



# SEARCHING FOR NEW PASTURES

By JOY MARLOWE

**Joy Marlowe** (pseudonym) has a heart for the least-reached people of the world. She has had the privilege of serving cross-culturally in a variety of locations and is passionate about learning more about modern nomads.

From camel-herding nomads of the Sahara to educated European immigrants, the Saharawi people are using their traditional skills and adapting them to fit their new modern environment. Prior to Spanish colonization, the Saharawi lived in nomadic tribal groupings, unified by a common culture and language. The Hassaniya dialect of Arabic they speak is shared across the western desert regions of the Sahara and includes the controversially labeled Western Sahara, Mauritania, the refugee settlements in western Algeria, and an increasing number of diaspora communities across Spain. Traditionally, the Saharawi were known for traversing the Sahara Desert in search of pastures and oases for their camels and other livestock while following the scarce rains.

After a series of complex geopolitical wars beginning in the 1970s, the Saharawi were separated by political boundaries, unable to freely move as the nomads they once were, segmented by the fallout of colonization and war. This is the situation in which they now find themselves, needing to adapt the skills learned from the nomadic life and apply them to their new situation. The Saharawi are a fragmented society clinging to their cultural identity and yet being propelled into modernization. This article will focus on three important Saharawi traditional practices and offer a further question of how these practices might be implemented to aid church-planting among this people group.

## TRUSTED NETWORKS

An adolescent Saharawi boy in the refugee camps will often be taken out to *bediya*, remote regions to learn how to assist older male family members and to acquire the skills needed to be *beydhani*, a term given to articulate someone well-adherent to traditional Saharawi culture. Tasks include learning how to tie knots, slaughter camels, erect tents, navigate by the stars, and, most importantly, deepen relationships with the trusted network of people who can guide further nomadic exploration.

Now, the concept of a trusted network is being used in the Saharawi immigration to Spain. As young Saharawi migrate to Spain, they are following the same routes as those who have gone before them, traveling to places in Spain such as the southern Andalusia region, coastal port cities like Alicante, the Canary Islands, and the Basque region in the north. When these young Saharawi first arrive in Spain, they often stay with the friends and family members of the older generation, many of whom are there for medical reasons. These older and more established immigrants are showing the younger ones how to obtain government assistance, how to enroll in Spanish classes, and how to work low-paying jobs until paperwork can be completed. Take Ali for example, born into a camel-herding family in the desert, he now owns a van and runs a transport service, moving goods from the camps to Spain for families to send things back and forth.

The establishment of trusted networks must become a factor for consideration for the Gospel to spread. Is it possible that there would be people mature in faith showing and guiding the way for others to do the same?

## IMPARTING WISDOM

Only recently have the Saharawi begun to say *googliha*, meaning “Google it,” using more modern means to find needed information. In the past, this nomadic community relied on the oral tradition of storytelling and repetition of *emtheela*, proverbs to pass on wisdom. Sitting around the tent drinking tea and sharing the news, the older Saharawi commend, correct, or challenge, using a series of proverbs often involving the example of a camel to illustrate a meaning. As the younger generation moves into Spain, they are taking these proverbs with them. The Saharawi-Spanish household often comes alive with conversation when debating the merit of a proverb, each person engaging with the facts and their feelings about them, choosing for themselves to accept them as fact or myth. Is this oral tradition and skill in engaging with truths and myths something that can be used to share the Good News, and can Gospel truths be introduced to these people in the form of *emtheela*?

## RESOURCEFULNESS FOR COMMUNITY

Generations ago, the Saharawi nomads knew how to utilize almost every part of the camel after it was slaughtered. The meat was for sustenance, the leather was for a *chekwa*, a milk storage jug, and even the bones were for traditional games like *seeg*. Each part was useful and each part was needed by the community. This resourcefulness has passed down through generations and the trait of being resourceful is second nature even to the modernized Saharawi in Spain. Each part of a

Saharawi individual’s life in Spain can be used by the community and is meant to help. Homes are meant to house other Saharawi giving them addresses to apply for paperwork. Connections and friendships with people are meant to get other Saharawi jobs. Finances are meant to be sent back to families in the desert to provide for their needs. Even a *matla*, floor cushion, circulates around Saharawi families as they move from city to city in Spain. Each piece of immigrant life is a tool, a resource that is meant to be shared with the greater community for all to find a better life. So how can this resourcefulness be used in the community of Saharawi believers? Could it be that the Saharawi Church would be a close example of being together and having everything in common such as the early Church modeled?

## POWERFUL SKILLS FOR FUTURE CHURCH-PLANTING

As every person and people are made in the image of God, the Saharawi have a unique skill set developed by their nomadic roots that now is being adapted by the immigrant population in Europe. Modernized Saharawi have learned that trusted networks that once led them through the desert at night now lead them through the complicated immigration paperwork process. They have found that imparting wisdom through oral stories is now able to be fact-checked and debated and yet still valued. They have used their innate resourcefulness that once benefited the nomadic community in using every part of a camel to survive, to using every experience of life in Spain to assist others. What a powerful force if these people came to know the Gospel! Not only would the resources, talents, and skills of the Saharawi people benefit new believers in their community, but these same resources, talents, and skills also could be utilized to penetrate other unreached areas of the world. ❏

