'MY UNCLE CANNOT SAY "NO" IF I REACH LIBYA': UNPACKING THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF BORDER-CROSSING AMONG ERITREANS HEADING TO EUROPE

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of transnational family networks in facilitating undocumented migration, by analyzing the case of Eritrean refugees on the move towards Europe. Based on the consideration that irregular border-crossing usually involves not only migrants and smugglers but also family members financing these journeys from abroad, I illustrate that their economic support is rarely voluntary. This is mainly due to the moral dilemmas of funding potentially fatal border-crossings. The economic assistance of kin instead results from tough negotiations between them and the migrants in transit. Safety, responsibility, membership of the community and money are at stake in these negotiations. Based on my fieldwork and ongoing contacts with Eritrean refugees on their way to Europe, I show that migrants play an active role in the smuggling process, especially when they move to Libya without their relatives' permission. In so doing, migrants gamble that kinship and emotional solidarity on the one hand, and the fear of smugglers' retaliations on the other, will lead their relatives to pay despite their initial refusal. The analysis of these negotiations and of the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded highlights the importance of emic moral rules to a better understanding of mobility and immobility in current refugee scenarios. Specifically, I argue that movers, among prospective high-risk migrants, are those who are more effective in mobilizing economic resources from their transnational networks, exploiting shared moralities and emotional bonds with left-behind kin and relatives abroad.

'Mi tío no puede decir "no" si llego a Lybia': Analizando las dinámicas sociales del cruce de fronteras entre eritreanos en camino a Europa

Resumen

Este articulo investiga el papel de las redes familiares transnacionales en la facilitación de la migración indocumentada, a través de un análisis del caso de refugiados eritreanos en movimiento hacia Europa. Basado en la consideración que el cruce de fronteras irregular normalmente involucra no sólo a migrantes

y traficantes sino también a miembros de familia que financian estos viajes internacionales, yo destaco que su apoyo económico raramente es voluntario. Esto se debe más que todo a los dilemas morales de financiar cruces de frontera que son potencialmente fatales. La asistencia económica de familiares en cambio resulta de negociaciones difíciles entre ellos y los migrantes en tránsito. La seguridad, responsabilidad, membresía en la comunidad, y el dinero están en juego en estas negociaciones. Basado en mis investigaciones de campo y contactos que siguen en marcha con refugiados eritreanos en camino a Europa, demuestro que los migrantes desempeñan un papel activo en el proceso de traficar, especialmente cuando se mueven a Lybia sin el permiso de sus familiares. En hacerlo, migrantes apuestan que sus enlaces familiares y la solidaridad emocional por un lado, y el temor a las retaliaciones de traficantes por el otro, harán que sus familiares paguen a pesar de su denegación inicial. El análisis de estas negociaciones y del contexto socio-cultural en que se integran destaca la importancia de reglas morales emic para un mejor entendimiento de la movilidad y la inmovilidad en escenarios de refugiados hoy en día. Específicamente, yo argumento que los movedores, entre los prospectivos migrantes en alto riesgo, son aquellos más capaces de movilizar recursos económicos de sus redes transnacionales, explotando moralidades y vínculos emocionales compartidos con familiares que dejan atrás y que tienen en el exterior.

Palabras clave: Movilidad de alto riesgo, movimientos secundarios, refugiados eritreanos, redes familiares transnacionales, tráfico de migrantes, economías morales

Introduction

Asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea and other conflict-ridden or poverty-afflicted countries engage in high-risk journeys in order to reach their preferred destinations. Although the cost of these journeys can greatly vary according to the trajectory, the smuggler and the means of transport, it is clear that irregular migration is extremely expensive. For instance, recent reports have documented that asylum-seekers may pay up to 10,000 euros to move from the Horn of Africa to Europe (RMMS 2014). These prices surprise the public and raise many questions. How can refugees pay such amounts for their journeys to Europe? Are the wealthy the only ones able to seek asylum in Europe? Is someone financially supporting them?

This article aims to provide a better understanding of the internal dynamics of high-risk mobility by analyzing the case of Eritrean refugees on the move from the Horn of Africa to Europe. In order to do so, I touch upon the debate on migrant smuggling, family networks and remittances to understand who facilitates irregular migration, at what cost and to what benefit. Contrary to widespread accounts blaming smugglers for the tragedies of hazardous border-crossings, this article argues that refugees play an active role in pursuing their migratory strategies to reach Europe and in seeking help from their relatives living in the diaspora. The word 'refugee', here, is used in a broad sense to speak of contemporary Eritrean migrants, asylum-seekers and recognized refugees. This is a close approximation for a migration flow internationally recognized as mostly consisting of 'forced' migrants.

After describing the characteristics of Eritrean forced migration, I briefly revisit the wider debate on migrant networks, moral economies and the smuggling business from a forced migration studies perspective. First, drawing from my ethnographic material, I describe the complex 'game of roles' between migrants in transit, relatives abroad expected to pay for irregular border-crossing, and smugglers. As I show, migrants' power of negotiation with their often reluctant sponsors amplifies, depending on the increasing risk they experience throughout the journey. I then explore the possibilities for refugees to move onwards depending on the existence of family networks in the diaspora, the socio-economic condition of the relatives there and the degree of kinship and ongoing solidarity between them. Several observations are made on the functioning of transnational networks based on implicit moral rules and on the counterintuitive implications of ongoing transnational communication.

The article is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork which took place between 2012 and 2014

in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Italy. My research entailed the investigation of Eritrean families' everyday lives in Asmara and some rural areas in the countries; it also involved my observation of refugees' daily activities in camps in Ethiopia, in their housing arrangements and in public spaces of cities such as Addis Ababa, Khartoum, Rome and other Italian cities. This fieldwork has enabled me to explore the migration corridor linking Eritrea with Europe and to observe the flow of money, expectations and information which links different actors in different locations.

On the role of family networks and moral economies in migrant-smuggling

This paper argues for the need to revisit migrants' smuggling[1] in light of the influence of their kinship ties and of the attendant moral economies. This calls for renewed attention to be paid to migrants' networks and their role in facilitating the initial and secondary mobility of forced migrants towards Europe. Although migrant networks have been at the centre of migration studies since the 1960s (Boyd 1989; McDonald and McDonald 1964), only recently have forced migration scholars started integrating these findings into their analysis of refugee mobility. Crisp (1999) claims that refugee networks, not unlike migrant networks, play a major role in prospective refugees' decision to depart by providing them with the financial resources to make the journey and the organizational structure for settlement. In a similar vein, Koser and Pinkerton (2002) claimed that refugees' social networks orient their choices concerning countries of destination. However, not much is known about how these networks are activated and operate in practice.

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[1] The United Nations (2000) Smuggling of Migrants Protocol defines human smuggling as the 'procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident' (Article 3). According to official definitions, smuggling differs from trafficking in several respects, namely: smuggling is usually based on the consent of the migrant, while trafficking is based on coercion; moreover, profit in smuggling comes from facilitating migrants' journeys whereas, in trafficking, profit derives from ongoing exploitation of the victim (UNODC 2011).

While a commonsense understanding would emphasize the dominant role of long-stayer migrants in developed countries in controlling the access and development of networks, an emerging stream of socio-anthropological scholarship has suggested that the relationships between pioneers and prospective leavers can be much more fluid and open to mutual negotiation, as long as they are embedded in shared, kinship-based moral economies (Boccagni 2015; Carling 2014). This may expose already settled migrants to strong expectations, under the implicit threat of being ostracized or marginalized by the community of origin. Likewise, some scholars have illustrated that refugees are also burdened with expectations and economic requests from their kin back home (Akuei 2005; Lindley 2009). The inability to meet these economic obligations may lead to social exclusion even in the context of forced migration.

The above considerations are crucial to understanding the role of relatives abroad in facilitating the irregular border-crossing of Eritreans to Europe. Rather than being active facilitators of their relatives' migration, my informants were reluctantly responding to the expectations of the wider family networks. More specifically, among my informants, support was expected in two domains: economic remittances for everyday survival in Eritrea, and assistance to other siblings who intended to migrate. The latter was probably their most important duty in the Eritrean context, where migration was widely considered the best strategy for individual social mobility and family subsistence back home (Belloni 2015). However, such requests not only placed an economic burden on migrants in developed countries – who were often not that wealthy – but also loaded them with many responsibilities, in light of the high number of casualties associated with irregular migration to Europe. To put it differently, by providing the money to pay smugglers, relatives abroad are aware that they may not only facilitate the realization of migrants' aspirations, but also contribute to their tragic failure in some instances. To understand the factors underpinning the decision of relatives to support these risky journeys in spite of these concerns, it is important to orient the focus of the research on the internal dynamics of smuggling.

With a few exceptions (e.g. Spener 2009; Zhang and Chin 2002), empirical research on migrants' smuggling is limited due to the difficulties accessing the field. Studies such as those reviewed in UNODC (2011) focus on the relationship between smugglers and migrants, the organization of the business and the impact of border-control policies. However, these studies suffer from two main fallacies: first, they downplay the active role of smuggled migrants in the process (even if some research has illustrated the importance of this dimension, e.g. Van Liempt and Doomernik 2006); second, they tend to isolate the smuggler–migrant relationship from its social context. However, as I illustrate here, the involvement of family members is crucial in the smuggling process of Eritrean refugees. A sensible analysis of smuggling cannot avoid taking into account a wider range of actors beyond the usual dyad smuggler–smuggled. A plurality of stakeholders, including relatives abroad and left-behind kin, is involved in the process which brings migrants across borders. Within this context, refugees are far from being passive victims. Rather, they are the active pursuers of mobility strategies (Long and Crisp 2010) aimed at circumventing the international asylum regime, which offers limited possibilities for long-term integration and mostly traps them in camps (Hyndman 2012). Before moving on to the core of my research, the next section presents the historical context of Eritrean forced migration and the formation of its diaspora.

Eritrean forced migration and the diaspora

According to recent EUROSTAT data (2016), Eritreans are one of the largest groups of asylum-seekers in Europe, with almost 150,000 applications between 2008 and 2015. They mostly arrive in Europe through Libya, crossing the Mediterranean by boat to Italy and often falling victim of shipwrecks and fatal incidents on their way. A well-known and politically influential case in point occurred in Lampedusa in October 2013, when over 350 Eritreans lost their lives near the Italian shore.

Despite the mass exodus in recent decades, Eritrea is not a country at war today, though it remains deeply marked by past conflicts. In the 30 years since 1961,

guerrilla fronts seeking independence fought against the Ethiopian army and finally won in 1991 (Iyob 1995). This conflict led over 1 million Eritreans to look for refuge in neighboring countries as well as in Europe and the USA (UNICEF 1994). After Independence (1993) the country enjoyed a few years of relative peace and development, until another conflict – allegedly for border demarcation reasons – broke out with Ethiopia in 1998 (Negash and Tronvoll 2001). The conflict lasted until 2001 and led not only to death and displacement on a massive scale for both populations (Bariagaber 2000) but also to the restructuring of the Eritrean civil society into a military one. Since the end of the conflict, most soldiers have been permanently mobilized, military training has become a crucial part of the national education, and the free press has been suppressed. Altogether, the population enjoys limited civil and religious, and practically no political, rights. The previous leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front which liberated the country have become the oppressive rulers of the only legal party in Eritrea today, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Among the post-conflict government measures, the one which had the most negative consequences is probably the transformation of the 18-month-long national service into one of indeterminate length (Treiber 2009). Young people doing their national service earn at most 20 euros a month, which makes them unable to provide for themselves or their families. Moreover, many of them are sent to remote locations where they endure poor living conditions. This has led young people to think that there is no future for them if they stay in Eritrea. In their eyes, migration is often the only solution if they are to earn a decent living.

This is the context from which many of my informants in Ethiopia and Sudan were fleeing. However, these countries rarely represented their preferred final destinations. Most thought that there were no long-term prospects of settlement there due to the limited freedom of movement, the scarce possibility of integrating the local labour market and other safety concerns. For these reasons, they wanted to move onwards to Europe. To do that, they mostly had to mobilize the support of their kin abroad to

pay the professionals of irregular migration, as other channels of legal migration – i.e. UNHCR resettlement programs, work and study visas – were mostly inaccessible (Belloni 2015). Drawing from my experience in the field, the next section analyzes the tough negotiation between one of my informants and his relatives abroad to secure the payment of his journey to Europe.

A game of roles: victims, smugglers and unwilling helpers

I met Jacob in the Adi Harush camp in the north-western part of Ethiopia in December 2013. He was a 27-year-old mechanical engineer and had been in the camp for the previous eight months. While answering my questions about his plans for the future, he showed resentment towards his brother and sister in Sweden because they were not willing to pay for his journey to Europe. Nevertheless, Jacob was determined to pursue his dream of living in Europe with his girlfriend, who was staying with him in the camp: 'I am ready to do what it takes … I cannot waste my time in this camp. This is not life, we have no choice'.

An 'idle' life in camps with no prospects of local integration was compared by Jacob and many of his companions there to a 'slow death'. For these refugees, mostly men in their 20s and 30s, the risk of dying at sea or in the desert was better than the certainty of a long-term encampment in Ethiopia. Jacob then explained his plan to reach Libya without his siblings' permission: 'I will let them decide then if they are paying or not' he resolutely stated.

After a few months, in May 2014, he called me from Libya from an unknown number. He had enacted his plan, but apparently the brothers were not able to pay all the money and he asked me to contribute to his liberation.

> Milena, here it is horrible. We are locked inside … we have no communication with the outside … if you could help me and my girlfriend. … They are telling us they will sell us to other smugglers. May God have mercy on us.

Although I was deeply concerned about his fate, I was not able to provide the financial help he had asked for. This was one instance of the several ethical complications I had to confront during my fieldwork with refugees. My privileged position as a European, female, middle-class, paid researcher with a passport often led my informants to think that I could have helped them, despite my attempts to correct their misapprehension. The moral conundrum – often explored in literature on refugees (e.g. Hugman *et al.* 2011) – between intervening or simply observing, became at that point an inescapable part of my research. At the same time, by being taken to the centre of the action by my informants, I gained an unusually clear insight into the unexplored dynamics of border-crossing. Finally, Jacob's siblings managed to pay and he embarked on a ship to Italy and from there he successfully moved on to Denmark, his final destination.

Although Jacob's case may be specific in several aspects, it represents a common *modus operandi* among Eritrean refugees pursuing onward migration from Ethiopia and Sudan (RMMS 2014). As most refugees do not own the necessary resources to pay smugglers' services, they usually ask their kin for help. Due to the weakness of the Eritrean economy and the widespread poverty, these financial requests are usually addressed to relatives – normally uncles or siblings – who have already settled in the diaspora in Europe, the US or the Middle East. They are the preferred recipients of these requests firstly because they are deemed to be wealthier than their families at home and secondly because my informants felt that the latter, especially their parents, should be protected from the potential emotional costs of their offsprings' journey and thus kept in the dark about their migration plans.

My informants' secretive attitude can be better appreciated by considering their embeddedness in a cultural context which is deeply ambivalent towards migration. Although migration is highly valued among Eritreans, and those who leave the country are praised for their entrepreneurship (Belloni 2015), families back home are somehow torn between the desire to promote their children's success outside Eritrea, their own need of economic support from

abroad and the fear of hazardous irregular migration. Some families, who can afford it, finally decide to fund these journeys, but many others refuse it, as for Adonay, a 28-year-old Eritrean student at Addis Ababa University. His parents had refused to support him in his attempt to escape Eritrea. They told him: 'We are not going to pay for your travel…if you die we will lose you and the money!' He then left Eritrea without telling his parents. Likewise, Rigatte, a 24-year-old girl whom I met in Addis Ababa, confessed that she had crossed the border without telling her mother. In my informants' narratives, the choice of keeping their departure unknown to their closest family members was presented as a demonstration of respect. If their parents had known before, they would have worried and tried to make them desist; alternatively, they would have blamed themselves if something went wrong during the border-crossing. For all the above considerations, families back home were not the main target of most of my informants' requests.

Even when financial requests to move onwards were addressed to relatives in the diaspora, they were often rejected. At this point, a more-or-less-explicit negotiation opens up between the prospective migrants and their relatives. Many of the refugees I met decided to force the hand of their relatives, gambling on their loyalty to kinship solidarity. They asked to be taken at least to Libya and, once there, they provided the smugglers with the telephone numbers of their relatives abroad so that the payment could be settled. This entails several risks, as shown by Jacob's unfortunate situation in Libya. If relatives are not able or willing to pay at that point, refugees may suffer from violence and become the victims of trafficking (RMMS 2014). These threats, precisely for their severity, become a lever with which refugees can push their kin or other close friends to support their journeys.

This is a rather tricky and subtle 'game', more or less willingly played by middlemen organizing the journey, smuggled refugees and their relatives. By complying with the rules of the game, the first increase their customer numbers, as the refugees who are able to pay high amounts of money upfront would be significantly fewer. The risks of not being paid are then downsized by the possibility of selling insolvent customers to traffickers. The negative reputation of smugglers in Libya is actively used by refugees in order to achieve their migratory goals and push reticent relatives to support their journeys. Despite the hazards they may face, young Eritreans such as Jacob feel 'ready' to take life-threatening risks in order to 'unlock' their lives, which they perceive as being on hold in refugee camps. The whole smuggling process thus becomes a role-playing game in which the smuggler is the 'bad guy' and the refugee 'the victim'; the relative is thus forced to play the part of the 'good guy' who saves the refugee. Relatives in the diaspora also become unwilling but crucial actors in this game.

Importantly, the unwillingness of those who are asked to support these journeys is due not only to the high price they have to pay, but also to the responsibility they take by financing an unsafe journey. This is the same conundrum I faced when my informants asked me for money to move on from Ethiopia and Sudan. Even if I had had the money, how would I have felt if something had happened to that person on his way to Europe? While Eritreans sit in camps they certainly face daily hardships and feel hopeless due to the lack of long-term prospects, but their safety is rarely at risk. However, once they reach Libya, the situation changes. The risks of the trip seem at that point smaller than the threat of smugglers in Libya who could torture, hurt or decide to sell the refugees to someone who will ask an even higher ransom (RMMS 2014). The request for financial support thus becomes not only emotionally and morally compelling, but also socially required by the migrants' family and the community at large, the fourth virtual actor of the 'game'.

The moral, emotional and social ties between the migrant and the relative in the diaspora are based on implicit rules of ethnic and family membership. However, this membership needs to be cultivated and negotiated over time, on both sides. As illustrated in the next section, my informants who embarked on these risky initiatives were well aware of it. Nevertheless, as long as a membership applies, it does have major consequences. While relatives may afford to refuse to finance migrants' journeys when the risks of leaving are higher than those of staying, their power

of negotiation is residual when the migrants are smugglers' hostages in Libya. Even leaving aside the emotional pressure of seeing a beloved one in danger, the refusal to help a relative at that point would be unjustifiable in the eyes of the transnational community. As I was not part of Jacob's family and ethnic network, I did not experience any social pressure – though his request for help was no less alarming.

It is thus clear that power relationships within the smuggling process are much more dynamic and balanced than usually thought. Although migrants certainly run high risks in order to move onwards, their recourse to the smuggling industry is a functional means of mobilizing those resources they need for onward mobility; their voluntary and conscious involvement in these risky ventures should not be underestimated. If young prospective migrants have a limited power of negotiation with their relatives abroad as long as they are safe at home, their power of negotiation will considerably increase once they get to a refugee camp and will become even higher when they reach Libya. In a nutshell, the rule of the game is as follows: the greater the risk you are ready to run, the greater your powers of negotiation with your relatives. Moreover, we should remember that families back home will increasingly expect those relatives abroad to help the migrant in transit. This will further increase migrants' capability to negotiate the next step with their relatives.

We could hypothesize that, to some extent, this game is convenient for the involuntary helpers too. As they play by the rules imposed by others, the helpers are not deemed responsible for the possible consequences of the journey. In fact, their initial refusal to help relieves them from carrying the burden of an eventual tragedy. If something happens to the migrant, nobody from the community or from the family will be able to blame them, as they did not play any role in inducing the departure of the migrant. If the journey is successful, this becomes a win–win situation, whereby migrants achieve their goals, families back home hopefully start receiving remittances and relatives in the diaspora have met their moral duty towards kin.

Mobility and immobility among prospective high-risk migrants

The above considerations shed light on the factors differentiating between those refugees who are willing to engage in high-risk migration but cannot, and those who are actually able to do it. They show that high-risk migrants are not necessarily the poorest or the wealthiest, nor simply those who have a wide ethnic network in the diaspora. As the previous description of the smuggling process shows, movers are those who are more effective in mobilizing social and economic resources from their social networks by taking risks. Apart from a risk-prone attitude which I have analyzed elsewhere (Belloni 2016), this stratification of mobilities relies on several variables: the existence of transnational networks, the ways in which kinship is emotionally reproduced and socially sanctioned, and the socio-economic position of relatives in the diaspora.

Those refugees who can undertake the journey without having settled the payment are the ones who can count on close relatives or friends who will not refuse to pay. The others, who have no contacts abroad, have just to stay in camps or in the city. For example, Maria, my Eritrean host in Khartoum, was often complaining about the fact that she was 'alone' with no brothers or uncles who could help her or support her journey to Europe. Other refugees I interviewed in Ethiopian camps told me that they could not proceed with their journeys because they had nobody who could pay for the trip.

Between the extremes of those who have strong ties and those who have none there may be a wide range of refugees who have some not-so-close friends and kin abroad who could potentially pay. However, in these cases, when the kinship or friendship bond is not as strong, refugees may be more careful in taking such a risky decision. Adonay, for example, was extremely tempted to engage in the trip to Libya. He wanted to be sponsored by his uncle, who had been in Italy a long time, but he was scared that he would not agree to help him. He told me that the uncle and his father had a big argument years before and since then

family relationships were tense or non-existent. As he told me while sipping some tea in Addis Ababa:

> What if he refuses to pay for me once I get there [to Libya]? I should wait for him to go to visit my parents in Uganda … then he will not be able to say 'No'. My parents will beg for me.

Adonay's case shows that, even if there is an established transnational kinship network, requests for financial help may be unsuccessful if the moral rules of family solidarity have been suspended. Adonay, then, counted on the influence of his parents, at that moment living in Uganda, to re-establish the family bond with his uncle and exert the social pressure which would have ensured the payment. However, Adonay's story ended differently, as the uncle insisted on meeting him in Addis Ababa and convinced him not to pursue his plans to reach Libya, by promising to support one of Adonay's business initiatives in the Ethiopian capital.

Lastly, one might reasonably expect that the possibility for refugees to move onwards depends on the socio-economic condition of their relatives in the diaspora. If migrants have relatives who have secured a well-off position in Europe, the US or the Middle East, for example, these will be able to provide funding for smuggling services. On the other hand, if relatives abroad are still struggling for their own daily subsistence – as was the case for most of my Eritrean informants in Italy – their kin in refugee camps will not be able to move further. However, things were not so straightforward in many instances. Although transnational communication through mobile phones and Facebook was part of my refugee informants' everyday life in Ethiopia and in Italy (Belloni 2015), information about reciprocal financial capabilities was not necessarily transmitted and, even if it was, it was likely not to be believed. Jacob's story is again a case in point. Although his siblings had told him they were not ready to pay for him, he still embarked on the journey to Libya, thinking that his brother and sister simply did not want to share their resources with him. However, his calculations were probably wrong, as suggested by the fact that his siblings needed a few weeks to gather the necessary money to pay Jacob's smugglers.

Conclusions

Despite border controls, risks and limited avenues for regular migration, the current refugee 'crisis' in Europe shows not only the limits of the international asylum regime, but also the capabilities of those the most affected by it, in circumventing established geopolitics of mobility (Hyndman 2012). This article has illustrated the role of refugees' agency in the context of secondary mobility – that is, from the first safe country in Africa towards Europe. Migrants' smuggling, usually depicted as a site of exploitation and coercion, has been approached here as an instance of migrants' perseverance in pursuing their migration goals. Specifically, smugglers' infamous reputation and the mechanisms of this business were actively used by my informants to solicit the financial support of, otherwise non-collaborative, relatives abroad.

As shown, relatives abroad are usually reluctant to finance dangerous border-crossings due to the responsibility they would bear themselves and in front of the community if something bad happened to the migrant on his/her way to Europe. These moral imperatives, which often prevent kinship support for high-risk journeys, are the same instrumentally employed by young Eritrean refugees to push their relatives to pay. Once refugees arrive in Libya without having settled the payment in advance, and become smugglers' hostages, the rules of kinship solidarity and emotional attachment oblige relatives abroad to send the requested money for the journey. Within these more or less explicit negotiations between the unwilling helper and the help-seeker, the smugglers' role is, to some extent, a marginal one. Their infamous reputation is what mostly counts at this stage of the migration process. This is not to deny that some smugglers also abuse migrants to extort more money or keep them in appalling conditions while waiting to load them on the boats to Italy (RMMS 2014).

These negotiations, however, are possible only for those prospective migrants who can count on a network of relatives in the diaspora, as long as the

latter are 'close' enough to comply with the rules of the 'game'. This has much to suggest for the debate on mobility and immobility (Hammar *et al.* 1997; Lubkemann 2008). It is not only the presence of transnational networks, nor simply the socio-economic conditions of relatives abroad that determine whether or not migrants undertake these risky journeys; the strength of bonds with relatives abroad and the capability of the community to put pressure on them are also crucial factors which differentiate between movers and stayers in refugee camps.

My informants' stories show that established geographic hierarchies of power can be transformed by refugees in transit. Those living in camps or in transit may have a strong hold on the relatives who are relatively well-settled in destination countries. In particular, migrants' powers of negotiation with relatives abroad amplify when the risk they face increases. Conversely, due to the implicit moral rules of community and family membership, the capability of relatives to dismiss financial requests decreases, the more refugees advance in the journey and the more the risks augment. This points not only to the economic sacrifices made by relatives abroad to help migrants, but also to the potential human costs, in terms of psychological stress and even physical harm, which refugees are ready to undergo in order to circumvent established borders.

While aiming to advance a more critical understanding of the power dynamics implicit in current migration to Europe by highlighting refugees' agency, this paper does not minimize the human suffering resulting from irregular migration. However, a critical stance towards inadequate asylum policies and restrictionist ways of border control cannot be separated from a deeper understanding of the strategies which individuals and groups put in place to respond to mobility obstacles. The future research agenda of critical geographies of mobility (see, for instance, Söderström *et al.* 2013) should not downplay the role of refugees' agency, even if constrained under increasingly repressive regimes of migration management.

Along with the contribution to the literature on migrant networks, smuggling and moral economies in

contexts of high-risk mobility, the findings discussed in this article pave the way for further comparative research on the social dynamics surrounding migrants' smuggling. Most notably, more research is needed on the role of transnational family networks in facilitating or preventing high-risk migration, on the underlying power dynamics and on the management of information flows within these networks.

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