

**Historia contemporanea
del Sahara Occidental
– nuevas cuestiones y resultados**

TOWARDS A COUNTERHISTORY OF THE WESTERN SAHARA¹ ☐

*'If history is made in the short run by the victors,
historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run
from the vanquished.'* Koselleck, 2001, p. 83.

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Summary: This article is the product of research in co-labor between Saharawi and Spanish researchers. It proposes a first approach to the construction of a counter-history of Western Sahara, dating from 1884, the date of the arrival and installation of the first Spaniards on the coast of the territory, until the “pacification” of 1934. This counter-history Demands a post-colonial and decolonized look to review the hegemonic stories about the region. This revision is, on the other hand, the necessary condition to undertake in parallel a counter-history of twentieth-century Europe.¹

Sumario: Este artículo es el producto de una investigación en co-laboración entre investigadores saharauis y españoles. En él se propone una primera aproximación a la construcción de una contra-historia del Sahara occidental, desde 1884, fecha de la llegada e instalación de los primeros españoles en la costa del territorio, hasta la “pacificación” de 1934. Esta contra-historia exige una mirada postcolonial y descolonizada que revise las historias hegemónicas sobre la región. Esta revisión es por otro lado la condición necesaria para emprender de manera paralela una contra-historia de la Europa del siglo XX.

Introduction. Hegemonic stories and counter-history

In this article we explore the production of an alternative history of Western Sahara, a counterhistory, based on a critical dialogue with the hegemonic stories about the region and the use of a perspective from the Saharan society on its own dynamics and transformations. We take the term counterhistory from the *Genealogy of Racism* by Michel Foucault, in his critique of history as a discourse of power and the fascination it exerts, and proposing counterhistory as the ‘discourse of those who do not possess the glory, or of those who having lost it lie in darkness and silence.’ (Foucault, 1976, our translation from Spanish). The question we ask is: how do we contribute to getting these Saharawis² out of the shadows, taking their words and beginning to tell their own story?

¹ Violeta Ruano realizó la traducción al inglés del texto al inglés.

² The term “Saharan” will be used here to define the populations of the territories of the Sahara desert, and in particular of the Western Sahara (referred to in this article), according to the boundaries set by the colonial powers. On the contrary, the term “Saharawi” will be used to define the present inhabitants of the Sahara who claim their right to decolonization and self-determination, based on the historical existence of a society that has its own identity and shares a common past. The names of the characters, the tribes and the Saharan place-names are written, by joint decision of the authors, according to their transcription in Spanish (the original language of this article).

We start from the consideration of history as story and invention. The Sahrawi people can be seen embodying an invented historical tradition; in the same sense that we speak of the invention of the tradition of the Spanish, French, Moroccan people, if we take into account the arguments of Hobsbawm and Ranger (2002). Invented traditions enable modern nations to claim to be rooted in the remotest of antiquities, in a way that communities appear that are seen as so “natural” that they need no further definition (Hobsbawm, 2002, 21). The element to emphasize here is the political character of this construction. Who can build / invent stories? Who has that power? Empires, states, people?

The term “invention” of peoples, traditions and histories can also be related to Mudimbe’s (1988, p. XI) ideas when he proposed ‘to study the topic of the foundations of the discourse on Africa ... (how) African worlds have been established as realities for knowledge’ in Western discourse. Mudimbe emphasizes that the writings that have contributed to the invention and the idea of Africa have been basically produced by Europeans during the colonial period, a fact that has produced a “colonial library” of reference. This library would trace the contours of an epistemological territory inhabited by concepts and visions of the world inherited from the West (Mudimbe 1988, p X, 1994, page XV), which would not only conform to the views of the Europeans but also of the Africans about themselves.

There is an important difference in the two meanings of the term “invention.” If the former refers to the historical story that a society makes about itself to account for a sense of belonging to what has been and what is to come, the “invention” in Mudimbe puts the attention on the capacity of the power of the West to invent the history of other people around the world, especially those that were placed under its dominion in the 19th century.

Can colonized peoples invent their own traditions, or should they conform to the place they occupy in the story of the historical production done by the imperial metropolis? It is this situation that we are interested in exploring in Western Sahara through the consideration of a counterhistory, which, on the one hand, calls into question the foundations of a colonial library, while, on the other, explores the interrupted historicity of the Saharan society and its claim as people who are protagonists of their own history. It is a complex task.

The conditions for the production of a counterhistory that faces the colonial library constitutes a challenge that must be addressed by epistemic coloniality and cultural dependence. African authors, such as O. Kane (2011), argue that on the African continent there is no single epistemological order, but multiple “spaces of meaning”. We understand the “spaces of senses” in Koselleck’s terms (1993) as the result of the tense and dynamic articulation of the spaces of experience of societies and their horizons of expectation.

In Africa, relations between experiences and expectations were affected by colonialism, which led to drastic changes in the continent (Boahen, A. 1987). We argue that these dramatic changes occurred in societies with their own histories, societies loaded with experiences that then

projected their expectations for the future on the horizon. Contrary to this reality, the colonial encounter with African societies produced “spaces of foreign senses”. Colonialist metropolis won the monopoly of naming and regulating. Naming the past experiences, rewriting them through a history that undervalued and despised them: turned into traditions, frozen in time. Normalizing their lives, as colonized subjects, through specific regulations that created spatial and social boundaries whose object was to divide the populations, to articulate them in a way dependent on the market economy. Thus, the horizon of future expectations was transformed, implementing devices designed to inscribe progress, if or not, in their future, and completely separating future expectations from past experiences.

The spaces of sense rooted in the traditions are absent from colonial hegemonic histories; they are neither fully captured in African national histories, centered on an anticolonial resistance constructed from a teleological tendency, which only serves to counteract the other. If the liberal (Eurocentric) perspective of African history tends to see the colonial conquest as the event that incorporates the continent’s societies into History, nationalist histories see the anticolonial struggle as the process that makes it possible to restore the integrity of its national past with the present struggle for independence, and imagine the future of the independent states that emerges from the struggle linked to narratives oriented by modernity; they are projected into the future as modern states. The national history of the Saharawi independence is not an exception³. In African national histories the historical continuities linking the present, the past and the future are emphasized, not the discontinuities introduced by the colonial encounter (Burke III, E., 2009).

A counterhistory of Africa and Western Sahara should focus not on the spaces of experience and the horizons of expectations introduced by European imperialism, but on the experience of a meeting of Africans with Europe, inscribed in a long history. This is the aim of this article, which focuses on the various histories related to the colonization of the Sahara and the resistance it met between 1884 and 1934.

The production of a counterhistory requires postcolonial (Guha, R. 1982) and decolonized (Smith, L.T., 1999) methodologies. Guha wonders about the way we can pick up the story of the subalterns from the trail left by the writings of power over them; Smith wonders: how to see human subjects in our research?⁴ The answer to these questions is not easy. It requires a decolonization of knowledge and forms of co-labor in the conduct of social research and different writing strategies.

³ The book of the diplomat Ismail ould Es-Sweyih, M.F. (2001) represents a good approximation to the nature of this story and the role that resistance plays in it.

⁴ ‘One thing we must have learned from the past is that when, to start with, the subjects of research are not considered human, when they have been dehumanized, when they have been marginalized from “normal” human society, the human researcher does not see human subjects’ (Smith, L, T. 2012).

This article is a result of the collaboration between Saharawi and European researchers who have since 2003 shared two projects: a project to recover the oral memory of the Saharawi history of Saharawi elders (project: “Tell me, grandfather / grandmother “), promoted by the Saharawi Ministry of Culture⁵; and an investigation whose objective is the recovery of the (Saharawi and Spanish) memory(ies) of the colonization of the Sahara⁶.

We advocate here for a type of research and another type of writing, which includes co-writing (writing with) and writing in the presence of others about / from which we write, which is what we are trying to practice now. The challenge is to agree with our collaborators an autonomous textual space; where they transcribe their testimonies, their contributions are long enough, to speak for themselves, and resist the textual tactics of those who use them from the outside, making them say, quoting their own words, what they do not say. Only then indigenous / local statements will make sense in different ways from those of the historians and ethnographers who normally manipulate them. Our commitment is therefore to collect, as much as we can, the voices of the Saharawis and take their words on their own terms. That is why we present long, unusual statements in academic work. With them we seek to maintain a dialogue with the authors and characters that are presented here, trying to collect not only what they say, but also the way they say it. In this sense, not only the contents of what is said, but also the languages that transmit and disseminate this co-produced knowledge are relevant. It cannot be forgotten that a fundamental part of the historical episodes of Western Sahara are and have been transmitted orally by their native protagonists⁷.

Finally, we want to reflect on the distance we take. We, as European researchers, are joined by a common history with Western Sahara and with Africa; a history of violence that we cannot call pleasant. As Spaniards we also recognize ourselves as part of a society that, being the *de jure* administrator of the territory, has been unable to contribute to its decolonization; and therefore must be held responsible, for the production of a pain, which from a justice perspective, can only be indignant. Certainly, this is a part of the history of Europe that needs (an)“other” history to be told. Addressing the counterhistory of the Sahara means to also address the counterhistory of Europe.

⁵ The project is coordinated by Mohamed Ali Laman, and carried out in collaboration with researchers in the Department of Social Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Madrid.

⁶ Other results of the project, “Western Sahara (1884-1976): Colonial Memoirs, Postcolonial Looks, (CSO2012-35314), and related to this article are: Gimeno and Robles (2012; Mahmud Awah, B. (2012).

⁷ Counterhistory is also constructed from different forms of telling that facilitate its co-production (Stavenhagen, 2006, pp. 42-43). Visual and sound technologies are ideal formats for this. Since 2010 we have been recording in sound and visual formats historical episodes narrated in the first person by Saharawi people, especially their poets. (Robles, J.I; Mahmud, Ali y Gimeno (2011).

To rescue the voices from the shadows and to translate them into this text, to construct a space to listen to these voices clearly, entails several challenges: the first, a critical approach to hegemonic history (with its colonial precedents) on Western Sahara, as well as a critical position on the ways of building history. A postcolonial perspective will do this. The second challenge is more complex: it is about removing the veils and noises left by the other stories in the shade. The third challenge is to recover those voices and testimonies, avoiding drowning them with the noise of our own words.

Borders in the desert and stories of “bandits”

Moroccan historian Laroui (1987, 127) distinguishes two stages in anti-colonial resistance in the Maghreb and the Sahara: from 1880 to 1912; and from 1921 to 1934 (the intermediate period would be marked by the effects of the first resistances and by the First World War). During the first stage, colonial campaigns followed a model that had been developed by France during the conquest of Algeria, and later adopted by Spain and Italy, characterized by its brutality⁸.

At the end of the 19th century, France entered the Sahara through the deployment of military power and administrative organization charts to convert the Saharan territory, the Bidan, into the center of an immense French belt that would run from Algiers to San Luis in Senegal. Using the stick, the carrot and a good sense of diplomacy to manipulate the *qabilas*, they managed to attract some as allies and confront them with others, through a policy of “divide and win.” France dominated the territories of the Sahara that currently correspond to Mauritania and Algeria. The confrontations of the Saharan populations with French forces were constant from the late 19th century until the peace process of 1934. In contrast, the Spanish presence was weak. Between the beginning of the century and the 1930s the Spanish occupation of the Sahara was limited to the coast. Although initially tolerated by the Saharan tribes, they had to resist attacks by armed groups with few forces and resources. French colonization, which attempted to enforce colonial control in the territory under its rule, produced an important anticolonial resistance among the nomadic tribes. The weak Spanish presence in the territory favored the tactics of different Sahrawi tribes who strategically took advantage of the little Spanish presence in the interior to play with the newly drawn frontiers, escaping French repression and control (López Bargados, 2003).

Borders were key areas in the large colonial game. Traced with pencil on the maps, they impeded the transaharan trade; they hindered the free circulation of the nomads in search of pastures,

⁸ In the pacification of Algeria in 1840, Bugeaud used very aggressive tactics that included the burning of crops, the destruction of villages and the confiscation of livestock. He came to order smothering the Arab refugees in the caves.

threatening the basis of their survival. This was especially important in times of no rain, and in periods of pests. López Bargados has shown that the severe drought of 1909 throughout the region forced the Ulad Delim to move south. But after 1906, with the establishment of the colonial frontiers in Western Sahara, the need for displacement caused the Ulad Delim to leave the Spanish zone to enter the French zone, forcing them to negotiate with the French colonial authorities. That provoked the subjugation of some factions of the Ulad Delim to the French, who took advantage of their position to develop a policy of “divide and conquer”, a policy called “domestication”. Colonial domination made nomads dependent on forces that were beyond nature, established laws that threatened to change their way of life, and the possibility of inhabiting the world as they had been doing.

The artificial division of the desert created by the colonial partition generated a dynamic that López Bargados defines as “frontier factionalism”, a concept that refers to the political divisions derived from the attitude of patronage adopted by the colonizers towards the different tribal segments on both sides of the border. This becomes a space that gives rise to new political strategies of the nomadic tribes that try to use the borders and the different colonial logics of France and Spain in their favor. In this context, certain figures appeared, with less power within the tribal logics, who took advantage of the situation to promote, from the contraband, the raids or prebends of the colonial agents. The action of these people will be characterized as frontier banditry⁹.

One of these people was Wayaha Uld Ali Uld Cheij¹⁰, the nephew of Ma El Ainin¹¹, who, along with his brother Muhamdil Mamun, played a significant role in the events of the border between 1923 and the peace process of 1934. Wayaha¹² was, according to the colonial chronicles, one of the “characters” that populated the borders of the Western Sahara: they struck hand in the French Sahara and sheltered in the Spanish Sahara.

⁹ The concept of social banditry was popularized by Hobsbawm (1959 and 1969). Their social character was manifested in the bonds of social solidarity: from peasant communities, bandits took refuge in them and were aided in material or symbolic form. The figure of the bandit also had influence in the interpretation of the colonial encounter in Africa and the resistances that provoked, especially in the borders (Crummey, D. (1986), Isaacman, A. and Vansina, J, 1987; van Walraven And Jon Abbink, 2008), where, in general, the resistant were assimilated to the “bandits.”

¹⁰ Among all the ways of registering the name of this historical character, we will use the Wayaha, given that this is what the Saharawi researchers of our team do.

¹¹ Ma el Ainín (or Mā ‘al-‘Aynayn) is a Saharan chej who had lived between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. From Smara, where he built a ribat around 1898, he called the holy war against the colonizers.

¹² We have taken the biographical data and the actions of Wayaha from the archiving and bibliographical work carried out by Caratini. (1989), López Bargados (2003), Martínez Milán (2003) and Portillo de Riquelme, J. (1991).

They took advantage of the denial of the permission of persecution of French troops by the Spanish government (Martínez Milan, 2003).

The appearance of Wayaha in the Atlantic Sahel occurred in 1923, when he organized, together with other members of the resistance, like Ismail Uld Bardi, (Martínez Milán, 2003, 288) a gazi that on November 28 attacked the second Meharist squad of the Adrar in Srayril, near Atar, annihilating them during the battle (Martínez Milan, 288). This combat is famous in the colonial annals (Caratini, 1989, 168). Afterwards, Wayaha, decided to attack Port Etienne; he did that during the night of March 26, 1924. The men that accompanied him were recruited from different qabilas (Swa`ad, Ulad Sih, Arosien and Ulad Delim, according to Caratini, 1989). This time, the result was not favorable to the interests of the group as the garrison of the French fort, alerted in time, could repel the attack, causing five dead and numerous wounded between the components of the gazi. After the frustrated attack the group of Wayaha retired to a safe place in Rio de Oro during the necessary time to prepare a new gazi, which finally fell down on a Meharist detachment in Bu Garn on May 5. This fight was Wayaha's last action. The group being pursued by Captain Thoine, it was intercepted when it went towards the north. During the attack, a bullet hit Wayaha in the head, causing his death (López Bargados, 2003 and Caratini, 1989, 169).



Fig. 1. Tomb of Wayaha, liberated territories of the SADR. | Photo by Juan Ignacio Robles Picón.

Wayaha is just one of the Saharan dissidents of those years, not even the most important, given the brevity of his actions; but his figure is part of the resistance imaginary of the Polisario fighters. After his death, his brother and other companions continued the struggle (Caratini, 1989, 169). In the autumn of 1924 they resumed combat: Ahmad uld Hammadi joined Ismail uld Bardi, Abdallahi uld Abd al-Wahhjab and Mujammad Taqi Allah, Wayaha's own brother, to attack, on October 23, a detachment of the second Meharist platoon of the Adrar. It is the combat known as Lakdaym (or Lekdim), near Wadan; a combat also celebrated in the French annals. The resisters, victorious, took about 200 camels. The deeds of the combatants, particularly Ismail Uld Bardi, are still recounted in the Erguibat jaimas (López Bargados, 2003).

In April 1925 Ismail organized another gazi accompanied by former Wayaha companions (Abdallahi uld Abd al-Wahhab, Ahmad uld Hammadi, al-Bu and Muhtar uld Abayd Allah, to name the most famous), as well as Ali uld Meyara and his Thalât partisans. A group of 300 warriors attacked the first Meharist platoon of the Adrar in the battle of Trayfiyat. This is how the contemporary Gillier narrated it:

This combat is the longest and most relentless of those we have known in Mauritania, and perhaps even in all of our Saharawi territories. It lasted not less than three days and three nights, during which one of our Meharist platoons was surrounded by razzias three



Fig. 2. Tomb of Ali Uld Meyara, liderated territories of the SADR. | Photo by Juan Ignacio Robles Picón.

times superior in number, and had its salvation, after the heavy losses and after having suffered thirst in a cruel way, to the exhaustion of the attackers' ammunition.

(Quoted in Caratini, 1989, 169.)

The French administration was aware of the qualitative leap of the activities of dissent in the Mauritanian region. A new strategy was developed based on the conviction, both in the French diplomacy and the Spanish Colonial Ministry, that the only way to end nomadic banditry (Martinez Milan, 2003, 294 and 295) was a convergent action of the French-Spanish forces¹³. Repeated assaults in Mauritania were interpreted with concern (Caratini, 1989, 171):

They are no longer mere thieves forced to live in a troublesome industry that no doubt imposes on them the poverty of their country, but true belligerents who must be treated as such, applying the laws of war to all their rigor.¹⁴

The period of tranquility was not long, since the Saharans counterattacked 'under the command of one of Wahaya's brothers, who had massacred a French convoy,' and whose column of 300 families suffered a severe setback in July: 70 dead and 'survivors flee to Rio de Oro' (Portillo, 1991, 541).

The new French tactic was launched and the mobile group of the *Compagnie de la Saura*¹⁵ entered Western Sahara at the height of Tindouf, attacking the Erguibat camps; an operation that, according to the French, reestablished the Gallic prestige and assured Mauritania a period of tranquility. According to Laroui (1987), the new strategy took old practices used with the intention of the total pacification of North Africa: 'The (French) colonial generals, who during the conquest were easy to hear speak of peaceful penetration, returned after 1926 to Bugeaud's ideas: that the enemy should be destroyed and that many troops were needed to conserve North Africa and to conquer it.'

Rethinking the history of Saharan "banditry"

In the light of archival data, López Bargados (2003) considers that, since 1924, the gazyan no longer constituted a response to the factional activity installed in the different fractions of a qabila, but rather a matter - in the Economic sense of the term - promoted by certain Saharan characters, who operated in the borders that would have professionalized their pillage

¹³ The Franco-Spanish spirit of collaboration to end the Riff resistance enabled us to think about the possibility of joint action also in the pacification of the Sahara. But in practice it was not easy, nor was it possible until 1934 (Martínez Milán, 2003, 301).

¹⁴ Letter from the governor Carde signed on May 26, 1925, quoted in Caratini 1987, 171.

¹⁵ Saura is a desert region of south-west Algeria.

activity transforming it into a kind of banditry. Its primary objectives would no longer be, as before, the herds of the fractions and qabilas subjected to the French administration, but the administration itself.

The work of R. Guha (2002) is useful here. In ‘The Prose of Counterinsurgency,’ he pauses to reflect on the relationship between the production of history and the use of historical documents that contain the archives and on which historical analyzes are based.

According to this author, the archival documents are the result of a process (recording events, making official reports, consulting the historians of these archives), adding the biases derived from the description, analysis and interpretation of the facts from certain positions, which end up impressing the interests of power on the historical reality. The problem of the bias of the sources leads Guha to consider the difficulties of arriving history of the subalterns themselves. In his analysis of peasant movements against English colonialism, he argues that primary sources give rise to the myth that peasant insurrections ‘are purely spontaneous and unpremeditated.’ The truth, he says, is almost the opposite.

We draw inspiration from Guha’s criticism to revise the history of the Sahara border. Starting with the reception of the facts on the field. Laroui (1987, 113), notes that the press of the time, ‘published almost immediately stories of combats seen from the colonial point of view’. The chronicle of the pacification of North Africa was published monthly from 1898 in *Afrique Française*, a newspaper of the *Comité de l’Afrique*. These stories came, of course, from military reports and direct witnesses.

The “adventures” of Wayaha of 1923 were also documented by his contemporaries. Ahambou Ba (1928, p. 572) described Wayaha as a mere swindler; a great-grandson of Chej Ma el Alain, who had been engaged in trade in the Adrar, and who, having undertaken several fraudulent businesses, had been forced into exile in the Saharan al-Hamra in the early 1920s. The swindler mysteriously traded himself into a feverish fanatic; in 1922, a series of successful incursions into the Azawad¹⁶ allegedly led him to conceive the dream of becoming a leader of jihad, which was to commit the whole of the qabilas of upper Mauritania to the project of expelling the French back to the basin of Senegal. Gillier (1926, 252), on the other hand, describes Wayaha as an ‘old merchant from Adrar who departed in dissidence after some difficult account settlements with his creditors.’

In the descriptions of Wayaha and his companions of “misdeeds” - of dissent - their selfish character and their fanatical relationship with Islam are emphasized as the basis of their actions. Such characterizations of the Saharan dissidents were commonplace in the French

¹⁶ The Azawad is an almost totally barren territory in the north of present-day Mali. It is considered as the cradle of the Tuaregs and in it are located its main areas of transhumance [NDLR].

chronicles of the colonization of Mauritania and North Africa. They were inscribed in the narrative used during the colonial conquest. Gillier, in 1903, justified the French conquest of Trarza 'to put an end to the anarchy that reigned there' (Diego Aguirre, 2004, 393). Colonial narratives represented dissidents, like Wayaha, not as resistant to colonial invasion, but as thieves, outlaws, bandits, and their actions fueled by greed and fanaticism. In her research on the Erguibat, Sophie Caratini (1989, p. 168) departs from Gillier in his assessments of Wayaha:

Let's recall, regarding this quotation, that colonial literature generally presents the leaders of dissidence as dubious individuals. It is the systematic denial of all resistance behaviors, which can in no case be compared to the "civilizing" ideals of the colonial army.

Caratini goes on to use the terms used to describe them:

When they are not irresponsible fanaticized by some ambitious marabout, the resistant can only be murderers and thieves eager to escape justice, unless by a "congenital" atavism they are inveterate looters.

Caratini's comments are taken up by Diego Aguirre (2004, 393) in a strong plea against the misrepresentation of the performances by the colonialist narrative, which contrasts with the judicious content of a letter from the Erguibat yeema sent to the commander of Adrar, February 24, 1917: 'The numerous gazzyan that we carry out and the goods we take on a more or less legitimate basis, are motivated only by the fact that you prevent us from having what our ancestors have left us, that is to say, our trade and our cultivated land.'

In this letter, colonialism is seen as a system that takes away the resources of territories that are occupied by violence, preventing inhabitants with historical rights to that territory from developing their trade and accessing their crop lands; that is, to continue to carry out the practices associated with their way of life.

The rationality of the action of resistance and struggle in defense of its way of life can be better understood in the light of the details of the actions we have described, which allows us to unravel the logic of the actions of Wayaha and his fellow dissenters.

Caratini and Martínez Milán (2003, 251) note that, except for the attack on Port-Etienne, the operations carried out against the French detachments were generally carried out in the pastures reserved for grazing the camels of the Meharist platoons. To deprive the Meharists of their mounts was the easiest way to immobilize them.

Colonialism had exacerbated the difficulties of the development of nomadic life and trans-Saharan trade. It threatened the balance between men, cattle and the environment. These balances, unstable and precarious, did not entail any chaos, as Gillier suggested, but flexible forms of social organization and nomadic life practices, which included movement and friction

with others (López Bargados, 2003). Periodic catastrophes had been addressed through mobility strategies, which the establishment of borders now hindered or prevented. The management of famines resulting from climatic disasters, such as droughts and plagues, are part of the memory of the Bedouin. These calamities are collected in their computations of time (Caro Baroja, 2008, 497), as well as the names of places where they found abundance and where life became kind.

The poet Badi, in an interview conducted by Antonio Pomares in 2012, accompanied by Ahmed Fadel, summed up the Bedouin life in those years:

We have gone through different kinds of life. Sometimes we were fine, because the pastures were abundant, the rain, years of milk, camels with firm humps. We played, camel raced, shot the target, practiced the fight; everything was joy, we recited, we listened to music. Then come other times, hunger, scarcity, without clothes, we have a bad time ... Sometimes we eat desert grasses like *guerreima*, *danum*, *terzuz*, *elh* (gum) and we also eat locusts when the plagues arrive, they finish with the grass, there was no choice but to eat them; sometimes we also eat some fruits, *cegrín*, which the ants catch, we have to remove them from the anthill; and with that we fight the misery. We have gone through all this. There is a saying: everything that is not forbidden, can be done ... My father went through many stages, sacked, once drank *cirz* (liquid remains that remain in the stomach of the camel), other times we were plundered.

As anthropology and cultural ecology have documented, mobility is the most important defense of nomads in the face of the uncertainty of their habitat. But it is above all decisive in the face of catastrophe. In such a case, nomadic pastoralists migrate long distances. This practice of mobility necessarily entails a set of political alliances and the establishment of relations between tribal confederations. In short, droughts and their consequences (mortality and famine), as well as the inherited coping strategies, the ingenuity to survive and the flexibility associated with the mobility of the nomads, are part of the experiences of Bedouin men and women, of their ways of life.

These mechanisms of adaptation to the environment of the Saharan tribes were threatened with the establishment of frontiers, with pacification and colonial conquest, conditioning the strategies of the fractions themselves. In the colonial period, droughts became part of the great colonial game, as one of the main instruments of domination (Davis, M. 2006). Laroui (1987, 130) points out:

During the Adrar campaign in 1909, French soldiers occupied the oases at the time of the harvest of dates and waited for the men, forced by hunger, to come and surrender (it is true that not for long). In areas where there were seasonal migrations, they closed the winter pastures and hoped that hunger and cold would force the villagers to reach

an agreement... A consequence of the continuous hunger created by such policies, which were tougher for livestock than for the people, was that the colonial army found volunteers immediately after finishing the operations.

The management of hunger was the continuation of the French military conquest by other means. Sophie Caratini (198) correlates the difficulties encountered by the nomads in the renewal of hostilities in 1923 and the following years. These years were very dry, and the lack of pastures, especially in the north, forced the Erguibat to concentrate their herds in the Adrar, under French dominion. This argument is shared by Martínez Milán (2003, 251). For him, the resurgence of hostilities in Mauritania against the occupiers was limited in scope because the “allied” Erguibat could not participate in dissent since they were forced to leave their flocks in the edges of the Adrar Tmar¹⁷. In the early 1930s, Caratini points out, the situation was reversed both economically and politically; in those years all of them started again to dissent.

For Diego Aguirre (2004, 383), the change of resistance towards 1923 reveals the difference between the anti-colonialist struggle, initially applied to the obtaining of economic benefits, and the ideological and political struggle in favor of a nationalism or independence, which is an inseparable feeling of the Saharan tribes since the nineteenth century. There was a common basis, a shared ideology in the resistance from the beginning of the colonial invasion, based on the ‘rejection of the Christian presence (...), destruction of the Sultan, as delivered to the French; and recovery of their grazing lands and their commercial lines’. Islam served as a shared language of contestation and struggle.

The fighters fought against the interests of the French, not against those of the other Saharawis. They could not accept submission to the French, or their accomplices (like the Moroccan sultan, and the co-opted *chiuj*). It was a war against the French who wanted to impose their customs on the region, its rules, its limits. The motto of jihad ‘the war against the infidels, liberate our land’ was a mobilizing source in itself¹⁸. Islam reminds the human being to be aware of his submission to God, and if an authority that prevents it is established, like the colonial one, an unsustainable situation is inevitably generated. Islam promotes internal and external (jihad) and movement (*hijra*)¹⁹ for human beings to submit to God and defend themselves against those who prevent it. As a shared belief, Islam served to overcome political opposition among Saharawis, to group and mobilize the population and recruit combatants for their cause.

¹⁷ The Adrar Tmar is a component of the great region of the Adrar; it constitutes, by the geologists, the southern part of the “dorsal of Erguibat”. Its main cities are Atar, Chingueti and Wadan [NDLR].

¹⁸ For Laroui (1987, 132) jihad is defensive: ‘Contrary to the common idea in the West, *djihad*, as it has been understood over the last few centuries, is defensive: that is, military service and taxes from it are only obligatory if the country is the victim of an aggression.’

¹⁹ The *Hijra* is the name used to evoke the parting of the companions of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina (in 622 of the Christian era)

In short, these were combats whose purpose was to defend their way of life; actions that came from a political program, which conformed to the immediate interests of the population, to their schemes of organization of life; and not actions of irrational banditry. They were strategies used in a correct reading of what constituted the invasion of the colonial metropolis, of the threats to their forms of life; they used what they had on hand to develop a project rooted in the historical social experiences that constituted their lives. There was a real political struggle against the invader, against the colonialist metropolis. And they are seen today by the Saharawis as components of their history.

Wayaha reconsidered. Towards a counter-history of the Sahara

The considerations derived from the work of Guha allow us to question the scope of colonial histories, constructed on the basis of archival documents. Guha (1983) has also questioned Hobsbawm's thesis on banditry, which 'deals with prepolitical people who have not yet, or have just found, a specific language in which to express their aspirations to the world' (Hobsbawm 1959, 11 and 12).

The pre-political dimension with which bandits are characterized is based on a non-rational basis of beliefs, not conscience. It is easy to draw parallels with the case of banditry on the Saharan border, where we find nomads who are represented as pre-political organized bands, based on religious beliefs. In the more modern versions, the concrete interests of the booty and the resources leave the beliefs aside to make a material motive arise, but which also distances the dissidents from a political stance in their resistance to the colonial invasion.

We can now return to the case of Wayaha to take into account the issues of political consciousness and their capacity to act as subjects immanent to the practices of the Saharan dissidents, taking into consideration the representation of their figure by the Saharawis themselves. This provides a framework for interpreting political action based on its own parameters, which we call the beginning of the article the "space of meaning". Let the Saharawis speak.

In the 1990s, Ahmedu Suelim, a dignitary Ulad Delim, introduced the historian Alejandro Garcia to the figure of Wayaha and his actions in these terms:

After Ma el Ainín had died and his sons had been defeated and his library of Smara destroyed by Lieutenant Morat, Ma el Ainín is replaced in the struggle by the children of his cousin; Wayaha and his brother Mohamed el Maimin. Wayaha feels legitimized for the fight due to the fatua of Ma el Ainín that calls to the holy fight. In his Ghazzis he never attacked the natives, except the collaborators of France. He maintained his struggle without truce until 1925. Wayaha was not a man of arms but the circumstances led him to it. He showed himself to be a bold, fearless, and honest man who never

picked up booty. Impregnated by a deep Islamic faith in fighting infidels, he never took anything away, practiced a clean war. He died in combat near Aguenit, although he had the possibility of retiring but that would have meant turning his back. There he is buried. Wayaha distinguished himself from other warriors, such as Ali Meyara and the others, because he came from a Chorfa family of Mauritanian origin and feel impregnated with the prophet's heritage.

(García, A., 2002, 77 and 78.)

In our work on the ground, in October 2011, the tomb of Wayaha, in Djen. We collected testimonies among Saharawi Bedouins, poets and military men in the liberated territories²⁰, about the history of Wayaha and other dissidents. Bahia Mahmud Awah, a Saharawi poet and member of the research team, summarized these testimonies:

[...] we find ourselves here, in one of the many caverns in Tiris, a cavern related to the great tyrant poet Mohamed Uld Tolba, and here we want to remember a history also related to all this geography, this magical land of the poets, of the erudites from Tiris, and a place that relates the past centuries with characters that are alive in the memory of Saharawi culture. Remembering one of them, a legendary warrior who resisted in the twentieth century, against French troops trying to penetrate the Saharawi geography ... The story of Wayaha. There are many versions related to his fall in combat against the French colonialists, and ... the closest to reality, according to the elders and the people of great oratory, who know the history of that geography, they say that Wayaha was in the region of Galb Buhalala, very near the area of Agueinit²¹, and of Tazualet. And they tell of the annoyance he made to the French with their incursions against the French sanga²². They gave a lot of money, they gave a very large reward to those who could kill Wayaha and give his head to the soldiers, to the French generals of the time.

But Wayaha was always on the alert, on his journeys, he hit when he could, in those places where the companies called sanga were concentrated, and he retired with ammunition, with weapons, with dromedaries. But finally they persecuted him with a sanga, and they located to him in the zone of Agueinit, in the mount of Buhalala. There started a combat between Wayaha, his group and the French troops, in which the number and the correlation of forces was totally abysmal. Finally, Wayaha fought from the back of his dromedary, but when he saw how the combat was developing and that

²⁰ The liberated territories are the territories controlled by the SADR - Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic - after the cease-fire with the Kingdom of Morocco on September 6, 1991. They represent about 25% of the territory of Western Sahara formerly occupied by Spain and claimed since 1973 by the Polisario Front.

²¹ Aguenit is located a few kilometers west of the border between Western Sahara and Mauritania.

²² Sanga: Auxiliary French troops consisting of a hundred soldiers, mostly native.

he was increasingly cornered, one of the French, of the French command, ordered the camel to be shot and knocked down. And then, when his camel was knocked down, Wayaha jumped near his camel, escaped to a trench and from there began the combat shot to shot, body to body, against the French, until they beat him badly together with another companion. And finally, when they approached him, they did not want to interrogate him, according to the account we have heard these days here in Tiris, they shot him right off the mark, beheaded him and took his head to the area of Agueinit. (...) according to that version. In Agueinit they said that there was a centenarian acacia that today no longer exists in the river of Agueinit, this was the place where it had hung his head. The purpose of doing this is to intimidate the rest of the resistance, because there were many legendary fighters scattered throughout that geography, from north to south, and that was to spread panic among the nomads who were here, and create, ... among the inhabitants (the idea) that France is a powerful enemy and that nobody can face it. The fact happened in 1924 to 25. There is not ... a date, let's say, that can be taken as an exact date. But it is said that in 1924-1925. (...) The inhabitants also tell that Wayaha, at the time when he was beheaded... entering now, let's say, religion, and because they committed a human crime, a crime unforgivable for the religion, God caused a whirlwind for more than four days in which nothing could be seen in that region. ... Some inhabitants of the area approached the French and told them that if they did not return his head to the body and bury it in the same place as dictated by the rules of his religion ... the gale will follow and possibly a tragedy would happen. Then the French, faced with this situation, and under the pressure of the people, had to take the head, return it and bury it again with the corpse. ... This is more or less the version that is collected among the nomads, among the wise people that know all this history, and we believe that it is necessary to do more investigation and look for more stories about Wayaha and about the circumstances in which everything happened.

It is not necessary to believe this history literally to accept that the reconstruction of the Saharawis on the struggle and death of Wayaha composes a moral narrative on the difference between the colonialists and the Saharawis, which contrasts with the perspective derived from the archives, to which we referred to earlier.

The practice of cutting heads was not exceptional in colonial repression. It was part of the representations of colonial violence: a pedagogy of terror that sent clear messages about the power of the colonizers and the negative consequences that resistance had. It was a practice carried out by the French and Spanish colonialists and by others (Wesseling, 1991,267).

The Saharawi poet Liman Boicha, in his book of stories *Ritos de jaima*, collects some Saharawi traditions, which bring us closer to the meaning they could give to the severed heads. It speaks of the mourning that a wife keeps for four months, ten days (and some say ten hours) to her husband after his death. 'It is believed that this space of time is the exact time it takes the deceased's head to separate from his neck. The neck symbolizes strength, vigor, personality.

Therefore, when a woman is married it is said of them *f'ragbtu*, “it is on your neck”, which means “it is under his protection.” We can imagine the horror that a practice like this could provoke on the Saharawis and the Muslims of the Maghreb.

There are several elements in the narrative about Wayaha that reverse the conventional image between civilized and barbaric. The Chorfa origin of Wayaha, its relation with the Prophet, that just ennoble him; the continuity of his struggle with the actions of the previous anticolonial resistances that compose the threads of an interrupted history; his deep Islamic faith, which gives meaning to actions and connects the present with the past and the future; his value in combat, even if it does not come from personal experience as a warrior, which reveals both personal value and the design of an accepted destination; his refusal to turn his back and flee, even risking his own life, in an act of warlike chivalry that insulted the invader; the practice of clean war in front of those who claim to be carriers of civilization, and the fact that it never took hold of anything alien, which contravenes the image of an interested thief. All these terms contrast with those used in the documentary sources of the time to refer to Wayaha as an interested and fanatical bandit. They provide a powerful counter-image, an inverted representation that places Wayaha as a protagonist in the interrupted history of independence, freedom, and generosity practiced to the extreme by the Saharan Bedouins, practices that today the Saharawi people claim as a legacy.

The practices of the settlers establish a powerful contrast with the image of European civilization, with the image that Europe wants of itself, and with what it appears on the outside. The new order that emerged in Europe after the Thirty Years' War, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars involved the emergence of all European States, the mobilization of peoples on the European continent, the advent of modern nationalisms. Polanyi (1989) notes that after the “Peace of One Hundred Years,” as the allied powers of Napoleon I called the Treaty of Vienna signed in 1815, there was the feeling, deeply rooted in all European countries, of belonging to the same civilization and of sharing the same values. The Old World, in the nineteenth century would have forged a social system, institutions, a culture and some components that seemed unshakable. The torture had receded almost everywhere, until it disappeared; peace was recognized as a shared value; wars had a limited duration and scope. The system of alliances between the great powers was the reflection of this civilization. The same partition of Africa was a palpable demonstration of the achievements of knighthood diplomacy (Traverso, 2009).

European civilization was defined as the antithesis of the colonial world, a world of radical alterity that confirmed its image of superiority and domination; its historical “mission” as a vector of progress. The extra-European space was conceived as a space necessarily open to colonization, violence could be deployed without limits or rules. Justified as a means to an unquestionable end. The civilizing process by which Europe rescued African societies from their own obscurity was legitimized by a set of ideas, forms, images and imagery based on the moral, physical and technical superiority of Europeans. Morality was associated with the Bible, physical superiority with the demonstrated ability of Europeans to live anywhere in the

world, the technique with the access and control of energy, such as the steam, which allowed to navigate the African rivers and reach the center of the continent, and of arms. Moral superiority legitimized the colonizing action and excused its excesses, calling them errors, reprehensible but necessary. Burke III (2010) quotes one of the fathers of the revolution and democracy, Toqueville: ‘Once we have committed ourselves to the great violence of the conquest, I think we should not stop exercising the small violence that is absolutely necessary to consolidate it.’

The vernacular narration of Wayaha’s story helps reverse this narrative. It is an account of a moral victory, where the military defeat that leads to his death is delegitimized by the irrational violence of the victors. To separate the head of the body of a man, of an opponent in a fight, to hang it from an acacia to exhibit it like a trophy or to produce fear, are not acts that have to be accepted; they delegitimize those who perform them. The appearance of the wind that prevents the vision of the severed head cannot be seen but as a divine or supernatural sanction in favor of the cause of dissidence.

The confrontation between these two logics is evident. In the logic of colonialist thought the oppressed should accept the invasion because it is the natural extension of the evolution of humanity, which legitimizes European expansion; it is a necessary and inevitable process, and therefore, just, despite the “collateral damage;” and is also presented as beneficial. In the logic of the colonized the question is very different; pacification, the conquest suffered is not beneficial or fair, so it is not natural. The colonial invasion could be seen as a plague. Like the droughts and plagues that were part of the memory of the Bedouin years, the good years and the bad years, the colonial invasion was part of the accumulation of calamities that destiny holds, and also found its reflection in the count of the years. But if droughts and plagues were natural, colonization was not; so it could be resisted, avoided, never accepted as a design of God. Dissent was fully justified.

The dissidence of those years is part of a struggle that continues in the present. The histories of the death of Wayaha and Ali Meyara are part of the chronologies of some Saharawi tribes, although not all of them; they contribute to sew the colonial resistance in the passage of a long Bedouin time. To say Bedouin is to use a term that can only be understood in the plural. Today, these stories feed the common imaginary of the struggle for national liberation happening now. A counter-history of the Sahara will have to take into account the existence of a plurality of stories about the history of the Bidan world, the Bedouin societies, the Saharawi people.

History must be considered in relation to a plurality of events that form threads, traces on the territory. Something like rivers that collected the different significant events for each family, for each individual in their travelling through the years and through the movement moving through the territory. Resistance to invading aliens brought together these rivers, these lives; assemble them and disperse them again, gather them and disperse them again. In the contemporary story, Saguia el Hamra would be the river that would gather all these stories at once and lead them to the sea, where freedom would be conquered.

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