

**‘Like a plate of spaghetti’
Migrant Narratives from the Libya-Lampedusa Route
by**

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Abstract

Storico dell’Università di Napoli l’Orientale e presidente di AMM, Alessandro Triulzi fornisce il tracciato di collusione-corrruzione tra polizia e passeur libico-sudanesi e degli ostacoli umani e materiali della rotta L-L (Libia-Lampedusa) nella ricostruzione dei migranti etiopi che l’hanno percorsa al tempo di Gheddafi.

Introduction

In October 2003, the discovery of a boat drifting off the coast of Sicily with “13 corpses and 15 barely alive survivors” (Coluccello & Massey 2007:77) captured and magnified in Europe the ‘desperate journeys’ undertaken by increasing numbers of refugees and poor migrants, mainly coming from the African continent, who were being smuggled via the Mediterranean by illegal transnational networks.¹ The alarming reports in the media gave way to a series of police investigations in Italy culminating in a country-wide operation called *Harig*, which showed the extent of the transnational connections of the Libyan-Italian human trade. At the end of a four-year judicial enquiry led by Luigi de Magistris, an Italian magistrate operating from the southern region of Calabria, over 33 people of different nationalities were charged with trafficking no less than 2,500 persons and reducing them ‘to slavery’. The enquiry revealed that the transnational networks involved were not ‘Mafia-like’ hierarchical organisations, but rather ‘smaller, more complex and fluid’. The investigators found out that transnational trafficking in humans was not so easily disrupted as ‘fluid networks are intrinsically resilient to decapitation’ and tend to act like ‘a plate of spaghetti’: “Every piece seems to touch each other, but you are never sure where it all leads.” (Coluccello & Massey 2007:85-88; quotation at p. 88 is drawn from Green 1969).

¹ Since then, increasing numbers of pack-full ‘cathedral boats’ coming from Libya have been registered in the Mediterranean. Irregular crossings diminished following the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Italy and Libya, but resumed en masse since the start of NATO bombings over Tripoli in March 2011. The narratives reported in this chapter have been recorded prior to the Libyan war.

Many of the smuggled migrants and refugees came to Italy through the Libya-Lampedusa (L-L) route, which involved the crossing of some 2000 km of sun-scorched Libyan desert, followed by approximately 200 miles across the Mediterranean sea to reach the small island of Lampedusa south of Sicily. While the 2003 police investigation went on, the number of irregular migrants and refugees landing in Lampedusa or rescued from drifting off the Sicilian Channel increased sharply². By 2006, 19,000 irregular migrants and refugees had arrived on the island; they had almost doubled by the end of 2008, when their landing on Italian soil was labeled for the first time by Italian authorities as ‘clandestine’ and pursued indiscriminately by Italian law as a severe criminal offence (Del Grande 2010; Morone 2009; Rastello 2010).

It is significant to note that the wide-reaching investigation was given the code name *Harig*, from the Arabic ‘*harg*’, ‘to burn’ (also *Harrag*, see Del Grande 2007:109); a common term employed throughout North Africa to denote those who ‘burn’ (i.e., cross illegally, but also ignore or challenge) a traffic light, a state border or a public ban. The term further applies to migrants who destroy their identity papers upon departure, or at times burn their own fingertips to avoid being identified by immigration officers at the border³. By the time the *Harig* investigation was over, in April 2007, it was increasingly clear to police authorities and legislators in Italy that there was no way to handle irregular, i.e., ‘clandestine’ migration, but to crush it. Although there was ample evidence indicating that the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy by sea was small (only about 12% as compared to the vast majority of persons ‘overstaying’ their legally authorized travel period), the very fact that the majority of sea-borne irregular migration was arriving via Lampedusa allowed the Italian government to invest in the symbolic importance of the ‘clandestine invasion’ by sea as the source of all evils concerning the defense of national identity and the maintenance of security.

Henceforth, all irregular migrants were classified by law as ‘clandestini’, i.e., strangers illegally residing on Italian soil; their landing in Italy or crossing it without

² Pastore et al. (2006) differentiate irregular entry in Italy by maritime vessels into ‘clandestine landings’ in which migrants are set ashore along unpatrolled strips of coastline, and ‘open landings’ in which the boats are left to drift off in Italian territorial waters till they are rescued by the Italian Coastal Guard; see Coluccello & Massey, 80). By July 2002, the Bossi-Fini Law, from the name of its two initiators in the Italian Parliament (the head of the northern League, Umberto Bossi, and the leader of the neo-fascist “National Alliance” Party, Gianfranco Fini) made all irregular entry into Italian territory a criminal offence.

³ Uncertainty of origin allows irregular migrants to have better chances in claiming refugee status for oppressed groups or nationalities. The increasing use of DNA for identification has made fingerprints somewhat irrelevant nowadays.

authorization was declared a criminal offence to be punished with 4 years of prison followed by expulsion from the Italian territory (Borgna 2011:22). Further, between 2002 and 2009 migration laws and controls were severely tightened by the Italian Parliament and differential legislation was passed not merely to keep out the ‘uninvited’ (Harding 2000) but to make their ‘clandestine’ life simply unsustainable by denying them basic rights in integration processes such as education, health or political representation (Mezzadra 2006; Borgna 2011; Rastello 2010). The L-L route soon suffered the same constrictions. By August 2008, following Italian pressures on the EU to lift its ban on Libyan trade, the signing of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Italian and Libyan Governments ended a long-standing dispute over Italy’s colonial responsibilities when the Italian Government agreed to pay reparations amounting to 5 bn. dollars in exchange for oil and a concerted effort to stop irregular migrants from departing from Libyan soil. By the first anniversary of the Libyan-Italian Treaty, solemnly celebrated in Benghazi by the two leaders on August 2009, the L-L route had been effectively blocked and the Italian Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni extolled the virtues of the Italian and Libyan cooperation on irregular migration as a model for the whole of Europe. From May 2009 to March 2011, when Italian forces joined in the NATO-led ‘humanitarian’ war against the Libyan Government, joint patrols of Italian and Libyan naval forces in the southern Mediterranean achieved systematic refoulement of all migrant boats heading north towards the Italian shores⁴.

The paper argues that the eastern Sahara migrant route, briefly disrupted by the Libyan war, is in fact ‘resilient to decapitation’ and reacts to outside pressure, like all trading networks, depending on the readjustment of supply and demand. All migrant routes are ready to give way to safer or more profitable alternative routes only to open again once basic security and network conditions have been reestablished. In fact, every ‘closure’ of a migrant route simply means the opening of an alternative one, usually more costly in terms of financial transactions and human lives, as recent examples of both Mediterranean and Canary Island crossings have shown.⁵ As the opening and closing of the L-L route appears to be emblematic of most irregular migrant trajectories in Africa, and reflects European reactions to control as well as local attempts to exploit

⁴ The Italian policy of open refoulement in the Mediterranean was severely questioned by the European Commission of Human Rights in July 2010, and was condemned by the European High Court in February 2012.

⁵ See the increasingly-distant crossings to the Canary Islands from the African coast, the new Hannaba-Cagliari route connecting Algeria to Sardinia, or the recent Egypt-Gaza crossings of migrants from Eritrea and Sudan.

them, it is important in my view to gather and document migrant testimonies and their travel narratives in order to understand what exactly the L-L route meant to traveling migrants and how local trade and smuggling networks operate on the ground.

The following narratives are based on migrant testimonies and travel accounts of the L-L route which have been collected in Rome among recent arrivals from the Horn between 2006 and 2009. Narrative sources are, of course, highly interpretive and selective in as much as they reflect individual stories and the ability of those who tell them to recall traumatic events of their lives. Most migrants and asylum-seekers shy away from being interviewed since the migratory process already involves too many awkward questions being asked or forced on them in their uneasy attempt to fit into western categories of a bona fide migrant or refugee. So migrant narratives are often flawed and secretive (Ranger 2005). As such, they may have little to offer to the security, development or migration officer. As a historian however, I have been fascinated by the amount of information these narratives reveal and from the very beginning I have felt the need to create a healthier context for their utterance and survival. Involving migrants in the research process, and helping mobilize their voice and agency to widen awareness of their condition in Italy, resulted in the creation of a migrant memory project in Rome which provided a sympathetic listening context for migrants willing to speak out and to have their voice used both as an archival source and as a live testimony in public occasions and debates⁶. We soon found out that ‘unspeakable truths’ could be shared together with fellow migrants within a joint, participatory context which assured both confidence and empathic listening. Richer and longer narratives soon followed aimed not just at acquiring refugee status or humanitarian protection (which was promoted elsewhere) but at producing an articulate body of self-reflexive accounts of the so-called ‘exit-option’ and its human toll. The L-L

⁶ Beginning in 2007, with the help of migrants who had recently arrived from the Horn, a group of researchers, volunteers and social activists started an informal “Archive of migrant memories” (AMM- *Archivio delle memorie migranti*) at the Asinitas School for migrants in Rome (see www.asinitas.org). Around the school activities, narrative circles and audio-visual seminars were organized to record, translate, and store migrant narratives which were then printed, filmed and broadcasted through civic medias and social networks. The result was a series of interviews in the form of written, audio and visual testimonies extracts of which will be reported here. The films *Come un uomo sulla terra* (‘Like a Man on earth’ 2008) and *Soltanto il mare* (‘Nothing but the Sea’ 2010), both co-directed by Dagmawi Yimer, a refugee from Ethiopia, were the first multimedia results of this work. AMM has since become a nation-wide no-profit association (see www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net).

route amounted to a long journey the cost of which we jointly agreed should be made known to the Italian public as well as to the migrants' relatives and friends back home.

Background to the L-L route

According to several observers (Marfaing & Wippel 2003, Bredeloup & Pliez 2005; Bensaad 2005, 2007), the Sahara has become in recent times not only 'the preferred route' for migrants heading to Europe but also a densely populated area of forced residence for many undocumented African migrants. The restrictive anti-migrant policies being implemented by Governments on both sides of the Mediterranean from the mid-1990s onward forced many Sub-Saharan migrants to remain stranded in the wider Sahara macro-region, transforming countries such as Libya, Morocco or Algeria into both transit and destination countries, confirming the fluid nature of transnational mobility and its impact on target countries (Hamood 2006). This development affected Libya in particular following the pan-African open door policy adopted by Kadafi's government since the mid-1990s (Pliez 2004). As the Schengen countries gradually closed their gates to migrants in roughly the same period, and linked their containment policies to those of the North African states (De Haas 2006), the Sahara and coastal regions of Libya became increasingly inhabited by Sub-Saharan migrants who found in the informal economy of the Sahara a precarious yet available source of living and working (CARIM 2010).

The Sahara has always been an area of mixed transhumance and migrancy. Mobility flows, however, were accentuated in the last forty years by the worsening environmental and economic conditions and multiple conflicts flaring up throughout the Sahelian region. Starting with pastoral nomads from Niger and Mali moving north in the mid 1970s to escape drought and war, the early migrants were followed by increasing numbers of central and west African agriculturalist and urbanized youth seeking better working conditions, and by refugees and asylum-seekers escaping the excesses and pitfalls of the 'failed' states' of the Horn. The opening of oil fields and construction sites in the middle of the desert encouraged the new economic and political migrants to enter the wider Sahara macro-region, while the increasing migratory flows fed a profit-based economy for transport and services geared towards migrants (De Haas 2006; Pliez 1999, 2004). Thus original inhabitants and established migrants became increasingly connected with the new arrivals, and the informal economy was soon embedded in government policies and an increasing number of ventures for private profit that led to systematic abuse and greed. The new 'villes-carrefour' of the Sahara,

like Sebha, Agadez, or Kufra (Pliez 2000, 2006), with their flourishing transport and transit economy, depended on the exploitation of migrant labour forces and their *hawala* credit network⁷. With markets and streets named after the migrants' place of origins⁸, these desert cities soon became a living testimony of the transformative role played by migrants in the very making of the Saharan economy.

According to the Algerian geographer Ali Bensaad (2005, 2007), it was during this period of high human mobility that the Sahara reverted to a lively place of cohabitation for North African groups of various origin (Berber, Arab or Afro-Arab descent) who increasingly mixed with the Sub-Saharan migrants and their kin reviving old links and memories of a complex and often tense past. It is in this context that the Sahara rediscovered both its ancient vitality (including new inroads of cosmopolitanism due to the new languages, religions and social values introduced by the migrants) and new exclusionist trends going back to the old trans-Saharan slave trade and long-maintained feelings of 'white' superiority vis-a-vis their 'black' neighbours. The larger Mediterranean area soon experienced all the contrasts and challenges of the new economic dynamism typical of all 'globalization at the margins', involving high mobility, strong communication networks and brutal profit-making. Thus the Sahara was transformed into 'a major terrain of confrontation and of violence' (Bensaad 2007: 55-57). Because of this, "Trans-Saharan corridors now directly link black Africa and the Mediterranean" and the Sahara "is more than ever a Mediterranean outpost. As such it is also a periphery, a 'suburb' increasingly close to Europe", both a 'taking-off point' and a 'holding zone', or 'vanguard barrier' to control unwanted movements of its southern neighbours (Ibid:51-52). It is in this context that an informal economy of transport has arisen, transit States often acting as first organizers and beneficiaries of this trade, whereas nomadic groups and newly-born intermediaries play the traditional "double role of conveyor/robber: they earn money by guiding and by robbing, robbery reinforcing their necessary functions as guides." Thus a slave economy is gradually being built across the Sahara, having at its base "a mix of local notables and entrepreneurs, local and south-Saharan mafias, and agents of the State." (Id., 62-63)

For migrants coming from the Horn, and aiming to reach the Mediterranean shore, the L-L route has been the most heavily travelled track and a source of very brisk

⁷ The *hawala* is an informal credit system based on mutual trust and compliance. It is through this system that families sustain the travel of their members on the road, and they in turn, once arrived and self-established, sustain their families with remittances that avoid official channels and fees.

⁸ Such as Rue Quarante in Sebha, from N'Djamena in Chad, or *sūq* Sudan in Kufra, or *sūq* Africa in Tripoli. See Pliez 2000, 2006. Interview with Damallash, *passim*.

human traffic. From the early 1990s, reaching the Libyan coast was a mirage and a nightmare, but also a challenge and an initiation to adulthood for young migrants journeying through smugglers' stop-and-go form of travel and traffickers' delays. Along the rough 2000-mile route, migrants coming from the region of the Horn encountered all sorts of obstacles -- cultural, racial and political -- yet the urge to come out of the 'regimes of violence' and the continuous state of disarray at home made them push through both the Sahara and the Mediterranean, whose informal 'economy of violence' attracted and wearied them out as they strove to forge ahead and gather resources for continuing their travelling.

In fact, both regions offered physical as well as economic and social challenges to migrants. In the Libyan Sahara, the strong economic revival was due to the arrival of next to 1.5 million workers and migrants attracted by the open door policy inaugurated by Kaddafi in the mid-1990s to sustain the economic growth of the country⁹. The new Saharan economy that soon emerged was based on vital productive sectors such as constructions of road, housing and public infrastructure, coupled with agriculture and transport services produced by, and anchored to, an abundant supply of cheap manpower and labour supply mainly extracted at the expense of Sub-Saharan migrants whether in transit or in temporary residence. The flowering Sahara economy soon came in contact and converged with the southern regions of Mediterranean Europe (mainly Spain, Italy, and Greece) where, quite in parallel, increasing numbers of African, Asian and Eastern European migrants were competing in the long-established informal economy of agriculture, construction and domestic services. In southern Italy, particularly, the illegal migrants were to be easily absorbed by differentiated horticultural picking seasons, the construction sector, and domestic work benefitting, here too, a profit-based structure of easy-won power and wealth (Leogrande 2008). In spite of the increasing anti-foreign rhetoric publicly announced and sustained by the respective states on both sides of the Mediterranean, and by the repressive anti-migrant policies the Schengen countries imposed on their North African allies, the strong migratory flows crossing both regions were in fact tolerated, or selectively complied with, to allow the informal economies of private profit to continue.

⁹ The open door policy was stopped by the Libyan government in the early 2000s after serious racial riots took place and a series of brutal expulsions of illegal migrants opened the way to repressive anti-migrant measures long-advocated by Europe and encoded in the Libyan Italian treaty of August 2008 (Hamood 2006; De Haas 2006).

Thus, although they reflected different geo-political, cultural and social settings, the Sahara and the Mediterranean macro-regions share some strikingly common characteristics for migrants who run ~~in both cases~~ along parallel paths of constrictive, albeit transgressive, behaviour. Each macro-region is in fact both the springboard and the terminal venue of a growing informal economy, which fuels cheap labour and economic resources to its respective networks of smugglers, traders and colluded state authorities. These in turn liaise with political and economic actors operating across the national markets on both shores of the Mediterranean, each rivalling to compete within the local economy and with the world's global markets.

Within these different economic and social settings, two small localities stand out in the imaginations and memories of Sub-Saharan migrants who crossed or stumbled on them: the small oasis of Kufra in the southeast section of Libya, and the small island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, in the Mediterranean. The latter is surrounded by a vast and unforgiving desert, the former by a deep and formidable sea. As the testimonies collected for the Archive of Migrant Memories were mainly coming from Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants who had crossed or been stopped in these two localities, I will try here to describe the 'traveling pains' of the long journey across desert and sea through the voices and memories of a group of young Ethiopian men and women coming from Qirqos, one of the poorest districts of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa.

The Qirqos youths

Between the Fall of 2005 and the Summer of 2007 a group of disaffected youths mainly coming from the Addis Ababa district of Qirqos decided to leave Ethiopia in the wake of repressive government policies following contested 2005 national election results¹⁰. The stifling of the opposition and the slow growth of Ethiopian democracy was only one of the reasons pushing the Qirqos youths to leave the country. As Dagmawi Yimer states at the beginning of the film *Like a Man on Earth*, people like him and his friends were tired of living in 'a country where judges are put to prison for their judging'. In addition, the opportunities for work and social advancement were scant, and an increasing number of young people felt they simply had no future if they stayed behind. A crowded and mostly poor community with a high rate of

¹⁰ The repression of political protest in the country led to 193 people dead, several hundred wounded and 30,000 imprisoned. See Smith 2007:7.

unemployment and prostitution, Qirqos is somewhat typical of the social marginalization and destitution that pushes many urbanized youth of sub-Saharan Africa to leave friends and family in search of a brighter future (Honwana and Boeck 2005). Although the travelling youths came from different corners of town, the core group was from the Kirkos district, and it is under this name that their memories have been recorded¹¹.

My name is Adam (...). I am the fifth child (out of eight) in my family. I was born in 1989 E.C. in Addis Ababa, in the Qirqos area (...). At [school] I was able to score sufficient points to go for higher education but at that time many kids of the younger generation were leaving the country in different directions, for different reasons. Some went out to Kenya and then to South Africa. Others went to Yemen via Somalia, the rest went to Sudan and Libya. I was restless at the time. I was only 17 then. My brother, who is still living in London, used to call me and insisted on my leaving the country as everyone was doing then (Interview Adam, May 2008:1).

My name is Negga (...). I am 19 years' old and am a tenth grader. I came here because I heard a lot from other youngsters in Qirqos about people who had come over to Europe, London, Italy, also by watching western movies and TV. We knew nothing about the problems of how to get to these places, we only heard that life in Europe was beautiful; we were encouraged by all these rumors and tales to make the journey (Interview Negga, February 2008: 1).

Of the Addis Abeban youths who left at about the same time and arrived in Italy between 2006 and 2007, some were high school students who could not continue their studies, one was a 1st year law student enrolled in a private University, two were police officers who had left in disagreement with the government order to crush the post-election protest, one was an English teacher who had been imprisoned for translating opposition leaflets to foreign correspondents, two were young women looking for better job opportunities. Of the others who joined the group later on, three youngsters would die during the fateful crossing of the desert and sea, two would eventually give up and return home. The rest would arrive to Lampedusa after several stop-and-go's involving various forms of confinement and release imposed alternatively by police, smugglers and/or intermediaries along the way¹². They knew from the start that the journey through Sudan and Libya would be long and difficult:

¹¹ The recorded memories to follow are drawn from the Archive of Migrant Memories (AMM) in Rome and from the backstage production of the film *Like a man on Earth*- For an account of how the film came about; see Carsetti & Triulzi 2009: 97-132.

¹² Throughout, the European 'confinement logic' appears to have dominated both transit and destination countries (Perrin 2005:67).

At that time I heard that some of my friends were ready to go out of the country. I talked to my sister, and she said she would find some money to help me go with them. She sent me the money. Together with my friends, we made preparations (...) We were eleven youngsters from the same *safar* who had started the journey together and travelled through the Sahara for 21 days. We chose the route thorough Sudan and Libya because we thought it would be easier there to travel without documents (...) We did not want anyone to know about our intentions. We prepared our trip secretly. (Interview Dawit, February 2008:1).

The youths left Addis Ababa in small groups, at different times, not all knowing each other, or the others' decision to move out. Families were involved only rarely as a decision-making group, as in Dagmawi's case, who left without telling his father. Brothers and sisters were informed before parents. Of the unwritten 'rules of travel' that were recorded after arrival, the first three ran as follows:

1. Never travel with brothers, wives, fiancées, parents.
2. Share with closest friends only, no more than one or two persons, your intention to leave.
3. The day of departure do not say farewell to your dear ones as it may prove to be hard, if not impossible, to leave after that (Carsetti & Triulzi, 44).

Information about the travel and its difficulties were scant, basic instructions were reported in rumours or letter extracts by previous migrants and were circulated among the departing group and their families. Most travellers started their own individual odyssey with no idea of what the journey would be like. Factual information came only later, often too late. Families learned of their children's fate from an unexpected phone call informing them of a road accident, a renewed smugglers' hold-up, or a repeated request for more *hawala* money. The migrants themselves were somewhat reticent to give their families or outsiders a true account of their travel hazards, as its human cost was often too high and traumatic, and could only be divulged to a small circle of 'arrivants' (Derrida 1998). For those who arrived, to have made it did not necessarily mean success. The individual experience of violence -- forced on them by others and perpetuated by them on others-- recalls Primo Levi's description of camp survivors, either 'saved' or 'submerged' by their own process of salvation (Levi 1986).

I would not advise anyone to make this trip the way I did. If there were another way of coming, it would have been much better. I would like no one to experience what I had to go through during this journey. First of all no one should sacrifice his own life [to migrate] (...) Let alone my friends, I would not

advise even my enemy to come this way. One should experience this only to go to Paradise, not for worldly matters. If it is for this life, I would advise this experience to no one. (Interview Negga, 11-12)

Crossing the Sahara

The crossing of the Sahara desert is no easy matter even for well-equipped travellers. For migrants barely able to care for themselves, endowed with no rights or entitlements in a foreign land, the journey was riddled with traps and obstacles, some of which were beyond imagination. The first part of the trip, the odd 1000 km separating the Ethiopian highland from Khartoum, were easily covered mostly by bus, the Ethiopian youths being directed through a network of local protectors and mediators (*dallala*) to the *Habesha* (i.e., Ethiopian) district of Diem in the Sudanese capital (Le Houerou 2004). Here, the migrants were taken to ‘hospitable’ guest houses run by co-religionists who only ‘mildly taxed’ them for food, lodging and urban services. The *dallala* system of ‘guiding/robbing’ started in fact from Khartoum onwards, where migrants were welcomed by other kinds of ‘relatives’ more profitably involved in the busy traffic of humans. Ato Mesfin¹³, a man from Gondar, was the first of a long series of smugglers, service intermediaries and money-brokers who would accompany the different members of the migrant group through their diversified itineraries to the coast¹⁴:

We called Mesfin. He told us that on Monday there would be an arranged trip. The trip was supposed to take place on Monday night, but on Monday morning we heard from a friend that another group was coming from Kirkos and we thought we should wait for them. This group arrived on Wednesday. They were three. We stayed there for six days. Then on Friday night we were taken out from Mama’s house and early morning on Saturday we started our trip. On Saturday we were taken outside Omdurman: Mesfin had warned us that this would not be an entertaining trip, and that we should not complain. When we saw the open Land Rovers which were supposed to take us through the desert we thought they were too small. But we managed to get in it, even with all our belongings. We paid 200 dollars. The sitting was arranged by Mesfin. We were 45. Water, food, etc., was distributed by group; our group had nine people. We were basically all from Qirqos but there were youngsters from Megganegna and Liddeta *safar*. There were 5 Sudanese, and some Eritreans. At first we could not endure the orders given us by the Sudanese. We didn’t understand their language, they beat us whenever they wanted. And slowly, day after day, even the closeness and friendship within our group started to falter. (Interview Tsegai ‘piccolo’, February 2008:3)

¹³ See Dagmawi Yimer, *Our Journey: A Narrative, passim*.

¹⁴ On Ato Mesfin see Dagmawi Yimer, *Ibid*.

Thus, the initial Ethiopian group split several times, adapting to the vagaries of the trip and to individual reactions to it. As noted earlier, not all the members reached the planned or imagined destination: some will give up and return home, some will be imprisoned or otherwise stopped for indefinite periods during their journey; some will die on the way. Throughout, the migrants' resilience was encouraged and supported by half-guiding half-robbing intermediaries known as *dallala*, themselves former migrants who had been prevented from going any further and had turned into road mediators to make a living. Their identity and social positioning changed or alternated following the fluid rules of need and greed. The long journey, in fact, was broken into continually negotiated tracts, travelling migrants being retained and freed alternatively by different 'captors' and 'saviours' under the changeable guise of guide, mediator or policeman.

It was in the middle of the desert, near the Sudanese border, that the Ethiopian group was handed to the Libyan smugglers by the Khartoum brokers so that they would continue 'guiding' their travel into the new country. Here, several hundred miles away from Khartoum, just off the Libyan border, began the 'no man's land' where every migrant was on her/his own with no individual right, and without kin or state protection. It is here that the hard and fast rules of the profitable business of guiding and robbing were strictly implemented:

After three days of journey from Omdurman we reached a place near a very high mountain where we were to meet the Libyans (...) It was very hot at that time, and dusty. When the Libyans arrived, we were happy to see white men in the desert (...) The Sudanese and the Libyans exchanged petrol barrels, we were rounded up to meet [them]. Then the Libyans said we should pay 500 dollars each, and all of us were disturbed by this news. Those who came from Addis did not have that amount of money. Two of the Libyans were white and one was black. The nine of us who came from Addis were separated from the rest of the group. Then the Libyans said we should pay four hundred each. The Eritreans were the first to agree to settle with that amount, they were followed by the Oromo for whom even 350 would do. We from Addis said we were going to pay 200 only from there to Tripoli. Some of us did not even have that much money, we only had 150. But the Libyans said 'al hamdelillahi', you can stay here for the rest of your life'. (Interview Negga, 4)

The hard lesson of desert crossing was soon learned; illegal migrants were due to follow circular rather than straight trajectories as they were forced to go back time and again to the starting off point by the predatory rules of the smuggling economy: each new start provided ways and means to tax, abuse, or otherwise impose new levies in kind or nature, migrants being squeezed to the end before they were allowed to continue

to the next stop. There is no ready evidence of this erratic stop-and-go system, and of the imbued violence inherent in the crossing and re-crossing of entire stretches of desert and sea, except in the memory of old enslavement practices across the Sahara with their strict ‘logic of confinement’ applied equally by smugglers, traffickers and corrupt police authorities:

We were stopped, imprisoned, and sold time and again. I did not think we would be treated like donkeys, we were being sold just like objects. It reminded me of the past when we were sold [like slaves]. In Libya it is the same [today]. I could not believe it (...) After the fifth [arrest] I called my mother and told her crying that I could not bear it any longer and wanted to return. I thought the journey would simply be from Sudan to Kufra, from Kufra to the Libyan coast, and from Libya to Italy. What I did not expect was all that in between. (Interview John, backstage of *Like a Man on Earth*, March-May 2008:10-11)

Daily violence accompanied ‘all that in between’: conditions of imprisonment were intolerable for both men and women, but were especially degrading and dangerous for children and women. Men were regularly beaten on the soles of their feet, or kept in solitary confinement for any independent reaction or expression of protest against the bad quality of food or prison conditions. Women were raped in retaliation, admonishment or as mere expression of male power, children being abused as routine of an unquestioned show of force. Far-away prisons such as Kufra or Sebha in the Libyan desert were particularly inhospitable. In the words of Tighist, one of the three women interviewed during the making of the film *Like a Man on Earth*:

At Sebha we were severely beaten, men especially, on the soles of their feet. We were left aside, because we screamed, and because we were only a few. They called us *Iudii*, they snatched the crosses from our necks, and beat our heads against the wall. We tried to resist, and did not want to give our crosses away because of our religion, so they beat our heads against the wall. Some of us, men and women, had our arms and legs tied together. (Interview Tighist, backstage *Like a Man in Earth*, March-May 2008:8-9)

It was here that the informal economy of transport and violence first merged with the ‘slave economy’ of the globalized Sahara and its innumerable forms of forced impositions. After crossing the Libyan border, the physical conditions of travel worsened considerably: the Horn migrants were joined by several other groups coming from nearby regions and squeezed into overcrowded pick-ups in a state of total helplessness. People fainted, at times falling off the fast moving vehicles from

exhaustion. The smugglers' fees for the transport services -- consisting of food, water, lodging or further movement -- were continuously and erratically raised. Arrest by police on the road was often a practice agreed with the smugglers themselves, and was used both as a threat and a control practice to ensure obedience and subordination. It was followed by detention and at times deportation to the southern border areas and their thriving commercial hubs. There, arrested migrants were handed over to local entrepreneurs or colluding *dallala* who kept them at their service till they earned enough money to be able to start the journey again:

There was a Libyan mediator, called Ibrahim, who led us into the house. He told us he was expecting us, that he had bought water and food. He told us to get rest, washed, after which we could go anywhere we wanted. He told us this in a very gentle way. Then we agreed. But his look was rather suspicious. And we told him before we took our shower 'let us reach an agreement'. He said we should pay 300 [dollars] to reach Trabulus [Tripoli], and 200 for Benghazi. We said we had already paid 200. We were very angry and we said we would not pay any money. He changed dramatically when he heard this. He slammed the door on us and said 'If you don't agree with what I said I will call the police and you will be sent to prison.' (Interview Negga, 3-4)

In this way, the crossing of the desert could take from 15 days to 6 month or more depending on circuitous events, network connections, and good luck. Its human and financial cost changed accordingly. Rarely was the crossing done only once: migrants were squeezed to the last penny they had or were able to receive from their families. The final indebtedness of migrants and their external supporters -- whether they arrived or not -- was out of proportion with the possibility of paying back. The only ones who surely profited were those involved in the informal transport and slave economy thriving on forced cheap labour from persons stripped of all basic rights.

The oasis of Kufra, situated at the border of the Great Sand Desert, 300 km away from any water well (Gandini 2004:384) was the starting point and the dead end of every eastern desert crossing until the Libyan Italian Treaty of Cooperation of 2008 started having its effects. The area of Kufra was well connected to the coast by a road of about 900 km and a yet unfinished water pipe leading straight to the coast (Gandini 2004:48-9), but the smuggling of irregular migrants was mostly done at night through the old caravan and slave routes along the Great Sand desert, a much longer, harder and safer route for the traffickers' overcharged pickups and their networks of contact and support bases.

Most migrants crossing Kufra for the first time were unaware that the desert journey would be repeated several times. Many of them would soon return, trapped in the transport and slave economy of the Sahara desert: brought up north by ‘helpful’ guides, they were taken back to Kufra more than once in a vicious circle of exploitation and robbery. Guided and robbed alternatively by unscrupulous smugglers and zealous *dallala*, the various members of the Ethiopian group were stopped, arrested, freed and sold back time and again. The smugglers and their local connections employed them in manual work and held them in closed housing till they paid their debt and managed to gather more *hawala* money to start the journey again. Thus the Kirkos youths, like thousand others like them, were shuttled back and forth between Kufra and the coast until they were coerced out of their remaining savings or usable contacts. From the ‘prison-market’ of Kufra, where migrants were supposed to be expelled to neighbouring countries, they were ‘sold’ instead to covetous *dallala*. When asked how he was ‘sold’ at Kufra, Dawit gave the following answer to Dagmawi:

Usually we were sold for thirty dinars. It was a Sudanese who did it. His profit derived from the Libyans who would take you back to Tripoli. This is why you normally don’t stay in Kufra for long. For instance, if you go around in town, they may come and tell you that the police is on its way and you’d better hide in one of their houses. Then you have to spend 200 dollars to get out of there. The intermediary (*dallala*) has a cell phone he will lend you so that you can call home. You do so and ask your relatives to send the money to Mesfin in Sudan. Then you call Mesfin and tell him the name of the *dallala* you are staying with. He has someone in Sudan, often a relative, who can get the money to Mesfin. When the transaction is done, the intermediary will take you 30 km away from Kufra, and drop you in some abandoned *misrah* or agricultural set up run by a Libyan he is in touch with. There you wait for the car that will take you again to the coast. (Interview Dawit 2, backstage of *Like a Man on Earth*, March-May 2008:4)

Mediterranean crossings

Once the shuttling back and forth was over, and the desert crossing by the exhausted migrants came to an end, those who managed to reach the Libyan coast joined the others who had preceded them and squatted in groups in rented shacks around Tripoli’s outskirts or in *dallala* houses waiting till the first boat sailed out to Italy. According to oral reports, to live in a pre-war Libyan coastal town as an illegal migrant required inordinate skills and contacts. Fear of arrest dominated the daily routine of *Habesha* migrants and was a constant source of uneasiness and insecurity: one could be betrayed by a suspicious neighbour or taxi driver, or by a simple gesture, a casual dress,

a foreign accent. As soon as one got to Tripoli, the search started for a trusted intermediary in touch with reliable sea smugglers to start the lengthy negotiations for the next step of the L-L route, the risky and much-feared sea crossing:

After three trials, I reached Tripoli for the first time and went directly to Krimea where the *Habesha* used to work and live quietly. I was tired of being in and out of prison and decided to stay there for a while (...). I started working as a porter by the day. We used to take bananas and apples from a depot to a small lorry. We were given one Libyan dinar for every box of apples or other fruit that we carried. One could get about 10 dinars every hundred boxes we carried, but seven dinars went straight to the intermediaries. As I was working in this way, the time for the sea crossing arrived. I had received 1200 dollars from my family to do it. I knew it was hard for them to be asked all that money but I had no choice. So I started asking around among the local mediators whom I could trust. (Interview Negga, 7)

By this time, migrants usually had no money left, so they survived by taking little-paid, unstable and temporary small jobs in the local economy, or were recruited for odd jobs at Sūq Africa, the central market and main meeting point for all contacts and negotiations in Tripoli. Here, in order to raise the money which was needed to pay for the sea trip, one was forced to engage in highly profitable, but often illegal activities or try again for a renewed *hawala* call for additional money from home. Sub-Saharan migrants -- contrary to Maghreb or East Europeans -- had to pay their fare in advance and were not given their money back in case of accident or seizure of the boat by the police.

The payment for the sea crossing is 1,200 dollars. It is to be paid in advance without any real guarantee of success. You cannot pay just before leaving, but you have to pay weeks in advance. Once you take the money out of your pockets, you can only pray that the money is not lost. But there is no way for you to make sure of it. Actually the boat owners are rumored to be allied with the policemen themselves. If you don't pay what they ask you to pay, you will end up in prison. (Interview Dawit1, February 2008:4)

Boats used to leave the coast when there was an adequate number of paying passengers, ranging any number between 30 and 300 according to the size of the boat. The rundown boats were often entrusted to self-made captains who were appointed on the spot in exchange of a free ride or a lower fare, and were given last minute instructions for the improvised job. Because of this, many boats never reached their destination. Some were stopped before they left, some were seized in the open sea and were taken back to the port of departure, others were rescued in Italian or Maltese

waters and taken respectively to one of these two countries. In his oral memoir, Negga vividly recollects the agony of a long-awaited departure:

In the meantime the summer had arrived. There was one Sudanese mediator (...) with whom I made an arrangement that if I could get 15 people who would pay full price I could get a free crossing. I managed to find 15 people. We were taken to the departing area called *misrah* (abandoned house) near the sea. Here there were 400 people from different mediators waiting to go. In this *misrah* the only meal we could get was one bread and a little cheese. We slept on the floor, it was very close to the sea, we were very worried the police would catch us. We stayed [there] for 15 days. After that, one night, they came and said that the weather conditions were convenient. So they gathered us. There were so many mediators, some *Habesha*, some Sudanese, but the owners of the *barka* (boats) were all Libyans. We were taken to the port with a container. We travelled for a long time from the *misrah* to the port. It was a mafia-like operation. At the port there were three big outboard *gommoni* (rubber boats) on the beach. They were inflated. They said the weather was good but when we reached there the sea was rough. We prayed and were very afraid, but we could not go back after all that. We were ten from Ethiopia; the others were Sudanese, 60 people in all with our mediator. We carried the boat to the sea. Then the captain took the command and we pushed the boat into the sea. When the boat was well into the sea we jumped into it. By this time we were 72 people, and everyone was trying to embark first. There were fights to get in. The boat was for 50 people, but we were 72, so after the engine went on we saw it could not go very fast. (Interview Negga, 9)

Negga eventually managed to arrive safely in Lampedusa, but it is no wonder that many did not, including three boys from the old Qirqos group. Since then, many more men, women and children have lost their lives during the fateful sea crossing, particularly after the opening of the military operations over Libya in March 2011. Here again, the closing of a migratory route usually means the opening of a more costly and risky diversion for migrants in their attempt to go through. Yet the logic of violence and forced confinement remains unaffected. It is this system that, today, is the cause of the increasing casualties in both desert and sea:

Both the crossing of the desert and the sea are tough. The difference is that while you are in the desert, if something happens, you can stop and wait for help. But this is impossible at sea. There are so many people who died in the sea, many more so than in the desert. People see their relatives die in front of their eyes. This is why it is better that my brother and I did the crossing in separate journeys. It would have been unbearable otherwise. (Interview Dawit 1, February 2008:5)

During the 1911 NATO operations over Libya, the L-L route has been temporarily blocked and made inactive. As the conflict raged however over the Libyan

skies and on the ground, the number of migrant as well as civilian losses dramatically increased, as did the number of dead bodies surfacing in the Mediterranean¹⁵. The worsening sea and transport conditions were only partly responsible for the rise of the death toll. This was also due to Kadafi's decision to hurriedly drive into the sea several thousand harmless Sub-Saharan migrants stranded in Tripoli as a retaliation to the war, and to the guarded efforts by the NATO contingents at sea to avoid 'interfering' with irregular migrants crossings the Sicilian Channel. It is a sad irony that, while NATO forces daily bombed Kadafi's headquarters and military installations in Tripolitania, thousands of new irregular migrants were hurriedly driven to Italy in an attempt to counteract the international 'humanitarian' intervention and punish the old Italian ally. The L-L route may have been temporarily disrupted, first by the Italian-Libyan containment policies, and later by the side-effects of the NATO war, but there is no doubt that its deadly effects will continue in the years to come.

¹⁵ In the first six months of 2011, recorded losses in the Sicilian Channel went over 1600, bringing the total amount of registered losses in the Mediterranean in the last fifteen years at about 15,000. The percentage of deaths among irregular migrants attempting to reach Lampedusa has been calculated at 11%. See <http://fortre-esseurope.blospot.com> accessed 3 June 2011. Major shipwrecks on the Sicilian Channel occurred on 14 March (601 dead), 22 March (335), 6 April (250), 6 May (600), and 3 June (250). During the same period, 25,000 refugees from Tunisia and 15,000 more from Libya landed in Lampedusa. See *la Repubblica* 3.06.2011, 19.

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