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Ten years after the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East

Historical roots, political transitions and social actors

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The Sanussi's Legacy: An Analysis of the Political Reconstitution of King Idris's Memory in Post-Qadhāfi Libya

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Abstract

During the 2011 uprising in Libya, the red-black-green flag with a star and a white crescent in the centre became a symbol for a new regime. This was the former ensign of the United Kingdom of Libya, which Qadhāfi's revolution discarded in 1969. The flag was revived to represent Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan as a symbol of national unity, but it also implied a relationship with the history of the nearly twenty-year-long regime of King Idris. The memory of the monarchy, erased by the Qadhāfi regime, seems to have found a space of recognition and meaning in public discourse and narrative. The present contribution aims, on the one hand, to analyse if and to what extent symbolism linked to the monarchical period became an emblem of the revolts against the regime in 2011. On the other hand, this article examines the reconstitution and reappropriation of the memory of the monarchy, and its source of legitimation, the Sanussi Order, from a social and political point of view.

Keywords: Libya, Constitutional legitimacy, Memory, Monarchical symbolism, post-2011

Introduction

Ten years after the 2011 outbreak of war in Libya, the situation in the country reflects a social and political fragmentation that has its roots in the history of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan, which were unified into the nation-state of Libya in 1951.

The creation of an independent Libya in 1951 was marked by the confrontation and convergence of multiple local and international interests that were not necessarily oriented towards the same goal, as well as by the "abundance and mutual competition of different colonial projects" (Morone 2018a: 5). The conservative outcome of this

process, namely the creation of the United Kingdom of Libya, depended both on the political strategies of the great powers and on local aspirations and will.

The 1940s highlighted the lack of alignment between the three realities of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan, whose colonial past and experiences of exile had generated different needs (Baldinetti 2010). This decade also revealed reasons for international interventionism, expressed in a renewed phase of colonial competition. The latter ended, at least in appearance, in 1949, with the failure of the Bevin-Sforza compromise, the last attempt to subdivide the three provinces between Britain, France, and Italy. This failure prompted a broader reflection on the path to independence (Rossi 1980). Based on this reflection, the "formula of an independent Libya organised in the form of a federal state" (Morone 2018a: 43) under the crown of Idris al-Sanūsi, *šayḫ*[1] of the *ṭarīqa*[2] *al-Sanusiyya*, was the best conservative solution for the future of the three provinces.

After 2011, the memory, symbols, and legitimacy of the monarchy and Sanusiyya, erased by the Qadhāfi regime, seem to have found new space in social and political discourse, as well as in historiographical discourse. This essay aims, therefore, to investigate the nuances of this historical and socio-political course by analysing publications, memoirs, scientific production, and public narratives from 2011 to 2021. A historical overview, starting with the foundation of the *ṭarīqa al-Sanusiyya* in the second half of the 19th century, is necessary for the purposes of this contribution.

The Sanusiyya, a Sufi *ṭarīqa* founded in 1837 near Mecca, has played an extremely important role in the history of Libya since 1843, when the first *zāwiya*[3] was established in Cyrenaica; from the mid- 19th century, the region became the epicentre of the *ṭarīqa*'s religious expansion, as it became for all intents and purposes a mass organisation, deeply involved in the management of the territory at the social and economic levels. This structure depended on the political and institutional context in which it operated: because the Ottoman Empire was decaying, the Sanusiyya enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as it expanded (Triaud 1987; 1995). By the time of the clash with European colonialism, in the transition from the 19th to the 20th centuries, the Sanussi elite was fully involved in "the complex negotiations of local, regional, and international politics in the era of high imperialism" (Ryan 2018: 7).

The *ṭarīqa* played a leading role in the resistance to European colonialism, of which it became a symbol; even in the 1930s, far from being defeated by fascist Italy, it presented itself as a reference point for liberation from European imperialism. During the 1940s, the *ṭarīqa* participated in the Libyan landscape and acted as a source of political legitimisation and dissent at the local and international levels (Khadduri 1963). Yet, towards the end of the decade, with the failure of any other, both local and international, attempt, the Sanusiyya and Idris al-Sanūsi consolidated as the only viable political option: when defining the future of the three provinces, the *ṭarīqa* and Islam became a source of legitimation and contestation, until, after 1951, they became the "barycentre of the new state" (Morone 2018b: 56).

Within the borders of the United Kingdom of Libya, therefore, the Sanusiyya underwent a process of political instrumentalisation, which affected its primarily religious nature. In the 1950s, it was used by the sovereign as source of legitimacy, influence, and control (*ibid.*); by the affiliates as a means of insertion in the state apparatus; and by the branches of the royal family as a springboard for their political ambitions. Consequently, a profound devaluation of the traditional role of the *ṭarīqa* within society took place, which was experienced, mainly by the youth component, as closer to the ideology of Arab nationalism and Nasserism. The same laid the basis for the 1969 *coup d'état*.

The events of 1969 resulted from the inability of the monarchy to respond to the social, political, and economic changes that the kingdom was facing, as well as to the sovereign's excessive alignment with European powers. The narrative imposed after the regime change portrayed the monarchical period as "weak, inept, utterly corrupt, ideologically bankrupt, lacking of nationalist credentials, and as anachronistic political system that outlived its usefulness. [...] When the young revolutionaries took over the reins of power in September 1969, Libyan citizens had known a unitary state for barely six years. During that short period, the combination of historical memory and the actions of the Sanusi monarchy had not significantly strengthened their sense of identity as Libyan citizens, or made modern statehood particularly attractive to them" (Vandewalle 2021: 74). From a historiographical point of view, the monarchy insisted on the role of the Sanusiyya and resisted legitimising the king's power, which was supported by the British. Therefore, a biased, regionalist (Di Pasquale 2017), and historical narrative - defined by Lisa Anderson as "British-Sanusi interpretation" (Anderson 1990: 82) - imposed itself.

During the Qadhāfi regime, shadows were cast on the Sanusiyya and the monarchical period. With the establishment of the *Jamahiriyya*, in fact, "the figure of Umar al-Mukthār became an example of heroic resistance, contrasted with Idris's cowardice and opportunism. This juxtaposition served to obscure the role of the Sanusiyya [...] in anti-imperialist resistance and to affirm the legitimacy of the new republican regime" (Cresti and Cricco 2015: 98). The removal of the monarchical past was accompanied by the twofold strategy of destroying the documentary heritage and making archival sources inaccessible, which was revealed in the 2000 (Di Pasquale 2017). The work carried out by the Libyan Studies Center[4], created by Qadhāfi in 1978, which became the "repository of the country's historical memory" (Baldinetti 2016: 138), was crucial in this regard.

It is only since 2011 that a reappropriation narrative of the monarchical experience, phases, and actors has arisen as part of a more inclusive social path for reconstructing memories and history, though characterised by new distortions (*ibid.*). This reappropriation of the monarchical experience is manifested on three fronts that do not necessarily align with each other: historiographic, social, and political.

Since this article will consider different sources that provide a biased and uninformed view of the Libyan monarchist experience and that suggest that the 1969 coup could have overturned a fully functioning and accepted system, a premise is necessary. It should be kept in mind, in fact, that the non-recognition of the power of Idris al-Sanusi, who had been affirmed as present in the Libyan scene well before independence in 1951, and internal opposition, which was justified by the monarchy's inability to ensure national unity, were undoubtedly among the main causes that led to the 1969 coup.

Reclaiming the Monarchical Era: The Post-2011 Historiographical Narrative

As mentioned above, the Qadhāfi regime erased the memory and legacy of the monarchy from the historical narrative. In a recent publication, Anna Baldinetti (2018) underlined how, following the 1969 military coup in Libya, history and religion were transformed into the legitimising elements of the regime's ideology, as well as tools for building consensus and a sense of belonging. Thus, a process of nationalisation of memory began, which had to be first and foremost shared and unifying. The path of reconstruction and historical narration aimed to present a united and independent Libya and to create a national identity "eternally opposed to foreign cultural and political interferences" (*ibid.*: 28-29). The result was the removal, not only of the monarchical period but also of the sources of legitimation of the sovereign's power, including the Sanusiyya. This explains the need to fill a gap in the history of independent Libya. A process of historical reconstruction is essential for understanding the historical reasons for today's events (Hüsken and Klute 2015).[5]

From a historiographic point of view, the works related to the *ṭarīqa* and the monarchy of Idris al-Sanūsi, not of western production, can be distinguished into three strands: the first includes those produced during the monarchical period (al-Ashhab 1947; 1958; Shukrī 1957; 2005), which reflect in content and setting the political and social positioning of the authors, who were close to the monarchy. The second strand includes those works published outside Libya during the Qadhāfi regime; this category includes memoirs, which are fundamental in reconstructing the history of the United Kingdom of Libya (Bin Ḥalīm 2003), and texts written by people close to the crown (al-Dajani 1988). Finally, the third field comprises works from the post-2011 period.

As Baldinetti (2018: 31) has noted, the monarchy has found a renewed space in post-Qadhāfi historiography, which reflects a more general phase of renewed interest and reappropriation of Libya's past on several levels. The importance of this phase is summarised in a 2015 article, published in Egypt and entitled *Al-Dūr al-tarbūy lizawāyā al-ḥarakat al-Sanusiyya fī Lībīya min saba 1843 ḥatty 1969* (The Educational Role of the *Zawāyā* of the Sanusiyya Movement in Libya from the Year 1843 to the Year 1969), which recounts the history of the Sanusiyya up to 1969. The article states, "a generation of young people has neglected the history of their ancestors, their heroic struggle against French colonialism in Central Africa and the Sahara, their great struggle against Italian

colonialism throughout the country that lasted for almost twenty years [...] and their struggle against English colonialism on the Egyptian-Libyan borders. [...] As the Lord said, 'remember, for remembrance is for the benefit of the believers'" (Ṣālaḥ 2015: 527). This excerpt makes evident the importance of a reappropriation and awareness of this forgotten past, especially the resistance phase, which, on a symbolic level, is directly linked to the desire for liberation from the regime.

For an overview of the publications that appeared in the post-2011 period, reference should be made to the article by Baldinetti (2018). It should be emphasised, however, that this production has an ambivalent nature: on the one hand, the time of the monarchy is positively described as a period of prosperity and justice. On the other hand, the monarchy is also harshly criticised, as in the case of Bashir al-Sunni al-Muntassir's memoirs (*ibid*: 33).

Alongside the works listed above, it should be noted that interest in Sanussi history has found more and more space in Arab historiography, published in Libya, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, and Jordan: its aim seems to be a critical revision of the function of the *ṭarīqa* and a rediscovery of its identity. These publications focus on the foundation and development of the Sanusiyya and its role in society ('Alī 2016);[6] on the historical importance of the Sanusiyya network (al-'Askarī 2017).[7] On the activity of resistance to European imperialism (al-Ḥasnāwī n.d.);[8] on the relationship with political power, and, in particular on the position of the parties in the provinces in relation to the constitution of the Sanussi Emirate ('Abū Bakr 2015; al-Shaybani 2018).[9] Finally, on the personality of Idris al-Sanūsi (Mu'addī 2016).[10]

The literature cited so far allows a reconstruction of the historical path of the Sanusiyya and events connected to the United Kingdom of Libya, showing a reappropriation of the past and responding to the need for a redefinition of identity. At the same time, it is worth focusing on those works that consider post-2011 events and to identify the symbolism linked to the monarchical experience and the idealisation of the pre-regime period at a social level. In this regard, it is interesting to examine more recent memoirs, although it must be stressed that the memoirs, by nature, provide a personal and not necessarily objective view.

A notable example is Adel Dajani's memoir *From Jerusalem to a Kingdom by the Sea. The Story of a Family and its Black Swans*, published in early 2021. Adel Dajani, a son of Awid al-Dajani, advisor to Idris al-Sanūsi, was born in Libya in 1955 and spent his childhood close to the Libyan royal family. The importance of his memoirs is twofold: on the one hand, they report episodes and events extremely close to the royal family and the Libyan court, thus serving as an innovative reading tool for the monarchical period. On the other hand, they represent a *continuum* of life, in which the Libya of childhood remains a present and nostalgic memory. This memory emerges when the author recounts more recent post-2011 events. The biographical approach enables one to clearly see the contrast between the happiness represented by childhood and the

monarchy and the oppression represented by the long exile under the Qadhāfi regime. The year 2011 is therefore described as a turning point, a moment of liberation and a possible return to the monarchical experience (Dajani 2021: 134-182).
As mentioned, the fall of the regime seems to have given space to a reappropriation and recognition of the past, especially of the monarchical experience and the symbols and values linked to it. This course, which is explicitly manifested from a historiographic and literary point of view, is also expressed through other forms of representation and can be investigated with different tools: newspaper articles, reports, artistic works, and interviews. The following section focuses on reading the symbolism in the demands and claims of political and social discourses in the immediate post-2011 period and in 2021. It is indeed possible to discern, comparing 2011 and 2021, similarities and marked differences in terms of instrumentalisation and political dialectics, through which the idea and the memory of the monarchy assume a specific weight, although hard to quantify in social terms.

"Libya's Forgotten King"[11]

If the reappropriation of the past at a historiographic level is evident, it is equally true that the same process can be traced at a social and political level by looking at the instrumental and symbolic use of memory in media, social networks, artistic events and symbolism adopted by the squares. In the post-2011 years, in fact, the symbolism of the past and the hypothesis of a restoration of the old form of state have found space in the socio-political debate in Libya and internationally. At the same time, there has been a re-examination, and in some ways, a celebration of the figure of Idris al-Sanūsi, recalled in opposition to the image of the dictator.

As an example, it is interesting to consider the two-part miniseries produced by *Al-Jazeera*, entitled *Libya's Forgotten King*, through which Libyan and international scholars and personalities reconstruct the history and deeds of Idris al-Sanūsi. Listening to the words of scholars and personalities who were more or less close to the royal house, among which the voice of Bin Ḥalīm stands out, Idris is described as a figure far removed from political interests, whose only objective was the well-being of the state.[12] Thus, he accepted the coup of 1969 because it mirrored the will of his people: "when I was trying to save the situation, I [Bin Ḥalīm] asked 'Why don't we amend the constitution and make the King's position similar to that of the British king?' I suggested we leave power in the hands of parliament and the government. He said, 'If any member of the family took power he'd change this law in three hours. I don't want to have any relationship with my successor. I don't want to be blamed for the wrongdoing of my successor'".[13] Bin Ḥalīm's discourse conveys an extremely important message when contrasted with Qadhāfi's personality; yet Idris's choices, analysed in retrospect and decontextualised from the forty years of the regime, were neither clear-cut nor unambiguous. Through an analysis of Idris's declarations, as well as appeals,

newspaper articles, and official memoranda, it is possible to identify a characteristic of the monarch's position: a lack of clarity that reflects a position in perpetual, precarious balance between collaboration with international powers, representation of the Libyan people, and intermediation between the two sides. Suffice it to say that at the end of the 1940s, the *šayḫ's* opinion on the future of Libya oscillated between two poles: the unity of its three parts and the independence of Cyrenaica (Khadduri 1963; De Candole 1990).

The removal or simplification of the reality of the twenty years of the Sanussi monarchy, analysed and recalled in contrast to the decades of the regime, depended in part on a parallelism. Just as the creation of the United Kingdom of Libya under the Crown of Idris had symbolically, and apparently, marked the liberation from the colonial experience, so did the symbolism and memory of that period mark the desire for liberation from the regime. In both cases, the idea of a *rebirth* of Libya clearly appears. The epilogue of the second part of the *Al-Jazeera* documentary summarises this concept well: "Qadhāfi removed traces of the Sanūsi order in the public life and replace the flag with a new design. King Idris died in exile in Egypt on the 25th of May 1983, aged 93 [...]. Three decades later, in 2011, the Qadhāfi regime was overthrown, and the flag of independence flew once more over Libya".[14] Therefore, the already-mentioned return to the experience and narration of resistance, which legitimises the post-2011 claims and social aspirations and stands out at a symbolic level, re-emerges.

The fall of the Qadhāfi regime, after 42 years, was therefore dense with symbolism. Social mobilisation was driven and animated by three emblems: the flag of independent Libya, red-black-green with a white star and crescent in the centre; the image of 'Umar al-Mukhtār, hero of the resistance against Italian imperialism; and, finally, the old national anthem, with the replacement of the King's name with that of 'Umar al-Mukhtār (Ahmida 2019: 252).

A clarification must be made since the square's adoption of these symbols does not *a priori* presuppose a widely shared awareness of the past nor a desire to rebuild the monarchy nor does it present a nostalgic view of the monarchy. Nevertheless, it permits a few considerations: on the one hand, the symbols represent a link with the monarchical period and, consequently, a reappropriation of the past that was erased by the regime; on the other hand, they also clearly show a link to the resistance to colonialism, represented by the figure of 'Umar al-Mukhtār.

It is also possible to identify some geographical correlations, as highlighted in a 2013 report entitled *Revolution and Its Discontents*. The authors underline how the eastern part of the country was "ready to explode", as the province "which had suffered the most from the Qadhāfi's policies. [...] The history of the armed opposition in the East, from the anti-colonialist guerrilla of Umar al-Mokhtar to the insurgency of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, came to serve as both a symbol and a practical example of opposition to the state" (Smits et al. 2013: 15). It is worth highlighting the historical

importance of *Barqa,*[15] which was the centre of the religious expansion of the Sanusiyya and the legitimating base of the monarchy as well as the region in which, during the 1990s, a wave of opposition against the regime emerged (Ahmida 2019: 250-251). As early as 2011, moreover, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was created in Cyrenaica. Several technocrats and former members of the regime (mainly military) took part in this council, aspiring to the formulation of a free, democratic, and united Libya (Smiths et al. 2013: 15).

The focus of the 2011 revolt, which began on 17 February to the cry of "the people demand the downfall of the regime" (Dajani 2021: 134-145), was the civilian population and armed militias. With the support of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops, Tripoli fell in August, while October, with the battle of Sirte, marked the end of Qadhāfi's regime. Dajani's account of Tripoli in February 2011 is symbolic: "[i]t felt gratifying to be able to finally take part of a disparate but passionate civil movement that had simply had 'enough' of '*kifayah*' in Arabi. [...] Friend of mine bravely went to the Green Square in Tripoli to celebrate the first spontaneous whiff of oxygen in Libya since the monarchy was deposed on the 1st of September 1969. [...] Anyone who engaged could make a difference. There were three options of active resistance: military, financial and humanitarian, and international media mobilisation" (*ibid.*: 138-141). Certainly, Dajani's position betrays a loyalty and nostalgia for the monarchical experience, deriving from the author's personal past. However, the story also shows how there was an immediate and, in some ways, unconscious instrumentalisation of the past, its symbols, and its actors. A striking example is the story of the Dajani's arrival in Benghazi in April: "when I saw the royalist flag that I had not seen for 24 years, I was overwhelmed by a swell of raw emotion and kissed the flag, tears streaming down my face. For the first time since 1969, I also saw the portrait of a man who I had revered and admired from my childhood and whose portrait had been missing in Libya ever since. King Idris's benign and saintly face now greeted visitors to Benghazi Airport. [...] Royalist flags, a testament of our proud history [...] were being sold in makeshift markets all over the city" (Dajani 2021: 138-144).

Beyond the memoirs, further testimony of the symbolism is contained in the artistic representations of the uprising. Examples of these caricatures, murals, graffiti, and other images were collected in photographic volumes such as *Libya – The Art of the Revolution* by Rula Bilbeisi Dajani (2013) (Dajani 2021: 237) and *The Art of Uprising: The Libyan Revolution in Graffiti* by Soumiea Abushagur (2011). The presence of symbolism belonging to the monarchical period certainly demonstrates a process of instrumentalisation, which has its roots in a past that is not known to all and is in some ways mythologised.

On a strictly political level, as early as 2011 the idea of a possible restoration of the Libyan monarchy began to emerge, primarily in the international press. What political role could be played by those loyal to the monarchy? "Could royals ousted by Gaddafi

reclaim centre stage?".[16] A path of political legitimacy seemed to be traced through the participation of Ahmed al-Zubair Ahmed al-Sanūsi, descendant of King Idris, in the NTC. At 77 years old, with 31 years spent in captivity, he could represent the part of the past erased by the regime. As reported by a BBC correspondent, "some Libyans look at Ahmed and dare to wonder whether, after almost 42 years of dictatorship, the Sanūsi name may yet return to the fore".[17] From a historiographic point of view, it is interesting to note an analogy with what happened at the end of the 1940s, when the same question arose internationally: what should and could be the role of the Sanusiyya and Idris al-Sanūsi in relation to the future of the three provinces?[18]

In 2011, media interest immediately turned to King Idris's heir, the Crown Prince Mohammed al-Sanūsi. Interviewed in February 2011 about events in Libya and his political positioning and intentions, he delivered a message not dissimilar to Bin Ḥalīm's reference to his ancestor: "'What I try to do now to stop the massacres, I tried to put pressure and call the international community to stop these killings. Qadhāfi he must leave, and that's what I try to do every day'. [...] 'Are you planning to return to Libya, are you thinking of going home now?' 'It's not the issue now going home, of course my heart is with my people, but the main issue now is the massacre. [...] This is an anti-Qadhāfi revolution, if you like, it is not a pro-monarchy, a pro-restoration of the monarchy movement, isn't it?' 'Of course, yes, people came in the streets, you know, by themselves after 40 years and they ask for freedom, they ask to live as humans, that's what they ask'. 'Do you think restoration of the monarchy in Libya would be a good idea?' 'This is up to Libyan people'".[19] As in the case of Idris al-Sanūsi, Mohammed al-Sanūsi's public speeches showed an interest in the will of the people first and foremost. In the moment, the emerging interest was not restoring the monarchy, even though the revolt's symbolism drew inspiration from the pre-Qadhāfi era. As already mentioned, in the first months following the *Day of Rage* in February, the memory of Idris al-Sanūsi and the Sanusiyya acted as one of the driving forces of the revolt, through the perspective of liberation. This showed an evident parallelism with Libya's past but, at the same time, a little-rooted historical awareness. An emblematic example is represented by the events of 24 December of that year when a crowd marched towards Martyrs Square in Tripoli to the cry of "No more Qadhāfi!". This date, which already represented the birth of the United Kingdom of Libya and its independence from foreign powers, took on a new meaning: that of the desire to rebuild the state and regain democracy. And yet, "many Libyans remain unaware of the significance of 24 December - [since] the anniversary was not celebrated during Col. Gaddafi's four-decade rule".[20]

The Sanussi Legacy Ten Years Later

As is well known, the revolt that began in Libya in 2011 was not resolved with the overthrow of the regime, and today the country is living a condition that is in some ways similar to the 1940s: in extreme synthesis, a political and social local

fragmentation, and a contested international presence (Khadduri 1963). The causes of this situation have been the subject of various analyses, which are often groundless or based on Eurocentric paradigms. This author is persuaded of the need for a long-term, historically-based vision that considers the circumstances in which independent Libya was established in 1951 as well as the years before and after.

It has been said that the Sanusiyya of Idris al-Sanūsi became, in the immediate post-World War II period, the main, if not only, political path forward for Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. Between the 1940s and the 1950s, the religious sphere was gradually instrumentalised, such that the *ṭarīqa* and Islam became the legitimising bases of the new monarch's political power, as well as useful tools for creating a sense of identity and unity. Antonio M. Morone (2018a: 50) has written that "the lowest common denominator" of the new kingdom was found in Islam according to the way of the Sanusiyya, of which Idris al-Sanūsi continued to remain the religious leader. The constitution, enacted on 7 October 1951, defined Islam as the state religion and thereby sacralised Idris's political power (Baldinetti 2006: 231).

The events of 2011 drew inspiration, from the perspective of rebirth, from the symbolism of the monarchical period and the figure of Idris. In the following decade, especially after 2014, the idea of a reconstitution of the federal monarchy as it appears in the Constitution of 1951 began to circulate. As in the 1940s, the idea of a monarchy as the only viable solution and as a symbol of unity found space in the political debate: "Yet the popular memory of King Idris [...] has quietly endured in Libya. And now, after Gadafy's [sic] own fall and the years of violent turmoil that have followed", the article is from 2016, "the country's closet royalists have emerged with a radical suggestion: restore a form of monarchy, at least temporarily, to let Libyans rally behind a respected father figure and begin to rebuild their splintered nation. [...] 'The monarchy offers the most viable way out of the current mess, and it is right for the Libyan people' said Fathi Abdalla Sikta of the Return to Constitutional Legitimacy Movement. 'The king is a symbol of unity for the people'. [...] 'If this fighting continues, many Libyans will see a return to the monarchy as a viable solution' said Abdulrauf Kara, an Islamist militia commander"[21]. A provisional restoration of the monarchy, under the leadership of Mohammed al-Sanūsi, "not forever [...] just until we hold an election. He can use his influence to bring the militias into line".[22]

The current difficulties in conducting research in Libya leaves the question of the social extension of this political project's diffusion, popularity, and awareness open. Nevertheless, various tools, of which social networks are important, provide a partial outline of this interesting scenario. This includes the Zlitan[23] branch of the Movement for the Return of Constitutional Legitimacy. The Movement's primary goal is to re-establish the Constitution of 1951,[24] and, as reported by several journal articles, since 2015, it has intensified its activities for the return of constitutional legitimacy as it is seen as the best solution for the country's future.[25] The Zlitan group is said to be

particularly active in promoting the restoration of the Sanussi monarchy, as evidenced by various statements on its Facebook page that is followed by 27,915 people: "[t]he constitutional monarchy is an original right and an integral part of the project to return to constitutional legitimacy... the Crown Prince, Mohammed al-Sanūsi, is the legitimate heir representing this right in a project to return to the legitimacy of the constitutional monarchy".[26] This example shows a concrete case of reappropriation of the past in a political sense that also involves the monarchy, thus presupposing a change in the form of state. It should be noted that branches of the same movement also exist elsewhere, in Tripoli, as well as in Cyrenaica;[27] however, the case of Zlitan was chosen since, on social networks, it has a much higher following.

The parallelism with the situation in Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan in the 1940s is clear. Then, the *barycentre* of the new state was found in Islam according to the way of Sanusiyya, as well as with the reconfiguration of the image of a King as a symbol of political and social cohesion. For his part, the heir to the throne Mohammed al-Sanūsi has never publicly advocated for the reconstitution of the monarchy, although during a conference in Tunisia in September 2017, he said he was willing to accept the role of transitional figure in order to re-establish the Constitution of 1951 as safely, effectively, and rapidly as possible. This represents "the only [...] constitutional and legal legitimacy in the Country".[28]

Alongside the proliferation of journalism evoking Libya's past, recent years have seen the development of new and different forms of communication and social interaction, which can also be used politically. In the case of the heir to the Libyan throne, Mohammed al-Sanūsi, a series of eight videos in which he appears as a protagonist were uploaded to the Vimeo platform.[29] The videos were posted by the clearly pro-monarchy profile *Free Libya*, which has a small following (75 followers)[30] and was created in 2011 by an unknown author. The oldest videos are about the history of Libya, from the creation of the United Kingdom of Libya to the events of 2011 and the anniversary of sixty years of independence. The remaining videos are about the heir to the throne. They open with the effigy of the Monarch and contain Mohammed al-Sanūsi's speeches on the anniversary of independence in 2014, 2016, and 2020, as well as an interview. In the interview, dated 2019, al-Sanūsi invokes the importance of the 1951 Constitution and the need for Libyans to freely choose their destiny without any imposition or interference from the outside. In particular, he stresses the exacerbated external interventionism, calling for the application of mutual respect to ensure national rebirth. Yet again, this is an interesting point, since it was precisely the strong influence of external powers in the affairs of the kingdom, along with other factors, that undermined the legitimacy and solidity of the monarchy since before its founding in 1951.

These examples, which directly and indirectly involve a member of the royal household and the legitimate heir to the throne, permit an investigation as to what extent the symbolism adopted in 2011 has been translated into a political strategy and assimilated

socially. Though an analysis of the second point, the social assimilation, is difficult due to the impossibility of conducting research in Libya, regarding the translation into a political discourse, it is possible to argue that the reappropriation of the memory of the monarchy had consequences in the political arena, although it has a more limited impact than in the past. With the anniversary in 2021, however, the re-evaluation of the Sanussi legacy seems to have found new strength from a social and international point of view.

By analysing journalism produced during 2021 together with editorials and reports from Libya, an interesting fact emerges, namely, a reappropriation of the past as a key to solve the Libyan situation. A recurring question arises: "Is it time for the Second Kingdom of Libya?";[31] "Those who deny that history repeats itself should take a look at recent Libyan history. Almost three-quarters of a century ago, following the defeat of the Axis forces in Libya during World War II, the issue of the destiny of the former Italian colony arose. Not unlike today, the international community was divided on how to deal with Libya. Interestingly, the same major international players currently present on the scene were already there in the 1940s. [...] Idris was the only national figure who enjoyed both nationwide consensus and international confidence. [...] Notwithstanding certain limitations, the eighteen years that followed [1951] were an exemplary era of unity, stability, and prosperity, especially when compared to the post-monarchy era".[32] Drawing a comparison with the second post-war period and identifying in the figure of Idris al-Sanūsi the only legitimate political force able to save Libya, the author of *Is It Time for the Second Kingdom of Libya?* proposes to remedy the current condition of the country by relying on the Constitution of 1951 and the figure of Mohammed al-Sanūsi as "the only legitimate foundation for political action".[33] The latter, by accepting the throne, would bring "with him the same unifying powers his forefathers exemplified".[34] It is clear that Abdurraham Habil, former Minister of Culture and member of the steering committee of the Central Bank of Libya, attempted to use a historical explanation to justify a possible political manoeuvre. Nevertheless, this analysis lacks depth. While it is true that Idris al-Sanūsi emerged in the 1940s as the only possible interlocutor and mediator in the local and international political scene, the reasons for the 1969 coup were rooted, among other things, in a lack of political recognition of al-Sanūsi and the policies implemented by the monarchy (Sury 1973; Vandewalle 2012).

A halfway historical reappropriation is a common feature in articles produced in recent months. The use of history as a source of legitimation of the monarchy stops at the negative analysis of the regime and does not consider the weaknesses of the kingdom of Idris: "the chaos in Libya lasted 43 years under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, the eccentric army officer who emerged in September 1969 and became known as the Great Al-Fateh. [...] The authentic Libyan kingdom with its austere King [...] became known as the Great Libyan Arab Republic".[35] This approach betrays a dichotomous idea that counterposes, the monarchical and dictatorial experiences, as well as the monarchical

and republican experiences, in terms of positivity (the monarchical) and negativity (the dictatorial/republican).

An important saving role is entrusted to the Constitution of 1951 and the "Return of a Constitutional Legitimacy", which would be invoked by several "tribal leaders and politicians".[36] The monarchy, legitimised at a constitutional level, appears as the only symbol of unity able to transcend, as in the past, "tribalism and religious issues" and as "the glue a shattered Libya needs".[37] The appeal to the Constitution of 1951 is described as the only viable way forward since no other local or international agreement would be able to obtain the same legitimacy.[38]

Moreover, the 1951 Constitution would bring with it a federal system conceived to preserve the autonomy of the three provinces that constituted the United Kingdom of Libya. On this topic, it is interesting to read the interview given by Ahmed Zubair al-Sanūsi, who in 2012, as a member of the Council of the District of Cyrenaica, became a spokesman for the request for a federal system: "we put forward this idea - he says - and we were attacked hard. They called us agents. And in the end, they introduced the quota system, this failed system that has already brought down Lebanon. In reality, in current or future officials if they want to succeed in the reconstruction of the state of Libya they must follow the federal system in order to best serve and guarantee the rights of each citizen".[39] Idris's great-grandson, Ahmed Zubair al-Sanūsi, recalls the role of the Sanussi family from 1951-1969, in contrast to the actions of today's politicians. The family's lack of involvement in the affairs of the state emerges from the Ahmed Zubair al-Sanūsi's discourse, but historical sources paint a different picture, showing how one aspect that weakened the monarchy and the esteem of the Sanusiyya was the social perception that the management of the state was nothing more than a family affair.[40]

Though there are several similarities between 2011 and 2021, it is possible to discern a change in the symbolic political approach to the past between these periods. In 2011, the monarchy, and with it the Sanusiyya as its source of political legitimacy and a symbol of struggle and resistance, re-emerged, mainly in the streets, as a social symbol of redemption and liberation from the regime of Qadhāfi. It could be said that this was a historically unconscious reappropriation, insofar as the monarchical experience had been erased from the collective memory. In 2021, a decade later, the hypothesis of a restoration of the monarchy has returned to the surface, first and foremost from a political point of view. There is a historical justification, albeit half-undone, as well as a parallelism with the immediate post-war period. Yet it is no longer a question of the appropriation of symbols, but rather of a desire to restore a form of state and government belonging to the past, about which, however, little awareness remains: "[a]lthough few citizens alive today can recall it, there was a time before the fall of Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi [*sic*] in 2011, when Libyans were united. The country's 1951 constitution mixed democratic practices with a figurehead capable of ensuring the interests of Libya's diverse citizenry. Notwithstanding its colonial influences,

inefficacies in redistributing wealth, and limitations on some democratic processes (the monarch had overbearing power over the lower house of parliament), that era's constitutional monarchy at least provided a powerful answer to many of challenges the country is witnessing today".[41]

Conclusion

More than a decade has passed since the outbreak of the revolts in Libya, wrongly and simplistically identified with the term *revolution*, but the country remains in a state of uncertainty. The elections scheduled for 24 December 2021, a symbolic date in Libya's history, were cancelled just hours before the vote. Furthermore, investigations and in-depth analyses that consider Libya's historical path and its regional and social composition affirmed themselves with struggle.

Since 2011, however, a process of reappropriation of the past has begun, with reference to the monarchical era and its legacy. This process has developed on different levels: historiographic, social, and political. In the first case, the primary objective seems to be to shed new light on a historical period that is still under-investigated due to the removal policy of the Qadhāfi regime. There are numerous historiographic reconstructions, produced locally and internationally, that aim at this result and, as seen above, scientific production is growing.

From a social point of view, although there has been a lack of historical awareness of the period of 1951-69, the Sanussi heritage was adopted by a variety of actors, since 2011, as a symbol of liberation from the regime. This is a clear parallel, albeit decontextualised, to the situation in the 1940s, when the Sanusiyya of Idris al-Sanūsi imposed itself on the political scene and became the protagonist of Libya's independence. At the same time, the image of liberation recalls the past of struggle and resistance against colonialism.

Finally, on a political level, the last decade has seen the return of a prediction of a restoration of the 1951 Constitution, as well as a reconstitution of the monarchy and the federal system. These three are once again, although to a lesser extent, identified as the only possible way forward for the rebirth of Libya. However, the political instrumentalisation of the legacy of the monarchy, mainly implemented in recent years, often lacks historical awareness, which could be remedied by drawing on recent historiographic production.

In conclusion, the legacy of the Sanusiyya and the monarchy is today presented on three distinct levels, which struggle to dialogue and intersect with each other and represent only the start of a path toward the reappropriation and reconstruction of memory.

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Notes:

1 - The transliteration of the titles of the volumes in Arabic followed the norms of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (TransChart.pdf (cambridge.org)). For the transliteration of terms related to Islamic doctrine and Sufism, the terms most widely used in the relevant historiography were adopted; a similar choice was made for the conversion into English of the names of political and cultural parties and personalities.
- *Šayḫ*, "literally 'old'; in Sufism it indicates the spiritual master, and the head of a ṭarīqa" (Scarabel 2007: 211).

2 - *Ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq*, the spiritual ṣufī path, brotherhood (Scarabel 2007: 212).

3 - *Zāwiya*, pl. *zāwāya*, ṣufī center (Scarabel 2007: 213).

4 - On the Libyan Studied Centre see, for example, Anna Baldinetti (2016) and Francesca di Pasquale (2017) works.

5 - On this matter see also the interview to Ali Abdullatif Ahmida: *Interview with Prof. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, Political Science Department, University of New England in Maine February 2022*, in "International Centre for Dialogue Initiatives", 14 February 2022. https://tinyurl.com/3rz68bm9 (last accessed on 7 November 2022).

6 - See for example: AA.VV., *Nashāṭ al-ḥarakat al-Sanūsiyya fi Ṭarābulus al-Gharb (1843-1919)* (The Activity of the Sanussi Movement in Tripolitania 1843-1919) published in 2017-18 at the University Mohamed Boudiaf of M'Sila, in Algeria (AA.VV. 2017-18); Flīḥ Ḥasan 'Alī, *Al-ḥaraka al-Sanūsiyya fi 'Ifrīqyā fi ḍaū' taqrīr siriyya brīṭaniyya ṣādir 'ām 1908m* (The Sanussi Movement in the Light of a Secret British Report Issued in the Year 1980) of 2016, published in Iraq at Kufa University ('Alī 2016).

7 - A clear example is al-Sanūsi Yunus 'Alī al-'Askarī, *Al-mawārid al-iqtiṣādiyya wa al-naẓb al-'idāriyya lilzawāyā al-sanūsiyya* (Economic Resources and Administrative Systems for Sanussi Zawāyā) of 2017, published on the Global Libyan Journal of the University of Benghazi (al-Sanūsi 2017).

8 - See Ẓāhir Muḥammad Ṣikr al-Ḥasnāwī work *Al-ḥarb al-Sanūsiyyat - al-fransiyya fī-l-Ṣaḥāra' al-akbarā 1837-1913* (The Sanussi War - France in the Sahara), published at Baghdad University (al-Ḥasnāwī n.d.).

9 - See, for example, the 2015 analysis published in Egypt by 'Idrīs Muḥammad Ḥasīn 'Abū Bakr, *Ẓuhūr wa nash'āt Al-'āḥzāb al-siyāsia fi Lībīya wa mūqifhā min al-'Imāra al-Sanūsiyya* (The Emergence of Political Parties in Libya and their Position Towards the Sanussi Emirate) ('Abū Bakr 2015); or the article published in 2018 at al-Marqab University by Abu Bakr Salem al-Mahdi al-Shaybani entitled *'Alāqat al-jumhūriyya al-ṭarabulusiyya bi al-'imārat al-sanūsiyya fi Barqa 1920-1922* (The Relationship of the Tripolitanian Republic to the Sanussi Emirate in Cyrenaica (1920-1922) (al-Shaybani 2018).

10 - See the work published in Amman, dated 2016, by al-Ḥusaynī al-Ḥusaynī Mu'addī, *al-Malik Muḥammad 'Idrīs al-Sanūsī: ḥayātuhu wa-'aṣruhu* (King Muhammad Idris al-Sanūsi, his Life and his Era) (Mu'addī 2016).

11 - The title is from a mini-series made by *Al-Jazeera*. See *Libya's Forgotten King (Ep 1) | Al Jazeera World*, 19 November 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTKaF-7zC38 and *Libya's Forgotten King (Ep 2) | Al Jazeera World*, 25 November 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_i3obTnQ10 (last accessed on 7 November 2022).

12 - Muṣṭafa 'Aḥmad Bin Ḥalim was Prime Minister from 1954 to 1957. His memoirs were published, as the first edition, in 1992 (Bin Ḥalim 2003).

13 - *Libya's Forgotten King (Ep 2) | Al Jazeera World*, 25 November 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_i3obTnQ10 (last accessed on 7 November 2022).

14 - *Ibid*.

15 - Cyrenaica.

16 - Justin Marozzi, *Could Royals Ousted by Gaddafi Reclaim Centre Stage*, "BBC news", 23 April 2011.

17 - *Ibid*.

18 - The reference here is to the archival documents. See Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Algérie, Gouvernement général de l'Algérie, Series H - Affaires Indigénes, 29H - Pays musulmans divers 1856-1956, b. 18; and The National Archives (TNA), Records of the Cabinet Office 158.2.

19 - *Libya's 'Crown Prince' Makes Appeal*, "Al-Jazeera", 24 February 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/2/24/libyas-crown-prince-makes-appeal (last accessed on 7 November 2022).

20 - *Libya Independence: King Idris Anniversary Celebrated,* "BBC News", 24 December 2011.
21 - Declan Walsh, *Libya's Closet Royalists Re-emerged with Radical Plan. Calls Made to Restore the Monarchy to Country Shattered by Internal Divisions*, "The Irish Times", 25 February 2016.
22 - *Ibid.*
23 - Zlitan is a town in the Tripolitania region.
24 - The Movement's manifesto lists 4 points supporting the return of constitutional legitimacy to "save the country and achieve stability": 1. The return to constitutional legitimacy, through the reactivation of the 1951 "UN-approved" Constitution would ensure a return to the situation prior to the establishment of the Qadhāfi regime. 2. The constitution is a sacred property of the nation and any act that violates it is to be considered a violation of the will and rights of Libya. 3. Libya is one and united. 4. Constitutional monarchy is meant as an integral part of the return to constitutional legitimacy, and the designated heir to the throne is Mohammed al-Sanūsi. See: Du'āt al-'awdat lil-shar'iyya al-dustūriyya al-malikiyya (Supporters of the return for a Constitutional Monarchy Legitimacy), *Nayān du'āt al-'awdat al-shar'iyya al-dustūriyya al-malikiyya* (A Statement by Supporters of a Return to Constitutional Monarchy), 1 June 2022. The Movement's manifesto can be found at this link: https://www.facebook.com/ZLITENoo/photos/a.293285630843776/2112086535630334/ (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
25 - Zayd 'Adiyya, *Hal al'awdat 'il-al-malakiyya al-dusturiyya ṭawq najāt Lībīya?* (Is the Return to the Constitutional Monarchy Libya's Salvation?), "Independent Arabia", 15 January 2022, https://www.independentarabia.com/node/294841/ (last accessed on 7 November 2022). See on this matter the articles published on: https://www.libya-al-mostakbal.org/keyword/855.html (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
26 - *Ḥarāk al-'awdat al-shari'iyya al-dustūriyya – madīnat Zlītan* (Movement for the Return to Constitutional Legitimacy / Zliten City), Facebook Community, https://tinyurl.com/5apa5s8k (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
27 - *Ḥarāk al-'awdat al-shari'iyya al-dustūriyya – Tripoli* (Movement for the Return to Constitutional Legitimacy / Tripoli), Facebook Community, https://tinyurl.com/22sfeetp (last accessed on 7 November 2022); *Ḥarāk al-'awdat al-shari'iyya al-dustūriyya – Barqa* (Movement for the Return to Constitutional Legitimacy / Barqa), Facebook Community, https://tinyurl.com/4kpmamau (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
28 - Kareem al-Boali, *Libya: Royal Grandson Suggests Restoring 1951 Charter. Grandson of Libya's Last King, Deposed in 1969, Proposes Himself as Consensus Figure to Lead Transition to Rebuild State,* "Anadolu Agency", 8 September 2017.
29 - *Free Libya*, https://vimeo.com/user6146915 (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
30 - The data is updated to 21 October 2022.
31 - Abdurrahaman Habil, *Is It Time for the Second Kingdom of Libya?,* "The National Interest", 4 September 2021.
32 - *Ibid.*
33 - *Ibid.*
34 - *Ibid.*
35 - Ahmad al-Qadidi, *Libya is Limping from Chaos Towards a State,* "Al-Sharq", 5 July 2021, and "MEMO", 6 July 2021.
36 - Shlomo Roiter Jesner, *Can a Constitutional Monarchy Save Libya from Chaos?,* "The National Interest", 7 June 2021.
37 - *Ibid.*
38 - Abdel-Monim al-Shomani, *To Save Libya's Future, Look Back to Its Past*, "The National Interest", 19 October 2021. On this matter see also the article published on *al-Wasat*: "Al-takattul al-fīdirālī yaḥ'uw īla i'timād dustūr 1951 wa ya'dhar min 'adam istijāba (The Federal Bloc call for the Adoption of 1951 Constitution and warns against non-response)", 13 August 2015, http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/80225 (last accessed on 7 November 2022).
39 - Interview to Ahmed Zubair Al-Senussi, al-Baida, 18 March 2021, in Vanessa Tomassini, *Parola ad Ahmed Zubair Al-Senussi: "il sistema federale, unica via d'uscita per la Libia"*, "Speciale Libia", 18 March 2021, https://specialelibia.it/2021/03/19/parola-ad-ahmed-zubair-al-senussi-il-sistema-federale-unica-via-duscita-per-la-libia/ (last accessed on 7 November 2022).

40 - A clear example of the social and political repercussions of family intrigues on the esteem of Sanusiyya and his *šayḫ* was the issue of the inheritance of the Emirate, set as a necessary condition by Idris al-Sanūsi for the achievement of a united political front between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the late 1940s. This is an important example because it shows how this mechanism was pre-existing compared to the creation of the United Kingdom of Libya. The issue of the inheritance of the Sanussi Emirate turned into a *barrier to unity* and laid the foundations for the unilateral decision to create the Emirate of Cyrenaica in 1949, and then for the constitution of the United Kingdom of Libya in 1951. Therefore, the stance of Idris al-Sanūsi arose, even before 1951, as a condition of weakness of the future United Kingdom of Libya. See Khadduri (1963).

41 - Patrik Kurath, *Could Monarchy Heal Libya?,* "Foreign Policy", 23 June 2021.

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