Precarious Mobility: Infrastructures of Eritrean migration through the Sudan and the Sahara Desert

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Abstract

This paper explores migrants' experiences and their specific practices geared towards negotiating migration barriers and the effects of externalization. Contemporary migration from Eritrea is shaped by changing migrant aspirations, expanding networks of intermediaries and socioeconomic challenges. This is compounded by the European Union's (EU) externalization of border controls and limited opportunities for legal migration paths. In this context, a vast majority of Eritrean young men and women opt for overland exits through dangerous and long trails across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea until they arrive in Europe. The irregular transitions and stepwise mobility are facilitated by the interactions of actors, mainly smugglers, family members in one's homeland, former migrants en route and in the diaspora as well as the local people along the trails, which I call infrastructures of migratory mobility. The paper argues that migrants and their communities develop and use alternative mobility infrastructures by establishing a transnational knowledge community to navigate increasing migration controls in origin and transit countries, as well as the externalization of European borders and migratory controls.

Keywords Migration infrastructure, journey, transition, Eritrea, smuggling, knowledge, externalization.

Introduction

> *Our dream is to reach Europe at any cost. Look at what is happening here [Sudan]….The police chase us everywhere in Khartoum. We must leave soon…. We cannot go back to Eritrea.... Staying here is also dangerous.... I pray to find a good 'semsari'[1] [lit. smuggler in Arabic] and a good co-traveller. I am gathering information about routes, smugglers, timing,*

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[1] *Semsari:* A term used for persons who informally arrange travel documents or transport services for migrants in exchange for money. Migrants also use the term alternatively with delaloch when they are in Libya, Sudan or other Middle Eastern countries. Semsaris or delalochs also arrange domestic work for migrant women in the Sudan, Libya and Italy.

> *how to behave during interactions with smugglers, how to hide money, which clothes, medicine and food to carry. I am also waiting for my sister from Germany to send me money to pay the 'semsari' who would assist us to cross the desert.*

The vignette above was narrated by an Eritrean migrant named Meqdi, who was in her 30s when I met her in Khartoum, Sudan, in April 2016. She was mobilizing resources to cross the desert from Khartoum. Her situation was not an isolated case. It was a typical example of how, in the context of challenging socio-economic and political conditions in origin and transit countries and limited availability of paths for legal migration, young male and female migrants from Eritrea strive to organize precarious journeys across deserts and seas.

This paper discusses the emergence and role of irregular migration facilitating infrastructures that support and sustain Eritreans migrating to Europe and their transition experiences in the Sudan in the context of the European Union's (EU) increasing efforts to externalize border controls. By transition I mean an onward migratory mobility through transit spaces. The discussion is based on empirical data from the field that show specific resources and knowledge used by migrants to keep moving, despite the stated impediments.

Since 2000, the Sudan and Libya have been both destination and transition countries for Horn of African migrants and asylum seekers who use the north-western migration routes towards Europe via the Sudan, the Eastern Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea. However, the journey is unpredictable and migrants face uncertainty and violence at every step of their journeys and transitions, particularly in Libya. The migratory journeys across the Sahara Desert have always been risky (Dinbabo and Carciotto, 2015; Dinbabo and Nyasulu, 2015; Triulzi and Mackenzie, 2013: 219). However, the level, types and intensity of violence have recently become more complex, particularly after the Libyan civil wars. The situation has deteriorated further with the EU's insistence on tightening the control of its external borders with the Mediterranean Sea and Libya. It has created a legal and security vacuum where various criminal groups take advantage of the increasing number of migrants who try to cross the desert and enter Libya for subsequent mobility towards Italy or beyond (cf. Reitano, 2015).

In addition, countries such as Ethiopia and the Sudan cooperate with the EU in border controls as they introduce tough border control strategies including

seizing and imprisoning Eritrean migrants irregularly transiting through their territories (cf. Gaibazzi et al., 2017; Mengiste, 2017). This indicates not just tightened border control in Europe but the diffusion of border control practices from Europe to Africa. Because of these measures and the structural violence manifested via the unequal access to safe migration channels between citizens of the global north and those of the south, a migration journey to Europe requires more resources than before, not only in terms of finance but also with regard to reliable information and useful connections with former migrants stationed *en route* and those settled in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, migrants are not just victims of this direct and structural violence and the impediments erected along their treks. They have a collective practice in producing and sharing relevant knowledge, finance and other resources by multiplying the effectiveness of individual capacity to enhance their safety and welfare and to keep moving (cf. Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016). Migrants and their communities design alternative mobility strategies by mobilizing irregular migration facilitation infrastructures (cf. Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). These include support from their family in the diaspora, smugglers and local people along the route, which becomes a transnational knowledge community (see also Mengiste, 2018). This article explores how migrants survive violence and how they organize their migration by mobilizing knowledge, finance, and smuggling services at different phases of their journeys. The next section elaborates the underlining socio-economic and political conditions of mass migration from Eritrea.

Background/Contextualization

Eritrea has recently become one of the leading refugee-sending countries in the world, mainly towards Europe. Between 2013 and 2016, Eritreans constituted about 20 percent of migrants entering Italy by sea (Frouws, 2017) and from 2013 until 2017 about 104,415 Eritreans arrived in Italy by sea (UNHCR, 2018). However, Eritreans have been fleeing war and conflict since the 1960s: first they experienced a 30-year-long war of independence from Ethiopia (between 1960 and 1991), which was compounded by recurrent drought and famine that generated about 1 million Eritrean refugees scattered throughout the world. Many of the early refugees settled along transit countries such as Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Libya. Contemporary migration routes that link Eritrea with Europe, are extending financial support and information to newly arriving migrants. Many of the young people from contemporary Eritrea are dissatisfied with the growing economic inequalities,

prolonged conflicts and repressive political conditions. The introduction of open-ended and not rendering compulsory military service also put the vast majority of Eritrean youth in a prison-like situation (see Belloni, 2015). They are also lured by diasporic remittances from receiving countries, mainly in Europe, or "returnees' prosperity" and are driven by social and familial expectations. State persecutions and human rights violations in contemporary Eritrea lead to an increasing number of refugee flights (Treiber, 2014; Campbell, 2014; Belloni, 2016). There are smugglers and their connectors and several other actors that emerge and engage in mediating barriers and organize departure and mobility.

In addition, the regime has not only inadvertently caused an increase in the flight of asylum seekers but also designed strategies to sustain them, for example, through remittances sent back by the exiled community (Tecle and Goldring, 2013). Within this context, risky migration departures and reaching a perceived better refugee receiving country, mainly in Europe, have become a part of the societal norm as well as personal and family hopes to survive and thrive in such uncertain socio-political environments (Kibreab, 2013; Belloni, 2016).

This, in turn, is compounded by the EU's increasing efforts to stop migratory journeys towards Europe by introducing various externalization strategies of border controls such as intercepting migrants and refugees *en route* and forced deportation. European borders have penetrated deep into African territories as the EU has begun collaborating with African states to impede the migration of Africans to Europe. This has drastically altered well-established regional population movements within Africa (Andersson, 2014; Menjívar, 2014; Kleist, 2017).

The EU forcefully implemented its externalization programs by engaging countries such as Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea to fight irregular Eritrean and other east African migratory journeys across their territories (Stern, 2015). To generate the promised economic and diplomatic gains from the EU's externalization strategies, the Sudan and Egypt introduced tighter border controls in 2014. They began shutting down human smuggling routes that connect Eritrea, the Sudan, Egypt, Libya, the central Mediterranean Sea and Italy. They also continuously intercept Eritrean asylum seekers passing through their territories and deport them back to Eritrea and Ethiopia (Mengiste, 2017).

However, depriving formal channels of mobility across territorial spaces in the era of 'global interconnections' has forced many of the youth from Eritrea to find alternative informal, dynamic and defiant means of mobility, often at the expense of their lives (cf. Triulzi and McKenzie, 2013; Belloni, 2016). Dynamic informal migration strategies and facilitating infrastructures have developed to fill this gap between expectations and opportunities of migration and mobility. However, the above discussion does not mean that migrants chose mobility because of political and socioeconomic challenges, all at the same time. For each individual, one of the factors is more important and compelling than others. In addition, one condition results in the other. For instance, political challenges and dictatorship may result in economic deprivations and desperations. Thus, the focus of this section is not to explain causes of migration in Eritrea, but rather to show the forces behind or the context of Eritrean asylum seekers' flight. The sections below empirically highlight how individual strategies, the flow of information and the flow of money are affected by the externalization measures and how they also help to mitigate externalization effects and all kinds of impediments and risks along the migration trails.

Conceptual Framework

The paper analyses the material using two concepts: the notion of structural violence and migration infrastructure. The theory of structural violence explains how structural inequalities (political and economic) systematically deny some people their basic human needs and rights (Ho, 2007). It defines violence as the avoidable disparity between the potential ability to fulfil basic needs and their actual fulfilment. The theory further constitutes the unequal share of power to decide over the distribution of resources as the pivotal causal factor of these avoidable structural inequalities (Ho, 2007). The theory of structural violence provides a useful framework for the understanding of structural violations of global inequalities that lead to violence. These include limited access to safe migration paths for Africans, through an examination of how structures (such as border regimes, poverty, political crises, globalization) constrain migrants' agency to the extent that migrants' fundamental human needs are constrained during clandestine journeys.

The renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman noted the unintended and uncontrollable consequences or risks related to contemporary globalization processes. He argued that globalization divides as much as it unites by making the poor poorer, while the rich become richer and those in the middle suffer

from "existential uncertainty, anxiety and fear as a result" (Bauman, 1998: 4). Bauman asserts that the freedom of mobility promoted by globalization is not equally distributed across the world and certain sections of the population. He further stated that "mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or post-modern times" (Bauman, 1998: 2). In transnational migration, context violence refers to structural inequalities that deprive people of access to valued resources, including legal paths of migration and hence forces them to take dangerous migration routes (see Holmes, 2013: 43-88). It is violence committed by configurations of global inequalities that, in the end, lead to deprivations and physical and psychological injuries. Clandestine migrants also experience violence directly, as they often encounter physical, sexual and labour abuses during the migration process (Lucht, 2012; Mengiste, 2017).

To organize migration and survive these violent conditions, migrants mobilize the necessary resources from migration facilitation infrastructures. Xiang and Lindquist (2014: 124) define migration infrastructure as "the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and control mobility". In the context of restrictive immigration regulations at destinations globally and externalizing border control practices towards transit lands, migration can be viewed as procedural, multidirectional and self-adjusting movement. Accordingly, migration is mediated by the involution of the regulatory, humanitarian and facilitation elements of the migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014).

In this regard, the rise of an international regulatory environment and externalization of border control practices have led to a renewed and broad scholarly concern with the migration industry and infrastructures (Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013; Andersson, 2014). However, the migrant has long been left out of this concept of the migration industry, which pays little attention to migrants' active and passive agency in mobilising migration resources and the diverse and dynamic relationships that emerge between migrants and smugglers (Herman, 2006; Mengiste, 2018). This study goes beyond the business dimensions and adopts a broader approach, recognizing the entanglement of social and smuggling networks, migration knowledge production and mobilizing financial support from the diaspora. This helps migrants to survive the risks and to mediate barriers related to the EU's

externalization practices including tracking, intercepting, detaining and deporting migrants back to their countries of origin (see Gaibazzi et al., 2017).

This migration facilitation infrastructure becomes important in organizing migratory journeys from the Horn of Africa towards Europe. It becomes the "spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities" (Hannam et al., 2006: 3). As demonstrated in the empirical section of this paper, the practice of human smuggling and organizing overland migration partly thrives on being embedded in diasporic transnational social spaces, material practices and migration knowledge production, which collectively build up a transnational knowledge community of migration.

While the term transnational knowledge community does not disregard the violence and suffering encountered by migrants and refugees, it can be used to understand the shared practices of producing a body of information pertaining to and allowing for past, on-going and future experiences of migration as constituting a collective system of knowledge. It goes without saying that migrants' knowledge is incomplete and partial to combat all types of threats and risks; however, it is constantly improvised and updated within the community of mobility. Some groups of migrants are well connected to diasporic networks that generate material and economic support. However, as demonstrated in the empirical section, those migrants who have no connections of this kind also generate support from fellow travellers, helpful locals as well as former migrants or co-nationals settled in transit locations (cf. Kleinman, 2014; Mengiste, 2018).

This kind of translocal relations and infrastructural practices enable Eritrean migrants to design their own strategies and ways of navigating the system to survive and access remunerative work *en route*. The translocal connection is an ambiguous space of experiences and agency, a space that does not exist in an absolute form but is created by the interconnections of mobile people, ideas and objects during the migration journeys (see Mengiste, 2017).

Methods of the Study

This paper is part of a larger research project based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Stockholm (Sweden), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Khartoum (Sudan) and Rome (Italy), conducted between 2014, 2016 and 2018 but this paper focuses on the African part of the study. These cities were chosen because they are both main destinations and transition nodes of Eritrean migration, and they are located along the overland migration routes

that link Eritrea with main European destination countries such as Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK) (see Mengiste, 2017). The ethnography produced from the African part of the study and used for this paper consists of 94 in-depth interviews with interlocutors (migrants, brokers, border guards and non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel) composed of an almost equal number of women and men, including 35 detailed individual migration narratives. Five smugglers were also interviewed, each providing insights into a particular leg of migration pathways. Primary data findings were supplemented through reviewing research, policy and critical media reports on contemporary migratory mobility from the Horn of Africa and practices of human smuggling across Euro-African borderlands and beyond.

I also had several informal discussions with migrants in the stated research sites and other locations such as Malmö in Sweden and London in the United Kingdom. I carried out participant observations, including extensive casual conversations with refugees, brokers, and smugglers in reception camps, homes, churches, neighbourhoods, squats, restaurants, workplaces and a variety of other settings in Addis Ababa, Khartoum, and Rome. This method helped me to generate data on migrants' transition experiences and the role of communication technologies, brokers and smugglers in facilitating their onward mobility. Informal conversations opened up opportunities to recruit key participants who were willing to describe the organization of migratory journeys from Eritrea to Europe. I conducted interviews while sitting, standing, walking and eating with the interlocutors. In fact, participant observations and informal conversations went hand-in-hand when I conducted fieldwork in the refugee reception centre in Stockholm, migrant neighbourhoods, mainly in Khartoum and Addis Ababa and squats in Rome. I referenced a list of key themes and questions during the interviews to generate the required information related to migration conditions, facilitation actors, networks and their roles. Nevertheless, interlocutors were allowed to propose issues and events they believed were important in the immigration process. I employed life history narrative techniques to generate data on the various stages of migration.

As a follow-up, I conducted telephone interviews with my interlocutors regarding their experiences in Libya, Italy and Germany and also with asylum seekers in the Märsta refugee reception centre in northern Stockholm but who were transferred to other municipalities in Sweden. Because of the mobile nature of my study subjects, I ensured taking their telephone numbers and

established online connections with them via Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber. I actively conducted follow-ups using old, new and social media during all phases of this project (e.g. data collection and write-up processes) to remain updated about the latest developments in the 'migration and refugee crises', mainly along the Euro-African borderlands and within Europe. Through the migrant biographies in Sweden and the UK and shorter fieldwork stints in the transition nodes in Addis Ababa, Khartoum and Rome, I managed to track, trace and map the process of migrants' mobility across the origin, transition and destination locations.

Results and Findings

Process of Departures: Leaving Eritrea

Clandestine overland migration from Eritrea requires careful planning, money and accumulated knowledge. In general, the necessary knowledge and information about the 'safest ways of escape from Eritrea' are obtained from former migrants *en route* and in the diaspora, using cell phones and social media. The overland departure routes and different actors that organize the journey towards the Sudan are located in Ethiopia and Eritrea and link Eritrean villages and towns to the city of Khartoum in the Sudan. This in turn forms a transnational social space that reproduces clandestine migratory exits from Eritrea.

Before departure, Eritrean migrants spend months to years gathering the necessary migration knowledge. This shows that the decision to leave Eritrea is dangerous, given that its government criminalized migration. The journey to Europe is riskier and longer, partly due to the EU's external border enforcements. Before the peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018, the Eritrean regime followed 'shoot-to-kill policies' for migrants attempting to cross the border with Ethiopia. Even though the borders have recently legally opened up and freer movement of the population is made possible, in practice, free mobility of younger people from Eritrea to Ethiopia or the Sudan is not possible as the Eritrean regime still maintains the compulsory open-ended national service for the youth. The escaping youth are labelled 'traitors' and are hence often exposed to imprisonment or torture.

Due to the irregular and clandestine nature of the mobility across the highly risky Eritrean-Ethiopian and Eritrean-Sudanese border zones, which is partly related to EU intervention and collaboration with migrant-sending and transit countries in east Africa in border controls, secrecy is a necessity for the

survival of the migrant (cf. Alpes, 2012). It took four years of learning and preparation for the 26-year-old Yordi and her husband to leave Eritrea. She stated, "I decided to leave the country. But, it took four years of preparation to escape Asmara." Migrants claim that in Eritrea, it is difficult to know who is a friend or a foe. Even one's own close relative may be a *siliya* (a spy for the government) and may expose migrants' escape plans to the regime. Migrants could end up in prison for unlimited periods of time. Yordi further noted, "The most important thing is finding a reliable 'pilot'" (a smuggler who guides migrants all the way to the borders). Finally, her husband's friends who were former migrants in Ethiopia put Yordi's husband in touch with a 'pilot' named Kibru, via the internet. Kibru had lived in the border areas and crossed the Ethiopian borders before the war. He knew every detail of the 'safest routes to Ethiopia'. Yordi said that she dressed in black pretending to go to a funeral outside the city. She styled her hair like a rural girl, made up her face and hid any traces of an urban look on her body, to ensure that she did not attract attention from the soldiers and security people. This shows that during escapes, Eritrean migrants use particular forms of visibility and invisibility strategies in order to move across closed borders.

Migrants attempting clandestine crossings at the Eritrean-Ethiopian and Eritrean-Sudanese borders do not simply run away independently when they are desperate (Mengiste, 2017). Rather, their flights are gradual and processual, which requires accumulated knowledge and networks of help embedded in and generated from relations and a range of actors in the locations of origin and in the diaspora. This illustrates that brokering migratory exits involve elements of migration facilitation infrastructures such as communication technologies, state actors and translocal and transnational social relations that produce the necessary migration knowledge, finance and smuggling services (cf. Spener, 2004; Andersson, 2014; Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Thus, migratory departures are not an act of moving but a process that requires context-specific substantial resources and know-how.

In addition, the clandestine departures from Eritrea and overland journeys towards Khartoum in the Sudan, are dangerous mainly due to kidnappings by criminal Bedouin Rashaida tribes for ransom (see Belloni, 2015), environmental hazards such as hot and arid deserts and interceptions and detentions by the Eritrean regime. The migrants therefore need migration facilitators such as 'pilots' that guide them through safe passages. Yordi noted, "The 'pilots' are our visa to exit Eritrea. They are our saviours!" This indicates

that the process of escape facilitated by smugglers is, contrary to the mainstream narratives of exploitation and crime, far from being perceived as exploitative by migrants. Rather, smugglers and migrants conceptualize the facilitation of migrants' clandestine departures as a mechanism that allows those in transit to be guarded against criminal organizations, environmental challenges and restrictive migration regimes. The specific resources and knowledge produced and reproduced by prospective migrants and migration facilitators enable the migrant departures in the context where externalization operates together with internal measures such as criminalization of emigration in Eritrea, put in place by the authoritarian state. This also shows that, because of restrictive border controls, smuggling becomes not only a small-scale migration facilitation industry along state borders, but also an element embedded in the web of social relations within the migrant community (see Spener, 2004).

The EU externalization policy has increased the vulnerabilities and risks of Eritrean migrant departures. Following a collaborative border management platform between the EU and east African countries, the Sudan and Ethiopia increased border control measures including interceptions and deportations of Eritrean migrants along the existing overland migration routes that link Eritrea with the Sudan and Ethiopia (see Mengiste, 2017). To escape state interception, Eritrean migrants take longer and dangerous journeys in order to arrive in the Sudan. Some of the interlocutors on this research project stated that they moved northwards from Asmara and other towns in northern Eritrea and passed through several towns to enter Port Sudan, and then to Khartoum by walking for months along dangerous lowland deserts. This has exposed migrants to various kinds of risks including robberies, kidnappings by Bedouin Rashaida pastoralists in eastern Sudan for ransom and attacks by hyenas (see Belloni, 2015; Mengiste, 2017, 2018). This indicates that the cooperation between the EU and non-European countries on migration and border control could lead to serious human rights violations and migrant vulnerabilities instead of stopping mobility.

Migrant Vulnerabilities in Sudan and Decisions to Cross the Desert

The Sudan has historically been a major destination of Eritrean migrants during the liberation war and after the independence of Eritrea. Since the early 2000s, Eritrean migrants have been joining their friends, relatives, neighbours and other Eritreans residing in Kassala, Port Sudan, Gedaref and Khartoum (Hassanen, 2007; Kibreab, 2013). From 2003 – after the Eritrean regime

introduced restrictive emigration laws including criminalizing migratory departures – to the time of writing this article, 1,600 Eritreans have crossed the border and entered the Sudan every month (Kibreab, 2013; Mengiste, 2017, 2018). However, new arrivals often come to the Sudan using Khartoum as a stepping-stone and proceed towards European countries that are assumed to be refugee welcoming nations (cf. Belloni, 2016). However, the old, the sick, those who have well established family members in Sudan and those who have acquired businesses and obtained Sudanese citizenship in various ways, remain in the Sudan (see Mengiste, 2017).

As discussed in detail below, many newly-arrived Eritrean migrants in Khartoum are undocumented and informally engage in various income-generating activities. Similar to other contexts of deportable and thus easily exploitable labour, migrants suffer many forms of abuse and exploitation. Women migrants are overworked, denied of their salary and lack access to healthcare. They claim that they are also physically and emotionally abused, bearing insults, threats of attacks and ultimatums perpetrated by employers. The police repeatedly ask them for *butaqa* (identification) and threaten to imprison them if they do not pay bribes.

Migrants claim that in 2014 and 2015 social exclusion, police harassment and economic exploitation became more frequent. This crackdown on irregular migrants and refugees in the Sudan is related to the internal crises in the Sudan and the pressure from the EU's externalization practices via the Khartoum process. Through the Khartoum process, both Ethiopia and the Sudan receive direct and indirect support from the EU in terms of logistical facilities and development aids in exchange for preventing would-be migrants from migrating. The EU gives states incentives for ensuring that individuals remain in the Sudan or Ethiopia or for keeping asylum seekers in refugee camps and for introducing physical or legal barriers, including migrant apprehensions (interdictions, interceptions, or 'turn-backs') (Stern, 2015; Mengiste, 2017). This has made the traditional population movements, including migration across the Sudanese, Ethiopian and Eritrean borders more difficult, compared to previous decades.

Many of the Eritrean migrants I met in the Sudan said they were planning to leave the country. My informant, Meqdi, told me that she and her Eritrean partner, Solomon, had been preparing to migrate to another country for the past four years. Meqdi was tired of the situation in Khartoum. Every day, the police would round up, detain and impose penalties on undocumented

Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants. Meqdi and many other Eritrean women who sold coffee and tea on street corners were most vulnerable. In 2015 alone, the police detained her twice, imposed a penalty and confiscated her stall equipment. She had been anxiously waiting to hear about the decision on Solomon's family reunification visa for Canada:

> *I am tired! Have you seen the giffa [police rounding up and detaining migrants] today? I have lost hope! I should leave soon! It is taking longer. I can't wait! I do not want to miss this season. All my friends have reached Europe. I have prepared all necessary things to cross the desert!*

Meqdi was determined, like many other Eritrean overland migrants entering the Sudan, to reach Europe by crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Migrants complained about skyrocketing rental and housing costs, deteriorating employment opportunities, frequent arbitrary detentions and demands for bribes by the police. Christian interlocutors mentioned that they experienced increased xenophobia from local Muslim Sudanese. Following the EU externalization of border controls to the Sudan, mass arrests and deportations of Ethiopian and Eritrean undocumented migrants and refugees who had moved illegally to the city were the order of the day when I was in Sudan in May 2015 and 2016. The police would suddenly round up migrants on the streets or raid their neighbourhoods at night, pile them into trucks, transport them to Kasala, a town on the Eritrean-Sudanese border, or other remote areas and offload them there.

In the face of social, economic, political and cultural exclusions, many of my informants felt that they were stuck: they could not return because of the social, political and economic challenges in their homeland, nor could they easily move forward. Staying in the Sudan was equally dangerous given the high probability of deportations. Similar to many refugees in other countries resettlement in a well-off third country through the support of the UNHCR was either inaccessible for many of the Eritrean asylum seekers or complicated and time-consuming in the Sudan for various reasons, including corruption (Hassanen, 2007; Treiber, 2013, 2014). Thus, the Sahara Desert becomes the only way out for migrants in order to keep moving.

As elaborated in the examples below, while they were in Khartoum, many migrants were also engaged in income-generating activities until they met a smuggler, found co-travellers and cultivated other necessary resources for the journey to cross the borders.

Sharing and Reciprocity among Migrants in Khartoum

The accounts of a female migrant, Samrawit, demonstrate how migrants in transit countries generate assistance and resources from former migrants who settled in Khartoum. When I met Samrawit, she was in her late 30s. Samrawit first moved from Asmara to Ethiopia with the help of 'pilots' and then to Khartoum by securing a tourist visa which was arranged by a *delala* (broker) in Addis Ababa for a fee of 18,000 Birr (about 750 USD). She lived clandestinely in Khartoum for four years, as her tourist visa had expired. She got a cleaning job informally at a private school with the help of her friends and families in the Sudan. When I was in Khartoum, she was accommodating three cousins and a woman named Semhal, a former neighbour and friend in Asmara. All four moved to Khartoum after living in the Shagarab refugee camp for three weeks. Smugglers arranged their clandestine trip from the camp to the city. Samrawit shared her rooms and food and provided information she assumed was helpful to survive in Khartoum. She told them how to move around, use public transport, meet *delala,* how to behave towards the police and how to bribe them when necessary. Samrawit asserted that it is her social duty to help her kin and fellow Eritrean migrants:

> *It is my responsibility to help them as much as possible. When I arrived in Khartoum, others did the same for me. It is my turn now to help others […] I have to do what I can do for them until they find ways to settle here or move to another country. Every Eritrean migrant does the same in every step of the journey … in Ethiopia, in Sudan, in Libya, even in Italy.*

Samrawit's accounts reflect ethnic solidarity, kinship obligations and reciprocal relations developed along the transition spaces. These are important resources that configure the organization of contemporary irregular migratory journeys from the Horn of Africa towards the EU and beyond. Social ties *en route*, according to Samrawit's accounts, not only provide useful information and material support, but also generate hope of surviving the journey and keep migrants moving. Community ties are sources of knowledge on how to navigate between the labour market, strict border controls, smuggling services, the Sudanese migration or refugee regimes as well as police violence and brutality (cf. de Genova, 2002; Mengiste, 2017). Thus, it is an important element of migration facilitation infrastructure that is reproduced in transit locations via translocal social relations (Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013; Xiang and Lindquist, 2014).

Before the EU tightened its migration policies and externalized border controls to African states, there was huge migratory mobility from Sub-Saharan African countries towards Libya via the Sudan without much difficulty (see Triulzi and Mackenzie, 2013). However, following the externalization, smugglers that facilitated migration through the Sahara Desert found out 'new' but dangerous and long routes along the Chad territory which in turn exposed migrants to environmental hazards and abuses by criminals (cf. Mengiste, 2017; Gaibazzi et al., 2017).

Thus, before their departure from Khartoum, migrants generate information from multiple sources, including former migrants who had settled *en route*, those who managed to arrive in Europe, smugglers, local people and failed migrants as the journeys traverse multiple locations and risk factors. Migrants constantly learn and differentiate between information that is valuable or not, in managing their journeys. Migrants *en route* establish intimate relations with co-travellers and smugglers to cultivate and maximize their individual and collective agency, survive violence, keep moving and cross borders. Even strategic spousal relations are used as a migration strategy through which male and female migrants help each other by generating, for example, money, charity and protection. The sharing practices and knowledge production in transit spaces become an important element of the migration facilitation infrastructure. It serves as a means for migrants to overcome immobility regimes resulting mainly from the diffusion of border controls from Europe to transit places in Africa. These transition practices further indicate that each step of transnational migration mediation encompasses multiple layers of social relations, values, imprints of the past and imaginations of the future.

Preparing to Cross the Sahara: Meeting the Desert Smugglers

When migrants decide to cross the Sahara Desert with the help of smugglers, they must gather the necessary information from their contacts in Khartoum and abroad. They try to talk to many people they assume have useful information at every possible occasion, for example, at the church and workplace, to minimize the perceived risks in the desert, Libya, the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, which indicates the unpredictability of the journey. Many of the migrants prefer to stay in the Sudan or move to other destinations such as the Middle East and South Africa, rather than crossing the desert.

After the Sudan introduced tough migration control policies partly due to the pressure from the EU to block east African migrants' transitions via the Sudan,

migrants and smugglers established underground 'migration shops' in Khartoum (cf. Mengiste, 2017). There were some Ethiopian and Eritrean electronic and clothing shops in the neighbourhood of Sahafa Sherig and surrounding areas in Khartoum. Those shops were also the places where the newly arriving and established migrants planning to move to other places met different brokers of Eritrean and Ethiopian origin, referred to as *semsari* in the Sudan. Some of the *semsari* are shop and other business owners but they work as connectors of migrants with the Sudanese and Libyan smugglers. Here, migrants negotiate prices with *semsari* to travel to Libya or buy passports with forged visas to enter Europe or other destinations and collect remittances transferred through *hawala*[2] money transfers and credit networks from families abroad. Remittance in foreign currency is exchanged on the black market. The shops connect migrants, smugglers and migrant families abroad or in the diaspora as well as employers in the Sudan and in other countries. This type of shop is an alternative liminal space carved out by migrants and their needs and thus, is truly a 'migration shop'. I refer to such places in migration trails as 'transition nodes', which are places where newly arriving migrants meet former migrants, brokers, informal money transfer agents and other actors to gather information and resources to organize transitions and subsequent journeys. The police regularly raid these areas to corner and detain undocumented migrants, partly with the intention of collecting fines and bribes.

Choosing 'good smugglers' can be difficult, given the rumours of success and failure circulating in the migrant community. Some important questions raised by potential migrants include: Whose boat is it and how many entered Europe safely, traversing EU border control infrastructures in the Mediterranean Sea? Which *semsari* rescued migrants from criminal kidnappers in the desert and has wider contacts with the Sudanese and Libyan bigger smuggling rings? Which *semsari* has the 'best *misras*' (lit. safe houses) in the desert and in Libya? However, except the connectors, no one knows the exact whereabouts of the bigger smugglers (bosses). One of my informants in the Sudan said that *semsari*s are like winds – they are everywhere and nowhere. They go by different names and constantly change their names, phone numbers and other

[2] *Hawala:* The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (5th ed.) defines hawala as an "informal system for transferring money, especially across borders, in which local agents disperse or collect money or goods on behalf of friends, relatives, or other agents without legal protection or supervision, trusting that all remaining obligations will be settled through future transactions." From < https://bit.ly/2DuC8Pz> (retrieved 21 December 2018).

contact details. Former migrants *en route* and those who managed to enter destinations in Europe using the same route also guide prospective migrants and put them in contact with connecters and human smugglers. Migrants generally prefer a *semsari* from their own ethnic background or hometown. This increases their confidence and trust in the smuggler that he would be more humane to them during the journey. This indicates that migrants have voices in the smuggling processes and their relations with smugglers are diverse and complex (Van Liempt and Doomernik, 2006).

Mesi, a 28-year-old Eritrean migrant woman, was selling coffee on a street corner when I met her in Khartoum in 2015. She told me how she and other Eritrean migrants meet smugglers in Khartoum.

> *We make and serve coffee in an Eritrean way, smoking Etan [lit. incense]. We also serve shisha together with coffee. All kinds of migrants, including brokers visit these coffee shops. It is a meeting ground for us to gather information about good brokers and how to contact them. It was here that I contacted the semsari, Kibrom. He was a popular semsari from Eritrea and has worked with a reputable delela, Abdirzak, in Libya. Kibrom became a friend and arranged my trip to Libya on discount. I am working until we depart in the summer.*

The Sudan also has other irregular transition opportunities for migrants and refugees stranded there. The highly corrupted state systems, mainly the security and the police, also engage in human smuggling, exploiting the poorly controlled but vast geographical borderlands the country shares with Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt and Chad, which makes it an ideal place for the overland human smuggling industry to flourish (cf. Triulzi and Mackenzie, 2013). However, the EU is trying its best to convince and collaborate with the Sudanese government to close the migration routes that pass through the Sudanese territory. The EU, with various agreements, including the Khartoum process and development aids, helps Sudan by funding the border infrastructure at 17 crossing points. The Sudanese government militia, the Rapid Support Force (RSF), is tasked with preventing border crossings. With EU support, the Sudan also increased joint-border management as already tried between Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Sudan. In addition, the EU money goes towards the financing of the border police in the Sudan, purchasing equipment for a training centre in Khartoum, and securing cars, cameras, and computers at crossing points (Stern, 2015; Mengiste, 2017). Border guards and security

people of the Sudan see these EU externalization measures as a support to strengthen the Sudanese internal security and also boost the importance of their task as border controllers (cf. Andersson, 2014).

The smugglers use their networks to design new and alternative mobility strategies. They gather and share information in reaction to the effects/impact of the EU externalization measures, including the changing situation at the border infrastructure, the legal infrastructure and the securitization context along the migration trail. As discussed below, smugglers and migrants also continuously update each other on the tightening of border control practices and collectively devise strategies to use new mobility routes and timings of the journey. According to my interlocutors, big Eritrean and Ethiopian smugglers (bosses) are often based in Libya and organize the migration remotely. However, after the EU externalization of border controls, they began to commute between Khartoum and Libya to gather migrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea through their intermediaries and collectors at various stages of the journey. Each smuggler has 10-15 brokers (intermediaries) in Khartoum, Matama (a border town between Ethiopia and the Sudan) and Kassala (a town along the Eritrean and Sudanese border) – even in refugee camps in northern Ethiopia, eastern Sudan as well as in towns and villages in Eritrea. Each smuggler has connections with other Sudanese, Libyan, Ethiopian and Eritrean smugglers *en route* and at destination points (cf. Newsweek, 2015). The major task of Ethiopian and Eritrean smugglers is generally to bring migrants and connect them to Sudanese and Libyan smugglers who transport them across the Sahara Desert. In Libya, both Eritrean and other Libyan or Sudanese smugglers host migrants in their *misrah* (lit. a safe house arranged by smugglers for migrants in order to guard migrants from border regimes) and arrange boats to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

These smuggling services are some of the key elements of the migration facilitation infrastructure that enable migrants to overcome barriers related to externalization measures and cross the harsh and vast desert as well as the Mediterranean waters. However, smugglers do not often work as full-time professionals or organize the entire journey. Many of them are stranded Eritrean and Sudanese migrants themselves along the migration route. They temporarily team up with brokers, transporters and informal money transfer agents and facilitate journeys to a certain location, namely from the Sudan to Libya. In Libya, migrants must find another group of facilitators to cross the Mediterranean Sea. This shows that migrants negotiate challenges and risks

as well as opportunities of mobility by mobilizing information, economic and social resources as well as psychological or emotional strengths through prayer in migrant churches/mosques in transit lands. These relations and practices exemplify how migrants keep moving along closed borders by navigating and negotiating various dimensions of migration infrastructures (cf.Xiang and Lindquist, 2014: 132).

Crossing the Sahara Desert from Khartoum: Risks and Violence

Informants mentioned that once the migrants and smugglers, including their connectors and transporters, complete the preparations, the journey commences when the time is right. In general, the journey begins in seasons when the heat is less harsh in the Sahara Desert and sea passages are assumed to be most favourable. On the day of the journey, connecters secretly move from door-to-door and pick up migrants in mini-buses and rickshaws, which transport them to hidden houses rented by the smugglers on the outskirts of Khartoum. My interlocutors said that 150-200 people are transported in one go. According to a connector in the Sudan, the Sudanese drivers and guides take migrants half-way and hand them over to the Libyans, or the next link in the trail, who then complete the rest of the journey to Libya. The 'safety' of the routes from robbers and border control agents on the Sudanese, Egyptian, Chad and Libyan territories are double-checked. Payment procedures and other matters with transporters, connecters and big smugglers in the Sudan and Libya are also properly settled. This is because smugglers' agents who drive the migrants across the desert have more power than their big bosses as they have custody of the migrants in the no-man's land of the Sahara Desert and they perpetrate sexual abuses. My informant, Meqdi, said, "We were intercepted by robbers when we were crossing the desert. Many of the girls travelling with us were raped by robbers. Later, our broker in Libya negotiated with the bandits and rescued us."

According to the interlocutors, the journey from the Sudan to Libya across the Sahara Desert is generally unpredictable and dangerous and everyone is vulnerable to forces beyond their control. The externalization of border controls effected through collaboration between the EU and the transit countries (Sudan and Libya), by intercepting migrants trying to cross the desert, forced migrants and smugglers to take longer and riskier routes of crossing the Chad territory where various types of criminals and armed groups engage in kidnapping refugees for ransom (see Mengiste, 2017). The major sources of the risks are robbers, human traffickers, natural phenomena,

border guards and armed rebel groups. However, the level of migrants' vulnerability varies depending on prevailing local realities along the routes and migrants' individual conditions, with some migrants being more vulnerable than others. Migrants' individual profiles such as gender, age and access to remittances are also crucial factors of vulnerability. This in turn indicates differentiated impacts of the externalizing of border controls by the EU on migrants on the move. The literature shows that women are likely to be subject to abuses including rapes on different occasions, and it is difficult for groups such as pregnant women, children and the elderly to survive dehydration and other challenges during long journeys across such a vast desert (see also Hamood, 2006; Triulzi and Mackenzie, 2013).

Many of those involved, including robbers, smugglers and security/border guards, take advantage of migrants because they are lucrative trade subjects. Migrants are often rescued from criminals and kidnappers in the desert by smugglers in Libya, but they have to generate money from their families and friends in their homeland or diasporic locations and pay a ransom, which could be transferred to the criminals through an informal money transfer system known as *hawala*. Some of the migrants, who have no families abroad to transfer ransom money (*hawalet*) to the bandits, are tortured by them. Thus, they often depend on support from co-travellers.

According to some narratives, Eritrean migrants become victims of a slave trade in the Sahara Desert and in the Libyan territory as they are sold time and again between brokers, detention guards and criminals (see Mengiste, 2017). Even some local Libyans buy migrants from the police and exploit their migrant labour. I met Hagos, a 29-year-old man from Eritrea, in Rome in May 2016. He told me that he had been sold by prison guards in Libya. Hagos also said that migrants with families and friends abroad who were willing to remit, could be rescued from prison or from the migrant slave trade between prison guards, *delaloch* and locals in Libya. Migrants could also negotiate a price to buy their freedom or bribe someone who could help them escape. Migrants in precarious conditions in transit spaces, therefore, establish multiple relations with actors ranging from smugglers, locals and fellow travellers, to families and friends back home and elsewhere, to survive the violent conditions and negotiate involuntary im/mobility.

However, migrants who cannot arrange for the ransom money, try their best to mobilize support from possible compassionate locals. Migrants also end up making friends with former migrants who settled in Libya or by finding

partners who may help acquire financial and other resources for the next stage of their journey. This is an important aspect of translocal connections that help refugees to generate resources of mobility *en route*. Hagos was accommodated and financed by his girlfriend, whom he met in Benghazi, Libya. This exemplifies how migrants get access to capital (money, information and logistics) through social networks with fellow travellers, those in the diaspora and smuggling services during the journey. Through these relations, they generate the specific capital needed to overcome barriers and specific risks they face *en route* and to keep moving. The above discussion shows that externalization has different effects on different migrants on the move and this in turn requires specific skills and networks to secure help *en route*. This is possible through translocal networks and practices of reciprocity, solidarity and the sharing of resources and knowledge along the migration trails.

The Underlying Conditions of Violence and Survival

The direct violence, as reported by informants, perpetrated by agents of the smugglers, drivers in the desert, other actors and criminals in the Libyan territory need to be viewed from a perspective of broader structural violence that produced inequality and powerlessness (cf. Holmes, 2013). Unlike the popular discourses, the suffering of migrants *en route* is not just due to smugglers' mercilessness. Migrants often associate smuggling practices with service to overcome border regimes and realize migration dreams (see Mengiste, 2018). There are a number of related structural conditions that expose migrants to violence, such as, restrictive migration control regimes depriving asylum seekers' formal mobility channels to file their applications directly in Europe; the security and protection vacuum mainly due to crises in Libya; and chaos and statelessness in the area. Thus, migrants are exposed to violent practices and natural obstacles (deserts) or geographic contexts in which mobility is organized. These conditions, together with the diffusion of border control from the EU to African transit countries, exacerbate migrants' vulnerability in the desert.

Faced with these harsh conditions, migrants desperately desire support to survive the violence and mediate barriers to keep moving. Diasporic remittances, practices of sharing among migrants/refugees during the journey, systems of informal money transfer networks (*hawala*) and the creation and sharing of important information and support of *semsari* are vital conditions in mediating involuntary mobility and immobility of asylum seekers and migrants along the Sudanese and Libyan borderlands.

In sum, the violence that migrants encounter in the Sudan, the Sahara Desert and Libya is an extension of the structural violence of global inequality that deprives the migrants of their mobility rights. The violence is also due to western intervention in African conflicts and crises as well as the externalization of European borders and migratory regimes (cf. Holmes, 2013; Albahari, 2015; Andersson, 2014). The EU's attempt to tighten its migration and border policies and the practice of externalization result in the production of this structural violence. To survive these predicaments and meet smugglers to organize their transitions and journeys, migrants and their communities mobilize the necessary resources such as finance and knowledge through their local and transnational social relations with former migrants who have settled *en route* and in the diaspora.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research on the irregular journeys of migrants from the Horn of Africa indicates that the smuggling of migrants is far from being monolithically perceived as a criminal activity. Instead, it is a socially embedded collective practice emerging in the context of restricted mobility and migration-enforcement infrastructures and where cross-border social networks, communication technologies and brokering practices intersect. This study demonstrated how borders and immigration control systems produce different systems of migration facilitation infrastructures and the various ways in which migrants experience and cope with immobility regimes and suffering at the hands of criminals *en route*.

Migration systems originating in Eritrea towards Europe can be regarded as unpredictable assemblages of diverse actors operating at different scales and with different objectives that overlap or are in conflict. Their interactions shape the migration industry and infrastructure and are in a state of flux in response to changes in geopolitics and externalizing border control along the trail. The infrastructures such as interlinked technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate Eritrean transnational migration have evolved historically in relation to changing border regimes (Cf. Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013). Migratory journeys thus involve designing new strategies to negotiate with changing migration facilitation actors, externalization practices and global inequalities that led to structural violence.

Migration from Eritrea does not imply a linear journey to Europe. Migration biographies reveal that the migration projects are fragmented, stepwise and

unpredictable and can take anything between months and years. This migration process requires choosing a good smuggler, engaging in an informal economy and continuously learning about the possibilities of mobility and surviving new challenges along the routes and transit lands. In the face of externalizing migration and border controls, migratory journeys are produced in complex social relations where different influences reinforce, complement and sometimes contradict each other. Externalizing border controls and global inequalities together with the authoritarian Eritrean regime that has criminalized migratory exits, have resulted in a system of complex smuggling practices that shape and are shaped by intra-migrant support networks and transnational social relations between migrants, those left behind and the ones settled in the diaspora. This in turn has affected the old established population movement patterns and directions in east Africa and the eastern Sahara. New migration facilitation industries have been built along the emerging clandestine migratory mobility routes that link Eritrea, the Sudan, the Sahara Desert, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea.

Social connections — translocal and transnational — between migrants, smugglers, helpful locals and former migrants along the trail or in the diaspora have become a transnational community. Relations are used to generate the necessary information, material and economic resources at a specific time and location during the journey. This has become an alternative mobility infrastructure for migrants who are immobilized due to restrictive migration controls and the externalization of borders and migratory controls from receiving countries (cf. Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Gaibazzi et al., 2017). The borderlands and clandestine migration routes are not merely sites of border control where state power is exercised and violent practices of smugglers and criminals against the migrants are exhibited (see Andersson, 2014). They are also locations of knowledge production and the reconfiguration of social relations between mobile and non-mobile people in nearby and distant locations.

However, the externalization of borders and migration controls by the European Union has different effects on migrants on the move. Those who have some kind of capital in terms of finance and social networks in the diaspora could generate the necessary knowledge of migration to survive risks and accomplish their journey to Europe. However, those who do not have such resources are less likely to manage long journeys and endure the vulnerabilities along the migration trail, unless they mobilize support from local people and fellow travellers.

From the time that the EU tightened its migration polices and externalized border controls towards the migration routes in Africa, migratory mobility have become risky and complex. Migration facilitators have grown larger and routes have become longer and more dangerous. Several actors, including criminals, local people *en route* and smugglers started taking advantage of the migrants' immobility by perpetrating sexual, labour and physical abuses against migrants on the move (see also Andersson, 2014; Gaibazzi et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2018). In this context, the entanglement of transnational social relations, smuggling practices and the generation and flow of information and finance from the diaspora and other actors have become infrastructural moorings of migrant mobility. Specific resources and knowledge enable migrants to navigate impediments resulting from strict migration controls at various scales and locations and also the externalization of border control from Europe to transit countries in Africa.

Migration journeys should not be imagined as a line between two places but rather as a multifaceted space of mediation occupied by migration facilitators and intermediaries. These include actors such as smugglers, local people, migrants, former migrants and communication devices. This in turn constitutes the notion of the transnational knowledge community that is constituted by the phenomena described above. It takes into account the entanglement of social and smuggling networks in the migration facilitation industry. Smuggling migration journeys thrive as they are embedded in and function with diasporic transnational engagements and translocal networks. Migrants who have no transnational connections generate support from fellow travellers and former migrants settled in transit spaces. It is in these transnational and translocal social spaces that migration journeys acquire their particular forms and meanings. This collectively builds up migratory mobility infrastructure and protective mechanisms against structural violence, which are related to immobility regimes, global inequalities and externalization of migration and border controls.

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