

Beyond hypercriticism and exclusionary rhetoric: Sahrawi sovereignty and 'ethic of life and future' against realpolitik ☐

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Abstract: Almost five decades after the illegal occupation of Western Sahara, the *realpolitik* approach continues to be utilized by conservative scholarship and the media to claim absence of pragmatism in the Sahrawi demand for self-determination in the wider power context. This pragmatist and rationalist reasoning is applied as a disqualifier of Sahrawi approaches to liberation and decolonisation, deeming them insufficient and unfeasible. Conversely the approach of the Sahrawi diplomat and thinker Boukhari Ahmed emphasized that *realpolitik* as framing of expert position on Western Sahara operates as an exclusionary rhetoric towards the dismissal of the capacities and the determination of the Sahrawi people. Sahrawi resistance and survival in conditions of occupation and severe deprivations offers more than a model for anti-colonial action. The article examines the hypercritical – and intrinsically ideological– nature of the scholarly scrutiny of the Sahrawi governance and statehood.

Key words: Western Sahara, decolonisation, realpolitik, coloniality of power.

Resumen: Casi cinco décadas después de la ocupación ilegal del Sáhara Occidental, el enfoque de la realpolitik sigue siendo utilizado por los académicos conservadores y los medios de comunicación para afirmar la ausencia de pragmatismo en la demanda saharauí de autodeterminación en el contexto de poder más amplio. Este razonamiento pragmatista y racionalista se aplica como descalificador de los planteamientos saharauis de liberación y descolonización, considerándolos insuficientes e inviables. Por el contrario, el enfoque del diplomático y pensador saharauí Boukhari Ahmed subrayaba que la realpolitik como marco de la posición de los expertos sobre el Sáhara Occidental opera como una retórica excluyente, es decir un medio para desestimar las capacidades y la determinación del pueblo saharauí. La resistencia y la supervivencia saharauis en condiciones de ocupación y graves privaciones ofrecen algo más que un modelo para la acción anticolonial. El artículo examina la naturaleza hipercrítica –e intrínsecamente ideológica– del escrutinio académico de la gobernanza y la estatalidad saharauis.

Palabras clave: Sáhara Occidental, descolonización, realpolitik, colonialidad del poder.

Introduction

Since 1975, the prolonged Sahrawi people's struggle for decolonization, statehood and sovereignty attracted varying levels of interest from media and academic researchers. Most visibly, it attracted hypercritical scrutiny: Sahrawi people and their governance structures are studied by political scientists, legal scholars, ethnographers and anthropologists regarding their position on self-determination and matters of sovereignty, political organization, state

formation, refugee camp management¹; also, and prominently, gender roles and position of women in the Sahrawi society and governance². Disavowal and hypercriticism are abundant and remarkably superfluous considering the relative absence of the Western Sahara conflict from the mainstream media and a modest scope of published research and coverage by international scholarship. Additionally, it is unfounded in the context of unlimited support provided by the Sahrawi communities and Polisario to all initiatives involving research and visits to the Sahrawi refugee camps. The criticism comes in many forms, not just regarding the staunch attitude towards the issue of self-determination or matters of governance. Sahrawi people, their institutions and recognized representative authorities are accused of forging false appearances and manipulating their public image in the world, while some scholars even speculate on the covert nature of Sahrawi religiousness (Fiddian-Qasmieh 2014). As Zunes and Mundy (2010) demonstrate, even the Sahrawi identity is questioned, problematized as inauthentic or incomplete.

At the same time, the struggle of the Sahrawi people is marked – and marred – by the public reproduction of the ‘forgottenness’ discourse, closely related to the politics of forgetting, a political-discursive process in which certain groups are rendered invisible within the dominant political culture (Fernandes 2004). As a darker counterpart of politics of memory, politics of forgetting operates through ‘inaction, hesitation, and silence’ as means to suppression and erasure (Shin and Jin 2012, 4). ‘Forgottenness’ as a discourse involves perpetual – past, present, ongoing – process of production of representational material situating a group or groups into a position outside of the horizon of expectation of relevance and, to a varying extent, viability (Vičentić and Abdeslam, forthcoming). As explained by a media professional in 2007, “Sahara does not exist. It does not appear in the media and therefore, it does not exist.”³

Over decades of occupation and postponement of the referendum for self-determination, a stability of placement of Western Sahara into ‘forgottenness’ has been achieved, ensuring what Zunes and Mundy had termed “low visibility ‘silent march’ for North Africa’s untapped natural resources” (2010, 86). Keeping the unresolved issue of Western Sahara self-determination off the mainstream media radar, maintains the disconnectedness from understanding causal chains of exploitation and securitization in the region. Sahrawi ways of being, knowing and surviving in the world are erased from mainstream public domain in Europe, relegated to ‘forgottenness’, while specialized fora continue to produce single-faceted depictions of the Sahrawi cause and identity, undifferentiated and anachronistic.

¹ see Ammour 2014; Boukhars and Roussellier 2014; Boukhars 2013; Jensen 2013; Lohmann 2011; Mohsen-Finan 2009; Wehrey & Boukhars 2013

² Fiddian-Qasmieh 2010, 2014; Hinden 2018

³ “El Sahara no existe. No aparece en los medios de comunicación y por lo tanto no existe.”, Vicente Romero, RTVE journalist, 2007 (transcribed in Lillo et al. 2009).

Drawing from David Scott, anthropologist Mark Drury (2023) employs the notion of ‘the trace of futures past’ to add clarity to the developments following the transition from the era of anticolonial emancipatory ethos to the age of development and humanitarianism. This displacement had reconfigured temporal relationships, blurring lines between the past, present and future and allowing merely for an immobile and anguished aftermath of the dissipation of a horizon of expectation of revolutionary change. Drury identifies the Sahrawi struggle as such a trace, a phenomenon belonging to a political outlook of an era forgone. The protracted conflict and the absence of resolution for the Sahrawi people create accordingly the effect of being stranded in ‘in-betweenness,’ between decolonization and national sovereignty, between the right to self-determination and its enactment, between international law and occupation, between conflict and resolution, between war and peace” (Drury 2020, 93). Pronouncing this condition as ‘being stranded in and by the process of decolonization’, Drury interprets Sahrawi agency as captured in decolonization as a horizon of expectation, “compelled to undertake continuous, ongoing action with the aim of achieving a political future that is both apparently imminent and chronically unattainable” (2023, 93).

By undertaking a decolonial reading⁴ of the subject matter and engaging critical to be replaced with Indigenous (with capital I) scholarship pertaining matters of sovereignty and self-determination, this article explores the aspects of critical engagement with Western Sahara and the Sahrawi struggle that apply the rhetoric and the logic of *realpolitik*, more or less directly incurring erasures of the Sahrawi knowledges, ethics and culture. The elisions and exclusions incurred by the violence of this logic reveal the workings of the coloniality of power in the international order.

Between sovereignty and *realpolitik*

The term *realpolitik* came to commonly denote an approach to politics and policy that purportedly rests on the premises of pragmatism and interest. The concept, tied to a loanword originating from German language and XIX century practice of statesmanship, subsequently transferred into the Anglo-American political discourse, also refers to theory, the realist approach in international relations, often encompassing both positive and negative usages. Although still marked by some lingering negative connotations such as cynicism, power politics and self-interest stripped from any moral frills, the notion of *realpolitik* has expanded to refer to a position, aspiration, theory, policy, and practice, and as such it been embedded into the public discourse over time⁵ as a neutral, objective fact of the state of the world and relations in

⁴ Decolonial reading means reading how modernity/coloniality is at work generating images of the world (reality) that prevent us from seeing what is in front of us... exposing the ontological fiction of Western modernity's vocabulary.” (Casimir 2020: xiv)

⁵ As demonstrated in Bew's history of *realpolitik*, the popularity and the connotation of the concept appear to be changing over time. As illustrated by Zunes and Mundy (2010) in case of Western Sahara the

it, a requirement even, “a necessary antidote to the perceived excess of idealism” (Bew 2016, 3). With the recuperation of the ‘great power’ competition narratives, a subtle and pervasive turn has occurred, reclaiming the exclusive dichotomy of the ‘real’ against the ‘utopian’, relating the *realpolitik* as “cool, circumspect approach to statecraft, deliberately contrasted to what is presented as the naïve idealism of others” (Bew 2016, 4).

Moroccan invasion on the territory of Western Sahara occurred on October 31, 1975, violating UN resolutions and the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) from October 16, 1975, and two fundamental principles of the existing international order – peoples’ right to self-determination and the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force. The Security Council, the body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security under the UN Charter, did not act in appropriate response, maintaining an attitude of ambivalence, inaction and indifference since. Sahrawi scholar Sidi M. Omar attributes this failure to causes related mainly to *realpolitik*:

This is obviously not the place to engage critically with *realpolitik* and its ‘dogmatic acceptance’ of power as the fundamental determinant of international politics, among other things. There is no denying the fact, however, that its doctrinaire power-centred approach in policymaking has caused (and continues to cause) so much instability and insecurity in many parts of the world. (Omar 2020)

From the perspective of ‘political realism’, the Western Sahara conflict is “essentially a territorial dispute pitting Western Saharan nationalism against Moroccan irredentism” (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiv). However, Zunes and Mundy discount it as reductionist, lacking argument to explain the persistence of the Sahrawi resistance. Omar identifies a tension between approaches rooted in doctrine of *realpolitik* and the ones founded upon the right of colonised peoples to self-determination. Following the calls issued by the Security Council, he recognizes the self-contradictory and confusing nature of international organization’s approach, losing focus of its own foundational principles under the weight of the supposed ‘realist’ argument.⁶ He terms this attitude “destructive ambiguity”, as it creates more confusion and thwarts any member initiatives toward action, while providing Morocco with opportunities for obstruction and evasion of responsibility (Omar 2020).

attitude of *realpolitik* never relaxed, regardless of the tag, “contrasting Kissinger’s *realpolitik*, the Carter administration’s ‘idealism’, and the subsequent Reagan and George H. W. Bush (1989–92) administrations’ hawkish approach, the differences were minute. The only perceptible changes have been in terms of the quality and quantity of support the U.S. government has afforded Morocco. Support for the Moroccan regime and thus for its expansionist campaign in Western Sahara was never questioned.”

⁶ UN Security Council on the one hand calling for “a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution based on compromise”, and to enter into “negotiations without preconditions in good faith with a view to achieving a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara” (Omar 2020)

In this sense, *realpolitik* acts as another protective shield that enables members of the international community to shrug at the pretence of irrefutability of power politics, despotism, violence and insecurity.

The *realpolitik* approach continues to be a method utilized to claim absence of pragmatism in the Sahrawi demand for self-determination in the wider power context, thus deeming it unfeasible. It acts as a disciplining technique intended to ultimately trickle-down critical realist argument to Polisario as a political structure representing Sahrawi people, operating on multiple levels. It is also consistently applied in the attempts to reduce the significance of factors of solidarity in foreign policy and continuing moral obligation to assist in suppression of colonialism (Elagougne and Aty 2018).

Sahrawi diplomat and political thinker Boukhari Ahmed (Boukhari Ahmed Barikala)⁷ affirmed in his work his understanding that *realpolitik* as framing of ‘expert’ position on Western Sahara operated as an exclusionary rhetoric. The exclusive space opened for inherently Eurocentric and power-oriented privilege-affirming ‘expertise’ functioned as a venue to apply purportedly realist narrative as means to dismiss the capacities and the determination of the Sahrawi people (Awah 2019, 21).

Realpolitik can operate as a tool of policy and public discourse management in the national contexts of settler colonial states, being applied as an ‘antidote’ to the Indigenous methodologies and philosophies of custodianship and governance. In this context, Indigenous theoretical approaches to colonial occupation and extraction emphasize the significance of the irreconcilable nature of land as pedagogy – as a life practice and resistance in one – with authority of the settler colonial state. The fact of Indigenous life and sovereignty practiced through land as pedagogy triggers colonial state’s surveillance and violence, as “it places Indigenous bodies between settlers and their money” (Coulthard 2012).

In the case of the Sahrawi people, settler colonialism is a fact of daily life within the Morocco occupied territories of Western Sahara. Elaborating on Drury’s argument (2023), it is thus possible to say that Sahrawi people are not ‘stranded in the process of decolonisation’, which presents suspended decolonisation itself as the root cause of Sahrawi detriment and the unrelenting demand for self-determination the cause of blockage in the international system; they are stranded in the expansive web of colonial complicity by the international community. The prolonged state of irresolution is more complex than an outcome of being “a geopolitical hot potato in the corridors of Washington and the United Nations” (Isidoros 2018, 5).

Pulling at the threads of the unresolved Western Sahara conflict reveals the seams of the interrupted process of decolonisation enmeshed with the lingering effects of the colonial

⁷ In Spanish transcription, Bujari Uld Ahmed Uld Barical-la.

world order and mindset or coloniality of power, as defined by Colombian scholar into Aníbal Quijano (2000).⁸

The colonial matrix of power⁹ operates in interrelated domains: control of economy, including land appropriation and extractivism; power, including all institutionalized authority; control of gender (as another hierarchic sorting mechanism and system of exploitation¹⁰); and control of knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity/identity).

Resilience of the Sahrawi struggle presents a universal challenge to colonial complicity and lingering mechanisms of coordinated colonial plunder and subjugation. It is a challenge to all institutions and structures maintaining systems of oppression: Western-imposed model of a surveillance state, sorting mechanisms of racial capitalism, including disciplining through imposition of Eurocentric feminisms. It resists embeddedness in the colonial trope of disappearance and extinction, as well as fixedness and datedness of ideas of community, resistance, liberation, and decolonisation.

The territorial negotiations between some of the Latin American governments and the Indigenous peoples can be addressed as a matter of difference in signification: for the state, some phenomena have meaning only in the context of extraction of value, such as natural resources, while to the Indigenous communities with an ancestral connection to the place, a resource, a locality or a natural object can engage a number of meanings, roles and practices. In the process of negotiation on the matters of access and ownership, Di Giminiani recognizes that the same concepts employed by both groups refer to “radically different worlds” (Di Giminiani 2013, 535). The neoliberal culture of expertise imposes its interpretations of the issue within the neoliberal model of governability, not allowing the space for Indigenous views (Di Giminiani 2013, 540). When studied, Indigenous land activism are often presented within the constructivist framework as expressions of identity politics, with land standing solely for a symbol of collective identity. Di Giminiani explains the significance of recognition of ontological difference:

⁸ Quijano saw the contemporary globally hegemonic model of power as presupposing the element of coloniality, inherent to capitalism and its idea of race and classifications of the peoples and control and division of labour. (Quijano 2000)

⁹ “Implanting the colonial matrix of power (either in sixteenth century Anahuak (Valley of Mexico) or in today’s Iraq) implies to dismantle, simultaneously, existing forms of social organization and ways of life”. (Mignolo 2007).

¹⁰ For more information about Spanish colonial gender interventions, see *Mujeres, colonialismo y nacionalismo saharawi: hilvanando historia(s)* by Enrique Bengochea Tirado, Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín and Rocío Medina Martín.

Recognition of ontological pluralism is central in the debate on the political self-determination of indigenous groups. Conflicts over the recognition of cultural difference have been generally regarded as ‘negotiations over meaning involving different, culturally conditioned interpretations of social reality’. However, claims point to the possibility that divergences refer not only to discordant representations of society, but also to differences in ontological terms. (Di Giminiani 2013, 540).

Failure to address the matter of ontology and plurality of meanings, as much as the oversimplified and essentialist notions of symbolism and identity, interfere with proper understanding of the significance of the territory, leading to failure of negotiations. According to Di Giminiani, this recognition is a political act in itself, nonetheless, an unavoidable one, as “the political self-determination of indigenous people is indeed incomplete unless we take into account questions concerning the conceptual and ontological self-determination” (Di Giminiani 2013, 541). Similarly, Zunes and Mundy see the Western Sahara conflict as ‘imaginary at its most fundamental level’, being based on ideas. They do not dispute the materiality of war, displacement, plunder, nor the territorial dispute: “Yet abstractly, at the level of the ‘metaconflict’, the dispute stems from mutually exclusive differences in the self-perceptions that ground Moroccan and Western Saharan nationalism.” (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiii).

Regardless of the measure of *realpolitik* in the status of affairs regarding Western Sahara in an international context, the Polisario and the Sahrawi people cannot be engaged in legitimizing or justifying the approach or lenience to it (Omar 2020). In Boukhari Ahmed’s word, what is fundamental is the principles that should be engaged to seek the solutions: “The solution exist, it is and will be here, and Polisario cannot renounce, not today, not in a hundred years, this right to independence” (Awah 2019, 15). The political, economic or strategic motivations and incentives behind the illegal occupation of Western Sahara constitute “a denial of the existence of the Sahrawi people and their right to self-determination and independence” (Omar 2020). What Omar terms ‘the practical expression of denial’ other than denial of territory includes bombardment of Sahrawi civilians, scorched-earth policy, violence practiced against civilians in the occupied territories and appropriation and destruction of Sahrawi cultural heritage.

Following this logic resulting from the lived experience, the Sahrawi people’s struggle goes beyond defending national identity as existing in the European imaginary, as it involves their right to exist altogether, and in particular “as a free and sovereign people in their homeland” (Omar 2020). In other words – and paraphrasing decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo – for an greater understanding of the Western Sahara issue, the epistemic decolonial shift is required that would look at the ‘empires’ from the perspective of the Sahrawi people rather than looking at the Sahrawi people from the perspective of the ‘empires’ (Mignolo 2007).

Indigeneity: interrogated identity and denial of authenticity¹¹

The term Sahrawi (or Sahrawi) is broader than ethnic or political-geographic category. Complex historical and geographical circumstances are further complicated by the political situation of settler colonialism in the occupied territories of Western Sahara and displacement of the refugee population. The question of Sahrawi identity as a point of relevance for the prospective referendum had additionally been manipulated by the Moroccan government as a source of continued contestation of Sahrawi claim (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxi). Since 1976 almost half of the Sahrawi population lives in the refugee camps in Tindouf area of Algeria, and many continue to move for purposes of activism, education and work. In addition to the already present influence of the language of the former colonizer, strategic relationship with Latin America and particularly Cuba contributed to what Pablo San Martín termed ‘Hispanisation’ of the Sahrawi (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

Omar provides an overview of the process of development of the collective sense of ‘people’ among the indigenous population of Western Sahara (2008). Prior to Spanish colonisation there was a sense of distinct territorial belonging and a common understanding of a sociopolitical community, shared language (Hassaniya dialect of Arabic), distinct systems of governance, and legal custom and practice. Clarifying that all identity formation occurs through performative acts, Omar explains that Sahrawi identity came to exist through combining pre-existing collective identity and series of such acts, as socially constructed as any other, “socially produced, reproduced and normalized through various institutional and discursive practices” (Omar 2008, 44):

Historical studies on the region indicate that the present-day Sahrawis represent a fusion of the indigenous Sanhaja Berbers, Africans and Arabs who came from Arabia during the 13th century. Successive invasions of the territory by the Arabs led to the gradual Islamization and Arabization of the indigenous people. This process gave rise to an ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural symbiosis that gradually led to the formation of the constitution of the Sahrawi people represented by the tribes and tribal confederations that inhabited the area now known as Western Sahara. (Omar 2008, 44)

Contemporary understanding of indigeneity resists stereotypes, colonial tropes and essentialisms of land, tradition and genealogy, recognizing “eclecticism, and dynamism as the

¹¹ Authors do not intend to evaluate or validate evidence of the indigeneity of the Sahrawi people, nor provide elements for compliance with its legal definitions. We share an understanding of the historical account of Western Sahara as complex, characterized by unrestricted migratory movement in the region, organized along specific routes, tribal autonomy and legal custom. Attempt to read ethnic or any other form of homogeneity into Sahrawi population would disregard “complexities of identity, further legitimise the colonial boundaries, and force identities to conform to them” (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

essence of indigeneity as opposed to a falling off or ‘corruption’ of some original state of purity... recognizing [indigeneity] as a relational field of governance” (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 3). Reconceptualization of Indigenous identity requires a recognition of larger social fields of difference and sameness:

It acquires its “positive” meaning not from some essential properties of its own, but through its relation to what it is not, to what it exceeds or lacks. This is not to say that the indigenous condition is somehow derivative or without powerful visions and directions of its own. What it does mean is that indigenous cultural practices, institutions, and politics become such in articulation with what is not considered indigenous within the particular social formation where they exist. (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 4)

Indigenous struggle for liberation in Western Sahara challenges notions of Moroccan nationalism, contributing to the construction of the Sahrawi national identity inseparable from claim to their territory. Zunes and Mundy clarify that this relationship implicitly asserts incompatibility with being/becoming Moroccan or being subjected to foreign power:

Claiming centuries, if not millennia, of continuous habitation, Western Saharan nationalists have constructed themselves as the natives, whereas Moroccans are the settlers, a reflection of the same volatile identity dynamic found in other colonial situations. In such colonist–settler situations, the outcome has historically tended to follow one of three trajectories: total independence for the native population (e.g., Algeria’s liberation from France); total subjugation, if not near annihilation, of the indigenes (e.g., the Native Americans in the United States); or an independent, hybridized polity (e.g., postapartheid South Africa). (Zunes and Mundy 2010, xxiv)

At the same time, Sahrawi relationship with territoriality is problematised. Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo ask whether current circumstances of the international order permit an identity that is not based on a territorial assumption, and still be entitled to statehood.¹² Additionally, the centuries of continual habitation and movement are not regarded as a sufficient source of identity by some, as Western Sahara “functioned largely as a frontierless entity whose peoples had close relations with the entities that neighbored it” (Castellino and Dominguez-Redondo 2013).

¹² “Inside me, I know Western Sahara is my home. I have never seen it, but I know it does exist, maybe it does not exist in other people’s minds or library books and school maps, but it does exist inside me, inside all the Sahrawi and inside all those who believe in justice.... I do not really agree that we should have borders; I wish that all people would be able to live together. But first I want to experience that feeling. The feeling of belonging. The feeling that people get when they see me wearing my traditional Melhfa and say to me that I am from Western Sahara, not India. I want to witness my family and all Sahrawi return to our country.” Sahrawi activist Asria Mohamed Taleb (Taleb 2013).

Expectations around indigeneity remain “fickle, sometimes contradictory”, including the demand for cultural purity and authenticity (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 9). Previously mentioned research on land disputes between Latin American governments and Indigenous groups, establishes that sites in question have multiple meanings as sources of identity and/or, but not exhaustively, other form of power and agency. According to Di Giminiani, making such territories an object of Indigenous land activism is often deemed inauthentic, as land claims derive from the supposition that political usefulness and sacredness are mutually exclusive (Di Giminiani 2013, 537). In a similar fashion, disputing Sahrawi connection to the land on the grounds of the nomadic nature of their culture, “perpetuates the sedentarist view that living spaces should be static, constant and without much movement, that transience suggests insecurity and instability and that a place must have perceptible borders” (Isidoros 2018, 91). Engaging the notion of ‘relational view of home’, as proposed by Isidoros, is useful, indicating the complexity, dynamism and the cyclic nature of pastoral movement.

The tendency towards dismissal of Sahrawi abilities constitutes one of the continuities of misrepresentation since the early days of the war in 1975. Zunes and Mundy list several examples of such dismissal in the context of early evaluation of Sahrawi military capability, all excluding the possibility of knowledge: “As is often the case with indigenous insurgencies, observers also failed to understand the advantage of generations of place-based knowledge (Zunes and Mundy 2010, 6).”

Isidoros (2018) proposes that the Sahrawi identity takes place as a negotiation between various pressures: geopolitical, religious, neo-patriarchal, and those imposed by the development and humanitarian actors. In his early work, Boukhari Ahmed discussed the departure from the apparent ‘traditional’ towards the ‘contemporary’ in the Sahrawi identity and the significance of this negotiation, reflecting on the move from an embeddedness in the dogma towards following ‘an ethic of life and future’, grounded in the Sahrawi philosophy and wisdom offered by African anti-colonial leaders, alert to the divisive ambitions of the colonizer (Boukhari Ahmed in Awah 2019, 21).

Criticisms that Polisario’s appearance is fixed and obsolete, place it as visually belonging to an era long gone, not moving with time and appealing to the tastes of the new generations of news content consumers. Some scholars however recognized change as the continuum of the Sahrawi struggle: change of tactics was necessitated by changes in the terrain of conflict. Polisario and Sahrawi communities have developed unique coping mechanisms to deal with war and its aftermath, prolonged armed struggle, leading to ceasefire and then a campaign for a referendum. The discursive shifts had also been noted, self-determination to negotiated settlement and then to human rights discourse, while it is Morocco’s approach that is marked by rigid consistency: “Occupy, settle and exploit the territory, forestall any agreement under the rubric of UN-based decolonization, maintain French and American support within the Security Council, use Western Sahara as leverage in diplomatic negotiations with other nations and ruthlessly repress domestic dissent” (Drury 2020).

Negotiating recognition, surviving misrepresentation

Perhaps the Sahrawi people of this generation will not live to see the independence, but the next one will. Our determination is in any case unflinching. Children born in the occupied zone sing the notes of the Sahrawi national anthem. This generation managed to successfully transfer the seeds of this independence onto the next generation. In this sense, we can die in peace. (Boukhari Ahmed in Lillo et al 2011, 69)

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, a prolific scholar on matters concerning representation of Western Sahara, and Sahrawi women within the development paradigm, raises issues of myths of ‘uniqueness’ of Sahrawi refugees and the ‘ideal’ refugee model based on the Sahrawi, and the purported role of gender equality in promotion of that public image (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010, 2011, 2014). These works unreflectively perpetuate and reproduce colonial-style sorting, by scrutinizing imagined representations of the ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ categories of refugees, women in particular. Focusing on the ‘mythological’ aspect of the constructed image of the Sahrawi refugees, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh introduces claims that Polisario Front mobilizes gendered images and concepts strategically in order to secure humanitarian and political support from the West (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014, 3). This undertaking is performed with the asserted aim to “reveal a manipulation of gender and imagined gender relations” and marked by an inquisitorial style mixing scrutiny and assumption (2014, 3). The analysis is challenged by an inconsistency in author’s contestation of the Sahrawi identity and agency, as she argues that the perception of the Sahrawi is an almost exclusive construction of writings and observations of the Western academics, NGOs and international organizations (Sahrawi being an invention of the West), simultaneously pursuing her investigation with a presumption of self-interested false pretence (“They have in turn projected a specific image of the camps to ensure these actors continued support”, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014) attributed to the Polisario.

In addition to the critical scrutiny of Sahrawi agency and public image (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010; 2014), a Eurocentric and development-centered examination of Sahrawi feminism and the Polisario’s imagined construction of an idealized image of Sahrawi woman (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018), some of the recent scholarship explores intergenerational relationships within the Sahrawi communities, projecting an image of conflicting views, beliefs and objectives between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’ (Finden 2018; Finden and Olson 2016). In this instance, the misrepresentation of the intergenerational ‘disaccord’ and the supposed dichotomous opposition of views and positions on the continuing struggle of the Sahrawi people is intended to construct evidence of uncertainty and instability in the general context of the world, and within the community. The article in question (Finden 2018) reflects upon the relationship to the ancestral lands present in the older generations and absent from the younger ones, as they have no connection to the landscape of Western Sahara. Through application of repetitive reductionism and on the basis of two misconstrued interviews presented as research material, it misinterprets the meaning and the effects of stated frustration of the refugees and the desire to return to the armed conflict. The hypercritical misrepresentation is rounded with an

account of (Eurocentric) gender-binary views of the Sahrawi circumstance, reproducing and affirming externally imposed gender framings. Article outlines a set of essentialized feminine or ‘matriarchal’ gender features as a norm, simultaneously pronouncing them to be a witting ruse by the Sahrawi people to ameliorate their case for the European audiences, as carriers of universal meanings of peacefulness, non-violence, absence of potential for harm. The misrepresentation¹³ appears to intentionally disregard the multiplicity of views, opinions and positions present and proliferating within the Sahrawi political community, as well as the particular cultural aspects of intergenerational interactions and gender as manifested in the Sahrawi communities (see Isidoros 2018 for anthropological insights and complexity of gender). It also reinforces the positioning of the authors into a hierarchic setting where European scholars allow themselves unhampered practice of the white gaze scrutiny and corrective critique, while they situate Western Sahara conflict and the predicament of the refugees in a place of availability for the European eyes, naturalizing the condition in which the Sahrawi – or all refugees for that matter – need to appeal to the good will of the international institutions and appease the anxieties of the Global North.

The hypercritical discourse on the topic of Sahrawi women and theoretical non-permissiveness of Sahrawi women’s agency raises the issue of multiple violences Sahrawi women are subjected to: in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, Sahrawi women, as leading figures of the resistance to occupation, activists and community members, experience, institutional discrimination and violent suppression and constant abuse¹⁴ by Moroccan security forces (Vasquez 2014). The systemic violence experienced in the occupied territories is complemented by symbolic violence, particularly affecting women, “the subjectifying form of violence that renders the crushing materiality of systemic violence invisible, appear natural, acceptable” (Coulthard 2014, 177). The scepticism and distrust exhibited by some of the scholarly scrutiny of the Sahrawi women extends this form of systemic violence.

Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard writes about the central themes connected to the struggle for recognition experienced by multitudes of Indigenous peoples. These scenarios differ and engage a range of complex ethical, political, and legal questions, with varying aspirations towards “affirmative recognition and institutional accommodation of societal cultural differences on the one hand, and the freedom and autonomy of marginalized individuals and groups living

¹³ Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that the systemic racism erases Indigeneity and replaces it with stereotypes, leading to continual misrepresentation of Indigenous movements and actions. It is through solidarity within one’s community and other communities of radical resistance that self-image is recuperated. (Simpson 2018, 235)

¹⁴ See El-Ejla Chejh Alla (Ayla Chejh), *Women at the forefront of politics: the organizing work of the Sahrawi women*, 24.03.2023, and Capire in conversation with Sultana Khaya, *Despite persecution, Sahrawi women have not stopped demanding freedom and independence*. 18.02.2022 Capire at <https://capiremov.org/en/interview/sultana-khaya-despite-persecution-sahrawi-women-have-not-stopped-demanding-freedom-and-independence/>

in ethnically diverse states on the other” (Coulthard 2014, 3). The Sahrawi predicament plays out in two fields: the one of settler-colonial occupation and the one within the international legal system, engaging international community in a variety of ways. The recognition is not sought on a state level, but within an international domain, too often influenced by residues of the colonial self-interest framed as pragmatism and *realpolitik*. Coulthard argues that the recognition approach appealing to the power in a one-directional manner is counterproductive, as “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (2014, 3). Instead, he proposes the ideal of reciprocity, which presupposes mutual contributions to conviviality.

Mutual contributions and reciprocity, as values present in many Indigenous cultures, remove the threat of placement of the state/international actor in the unearned position of moral authority. According to Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, appeals to compassion of the colonizing state or ‘benevolent’ forces results in false pity and inaction:

The politics of grief can also so easily become the politics of distraction—a process, which moves us away from the renewal of place-based practices by distracting us with politics that are designed to reinforce the status quo rather than deconstruct it. Both the politics of distraction and the politics of grief are just enactments of the politics of recognition. (Simpson 2018, 240).

Simpson poses the question what the outcome of acting in concert would be, “engaging in large-scale resurgent organizing on our own terms” (Simpson 2018, 240). Sahrawi struggle and the culture of resistance to oppression provides a possibility for better understanding of peaceful resistance and mutuality in the exchange with the international community.

Boukhari Ahmed uses the principle of self-determination as the point of international consensus, as the one of foundational importance for the acceptance of the construction of the international legal order. As the “basic and irrevocable principle” it is embedded in the international system in the form accepted by the states of today (Boukhari in Lillo et al. 2011, 68). Due to the validity of the foundational and consensual nature of the arrangement, Western Sahara, in his words, cannot be exception to the general rule, as it is one of the building blocks international legal order rests upon (Lillo et al. 2011, 69). Self-determination as a concept however goes beyond the legal: it is a value in itself, expressed through a perpetual aspiration towards growing and evolving process of decolonisation of the peoples. It operates as a multidirectional agency, recognized by Awah as a morality gleaned from the thoughts and actions of the African anti-colonial forefathers (2019). As a sense of duty of action, it is an ongoing call to continue one’s own path of self-determination and support others in their struggle, with a constant reminder that the goals have not been reached as long as the traces of colonialism are observable (Awah 2019, 20). In this sense, it encompasses several mutually contingent, expansive and cumulative demands, as it is a process that cannot take place in isolation:

“Nothing can impose a solution in Western Sahara that is in opposition to the international legality, in opposition to the will of the Sahrawi people and the vision of Africa and the countries in the region that have something to say about today and tomorrow of Western Sahara.” (Boukhari Ahmed in Lillo et al. 2011, 69).

This attitude echoes another aspect poignantly elaborated upon by Drury (2018) on Western Sahara and advisory opinion on Western Sahara (The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara, 1975), in particular, contributing significantly to the corpus of the international law regulating the right of the peoples to self-determination. He identifies irony in the fact that this contribution and the legal commentary proceeding from it had given more impetus to the norm of self-determination, than in actuality improving the case of the Sahrawi people. As Drury points out, the advisory opinion on Western Sahara is premised on the Eurocentric and undoubtedly colonial legal concepts such as *terra nullius*, while simultaneously opening a less restrictive, multicultural legal space:

From one perspective, the decision has contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive, multicultural international law characterized by a Rawlsian ‘overlapping consensus’ between European and non-European concepts, thanks to its narrowing of *terra nullius*. Conversely, others have contended that, given its very reliance upon *terra nullius*, a concept used to justify colonial occupation throughout the 19th century, *Western Sahara* (1975) participates in reproducing international law’s irrevocable Eurocentrism. Still others see an “ambivalent compromise” in the case’s reinforcement of self-determination and, by association, normative concepts of territorial sovereignty, even as it engaged with non-Western political formations. (Drury 2018)

Conclusion

Sahrawi people possess detailed and embodied knowledge of the geopolitical intricacies of the Western Sahara predicament, including the passivity of the UN bodies, the role of the major EU member states in perpetuation of it, continual colonial relationships of patronage and exploitation, as well as the extractive presence of the corporate actors, and the greenwashing of the occupation performed by the Kingdom of Morocco. Occupation of Western Sahara remains a violation of a fundamental norm of international law, and the displacement of Sahrawi people a matter of urgency.

The conflict of Western Sahara remains the point of contention where *realpolitik* and international law clash. More importantly, it continues to be the place of Sahrawi past, present and future, and the locus of Sahrawi agency. The Polisario Front and the Sahrawi people have conscientiously been fulfilling their responsibilities towards the international community and contributing to its legal order premised on the principles ensuring people’s inalienable right

to self-determination. In the spirit of good will built into the foundations of the consensual international legal order, and consistent with the principles of Sahrawi socio-political thought, ethics and legal custom, it is the responsibility of the international community to respond with reciprocity to their continued efforts.

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