



## FORGING A LIBYAN IDENTITY: THE EVOLUTION AND STRUGGLES OF A DIVERSE NATION

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines the origins and evolution of Libyan cultural identity, shaped by diverse historical forces and ongoing internal divisions. Libya's location at the crossroads of the Mediterranean exposed it to successive colonisations by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs over centuries, creating a layered identity. Key aspects include the importance of Islam and Arab culture and regional, tribal, and ethnic diversity. Expression of Libyan identity can be seen in areas like cuisine, music, and traditional arts. However, forging a unified national identity continues to be hindered by tribal/regional affiliations, the legacy of oppression under Gaddafi and instability since the 2011 revolution. The article analyses how Libya's richly diverse heritage and cleavages pose challenges in establishing social cohesion and collective identity.

**Keywords:** Libya, Libyan identity, Arab culture, Berber culture, tribal identity, regional identity, colonialism, Ottoman Empire, Italian colonisation, Muammar Gaddafi, Libyan revolution, civil war, national identity, unity

### **1. Introduction**

Libya is strategically located along North Africa's Mediterranean coast, just miles from Europe's southern border. The country has a population of around 6.8 million, many clustered along the coastline in cities like Tripoli and Benghazi. Arabic and Berber descent dominate Libya's ethnic makeup. The Berbers, also called Amazigh, are indigenous peoples of North Africa predating the Arab conquests (Quinn, 2021). Most Libyans today identify as Arab, though regional and tribal affiliations also run deep. Islam is a unifying force, with over 97% of Libyans identifying as Sunni Muslims. However, the interpretation of Islam also varies by region and tribe (Vandewalle, 2006). This diversity of identities already hints at the complexity of defining a singular Libyan culture.

The Complexity of Libyan Identity Libya has a long and rich history that has shaped its national identity. However, various historical forces have also created

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divisions among Libyans that continue to challenge unity. Libya's strategic location on the Mediterranean coast exposed it to many outside influences that have left an indelible mark on the culture. However, the diversity of those influences, combined with strong tribal and regional identities, makes defining a singular "Libyan identity" difficult. This article will provide an overview of Libyan identity's critical aspects and evolution from its ancient roots to the present day. It will also examine the factors that have long hindered - and still threaten - the emergence of a cohesive national identity (Pargeter, 2012).

## **2. Historical Influences on Libyan Identity**

### **2.1 Ancient Civilisations like the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs**

Libya's strategic location at the intersection of Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East subjected it to various cultural influences throughout its history (Vandewalle, 2006). The Phoenicians, expert maritime traders from present-day Lebanon, established coastal colonies and trade routes along the Libyan shore as early as the 8th century BCE. They introduced new agricultural techniques, pagan gods, and the Phoenician alphabet, remnants of which can be seen in modern Berber scripts (Quinn, 2021).

Greeks followed, founding the city of Cyrene on the eastern Libyan coast in 630 BCE. Cyrene flourished for centuries as a significant Greek colonial centre famed for its intellectuals, poets, and philosophers (Synnes, 2015). Alexander the Great conquered eastern Libya in 331 BCE, fostering the Hellenization of the region (Quinn, 2021). The Greek language, philosophy, architecture, and urban planning shaped coastal Libyan cities for centuries.

After the fall of Greece, Libya became part of the Roman Empire for around 400 years, beginning in the 2nd century BCE. The Romans unified the coastal regions of modern Libya into a single province they called Tripolitania. Roman engineering transformed cities with temples, theatres, markets, and baths, merging Mediterranean and North African designs (Leone, 2007). Latin became the administrative language. While Christianity emerged, many Libyans clung to indigenous polytheistic faiths (Mattingly, 2003).

The 7th-century Arab conquests brought Islam to Libya, gradually displacing Christianity and pagan beliefs. The Arabs introduced the religion, language, and cultural elements that form the core of Libyan identity today (Pargeter, 2012). Arab rule fostered the spread of Islam along with associated architecture, education, cuisine, and social customs. This Arabization defined Libya's identification with the broader Arab world (Vandewalle, 2006).

### **2.2 Ottoman Rule from 1551-1911**

Libya became part of the vast Ottoman Empire starting in 1551 when the city of Tripoli came under direct Ottoman control. Over the next few centuries, the Ottomans expanded their authority along the Mediterranean coast and into the interior (Panzac, 2005).

However, Ottoman rule was primarily confined to the cities and coastal regions. Inland areas and Saharan oases remained under local tribal leadership (Vandewalle, 2006).

The Ottoman era impacted Libyan society and culture (Pargeter, 2012). The Turkish language entered the local lexicon as bureaucrats and soldiers garrisoned in the cities intermingled with locals (Panzac, 2005). Ottoman architecture transformed city skylines with mosques, schools, baths, and other monumental projects fusing Mediterranean, North African, and Islamic styles (Ayalon, 1995). Trade expanded across Ottoman territories, linking Libya to a broader commercial network.

Significantly, Ottoman rule also reinforced the importance of Islam and Sunni Muslim identity in Libya (Vandewalle, 2006). Under Ottoman patronage, Islamic institutions like madrassas flourished, and the (class of religious scholars) grew in influence (Pargeter, 2012). While various Sufi orders and local Islamic practices persisted, adherence to Sunni orthodoxy was encouraged. This fostered Libya's enduring Arab and Muslim identity.

At the same time, the Ottoman system empowered local chiefs and provincial notables, allowing native traditions to endure. The Senussi Sufi order strengthened during this era, spreading Islamic education and unity (Pargeter, 2012). While Ottoman cultural influence was profound in urban areas, rural tribal life continued relatively untouched. The Ottomans never sought to comprehensively assimilate Libya, governing through a decentralised model that inadvertently encouraged regionalism (Ayalon, 1995).

### **2.3 Italian Colonisation from 1911-1943**

Italy invaded Ottoman Libya in 1911, wresting control from the Ottoman Empire (Vandewalle, 2006). The Italians confronted fierce resistance from Libyan tribes and united for the first time to repel a common foreign occupier (Ahmida, 2005). Italy responded with overwhelming military force, using aerial bombing, concentration camps, and executions to suppress the uprising (Ahmida, 2005).

Nearly a third of Libya's population perished during the initial decade of Italian occupation (Ahmida, 2005). However, the shared suffering and sacrifice of the resistance movement cultivated a more vital national spirit that endured after independence (Vandewalle, 2012). It marked the first time Libyans across regions united in a common cause (Ahmida, 2005).

The decades of Italian colonial rule also left an indelible cultural imprint (Vandewalle, 2006). Italian administrators aimed to remake Libya as an extension of Italy. They constructed modern towns and cities in Italian architectural styles (McLaren, 2006). Italian became common among the educated urban class (Ahmida, 2005). Italian food, especially pasta, tomato sauces, and wine, grew popular in Libyan cuisine (Vandewalle, 2006).

While oppressive, Italian policies were less overtly destructive of local culture than other European colonial regimes in Africa (Ahmida, 2005). Some colonial administrators even studied and celebrated Libyan folk culture (McLaren, 2006). This Italian cultural infusion was primarily confined to cities and the Mediterranean coast, where settlers

concentrated, leaving the interior less affected (Vandewalle, 2006). The brutal realities of Italian occupation fed lasting resentment among Libyans (Ahmida, 2005). However, the extensive cultural influence remains woven into modern Libyan identity, demonstrating the complex colonial legacy (Vandewalle, 2006).

#### **2.4 Independence and Kingdom under King Idris**

Libya gained independence in 1951 under the leadership of King Idris al-Senussi, who became the country's first and only monarch. Idris traced his lineage to the Senussi Muslim order and had spearheaded Libyan resistance to the Italians (Ahmida, 2005). This religious legitimacy and anti-colonial credentials lent Idris credibility as a national unifying figure (Pargeter, 2012).

As king, Idris forged a federal constitutional monarchy and the trappings of a modern state. Libya joined the United Nations and the Arab League, aligning itself with the region and the broader international community. The discovery of oil in 1959 provided wealth that improved living standards (Vandewalle, 2006).

However, regional and tribal rivalries continued to fester under Idris. He relied heavily on loyalist support from the eastern Cyrenaica region, sowing resentment in the west. Rapid modernisation and urbanisation disrupted traditional social structures (St John, 2008). Idris prohibited political parties, limiting dissent. While modest steps toward nation-building occurred, national identity remained secondary to local and tribal loyalties under Idris's rule (Vandewalle, 2006).

The king tried to valorise Libyan heritage. The national museum opened in Tripoli to conserve antiquities and cultural artefacts. Archaeological studies expanded across Roman sites. However, King Idris's reign was ultimately too brief and restrained to overcome the solid centrifugal forces hindering national unity. His overthrow in 1969 gave way to ruler Muammar Gaddafi (Pargeter, 2012).

#### **2.5 Qaddafi's Rule from 1969-2011**

In 1969, a young army officer named Muammar Gaddafi seized power from King Idris in a bloodless coup (Pargeter, 2012). Gaddafi soon consolidated total dictatorial control over Libya as chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (St John, 2008). He abolished the monarchy and the entire previous governmental structure, turning Libya into a police state dominated by his Revolutionary Committees (Vandewalle, 2012).

Gaddafi sought to radically transform Libyan society according to his governing philosophy in his Green Book (Pargeter, 2012). He banned opposition groups and political parties, repressing dissent through intimidation, imprisonment, and execution (St John, 2008). Gaddafi deliberately stoked divisions between tribes and regions to maintain power through divide-and-rule tactics (Vandewalle, 2012).

Culturally, Gaddafi imposed his ideologies and mythos on the country. Gaddafi rebranded Libya as the "Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya." Under Gaddafi, national identity was whatever the regime dictated. He suppressed regional identities, Islamic activism, and other political or cultural affiliations (Pargeter, 2012). Libyan identity was hollowed out for over four decades and warped to serve one man's vision.

This suffocating authoritarian control would fuel the popular revolt against his rule in 2011 (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

## **2.6 Arab Spring and the Current Conflict**

The 2011 Arab Spring protests finally reached Libya in February 2011 after decades of repression under Gaddafi's rule. Libyans launched a popular uprising in Benghazi to end Gaddafi's dictatorship. In response, the regime cracked down violently on dissent, prompting international intervention (St John, 2014). NATO launched a bombing campaign against Gaddafi's forces per UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians. Rebel groups backed by NATO airpower toppled the regime, capturing Tripoli in August 2011 and killing Gaddafi in October (Pargeter, 2012).

However, Libya sank into turmoil in the aftermath (Pack & Barfi, 2016). Rival militias fought for power and control over oil facilities. Factions split between governments in Tripoli and the east. Violence escalated into a civil war (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

This chaos has eroded Libyan identity and unity. The country has become divided along political, regional, tribal, and ethnic lines. Outside powers have funnelled weapons to opposing sides, exacerbating conflict (Gaub, 2014). Extremist groups like ISIS have exploited the instability. Ongoing strife has gutted Libya's oil-dependent economy. Establishing security, governance, and reconciliation remains critical before rebuilding a shared Libyan identity can begin (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

## **3. Critical Aspects of Libyan Identity**

Islam and Arab culture are the foundational pillars of Libyan identity for most citizens. Nearly all Libyans are Sunni Muslims, and Islamic values and practices infuse daily life from social customs to legal codes (Vandewalle, 2012). Most Libyans ethnically identify as Arab, linked by shared language, heritage, and membership in the broader Arab world (Pargeter, 2012). Classical Arabic binds the country linguistically as the official national language. Traditional Arab customs around hospitality, family, gender roles, and respect for elders remain integral to society (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

However, the interpretation of Islam and Arab identity varies locally, with differences between Arab and Berber populations, regions, and tribes. The Senussi reformist Islamic movement grew strong in eastern Libya, distinguishing it from western urban centres. Mystic Sufi traditions persist in some communities (Vandewalle, 2006). These local variances in practising the faith resist nationwide homogenisation (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

Similarly, while most see themselves as Arab first, tribal and regional affiliations often supersede national identity (Vandewalle, 2006); Libya comprises over 140 tribes and clans, with the main tribal groups including the Warfalla, Tarhuna, Magharba, and Al-Zintan (Pargeter, 2012). Tribal lineages, social codes, and loyalty to sheikhs carry weight in social organisation, business dealings, and politics (Cole & McQuinn, 2015). Regional identities also divide Libya into three central provinces - Tripolitania in the

northwest, Cyrenaica in the east, and Fezzan in the south and southwest. Residents exhibit stronger affiliation to their city or region than the nation (Pargeter, 2012).

#### **4. Expressions of Libyan Identity**

Libyan cuisine illustrates the country's blended cultural heritage. Staples like couscous, been, and aside reflect indigenous Berber and Arab influences using local ingredients. Italian pasta, tomato sauce, and wine are beloved vestiges of colonisation (Vandewalle, 2006). Food culture varies regionally, with spicy Tripoli dishes differing from Benghazi's Greek-inspired seafood. Traditional Libyan food uses olive oil, dates, lamb, spices, and seafood adapted to local tastes (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

Music also conveys Libya's diverse roots. Malouf is an elegant Arab-Andalusian song style tracing its origins to Islamic Spain. Berber folk styles feature traditional instruments like drums, flutes, and lutes paired with call-and-response singing. These genres coexist alongside popular Arabic music and newer styles. Lyrics preserve Libya's oral traditions through poetry, storytelling, and folk tales (Vandewalle, 2006).

Traditional handicrafts maintain community identity and distinct regional aesthetics. Wool carpets feature geometric Berber motifs. Silver jewellery-making, ceramics, and leatherwork comprise living folk arts. Embroidery and traditional costumes retain tribal and village affiliations, even as modern garb prevails (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

Cultural expression allows the diversity of Libyan identity to manifest through cuisine, music, arts, and oral tradition. These practices connect Libyans to their histories and shared humanity. Nurturing arts and culture could aid unity and post-conflict healing (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

#### **5. Challenges to Unity**

##### **5.1 Divisions along Tribal and Regional Lines**

Despite shared cultural touchstones, numerous factors divide Libyans and hinder the formation of a solid national identity. Tribal and regional loyalties continue to pose one of the biggest obstacles. The multitude of tribes and clans encourages identification with local kinship groups rather than the nation (Pargeter, 2012). This tribalism also fuels political divisions (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

Regional identities also foster division between eastern, western, and southern Libya. Eastern Cyrenaica and western Tripolitania regions harbour economic and political rivalries. The Fezzan region remains somewhat isolated in the desert south. Residents prioritise their city or region over the country when self-identifying (Vandewalle, 2006).

Other divides stem from ethnic Berber-Arab tensions, religious differences between moderate and extremist Islam, and lingering resentment over old Ottoman and Italian control (Pargeter, 2012). The trauma from decades of oppression under Gaddafi likewise discourages unification. The civil war has recently partitioned the country

between Eastern and Western factions. These multifaceted rifts frustrate efforts toward solidarity and a shared Libyan identity (Vandewalle, 2006).

## **5.2 Struggle for National Identity Following Gaddafi's Rule**

The fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011 left a profound vacuum regarding Libyan national identity (Pack & Barfi, 2016). Gaddafi had ruled repressively for over 40 years, suppressing independent identities. This stunted any sense of nationhood (Pargeter, 2012). When Gaddafi fell, Libyans finally could redefine their country and culture (Pack & Barfi, 2016). However, the unifying vision has yet to emerge amidst instability and factionalism. The lack of institutions has hampered efforts to shape an inclusive identity (Cole & McQuinn, 2015). Divisions seeded by Gaddafi's divide-and-rule tactics persist. While most Libyans desire unity and shared identity, achieving this remains difficult (Pack & Barfi, 2016). A decade after the revolution, forging identity beyond Gaddafi's legacy remains fraught (Wehrey, 2014).

## **5.3 Effects of Recent Conflict and Instability in Libya**

The civil war since 2011 has exacerbated Libya's identity crisis. The ongoing violence has fragmented the country along political, regional, tribal, and ethnic lines. Rival militias and extremist groups thrive amid the instability, hindering reconciliation. Lack of security disrupts efforts to strengthen national unity and identity (Gaub, 2014).

Moreover, Libya's oil wealth and strategic location make it vulnerable to foreign intervention. Regional and world powers back factions serving their interests, flooding Libya with weapons and fuelling conflict. The climate of perpetual crisis hinders economic development and quality of life. This accelerates the erosion of a transcending Libyan identity (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

Healing these fresh divisions represents monumental challenges. Rebuilding trust, disarming militias, establishing security, and alleviating economic suffering are critical before collective efforts to forge an inclusive identity can gain traction. The more extended instability and despair prevail, the more fleeting becomes the dream of a unified Libya (Cole & McQuinn, 2015).

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, Libya has a rich but complex history that has shaped its cultural identity. Influences from ancient civilisations, colonial powers, and authoritarian rulers enriched Libyan culture and created fragmentation. Key unifying factors like Islam, Arab heritage, and some shared customs persist. However, tribal, ethnic, and regional divides hinder national unity. Furthermore, the trauma of oppression under Gaddafi, followed by the instability since 2011, has deeply threatened the forging of a new Libyan identity.

Libyan culture has shown remarkable resilience despite its tumultuous past. Folk traditions endure, and a shared pride in local foods and music maintains bonds. The intense desire for unity and identity shows that the Libyans' spirit has not been broken. With time and the right conditions, the disparate pieces of Libyan identity may gradually

coalesce into a vibrant national mosaic. However, getting there will require surmounting the myriad divisions sown throughout Libya's history. Forging an inclusive and unifying Libyan identity remains a monumental work in progress.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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