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A Gathering

As libya struggles to shape itself in the years following uprisings that toppled a decades-long dictatorship, as the country's state and educational institutions grapple with the past and attempt to look forward, and as Libyan cultural institutions are more numerous and active than ever, students and scholars in Libya and elsewhere want to understand Libya's histories, societies, struggles, and achievements. Now, more than ever, "Libyan Studies" must broaden its horizons and re-center the means and methods of knowledge production. There is a need for a forum that does just this, while also accounting for the complex ideas, values, social configurations, histories, and material realities that constitute Libya. This journal aims to provide that forum.

Lamma: A Journal of Libyan Studies gives attention to as wide a range of disciplines, sources, and approaches as possible—especially those that have previously received less scholarly attention or have not been thought of as participating in "Libyan Studies." We intend to recenter and relocate knowledge production, aiming not only to publish research and writing that addresses new themes, foregrounds previously marginalized perspectives, and integrates new sources, but also to encourage new research interests by bringing together people whose research and writing involves Libya in some way.

The seeds that have grown into *Lamma* were sown some time ago. As students, we were frustrated by the lack of literature relating to Libya in our various fields of interest. As academics, we have been able to see the horizons of these fields and realize just how narrow they are. In Libyan writer Hisham Matar's recent book *The Return*, he laments:

> All the books on the modern history of the country could fit neatly on a couple of shelves...A Libyan hoping to glimpse something of that past must, like an intruder at a private party, enter such books in the full knowledge that most of them were not written by or for [them], and, therefore, at heart, they are accounts concerning the lives

> of others, their adventures and misadventures in Libya, as though one's country is but an opportunity for foreigners to exorcize their demons and live out their ambitions.

Matar's image is striking—and yet, actually, exaggerated. There is hardly a handful of general histories of modern Libya in Western languages. The remainder of Matar's bookshelves can be filled though, but primarily with works of political science, economics, and portraits of Qaddafi and his policies. A few of these are valuable and based on deep engagement with Libyan society; others are fawning accounts of the regime as a curious sociopolitical experiment. Arabic scholarly works published in Libya are largely inaccessible and known only to a few specialists, but even then infrequently used. Translations of Libyan literature into languages like English, French, and Italian have only begun to appear in the past few years, while there are no translations of Libyan scholarly works in Arabic. Yet since 2011, publications on Libya have dramatically increased in number, such that one would think the field to be experiencing a flowering. Matar is on point in recognizing the purview of these works—by experts, for experts. Many scholars of Libya and self-proclaimed experts, notably, do not write for Libyans.

Our goal isn't necessarily to expand those few shelves into bookshelves and then libraries. Knowledge production on its own may do nothing for the object of study. Rather, our concern is to provide a critical means of knowledge production while shaping how that knowledge is used, who is able to use it, and who participates in its production and use.

We have often heard it said by scholars and writers that Libya has less of interest to offer scholarship than its neighbors—an unfortunate perspective which continues an old and well-worn colonial trope of Libya as merely empty desert. This trope is still present in many works on Libyan history, which view this empty space as simply waiting to be filled by a foreign power. Our position is not only to show that this space is not empty at all, but also to question why such a proposition has and continues to exist. In doing so, we hope to change the hegemony of knowledge production.

We are also aware that this journal's title implicitly adopts a modern and problematic unit of analysis: the nation-state. This seems inevitable, as it is an entity that is very real in the lives of Libyans and non-Libyans, researchers, inhabitants, migrants, policy-makers, and

militaries alike. The nation-state is moreover the primary marker of identity for area studies all over the world. But we believe that the nation-state is in many ways arbitrary, and many aspects of research on "Libya" necessarily must look across political and conceptual borders. We argue that though "Libya" is our conceptual focus, it does not exist in isolation but in synergy with numerous historical and regional networks: northern and western African, Saharan, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and more. We are far more interested in exploring these connections and branching outwards than we are in shoring up geo-political and intellectual borders.

Moreover, "Libya" as a term and as a concept is a Western creation which arose from the resurrection of the ancient designation "Libia" by Italian colonial geographers, who saw the colonial project as one of reclaiming the ancient territory which was once Rome's. The very term, then, comes with its own particular epistemological history and struggles over ownership. We acknowledge these and take them on, hoping to trouble and problematize them in some small way.

It is also important to locate our initiative both outside of, and adjacent to, the current scene of knowledge production and publication concerning "Libyan Studies." In Western academia, there currently exist three outlets for the publication of research on Libya, all of which focus mostly on archaeology from the pre-historic to the Greco-Roman and early Islamic periods. These outlets are the following: *Libyan Studies* (published by the Society for Libyan Studies, part of the British Academy), in print since 1969 when it began life as the annual report of the British School of Archaeology in Libya; *Libia Antiqua*, the annual of the Department of Archaeology of Libya (published in Italy), primarily the outlet for various Italian-led archeological projects in Libya, which first appeared in 1964; and *Quaderni di archeologia della Libia* (also published in Italy), which goes back to 1950 but has recently appeared only about once every decade.

There are two striking things about these journals. First, their period and subject emphases work towards defining "Libyan Studies" primarily with reference to a remote past which relates to only one small part of the lives of modern Libyans. After all, a society of scholars, such as the one which publishes *Libyan Studies*, is one of the main ways in which a field of study takes shape and produces meaning in academia. Moreover, scholars working in the areas served by these journals have a relative abundance of outlets to choose from in publishing their work.

Second, none of these journals are open-access, and so their findings are only available to a limited group of people, and least of all by students, scholars, and the interested public in Libya. In the case of *Libyan Studies*, its issues are now online and can be accessed by those with a society membership or university library subscription; the other two journals have no meaningful online presence, and are more obscure and obscenely expensive. This means that there is no dedicated and specialized platform which scholars working on any and all aspects of Libya feel may be thematically relevant to publishing their research—and that the Libyans whom that research concerns, and to whom it may be very relevant, have little to no chance to read it. Any new academic platform related to Libya must address both these points.

Lamma is, therefore, broadly multi-disciplinary in its mission. Additionally, we support an alternative to the dominant paradigms of academic publishing and believe in free access to research and information. Every issue of *Lamma* will therefore be accessible online and available in print at low cost.

There is also a history of Libyan research and publication within which we situate ourselves. Not so long ago, a group of Libyan scholars in the United Kingdom endeavored to challenge the norms of knowledge production and founded an English-language journal, the *Journal of Libyan Studies*, motivated by the "need for a general forum of Libyan Studies which, while taking Libya as its regional focus, should not restrict itself to a particular field or specialty but provide a cosmopolitan meeting of minds for writers from diverse disciplines and points of view." This project unfortunately only published seven issues between 2000 and 2003 before folding, but in doing so showed that there was both room and desire for a Libyan-centered research outlet. We hope to continue the spirit of their work. In Libya, the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli with its branches in other cities, as well as various universities, have long published academic journals (to which Western scholars have also contributed), though they are difficult to access and not widely available outside the country. Most prominent of these is probably the *Journal of Historical Studies* (مجلة البحوث التاريخية), oriented towards Libyan history in a northern African and African perspective; this, along with several other journals, have enjoyed activity since the late 1970s and early 1980s. The current conditions in Libya leave the near future of academic publishing and research support somewhat uncertain, and for that reason too we hope that *Lamma*,

with access to the resources of Western universities, can also be a viable option for scholars in Libya as well as in northern Africa, the Middle East, and the Global South more generally.

Lamma is, we would like to emphasize, only one possible way in which to move toward a new kind of "Libyan Studies": one that is multidisciplinary, collaborative, multilingual, inclusive, and even radical. We believe that academics should work alongside cultural actors, social activists, and Libyan and non-Libyan students and scholars alike. This gathering therefore does not impose boundaries, but seeks to trouble them. It does not define membership but seeks to be defined by it. It is not static, but continuously changing. It does not aspire to eliteness, but desires inclusion, accessibility, and openness.