

Rising from *Shar*: A Meditation on the Future of our History

I.

These roads will take you into your own country.
Muriel Rukeyser

With the hindsight of nearly five decades, I can say that the experiences that shaped my national identity, and gave me the sense of my country, were several long road trips along the Libyan coastal highway. A merchant in Benghazi, my father's business took him all the way to Tobruk 500 kilometers in the east, and to Ajdabiya 150 kilometers southwest of Benghazi, and all the cities in between. Three times a year, he took my cousins, my brother and myself on these trips. The road to Derna was a sensory immersion in the beauty of nature, the mountains, the greenery, the scent of the shrubbery, and in winter and spring, a sense of bounty, the land covered with vegetation, a glint of gold on the grass in the sunshine, a silver sheen in the rain. We were always well provisioned on these trips, and it seems to me that we stopped as many times to eat and enjoy the scenery as we did to conduct my father's business. The food we had with us was unlike what we ate daily—drier food so things don't spill in the car—and so much of it, enough for a grand picnic, and so delicious because it marked us as travelers, eating on the side of the road, surrounded by beautiful scenery and the purest air.

On these trips each city projected its own identity. Al-Marj, when we were travelling to it a decade or so after the devastating earthquake 1961, which the King Idris government was quick to rebuild. It was an orderly town where cows and sheep roamed among the sharp modern white villas. The entry into Al-Baida with its giant eucalyptus trees alongside the city entrance, followed by the great university campus, made a stately impression of power and leisure, worthy of a summer capital. One had to stop in Shahhat, Cyrene, because one simply must

acknowledge *al-athar*, the mysterious Greek ruins, and perhaps to reminisce about a great hotel that closed soon after the 1969 coup d'état. Derna was the jewel of the trip, a beautiful city that in my eye competed with our sprawling and pulsating Benghazi. The city's fine grand hotel was the first I ever stayed in, its elegant restaurant and coffeeshop resembled anything one would have encountered in Italy then. Derna had a brand of soda, Sadaqa, that was all its own and it came in all the colors of the rainbow, and none of them were available in Benghazi. A famous Cretan restaurant must have served a version of the mythical lotus soaked in secret elixirs because everyone that had eaten there never forgot it, and always wished to return. At night one could go to an open roofed cinema or walk the narrow, jasmine scented streets. The trip to Tobruk was longer and less green. Scene of great WWII battles, and until 1970's site of a major British military base, Tobruk looked to the world with its strategic wide harbor, a vista that resonated with import and intrigue. This made the return westward toward the Green Mountains even sweeter, another chance to experience the hedonism that the ancient philosophers of Cyrene had preached long ago. We were innocent of the horrific journeys that trod these mountains only a few decades before.

Travel to Tripoli was always cause for excitement. Indeed, the Tripoli of my youth, bigger, more built-up and cleaner than Benghazi, seemed to evoke sleek and glamorous Europe. We had relatives in Tripoli to visit and stay with, sometimes all summer long. Boarding the famed, and later infamous, 727s of Libyan Arab Airlines was how I first traveled to the nation's capital. Something of that thrill remains with me now when I take window seat and try to place myself a dot on the map, the long haul over the Gulf of Sidra, then a clutch of cities, Misrata, Zlitan, Khoms, Garabulli, until landing into the lap of 'Arous al-Bahr.

As impacting as these travels have been on my sense of rootedness as a Libyan, a citizen who belongs to several parts of the same nation, it was two road journeys between Tripoli and Benghazi that gave me a deeper and perhaps more sobering sense of my country. Driving southward from Benghazi on the coastal highway, and soon after leaving the famous trees of Teeka behind, the rugged, desert landscape begins to engulf the riders. And as the car begins to reach high speed, cars from the other direction will begin to shoot past at a hundred miles an hour. The journey begins to feel like a daunting task that no one wants to take, preferring instead to speed through it, as soon—as insanely soon—as possible.

The most prevalent image of the coastal highway as one fol-

lowed the arc of the Gulf of Sidra is the mirage, the bright mercurial shimmer of water that always shone a few kilometers ahead of you on the burning asphalt and, which as the trip continues, begins to seem like the force that made drivers become maniacal, as they sped toward it and never reaching it. It was in the middle of this hot, oppressively bright landscape that my uncle, also chasing the mirage, pointed to his right and said, "This is where they killed all those poor people long ago. Al-Agila! The Italians. God curse them." Looking through the open window, there was nothing to see, except apparitions half standing in the middle of nowhere. History was before us, but it was also a mirage.

I do not recall if the camp was on the right/north or left/south side of the coastal highway. Although barely a thread of asphalt separating desert from sea, the road was a mental barrier for many like me who lived on the coast and never looked southward. Even when I tried to imagine the long journey, *rihlan*, that my clan took from Misrata to Egypt in 1923, I naturally thought they followed the coastal route which had not been built then. A conversation with my father in my twenties revealed a different lay of the land. When they were expelled from Misrata after the city fell to the fascists, my ancestors, regrouped as several hundred, headed south/southwest to al-Sadadah, nearly 100 kilometers away. I track that line on the map. Nearly a year later they ended up in the oasis of Al-Jaghub, right on the Egyptian border, but 300 kilometers from the coast. They certainly did not take the coastal road but followed a centuries-old route among the desert oases that connected ancient Egypt to Carthage, and both ancient civilizations to the Sahel, all the way to the River Niger.

But where did the ancestors stop, and how far south did they go before they swerved eastward? Sokna, Waddan, certainly Jalu and Awjila. In Al-Jaghub, they waited for permission to enter Egypt, where the British blocked them from moving on. The League of Nations, so the story goes, intervened. At last, they entered Egypt with Italian identity documents, expelled but somehow recognized by the European power that tormented and uprooted them. Many died along the *tirhal*, but somewhere along the year-long journey my father was born.

In a more benign interpretation of our mad, leisurely, and agonizing crossings of our land, I imagined that we Libyans were sewing our scattered, tattered country together with our journeys. It is indeed a thrill, albeit a disorienting one, to travel so far and deep and to remain in one's country.

II.

Beyond (and sometimes even within) people's memories was undated time, historical darkness. Out of that darkness (extending to place as well as time) we had all come.

V. S. Naipaul

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Like many Libyans I learned about Al-Agila and the other Italian concentration camps in intermittent doses. A television program drama, perhaps, a short black and white film about Ghaith al-Saghir. The melodrama and the overacting betrayed the national sense of grievance, and misapprehension of the trauma that took place. A seemingly long and endless reel of a young broadcaster shoving a microphone in front ancient people and asking them to render their pain as quickly as they can. By the time Qaddafi began to put his Third Universal Theory in practice, with its cult of personality propaganda pervading the ether and the public sphere, references to the trauma of the Italian concentration camps began to disappear. The revolution had made its case against imperialism and colonialism and now the glorious leader and his three green pamphlets are ready to storm the world. The time was a time of victors, not victims.

And this momentum of leaving history behind, driving past it along the coastal highway, or chucking it aside when the trumpets of destiny begin to herald a new future, has been with us all along. For the Brits victory in North Africa resulted in their utter neglect of any pursuit of war crimes against the murderous Italian generals. The newly established Libyan monarchy, dirt poor and unable to take on its former colonizers, many of whom controlled most the country's economy, pushed headway into the future. And when the oil came, the petrol induced frenzy, the clanking of the oil wells and the hard currency pouring in, along with the aging monarch's bafflement before the ideological currents that swirled around his kingdom, made contemplation of the past seem like a luxury.

Yet, for many Libyans, impressions of the camps did remain, some sharp and resonant and otherwise uncertain but evocative as the students Professor Ahmida interviewed testified. Indeed, the verse *ما بي مرض غير دار العقيلة* ('I have no illness except the abode of Al-Agila') which opens Rajab Buhwaish's great ode is seared on the Libyan aural memory. And along with the image of Omar al-Mukhtar (sometimes in the guise of Anthony Quinn), it is one of the primary memory triggers of the nation's past. It's ironic that as much as the Qaddafi regime had affiliated itself with the heroism of al-Mukhtar and the anti-Italian ji-

had, this same tradition was ultimately utilized as a potent symbol in the rebellion that brought down the 42-year-old dictatorship. In 2011, Libyans found no difficulty identifying themselves with al-Mukhtar and the victims of Italian brutality, while comparing Qaddafi and his henchmen to the Italian occupiers who oppressed the nation, corrupted the land, and defiled the bodies of the citizenry with killings and torture. Of note here too is that both during the Qaddafi regime and in the rebellion against him, the identification focused on the fighters, who by virtue of being rewarded eternal paradise, were themselves victorious even in defeat. The identification was not with the masses killed in the camps, many of whom remain unnamed. Also in the 2011 rebellion, the crucial contribution of the Abu Salim victims, being presented as evidence of Qaddafi's brutality, was soon neglected, the population opting for an elusive victorious past rather than a painful history that can perhaps be known and documented.

As opposed to history, the past is brittle, the legends recounted around which identities are shaped can quickly fall apart. Libya is full of attempts to create such pasts, mainly in the form of mini-tribal biographies written by pseudo historians who created for their tribes and tribal heroes histories that trace their genealogies to the purest native blood, or the mightiest conquerors. In such "histories" of tribal heroes, one's ancestors emerge as unblemished paragons, who spared the nation no act of courage, who never tasted defeat, never abused their neighbors, acted on greed, or cowered, collaborated or betrayed tribe or nation. Reading such versions of the Libyan past, one must wonder why the nation has fared so badly, with the same internecine violence, flaring up at the first decades of the 21st century as it had in the 20th, and where acts of disloyalty and contempt sometimes overshadow deeds of courage and goodwill.

Indeed, I am thinking of the unaccounted for, and unacknowledged betrayal and collaboration during Italian colonization. It's evident that a sizeable number of Libyans from all over Libya had been recruited from as early as 1912 to fight with the Italians against other Libyans, and that there were Libyans responsible for other Libyans' suffering. Accounting for such a fact may seem inconvenient for the creation of a national myth. Indeed, such an effort at truth and reconciliation was not possible after WWII, when poor and battered Libya was attempting to gain statehood through the world powers via the U.N. During the era of King Idris, the country still bore regional fractures that needed tending. The country was also harangued by Nasserite propaganda that spread lies against it to explain away its short-

comings and was encircled by the oceanic tensions of the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Libyans were never allowed a moment of peace to sift through their history, and solidify it their understanding of it, through recognition and forgiveness. The age of oil with its heady rumble of development and dizzying possibilities for enrichment made history seem a minor nuisance. The enrichment of the nation itself seemed a reward from God, in accordance with the Quranic promise of “after hardship there is ease.” God himself seemed to have pushed us into the future.

The Qaddafi regime, as stated earlier, had little patience with history even as its institutions had made the most inroads into chronicling such history, such as with the collection of archives and ethnographies which Professor Ahmida’s study references. Perhaps as a point of tact, though I doubt it very much, Qaddafi’s propagandists could not persist in condemning the atrocities of the Italian occupation, when they themselves began to commit their own audacious atrocities. The public hangings of the Libyan mujahideen which had signified the brutality of Italian colonization were replicated in the late 1970’s and 1980s, in universities, public squares, and sports arenas. Atrocities such as the summary executions, torture, beatings, unjust trials, expulsions, and indefinite detentions which had been faced by our ancestors during the Italian era were a fact of life for Libyans in much of the Qaddafi era. People would have seen through his cynicism, and the Colonel seeing no benefit in solidifying the nation’s history to his advantage, cooled off on such chores.

Ten years now since the rebellion that toppled Qaddafi, it seems evident the Libyan leadership or intelligentsia is incapable of addressing history. The Abu Salim massacre, which more than any other atrocity in the Qaddafi era contributed to the regime’s downfall, remains as inscrutable now as it was when it was first revealed 20 years ago. And sadly, as the revelations of the recent Kaniyat reign of terror in Tarhuna continue to abhor us, among many other atrocities committed by the combatants in our current civil strife, we are a long way off from any reconciliation. As was the case during the Colonel’s era, any attempt now to address the Qaddafi regime’s atrocities, in isolation, will seem cynical given the fact that powerful forces in Libya have been engaged in wholesale murder, disappearance, and torture.

A century or so after the onset of colonization in Libya, the colonized have been caught in a cycle of violence among themselves. And one can make a very good argument that indeed Libya’s fiery modern history is not a set of separate fires, but a continuous burning that

began with the first sparks of Italian colonial violence in 1911. The territorial tensions and animosities that had flared during the Italian era, pro-Sanussi in the East and anti-Sanussi elsewhere, Arab vs. Amazigh, coastal towns vs. hinterlands, soldered over during the monarchy, and silenced during the Qaddafi era, blazed back to life during the 2011 rebellion. Such conflicts, while seemingly intractable, are made much worse without serious efforts to understand them and their roots, which is what serious history is about. As to truth and reconciliation, the two words should and ought not be separated. You can't reconcile without the truth. Groups cannot reconcile by lobbing their heroic mythologies at each other. They do so by counting the dead, naming the culprits, and addressing the grievances, a process that has yet to take place in Libya, not in our internal conflicts, and not even in the case of the criminal Italian violence inflicted upon us and that exacerbated our antagonisms.

The nation's leaders, old and new, seem to view history as an inconvenient burden, an obstacle on the fast highway of nation making. In fact, as Libyan novelist Wafa al-Buissi recently observed in an interview, Libyans insist on foggy versions of the past as their blueprint of the future. She writes,

As for the general public, they quarrel over the past, some of them want to restore the chaotic, corrupt regime of Qaddafi, although they let him down and fled from it the first week of the February uprising.

Some of them want to restore the monarchy, and most of them did not live through that period and know little about it.

And the rest want to restore the Prophet's state, and they forgot that if it was a good state, whole tribes from Mecca would not have renounced Islam and returned to it only submissively.

Very few Libyans think about the future.¹

What impresses me most in al-Buissi's observation is the link she makes between the past and the future. Those who insist on a glorious past, and who want to relive the past as if one can plug oneself into like an electronic instrument, along with those who do not know their history, cannot build the future. Unfortunately, these propagators of

1 Wafa Al-Buissi, Interview with *Libya Al-Mustakbal* (9/29/21), <https://www.libya-al-mostakbal.org/94/29958/البيوعيسى-أراقب-العالم-الغبي-من-مكاني-وهو-يعود-القهقري-ببطء-شديد.html>

time-travel have become powerful forces that silence all attempts at dealing rationally with the present, which is how the future is made. Nonetheless, in the case of the Italian genocide and the internal atrocities that have taken place since, Libya's history has been the opposite of Shelly's Ozymandias. Repeatedly those in power have tried to bury it, but it has repeatedly risen from the sand demanding resolution.

III.

*What three things can never be done?
Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone*
Muriel Rukeyser

History and memory create an arena of the politics of the present.
Ali Ahmida

In addition to being a poignant and authoritative reminder of our history and its distinct historiography, Professor Ahmida's *Genocide in Libya: Shar, A Hidden Colonial History*, is a significant contribution to the way we perceive and can potentially rearticulate Libyan identity. Particularly, I note his attempt to decenter genocide studies from its European locus and its positioning as an epiphenomenon limited to the Holocaust, toward seeing it as an evolutionary form of violence that began in Africa with deep roots in the Americas. Doubtless, the Italians learned from the Cherokee Trail of Tears, as well as from the British treatment of the Boers, in the same way that the Nazis examined the Italian genocide in Libya, as Professor Ahmida establishes, to structure the hellish machinery of the Holocaust. Decentering the horrors of genocide in the modern age and narrating them as a continuum can have the impact of uniting the victims by creating a genealogy of suffering based in empathy and solidarity, rather than isolation and paranoia. Decentering the fascist genocide for Libyans from a peculiarly violent, demoralizing and isolating experience and placing it within the continuum of violence of the modern era will allow them to see their national history as part of a larger context. The genocide may then cease to be an isolated, localized trauma worthy only of repression, but as stage in modern history where violence and inhumanity rose to unprecedented levels, but where they like other victims of genocide and colonial violence fought valiantly and nobly to sustain their humanity.

Repositioning the fascist genocide in Libya as part of a historical evolution will perhaps encourage Libyans to see it as a development

that arose from a complicated series of events and political choices. While the Italians were indeed the overwhelmingly more powerful agents in this historical epoch, Libyans acted with a great deal of determination for at least a decade, defeating the Italians in several battles and limiting their control to the cities until the early 1920s. One would also have to reconsider the wisdom of the Sanussi leadership joining the Ottomans' fight against the British in WWI when they could least afford to, and considerably weakening their ability to fight their enemy, the Italians. And, as well documented by Libyan historians, Libyans also fought amongst each other as well.

And for the sake of historical veracity, I must recount an incident that rattled my own understanding of genocide in Libya. On a visit to Ajdabiya in the early 2000s, I met a respected elderly sheikh who had survived the camps. He was a teenager at the time. As the conversation flowed, I mentioned the capture of Omar al-Mukhtar, referring to it as our great shared tragedy. But the sheikh shocked me when he said, "What a blessed day it was! It was the day they began to let us out of the camps."

I had never heard this point of view of the genocide, never expected to hear any view that deeply questioned Omar al-Mukhtar's jihad. The other people in the room were bemused, for they knew that the sheikh's view of the genocide experience was unacceptable to the Qaddafi regime and among the general public. But the sheikh spoke fearlessly and what he said came from the experience of actually living in the camps, suffering the horrors, abuse, and starvation that Professor Ahmida so well documents. What I'm saying is that the sheikh I met was not a traitor, but a victim of a horrific system that overwhelmed his and his people's ability to endure. Given what we know of the suffering that took place, and despite the honor in which al-Mukhtar has been held, I don't think that my sheikh's point was idiosyncratic, but one that has been thoroughly repressed.

The question this suppressed point of view raises is, what did the victims of the camps think of al-Mukhtar's ongoing jihad at that time? And what did he and his fellow fighters think as they learned of what was happening to the hundreds of thousands of people dying of disease, torture, and starvation in the camps? Did the struggle to "victory or death" go on too long? And even as we view it as a component of our national identity, can we also, as a useful and necessary engagement in negative capability, recognize al-Mukhtar's noble jihad in the late 1920s as also a doomed cause?

It is telling that in 2011, at the beginning of the anti-Qaddafi rebellion, Libyans recalled the legacy of al-Mukhtar and the other anti-Italian jihad leaders to inspire them in toppling the regime. It was a time where they felt they had no choice but to fight or die. But to what extent is al-Mukhtar's legacy useful in the process of national rebuilding and reconciliation? Al-Mukhtar was recalled to inspire the fighters during battle, but history is not made up of, and is not made by, fighting alone. A people can also fight by preserving their own lives, by being resilient, preparing themselves better, at home or in exile, for a longer struggle.

I raise these deeply uneasy questions as I forcefully acknowledge that the Italians' aim was indeed to displace the Libyan population from their farmlands, which they did shortly after closing the concentration camps in eastern Libya. It is also clear that the Italians needed the Libyans to serve as semi-enslaved, barely educated labor. The Italians, it should be noted, limited Libyans' education to primary school. This is textbook settler colonialism; otherwise, the enterprise is not profitable without cheap native labor. This was happening in western Libya in the 1920s, and as the sheikh I met in Ajdabiya told me, he and many youths his age, upon being released from the concentration camps, were forcibly recruited to build the coastal highway that I traveled in my youth in the 1970s. In fact, labor was so scarce in 1930s colonial Libya that the Italians were forced to pay Libyan laborers more than their racialized labor wage code had dictated. And as the old sheikh I met in Ajdabiya testified, the forced labor on the coastal road was no walk in the park. Furthermore, Libyans who worked in less labor-intensive jobs were not spared the injustice and daily humiliations of Italian racial supremacy, where Libyans lived under an Italian Jim Crow system. Doubtlessly, the fascist colonial plan was violent, vulgar, and demeaning, but the practical realities of settler colonialism should perhaps allow us to reexamine the variety of circumstances under which the various agents in the colonial struggle had operated. The reader may consider this an invocation to bring the full force and rich trove of postcolonial theory, which has been woefully underutilized in Libyan social and literary studies to study the various means of resistance and the various types of agency experienced in the colonial struggles the world over, some of which could also be discerned in the Libyan colonial experience. To his credit, Professor Ahmida, in his most recent book and in earlier work, has vigorously applied and called for approaching the Libyan experience from the wide range of postcolonial criticism. But it will behoove us at this point to consider other

strategies used by Libyans during the violent Italian era. Indeed, many Libyans did rely on James Joyce's triptych of postcolonial responses, "silence, exile, and cunning," forms of resistance they utilized during their colonial experience but that remain woefully underexplored.

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Finally, I want to speculate about the role that the Libyan experience and memory of genocide contributes to the Libyan sense of identity. In this case, I want to target the question of how genocide as national history can shape a sense of identity. There are not many nations that have made genocide as a core to their sense of nationhood. In the past few weeks where we have been learning of the Canadian residential school mass graves, we have also been witnessing a recalibration of Canadian history and identity, whereby genocide is being recognized as an integral part of that nation's experience. Germany perhaps more than any other nation in history has made its guilt of committing the Holocaust, and its citizens culpability in it, a central pillar of the nation's world outlook. In the case of Rwanda, a country now ruled by the victims of genocide, it is difficult to gauge to what degree the memory of genocide has become a potentially unifying force. In Armenia, now an independent state, although most ethnic Armenians live abroad, remembering the genocide and widening the circle of recollection has become a national duty. Visitors to Armenia, as far back as the Soviet era, have been forced to confront the memory of the genocide through the numerous memorials to the Armenians' suffering.

In Israel the memory of the Holocaust has become a kind of civil religion, as historian Esther Benbassa has noted, where the Holocaust is emphasized as part of the nation's uniqueness. Most disturbingly for the Palestinians who have been colonized, displaced, and disenfranchised for nearly eight decades, the state of Israel is using the memory of the Holocaust to combat their legitimate rights to their land, to equal rights, and the right of return. In fact, as recent statements by PM Netanyahu demonstrate, Zionists, as far back as 1945, have tried to accuse the Palestinians of recommending the idea of the Holocaust to Adolf Hitler! It's hard to think of anything more brazenly cynical than such a blatant fabrication, but such behavior has become unsurprising in Israeli politics.

This is all to say, that genocide as a component of national identity, and as a marker of national memory, differs from one nation to another. It presents a contentious legacy that can never be free from political manipulation and divisiveness. Recovering the memory of

genocide as a means of enhancing our imagined community, would require a conscious and well-organized effort to teach, preserve, and integrate history among the whole population, and making it a shared, accessible, and examinable part of the nation's heritage. This is what needs to happen to Libya's fascist genocide trauma, and to all our legacies of trauma.

I began this part of the essay with an invocation from the poet Muriel Rukeyser that we should never "Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone." Indeed, these are the same precepts that Professor Ahmida's remarkable book invokes us to do regarding Libya's experience of genocide and his book serves in some ways as a guidebook on how to do all of Rukeyser's invocations. History does not only tell us what happened. When well-told and deeply probed it opens our eyes into unknown facets of human behavior and changes our sense of given landscapes and the rituals of the people who live on them. Widening our imaginations as such, it invokes upon us to think of what could have been and recruits us into shaping human destiny by leading us to imagine what needs to be done. To repair the homeland, to bring the human carnage to an end.

