

Researching Music in the Saharawi Refugee Camps: the Challenges of Doing Fieldwork in Semi-permanent Desert Settlements

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Image 8: - Saharawis with flags riding camels, Feb 2014

Migration and displacement are inevitable in any society and living in forced exile is a daily reality for millions of people around the world. In Africa, recent conflicts, such as the violent dispute in the border area between Sudan and newly independent South Sudan or the war in Mali, have triggered significant displacement and humanitarian crises. Throughout its recent history, and especially due to its colonial inheritance, the African continent has been the backdrop for many stories of forced migration, which has been a source of much instability. This has created unique sites where relationships and developments happen at a different pace than in other, more stable areas. Whether refugees become part of the host society or remain isolated communities, cultural lines are constantly reshaped. Once in the new locales, traditional practices suffer from a loss of context and in many cases fade away or are

preserved in a rather static form by the cultural mediators of the refugee community.

The Saharawi refugees, currently living in one of the harshest parts of the Sahara desert, the *hamada*, in south-west Algeria, have faced one of the longest periods of protracted exile in Africa. They have been displaced for more than 38 years, since in 1975 their homeland, ex-Spanish colony Western Sahara, was invaded by Morocco and Mauritania. Previously nomadic and tribal camel herders and fishermen, a UN-estimated 100,000 Saharawi are now stranded in a barren land, depending on international aid to survive, deprived of opportunities to develop and subject to regional changes. Known as the 'unusual refugees' due to their ability to run their own affairs almost from the beginning, throughout this time they have turned the camps into a nascent nation, run by their self-proclaimed government, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. Cultural practices, especially music, have been essential for their project of nation-building. Almost four decades of exile have shaped a tremendously resilient society that is living in apparent 'randomness' and frustration. Conducting research in this kind of environment can be a challenging experience due to its instability and non-permanent state. From an ethnomusicological perspective and drawing on my ongoing doctoral fieldwork, this paper discusses methodological and ethical issues around doing ethnographic research in the Saharawi refugee camps, where everyone, foreigners included, is expected to contribute to the national cause.

The Saharawi refugee camps: understanding my research field

The Saharawi refugee camps were set up in early 1976 and turned into the self-proclaimed Saharawi independent republic on February 27. In late 1975, the indigenous Saharawis were forced out of their homeland in Western Sahara after the Moroccan-Mauritanian invasion. A 16-year-long war between the two countries and the Saharawi liberation movement, the Polisario Front, followed. Morocco claimed its right to recover the Great Maghreb, a territory that would include not only Western Sahara, but also Mauritania and parts of Algeria and Mali.¹ Mauritania was looking for a 'buffer zone' that would keep Morocco from expanding further south. Nevertheless, they withdrew from the war in 1979, recognising the Saharawi republic. After months of escaping through the desert, the refugees settled near the Algerian city of Tindouf. Algeria has been supportive of the Saharawi from the beginning of the

¹ This claim was rejected by the International Court of Justice in 1975, leaving the invasion without any legal justification.

independence struggle, something that has caused a long-term disagreement in Algeria's relationships with Morocco and a general instability in the Maghreb region.

The newly formed Saharawi government established four camps or *wilayas*, named after the main Western Saharan cities, Smara, Ausserd, Al Aiun and Dakhla. Later on they built other settlements such as the administrative centre, Rabouni, and the school of 27th of February, which has recently become the fifth *wilaya*, Boujdour.



Image 1: View of Boujdour camp from a hill at sunset, Nov 2012

At first, the camps were built by women while the men fought on the front. Based on the post-colonial experiences of other African and Latin America countries such as Algeria and Cuba, and following a mixture of ideologies, such as socialism and a mild capitalism, the camps soon became organised as a country, with infrastructures such as ministries, hospitals and schools. Today, they have electricity, access to water and a nascent private economy built on taxis, small shops and restaurants. The original *khaimas*² that were used as shelter have been replaced by mud houses shared by several members of a family. The half-paved and dusty roads are full of cars, especially in the evening, when the heat is less intense. They have also built small vegetable gardens and a farm to sustain the population, although the harsh salty terrain has made it very difficult for them to succeed.

² The *khaimas* are the traditional nomad tents that the Saharawis lived in while travelling the desert.

As the only place where the Saharawis can freely express their national identity, the refugee camps have come to represent special ideals for the local population: freedom, independence and everything they would like to have once they return to their homeland. The symbolism of the nation is everywhere, in the flags, the education and the political speeches.



Image 2: Women parading with flags and fake guns, Dec 2012

Nationalism is even discernible in the counting of money - multiplying by twenty the value of the Algerian coins and notes they use to create their own currency. And it is also present in the music; as an oral culture, music and poetry have always been important means of expression for the Saharawis. Even before exile, when the Polisario Front was created in 1973 as an anti-colonial movement, they began to be used to spread their revolutionary message. Based on traditional drum and voice music and adding the acoustic guitar, Polisario leaders wrote simple educational tunes that travelled the territory through smuggled cassettes. Once in the camps, this music was developed further and fused with other regional and international influences, adding the electric guitar and the keyboard, although this was always tempered with hard-hitting lyrics about their struggle. This music, known as *nidal*,³ became the hallmark of the Saharawi cultural identity and has remained a key part of their imaginary, even overshadowing other styles.

³ The word *nidal* is used in Saharawi culture for everything related to the nation.

Methodological strategies and adaptations: hands-on fieldwork

The methodological strategies for developing a music research project in the camps have to be varied and flexible, ready to be adapted to the necessary improvisational character of this particular locale. In order to gain access, an official Polisario invitation is needed. The camps are used to receive foreigners who bring humanitarian aid, but everyone permitted to enter must have a project that helps in a direct way. Before officially starting my fieldwork, I travelled here three times in two-week periods with the British organisation Sandblast.⁴ Working for its music empowerment project, Studio-Live,⁵ became my way of meeting musicians and the relevant cultural authorities that would become my local counterpart. These trips were also an introduction to the customs and daily organisation of the *wilayas*. Using on this acquired knowledge, I developed a research methodology based on participant-observation strategies.



Image 3: Setting up a recording session in the camps, Sep 2013

My main objective was to record and play back music and conduct semi-structured interviews with musicians, cultural figures and the general population. This was meant to encourage conversations about music history, style, the socio-political environment surrounding Saharawi music and the role of the youth within it. I wanted to discover the creative strategies young people are using to voice and channel their frustration about the current political situation. I also planned to attend weddings, almost the only private occasions where music is performed in a concert form, and big national events. Finally, I

⁴ www.sandblast-arts.org

⁵ <http://www.sandblast-arts.org/our-projects/studio-live/>

conducted research in the National Saharawi Archive to learn more about the historical relationship between politics and culture.

In order to follow my methodology when I moved to the camps in September 2013 I had to create strategies to overcome the new security restrictions implemented after the kidnapping of three aid workers in 2011.⁶ The restrictions are very severe and concern foreigners' accommodation and transport. I currently live in Boujdour, comfortably settled with a family. This, however, is not the norm, since most non-Saharawis live in the central Protocol,⁷ a well-guarded hotel in the outskirts of Rabouni. The London Polisario representatives helped me convince the local authorities that I had to become part of the local population to carry out ethnographic research. Despite this, I still had to respect a curfew and be home by sunset. Regarding mobility, the restriction on foreigners taking public transport or travelling in a private car limited my ability to go from camp to camp. During the first three months, any trips through the desert required a protocol car and a police escort.



Image 4: Convoy of Saharawi protocol 4x4 cars, May 2013

⁶ Two Spanish and one Italian, the three aid workers were kidnapped in November 2011 and released ten months later without injury. The kidnapping was linked to the new waves of Islamist terrorism who have emerged in the Malian desert in the past two years and has been regarded as the Saharawi 9/11.

⁷ The Protocol is the official Saharawi institution that handles everything related to foreigners' visits.

For this, having an official programme approved by the Saharawi Ministry of Culture was essential. I used a very concrete project, the creation of an archive of Saharawi music to be deposited in the British Library, as the main strategy to meet, record and interview musicians from the different *wilayas*. Today, this restriction has been reviewed and it is possible to get a permit to travel in a private car without an escort.

Every aspect of Saharawi life is conditioned by the circumstances: the harsh environment, scarcity of resources and political decisions made thousands of miles away. The socio-political structure of the camps is complicated by a diversity of mediators, quite difficult to understand for an outsider, such as family groups, strict social norms based on religion and respect for the elders mixed with a strong sense for equality. On the cultural front, music has a special relationship with society. Before exile, there were no professional Saharawi musicians. Traditionally, music was performed to accompany daily activities and to praise Prophet Mohamed with the *medeh*.⁸



Image 5: Female tbal drum player during a medeh session, Nov 2013

At weddings and celebrations, the host family would hire a group of mainly Mauritanian musicians known as *iggawen*. These were only appreciated for their function, but not respected in the society because they sang for money. During the revolution, musicianship was encouraged to spread the

⁸ *Medeh* is the traditional spiritual music of the region of *Trab el-Bidan*, which encompasses Western Sahara, Mauritania and parts of Mali and Algeria. They share the language Hassaniya, their traditional nomadism and the same oral culture, among many other cultural and social traits.

message and support the fighters, but it was only socially accepted as a voluntary act for the national cause. Today, issues around money are still key to the development of the music scene in the camps. When a foreigner wants to record and learn about the music, these issues arise, encouraged by contradictory opinions regarding fair payments.



Image 6: Wedding musicians, Oct 2013

I chose to offer payments to those musicians who requested it for the participation in the British Library music recording project because the sessions were mostly organised in the musicians' houses where lunch or refreshments were offered. There is a difference between young musicians who have made music their way of life and have no problem accepting money and those who used to sing during the war years and still believe that 'helping the cause' should be unpaid and voluntary. Conducting ethnographic research always brings about different ethical issues, in particular when researchers establish long-term relationships with a foreign culture. The constructed 'subjects' we have endlessly talked about in previous research stages become, during fieldwork, our daily companions, our friends, which forces us to constantly navigate a diversity of identities. In my case, I have my Spanish background, which inevitably links me both to the Saharawi colonial history and the main current source of international aid. At the same time, I am a project manager that helps bring resources and training into the camps. I am also a researcher, asking questions, taking pictures and wanting to meet people

and attend events. Now, I am also a friend and have become part of my host family. As an ethnographer, I have to be aware of these identities, since I am a representational voice, writing about my experiences in the field and shaping the discourse about those who have become part of my life. Constant reflexivity, thus, is now an essential part of my daily routine.

Final thoughts

The Saharawi refugee camps have been my temporary home for the past six months, eating, sleeping and suffering the same exponential temperature changes as a refugee. After multiple glasses of tea, blinding sand storms and rides in half-alive cars, I have started to understand a little better the frustration, but also the resilience, of the Saharawi youth. For example, a few weeks ago the local branch of the youth union organised a traditional arts festival to showcase the importance of culture for the preservation of the Saharawi identity. Its main objective was to engage the young people in creative and inspirational non-violent events. Music was at the heart of the celebrations. A band run by people in their early twenties performed one of the nights, becoming the highlight of the event. Despite having no funding available, the two-day festival succeeded in showing how, when given the opportunity, youth can achieve great things with very few resources.



Image 7: Young female participants at Saharawi traditional arts and culture festival, Feb 2014

Unfortunately, living in constant uncertainty prevents them from carrying out most of these initiatives. Here, life is divided between the cause and the need to survive. Family ties are still strong, but protracted exile is creating big generational gaps and rupturing the natural cultural transmission process. Traditional music has lost its context and the nostalgia for the revolution impregnates every aspect of musical life, preventing other styles to grow. Nonetheless, young musicians keep playing, singing and composing, fighting hard to develop their own strong cultural identity that sets them free from their circumstances.