

The Strategy of Style: Music, Struggle, and the Aesthetics of Sahrawi Nationalism in Exile

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Abstract: The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), as a contested post-colonial state built entirely in exile, has forged a national identity based on collectivist notions of political struggle, cultural expression, and resistance. Throughout the past four decades, the Saharawi music scene—and its carefully crafted music styles—have been particularly important to advocate for this vision, both locally and internationally. Through a musico-historical analysis of some of the most influential Saharawi musical productions that have been released since the 1980s, and conversations with influential Saharawi cultural actors, this article engages the dialectics of nationalism and exile in Saharawi music. We argue that the flourishing of a unique Saharawi musical style during the exodus and the war, the *midal*, and its more recent developments after the ceasefire in 1991, has been instrumental for the creation of a strong international Saharawi discourse that has proved to be, at times, more influential than any political speech.

When interviewed in the headquarters of the Sahrawi Ministry of Culture in Rabouni, in the Sahrawi refugee camps (southwest Algeria), Zaim Alal, one of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's most famous poets, asserted: "*Movement* is the source of Sahrawi music" (n.p.). Nomadic herders, he explained, drew inspiration for their poetic metric styles and melodies from their movements across desert heartlands imitating "the sounds made by the wind, the footsteps of camels over the sand, the rattling of leaves and the noise made by raindrops as they fell over caves" (Alal n.p.). Indeed, *movement* is at the center of the story this paper traces, the story of the social and political movement of a people whose decolonization struggle displaced them into exile, and of the artistic exchanges underlying the birth of a uniquely Sahrawi musical style which has served as a conduit for the aesthetic performance of Sahrawi nationalism.

Throughout the past four decades, the Sahrawi musical scene has played a central role in advocating for the vision of an independent Sahrawi nation, both locally and beyond. This article explores Sahrawi music as a powerful "means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed" (Stokes 4) and one of the most important tools used by the Sahrawi revolutionaries to construct and reconstruct collective ideals in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Drawing on similar trends in post-colonial Africa (see Askew; White; Counsel; among others), we describe the process

through which the Sahrawi movement for national liberation has crafted a revolutionary musical style that, based on a symbolic interplay of “modernity” and “tradition,” became identifiable as uniquely Sahrawi and representative of the Sahrawi nation. Through a musico-historical analysis of some of the most influential Sahrawi musical productions that have been released since the 1980s and the incorporation of personal accounts of key Sahrawi cultural figures, we argue that the flourishing of the Sahrawi national musical scene during the exodus and the war, and its more recent developments after the ceasefire in 1991, have been substantiated in struggle and instrumental for the creation of a strong Sahrawi discourse that has proved to be, at times, more influential than any political speech.

Music in pre-revolutionary times

The roots of Sahrawi music cannot be neatly situated within the borders of the Western Saharan territory that the POLISARIO Front seeks to decolonize to this day. Sahrawi families are interconnected by political, economic, social and artistic structures and flows that exceed the borders with which European powers first divided the region during the Conference of Berlin 1884-85. *Hassâniya* speaking *qabâ'il* (units of kinship problematically translated as “tribes,” see Isidoros) were connected across a much larger territorial expanse known as *Trab el-Bidhân*, which encompasses Western Sahara, Mauritania, and parts of southern Morocco, western Mali and Algeria.

Trab-el Bidhân's long and rich tradition of Hassani poetry is highly musical. According to the renowned Sahrawi poet Badi Mohamed Salem, for a poem to be considered a work of art, its lyrics must be emotionally charged, they must follow a suitable rhythm, and they must always have a beautiful voice to recite them (Mohamed Salem). Circulating orally, for the most part, Hassani poetry is meant to be experienced primarily through the ears. In fact, the word used for poet in *Hassâniya* is *mgani*, deriving from the Arabic “to sing” (*ugani*). Yet, although the flute (*neifara*), the drum (*tbal*) and handclapping were often used to accompany poetic chants, including the musical traditional of *medeb* (praise)—a spiritual style of song dedicated to the prophet Mohammed—in pre-revolutionary times, these practices were not considered part of a specialized musical tradition; rather they were trivialized as forms of popular entertainment. Perhaps for this reason Alal stated that families who originated from the Western Sahara (here referring to the people of the colonial territory claimed by the POLISARIO Front today) did not play music before the revolution, explaining: “Of course youth sang, clapped their hands and danced amongst themselves as a form of entertainment but it was neither considered music nor art; it did not require talent” (Alal n.p.).

Instead, in pre-revolutionary times, the art of music was closely associated with two string instruments—the *tidinit* (male lute) and the *aardin* (female calabash harp). These were played only by specialized families of hereditary professionalized musicians known to originate from Northern Mauritania, the *iggâwen*, who were closely associated with the “griots” found in other West African cultures (Guignard; Hale). The *iggâwen* played—and still play in many parts of present-day Mauritania—*el-hawl*, a musical genre known to be the perfect marriage between music and poetry. Its lyrics derive from Hassani and Arabic poetry, usually embedded in a complex musical system—the *azawaan* (Norris 69)—characterized by its division into modes (*bhor*, meaning “seas,” Guignard 91) that were played one after the other in a cycle.

In part due to a widespread interpretation of Islam that prohibits the use of string instruments (Alal n.p.)¹ and partly due to a religious ethic that attributes artistic talent to be a gift from God (*mouhiba*) that should not be used for economic sustenance (Gimeno et al forthcoming), the *iggâwen* were discriminated into a social group of a lower status (Baroja 47). According to Badi Mohammed Salem’s description of pre-revolutionary *iggâwen*: “They were regarded with disdain. They played and distributed their music, passing on their skill between the generations. They married between themselves. Each family had their own group of *iggâwen* who they looked after and who they paid to sing for them, usually to praise them...” (Mohamed Salem n.p.).²

Thus, despite the close relationship between these two arts forms, before the revolution, poets enjoyed a prestige amongst the Sahrawi that musicians, associated with the *iggâwen*’s trade, did not. Poetry deliberated on topics ranging from: battles and their earnings, including the history of the early anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century against the Spanish and French occupation of Western Africa (Robles et al 7-33), the geography of the desert and its resources, histories concerning the memory of ancestors, love, religion, as well as political and social critique (Deubel 298). If in pre-revolutionary times, music was composed to follow and enhance such poetry, today the process often happens in reverse and Sahrawi poets sometimes compose verses for musical compositions (Alal n.p.). Nowadays, music and musicians have accrued a new legitimacy. One must turn to the birth of the Sahrawi Movement of National Liberation of the 1960s to understand the process through which music acquired a role of greater stature amongst the Sahrawi people.

The Seeds of Revolution (1960s–1975)

From the 1960s onwards, Franco’s colonial regime attempted to strengthen its grip over the Spanish Sahara, increasing policing measures over the territory as well as introducing an array of incentives aimed at displacing Sahrawi nomads towards cities (cf. Correale 2012 in Gimeno and

Robles 167). An unprecedented number of Sahrawi men were employed by the administration during this period, either joining the colony's indigenous military branch *Tropas Nómadas*, working for the construction of the 26.000km of roads built between 1960-1975 (García 86), operating the 100 km transporter belt that delivered phosphates to the coast (Zunes and Mundy 102), or employed by any of the other Spanish companies or governmental institutions.

The Sahrawi singer and guitarist Ali Salem Kaziza (known simply as Kaziza) grew up in this urbanizing environment and remembers teaching himself how to play the acoustic guitar from an early age in the colonial city of El Aaiun (Domínguez 10). Similarly, the singer and percussionist Mahfud Aliyen (better known as Drei Baba), a descendant of a family of *medeb* singers, grew up in the colonial city of Villa Cisneros (present-day Dakhla), where he was exposed to the global musical trends of the times, saving the little money he made to “buy cassettes by Jacksons 5, The Beatles... Stevie Wonder... I would go home, grab sticks and bang them over empty cans as if they were drums, as I listened to the cassettes and sang out loud” (Aliyen n.p.).

It was also in this context that Mohammed Ibrahim Bassiri's *Movement for the Liberation of Saguia Al-Hamra and Wad Dabab*³ emerged, clandestinely, gathering up to 7.000 militants in only one year (García 102). The intransigence with which, in 1970, the colonial administration crushed the demands of this movement for greater economic and political rights⁴ only served to fuel the uprising further, re-organizing under the name of the POLISARIO Front⁵ shortly after. Cognizant of Spain's indifference to Sahrawi requests by peaceful means, this new version of the movement was poised to employ new methods, organizing their first congress in 1973 under the slogan: “We will seize our freedom with our rifles” (San Martín 85-86).

During these times, Sahrawi poets took it upon themselves to spread the news of the movement. From the early seventies onwards national poets Ahmed Mahmoud Oumar, Badi Mohammed Salem, Beibuh, Bonana, Sidi Brahim Salaama, Bachir Aali, Elkhadra Mint Mabrouk, Hussein Mouloud, and Zaim Alal started to devote their poetry to the exclusive purpose of uniting Sahrawi people to overcome colonization (Gimeno Martín et al forthcoming). Musician Kaziza, who belonged to an all-Sahrawi musical band that the Spanish administration had put together as a governmental initiative for Sahrawi youth during the early 70s, also remembers adding revolutionary poetry to their repertoire and singing revolutionary songs in concerts whenever they were invited to perform at Sahrawi celebrations (Domínguez 10).

Seeking to channel a nascent Sahrawi nationalism movement towards a nationalism that would be friendly to Spain's interests in the region, Kaziza's musical band formed part of a larger set of initiatives of rapprochement with an emerging, elite educated youth, that Spain's colonial regime started to put place in the aftermath of the Sahrawi uprisings of *Al Zamlab* (Mahmoud

Awah 42-45). Nonetheless, just as Sahrawi young intellectuals used the cultural sections of the colonial government's radio programs, as well as youth magazines and other official publications, to filter subversive poems and other encrypted messages amongst the larger native population (Mahmoud Awah 24, 47), revolutionary song circumvented the prohibition for Sahrawis to hold public assemblies under Spanish colonial rule. Generally conceived as a form of unthreatening entertainment, music offered a safe medium to spread revolutionary ideas clandestinely, especially in social events such as weddings. As famous revolutionary singer Mariem Hassan has stated,

You couldn't sing in any public event or place. You could only sing at weddings. That was the only way to sing under the Spanish rulers. Everyone came to the weddings, even those who weren't in the struggle. But when they heard the songs, they became very moved. They would leave everything... their work, their families and join the struggle. (Mariem Hassan in Smith n.p.)

Moreover, the musical medium allowed revolutionary poetry to travel longer distances – especially when recorded in cassettes (Bachir Aali in Smith n.p.), attracting the attention and the support of Sahrawi families residing in Mauritania, Morocco, Mali, Algeria, and beyond. Convinced by the emotional force of its lyrics, many dropped their occupations in Europe and elsewhere to join the revolution. Resonating with Paulo Freire's ideas, the POLISARIO movement understood the pedagogical and emancipatory potential of music, in the words of Zaim Alal: “music enabled an awakening that persuaded Sahrawis out of the ignorance that colonialism had produced” (Alal n.p.).

The purpose of this music now resembled the non-materialistic goals attributed to poetry. Poetic and musical production converged and influenced one another stylistically from this period onwards in new ways, too. Poems with longer *bhor* (modes) became less common given the difficulty of turning them into catchy songs that could be easily memorized and repeated (Alal n.p.) and the long *aḡawaan* cycles were broken up into individual modes that were used for each song. Crucially, the revolutionary content of its lyrics and their association with a collective struggle encouraged conservative sectors of society to accept and even encourage the emergence of this musical scene (Mohamed Salem n.p.).

One of the early goals of the revolution was that of dissolving *qabâ'il*, age and gender hierarchies, uniting all Sahrawis against a common cause and a single, national identity (Caratini 6). Since its inception, the POLISARIO Front actively sought the participation of women within the movement. Whereas prior modesty codes had rendered women's singing and dancing in front of male elders improper, the revolution encouraged and propelled women to occupy visible and

public spaces, praising them for their political expressions in the form of speeches, poetry, dance and song (Solana forthcoming). By contrast, the *machismo* of Franco's regime overlooked women's political agency and, as a result, female militants encountered less policing by colonial authorities than men (Bengoechea 119, Hernández 59).

The burgeoning of Sahrawi music was thus thoroughly embedded in this anti-colonial movement, an artistic scene that developed organically from the imperative of finding a medium that could spread an ideology of liberation. Men and women from different families and *qabā'il* precedence supported and joined this form of expression without suffering moral reprisal. On the contrary, contributing to this musical production was understood as a laudable expression of strength and commitment to the unity and the common cause of the Sahrawi people.

The war of liberation (1975-1991)

"Revolutionary songs lifted our spirits, cleaned out our hearts and kept our minds away from thinking of everything and everyone we had lost. They helped us keep going..." (Legleil n.p.)

Spain's sly handover of the Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania in 1975 propelled this intertwined process of artistic production and political resistance even further. The occupation of the Western Sahara by its neighbors prompted a sixteen-year long war and the displacement of thousands of Sahrawis to Tindouf, in southwestern Algeria. It was in Algeria that Sahrawi refugees built and managed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and where they consolidated a Sahrawi musical genre, *el-nidal* (literally meaning "the struggle", see Ruano Posada), that blossomed out of the needs imposed by the Sahrawi movement for liberation. Song helped assuage the pains of destitution, occupation, war and separation from loved ones and became part of everyday life for both refugees and combatants.

The organization of the movement in exile made a conscious investment in musical training and production. The Republic was divided into provinces (*wilayāt*, sg. *wilaya*), districts (*dawair*, sg. *daira*) and neighborhoods (*ahyā'*, sg. *haij*). Each *wilaya* and each *daira* had two musical groups of its own: one for adults and one for children. Moreover, each of the seven military bases of the POLISARIO combatants located in the Western Sahara had its own musical group, too, with "revolutionary song behaving like a tree of telecommunications which transmitted what was going on in the battlefield to the people and vice versa" (Mohamed Salem n.p.). Last but not least, the movement put together a musical group at a national level, similar to other national orchestras found in post-colonial nation-states at that time, including Mali, Guinea, Congo, Mauritania, and Cuba (see Charry *Mande Music*; Counsel; White; Sahel Sounds; and Moore). It was *Furka Shabeed El*

Uali, named after Martyr Mustafa El Uali El Sayyed, the first POLISARIO Secretary General and charismatic leader of the movement, who fell in combat in 1976.⁶

Kaziza was one of Shaheed El Uali's founders. As soon as he arrived in Tindouf, Mohamed Tamy, who was appointed Director for Culture for the newly formed Sahrawi Ministry of Information in exile, sent Kaziza along with another four men and six women to receive musical training in Algiers. There they were taught how to play new instruments including the drum kits, the keyboards, the saxophone, the trumpet and the electric guitar, combining these with the string instruments characteristic of *el-hawl*. The exercise involved fusing the classical musical tradition of the *iggâwen* (and other popular artistic traditions of the region) with a style that would be more familiar and resonant to a global musical scene, creating a symbolic interplay between an imagined "traditional" past and the imagined "modernity" of the Sahrawi revolutionary project.

As Eric Charry (*Mande Music* 242) has observed of the neighboring postcolonial musical scene in Guinea and Mali, the term "modern" has been typically used to describe similar developments in music traditions across Africa. As Kaziza himself explains: "To achieve a music that was more modern we had no option but to learn to tune our guitars in accordance with Western musical theory" (in Domínguez 11, our translation). However, this modernization was not a process of imitation of a Euro-American musical style. On the contrary, it was a process of simultaneous *mimesis and alterity* (Taussig) or *mimicry* (Bhabha), one geared towards consolidating a style that was different enough to make a difference; that is, *different* enough to be unique and identifiable as part of a Sahrawi tradition, but *same* enough to be recognizable to a "modern" musical tradition, consumable by international audiences. In short, the modernization of music was embedded into a revolutionary project that sought visibility and demanded international recognition for Sahrawi sovereignty.

The work of Shaheed El Uali mirrored the POLISARIO's larger diplomatic effort to seek international recognition and support for Sahrawi nationalism. Between 1977-1979 the group toured Libya, Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Cuba, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Guinea Bissau and Benin, among other places: "Our desire to reach as many places as possible was so that sometimes, we divided the group in half, so that we could be in two countries at the same time..." (Kaziza in Domínguez 11, our translation). Touring Sahrawi musicians absorbed and were influenced by the musical vanguards of all these places, making the venture of Sahrawi music's modernization one that was engendered in South-to-South exchanges as well as North-to-South.

In 1980, Shaheed El Uali released their first album, *Grupo Nacional de Cantos y Danzas Populares*, dominated by the sound of the traditional drum (*ettabel*), handclapping, and the acoustic guitar, which had already entered the Sahrawi music scene through the Spaniards in the final years

of colonial rule in the late 1960s (Tamy n.p.). The most emblematic of its songs was the famous “The Sahara Is Not For Sale” (“Sahara ma timbah”), sung by one of the most representative Sahrawi revolutionary singer, Um Murghia Abdullah.

The Sahara,
 my brothers and sisters,
 is not for sale.
 The green of my land makes me proud,
 as the beauty of its pastures,
 in the eyes of the good shepherd.
 The phosphates you desire,
 they will cause you harm,
 even if they were for sale,
 you would not be able to buy them. (Abdullah, “The Sahara is not for sale”)

Since then, her young voice has imprinted a piercing anti-colonialist message across the memory of Sahrawi generations; young Sahrawi refugees today are typically still able to sing along the chorus of this song (Ruano Posada forthcoming).

Shaheed El Uali’s *raison d’être* was not to promote individual artists but to promote the Sahrawi people as a unified entity. Thus, the celebrity value of individual artists was secondary to the fame of the band as a whole. Perhaps for this reason, the band’s membership was in constant flux, with new talent and energy continually injected into it straight from the Sahrawi refugee camps, where the political base for the movement was located. Musical competitions took place in the camp’s theatres on a regular basis, bringing people together to enjoy a break from the everyday, arduous labor required of refugees during those years. It was during those competitions that singers like Beitora, Seluka, Mariem Hassan, Houdeidhum, Faknish, Habuza and Legleil, among many others, were discovered.

Singer and songwriter Legleil had not thought of herself as a musician until she took part in one of the musical competitions of her *daira* (neighborhood) in El Aauin. There she was praised for her beautiful singing voice and selected into the musical group of her province. As part of her involvement with the musical group she taught young children how to sing revolutionary songs and she was summoned to sing during family celebrations including the name days of newborns, circumcisions and weddings, where it was mandatory for music to have a revolutionary content and the musical groups of the neighborhood were summoned to provide entertainment. Legleil was also selected from her musical group to take part in national tours, performing in countless of

the Republic's conferences, rallies, events and commemorations, sometimes alongside other members of Shaheed El Uali (Legleil n.p.).

Local musical groups like Legleil's were also involved in songwriting. They received poems from soldiers that they memorized and sang, spreading the news from the battlefield. Then, they would compose songs in response, praising the bravery of the soldiers, returning their songs for more songs, meant to encourage combatants in their fight. Such songwriting, Legleil explained, was thoroughly collaborative too, even the governor of her province and others political leaders participated in it:

We had to be sure that our songs were in line with the political priorities of the moment, we didn't sing for ourselves, we sang for all of our people and we always sang in groups. Now when you play these songs to me, I can't even distinguish my voice from that of Habuza, Salama Mint Shaheed, Aisha mint Bauba... and so many others... (Legleil n.p.)

Not only did Shaheed El Uali feed off the bustling poetic and musical communication that was going on between the battlefield and the Sahrawi Republic, but the expertise the band received abroad was also used to train musicians based in the camps. For example, in 1980, Legleil and Houdeidhoum were both selected, amongst other artists, to undergo training over a period of two months in a camp-based military school named the *12th of October*.⁷ There, singers like Kaziza and El Bashir taught them how to sing to the traditional *bhor* as well as how to follow new instruments such as the electric guitar, which at the time had already become a main symbol of modernity in West Africa (Kaye 101). On this occasion, national poets, musicians and actors came together to compose an operetta (*tami*), which they then toured throughout the *wilayāt* of the Republic for months (Houdeidhum and Faknish n.p.).

In 1982, Shaheed el Uali released its second album, *Polisario Vencerá* (*Polisario Will Prevail*), produced by the Sahrawi Director of Culture Mohamed Tamy and recorded in Barcelona during one of the band's international tours. *Polisario Vencerá* is a clear representation of the music style of *el-nidal*, all songs being devoted to the Sahrawi struggle. Influenced by regional musical vanguards of the time, one of its most famous songs, "Jamás" ("Never"), was inspired by the tune "Oumletna" ("Our coin"), played by the Mauritanian National Orchestra in the late 1960s and early 70s. Much like Shaheed El Uali, the Mauritanian Orchestra was a national band that represented the first of Mauritania's independent regimes, led by Moktar Uld Daddah. Its members had been trained in the Guinea's post-independence bustling musical scene with the famous band Bembeya Jazz, learning to complicate the classical Mauritanian music of the *iggâwen* with a bluesy flavor and the sound of new instruments such as the saxophone and the electric

guitar (Sahel Sounds). Although the nationalist spirit of “Oumletna” (referring to the Mauritanian national currency, the Ougiya) is discernible from its very title, the version by Shaheed El Uali is set apart from it by its vindictive lyrics, “*No country had ever owned us*” (*magat melketna dawla*), as well as by its arousing fast-paced tempo. This gives sound to a nationalism characterized by struggle, as if conveying that, unlike the Mauritians, the Sahrawi plight for political independence is not in the past, but very much in the present.

The rest of *Polisario Vencerá* is similarly characterized by its combative lyrics, with songs rendering homage to the popular army of liberation and their victorious battles, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, cities left behind in the Western Sahara, their Martyr El Uali, the struggle of the popular masses and the 20th of May, the day when the POLISARIO Front carried out its first armed attack on a Spanish military post in 1973. Choruses of young female voices accompanied by the *thal* drum, reminiscent of *medeh* and other popular Hassanophone genres, feature prominently throughout the album. These influences can be heard in tunes such as “Lucha de masas” (“Mass struggle”), where a male-female duet replicates a call-and-response pattern that can be found both in Hassani poetry and extensively in spiritual, folk and popular music (e.g., blues) in Africa and beyond (Middleton 143).

Interestingly, the acoustic guitar, handclapping and the drum continue to be the only accompanying instruments used in the 1982 album. Indeed, it was not until Shaheed El Uali’s third album, *Orchestre Nationale Sabraoui* (1989), recorded in France by the independent label Le Tremplin, that the mastery that the group had acquired over the years over instruments such as the electric guitar, the saxophone and the keyboard was displayed in full force, wrapping the still revolutionary lyrics with the “modern” sound typical of other national orchestras in West Africa. Famous songs such as “Chaab sahara kassar gaïdu” (“The people of the Sahara have cut their chains”), despite using references to the *azawaan* modes and to the typical melismatic singing of *el-hawl*, showcase influences as diverse as jazz, funk and pop, whilst others such as “Hay-ya Chababna” (“Hey, our youth”) return to a more traditional *Bidhâni* sound, particularly framed by modal melodies on the electric guitar, slow rhythms on the *thal* and, once again, call-and-response patterns typical of the *medeh* and other folk styles.

“No War and No Peace”: The Transitional 1990s

The album *Orchestre Nationale Sabraoui* was released as the global Cold War was coming to an end and shortly before Sahrawi history was to undergo another important turning point: the end of the war with a ceasefire agreement between the POLISARIO Front and Morocco, led by the UN in 1991. Interpreting this internationally mediated truce as a sign of victory, in the early

days of the ceasefire many projected their thoughts on their return to the Western Sahara and the celebration of a self-determination referendum. The hopeful moment of these times was memorialized by Shaheed el Uali's third and last album, *Tiris* (1994)⁸ – named after one of the regions in Western Sahara, also known as the “land of poets.” One of its most famous songs, titled “Ya ahel el aaiun” (“Oh people of El Aaiun”), expressed such sentiment with particular force: “Our families in El Aaiun, do not worry, we will be returning soon with our victory” (Shaheed El Uali, *Tiris*). Interestingly, this album is the first in Sahrawi revolutionary music to include a traditional lute, the *tidinit*, played by Mohamed Salek, as if indexing proximity with a symbolic return to the homeland.

Several months after the ceasefire, however, negotiations over the identification of eligible voters were not advancing and it became clear that the referendum was not going to be held anytime soon, creating a deep feeling of frustration among the refugee population. As has been argued by Zunes and Mundy, the spirit of the Moroccan-Sahrawi ceasefire agreement was not one of peace, but of war by other means (xxix), or as many Sahrawis describe it today, of “no war and no peace.” Twenty-four years of a diplomatic war of attrition between the parties seem to provide ample evidence for this point.⁹

After Shaheed El Uali was finally dismantled in the mid-1990s, many of the original Sahrawi revolutionary musicians (those who had inspired the Sahrawi army to keep fighting and the refugee population to keep resisting during the war) left the music scene. Many moved to Spain, lured by the promise of a better life for their families in Europe; others joined the waves of Sahrawi migrants that were regularly travelling to Mauritania to work in the iron mines of the desert city of Zouerat or in the rich fisheries in Nuadhibou, some even establishing their own trading businesses. Former revolutionary guitarist and singer Kaziza was among them: “It got to a point when I understood that I could not do it any longer. I have given music the best years of my life but I had to earn a living somehow else” (Ali Salem Kaziza in Domínguez 12, our translation).

Political stagnation and mass migration threatened to fragment the unity that the years of war had forged amongst Sahrawi refugees. In order to neutralize this situation, from the 1990s onwards, the POLISARIO Front devised new policies aimed at improving the material well being of refugees. During the 1990s a growing number of Ministries and institutions were able to absorb the skills of many of the Sahrawi youth returning to the camps with higher education from abroad (most notably from Cuba, but also from Algeria, Libya, Spain and the Soviet Union) (Gimeno Martín 30-33). With the aid of humanitarian agencies, NGOs and other international solidarity organizations, the Sahrawi government has worked on improving the camps' infrastructure, including the construction of roads, the progressive introduction of electrical light,

the improvement of water quality and distribution systems, a better-organized administration and security system, hospitals, schools and other social facilities. Job opportunities associated to such developments have been rewarded with salaries (albeit humble) since the early 2000s, regulated by the policies of an institution dedicated to public employment (*elwadij alumumi*).¹⁰ In addition, throughout this period the refugee camps saw the development of small independent shops, restaurants, taxis, garages and trading businesses, leading to the development of an embryonic Sahrawi economy both in the public and private sectors.

This nascent dual dynamic of public/private life in the refugee camps, described by Wilson as the “new public space for the pursuit of private interests” (33), also affected the music scene. Some of the musicians who had remained in the refugee camps became public workers of the Ministry of Culture, performing in national festivals and political events in exchange for incentives or small salaries.¹¹ Others also started to perform privately in family events such as weddings, naming days and other gatherings in order to earn a living, influenced by contemporary versions of the Mauritanian *iggâwen* (Ruano Posada forthcoming).

However, the Sahrawi refugee camps were about to become the scenario for another major turning point in the history of Sahrawi music: the involvement of Spanish label Nubenegra and its leader, music producer and journalist Manuel Domínguez.

The Involvement of Nubenegra: Marketing the National Identity

Manuel Domínguez travelled twice to the refugee camps between October 1997 and February 1998 with a team of musicians/producers in order to record samples of Sahrawi music. These trips resulted in the production of two new albums: *Sábara, Tierra Mía* (*Sahara, My Land*) and *A Pesar de las Heridas* (*Despite all Wounds*). These were then released in 1998 as part of a three-album box set called *Sabrahis: The Music of the Western Sahara*, which included the re-release of *Polisario Vencerá* (1982). The box set also included an extensive informative booklet with stories about the recordings, the Sahrawis and their independence struggle, clearly aimed not only to contextualize their music, but also to reproduce the revolutionary spirit out of which Sahrawi music had emerged. For the first time, Sahrawi music was being specifically marketed to an international world music scene carefully packaged to represent the many angles of Sahrawi national identity across new audiences.

The encounter with these international music distribution markets accentuated the emphasis laid over stylistic elements symbolically associated with “tradition.” For example, both celebrating the contribution of women to the revolution and mobilizing a common association drawn between women as embodiments of cultural identity and tradition (Yuval-Davis), *A Pesar de*

las Heridas is sung entirely by women. The recordings *Sáhara*, *Tierra Mía* and *A Pesar de las Heridas* both use the *tbal* drum and the *tidinit* lute, and there is an almost complete disappearance of the keyboard and the “dance band” sound that had dominated albums immediately preceding these. However, the electric guitar, the Sahrawi revolutionary musical instrument *par excellence*, remains a star instrument throughout the albums, thus rendering youth and revolution as the other constitutive half of this identity. According to Nubenegra, all production decisions were taken collectively by the producers, the musicians and the Sahrawi cultural authorities (Nubenegra 97-99).

This powerful juxtaposition of “tradition” and revolution can be observed, for example, in the tune “Intifada” (*A Pesar de las Heridas*, track 19), sung by revolutionary singer Mariem Hassan accompanied by an electric guitar and a *tbal* drum, among other instruments. Born in Western Sahara to a family of popular singers during the final years of the Spanish colonial rule, Mariem has been singing revolutionary songs since she was fifteen years old (Álvarez 28-29). In this early version of her famous song “Intifada,” she used the idea of the Arabic *intifada* (uprising) to inspire her people to rise against their oppressor, almost predicting the first Sahrawi uprising that happened in occupied Western Sahara a year later.¹²

The tune starts with an improvised riff on the electric guitar in which guitarist Najm Alal mimics the intricate patterns that would be traditionally played on a *tidinit* lute.¹³ This incorporation of traditional playing techniques into modern instruments has also been common in other parts of West Africa (Charry *Mande Music* 254). Mariem’s raw and high-pitched voice introduces the theme with a powerful *manwál* (a free-rhythm melismatic introduction typical of the Arabic singing tradition, Cachia), highlighting the Arabic influences present in Sahrawi music and identity. Afterwards, the *tbal* drum makes an appearance, keeping a more structured rhythm that is backed by handclapping, serving for the development of the poem: “The stars laughed, celestial justice smiled and glistened in the soul of heaven. All sorrows came to an end . . . by active members of the intifada” (Nubenegra 36).

Both the structure and the sound of this song are reminiscent of the epic *Bidhán* desert tunes performed by the late Mauritanian singer Dimi Mint Abba and her husband, *tidinit* player and guitarist Khalifa Ould Eide, in their album *Moorish Music from Mauritania* (1990). This reveals, once again, the deep regional interconnections present in Sahrawi music, as well as how a Sahrawi musical style differentiated itself from its roots in Mauritanian classical music through the irreverent “modernizing” spirit of the revolution.

Globalizing Sahrawi Music: Sahrawi Musicians as Cultural Ambassadors in a ‘World Music’ Scene

The participation in Nubenegra’s recordings opened up opportunities for a new group of Sahrawi musicians, Leyoad (named after one of the most emblematic mountainous and cavernous landscapes found in the southern region of Western Sahara), to travel to Europe and tour internationally. Their trips mimicked the intensive international touring of national band Shaheed El Uali, particularly throughout the 1980s under the supervision of Sahrawi Direction of Culture, and the musicians’ desire to spread the Sahrawi national message beyond their borders. However, this time the musicians were travelling independently, and some of them, including Mariem Hassan and young singer and percussionist Aziza Brahim, chose to stay in Spain and pursue a professional career in music.

The album *Mariem Hassan con Leyoad* was released in 2002. It was a Nubenegra production that focused, in a similar way to *Despite All Wounds*, on the tradition of the female Sahrawi voices and the innovations of Sahrawi music within that tradition (e.g., through the composition of new lyrics for traditional melodies). One of the highlights of this album was “Wadna” (“Our river-valley”), a tune composed and sung by Suelma Mohamed Said (better known as Shueta). Her lyrics are dedicated to the bed of the *wad* Saguia Al-Hamra¹⁴ in Al Aaiun, in the outskirts of the city, where the singer was born and spent her childhood until she went into exile in 1975. Through a nostalgic description of an emblematic part of the Western Sahara landscape, the singer expresses her desire to be reunited with the *wad* and the half of her family who still lives next to it, under occupation. Despite the nostalgic subject, the music of this song is celebratory and danceable, with a strong presence of the electric guitar and a brass section, thus portraying a hopeful view of the possibility of returning to the homeland. In recent live performances of “Wadna” in the Sahrawi refugee camps, Shueta keeps conveying the idea of hope in the diplomatic process.¹⁵

Throughout the most part of the 2000s, Mariem Hassan remained the only Sahrawi musician with international presence, releasing two more albums; *Deseos (Wishes)* in 2005 and *Shouka (The Thorn)* in 2009. Unlike the albums of Shaheed El Uali, her songs are not dedicated exclusively to the idea of nation. Instead, the themes of the revolution (e.g., freedom and martyrdom) are combined with pre-revolutionary themes (e.g., love and the prophet Mohamed), while the music fuses the traditional *hawl* with the increasingly popular West African “desert blues” style (Durán 216), such as in the love tune “La tumchi anni.”

More traditionally shaped is the tune that gives name to *Shouka*. In this tune, Mariem makes a musical reference to the classical *hawl* style, dividing the song into ten sections each featuring a different *bhor*, following the traditional *azawaan* musical cycle. Meanwhile, in the lyrics

the singer channels her anger against Felipe González, one of the Spanish politicians who claimed to support the Sahrawi Republic in a speech in the Sahrawi refugee camps in 1976, but then betrayed the Western Sahara struggle when he became president of Spain in 1982 and reinforced the Spanish connections with Morocco:

We listened to you with respect and opened our tents to you. . . . Lawyer, big leader, great talker, sometimes your words harm. . . . You seem to have forgotten all the promises you made to my people. . . . We don't respect you any longer! . . . Your words have gone with the wind. . . . There's no rose without a thorn. (*Shouka*, track 15)

In 2012, Mariem released *El Aaiun Egdat (El Aaiun On Fire)*. She was inspired by Gdeim Izik, the 2010 mass uprising in which more than 10,000 Sahrawis gathered in the outskirts of occupied El Aaiun to protest Morocco's occupation, which was forcefully dismantled by the Moroccan authorities one month into the protest (Brown). *El Aaiun Egdat* had quite an echo in the international world music scene, providing important platforms for the recognition of the Sahrawi struggle as a global and unified campaign of international solidarity. For the first time, Hassan was exclusively working with non-Sahrawi musicians (except for Sahrawi dancer and *thal* player Vadiya Mint El Hanevi), adding new influences to her music from Spanish, Zimbabwean, Andean and jazz backgrounds. However, the album was still connected with the *Bidhân* musical tradition and the roots of the Sahrawi identity through Mariem's powerful singing in *Hassâniya*, such as in songs "Rahy el aaiun egdat" and "Arrabi al arabe."

Throughout the past decade, Mariem Hassan became one of the most important cultural icons of the Sahrawi struggle for independence in the refugee camps, the occupied territories and the diaspora. During the months prior to her passing away on the August 22, 2015, there was an explosion of posts in the social media: YouTube photomontages, video-clips from live concerts, poems, and words dedicated to her work; a communal expression of grief showing that Hassan was an important figure not only to her co-generationalists but also amongst youth. Mariem Hassan's work was pioneer of an international artistic, non-violent, movement of resistance that currently fights against the invisibility of the Sahrawi community in the international scene through painting, literature, poetry, film and, of course, music (*Life is Waiting*; Ruano Posada forthcoming). This movement also attempts to counteract the cultural strategies that the Moroccan government has been developing in order to support their claim to Western Sahara, such as the organization of music and dance festivals that feature Sahrawi culture and other minorities in the country as traditionally Moroccan (Boum 222-26).

In recent years, Cuban-educated Sahrawi singer and *tbal* player Aziza Brahim has joined Mariem Hassan in her quest to take Sahrawi music and struggle into the international world music scene. Aziza started her musical career in the refugee camps, moving to Spain in 2000 with the band Leyoad to pursue her dream of becoming a professional musician. Aziza released her first album in 2012 with her band Guilili Mankoo, a mixture of Sahrawi, Spanish, Colombian and Senegalese musicians with whom she has explored diverse stylistic and linguistic avenues for her music. It was *Mabruk*, which she dedicated to her grandmother Elkhadra Mint Mabrouk, the only female poetess to have documented the sixteen years of revolutionary war (1976-1991) through poetry. Aziza paid homage to her through the musicalization of poems such as “Invasores” (“Invaders”), “Liberación de Guelta” (“The liberation of Guelta”) and “Sensación del tanque” (“The feeling of the tank”), accompanied by her *tbal* and backed by electric and acoustic guitars, bass, drum kit and other percussion. She also incorporated her own compositions, such as “Laayoune ezeina” or “Wilaya blues,” a tune that was also part of the soundtrack of Sahrawi film *Wilaya* (2011). The extensive sleeve notes of the album summarize the Sahrawi struggle and its influence on Sahrawi contemporary music (Mahmud Awah, *Mabruk*). In *Mabruk*, Aziza also includes songs in Spanish, making her musical and political message more available for her mostly Spanish audiences.

In Aziza’s latest album, *Soutak* (*Your Voice*, 2014), she again dedicates her songs to the Sahrawi struggle and its brutal consequences on the Sahrawi people, both in the camps and in the occupied territories. As she stated in 2014, “I have to incorporate these political and social issues in the songs. I can’t look to the side and sing about a disassociated reality. I think the artists have a responsibility” (Aziza Brahim in Johnson n.p.). Sometimes she does this in a more direct way as in the opening song “Gdeim Izik,” whilst other times she plays with more personal feelings, as in the tune “Julud” (“Resist”), especially dedicated to her mother and the transmission of Sahrawi culture as a tool of resistance (*Soutak*; Ruano Posada forthcoming).

Throughout the past five years, Sahrawi artists have participated in a myriad of international music festivals and venues, such as WOMAD (UK and Australia), WOMEX, Africa Oyé (UK), World Village Festival (Finland), Festate (Switzerland), Hayy Festival (Egypt), Bardenfestival (Germany), L’Afrique dans tous les sens (France), Queen Elisabeth Hall (London), and Barbican Centre (London). They have also been featured in leading world music magazines, such as Songlines, fRoots, Ritmos del Mundo, and European newspapers, radio stations and TV channels, such as El País, BBC Radio 3, BBC Two, Jools Holland, apart from an extensive list of online blogs and magazines. In addition, their songs are circulated through different online platforms such as YouTube, travelling back and forth from the camps to the occupied territories

and the Sahrawi diaspora in a symbolic journey of musical reunion, serving as an example of the growing importance of the Internet for the cultural and socio-political mobilization of exiled communities (Aouragh).

Mariem Hassan and Aziza Brahim represent two generations of Sahrawi musicians who have used the international world music scene and its promotional opportunities to make a statement about the Sahrawi struggle and their right not only to self-determination, but also to a dignified life. Whilst Mariem became a revolutionary singer through her experiences of colonialism and occupation, Aziza learned to love her homeland, which she has never seen, and support the Sahrawi struggle through the poems of her grandmother and the stories of her mother, showing the power of Sahrawi oral traditions to transmit not only social, but also political values (Mahmud Awah, "Oral Literature"). Although their work was no longer directly managed by the Sahrawi cultural authorities in the camps, both artists have found independent strategies to keep raising awareness about the Sahrawi struggle through their music, embedding the Sahrawi revolutionary style into more globalized musical trends.

Conclusion

Sahrawi music is marked by movement; by the movements of nomads' travels through the desert, the sounds of the natural elements they came across and, notably since the final years of Spanish colonial rule in Western Sahara, by the socio-political movement of the Sahrawi struggle for independence. This article has traced the movements of Sahrawi music in Sahrawi recent history, using a collection of personal stories from key cultural players and analyzing some of the most representative musical productions of that history.

With the aim to engage the dialectics of nationalism and exile in Sahrawi music, and thus explore the active role of music in the Western Sahara conflict, we have particularly focused on the birth and evolution of the revolutionary song, *el-nidal*, the most characteristic of the contemporary Sahrawi music styles. Martin Stokes (1994) claims that 'music is socially meaningful because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them' (Stokes 5). We have shown the way in which Sahrawi music came to constitute a national signifier, influenced by African musical vanguards of the time, whilst distinguishing itself from a shared Mauritanian musical tradition precisely through its revolutionary lyricism and its irreverent style.

Moreover, we have described how Sahrawi music first emerged as a tool to spread the ideologies of the revolution, uniting people in an armed struggle against colonization. Indeed, under the terms imposed by the current cease-fire, music remains one of the few weapons Sahrawi

revolutionaries can continue to ignite. As this paper has argued, at a time when Sahrawis are fighting against international invisibility, frustration and the indifference of global powers to their cause, musicians such as Mariem Hassan and Aziza Brahim have contributed to the creation of a strong Sahrawi discourse in the international arena, re-interpreting and adapting revolutionary aesthetics in ways that allow the cause to travel further than any political speech. Providing an aesthetic corpus for the unification of a people against foreign impositions, music serves as powerful reminder that the Sahrawi people have not forsaken their independence.

Notes

¹ See Charry (*Music and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*) for more details, and Shannon (42-44, 153) for a similar observation in the context of Syria.

² Notwithstanding the *iggâwen* exercised an ambivalent role in the region. With their capacity to either ruin or exalt the reputation of men, women and their families, the *iggâwen* were as disdained as they were feared. For more information on the ambivalent social position of “griots” in West Africa, and specifically the *iggâwen* in Mauritania, see Hale; and Guignard.

³ In *Hassâniya*, *saguia* designates a land that collects water and becomes a river; *el-hamra* means red; *wad* designates the bed of a river, mostly a fossilized one; and *el-dahab* means golden. The Sahrawis call Saguia El-Hamra to the northern half of the Western Sahara territory after the red “river,” a fossilized river-valley near their capital in Al Aaiun. In turn, they call the southern half Wad El-Dahab (the golden “river”), inspired by another dry desert river that crossed through that part of the region.

⁴ For more information on the formation and the dismantling of Bassiri’s movement, see the testimony by the national poet Sidi Brahim Salaama in Gimeno and Robles 167.

⁵ Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia El-Hamra wa Wad El-Dahab (Jabhat al-Bolisaryu).

⁶ Prior to El Uali’s fall in battle, on the June 9, 1977, the musical group had been named after Shaheed El Hafed Buyem, after the first martyr of the POLISARIO Front, who had been killed in a Spanish jail.

⁷ This was turned into a high school after the war.

⁸ Although recorded in 1994 during a tour in Belgium, the songs included in *Tiris* had been composed and regularly performed since the ceasefire in 1991.

⁹ For more details, see Jensen; Solá-Martín; Theofilopoulou; and Zunes and Mundy 169-253.

¹⁰ After the 8th National Congress of the POLISARIO Front in 2011, this institution has become an official ministry (*wasirat elwadij alumumi*), led by Minister Jira Bulahi.

¹¹ Similar to that of other public workers such as doctors, teachers or journalists, these irregular salaries can amount to as little as thirty euros a month (Wilson 33).

¹² In September 1999, just two months after the death of Moroccan king Hassan II and the coronation of his son Mohamed VI, the main cities in occupied Western Sahara, such as Al Aaiun and Dakhla, were the scenario of the first Sahrawi civil demonstrations against occupation (Zunes and Mundy 179).

¹³ In the YouTube video “Nayim Alal: técnicas de guitarra saharai” (“Najm Alal: Sahrawi guitar techniques”), Najm explains the basic Sahrawi guitar playing techniques, such as the names of the right hand finger techniques and the exact position of the body and hands. We can also observe the physical changes that need to be applied to the electric guitar in order to adapt the techniques of the *tidinit* (e.g., the duplication of the frets to allow quarter tones) (Promonubenegra).

¹⁴ See note 3. In this song, Shueta uses *wad* and *saguia* indistinctively.

¹⁵ See, for example, the YouTube video showcasing the performance of Shueta and her new band Tiris during the celebrations of a marathon in the refugee camps in December 2012 (Sandblast).

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