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While 26 years old Nasra is making tea, her veil keeps slipping down; "I still have to learn how to wear this absurdity," she grins. "In Cuba I used to wear mini-dresses. Here people find it odd when I wear jeans under my veil. After my return, my mother asked why I undress before going to sleep. Here it is customary to keep on your clothes at night. There is a world of difference between Havana and the desert of Tindouf."

Nasra like thousands of Sahrawi youth has followed a secondary education in Cuba. In the camps there are only primary education and two lower-level boarding schools. For their future education, Sahrawis are dependent on training facilities in friendly, socialist orientated countries like Cuba, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Russia and the former East Germany. After more than ten years abroad they return to the camps and face difficulties adapting.

Where does Nasra feel more at home? She thinks profoundly about it, "Cuba is my second home. I do speak Arabic, but I can express myself better in Spanish." She smiles, but stares as soon as she hears Julio Iglesias' voice on the radio. "My friend used to put on this song when I stayed over for the night," she whispers.

"What do you miss most?" I ask.

"In Cuba we went out for dinner, we visited a café or the cinema and we used to dance in the open air. Wonderful! Everything that was so common there, I miss over here. Even if the means are available, the society disapproves. Some time ago we had a salsa party—salsa in the Sahara. We have to hold that somewhere back, in secret."

Nasra has studied psychology in Cuba but she can not do much with it here. She wants to work, but there are no jobs available. Staying at home drives her mad. She wants to marry, but thinks that in these circumstances it would be "criminal" to have children. "What kind of future do they have here? Waiting for a referendum that keeps being postponed time after time?"

Overhearing our conversation about Cuba, a corpulent young man in jeans and a sweater calls: "Havana, I long for you and your cigars." He introduces himself as Ali and says that Cuba used to be his home for seventeen years. He studied medical biology. He left the camp in 1985 when he was ten years old, together with hundreds of Sahrawi children. An old Russian cruise-boat carried them for 13 days from the Algerian port town of Oran to Cuba.

"Ten years is rather young. Didn't you miss your family terribly?" I ask.

"I was too young and impressed by events that I forgot about my family in a couple of weeks. Once per six months I received a letter or a tape from home. That was all."

"Did you see your family in these seventeen years?"

"Yes, twice. It is too expensive to fly in all pupils every summer. Usually only the best students would come home during holidays. They used to teach at the camp schools in order to participate in the Sahrawi society and culture."

Nasra is one of the thousands of second generation Sahrawi youngsters who have studied for more than ten years in Cuba before returning to the camps of the liberation movement Polisario, in the South Western Sahara in Algiers. There they wait in a state of limbo for a solution to the conflict that has lasted already three decades. What follows is an excerpt from the recently published travelogue Africa's last colony, travels in the Western Sahara (in Dutch).¹

"I have heard elders complain that you youngsters are forgetting your roots," I remark. Ali looks at me with desperation and nervously cracks his knuckles. "Imagine," he replies softly. "When you live for seventeen years with the Cubans, you adapt to their state of mind. The cultural evenings of the Youth Union of Polisario are no match for this. Have you seen the museum of Sahrawi history next to

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the women's school? There are pictures of prehistoric men. Do you believe in that theory?"

Without waiting for an answer he adds, "In Cuba I studied Darwin's theory of evolution. I do not believe in the origin of the universe as described in the Quran. To whom can I say these kinds of things? You get back to the camps and are confronted with many things you are not used to, or things you even disapprove of. If I say something, it is not accepted. We find ourselves in an intellectual straddle."

"We live in the desert, there is nothing here, we are dependent on aid. I cannot work nor earn any money. I am afraid I can't keep up with my field of studies."

What about the growing generation gap? "My father wants me to marry a girl from a well-off family. When I marry it will be with the woman I love. My father doesn't understand that. We quarrel regularly about it. I am used to expressing my feelings, to talking about girl friends and sex. That is not done here."



PHOTO BY NICOLIEN ZUIJDGEEST, 2003

Note

1. Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2004

*Nicolien Zuijdggeest works as an independent journalist. She has lived for several months with Sahrawi families in the occupied Western Sahara and travelled extensively in Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara, and Mauritania.
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Watching a soap opera, Sahara desert