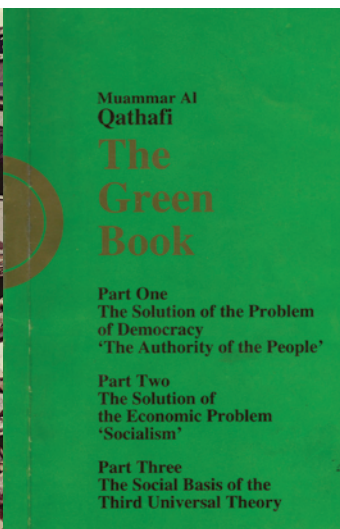




joshua craze



THE AUTHORITY OF THE PEOPLE



DESERT STRUCTURES |
QADHAFI'S TENT
BY JOSHUA CRAZE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
GIULIO PETROCCO

a sketch for the tent of the future

So what can I – a poor Bedouin – hope
for in a modern city of insanity?
— Muammar Qadhafi



Freetown, Sierra Leone
Welcome to Japan. Home of a secret
society named after the products they
bring in from the ports.
The influential Green Book, a manifesto
for the perfect democracy, and in it,
Qadhafi's diagram for the organisation of
the Jamahiriyya.
Looking up from the port of Freetown at
the hill communities. In the 1980s, these
areas were where students smoked grass
and plotted revolution.

facing page: Rebel fighter during the
battle for Bir Ghanam, Aug 2011.

I
One of the central dilemmas of European literature in the
nineteenth century is the movement of the country to the town:
the play of masks given to the young man who arrives in the city
to begin life afresh, cutting ties with everything he knows, for the
promise of a place in which he can make himself anew. This great
drama continues apace in the twenty-first century.

The drama contains within itself two central narratives. In the
first, people preserve memories of rural life. Turkish villagers,
uprooted to Greek cities in the wake of the population transfer
of 1923, used to call streets after the names of the villages and
families they had left behind; impersonal street signs were
replaced by the continuities of kin. In Sierra Leone, the secret
societies that organise rural life are also found in the cities – only
now their purpose has changed. On the rubbish-filled waterfront
of Freetown, Sierra Leone's coastal capital, I came across a secret
society called 'The Japanese', the name a commentary on the
work its members did as port labourers, laying rhetorical claim to
the gleaming Toyotas they bring off the ships and their insertion
into the global economy.

In the city, the village.

The second narrative is, for me at least, closer to home. In
June, the small village in the south-west of France in which I live
is almost deserted. No one grows crops here: rather, farmers
farm the EU subsidies they receive for letting their fields lie
fallow. The young people who remain loll in the central square.
In the absence of genuinely rural rhythms (the silence of winter,
frenzy of the harvest), the villages in this area of France are small
emaciated cities. The young watch television all day and have
the same phones, computers, and posed busyness that marks
France's urban youth, but they have nowhere to go and nothing to
do; they remain suspended, gazing at the city portrayed on their
screens.

In the village, the city.

But what if the rural could be something else? Neither the
nostalgia of the displaced, nor an inadequate version of the urban.
What if the rural could be a model for the way urban life should be?



giulio petrocco

2

Freetown spreads up from the port, slums slowly creeping into the hills. In the 1980s, these areas were still bush, and it was here that one found the *potes* – places where students from the nearby university could come to smoke marijuana, read books and discuss politics. Communism no longer offered much in the way of revolutionary support, and for the young intellectuals who would later go on to found the Revolutionary United Front, ushering in ten years of brutal civil war, Qadhafi's *Green Book* was a central inspiration. I picked up a second-hand copy when I was in Sierra Leone; one of many English-language editions circulated by the Libyan government. Someone has furiously underlined page 108, which is titled 'The Blacks Will Prevail in the World'.

Africa was Qadhafi's last great stage. As his dream of Arab nationalism burned out, he transferred his energies south, trying to install himself as the head of the African Union and sponsoring a series of violent civil wars on the continent. It would be unfair to Qadhafi, however, to say that it was only his money that talked. Elsewhere in West Africa, I remember acquiring a slim pamphlet, written by a Ghanaian revolutionary who had trained in Libya during the 1980s. He wrote with awe about Libya's popular committees and its road network. Most surprising was his enthusiasm for the ideology of the *Green Book*: here, he wrote, was a creed that was not an imperialist imposition; it understood the tradition of direct democracy to which all of Africa is heir. Deluded or not, his words are a tribute to a book that circulated throughout Africa, and at a time when the Communist era was closing, managed to get thousands of people thinking about the relationship between the rural and the urban in a different way.

3

It is often said that newly independent former-colonies are 'not really nations'. In the case of Libya, such a statement has the advantage of being true. Prior to the arrival of the Ottoman empire, strong alliances, both tribal and peasant, organised the country. In Cyrenaica, the Sanusiya built an order based on trade and informal institutions, while around Tripoli, cosmopolitan Tripolitania emerged. In 1922, a new fascist government in Rome abrogated its treaties with the two states that then existed in Libya – the Sanusi Emirate and the Tripolitanian Republic – and began a colonial war that in Africa is only bested by Algeria and Congo in its brutality. At the cost of at least 500,000 lives, Italy subdued the rural hinterland of Libya, the site of the fiercest resistance to colonialism. At the end of World War II when Libya was given independence and the British were establishing military bases in the country, there was little to bind the nation together, other than a wish to be left alone by the colonial powers and a strong history of anti-urban sentiment in the desert hinterlands.

Oil transformed this nascent state, and with it came the slow emergence of a middle class. Teachers were imported from Egypt and Palestine to teach, and they brought ideas of Arab nationalism to their Libyan students. When the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) overthrew King Idriss Al-Sanusi, they declared the birth of a Libyan Arab Republic, clearly inspired by Nasser's Egyptian revolution in 1952. All but two of the twelve officers in the RCC were from marginal tribes. It was a revolution of the lower-middle classes from the hinterlands, who came to the richer cities of the Mediterranean coast with the promise to make it new.

But how to rule? And to what end? How to build these disparate regional loyalties into something resembling a nation?



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4

Initially, despite the RCC's backing for Nasser's trinity of freedom, socialism, and unity, it pursued policies largely identical to that of the monarchy that preceded it. In 1970, following the Egyptian model, political parties were banned, leading to a loss of support within the country. Shortly afterwards Qadhafi made his most famous speech, on 15 July 1973, and announced that the old bureaucracy was to be replaced by popular committees.

This heralded the beginning of the triumph of the bedouin hinterlands over the cities.

This movement, from the tent to the city, is the great theme of Qadhafi's fiction which, while formulaic, is revealing. Time and again in his short stories, the central question emerges: how is the bedouin to exist in the modern world? Is he to be crushed like an ant, his soul worn down at the factory, to be stepped on along the long city boulevards? Or is there another way: could the bedouin become the model for the city?

The *Jamahiriyya* (state of the masses), was declared in 1977, and took its inspiration from Qadhafi's *Green Book*, published in 1975. It announced that representation is fraud. Political parties pretend to represent the people, but are only concerned with their own interests. Classes are no better. Qadhafi was explicitly anti-statist, writing that 'the state is an artificial economic and political system...with which mankind has no relationship'. In Libya's direct democracy, Qadhafi held, everyone will join popular committees, which will then chose people's committees to run public utilities; quite how these latter committees were to prevent the problem of representation was never answered.

Nonetheless, Qadhafi achieved something remarkable – he harnessed the great Libyan tradition of hinterland resistance to colonialism, and articulated this distrust of the state in a populist

this page: Libyan rebel fighter sets up and aims a missile before shooting it towards Qadhafi loyalists entrenched in the town of Bir Ghanam, Libya, on Aug 1, 2011.

facing page: Rebel fighter exchanging gunfire with Qadhafi loyalists during the battle for Bir Ghanam, on Aug 6, 2011.

language understood by the people: he made the distrust of the state the basis of his state project.

On the surface, it may seem like Qadhafi's political system is but another variant of the sort of direct democracy which begins with Rousseau – there is the same distrust of representation, and the same endorsement of direct participation as the only real means to ensure a legitimate government. The *Green Book* even echoes Rousseau in its suspicion of theatre, which may distract man from his direct participation in public life. What Qadhafi uses to criticise the theatre however, is not a model of the citizen, but an appeal to the life of the bedouin.

5

Many of the nations that sit on the edge of the desert have placed the bedouin at the center of their national mythology, even as they busily modernise and forget the bedouins' rigorous egalitarianism and concern with socio-economic rights: witness Doha's comical, surreally monumental coffee pot, a strange symbol of bedouin hospitality for a land of underpaid migrant workers in which the bedouins themselves are pushed to the margins of the city.



giulio petrocco

Qadhafi's Libya was different. The very qualities the *Green Book* eulogises as those that should be the basis of the nation are centred in Qadhafi's understanding of what it is to be bedouin. The Libyan nation, he held, is merely a 'big tribe'. Analogously, Qadhafi's inner circle were known as the *Rijal Al-Kheima*, the men of the tent. Qadhafi pursued policies of bedouinisation and attacked urban values. He did not want to destroy the cities, but to transform them into places governed by the sort of affinal feeling and egalitarianism he saw among the bedouins; a people who would not be distracted by the delights of the city, but could commit themselves to the serious business of building a nation.

At least, that is how it was supposed to work out.

6

Some in the RCC resisted, claiming that some degree of technocracy was necessary to manage the state. Following a failed coup against him in 1975, Qadhafi tightened his grip on power, and paranoia set in.

The Libyan state became one that denied its own existence. In theory, everything was in the hands of the people's committees. In reality, everything became increasingly informal – decisions about oil, foreign policy and defence were taken out of the hands of the committees and instead made by the very technocrats Qadhafi had wanted to remove from power, except this time the technocrats were invisible and firmly under his control.

The whole process is summed up by the bizarre spectacle of Qadhafi's tent, in which he famously met visiting heads of state. To the end of his life, Qadhafi claimed he wasn't the head of state. In a sense, he was right. There was no state – just a seemingly

empty place that he inhabited: the whole structure of political egalitarianism was made possible by oil revenues that flowed to a state that was informal and gained its efficacy through the fact that it denied its own existence.

When you entered Qadhafi's tent, you entered the hollow image on which he had constructed his private state: a formal egalitarianism that allowed an enormous private hierarchy, based on friends and family, with Qadhafi sitting on the top of it.

7

As the Libyan regime fell, and images poured in of endless swimming pools, caged tigers and the various fantasies of the Qadhafi clan, it was easy to be cynical about the people's committees, and the history of the *Jamahiriyya*. I traced other continuities, as the revolution continued. If the rebels at Bir Ghanam you see in the photos around this text were fighting against Qadhafi, they were also fighting with the same spirit, and the same hostility to exterior power, that Qadhafi harnessed to build his state. All over Libya, regional bodies, peoples' committees and growing self-governance emerged. Today, the question of the Libyan state is again an open question, and it is not too outlandish to think that, over the body of Qadhafi, something of his ideology will continue. It may not be the moment for the people of Sierra Leone to stop watching Libya just yet. =