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Knowing Libya: Ethnography

Ethnography remains among the most underused methods in Libyan studies. A dearth of Libyan ethnography pairs troublingly with paradoxical tropes that originate in the colonial period: that Libya is on the one hand exceptional, distinct from the cities and countries that surround it in remoteness and isolation, and on the other hand quickly knowable, enabling the outsiders that do gain access to rapidly attain expertise. A similar representational pairing operated in cultural production that accompanied the Italian colonialization of Libya, one that Brian McLaren points to in a description of a 1906 play, *Più che l'amore*, of "Africa as both *terra incognita* – an atavistic terrain where [the heroes of colonial literature] could exist outside of the restrictive morals of contemporary society – and *terra promessa*, a land already latent with the call for Italian colonial expansion."¹ If in the early twentieth century these tropes packaged indigenous lives for colonizer-tourist consumption, in the early twenty-first century their analogues encourage short-term, policy-oriented research engagement and narrative overgeneralization. Against these currents, what are needed are long-term studies, critical ethnographic methods, and interdisciplinary approaches that contextualize, rather than exceptionalize, Libyan lives and worlds.

The notion that Libya was distinct from its neighbors became a facet of Italian colonial production of knowledge about Libya in part due to of a politics of cultural reclamation. Colonial policy makers, and the researchers who supported them, sought evidence of continuity in what they understood as Roman civilization only partially disrupted by Arab, Ottoman, and "Sudanese" (Black African) others. For some

1 Brian L. McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya: An Ambivalent Modernism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 110-111.

writers, this meant valorizing a version of indigeneity that they framed as enduring from “Latin origins”;² for others, it meant a dismissal of “Berber culture,” whose “inability to progress” had been palliated historically only by outside – Roman/ Italian – civilizing forces.³ This was a particular type of civilizing mission in that it produced a taxonomy of cultural, racial, and civilizational artifacts in order to label some as “Latin” and others as Other.

These colonially-produced artifacts were presented not as the rarified purview of scientists, but, importantly, as part of the display of indigenous culture for tourists to the colony, who were encouraged to think of themselves as researchers. The Italian Touring Club’s guidebook, for example, described the people of Ghadames as having “maintained their original characteristics intact, so that even today they constitute an interesting topic of study.”⁴ Across various Libyan sites, “the research expedition became a model for structuring the tourist expedition,” with groups of tourists following itineraries previously used by teams of researchers, expecting to encounter unchanging cultural performances.⁵ At the same time, visual iconography made the “eye of the tourist” into “the eye of the anthropologist” with postcards and flyers that blended the ostensibly scientific with tourism advertising.⁶ Aesthetically and even methodologically, “the tourist experience of indigenous culture [...] was seen as being coincident with the objective practices of scientific study.”⁷

The notion that any traveler could rapidly gain expertise in the people and places of Italian colonized Africa has had lasting import for Libyan studies. Twentieth-century ethnographic writing in and on Libya was shaped not only by the vantage points of Italian and British colonial-military officials, and tourists, but also subsequently by the epistemological frameworks of oil company executives and western diplomats. As in the Italian-colonized Horn of Africa, the writings of

2 McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism*, 166.

3 *Ibid*, 118.

4 Cited in McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism*, 107.

5 McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism*, 119-120.

6 *Ibid*, 122.

7 *Ibid*, 106-107.

“accidental ethnographers” were more numerous in the colonial period than those of anthropologists.⁸ What is remarkable is that this has remained the case in the decades since. In comparison with other parts of North Africa, formal anthropological studies of Libya remain very limited; books and even article-length ethnographies of any Libyan settings are exceedingly few. Further, those few are themselves not widely available.⁹ There do exist anthropologists who have spent years in Libya.¹⁰ Still, much more prolific are the writings of the former diplomats and corporate executives whose sojourns in Libya lent themselves to later opportunities to publish.

On the whole we simply lack the varied and textured ethnographic writing that one finds focused in a place such as Morocco, and even to a lesser extent Algeria and Tunisia. Indeed, we know that Libya is too often simply omitted from research across a variety of fields in surveys and anthologies focused on North Africa. With its distinct colonial history and continued reputation for being “inaccessible” for foreign researchers, Libyan social space is held apart, resulting in a kind of no-man’s-land characterization that simply doesn’t match the realities of the country’s continuing interconnectedness with its neighbors on all sides.

Perhaps as a result of the pressure of the field’s sparseness, the authors of the ethnographies that do exist have sometimes taken on overly ambitious descriptive scope. Yet even those texts that overreach have offered nuance when compared with the bulk of books on Libyan politics and the many texts that perform a representational elision of Libyan society as the singular figure of Muammar al-Gaddafi. We are only beginning to free ourselves from the burden of this representa-

8 Barbara Sorgoni, “Italian Anthropology and the Africans: The Early Colonial Period,” in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 62-80.

9 British anthropologist John Davis’ 1987 book, *Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press), is out of print, as is Marius K. and Mary Jane Deeb’s 1982 *Libya Since the Revolution: Aspects of Social and Political Development* (New York: Praeger Publishers), which draws on interviews as well as locally published sources.

10 Thomas Hüsken’s 2019 monograph, *Tribal Politics in the Borderland of Egypt and Libya* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), is a welcome exception.

tional elision after Gaddafi's death more than a decade ago. The eclipsing of the nation writ large with its individual former dictator is by no means something exclusive to the Libyan context. We have seen, in a number of other settings, that powerful political figures with narcissistic tendencies and cult followings garner attention at the expense of the masses – all while speaking in the name of those masses. The legacies of these representational elisions are many. One aspect is particularly important for Libyan studies to reckon with: the over-focus on Muammar for all those years has left us, I think, less capable and with a greater amount of work to be done in order to understand how his 42-year reign shaped Libyan lifeworlds and politics. Ethnographic studies of the present and oral histories of the past will be essential tools in this work.

Alongside the eclipsing of the many by the individual figure of Gaddafi, a further representational challenge for the development of critical ethnography in Libyan studies persists in the fact that especially post-2011, journalistic accounts of Libya have come to dominate. During the 2011 uprising, the country saw an influx of foreign journalists, most of whom were navigating Libya for the first time. One of the enduring consequences of this influx was the creation a wave of temporary jobs for educated, bi- and trilingual young Libyans who initially became fixers and translators, and some eventually news reporters and producers. What had been a narrow field of state media rapidly shifted into a range of news outlets across the region with a variety of funding sources and attendant politics. This change profoundly shaped the post-2011 lives of the upper middle class of the generation who came of age with the revolution, now in their late twenties and early thirties. These young people moved to Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, and elsewhere for jobs in very partisan media. Those left in-country find work if they are lucky in the economy of humanitarian aid, working with the Red Crescent, UNICEF, UNHCR, and the IOM.

Why remark on the career prospects of Libya's millennials here? We know that our research, across disciplines but especially ethnography, takes place in dialogic production with our interlocutors in the field. It is of deep consequence, I believe, that this generation has had to assimilate to the global and regional norms of news reporting to narrate events in their home country. In the years since 2011, news reports have come to nearly monopolize the globally circulating representational field in portraying Libyan daily life, from Guardian updates on U.N.-led peace processes to edgy Vice reports on what I will

inelegantly call the coast guard-militia-clandestine migration-human trafficking complex. In this context, one characterized by a hegemony of the rhetorics of news reporting, ethnography, if it hopes for legibility, comes to be weighted with positivist expectations and colonial logics for determining relevance. We see these logics, for example, in reporting on Mediterranean crossings, which tend to implicitly center European actors, concerns, and politics.

However, I want to stress that, important as it unquestionably is in its own right, journalism is not ethnography. Didier Fassin puts it pithily in a 2016 interview when he says of these two fields, “they’re different jobs, different practices, and different ethos.”¹¹ Ethnographic work offers a very different set of tools and insights than news reporting. It is, first and foremost, rooted in duration: whereas interviews done over the course of a day or a week often suffice to report a news story, one cannot do credible ethnographic writing without sustained engagement. Even long form journalistic pieces that are the result of months of years of investigation do not constitute ethnographic research. This is in part because ethnography is, among other things, an exploration of shared experience. Ethnography has a different relation to advocacy than journalism – certainly in part because of the distinctive, if overlapping, audiences these modes approach. Crucially, ethnography has different relationships to positivism and positionality than journalism. Ethnographic work explores lifeworlds through the voices and stories that animate them, in turn translating experience into narrative. Ethnography should enable the unfolding of layers and tracing of constellations that produce a process, practice, or situation.

As Hager El Hadidi writes, “Unlike a report or information, a story does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing.”¹² In this way, ethnography shares much with the writing of fiction, and ethnographers have long explored the overlaps and boundaries between these fields. Here, also, is an underutilized area for Libyan studies. While we have not as of yet seen a flourishing anthropological practice in Libyan

11 Didier Fassin, “Ethnography and Theory,” *Conversations with History*, University of California Television, 13 April 2016, <https://tannerlectures.berkeley.edu/2015-2016-lecture-fassin/>.

12 Hager El Hadidi, *Zar: Spirit Possession, Music, and Healing Rituals in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 29.

universities, one does find a depth of both creative writing and literary critique, as well as scholars from other fields for whom the writing of fiction has offered an outlet for sociocultural commentary.¹³ The ethnographers of the Libyan present and future that I hope to see will do well to gather, and write in conversation with, this material.

The prospects are vast for a new generation of critical ethnographers to denaturalize the Libya-as-Gaddafi slippage, and to portray and theorize multifaceted sociopolitical landscapes in the country through grounded research. Likewise, we can depart from journalistic rhetorics and their “pariah state” predecessors to theorize the Libyan quotidian and its imbrication in broader structures of power. It is that question of imbrication that feels to me like both a stumbling block and a powerful key. It will take the concerted effort of a team of scholars, I think, to write Libyan places, people, and politics back into relation with neighbors; state, corporate, and individual spoilers; and global movements of people, capital, media, and affect.



13 A notable example is Libyan attorney Azza Kamel Maghur’s *Fashloun: Stories of [the] February [Revolution]* (*Fashlūm: Qiṣaṣ fībrāyir*) (Benghazi: al-Rowad Books, 2012).