

## Tabibas and the Success of Procreation in Western Sahara

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### Abstract

The Saharawi people, establishes one of the most interesting milestones of Africa in the struggle to obtain its freedom and that of its occupied territories. *Tabibas* (women who practice medicine) are in charge of wandering through the sands of the desert, carrying the body of ancestral knowledge, fulfilling a task that transcends what they apparently represent as obstetrician assistants or empirical midwives. Although the relationship with fertility indicates early unions, high rate of pregnancies, excessive births, minimum intergenetic intervals, reproductive stress and high reproductivity in accordance with the spontaneous needs to regulate the population. The success of procreation is the resistance of the group to the oversight of the birth rate, by excluding the modern practices of biomedicine.

**Keywords:** Tabibas, fertility, mandate, reproductivity, claim back territories

### Introduction

The population of Western Sahara largely consists of Arab and Berber<sup>2</sup> origin, but there is also a small minority of Spanish, European and Berber ancestry. The Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria are the headquarters of the Polisario and there are approximately 240,000 Sahrawi refugees<sup>3</sup> living there according to the latest computation made by the United Nations. Polisario (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguía el Hamra and Río de Or) is a rebel political and military movement in Western Sahara that seeks to free its territories from the occupation of Morocco.

### (Figure 1)



According to data from the UNHCR (2000 to 2004), the measurements establish these populations with a growth rate of 2.29% (2004 estimate), and a birth rate of 45.07 births per 1000 inhabitants; with calculations of

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<sup>2</sup>The descendants of the indigenous peoples of North Africa, before the Arabs and Andalusians, are called Berber or Amazig.

<sup>3</sup>These is how the inhabitants of the SADR are called, in the territories of Western Sahara.

mortality of 16.11 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants. To all this we must adduce that the infant mortality rate was 133.54 deaths per 1,000 live births (2000 estimates), with a total fertility rate of 6.64 children born per woman, in the same year.

The Saharawi people established a milestone, were precursors of a change in Africa's history, in the struggle to free their territories occupied by Morocco. They have been living in refugee camps for over thirty years, and currently the women, the elderly and children are in charge of organizing them. They have developed skills through different social strategies that include organizing the populations as a role model in economic, cultural and social development, practiced in exile, integrating them by their common cultural roots and the prevailing Muslim religion. They have also maintained their Saharawi identity by autonomy and self-determination, associating freedom with independence, hoping to recover their lands and becoming the Frente Polisario (SADR).

All of this is made more impressive taking into account the difficulties of their desert environment. For example, this has been achieved in spite of the difficult nature of the hamada desert<sup>4</sup>, the lack of the minimum resources to survive, and the position of exile and isolation of the developed world. The Saharawi people persist in the search for cohesion, creating conditions of security, hygiene, food and social stability for the inhabitants of the camps, displaced towards the desert. All this with the help of NGOs and humanitarian cooperation groups. My research aims to understand the complex situation of political pressure to increase procreation in the Western Sahara and how generations of women have reacted to this pressure. I argue that efforts to integrate Western and traditional health systems in the exiled communities of the Sahara require an understanding of the cultural context of the past and the present. My fieldwork was conducted in Tindouf, El Ayoun, Smara, Tifariti, and the region of Zemmour. Through this paper I will investigate the concepts of identity within the Saharawi population, specifically Saharawi women, and how these identities have been educated by the past and now shaped by the present.

#### Contemplation of identity:

Three generations of females, grandmothers, mothers and young women interact in the "being a Saharawi woman" today, experiencing the same realities in the camps but facing them in different ways.

The grandmothers, who belong to a nomadic group, sustain and reinforce the tribal culture. The mothers forged the revolution building and organizing the camps. And the young girls have been born in exile and have been instructed abroad. This education abroad has allowed these young women to have an imagination open to other worlds.

These generations often converge and disagree. While the grandmothers dream of their solidary and tribal past, raising and milking the cattle, their daughters elaborate the discourse of liberation, from their revolutionary spirit towards self-determination. The youngest generation dream of other countries and aspire to develop their individuality.

The contradiction is seen in the conversations of younger women, born in exile, who have traveled on vacation or lived in other countries such as Spain, Cuba, Italy, etc. for reasons of health or study. These younger women do not agree with the social mandate to populate the Polisario that pushes the population to produce a large amount of children to obtain a population number that is recognized by the UN. Today, although not publicly manifested, the younger women think of emigrating as the only way to have a better life.

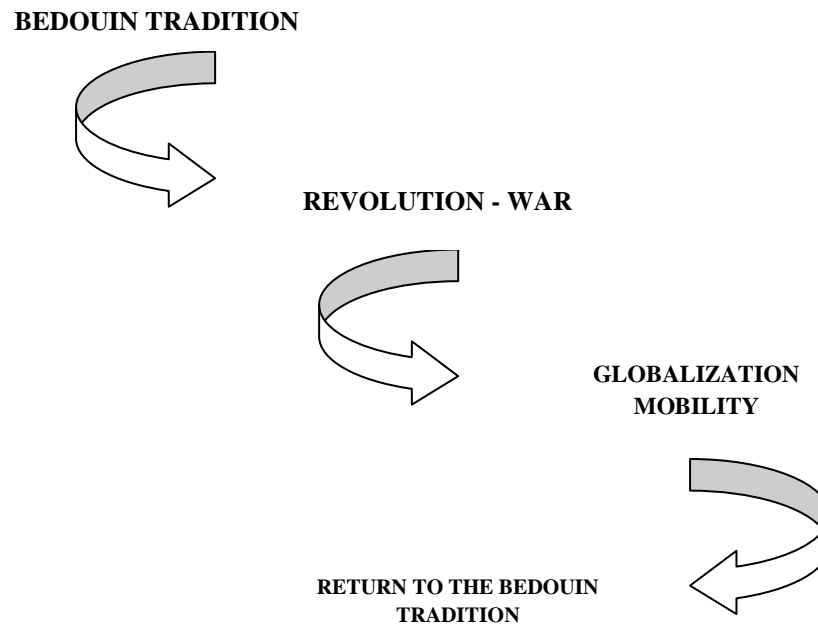
Some years ago young people migrated to other continents, women along with them. But the phenomenon of migration produced only discouragement among those who dreamed of living in a better world when they did not find what they sought socially in European or Cuban cities. So marches and countermarches are then developed dialectically, reaffirming an identity. As drawn from Foucault in this study of identity:

"This identity ... that we try to secure and assemble under a mask, is no more than a parody, the plural inhabits it, numerous souls fight in it, the systems are intertwined and dominate each other" (Foucault 1992). In that plurality, the young women dream of the complementarity of rights and duties, seeking an egalitarian society, believing and wishing to be the protagonists and not victims of history.

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<sup>4</sup> A *hamada* is a stony desert, characterized by normal cliffs, unlike the *erg* which is a desert formed by sand dunes continuously modified by the dominant winds (sirocco). The surface of *ahamada* is composed of flat rocks covered with gravel larger than six centimeters

All of them, however, keep a common dream: to recover their lands, and be able to return to the sea and to the cities that were taken from them. Identity manifests itself in a territory populated by singularities, with its own dynamics expressed in an almost cyclical way, changing and returning to its origin, reconvening tradition as an effective system of social cohesion:



The past, the present and the future are intertwined. The Islamic tradition and their ideas return to give security to the Saharawi woman, who is constantly redefining herself and continues the search for identity.

The *Kabyle* is a recovered Islamic protection element that re-establishes ties of blood and the marriage arrangements. *Kabyle* is the longest permanent social unit in the Sahara region. It defines a large group of people where most of them have a common ascendant, usually an important character in his time that gives name to the *Kabyle*, therefore *Kabyle* and lineage are intimately linked. Although during the war period divorce was socially accepted and established in Islam, divorced woman today are not seen with the same consideration. Divorce invalidates the unity of *Kabyle*, deteriorating family and economic ties.

### Procreation:

1- The *tabibas* and its symbolic efficiency

The term *tabiba* derives from *tabib*, who was formerly the practitioner of the Medo-Persian paradigm of medicine, and who could be compared to the family doctor. The tradition of *tabib* was healing using the opposite elements. For example, if the evil was produced by excess heat, cold elements were used to counteract it through the use medicines and minerals. This principle also uses complementary opposites. In the Saharawi society of Malekite<sup>5</sup> and Sufi<sup>6</sup> culture, men established that women, are changing and do not let themselves be dominated. Like night and darkness, women are believed to be perplexing, almost impossible to fathom.

<sup>5</sup>Of dogmatic foundation, they confuse the practice of the religion with a rigid teaching of the cult and they taught the Koran by memory.

<sup>6</sup> Sufism is less a doctrine or a belief system than an experience and a way of life. It is a tradition of enlightenment that carries forward the essential truth through time. Tradition that, nevertheless, must be conceived in a vital and dynamic sense. Magic and poetry have their origin here, the action of the *tabibas* has to do with this conception of the meaning that changes and transits the times.

A woman does not allow herself to be trapped like the cavity and the heavens, she is the emptiness that contains, and for all of this she is the *tabiba* (healer) par excellence. In these latitudes she will be the woman of medicines and the one in charge of taking care of procreation. In the regions where their nomadic families travel, they learn from their mothers, becoming the heirs of a long line of *tabibas*.

(Figure 2)



The mothers teach them how to collect herbs and medicinal plants, with which they still cure wounds and diseases today. They collect several varieties of these plants seasonally, following periods of rain, in the desert oasis. These children follow their mothers with bare feet across the desert, learning the secrets of life and the efficacy of long-prepared powders and ointments. The powders and ointments would be enclosed in small goat leather bags and decorated with the colors they squeezed from the plants and minerals of the desert, "... only my mother handled that little box called *batatjelud*<sup>7</sup>, she was a *tabiba* of great reputation ... " (Hjeiba of Auserd, who learned in Smara and Dakhla the ancestral medicine).

The matrimonial rite in the *Kabyles*, protects the sexuality of the spouses and legitimizes the procreation. The woman will be mother and worker, support of the patrilineage, because women have the most respect to the authority and hierarchy of the patriarch, and is responsible for the same to be prolific. Fertility is very important in this culture, and this is one of the most difficult problems *tabibas* have to solve. In the face of an evident sterility or impossibility of procreating by man, they prescribe to eat jackal meat. The jackal is associated with the narrations of the Tuaregs<sup>8</sup>, and with a prehistory in common in the desert expanded in the north of the continent, which has to do with:

"Ainsi cette figure du chacal si présente dans l'art rupestre saharien n'est pas directement liée à Anubis, le dieu égyptien des morts, mais paraît plus proche de contes touareg et berbères. De mystérieuses scènes érotiques avec un homme portant une tête de chacal prennent alors tout leur sens rituel si on les met en relation avec l'expression 'le

<sup>7</sup>*batatjelud*: old wooden box, used by the *tabibas*, which contained long-prepared compounds, powders and ointments, which were enclosed in small leather bags decorated with the colors of the plants and rocks of the Sahara.

<sup>8</sup>tuareg: Berber or Amazig people in the Sahara desert. When they travel they cover the needs of the animals and their own on the way, since they live in extensive family units which follow the large herds under their care. They have their own writing, the tfinagh.

mariage de chacal' encore vivante au Maghreb pour célébrer l'arrivée de la pluie par temps ensoleillé"<sup>9</sup> (France Huser, 2003 Les mystères du Sahara).

This is how Huser describes it. On the one hand, the ever-present figure of the jackal in Saharan rock art is not directly linked to Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, but it adorns the Tuareg and Berber tales. It has to do with mysterious erotic scenes of a man wearing a jackal's head, and is related to "the jackal's marriage", still alive in the Maghreb, which is used to celebrate the arrival of the rains in sunny weather. Linked to eroticism, fertility and rain.

(Figure 3)



A Berber proverb reads: "the glory of women are children". In these societies women are only recognized socially through motherhood, they define themselves as mothers, showing the effectiveness of the socializing mechanisms that they are instilled at birth.

The motherhood of daughters is a half-hearted motherhood, due to the fact that giving birth to sons gives the mother a social status and stability within her new family and therefore fulfilling her part of the social contract of marriage. The *tabibas* accompany the cycles of the Sahrawi women, from birth, the initiation of the menarche until the moment of the marriage ritual, where they officiate with their knowledge so that the marriage is consummated in all aspects, and then attend to their deliveries. They transmit to young women, in an initiation to sexuality, the exclusively feminine knowledge that will serve them to dominate the character of the chosen man. Men for their part prefer to ignore all this, maintaining it as a feminine and hidden manifestation, aware that in it is sustained the durability of patrilineage.

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<sup>9</sup> "Thus, this jackal figure, so present in Saharan rock art, is not directly related to Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, but seems to be closer to the Tuareg and Berber tales. Mysterious erotic scenes with a man wearing a jackal head, acquire all their ritual significance if we put them in relation to the expression "the marriage of jackals" still living in the Maghreb to celebrate the arrival of rain on a sunny day".

**(Figure 4)****(Figure 5)**

## 2- Exile and forced emigration

Identities are re-signified when people change and expand their understanding of the world. Cultural and social exile is implemented in the process of war. Isolated camps in the south of Algeria have resulted in poverty and deficient nutrition for women causing them congenital anemia, that they transmit to their children. However, they have received constant support from NGOs, which allowed them to move forward by improving the incorporation of Western medical systems.

The desire to leave the camps and work abroad has spread among the youngest generations born in exile. However, the feasibility of working elsewhere is difficult and at the same time they feel that they need to support the collective search of the Referendum (is an agreement to achieve self-determination to populate the territory so they can call themselves a country, therefore they need the youngest generations to remain and procreate in the Saharawian

territory) to return to their dreamed territories of the SADR. Despite their desires, the children of the Western Sahara think and interpret reality in a way that translates and reproduces, in all its complexity, the world in which they were born, as do we all. A fracture is produced between the women of the war and the generation of their daughters, women of the postwar period. The women of the war support a model that was produced by the revolution and proclaims the rights of the Polisario, and the women of the postwar period hope to leave the camps in a search for the well-being that the globalized world offers on the screens of their televisions. And there are even young women who traveled to study in other countries and think about returning to their lands to produce another revolution, that of re-creating a better life for those who inhabit the camps of the *Kabyle*.

(Figure 6)

<b>Generations of women that live in the camps</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Average age of motherhood</b>	<b>Fertility index</b>	<b>Intergenic interlude and methods</b>
Bedouin tradition	Illiterate Only 10% knew how to read or write	16 - 40 years old	10 to 16 children	From 12 to 20 months alkamut (a rope tied around the waist with or without an amulet, which is hidden because if it is seen, it loses its effectiveness)
War - Revolution	Primary school and studying the Quran	16 - 40 years old	6 to 8 children	30 months abstinence because of breastfeeding
Born in exile	Secondary school, tertiary education and college education taught in other continents	22 - 35 years old	2 to 3 children	42 months modern contraceptive methods

Pregnant women are one of the most protected groups, given that the increase in population and birth rate is important for the growth of a small population that needs young people willing to fight to liberate their territories.

(Figure 7)



The joy of being a mother is mixed with the pain of knowing that one day she can lose her child in the struggle for independence. Some young women rebel against this fate. They do not want their womb to give children that they will not be able to feed later or that will become only a number to increase the expectations of the Referendum.

"If you do not assume the responsibility to stop the violence, we have ways to eliminate it radically. No one can kill our children if they do not exist ... "Francoise Heritier (2007).

But it is also true that as the same author analyzes in "Male / Female", the capacity of obstruction of women in this field is more imaginary than real. She will succumb to being a mother given the social weight that drives reproduction, the male desire of the offspring and the desire of women to do anything for themselves within consensual motherhood, for in this society motherhood has to do with "existing in the neighbor's gaze".

### 3- Cultural Aspects

The women in the *dairas*<sup>10</sup> do not go to the doctor for the control of the pregnancy or in the post-partum, but they do it if they have problems of sterility or if they register menstrual problems. The births are carried out in the *jaimas*<sup>11</sup>, when they feel the first pains they rest and stop taking food, with the usual lengthening of the natural process of giving birth. During pregnancy, women do not accept vitamins because they think that vitamins will make the fetus fatter and will hinder the birth of the child. They also do not breastfeed babies if male relatives are present, they require intimacy. The *tabibas* will act in childbirth but not in pregnancy. They will be called if delays at birth appear, or other problems such as breech or foot birth, transverse arrangement, dystocic birth, cord prolapse, or cord around the neck.

Gali Ahmed Brahime, my tabiba informant, tells us that the *tamat*<sup>12</sup>, a type of herb, is drunk with hot or cold milk to expel the child sooner. It is used especially in deliveries where the child has died inside the womb. The *tara*, *hambra* and *legrofe*<sup>13</sup> are prepared in hot stones and the smoke will be inhaled by the woman so that the child is born. The pregnant woman is wrapped with a blanket so that she can exude to help the process of childbirth.

<sup>10</sup>daira: it is a territorial administrative unit that groups municipalities, used mainly in Algeria and in the territories controlled by the Saharan Republic.

<sup>11</sup>jaimas: ancient dwellings of the desert, original of the nomads, were made of camel hair. Nowadays they are made of goat leather or canvas. The SADR gives them to women every time they marry.

<sup>12</sup>*tamat*: acacia ehrenbergianahayne (legume) shrub less than 4 meters tall with yellow flowers and long, thin pods. It has different medicinal uses, depending on how it is used.

<sup>13</sup> It is placed on hot stones and hot smoke is inhaled by the woman when her child cannot be born. The pregnant woman is wrapped in a blanket, producing strong heats that help contract the uterus.



In the current health system, midwives have recently been prepared who work from the *dairas'* dispensaries. Their responsibility is to capture pregnancies in the early phase, attend deliveries in *jaimas* and in hospitals. They have the function to act as an intermediary so that deliveries are made in hospitals to avoid risks, they visit the *puerpera* at home, and they educate her healthily.

In spite of all this, there are the *tabibas*, empirical and original midwives, who have the most prestige in the camps. Tireless, they generate strategies for the survival of the group, both in the societies of the *jaimas*, and in the societies of migration, building in the success of procreation when they not only deal with fertility, but also with the processes of birth and postpartum, and the survival of newborns with all their subsequent development in the communities of exile.

### Some conclusions:

When we seek to integrate health systems, in this case the western medical system to the traditional system, we have to consider that no functional study can be complete without linking the structure and pragmatic functioning of culture with its emotional tone or ethos<sup>14</sup>.

The *tabibas* fulfill important purposes in the culture and society where they persist. *Tabibas* intuitively know the structural relationships between the cognitive aspects of the behavior of the individuals who they attend. They have a profound knowledge of Saharawian thinking and feeling, which favours healing. They are aware of basic emotional needs and desires and their emotional motivations. They also know and favor the sociological relationships between the behavior of individuals and the needs of the group as a whole, maintaining cohesion, solidarity, and their existence.

Technological approaches that do not take into account cultural characteristics and community beliefs run the risk of clashing with traditional practices, without achieving the objectives of improving the level of health. Recorded data give us an account of a high birth rate, with a growth rate of 4000 children per year (difference between births and deaths). The recorded mortality data show the impact of problems related to pregnancy and childbirth, both in children and in mothers.

Health systems have improved significantly in the last five years, working to train cultural intermediaries so that Sahrawis understand the importance of being treated during pregnancy, to improve the chances of life of the child and the mother.

(Figure 8)



<sup>14</sup>ethos: The ethos being understood as a habit, as a way of being, constitutes a second nature for the Greek tradition. It is a genuine and necessary creation of man, since from the moment he is organized in society, he feels the imperative need to create rules to regulate his behavior and allow modeling his character.

Gregory Bateson wrote: " in the nature of the case, an explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored..." ("The Science of Mind and Order" 1978). That will be a reality when the health systems understand that the success of procreation has nothing to do only with reproductive health treatment manuals, but that it completes the inexplicable miracle of nature to the Sahrawis:

"The moon is blinking  
between the mud ruins,  
And the light writes its name  
on the jaimas.  
A man meets  
your night prayers  
while a woman gets naked  
in the privacy of darkness  
and hope that love is born. "  
The moon (poem of Ebnu 2005 Smara)

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Hjeiba de Auserd (tabiba, daughter of tabiba)  
Tabiba Gali Ahmed Bahim - 45 years old  
Tabiba Lala Sidamar Nasrdin - 50 years old  
Interpreter: Ahmed Ali Salem (Smara)

**English traductor:** Lucía Carbonell