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DOI: https://doi.org/10.23810/1345.ANNABALDINETTI
When citing this article please include its DOI with a resolving link

Shifting Perceptions of Shared History in Post-Independence Libya

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Abstract:
The article presents the key elements of Libyan national historiography since independence and trace the main trends and shifts in writing and narrating national history that have emerged in post-2011 Libya. The first section highlights the writing of a national history considered as a key element in the country's post-colonial period, both under the Sanusi monarchy and during the regime of Muʿammar Qaddafi. The second section argues that in post-2011 Libya political change has translated into a new interest in history and in the writing of national history and sensitive topics, such as the role of minorities in the formation of the nation-state and the use of political violence begin to be discussed.

Keywords: Libya, national history, historiography, memoirs, collective memory.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the invention of a national history for Libya was central to the unified nation-state building project in the country's post-colonial period, both under the Sanusi monarchy and during the regime of Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi. And now, in the volatile post-2011 revolutionary reality, the rereading and rewriting of national history has permitted many previously overlooked components of society to reclaim their past and shape their own narrative. This article will present the key elements of Libyan national historiography since independence and trace the main trends and shifts in writing and narrating national history that have emerged in post-2011 Libya.

Writing the national character: history and historians in post-independence Libya

History was among the first disciplines taught at the University of Libya, established in 1955 in Benghazi. Its teaching, entrusted to an Egyptian, was introduced in the Faculty of Arts in the academic year 1956-57 (Kabti 2012a: 42). However, the writing of Libyan national history was discouraged under the reign of Idris (1951-1969), to avoid exacerbating the differences and rivalries which divided Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

For instance, the colonial period went largely unmentioned, and those books that were commissioned by the monarchy largely reproduced the thesis of British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1949), whose work emphasized the Sanusi resistance in Cyrenaica as the true 'national struggle' of Libya, rather than a struggle to throw off the colonial yoke. Reflected in school textbooks, ending at the close of the Second Ottoman Period in 1911 (Suri 2000: 33-37) this narrative served a double purpose: to distract from the royal family's historical collusion with the Italians, and to encourage the creation of a unified national identity among the socially and politically disparate regions of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. These works follow the pattern of modern Arab historiography, which as Youssef M. Choueiri states, "accompanied or responded to European influence and expansionism" (Choueiri 2003: 197). It aimed at shaping a national history and a common narrative of the new territorial entities by rooting the formation of the new nation-states in the past. Despite the monarchical censorship of certain narratives of historical writing and the promotion of others, the different regional perspectives also marked the historical production of literature during Idris' reign.

The Sanusi account of the colonial struggle is mainly represented by Egyptian historian Muhammad Fu'ad Shukri's (1904-63)'s *Milad dawlat Libiya haditha. Watha'iq tahririha wa-istiqlaliha* (*The Birth of the Modern State of Libya: Documents of its Liberation and Independence*), which was published in two volumes in Cairo in 1957 (Shukri 1957). Shukri's narrative was forged by his relationship with the Sanusi and his personal involvement in the Libyan issue.[1] The main account was intended to highlight the role played by the Sanusi, but it is important to emphasize that despite Shukri's own personal perspective on the events, *Libiyya haditha* represents a hugely important primary source as it reports on many documents and memoirs of the time. The presentation of the anti-colonial struggle as an integral part of the history of the Sanusiyya, is most apparent in the work of a Sanusi author, Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Ashhab, whose books published after 1951 presented what was in effect the official 'national' history. They were mainly based on the assumption that the Sanusi were the main political force which led the resistance and had a central role on the path to independence.[2]

On the contrary, the anti-Sanusi attitude and the tendency to question the legitimacy of the monarchy which characterize the Tripolitanian historical writings are best represented by Tahir al-Zawi.[3] His *Tarikh al-fath al-'arabi fi Libiyya* (*History of the Arab*

Conquest of Libya), published in Cairo in 1954 (Al-Zawi 1954), was evidently aimed at shaping a national history by placing the past in the history of the new nation-state; but asserting a certain supremacy of Tripolitania over Cyrenaica. Al-Zawi also questioned the denomination 'Libya', adopted to indicate the territory that formed independent Libya: he argued that the word 'Libya' was introduced as part of the colonial redefinition of space and, as Tripolitania was the word used by the Arabs following the Islamic conquest to indicate the whole region, "the state should be named the Tripolitanian State [*al-dawla al-tarabulusiyya*]" (Al-Zawi 1963: 13).

After the Qaddafi-led military coup in 1969, history and the revision of history continued to be central elements both in the construction of national identity and in the search for consensus and political legitimacy. History was at the center of Qaddafi's ideology, and along with religion formed a core element of the Libyan national identity. The third part of his Green Book, published in 1979, was based exclusively on historical arguments that referred to a theory of universal history reminiscent of Ibn Khaldun's cycle of the rise and decline of societies, combining the socialist idea of the struggle for liberation, seen through an anti-colonial lens, with the Nasserite view of history as a fundamental element of national unity, and drawing a path that led from the isolated individual to the tribe and the nation.

This imposition of a discourse which presented the Qaddafi regime as the result of a long-term historical process required in every case the creation of consensus. Professional historians, many of whom trained abroad, were entrusted with writing a national mythography in which the country's regional and ethnic rivalries and divisions were overcome, and which presented Libyan society as cohesive and eternally opposed to foreign cultural and political interference. These historians saw revolutionary change as an opportunity for professional growth and social promotion. A notable example of this first generation of post-revolutionary historians is Mohammed Taher Jerary, who returned to Libya from the University of Wisconsin, where he was preparing a doctorate in Prehistory. Because of this, he obtained a chair at the University of Tripoli and was responsible for a study center linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later he directed the institute to which Qaddafi entrusted the rewriting of national history (Dumasy, Di Pasquale 2012: 135).

This special research institute was established in 1978, initially named *Markaz buhuth wa-dirasat al-jihad al-libi* (Research and Studies Centre of the Libyan Jihad), and renamed in 1981 to *Markaz jihad al-libiyyin didda al-ghazu al-itali* (Centre of the Libyans' Jihad against the Italian Aggression). The new name indicates the main objectives for the center: the decolonization of history as well as its 'nationalization' through the narrative of jihad against the anti-colonial resistance. This decolonization of history, called the 'liberation of history', has as its main task the creation of an alternative historical narrative to the colonial one. It aimed to place colonized people, and not the colonizers, as the principal protagonists of history. Highlighting the role played by the

Libyans during the anti-colonial struggle worked to support Qaddafi's ideology, which was based on the direct participation of the people. From this perspective, anti-colonial resistance was presented as a united struggle, without regional rivalries or intertribal and ethnic conflicts. In this way, the presence and the contribution of minority groups such as the Berbers and the Jews were overlooked, and in contrast to scholarship from the monarchical period the work of this research institute suggested that the unity of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan predated the founding of the Kingdom of Libya. This completely erased from the national historical narrative the role played by the Senusites in the resistance in Cyrenaica, and throughout the period of the monarchy (Baldinetti 2010: 20-21).

This historical research institute became known abroad as the Libyan Studies Center (LSC). Rather than for its work rewriting the nation's history according to Qaddafi's guidelines, it gained international renown for its impressive work in collecting oral sources. This project, which began in the early 1980s, mainly consisted of interviews with surviving *mujahidin*, veterans of the anti-colonial resistance struggle, as well as their relatives. Besides filling the gap of the paucity of written local sources, as Francesca di Pasquale clearly argues, the goal was "the nationalization of memory"; this memory, no longer considered a 'heritage' belonging to individuals or specific tribes, was functional in strengthening the national identity (Di Pasquale 2017: 39).

The institute was also involved in an important project translating archival documents from European languages into Arabic, including the translation of some Italian studies published during the colonial period (Baldinetti 2010: 22). This worthy activity was carried out with great difficulty, both due to the regime's suspicion of any document left by the Italians or the British, and due to the scarcity of local sources, the latter also attributable to the destruction, in the '70s and '80s, of important institutions, archives, and libraries linked to Sanusiyya and the monarchy (Ouannes 2009: 260-61). For this reason, Mohamed Jerary, who as previously mentioned was director of the center from its foundation, compared the difficult relationship between the institute's historians and Qaddafi to "walking on a minefield".[4] Although lacking autonomy in their choice of research topics, the center's historians constituted an important socio-professional category that, over the years, managed to preserve a limited margin of independence from the regime, adapting to its evolution (Dumasy, Di Pasquale 2012: 136, 140). The other Libyan historians outside the center, who only operated in the country's universities, were not able to establish international scholarly relations or circulate their publications widely during this period.

The fortunes of the LSC declined in the latter decades of the regime, notably during the international embargo of 1992-2003. It subsequently saw a recovery thanks to the international rehabilitation of the Qaddafi regime and the reopening of diplomatic relations between Italy and Libya. Recovering their function as "scientific mediators" (Dumasy, Di Pasquale 2012: 133) between Qaddafi and society, the LSC historians

were entrusted with managing the Italo-Libyan research program carried out between 2000 and 2005, with the specific goal of investigating, in depth, the largely forgotten episode of the Libyan deportees to Italy. The research program was an integral part of the Sirte Agreement signed in August 1999, which marked a turning point in the political relationship between the two countries and made a provision for many forms of economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation between Libya and Italy. The program helped the LSC, which by 1990 had again changed its name to *Markaz jihad al-libiyyin li-l-dirasat al-tarikhiyya* (Centre of the Libyan's Jihad for Historical Studies), to mark the extension of its research fields to all periods of Libyan history, to build a network of new international relations (Baldinetti 2010: 23-24). Taking advantage of the regime's need to rebuild its internal legitimacy, especially in Cyrenaica due to the Islamic opposition there, the LSC began to publish studies on subjects that were previously banned, for example on the Jews of Libya (Al-Ahwal 2005), even managing to obtain, in 2010, authorization for the collection of oral sources on the monarchical period (Di Pasquale 2017: 43).

The real battle conducted by the institute's historians, however, with Jerary in the foreground, was for the establishment of a national historical archive that brought together in a single institution the funds dispersed in different locations, above all in the Castle of Tripoli. Thanks to an aptitude developed over decades for negotiating with the regime, the LSC - which since 2000 in the framework of the above-mentioned Italo-Libyan research program took initiatives to preserve the archival documentation stored in the Castle of Tripoli -[5] managed to obtain the transfer of important archival documentation and in 2009 was renamed *Markaz al-watani li-mahfuzat wa-l-dirasat al-tarikhiyya* (The National Centre for Archives and Historical Studies; Baldinetti 2010: 24).

Aside from the writing of the national history, which as seen has largely been undertaken by the LSC, a tentative new rewriting of Libyan history can be traced through political memoirs published from the early 1990s onwards outside Libya. These were written by former Libyan politicians who contributed during the formative years of the modern state of Libya and served at different levels in the country post-independence. These memoirs, the outcome of individual initiatives rather than collaborative efforts, aimed to rehabilitate the monarchical period, which was quite removed and discredited in the official narrative.

The first political memoirs of a former Libyan statesman to be published were, in 1992, those of Mustafa Ahmed Ben-Halim, who was Prime Minister from April 1954 to May 1957 (Ben Halim 1998). Two years later, in 1994, another former Prime Minister, Muhammad 'Uthman al-Sayd, published his edited memoirs in the Arabic newspaper *al-Sharq al-awsat* and a few years later, these were collected in a book (Al-Sayd 1996) which was then republished in French (Assed 2007).

Counterbalancing the official narrative of Libyan history as perpetuated by the state was also the task of the Centre of Libyan Studies, founded in 1994 in Oxford, Great

Britain, by Libyans living in exile. Its activities include the gathering of documentation pertinent to Libya and making it accessible to scholars. The Centre has published a number of works in English and Arabic, which include the three volumes of *Libya bayna al-madi wa-l-hadir. Safahat min al-tarikh al-siyasi (Libya between Past and Present: Pages from the Political History*), a history of Libya during the monarchy written by Mohamed Yousef al-Magariaf, one of the chief founders of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, an opposition group to Qaddafi.[6] This work, similar to the memoirs, represents a contribution to the recovery of the history of Idris's reign which had been relegated by the state under Qaddafi to a deep trunk of memories. The monarchy, as we will see, is at the core of the writing of history in post-Qaddafi Libya.

Recovering and rehabilitating the past: documents and memoirs on the monarchy and the Jamahiriyya

Since the revolution of 2011, control of the archival documentation has allowed the historians of the former LSC to continue their work. Positioning themselves as the sole repositories of the country's historical memory, these historians could also become the guarantors of its 'historical unity'. In addition to the public and private collection campaigns launched a few months after the promulgation of the law of 2012[7] regulating archival material, the new institution, *Markaz al-libi li-l-mahfuzat wa-l-dirasat al-tarikhiyya* (whose English title is the Centre for Libyan Archives and Historical Studies), has continued to publish series and sources on anti-colonial resistance, according to the LSC tradition, while at the same time contributing to the field of regional history, which sees Libya in the context of African history.[8]

However, after the 2011 revolution, the historians of the ex-LSC seem to have lost their monopoly on the writing of Libyan national history: as in Tunisia and Egypt there is today a re-appropriation of the past by many different components of Libyan society. In Egypt since the end of the Mubarak regime, the battle for the control of the national archives carried out by the main political forces for access to some documentary funds has not affected the 'silencing the past' mechanism that has characterized Egyptian historiography post-independence. Since 2011 new archives have been emerging that are beyond the control of the state (Barsalou 2012).

In Tunisia, where the writing of history has always been supported by archival documents since 2012, the funding for the period 1956-1984 was published and made available for consultation (Ben Hamouda 2014). Nevertheless, the traditional role of historians has been questioned, due to the low value given to their profession by previous regimes, and today we find a situation in which the writing of the past is produced by a plurality of actors, and historians have little impact on the narration of the national past (Bendana 2016).

In Libya, the most relevant theme that arises after reading the websites, specialized library catalogues, and monographs that I was able to access, is a rise in the number of

publications (also by Egyptian and Lebanese editorial companies) on the major taboo subjects of the Qaddafi period: the monarchy and the Amazigh minority. One example of this last is the volume *Siyar wa-muʾallafat al-Amazigh al-libiyin: al-qudama wa-l-muʿasirin* (*Biographies and Writings of the Libyan Amazigh: the Ancient and the Contemporary*) by Muhammad Ahmad Jarnaz (2017), who is a professor of Library and Information Science at Tripoli University. The book is a sort of handbook on the Amazigh authors and literature from the Islamic conquest to 2014 with particular reference to the Jabal Nafusa area. There is also a long chapter on the cultural life of the Jabal Nafusa from the second to the tenth century. Also of particular importance are the narratives which look at the *longue durée* of the country's past and include the second Ottoman period (for example see Manqush 2012; ʿIsa 2013; Bu Ruways 2014), which previously had been neglected, as it was considered 'an external domination'.

In 2012, the Libyan publisher Dar al-saqiya li-l-nashr, based in Benghazi, inaugurated a new series with a significant title: *Majhul min tarikh Libiya* (*The Unknown History of Libya*). The first two titles, each formed of three volumes, are a collection of unpublished documents collected and edited by Salim al-Kabti. Not a professional historian, but a writer and intellectual interested in Libyan history, who had already published books of history, since the 2011 political change Kabti has regularly written in the press about his country's past.

The first title, *Libya masirat al-istiqlal* (*Libya: The Path to Independence*; Kabti 2012b), is a collection of reproduced local and international documents. The first volume, subtitled *Khutwat al-ula* (*The First Step*), gathers documents which cover the periods from the 1930s to the United Nations' resolutions of 1949, which stated that Libya should be an independent and sovereign state. The second, *Maʿalim tariq* (*Milestones*), covers the United Nations' activities in Libya. The third volume, *Takwin dawla* (*State Formation*), starting with documents reporting the activities of the Constituent Assembly, reproduces important official documents such as the minutes of the sessions of the Libyan Parliament.[9] The documents, explains the editor, were gathered over decades and the monarchy was such a taboo subject during Qaddafi's regime that the documents were moved from place to place because of the fear that they would be discovered and destroyed. The success and popularity of the publication, which reached its second edition in less than a year, is a testament to the need and desire of Libyans to understand and recover the neglected period of the monarchy. In fact, Kabti states that the aim of collection is "to make generations born after independence aware of the great debt they have towards the founding generation of the state whose history has been hidden for forty years, years with a single voice (*sawt wahid*) and a single leader" (Kabti 2012b vol.1*:* 19).

The second title in the series, *Idris al-Sanusi: al-Amir wa-l-Malik. Wathaʾiq ʿan dawrihi al-siyasi wa-l-watani* (*Idris al-Sanusi: The Prince and the King. Documents on His Political and National Role*), is devoted to Idris al-Sanusi. The three volumes, of which

the first covers the period 1914-45, the second the period 1946-51, and the third the period 1952-69, are intended to fill a gap in the historiography, which amounts to only a few books, limited by the need to be based mainly on Western documentation (Kabti 2012 b vol. 1: 20-23). It goes without saying that these volumes, being the first organic collections of Arabic documents related to the monarchy, represent an important tool for any scholar aiming to investigate this historical period, also taking into account that as time goes by it becomes more difficult to carry out research on the monarchy because the Qaddafi regime may have intentionally destroyed the relevant documents. Also related to the monarchy is the biography of Mahmud Ahmad al-Muntasser, written by Sadiq Faḍil Zughayr Zuhayri (2017), who was the Prime Minister and Minister of foreign affairs in the period 1951-1954, and Prime Minister a second time in 1964-1965. It constitutes a detailed and documented study of Libyan foreign policy toward other Arab countries. The research, which is a further elaboration of a master's thesis in history submitted at the University of Baghdad and based on official Libyan documentation such as the reports of the Senate (*majlis al-shuyukh*) and archival documentation from the Iraqi national archives, offers an internal insight into the workings of the Libyan government during this period.

However, particularly significant are the memoirs of some protagonists of Idris' Libya. As in the other Maghrebi countries, where the writing of history has traditionally focused on the top-down state narrative, in recent years the project of national memory has incorporated more diverse sources such as memoirs and diaries. Community appropriation of memory generates awareness of competing majority and minority narratives within the nation and contributes to the creation of a fuller and more informed national identity (Bras 2008: 5).

The new-born post-revolutionary publishing house Maktabat 17 Fibrayr, republished in 2012 the memoirs of Bashir al-Sunni al-Muntasser,[10] a key political figure under the monarchy. Al-Muntasser held different positions in the administration, including Deputy Prime Minister from 1964 to 1967, when he was also Minister of state for cabinet affairs, and Minister of justice in 1968. His memoirs, titled *Mudhakkirat shahid ʿala al-ʿahd al-malaki al-libi* (*Memoirs of a witness in the monarchical period*), first appeared in London in a private edition in 2008. These memoirs were written in 1970 and were never rewritten, despite only being published a few decades later, and they contain only his personal memoirs because, as the author notes, all the documents he collected during his service in the administration were confiscated from him after the 1969 coup d'état (Muntasser 2012: 11-12). They were written with the sole aim of leaving them to his family, and he notes that he is not an historian and leaves the task of "writing history" to the "competent people" (Muntasser 2012: 9-10).

It is notable that these memoirs, as opposed to most narratives that emerged in Libya after 2011, do not idolize the King and the monarchy but criticize him harshly. In the author's words: "the King, besides being a Sanussi of Sharifian origin [was] also a Libyan

citizen who accepted to occupy a public position. He swore to respect the constitution and exercise its functions in the interests of the people" (Muntasser 2012: 14). These memoirs shed light on uncovered aspects of the inner workings of what Majid Khadduri has termed the "machinery of government" (Kadduri 1963: 180) and on the motivations and consequences of some of Idris' choices which ultimately led to his overthrowing.

The author ascribes the failure of the monarchy to the indecision of the King and his failure to ensure his decisions were carried out in full. In particular, the resignation of Abdul Hamid al-Bakkush as Prime Minister in September 1968 ended the possibility of any real political modernization of the country and paved the way for the 1969 coup d'état. Bakkush's appointment in October 1967, which was backed by Great Britain and USA, gained broad consensus among students, who were the target of initiatives to involve them in the public sphere, and intellectuals and journalists, whose freedom of expression was strongly encouraged. However, reform programs were strongly opposed mainly by the Cyrenaican tribes and traditional elites, who considered the new head of government a threat to their interests (Muntasser 2012: 255-277).

In particular, Bakkush's 'call to the Libyan character' (*daʿwa al-shakhsiyya al-libiyya*), which was an effort to create an awareness of a national identity and cement feelings of belonging to their own nation-state, was strongly opposed because it was considered an attempt to push Libya away from its Arab environment without considering the bonds of culture and religion and a will to Westernize the country. Muntasser argues that in reality the idea of a Libyan character had a double goal: on one hand it aimed to erase regionalism and tribalism, on the other hand it aimed to stop the 'race' of Libyans towards Nasserism, which led people to be interested in issues concerning the Arab world much more than internal affairs. Muntasser judges that Bakkush' main mistake was to believe he had the King's support in his decisions (Muntasser 2012: 263-264).

Also significant as an historical source on the monarchical era and state formation are the memoirs of Ibrahim Muhammad Hangari, *Awamish ʿala daftar al-ayyam. Mudhakkirat wa-dhikrayyat*) (*Footnotes in the Book of Days. Memoirs and Memories*), published in 2016 in Lebanon and almost entirely written after the 2011 uprisings, although the author claims he started to record them a decade before (Hangari 2016: 29-33). Hangari was born in Ghat, a city located in the extreme south of Libya, where he attended elementary school. Later he moved to al-Zawia, then to Tripoli where he attended high school. Son of a judge, he obtained a state scholarship to study law at the University of Cairo in the academic year 1955-1956, but the Libyan government revoked his scholarship and enrolled all the students who had been awarded the scholarship, who had pursued literary studies in high school, into the newborn Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Benghazi. In 1959, Hangari graduated with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and started to work at the national radio station, and later in the Ministry of Petroleum.[11]

Hangari's book covers the author's life until the *zalzal* (earthquake), which is how Hangari defines the 1969 overthrow of the King. He was arrested in 1969 and prevented

from leaving the country or working in either the public and private sectors. After the end of the prescriptions at the beginning of the 1980s he moved to Great Britain. The book's stated intent is to convey "to the new generations the values and sacrifices of the generation which created a new nation and state in a period of time not exceeding 18 years that are the years of the independent monarchy of Libya" (Hangari 2016: 29-33).

Indeed, these memoirs are very supportive of the monarchy, here regarded as a period of justice, equality, and development, which was interrupted by the 1969 coup d'état, when in the author's words "Satan arrived, bringing with him injustice and corruption, transforming the country into a lake of blood" (Hangari 2016: 209). This nostalgia for the period of the monarchy, considered as the golden age in the history of Libya, also permeates the two prefaces, penned by the famous novelist and former diplomat Ahmad Faqih and the intellectual Salim Kabti, mentioned above.

Ahmad Faqih points out that the importance of these memoirs lies in the fact that they were written by one of the first graduates in the history of Libya and depict the history of the generation who had the task of building the country after centuries of foreign domination (Faqih in Hangari 2016: 9-15). In effect Hangari's pages on his life as a student are among the few documents that offer a picture of the educational system at the eve of independence (Hangari 2016: 52-62) and the establishment of the university by the new Kingdom of Libya (Hangari 2016: 63-76).

Particularly relevant is the narrative of his experience in prison under the monarchy. In 1961 Hangari served a one-year sentence for his secret affiliation with the Baʿth Party. These pages present a rare and precious account of the political opposition in monarchist Libya. The Baʿth was very attractive to students and youth because its program, which included the union of Arab States and the withdrawal of USA and Great Britain from Libya, reflected the Nasserist revolution. Hangari argues that the arrests and amplification of the party's activity reflected the internal political clashes that opposed federalists and unionists and was exploited by various political actors (Hangari 2016: 102-107). Indeed, in those years the activity of the Ba'th was limited to the publication of posters and the distribution of books to spread the party's ideas (Hangari 2016: 100).

It is worthy to note that Hangari's judgment of his experience of the prison is a positive one, not only because, the author claims, the guards facilitated contact between the various members of the Baʿth who continued to coordinate their activities from the prison, but mainly because they had a proper trial and their rights were respected (Hangari 2016: 110-135). On the other hand, his judgment of his brief incarceration in the aftermath of the coup d'état of 1969, when he was arrested on charges of corruption at the airport arriving from London, is a very negative one. Hangari claims that all trials of former state officials were arbitrary and did not follow the correct procedures (Hangari 2016: 209-250). The political activity and the consequent experience of prison

during the Qaddafi regime is the subject of most memoirs published after 2011.
In September 2011, Dar al-Ruwad published *Fi al-sijn wa-l-ghurba. Mudhakkirat* (*In Prison and Exile. Memoirs*), the memoirs of Jum'a Ahmed Atiqa, which only a few months later already reached its second edition. Atigha, a relevant political actor in today's Libya,[12] was an opponent of the regime and spent many years in Qaddafi's prisons. Born in Misrata in 1955, after graduating in law from the University of Benghazi in 1972 he was appointed attorney general. During the 1973 Cultural Revolution, he was arrested a first time because of his 'cultural activity'. As a student he used to write in journals published by the university and was on the editorial board of the *Majallat al-'adala* (*Justice Journal*), issued by the Faculty of Law (Atiqa 2011: 15). Released from prison in 1974, he worked as a lawyer until 1977, when he left Libya and spent more than a decade in exile, living in Egypt, Morocco, and Italy. He returned to Libya in 1988 following a general amnesty, but was arrested a second time in 1990 for his activity abroad as an opponent of the regime and this time remained in prison for seven years. In his descriptions of prison life the author, rather than focusing on himself, narrates his prison mates' individual histories and describes the systematic violation of human rights that took place. This reflects his educational background, as in exile he pursued his studies and graduated with a second degree in law from Sapienza University in Rome, with a dissertation on international criminal law (Atiqa 2011: 57).
These memoirs offer a detailed account of the formation of the ranks of the opposition abroad (Atiqa 2011: 57-64) and inside the country (Atiqa 2011: 86-90) in Qaddafi's Libya, and show that the formation of the political opposition to Qaddafi was the direct result of the complete absence of freedom of thought; his repression of any cultural initiative which was perceived as a threat led to the creation of his political opposition. *Mudhakkirat mudda'in 'amm. Shahadat 'ala 'asr al-zalam* (*Memoirs of a Prosecutor. Testimonies on the Age of Darkness*) also published by Dar al-Ruwad, presents the memoirs of 'Ali Salim al-Fituri, who worked for forty years in different positions in the judiciary and from 1976 to 1986 was the head prosecutor in the court of Tripoli.[13] The memoirs were written during the 2011 uprising, but the author specifies that he recorded the facts he witnessed at the time on scattered papers but could not assemble them in a manuscript due to fear of persecution. The stated aim of his memoirs is to let people know what was happening behind the scenes during the Qaddafi period and it is evident that the author attempts to prove that the judiciary was not complicit with the regime but tried to remain independent.
The importance of this book lies in the fact that it records for posterity the names of prisoners and public officers, events, and processes held by the special courts, of which nothing was known and which can help to reconstruct the inner organization of state apparatus in the Jamahiriyya.
While al-Fituri's memoirs[14] were not coeval to the events they portray, and rather than concentrating on a narrative of the self are a denunciation of Qaddafi's regime, Salah

Qasabi's memoirs, *Ka-annaka mai. Mudhakkirat sajin raʾy fi sujun al-Qadhdhafi* (*As if you were there with me. Diary of a prisoner of conscience in Qaddafi's prisons*) (2014), have a different tone and are a diary which the author kept during his prison sentence, which lasted 29 years and 5 months. Born in Jado in 1942, he began sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood during his time at university and became a member of Hizb al-Tahrir in 1967, during the last years of Idris' reign. His affiliation to this pan-Islamic organization, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, led to his incarceration and the People's Court, the extraordinary court which was only abolished in 2005, sentenced him to 50 years in prison. This remarkable testimony, written in the form of letters to his daughter Safia, who was less than two months' old at the time of his arrest, is a journey in the history of political thought and the groups that sprouted in Libya in the 1960s and 1970s.

The diary contains a long section in which the author sketches his biography since 1964, when he moved to Tripoli as a teacher in a primary school, to the year of his arrest, giving a picture of the rise and organization of the Islamic groups in Libya. He emphasizes that it was the educational system, mainly through the Egyptian and Palestinian teachers, that was the main propeller of Islamic ideology (Qasabi 2014: 101-134), although he admits that the mosques also played a significant role. Besides Qasabi's, other prison memoirs (such as Bishti 2013) also give a witness account of political detention during the Qaddafi's regime. This production, although still limited in its volume (at least from the data I was able to collect), will play a relevant role in forging the collective memory of those years similar to what happened in Morocco (Hachad 2018) and the ongoing process in Tunisia (Ghachem 2018). To my knowledge, with the exception of al-Maliki (2016), scholars have not paid much attention to this prison literature and such work is necessary for a full understanding of this period.

Conclusion

In Libya, as in Tunisia and Egypt, political changes have translated into a new interest in history and in the writing of national history, which concerns not only professional historians but the whole of society. A similar process, however, had already been underway for some years before in Morocco and Algeria, which were least touched by the revolutionary shockwave, as a result of the reconfiguration of the political sphere (Grangaud, Messaoudi, Oualdi 2014). In general, North African historians today enjoy greater freedom of expression and participate in the public debate on the past through the media, while they begin to discuss sensitive topics of national histories, such as the role of minorities in the formation of the nation-state and the use of political violence. Concerning Libya, the first relevant point is that the establishment, in 2012, of the National Archives marks for the first time since independence a recognition of the importance of written documentation, during a period of redefinition of the national historical identity. During the Qaddafi regime, as evidenced, historical production

(which had almost exclusively concerned the colonial period and ignored the monarchical period) mainly used oral testimony as a primary source, while the writing of the story was entrusted to a specially created research institute. Preserving and making accessible written documentation, in particular on the monarchy, is also the main concern at the heart of writing history by non-professional historians. The writing of narratives that consider the history of the country over a longer timescale can also be useful to examine the development of the identities of the peoples of Libya and their relationships with each other in the Ottoman period.

Also noteworthy is that memoirs and autobiographies published after 2011, although reflecting different experiences, share a common departure point: they are written with an educational purpose and acknowledge the importance of knowing the past to shape the country's political future. In particular, in narrating the prison and the political activity in the ranks of opposition during the Qaddafi regime, the testimonies present themselves as a 'source' for the history of the country. It is probable that this narrative was influenced by the Moroccan experience, where the Equity and Reconciliation Commission raised the prison's memoirs to the rank of archives (Cohen 2012). Thus, the national memory is no longer state-driven, but despite the fact that it is shaped by a plurality of actors it aims to tighten and unify the different components of the society, not to divide them.

Despite the renewed interest in history, it is nonetheless significant that, as part of the government experience immediately following the fall of Qaddafi, the new textbooks adopted in January 2012[15] perpetuate the distortion of public writing in national history: if, on the one hand, the period of the monarchy was included, the history of the regime was completely excluded, as well as the presence of the country's ethnic and religious minorities, testifying to the persistent difficulty that the post-revolutionary Libyan society encounters in definition of its past.

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NOTES:

1 - Fu'ad Shukri (1904-63), who obtained a doctorate from the University of Liverpool in 1935, was among the first Egyptian experts in modern history. His first contacts with Idris al-Sanusi date back to 1943 when, working in the Egyptian Ministry of Education, he escorted a Cyrenaican delegation, sent by Idris al-Sanusi, on their visit in Egypt to observe the local educational system. In 1948 he published his first work on Libya, *al-Sanusiyya: din wa-dawla* (*The Sanusiyya: Religion and State*), mainly an account of the birth of the Sanusiyya and its development, with particular emphasis on its resistance to the colonial occupation. Later in 1947 he became the Egyptian government expert for the preparation of the memorandum addressed to the Council of foreign ministries, which included the Egyptian claims over Libya. In the following years he played an important role in trying to reconcile the Tripolitanian political claims with those of the Sanusi. For a detailed discussion of Skukri's direct involvement in Libyan issues and his historical production on Libya see Baldinetti (2010: 15-17).

2 - Muhammad al-Tayyib al-Ashhab, who died in 1958, was the press attaché at the Libyan Embassy in Cairo. Some of his works, for example *'Umar al-Mukhtar* (1958), were published at the expense of the Sanusi family and it is probable that al-Ashhab got much of the documentation used in his books directly from the royal family. For a detailed discussion of al-Ashhab's production see Baldinetti (2010: 17).

3 - Tahir al-Zawi (1890-1986), a prolific author whose production included over twenty volumes, emigrated to Egypt during the Italian occupation and was among the founders of various Tripolitanian exiles' associations and authored pamphlets denouncing the Italian violations in Libya. Despite returning to Tripolitania in 1951 al-Zawi was forced to flee again to Egypt after independence due to his tense relations with Idris al-Sanusi who had banned his books, see Baldinetti (2010: 19-20).

4 - Kenyon P., *After Gadhafi Libyans Try to Reclaim their History,* 21 November 2011: www.npr.org/2011/11/21/142609002/after-gadhafi-libyans-try-to-reclaim-their-history.

5 - For details of the first reconnaissance, in which I participated, of the Italian colonial documentation in the Castle of Tripoli see Baldinetti and Di Palma (2002).

6 - Back in Libya from exile after 2011, he was President of the General National Congress from August 2012 to May 2013.

7 - For the complete text of the Law n. 24/2012: http://www.libsc.org.ly/mrkaz/images/pdf/kanoun.pdf.

8 - Information taken from the web page http://www.libsc.org.ly/mrkaz/index.php.

9 - In appendix the volume lists all the government formations with the names of all the ministers, the texts of the King's speeches on the independence anniversaries, and some pictures. The three volumes are completed with a CD, which reproduced a few discourses of Idris.

10 - Born in 1932 in Fascist Libya, he attended the first secondary school in Tripoli, established by the British administration. He pursued his studies at Cairo University where, in 1957, he graduated in Political Sciences from Cairo University and began his career as a Minister's assistant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and worked also in the Libyan embassy in Cairo and London. Arrested on 1 September 1969 and released on December 3 of that year, he remained in Libya until 1977 working for oil companies. In 1977, he moved to Geneva and obtained some assignments in the UN (Muntasser 2012: 17-26).

11 - These biographical data are taken from the Hangari's book. Since the 2011 revolution Hangari regularly writes on the political situation in the main online Libyan newspapers and on his Facebook page.

12 - In 2012 he was elected to the General National Congress and from 28 May 2013 to 25 June 2013 he was the GNC's President.

13 - Al-Fituri died in July 2012; a few months before he was appointed as a member of the Fact Finding and Reconciliation Commission which had the task of collecting information on the human rights violations committed by the Qaddafi regime. After his death he was awarded for his role played with honesty and transparency as head of the independent commission that oversaw the election of the local council in the city of Zliten, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0d4uu59VG8.

14 - In appendix are reproduced some articles published during the exile, a few documents from the Qaddafi courts.

15 - Fhelboom R., *Removing Gaddafi from Schoolbooks,* 17 December 2013, https://en.qantara.de/content/libya-removing-gaddafi-from-schoolbooks; Gillis C.M., *The end of History in New Libya,* 23 April 2012: http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/the-end-of-history-in-the-new-libya/.

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