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## ► To cite this version:

Alice Wilson. Households and the production of public and private domains. Revolutionary changes in Western Sahara's liberation movement. *Paideuma*, 2012, 58, pp.19-43. <hal-00769270>

HAL Id: hal-00769270

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00769270>

Submitted on 30 Dec 2012

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## HOUSEHOLDS AND THE PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DOMAINS Revolutionary changes in Western Sahara's liberation movement\*

Alice Wilson

*Abstract.* Saharawi refugees from Western Sahara have been leading a social revolution from the desert refugee camps in Algeria, where they have been living since the partial annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco in 1975. The households of these refugees have changed enormously over three decades of exile and revolution. This study, which draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork with Saharawi refugees (2007–2009), analyses households across the pre-exile and revolutionary periods to highlight the changed and changing nature of 'domaining', or the production of public and private domains, in the revolutionary period. The article explores the role of households in different articulations of 'domaining' and in producing persons with different kinds of social dispositions, those suited, more or less, to the revolution, or its once self-proclaimed foe, the 'tribe' (*qabīla*).

### *Introduction*

In her analysis of socialist regimes, Katherine Verdery observes that they operate parallel systems of production: in addition to the production of goods, she also identifies a parallel system specialising in the production of secret service documents (1996:24). Verdery argues that the ultimate aim of this production of documents is not to produce the dossiers themselves, these being only 'immediate' products. The 'ultimate', more interesting and more valuable products, she suggests, are persons with social dispositions useful to the regimes in question (Verdery 1996:24).

In this article, I take Verdery's paradigm of immediate and ultimate products and apply it to an analysis of households. Feminist-inspired anthropological analysis of households has already emphasised the importance of households not merely in reproducing persons but in reproducing persons with appropriate kinds of 'social identities' (Moore 1994). I draw on these two approaches to explore how households produce both 'immediate' products, namely persons, and 'ultimate' products of persons with particular kinds of social dispositions.

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\* This article draws on a paper delivered at the Afrika Kolloquium, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, on 16 December 2010. I thank Hans Peter Hahn and Judit Smajdli for their kind invitation and the members of the Kolloquium for their comments. I am deeply indebted to the many Saharawi refugees who hosted me and let me share their lives. Fieldwork was generously funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. My thanks also go to anonymous reviewers, as well as Sidi Omar and Tara Deubel, for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. The responsibility for views, and errors, remains my own.

In the case I consider, that of the Saharawi in refugee camps in Algeria, the refugees themselves, like visitors to the camps in the late 2000s and in the preceding years, are well aware of how Saharawi refugee households have changed enormously since the camps' inception in 1975. Until the mid-1990s the camps and their households were marked by material simplicity and hardship, but at least in memory this period is associated with intense openness and generosity of social relations. By the late 2000s, many households had taken on a more enclosed, physically more sophisticated architecture, and in turn the social atmosphere of the camps was talked of and experienced as less open and generous than in those early years. Both these periods stand in contrast in their own right to pre-exile households, which for many refugees, for at least part of their lives or the yearly cycle, belonged to mobile pastoralist encampments.

In what follows, I take these changes in households as points of insight into changes in the social dispositions produced by these households. The Saharawi refugees conceive of their exile as a social revolution (on which more below); I structure my analysis around what I shall call the pre-exile, early and late revolutionary periods. For each period, I consider how the household's role in the production of social dispositions relates to the activity that Marilyn Strathern has called 'domaining' (1988:97). This can be understood as an engagement in social relations which supposes the elaboration of a boundary between different domains of social life. Strathern suggests that great cross-cultural attention may have been paid to 'domaining' because, for the 'Western' observer, the notion of contrasting domains thereby invoked stands for two domains of sociality: the particular which makes existing social relations more or less visible, and the non-particular or collective, which distinguishes itself from the former in being able to create new social relations. These two presumed domains of sociality are often mapped on to the terms 'private' and 'public'.<sup>1</sup> I shall argue that in the case of the Saharawi refugees, the social revolution re-located their domaining activities to the production of public and private domains, where previously this had not been the case. Households, I contend, played a key role in these processes.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First I describe the setting of the refugees from Western Sahara exiled in Algeria, and some of the key terms and methods that underpin my research (based on two years' fieldwork, 2007–2009). An ethnographic presentation of the Saharawi refugees' pre-exile, early and late revolutionary households follows. I conclude by highlighting this study's insights into both domaining and its potential re-articulations, as well as the social relations of the Saharawi refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> Strathern's terms, though, are 'domestic' and 'political'.

### *Western Sahara, key terms and methodology*

As I use the term here, Western Sahara is distinct from, and yet a part of, a wider geographical region of Saharan north-west Africa, for which the French term 'ouest saharien' is a convenient phrase. The hassanophone inhabitants of the *ouest saharien* are found in Western Sahara and the Saharan parts of Mauritania, southern Morocco and south-west Algeria as well as parts of Mali and Niger; this hassanophone population shares much in terms of linguistic, cultural, religious, economic and, to an extent, political heritage and practices (see Norris 1986). The region's late nineteenth-century division between colonial powers resulted in the delineation of the Spanish colony of Spanish Sahara. In the 1960s and 1970s, the UN pressured Spain to decolonise and recognise the right to self-determination of the people of the territory. When neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania presented claims over the territory to the International Court of Justice, the Court's findings in 1975 rejected these claims and supported the right of the people of the territory to self-determination (International Court of Justice 1975). Nevertheless, following the Court's decision, Morocco annexed part of the territory in 1975. Thus annexed, the territory is still on the UN list of non-self-governing territories under the name of Western Sahara. Its people have come to be known as Saharawi.<sup>2</sup>

Morocco's annexation has been contested by Western Sahara's liberation front, Polisario. Morocco and Polisario initially disputed the territory through armed conflict (1975–1991). From the early 1980s, Morocco constructed a militarised sand wall, eventually effectively partitioning the territory between areas under its control (the western and larger portion, with important water and mineral resources) and those under Polisario control (the smaller eastern portion, with no coastal access). On Spain's final withdrawal from its erstwhile colony, in 1976 Polisario founded the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Whilst SADR claims sovereignty – like Morocco – over the whole of Western Sahara, it has access to and control over just the portion to the east of the sand wall.<sup>3</sup> SADR's governmental structures (ministries, Parliament, High Court etc.) ordinarily reside, however, not in the areas of Western Sahara under its control, but in refugee camps in Algeria, located near the Algerian town and military base of Tindouf (approximately 50 km from the border with Western Sahara).<sup>4</sup> The camps, founded as Saharawi civilians fled Morocco's annexation, are believed to host a

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<sup>2</sup> In English the spelling Sahrawi, a closer transliteration of the Arabic pronunciation, is also found.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Morocco, which has achieved no international recognition for its claims to sovereignty over Western Sahara, SADR has been recognised as a state with rights to sovereignty over Western Sahara by a number of states, as well as the African Union.

<sup>4</sup> The refugee camps have several advantages as a site for the SADR government. Morocco would be much less likely to attack this site, since this would entail an attack on Algerian territory. The civilian population there, having crossed an international border to seek refuge, is eligible for refugee status by virtue of having crossed this international border. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that SADR governance activities, including voting and the operation of law courts, also extend to the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara.

large proportion of the pre-1975 population of the territory, estimated by aid agencies working there to number some 130,000 to 160,000 refugees at present, though accurate figures are not publicly available.<sup>5</sup> Although the camps are technically in Algerian territory, juridical and political authority over the area in which they are located has been delegated by Algeria to Polisario. This allows SADR to operate as a state-in-exile from the refugee camps. The refugee population it governs there is subject – like those living in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara – to SADR laws and constitution (and prisons), not those of Algeria.<sup>6</sup>

The UN brokered a ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario in 1991. Since then, efforts at conflict resolution have been focused on the activities of the UN mission for a referendum in Western Sahara (Minurso). This referendum, proposed as a means of finally enacting the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people, has nevertheless eluded implementation. With Polisario insisting that independence be included as an option, Morocco refusing its inclusion, and the UN Security Council applying no effective pressure for a free and fair vote, the Western Sahara conflict is at an impasse (Jensen 2005, Theofilopoulou 2006). Those who remain as refugees in the camps hold out for an ever more elusive act of self-determination.<sup>7</sup>

With this background to the conflict and camps in mind, let us now address more closely the character of life and political organisation in the camps. There is a very close relationship between Polisario as a liberation movement and SADR as a state (-in-exile). The distinction between the two is often blurred in practice by the fact that holding office in one may be associated formally or in practice with holding office in the other. For example, the Secretary General of Polisario by virtue of that office holds the office of President of SADR, ministerial appointments in SADR not infrequently draw on those elected to Polisario's general secretariat (*alamāna alwataniya*), and in 2008 holding a managerial office in a Polisario structure was one of several ways of qualifying as a

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<sup>5</sup> The lack of transparently compiled population figures for Saharawi in Moroccan-controlled and Polisario-controlled areas is notorious. Zunes and Mundy (2010:214) cite the UN figures for provisional approved adult Saharawi voters as 41,150 in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and 33,998 in the refugee camps (figures for the year 2000). Thus these figures concern only those persons over the age of 18 at that time whom the UN defined as eligible to vote, rather than the whole Saharawi population in these areas. For a discussion of population figures for the camps, see Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello (2010:41).

<sup>6</sup> Again, we do not have transparently compiled population figures for those living ordinarily in the Polisario-controlled parts of Western Sahara as a distinct category from those living ordinarily in the refugee camps. My experience in fieldwork, and in particular during twenty days with a family engaged in camel-herding in the Polisario-controlled areas, indicates that those who work and pass through this zone are linked to families in the camps. It is therefore likely that they are taken into account in the UN's compilation of the numbers of adult Saharawi voters.

<sup>7</sup> The political stance of those who remain in the camps is only one aspect of the politicisation of Saharawi who are sympathetic to independence. In the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara in recent years there have been protests contesting Moroccan presence there, and a number of human rights NGOs have expressed concern over reports of human rights abuses against Saharawi political activists there (see Shelley 2002, Mundy 2006, Human Rights Watch 2008).

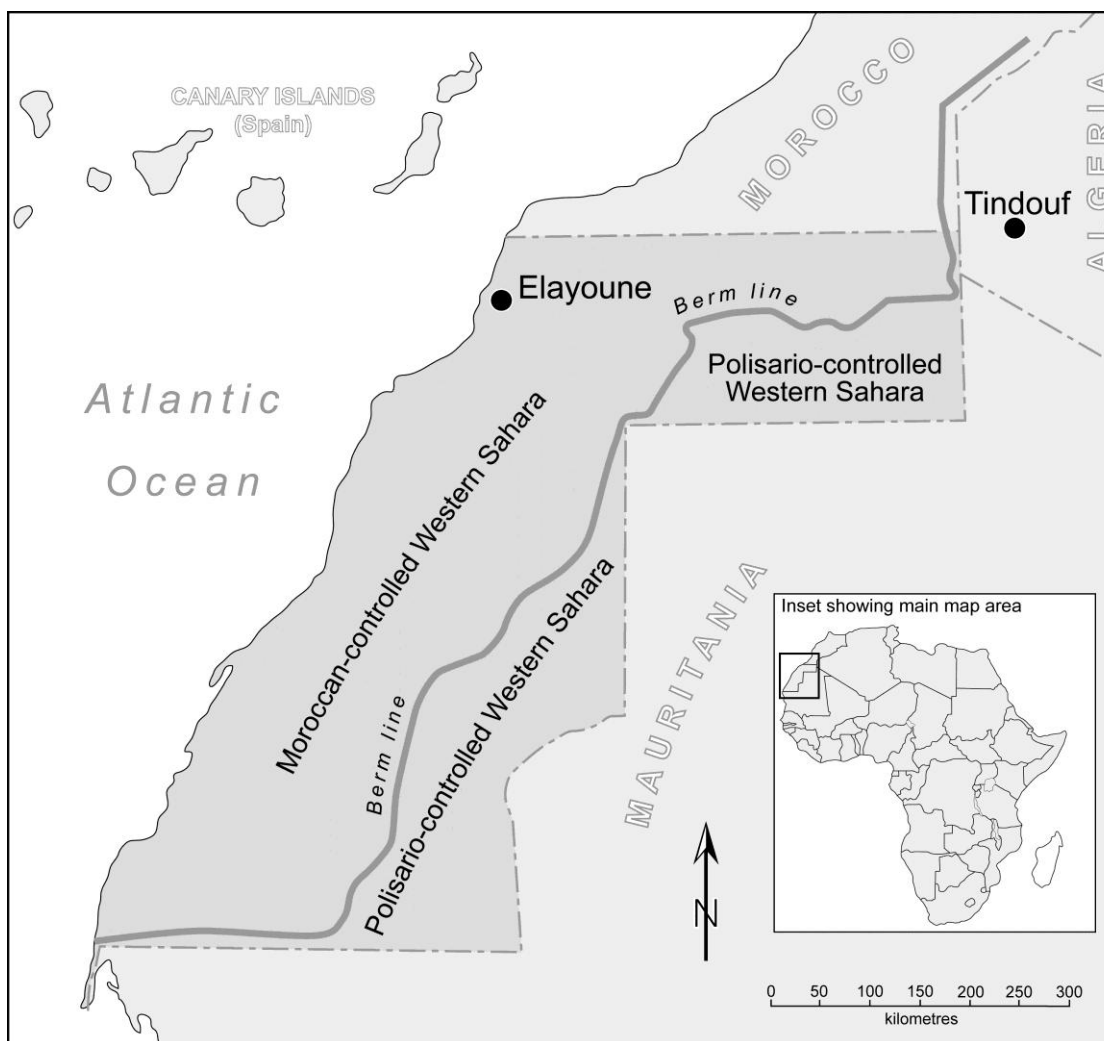


Figure 1: Western Sahara (copyright Alice Wilson)

candidate for election to SADR's Parliament (see Wilson 2010a). This entwining of state institutions and liberation movement is one of several features which set SADR apart from conventional notions of a state. In addition, it is only partially recognised by other states and international bodies and has access to only part of its claimed territory. Furthermore, it does not fit another common notion, that of the 'party-state', for technically Polisario is a liberation movement and not a card-issuing political party. Because of this resistance to fitting conventional meanings of categories such as 'state' or 'party-state', and because of the entwining of state institutions and liberation movement, I refer to the political authorities in the Saharawi refugee camps and adjoining areas of Western Sahara with my own term 'state-movement'. This term seeks to capture the notion that these authorities operate with state-like qualities, are a liberation movement rather than

a political party, and closely overlap these two functions in a way that makes it difficult to separate them analytically.

This state-movement has conceived of its leadership of a civilian population in exile as a social 'revolution' (*thawra*).<sup>8</sup> This has entailed an agenda of emancipation for women, former slaves and other oppressed or stigmatised groups, and a banning of 'tribalism' (*qabalīya*). This ban sought to address behaviours, loyalties, rights and responsibilities pertaining to membership in a 'tribe' (*qabīla*, pl. *qabā'il*). 'Tribe' is a problematic term in anthropology (Kuper 1988, Sneath 2007). Specifically with regard to 'tribes' in the arabophone world, Shelagh Weir observes that *qabīla* is in fact used polysemously there, making it necessary to specify ethnographically what is meant by it in any given setting (2007:78). In the case of Western Sahara, ethnographic accounts of the colonial (Caro Baroja 1955) and pre-colonial periods (Caratini 1989) make clear that *qabīla* has been used to mean political groups into which members can be recruited by birth or pacts, and which are internally stratified and engage in stratified relations with other such groups. My use of *qabīla* in this paper refers specifically to the social relations in this ethnographic setting (and not to a notion of arabophone 'tribes' in general). I suggest that one can see the *qabīla* – in the manifestation that the state-movement sought to counter with its ban – as what I call a 'sphere of consented solidarity'. The circumstances of the giving of 'consent' for membership can vary to include coercion, resulting in stratified intra- and inter-*qabīla* relations between protectors, protected and exploited groups. Because of these stratified relations, it follows that any given *qabīla* is not necessarily the political 'equivalent' of any other – hence the use of the term even within Western Sahara is polysemous. This polysemy, as Weir suggests, draws attention to certain similarities between social groups (e.g., their assigning rights and duties to members as regards access to and the redistribution of resources) at the expense of glossing over the differences between them (e.g. their hierarchised positions vis-à-vis one another).

Initially, for its governance of the camps the state-movement embraced a system of Popular Committees along the lines of the model of Gadhafi's Libya.<sup>9</sup> These Committees were one of the means (along with public discussions and elections for political representatives) through which direct democracy was meant to be enacted in that 'the people' were themselves meant to be in direct control of running public services. Nevertheless, it has been widely noted (e.g. Bäschlin 2004) that the 1980s was a time in which the camps were torn between a model of direct participation and one of tight social control. Following the ceasefire in 1991, the camps underwent a process of social and political relaxation (Bäschlin 2004, San Martín 2005), a key feature of which – though

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<sup>8</sup> In this article, I transliterate words as pronounced in daily usage in the camps. As regards the terms used in this article, in the following cases the pronunciation is the same in Hassaniya and Arabic: 'thawra', 'qabīla', 'qabalīya', 'wilāya', 'farīq', 'sundūq'. In the remaining cases the pronunciation represented is specific to Hassaniya.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g. Vandewalle (2006).

often neglected in the literature – was the transformation in the 1990s of the Popular Committees into Councils. Meanwhile, as registration for an eventual referendum on self-determination progressed, the ban on the use of *qabīla*-terminology had to be partially relaxed in that claiming voting rights came down to proving membership in a *qabīla*.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in the late 2000s the use of some *qabīla*-terminology in daily intercourse remained taboo, and even, for some words, offensive. The contrast in the social and political atmosphere between the periods before and after the 1991 ceasefire leads me to distinguish between them as two contrasting models or tendencies of social and political control in the camps, which I call the early and late revolutionary periods.

The main residential camps, Auserd, Elayoune, Dakhla and Smara (named after cities in Western Sahara), are known generically as *wilāyat* (sg. *wilāya*).<sup>11</sup> Each is divided into sections called *dawair* (sg. *daira*), and each *daira* into a neighbourhood (*ḥaiy*, pl. *aḥyā*). The main government administrative centre is commonly known as Rabouni, and the women's school, which now has a significant residential population, is known as 27<sup>th</sup> February (it is named after the date on which Polisario founded the SADR).

The research on which this paper draws took place over twenty-four months spent with Saharawi refugees (January 2007–January 2009), the scope of the wider research project being an enquiry into the relationship between the state-movement and its citizens across a number of areas of social life. The first nine months in the field were dedicated to language training in both standard Arabic and the Hassaniya dialect. During the first five months of this language training, I lived with two Saharawi refugee families in 27<sup>th</sup> February. This was followed by four months with Saharawi refugee students in Damascus, Syria (where I could practise the dialect away from the fierce summer heat in the camps). The remaining fifteen months in the field were spent in the camps (and, for twenty days, the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara). In this period I lived first in 27<sup>th</sup> February, then Smara, then Auserd, with a different family (previously unconnected to each other) in each camp, yet always keeping up visits between host families. By my return from Syria I had acquired fluency in Hassaniya. This permitted me to focus on participant observation fieldwork methods, such as my observation of and participation in events and conversations, both of the ordinary and extraordinary kind (family evening chats, rations distributions, weddings, shopping and elections). The relationships formed through this long-term presence underpin the research in this paper.

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<sup>10</sup> On voter registration, see Jensen (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Thus, the original Elayoune is in Western Sahara, whilst the *wilāyā* going by that name belongs to the complex of refugee camps in Algeria.



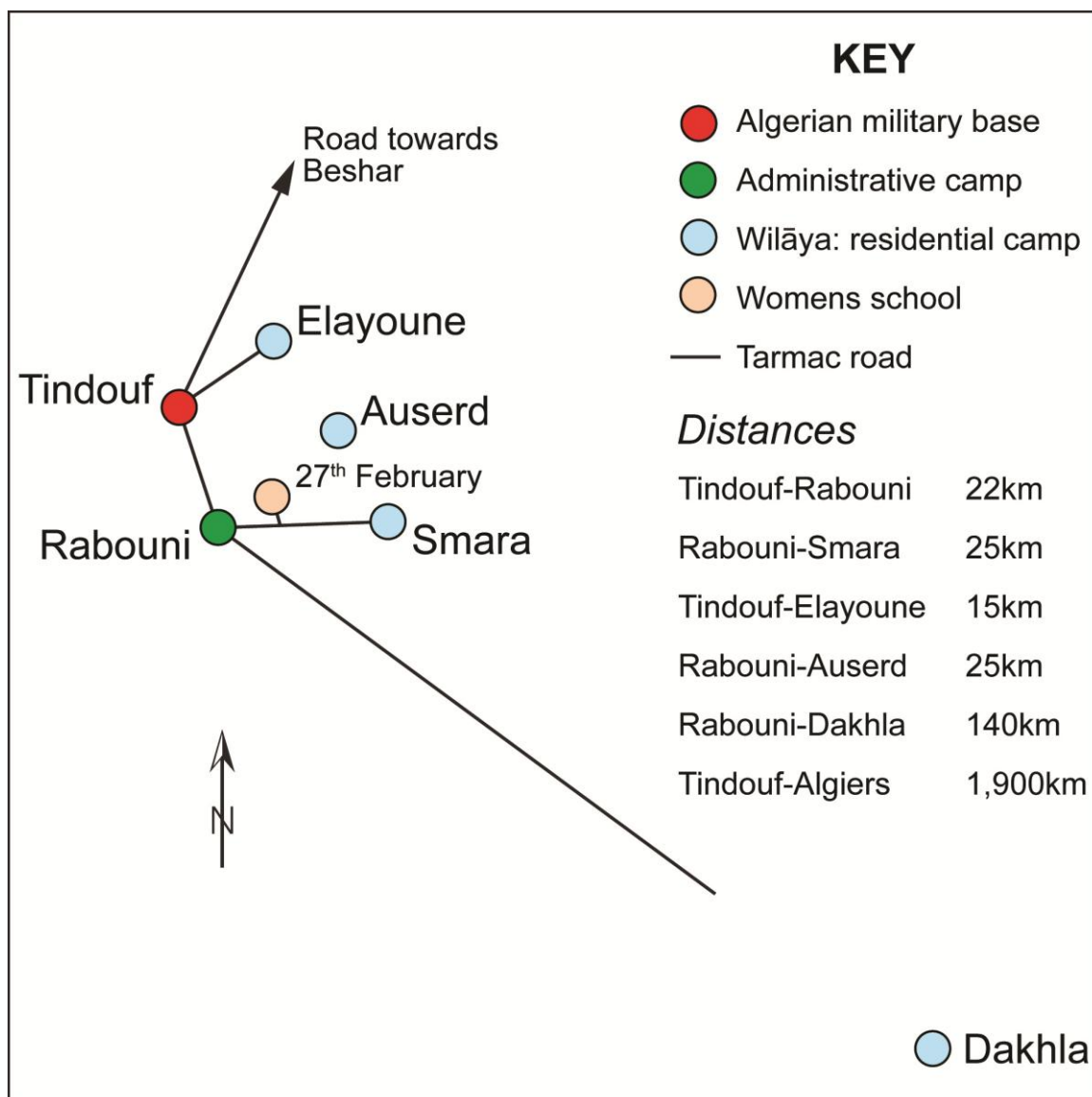


Figure 2: Sketch map of the refugee camps near Tindouf (copyright Alice Wilson)

### *On pre-exile households*

Some, but not all of those who went on to become Saharawi refugees were mobile pastoralists before exile. Whilst no accurate breakdown of refugees' pre-exile livelihoods is available, there is reason to suggest that most refugees would have been personally familiar, if not for all then at least part of their pre-exile life, with a mobile pastoralist context. Some were semi-sedentary, whilst others had moved only relatively recently to Spanish Sahara's newly established towns, which had been expanding steadily since the 1950s (Hodges 1983). But even town-dwellers maintained strong ties with the pasturelands (*badīa*). For example, where two of my host families had members living in towns prior to exile, they recalled regular visits to and contact with family members in the *badīa*. It is useful to think about the pre-exile household in terms of mobile pastoralism, for this is the background that the refugees and the state-movement have borne in mind, both to emulate and to contest, when setting up their revolutionary society in exile.

If we follow Jane Guyer and Pauline Peters' approach to conceptualising the household in terms of the basic units of production, consumption, distribution and investment in a society (1987:208), then in the mobile pastoralist context those pre-exile basic units would have been at times the mobile pastoralist encampment as a collection of households, and at times the individual households (tents) within them. The mobile pastoralist encampment is known in Hassaniya as a *frīg* (pl. *firgān*). Classical Arabic has *farīq* (team), from which *frīg* is likely derived, yet amongst the meanings of the Classical root 'frq' is 'separate, disperse'. The *frīg* could indeed be understood as a part that has been separated from a larger unit (as we shall see, that larger unit can be understood as the *qabīla*). By the 1950s, a *frīg* was typically composed of several tents (3–15) or *khiyām* (sg. *khaima*).<sup>12</sup> It would follow the same migratory schedule as nearby *firgān*, and the members of coordinated *firgān* belonged to the same *qabīla* (Caratini 1989, Caro Baroja 1955). Families from a different *qabīla* by name might be attached, but they would be part of a *frīg*, or a group of *firgān*, on the grounds of their attachment to the *qabīla* of their protectors. Each *frīg* tended to rely on the resources in labour and animals of its members. To an extent, then, a *frīg* bears resemblances to Marshall Sahlins' (1972) notion of a unit of the domestic mode of production (DMP) that is mostly reliant on the labour and resources of its own members, yet with labour being pooled between units in particular circumstances. Such labour pooling indeed operated here through a system known as *twīza*. Nevertheless, as Caroline Humphrey points out in her important reflections on the concept of the DMP, each unit (in her discussion, household) tends to see itself as spiritually and socially incomplete and as belonging to a wider sphere (2002:164–174). This can very much be said to be the case for the *frīg*, whose members conceived of it as part of the *qabīla* to which it, along with other *firgān*, belonged. Thus, although each *khaima* housed a nuclear family, with any unmarried extensions, this family unit ('*aila*') would be known to the other members of the *frīg* by the patronym of the senior male, and the *frīg* itself would be known as the *khiyām* of a particular *qabīla*.

The close relationship between the *frīg* and the *qabīla* calls for reflection on how the *frīg*, and the *khaima* within it, served in the pre-exile setting as a domain in which persons were produced with the dispositions suited to membership in a *qabīla*. This would have happened quite literally, in the teaching of genealogies and status relations to young members, and more subtly, in the socialisation of work relations and education. Writing of the hassanophone *ouest saharien* more generally, Francis de Chasseay describes how a child's first seven years or so were spent under the tutelage of the mother, and then the children learned the tasks and occupations particular to their (gendered) status, whether as a religious specialist, animal herder, blacksmith, or domestic slave (1976). The layout of the *khaima* was also a space through which status hierarchies could

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<sup>12</sup> Caro Baroja (1955:258). In earlier periods, particular circumstances such as times of war could see encampments of up to forty or more tents (Caro Baroja 1955:258).

be learned. For example, Sophie Caratini describes how slaves were not allowed beyond the threshold of their owners' tents (1989).

My first point about the *khaima* and *frīg* as household units is therefore that this social environment helped produce persons with the social disposition of membership in the social relations of the *qabīla* and all that that entails in terms of hierarchies of birth, age, gender and status groups. My second point, however, is that the activities of 'domaining' in this context should be explored. Domaining activities here are not immediately recognisable as concerned with producing a distinction of boundaries between 'public' and 'private'. The social relations of the *frīg* seem to be particularly weakly implicated in certain notions of the 'private'. A *frīg* lacks a notion of space that is concealed from the ears and eyes of others (Caratini 1993). Whilst property such as animals and other objects are privately owned, there is nevertheless a remarkable presence of social institutions testifying to the facility with which privately owned property can – and at times should – circulate beyond its owners. These range from institutions which facilitate loaning, such as *mnīha*, a scheme for loaning herd animals, to practices which serve as the exceptional brake on the otherwise expected behaviour to pass on privately owned objects.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the strongest notion of 'the private' attested in the ethnography of the hassanophone *ouest saharien* is the concept of *ḥarīm*, those things or persons, such as a tent and womenfolk, that it was a man's duty and honour to protect from others' access and potential abuse (Boulay 2003, Bonte 2008). This concept has also been applied to the precious resources of the *qabīla* that deserve protection, such as its wells and its marriageable young women (Fortier 2000). Yet to associate the concept of *ḥarīm* exclusively with a sense of 'the private' is problematic in that one of the most important things that can go on in the space of the *ḥarīm*, and an activity for which the *ḥarīm* space is essential, is the giving of hospitality. This, by its very nature, means that the 'private' space of the *ḥarīm* is inherently and simultaneously also required to function as a space that is open to the public for the welcoming of guests.

It seems to me that domaining in the pre-exile sphere is not primarily about the marking of a boundary between public and private domains, but rather marks the boundary between membership and non-membership in the *qabīla*. With regard to access to things, persons and spaces, one can notice that there was only a weak notion of it being possible to limit legitimate claims to them to just a few close relatives, to the

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<sup>13</sup> For details of the conditions of *mnīha*, see Caro Baroja (1955:103–104) and Caratini (1989:56–57). As regards preventing property from circulating, I refer here to a use of *ḥubs* in the hassanophone setting that seems distinct from its wider use in North Africa. In North Africa in general, *ḥubs*, like *waqf* in the Middle East, commonly refers to making property inalienable so that its usufruct can be dedicated to charitable purposes (Layish 1994, Powers 1994). In daily life in the camps, I observed a *ḥubs* placed on items such as clothing or jewellery, where a usufruct such as that arising from land or livestock was not at stake. For example, when gifts arrived for a host family from their relatives in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, a female relative there had placed a *ḥubs* on the sheets that she had sent to my host mother. The latter was torn over this, as she wanted to give the sheets to her daughter, who was studying in Algeria. 'Mashkīla, alḥubs', she told us ('*ḥubs* is a problem').

exclusion of fellow members of the *qabīla* or a section thereof; likewise, there was only a weak notion of being able to extend claims for access to resources beyond fellow members of the *qabīla* or a section of it. This situation gives rise to well-known aspects of the social relations of hassanophone mobile pastoralists (and indeed Bedouin in general): no persons within a *qabīla* could be excluded from access to the wells and pasturelands over which that *qabīla* held priority rights of access, just as no person from beyond that *qabīla* could access them without first contracting permission and protection from the *qabīla* in question.

One consequence of pre-exile domaining revolving around the marking of a boundary between membership and non-membership in the *qabīla* is the likely weak manifestation of a 'supra-*qabīla*' public domain accessible to all beyond questions of *qabīla* membership. Arguably a 'supra-*qabīla*' domain can be said to have existed in what Paul Dresch has called the 'moral community' of tribal membership (1989), the recognition that members of *qabā'il* other than one's own subscribed to common values. But a tangible manifestation of a 'supra-*qabīla*' public domain was apparently absent in the pre-exile setting. True, land and water resources could not be privately owned, but the access to them was governed by *qabīla* membership. Notably, Spanish colonialism, with its low provision of schools, health-care centres and other public services (Hodges 1983), did little to change the lack of a tangible public domain accessible to all beyond *qabīla* membership. It is to the creation of just such a tangible, public domain that, in my reading, the early revolutionary state-movement would dedicate itself.

#### *Producing a public domain (1975–1991)*

From late 1975, tens of thousands of civilian refugees fleeing the armed annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco (and, for a time, Mauritania) found refuge in the arid, stony area around Tindouf. The refugees arrived with few, if any, livestock, and some had only the clothes on their backs. In this context of dispossession and inhospitable surroundings, it was not possible for a concentration of tens of thousands of de facto sedentarised refugees to rely for survival on their own labour and resources. Yet the survival of the refugees is perhaps remarkable not so much despite the unpromising circumstances as because of them (Clarke 2006). Arguably, the dispossession and impoverishment of the immediate surroundings proved a highly fertile setting for the state-movement to reconfigure the social relations of political, economic and social life, placing a high priority on undermining the social relations of the *qabīla* as those of the state-movement were being built up. The articulation of public and private domains became an arena through which that agenda was pursued.

The pre-exile, mobile pastoralist tendency of each *friḡ* to rely on the labour and resources of its own members for production and consumption, with stylised reciprocity

between *firgān*, was shaken to the core. For a start, the *frīg* itself was physically and economically no longer in existence in the new context of tents arranged in rows forming neighbourhoods (*aḥyā'*), districts (*dawair*) and *wilāyāt*. Regarding access to resources, persons and households relied for their physical survival on humanitarian donations, at first provided by Algeria and then later by the international community.<sup>14</sup> Yet this aid has always been distributed through the structures of the state-movement itself. Thus refugees depended on resources made available to them through their relations with the state-movement. As regards labour, the work of refugees in the Popular Committees can be seen as replacing the former stylised reciprocity between *firgān* characteristic of the pre-revolutionary setting. Labour was now pooled between refugee citizens coordinated through units of the state-movement.

As households were engulfed in new relations of dependence for resources on the state-movement and inter-household pooling of labour coordinated by the state-movement itself, the Committees, and other personnel of the state-movement, literally extracted many of the activities formerly staged in the *frīg* and re-deployed them in a new, public domain that was accessible to all refugee citizens. Randa Farah writes:

The Polisario assumed and transformed many of the functions of the traditional Bedouin camp (the *freeg*), which comprised the basic socioeconomic unit in Sahrawi society [...] providing food, shelter, education, and healthcare for their individual members (2008:82–83).

The high priority the state-movement placed on education and health care has frequently been noted (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello 2010:53–62). But as I listened to refugees recall the 1980s in the manner of 'the good old days', I realised that it was not only these iconic areas – education, health, food and shelter – that had been shifted into a public domain, but also the very nuts and bolts of every-day domestic labour. I learned that those refugees who had brought a few livestock with them, or acquired some, could not keep them in individual pens. Although in the late 2000s a typical image of the camps includes hundreds of family-run animal pens, with the women and children going back and forth to feed the sheep and goats kept there, in the 1980s there was 'one pen' for everyone and 'one time' for opening and closing it. Likewise, the shortage of firewood, gas fuel and even cooking equipment meant that individual households did not cook their own meals. 'There was one gas ring for the whole row of tents, and one woman cooked for everyone', a friend recalled. If a woman found herself divorced or widowed, instead of keeping the marital tent she had been given by the state-movement – it was the right of a formerly married woman in pre-exile circumstances to maintain her marital tent even if she moved back to her natal *frīg* – she might give her tent back

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<sup>14</sup> The World Food Programme, UNICEF and the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (ECHO) all contribute to providing aid for the refugees, some of them working through contracted NGOs.

to the state-movement and move back in with her natal family so that her tent could be re-distributed to someone else.<sup>15</sup>

I heard so much about 'the good old days' of the 1980s that I almost stopped listening to these stories, which I thought I knew already. In fact, they carry a very important message. They tell of a consistent push to shift the activities of the pre-exile household – education, health care and the basic activities of production and consumption, including domestic labour – from the *khaima* and *frīg* to the newly forged public domain of the state-movement on which all citizens could make claims, and in which all also had an obligation to participate. This is important for two reasons. First, it creates a tangible manifestation of the state-movement in the form of a public arena in which all are implicated by rights and obligations – precisely the kind of public domain that was lacking in mobile pastoralism before exile. Secondly, I suggest, the changes to the *khaima* and *frīg* played a role in the revolutionary agenda that went beyond practical reasons arising from dispossession and exile. These practical reasons of material shortage and the consequent need to share cannot be overlooked – if there is only one gas ring, then it is best that many people eat from the meals cooked there. My contention is that the transfer of activities away from the *khaima* and *frīg* also helped undermine them as sites in which, as in the pre-exile setting, dispositions suitable for the social relations of the *qabīla* were produced. The early revolutionary household, whose members woke up to work, study, eat and take part in the Committees, schools, hospitals, nurseries and meal times orchestrated and run by the state-movement, were thereby encouraged to develop not the dispositions of membership in the *qabīla* but rather those suitable for citizens of the revolutionary project. Such dispositions included giving priority to the affairs of the newly created public domain, over and above concerns of individual or familial interest: all those working for the state-movement as teachers, administrators, doctors etc. did so without any material remuneration other than the rations that any refugee was entitled to receive. Indeed, at this time private trade in the camps was not permitted outside the context of just one shop in every *daira* which was run by the state-movement. Money was virtually unseen and unused.

Looking back at this period through refugees' memories of it, we might be tempted to reconstruct a situation in which the relocation of domaining in the direction of the articulation of the public and private domains occurred smoothly and met with little resistance. In practice, we can expect this transformed articulation to have occasioned both compliance with and resistance to the revolutionary agenda. Indeed, elsewhere households have been studied as sites of resistance to political and economic change (Hart 2000, Pine 2002). We know that there was an outbreak of protest demonstrations

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<sup>15</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out (thereby going into further detail than my informants did whilst I was in the field) that the matter of whether married women should return their tents after the end of the marriage was discussed in the Saharawi Women's Congress of 1985. It was then decided that women without children who lived in their place of work should return their tents on the ending of a marriage.

in the camps in 1988 (Zunes 1999, Shelley 2002). Discussion of these events remains sensitive in the camps today. Those refugees who discussed them with me reported that the demonstrations were headed by women (who indeed composed the majority of the camps' adult population in that wartime period) and expressed resistance to the state-movement's repression of political opponents. It is unclear to what extent the demonstrations may have expressed wider social dissent. Alternative sources for assessing resistance and non-compliance in the early revolutionary period are obscured in various ways. Those who were most opposed to the direction life took for the refugees are likely to be among those who have left the camps, and thus would only be reached through research in sites beyond those represented here.<sup>16</sup> Resistance in the 1980s may not be remembered or voiced by the informants with whom I spoke in that, by the time of my research, refugees tended to recall the early revolutionary period with a mixture of relief that its conditions of extreme material hardship had been relaxed, and nostalgia for this period as a time when hopes for a political solution to the conflict were high. Complaints and criticisms of the state-movement voiced during my research tended to focus on the present, not the past. If it is not clear how the picture above must be qualified as a representation of the 'production' of a public domain in the 1980s, this depiction at least conveys how the refugees represent the changes of that period to themselves and to others.

#### *Trajectories of privatisation (1991–2008)*

The ceasefire of 1991 led to political and social relaxation in the camps, bringing greater freedom of movement of people and goods in and out of them than had been permitted in active wartime. Constitutionally, and in line with international post-Cold War shifts, the state-movement shifted its position to explicit acceptance of a role for a private market sector in the economy of a potentially independent Western Sahara.<sup>17</sup> There does not seem to have been an explicit parallel shift towards accepting marketised trade in exile the camps (as opposed to in a future, potentially independent Western Sahara), but from the late 1990s specialised areas of marketised trading were emerging across the camps. By the late 2000s each *wilāya* had one or several such areas, known as a market place (*marsa*). This new arena has fostered markets for commoditised goods and labour. If the state-movement did not explicitly seek the creation of this domain, there can be little doubt that it has endorsed it. Traders bringing goods from Mauritania or through Algeria to be sold in the camps are reportedly subject to 'customs' fees payable to the

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<sup>16</sup> Whilst transparently researched figures for the numbers of people who have left the camps over the course of exile are not available, it is known that people have left for a range of destinations, including Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, as well as spaces under neither Moroccan nor Polisario control, such as Spain and Mauritania.

<sup>17</sup> See article 45 in the 1999 constitution of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (1999).

state-movement according to the value of the merchandise in question. Whilst traders themselves told me this, and one former employee at a customs point described it to me, I was not able to obtain an account of these practices from serving officers of the state-movement.

To construe marketised trading in commoditised goods and labour as a 'private domain' is not straightforward: in order to function, market places must be publicly accessible, and therefore comprise an inherently public element. The enduring association of market and private domains in the classic theorisation of markets is that in markets participants pursue their 'private interests' which, collectively, leads to the fulfilment of public interests. From such a point of view, marketised trade and labour relations in the camps might be understood as constituting a private domain in that they cater primarily for the pursuit of private interests, in contrast to the public services in the camps, which cater primarily for public interests. Indeed, in Sophie Caratini's view, with the refugee camps' post-ceasefire economic and social transitions came new opportunities for the pursuit of individual and family strategies to take priority over those of the camps' leadership (2003:422). I build on her position by suggesting that what was new in the late revolutionary period was the potential public character of the pursuit of private interests, which previously had had to remain covert.

The new public space for the pursuit of private interests reflects a re-articulation of domaining in the late revolutionary period which challenges the early revolutionary prioritisation of the public domain. There are greater earning possibilities in the new 'private' sector, where earnings can range, informants told me, from 100 to 500 Euros a month in trade, the construction industry, waged labour for NGOs or international organisations working in the camps (to say nothing of migration abroad). Although the state-movement introduced 'wages' in the public sector in about 2003, given its budget restraints, these 'wages' – which may be as low as thirty Euros a month for primary school teachers, if they are paid at all – leave the public sector unable to compete with the more lucrative private sector. The public sector consequently suffers from a 'brain drain' effect, as trained personnel take up more materially rewarding opportunities elsewhere. The schools and health-care centres that were once the pride of the refugee camps are now under-staffed and have become the topic of widespread consternation. The weakening of the public domain is also reflected in changes to the Popular Committees, which, as noted above, were dissolved in the 1990s and transformed into Councils. Crucially, adult labour conscription via the Committees appears to have ended then too.

The demise of the Committees invites us to consider how the late revolutionary domaining shift towards an emphasis on privatisation manifests itself in households. This is noticeable in a number of areas beyond the undermining of early revolutionary 'substitutes' for inter-household reciprocity via Committees. Commercial activities formerly based in the household, such as those of blacksmiths, are now increasingly relocating into stalls in the marketplace. This also relocates part of the 'openness' of the



tent, as a venue for accessing the specialised services of its members, to the marketplace, thereby decreasing an aspect of the public character of the tent. I asked one blacksmith about the circumstances of his moving his workshop from his tent, which was close to that of one of my host families, to the *marsa* nearby.<sup>18</sup> He explained that, as people had grown accustomed to going to the *marsa* for their business, it became more infrequent for people to bring him work to do in his workshop in the tent. He had moved his workshop to the *marsa* in order to keep the work coming in.

The infrastructure of dwellings has also changed in ways that would make them increasingly unsuitable anyway for public access to the services of household members.<sup>19</sup> The former simpler abodes consisting of a tent, and possibly a small tent in which to cook, have now acquired additional mud-brick rooms. Various practical reasons can help explain the changes in dwellings, such as that mud brick rooms offer greater protection than tents against household fires, and latrines are more convenient than long walks out to uninhabited areas.<sup>20</sup> But in the late 2000s, changes in dwellings have arguably surpassed such practical considerations. For those who can afford it, the formula of mud brick houses and a latrine may be replaced by concrete rooms connected by covered corridors surrounding an enclosed courtyard (*hawsh*), and more sophisticated 'bathrooms'. In these cases a tent has even become optional. Whilst the living spaces are treated as pseudo-tents – as has been noted to be the case in mobile pastoralists' households elsewhere (e.g. Layne 1994) – social life in these houses is significantly different to bring to mind the notion that a new regime calls for a new kind of housing (Humphrey 2002:175–201). The *frīg*'s lack of spaces that were private from the eyes and ears of others is no longer characteristic of these domestic spaces, with their enclosed courtyards and thicker walls. Juan Carlos Gimeno suggests that the greater enclosure of households in the camps reflects the fact that there are now more material items in households which have to be protected from other people's access (2007:35). Homes and the things and people in them are increasingly 'privately' accessed. For Gimeno, the changes in the physicality of homes indicate the increasing importance of the household, as opposed to the state-movement, for economic management (2007:35).

The late revolutionary household is indeed more individualised and self-sufficient as a unit of production and consumption than it was in the days of the *frīg* or the early revolutionary period. Several features indicate this. Rations having fallen to below survival levels, and each family exerts itself as best as it can to develop private means of income, with income from labour (as opposed to 'windfalls' such as gifts from abroad)

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<sup>18</sup> In this article I discuss events or scenarios which I encountered in each of my host families in three different camps. In order to respect the privacy of these host families, I do not specify here in which host family a given event or scenario arose.

<sup>19</sup> Julie Peteet (2005) notes that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, in comparable circumstances of less political pressure and greater earning possibilities, also invest in their homes.

<sup>20</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that these practical considerations should not be overlooked.

usually kept within the family rather than distributed amongst kin and friends. Consumption patterns supported by that income do not have to be shared. Where once all refugees ate the same rations, now inter-household variation in food consumption is pronounced.

Secondly, in some elite households commoditised labour has appeared, for example, in the form of the hired help of a male worker from Mauritania.<sup>21</sup> Labour shortfalls in non-elite houses are usually met by the loaning of female kin's labour. This alternative and more frequent practice makes it all the more remarkable that some elite families prefer to bring waged labour into their homes.

Thirdly, in specific contexts the extent of the social relations in which household members engage may be deliberately curtailed. Some families avoid going to see certain relatives so as to avoid imposing the costs of hospitality on them. Now that hospitality can include going to the shops to buy the necessaries, rather than just doing the best with what one has to hand, people have grown cautious about inflicting its burdens. In one of my host families, the mother explained to me that she did not go to see her daughter's in-laws, even though they were relatives and lived near her own close relatives in a *wilāya* that we visited regularly, because it was not right (*mā hi zaina*) to impose on them the material costs of hosting her. Likewise, persons may feel they cannot make a visit or attend an event unless they can afford to take appropriate gifts. Another of my host families had been invited by a personal visit to attend a wedding in the same *wilāya*. Such personal visits could on occasions operate as a prerequisite for attending a wedding: I observed that when a physically close neighbour hosted a wedding, but had not personally invited the host family in question, the family felt that it would not be right for them to attend if they had not specially 'called' to go. Yet, on the occasion of this personal invitation, in the end no one from our family attended the wedding in question. When I asked why, they explained that, again, it was not right to go to a wedding if one could not take along a gift (*rāfīdh shi*).

This sketch of an increasingly privatised household must be qualified in a number of ways. Where the sphere of some household ties is narrowing, other ties may be activated on an ever-widening scale. The incident of the wedding invitation above might also be read as an example of a family activating as many ties as possible in the hope of attracting more contributions towards the costs of the wedding celebration. A few informants, both men and women, of younger and middle-aged generations, thought that some families acted in this way. Refugees also engage in extensive networks of reciprocal help as a means of coping with market shortages. There is an unpredictably irregular supply in the market of items such as sugar and the spring water with which tea

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<sup>21</sup> Elite families in the camps enjoy different kinds of economic, political and social privileges. Sources of income in the camps for the richer families can include remittances from relatives in Europe, well-paid jobs in aid organisations or the political infrastructure, help from relatives in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and pensions from the Spanish state for former employees who carried out certain kinds of work in the Spanish colonial administration.

is made. Neighbours will help each other through times of shortage until supplies are once again available. Such help networks in the face of market shortages extend beyond inter-household relations, for equivalent help networks are cultivated in Rabouni, where a savvy ministry worker may foster close ties with a Rabouni restaurant so that he or she can buy bread there on the days when bread has run out in the *marsa* shops. I also noted a tendency for households to diversify the labour force participation of unmarried working household members across both public and private labour sectors. At the level of the household, this promises the benefits, as well as protection from the pitfalls, of both sectors. Thus one finds siblings who are both teachers and shop-keepers, taxi-drivers and ministry workers.<sup>22</sup> The 'privatisation' of households in the camps is therefore but one trend in a complex social panorama.

One might respond that the sketch of a privatising household and its counter-currents merely tells a similar tale to that of other studies of household changes in situations of marketisation, sedentarisation and exile (e.g. Layne 1994, Bascom 1998, Pine 2002) and coping strategies for all of these (e.g. Humphrey 1983:296, González de la Rocha 1994). Certainly, though these changes are not without their ethnographic interest, I delineate them here not so much for their own sake as for the sake of what tracing these changes may allow us to see and ask. That is to say, in contrast to the early revolutionary household and its associated domaining, has the late revolutionary domaining created the opportunity for households to produce persons with dispositions less suited to the state-movement, and even perhaps more suited to membership in the *qabīla*?

There is some evidence that this may be the case. The increasingly privatised household, with (more) private infrastructure, income, consumption patterns and – to an extent – social relations, is producing persons whose social dispositions are less suited to the state-movement in that they are more ready to give up labouring for it, even when this jeopardises the state-movement's capacity to provide public services. Such persons include the a woman who once wove floor mats with her local Committee and now makes her weekly trip to Tindouf shops to stock her home-based groceries shop, a man who left teaching to run his clothes shop in the *marsa*, and a judge who has migrated to Europe to seek work there. On the further question of whether households may be producing persons with social dispositions suited to membership in a *qabīla*, daily practices in the refugee camps, many of them centring on the household, indeed bespeak the apparent re-emergence of the social relations of the *qabīla*.<sup>23</sup> The foundation of a new household, a wedding, which was celebrated in the early revolutionary period within the local structures of the state-movement, is marked in the late revolutionary

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<sup>22</sup> This diversification usually relies on a male in a private sector role. The public-sector role could be performed by either a male or a female.

<sup>23</sup> However, in writing of a 're-emergence' of the *qabīla*, I am not suggesting that 'unchanging' *qabīla* relations are 'returning', but that a discourse surrounding a notion of *qabīla* is re-emerging that, as others have shown elsewhere (e.g. Casciarri 2006), may entail social relations significantly changed from those going by that name in other historical settings.

period by the congregation of many people linked by their common membership in a *qabīla*. Of course not only *qabīla* members will attend a wedding, but the presence of many of them is expected. The domestic space of third parties is frequently referred to through mention of their *qabīla* or even their status group (blacksmiths, ex-slaves). On two occasions I observed in homes the teaching of genealogies to young children by adult relatives. There are even some *qabīla*-run schemes which set up a *qabīla*-specific fund, called a *sundūq*, into which male adult household members make regular financial contributions, the sum of which are placed in collective *qabīla*-owned investments such as trucks to bring trade goods to the camps from Mauritania (though not all *qabā'il* have such funds) (Wilson 2010b).

Yet these trends in which households are playing a part – the undermining of the public sector and the re-emergence of *qabīla* loyalties – are received problematically by both the state-movement and refugees. I have already mentioned the widespread consternation at the reduced level of public services in the camps. The state-movement is also enacting its own measures to bolster the public sector. For example, it requires that groups applying for a Spanish NGO's micro-credit scheme contain several public-sector workers, and it recognises five years' service in the public sector as one means of qualifying as a candidate for the legislative elections (there is no such private sector equivalent qualification). As for the re-emergence of *qabīla* loyalties, some refugees criticise the *sundūq* as unwelcome, opining that there is scant evidence of a *sundūq* being known to be used for the purposes for which it was founded, such as discharging compensation (*diyya*) payments. Some are openly critical when they believe that a particular family have refused a marriage for their daughter because of questions of *qabīla* membership. The state-movement also demonstrates wariness of *qabīla* loyalties, for instance, campaigning openly through the 2008 electoral reforms for votes to be cast for candidates on the grounds of competence rather than *qabīla* membership. Thus, any discussion of the re-emerging importance of the *qabīla* in the camps must recognise local controversy surrounding this, at the level of both state-movement officials and those who hold no such office. If this controversy expresses concern in the camps that, despite the original anti-tribalist vein of the revolution, the *qabīla* may be strengthening its claims on and appeal to refugees, then the new kinds of households seem both to facilitate and reflect this shift.

### *Conclusion*

Taking inspiration from Verdery and Strathern, I set out to examine households in order to map changes in the articulation of domaining for Saharawi refugees from pre-exile to early and late revolutionary times. The revolutionary agenda of the Saharawi refugees — which, I have argued, re-articulated domaining away from the supposition of a *qabīla*/non-*qabīla* distinction towards the supposition of a public/private distinction

orientated originally towards the prioritisation of the public domain – is a provocative ethnographic reminder that, even if domaining is often assumed to take the form of a public/private division, this is by no means necessarily the case. My main theoretical concern has been to show, at least for this case, how the household as the site for the production of 'ultimate' products of persons with certain social dispositions is significant in re-articulations of domaining. The discussion also allows us to address several questions particular to the Saharawi refugee case.

The observations of refugees and visitors, reported at the outset, of how much households in the camps had changed over the course of exile can now be understood with greater nuance. My argument suggests that the remembered early revolutionary household is so strongly present in refugees' memories not only because it is different from late revolutionary households, but also because it is in turn so different from pre-exile households. For households, in my analysis, were subject in the early revolutionary period to changes, at times instigated by the state-movement, which went beyond the practical considerations of the constraints of exile, both encouraging the production of social dispositions suitable to the state-movement and discouraging dispositions suitable to membership in the *qabīla*.

In contrast, changes affecting the late revolutionary household, which I characterised as more 'private', were not instigated by the state-movement, which perceives it as problematic to say the least. That the state-movement is coping with, rather than directing, these changes in the late revolutionary household fits with a wider late revolutionary pattern that the state-movement is less able to direct the refugees than before. This can be seen in how it has sought to work through *qabīla* leaders (*shuyūkh*) rather than its own officers in several areas of administrative life in the late revolutionary period (Wilson 2009, 2010c). But whilst other commentators would go so far as to suggest that *qabīla* affairs are a driving, if covert, force in the camps (Cozza 2004, Solà-Martín 2007), I would suggest grounds for caution. One reason for caution is that, although for methodological reasons it was hard for me to reconstruct 'resistance' to the state-movement's directed transformation of the household and domaining in the early revolutionary period, it is clear from the late revolutionary material that the local reception, across different political environments, of the re-emergence of the *qabīla* is controversial. If this controversy exists, it suggests that the public domain and revolutionary agenda have not disappeared, and that shifts which are perceived by some to threaten them – such as the re-emergence of the *qabīla* – can attract criticism. That said, a second reason for caution is to question whether the notion of an opposition between the *qabīla* and the state-movement, as originally implied by the latter's ban on 'tribalism', a notion still pertinent for many in the camps (and some external commentators), is satisfactory.

What we see clearly in the late revolutionary period is how the public domain and revolutionary agenda may be challenged by, and yet co-exist with, (potentially) contrary tendencies. The late revolutionary households are interesting for how they are caught between producing persons who wish to pursue both the political and social aims of

self-determination and the social revolution on the one hand, and other interests, such as private (especially material) interests and those of *qabīla* membership, on the other. The notion of an opposition between state-movement and *qabīla* may not be satisfactory, then, in that what late revolutionary households help us see is how the production of social dispositions does not necessarily entail choosing between the state-movement or the *qabīla* (or private, material interests for that matter), but rather can involve accommodating a range of social dispositions. Such accommodation can be hard work, though – and is surely only made harder not just by the re-emergence of the *qabīla* but by years of exile and disappointment with the international community's commitment to implementing self-determination. Indeed, taking inspiration once again from Verdery, we might say that the complaints about how much households have altered, which provided the ethnographic entry point for this study, refer to the changes described here only in an 'immediate' sense. In 'ultimate' or implicit terms, these complaints may express something more: both the hard work of accommodating revolutionary aspirations through historical change, and refugees' deep-felt malaise that after so many years political barriers far from the camps keep them living in households of exile.

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