

The society of the Sahrawians

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In this article, a short analysis about the society of Sahrawians (locals of Western-Sahara) is given. I think, that we have to see a global picture when we make a research about any peacekeeping, peace-support or peace-enforcement mission, because without the background of the conflict, we can't get a correct view.

Introduction

Nowadays, a small Hungarian contingent (7 people) serves in MINURSO. However, nobody made any analysis about the Western-Sahara case till today. Present author made some small articles in various newspapers previously. For this reason I chose this theme to make a dissertation about MINURSO and the Western-Sahara case.

In Western-Sahara, there is a clash between the real inhabitants of the land (named Sahrawians) and the newcomers from Morocco. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to understand the conflict, if we don't know who the Sahrawians are. Because only the locals have the right to vote about the future of Western-Sahara, we have to know who they are. Hopefully, this article will give some idea for the readers about this matter.

Discussion

The social structure of the Sahrawian is similar to that of the other nomadic or partially settled tribes living in Sahara. The most basic structure of the society is the family. Families in blood relation constitute a tribe, the leader of which has special rights in organising and directing the life of his tribe. The leading position (sheik) is mostly hereditary, passing from father to son, while the members of the family or the tribe belong to different classes on the basis of their birth or occupation. It is possible to pass from one class to another based on individual talent but it happens very rarely. However, marriage between a man and a woman coming from different classes is practically impossible.ⁱ

ⁱ CHARLES DUNBAR: *Saharan Status: Status and Prospects in the Western Sahara* (The Middle East Journal, 2000, Spring Issue 4), 527. pages

Received: January 13, 2009

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Sahrawian men consider their pipe as a status symbol. They are prepared from several different metals, but all strive to have one made of silver.

Locals constitute more than *twenty major tribes*, which can be divided into three main groups: *Ouled Delim*, *Reguibat*, and *Tekna*. Beside these there were minor tribes in occasional alliance or at occasional wars with each other. Though maintaining a rather loose relationship with each other these tribes had substantial autonomy on their own territories. For this reason a Spanish chronicler once mentioned them as having a lifestyle of complete anarchy. Leo Africanus and Luis de Mármol y Carvajal was the first foreigner to write about the nomads living in this territory, about their social life, and they were who mentioned them by their names such as: Ouled Delim, and Tekna.ⁱⁱ

As the colonists focused their attention on the free territories to be colonised more and more people arrived to map the region and to make favourable trade deals there. Colonels Leopold Panet and Faidherbe, who arrived at the region in 1850, were commissioned by the French Government to assess the strength of the local tribes and to maintain friendly relationship with the most important tribal leaders for the interests of France.

A couple of years later Joachim Gatelle toured the region inhabited by the Tekna tribes and prepared a very detailed description, which the French made a good use of later. The Spanish strived for maintaining friendly relationship with coastal tribes (Ouled Delim, Ouled Bou Sba, Ait Moussa and Imraguen) and they even entered into official agreements and contracts with some of them. At the end of the 1800s French Camille Douls visited the majority of the west Saharan region meeting other tribes such as Tadjakant, Mechdoug and Ouled Sidi Mohamed. The writer as a member of a Tidrarin caravan experienced an attack of the Ouled Delim tribe (1887), who besides shepherding also dealt with slave trade and looting caravans.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Sahrawian tribes are not all of Arabic origin as the Arabic tribes occupying the region mixed with local Berber tribes.

Nevertheless, there remained some relatively clean blooded Berber tribes like the majority of the Reguibat tribal union, originating from the *Sanhaja Berbers*, who occupied the region before the Arab conquest. Later they accepted groups of Arabic descent, but Berber traditions are exceptionally strong both in their language and in their culture.

ⁱⁱ TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill&Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880) 9. pages

ⁱⁱⁱ BESENYŐ JÁNOS: *A nyugat-szaharai kérdés és az ENSZ által vezetett békefenntartó misszió (MINURSO) tevékenysége* (Geopolitikai Tanács Közhasznú Alapítvány, Műhelymunkák 2007/11, HU ISSN 1788-7895) 16. pages

The descendants of the *Makuil* tribe (Beni Hassan tribe) and tribes like Ouled Delim, Ouled Arousien and Ouled Bou Sba arriving from the area of present day Yemen in the 13th century are among the clean blooded Arabic tribes.

Figure 1 shows the migration route of the Arabic tribes arriving in the Sahara.

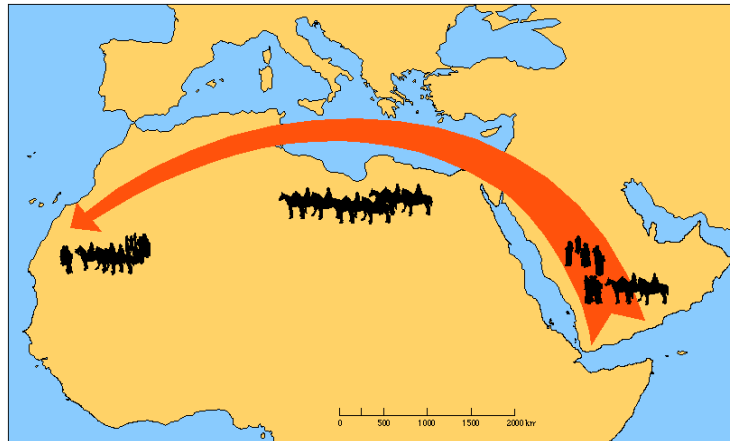


Figure 1. The migration route of the Arabic tribes arriving in the Sahara

Source: www.naveviva.com

Tribes of Arab origin are very proud of their roots and of their clean blood. For example the members of the Ouled Delim tribe can trace back their origin as far as Delim, the son of the supposed founder of the Beni Hassan tribe. They are the most populous tribe in the Western Sahara and they consider themselves the cleanest blooded Arabs in the Sahel region.

The tribes and the different unions were organised on a regional basis, therefore most tribes of the Sahara still live and migrate with their animals within the same area to the present day. The territories of the clean Blooded Arab tribes were referred to as the land of the whites i.e., "*Trab el Beidan*" although this area was further divided into smaller regions. The most famous of these was the "*Sahel*" which was later completely occupied by the Spanish, who called the natives Ahel el-Sahel, i.e., "the people of the Sahel" after the name of the region.^{iv}

Having examined the regional aspects of the Sahrawians it is also interesting to look at the typical occupations they pursued.

^{iv} ANTHONY G. PAZZANITA, TONY HODGES: *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1982) 353. pages and TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880) 9. pages

Some tribes were mainly soldiers and in return for their armed assistance smaller tribes paid a kind of tax (*debiha*). These tribes provided armed escort for the caravans, though in case a rival tribe was commissioned to do the task they would attack and attempt to rob the traders not employing them. These tribes were known as "the people of arms".^v

Tribes of this category were the following:

Reguibat Sarg
Reguibat Sahel
Izarguien
Ait Lahsen
Arosien
Oulad Delim
Yagout
Ait Musa Oulad Ali
Azouafit
Ait Usa
Oulad Bou Sbaa

Tribes that were conquered or forced to pay tax had the common name (*znaga*) and although they were not slaves they had a very similar status to the Helotes in the military state of Sparta. Stronger tribes would often attack and rob the *znaga* tribes with the pretext of a military exercise in order to practise their fighting skills and weapons handling. The word *znaga* comes from the Sanhaja Berbers and it denoted the Berber ruling class before the Arabs. The meaning of the word was slightly modified in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Spanish used it for the non-Arabic, but Berber origin nomads who did not adapt the *Hassania* dialect, but preserved their mother tongue. Later the word lost its ethnic meaning and was only used in connection with tribes that had the status of slaves or that were tax payers.^{vi}

People of *znaga* status were not allowed to carry weapons officially in the presence of members of superior tribes and were not allowed to sit in the middle among their guests in their own tents. This was a very serious offence among the people of the Sahara. Subordinate tribes would often pay for the protection with animals or forced labour (*horma*).

Mostly the smaller tribes living along the coastline belonged to the *znaga*, like:

Foicat
Imeraguen

^v BRIGGS L. C.: *Tribes of the Sahara* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard, 1960) 223. pages

^{vi} TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill&Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880.) 9. pages

Le Menasir
Meyat
Lamiar
Oulad Bou Aita
Oulad Abdeluahed
Ouled Tidrarin

Some tribes whose members studied the Quran all their lives and worked as teachers of the religion were referred to as “*zuaias*”. Members of these tribes were called “people of the book” (*as ahel ktub*). These tribes had a high esteem and a deep respect. Nevertheless, stronger tribes made attempts to suppress them from time to time. That happened to the Ouled Tidrarin tribe, who after several years of desperate fight became tax payers of the Ouled Delim tribe in the 18th century, thereby losing their position among the religious tribes became znaga. Ahel Berical and Tendega belong to the “zuaias” but there are some tribes along the coast who are also members of this group, like Kenta and Terquez.^{vii}

In order to avoid the tax paying status some tribes tried to prove their Arabic descent therefore they would manipulate their family trees to get the honourable “*chorfa*” status (descendant of the Prophet). This, of course, led to a boom in the industry of pedigree forging, which used to be fashionable in Hungary too (i.e., proving never existing nobility or sheepskin).

The following belong to the Chorfa tribes:

Reguibat Sarg
Reguibat Sahel
Arosien
Oulad Bou Sbaa
Ahel Sejk Ma El Ajnin
Filala
Toubalt

The tribes of Arabic origin (descendants of the Beni Hassan tribe) had the status of free fighters which meant the highest level in the traditionally weapon using Saharawian society. Although they also mixed with Berber tribes during their history, they are still regarded as clean blooded Arab tribes. They are the following:

Oulad Delim
Tekna
Escarna

^{vii} TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880) 13. pages

Figure 2 illustrates the area occupied by the tribe and its tax payers:

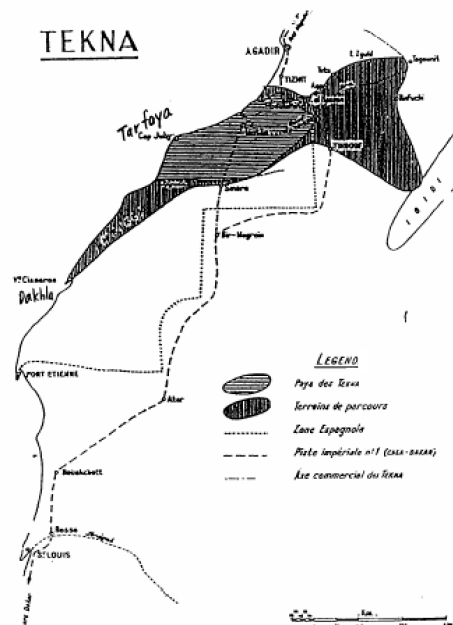


Figure 2. The area occupied by the Tekna tribe
Source: IDC Centre in Layounne

viii TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880) 12. pages

During the centuries the tribal union was divided into two fractions opposed to each other:

Ait Yemel "El Gazzi"

Ait Atzman (Ait Bella)

Ait Yemel:

Ait Lahsen

Izarguien

Ait Musa Ould Ali

Yagout

Ait Bella:

Azouafit

Ait Usa

Ait Iasin

Ait Ibrahim

Ait Ahmed

The *Izarguien* was the third biggest tribe in the region of Western Sahara and the biggest within the Tekna tribal union. They are still nomads dealing mainly with shepherding (keeping camels) and trade. Their territory extends from Tislatin (south of El Aiun) to the northern part of River Draa, though by now they have moved into several towns of the Sahara (El Aaiun, Smara, etc.).

The *Ait Lahsen* tribe is the second biggest member within the tribal union. They live mainly in South Morocco (Tan-Tan), in the northern part of Western Sahara and in Algeria. The Spanish highly esteemed their belligerence employing great numbers of them in their army.

They are members of the Tekna tribal union. Though they mainly dealt with shepherding, horse breeding, and doing military (Ait Oussa) service, they had tribes which became known as traders. Members of the *Azouafit* tribe were famous all over the Sahara as traders and caravan leaders. Their caravan leaders travelled in Essaouira (El-Kouz), Timbouktou, Walata, Taoudenni, Chenguitti and most of the countries of Black Africa (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon etc.).

After thorough education the merchants sent their children to foreign countries and cities as their representatives, where they, after getting acquainted with the local situation took part in organising local economic life. They traded mainly with horses, tobacco and wool, but they conducted trafficking in gold and slave for the Tichit and Oualata (Sudanese) tribes. Some members of this group also carried out courier services for the Sultan of Morocco and other higher or lower ranking local leaders. Since as traders they could get into Algeria and other parts of the Turkish Empire without any difficulty the consignments they were commissioned with were usually delivered to the

addressees. The service they provided is chronicled in contemporary Arabic historical sources such as the *Tarik el Fettach* the *Tarikh be Sudan*.^{ix}

Of course they were not the only traders in the desert, because their relatives, the *Ait Lahsen* tribe was a serious rival posing a threat to their interests. This tribe sold animals both of their own breeding and bought from other tribes to the Spanish and the French.

The *Ouled Bou Sba* was also a trading tribe transporting tea, gunpowder, and fire arms from Morocco and trading them in for dates in the area of Mauritania. Members of the *Kounta* tribe besides shepherding also monopolised the salt trade on the greater part of the Sahara. The French recruited their Arabic gendarmerie (*Goumier*) of frightful fame, also used as military support, from among them.

Members of the *Tagant* tribe were mostly farmers, who traded in their produce of barley and millet in Atar or Saint-Louis (French forts in Mauritania) for salt, dates and camels.

Among the Sahrawian the members of the *Imraguen* tribe pursued the most peaceful occupation, making a living exclusively from fishing for centuries. They live in the D'Arguin National Park (Mauritania) where they fish on coastal waters. About two hundred families constitute the tribe who live in four fishing villages. The national park is on the list of World Heritage and there have been considerations to move the fishermen from the place. Since they live in a very close community and they have no other skills apart from fishing the WWF and the FIBA (Foundation for the Banc D'Arguin), with the help of the Mauritanian Government, worked out a programme to preserve the traditional fishing and tribal life. Figure 3 shows the major tribal areas.

The tribes introduced above present only a relatively narrow cross section of the Sahrawian tribes. There are approximately 120 minor and major tribes in the region of the Western Sahara, who are related to each other live separately though. Beside the tribal leaders who represented the executive power there was an advisory council called Djemma which was made up of the delegates of various tribes. This council was dissolved without a trace with the creation of Polisario.

At war time a *war council* was established in order to fend off external threat. When the community was divided by internal conflicts like the more than thirty-year long war between the tribes of Reguibat and Tadjakent, or the disputes about the use of wells the *Council of Fourty (Ait Arbajn)* was established. This organisation, which none of the neighbouring countries ever employed or even knew, always had a job to do because the tribes were very likely to solve their disputes with the use of weapons, and also stronger tribes liked looting smaller and weaker ones.^x

^{ix} ANTHONY G. PAZZANITA, TONY HODGES: *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1982) 55. pages

^x MARK HART: *The social structure of the Rgibat Bedouins of the Western Sahara* (Washington D.C., Middle East Journal, Volume 16. Number 4 Issue: Autumn, 518. pages)

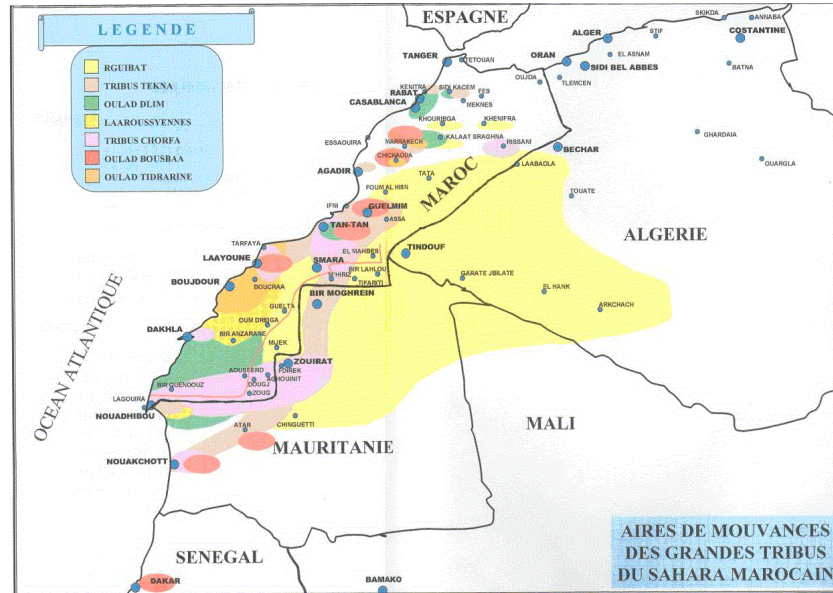


Figure 3. Major tribal areas

Source: Attilio Gaudio: Les populatus du Saharaïoccidental

English explorer Alexander Scott was visiting the region when the Mejjat and the Izerguine tribes were unsuccessfully trying to protect their areas from the Ouled Delim warriors (1810).

Leopold Panet recorded about the Reguibat tribe that constant fighting was their natural element. So it happened that two tribes while at war with each other joined forces to rob the Ouled Bou Sbaa living in their vicinity.^{xi}

Another specific office that the Sahrawians had was one which we today would call an ambassador (*kafir*). It was a person delegated and authorised by the tribes to officially represent them at the neighbouring tribes.

It is interesting to know that the women of Western Sahara as opposed to the tradition of the neighbouring countries take part in the work in several ways. For example in Mauritania it would be impossible for a woman to milk the animals while among the Saharawian it is a woman's job. Nowadays women have a very important

^{xi} TONY HODGES: *Western Sahara, the Roots of a Desert War* (Lawrence Hill & Company, Westport, Connecticut 06880) 11. pages

role in society because the number of men living in the refugee camps is very small. As a result they have to do jobs which were considered to be men's responsibility earlier.^{xii}

To this day camels have a very high value for the locals. The possession of one is a kind of status symbol in society. Even though the number of nomads have decreased considerably there are still Sahrawians possessing herds of several hundred animals. The price of a camel is nearly 10–12.000 dirham (USD 1000–1200), and it still happens that on signing the marriage contract the negotiated "price" of the bride is paid in camels.^{xiii}

The Sahrawians are proud of their origin and although they still keep in evidence where they come from, the tribal ties are much looser today especially among those living in towns and also because of the different ways of life they lead.

This is due to the fact that the Moroccans forced the majority of the Sahrawians who had led a nomadic life for centuries to settle down in cities. There may be a slight similarity to the gipsy minority in Hungary who do not live by their old living standards and laws any more, but the norms and laws accepted by the majority of society still do not have enough influence on them. That is they do not apply their old laws any more, but they haven't mastered the new ones yet.

Although the majority of the Sahrawians have settled down in the towns with the lack of stable job opportunities they just increase the number of those who live on social aids. When the locals made a living from shepherding and trade the number of able-bodied men receiving social aid was minimal, while today the majority of men living in towns are unemployed. Extended unemployment soon results in a state where unemployment is accepted and work and the old way of life devaluate. As a result people living on social aid become more vulnerable (financially and politically) since they are unable to keep themselves up without social support.

Sahrawians speak the *Hassanija dialect* of Arabic, but since the occupation of the region they have mostly used the Moroccan Arab dialect. A lot of them also use Spanish, the language of the former colonists, and thanks to the state education the number of French speakers has considerably increased recently.

The majority of the population is Sunni but there are some Shiites and some Christians (mostly Catholic) among them. Sahrawians are characterised by a high degree of religious tolerance both within and outside their communities.

^{xii} ANTHONY G. PAZZANITA, TONY HODGES: *Historical Dictionary of Western Sahara* (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1982) 360. pages

^{xiii} BESENYŐ JÁNOS: *A nyugat-szaharai kérdés és az ENSZ által vezetett békefenntartó misszió (MINURSO) tevékenysége* (Geopolitikai Tanács Közhasznú Alapítvány, Műhelymunkák 2007/11, HU ISSN 1788–7895) 23. pages

The estimated population of the Sahrawians living in Morocco is 262.000, but there are about 120.000 refugees in Algerian refugee camps (Tindouf) and a further 30–40.000 abroad in different countries.^{xiv}

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^{xiv} BESENYŐ JÁNOS: *A nyugat-szaharai kérdés és az ENSZ által vezetett békefenntartó misszió (MINURSO) tevékenysége* (Geopolitikai Tanács Közhasznú Alapítvány, Műhelymunkák 2007/11, HU ISSN 1788–7895) 24. pages