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Living in a Limbo. Eritrean Refugees in Kampala

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Abstract:
In Uganda, there are about 15.000 Eritrean refugees and most of them live in the capital Kampala. The majority are young people, both men and women, who fled Eritrea to avoid the national service imposed by a despotic regime. Indeed, the Eritrean government, led by Isaias Afewerki, imposes a period of conscription that can last for an unspecified period of time, annihilating the possibility for young people to plan their future: the only alternative is to flee to exile. Some Eritreans try to reach Europe passing through Sudan and then Libya; some others go to Israel. Quite a large number travels to Kampala passing through Sudan and Kenya. In Kampala, they apply for refugee status and try to move to Canada or USA. This process can take up to three years, but sometime even more. This paper focuses on the Eritrean refugees in Kampala and tries to shed light on the strategies they use to cope with life and reconstruct a quite closed and self-referential diasporic community. Moreover, it focuses on the ambivalent relationship between the Eritrean diaspora and the Eritrean state. The latter forces many young people to leave the country but, at the same time, exploits them as a source of income. On their part, most of refugees display an ambiguous and ambivalent attitude towards the Eritrean regime, a mix of disapproval and reverential nationalism. Nostalgia and dreams for the future shape the diasporic life in Kampala, a limbo characterized by paradoxes and ambiguities: even though Eritrean refugees live in a closed community, their internal relationships are pervaded with mistrust, divisions and paranoia. The Eritrean refugee community embodies all the contradictions of a despotic state, which is perceived as an autocratic enemy as well as a symbol of presumed superiority of the Eritrean nation.

Keywords: Eritrea, nationalism, refugees, Kampala, Uganda.

Introduction

I started to frequent the Eritrean community of Kampala in 2002. At that time, I was carrying out a research on the war in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Jourdan 2010). From there, I used to go to Uganda and spend some time in Kampala, especially when security conditions were volatile in the Congo. Over time I began to appreciate more and more the Ugandan capital where I could move freely and carefree. I used to spend time in the district of Kabalagala, known for its lively nightlife, as well as for the presence of many refugees coming from different African countries: Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, etc.

By chance, I got in touch with an association of artists founded by a Congolese video maker, which had its small office in Kabalagala. It was through this association that I met some Eritrean refugees: in particular, I became friends with Sami, a young painter who was then starting to have some success.[1] Sami had been in Kampala for a couple of years: at the beginning, he was completely broke and some of his Eritrean friends hosted him. To save money, he used to eat mainly *chapatti*,[2] the cheapest street food made in small kiosks scattered through the Ugandan capital. With obstinacy, however, Sami had started painting, something he was already doing in Eritrea, and since he had no money to buy paint, he resorted to use shoe polish.

When I met him, he was starting to sell his paintings at a good price. The buyers were mainly expatriates - staff from NGOs, embassies and United Nations - and he was able to sell his paintings also in Holland through an association. When I was in Kampala, I was a guest at his house in a neighbourhood called Nabutite, a kind of slum not far from Kabalagala. He lived with his girlfriend and his son, and his house had become a meeting place for many Eritreans and Ethiopians. Sami spent his afternoons painting while I typed on the computer; the other friends chatted, chewed *khat*[3] and drank tea and coffee.

Since then, I have spent most of my time in Kampala hanging out with Eritrean refugees. Sami managed to move to Canada, like many of his fellow citizens. Meanwhile, I became close friends with Berhane, who had fled Eritrea with Sami, a strong friendship that still unites us today.[4] For various reasons, Berhane did not move to Canada and at the time of writing, 15 years later, he still lives in Kabalagala sharing a bare room with a compatriot. The time I spent with Berhane, Sami and other Eritrean friends was pleasant and entertaining but also very insightful as we used to engage in long conversations about politics, their living conditions in Kampala and their dreams. In essence, it was a time devoted to building relationships, listening and conducting research. Therefore, this article is the result of the numerous conversations, observations and questions through which I tried to understand how the young Eritreans I met reconstructed their own world in Kampala. I focus on their dreams and strategies for the future and, above all, on the way the contradictions within their cohesive and conflictual community affected and shaped their lives. I have tried to understand how the Eritrean state

continues to exercise a transnational sovereignty over young people in the diaspora and how the latter relate to it and, more generally, to politics. As we shall see, the picture that emerges is of great ambiguity and paradoxes in which the desire to escape and break away often coexists with a nationalist sentiment and affection for the homeland. The attitude towards politics is mainly disinterested and mixed with disappointment, a posture that seems to facilitate an ambiguous and oscillating positioning. This ambiguity is in part the product of the actions of the Eritrean state, which in turn condemns young people who leave the country and at the same time tries to co-opt them and bind them to itself.

As we know, ethnography tends to break the canons of positive sciences that envisage a distancing between the researcher and his object of study, while the anthropologist enters into a relationship and mingles with the subjects of his research. From a methodological point of view, this work has made use of the classic tools of ethnography - interviews, long conversations, observation, etc. - within a framework of frequentation between myself and some of the subjects of my research that has now lasted for over a decade. The Eritrean community in Kampala is quite heterogeneous and differs in origin, social class, ethnicity and religion. In addition, a minority group comes from Israel as a result of the agreement established with Uganda and Rwanda that recently led to the transfer of approximately 4,000 refugees from Israel to these two countries (IRRI 2018). As I mentioned above, I related to quite a large group of refugees although I only developed a close friendship with Berhane and Sami. They had met during their escape first in Sudan, then in Nairobi and finally in Kampala. Both were originally from Asmara, where the population has a higher level of education than in rural Eritrea. Undoubtedly, one of the peculiarities of these two friends of mine was the fact that they had many acquaintances: Berhane because several young people used to gather in his house while he was painting, Sami because he was outgoing, he had the gift of the gab and an eclectic culture. Because of the networks of contacts I developed through them, most of the young Eritrean refugees I dealt with were also from Asmara (I never had the chance to meet Eritreans from Israel), so generally with a decent level of education and a good knowledge of English. The analysis I am proposing in this article is therefore the result of frequenting this group, though heterogeneous within itself. I will begin by describing the reasons for the exodus and the ways of escape from Eritrea; I will then focus on the refugees' life in Kampala and on the paradoxes that characterize it in terms of internal relations within the diasporic community and of the relationship between the latter and the Eritrean state.

Fleeing Eritrea

The Eritrean state is among the major 'producers' of refugees in the world. According to UNHCR, in 2020 the global number of Eritrean refugees reached 514,389:[5] it is the ninth largest refugee population in the world, but when we compare this number with

the total of the Eritrean population (6,147,398 July 2021 est.),[6] this figure appears incredibly high. What are then the causes of this massive exodus? And where do Eritreans flee to?

It is not possible to retrace here the troubled political history of Eritrea in depth; however, it seems appropriate to retrace the main events that marked the history of the country (Guglielmo 2013). After a 30-year-long war with Ethiopia, Eritrea achieved independence in May 1991, an event sanctioned *de jure* with a referendum in 1993. The years that followed independence were particularly positive: socio-economic indicators improved, the infrastructures were substantially rehabilitated and in the five-year period between 1993 and 1997 the economy grew at an annual average of 10.9% (IBP 2019: 35). After decades of war, the situation was catastrophic, therefore this growth rate refers to a very small economy. In any case, the country was in the good graces of the Bretton Woods institutions, which considered it a virtuous example of economic performance for the African continent.

However, in May 1998 a new war with Ethiopia brutally interrupted this positive trend (Negash, Tronvoll 2001). The *casus belli* was the border town of Badme, claimed by both countries. The war lasted until 2000, it costed hundreds of millions of dollars and provoked tens of thousands of deaths. Furthermore, both Ethiopia and Eritrea, during the war, decided to deport the citizens of the rival country confiscating their properties: the result was a sudden increase of the refugees number. Under the umbrella of the United Nations, the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC) was established in 2000 and in 2007 it definitively demarcated the border, but Ethiopia did not accept its resolution. Only in July 2018 at a summit in Asmara, the new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, and President Isaias Afewerki signed an agreement ending the state of war and accepting the EEBC's resolution that had been previously rejected by Ethiopia. The latest war with Ethiopia has terribly impoverished Eritrea and exacerbated the dictatorial character of the regime (Kibreab 2009). Not surprisingly, the country was nicknamed the North Korea of Africa. The regime never applied the constitution (Markakis 1995), and ended up in a rigid one-party system, without freedom of expression and movement. Prisons are teeming with opponents whose fate is often unknown. The tightening of the regime has produced a generational fracture, causing a rift between what Tricia Hepner (2009b, 2012) has called the 'generation nationalism' and the 'generation asylum'. The former includes those who lived through the glorious years of the war of independence from Ethiopia, nurturing nationalistic feelings and faith in a better future; on the other hand, the new generations have largely suffered from the consequences of a betrayed dream. As we shall see, the regime's attitude towards the latter is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, they are branded as traitors, on the other there is an attempt to co-opt them in order to capture a part of the revenues made by Eritreans outside the country.

As far as we are concerned, the main reason why many young men and women flee

Eritrea is the compulsory national service introduced in 1995, which condemns them to a life of extended adolescence since the period of conscription is unspecified, making it impossible to plan for an adult life (Treiber 2009). Although the law provides for six months of military training and a year of working service for the state, once enrolled the conscription can last for an indefinite period of time, preventing the conscripted to return to civilian life.[7] In addition, especially during the military training period held in the military camp of Sawa, the recruits live in harsh conditions and are often abused by their superiors, including sexual harassment for women.

Although the national service is the main reason for young people to leave the country, there are other factors at stake. Eritrea is a poor country, with the majority of the population living on subsistence agriculture in the rural areas. Although in recent years the country has not provided official data on its economy, its level of development remains very low and therefore poverty joins political oppression in pushing young people to go abroad. Moreover, the presence of a large diaspora on a global scale represents another push factor. Diaspora can be an incentive for migration: it can provide the capital needed to leave the country as well as a substantial logistical support. It is also a constant and attractive symbolic presence for young people living in Eritrea. These continuous contacts and exchanges have fuelled the imagination of a rich Elsewhere where a comfortable life is possible, thus exacerbating their desire to escape.

Escape routes

Fleeing Eritrea is a step-by-step route. First, to cross the border you need the money to pay the traffickers who, in league with the Eritrean army commanders, leave some unguarded corridors along the frontier in exchange for bribes.[8] Most of the young Eritreans I met believe that the government is complicit in this system. According to my interlocutors, the cost of crossing the border used to exceed 5,000 US dollars, while recently, the price has decreased due to the diminished tensions with Ethiopia following the agreement reached between the two leaders (see above).

The main border crossing points are three. 1) To the north, it is possible to reach Port Sudan and then head towards Khartoum. 2) To the west, it is also possible to cross the Sudanese border and reach the city of Kassala, where there is a refugee camp managed by the UNHCR; from there, refugees usually head towards Khartoum or Libya. 3) To the south, it is possible to cross the highly militarized border with Ethiopia, reach Addis Ababa and from there move to Khartoum, Nairobi, or Kampala. 4) Finally, from the southern coast, towards Djibouti, it is possible to reach Yemen and from there Saudi Arabia where Eritreans often pretend to be Ethiopians, so that they can be taken to Ethiopia in case of repatriation.

Khartoum represents a nodal point for the Eritrean refugees. From there they can head in three directions. 1) Some go to Libya where they try to reach the Italian coasts. As it

is well known, this is an extremely dangerous journey that can easily turn into tragedy: you can end up in Libyan prisons where you face torture, and the families are forced to pay a ransom in exchange for your liberation. Moreover, nowadays the crossing is mostly made on very low-quality inflatable boats, which often do not last the entire journey and sink in the middle of the sea. In any case, compared to the other routes, the one to Libya is considered a shortcut to Europe. For this reason, many young people decide to gamble their lives along this route despite the dangers.

2) Others head towards Israel where the Eritrean community is quite numerous, particularly in Tel Aviv. Here it is a question of crossing the Sinai desert, a route that is also very risky because one can be kidnapped by bands of bandits who demand ransom from the relatives of the kidnapped (Van Reisen, Rijken 2015). Even on this route, during imprisonment you risk being tortured and there are rumours about how the abducted refugees are trafficked to feed the organ black market.[9] Moreover, since 2012, Israel has adopted a policy of prolonged detention without trial. The detained refuge-seekers are encouraged to leave the country to Uganda and Rwanda (Sabar, Tsurkov 2015).

3) Finally, a third group of refugees heads towards Kenya and Uganda. This is a less risky route, but it takes a long and uncertain time to reach the final destination, mainly Canada or the USA. From Khartoum, both Kampala and Nairobi can be reached by land via Juba, but since 2014 this route has been blocked due to the civil war in South Sudan. The alternative is air travel, for which you need a passport. The passport issue is quite critical since the recognition of the refugee status implies the requisition of the passport issued by the country of origin. However, many refugees do not consign it and often pretend to have lost it because, without it, it is very difficult to travel and completely impossible to buy a plane ticket to Nairobi or Entebbe. The passport is therefore a fundamental document without which you risk being stuck in a transit country (we will come back to the passport issue later). It is quite common that the refugees who initially chose to settle in Nairobi decide to move to the Ugandan capital. Nairobi is an insecure city for refugees since they are often victims of police abuse based on the shared assumption that refugees have money or that they can easily obtain it from relatives living abroad.

Transiting in Kampala

The reasons why many Eritrean refugees choose Kampala as a springboard for their final destination are the following: it is definitely a safer city then Nairobi; the Ugandan police does not ask the refugees for money and does not harass them; refugees can move freely inside and outside the country; Ugandans are deemed friendly towards refugees; the government leaves refugees free to do business; finally, the institutions needed for the bureaucratic procedures to reach Canada or the USA (UNHCR, IOM, and embassies) are all available and can be easily reached in the Ugandan capital. Nevertheless, Uganda is by no means considered an ideal place: instead, many refugees complain about the

corruption that affects them in the refugee status procedure (on this issue see also Cole 2018), and show a certain distrust mixed with devaluation towards Ugandans, who are considered untrustworthy and cheaters. However, contrary to what other scholars have pointed out (Araia 2005), I found that most of Eritreans still consider Uganda to be one of the best options among the transit countries.[10] Kampala is therefore a transit place, a limbo between the home country and the final destination. It is the city where all the paperwork has to be done to reach the country of destination, but this is often a long and uncertain process. Consequently, Kampala becomes a significant stop in the journey to Canada or USA, where a temporary diasporic community takes form, a cohesive one but at the same time full of contradictions.

Let's focus first on the process to obtain a visa to leave Uganda, which is obviously the main goal for the Eritrean refugees (Hope Shaps 2019). The preferred destinations are, in order of importance, the following: Canada, USA, Australia and Northern Europe. Most of the Eritreans I met in Kampala during my stays went to Canada and therefore, for the sake of simplification, I will focus on the procedures and strategies implemented to reach this country.

Canada can be accessed basically in three ways. 1) After obtaining the refugee status in Uganda, recognized first by the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister and then by UNHCR, which allows to apply for a resettlement program.[11] This is, however, a long and uncertain process that can take up to ten years. 2) The quickest solution is to have a sponsor in Canada: according to the Canadian law, the sponsor consists of an organization or a group of people who have committed to assist the newcomer for one year, covering start-up costs, on-going monthly costs for basic necessities and social and emotional support.[12] Once this documentation is obtained, the Canadian embassy issues the visa and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) organizes the trip. 3) Another way is to marry a Canadian citizen or a long-term resident, almost always an Eritrean previously migrated in the country, since marriage grants the right to family reunification. Inevitably, many refugees resort to a 'fake marriage', a marriage of convenience, which has been developed into an actual business charging different rates depending on the country of destination.

Surviving in Kampala

Since in Uganda refugees have the right to move freely, most of Eritreans choose to live in Kampala where there is a full-bodied Eritrean community. The advantages of living in the Ugandan capital are manifold. First of all, the presence of a solidarity network eases the hardship of diasporic life: through this network it is possible to find accommodation, usually shared with other compatriots, to become familiar with the city and especially with the procedures to obtain the refugee status and then a visa to go abroad. The Ugandan capital offers also job opportunities, mostly within the Eritrean community itself, and in general city life is more attractive than the rural one. Kampala

offers a level of freedom that many Eritreans have never experienced before: a tireless and libertine nightlife, freedom of opinion and movement, etc. Many young Eritreans experience a new lifestyles and freedoms in the Ugandan capital, even though moral constraints are still imposed by the diasporic community. However, these constraints are easily overcome in private life: for example, dating a Ugandan partner is officially deprecated and condemned, yet many refugees do it secretly or discreetly.

The connection between a refugee status and extreme poverty is a widespread stereotype. In fact, the Eritrean community of Kampala is quite heterogeneous and characterized by class divisions. A small minority of Eritreans have managed to prosper economically and moved in luxurious areas of the city, such as the hills of Kololo and Muyenga. There are various reasons for the economic success of this small elite of businessmen: one of these is that part of them has managed, in the past years, to occupy some important economic niches in the nascent economy of South Sudan, which was the fastest growing economy in the region until the outbreak of the civil war in 2013. Numerous Eritreans were able to succeed in different business sectors in Juba: construction, local transport, hotels and above all foreign trade (South Sudan has no industries and all goods are imported). These activities, which were highly profitable at the time, have resulted in capital accumulation and produced a good number of jobs for the Eritreans living in Kampala, many of whom spent a period of work in the South Sudanese capital.

In addition to the economic boom in South Sudan, there are other likely reasons for the success of the Eritrean businessmen: for example, according to my interlocutors the wealth of some of them should be traced back to the relationships they maintain with the government of Asmara. These people are allegedly the managers of companies operating abroad that facilitate investment and money laundering by the big men of the Eritrean regime. Nevertheless, there are no official reports on these activities. Lastly, some rich Eritreans in Kampala allegedly engage in illegal activities such as human trafficking.[13] Aside from this businessmen elite, the majority of Eritreans in Kampala lead a modest life navigating through poverty. Thanks to the economic freedom guaranteed by the Ugandan government, some refugees open small shops, bars and restaurants, hotels and internet cafes, etc. These small businesses, which usually pass from hand to hand within the Eritrean community itself, guarantee a minimum income and keep people busy fighting boredom while waiting for years in Kampala. However, working implies the need to maintain an ever-ambiguous relationship with the Eritrean embassy in Kampala and more generally with the Eritrean state.

The relationship between the Eritrean diaspora and the Eritrean state has been the subject of numerous studies. As Tricia Hepner and Samia Tecle (2013) have rightly observed, on the one hand, the policies of the Eritrean state have produced a mass exodus of the youngest people while, on the other hand, the Eritrean state itself seeks

to exercise international governance over the diaspora which becomes an essential building block for its economic and political survival. This ambivalence produces an ambiguous attitude on the part of young refugees towards their country of origin since they find themselves playing several roles at the same time: political refugees in difficult and often hostile contexts, patriots and citizens when they have to maintain relations with their embassy, breadwinners for the family members who remain in Eritrea (Belloni 2019).

The Eritreans living in Kampala seem to strongly embody all these paradoxes and ambiguities. As well as in the rest of the world, the Eritrean embassy in Kampala requests its citizens to pay a 2% income tax to the Eritrean government (DSP-groep BV 2017). This allows the regime to raise revenues to sustain itself while at the same time exploiting and keeping the diaspora under control. Few people refuse to pay this tax for various reasons. First of all, many refugees keep a strong patriotic and nationalistic sentiment, making it acceptable to finance the regime. Secondly, the embassy has a strong blackmailing power as any Eritrean who needs documents will have to deal with it: for example, businessmen that want to invest outside Uganda (in Sudan, Kenya or elsewhere) need a passport. The embassy also provides the documents for the possible expatriation of relatives, and keeps an eye on the assets (houses, land, etc.) acquired in Eritrea by Eritrean citizens working abroad. Many refugees are afraid that, once entered in the regime's blacklist, these assets would be confiscated. In other words, the sticky relationship with the Asmara regime, mediated through its embassies, is a pervasive aspect of the life of Eritrean refugees in Kampala and elsewhere. This is one of the ambiguities and paradoxes that mark their life: a life on the run, but trapped in a revolving door, that never ends with a definitive break-up and instead obliges them to keep good relations with the regime representatives.

Apart from the workers, a large number of refugees in Kampala lives on the remittances of their relatives in the diaspora. On average, they receive about 200 US dollars a month, an amount that allows them to survive with dignity, without pomp but also without the need to work. Therefore, many young people lead an idle life in wait, spent in the bars owned by their compatriots, where they drink, smoke, chat, watch football on TV and bet on the results. Their days repeat themselves, with late wake ups and chewing of *khat*, an exciting herb with an amphetamine effect (see above).[14] Because Eritrea is the only country in the Horn of Africa where *khat* is prohibited, its consumption is part of the 'transgressions' of the refugee life. A transgression that soon becomes a daily routine: its euphoric effect kills boredom, loosens the tongue, and makes time more enjoyable. *Khat* consumption becomes the central moment of the day, the push that makes everything more tolerable. It suppresses sleep and appetite, therefore those who chew it usually go to bed late, perhaps after drinking a few beers or some gin to dampen the effect. The days of these refugees pass in a stand-by condition, made of some pleasant distractions and boredom, nostalgia and illusions.

Beyond the community's borders

The Eritrean community is rather closed and self-referential. On the other hand, Kampala represents a transit place towards an elsewhere where hopefully it will be possible to start a new life. It is not worth to get attached or to invest too much in this limbo where the bodies are stuck but from where the minds wander away, between the nostalgia of what has been left and the illusion of what will be found.

Eritreans in Kampala share the public space with Ethiopians. Despite the long years of war, the diasporic life seems to cancel out the hostility between the two peoples, who tend to interpret the war as the consequence of the rapacity of their respective political elites. They hang out in the same bars, they pray in the same churches, and they share the same food, the *injera*.[15] However, on a more intimate level, divisions remain: exogamous relationships are rare, houses are shared mostly with compatriots and business relations are based mainly on a relationship of trust between people from the same country. An ethno-nationalist sentiment seems to prevail among the Eritreans who tend to consider themselves better and sharper in business than the Ethiopians.

The sense of superiority represents a remarkable and contradictory trait of the construction of identity in the Eritrean diaspora and it is partly the consequence of the exasperated nationalism of the Asmara regime (Bernal 2014; Woldemikael 2009). The transnational character of the Eritrean state (Hepner 2009a; 2009c) enables it to exert a strong influence and control over the diaspora. The war of secession from Ethiopia and the following ones fuelled a powerful nationalism. The interiorization of this nationalism can result in a paradoxical attitude: many young Eritreans end up supporting a government that forces them to flee their country. Even though the Eritrean diaspora is divided between supporters and opponents of the regime (a division that partly follows generational lines), a generalized attitude of closure and self-glorification prevails, which becomes evident while exploring the relations between Eritreans and Ugandans.

The tendency towards exogamy, whose aetiology is undoubtedly complex, is certainly a good indicator for measuring the degree of openness or closure of a community. In this regard, affective-sexual relationships between Eritreans and Ugandans represent, in my opinion, a relevant issue. While many young male Eritreans frequent local prostitutes, marriages or at least long-lasting relationships with Ugandan women are very rare (instead, to my knowledge, there are no cases of Eritrean women in a stable relationship with Ugandan men). In spite of the absence of statistical data about exogamous relationships, in over 12 years of participant observations, I have come to know of only two long-lasting relationships between Eritrean men and Ugandan women. I deduce from this that the exogamous propensity is very low and concerns, in this specific context, only men. In both cases, the relations ended due to the departure of the man. It should be added that one of these relationships was publicly justified by the fact that the Ugandan woman was a Tutsi: the myth of the Tutsi being an ethnic group of Nilotic

origin makes them more acceptable to the eyes of the Eritrean community.
Another significant element for assessing the degree of openness and closure of the Eritrean community is food, since it is an important marker of nationalism and national identity (Ichijo, Ranta 2016). Here again, although most of the Eritreans stay for years in Kampala, they hardly ever adapt to local cuisine. Most of them continue to eat *injera*, or spaghetti cooked in the Eritrean restaurants of Kampala. Although Ugandan food is cheaper, it does not become part of the culinary habits of Eritreans. This resistance to adapt, as we have already said, is certainly also due to the conception of Kampala as a transit place, that refugees hope to abandon as soon as possible and where they tend to invest as little as possible.
Finally, it is remarkable that Eritreans display a certain widespread racism against Ugandans, though subtle and never ostentatious. Ugandans are often described through stereotypes: less beautiful (the celebration of Eritrean beauty being central in their self-perception), less intelligent, more backward, dishonest, etc. At the same time, however, beyond these stereotypes, admiration and envy sometimes seem to transpire among young Eritreans: Ugandans are still considered freer and open-minded, as if they belonged to a more modern world than theirs.

Paradoxes and conflicts within the Eritrean community

One of the main paradoxes of the Eritrean community is that, despite its closure, it is pervaded by a strong internal conflict that undermines the trust among the members. On the one hand, the nationalist sentiment makes the community closed and rather cohesive; on the other hand, it is divided between supporters and opponents of the regime. It should be noted that the opponents themselves are not immune to nationalism: in fact, most of them are very patriotic, although they criticize the authoritarian degeneration of the regime. As we have seen, the division between opponents and supporters is partly generational: the old refugees, who are a minority within the Eritrean community of Kampala, tend to support the regime, while the opponents are generally younger, although many young people support the regime. This paradox is the result of the pervasive nationalism that produces this grotesque effect: a refugee population that massively keeps on supporting a government that forces them into exile.
These divisions lead to a high level of distrust and paranoia: the community is closed but at the same time its members do not trust each other. There are few refugees who take a clear public position against the regime since there is a widespread fear of spies and detractors and if someone is flagged as an open opponent, he may encounter serious difficulties in obtaining the passport or other documents needed from the embassy. Closure and self-reference on the one hand, distrust and paranoia on the other: these are the main contradictions and paradoxes that deeply affect the life of refugees of the Eritrean community in Kampala.

Conclusions

The condition of refugee is becoming increasingly widespread in our world. Refugees are people on the run, who maintain transnational ties and who cross different worlds following their own strategies and illusions. They often find themselves in a state of suspension. Victims of discrimination and racism, they live in a state of infinite expectations and in a condition of double absence as they are uprooted from their country and not yet rooted somewhere else (Sayad 1999). In this article I have tried to analyse a particular community of refugees, the Eritrean community of Kampala. I have tried to shed light on the reasons why many young Eritreans leave their country and retrace their steps through countries they run across in search of a new life. Two fundamental questions emerged from this analysis. First of all, the ability of the Eritrean government (from this point of view a rather peculiar case) to exercise a transnational sovereignty that enables the control and exploitation of its own diasporic population. Secondly, I have tried to show the deep contradictions and conflicts within the Eritrean community which is closed and self-referential while at the same time eroded by conflicts and lack of trust. The young refugees move through these two different forces deeply shaped by a strong nationalism: that of the Eritrean state and that of the moral bonds of their own community, sometimes resisting, other times taking advantage. Kampala is a social theatre in which these paradoxes and ambiguities clearly emerge: a limbo, a delicate place where nothing has yet been accomplished and people cautiously act to avoid ruining their final project, at the same time trying to invest as little as possible. No one wants to remain stuck in this limbo: whether it is an illusion or not, the future is elsewhere.

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NOTES:

1 - In this article, to protect my interlocutors' privacy, I resort to pseudonyms.

2 - *Chapati* is a typical Indian bread, flat and unleavened, made of wheat flour and cooked on a griddle.

3 - *Khat* is a plant native to the Horn of Africa. Its leaves contain a stimulant alkaloid that causes excitement and loss of appetite. *Khat* chewing is an old social custom in the Horn of Africa and in the Arabian Peninsula.

4 - I published an article on the life history of Berhane (Jourdan 2012).

5 - *Refugee data finder*, "UNHCR", n.d.: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=O6rv3B.

6 - *The World Factbook*, "CIA", n.d.: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/#people-and-society.

7 - R. Maclean, *'It's just slavery': Eritrean conscripts wait in vain for freedom*, «The Guardian», 11 October 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/oct/11/its-just-slavery-eritrean-conscripts-wait-in-vain-for-freedom.

8 - According to the UN monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea (UN Monitoring Reports 2011, 2012, 2013), the Eritrean government and high-level officials are involved in the trafficking. In particular, General Teklai Kifle ('Manjus'), the commander of the Border Surveillance Unit and Colonel Fitsum Yishak of the Eritrean Army were considered responsible for the cross-border smuggling of people and weapons.

9 - The report of organ trafficking was made by the NGO Gruppo Everyone, *Rapporto-denuncia contro il traffico di migranti e organi nel Sinai*, "Everyone Group", 4 January 2012: http://www.everyonegroup.com/it/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2012/1/4_Rapporto-denuncia_contro_il_traffico_di_migranti_e_organi_nel_Sinai.html. However, there are still some doubts about the veracity of these facts if nothing else because the removal of organs, a sophisticated and delicate operation, would be very difficult in such contexts.

10 - On this point, I agree with Erica Hope Shaps (2019) who pointed out that many Eritrean refugees consider Kampala as the best of bad options in terms of safety and quality of life.

11 - Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another state that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement. In recent years, the United States has been the world's top resettlement country, with Canada, Australia and the Nordic countries also providing a sizeable number of places annually. See *Resettlement*, "UNHCR", n.d.: https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement.html.

12 - *Sponsor a Refugee*, "Government of Canada", n.d.: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-outside-canada/private-sponsorship-program.html.

13 - According to some reliable sources, one of the most important Eritrean human traffickers resides in Kampala. Cfr. L. Tondo and A. Mwesigwa, *People Smuggler who Italians Claim to Have Jailed is Living Freely in Uganda*, «The Guardian» (online), 11 April 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/law/2018/apr/11/medhanie-yehdego-mered-people-smuggler-italians-claim-jailed-seen-uganda.

14 - *Khat* is largely consumed in the Horn of Africa and in Yemen, and in the last twenty years it has also been cultivated in Uganda where it is legal, although it seems that the government intends to prohibit it (Beckerleg 2005).

15 - *Injera* is a flat bread prepared with *teff* flour and is the basic dish of Ethiopian and Eritrean cuisine.

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