



Imagined territories and histories in conflict during the struggles for Western Sahara, 1956–1979



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ABSTRACT

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

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

Many studies have analysed the origin of the conflict from different, and even rival, perspectives. Some of them define the initial situation as a 'failed' or 'unfinished' decolonization process, as the former Spanish colony did not become a sovereign state as most European colonies in Africa did.¹ Others consider the

integration of Western Sahara into the Kingdom of Morocco as a partial reconstruction of an old African polity dismembered by European partition.² Without denying the merits of either perspective, our contribution will regard the situation as the result of competing nationalist projects which appeared towards the end of the 1950s.

As Fred Cooper has shown for other European colonies in Africa, there was rarely only one anticolonial movement that led to the independence of each state.³ Social mobilizations were plural and diverse in their composition, aims and leadership. They sometimes converged around a nationalist discourse and a single political party, but many other times they competed. In addition, they were all developed in a changing political context in which colonial powers were reforming their rule in more intrusive and inclusive ways, intervening more intensely in the lives of their African subjects.⁴

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

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

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

⁴ D.A. Low and J. Lonsdale, Introduction, in: D.A. Low and A. Smith (Eds), *History of East Africa*, volume 3, Oxford, 1976, 1–64 called this process the 'second colonial occupation' of Africa.

Most anticolonial demands finally concurred on one main aspiration: that peculiar organization, the nation-state, 'based on the idea of a single people in a single territory constituting itself as a unique political community' which recognizes no authority above its own.⁵ But the postcolonial nation had to be imagined before being fought for.⁶ And the national territory and its borders, far from being a given, also had to be defined by those who imagined their nations.⁷

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

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

In order to analyse the role of geographical imaginations in the political struggles around this territory during the years when Spanish colonialism drew to a close we will discuss alternative maps that were elaborated or used to corroborate different political claims. These maps will help us to understand the aims of the political actors in the successive conflicts over the Sahara, and how they have made use of divergent interpretations of the territory and its history in order to provide a basis for their aspirations.

We begin our account in 1956 when the government of the recently independent state of Morocco claimed the then Spanish

Western Africa as part of Greater Morocco, inheritor of the old Sherifian Empire. Countering this, the Mauritanian independence movement to the south considered that the territory had belonged to an 'Ensamble Mauritanien', which should be decolonized as a whole. Meanwhile, the colonial power reacted by declaring its African colonies to be an integral part of the Spanish state, transforming their own national imagination. Only at the end of the 1960s did the idea of a Saharawi nation, corresponding to the land of the then Spanish Sahara, emerge as part of a local nationalist movement.

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

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

Before then the political order was articulated as autonomous tribes or *kabilas*. These were organized along lineage lines, but did not exclude relationships with more centralized polities occupying the fringes of the desert.¹⁴ Different sovereignties overlapped in the same spaces, while the territory did not determine either the status or the rights and privileges of persons. Maps drawn by geographers and anthropologists during colonial times usually defined no clear borders for the 'nomads' of the western fringe of the Saharan desert. One of those maps is included in the most thorough ethnography of the Spanish Sahara, *Estudios Saharianos*, written in 1955 by the anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja. Fig. 1 shows how the movement of the local population and their conception of the space clearly transcended well-defined colonial frontiers, but without generating alternative ones.¹⁵ Paradoxically, the special fluidity of relations of people and space in the desert may have helped to support alternative and contradictory claims on the territory and the population that lived within it.

Greater Morocco in the Atlantic Sahara

Soon after the independence of the French Protectorate and the Spanish Northern Protectorate in Morocco in 1956, the Moroccan nationalist and anticolonial party Istiqlal articulated a vision of Greater Morocco. On the 5th of July that year the party's journal, *Al Alam*, published a map which depicted a polity running from the Mediterranean to the Senegal River, and from the Atlantic to Timbuctu (Fig. 2). The map was authored by Abdelkebir Al-Fassi, brother

⁵ J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History*, Oxford, 2010, 8; J. Bartelson, *Sovereignty as a Symbolic Form*, Oxford, 2014.

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

⁷ J. Anderson, Nationalist ideology and territory, in: R. Johnston, D. Knight and E. Kofman (Eds), *Nationalism, Self-Determination, and Political Geography*, New York, 1988, 18.

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

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

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

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, chapter 10.

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

¹³ On these questions see A. Wilson, Ambiguities of space and control: when refugee camp and nomadic encampment meet, *Nomadic Peoples* 18 (2014) 38–60.

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

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

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