Building Bayt Ali Gana

During the Jamahiriyya (1969-2011), Libya was under "emergency law" and assembly was forbidden. In this way, all possibilities for constructive exchange between citizens, cultural spaces, and public spaces were reduced to a minimum. Toward the end of the 1990s foundations appeared, but these all had to be under the umbrellas of either the Qaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation or Aisha Qaddafi's charitable foundation. During the first year of the post-revolution period, hundreds of NGOs and socio-cultural institutions were registered, encouraged by the transitional ministry of culture. However, since then, the majority have vanished or struggle to exist. Most lacked long-term vision and planning in their initial formation. The country's inhabitants suffer from traumas left by four decades of destabilization; more recently this is emphasized by the polarization of different ideological and political tendencies, continuing the destructive process. What features and strategies could cultural spaces embody to create a sustainable environment propitious for dialogue and freedom of thought and movement?

In this essay I trace the emergence of four Libyan cultural institutions after 2011. I place my own ongoing experience building Bayt Ali Gana in context alongside the examples of Tanarout and Habka in Benghazi and WaraQ in Tripoli. How can cultural spaces create environments for dialogue, negotiation, and creative thinking, thereby helping to relieve traumatic stress disorders on a broad social scale?

Eight years after the end of the 2011 revolution and death of Libya's former leader, the country under consecutive weak governments now counts two governments with negligible effective power and continues to undergo mini-wars bursting here and there, erratic, emphasizing the sense of insecurity and instability, enhancing secular divisions and enlarging the void between communities. Strangely, those problems are in a way dealt with by a population moving "nomadically" from one city to another or from an area to another. However, their daily repercussions are the heaviest to bear for most. Those boomerang

effects are constant: extremely long power cuts, blackouts, water cuts, drastic monetary inflation, and shortages of local currency in the banks paralyzing the whole country.

Statistics in general, and certainly those related to culture, continue to be scant for Libya. Although Libya is now a more democratic environment than during the dictatorial era, political polarization, armed conflict, and remnants of imbued distrust make it an unstable environment where it can be difficult to observe the work of small and medium sized cultural activities for external reporting. A report published by DIGNITY: Danish Institute Against Torture in October 2014, concludes that:

> both the short-term consequences of the internal conflict as well as the long-term consequences of the Qaddafi regime are in large measures still unaddressed. In order to deal with life stress, 59% [of people interviewed] indicated they needed assistance in terms of justice, legal remedy and compensation, while 44% indicated they needed health and medical assistance. Thus, the report concludes that any future government of Libya faces massive challenges in alleviating human suffering and improving mental health. However, as the internal conflict continues more and more people are affected by human rights violations aggravating mental health afflictions, straining the social fabric and the capacity of the Libyan state.[1]

This survey can be seen as a rough sketch of the situation; other surveys should follow with more accurate data specifying the groups targeted (socially and geographically). Alarming as it is, this report helps illustrate the need for safe spaces for gathering and discussion, places where people interact with each other far from political or ideological conflicts and learn to find links among each other that are not family- or job-related.

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[1] Fathi Ali, Morten Koch Andersen, Ahlam Chemlali, Jens Modvig, Mette Skar, and Henrik Ronsbo, "Consequences of Torture and Organized Violence: Libya Needs Assessment Survey," DIGNITY: Danish Institute Against Torture, 14 October 2014, www.temehu.com/HOR/dignity-report-torture-and-mental-health-in-libya.pdf (accessed 21 May 2019).

For this reason, I will describe the paths of three Libyan cultural institutions that materialized after 2011—WaraQ, Tanarout, and Habka—before concluding with a discussion of my own project, Bayt Ali Gana. This enables me to give an overview of some common challenges Libyan cultural institutions have faced in the post-2011 environment and recount the resourceful responses of these institutions' founders to these challenges.

The first, WaraQ,[2] was initiated in 2016 by Tewa Barnosa, then 17 years old, with the support of her parents. She created a multidisciplinary space to answer her own need for a shared art studio where young creatives could meet, work, discuss, learn from each other, and encourage each other. WaraQ was a much-needed space, well-situated in the city center. Discussions were organized, themed exhibitions flirting with a conceptual approach to curatorial work started to appear, young digital artists were exhibited, and an interesting buzzing creative ecosystem started to flourish. Like other art activities in Libya, they started with a WaraQ Art Community group on Facebook in which young art lovers and artists would post their work, slowly building greater interest and popularity. The physical space materialized in a rented basement that they redesigned and furnished in the international trend of reuse and minimal design, taking a bright yellow as their brand color. After approximately one year of existence, the landlord changed his mind and interrupted the contract rather aggressively with the excuse that the space encouraged young people of both genders to mix and that it wasn't "correct religiously and socially". This abrupt end of contract came with no compensation. After a few months recovering from the shock, Tewa continued on her path. This experience matured her view on curatorial activities and she decided to exhibit young Libyan artists abroad while teaching herself Arabic calligraphy and using the internet to build international connections, network, and research. However, traveling with the artists' works under her arms in order to exhibit – with the current situation (there are no foreign embassies at which to apply for visas in Libya, obliging everybody to transit via Tunisia, Egypt, or Turkey using devaluated Libyan currency) revealed itself to be an excessively heavy weight on her shoulders, so she reduced her pace and turned to local public space

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[2]   https://waraqartfoundation.com/

as galleries, organizing a series of exhibitions, screenings, discussions in the Old City of Tripoli under the name "Art Out, The City is Our Gallery." WaraQ is now an art foundation with more than fourteen thousand cyber followers aiming to create environments propitious to creativity in Libya and the region.

The second cultural organization is Tanarout.[3] The initiators of this space are of a middle-aged generation of artists. They worked on various cultural activities and organized exhibitions during the pre-revolution era. With this experience, Tanarout thus blossomed after 2011 to become a multidisciplinary center offering drawing and painting classes, music classes, cultural discussions, and poetry readings, among other events. The space evolved as a club, with partners, memberships, and adherents. The first space was situated in Benghazi's city center, a rented flat on the ground floor that they had to flee after having been threatened several times by fundamentalists. They then decided to move to the outskirts of the city, into a larger venue that they left as an open space, inviting young artists to inhabit the space with their artwork and organizing artistic events grouping music, fine arts, and creative writing. The classes offered evolve depending on the members' availability and willingness to give classes.

The third institution is a cyber platform: a network of cartoonists linked together by mangaka Abdullah Hadia and script-writer Alhouni. The buddies started working on their own projects after 2011, showing their work on different social media platforms, thus gaining an audience and adherents. They then decided to create a Libyan manga magazine that would gather the work of young Libyan cartoonists. To do that, they received funding and organized a series of workshops to gather the creatives and let them meet and work together on specific tasks such as a "one page story". The participants work remotely, independently, and send their work to be published in Habka magazine,[4] which is then distributed in limited print editions as well digitally. Even if they have no stable place to meet, Habka creators regularly organize workshops in rented spaces and enlarge their network through the different social media platforms.

I strongly believe that culture and arts can play an essential mediating role and help to relieve the traumas affecting people and which, if not tackled, will continue to spread through generations.

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[3] https://www.facebook.com/TanaroutLy/

[4] http://www.habkamagazine.com/

Stress, lack of concentration, lack of trust, difficulty in dialogue, instability, and an inability to plan long-term are some of the PTSD symptoms that have to be fought with all means possible to reconstruct a society, a country. Bayt Ali Gana[5] aims to give a little push in that direction. It is a cultural center based on the collections and studies of a Libyan artist who had a unique position in being multi-disciplinary and transgenerational. Ali Gana (1936-2006) is usually presented as one of the first-generation artists in modern Libya. He graduated from the Scuola degli Belle Arti in Rome in the early 1960s and went back home to teach in Tripoli's Faculty of Architecture from 1970 to 2002. Besides teaching, he sketched, collected, photographed, and studied local crafts and architecture. Ali Gana has the potential to be a reconciliatory figure as he was respected, trusted, and known to be a pleasant interlocutor and listener. Following the same path, the cultural space named after him is planned to be social and educational. The project also came into existence after the 2011 Libyan revolution, surfing the opening that the country witnessed after forty years of prohibition. The Bayt Ali Gana project is to me a work in progress, as even though the aim or end result is designed, it has a wide spectrum of input possibilities by friends of the project, causing it to grow slowly but steadily in a country that has been accustomed to abrupt decisions changing drastically from one day to the next.

The preparation stage of the cultural house was executed underground, with only very few people knowing about it. The main response at that time (2012-2014) when I said that I was planning to create a museum in the name of my father was always along the lines of "this is not the right time for a museum...wait a bit for the country to settle." To me that was exactly the right time to start a community/cultural project of which I would be the first beneficiary, as I needed to create a project to keep me busy and positive during a long period of time. I wanted a project that would be able to evolve gradually depending on the country's circumstances, in a protected environment, with quasi no budget to start with. The Bayt Ali Gana cultural space is a two-floor private house situated in Tripoli's outskirts. The building is Ali Gana's family house designed and built by the artist himself with his friend Professor Kamal Kaabazi during the 1970s. The building is not vast, but has all the potential to host an exhibition area to become the collection showroom on the first floor. On the ground floor and in the garden is a multidisciplinary space, a cafe, toilet facilities, and an

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5   https://www.facebook.com/ali.ganafoundation/

iron extension which was designed to host a rooftop library, add more exhibition space on the first floor, and cover a lobby/winter garden on the ground floor.

The first step after the decision was to completely vacate it and build partitions to separate the private area from the public areas and a room prepared to host the artist collection and be the archive of the Bayt. The second stage needed a specialized workforce and knowledge to restore parts of the building and create new openings. I contacted a friend and student of my father, the architect Izat Khairy, seeking a professional viewpoint to change the first-floor setting, create new openings, remove walls, and redo deteriorated areas of the building. The response was an immediate boost of energy that worked both ways and the work started in 2014, just after a major armed clash burst in Tripoli, during a period in which kidnappings for ransoms flourished and the atmosphere was tense. Around this time the country's electricity plants started showing major failures as their long overdue backups could not be finished due to the instability, and extremely long power cuts became the norm. The few hours of electricity each day were awaited like a water drop in the desert and, as bad news never comes alone, water would stop flowing in areas fed by the governmental water system as the pumps started collapsing. The citizens needing water from wells drilled in their gardens, needed energy to extract the water, and started buying generators, adding to the different layers of stress with noise; and of course, generators just like cars need petrol to work, and that also became scarce due to several reasons mostly related to corruption. Despite that, work on the Bayt continued day by day.

Since 2015 the project has evolved before its potential makers and customers. Similar to a reality show, the Bayt Ali Gana project keeps a daily dairy posted on Facebook explaining the "work of the day" in Libyan dialect and with photos or time-lapses, pointing out the different stages of work, joking about the difficulties and solutions that it is going through. Like soap operas that last for years and become part of the family, this diary is usually posted at the end of the day, and has become for some followers a routine to be checked. Some started asking for visits through private messages; others asked how they could help. Could they take part by either giving money or a helping hand? Through the page I ask for advice, encouraging followers to take active steps in building and preparing the space, thus creating a sense of inclusivity often lost. The cultural platform is a collaborative project. It reaches out for solutions but waits for potential helpers to come once they decide or feel the real need to give a hand. Forcing their way in, appropriating it yet understanding that the space is a private

and community nucleus. In the future, it will collaborate with different local institutions such as Arete, the Libyan Board of Architecture, WaraQ, and Tanarout, among others. Artists, designers and architects are naturally participating in the making of the Bayt and when the environment is ready, it will seek cooperation with international institutions to exchange knowledge, experience, and widen its field.

I think of Bayt Ali Gana as a low-threshold environment, a vivarium in which ways to induce curiosity for culture are studied. Ali Gana had a wide range of interests encompassing art, architecture, design, crafts, and environment. The eclectic collection and archive he left behind will be the core of the center's program. Discussions, debates, workshops will be designed as part of that. Finally, the name *bayt* ("house") was chosen for its symbolism, a protective space to feel safe enough to behave "naturally," educate, and boost the will to participate and share creative thoughts.