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*Imagined Territories and Histories in Conflict
During the Struggles for Western Sahara (1956-1976)*

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ABSTRACT:

Political conflicts in the Western fringe of the Saharan desert since the second half of the 1950s have involved actors using competing territorial imaginaries, which disagree on the question of sovereignty and who should hold it. As soon as newly independent Morocco claimed the then Spanish Sahara as part of a "Greater Morocco", other nationalist projects such as the "Ensemble Mauritanien", the "Spanish nation" and the "Saharawi people", incorporated the colony into their own imagined territories in incompatible ways. All of these geographical visions were justified by different interpretations of the history of the Atlantic Sahara. This article shows the role played by alternative conceptions of this space, and the histories that supported them, during the end of Spanish colonial rule and the beginning of Moroccan control. It also shows how new ideas of state sovereignty and political legitimacy within the regional and international context conditioned the competing territorial conceptions and discouraged any attempt to develop a non-nationalist imagination.

KEYWORDS:

Western Sahara, geographical imagination, nationalism, conflict, decolonization.

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict between the Moroccan government and the POLISARIO Front over the Atlantic fringe of the Sahara Desert has its roots in the end of Spanish colonial rule in the area, which had lasted from 1884 until the mid 1970s. During the armed conflict that broke out in 1975, Morocco built two thousand kilometres of sand walls that crossed the territory from northeast to southwest, separating the most "useful" regions in the west from those controlled by the POLISARIO from its base in the refugee camps in Algeria. Since the armistice of 1991, supervised by the United Nations (UN), the position of the actors has hardly changed, and people on both sides continue to suffer severe restrictions on their citizenship rights.

Many studies have analysed the origin of the conflict from different, and even rival, perspectives. Some of them define the initial situation as a "failed" or "unfinished" decolonization process, as the former Spanish colony did not become a sovereign state as most European colonies in Africa did.¹ Others consider the integration of Western Sahara into the Kingdom of Morocco as a partial reconstruction of an old African polity dismembered by the European partition.² Without denying the merits of either perspective, our contribution will regard the situation as the result of competing nationalist projects, which appeared towards the end of the 1950s.

As Fred Cooper has shown for other European colonies in Africa, there never was rarely only one single anticolonial movement that led inevitably to the independence of each African state.³ Social mobilizations were plural and diverse in their composition, aims and leadership. They sometimes converged around a nationalist discourse and a single political party, but many other times they competed. In addition, they were all developed in a changing political context, in which colonial powers were reforming their rule in a more intrusive and inclusive ways, intervening more intensely in the lives of their African subjects.

Most anticolonial demands finally concurred on one main aspiration: that peculiar organization, the nation-state, "based on the idea of a single people in a single territory constituting itself as a unique political community",⁴ which recognizes no

¹ J.I. Alguero Cuervo, *El Sáhara y España: Claves de una Descolonización Pendiente*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2006; S. Zunes and J. Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, Syracuse, NY, 2010. P. San Martín, *Western Sahara: the Refugee Nation*, Cardiff, 2010; C. Ruiz Miguel, *El Sahara Occidental y España, historia, política y derecho: análisis crítico de la política exterior española*, Madrid, 1995.

² M. Cherkaoui, *Morocco and the Sahara: Social Bonds and Geopolitical Issues*, Oxford, 2010; A. Boukhars and J. Roussellier, *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms, and Geopolitics*, Lanham MD, 2014; B. López García, "Limitaciones de la política marroquí en relación con el Sahara Occidental", *Transmodernity Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 5(3) (2015) 149-165.

³ F. Cooper, *Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present*, Cambridge, 2002.

⁴ J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History*, Princeton and Oxford, 2010, 8.

authority above its own.⁵ But the post-colonial nation had to be imagined before being fought for.⁶ And the national territory and its borders, far from being a given, also had to be defined by those who imagined their nations.⁷

The specific aspect upon which our study focuses is the capacity of borders to demarcate imaginary territories that support national political projects.⁸ David Knight has already called attention to the need to consider the geographical perspective in shaping national identities.⁹ Maps have the power to realize the spatial imagination of national projects and help us to understand how these projects relate to and confront the same territory. Thus Thongchai Winichakul's on Siam (Thailand), has highlighted the importance of maps as symbolic representations of spatial realities in legitimizing power, domination and subordination, and their contribution to the nationalist imagination as a powerful icon.¹⁰ Acknowledging Winichakul's work, Benedict Anderson, the pioneer theorist of the social construction of nations, has highlighted the role of maps and geographical imaginations.¹¹ His focus, like ours, is not on the physical boundaries, but on those imagined lines that, with more or less correspondence to –or divergence from– the spatial practice of power, are even capable of mobilizing people to the point of killing or dying for their nations.

Due to the imaginative character and the totalizing aspiration of the nation-state, there is always the possibility of alternative and incompatible nationalist claims, based on different conceptualizations of the people and the territory. As Mark Prucell notes in his study of Arabic and Coptic communities in Egypt, when two or more communities envision their national territories in the same place, an "inevitable" struggle for the same occurs.¹² This is what happened in late-colonial Spanish Sahara, as a strong disagreement regarding the nation that should compose the new postcolonial state emerged, and imagined borders became a fundamental element under discussion.

In order to analyse precisely the role of geographical imaginations in the political struggles around this territory during the years when Spanish colonialism drew to

⁵ J. Bartelson, *Sovereignty as a Symbolic Form*, Oxon and New York, 2014, 41.

⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991.

⁷ J. Anderson, "Nationalist ideology and territory", in: R. Johnston, D. Knight and E. Kofman (Eds), *Nationalism, self-determination, and political geography*, New York, 1988, 18.

⁸ Different dimensions of African borders have been explored by members of the African Borderlands Research Network (www.aborne.org last accessed 19 July 2016) or the FrontAfrique project (www.frontafrique.org last accessed 23 July 2016).

⁹ D. Knight, "Identity and territory: geographical perspectives on nationalism and regionalism", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 72 (1982) 514-531.

¹⁰ T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, chapter 10.

¹² M. Purcell, "A place for the copts: imagined territory y and spatial conflict in Egypt", *Ecumene*, 5 (4) (1998) 432-450, 443

a close we will discuss alternative maps that were elaborated or used to corroborate different political claims. These maps will help us to understand the position and aims of the political actors in the successive conflicts over the Sahara, and how they have made use of divergent interpretations of the territory and its history, in order to provide a basis for their aspirations.

We begin our account in 1956, when the government of the recently independent state of Morocco claimed the then Spanish Western Africa, as part of Greater Morocco, inheritor of the old Sherifian Empire. Countering this, the Mauritanian independence movement to the south considered that the territory had belonged to an "Ensemble Mauritanien", which should be decolonized as a whole. Meanwhile, the colonial power reacted by declaring its African colonies to be an integral part of the Spanish state, transforming therefore their own national imagination. (section III). Only at the end of the 1960s did the idea of a Saharawi nation, corresponding to the land of the then Spanish Sahara, emerge as part of a local nationalist movement (section IV).

Having set out these contending visions we argue that the UN became a main arena where these rival imaginaries clashed. The Afro-Asiatic group of countries, which dominated the politics of decolonization at the UN, helped contributed to configure the terms of these struggles. In the end, the UN contributed to the general use of nationalism as the main language in which anticolonial demands were expressed. However, proposals that did not take a nationalist approach and which considered the possibility of sharing and redistributing power over Spanish Sahara, also existed (section VI). In the last section we will briefly refer to the persistence of opposing geographical imaginations since the mid-1970s in the conflict between the government in Rabat and the POLISARIO movement.

As will be evident, our focus will in on elite geopolitical imaginations rather than how other social groups relate to, or conceptualize, this territory. There is much to be said in this respect, especially on the role of nomadic *vis a vis* sedentary forms of life for the geographical imagination, or the impact of migration and exile on the formation of political imaginations.¹³ What is clear is that the competing nationalist projects we will discuss in detail below diverged more or less dramatically from the political understanding of space that had dominated the desert prior to the urbanization processes which started in the 1950s.

Before then the political order was articulated as autonomous tribes or kabilas. These were organized along lineage lines, but did not exclude relationships with more centralized polities occupying the fringes of the desert.¹⁴ Different sovereignties overlapped in the same spaces, while the territory did not determine either the status or the rights and privileges of persons. Maps drawn by geographers and anthropologists during colonial times usually defined no clear

¹³ On these questions see the work of A. Wilson, "Ambiguities of Space and Control: When Refugee Camp and Nomadic Encampment Meet", *Nomadic Peoples* 18(1) (2014) 38-60.

¹⁴ A. López Bargados, *Arenas Coloniales. Los Awlad Dalim ante la Colonización Franco-Española del Sáhara*, Barcelona, 2003.

borders for the "nomads" of the western fringe of the Saharan desert. One of those maps is included in the most thorough ethnography of the Spanish Sahara, *Estudios Saharianos*, written in 1955 by the anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja. Fig. 1 shows how the movement of the local population and their conception of the space clearly transcended well-defined colonial frontiers, but without generating alternative ones.¹⁵

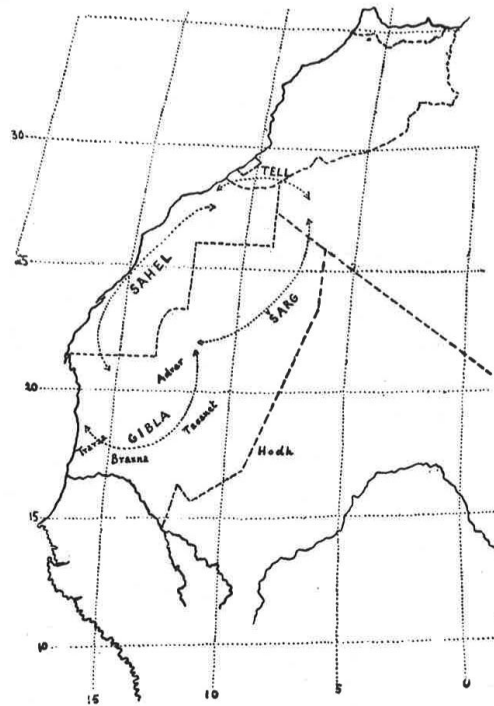


Fig. 1: Orientation sectors and familiar regions for the nomads of Spanish Sahara
From J. Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, Madrid, 1955, 66.

Paradoxically, the special fluidity of relations of people and space in the desert may have helped to support alternative and contradictory claims on the territory and the population that lived within it.

¹⁵ J. Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, Madrid, 1955.

GREATER MOROCCO IN THE ATLANTIC SAHARA

Soon after the independence of the French Protectorate and the Spanish Northern Protectorate in Morocco in 1956, the Moroccan nationalist and anticolonial party Istiqlal articulated the vision of *Greater Morocco*. On the 5th of July that year the party's journal, *Al Alam*, published a map which depicted a polity running from the Mediterranean to the Senegal River and from the Atlantic to Timbuctu (Fig.2). The map was authored by Abdelkebir Al-Fassi, brother of Istiqlal founder Allal Al-Fassi. According to the latter's commentary on the map (based on his discourse in Tangier on 18 June) "for reasons of geography, history, and international law the "natural frontiers" of Moroccan Sahara should end where Mauritania meets Senegal". This territory would include parts of French Algeria and French West Africa, as well as what still remained of the Spanish Southern Protectorate in Morocco and the Spanish Sahara. It would cover nearly two million square kilometres.¹⁶

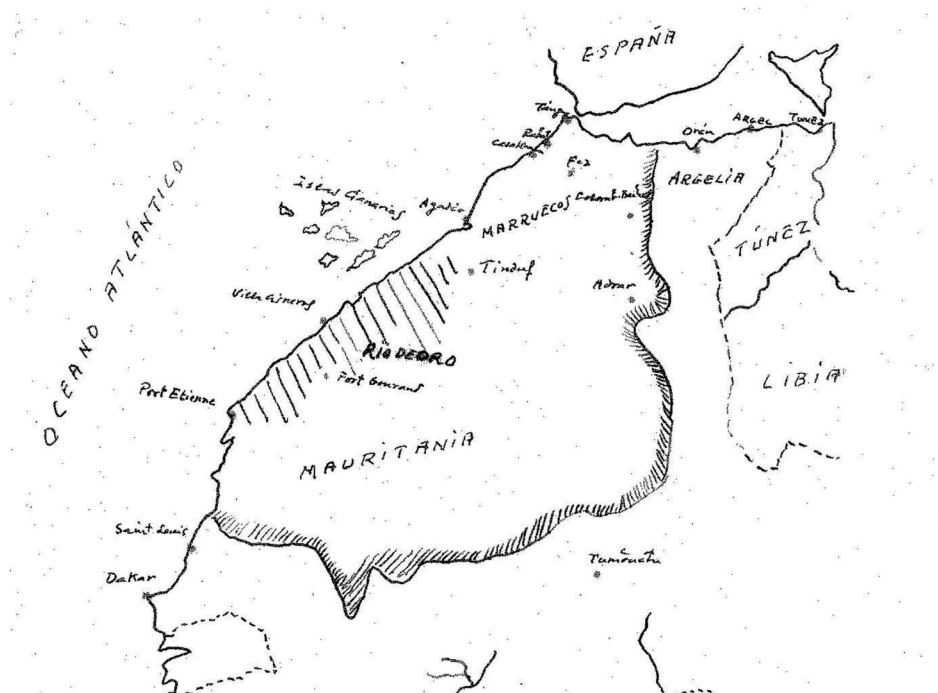


Fig. 2: Greater Morocco

Copy of the map published by Al Fassi in Moroccan journal *Al-Alam*, included in a Spanish translation of the issue dedicated to the Sahara. The territory of Spanish Sahara has been shaded in by the Spanish translator.

¹⁶ F. Villar, *El proceso de autodeterminación del Sáhara*, Valencia, 1982, 45. Letter by the Director General de Plazas y Provincias Españolas to the Director General de Relaciones con Marruecos, 29 May 1975, translating into Spanish the *Al Alam* issue of 5 July 1956. We thank Bernabé López for this information

The history to which Al-Fassi refers was that of the Sherifian Empire or Sultanate, whose territories were divided by European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ According to this nationalist interpretation of the sultanate's past, "the Western Sahara played a decisive role in the history of the creation of Morocco in the 11th century", and it had constituted a "privileged land" of the Moroccan anticolonial resistance.¹⁸ The end of French and Spanish colonial rule in the region would mean, according to this argument, the restoration of the old sultanate (now a kingdom) and the redrawing of boundaries.

After initial disputes between the monarchy and the Moroccan national movement, this doctrine became official when King Mohamed V adopted it in 1958.¹⁹ From the Moroccan point of view, the idea of a Greater Morocco justified two initial wars and the support of armed groups in neighbouring areas. In October 1957, what remained of the anticolonial National Liberation Army (ALN) launched irregular attacks in Ifni, the southern part of the protectorate under Spanish rule, and in Spanish Sahara, as well as in Mauritania, which were under French control. At this time, many young men from the Saharan *kabilas* participated in the Moroccan ALN. The so-called Ifni-Sahara war resulted in the integration of the southern part of the protectorate in Morocco, whereas a French-Spanish operation crushed the armed rebellion in the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania.²⁰

The subsequent decolonization of neighbouring countries fed Moroccan anxieties. After Mauritania achieved its independence in 1960, the Moroccan government supported some rebel groups in the north who sought integration into Morocco. The end of the bloody anticolonial war in French Algeria in 1962 gave birth to a new sovereign state, whose enormous territory comprised both a Mediterranean fringe and a large portion of the Sahara Desert, and frustrated in great part Moroccan irredentist aspirations. Rabat's government failed in its diplomatic effort to convince Houari Boumédiène and the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) to give back those areas that, according to the idea of a Greater Morocco, France had removed from the Sherifian Empire.²¹ In 1963 Morocco occupied the frontier region between both countries. This "Sand War" ended within a few months with the establishment of a demilitarized zone, and provided the basis for the long lasting hostility between the governments.

¹⁷ W. Zartman, "The politics of boundaries in North and West Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 3(2) (1965) 155-173.

¹⁸ These arguments were articulated two decades later in front of the International Court of Justice, during the process of the Advisory Opinion of Western Sahara that we will mention later. ICJ, *Pleadings, Oral Arguments, Documents. Western Sahara*. Volume III, 1975, 170 and 185.

¹⁹ M. Hernando de Larramendi, "Ideología y política en el Marruecos postcolonial: irredentismo y cultura política en el Marruecos en los primeros años de la independencia", in: A. Torremocha Silva (Ed.), *La Conferencia Internacional de Algeciras de 1906. Cien Años Después*, Cádiz, 2008, 307-320.

²⁰ G. Montoro, "La retrocesión de Tarfaya e Ifni", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie V, Historia Contemporánea*, 4 (1991) 181-190; C. Canales and M. del Río, *Breve Historia de la Guerra Ifni-Sáhara*, Madrid, 2010.

²¹ Zartman, *The politics of boundaries*, 164.

During the rest of 1960s, Moroccan territorial ambitions were reduced to making claims over the Spanish colony, especially after the formal recognition of Mauritanian independence in 1969. Moreover, international organizations became the main forum for Moroccan claims, and these had to take into account the new language developed around the self-determination of people that was used to pursue the end of European colonial rule in Asia and Africa. The UN General Assembly resolution 1514(XV) of 1960 had definitely outlawed colonialism and considered the sovereign state to be the normal destiny of former colonies. Other UN resolutions, as well as the first ones approved by the Organization for the African Union (OAU) founded in 1963, established respect for the old colonial borders in the configuration of new independent states, adopting in this way the old legal principle of *uti possidetis*.²² A new UN body, known as the Committee of Twenty Four, was created in order to promote and monitor the application of the new rules by the colonial powers and to offer a forum for the demands of anticolonial movements.

Moroccan independence was obviously part of the decolonization movement. Yet, from the beginning, Rabat's irredentist claims over surrounding areas constituted a dissident voice within the OAU and the UN and its Committee on Decolonization, where colonial powers were scrutinized and had to meet with anticolonial groups. Arguments based on pre-colonial history, and on the dismembering effects of colonial partition on older polities (such as the Sherifian Sultanate), had not much echo among Afro-Asian representatives, except for some members of the Arab League countries. Not by accident, many of the territorial contours of the new postcolonial states that were joining the UN were colonial in origin. However, in part as a result of heterodox positions such as Morocco's resolution 1541(XV), two other possibilities were considered in order to put an end to colonial rule: either free association with, or integration in, an independent state.²³ These alternative solutions would, however, be conditioned by the decision of the population in a referendum.

The voice of Moroccan diplomats would always be heard during the discussions on the General Assembly resolutions concerning Spanish Sahara since 1966. From the very first, each one reflected Moroccan interests, asking the Spanish "administering Power" to consult "with the governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party, the procedures for the holding of a referendum under United Nations auspices with a view to enabling the indigenous population of the Territory to exercise freely its right to self determination".²⁴ It was precisely Morocco's insistence that made the referendum a constant requirement in the UN policy towards Spanish Sahara.

²² For an analysis of the legal dimension of decolonization see A. Cassese, *The Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal*, Cambridge, 1995.

²³ United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 1541(XV), 1960.

²⁴ UNGA Resolution 2229(XXI), 1966.

LA GRANDE MAURITANIE ÉCONOMIQUE ET SPIRITUELLE

As can be seen in the UN resolution of 1966, Moroccan interest in Spanish Sahara was not unique. An alternative claim came precisely from a territory that had also been gathered into Greater Morocco by Al-Fassi. In a discourse in 1957, three years before Mauritanian independence, the man who was to become the country's "rst president, Moktar Ould Daddah, had celebrated "the innumerable links that bind us" to the people of Spanish Sahara. He the appealed "to our brothers in Spanish Sahara to dream of this great economic and spiritual Mauritania" and addressed to them "a message of friendship, a call to the concord of all the Moors from the Atlantic to Azawad and from the Draa (river) to the shores of Senegal".²⁵ In doing so he was defining an area that included, along with Mauritania, the Spanish possessions in the Atlantic Sahara, and the northern parts of French Mali (Azawad) and French Senegal.

Mauritanian authorities such as Daddah claimed Spanish Sahara as part of their own territory on the basis of an alternative history to that of Greater Morocco: the Ensamble Mauritanien, Bilad Chinguetti or the Moors people.²⁶ These terms defined a political and cultural area which occupied the Atlantic Sahara and Sahel, and was formed of two kinds of political entities which were strongly linked to each other: the nomadic and pastoralist tribes that used to cross the desert, and the more centralized and sedentary emirates of Trazna, Brakna, Tagant and Adrar. The population of the Spanish Sahara was understood to belong to one or other of the five *kabilas* –Aroussiyin, Oulad Dleim, Oulad Bou Sba, Ahel Barikalla, Rgueibat– that also inhabited the Mauritanian desert. The fact that these people frequently crossed the colonial borders in their everyday activities was taken as proof of the existence of a united Mauritania, of which the former Spanish colony was part.

There was no official map of this Greater Mauritania comparable to that produced by Al Fassi. Fig. 3 represents what is locally known as Trab El-Bidan (the "Land of the Whites" in Hassaniya Arabic), and can be found in some academic works on the Atlantic Sahara. This area coincides approximately with the imaginary social space to which Ould Daddah and the Mauritanian diplomats referred to in order to legitimate their claims.²⁷ These maps were produced, however, after the Mauritanians dropped their irredentist demands, and they only aim to support academic arguments about the cultural similarities of the people living in this area.

²⁵ M. Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie Contre Vents et Marées*, Paris, 2003, 5-6. (Authors' translation).

²⁶ These were the concepts used by the Mauritanian delegation in the written statement presented before the ICJ, see ICJ, *Pleadings, Oral Arguments, Documents. Western Sahara*. Volume III, 1975, 58-90.

²⁷ S. Caratini, *Les Rgaybat. 1610-1934*, Vol. 1, Paris, 1989, 21; F. Pinto Cebrián, *Proverbios Saharauis*, Madrid, 1997; López Bargados, *Arenas Coloniales*, 41.

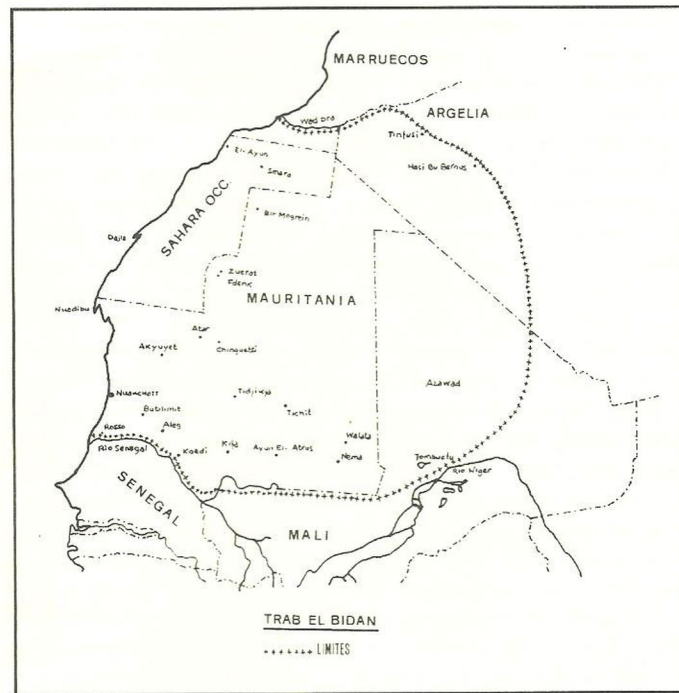


Fig. 3: Trab El-Bidan

From F. Pinto Cebrián, *Proverbios Saharauis*, Madrid, 1997 (V).

Due to Mauritania's weakness as a state, these claims were initially expressed in a more nuanced and prudent way than those of the Moroccan government, and their authors never intended to aspire to territories other than Spanish Sahara. The fact that Trab El-Bidan extended to lands of Algeria and Mali may be one of the reasons why there was never an official map of this imaginary. Moreover, in the discourse of Ould Daddah's initial appeal to an "economic and spiritual" brotherhood had avoided direct mention of political union, although this would be expressed more clearly over time.

As a result, the Mauritanian delegation at the Committee on Decolonization periodically demanded, from the first General Assembly resolution on Western Sahara in 1966, the inclusion in the referendum that should be organized by the Spanish in the colony of the option of the integration into Mauritania. When, in 1969, the Moroccan authorities finally recognized Mauritania as a sovereign state, what had previously been Moroccan arguments for the assimilation of the Spanish Sahara to the Mauritanian lands could now be used by the Mauritanian irredentists themselves.

ÁFRICA OCCIDENTAL ESPAÑOLA AND THE SPANISH NATION

A variety of official and semi-official maps that reflected changing political and territorial conceptualizations of the Spanish Sahara also appeared in Spain. By the time of Moroccan independence in 1956, the Spanish territories running south to the French possessions had been governed as Spanish Western Africa since 1946.

That included, under one same governor, the southern part of the protectorate in Morocco, the two territories of Seguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, and the Ifni enclave. These are shown as part of a single political entity on the map in Fig. 4 which was commissioned in the early 1950s by the official Institute of African Studies in Madrid, under the auspices of the Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias at the Spanish Ministry of the Presidency.²⁸



Fig 4: Spanish Western Africa

From Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias, IDEA, 1951-1952.

In 1958 the Treaty of Angra de Cintra between Rabat and Madrid put an end to the Ifni-Sahara war, and delivered to Morocco the southern part of the old protectorate. This implied moving the southern border of Morocco to 27° 40" parallel.²⁹ At the same time, the colony of Spanish Saharawas established comprising both the Seguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro areas. The map in Fig. 5 was published in 1960 by one of the main theorists of Spanish colonialism during the Francoist regime, José María Cordero Torres, in a work on the history of Spanish

²⁸ This map was a reduction of the geometric one elaborated by the Geographical Service of the Spanish Army Spanish, finished in 1949 at 1:500.000 scale, which was part of the Spanish compromise with the International Map of the World project. On the production of that map, see J.A. Rodríguez Esteban, "El mapa del África Occidental Española de 1949 a escala 1:500.000: orgullo militar, camelladas y juegos poéticos saharauis", *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography*, 2011.

²⁹ This was the line established in the Treaty of 1912, under which France recognized a new area of expansion to Spain southwards into its Moroccan possessions.

borders. It indicates along each border the years in which they were defined by colonial partition and the independence of Morocco.

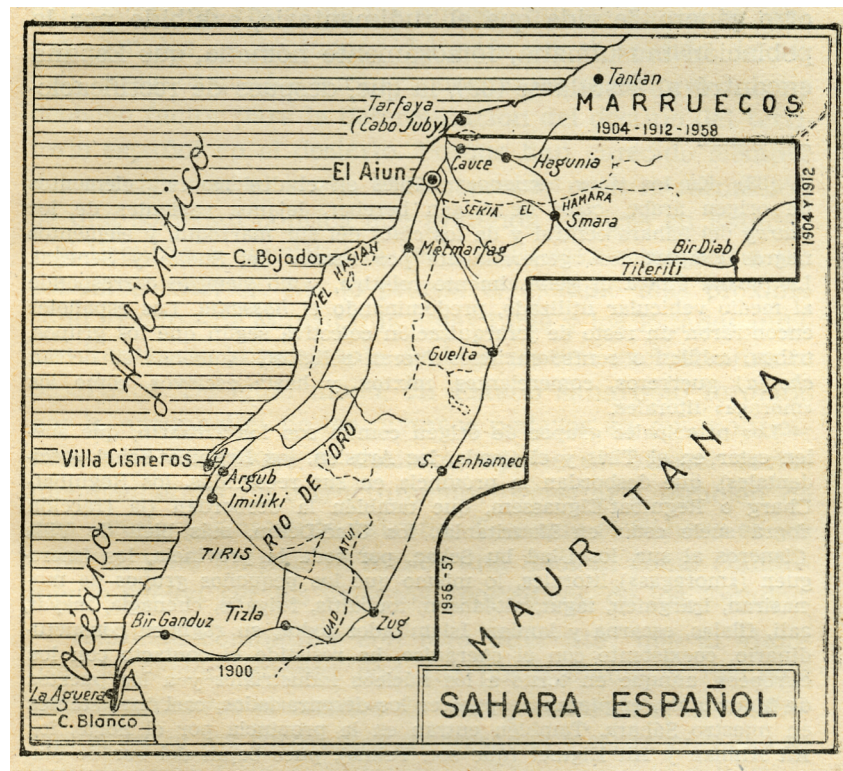


Fig. 5: Map of Spanish Sahara after 1958

From J.M. Cordero Torres, *Fronteras Hispánicas geografía e historia diplomática y administración*, Madrid, 1960, 425.

At the end of the 1950s, Spanish authorities were also elaborating a new argument in order to legitimize their rule over their African colonies. This included an alternative territorial representation of the western edge of the Sahara Desert. By that time, it seemed clear for many in Africa and Europe alike, that the colonial rule was coming to an end. In 1958, the French government tried to change its already transformed empire (the French Union) into a kind of confederation under the leadership of France (the French Community), though only two years later it recognized the independence of most of its African colonies. Great Britain had attempted different versions of self-government for its African colonies since the end of the Second World War. However, it also started to withdraw, in the late 1950s, beginning with the Gold Coast-Ghana in 1957.

Spain, as discussed above, had been forced to retire from the Moroccan Protectorate in 1956 and 1958. Within the United Nations, which Spain had joined in 1955, it was confronted by the anticolonial movement led by the Afro-Asiatic group in the United Nations, to which Spain had been admitted in 1955. In this context, the determination of Franco's regime to retain the colonies of Spanish Guinea, Spanish Sahara and the enclave of Sidi-Ifni required changes in the form and legitimation of their colonial rule. As in the case of the Moroccan and

Mauritanian claims, this new form used the language of nationalism. On this occasion it the Spanish nation that was redrawn. So, in January 1958, a decree formally declared that Spanish Sahara and Ifni were to become new provinces of the Spanish national territory. The following year, Spanish Guinea became the Spanish provinces of Fernando Po and Río Muni.³⁰ This was an obvious imitation of the Portuguese strategy in their African colonies, through which both countries tried to avoid the accusation of being colonialist in the international forums. The legislative process of *provincialización*, as it was called, meant a formal reimagination of the Spanish nation, which was now composed of territories in Europe and in Africa.

Fig. 6 represents this new administrative situation depicting the Spanish state as comprised as much of African as of European territories. It appeared in a 1967 book on Spanish Africa authored by General José Díaz de Villegas, the highest authority on the Spanish colonies at the Ministry of the Presidency. Díaz de Villegas was also the director of the Institute of African Studies (IDEA), which tried to monopolize the official study of Spanish African territories, and published numerous books such as this one.



Fig. 6: "Spanish provinces in Africa"
 From J. Díaz de Villegas, *África Española en la Geopolítica y Geoestrategia Nacionales*, Madrid, 1967, 425.

³⁰ For Spanish Sahara: Decreto por el que se reorganiza el Gobierno General del África occidental Española, 10 Jan. 1958; and for Equatorial Guinea, Ley sobre organización y régimen jurídico de las provincias africanas, 191/1959.

This new status brought some changes to the political order in Spanish Sahara. In the ensuing years, the Spanish colonies were included in the national Economic and Social Development Plans. Within this scheme, social services increased and numerous public works were promoted, such as seaports, institutional buildings, water wells, tracks and lighthouses.³¹ Yet this did not mean equality between Spanish Sahara and the other provinces, or within the colony itself, as social and legal differentiation between the "Native" and "European" populations continued to characterise the political order.³² In fact, it is during this period that we can talk of a *second colonial occupation* of the territory, which subordinated the country in a more intensive way to Spanish control.³³ The military presence, and the participation of many more local soldiers in the colonial army, had increased after the French-Spanish war against the Moroccan National Liberation Army in 1957-1958. The discovery of the Bucráa phosphate mines in 1963 brought new extractive interests from Madrid, after decades during which the main colonial exploitation activities had focused on the coastal fisheries.

It was within this new structure that the *chiuj*, or heads of Saharan local *kabilas*, were integrated into the colonial administration, and their functions regulated with great precision as key intermediaries between the Spanish administration and the local population, establishing a true indirect rule. The population of the territory was classified as either "Spanish" or "Natives" in a clearer way than before, and despite the integration process. A new decree in 1962 (3249/1962) introduced a colonial council (*Cabildo Provincial*), in which key local intermediaries were represented along with Spanish representatives from the municipalities and the economic and cultural associations.³⁴

In May 1967 a Saharan General Assembly or Yemáa was added to this system.³⁵ It was intended to enhance the representative character of the colonial institutions: the *chiuj*s members would be elected from among the household heads of tribes and fractions, and there would be forty other representatives elected from among the male members of the population older than twenty-one. Elections were organized for the first time, and 9056 men were eligible to vote for the representatives to the Yemáa and the Francoist national assembly (*Cortes Españolas*) in Madrid. This reform was trying to respond to the social changes and pressures that, as we will see, were occurring in the territory and beyond. But within the authoritarian Spanish regime, the Yemáa had only consultative functions.

³¹ C. Barona, *Los hijos de la nube. Estructura y vicisitudes del Sáhara Español desde 1958 hasta la debacle*, Madrid, 2004; A. García, *Historias del Sáhara: lo mejor y lo peor de los mundos*, Madrid, 2002; T. Hodges, *Western Sahara and the roots of a desert war*, Westport, CT, 1983.

³² J.A Rodríguez Esteban and D.A. Barrado Timón, "Le processus d'urbanisation dans le Sahara espagnol (1884-1975): une composante essentielle du projet colonial", *Cahiers de l'Emam*, 24-25 (2015) Monograph: *Sahara Occidental: Memoires, Culture, Histoires*.

³³ A. Campos-Serrano and V. Trassosmontes, "Ressources naturelles et seconde occupation coloniale du Sahara Espagnol: 1959-1975", *Cahiers de l'Emam*, 24-25 (2015) Monograph: *Sahara Occidental: Memoires, Culture, Histoires*.

³⁴ Campos-Serrano and Trassosmontes, *Ressources naturelles*.

³⁵ Hodges, *Western Sahara*.

In summary, the second Spanish colonial occupation was so late that it was almost contemporary with the "winds of change" and the spread of nationalist demands in most of Africa at the end of the 1950s. That meant that, when Spain was establishing a form of indirect rule, it had to legitimate its claim over the territory in languages closer to those of nationalism than of the old European civilizing mission.

IMAGINING THE SAHARAWI NATION

As has been shown, from late 1950s the Spanish Sahara was being imagined as part of different competing nations: Morocco, Mauritania and even Spain. People living in the territory participated, in different ways, in these projects. However, by the end of the 1960s an alternative nation was being constructed: the "Saharawi people", which was comprised of the "natives" living within the existing colonial borders. In spite of the colonial origin of many of the elements of this new imaginary, this project would become widely embraced by the local population by the 1970s.

The idea of a Saharawi nation emerged in a context of rapid social change in the territory. Since the 1958-1959 war, the settlement of the nomadic population in the cities increased exponentially.³⁶ By the mid 1960s, the phosphates mines in Bucráa not only attracted many Spaniards, but also generated new work possibilities for the young Saharans, contributing to the proletarianization of the former pastoralists.³⁷ According to the census conducted by the Spanish administration in 1974, after the terrible drought of 1968-1973 only 18% of the population lived outside urban centres.

These new social spaces, cities and mines, were configured as segmented places, in which locals and non-locals occupied different niches and enjoyed different labour and life conditions. Spanish settlers, from the Canary Islands and the peninsula, lived in the oldest neighbourhoods; whereas most of the autochthones were crammed into peripheral slums made of tents and temporary materials in the peripheries, without sanitation and other services. Saharans working for the colonial administration or mining sites tended to occupy the lower levels,³⁸ and their salaries were lower than those earned by Europeans.³⁹

Living under these conditions younger people became more and more aware of social segregation, discrimination in the education system, and salary disparities

³⁶ Villar, *El proceso de autodeterminación*, 29; Rodríguez Esteban and Barrado Timón, *Le processus d'urbanisation*.

³⁷ García, *Historias del Sáhara*, 30.

³⁸ T. Bárbulo, *La historia prohibida del Sáhara Español*, Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, 2002; García, *Historias del Sáhara*.

³⁹ UN Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, 1975, General Assembly, 30th Session, Supplement 23, UN Document A/10023/Rev. paragraphs 155-167. Bárbulo, *La Historia prohibida*.

with the Spaniards, as well as their exclusion from the colonial order. Tensions between urban youth and the *chiuj*s' generation increased, as the narrowness and conservative character of the new provincial institutions became more and more evident.⁴⁰ At the end of the 1960s expressions of social discontent appeared, inevitably conditioned by the despotic character of the Francoist colonial regime.⁴¹

It was in this new social context, of sedentarisation and intergenerational conflict, that the idea of a Saharawi nation was first articulated. The *Organización Avanzada para la Liberación del Sahara* (Advanced Organization for the Sahara Liberation - OALS) was founded by Mohamad Sidi Ibrahim Basir (nicknamed Basiri), an activist from Tam-Tam, in southern Morocco. The OALS started claiming greater autonomy for the territory, albeit as a state associated to Spain, as a previous step towards a negotiated independence.⁴² This was the first time that the idea of a Saharawi nation, different from Spain, Morocco or Mauritania, was expressed. Its appearance was associated to some extent with social revolution, as there was an implied criticism of the inequality of rights between Europeans and natives, and of the undemocratic character of the *chiuj* structure and the colonial Yemáa.

However, while Equatorial Guinea obtained independence in 1968, after the celebration of a Constitutional Conference, and Ifni was integrated into Morocco the following year, Spanish politicians took a tougher position towards Spanish Sahara. This is explained by the growing mining interests, the personal attachment of the Spanish dictator to the Sahara, and the competing demands of Morocco and Mauritania. Its effects on the ground were evident during the repression of the great demonstration organized by the OALS on 17th June 1970 in El Aaiún, during an "act of support for Spain" which has been organized by the colonial governor. The petition that was handed over during the protest asked for immediate independence.⁴³ In response, Basiri was detained, tortured and disappeared.⁴⁴

Together with increased repressive measures, the government tried to enhance the representative character of colonial institutions. A reserved decree dated 4th October 1970 reinforced local sectors different from the *chiuj* at the Yemáa, and in 1971 new young representatives were incorporated into the Yemáa, the council and the municipalities. On 30th April 1973, an *ordenanza* reformed the functions of the *chiuj* and local Yemáas to make their role more democratic.⁴⁵ In spite of all these measures, independence movement was taking a new form with the creation in May 1973 of the Frente Popular de Liberación de Seguía el Hamra y Río de Oro

⁴⁰ UN Visiting Mission, paragraph 123.

⁴¹ E. Bengochea Tirado, "La movilización nacionalista saharaui y la mujeres durante el último periodo colonial español", *Revista Historia Autónoma*, 3 (2013) 113-128, 117.

⁴² A-B. Miské, *Front Polisario, l'Âme d'un People*, Paris, 1979.

⁴³ The UNGA resolution 2711 (XXV), regretted "the incidents of bloodshed which occurred in the Territory in June 1970" and demanded the Spanish Government "take effective measures to create the atmosphere of détente required for the orderly holding of the referendum as defined by the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly".

⁴⁴ García, *Historias del Sáhara*; Barona, *Hijos de la nube*.

⁴⁵ Campos-Serrano & Trassosmontes, *Ressources naturelles*.

POLISARIO by Saharans in the exile in Zuerat (Mauritania). This organization, especially popular among women and the young, demanded the recognition of a sovereign state differentiated from any other state in the region, adopted a socialist program, and was initially opposed to the celebration of the referendum being proposed by United Nations.⁴⁶ Its strategies included acts of sabotage against phosphate infrastructures, attacks on border posts, and fomenting mutinies among colonial troops.⁴⁷

There were other small local groups that clamoured for the end of Spanish rule, but they did not always share the project of a Saharawi nation-state. At the beginning of the 1970s, the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire des Hommes Bleus* (MOREHOB), funded in Rabat by Eduard Moha, and the *Mouvement du 21 Août* with based in southern Morocco advocated for the integration into this country. MOREHOB, however, did support the independence of the territory from 1973 to 1975, during its exile in Algeria.⁴⁸ In 1974, the *Front de Libération et de l'Unité* (FLU), carried out several armed attacks also in the name of the integration of Spanish Saharan within Morocco. By the end of that year, the *Partido de la Unión Nacional Saharaui* (PUNS) was created by a group of *chiuj* that proposed independence, but with strong relations with Spain.⁴⁹

The national territory for which POLISARIO fought was that of the Spanish colony. Ironically, the origin of POLISARIO was, in large part, in the neighbouring countries, especially Mauritania and Morocco, not only among those exiled after the repression of 1970, but also among some of the inhabitants who spoke the same Hassaniya Arabic dialectic as the Saharans. The relevance of the colonial borders as they existed in the early 1970s is expressed straightforwardly in the fact that POLISARIO never produced an official map of their own. Right up to the present day, the map that has been exhibited and vindicated by the Saharawi nationalist movement, and by its diplomatic delegations worldwide, is a colonial one, a map produced by the Geographical Service of the Spanish Army in 1961 showing the region's topography, roads and political boundaries.⁵⁰ The use of a colonial map clearly indicates, not only the inevitable lack of cartographic capacity of a movement in exile, but its intention to trace a clear genealogy for the project of a Western Saharan state from the late Spanish colonial legacy rather than any other political entity.

⁴⁶ Villar, *El Proceso*, 70. Hodges, *Western Sahara*.

⁴⁷ UN Visiting Mission, paragraph 261.

⁴⁸ R. Rézette, *Le Sahara Occidentale et les frontières marocaines*, Paris, 1975.

⁴⁹ UN Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara. General Assembly, 30th Session, Supplement 23, UN Document A/10023/Rev., 1975, paragraph 223.

⁵⁰ This is the map of the provinces of Ifni, Sahara and Canary Island, elaborated by the Geographical Service of the Spanish Army in 1961 (and provided as an online supplement to this paper). We are grateful to Bahia Awah for this information.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Saharawi nationalists had imagined an alternative territory, whose northern border was at the Draa River and not the 27° 40" parallel to the south. This envisaged a nation-state that incorporated the old southern protectorate of Morocco, as Spanish Western Africa had from 1946 to 1958 (see Fig. 4), on the basis that most of the population living there belonged to the same Saharawi *kabilas*, spoke Hassaniya Arabic and shared many cultural forms.⁵¹ One of the foundations of this alternative cartography was the nineteenth century manuscript *Kitab Al-Badiati* by Chej Mohamed el Maami, which defined an area called Al Badia the "herding country" that covered the part of the Atlantic Sahara inhabited by nomadic people. It also mentioned the existence of a "line of danger", o Jat Al-Jaof, that separated Al Badia that separated Al Badia from the rest of polities of the region, such as Bilad Chingetti, vindicated by the Mauritanian authorities.⁵²

In 1975 this manuscript formed part of the arguments in favour of the independence of Spanish Sahara presented at the debates in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (see below). As Fig. 7 shows, the Jat Al-Jaof border was hand-drawn on a National Geographic Magazine map of northwestern Africa and made up part of the dossier put together by the Spanish delegation and its Saharan advisers for the ICJ, when Spain had already decided to withdraw from the territory.⁵³ The commission established for the occasion, formed by Spanish and Saharawi experts, felt the need to use these historical arguments in order to offset the Moroccan and Mauritanian historical and geographical narratives.

⁵¹ There used to be a map at the National Museum in the Refugee Camp of 27th February, in Tindouf, Algeria, where the region south of the Draa River (Cabo Juby, TanTan and Tarfaya), which made up the Spanish Southern Protectorate in Morocco, was represented as part of Western Sahara. We are indebted to Francesco Correale, who visited the museum in 2007, for this information.

⁵² ICJ, *Pleadings, Oral Arguments, Documents. Western Sahara*, Volume V, 136, 349; Se descifra un documento sobre la frontera entre el Sáhara y Mauritania, ABC, 2 July 1975.

⁵³ Comisión Hispano-Saharaui de Estudios Históricos y Culturales, *El Sáhara como unidad cultural autóctona*, Madrid, 1975. This leaflet collected the main arguments of the Spanish delegation at the IJC.

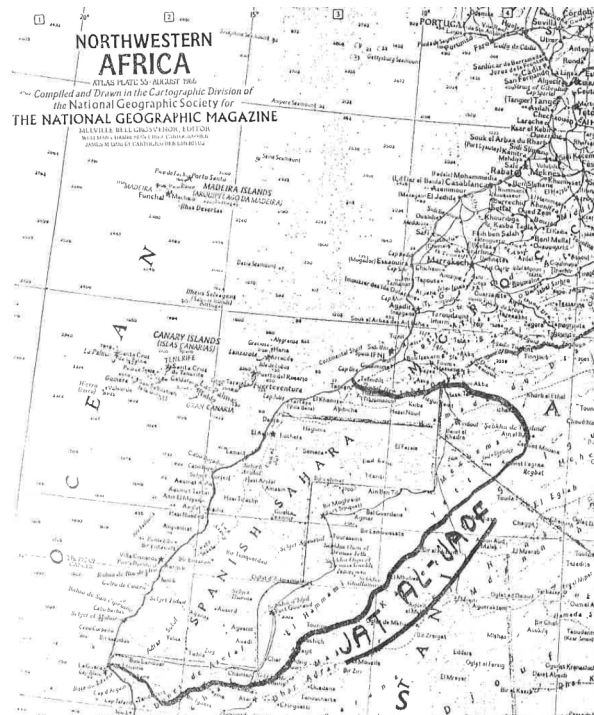


Fig. 8: Jat Al-Jaof border

From Comisión Hispano-Saharai de Estudios Históricos y Culturales, *El Sáhara como Unidad Cultural Autóctona*, Madrid, 1975, p.14.

However, because the region this map depicted exceeded the colonial borders of Spanish Sahara, the Saharawi movement could never use this alternative political map, or make explicit demands regarding lands now under Moroccan, Algerian, Malian or Mauritanian sovereignty. The need for international support made POLISARIO keen to conform to UN rules on decolonization and to avoid articulating any irredentist aspirations. This was one aspect of the importance of international organizations for the definition of the Saharawi national territory to which we now turn.

THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF THE PEOPLE OF WESTERN SAHARA AT THE UNITED NATIONS

As indicated in previous sections, from the mid-1960s the Committee on Decolonization at the United Nations became the forum where the Moroccan, Mauritanian, Spanish and Saharawi national projects were confronted with each other. In the process, all of them would be transformed and even reduced in their territorial aspirations. This was a consequence of the need for all of them to use the language of self-determination, and also of the strategic alliances that were formed amongst themselves.

The argument that the Sahara, along with Equatorial Guinea and Ifni, were part of the Spanish nation did not convince the Afro-Asiatic countries that dominated the

decolonization politics of the United Nations. Moreover, with the agreement to transmit information on their African territories to the UN Committee of Twenty-four in 1960, the same Spanish delegation implicitly accepted their colonial character. This was the beginning of a long internal conflict inside the Spanish government between, on the one hand, those in charge of the colonial administration and promoters of the provincialization strategy at the Ministry of the Presidency and, on the other hand, officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who assumed a more favourable attitude towards decolonization.⁵⁴ One moment of tension arose in 1966, when the Presidency sent some Saharan notables to the Committee of Twenty-Four in order to support Spanish policies in the Sahara, against the position of the official Spanish delegation itself.⁵⁵

The General Assembly's resolutions on Spanish Sahara, approved from 1966 to 1973 (excluding 1971) by the General Assembly, asked the "administering power" to prepare a referendum in order to enable "the indigenous population of the Territory to exercise freely its right to self-determination". It was because of the competing claims over the territory, and the proposals for association with other states, that it was organization judged necessary, according to UN resolution 1514(XV) to ask the population and not to assume, as in majority of cases, that independence was the only and possible outcome.⁵⁶ Finally, at the end of 1973 the Spanish government invited a UN mission to visit the Sahara. As had happened in the case of the Spanish Guinea a decade before, growing international pressures, along with the weakness of Franco's regime at the time, pushed the Spanish delegation to acquiesce more and more to the UN's demands.

For their part, the governments in Rabat and Nouakchott increasingly coordinated their strategies against Spanish colonialism at the UN. This was done through diverse agreements, such as those signed in Casablanca in June 1970 and more importantly, the secret agreements signed in Rabat in June 1972 and Fes in August 1974.⁵⁷ One of these joint strategies was to look for some legal foundation to their claims. At their request, the General Assembly resolution of 1974 on Spanish Sahara, in addition to insisting on a visiting mission to the territory, also included submitting two questions to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the pre-colonial political and legal situation of the Spanish Sahara.⁵⁸

On 15th October 1975, the final report of the visiting mission that had toured the territory and neighbouring countries in May 1975 concluded that there existed among the population an ample desire in favour of independence, as well as a

⁵⁴ A. Campos, "The Decolonization of Equatorial Guinea: The relevance of the international factor", *Journal of African History*, 44 (01) (2002) 95-116.

⁵⁵ J. de Piniés, *La descolonización del Sáhara. Un tema sin concluir*, Barcelona, 1990, 16.

⁵⁶ UNGA Resolution 2229(XXI).

⁵⁷ Ould Daddah, *La Mauritanie*, 451-480.

⁵⁸ These two questions were: "Was Western Sahara (Rio de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (terra nullius)?" and "If the answer to the first question is in the negative, what were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?" UNGA Resolution 3292 (XXIX).

general rejection of its integration into Morocco. It also recorded the popular support for POLISARIO and, to a lesser extent, for PUNS. The same report admitted that its presence had functioned as a catalyst for the massive demonstrations and protests, which had not previously been possible on such a scale and in such comparative safety. The report insisted that a referendum be conducted.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, during the hearings at the ICJ in The Hague, the Moroccan, Mauritanian and Saharawi interpretations set out above were extensively expounded, while Spanish officials, having decided at this point to withdraw from the territory, defended the idea of its independence. In its advisory opinion of 16th October, one day after to the visiting mission report, the ICJ recognized "the existence, at the time of Spanish colonization, of legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in the territory of Western Sahara". It also admitted "the existence of rights, including some rights relating to the land, which constituted legal ties between the Mauritanian entity" and the same territory.⁶⁰

The court partially recognized, therefore, both Moroccan and Mauritanian historical interpretations, and, as a consequence, highlighted "the overlapping character of the respective legal ties" with Western Sahara, as sovereignty in the area seemed to have been shared by different polities. What the court did not infer was that pre-colonial history affected the right to self-determination of "the peoples of the Territory", which it argued should be exercised "through the free and genuine expression" of their will.⁶¹ It was, therefore, the colonial territory itself, and not its history, which determined the "people" for whom the right of self-determination was recognized.⁶² Yet this could only be done through the decision of the "Saharawi people" in a referendum. It is notable, of course, that no other outcome than some sort of statehood was considered for the postcolonial future of the Sahara.⁶³

As the disputes and struggles over the territory continued, the UN developed a map of Western Sahara which demarcated the territory that defined the people to whom the self-determination principle should apply. Fig. 8 from 1988, is the oldest one elaborated by United Nations that can be found in the Dag Hammarskjöld

⁵⁹ UN Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara.

⁶⁰ ICJ, Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975. Western Sahara, 68.

⁶¹ ICJ, Advisory Opinion, 68.

⁶² In his dissenting opinion, Judge Harry Dillard maintained, on the contrary that "It is for the people to determine the destiny of the territory and not the territory the destiny of the people". ICJ Advisory Opinion, 116.

⁶³ J. Castellino, "Territory and identity in International Law: The struggle for self-determination in the Western Sahara", *Millennium* 28(3) (1999) 523-551.

Library in New York. Its borders coincide with those on colonial maps of Spanish Sahara since 1958.⁶⁴

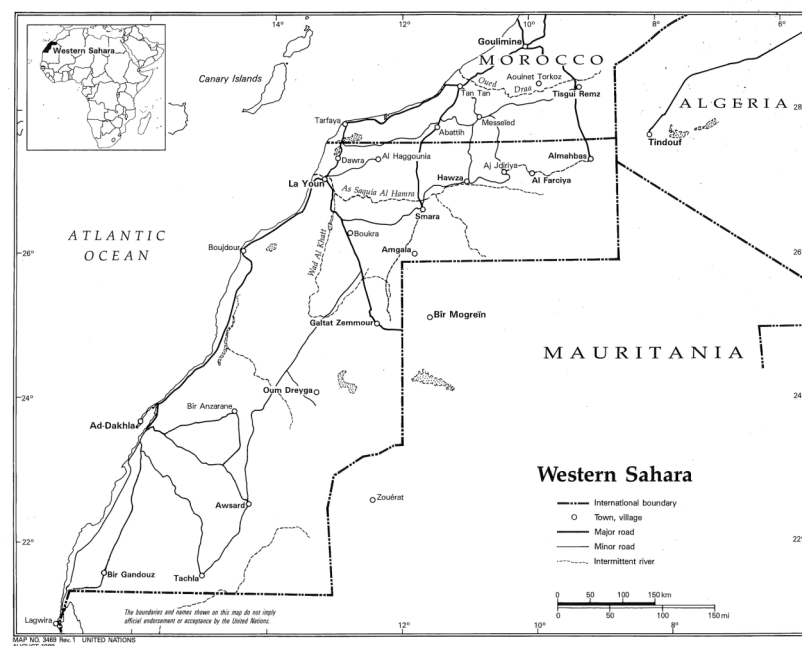


Fig. 7: Western Sahara, 1988
From Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations, New York.

Ultimately, when the map of the Saharawi nation was finally imagined it was brought into being not only in opposition to the colonial order, but also within the context of competing national imaginations articulated by the Moroccan, the Mauritanian and even the Spanish governments. This latecomer would and powerful advocates in international organizations such as the United Nations, but this support would define, at the same time, the contours of the Saharawi nation itself. Conforming to the expectations of the international order precluded claiming any other borders (Jat Al-Jaof, for example) than the colonial ones, and certainly ruled out any postcolonial political solution other than the nation-state.

⁶⁴ The most recent UN map of Western Sahara is the one on the deployment of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) on the territory; it reproduces the same borders, as well as the Moroccan military wall that crosses the territory: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/dpko/minurso.pdf> last access July 2016.

THE NON-NATIONALIST IMAGINATION

While the nation-state solution seemed self-evident for the majority of actors in this drama it is worth remembering that during these years there appeared some propositions appeared that dared to imagine other possibilities. They came, as we will see, from very different spaces and actors, such as local activists, the Spanish government, a Mauritanian diplomat and intellectual and a French jurist.

As shown above, the OALS, which operated clandestinely between 1968 and 1970, demanded the democratization of the colonial structures, including the abolition of the *chiuj* and the Yemáa, and a greater autonomy for the territory in association with Spain prior to independence. For their part, the Yemáa sent a missive to the Spanish dictator on the 20th February 1973 in which they simultaneously rejected any interference by "foreign parties" and praised the "secular coexistence between the Spanish and the Saharan peoples". They called for greater autonomy and "participation in the administration of the territory" as a way of exercising the right of self-determination.⁶⁵

These demands prompted a last attempt to reform of the Spanish political order in the Sahara. In July 1974, shortly before the announcement of the referendum by the Spanish government, its Ministry of the Presidency proposed a last political regime based on an statute of autonomy. This was reminiscent of the British endeavours with self-government and the measures adopted in Spanish Guinea a decade earlier. The Yemáa, or Sahara General Assembly, would now be elected by general suffrage of autochthones and would function as a local legislative council. A governing council would be created as the executive branch of the Yemáa, but always under the direction of the governor general. In turn, the Spanish government would remain in charge of diplomacy, defence and internal security. The statute was also accompanied by a five-year investment and development programme similar to those approved during the 1940s by the French and British authorities in their colonies.⁶⁶

Among the aspects that make this proposal a non-nationalist solution there is the treatment of the question of citizenship and nationality. According to an initiative by the Yemáa, ratified by the Spanish governor on November 1974, the previous "natives" would be transformed into "autochthones", under the name of "Saharawi", though at the same time they were accorded the rights "inherent to the Spanish nationality".⁶⁷ Interestingly, the Spanish state granted the exclusive property of the natural resources to the Saharawi people, the benefits from which should be reinvested in the territory.⁶⁸ This was neither a "colonial" nor a "national" solution, as autochthones lost the character of subjects and acquired the rights of citizens; whereas at the same time, the state recognized a differentiated citizenship.

⁶⁵ Letter of the General Assembly of the Sahara to the Spanish Head of State, 20 February 1973, French Diplomatic Archives, 187QO/451 Also cited in UN Document A/10023/Rev.

⁶⁶ Programa para la Promoción del Sáhara, 1974-1978; Barona, *Hijos de la nube*.

⁶⁷ Barona, *Hijos de la nube*, 48.

⁶⁸ UN Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, paragraph 148.

Even a traditional mark of sovereignty, such as the state property of subsoil resources, was questioned in this solution.

In any case, this new attempt at democratizing the old colonial order was in contradiction with the authoritarian and centralist character of the Francoist regime, and it arrived too late in the decolonization process to be viable. In fact, it was never implemented. The local, metropolitan, and international context pushed in other directions. By the end of 1974, the Spanish government finally accepted, as we have seen, the UN visiting mission, and on 23rd May 1975 it agreed to withdraw from the territory.

There were, however, some other proposals for the end of the colonial situation in the Sahara that went further than also the national imagination. One was debated in Mauritania, and was best formulated by the diplomat and intellectual Ahmed Baba Miske, who in an article published in *Le Monde* in September 1974 proposed a "Maghrebian solution". The idea was to establish a tripartite administration of the territory by Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria, which could become quadripartite with the participation of representatives of the area's population. This solution was envisaged as the best way to ensure the self-determination of the local people, and also as a first attempt to create an "experience maghrebine supranationale".⁶⁹

Also in 1974, the French lawyer and Morocco specialist Robert Rézette, who had written a book on Moroccan political parties in 1955, proposed an alternative which displayed a remarkable political and legal imagination. Establishing an analogy between the desert and the ocean, he suggested creating an International Law of the Desert, similar to that for the sea. For Rézette, the major part of the Sahara Desert should be considered as a space open to the freedom of passage of the nomadic population, only limited by certain policing and courtesy rules. In addition, each of the littoral countries would exercise some sovereignty over its fringe of the desert, such as all the coastal countries exercise over their territorial seas. Rules would be in place to enable the "common exploitation of the Saharan resources by all adjacent countries".⁷⁰

This was a marginal proposal, by a negligible actor in this drama, which did not take into account the processes of sedentarisation and urbanization of the people of the desert during the 1960s. However, along with the other proposals outlined, it is proof that the hegemony of the nationalist imagination was questioned during the debates and conflicts provoked by the end of European colonial rule in the Atlantic Sahara. Despite this, however, it was the idea of the nation-state that triumphed within the battle of political imaginaries, as it was an idea shared by those who ended up dominating the territory, as well as those who fought against them.

⁶⁹ A. Baba Miske, "Point de vue une solution maghrébine", *Le Monde*, 17 September 1974.

⁷⁰ Rézette, *Le Sahara*, 173.

THE TRIUMPH OF NATIONALISM, THE FAILURE OF CITIZENSHIP AND THE BEGINNING OF A NEW WAR

At the end of 1975, the conflicts among governments and a political movement and their competing national projects increased in intensity, eventually creating a reconfiguration of power and numerous displacements of people across the territory. Unlike the majority of cases in Africa, the outcome was not the emergence of a new state where there had been a colony, but to the contested integration of the territory into neighbouring state and the creation of a new political space, a refugee camp on the Algerian side of the border, governed by a movement of national liberation.

After the Moroccan mobilization of a military force against the Spanish colony, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of people in what was called the Green March, a tripartite agreement was signed in Madrid on 14th November 1975, and Morocco and Mauritania replaced the Spanish in controlling the territory.⁷¹ After that, half of the local population fled to Algeria and settled in refugee camps near the border town of Tindouf, from where POLISARIO established a socialist regime and organized its war against Morocco.⁷² On 27th February 1976, the POLISARIO government proclaimed the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD), would be recognized by thirty-two states, of which nineteen were African, before the end of the decade..⁷³

In 1979, the Mauritanian government formally recognized POLISARIO's claims to the territory and renounced its national project for Western Sahara. At the same time, Morocco incorporated the Mauritanian portion of the former colony to its national territory, making the whole of Spanish Sahara part of the Southern Region out of the seven areas created in 1971 through which the state territory was administratively organized. In successive territorial reforms of the state, in 1997 and 2015, Western Sahara would be subdivided into three different regions with no reference to past colonial borders (whether the Draa river or the 27° 40" parallel).⁷⁴ The official map of the Kingdom of Morocco has subsequently shown a national territory comprised of the former protectorate in Morocco and the rest of Spanish possessions in the region (see Fig. 9).

⁷¹ See the supplementary map on Moroccan and Mauritanian partition and incorporation of Spanish Sahara, 1975-1979, prepared by the authors.

⁷² P. San Martín, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*, Cardiff, 2010, 105, 109.

⁷³ C. Ruiz Miguel, Una documentación esencial para conocer el Sáhara Occidental: http://asoc.umdraiga.com/documentos/RASD/RECONOCIMIENTOS_DE_LA_RASD.htm last accessed 19 July 2016.

⁷⁴ A. Suárez Collado and R. Ojeda García, "The effects of the Moroccan advanced regionalization process in Western Sahara", *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 5(3) (2015).

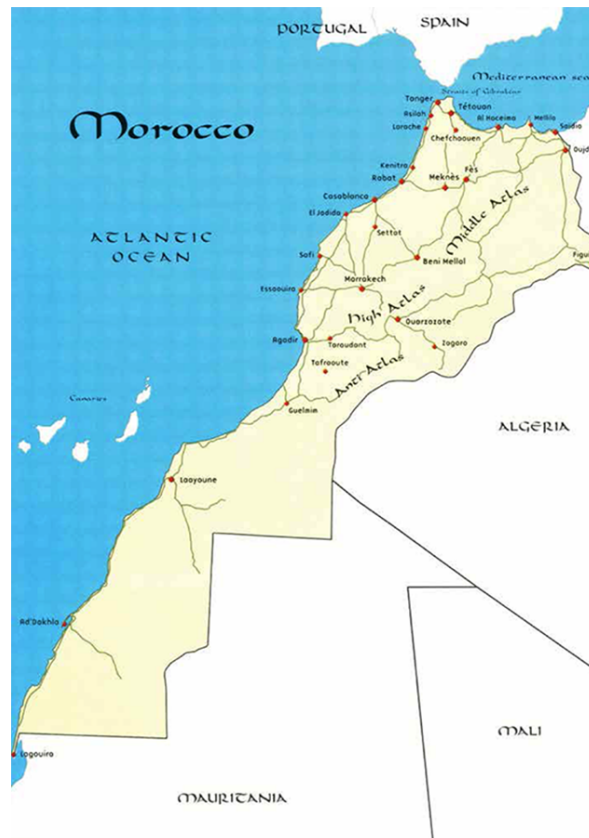


Fig 9: The Kingdom of Morocco

From the website of the Moroccan Embassy in India,
<http://ambamaroc-india.gov.ma/> last consulted, 16th January 2016)

As a result of Morocco's incorporation of the territory thousands of colonists arrived from the north, many of them from the adjoining region where people shared many linguistic and cultural features with those of former Spanish Sahara. However, it is debatable whether this integration was a "national" project or whether it should be described as "colonial". In relation to the economy it certainly responded to an extractive logic as it was almost exclusively based on phosphate mining and fisheries.⁷⁵ Moreover, the territory's government is more concerned with policing character than in the rest of the country, and the violation of human rights constitutes a persistent instrument of political control.⁷⁶

During the war between the Moroccan army and POLISARIO, although competing territorial imaginations persisted, they diverged dramatically from the situation on the ground. In the 1980s Rabat raised its two thousand kilometres of sand walls within the borders of its claimed territory as a barrier against POLISARIO.⁷⁷ So,

⁷⁵ V. Trasmontes, "La explotación de los recursos naturales en el Sahara Occidental", in: I. Barreñada and R. Ojeda García (Eds.), *Sáhara Occidental. 40 años después*, Madrid, 2016.

⁷⁶ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, Mission Report, *The Human Rights Situation in Morocco and the Western Sahara*, March 2015: <http://euromedrights.org/publication/human-rights-situation-in-morocco-and-the-western-sahara/> last access August 2016.

⁷⁷ The path of the wall coincides largely with the spread of a giant aquifer that the Spaniards found

while Moroccan rulers represented its national territory as including the whole of the old Spanish Sahara, in effect its control did not reach east of the wall. For their part, the leaders of RASD and the POLISARIO still imagined the Saharawi nation in the framework of the old Spanish Sahara. But what they exercised was a kind of shared sovereignty over the refugee camps along with the Algerian government, and a growing control over the territorial fringe to the east of the Moroccan sand wall.⁷⁸

In spite of the ceasefire of 1991, the referendum that was part of the peace agreement has not yet been undertaken. A strong disagreement arose over who should be allowed to vote. The Moroccan government wants to include those inhabitants that have settled in the territory since 1975, POLISARIO privileged all those autochthones who used to live in Spanish Sahara and their descendants. For the Saharawi nationalism, old colonial borders have continued to define the territory of the future Saharawi state, but do not define the nation any more. After the demographic changes brought about by processes of exile, re-settlement and emigration, the Saharawi nation is now imagined as a transnational community spread across different spaces, from the refugees' camps to the Moroccan-occupied territory, and on to the diaspora of emigrants in neighbouring countries in Africa and also in Europe.⁷⁹

These positions have shifted more recently, but they have not come close to resolution. POLISARIO have accepted some of the proposals coming from the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) and the personal envoy of the UN secretary-general for the Western Sahara in 2003, but the Moroccan government seems to have renounced its commitment to hold the referendum.⁸⁰ As an alternative, Rabat has proposed conceding wider autonomy to the territory. However, as was the case with the Spanish statute of autonomy of 1974, and given the authoritarian character of the Moroccan regime and the lack of consultations with the population limits to the effectiveness of this solution seem evident.⁸¹ In the meantime, people on both sides of the sand wall continue to suffer a marginal citizenship status and the subordination of their human rights to incompatible nationalist ventures.

when doing oil exploration in the region.

⁷⁸ The map published by the Spanish research and journalism team Colectivo Mediterráneo Sur, shows the areas effectively controlled by Moroccan government and POLISARIO Front: <http://msur.es/focos/sahara>, last accessed 19 July 2016.

⁷⁹ A. Wilson, "Cycles of crisis, migration and the formation of new political identities in Western Sahara", Working Paper du CePeD, 25 (2012) 1-20.

⁸⁰ M.G. Guindo and A. Bueno, "La cuestión del Sáhara Occidental: de los Acuerdos de Madrid hasta hoy (1975-2016)", in: Barreñada and Ojeda, *Sáhara Occidental*.

⁸¹ J. C. Gimeno, "¿Elegir entre paz y justicia? Apuntes para la resolución del conflicto del Sahara Occidental", *Revista Andaluza de Antropología*, 10 (2016).

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that social actors can conceptualize a territory and its borders in very different forms, and construct through in this way a framework for their struggles. If it is true, in the majority of cases, that nationalistic claims do not form a united argument, then they have particularly plural and conflicting in the Sahara. Moroccan and Mauritanian irredentism imagined two bigger nations based on different interpretations of old old histories of political connections across the desert. For their part, the Spanish and Saharawi nationalists emphasized mainly European imperial history and colonial borders in order to lay a foundation for their claims. The "nations" that these imaginings referred to were at odds with each other, as they were defined by different borders, and were considered to be products of alternative versions of history.

The United Nations, and particularly the Afro-Asiatic bloc of countries that dominated its decolonization politics, assumed an important role in this process. It did not only provided one of the main forums for these struggles, but also shaped the language in with which the contenders had to express their aspirations. If the final conclusions of the UN visiting mission to the territory and the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion seemed to support POLISARIO's project it was in large part because POLISARIO adapted themselves and their imagination of the future, including the borders of the territory claimed, to the language of self-determination and the *uti possidetis* principle.

Indeed, since the end of the 1970s both the Moroccan and Saharawi nationalists have persisted in their claims to the whole territory on the basis of conflicting nationalist narratives. Ironically, this has happened in an area traditionally criss-crossed by numerous groups that have tended to identify borders as porous and non-defining of political orders. Sovereignty has historically been shared, fragmented, and superseded in the Atlantic Sahara context. The alternative and heterodox non-nationalist proposals raised during the frustrated decolonization process prove that the multiple histories of the Saharan desert may inspire more complex political imaginations, in order to ensure the citizenship rights and mutual understanding of its current inhabitants.

This article maintains that it is worth remembering all the possibilities that were opened up during the late Spanish colonial period, as well as those that were closed, in order to better understand the later conflict between Moroccan and Saharawi nationalisms. We also suggests that the difficulties of arriving at a negotiated and final solution are due not only to Moroccan dilatory tactics, but also to the exclusionary nature of territorial nationalism, which hinders the possibilities of foreseeing any solution different from a sovereign state. The recovery of older debates may help to conceive other possibilities not yet imagined, which might permit all the inhabitants of the area to peacefully enjoy the land.

This is not to argue for yet another solution based on the past that does not take into account the will of the people that currently live in (or want to come back to) the territory. A more complex interpretation of history can be inspirational, but it can hardly provide the basis of any durable political solution that the people

concerned have not agreed. In this sense, the organization of a referendum in Western Sahara is probably a crucial condition for the solution of the current conflict. We would simply ask whether the alternatives proposed in that halted referendum should be limited to those regarding competing nation-states, or if they should incorporate some other non-nationalist proposals, including the sharing of sovereignty over the same space, that would enable the enjoyment of freedom of movement and citizen rights for all its inhabitants.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.11.009>.