nations resolutions and the International Court of Justice 1975 ruling on Western Sahara.

Dictionary of Western Sahara (Hodges 1982, Pazzanita and Hodges 1994, Pazzanita 2006).[6] The 1991 ceasefire also marks the arrival of the development and humanitarian regime's reports and policies.

The 'problem of tribe'

San Martin's (2010) account of how the Spanish constructed their own colonial space in the Spanish Sahara (now Western Sahara) illuminates the first substantial insights into the construction of the ossified tribe (conceived of as Sahrāwī tribes*men*).[7]

Compared to other colonial encounters, the Sahrāwī tribal nomadic pastoralists experienced little colonial interference until the very late period. Spanish interest focused primarily on Atlantic fishing resources and did not penetrate the interior because it attached little economic value to the Sahrāwī heartlands. Encounters were rare and hostile, producing early exoticised and clichéd writings about 'savage' tribes. The first Spanish outpost proper was a fortified fisheries factory built by Emillio Bonelli in 1884-5, and his first records of the coastal and inland inhabitants corresponds to their later classification as tributary tribes of the coast and warrior tribes. The more multifaceted social organisation of the Sahrāwī – their internal mechanisms of power, economic logic of nomadism, the socio-political significance of *ghazw* (pl. *ghizwān*, 'raiding/war'; *rezzou/razzia* in French and English) – still remains misunderstood today.

The binary social division was noted by General Francisco Bens, who replaced Bonelli from 1904-1925. When he first arrived, he wrote of the little colony as 'a warehouse and a flag, far from Madrid…' but as a master diplomat, Bens built bridges of trust with some tribes. Studying Bens' memoirs, San Martin charts his changing personal perceptions, from prevailing narratives of uncivilised inland tribes with a lust for blood to his learning Ḥassānīya and his journeys into the interior with those tribes. He built two new outposts, Cape Juby in 1916 and La Güera in 1920, but despite his territorial advances and initial relations with most of the tribes, Madrid still did not attach any great importance to the territory.

In the 1930s, with competing French penetration into Mauritania, Algeria and Morocco, Spain began to develop a half-hearted interest in the desert. In the first instance of anti-colonial resistance, the Sahrāwī Shaykh Maʾ al-ʿAynayn had undertaken raiding attacks against the encroaching French, but Spain ceded to French pressure to define their common

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[6] Cf. Lippert 1992; Mundy 2007; San Martin 2005; Jensen 2005; Shelley 2004; Murphy and Omar 2013; Caratini 2003; Wilson 2014; Deubel 2011; Pazzanita 2006.
[7] This section draws on San Martin's (2010) substantial study of Spanish colonial records, unless otherwise cited.

boundaries and engage in a joint military effort to 'pacify the tribes'. The Spanish took Maʾ al-ʿAynayn's stronghold of Smara in 1934, and in 1938 Captain Antonio del Oro founded al-'Ayun.

This progressive move inland, with small garrisons built along the way and reluctant militarisation of the territory, was generally accepted by the Spanish Saharan tribes. They recognised that the Spanish offered some degree of stability against French colonial rule, given Spain's *laissez-faire* attitude (Bens' paternalistic 'sugar-lump policy') towards the internal affairs of the tribes. From 1926 the Spanish began recruiting native Sahrāwī soldiers to patrol the interior, this being the first Sahrāwī experience of economic opportunities in a 'new order' where the old <u>*ghazw*</u> (usually against the French) was becoming prohibited.

In this context, colonial *scientific* expeditions ventured inland, the first anthropological and sociological studies of the Spanish Sahara dating from the 1940s. The first detailed descriptions of 'tribal society' emerge, such as those by Sánchez (1932), Bullón Díaz (1945) and Caro Baroja (1955). This new exploration and its burgeoning literature established a colonial technology of knowledge of the tribal system with which to govern it, resulting in the first Spanish censuses and genealogical classifications of the nomadic tribes.

These colonial studies of the Sahrāwī constructed a new colonial space in which one can observe the beginnings of invention and distortion. The first example, San Martin, shows how colonial writers ascertained that 'there was not a true political organisation [*sic*]' but a collection of tribes 'independent from each other, as are the families from each other' and that they were 'without a fixed place…all the desert is theirs, mounting the tents at any point, without any other title of property than their constant ride through the immense plains' (citing Sánchez 1932). Furthermore, the structure of tribal leadership was 'composed of a chief [*shaykh*, pl. *shuyukh*] and an assembly of notables [*al-jamāʿa*]'.[8] Sánchez discerned that the *shuyukh* did not have any authority other than what the *jamāʿa* or tribes members gave them, and that 'in such an assembly the powerful sheik and the herdsman have the same kind of seat'. Other colonial writers similarly noted that the sheikh was a prestigious person, invested with a symbolic but limited authority by the *jamāʿa*. As late as 1955, Caro Baroja stated that the power of the 'notables' should be defined as 'diffused…its expression in assemblies celebrated sporadically'.

Although the general consensus among colonial researchers was of the supremacy of the *jamāʿa* over the more symbolic power of the *shuyukh*, the colonial administrators decided

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[8] In Arabic, *jamāʿa* can mean a gathering, a group, an assembly of either a large or a select group. I use the spelling 'Djemaa' to connote the Spanish-constructed version (also spelt 'Yemaa'), and *jamāʿa* for the customary Sahrāwī configuration.

to deal exclusively with the latter, considering the traditional *jamāʿa* and the highest inter-tribal assembly of the *ait arba'in* to be turbulent and inefficient, as well as a threat to Spanish intentions for the progressive control of territory.[9]

From the 1940s, scientific explorations began uncovering the rich mineral wealth of Spanish Sahara, and Spain became progressively reluctant to relinquish the colony at a time of other decolonisations and the first UN calls on Spain to follow suit. Its 1958 politico-juridical reorganisation of the newly made province of Spanish Sahara introduced the first attempt to institutionalise the tribes, creating symbolic posts (empty of any decision-making power) at the local government level in the form of the Cabildo Provincial and a new Spanish-styled Djemaa.

Colonial interpretations of Sahrāwī society consisted of manipulative and distorted readings of long-distance networks between widely dispersed nomads and neglected recognition of the centralised political organisation of *jamāʿa* elders and the higher *ait arba'in* assembly of representatives ('supra-tribal'). San Martin (2010) finds in this false revalorising of 'the shaykh' a distortion of customary institutions into a 'democratic façade' so as to avoid decolonisation.

Despite the continued narrative of the friendly, paternalistic, 'sugar-lump policy', the embryonic colonial society became deeply segregated, with an emerging Sahrāwī underclass to the benefit of the small settler population of merchants, civil servants and military personnel. Spanish control relied on involving the newly elevated *shuyukh* in an organised system of favours, economic incentives and corruption. The administration had re-interpreted the traditional Sahrāwī social structure to give power to chosen *shuyukh* and notables, thus distorting the customary notion of 'tribe' and elevating the role of *shaykh* to a central position within the tribe that had not previously existed.

Often glossed over as 'sedentarisation', the movement of Sahrāwī towards the Spanish settlements does not reflect on-the-ground realities. Displacements of population occurred, due variously to two major droughts that decimated livestock and the 1934 and 1957-8 Spanish-French pacifications and Sahrāwī counter-uprisings (Mercer 1976). Opportunities to trade in the Spanish settlements or to enlist in the two Spanish desert patrol forces gradually became available to a minority of the total population. Keenan (2006) describes the similar plight of the Kel Ahaggar (Tuareg) in the central-eastern Sahara as one that 'has arisen as much from an act of God as an act of state'. Although they were used to dealing with such

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[9] The oft-cited translation of 'Council of Forty' is of colonial legacy and earned mythical fame among early scholars, but its customary meaning is still present in the Sahrāwī collective memory today. See Hart (1998: 43-7) for a rare historical analysis.

episodic adversities, new colonial constraints inhibited traditional responses such as the diversification of livestock holdings, raiding, and access to pastures or migration to other regions. Likewise, in the Sahrāwī context the new trading and few wage-earning opportunities offered by the incipient Spanish administration were temporary responses to the crisis, not the full case of sedentarisation that some scholars propose.

With this backdrop, I move to the late 1960s, when significant discontent in Sahrāwī society first becomes apparent in a second anti-colonial liberation movement, but with a *nationalistic* vocabulary: that of Harakat Tahrir led by Bassiri, a predecessor of the founding members of Polisario. Here, for the first time, we find evidence of criticism of 'tribalism' in *Sahrāwī* vocabulary. This is where I mark the start of the early post-colonial generation of Western authors interested in the leap from tribe to state.

In a delaying tactic in response to the UN's persistent calls for decolonisation, in 1973 Lieutenant Colonel Alonso del Barrio was commissioned to undertake an updated study (*Las Tribus del Sahara*, del Barrio et al. 1973) of the changing Sahrāwī social structure as a pilot analysis for a planned formal census. However, explicitly referring to the Sahrāwī's deteriorating social and ecological conditions, the authors stated that the hypothesis on which they had based their study (as had the previous colonial scientists), namely kinship and descent, was collapsing very rapidly. Del Barrio warned that 'to talk about tribal civilisation is linked to underdevelopment, to secular backwardness, to levels of illiteracy…the voices of the young [Sahrāwī] resonate in an attempt to eradicate such a social meaning'. Likewise in the context that certain *shuyukh* were regarded as collaborators of the Spanish colonial authorities, 'many young people, when they were asked to which tribe and faction they belong, responded politely, but proudly, that they were residents of Aiun [al-'Ayun], with address in street x, number x'. This is a precursor to the Polisario's later, total prohibition of the word *cabila* (tribe in Spanish) in their first manifestos and constitution.

In other words, the Sahrāwī had begun symbolically to resist the colonial system of classification, denying relevance to the categories of descent and kinship, and thereby refusing to identify with 'the tribe'. Diego Aguirre's (1991) research recognises the second half of the 1960s as the time when the Sahrāwī had begun to comprehend fully how the Spanish had distorted their political institutions and modified their social structure, as does San Martin's analysis (2010) of the 1974 census. Although the education and employment data indicate that low numbers of Sahrāwī were coming into direct contact with and settling around the Spanish towns, this represented nothing more than cheap labour.

San Martin (2010) disagrees with post-colonial authors such as García (2001) and Diego Aguirre (1991), who both argue that these profound changes broke down the centrality

of *'aṣabīya* and were replaced by a new 'capitalist' and 'urban' individualism.[10] Correspondingly, I further see in their misinterpretation of the 'crisis of traditional society' a continuation of the preoccupation of the journey (or transformation) between the two stelae of tribe and state. In San Martin's view, what really changed were the foundations upon which *'aṣabīya* was organised, whereas I do not see such a structural change, but rather a change in the vocabulary of *'aṣabīya*.

While San Martin claims that the Sahrāwī 'crisis' created the conditions for the emergence of *new forms* of collective solidarity and action from a Spanish-induced 'class consciousness', I find instead that customary Sahrāwī solidarity developed a *new language* in collective solidarity *against* the Spanish perception of 'tribal consciousness'. Nevertheless, both San Martin and I share the opinion that *'aṣabīya* remains the traditional glue that has evidently successfully held Sahrāwī society together today and inspired its self-initiated project to build a nation-state. *'Aṣabīya* does not have to be conceptually inseparable from 'tribe', nor seen as incapable of adapting in the direction of a nationalist sentiment. The shared violent colonial encounter united the various tribes to confront the colonial distortions. Here is a glimpse, a captured moment of historical action, where the stele 'tribe' coalesces in alliance against an external threat to the respected customary social order and territory. Some authors have termed this 'supra-tribal' consciousness, but I do not see *'aṣabīya*, defined as collective sentiment and group identity in the face of an external threat, as being different from nationalism.

The colonial administration overlooked these shifts, remaining obstinately attached to the tribalist conception of Sahrāwī society. The 1974 census was conducted by ten research teams using Land Rovers and helicopters to cross the territory in search of 'pure' nomads and to register the nomadic *firgān* (sg. *frīg,* familial collections of tents) that were not based around any of the urban centres or military posts. The colonial researchers' gaze was still fixed on the stele of tribal affiliation as the primary classificatory factor. The final census is clearly problematic: the 73,497 Sahrāwī living within the defined Spanish Sahara comprised 60,246 'settled' and 12,428 'nomads', not including those nomads moving back and forth across borders.

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[10] In anthropology, *'aṣabīya* is understood to refer to solidarity and capacity for collective action, the social cohesive force of a group to form community. Cf. Durkheim's 'social cement' (1969); also Gellner 1975: 203-18; Tibi 1997: 139; Weir 2007: 191; Rosenthal's (2005) translation of Ibn Khaldun's *The Muqaddimah*.

Pre-figuring the Western Saharan nation-state[11]

I now turn to examine the next stage, where too much focus on *de*tribalisation muddies how a nationalist consciousness could emerge. I challenge the implied tribe–state leap to present a nuanced reading of it as the silencing of unifying tribes. I am figuratively moving from the colonial position of standing 'outside' the tents to ethnographically entering them to find women and families.

I pick this up from the 1967-70 rise of Harakat Tahrir, led by Bassiri (a member of the Reguibāt tribe) as the first *nationalist* anti-colonial liberation movement, and emerging against the 1934 and 1957-8 Franco-Spanish pacifications. These had created degrees of cross-border displacement (i.e., the reconfiguration of the tribes' traditional zones of use and/or influence), but further inscribed an image of anarchic, 'bellicose' and incessant inter-tribal warfare into the historical record.

Examining Bassiri's early discourse of liberating 'their' territory, San Martin perceptively asks *which* territory he was referring to. This is because a Polisario memorandum to the UN Decolonisation Committee in 1975 surprisingly mentions the existence of the *ait arba'in*. San Martin's and my interlocutors describe this as an assembly of representatives from different tribes that convened in times of war to prepare *ghazw* and to arbitrate between tribes, while Shelley (2004: 167) describes it as loosely confederated tribal groups represented in a periodic assembly which ensured trade relations, arbitrated disputes and organised Koranic education. If the *jamāʿa* were internal assemblies within tribes (for large tribes like the Reguibāt, within factions and sub-factions), the *ait arba'in* was a higher-level *jamāʿa* of senior members across the tribes ('supra-tribal'). In the Sahrāwī tradition, this geographical space was called *khatt al-khawf*,[12] and it is said to correlate roughly with the Mauritanian tradition.

Mundy cautions that the concept of *khatt al-khawf* is problematic as an idea of a precolonial Sahrawi homeland (as is *turāb al-bīḍān* as a term for precolonial Mauritania) because documentation from the ICJ's 1975 hearings elucidate the historical contortions that both Morocco and Mauritania went through to prove their claims to territorial sovereignty.[13] This is reminiscent Ibn Khaldun's *badāwa* and *hadāra*. There have been numerous interpretations of his intended meanings, such as the desert and the sown, the primitive and the civilised, ungovernable anarchic tribes versus governable city-dwellers (cf. Waterbury 1970: 20; Hart 2000; Baali 1998; Black 2011: 183). A contentious reference is found in the

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[11] Here I am borrowing Jacob Mundy's (2007) perceptive title 'Performing the nation, pre-figuring the state'.
[12] Translated as 'line of fear', 'line of danger'. Spelt Jat al-Jaof in Spanish.
[13] Personal communication, 25 April 2015. I add that the Sahrāwī were *not* allowed to represent themselves at the ICJ – they are always 'spoken for' by the key architects of these legal representations.

Spanish colonial historiography and in the International Court of Justice's 1975 legal representations by Spain, Morocco and Mauritania of the *bilād al-makhzān* (urban or rural power structures administered by state officials) and the *bilād es-ṣiba* (tribal/religious administration).

I concur with Mundy, and neither of us intends to deny the existence of a political geography prior to 1885; the problem is that notions such as *khatt al-khawf* today become simple substitutions for geographical constructions that are quite different and quite recent. Mundy's position is that the idea of a 'Sahrāwī people' is inseparable from the territory of the Spanish Sahara, which was only definitively elaborated in 1912 and occupied in 1934 (not long after contemporary Italy takes shape). I therefore treat *khatt al-khawf* as constituting elements that are precolonial and others that are irrevocably altered by the colonial experience. What Sahrāwī say they mean by *khatt al-khawf* is the Ḥassānīya-speaking socio-linguistic territory that is broadly delimited today as southern Morocco from the Oued Draa, south-western Algeria, Western Sahara, northern Mauritania and part of north-west Mali.

My point is that Harakat Tahrir was clearly referring to that extensive territory of western Sahara, not the delimiting area of the Spanish 1974 census. This is significant in that it suggests the first inclusively envisaged unification of *territorial consciousness* requiring the coming together of widely ranging *nomadic* tribes to aggregately affirm and regain their various zones of use and influence as 'ancient' territories.

I diverge from some authors in the interpretation of Harakat Tahrir's questioning of the representative role given to *shuyukh* by the Spanish administration, which 'articulated into a new concept of "people" that undermined the *whole tribal structure'* (San Martin 2010: 76, my emphasis). Were these new leaders challenging the entire traditional (customary) system, or its colonially *distorted* form? Scholars consistently refer to 'the total' and 'the entire' tribal system. It is difficult to tell when the only records we have are colonial texts, such as San Martin's discovery of a Spanish intelligence note in 1975 that Harakat Tahrir had broken 'with the tribal traditions and the authority of the Chiuj [Spanish for *shaykh*] as a curtain, although it was well known that it was an independence movement'. I argue that the Spanish are referring here to *their* (distorted) *shuyukh*. San Martin found another report stating that the aim of Harakat Tahrir was 'the destitution of the *current* Chiujs and the *renovation* of the Assembly [Djemaa]…since the young have difficulty in accepting the survival of a tribal organisation that leaves very few possibilities of progress for them…' (my emphases). This more clearly suggests that the strength of feeling was directed at the Spanish-created Djemaa, not the traditional form of *al-jamāʿa*.

Turning to Harakat Tahrir's own texts, a letter to the Spanish General Governor dated June 1970 adopts a conciliatory tone, praising the Spanish government for building, urbanising and working towards 'the line of civilisation in the twentieth century', but then rejecting annexation (Spain had just ceded the Spanish southern Morocco to Morocco) and asking the Spanish government to grant them the right 'to govern by ourselves. Doing it in a progressive form as the father does with the son…' San Martin reads this as trying to negotiate a progressive move from internal autonomy to total independence, but I see this process of devolution as signalling the desire to redefine the Spanish-created system of political representation. One month later, Harakat Tahrir adopts an aggressive tone, openly repudiating the Djemaa. I suggest that Bassiri is trying to negotiate a new world that *rejects* the Spanish distortion of the otherwise respected and uncorrupted customary organisation, requests Spain's compliance with the new world order (newly learnt by these young and emerging Sahrāwī leaders as being international law and decolonisation),[14] and communicates great interest in procuring the benefits, such as education and economic opportunities (the 'civilising/modernising'). This is not an outright rejection of tribe *per se*. If it was, it would entail a rejection of the most senior *al-jamāʿa* elders (respected father figures) right across Sahrāwī society, and of the *khatt al-khawf*, the very desert heartlands (*bādīya)* they were trying to secure.

As the younger brother of El Ouali, the shortly to emerge charismatic founder of Frente Polisario, the next liberation movement, told García (2001: 109):

> My father was a severe man, like the warriors of the old times…the old stories about the warriors of past times, about their achievements, about the battles in which they participated, about the actions of our relatives in the wars, were told every day in our family. The remarked poverty of our home was compensated for by the emotion the words we heard from our elders caused us. It was our food, our university.

El-Ouali's father, Mustafa Sayed, a Reguibāt Talahat and a warrior skilled in the desert *ghāzī*, was a respected elder. The poverty refers to a collapsing socio-economic system of interdependence in which, in the new Spanish order of civilisation, a warrior family were unable to maintain their economy of *ghazw*, and so lost their socio-economic and cultural ties with other specialised groups such as horticulturalists, herdsmen, merchants and blacksmiths (and vice versa).[15] But crucial in this quote is the reference to the enormous respect that a

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[14] Bassiri was one of the first young Sahrāwī men to be educated in Moroccan universities, as were the soon-to-emerge young Polisario leaders.

[15] This is another example of how colonial categories such as tributaries and slaves, hierarchies and castes, lose the complex meaning of interdependencies. Here, a renowned warrior is reduced to poverty – the same fate will have befallen the other groups that would have historically cooperated with and relied upon his group to ensure group survival and access to wider resources through combined, inter-familial specialisations.

mature son at the heart of a group of emerging young leaders attached to the received wisdom of male elders.

Polisario expanded Harakat Tahrir's ideas of liberation, social reform and nationalism, and continued its anti-'tribalism' calls. Again I find that the criticism was of the Spanish-created Djemaa, not the customary *jamāʿa*. Polisario's new emancipatory rhetoric contained the new vocabulary of that era; its founders were also young students from Moroccan universities with access to the inspirational revolutionary literature of other international liberation movements. At the start of Polisario's advocacy of social change and the eradication of tribalism was a vocabulary calling for the abolition of the word *cabila* ('tribe' in Spanish) and for the exclusion of the 'new language [of the Spanish colonisers]' that suggested difference and division. Polisario's early documents emphasised the need for equality by referring to the exploitation of 'colonial and imperial forces'. San Martin observes that Polisario's publications between 1974-5 recognised that *not all shuyukh* had collaborated with the exploitative colonial system. This is inherent in Polisario's reference to inequality as relating to the contradictory empowerment of certain notables against the marginalisation of the collective body of traditionally respected elders, exemplified by an earlier declaration to 'isolate colonialism' from the nationalist *shuyukh*.

This can be further evidenced from the nuanced historical record in many different ways, but I offer select examples. The October 1975 report of the UN visiting mission (related to the ICJ advisory process) noted that members of the Djemaa had held several meetings with the young founders of Polisario, and although there were disagreements, the consensus had in fact been for independence. Likewise, when Spain had issued its decolonising Madrid Accords in November 1975, this tripartite agreement still clung on to references to the Djemaa as 'an expression of the will of the Saharawi people', and in the same month Morocco had attempted to convene some of the Djemaa in al-ʿAyun to ratify the Accords while moving troops into Western Sahara. Not only were many of the Djemaa absent, but the second vote was taken with votes against ratification (Shelley 2004: 133). Perhaps the best illustration is the now legendary meeting at Ain Ben Tili, a few kilometres inside the Mauritanian border, which, less than two weeks after the UN mission, involved a pact of unity between the *old* respected tribal elders of the territory (*al-jamāʿa*), those discordant members of the Djemaa, and the *young* founders of Polisario.[16]

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[16] Obscured by the new vocabulary is the customary importance of the Ain Ben Tili meeting as reminiscent of the *ait arba'in* assembly. Polisario had succeeded where Harakat Tahrir had failed by remaining clandestine, moving to Zouerate in Mauritania out of reach of the Spanish (Bassiri was 'disappeared' by the Spanish after his arrest). El Ouali also travelled widely across the region, meeting young and elders to elicit support for independence, as well as seeking international support from other 'revolutionary', socialist and newly

At this Ain Ben Tili assembly, sixty-seven of the 102 members of the Djemaa had met in Guelta, then under the control of Polisario. They unanimously signed a declaration of independence and recognised Polisario as 'the only and legitimate authority of the Saharawi people'. By December, eighty-five more announced from Algiers that they were joining Polisario, and by early 1976, the majority of the 226 '*chiuj*' classified in the Spanish 1974 census had defected to Polisario. Ain Ben Tili represents a customary social transition from old leaders to their young sons that allows for the merging of two generations of warrior-statesmen to make centralised political adaptation at a critical point along their historical continuum, not a head-on ideological confrontation between *'aṣabīya* and nationalism or an extraordinary leap between the stelae of tribe and state. It is a *terminological* shift between two generations sharing the same meaning and unified sentiment.

Detribalisation: or the silencing of unifying tribes

I now move to the refugee camps in Tindouf, southwest Algeria, as the main base of support and military headquarters for Polisario. How has 'detribalisation' fared in the camps in the post-1975 period? Initially, the Sahrāwī who fled the 1975 war (women, children and men unable to fight) gathered in a series of camps in areas of the desert under control of Polisario, such as Guelta, Umm Drayga and Mahbes. With the Moroccan aerial bombardment of these early refugee camps, survivors from Umm Drayga and Guelta, the two largest camps, continued through the desert to Mahbes, where Polisario had organised initial provisional administration that would form the future Sahrāwī Republic, and the Provisional Saharawi National Council was created soon afterwards. The growing numbers of refugees concentrating in Mahbes were then moved to Tindouf. The immediate problems the refugees faced were to survive their first months with the onset of winter in a location with few wells and few of their life possessions.

The structure of the camps was inspired by the traditional spatial organisation of the *frīg* and mainly run by women, with most men at the battlefront until the 1991 ceasefire. But authors suggest that the camps also departed from tradition in some crucial ways which I argue requires a subtle re-reading. Traditional, pre-colonial *firgān* are often assumed to be a 'tribal base', with only members of the same family and 'tribal faction' travelling and living together. The new refugee camps are described instead as being ideologically structured not to replicate 'tribalism', but to weaken such traditional identities and alignments, since the nascent nationalist ideology perceived 'tribalism' as a challenge to Sahrāwī national identity.

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independent governments both regionally and overseas. Polisario's diplomatic success in these efforts culminated in its becoming a founding member of the African Union.

Further, in the camps a society without classes emerged inspired by the emancipatory programme declared by Polisario from its foundation. Diego Aguirre writes that 'one of the first concerns was to…make the old institutions and situations disappear: thus, slavery was abolished…the subordination of women, who began to occupy a prominent and directive role in the camps…in the same way, regarding public health, traditional medicine was attacked….' (1991: 346). San Martin continues this thread: 'The new hegemonic ideology, by banning tribalism and, consequently the whole social structure associated with it, favoured a new idea of Sahrāwī family' (2010: 117), citing Diego Aguirre's (1991: 346) problematization of 'the concept of a nuclear family, of the Western type'. This new reduced familial institution composed of two parents and their children became the basic unit constituting the camps.

I suggest these interpretations demonstrate subtle misconstructions, to the effect that *firgān* are not 'tribal bases' but collections of families actually comprised of different and interdependent 'hierarchies' and 'castes' (to use the colonial terminology). Tribes do not necessarily identify a specific geographical area as belonging to a specific tribe. Territory comprises interdependent zones of use and/or influence between groups of nomadic families negotiating use of pasturage, wells and trading routes through each other's preferred, specialised or indispensable zones of movement and settlement. I suggest that the early 'detribalised' configuration of the camps is instead related to the *Spanish* notion of tribe and its 'base'. Moreover, the nuclear family as a Western concept central to the notion of stability in modern society has long been challenged as historically and sociologically inadequate to describe the complexity of actual family relations.[17] If contemporary scholarship wishes to continue using this interpretation about 'eradicating tribalism', then it must state which tribalism and from whose perspective[18]

Studies of Sahrāwī social transformation in the camps also cite changes in the naming of families. The fact that the camps were run by women (with men at the battlefront) explains why these new nuclear families are referred to by the name of the mother instead of the father. These new family units, associated with a *khāyma* that is also a fixed address, break symbolically with the patrilineage of tribal society. Arranged marriages within the same extended family (which in the past strengthened the wealth of the group) have almost disappeared. There is a common consensus, therefore, that the camps symbolise a clear rupture with the nomadic and tribal tradition.

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[17] An 'ideal type', not necessarily a practical one. Cf. Widmer and Jallinoja (2008).
[18] Wiley (1982).

Again the subtle misinterpretations here suggest a constant need to prove detribalisation in order to validate 'national civilisation'. There is no evidence that pre-colonial Sahrāwī society was monolithically patrilineal. The female naming of tents is not new in the pastoral movement of women's tents and its highly preferential matrilocal residential patterns, where men were often absent in their searches for subsistence. Moreover, the refugee tents can be identified by their male heads depending upon the context – both historically and in the present, there are bilineal and bifocal factors in operation in different ways and times. With the introduction of identity cards, children are given their father's first name as the new family surname. This is a Western patriarchal naming convention which unquestionably identifies patrilineage, but this is ignored in its attribution as an outcome of 'detribalisation'.

There is a fine line of interpretation here – these identity cards have to conform to international criteria, but what is on paper does not necessarily denote personal affinities with place and people. In relation to arranged marriages, the collapse of traditional movement through the *bādīya* resulting in high densities of neighbouring families (in the camps, the Occupied Territory, and urban cities of northern Mauritania) might in fact enable greater 'multiple choices' (Ardener 2007) in marriage options than what is practicably possible in arranging marriages across a widely dispersed society. Historical alliances between tribes facilitated the same range of options. In my view the camps do not, therefore, suggest any rupture with tradition (I hesitate to use the word 'tribal' tradition because, as this chapter has argued, there is an epistemological problem with tribe).

I agree with San Martin that the camps have been a blank slate on which to write a new historical narrative – a 'new society' – based on the desire for a new political form of organisation, the independent nation state. In this Sahrāwī project of reconstruction following colonial violence, the camps provide a temporal and spatial fix to a colonial- and war-fractured society to be refashioned by the contemporary needs of a nation and a state. As a place of transformation, the camps have employed new tools and vocabularies. One of Firebrace's (1987) points identifies the Sahrāwī emphasis on achieving political *unity*, since the Spanish-created distortions of *separate* identities had collapsed the former *collective* identities. As the ossified becomes etched in generational overlays of scholarship, sentences such as 'Polisario enforced, from the early days of exile, the creation of an ordered society' (San Martin 2010: 120) reiterate colonial notions that they were disordered previously.

Subsumed and sometimes written out of the historical record are insights that offer a rethinking of, for example, Gellner's (1969) acephalous model, the absence of central

political organisation, and the tribe as being in opposition to state,[19] as in the following observation about Polisario by García:

> …attempting a new mode [of society] that replicated politically…the classic lines of the revolutionary left: *primacy of collectivism* over individualism, and *democratic centralism*, *Markasía Demokratía*.[20] A central element of the new order was its emphasis on *equality*, although in fact *it came naturally*. (2010, my emphases)[21]

San Martin (2010: 121) cites a Polisario official, Ismail Sayed (2001: 54), that Sahrāwī society is still fundamentally conservative. With regard to Polisario's 'eradication of tribalism', García says:

> In everyday life it was necessary to create a *new language* and to develop a new and *artificial behaviour*. It was prohibited to mention the name of the father because that would inform about the tribal origin. (2001: 240 my emphases; also cited in San Martin 2010: 121-2)

Similarly, in Zunes' interview with elderly *qadi* (judge) Mohammed Abdel Khadeh in Dakhla camp on June 1987:

> What Polisario is doing is not really new. Their programs derive from our *historical traditions*. …but we also know that these are *new and different times*. Thus, we have *new terminology* and new issues, but it remains faithful. Conflicts between old and young in other countries are primarily due to differing ideologies. We don't have those sorts of conflicts: there may be different roles between the old and young, but we have the same objectives. (Zunes and Mundy 2010: 134, my emphases)

The 1990s UN-led voter identification process was a period often referred to by commentators as a 'tribal revival' or the 'reawakening of tribe', whereby Polisario and the Sahrāwī people had to '*re*'-identify their tribal affiliations for the UN to match eligible voters to the 1974 Spanish census. Ironically, the decolonising process required *shuyukh* to be used again to verify the claimed tribal affiliations. Jensen (2005: 76-77) also encountered 'the shaykh problem':

> Isolated cases remained where there was no surviving shaikh, son or even [suitable] candidate. My compromise was to have three names put forward of respected members of the subfraction. […] The compromise on substitute shaikhs worked most of the time, but there was a quibble about one provision. The Moroccans wanted a flexible interpretation of 'eldest son'...; Polisario stayed restrictive.[22] [sic]

The 'problem of tribe' is that it is conceptually analogous to standing high on a plateau and squinting into the horizon to try to make out what it is doing. Sahrāwī detribalisation comprises nuanced actions: the *silencing* of a *unifying* of tribes. Detribalisation is what has

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[19]See also Claudot-Hawad (2002) on segmentary theory's perceived categories of tribes.

[20] Ḥassānīya for democratic centralism, which according to San Martin (2010: 120) was one of the popular Polisario slogans until the 1980s.

[21] This 'emphasis on equality' is mentioned by Khuri (1990) as 'first among equals' in the flat, non-hierarchical Arab world.

[22] The latter sentence relates to the Moroccan authorities trying to stretch rules of succession, with Polisario remaining prescriptive to tradition.

had to be presented to the hypercritical external gaze in the foreign-public infrastructure of the refugee camps. The significance of the unification of tribes is the recognition of customary mechanisms of *alliance*-making *between* tribes. Its 'silencing' is a reaction to violent colonial and neo-colonial pressures to crush identity out of the rigid western misconception of tribe (cf. Asad 1973; Kuper 2005). The fact that tribes have unified – demonstrating centralised decision-making between elder and junior warrior-statesmen, employing traditional and modern terminology – does not appease the omnipresent scrutiny. It then has to be silenced in order not to appear 'tribal', but conforming to a western conception of being 'modernised' and 'civilised' citizens. The absurdity of the 'problem of tribe' is that the Sahrāwī do not themselves customarily refer personhood or group to *qabīla* on a daily basis – family, brother, cousin, mother, aunt, friend or neighbour are the everyday terms of orientation.

Since resistance first began to Spanish colonisation, the Sahrāwī have had to re-envisage their ancient territories as a new concept of territory (the modern nation state) and accept that their variously shared geographies have been diminished to that of a 'Western Sahara'. If tribe can be fundamentally reconsidered as having its own socio-juridical refinements and the colonial creation of 'incessantly warring tribes' be seen as entirely erroneous, then Sahrāwī nationalism does not represent such a great leap. Under colonial cartography and in the moving battle lines, some tribes stood to lose their historic zones of tribal nomadic pastoral habitation (zones of influence *and* identity), while others did not. Despite this, unification has successfully worked in a new age of state formation and becomes a contemporary glimpse of Bamyeh's (2006) historical study of nomads in pre-Islamic Arabia engaged in strategic tribe–state symbiosis.

The 1975 Spanish census, intended to *fend off* international law, had to seek out the tent and *frīg* in order to identify the ossified yet imagined tribe. The earlier 1954 Spanish census had also resorted to counting tents, finding only 6,300 tents in the territory (Mercer 1976: 127). But tribe (at least in the Sahrāwī context) is not visible by its number of tents, nor in the numbers of tribes*men* assembling for war; it is an intangible and mutable genealogical reckoning which is made *inside* these tents and scattered so widely that only minute sections of a total genealogical reckoning could be glimpsed by the hopeful social scientist. To speak of tribe is to do so without ever having the possibility of actually seeing it in its total configuration, other than on paper in ascending genealogical charts. In practice and practicability, when a 'tribe' amasses on a battlefield, its assembly and kin reckoning will for the scientist be untidily heterogeneous and *between* several 'total' genealogies. A more enlightening rendering of tribe might be the relationships between tents (families, the base

units of tribe) and how tents move towards each other (coalesce, not just fraction – ally, not fight). The ossified tribe, as an anarchic model antagonistic to and in opposition to the state, can never provide an adequate explanation of how ecologically dispersed (and mutable) kin can successfully assemble to symbiotically employ a Western default model of a modern sedentary state.

Conclusion

Why is it so hard to conceive of nomads making a nation, of 'tribes' making a state? Can a nation state only be made using Western architecture? Considerable scholarship has long held a fascination with the post-colonial transformation of such social groups. Despite progression in intellectual thought on the Western default model of state formation, it is still upheld as the pre-eminent ideal of human organisation. 'Tribalism' continues to be used as a derogatory term, and this was very much recognised by the Sahrāwī in their explicit attempts to disconnect their political adjustment from it as a colonially constructed legacy.

The Sahrāwī as 'tribal nomadic pastoralists' have initiated their own ideological re-assembly of national consciousness to build their own nation state, without an inherited colonial infrastructure, and in *balanced* opposition (not 'segmentary' opposition; cf. Sahlins 1961) to detrimental colonial misrepresentations. Unlike decolonising peers, Sahrāwī kings and presidents were not pre-selected by the outgoing coloniser.

Instead the colonially created Djemaa swiftly relinquished their positions to the customary *jamāʿa* elders, who handed the baton to the young founders of Polisario as their sons and grandsons seeking to re-balance customary society with new, university-educated modern ideas. They crafted (and continue to re-adjust) their own constitution from a hybrid selection of what they perceive as the best parts of different socio-political models. Their interest in variations of socialism, democracy and capitalism is evident in the constitutional revisions they have introduced since 1976, which illuminate how they re-frame conceptions of a society for the return to the homeland. The *jamāʿa* as elders acted as an important generational counterweight to a chaotic and failed decolonisation, and in fact fragments of the historical record also hint at the role of women in such eldership. Nevertheless, the Sahrāwī have written *al-jamāʿa* out of a contemporary history that they can now write themselves, an act that has sought to distance Sahrāwī society from our distorted colonial notions of it.

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