

PORTRAITS OF SAHARAWI MUSIC: WHEN CULTURAL PRESERVATION MEETS POLITICAL ACTIVISM

by

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Abstract. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork done mainly in the Saharawi refugee camps and the development of “Portraits of Saharawi Music” (2013–2014), a collaborative music archiving and research project in partnership with the British Library and the Saharawi Ministry of Culture, this article analyses issues in the political realities for Saharawi refugees from the perspective of the musicians and the cultural authorities in the refugee camps. In addition, it explores methodological and ethical issues derived from the uses of political and cultural activism as an ethnomusicological research method. It examines the interactions of the ideologies, motivations and personal relationships of the researcher, the musicians and the institutions involved in this recording project, focusing on the selection of repertoire as an activist act and the impact of doing advocacy research on an extremely vulnerable social group as the Saharawi refugee community. In agreement with basic principles of social responsibility of academia, it supports the role of “activist researcher”; but it cautions that it is essential for researchers to understand how relations of knowledge and power are produced, perpetuated, and challenged in specific situations of conflict, in order to turn their research into a true collaborative action.

Navigating the multi-stranded and rich nature of the music being produced by the Saharawi refugees from Western Sahara¹ brings to the fore the fascinating, and often overlooked, cultural and socio-political dynamics that have operated in the Western part of the Sahara desert for centuries.² These range from the inter-*qabila* (nomadic social/family groups) wars of the 18th and 19th centuries and the extremely detailed oral descriptions of traditional nomadic routes throughout the *Trab el-Bidhân*³ to the

¹ The Saharawi refugee camps, located in the harsh *hamada* desert in south-west Algeria, were set up more than forty years ago to host the thousands of refugees that were escaping the Moroccan-Mauritanian invasion of their homeland Western Sahara at the end of 1975 and beginning of 1976. The Polisario Front—the Saharawi liberation movement—established their own Saharawi republic in exile in the Saharawi refugee camps (known as SADR) on 27 February 1976. For more detailed information on Western Sahara and its socio-political and cultural history, see Firebrace 1987; Thobhani 2002; San Martín 2010; Bárbulo 2010; Zunes and Mundy 2010; and Boukhars and Roussellier 2014.

² This article is based on the paper “Activism as Methodology: Collaborative Music Research Projects to Further a Political Cause, the Saharawi Case” given by the author at the SEM-ICTM Joint Forum Transforming Ethnomusicological Praxis through Activism and Community Engagement, Limerick (Ireland), Sep 13–16, 2015.

³ The *Trab el-Bidhân*—or the land of the white, as opposed to the southern black populations (*Sudhân*) (Cleveland, 2002: xx)—encompasses present-day Western Sahara and Mauritania, and parts of Morocco, Algeria and Mali.

new waves of political activism against the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara that have characterised the plight of the Saharawi people and their supporters in recent times. In particular, as has been observed by the few researchers currently working on this area (Giménez 2013, 2015; Ruano Posada and Solana Moreno 2015; Ruano Posada 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Ruano Posada forthcoming), the study of Saharawi music reveals important aspects about the use of culture for the reinforcement of national identities in situations of conflict and exile. Moreover, throughout its recent history Saharawi music has not only been considered an essential tool for the building of a Saharawi national identity, but it has actually been treated as an almost exclusively political, rather than cultural, product. Research shows that this is also common in other contexts with a long-standing situation of exile and struggle for national self-determination such as, for example, in Palestine (McDonald 2013) or Tibet (Diehl 2002).

Living and working in the Saharawi refugee camps is a challenging endeavour for the Saharawi population, their leaders, the humanitarian aid workers, and the hundreds of individuals that visit the camps every year to develop projects, from educational workshops and cultural festivals to feature documentaries and field research. For the past forty years, the camps have suffered a chronic shortage of food (aggravated by the recent global economic crisis, see Martínez 2013), medical supplies, transport, water, and electricity. In addition, they endure extreme temperatures (easily reaching 50 °C in the summer), common “siroccos” (sand storms), and occasional rainfall, which can cause devastating floods as it happened at the end of 2015.⁴ In addition, growing threats of Islamic terrorism in the entire Sahara desert region have affected the ability of Western foreigners to move freely in the camps, where the local authorities have imposed severe curfews and other security measures, especially since the kidnapping of three humanitarian aid workers in 2011.⁵ Due to these circumstances, therefore, the study of Saharawi music also raises crucial methodological and ethical questions in ethnomusicology and anthropology, such as whether or not the researcher should remain neutral when working in heavily politicised environments, the particularities of working with potentially vulnerable communities such as refugees, or issues of safety.

Through the examination of the music recording project, “Portraits of Saharawi Music”—developed in the camps between 2013 and 2014 as a collaboration between the British Library, in London, and the Saharawi Ministry of Culture—based in the camps, this article addresses some of these issues following recent studies of applied and advocacy research in ethnomusicology (Helbig 2007; Seeger 2008; Harrison, Mackinlay and Pettan 2010; O’Connell and El-Shawan Castelo-Branco 2010; Dirksen 2012; among others). Particularly in situations of conflict and injustice, doing advocacy research ideally calls for a horizontal collaboration between the researcher and the communities with whom we work in the pursuit of conflict resolution and social change. As El-Shawan Castelo Branco has put it:

⁴ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/western-sahara/flooding-saharawi-camps-we-havent-got-time-wait> [accessed 17 June 2016].

⁵ They were finally released unharmed in July 2012 (Human Rights Watch 2014) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/18/radar/human-rights-tindouf-refugee-camps> [accessed 17 June 2016].

The use of expressive culture in the identification, denouncement, and resolution of conflict and violence requires the agency of ethnomusicologists and other cultural specialists (...) who should develop their work in partnership with community members, performing artists, music educators, and cultural workers. In conflict-ridden situations, ethnomusicologists can make a valuable contribution toward reconciliation through their strategic engagement as mediators and cultural advocates and by carrying out dialogic research and publication, formal and informal education, audiovisual documentation, and archiving (O'Connell and El-Shawan Castelo-Branco 2010: 246–247).

With all this in mind I developed “Portraits of Saharawi Music” as part of my doctoral research on music, resistance, and exile within Saharawi culture. As will be described further in this article, the project had the aim of establishing the first archive of Saharawi music held at the British Library, contributing to local Saharawi efforts to preserve and promote their endangered oral culture, and providing platforms to raise the visibility of the Saharawi struggle, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Throughout the different stages of the project, however, I often found myself pondering the following recurrent questions: Would a project that aims to tell the contested story of a community be considered political activism? How would I manage the expectations of the two main organisations involved, which were both bottlenecks for my research in terms of money and visibility (British Library) and access to resources and musicians (Saharawi Ministry of Culture)? Was there a real way in which I could contribute to the Saharawi struggle whilst constructively analysing and reviewing its practical, daily manifestations in the refugee camps? Was it wise to do so? What would it be like to work with refugees who, after forty years of living in the middle of the desert, are still able to maintain strong socio-political convictions and aspirations? Is it actually possible to do advocacy/applied research?

Anthony Seeger concluded in his essay “The Joys, Dangers, and Potentials of Advocacy and Fieldwork”:

The dichotomy of “theoretical” and “public” or “applied” ethnomusicology is false. The most abstract research can have practical benefits and the most practical projects can stimulate abstract thinking. The most rewarding public projects for ethnomusicologists will often come from the desires of the community members themselves. (...) [However,] it is important to separate the objectives of the research project from the objectives of the action project in some way. (...) When working on a public project, it is very important to try to understand factional politics and the relationships among the different agents and agencies in the community in which one plans to introduce it (2008: 286)

The engaging, valuable, and rewarding contributions of cultural preservation projects done through collaborations between researchers and the members of endangered communities can be tainted with socio-political instabilities, especially in situations of ongoing conflict and exile such as the Saharawi, where culture has often been put at the forefront of territorial and symbolic recognition. As Adriana Helbig has put it when talking about Romani NGOs in Ukraine, in these cases “[i]nterlocutors anticipate that the researcher’s findings will be positive (...) and work towards the goals set by the interlocutors themselves” (Helbig 2007: 79), at the same time that

funding (cultural) bodies may require that the researcher keeps their distance from any particular political stand.

Drawing from the experiences and challenges of the project “Portraits of Saharawi Music,” as well as from ethnomusicological fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2014 within different Saharawi communities in the Saharawi refugee camps, the occupied territories of Western Sahara, the north of Mauritania (Nouadhibou), Spain and the UK, in this article I explore in-depth the realities noted by Seeger and Helbig. I acknowledge the commonalities with other similar fieldwork situations, while delineating the particularities of living and working with the Saharawis, whose (national) socio-cultural identity has historically been (and still is) inextricably linked to their political aspirations. My research has led me to realise that, in such a politicised situation where even five-year old children are aware of why they are being born and raised in harsh desert refugee camps, visiting the camps, acknowledging the existence of a conflict, and expressing an interest on their stranded culture is already an activist act. Therefore, I stand in favour of the figure of the “activist researcher,” arguing nonetheless that, for the success of advocacy research projects, it is essential to understand “the ways relations of knowledge and power are produced, perpetuated, and challenged” (Helbig 2007: 78) in specific situations of conflict in order to turn that research into a true collaborative action.

A scene from the field

It was late October 2013, but the midday sun was high and strong. We had just arrived in the Saharawi *wilaya* (camp) of Ausserd after a 40-minute trip through the *hamada*, travelling in a large Protocol 4x4 car from my host camp, Boujdour. Since it was before the Algerian authorities had finished the paved road that today connects Boujdour, Smara, Ausserd and Al Aaiun Saharawi refugee camps, the only way to Ausserd was through the desert. I was accompanied by my friend and translator Umuetha Hamdi, and together we were heading to the local cultural centre where the then Director of Culture, Abdelahi Ould Ely Moussa, had prepared a meeting of local young musicians. We had been travelling around the Saharawi refugee camps for a few weeks interviewing and recording musicians for the music preservation and promotion project, “Portraits of Saharawi Music.” That day we had been lucky. The Protocol—which battles on a daily basis with a shortage of resources to offer to the different projects in the camps, including medical and political delegations, development work and the very sought after international journalists—had sent us a car on time. Although we were supposed to go back for a recording session in a couple of days, I had already taken my recording equipment—a field recorder, a mic, a pair of headphones and a small compact camera—with me; we might not get another car in a week.

The space was dark and cool. Abdellahi led us through a corridor all the way to the back room, where we met Abderrahman Mohamed Lamin, better known as Abeida, one of the few young guitarists currently working with the Saharawi Ministry of Culture and Dah Mohamed Embarek, a young keyboard player. They were excited because they had invited one of the famous revolutionary voices from Ausserd camp,



Figure 1. Mariem Mouloud performing at the cultural centre of Ausserd camp.
21 October 2013. Photo by author.

Mariem Mouloud, who used to sing with the regional band during the liberation war in the late 1970s and 80s. She was sitting on a mattress on the floor next to a beautiful *tbal* drum that the director of culture had lent her for the occasion.⁶ Although traditionally played by men and women, in the refugee camps the *tbal* is nowadays mostly associated with women and the performance of traditional spiritual music (*medeh*) and other drum and voice genres. With the help of Umuetha, I explained to the singer that with “Portraits of Saharawi Music” we were trying to understand the meaning of Saharawi identity through music. Mariem smiled and said she was ready to record; if the project was approved by the Ministry of Culture, she was happy to contribute.

We set up quickly while Mariem instructed the other musicians on the accompaniment she wanted for the first song she would perform. Abeida started with a riff on the guitar, followed by the keyboard. After a few seconds, Mariem took the *tbal* and started singing a simple love verse called “*mint bib*” (“Bib’s daughter”) [CD track 1], quietly tapping a traditional rhythm on the drum. When she finished the song, she looked at me and asked if the recording sounded good. “I can’t really hear the drum,” I said. “You’re right,” she replied. “This type of singing used to be very quiet, it doesn’t need a lot of music so you can hear the words of the poem.” She then went on to record a few more songs accompanied only by her drumming. The themes were varied: a love

⁶ Due to a chronic lack of resources in the camps, most musicians who only work for the government do not have their own instruments and borrow them from the cultural authorities on a need basis. Because of this, many of the women featured in “Portraits of Saharawi Music” recorded their songs accompanied by the most varied drumming surfaces: plastic buckets, metal plates, jerry cans, wooden chairs, and even the floor. Traditionally, it was common to use the soundboard of other instruments or any *ad hoc* object as drums (Guignard 2005: 102).

poem dedicated to a girl from the Mauritanian region of Bamuera, a song dedicated to the Saharawi nation where the poet ends up complaining about his wife leaving him, and a compelling account of a *wad* (river valley) next to the well of Entezel, in the Saharawi region of Zemmour [CD track 2].

After the session was finished, I noticed that the young musicians gathered in the room were having some heated debate about something I could not fully understand. After a few minutes, my friend Umuetha looked at me and said: “They are not happy because none of the songs were really about the Saharawi revolution nor about the true Saharawi national identity!” Mariem seemed uncomfortable. “I am a traditional singer! This is what I do. These songs are important!” And she said this while reminding them that she had performed for the revolution before they had even been born...

The other Saharawi music: preservation of an endangered (national) oral culture

Throughout the past four decades, the large majority of musical output from the Saharawi refugee camps has been dedicated to their national struggle for self-determination (Giménez 2013, 2015; Ruano Posada and Solana Moreno 2015; Ruano Posada 2016 a, 2016b, 2016c; Ruano Posada forthcoming). Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the newly created Saharawi republic in exile worked towards the creation of a national school of music shaped around the formation of regional and national bands, the organisation of cultural festivals, and the touring of musicians to participate in international political and cultural events. Saharawi music—which traditionally followed the rules of the *azawaan* cycle, a series of musical modes ‘arranged in a certain order [with] an underlying unity of style, idiom, and development’ (Norris 1968: 69; see also Guignard 2005)—underwent a process of conscious modernisation and politicisation. This was characterised by the use of revolutionary lyrics in praise of the nation, the liberation army, and the independent identity of the Saharawi. This new musical genre—locally known as *el-nidal* (struggle) or “música revolucionaria” (“revolutionary music” in Spanish)—introduced the acoustic and electric guitar in replacement of more traditional instruments such as the *tidinit* lute, breaking the *azawaan* cycle into shorter songs while still using most of its musical rules and elements as a base.⁷

Throughout the past 40 years of struggle, *el-nidal* has become the most representative style in Saharawi music. In the 1990s, after the war ended, the Polisario Front kept using old and new revolutionary songs to encourage their new diplomatic strategies of peaceful resistance. At the turn of the century, the involvement of Spanish label, Nubenegro, with the production of Saharawi music helped put Saharawi culture in the “world music” map (see Giménez 2013). This was especially done through the promotion of nationalist singer Mariem Hassan,⁸ whose flourishing international career was sadly truncated by her death in 2015. Today, the Saharawi revolutionary musical spirit lives on in the figure of another internationally-recognised Saharawi singer and

⁷ For more detailed information on the musical structure of traditional Saharawi music, see Giménez 2015.

⁸ www.mariemhassan.com [accessed 17 June 2016].

activist, Aziza Brahim, who is known as the new voice of resistance in Western Sahara (Ruano Posada 2016c).⁹

Although relatively successful in the promotion of the national message, the over-promotion of *nidal* music and the over-politicisation of the Saharawi music scene, together with ongoing conflict and permanent displacement, have however provoked a loss of context for more traditional activities among the Saharawi population—such as the communal *twiza*,¹⁰ which was usually accompanied by singing and clapping—thus tampering with the natural transmission of hundreds of traditional songs about love (*ghazâl*), the landscape (*adlal*), epic tales (*thaydin*), didactic and moral commentary (*hikma*), and religious praise (*medeh*), among others (Deubel 2012: 298). This traditional repertoire is what singer Mariem Hassan, who in the years prior to her death became actively involved in raising awareness about this issue, called “the other Saharawi music” (Domínguez 2012: 16).

What is the other Saharawi music? Well, since we are so invested in our political situation and above all we sing songs of denouncement and resistance, usually more traditional songs are left on the side. I am collaborating in the program ‘Cuéntame Abuelo’ (...) for the recuperation of the Saharawi oral heritage in the area of music. With a team of ethnomusicology professors and students from Salamanca we have spent a week interviewing old singers already retired to rescue some old songs, and we have discovered many tunes that hadn’t been sung in a while (Mariem Hassan in Lasuen 2013, my translation).

Particularly concerned about the consequences of protracted exile on the Saharawi cultural heritage, which if disappeared would severely affect the Saharawi claims to their own unique cultural identity, in 2008 the Saharawi Ministry of Culture, based in the camps, created the “Observatorio Internacional para la Protección del Patrimonio Cultural en el Sáhara Occidental,”¹¹ an international platform particularly aiming for the protection of the “Saharawi archaeological, architectonic and natural heritage” (Ministerio de Cultura RASD 2008, my translation). A year later, the Minister of Culture, Khadija Hamdi, publicly announced the launch of “Cuéntame Abuelo” (“Tell me Grandfather”), a project for the preservation of Saharawi traditional poetry in collaboration with the University of Madrid and anthropologist Juan Carlos Gimeno (Domínguez 2012: 16). For the first time, the Saharawi government officially included traditional poetry as a main pillar of their cultural archiving policies. One of the results of this initiative has been the release in 2014 of the documentary film “Legna, Habla el Verso Saharawi” (“Legna, the Saharawi Verse Speaks”) by Spanish anthropologists Juan Carlos Gimeno and Juan Ignacio Robles, and Saharawi anthropologist and poet Bahia

⁹ For more detailed information on *nidal* music and its local and international impact on the development of Saharawi music, see Ruano Posada and Solana Moreno 2015.

¹⁰ A kind of social solidarity to carry out communal production activities (M. Tamy, pers. comm. 31 Oct. 2013).

¹¹ “International Observatory for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage in the Western Sahara.”

Mahmud Awah.¹² This project, led by Spanish organisation Antropología en Acción¹³ (Anthropology in Action) and their project “Oral Memory and Western Sahara,” documents Saharawi nomadic oral poetry from the refugee camps and the liberated territories of Western Sahara.

The involvement of outside forces in the archiving and preservation of endangered musical heritages—as part of the so-called intangible cultural heritages by UNESCO and other international bodies—has been the subject of some debate in (applied) ethnomusicology and cultural conservationist circles (Topp Fargion 2009; Harrison, Mackinglay and Pettan 2010; Grant 2012). This debate particularly focuses on the very nature of the word “endangered” and issues around the “artificial” versus “natural” evolution of cultures. As Catherine Grant has stated: “music genres, just like languages and cultures themselves, have been blossoming and dying away through history. Yet if it is ‘in their nature’ for cultural traditions to disappear (Christensen 1992: 108), a strain seems to exist between artificially keeping them alive and permitting them to be subject to natural evolutionary processes” (Grant 2012: 35). This statement suggests that external efforts to tamper with the natural evolution of musical repertoires does more harm than good for the “self-regulation” of cultural ecosystems. However, Grant continued, “over the past few decades in particular, human agency itself has substantially disrupted the natural order of evolution and survival of cultures and cultural heritage” (2012: 35).

This is particularly true in refugee situations, where the dichotomy between “artificial” and “natural” survival of musical traditions is blurred by issues of national and international recognition, as well as by people’s overarching need to constantly establishing well-defined identities separated from the occupying forces as well as their host countries. Taking this into account, who has the capacity to decide when a musical tradition becomes “endangered” and is in need—and worthy—of protection? What qualifies as “artificial” vs. “natural” preservation? Is it just a matter of outside intervention, whether from local or international institutions and agents, or is it more related to musicians’ and audiences’ choices? Can it not be considered that the involvement of any of these forces in the evolution of musical practices has actually always been an essential part of the “natural” order of things?

In the Saharawi refugee camps, their history of ongoing conflict and protracted exile throughout the past four decades, which has provoked scarcity and extreme dependency for the refugee population, has severely—and to some extent artificially—affected the survival of their musical heritage. Moreover, as mentioned, the over-politicisation of musical practices (both production and archiving) has put at risk the continuation of traditional musical repertoires, and the knowledge that the elders used to transmit through them, whether it was the mapping of nomad routes throughout the *Trab el-Bidhân* land or the pre-colonial history of the battles between families and social groups. In addition, for the Saharawi, recuperating these “endangered” traditions and transmitting them to the

¹² “*Legna, Habla el Verso Saharawi*” won the first prize in the International FiSahara Film Festival 2014, celebrated in the camp of Dakhla. (EFE Agency 2014).

¹³ www.antropologiaenaccion.org [accessed 17 June 2016].

next generations is not just a matter of keeping them alive. However, as discussed through specific examples in the following section, it is also concerned with ensuring the very existence of their struggle, their community, and the identity they represent.

Portraits of Saharawi Music: the choice of repertoire as an activist act

As was quoted in the original proposal to the Saharawi Ministry of Culture, “Portraits of Saharawi Music” was envisioned as a music recording project to “give a platform for the representation of the musical heritage still alive in the Saharawi refugee camps after 40 years of struggle for self-determination.” This description was developed in consultancy with the Saharawi cultural authorities, a series of musicians interviewed during two trips to the camps in February and November 2012, the representation of the Polisario Front in the UK, London-based arts and human rights charity Sandblast,¹⁴ which has been involved with cultural projects with the Saharawi refugees since 2005, and the department of World and Traditional Music at the British Library (as main funder).

From the beginning, the project was devised as an important way to counteract Morocco’s attempts to deny the existence of an independent Saharawi identity (Ruano-Posada, 2016b); therefore, it was identified by the Saharawi cultural authorities as part of the global Saharawi non-violent resistance and activism movement. Nevertheless, it was never described as a political action project *per se*, but as a “musical preservation” initiative, instead. Here, we understood preservation, as lead curator of the British Library National Sound Archive Janet Topp Fargion has argued, as the

facilitation of the continuation of tradition (...) through a range of activities including: research—fieldwork to gather data and knowledge; education—teaching in schools and universities; dissemination—publication, media journalism, books, internet, exhibitions; and archiving—engaging in all of the above and ensuring it does not all disappear and that it is available to all (Topp Fargion 2009: 76, emphasis in the original).

Over two, three-month periods between September 2013 and April 2014 I lived in the Saharawi refugee camp of Boujdour while doing part of my doctoral field research. I used to travel two or three times a week through the *hamada* in a 4x4 Protocol car in the company of my friend and translator Umuetha Hamdi to visit musicians in their homes or the local cultural centres in each of the five residential camps, where we interviewed them and recorded any songs they wanted to share with us. There was not any particular stylistic focus or constraint; we just asked musicians to choose the songs they felt were most representative of Saharawi culture and identity, whether “traditional” (*tagledi*), “modern” (*el-asri*), “revolutionary” (*nidal*), “national” (*el-watan*) or otherwise. This served us as a first step for the identification of the repertoire that the Saharawi musicians themselves considered important to share. As a basis, we worked with a list of suggested participants that was provided by the Saharawi Ministry of Culture; however, that list was modified several times as we went along depending on the suggestions of the participants, who in that way were also actively involved

¹⁴ www.sandblast-arts.org [accessed 17 June 2016].

in the decision-making process of who would best represent their musical culture. Therefore, the project was not only a matter of creating a collection of recordings, but of understanding and actively engaging with the Saharawis' own ideas about cultural representation.

The 133 recordings in “Portraits of Saharawi Music” feature 42 musicians from different generations who perform diverse musical styles on different instruments—male and female voice, *tbal* drum, a wide variety of drumming surfaces (see footnote 6), electric and acoustic guitars, keyboard and accordion—and thus reflect varied opinions of what constitutes Saharawi music and identity. Of the 42 musicians recorded, 23 were women and 17 were under 35 years old. In most occasions, musicians chose the repertoire they were going to perform prior to the recording sessions. Other times, however, onsite exchanges between musicians triggered participants' memories, leading to more improvised performances and allowing for revealing discursive exchanges among the musicians and other people present in the sessions. This resulted in an eclectic collection of recordings that included nostalgic love tunes (*ghazâl*), tongue-in-cheek short verses about traditional nomadic daily life (*lashwâr*), spiritual praise songs in honour of Prophet Mohammed (*medeh*), sung poems about the landscape (*adlal*) describing ancient nomadic routes, tunes of social advice, and a wide variety of *nidal* songs, from poems from the early years of the revolution prior to exile in Algeria (1973–1975) to contemporary songs about the activism in the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

For example, after having spent the afternoon before the scheduled recording session watching YouTube videos about Gdeim Izik—a mass protest camp near El Aaiun, the main city in occupied Western Sahara in 2010—composer Mahmud Bara



Figure 2. Mahmud Bara and his band in the Youth Centre of Boujdour camp. September 2013. Photo by author.

and his protégés, Lmarabet Mahfud, Salem Sidi and Suleiman Mohamed, decided to perform only their new repertoire, entirely dedicated to the Saharawi activists and peaceful resistance, even though they had not had enough time to rehearse, therefore sacrificing quality for content. An example of this repertoire is *shauara el aaiun* ('Streets of El Aaiun') [CD track 3]. Through their musical contribution, these artists aimed to show their unconditional support to their brothers and sisters' daily fight against occupation. They also wanted to raise awareness about the alleged human rights violations happening in Morocco on a daily basis in a revolutionary *nidal* fashion.

My music transmits the reality we live in, as for example what is happening in the occupied zones. (...) When I learn that the Moroccan have killed forty martyrs, including children and women, I am not going to take my drum and my music and be happy. I compose in a way that conveys the sadness I suffer (M. Bara pers. comm. 3 Oct. 2013).

On the contrary, during our first session with Luali Said—well known in the camps for his participation as electric guitarist in weddings and national festivals, he only played a 20 minute-long *azawaan* cycle on his acoustic guitar in which he carefully improvised in each of the traditional modes. His aim was to show the outside world "how the Saharawi music really works" (L. Said pers. comm. 3 Oct. 2013) with the idea of establishing a musical reference for foreign audiences to turn to when listening to the rest of the recordings in the collection. Thus, Luali's performance can be understood as an attempt to break down and theorise a musical system that is little known outside the *Bidhân* world.

As a final example, in another occasion singer Tarba Bueibu insisted on performing a series of twelve short snippets of traditional and revolutionary songs only accompanied by a plastic bucket. Her objective was to show evidence on how the



Figure 3. Tarba Bueibu during recording session. October 2013.
Photo by Ali Meziane (used with consent).

early *nidal* music and rhythmic accompaniments were entirely based on traditional drum and voice verses, a theory that has never been studied in-depth by the Saharawi cultural authorities. During the session, she often consulted a piece of paper in which her mother had scribbled some of the lyrics for her, showing the importance that family and other close social interactions still have for the continuation of traditional music in the current Saharawi refugee environment. It also showed how Saharawi musicians are increasingly relying on written sources rather than just oral ones for passing on musical knowledge. This, together with the importance placed on recording and “preserving” this knowledge, are clear examples of how much Saharawi musicians are aware of the current invisibility and potential disappearance of their traditional cultural practices.

Overall, following this strategy for the choosing of repertoire showed us two things. On the one hand, it exposed current debates in Saharawi culture around the need for the national art to be or not be politically engaged in order to be valuable to the Saharawi refugee (and resisting) society and the consequences this understanding may be having for the creativity of the artists. This is particularly important when that art is going to be used to promote the Saharawi national cause abroad, as was the case with “Portraits of Saharawi Music.” On the other hand, it provided important insights into the diverse understandings that exist behind the overarching ideas of Saharawi (national) identity and music, showing the impact of the conflict on the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. By the end of the project it was clear that Saharawi musicians are not only concerned about the sustainability of their musical practices in their current situation, but are also actively creating strategies—within their means—to ensure this sustainability while developing their music in different directions. Therefore, it could be argued that Saharawi musicians represent, at the same time, natural and artificial forces of change within Saharawi culture. As cultural activists for their self-determination struggle, they do this by supporting not only their political cause, but also their right to preserve, develop, and represent their own cultural output.

Impact and the ethics of advocacy research

Apart from music files, the documentation of “Portraits of Saharawi Music” also included photographs, video recordings and recordings of detailed interviews with participant musicians, originally in *Hassâniya* and translated into English and Spanish. With written consent¹⁵ from all parties involved, as well as each of the participating musicians, all of this material has been archived in five different locations: one in the British Library Sound Archive, which can now be freely accessed online,¹⁶ three left in local institutions—the Saharawi national library, the national music school and the

¹⁵ We presented each musician with a short written description of the project in Arabic, as well as the potential (non-commercial) uses of their recordings and interviews for them to decide on their participation. During the preparation stage, we considered the possibility of having to also use non-written ways for gaining consent, such as recorded verbal consents; however, in the end it was not necessary since they all gave us written consent.

¹⁶ <http://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Violeta-Ruano-portraits-of-Saharawi-Music> (videos and interviews available on request) [accessed 17 June 2016].

national archive—to be accessed by the local refugee population and anybody interested in doing future research on Saharawi music, and a final copy that I kept for my own doctoral research and for promotional non-commercial purposes.

Since 2014, the recordings have been featured in radio shows (e.g., Algerian *Imidiwan*: the music of the Sahara #36¹⁷), local videos (e.g. promotional video of Saharawi youth initiative “Platform of Cries Against the Moroccan Wall”¹⁸), presentations (e.g., at the “Africa’s Last Colony: 40 Years Not Forgotten” exhibition at the Hundred Years Gallery (London) in October 2015), conferences, lectures, the promo CD of the British Library “West Africa: World, Symbol, Song”, released by leading British world music magazine *Songlines*,¹⁹ and in two upcoming artistic projects. All of this has contributed to raise the profile of Saharawi music and ensured that this tradition can, at least to an extent, “continue to thrive” (Topp Fargion 2009: 76).

This impact has been closely monitored by the Saharawi Ministry of Culture, who were originally in charge of overseeing the potential commercial and non-commercial uses of the recordings, as well as ensuring fair payments for the musicians who requested them. I however soon learned that those musicians who saw my role and their role in the project as activism for the cause were reluctant to accept any compensation for their music, while on the contrary, those who were pursuing a local or even international career in music did expect to get paid. Due to existing taboos about money and the arts—and, in fact, money in general—in the camps, where voluntarism for the cause has been an important part of the national-building project (Ruano Posada, forthcoming), I often found myself offending people either by offering money or by not offering enough, despite the advice and field research done beforehand.

We counted on the aid of the Protocol—the local institution that coordinates the logistics of all foreign visits. A normal workday often included last-minute changes in the schedule, especially due to the shortage of official cars, military escorts and other human and material resources, as well as cuts in the power supply and sandstorms. I soon had to come to terms with the fact that the pace and daily progress of the project were going to be subject to the circumstances, and adapt our programme accordingly on a daily basis. What to me sometimes seemed like improvisation on the part of our local partners, in the end proved to be part of a carefully studied use of resources in a very harsh and challenging environment.

In a true Saharawi collaborative fashion, my role as a researcher of Saharawi music, as an academic interested in Saharawi culture, and as a supporter of their right to self-determination was more determined by the reality of living and working in the desert, as well as by the immediate needs of the community in certain moments, than by my own proposed schedule and ideas of how to move the project forward. This may seem contrary to the very idea of methodology; however, I found that by adapting to

¹⁷ http://imidiwan.podomatic.com/entry/2014-07-01T10_00_00-07_00 [accessed 17 June 2016].

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOr4tx0yrLE> [accessed 17 June 2016].

¹⁹ <http://www.songlines.co.uk/world-music-news/2015/11/west-africa-at-the-british-library-free-cd/> [accessed 17 June 2016].

circumstances, the results were often more nuanced and gave many more insights into Saharawi understanding of their experiences and the role of music within them.

“Portraits of Saharawi Music” was created and re-shaped as part of a growing horizontal solidarity movement that currently determines the nature of many small-scale collaborative projects between foreign individuals or small collectives and the Saharawi refugees.²⁰ These projects, while embedded in a heavily politicised and unstable context of protracted conflict and exile, advocate for the reinforcement of existing desires and initiatives in the camps and for the establishment of long-term relationships with local participants in order to encourage sustainability (Gimeno 2016). In addition, the very nature of the project led everybody involved to anticipate, including myself, that both the recordings and my findings would be used to raise awareness about the Saharawi cause for self-determination, thus categorically denying Morocco’s claims over the Saharawi land and identity. Throughout my research as part of “Portraits of Saharawi Music” and other projects, I have consistently found that this point is the base of any activist initiatives in the camps, accepted and reinforced by the local population; no matter how many internal social problems might be happening, or denounced, Morocco’s occupation is undeniable. It is important to realise that one of Morocco’s longest standing strategies of occupation has been to deny the existence of a Saharawi identity that is distinct from Moroccan identity, as well as using any internal discordances among the Saharawis to prove that they are not really a unified voice of protest. As it turned out, the recordings in “Portraits of Saharawi Music” actually showed a wide variety of musical styles, voices, and cultural identities present within the Saharawi refugee society, and not really a unified voice of protest. But, nonetheless, all these voices are at the heart of, and give weight to, the Saharawi cause for self-determination.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been double. On the one hand, it has presented the current Saharawi refugee situation from a cultural/musical point of view, signalling the impact that the ongoing situation of conflict and exile has had not only on Saharawi intangible musical heritage, but most importantly on the self-representation of this heritage. It has become apparent that the over-politicisation of music during the liberation war and beyond has caused the disappearance of many traditional songs that were once essential for the recognition of an independent Saharawi identity, at least on a collective level. Nevertheless, many of these songs are still embedded in the memories of those who used to sing them before exile—and in many cases in their children’s memories as well—together with the revolutionary and nationalistic repertoire that has been developed throughout the past 40 years of revolution.

Through this examination I have also exposed the different ethical and methodological questions that arise from the intersection of field research, cultural preservation projects (understanding preservation here as the support of local efforts to ensure the continuity of Saharawi culture despite the harshness of their current circumstances), and engaged

²⁰ E.g., Bubisher Libraries, ArTifariti, FiSahara, Cuéntame Abuelo, Saharawi Artivism Fund, etc.

political activism within the Saharawi struggle for self-determination. I argue that when doing applied ethnomusicological research in highly politicised and apparently vulnerable situations such as the Saharawi refugee camps, it becomes necessary—and almost unavoidable—to listen and offer a variety of platforms to as many local voices as possible, turning the research into a true collaborative action that can show the strength and value of a people who have been stranded in the desert for over 40 years.

After four years of involvement with the Saharawi situation, I have realised the impossibility—and potential danger—of remaining completely “neutral” in a situation where the mere mentioning of the words “Saharawi” or “Western Sahara” was already clearly positioning my research. As mentioned, from early on the project “Portraits of Saharawi Music” was positioned as one of the many existing counter-measures to Morocco’s attempts to deny the very existence of a Saharawi identity. Nevertheless, it has also been the intention of myself and my local collaborators to look at the situation from a diversity of (musical) angles, understanding, beyond the Saharawi and Moroccan official lines, the different voices that complicate it. “Portraits of Saharawi Music”, therefore, not only reflects a diversified set of political opinions about music in the Saharawi refugee camps, but it is also in itself a political act of cultural advocacy.

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