

Music as a source of ontological security: traditional and political songs of the Saharawi diaspora in Spain

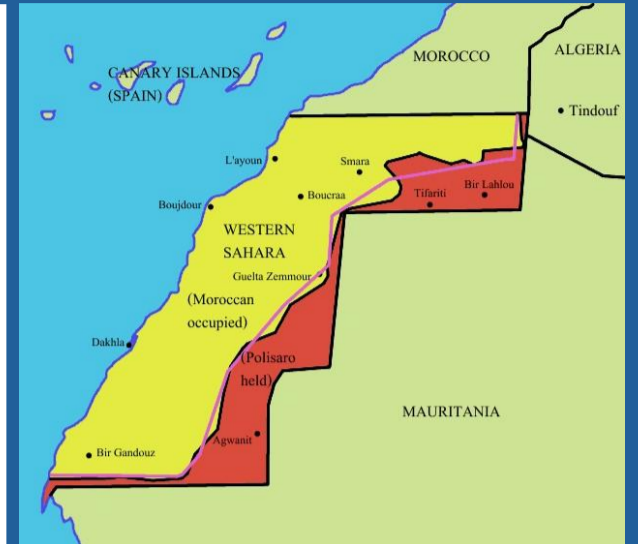
Sabrina Salis, independent researcher

Saharawi music

The Saharawis

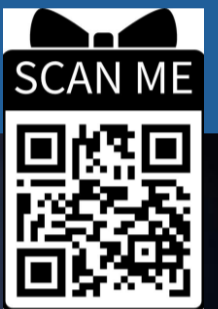
Traditional repertoire on nomadic life, evocative of Western Sahara as a place/homeland;
Transformative shift in 1975:
 - music assumed a **higher status**;
 - music became a **political tool**;
 - In the camps: it was while listening to music that people came together to discuss the conflict and the lost homeland.
 - traditional and political songs, which are played and sang at community events, are an important means for the diaspora's **political and cultural activism**.

- **Nomadic population** living in Trab-el-Bidan;
- Various tribes, speaking Hassaniya (Arabic dialect);
- 1884: Beginning of **Spanish colonization** of Western Sahara;
- 1975: the invasion of Western Sahara by Morocco sparked the **exodus of the Saharawis** in the Algerian refugees camps, in Spain, Cuba, and Syria.
- The **Saharawi diaspora** has been a prominent voice for self-determination, freedom and human rights, keeping international interest on this cause alive.



Map of Western Sahara: <http://mapsof.net/map/western-sahara-map-showing-morocco-and-polisario>

'Viva el POLISARIO', song by Nayim Alal



Aim

To explore how Saharawi traditional and political songs provide ontological security for the Saharawi diaspora in Spain.

Argument

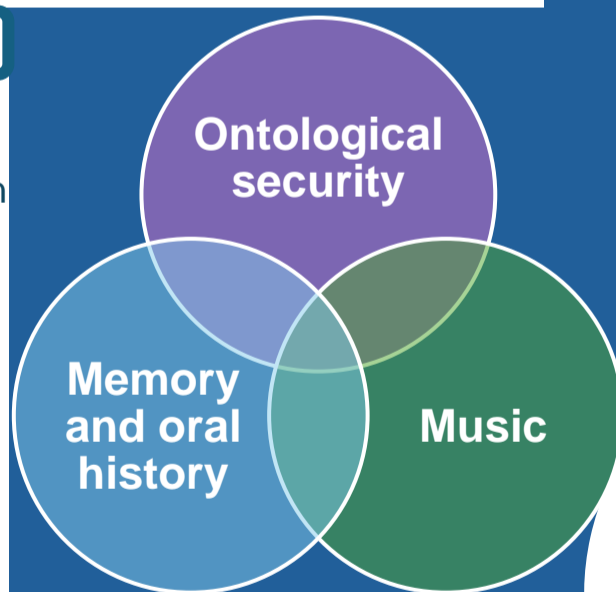
music provides the Saharawi diaspora with a sense of ontological security, by acting as a "site of memory" (Nora, 1989) where feelings of belonging and yearning for a lost homeland are evoked, enacted and mobilized.

Methodology

Oral history approach, in-depth interviews with members of the Saharawi diaspora in Spain, Andalusia.

Gap in literature

While scholars have increasingly explored the relevance of cultural heritage- in its built, environmental and archaeological forms- for ontological security, the role of intangible heritage has been so far underexplored. This research contributes to fill this gaps with a case study bringing together studies of ontological security and traditional music



"This music you know...helps me recover what is my homeland!" (field interview 1)

"It is something that I listen to and suddenly brings me back when I was in Sahara! I was young, in the Saharawi camps and I was with my family" (field interview 2)

"We don't listen to romantic music here. All our music is about the struggle...our land...the fight against Morocco!" (field interview 3)

Memories and evocations elicited through music keep the search for a lost homeland active. Expanding on Vulović and Ejdus' (2024) argument that the lack of the object of desire fuels agency, music generates agency for the Saharawi cause as the homeland remains an unattainable object.

Conclusions and future directions: this case study highlighted the mechanisms through which music, as evoked through oral histories, constructs ontological security and fuels agency. Future research might expand this area of work to other mechanisms, geographies, and contexts, in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the role of music for ontological security.