

Ambiguities of space and control: when refugee camp and nomadic encampment meet

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AMBIGUITIES OF SPACE AND CONTROL: WHEN REFUGEE CAMP AND NOMADIC ENCAMPMENT MEET¹

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Abstract

This article explores sedentarisation as a process of inherent tension between the rupture and preservation of values associated with mobility. This tension is compelling when mobile pastoralists settle in refugee camps. Refugee camps resemble nomadic encampments in material infrastructure and (alleged) non-permanence. Yet refugee camps contrast with nomadic encampments in facilitating control and evoking, through its disruption, rootedness. In the case of refugees of mobile pastoralist heritage from disputed territory Western Sahara, the tension in the meeting of nomadic encampment and refugee camps sees the nomadic encampment reproduced and transformed in the refugee camp, creating ambiguities of space and control.

Keywords: Nomadic encampment; mobility; sedentarisation; refugee camps; Western Sahara

Sedentarisation as rupture and continuity

A longstanding, if now problematized, trope has associated mobile pastoralism with the 'desert', 'mobile', 'primitive' and 'non-state' in supposed opposition to alleged antonyms 'sown', 'sedentary', 'civilized' and 'state'.² The apparent inevitability of 'mobile' succumbing to 'sedentary', 'non-state' to 'state', is seemingly suggested by the rapid decline in numbers of mobile pastoralists in the 20th century. Factors such as sedentarisation policies, drought, conflict, and the development of alternative extractive industries in steppe areas have contributed to this decline, a trend for which the Middle East and North Africa is a good example (Cole 2003). Nevertheless, a presumption of incompatibility between these poles has been questioned by scholars who have highlighted the mutual compatibility (Humphrey and Sneath 1999) and dependence (Marx 2006) of 'desert' and 'sown', the mutual constitution of 'non-state' and 'state' (Scott 2009; Sneath 2007), and the extent to which the mobile can play an influencing or constitutive role in sedentary life (Scheele 2012). Accordingly, mobility is now recognized as a lifestyle of interest and value for its own sake, and a factor contributing to the resilience of mobile pastoralist-infused lifestyles, despite earlier expectations of their demise (Chatty 2006).

The tension between expectations that the sedentary opposes and overcomes mobility, and more recently recognized expectations that mobility can modify the terms of engagement with the sedentary, manifests itself, I suggest, in the settlement of mobile pastoralists.³ Sedentarisation has been conceptualised as a process consisting not of a permanent and discrete change from mobile to sedentary but a shift from less mobile to more sedentary, amounting to a process of adaptation and response (Salzman 1980). Building on the notion of settlement as the adoption to

varying degrees of less or more sedentary/mobile lifestyles, I see sedentarisation as comprising an inherent tension between the rupture and preservation of values and lifestyles associated with mobility, which echoes the broader tension between mobility as both vulnerable and resistant to the sedentary. Thus, on the one hand, sedentarisation may entail breaking with aspects of mobile lifestyles. Settlement has been linked to the loss of flexible notions of territoriality and a preference for control over people, and to the adoption of new ideas of rootedness and control over fixed territory (e.g. Grémont 2012).⁴ On the other hand, sedentarisation preserves aspects of mobile lifestyles and values. The houses of settled mobile pastoralists may replicate the layout of tents (whilst still allowing for transformations in the use of space) (Layne 1994: 56). The spatial development of villages housing former mobile pastoralists may follow older principles of claims made by mobile pastoralists to areas around water sources (Grémont 2012). New technologies such as the truck may reduce the need for household mobility but also extend mobile pastoralists' access to markets for livestock (Chatty 1980). Mobile pastoralists who settle may continue to work in pastoralism (sometimes in combination with a number of other activities), return to pastoralism at a later date, and keep in regular contact with relatives who rear livestock in the steppe (Salzman and Sadala 1980, Cole 2003). Paying attention to both that which is lost and that which is (adapted and) maintained when mobile pastoralists settle underscores how sedentarisation comprises a tension between the rupture and preservation of mobile lifestyles.

This article explores a compelling case of the tension in sedentarisation between rupture and continuity with mobility, namely that of settlement occurring not in villages, towns or cities, but

in refugee camps. A shift from (a perception of) living in a nomadic encampment to living in a refugee camp has been the case for a number of refugee communities.⁵ These include Somali refugees in Kenya (Horst 2006), Malian Tuareg displaced to refugee camps in Mauritania in the 1990s (Randall and Giufridda 2006), and Sahrawi refugees from disputed territory Western Sahara, the case on which I focus here.⁶ To explore how the meeting of nomadic encampment and refugee camp highlights the tension within sedentarisation between the rupture and preservation of mobility, I first examine how refugee camps both resemble and deviate from nomadic encampments. Refugee camps may emulate nomadic encampments in material infrastructure and alleged non-permanence. Nevertheless, refugee camps also clash with nomadic encampments in their political and practical operation as spaces of control over mobility (Agier 2011; Black 1998) and in their evocation, through its disruption, of rootedness (Malkki 1995b). I then turn to the Sahrawi refugee camps in particular.⁷ I trace how Sahrawi exiles distinguish between nomadic encampments and refugee camps whilst nevertheless recognizing similarities between them, and the fact that neither offers the sedentarisation to which they aspire. The refugee camps emerge as an ambiguous space, similar to and different from both the 'mobile' (nomadic encampments) and the 'sedentary' (cities and towns). I go on to suggest that in the Sahrawi case the resonances between nomadic encampment and refugee camp are not limited to questions of temporality and materiality. Following a related yet distinctive line of argument to Cynthia Horst (2006), who has examined how the strategies for survival in the hostile environment of the steppe have been adapted by Somali refugees to aid their survival in refugee camps in Kenya, I explore how the nomadic encampment becomes a resource for control and governmentality in the Sahrawi refugee camps through both its reproduction and its

transformation. Appeals to the nomadic encampment (whether its reproduction or its transformation) not only reinforce control and governmentality in the refugee camps, though, but also attenuate or soften control there. Daily life is made familiar and homely for the refugees by the retention and adaptation to the refugee camp setting of domestic arrangements reminiscent of life in the nomadic encampment. The relationship between the refugee camp and the nomadic encampment in the case of Sahrawi exiles is thus complex. It not only highlights the tension between the rupture and preservation of mobility in processes of sedentarisation. It also shows, perhaps counter-intuitively, how the vocation of the refugee camps as a space of control is both strengthened and attenuated by interaction with another kind of camp, the nomadic encampment.

Sedentarisation in refugee camps

The sedentarisation of mobile pastoralists in refugee camps, rather than villages, towns or cities, constitutes an extreme case of the tension already inherent within sedentarisation between the rupture and preservation of mobility. In some ways, refugee camps fail to offer 'true sedentarisation'. Although, in practice, refugee camps may prove a long-term de facto alternative to the solutions for refugees officially espoused by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), namely repatriation, integration into the host country or resettlement in a third state (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992; Frésia 2009; Agier 2011), in theory refugee camps are supposed to be a non-permanent space of residence (and refugees may cling to this distinction cf. Gabiam 2012). This alleged non-permanence calls into question whether sedentarisation in refugee camps will endure beyond exile. In their study of Tuareg repatriated from refugee camps to settlements in Mali, Randall and Giuffrida (2006) note that, whilst the time spent in the

refugee camps established trends of sedentarisation, some of these trends, such as school attendance, dropped following repatriation into new settlements. Without the resources supplied to the refugees, and with few economic options available, Randall and Giuffrida suspect that the repatriated refugees' experience of sedentarisation may prove transient. In addition, the principle that refugee camps are a non-permanent place of residence can lead refugees of mobile pastoralist background to treat the space in ways analogous to the treatment of a nomadic encampment as a space of non-permanent residence. As we shall see, this concern manifested itself for Sahrawi refugees in the question of whether they should build mosques in exile. Another factor is that when refugee camps begin (and perhaps endure) as row upon row of tents in an arid desert where no piped water or mains electricity are available, as has been the case for Somali refugees and Sahrawi refugees in Kenya and Algeria respectively, the physicality of life in the refugee camp can strongly resemble mobile pastoralist lifestyles and differ from the access to mains electricity and piped water associated, at least in the case of exiled Sahrawis, with cities.

If in some respects the temporality and material infrastructure of refugee camps can resonate with those of nomadic encampments, as concerns politics and governmentality (government concerned with at least the basic survival of a population), refugee camps contrast starkly with nomadic encampments. A nomadic encampment evokes the notion, not unproblematic (see Humphrey 2002), of the Domestic Mode of Production, in which, in different contexts, the encampment or its constituent households may rely extensively, although not entirely (Khazanov 1984; Marx 2006), on the labour and resources of its own members. In contrast to such a

tendency (albeit not total) towards self-reliance, refugee camps may subject refugees to a regime of dependence on external aid that has been criticized for its debilitating effects (Harrell-Bond 1986). Another contrast is that nomadic encampments foster and rely on flexible patterns of mobility within political and ecological constraints.⁸ The families making up an encampment can reduce or diminish according to circumstance as mobile trajectories are followed. In a refugee camp, however, refugees' rights to move to, from and between refugee camps can be highly constrained by the institutional regime to which the refugees are submitted. This, working in parallel to the potential threat of violence beyond the refugee camp and reliance on refugee rations, typically constrains refugees' declared or practical freedom of movement. For refugee mobile pastoralists, their possibilities for continuing mobile pastoralist practices from within the camps are thus highly constrained (Horst 2006; Randall and Giufridda 2006). A further divergence between refugee camp and nomadic encampment is that mobile pastoralism has been associated with flexible and contextual political identities at odds with the claims of nation states to a unified territory for a national community (e.g. Lecocq 2010: 1-26). Refugee camps, however, have proved fertile grounds for politicization around national identities claiming rootedness (Malkki 1995a). Refugee camps can host governments or governing authorities claiming to represent such nationalist causes (Peteet 2005; Frésia 2009; this is also the case for the Sahrawi refugee camps). In sum, the vocation of refugee camps as domains of control which, by sheltering those who could not fit into its narratives, ultimately reinforce the idea of nations rooted in a place from whence people's uprooting disturbs the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995b), seems deeply at odds with the social and political environment of the nomadic encampment.

The tension already apparent in sedentarisation, whereby settlement can accommodate both rupture with, and influence by, mobility, is thus especially marked when mobile pastoralists experience sedentarisation in refugee camps. This tension has been experienced, and debated, by Sahrawi refugees over nearly forty years of exile.

Into exile

Sahrawi refugees have been living in refugee camps in south-west Algeria, near Tindouf, since early 1976. This exiled population arose in the wake of Morocco's partial annexation in 1975 of Western Sahara, a territory whose decolonization was thereby paralyzed.⁹ In various UN resolutions from the 1960s to the present, and in the 1975 non-binding finding of the International Court of Justice, the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination has been recognized. Morocco, however, claims the territory as historically part of the Sultanate and has seized some three quarters of it. It rules this area as an integral part of Morocco. Nevertheless, with the exception of Mauritania 1975-1979 (when Mauritania was a co-annexing power with Morocco prior to Mauritania's withdrawal and subsequent recognition of Morocco's rival), to date Morocco's claims to Western Sahara have not been officially recognized by a third state. Morocco's rival claimant to Western Sahara is the national liberation movement Polisario Front (henceforth Polisario), recognized by the UN as of 1979 as the sole representative of the people of Western Sahara. Founded in 1973 to resist the then Spanish colonial rulers of Spanish Sahara, Polisario since 1975 has vied with Morocco (and, 1975-1979, Mauritania) for the territory. This struggle took the form of war 1975-1991. Following the 1991 UN-brokered

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ceasefire, and during the UN's to date failed efforts to organize a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara, the conflict has assumed alternative battlefronts over reputation, legitimacy and the registration of voters for an eventual referendum on self-determination (see Zunes and Mundy 2010). Polisario's legal position is strong, due to the consistent international recognition—on paper—of the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination. But Morocco's political position, benefiting from strong support from France and the US, has so far proved robust enough to block the implementation of decolonization, despite increasing concerns about the human rights situation in annexed Western Sahara (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2012).¹⁰ With Morocco refusing the inclusion of independence as a referendum option, and Polisario insisting on its inclusion, the efforts of the UN mission for a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara, Minurso, have been at a standstill since the mid 2000s (Theofilopoulou 2006).

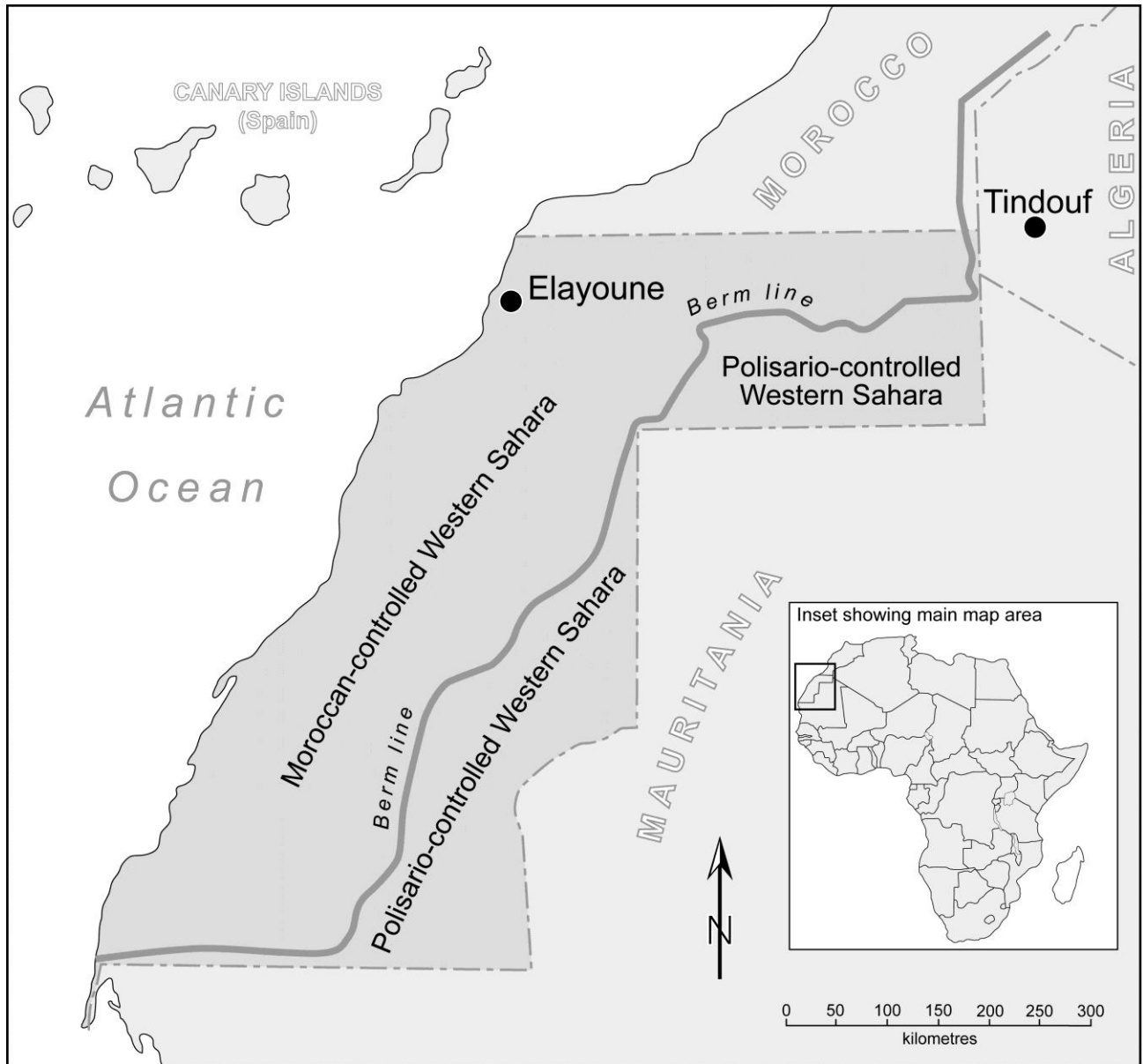


Figure 1. Western Sahara

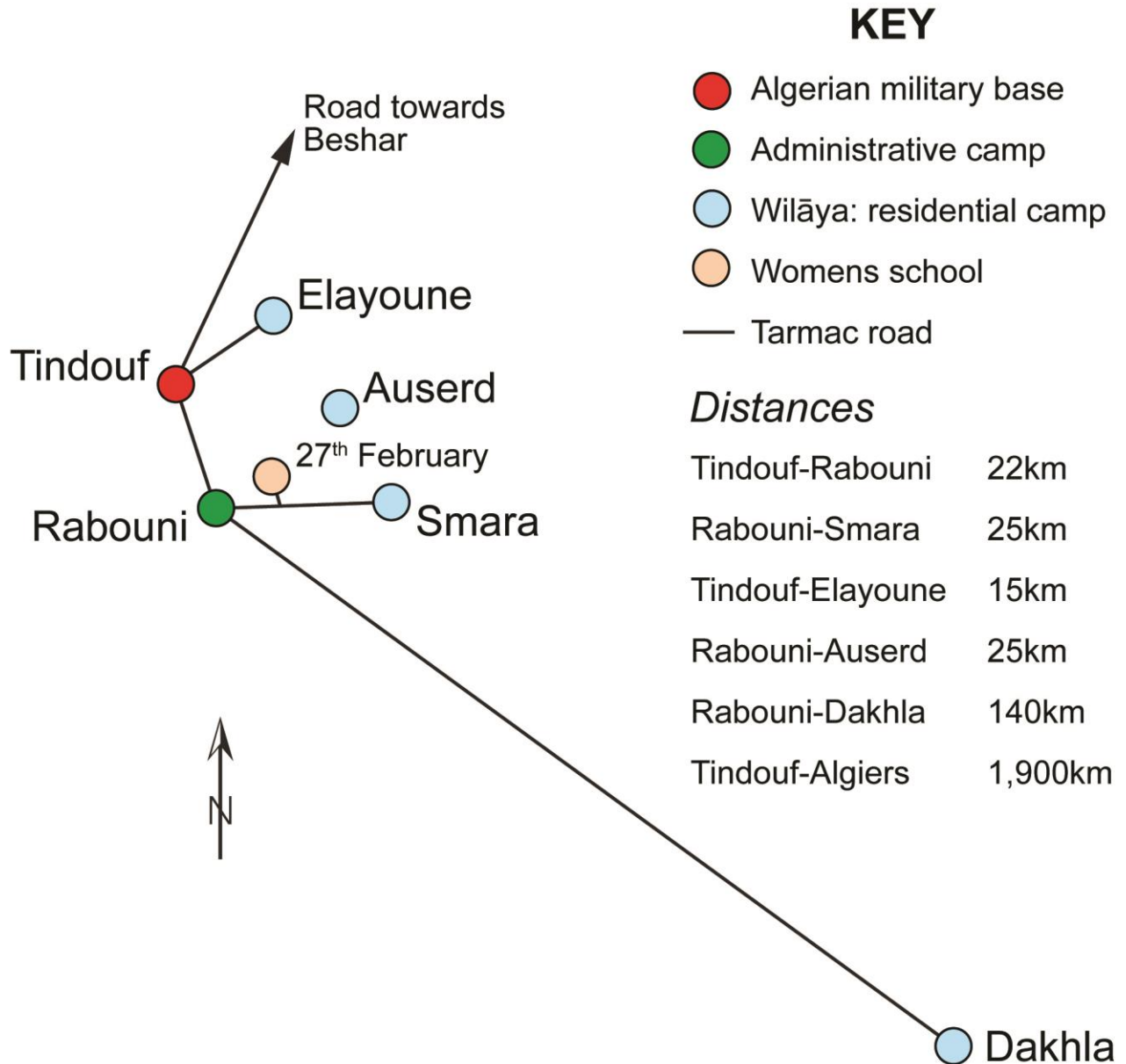


Figure 2. The Sahrawi refugee camps

With no sign of successful decolonization in sight, the Sahrawi refugee population is nearing its 40th year in exile. Throughout this period, Polisario has been responsible for governing the exiled population in refugee camps near Tindouf, south-west Algeria. No reliable transparently

produced population figures for this exiled population have ever been published, but the refugees may have numbered some 160,000 by the late 2000s.¹¹ Extrapolating from UN figures, the Sahrawi population living under annexation may be slightly larger.¹² Although located in refugee camps in Algeria, the exiled population is governed by Polisario, for Algeria has delegated authority over the refugee camps and the territory between them to Polisario. Thus, Polisario governs the civilian refugee population, in sometimes indistinguishable conjunction with the state that it founded in 1976 for Western Sahara, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).¹³ The fusion of Polisario and SADR has state-like qualities. In external relations, SADR has achieved some international and multi-lateral recognition.¹⁴ In internal relations, the fusion of Polisario and SADR operates ministries, a Parliament, police, prisons and law-courts administering SADR laws. Over the years during which they have become Africa's longest-standing refugee dossier, Sahrawi refugees, perhaps even more formally and practically than other long-term exiled communities (Peteet 2005; Frésia 2009; McConnell 2009), have come to be refugee citizens of a state-like administration of their own. Their experience of exile in refugee camps has acquired particular nuance from the fact that many refugees identify with a past as mobile pastoralists living in nomadic encampments.

Distinguishing between two kinds of camps

Whilst the lack of transparently produced population figures for the Sahrawi refugees leaves shrouded in uncertainty how many of them were mobile pastoralists before exile, it is likely that many refugees who came into exile in the 1970s and 1980s were familiar with mobile pastoralism. By then sedentarisation was still relatively new and by no means had all Sahrawis

settled. Sedentarisation took off in Western Sahara from the 1950s (Hodges 1983: 130-132). According to the Spanish census of 1974 (which was meant to prepare for a referendum on self-determination), more than half of some 74,000 Sahrawis were then resident in towns (Zunes and Mundy 2010), but the extent to which the 1974 census may have underestimated the mobile pastoralist population is unclear. Living with Sahrawi refugees in the late 2000s, I came across families with varying trajectories of sedentarisation, or lack thereof. Some families had lived solely in the pasturelands prior to exile. This was the case for Zaynabou.¹⁵ In her late fifties in the late 2000s, she was born in a *frīg*,¹⁶ nomadic encampment, in the northern part of Western Sahara and upon marriage moved to another *frīg*. She, her husband and their three children came into exile from the pasturelands, *badīa*.¹⁷ After bearing him three more children in exile, she was widowed. She went on to re-marry a fellow refugee, Brahim, and to bear him two further children. The situation of Brahim and his family as regards sedentarisation prior to exile was different. Brahim was (and remained from exile) married to a wife with whom he shared a home in the city of Smara, Western Sahara. Yet Brahim and his elder son were herding in the pasturelands, again in the northern part of Western Sahara, when the war broke out. As a result, Brahim's family was separated. Those in the city fell under Moroccan control, and those who were in the pasturelands became refugees. The situation of Khadija, of a similar generation to Zaynabou, illustrates a third possibility. Khadija was born and raised in a *frīg*, but moved after her marriage to live in El Ayoune, the capital of Spanish Sahara. By the time she, her husband and, by then, four children became refugees, Khadija had been enjoying life in the city—with mains electricity, running water, a fridge and a washing machine—for several years.¹⁸ Other refugees had been mobile pastoralists and belonged to Sahrawi tribes, but had been herding

outside Western Sahara when the conflict broke out. This was the case for Māghalāha and her young family of one child, who left the *badīa* in northern Mauritania to join the refugee camps, where four more children were born to her and her husband. Some refugees had been living in towns for longer than Brahim or Khadija, but in my experience, and given that sedentarisation in Western Sahara only took off from the 1950s, these families were likely to have been living in towns with significant Sahrawi populations in areas that, by 1975, were part of southern Morocco.¹⁹ That many of the refugees thought of themselves as more familiar with the *badīa* than with life in a town is suggested by the fact that, in exile, Bir Lehlu district (*daira*) in Smara 'province' (*wilāya*),²⁰ had the reputation amongst the refugees as being unusual in hosting a population that was mostly from cities. This *daira* was reputed to have the earliest uptake of televisions, once they became available in the refugee camps—an enthusiasm attributed to the perceived predominantly urban character of its residents prior to exile.

The limitations to the longevity and scope of sedentarisation by 1975 suggest that it is likely that most adult refugees from Western Sahara were familiar, either from childhood or even from the period immediately prior to exile, with life in a nomadic encampment. Refugees' identification with a past life in the *badīa* may nevertheless have drawn on more than personal experience.

Polisario adopted as part of its own discourse the notion that Sahrawis were historically Bedouin who resisted state power—first Morocco's, and then Spain's. This in turn reinforced popular convictions of the right of Sahrawis to self-determination (claimed on the grounds that Sahrawis had (successfully) resisted being part of the Moroccan Sultanate). It was thus politically

important for the cause of self-determination for refugees to identity with a mobile pastoralist past.

Identifying with a mobile pastoralist past for both practical and discursive reasons, Sahrawi refugees maintained a distinction between the two kinds of camps, nomadic and exilic. *Frīg* and *badīa* were not used as terms to describe the refugee camps. Rather, *frīg* and *badīa* were places and spaces from which the refugees had been separated by the war, exile, and its impoverishment—although refugees regained access to some of these spaces after the ceasefire. The refugee camps were called, by refugees, *almukhayam*, 'the tented [place]'. (During brief fieldwork with annexed Sahrawis in 2012, I noticed that they preferred other terms to *almukhayam*, such as *ashsharg* (east) or 'Polisario'). For its residents, *almukhayam* was clearly distinguished from *frīg* and *badīa*. I discuss below the relationship between the *frīg* and *almukhayam* in terms of layout and the social identity thus evoked. For now I address the material and ecological environment. Refugees arrived in exile with very few possessions. Those hailing from the *badīa* typically brought with them neither animals nor tents (Hodges 1983: 233). The tents that had been lost to them were *khiyām* (sing. *khaima*), made of woven goats hair and constructed around two slanted tent poles. The word *khaima* continued to be used in the refugee camps for residences there with the sense 'home' or 'household'. But the physical tents provided by aid agencies as shelter for the refugees, made of tough cloth and constructed around one or two upright tent poles, were not called *khiyām*. Such a tent was known as a *gaytōn*. The two kinds of tents, then, were not to be confused. To its connoisseur, the *khaima* was much the preferred tent. In December 2008, I had the opportunity to sleep in a *khaima* which Māghalāha had set up near her had set up near her

gaytōn as she and colleagues were preparing for the forthcoming Sahrawi Cultural Festival. In the morning, Māghalāha's husband, Tawwālu, a veteran of the *badīa*, discussed with me how much more pleasant it was to sleep in a *khaima* rather than a *gaytōn*. Another stressed difference between the refugee camps and the pasturelands was the climate. *Almukhayam* was in the Algerian *hamāda*, a harsh, stony, arid desert that, home to a few Sahrawi tribes prior to exile, was infamous amongst Sahrawis further afield as an unforgiving place of extreme temperatures in both winter and summer. Khadīja recalled from her childhood in the pasturelands of northern Western Sahara that the "cold of the *hamāda*" and "thirst of the *hamāda*" were invoked in threats or admonishments. The *badīa*, in contrast, was for the refugees a place of breeze (*garwah*) and, in clement times, grass (*rabī'*). The physical contrast between *badīa* and *mukhayam* was compounded by the late 2000s. By then, the extreme material hardship of the early exile years had been modified by the increasing movement of people and goods through the camps which had followed the 1991 ceasefire. Greater access to material goods transformed the 'tented' place (*almukhayam*). It retained tents, but the *gaytōn* came to be outnumbered by mud-brick (*brīk*) and, for richer refugees, concrete rooms (see Wilson 2012b). Four wheel drive cars and desert-hardened Mercedes moved within and between the camps, kicking up dust (*nabhga*), about which refugees complained vociferously. The *badīa*, however, promised escape from the oppression of the climate and built environment in *almukhayam*. It was thus the destination of choice for elderly refugees whose relatives wished to offer them respite from the confinement of the refugee camps. The aged parents of both Zaynabu and Māghalāha enjoyed sojourns in the *badīa* whenever enough resources and family members could be mustered. The escape from the confinement of the refugee camps was not only physical, though, but also spiritual. Whereas

almukhayam was associated with exile and the *hamāda*, the *badīa* was associated with a return to origins and the homeland, Western Sahara.²¹

Ambiguities on the ground

Almukhayam was distinguished not only from the *badīa* but also from 'true' centres of sedentarisation. These existed in a number of places elsewhere. In the immediate vicinity, 'true' sedentarisation was in the nearby Algerian military base, Tindouf. Some 720km from the nearest town, Beshar to the north-east, and some 1,720 km from Algiers, this once remote military base, to which young Algerian men feared postings for military service due to the scorching summer heat, has boomed as a town providing services in trade, banking and houses for the refugees and UN and NGO administrators. For refugees, Tindouf is *adashra*, 'the city', a word not applied to the refugee camps. In the 2000s, some refugees, rich enough to be able to procure material comforts outside the refugee camps, but perhaps not rich or well-connected enough to do so as far afield as Mauritania, Algeria or Europe, frequented Tindouf to enjoy such comforts there. When the heat hit the *hamāda*, such refugee families might rent a house in Tindouf for the summer where they could enjoy electricity (or at least the chance of it, power cuts being frequent) and running water. Throughout the year, refugees would make day trips to Tindouf, not only to shop and trade, but also to use high speed internet and a steaming *hammam*. *Adashra* could provide such luxuries, and *almukhayam* could not. More distant horizons of 'true' urban centres were the cities of Western Sahara under Moroccan control: El Ayoune, Smara and Dakhla. The UN organizes family reunion visits, allowing families such as Brahim's to be reunited, albeit for a few days, after decades of separation during the conflict. Thanks to these

visits, increasing numbers of refugees have (briefly) seen the cities of Western Sahara in person after years or for the first time. However scant the physical contact between the refugees and these cities, though, they were constantly evoked and shown in the SADR media with its daily radio, and, as of a few years, television broadcasts. Such evocations reminded the refugees that their true cities lay beyond the refugee camps.

The fact that *almukhayam* was not *adashra* opened the door to some ambiguity in its separation from the *badīa*. As described above, the *badīa* was generally distinguished physically and spiritually from *almukhayam*. This distinction was, initially, further pressed upon me by refugees when I began to try and organize to obtain permission, as a foreigner, from Polisario to leave the camps to spend time in the *badīa* with Māghalāha's brother, who looked after a camel herd owned by his *wilāya*. Refugees did not need permits to go to the *badīa*, but, as a foreigner, I did. During the weeks in which I searched for a patron figure whose connections would secure me the permit, my refugee friends assured me that whilst life in the *badīa* when the grass was good was sweet, much sweeter than life in *almukhayam*, everyday life there was tough. There would be hardly any water. Most pronounced that I 'would not be able' to cope. After several weeks, a high-ranking Polisario figure unexpectedly granted me a permit to visit the *badīa* that could not be refused by the Polisario office dealing with foreigners. My refugee friends tactfully ceased to predict that I 'would not be able' to cope in the *badīa*, and turned to giving me advice as to what I should take. The list grew enormously. By the day that Polisario sent a four-wheel drive car to take me, along with Māghalāha's daughter and sister, to Māghalāha's brother in the *badīa*, our equipment included: a tent, a tent pole, a gas bottle, a cooking hob, blankets, a solar panel, a car

battery, a light bulb, cooking pans, batteries, torches, flour, potatoes, rice, onions, salt, canned tomato puree, sugar, and tea. Indeed, the list continued. As the list had lengthened, the distinction between *mukhayam* and *badīa* had grown more ambiguous. I reflected that, for the *badīa* we needed everything that we needed in the refugee camps, not least the substitutes for mains electricity (only available in Polisario's administrative centre and one of five residential refugee camps). For the pasturelands, we needed greater supplies of consumables to last out our time away from refugee ration distributions and the refugee camps' shops. The blurring of the distinction between *badīa* and *almukhayam* did not escape the refugees. The friends who generously lent and made do to help us amass our supplies for the *badīa* found themselves cheerfully telling me that the *badīa* was 'the same' as *almukhayam*. Some months later, when I was in a shop in the refugee camps with Māghalāha's son, two young women came in and began to buy typical consumables for life in the refugee camps, such as batteries and henna, but in unusually large quantities. 'Ah,' my host brother remarked, 'you're going to the *badīa*', to which the women acquiesced. Refugees were well aware, then, of the fact that for most refugee families, the refugee camps offered precious little more in material infrastructure than the *badīa*.

If the distinction between *almukhayam* and the *badīa* could be shaken, the distinction between *almukhayam* and *adashra* was not impermeable either. Michel Agier (2011) has explored how long-term refugee camps can develop the characteristics of cities. The Sahrawi refugee camps were poor in the infrastructure of water, electricity and, for the most part, roads, but this does not distinguish them from many African cities. Furthermore, with the state-like qualities of the fusion of Polisario and SADR, the refugee camps certainly hosted a *polis*, offering the refugees

political participation in elections and imposing on them laws for the infringement of which they were subject to punishment.²² For many refugees, the fact that the refugee camps increasingly resembled 'normal life' was, however, an unacceptable suggestion that exile was their new home from which they would never return to a post self-determination (independent, they hoped) Western Sahara. Like Palestinian refugees who may resist development projects on the grounds that these may suggest permanent resettlement and the abandonment of the right to return (cf. Gabiam 2012), Sahrawi refugees resisted changes that might make *almukhayam* seemingly become *adashra*. The need to maintain, in the face of ambiguity, a distinction between *almukhayam* and *adashra*, and prevent the former from becoming the latter, manifested itself in public debate about the building of mosques in the refugee camps. In Sahrawi nomadic encampments, no mosques are built. If marking out a place to pray in an encampment, a curved row of stones, *lamseed*, will be laid out. The lack of a mosque was a sign of a lack of 'being settled', *istiqrār*. As Sahrawis' exile dragged on, two divergent opinions developed in the refugee camps on whether to build mosques there. Some argued that, after so many years in the same place, and with no likely prospect of self-determination on the horizon, it was shameful not to build a mosque to be able to hold Friday prayers there, as other settled Muslims did. Opponents disagreed, pointing out that precisely because exile was not *istiqrār*, mosques should not be built. This debate highlighted the ambiguity that *almukhayam* was in practice experienced as 'being settled', but that this should be resisted. Although mosques were indeed built from the late 1990s, and by the late 2000s existed in each *daira*, the debate as to whether this was correct continued. In practice, mosques were used by those who chose to do so, with other refugees preferring to pray at home.

If *almukhayam* was vehemently distinguished from *badīa* and *frīg* by the refugees most of the time, in temporality and materiality the *badīa* and *frīg* nevertheless infiltrated *almukhayam*. Yet the nomadic encampment was even present in the refugee camp in the operation of politics and governmentality, to which I now turn.

Reproduction, transformation and reminiscence

Camps that serve as zones of exception, such as refugee camps, concentration camps and detention centres, have been analyzed as spaces epitomizing control. In the most extreme form, camps facilitate the ultimate control of sovereign power over 'bare life', the life that can be killed with impunity (Agamben 1998). Yet camps, including and perhaps especially refugee camps, also lend themselves to other forms of control: by refugee camp leaders over the manipulation and reproduction of refugees' identities (Malkki 1995a), and by humanitarian administrators over refugees access to resources (Harrell-Bond 1986), which can in turn elicit responses of contestation (Feldman 2012) or manipulation (Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995). Although it is not necessarily always the case, refugee camps may also lend themselves to a very literal form of the control by host governments over refugees' possibilities to leave refugee camps (Black 1998; Peteet 2005; Horst 2006). In the case of the Sahrawi refugees, it is generally recognized, including by Polisario, that prior to the ceasefire of 1991 Polisario was responsible for authoritarian and repressive measures in its government (Shelley 2004). This included the restriction of refugees' movements by Polisario, rather than Algeria.²³ In the context of the political and economic opening up of the camps after the 1991 ceasefire (Shelley 2004), by the

2000s direct restrictions from Polisario on refugees leaving the camps were no longer in place. Refugees were engaging in a variety of migratory trajectories from and, in some cases, back to the refugee camps, all the time negotiating political and economic constraints associated with favoured destinations, and which might be covertly exploited by Polisario (Wilson 2012a). In the context of this recovery of mobility, refugees regained access to the *badīa* east of the military wall that Morocco built in the 1980s to divide Western Sahara between a larger, westerly, Moroccan-controlled portion, rich in mineral and water resources and containing the main cities, and a smaller, easterly Polisario-controlled portion. Although Polisario-controlled Western Sahara had few water resources, after the ceasefire those refugees who could gather animals or the social connections to access other people's animals could visit the *badīa* in this area. Many frequently did so, especially, as noted, to allow elderly relatives reprieve from the refugee camps.

If by the last 2000s it was no longer the case that mobility was controlled to the point of preventing refugees from engaging in mobile pastoralism, the refugee camps nonetheless remained a domain of (attempted) tight control by Polisario in other respects, such as the reproduction of Sahrawi nationalism (San Martín 2010) and the promotion of revolutionary moral ideals of social egalitarianism (see Wilson 2012b). Given Polisario's interests in nationalism and state-making, agendas to which it has readily assumed that mobile pastoralist lifestyles are antithetical, it is hardly surprising that ruptures with the *badīa* reinforced social and political control in the refugee camps. For instance, refugees were expected to accept rooted belonging in a national homeland from which the exiles were (encouraged to perceive of themselves as) displaced. This stands in sharp contrast to the previous mobility whereby

pastoralists in the north-west Sahara moved with little regard for nation state and colonial borders (cf Hodges 1983; Caratini 2003). That the refugee camps, specializing in new and intense forms of social and political control, introduced forms of rupture with former mobile lifestyles is one strand in the tension, observed above, between sedentarisation as entailing both rupture and continuity with mobility. Nevertheless, in contrast to the perhaps intuitive association of sedentarisation, control and ruptures of mobile pastoralist lifestyles, social and political control in the Sahrawi refugee camps could also take the form of the reconfiguration of the nomadic encampment, through either its reproduction or its transformation.

Caratini (2003: 33-34) has suggested that in overall layout, the Sahrawi refugee camps reproduced two kinds of layouts for nomadic encampments, with meaningful political implications. In the *badīa*, Caratini explains, pastoralists could adopt either a square or a circular layout for a *frīg*. These shapes differed in their social and political connotations. In the square *frīg*, the tents were arranged in an approximate line, with the most important head of household occupying the middle of this row. Each tent's animals would be gathered at night behind their own tent, and the tent of any slaves owned by a household would be set up behind the owners' tent.²⁴ Thus, a *frīg* laid out in these arrangements made legible social and economic hierarchies amongst the *frīg* members. Alternatively, Caratini explains, in a defensive situation, a *frīg* could be laid out in a circle, with tents forming the circle and all the animals herded in the centre. In this circular layout, the social and economic hierarchies that were legible in the 'square' *frīg* were no longer made explicit from the layout. Caratini suggests that the refugee camps were built in a layout combining these two idioms of hierarchy and lack of hierarchy. Each *daira* was built

in a square shape, but as an ensemble they were built to encircle the central administrative buildings for the *wilāya*. Thus the overall layout of the camps both harked back to lack of hierarchy where social and economic distinctions should not be legible (the circular *frīg*), as befitted Polisario's revolutionary aspirations towards social egalitarianism, and at the same time evoked hierarchy, where here the important position at the 'front' of the square layout was occupied by Polisario's offices, as befitted its claims to be in a position of political authority. By reproducing the *frīg* in two ways, the refugee camps reinforced two kinds of political claims on the part of Polisario.

Polisario's efforts at exerting social and political control was sometimes made meaningful to the refugees not by the reproduction but by the transformation of the nomadic encampment. A first example concerns animal-raising. We have already seen that in the square *frīg*, the location of animals behind owners' tents made economic hierarchies visible. Refugees recalled of the 1980s that those refugee families who had acquired some sheep or goats had to use 'one pen' with 'one opening time'. The fact that all the animals were kept together disguised the possibilities for making, as had been the case in the square *frīg*, economic distinctions visible through the way that the animals were herded at night. Even though this arrangement did not prevent some economic distinctions between refugees from existing, it at least disguised them and constrained their manifestation, as befitted the official emphasis on social egalitarianism. A second example of the transformation of the nomadic encampment as a means of reinforcing social control concerns the layout of tents within the refugee camps. In the *badīa*, each *frīg* could typically be identified with a particular tribe (*qabīla*), although the emergence, following Spain's pacification

of the interior pasturelands in 1934, of a novel phenomenon of a *frīg* accommodating tents from different tribes had been noticed (Molina Campuzano 1954: 8). Polisario, like other revolutionary movements, has maintained, even if it has modified (see Wilson 2012b), anti-tribalist policies. In exile, the link between a residential group and a tribe was undermined. Even if several families from the same tribe were living together in exile, what might once have been recognizable as a *frīg* associated with a particular tribe effectively 'disappeared' in exile, engulfed in a multi-tribe *daira* composed of row upon row of tents (Wilson 2012b). A third example of a transformation of the nomadic encampment that supported a broader political programme is that where once there had been stylized reciprocity between nomadic encampments usually recruited through ties through *qabīla* relations, in exile this was replaced by labour pooled between refugee households in Polisario's Popular Committees (Wilson 2012b). The new arrangements in exile for animal pens (as per the 1980s), residence and labour pooling were all transformations of arrangements in nomadic encampments, that, through the very nature of the transformations, reinforced Polisario's policies.

Whilst the reproduction and transformation of the nomadic encampment discussed so far reinforced Polisario's social and political objectives, the refugee camps were also reminiscent of mobile pastoralist lifestyles in ways that gave the refugee camps a distinctive, and, for the refugees, homely feeling, beyond questions of revolutionary subjectivities and Polisario's desires to effect social and political change. The mud-brick (*brīk*) rooms that were ubiquitous from the 1990s onwards were built to accommodate the lifestyle of persons accustomed to living in tents. Refugees preferred to sit or lie on the floor in these rooms and generally eschewed furniture. The

windows in these rooms were therefore built a few centimetres above floor level, so that they could easily be opened by someone reclining, as one would in a tent, on the floor. For many families mud-brick rooms only supplemented, rather than supplanted, tents, which were kept on. As a result, the daily routine of housework included lifting up different sides of the tent throughout the day according to the trajectory of the sun, and closing up the tent as much as possible if the wind whipped up. As concerns animal-raising, by the late 2000s, each family engaged in raising sheep or goats in the refugee camps had its own pen. (Camels were rarely kept in the refugee camps due to lack of suitable pasture). Although by then it was years after the ceasefire and the return of many men from the army to civilian life in the camps, and although many of the men in the refugee camps did not have regular work and were available in the daytime, the division of labour in the *badīa*, whereby women and children tend to sheep and goats (and men to camels) had been kept up in the refugee camps. Thus, at morning and evening feeding times in the refugee camps, it was a familiar sight to see women and children, but rarely men, crossing the camps with swill buckets to feed their sheep and goats. The long evenings in the camps were marked by a round of tea, with dinner appearing last of all before sleep. In my time in the *badīa*, I learned that the rhythm of life there lent itself to such a late evening meal. When female camels with milk return from the pasturelands in the evening, Māghalāha's brother explained to me, they need to stand and rest for a few hours for the milk to descend. Only after this time would he go out with a large wooden drinking bowl to collect the milk. Most Sahrawis in the late 2000s, whether living in the refugee camps, the cities of Western Sahara, or elsewhere, would not have their evening meal served to them as fresh camel milk. But their long evenings spent drinking tea, waiting for a late dinner, were a reminiscence of life in the *frīg*. In the refugee

camps, such reminiscences of the nomadic encampment made the refugee camps a homely place, beyond tenuous questions of social and political control, whether the refugee camps should have mosques, and the poverty of their material infrastructure.

A productive ambiguity

Starting from the premise that a tension inheres in sedentarisation between ruptures and continuities with mobile lifestyles, I examined how this tension manifested itself strongly for mobile pastoralists who sedentarise in refugee camps. The non-permanent temporality and material infrastructure of refugee camps can strongly evoke the nomadic encampment and/or the failure to achieve true sedentarisation. But the politics and governmentality of refugee camps, associated with social and political control, constrained mobility and the evocation of rootedness, clashes with the associations of nomadic encampments. I explored how the distinction between the two kinds of camps was, for Sahrawi refugees, both meaningful and yet ambiguous. The Sahrawi refugee camps were an ambiguous space, neither *badīa* (pasturelands) nor *adashra* (city), yet they maintained or acquired aspects of both. Finally, I showed how, for Sahrawi refugees identifying with a mobile pastoralist past, the tension between sedentarisation as both rupture and continuity with regard to mobility was more complex than a question of forms of control in the refugee camps being associated with ruptures with a mobile lifestyle. In addition, and perhaps counter-intuitively, Polisario's governance of the refugee camps drew on the nomadic encampment. Reproduced in some aspects and transformed in others, the reconfigured nomadic encampment made forms of social and political control more meaningful. Yet even though the refugee camps' governing authority, like other humanitarian regimes (cf Feldman

2012) exerted itself to control its population, the meeting of two kinds of camps did not merely see the nomadic encampment reconfigured to serve the vocation for control of the refugee camp. Rather, to the extent that refugees' daily lives were reminiscent of the *badīa* in ways that made life in exile homely to them, the meeting of nomadic encampment and refugee camp not only intensified but also attenuated refugees' experience of control.

In a broader context of blurred distinctions between 'mobile' and 'sedentary', 'desert' and 'sown' (Sneath 2007; Scott 2009), I hope through these reflections on the relationship between the nomadic encampment and the refugee camp to have underscored how actors may find both such a distinction and its ambiguity meaningful. In the case of Sahrawi refugees, the nomadic encampment infused their refugee camps in ways that produced as well as attenuated revolutionary subjectivities.

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² For a critical approach to alleged opposition between mobile and sedentary, see e.g. Salzman and Sadala 1980; Khazanov 1984; Humphrey and Sneath 1999.

³ On experiences of sedentarization, see Salzman and Sadala 1980. For a discussion of different kinds of sedentarization, see Randall and Giufridda 2006.

⁴ I focus here on the loss of values and attitudes, which may of course be related to potential physical loss of animals and pasturelands as a result of sedentarisation.

⁵ In this article I use 'nomadic encampment' to refer to a mobile encampment housing families and persons engaged in raising animals in steppelands. I use 'refugee camp' to refer to centres of ostensibly non-permanent accommodation put together to house persons forcibly displaced, for instance by conflict, from their homes and livelihoods.

⁶ I address below the question of Sahrawi refugees' perceived and actual practice of mobile pastoralism in the years shortly before exile.

⁷ I draw on fieldwork with Sahrawi refugees conducted from 2006 to 2012, including a period of two years 2007-2009.

⁸ For examples of such flexibility in what is now Western Sahara see Caro Baroja 1955.

⁹ On the Western Sahara conflict, see Hodges 1983; Zunes and Mundy 2010.

¹⁰ A recent example of Morocco's strong political position is that in April 2013 when, in anticipation of the renewal of the mandate of the UN mission to Western Sahara, the US indicated that it would back UN monitoring human rights in Western Sahara, Morocco cancelled its joint annual military exercises with the US. The US then dropped its support for UN human rights monitoring.

¹¹ For a discussion of population figures for the camps, see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Crivello, 2010: 41.

¹² The UN figures for 2000 for provisional approved adult Sahrawi voters are 41,150 for Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and 33,998 for the refugee camps (Zunes, Mundy, 2010: 214).

¹³ To clarify, Polisario is a national liberation movement which runs, and to a degree populates, a state authority, SADR. The technical distinction between the two can be observed in the different kinds of recognition offered. Polisario is widely recognised as the sole representative of the people of Western Sahara. SADR is less widely recognised as a state. The distinction between liberation movement and state authority can be blurred on the ground, though. For example a member of Polisario's National Secretariat may at the same time hold an office within SADR such as a minister or ambassador.

¹⁴ For a list of 80 recognitions by states as at 2006, including 22 cancellations or suspensions, see Pazzanita, 2006: 376-378. SADR has been a full member of the African Union since 1984.

¹⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

¹⁶ All transliterations are from Hassaniya, rather than classical Arabic, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁷ The classical Arabic term is *bādīa*, but the pronunciation in Hassaniya is closer to *badīa*.

¹⁸ By the 1970s, Spanish Sahara offered a high material of standard of life to urbanized Sahrawis, with the colony enjoying high income per capita compared to other African countries at the time (San Martín 2010).

¹⁹ On the gradual establishment of the borders of Spanish Sahara, see San Martín 2010.

²⁰ The refugee camps (*wilāyāt*) and their districts (*dawair*) are named after localities in Western Sahara. Thus Smara *wilāya* is named after, and distinct from, the city of Smara in Western Sahara.

²¹ Longing for the *badīa* also goes beyond the context of exile. In annexed Western Sahara, Sahrawis living in confined urban space also experience nostalgia for the *badīa* (see Deubel 2012).

²² Elections are held in exile for Polisario bodies, such as the Polisario General Congress, and SADR bodies, such as the Parliament. Whilst there are no formal political parties, there is lively political debate and, I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 2010), competition amongst candidates on the grounds of different political currents within the refugee community.

²³ The movement of persons in the Western Sahara conflict is politically loaded, as is reflected in policies adopted by both Polisario and Morocco (see Wilson 2012a). For narratives of Polisario's erstwhile restrictions on the movement of refugees recounted from the perspective of former

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residents of the refugee camps who have left the refugee camps to live in Morocco or Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, see Hernández 2001.

²⁴ For examples of such a layout, see Caro Baroja 1955: 195-228.