

# Flood in Western Moroccan Sahara: Saharawis and their belief stronger than their food needs in relation to scientific rationality

**Keywords:** saharawis, environment, bacteria, representations, biological phenomenon

## Introduction

On February 17, 2017, the Oued Sakia el Hamra in the region of Laayoune in Morocco was overwhelmed by a huge flood. The environment was turned upside down, instead of having a pond of about 10 hectares, the surface after the flood around 200 hectares and had become greenish carrying a strong smell (Direction of the service of water and forests, 2017).

The Saharawis believed that the water was dirty and they forbade it to be consumed and washed. Following this, the local authorities undertook to empty this pond including watering hundreds of tamarisks to maintain the dunes. French scientists I was part of alerted by this extremely rare biological phenomenon came to make a study on this aquatic biotope and by the same on the new representations raised by this place with the users. In May 2017, the team, after a biological analysis of the environment, validates the good quality of the water and enthusiastically discovers the abundant presence of a food bacteria throughout the pond commonly called spirulina. Despite this positive observation, the Saharawis have remained on their representations and continue to act accordingly.

My anthropological approach has tried to highlight, why this phenomenon of belief was unalterable among Saharawis, facing the encouraging scientific demonstration that could also help them in terms of food.

This research is located in Western Sahara in a conflict zone between Saharawi separatists in Morocco who claim sovereignty over the entire territory.<sup>1</sup> Their freedom of expression is sometimes limited because they are under Moroccan control and some sleep in refugee camps. However, during my talks they were able to engage because our speeches had no political significance.

From then on, I was able to set up an ethnographic approach that was based on direct observation of their representations and behaviors. This was of course based on the lived experience of my interlocutors which is part of the comprehensive anthropology.

## The context of this study

The place was a pond of the Oued Sakia el Hamra after the western exit of the city of Laayoune which was founded in 1940, after the discovery of a large water table.<sup>2</sup> This one is in full Moroccan Western desert.

The target audience: the inhabitants of this place are mostly Moroccan Saharawis, mostly sedentary but of nomadic traditions<sup>3</sup> and occasionally Moroccans working for the Regional Directorate of Moroccan Water and Forests.

The aim of this study is to understand why Saharawis continue to imagine dirty water despite scientific analysis demonstrating

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otherwise, and which also validates the presence of a bacterial food called spirulina<sup>4</sup> that could have to be very useful for them in terms of food.

## Concept and methods

### Concept

**The system of representations:** It should be noted that “the expression” system of representation “generally refers to sets of ideas and values specific to a society (...) or to a group, we will speak of collective representations”<sup>5</sup> Among Saharawis who are under a matriarchal regime,<sup>6</sup> verbal transmission is mainly made by women who convey their representations within the group and from generation to generation.<sup>3</sup>

During my interviews, I realized that the representations of my interlocutors were transmitted as “a contagion”.<sup>7</sup> The representations are propagated by three forms according to Saadi Lahlou: “the creation, the diffusion and the reifications”. In the subjective world of the individual these different forms have symbiotic relations and are constantly trying to structure themselves.

### Ethnographic method

**The comprehensive method:** On this phenomenon, we must identify what are the meanings attributed by the social actors. For this, my research is based on a comprehensive method that considers the individual as the unmistakable and unique unit that can reveal in certain situations a significant social behavior. This method crystallizes on the search of the meaning of the social practices and the cultural world of each informant. It is a way of approaching its object of research with the will above all to build its work with and around the informants. This approach works well if we are dealing with people representative of the phenomenon that interests us. My main tool for producing data was the free interview: a lively conversation. The interview helps to build the scientific activity based on the questions that the actors ask themselves in relation to their concrete knowledge”.<sup>8</sup> For the collection of data, I used a notebook and digital dictaphone receptacle of my observations.

## Results

**Water:** from the blessing of the rain, to the staining of their pond.

“In the desert without water, a Saharawi nomad is immediately sentenced to death,” explains Agha-Khaiifa, one of my informants. For Saharawis as for many other desert peoples, rain represents the divine manna.<sup>9</sup> “The salvation comes from the sky and for us the rain filled the wadi that makes us live” tells me Faska. “After the rain, however, we did the ritual prayer and we purified ourselves,” says Faska. Because water symbolizes life: water that we discover in darkness, and regenerates. The fish thrown at the confluence of the two seas, in the Sura of the Cave (Quran, 18, v. 61, 63), resurrects when it is plunged into water.

Thus the water that falls from the sky is comparable to the manna: by quenching it, it nourishes it. This is why water is requested by prayer, it is an object of supplication. “What in Allah hears the cry of his servant, he sends the rain may be that our prayers have not been strong enough,” proclaims me Wadou”. So when they experienced the torrential rains of February 17, 2010, they were happy with this vital event for them as for their crops or livestock, but: “The miracle turned into a nightmare and we cried when we saw the water change color and become all green (...) the information went around the camps in two days,” says Oum lakhoute. The greenish stained water is synonymous with death for them because often ancestral stories mixing belief and reality report identical facts especially concerning the very strong smell of putrefaction which is for them an indicator of risk, even if in fact they are only low amount of dead spirulina on the banks of the pond.

The belief prevailed over the scientific reality and it was like a contagion effect, all the Saharawis agreed not to touch this sick water as said to me Ali Fal one of my interlocutors. The basis of this phenomenon is empathy between individuals. What releases a transmissible adhesion from one individual to another, there is a symbolic efficiency that is established.<sup>10</sup> Thus, they can validate on this occasion a new representation of an unusual phenomenon that will allow them to federate. My study revealed the persistence of water symbolism among Saharawis. “This green and stinking water horrifies us, it can only lead to illness and death (...) this strange pollution me I tell you it is the cancer of the water, the wadi curses us (...) and that Do not eat it as foreigners say unless you want to catch the desert fever,” explains Aabla, an indignant Sahrawi mother. The desert fever called “giardiasis” is a disease contracted by dirty water, usually in desert countries because it can be transmitted through personal contact. The giardiasis infects somewhere near 200 million people worldwide, and is transmissible between animals and humans.

Everyone perceives the water of this pond as the primordial vital element that has been polluted by the wadi that has already brought them Moroccan settlers and now a life even more difficult. Once again we find that fundamental symbols persist in the human heart and imagination, in the collective mentality. This depiction of defilement can heighten the anxiety and appetite of talking signs. The bad luck since the events seems to be part of their daily life as soon as they become fatalistic and impervious to external opinions especially foreign. Isolation of Saharawis by the non trust abroad which generates new behavior.

**Following the analysis of the water and its positive results:** “We, we have lived in the desert for a long time and we know what is good or bad for us (...). During the events, we suffered a lot and we learned to be wary of the foreigner” explain me El hafed. This news that should have relieved them was taken as a challenge to their belief. “Nothing but the smell of water, it must not be good, I tell you”, retorted the scientist Zaoui.

He continues “You know we have suffered a lot during the events and especially our beautiful culture, so now the beautiful words of the foreigners can keep them for themselves even if they are scientists do not want to die for them”. “The children, as we no longer drink this water, we do not wash anymore, but the hardest thing is to ban animals,” says Nassima. We see that this decision is very important because it involves their survival, their belief in this case ignores the scientific reality. All my interlocutors consider the water of the pond despite the biological analysis revealing the presence of a food bacterium such as: Dangerous, dirty, stinking, disease-carrying, dead, unconscious, cursed. That this water must be evacuated by the watering of African Tamaris<sup>11</sup> for what returns to the bottom of the earth. Their behavior has changed and they avoid like the plague this place which since childhood was almost sacred, this water is no longer a reference of hope, but of danger. Now the water of this pond, in their symbolic representation, no longer represents order as purity but disorder in defilement.<sup>12</sup> In their imagination, there was between the clear consciousness and the unconscious collected as a synthesis between the two.<sup>13-26</sup>

## Conclusion

Having experienced the joy of the saving rain of the desert and the nightmare of defiling their pond. They remained on their position in front of the scientific demonstration because their route taught them to mistrust foreign opinions. From this experience all of my interlocutors want to forget this sad episode and convinced the local authorities to empty this pond to the regret of the scientists who thought they had found a fantastic experimental place. In a more general way, most of my interlocutors experienced as a failure the result of this fantastic flood. Their reports to the elements confirmed once again their fatalistic and respectful philosophy. This religious vision of my interlocutors in front of this event positions them as individuals impressed in their belief and who by their history have released a mistrust of the other.

For the moment, their attitudes towards the pond of their childhood have changed. They now look at the empty pond associated with the terrible heat of the desert, which in a few months should end their ordeal.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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