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A History of Western Sahara

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Introduction

Western Sahara, a vast swathe of desert along Africa's northwest coast, is a land shaped by its geography and the resilience of its people. Bordered by Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and the Atlantic Ocean, the region has long commanded the attention of powers near and far, though it remains one of the world's last unresolved colonial territories. The purpose of this book is to trace the intricate and often turbulent history of Western Sahara—a history defined by indigenous cultures, European ambitions, and a still-unfolding struggle for self-determination.

At the core of Western Sahara's story are the Sahrawi people, nomads whose lives, identities, and loyalties evolved across centuries of trade, migration, and adaptation to one of the planet's harshest environments. Their tribal societies navigated shifting alliances, survived in the arid expanse, and left an enduring cultural imprint that persists in the face of monumental change. The region's early history, while less documented than later colonial and post-colonial periods, laid the groundwork for the challenges and contestations that followed.

The late nineteenth century brought dramatic transformation, as Spain, drawn by European rivalries and ambitions, asserted colonial authority over the territory. Spanish rule would reshape the land's political contours, introduce administrative isolation from the region's neighbors, and extract natural resources—particularly the lucrative phosphate deposits. Yet, despite the trappings of colonial governance, the question of Sahrawi representation and rights remained consistently unresolved, leaving a legacy of frustration and unrest.

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Decolonization after World War II sparked new currents of hope and conflict. The global push against colonialism, coupled with rising Sahrawi nationalist aspirations, intersected with competing regional claims—most notably from Morocco and Mauritania. Key moments, particularly the International Court of Justice's 1975 opinion and the controversial Madrid Accords, set the stage for decades of conflict and negotiations, leaving the fundamental issue of self-determination dangling without clear resolution. The struggle for Western Sahara became internationalized, attracting both solidarity and strategic interest from countries and organizations around the world.

The subsequent decades witnessed armed conflict, mass displacement, and a prolonged humanitarian crisis, with thousands of Sahrawis forced to seek refuge in Algeria's Tindouf camps. The 1991 ceasefire offered a brief hope of a peaceful referendum, but its promises remain unfulfilled, hampered by irreconcilable positions on the territory's future and persistent diplomatic deadlock. Sporadic flare-ups and a

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2020 resumption of hostilities underscore how fragile the peace continues to be, and how unresolved questions of sovereignty, rights, and identity endure.

This book aims to illuminate the many threads of Western Sahara's past and present: the interplay of indigenous society and colonial imposition; the geopolitics of decolonization; the long, slow workings of diplomacy; and the lives of those who endure amid uncertainty. It is a story whose conclusion remains unwritten, but whose significance—as an emblem of incomplete decolonization and as a lived reality for the Sahrawi people—demands our enduring attention.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its People: Geography and Early Inhabitants

Western Sahara is a land defined by the vast, unyielding power of the Sahara Desert. Stretching across the northwest coast of Africa, this sparsely populated territory occupies a unique geographical space, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and northwest, Morocco to the north, Algeria to the northeast, and Mauritania to the east and south. Its boundaries, like many in Africa, are largely a legacy of colonial agreements, defined by lines drawn on maps rather than natural formations or historical divisions. The sheer scale of the territory is significant; at approximately 266,000 to 284,000 square kilometers, it's roughly the size of the United Kingdom or slightly smaller than Italy.

The dominant feature of Western Sahara is, undeniably, its arid terrain. It is one of the most inhospitable and sparsely populated regions on the planet, consisting mostly of low, flat desert plains. These plains are a mix of rocky areas (hamadas) and vast stretches of sand dunes (ergs). While generally flat, the land rises slightly in the east and northeast, with small mountains reaching up to around 700 meters in elevation. Water is exceptionally scarce. There are no permanent rivers, though wadis, or dry riverbeds, crisscross the landscape, occasionally filling with water during the rare periods of rainfall, primarily in autumn. However, due to the intense heat and permeable ground, this water quickly evaporates or is absorbed into the subsoil, forming underground reservoirs tapped by wells.

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The climate is characterized as a hot desert climate. Along the Atlantic coast, the presence of a cool offshore current provides a moderating influence, keeping temperatures relatively constant and producing morning fogs that can penetrate several miles inland. This coastal strip offers a slight reprieve from the extremes of the interior. Inland, however, conditions are far more severe. Summers are long and intensely hot, with average highs frequently exceeding 40°C and capable of soaring past 50°C in places like Smara or Aousserd. Winters in the interior are shorter but still very warm, though nighttime temperatures can drop significantly, occasionally falling below freezing in the northern areas, which is a rare but stark reminder of the desert's variability. Annual rainfall is minimal across the entire territory, typically less than 50 millimeters per year, making sustained agriculture nearly impossible in most areas.

Despite the challenging environment, this land has been inhabited for millennia. Archaeological evidence, such as Neolithic rock engravings found in areas like Saguia el-Hamra, suggests a long history of human presence, with successive groups of hunters, pastoralists, and even some early agriculturists in favored locations. This was

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prior to a gradual process of desertification that began around 2500 BCE. The introduction of the camel, from the third century CE onwards, was a transformative development, facilitating movement and interaction across the increasingly arid landscape and enabling the development of more extensive trans-Saharan trade routes.

The people who came to define the territory now known as Western Sahara are the Sahrawis. They are a population with deep roots in the western Sahara desert, a complex ethnic tapestry woven from indigenous Berber strands and later arriving Arab elements. The earliest known inhabitants included groups like the Gaetuli and possibly the Bafour, who were later absorbed or replaced by Berber-speaking populations. Among the most significant of these Berber groups were the Sanhaja confederation, who inhabited vast areas of the western Sahara before the arrival of Arab tribes. The Sanhaja were instrumental in the early trans-Saharan trade networks, connecting sub-Saharan Africa with the North African and Mediterranean worlds.

The arrival of Arab tribes, particularly the Beni Hassan, beginning around the 11th century, marked another pivotal moment in the ethnic and cultural formation of the Sahrawi people. These Bedouin Arab tribes, part of the larger Maqil migration from the Arabian Peninsula, gradually moved westward across North Africa. Over centuries, through a process of interaction, acculturation, and sometimes conflict, the Beni Hassan integrated with the existing Sanhaja Berber tribes. This fusion of Arab and Berber elements, along with influences from West African populations encountered through trade and migration, gave rise to the distinct Sahrawi identity and culture. The Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, still spoken by the Sahrawi people today, is a linguistic testament to the influence of the Beni Hassan.

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Traditionally, Sahrawi society was organized around tribal structures. These tribes were not static entities but rather existed in a complex web of shifting alliances and relationships, reflecting the fluid nature of nomadic life in the desert. Each tribe was further divided into sub-tribes, often operating with a significant degree of autonomy. This tribal organization was the primary basis for social and political life in the pre-colonial era. Decision-making within a tribe was typically handled by a *Djema'a*, an assembly of elected elders and religious scholars who would gather to make laws and resolve disputes. This system, based on consensus and customary law (*A'arf*) alongside Islamic judicial code (*sharia*), underscored the decentralized nature of Sahrawi governance before external powers imposed their will.

Life for these early inhabitants was inextricably linked to the rhythms and demands of the desert. Nomadic pastoralism was the cornerstone of their economy and lifestyle. Herding camels and goats across vast distances, following seasonal rainfall patterns and seeking out scarce water sources, was essential for survival. The camel, in particular, was vital, serving not only as a source of milk, meat, and hides but also as the primary means of transportation across the challenging terrain. This nomadic

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existence required an intimate knowledge of the desert landscape, its subtle signs, and hidden resources.

Beyond pastoralism, trans-Saharan trade played a crucial role in Sahrawi society. Western Sahara lay along important caravan routes that connected the resource-rich regions of sub-Saharan Africa with the markets of North Africa and beyond. Sahrawi tribes participated in this trade, facilitating the movement of goods such as salt, gold, slaves, and other commodities. This not only provided economic sustenance but also exposed them to different cultures and ideas, contributing to the unique blend of influences in Sahrawi culture.

The pre-colonial history of Western Sahara, while less extensively documented than later periods, reveals a society deeply adapted to its environment, organized along tribal lines, and connected to wider regional networks through trade. It was a world of movement, resilience, and intricate social structures forged in the crucible of the vast desert, a foundation upon which future layers of history would be imposed.

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