

# Western Sahara - a forgotten country!

By Fr. Bill Turnbull W.F.

## THE LAND

The Western Sahara borders with Morocco (north), Algeria (east) and Mauritania (south). It is the only country in Africa which has still not gained self-determination and full independence. Formerly known as the 'Spanish Sahara' it's sovereignty has been disputed for several decades.

Morocco has laid claim to the 'Southern Provinces' and controls much of present day Western Sahara. The two original provinces, 'Saguia el Hamra' in the north and 'Rio de Oro', the two-thirds in the south, cover the country's area of over 102,703 square miles (267,028 sq.kms.). For administrative and political purposes Morocco has divided Western Sahara into four provinces which have ten seats, filled by Saharawis (the people of Western Sahara) whose political views are favourable to the regime, in the Moroccan Parliament. The provinces of Laayoune, Smara, and Boujdour have taken part in elections since 1977 and Oued Ed Dahab province since 1983.

The Western Sahara can be divided into three topographical areas extending from the Atlantic coast in the west. There is the rocky desert of the Atlas mountains and the Zemmour hills (north east); the Oued Draa (north) and the Jat (west) river basins where the Saguia el Hamra (the Red Canal) flows and gives its name to the region; and finally there is the Rio de Oro which is the flat low lying plains and sand dunes of the Sahara desert in the south and east.

Overall the climate of Western Sahara is harsh with the extremes of cold dry winters and hot summers. There is some low irregular rainfall in the Jat and Draa valleys which is

held in the depressions and allows for a little cultivation of cereal, such as barley and corn, and cattle raising. Despite this the rainwater evaporates quickly. In the Rio de Oro the rainwater sinks below the surface and gathers in underground wells. The interior's temperatures can reach 120 to 140° F (50 to 60° C) in the summer and drop to freezing in the winter.

## THE PEOPLE

The Saharawi are a mixture of indigenous Berbers and Arab peoples from the area and also those who have passed through over the centuries. The direct ancestors of the present Saharawis were peoples who crossed North Africa from the Yemen in the 15th. century. There were clashes between local tribes and any newcomers but things had settled by the 18th. century.

The nature of the land nurtured the type of people who lived there. With very little rain they were forced to be nomadic and so moved around in search of pasture for their animals, only growing a few crops. They crossed the desert following regular routes according to the season and the places where water and pastures could be found.

In the Middle Ages the Saguia el Hamra became known as a centre of Islamic learning. The influence of Islam and Arabic culture has been a layer of unity amongst the different peoples. All this, together with the country's struggle for independence with Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, has made a perfect soil from which Saharawi nationalism has grown.

## THE HISTORY

It is difficult to give a detailed history of the Western Sahara. The main reason for this is



that it has always been sparsely populated by mainly nomadic people. Over the centuries there have been historical links between Morocco and Western Sahara. These connections were not in the strict sense of a state or political alliance but were more through religious, cultural and personal contacts. The presence of the trans-Saharan trade routes meant that the region was a place where different cultures and peoples met as they passed through, each leaving their mark. (please see the next article)

## THE 19TH. CENTURY

During the 19th. century Spain showed an interest in the coastal areas of Western Sahara and Morocco especially in connection with the Canary Islands. Spain first colonised the

'Spanish Sahara' in 1884 and proclaimed the area from Cape Blanc to Cape Bojador a protectorate. This was ratified by the European powers at the 'Berlin Conference' the following year and Spain was given jurisdiction over the territory.

At the time France was the major colonial power in much of North and West Africa and was always looking to expand. Between 1886 and 1900 there were discussions to define the borders between the French and Spanish territories. From these talks came several Franco-Spanish agreements, some involving Morocco, which were signed in 1900, in 1904 and 1912. These treaties defined Western Sahara's borders for the colonial powers, though there were to be further developments later.

The local population in the area resisted the changes as much as possible. The new borders also affected the surrounding countries of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania. This brought local leaders, such as Ma Al-Aineen, into the fight. Al-Aineen was a chieftain from Mauritania and he moved into Western Sahara (Wadi Dahab and Saguia el Hamra) from where he led a coalition of Mauritanian tribes.

### THE 20TH. CENTURY

In 1905 Al-Aineen asked the Sultan of Morocco to support the resistance against the colonisers. The Sultan gave some help in the form of arms. He too was having trouble with France at the time and was in the process of coming to an agreement with them. The Saharawi people began to fight back in 1906. Al-Aineen and his army were eventually defeated by the French in 1910.

France intensified its military campaign in Mauritania and also made many incursions into Saguia el Hamra. The sporadic fighting continued and France even threatened to occupy Wadi Dahab and Saguia el Hamra because of the rebel activity. After several joint Franco-Spanish military operations Spain took full possession of the area as a colony in 1936.

In 1958 France, Spain and Morocco co-operated in the 'Ecouvillon Operation' against the Saharawi rebels. As a result of the help which Morocco had given to Spain, Morocco was allowed the province of Tarfaya south of which was under Spanish control.

Morocco's claims on 'Spanish Sahara' began at the time of the country's independence in 1956. King Hassan, of Morocco, had the idea of re-establishing the 'Greater Morocco' or 'Moroccan Sultanate'.

This concept, and the claim to sovereignty over the Western Sahara, is based on the idea that Saharan tribal leaders had a traditional

loyalty to the Moroccan Sultan as spiritual leader and ruler. As a result it is asserted that the 'Moroccan Sultanate' of old extended into the Sahara, into Algeria and south to the Senegal River, including present day Mauritania. There was no real proof of this but it gave Morocco some justification for claiming sovereignty over Western Sahara and the south-west of Algeria. The French had not clearly defined the Morocco-Algeria border which left the ownership of 600 miles of desert, between Bechar and Tindouf, in dispute. This added more to the confusion.

Until the 1960s the Saharawi people still retained their essentially nomadic life but they then began to settle more. During this decade Spain and Morocco began to exploit the vast natural resources of the territory. The 'wind of change' was sweeping across Africa with all neighbouring countries looking for independence. The Spanish Sahara was no exception and the question of its future was first brought to the United Nations General Assembly in 1965.

In 1967 the 'Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara' was created which intensified the political move towards independence and organised huge demonstrations. This was especially so in 1970 when demonstrations were harshly put down and the party banned, on 17th. June, but not before the seeds of Saharawi nationalism had been truly sown. Instead of quieting the situation this gave new impetus to the Saharawi cause and the fight for independence.

### THE POLISARIO FRONT AND THE SADR

In 1969, the 'Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro' (Polisario Front) began to take shape in order to fight Spanish colonial rule in 'Spanish Sahara'. Members of the Polisario were drawn from the indigenous Arab-Berber population. They

claimed to represent the Saharawi people's wish for independence and they began to fight a guerrilla war to establish the 'Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic' (SADR). When the Spanish left they turned their arms against the Moroccans and Mauritians who occupied the territory.

Both Algeria and Libya supported the Polisario Front at different times and as a result have had strained relations with the Moroccan government. Algeria has also allowed Saharawi refugees to establish camps in the Tindouf area, in the west of the country. Algeria does not claim any part of Western Sahara for itself but, like many other countries, supports the idea that the population should have a referendum on self-determination in order to determine the territory's future status.

Those who have fought for the independence of Western Sahara believe that there are many reasons why the West does not wish this to come about. These may be summed up as follows: Western Sahara's mineral wealth (phosphates, uranium, iron, natural gas and oil), the fishing grounds and the US, French and Spanish have economic and strategic interests in the area.

### THE 'GREEN MARCH'

Morocco officially pressed its territorial claims to the Spanish Sahara in 1974 and, together with Mauritania, protested against Spain's plan to grant independence to the territory. A census, in the same year, was undertaken to find those who were eligible to vote in a

referendum on the issue of self-determination which was due to take place in December.

At this time the United Nations General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to look into the dispute. On 16th. October, 1975, the ICJ delivered its opinion. It found that while there were historical ties between the inhabitants of the 'Western Sahara' and Morocco, they were not sufficient to give Morocco, nor Mauritania, sovereignty over the territory. At this time 'Western Sahara' became the UN's new name for the area.

In an almost instant response to the ICJ ruling over Western Sahara King Hassan ordered the start of the 'Green March'. This was the mobilisation of about 350,000 unarmed civilians. The aim of the march was to show Morocco's claim over the territory and to take control of it. On 31st. October Moroccan forces enter the north west of the territory



and they were followed by the 'Green March' which crossed the border on 6th. November. Three days later King Hassan asked the marchers to withdraw. The 'Green March' gave King Hassan popularity at home but it brought a strong reaction from the Polisario. They fought back against the Moroccan occupation and began an extended costly war which has effected northern Africa to the present day. 35,000 of Morocco's 70,000 military were involved in defending the territory.

At the same time King Hassan made diplomatic moves to take over Western Sahara. This was towards the end of the Franco era in Spain. Secret meetings were held in Madrid between Mauritania, Morocco and Spain to decide the fate of the territory. From this King Hassan got the Spanish government to agree to the tripartite 'Madrid Accord' on 14th. November, 1975. This gave control of the northern two thirds (Saguia el Hamra) of Western Sahara to Morocco, and the southern one third (Rio de Oro) to Mauritania.

The result was a shared administrative authority between the two countries but the question of sovereignty was not settled. Spain's role in the administration of the Western Sahara ceased altogether but an agreement with Morocco was made on the rights to exploit the phosphate deposits in the area.

#### THE REFUGEE CAMPS

In 1975 the Saharawi people were caught in a pincer movement by their two neighbouring countries. The Mauritanian armed forces entered Western Saharan from the south and Moroccan forces from the north. This meant that the local inhabitants found themselves faced with two choice: to remain under the rule of one of these countries or to leave.

By the end of 1975 many thousands had chosen the latter and fled to refugee camps in

the east of the region. Most of the men joined the rebel army while mainly women, children and old people made up the population of the new camps. Later these havens were attacked causing the inhabitants to flee into the desert of south west Algeria where new camps were established at wells around the town of Tindouf.

At first there were three refugee camps each named after towns in Western Sahara - Smara, Dhakla and El Aaiun - and later a fourth camp (Auserd) was formed. Despite the assistance given by the Algerian government thousands of people died of hunger and disease. Gradually, by 1980, the epidemics were stopped through health and hygiene programmes.

The camps are still there today and have taken on a town-like structure for their daily running with dispensaries, schools, administration, and a SADR elected council. Still they lack many of the necessary medical and other facilities to support a population of about 170,000. 80% of the camps' adult population are women.

#### THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

As had been agreed, Spain withdrew from the Western Sahara and ceded the territory to Morocco and to Mauritania on 27th. February, 1976. On the same day the Polisario Front proclaimed the SADR, at Bir Lahlou, with a government in exile, and they set about trying to gain international recognition. Within two months of Spain leaving, Morocco had occupied two-thirds of the land - about 70,000 square miles.

The Polisario's diplomatic efforts began to bear fruit in October, 1978, when the Centre Democratic Union (CDU), Spain's ruling party, signed an agreement recognising them as the only legitimate representatives of the Saharawi people. Spain said that the 'Madrid Accord' of November, 1975, was just a transfer of

### SOME FACTS AND FIGURES ON WESTERN SAHARA

#### THE COUNTRY

Land area: 102,703 sq. mls. (266,000 sq. kms.)

#### THE PEOPLE

Population: 217,211 (July, 1995 estimate), There are about 170,00 refugees in Algeria. The Polisario Front estimates the total population at one million. The people are mainly of Arab and Berber descent.

Religion: Islam.

Languages: Spanish (official), Hassaniya Arabic, Moroccan Arabic.

#### THE ECONOMY

Land use: meadows and pastures 19%; other 81%. Most of the land is arid so the main economic activity is the grazing of livestock and mining of phosphates.

Currency: 1 Moroccan dirham (DH) = 100 centimes

Exports: \$8 million (f.o.b., 1982 est.)  
commodities: phosphates 62%

Imports: \$30 million (c.i.f., 1982 est.)  
commodities: fuel for fishing fleet,  
foodstuffs

#### HEALTH

Infant mortality rate: 148.95 deaths/1,000 live births (1995 est.)

Life expectancy at birth:  
total population: 46.31 years  
male: 45.34 years  
female: 47.59 years (1995 est.)

#### POLITICS \*

Political Parties: The People's Liberation Front of Saguia al-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) founded 10th. May, 1973. The military wing is the Saharan People's Liberation Army.

Unions: The Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro General Workers' Union (UGTSARIO).

Government: The President of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is Muhammad Abdelaziz. Mahfud Ali Beiba, is President of the Council of Ministers. The Superior Council of the Revolution is the main governmental body.

\* Morocco claims and administers Western Sahara, so much of the information and statistics are included in those of Moroccan.

administrative power, not sovereignty, and then began to support the call for a referendum of self-determination.

In July, 1979, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), at their Monrovia Summit, advocated a referendum on the Western Sahara's future. Support for this grew and by October of that year the SADR government was recognised by thirty four countries, twenty being African. By 1982 twenty six of the fifty OAU states recognised the SADR and it was admitted as a member.

Eventually, in 1979, a new Mauritanian government renounced its territorial claims on Western Sahara. It also recognised the rights of the Saharawi people and signed a peace agreement with them in Algiers. When Mauritania moved out Moroccan troops filled the vacuum and some tribal leaders pledged allegiance to King Hassan.

Morocco now ruled the whole of Western Sahara, proclaiming its annexation on 12th. August, 1979, and encouraged Moroccans to move in and settle. Until this point two countries had fought against the Polisario, but now Morocco had to bear the whole burden alone. Elections were held, both local and for Representatives to the National Assembly, and Western Sahara was reintegrated into Morocco.

A series of fortifications, known as 'the Wall', were subsequently built that control about three-quarters of Western Sahara. These were to protect the towns and mineral sources, including the phosphate mine at Bou Craa (Kra). Still Morocco had underestimated the Polisario force and the amount of support they would receive from neighbouring countries. At this time, according to the Polisario, they were on top and able to go where they wished and even fought in the town of Tan-Tan on the Moroccan side of the border.



As the end of the decade approached the Polisario increased their campaign as did the SADR government in exile. By June, 1981, the war was believed to be costing Morocco more than US\$1 million a day. Left-wing parties in Morocco refused to lend their support to the King and to pay for the war.

The Polisario opposition may not have been too strong at time but a Moroccan presence has always been needed to hold 'the Wall'. Much of the land which has been gained is uninhabited desert. Despite this by the mid-1980s Morocco occupied almost the whole territory as far south as Ad Dakhla (Villa Cisneros) and between fifty and a hundred kilometres in from the coast.

In June, 1981, at an OAU summit, King Hassan announced his willingness to hold a referendum in the Western Sahara. The OAU then followed this up and after further meetings proposed that there should be a cease-fire, a UN peace-keeping force, and an interim administration to help with an OAU-UN-supervised referendum to find out what the local population wished for the future.

At home the King's proposal brought criticism from Morocco's socialist party (USFP). This ended in the arrest and conviction of some USFP leaders for offenses against national security and public order. There was also little progress for either Morocco or the Polisario on the battlefield and signs of tension began to show in the Moroccan armed forces. This was brought to a head in 1983 with the mysterious death of General Ahmed Dlimi, the Moroccan supreme commander, who was said to have been involved in talks to end the war.

In 1984 Morocco received a blow when the SADR was recognised as a full member of the OAU. Morocco withdrew from the Organisation in protest in November, 1985, and has still not returned to the OAU.

## THE UN AND MINURSO

Things began to look a little brighter for both Morocco and Western Sahara in 1988. In May Morocco and Algeria re-established diplomatic relations. In August Moroccan and Polisario representatives met separately with UN officials and agreed on a peace plan. Both sides accepted the 'Settlement Plan' on 30th. August and it was approved by the UN Security Council on 27th. June, 1990 - in resolution 658 (1990). This agreement was to hold a referendum to enable the people of Western Sahara to choose between independence from or integration with Morocco.

A UN-brokered cease-fire and the plan for a referendum was put into action on 6th. September, 1991. Just before the settlement plan implementation Morocco violated the cease-fire. Morocco also denied the 'United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara' (MINURSO) free movement through parts of Western Sahara which it occupied. MINURSO is the UN peace-keeping force which monitors the cease-fire also, as part of it's mandate, has the task of organising the referendum. To this end MINURSO compiled a register of those who are eligible to vote in the referendum.

The purpose of the referendum was to find out if the territory would choose to be integrated into Morocco or to become independent. The referendum was originally scheduled for January, 1992, but it has yet to be held because of difficulties between the two parties on its implementation.

The whole process of preparing for the referendum has been fraught with difficulties and very little progress has been made over the years. There have been various problems which have slowed down the process. The Polisario Front wanted OAU observers to take part but Morocco did not as the

Organisation has already recognised Western Sahara, or the SADR, as an independent state.

There have also been disagreements concerning those who are eligible to vote. Both sides had accepted the 1974 Spanish census as a basis for the number of the territory's eligible voters - which should number about 75,000 - but Morocco insists on them being taken from the estimated 140,000 voters in the present population of the territory. At different times both sides have accused the other of bringing in extra people to register.

Morocco also submitted registrations on behalf of 120,000 of its citizens to take part in the referendum. At the same time the region was becoming increasingly integrated, economically and through migration, with Morocco. A further blow came on 8th. September, 1992, when King Hassan announced that it was a priority to make the territory a region of Morocco.

In the same month eight senior members of the Polisario defected to Morocco accusing the organisation of misusing food supplies to the refugees in the camps near Tindouf, Algeria. Brahim Hakim, a founder of Polisario and Minister of Foreign Affairs of SADR, had defected earlier. They all attended a press conference on the 15th. September, and the next day Hakim was appointed Morocco's 'Roving Ambassador'.

In February, 1995, the Polisario controlled four-fifths of the disputed area with an army

of about 80,000 men. Despite this, in September, 1995, there were reports from 'Human Rights Watch/Africa', based in New York, that the Moroccan security forces regularly prevented Saharawis from going to registration centres or complaining to UN officials. They also said that Morocco has submitted applications for more than 100,000 potential voters, which are questionable, while Polisario has submitted 40,000 names. Morocco also moved 40,000 people into the territory.

The referendum was to have taken place in 1992 but has been indefinitely postponed. There have been several UN resolutions concerning the situation and things began to come to a head in 1996. The UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, stepped in and ordered it to be postponed. On 31st. January, 1996, the Council supported the Secretary-General's intention to withdraw MINURSO from Western Sahara if there was no meaningful



progress to complete the 'Settlement Plan'. By 29th. May, in resolution 1056 (1996), the Council agreed to reduce the military side of the operation by 20%, from 288 to 239, in the territory. The identification process, that is the registration of those eligible to take part in the referendum, was also suspended until both parties would "show political will and flexibility" to let it continue. At this time 60,000 voters had been identified by the UN and there remained a further 175,000 to be evaluated. The present situation is that MINURSO's mandate has been extended until 31st. May, 1997.

### HUMAN RIGHTS

Over the years the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been successful in assisting in the repatriation of Moroccan prisoners-of-war (POWs). The ICRC reported that the Polisario held about 1,900 Moroccan POWs in 1996.

For many years the Moroccan authorities have imprisoned Saharawis for Polisario-related activity - in 1991 300 such prisoners were released. There were many 'disappearances' in the mid-1970's. Some Saharawis have been held incommunicado for up to sixteen years without charge or trial. The 'disappearances' have continued into the 1990s and the Polisario claim that the Government still holds several hundred Saharawi prisoners, but according to the ICRC Morocco holds 66 Saharawi combatants, and six civilians, as POWs.

Saharawis living in the Moroccan controlled areas "have difficulty obtaining Moroccan passports, that the Government monitors the political views of Saharawis more closely than those of Moroccan citizens, and that the police and paramilitary authorities react especially harshly against those suspected of supporting independence and the Polisario Front. Access to the territory is limited by

the Moroccan Government and international human rights organisations, and impartial journalists have sometimes experienced difficulty in securing admission." (US Country Report on 1996, 31/01/97).

### MOROCCAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

The main concern which has coloured much of Morocco's foreign relations is its claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. This has meant a continual war with the Polisario Front up until the cease-fire of September, 1991. In 1984, Morocco signed a Treaty of Union with Libya. This only lasted until mid-1986 and was primarily aimed at ensuring a cessation of Libyan support for the Polisario.

The US, even as an old friend of Morocco since 1777, has supported negotiations to end the war and supports the proposed referendum to determine the will of the Saharawi people. America has always looked upon Morocco as a stabilising influence in North Africa and the Middle East - being a bulwark against 'Islamic Fundamentalism' and Communism.

The friendship of the two nations has been cemented by the numerous visits King Hassan has made to the United States and by military and financial bonds. The US navy make regular calls on Morocco's ports. The US forces have been given rights of transit through Moroccan airfields and the two countries often hold joint exercises. Since independence, more than \$1.5 billion in US grants and loans has been provided to Morocco - the total US economic and military assistance is an annual average of about \$100 million.

The future of Western Sahara is still uncertain. Let us hope that one day the long wished for referendum does take place and the Saharawi people can finally determine the direction they wish to take.

# The Almoravids and Almohads

By Fr. Bill Turnbull W.F.

## THE ALMORAVIDS (1030-1147)

The origins of the Almoravid empire goes back to early in the 11th. century when the Soninke of Ghana took control of Awdaghost and the surrounding area which was populated by the Lamtuna branch of the Sanhaja Berbers. Soon afterwards one of the Berber leaders visited Mecca. On his return in 1036 he stopped at Al Qayrawan, (Kairouan) an Islamic holy city in northern Tunisia, where he spoke with the scholars about how the quality of Islam had deteriorated in his home area. He returned with a northern Berber scholar called Abdallah Ibn Yasin.

Abdallah was shocked to find the level of illiteracy and ignorance of the Koran amongst the believers. They had also combined local traditions with Islam and Abdallah saw this as the reason for their disunity and having been overcome by the pagan Soninke. Abdallah's first attempts to reconvert the Juddala Sanhaja failed.

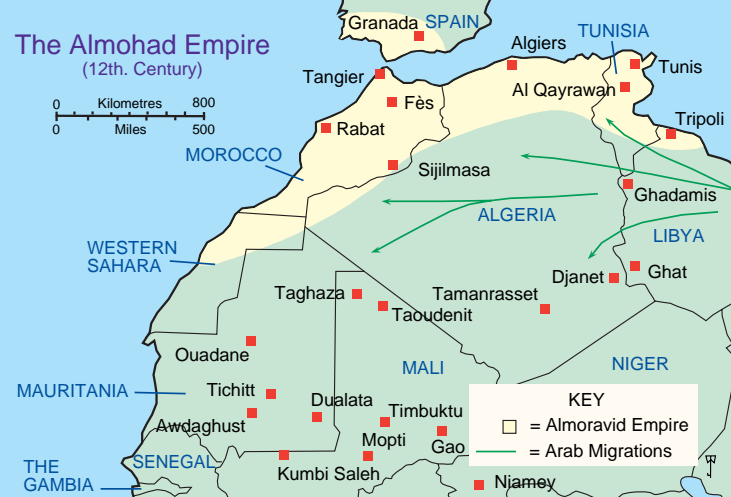
Abdallah then moved to a secret fortress or place of retreat, a 'ribat' in Arabic, which was probably on one of the Tidra Islands, off the Mauritanian coast. There he built up a group of Islamic followers who came to be known as the 'al-murabitun' ('men of the monastery') or the Almoravids - the name by which they are known to Western historians.

Other sources say that their name means 'people of persuasion' or 'the body of men committed to the fight of establishing true Islam' and also say that it is not certain if the 'ribat' actually physically existed.

The Almoravids preached a strict observance of Islamic law and the waging 'jihad' (Islamic holy war) against the infidel (unbeliever). The Lamtuna Sanhaja nomads, who were in conflict with the Soninke, joined the Almoravids in the early 1040s. Two of the outstanding Lamtuna were Yahya Ibn Umar and his brother Abu-Bakr who helped Abdallah conquer and convert the Sanhaja Berbers of the Western Sahara in the early 1050s. The Almoravid movement unified the rival Sanhaja



## The Almoravid Empire (12th. Century)



clans. This helped them to stand firm against both the Zenata Berbers of Sijilmasa and the Soninke of Ghana. Yahya and Abu-Bakr formed a strong enthusiastic army. They seized towns of Sijilmasa (1054) and Awdaghust (1055) which gave them control over the gold trade and the western trans-Saharan trade routes. They also made allies of the Tokolor, in middle Senegal, who had converted to Islam earlier.

After these successes the Almoravids turned north with a view of conquering Morocco. At this time the tide turned somewhat with the death of Yahya, in 1057, and Abdallah, 1059. Abu-Bakr tried to hold things together, but the territory had become too large for one man to control and so much of the former unity was lost. Abu-Bakr returned south to continue the battle against the 'Sudanese', leaving his cousin Yusuf Ibn Tashufin to control the north. Thus the Almoravid movement and territory was split in two.

The southern Almoravids, led by Abu-Bakr, are often said to have overcome the Sudanese state of Ghana by 1076 and brought Islam to this part of Africa. It is not clear if the Almoravid actually conquered the Soninke of the Ghana empire. The evidence suggests that there was a series of conflicts which pushed the Soninke back beyond Awdaghust and disrupted their

trade. By the end of the eleventh century the Soninke leaders converted to Islam and the Ghana empire became both Islamic and Independent. This was possibly brought about by a combination of the sword and politics in order that the empire could re-establish trade links with the Islamic Sanhaja.

Abu-Bakr died in 1087 and so began the collapse of the southern Almoravids. Many of the best soldiers had also returned north to join Yusuf in his conquests. These factors combined to weaken the southern Sanhaja's resolve and unity, and they were overrun again by the Soninke and later by the Malinke.

Yusuf took the northern Almoravids army through Morocco and as far as southern Spain. They invaded Morocco in 1055 and founded the city of Marrakesh (1062) as their capital and later they captured Fès (1069). They united Morocco under a single government. In a few years, by 1091, the Almoravid dominated all the Muslim states in Spain, except for Valencia which was conquered by 'El Cid' (Lord Rodrigo) who went to Spain to fight the Christian powers at the request of the Spanish Muslims.

Despite the gradual collapse of the southern part of the Almoravid empire it remained vast and very wealthy. It's fate was that of most great empires: the settled nomads became corrupted by their wealth and power. They also began to lose their Islamic fervour and piety, which provoked a reaction from neighbouring Muslim Berbers.

### THE ALMOHADS (1140-1268)

The Almohads, 'al-muwayyidun' meaning 'those who proclaim the unity of God', were Zenata and Masmouda Berbers of the Atlas mountains

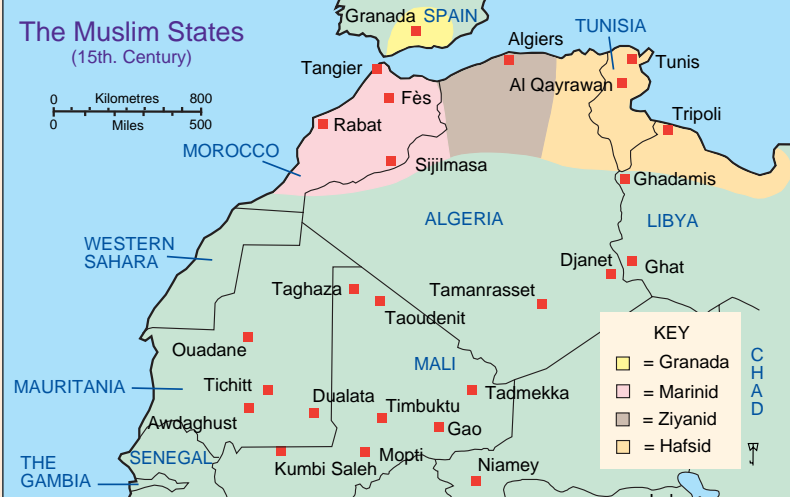
and were arch-enemies of the Almoravids. Their origins can be traced to Muhammad ibn Tumart, an Arab reformer, who gathered a large following of both Arabs and Berbers. He was proclaimed Al Mahdi ('The Rightly Guided') in 1121. The founder of the dynasty was Abdel Moumen (Abd al-Mumin), who succeeded Ibn Tumart, was the first Almohad Caliph. He managed to unite the North African Berbers in the 'jihad'. The Almohad army was made up of Berbers from the Anti-Atlas mountains of Morocco. The empire had a professional civil service, recruited from the educated classes, but did not have mass appeal amongst the other peoples of the time.

The Almohads conquered Morocco between 1140 and 1147 and gradually they gained control over the northern part of the Almoravid empire. At the time this included Algeria, Tunisia, eastern Libya, part of southern Mauritania and to the Ebro River in Spain. Moumen's successor, Yacoub El Mansour, had crossed the Mediterranean in 1165 and beaten the disunited Almoravid Emirs.

One of the most famous Almohad rulers in Spain was Yakub al-Mansur, who ruled from 1184 until his death. He helped Sultan Saladin fight against the Crusaders and was responsible for the construction of numerous architectural monuments in Spain and North Africa.

The the united Kingdoms of Castile, Aragón, and Navarre fought back against the North African invaders in their campaign of the 'reconquista' ('war of reconquest'). In the

## The Muslim States (15th. Century)



battle of Navas de Tolosa, 1212, the Almohads suffered their first major defeat and were gradually expelled from Spain by 1232.

While fighting on their European front the Almohad left their North African side open to attack from local groups which they had conquered and so they began to lose ground on both sides of the Mediterranean. This signalled the slow disintegration of the empire over the next thirty years. All that remained was roughly the coastal area across Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. This eventually broke up into the independent dynasties of Hafsidi (Tunisia from 1236), Ziyaniid (in Algeria from 1239) and Marinid (in Morocco from 1269) due to further advances by the Christian Kingdoms in Spain and the Berbers in central Magreb.

So ended a vast Berber empire and the unification of the Magreb. Both the Almoravids and the Almohads left a great cultural and religious legacy in their wake across North and West Africa. This has given the region distinct cultural characteristics upon which numerous kingdoms and dynasties built. Later, the subsequent North African states, continued to take part in the creation of the Muslim world's literature, science and mathematics, the benefit of which we all share today.