History of Western Sahara and Spanish colonisation

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Introduction
A look at the history of what became Western Sahara, reveals that the legal issue is one of decolonisation. Its people, the Saharawi, are a hybrid nation also found in neighbouring Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. They have distinct cultural attributes including a hybrid language shaped by long interaction between peoples from within and outside of Africa.

Of the extra-continental forces, it is Spain that colonised most of the Saharawi. Once a great European power that had been reduced to a third rate position, Spain had been humiliated by the Americans at the end of the nineteenth century just when other Europeans were busy grabbing territories in Africa. It acquired tiny Western Sahara, but delayed actualising its territorial claims on the ground through effective occupation. Its neighbour, in both Europe and Africa, was France, and France was more efficient than Spain at taking care of its colonial interests.

Spain suffered as a virtual international outcast early in the 20th Century. It played little role in World War I, was plunged into a civil war, and sympathised with Hitler and Mussolini in World War II. Rehabilitated through the exigencies of the Cold War, it was admitted to the United Nations in 1955 and became subject to new international rules requiring colonial powers to show how they intended to set about de-colonising their foreign possessions. It was reluctant to do so, particularly in the light of the possibility of the commercial exploitation of phosphate deposits at Bu Craa that would free it from dependency on Morocco. It was eventually forced to leave unceremoniously in 1976.
With the Spaniards preparing to leave, the internal struggle for power and identity manifested itself in the emergence of several Saharawi ‘liberation’ groups. These groups were virtually non-existent before 1960s, and may had been inspired by the independence of Morocco in 1956, Mauritania in 1960, and Algeria in 1962 which had left Western Sahara as the only remaining colony in the region. The Saharawi were divided some looking up to Morocco, others claiming they wished to continue ties with Spain, and yet others demanding full independence. The demand for independence was championed by the Frente Popular Para La Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio De Oro, Polisario.

Polisario came to symbolise the Saharawi desire for independence and the struggle for identity and international acceptance of the Saharawi state. Two declarations by Saharawi leaders in 1976, the year that Spain officially withdrew from Western Sahara, illustrate this struggle. On declaring the territory to be the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, SADR, on 27 February 1976, Polisario leaders appear not to have regarded their new state as an African country. They described it as a ‘free, independent, sovereign state ruled by an Arab national democratic system of progressive unionist orientation and of Islamic religion’.¹ Some months later, Polisario modified this by describing the Saharawi state as having ‘Arab, African, and Islamic identity’, and forming part of the Third World in ‘opposition to imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation’.² Still, it had problems being welcomed into the community of nations as had happened with other former European colonies.

The initial emphasis placed on ‘Arab national’ is an indication of power relations that have evolved over centuries to the extent that being ‘Arab’ is considered prestigious, and an issue of social status.³ Though preferring to be Arab, its people are a mixture of various ethnic groupings with links between predominantly black
people in the south, and more light skinned people in the north. They are culturally different from their immediate neighbours in terms of lifestyle, religion, and even language. They are a hybrid people with a hybrid language, Hassaniya. Their music is predominantly African, place names are predominantly Berber, religion is Suni Moslem, and everyday words to describe small items are Spanish. Although divided into different groupings each with its own identity generally traceable to a founding patriarch or holy man, they had a form of government, the Ait Arabin or Council of Forty, that brought together different groupings to discuss the fate of their people independently of the governments in Morocco or Mauritania. They were mainly nomadic bearing primary loyalty to the qabila and clan. They engaged in ghazi, or raids, in order to acquire livestock from other qabila. Their hybrid language, which incorporates Arabic, African, Berber, and Spanish cultural concepts, is a part of their identity which distinguishes them from their Moroccan neighbours.

They maintained a caste system of superior and inferior tribes with slaves, mostly black Africans, considered the most inferior. Those assuming superiority, were of two types: the shorfa who claim to be Arab and presumably can trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohamed; and the ahel mdafa who are warriors or people of the gun. Those considered inferior were the znaga, the weak or the conquered, who needed ‘protection’ and therefore had to pay horma or tribute to the superior groups. When the Spaniards effectively colonised the Saharawi by establishing administrative machinery, all Saharawi became znaga and had to pay horma to the Spaniards.

Before the Arab invasions

The evolution of hierarchic identity in Western Sahara can be traced roughly to 5500 BCE when a people termed Bafots, are
reported to have migrated north from the tropics and probably crossed over to the Canary Islands where they are identified as the Gaunche. They were joined at around 2000 BCE by a light skinned ‘Neolithic’ people who came from the north through the Rif and Atlas Mountains. These various peoples intermarried and, as a result, a people calling themselves ‘Amaziah’ or ‘Imazighen’ – meaning ‘free men’ – emerged to dominate the region. Other migrants from the east and the south mixed with the Imazighen and came to be called, and would seemingly accept to be called, Berbers.9

The Berbers occupied most of what became the North West African states of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara, Mali, and Mauritania. They suffered a series of invasions from the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, and finally Western Europeans. The Phoenicians and Romans concentrated their activities along the Mediterranean and rarely ventured south of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. The Phoenicians helped to build Carthage, controlled the Mediterranean, and mingled with the Berbers until they were dislodged and driven out by the Romans.10 The Romans dominated North Africa for 600 years but there is virtually no evidence of their presence south of the Atlas Mountains. The Phoenicians and the Romans, therefore, had little influence in what became Western Sahara.

The waves of Arab invasion

The first extra-continental invaders with a lasting impact on Western Sahara, were the different Arab nations. Arab invaders disrupted the status quo on two fronts. First was the ‘Arabisation’ of the region which proved so effective that today it is difficult to classify the people as either Arab or African.11 Secondly, Arabs succeeded in imposing their new faith, Islam, from Egypt in the east to Morocco in the west, from ancient Ghana in the south to
Cordoba and Toledo on the Iberian Peninsula in the north. They mingled and intermarried with the various Berber peoples and produced autonomous communities that were identified with certain regions. Western Sahara was part of this Arab-Islamic conquest and of the intermingling of different peoples. Given the desert environment, the peoples tended to become nomadic pastoralists rather than sedentary agriculturalists.

In Western Sahara, the main Berber people were of the Sanhaja branch, initially a sedentary agricultural people who were forced by the encroaching desert to become nomadic, warlike, caravan raiders. Having initially conquered and pushed the existing black people southwards, they too became subject to control by their Berber rivals and were confined to the desert by the Zenata in the north and the Soninke in the south. They eventually broke out of this confinement in the eleventh century after Yahya Ibn Ibrahim, chief of the Gadala sub-branch of Sanhaja, invited Abdallah Ibn Yacin to teach his people proper Islam. The Gadala did not like this, and rejected Ibn Yacin.

Ibn Yacin found refuge, and followers, among the Lemtuna in Adrar, Mauritania, and went on to create a vast empire that was eventually split by two cousins. Known as the Almoravids, or ‘people of the ribat’, his followers imposed themselves on the Sanhaja tribes of Lemtuna, Gadala, and Massufa. They captured Sijilmasa in 1053, and Audaghast in ancient Ghana in 1054, and founded the city of Marak or Marakesh, from which the name Morocco would later be derived. When Ibn Yacin died in 1059, a Lemtuna chief, Abu Bakr Ibn Omar, assumed overall command of the Almoravid forces. When Abu Bakr travelled south to suppress anti-Almoravid revolts by various Sanhaja tribes with the Gadala in the lead, however, he made the mistake of leaving his cousin, Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, in charge of Marakesh. On his return, the cousin advised him to go back to the desert so that Tashfin could keep what would become Morocco, and Abu Bakr
could rule the Sahara. Abu Bakr had no choice but to accept the coup and the division of the Almoravidic empire.\textsuperscript{12}

Although Morocco began to emerge as a geographic reality under the Almoravids,\textsuperscript{13} it was with this division between Ibn Tashfin and Abu Bakr that its frontiers became clear. Subsequently, a cultural demarcation arose with the Atlas Mountains as the southern frontier of what was Morocco proper, the \textit{bilad el- makhzen} where Moroccan authority was not in doubt. Beyond that was the land of trouble, \textit{bilad es siba}, where Morocco had no control. These were a separate people in a separate territory that became Western Sahara occupied by nomads.\textsuperscript{14}

Other than the division between the claims of Ibn Tashfin and Abu Bakr, the Almoravid empire collapsed as a result of continuous internal challenges. Abu Bakr continued with his efforts to suppress challenges to his authority in the south and succeeded in capturing Kumbi Saleh, the capital of ancient Ghana, in 1076. The challenges, however, continued. He was killed in battle in 1087 trying to suppress a rebellion. The Masmuda, terming themselves the ‘Almohades’ or ‘people of one god’, brought an end to the Almoravidic dominance by 1147. Thereafter, Abu Bakr’s zone was repeatedly invaded by various Arabs who depleted the size of the remaining Sanhaja presence, with the Tekna reportedly among the few remaining descendants.\textsuperscript{15}

Out of the various conquests of the Sanhaja by the Arabs and subsequent intermingling, an assortment of clans, or tribes with which most people in Western Sahara came to identify, were founded. The earliest of these new tribes were the Ulad Delim who traced their origins to Arabia. Eventually settling in Western Sahara and Mauritania, they intermarried with the Berbers and after prolonged wars, imposed themselves and their language, which ultimately became Hassaniya.\textsuperscript{16}
The next major tribal grouping to emerge and challenge the Delim for prominence, was the Reguibat, a mixture of Arabs and Berbers. They abandoned sedentary life, became nomadic, and ended up splitting into two groups, one in the west, the other in the east. Their founder, Sidi Ahmed al-Reguibi, supposedly settled in southern Morocco around 1503, reportedly after buying the Drar desert land from the Sultan. They considered themselves independent and did not recognise the Sultan of Morocco as their sovereign. With time, the Reguibat came to dominate parts of modern Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, and the entire Western Sahara. They experienced a Reguibat civil war in 1863, fought the Delim from 1877-1891, and captured Tindouf from the Tajakant and raised it in 1895. Their dominance was finally established in 1907 when they defeated the Sba, but they too came to be dominated by France and Spain.

As the Delim and the Reguibat entrenched themselves, Morocco experienced dynastic changes that eventually brought the Alawites to the throne. There was the Saadian dynasty, named after the Beni Saad of the Draa region, who fought the Portuguese on the Atlantic coast to secure control of Saharan caravan trade from the Songhay in the south, to the Mediterranean. Having defeated invading Portuguese and Turks in the ‘Battle of the Three Kings’ in 1578, Ahmed – thereafter known as Ahmed Al-Mansour – consolidated his hold on Morocco before turning his attention to the unruly south in the quest for gold and slaves. He died in 1603 and Morocco fragmented in the face of numerous claimants to the throne. Out of the chaos emerged the Alawites who gained control of the caravan routes before seizing power in Morocco. Moulay Ismail, son of an African slave woman, brought stability to Morocco by 1677, built up a large army to defend the empire, acquire slaves, and contained Sanhaja rebels. After his death in 1727, Moroccan influence in the south dissipated to the extent that future sultans
would admit to Europeans that they had no control over the desert and therefore could not guarantee safety. The Sahara remained a no-go zone for Alawites, even when they temporarily ganged up with Ma el-Ainin to oppose European penetration in Northwest Africa. It was impossible to stop the European colonial powers who conquered the Saharawi and made them colonial subjects.

The Europeans: Spain as a colonial power

The other extra-continental force to affect Western Sahara was the Europeans who came mainly through the Atlantic Ocean. Initially it was the Portuguese who made inroads at the coast, and then came the Spaniards who seemed to concentrate on the wealth across the Atlantic. Finally were the French who actually determined the current borders that define Western Sahara. Of these three, Spain became the colonial power. As a colonial power in Africa, Spain was weak, out of tune with trends in colonialism, dependant on France for defence against the Saharawi, and was manipulated by other forces. A far cry from its status as a European power in the conquest of the Americas!

It started with the Spaniards, their country being the one European state where Islam had been firmly entrenched, seeking ways of liberating themselves both geographically and psychologically from the Muslims. Although they suffered a setback when Ibn Tashfin declared Spain part of the Almoravidic empire, they eventually succeeded in 1492 after capturing Alhambra in Granada and seizing Ceuta and Mellila in North Africa, almost as a guarantee that the Africans would never return. In an attempt to engender a sense of ‘Spanishness’ in the population, the colonial memory was expunged and the colonial record re-written removing anything that did not glorify white achievements. Deliberately engaging
in this exercise of official amnesia and mythical superiority, Spain went on to conquer the Americas.

These feelings of glory, however, came to an end when other European nations joined the competition between Spain and Portugal for overseas territories. Spain’s feud with Portugal was partly settled by the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, which declared the strategic territory from Cape Bojador to Messa a Spanish zone of influence. Targeting the riches across the Atlantic, Spain ignored the African interior although it made contacts with the Berbers on the coast. Seeing Spain’s riches, the English, the Dutch, and the French intervened to short-circuit Spanish greatness by engaging in piracy against Spanish wealth on high seas.

Spain’s inability to defend its empire made it open to manipulation and weakened it both materially and morally. Piracy gave mainly the English and the French a free hand at the expense of Spain. With its imperial fortunes tied to those of France, especially during the Napoleonic Wars, Spain lost its Latin American colonies with the United States warning it not to attempt recolonisation. It was further demoralised when the United States, coveting the remnants of the Spanish empire, provoked a war which enabled it to seize the islands of Cuba and the Philippines. Spain was helpless and none of its supposed friends could help.

In the later part of the 19th Century, as big powers embarked on territorial expansion by acquiring colonies, mostly in Africa. Spain appeared old and weak. It had been slow to industrialise, to take advantage of technology, and to acquire new capacities to defend its interests. Its strategically located overseas claims attracted the attention of new and technologically stronger empires that, wrote Sebastian Balfour, ‘did not respect historical rights over territories or dynastic connections.’ Instead, the emphasis was on ‘a crude new
philosophy of Social Darwinism in which the notion of the survival of the fittest was extended to peoples and nations. Older and weaker empires … found stronger and acquisitive Powers chafing on the borders’. Among those chafing at the borders was the United States which emerged as an imperial power by robbing Spain.

Spain was late in adjusting to new realities and the climate of colonialism and in staking claims to Africa. There was a European rush to grab African territories in what Zartman termed ‘the great African hunt’. The hunt, however, was mainly a stiff territory grabbing competition between the English and the French. Other Europeans were minor hunters, and Spain was the least of all. Its catches in the hunt, including Western Sahara which it claimed in 1884, were tiny and not as well endowed with natural wealth as the others.

Those catches were a result of a few Spanish imperialists and adventurers who showed interest in the exploration and claiming territories in Africa. These took the initiative of paying some people, whom they called chiefs, on the coast of Guinea to pledge loyalty to Spain. Among such adventurers was Joachim Gatell, a medic, disguised as ‘Caid Ismail’, and Emilio Bonelli. There was also Joachim Costa from the Spanish Society for Africanists and Colonialists, and Manuel Iradier, the explorer from the Basque country. Iradier, with dreams of making Africa Spanish from Cape to Tripoli, explored the Guinea coast and helped Spain to claim that territory by convincing chiefs not to follow the British, the French, and the Germans who reportedly robbed, cheated, and were violent.

Although Spain eventually took some interest in staking claims to Western Sahara, it waited for France to determine the size of its claims. In January and February 1884, individual Spaniards and companies took the initiative in securing deals with Saharawi chiefs ceding the Rio de Oro zone to Spain.
Bonelli even got the Saharawi to agree that trading coastal posts should be named after Spaniards who championed colonisation. Subsequently, such names as Villa Cisneros, Medina Gatell, and Puerto Badia, cropped up as place names. And in December 1884, Madrid declared it had seized the territory ‘between Bahia del Oest … and C Bojador’. Other individuals, like Alvarez and Quiroga in the Saguiet-el-Hamra, worked to persuade the Saharawi to accept Spanish rule while Spanish officialdom dragged its feet and tended to watch what the French would do. The limited contact its people had with the Saharawi, was confined to a few small towns and military barracks. Through a series of treaties from 1900 to 1912, the French forced through a definition of what Spain could claim. After ensuring that the rich parts of the territories stayed within the borders of its colonies of Mauritania, Algeria, and Morocco, France allowed Spain to become the owner of Rio de Oro, Seguiet-el-Hamra, and southern Morocco or Tarfaya.31

Furthermore, Spain had problems in its zone because it was too weak to deal with the resistance mounted by Ma el Ainin. Born at Hodh near River Niger in the 1830s of Lemtuna parentage as Mohammed Mustafa, Ma el Ainin’s father was a respected marabout who passed his religious zeal to his son. With his name changed to Ma el Ainin because of his eyes, the son fathered sixty-eight children, with twenty-six women, who subsequently became founders of his tribe to be found scattered throughout Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, and Western Sahara. He acquired fame and power as a religious zealot, having mastered the Koran at the age of seven, and built a committed following, called Berik Al-Iah, who attributed miracles to him.32

This fame enabled him to establish contacts. His reputation had attracted the attention of the Alawite rulers in Morocco who wanted to ward off European penetration. In 1859, he established a base at the Tindouf area from where he could roam the desert.
In his preaching against the defilement of the desert by the Europeans, he encouraged the harassment of the Spaniards at Villa Cisneros. This pleased Moroccan Sultan Hassan I who gave him the title of *caliph* and some guns with which to fight the Europeans. When Abdelaziz, then fourteen, succeeded Hassan in 1894, Ma el Ainin’s influence increased with the Sultan entrusting him with the administration of Tarfaya which Morocco had supposedly bought from the English in 1895. He then decided to build a religious and commercial centre in a strategic and fertile area, alongside the Saguieet-el-Hamra, which became Smara. With a lot of help in terms of materials and skills from the Sultan, Ma el Ainin occupied his city in 1902.33

Collaboration with the Sultan, however, was limited to fighting the defilers of the desert but not in joining the defilement. The biggest defilers were the French who were encroaching on the Saharawi from every corner, having effectively taken over his birthplace of Hodth, Tunisia, as well as Algeria by 1903. In their conquests, the French had been assisted by Saharawi leaders in Mauritania, especially Sheikh Sidiya Baba of Trarza. In 1903 Traza was declared a French protectorate. This disgusted Ma el Ainin who then organised the assassination of French commander Coppolani at Tangant. In 1905, Ma el Ainin tried to induce Morocco to join an anti-French *jihad* by declaring his territory part of Morocco which was engaged in a struggle against Christian invaders. His ability to procure arms from Morocco, as well as Spanish and German companies, made him titular leader of a Saharawi coalition of tribes that were opposed to France. An initial success against the French at Tidjikja turned into defeat when in December 1906 the French received large reinforcements. When Abdelaziz seemed to change his mind about confronting the French,34 Ma el Ainin’s loyalty of convenience, too, disappeared.

While Abdelaziz had simply come out of the shadow of Ma el Ainin and had come to terms with the powerful Europeans,
particularly the French who determined the future of Northwest Africa, Ma el Ainin was un-reconciled with the French defilers. Other than limiting Spanish expansion of any of its colonies into the interior through a series of Franco-Spanish conventions, the French had created Mauritania in 1904, incorporating Ma el Ainin’s birthplace of Hodth. Mal el Ainin then helped to overthrow Abdelaziz by supporting a rival brother, Abdelhafid, in 1907 in return for arms against the French. But within three years, Abdelhafid had turned against Ma el Ainin.36

Seemingly betrayed by the Sultans, Ma el Ainin unsuccessfully tried to seize power and challenge both the French and the Sultan.37 Before reaching this decision, however, his forces led by his sons had repeatedly harassed the French in the south, without, however, score victories, and had seemingly turned on each other. Furthermore, the French forced Abdelhafid to turn against Ma el Ainin. In response, Ma el Ainin abandoned Smara, headed north, and set up camp at Tiznit in southern Souss, later southern Morocco. In May 1910, he declared himself the mahdi and his followers proclaimed him the Sultan. In June 1910, he led a 6000 strong army towards Fez to fight Abdelhafid only to be intercepted by the French who routed him on 23 June 1910. He returned to Tiznit and died in October 1910.38

Ma el Ainin’s legacy lived on in his sons, mainly Ahmad El Heiba, who continued harassing the French until 1934. Proclaimed mahdi and Sultan in 1912, El Heiba’s domain reportedly covered everything north of the Adrar. He marched on Marakesh, but was defeated by the French at Sidi Othmane. The French also invaded and desecrated religious sites in Smara in 1913.39 This energised the Reguibi to step up resistance against the French, and during World War I, the Reguibi supported the Turks who tried to help El Heiba. El Heiba died in 1919 and his role of leading the resistance was taken over by his brother, Merebbi Rebbu who fought in the Adrar until 1926 when he was defeated.
There was also Mohammed el Mamun, a relative of Ma el Ainin, who had served as an anti-French agent for the Germans in World War I, but had ended up being decorated by the French. He took over the anti-French campaign in 1929 and started attacking French positions in Mauritania. The French, moving from Morocco southwards and from Mauritania northwards, finally ended the Ma el Ainin and Reguibat resistance in 1934. Spain was then free to pursue its Western Sahara claims.

Spain, however, was reluctant to incur administrative expenses in Western Sahara. Its presence was established only in smaller towns such as Al Ayuon, La Gueira, and Villa Cisnero. Western Sahara was considered a military outpost from which the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War recruited a few Saharawi fighters. And during World War II the territory could be used as a bargaining chip with Adolph Hitler when it appeared as if the Germans might win. The territory was assumed to be a wasteland until 1947 when Manuel Alia Medina found large phosphate reserves Bu Craa.40

After World War II, Spain remained a pariah state because of its links to Hitler, but it was drawn into the Western camp in the wake of the escalating Cold War.41 Although it was not a founding member of the United Nations at San Francisco in 1945, its colony was still noted by the trusteeship committee. Isaiah Bowman had suggested that Spanish Sahara be considered a Spanish metropolitan area to be exempted from potential decolonisation – like Alaska and Hawaii would be for the United States, and Algiers for France42 – but the proposal was rejected. Instead, Spanish colonial policies were closely scrutinised as it sought to be accepted into the community of nations by portraying itself as a bastion of anti-communism. Its admission to the United Nations in 1955 represented an implicit acceptance that it would abide by new rules that called for colonial accountability. It was reluctant to do so.
A big challenge for Spain arose with the outbreak of violence in Algeria and nationalist unrest in Morocco, not to mention disturbances in Mauritania. Together, these eventually led to independence for the three French colonies surrounding Spain’s Sahara territories. In 1954, when France deported Sultan Mohamed V to Madagascar, an Army of Liberation rose up in southern Morocco that inspired the Saharawi to fight. Since it was fighting an anti-colonial war in Algeria, France chose to appease the Moroccans by returning Mohamed to Rabat as a hero, and by granting independence to Morocco in 1956. Although Mohamed, thereafter, sought to disband the Army of Liberation by absorbing some members into his new Forces Armees Royales (FAR) many Saharawi who had joined the Army of Liberation to harass both the French in Morocco and Algeria, and the Spanish in Western Sahara, continued with their attacks. Spain was particularly hard pressed in Ifni, Tarfaya and Western Sahara although it still managed to get the support of some Saharawi who reportedly volunteered to fight the Army of Liberation and demonstrated in favour of Franco. With Moroccan support, France and Spain mounted Operation Ouragon to flush out the remnants of the Army of Liberation. Those who fled to Morocco were disarmed. Madrid then rewarded Rabat by handing over Tarfaya in 1958. Though defeated, the Saharawi had tasted a war of liberation.

Spain was forced to rethink its colonial policy, and with Morocco and the future Mauritania casting covetous eyes on Western Sahara, and with the United Nations demanding colonial accountability, it decided to make its presence felt on the ground. This presence was to be administrative, industrial, commercial, educational, and social. Administrative changes, announced in 1961, included the creation of forms and levels of local governance that were to be based on the structures in Spain. There was to be a governor general residing at El-Ayuon
and answerable to Madrid. Next was to be a territorial council, called cabildo, city councils, called ayuntamientos, for El-Ayuon and Villa Cisneros, local authorities at Smara and La Gueira, and ‘nomad factions’ which referred to various nomad peoples in the land. The cabildo was to have fourteen members, two of them elected by the two ayuntamientos, six by commerce, industry, and the professions, and six by ‘nomad factions’. The president of cabildo and the mayors of ayuntamientos, automatically became procuradores or members of the Spanish parliament, the Cortes, sitting in Madrid. It took two years to put these structures in place and the first president of the Cabildo was Khatri Ould Said Ould el-Joumani, a Reguibat who at the time was considered loyal to Spain. Khatri lost his position in 1965 to another loyal Reguibat chief, Seila Uld Abeida. He had sided with Spain against the Army of Liberation.

Other than administrative adjustments, Spain attempted in the 1960s to be seen to be developing its province. It started directing human and material investments to the territory. Mining infrastructure was put in place, towns upgraded, labour recruited, and a program of sedentarisation of the nomads mounted. Nature helped in the ‘sedentarisation’ as the drought that hit the area killed large numbers of livestock and made people desperate to find alternative livelihood in the growing small towns. Spain increased budgetary allocations, built infrastructure and schools, and encouraged investments in mineral exploration, particularly oil and iron. Most importantly, the production of phosphate at Bu Craa was started and a sixty-two mile long conveyor belt was built to deliver the phosphate to a port near Al-Ayoun from where it would be sent to Spain.

All these activities brought the different Saharawi tribes into close contact with each other and with the Spaniards. The contact with the Spaniards was not on an equal footing; it was a master servant relationship in which all the Saharawi became znaga and
had to pay *horma* or tribute to the Spaniards. Many Saharawi, such as the Reguibat, were forced to settle in the towns by drought and by the possibility in and around the phosphate mining industry. In this unequal set up, some were recruited into the lower ranks of the police and the military forces to help keep the peace. In the towns, the Saharawi interacted with through residence, schools, and new rules of governance.48

Still, there was clear political dissatisfaction and in particular in the face of mounting pressure from the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity, it became necessary for Spain to show that it really acted in the interests of the Saharawi. Madrid became increasingly intransigent as it insisted that Western Sahara was a province of Spain, not subject to self-determination.49 It tried to prove that the Saharawi were happy under the Spaniards as demonstrated by the March 1966 petition to the United Nations by various chiefs in Western Sahara who thanked Spain for raising their level of civilisation! In October 1966, Spain organised a referendum in which 90% of the votes cast were in favour of Spanish rule and, Saharawi elders took the results to the United Nations Commission on Non-Autonomous Zones. In Madrid, Franco happily received the elders who thought him to be godlike.50

Yet, despite the petitions, Spain was still not looking good and so it decided to improve its global image by creating a legislative assembly that would be purely advisory. Franco reportedly indicated that he was amenable to a request for a legislative assembly and then he willingly consented to the Saharawi request. Although Spain then, in 1967, proceeded to create a general assembly of compliant elders, the *djemaa*, the move did not ease pressure. The United Nations remained unconvinced and continued to affirm the right of the Saharawi to independence.51 And most importantly, the Saharawi did not wish permanently to remain Spain’s ‘African brothers’ and were demanding more than an advisory role from Madrid.
They were not happy with their subordinate status under which all were classed as znaga.

As a collective znaga, the various groups in Western Sahara were forging a sense of common identity as Saharawi. Some were bitter veterans of the disbanded and crushed Army of Liberation which had been a good training ground for future anti-Spanish guerilla activities. Others were educated young people, aware of what was happening in the rest of Africa as well as in the neighbouring colonies. As Saharawi, they started demanding involvement in matters of the ‘province’ and then evolved into an anti-colonial movement demanding independence. In addition, new administrative and political institutions, designed to entrench Spanish rule in which the Saharawi were treated as little brothers to be spoken for, provided an opportunity for Saharawi to think in terms of a Western Saharan geopolitical entity separate from its neighbours. The other colonies had had French colonial experience and had acquired their independence from France. The Saharawi colonial experience was Spanish, and they were not independent.

The first serious group to mount an urban challenge to Spanish control in the 1960s was Harakat Tahrir. It was led by Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri who, as a teenager during the 1957-1958 Saharawi anti-Spanish War, had been evacuated by Saharawi guerrillas. After schooling in Morocco, he imbibed nationalist rhetoric in Middle East universities, returned to Morocco in 1966 where he established a newspaper, and then moved back to Western Sahara in 1967 as a Koranic teacher at Smara. At Smara, he founded the Harakat Tahrir Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab (Organisation of the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Oued ed-Dahab), or simply Harakat Tahrir, which infiltrated even the supposedly loyal uniformed Saharawi and office employees. They were attracted by Harakat Tahrir’s calls for reform and progress towards independence. A
confrontation with the government at Zemla, led to what came to be termed the Zemla massacre in 1970 after Harakat Tahrir presented demands to the government. The government rejected the demands, arrested some leaders, and after a riot broke out, shot a number of people. There was further arrests including that of the ‘classic agitator’, Bassiri, who was never seen again. That shattered Harakat Tahrir.55

Although shattered, Harakat Tahrir had reignited Saharawi nationalism that re-emerged barely three years later in the form of Polisario.56 Opposition to eventual Saharawi independence, however, came from two powerful sides that tried to sponsor alternative anti-colonial movements that would advance their interests. Morocco and Mauritania wanted anti-colonial movements that would lead to annexation, not independence. Spain wanted movements that stressed Spanish benevolence and continued presence, and so it sponsored and registered PUNS, acronym for Partido de la Union Nacional Saharaui, which rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian irredentism and advocated close relations with Spain. Making little headway, PUNS soon fell apart. Morocco also sponsored its own party, FLU or Frente de Liberacion y de la Unidad, to discredit Polisario and advocate union with Morocco.57 And there was also Morehob, or Movement de Resistance des Hommes Bleus, associated with an opportunistic ex-policeman, Bachir Figuigui also known as Eduardo Moha,58 who kept on shifting political positions.

What would become Polisario, therefore, initially had a rough time but it eventually forced change of attitude and the international dynamics of Western Sahara. To spearhead it were university students revolving around El-Ouli Mustapha Sayed at the Mohammed V University at Rabat, who studied such revolutionaries as Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara.59 He was joined by such future leaders as Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed, Mohammed Ali Ould el-Ouali, Mohammed Salem Ould Salek,
Mohammed Ould Sadati, and Bashir Mustapha Sayed, and together they formed a network of Saharawi students that initially approached Moroccan opposition parties such as the Istiqlal Party, because they opposed Moroccan government policies. Disillusioned by lack of support in Morocco, they started approaching the Saharawi in Western Sahara and established contacts with former supporters of the Harakat Tahrir to strengthen an anti-colonial militant movement. They were harassed by Moroccan officials in April 1972 at Tan Tan for their anti-Spanish activities.60

They sought aid from Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania, but only Libya, in 1972, was willing to support a liberation war in Western Sahara. After a 1969 coup, Libya was under new revolutionary leadership committed to supporting other revolutionaries. It was, therefore, willing to supply anti-Spanish forces with weapons, funds, and an initial propaganda base.61

In May 1973, Polisario was founded on the frontier of Mauritania and Spanish Sahara62 and declared that it opted ‘for revolutionary violence and the armed struggle as a means by which the Saharawi Arab African people can recover total liberty and foil the manoeuvres of Spanish colonialism’ and started attracting attention with attacks on Spanish installations in the territory.63 It appeared to be more committed to the struggle than any other group, and this increased its popularity among the Saharawi, especially when, in 1974, it clearly stated that independence was its objective. Its successes in sabotaging infrastructure and garnering the support of the Saharawi people, forced a reevaluation of positions by Spain and by other countries.64 Among those to change position on Polisario was Algeria which became the guerrilla movement’s biggest supporter against Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania.

Algerian support was interesting in that Algeria was initially skeptical of how serious Polisario’s was. Acceptance came later
only once Algeria’s security interests coincided with those of Polisario, and Polisario had proved its popularity and serious commitment to fight on the ground. Algeria had even tried to coordinate policy on Western Sahara with Morocco, in the hope that Morocco would abandon claims to Tindouf and other Algerian territories. It had refused to support Polisario, allow the transit of weapons, and had even imprisoned Polisario leaders. It had reportedly funded Mauritanian activities and endorsed a secret deal between Morocco and Mauritania to share Western Sahara. Algeria felt its security interests were seriously threatened when Morocco and Mauritania decided to frustrate a United Nations mandated referendum, and proceeded to exclude Algeria in a settlement with Spain over Western Sahara. With its interests ignored and seemingly under threat, Algeria decided to support Polisario in every way it could to defeat Mauritania and Morocco in their expansionist designs. As a consequence, Polisario acquired a solid support base which made it a force to be reckoned with.

Spain and external forces
The interests of external forces, as Algeria’s behavior showed, complicated decolonisation in Western Sahara and resulted in Spain losing control as the Saharawi became victims of the power play. At the centre was Morocco’s imperialist irredentism which threatened not only Western Sahara, but also Algeria and Mauritania. This was first given voice by Istiqlal leader Allal el-Fassi on 7 July 1956 through a map claiming that ‘Greater Morocco’ included Mauritania, as well as parts of Senegal, Mali, Algeria, and all Spanish colonies in Northwest Africa. The party and the King, Mohamed V, endorsed the claim which became part of the new Moroccan ideology. Morocco, to buttress its claims to Mauritania, supported the activities of Hurma Ould
Babana who sought a Mauritanian union with Morocco in order to dilute the influence of Mauritania’s black people. In October 1957 at the United Nations, Morocco opposed the Inclusion of Mauritania, Western Sahara, and Ifni on the United Nations list of Non-Self-Governing-Territories, claiming that these were integral parts of its territory.

Morocco thereafter, quarrelled with two of the territories – Mauritania and Algeria – included in its ‘Greater Morocco’ when they became independent. It refused to recognise Mauritania’s independence from France in 1960, unsuccessfully tried to block its entry into the United Nations, and even broke ties with Tunisia for recognising the new state. For his part, in 1957 Mauritania’s new president, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, countered Rabat’s 1956 claims to a ‘Greater Morocco’ with his own assertion of a ‘Greater Mauritania’ extending to the borders of Morocco. Like his political rival in Mauritania, Babana, Ould Daddah disliked black people and wanted to dilute their presence by uniting Western Sahara and Mauritania as ard al-bidan, or the land of the whites who combined Arabic and Berber attributes.

Considering Western Sahara as a buffer zone between his country and irredentist Morocco, he repeatedly portrayed Mauritania at Organisation of African Unity meetings, as ‘a hyphen between the Maghreb and Central Africa’. Eventually, Morocco recognised Mauritania in 1969 and the two started collaborating at the expense of Western Sahara.

The Moroccan King, Hassan II, with similar designs on Algeria, had taken advantage of the weakness of the Algerian revolutionaries. In return for anti-colonial support, he pressed Ferhat Abbas, in July 1961, to agree to border adjustments after Algerian independence. When in July 1962, Algeria became independent, Moroccan troops moved into Algeria to actualise the claim and await official endorsement. At the time, Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella was trying to consolidate his position
in the face of a myriad of problems. Amongst them was a rebellion in the south by the Berbers, or the Kabyle Revolt, and he was not in a position, or willing, to discuss the border. For Algeria, the colonial borders were to remain unchanged. Hassan then decided to annex the territory militarily and in 1963 embarked upon what came to be termed the ‘War of the Sands’. The war ended when the newly created Organisation of African Unity persuaded Hassan to withdraw his troops from Algeria. The two remained suspicious of each other, however.

The Organisation of African Unity was a product of many conflicting interests confronting newly independent African states. Many of these states had gained their independence in 1960, and had been admitted to the United Nations as full members. Their presence, along with that of other Third World countries, might have induced the United Nations to adopt resolution 1514 of 1960 – the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples – in which it stressed that ‘all peoples have a right to self-determination’ and the right to choose freely their own economic and political future. While they all agreed on the need for speedy decolonisation, they were divided on the direction self-determination should take when conflicting claims to rights arose. They particularly disagreed on the adjustment of colonial boundaries. Some countries displayed irredentist tendencies, Morocco amongst them, and claimed to be ‘progressive’ while coveting land in other states. They called for the abolition of colonial boundaries to suit real African interests, as opposed to those of colonialists who had determined them. Opposed to them were those, mainly potential victims of irredentism, insisting on the sanctity of colonial boundaries, unfair as they may have been, in order to avoid chaos and possible bloodshed.

This was the situation in May 1963 when the heads of state and governments of independent African states met in Addis Ababa to found the Organisation of African Unity. They agreed
to uphold the sanctity of colonial boundaries and that the right of self-determination was to be exercised within colonial borders. They also agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of member states. These provisions appear to have been aimed at the ‘progressive’ states who were seemingly guilty of trying to violate existing boundaries and of interfering in the internal affairs of member states. The Organisation of African Unity, however, did create a Liberation Committee to promote the liberation of the remaining colonies.

The Liberation Committee first met in July 1963 and seemed unsure on how to treat tiny colonies, implying concessions to irredentists. It sought to categorise colonial powers and colonies in terms of amenability to decolonisation coupled with the viability of the entities to be decolonised. Spain, along with Britain and France, was described as a country which, although it recognised the right of self-determination, needed diplomatic pressure to make it accelerate decolonisation. It also tended to defer decisions on the plight of small colonies, such as Spanish Sahara and Djibouti, that were assumed to be unviable if independent. This was heartening to both the colonial powers and the neighbouring irredentist countries. This may well have been what induced Madrid to announce, in August 1963, that it intended to give administrative and economic autonomy to Guinea, and Ifni to Morocco, but made no commitment on Western Sahara. Equatorial Guinea attained independence in 1968.

While the Organisation of African Unity was initially reluctant to engage Spain on the Western Sahara, the United Nations was not. In December 1960 the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 1514(XV) on the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples stating that ‘all peoples have a right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social
and cultural development’. Resolution 1514 also prohibited any ‘attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country’. The United Nations followed this up in 1961 by creating a watchdog Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which allowed the United Nations a special presence in the final stages of the decolonisation in any territory. In September 1963, it specified Western Sahara as a territory affected by resolution 1514, and in 1964 went on to complain about Spain’s reluctance to implement United Nations wishes. The General Assembly, in 1965, went on to request Spain to do everything possible to decolonise Western Sahara and to hold a referendum on self-determination.

Madrid became increasingly intransigent with claims that Western Sahara was a province of Spain, not subject to self-determination. Eventually, however, it was forced to shift its stance and accept possible Saharawi independence. Irredentist Morocco and Mauritania in 1966, each with dreams of making Western Sahara one of its provinces, had countered Spain by insisting on the Saharawi’s right of self-determination. Spain had then proceeded to create a General Assembly of Compliant Elders, the djemaa in 1967. This, however, failed to relieve the pressure from the United Nations which continued to affirm the right of the Saharawi to independence. In September 1973, Franco gave the djemaa powers to legislate on internal, but not external or defence, matters, and promised the Saharawi the right to vote for their future when they ‘freely request’ that right. The United Nations responded by insisting on the Saharawi exercising their right to determine their future freely and authentically. Then, cornered, Spain agreed in 1974 to hold a referendum in Western Sahara in 1975 under United Nations supervision. It lost control.
Morocco’s dominance

With Spain changing position, Morocco also switched and from that point Rabat, with support from Washington and Paris, virtually replaced Madrid in determining Western Sahara’s future. Joined by Mauritania, Morocco denied that the Saharawi existed as a distinct historical group, and insisted on the incorporation of Western Sahara in Morocco. For Hassan II, Saharawi self-determination leading to independence rather than annexation by Morocco, was unacceptable and so he came up with tricks to negate self-determination. Secretly, he cut a deal with Mauritania to split the territory into two with Mauritania, keeping Rio De Oro and Morocco taking Saguiet el-Hamra. To thwart the expected referendum, supported by Mauritania, he suggested that the International Court be asked to decide the ownership of Western Sahara. It was a delaying tactic which, a disgusted Kenyan delegate, Frank Njenga, asserted was tantamount to asking the United Nations to treat the Saharawi ‘as chattels and not as people’. And the debates in the United Nations, before authorising reference of the Western Sahara question to the International Court of Justice, made it clear that its action did not mean negating the right of self-determination. The matter was referred to the ICJ which in October 1975 found that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had sovereignty over Western Sahara, and that the Saharawi had a right to self-determination. In addition, a United Nations inspection team found that most people wanted independence and supported Polisario.

Although disappointed, and knowing he had the support of the United States and France, Hassan properly gauged that Spain could be manipulated, partly because of the dying caudillo. He then declared his intention to invade Western Sahara with an army of 350 000 pilgrims holding the holy Koran to claim the territory. Although he violated an October 1970 United
Nations resolution prohibiting the use of or threats of force to acquire territories, he succeeded in creating tensions to force things his way. With the United States and France protecting Morocco in the Security Council, the United Nations was hamstrung and failed to condemn the Moroccan invasion. France and the United States preferred to have Morocco seize the territory, than have a revolutionary group replace Spain.

Hassan had thus avoided condemnation by bringing into play the biggest international card on his side, the United States of America and France. These two powers pressured Spain to reach an understanding with Morocco on the future of Western Sahara. Thereafter, Spain indicated to Morocco and Mauritania that it was willing to deal on the future of the territory. The three met in December 1975 and agreed that Spain would simply leave, and that Morocco and Mauritania would split the territory between them. In February 1976, Spain left unceremoniously abandoning its ‘African brothers’ to Moroccan and Mauritanian invaders. In April 1976, the two expansionists officially agreed on the demarcation line separating their claims to Western Sahara.

To get its own way, Morocco had developed the capacity to manipulate bigger powers than itself, to its own advantage. It had already proved its ability to juggle the big powers during the ‘War of the Sands’, one of whose peculiarities had been playing Washington and Moscow and securing support from both! While the weapons that the Soviets had given Morocco were being used to rout a weak Algeria, the Americans provided Morocco with logistical support. Moscow had chosen to remain on the good side of Rabat and refrained from criticising Moroccan expansionism. Instead, partly to secure a supply of phosphate, Moscow endorsed Moroccan irredentism in the guise of supporting anti-colonialism against Spain. It continued to sell military equipment to Morocco, and
Morocco found the Moscow connection a useful leverage in the West.\textsuperscript{92}

A convergence of United States and Moroccan interests enabled irredentist Morocco to exploit American preoccupation with the Cold War, and snatch Western Sahara. To Americans, Morocco had special strategic value as a military storage facility, detachment and communication centre, and staging post for intervention in the Middle East. Although, after independence, there were symbolic withdrawals from some bases, this did not affect Morocco’s strategic value to Washington.\textsuperscript{93} With the United States, by the early 1970s, suffering diplomatic paralysis as a result of humiliations in Vietnam and Angola, Morocco played the Cold War card by implying that its critics were communist and therefore threats to United States interests. On its part, the United States wanted to prove somewhere that it could still be counted to stand by ‘friends’. Western Sahara was a good place to prove ‘friendship’ as a ‘revolutionary’ Polisario, backed by Algeria, threatened a ‘friend’ called Morocco. To prove that he was there to be counted, Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, declared that ‘the United States will not allow another Angola on the east flank of the Atlantic Ocean’. Kissinger went on to press Spain to accept Morocco’s demands.\textsuperscript{94} Spain obliged, and abandoned the colony to Morocco.

Conclusion

For over 5 000 years, many forces have affected the history of the Saharawi people through conquest and counter-conquest, to produce a hybrid people with a distinct identity. In their blood are to be found two groups of peoples, accounting for the forces shaping the identity, continental and extra-continental. First are the different African peoples such as ancient Bafots and the various Berbers, themselves a hybrid
people. Second are the extra-continental peoples, mainly an assortment of conquering Arab tribes and a sprinkling of Europeans, probably Iberians, and a touch of the French.

The conquering Arabs imposed their religion, Islam, and intermarried and were absorbed into different communities to form the basis of new tribes that dominated Northwest Africa until they, in turn, were conquered by the French and the Spaniards. They fought each other with the mostly Lemtuna Almoravids from Mauritania over-extending themselves from Ghana to Spain. Out of the fragmented empire emerged new peoples associated with individuals, such as the Delim and the Requibat, the two tribes which would dominate what became Western Sahara, and deal with the European colonisation in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Protracted resistance to the French and the Spanish, mostly from the Reguibat, made Ma al-Ainin legendary as a symbol of Saharawi nationalism. That nationalism, however, was too weak to stop the Europeans who were busy undercutting each other. Of the two, France was the stronger and determined the actual size and location of the Saharawi territory that Spain received as its colony. Spain received Western Sahara, and also Tarfaya and Ifni, but showed little administrative interest in the place except for the fishing ports along the coast. It treated the territories as military outposts, and continued to rely on France for protection against Saharawi nationalists. Divided administratively into two, those in the French and those in the Spanish colonies, the bulk of the Saharawi remained in Spanish Sahara. A few, however, ended up in parts of French-controlled colonies.

Spain, ambivalent about its tiny African colonies that were seemingly not well endowed with natural wealth, was externally manipulated. As an international outcast because of its position in World War II, it was rehabilitated and admitted into the United
Nations in 1955 mainly through the exigencies of the Cold War. This made it subject to new international rules requiring colonial powers to de-colonise. To avoid decolonisation, it tried to claim that Western Sahara was a province of Spain, not a colony, where its ‘African brothers’ were well treated. It started exploiting phosphate deposits at Bu Craa and encouraged Saharawi settlement in new administrative and political areas. And when it eventually agreed to decolonise, it lost control of the colony and was manipulated by Morocco which had the support of powerful countries such as the United States and France. These two condoned the sabotage of Saharawi independence by pressuring Spain to let Morocco have its way. Spain then ran away and Morocco grabbed Western Sahara.

With support from Washington and Paris, Rabat replaced Madrid as the colonial master in El-Ayuon, so violating United Nations principles and prohibitions against territorial annexation, but escaping serious international reprimand. Like Spain before it, Morocco regarded Western Sahara as a province, not a colony. Like Spain, it aroused anti-colonial hostility.

Polisario, linked inspirationally to guerrillas in the Army of Liberation, and to Harakat Tahrir, had rough beginnings. With time, however, it came to symbolise and represent the Saharawi desire for independence and struggle for an identity: be it Arab, African, or a hybrid. It insisted that the Saharawi were not Moroccans and that Moroccan colonialism simply replaced Spanish colonialism.
Endnotes

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