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‘A ground-breaking, if not revolutionary, contribution to the anthropology of the Western Sahara conflict. This book has the potential to radically revise prevailing understandings of the interrelationships between gender, tribalism, and nationalism among the exiled constituents of the Western Saharan independence movement.’

Jacob Mundy, Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Colgate University

‘There is a two-fold boldness in how Konstantina Isidoros speaks of Sahrawi refugee camps. First, she explores areas where NGOs, confined to “official” camp zones, never venture and whose very existence they do not suspect. Next, by ethnographically observing Sahrawi men through women’s eyes, she is able to understand that tent-owning women, who control the tents, are the focus around which men circulate – this brings a radically new insight into classical anthropological understanding of Arab and Bedouin society.’

Dominique Casajus, Emeritus Director of Research, Institute of African Worlds (IMAF), The National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS)

‘This book not only fills a huge gap in the academic literature on the basis of highly original, first-class ethnographic research, it is also a fascinating and really enjoyable read. To date there has not been any comparable exploration of the “strategic silences” surrounding the lives of Sahrawi refugees beyond the humanitarian domain.’

Irene Fernández-Molina, Lecturer in International Relations, University of Exeter
NOMADS AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE WESTERN SAHARA

Gender, Politics and the Sahrawi

Konstantina Isidoros
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To Mum and Dad, who gave birth to me in another desert and through their magical, adventurous journeys across Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, set a path towards the Sahara.

To Krekiba, Metu, Bashir, Fatimetou and all the family for ‘a’ila al-kubra.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AATSF  Asociación de Técnicos y Técnicas sin Fronteras
AECID  Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional al Desarrollo
ECHO  European Commission Humanitarian Office
EU  European Union
FiSahara  The Western Sahara International Film Festival
ICJ  International Court of Justice, United Nations
MENA  Middle East and North Africa
NGO  Non-governmental organization
POLISARIO  Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and the Río de Oro)
SADR (RASD)  Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (República Árab Saharaui Democrática)
SPS  Sahara Press Service
UJASRIO  Unión de Jóvenes de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Youth Union of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro)
UN  United Nations
UNHCR  United Nations High Commission for Refugees
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<td>UNSC</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
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| UPES         | Unión de Periodistas y Escritores Saharais  
(Saharawi Journalists and Writers Union) |
| WFP          | World Food Programme |
I wish first of all to thank the many Sahrawi who received me in a rich range of fictive kinships and took me across an extraordinary ecology as interlocutors, teachers, poets and avid jnun storytellers, offering me safety and hospitality, and trusting my sincere research intentions. For occasional medical assistance I thank Bah for introducing me to talha leaves, Dr Mohammad in Smara camp and Metu for her herbal remedies. I also thank Zorgan, my translator and guide in the very early journeys I made to the camps in 2007, and Malainin Lakhal and Salek for our writing collaborations and long conversations in Rabuni.

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The Trustees of the Royal Anthropological Society’s Emslie Horniman Award, the Royal Geographical Society’s Frederick Soddy Trust and the E.O. James Bequest at All Souls College generously funded my fieldwork. I always hoped the benefactors of these three bequests could catch sight of me from way up above the Sahara’s skies. During the RAI interview, Professor Glen Bowman noticed an intriguing link. Emrys Lloyd Peters, under the supervision of Edward Evans-Pritchard at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford, had also received the Emslie Horniman Award for 1947–9 for his fieldwork on ‘The Bedouin peoples of Cyrenaica’, from which his
accompanying wife, Stella Peters, wrote her ethnography of their tents, cited in my final chapter. Moreover, Frederick Soddy was an atomic scientist, a graduate from Merton College, Oxford in 1898, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1921, and also rediscovered Descartes’ theorem in 1936, which he published as a poem *The Kiss Precise*. His poem pretty much describes anthropological understandings of human kinship and offers enthralling parallels to Nick Allen’s anthropological study of tetradic theory.

All interpretation and errors are entirely my responsibility. As Dr Mohammad Talib once told me, authority and authenticity can never truly lie in our texts and theoretical interpretations of human life. So it cannot in mine, but it remains firmly among the Sahrawi in whatever way each generation wishes to shape their history, discourse and future. Anthropologists have one foot in objectivity and one in subjectivity and specialize in the area in between. It is from that positionality that I wish you may achieve self-determination. You have dwelled in the largest hot desert in the world for at least three millennia and surveyed the rise and fall of some of the greatest ancient North African empires. When international law fails you so gravely and little kings rise and fall along your historical continuum, it is as if this old poem was written for you:

> I met a traveller from an antique land,  
> Who said – ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
> Stand in the desert… Near them, on the sand,  
> Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
> The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
> And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
> My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
> Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
> Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

Map 1  Map of Western Sahara. Creative Commons.
M’haymed is stretched out on his side with an arm propped against the floor cushion. ‘Do you want to go to the protest?’ His other hand folds the loose end of his face veil to lift the little red teapot briefly off the coals as the syrupy water inside begins to froth up. It isn’t really a question, intimating that I might share an inclination to say no. Habib and Hassana, ducking through the low doorway and kicking off their shoes at the sight of fresh tea being made, ask the same question: ‘Do you want to go to the protest?’. Lowering their face veils, the conversation drifts as Habib and Hassana stretch out alongside us, and M’haymed rattles the teapot lid, fans the coals and rustles a packet of sugar. Najem’s face pops around the doorway, a big grin and meshwak twig between his brown, tea-stained teeth materializing as he loosens his face veil to sit around his shoulders. 1 Slipping his shoes off, he sits down with us and cheerily opens a white plastic bag with fresh baguettes, La Vache Qui Rit cheese and a jar of Algerian apricot jam. He too asks, ‘Do you want to go to the protest?’ We break into our breakfast, and the social life of the teapot changes hands as others drop by for these Sahrawi nomads’ customary three glasses of cloying sweet black tea. The conversation drifts far and wide between life, love, births, deaths and other mutual news; between stories, laughs and dozes. The little glasses are rolled back across the carpet to be refilled by whomever is the next tea-maker, while dust particles, suspended in the shaft of daylight from the open doorway, float in the air around us like minuscule other worlds.

The five of us set off lethargically down a path of intermittent ridges of rough desert gravel and soft sand, weaving our way from our little
sand-mud brick rooms nestling under a few low, fat date palms, which keep our courtyard cool, quiet and secluded. It’s now around four o’clock in the afternoon, and it’s searingly hot. Mid-June here in the Sahara Desert is uncomfortably close to August temperatures, which can reach into the fifties centigrade. This is the dra’a bammada, a high and barren desert plateau surrounding the town of Tindouf. Hamadas are extraordinary ecological creations of Aeolian deflation. Over thousands of years, wind has slowly weathered the geology, eroding it into sand grains, carrying up the finest grains to be suspended like a pinkish-red talcum powder in the atmosphere and moving the heavier grains through saltation and surface creep, stripping the landscape back to create stony deserts (reg) or shifting sand dunes (erg).

We pass the front of the National Archives and then round the side of the television station, cross the wide black tarmac road and head towards the first line of little sand-mud brick shops with their rickety shelves displaying wilting vegetables and some garages whose spare parts spill around to form tentative boundaries between each other. Rabuni, one of the six little refugee camps self-administered by the Sahrawi and the base for their international legal fight for self-determination and return to the Western Sahara, is twenty-five kilometres from Tindouf. It is the central government camp for the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), houses all the important infrastructural buildings for state formation and is effectively the administrative capital of the nomads’ nation in exile and state in waiting. It is residential only in the sense that it is mostly men working for the Polisario, the Sahrawi liberation and independence movement, in the SADR offices and press services or running the shops who live here for days, weeks or months. It is a place of politico-administrative life in suspension, with real life – family life – taking place in the other five camps.

Back in 1852, Tindouf was a guelta (oasis) trading post founded by the Tajakant qabila (tribe, pl. qaba’il) and connecting into the vast Trans-Saharan trade routes. Sacked by the Rgaybat around 1895, French colonial troops took over the deserted post in 1934, and it resumed its former role as an annual market gathering for the western Saharan qaba’il. Today, Tindouf is a strategic town for the Algerian military. In a poignant aide-mémoire of longstanding military tensions with Morocco, the town turns its lights off when civilian night flights land and take off.
The antagonistic presence of six little Sahrawi refugee camps inside this southern sector of the Algerian desert borderland places them safely and infuriatingly out of reach of Morocco. The 1975 military annexation of Western Sahara is the lasting vestige of the 1963 *barb ar-rimal* (Sand War) between Algeria and Morocco and the latter's emerging dreams of a 'Greater Morocco', expressed through historical claims to parts of Algeria, Mauritania, Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla.

The scene outside the shops and garages looks chaotic, but it is organized. Cars, jeeps and mostly Sahrawi men of all ages have gathered. Car horns are beeping, flags and protest signs are waving, and whistles, chanted slogans and shouts fill the air. At this time of year, approaching the high heat, there are very few foreigners, so I subconsciously do not bother to look for any. It just feels, and is, a ‘private’ Sahrawi protest. M'haymed had told me we'd get into one of the cars, but suddenly wheels and dust churn into activity, and the uproar rises even higher. I turn in response to Habib's hand thumping my shoulder and silently shouting at me in the cacophony. He scrambles me towards an open car door that has just sharply braked, and I clamber in, with him behind me and Najem falling in through the other door. The thin cotton fabric of my *melhfa* is caught up with Habib's left trouser leg. Will it tear? Where's M'haymed? The driver is pumping his car horn and turns to check we are in, pointing his thumb back to indicate M'haymed is in the jeep behind. The front-seat passenger is banging his hand on the outside metal panel of his door. The windows are open, and the air is full of swirling dust. I can taste its talcum powder. The men are fully veiled to cover their mouths and noses, but I can hear their smiling and laughing of excitement through their chanting. I'm trying to tug my *melhfa* loose from Habib's legs to free the upper section to veil with. Najem is reaching across me, tapping Habib's thigh to signal that he should sit up a little. Habib does so, raising one arm to help me lift the back of the cloth to be able to wind it around my face. His other arm is through the open window thumping the metal on the car roof.

Our car feels as if it is being propelled in slow convoy in comparison to others speeding past us. We arrive at the presidential building, and I'm caught in a throng leaving the cars. Shuffling feet are now sending up the Sahara's fine talcum dust in slow curls as everyone runs towards the entrance gates. Although I hadn't noticed many women when we set
off, there must be some here because I can hear their piercing ululations. But as I am jostled between men, I catch the lower tone of male voices ululating – unusual. I notice I have also been running amidst some men in police and army uniforms. Clifford Geertz’s anthropological thesis of Balinese cockfights comes to my mind: theoretically, I’m supposed to be running away from the uniforms. Uniformed men are part of a tighter perimeter at the gates, facing the crowds and shouting at them to stay back and calm down, but these ones seem part of the demonstration, repeating the slogans as they swarm forward in the mêlée. Technically, all men of fighting age are part of the Polisario’s military force, so I am running with a Sahrawi military group towards and into itself. Some of those in uniform have clambered up the metal entrance gates, their hands and feet wedged between the filigree metalwork, facing the throng and repeating the chants, fists and lengths of fabric from their male veils waving in the air. Those guarding the gates are also shouting in the same direction towards the crowd, but telling them to get back. They are all doing the same thing and are part of the same whole, including those protecting the gates.

Afterwards, we take a long walk back to a light breeze rustling the palm fronds in our little courtyard. Hassana appears a short while later with another white bag wafting the aroma of rotisserie chicken and fresh baguettes. He also brings his brother, still in his army uniform, who has been at the gates as one of the protectors.

Geertz’s (1972) seminal argument was about ‘deep play’. This day of protest signifies a non-cockfight (Barbosa) between a population, a president, the gates and its guards. The gates are the threshold of a Sahrawi thesis of self-determination. The presidential building is not actually lived in, but is a symbolic infrastructure, used for important meetings and to receive international dignitaries. Everyone that day knew that the president lives in, and was in, his tent in one of the residential camps like everyone else. Why didn’t the protest go there? The threshold of the Sahrawi thesis – the whole point behind sticking bare life out in refugee camps in a hamada – is not located at the opening canvas flaps of the president’s tent. His tent threshold is a conventional, time-honoured one that anyone can in principle approach, and where these warrior-nomads would customarily lower the el-them, their face veils. But the gates signify the exceptional and uncharacteristic nature of the political situation the Sahrawi find themselves in. This may all seem far removed
from Geertz’s study of gambling, but with extraordinary insight he reminds us that it does not pertain just to economic life. The gamble can signify deep play within politico-cultural stakes that are much, much higher. For the Sahrawi, it relates to an international legal principle.

***

Western Sahara is often described as the last colony in Africa and as the ‘forgotten conflict’. Locked in a fierce war with Morocco, the Sahrawi are engaged in an international diplomatic battle for self-determination. Overwritten by colonial cartographies, their ancient desert heartlands are sharply divided by the world’s longest fortified sand berm following Spain’s abandoned process of decolonization and Morocco’s military invasion and occupation.

The Sahrawi story in this North African conflict has geopolitical relevance involving precarious relations between Algeria, Morocco and external powers such as the US and France (cf. Mundy 2006a), as well as the Western Sahara’s significance in the context of European pressure for alternative sources of energy. This low-visibility ‘silent march’ for North Africa’s untapped natural resources (oil, gas, phosphates, uranium, water, solar and wind power and the Atlantic Ocean’s rich fish stocks) is often off the mainstream media radar, but it has the potential to trigger other high-impact regional conflicts in the future. The ‘Western Sahara question’ is a geopolitical hot potato in the corridors of Washington and the United Nations, and since 2000 the rise of ‘global Islamic terrorism’ has amplified US and French military securitization of North Africa. Thus, the nature of conflict and social transformation across the western Sahara Desert has also turned into a battle within the highest cathedrals of international law and governance, between the International Court of Justice, the United Nations Security Council, the European Union and the African Union.

As a result, the Sahrawi, being at the heart of a desert battle for autochthony and territorial sovereignty, attract a great deal of hypercritical scrutiny. They are usually studied by political scientists and legal scholars from the point of view of their right to self-determination and their political thesis of territorial sovereignty. They are also analysed frequently in terms of their refugeehood and their state formation. Despite geopolitical disavowal of their self-determination
project, I find the Sahrawi are doing something else that is very interesting: creating a nomadic configuration of a new, self-initiated nation. These desert nomads have assembled a nation state in waiting, which ‘floats’ like a shimmering mirage of international law above their refugee camps inside the Algerian border.

Against this backdrop, this ethnographic monograph foregrounds some of their rarely studied customary principles of social organization to contribute new and innovative understandings of their contemporary socio-political transformations. Sahrawi men have long been renowned as fierce desert warriors, theologians and poets, but this book illuminates a society where men veil and are intensely matrifocused towards their womenfolk, who are the property holders of tented households and have the capacity to form powerful female matrilocal coalitions. Seeing men through the eyes of women captures for the first time, a glimpse of women’s historic political architecture and what I term their desert-wide ‘economies of affection’. These illustrate how women’s kinship strategies have acted as a customary scaffold for men’s contemporary survival responses to the symbiosis of tribe and state and their own tactical sedentarization (Isidoros 2015a). As the Sahrawi negotiate the modern, neo-patriarchal pressures of urban Islam, neighbouring nation states and the hyper-critical scrutiny of Western development and humanitarian actors, making women central shows how these legendary warrior-nomads have innovatively reconfigured a customary tribal nomadic pastoral society into a modern and nascent nation state consisting of refugee-citizens and warrior-statesmen.

Anthropologists are well known for our long disciplinary history of engaging with the ‘exotic’, yet we love the mundane. Our task has always been to look deep into, and between, the everyday and the undistinguished. While the analysts of other sciences determine the hard ‘facts’, we look at the materiality of fact . . . what a colleague once expressed to me as ‘the lemonyness of lemons’. Our ethnographic detail offers nuanced insights from up-close and inward-looking-out from which to discern larger patterns of human thought, words and action. Our quintessential question is: What does it mean to be human? At the same time, to explain any one feature, we endeavour to explain the whole, the ‘bigger picture’. It is a juggling act between micro and macro, the Geertzian ‘thick description’ (1973) and the façade, human subjectivity and scientific objectivity. We also navigate through ‘deep time’ in a series
of ‘ethnographic presents’ and then seek to distance ourselves to be able to indulge in deep reflections on fieldwork (Rabinow 1977) from which to engage in a form of storytelling that produces ethnographic theory and anthropological analysis.

International analysts and observers of the Polisario, its camp population and their political affairs keep a close eye on indications of internal discord with the Polisario leadership and ‘cracks’ in the Sahrawi thesis of self-determination. But I think this misses the nuance of life, subsuming a simple binary between either a Polisario or Moroccan thesis. Analyses often home in on the criticisms of the ‘internal protestors’: they want jobs and a future, are fed up of ‘sitting’ in the camps for over forty years, of accusations of corruption and questioning the leadership’s slow approach to diplomatic resolution and so forth. But what is missing is a deeper understanding of the customary desert rules of warfare and political engagement and of the cultural expressions behind these criticisms. Such ‘internal protests’ are not just signs of challenges to leadership; they are collective ritual actions — and symbolic ululations in the absence of women — of warriorship that cannot be emitted in the corridors of the United Nations. They are ceremonial forms of deep play (James 2003) enacting out and expressing the liminality of a political ‘deep time’. Anthropologically, the rush to the president’s gates was not a simple case of divisions appearing in a political thesis, but the strengthening of a reminder to previous political promises. This deep time is enacted differently by the Sahrawi living under Moroccan occupation in Western Sahara, friends and relatives of those in the Tindouf camps. There, the ‘divisions and cracks’ are played out, face-to-face, in direct protests against a Moroccan threat and its security forces.

War and its games involve complex human behaviours. My hope is to welcome political analysts to some intriguing anthropological insights to the Western Sahara story. The Western Sahara story has much comparative analysis to offer across Middle East, North Africa and Africa area studies. For readers in the disciplines of political science and theory, international relations, peace and conflict studies, this study introduces some of anthropology’s unique approaches to understanding human life and offers fresh insights towards political analysis of the Western Sahara conflict. Anthropology is able to transport readers from their armchairs right into a field site, into the political thick of it — the cockfight is with
Morocco, but the deep play is among the Sahrawi and their warriors in waiting.

The Tindouf refugee camps are a material manifestation of temporal deep play between a nomadic society inhabiting a vast territory and its leadership, one that wrote into its first constitution in 1973 at Ain Ben Tili that it was pupating from a small group of very young and skilled desert-guerrilla fighters in their early twenties into the elder statesmen they are today operating on the international diplomatic platform. Zunes and Mundy (2006) describe this fascinating trajectory from another angle, as a transition from a pro-independence strategy based on armed struggle to one of civilian-led, non-violent resistance led by Sahrawi activists inside the Moroccan occupied territory. Fernández-Molina (2015) offers another vantage point, that of a ‘symbiotic relationship’ across the berm: between the Polisario and its Sahrawi population in the Tindouf camps, with the often clandestine non-violent Sahrawi human rights activism inside the occupied territory (the ‘second front’) and the rather extraordinary recognition that both receive from the international community. Extraordinary in the sense that the Sahrawi receive tremendous international ‘civil society’ support for their independence thesis, translated into widespread support to uphold international law on decolonization, self-determination and the conventions for territorial sovereignty. Conversely, Morocco can only rely entirely upon the support of certain UN Security Council members, primarily France and the US, to maintain the status quo that undermines international law. Veguilla (2017) probes Sahrawi activism in the occupied territory more deeply to show how they have mobilized new activism projects against their marginalization by Moroccan policies in local fisheries and housing, while Deubel (2015) sheds light on the growth of Sahrawi digital activism.

The chaotic event at the presidential gates (rather than his real tent entrance) was, then, just one ritual enactment of a symbolic exchange that is part of a much great whole, not only reiterating and enacting the ‘ceremonial’ rules (James 2003) of the game — a war game — but deeply interconnected to dynamic social relations that cross and defy the Moroccan berm both physically and orally.

Fellow anthropologists and sociologists will instinctively discern much from the opening vignette, such as the distinguishing Durkheimian features of social solidary (1933), collective ritual action
and symbolic human thought (1995) in the gathering at the gates, and how, on the surface, such actions signify much deeper play at work in a distinctively human language of metaphor, liminality and rites of passage (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1960). Little further enticement is needed, other than to say that the book offers a rich range of comparative analysis for syllabuses where students seek new empirical material and original applications of theoretical frameworks. There is substantial relevance to those in international development and refugee studies, as well as policy makers and practitioners in government and aid agencies working specifically in the Western Sahara and North African context. Correspondingly, there is broader comparative bearing in this book for the policy-oriented interests of civil-society activists, human rights foundations and research institutes that produce assessments and reports on conflict analysis and resolution in other, similar settings. The ethnographic heart of this book in Part II will also be of special interest to feminist civil-society and NGO campaigners in comparable international contexts, as well as anthropologists in gender and masculinities studies. And as anthropology is always about people’s stories, and as ethnography is an art of storytelling, this book is also an invitation to general readers to discover our scientific world and to feel encouraged to see this – and other ethnographies – as an educational genre of documentary and travelogue to some of the world’s most remarkable human cultures and research field sites.

Overview

Nomads and Nation-Building is an intimate ethnographic portrait of the enigmatic Sahrawi nomads of the western Sahara Desert. Their extraordinary story is of a highly specialized desert society that has successfully survived the western Sahara Desert for at least three millennia. Scholarship on the Western Sahara conflict has puzzled over the ‘extraordinary leap’ made by Sahrawi tribes to the status of refugees and citizens of an exiled nation state. It has perceived this process as a modernizing and civilizing act of detribalization and applauded women’s recent political appearance within a sovereignty–solidarity discourse. Yet in scrutinizing Sahrawi ‘modernizing’ and ‘civilizing’ efforts, a few scholars and general commentaries remain critical of ‘tribal’ patriarchy and women’s inconspicuousness in state structures, while
simultaneously using an insecurity discourse to measure Sahrawi ‘performance’ hypercritically from inside the nascent state’s corridors.

The aim of this ethnographic work is to unfold more nuanced understandings from an anthropological perspective. My research addresses this gap in Western Saharan historiography and vocabulary: of an exclusively patriarchal society misread by a colonial narrative that is focused solely on ‘pacifying’ anarchic tribesmen and ‘ungovernable’ nomads, and ossified in post-colonial overlays of scholarship (Isidoros 2015a). Absent from the historical record are tribeswomen, customary alliance-making and central political organization. This study observes Sahrawi political action differently. By looking out from inside the tent and through the eyes of women, it re-examines the transition of the Sahrawi from tribe to state using a new framework of women’s tents and circulating, veiled males. I do not intend simply to write women back in, as the absence of women from the historical record actually has the effect of underemphasizing and misrepresenting male action as well. Thus my conceptual approach is to focus on women’s menfolk – of seeing men through the eyes of women – to suggest a different reading of their own unwritten Western Saharan social organization and adaptation.

The first objective is to home in on the significance of the tent and to upturn ideas about the domestic versus the political, so that the tent is seen as a decision-making centre for both men and women, where, shaped by desert ecology, the domestic is the political and the tent has been, until recently, the foremost ‘built’ structure. I argue that women must be analytically recognized in their own right as political architects, utilizing and presiding over tents as a female economy of affection that casts a centralized political constellation across the Sahara. The second objective offers fresh insights of how women and their tents can offer further nuanced explanations of Sahrawi strategic tribe-state symbiosis and tactical nomadic sedentarization, overturning the stele of ‘tribe’ and the ‘leap’ from genealogical reckoning to nationalist consciousness. A third objective is to offer a comparative ethnography that can engage critically with anthropology’s ‘great debates’ and popularized tropes regarding veiling, patriarchy, gendered space and power, and ‘tribal’ society. A different analytical light is cast on the exoticized Middle Eastern harem (harim), masculinity and veiling, and of new hybrid forms of human socio-political reorganization that challenge the Western default notions of nation and state.
My ethnographic data discern matri-focused _khayam_ (tents) as little female _makbazin_ (treasuries) that are cast desert-wide to create a web of female political economies of affection. These are political constellations _through_ which guarded veiled males traditionally circulate in the currents of the trans-Sahara economy. This redirects the heart of male political action to the matrifocused tent in which women preside, so that, in considering Sahrawi history through the actions and decisions (the eyes) of women, those of men may also become clearer. Assumed as unbuilt and ignored as an architectural structure, the tent emerges as more than just a domestic space. It resolves the puzzle of the tribe-to-state transition by illuminating the corresponding role of tribeswomen as political architects bringing ‘asabiya’ (solidarity) and nationalism ‘under the same tent’.8

Certain research questions, which prior studies appear to have stopped short at, are woven through the chapters. Detribalization is one such example that has been accepted to explain an _a priori_ leap from tribe to state (i.e., from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘civilized’). As I have previously examined (Isidoros 2015a), detribalization has instead been a _silencing_ of unifying tribes, in response to a threat to multiple territories that historically comprised nomadic zones of influence and shared ecological utilization. By seeing it as unification, more complex and less visible decisions and actions are revealed to offer a contemporary and living glimpse of how nomadic _qaba’il_ were in fact historically engaged in very centralized political organization. The subtle and overlooked significance of this finding opens further questions for this book to explore the next stumbling block in existing scholarship: might both the absence of women from the historical record and low female participation in contemporary state structures be explained instead by looking for female political action in the heart of the tent (cf. Isidoros 2017a)? Are women politically engaged through their coalescence and fractioning of matri-focused _khayam_? If so, might the Tindouf refugee camps be reminiscent of historical battle _frig_ (collections of tents) and instead signify heightened female politics through collective action engaged in _alliance-making_?9

These three questions not only begin to locate women in the right place, they also contradict the historiographical emphasis on nomadic ‘anarchy’ and ‘ungovernable’ tribe-state antagonism. And finally, if women are tactically sedentarizing the Tindouf camps as battle _fargan_, can their encampments also be resonant of a historical fortified _qsur_ (settled oasis or
defensive fortified trading centre, pl. qsar) to form a new trading satellite in the long-distance trans-Saharan economy? This latter question opens up a new recognition of the configuration of political economies of affection by women as against the received wisdom of masculine-dominant economic activity in the trans-Saharan space.

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Although the three anthropological components of the ‘tribal nomadic pastoralism’ paradigm are deeply interlinked, it being difficult to separate them out, one of my aims in this book is to establish a historical backdrop to re-frame the Sahrawi ‘tribal nomadic pastoralist’ geography as a ‘protective way of life’ (Claudot-Hawad 2006: 664–5). I use three fields of anthropology to construct a theoretical framework that is integral to the three parts of this book, but also distinguishes them.

Part I is underpinned by two revisionist themes that argue the need to re-evaluate colonial historiography and nomadic society. Chapter 1 draws primarily on critical refugee theory, notably of anthropologists in their own refugee settings who have built on the critical field of the anthropology of development of the 1980s and 1990s. A seminal work for my research has been Horst’s (2006) study of the Dadaab camps, which looked at humanitarian workers through the eyes of the refugees. This influenced both my fieldwork methodology and data analysis to move conceptually away from the humanitarian aspect of the camps. Chapters 2 and 3 then begin to depart textually from the context of refugees and temporarily ‘suspend’ the humanitarian corpus from the field site, thus creating a topographical sketch of the refugee camps as customary Sahrawi encampments. This is linked to another field of revisionist anthropology from the 1980s on arid-zone nomadic pastoralists in order to acknowledge their persistent use of both modern and traditional resources along their historical continuum. The use of advanced refugee studies theory and comparative ethnography from international refugee settings helps to reframe why the Sahrawi refugee camps have become hypercritical humanitarian enclaves producing contradictory discourses of sovereignty, solidarity and insecurity, and how the Sahrawi as refugees have become trapped between them. The aim is to navigate anthropologically through a field site that contains a ‘natural’ (accepted) binary dialectic between humanitarian and refugee,
giver and receiver, expert and naïve, and so forth. These countless binaries are not only vividly observable in the field site, they have not yet been treated analytically by other scholars of the Western Sahara. This perpetuates a demographic fog that assumes a constant point of convergence and intersection between the binaries. As will be shown, there is a need to re-examine how space is being used in order to see the simultaneous presence of complex divergences.

Overall, Part I conveys the first part of my anthropological journey from foreigner to deep immersion (non-place to meaningful place). Chapter 1 is a disquieting overture that lays the path to re-enter the field site from a very different analytical angle: through a point of divergence from what the dominant discourse perceives as refugee ‘strategic silences’ and ‘silent peripheries’. The motion of lifting out and moving away from the public infrastructural humanitarian space into densely packed residential areas renders an abstract typology of the built camp environment from which to start again. It conveys a gaze through which foreign visitors experience the camps looking out from the dusty windows of 4x4 jeeps on to a seemingly abstract setting that appears devoid of human occupation, except for an occasional child or veiled adult glimpsed momentarily in a narrow passageway. Following an ethnographer to leave behind the foreign domain of the camps and the visible performance of the geopolitical context, Chapters 2 and 3 begin to move deeper into the heart of ‘strategic silence’, to live in the inner sanctums sheltering these narrow passages, moving from negative to positive space (Raubisko 2011).

In Part II, the encampments can now come alive with the thriving bustle of life as lived, but this part also develops into a ‘slow ethnography’. In this Sahrawi centre, few foreigners punctuate daily life, being seen instead only in their converse antithesis as flashing past in their 4x4 jeeps, their faces circumscribed behind the dusty windows. This marks the start of an ethnographic trilogy of intimate portraits of daily family life illuminating a different type of public and private which very much belongs to the Sahrawi alone. It also marks a change in methodological tempo, shaped by immersed participation as a female ethnographer living among host womenfolk. It reflects my own anthropological move away from the highly politicized humanitarian domain of the camps in which Sahrawi men are dominantly and visibly engaged and into the Sahrawi-intimate residential domain, which has little engagement with that humanitarian space.
Chapters 4 to 6 are everyday ethnographies of different aspects of Sahrawi life; the data subtly juxtapose the classical anthropology of the Middle East and gender relations. This part of the book homes in on their fabric of life, which they are holding on to, interweaving it with the new stages of life along their historical continuum. Respectively, each chapter engages with the great debates on the position of women and property, male veiling, and the problem of tribe and the patriarchal Western model of state formation. However, as my intention is to challenge the overarching concept of tribe, I follow Tucker (1993) and Abu-Lughod (2008) to position my ethnographic focus continually on the family as the base unit of tribe, and from which tribes women come to the fore. Given the agitated ‘noise’ of the humanitarian domain of the refugee camps demonstrated in Chapter 1, what is significant in Part II is the mundane calmness of everyday life as encampments and the little understood position of women. The camps are ethnographically captured as very feminine places containing menfolk in a very different bustle of daily life among densely packed tent clusters. I contend that it is women who provide the crucial yet ignored analytical link back to the geopolitical context. This different understanding of the social and political transformations of the Sahrawi serves to demonstrate where the decision-making centre of the Sahrawi ‘whole’, the centre, really lies.

Part III is explorative and new, tentatively venturing an interpretation of Sahrawi tribe-state symbiosis by juxtaposing Khuri’s thesis of tents and pyramids (1990; 1976) to embryonic studies of urbanization in refugee camps. Chapter 7 has an experimental component, drawing on the metaphor of ‘the emperor’s new clothes’, Agier’s ‘naked city’ (2002) and Agamben’s ‘states of exception’ (1998) as the primary scaffold. This connects back to the topography of the camp in Part I, abstracted to ‘lift’ the humanitarian nexus out so its abstraction can now be seen in terms of the newly emergent and hybridizing forms of infrastructure that shape the camps as cities beginning to be ‘plumbed in’ to the West’s default model of the nation state. This part draws on the fledging but cutting-edge academic questions about hybridizing refugee camps and tented cities in the light of recent concerns in the West about future climate change and conflicts over natural resources. This chapter asks: Can tents have architectural rationale and purpose in a city, and in a state? The Bedouin tent has certainly been both a powerful metaphor and a symbol for Arab
kings and presidents. But what of the Sahrawi president – a warrior-statesman – who actually lives in a real, dusty tent in a very real (refugee) encampment? What of a nascent nation state that tangibly exists in six tented cities, where women are property holders?

Chapter 8 returns to the Sahrawi tent. Long neglected by scholars as flimsy and ‘unbuilt’, and disregarded as an architectural structure, the tent emerges as more nuanced than just a female private-domestic space. This foregrounds the corresponding role of women as political architects in their own right. My key argument here is that tent cities have formed from the ever-increasing circles of tiny, politically centralized base units tactically settling beside each other. By lifting out the humanitarian haze in Part I and looking at these encampments as ‘naked cities’, it is clear they are not ‘islands unto themselves’, but that they are coalescing into a larger political constellation. What is extraordinary is that the refugee camps as ‘modernizing’ and ‘urbanizing’ spaces of nation and state are based on hybridized nomadic principles of social, economic and political organization. The base units may coalesce and fractionate without disturbing the whole, but ‘fractionating’ does not necessarily mean a splitting off from the shared political objective, nor does it mean a ‘failed state’, as implied by elements of the regional and global insecurity discourse about this sentient war zone. Instead, it means that the units can move and respond adaptively and with agility, something that the static and ‘plumbed-in’ nature of the Western default model of the nation state cannot do.

Fieldwork, methods and bias

The research behind this book draws on ten years of anthropological research in the Western Sahara, applying the classical anthropological method of immersed participant observation. This began in 2007 as I undertook my MPhil and DPhil in Anthropology and postdoctoral research at the University of Oxford. The ethnographic data in this book centres on two intensive years of doctoral fieldwork between 2010 to 2012, as well as extended periods of ethnographic journeys across the western Sahara before and after. These long-distance journeys radiated out of the camps through the desert geography to be spent living in the western Saharan and Mauritanian badiya (desert heartlands). Developing long-lasting relations with various host families and their extended
kinship links created the lineage bonds through which I was able to move safely through the region. This latter point is especially relevant; as a female ethnographer I became rooted in private family life, distanced from the need to negotiate through official males or live in the public infrastructural space of the camps as most short-term camp visitors must. These encounters led me to develop a profoundly different perspective of the humanitarian regime’s strategic performance of the camps as a humanitarian centre, and of the humanitarian-centred notions of refugee fixity, insecurity and dependence. These three paradigms came to reflect for me a far too narrow, bounded perspective of the Sahrawi, their social place restricted tightly to the interior camp structures and (humanitarian-perceived) boundaries. Living in densely packed residential areas, moving through the public infrastructural areas themselves with rare daily sightings of the external humanitarians (a sort of on-the-ground elliptical illusion of centre-periphery) and leaving the camps to enter the ‘peripheries’, I instead experienced the Sahara as a central hub with a strong antithetical paradox of mobility, security and reciprocity.

As ethnographer I became very much drawn in a web of relations and conversations. My fieldwork was governed by one methodological tenet – to avoid probing questions and not to conduct formal structured interviews or surveys. By experiencing ‘life as lived’ (Abu-Lughod 2008: xi), I wanted to follow the field site by letting the Sahrawi tell me what they wanted to share with me when they wanted. This stemmed from my early disquiet with the phenomenon of humanitarian activity in the camps, which becomes apparent in Chapter 1 where I navigate Sahrawi circumspection. This is due to heavy scrutiny through this humanitarian activity and geopolitical interests, leading them to envelop their privacy with stock responses to protect themselves from the never-quite-certain outcome of foreigners’ intentions.

By not focusing on one rigid anthropological topic, I aimed to achieve a ‘wide-open’ ethnographic encounter that recognizes mutual ethnographic experience where they and I are both what Willis and Trondman (2000) call ‘part subjects and part objects’. My objective was to learn through participation ‘the meaning of individuals’ actions and explanations rather than their quantification’ (Savage 2000: 1400) and the inclusion of the groups’ views and sentiments (O’Reilly 2012: 14). Because the Sahrawi are always being interviewed, filmed and
photographed (as informants), I attempted an alternative cognitive approach: that of my transferral as a student from my university to my Sahrawi teachers. This recognizes, for instance, the role of (and my dependence on) children from signalling imminent faux pas to my first daily lessons in Hassaniya, and using English, French and Spanish among a population that employs different languages to communicate with international visitors and on the geopolitical platform. My experience of both the Oxford tutorial and the Sahrawi customary habitus have not been so different: they both involve sitting and listening to tellers of stories, conversation and news; to teachers rather than interviewees. As Ingold has argued, anthropology is ‘not a study of […] but a study with’. Anthropologists work and study with people’ (2011: 238, my emphases). This changed the focus of my entry into a field site as the Sahrawi receiving me as a student and a daughter, as carrying significant meaning in a nomadic milieu and customary tents that conceive ‘reception points’ as thresholds (a thread I return to in Chapter 7).

Fieldwork was inspired but also limited by the relationship between this being a war-zone and circumspection regarding external visitors’ intentions. As Chapter 1 illustrates, refugees are often caught with their backs to several corners. Sometimes on-the-ground reality requires one to choose the participant element of fieldwork. I chose to volunteer as a journalistic writer with the SPS and UPES teams and published two special issues on the Western Sahara for *Pambazuka News*. This introduced me to some inner political spheres of Polisario and to a newly emerging group of politicized young males (giving me increasing circles of lineage) inside the camps and the over- and underground network of Sahrawi activists (Lakhal and Isidoros 2013; Isidoros 2011). It also introduced me to cross-disciplinary networks of scholars and jurists working in international law and human rights.

Movement, protection and legitimacy in the field site were shaped by the demands of regional military securitization (as regional state-complicit il/licit flows) and notions of correct forms of customary circulation. The former creates controlled and restricted movement for foreigners through and between the camps (and even more beyond the camps), for whose safety Polisario bears the burden of responsibility. I required lineage association with a maximal socio-linguistic group, and then deeper (or ‘on-the-ground’) association with specific families from
whom I could access every-increasing circles of both matri- and patri- 
kin. When ego is correctly positioned, the conventional ‘vertical’ 
genealogical chart (which looks like a pyramid to the outsider, looking 
upwards/inwards) is transformed differently into ever-increasing circles 
(the insider looking outwards). This emphasis on family could position 
this research as a multi-sited study, given that I have lived and travelled 
with a number of long-term host families across the region. Instead, I see 
the study as single-sited but related to several families who happen to 
have wide geographical movement through ever-increasing circles of 
lineage across what is meaningfully to them one ‘whole’ landscape. The 
importance of family meant I experienced milk kinship for the first time 
in my life (Isidoros 2017c). Kinship links engaged me in familial 
obligations and removed sexual interest on the part of eligible males, 
providing a wider (and customary) circle of male security (Isidoros 
2015b). Correspondingly, as I took on these duties, I began to ‘sit’ 
around less like a visitor and become drawn into private family matters 
more like a daughter and a ‘constant [guest]’.

The everyday negotiated character of Islam (Abu-Lughod 1988) is 
woven imperceptibly throughout the book, as it did organically 
through daily life during fieldwork. In the background to this 
ethnography, someone may get up from a relaxed lying position on the 
carpet to pray quietly. In one host family, a daughter prays five times a 
day and likes to find a quiet place to read the Qur’an, while another 
does not; both loved to watch a period drama television series about the 
life of the Prophet. In another family, a son avoided my hand because of 
evening prayer; his friend held my hand customarily in the long 
greeting. In my ten years of research, mosques have appeared in each 
administrative quarter, but they remain small and indistinguishable 
from existing camp buildings. Praying is still visible (and preferred) in 
the open air, in front of small boulders in a crescent shape on the sides 
of roads, down the sandy middle strip of a suq (market) street, in the 
central taxi areas or outside an administrative building. It may also be 
marked by a single stone sitting on the carpeted floor of a tent, shop or 
office. Some commentators and journalists have described the Sahrawi 
as practising a ‘liberal’ Islam – my fieldwork experience would explain 
it as more of a quiet and contented Islamic philosophy shaped very 
much by its natural ecology. I have, therefore, followed Abu-Lughod in 
not essentializing it.
In environments of regional conflict, an analytical tension will inevitably oscillate in the degrees of ‘separation’ between objectivity and subjectivity. Sentiments surrounding the Western Sahara conflict are high on all sides, and researchers will find themselves having to identify the fine lines of positionality between activism or ‘partisan’ sentiment to achieve academic credibility. From the outset, I have clearly positioned myself within the framework of international law (cf. Liceras 2014), specifically the United Nations and International Court of Justice resolutions on the Western Sahara and the Geneva Conventions on Human Rights (c.f. Isidoros 2017b; Theofilopoulou 2017; Mundy 2017). This has come through long-standing discussions with fellow Western Sahara observers such as Mundy, Ruiz Miguel, Pinto Leite and others, most of whom are international jurists (cf. Liceras 2014; Arts and Pinto Leite 2007; also the work of Anna Theofilopoulou, a former UN official who covered the Western Sahara conflict from 1994 to 2006). I entirely agree with Zunes’ and Mundy’s erudite position, to which I point readers (2010: xxxiv-xxxvi).

There are three aspects that this book does not cover. First, I have not set out to incorporate everything about the field site – this study explores selective aspects that I wanted to examine more deeply, which I felt would make an original contribution to fellow Western Sahara scholars. These were research questions that emerged when I first became familiar with the literature and which developed during fieldwork as conversations unfolded among interlocutors. Second, I have not included many of the families I lived with nor the non-familial groups and individuals I encountered; this would have created a rather ‘jumpy’ series of data darting across a very large field site, difficult to compact into a single book. Instead, I have chosen to frame the ethnographic scene around one host family whom I have known consistently over ten years and whose wide circle of relatives and friends preserves an underlying link across all my interlocutors. Third, this is not a book that offers ‘criticism’ of the Polisario, its political thesis or Algeria’s part in the story. I am not attempting to question the politics per se, but attempting to analyse data at the micro-level of Sahrawi actions. I do not accept that real objectivity needs to be proved by obliging doses of censure. Except for Chapters 2 and 9, I have de-coupled my data from the tense politicization of the Western Sahara debate so that it can speak for itself. Turning my critical engagement to anthropological perspectives
and the relevance of the ethnographic data to contribute to the wider
debate affects the context of meaning, rather than determining whether
these people are doing things ‘well’ or not. But I do take an obvious
stance against Morocco’s contravention of international law on territorial
sovereignty.

It is, therefore, to studies such as Bourdieu (1990) and Wacquant
(2011) on practice and habitus and Rabinow (1996, 1997) on fieldwork
reflections and the anthropology of reason that my methodology pays
homage in respect of both my physical presence and my epistemological
movement through ‘the field’ (in all its forms), as well as in analytical
acknowledgement of the subjects’ own logic.17 The latter is especially
salient given that the point of anthropology is to tease out the logic of
what people do in practice, not just what they say and think they do.

**Historical and literary précis**

The western Sahara has long been fabled, attracting the fascinated gaze
of medieval Arab travellers such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun to
nineteenth-century shipwrecked European sailors like James Riley,
with his wild 1817 memoir *Sufferings in Africa*. Early Portuguese,
Spanish and French colonizers began to demarcate the region
cartographically, fight over it and carve it up between themselves,
while more recently scientific explorers across a range of academic
disciplines like myself have been going there to conduct contemporary
practices of scholarly research (Isidoros 2017a). The Sahara can be
divided approximately into two principal socio-linguistic groups, on
either side of a central line drawn roughly down the middle of Algeria.
The western Hassaniya-speakers (the Sahrawi, the focus of this book)
up to the Atlantic Ocean and the eastern Tamashek-speakers (the
Tuareg) up to the Libyan desert are both tribal nomadic pastoral
societies who have inhabited and exploited the hydrologically deficient
desert interior for at least three millennia.

The Sahara Desert in North Africa is the world’s largest hot desert and
the third largest desert after the Antarctic and Arctic polar deserts.
At 9,400,000 square kilometres, it covers most of northern Africa, and
its extreme environmental changes in the Pleistocene-Holocene period
marked a human transition from hunter-gatherer to agriculture in North
Africa. Human migrations by three large pre-Islamic Berber
confederations (Zenata, Masmuda and Sanhaja) entered northern Africa around 1000 BC. Initially sedentary and engaging in agriculture and raising animals, their early desert expeditions, with the use of iron and horses, developed a mixed set of economies of widespread pastoralism as systems of exchange linking the different populations and raids by mobile groups upon settled farms. The discovery and exploitation of the camel (first arriving in the east around AD 50) enabled adaptive nomadism and the establishment of the legendary trans-Saharan caravans – an important trigger for early state formation that tied emergent cities into vast commercial, cultural, ethnic and political webs across North African. By the ninth century, the Berbers were known for their warlike qualities, feared and disdained by agriculturalists and urban dwellers beyond the desert (Mercer 1976, 1979; Hodges 1983: 3; McDougall 2005; 1990; 1985: 2–3, 14).

Islam entered North Africa through migrations of invasion during the seventh and eighth centuries, spreading through nomadic movements of trade caravans, tents and troubadours. Although Islam is often treated as an urban religion because its institutions of knowledge and learning were usually in fixed urban settings, it flourished adaptively in the Sahara’s nomadic environment (Norris 1986: 44–45, 1972: 318; El Hamel 1999). The Arabization of the Sahara began with the progressively cumulative flow of trading networks facilitated by the evolving transition from Sanhaja (Berber) to Hassan (Damis 1983: 5; Hodges 1983: 4, 8–9). This Yemeni coalition of the Awlad Hassan began skirting the desert fringes, reaching the oases of Wadi Dra’a and the Atlantic coast by 1218 (Brett and Fentress 1996: 82; Lapidus 1988: 491; Hodges 1983: 8). The Awlad Dlim tribes gradually infiltrated and acculturated the Saharan Sanhaja Berber tribes, giving rise to a new Arabic-speaking population of mixed ethnic origins – Arab, Berber and black African. The Reguibat were another large, incoming Bedouin tribe whose nomadic zone was to spread to southern Morocco and eastern Western Sahara into western Algeria, northern and central Mauritania and parts of Mali. During the late nineteenth century, the Reguibat population expanded south rapidly through assimilation with weaker or defeated groups, dividing into two broad units with overlapping territorial bases: the coastal Sahel Reguibat es-Sahel and the eastern interior Reguibat esh-Sharq (Damis 1983: 6; Hodges 1983: 11). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were foremost
in anti-colonial insurgencies and are thought to be the most active founding participants in Polisario Front (Trout 1969).

Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, a new symbolic territory emerged called Bilad Shinqiti, from which readers will recognize ‘the Moors’ (El Hamel 1999; McDougall 1985). By the eighteenth century the Arabo-Berber dialect of Hassaniya (klam al-bidan, language of the whites) had displaced the proto-Berber languages (klam al-aznaga). Hassaniya remains the primary lingua franca across the western Sahara, famed for its musical poetry, although the exact number of Hassaniya speakers and those identifying themselves as Sahrawi in the modern nationalistic sense is unknown (Norris 1986 and 1993; Zunes and Mundy 2010).

The arrival of early European explorers evolved into the colonial period. Unlike France’s aggressive colonial expansion and pacification policies in Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, the colonial administration of the Spanish Sahara largely ignored its desert interior. Spanish wakefulness regarding the value of the Spanish Sahara came late, when UN-led decolonization processes were already well under way and had already been completed for Morocco in 1956 (Jensen 2005:26). Spain declared its desert colony a province to circumvent UN pressure to colonize and began investing heavily in mining equipment, building the world’s longest 62-mile conveyor belt at Bukra’a and new port facilities for off-shore fishing (Mercer 1976:210; Zunes and Mundy 2010:101).

Intensified UN pressure for decolonization in 1963 rallied Sahrawi anticolonial activity. By 1973 the present-day Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario Front) was founded by previous veterans’ sons. Educated in Moroccan universities, they had become knowledgeable about emerging nationalistic movements worldwide and began to transform anticolonial sentiments into demands for decolonization. In 1974, Spain finally agreed to the decolonization of Spanish Sahara, promising a referendum within a year, while Morocco demanded an advisory legal opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Court rejected Morocco’s claims to historical sovereignty over Western Sahara and supported the native Sahrawi right to self-determination. Defying the UN and ICJ, Morocco launched its ‘Green March’ of 350,000 civilians across the Moroccan-Western Sahara northern border on 6 November 1975,
followed by a heavily militarized invading force (see Spadola 2013 for an illuminating study of the Green March). War broke out between Morocco and the Polisario guerrillas, triggering a Sahrawi exodus that separated individuals and families and tore apart established tribal geography. Flight paths went east to the initial refugee camps near the Algerian military base of Tindouf or south towards relatives in Mauritania, while others remained behind the Moroccan invading forces. The Red Cross first reported 40,000 refugees fleeing eastward at Amgala, a staging post en route to safety across the Algerian border. A month later, the UNHCR estimated that 50,000 refugees had reached Tindouf, and Morocco was accused of deploying napalm against the refugees on the mid-way flight paths of Guelta Zemmur and Oum Dreyga.

At Bir Lehlou on the 27 February 1976, Polisario declared Western Sahara an independent state and formally proclaimed the Al-Jumhuriya al-‘Arabiya as-Sahrawiya ad-Dimuqratiya (SADR). Since the 1980s, the Western Sahara has been divided by the Moroccan-built 2000 kilometre militarized berm or sand wall, two-thirds of which now forms the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara and the remainder the Polisario-controlled Western Sahara, referred to by the Sahrawi as the ‘Liberated Territory’ or ‘Free Zone’.

A UN-led ceasefire has held successfully since 1991. The ceasefire established MINURSO, the UN mission of peacekeeping forces for Western Sahara, and led to the 1991 Settlement Plan as a proposed solution. However, the spirit of the ceasefire has remained that of a sentient war zone and a diplomatic battleground, with the ongoing period of irresolution still caught simultaneously between a post-1974 peace process and the still incomplete pre-1974 decolonization problem. Both parties’ positions can be summarized as Morocco’s tending towards the principle of *jus sanguinis* and Polisario’s to *jus soli* (Jensen 2005). Since the 1991 ceasefire, the political combat has involved a cycle of secretive shuttle diplomacy, changing UN envoys, contentious arguments about repatriation, integration and voter identification, the UN peacekeeping force’s mandate to monitor human rights, flights for family exchange visit organized by the UNHCR and Morocco’s resettlement drive (see Mundy and Zunes 2015) into the area it has militarily invaded and occupied.

The 1991 Settlement Plan got as far as the start of UN preparations in 1994 to determine voter registration for a referendum (Jensen 2005), but
this collapsed in 1996 around contentions between Morocco and the Polisario about ‘native’ ethnicities and who had the right to vote. In 1997, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan brought in James Baker, former US secretary of state, to revitalize the search for a solution. The voter registration process was completed between 1998 and 2000, but new factors collided to lead the UN to abandon the referendum: briefly, anomalies appearing in the voter lists of ‘Moroccan Sahrawi’; the succession process in the Moroccan monarchy; East Timor’s 1999 referendum majority for independence, which frightened Morocco; and the increase in pro-independent uprisings among Sahrawi under Moroccan occupation, igniting nationalist feelings leading to their *Intifada al-Istiqlal* (‘the independence uprising’) of May 2005 (Mundy 2006b; Barona and Dickens-Gavito 2017). A new Framework Agreement devised ‘a third way’ between integration into Morocco or full independence as a new solution, proposing Western Saharan autonomous self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty for five years followed by a referendum, but though not actually offering independence as a possible final outcome. Baker’s revised proposal was the 2003 Peace Plan (known as ‘the Baker Plan’), but this too collapsed following French interference. Baker resigned in 2004, and in 2007 Morocco presented its unilateral ‘autonomy’ proposal to the UN Security Council. Again this collapsed, as it had no provision for any process of self-determination.

This stalemate on the ‘Western Sahara question’ continues to be stuck in stagnant irresolution and bitter contestation today. As Zunes and Mundy (2010: 252–3) state the patent and rationally obvious in their conclusion, a view shared by legal experts represented by Arts and Pinto Leite (2007) and Liceras (2014): ‘Why reject self-determination because it requires coercion when autonomy will need the same? Autonomy is, after all, a far more complicated solution to implement than an independent Western Sahara. The latter simply requires nonviolent international pressure on Morocco to withdraw.’ Yet, this irresolution may have more to do with international law – our concept and precept, and our ability to implement it only when it suits us. Casting back to my opening vignette of the protest storming towards the presidential gates, ‘internal complaints’ and external concerns about the content of these complaints pales to insignificance in comparison to the fiasco, corruption and treachery of our Western, international legal failures to enforce the rule of law concerning territorial sovereignty upon Morocco.
This still incomplete process of decolonization and its ensuing conflict puts the case of the Western Sahara in a unique position in this twenty-first century: as the last colony in Africa still awaiting a decolonization process while simultaneously undergoing a second process of colonization in Morocco’s invasion and ongoing militarized occupation. This has forced the Sahrawi to adopt new geographical delimitations, concepts and vocabulary to redefine their identity and territory. The area of the ‘western Sahara’ refers to the Khat al-Khaof, a wide geographical zone of influence forming ancient Sahrawi heartlands. Yet this has now territorially shrunk to the modern sense of as-Sahra al-Gharbiya in Modern Standard Arabic – the Western Sahara in its post-colonial, nationalistic meaning. The Arabic word ‘Sahrawi’ literally means ‘of the Sahara’, used as a general term denoting an inhabitant of the Sahara. However, the contemporary sense of a Sahrawi people and ethnicity is born out of the 1960s colonial dialectic and constituted in their early narratives of nationalism (cf. San Martín 2005). Formalized as a national self-construction during the emergence of the Polisario Front in the late 1960s, it has come to signify Western Saharan independence, nationalism and human rights activism. Being Sahrawi today means being able to claim descent from recognized indigenous social groups, but it also connotes those who subscribe to Sahrawi nationalism.

It is extremely hard for an outsider to ‘fake’ blood, milk or fictive kinship ties, as this desert society remains highly dependent on collective mnemonic proof across a wide geographical web of social relations. Jensen provides insights into how the 1990s UN voter-registration process had to fall back on this personal system of identification (2005: 65–6) and also explains why Morocco’s active policy of ‘Moroccanization’ failed to convince anyone during the UN process, and why the ICJ originally ejected its historical claims to a ‘Moroccan Sahara’ in 1975. In the meantime, Morocco’s bitter contestation of a nationalist Sahrawi identity has seen a policy of settler-colonialism, moving Moroccan settlers (a contravention of the Geneva Conventions) into the occupied territory to change the local demography. This complex human landscape creates a tense relationship between pro-independence (nationalist) Sahrawi, ethnic Sahrawi originating from southern Morocco and this new category of ‘Moroccan Sahrawi’ (San Martín 2005; cf. Rguiibi and Belahsen 2006). In the event of a referendum, many other individuals and groups would see valuable opportunities in subscribing to a new nation state being
formed; some scholars even suggest the likelihood that Morocco’s soldiers stationed along the berm might jump ship. Thus as a nomenclature the term ‘Sahrawi’ has arisen from the pressures of the decolonizing population to stake a claim to a re-defined piece of land (a nation) and establish a re-legitimizing identity (the rightful citizen) for a new being, the Western Saharan, but it is still open to change and evolution among a (tribal) nomadic population that historical data have shown have always been extremely open to accretion and alliances.

Scholarship on the Sahrawi is best presented as falling into three interlinked periods. Spanish colonial social scientists, many serving as colonial officers, produced the first studies of Sahrawi social, economic and political organization. Caro Baroja’s (1955) detailed ethnography is considered the most seminal piece, followed by Vieuchange (1933), Morales (1946) and Gaudio (1975). English commentators and historians also took some interest, such as Mercer (1976), Hart (1962), Norris (1972) and Cabot Briggs (1960, 1958). The second literary period marks the agonistic end of the colonial era, stimulating international curiosity such as Trout (1969) and Franck (1976) on the emerging political situation and enshrining ‘the Western Sahara question’. The third period begins with the 1975 Moroccan invasion and the current, ongoing body of international scholarship from the disciplines of journalism and war correspondence, international law, political science, international relations and conflict studies (cf. Liceras 2014; Zunes and Mundy 2010; San Martin 2005; Shelley 2004; García 2001; Seddon 1996; Bontems 1987; Lippert 1987, 1992; Firebrace 1987; Lawless and Monahan 1987, Hodges 1984). The French anthropologist Caratini (2003, 1989) also appears at this time, writing mostly in French and focusing on the conflict and the refugee camps, capturing the Sahrawi in the early stages of their refugee encampments and formation of state infrastructure.

The 1991 UN-led ceasefire re-opened the battlefield to foreign observers, and the above conflict literature continues. The Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara (2006) best highlights the explosion of literature from the 1980s. The respected body of political and legal scholarship sees Sahrawi self-determination as an international legal prerogative. Zunes and Mundy (2010) is currently the pre-eminent political science publication to address both the regional and international dimensions and the processes of Sahrawi nationalism and identity formation. There is also the edited volume by Botha, Olivier

This work sits alongside the first two English-language ethnographies on Western Sahara, in a complementary continuum of enduring and methodologically untroubled access to the Sahrawi refugee camps and their political infrastructure. San Martín (2010) focuses on how the Sahrawi as refugees are making their nation state, with a comprehensive historical and ethnographic study of nationalism and identity formation. Wilson (2016a) develops a political anthropology of state and sovereignty, with rare detail on legal reforms and electoral processes in her meticulous study of how the Sahrawi, Polisario and SADR are engaged in exiled statecraft. Among French scholars, an edited volume by Boulay and Freire (2017) has compiled research across the Sahara and Sahel, including Western Sahara scholars such as Solana on women’s rights, Ruano on ethnomusicology and Deubel (2015, 2011) on Sahrawi poetry. Also published in 2017 is the edited volume by Ojeda-García, Veguilla and Fernández-Molina offering interdisciplinary analyses of the protracted nature of the Western Sahara conflict.

**Note on translation and transliteration**

Translations from Hassaniya, Spanish, French and Arabic sources are mine. Transliterations of Arabic and Hassaniya words into Latin script are simplified, for example, Sahrawi to Sahrawi and ‘ā’ila to ‘a’ila. The *ta marbuta*, the terminal Arabic silent *t* rendered as *b* in English, and diacritical marks have been omitted to render terms easier for those unfamiliar with Arabic. However, initial hamzas (‘) and ‘ayns (‘) have been preserved. Words rendered in Standard Arabic follow the
International Journal of Middle East Studies and the Encyclopaedia of Islam, with those commonly seen in English such as ‘Qur’an’ not italicized. Certain words in French and Spanish have been kept in their original to preserve recognition of historical colonial connections. For people’s names and everyday words in Hassaniya, I have tried to keep transliteration close to the way they are pronounced and written, but have also been influenced by Taine-Cheikh’s (1998) and Heath’s (2004) dictionaries because Hassaniya has nuanced dialectal variations. Place names are complicated by the eclectic range of European naming conventions in usage (Spanish, French and English, such as El-Aiún/Laâyoune/Laayoune respectively), and I have chosen to render them in English.

Key terms such as nation, state, refugee, citizen and tribe are always open to analytical problematization, but I have not discussed their definitions. Instead I have assumed standard definitions so as to focus on the ethnography, unless one of these terms requires special interrogation. One such example is the term ‘tribe’, which is especially problematic for the central thesis of this book. I have already tackled it elsewhere (Isidoros 2015a), so in this book I use it as the standard English anthropological translation of *qabila* where others have used it only to preserve their meanings and perceptions. ‘Modern’ is also subject to interpretation along a historical continuum. I use it to mark the later Spanish colonial period from the mid-1960s when Sahrawi gained access to contemporary European ideas, employment, education and so forth; I expressly do not imply a ‘pre-modern’ period or any negative connotation in the word ‘tribal’. I use the terms ‘traditional’, ‘conventional’ and ‘customary’ to mean aspects that have been carried forward into this contemporary period. Unless separately distinguished, I use the term ‘Sahrawi’ to denote those in and beyond the Tindouf refugee camps who subscribe to the nationalist idea of self-determination and Western Saharan independence from Moroccan occupation. ‘Sahrawi’ also refers to the socio-geographical group of Hassaniya speakers and is further explained in the historical précis.

Identities and camp locations/descriptions are made anonymous except in the case of public figures, and all photographic images were taken by the author.
This is the power of development: the power to transform old worlds, the power to imagine new ones. (Crush 1995: 2)

Wherever one looked, one found the repetitive and omnipresent reality of development: governments designing and implementing ambitious development plans, institutions carrying out development programs in city and countryside alike, experts of all kinds studying underdevelopment and producing theories ad nauseam. The fact that most people’s conditions not only did not improve but deteriorated with the passing of time did not seem to bother most experts. Reality, in sum, had been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed. More recently, however, the development of new tools of analysis, in gestation since the late 1960s but the application of which became widespread only during the 1980s, has made possible analyses of this type of ‘colonization of reality’. [...] Anthropology’s self-critique and renewal during the 1980s have also been important in this regard. (Escobar 1995: 5)
CHAPTER 1

SITUATING SAHRAWI REFUGEES BETWEEN IDENTITY, PLACE AND SOVEREIGNTY

Je hais les voyages et les explorateurs. Et voici que je m’apprête à raconter mes expéditions.

(Lévi-Strauss 1955: 9)

Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1995: 209) have suggested that refugee camps, where survival is the prime concern, present a ‘unique social enclave’ in which to observe ‘cultural adaptation’. Situated in a regional war zone under a delicate ceasefire since 1991, the Tindouf refugee camps certainly provide an ideal base with a rudimentary infrastructure for foreign visitors to access transport, food, lodgings and security. They also provide a concentrated mass of human refugees – of an otherwise discreet and widely dispersed indigenous nomadic desert population – to meet, interview, film and study. In these senses, these camp enclaves surely do provide a convenient site of rich material from which to scrutinize and measure the ‘modernizing’ and ‘civilizing’ social transformation of tribes into refugees and citizens.

However, refugees are not the only inhabitants; as Hyndman has argued (2000: 137–138), refugee camps are institutions ‘generated by the international refugee regime’. Since the 1991 ceasefire, the Tindouf refugee camps have gradually become sites of extensive, year-round foreign humanitarian and developmental activity. This external body comprises many different social and professional spheres, multifarious
group sizes and ages, all with diverse developmental and humanitarian projects in mind. New groups (as well as the occasional postgraduate researcher) enter the domain with initial familiarization visits, surveying the camp terrain to establish what projects have and have not been thought of before and to envisage new philanthropic ventures.

In this chapter, I use the public–private dichotomy from the perspective of critical refugee theory about refugee camps and the humanitarian ‘regime’ so as to bring the striking binary between two distinct human spheres within the camps to the fore: the local indigenous Sahrawi, and an influx of visiting foreigners, or the receiving refugee and the giving humanitarian respectively.

There have been two distinct spheres of developmental and humanitarian activity in and of the camps. The first is at the major aid-agency level. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the UNHCR form a collaborative donor group with regional partners, such as ECHO, AECID, Oxfam (Belgium) and the Spanish Red Crescent, trickling down to local implementing partners such as the Algerian Red Crescent and the Sahrawi Red Crescent and further still to a palimpsest of seemingly ‘non-governmental’ organizations (NGOs) and other, more disparate philanthropic individuals and groups who perhaps are more like what Sandri (2017) terms ‘volunteer humanitarians’ made up of ‘grassroots’ individuals and groups. International aid agency infrastructure involves complex channels and fluctuating negotiations. In 2011, the WFP’s monthly fresh-food distribution was being funded by ECHO (implemented through NGOs) and AECID (implemented directly), along with a monthly distribution of tinned pilchards. The UNHCR funded yeast and tea. Aid transportation at the local level was managed by AATSF, a Spanish NGO funded by AECID. Logistical challenges include funding shortfalls and delays in aid delivery, with aid commodities taking between three to six months to arrive physically at local storage warehouses and food rations known not to last the projected thirty days.

The complex relations between the refugee regime’s ‘humanitarian partners’ can still be glimpsed in the UNHCR’s figures for 2016–17, which come from the European Commission’s humanitarian arm, ECHO, which has provided a total of €222 million since 1993. For 2016, ECHO allocated €9 million, of which €5 million was directed to UNHCR’s other two partners, Oxfam and the WFP, for food provision, as well as to ‘initiate livelihood activities through the Danish Refugee
Council and Triangle Génération Humanitaire’, two further partners making up the UNHCR ‘whole’ (ECHO 2016).

Despite this hefty and complex international megalith of major aid intervention: ‘The majority of the Sahrawi population living in the refugee camps in Tindouf remains chronically food insecure and their nutrition situation is not satisfactory’ (WFP/UNHCR 2011, my emphasis). Yet this major entity maintains a minimally staffed and low-visibility physical presence in the camps. They tend not to deal on a daily basis directly with the refugees because the Sahrawi are known for their efficient self-administration at the local level:

The refugees are very well organized, and the organization of the camps relies heavily on women’. […] Unlike in many refugee operations, refugee leaders have been very active in advocating for the needs of their population and have obtained bilateral food and non-food contributions as well as financial and technical support from various donors and NGOs, mainly from Spain and Italy. This has been done […] in an environment that does not provide for viable alternatives. […] Ad hoc food distributions occur through ‘caravans’ from bilateral aid sent by mainly Spanish and Italian civil society associations, who work directly with the Sahrawi Red Crescent. (WFP/UNHCR 2011, my emphases)

A shift in focus within UNHCR and the refugee regime as a whole to stress self-reliance, self-sustainability and refugee resilience has become apparent since the emergence of the Zataari refugee camp in Jordan in response to the start of the Syrian refugee crisis.¹ Since 2014, UNHCR has begun to translate its new thesis to the Tindouf camps, seeking new approaches for ‘restoring self-reliance among Sahrawi refugees in Algeria’ in order to help them ‘combat frustration and aid-dependency among young refugees who find few opportunities to use their skills and education’:

We are calling on the international community, including humanitarian and development actors, to work together on a livelihoods strategy that will strengthen the resilience and self-reliance of Sahrawi refugees, in order to give them back their dignity and some prospects for the future […] We need to look at delivering aid while
developing community structures. How can we incorporate elements of development into humanitarian assistance operations? Our aim is to increase the resilience of the communities through creativity to deter dependency on assistance and establish an economy that is self-sustainable. (Ralf Gruenert, UNHCR Representative in Algeria, UNHCR 2014 my emphases)

In July 2016, UNHCR set out its ‘summary of needs 2016–17’ for the next annual cycle of financial requirements for aid (UNHCR 2016). Seven re-categorized ‘sectors’ appear – protection, education, food and nutrition, health, livelihoods and resilience, shelter and non-food items (‘NFI’), and water, sanitation and hygiene (‘WASH’) – projecting $60,698,012 for 2016 and $74,701,684 for 2017 (a two-year total of $135,399,696), to be delivered between the ten major aid agencies (ibid., p. 10).

What I find extraordinary are the ideas and vocabulary that nestle quietly in the above direct quotes, as well as this from UNHCR’s most recent 2016 vision for the ‘livelihoods and resilience’ category:

Another area of intervention will give particular attention to youth, focusing on their potential, strengthening their resilience, and increasing their engagement in the community. This will be done through skills development and self-empowerment activities, including attention to out-of-school children. Vocational training and online courses to acquire business and small scale project management skills will be implemented. In addition, financial support for education and training, including though ‘start-up’ toolkits, will be provided. Existing vocational training centres will be improved through provision of additional equipment. In addition to this, a comprehensive market analysis is foreseen, to explore opportunities for increasing livelihoods opportunities and refugees’ resilience. Value-chain analysis on already identified sectors such as camel milk sale/production and handicrafts will look at long-term opportunities for this community. (UNHCR 2016: 9, my emphases)

Exactly who is going to buy the handicrafts? Foreign visitors to the camps perhaps, who, although they visit year-round, buy little from existing shops? Or perhaps hazy apparitions from across Algeria,
Mauritania, Mali, Niger, or further afield, struggling in their own socio-economic and political troubles? Or is this bizarre vision of creating a vibrant and fizzing internal market economy with the Sahrawi knitting and weaving ‘useful’ items to buy among themselves? For at least three thousand years, the Sahrawi have developed a desert-specialized expertise in pastoralism, in which camels have a deep cultural and cosmological significance (see Volpato and Howard 2014). Camel milk is much treasured, and they having been drinking it virtually unpasteurized – only hand-pasteurized by shaking it for a long time in a gourd, or nowadays an empty plastic bottle. So who exactly does the refugee regime envisage will buy camel milk? Urban cities across northern Africa have ‘modern’ milk, and non-urban populations have their own sources of camels, sheep or goats. If they do not, nor will they have the money to purchase milk further afield. So, which persons, precisely, will be the commercial end-users? It does not need ‘comprehensive market analysis’ to know these are fanciful, imaginative (indeed one quote above calls it ‘creativity’) and whimsical notions plucked out of thin air and inserted promisingly, but vaguely, into utopian humanitarian ideologies divorced from its colonization of harsh reality.

Not only do these texts contain a vocabulary which deflects the overarching international legal (‘human rights’) failure on to an abstract refugee other, they also represent a brief acknowledgement of the existence of a significant secondary sphere of humanitarian intervention and influence within the Sahrawi camps – the worldwide NGO phenomenon. This second sphere, comprising foreign NGOs, civil-society groups and other disparate groups and individuals – frequently Spanish – maintains the most visible presence and significant year-round social contact with the Sahrawi refugees. Given the negligible research as yet on this striking phenomenon the numbers of visitors are unknown, but San Martín (2005) and Zunes and Mundy (2010) consider that the Spanish NGOs alone account for at least a few hundred organizations (and thus an enormous number of individuals), some coming regularly such as once a year, others once or twice.

De Armiño and Rey (2001) question whether these NGOs are entirely non-governmental; most appear to be founded by Spanish civil-society actors using the name of their town or organizational collective in their logo, and their members often include a mixture of political actors such as local mayors, politicians and businesses. Such groups
operate independently of each other, not only with little public accountability in what may sometimes be a highly competitive enterprise, as they jostle with each other in the camps, but also are neither controlled by nor dependent upon nor monitored by the major aid agencies or any form of independent scrutiny. Working through coordination offices in Spain, these Spanish entities constitute the second most vital source of humanitarian assistance to the Sahrawi, after the major aid agencies (San Martín 2005). This further highlights the political complexity and skilful negotiation – not just in a sentient war-zone, but in the refugee camps themselves – facing the Polisario and Sahrawi population in both the management of their many different foreign visitors, but also of the logistical guardianship (it is a desert, after all) of these groups jostling with each other and their project sites.

Although reports state that the caravans represent only two to three per cent of the major agency food distributed, it is the massive array of this bilateral humanitarianism (food, medical, financial, technical, political, legal, artistic and so forth) that provides an arguably greater source of humanitarian (and more than just material) aid for the Sahrawi refugees. These range widely from European summer holiday programmes for Sahrawi schoolchildren with host families to donations to build libraries and clinics, the provision of medical equipment and educational materials, and development projects such as implementing a rubbish collection scheme, educating against the discarding of batteries on the ground, which are eaten by and poison residents’ wandering goats and staging the annual FiSahara film festival, a marathon and an array of youth music/film projects. In one way or another, these projects bring sources of camp-internal currency to those in contact with foreign visitors, such as hosted schoolchildren returning with Euros and foreign visitors paying for board and lodgings, Polisario drivers and vehicle petrol. Since the 1990s, a minority of Sahrawi men have been able to negotiate temporary Spanish work visas through Spanish NGO staff and host families, sending important remittances back to families in the camps, and since 2013, Spain has begun to recognize Sahrawi statelessness (Cherednichenko 2013). Nevertheless, this secondary aid economy is erratic and marginal. Not all Sahrawi families can establish a beneficial host relationship, and as of 2017 the post-2007 European economic crisis is still affecting remittances from both Spanish families and the
Sahrawi diaspora in Spain back to the refugee camps, as well as opportunities for labour migration in Spain.

Points of intersection: Sovereignty and solidarity

Foreign visitors arrive at Algiers’ Houari Boumediene international airport for the midnight flight to the Tindouf military airbase in the southern desert. Arriving at around 03.00, sleepy visitors disembark and walk across the Tindouf airfield tarmac towards a basic single-storey building to gather their luggage alongside some of the waiting Polisario drivers. Amidst the tired but excited group noise and the sluggish luggage carousel, these new ‘herds’ are transported by a miscellany of 4x4 jeeps and trucks in various directions for their final destinations by sunrise. These are usually various accommodation sites called Protocol Centres in or near the NGO projects’ relevant work areas. A few who pre-negotiated or have established family links will be dropped off at tent compounds, while others might experience tent living for short periods if invited by the Sahrawi they meet during their stay to visit their own families. Such stays in tents are an opportunity to experience Sahrawi culture, hospitality and a number of other pursuits which are often the making of the first bonds of friendship and emotive experiences or the renewal of past ones. The experience of the camps can often seem surreal, a suspension of the familiar, evoked among first-time visitors in their descriptions of this ‘trip of a lifetime’, their naivety in the innocent ‘first-timers’ kinds of questions, in contrast to returning visitors who arrive with a gradually acquired habitus and techniques of the body (cf. Mauss1991 [1934]; Bourdieu 1990). At the small ‘old’ airport building (Terminal 2) next to Houari Boumediene international airport in Algiers, alongside the mostly French tourists taking a Tassili Airline flight to Tamanrasset to see the Tuareg, the familiar visitors to Tindouf are likely to have a noticeably worn Sahrawi el-them (face veil) with them, tucked into a rucksack or loosely around their shoulders, or pulled up around their heads in a practised way to fall asleep in the waiting lounge, surrendering quietly to the journey and delays. Awaiting the return flight from the little Tindouf airfield, first time visitors wear their el-them, a ubiquitous departing gift, somehow too obviously and idealistically, carried along in the mid-air of an adventure’s excitement.
The official northern entrance to Smara camp is off a tarmacked road that heads south-west from Tindouf and off into the vast militarized Algerian desert. Most visitors are driven throughout their visit in Polisario vehicles as part of securitized logistics; few need to use intercamp taxis. Polisario has long assumed the logistical responsibility for ensuring the safety of foreign visitors in an area that is ‘open’ desert and heavily militarized. An example of regional triggers that add pressure to Polisario’s responsibilities is the 2013 hostage crisis at Algeria’s In Amenas gas plant. Soon afterwards, during a field trip, host family members took me for an evening walk to see the sand berms that had begun to be built around the boundaries of Smara as another means of protecting themselves from their desert heartlands through which unfamiliar Others (strangers) seem to be moving, as well as the burden of safeguarding the year-round visitors — a dialectic humanitarian weight on Sahrawi shoulders. A short turning leads to a Polisario police armed checkpoint, after which one abruptly finds oneself inside the refugee camp. To both left and right of a long, black tarmacked road are the beginnings of densely packed residential areas, but the Polisario jeeps
continue a short distance to a central open space flanked by large flat official-looking buildings, one of which is the Protocol Centre. As the time of arrival is just before sunrise, a few Protocol staff and Mohammed the director (a renowned war hero who lost an eye during the Moroccan war) are waiting to receive the tired (and, if first-time, wide-eyed) visitors, who are unloaded and organized into each of the centre’s block rooms containing basic beds, mattresses and blankets. In a few hours, these visitors will awake either to their very first experience of Sahrawi refugeehood, or to pre-established solidarity familiarity from a previous trip with old friends – drivers, translators, doctors and nurses, schoolteachers, project colleagues and so forth among the Sahrawi.

Like the other five camps, initially Smara camp appears undifferentiated: what are in fact densely packed residential compounds are indistinguishably hidden behind vague sand-brick walls without apparent entrances. Other buildings, large and flat with weather-eroding cement or sand-mud render, are more easily distinguishable in wider, more open areas that serve more as public infrastructural spaces. These are the main public buildings such as hospitals, clinics, aid distribution centres, schools, museums and Protocol Centres, usually facing on to the wide, open areas with prominent large doors and metal gates or encircling high walls. Visible over many of the infrastructural entrances in all the camps are large painted signs in Spanish and Arabic indicating, for instance in Smara, the UJASRIO (Sahrawi Youth Union), the Es-Salaam School English language school run by American Evangelists or the Centre for Education and Integration, a school for disabled children. Private buildings, that is, those serving Sahrawi infrastructure alone, tend not to have identifying markers, or only in long-faded Arabic script. It is only to the long-term visitor that the uses of such unrevealing buildings will gradually unfold and be identifiable as indirect and imperceptible geographical markers, in Agier’s sense of the ‘inventions of the everyday’ (2002: 329), such as police stations, bakeries, local committee meeting places, aid ration collection points, schools and mosques.

These wide, open spaces with broad thoroughfares, comprising public infrastructural spaces, dissect the camps. Most foreigners will be transported along these wide roads and between the infrastructural buildings, never fully experiencing anything beyond these open spaces. Although all jeeps, cars and trucks need to drive slowly over these rough
gravelly (reg, in Hassaniya) tracks, from which the eyes of passing foreigners can capture a glimpse of daily camp life and its sluggish slowness, the jeeps containing foreign groups seem more to flash through, their brash emblazoned ‘solidarity’ logos creating an image of newness that passes more quickly because of its transience. Slightly elevated earth mounds and higher geological escarpments around the camps provide popular vantage points from which to photograph the sprawling panoramas of the camps. To the eastern and western sides of Smara are two short stretches of marca, a shabby weather-eroded clutch of shops and mechanics’ workshops built from sand-bricks, metal wire and flattened sheets from oil barrels. Visitors in the Protocol Centres, or the Spanish host families who have come to visit with their Sahrawi families, can be seen venturing out on walks to the shops, the former guided by a Protocol staff member or driver-guide, the latter usually by their Sahrawi host children.

The visibility of foreign visitors is heightened at certain times of the year, such as the annual Spanish-led film festival, political anniversary events, and cultural festivals and the Christmas and Easter holiday seasons. Otherwise, throughout the year there is a steady flow of incoming and outgoing NGO groups typically working on a project of between one and four weeks. During the high heat of summer from July to early September, with temperatures reaching over fifty centigrade, few foreigners stay or arrive. A rare moment of abandoned temporality in many senses, but in other senses for the rare and deeply immersed anthropologists who do stay (notably the first three diachronic studies overlapping since 2003 – San Martín, Wilson and myself to glimpse these rhythms, with new doctoral researchers emerging since), life goes on, different in many ways, yet the same in others, with or without us and the others.

Though the two worlds are of course correspondent in their collision in the camps, it is important not to lose sight of the incommensurable ‘whole’, the camps as illuminating places of intersection and convergence between the two very different human groups. Neither group is homogenous, but each possesses their own particularistic life worlds; one comes and goes while the other stays interminably (but has their own way of moving beyond the camps and out across their desert heartlands, which is never seen along a lengthy continuum and little understood). The camps create a ‘norm’ (however ‘performed’) of friendships found at
these intersections, but these begin to reveal tensions and points of divergence, which in turn begin to cast light on certain reliefs: how may the ‘enclave’ instead be of the external body, not the refugees, and in so doing break away from the dominant humanitarian conceptualization of refugees. Who really occupies these refugee camps?

The public infrastructural spaces of the camps are ‘working’ spaces in which most foreign visitors live and conduct their projects. For most of the time, the Sahrawi physically come in to these central spaces to work alongside the foreigners as translators, guides and drivers, or to be filmed and interviewed. Visitors do not venture to the camps for any purpose other than humanitarian developmentalism. However much it may be an adventure trip for some, there is always a project of some kind to undertake. This is never a holiday destination: the boarding lines of mostly French travellers heading for a Bedouin tented adventure holiday in Tamanrasset are clearly separated off at the airport in Algiers. The manifold objectives of the many varied projects are all forms (albeit different in variation) of humanitarianism in the sense that they are intended to do, and give, and leave, and impart something from across a vast array of different forms of technical assistance, whether schooling, health care, the arts or so forth. One way to frame the ways and spaces in which the two types of inhabitant intersect in the refugee camps are as ‘sites of solidarity’. In these spaces, varying degrees of intertwining political, social, cultural, economic and linguistic solidarities are displayed and enacted, embodied and communicated, building up into crescendos of ‘discourses of solidarity’.

Foreigners trigger the solidarity as the incoming empathizers, supporters, activists and advisors, the ‘experts’ carrying and transmitting important knowledge and expertise. They rarely arrive at the refugee camps without the most basic knowledge of the Sahrawi story, which is transmitted among themselves overseas and re-enacted in conversations within the groups and in their encounters with each other. Newcomers will have either joined a related humanitarian group or stumbled across the story through each other and general media coverage. The camps, like the wider desert itself, are not a geography one can just travel to; one cannot simply arrive and stop-over as a passing-through kind of journey. Humanitarian solidarity with the Sahrawi story is therefore generated and transmitted to newcomers from the distant sites of their own countries, and the journey there can only have been a specific decision to
reach such a destination. And on arriving, this pre-formed solidarity is then enacted and fossilized in the formation of working relationships to improve Sahrawi refugee life.

There are times and places where foreigners’ solidarity has a life of its own, without any Sahrawi presence or input. There is a sense of discovery driven by the philanthropic mission, an excitement shaped by the specifics and surreal suspension of the long journey to the desert and refugee camps. On arrival, an emotionality of gradually learning the full story up close and personal emerges, as well as extraordinary memory-making moments such as sunrises, sandstorms and general human–ecological landscapes. A Spanish youth group, part of their school’s annual trip (a good example of Sandri’s ‘volunteers’, 2017), struck up their guitars to sing Bob Marley lyrics during a ‘sunset moment’ and, having brought their own supply of beers and pot, created an especially memorable moment of ecstatic solidarity – though for themselves, as the staff of the Protocol Centre had long gone. An English group of drama students, having been driven to the annual FiSahara film festival in the most distant camp of Dakhla, settled into a tent made up for them alongside a Sahrawi family’s tent. In the cosy tent, with mattresses laid out on the floor and polyester blankets, and the left-over plates of food prepared by the family, they deliberated long into the night about their first experiences of a desert and camps and nomads and refugee food, sharing advice about how to shower and toilet in the drop-hole blocks while scrolling through their cameras for their favourite photographs thus far.

The humanitarian purpose carries and creates a ‘euphoric’ aspect in which the feeling of charitable sensation builds its own momentum and can achieve ecstatic levels.² Gathering around a Protocol Centre dining table, evening discussions among a medical group about the Sahrawi struggle can instead ignite the deep personal morals and meanings of a group’s project, circling between emotional avowals of Sahrawi rights under international law to ‘diagnostic solidarity’ of their extraordinary resilience vis-à-vis the group’s expertise for disapproval of a specific local hospital or a Sahrawi doctor. This is also illustrated by projects to salvage endangered traditional practices and indigenous knowledge, such as poetry and customary sayings, camel pastoralism or flora and fauna (c.f. Volpato 2012), where ‘urgency in solidarity’ is impressed upon the Sahrawi. Similar contemporary recordings and interviews are made
of memories of the war years from women, the elderly and victims of landmines.

These avowals are not simply about shared aims, but entail constant enactments of re-tellings of the history of the Western Sahara conflict, despite the fact many visitors already know many of the salient points (especially the Spanish). Any Sahrawi friends or Protocol staff or driver-guides that happen to have stayed for the evening are drawn into the ritual, just as visits to familial tents become replicating spaces of retellings and capturing these on camera or digital recorder. Yet another illustration is the key political-cultural festivals held on important anniversary dates throughout the year to which foreigners also travel – the palpable excitement between newcomers and experienced visitors creates a frisson of desire to ‘do more’ for the Sahrawi, generating new ideas for new projects, new recordings and promises and creations of blogs, articles, films, photographic exhibitions. On the other side of all this – in the rhythmical midst of it all – are the Sahrawi, patiently telling and retelling, answering and reframing the same old questions year after year.

Solidarity is not only enacted by the serious objective of the humanitarian project, it co-mingles with ‘humanitarian tourism’ whereby the ‘expert’ intervention brings additional romanticized experiences of desert dunes, camels and cultural festivals and the hospitality of ancient desert peoples. Foreigners learn stock political slogans of freedom and independence in Spanish and Hassaniya with which to enact and ratify solidarity between each other and the Sahrawi. Sahrawi children pose for photographs making the V-sign and ask for the ubiquitous carameles (sweets). Linguistic solidarity accompanies stock images that convey visual solidarity, which mix already powerful international iconic images with newly created ones whereby group momentum creates self-styled projections to match the purpose of the trip. These range from T-shirts with images of rainbows, the marijuana leaf and Fidel Castro, to the beige-khaki-ish uniformity of outdoor exploration clothing, to NGO logos that prolifically reference ‘friendship’ and ‘solidarity’ with a Sahrawi people, women, families and children, such as ‘amigos del pueblo saharaui’ and ‘asociación de familias solidarias saharauis’. Medical NGOs and politicians project solemn professional solidarity for media interviews or specialized co-partnerships with Sahrawi doctors, journalists and Polisario officials.
There are cultural variables across the range of foreign solidarity displays. An English youth drama group wore little symbolic clothing and remained reservedly disinterested (technically unknowledgeable) in the finer points of human rights and international law. Spanish visitors are likely to have greater awareness of the Sahrawi history of failed decolonization, which is routinely communicated throughout Spanish civil society and leading news media such as *El País*.

Although the ‘bubble’ of foreign solidarity is stimulated by the Sahrawi presence, it carries a high degree of self-motivation and initiation. At times and places with no foreigners present among Sahrawi, the latter do not engage in solidarity-making among themselves. Solidarity is not just ‘with’ and ‘to’ the Sahrawi, it belongs to and is created by and between the foreigners and accompanies the physical humanitarian gift brought by the arriving givers and delivered to the waiting receivers. Humanitarian visitors invest substantial moral and physical effort in both the tiring journey to the camps and the rudimentary facilities and food. A high degree of self-motivation and determination comes from strong altruistic desires to engage in real life philanthropy and share expert knowledge. Returning home, most visitors will produce or participate in some form of textual or visual output about the Sahrawi struggle, whether scientific, medical, cultural, political or journalistic, whether referring to international law or involving internet blogging and the like. Foreigners and their projects become the primary transmitters of the refugees’ plight to the outside world – including my peers, the few but gradually increasing numbers of academic researchers.

The Sahrawi are not passive in their own communication of their cause of self-determination. In recent years, with this external body’s technical assistance, they have developed basic, yet fairly sophisticated television, radio and online press service outputs. For the Sahrawi, the primary purpose of intersection with the humanitarian corpus is to keep pressing home the facts about the Sahrawi struggle. In this way, the ‘whole’ external body is stimulated to be a vocal interlocutor and lobby group communicating the Sahrawi’s political problem. The Sahrawi participate in these ‘positive’ communications about themselves and reciprocate the ‘solidarity’ with their empathetic supporters, but not in a manner that replicates the romanticized mirages. While they communicate and press home their positive space of self-determination,
they participate cautiously and circumspectly as the backdrop to a humanitarian ‘enclave’ that is for them a deeply negative space. And this is where a point of divergence comes into view, wherein the camps may instead be a ‘rich enclave’ of study as a site into which foreigners enter and make (or perform) much more than solidarity to the Sahrawi.

Points of divergence: Insecurity and the construction of an unruly terrain

These points of divergence emerge from a notion of insecurity and the construction of an unruly terrain. The interconnected discourses of humanitarian solidarity are not just about an *esprit de corps* shared between humanitarians and refugees: they contain a friction illuminating an underlying contestation between solidarity and sovereignty. The large numbers of humanitarians, who sometimes become competitive, when they get jealous or territorial about each other’s projects, are themselves representatives of either the failed decolonizer or other UNSC member states, directly responsible at the geopolitical level for the protracted nature of the refugees’ status. These bodies, large and small, are in disjuncture with the Sahrawi’s own international legal battle for rightful territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara, known as the Spanish Sahara during the colonial period. Complexly entwined with feelings of solidarity, sovereignty is the awkward technical (legal, political) start of divergence.

Over the years, my informal field conversations with various visitors, from NGO staff to students, have revealed a widespread opinion that Spanish civil society’s solidarity is fuelled by moral conscience of its colonial occupation of Spanish Sahara, in conflict with their government’s opposite stance. Likewise, Howe (2005: 314) found that ‘Explaining Spanish sympathies for the Saharan nationalists, a senior Spanish official says [...] that Spain feels “a moral debt” towards the Sahraouis’. Simultaneously, these visitors communicate modern, conditioned notions of expertise and humanitarian responsibility connected to Spain’s failed colonial legacy in Western Sahara. The visual dominance and sometimes highly competitive nature of Spanish NGO activity within the camps portrays an impression of expert authority embedded in a politically neutralized (historical colonizers and modern experts) sovereign right of access. Alongside the contradictory
rhetoric of government-level ‘Madrid complicity’ versus on-the-ground Spanish civil society as the charitable ‘protector’ and ‘educator’ of a ‘forgotten people/conflict’ is perhaps a reality reflecting a new form of civilizing mission that masks the highly politicized backdrop to their own government’s inactions over the conflict’s lack of resolution.

This applies correspondingly to the humanitarian corpus. They fly into the camps to legitimate the *imagined* citizens of a nation state, but fly out leaving them still un-legitimated under international law. In other words, the external body performs ritual solidarity with both a human and a physical landscape that it enacts (imagines) as ‘concrete’, but which in fact has a shimmering intangibility and technically does not exist. In a similar vein, annually and ritually the UNHCR reaffirms the existence of the Western Sahara conflict, and it and the major aid agencies recognize the Polisario and its state, SADR, enough to work with it. In other words, half of the UN recognizes the existence of a Sahrawi citizenry and their state, while the other half of the UN ritually produces the other half of the anomaly. It is here that solidarity and sovereignty first collide with each other – as ‘sovereign solidarity’ enacted between the two groups inhabiting the camps but also as the marker of their divergence.

It is also in this vein that I use the word ‘shimmering’ because of a geographical idiosyncrasy that is rarely teased out. Stuck in the peculiarity of non-place and non-person under international law, the Sahrawi should be ‘normal’ refugees – but in the double-paradox of the UN anomaly, the Sahrawi are simultaneously not recognized as stateless. But again, in concurrently self-initiating themselves into citizens and a nation state, they become another technical (international legal) oddity – they have created a nation state that is ‘floating’ ethereally above their camps (as its headquarters). A nation state of Sahrawi citizens exists unequivocally – it exists physically in the camps – yet it floats ‘above’ the camps in an ethereal, shimmering mirage of international law, simultaneously recognized and unrecognized depending upon how one squints through the legal lens. Furthermore, their location is neither on their own liberated sovereign soil (the Free Zone part of the Western Sahara) nor on Moroccan-occupied soil, but just a few kilometres inside neighbouring Algerian soil, a third territory of sovereignty. All the meanwhile, the newly Moroccan-occupied territory of Western Sahara remains simultaneously un-decolonized by Spain. Turning
the gaze back on to the external humanitarian body, all this makes it operate, ‘shimmering’, in the extraterritorial sovereignty of Algerian soil.\textsuperscript{4} Out of these anomalous stratigraphies of international law, it seems shrewder to clear the demographic haze and view the refugee camps instead as a rich ‘enclave’ of the humanitarian body composed in its own international legal mirage.

Picking apart this divergence highlights a third transition from solidarity to sovereignty to [in]security, from which the two camp inhabitants move further apart. By ethnographically moving with the Sahrawi to ‘look back’ at the ‘enclave’ (the negative humanitarian-positive space) through Sahrawi eyes, their persistent engagement with the enclave indicates their continual attempt to hold on to it as a very different kind of positive space and the difficulty they face in dealing with the negativity (and analytical peculiarity) of this mirage-like entity of the external body, which embraces, envelopes, sustains – protracts – them.

The creation of an unruly terrain comes from the rise of Western political theory, with its notion of demarcated territorial sovereignty, the emergence of nation states and the use of passports and visas, has become instrumental in the concept and restriction of the ‘non-citizen’ (Horst 2006: 106–7). Skran (1992) linked the root of the contemporary refugee problem to such immobile restrictions where displaced populations have to negotiate non-place and non-identity. Geographers began to expand Anderson’s 1983 thesis to ‘imagined geographies’, as did Gregory (1994), who argued that the US War on Terror was a continuation of Said’s uncovered imagined geographies of the Orient, while O’Tuathail (1996) suggested that geopolitical knowledge also constitutes forms of imagined geography whereby geopolitical rhetoric constructs a spatial reordering (Isidoros 2010). Similarly, ecological anthropologists such as Fairhead and Leach demonstrate how developmental imaginings produce a ‘degradation discourse’ which ‘read[s] the landscape backwards’ (1996: 292–93). Campos-Serrano and Rodríguez-Esteban (2017) present an interesting examination of historical maps of the Western Sahara from between 1956 and 1979 and the imaginatively character of the nationalism projects and competing socio-political mobilizations they depict. In particular they demonstrate how the geographical delineation of a Western Sahara requiring decolonization evolved and developed as a language of self-determination from the \textit{uti possidetis} legal principle.
The international refugee regime operates as part of security and foreign policy (Loescher 1993: 39), whereby donors’ political interests come to take precedence over original humanitarian principles (Harrell-Bond 1986: 54). Likewise, for Krever ‘the use of a humanitarian discourse masks what is fundamentally a shift to policies of containment and the pursuit of State, not refugee, interests’ (2011: 589), while for Betts and Loescher (2010) the refugee regime overlaps with a range of other regimes within which states engage in forms of institutionalized cooperation. On the ground, refugees physically inhabit an institutionalized world of NGOs and intergovernmental agencies and have come to be defined as a target ‘client group’ (Zetter 2007). Leading up to 1991, Hathaway observed a shift away from the admission of refugee into Western states to new concepts of the ‘protection’ of refugee populations by keeping them away from Western states (i.e., being maintained by distant host governments, notably in underdeveloped countries). Thus, while development’s objective represented the transformation of the backward, irrational and uncontrollable into the modern and progressive within new national boundaries (internal security), humanitarianism’s objective has been to prevent the ‘to be developed’ from crossing international boundaries and to ensure their distant containment away from the developed world (external security).

Crush summarizes these political processes as ‘vocabularies deployed in “development” texts to construct the world as an unruly terrain requiring management and intervention’ (1995: 3, my emphasis). Western countries are closing their borders and transforming earlier humanitarian sentimentality into a refugee regime that contains refugees as far away as possible. Chimni similarly notes that the original humanitarian language of ‘burden-sharing’ regarding refugee protection has been transformed into a new language of accusations of insecurity and/or corruption. Refugees come to be seen as either threatening host countries’ security due to the increased demands upon the hosts’ own scarce resources, or as undermining wider regional security and stability (2000: 252). In the Western Sahara conflict, Polisario and Algeria have both been accused of corruption, human rights abuses and causing regional insecurity. Despite Polisario’s attempts to build a model nation state and to be model refugees administering the camps themselves, they are perceived as being a future failed state with potential links to the Saharan al-Qaeda of the Maghreb. Algerian support of Polisario, and its fiercely independent colonial
sensitivities, are also blamed for regional insecurity. Morocco attracts less criticism as an ingratiating Western ally, but it too actively produces its own ‘insecurity discourse’ about its regional neighbours (cf. Zunes and Mundy 2010; Pazzanita 2011, 1994).

Host governments are put under similar pressure. One of the tasks that is often left to them is to provide internal camp security by government police, who are often exposed to danger themselves in attempting to meet the international legal obligation to protect refugees (Horst 2006: 117). The Algerians, as host to the Sahrawi refugees, have ceded temporary administrative control of the refugee camp area to Polisario. Algeria’s responsibilities to uphold international conventions on human rights inside the camps are thus ambiguous, as Polisario is not a recognized nation state and therefore cannot be a signatory to such conventions. This internationally legal grey area inadvertently adds fodder to the insecurity discourse.

This theoretical overview brings to the fore the higher-order political mirage that refugees face, but how do they encounter insecurity discourses on the ground? The sites of intersection in the camps’ public infrastructural (humanitarian) space are those where the foreign visitors work and into which space the Sahrawi come to work with them, such as hospitals, clinics, aid distribution points, schools, libraries and media stations. When foreigners are not present, or metaphorically, beneath their feet, these infrastructural spaces also constitute the private infrastructural spaces of the Sahrawi in conducting their building of society, state services and governance. But there is another way in which the external body comes into the Sahrawi – when the private Sahrawi body comes under inspection.

Schoolchildren are watched and photographed during a class, and young adults are questioned about their overseas schooling and university scholarships. Sahrawi schoolteachers may be interviewed in front of the children and may feel the need momentarily to change an uninteresting part of the lesson into something more dynamic for expectant visitors and their rolling cameras. Women collecting rations are surveyed and photographed, their household consumption and nutritional values placed under humanitarian surveillance and judgement by unknown distant strangers. In hospitals and clinics, the few Sahrawi doctors and nurses might be introduced, patients smile or undergo foreign physical examination. More generally, Sahrawi are
filmed and interviewed on the political conflict, the same questions being asked about what they want, what message they would send to the world, what are the hardships of life here? It is under these conditions that the Sahrawi must perform, answering the same questions, demonstrating their developmental progress and repeating their story to each new group, year after year.

Home tents become points of inspection too. For foreign visitors housed in Protocol Centres, short visits to a traditional Sahrawi family require polite hospitality conveying Sahrawi traditions and culture, with tea-making a ritualized example. Adults and children hold conversations with the visitors, giving small gifts, usually in the form of bead bracelets and necklaces, emblematic key rings and bangles with the SADR flag, as well as lengths of melhfa (female body scarf) and el-them (male veil) cloths, in the well-worn rituals demonstrating how to wear them. For those who are housed with a family for longer periods, deeper friendships are made; with regular returnees, the performative pressure may diminish depending on personalities and the reasons for return and the depths of friendships and emotional bonds.

The little market areas of shops are also spaces where the two worlds briefly intersect. During high visitor peaks, foreigners visit these marca to purchase food and other items to supplement the often basic provision and low nutritional value of camp food – they are eating the refugees’ food rations. Despite visitor influxes, I still have not found the marca economy to be greatly increased by visitor spending, but experienced it as the more permanent and regular site of low-level Sahrawi commerce, as did Mundy (2007) and San Martín (2010) before me.

Complaints from foreigners are another point of intersection and the micro-level in the discourse of insecurity. A common frustration is the quality of food, as foreigners begin to experience refugee camp hunger and the low level of variety of familiar cuisine. Both in the Protocol Centres and in family tents, a meal may take hours to be served and primarily consist of low-nutrition humanitarian rations. Sahrawi often use the caramel-sweet tea to stave off hunger and boost waning energy. For foreigners, it is conceived as being offered out of exasperation instead of – and against the foreigner’s ‘logic’ of – a proper meal. The Catch-22 link between food aid provisions and the resulting camp diet is particularly the cause of high rates of adult diabetes, coeliac disease and children’s vitamin deficiencies, among many other medical problems.
Waiting for interviews and transport can seem interminable and disordered, with foreign teams feeling under pressure to complete their project within a definite timescale, culminating in becoming frustrated and voicing low-decibel criticisms.

During a conversation in a Protocol dining hall, a long-time French female visitor, part of a European solidarity association, saying she came once a year for a week or two, complained to me of things she had seen change in the last fifteen years. She observed that I was wearing my melhfa tightly around my head. I had not noticed this myself, but nodded. She complained that this was ‘a sign of Islamization’ emerging in the camps, and that my melhfa was the evidence because historically Sahrawi women wore the melhfa loosely around the head. Another day, after a minor political meeting at which one of the Sahrawi television film crew was a young female, she pointedly advised me: ‘One has to ask why a Sahrawi girl is filming when foreigners are present’.

My perception of this female camera operator was that she had been trained with other young women as part of increasing measures to provide greater women’s opportunities, but also for young males too. The RASD television station had technically been set up by a Spanish humanitarian project that intended it to be a Sahrawi station. The Spanish teams funded the building and equipping of both television and radio stations and trained both Sahrawi genders, and today they are solely operated by Sahrawi with technical assistance visits by the Spanish project. One subsidiary objective was to provide specialist training to young adults, given widespread acknowledgement that early adult youth suffer extreme boredom in the camps. There are numerous other youth projects like this, such as the UK-based charity Sandblast, founded by Danielle Smith, a long-standing visitor to the camps, such as their annual Sahara Marathon and various creative social-engagement projects in art and other festivals. Sahrawi music as both an area for humanitarian assistance, such as the provision of recording studies and elevation to the world music platforms, and as a dynamic form of activism from within the Tindouf camps, has been a key area to emerge, best demonstrated by the emerging ethnographies of ethnomusicologists Solana (2017) and Ruano (2017) as our next generation of anthropologists developing long-term and immersed musical participation with the Sahrawi. Poetry, as both traditional and political activism, is also receiving greater attention with Deubel’s emerging studies (e.g. 2011 and 2015).
Two years later, when I spent several long periods living at Rabuni government camp in the compound of the UPES (Saharawi Journalists and Writers Union) and SPS RASD (Sahara Press Service) news teams (Lakhal and Isidoros 2013; Isidoros 2011), I met this same young camera woman living alongside me, with her female and male colleagues working together in both the television and radio stations. I did not find these women to be pushed into the limelight for reasons of public political performance – although, as previously discussed, Polisario is under pressure to conform to western expectations of female visibility – but saw these women as enjoying these professional opportunities in a private political space of Sahrawi life, out of sight of foreign eyes, and conducting their jobs regularly and with passion. Sahrawi television is unlikely to be watched by foreigners like the critical French woman. It is on for a few hours each evening, comprising the news section (relating to the Sahrawi Struggle in the international arena, not to international news) and various segments of poetry, music, footage of any recent political or cultural festivals, and looped playback of old black and white video images of war with Morocco and the early camps’ construction. The French female visitor, by always staying in the Protocol Centre, would not have had access to television. I saw the female members of these Sahrawi teams in the radio and television stations more often in this private political work space than in the foreigners’ public line of vision. Occasionally the girl with the camera appeared in the public spaces containing observing foreigners, but so too did her male age-peers, and they were filming for their own Sahrawi television audience.

With regard to the tighter style of the *melhfa*, having learnt its habitus from host womenfolk and observing them wearing it, I do not find any essentialist correlation with Islam. On the day the French woman observed me, I was seated opposite her at the corner end of the long dining table. Right behind me was a small square window opening in the sand-brick wall. Billowing through the window on the light breeze that day was the thin powder of desert sand that is usually hanging imperceptibly in the air in daytime and most obviously at night when moving cars’ headlights illuminate its slow swirling patterns. I had quite simply tightened my *melhfa* around my head and chin to protect myself from the powder coming against my back; she made no remark regarding how I was holding a loose section of *melhfa* over my mouth and nose. While an underlying Muslim prescription exists for
both genders to dress modestly, my experience is that this prescription is contiguous with ideals of fashion and beauty, of femininity and masculinity, and of lessening overt sexual displays of both gendered bodies. This French woman did not know that nine months later I would collapse with pneumonia because I had lazily neglected to wrap the el-them tightly around my face as is the custom during the March–April sand storms. Women too use the el-them.

Foreigners’ complaints and criticisms shed interesting light in areas that intersect with the Sahrawi’s own public and private. Foreigners perceive their experiences of Sahrawi life when it does not conform to the high standards of western expectations as sites of Sahrawi failure. Complaints therefore provide an area of analysis that demonstrates how refugees are scrutinized and picked apart by judgemental observers. In this way, a multifaceted insecurity discourse about refugees is produced by a humanitarian corpus, and in the Sahrawi case it emerges in overt contradiction to the already uncomfortable co-production of sovereign solidarity.

Yet another point of divergence lies in the ultimate paradox underlying the humanitarian regime – the striking contradiction in the perception of the gift that occurs between givers and receivers. On the one hand, refugees are dependent upon the provision of aid and are acutely vulnerable without immediate emergency assistance in the provision of food, water and safety. On the other hand, most analysts agree that humanitarian aid consistently falls short of the most basic levels of subsistence and that it is implausible that recipients are surviving solely on it. Delivery of aid is perceived as charity, yet it operates in a hierarchically exclusionary manner towards refugees who are not authorized to express needs or distribution preferences (Schrijvers 2004). This Trojan gift becomes insufficient for recipients to rebuild sustainable livelihoods and reassert self-sufficiency, and is therefore inadequate for building durable solutions.

This latter point about distribution is not the case in the Sahrawi camps. The Sahrawi remain unable to choose what aid they receive, but early on they asserted a degree of control in the small part of the chain that they could wrest control of by administratively taking charge of the distribution of humanitarian aid on its arrival at the Algerian port of Oran (attracting further suspicion which enters the insecurity discourse). The humanitarian Trojan gift frustrates refugee livelihood strategies and
disparages their actions as deviant, further impelling refugees to conduct them beyond the public gaze. Yet these livelihood strategies often derive from existing socio-economic structures where self-reliance includes the traditional ability to take care of a widespread indigenous community. Conversely, humanitarians often report that they have to play politics with refugees. This too should be seen in perspective, where, in often resource-poor environments, food distribution becomes highly politicized due to the variety of stakes in it (Horst 2006: 111) and the genuine struggle for subsistence survival.

Fragments

The first and only census of Sahrawi refugees was conducted by Dr Harrell-Bond in 1986, producing the figure of 165,000 which is still used today. A common point of external criticism is that the Polisario have been reluctant to permit a camp census to be conducted. Rarely is this explained correctly, that is, as an understandable matter of military security. The UN-led self-determination process involved a voter registration scheme requiring detailed genealogical data that would illuminate the Sahrawi ‘body’ to the enemy, Morocco. It also relates to a Catch-22 scenario regarding aid rations: the refugee population is heavily dependent on humanitarian aid, which has enabled it to rebuild modest war-fractured livelihood strategies. This demography of ‘vulnerability’ is not something anyone would want to share, except when one is a refugee and your body becomes both an unruly terrain and the ‘property’ of those who feed you.

Critical refugee theorists have shown how both refugees and humanitarian staff often initially see refugee camps as temporary settlements. Television images convey the idea of humanitarian assistance as being triggered at the moment of crisis, but in reality refugees create unassisted camps long before the arrival of any external humanitarian bodies. Allen (1996) found the Mursi’s self-representation of their 1979 migration from their homeland in response to severe drought as a people ‘in search of cool ground’. Not only do refugees search for safe flight paths and ‘cool ground’ resting places, but they do so through networks of social relations, where safety can be sought amongst those trusted networks. Likewise, the renewal of war-fractured survival strategies will require these same networks, particularly in view
of the above demonstration of the major aid agencies reporting their own system failures.

In much the same way, at the onset of the 1975 Moroccan invasion, the early sites of the Sahrawi refugees’ own ‘cool grounds’ were in temporary camps scattered throughout the conflict zone, such as at Um Dreiga. Those at Um Dreiga fled again when Morocco dropped phosphorous bombs, and shortly afterwards the Algerians offered Polisario the Tindouf location. When the Sahrawi began setting up the camps at Tindouf, they were crowded into improvised lines of makeshift tents with only one doctor and little food (San Martín 2005: 567). Mercer reported that initially there were 22 scattered camps (informal tent clusters), but by 1979 the camps had been regrouped into the first bare bones of three main settlements named after those in the homeland – Layoune, Dakhla and Smara (1979: 19) – and they have since grown into the three further camps of Ausserd, Rabuni and Boujdour. Since those early days, refugee camps around the world have, on the international geopolitical terrain, become extensions of Western political ideas about international insecurity.

The humanitarian gaze is critical of the misuse of aid rations but does nothing to resolve the underlying political problem that creates the refugees’ continued displacement (cf. Krever’s 2011 study of the UNHCR). The ultimate risk that refugees face is to remain refugees but lose the aid. Polisario therefore has to juggle receiving enough aid for a certainly growing population that is still highly dependent on the aid, while simultaneously satisfying external humanitarian demands for the model refugee and protecting its own state information about its citizenry from a neighbouring enemy state. They are not ‘just’ refugees anymore; there is no such thing as a ‘free gift’. Recognizing the new militarized world (dis)order of developmentalism and humanitarianism, now hand in hand as the new major instrument and language of the geopolitical context, illuminates the complex stress the Sahrawi are under to manage that technical politico-legal mirage, embodied on the ground by the humanitarian entity in their midst.

The illogic is astounding.

Using the rich comparative analyses of critical refugee theorists to circle the Sahrawi refugee camps aeraily certainly helps to understand and convey them better as a rich research ‘enclave’, but one inhabited as much by the omnipresent humanitarian external body envisioning its
abstracted refugee. Even in their most basic category (to use the external body’s binary classification), the Sahrawi as refugees are having to manage, mediate and control that humanitarian body. The remainder of this book presents the real ethnographic journey through the fog of Western and humanitarian illogic, which the next chapter initiates by lifting out – and temporarily suspending – the hypercritical humanitarian infrastructure to explore what lies beneath and beyond the camps.
CHAPTER 2

OVERTURES TO SCEPTICISM

If this seems an overly sceptical beginning, there is good reason: reflexivity (as one of anthropology’s teleologies). On a short field trip in 2013, a jeep beeped outside the tent compound, and I picked up a plastic bag with some basics to head off for two days to see the FiSahara film festival. I was told a Polisario driver had been arranged to take one group that could squeeze me in. Not too bothered about it, having been three times before, I kind of made myself do it, telling myself it was only two nights with these strangers. And I was told I would stay in some host tent with Zorgan, a well-known guide on my first trips in 2007 (and to Jacob Mundy and John Thorne too in earlier years). I came out of the compound gate, partly regretting that I was bothering to go at all while giving a wave to et-Khira’s head poking out of the side tent flap to reassure me. In the split second it took to step over the gate threshold and take the twelve or so footsteps to the jeep’s open rear door, my face turning away from the wave to et-Khira to the right to face the rear jeep door and step up inside, I had run into several rapid firing rounds of mechanical clicking and the tiny electronic bleep-bleeps of an automatic lens engaged in finite focusing, interspersed by a few bright flashes. Halfway into the back of the jeep, I looked angrily up into the line of sight of a hefty camera lens still beeping to the minute precision zooming readjustments to my slight movements. Putting my hand up to the lens in immense irritation, I sat in the unoccupied rear seat and readjusted my melhfa. The camera lowered and a woman smiled at me, raising it again to shoot out of the window as the jeep reversed. On the long drive to Dakhla, the woman eventually lent forward: ‘I can’t see
your face; do you wear it all the time? Can I take more photos of you? We heard you are an anthropologist. They said you have lived here a long time. We’re making a film; can I interview you for it?’

The scepticism encapsulates a gradually unfolding ethnographic disquiet with studying and reading scholarship, humanitarian reports and media commentary about the Sahrawi as just refugees in refugee camps, through the developmental-humanitarian lens of the idealistic political secularity of a western Christian ‘civilization’ that created ‘Orientalism, Africanism and Developmentalism’ (Escobar 1995: 5; Said 1978). Rabinow similarly argued:

We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world. (1996: 36)

Turning the gaze upon itself requires a brief historical diversion into contextual comparative theory to help illuminate the backdrop to the shimmering mirage of these six refugee camps in Tindouf (cf. Isidoros 2017a), and from which to unfold a disquieting anthropological journey.

During the 1960s, at the same time the Sahrawi were articulating their aspirations for decolonization, two specialized discussions appeared separately of each other, critically engaging with two different life worlds – those of refugees and nomads. Usually far apart in disciplinary and geographical terms, they collide in the story of the western Sahara. The former took off with the escalating disorder of increasing refugee crises around the world, some made by humans, others by natural forces. The latter discussion declined around the 1980s, with the inevitable inward human movement to and outward growth of urban areas in parallel to the steady tread into ‘untamed’ lands to exploit natural resources. However, both discussions created their own critical shifts of scepticism from western illogic to indigenous logic. Situated against this backdrop, as nomads and refugees the Sahrawi bridge these two worlds, showing how they are experienced.

Shatter the idea of a pristine nomad, as there is no such thing. Nor do nomads ‘wander’; they always move with calculated purpose and for
reasons of subsistence. The Sahrawi have been long-distance trading entrepreneurs for at least three millennia, quite capable of moving between *badawa* and *hadara* (‘desert and sown’).\(^1\) It is when nomads *cannot* do so that something is very wrong, that ‘something’ being western foreign policy, developmental dogma and geopolitical self-interests encapsulated in the ongoing primitive evolution of western ‘isms’: imperial colonialism, neo-colonial interventionism, neoliberalism. A couple of book reviews criticized San Martín for sometimes taking a ‘postmodernist’ diversion. Call it what you wish – for us anthropologists it is straightforward, reflexive, critical engagement with what we see before us.

Turning a hypercritical gaze that is so concentrated upon refugees back on to the humanitarian entity itself helps to reframe the antithetical paradoxes of refugee behaviour that directly contest such humanitarian perceptions about refugees. Turning that gaze captures the different reflections and refractions in the shards of analytical light falling on to a field site – doing so is to make macro-zoom readjustments of the gaze back on to the ‘movements’ of one’s own society, from whence the entity came.

**Refugeehood**

In conventional terms, development and humanitarian aid connote ‘good intentions’ to offer improvements in well-being, living standards and life opportunities, often in response to long-term humanitarian crises and conflicts. However, the ‘good’ in these responses is packaged up in what has become a global system – developmentalism – couched in terms that tout equality and modernity. Kapferer (2015) argues that the idea and ideal of equality is an entirely nebulous, ontological value embedded in Euro-American thought. His recent research delineates such concepts of egalitarianism, equality, modernity, advancement and progress as synonymous with and underpinning the explicit, ideological legitimation of intensely Eurocentric concepts of power, also packaged as reason and rationality, that came to replace Enlightenment’s ‘civilization’. Barnett (2016) comes at this from another angle. Examining the actual, everyday practices that are designed to improve lives and ‘make the world a better place’ (humanitarianism, human rights, development and so forth), he finds another idealistic practice in a
‘paternalism of global compassion’. So, compassion joins the list of terms that formulate practices ‘designed’ for what are, ultimately, power over an Other. Paternalism has come to be the organizing principle (Barnett 2012) behind the ‘control of care’, as evidenced in Scott-Smith’s (2015) study of control and biopower in the way humanitarianism measures hunger, where the selling and provisioning of care has become a global economic enterprise.

For Edelman and Haugerud (2005), the West’s processes (and history) of industrialization, civilization, and globalization then direct discourses down to the ground level of citizenship and state control.

The notion of regimes of representation is a final theoretical and methodological principle for examining the mechanisms for, and consequences of, the construction of the Third World in/through representation. Charting regimes of representation of the Third World brought about by the development discourse represents an attempt to draw the ‘cartographies’ (Deleuze 1988) or maps of the configurations of knowledge and power that define the post–World War II period. These are also cartographies of struggle, as Mohanty (1991) adds. (Escobar 1995: 10)

The history of scholarly debate and their findings around such sceptical views of the power over global compassion (which is always one-directional, from the ‘First World/Global North’ to/over the ‘Third World/Global South’) is fascinating. One route I take now is to share two of the prominent veins of academic interrogation that match the twenty-first century swing from development to humanitarianism: the first from the field of anthropology of development, and the second from a sort of ‘sub-field’ group of critics within refugee studies.

Over the past eighty years, development policies and practices have received critical scholarly scrutiny ranging from romanticized ideals of imagined futures to demonized criticism of destructive myths in what came to be seen as a failed chapter in the history of Western modernization and its ideology (Escobar 1995). No longer moored to colonial science, the former colonial powers cultivated development agencies which revised and reframed their neo-colonial policies and procedures to legitimate their own political and moral positions (Mosse 1996). This post-development theory, the anthropology of development,
critically engages with and conceptualizes post-colonial development as a regime imposed upon third-world peoples through the North’s interventions in the South (Apffel-Marglin and Marglin 1990; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992). Development models unleash the social re-engineering of undeveloped by developer, producing hierarchies in which scientific knowledge trumps indigenous knowledge (Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1995), while the language of ‘participatory’ or ‘bottom-up’ principles sustains development hegemony ‘behind the beguiling rhetoric of “people’s control”’ (Mosse 2004: 643; cf. Mosse 2001; Cook and Kothari 2001).

Applying Foucault’s (1970) notion of fields of knowledge that are constructed as politically neutral, Escobar (1995) argued that development discourse creates powerless and dependent subjects. Ferguson (1990) similarly posited that this development discourse of knowledge appears impenetrable and unchallengeable, excluding and silencing political realities to further development’s own political activities. The political messages embedded in development discourses manufacture their own sources of moral authority, which Desai (in Lewis and Mosse 2006) refers to as the selling of dissent to recipients as consent. Desai also invokes the science–practice dichotomy that challenges the myth that science is politically neutral. Instead, development institutions become ‘factories of knowledge’ forming a field of power where developers (scientists) are the experts and the developed become irrational and traditional. The theme that emerges from this summary of critical scholarship suggests a manufactured construction of moral authority requiring the creation of a new imagined world, of social reengineering based on a language and praxis that seeks to legitimate its intervention and hegemonic control.

A new field of critical scholarship began tracking the parallel emergence of humanitarianism, likewise referred to as the new neo-colonial project of the ailing post-colonial developmental mission. The international refugee regime, with its legal concepts of humanitarian rights, intervention and aid, emerged in the early twentieth century, operating in a highly politicized context initially for European refugees (Loescher 1993: 39). With subsequent post-colonial conflicts increasing the global refugee problem, governments recognized their limited power to control international population movements. Consequently, in 1951 the world community set up the UNHCR, initially as a temporary
project with a three-year lifespan (Skran 1992: 18), and with little authority and few resources (Hathaway 1991: 290–1). However, increasing refugee numbers during the Cold War contributed to the continued survival and political interests of this Western refugee regime (Harrell-Bond and Mahmud 1996).

As the Cold War ended, there was increasing reluctance to recognize or provide for refugees, since their political and symbolic value had disappeared from its previous entanglement with anti-communist politics. With state-sponsored, top-down development receiving mounting criticism, attention was redirected towards private professional development organizations and the voluntary sector – the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Hathaway 1991; Skran 1992). A crucial change in development practice occurred, with foreign funds increasingly being competitively channelled towards NGOs (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 107). From this conscious policy shift by Western governments and their international agencies has emerged the newly defined ‘third sector’, regarded as a viable humanitarian alternative to the now disparaged industry of development (Goonatilake 2006).

The 1980 and 1990s saw Western states rapidly confronted by an unprecedented increase in forced migration from developing countries in Africa and elsewhere (Horst 2006: 109; Harrell-Bond and Mahmud 1996: 56; Hathaway 1991). Proving to be ill-equipped to address either their causes or consequences (Loescher 1993: 129), Western countries instead resorted to closing their borders and using the refugee regime to contain refugees within developing countries themselves.

Scholarly attention reacted by shifting its attention to questioning the role and political economy of these new, foreign and privately funded NGOs (Goonatilake 2006), drawing attention to the prevalence of NGO myths as preserving ‘the previous era of developmental orthodoxy’ (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 108–9; see also the influential contentions of Smith’s 2004 ‘refugee warehousing’ and Kibreab’s 1993 ‘dependency syndrome’). Scholars in the critical part of Refugee Studies – there are others who do not question the regime – have gone on to produce extensive ethnographies showing that NGOs constitute a diverse set of actors, ranging from those who conduct their own development activities to those that work indirectly with beneficiaries to activist NGOs involved in lobbying and advocacy work. Bureaucratic interests in keeping refugees dependent are linked to a higher order of
international political interests which inhibit permanent solutions (Harrell-Bond and Mahmud 1996: 6; Gorman 1985) and ensure that refugees remain separate populations (Wilson 1992: 230). Donor states therefore prefer to see the camps administered by their own experts (Harrell-Bond and Mahmud 1996: 6). As a result, donors come to view refugee camps as spaces in which they are entitled to exercise sovereignty (Verdirame 1999: 70).

The sole raison d’être of a refugee camp is that there exists within it a population requiring external assistance and protection (Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995). In many refugee crises, humanitarian and development bodies quickly initiate the formalized process of structuring and developing the refugee camps, underlying which is the function of counting, feeding and regulating refugees. Scholars in refugee studies have since moved on to question whether refugee camps provide security or sustain dependence. Horst (2006: 77) was pivotal in first arguing that the confined artificiality of the camps not only thwarts refugees’ abilities to make indigenous decisions to deal with insecurity, it also forces a greater degree of dependence on refugees, which can instead increase their insecurity. In the Sahrawi case, for example, it is highly significant that, despite the lauded development–humanitarian activity, Sahrawi youth still have negligible employment prospects within the camps other than those that must be conducted beyond humanitarianism’s own critical gaze upon the refugee. The genuine problem of boredom and the frustration of stultified life-aspirations among young people, especially young males who want to find work but have few viable opportunities, is simultaneously censured and exacerbated by the humanitarian corpus.

Inextricably linked to the post-9/11 ‘world’ and its aftermaths, such as Western intervention in the Middle East up to the most recent events in Libya and Syria that have triggered the ‘migration [refugee] crisis’ into Europe and the eastern Mediterranean has been what I consider is a resurgence of intelligent scepticism. Scholars in refugee studies seem to have renewed their critical study of the international development and humanitarian regime with greater intensity. To give a few examples, De Genova (2013) argues that ‘the obscenity of inclusion’ essentializes and racializes inequalities whereby the recent heightened border policing and immigration law are fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment, thus accelerating ‘the inclusion of the migrants targeted for exclusion’,
their ‘inclusion’ within this category constituting a form of subjugation. Redclift (2013) finds Urdu-speakers in Bangladesh, who were displaced by the Partition of Indian in 1947 and made ‘stateless’ by the Liberation War of 1971, having to ‘narrate themselves into’ the nation, demonstrating that citizenship is a topographical exercise of exclusion. Saunders (2014) tackles the recent shift towards the securitization of refugees, which takes a ‘burden-limiting’ and ‘technocratic approach to the “disposal” of refugees’. This is far removed from conventional ideas about the humanitarian objective relieving plight, which Gammeltoft-Hansen (2014) sees occurring in the politicization of asylum as a deterrence mechanism, whereby states seek to circumvent their own international legal commitments so as to prevent refugees accessing protection.

The United Nations comes under equal criticism for the tying of its UNHCR humanitarian arm to Security Council members as powerful donor states with whose higher geopolitical script refugees become inextricably linked (Loescher 1993: 138). However, Loescher (2017) has recently offered a corrective to this stance. Reviewing its evolution in global refugee policy, she finds that its influence has been all too easily unappreciated due to the ‘statist perspective’ and ‘realist paradigm’ of international relations theory and literature. These present the UNHCR as simply a mechanism and instrument of states, lacking autonomy and entirely dependent on donor states and host governments. Instead, she argues that it is the foremost humanitarian authority and has been a ‘purposive, entrepreneurial, and strategic actor with independent interests and capabilities, and has even exercised power, despite the resistance of prominent states’.

Nevertheless, Barnett (2001) finds the UNHCR’s ‘sovereign’ face in the links between multilateralism, sovereignty and humanitarianism. He argues that the increasingly political UNHCR may have played a role in recent shifts towards containment policies and ‘refugee-producing’ countries, as well as in the new ‘policy’ push towards ‘repatriation’ and ‘reintegration’, which has complicated original refugee rights against refoulement (forcible return). Likewise, Verdirame and Harrell-Bond (2005) see a ‘Janus’ face in the international refugee regime, where ‘the central argument is that the international and humanitarian organizations that are in charge of looking after refugees are responsible for extensive and avoidable violations of the rights of
those dependent upon them. [. . . ] At the same time they are subjected to only minimal levels of accountability, either legal or political. In general terms, it is very rare for them to have to submit to the due process of law in national or international courts’ (2005: ix). Brownlee (2017) also takes up the Janus-faced theme, but observes new forms of ‘non-collateral, bottom-up support’, where international development aid had begun supporting Syria’s media landscape prior to the 2011 uprising as ‘a new modus operandi’ for promoting Western ideals of democracy.

There is clearly a gap between human rights norms and the mandates of international organizations, or at the very least a cleft in intellectual standpoints between the two. Perhaps ‘norms’ are the problem: echoing Kapferer (2015) and Barnett (2016, 2017), referred to at the start of this section, whose norms are we talking about? Loescher also mentions that when the UNHCR was first created in 1950, the entire legal unit at the International Refugee Organization (created during the World War II) moved to it and formed its legal protection bureau. She states that these staff ‘had unmatched legal and moral expertise on global refugee matters’ and that it was only later in the UNHCR’s history that states ‘developed their own legal expertise and had their own networks to counter UNHCR and to create alternative policies’ (2017: 84, my emphasis). Whose ‘morals’, then, should we respect?

The Sahrawi case needs to be seen in this context, from the on-the-ground altruism of individuals and small groups to its ‘commercialisation’ to the higher geopolitical ‘militarisation of care’. It is a story of complicit sovereign territorial theft, refugee ‘warehousing’ (Smith 2004) and abject failure of the tenets of international law. Although the UN annually re-affirms the Sahrawi right under international law to decolonization and self-determination (see also Liceras 2014), and although the UNHCR is actively involved in giving humanitarian assistance to the Sahrawi, the geopolitical interests of the UNSC (primarily France and the US) are opposed to Sahrawi self-determination.

**Thesis to antithesis: The impossibility of a free gift and developmental humanitarianism**

Aid can never be unconditional – there is no such thing as a free humanitarian gift. Although aid is a charitable gift intended for the most deserving (Horst 2006: 99), merit is construed in terms of the
recipient’s absolute destitution (Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992: 207). Determining levels of destitution is extremely complex, and the categories will change according to donor priorities and international political interests. In reality, these fixed categories can never truly determine precise need (Horst 2006: 103), partly because those needs vary enormously between refugees, time and place, but also because not all refugees in need are captured by the identification process. Humanitarian aid is based on a moral kind of good that masks how international political factors determine the creation of refugees in the first place. Western governments close their borders to refugees, while their humanitarian system simultaneously contains them at a distance – a *safe* distance (but safety for whom?). Correspondingly, aid agencies are tied to donors from the very countries that create and control refugee movements (Horst 2006: 110). These same countries create and control war, arms and international in(security). Taken as a whole, critical analysis of the humanitarian ‘gift’ has followed similar arguments to those against the development–humanitarian nexus (cf. Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992: 220; Malkki 1996).

These are theoretical challenges to how refugee communities, geographies and ‘syndromes’ are imagined by an external gaze that falls upon the refugee. How does all this theory work comparatively, on-the-ground? There are three primary theses in which refugees are perceived by the external body: fixity, protection (*in*security) and dependence, though they come with three antithetical paradoxes of refugee behaviour: movement, *being in* security and reciprocity.

It is widely acknowledged that in most cases refugee camps have existed for many decades and become virtual cities (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja 2000: 205), and several authors have produced thought-provoking on-the-ground studies of this phenomenon elsewhere. Horst records signs of extensive urban planning in the Somali Dadaab camps (2006: 77), while Wilson (1992: 232) criticizes how relief agencies have organized camps in Africa as artificial structures in order to facilitate their remits of infrastructure-building efficiently. Krever (2011) follows Wilson by criticizing the top-down evolution of the UNHCR’s mandate from protection to (human) containment.6

It has been argued that camps constructed and formalized on the arrival of the external agencies can be considered an extension of Western political theory of inter/national security. Camps, as consolidating
'bodies' of refugees assembling at the site, are often depicted as ‘excluded and isolated areas with no connections to wider networks’ (Horst 2006: 124). This assumption denies the realities of life where people in flight not only hope or work to retain their networks (albeit in various degrees of ‘suspension’ at the time of flight), but these networks evolve fluidly as members of other networks arrive and new networks are formed within, between and beyond camps (and non-camp spaces). The assumption also visually transmits an implied fixed edge or border around each camp, when in fact, seen from satellite maps, many refugee camps appear like a scattering of dots on the peripheries but with a greater density in the centre, where Western-style compounds may be visibly different. Depending on local security issues, others may well be tightly delimited within bound structures.

Refugees appear to undergo a variety of different representations that not only ‘other’ them, but also distance them from the reality of their lives and contextual life in the broader region. Malkki (1996) and Horst (2006), among others, emphasize how refugees are commonly portrayed in a very public image as a ‘sea’ or ‘mass’ of people powerlessly reduced to vulnerability and dependently in need of protection. This is exemplified by De Waal’s 2005 (originally 1989) assessment of emergency relief in Darfur in 1984–5, whereby humanitarian publicity communicated the crisis as ‘gigantic’ and ‘sudden’, when in fact the indigenous population conceptualized it more as a gradual and cyclical struggle for survival throughout the preceding years of war and drought. Such studies, often by sceptical anthropologists, provide evidence that refugees are represented as not fitting into the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995: 5, 12, 253), of being in a liminal state and thus constituting a threat to the ‘imagined’ national order (Anderson 1983). Caught between these polarized meanings of insecurity and a stable social reality (as the ‘natural’ order of things), refugees are commonly linked to ‘being’ the cause of problems, not to the problems that caused their flight and crisis in the first place; the crisis is related to the existence of refugees, not to the external factors that turned them into refugees. This, Horst maintains, creates the overarching ambiguous contradiction of refugees who are at once the ‘masses’ of the underdeveloped without agency, yet simultaneously ‘crooks’ misusing agency to profit from resources they have no right to ‘exploit’: a powerful image of refugees being simultaneously liminal victims and the cause of problems (2006: 13).
In line with Chapman’s work on the anthropology of semantics and dyadic ‘othering’ (1982), refugee theorists who examine the whole refugee complexity rather than dyadic abstracts of vulnerability and cunning find the ‘othering’ of refugees highly problematic. This disciplinary approach recognizes that refugees conceptualize a very different identity for themselves than that ascribed to them and that the ascription of a single identity of ‘refugee’ strips away the complex identities and specific features of society, place of origin and history (Horst 2006: 14, 40; Isidoros 2017b), erasing these specific features and depoliticizing fundamental inequalities and injustices. Practices of ‘humanitarian’ representation hide the politico-economic connections between television viewers and media images of refugees (Malkki 1996), with humanitarian aid being ‘insistently formulated as part of a benign and universal human project of “technical fixes”’ (Horst 2006: 205).

As quickly as most refugee camps in their initial rudimentary form are constructed by the refugee regime, so too do refugees quickly become universalized into a single ‘mass’ identity and depoliticized before being presented to the givers, thus strategically masking the true political activities in the givers’ own world. Refugees are stuck in an agenda-setting and news-framing context which is then reconstructed to influence policies and politics back in their direction (Kaye 1998). Horst best illustrates this in her ethnographic analysis whereby Somalis are commonly represented as one people (Somali), with one language (af-somali), one livelihood (nomadic pastoralism) and one religion (Islam). The clan as an organizing mechanism is un-communicated (2006: 45). Disconnected from this depoliticizing and universalizing depiction of refugees by the humanitarian regime, Somali social reality draws upon shifting cultural constructions of race, language, status and economic divisions (Besteman 1996: 123), homogenized into an idealized national identity for the purposes of creating their own nation state (Brons 2001). As they undergo classification and categorization, with certain characteristics assigned to them, ‘becoming’ a refugee thus entails a transformation into a constructed image (Horst 2006: 12; Malkki 1996). Refugees are conceptualized as recipients of ‘expert’ action, not as actors themselves, thereby ensuring the survival of the ‘experts’ and their institutionalized discourses. This asymmetric conception of refugees creates a paternalistic top-down regime where refugees are delegitimized as ‘victims’ (Indra 1993; Allen 1996: 9). Defined as a client group and as
objects of policy (Zetter 2007), refugees are prescribed a standardized set of identities and an assumed set of needs (Malkki 1996: 385).

From these needs, ‘dependency theory’ emerged to condemn the ‘dependency syndrome’ ascribed by developmentalists to refugees. Horst disagrees with Seligman’s psychoanalytical theory of ‘learned helplessness’, pointing to the Somali notion of *nasib* (destiny, future, luck), which may entail acceptance that the crisis has happened, but does not create apathy or dependence (2006: 92–3). Hansen (1991) identifies instrumental behaviour which simulates dependence in order to achieve a desperate objective, which Kibreab finds ‘entirely rational under highly uncertain circumstances to exhibit simulated traits of poverty or dependence in order not to lose rations’ (1993: 332). In these perspectives, which turn the critical gaze back upon the development–humanitarian nexus, refugees are recognized as highly capable actors exploiting scarce opportunities in the best way possible. Another perspective questions the actual labelling of ‘dependent’ behaviour (Hansen 1991); instead, the provision of aid should take place in the context of the full cultural meaning for the recipient of that gift (Harrell-Bond et al. 1992).

One of Horst’s important contributions to the earlier shift in critical stances was her research on Somali refugees in Kenya’s Dadaab camps. She observed humanitarian staff perceiving Somali refugees as arrogant for taking assistance for granted or demanding it, without understanding Somali norms of communal provision to their own needy. She points out that ‘the line between simulated and real dependence is thin’ (2006: 92–93), a fine line that humanitarian observer-practitioners may tread in making easy distinctions in judging human behaviour. As early as 1981, Harrell-Bond, founder of the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford (the world’s first such institution), had begun to criticize the contradictory but popular image of a welfare recipient: passive and indolent on the one hand, while adept at ‘playing the system’ and taking unfair advantage of it on the other (1981: 37–9). Malkki’s (1996) ethnographic study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania took a similar approach to illustrate how aid workers envisaged refugees being at their ‘purest’ when they first arrived in their most desolate condition. After the initial period of ‘helplessness’, they were then perceived as untrustworthy and dishonest. Likewise, Horst further observed humanitarian staff reporting that they had to ‘play politics’ with
refugees (2006: 111). Focusing attention on the presence and practice of
the humanitarian and development agencies within the Dadaab camps,
she also found them labelling refugees as both ‘vulnerable victims’ and
‘cunning crooks’. This double characterization simultaneously ascribes
positive and negative features in a dyadic ‘othering’ (Chapman 1982);
receiving aid positions the refugee as dependent, but the resulting
refugee behaviour becomes classified by the system as inappropriate and
undesirable (Allen 1996: 10).

Critical dependency theory therefore treads its own fine line between
its ascriptions of ‘rewards dependency’ on to people who have just
undergone extensive trauma and ‘real dependency’ reflecting a genuine
need to reconstitute themselves. How else might refugees reconstitute
themselves when the humanitarian regime only provides aid rations
which the major aid agencies themselves admit ‘does not provide for
viable alternatives’? But there is another aspect to the notion of
dependency. When refugees are conceptualized as the recipients of
expert action rather than as actors in their own right, they serve to
ensure the survival of the humanitarian regime, its ‘experts’ and their
institutionalized discourses. Allen (1996) argues that refugees become
the condition of survival for such professionals and their institutionalized
discourses. The existence of refugees ensures the continued ‘business’ of
humanitarian programmes, an industry upon which the careers and
salaries of permanent and consulting staff are reliant, and in which cost-
efficiencies and profits must be made.

Moving from thesis to anti-thesis, my research was drawn to Fabian’s
Questions, which posited a shift in the debate over the discipline of
anthropology. He proposed that, from the ‘study of diversity and
similarities of human life’ which originated with a focus on custom,
tradition, structures and systems, a new interest has developed in ‘forms
of human survival’ (in Ribeiro and Escobar 2006: 290; my emphases).
I then noticed ‘survival’ jumping off the pages of certain critical
ethnographies. Horst argues that analysis of refugees’ indigenous
community assistance should positively focus on their traditional forms
of survival, of how they assist each other through levels of agency,
transformative power and choice, rather than the negative develop-
mental–humanitarian focus on dependence. Yet the former is rarely
associated with refugees (2006: 204). As perpetual receivers and never
givers, refugees’ positions as clients weaken their personal volition and
decision-making capabilities (Indra 1993). This asymmetric relationship symbolically disempowers refugees (Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992), despite ‘empowerment’ being the paradoxical component of humanitarian and developmental doxa. If refugees are persistently disempowered by the very system that claims to empower them, then perhaps it is their own allegedly ‘deviant’ behaviour that should be re-contextualized by recognizing that they make innovative uses of the few resources open to them, thus making it possible to see these as acts of empowerment. For Horst, the disempowering categories ‘do not do justice to the multifaceted and fluid humanness that characterizes refugees, nor their agency in attempts to deal with their lives’ (2006: 11).

Allen has argued that, for many refugees, ‘migration’ often entails getting caught up in multiple conflicts where movement occurs through cycles and waves of flight across borders in efforts to escape sequences of violence (1996). This is a very different form of migration to indigenous traditional mobility. Whether refugees face single or multiple flights, these types of movement form ‘clan-based patterns’ of flight, as illustrated by Horst’s (2006) Somali interlocutors narrating the intensity of a flight’s search for clan members – this then decides the direction of flight, the destination of safety along trusted routes, information, refuge points (as in Allen’s 1996 ‘cool grounds’) and companions during the actual journey(s). At the moment of crisis, existing clan-based patterns can be disrupted and become subject to change. Because clan-based patterns of flight reflect these patterns of pre-conflict, traditional mobility (kin-oriented movement as interrelated with norms of nomadism), most decisions to move are undertaken by the wider group, not just an individual, seeking out the temporarily fractured resources spread across the kin group over a wide area.

There is little precise data on Sahrawi flight paths during the 1975 conflict. However, Caratini (2003) and I found known flight paths were confirmed by kin-based patterns, such as those fleeing to tribe-kin in Mauritania, flight paths to the early rudimentary camps and the subsequent years of movement between the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Mauritania and the camps in search of kin-based solidarity and economic resource networks. San Martin’s (2005: 568) research states that the early occupation of the Tindouf camps comprised students from Layoune and Dahkla, former members of the Spanish army, workers from
the Fos Bu Craa phosphate mines, nomad families of the Reguibat, Izarguien and Awlad Dlim tribes from the Tiris Zémur area of northern Mauritania and the wider Western Sahara-Morocco region, and ‘abid and haratin (conventionally translated as tied and freed slaves).8 While on the surface this seems like a mixture of people moving in the same direction, Tindouf has been a Reguibat centre since the nineteenth century, located on a historically embedded Saharan trading route (Norris 1986). Modern national cartography blurs the deep-rooted connections between the Reguibat tribes and others, but ethnographic evidence points to other tribes making conflict-related decisions to move based on kin-related political inclinations (and necessities relating to maximum group survival), such as those tribes that decided to remain in or withdraw back towards Morocco’s invaded territory or Mauritania, rather than follow the news about the newly formed Tindouf camps.

In Horst’s analysis (2006: 68), although national borders posed obstacles to free movement, movement was often determined more by clan distributions than by formal national borders, as the geographical span of the underlying clan structure existed long before colonial borders, which explains the persistent tendency for border-crossing movements to occur towards known sources of relatives (cf. Brons 2001: 84). Although, as Mercer (1979: 19) indicates, by 1979 Polisario had begun to reorganize the camps in accordance with its new national ideals, the initial scattering of refugee tents at Tindouf followed tribal lines in order to retain pre-flight social patterns. Comparative refugee ethnographies also highlight the often discounted and concealed fact that such flights, being forced and not voluntary, may not have been part of pre-existing intentions to move beyond the existing indigenous territory. For a majority of Sahrawi on both sides of the Moroccan berm, their war against Morocco’s invasion represents a desire to return to their sovereign territory, thus accepting the national borders of Western Sahara established by decolonization (Isidoros 2012, 2017b). Much of their historic tribal territory falls outside these boundaries, comprising the whole of the western Sahara. Yet the dominant discourse not only displaces their historical links to the latter, it denies recognition of their willingness to accept the former as decolonization.

Horst further stresses the difficulty in distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary movement, as refugees may live alongside non-refugee co-ethnics and non-ethnics (2006: 34). Refugee camps often
bring together a mixture of refugees, host-locals and longer-distance migrants, who may in fact use the camps with great skill to survive in varying degrees both in and out of the camps. Horst observed destitute Kenyan Somali nomads utilizing refugee camps when their own crisis had still not been recognized by the humanitarian regime, buying Kenyan identity cards from local Somalis in order to migrate for survival into Kenya (2006: 23). Conditions and provisions inside refugee camps may be better than those for host-locals. Once settled in the camps, the original refugees may begin to migrate between the camps and wider host region as they rebuild basic livelihood strategies in the host economy (cf. Hyndman 2000, Turner 1999, Michael 1997, whose studies greatly illuminate this type of evolving dynamic between refugees and host populations).

Mundy (2007) found that some Sahrawi refugees perceived their standard of living to be better than that of neighbouring Mauritanians, and my own fieldwork observed regular in- and outflows, such as a’imma (clerics) and migrants from Mauritania seeking work or trading opportunities, and discrete Sahrawi movement into neighbouring countries and Europe. This introduces refugee activity beyond the humanitarian gaze where, in the pursuit of survival, people may draw on a variety of new identities that emerge from the presence of relief agencies and assume its labels simply in order to survive (Horst 2006: 23).

Thus, the stereotypical portrayal of refugee camps as fixed and bounded entities possessing a ‘static’ and isolated nature with apathetic inhabitants is erroneous. The Sahrawi refugee camps may have physically defined boundaries in so far as how the external foreign body experiences its imagined geography (and the limitations of its own movement there), but not necessarily for the Sahrawi themselves. The eighteen-year ceasefire has not just enabled both sedentarization and urbanization, with tents now supplemented by sand-brick compounds that appear as tent cities from above (see Figure 1.1), it has also simultaneously rejuvenated the historical, long-distance mobility of trans-Saharan economic flows.

One of the key criticisms of conventional migration, development and political studies is their tendency to perceive contemporary crises as external ‘single’ events that interfere with a historical and ideal ‘stable social reality’ (Zeager and Bascom 1996; Horst 2006: 18). This notion of stability is deeply embedded in Western theory of state formation and nationalism, where a defined population has its proper place in a clearly
defined sovereign territory (Allen 1996: 10). Some scholars have argued
that, in many refugees’ pre-flight pasts, as in other non-flux societies, life
involves insecurity as an aspect of historical actuality (cf. Davis 1993; De
Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995; Horst 2006). For many populations world-
wide, insecurity is built in to their traditional survival mechanisms.

Such authors also concur that, as many refugees’ pre-flight lives
required constant indigenous adaptation to ecologically insecure
environments (especially relevant for desert dwellers such as the
Sahrawi), it is misleading and erroneous to assume that stable conditions
are ‘normal’ when in fact it is insecurity that is more ‘normal’ in daily life
(cf. Aronson 1980; Hjort af Ornäls 1990; Braun 1992). As Horst puts it,
with instability an inherent part of life, mobility becomes the most
suitable strategy and a vital coping mechanism (2006: 18). My own
fieldwork experience showed how the insecurity of the environment
(human and physical) means that the Sahrawi social system seeks to be in
security to survive, not out of it (insecurity). It does so by retaining and
utilizing ‘toolkits’ embedded in Sahrawi heritage.

Linking to Malkki’s argument (above) about refugees not fitting the
‘national order of things’ (1995: 5, 12, 253), I suggest that modern
Western political theory’s problem with insecurity is its view of an
imagined, ideal, stable social reality which amplifies different
conceptions about what constitutes a ‘natural order of things’. In this
sense, I further expand my idea that it can be an indigenous/traditional
state of mind that seeks to be in security in a world accepted as insecure (as
the ‘natural order’), as opposed to a modern ‘fear’ of insecurity in a world
presumed to be secure (‘national order’). Contrary to the latter’s ‘fear’,
all the ethnographies I cite so far, as well as the Sahrawi field site,
consistently demonstrate how traditional indigenous coping mechan-
isms may in variously innovative ways stimulate and revitalize social,
economic and political security. Indigenous forms of self-sufficiency and
traditional aid should instead be understood as preferences for being in
security and not presumed to be the ‘national order of things’ (insecure).\textsuperscript{9}

Braun states that the basic rules of life are in fact ‘safety first’ and ‘risk
strategies are geared towards long-term security concerns, not just
production needs, and are based on similar factors to those that Horst
and others identify: a social network for protection in times of
contingency, agile mobility to mitigate risk and diversification as a
‘safety first’ philosophy. Social security choices are not just survival functions but complex socio-cultural frameworks (Kibreab 1993) – control in life is achieved through thinking as well as actions (Horst 2006: 62) – together with the idea that, in a situation of scarcity or crisis, the best guarantee of human survival is human cooperation (ibid.: 63). De Waal’s (2005) analysis of the 1984–85 Darfur famine crisis illustrates how Western publicity portrayed external food aid as a major source of relief; it was in fact modest in comparison to existing indigenous socio-cultural models of community welfare.

Not only was the aid response far less important than the aid workers believed and publicized it to be, but de Waal’s research indicated yet another internal institutional discourse that imposed its own orthodoxy on the rural recipients, silencing indigenous systems of survival (domestic security) in order to communicate its own institutional and political successes to donor partners and the central state respectively (international security). De Waal also documented the 2002 crisis when international aid flooded the market but disrupted the indigenous balance of farmers’ existing traditional credit-debt systems to such an extent that it subsequently trapped the farmers in irreversible debt. The macroeconomics of aid (international security) was oblivious to the importance of indigenous micro-level livelihoods and coping strategies (domestic security).

Security mixes are usually based on a plurality of social relationships (Horst 2006: 72), with daily survival occurring across a complex network of human relations and shifting negotiation. Clan and alliance systems provide intricately interwoven and interdependent strands of affiliations and divisions, whereby coalitions are constantly being built and restructured (Brons 2001: 113). These kin ties provide group-wide insurance and therefore a security network from which different relations, such as family, neighbours or trading partners, are drawn for different times and purposes (Isidoros 2017c). Horst specifically emphasizes reciprocity as providing ways in which individuals and groups can maximize assistance and thus security for the various members of a social network (2006: 103).

The dominant portrayal of refugee dependence by the development–humanitarian regime I defined previously also requires a different analytical treatment. Kibreab’s (1987) study of Eritrean refugees in Sudan found that the population remained characterized by
interdependent social relations and subsistence economies. The intertwined social obligations in subsistence economies include reciprocal exchanges of food, shelter and land, as well as non-monetized exchanges of labour (Bascom 1993). Horst’s (2006) study of Somalis refugees in Kenya also found reciprocity mechanisms embedded in their heritage, from which they were able to apply social security strategies. Their survival strategy needed indigenous reciprocity (not external humanitarian dependence) as a mechanism of self-reliance which included the being in security responsibility to take care of others. As a vocal opponent of the notion of ‘imposed aid’, Harrell-Bond (1986) documented how refugees in southern Sudan were expected to accept humanitarian aid, but also offered the rare observation of how defiantly they sought to circumvent this external dependence by avoiding the camps.

Customary rules and practices of indigenous reciprocity are likely to be deeply embedded in refugees’ pre-flight pasts. Indigenous reciprocity and aid will be perceived differently across different cultures, and certain ways of giving, types of gifts (symbolic or material), the timing of giving and receiving, will vary across societies for whom phenomena such as gift, charity, barter and commerce carry different commercial and philanthropic meanings and practices.

I link two scholars’ references to this indigenous reciprocity. Hyden’s term ‘economy of affection’ is defined as ‘a network of support, communications, and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities’ (1983: 8–22). Similarly Horst sees nomadic heritage as consisting of three traditional features of ‘communal assistance’: a state of mind to look for greener pastures, a strong social network comprising obligations to assist each other to survive, and strategic risk-reduction by dispersing investments across family members. This particularly expands Hyden’s concept into a political economy of affection and positions it at the heart of Sahrawi women’s tents in which there is a strong focus on creating security in response to the insecurity of life. Thus customary notions and practices of indigenous social welfare can provide critical insights into understanding the otherwise misjudged trading of humanitarian aid and its subsequent ‘Columbus construction’ (Leach 1977: 28). Such actions should instead be seen as indigenous preference and long-established heritage toolkits to stay in security, rather than being interpreted negatively as refugee camp-internalized dependence on
international aid (Horst 2006: 204). Within the rigid and artificial structures of refugee camps, refugees seek to exercise independent autonomy and choice in ways that challenge this structure of ‘imposed aid’ (Harrell-Bond 1986).

In the Sahrawi case, upon receipt of humanitarian aid, goods become personal property linked to certain rules of reciprocity (also noted by Cozza 2003). Like many other types of indigenous gifts, aid goods are expected to be passed on, albeit in this case, when they are insufficient for basic survival, they are both shared across kin groups and resourcefully traded in order to acquire goods that will make a harsh life better. These constitute preferences for nutritional food items that the World Food Programme fails to provide, including life’s dignity items such as marriage gifts, children’s toys, torches, mobile phones, women’s sanitary items and the like. Like other scholars, Allen has argued that, when refugees buy and sell ration cards, register family members several times or divide the family between camps and external sites in order to spread various economic activities such as trading aid provisions, these are reciprocity behaviours, actions of resourcefulness and ingenuity as the only defence against the situation of dependence in which they find themselves (1996: 10). Of Eritrean refugees in Sudan, Bascom states that, ‘the fact that reciprocity practices have been suspended or deleted illustrates that unassisted refugees have been unsuccessful in reconstituting their pre-flight economy’ (Bascom 1993: 334–5, my emphases).

Having contextualized the theoretical backdrop to developmentalism, humanitarianism and the refugee regime, I now begin to fly the reader into real group of refugee camps where the above précis of theory comes to life.

**Non-place as centre: Silent peripheries and strategic silences**

Everywhere in the Tindouf refugee camps, the very ethereal nature of ‘it’ as a collective of six camps reveals classic but striking dichotomies between rhetoric and reality, modern and traditional, public and private, centre and periphery, and the contradictory but simultaneous solidarity and insecurity discourses. The formal grid-designed tent city, with its wide open ‘public’ spaces inhabited by the omnipresent world and dominant discourse of the external humanitarian body, contrasts with the intensely ‘private’ inner sanctums of densely packed residential areas,
with ambiguously narrow passages connecting undisclosed close-knit familial tents. Likewise, there are the striking visual symbols within the space of a camp: the vibrantly coloured, paint-fresh, competing group logos, project posters and 'solidarity messages' that vie for attention on official foreign-staff buildings and their vehicles that flash through the camps, as against the discrete, well-worn, low-noise visibility of the refugees’ own tents, vehicles and government buildings. In effect, the former flies into and descends upon the latter. These dichotomies communicate explicit cultural differentials between bold brashness and composed discretion.

Correspondingly, the dominant discourse about the Sahrawi seems to envisage them ethereally as abstract entities and as shimmering, geographically displaced mirages of desert tent cities in a ‘nowhere’ space. The Sahrawi have been given three abstract part-identities that are stitched panoramically into an ambiguous montage of desert nomad – refugee – citizen-in-exile. Each of these three identities, which also represent past – present – future, float territorially disconnected and culturally disembodied from one another. How and when the nomad, refugee or citizen is stressed more depends on which respective discourse is relevant. And all three part-identities seem to be waiting for something – the desert nomad to return unhindered to tradition, the refugee to return to autonomous self-sufficiency, the civilized citizen to return to the Western Sahara as modernized sovereign.

Marc Auge’s (1995) controverted thesis of ‘non-places’ poses both a puzzle and a solution respectively. In Ingold’s ‘sense’ (2011; 2013), the Tindouf refugee camps are a shimmering mirage that alternates simultaneously between place and non-place depending on the eye of the beholder and the vantage point of the gaze, a reading that Augé does not contemplate, perhaps restricted by his application of it to ‘super-modernity’. Khuri (1990) employs a similarly binary application of horizontal Arab ideology vis-à-vis the vertical West in his contrast of the Middle Eastern game of dama (backgammon) as ‘first among equals’ to the hierarchical Western game of chess, the former instituting egalitarian relations between different statuses, the latter hierarchically structured and with sharp differences in power. However, depending on which spot one is standing, which road one is driving along, which type of built structure one is sitting in and which time one chooses – or, for anthropologists, ‘the ethnographic moment(s)’ – the centre–
periphery binary of the camps may instead be treated as an elliptical non/place illusion rather than a binary blind spot.

In contradistinction to Augé and Khuri, I found that what the humanitarian body considers to be the ‘peripheries’ of both the place and the situation is instead the Sahrawi ‘centre’. But the centre–periphery binary does not mean that the humanitarian centre is a Sahrawi periphery. Although the corporeal ‘flatness’ of Bedouin tents and ideology which Khuri uses in his argument certainly do not cut into or impinge upon the horizon, it is not simply ‘flat’ – it has its own complex layers. And it is this stratigraphy of Sahrawi life that I wish to tease out ethnographically.

As Cohen (2001) importantly acknowledges, different geographical, ecological and historical conditions play a part in shaping idiosyncratic social configurations. Khuri’s Tents and Pyramids (1990) draws greatly on Bedouin inferences, but applies them universally to long urbanized Arabs. My difference here is to apply Cohen’s observation of idiosyncrasy to Sahrawi nomadic perceptions of Khuri’s ‘flat’ horizon as an ever-increasing circle (‘centre’) through which to keep moving forward – an infinite horizon through which there is always much beyond to connect to.

Other scholarship treats horizontality in terms of informality and the informal economy as opposed to formal (vertical) state structures, or opposes traditional subsistence to national market economies. The two are often seen as inter-related, with the formal structures containing the informal. I argue against this: the Sahrawi centre contains its own structural formality and institutionality that has nothing to do with refugeehood and state-formation because it pre-existed the two new conditions of refugeehood and state-forming citizenship. But the humanitarian eye sees all this as part of the periphery, as the informal beyond the formal (‘centre’) gaze, the non-institutional outside the institutional. By lifting out the humanitarian centre to reveal the Sahrawi centre, we might instead come to understand that the ‘informal social space is no longer defined as the part of social space that escapes the control of the state, but as the total social space minus what is controlled by the state’ (Irek 2009: 221, my emphasis).

And so I treat the Tindouf camps instead as a shifting non/place between two governing bodies: as refugee camps in which the humanitarian entity governs as a refugee regime, and as traditional Sahrawi encampments under customary forms of governance.
By customary and traditional, I do not mean ‘pre-colonial’ or its variable romanticized ideas of a past nomadic life, but as the way the Sahrawi want to do it *their way*, and in the ways they chose to feature their pre-colonial architectures. The former relies on ‘methodological nationalism’, which treats the nation state as the default unit of measure (Irek 2009: 215). For the latter, I slightly adapt Raubisko’s (Raubisko 2011: 26–8) account of the situation she encountered in Chechnya, so that the Tindouf camps need to be treated as analytically different from existing Western Sahara scholarship, that is, as an action of moving from negative to positive space, which similarly reflects Irek’s (2009: 207) conceptual notion of negative and positive ‘signifiers’. In this vein, I suggest that the Tindouf camps are also customary encampments in which, I contend, the Sahrawi are connected to a wider geographical ‘laboratory’ (I bridge to Bonte 2006: 99 on Mauritania) of tribe-state experimentation in which the sole vertical formality of the external default model is being adapted to an existing customary model.

This is why, in this book, I do not follow anthropological tradition to home in on and identify tribal genealogies and hierarchies, but instead question such historiographical definitional distinctions as ‘negative’ units of analysis and accept the real on-the-ground, multi-dimensional, stratigraphic messiness. In everyday life, a single tent can contain and signify a temporal and spatial ‘bricolage’ of residents (permanent and temporary) from across the different tribes and regions. I wish to reach a crucial point: in conceptualizing the periphery as a non-place, the humanitarian body (and research conducted from its enclave) actually renders its own centre a peculiar non-place in Augé’s sense – the technical politico-legal mirage I posited above. For the Sahrawi, there is no such distinction other than the ‘whole’ (the Sahara) as the centre. Such notions of periphery and informality are misreadings of both the human and physical landscapes: there are no edges, but thresholds; no default models, but rhythms of adaptation. As Baali explained to me during a desert journey, referring to the ‘whole’ of the Sahara:

In our culture and in the Muslim one the land belongs to God. And as people were nomads that means they did not have to dispute over the land because in the end they will leave it and go to another place. It is true that, for example, some tribes were known to live mostly in Saguia El Hamra or others in the zone of Dakhla.
but it did not mean those areas belonged to them or that they had the right to deprive other people from staying there. Even the wells did not belong to anybody. Yes, there were sometimes cases of dispute over who had the priority to serve himself or his animals before the others. But people were also able to organize themselves.

And distinguishing between the western Sahara in that ‘whole’ and a different concept of outside:

There were no external signs through which tribes could be identified. The written history [referring to Western historiography] speaks about rhezzou (raiding) but these were mostly against very far tribes such as those in Mali. Western Sahara was almost like the safe haven of the [western] tribes. All of the [Saharan] tribes have the same mode of production, the same activities, the same conditions of life and experience, all the time the same sufferings such as the years of drought. This makes them almost the same. When one tribe is subject to attack from the outside then the tribes did make a coalition and vindicate the aggressed tribe. The external observer cannot make any distinction between people of different tribes unless by the specific marks they have on their camels. Many people see our ‘country’ like a desert but we see it as a homeland which deserves all kind of sacrifices. When you love a people you love the land where they live and vice versa.

This directly challenges Augé’s (2012) conception of non-place:

[... ] today, the political and economic life of the planet depends on decision-making centres located in the major world metropolis which are all interconnected together, and together constitute a sort of virtual ‘metacité’ [citing French philosopher Paul Virilio]. The world is a huge city. This is what we could call a city world within which all categories of products circulate [... ] It spreads its tentacles across the whole planet [...].

Unrestricted by Augé’s conditionality of supermodernity, Baali conveys in his own terms how the Sahara has, from the Sahrawi vantage point, been a thriving, dynamic ‘metacity’ and decision-making centre for at
least three millennia. The epistemological stumbling block continues to be Western scientific territorial methodology – we seem only to be able to ascribe the ‘global nomad’ (the supermodern human) with metacity qualities, not the ‘local traditional’ nomad. The Tindouf refugee camps are only an elliptical non/place because of our presence in their midst – we the humanitarian visitors, journalists, film-makers, scholars and so forth. This is evident from the very clear binary dialectic of how the refugee camps (and thus the Sahrawi) are externally perceived and conventionally described. Scholarship about the Sahrawi always takes as its starting point the positionality of the Sahrawi as refugees in refugee camps. Typically, early colonial literature on western Sahara started with introductory paragraphs that breathlessly contextualized the hydrological deficiency of the Sahara, followed by a jump back into ahistorical time to describe the classifications of tribal hierarchies and class structures. Post-colonial literature replaces breathless geology with an exposition of a new starting point: Moroccan irredentism. Together they have produced an extraordinary leap from tribe to ‘modernizing’ and ‘civilizing’ citizens making a nation state. There is no relational link between these leaps, erasing the Sahrawi continuum between the historical and the present (Isidoros 2015a).

The Sahrawi do not say or write very much in this vein – an interesting circumspection and strategic silence on the one hand, yet on the other because they do not need to. It is only we who need to keep stating the obvious.11 My theoretical synthesis in this observation is of Sahrawi reticence and silence on the external body’s inaccuracies and criticisms because the former need the latter to say something, at least. Although the Sahrawi have developed an assertive post-colonial narrative – a stimulating study in its own right – it retains a minimalist quality that is focused on and driven by self-determination. In this new ‘modern’ period, tribe has had to become a taboo subject in the leap from tribe to state. They neither see their Sahara as a ‘vast’ and ‘empty quarter’, nor as inhospitable, uninhabitable or uninhabited. There may not be much water, but it is not ‘devoid’: there is water, which simply requires highly skilled arid-zone specialization to access – so simple, in fact, that the Sahrawi have been doing it for at least three millennia. It is just not ‘simple’ to us.

In such ‘peripheries’ is a Sahrawi ‘centre’ that is silent for a reason. These are places which the Sahrawi refugees perform back as peripheral
spaces in order to protect their desert heartlands, their centre, from the further intrusive reach of the external body’s conditional and hypercritical scrutiny. There is nothing to hide but everything to protect from the contradictory sovereign-solidarity and insecurity discourses. Circumspection is a requisite performance of protection from damaging misinterpretations. In coexisting synthesis, the dominant humanitarian sovereign-solidarity discourse drops a decibel (but remains audible nevertheless) to form the insecurity discourse about various activities and behaviours that no one is very certain of, though certain signs of it can be glimpsed. For example, ‘smuggling’ and the trading of humanitarian aid are actually more analytically intriguing when viewed as ‘long-range trading’, thus enabling analytical consideration of a broader range of goods, practices and meanings. The credibility of such hyperventilated rumours and parsimonious criticisms are ascertained in regular conversational verifications passed on like a baton through the flows of camp visitors. Bagging a lift one day in a Polisario jeep carrying a group of visitors, one young female Italian journalist leaned forward to me to whisper her burning question – did I know anything about unmarried pregnant girls being imprisoned? These lower-decibel narratives are reproachful criticisms of supposedly exemplary refugees, grumpy disappointments of model citizens in the euphoric emotion of sovereign solidarity with a just cause, and the frustration of purportedly counterproductive behaviours disrupting the humanitarian’s order of expertise. At the heart of these whisperings is the ironic external requirement of the dependent recipient to adhere to the canonical jig of human rights at the heart of international law.

The Polisario and the Sahrawi as refugees participate enthusiastically and dynamically in the positive dominant rhetoric about themselves, while these criticisms are ones that the Sahrawi do not participate vocally in, but deftly sidestep. These criticisms are illustrative of three strategic silences: illicit flows and the trading or sharing of aid (versus the economic humanitarian ‘gift’), tribalism (detribalization as a modernizing nation state) and discrete indigenous mobility (civilized sedentary citizens). These strategic silences are situated ‘outside’ the humanitarian centre – the silent spaces of daily life beyond the public gaze to which refugees are under pressure to conform, to portray and to perform. Nowhere in this lower-decibel criticism and dominant discourse about the Sahrawi is there any mention of the human drive to
strive for self-sufficient survival, security and autonomy. Consequently, a
sphere of the Sahrawi’s own efforts becomes driven beyond the public
gaze because the humanitarian regime does not provide what refugees
actually need to return to self-sufficiency, ‘progress’ out of refugeehood
or make a modern nation state.

Bending and Rosendo’s (2006) study of the Penan of Sarawak shows
that, while they are portrayed by development discourse as passive
objects of resistance, they strategically tailor representations of
themselves to politically sympathetic and powerful visitors. Is this
really just conniving behaviour, or is it only anthropologists who can
understand why securing international intervention entails telling the
emperor he is clothed? And expanding the nuance – complementing
Van Schendel’s (2005) suggestion that we consider strategic silences and
peripheries as the real spaces of engagement, Bending and Rosendo
further suggest that ‘what we should really be paying attention to is the
counter-hegemonic moment, the political response to an anti-politics
machine, the moment when someone says, “The emperor has no

Not only do the comparative ethnographies of development and
refugees challenge enclave-generated analysis, they also shed contextual
light on why refugees engage in strategic silences beyond the
humanitarian gaze. The Penan excluded their own long history of
logging and forest clearance, a positive activity, because the price of
achieving international support required them to conform to and
reproduce the very different (negative) language of the more powerful
(Bending and Rosendo 2006). By presenting themselves as appropriate
beneficiaries, refugees’ silent strategies do not just resist, they sustain
development rationales in order to reassert their own influence over their
social world (Rossi 2006). And this, I argue, is what the Sahrawi are
doing, and must do, to survive.

Likewise, the Sahrawi are still culturally nomadic pastoralists
(to varying degrees across their populations) and are still philosophically
attached and emotionally invested (if not always permanently
engaged) in this way of life and the life-world of the Sahara. Here
Baali tries to explain to me the flexibility of desert specialization and its
adaptive ease to move outwards from its centre in ever-increasing circles,
and vice versa, the difficulty of those outside moving through and
surviving the centre:
The present political borders were drawn by the European colonial powers. The desert itself is a huge barrier [to those outside it]. When we speak about western Sahara and the Sahrawi people we refer to the region included from the south of Ouarkziz and Oued Dra’a as a natural border in the north, to the hammada west to Tindouf, east and south-east of the zone from Tifariti to Zouerat, and to the south the chain of dunes. It is a big region delimited only by natural borders and not by any other considerations. Seen from abroad, people could say that the desert starts from Marrakech in Morocco up to the River of Senegal. But geography and history are something completely different. The geography of southern Morocco is characterized by horizontal hills of almost 400 kilometers which cannot be crossed even by people, and forms a natural border between the two parts it separates. Nomads are people who do not have borders imposed on them. Yes, they are free to move, but that does not mean that they have no borders to respect: the borders imposed by nature I mean, only natural obstacles.¹²

The Sahrawi are not ‘just’ refugees, and as nomads nor are they a ‘backward’, ‘primitive’, ‘undeveloped’ other – they are a highly specialist arid-zone society. In becoming refugees and adopting the ‘modernizing’ and ‘civilizing’ model of a nascent nation state, the Sahrawi did not sever such connections – they should not need to. However, they ‘do’ because the dominant discourse requires them to portray themselves as exemplary refugees and model citizens from a very different geometry of perspective – the dominant discourse romantically gives a nod to their indigenous life-system while prosaically displacing it.
CHAPTER 3

THE LOGIC OF NOMADIC MOVEMENT AND DWELLING

Everything outside the hypercritical humanitarian ‘centre’ of a refugee camp – the vast inhospitable desert beyond, quaint backward traditions, shadow economies, failures of the abstracted other’s modernizing and civilizing endeavours and so forth – constitutes a humanitarian ‘silent periphery’ because what happens in it is beyond its gaze. Exemplary refugee behaviour is embraced in the centre; deviance exists in the periphery.

Bridging this centre–periphery binary – over simplistic for this moment of initial translation – is an ethnographic decision to lift the humanitarian body out, temporarily suspend it out of the frame and move beyond refugees as non-persons in nowhere spaces. This reflects an ethnographic movement into those silent peripheries as, instead, places of strategic silence. Here lies a different ‘centre’, the cultural fabric of Sahrawi life for at least three millennia, dynamically participating in a much wider geographical landscape, and with a far greater logic that is embedded in their nomadic heritage.

Twentieth-century Western colonial concepts of civilization and later theories of nationalism, development and modernization brought with them notions of sovereign power over newly defined political territories and cartographically demarcated edges of state control. Social science emerged from this modern nation state territorialism with a conceptual framework of scientific methodological territorialism (van Schendel and Abraham 2005: 38–68). The new uniform model of human society was
one of enclosed geographical units within defined national borders: sedentarizm becomes an economic expectation, and identity a derivative of restricted territorial sovereignty (Allen 1996: 11; Chatty 2006). This was explicitly perceived as the culmination of a natural evolutionary sequence towards progress and modernization. It also attached a derogatory evaluation to tribal nomadic pastoralism (Hobbs 2006; Fabietti 2000: 82–9) in terms of developmental ideals, projects and analyses such as environmental degradation being attributed to nomadic pastoralist practices.

This new political ideology was integrated into the aspirations and practice of colonial and post-colonial Arab states, with its view of nomadic pastoralism as ‘irrationally backward’ and ‘tribalism’ as antithetical to modern nationalism and as an internal political problem (Chatty 2006). Two concerted policies emerged to pacify ‘problematic’ tribal nomads as part of a more ‘progressive’ agricultural or industrialized settled population: sedentarization and detribalization (Fabietti 2000: 82–9). At that juncture, scholarship perceived the resulting transformations as being under threat from nationalism and settlement, signalling the end of traditions and nomads dying out,

Figure 3.1 Nation-building and nomadic heritage. Photo courtesy of author.
which Chatty describes as the often unacknowledged continuities of French and British Mandate policies into the emerging Arab nation states (2006).

Chatty cites the Bocco, Jaubert and Mitral volume (1993) as moving studies of nomads in a new direction, away from 1980s assumptions that ecological degradation and desertification were a result of ‘backward’ nomadic pastoralist practices and towards a view of the practicability of nomadism in its compromise with industrialized and agricultural urban society. Present scholarship continues to challenge these notions of degradation and increasingly finds patterns of resistance and persistence. Questioning the gap between official and local representations illuminates the multiple realities and alternative perceptions of nomadic tribes facing contemporary political and socio-economic pressures (Chatty 2006).

There is growing recognition that globalization’s explicit anticipation of the ‘end of geography’ disregards the particularism of any social and moral geography which does not coincide with desired state territorialism (van Schendel and Abraham 2005). As in other scholarship, Simala and Amutabi’s (2005) study of the East African Illemi Triangle shows that new national spaces are artificial and arbitrary creations that cut across the indigenous cognitive perspectives of their heartlands. Rhetoric embodies notions of frontiers as being beyond the formal gaze (and therefore control) of the state, peripheries as sites of transgression or of unauthorized migration and trade. Discourses of trafficking and smuggling distort the licit and legal rituals, customs and practices of indigenous populations. Lancaster’s study of the Rwala Bedouin argued that smuggling was an example of using modern borders as a resource – despite being illicit in the external modern system, it was practiced within the traditional internal framework of social ethics and moral practices (1997: 92–112). Referring to ‘borderland citizens’, Wong suggests that ethnic and ancestral ties may be far more meaningful than the political sovereignty of states, whereby shared culture and language create a greater closeness to kin across a border than to fellow citizens within the artificial confines of official state territory (2005: 204).

Although nomadic pastoralists do face shrinking spaces, numerous authors suggest that the factor explaining their capacity for resistance lies in the very tools of adaptation of nomadic societies (Salzman and...
Galaty 1990; Fabietti and Salzman 1996), such as the pursuit of a multi-
resource economy, household diversification (Casciarri 2006: 421) and
the adaptive flexibility of genealogy that facilitates alliances and forges
manufactured links. As Bamyeh argues: ‘The point is not that nomadism
experiences no change. Rather, it is that nomads themselves experiment
constantly and in a pragmatic manner with parameters of change, but so
that the process remains under their control’ (2006: 33). For instance,
assimilation through the use of genealogical amnesia helps to legitimate
inequalities, and this is how small nomadic units scattered over vast
areas can ritually reinforce their blood ties (Bamyeh 2006; Salzman
1980: 8–9). These kinds of solidarities still continue to reinforce
western Saharan alliances ritually and to forge manufactured links today
(Caratini 2003, 1995). By way of another illustration, Chatty (1986,
1996) chronicles the spontaneous acceptance of the motor vehicle among
the Hasîiri tribes in Oman as a means to maintain the traditional
subsistence economy, but also to link it to the newly emerging national
market economy (i.e., the faster transportation of camels to market).
This is also apparent among the Sahrawi (albeit discretely beyond the
hypocritical external gaze), who, I also argue, apply the same complex
logistical dexterity to managing and moving the year-round visiting
foreign corpus around the camps and the desert.

Thus the modern sedentarized ‘bounded’ model of organization is
widely considered to be fundamentally incompatible with the complex
social organization required by large and widely dispersed communities
and their desert ecology of nomadic subsistence (Bamyeh 2006).
Similarly, the Lancasters suggest that the idioms of the past remain
current at the same time as new terms enter discussions of identity and
political change (2006: 339). Many authors argue that the nomadic
tribal way of life has in fact outlived other forms of human organization,
illustrating its successful resilience and strategic persistence (Casciarri
2006; Lancaster and Lancaster 2006; Marx 1984; Kressel 1984; Métral
1984; Dresch 1989; Bonte et al. 1991). The problem perhaps is that we
envisage things as static objects for examination, when actually nomads
(and people in general) are highly mobile – not just physically, but
temporally too. As Laroui points out: ‘If we fail to distinguish the
different types of nomad arising in different historical conjunctures, we
shall be reduced to representing an abstract social structure as the cause of
totally different developments and [will be] faced with insurmountable
contradictions (cited in McDougall 1983: 1). Also picking up on the problem of fixed ideas vis-à-vis portable time and space are Fog Olwig and Hastrup who insightfully detect that: ‘If the world is seen as a place where moving and dwelling are in constant interplay, then sites are not experienced merely by being present in them, but also by leaving them behind’ (1997, cited in Horst 2006: 10).

Tribal nomadic pastoralism may therefore not be disappearing, but change is rarely unidirectional (Salzman 1971). Rather, it involves a complex transformation and redefinition of tradition and modernity (Keenan 2006), whether in the seventh century or the twenty-first (Norris 1986). Casciarri warns agains trying to define tribes today without recalling their historical processes of constant restructuring. Although complex historical processes have undoubtedly reshaped tribes over the centuries, ethnographic studies keep revealing the continuity and relevance of tribal models (see Dresch 1989; Bonte et al. 1991). Casciarri’s ethnographic study of the Ahanda gabila (vernacular for qabila, Arabic: tribe) of central Sudan exemplifies how important it is not to conceive of the tribal paradigm ‘as a timeless model, rigidly codified and of an immutable character’ (2006: 230–2). Tribal genealogy is highly mutable: real or fictive, kinship iron out inequalities as an enduring adaptive survival strategy, and as creative reconfigurations in response to necessary rewritings, as Shryock profoundly discovered (1997).1

Although societies have undergone transformations throughout history, the modern concept of the bounded group carries a distinctively embedded expectation of territorial fixity, static stability and controlled migration. Yet while nationalism’s goal was to make space and identity coincide, Cohen and Rai argue that ‘practices and meanings derived from old loyalties … [religious, ethnic, regional, linguistic, geographical and historical points of origin] … are increasingly transferred and re-grounded outside national spaces’ (2000: 14). Human movement has been an integral part of historical survival and adaptation, and while identity is not necessarily lost through that movement, it can be opportunistically malleable. Movement can change or reinforce identity, but attachment to territory is not the sole source of individual or collective identity (Malkki 1996; Kibreab 1993).

Nomads usually occupy environments that may not reliably support sustainable agriculture (Barfield 2006: 348–50) and that observers often describe as tracts of inhospitable or desolate land, uninhabited wastes or
empty quarters. For instance, Claudot-Hawad describes the Sahara as consisting of ‘frontiers’ that are ‘like transit zones rather than living spaces’ (2006: 664–5). I suggest that these terms, and others that recall Marc Auge’s 1995 non-places, perpetuate 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.

Instead, James (2003: 223–35) describes mobile populations’ ‘relational view of home’ as one of rhythm in the way space is used through networks to provide a more complex idea of home than the sedentary equivalent. Nomadic movement is invariably of households, with in-built spatial flexibility to carry out the diverse activities necessary to a household’s survival: in such insecure ecologies (the ‘natural order’), survival is more successful with inter- and intra-group cooperation. The nomad’s environment is a space within which to reach wide social and territorial networks where the condition of life is a constant weaving of relationships: socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological. In this way, a web of families is spread over a wide geographical space, forming a network of people associated with places and engaged in social activities such as strategic marriages as extensions of those networks. Layne emphasizes that autonomy and sociability are facilitated and enhanced by these mobile residence patterns (1994: 149).

Often spoken of as a philosophy (Claudot-Hawad 2006; Chatty 2006; James 2003; Galaty and Bonte 1991), nomadic mobility signifies the search for economic advantages, the maintenance of ecological resources and the creation of social-symbolic ties to both land and people. These organized economic journeys and regulated residential crossings are made through intersecting layers of socio-cultural spaces. I suggest that this mobility is a hidden logic embedded in the tribal nomadic pastoral paradigm, helping to build up and shape political, geographical and socio-linguistic bodies like the Hassaniya of western Sahara and the Kel Tamashek of eastern Sahara.

Although it may appear counterintuitive that those who are routinely on the move and lack fixed dwellings should have strong attachments to particular places, places acquire heightened meaning and importance when landscapes are rarely fixed and resources change. At the same time, despite their changes, these resources do have some kind of position on the landscape, so knowledge and taking care of place becomes essential
to human welfare. Nomadic lifestyles anticipate changing landscapes, with ‘thousands of years’ of experience in devising effective means of predicting and reacting to environmental opportunities and losses (Hobbs 2006: 786) through ‘logical movement’ from deficit to surplus areas (Chatty 2006: 497). The significance of the establishment of long-range ties means the capacity to mobilize a far-flung and powerful network of social relationships and to participate in a variety of different social groups. These interlocking networks and affiliations cement the different communities’ interests (Marx 1984), and the patterns of long-range mobility radiate across this varied social, economic, political and ecological territorial network.

In its roughly 5,500-year-old desert ecology (Foley et al. 2003), the Sahara should instead be seen as an abundantly habitable and inhabited place: the social construction of individuals make house and homeland, whereby a locality embodies the meaning of belonging through its human occupation of it (Casajus 2011; Lovell 1998: 1–18). The Sahara comprises a variety of ecologies and is inhabited by both the settled and the nomadic. While the harsher areas of the Sahara tend to be inhabited by the nomadic and appear to be criss-crossed by seemingly transient routes, these movements actually form regularly repeated patterns, series of residences-in-motion (i.e. not static in the sedentarist manner), with occupants strongly identifying with places in their beloved badiya (desert heartlands), such as the Tiris Zemmur region of western Sahara, with its mysterious black basalt mountains and jnun (spirits, sg. jinn), in which the best camels are raised, some say.

An understanding of local perceptions of space and geographical ties encourages a very different treatment of local social landscapes (Barth 1969: 9–38). My ethnographic approach treats the Sahara as one very large and dynamic living space, full of energetic life, within which there is constant movement by both the settled and nomadic, and comprising vibrant streams of long-range human movement spreading through it, utilizing it and mastering it. These streams are multi-layered geographical overlays, comprising commercial, social, cultural and political tributaries, with multi-centred places of convergence (McDougall 2005) such as markets, wells, towns and oases, as well as other geographical overlays, for instance, long-range familial units with their ‘webs of kinship’ (Fortes 1949) and long-range trading, with its webs of commercial centres. Although Claudot-Hawad refers to ‘frontiers’, she acknowledges that they...
are not a barrier, but a negotiable, fluid, meeting point, forming part of a very widespread system’ (2006: 662–3).

Thus, a logic of movement and dwelling exists and is deeply ingrained in the tribal nomadic pastoral philosophy. The ability to shift politically, economically and socially with fluid agility is the ability to protect the internal structure and system as much as possible by casting a wide web of networks and relationships across a broad regional and horizontal dimension.

Between rhetoric and reality: Moving into the silent peripheries

The Tindouf encampments are places of Sahrawi private and public life worlds. The humanitarian world within the camps has its own private-public activities reflecting the fields of power of a foreign refugee regime, but so do the Sahrawi, and while they interconnect, the following chapters will begin to move into the solely Sahrawi private-public domain, turning the gaze to distance the humanitarian inhabitants on the periphery of a
Sahrawi centre. I acknowledge the historical, political and theoretical complexities of the private-public dichotomy, especially as a ‘purposeful fiction’ (Joseph 1997), but here use it temporarily as Weintraub’s ‘two cities’ (1997: 25–27) to distinguish the camps’ two sets of occupants in order to make a space to acknowledge the Sahrawi’s own body politic (cf. Al-Hassan Golley 2004 and Nelson 1974: 558–561). Moreover, Wilson (2014) has noted the paradox of refugee camps resembling traditional nomadic encampments denoting both non-permanence and temporary material infrastructure, yet refugee camps also denote a sense of disrupted rootedness. She finds that the nomadic encampment is ‘reproduced and transformed in the refugee camp’, which is certainly visible to us in the performance of heritage (in the form of setting up traditional camel- and goat-hair tents and so forth) at public events and how the continuation of some customary practices and preferences occur, for example, in the very different canvas tents provided by the humanitarian agencies.

Expanding on this, I argue that, although the camps look like refugee camps and are performed as such for the self-determination project, when it comes down to everyday life they have strong connotations of pre-colonial traditions surrounding rare agglomerations of qaba’il (expanded further below as ‘battle’ frig). Sahrawi organization in the camps comprises its own public and private domains and rationales, irrespective of the humanitarian corpus. When the humanitarian bodies fly into Tindouf, they move through their own demarcated cartography of colonizing intervention. However, Tindouf is not just the site of refugee camps; the camps are situated in an indigenous geography on a modern battlefield, in and on which ancient Sahrawi territory is being reclaimed, at the end of one of the paths of flight taken in the 1975 Moroccan invasion, and as the strategic site in which the Sahrawi have been building the nascent infrastructures of their nation state. Cartographically this is the view from a position of exile; geographically it is within Sahrawi heartlands. In this sense, I first saw and experienced the camps as a Sahrawi public body politic, as the ‘work place’ of their customary political adaptation to state formation. These are nomads building a nation. Nomads and nation are their resolve; refugeehood represents the irresolution of the external body and its international legal fragility. As refugee camps, the camps sit in the mirage of that international fault line, but as nomadic encampments they serve as a correction and reclamation.
The encampments are Polisario’s headquarters, from which they lead the fight for self-determination. This ‘public’ camp space is where they actively invite foreign observers, undertake their logistical transportation and provide hospitality for a very distinct purpose: the reacquisition of historic tribal territories. It is in this public-political space that the Sahrawi body politic is on display and is scrutinized.2

Some commentators voice rhetorical criticism of matters such as Polisario not issuing passports, implying that its population has little freedom to leave and by further implication that they live an involuntary life in the camps. But such analyses are crude, denying the range of human beings’ options, subscriptions and actions, as well as the realities they face. Firstly, SADR is unable to issue passports for its ‘temporally floating’ nation state until it is formally recognized under international law, which can only occur when the independence of Western Sahara has been achieved. Any such documents issued in the meantime would be unusable. Algeria supports Polisario to a certain degree, but the political or economic absorption of its population into domestic Algeria is not an option. Nor are neighbouring nation states particularly keen on absorbing the refugee population. Such displaced populations remain ‘warehoused’ in non-places for protracted periods – this is the involuntary nature of Sahrawi life in the camps. Secondly, the population does indeed have Polisario-SADR identity cards as part of Polisario’s de facto administrative control of this small area lent to them by Algeria and as part of the necessary registration of human bodies eligible for aid distribution. These identity cards can only symbolize the body – both physical body and paper body are liminally interim (non-person and non-place), unusable outside the camps and waiting for legitimization in the contiguous international space. Such unidentified bodies have little choice in such matters (Isidoros 2017b). Some are able to acquire Algerian identity cards, but this occurs between an apprehensive sphere of rare resourceful acquisition and Algerian restrictions on migration, again going beyond the humanitarian gaze while simultaneously criticizing it.

Thirdly, many Sahrawi engage in varying degrees of opportunistic movement between kin and non-kin links across the region and beyond, depending on personal circumstances. Being trapped in the camps is part of a Sahrawi reality – they are indeed stuck in what is a non-place, but by humanitarian forces that create and maintain them as refugees, not out...
of their own choice. But ‘not out of choice’ presents a unique dichotomy embedded in a simultaneous choice. The majority camp population also appears to choose to stay, to fight for self-determination and the dream of a return to the homeland. This is the voluntary nature of Sahrawi life in the camps – an act of dogged persistence in protest over their desired return to their homeland.

These premises are based on fieldwork that entered into the discrete (i.e. beyond the humanitarian gaze) breadth of movement across, in and out of the camps. There are simply too many kin and non-kin links and too much long-distance mobility (through trade and family) to argue that a large proportion of the camp population could not quietly disperse over a period of time if they really wanted to. Mauritania and the area under Moroccan occupation are the primary paths of movement, the latter being exceptionally difficult but discretely possible. Through this movement, Sahrawi are actively revitalizing and maintaining historic links fractured by the 1975–91 war.

As refugee camps, they are the sole premise for both human groups to be operational there, serving as the Sahrawi-public body politic and the humanitarian body-politic. Sahrawi men, women and children have their body politic roles which are called into operation in a number of ways. Men of fighting age are the front-line military corps, and even deep-desert shepherds are soldier-scouts. Women, the elderly and children stand symbolically behind this front line. The presence of foreigners entails action, to offer hospitality, to answer the same questions year after year about the conflict, to participate in films and photographs, interviews and surveys, and to encourage foreigners to continue visiting and lobbying. The Sahrawi corpus is engaged in a mutually cooperative, war-liminal life that is ready for and engaged daily in the fight and dreams for a return to their homeland and its independence. They do not live in the camps for any other reason than they are displaced persons engaged in a politically charged, physically embodied protest that is ‘making a stand’ over territorial sovereignty.

Polisario has been (and remains solely today) the chief political representative assuming a fighting position and representing the people as the rightful heirs of a decolonized and independent Western Sahara. They are the political representative of a regional diaspora of Sahrawi who (variously) subscribe to the idea of an independent Western Sahara. Of course there are the disgruntled Sahrawi like Beba,
a twenty-five-year-old male who worked on and off in a shop. I often stopped on my way through the shops to see if he was working, and if so we sat on the threshold to chat. Beba had spent seven years studying in Libya and back in the camps, unhappy and frustrated, he felt ‘trapped like a vagabond’, struggling to scrape a living together and saying that ‘we have no future here’. Our discussions ranged around his inability to get a passport to leave the camps, which in his eyes was due to ‘tribalism’ within Polisario. He emphatically repeated that he simply wanted to have a job, save money and get married. Someone like Beba, with his non-stock responses, is dangerous in this environment because foreigners would jump upon such interview content to essentialize the failings of the society. And yet Beba’s meaning reflected the same life problems and trapped feelings of other men and women, though this time trapped in the linguistic inaccuracies of Western concepts of ‘tribalism’, counterpoised in stock responses that give voice to the same feelings framed in the different vocabularies of international law. Two days after the heated protest outside the president’s formal residence in Rabuni, Beba told me that he had wanted to join in, but his brother had reacted cautiously, saying, ‘Wait, wait until we know who the protestors are; we don’t know what is behind their demands yet’.

What I am interested in here is the range and complexities of human subscriptions to multiple options and ideas, human behaviour in terms of life optimization and ideas about how some fail where others succeed. Beba’s complaints about ‘tribe’ are made when the state institution does not optimize his opportunities; in other entrepreneurial endeavours, he is successful in using the same non-state (customary) institution. The earlier mentioned circumspection is a protective act that has to cope with an external body that would jump on ‘tribalism’ as diverging from the expected behaviours of ‘civilized’ citizens or of protests against a sole governing representative (Isidoros 2012). Beba’s favourite phrase, ‘we are all vagabonds here’, illustrates how a single ‘dangerous’ word (‘vagabond’) is far more incommensurable than may be understood in interview data. This is why my methodology avoided interview-like interactions. The same word can be used in different ways and different settings; long-term listening can discern that word’s many varied uses, alternative translations and symbolic cues. What Beba was signalling was who was treating them ‘like tribes’ (‘vagabonds’) – he did not mean the Polisario.
At the same time, the public political space also constitutes the site of a Sahrawi private space. When the foreign visitors depart – or are momentarily lifted out, as I have suspended them out of the picture in the rest of this book – the foreign-public infrastructural spaces echo emptily until another group occupies them. The short-lived performance and the daily ‘norm’ of the two Sahrawi body politics are not vastly differentiated, but there is a conscious shift. The private body politic underpins the public body politic – the inner scaffolds the outer – but it is discreetly protected under the scrutiny of the foreign public. To clarify the visibility of men and women in both body political spaces, Sahrawi men and women have their visible war-political roles, as well as their ordinary everyday lives. I will not focus on the exclusivity of roles: there are women trained as soldiers, visible in political anniversary parades, and men and young males have their breadwinning roles to support their families.

The Sahrawi-private body politic is not just confined to the camps’ private political stage: it is cast across the region as part of their Hassaniya socio-geographical and linguistic web, emanating through the refugee camps’ ‘silent peripheries’. While my pre-doctoral MPhil research was interested in how the Sahrawi have utilized the contemporary resources of UNHCR refugee tents, the nation state and humanitarian aid, my doctoral fieldwork and data pointed me back to how they are using their historically rooted traditions. It is not my intention to focus naively on traditions: the Sahrawi are what they want to be, and that is a modern cultured society, using mod cons such as fridge-freezers and USB sticks, astutely engaged in international law and human rights conventions, and skilfully navigating the corridors of the United Nations and Washington as refugee-nomad-statesmen. They are perhaps more worldly-wise than the average American citizen due to the desert’s unrestricted access to world-wide satellite television stations, despite reception being powered by a basic car battery connected to a solar panel.

Points of ethnographic departure: Moving into protective densities

Throughout the ‘refugee’ camps are points of dissection and departure from the public infrastructural world of the external humanitarian body into the Sahrawi body-politic as entrances into Sahrawi encampments. As a
movement away from the foreigner's domain, which is restricted to and delimited within the camp boundaries, it is an action of lifting out the humanitarian centre to begin again from walking through an abstract topography. What emerges is not just the private space of the camp, but a recognition that these private spaces penetrate beyond the camps deep into the desert, a space into which foreigners rarely venture, or only for extremely short timescales. This marks the beginning of ethnographic immersion into daily life without the refugee regime, a shift from spatial diplomacy into peaceful temporality, a day-to-day life that few of these foreigners 'puncture'.

My host family is located in Smara refugee camp. The motorable approach to our home tents (kbayam, sg.khayma), along the wide open public infrastructure or reg (stony) road heading west from the central Protocol area, leads to the camp’s second-only shopping area. Between marca Lahbib (supermarket) and a little phone shop is an insignificant sandy area on to which oil and spare parts spill from the rear of a mechanic’s workshop and around which rubbish is blown by the wind and a few goats roam. It offers no reason to enter and no suggestion of anything beyond. But behind this mechanic’s shop, a small discrete reg track forms and curves out of view to continue deep into this south-easterly and densely packed residential area.

Alternatively, going by foot along the same wide-open reg road billowing tyre-churned dust, there is a characteristically thick sandy passageway between marca Lahbib and another mechanic’s workshop. There are innumerable passageways like this throughout the camp, unremarkable and not obvious, webbing out from the public infrastructural areas. The workshop’s fence is fashioned haphazardly from a few corrugated sheets, tree branches and wire. Lahbib’s eroding sand-and mud-rendered shop wall, revealing the bricks underneath, marks the other boundary, the side corner indicated by a tall but small solar-generated wind turbine which sometimes hums, running a few fridges. Behind marca Lahbib is the aforementioned mechanic’s workshop with three or four pale beige dogs that snarl at passers-by through a similarly makeshift wire fence.

The soft sand is thick and difficult to walk through, its fluid particles underfoot making a slow heavy tread. These Aeolian erg (sandy) drifts accumulate as undulating mounds in wind-sheltered areas such as narrow passageways or inside compounds and thresholds, and up against
saltation barriers such as alongside the edges of buildings, tents and the boulder-lined reg tracks. Most of the year the atmosphere contains aerosol dust from the desert, as well as from the localized phenomenon of sand particles being powdered by vehicle tyres from their exponential increase in use within the camps since private ownership began in the 1980s. Natural sandstorms occur seasonally throughout most of the year, October to January being the least likely months for them. After rare but insubstantial rainfall or during south-easterly winter winds, inhabitants remark on the fresh crispness of the air during its brief but noticeable timeframe. Weather is an important aspect to life here, shaping physical and cognitive human behaviour and inflecting the senses.

To know both this passageway or road respectively before and after Lahbib’s busy marca frontage is to transition between two camp spaces in which two human spheres intersect yet diverge in many ways – between the fixed static nomad-refugee-citizen and the temporary dynamic visitor, in the slow plodding movement of longstanding locals travelling on foot or in rudimentarily repaired old vehicles, and in the flashing through of ephemeral foreigners; they scrutinize each other, one from the windows of a 4x4 jeep rushing past, the other sitting or leaning in shop doorways.

Emerging out of this passageway between the mechanic and marca Lahbib is a small anomalous stretch of open reg area with a short row of cuba (metal water containers) and goat pens, having little use other than perhaps as an idle space separator. Ahead is a flat, dusty beige horizon of homogeneous sand-brick walls and the sides or tops of tents. Whichever direction these walls and tents face, they seem to have their backs turned, any likely ‘fronts’ being indistinguishable.

Walking onwards, more thickly undulating erg pathways become uncertainly discernible and begin to indicate an encircling configuration to the walls, around which one begins to catch sight of an intermittent imposing metal sheet or diminutive makeshift gate. Some walls are perforated by small square windows, usually low to the ground and black-eyed against the beige sand-brick wall, reflecting the sheer glare of external sunlight.

Occasionally the passageways and encircling walls are momentarily broken by a narrow reg track that bends out of view through them, or by a small open area with a few piles of small desert boulders or old tyres that might be markers, or scattered stacks of sand-mud bricks from a
long-eroded or about-to-be-built bayt. The encircling walls also momentarily give way to the back of dull-khaki-coloured tents whose ropes are pegged out wide into the sandy passageway. Boulders or sand bags – recognizable under the ruddy dust as trouser-leg or shirt-arm offcuts sewn into sausages – sit heavily jumbled against the tents’ bottom edges. Sometimes the rear of a tent is also enfolded by a wobbly wire fence simply pressed into the sand and easily lifted up.

The inner sanctum: moving into a private residential place

These undifferentiated encirclements of interweaving walls and roped tent pegs seclude and protect an ‘inner sanctum’, interwoven with ambiguous narrow passages between undisclosed individual khayam compounds, and collectively forming intensely private and densely packed residential areas.

Walking further on, the narrow sand-thick passages continue between manifold, densely packed, gradually recognizable contours of each individual khayma compound stretching more deeply away from the main public infrastructural areas. Without familiarity, it is not possible to gauge if particular compounds are related through kinship, as the densely packed narrow passages simply unfold in every direction, around and between each other. These ambiguous sandy corridors encircle neighbouring khayam compounds, creating a maze in which a stranger could lose his or her bearings. Although it becomes a familiarly intricate habitat to dwellers, there are also khayam belonging to unknown neighbours. In seeking someone out for the first time, one needs to catch a glimpse of a dweller to enquire if the khayma of X is known, or gingerly penetrate the silence to call out insistently from the narrow corridors to wait for a response from one of the inner sanctums.

Human movement between these narrow passages appears imperceptible, conveying the impression that few pass between them. However, they serve as the only areas of movement other than the reg tracks. The latter, although used, are the public/open spaces of the private. Walking down them, one enters fully into the sight of others. The narrow passages are also open but to a far lesser degree, and one is able to move through them discreetly with less visible exposure. Simultaneously, to move through these is to move close alongside the inner sanctums of other people.
Such movement is done quietly, to slip through and between. One rarely hears those who do walk between the compounds, and similarly one rarely hears those inside them. I understand from informal conversations with geologists and geographers that the sand-mud bricks and sand mounds have sound absorption qualities. I asked Fadah about this, and she joked that hers was probably the loudest family in the immediate area—the two babies often cry loudly in an argument; the adult sisters often yell across to each other or have shouting spats. Yet I rarely heard her family when I left or returned through our passages. On one occasion in our tent her mother, grandmother and aunt dropped their voices, one leaning back slightly to peer through the northerly tent flap and, in a lowered voice, verifying who the small group of passing women were. They had faintly heard and sensed unfamiliar movement and looked to see. This also occurs when unfamiliar car engines pass along the nearby reg track, though this is rare. These dense quarters are imperceptibly dissected by small narrow reg tracks (on the ground, that is—evident on satellite maps). These discrete tracks enable residents’ vehicles to get deep inside, close to their homes. Foreigners are rarely seen freely walking inside these areas, instead of being driven on alternative wide ‘public’ roads to get to infrastructural buildings that dissect the intimate residential areas, though infrequently a Polisario driver may take a short cut penetrating the private.

Administratively, certain wide roads and reg tracks delineate the camp administrative neighbourhoods. Foreigners become familiar with the concept of the three levels of neighbourhood (wilaya, daira and barrio/hay), using the terms during their trip to identify individuals and sites they wish to visit or interview, and this administrative cartography is repeated in articles, blogs and the like as part of the continual cycle of rhetorical description of the camps and the refugees. It is particularly associated with the often-commended organizational proficiency of the Sahrawi inhabitants in administering their camps themselves.

In the flow of ordinary daily life, I have only heard these administrative terms used with nominal and far less conscious awareness by foreigners. On aid distribution days, ration-identity cards briefly underscore which daira and barrio one is in, but there is little need to mention the terms or their geographical appellations (e.g., Ejderiya, Farsiya) because the regular pattern of going to the same aid distribution centre eliminates the need to raise the issue. Women, who collect the aid, gather inside and outside the centre, chatting and
waiting for their names to be called. Their card is checked, an administrative system will record the ration collection, and the women return home with their supplies. The question ‘which \textit{barrio}/\textit{daïra} are you in?’ is asked to determine the imprecise location of someone new one has met, but after this, locals will walk or drive through the area gradually determining the location of the tent by simply asking with names. Accurate directions are rarely given immediately, caution being needed with undetermined intruders. In the case of Polisario drivers and translator/guides, the terms are used with precision to determine the logistical positioning of non-Protocol-accommodated foreigners for their delivery and collection – there is no reason not to be able to pinpoint their whereabouts accurately.\footnote{4}

The visual dichotomy conveyed when examining the camp layout using aerial satellite maps is one of distinct public foreign Protocol areas located in wide-open spaces and connected by wide \textit{reg} thoroughfares contrasting strongly with the densely packed privately close residential spaces of tribes. On the ground, the physical transition of moving from the foreign-public spaces into the private Sahrawi spaces is palpable. This is certainly a powerful experience for foreigners asking to live with a Sahrawi family.

There is a protective essence overall to the characteristics of density and clustering, reminiscent of \textit{frig}, the historical coalescing of tents into large encampments. The wide-open public spaces in which Sahrawi receive these foreign solidarity visitors are a ‘work place’; the narrow and close private spaces are ‘home’ and ‘family’ (see Figure 3.3). Additionally, if these are ‘tribal spaces’, my fieldwork did not reveal any tendencies towards the homogeneous clustering of a single tribe in any one residential area. Conversations with womenfolk transmitting love stories and information about divorces and marriages indicate that some degree of heterogeneous intermarriage occurs. Therefore, another level of ‘tribal protectiveness’ appears, in the sense of the strategic unifying – \textit{coalescence} – of tribes when there is a \textit{need}, in the Sahrawi case, to respond to a group-wide external threat to heartland territories.

The edges of the camps are not clearly marked on a satellite map. A scattering of dots and a web of sand tracks indicate considerable movement occurring in and out of the camps, away from the wide public open spaces and the formal ‘administrative’ checkpoint entry/exit points, and out of sight of foreign scrutiny. The densely packed residential areas
seem to encircle the central foreign spaces, but also seem to have their backs oriented protectively to the camp peripheries. And yet, the density has a quality of ‘choice’ about it in its horizontal ‘sprawling’. This is especially the case when one thinks of other refugee camps where buildings grow ‘up’, spreading instead vertically and shutting out the sky, and where camp boundaries cannot expand, thus creating chronic overcrowding, such as Feldman’s (2017) experience of Burj al Barajneh, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut’s suburbs.

While foreigners can technically enter the tightly packed residential areas – a group living in a Protocol Centre could go for a stroll and end up in the heart of these tented zones – if someone from the Protocol Centre did not come to guide them back, they would most certainly be under the guarded observance of residents. Foreigners are not stopped, but there is an invisible marker and a subtle response. Nevertheless, due to the brief nature of foreign visitors’ trips, they rarely penetrate such residential areas often or for long periods. Likewise, those who spend their trip living with a host family will invariably join it in going to the shopping area, on neighbourhood strolls and even to see an aid collection

Figure 3.3 Approaching kin clusters, imperceptible female kin coalitions. Photo courtesy of author.
day. But there is a side to Sahrawi life that is private. Subtle controls minimize foreigners’ presence in the residential hearts, and it is most certainly impossible, triggering an immediate Polisario reaction, to wander beyond a camp’s boundaries into the open desert.

While concentrated density in the camps provides a private protective response, so too is it protective of its freedom to ‘dilute’ beyond the public gaze of foreigners and to disperse privately into the camp ‘peripheries’ as a defensive measure of interests far beyond the camps. Over time, the gradual and intimately decided spread of tents in available spaces rewrites and even overwrites the ‘administrative logic’ of kin location and cartography’s original intention to delineate a population within a confined place. The edges of the camps instead delineate entry into the peripheries beyond, which are the extension of the dense human occupation of the camps. To enter these peripheries is to enter millennia-old heartlands, the badiya.

Khayam clusters: Imperceptible relationships between tents

Looking beneath this overarching, wide protective density is another level of protectiveness: familial constellations. In light of the previous section’s discussion of the formal public infrastructural administrative structure, the relationships between tents do not always relate to or comply with these intended organizing rubrics, ignoring the need to define and delimit the population. New marriage tents are squeezed in beside relatives, spilling over into a neighbouring daïra, or if kin-space is too dense, new marriage tents may be set up near kin on another side of the camp, or increasingly in an entirely new neolocal site.

Kin clusters of compounds are indistinguishable from each other visually or by tent nomenclature – there is little to indicate relational connections between the individual compounds that form clusters. Each khayma compound is a stand-alone structure and a self-functioning unit, rarely built with physical joins such as connecting walls or shared entrances. Tents are usually identified with reference to a very elderly male head, so that one tent is khayma Mbairkat and the next tent is khayma Hassan. Yet due to marriage preferences, invisible relational links may connect these two individual khayam compounds together, creating an economically self-sufficient and politically defensive, but externally indistinguishable cluster. The kin cluster’s
relational links are integrated into web-like relational links that stretch far and wide.

Emerging through the passageway alongside marca Lahbib and crossing the open unused area, ahead is the first sand-brick wall forming the rear of Aghla’s khayma, its little square window openings unglazed with chicken-wire mesh. At night it is possible to glimpse movement inside, lit by a battery-charged lamp or a moving hand-held torch if the curtains or wooden shutters have not been closed. Walking around either side of Aghla’s khayma compound, it looks the same, with the metal entry gate only appearing in the southern wall. Inside is a small bawsh (the centre courtyard) with four rooms against the west, north and east walls. From the left side is a small toilet/shower area (doush) and kitchen (cuzina), and two bayut (rooms, sg. bayt), the first recently turned into twelve-year-old Najwa’s study-bedroom, but in which both her younger brothers or guests might sleep, and the second being the main bayt; the final room is the makhzan (store room). Aghla does not have a tent in her compound because she could not be bothered to sew one during her fifteen years of marriage, primarily because she has mostly oscillated between her mother Minatou’s and sister et-Khira’s tents.

Leaving Aghla’s entrance gate, a few steps away is the back of her elderly mother Minatou’s khayma compound in which her three adult sons live (two divorced and recently remarried). To the left is the rear north wall of a large bayt unusually divided into three rooms, given over to her son Abdel to use following his recent second marriage. Referred to by the womenfolk as ‘Ali’s bayt’, inside his mother’s compound it is an unusual set-up and an example of an incoming bride who spends most of the year with her family in Mauritania. One room is the functional bayt, royally decorated in plush red, green and gold polyester curtains and low cushion settees, with a central khazana (display cabinet) displaying a dusty DVD player, some crystal-imitation objects and plastic flowers that were part of the 2009 marriage dowry (sadaq) and ornamentation and the typical Persian-style carpet on the mud-hard floor. The other, smaller room is characteristically carpeted over the hardened sand-mud floor like most bayut with folded sleeping blankets in one corner; this is Abdel and et-Galiya’s bedroom. The third, very small room is their makhzan.

Alongside this bayt is the rear of Minatou’s khayma, made of the now solely used UNHCR canvas, supplied in pre-set rolls which female
relatives gather to sew into a new tent. The traditional camel- and goat-hair *khayam* are rarely made nowadays (they can take months or years) but are now commissioned and looked after by Polisario for special use at key events and cultural festivals. Between the *bayt* and tent, circling the latter’s side-peg, is a wobbly line of wide-holed wire mesh forming a subtly visible fence boundary with a makeshift wire and wood rear gate through which one enters Minatou’s *bawsh*. Her *khayma* entrance flap faces into the *bawsh*, and circling on the southerly west-to-east sand-brick walls are a larger *dousb*, beside which is a second makeshift wire gate opening on to the sides of two neighbours’ compounds, two *makhzan*, a large *bayt* and the *cuzina*. Minatou’s *khayma* is large in comparison to those of her two mature daughters. Her *dousb* has some floor and wall tiles fixed by one of her sons, and her two *makhzan* store her many household working objects and tools, as well as substantial amounts of stored items mainly belonging to her three sons. The large *bayt* is used mostly by her sons and other circulating males who have a variety of connections or relations to the family, although the former often sleep with her in the *khayma*.

Between Minatou’s *cuzina* and two *buyut* is a third improvised wire gate opening on to another sandy passageway and on to the rear of a third tent’s canvas roped pegs and sandbags, with a sand-brick wall and a tall, heavy, creaking, sheet-metal gate. This *khayma* compound belongs to Minatou’s other daughter, et-Khira, and her six children. Entering this *khayma*, it is also encircled by sand-brick walls against which are built three rooms – a split *makhzan* (one half containing mostly food aid ration sacks, the other being the usual place to keep the family’s clothes and belongings), an open, unsheltered *makhzan* along the corner of the continuing wall perimeter, a *bayt* with gold curtains from left-over fabric used to decorate Minatou’s marriage *bayt* for Abdel, a very small *dousb* and a *cuzina*. The *bayt* and *cuzina* have the same small square windows, the former looking on to the sand brick wall and windows of the next neighbour’s *bayt*, the latter allowing a glimpse through their wire mesh fence, *bawsh* and rear tent canvas.

**Fleeting movement and protracted disinterest**

Movement through the densely packed residential areas has a paradoxically fleeting quality accompanied by that of the protracted
disinterest in privacy. Many times during the day, the camps have a near-permanent sense of being deserted, with moving figures briefly glimpsed. It is the same at night, but darkness provides an understandable explanation. Although women do tend to spend much time within their compounds, residents are frequently on the move to do the necessary daily activities that take them outside their *khayam* compounds. Everyone seems to move imperceptibly, fleetingly. Boundaries between spaces shift in relation to both gendered and ungendered aspects of habitation, and, as Vom Bruck (1997) observes in her study of Yemeni houses, ambiguous continuities and discontinuities in the ordering of space will emerge in the next three ethnographic chapters on a Sahrawi *khayma*.

Other than political meetings and aid distribution days – in which large groups mostly of women can be seen gathered around the edges of the relevant building or at the moment of their dispersal – there are no public social places in the western sense where large groups gather such as shopping or eating districts that constitute a dynamic hive of human interaction. There is a regular flow of people through the *marca*, but even this has a fleeting quality. Small groups of two or three walk through the undulating sand passages between the shops, and the same number may sit inside or on the threshold of the shops socializing with the shopkeeper. But everyone’s faces are covered, and shopping enquiries or conversations are epigrammatic in the typical Hassaniya way. There is little calling or shouting out among adults.

In the vicinity of the shopping area are a handful of little restaurants, built as an open *bayt* with two or three open doors, a few tables covered in wipe-able plastic tablecloths and plastic chairs. Behind a high-bar worktop, cigarettes and juice cartons are on display for sale, and the food is either juicy spit-roasted chicken with limp fried chips, or sandwiches consisting of a baguette containing plastic cheese squares or La Vache Qui Rit, halal salami, mayonnaise and a little salad green.

These restaurants are not solely intended for locals, but also hope to capture foreign visitors. Nevertheless, they constitute the quality of a male space into which only exempt foreigners or Sahrawi children and men freely walk in. I have not seen women voluntarily gather in them, and I did not frequent them much (I primarily went in to buy juice as an excuse to observe them). On a few occasions I went to one with my two elder host sisters because one of our *khayma*-residing (non-kin) young
males worked there for a few weeks, and he gave us sandwiches. We did not sit at the tables, but stood chatting to him and a few other young males as he prepared the sandwiches. It was fine as a group of females to do this, and we had the two family babies with us, but we then left to return home with our wrapped sandwiches.

Despite the ‘third spaces’ and public spaces of men’s coffee shops throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East, here these restaurant cafés are not used in the same way.\(^6\) The Sahrawi have not yet adopted the Arabic coffee house (al-*maqha*), traditionally a male space. Sahrawi men preferentially have tea in tents, and these are women’s tents. Men do go in to buy food, and young males might sit at the tables, but not for long and not in large groups as a specifically social point of assembly. The place most people want to be is lying down propped up against cushions in a *bayt* or *khayma* with traditional tea being made.

Early dusk sometimes sees small groups of friends and kin sitting in the shade on the edges of *khayma* compounds or the *cuba*, or taking an evening stroll. Groups of girls gather, laughing and gossiping, watching others pass by. Young males may drive their cars slowly through the narrow *reg* roads. But the preference remains to socialize in each other’s *bayit/khayma*. Souado and et-Farrah visit each other, as does Lamina and her friend: these small groups of young females will put on make-up or beauty products, wear high-wedged sandals and play music. Adults primarily socialize in their *khayam* compounds, and this ranges from informal gatherings among intimate friends to conventional visits from distant relatives or acquaintances.

The Sahrawi greeting is a long, repetitive ritual, consisting of generalized impersonal enquiries as to the health of self and family and containing blessings. Unlike the fleeting sense of human movement, in that it can last a few minutes, it has another quality of disinterest to it: it is not conducted with any sense of ‘exuberance’ like western outward displays of pleasure at meeting a person, but is conveyed with a droning repetitive melody. Marriageable men and women should not touch (nor should young women touch senior male elders or strangers unless intimate relatives), but otherwise palms or wrists are gripped as if both hold the other person there longer and maintain a held space. Bodies may be set sideways but apart, perhaps looking down or away as if not wanting to be there and rarely staring into the eyes, seemingly disinterested by western norms.
The variations of speed, length and hand-holding of the Sahrawi traditional greeting depend on the circumstances in which it is used – it must be used, but can be malleably shortened but not interrupted (if it is, it is resumed). It is prescriptively longer for formal strangers and those of greater age or status as a way of communicating social respect and correct etiquette, but can be shortened by elders wishing to speed up a junior’s politeness, or among those who see each other very regularly.

Learning the greeting was confusing and took me a long time because it was a fluid process and no one could define for me any particular pattern to the undulating questions and answers; it simply flows in a mutually intuitive order. I do not think there is anything specific that ‘finishes’ the greeting, which seems to happen when it feels as if enough formality has been displayed the right period of time, or a sort of increase of disinterest or weariness brings it to a close when the more senior (or either party in the case of equals) breaks the cycle with an unprescribed question or change of topic that begins a conversation.
PART II

HAREM: THE TENT AND THE BREAST

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty 1991: 56)

[...] the word Bayt [bāyʿt] here means tent as a shelter and the protection it affords, and the word ‘Ait is used to mean the family which is protected by it. And in the same way as the occupants of a tent need not necessarily be of the same elementary family, so the Bayt as a tribal sub group can include members not of the lineage proper. The tribe, therefore, is built up and is divided into sections in the same way as the tents of the camp. The Bait, the single tent, is the model on which the framework of the tribe is constructed. (Peters, S. 1952: 245, unpublished B.Litt. thesis in the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
From this purposefully abstracted topography of the camps, three *khayam* compounds have emerged with the names of three women: grandmother Minatou and her two mature married daughters, et-Khira (my host mother) and Aghla. These three women epitomize my general fieldwork experience of how women occupy a kin-cluster as the public realm of the private inner sanctum. These three *khayam* are distinct separate households, containing three permanently resident women and their children from any marriage. Although this tight contiguous cluster of three households has no built structures connecting them, the narrow separating sand passageways that encircle the three compounds are fashioned into one connected familial cluster by embodying daily familial crossings. Without knowing a family’s members, neither the actual built structures nor the internal human relatedness between *khayam* clusters are outwardly recognizable, making the narrow passageways an optical illusion and anonymous maze. As the inter-relatedness of households becomes known, these passages become a web of meaning structured by the movement of relatedness.

In another discussion with Baali, he began to reminisce about his childhood before the war. We had been talking about the anomaly between some scholars as to the extent to which the Sahrawi had sedentarized under Spanish colonization. He was one of a number who drew my attention to problem of ‘counting male heads’ (which I raise in my article, 2017a), and in so doing expressed this memory of both his parents and maternal and paternal grandparents:
As most men should keep continuously their herds, the role of women became very strong. First of all no men did live on their own as in the cities today. They have to have their own family or live with the mother, sister, grandmother, aunt. Women became the centre of the family, and in the absence of men in different activities the role of women became even stronger because of the familial ties and the difficult conditions of life in the desert. For being very precise, the traditional Sahrawi society was organized around two axles: women and generosity.

Wilson (2012b) offers a fascinating analysis of the public/private distinction in the camps, observing it in terms of the household in relation to the ‘public’ social revolution, ‘private’ material interests and qabila membership. In this section, I enter the private/public within the Sahrawi household as Wilson does, though my ethnographic data offer an alternative reading which has more to do with feminist revisionist theory around domestic and biological reproduction, which I will then link to men and studies of masculinities.

**Women’s tents and women as property holders**

Minatou’s *khayma* is the primary and intersectional node of the three *khayam* compounds around and through which her five adult children circulate. As a grandmother, she is the focal matriarch to her mature daughters et-Khira and Aghla and sons Mokhtar, Abdel and Karim. She has several step-children from previous marriages, all of whom reside across Mauritania and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. She is aware of long-lost distant relatives in the south-east of Morocco proper from her parents’ tribal territory, but waves her hand over her shoulder to indicate that they are ‘long gone’, historically disconnected. Et-Khira says they intermittently receive a telephone call from some of these descendants, and Fadah mentions that her father has aunts there too, but she has never met any of them. Two of Minatou’s step-daughters and two cousins from Mauritania came to visit, and one of her step-sons from the occupied territory came for a month in search of work.

Minatou has been married three times, and et-Khira and Aghla are in their long-term first marriages. Et-Khira has been married to Baali for 29 years and has six children: el-Mehdi (m) aged two, Hassana (4 f),
Sidi and Lamina (15, twins m + f) and Souado and Fadah (f, twenty-four and twenty-six respectively). Aghla has been married to Brahim-Salem for fourteen years and has four children: Najwa (15 f), Salem (13 m), Hammadi (5 m) and a newborn son. Minatou, her two daughters and grandchildren occupy these tents for most hours of each day. The three women’s daily lives are intimately intertwined, and despite ordinary familial disagreements and different personalities, this vivacious, noisy and collaborative female cluster is filled with intimate affection and conspiratorial support for each other. While each household is engaged in its own chores and sometimes its own gatherings of guests, there is much interaction in assisting each other, sharing aid rations, cooking meals and other items and activities, and freely joining in the socializing with and mutual entertaining of each other’s guests. Those wishing to ‘duck out’ will move to the other’s compound. In sum, the women and children create tight-knit and unrestricted cross-flows within the cluster.

The womenfolk leave the *khayam* to run camp-local chores, visit kin in neighbouring camps or socialize with local friends, attend social events by invitation such as weddings and baby-naming celebrations, and occasionally get a *basaga* (taxi) or lift from male kin for a shopping day to Tindouf market. Once a year, et-Khira might make the journey by car through the desert to Mauritania to visit relatives because Minatou is too old for such journeys. Aghla tends not to receive guests in her own *khayma* as much as et-Khira does; she cooks infrequently and consistently prefers to go to Minatou and et-Khira for her socializing and eating. Very often, et-Khira’s daughters will carry across food for Aghla’s husband when he returns. Uncles Karim and Abdel, however, visit these Mauritanian relatives at least once a year and act as purveyors of news and shared goods between distance-separated womenfolk. In the summer of 2013, Minatou, et-Khira and her second eldest daughter Souado made a major and important trip to Mauritania. Minatou wanted to see an equally elderly sister she had not seen since childhood before the sister passed away. Souado, a very sociable young woman, was not only interested in an exciting trip to see both her unknown homeland and relatives, she has long been preoccupied with looking for her ideal husband. While this journey will be assisted by male kin and non-kin along the way (ensuring the safe passage of women), and it is usually men who appear to be the most circulatory through the desert, this is an
example of the tenacious agility of women when they want to circulate in their own right.

In relation to their own husbands and children, both Aghla and et-Khira are matriarchs in their own right, each of their *khayam* being smaller satellites in which they exercise their own zones of family influence. These two satellites, and any new ones made in preferential matrifocal marriages, form ever-increasing circles that radiate out from the existing primary constellation made by the three women. The familial constellation undergoes transformation as each female elder passes away and the next daughter becomes the foremost matriarch. Although each married couple make their own familial decisions, and husbands possess ‘patriarchal’ influence, it is between these three matriarchs that most matters on life, family and children are consulted and acted upon. Such discussions are nevertheless dependent upon personalities. In this host family, these three women are considerably dominant and take charge of major life decisions. Aghla and et-Khira, being in long-term marriages, talk about their husbands as ‘good’ ones. In Aghla’s case, her husband is considered by all the family to be long-suffering.

Together, this cluster of three women’s tents forms a *zone of female influence* and power through which all members must negotiate their preferences and actions between each other. However, it is to Minatou’s primary *khayma* that the two daughters will turn and with whom they are exclusively connected. The father of these children of Minatou, Mbairkat, died in 2011. For many years previously and during ill-health he lived mostly with his younger sisters in Mauritania, returning to Minatou’s *khayma* for two weeks before his death. During this visit, as it was the ‘last time to see him’ for the grandchildren and many friends and acquaintances from the camps, everyone would sit regularly in a formally respectful semi-circle around his weakened body. When Mbairkat had left Minatou’s *khayma* years previously, and in the years I visited the family after his death, she embodied a sustained representation of his absence and administered the missing patriarchal authority, in the sense that her tent is identified with her as it always had been, though it can also still be referred to as *khayma* Mbairkat as a deeply respectful memory of his time there. This reference acts as his locator, a circumstance I expand on later.

An average day in the women’s daily lives in this kin cluster can straightforwardly be described as swiftly completing household chores
in the morning so as to spend the rest of day relaxing, and as passing quietly and calmly through the simultaneous commotion of thriving bustle and noise with so many children around. I use this dual meaning because, when the youngest children are not present at various times of the day, the silence appears immense and is often commented on wistfully by an adult. The chaos and racket of the childrens’ return signals that life and daily routine are back to their fullness.

Breakfast is simple: et-Khira usually rises first at seven a.m. and heats the tea coals in a metal dish on the kitchen’s gas hob, transferring them to the brazier to be brought into the tent. Her children and I rise around this time, her sounds signalling the time to us. Either on the floor or on a low plastic table, she brings stale bread from the previous evening with tinned jam or La Vache Qui Rit cheese, a small plate of butter and oil, sometimes with one or two poached eggs for the youngest children. Once in a while she fries et-churu pastries, a sugarless doughnut, and in winter she makes a warming sweet insbe (barley porridge drink). Tea is made synchronously, and we all gather around the tea fire for this short breakfast before the children leave to go their respective schools. In 2012, el-Mehdi began attending nursery school, leaving the tent compounds entirely childless until lunchtime.

Household chores occur hurriedly after the early breakfast, and they are often either partly done or skipped entirely for a day or two. These chores consist of using a hand-held straw brush to sweep the sandy bawsh to tidy it up, and sweeping the tent and bayt to remove sand, dropped food, sweet and crisp wrappers, juice cartons, yoghurt pots, toys and the like. Once a week on Fridays and never skipped clothes are washed, and the kitchen and the two makhzan (containing the food aid and clothes) are methodically tidied up.

Both Minatou’s and et-Khira’s compounds experience the most familial traffic through them, but Minatou’s receives more elderly adult socializing and is kept in smart order each day. She potters around her compound daily, doing her own lighter chores and everyone’s favourite ‘mothers cooking’. In particular, she hand-grinds the barley down to a course powder for her couscous recipe. Any heavy work such as filling and carrying the plastic water jerry cans (for the shower and toilet) is done by her grow-up sons intuitively when they are present because they like to help her. In these moments, her compound is similarly filled with the chatter of children — they are just adult children! Otherwise the
permanently present daughters and grandchildren will do similarly. When they are present, young males, such as the teenage sons, young adult milk-sons and unrestricted males do not presume to assist more in the sense that this is women’s property (not ‘women as property’, cf. Hirschon 1984), but they will helpfully do so *when* asked.

Et-Khira’s compound is the most dynamic and untidy, containing six children with theirs and her regular stream of visiting friends, which creates a daily mess. When the basic sweeping is not done, the breakfast items and tea tray are left abandoned after breakfast in the kitchen for someone to wash up the next day, and the numbers of flies and ants increase, attracted by the crumbs and spilt sugary juices. Et-Khira occasionally attempts to reinstate order but has an easy-going character. While she occasionally sweeps and tidies up across the compound, her two eldest daughters are of an age to take on these chores. Due to personalities, Souado will voluntarily do any cleaning only infrequently, which sometimes causes quarrels with Fadah, who is very homely and does most of the chores on most days.

In Aghla’s compound, Najwa at the age of fifteen has begun to participate in running the household and babysitting between school hours, but Aghla usually comes straight to Minatou’s or et-Khira’s tent for breakfast and will oscillate throughout the day between the two, so she and her children spend less time in their own compound.

Most mornings Fadah attends English-language classes at Salaam English School, as well as a job for an hour or two as a secretary for one of the local Polisario administrators when she is needed. The school is a small and closely monitored American evangelical-run school called ‘Christ the Rock’, into which flow termly cycles of evangelicals displaying a pronounced religiosity both physically and orally. Polisario provides secretarial jobs to females as part of a history of past development projects for training women. Polisario has to show that it is providing jobs for these girls in refugee camp environments where there are few real secretarial tasks needing to be undertaken. None the less during term time Fadah’s morning chores are rushed for these reasons. I began to take over these chores during her school terms, otherwise we would do them together, as we had become close friends. This enabled Fadah to focus on her school and job, returning to join everyone gathering at lunchtime to begin the rest of the day’s rhythm of relaxed socializing. Et-Khira sometimes left the baby with me, although she still
only joined Minatou and Aghla and rarely used the time to do anything different. This all lessened Fadah’s pressure on Souado but enabled Souado to sit alongside me to chat, gossip and play music on her mobile phone. By taking on Fadah’s morning chores, I found a useful role enabling me to be more of a daughter-sister and less of an incessant guest, but it also gave me another domain for my participant observation and conversations in the interaction with Souado. This kitchen time created a new group activity attractive to the unrestricted young males in their boredom over the women’s morning routine. It was also through these chores that I earned the right to enter the food makbzan for ingredients, although to prove my respect for it I rarely used this right and instead often asked the children to go in there for me. More specifically, I did not want to be seen as scrutinizing private matters about aid rations, and for a similar reason I rarely entered the other half of the makbzan containing the family’s personal belongings.

As with breakfast, most other meals are prepared hastily and disinterestedly. Lunch and dinner occur long after their due time. Lunch is usually prepared just after breakfast, dinner at around six or seven p.m. Both usually comprise a disinterested boiling on low heat of rice, lentils, smiden (tapioca/sago) or pasta with a few vegetables finely chopped into a near mush. Fresh fruit and vegetables are available through both Algerian food aid and commercial activities, but these rot very quickly in the desert temperatures. Such meals are boiled for two to three hours, then left warm in a large lidded saucepan until whatever time members of the group feel it is time to eat. Alternative options are dishes such as omelettes or boiled chicken with chips, or red tins of pilchards (part of aid rations) rolled in flour and shallow-fried. Hunger is routinely dissipated by the customary sweet tea-making (and is often the focus of medical NGO studies). Meals that require care in preparation and have better nutritional value are those related to the customary diet for which none of the necessary ingredients form part of the food aid. These are made once or twice a week for the evening meal and consist of hand-ground barley to make couscous, accompanied by boiled camel or goat meat and offal and traditional round bread. Camp bakeries produce the Algerian French baguette in vast quantities, which is eaten with most mundane meals. It is made from US Aid flour, also the subject of medical NGO studies of increasing coeliac disease. The meat is usually tough and leathery, despite being boiled for long periods, the result (because of
war and security restrictions) of it not being possible to pasture the herds freely in the traditional sites. The only ‘tender’ meats are some of the offal, or when the best cuts of meat are occasionally skewered over the tea coals as a special treat. My host father especially does this for the breakfast meal of ‘Id al-’Adha, for instance.

The customary sweet et-tay (caramelized tea, Figure 6.2) is made innumerable times a day, and should be assumed as reoccurring as an unspoken rhythm throughout this ethnography. Its length of preparation to make three fresh servings (three demitasse glasses per person) can take up to an hour or longer if the company and conversation are good. With habitual Sahrawi reliance upon it as a source of energy, there may only be a maximum of one or two hours before a new tea-making session. It is perhaps this cultural tradition that best describes an average day of both lethargic and leisurely relaxation at home, and it is how my host womenfolk (and non-working menfolk) spend most of their day lying on the khayma or bayt carpets, necks propped up against cushions. It forms the same rhythm at Sahrawi places of work, including in the corner of an interior floor of shops and government administrative buildings.

At around lunchtime the womenfolk and unrestricted young males start to gather in et-Khira’s khayma again, usually to watch television. Each morning its cables are twisted around a car battery, two of which are connected to the two solar panels in the haush to recharge from the early morning desert sun. For the rest of the day and evening we watch television interspersed with the easy-going hospitality of informal family friends dropping in to chat and make tea, doze and watch the musalsalat (Middle Eastern soap operas). Some might move to Minatou’s khayma to play cards, or to our bayt to do halawa (hair-removing ‘sugaring’) or dress up for fun. Lamina might hide out in the makhzan with her friend talking teenage matters, and et-Farah may come by to visit Souado, resulting in a beauty experiment or bringing out the large make-up box. Souado often discreetly disappears for a whole day, visiting her wide social circle, her mother never scolding her or worrying about her. Fadah is very much a home girl and more reserved, with fewer friends than Souado, her social world being primarily the family, and secondarily the girls at school and a few other females around the camp.

Minor chores might be conducted during the rest of the day, such as sewing, grinding cloves for body oil and sifting barley. Food shopping is
done randomly in small quantities, usually a child being sent to the shops to bring back an item or two. Aid rations, which are collected on regular distribution days, are stored in the makhzan and more regularly utilized than shopped items which comprise other items such as baguettes, yoghurt pots and sweets for daily consumption, bottled perfume for the dark indigo nile fabric, new lemlabef and dara’a, wedding gifts, and household items such as torches, brooms and mobile-phone SIM-card top-ups. Ordinary clothes worn by children, men and as under-garments for women (such as T-shirts, trousers, jackets and the like) are mostly obtained from the humanitarian distributions and brought home in plastic bags. Et-Khira goes to the nearby aid distribution centre to gather with other women who are assembling to collect the rations.

Aid is distributed in different weekly or fortnightly cycles, some on set dates, others being communicated by the local loudspeaker calling out family names to indicate that day’s group. Et-Khira collects for both Minatou and Aghla, the former being too elderly to make the short walk and carry, drag or roll the various items. Depending on the size of the allocation, sometimes et-Khira will ask her daughters and I to help bring the items back. The collection date for the flour and sugar means we take an old wheelbarrow with us, as do other women unless they have arranged a male relative to help with a car and share this with friends and relatives. On the day that gas bottles are allocated, the sound of the metal clanging against stones in the road can be heard as they are tiresomely rolled home using a foot to push them forward. Those who live a further distance away have to arrange a lift, and so women often gather for a time after the distribution while they wait. Others like et-Khira, who live nearby, will stay around longer to chat to those who are friends. Occasionally, a foreigner (or group) is brought to see and photograph this aid distribution spectacle.

Minatou’s almost daily evening card games involve her neighbouring brother and long-time male and female friends comprising two renowned poets and an imam; their short sharp jocularity and shouts indicate competitively intense games. Once or twice a month et-Khira has a group of five male peer friends whom she calls the ‘jokers’ (aged 26 to 42, two married, three unmarried), who arrive together, and the six of them make tea, telling jokes and juna stories late into the evening. Throughout each day our younger unrestricted non-kin males continue
to hang out inside the kin cluster if they are unemployed or working locally at odd jobs, drifting between khayam spaces following the female production of tea-making, meals and company. The otherwise serene sounds of this female kin cluster are punctuated by the near-constant noise of the children energetically running around in shrill play or piercing crying, occasional bursts of quarrelling between Souado, Fadah and Lamina, and the spontaneous exchanges of booming joviality between everyone in a loving and intensely devoted family navigating between each other’s various foibles and temperaments.

Life within this kin cluster of three families, at once fiercely independent of each other, but also united in group survival and safeguarding, is highly communal and horizontal. It symbolizes communality and crossing, particularly in the way women flow between khayam clusters. Sahrawi convention is to lie on the khayma carpet on the back or side, heads propped up by cushions. Men and women might sit upright cross-legged or with their feet stretched forward, but not for very long. Thus, for most of the day life is seen from this eye level, with children usually playing or walking towards adults at a higher eye level. Few personal belongings are visible inside these living spaces, yet they are greatly communal within the family. Et-Khira and Minatou tuck items like scissors, tweezers, needle and thread under the edges of the carpet skirting around the tent. Anything can be borrowed, so there is a microcosmic line between private ownership of an item and its communal function and transience. Fadah has had three mobile phones in the time I have known her, these being lent to a cousin or milk-brother who intermittently switch their displays between Algerian and Mauritanian dialling codes, indicating the range of movement of one or more users. An old phone number I have for Uncle Karim now connects to a Mauritanian cousin, yet Karim has been working in Spain for nearly three years. There is never much guarantee that the person you are trying to reach will be anywhere near their original phone. Since my fulltime doctoral fieldwork ended, Fadah has guarded her phone, knowing that now it is the only way I can reach her and the family by phone from the UK.

Newly purchased items from jewellery to torches are treasured briefly, followed by little regard for protecting them from breakage, making another level of disinterest and short-lived sentimental value about the possession of objects. At night, when a car battery charging a light bulb
hung from the tent pole runs out, it might be found that the regularly purchased torches are either broken, missing or in one of the other khayam. While the girls do have their preferred melhfa, these fabrics are often exchanged between them, and in any case are frequently replaced with new purchases, the very old ones forming a pile in the makhzan for future use as functional rags or to decorate the interior of a tent. Shoes are left outside the thresholds of any tent or bayt upon entry, and different pairs of feet may use them.

This life first appeared to me erratic and chaotic, but when I became fixed in the cycle of chores, socializing and musalsalat, I experienced an order of freedom to it. These womenfolk enjoy a good life, pursuing various socializing interests, hurrying or skipping boring chores so as to have the rest of the day and night completely free. Their interest in and long hours of watching musalsalat creates a highly social domain, but also a female domain of moral regulation and transmission that might otherwise be misunderstood as being subsumed beneath male ‘patriarchal’ regulation.

Sometimes the women follow two favourite musalsalat between interludes because the programme timing clashes and the discussions around the soaps evince either approval or disapproval measured against the female Sahrawi value system. The patriarchal depictions in the range of Arab world musalsalat (and of Bollywood productions) were recognized by the women, and their response reminded me of Greek and Cypriot soaps and comedy sketches since the 1950s (early Greek audiences also favoured Egyptian soaps) that still depict in either serious or comical fashion the obstinately bumbling father or parsimonious husband in a household of stubbornly dominant womenfolk, or the historical period dramas of princely leaders raiding an enemy or endorsing a heroine. Although there was little interest in equally available Hollywood blockbusters, US syndicated programmes such as The Moment of Truth and Biggest Loser also elicited special curiosity, the former bringing disbelieving laughter at the shocking behaviour of scandalous sexual affairs and lies, the latter a range of perplexed opinions of which kinds of fatness are good or bad. Fatness is an admired female characteristic conveying reproductive health, beauty and successful male bread-winning, but the scenes in this TV programme prompted judgements on negative types of fatness in relation to, for example, bad diets, greed or selfishness.
When I asked Fadah if she was not embarrassed to translate the scandalous series to her mother, she laughed: ‘There is nothing to be shy of!’ When I asked if she understood what one participant in *The Moment of Truth* was admitting: ‘Yes, he slept with his girlfriend’s friend, then the friend’s mother. This is very funny to us, especially to see they each find out about each other. Why, are *you* embarrassed?!’ I replied no, but that I did not like such programmes because these were actions that I found dishonest or immoral. Fadah switched from my English conversation (I was trying to be discreet) into Hassaniya to tell et-Khira, who assured me, ‘Don’t worry, you are not like them, you must eat more. We only find it funny to see them, how they do not understand why they get into these troubles!’ The reference to my need to eat was because I am physically slim; et-Khira has always been concerned that she needed to send me back to the UK successfully a little fatter.

I tried again later to ask Fadah about the explicit descriptions in the programme, and she explained that there were no boundaries with her mother, that we could discuss anything with her. Et-Khira certainly enjoyed the programme, her infectious laughter drawing the womenfolk and female friends together, and for short whiles Minatou when she dropped by, ‘tsk-ed’ and wrinkled her nose in wisdom. Such programmes were rarely watched in front of senior adult men, and younger unrestricted males (rarely able to access the television given female control of the remote control) joined in the laughter but often asked detailed questions about how such and such could have done something without the other person knowing. In 2009, Lebanese Pop Idol was extremely popular and watched as much by these young men, but it was the womenfolk who led the judgemental criticisms or approvals of looks, skill and dress. Younger menfolk fell silent in the vocal outspokenness of female censure.

The cross-flows of kin movement between *khayam*, separated by the narrow sandy passageway, are frequent. However, being outside the *khayam* sand-brick walls, these sand passageways technically constitute a public space immediately adjacent to the reg track a few feet away, as well as to neighbouring non-kin clusters. Passers-by can see straight into et-Khira’s and Minatou’s gates and catch sight of familial crossings. Yet by virtue of these daily crossings, the passageway becomes a private place of connection, and passers-by rarely look for very long, as our quick glances are enough for us to fleetingly recognize the movements of passers-by.
Infrequently, precocious young adult male(s) might ‘stare’ for seconds longer, but body language, the el-them and the mellfa serve to make the unacceptable clear, as well as to minimize what the starer might otherwise make discernible.

Similarly, the passageway between Minatou and Aghla feels incorporeally more exposed as it is wider, but also because it is closer to the edge of the foreign-public infrastructure, i.e. immediately behind the backs of mechanics’ workshops and general shops, where strangers and foreigners move through. Thus movement through Aghla’s open crossing is more restrained, and she and her children will cross more often to Minatou’s and et-Khira’s khayam than we cross to hers. Moreover, Aghla’s habitual presence in her sister’s and mother’s homes is due to her personality, and if this had been different I think some effort might have been made to make her open crossing nearer and more closed. Consequently, it is from Minatou’s khayma that the sense of density in the neighbourhood truly begins.

Where people choose to sleep at night also illuminates the freeness of regularized crossings through the cluster and the bonded sense of communality, but it is also complexly negotiated between personalities and preferences depending on which adult males are present in which household. Souado and Lamina appear to be the most mobile and have a fondness for sleeping with their grandmother most nights. As the most house-proud, motherly sister, Fadah tends instead to sleep with et-Khira and the youngest children. Although Minatou and et-Khira always sleep in their own khayam unless a tent has been given over to special guests or if someone is ill, et-Khira’s daughters tend to move around depending on who else is present. For instance, if their uncles spend nights with Minatou, Souado and Lamina may share the tent with them and their grandmother, but they may also join us if they are irritated by an uncle’s habit of having the radio on all night. Expressing my surprise that a young male, passing Fadah and I on a walk to a friend’s home, had lifted little el-Mehdi to swing him in affectionate swoops and squeezing hugs, Fadah explained that children are seen as important and special.

All children are pure and innocent, they are Allah’s angels \( \text{fitrah} \) \[ \ldots \] he’s not a relative, just someone we know, but he was happy to see el-Mehdi for the first time. Everybody loves the children, did you see how el-Mehdi was easily replying to him!
Children are much loved, receive a lot of affectionate attention and may enter any space at any time. Most especially *et-turk'u* (like ‘mafia’: a joking term for groups of young boys, but can include girls) are free to roam, playing together in these back roads, between *khayam*, around the *cuba* and goat pens, and the dusty football pitches interspersed through the local *hay* (administrative district, pl. *hayat*). Occasionally the local *da’ira* administrators or police will drive through a *hay* announcing a ‘lost’ child from al oud loudspeaker, later confirming it has been found. Et-Khira always finds this amusing and will affectionately squeeze or kiss el-Mehdi for not yet experiencing this comical indignity. Nevertheless, despite the extensive freedom children have, they are at once closely protected and supervised, and babies are not let out of sight unless in trusted adult company.

The sewing of a new *khayma* best illustrates female autonomy in its customary sense. I also present this women’s domestic autonomy, which leads to Hirschon’s (1984) insightful ethnographic theory on women as/ and property, and then on to women’s sovereignty. My host womenfolk rarely asked males to help with major tasks around the *khayam* compound unless it was absolutely necessary. In October 2010, et-Khira decided it was time to sew a new tent since the old canvas had begun to decay. She had applied for the UNHCR canvas quota, and when the heavy rolls arrived we spent slightly over one month of hard work constructing the new tent, with only one man being asked for assistance for twenty minutes at the very end. We first unrolled the thick, heavy sections of canvas out in the *hawsh* to soften under the heat of the sun while beginning to unpick the internal patterned fabric lining of the old tent to rescue old threads and thin ropes from its internal framework, leaving the main canvas sections and two central poles in position.

For weeks, we cut and sewed the new canvas, developing painful blisters across palms and fingers trying to get the needles through the unyielding material. Souado and Lamina were unexpectedly diligent, and when I joked about this, et-Khira said it was important that they experience this as their heritage, but also because tents usually need to be renewed every ten years. Each morning we would sit on top of unrolled sections stretched across the sandy *hawsh* to sew through the thick layers of canvas and interlining. Minatou helped a little but mostly ensured a continuous flow of tea-making, food and guiding instructions. In the final week, the canvas skeleton was ready to be dragged, hoisted and
stretched over the two remaining central poles, fixed by taut ropes pegged into the reg ground to create the right tension and stability. We used large boulders and full body weight to slam the metal pegs into the hard reg rock below the sand, and painful physical positions to hold up heavy sections of canvas on one side while the other side was hauled and pulled up.

When I asked why we could not wait for the men to return, or ask male strangers passing in the adjacent reg track to help us, the women rejected this with a repeated ‘tsk’ sound or salacious jokes. At the very end, we simply came to a standstill, unable to lift and haul the two hefty tent poles carrying the main canvas weight back into their deep reg holes. I suggested asking milk-brother Khadir, and connected to a long-standing family joke, Fadah telephoned him saying they had lowered my camel dowry price against the women’s background sounds of playful ululations and shouts. He came in good humour early that evening, helped us to hoist the heavy canvas and central poles and stayed for the evening meal before returning to the other camp. Over the following weeks, the women finished the tent with a gentler sewing schedule, using softer decorative fabrics to make the brightly coloured interior lining and new matching floor cushions.

Seeing menfolk through women’s eyes offers the opportunity to observe how matrifocality and female centrality are some of the central customary tenets of Sahrawi principles of social organization. The fundamental marriage practice of residential matrifocality has a deeper underlying meaning relating to male political and economic investment (despite their being the primary breadwinners) in a female unit. But I wish to make a subtle distinction from the approach of seeing men through women’s eyes regarding some longstanding debates about matrifocality and matrilineal-ality – for instance, James’s querying of the ‘matrifocus on [African] women’ (1993: 123–45). While Sahrawi women have a strong matrifocal preference, the interesting aspect is that men are matrifocused towards their womenfolk. As will unfold, women’s tents are – to use global financial vocabulary and not just a pun – investment vehicles. A bride’s preference is to set up her new marriage compound next to her mother’s, creating generational sequences of female clusters.

For most women, marriage is an opportunity to establish their own autonomous khayam compound. This usually occurs gradually in stages due to limited financial resources, but it is uncommon for a new bride to
consummate her marriage in a *khayma* occupied by others. Depending on the bride’s preference, either a new tent will be sewn by her womenfolk (in some cases including the groom’s womenfolk, depending upon personalities and proximity) or a skeleton *bayt* compound is built, to be completed during the marriage. The few who are able to find the money will build a more advanced *khayma-bayt* structure.

Variations occur depending upon personal circumstances: when a mother or grandmother is absent or deceased, a favourite close female relative is the next option. In the case of Maryam, a new bride in October 2010 and friend of Fadah, after her wedding ceremony she and her new husband moved into her mother’s *bayt*. She and her sister had been living there when their mother had returned to live in the *badiya* four years previously. These two adult unmarried sisters occupied their absent mother’s compound because it was clustered to and therefore daily overlapped with an aunt’s compound (their mother’s sister’s) occupied by her own large family of young children. In effect, the empty compound remained in the ownership and use of the women. Upon Maryam’s marriage she was given her mother’s compound to occupy with her new husband. Her sister simply started sleeping in their aunt’s compound, but both girls and their aunt continued spending most of the day crossing both households. Maryam’s *bayt* compound did not have a tent set up as yet, but the canvas had been applied for through the UNHCR process and delivered and stored, wrapped up in a large bundle against a walled corner of the *bayt* in her aunt’s compound for future use. If Maryam’s mother were to return, either she would live (being long widowed) with the aunt (as another established household), or the tent would be set up as a *khayma* just outside the bride’s *bayt* for her mother’s use. The objective is to give a young married couple time to consummate their marriage and for the bride to fall pregnant and thus be given the chance to establish her own new satellite unit. Nevertheless, proximity to the constellation of natal womenfolk and siblings ensures that the young bride is constantly connected to her kin base.

There are, however, times when mature families have begun to uproot themselves from the dense centres of these residential areas and have moved on to the camp’s outskirts in their desire to feel freer and closer to the open desert, reflecting a growing feeling among some that the camp centres are becoming too tightly urbanized. Minatou regularly tsk–ed at the feeling of being too hemmed in and expressed sentiments of moving
to be closer to the ‘open’ desert. In cases of such a move, married daughter’s compounds may remain in their original locations, and in time a new compound will restart its clustering as daughters are born, grow up and marry matrilocularly.

Linking back to the previous discussion about the spread of *khayam* compounds over administrative districts, as time passes and the population grows and begins to spread out a new *daïra* is created, as in the case of Šmāra camp. ‘Mhayrez was created eight years ago. This new *daïra* is where Maryam’s female tent cluster is located and is indicative of a new habit of creating wider spaces between kin clusters for future matrilocal use, but also to re-establish a delicate distance from others. This reveals an underlying longing among some Sahrawi reflecting their deep cultural attachment to the open desert rather than the increasing occurrence of camp-centre urban density (see Figure 1.1).

There are exceptions to the matrifocal rule which arise out of personal circumstances among families. Where a groom’s family has few females or there is pressure on female numbers due to illness or age, marriage negotiations may entail the groom and his family seeking a bride to reside with them. I did not observe any such families among those I met, but the possibility was mentioned in a discussion with host sisters about their marriage ideals. Both Souado and Fadah were clear that they wanted to stay close to their mother first, or loved female relatives if at a distance, and found it difficult to conceive of falling in love enough to want to move away.

However, within my host family a different exception has arisen which keeps the matrifocal rule but hints at how matrilocality worked historically before the Sahrawi became refugees in close proximity within the camps. In 2009 Minatou’s eldest son Abdel married after a previous divorce. His preference was for et-Galiya, an unrelated female whose family was known through relatives in Zouerate, Mauritania. Given the distance between the camps and Zouerate and the fact that Abdel had been spending several months a year in Spain for work, he did not want to ‘circulate’ that far, but neither did et-Galiya want to leave her family as an incoming bride. The marriage negotiations agreed that both groom and bride would stay where they were, but meet in either’s location each time they wanted to make their next baby, and that et-Galiya would visit to show her pregnancy and new-born child.
In 2009, the main wedding ceremony took place in Zouerate with et-Galiya's family, and Abdel's family sent the dowry there. Karim and et-Khira accompanied Abdel for his marriage, and their Mauritanian relatives joined them in attending the wedding. Abdel stayed approximately a month, and et-Galiya fell pregnant very quickly. Abdel returned home, and a month later et-Galiya came to live with us for three months in order to show her pregnancy to the groom's family (as well as eagerness on the part of my womenfolk to bring her 'under the same tent'). Et-Galiya fitted in well with her in-laws' family, becoming firm friends with Fatimetu and Souado and playing or babysitting with the younger children. She was considered to be from a good family with good manners. During this early stage of her pregnancy, Aghla, et-Khira and Minatou looked after her as they would each other – it was in everyone's interest that a new baby was produced, especially as Abdel's first born.

Prior to the Mauritanian wedding ceremony, part of et-Galiya's dowry was the three-roomed bayt built inside Minatou's khayma compound. This was magnificently decorated in order to welcome et-Galiya's family members, who had visited the camps to conduct the marriage negotiations. From this bayt they could determine that et-Galiya would be well provided for during her future marital visits: she would have her own sub-satellite compound, which was safely and respectfully located in a traditional, fully functioning female cluster. Likewise, for Abdel it was a matter of great pride to be able to offer this set-up, make a good marriage and continue his own lifestyle. When et-Galiya stayed with us she either slept in the khayma with Minatou or in her bayt when Abdel stayed at night. Although she spent most of her days with us across our three compounds and had freedom to cross our spaces, one day Fadah and I in chatting came up with the idea of making a formal visit to et-Galiya in her special bayt. She liked the idea, and a week later enthusiastically borrowed Minatou's tea utensils; the three of us shared an afternoon together chatting in the decorated sitting room while she made tea. During this time, I shadowed Fadah's semi-formal etiquette, thus enabling et-Galiya to engage in a new bride's pride in entertaining in her own right and to discuss her wedding gifts and pregnancy, with full adult-female status for the first time in her life.

This same hospitality display of the pride of a new bride was exhibited in full, as a performance of a 'real' household, on a visit to
Maryam, Fadah’s newly married friend, one month after her wedding. Fadah and I sat in her similarly splendidly furnished bayt, with Maryam sitting formally upright to make the tea. Her new groom and his best friend, whom we had passed with a brief word on arrival and who were outside her compound working under the bonnet of their old car, joined us soon after in the bayt but relaxed shyly on the carpet at a distance from us and spoke little. Nor did we three women direct any conversation or question in their direction. Instead, both young men dozed quietly, opening their eyes to sit up and take each of the tea glasses that were passed from Maryam to Fadah to me on a silver tray that returned empty to Maryam, followed by the empty being rolled back along the carpet in the direction of the tea maker. By contrast, Maryam held court with her new status conveyed in her performance of household hospitality, content with conversation and gossip, and new authoritative mannerisms and gestures as a now married young woman with property. At the end of tea, Maryam took us to her makhzan, where we sat on the dusty concrete floor to survey and praise her dowry clothes, shoes, handbags, make-up and jewellery.

**Love and marriage**

Other people’s life events are not just gossip; they are part of daily conversations which transmit domestic, economic and political news, moral values, socio-legal norms and shared insights into how other people solve life’s problems. Nor is making tea simply a cultural ritual or function of hospitality; it is an important site for the transmission of news which creates social cohesion, enacted in its frequency each and every day. In general, both men and women are interested in news of other peoples’ life events, despite the earlier illustration of the overt display of protracted disinterest in the early stages of meeting or social gatherings, or of the hypercritical humanitarian domain. These stories convey the real-life ideals, achievements and dilemmas of people negotiating their ways through life.

Fridays are the days on which Souado, Fadah and I do the weekly washing in a corner of the bawsh sitting on the raised concrete door thresholds of the bayt and makhzan. Ordinary conversations on occasions such as these, or in the cuzina, elicited some of the best ethnographic quality of conversation for me. A common exchange between us was that
of love stories, to which I could contribute as a Mediterranean female with a comparable cultural penchant for such stories.

There was a Mauritanian man called Tuba. He came here some years ago and fell in love with a Sahrawi woman. But she said no to him, and one day he went to the douche and cut his stomach. After some hours, his friends were shouting to him through the door. Then they pushed it open, there was blood everywhere and he had to go to hospital. He is still alive, I don’t know if he ever found love, but whenever someone spends too much time in the douche, people joke and shout ‘ey-ey-ey, Tuba’. (Fadah’s story)

We occasionally had a visit from a middle-aged woman with a young daughter. Et-Khira told another story that:

She had a good husband. He gave everything to her, they had three children. He always brought her new melhfa, but she was never happy. One day he left her and took the children to Sahra’ [the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara]. She was pregnant with this little girl. This woman always spoke badly of him, and Minatou always said, ‘No, your husband was a good man’. Then he died, and now she always says he was a good man. Every time she buys a new melhfa or something, she says ‘Oh, he would have bought it for me’.

In another love story from Souado relating to family friends in the same camp, a husband loved his wife very much, but she divorced him to marry another. This ended in divorce again, and she somehow ‘lost’ (as in wasted, broke, wore out, spent/sold) all her sadaq (bride price/dowry) and was living in a difficult situation with her aunts:

Et-Khira and a friend kept telling the first ex-husband to marry her again. Whenever they saw him, or sometimes he visited us here, he kept saying he still loved her so much. He had never remarried. So et-Khira and her friend kept on telling him to marry her, but he said, ‘No, no, she will not want me’. When they spoke to the woman, she also said the same thing, that he would not want her after what she did, but they had many discussions with
her to show that he was a very good man. It was et-Khira and her friend who got them married again [. . .] because et-Khira told him to ask her for marriage and that if she divorced him again, et-Khira would give him all the money he spent for as-sadaq. This was how certain they both knew that the man really loved her. Since then, they now have eight children! [. . .] Yes, she has learnt how to appreciate him, we see them around. Hassana is in the same class as one of the children.

Developing close proximity to my host womenfolk, I noticed that on the days and nights that Baali did return to our khayma, et-Khira sometimes dressed up, wearing the very thin nile and its unfast indigo dye rubbed on her skin (see Figure 4.1). These were often the times I would be drawn into having henna on my hands and feet alongside et-Khira. Sometimes I would catch sight of her and Minatou grinding cloves in oil, and later that evening rubbing it on her skin for Baali’s arrival that evening. During early fieldwork, it had taken me a while to notice a pattern to the nights that Baali returned to our khayma. I was reflexively following my host sisters to sleep in our bayt or with Minatou, rather than in our usual place with et-Khira in the khayma.

I often remarked privately to Fadah that Baali and et-Khira seem to have a very successful marriage in its longevity. ‘Yes, they have been married forever! But many people are married like this.’ I asked if it was not unusual, given how many divorce stories we exchanged:

Many years ago, a neighbour came to my grandmother and said Baali should marry a second woman. Et-Khira ignored this but was hurt. She then told Baali, who said ‘No’, this was wrong, he would never do this.

KI: Was it an arranged marriage?

Yes, in those days marriages were arranged more than today. And for Aghla it was arranged to marry Brahim-Salem. But in Sahra, love is encouraged. It has nothing to do with divorce. My parents met before they were married, and they liked each other very much. And look, Aghla and Brahim-Salem do not divorce. Brahim-Salem is good with her.
Fadah and Souado often made it clear that they were in no rush to get married, and Souado noted that she was actually supposed to wait for Fadah, the eldest, to marry first. Fadah was always emphatic that ‘I want a good man, to be good in the heart’. She had previously had ‘one boyfriend’ introduced to her and:

He was very handsome. His father made good money from business. He took some, and he made more wealth. He had a lot of cars and many camels. He had a lot, a lot [circling her hands expansively]. But he always looked at girls, so I said no. Now he is married, his wife is pregnant and still he looks at girls. Hamdulillah I said no [gesticulating wiping him off her hands].

These two sisters and their friends made it clear that they wanted to find their own husbands, but did not divorce this conceptually from the concept of an ‘arranged’ marriage, whereby arrangement connotes correct procedure and the means through which to determine and verify the suitability and reliability of the young man. This adamant independence is illustrated in the next two insights from Souado falling in love with a Mauritanian boy and a long wait for Uncle Mokhtar’s wedding.

Several months passed, despite a continual cycle of shopping trips to help Mokhtar purchase the dowry items. Different dates and shrugs of uncertainty seemed to indicate that the bride and her family had still to make the final decision:

They will call et-Khra or Minatou. When they call, then we will know […] Mokhtar told Aghla the family of the girl will call maybe next week […] Mokhtar went to visit them at the weekend, he thinks after ‘Id al-‘Adha […] et-Khra said maybe the 17th December. When the bride’s family make the telephone call, then they go.

Souado had met Jamal, a year younger than her, at a large wedding in Ausserd camp in 2009, but the family links were tenuous. When Souado told et-Khra she was interested to marry him. Et-Khra and Baali agreed to Souado’s proposal for Jamal to visit for two months, in a formal introduction between them all. Although Baali formally brought him to
the household, they had little contact afterwards, and Jamal stayed away from the _khayma_ on Baali’s overnight visits, and from Minatou’s compound. The young unrestricted males were recruited to take him out of our compound for an evening stroll or to watch a football match on the television of a nearby restaurant.

When I broke etiquette to ask Baali what he thought of Jamal, he replied to me: ‘I do not want to know. The women will sort it out’. Shortly after Jamal had arrived, Fadah told me that, ‘If anyone asks, we are saying he is someone you know’. On the whole the family disapproved greatly, and when I asked the same question of et-Khira, she gesticulated to me to say little: ‘Let them be together, and we will wait to see what happens’. As time passed, Fadah indicated that the rest of the family within the cluster had gradually been told, with Souado’s dreams of opening a beauty salon growing, that Minatou and et-Khira had raised the possibility that Jamal might find work through the family. Later that year, with Jamal back in Mauritania, Souado reflexively broke off with Jamal, unsure about him as a marriage partner.

Despite dreaming of new opportunities and home-making, seeing him in the bubble of his visit into her environment, Souado came to feel he was not the right choice. Underlying this was advice from her mother and grandmother in the form of stories of different marriage failures and just not pressure alone. Despite their forays into finding a ‘good man’, both Souado and Fadah are in comfortable positions, and while Minatou, et-Khira and Aghla have begun to make comments about the girls’ need to focus more diligently on finding husbands, neither girl has yet come under excessive pressure. They are openly explicit about looking for the right man in their eyes. Nevertheless, behind the scenes in soft but regular comments, Minatou and especially et-Khira express concern at the passing of biological time, a concern which was directed at me too.

Understanding the _melhfa_ as more than just a ‘veil’, as a form of (un)dress and in relation to cultural ideas about fatness provides insights into the private female body and the public sexual body (Figure 6.2). In the fleeting seconds it takes, the women often dart through the ‘open’ sandy passageway between Minatou and et-Khira into each other’s _khayam_ in various stages of informal (un)dress. The bottom of the _melhfa_ may be tied up to the waist or hoisted up over the shoulders (during household chores, or the latter especially during high-summer heat) showing trousered legs or bare, unsleeved arms or a hardly covered head.
While both inside and outside the *khayam*, dress conformity is strictly adhered to – it is vulgar and unnecessary to show one’s body, in as much as it embarrasses the onlooker. Yet such privacy is respected when either male or female has undertaken a modest (un)dress within private domains. As it is quite rare, when it does the eye is respectfully turned away.

The (un)dressed movement of male and female kin between the kin-related *khayam* open spaces is functional. The waist-tied *melhfa* denotes that housework is being undertaken and provides a concession of temporarily exempted necessity rather than a signal of an omission of dress like my failure to position the bottom of my *melhfa* properly (cf. Kriger 2006). The extreme temperatures of summer and/or exhaustion of work, particularly for men, require concessions to be made within the parameters of the private space of the family. These are fine lines negotiated with sensitivity, met with averted deflection, to respect that momentary need and preserve dignity. During the times we have moved between the narrow passageways of others’ tent compounds, I have often caught glimpses of similarly (un)dressed men and women slipping between kin-related *khayam*. On an evening stroll with Souado and Fadha, we caught sight of a female friend and popular singer in her *baushb*. Wearing a thinly strapped vest, her *melhfa* was so loosely knotted that her entire head, upper chest, neck and full arms were bare. She stepped out of her compound gate immediately adjacent to the open *reg* track to talk to us for a few minutes and raised her *melhfa* so loosely over her head that she still remained (un)dressed enough to most certainly not have been able to step further out into the street.

During the high summer of 2010, the girls had begun experimenting with ways to help me survive the heat. We had many inventive discussions and had asked the older uncles how air-conditioning worked. Mokhtar had even drawn a diagram showing how water was used to cool the air. Fadah then experimented by placing an old tent frame over me with a wet *melhfa* draped over it. For the week or so that we kept trying this, Abdel and Mokhtar sometimes came to sit with us in the *bayt* for short periods and have discussions with us as to whether the system was working, while the unrestricted young males came and went at any time as usual. But I was underneath wrapped in my dampened *melhfa*, in only a vest and shorts. While I was not physically naked, I was so in the sense of its dampened clinging
transparency and the fact that the detailed discussions entailed everyone knowing that I was not wearing trousers and long-sleeve T-shirts. And yet, in an entirely different setting and time of the year, Fadah crossly pulled the lower part of my melhfa no more than two centimetres over my ankle when Abdel had dropped in to drink tea with us. An appropriate length of foot to show is about three centimetres above the ankle. Any more shows too much of the remaining covered leg, although this also appears to be suspended with the brightly coloured and specially stiffened, near-translucent type of nile that women wear to dress up for weddings. When I signalled a discreet surprised look at her, she crossly retorted under her breath that Abdel was a married man.

Lamina, aged fourteen in 2010 and just past puberty, but still a child and not yet of sexual concern, could (un)dress ‘in between stages’ with fully bare arms, wearing a sleeveless vest and her melhfa thrown over her shoulders, and lie on her stomach to watch TV or read. But unlike children, in formal settings she must wear a long-sleeved T-shirt for every public movement and exhibit the more decorous lying position on her back or side. Early 2010 saw her initial attempts over several months to transition to wearing the melhfa: after school and weekends she would quietly put on a melhfa, and the observant womenfolk signalled to each other with silent jokes or nudges. However, she only put on the melhfa when there were no mature adult men around, and if we heard her father’s jeep engine signalling his arrival, she quickly took it off. One evening I saw her hurriedly flinging it off near Souado, who collaboratively bundled it up between her own head and the floor cushion. Her father came only to eat with us and then left. When I asked the women why Lamina was so shy, they just laughed and said it was a young girl’s embarrassment. From October 2010, she regularized her wearing of the melhfa and has now transitioned in a fully grown-up young woman who is never seen without it, like her two older sisters.

At many weddings of young couples, the young people (the friends of the bride and groom) join forces to make the most of the wedding arrangements, which are overseen and paid for by the relevant family elders. At the first public (but in fact very private) bringing together of the bride and groom, Fadha’s friend Maryam sat in a friend’s khayma with a piece of white muslin obscuring her head and face, and her close female friends, female neighbours, neighbours and children packed
tightly inside. The distant sound of beeping cars triggered an electric moment of excitement and initial ululation. Fatimetu explained: ‘They are calling the men, “guiding” the men’ towards and into the *khayma*, the ululation acting as both warning and permission. As the cars noisily arrived outside the *khayma*, the groom was brought in by his male friends to the sound of ululation from the women reached a piercing pitch accompanying the entering men. Slowly the ululation decreased into joyous shouts from all men and women, everyone now standing, as the groom finally sat down beside Maryam. His friends squeezed in among her friends on both sides. Then, in one of many moments that they had been talking to each other, he raised her white muslin without revealing her face, placing his head underneath it for two to three minutes. This private intimate and honourable moment was displayed in a public moment. A short while later, Maryam’s sister slowly rearranged her white muslin veil to reveal her face. Maryam looked unbearably shy as a new round of ululations reached fever pitch and then stopped when she pulled the muslin over her face again.

Later that afternoon, after sweet foods, crisps and a huge Algerian French-patisserie-style cake bought especially from Tindouf had been eaten, the male party left with more noise and ululation, and Maryam and her close female friends were driven by male friends to another friend’s *bayt*. That late afternoon, we sat together as a small group chatting while Maryam removed her make-up and had a small celebratory early dinner of good-quality slow-cooked camel meat and offal. Maryam had, in front of us, taken off her outer wedding garments, wearing the simple black *nile* fabric loosely around her body. At two separate times, a male cousin and a male friend of the groom casually arrived, hugged her, kissed her face, and chatted excitedly with us all, kneeling or sitting among us to dip into the left-over camel meat. Her transparent *nile* did not hide her semi-nudity, and her finely plaited hair was fully uncovered. There is no shame about the dignity of life’s stages, just privacy. Maryam was honoured by those around her, and her beauty and womanhood likewise honoured them back. The harsh polar distinctions of honour and shame in conventional portrayals and analyses of the Arab-Muslim world do not illuminate the local, customary thresholds of where appropriateness and inappropriateness may lie. While a person would be horrified to walk in the street dressed so lightly, appropriate intimacy is enjoyed, and making the biological body personal is not something to hide.
Despite the ‘functional’ exceptions described previously, the melhfa is never taken off fully in sight of others. It is inappropriate, and it would show a lack of dignity for either gender to show their bodies. The melhfa is a four-metre length of cloth and is properly worn by tying two knots along the left-hand two-metre length to create a wide arm opening, the remaining two metres being brought behind the body, over the head, to the right side of the body and round to the front and over the left shoulder. It is a voluminous flowing ‘body scarf’ that wraps slackly and freely around the body and head, displaying the face, neck, front-top of the hair, lower arms, ankles and feet. Other than the shoulder knot it has no other form of fastening and is regularly readjusted in infinitesimal and often indiscernible ways, including the last length around the head and shoulder, as it tends easily to fall off the head or shoulder.

Although this female covering embodies Muslim prescriptions for modesty, women also apply extensive fashionable interest in wearing their melhfa to matching coloured or patterned long-sleeved T-shirts. This ordinary daily melhfa is made out of thin cotton or polyester, worn over trousers and long-sleeved T-shirt (or jumper in winter), with flip-flops or socks with open sandals. If moving a greater distance from home or going to the shops, boots or closed shoes with socks, the male el-them, sunglasses and gloves are worn as protection against the sand and sun.

Lemlahef come in many colours and patterns, and fashions change regularly, triggered either by a local female singer-musician or by the stocks of fabric brought from Mauritania by the traders. In January 2011, a single block colour of purple with T-shirt sleeves in contrasting colour such as fluorescent orange or crimson became the costume de rigueur, while previously in 2009 it had been a beige and black animal print with a black T-shirt sleeve. When seated or lying on the floor, women tuck their toes into the bottom of the fabric, sometimes creating a taut shape to it. Although effectively a body covering, it also shows off women’s curves, especially when they are lying down. In an external environment, the melhfa twists around the legs while walking, and the desert wind makes it flutter tightly against the body, again revealing much about the female body shape while simultaneously covering it.

For special social events, two thinner, highly transparent and stiffened versions of a muslin nile fabric are worn with hennaed hands and feet. The highly coloured or patterned nile is worn for special events like attending a wedding, especially by younger unmarried females, with
large gold-diamante costume jewellery, shorter trousers and strappy vests showing the lower arms, ankles and bare feet in wedged sandals – in the constant feminine adjustment of the fabric, arms are frequently visible up to the elbow. The fabric also hints at their large dark chignons and nape, easily seen through the transparency.

The real – customary – *nile* is highly prized, and although the word is used (and the fabric worn) in the same way as the *melbfa*, it specifically denotes the use of an unfast indigo dye on very thin and transparent muslin cloth. Undyed white muslin *nile* is used at certain stages during a bride’s wedding party (at one point it is torn up during a competitive mock fight between her female friends) and by certain male elders as an *el-them* when they have reached an eminent age. For instance, I have most often seen two elderly poets, Badi and Be’ibou, wear the white *nile el-them* with the light blue or white *dara’a*. Young men also wear *nile* but on fewer occasions. A bridegroom’s *el-them* will most certainly be made from it (or at least the white undyed muslin), and it can also be worn by other men attending the wedding party. Bah, a very traditional middle-aged man (and, I was told, an example of the practice of polygamy) who had been a driver on three of my archaeological surveys and whom I often see in the camps, uses *kehle* (eye kohl) and the black *nile el-them* with the indigo dye rubbed on his skin on a daily basis. It is commonly believed that the dye helps protect the skin from the sun and from *jnum*, in addition to its properties of male and female beauty. Poems and songs often refer to this latter attribute. However, I have never seen my host menfolk use *kehle*, or wear a *nile el-them* except at weddings. At all other times they use the ordinary black, light blue or khaki green cotton *el-them*, as do most men at all times.

The black (indigo) *nile* is used by mature and married women to dress up, but is also worn for the first time by a bride during the first secluded week or so after her initial wedding ceremony. Thereafter she may wear this black *nile* as a mature and reproductive female. The unfast indigo dye of *nile* creates a stiff oil-like shine to it: it should not be washed regularly, is perfumed and re-stiffened with a special *nile* liquid and scent splashed on to it with the hand, and it is considered *exquisitely* beautiful when the fabric is rubbed on to the face and body to spread the dark dye. This beauty is featured in many poems and songs. Women wearing *nile* will almost always also have rubbed their skin with it and splashed the fabric with the special scent. Virtually no ‘modern’ jewellery is worn,
and the soles of the feet, entire inner palms and lengths of fingers and fingertips are dyed in full, un-patterned sections. The more typically elaborate Middle Eastern patterns of henna are seen as modern, and their intricate designs are admired by mature and young women, but the traditional Sahrawi style carries deeper significance in terms of customary beauty, magico-religious and health signifiers.

Like many elderly grandmothers, Minatou regularly wears her indigo nile at home within the kin-cluster. Et-Khira has worn hers for weddings and baby-naming parties, but also wore it especially to take me to one of the annual anniversary cultural-political festivals, where she spent much time engaging with women across a wide social network who had dressed in a similarly ‘traditional’ fashion. These were mature women in their marital, child-rearing or menopausal life stages, wearing the symbolic idiom of nile, with its dye rubbed darkly on to their skin (Figure 4.1). On other occasions both et-Khira and Aghla have instead chosen to wear the stiff melhfa in bright colours and patterns and gaudy gold diamante costume jewellery.

Figure 4.1  Women wearing the prized nile. A young female raises her nile over her head – as the author-photographer was female, she was playfully demonstrating the ‘power’ of its beauty. Photo courtesy of author.
Fatness is an attribute sought after and discussed by Sahrawi that conveys a variety of meanings and values. A good marriage and husband not only means the woman has done well in her life prospects, it also carries connotations that the man is a good provider and carer. The fatness of a wife and daughters shows they are eating well and that the family will prosper, and it also signals healthy fat women capable of fertile reproduction and future marriage prospects. Fatness is also linked to sexual preferences compared to thin women, who instead imply a lack of food and having less reproductive success. Interwoven through many conversations are references to fatness and beauty for women, whereas male handsomeness and manliness is linked to being robust or slim, conveying hard work, diligence and agility in survival. Manliness is also conveyed by shaving and perhaps a small moustache in older men and neatly trimmed beards for elders such as poets and a’imma. Sometimes women’s hesitant or disapproving comments about ‘very’ religious males with uncut beards indicate that they might not be keen to not marry them.

External commentators often relay a widely mentioned Sahrawi custom of fattening women for marriage, but among the marriages I accompanied my womenfolk to, all the brides were slim. During et-Galiya’s first pregnancy visit to our khayam, she remarked that after the first birth she hoped to get fat. Echoing et-Galiya’s comments, on Fadah’s and my first post-marriage visit to Maryam, she also conveyed an aspiration to get fat after her first baby. Yet Fadah often said she had no desire to fatten specifically because she thought it would happen naturally with age and childbearing, and Souado, who was naturally voluptuous without intention, said she had been told by doctors to try to lower her weight slightly in relation to pre-existing health problems because her medication would have a weight-gain effect. Both host sisters said that the ‘old’ fattening methods were certainly aimed at imminent brides and comprised a rich diet of the milk, kidney and liver meat of camels, and they said that some young brides and their families might still practise this. Yet both said that they were not aware of many deliberately fattening themselves because of new beauty influences coming from satellite television; if anything, they thought the concern should be of the influences of thinness. Programmes such as Lebanese Pop Idol and Musalsalat conveyed new ideals of such thinness, but Souado and Fadah would often remark on how ‘perfect’ some of the televised
women were with their semi-voluptuousness. These observations meant Fadah wanted to put on a little more weight and Souado to lose a little to reach these ideals. Programmes that conveyed images of Western thinness nearly always triggered comments about my own thinness. The family always pressed me to eat more at mealtimes, and everyone categorically agreed that I was too thin for marriage. At some mealtimes, et-Khira would partly joke, partly complain, that other Sahrawi would think the family were neglecting me.
CHAPTER 5
CIRCULATING MALES: FEMALE ECONOMIES OF AFFECTION

Where, then, are the men? This question absorbed much of my daily curiosity because womenfolk were always in my line of vision, enabling me to participate in daily activities, almost all of which we did together, crossing freely between each other’s khayam. At first familial males would appear and disappear without any long-term consistent pattern. In time, this became a predictable rhythm, and in their absence I often enquired among womenfolk where the menfolk were. My large host family comprised a large number and range of menfolk engaging in many different roles requiring interconnected variations of movement, absence and presence.

Rather than use the previous chapter to engage in the great debates over the Arab/Muslim woman – the exchange of women through marriage, veiling and patriarchy – the next two chapters juxtapose these stereotypes by illuminating men differently, as circulating males through (the eyes of) womenfolk, and as veiled males who marry out but remain highly residential and dependent upon their matrilineal grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters.

Today, as in the past, war, long-distance trading and pastoralism still circulate these males through their beloved badiya. Their movement across the Sahara requires a web of relationships along which women’s tents serve as nodes of safety, hospitality, kinship and financial investment (cf. Isidoros 2017c). While Sahrawi males may fit the stereotypes of dominant, patriarchal and patrilineal Arab-Muslim males,
it is by focusing on women that they are able to survive the conditions of life in the Sahara.

**Warrior-nomads, soldier-statesmen**

In this modern period, from the later Spanish colonial period (1960s) to the present day via Morocco’s invasion in 1975, the Sahrawi have been engaged in both a conventional war and a diplomatic battle. Sid-Brahim, a renowned poet-elder living a few tents away from my host family, says:

First we were fighting the Spanish — we had begun to understand the United Nations’ calls for decolonization [...] and as we began to understand this, we knew that the world was changing, that we needed to make a country. As-Sahra’ al-Gharbiya belongs to no man, only to Allah, but we knew we would lose it [...] so we had to fight for it. Before, we only fought amongst ourselves [meaning domestic regional powers] — now we had to fight strangers. First it was Spain, then one day we awoke to see the enemy had changed. We were looking into the eyes of Morocco. (2011)

The early Spanish colonial conflicts saw the last use of traditional camel regiments, but with the formation of the Frente Polisario (and its short-lived predecessor Harakat Tahrir) a first generation of university-educated Sahrawi leaders emerged, well-informed of other international revolutionary movements (Isidoros 2017a). These young men were able to impress enough anti-colonial sympathetic governments — such as Cuba, Libya and Algeria, and also the African Union, of which Polisario was a founding member — to receive second-hand jeeps, tanks and other weapons. During the 1975–91 war with Morocco, all Polisario-Sahrawi males of fighting age were soldiers on the front line. It is widely acknowledged that the Tindouf camps were primarily set up, administered and occupied by women, children and the elderly. Polisario leadership and male elders oversaw the ideological formation of these camps as a symbolic blueprint for the charismatic founder El-Ouali’s vision of an independent Western Sahara. Women describe this period one in which they bore almost all the practical weight of the growing camps, including policing the camps and the wider environment against enemy incursions. Minatou emits a piercing ululation to demonstrate how
women issued such alarm calls to other women and young males and in her storytelling relates this to the 'old days', when adult males were absent, and women habitually scanned the horizon with young boy shepherds as scouts as they moved with their pastoralizing khayam.

The 1991 United Nations-led ceasefire removed the war's physical front line, and external commentators have recognized the changing male demography, as Polisario-Sahrawi soldiers began to return to the camps. Nevertheless, most Sahrawi males of fighting age continue to receive regular military training, and ideologically 'all' remain in a mind-set of war. Their political battle for self-determination is not over, and this is regularly played out in the political anniversaries throughout the year, as well as the stock responses to the humanitarian corpus reiterating the need to resolve the conflict. The ceasefire has also moved the battlefield to the diplomatic corridors of Washington, the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union, where the weapons have become international law and human rights. Since Morocco's 1975 invasion, the camps still remain both the symbolic and actual headquarters of tribal military unification, with the shared goal of regaining what, beneath modern cartography, is ancient tribal territory in the new form of national sovereign territory. However, Western Sahara is still a fragile war zone, and the region remains an open battlefield.

Thus to foreign observers and visitors, Sahrawi males are predominantly visible in these refugee camps, both in and out of military uniform. The camps are a political site of a war that is symbolically and culturally displayed and performed to visiting onlookers. Although women participate actively, these aspects of the camps' existence constitute a dominant male political sphere to protect territory and population, as well as build the new model of state formation.

Yet, in a low-key manner, many men are not quite permanently resident in the camps. The present-day conventional role of men around the world is not so different for Sahrawi men. As a political and military arena, their military roles as active soldiers continue to take them away from their families for long and irregular periods. Moreover, their related political jobs as drivers, translator-guides and political representatives within the region mean driving foreign guests to various desert locations and in the process acting as deep-desert scouts in their intrinsic military capacity.
This resource of foreign visitors and their logistical ‘herding’ enables the traditional male circulation far afield and for long periods, continuing their historically prevalent activities of gathering and passing on military and desert-indigenous information among themselves and contemporaneously with the Algerian security forces relating to military sensitivities with Morocco. While all males are potentially soldiers, they are also consistently away from the camps in their parallel searches for subsistence, dispersing and gathering far and wide, seeking paid labour or engaging in long-distance trading. As previously mentioned, there are political, military and economic reasons for sidestepping the major aid agencies’ calls for a census within the camps.

Host father Baali and Uncle Mokhtar are both high-ranking military Polisario men. Baali is a senior diplomatic representative and spends very little time in my host mother’s khayma compound. He and his patrilineal line are renowned for a quality which makes him a rare ‘young elder’. During busy periods he comes for a night or the occasional day, although he is always present for two to three days for important family events such as ‘Id al-‘Adha. He also circulates through his three sisters’ khayam clusters in two different camps, spending occasional nights and running chores for them, as he does for his conjugal family. In the nine years I have known Baali, I am always surprised to receive emails from him saying he is in one of the African Union states engaged in political campaigning. But he also travels widely through Algeria, the Liberated Territory and Mauritania as a driver-guide-translator for important foreign visitors, from international political delegates to geologists.

Baali arrived at our khayma one evening to find Fadah and I alone in the compound, where we were quietly reading some books together and discussing these stories. Baali walked quietly in, surprised and a little piqued that ‘everyone’ was not there, but he also said as he stood by the tent flap, ‘I envy your peaceful moment’. I ventured to say, ‘Please sit with us. We see so little of you’, and he did. It was a rare moment for us to have him to ourselves before everyone descended back into the household. Unusually he had arrived on foot that evening, and et-Khira had not heard his jeep engine from the gathering in Minatou’s tent. We sat close together and listened to Baali’s philosophical meditations. Although this is a family that gets on well together and is successful as a unit, Baali has little time to spend alone with his children. His only truly private time with his wife is at night. All other times are filled with
communality and the spreading of his various roles across his dependents. *Khayam* are open spaces through which occupants move together; a group of two equates to being alone.

Uncle Mokhtar is a junior but rising military strategist (i.e. not an elder). Newly divorced when I first met him and then remarried during my fieldwork, his permanent place of residence is in his mother Minatou’s *khayma*. Unlike Abdel’s wife, who lives matrifocally in distant Mauritania, Mokhtar’s new bride is in Layoune camp, yet he still lives with his mother and visits his bride for the occasional night or few days or week. Mokhtar is often away for long periods of military work, but he also engages in entrepreneurial searches for subsistence in the same way as his brothers and Baali. So although I position him as permanently resident with Minatou, he is in fact engaged, as is Baali, in a contemporary version of traditional desert circulation between his womenfolk’s *khayam* clusters – his mother, sisters and aunts. At the same time, technically he is simultaneously resident with his bride – like Baali, through marriage he has helped to generate a new family unit of which he is now the male head.

KI: Ya el-Baali, I read in the early Spanish texts and books like Toby Shelley that the Sahrawi are ‘sons of the clouds’. What is this?

[My host father has an infectious rumbling laugh] You have been with us to our *badiya* – where did you see the clouds?!

KI: But they must be referring to something, ‘abi’?

Baali: They dream. Yes, we move our herds to the areas where it has rained, but as you have seen, there is little rain. We do not chase clouds. Next time you come with me, tell me when I am driving too close to a cloud! [gripping my arm to steady his mirth and emphasize the joke]

Until the 1975 Moroccan war, all Sahrawi males will have been engaged in long-distance herding and trading. Romanticized notions of pastoralism as relating only to the raising and herding of livestock, especially in a hydrologically deficient environment, fails to encapsulate
the real life entrepreneurship of nomads’ risk-taking resourcefulness. What Baali found facetious in the modern invention of ‘sons of clouds’ was the whimsical suggestion of the eternal wait for rain. Historically, pastoralism occurred alongside multiple searches for subsistence, but also with herds being moved because of their commercial value in being sold and slaughtered. The goods being carried in long-distance trade flows by camel caravans could be of higher value than the beloved camels themselves.

The lines between the traditional subsistence economy and the modern (national) market economy are blurred. With the modern transition ‘from camel to truck’ (Chatty 1986), the latter now provides the primary means of transport for both goods and camels. In both daily and household items, women encourage the purchase of modern resources, which has simplified the same activities they have traditionally engaged in (Chatty and Rabo 1997: 5). So while humans and livestock remain dependent upon water in a difficult ecosystem, nomads skilfully adapt to new resources.

Despite Spanish colonial records and census data suggesting increasing demographic movement towards and employment in Spanish colonial centres, these data are widely considered unreliable. The general consensus among analysts and conversations with Sahrawi elders is that this demographic movement occurred on a very small scale. Moreover, while some Sahrawi males were drawn to Spanish settlements for work, women’s tents continued to move slowly with smaller retained herds shepherded by young males and elders. Those who appeared to the Spanish to be exploiting what colonialism offered were tactically tapping into new resources, especially in response to two severe droughts that had decimated herds. Unlike the French colonies surrounding the Spanish Sahara, the Sahrawi experienced little interference until the very late colonial period and were left to themselves up to the Spanish withdrawal. To use a metaphor, if anything the Sahrawi themselves came out of the political clouds in response to the prospects of decolonization and emerging economic opportunities, rather than the colonizers penetrating into the Saharan interior to reach them.

During the war with Morocco, Sahrawi again lost many of their herds, although stories exist of some families driving their herds hard to reach safety inside Algeria and Mauritania. Mauritania had also jumped on Morocco’s sovereign ambition with its own claim to a
'Greater Mauritania', so only some families of tribes with Mauritanian connections would have had such a temporal and spatial opportunity. Certainly most of those who fled east to the Tindouf camps had to leave their herds behind or along the way. Nevertheless, since then, those in the Tindouf camps have revitalized region-wide familial and tribal shares in herds and have been able to rebuild their herds, although to a lesser degree than of the famed pre-war times. Those who remained inside the now Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara worked hard to keep their herds alive and out of the reach of Moroccan forces, with stories of Polisario soldiers not only engaging in pitched guerrilla battles but simultaneously guiding herders (not just women) away from battle zones.

Camels first, then goats, are the primary survival resource for many Sahrawi who retain nomadic pastoralist interests. Herds also remain symbolically related to the deeply felt love of the desert. In 2008, Sayid, one of Polisario’s Sahara Press Service young males I worked alongside in Rabuni camp (Lakhal and Isidoros 2013; Isidoros 2011), had symbolically driven eighty camels over the Moroccan berm, the same dangerous overnight crossing that his peers make to escape Moroccan arrest and torture. While making al-kundra (winter tea with herbs) in our Rabuni bayt, he said:

They try to get to us by getting to our herds. They confiscate them and take them into the badiya [in Morocco’s area of occupation] but leave them in the bad areas far from water. They try to break our hearts and our will like this, knowing it gives us agony even just to think of our camels dying slowly and painfully. [...] I took these camels and brought them here [to Polisario], I saved the camels, but I also took them to what Morocco hates, back into the hands of Sahrawi.

What is not seen in the peripheries of the public gaze is the movement of herds, which is a key indicator of the movement of people. As with census demographics, neither Polisario nor the Sahrawi in general divulge their herd assets to inquisitive foreigners — the region is in a state of war, and this is a society under judgemental scrutiny. I did not enter the field site to ‘ask questions’ and so cannot properly assess herd numbers with accuracy. While there will certainly be those who have
still not been able to rebuild camel herds or have had difficulty in doing so, they remain crucial investments to most people, and the practice of mniha, the loan of lactating camels, continues. My own movement through the badiya and the amount of meat that is consumed among Sahrawi families means that camel and goat herds are no longer in a decimated state. While they purchase some meat from the marca butchers, the movement and herd sizes I see in the badiya and far to the south into Mauritania means that a fairly extensive and regularized market trade pattern has been re-established.

Camel herds still have especially high cultural, symbolic and economic value for Sahrawi on both sides of the berm, as for their indigenous counterparts in Mauritania. Mauritania is famed for its Adrâr dates, and these items themselves provide an intriguing insight into the movement of goods and people. Historically, camel and date trade routes often followed the same pathways along the trans-Saharan trade flows, moving together as culturally complementary connected food items that are common to the wider Arab-Muslim world. Today, Zouerat market still demonstrates the same outflows of both camels and dates. As a key historical trading post among many between Western Sahara, Mauritania, Algeria and Mali, Zouerat’s majority population remains Sahrawi and continues to serve as an important site from which they have revitalized their historically established trade flows and reconnect them back into the Sahara-wide economy since their war-fracturing experience.

Beyond the public gaze, my host family’s neighbours and friends show signs of resumed (and beloved) returns to the badiya in relation to their herds (Figure 3.2). Journeys with my host father as a doctoral student and previously with an archaeological survey group into the badiya showed continued utilization of shepherding families employed to seek pasture for another family’s herds (the latter when choosing to be present in the camps or other urban cities), of ‘group-herding’ between families using such shepherd families, but also of members of camp-resident families choosing to return to the desert for a year or more. This reconnects back to the ‘strategic silences’ wherein Polisario will not permit aid agencies such as WFP or UNHCR to conduct a population census of the camps. Refugees are supposed to be statically dependent; the Sahrawi have not yet lost their symbolic yearning and ingrained self-sufficiency (being in security) to continue moving persistently through their heartlands.
During badiya journeys, we often stopped our drive to undertake the long greeting, be offered tea and gather news. It is extremely rare to not stop: when a khayma is seen on the horizon, we invariably detour to it. One of our immediate neighbours had received a sister and brother-in-law returning after six years in the badiya. Their only child, el-Baydou (16), became a regular unrestricted male in our khayam. It became apparent he was fairly illiterate, and my host-sisters, without intended cruelty, described him as ‘knowing only about goats’. There were many discussions between the two families’ womenfolk about how best to assimilate him back into the camp’s educational system. Nevertheless, el-Baydou’s parents frequently lamented their love of the badiya life, having returned due to increasing ill-health and the medical facilities available in the camp.

The contemporary ghazi

Despite the existence of families such as el-Baydou’s, where small familial units including adult men are circulating through the desert as pastoralists, the complementary economic forms of male circulation still continue. This male search for trade and labour creates perhaps the widest circulation and that with the most irregular pattern of movement.

Since the ceasefire, without males needing to be physically on the front lines of war, they have returned to their families and resumed their searches for subsistence. Humanitarian aid and the refugee camps have provided jobs within and between the camps, or in the near badiya vicinity in relation to ‘humanitarian tourism’. However, the ceasefire and the camps have also enabled the Sahrawi to resume and revitalise their traditional trans-Saharan economy and trading networks. Many Sahrawi males actively engage in long-distance trading as drivers, merchants and traders. They easily cross back and forth into Mauritania, make surreptitious (and dangerous) crossings over the Moroccan berm, and engage more restrictively in licit and illicit trading using (state-compliant) Algerian flows.

To some degree, I find Polisario camps to be reminiscent of qsar, historical fortified trading posts that formed crucial nodes along the Sahara’s economic web, some of which grew into the Mauritanian emirates of the seventeenth to nineteenth century. The historic vestiges of these tribal confederations forming emirates can be seen today in
post-independent Mauritania's administrative regions such as Brakna, Tagant and Trarza. By this I mean that the camps appear within the wider context of the western Sahara like a major fortified military post that has recently regrown as a new economic node on the Saharan economic web, from which its occupants actively engage in long-distance trading back and forth between, in and out of the camps and other regional urban sites. Of note is that, from the 1850s, Tindouf was in fact a Tajakant and then Reguibat stronghold and a trading post in its own right, with a renowned annual market that is remembered by elders today. So it makes deep historical sense for Tindouf to be more than just Algeria's strategic military base.

While Uncle Mokhtar and host father Baali are mostly engaged in senior-level political and military work, other menfolk engage in irregular subsistence pursuits which are quite speculative and risky, as well as whatever military jobs they can find. Uncle Abdel has for six years been able to find temporary work in Spain, where he has irregularly spent long periods of time, assisting youngest Uncle Karim to do the same in the last three years. Abdel also makes trips to Mauritania, combining seeing relatives (and his newly married bride) with entrepreneurial opportunities.

Prior to Uncle Karim's acquisition of a Spanish work visa in late 2010, his search for subsistence, shaped by his personality in preferring to stay close to his mother Minatou, led him to inter-camp odd-job labouring such as mechanics' workshops and building work. Host milk-brothers are also engaged in irregular employment. Khadir was able to acquire an on-off job as a policeman or guard at the law court in Sab'a wa-'ishrun camp (27th February camp, now renamed Boujdour camp), where he slept and ate with other similarly employed males. In between doing this job, he would return to our khayma to find other temporary jobs such building work or borrow a friend's car to try his hand at driving an inter-camp basaga or taxi. Brahim also managed to find similar odd jobs, but both frequently had days or weeks with no work, which they spent as unrestricted males in our khayam cluster.

In November 2010, womenfolk quietly mentioned that Brahim had got a driving job, indicating it was a long-distance one. Little was spoken of it, although the younger boys often asked Brahim if he would be driving a big truck. He left late one night, jumping into a car that had beeped on arrival outside our khayam, with no discussion or goodbyes and just a
small bag of basic belongings in the same way as when he or Khadir left us for a few days to visit family and friends elsewhere. The following morning, I realized he had really left. In the following months, Brahim made several such trips, being away for about ten to twelve days at a time.

In June 2010, a man I had never seen before suddenly appeared in Minatou’s tent. He was a very distant relative of the first of Minatou’s three husbands, and the family was discussing his journey with other men. They had crossed as a convoy, travelling to the furthest southern border of the occupied area under Moroccan control, south-east through the sand-sea into Mauritania’s Zouerat and then north to the camps. He stayed with us for a month and then quietly left one night to make the return journey.

Women’s menfolk: The flow of males through women’s tents

While Sahrawi men acknowledged that a khayma constitutes a predominantly female property, they rejected suggestions of the lack of any strong male (kin and married) presence, but they described how, in the present as in the past, most males are irregularly present, creating their own feelings of displacement from their khayam’s daily events and decisions, missing their family and being ‘at home’. They also stated that they relied upon their womenfolk to keep matters in order. Although men cluster in male groups at times of necessity (such as the modern period’s employment domains, travelling in male groups), their first choice is to move towards women’s tents where possible – within geographical reach and with some link of kin or kith to seek sanctuary. Kin is highly interpretive; there are usually only micro-reasons not to seek sanctuary in women-strangers’ tents. The request and offer of sanctuary (the famed Bedouin hospitality) can offer possibilities for new and future kin-making and network linking. Women’s tents quite literally knit together a widely cast web of relations, a web that women are actively engaged in making across a wide geographical area.

I am cautious about entering the debate about patriliny, patriarchy and the idea of the ‘exchange of women in marriage’ from Lévi-Strauss’s (1949) classical structuralist theory of alliance because of the broad brushstrokes they often entail: my host family appear to be a large extended and happy family, with senior males and females each
negotiating their dominant, authoritative strengths, while holding their
different grounds with each others’ temperaments and foibles. Even with
families I know who are extremely poor, in their engagement in the
continual struggle to find subsistence work, the families I have known
were in harmony, capable of ensuring the group’s comparatively good life
and working cooperatively together ‘in sync’, despite the varied
personalities involved.

Most mature sons and husbands, when present, will leave after the
early morning breakfast (usually around seven a.m.) and return home
irregularly during the following days, weeks or months. My overriding
sensation was that it was difficult to determine when males had left, as
they most often did so imperceptibly, without goodbyes or indications of
precise departures and returns. Instead, it was more obvious when they
reappeared, for they rarely spent time alone or together, instead
following us womenfolk as we moved around our cluster. There was a
subtle shift in female behaviour on the appearance of adult males,
entailing quiet tolerance and subtle grumbles on some occasions. One
evening, Baali’s car door suddenly clicked shut, its engine unheard upon
its arrival. Lamina, Souado, et-Khira and I were watching a musalsal, but
in the seconds it took for Baali to appear through the tent flap, Lamina
and Souado suddenly jumped up and ran to sit upright behind et-Khira
on the other side of the khayma. As Baali entered, this left me appearing
as if I was the one watching musalsalat. A few moments later, et-Khira
deftly used the remote to switch to the news channel.

My host family seemed a particularly happy and contented unit, but
when males were not around, the khayam clusters were distinctly female
spheres, and the arrival of a male for a day or more seemed an intangible
intrusion, involving Mokhtar’s adamant opinions or Abdel’s bossiness.
Fadah sometimes complained that Brahim was ‘always in the khayma’ as
if he was disturbing her chance to be there alone. Yet Sahrawi rarely
spend time alone: if a room is empty, they will find which room offers
companionship. The only time one of these males had an important
space was a party that Uncle Abdel said he wanted to have. We women
joyfully cooked in Minatou’s cuzina, but Abdel’s overexcited bossiness
and attempts to manage the affair were met with female grumbling, a
clip across the head from his mother and Fadah loudly declaring she had
an earache as an excuse to return to her mother’s tent and continue
watching television.
Importantly, et-Galiya was present and heavily pregnant at this time. Abdel’s party was a rare occasion to host male friends in a modest celebration of how he felt happy about life at that moment in what might otherwise be caught in a frozen photograph as a scene of male patriarchy and female domesticity. Despite the grumbling and rolling eyes, female solidarity empowered Abdel to have his party – notably in his mother’s hawsh right outside the cuzina, not inside her khayma or inside his small marriage bayt allocated as et-Galiya’s bridal space. Another frozen moment might have captured us women moving silently in the dark while the children ran back and forth to serve the flowing dishes. But these movements were to return back to et-Khira’s khayma, with piled plates of food to resume watching television, leaving Abdel calling out to the children to bring water for hand washing or coals for making tea.

‘Home’ therefore depends upon interpretation. A male’s primary home (or connection with and dependence upon home) is grandmother, mother and sisters’ clusters – with female blood kin. Married males acquire their second home in the bride’s khayma, created by his sadaq (dowry) provision, but do not always develop purely reliant relationships with this bridal khayma – the most dependable khayam are those of his female blood kin. Some husbands do permanently live in the bridal home, but these cases emerge from the contemporary setting of the camps, such as one of the shopkeepers I would stop to have tea with. Limam ran a little homewares shop and so was at home on evenings and weekends. This kind of job sedentarizes a male: he has been unable to establish wider economic links, or any with the economy that is linked to visiting foreigners. His expressed desire to get a job as a translator within Polisario (having studied at an Algerian university as a young man) would mean access to travel and wide-ranging economic opportunities (and Euros) related to overseeing a foreign visiting group. This household represents an exception to those like my host family, where there is a constant flow and absence of menfolk who have sought out and shared such opportunities. Limam is one of a growing example of those working within the camp infrastructure, becoming removed from their customary nomadic and subsistence mobility, and thereby changing their presence in their women’s tents.

I do not wish to overstate the idea that males do not live with their brides – there are cases of neolocal residence. But both the cultural
preference and the practical traditional lifestyle continues in the sense that most males do and still need to circulate widely and often in their search for entrepreneurial subsistence. In doing so, they vacillate between natal and conjugal *khayam* as they travel in that search, being most dependent on their more reliable mother-sister kin clusters.

As a single tent unit with or expecting progeny, Mokhtar and Baali are male heads of their respective tent units. This is why, when Baali comes home to et-Khira’s *khayma* compound, there is a slight and subtle ‘shift’ in behaviour and actions, with more circumspect ‘crossings’ into this one of three tents. Minatou and Aghla appear to come in less often, while Abdel and Mokhtar may come briefly into our tent at breakfast time and be offered *insbe* (barley porridge) by et-Khira, sitting beside the tea fire in conversation with Baali. But this is ‘male business’ — they are sharing news and subsistence information. Being present, Baali is the immediate and predominant male head of their sister’s own household. When Baali is not present, this tent unit shifts back to being part of a female cluster comprising Aghla and Minatou’s *khayam* — and here these blood-females reign in their matrilocal power, with their blood males matrifocally dependent upon and circulating through them. But there is also another very subtle shift in that the three senior males, Mokhtar, Abdel and Karim — in their son-brother-uncle bond to this female cluster — become the male protectors, as indeed do milk-brothers and unrestricted males in the absence of, or together with, consanguineal and affinal males.

Likewise, when Mokhtar visits his bride, he expects to enter her *khayma* compound with the respect due to being her husband and the father of their children, just as Baali does when he arrives and commands his place in a domain he is irregularly present in. Most usually good natured with an infectious laugh, he once got angry that we had brought the evening food and casually placed it down on the tent carpet, as we do for ourselves in his absence. He wanted the short plastic tables, one for him and his two sons to sit at, and one for us womenfolk. His barked instructions to correct this upset Fadah, who sullenly refused to eat and then cried. Baali, a loving and generous father in a 32-year marriage with et-Khira, wanted more acknowledgement that he had come home, with a decent meal and a show from his womenfolk (*and sons*) making a bit more effort on such rare occasions. And yet many other times, Baali contentedly ate from a plate on the floor with his wife, daughters and sons around him.
Divorce and male residence

The previous chapter showed that khayam compounds are women’s property and that Muslim inheritance prescriptions apply to everything else — but what is left over and above the ‘entirety’ of a tent household? When men divorce, they lose their bridal khayam cluster in that they lose the investment they made in providing the dowry to create a new family unit. On divorce, men return to their natal womenfolk, as did both Abdel and Mokhtar. Although they never left their female kin cluster and spent more time living with Minatou than their previous wives, their returns to Minatou as divorcees were subtle ‘tail between the legs’ events. Abdel remarried in 2010, as previously described, to et-Galiya, who continues to live with her parental family in Mauritania. Mokhtar remarried in January 2012, but he continues to live with Minatou and visits his new wife in a neighbouring camp from anything between few nights a week to a fortnight or so (depending on his irregular mobility, of course). By contrast, Minatou’s female kin cluster barely changes: in marrying, her daughters set up tent beside her (as most likely will her granddaughters), and her sons are still very much present, despite having remarried and invested substantial sums in their new bridal units. When Mokhtar and his wife have had several children, his wife’s household will appear the same when seen through the female perspective.

Although data on family history indicates that divorce was common in the past, one of the romantic, foreign ‘solidarity’ discourses about the Sahrawi is the ease with which they divorce today, and of women’s celebratory ‘divorce parties’. The Sahrawi co-opt and stimulates such commentaries to showcase their ‘civilized modernizing’ society for the obvious political reasons. However, I did not see such an essentialized divorce party during fieldwork, and the womenfolk spoke of it more indifferently. While I do not want to imply an opposite pole in the discussion of the exchange of women, I would instead suggest that, if there is any suggestion of ‘exchange’ occurring, it would correlate more to women’s perception of the ‘circulation’ of males through female tents. There is an underlying essence of husbands marrying out, becoming incoming males to someone else, rather than this occurring as any exchange of women.

Re-visiting the kinship debate, Parkin (2013) argues that there is evidence for greater internal unity expressed in representations of
kinship than past debates have recognized. ‘I have come to see sharing as a counterpart to exchange, as too the practice of retaining property within a family line and not alienating it to outsiders, so it is transferred by descent rather than exchanged (the heirloom).’ Using the concept of heirloom may better interpret Sahrawi marriage practices, especially of men focused towards and moving into (circulating) their matrilineages rather than of women moving ‘outwards’.

There is another analytical risk in seeing and seeking uniformity: that of placing too much distance between formal Islamic patriarchal ideology and Sahrawi matri-focused practice. Not only does Parkin perceive that there is an ‘everyday life outside and between […] events’ (2013: 20), but he points to the likelihood of interlocutors being sceptical of their own representations at the same time that there is a tendency for fieldwork to ‘latch on to the more (and relatively few) articulate’ interlocutors (2013: 19, footnote 12). In the following conversations, I attempt to show women’s perception of love, marriage and men entering their lives, but also the strategic variability of the everyday decision-making in Parkin’s ‘outside and between’ places of key life events.

Et-Khira and Souado described how:

In Sahra’, a man can divorce instantly, but the woman must go to the judge with a good reason, and then he can make the man divorce her [citing Islamic prescription]. If the man divorces, he leaves the bayt/khayma. He paid for everything, he has to provide it all to a woman at marriage, but he has to leave it all to the woman and the children. And she must wait for al iddah before she can marry again. If he says he wants to reverse the divorce, she has to accept, but if he does it after al iddah she can say no. If she says yes, he has to pay as-sadaq again, otherwise she can marry another man. Or in Sahra’, she can also choose not to marry and just live in her bayt/khayma and raise her children. He has to pay to raise his children with her. […] In a’adat (past traditions), yes, the women made a big party. Especially to wear a beautiful melbfa, she could find another husband. But now in Sahra’, not many make this party.

KI: Did this mean that women were allowed to remain unmarried, especially if they were still fairly young?
This is interesting [with a lowered voice and laugh]. Many women here say only marry to have children. Once a woman has children, then she has lots of people to look after her in old age. [So is mother more important than father?] No, no, the children must have a father. Many people want to get married again – it is good to have a husband, if he is a good man. But a woman can divorce, and she will keep the children and sadaq. She is near her ‘a’ila [family], and her daughters will stay when they marry. This makes many grandchildren to look after her. Yes, her sons will move to the bride’s ‘a’ila, but maybe some sons will stay and bring a wife. Look, Abdel brings et-Galiya here. But Mokhtar is going to her family in Layoune camp.

In practice, most men oscillate between bride and mother. Although families will develop great affection between them, men care for their children in the bride’s tent. Many young women expressed great love for their fathers, and as will be seen further on, the khayma is usually identified by this affinal male’s name. Nevertheless, Mokhtar’s marriage illuminates the sensitivity regarding where a male’s residence is located. I prefer to see it as a flexible mechanism that recognizes men’s manifold economic ‘investments/assets’ because of the nature of deep-desert subsistence:

Yes, when Mokhtar gets married, he will not be coming here for a long time. It is very rare that a woman moves to the man’s family. [In that event] there is a higher chance that if they divorce, he might tell her to leave the khayma . . . this would be in or nearby his parents. So women prefer that the new husband moves to her family compound. If she has to leave [patrilocal], she takes everything except the khayma, but they will often say ‘No’ and she cannot leave the khayma, but this means that she is near him, so it is very uncomfortable. So most likely she will leave his area.

The reference that ‘she cannot leave the khayma’ refers not just to the actual tent. While being allowed to leave physically and return to her mother (affinal men are unlikely to want to incur the wrath of a trapped bride’s menfolk), it would be difficult to separate out the full package of sadaq prestations in its entirety from virilocal possessions. While
blood-menfolk concentrate their economic energies on sustaining their blood-womenfolk and could well assist in building a returning divorced sister a bayt attached to their mother/sister’s compound, women seem determined to acquire their own satellite dish and cluster it next to mother and sisters. Men therefore need a political economy of affection cast across a wide geography, consisting of as many enterable tents as possible. Thus, while in the oral explication men will move to the bride and stay with her, this is heightened during the period of conceiving, validating and displaying a pregnancy. It is in both the bridal family’s and the incoming husband’s interests to activate and display his role as incoming head of the new household (and forthcoming progeny). And while his bride’s interests are nurtured by her menfolk, as is the new husband’s in his blood kin, this husband is technically entering the bride’s male kin’s territory. So while the new husband is publicly in attendance at his new bridal household, in a private capacity he is still materializing in grand/mother’s clusters where his brothers, sisters and aunts are. Fadah agreed that women have a lot of autonomy from these respects. Not only does the system seem to attempt to spread out the newly married units, Fadah also sees it as also trying to keep households demographically balanced:

... because the man gives everything for as-sadaq, but the women do everything else. The occasions when a woman does move to her husband’s area is if he is the only child, or if he is the oldest and his siblings are still children, or if he sits with just one married sister. [. . .] No, it is not embarrassing for the man [after divorce, to return to mother/sisters], this is normal, but yes, the man does not like it. It is good for him to re-marry and have his own tent again. But hard! He has to again buy everything for as-sadaq.

The relationship of a husband to his in-laws is illuminated by a very subtle and traditional etiquette within the bride’s kin cluster:

When a wife visits his parents, she wears the melhfa properly [Fadah demonstrated this by readjusting hers neatly around her hair and face]. Not speaking, well just a little bit, but it depends on the families, if the women are very close, then they are friends, but more if the father-in-law is sitting with them. And she can
make a good impression if she sits well to make good tea, but for the husband, it is different.

The first evening I was asked to come to Minatou’s tent for the first gathering around the dying Mbairkat, the semi-circle of respectful family and visitors ran in a semi-circle around the rear tent flap. Usually permanently closed, this was where a long-time female friend of the family had taken the lead role in tea-making. A while passed and Aghla’s husband joined us, kneeling through the rear flap and squeezing in beside the women. Some weeks later I remembered that he had refused the glasses of tea, sent round the gathering on a silver tray. Fadah explained:

A man never eats or drinks with his wife in the *khayma* of her mother and father.

KI: So when Aghla was sick and she ate and slept in Minatou’s *khayma*, I remember we were cooking for Brahim-Salem and took it to him in his and Aghla’s *bayt*. He could not come to eat with her?

If he does go, he just sits. He should not eat or drink with her and Minatou in Minatou’s *khayma*.

I began trying to follow husbands’ movements through our cluster. One morning during Aghla’s illness, Brahim-Salem did come to join us for breakfast (in et-Khira’s compound), and Fadah explained that an external male could join the siblings of the married couple, but not the in-laws. ‘But, we rarely see Brahim-Salem here anyway. Aghla eats with us when he is not here; we take our food to Aghla’s *bayt* when Brahim-Salem has returned. He comes here very few times — he is always away for his work. When he comes home, he just wants to be with his family’. Underlying this is the fact that, while each compound constitutes a male head’s (husband’s) own household and zone of patriarchal influence, the compound is nevertheless part of a cluster containing all the menfolk of these incoming husband’s brides. By entering any of the bride’s sisters’ compounds, a husband is entering the matri-focused territory of these women’s protective and potentially threatening males.
Sometime after Mbaikrat had returned to his womenfolk and passed away, Fadah had remembered my surprise at this propriety of husbands. She told me to come straightaway to see Brahimsalem in Minatou’s tent, to see that he would not drink. He had come because his three sisters came to pay respects to Minatou, even though one of the sisters was making the tea. Fadah later whispered, ‘Did you see? They offered him a glass, but he said no to show respect’. When I asked if he had to enter from the rear tent flap, she said no, this was not part of it, but she thought it showed very good manners that he came ‘quietly’.

Observing my own host father, I noticed him only a few times in Minatou’s compound. During ‘Id al-Adha 2010, he slaughtered her two goats outside her rear gate, entering into her bawsb to carry the dead goats with the young boys to teach them how to skin them and cut them open. We ‘younger’ women floated around to watch, bringing bowls to put the meat in.

During the breakfasts that Baali spent with us, Aghla and Minatou joined us far less. One of us instead took the breakfast inshe in a plastic mug to Minatou. Yet on the mornings that Baali was not present, these two women tended mostly to be with us or at the very least pop in to talk or have a discussion. Only a few times did Minatou enter our khayma one evening when Baali was present, and Aghla did come at such times but far less often and for a much shorter time. I would not argue here that they cannot come into Baali’s presence, but rather that his time here is his time with his family — the compound momentarily comes under his physically present headship. And in essence, it is respectful to allow a husband and wife their zone of temporary privacy.

Milk brothers and unrestricted males

I have so far referred to the movement, presence and absence of ‘senior’ adult males (primary blood-males) who are the circulatory economic backbone. Younger males, however, also play an important role and circulate widely through women’s tents. Creating milk kinship is a customary means of extending family, whereby women will breastfeed another’s baby for a variety of reasons, such as illness, death or simple friendship (Isidoros 2017c). Although often done as acts of friendship and assistance, creating milk kinship enables women to cast a wider social network of relatedness, thereby extending and enhancing group
survival. Baby girls are breastfed, as my younger host sister Souado had been by a friend of et-Khira’s twenty-four years ago.

This ‘giving of children’ was described by my womenfolk as the normal *a’adat* of children being brought up in different households. Souado says:

> If there are two sisters, one is childless – she will share a child with this sister. One lady gave her first child to her sister. If a woman is sick or the child is sick, you know, these kinds of situations, there are sometimes reasons to do this.

There seems to be no fear of doing this among friends and family womenfolk, with children growing up knowing who their parents are. Instead the sense is of being raised by ‘extended’ members of the family, in some cases by unrelated persons who become nominal fictive kin by virtue of this. Descriptions of the spread of children at various life-stages of the growing family unit seem to show it occurring across households, without fear of loss, the surrogate ‘relative’ (rather than a distinctly ‘new’ mother) enjoying the raising of the child and relieving any pressures a mother may be encountering. This correlates with comparative analyses in kinship studies started by Ester Goody in West Africa (1973), notably her observations about further layers of kinship structures arising from various practices delegating child rearing (i.e. fostering) and how they blurred the lines between related and unrelated personhood. These serve to cement kinship ties in societies with little corporate property – of rich application to desert nomads, especially in relation to the much-discussed malleability of Arab genealogies.

However, among the Sahrawi it is with milk-sons that the practice is most noticeable because these young males will often use their milk-mother’s kin-clusters as a wider circulating net than their own blood female clusters, whereas females stay closer to home. Milk-sisters may retain a thin bond between each other unless they live in close proximity and therefore establish regular contact, whereas milk brother-sisters are most likely to meet and live alongside each other, as the breastfed young adult males seek their milk-mother’s clustering safe nodes in their life journeys.

Within my host family, two milk-brothers were present during four of the years I have known this family. Minatou breastfed Brahim’s father...
(still in the area under Moroccan occupation), and et-Khira breastfed Khadir, being good friends with his mother. Both boys come and go as they please in relation to their seeking subsistence, and as brothers to our *khayam* cluster, social formalities can be loosened in the direction of familial intimacy. Yet milk-kin, in their circulation through our cluster, also serve as additional economic sources and alternative/substitute male protective presences when the primary blood male kin are absent. During the spring and summer of 2010, when all primary blood males were absent except for Brahim and Khadir, the former slept every night in Minatou’s compound, and Khadir slept under the stars in our *hawsh*.

Although these males have yet to establish a regular and ample source of income, money passes freely between us, as it does amongst the blood-related males. Khadir easily presses a hundred Algerian dinars into my hand to buy something, as we do for him.

By ‘unrestricted’ males, I mean very young boys or early pubescent males – generally speaking where there are few sexual problematics. But fictive kinship can be quickly and easily formed. El-Baydou is a distant neighbour’s single child seeking company. Brahim, whose family live in Layoune camp, has no blood or milk kinship with my host family other than an old but thin thread of inter-familial friendship. Both have also been an unrestricted brother, nephew, son and grandson among us. These two milk-brothers and two unrestricted males, however, only circulate through our *khayam* cluster as our relatives, and are less liable to consider each other’s womenfolk as appropriate informal circulatory nodes. There are other unrestricted males under eighteen years old, who constitute ‘children’ and may come from across the camps for various reasons. Fictive ascription permits unrestricted movement among the unmarried female members of a family when these are young males of either a safe age, or where the need is so strong that everyone feels that domestic harmony and honour would not be breached.

**The patriline: The naming of children, tents and herds**

So if men invest heavily in the bridal unit, but lose *sadaq* on divorce and return to mothers/sisters, what do they actually have that they can call their own? Patriliny appears to sit without complications within a seemingly matrifocal system of social organization. The distinctly legendary Arab *patri*-focused image is contradicted when seeing this
system through women’s eyes – their menfolk are heavily invested in being matri-focused. In the use of patriliny, children are technically identified through their fathers. Such patrilines fulfil the application of Islamic socio-legal precepts and contemporary nation state identity conventions. Baali’s inheritance from his recently deceased father followed mirath (Islamic inheritance laws), and the father-husband’s surname is used on aid ration cards to identify women’s households. Yet with women near-permanently attached to their khayam, the matriline has an underlying softer (non-legal) identification and relational proximity.

Tents also are identified with a male head, but in practice this occurs flexibly with either a long-resident elderly grandmother or grandfather, or a well-known wife’s name. For instance, in one of my earliest field trips, I tried to find my current host family’s cluster. Using Baali’s name brought confusion, while using Minatou and et-Khira’s names identified ‘khayma Mbairkat’. On the whole, it was males who were more inclined to identify my khayam cluster with either Mbairkat or Baali. Not only will these male elders’ names be well-known between families within the tribal hierarchy, they are also likely to be remembered from the contemporary period of war (and renowned historical warriors) in which this now senior male generation will have become more familiar with fellow males across the war-coalescing tribal groups. Females tended to understand better with whom I lived if I used the names Minatou and et-Khira. When first trying to locate another teacher’s bayt, I could only do so using the name of his mother-in-law, well-known locally as a herbalist. Thus, ‘patriarchal’ markers are not so rigidly adhered to, which I think relates to ‘private’ males and ‘public’ females, a parallel female characteristic to such identification.

My womenfolk described the historical variations of nomadizing tents from predominantly female (due to the economic need for males to travel long distances for trade and more extensive herding) to shepherding tents that retained the majority of menfolk and moved as a near-permanently co-habiting unit. Minatou’s conversations are difficult to translate into writing: her elongated vowels, repeated syllables and short abrupt Hassaniya are both unique to her and characteristic of a long-past oral style of communication. However, accompanied by interjections from the family sitting enthralled around her, she uses items at hand (such as small piles of barley, some hair clips) to depict
khayam, herds, wells, territorial features and so on. She moves the items around the carpet to demonstrate how household units moved and grouped, with men moving back and forth over long distances from their herds and khayam. From these conversations she indicated that, in the past too, khayam, children and shepherded herds could also be identified with women, with tents belonging to women and aiding more stable identification.

Camel herds, historically and today, remain a primary high-value asset and provide illuminating analytical insight with which to follow the interplay between customary and conventional Muslim patrilineal inheritance rules. They are accumulated and held within a blood-family, with senior males controlling and inheriting them, ensuring notably that they are kept out of sight. Conversely, thousands of goat pens are dotted throughout the camps, usually somewhere nearby their owners’ khayam. Again, just like the earlier description of the residential areas, these livestock pens are visually unidentifiable to a specific family or built residence, unless one sees who visits them to provide food and water. Far less often, the goat pens are slightly taller and contain a camel or three. Minatou, et-Khira and Aghla share a part of the ‘buffer’ area at the back of the mechanics’ workshops, and once in a while one of the women will use some spare money to buy another goat, but they also buy goat and camel meat in the marca on a regular basis. These goat herds do not really form part of the larger familial herd-asset; they are usually just for barter, ‘practical’ food, and reflect a semi-subconscious desire and enjoyment among immobile women to have proximity to the traditional animal husbandry.

The camel herd owned by my host family belonged to Mbairkat’s lineage and is entrusted to a shepherding family in the badiya. Minatou and her daughters and sons discuss and decide upon the future of this herd as a customary practice (and, as demonstrated, women are authoritative figures), but under Muslim patrilineal conventions Abdel and Mokhtar have full control and ‘ownership’ even before Minatou’s death. These are subtle degrees of responsibility passed down from living elders to senior sons, and are dependent upon personalities and relationships. Nevertheless, et-Khira and Aghla let their opinions be known with full force, and the men remain matri-focused. This herd, symbolizing patriliny and applied using legal Islamic fiqh (jurisprudential schools) regarding inheritance, constitute one of the most vital
savings (assets) of this blood-related family. It is in Mokhtar’s and Abdel’s best interests not to ‘cheat’ their sisters, for, as has become apparent, they depend upon their consanguineal womenfolk, not their wives. Likewise, et-Khira’s and Aghla’s underlying trust is in their brothers-uncles-sons, not their husbands.

While et-Khira has a vested interest in her patrilineal herds through her patriline (the same patriline that her brothers share with her), the same will be true of her husband’s family herds in relation to his sisters. Childrens’ interests are served by both their patri- and matri-lines working (ideally) in the co-operative allocation of resources. At a divorce, a wife and husband will only retain the shared link of responsibility for the children (although family bonds and the love of children often retain or continue to make future inter-family cooperative arrangements).

Brothers need to keep their sisters because they can lose everything they invested in their wives, and vice versa. Thus there is a greater tendency towards brother-sister or son-mother’s sister interdependence than husband-wife. A wife may keep her entire dowry khayma and is situated alongside her consanguineal womenfolk, but losing a husband means losing his economic contribution. Women’s tents provide nurture and safety for highly mobile blood- and milk-males, thus ensuring sustained male contributions, with or without husbands. In this way women retain proximity to their male blood relatives (fathers, uncles, brothers and sons). If Aghla and et-Khira lost their husbands, Minatou’s carefully held-together female kin-cluster would continue to survive with its own sons and grandsons. Likewise, Minatou has remained self-sufficient by keeping the bonds of her sons and daughters, ensuring the kin cluster bond is transmitted down the generational line as a subtle matrilineal web.
The connections which men seek are vested in women and they are as strong or as fragile as is the determination of women to maintain or sever them. Women have in their hands a bundle of claims, and the man who can influence the use of these [...] gains a wealth of social assets. (Peters 1990: 124)

Studying the practice of Sahrawi male veiling is not only a chance to see men through women’s eyes but reveals striking features in relation to the practice of Tuareg male veiling and discussion about it among a small group of eastern Sahara scholars. My curiosity with this lineage of academic debate is twofold: none of the authors appear to discuss their own practice/experience of veiling during anthropological fieldwork, and they all stop short at the puzzle of women (and children) being unveiled.

Focusing on five primary authors on the topic, Rasmussen (1991) provides a detailed synopsis. The predominant hypotheses overlap and generally correlate male veiling with social conduct and expression: rules and ‘displays’ of formality and ceremony; moral values (takarakit, translated variously as reserve/respect, honour, shame and embarrassment); and Islamic doctrinal prescriptions for modesty. Likewise, connections have been made with class and age-sets. Keenan (1977) argued that the tagelmust was related to the higher socio-political status of men over women, whereas Murphy (1964) saw male veiling as an
idiom of male privacy creating symbolic social distance, and Claudot-Hawad (2005; 1992) similarly points to men’s dangerous encounter with the ‘wild’ of the Sahara. Casajus (1987; 1985) and Keenan (1977) also considered veiling as preventing evil spirits from entering the body and pollution from bodily secretions such as saliva. I do not contest these reasonable interpretations; where I pick them up is the point at which all these scholars acknowledge that these do not explain why women and children do not veil.

The Western Sahara data fills this gap because Sahrawi women do wear the male Sahrawi *el-them*, from which the above hypotheses appear as valid. However, correlating the significance of women’s practice of veiling and the female-regulated ‘entry signal’ and ululations with male veiling, a fresh insight emerges into my concept of the female *makhzan* and the guarded male.

### The male *el-them*

Sahrawi men, not women, are the principal and traditional wearers of this head covering, the *el-them*, which closely represents the Euro-American conventional interpretation of a Muslim-Arab veil. It is a piece of cotton fabric between three to four metres long, and is wrapped around the head and face using one main folding and wrapping technique. The predominant visual image is of the entire head, face and neck being completely covered. This leaves a narrow opening between the folds for the eyes to look out from, making the eyes hard for an onlooker to distinguish through the opening. Attention is paid more to fitting it comfortably than to any particularly obvious variations in fashion.

Its short range of commonplace functionality serves two purposes: as a religious prescription to cover the head, and as protection against the sun, sand and wind (as with women’s *melhfa*). In its most basic but primary arid-zone climatic functionality, the two main folds around the face can be adjusted quickly, the upper fold being pulled down from the forehead, the lower fold up to the chin or the nose. Other adjustments can loosen or tighten it, and its simplicity means it can also be dismantled quickly and easily in such a manner that it appears to fall apart into the hand, unlike the complex unwinding of the *tagelmust*. In agreeable weather, it is more loosely wrapped around the head, with the entire face and neck open and visible.
In bad weather (sand- and powder-storms, cold winter, the high summer's heat), men tightly cover their heads. Sahrawi say they feel the cold easily and can discern the smallest changes in temperature. The *el-them* is used to maintain balanced body heat. Wearing it firmly around the head, covering nose and mouth, in high summer temperatures of over forty degrees centigrade it is not suffocating to wear when breathing and body movement become slower. The layers of fabric create a thermosphere, balanced against the outside temperature. This works on the same principle as wearing warmer clothes to build up heat and stay warm — as does staying cool (a balanced heat) and drinking hot tea. Notably, the *el-them* is made of black cotton with high heat absorption and retention qualities, a preference also found in the traditional handmade tent made from the darker coloured camel hair rather than lighter coloured goat hair. The *el-them* is used as much in August temperatures reaching at least fifty degrees Celsius as during January’s zero-to-minus temperatures. During the cold winter months, the brown Moroccan style *galibiya* is worn, made of coarse woven goat hair with a pointed hood. I understood this came originally from the High Atlas region, spreading into the western Sahara and Mauritania through the historical cross-flows of regional trade. It also serves as a useful cloth on a person to aid with chores, such as lifting hot items like the teapot, drying a washed face and so forth.

Figure 6.1  Male veiling with the *el-them*. Photo courtesy of author.
Sahrawi men prefer a narrow range of fabric colours in khaki, black, light blue, white and dark indigo *nile*, but there are differences in the meanings of these colours. The black *el-them* is considered the historically and contemporaneously symbolic colour of the Hassaniya-speaking socio-linguistic group. The khaki colour appeared sometime in the mid-twentieth century as a form of modern military camouflage. The indigo *nile*, with its un-fast dye, also a historical fabric, carries the same special connotations as for women. Although white is usually used by male elders and poets or for smart occasions, and the light blue has a historical connection with Mauritanian Sahrawi, both have come to be widely used with the matching blue or white *dara’a* robes, as worn by young men for weddings or ‘Id celebrations. In everyday use, the *el-them* is worn with Western male attire – trousers, shirts, jumpers and jackets.¹

The two ways of wearing the *el-them* described above (either fully concealing or displaying the face) also occur at times and in social settings where climate variables are not in play. As the following general survey shows, this range of use initially appears to have no obvious rules in terms of time, location or company. At cultural-political festivals and annual parades, where foreign delegations are likely to be present, a range of combinations are worn. Sahrawi onlookers will be in everyday clothes, either bare-headed or with the *el-them*, soldiers in military camouflage uniform with either matching caps or the *el-them*, and officials may be in a smart *dara’a*, bare-headed or with *el-them*. All men of fighting age are a dormant military force. Males often wear camouflage trousers in everyday use. When Minatou’s elderly male friends come to play cards, again there is a range of ordinary clothes and *dara’a*. And there is the same varied use of the *el-them*, either placed on the floor beside them, or wrapped loosely around their necks, easily close at hand to wipe eyes, cover a sneeze or hide a yawn.

In a spontaneous walk with a few members of my host family to watch the large communal prayer of ‘Id al-‘Adha in 2011, a beautiful day of gentle weather, none of us dressed up, and my host father neither wore his *el-them* nor joined the approximately five hundred males seated in the open-air congregation. We simply stood on the side-lines with many others to watch for twenty minutes or so before heading back home. Surveying the congregation, aside from a small group of soldiers present in military camouflage, the seated male congregation seemed like a sea of blue and white *dara’a*, heads either bare or with the small range of
el-them colours. Of those who were veiled, some faces were fully covered, others were not. At marca Lahbib, the shop that we go to almost daily, the owner Lahbib never fully uncovers his head, although his el-them is always unfolded enough to leave his face entirely visible. Throughout the marca his male staff and other shopkeepers also almost always wear the el-them, but again with a range of folds. Accompanying my host father to a secluded military gathering of tribal elders at a base in the badiya, I noticed that all men wore the el-them, but some, including Baali, removed theirs and wrapped them loosely like scarves around their necks or placed them on the floor or table beside them. The remainder adjusted their folds to reveal their full faces — no one stayed obscured.

Living with Saleh and the other young UPES males in Rabuni, I found that there appeared no obvious rule as to why they chose not to remove their el-them inside a bayt, except if they were cold or expected to leave soon. One afternoon, an elderly man came in quietly at a time of tea-making. He sat with us and, after the long greeting, during which he removed his el-them, he was introduced to me as one of a small group of the most senior founding tribal leaders of Polisario and a renowned war hero during the early Western Sahara conflict. None of the young UPES males present changed their el-them (some wore it both tightly or loosely, others did not), but we did all slightly adjust our lazy laying positions, and I checked my melhfa (as women do) at the sound of a stranger’s entry greeting. On another occasion, early one evening Salah and I walked to the basaga to get a ride to another camp. Salah was fully veiled, and he stopped in polite conversation with an elderly man wearing a blue dara’a and with his el-them off the head, around his neck. Walking away after this brief exchange, Saleh explained that this elder was the President of the Parliament (and another of the early Polisario founders). Likewise in the family khayma, young unrestricted males arriving for an hour or a whole day, or Uncles Abdel or Mokhtar hurriedly dropping by to sit and eat breakfast with us and talk to et-Khira before they leave, or joining us more leisurely of an evening, may keep their el-them tightly bound, loosen them or take them off completely.

‘Bah, a very ‘traditional’ man in his late fifties, never takes his el-them off in public even among fellow males, and usually wears a nile el-them, rubbing its indigo un-fast dye on to his face, neck and hands, and using traditional kohl to blacken his eyes. ‘Bah was someone with whom I could talk about the theories in eastern Saharan scholarship of veils
as protecting against *jnun* entering the body, mouth or nose (cf. Casajus 1985). While he excitedly agreed, offering his own similar interpretations, he also emphasized function relating to desert weather and the Islamic religious meaning of *khawarim al'mur'a* (betraying a lack of respect) in baring one’s head. In wider conversations, younger men and women generally rejected the *jinn* explanation – they described medical symptoms such as catching a cold, sore throat and eye irritations as ‘entering the body’, but from Aeolian processes or cold/hot weather. Although I did not elicit explicit references to match the *jinn* thesis, it is likely to have been historically viable among the Sahrawi because of strong beliefs that *jnun* do indeed exist. Perhaps education and modernization among the Sahrawi has pushed such beliefs into a forgotten past alongside an unspoken avoidance of the ‘backward other’, given their modernizing and civilizing efforts and the critical scrutiny they are subject to.

Bah is teased by his fellow males as being old-fashioned and practising polygamy. He told me that veiling did play a part in keeping spirits and sickness from entering the body. Bah and several other Sahrawi also assisted me in gathering *jnun* stories over the years. After an initial shudder, they avidly share such stories, and on one occasion in the *marca*, when I was listening to a *jinn* story, it attracted a large group of shopkeepers and shoppers gathering around to hear it too, and to tell the stories they had heard, listening to each other’s tales with fascinated horror. These reactions of combined horror and delight are identical to Western reactions to ghost stories and horror films. *Jnun* are detailed in the Qur'an: both good and bad *jnun* were created by Allah to occupy earth alongside human beings. ‘Good’ *jnun* are benign, mostly mischievous, but are still disliked.

Across the wider Sahara region, stunning photographs and films are made of the famous Tuareg nomads in the central eastern Sahara, portraying their exquisitely and complexly folded head veils. In particular, the dark indigo fabric (*nile*) they also preferentially use led them to become known romantically in the western world as ‘the men of the blue veil’ or ‘the blue men’. Like the Sahrawi, the Tuareg also traditionally wore the small colour range of khaki, black, light blue and white. To both socio-linguistic groups, the *el-them* is an instant and historically traditional symbolic marker of identity. However, Sahrawi definitely say that the black *el-them* is synonymous with them and not the Tuareg. The UPES males often pointed out to me that Sahrawi youth
in the Moroccan-occupied side of Western Sahara wear the black *el-them* as a clear identity signal and a symbol of their resistance to occupation when engaged in protests or the secret spraying of resistance graffiti in a politically provocative act (Isidoros 2012). These youths are often referred to as ‘militants’ in Sahrawi political and youth activist discourse, but this relates to political protests and campaigning on international law and human rights, not terrorism.

There is a distinctive comparison between the Sahrawi *el-them* and Tuareg *tagelmust*. The latter’s intricate folds provide something structurally concrete for the analyst to latch on to, something ceremonially ‘fancy’ as a starting point in contacts between scholars and interlocutors. Austrian anthropologist Ines Khol (2009) illuminates how young Tuareg males express their masculinity and beauty by increasing the elaborateness of their traditional dress. In contrast, the Sahrawi *el-them* is plainly unelaborate and ‘shabby’ (in casual imprecise comparison, of course). For some reason, unlike the Tuareg the Sahrawi have a markedly different reasoning in dress, behaviour and dialogue: not to be spotted a mile off, and to minimize any display of status and wealth. Moreover, the fact that Western exploration historically tended more to the central-eastern Sahara, that Spanish and French colonizers did not penetrate the western desert administratively to the same extent and that this became further inaccessible to visiting foreigners during the 1975–1991 war may explain why historically Sahrawi culture has not been captured as romantically and prolifically in photographs and film in the same way as for the Tuareg. These minimal feedback loops from external influences may also explain why the Sahrawi *el-them* never became ‘fancy’, unlike the case of their Tuareg counterparts, who appear more used to expressing the finer details of the *tagelmust* to outsiders and scholars (Bourdieu’s ‘conscious aim [to] express mastery’, 1990: 53) and to whom these scholars ascribe social class and age-sets to different *tagelmust* styles. While the visually striking and thus more noticeable *tagelmust* offers greater attraction to the eye, the Sahrawi *el-them* may suggest less affectation.

The audience for the Sahrawi has become more intense since the 1991 ceasefire, having the character of an international legal, political and humanitarian form of ‘solidarity’ (not the colonial-turned-touristic nature of Tuareg contact with outsiders). *Et-tay* (tea) and the *melhfa* have quickly but only recently become embedded and performed
(Bourdieu’s ‘expressed mastery’ again) by both parties in the narrative about the Sahrawi pre-configuring a nation state, the struggle for self-determination and the finely negotiated line of syncretic historiography between civilizing modernity and cultural heritage. To illustrate, *et-tay* has become constructed into a story about failed decolonization, whereby the making of each small glass narrates a journey from political bitterness to sweet freedom. The *melhfa* has been literally woven into the fabric of social reform in terms of women’s equality, literacy and strength of character. To a lesser degree, the *dara’a* robe epitomizes something male and something traditional. All three have gained momentum and prominence as cultural symbols of traditional regional identity during a modern period of transition to nationalism. Visitors are proudly shown how to wear these garments and make *et-tay*: the fabrics and colourful teapots are frequently given as cultural gifts to departing foreign visitors. Female visitors may also depart the camps with henna on their hands and feet. This is obviously a wider ‘Arab cultural’ symbol, not specifically Sahrawi, but nevertheless another ‘gift’ of cultural heritage.

Figure 6.2 Women wearing *melhfa* and in customary seated position to make *et-tay*. Photo courtesy of author.
Conversely, the *el-them* has not become as powerfully synonymous to an external audience for the Sahrawi as the *tagelmust* has for the Tuareg. Instead, the *el-them* is still very much a tacit Sahrawi ‘internal’ artefact and associated practice. By ‘internal’ I mean private, undisclosed: it has not yet been ‘externalized’ for external ‘consumption’ by foreign observers. Unlike the Tuareg case, it has not yet been ascribed any big meaning; it remains meaningless to the external vocabulary. The colonial period and war years (before the 1991 ceasefire) produced few visual images of the Sahrawi; and although the Sahrawi ‘guerrillas’ and the *el-them* were portrayed romantically, no one referred to the latter as a *male veil*. In contrast, women are enthusiastically written about as *unveiled*. These early collections of photographs, films and books can appear as if they were widely available prior to the 1991 ceasefire because they are now easily available as archives. However, few pre-ceasefire commentators of the Western Sahara conflict actually visited the war zone. The large volume of images and texts about the Sahrawi has grown since the ceasefire with the year-round visitors to the Tindouf camps.

Although male interlocutors emphasized function as the predominant reason for the *el-them*, younger males sometimes offered explanations about privacy, concealment and handsomeness (manliness), where it completes and makes elegant a man’s presentation of himself. There is a sense not only of the flirting virtues of the *el-them* for both men and women, but also of the equal mystery of the young man underneath when he catches the eye of a young female or to his bride. In these conversations Saleh said that the same mystery applied to women. I asked him his thoughts of Saudi women’s body and face coverings (*abaya* and *niqab*), in comparison to the colourfully patterned and less concealing Sahrawi female *melhfa*. He replied that he thought the former made women extremely beautiful, but felt Sahrawi women and desert Islam to be less extreme than in such Arab countries.

I admitted my astonishment on a previous occasion when he had shown me a photo of a female best friend. After her marriage, a small portrait had been arranged at a local camp photographic shop and copies given to her circle of friends. My surprise stemmed from the pose of her head and shoulder, since she was wearing the transparent black *nile* with full-length bare arms and one shoulder visibly uncovered. At the time I was sure I had misheard and that this could only be his fiancée. Saleh rejoined with irritated surprise:
We are all friends from childhood—these photos were given to our families. Our parents see it. This photo is of her beauty and success in marriage, insha’allah soon she will have a child. Yes, it is not for strangers, but it is not haram between us. […] No, I would not mind if my fiancé makes such a photograph. I will too, in my dara’a. […] I will have a good el-them, to show my youth for when looking at it when I am old [laughter]. These photos are celebrations. I love this photo. I see the change in her face, her pride to have married. I want my fiancé to have this happiness in her face.

His equating the two photographs together makes it clear that both are dressing up, not the female uncovering. I was completely wrong to see the female showing a degree of nakedness. This revealing marriage portrait illustrates the pride, attentiveness and concern among close friends and family of each other’s life stages and biological changes. While the body’s decency is preserved within appropriate frameworks of social acceptability, intimacy with the personal aspects of life serves to attest that decency. The generic terms public and private create two extreme poles of a space in which there appears nothing in between. These photographs show that understanding the many degrees of intimacy along that blank ‘in between’ (Parkin’s ‘outside and between’, 2013: 19) better illuminate the range of warmth by which confidential details can be displayed – the humanness of interaction. The mutual presentation of each other’s intimate and socio-biological life changes serves as both evidence of achievement and a display of dignity (honour). A ‘private’ contains incommensurable layers of other publics and privates, and vice versa.

I discern the el-them as still captured accidentally by virtue of its quiet presence, rather than for its aesthetic beauty or ‘big’ meanings. The Sahrawi are not headlined as ‘men of the black veil’, the focus being on their modern political problems as ‘the last colony of Africa’ and ‘the forgotten conflict’. Yet the el-them is as popularly given as gifts and enthusiastically donned by visitors (‘connoisseur’ visitors can be spotted wearing the el-them on heads on outbound flights and around necks on inbound flights), for whom it conveys visitor authenticity and authoritative experience.³ It remains situated as a functional item not held up to, nor divorced from, the modernizing, civilizing and
nationalizing narrative. And while it is (romantically) associated by Sahrawi audiences, with themselves as historical desert warriors on camel-back and contemporary ‘Cuba-influenced’ guerrilla fighters (the latter preserved by small collections of black and white photographs and cine-films of Spanish colonial personnel), I have not still heard any mention of it as male veiling. What I do hear is high-frequency praise that women do not veil with the melhfa, or rarely, soft-noise complaints about ‘religious’ female veiling.

Given this very minimalist, disinterested and indirect quality to the el-them, there seems to be little of it to catch hold of analytically beyond the ‘uniqueness’ of unveiled women. Without the tagelmust’s complex folding techniques, elaborate decoration or ceremonial meaning, I have to start from the very basics of the el-them. Thus from fieldwork experience, this is a garment that has to be worn for its rudimentary simplicity to be understood. The very functional minimalism and understated-ness of the Sahrawi el-them is not comparatively ‘disappointing’, but should offer much to the ethnographer willing to experience veiling corporeally and discover its richness in the Maussian and Ingoldian senses.4

On the topic of modesty, I encountered a stress on the importance for male haya’ as much as for women. Asking Saleh why, when our UPES team slept as a large group together, I had noticed they did not undress when getting under their blankets,5 yet he discreetly removed his shirt when he and I worked and slept in Fatma’s bayt, he replied that, as unrelated males, personal dignity meant an unwillingness to reveal their bodies to each other. Yet alone with me:

For you to be here means we must be mahram. It is not just your modesty; it is of Baali’s and mine, everyone involved, I have a fiancé. You are like my sister. Otherwise the situation would be impossible. There would be embarrassment for me as for you.

As an older married female, Fatma was like a mother-sister to Saleh, and in our private informal times with no risk of strangers arriving, she dressed loosely in front of him. From this survey of when and where males veil, it is clear that most adult Sahrawi males nearly always wear the el-them across a broad range of temporal and spatial terms, and that even when not worn, the el-them is close at hand. Males consistently
insisted that there is no restrictive prescription and that it is worn in a purely functional manner for religious and climatic reasons, with an element of personal choice regarding when they want to wear it or not.

There appear to be no obvious rules to wearing the *el-them* and little to distinguish which times and places males choose to cover or display their faces. I do not want to seek depth where there is none, where Sahrawi males do not recognize any ‘big meanings’ or seem uncertain how to elucidate the minutiae of habitus. However, subtle variations and adjustments do exist which occur at times when arid climatic conditions are not at work. These subtleties kick into play as (and actually do feel like) a range of communicative adjustments as corrections of composure and conspicuousness (cf. Khuri’s ‘first among equals’ 1990). And it is at this meaningful stage that we return to women – how women use, describe and teach others how to wear the *el-them* illuminates these subtleties.

**Women and the *el-them***

A revealing aspect of the academic debates in eastern Sahara scholars’ attempts to elucidate the male veil is their own acknowledgement that such explanations fail when applied to women and children operating within the same set of variables. Regarding the connection between methodology and corporeal habitus, few eastern Sahara scholars investigating Tuareg male veiling communicate their own personal experience of wearing it, except for Rasmussen. Furthermore, she distinguishes three crucial aspects: the study of veiling as ‘social practice, rather than in isolation as static icon’; of men’s face veiling and women’s head covering (inverting the gendered trope); and her central argument that Tuareg headdress (both male and female) is ‘a metonym for a larger whole; access to property.’ (1991: 101). My field experience as a female ethnographer required me to wear both the female *melhfa* and the male *el-them* daily as Sahrawi women do, which accordingly informs my observations and critical engagement with notions of veiling. In parallel, in line with my seeking to avoid interrogative questions, already noted, I found Sahrawi males did not refuse to answer as such but disinterestedly shrugged off my understated enquiries about the *el-them*, redirecting (or deflecting) me to ask the women. Both genders, and both adults and children, did take an interest in being my teachers of
customary culture, and both did share the task of slowly elucidating the ‘insignificant’ details of how to wear these clothes.

None the less I mostly learned through unhurried practice and ‘indirectly communicated’ (Hendry and Watson 2001: 1–16) instructions about dressing, such as physical adjustments made by reaching across to my clothing and signals for me to mimic readjustment. Veiling as dressing contains a quality of unspoken practice possessing its own form of communicative language — Bourdieu’s habitus as knowledge that may ‘go without saying’ (1990: 66–7) and as a kind of genuine knowledge which is located non-discursively in both logical practice and practical sense (his ‘bodily know-how’). Receiving directions indirectly conveys a consciousness that may not be strongly expressed (or at all), or as a greater consciousness than habitus, such as when people deliberately hint rather than say something explicitly.

My stress on habitus relates to what the ethnographer is trying to learn as a new habitus — mastery as an unconscious practice, although that is not to say it cannot also be learned and used as explicit and therefore consciously. Moreover, to learn how to dress, I had to rely upon learning its un/conscious habitus as both topic and tool in the sense that ‘the practical acquisition of those dispositions by the analyst serves as technical vehicle for better penetrating their social production and assembly’ (Wacquant 2011: 81–2). As Wacquant observed of his field study of prize-fighting in a black American ghetto, habitus involves and requires a ‘practical mastery’ which ‘operates beneath the level of consciousness and discourse, and this matches perfectly with a commanding feature of the experience of pugilistic learning, in which mental understanding is of little help (and can even be a serious hindrance in the ring) so long as one has not grasped boxing technique with one’s body’ (2011: 86).

To close this point, I also draw on Ingold’s concept of ‘being alive’ (2011: 33–50), which explores and questions the ‘doing’ of anthropology barefoot or with cramped booted feet. I find this especially insightful for my field site, where the very ‘nature’ of the site is so tactile and sensory. As the next three points show, an analytical study of who veils, why, how and when (and especially what is and is not a ‘veil’) is restricted if it does not incorporate the unspoken habitus and greater consciousness of it all. The fold of a veil might be raised very slightly at a certain type of taste of powder in the air signalling an equally slight
change in Aeolian processes. But, people will say ‘yes’ if they like the sound of what they hear when the same slight movement of that fold is ascribed to a complex meaning (cf. ‘the emperors’ clothes’). On the other hand, there is a fine line when interlocutors feel under pressure to find the right vocabulary for something that is unconsciously habitual for them. How can one see (and describe) something that one does not notice? This is best illustrated in my conversations with Sahrawi males about el-them. They would tire of struggling to find something descriptively concrete and suggest ‘Why don’t you ask the women? They also wear it.’

In outside settings, perhaps at a large cultural-political festival or in the marca, at any climatic time of the year, Sahrawi women can be seen cocooned in the melhfa as an enveloping body veil incorporating additional layers of jumpers or jackets, thick socks and gloves, the latter for warmth and protection from the sun and dust. Wrapped around many female heads is the el-them, sometimes in its traditional small range of colours and at other times as a patterned piece of cloth that fashionably matches the melhfa. It is bound around the female head in a marginally different way but has the same modes of adjustment and function as for men. It’s somewhat different appearance is more due to the fact that it does not arrest the eye in the same visually striking manner as the image of a fully veiled male head, but melts out of sight between the coloured patterns of female fabrics. Nevertheless, the image of a fully covered female is striking in its own right.

Heated debates about the veiled Arab Muslim female imply the action of putting on a veil, but what about taking it off? If the above static image came to life in a moving film, it would show women unfolding the el-them from around their faces. This unravelling continues with other layers such as jackets, jumpers, gloves and socks to reveal the light, breezy floating melhfa in bright colours and patterns. Following these women into an ‘inside’ space such as a kbayma or bayt, or entering an afternoon wedding party, they would be seen with the draping fabric falling lightly around their heads to show hair, necklines, ankles and feet, or to reveal a bare upper arm that is raised in dance.

Within such public spaces as wedding celebrations, individual women enter the dancing square, clearly showing off their skills. Women’s dance movements include a momentary raising of a flowing section of the melhfa held briefly across their face, as coy an action as their
slower tempo of the same body movements found in the faster Middle Eastern belly dancing. There is no gender segregation, as joining these women are men often dressed up in their voluminous dara'a and complementing women's dancing movements with traditional male movements. However, here again most men appear to be wearing their el-them either fully concealing or displaying their faces or not at all. Among the guests are informally invited acquaintances and distant neighbours who crowd the celebratory tent's open flaps and the edges of the tent; these men and women often remain completely veiled and just pass by for a short while.

However, the subtlety here is twofold. For the men and women who are making a passing visit and/or are informal onlookers there is no need to 'unwrap'. However, unwrapped women are most likely not participating fully enough to unwrap to show they are dressed up, and these are usually very few; most women not only unwrap but will walk to the wedding unwrapped to show they are dressed up. On the other hand, men almost always retain some bit of folded el-them. For men, unwrapping the el-them is an intimate undressing of the bare head and face.

Sahrawi women habitually adopt the male el-them for the same functional purposes as men. Apart from climatic reasons, women have no customary or religious reason to cover their faces entirely; the melhfa sits loosely to cover the back half of the head and can be brought around the face if necessary. Women are customarily in full view in both 'inside' public settings and in certain 'outside' settings when they want to suspend the climatic functionality. The loose melhfa may constitute a female veil in the Euro-American trope, but it does something very different: it inversely serves to conspicuously display the female's full body and face. Conversely, for males, domains outside the matrilineal tent contain degrees of in between-ness, uncertainty and insecurity. Although on rituals Turner also notes a 'betwixt and between' domain (1967), there is a suggestive parallel for the term 'betwixt' between veiled males having to operate in the dangerous spaces of the Sahara (Claudot-Hawad’s ‘wild’: 2006) and Sahara-wide beliefs in jnun.

The previous chapters have illuminated men's customary (and historical) circulatory flows through the Sahara. Economically and politically, men are still engaged in high-risk and long-distance searches for subsistence, a domain in which they will encounter further circles of 'unknown' males. Likewise, matrifocal marriage patterns mean that
incoming men encounter their bride’s menfolk. Through fictive and milk-kin, women cast as wide a net of known males ‘under the same tent’ as possible (Isidoros 2017c). This not only increases the benefits to women of economically circulating men, it also forms women’s political economies of affection, creating increasing circles of known men out of strangers for women’s menfolk. While marriage does create degrees of marriage-fictive (non-blood) kin for incoming males, these are less certain and reliable, especially with divorce. Mother-grandmother-aunt-sister’s tents are the safest intimate tents in which a man is most likely to retain his protective blood-menfolk for life (also as the securest economic partners).

Not only must males negotiate their circulation through in-between spaces, they also experience regulations in circulation, which in turn organizes their assembly. The never far from hand el-them has a different role from women’s use of both it and the melhfa: it keeps a man inconspicuous and protects his vulnerability when he is ‘betwixt and between’.

Conversations with womenfolk, together with my own desk research into the earliest black-and-white film and photography starting from approximately the 1940s, indicate changes in male and female dress, but in simultaneously inverted ways. These conversations were first prompted by my watching Polisario’s television station on air for a few hours each evening, which uses the National Archives collection to create a weekly loop of heritage recollections of the past. The women’s interest in it grew as mine did. Minatou began joining us for these occasions and, intently watching the images, we listened to her explanations: from the different ‘Mohican’ haircuts of young children to identify them with their lineages, to the ‘old’ traditional costume of Sahrawi women. These are still worn today in the cultural-political festivals, the latter comprising two to three layers of thin white muslin tied around the waist creating a puffed-out skirt and a thin black muslin scarf loosely covering the upper torso and head.

Minatou remembered that, with no underwear in those days and both fabrics being the black and white transparent nile, pubic hair and breasts may well have been faintly discernible, a fact that became one of et-Khira’s salacious on-going jokes. The black muslin scarf wrapped around the torso also passed high above the head because, unlike today’s long hair clipped into a large bun at the back of the head (the ‘Dubai’ style),
the hair was plaited into a high bun on top of the forehead in which one could hide small valuables. Minatou still plaits her hair into this forward position, but keeps it flat under her loose melhfa. Another feature was the thinner, multiple plaiting of long hair adorned with beads and shells, especially around the front fringe area. Like the high plait of adult women, this fringe-plaiting for young girls is mimicked at cultural festivals and sometimes worn by contemporary brides, although now often pre-made out of synthetic fibres as a replica hairpiece attached with clips. Unlike the head-shaved patterns, female plaitting was not remembered as having any significance for identification.

During my research, melhfa fabrics have been described as coming from Mauritanian markets, as part of both late-colonial regional changes in fashion and the simultaneous Sahrawi rebuilding of war-fractured trading and the underlying ‘modernizing’ ideology of the early Polisario founders during the mid- to late 1960s. The melhfa conserves Muslim modesty and has come to symbolise powerfully the Sahrawi female’s equality and freedom and the ideological progressiveness of Sahrawi contemporary culture. The same historical archives indicate virtually no change in male dress other than the now rarely seen tribal head shavings of children.

In the same colonial photographs, those Sahrawi males who began living or working under Spanish administration begin to appear wearing Western male clothing. Notably these are nearly always photographs of them standing beside their colonial employers (cf. Isidoros 2017a). The contemporary increase in the purchase of the blue and white dara’a and el-them by mature men and younger males has occurred with greater post-colonial access to a cash economy. However, the el-them remains unchanged in its use and visibility.

Still, perhaps the most important observation is that in these bygone images only men are captured wearing the el-them. Women are consistently seen with their faces uncovered, and early photographers appear not to have captured moments when women might have veiled. Since the transition to the melhfa, women’s dress has retained its same unveiled nature. Although women appropriate the el-them for the same climatic reasons as men stated earlier, they also do so selectively in the same in-between spaces as for males. However, they do not do so in the same way that – socially, economically and politically – men need to. For instance, women can be seen fully veiled in the market or walking in
between destinations. The market is an ‘open’ area in the same way as it
is in the ‘wild’ (the high-risk trans-Saharan economy); it is not a public
area of (safe) private life. A wedding is a public area of private life, not an
‘open’ area, even though there may be strangers present.

When the climatic reason does not apply, women can be seen crossing
these in-between spaces in just their melhfa. Likewise, when there is a
wedding they can again be seen crossing the same in-between spaces
without being face-veiled, but dressed up in expensive melhfa or nile with
flamboyant gold and diamond costume jewellery and Lebanese Pop Idol
influenced makeup. Nor do they hurry when they walk, but can dwell in
their female groups and walk slowly to their destination. On a walk
across the wide dusty road in the camp centre to the library, I asked
Fadah: ‘Do you think those people over there would think that I do not
walk like a Sahrawi? Look, my melhfa keeps opening at the back.’

No that’s normal, and the melhfa moves OK when you walk, but I
always see that you look down all the time. We walk with our faces
up. [KI: But I am checking where I step on the stones and rocks.
I don’t want to trip over.] That is why Sahrawi women walk so
slowly, we step carefully but we never walk with our head bent
down. [A few moments later, with exasperation] You are doing it
again. Keep your head up, look forward.

On my trips into the badiya, when male drivers diverted to a khayma
spotted in the distance to stop for a rest, tea and news, these nomadizing
women did not cover up for us as approaching strangers. If they had been
wearing the el-them, they were doing so before either party saw each
other’s khayma or churned up tyre dust. This approach of strangers in
open desert is notable in that this population has historically comprised
groups unknown to each other moving through the area (see Figure 3.2).

Nevertheless, women also appropriate the el-them to attain anonymity.
In a response from Fadah, one morning in our kawsib I complained that
we had to put on the el-them just to go for a short trip to the marca, but
with Souado I sometimes did not:

Because I do not want to have to speak to everyone! Some people
have nothing better to do. I have my own time. We are just going
to buy eggs. [KI: So it is just eggs, we will be two minutes to the
marca and back?]. But I can’t be bothered to say hello to everyone [. . .] and keep stopping to stand and talk to this person and another and another. Ah, I remember I want to get some halawa from Najla. Maybe we will sit with her a short while in her shop and talk, OK? She was in my school [. . .] If we did this, we would be for ever in the marca. She speaks to everybody! Go with her, and you will return a week later!

Asking if we might also be discouraging possible male attention, Fadah reflected:

Well, I suppose so. But not just for this. [. . .] I do not want to waste my time being polite when I am not interested. And I don’t want people knowing my life. It is nobody’s business who is the other person in this shop or that street. I can’t be bothered with people’s questions. Some people want to just talk [meaning gossip]. If Najla is in her shop today, I am not going to take my el-them off. She knows me; we can talk the same with or without it. Otherwise I have to take it on and off, on and off. [. . .] Hey, I told you before, put the sunglasses over the el-them so they do not fog up.

The few male interlocutors who briefly thought about the el-them alluded to not wanting others to ‘know their business’. Acknowledging that even when fully veiled it was often possible to gauge a vaguely known person intuitively, there was still a sense of being anonymous and unavailable. Grandmother Minatou elaborated on a historically similar purpose of the el-them, namely to protect individual identity on the battlefields and during raids upon encampments. She described the rules of war as relating to what could not be plundered: females, children or the elderly, and the smaller subsistence herds kept close by, inside encampments. So too were the insides of women’s tents intended to be un-transgressable – a place in which valuable assets (children, livestock, the elderly) could hide and be saved. Compensation out of raiding plunder was customarily supposed to be allocated to the enemy in exchange the for loss of warrior-males on the battlefield or violating what could not be raided.

Having accepted a lift from unknown young males related to a wedding party, Fadah had dressed up in an expensive melhfa. Yet in the car, she had wrapped it el-them-like around her face in fully face-veiled
form; the remaining opening slit was covered up by large sunglasses. Whispering, I asked why, expecting it to be related to the unknown young driver and his friends, but she said she was not ‘covering’ her face. She was wearing it in its most visually ‘dressed up’ form and insisted on having photos taken. During the drive, she spoke without restriction, albeit shyly, to the young males; on arrival at the wedding tent, getting out of the car she removed her sunglasses, and the melhfa fell back off her face into its usual floating looseness. The effect was an unstaged moment displaying a magnificent outfit.

In the privacy of female-only company, as women-only time and space, when there is some guarantee that no men will appear, beauty treatments and relaxation do bring degrees of undress, although contained with the parameters of dignity. Et-Khira and Minatou rub homemade clove oil over their bare legs, torso and arms in front of us immediate female kin, although et-Khira openly breastfeeds in front of our unrestricted young males and milk-brothers, who will often lean over her to tease el-Mehdi affectionately by playfully pulling him away from her breast. Halawa also entails bare legs and arms on display as women exfoliate together, washed hair is brushed and oiled, and conspiratorial banter and gossip is shared.

Among non-formal female guests, conversations or napping may loosen the melhfa to show most of the head, accompanied by absently relaxing into slightly less decorous sitting or lying positions. A female may take her melhfa off in front of womenfolk if changing into or trying out new lemlabef as part of preparations to get dressed for something. For example, at a spontaneous late afternoon decision to attend a neighbouring wedding party, Aghla and Fadah were trying different lemlabef in our khayma with non-formal female guests present, during which all the women were engaged in avid discussions as to how much we should be dressing up, that someone’s preferred melhfa was too dressy and showing up someone else’s melhfa. But all that was privately visible were the trousers and T-shirts being worn underneath. On another occasion, et-Khira, Souado and Fadah had made a hopping excursion to Tindouf using the basaga. For a few hours upon their return, the three with Aghla shut the door of the bayt and went through the bags of clothes purchases, trying items on and swopping with each other. Minatou came to investigate the purchases and volubly enthused at the newly invented ‘sleeve-bra’ (two fashionably patterned sleeves attached
by elastic around the wearer’s back) enabling the appearance during summer high-heat of being fully dressed underneath the melhfa.

In learning how to dress, I consistently encountered this range of uses and manipulations of fabric and their unspoken communications. But these do not correspond to the Euro-American tropes of the hotly debated veil in relation to the Arab-Muslim woman, nor do they convey the ‘Islamizing’ change perceived by some insistent foreign observers. Photographs and observing moments can also capture – and mis-convey – scenes where males go bare-headed and women appear fully face-veiled. The epistemological enigma is what exactly is a veil and to whom? As I have argued above, the melhfa is and is not, simultaneously, a head-, face- and body-veil. It is also just a scarf, a loose bolt of cloth. It can be easily modified to sit more tightly around the head, to cup the chin (and body) with comforting ‘firmness’, and easily create el-them-like folds. The same enigma applies to the el-them. Are these really a veil in all the term’s mysterious and exotic features? What is clear is that the melhfa does not necessarily serve a need to make a woman inconspicuous. To further understand the subtleties of why males practice a greater reliance on the el-them, I will now look at two regulatory features of social organization.

**Signalling entry and female ululation: The regulation and assembly of circulating, veiled males**

On the one hand, living space is wholly communal, whether within a single household compound, across densely packed households in the modern urban space of the encampments or between the widely dispersed single or small tent clusters that still move through the badiya. These are living and lived-in spaces that may be entered at any time by any persons. For instance, in the badiya, where one travels long distances between tents, catching sight of a distant tent on the horizon is an opportunity for strangers to seek and request the provisions of rest, hospitality, supplies and news unless there is an underlying political reason to steer clear from specific persons, tribes or territorial areas (Figure 3.2). The fundamental principle of surviving in a desert is that geographically it is a living space containing far-flung persons occupying lived-in ‘rooms’ (geographical areas, tents). It is crucial to be able to stop at such resources. This same principle of rooms exists in the
contemporary urban setting of a densely residential refugee camp. And it is a higher proportion of the males who undertake the most frequent movements across greater distances through such ‘in-between’ spaces. Women’s tents form the gathering places at either ends of in-between spaces.

On the other hand, in both past and present settings, while any person may enter any space at any time, their entrance must be announced. So although technically one may argue conversely that this regulation immediately erases the open-all communality, there is a dual simultaneity in how it operates: both mechanisms work together at the same time. Only the shut door of the toilet area and the small storage makhzan are off limits, both with their obvious implicit meanings (body-privacy and asset/resource theft).

In the urban setting, where a tent has grown into a compound of additional sand-brick buildings (albeit small at present, but creating a distinct ‘enclosure’ or ‘compound’), signalling one’s entrance occurs a couple of times during deeper penetration of the household. The same was true in the past and still is today when moving through the badiya: at the earliest stage, one must be seen approaching in the distance – behaviour that enables both parties to gauge each other’s intentions and receptions from that distance. In a dense residential area distance is eliminated, and in many cases there is a front gate, so the orally signalled greeting occurs straightaway after the first close-proximity approach, including waiting at each ‘outside’ stage.

Although some tent clusters are enclosed by walls (see Figures 3 and 6), gates may be very low or open and easily seen through. Other tent clusters are without walls and entirely open to scrutiny, so when walking past one may survey the entire layout around the bawsh (a cluster’s ‘internal rooms’ are still separated by these open sandy areas, the bawsh). Yet more noticeably on the slowly expanded edges of the camps, tents are even more separated by wider distances between them and with lone out-buildings (toilet, kitchen) scattered around. These do not have a distinct enclosing wall or cluster around a bawsh, so that it is not easily discernible which lone out-buildings belong to which tent. For these the point of first entry is in the approach from a distance, and then literally outside a tent threshold, as in historical practice.

I will now illustrate how signalling one’s entrance works, firstly for full strangers and then for friends and relatives, before connecting this to
a discussion about female ululation and its assembling of males. Although here I break the signalling entry down into slow motion micro-moments, they occur very quickly and as ‘low noise’.

‘Salam a’alaykum’ is first uttered at the gate, and the stranger awaits the response ‘A’alaykum wa’salam’ before crossing the threshold and entering into the bawsh, trying to gauge if there is movement in the bayt or khayma to approach for the next signalling stage. If there is none, he or she will halt uncertainly and repeat the signal until someone calls back or steps out. If there is a responsive oral gauge, the person moves forward repeating the greeting at the bayt or khayma entry, and by this point there will be a clear response. The recipients of the entry signal will have been trying to determine the stranger’s identity and possibly first responding either to check what the person wants, or to send someone out to ask. An entirely unknown person is unlikely to come with much to offer, and there is a reluctance to respond on the basis that needs are only sought from known persons. If the stranger has been given the response to continue approaching into the bayt or khayma, the inhabitants will have rearranged themselves (satlain more decorously, adjusted clothing). If the person is definitely unwanted at the first entry signal, recipients remain silent, ignoring the entry signal or responding uninvitingly.

On entry into the living space, the long greeting which gradually incorporates full enquiries is undertaken unless the person is unwanted or very clearly an absolute stranger with no importance or need to the family, in which case the greeting is treated abruptly or allowed to peter out at its long end. If the stranger merely has a brief question as to the location of another tent, they would not have needed to enter beyond the gate, and the answer would be called out to them. Despite the fact that the style of tent flaps and bayt windows enables the occupants to look out secretly, I was often surprised that family members did not do so more often, instead lowering their voices to discuss who it might be and to call out asking what the person wants. Sometimes a child might peak through and give the adults an indication, but if anyone indicated serious alarm a young male might step outside, but most usually an extremely provoked senior female would face the stranger. My point is that the stranger will never really know how many males might be present. These are extremely subtle differences from exoticized stereotypes of ‘hidden women’. Anyone representing a threat will know
for certain that there will be any number of women present in any khabaya; it is the number of males present that is never certain.

On the occasions that the unmarried females in my host family were alone in the compound and we received a full stranger's signal, we would either stay silent or a female would reply simply saying that the person being sought was not present, signalling a disinterested response. If the stranger insistently signalled that they needed to speak to someone, then a female (contrary to western stereotyped perception) would step out to face the stranger, with the others interjecting with their voices from inside a room. As previously described, tents of absent adult males means women and children will need to be engaged in providing security for their kin cluster. Either way, the stranger would be unable to gauge the true force of either gender aggregate of those present. Thus for strangers the regulation of contact is straightforward, but for well-known persons the range of entry signalling becomes more complexly related to depths of relations and frequency of visiting.

The difference from the entry of friends and non-resident relatives is that I have not seen anyone be rejected in these cases. Such known persons are welcomed at all times, and the flow of the entry signal is entirely different, being affirmatively relaxed long before coming face to face. Friends and relatives enter the first gate threshold with the signal, and there is a smooth flow of positive signals back in that they are unlikely to need to hesitate or wait (unless they were not heard the first time). Children might run out or family members inside the bayt or khabaya begin a flow of chatter to draw the visitors in. They are easily able to gauge which room everyone is in from the unchanged movement within. The repeated signal at the next threshold becomes commonplace etiquette and receives continued affirmative responses – these entry signals become more like a short 'hi'.

Among immediate kin and resident relatives within the cluster, all may enter at any time. Males more often give the signal in case women are in a 'personal' state (such as brushing washed hair etc.). Minatou’s bayt, which is used primarily by the menfolk, can have a higher degree of signalling entry by womenfolk (especially young females), but this is because Minatou’s tent is often where visiting non-kin males are accommodated in the cluster. In fact, a specific bayt is commonly used for such males, so all females know to avoid it. Although my host sisters walk freely into Minatou’s khabaya, the signal is often given if entering
for the first time that morning or afternoon or if there are guests, but again more as a ‘hello’, unless Minatou has very formal guests (or kin that have not been seen for long periods), in which case the long greeting is made out of good manners. When Fadah returns before lunchtime from her morning at school or et-Khira returns from an external visit or aid collection, they give the signal primarily to check if anyone is home, more like a ‘hello?’ question. Close young unrestricted males (such as milk-brother Khadir or non-kin Brahim) often give the signal as they bounce into a room without very much hesitation. This has sometimes caught us young females out, such as when applying beauty treatments and having to shout ‘eh eh eh’ in the seconds before they enter, at which they stop but may jokingly pretend to continue entry in humorous mischief. Women, as permanent residents of households, have the right to enter any area: the emphasis is when men are present. In my host family, the occasions when young unrestricted males ignored the shout not to enter and continued to push a door or tent flap open at least to briefly see what was happening had more to do with the jealous possibility that they were missing out on something rather than any ‘patriarchal’ regulation of women.

Nevertheless, personality is a variable, as Fadah elucidated in a story of her Uncle Mokhtar’s bossiness. Some years previously, she had been left in charge of the youngest children for a week or so while Minatou, et-Khira and Aghla visited another camp, although all three uncles were still residing in Minatou’s tent next door. Uncle Mokhtar, however, took it upon himself to sleep protectively in et-Khira’s tent each night with Fadah and the children, and also hung around in the daytime. Fadah related that this annoyed her a lot and she was in a constant bad mood. While she did not challenge him openly and tell him to leave her to be in charge, when the elderly women returned she complained bitterly to Minatou and et-Khira: ‘After this, he will never do it again! Do you see that he doesn’t even stay for long in [our] cuzina!’ While she was suggesting that her mother and grandmother should have some effect on her uncle’s interference in the future, also at play is the general principle that adult men do not interfere in the adult women’s domestic domain. If Fadah gets married and sets up her own household next to et-Khira and Minatou, Uncle Mokhtar would most certainly only ever enter with prescribed behaviour, and never casually with a husband present unless in a suspended timeframe of
male affairs, such as the way Uncles Mokhtar and Abdel entered at
breakfast time to discuss things with Baali.

The entry signal is also issued by intimate family when entering
innocuous areas such as the purely functional kitchen in which little
time is spent, and therefore little personal behaviour occurs within it.
This also illustrates how the brief 'hello' format is still used as a simple
voice-recognition signal. This voice-recognition facet is also in play
when a voice in conversation can be heard (i.e. one's voice arriving before
one's physical self does), such as et-Khira, who often walks in through
the gate from a morning errand in part-conversation with herself, such as
to complain that the hawsh hasn't been swept yet. The lack of voice
recognition can catch one out, as illustrated by the sudden appearance of
my host father in the tent flap late one afternoon. The ticking sound of
his jeep's engine pulling up outside the hawsh gate is enough to trigger
activities related to father's arrival, and so he rarely orally signals entry.
On this occasion, having lent his jeep to someone who then cracked the
windscreen, he had left it at a mechanics workshop and very unusually
walked home. As normal, he did not orally signal his arrival and walked
in through the tent flap. His two eldest daughters shot up from the floor
and scrambled to sit next to their mother, who was sitting sewing
further back in the tent. This not only left me in the disrespectful
position of being a watcher of musalsalaat, but indicated to my host
father that I was watching musalsalaat with the tolerance of the women's
serene patience.

Entry signalling is more than just requesting and confirming entry
into an 'inside' area: it contains further significant action. Despite full
group communality, it is unreservedly inconceivable for any adult
gender to proceed forward into any place without clear signals
permitting him or her to do so. If one does not receive clear signals at any
stage, there must be a full stop in the advance so as to read the situation
and to re-signal, or to reverse and leave. Continuing to enter otherwise
can be tantamount to a full threat that will trigger an immediate shield
and fight response to display the potential full might. The underlying
significance of entry signalling is that its regulations are not male-
induced; they are female-enforced. This is especially so because men's
long-distant circulatory patterns means they often flow unpredictably
through women's tents. Likewise, young males follow cues from senior
females. My host mother will signal entry when I am studying on my
own in the *bayt*, but rarely can an exclamation on my part stop her from proceeding inside — as her daughter, there should be nothing for me to hide from her. A host uncle, however, should issue a courteous entry signal and must respectfully stop at a female’s alarm signal (unless he feels there is an untoward situation occurring).

This consequently leads to the practice of female ululation, which is rarely emitted by males. I have not yet found any scholarship on ululation. When emitted by males, it is done so jokingly and briefly, creating a slight reaction of surprise among those present. It appears to be distinctly a women’s tool. Now specifically here I refer to the female *alarm* ululation; the other type is celebratory and praising (if the two types are to be analytically separated), such as at political meetings, where it jointly rallies (celebrates and praises) the male occupation of war, offering men women’s vocal support. On some occasions, it has seemed a little like goading on the women’s part. Below I will describe two such occasions of the alarm in action: an unsignalled male entry, and a fight at a wedding. Although on a small scale (i.e. not on the scale of an encampment raid or battlefield), it is reminiscent of my childhood fascination for how termite and ant nests explode in furious challenge and defence (cf. Ardener’s use of the term ‘swarming’). Or, in an alternative vein, I draw on another specific reference made by Ardener:

... whether a segmentary lineage system is expansionary in tendency, the question is more complicated than it seems. Societies with such systems express the recruitment process through the image of continually branching genealogy. *Placed on its side its branches look like those in a model of successive multiple choices.* (2007: 125 my emphases)

I do not wish to challenge the following received wisdom, but wish to suggest a different female experience that is connected to Ardener’s nuanced observation. In classic anthropological debates about Middle Eastern tribe and kinship, the Arab proverb ‘I against my brother; I and my brother against my cousin; I and my brother and my cousin against the world’ came to be related to segmentary lineage theory. This was epitomized by Sahlins 1961 and Barth 1973, and although Aswad (1971) corrected the English translation of the Arab proverb, it still followed the premise of male-as-ego. Interpretation of this proverb has
focused deterministically on *male-initiated* assembly in defence and attack – the word ‘against’ in the proverb indicates this. I wish to offer an alternative understanding of this proverb in action.

Firstly, when emitted in alarm, the female ululation has the powerful corporeal effect and symbolic meaning of *triggering* the gathering together of males. An alarm ululation will immediately explode the nest, creating a domino effect by drawing circulating males to the female call and gathering in assembly. Although such ululation would of course also attract female attention, it is intended to implode the male part of the nest. It simply does not work the other way around – males do not ululate as a mechanism to rally each other or women. I wish to reposition this proverb with Ardener’s observation of the genealogy branch being placed on its side. This proverb always assumes ‘I’ (ego) is male. In the female alarm ululation, it is females who are activating a vast network of brothers, cousins and the ‘world’. The ululation is the script/encryption behind the proverb: the ululation communicates and draws together the increasing circles of relatedness, and the ‘I’ is the matri-focused system of women actively casting and rewinding a circulating system of males. Furthermore, males do not have an oral mechanism to gather themselves other than shouts or guns (or today, mobile phones) – *women* issue this piercing ululation.

The term ‘recruitment’ used by Ardener (2007) is meaningful here in two senses related to women’s recruitment of kin members as leading to their ability to assemble those members. Now males do, of course, ‘recruit’ each other, and arguably wives and children, and they can raise alarms and gather fellow males. But it is women who create, cast and summon the recruitment net. Blood-kin and milk-kin can only be by the female and her breast. Fictive kin ties can, of course, be formed by males among themselves, but the place in which the cementing of such relationships (and the *making* of genealogy) is legitimated is through a (woman’s) tent. Given that males need to circulate widely through women’s tents and that the tent is female property as a little resource-laden *makhzan* (treasury), legitimation of the various forms of kinship may thus arguably occur through blood, the breast and the tent.

During early fieldwork, I tried to cement my ‘kinship’ to the family by conveying to my host father that I considered him to be a father to me (I assumed ‘the male head of the family’). He quickly laughed this off and rejected this role. Yet from the start of fieldwork, his wife’s kin
cluster regularly made references to each being mother, grandmother, uncle, aunt, niece/nephew and brother/sister to me. Particularly my two eldest host uncles, who from the outset were insistent that I save their mobile phone numbers in my phone should I need help, regularly made affirmations that ‘we are family’ and often asked if I needed more writing pads or some money. The point structuring such connections is that all participants possess resources useful to each other and that these are fully exploited. My host father was guardedly delineating my kin-making to his wife’s women’s tents, and not to his own female blood-tents – a diversion of my resources to one or a protection of the other? For some reason, he positioned me in his bridal unit. Males carefully guard their own blood-tents, while women proactively try to expand them. This natal kin cluster legitimated kin-making as everyday practice, positioning me as ego within the living genealogical chart from which I could employ the appropriate kin terms to them, but my host father distanced himself from inserting me into his own biological womenfolk. If we shift the lens slightly, he was in fact inserting me into the short range (recent) section of his patriliny (as ego to his sons and daughters), but not to his older blood matriline.

Secondly, males not only assemble themselves to protect life-system assets under threat, they forge and facilitate them economically and politically. In the design/idea of gradual degrees of relatedness (blood, milk and fictive), genealogy (or Ardener’s ‘multiple choice’) correlates with the trans-Saharan economy in terms of intertwined forms of economic and political survival to make ever-increasing circles (not decreasing or static ones). Are there none the less ‘losers’ in this process? Yes, although it is extremely rare due to the pre-eminence of group survival. I encountered one such case when using anthropology to write an expert report for the UK immigration court about a Sahrawi asylum-seeker. My ethnographic data indicated that this individual was the last vestige of a tiny tribe. This occurs in and through women’s tents in what I think of as women’s economies of affection. Males may make their own individual decisions as to who to cooperate, conduct business and marry with, but ultimately this is legitimated and made authentic through women’s blood, breasts and tents. In later field trips, Uncle Abdel had suddenly divorced et-Galiya and was beginning to arrange his third marriage, to the weary exasperation of his mother. Minatou vocally told him that he had to choose his own wife this time (she had suggested
his previous wife, related to distant friends in Mauritania) and frequently
gestured she was wiping her hands of him when this topic was raised.
Nevertheless, when the time came for him to try to formalize the
marriage (a form of engagement), she and et-Khira, accompanied by
Minatou’s two elderly brothers, made the car journey to meet the
potential in-laws. Uncle Abdel’s mother and sister were the primary
negotiators with the bride’s womenfolk, not Abdel’s elderly uncles or the
bride’s token male elders who were also present. This is not intended as a
discussion of or evidence for gender equality and female empowerment,
but a micro-ethnographic insight into the jostlings among people to
secure their stakes in life. This is more than just a domestic women’s
action, rather an illumination of and better understanding of the
presence of the female political economy of affection through which
males conduct some of their affairs. The marriage could not have been
explored, let alone agreed, without women’s socio-political legitimation
of men’s interests, and the latter can only occur if women agree to be the
political conduit.

In both entry signalling and female alarm signals, a man would
recognize himself as gathering with his brothers and cousins, as he
would through everyday circulation through women’s tents. Let me offer
two illustrations that show the powerful reaction and speed of the female
regulation of women’s tents and circulating males, but in a way that
challenges some of the cultural Arab-Muslim stereotypes and male-
centric assumptions.

In the only event that I experienced of this kind, a little-known male
in his twenties entered the tent compound one afternoon and walked
straight into the bayt where we unmarried young females were relaxing.
He had not issued a single entry signal (not even a cough or noisy
walking), but had just wandered in. He sat on the floor mattress near the
door, and the shocked girls subtly adjusted their melhfa while issuing a
short greeting. He ignored this, but muttered short sentences asking if
there was tea, asking after named age-peers and lighting a cigarette. The
girls continued lying in their relaxed postures, seemingly disinterested.
In a few minutes after his arrival, four young unrestricted males abruptly
cross the bayt threshold (they had also not issued the entry signal).

I was later told that Souado had imperceptibly signalled to six-year-
old Hassana to raise the alarm. Now this was not an audibly ululated
alarm signal, but is part of the alarm ululation for this reason. Although
Minatou had been in her tent (et-Khira was visiting somewhere else), it was the role of the available males to assemble. Had the situation deteriorated, Minatou, as the only mature adult present at the time, would have come in full force, and the audible alarm signal will have been issued by the females as a group, strong and loud enough for males further away to hear (and for other neighbouring females to be alarmed by and add to the alarm). After the event, the unfolding story was repeated to other members of the family, and little Hassana was commended for reading the signal at such a young age. Souado enacted how she had ‘flashed her eyes’ and how Hassana had discreetly left the bayt without attracting the odd visitor’s attention.

A counter-point to this is that women always ululate in groups – the most powerful and deeply worrying alarm is that of a single female. Celebratory or praise ululations are usually emitted in groups – life is communal and social. A single female on her own would not issue a piercing ululation to celebrate something on her own. Of the first young males who had come, two were a neighbour’s sons, one was a milk-brother who came from a nearby sandwich shop, and another had been asleep in Minatou’s bayt. Three further males whom I had never met before also arrived, friends of these unrestricted males. When Hassana had gone to the first unrestricted male, he had gathered two neighbours and used a mobile phone to call another, who had also recruited more.

Although one could argue that this was a call issued to answer a social visitor’s enquiry about male peers, the difference is that the peers ‘swarmed’ rather than gathering more slowly in a truly friendly scenario and the women offering hospitality to the intruder while awaiting their arrival. In any case, as the male had not signalled entry, it was the women who had relayed a powerful message to him. Moreover, as soon as the swarming men had begun to arrive, Souado launched into a powerful, relentless attack, pointedly repeating the ‘*gul, gul as-salamu ʿalaykum*’ (‘say it, say as-salamu ʿalaykum’ – the missing entry signal) and orally blocking each of his attempted evasions and conversational remarks to the gathered males (who also gave little acknowledgement to him). Her voice droned on incessantly about it. Sometimes he mumbled an excuse, which merely made her raise her incessant pitch. She even summoned the tea fire to be brought, not in acquiescence of his request for refreshment, but as an act of the tight-knit gathering of the group displaying a fully functioning ‘interior’. The young unrestricted males...
gathered in a tight cluster, chatting and making the tea. The girls remained in their relaxed lying positions. Even in the act of giving him the three glasses of tea, he would not leave thinking this household had an Achilles heel for future entry. None of the females had left the bayt, but they had displayed indifference while showing the ability of the tent – its lineage – to implode in defence and attack. When the stranger finally left, Souado’s pointed remarks rose in pitch even after his back was no longer visible through the gate: her voice will have carried a short way further on his path.

A different example of an audible ululation that occurred at a wedding is a time of repeated female celebratory group ululation. In the weddings of young couples, their mutual young friends and relatives take great pride in arranging and gathering for the celebrations. Mature adults are around, equally celebrating, but tend more to oversee very important aspects such as the cooking and gathering in their own mature age-sets in nearby tents and bayt. Consequently such weddings have a large presence of young adults who occupy and move around the wedding location more than the elders. There was, however, a clearly different collective ululation issued by one group of young females which triggered a fight among a large and increasing circle of young males. Everyone rushed out into one of the open sandy passageways between indiscernible compounds where the fight was taking place, trickling into a nearby road as one particular young male was beaten and his car smashed. I was told that this boy had made suggestive and derogative remarks about a girl, and her female girlfriends had issued the ululation alarm.

This created two distinct fighting groups of boys who had previously been celebrating collectively. The mature adults allowed the fight to end, but interjected vocally with shouts for everyone to stop. One mature female angrily cuffed her brawling nephew and sent him home, banning him from the wedding, while some male elders related to the different boys made gentle reparations to each other (all communicating that no serious offence had been taken). In the retelling of the story, mature adults clearly communicated disapproval of a misuse of the ululation alarm among very young adults over a minor offence and hot-headedness. Young adults in general, however, related the story as gossip with humour and delight at the sequence of events, and girls in particular quietly mimicked the alarm ululation when retelling the story.
In both examples, the alarm ululation is both an important function that even young children discern and a dangerous tool that must be used with great caution. Womenfolk could not put their finger on a specific auditory difference between celebratory/praise and alarm ululations, but it is clear that the context of every ululation is carefully read to ascertain its signalled meaning, and that it can precede and trigger an event. Furthermore, as the fight broke out, the young females who had been alarm ululating continued to do so in a provocative manner, goading the fighting males in front of them. This goading ululation also has the effect of motivating and encouraging male action. It is often used at important political gatherings, where mature females ululate together to celebrate and praise, but also to motivate and fire up the males in front of them, such as at male political speeches or the parading of soldiers. The subtlety of ululation also brings the danger of analytical interpretation – women also ululate in unison at fellow females’ participation in the same speeches and parades. But there are two aspects which are certain: that woman use ululation with caution and for a very narrow range of meaningful actions; and that men do not use ululation as a tool except in very shy and fleeting mimicry of women.

The female makhzan and the guarded male

The three senior women’s tent cluster forms an important hub and an inclusive sponge: if the three women are not in one tent, the menfolk and children look in each of the other two tents. In essence, the women are the taiyar (leaders) that the khanat (stones) seek out and follow. The three women are patient and regulatory, keeping their hub collectively organized as a desert-wide node. Minatou, et-Khira and Aghla manage all the complications in this large family’s daily life, handling the diverse personalities, disagreements and life-decisions to ensure that inter-relational bonds are maintained. There should be no cast-out individuals; everyone brings different resources into the group unit. For these women, the more it expands, the more resources become available to the whole, and the greater the protective security and well-being of that whole.

In Western conventions, women are the home-makers of the private place that men return to after public work. However, among Sahrawi not only does the concept of women’s tents offer an insight into alternative
interpretations of and roles for female domesticity, but the movement of women through and occupation of the domestic space challenges the *harim* trope of Arab-Muslim woman. The role of women, seen by themselves and their menfolk, is to establish and run a reproductive unit that supports a specifically nomadic system. In opening the private to a flow of hospitality, women manage and maintain the extended family network of relationships that is cast as a political economy of affection ranging as widely as possible over vast distances.

*Khayam* compounds are women’s property, and in a society where men are matri-focused, as the next chapter will demonstrate, Islamic inheritance prescriptions and new Western state-norms provide males with both old and new types of patrilineal property. My host grandmother’s female-oriented kin-cluster barely changes – in marrying, her daughters may set up tent beside her (as may her granddaughters), and her sons remain very much present, despite having remarried and invested a substantial sum in creating new satellite, bridal *khayam* in someone else’s mother’s constellation.

Not only has this attempted to see women differently by momentarily shifting the gaze to re-examine the ‘patri’ in the sense of women’s men, but it has begun to lift out the masculine grammar in discussions of tribe, politics and economics – a theme that unfolds in the following chapters, which continue to see men through women’s eyes.

By momentarily separating these two chapters on women and men respectively, the ties between both can show how both interact in a mutual life system. Furthermore, the concept of women’s tents offers an insight into an alternative interpretation of female political domesticity. This is evidenced in the role that matrifocal women’s tents play in providing a political space ‘under the tent’ for highly mobile menfolk, not just in securing the economic resources of highly mobile men in their conventional male-dominant breadwinning roles.

Not only do we capture a chance to see women differently by momentarily shifting our sights to see men in the sense of being women’s menfolk, but we see the role that women’s tents (as female blood and milk clusters) play in their ability to enable men to be highly mobile, to make war and protect territory, but also for the ‘whole’ in terms of group and generational survival and adaptation. As Chatty (1996: 4) succinctly notes of the Hasiri in Oman, ‘These split households could operate for weeks and sometimes months before reconsolidating’. Women are not
just running households in men’s absence; they are doing so in the *longue durée* and socio-architecturally at a structural, organizational level.

However, if there is one striking feature in Saharan social organization, it is that, unlike their Bedouin counterparts in other Middle Eastern ethnographies, Saharan men veil, not women. I will now examine how the phenomenon of veiled males circulating through matrifocal *khayam* offers new comparative insights into the classical anthropological interest in Arab and Bedouin society.

So far I have presented a trilogy on women’s tents and circulating, veiled males. The emerging significance is my concept of the female *makhzan* and the guarded male as both self-guarded (veiled) and shielded by women by virtue of the nature of Saharan male political and economic risks, not just the stereotypical guardianship of women. In her conference paper entitled “‘Woman the Shelter’ and ‘Man the Traveller’”, Claudot-Hawad (2005) uses Tuareg mythological representations of gender creation and difference to explain female precedence and its matrifocal social system. Unlike other Saharan scholars (illustrative of Keenan’s statement\(^{15}\)), she recognizes that Tuareg gender cognition possesses ‘a dynamic framework which continually modifies the *vertical* order of the *hierarchy* as it does the *horizontal* order of *equivalencies*’ (2005: np, my emphases). She makes no reference to Khuri’s *Tents and Pyramids* (1990), yet the conceptual similarity is striking. Nevertheless, although Claudot-Hawad’s title is so close to what I want to say (women’s tents and circulating, veiled males), she also seems to stop short when encountering the dilemma of unveiled women. Therefore, this trilogy has attempted to tease out and expand the micro details of these rare macro-references.

The following chapters, in Part III, mark a closing shift in this story, allowing women and their customary principles of social organization to circle us back to the harsh realities and scepticisms of Part I. If there is one starkly omitted comparative and contemporary feature of Sahrawi and Tuareg society (and of Middle East ethnographies), it is that they are simultaneously and each in their own way conducting a post-colonial struggle for independence. While the Tuareg struggle has no international legal recognition and is seen geopolitically as regional terrorism and insurgency, the Sahrawi are seen as being engaged in nascent state formation and political centralization from an internationally recognized legal platform (Isidoros 2010). Nevertheless, the
Sahrawi are scrutinized through the prism of Western notions of what makes authentic political behaviour and the Western model of the nation state. Scholars consistently home in on the transition of tribe to *state*, whereas, drawing on classical anthropology, I do not collapse *tribe* to state so easily (Isidoros 2015a). Instead I foreground women and their tents in an otherwise masculine vocabulary of scholarship about supposedly male-dominated political action.
PART III
THE NAKED CITY

Anthropologists have been blinkered by segmentary theory, with its anarchic and agonistic vision of tribal societies. They have therefore tended to see tribesmen more as warriors to be mustered in battle than as citizens subject to the same jurisdictions. Like the citizens of states [...] they can be either according to circumstances. (Weir 2007: 5)

No, we are not primitive, we are not tribal. The Sahrawi have tried to unite the old tribes and be as one group. Citizens, not factions. We must have a united focus. Some persons try to use tribalism politically, but we tell them, ‘OK, if you can get independence, you try and we will wait to see if you can. But for now, we feel this way is better’. (Malainin, Rabuni 2011)
So far this book has temporarily lifted the humanitarian haze to offer an alternative contextual reading of historical and contemporary male and female political action. Foregrounding women has illuminated the significance of the *khayma* as a central structure – both corporeal and symbolic – in the social organization of the economic and political. It is to these tents that I now turn.

In the late 1980s, sand-brick walls and single-storey outbuildings began to be constructed within *khayam* compounds. Prior to this, the built infrastructure comprised the necessary functional edifices and symbols of the nascent state, such as hospitals, government buildings and Protocol Centres – places that did not simply (and crucially) serve the Sahrawi in war and reconstruction, but also as a space to which the external humanitarian corpus required (and expected) primary access.

However, Sahrawi national consciousness and state formation began in the tent, long before any such external body arrived. It is no coincidence that tents (*women’s* tents providing men with political space) are the original and principal built structure in which the first ideas, radio transmissions and political subscriptions to self-determination and war were discussed, heard and decided upon to envisage a new post-colonial future. Of significance, the political organization of and subscription to ‘the Sahrawi’ cause occurred both across a geographically dispersed and majority tent-dwelling population and against the colonially defined
social strata. The tent is fundamental to understanding the materiality of the tribes’ national coalescence.

My argument here is explorative and experimental: using ethnographic data, it asks, Can a nation state be made up of modern nomads? Can tents have architectural rationale and purpose in a city, and in a state? The Bedouin tent has certainly been both a powerful metaphor and a symbol for Arab kings and presidents. What of a president who actually lives in a real, dusty, UNHCR tent in a very real (refugee) encampment? And what of a nascent nation state that ‘floats’ in ethereal international legal legitimacy over six refugee camps, yet works as six palpable tented cities?

The naked city

There is widespread agreement that the majority of refugee camps around the world have not only become indefinitely protracted sites for the foreseeable future, but that their initial infrastructures are beginning to look like and in some cases being re-designed as ‘ideal cities’. In 1964, Bourdieu indirectly touched on this topic, describing the ‘suburbanity’ of French colonial resettlement camps in Algeria. In 2010, Herz (2012), an architect from ETH Studio Basel, began a (non-academic) study of architecture in the Sahrawi refugee camps which creates much food for thought, using extensive satellite maps to abstract the camps visually into static city forms. Agier (2014) has long challenged standard refugee theory, suggesting that refugee camps are now alternative urban centres, and even envisaging a ‘world of camps’. Such discussions interrogate recent innovations explored and undertaken by UNHCR’s architects and technical planners to modify the standardized and culturally ‘neutralized’ model of early refugee emergency and ‘settlement’ policies, often working with unexpected partners such as IKEA. These developments receive considerable criticism. Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) find a new trend towards a ‘neoliberal rationale of care’ in the UN’s reforms of its emergency humanitarian governance policies and thought. The authors term this ‘resiliency humanitarianism’, whereby refugees are being ‘responsibilised’ to govern themselves and manage their camps as ‘community development’ from which to ‘refashion themselves as resilient, entrepreneurial subjects’. It seems to me that the Sahrawi have been forty-two years ahead of the UN, although Ward (2014) has
criticized the UN’s urban refugee policy and the contradiction of its community-based model in the Middle East.

The Sahrawi and their refugee camps in Tindouf have a number of characteristics that differentiate them from conventional cases of refugees. First, the Sahrawi are not entirely ‘stateless’: since 1974 they have possessed an important legal opinion affirming their legitimate right to territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara from the ICJ, and the annual UN resolutions serve as a technical and legal affirmation of that. Second, they have built into the camps a state-like structure with a necessary and functioning political and administrative infrastructure. Although their governance structure, SADR, is not recognized as a UN member state, the Polisario is formally recognized as the representative of the Sahrawi people in UN General Assembly Resolution 34/37 of 1979. And SADR is recognized by many UN member states; the exact number fluctuates with geopolitical changes, but in 2017 it was eighty-four. In another legal anomaly, the Western Sahara as a country is registered by the United Nations as a Non-Self-Governing Territory and subject to decolonization – in other words, still requiring self-determination. The UN considers the whole country of Western Sahara as still under Spanish administration (de jure) – i.e. its decolonization process has not been completed – while Morocco has an overlain de facto administration of the territory under military occupation. This messy situation is strongly dismissed by international jurists as legally illegitimate, but both Polisario and SADR receive widespread diplomatic recognition across the international community – legitimation through a mixture of patronage and quiet approbation, as evidenced by the Polisario being a founding member and full member of the African Union since 1984. Of the three parties involved in the Western Sahara, the Polisario (the ‘Sahrawi people’) possess the only legally legitimate and unproblematic qualification for de facto control of something (the Free Zone of Western Sahara).

Third, the government camp of Rabuni is to all intents and purposes an administrative and governing capital, with the camps having been named symbolically to represent cities in the occupied territory – the ethereal quality I refer to is that of the camps being ‘in waiting’ to be figuratively lifted up and transplanted back into Western Sahara after independence. The formal capital is Tifariti, located in the Free Zone, on true Western Saharan soil. Caught in this Catch-22 situation, the camps
cannot (or cannot be allowed to) evolve into fully fledged cities, as they need to remain on Algerian soil as an unequivocal and continuous reminder to the international community that here is a population demanding the need for decolonization, self-determination and return to its homeland. Meanwhile, the Sahrawi population itself, while often represented as being painfully ‘divided’ by the berm, is (I think) also in the unique and militarily strong position of having a powerful presence on both the ‘right’ side of the berm (the Free Zone and Algerian soil) and the ‘wrong’ side, with an activist population in the midst of the antagonist (i.e. Morocco does not have absolute control and sovereignty).

Fourth, the Sahrawi have been tent dwellers for at least three millennia – the camel and goat hair tent may have morphed into a UNHCR canvas tent, but this whole region of western Sahara is the ancient heartland of the Sahrawi, including Tindouf, which was a Tajakant, then Reguibat, stronghold up to the mid-twentieth century. Wherever they are, they are in the ‘western’ Sahara as the Khat al-Khaof and very much at home in it ecologically, cosmologically and politically. Although in the Tindouf camps they are in exile in overlain cartographic terms, they are ‘at home’ in their own underlying historical and geographical terms. By this I mean that, while others draw lines and change those lines in the air above their heads, the Sahrawi have their feet firmly on their own soil. And they can survive in places in this geography where others, such as the neighbouring military forces or settlers, cannot without a heavy urban and sedentary infrastructure. These are positions of underlying strength that many other refugee populations do not have in terms of statelessness, displacement, forced migration and so forth, and serve to explain why the Sahrawi have not given up yet and suggest that they may be doing something thought-provoking.

Agamben’s (1998) ideas of ‘bare life’ and ‘states of exception’ become seminal references that are used to explore the ‘dialectics between the topographical and the topological in the production of spatialities of sovereign power’ (Ek 2006: 377). Sanyal (2012) notes the increasing scholarly interest from geographers, urban studies and refugee studies to interrogate whether such protracted spaces are becoming cities and, if so, how. Primary influences stem from Agamben’s notion of refugee camps replacing the city as a paradigm for contemporary biopolitical society, given that they are ‘the state of exception as zones of indistinction
between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion’ (Agamben 1998: 102). For other scholars, refugee camps are seen as suspended in various states of being, under the sovereign control of the refugee regime and host governments (Agier 2002; Malkki 2002), in opposition to the naturalized order of the nation state (Arendt 1966; Malkki 1995), in comparison to gated communities as ‘benevolent camps’ that are splintered from wider citizenship and rebundled as ‘premium networked infrastructures’, and connected to the ‘end of the city’ debates (Diken 2004). Many studies also account for refugees increasingly living outside camps in the ‘peri-urban fringes and slums of cities in developing countries’ (Sanyal 2012).

While such studies argue refugee camps are becoming more city-like, scholars also observe how refugee camps remain ‘spaces of incomplete development, frozen in time’ (Sanyal 2012; Agier 2002; Hyndman 2000), which makes the theorizing of spatial imaginations of refugee spaces as cities-versus-camps challenging (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja 2000; Gregory 2004). Amin and Thrift (2002) consider this new debate to be as contested as the small degree of consensus over what actually constitutes a city in the first place (as are contestations about what makes a refugee camp; see Feldman 2014, Minca 2015), but they have the potential to up-end old debates that have been conventionally focused on urban poverty and informality. Sanyal feels that the city is analytically as much a complex geography in its own right, but one that can be usefully explored in relation to refugee camps and the humanitarian regime as the ‘governing authority’.

Oesch (2017) argues for an expansion of Agamben’s original thesis on ‘zones of indistinction’ to cover situations of being ‘between simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. He finds Palestinian refugees in Jordan to be cast as autonomous, productive ‘subjects’ in their ambiguous inclusion into Jordanian state territory and neoliberal city life of Amman as entrepreneurs and consumers, yet excluded as assisted subjects by virtue of the temporary humanitarian character of their camp life. Oesch’s study helps identify some further undulations in the Sahrawi case. First, there is their ‘need to keep’ the bare life of the camps while engaging in their own state-craft in them while also mounting the political world platform with international law and UN Security Council statecraft. Their refugee camps must be refugee camps in order not to lose sight ‘of the plight’. Zones of indistinction are also evident in the process of being
made distinct in conjoint forms of undecolonized subjection: between the Sahrawi as refugees in exile and subjects of the humanitarian ‘order’, and their counterparts under occupation as subjects of socio-military and settler recolonization. And both circumstances contain further localized levels, indicative in the quiet movements of people between each other – across and around the berm and the wider north African region.

Sigona (2015) takes a similar starting point as Oesch from the sociological perspective of former Yugoslavia’s Roma refugee camps, which were forcibly displaced between the 1990s and 2000. He argues that Agamben’s conceptualization of refugee camps as spaces of exception has fashioned it as ‘other’ to idealized notions of law and citizenship. By ‘de-exceptionalizing’ the camp, he proposes the term ‘campzenship’ to capture the complex interaction of social relations and political membership in and around camps. Likewise, writing of the Palestinian Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, Martin (2015) proposes progressing the state of exception as relating only to suspension of the law towards ‘campscapes’, where bare life spills over the camp boundaries into informal settlements. She reasons that camps are not the only biopolitical spatial devices that separate the alien from the nation when they spill over into the space of the city.

These debates have relevance to what often appears to be the illusion of Sahrawi separation by Morocco’s heavily militarized berm and its land-mined ‘buffer’ zones, when in fact the berm could alternatively bring into sharp relief the ‘two fronts’ of the independence movement that share complications as zones of indistinction. The Tindouf camps contain and represent a clearly demarcated leadership and serve as the headquarters for its governing, military and highly nationalist polity. Tindouf is where the nationalist self-determination thesis officially sits, represented by the Polisario’s international diplomatic representatives, who literally ‘walk the corridors’ of international law. On the other hand, the Sahrawi polity that exists under Moroccan socio-military occupation can easily appear to external observation as disconnected from Tindouf. As Fernández-Molina (2015) and Veguilla (2017) elaborate, their ‘front’ is based primarily on non-violent human rights activism and protests, and tends to invoke international human rights language and organizational acronyms more than the Polisario and the international territorial-legal vocabulary it requires for its different lobbying corridors. Although Western Sahara scholars have known that both
sides having always been in contact (through family links at the very least) through mobile phones and internet, there have been strong signs since the 2010 Gdeim Izik uprising (which followed the concept of the global Occupy Movement)\(^7\) of more outwardly visible political contact across the berm between the Polisario and the Sahrawi activist leaders under occupation.

While Tindouf may represent a standalone vision of Sigona’s proposition of campzenship for a displaced people (in exile and, as I have suggested above, the Sahrawi seem to have been ahead of everyone in this socio-political configuration), we could expand this yet further in the Sahrawi case from in-and-around the camps to ‘over the berm’. The Sahrawi on the Moroccan side of the berm do not constitute refugees but reside in cities that are not refugee camps in the sense of Oesch and Sigona. However, both Sahrawi groups happen to be experienced tent and camp dwellers. These cities under occupation were once (well, they still retain) Sahrawi points of cultural geographical nomenclature linked to water sources, oases and tribal zones of influence around which their pre-colonial nomadic tented encampments and herds gathered. Since being built up by the Spanish and then Morocco into Bauman-esque nowherevilles (2002: 114), place-meaning and the ‘point’ of being ‘there’ are confused for both the indigenous Sahrawi (who liken life under occupation to tyranny) and the Moroccan settlers and security forces far from their ‘real’ (original) homes. The Gdeim Izik ‘peace camp’ was deeply motivated by cultural norms as a nomadic encampment. However, it was also inspired by the Occupy Movement with a paradoxical twist for a population simultaneously living under and protesting against Morocco’s forced military occupation. Just as Martin argues of Shatila that the physical and symbolic boundaries which separate the refugee and the citizen become blurred, this can also be seen in relation to the distinction between the Sahrawi refugee in a camp and the city-dweller under occupation, as well as the physical and symbolic separation of citizens by the berm between camps and occupied cities.

So, here we have a rich range of analytical deep play, producing the interwoven complexes of refugee camps and refugees in cities, of nomadic encampments and nomads in cities, of citizenship built from refugee tents and re-enacted with nomadic tents. But Martin offers one more profound analysis from Shatila. She concludes: ‘Once the exception leaks out of the space of the camp, the campscape becomes the threshold
where the refugee, the citizen and other outcasts meet.’ I suggest seeing
the berm, with its two sides, as the threshold, as the scape that
inadvertently creates the in/distinctions of zones of citizenships in,
between and beyond the camps and cities. Seeing how the exception
leaks out of the Moroccan berm indicates that it is not just about the
Sahrawi on either side of the berm – there are others across Morocco,
Mauritania, Algeria ... north Africa ... who would be interested in
subscribing to a new nation state. Some will come from cities, others
from camps and tents.

In Chapter 1, I intentionally disassembled, then lifted, the
humanitarian entity out of the picture. This enabled an ethnographic
transition in Chapters 2 and 3 from the misleading urban image of
refugee camp infrastructure and architecture to envisage that instead in
terms of customary nomadic encampments. When the humanitarians are
not present, the infrastructure echoes emptily, though unheard by this
external gaze, it comes to be filled with Sahrawi voices. In this
explorative section, therefore, I am focusing narrowly on the Sahrawi
Tindouf camps as newly emerging city(s), not on other urban variations
such as Sahrawi refugees moving through the region’s urban areas or
those Sahrawi who are already long-resident in towns and cities in
Mauritania, Algeria or the occupied territory. This is because I wish to
emphasize that the Sahrawi, as tribal nomadic pastoralists in their early
transitional stage before the external humanitarian body arrived (1960–
70s), were still primarily tent-dwellers who had begun and negotiated
three new actions at that time. First, they negotiated a unique de facto
position of sovereign self-governance in the Algerian-ceded adminis-
trative space of Tindouf. Secondly, in this space they began and have
continued to construct their nascent nation and state formation as tent-
dwellers. Thirdly, they have done so as an envisaged ‘waiting/ floating’
model to be transplanted as a mirror-image template on to the still
colonised homeland. This is relevant and will be connected back to the
theme of women.

There is a remarkable passage in Agier (2002) that relates to my
argument:

The camp is erected, by its very principle, as an authentic desert:
Hannah Arendt borrowed Nietzsche’s phrase, ‘the desert is
growing’, to express her concern at the ‘extension of the desert’
where the mediating space between humans disappears which in her view constituted the ‘world’, that is, the ensemble of social relationships wherein politics is born. The desert is the antinomy of the social and political exchange that links all humans, that simultaneously brings together and distinguishes them (Arendt, 1993). For Marc Augé (1992), exoduses and camps – like, at the opposite extreme, motorways, airports and shopping malls – are extended forms of an excessive, relatively mimetic modernity dominated by the model of ‘non lieux’, ‘nonplaces’ which characterizes places that are indeed various but which have all lost the memory, the relationships and the identity ideally attached to ‘anthropological places’. Even more, it should be emphasized, the camps are ‘hors-lieux’, outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary, predictable world, which itself tends to shrink as the spaces and situations that deny it expand, in other words when ‘the desert grows’. (2002: 323, my emphases)

I find this extraordinary not only because the Sahrawi case offers the real ‘authentic desert’ site analogously conjured up by these authors, but also because this notion of the desert growing recalls the flexible agility (adaptiveness) of the tribal, nomadic and pastoral specializations I have argued for in previous chapters. That this Sahrawi nation state is waiting and floating should not give it a temporary temporal and spatial quality or lead to it being treated as lacking analytical gravity. Something is being constructed by the Sahrawi that is not immediately obvious. It deserves scholarly thought, but it should not be epistemologically restricted to the narrow, Western default model of state formation and all that accompanies it.

Furthermore, Agier proceeds to see the refugee camp as a ‘naked city’:

[...] the camp is a new setting *sui generis* and to some extent an *innovating* framework. [...] The camp engenders experiences of hybrid socialisation that are not only multi-ethnic but also plural, in which clan strategies criss-cross ethnic strategies, and the latter overlap with the strategies of the humanitarian organizations of the ‘global’ sphere. The camp, then, is comparable to the city, and yet it cannot ‘reach it’. An economy that could exist since people
show they are willing to work (and, for many of them, to remain where they are), a social division which adapts to the plurality of constraints, an occupation of space which, however precarious, gives meaning to an originally desertic place — everything is potential but nothing develops …’ (ibid.: 336)

I particularly wish to follow Agier’s approach to the ‘formation of the novel sociospatial form of “city-camps”’ (2002: 320) as ‘sites of an enduring organization of space, social life and system of power that exist nowhere else’ (ibid.: 321). He treats these ‘hybrids’ as a political space, a polis. When I link this back to anthropology and the Middle East, I find that Weir suggests that the concept of sovereign tribal governance in the Arab world has received little attention, perhaps because their polities are observed in rudimentary infrastructures and thus considered ‘informal’ (2007: 4–5). Agier’s words also circle me back to Chapter 3’s discussion of non-identities, non-places and nowhere spaces.

Absorbing these influences in this chapter, I will now explore how, in becoming refugees, tribal nomadic pastoralists may offer new ethnographic insight to such debates. The Tindouf camps, as customary Sahrawi encampments, may be appositional in that the desert is full of life and can grow in antithesis to Nietzsche’s meaning. As suggested in Chapters 2 and 3, it is precisely as refugee camps that they are non-lieux and deserts, and where the emperor is not told he is naked. Unlike many other refugee camps comprising long sedentarized and urbanized populations (that is, without desert specialization), tribal nomadic pastoralists are already tent-dwellers. Their histories indicate that the social, economic and political interplay between badawa and badara may not make the Sahrawi transition to refugees and then to citizens in self-initiated state formation as dramatic or as puzzling as Western Sahara scholars have thought it to be.

Intrinsic to anthropology’s great debates over the Arab world is whether tribes are antagonistic to the state, in that tribes and nomads must both become ‘governable’, the latter requiring sedentarization. I argue that nomadism comprises agile political thinking, not just economic-residential physical agility, and that this political mobility is evident in both wider ethnographic suggestions and the Sahrawi’s own strategic tribe-state symbiosis and tactical nomadic sedentarization. Irons (1974) explicitly positions nomadism as political adaptation.
Yomut Turkmen of northern Iran maintained a nomadic residence pattern to gain political and military advantages, despite their economy requiring semi-sedentary residence. Regarding Sahrawi political adaptation, their political nomadic agility has enabled them to conduct both an externally much admired conventional war and, despite its continued irresolution, a successfully battle in diplomacy. This has not just revitalized war-fractured economic long-distance trading and restored decimated herds: tactical nomadic sedentarization for the Sahrawi means exploiting a range of residence patterns to gain new political advantages.

This political facet of nomadism should be kept to the analytical fore, and it also triggers the opportunity to re-think ‘tribe’. Unlike ethnographic comparisons concerning the Gulf Bedouin, the Sahrawi are not only retaining their tribal nomadic pastoral life-system to a greater degree, but are using it shrewdly to work for them as refugee-citizens in what I think is an analytically unique hybrid as nomadic citizenship. I share this sentiment with Mundy’s (2014) similar stance that the structures of global politics are responsible for the prolongation of the Western Sahara conflict. He argues, with his incisively razor-sharp title ‘Bringing the tribe back in?’, that ethnic conflicts in the Arab world are already deeply penetrated by global power structures and that any solution for the Western Sahara must also span local structures. Wilson too (2016a), a fellow anthropologist, has homed in on the intriguing idea that pre-existing affinities within and between the Sahrawi tribes are part of their contemporary state-craft. I have previously argued ‘against “tribe”’ and stressed the unification of Sahrawi tribes (Isidoros 2015a), the aim being to fight against the negative connotations of ‘tribalism’ that emerged out of colonial science and its popularized essentialization and to encourage organizations of how qabila may still be tenable as political organizations. As Mundy and Wilson demonstrate, and as I hope I do in this chapter, in the right hands and with epistemological care, ‘tribe’ needs rethinking as a system of human social, economic and political organization that may not be so ‘bad’ and warrant greater merit as a viable form of human organization. This is comparatively relevant not only to revising long-standing Middle Eastern ethnographies on ‘tribe’, it is especially significant in the Sahrawi context, and possibly in the wider Sahara which Bonte had long contemplated (2008; from the French school of anthropology, primarily

Middle East scholars have acknowledged that, despite global changes affecting tribal nomadic pastoralists in other locations, the meaning of tribal identity has in many cases been changing (Layne 1994: 47) into new social constructions of tribal identity (Isidoros 2017b; Malkki 1996; Kibreab 1993). Mobility serves as a source of socio-political strength (Lewis 1987: 35; Salzman 2006: 397–8) to shift Sahrawi’s social, residential and economic connections in response to threats and opportunities (Toth 2006). Historical ghazawat (sing. ghazu, raiding) enabled Sahrawi to employ an effective system of highly mobile and long-range military forces, which (while serving as a complex phenomenon for circulating herds through a widely dispersed society and replenishing drought-decimated herds and other goods, also served) as a mechanism for reinforcing governance such as establishing widely distributed khiwa (rights of passage taxes) and other tax relationships. Political mobility enabled the distribution of economic resources across a widely dispersed and transient population.

Nomadism: Tactical sedentarization

The Tindouf camps are not just refugee camps, they also capture a live glimpse of nomads tactically sedentarizing in customary encampments for a reason. Nomads have historically undergone fluctuating transformations between settlement and desettlement (Aronson 1980: 173), moving between sedentary and non-sedentary worlds (Michael 1997). This also reflects the fact that various encroaching authorities often sought to sedentarize nomads in order to control potential or actual political competition. Being well accustomed to such treatment, nomads have often frustrated such programs (Aronson 1980: 174), exemplified in Toth’s (2006) study of historically cyclical conquests from the nineteenth century. Northern Arabian Bedouin dominated their territories and often used force to assert themselves against the towns. However, the Ottoman push beginning in the 1830s challenged Bedouin power and autonomy into World War I and intensified the competition over land, markets, trade routes and legal practices.

These struggles between townsman and nomad also appear in the records of Ibn Khaldun’s fourteenth-century descriptions of cyclical
tension between the desert and the sown (cf. Rosenthal 2005). Altorki and Cole’s (1989) study of a Saudi Arabian oasis city, like much other Middle East and North African literature such as Khazanov (1984), shows how nomads were the main producers of pastoral products sold in town markets, as well as being important consumers of town goods and services. These contact zones, the frontiers of settlement, were where interests and practices between desert and sown overlapped, creating shifting lines of political control, vital inter-dependencies and a fluid matrix of alliances. Nomads and the settled expanded into each other’s zones depending on times of alternating weakness, economic losses or opportunities, and changes in relative power (Toth 2006). Likewise, Emmanuel Marx (2006) also found a constantly dynamic reciprocal relationship with urban centres — focusing on nomads and cities, not refugees and cities — while Meeker (2005) ventured further to state that ‘the city was to be found in their [nomads’] midst’.

Today, some nomadic societies that staunchly reject settlement still depend on sedentary society for food and twenty-first century products (Chatty 2006). Michael’s 1997 study of the sedentarizing Baggara of Sudan illustrates economic rationality in tactical sedentarization through the use of polygyny — a familiar traditional social structure — as an adaptive response to survive. He observed some male Baggara building bridges between diversified activities and households, with a wife each in a nomadic–pastoral–rural unit and a settled–agricultural–urban unit.

The impact of economic decisions on residential patterns can be seen in Chatelard’s (2006) description of how those Kel Ahaggar in the central Saharan region of Tamanrasset who have economically diversified into tourism appear to be nomadic, though many are bordering on appearing to be sedentarized in villages where they own a house. Tourism creates the incentive to occupy a tent encampment during the tourism season, but not only are these tent encampments actually fixed and remain in situ, which Chatelard equates with ‘desert lodges’, but seasonal mobility is restricted to only a few adult males. Nevertheless, she observed that this restricted mobility still allowed for some degree of redistribution of productive activities, while circulation (in the transportation of tourist groups through the desert) provided occasions to maintain social relations with non-sedentarized relatives, friends, partners and clients (ibid.: 728).
Keenan cautions that sedentarization is rarely a voluntary process (2006: 916), but rather a result of coercive external pressures which are nearly always resisted subtly or overtly, often through remarkable feats of ingenuity and tenacity to hold on to the vestiges of their preferred way of life. Were that lifestyle not to hold such a strong preferential attraction, it would seem easier to give up the hardship for all the comparative ease that a sedentarist town would offer. Equally, sedentarization is not always unidirectional and may take many generations, with movement in and out of nomadic-sedentary lifestyles and subject to temporary reversals.

Sahrawi tactical sedentarization is historically evident in their wide geographical dispersal across the western Sahara (and beyond). A contemporary pattern of tactical sedentarization began in the 1950s across southern Morocco, northern Mauritania, south-western Algeria and Western Sahara, following dramatic political, economic and ecological changes that occurred simultaneously.

Hodges compiled various sources to illuminate Sahrawi tribal demography (1983: 49–50). In 1958, French and Spanish colonial conflicts and an ensuing western desert-wide drought in 1959–63 severely reduced livestock numbers, prompting many thousands of Sahrawi to squat, impoverished, in southern Morocco’s Tan Tan, Tarfaya, Zaag and Goulimine settlements. Hodges (1987) found Moroccan census results listing 27,976 Sahrawi tribespeople living in Tarfaya in 1966. He also suggested that several thousand Reguibat were settled in northern Mauritania in the 1960–70s due to increasing employment in Zouerat and Nouadhibou from the newly opened iron-ore mines. By the early 1970s, Reguibat had also begun to sedentarize in south-western Algeria. This was due to the Algerian government launching a settlement programme in 1966 to assist drought-stricken Reguibat and encourage them to set up agricultural villages at Abadla (southwest of Bechar), Oum el-Asssel, Ain Naga and Hassi Abdallah (near Tindouf). Hodges suggests that there were some 18,000 Reguibat in Algeria by 1975, of which 10,000 were ‘sedentary’.

Writing in 1983, Hodges concluded that, despite this extensive dispersal of Sahrawi artificially separated by new political boundaries, tribal kin ties continued between nomadic and sedentarizing relatives. Salem’s work on Mauritania illuminates a related pattern of nomadic preference underlying modern sedentarization. The growth of fishing,
iron-ore mining and industrial centres in Zouerate and Nouadhibou in the 1960–80s attracted migrants from across the western Sahara. The extremely arid, desert-interior Tiris Zemmur region, on the edge of which Zouerate is located, has been one of the least populated regions of the western Sahara, but Salem suggests a growing population density of 42,000 inhabitants per sq. km. However, he suggests that, although these industries have contributed to an emergent urban workforce, these salaried workers have not ‘stabilised’, but instead retain their badiya bridges.

However, there is considerable pre-colonial data showing that historically western Saharan nomadic tribes also engaged in considerably long-distance travel (both pastoral and the trans-Saharan trade flows) between badawa and hadara. Following Salem’s (2005) references to a ‘Mauritanian mosaic’ of relationships and ‘points of reception’, the Sahrawi engaged in different types and degrees of mobility and settlement across the varied ecologies of the region. Additionally, the different parts of the same tribe (and in fact down to the base unit of family) comprised members who engaged in different specializations requiring different patterns and locations of residency.

Sahrawi oscillation between their beloved badiya and notions of hadara continues today, albeit somewhat differently from the pre-colonial context. Settlement is conceptualized by Sahrawi interlocutors as being constituted by a ‘waiting’ life in the refugee camps, as well as for those living ‘en villes’ in the territory occupied by Morocco or who have long been settled in Mauritania or overseas. The most recent development is captured by Wilson’s (2012a: 15–16) observations of the Polisario’s new provision of land and encouragement in the growth of new settlement municipalities at M’heiriz, inside the Western Sahara Free Zone. This can be seen articulated in other, often imperceptible ways, such as the old tyres or large stones scattered around tent compounds within the camps as otherwise ambiguous markers of ‘land’ and ‘ownership’, or in the lengthy ritualized crossings of tent/bayt thresholds that serve as oral markers of zones of entry and residence.

**Tribe: Strategic political symbiosis**

Khoury and Kostiner (1991: 1–22) find there to be a dialectal symbiosis between tribe and state, adopting a multifaceted view of tribes
interacting with other tribes to form states, or with states to form other kinds of states, or resisting states and acting as anti-states. Toth (2006) too does not find a wholly antagonistic relationship between badauwa and badara, and likewise Salzman (1980) does not believe that tribal nomadic pastoralists and state governments are inherently antagonistic, regardless of the stance each takes against the other. Both influence each other’s political organization and share socio-economic interests, demonstrating a historical capacity for fusion and fission.

The epistemological contradiction between a centralized state system and the central moral organization of nomadic tribes does not mean that nomads always reject the state, especially when using it might solve a problem for them. Bamyeh’s historical study of the failed royal experiment of the kingdom of Kinda in pre-Islamic Arabia, where tribes initially submitted voluntarily to Kinda’s monarchical central authority for a century, shows nomadic interest in the usefulness of state-like structures, but also how sovereign states can misinterpret signs of nomadic tribes’ loyalty or willingness to be governed (Bamyeh 2006).

Contemporary Middle Eastern ethnographies also show how tribal practice continues to protect autonomy and solidarity, as well as persistently influencing contemporary nationalism and statehood. For instance, the dialogic construction of Jordanian tribal and national identities finds tribesmen simultaneously employing dominant national discursive practices alongside alternative competing discourses (Layne 1994; Shryock 1997). Research illuminates the striking presence of ‘tribe’ beneath contemporary state political facades, also identifying re-emerging signs of nomadism and pastoralism. Underlying the nation is a tribal political agency persistently focused on access to and defence of resources and livelihoods (Lancaster 2006: 340).

Khuri positions the dialectic relationship of tribe–state alongside private–public (1990: 132), where tribalism is an expression of trustworthy endogamy, the private organization of solidarity and autocracy. Direct rule by centralized authority – the pyramidal ‘public’ of parliament, citizenship, political and civil rights – is of questionable value (also noted by Anderson 1991: 298). Khuri (1990) suggests that many Arab nation states avoid creating a public that might call the leadership to account, hence the commonly used state title of jumhuriya (republic, community, masses) that implies a dyadic relationship between individuals and leader, just as in the game dama (backgammon/
draughts), where khanat (‘stones’) of trustworthy group solidarity follow the taiyar (the third stone, the imam) who leads by consensus, charisma and mediation. As is also the case in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, jumhuriya is the idiom for nationalism, moulding a hybrid socialist-capitalist model of integration into the external modern political and economic world system without threatening the internal trusted and familiar endogamous solidarities.

Although the question of whether tribes form a centralized body or have any permanent interest in the state is strongly debated (Ayubi 1995), my research draws on those contextual ethnographies that increasingly suggest that, as a powerful and dynamic system, tribal nomadic pastoralism may have a centralized authority, just not in the same visual way that the Occidental eye is used to. Bamyeh (2006) contends that nomadic life must possess some central organizational and accompanying moral features, which can be given up only at the expense of nomadism. Khoury and Kostiner stress that one must not expect tribes to form a modern nation state in the Western sense, but rather see it as a process ‘built on a series of coalitions over long periods of time’ (1991: 19).

Scholarship of the Middle East evokes the image of the anthropologist approaching a mountain village or a sole nomadic tent wanting to ‘see tribe’. This tribe ethereally appears on the textual horizon as a male tribal lineage (a classificatory tradition in anthropology) and unfolds through pages of male political action as tribesmen appearing out of their segmentary lineages in agonistic rivalry and ‘balanced opposition’. Yet tribe is an enigma which has never quite been seen in its totality other than on vertically hierarchical and notably patrilineal kinship diagrams.

Figure 7.1 Nation, the tented-state and the battle/strategy game of dama. Photos courtesy of author.
Weir argues that tribe has not yet been adequately defined but is simply used alongside the equally problematic term ‘state’ (2007: 1–2; cf. Isidoros 2015a). Likewise, Dresch suggests that the two entities of tribe and state should not be empirically separated because both embody a coexistent system of ideas that are constantly reworked: ‘...we must recognize that the state is an idea just as much as an institution and that people may subscribe to several ideas in turn or, indeed, simultaneously ...’ (1991: 277–81). For Chatty (1997), patriarchy in the Arab model of state most likely has a Western origin.

Gellner argued that, as state centralization of power and authority is achieved, ‘it follows that nomadism becomes an economic rather than a political adaptation – the solution of an economic rather than a political problem’ (in Gellner and Micaud 1972: 7). In the Sahrawi ethnography, this is certainly not the case. Weir also challenges other authors who deny the impact of ecology (Weir 2007). In a single socio-linguistic group across as wide and geologically differentiated area as the western Sahara, the Sahrawi Hassaniya-speakers exhibit substantial temporal and spatial variations from their colonially classified ‘pure’ tribal nomadic pastoralism. Not all nomads are tribes or pastoralists, all three vary in residential degrees between ‘purely’ nomadic or sedentary, and these variations also change generationally as people might move between specialization, location and kin reckoning. Equally, in a single family, different members may specialize or switch between the three different axles.

In 1978, Bennoune, an Algerian anthropologist, criticized the term ‘tribal society’ as an ‘ill-defined catchall’ within which the concept of ‘tribe’ had been ossified by colonial territorialism and early Western anthropological theoretical assumptions envisaging tribal systems as ‘final political units’ acting as ‘islands unto themselves’. He stated that almost all Saharan tribes formed a range of centralized polities, from powerful tribes to independent desert confederacies or loosely linked regional states and multi-ethnic empires, and exhibited ‘articulated’ (i.e. mobile) socio-economic and political formations. Each of the spheres shared interconnected cultures, languages and histories, and their invisible ‘frontiers’ were places of fluid fusion and fission, where warriors formed close alliances with religious brotherhoods, and nomad and settled were interdependent, these spheres switching strategically throughout a long historical continuum (1978: 34). Salem too points to
complex formations of tribes as a ‘centralized political structure’ (Salem 2005: 494). Both authors are referring to historical events, such as the ninth-century tribal kingdoms of Masufa and Lamtuna; the eleventh-century Almoravid dynasty; the seventeenth-century warrior Bani Hassan empire; the tribal confederacy of Shaykh Ma’ el-Ainin organizing four *qsar* of Atar, Chinguetti, Ouadane and Oujeft (and the nearby nomadic populations) into the emirate of Adrar in response to both the threats and opportunities from the new European maritime trade in *gum arabic* and subsequent 1906 French colonial interest; and of Shaykh Ma’ el-Ainin’s descendants following suit to form the remaining three emirates of Trarza, Brakna and Tagant until 1934 (Mauritania still retains these emirate names as modern national administrative regions).

Hodges links this historical evidence of ‘articulation’ to contemporary Sahrawi. The western Saharan’s prime loyalty is to tribe, faction and family, and it carries particularly strong notions of ‘*asabiya* (agnatic/tribal solidaries). Despite the Spanish and French colonialists’ interventions which terminated the *ghazw* (the last is said to have been in 1934) and eroded protection systems, notions of tribal identity and solidarity appear to have changed little today. In Hodges’ words, ‘they remained much stronger than any incipient sense of *supratribal national identity*, whether Western Saharan, Moroccan, or for that matter, Mauritanian’ (Hodges 1983: 29–31, my emphasis).

Alongside the powerful reality of Sahrawi nationalism, an equally authoritative tribal relationship exists between the structure of Polisario as an ideological liberation movement and the structure of SADR as a nation state institution (Isidoros 2015a). San Martin suggests that it is ‘almost impossible to trace a clear dividing line between the two’ (2005: 573). The acrimonious colonial withdrawal from Western Sahara that led to the nascent formation of Sahrawi nationalism brought western Saharans from different tribal origins and heartlands together. The socio-geographical web of strong tribal kindred (real and forged) across the region’s new borders roused many thousands of Sahrawi across southern Morocco, Mauritania and south-western Algeria, possibly including eastern Tuareg from Mali and Niger in the midst of their own post-colonial conflicts. This is demonstrated by the range of tribes from which the founding Polisario members came, such as Reguibat from both as-Sahil and ash-Sharg groups, the small Taoubalt tribe and the Tidrarin tribe (Hodges 1983: 56).
Mundy’s study of internal conflict within Polisario and SADR finds the ‘overall contours of its high-level internal politics largely obscure’ and writes of an emerging pattern of elite control versus ‘impulses of democracy and accountability’. He describes how, despite democratic ideals, Polisario’s top echelon discretely manage their internal politics by reshuffling duties amongst themselves (2007: 279) and how one particular tribe ‘with warrior tendencies’ (widely assumed to be the Reguibat ash-Sharg) is said to dominate the nationalist movement. Nevertheless, Mundy supports other Western Sahara scholarly opinion that Sahrawi nationalism and identity ‘subordinate[s] consanguineous identifications . . . to a unified national one’ which masks the power of one particular governing tribe (notably, if correct, the Reguibat, whom historians Hart and Norris thought possessed a highly accretive organizational disposition). Mundy also notes that United Nations officials reported off the record that a 1990s refugee registration process appeared to indicate correlations along tribal lines (2007: 281; cf. Isidoros 2017b, 2015a).

There are two often cited occasions when ‘tribal elitism’ has been challenged. Camp protests in 1988 triggered structural modifications at the Eighth Congress in 1991. However, the modified reduction of members of parliament and the creation of a Consultative Council of shuyukh a year later appears to be a ‘retrograde move back to elite tribalism’ (Hart and Norris 2007: 282). In 2003, Polisario accepted a new peace proposal that involved a serious political compromise without popular consultation, creating deep disturbance amongst camp residents at their dangerous unilateral tendencies. In 2004 this triggered the first known faction within Polisario, the Khat al-Shahid reform movement, which claimed SADR officials amongst its members. With one foot in the camps and the other in the nascent Sahrawi student intifada in the Occupied Territory, it has not only linked its organization to the complete separation of Polisario and SADR (an ‘anti-tribalism’ sentiment), but also sought a return to the movement’s original principles in order to renew military action for self-determination.\footnote{12}

From his analytical international relations and conflict studies perspective, Mundy intuitively (not realizing the micro-anthropological significance) sheds a different light on this ‘anti-tribalism’ sentiment. Although refugee fidelity to Western Saharan nationalism continues to remain a strong force, the period of time since the ceasefire has brought relative comfort and economic opportunities to the refugees, who
increasingly appear to be more focused on building decent livelihoods and futures. As a result of this revitalized indigenous security and self-sufficiency, they also appear to have become more entrenched in not accepting peace plans that do not offer full independence. Nor can Polisario’s leadership take any further risks in compromising the continued Sahrawi commitment, as shown in the consequences of the gambled 2003 peace plan, the emergence of Khat al-Shahid on the sidelines and the intifada. What is interesting is that, despite the pre-ceasefire vulnerability of refugees, the impermanence of the camps, popular solidarity for a war of national liberation, the eighteen years of ceasefire and revitalized security from socio-geographic links far beyond the camps, the continued interest in independence ‘points towards a remarkable resilience’ (2007: 293).

As early as 1959, Murphy and Kasdan stated that ‘Arab Bedouin society is not simply another case of a simple patrilineal, segmentary society structured along the lines of our African models … its plasticity, its capacity for fusion and fission, its lack of bounded and stable descent groups has contributed to its enormous persistence in time’ (1959: 27). Similarly, the French ethnologist of Mauritania, Bonte, stressed that the western Sahara ‘presents some remarkable features’ of tribal social order and is an important ‘laboratory’ in which to rethink contemporary principles of inter- and intra-tribal society and organization (2006: 98).

Mauritanian politics is one setting within which the tribe is an overarching social formation, and as Emmanuel Marx (2006) describes, one at the apex of a political system which is based on homologous series of more and more inclusive groups. Bonte believes these are complementary, not oppositional interpretations, and he draws attention to other examples of ambiguous political organization. He warns against any ‘revival/reawakening’ of tribal identity being conceived as contradictory to national identity. The permanence of tribe and the order of kinship should not be deemed to be the distinguishing features of tradition or nostalgic conservatism, and ethnic groups/tribes should not be regarded as having been inherited from the past: ‘The holistic and often archaic representations of the tribe, as tribalism for example, cannot explain its role in the modern state context’ (2006: 120). Ould Cheikh’s 1991 study of the Shurbubba war recounts a seventeenth-century example of the ease with which new tribal groupings form around new sources of power.\(^\text{13}\)
Bonte suggests that the variation and mutual interaction of tribal status and political hierarchies have a more complex perspective than the definition of segmentary lineage because the dual organization of alliances between or within these Hassaniya societies occurs over a large region (2006: 99). Sahara tribes also show variously nomadic propinquities, unlike in many anthropological studies of sedentarized mountain tribes of the Middle East. In Saharan societies, ‘the genealogically defined [inter- and intra-] tribal affiliations are thus a kind of contemporary framework for civil society. Their roles mitigate the consequences of the weakness of the modern state’ (ibid.: 119).

Khuri’s metaphor presents the political organization of tribal nomadic pastoralists as a tent-like domain which can be easily moved in response to change. I argue that the paradox in the logic of nomadic tribes’ political mobility is that their system is highly centralized: it is not acephalous just because it involves widely dispersed nomadic-sedentary units, and it is not fixed in the same way as Western notions of central authority (Khuri’s Western chess verticality). It is instead a shifting system of centralized authority that can disappear in and out of view with its nomadic population and along its historical continuum. As Ayubi points out, it is too simple to portray tribal society as egalitarian, segmentary and autonomous: instead its importance lies in the mobility with which tribes interact with cities and the sedentary and the way their trade routes join all these components together (1995: 54–60).

Khuri (1990: 129–33) distinguishes between tribal states and tribally controlled states, but maintains that the former are not present in Arab society. He defines tribe in a tribal state as a self-sufficient autonomous whole which derives authority from within its system, whereas tribe in tribally controlled states is just one part of a society, a political faction competing for power within the modern state structure alongside other non-tribal groups. Government is controlled through a strict system of the distribution of benefits and power based on genealogically validated kinship links, such as Saudi Arabia’s, Bahrain’s and Kuwait’s unelected ruling families, who have the genealogical right to rule historically, or ruling tribal elites seeking alliances with religious groups, the latter reflecting what in the Sahara would be the hassan–zwaya (warrior tribes—religious tribes) relationship.

I would argue that Khuri dismisses the ‘tribal state’ too easily and that perhaps the Sahrawi nation state in exile is one such example of it.
As Lancaster observed, the Rwala did not adapt to the economy, but adapted it to them (1997: 47); the tribe-state symbiosis may be better understood as a political adaptation of a useful model of the times to the core social system. While debates have argued over whether tribes and states are sequential stages or alternative answers to the question of security (cf. Gellner 1991), Ayubi posits that in the Middle East, tribe and state are neither stages nor alternatives, but are intricately articulated with each other in what some Arab authors have called ‘political tribalism’ (al-qabaliya al-siyasiya) or ‘clannish democracy’ (dimuqratiya ‘asha’iriya) (1995: 328).

Villasante-de Beauvais sees the qabila as the central pillar of Mauritania’s state apparatus and its modern political institutions, and she reads the reactivation of tribal solidarities as a response to the uniformization of society that comes with the process of installing a democracy (1998: 251). In his preface, Bonte does not find her evocation of a Mauritanian ‘tribal democracy’ far-fetched when remembering from his classical training that democracy had its ancient roots in a tribal society that was statutorily and politically differentiated, and which practised slavery (ibid.: 18). Today’s conceptualization of democracy has also been shaped over time, but why do we presume that there is one correct model to subscribe to? Perhaps Arab authors answer this with their own expressions, such as bedoucracy or petrocracy (Ayubi 1995).

In the Sahrawi case, one of Polisario’s early political ideas and its key slogan was ‘markaziya dimuqratiya’ (democratic centralism). San Martin (2005: 571) suggests that this was Polisario’s interpretation of the world’s new national model of society, but with primacy given to collectivism over individualism, which Mundy (2007: 280) calls ‘their own “indigenous” fusion of state-driven economic socialism and multiparty representational democracy’. Just as Islam adapted itself during its transmission through the streams of Saharan nomadic routes, perhaps too the Western model and practices of statehood are being filtered and adapted to fit contemporary Saharan streams.

This brings together selected scholarship from both the Arab world and Saharan debates about tribe-state formation, as well as a newly emerging debate about camp-cities. What is missed is that refugee camps usually contain tents, albeit UNHCR tents. Yet in the Tindouf camps, the Sahrawi were already tent-dwellers and initiated nation state formation as tribes and nomads before they became refugees. I have
exploratively brought the tent into the foreground of these two debates, especially in relation to a new model of tribes’ centralizing political organization across a widely dispersed nomadic population. Not all have always been or are still nomads, nor are they tribes in the derogatory Western sense, nevertheless they have come together at a site (or headquarters) of centralizing political action and are attempting the construction of ‘something’ analytically intriguing, despite receiving superficial hypercritical scrutiny. I will now relate all this back to the phenomenon of female political action.
CHAPTER 8

WOMEN AS POLITICAL ARCHITECTS

The previous chapters have clearly presented the customary significance in Sahrawi society of women’s tents through which Sahrawi men circulate politically and economically. My enquiry here is how might tents as ‘domestic’ customary political constellations relate to the formation of modern states and cities? The default obstacle here is that states must contain cities – states cannot be a ‘desert’ (cf. Agier 2002; Arendt 1966) – and that states must be immobile.

While tents do constitute the domestic familial place in all its stereotypes, for ‘pure’ nomads in an ‘empty’ desert the tent structure is the only built structure, and it is entirely mobile, simultaneously forming the heart of male political centrality. Women do not just own but make, put up and take down, manage and protect this heart of male investment because men are frequently on the move. Women are capable of and do move these tents themselves, albeit in shorter-range mobility than conventional male long-range movement. Women preside over these tents as their property in which men invest. Women are protected because it is precisely what they hold as trustees (the tent). Women’s political economy of affection casts a wide geographical web to ensure that men can circulate through their tents and protect the resources brought into them. Likewise the previously unstudied subtleties of how men enter female spaces, female regulations of that movement, and the female ululation, for instance, also add to this bigger picture – that at the higher organizational level, women’s assembling or summoning of men
in fact structures society. This casts women in a very different light from the hidden, domestic, unpolitical female, only caught sight of briefly flitting in the background of male action: they are architects in their own right who design and structure society.

Detribalization is the usual explanation for the leap from Sahrawi tribe to citizen (Isidoros 2015a). If it can be accepted that tribe is not a primitive, backward Other, but capable of logical practice, then it is to the unifying action that I now return, which illuminates the sophisticated way in which tribes have initiated the current model of state formation. This concept of unifying tribes should prevent images of tribesmen gathering on mountain hilltops from being evoked. In the Sahrawi context, political alliances – unifying tribes – can only occur physically and metaphorically through the tent, which is where women come to the fore; the tribe and the state are bodily made and legitimated by being ‘under the same tent’. The following sections will demonstrate how tribes can make the state before returning to women’s finite role as architects.

**Frig and qsar: Tents in battle and economic configuration**

Drawing on conversations with some elderly Sahrawi in the northern Mauritanian desert, I suggest that the Tindouf encampments constitute a historical configuration of a ‘battle’ frig (or a series of large-scale fargat forming up for war) in which stratigraphic layers of society have assembled in response to a group-wide territorial threat. So too are they reminiscent of historic qsar or qasba found throughout North Africa, as fortified Saharan city states growing up from and persisting as important regional economic nodes in the trans-Saharan flows, from

![Figure 8.1](image-url)
which emerged the early Mauritanian emirate city states such as Adrar and Trarza, as well as Shaykh Ma‘ el-Ainin’s confederation in Smara.\footnote{1}

The Sahrawi are gathered in a modern battle to fight for what is ancient territory and are using a newly required vocabulary (international law) and a social re-configuring process (the nation state) to do so.\footnote{2} The nature and vocabulary of ‘\textit{\textasciitilde{as}abiya’ are not so far removed from the contemporary nature of nationalist consciousness, nor is the social organization of different types of population, with representatives chosen to represent political interests: both are the ‘glue’ that holds a population together. The Western methodological sticking point is over the type of ‘election’ of such representatives and leaders, for example, the choice between an Ait Arbain council of elders and a national parliament. The visual image is different, but the idea remains the same.

In order to unify tribes that are widely located across territory, they need to coalesce – women (women’s tents) play a part in this assembling of warrior males on the battlefield of Western romance as they should in assembling a parliament. But tents coalesce at the familial level too (see Figure 3.3), both in matrifocal patterns and during tactical sedentarization in which different genealogical reckonings may produce neighbours. This does not need to occur in a phenomenal change such as nationalist consciousness, but is relevant in the everyday flows of life, be it physical tents in the deep\textit{\textasciitilde{bad}iya}, perhaps moving around wells or saints’ tombs, or in times of living in non-fabric built structures as when tactical changes are made towards residing in urban areas (see Figure 1.1).

Instead of focusing just on the segmentary lineage – i.e., matching male political action with patrilineal genealogical charts that flow vertically down a page – a focus on the otherwise seemingly gentle, pastoral movement of tents offers a very different insight regarding where tents move to, which tents move next to each other and how the residents move between which tents (see also Claudot-Hawad 2002). This not only captures what women do, but what men do, in other words, how tribe actually works in its everyday ordinariness. If there is such an enigma as tribe in the Western and anthropological sense, then it is through women that we may capture a fleeting and alternative glimpse of it – of women and their tents, not of highly mobile and geographically dispersed men who carry few of their life assets with them.

Likewise, instead of emphasizing ‘balanced opposition’ (again an anthropological tradition that uses the classification of men in
genealogical charts), there is another way to conceptualize tribe. When tents move, they are always moving towards each other, especially as points of reception and in the ecological settings of deserts. The balanced opposition of Sahrawi tribes has been against the very colonial project of re-engineering which created these terms and classifications in the first place (cf. Isidoros 2017a).

Despite the often large distances between tents, survival necessitates actions of alliance-making, not decimation and raiding; tents do not move towards or against each other to decimate each other. In a desert environment, the decimation of sections of population is an illogical option. Such alliances are made and legitimated inside the tent, not by clusters of men on random mountain hilltops or desert dunes. Hospitality inside the tent is not just a domestic scene (the usual trope of quietly flitting women providing hospitality to serious gatherings of men) and not just a token assertion of some degree of female political space; women are preparing their property (invested in by their menfolk) for men to undertake their conventional male roles. Men do not engage in these seemingly domestic tasks because these are presiding women’s property, not just passive women’s housekeeping duty. Women are giving highly mobile menfolk a place to engage in, to meet peers and to make important decisions that cannot be made on the move. With their tents, women give men a political and economic space to engage in an otherwise ‘outside’ high-risk geography in which the same males are veiled and guarded. Womenfolk’s tents are places where menfolk may drop that guard. The domestic trope here relates to conventional domestic actions that make this political site presentable and showcase the family’s influential capacity (within available means, whether rich or poor, high or low status).

Mobile tents in desert locations become the rare ‘built’ domain and important political decision-making sites of alliance making and breaking. The ‘breaking’ should not be interpreted as antagonistic rupture, but evidenced at the familial level (the base unit of tribe) as the strategic reconfiguring of re-alliances. Sahrawi women are very much present in male political circles, both historically and in this modern period of nation-building. While men do gather on male-only occasions, such as Uncle Abdel’s party or the little sandwich restaurants, and in men-only domains, such as the military infrastructure and economic flows, it is through women’s tents that they move. Unlike the study of male and female spaces in sedentarized built structures, tents (as built
structures in their own right) often constitute the customary single ‘room’ for nomads. In this way, tents are the only built structures in a desert human landscape and thus the centre for the stereotyped female-domestic and male-political domains. Collections of tents, even when widely dispersed, not genealogical reckonings, form the decision-making centre of the Sahara. Instead I would argue that the combination of sedentarization and the architectonics of static buildings with multiple rooms provide the right environment for the often debated ‘patriarchal’ development of male focus and dominance.

In the Sahrawi case, how do ‘tribes’ gather? Tents: the only way to see the ethereal enigma of tribes is the physical coalescence of tents as women’s property. How is a segmentary lineage actually made? Through blood and breast and legitimated in the tent, not by male-only groups in the open desert. Furthermore, despite the highly stratified society defined by colonial scientists, a gathering of tents in a desert setting, by the very nature of that ecological setting, will historically have needed to contain a stratigraphic mixture of castes, hierarchies and genealogical reckonings, as a range of specializations, to survive and maximize group survival. There are none of the Middle Eastern ‘tribal mountain villages’ in the Sahara that contain just one tribe, nor are there residential units that contain one hierarchy or caste. Tents move, and they move through a wide geography through which other tents move. Genealogical reckonings pass by each other; they may make fusing actions (such as marriage) or fissioning actions (from ordinary personality-related distancing to the full-scale battles romanticized in the west).

It is, therefore, not far-fetched for different tribes, hierarchies, castes and any other classificatory labels to join forces in the face of adversity and to gather with the emphasis on the alliance-making of nationalist sentiment. Precisely with these analytical re-contextualizations of the Tindouf camps as customary desert encampments, I can now turn to ask the previously implicit question: what is that architecture that the Sahrawi may be constructing?

Sahrawi tent cities and tent-state

Whether as battle frig or trading qsar, the political architecture of coalescing tents involves base units of families. The Arabic term hayt (room, house, dwelling) implies something constructed, but it has also
been translated anthropologically as ‘clan’ and ‘family’. The population of single tents may expand in numbers and area to form large inter-and intra-tribal confederations’ and then fragment and disperse again. The mutability of genealogies enables larger units to coalesce when necessary to deal in strength, thus making nomadic genealogies highly mobile (Bamyeh 2006), as Caratini observes amongst the Sahrawi (1995). This paradox of the ritual reinforcement of blood ties (interestingly, this may also be seen in the movement and inheritance of herds) emerges against the backdrop of the largely separate existence of small nomadic units scattered over vast areas (Salzman 1980: 8–9).

This capacity for fission and fusion is finely tuned and analytically crucial: each tent is a miniature of the larger social system. What is different from the Western default model of central political organization is the ability of these large coalitions to fractionate into micro-sections without disturbing the overall social model. This gives the society a mobile resilience and adaptability (Murphy and Kasdan 1959) in the face of adversity and specialization over wide geographies. This is also reflected in Khuri’s (1990) concept of ‘the world as family’ linked through chains of alliances creating ‘constellations’.

Western nation states may be seen as single constellations, anchored in situ, and requiring their populations to be nested inside that single unit. For nomadic tribes such as the Sahrawi, the nation state model is adapted to many and highly mobile constellations that can be cast and managed over a wide geographical area. This is where I circle back experimentally to Agier’s (2002) references to innovative frameworks and naked cities to argue that the Sahrawi may, knowingly or unknowingly, be constructing something innovative that is not immediately obvious. Do human beings always know what they will ultimately construct, or can they only chart that construction’s historical evolution with the benefit of hindsight?

In their evaluation of Arab Bedouin kinship, Murphy and Kasdan (1959) posit that fission usually sets in shortly after a common cause (i.e. an external threat or opportunity) has abated and that the system appears unable to exert stable and unified political power for any length of time. This remains to be seen in the Sahrawi case in the future, and although their contemporary wider social fusion has only been visible in the last forty to fifty years, the fact remains that they have so far successfully coalesced across their entire (colonial classificatory) breadth and created a
unifying national consciousness through several tribal groupings, a widely dispersed customary nomadic population and a present-day diaspora (Isidoros 2015a).

Tribal nomadic pastoralist groups are acknowledged regionally as characterized by interdependent social relations, where intertwined social obligations include reciprocity between households and across vast networks of kin, neighbours and partners, contrary to the ‘dependence’ explored in the earlier critical refugee theory. If not in sedentarized Middle East comparisons, certainly in desert locations in response to the necessary specializations related to that ecology, a strong focus is put on creating a stable social security, as has happened in the coalescence of a broad strata of Sahrawi populations in the Tindouf camps. As tent-dwellers, their adaptation to refugee camps is not far removed from customary tactical sedentarization, which explains the internationally acclaimed success of their own administration of the refugee camps.

Major political actions of inter- or supra-tribal (to use the vocabulary of received wisdom) counsels of war such as the Sahrawi Ait Arbain, or the Bir Lehlou founding of Polisario, or the present period’s parliamentary elections and governance structures, may be visually dominated by Sahrawi men, but Sahrawi women are not just behind these men. The heart of Sahrawi state formation occurs analogously inside the tents of these leaders, inside the tents of its citizenry, with the various colonially classified tribes, hierarchies and castes ’under the same tent’.

Across the western Sahara, the Sahrawi are becoming resident in urban sites and living in built structures with multiple rooms. Customs and heritage are variously changing in relation to different regional influences, economies and political contexts, as they move into and between the arbitrary national state boundaries that cut across their historic Khat al-Khaof. To many varying degrees, traditional tea is made with different utensils, herds are invested in and pastoralized to satisfy lesser or different needs, and domestic, social, economic and political spaces change from the desert to the urban, the tent to multiple-roomed houses, from women sewing the fabricated structures of tents to men making bricks for buildings.

The Tindouf camps, as a site of Sahrawi state formation, still mostly contain the customary familial tents. They are canvas UNHCR tents, not traditional camel and goat-hair tents, and in the late 1980s brick-built compounds began to encircle the previously ‘open air’ tent. New
conjugal households may not put up the tent immediately, if they ever do, while others do so and forego the built sand-brick structures until some point in the future. Most likely they will disappear from sight in future generations as women and men encounter, prefer and introduce (as they will have historically done) new ideas and consumer items that improve their quality of life and the future prospects for their children and grandchildren; research will then need to move to different understandings of the use of multiple room homes. But at this point in time, research can capture the use and significance of the khayma and offer a live glimpse of how badawa and badara coexist, and especially how easily nomads transition in and out of settled, urban environments.

On the one hand, the administrative designs of the Tindouf refugee camps closely follow the Western and modern model of urban planning. The camps’ infrastructure is certainly rudimentary and underdeveloped, but bearing in mind that they are ‘floating’ in anticipation of transplantation into the homeland, the framework of a novel tent city state model is present.

Khuri’s micro-study of Beirut city ecology during the 1980 war vividly illustrates for him a series of tents:

The image of Beirut as a single organism, where the parts constitute an integrated whole, does not reflect socioeconomic realities. It is better seen as a series of individual ‘tents’ bound together in a constellation-like form rather than a single, monolithic unit. (1990: 122–4)

Likewise, the image of the Tindouf refugee camps as a single organism does not reflect the Saharan realities of Salem’s (2005) ‘mosaic’ and ‘points of reception’. I am not yet sure whether to play analytically with the idea of the six Sahrawi encampments as one city or six, but in the early stages of this explorative analysis, each of the camps analytically matches Khuri’s observation. Except for perhaps Rabuni camp as the government-military base, the other five camps mirror multi-functional and self-sufficient constellations of tents. If the residents of one of the densely packed residential areas were suddenly to depart, it would have little impact on the remaining residential constellations, unlike the economic ecology and administrative division of labour of stratified Western cities. Rabuni camp is strictly speaking devoid of domestic
familial units; nevertheless, it does not empty entirely each evening, since many workers remain overnight or for weeks or months before taking time off to visit their familial tents in the other five camps. Similarly, workers often form non-kin residential clusters such as the SPS and UPES male staff residentially gravitating towards a married female television presenter's working bayt. Although the camp nuclei are not based on militia associations as in Khuri’s 1976 study of Beruit, they do similarly form mutually exclusive 'social agglomerations interwoven by kinship and traditional ties of neighbourliness'.

Khuri finds a clear link between endogamous forms of action and behaviour and the constitution of the city as a series of 'tents' or 'urban nuclei' which correspond to different social solidarities striving to provide identical facilities (1990: 123; 1976). Unlike Khuri, I am studying 'a' city that has emerged from and still technically constitutes a refugee setting with mixed pre-national endogamous residential patterns, although arguably nationalism has created a new layer of endogamous interest. However, although each encampment certainly has identical facilities that are intended to create a 'detribalized' national administrative endogamy, they are not created by competing social solidarities. Nevertheless, Khuri's observations of tent constellations also certainly apply to the encampments' densely packed residential areas (the areas I footnoted that I was reluctant to call 'tribal' for epistemological reasons). Moreover, unlike Beirut, each of the six encampments are at distances from each other, separated by open desert (also constituting underlying Algerian militarized territory) and mostly connected by difficult reg roads. Although one might argue over whether the camps form one or six 'cities', Abu-Lughod usefully observes a similar model developing throughout Cairo's history in which she refers to the 'tents' as 'sub-cities' (1971).

Khuri (1990) uses the two concepts of the tent and dama (backgammon) to illustrate metaphorically Arab perceptions of reality as a matrix composed of discrete units that are inherently equal in value. These are useful concepts to apply to the idea of tent cities making the tent-state. Firstly, the design of a Bedouin encampment of tents scattered over a flat desert surface has no visible hierarchy. Khuri juxtaposes tents and pyramids as two metaphorically opposing images, the tent (Arab) signifying the absence of hierarchy and graded authority, the pyramid (West) signifying authority as a graded system, a vertical hierarchy of office and structure. In the former, authority is derived from
strategic manoeuvrability – strategy here is horizontal, with acting by groups because the isolated are also the vulnerable.

However, much as Khuri’s work has influenced me, he also only sees male political action and the actions of tribesmen. Khuri’s political application of the game of dama is as a male game. Sahrawi men also play dama, which they variously describe as military strategizing, as replaying a group battle. During a game, while it is highly competitive and noisy, men are strategizing collectively and not competing against one other in the same sense as in the game of chess. As Khuri perceptibly notes of dama, the opponent is not ‘eaten up’, as in chess, but displays features of khanat (stones/followers) following a taiyar (leader/imam). Considerable conversation can occur among the whole group to decide what someone’s next move should be. In chess, the imperative is for both players and audience to be silent. The former is alliance-making, the latter alliance-breaking.

Yet I wish to draw attention to Sahrawi women’s games such as sig and Baraka, which bear strong resemblances to dama; both are variations of the analogy of tents and occupants being moved around, but with a female intention of collecting as much as possible. Winning points is analogous to increasing resources (human and material) and is resonant of women building up their makhsan. Here, Khuri’s male-oriented analytical perspective of dama could be modified from khanat to khayam in that women are the taiyar concerned with building up and nurturing their khanat in order to be free economically and politically to move across the Sahara.

Today’s refugee camps may alternatively be women’s tent constellations coalescing into traditional encampments and amalgamating in inter-group resource- and threat-related battle formations from where customarily circulating, veiled (guarded) males undertake their conventional roles as protective men (of resources, assets and land) in war and politics. In practice, ‘tribe’ and nation state work and can be visually captured as coalescing women’s tents, and not in its ethereal stele form.
There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land. (Euripides, Medea 431BC)

The image is of an overarching political structure underneath which domestic relations are to be inserted. In this context, women are seen as of little or no consequence to political relations, since the structure is made by the ordering of groups of men arranged on a framework of patrilineal descent. My analysis amounts to a complete rejection of this view [...] The image offered here is [...] of individuals of power imposing an arrangement on an otherwise amorphous heap of relationships, as a magnet acts on a heap of iron filings by drawing them into a pattern. The assets of power delimited by this field of relationships are only a fraction of the total available to the Bedouin. (Peters 1990: 124–5, my emphasis)

My goal in this book has been to offer alternative glimpses into a key regional conflict that has serious geopolitical implications. It presents a vantage point of the Western Sahara conflict from a very local positionality, borne from the anthropological task of dwelling on other people’s thresholds, from which to offer a perspective of Sahrawi customary warrior-ship, matrifocality, the nomadic tent and male veiling (the latter being atypical in the Arab world). The objective has been to explore these rarely studied customary principles of social organization in analytical connection to their current socio-political transformations as a way of understanding the private socio-political
world of Sahrawi warriors who have transitioned into modern refugee-statesmen and -women and are making a nation state as nomads.

The Western Sahara story is an important one because it involves precarious regional relations. As well as setting a dangerous international legal precedent, it has the potential to trigger wider repercussions across North Africa and the European Mediterranean since the Arab Spring, Libya’s collapse to become the most unstable country in the region and the refugee crisis that has overwhelmed Europe in the last three years. The competitive stakes are high given the strategic territorial importance of the Sahara Desert, as evidenced by the increased US and French military securitization and natural resource exploitation of North Africa in recent years. This book contributes a fresh analysis to the debates among specialist Western Sahara observers and to a much wider audience about a multifaceted conflict. The premise has been a need for a more profound understanding of the grassroots political dynamics from the local and customary scenes of the conflict.

In many ways the book bears a subtle quality of ‘applied anthropology’ in reflecting on the abysmal situation the Sahrawi are in and the grim outlook for their future. It has to raise questions about the validity of our Western international law, which has failed their right to self-determination and forced them to live as refugees in protracted refugee camps for over forty years. Simultaneously this has the counter-intuitive effect of preventing them from legitimately taking their place on the world platform as a nation state in their own right, yet they are expected to ‘modernize’ and ‘civilize’ themselves inside these camps. This ensnares the Sahrawi in a Catch-22 position: it traps them as perpetually dependent refugees under the patriarchal control of Western geopolitical domination over them in the form of development and humanitarian regimes. None of this is logical, moral or ethical; instead it breaches international law and makes a mockery of human rights. The Sahrawi story is very much about Western hegemony justifying its neoliberal entry into ‘third-world’ societies. This is destroying and displacing an ancient society that had already been practicing forms of ‘gender equality’ and, in Khuri’s sense, a flat, horizontal system of socio-political organization, for at least three millennia. Perhaps it is the Sahrawi themselves, through their self-determination project, who can open our eyes to indigenous conceptions of security in a world accepted as insecure, as opposed to a modern Western fear of insecurity in a world presumed to be secure.
There is still much to be explored and understood about the Sahrawi – with their involvement – about their ancient territories and socio-political transformations. Hopefully the first generation of long-term fieldwork started by Pablo San Martín, Jacob Mundy, Alice Wilson and myself will guide future scholars in taking the ethically correct stance in international law with the Sahrawi.

**Patriarchy and the state**

One of the common observations made by Western Sahara observers of Sahrawi state formation and of its widely acclaimed attempts to include women in formal state structures is that few women appear to be visible. One example relates to the low levels of female participation in elections and Polisario/SADR’s parliamentary reforms to address this. This book has argued that the question ‘Where are the women?’ may indicate that observers are not looking in the right place when anthropological data illuminate alternative locations where rule by fathers exists alongside rule by mothers. The problem of patriarchy may not be ‘indigenous’ patriarchy, which I have argued is of a different nature to the blatant Western type, but that the Western premise locates gender equality in the equal visibility and power of women in pre-formed ideas about what makes up male-dominant spheres. Yet this assumption has long been problematized in, for instance, the token elevations of women into visible roles of power, bitterly contested in debates over, for example, ‘the glass ceiling’ and equal pay. The patriarchal Western model of the nation state may gradually be subsuming customary Sahrawi matrifocal socio-political organization. Sahrawi men and women may struggle to counterbalance this new patriarchal nature of socio-political organization, if metaphorically the external scrutinizing pressure forces them play chess rather than *dama*. It can seem all too simplistic to base scientific analysis on things such as a traditional game like *dama*, but it is rich with deep cultural meaning as one of many forms of ‘deep play’ among an ancient desert population.

The rules and objectives of such modest games like men’s *dama* and women’s *sig*, and comparison between them, help to understand how, in a broad generalization of Sahrawi life, there is more to a gendered division of labour. Men *tend* to be the main breadwinners and engage in front-line war and long-distance trading or wage labour, and women *tend*
to be domestically oriented to household and child-rearing. These games metaphorically indicate the different strategies and objectives the men and women employ to achieve their life goals, but they are not necessarily two separately gendered games. Instead, they might be better conceptualized as parts of conversations that eventually map on to a whole, as parts of calculations to work out the optimal formula (of life). Temporal and spatial contexts affect these variables, and it is parts of roles that can be seen to be interchanged according to fluctuating circumstances. Gender segregation is not the intention; the allocation of specific roles is. Nor does a division of labour necessarily entail the subjugation of women or ‘hidden’ women. Rather, the spaces in which women are dominant and visible are not visible to certain eyes and not located in occasionally expected sites. The same applies to men; there are times and spaces where men are not visible or located in expected sites.

Things get overwritten with new meanings attached. Yet, as the next generations of Sahrawi learn less and less how to play such games – as metaphors of desert politics, economy and sociality – what cognitive communications and cultural compass points are they losing? As Khuri (1990) brought to the fore of theories of Arab society in general, the Sahrawi are moving from the flat, horizontal structure necessary in a desert to the vertical hierarchies of modern warfare and diplomacy that requires the rule of a different game – chess. It is all a game and deadly serious, as the Sahrawi negotiate the modern, neo-patriarchal pressures of international law and neighbouring nation states, of ‘urban’ Islam, developmental scrutiny and the enjeux of Western foreign policy. Not only has this book sought to bring women back into the anthropological foreground – emphatically in a different approach to Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s (2014) developmentalist reliance on ‘ideal’ refugees – it has also sought to explore how nomads make a nation in complementary expansion of San Martín’s (2010) study of refugees making a nation. It has also sought to contribute contemporary updates to earlier anthropological studies of the first encounters of Middle Eastern qaba’il and Bedouin who developed into the new nations that emerged during the first decades of the post-colonial period. The greater bearing of this book is, perhaps, that it uses anthropological data to turn the gaze of critical scrutiny back around to Western society and history – from dama back to chess (1901), from sig to the ‘glass ceiling’, from ‘primitive patriarchy’ of
the noble savage to the ignoble savagery of First-World paternalism — in the fight over Western Sahara as a Kiplingesque (1987 [1900-01]) 'great game' of geopolitics over North Africa.

Thresholds

Sitting quietly in the data and its story that unfold in this book are little crossings through many forms of thresholds. Taking a different approach to existing scholarship on Sahrawi social transformation that measures Sahrawi 'performance' against Western expectations of how to form a nation and state and how to be 'ideal' refugees, my use of the classical anthropological approach has tried to capture nation state formation by looking out from inside the tent. Like the little folk games that otherwise seem so inconsequential, life in tents and the surfeit crossings over and between them illuminate microcosms of deep play in human relations. My intention has not simply been to give primacy to women, but to also give significance to the tent and its fabric of life, which unfolds over deep time. It is through this time that people appear and disappear through tented thresholds; the view from inside the tent is like an anthropological kaleidoscope. Moving beyond the time-worn tropes of the 'veiled, subjugated Arab/Muslim woman' and its abstracted gender problems, I have been able to reframe alternative readings of the socio-economic world of circulating, veiled menfolk.

Geertz did not intend his thesis of deep play to apply only to the Balinese cockfight in process: he developed it into a higher methodological theory of (serious) 'playing' with analysis of the origination of scientific translations of the meaning humans attach to their actions. As well as the ethnographic thresholds of everyday life among the Sahrawi, so have I engaged in analytical deep play in the structure of the book. I have tried to convey my ethnographic journey throughout the analysis, flying rapidly into the refugee camps as all visitors do, and then, marking an ethnographic departure, moving unhurriedly with Sahrawi out through the ever-increasing circles of their everyday lives and webs of kinship.

Bedouin society, *Tent and Pyramids* (I have always wondered if he knew of Stella’s study). Stella’s thesis is a rare example of a female scholar’s application of anthropology at a time when the anthropology of the Middle East was predominantly androcentric in both emic and etic terms. It came long before the early second wave of feminist revision, yet she offers an extraordinary challenge to the mainstream of that period, as in the quote from her conclusion which opens my final chapter here. I want to connect these two scholars to draw attention to an alternative link between the famous ‘*harim*’-like quality and connotations of the tent and the veil. Drawing on intimations from very elderly Sahrawi, the *el-them* may actually have far greater cultural significance as an even more mobile version of the *khayma* for men, rather than as simply a male veil. In different ways, Khuri and Stella Peters both evoke the analogous image of Arab social relations and Bedouin tents as ‘constellations’ in motion. During fieldwork, an elderly Sahrawi shepherd leafed through my field notebook and stopped to inspect a collection of genealogical diagrams I had been charting. I explained what they were, circles for females and triangles for men, and he corrected me: the circles should singularly co-represent woman: tent and the triangles denote the *el-them* as the ‘little hat’ – the little ‘tent’ of men. Using his fingers to draw in the sand and revising my charts, he showed me that a real tent – like the legendary ‘black tent’ of the Sahrawi – also sat like a little hat on the desert horizon.

The problem with our now considerably polluted connotations of the ‘veil’ is that it has come to foil alternative interpretations. The same shepherd ascribed extra qualities to the *el-them* as the mobile *khayma* worn around the head for men who had to engage in war and long-distance pastoralism or trading. The tent and the male veil are forms of thresholds – both physical and epistemological – that can help to illuminate the roles that women play in political actions manifestly made by men, and vice versa – what women do when men are considerably absent. The significance of the tent emerges as a site of political and not just domestic action, whereby the domestic is the political and forms a decision-making centre for both men and women. For men on the move, the veil serves the same purpose, and how the folds of the fabric are gathered, lifted or lowered reflects some of the similar rules of how to enter, sit in and leave a tent, which also possesses a set of its own idiosyncratic rules designed for very different
settings far from ‘home’ (the tent). This position of women is not an archaic survival of customary practices (and the often-disparaged idea of early human ‘matriarchy’), a charge that may instead be levelled at the historiographical tendencies of Western state models to emphasize a glorious past and origin myths. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that a society’s desert specializations in sheer survival and its distinctive social organization not only have relevance for them as they encounter and negotiate transformational forces along the historical continuum, they may offer challenging perspectives to social science regarding new forms and understandings of human reorganization.

**A tented state**

Western Sahara scholarship tends to focus on the unusual occurrence of refugees making a state, based on the equally unusual circumstance of a refugee population in proud possession of a legal opinion from the ICJ. Yet the Sahrawi still retain strong peripatetic and camel-pastoralist sentiments and practices. How do nomads make a nation state of their own? Unlike the decolonizing European mandates (mostly French and British) across the Middle East that turned Bedouin shaykhs into kings, the Sahrawi have done it differently, and of their own volition. The tent and the veil should receive acknowledgment as political architectures in both genealogical reckoning and gendered relations, also being developed to understanding the formation of a state made up of tents, rather than as just an apparently sedentary refugee camp. It partly matters that Sahrawi tents today are the typical UNHCR canvas tents, of a different shape to traditional camel and goat-hair tents (although it does matter when newly married couples forgo the tent for the sand-mud *bait*), or that they do not take lifetimes of women’s weaving investments to make. Nevertheless, the tent retains most of its original conceptualization, metaphor and rules – the formal front entrance still faces south, the threshold greeting remains necessary, the heavy central pole still holds the central section up, and so forth. Women now tend to use old *lemlabef* to decorate the inside of the canvas tents, and *lemlabef* fabrics themselves are fairly ‘new’. Certainly new meanings are woven into the fabric of life, and their conjunction with the old is what illuminates social transformations.
Scholars, particularly in refugee studies, have begun examining the evolving possibility of the phenomenon of ‘refugee cities’. Yet, while anthropological insights on the Sahrawi show they may be further hybridizing this phenomenon of refugee camp-cities formulated as a tented state, anthropology has long studied the nomadic Bedouin encounter with cities, nations and states. Such reorganization has become increasingly debated in climate change circles as concern mounts for the survival and adaptation of human societies to anticipated global environmental change, not just the ‘conventional’ creation of refugee camps out of war displacement. It seems to me to be a rich analytical source that desert-specialist societies such as the Sahrawi have long been reorganizing themselves in response to both human and environmental fluctuations. This in turn illuminates the fragility of the Western default model of city and state in terms of ‘failed state’ instability shoring up the principles of the West’s own idealized model of territorial sovereignty and governance.

For the time being, Sahrawi Bedouin tents are real, political architectures and not the air-conditioned incarnations of Middle East princes – as Sahrawi say, they are one of the few Arab populations who did not fabricate kingship from the post-colonial encounter. A Sahrawi joke is that, while a group was driving through the *badiya*, they came across an entourage clearly from the Gulf waving down their jeeps. Approaching this bizarre vision cautiously, the entourage asked for help. They had come with their falcons looking for the Moroccan side of the desert but had ventured far and were lost. Rattled, they asked to be taken to the Moroccan king, an obvious direction to seek the succour of fellow kingships. The Sahrawi explained this was not Morocco, there were no kings here. But the funniest part of the joke is the pleasure that they took in providing the most authentic Bedouin hospitality that night to the affluent-soft Gulfies.

Women’s roles as political architects materially facilitate the tent (as women’s property) to be the base units of centralized political constellations, which move towards each other in the alliance-making that is characteristic of female political economies of affection. As this increasing circle of families intensifies, so does the gathering of consciousness. The idiom of nationalist consciousness is ‘Sahrawi’: this is not another element of the tribe-state leap that used to be studied by anthropologists of the Middle East, but the continuation of a
pre-existing historical socio-linguistic (not just ‘tribal’) consciousness that is using a new vocabulary.

The notion of nationalist *coalescence* explains better the everyday ‘how’ of several *qaba‘il* moving towards each other and unifying across a widely diasporic terrain – they already possessed supra-group consciousness. In this way a tent-state has come to be constructed as a series of tented, refugee-cities formed out of the ever-increasing circles of tiny politically centralized base units tactically settling down beside each other. By lifting out the humanitarian haze and looking at these encampments as ‘naked cities’, it is clear they are not ‘islands unto themselves’, but signify a widely displaced nomadic population that began coalescing into a larger political constellation. The base units can coalesce and fractionate without disturbing the whole, as ‘fractionating’ does not necessarily mean a splitting off from the shared political objective. Fractionating does not mean ‘failed state’, as implied by elements of the insecurity discourse.

Using the global template of nation and state, the fission of tents to form national consciousness and state-like structure suggests an innovative construction and selective assimilation of old and new, traditional and modern, nomadic and sedentary. Unlike other colonially instigated Middle Eastern tribe-state formations – satirically, mostly into monarchies – the Sahrawi are initiating their nation and state formation from scratch and are certainly constructing something that contains experimental elements and hybrid modifications of centralized political organization in the contemporary moment. If dispersed, they can re-coalesce and hold that formation while widely dispersed. This offers the playful suggestion that such units might be able to move (shift, hybridize) far more adaptively than any Western default model of statehood. Desert nomads can ‘pack up and go’, which should force us to take their ‘mobile’ nation state seriously. While the West prides itself with such professed technological advancement to ‘plug and go’, perhaps other social configurations and structural political configurations may well be far ahead of us; more advanced in that they can actually ‘unplug and go’.
Introduction

1. A tooth-cleaning stick from the *Salvadora persica* shrub.
2. Throughout the book, I will distinguish between ‘Western Sahara’ and ‘western Sahara’. The former relates to the contemporary country formed out of colonial demarcations of the Spanish Sahara and the latter denotes the whole western region of the Sahara Desert as the traditional Sahrawi heartlands, the Khat al-Khaof and as-Sahra’ al-Gharbiya.
4. I give full acknowledgement of ‘non-cockfight’ to a fascinating chapter by Gustavo Barbosa in his examination of Palestinian youth in the Shatila refugee camps, Lebanon – presented at a Wenner-Gren Workshop at Oxford University (March 2017) and forthcoming in my co-edited volume with Marcia C. Inhorn (draft title: *Arab Masculinities: Anthropological Reconceptions*).
6. See Juan Soroeta Liceras’s (2014) detailed analysis of the Western Sahara case in international law.
9. A *frig* really refers to a small number of tents coalescing, primarily familial, whereas *hsar* refers to over one hundred suggesting extra-familial members, possibly in acts of alliance-making. I probably should be using *hsar* in my intended sense, but I am told that battle encampments were more likely to be
small, more at the frig level. The Tindouf camps are well beyond bsar, but really either term serves a similar purpose in terms of emphasizing the unusual gathering of so many tents as encampments.

10. It is tempting to write ‘tribal residential areas’ but see Isidoros 2015a, 2017a, 2017b) on over-essentialized masculine/patriarchal connotations of the term. I instead shift the analytical lens to these characteristics as female clusterings of tents.


13. For brevity, I use ‘external’ and ‘humanitarian’ (body, corpus, observers, regime, aid and so forth) and ‘foreign-public’ (body politic, infrastructure) to denote the totality of the foreign humanitarian and development corpus and domain related to the camps – a broad distinction between all types of foreign presence and action, and indigenous Sahrawi, unless stated otherwise.


16. Zunes and Mundy (2010) and other scholars whom I have cited throughout this book offer dedicated attention to the politics between the parties in the conflict.


18. Aggregately termed Maures/Moors by Europeans, a term still used by French ethnographers today.


20. See also the French sociologist, ethnologist and historian of Mauritania, De Chassey (1977).

21. Cozza (2003) appears to have caused upset and left Tindouf. He decamped to Mauritania and his unpublished PhD thesis indicates a methodological shift to informants antagonistic to the Polisario.

Chapter 1 Situating Sahrawi refugees between identity, place and sovereignty


3. But see Wilson and McConnell’s (2015) findings in a comparative analysis between Western Sahara and Tibet: the political legitimacy of exiled governments can be produced in a political liminality of displacement, despite the absence of full (international) legal recognition as a sovereign state.


5. The latter being an unconfirmed and ‘imagined’ entity in geopolitical insecurity rhetoric; (see Isidoros 2010).

6. Boujdour was renamed in 2013, having previously been known as Sab’a wa-‘ishrun (‘27th February’ camp). It had originally started as a women’s boarding school but gradually grew into a residential camp.

Chapter 2  Overtures to scepticism

1. Originally used by Ibn Khaldun, there have been numerous interpretations (commonly in the anthropology of the Middle East) of his intended meaning, such as the desert and the sown, the primitive and the civilized, ungovernable anarchic tribes versus governable city-dwellers. The most important and contentious usage by Western Sahara scholars and colonisers, as well as in the International Court of Justice’s 1975 legal study, has been the reference to the *bilad al-makhzan* (urban or rural power structures administered by state officials) and the *bilad es-siba* (tribal/religious administration). Cf. Baali 1998; Black 2011: 183.

2. These organizations are too varied and complex to discuss here. Is hall use the term NGO broadly to refer to all these ‘third-sector’ groups. NGOs engage in complex variations of development–humanitarian objectives, and controversially, many are actually governmental.

3. See the Chicago School’s and Park’s 1928 ‘catastrophe theory’, encapsulating much early fears of swarms of border-crossing migrants entering the US.


5. See Mauss 1990 on the original anthropological thesis of the gift. See Kowalski 2011 for a critical analytical comparison of anthropological gift theories and international aid, and Harrell-Bond’s 2002 questioning of whether humanitarianism can be humane.

6. See also studies of Palestinian camps, such as those in Lebanon (Peteet 2005), and the newly emergent ‘city’ (Dalal 2015) of the Zaatari refugee camp for Syrians in Jordan.
7. Following from the aforementioned Chicago School and Park’s ‘catastrophe theory’, I avoid the ‘swarming’ connotations of the term ‘migration’ and instead use the terms ‘flight’, ‘mobility’ and ‘movement’.

8. I prefer the term tributaire from the French school of ethnology (e.g., Pierre Bonete 2008 on Mauritania). While this book will not examine the Spanish colonial interpretation of Sahrawi social classes, the blanket (Western conceptual) term ‘slave’ requires caution. Western Saharan ‘slaves’ could establish a generational kin-like relationship with the Hassan a’arab warrior families. For instance, haratin families provided horticultural and pastoral skills, as well as male protection while Hassan males were away on battle raids. Haratin were also able to become wealthy merchants and traders in their own right, and intermarriage between the two classes occurred. It speaks volumes that the founding members of Polisario constitutionally prohibited slavery and the use of these terms in 1975. I suggest that to assume that this was just a post-colonial ‘modernizing/civilizing’ decision misreads a pre-existing logic of mutual economic dependence and social organization.

9. I acknowledge the problematic of ‘natural’ being used of social forms and ideas because of debates over cultural variation, determinism and relativism. I use this term because the Sahrawi philosophy of life contains micro-references and awareness of the desert ecology around them — insecurity is part of the actual geological natural world (cf. Ingold 2011: 33–50: ‘the world perceived through feet’).


12. The Ouarkziz mountain range is at least 585 kilometres long, the Oued Draa river 1,100 kilometres long. Both run parallel to each other, and without sophisticated survival or specialist skills, they form a near-impenetrable geological feature. In this quote, Baali is referring to the desert populations’ historical specialist skills in crossing this geology with agility.

Chapter 3 The logic of nomadic movement and dwelling

1. Regarding ‘fictive’ kinship, also note Bourdieu’s ‘practical kin’ (1990).

2. Referring to the Oxford English Dictionary, I use body politic as ‘public’ for ‘A nation regarded as a corporate entity; (with the) the state’, and as ‘private’ for ‘Any organized society or association of persons’. I distinguish respectively between the Sahrawi coming together collectively for nation state-building and their having their own pre-existing political organization (what others call ‘tribe’), which is not necessarily ‘past’ but very much present beneath their contemporary collectivity.
3. *Wilaya* refers to an actual camp, representational of a 'city/region'. Each camp comprises several municipal districts (*daira*) which is further divided into wards (*bario*, also called *hay*).

4. Foreigners are under subtle surveillance, both for their own safety and for reasons of regional military security.

5. I also experienced this inside Algiers’ medieval Kasbah as a stronghold of families at the core of the final French colonial 'battle of Alger’, which present-day Algerian state forces still dare not enter.


Chapter 4  The other side of the *mashrabiya*


2. See Wilson (2016b) for an insightful study of *faskha*, post-marital gifts from a bride to her in-laws to 'recalibrate' relationships. Wilson also mentions *rhil*, gifts that the bride's family give to the bride in her virilocal residence when she moves after marriage. However, I received different explanations for *rhil* as an occasional practice, in that virilocal moves were customarily rare because of underlying uxorilocal marriage patterns and preferences – see Isidoros 2017c.

3. Care is often taken among Sahrawi to distinguish idiomatic identities of Algerian or Mauritanian as to whether they are Sahrawi or non-Sahrawi.

4. This is an example of the *ralliés*: those who leave the camps to move to the Moroccan occupied territory. There is considerable controversy around this, often perceived by foreign observers as signs of nationalist Sahrawi defections. While there may well be defections, I have mostly heard of it as a Sahrawi tactic to take advantage of the enticements that Morocco offers, such as land/property ownership or assistance with setting up a business. If it occurred at all frequently, we would see a lot more of it being touted in Moroccan propaganda. As such, I think it is most likely highly tactical, given a prevalent, reverse movement of mostly young Sahrawi male activists crossing to the camps to escape Moroccan arrests. This latter activity indicates a high degree of commitment between Sahrawi on both sides of the berm, with Morocco being treated as 'piggy in the middle'. However, I have also met young men who had crossed for no apparent reason, either to meet family or look for work in the camps – we should not underestimate Sahrawi skill and agility in surreptitiously crossing the Moroccan berm as nomads with deep territorial knowledge, compared to the low paid, miserable life of Moroccan security forces far from their homes-of-origin in Morocco ‘proper’. See also Wilson's discussion of this (2012a: 13–15), and her argument that Sahrawi mobility between Morocco and Tindouf 'solidifies' the position of their political order of territorial dispute with Morocco (Wilson 2017b).
5. See Volpato, Kourková and Zelený (2012) for a lovely study of Sahrawi ethnobiology.
6. I have heard numerous explanations for this. One is that it is a symbolic tearing of virginity, another that it is a re-enactment of a story of jealousy in its original intention as a gift for the bride’s female helpers and should be split equally between them.
7. Yet, for a desert community in a harsh ecological setting, this might be the only time such a diet provides much-needed high calcium and iron intake.

Chapter 5 Circulating males: female economies of affection

1. Cf. alliance theory and exchange of women (Lévi-Strauss 1949) and criticism, such as Strathern (1984), Ortner (1990), Walker (2012), and more recently Parkin’s (2013) re-examination of kinship.
2. See Gómez Martín (2016) for a historical study of Sahrawi migration to Cuba in the 1970s up to contemporary economic migration to Spain.
3. This is not typically done in jeeps containing foreigners, unless Polisario drivers need to discreetly seek news and information from such families, who act as ‘shepherd-scouts’, especially in areas near the Moroccan berm.
4. Dr Robert Parkin, personal communication.
6. The three-month waiting period, to ensure there is no pregnancy.
7. In personal discussion with Dr Robert Parkin, this reminds us of the ‘visiting husband’ phenomenon (e.g. Gough 1959) although on a daily/nightly basis. I do find this of relevance to the Sahrawi case, although over longer time periods as long-distance nomadic pastoralists and Trans-Saharan traders.

Chapter 6 Veiled males and unrestricted females

1. For Sahrawi living in the Moroccan-occupied side of Western Sahara, the el-them is an immediate ethnic marker of the Sahrawi to the Moroccan security forces and settlers and represents a form of resistance against occupation (Isidoros 2012).
2. However, Sahrawi narrative may be absorbed from and fashioned by the foreign-soldarity narratives. I have experienced numerous occasions when the Sahrawi seem to wait for foreigners to speak and write about them, the vocabulary of which they then absorb and repeat. On the other hand, I have heard Sahrawi being asked and patiently replying to the same questions year in and year out, as new visitors arrive asking the same things over a forty-year span.

5. As an unmarried female and foreign visitor, I never ‘undressed’ but slept in my *melhfa*. As an older married female, Fatma was like a mother-sister to Saleh, and in our private informal times with no risk of strangers arriving, she dressed loosely in front of him.

6. My thanks to Dr Robert Parkin for discussions on these finer points between consciousness and unconsciousness.

7. At a three-day cultural festival, another host-mother went in a brand new white and pink *melhfa* on one day and returned the following day wearing *nile*, which she had also rubbed on her skin for the full traditional look.

8. One must remember the range of desert temperatures involved in relation to this clothing!


10. At the back of the body, the *melhfa* crosses from the right to the left side, leaving two ‘ends’ of fabric that can open during movement at the lower area to show the leg calf, trouser or underskirt.

11. See also Bourdieu and Sayad (1979) on the Kabyle house and vom Bruck’s Yemeni study (1997).

12. Using body language also recognisable across the Mediterranean and MENA region: a hand holding the other’s arm or shoulder firmly, both heads and voices lowering in solemnity and kinship appeal.

13. I thank Dr Robert Parkin for this perceptive observation.


15. Keenan explicitly sticks to the Middle Eastern thesis that ‘A [Tuareg] woman is not a public figure in the same way as a man, and takes no roles in the political arena. Similarly, it is surely because a boy has little or no social or political status that he does not wear the veil’ (1977: 10). However, Sahrawi children (traditionally) bore head-shaved patterns as tribal identification markers, are the most valuable (and thus the most vulnerable) asset of the Sahrawi women’s tent (as *makhzan*), and are a public political display of strength (socio-political status, wealth and role) in the absence of circulating veiled adult males.

Chapter 7 Tented cities and the tent-state

1. For the time-being, this is a politically philosophical residential preference and pattern, despite the camps’ ability to build conventional-style houses.

3. Of note here, Morocco belligerently left the African Union in 1984 after its members voted in favour of recognizing SADR. It rejoined in January 2017, after thirty-two years, realising that it was the only country in Africa not in the AU, clearly with the intention to widen its foreign policy to look for more ’friends’ to establish a dominant presence in Africa and attempt to undermine the Sahrawi referendum thesis.


5. Spanish spellings are prevalent in reference to the Sahrawi and the lexicon of Hassaniya. This region is often spelt ‘Jat al-Jaof’ by Spanish scholars.

6. For a study in the variations of refugee camp forms across the Middle East, Western Europe and the US, see Picker and Pasquetti (2015).


8. Although Tindouf is a critical Algerian military base, the Sahrawi are under self-rule. For instance, Algeria places responsibility for human rights under the legal jurisdiction of the Polisario and SADR (Goldstein and Van Esveld 2008: 216).

9. An admiration that has attracted the large foreign body of ‘solidarity’ to their cause; Morocco barely attracts this international solidarity for its military occupation thesis other than geopolitical foreign-policy interest in Morocco’s occupation as an open door to the exploitation of the natural resources of the Western Sahara.

10. My thanks to Dr Mohammad Talib for drawing my attention to the similar nature of tax in the nation state. One aspect of nomad–state antagonism is the existence of an ‘uncontrollable’ population that is not countable, containable and therefore taxable. But tax has historically been a political tool used by tribes, nomads and pastoralists too. See the article by Kevin Carrico, ’Towards an Anthropology of Taxation’, Anthropology News, Sept/Oct 2013: 16–18.

11. Such authors are given extensive recognition in Ayubi’s Overstating the Arab State, 1995.

12. Unlike these authors, I believe the words ‘tribe’ and ‘tribalism’ are used in the camps in their derogatory Western meanings. ‘Tribalism’ is frustratingly used to suggest that the leadership has grown comfortable in the ‘waiting years’ of the diplomatic battle for self-determination, while young people are increasingly calling for a return to war. See Isidoros 2017a, 2017b, 2015a, 2012.

13. Ould Cheikh uses the term ‘artificial’ tribes (in Galaty and Bonte 1991: 217 footnote 6), such as the A’bid Ahl ‘Utman tribe in the Adrar emirate and the Awlad ar-Rgayyig tribe in the Trarza emirate.
Chapter 8  Women as political architects

2. I reiterate here that this Sahrawi claim to territorial sovereignty is reaffirmed annually by United Nations’ resolutions, having been first established in fact of law by the International Court of Justice in 1975.
4. See Wilson’s (2017a) insightful chapter on camp elections as a ‘tool for liberation’, which provides a rare level of detail.
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GLOSSARY

a’adat  tradition, past historical customs
‘a’ila  family (usually as large/extended)
abd (pl. ‘abid)  usually translated as slave, also meaning servant, worshipper, henchman
‘asaba  agnatic spirit of kinship
‘asabiya  solidarity, social cohesion
as-salamu  Muslim greeting: ‘peace be upon you’
alaykum
badawa  nomadism, rural, desert dwelling (see badara)
badiya  desert
basaga  taxi, central area where taxis wait (to go to the basaga, to get a basaga)
bayt (pl. buyut)  room, house, family, clan. In the camps, refers to individual sand-mud brick rooms built inside the tent compound
berm  English term meaning barrier, wall
cuba  large metal water containers; filled every few weeks with water to serve small groups of tents
cuzina  kitchen
dama  male game similar to backgammon
dara’a  a distinctive traditional men’s costume; a long ‘shirt’-like outfit with blue or white with embroidery around the neck and sleeves
el-them  male veil, a long piece of fabric wound around the head; in (pl. el-lithma) Hassaniya (al-litham in Arabic)
et-tay  sweet Sahrawi tea
erg  sandy part of the desert
fiqib  Islamic inheritance law
frig (pl. fargan)  Small collection of tents (*hsi*ar roughly relates to over 100 tents)
ghafer      protection fees
ghazi (*pl. ghazawat*)  war and battle, economically linked to kafla and rhesza;
badara      urban, sedentary (see badawa)
bala wa      women’s hair removal paste, called ‘sugaring’ in the West, made from lemon, sugar and water
baram        Islamic restrictions, such as on certain types of food or prescribed contact between the sexes. See mahram for the opposite
baratin      freed slaves (French anthropologist Pierre Bonte more aptly translates this word as *tributaires* to convey inter-dependencies between social classes)
baram        from Arabic haram ‘forbidden place; sacrosanct, sanctum’ and related to harim ‘a sacred inviolable place; female members of the family’. Refers to the ‘harem’ in English, a polygynous household forbidden to men, originating in the Near East. See purdah and zenana for South Asian equivalents
bawib        the sandy central courtyard area in household compounds
hijab         Muslim women’s headscarf
‘Id al-’Adha  an important religious holiday after Ramadan
imam (*pl. a’imma*)  prayer leader
insba’allah  Arabic saying: ‘God willing’
insbe        Hand-ground barley porridge, usually served hot for breakfast in the winter months
jinn (*pl. jnun*)  genies, spiritual creatures mentioned in the Qur’an as inhabiting the world with humans; in Hassaniya (*jinn, pl. jinnī* in Arabic)
kafla         long-range trading, historically by camel caravanseri
khayma       tent; *gaton* in Hassaniya in certain parts of western Sahara and widely used among the older generation. *Khayma* is equally understood but seems to have become popularised in Spanish colonial reports and is used extensively by Spanish visitors today. Used more recently by younger Sahrawi generation to suggest the ‘whole’ – the ‘compound’ unit with extra non-tent rooms built of sand-bricks
mahram       the opposite of haram; acceptable contact or consumption
makhzan  
(pl. makhazin)  
storeroom, treasury, stronghold (from kazana to store)

masrabiya  
in Islamic-influenced architecture, an oriel or projecting second-story window of latticework, e.g., the segregated Muslim barim.

marca  
shopping area, supermarket, market, local terminology for the Arabic suq

melhfa  
(pl. lemlabef)  
women's body 'scarf'; a long and wide piece of fabric loosely wrapped around the body and head

mesbouk  
twigs from the Salvadora persica shrub used to clean teeth

mniba  
a custom of lending camels, particularly lactating camels for fresh milk, but also generally to help those unable to acquire their own camels, or since the Moroccan war, to help others start to rebuild their lost livestock.

musalsalat  
conventionally Arab soap operas, but also used of international soaps (e.g., Brazil)

nile  
dark indigo and fairly transparent bolt of fabric; unfast dye which stains the skins

qabila (pl. qaba’il)  
tribe (this term and its translation is epistemologically problematic)

qasha  
(kasbah in English) part of a medina quarter or citadel fortress

qsar (pl. quar)  
(ksar in Maghrebi dialect) castle, fort/defensive town or village

reg  
rough, stony, gravelled part of the desert

rhezzou  
raiding, historically by tribes on camelback of other tribes’ encampments or tents (a French colonial term adopted from gaziya/ghazw, razzia in English)

sadaq  
marriage dowry given by the groom to the bride (known as mahr in Arabic)

Sabrawi  
as in 'people of the Sahara', but has come to denote a distinct nationalistic population subscribing to self-determination and the independence of Western Sahara (previously colonial Spanish Sahara)

shaykh  
(pl. shuyukh)  
senior tribal leader, political representative (this term is also problematic – ordinary elders may also be deemed shuyukh by virtue of their aged wisdom, experience and the respect given to them)

suq  
small market, shopping area; also called marca

tagelmust  
eastern Saharan Tamashek word for Tuareg male veil
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