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# Folklore in the Modern World

*Editor*

RICHARD M. DORSON

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# *An Oil Boom, Women, and Changing Traditions: A Study of Libyan Women in Benghazi*

MONA FIKRY

After World War II, Benghazi was a city in ruins, its destruction comparable only to that of Berlin (Bulugma 1968:61). In 1942, when the Italian occupation ended, this flat, coastal area incurred 1,680 air raids, making war correspondents report with horror and sympathy on the worst-hit city of North Africa:

*Though independence* [December 24, 1951] fulfilled long and long-fought-for aspirations, reconstruction and development required basic resources which unfortunately did not exist. It is true that Benghazi became the first national capital within ten years of the war's end, but it is equally true that the face of the city remained as ruined as it was when the last German vehicle drove off for the last time. Had it not been for the discovery of oil fields in the Syrtic area almost a decade after independence the present condition of Benghazi would no doubt have been little different. Benghazi's location gave it a considerable share in the oil-companies' expenditure during the early years of exploration (Bulugma 1968:13).

Upon this background of desolation, a process of frenetic construction, expansion, urbanism, and rural migration was initiated in the 1960's and is still going on today, bringing about an unsettling swiftness of change over Libya and its population. To what extent, one may ask, have these changes undermined the basis of traditional living?

## THE ERRATIC MODERNIZATION OF LIBYA

While the unsettling and disturbing consequences of wars and colonialism indelibly marked Libyan society, these were, nevertheless, known and familiar forces to which expected reactions, actions, and strategies could be applied. But the discovery of oil in 1958 and the resulting economic

boom brought about an unfamiliar force — modernization. Its power is difficult to perceive and assess; its effects are more elusive to identify, to repress, and restrain; and yet some of its influences have been willingly and consciously adopted.

In the words of Hermann Hesse, as quoted by Halpern (1963), “Now there are times when a whole generation is caught . . . between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence” (1963:30). It would not be an exaggeration to say that this disequilibrium is one of the basic social problems of our times. Its impact on underdeveloped societies, where the tensions between far more distinct dual cultures create imbalance, dissent, and, often, total lack of comprehension, is felt and observed with greater anguish. This situation is particularly striking in Libya, for unlike most colonized countries which acquire a certain amount of modernization through colonial commerce, bureaucracy, and education in Libya under the Italians, Libyans were excluded almost totally from contact with and knowledge of processes that would have helped them acquire modern concepts and skills.<sup>1</sup> During exile to various Arab countries, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, Libyans tasted the bitterness and comfort of modernization, but even this privilege was essentially limited to men. Traditional behavior, education, and attire were largely continued in exile for the women.

In short, Libya did not benefit from the general modernization that is a particular consequence of colonialism. Consequently, not infrequently one hears Libyans, and particularly educated women, speak with envy of the type of colonialism their Algerian counterparts experienced. “At least, that was colonialism that brought with it culture,” they say, paying no regard to the deep sense of rootlessness, the loss of identity, and the psychological turmoil that this “culture” brought to the Algerians. No matter. Some Libyans, particularly those from Benghazi, which has always been far more isolated than Tripoli, think they would have preferred the “chance” the Algerians had of making contact with the outside world to their own situation, in which they were prevented from obtaining any sort of an education and from acquiring any modern skills. The only skills imposed upon Libyans throughout colonization involved the menial labor Libyans have traditionally considered, and still consider, undignified, an attitude that has hindered their economic development. The present labor force in Libya is almost entirely constituted of Egyptian and

<sup>1</sup> Following the Italian occupation, which lasted from 1911 to 1942, the Libyans still had no possibility of acquiring any sort of modern skills, for between 1942 and 1945, Libya was under military occupation of the Allied Forces under British command; and between 1945 and 1951, it was administered by the United Nations with Adrian Pelt as the UN Commissioner. In 1951, the year of independence, the ravages of war were still apparent everywhere, and Libya was counted among the poorer nations of the world.



Tunisian skilled and manual laborers (*Economic Development of Libya* 1960:9–10).

While modernization in Europe was a consequence of industrialization, in a country such as Libya it was a consequence of commerce with the West; consumption, not production, is the essential characteristic of a society that takes no part in, and has no knowledge of, the production of its consumer goods. In a society that lacks both a sufficient manual labor force and basic technological skills, the cost of repairing machinery is often exorbitant. Consumption consequently reaches levels of irrationality when money is readily available. Two examples from Libyan experience can illustrate this point. The owner of an apartment house may simply replace defective water heaters in apartments with plumbing problems rather than checking the pipes and elements for defects in the heaters. The next example may appear anecdotal but it is in fact true. A man purchased a refrigerator that he soon discovered did not function. He purchased another, then another, neither of which worked. So he put the machines aside without returning them. A neighbor who heard of the man's plight went to investigate and discovered that the electric wall plugs were defective, not the refrigerators. These examples show that modernization unaccompanied by an understanding of technological skills imposes tragic limitations on countries that have become very wealthy while remaining strongly traditional. The acquisition of useless objects — such as wigs and furs in hot, dusty regions — becomes the sign of ultimate modernity.

This veneer of modernization may be a source of frustration, “a knowledge of attempting to be modern but failing at it” (Apter 1965:47). This awareness is acquired by those who are, to use Daniel Lerner's apt categorizations (1958), the “transitionals,” those urbanized individuals whose inner life may still be close to the “traditionals” (1958:71–75). The “moderns,” those at the opposite social pole may appreciate traditional living, but are no longer able to identify with it. Consequently, they may reach an even more complex level of frustration, which is expressed in the form of alienation in many aspects of their behavior. This frustration and alienation are more characteristic of the educated and modernized Libyan woman than of the educated man. In no way do these “moderns” regret their level of modernism, but they deeply resent both the traditional society that restrains and criticizes their modernism and simultaneously, their inevitable loss of integration with it. This ambivalence is compounded when, in the face of the growing desire for modernity the traditional society intensifies its assertion of traditional and religious values.

With this background, the painful and erratic process of women's modernization in Libya can be comprehended. Several important elements have fostered a collision between the modern and traditional

values of the Libyan women. First, the movement from rural (if not essentially nomadic) to urban settings is often unsettling. For a man this change of environment is accompanied by the acquisition of a new and/or different job. For a woman, on the other hand, it usually means the loss of a job (for in her original setting, she participated in agricultural or handicraft work), or the acquisition of a menial job (such as a hospital lavatory cleaner), which she would never have conceived of doing in her rural setting. Second, in many underdeveloped countries, literacy is and has been the first step toward modernization, even in rural areas. In Libya, this has not been the situation. Although the emphasis of modernization will shift as an increasing number of rural and urban schools are opened for girls, the first most significant step toward modernization occurred in the material aspect: the accumulation of money, cars, houses, land, furs, wigs, and so on. Third, the increased awareness of a world outside that of the extended family has been made possible for Libyan women through contact with the mass media, especially television. In a predominantly illiterate society, seeing is far more impressive than either listening or reading. Unfortunately, television in Libya offers little more than packaged entertainment, greatly diluting the traditional imagination that folklore nourished through the ages. Instead of creating a new sort of imaginativeness, it has often led to an insidious boredom of which both women and youth complain. In the 1950's, Lerner stated a difficulty common in the Middle East that is the very crux of this dangerous consequence of change: boredom. "Needed there," he wrote, "is a massive growth of imaginativeness about alternatives to their present lifeways and a simultaneous growth of institutional means for handling these alternative lifeways" (Lerner 1958:411). This need is left grossly unsatisfied in Libya, as in many Arab countries, because of the very nature of that erratic level of modernization. In Libya, this particularly affects women's growing need to fill their leisure time; for whereas boys and men have the freedom to loiter in the streets after work or during periods of unemployment, or to spend their time in various meeting places, at the movies, soccer games, or the beach, or aimlessly riding in fast cars around town, women are restricted to the *hosh* [home] and their social and intellectual activities are greatly limited. In Libya, two absolutely distinct worlds exist, one of men and another of women, one lived "outside" and the other lived "inside" (Souriau 1969: *passim*).

## WOMEN AND CULTURAL OPPRESSION

Even inside the *hosh*, the personalities of women are in constant change. A very small percentage of them fit Lerner's category of the "moderns," that is, educated or even partially educated urban women who can form

opinions on general topics and who are no longer self-consciously concerned with being "modern." Most women fit the "transitionals" category. Either they were born in the city and reared in a predominantly traditional setting, or they moved from the village or the desert to the city, greatly desiring to change. One could even make several subdivisions according to the level of education, empathy, and years of urban living of these "transitionals." The last group "traditionals" are greatly diminishing in number, even in the rural areas, for those who fear change and modernization are forcibly abandoning traditional life (Hilal 1967:26–27). In fact, the majority of Libyan men and women could be called "transitionals." Their psychological search is a personal tug-of-war between modern and traditional values.

This ambivalence, so common among modern Libyan women, derives from different psychological and social reasons than those educed by Lerner, who saw ambivalence as a matter of inner uncertainty. To the women of present-day Libya, ambivalence is a consequence of society's religious, if not political, values. The importance of religious belief is drummed into the people through radio and television, newspapers, and magazines. To be born a Muslim and then to doubt one's religion is a very serious matter indeed, as it is in any traditionally religious culture. Thus, any opinion contrary to traditional Islamic concepts cannot be openly voiced. Opposition to polygamy, for example is not tolerated. In contrast to Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese women, who officially condemned polygamy in 1972 at the Congress of Arab Women held in Cairo, the educated, modern Libyan women attending the Congress condemned only its abuses. In fact, if the Libyan women had supported a "modernistic argument" against polygamy to its logical end, they would have incurred the double criticism of Libyan political and religious forces, if not that of other Libyan "traditional" or "transitional" women.

The personal drama of change in most underdeveloped countries lies in a consistent imbalance between change in individuals and in their environment, along with an even greater difference in the degree of change between men and women. The physical and psychic mobility of the woman in Libya is determined largely by the male's willingness to view her in a role other than that given her by tradition. Accordingly, the potential progressiveness of Libyan women is greatly curbed, for the nation "provides the channels through which individuals transform their own lives" (Lerner 1958:83).

The psychological spontaneity in the life of women is also greatly suppressed. This spontaneity was taken care of in the traditional setting by the organized repetition of routine, of traditional occasions and festivities accompanied by known and expected participation and performance. Yet many of the educated women, and even those in the process

of being educated, feel consciously oppressed. A very strong feeling of empathy, of understanding of one another's problems, characterizes this set of women: "I am really culturally oppressed!" This startling confession by a young, educated woman brought to light the entire problem of alienation, happiness, and traditionality. One first ponders what culture she is referring to. European? Arab? Libyan? Or is it the mixed life she is living, which as yet has no place in the society?

To what extent can these women participate in the traditional life of their culture? They have to participate in various traditional occasions or else be ostracized from their social and family milieu. For the modern, and maybe also for the transitional woman in the last stage, traditional participation is lived piecemeal. She goes to weddings and claps along with the others — but she remains an observer. She goes to funerals and wails and scratches her face like the others — but maybe with less intensity.<sup>2</sup> She rejects what she is not forced to participate in, such as the wearing of a talisman for protection against the evil eye. She is religious to the extent that all those around her are religious, but she can be discriminating in her religiousness by condemning certain abusive social practices tolerated by the religion. She is a secular-religious individual, living her religion in a nonchalant but dutiful fashion, with less inner intensity than outer obedience.

This ambivalent behavior is a determining factor in the level of happiness achieved in the life of the women. Those in the two extreme modes, the traditional and the modern, are the unhappiest. On the one hand, their mobility and self-assertion have been limited; on the other, the continuation of traditions has been threatened. It is also true among the modern or educated Libyan women that, with the disruption of the traditional values in their own daily life, their appreciation of formal education and of "mental" modernization grows. But they are faced with frustrating social and traditional elements that make them even more aware of their inner instability and lack of integration in the society at large. Such awareness made a young educated woman at a wedding observe how much happier the traditional girls (including the "transitionals") were and how much more actively they participated than the few modern girls present. The latter were quiet and expressed little enjoyment.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most persistent of traditional customs that women help perpetuate in spite of education, purer Islamization, and a lessening of family cohesion is the funerary custom in which women are socially obliged to mourn their dead by weeping, scratching their faces, and pouring ashes on their heads. In fact, even educated girls and women who may not show sufficient earnestness in these manifestations of mourning will be publicly disgraced. The only women exempt from this practice are those who are *hajjas*, that is, those who went to Mecca on a pilgrimage, for this is a custom abhorred in Islam. In fact, a law specifically forbids "the repulsive habits in funerals" (Law 31, 1951, in *Official Journal*, April 4, 1952) and is supported by the prophetic *hadith*, which says: "And they are not one of us who slap their face and tear their clothes."

The concept that happiness is achieved through literacy is expressed in the desire to acquire the minimum sense of independence necessary to city living — the ability to read street signs, dial the telephone, ride the bus without having to ask for assistance. It is also expressed in the desire to fill one's time with "something useful" — such as reading magazines, books, newspapers, and subtitles in foreign movies on television, for example. Moreover, literacy would allow the illiterate woman better to educate her children, who now go to school and ask her questions she cannot answer. Most of all, it would enable her to be independent from her mother-in-law (a significant point to which we will later return) or obtain jobs other than the menial positions open to her now.

All these aspirations toward greater personal happiness and freedom are in no way evaluated by the women as aspects of alienation but, rather, as a means of better integration into the urban society as a whole. The desire to be of use to the country is often expressed; it indicates the extent to which television and radio broadcasts link literacy to greater national usefulness and illiteracy to doom and darkness.

Women realistically evaluate the difference between the happiness generated by life in town and by life in the original rural or Bedouin setting as the difference between the material and the emotional satisfactions that each environment respectively provides. The Bedouin-become-urban-woman realizes that she was happier in her tent surrounded by her family. The unity of the family was far stronger then, if only because crowded living quarters demanded it. Such unity is difficult to find in the city. But she is content with what city living offers her — a house of her own, television, a school for her children, work. In the city, her material needs are satisfied, but her emotional life remains linked with past happiness.

## FOLKLORE AND THE MASS MEDIA

Folklore has lost much in its significance since the war years and military campaigns (Rossi 1965:88). In the city of Benghazi, the sudden rural movement to the urban center and the overwhelming use of television, radio, and cassette recorders have served to decrease greatly the folkloric activities in the lives of women and society as a whole.

Traditional handicraft skills have vanished except for the weaving of the traditional *rida*, perhaps because "Under the Italian occupation, domestic production was unable to compete with cheap machine-made goods" (*Economic Development of Libya* 1960:199). Even though the government has encouraged the formation of folk dance and folk music groups and the University of Libya has opened a center that collects folk poetry, the interest expressed in such activities, especially by the youth,



is very limited. Folk poetry, which is recited only by men and traditionally deals essentially with historic epics, today includes current topics such as the ills of traffic, the rudeness of drivers, praise for the 1969 revolution, and, more recently, praise for the Cultural Revolution of Libya of 1973. The radio regularly broadcasts folk poetry and music, as does the television, which also transmits folk dance performances. Attempts to “modernize” the choreography of the dances make the traditional viewer feel that he or she is observing a foreign performance of Libyan dancing. Here young men and women dance together, sometimes holding hands or even each other’s waists. Such conscious attempts at change are interesting expressions of the desire to mold the traditional into modern shapes, but the artistic ideas have not as yet matured enough to be satisfactory to either traditional or modern viewers.

Tale-telling, called *khurafat*<sup>3</sup> in Libya, used to be an essential part of family entertainment in towns, villages, and tents, but in the city it has now all but disappeared to be replaced by television. The time that young children spent listening to tales is now spent studying, reading magazines, or watching television. Rare are the occasions when tales are told and few are the young urban women who know any tales to tell. Even the special night devoted to tale-telling during the wedding celebrations is now firmly linked with the past.

Tales used to help fill the leisure time of the women, as did songs, poetry, dancing, and the rhymes that served as lullabies or as childrens’ games. Women fifty years old and over remember that, in their youth, they would get together with friends and play traditional instruments and sing and dance for the sole purpose of enjoyment. Such activities are truly nonexistent in the cities and have been largely replaced by television. For women, however, even television does not completely eliminate the boredom that results from their indoor seclusion and diminished contact with husbands and relatives. Television programs in Libya are essentially Egyptian, Lebanese, and American, with the latter having Arabic subtitles; rarely can the majority of the women (that is, the traditional and transitional) identify with the problems and programs aimed at the viewers. Thus, the television is used for entertainment, not educational purposes, even though literacy and counting lessons are presented regularly as are health and cleanliness campaigns. Today, television is increasingly used by the government to project its ideas through specific programs. Also, the speeches of the president of the Revolutionary Command Council are broadcast in their entirety.

<sup>3</sup> In Libya, tales are called *khurafat*, which literally means “superstitious sayings,” or “the meaningless,” “the imaginative.” It is said that the word *khurafa* originated in the name of a man who claimed he had been captured by a *djinn*, thus explaining the reason for his long disappearance. He used to tell stories about that *djinn* to the people who had neither heard of such things nor could believe them. Such tales were therefore called *khurafat* or *Khurafa* (Al-Kasshat 1968:19).

Undeniably, of course, television has influenced and does still greatly influence women viewers, as well as children. It has given them a wide vision of the world and has exposed them to attitudes beyond the limited traditional family allegiances. It has created new needs, new desires, new aesthetics, and new examples to imitate, even though these have not always been beneficial to them or to the society. A few years ago, an Egyptian series called *The Black Cat* (an imitation of American action movies) was very popular among the youth. It dealt with violence, kidnapping, stealing, and so on. Soon a wave of terrorism appeared in Benghazi: schools were burned down, and notes were left behind signed "The Black Cat"; kidnapping threats signed by "The Black Cat" were sent. The program was discontinued, but it is an indication of how easily the youth may be led toward violence as a means of filling their empty and undirected time.

The traditional aesthetics and signs of beauty have also changed, and television viewing is an important factor in this change. The traditional *washam* or "tattoo" made on the bride before her wedding was considered an embellishment. Each region and town had its particular symbol; Benghazi's was a small palm tree placed on one's chin. This embellishment is now on the wane in the rural areas and has disappeared from the city traditions.

The void created in the lives of the urban Libyan women by the rapidity with which modern mass media entered their lives and deracinated the old traditional customs has not yet been filled. If it has instilled a certain amount of empathy among women, it has also created a certain amount of social and psychological instability. Yet, one of the most important aspects of mass media, and particularly of television in Libya, regardless of its level of excellence, is that to most traditional and transitional women, it is at least a window to the outside world.

## RESTRICTIVE LAWS AND MORES

In Libya, it is the husband who shops for food. Yet, he does so not to be helpful to his wife, rather, to prevent her from having unnecessary contact with strangers. Many traditional and religious customs, in particular those pertaining to women, are tenaciously adhered to in spite of, and maybe because of, the surge of modernization and swiftness of urbanization, the apparent breakup of the family system, and the supremacy of money. All these changes erode the basic values of the society. This tenacity is clearly expressed in the laws that do not yet reflect the greater awareness and knowledge that women are acquiring through education, television, and physical mobility. Quite to the contrary, the laws seem to intensify the conservative and religious currents prevalent in Libya.

“Neither laws nor religions are stronger than traditions” is what a young Libyan woman graduate in law once said, implying that social reality is often different from and contrary to legal codifications. In Libya, however, the laws do not fully correct the abuse of women inherent in Islamic law, on which the status of women is based. With the exception of the matter of inheritance — it is illegal to rob a woman of her traditional rights of inheritance (she gets half of what her brother gets) — most other laws dealing with marriage, polygamy, divorce, and repudiation have not embodied a willingness to give the basic rights of self-possession to women.

The continuity of some restrictive traditions is not only the male’s doing. Women themselves cannot eradicate deeply rooted traditions in the space of ten or twenty years. The few university graduates — male and female — are not enough to overhaul the traditional concepts severely restricting the urban and modern woman. A case in point is voluntarism, which is, in every way, contrary to traditional behavior, for to do any type of voluntary work outside the family involves a certain amount of contact with strangers, both male and female, and demands a freedom of movement that women are neither free nor able to acquire. Not surprisingly, the New Woman’s Association of Benghazi is therefore almost at a standstill. With ninety members enrolled in 1973, only six or seven attended meetings, and eleven proposed projects have been left on paper.

The Libyan woman presents a particularly complex and difficult picture. She is living in two acculturated, but starkly different, cultures; her life is divided between indoor and outdoor behavior. Having little contact with the outside world, except through television, she truly has no model as a symbol of progress. Alienation of the woman is seen on all levels of society. The modern woman rejects her traditional counterpart; the traditional is tenaciously holding on to already diluted traditions; the transitional woman is jolted more and more by the inevitable and inescapable change in the traditional value system.

In the city, the lower-class woman, the one closest to traditional living, has had to shed many of the restrictive traditions by the mere fact of having to leave the house to work among strangers. Outside, even while covered up and observing the world with one eye, she is faced with constant novelties. Once indoors, she continues to live her secluded life. But now she is beginning to overcome a growing feeling of restlessness and solitude by learning how to read and write — to integrate herself and her family in the urban world more successfully.

The educated woman’s problem of alienation involves coping with social and religious pressure against identification with the norms and values of the outside world. This conflict makes her feel torn between outdoor contacts and indoor relationships. The tensions from such con-



trasting lives are not yet resolved, but they find an outlet in a static self-contentment with the status quo and the acceptance of and, more especially, the resignation to a system based on conservative religious values, traditional persistence, and male dominance.

Urbanization, literacy, and mobility have brought about a certain measure of modernization that has directly affected women. It has changed, to a certain degree, their way of life and their role in the changing social system. It has established, in all levels of relationships, an element essential to change — tension — that has helped her to acquire a new consciousness, a new empathy. It has also increased women's self-perception, through physical mobility, literacy, and varied contacts with the mass media.

Television has played an essential part in the life of the Libyan women, especially in the past ten years, for women spend almost all their time indoors at home and center their lives, more than men, on television. Television has widened the woman's perspective and awareness, thereby creating a complex set of feelings: inner instability, a sense of enjoyment, unconscious empathy, and previously unknown modern needs. Television has also effectively diminished the use and significance, on traditional occasions, of folk music, dance, poetry and tale-telling.

There exists and has always existed in the life of the urban Libyan woman a certain amount of contact and interaction, of acceptance and rejection, all of which are essential motor elements to the process of change and acculturation in the society as a whole. Yet, all these new experiences that she has acquired and is acquiring still, all these new attitudes that she is assuming are, in effect, lived behind closed doors.

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