

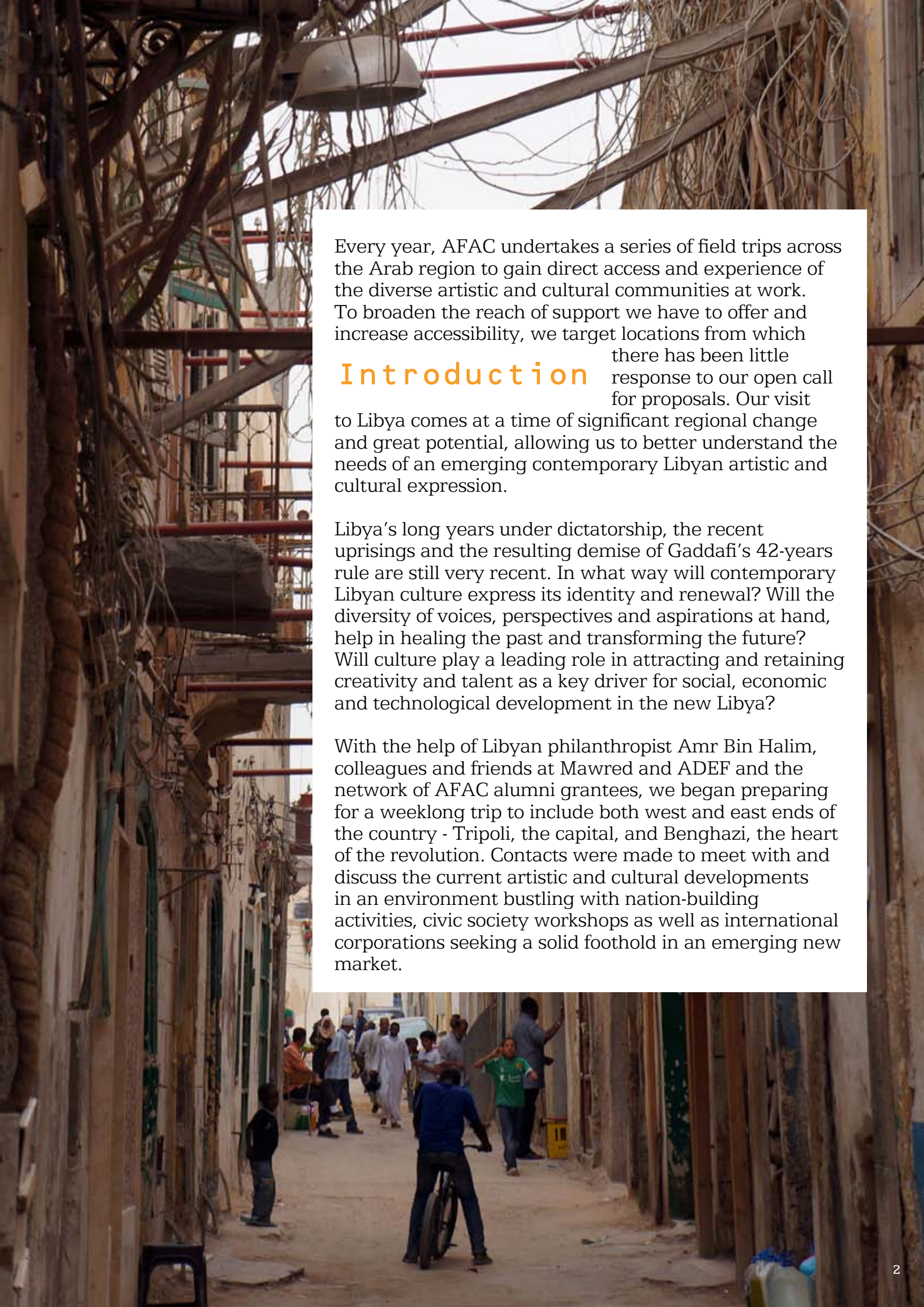


AFAC Field Visit to Libya May 2012



آفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون – آفاق




Every year, AFAC undertakes a series of field trips across the Arab region to gain direct access and experience of the diverse artistic and cultural communities at work. To broaden the reach of support we have to offer and increase accessibility, we target locations from which

Introduction

there has been little response to our open call for proposals. Our visit to Libya comes at a time of significant regional change and great potential, allowing us to better understand the needs of an emerging contemporary Libyan artistic and cultural expression.

Libya's long years under dictatorship, the recent uprisings and the resulting demise of Gaddafi's 42-years rule are still very recent. In what way will contemporary Libyan culture express its identity and renewal? Will the diversity of voices, perspectives and aspirations at hand, help in healing the past and transforming the future? Will culture play a leading role in attracting and retaining creativity and talent as a key driver for social, economic and technological development in the new Libya?

With the help of Libyan philanthropist Amr Bin Halim, colleagues and friends at Mawred and ADEF and the network of AFAC alumni grantees, we began preparing for a weeklong trip to include both west and east ends of the country - Tripoli, the capital, and Benghazi, the heart of the revolution. Contacts were made to meet with and discuss the current artistic and cultural developments in an environment bustling with nation-building activities, civic society workshops as well as international corporations seeking a solid foothold in an emerging new market.



We arrived at Tripoli international airport from Amman in a full-packed airplane to be welcomed by a 40 degrees overcast sky. There was a slight delay in getting through customs as

May 20 our invitation letters had failed to make it on time to the visas delivery counter. Khaled Muttawa came to the rescue and after a couple of phone calls with some higher officials, we picked up our bags heavy with AFAC brochures and sweets from Lebanon and got underway for the half-hour ride to the Radisson Hotel.

The Radisson was buzzing with activity, with a large traffic of visitors dashing through the security checks for meetings in the hotel's cafés. We heard later from the concierge that the hotel processed 75 new check-ins on the day we arrived. One could hear German, English but mostly Italian echoing through the lobby walls and the clientele was a mixture of businessmen in ties, security bodyguards in fatigues and younger Libyans making business in the post-revolution era. We saw a German lady, a project manager from the Germany foreign ministry nervously preparing a power-point presentation on renewable energies to 100 government officials and Libyan businessmen.



Khaled Muttawa is a Libyan poet and professor of literature at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is now sharing his time between the US and Tripoli. His wife, Reem Gibril is a visual artist and together with Khaled has launched a new cultural institution called "Arete". Arete is the name of a Greek goddess, daughter of Poseidon and synonymous with courage and strength in the face of adversity. One of the foundation's goals is to promote contemporary arts in Libya after the regime change. Arete had just hosted its first festival of poetry in April, in partnership with the new Ministry of Culture.

The festival's budget was 120,000 Libyan dinars or about \$100K. "There is funding for culture now, but it takes forever to access it. "When Shamma, a renowned Iraqi musician and Oud player, came for a concert few months back, we had to get him to the venue in a pickup truck as there was no money to pay for the limousine", says Reem.

One of Arete's goals is to introduce to Libya contemporary art practices in a scene that is largely dominated by figurative and traditional forms. Artists were making their living by selling their works to tourists and the few culturally inclined businessmen on visit during Gaddafi's Libya. In a rare instance where Libyan art was shown abroad, Saif-el-Islam Gaddafi had organized an exhibition of his own paintings – with two other Libyan artists in 2002 in Paris and London.

We talked about capacity building and the importance of languages. English is not widely spoken in Libya, as it was banned from schools after the bombing of Tripoli in 1986. Today, a good English-speaking government employee will double his salary. Some seem to have misused this by passing a rigged-up language test.

Another issue that came up often in our discussions was the ossified educational system in place that displayed a high ratio of teacher to student. The number of public employees was also a staggering 800,000 for an overall population of about 6 million people.

"There are a few good abstract painters here but it is time to introduce new art forms such as video art, installations, modern theater practices and independent creative films to the Libyan public. We would also like to help artists get access to funding, and initiate first art educational programs", states Khaled.

Khaled and Reem will be heading to Cairo in June for a training session organized by Mawred to Arab cultural managers, as part of their Abbara program.


We heard later in our trip about a project earlier this year initiated by the ministry of culture to commission 30 artists to produce new paintings for a public exhibition in a public space. When news of the 1,000 LYD commission per artist spread in town, 56 artists forced their way into the exhibition.

In spite of what seems to be a difficult situation, Khaled and Reem are nonetheless optimistic about the future of culture in Libya post the revolution. "The new leadership in the ministry is excellent and will help us move through the bureaucratic middle management, slowly but surely. Just remember where we were a few months ago!"

Another familiar issue makes it into the discussion: the apparently growing influence of conservative elements of the society. A famous Tunisian rap artist was apparently forced to cancel an outdoor public concert in Tripoli after he received threats.



free LIBYA



We start our first one-on-one meetings on the outside terrace of the hotel with Abdel Magid Fergany, the bureau chief of Associated Press in Tripoli. Abdel Magid is the founder of the Libyan Association for Photography and is himself a dedicated creative photographer who participated to a number of competitions in the Arab world and Europe and is recipient of several prizes. He showed us some of his favorite pictures and a short video clip he had directed, showing young Libyans during and after the revolution. Abdel Magid explained how he smuggled pictures of the uprising to the international press during the revolution through a friend British journalist staying at the Rixos hotel. "Had the militia discovered my camera at that time, I wouldn't have been here talking to you now."

In answer to our questions about cinema, Abdel Magid describes how the industry faded into decay during Gaddafi's rule. "In the 70's and 80's we had a dozen cinema theaters showing Italian, Indian and Egyptian movies. But Gaddafi was more interested in propaganda and forcibly neglected the industry. He did fund the al-Risalah as well as Omar al-Mukhtar films, but one theater closed after the other with only al-Waddan barely surviving until the year 2000."

To the question whether any of these spaces has opened again, we heard different answers during our 3-days stay in Tripoli. It seems there is currently only one to three theaters that sporadically screen Hollywood-style movies or football matches projecting from low-quality DVDs. "No businessman would invest today in the renovation of a cinema until the overall situation stabilizes a bit more."

Abdel Magid's association (which has 9 founding members and about 100 members) has now finally managed to register as an NGO when this became possible under the new ministry procedures. "We desperately need to start training our members for creative work and there is much experience around us in the Arab world that is now accessible; we need some resources to do that."

Our second meeting was with Mohammed bin Lamin, an artist and sculptor who had survived six months at the infamous Abuslim prison with his brother, Alhabib, who is now head of the office of culture at the ministry of culture and civil society. Both were liberated on August 26th after the fall of Tripoli. Mohammed described how he made sculpture portraits of his fellow prisoners from aluminum foil plates. His prison wall drawings and sketches gained international recognition after TV reporter crews reported on them after the liberation. Mohammed was an active artist for many years and participated to a number of international biennales. He described in one instance how he had antagonized the regime for refusing to make a monument to the glory of the ruler and how life became complicated after that.



Mohammed is an active member of an international network of artists, edits an art magazine, and is currently exploring new media for painting and sculpture. He has helped recently organize the Zawia Panorama International Expo that took place in April.

Mohammed tells us of another initiative he is engaged in, an Academy of Arab Visual Artists, launched by Morocco and UAE patrons, that is about to take off officially in September.

We sit down next with Khaled Muttawa, Reem Gibril and Sateh Arnaout, a World bank representative on visit to Tripoli, and listen to the WB's plan to fund the renovation of a public space that could support reconciliation efforts in the post-revolution era. We discussed the various models for supporting cultural sectors and forms of effective public-private partnerships. When asked about what would be the ideal space for such project, Khaled answers: "We would need two to three cultural centers, two to three independent cinema theaters with capacities for 300 to 400 people right away!" We also touch upon the caution displayed by Libyans when the subject of foreign funding comes up. Many point out to the state of amnesia, and politics of oblivion displayed in relationship with Western powers. "Those same governments, supporters and enablers of the Gaddafi regimes are now the best friends of the revolution and want to do business with us?"

In the afternoon, we take a tour of the compound of Bab al Aziziya, Gaddafi's former fortress inside of Tripoli. A rebel fighter who took part to the battle to storm the compound, walks us through the maze of bombed buildings, crumbled concrete walls decorated by graffiti, underground tunnels, swimming pool full of rubbles and burned private hospital. When we ask him why it was all destroyed, he said: "We did not really believe or realize at the time that the battle was actually won; we wanted to destroy the dictator assets, burn it before we continued the fight". We wonder about the future of this strategically located 6-square-kilometre space in the new Tripoli. We pass by two large burnt buses and Reem starts taking pictures. "This would be an amazing place for my next installation project".



After a short break at the hotel, we head out to Dar al Funun for our presentation. Dar al Funun is a known gallery and shop selling painting and framing supplies, which has served as a meeting point and exhibition space for visual artists in the capital for many years now. Jamila al-Wahidi is currently exhibiting "Contemplations", a series of beautiful A3-sized photographs of the spectacular town of Gadammees. We are greeted by visual artists and photographers, poets and writers as well as a couple of representatives from the ministry of culture. It becomes clear from the first few questions that most people present in the audience are unfamiliar with the process of writing grant proposals and formulating their project in writing. Two hours of presentation about AFAC's current grants and the process of application filling are followed by a lively discussion around tea, coffee, pizzas and Arabic sweets. Many issues are raised, especially ones dealing with the need for training, capacity building and support for the nascent cultural organizations and NGO's, the lack of public spaces for cultural production and consumption, and last but not least the role of public entities in the rebirth of cultural life in the country.

We brake off for dinner at the Elmatin Turkish restaurant with a smaller group of artists: Jamila al-Wahidi, visual artist; Nuri Abdul-Dayem, theater director and event organizer; Soad Salem, poet and editor of El-Beyt magazine; and Ferial Eldali, poet and editor of Atiaf magazine; Khaled Muttawa; and Reem Gibril. We listen to the most incredible stories about Gaddafi's oddities during his long years in power while trying out the local lahmbajins.





We meet first with Huda Abuzeid, a film director /producer and freelance journalist based in London that has returned to Libya after the start of the uprisings. Gaddafi's hit men

May 22

murdered Huda's father in London in 1995, and

although she says she was totally detached from her homeland during for the last twenty years, she spoke perfect Arabic and remained in touch with the region through media and friends. While working on a documentary for Aljazeera on the Egyptian uprising, she was asked to go to Benghazi with NTC on March 11th. "Two days after they contacted me, I was on a plane to Benghazi. Everybody was asking about who the rebels were, where they came from, who was backing them? I wanted to show their faces to the world".

When we asked her whether she would eventually return to London, she says in an impeccable British accent: "I belong to the new Libya now, right here."

Huda has compiled lots of footage from the early days of the uprising, including personal interviews, chilling pictures and footages from the killing of Gaddafi, but she doesn't know what to do with it.

"In there is a mix of personal experience with a desire to return to my roots. I still need to digest it all. I couldn't sell it to TV stations; maybe I will do a creative documentary with all of this one day".

One of her other projects is a foundation she has just registered, called "Rashad". Rashad aims to find creative ways by which citizens would engage in political life in the new Libya. One example was finding investors to lease a mobile cinema truck to screen movies in villages outside of the large cities. "We are starting everything from scratch here; this is an amazing spot to be in. But what is really missing is how to capture the energy of the young people that made all of this happen and celebrate their achievements. These guys can't speak English. They are uncomfortable in front of cameras, and they do not like the limelight. I hope they will not get forgotten and not all the glory falls unto the older people, or some who are riding the wave of the revolution without having been involved. It is necessary to be focused now, persistent and start the hard work of rebuilding and developing".

Next we met with Widad Murabit al-Mounsir, who had returned to Libya in 2002 from Milano to reclaim and restore the house of her father, a known historian philosopher and journalist. Her son is a football player that trained in Italy and played with major football team. He was forced upon his return to Libya to play in Saadi Gaddafi's national football team but managed to move to Dubai to work as a coach there. "Artists were cut off from the world here. Only



Saif and his clique were able participate to international exhibitions. Italian, Austrian and other embassies did lots of small, limited activities, but it was so hard to live any sort of a cultural life." When asked how things were now, Widad was cautiously optimistic: "My sister, based in Milano, tried to organize a classical music concert in Sabratha, but it was so difficult to manage the still prevailing chaos that the concert moved to Tunis in the last minute. This is all normal; we are in the process of undergoing a difficult transition." To the question of what is needed now, she says: "You have to give the young population some fun, after so much backwardness and oppression. 60% are below the age of 30. Give them something they can relate to, rock, pop, rap, whatever!"

Next we have lunch with Hadia Gana. Hadia is planning to develop a new cultural center at her late father's house, Ali Gana. The center would include a museum hosting her father's large collection of drawings and sketches, as well as a research center and a multi-purpose room that could be used for educational activities. Talking about the state of arts and culture before the uprising, she says: "Few artists managed to sell their work to hotels and private houses and live of it. There has been a Museum of Modern Art project since the 80's with a collection of hundreds of work, but now all of them have disappeared".

Hadia was involved in urban planning of the Green Belt project, one of Saif Gaddafi's initiatives that was to include a library, several galleries and museums, public parks and real estate developments, but it never came about. "Every 5 years period had its lie, somehow we were all led to believe that some major project was about to happen, that change was coming, and we worked hard on it but nothing came out ultimately. Nonetheless, I am glad I stayed here and did not give up and go away. There is a purpose to all of this."

We say goodbye to Hadia and meet with British Council's country director Cherry Gough and her assistant director and head of cultural programs, Awatef Shawish. Cherry was forced to leave Libya during the uprising, but now, the BC is beginning to give English courses again, 200 students this year, compared to about a thousand before the uprising.

"We are trying to investigate how to best engage with the young population after the revolution, with the help of cultural activities such as street art, graffiti and film workshops, while using non-conventional spaces and original programs" says Awatef. " We want to give a chance to people to come forward with their own ideas. For example we have developed a literature project, called walk-in cities whereby British and Libyan poets would alternatively visit towns in Libya and the UK and host poetry talks."

We move next to the outdoor terrace to meet with a group of young musicians Fouad Gritli, Hani Kot and Rida Idriss. Fouad learned about music from watching YouTube videos and downloading scores from the Internet. He is a self-taught guitar composer and player and insists on speaking English "as a way to resist the isolation that Gaddafi was imposing on the Libyan population and especially on Libyan youth". He is currently recording his first album and animates two radio programs.

Rida Idriss is fascinated by Amazigh music, which he compares to Central European gypsy music. He re-arranges scores of traditional songs in fusion with jazz and oriental tones. He is very proud to have performed with Naseer Shamma when he was in Libya. We were very surprised to know that he is about to finish his last year of university in dentistry. "I consider myself a professional musician, but I have to earn my living as a dentist; this was the doctor degree I could get in the least amount of years of study".

We ask whether they plan to organize themselves into an association of local musicians. "We didn't even think about it". An animated debate about the pros and cons and the potential of better recognition by the old guard musicians, the cultural ministry and society in general follows. "Most of us play music in hotels and private parties. We do not earn much with that, but this is the only way to practice and perform publicly". Rida and Hani get their guitars out and start singing old Libyan traditional songs to the surprise of the Radisson guests around us.

We met with a couple of young people proudly displaying their ink-tainted index finger who have just come back from Benghazi where the elections of the local council just took place. Attia al-Ujali, deputy minister of culture and civic





society, tells us about the symbolic importance of this event after the long years of dictatorships

We leave to an Italian restaurant to have dinner with a group of businessmen, members of the Association of Libyan Businessmen and Alhabib Elamin, head of the office of culture at the ministry of culture and civil society. We wanted to sound the terrain for local philanthropy, and get a feel of how culture is perceived in this climate of reconstruction and nation building after the revolution.

Shukri Benfaied returned to Libya during the uprising. Besides continuing to manage his own successful companies abroad, he has volunteered to support the new transitional government as advisor, to put in place strategies for restructuring of the Energy and Oil sector. Hatem Terbah, director of the same Association in Tripoli is full of energy and talks with passion about how his association played a key role in supporting the logistics of the rebels as well as the population at large during the long months of war. "We have invested a lot from our own money, all of us. Many have shown a wonderful sense of nationalism and helped supply hospitals with medicine. Today, now that our mission has been successful and looking into the future, we do not side with any single political party, rather we help one and the other become self-sustained and concentrate on our businesses again. The international community has been helpful, but we still have to struggle through daily hurdles, little things like some European banks not wanting to deal with our money, exchange rates for the Libyan dinars that are totally unfavorable, etc." Mustafa el Ghawi and Badr el Tagouri, director of public relations for the Association, make fun of the new situation today: "After the revolution, my kids have stopped obeying me. Nothing is sacred anymore!"

Alhabib Elamine wants things to change at the ministry of culture. He is a poet and writer and an archeologist by profession who specialized in ancient pottery. After the revolution he has reluctantly joined the ministry under pressure from his friends and colleagues. People with experience and education are scarce in the new Libya. As we start talking about the various models by which culture is funded in the West, and we describe support, or the lack of it, for arts in Arab countries, Alhabib throws a question at the businessmen around him. "What if we taxed businesses a small percentage of revenue on specific goods and allocate it to fund the local arts? We would make this an irrevocable law hard-wired into the new constitution. Would you accept this, and support it?"

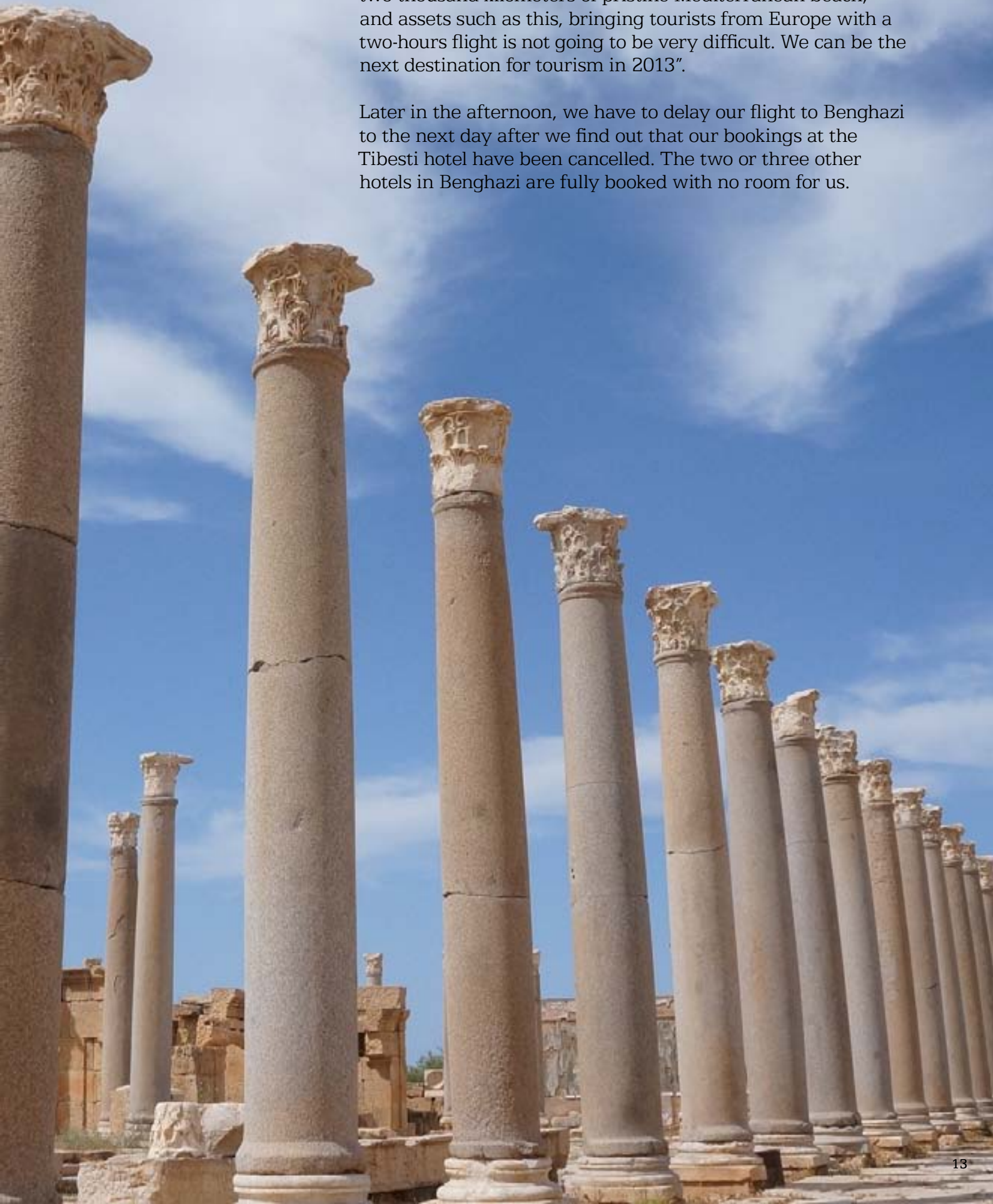
Hatem is the first one to answer. "Definitely! We were paying our taxes to Gaddafi anyway, and all of it went to his own pocket. This time, such a tax would fund a good cause. We will support you on that." We shake hands with all and leave back for the hotel at the end of a long but informative day.

Alhabib Elamine arranges for a guide to meet us at Leptis Magna, an hour and a half drive from Tripoli. Belqassem walks us through the rather neglected but spectacular ruins

May 23

of the Ancient Roman city and states proudly: "With two thousand kilometers of pristine Mediterranean beach, and assets such as this, bringing tourists from Europe with a two-hours flight is not going to be very difficult. We can be the next destination for tourism in 2013".

Later in the afternoon, we have to delay our flight to Benghazi to the next day after we find out that our bookings at the Tibesti hotel have been cancelled. The two or three other hotels in Benghazi are fully booked with no room for us.





It is less than an hour from Tripoli to Benghazi with al-Buraq airlines flight. We sit next to a Libyan engineer who is flying his family to Benghazi for a relative's wedding. He promises

May 24

to join us at our AFAC presentation this afternoon at the national library. "I am fond of Gibran Khalil Gibran and the Nahda poets. I wanted to study literature but that was impossible at the time; I hope young Libyans will be able to do that today."

We check in at the Tibesti after a long but successful negotiation with the hotel manager. The hotel is sold out to press people and participants to a conference on industry hosted by a Turkish conglomerate. The concierge tells us of the love-and-hate relationship between Libyans and media. "They have helped bring attention to our ordeals but lots of what they report on is lies. They tell you only what is convenient and when it is convenient".

We have a quick bite at one of the four hotel restaurants, in a decor that seems to come straight out of a 60's Egyptian movie --development in Libya seems to have been frozen for the last forty years--then drive to Dar al Kutub al Watani, the national library of Benghazi to present AFAC's programs to a group of about 40 writers, visual artists, theater directors and representatives of a number of small cultural institutions.

Our presentation continues informally outside of the conference room and at the library's entrance hall. About an hour and a half later, we are invited by a group of visual artists to see the "Martyrs' exhibition" at Qasr al Manar. The palace is a highly symbolic location for Benghazians and served as the headquarters of Italians in the forties. The white marble balcony on its first floor is where Libya declared its independence in 1951. The building served later as residence for King Idris before becoming the infamous symbol of the Gaddafi regime. Hussein, one of the artists guiding us through the exhibition said: "This was Huda bin Amer's office, Gaddafi's administrator in Benghazi. This lady was capable of anything, even executing people publicly during Ramadan. She had no heart, no faith, and was the infamous symbol of this dark period!" The revolutionaries burned the palace after the liberation in February, but today the elegant rooms have been spontaneously turned into a public cultural center. For Jamal Ahmed Al-Sharif, the dream has become a reality. Jamal has squatted into one wing of the Qasr, transforming it into a small school to teach art to the young aspiring artists. When Jamal heard about the rebels' plans to turn the space into a military base, he discretely installed a metallic door unto the gate and secured it with heavy locks. I wanted to save the palace from yet another destruction. I acted as if the military rebels did not exist, locked the metallic door and brought students in for workshops, inside and outside in the gardens, until the time when the Kataeb gave up and left".

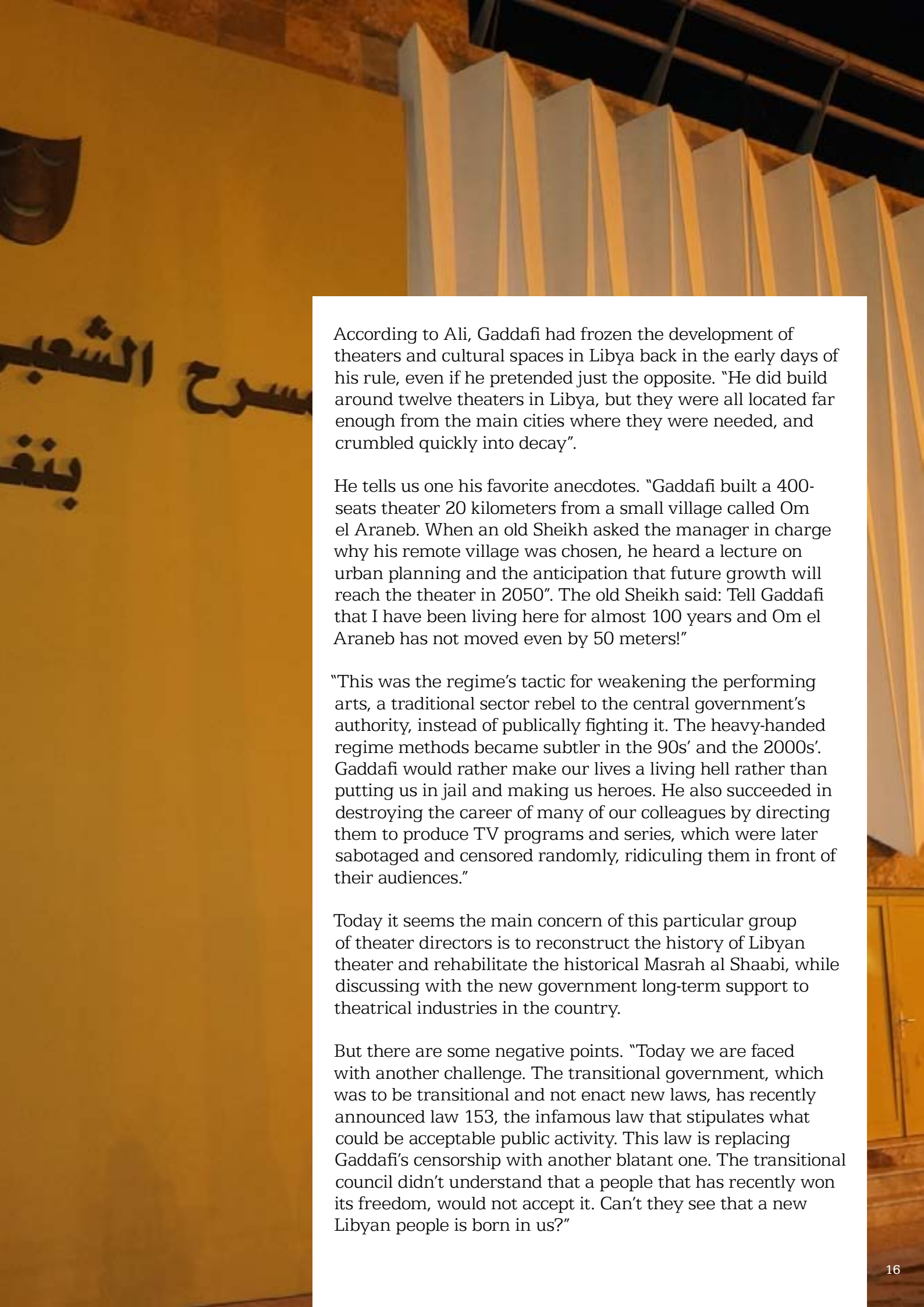


The exhibiting artists are keen on showing us their works, and we realize we have here two generations of Libyan artists on display. We could sense a bit of a tension between the young and old when the topic of future and purpose of art in the new Libya came up. Nevertheless, all seem to agree on the importance of looking forward and leaving the dark history behind.

Outside the palace, we find the extraordinary metallic sculptures of Ali Al-Wakwak. The exhibition was due to close yesterday, but the organizers kept it on display an extra day in our honor. A number of rusted dinosaurs, large-scale personages and alien monsters made of twisted metallic parts spread out below the palm trees and around the palace building. "I started collecting the remains of the war that was raging outside, empty mortar shells, lost helmets, metal sheets from burnt armored cars, even an empennage of a shot down airplane and spontaneously built these monsters. My work caught the eyes of the Europeans and I will be soon exhibiting in Italy," says Ali. Ali has never heard of Louise Bourgeois, Anselm Kiefer or Richard Serra.

It was getting late as we leave to Masrah Al Shaabi – the People's theater, to meet with a group of theater directors, actors and producers (most of them into their fifties or sixties) for a cup of tea on the outside terrace.

Ali tells us how the hard fight he put up with the ministry of culture to convince them to spend money on renovating the aged building. "With the lobbying help of a large group of theater directors and activists in Benghazi, the community has joined hands to rehabilitate one of the first theaters in this country."

The background image shows a theater interior. On the left, a yellow wall features large, dark Arabic calligraphy. To the right, a series of white, rectangular, three-dimensional architectural elements are arranged in a row, creating a modern, sculptural look. The lighting is warm and focused on the wall and the architectural details.

According to Ali, Gaddafi had frozen the development of theaters and cultural spaces in Libya back in the early days of his rule, even if he pretended just the opposite. "He did build around twelve theaters in Libya, but they were all located far enough from the main cities where they were needed, and crumbled quickly into decay".

He tells us one his favorite anecdotes. "Gaddafi built a 400-seats theater 20 kilometers from a small village called Om el Araneb. When an old Sheikh asked the manager in charge why his remote village was chosen, he heard a lecture on urban planning and the anticipation that future growth will reach the theater in 2050". The old Sheikh said: Tell Gaddafi that I have been living here for almost 100 years and Om el Araneb has not moved even by 50 meters!"

"This was the regime's tactic for weakening the performing arts, a traditional sector rebel to the central government's authority, instead of publically fighting it. The heavy-handed regime methods became subtler in the 90s' and the 2000s'. Gaddafi would rather make our lives a living hell rather than putting us in jail and making us heroes. He also succeeded in destroying the career of many of our colleagues by directing them to produce TV programs and series, which were later sabotaged and censored randomly, ridiculing them in front of their audiences."

Today it seems the main concern of this particular group of theater directors is to reconstruct the history of Libyan theater and rehabilitate the historical Masrah al Shaabi, while discussing with the new government long-term support to theatrical industries in the country.

But there are some negative points. "Today we are faced with another challenge. The transitional government, which was to be transitional and not enact new laws, has recently announced law 153, the infamous law that stipulates what could be acceptable public activity. This law is replacing Gaddafi's censorship with another blatant one. The transitional council didn't understand that a people that has recently won its freedom, would not accept it. Can't they see that a new Libyan people is born in us?"

Khaled proposes to show us the region east of Benghazi called Jabal al-Akhdar and meet a couple of the artists living there. We set off at 8:00am in his brother's car in towards

May 25

Shahat where we meet with Salem al Okely, a poet and writer from Derna. Salem walks us through the grassy hillsides covered with Roman ruins on the location of the old city of Cyrene, and points to the headless statues adorning the sacred walkway of the ancient site. "This is how Gaddafi wanted us to be, bodies without heads".

Salem represents a class of artists that retreated to the rural parts of the country to avoid having to deal with the regime's cronies in the large cities. That doesn't mean Salem was idle in any way. He founded the Cultural Association of Derna with a group of similarly minded poets and writers and based it in an old Byzantine church. "You will be surprised how confrontational we were. As Saif Gaddafi started to talk about development of civic society and opening the country, we became more vocal. We were very resourceful and had our own ways to mock the regime and its cronies. When we presented to the censorship office our plans to host a festival of Shakespeare's plays which had lots of kings' names on its program list, they objected to the use of King as a non-revolutionary word that lies outside of accepted vocabulary. We proposed to replace the titles of the plays with Leaders of Revolutionary Councils and they changed their minds."

Salem talked to us about his association and the work of his colleagues and invited us to meet with his colleagues on our next visit to the country.



We meet in the lobby of the Tibesti with Jalal el-Kawafi, one of the first activists to be arrested in February 2011 for his open criticism of the regime on Facebook. Jalal is writing

May 26

a book to document his experience in prison and during the uprising. "I want to ensure that this history will never be forgotten. I am talking to many potential publishers and am interested in receiving funding from an independent institution." We explain to Jalal about the scope of our institution and conditions for applying to a grant, and he promises to study the available information on our website and get in touch should he have questions.

Next, we sit down for a long talk with Walid el-Abed. Walid has participated to our discussion in Dar al Kutub. He has already started to prepare an application for AFAC with a group of his colleagues from the Chams Association. Chams has been created in 2006 in Tunis and was active in Libya, Egypt as well as Tunisia on theatrical productions. "We are planning to grow substantially after the revolution and attract many more members. But we need to put some order in our organization and approach things more systematically before." Chams has now both a legal advisor and a financial officer and is in the process of preparing its by-laws and formulating a long-term schedule of activities.

"We need to figure out how to deal with the new government. Public theater groups, funded by the government, were operating at al-Watani theater, a private space that had been appropriated by the government but now will be reclaimed by its owners. Private institutions are operating from the Masrah al-Chaabi which is being renovated by public money. We need to sort out this mess. When we were asked to give our vision for theater development in the country, we formulated a strategy and gave it to them. We haven't heard back from them yet. But I believe things will get clearer with time and there is a plan for a roundtable discussion with all stakeholders towards the end of next month".

"We need to forget the past and start working now. We do not need heroes, and indulge longer in the achievement of the revolution. Our priority is to plan the road ahead, hand in hand with the government. They need us for content, and we need them for a systematic long-term support to arts and culture in the country, maybe in form of semi-private funds such as AFAC. We desperately need new spaces to practice and perform. There is a lot to do".

With these last forward-looking statements in our head, we pack our things and head out to the airport to catch the Royal Jordanian flight back to Amman then Beirut.



The short one-week to Libya has been very informative and has given us a good sense of the energy, optimism and sense of renewal expressed by most of the people we have met.

Final notes

One artist puts it in a very expressive way: "It is as if we are rediscovering our own body parts and limbs after years of paralysis, feeling out how they function and figuring out the limits of their movements". The optimism displayed by artists is contagious.

It was an incredible experience to see how the country is functioning smoothly without a central government authority, especially after these long years of autocratic and arbitrary rule. Nothing seems to be short of supply or missing, and artists seem to be in the process of actively working and creating.

There seems to be an incredible opportunity in this transition period to move forward positively from a blank slate in many of the public as well private institutions and entities. What decisions get taken, what directions will be followed will be determinant for the future. The country is literally standing at an important crossroad.

Libyans seem to be very cautious when it comes to foreign funding and are weary of any agenda that comes with outside money, at a time when there is much interest from abroad with the developing cultural scene in the country.

The main challenges are not about money, it is more about the difficulties of inventing and shaping the new structures of the future. The determinant factors will be of human capacity; investing into education; good leadership; wise management of growth opportunities and foreign investment; balanced focus between infrastructure development and soft industries such as culture.

The business community and Libyan diaspora will play a key role in the re-launch of civic society in general and cultural development specifically. They should help the new public institutions as advisors on best practices and strategic partners in implementation of the basic structures the country has missed for the last forty years.

With this first trip, AFAC hopes to have spread the word about its programs within the community of cultural practitioners in the country. With many more applications coming from Libya, we hope that grants to worthy projects from all parts of the country will contribute in a modest way to the rebirth of cultural life in the country. AFAC will explore in a second stage further potential engagement with its partners and interlocutors on the ground.

As several graffiti loudly claim: "We are free at last". With freedom comes now the responsibility of leadership and action.

