

MULTIPLE COLONIALISM IN WESTERN SAHARA

Macharia Munene

Abstract

The Sahrawi are a hybrid people found in parts of northwest Africa, mostly Western Sahara and they are victims of multiple colonialism. The decision by European powers to include parts of their land in various colonies subjected many Sahrawi to different French and Spanish colonial policies and experiences in Morocco, Algeria, Mauretania and Western Sahara. The Spaniards took control of Western Sahara and when they decided to leave, Morocco, with its irredentist dreams stepped in. Morocco became the new colonial power as it claimed Western Sahara territory as a province. It behaves in the same way as the French did when they claimed that Algeria was a province of France. Morocco exploited the prevailing international climate to advance its colonialistic proclivities at a time when territorial colonialism had become anathema internationally. That climate made the big powers, whether communistic or capitalistic, appear to support Morocco. This way their perceived interests seemed to dictate that they be in good books with Morocco and they thus condoned Morocco's annexationist designs. The fact that Morocco itself used to be colonized by the French and the Spaniards tends to hide the fact that it is a colonial power imposing itself on the Sahrawi.

Introduction

Western Sahara is an international anomaly suffering from multiple colonialist effects. Its people, the Sahrawi, have been struggling to get accepted in the community of nations from 1976. This has proved difficult despite expressions of sympathy.

In that struggle for acceptance, they initially appeared confused as to their identity, Africans or Arabs, as shown by two declarations in 1976 by POLISARIO leaders. On

February 27, 1976 they asserted that their territory was the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, SADR, that was a “free, independent, sovereign state ruled by an Arab national democratic system of progressive unionist orientation and of Islamic religion.”¹ Some months later, POLISARIO made adjustments to describe the Sahrawi as having “Arab, African, and Islamic identity” that was part of the Third Word in “opposition to imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation.”²

The stress on “Arab national” was a power issue because of the prestige attached to being “Arab”, as social status.³ It was probably a reflection on the lingering caste system of superior and inferior tribes with black Africans considered as the most inferior.⁴ Those assuming superiority were *shorfa*, mainly of Arab descent or *ahel mdafa*, the warriors. The inferior were *znaga*, the weak or the conquered, that were forced to pay *horma*, or tribute, as protection fee. Although with colonization, all Sahrawi became *znaga* and paid *horma* to Spaniards, the system remained in the minds.

The Sahrawi, culturally different from their immediate neighbours, are a hybrid people. Their music is predominantly African, place names are predominantly Berber, religion is Suni Moslem, and words of daily usage on small items are Spanish.⁵ While most groups traced their origins to a founding patriarch or holy man, they all came together in the *Ait Arabin* or Council of Forty to discuss the fate of their people independently of those governments in Morocco or Mauritania.⁶ A nomadic people whose primary loyalty was to the *qabila* and clan, they engaged in *ghazi*, or raids, in order to acquire livestock from

¹ Quote in John Mercer, “The Cycle of Invasion and Unification in the Western Sahara,” *African Affairs*, Volume 75, Number 301, October 1976, p. 506.

² Quotes in John Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa: The Western Sahara Dispute* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), p. 43

³ John Mercer, *Spanish Sahara* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1976), p. 75

⁴ Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, p. 127.

⁵ Oral Discussions with Limam Ali, a Sahrawi doctoral student at UJI, November 24 and 25, 2008 at UJI, Castellon, Spain.

⁶ Sidi M. Omar, “The Right of Self-Determination and the Indigenous People of Western Sahara,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 21, Number 1, March 2008, pp. 44-45

other *qabila*.⁷ Their hybrid language, Hassaniya, incorporates Arabic, African, Berber, and Spanish cultural concepts is part of their identity; separate from Morocco.⁸

Like other colonies in Africa, Western Sahara was largely a European creation. The Portuguese made initial inroads at the coast and were followed by the Spaniards, and then the French. It was the French who actually determined the current borders that define Western Sahara but it was Spain that became the colonial power. As a colonial power in Africa, Spain was weak and was manipulated by other forces.

Spain had been a great imperial power that ultimately failed to defend itself against other imperialists. Spaniards kicked out North Africans from Europe, grabbed Ceuta and Mellila almost as a guarantee that those Africans would never return, and then tried to expunge memories of being colonized as they rewrote the record in order to create myths about their greatness.⁹ They felt great as they conquered the Americas but that feeling was terminated by other Europeans who, particularly the English and the French, successfully short-circuited Spanish greatness by engaging in piracy.¹⁰ Spaniards became weak and, in the 19th Century, lost their American empire and failed to defend their interests. They were unprepared, wrote Sebastian Balfour, for “a crude new philosophy of Social Darwinism in which the notion of the survival of the fittest was extended to peoples and nations. Older and weaker empires ... found stronger and acquisitive Powers

⁷ Tony Hodges, “The Origins of Saharawi Nationalism,” Third World Quarterly, Volume 5, Number 1 (January 1983), pp. 28-29

⁸ Susan Martin-Marquez, Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Performance of Identity (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), 255-256, 335; Toby Shelley, “Resistance and Colonialism: building the Saharawi Identity,” in Martin Arts and Pedro Pinto Leite, editors, International Law and the Question of Western Sahara (Oporto, Portugal: IPJET Books, 2007), p.31; Beth A. Paine, “The Western Sahara: international Legal Issues,” in Yahia H. Zoubir and Daniel Volman, editors, International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993), p.133; Jacob A. Mundy, “Performing the Nation, Pre-figuring the State: The Western Saharan Refugees, Thirty Years Later,” Journal of Modern African Studies, Volume 45, Number 2, 2007, pp.277-278 ; Discussions with Ali.

⁹ Marquez, Disorientations, pp. 12-16; Sophie Bessis, Western Supremacy: Triumph of an Idea (London: Zed Books, 2003), pp. 12-14

¹⁰ Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 55-56; Niall Ferguson, Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World (London: Penguin Press, 2003), pp. 4-12; T.O. Lloyd, The British Empire, 1558-1995, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 4-11

chafing on the borders.”¹¹ Those chafing on the borders included the United States which snatched the islands of Cuba and the Philippines from Spain.¹²

Spanish Colonialism in Western Sahara

In the intensified rivalry for empires, there was a European rush to grab African territories in what I. William Zartman called “the great African hunt”.¹³ The hunt, however, was mainly a stiff territory grabbing competition between the English and the French. Other Europeans were minor hunters and Spain was the most minor.¹⁴ Its catches in the hunt, including Western Sahara which it claimed in 1884, were tiny and not as well endowed with natural wealth.

Spain waited for France to determine the size of its claims. The French, through a series of treaties from 1900 to 1912, forced a definition of what the Spaniards could claim to be theirs. After ensuring that the rich parts of the territories stayed within the borders of its colonies of Mauritania, Algeria, and Morocco, France allowed Spain to become the owner of Rio de Oro, Seguiet-el-Hamra, and southern Morocco or Tarfaya.¹⁵

Before World War II, Spain ignored Western Sahara, its colony, but was forced to pay attention after the war. Considered a military outpost by the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War, the colony had also been a possible bargaining chip with Adolph Hitler when it appeared as if the Germans might win. It, however, gained some importance 1947 after Manuel Alia Medina found large amounts of phosphate at Bu Craa.¹⁶ Spain took

¹¹ Sebastian Balfour, The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898-1923(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 28-29, 46-48.

¹² Lawrence James The Rise and Fall of the British Empire(London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 5, 15-16, 30-31; Sidney Lens, The Forging of the American Empire, From Revolution to Vietnam: A History of American Imperialism(London: Pluto Press, 1971), pp. 95-98; Balfour, The End of the Spanish Empire, pp. 11-48; Frederick Stirton Weaver, Latin America in the World Economy: Mercantile Colonialism to Global Capitalism(Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 44-46

¹³ I. William Zartman, Problems of New Power: Morocco (New York: Atherton Press, 1964), p. 8.

¹⁴ Macharia Munene, “Hope for Africa’s Last Colony,” Business Daily, Nairobi, December 2, 2008.

¹⁵ Damis, Conflict in Northwest Africa, pp. 9-12; Mercer, Spanish Sahara, pp. 105-107; Hodges, Western Sahara, pp. 45-49

¹⁶ Mercer, Spanish Sahara, pp.121-122, 130, 185, 219.

advantage of the growing Cold War to get rehabilitated into the Western Camp¹⁷ by portraying itself as a bastion of anti-communism. But as it sought to be accepted into the community of nations, it came under tight scrutiny with regard to its colonial policies. Its admission to the United Nations in 1955 was an implicit acceptance to abide by new rules that called for colonial accountability. It was reluctant to do so.

Spain was reluctant to be accountable even as anti-colonial agitation in Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania rose up and eventually led to the independence of the three French colonies that surrounded its Sahara territories. The agitations, particularly in southern Morocco gave rise to an Army of Liberation that inspired the Sahrawi to fight¹⁸ against both the Spaniards and the French. Morocco got its independence in 1956, and then joined France and Spain in flushing out the remnants of the Army of Liberation; those who ran to Morocco were disarmed. Madrid then rewarded Rabat by handing over Tarfaya in 1958.¹⁹ Though defeated, the Sahrawi had tasted a war of liberation against two colonial powers and a potential one.

Spain decided to make its presence felt on the ground by directing human and material investments to the territory. It increased budgetary allocations, built infrastructure, put up schools, and encouraged investments in mineral exploration, particularly oil and iron. Most important, the production of phosphate at Bu Craa was started and a 62 mile conveyor belt was built to deliver the phosphate to a port near Al-Ayoun from where it would be sent to Spain. Nature helped in the sedentarisation because drought hit the area, killed many livestock, and made people desperate to find alternative livelihood in growing little towns. All these activities brought the different Sahrawi clans into close contacts with each other and with the Spaniards. They interacted through residence, schools, and new rules of governance.²⁰

¹⁷ Sheelagh Ellwood, France (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 156-159; Charles T. Powell, "Spain's External Relations, 1898-1975," in Richard Gillespie, Fernando Rodrigo, and Jonathan Story, editors, Democratic Spain: Reshaping External Relations in a Changing World (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 19-21.

¹⁸ Tony Hodges, Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), pp. 73-75

¹⁹ Hodges, "Origins of Saharan Nationalism," p. 32

²⁰ Marquez, Disorientation, p. 328; Hodges, "Origins of Saharan Nationalism," pp.35-36; Mercer, Spanish Sahara, p. 131.

Sahrawi Anti-Colonialism

With diverse experiences, and influenced by political developments in the neighbouring French colonies, the Sahrawi in Western Sahara started demanding independence. Administrative and political institutions designed to entrench Spanish rule in which the Sahrawi were treated as ‘little brothers’,²¹ provided opportunity for Sahrawi to think in terms of a Western Sahara geopolitical entity that was different from its neighbours. While their neighbours, having received French colonial experience had become independent, the Sahrawi colonial experience was Spanish and they were not independent. Together, they initially wanted to be involved in matters of the “province”, and then evolved into an anti-colonial movement demanding independence.²²

The first serious group to mount urban challenge to Spanish control in the 1960s was Harakat Tahrir.²³ It was led by Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri who, as a teenager during the 1957-1958 Sahrawi anti-Spanish War, had been evacuated by Sahrawi guerrillas. After schools in Morocco, he imbibed nationalist rhetoric in Middle East universities, returned to Morocco in 1966 and started a newspaper and then moved back to Western Sahara in 1967 as a Koranic teacher at Smara. He founded the Harakat Tahrir Saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab (Organisation of the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Oued ed-Dahab) or simply Harakat Tahrir which infiltrated even the supposedly loyal uniformed Sahrawi and office employees. They were attracted by Harakat Tahrir’s calls for reforms and progress towards independence. A confrontation with the government at Zemla led to what came to be termed the Zemla massacre in 1970 after Harakat Tahrir presented demands to the government. The government rejected the demands, arrested some leaders, and after a riot broke out shot some people. There were additional arrests and among the arrested was the “classic agitator”, Bassiri, who was never seen again. That shattered Harakat Tahrir.²⁴

²¹ Marquez, Disorientation, p. 328; Phillip C. Naylor, “Spain, France, and the Western Sahara: A Historical Narrative and Study of Transformation,” in Zoubir and Volman, editors, International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict, p. 23

²² Omar, “The Right of Self-Determination,” p. 45

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hodges, Western Sahara, pp. 153-155, 157; Damis, Conflict in Northwest Africa, p. 38

The shattered Harakat Tahrir had reignited Sahrawi nationalism that re-emerged barely three years later as POLISARIO.²⁵ Opposition to eventual Sahrawi independence, however, came from two powerful sides that tried to sponsor alternative anti-colonial movements that would favour their interests. Morocco and Mauritania wanted anti-colonial movements that would lead to annexation, not independence. Spain wanted movements that stressed Spanish benevolence and continued presence and so it sponsored and registered PUNS, acronym for Partido de la Union Nacional Saharaui, which rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian irredentism and advocated close relations with Spain. Making little headway, PUNS disintegrated quickly. Morocco also sponsored its own party, FLU or Frente de Liberacion y de la Unidad, to discredit POLISARIO and advocate union with Morocco.²⁶ And there was also MOREHOB or Movement de Resistance des Hommes Bleus, associated with an opportunistic ex policeman Bachir Figuigui also known as Eduardo Moha²⁷ who kept on shifting political positions.

What would become POLISARIO, therefore, initially had a rough time but it eventually forced change of attitude and the international dynamics of Western Sahara. To spearhead it were university students revolving around El-Ouli Mustapha Sayed at the Mohammed V University at Rabat who studied such revolutionaries as Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara.²⁸ He was joined by future leaders Mohammed Lamine Ould Ahmed, Mohammed Ali Ould el-Ouali, Mohammed Salem Ould Salek, Mohammed Ould Sadati, and Bashir Mustapha Sayed. Together they formed a network of Sahrawi students that initially approached Moroccan opposition parties such as the Itiqlal Party. Disillusioned by lack of support in Morocco, they started approaching the Sahrawi in Western Sahara and established contacts with former supporters of the Harakat Tahrir to strengthen an anti-colonial militant movement. They were harassed by Moroccan officials in April 1972 at Tan Tan for their anti-Spanish activities.²⁹

²⁵ Omar, "The Right to Self-Determination," p. 45

²⁶ Hodges, Western Sahara, pp. 171-172, 201-205.

²⁷ Damis, Conflict in Northwest Africa, pp. 39-40; Hodges, "The Origins of Saharawi Nationalism," pp.39-40

²⁸ Damis, Conflict in Northwest Africa, pp. 39-40

²⁹ Hodges, Western Sahara, pp. 158-160

They sought aid from Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania, but only Libya, in 1972, was willing to support a liberation war in Western Sahara. After a 1969 coup, Libya was under new revolutionary leadership committed to supporting other revolutionaries. It was, therefore, willing to supply anti-Spanish forces with weapons, funds, and an initial propaganda base.³⁰ In May 1973, POLISARIO was founded in the frontier of Mauritania and Spanish Sahara³¹ and declared that it opted “for revolutionary violence and the armed struggle as a means by which the Saharawi Arab African people can recover total liberty and foil the manoeuvres of Spanish colonialism” and started attracting attention with attacks on Spanish installations in the territory.³² It appeared to be more committed to the struggle than any other group and this increased its popularity with the Sahrawi especially when in 1974 it clearly stated that independence was its objective. Its successes in sabotaging infrastructure and getting support of the Sahrawi people forced a re-evaluation of positions by Spain and by other countries.³³ Among those to change position on POLISARIO was Algeria which became the guerrilla movement’s biggest supporter against Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania.

The Algerian support was interesting because it initially was skeptical of POLISARIO’s seriousness and it did not come until Algeria’s security interests coincided with those of POLISARIO and until POLISARIO proved popularity and serious commitment to fight on the ground. Algeria had even tried to coordinate policy on Western Sahara with Morocco in the hope that Morocco would abandon claims to Tindouf and other Algerian territories. It had refused to support POLISARIO, to allow transit of weapons, and had even locked up its leaders. It had reportedly funded Mauritanian activities and endorsed a secret deal between Morocco and Mauritania to share Western Sahara.

Algeria, however, changed position when it felt its security interests were seriously threatened. This was when Morocco and Mauritania decided to frustrate a UN mandated

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162

³¹ Hodges, “The Origins of Saharawi Nationalism,” p.52

³² Quote in Anthony G. Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* , Third Edition (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), pp. 149-150

³³ Hodges, *Western Sahara*, 168

referendum and then excluded Algeria in a settlement with Spain over Western Sahara. With its interests ignored and seemingly threatened, Algeria decided to support POLISARIO in every way it could to defeat Mauritania and Morocco in their expansionist designs.³⁴ That way, POLISARIO acquired a solid base of support to make it a force to reckon with.

Spain and External Forces

The interests of external forces, as Algeria's behavior showed, complicated decolonization in Western Sahara thereby making Spain lose control as the Sahrawi became victims of power play. At the centre were Morocco's imperialist irredentism which threatened not only Western Sahara but also Algeria and Mauritania. It was first given voice by Istiqlal leader Allal el-Fassi on July 7, 1956 when he published a map claiming that "Greater Morocco" included Mauritania, as well as parts of Senegal, Mali, Algeria, and all Spanish colonies in Northwest Africa. The party and the king, Mohamed V, endorsed the claim which became part of the new Morocco ideology.³⁵ Morocco, to buttress its claims to Mauritania, supported the activities of Hurma Ould Babana who wanted a Mauritanian union with Morocco in order to dilute the influence of Mauretania's black people.³⁶ At the United Nations in October 1957, Morocco opposed the placing of Mauritania, Western Sahara, and IFNI on the UN list of Non-Self-Governing-Territories claiming that those were integral parts of its territory.³⁷

Morocco, thereafter, quarreled with two of the territories that it included in its "Greater Morocco" designs when they became independent, Mauritania and Algeria. It refused to recognize Mauritania's independence from France in 1960, unsuccessfully tried to block its entry into the UN, and even broke ties with Tunisia for recognizing the new state. On his part, Mauritania's new president, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, had started countering the 1956 Rabat claims of "Greater Morocco" with his own assertion of a "Greater

³⁴ Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, pp. 47-57, 68-70; Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary*, pp. 149-150; Hodges, *Western Sahara*, pp. 160, 162, 190-195

³⁵ Yahir H. Zoubir, "Stalemate in Western Sahara: Ending International Legality," *Middle East Policy*, Volume XIV, Number 4, Winter 2007, p. 160; Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary*, pp. 223-224; Knapp, *Northwest Africa*, p. 9;

³⁶ Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, p. 30

³⁷ Omar, "The Right of Self-Determination," pp.48-49

Mauritania”, in July 1957, covering up to the borders of Morocco.³⁸ Like his political rival in Mauritania, Babana, Ould Daddah disliked the black people and wanted to dilute them by uniting Western Sahara and Mauritania as *ard al-bidan* or the land of the whites who combined Arabic and Berber attributes.³⁹ Considering Western Sahara as a buffer zone between his country and irredentist Morocco, he repeatedly portrayed Mauritania in OAU meetings as “a hyphen between the Maghreb and Central Africa.”⁴⁰ Eventually Morocco recognised Mauritania in 1969 and the two started collaborating at the expense of Western Sahara.

The Moroccan King, Hassan II, with similar designs on Algeria, had taken advantage of the weakness of Algerian revolutionaries. In return for anti-colonial support, he had pressed Ferhat Abbas, in July 1961, to agree to border adjustments after Algerian independence. When in July 1962 Algeria became independent, Moroccan troops moved into Algeria to actualize the claim and wait for official endorsement. At the time, Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella was trying to consolidate his position and was confronting myriads of problems. Amongst them was a rebellion in the south by the Berbers, or the Kabyle Revolt, and he was not in a position, or willing, to discuss the border. For Algeria, the colonial borders were to remain unchanged. Hassan then decided to annex the territory militarily and started what came to be termed “the war of the sands” in 1963.⁴¹ The war ended when the newly created OAU persuaded Hassan to withdraw his troops from Algeria.⁴² The two remained suspicious of each other.

The OAU ambivalence

The OAU was initially indecisive and ambivalent on the matter of Western Sahara in part because it was a product of many conflicting interests confronting newly independent African states. Many of these states had become independent in 1960 and had been admitted to the United Nations as full members. Their presence, along that of other Third World countries, might have induced the United Nations to issue Resolution 1514 of

³⁸ Pazzanita, *Historical Dictionary*, p.285

³⁹ Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, p. 30

⁴⁰ Knapp, *Northwest Africa*, p. 249.

⁴¹ Naylor, “Spain, France, and Western Sahara,” p. 22

⁴² Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, p. 18

1960 on the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples stressing that “all peoples have a right to self-determination” and the right to choose freely their own economic and political future.⁴³ While they all agreed on the need for speedy decolonization, they were divided on the direction that self-determination was to take when there were conflicting claims of rights. They particularly disagreed on the adjustment of colonial boundaries. Some countries displayed irredentist tendencies, Morocco amongst them, and claimed to be “progressive” while coveting land in other states. They called for abolition of colonial boundaries to suit real African interests as opposed to those of colonialists who had determined them. Opposed to them were those, mainly potential victims of irredentism, insisting on the sanctity of colonial boundaries, unfair as they may have been, in order to avoid chaos and possible bloodshed.

This had been the situation in May 1963 when heads of state and governments of independent African states met in Addis Ababa to found the Organization of African Unity. They agreed to uphold the sanctity of colonial boundaries and that the right of self-determination was to be within colonial borders.⁴⁴ They also agreed not to interfere with the internal affairs of member states. These provisions appear to have been aimed at the “progressive” states that were seemingly guilty of trying to violate the boundaries and of interfering with the internal affairs of member states. The OAU, however, did create a Liberation Committee to promote the liberation of the remaining colonies.

The Liberation Committee first met in July 1963 and seemed unsure on how to treat tiny colonies, implying concessions to irredentists. It sought to categorize colonial powers and colonies in terms of amenability to decolonization as well as viability of the entities to be decolonized. Spain, along with Britain and France, was described as a country that although it recognized the right of self-determination, it needed diplomatic pressure to make it accelerate decolonization. It also tended to defer decisions on the plight of small colonies, such as Spanish Sahara and Djibouti, that were assumed to be unviable if left

⁴³ Thomas M. Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Volume 70, Number 4, October 1976, pp. 697-698; Omar, “The Right of Self Determination,” p. 42; Issaka K. Souare, “Western Sahara: Is there Light at the end of the Tunnel?” *Institute for Security Studies Paper 155*, November 2007, p.3

⁴⁴ Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” p. 698.

alone. This was heartening to both the colonial powers and the neighbouring irredentist countries. It might have induced Madrid to announce, in August 1963, that it intended to give administrative and economic autonomy to Guinea and IFNI to Morocco but made no commitment on Western Sahara. Equatorial Guinea attained independence in 1968.⁴⁵

The UN Position

While the OAU was initially reluctant to engage Spain on the Western Sahara, the United Nations was not. In December 1960 the United Nation General Assembly had had passed Resolution 1514(XV) on the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples stating that “all peoples have a right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”⁴⁶ Resolution 1514 also prohibited any “attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country.”⁴⁷ The UN followed this in 1961 by creating a watchdog Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples giving the UN special presence in the final stages of decolonization in any territory.⁴⁸ In September 1963, it specified Western Sahara as a territory affected by Resolution 1514 and in 1964 went on to complain about Spain’s reluctance to implement UN wishes. The General Assembly, in 1965, went on to request Spain to do everything possible to decolonize Western Sahara and to hold a referendum on self-determination.⁴⁹

Madrid became increasingly intransigent with claims that Western Sahara was a province of Spain, not subject to self-determination⁵⁰ but it was forced to change and accept possible Sahrawi independence. Irredentist Morocco and Mauritania in 1966, each with dreams of making Western Sahara one of its provinces, had countered Spain by insisting on the Sahrawi right of self-determination. Spain had then proceeded to create a general

⁴⁵ Jon Woronoff, *Organizing African Unity*(Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1970), pp. 208-209; Paine, “The Western Sahara,” p.135.

⁴⁶ Quote in Omar, “The Right to Self-Determination,” p. 42

⁴⁷ Quote in Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” p. 698

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 699

⁴⁹ Omar, “The Right to Self-Determination,” p. 46; Souare, “Western Sahara,” p.3

⁵⁰ Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” p. 701.

assembly of compliant elders, the Djemaa, in 1967 but this did not ease the pressure from the UN which continued affirming the right of the Sahrawi to independence. In September 1973, Franco gave the Djemaa powers to legislate on internal, but not external or defense, matters, and promised the Sahrawi the right to vote for their future when they “freely request” that right. The UN responded by insisting on the Sahrawi exercising freely and authentically to determine their future. Then, cornered, Spain agreed in 1974 to hold a referendum in Western Sahara in 1975 under UN supervision.⁵¹ It lost control.

Imposing Morocco’s Colonialism

With Spain changing position, Morocco also switched and from that point Rabat, with support from Washington and Paris, virtually replaced Madrid as the determinant of Western Sahara’s future. Joined by Mauritania, Morocco denied that the Sahrawi existed as a distinct historical group, and insisted on the incorporation of Western Sahara in Morocco.⁵² For Hassan II, Sahrawi self-determination leading to independence rather than annexation to Morocco was unacceptable and so he came up with tricks to negate self-determination. Secretly he cut a deal with Mauritania to split the territory into two with Mauritania, keeping Rio De Oro and Morocco taking Saguiet el-Hamra.⁵³ To thwart the expected referendum, supported by Mauritania, he suggested that the international court be asked to decide the ownership of Western Sahara. It was a delay tactic which, a disgusted Kenyan delegate Frank Njenga asserted was tantamount to asking the UN to treat the Sahrawi “as chattels and not as people.” And the debates in the UN before authorizing referring Western Sahara to the international court made clear that its action did not mean negating the right of self-determination.⁵⁴ The matter was referred to the ICJ which in October 1975 issued its verdict saying that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had sovereignty over Western Sahara and that the Sahrawi had a right to self-

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 702-706; Naylor, “Spain, France, and the Western Sahara,” p. 23

⁵² Omar, “The Right to Self-Determination,” p. 44

⁵³ Knapp, *North West Africa*, p. 337; Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, p.52

⁵⁴ Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” pp. 705-707

determination. In addition, a UN inspection team found that most people wanted independence and supported POLISARIO.⁵⁵

Although disappointed, and knowing he had the support of the United States and France, Hassan properly gauged that Spain could be manipulated partly because of the dying Franco. He then declared his intention to invade Western Sahara with an army of 350,000 pilgrims holding the Holy Koran to claim the territory. Although he violated an October 1970 UN Resolution that prohibited using force or threats of force to acquire territories,⁵⁶ he succeeded in creating tension to force things his way. With the United States and France at the Security Council protecting Morocco, the UN was incapacitated and failed to condemn Moroccan invasion.⁵⁷ France and the United States preferred to have Morocco grab the territory than have a revolutionary group replace Spain.⁵⁸

Hassan had thus avoided condemnation by bringing into play the biggest international card on his side, the United States of America and France. These two pressured Spain to reach an understanding with Morocco on the future of Western Sahara. Thereafter, Spain indicated to Morocco and Mauritania that it was willing to deal on the future of the territory. The three met in December 1975 and agreed that Spain would simply leave and that Morocco and Mauritania would split the territory between them. Spain, in February 1976, left unceremoniously and abandoned its “African brothers” to Moroccan and Mauritanian invaders. In April 1976, the two expansionists officially agreed on the demarcation line separating their claims to Western Sahara.⁵⁹

To get its way, Morocco had developed capacity to manipulate, to its advantage, bigger powers than it was. It had already proven ability to juggle the big powers in the “war of the sands”, one of whose peculiarities had been the balancing of Washington and

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 708-711; William J. Durch, “Building on Sand: UN Peacekeeping in the Western Sahara,” *International Security*, Volume 17, Number 4, Spring, 1993, p.155; Hodges, *Western Sahara*, p. 210; Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, p.59

⁵⁶ Omar, “The Right to Self-Determination,” p. 50.

⁵⁷ Franck, “The Stealing of the Sahara,” pp. 713-717

⁵⁸ Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, pp. 67-68

⁵⁹ Durch, “Building on Sand,” p. 155; Mundy, “Performing the Nation,” p. 277; Osita C. Eze, *Human Rights in Africa: Some Selected Problems*(Lagos: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers, 1984), pp. 80-81.

Moscow in getting support from both. While the weapons that the Soviets had given Morocco were used to rout a weak Algeria, the Americans had provided Morocco with logistical support.⁶⁰ Moscow had chosen to remain on the good side of Rabat and refrained from criticizing Morocco expansionism. Instead, partly to secure supply of phosphate, Moscow endorsed Moroccan irredentism in the guise of supporting anti-colonialism against Spain. It continued to sell military equipment to Morocco and Morocco found the Moscow connection a useful leverage in the West.⁶¹

A convergence of US and Moroccan interests enabled irredentist Morocco to exploit American pre-occupation with the Cold War to snatch Western Sahara. To Americans, Morocco had special strategic value as military storage facility, detachment and communication centre, and staging post for intervention in the Middle East. Although, after independence, there were symbolic withdrawals from some bases, this did not affect Morocco's strategic value to Washington.⁶² With the United States, by the early 1970s, suffering diplomatic paralysis as a result of humiliations in Vietnam and Angola, Morocco played the Cold War card by implying that its critics were communistic and therefore threats to US interests. On its part, the United States wanted to prove somewhere that it could still be counted to stand by "friends". Western Sahara was a good place to prove "friendship" because a "revolutionary" POLISARIO, backed by Algeria, threatened a "friend" called Morocco. To prove that he was there to be counted, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger declared that "the United States will not allow another Angola on the east flank of the Atlantic ocean." Kissinger went on to press Spain to accept Morocco's demands.⁶³ Spain did and abandoned the colony to Morocco.

Conclusion

Many forces, through conquests and counter-conquest produced a hybrid people with a distinct identity. In their blood are to be found different African peoples, an assortment of

⁶⁰ Shelley, Endgame in the Western Sahara, p.14-15; Yahir H. Zoubir, "Moscow, the Maghreb, and Conflict in the Western Sahara," in Zoubir and Volman, editors, International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict, pp.108, 112

⁶¹ Zoubir, "Moscow, the Maghreb, and Conflict in the Western Sahara," pp. 103-104, 108-109.

⁶² Shelley, Endgame in the Western Sahara, p.14-15

⁶³ Stephen Zunes, "The United States in the Saharan War: A Case of Low-Intensity Intervention," in Zoubir and Volman, editors, International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict, p. 54;

Arab tribes and a sprinkling of Europeans, mostly Iberians and some French. They accommodated, intermarried with, and absorbed or were absorbed by different communities to create new peoples. The Sahrawi, who dominated parts of what became Morocco, Algeria, and Mauretania, were those people with distinct cultural lifestyle and language.

In the process of those interactions two cultural zones seemingly emerged to separate the Moroccans from the Sahrawi. The Atlas Mountain became the southern frontier of what was Morocco proper, the *bilad el- makhzen* where Moroccan authority was not in doubt. Beyond that cultural demarcation line was the land of trouble, *bilad es siba* where Morocco had no control. They were a separate people in a separate territory that became Western Sahara occupied by nomads.⁶⁴ This way Morocco began to emerge as a geographic reality⁶⁵ in the north of the mountain.

It was as Sahrawi that people resisted the French and the Spaniards, with Ma el-Ainin as the legendary symbol of Sahrawi nationalism that was too weak to stop the Europeans. It was France that determined the actual size and location of the Sahrawi territory that Spain received as its colony. Spain received Western Sahara, and also Tarfaya and IFNI, but showed little administrative interest in the place except for the fishing posts at the coast. It treated the territories as military outposts and still relied on France for protection against the Sahrawi. Divided administratively into two, those in the French and those in the Spanish colonies, the bulk of the Sahrawi remained in Spanish Sahara.

Spain, ambivalent about its tiny African colonies, was externally manipulated. An international outcast because of its stand in World War II, it was rehabilitated and admitted into the UN in 1955 mainly through the exigencies of the Cold War. It also became subject to new international rules requiring colonial powers to de-colonise. It tried to claim that Western Sahara was a Spanish province, not a colony, where its

⁶⁴ Hodges, Western Sahara, pp. 30; Mercer, Spanish Sahara, p. 103.

⁶⁵ Zartman, Problems of New Power: Morocco, p. 9.

“African brothers” were well treated. It started exploiting phosphate deposits at Bu Craa and encouraged Sahrawi settlements in new administrative and political dispensations.

Spain, however, was challenged by rising anti-colonial Sahrawi movements that were partially inspired by the success in the neighbouring French colonies. Among those Sahrawi anti-colonial movements was POLISARIO that was linked inspirationally to the guerrillas in the Army of Liberation and to Harakat Tahrir. It had rough beginnings but with time, it came to symbolise and represent Sahrawi desire for independence and struggle for identity whether to be Arab, African, or a hybrid. Its aspirations were thwarted by Mauritania’s and Morocco’s irredentist designs once it became clear that Spain was on the way out. Spain left unceremoniously.

It lost control and was unable to organize a respectable exit. It became manipulable and thus opened an avenue for Mauritania and Morocco to become the new colonial masters in Western Sahara. The two African neighbours competed almost in the same way that France and Spain had done but it was Morocco that eventually had the upper hand. Morocco had the support of powerful countries such as the United States and France as it eased Mauritania out of Western Sahara. The big powers condoned the sabotage of Sahrawi independence by pressuring Spain to let Morocco have its way. Spain then ran away and Morocco grabbed Western Sahara.

Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara created a new colonial reality on the ground that negated the principle of decolonization. With support from Washington and Paris, Rabat replaced Madrid as the colonial master in El-Ayuon, violated UN principles and prohibitions against territorial annexation. Yet Morocco escaped serious international reprimand because it was in good books with the big powers who willingly winked at its infractions of the expected behaviour.

Like Spain before it, Morocco spoke of Western Sahara as a province, not a colony. Like Spain, it aroused anti-colonial hostility but that hostility was limited due to a number of factors. It seemed to get Arab support because it appeals to Arab solidarity and Western

support because it was a Western outpost against potential ‘revolutionaries.’ It was condoned by the Soviets because it did not hesitate to buy and use Soviet arms in extending its territorial claims. In the process it became entrenched in Western Sahara so much that its colony is rarely discussed in international forums.

POLISARIO insisted that the Sahrawi were not Moroccans and that Moroccan colonialism simply replaced Spanish colonialism in Western Sahara. Having accepted OAU decision to respect colonial borders, the Sahrawi were not amused by Morocco’s and Mauritania’s attempt to annex their territory. Initially they were not even sure who was on their side given that Algeria had entertained a deal with Morocco at the expense of Western Sahara. Frustrated by what appeared like Mauritania and Moroccan betrayal, Algeria changed and became POLISARIO’s main supporter in challenging Moroccan rule.

There seems to be a growing challenge to Moroccan colonialism in Western Sahara. The reluctance to challenge territorial colonialism simply because it is an African country, Morocco, controlling its neighbour, Western Sahara, is wearing thin. This is due to the growing acceptance of POLISARIO as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi in international dealings. That acceptance, however, appears to be ambivalent, particularly where weak countries that are client states of powerful master states are concerned. This explains why some countries, especially AU members, would recognize and then de-recognized, or suspend recognition of, POLISARIO reportedly due to pressure from Morocco and its powerful allies.

This makes colonialism in Western Sahara multi-layered. Spanish rule ended in 1976 and was followed by a short-lived joint colonialism of Mauritania and Morocco. After Morocco eased Mauritania out, it became entrenched as the new colonial power that could ignore international norms and get away with it. Hovering over Morocco, however, is another layer of master states seemingly supporting Morocco’s colonial proclivities and thwarting decolonization effort.