

# 8

## Connecting Shores: Libya's Colonial Ghost and Europe's Migrant Crisis in Colonial and Postcolonial Cinematic Representations

Sandra Ponzanesi

### Shipwreck

In 2013, the Dutch film-maker Morgan Knibbe made a 15-minute video, *Shipwreck*.<sup>1</sup> The subject of this miniature is the disaster in Lampedusa on 3 October 2013, which has come to symbolize the never-ending series of tragedies in the Mediterranean. In the tragedy of 3 October 2013, a boat carrying 500 Eritrean refugees sank off the coast of Lampedusa, resulting in the loss of 360 lives. In this short and poetic documentary we hear the testimony of one of the survivors, Abraham from Eritrea, while hundreds of coffins await transportation back home. These were also the 300 coffins to which Barroso, then President of the European Commission, belatedly paid homage on behalf of the EU, among the protests and accusations of the local community prompted by the persistent indifference and inefficiency of the EU in supporting the locals and Italian authorities with their daily struggles.

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In this short, we see several parallel worlds intersecting and colliding. In the opening scene we do not see the recurring media images of desperate migrants; instead, we have a very calm scene, in which one character, the Eritrean Abraham, has a leading role. He is a survivor of the shipwreck who narrates his adventure almost in a whisper. Abraham is shot on dry land among wrecks of ships, their coloured wood reflected in the pools of water, the camera moving unevenly as it follows Abraham walking through the surreal maze of wreckage, captured between light and dark, a bluish tint dominating, with the sound of the seagulls hovering above. We hear Abraham's voice whispering in Tigrinya with subtitles:

We'd left together. When the boat sank, we swam towards the light. It was very far and one of us got tired. He said: not all of us have to die. You go ahead. He said farewell and so we parted. That's how we separated.

This confession is shot with Abraham leaning on a wrecked boat, wearing a dark T-shirt with the text 'I am Famous' in white (see Fig. 8.1), testifying to the irony of his becoming an international icon through the successful international reception of Knibbe's debut short, or simply by

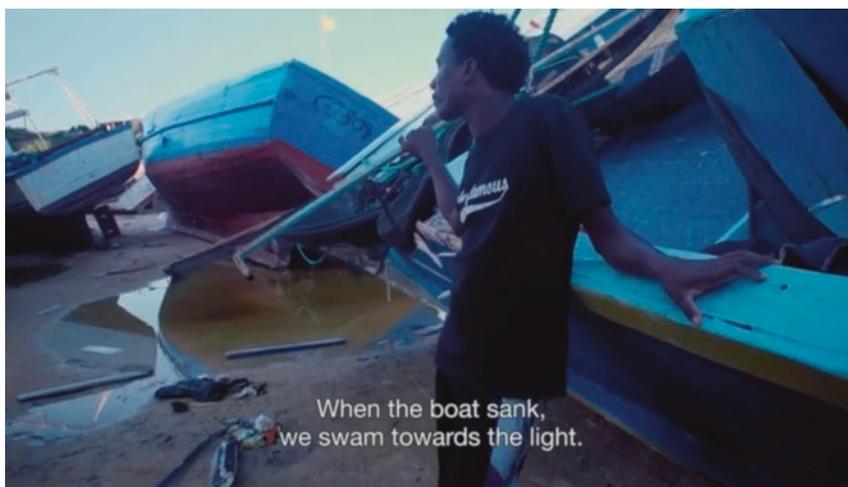


Fig. 8.1 Morgan Knibbe, *Shipwreck* (S. Ponzanesi screen shot)

being a survivor. Then the camera zooms in on the sky, capturing free birds, as if to foreshadow a free future ahead.

The miniature that the film-maker so suggestively manages to produce is able to counter the ongoing objectification of the desperate migrants, who are present in the second scene in which we shift from the subdued and poetic opening to the chaos of the rescue operations. The sound of the seagulls constitutes the continuing effect from the previous scene, interrupted now by the abrupt noise of cargo boats and machines operating. We are actually behind a wall of policemen who form a cordon sanitaire around hundreds of journalists, reporters and film-makers, all looking at something we cannot see yet. We see a migrant woman passing through this wall of human curiosity and witnesses, we hear confused voices, "Did you hear what I said", followed by injunctions "Don't talk at the same time" in Tigrinya. We start seeing faces, the faces of migrants gathered on the shore. Suddenly we have the flashing image of an ambulance arriving and the piercing scream of a woman on the waterfront leaning over a closed coffin. She is held still by others from her own country calling her "Mehret" as if to soothe her. It is an atmosphere of great chaos and intensity. We see alternating shots of migrants, police and army officers, journalists, harbour workers, shots of the island, the sky, accompanied by the cries and desperation of women lamenting their dead. We see the clustered journalists, filming the scene from close by (as Morgan Knibbe is probably also doing), who have flown to the island to record the event for the rest of the world. They look out of sync with the tragedy that unfolds beneath their eyes, holding their cameras high, while many migrant bystanders and marine officials watch from above on a ship. We hear another woman cry "What's happening to me. My brother, my sister, you're no longer there." She is being held by fellow travellers so that she does not injure herself. We see a close-up of another woman being held who says "Leave me in peace. I want to be alone. Don't touch me." And then she walks off crying, trying to reach the coffins being boarded. We go back to the first woman who is now saying "I don't have the strength. It's all over now." We see images of army officers arriving, their uniforms and demeanour contrasting with the harrowing visuals and sounds of the scene. Within this highly dramatic framing, we see the Italian officers operating with empathy, comforting some of the women, while also

trying to maintain a level of operability in the unprecedented scale of this drama. They stand by as if to say, "What now?" The journalists are spread around, using their cell phones, talking to each other and taking notes on their pads. We see a painful scene of a man wanting to stop two coffins, tied together, from being tilted up by cranes to be shipped back as cargo. The cries, faces, emotions and noise of the chains straining and rolling is hard to bear, and this is all intersected with the many journalists and their huge cameras filming throughout, and the policemen standing, some of them almost motionless, uncertain what to do.

We see a woman, inconsolable, who throws herself at a coffin as if not wanting to part from it, unsure of what will happen to it. A fellow migrant tries in vain to calm and reassure her: "They'll be back. They'll be back. Calm down, okay?" and the woman responds: "This is what they say, but they take them away." And the man repeats "They'll really be back. Just calm down, okay? Don't worry, they'll really be back" as if in a lullaby. Then back to journalists, wearing sunglasses, smoking cigarettes, nonchalant, conversing with each other as if this was one of their daily tasks, appearing removed and remote from the intensity of the pain and shell-shocked state of the survivors, chatting as if they are on a promenade. The scene of the coffins being lifted up continues among close shots of migrants crying, police officers standing by, women gathered on the ground praying. We see an image of the deck where all the coffins are being lined up, with coffins suspended from cranes being laid onto the deck with the help of workmen wearing yellow helmets and breathing masks who unchain the coffins.

Then we go back to the bluish light, back to Abraham and his story whispered among the wreckage: "After swimming for half an hour my other friend also got tired. He said 'Abraham, I can't go on. I am stopping here. You go and tell everything to my family.' I said to him: 'No, I am not leaving you behind'. So I swam like that for two hours, pulling at his arm." The camera moves away from Abraham and starts hovering around. We see street life at night, probably on Lampedusa, with cafes and shops, normal evening life. At the harbour, night has descended but the operations continue. Abraham keeps narrating: "After two hours he couldn't swim anymore. He said that he did not want to go any further. 'Go ahead' he said to me." It is totally dark by now and we hear just the

horn of a ship leaving. Abraham continues: "Because there was nothing I could do anymore we said goodbye to each other in tears." And then the screen goes completely black and silent with the final credits rolling, the sound of the wind and sea in the background. Knibbe manages to capture the intensity of suffering and the farce of the media assault through shifting close-ups, effectively conveying how a tiny place such as this shore in Lampedusa can effectively convey the magnitude of a global crisis.

Reproduced in its entirety, *Shipwreck* forms one of the more effective segments of Knibbe's following documentary *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning*,<sup>2</sup> which deals with the crisis of refugees, told from the point of view of a dead migrant, who is now a ghost in an unspecified land—Italy, Greece, the Netherlands. Through this strategy, Morgan Knibbe avoids representing "the refugee" by letting a disembodied voice narrate the events of other migrants in Europe. It is the voice of a migrant who drowned in the Mediterranean, who did not manage the crossing, as we can see in the eerie, dark opening shots in which we witness a shipwreck with cries and muffled voices. *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* plays with the symbolism of refugees not having a status, neither as a citizen nor as a human being, therefore conveying their existence as ghosts on earth, remaining invisible and unnamed. The narration of the film is left to Ali Borzouee, who gives voice to the protagonist, or rather the unseen ghost, who asks himself: "Where am I? Is this paradise?" While the narrating ghost seems to float through space, his fellow voyagers who are still alive are trapped in space, scrambling for their daily lives: "Existence and non-existence are both alien to me," the narrator says, a statement that resonates with the migrants stuck in limbo, made stateless and devoid of rights (Ross 2014).

The voice-over comes and goes, becoming at times inaudible, or just a whisper. The harrowing music and the editing style, with scenes tilted upward to the sky, accelerated images and the narration style, make this virtuoso film a rare addition to more traditional reporting of the migrant crisis. By offering snippets of intimate access to migrants who are often seen as ghosts beyond humanity, Knibbe creates an extremely atmospheric and gripping insight into what usually remains ignored and literally unseen (Ponzanesi 2016a). As Robert Young has so powerfully written in his overview article "Postcolonial Remains", the task of postcolonialism is to make "the invisible visible" (2012, 23).



The Lampedusa tragedy has confronted all of us with a new element: for the first time the authorities have been able to reconstruct all, or almost all, the names of the victims. This has never happened before. In *Asmat* I wanted to force my spectators to listen to all of them, from first to last. I did not limit myself to making a consolatory spot, to be quickly consumed between one film and the next. I wanted to defy the attention and patience of the public in order to bring back the numbers of the tragedy to the reality of names. It takes ten minutes to read the 368 names of the victims of Lampedusa. Imagine how long it would take to read all 900 names of the last tragedy. Unfortunately this time no one can tell with precision who they are. (Interview with Yimer as quoted in *Archivio Memorie Migranti*, 2015, translated by the author)

Through this visual and aural poem, the names and the bodies that were separated by death are reconnected, symbolically restoring memory and identity. It is both a visually poetic and political enterprise that problematizes issues of representation, embodiment and memory (Yimer 2014a, b). As in Knibbe's *Shipwreck* (2014a) and *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* (2014b), the question of how to represent the unrepresentable and recover the phantom-like traces of the past is central. These documentaries fully contribute to the postcolonial project of recovering omitted or elided voices and perspectives by offering a new visual style that defies both the categories of the traditional documentary genre and the right to represent or speak for the migrants and refugees. Recent forced migration has intensified the role of the Mediterranean as a crossroads but also as a deadly passage, with events like that of 3 October 2013 being repeated and replicated up to the present day in unrelenting and unchanged fashion.

## Other Shores

Looking for a new visual language is one of the steps that has to be taken not only to resignify the way in which migrants are perceived and depicted in mainstream media but also to find new ways of establishing connections with other shores—those other sites of the Mediterranean such as Libya that are inextricably linked to Italy's forgotten or repressed colonial

legacy. Libya is part of the network of Mediterranean crossings, linked not only geographically, but also historically, culturally and politically. And it is no accident that Libya, where most of the refugees from Eritrea pass through, was also an Italian colony. Many representations of destitute migrants do not focus on their histories, their journeys before Lampedusa, their motivations, dreams, itineraries. This is something that Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre take on in their documentary *Mare Chiuso* ('Closed Sea') (2012), by offering not only a denunciation of the push-back operations but also a contestation of romanticized and stereotypical representations of the immigrant subjects in favour of real-life testimonials and subjective viewpoints, told in their own mother tongues. The film focuses therefore not so much on the migrants' attempted arrival in Lampedusa, but mostly on the causes that lead them to make their perilous journey, thus providing a platform for their voices and stories. Segre has produced a consistent *oeuvre*<sup>3</sup> by focusing on the origins and developments of migrations from Africa, long before the migrants even reach Europe, in order to reveal migrants' motivations and depict life stories that are hidden behind the mediatized renditions of Italian and European reports.

The illegal refoulement actions (or push-back operations) were a consequence of the infamous Friendship Treaty, signed in 2008 by Berlusconi and Gaddafi when the Gaddafi regime (1969–2011) was still in place. The agreement was made in order to control migration flows between Libya and Italy but was also supposed to put an end to a painful chapter in Italian history, relating to Italian colonialism in Libya and the inhuman concentration camps set up between 1929 and 1931, mostly to uproot Bedouin nomads who supported the resistance movement led by Omar Al-Mukhtar. The end of this colonial chapter was linked to an injection of funding for key infrastructure projects, the nature of which remained undefined. Although the treaty had economic benefits for Libya and the parties involved claimed to be motivated by a wish to end past disputes, it simultaneously implicated Libya in the establishment of a violent technology of security. Against the backdrop of Libya's colonial history, it seemed particularly paradoxical for it to apply forms of containment that are similar to those the Italians used against Libyan people during colonial times (Powell 2015).

*Mare Chiuso* tells, in documentary form, what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these push-back operations and in the Libyan prisons after their deportation.<sup>4</sup> On 6 May 2009, an overloaded boat with Somali and Eritrean men, women and children was intercepted in international waters. The boat was not fit for sailing and failed to continue its trip towards Lampedusa. Under the 2008 Friendship Treaty between Italy and Libya, these people could be and were returned to Libya even though they were in international waters and subject to international legislation. The push-back operation violated the Geneva Convention on the rights of refugees and the duty of providing rescue in case of danger by deporting the migrants to detention camps in Libya, a territory outside the jurisdiction of the Geneva Convention. Of particular concern in this context is the fact that the migrants did not have access to asylum procedures, which they could only start once they reached Lampedusa, and that they were expelled to Libya, a country that was not their country of origin but a transit stop and that did not have a functioning asylum system, had not signed the Geneva Convention on Refugees and practised large-scale expulsion of undocumented migrants (Andrijasevic 2006). In *Mare Chiuso* Liberti and Segre visit the migrants after the events, now taken care of by UNHCR camps either in Libya at the border with Tunisia (see Fig. 8.3) or in the south of Italy, in 'centri di accoglienza.'

It is important to notice the clear link here between the failure of Libya as a security border and the failure of the Italian government, and with it the European Union, to deal with the flows of globalization and the consequences of decolonization. The treaty reproduced the colonial sovereign logic that implicated Libya in the production of sovereign violence against refugees. By implicating Libyans in Italy's violent sovereign ban on refugees and asylum seekers, it re-enacted Italy's colonial policy. Through this remapping, Libya had been transformed into a border zone of exception that was both outside but also inside the jurisdiction of Italian sovereignty (Palombo 2010, 51–52).

It was also a dire reminder of the colonial concentration camps, which Libya had been called upon to reproduce, transferring the destiny of the rebel Bedouins of the 1930s to the disenfranchised migrants of the twenty-first century. The ferocious response of the colonial Fascist regime to the



**Fig. 8.3** Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre, *Mare Chiuso* (S. Ponzanesi, screen shot)

Bedouin uprising in Libya involved creating new systems of ordering and disciplining. Nomads were considered worse than barbaric, and as deviant and dangerous to the Italian empire. This became what Foucault has named heterotopias, the ordering of deviant subjects as organized elsewhere (Foucault 1986). For General Rodolfo Graziani, nomadism was a real danger and required special attention. To this end General Graziani took measures officially sanctioned by General Badoglio, Governor of Cyrenaica, to physically exclude the local populations and locate them in specific spaces. Between 1930 and 1933, the Cyrenaica *sottomessi* communities were forced into what Badoglio called “a restricted space, so that they can be surveilled adequately, and isolated from the rebels” (Labanca 2005, 31). Entire tribes (primarily Bedouins from Aljabil Al-akhdhar) were forced into concentration camps in desert areas hundreds of miles away from their homes. There were three objectives: (1) to get people out of their mountainous strongholds where it was hard to control and subdue them; (2) to make sure that the mujahedeen were cut off from economic and social support; (3) to avoid having more men join the rebellion.

The exact number of deaths is unknown and not documented, but it is estimated that during this period between 40,000 and 70,000 were killed or died of starvation (Ahmida 2006). As David Atkinson argues:

[t]he camp and its barbed wired fences materialised European notions of a bounded territoriality; they finally forced the Bedouin to live within a disciplined, controlled, fixed space—in contrast to their traditional conceptions of group encampments and unfettered movement across territory. (2000, 113–114)

The camp was organized into re-education areas, which were meant to educate and train Libyan people for the military colonial apparatus, but they were also punitive spaces, where torture and human rights abuses occurred (De Carlo 2013).

## Bengasi

Augusto Genina's *Bengasi* (1942) is one of the major titles of Italian Empire cinema, and is considered a classic. It has interesting resonances with contemporary documentaries such as Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre's *Mare Chiuso*, and the role that Libya has had from colonial to postcolonial/neocolonial days. Made in 1942 by Augusto Genina, who also directed *Squadrone Bianco* (1936) and *Sotto La Croce del Sud* (1938), the film won the Coppa Mussolini in Venice for the best Italian film and Fosco Giacchetti won the Coppa Volpi for best male actor for his role as the Italian captain Enrico Berti. The film exalts the acts and deeds of Italian soldiers and civilians during the fall of Benghazi when it was taken over by the British. But the British eventually retreat and the German and Italian troops manage to reconquer Benghazi.

The film shows the triumph of the Italians after a major setback, with the city bombed out and reduced to dust. There are many Luce newsreels that document and glorify these events, where you see the heroic roles of the Italians, not only soldiers but also civilians.

The interesting aspect of this film is that it gives particular attention to female roles, stressing the role of women (though only expressed through

sacrifice, faith and silence) and going beyond the mere colonial aspect, showing war as a painful consequence of the imperial mission (Clara/ Enrico, Giuliana/Filippo Fanny/Antonio, the peasant mother of the blind soldier/Giovanni, Flippo/Giavanna). Women are the real heroines in the film, as is highlighted in the four stories that follow one other and intersect in the city of Benghazi under the British siege.

Benghazi under British occupation differs from previous Empire films that sought to mobilize Italians. *Bengasi* was shot completely in the studio in Cinecittà. The film aims to move the spectator through emotional effects as well as realism and much melodrama. The missing limbs of the male character, the blind soldier, the death of a four-year-old child, Sandro, that gives Enrico a feeling of guilt, all symbolize a new unravelling notion of masculinity, registering the crisis of Fascist imperial history. Genina uses the child to comment on the effect of an education teaching Fascist imperialist masculinity. Filippo the interpreter and gentleman, played by Amedeo Nazzari, represents the transitional stage in the practice of Fascist manhood. Because of his role of double agent, he is the traduttore-traditore, but also a modern educated man. His beloved Giuliana does not need saving.

In this film, the Libyan nomads are never shown but now come to reclaim their land from the Italian settlers. In Benghazi the desert has become a place of no exit: instead of the infinite horizon of *Lo Squadrone Bianco* the desert here is seen as the Italian tomb (Ben-Ghiat 2015, 288). Of course in this film there is a total denial of the concentration camps in Cyrenaica, which saw the deportation, displacement and human rights violation of millions of Libyan people in the 1930s, held in tents in the desert. Tens of thousands died from starvation, disease and summary executions, as discussed above (Ebner 2010, 261).<sup>5</sup>

During the Italian occupation in Africa, 1882–1942, Italians built many detention centres, the majority in Libya, one in Eritrea (Nokra) and one in Somalia (Dhanaane). Fascist Italy prepared 16 concentration camps in Libya. They were set up for the education of young indigenous people, who had been chosen to be part of the colonial administration. These concentration camps were established from June 1930 and closed in 1933 when Badoglio prepared the memorandum that forced about 100,000 people to move. These people imprisoned in concentration

camps in the central region of Libya, often reached only after days of marching in the desert, were often Libyan nomadic tribes of the Gebel forced to become sedentary. In this way the Italian wanted to suppress anti-colonial resistance.

This was also as a response to the successful campaigns by Sheikh Omar Al-Mukhtar, known as the *Lion of the Desert*. Italians thought that Libyans would be happy to be liberated from the clutches of the Ottoman Empire and did not expect such fierce resistance, which was often articulated along guerrilla lines, something that the Italians were unprepared for. The heroic actions of Al-Mukhtar were turned into a film only in 1981—the *Lion of the Desert* (Libya, 1981), directed by Moustapha Akkad, was a Hollywood epic with a lavish international cast including Anthony Quinn as Omar al-Mukhtar, Oliver Reed, Rod Steiger, Raf Vallone, John Gielgud and Irene Papas, with a \$35 million budget. The aim of the film was to show Western audiences what the sacrifices of the Libyan people had been in the face of Fascist oppression and extermination, and also to find a charismatic figure who could serve as a national hero and rebel through the ages. Omar Al-Mukhtar was hanged in public on 16 September 1931 at the age of 80.<sup>6</sup>

The film was banned in Italy in 1982 as “offensive to Italy’s military honour” and only shown on an Italian pay channel belonging to a satellite television network (Italy’s Sky affiliate) in 2009, the ban having been lifted on the Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi’s first state visit to Italy, where he pitched a Bedouin tent in a public park in Rome.

## Conclusions

The connection between Libya and its colonial concentrations camps, and the contemporary operation of containment of today’s refugees across the Mediterranean shores reminds us, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat has written, that histories of captivity and torturing often remained unchanged through history, or uncannily similar in their forms and psychological effect (Ben-Ghiat 2014).<sup>7</sup> It is stunning how the appearance of the modern-day camps for refugees is so similar to the concentration camps that Italians organized in the 1930s.

This confirms the general perception that the field of Italian postcolonial studies is belated, that there is a kind of amnesia or removal of the memory, effects and legacies of the Italian colonial past, but that contemporary patterns of immigration have suddenly demanded a new awakening, and the elaboration of a new ‘postcolonial consciousness’ vis-à-vis new political, social, cultural and humanitarian emergencies, as brought to light by the many recent Lampedusa disasters. Lampedusa should also be seen as a place of encounters and exchanges and therefore needs to shake off its doomed representations.

Through the rich visual cinematic accounts that connect past imperial productions with recent *engagé* documentaries (see Ponzanesi 2016c), a way of connecting different shores emerges that not only links the past to the present but also questions the way in which Lampedusa has become an undesired concentration camp, where many migrants and refugees end up stranded, stationary and hopeless. Morgan Knibbe’s *Shipwreck*, Dagmawi Yimer’s *Asmat* and Andrea Segre’s *Mare Chiuso* all contribute to a resignification of the different shores of the Mediterranean, showing contiguities and interruptions, bringing migrants centre stage and letting them act and tell their story, though whispers, shadows and waves.

## Notes

1. It was named best short at Locarno (*Eye Film Institute*, 17 August 2014) and was nominated in the same category at the European Film Awards.
2. The film, released in 2014, received considerable acclaim at the IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam) in 2014, and won the prize for best documentary at the Netherlands Film Festival in September 2015.
3. These themes are reflected in the trilogy of films he directed prior to *Mare Chiuso: A Sud di Lampedusa* (‘South of Lampedusa’) (2006), *Come un uomo sulla Terra* (‘Like a Man on Earth’) (2008) and *Sangue Verde* (‘Green Blood’) (2010).
4. For a more detailed analysis of *Mare Chiuso* see also Sandra Ponzanesi (2016b).
5. In Rochat “La repression della resistenza in Cirenaica” (1991), you can read that six camps, named after the cities and the villages where they were

located, were Marsa Brega (pop. 21,117), Solouch (pop. 20,123), Sid Ahmed el Magrum (pop. 13,050), el Agheila (pop. 10,900), Agedabia (pop. 10,000) and Abias (pop. 3123). Mortality rates in the first were 25 per cent, 30 per cent, and higher in many camps (del Boca 1986–1988, 179–189, cited in Ebner 2010, 261).

6. He was 80 years old, but refused to stop and give up and kept fighting and he really deserved the name given to him as “The Lion of the Desert.” On 16 September 1931 the Italians hanged Omar Al-Mukhtar in the city of Solouq and they forced the Libyans to watch their hero being hanged. No consideration was given to Omar Al-Mukhtar’s old age, no consideration to international law and no consideration to international war treaties.
7. And despite the availability of twenty-first-century technology, those torturing prisoners are often unwittingly repeating the exact actions of captors in centuries past. The ISIS beheadings put on public display an ancient execution method used by governments throughout Europe and Asia through to the early twentieth century. Most of the torture methods used by the CIA have their own long past: waterboarding, singled out by Senator John McCain as a method used by the Japanese on American prisoners of war in World War II, and before that by many other powers, is merely one example (Ben-Ghiat 2014).

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