



40 YEARS OF RUNNING ON THE SAME SPOT: A LIBYAN DIARY (PART II) - NOVEMBER 2011

Hadia Gana

5 December 2011

INTRODUCTION

Ibraaz is pleased to present the latest installment of Libyan artist and ceramicist Hadia Gana's diary. Following her return to Libya at the beginning of November, Gana discusses the attempts to rebuild the country both on a local and national level, and her own plans to create a cultural centre in her own home. Covering the efflorescence of cultural activity in Libya since its liberation, Gana's latest missive suggests the important role art and culture is playing in the reconstruction project.

40 YEARS OF RUNNING ON THE SAME SPOT: A LIBYAN DIARY

6 November, Sunday

Today is the big Eid, no sheep guts to clean for me this year as I'm not in Libya. I know some would say that I was lucky to get off the hook but I do like this feast even if it's a tiring one sometimes. Time with the family is even more special nowadays. Still, we had a nice BBQ with friends and that was fine. In Tripoli, our new Prime Minister Mr. el-Keib went for his first crowd dive in Tajoura for the morning prayer. He is a technocrat, the street seems to want a government made of technocrats. My generation and the younger ones have no idea of what exactly this species of politician is but it sounds serious and professional.

12 November, Saturday

Houda took me out for a guided tour around her dear city Zwara, and even if I had already been there several times in the past, she wanted to show me the 'free Zwara'. Walking around what remained of the old city, built with blocks of mixed crystallised salt and sand, we stopped to take close-up shots of an interesting wall where the holes had been filled with coloured plastic bags and then eroded by either wind or sun or eaten by goats. Even if it's years that I go back and forth, I am always shocked by the state of our poor country, so rich and yet so miserable. We also went around the port to check the boats that came from

Benghazi with humanitarian help or maybe weapons that were destroyed by Gaddafi's forces a few months ago. While we were driving around I couldn't help but compare the scenery with Europe and think of how it



A wall in the city of Zwara, where holes have been filled with coloured plastic bags and then eroded by either wind or sun or eaten by goats, November 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

could and should be. My God, the amount of work that needs to be done.

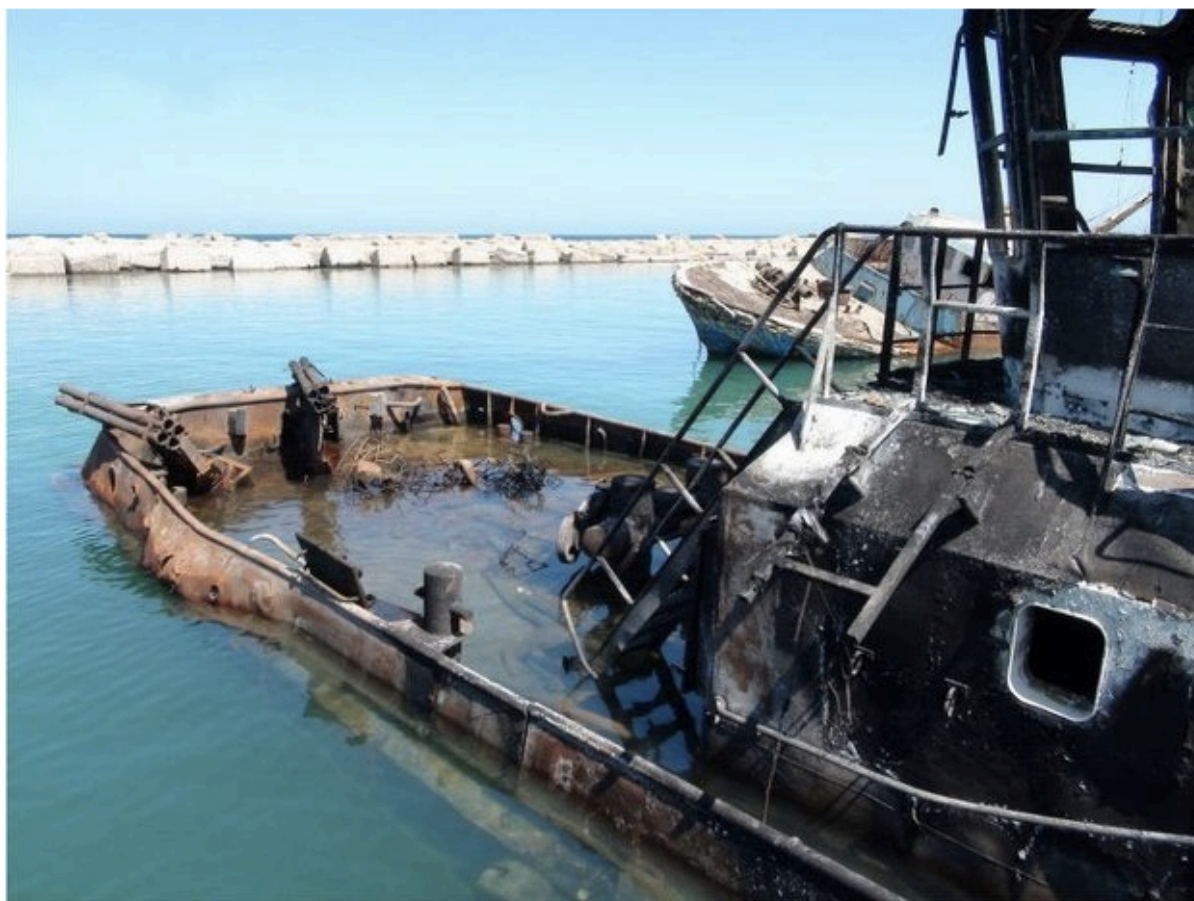
We then passed by some homes to collect clothing that people donated, selected them, folded them and put them in boxes to be sent to Ubari. Houda has created a small but efficient family humanitarian organisation.

Later she told me that there were some fights in Al Maya and that her nephew Youbas went with the boys to help.

13 November, Sunday

Finally home after a long short-cut to avoid some fights around Al Maya between Zawia and Werfella.

This morning Houda and I passed by Marwan at Mellita Gate to pick him up on our way back home. We knew that some fights were taking place here and there but we went anyway, knowing that the boys would redirect us or just tell us to go back. It was fine up to Zawia, where we had to go for a safer road going inland towards Bir Ghanam and from there to Azizia, Swani and home. We then heard that there were some fights around the Tunisian borders; the reports were all very foggy but from what I understood most of Jmail's



A bombarded boat in the city of Zwara, October 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Houda Elghali.

citizens are still causing trouble, to the point where the Misrata boys have to be sent in to put things in order.

15 November, Tuesday

The day started with the morning phone call from two Nalut girls who I met just before I left for France. They were seeking some last-minute advice regarding their first mini-festival of Berber culture. From the start, they had a clear view of what they wanted and a lot of energy so I just had to be there as simple moral support and try to resolve those last-minute problems that always arise. I don't know how it is in the rest of the world



but in Libya you can organise as much as you want but you always end up with a bunch of weird things cropping up.

I then went with Houda to the Radisson Hotel, where most of the NTC-related programmes take place, to join my friends Hytem and Faten for breakfast before attending a meeting. At first glance, I could see that it was all women. We stepped in and I was actually glad that I did: even if I am not a huge fan of so-called 'women for women' organisations, I have all respect for their work. It's just that somehow I always feel that they highlight or enlarge the gap between the two sexes, pitting women against men. It's a pity that we have to 'fight' to have equal rights. To sum up, and even if I sound negative, the board was comprised of some great ladies and the audience was studious and ready for the famous fight. I could feel the energy in this huge hall that is usually used for wedding ceremonies. The discussion orbited around women's rights in general but it allowed people to share experiences and tried to find practical solutions to help and protect the victims of rape and other war crimes, for instance. As De Gaulle would say: 'un vaste programme'. This forum will continue all week. During the conference I met a girl from Benghazi who lived all her life in France but came on the 15th of February to be part of the revolution and plans to stay and work on the reconstruction.

16 November, Wednesday

Reem, my friend and fellow ceramicist (you can count the ceramicists in Libya on one hand) seems to be planning to come back to Libya. After a few years in America studying and teaching art, she now wants to create an art centre. That doesn't surprise me at all as we taught together right after our graduation and we didn't like the way things were. We knew things wouldn't change and that we would have to create something different. This is still what I think: the revolution isn't a magic pen, minds won't change in an instant and big governmental engines will be the hardest to evolve. Call it cowardice if you want, but I don't want to enter into this kind of battle again, I have already been there.

Basma, an architect who used to work for 'the organism for the protection of the old city', is worried for her old city festival, which is supposed to happen mid-December. Some of the groups she contacted to help her with it are a bit frightened by the deadline and told her that it was impossible and that she should postpone it till spring. That bugs her and I can't blame her, we've been pushing dates all our lives so now we feel an urge to get things done.

18 November, Friday

The day passed in the blink of an eye, and even if I planned to start the mega task of emptying the house in order to start the museum project, I wound up speeding as much as I could across the jammed streets in order to arrive on time for the dinner that the HD Center organised to launch a three-day 'facilitation-and-dialogue' course. Again, it was a pleasure to see these new active faces. The majority of the 30 or so young people participating are from Eastern Libya, reaching from Tobruk to Misrata and Tripoli and had already attended HD Center discussions in their respective areas. The rest of the country wasn't represented,



because the HD Center is organising more of these workshops and planning to extend them to the mountains and the South.

19 November, Saturday

Saif is in the bag! Zintan's boys have their spoils! How good is this revolution! All the boys seem to get their rewards, Misrata's boys got Gaddafi, while the mountain boys got Saif. Now if only the Southern boys could get al-Senussi!

Today was the first day of the course. It started smoothly and progressed well throughout the day, all the while punctuated with news via text message: 'My bro told me that they got him!' ... 'No, sure he is with the boys' ... 'We have photos ... 'Are you sure?' ... 'His fingers have been cut off' ... 'No, no, he was wounded' ...

Then the first fuzzy printed-out photos circulated around the group like a freshly-baked loaf of bread. They showed he had bandages on three fingers. But not the hated finger that he used to threaten us in his famous 'forget about oil, forget about infrastructures, forget about evolution' speech, as if we had any of those! Still, as with the father, we didn't want to jump around before seeing proof, which was eventually broadcast on the Al Arabiya channel. Zintan's boys got him, so of course they were joking about whether they should put him in 'the well'. I'm not sure about that but it seems that up there in the mountains they have an old well that they use as a prison (would it be equivalent to those 'oubliettes' that were used in France during the Middle Ages?). I don't know but at least it would be secure! You probably are wondering, why don't they have a prison there? Sincerely, from what I have seen of the prison cells, he'd be better off in the well.

Then, we had some videos showing him on a plane, maybe on his way to The Hague, he looked as if he were sitting on thorns. I guess he couldn't believe that he was still alive. I'm glad that he is so that he can be judged properly and be an example for the rest. In any case, he isn't a threat for us alive like his father was. Talking about Gaddafi's death, it reminded me of Grenouille's death in the book, *Perfume*. Extreme passion is uncontrollable, be it love or hatred. Some boys in Misrata had to see members of their families being raped while helpless to act as they did.

20 November, Sunday

This revolution is really blessed! It's al-Senussi's turn today! And it seems that Saif sold him, telling the boys that he was at his sister's in Sebha! The way we received this information was interesting: we were in the middle of a training session, where one of our tutors and some of the group were acting as if they were on live radio. A question was asked to Mohamed (one of the young activists), who happened to glance at his mobile phone and said very calmly: 'One thing before I answer this question. They got al-Senussi.' We all screamed 'Allah Akbaaar!' The feeling of communion in these moments is indeed unrepeatable. Well, we still haven't seen video or even photos of the event so we might have an encore next time in case the information isn't right.



Amazigh demonstration, Tripoli, September 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

21 November, Monday

The third and last day of our 'dialogue and facilitation' workshop. It was interesting and opened up some new perspectives. Even if I don't organise political debates or facilitate discussion, what I learnt will surely be of use to the cultural discussions I will organise for the future AG Museum in my house.

Tariq (a young video-maker) came along at the end of the course to have a little top-up chat with me. He needs a break. One of his concerns now is that he needs to earn money! For months, we have been living on our reserves. Most of the work that has been done so far by the youth and local NGOs was for free or paid from their own pockets. That is the case for the recently-created 212 group, which is made up of graphic designers, photographers and video-makers. Some of the youths in the group went back to their pre-revolution jobs but some, like Tariq, don't want to do anything else but filmmaking yet can't get any work and that can be frustrating. To me, these energies are crucial to Libya's cultural scene and deserve a focus.

No news on al-Senussi's capture and no photos but we keep hearing what we call here 'happy gun-fire'. It may be happy but that doesn't make it any less dangerous. I have to say that the noise isn't really disturbing



as the city seems to slowly be emptying of weapons, though it remains a concern. The new transitional government is making the same old mistake (on purpose or not I can't say) of keeping information from entering the public sphere. Talking about the media, we now have around seven TV channels, numerous new newspapers are appearing as well as radio stations. For the moment they all have the same direction and aim, some areas need some polishing but they present discussions and interviews that we Libyans never even dreamt to hear. Before the revolution, I didn't even know who the Prime Minister was! So, all in all, we can pat ourselves on the back. The Amazigh channel that Omadi, an anthropologist and researcher focused on Amazigh issues, is planning to set up is still in the works, while wall paintings and songs continue to emerge. All this revolutionary cultural activity needs now to diversify its interests and media. Work still has to be done but we're going to do it.

About the author

Hadia Gana was born in Tripoli in 1973, to a French mother and Libyan father. She first attended Tripoli's French Primary School, then joined a public Libyan school, before going on to study ceramics and glass-making at the faculty of arts and media at the University of Tripoli. She then travelled to Wales, where she got a Masters in Ceramics from the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. She has taught arts at different levels, ranging from primary to university level. She was awarded a bursary and is planning to do a practice-based PhD in Amsterdam, the subject of which will be the creation of an art and discussion space in Libya. She plans to turn her family home in Tripoli into a cultural hub.