Memories of Havana in Desert Refugee Camps

While 26 years old Nasra is making tea, her veil keeps slipping down, “I still have to learn how to wear this absurdly,” 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 is one of the thousands of second generation Sahrawi youths 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 nervous 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 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.”

Watching a soap opera, Sahara desert

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Note
1. Amsterdam: Bukaq, 2004

Nicolien Zuijdgeest 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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