‘Perceiving Italy’: an exploration of asylum-seekers’ strategies.

The case of Eritrean asylum-seekers

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To Nonno Nino

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List of Acronyms

Names in the original language are indicated in italics.

ANCI	*Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni Italiani*- National Association of Italian Municipalities
AOI	*Africa Orientale Italiana* - Italian Eastern Africa
ARRA	Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs
ASL	*Azienda Sanitaria Locale* - Local Health Care
BAI	*Banca Dati Anagrafica Unificata dell'Immigrazione* – Unified Database for Immigration
CARA	*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* – Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers
CDA	*Centri di Accoglienza* – Reception Centres
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CIE	*Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione* – Identification and Expulsion Centre
CIR	*Comitato Italiano per i Rifugiati* – Italian Committee for Refugees
CPSA	*Centri di Primo Soccorso ed Accoglienza* – First Aid Reception Centres
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
ELA	Eritrean Liberation Army
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ESP	Eritrean Socialist Party

EU	European Union
EURODAC	European Dactyloscopy
HRC	Human Rights Council
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ISPRA	*Istituto per le Ricerca Ambientale* – Institute for Environmental Research
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLF1	People's Liberation Forces 1
PLF2	People's Liberation Forces 2
PP	People's Party
PSI	*Partito Socialista Italiano* – Italian Socialist Party
SPRAR	*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati* - Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploratory study of the way perceptions and emotions shape the agency of asylum seekers. Using Eritrean asylum seekers that travel to Italy and their perceptions of the Italian asylum system as a case study, it explores how perceptions of Italy and its asylum system shape the strategies of Eritrean asylum seekers at different stages of their migration journey. This research went some way towards developing a notion of agency that also takes into account dimensions (such as the importance of perceptions and emotions) that are sometimes overlooked in forced migration studies, thereby contributing (or so I hope) to a more informed and subtle view of asylum seekers' movements and of their interaction with their surrounding environment. My fieldwork demonstrates that perceptions and emotions play an important role in shaping asylum seeker agency, and that perceptions are heavily influenced by the circulation of rumours among migrants.

The first part of the thesis explores the way perceptions about Italy are produced and re-produced in Eritrea (thereby leading to a set of recurrent expectations), as well as the way the identity formation process happening in Eritrea has led to the emergence of peculiar characteristics that are relevant in explaining Eritrean asylum seekers' strategies for coping with the challenges of the asylum system. The second part of this project focuses on asylum journeys, and specifically on the various trajectories developed by asylum seekers, on the circulation of rumours and on the way perceptions about destination countries evolve. The last part examines the Italian asylum and reception systems and provides some examples of the strategies adopted by asylum seekers to overcome problems and obstacles; it also explores the factors that shape the agency of Eritrean asylum seekers, especially in relation to the Italian asylum system and to the rules of the Dublin Procedure.

INTRODUCTION
THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY IN REFUGEE STUDIES

This thesis is an exploratory study on the role of perceptions and emotions in shaping asylum seekers' agency. Taking as a case study Eritrean asylum seekers and Italy and its asylum system, it tries to explore how perceptions of Italy and its asylum system impact on Eritrean asylum seekers strategies at different stages of their migration path.

In order to pursue this aim, it is important to first address issues that are particularly relevant to this research and that continue to shape the debate among migration scholars and, in particular, in the field of refugee studies and unauthorised migration. In this section, I will therefore develop a literature review of key issues that are useful to develop a conceptual framework apt to interpret the data collected from the field. In particular, I will describe the general trends along which the literature has developed in refugee studies and argue that a deeper understanding of the agentic dimension of refugee is necessary as it helps to shed light on interesting dynamics that influence migration trajectories and the way asylum seekers cope with the asylum system in the host country. I will then focus on the long-standing debate around the relation between agency and structure, as it informed many of the studies that tried to look at the agentic dimension in migration studies. Furthermore, a review of the relevant literature on decision-making processes is deemed relevant here; in particular, agent-based models of migration provide a set of key concepts that will be further

elaborated upon in this thesis. Finally, the literature on the role of emotions in migration will be addressed here.

1. FORCED MIGRATION 'CLASSIC' THEORIES

In migration studies, due to the emphasis on the forced nature of asylum migration, asylum-seekers and refugee's agentic dimension has been somehow neglected. As De Jong and Fawcett point out, 'forced migration is of course a topic of considerable interest and significance, but not to respect to individual decision making' (1981: 45). On the same line, Bakewell (2010) argues 'we may try to explore the political, economic social factors which forced them to move, but we do not need to explain them in terms of their exercising agency'. In a way, many could argue that considering asylum seekers' agency equals denying the very nature of asylum movements, which are forced in character. According to this view, asylum seekers flee immediate dangers and persecution on the grounds of the 1951 Geneva Convention; they seek refuge in safe countries and any argument that might imply that there is more to just safety in asylum seekers flows is seen as undermining the distinction between asylum seekers and other kinds of migrants.

As a result, the literature has mostly developed in three directions. The first one addresses the issue of distinguishing between refugees and other migrants. A certain degree of dissimilarity exists in scholars' opinions about what are the identifying traits of the refugee. According to Koser (1997), it is possible to distinguish scholars between realists and nominalists. The first group sees refugee movements as provoked by political factors – rather than economic ones – and as involuntary. For example, Kunz (1973) claims that refugee movements are kinetic in nature. In fact, it is possible to distinguish them from voluntary migration movements because of the 'reluctance to

uproot oneself and the absence of positive, original motivations to settle elsewhere' (130). Moreover, refugees are not often able to exercise their freedom of choice when assessing alternative possibilities also because 'they are not always aware of crucially important factors' (1981: 46). Joly (1996), instead, by following Kunz in recognising the involuntary nature of refugee movements, also points out the complexity of the distinction between refugees and other migrants. Indeed, in her view, the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary movements cannot be the only criterion to identify the refugee; in contrasting this figure with the 'economic migrant' she enumerates a series of dissimilarities that somehow spotlight the refugee's own characteristics. First of all, the refugee is pushed to leave his/her home country by political reasons. Secondly, the decision of leaving the country of origin is charged with negative associations. Thirdly, refugee movements are generally collective, as they are started by dramatic changes in the refugee's home country; as a consequence, their flight is often unplanned and refugees face it unprepared. Fourthly, the refugee's often traumatic experience, his/her suffering prior to the flight, has strong repercussion on his/her present and future, and the settlement in the host society is made even more difficult as he/she, differently from other migrants, is not always able to choose the country of destination. This implies, according to Joly, that the cultural 'compatibility' with the host society is often lower. Consequently, refugees 'have experienced the most complete dislocation of their social world. They are deprived of power as social actors both in the country of origin and the country of reception' (1996: 149-150). Nominalist scholars, instead, criticise the dichotomy between political and economic circumstances as precursor factors of refugee movements, as they are inextricably linked (Richmond 1995). These scholars also claim that, as there is often a degree of constraint in the choices available also to other migrants, the division of migratory movements into

voluntary and involuntary creates confusion. Therefore, the refugee should be defined by ideally positioning him/her at the intersection between two axes, one representing various degrees of freedom in decision making, the other denoting different combinations of economic, social and political factors that lead to the flight (Richmond 1995, 1988; Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo 1989). Richmond (1995), for instance, points out that behind decisions to leave can exist economic, social, political and environmental pressures which regard security of individuals who can be threatened in many ways. Likewise, Kane (1995) argues that the combination of various factors – such as persecution and conflict, but also poverty, lack of resources and population growth – could lead to different kinds of migration movements. Schmeidl (1996) states that, although conflict remains the biggest cause of flight, human rights violation and economic considerations are undeniably taken into account by asylum seekers. Barsky (2000), more generally, argues that asylum seekers consider non-Convention grounds – such as domestic violence, restrictive social roles, and the dislike of a political system – which represent as well triggers and precursors of flights. Furthermore, other researchers have revealed evidence of the existence of such factors (for example: Colson, 2003; and Guy 2003).

A second current in refugee studies has focused on the decision-making process of asylum seekers, with particular attention to patterns of destination. This issue has been explored through very interesting case studies. Making a distinction between anticipatory refugee movements and acute refugee movements (Johansson, 1990) different factors have been identified that explain patterns of origin and destination for asylum seekers (Havinga and Böcker, 1999), namely: links between the country of origin and the country of destination (i.e. colonial ties); characteristics of the country of destination (i.e. asylum policy, economy, image of the country, etc.); and events during

the flight. As to the decision-making process (Gilbert and Khoser, 2006; Zetter et al., 2003; Hassan, 2000; Jordan and Düvell, 2003; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; and Robinson and Segrott, 2002), more specifically, some attention has been devoted to the refugees' prior knowledge on their destination country.

A third approach focus on immigration control as one of the defining features of the modern sovereign state (Bartleson, 1995) and addresses issues related to how immigration policies are influenced by the perception of the 'refugee problem' at the international level. This research, for instance, addresses the impact of EU regulations upon migrants in terms of exercise of their rights and constraints to agency (see Schuster, 2011). Many scholars have addressed much of their attention to the nature of asylum policies (visa regimes, carrier sanctions, pre-inspection agreements, contraction of boundaries, interdiction, excision of part of national territory, and other techniques that are continuously emerging) and their impact on asylum migration (King, 1992; Koser, 1997; Gibney, 2006; Jandl, 2007; etc.).

2. THE DEBATE ON STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

As Vicki Squire (2017) points out, in recent years 'an emphasis on migrant agency has become increasingly prominent in literatures in the field of migration and border studies, precisely in order to challenge oversimplified conceptions of people on the move either as victims of violence and exploitation or as villains who commit crimes' (255). As a matter of fact, one should be aware that, when it comes to unauthorised migration - a phenomenon that is determined by the relation between migratory forces and forces that render these 'illegal' or irregular (Squire, 2011; Squire, 2017: 255) – engaging the concept of migrant agency bears significance not only at the analytical but also at the normative level. This is even more so for refugee movements.

Indeed, the discussion about structure and agency raises questions about the intentionality or constraint of migrants, thus risking to easily legitimise assumptions that portray asylum seekers either as victims or as culpable of their own situation, if not as 'bogus'.

This debate has been very thoroughly analysed by Colin Hay (2002), who categorises the positions of social scientists on the issue of structure and agency into 'structuralists' or 'functionalist' on the one side and 'intentionalists', social phenomenologists, interactionists, and ethnometodologists on the other side. The first category believes that the primary and most significant element in human behaviour should be recognized in social structures and institutions, as they constrain, and more generally shape individuals' dispositions towards, and capacities for, action. As a consequence, structures cannot be understood as simply the sum of the individuals by which they are made up, but possess peculiar characteristics and properties that shape the social world. Methodologically, these scholars relie mostly on structural or contextual factors in addressing the issue on what determines migration (Hay, 2002: 93-95)[1]. In the structuralist approach, the focus is this on the conditions under which migration occur and the structures that shape it; individual agency, when considered, is regarded as constrained. On the contrary, the intentionalist approach stresses the centrality of the agent as the most important theoretical and ontological element in social systems; social structure is therefore seen as an epiphenomenon: a result and consequence of the actions and activities of interacting individuals. Methodologically, institutionalists tend to look more at the ability of the migrant to act in ways that are not constrained by the context (Squire, 2017: 257). To its extreme, this argument falls

[1] An example is the work of Castles and Miller (2008), who focus on 'push' and 'pull' factors as determinants of migration, where 'pull' factors are notably labour market opportunities, family ties and networks.

into the trap of considering the migrant completely free to choose and decontextualized, thus, overlooking the role of structures in shaping the choices available to the individual.

The limits of such both approaches are evident: none of them can allow for a complete account of human behaviour, able to take into consideration both the micro-level of the agent behaviour and the macro-level of structure. Thus, many theorists have attempted to find a balance between the two approaches and to combine them in a consistent and solid design[2].

In this respect, structuration theory of Anthony Giddens has been strongly influential in challenging this dualism (Squire, 2017). It represents 'one of the best-known and more articulated efforts to integrate agency and structure' (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004: 379)[3]. In order to integrate both agency and structure, Giddens surveys modern theories trying to overcome their deficiencies. Thus, if on one side he draws on the concepts of methodical and practical consciousness in order to overcome the problems inherent to the 'philosophy of action' (Giddens,1976), on the other side he also examines structuralist and post-structuralist theories (Lévi- Strauss and Althusser in particular), from which derives he notion of generative rules (Bryant and Jary, 2000: 253). In Giddens's words, 'what is an issue is how the concepts of action, meaning and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint…The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual agent, nor the existence of any

[2] Among the exponents of this approach we can find G. Simmel (The Metropolis and Mental Life, 1903; and The Philosophy of Money, 1907), P. Bourdieu (An Outline of Theory of Practice, 1972), P. Berger and T. Luckmann (Social Construction of reality, 1996), J. Coleman (Foundation of Social Theories, 1990). In the field of IR, for instance, scholars have recently focused on 'political action', that is the political meaning of migrants' agency vis-à-vis the structure, which can lead to different outcomes, namely rupture, change or continuity (Strange et al., 2017; Lundberg and Strange, 2017; Lind, 2017; Schweitzer, 2017).

[3] Cf. Bryant and Jary, 2000; Cohen, 1989; Craib, 1992; Held and Thompson, 1989.

form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time' (Giddens, 1984: 2).

At the heart of structuration theory Giddens places the concepts of 'structure', 'system' and, even more important, 'duality of structure' (Giddens, 1984: 2). The latter is indeed the concept that allows him to build a bridge between agency and structure: it represents 'the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the consititution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of its constitution' (Giddens, 1979: 5). In other words, structure and agency are dependent upon each other, but also constrain each other. Therefore, neither social structures nor social actions can exist independently of one another[4]. In Giddens' view, structure is represented by 'the structuring properties[5] which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them systemic form' (Giddens, 1984: 17). In this sense, structures are intended as resources both materially and phenomenologically (Stones, 2005): on one hand, they represent the material/physical setting that give the agent the capability and the conditions to perform the action[6]; on the other hand, they can be intended as agents' knowledgeability interiorised in memory traces[7] (Giddens, 1984: 377). Structure has another particular feature: it is 'virtual'. This means that it exists out of time and space, only in the memory of knowledgeable agents as potentially activated during the action (Giddens, 1976). As we

[4] As argued by Stones, Giddens 'combines the subjective and objective within his basic conceptualization of structure, and also within his conception of agent' (Stones, 2005: 16).
[5]The structuring properties are the rules and resources that are drawn upon by agents during the 'production and reproduction of social action. It is important to notice that these represent at the same time the means of social reproduction (Giddens, 1984).
[6] In this sense, these kind of resources can be described as external or internal to the individual.
[7] Here, these kind of resources are indeed internal to the individual.

said, structures are not only constraining, but also enabling: in fact, they sometimes allow the agent to conduct an action that otherwise he or she would not be able to do.

On the contrary, the system has an actual existence: it 'comprises the situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space' (Giddens, 1984: 25) and, therefore, 'analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated agents who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction' (25)[8].

Moreover, Giddens identifies three dimensions of structure (signification, domination, and legitimation) to which correspond different typologies of interaction, communication, power, and sanction respectively. The three dimension are always involved in any action (Giddens, 1984: 31; Stones, 2005: 17). Between them, Giddens introduces 'modalities' (interpretive scheme, facility, and norm) in order to 'clarify the main dimensions of the duality of structure in interaction, relating the knowledgeable capacities of agents to structural features' (Giddens, 1984: 28). That is, a social system can be explained and understood by its structure, modality and interaction. The first one refers to rules and resources governing and available to agents[9]. The second, instead, represents the means by which structures are drawn upon during the action. Here, as critics have pointed out, the distinction between structures internal and

[8] Of course, as structures are virtual, they do not have structures but structural properties (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004: 382). Let's clarify this with the example on language. It is clear to everyone that it (system) has an existence outside and independently from us. The structure of language is made up by grammar, phonetic rules, spelling, sentence-construction, etc. However, some individuals share the same structure (set of rules) and this makes communication (social activity) possible as we can draw upon our knowledge of these shared rules. But language in not immutable, fixed in time; it rather is modified and evolves constantly through communication (social activity) and the modification of the structure.

[9] Here, the author uses the term resources in relation to the structure of nomination, intending economic (allocative) and authoritative power (exerted respectively by economic and political institutions). The implication is that we cannot think about power in terms of unequal distribution, but we must above all consider it as characteristic of human agency (Giddens, 1984: 28-34; Cf. Stones, 1995: 17-18). Moreover, Giddens uses the term 'rules' to denote both the structure of signification and legitimation.

external to the individual is not so clear. Finally, the third denotes the activity instantiated by the agent acting within the social system.

From the analysis carried on until here, we can deduce that in Giddens's model a very important role is given to the agent and praxis. Agents are knowledgeable and competent, and reproduce, through their engagement in the process of interaction, entire social systems. We can understand this better by considering shortly the 'Stratification Model of the Agent' (Giddens, 1984: 5-14). First of all, the agent is situated in a structural context and is propelled to act or, more formally, to engage in praxis, by his or her desires, projects, wants, that are involved in the motivational aspect (Cf. Stones, 2005: 24-29) of agency and can be more or less purposeful, or routinized, or conscious[10]. Then, in order to reach his or her aim, the agent draws upon his or her knowledge about the structure in order to employ them as a medium of the action (rationalisation of action). The better the quality of the knowledge about the context the less probable for the agent to have unexpected consequences. The rationalisation of action, then, implies on one side degrees of knowledgeability and, on the other side, the engagement of the agent in establishing a hierarchy between his or her projects, wants, desires. It is through the reflexive monitoring therefore that the agent is able to organise his or her practises according to the hierarchy established by him or her and taking into account the context and the structure of action. Of course, as we said, the action could lead to intended but also, through perverse effects, to unintended consequences that become the conditions for the next action: the agent will in any case need to take them into account when engaging again into action.

[10]'Motivation refers to the potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried on by the agent. Motives tend to have a direct purchase on action only in relatively unusual circumstances, situations which in some way break with the routine' (Giddens, 1984: 6).

One of the main focus in Giddens's model of agency is that agents have freedom of choice: they can always choose to do otherwise. At the same time, however, they experiment 'constraints'[11]; these can involve for instance physical limitations, but considerations about time and space are relevant here. In fact, time and space have an impact on both the external structure and on the outcomes of action. As to the first, agents are historically (time) and geographically (space) positioned and this can make more actions more realizable than others (Cf. Stones, 2005: 28). As to the second, the bigger the temporal (and perhaps also geographical) distance between the action and the outcome, the less predictable the outcomes (Giddens, 1984: 110-116).

Moreover, agents' knowledge is sometimes 'tacit' but, in Giddens view, they 'routinely…maintain a continuing «theoretical understanding» of the grounds of their activity' (Giddens, 1984: 5). Therefore, for Giddens, the most important and prevalent kind of knowledge in social relations is the one that is often taken for granted, not always noticed. He calls it practical consciousness, and distinguishes it from the discoursive consciousness[12].

As it is possible to imagine, Giddens's structuration theory has seen many critics from contemporary social scientists. Some of them have argued that Giddens' attempt of bridging agency and structure has failed, as what the author considers and names as 'structure' (rules and resources of the virtual order) is something very different from the classical idea; therefore, the 'duality of structure' works only because structure is

[11] 'The nature of constraint is historically variable, as are the enabling qualities generated by the contextualities of human action. It is variable in relation to the material and institutional circumstances of activity, but also in relation to the forms of knowledgeability that agents possess about those circumstances' (Giddens, 1984: 179).

[12] Discoursive consciousness refers to the competency of actors in reporting discoursively 'about their intentions in, and reasons for, acting as they do' (Giddens, 1984: 6). This distinction is permeable, and can be shifted through socialization and learning experiences (Giddens, 1984: 7). Thus, when an agent gives his or her account of the action we could not only assume that he or she is relying on the discoursive consciousness, but we should also consider that a part of pratical knowledge could be embedded in his or her account (Cf. Giddens, 1979: 57).

replaced with something different (Layder et al., 1991). Others, have stressed that the concepts of virtuality of structure and voluntarism, and the nature of the constraints cause an underestimation of the importance of the cultural system (Archer, 1988): 'Since what is instantiated depends on the power of agency and not the nature of the property [of the rule or constituent of the cultural system], then properties themselves are not differentially mutable' (Archer, 1988: 88); this means that the constraints, as theorised by Giddens, are weak as agents can modify or conform to them as they like.

In general, we might argue that the major limitations of Giddens's structuration theory lie on the generality of the concepts and in the difficulties that this raises if one tries to apply it to empirical analysis. These limitations, and many more, have been recognised by Stones (1991, 1996, 2005) who attempts to overcome the theoretical shortages on mainly two fronts (ontology, and epistemology and methodology) elaborating a more refined version of structuration theory, namely 'strong structuration theory'.

On the ontological front, Stones carries out four operations: firstly, elaborates the concept of ontology in situ as different from Giddens's ontology in general; secondly, introduces an meso-level of ontological abstraction and a meso-level of ontological scale; thirdly, elaborates a quadripartite cycle of structuration from the duality of structure; lastly, conceptualises what he calls the independent causal forces and the irresistible causal forces. On the epistemological and methodological front, instead, Stones distinguishes appropriate forms of methodological bracketing elaborating, at the same, time specific methodological steps to be undertaken by the researcher.

According to Stone, Giddens's main concern is not to engage in conjuncturally specific empirical studies at the substantive level, but to elaborate his theory at the abstract and philosophical level, creating concepts 'about entities that exist in the social

world, that apply in all times and in all places' (Stones, 2005: 76). He only suggests to the researchers to use structuration theory's concepts as a guide when they engage in the empirical level. On the contrary, Stones, whilst developing and refining the concepts at the abstract level, also focus his attention on the substantive level; the author calls this the ontic-level[13].

As stated above, Stones also introduces a meso-level of ontological scale. The duality of structure requires that attention be paid both at the structures and at the categories of hermeneutics; thus, any empirical study aiming at studying a structuration process must provide itself of tools of hermeneutical and structural analysis (Stones, 2005: 81). Inevitably, this has the consequence of narrowing the scale and scope of the studies that can be undertaken within structuration theory. Therefore, following Parker (2000), Stones argues that the scale of temporality within which the researcher could study both structure and agency is the 'intermediate temporality of historical processes' (Stones, 2005: 81): it allows for the identification of both 'the relations between specific events and agency, and relations between events themselves' (Stones, 2005: 82). Drawing upon Cohen's elaboration of position-practices relations[14] (1989), Stones introduces them and their networked relations in the meso-level as they are able to provide a contextualising frame and allow for in-situ studies.

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[13] The role of ontology in empirical research is thus reinforced through a three-level dialogical structure: the ontic-level is the one in which the researcher gathers the empirical evidence; the meso-level accounts for degrees of variations in the abstract concepts contained in the abstract level. I have defined the relation between the levels as dialogical; in fact, these are not separated one from the other. Instead, they 'affect' each other through the guiding influence of ontological concepts on empirical research (that is, the suggest to the researcher which kind of empirical evidence is relevant) from the abstract level to the ontic passing through the meso-level, and the influence of empirical research on the modification and elaboration of ontological concepts. This means, in other words, that through empirical findings the theory allows for creation or modification of concepts adapting the theory to the in-situ situation.

[14] Cohen's position-practices relations are elaborated from Giddens's notion of 'social position' and Bhaskar's (1979) notion of position-practices. In this approach the roles of the individuals are seen as an elemento f the structure.

In his attempt of refinement of Giddens's structuration theory, Stones draws upon some elements emerged through debates and critiques on some of the aspects of the duality of structure[15]. Thus, the author develops a quadripartite model of structuration. It encompasses four elements: in first place, the external structure: this exists outside and autonomously from the agent-in-focus and represents the context of action (here Stones consider the agent in his 'action-horizon'); in second place, the internal (virtual) structures within the agent: these are in fact the means of agent's conduct (Stones, 2005: 86) and can be divided into two categories, the conjuncturally-specific knowledge of external structures and the general-dispositions[16] (or, following Bourdieu, the habitus). The third part of the quadripartite model of structuration is the active agency, the most dynamic moment of structuration: in it, the agent chooses how to act (if strategically or routinely). Finally, the fourth element is the outcome[17].

Stones's strong structuration theory is also confronted with the criticisms raised by Giddens's structuration theory about its 'overly-voluntaristic' character (Archer,

[15] In particular, he attempts to clarify the distinction between internal and external structures (concerns in this sense were raised for example by Thompson, 1997) and, more in general, tries to give more solidity to the theory in view of its application in the substantive level.

[16] The term 'dispositional' has been elaborated by Mouzelis with reference to Mead's theory on adaptable dispositions and Bourdieu notion of habitus (Mouzelis, 1991; Stones, 2005). The latter refers to those memory traces or habitual schemas that are taken for granted by the agents. Generally, they draw upon it without noticing. But, suddenly, the individual can become aware of it as the external conditions subvert the routinized and taken-for-granted part of the general dispositional. Thus the latter can become 'the object of reflexive attention' (Stones, 2005: 88). As to the conjuncturally-specific, the agent is considerated here as embedded in a network of position practices (positional). This is a key point for the elaboration of the ontology-in-situ: it represents that kind of specific knowledge that involves the specific context of action. It is the knowledge, acquired in time, on which the agents draw upon in relation to how the perceive their context (Stones, 2005), and can be subdivided in the three elements of structures formalised by Giddens: the interpretive schemes (that is, how other individuals will interpret the action), the power (that is, considerations about the power that they can exert in order to achieve their aim or about how much power they can obtain through other actors), the norms (that is, agent knowledge about how other people will behave and how they expect the actor-in focus to behave). As we have pointed out before, the introduction of a meso-level in ontology allows us to consider degrees of this knowledge.

[17] A remark must be made here: Stones is interested in what causes particular outcomes and therefore on counterfactuals. The whole process of structuration is, thus, very important in that determines the production of particular outcomes. These are distinguished in outcomes that will constitute the internal or external structure or other kind of outcome in the next round of agency.

Tompson)[18]. Thus, Stones introduces two concepts related to the external structure: independent causal influences and irresistible causal forces. The first refers to the situation in which 'external structures have complete autonomy from the positioned agents whom they affect' (Stones, 2005: 111). These do not have any capacity to resist or control these external influences as they are independent (i.e. unemployment rates). The second refers to the situation in which, even when they have the 'physical capacity to resist an external influence…[the agents] feel they do not have the ability to resist' (Stones, 2005: 111). Therefore, these are not independent from the agent's feelings on being (or not) powerless. Thus the agents would have to meet three 'counterfactual conditions' in order to resist these pressures: to possess 'adequate power to resist without endangering the conditions of possibility for the realisation of core commitments' (Stones, 2005: 115); to possess 'adequate knowledge of alternative possible courses of action and their probable consequences' (Stones, 2005: 115); and to possess 'adequate critical distance in order to take up a strategic stance' (Stones, 2005: 115). It appears very clear, then, that here also the internal structure of the individual and the active agency are at stake, and that this standpoint allows for a clarification of the voluntary aspects of agency without neglecting the constraints imposed to agents by the external structures.

As we said, one of the main concerns of Stones is Giddens's neglect of epistemology and methodology. In particular Stones criticises the conceptual practical guiding tools (methodological bracketing) proposed by Giddens: institutional analysis

[18] In contrast with this approach, Margaret Archer (1995), considers structure and agency as interactive rather than as mutually constitutive. Furthermore, she posits that structure precedes agency. The latter is understood as the conduct of people on the move, who reproduce or transform (although with great difficulty as structures are very difficult to penetrate by individuals) structures that pre-exist and condition conducts (Squire, 2017).

and conduct analysis[19]. Stones argues that institutional analysis should be substituted with context analysis, as the latter is better complementary to conduct analysis[20]. Finally, Stones provides a very interesting description of the recurrent steps to be undertaken by the researcher willing to conduct a study informed by the strong structuration ontology[21].

Stones brings some new elements to structuration theory. In particular, his emphasis is on the aspects of the theory that have mainly given rise to ruthless critiques in the Academia. Indeed, the clarifications and further distinctions brought by Stones give new light to some parts of the theory that would have been otherwise left on the philosophical level with no serious and concrete application. In doing so, he modifies the theory through a dialectical engagement with the critics giving birth to a new 'stronger' version of new structuration theory. Nonetheless, this theory still carries some of the limitations that where criticised in Gidden's theory. For instance, according to Spaargaren (2006), Stones reintroduces back into structuration theory some of the dichotomies Giddens tried to overcome with the very formulation of it, such as the dichotomy between individual (instead of 'agency') and society (instead of 'structure'),

[19] The first one is the 'social analysis which places in suspension the skills and awareness of actors, treating institutions as chronically reproduced rules and resources' (Giddens, 1984: 375). The second one, instead, is the 'social analysis which places in suspension institutions as chronically reproduced, concentrating upon how actors reflexively monitor what they do; how actors draw upon rules and resources in the constitution of interaction' (Giddens, 1984: 373).

[20] In fact, whereas conduct analysis focuses on the notion of knowledgeability in its self-reflective aspects (concerns, motivations, desires of the agent; Stones, 2005: 122), context analysis focuses on that kind of knowledge which is drawn upon in the conjuncturally-specific internal structures and, therefore, takes into account the other relevant part of the quadripartite cycle of structuration.

[21] Firstly, the researcher should consider the 'general-dispositional frames' through conduct analysis; secondly, the researcher should shift his or her attention to the conjuncturally-specific structures of the agent (that is, how he or she perceive the external structure from the angle of his or her own aims or projects); always as the second stage, the researcher should now focus on how the agent hierarchically organises his or her own aims or project; thirdly, the researcher should identify, through context analysis, the existence of external structures and how the agents are positioned in them; lastly, the researcher should take into account the space left for a modification of the external agencies, and diversity of constraints that these pose on different individuals (here, we consider elements like race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) (Stones, 2005).

also confusing again the level of ontology and substantive analysis, so clearly demarcated by Giddens.

According to structuration and strong structuration, then, 'migrant agency is both a medium and an outcome of conduct, which occurs under conditions of constraint that are not fixed but constituted dynamically through the very processes of unauthorised migration' (Squire, 2017: 260). Researchers that adopted this theory, however, have not managed to overcome - especially at the methodological level – the dualism of structure and agency, leaving 'empirical findings somewhat divorced from the theory that denies this dualism' (Bakewell, 2010: 1702). The theory also leaves other 'blurred' spaces that are recognised as particular relevant in this thesis. First of all, the underlying assumption of rationality of the actor. Agents choose rationally (almost strategically) the means upon which the draw to reach their project; in other occasions, they act almost unconsciously through habitus. However, a specific account on how an actor takes a decision is somehow absent and the important role of emotions in decision-making and the way migrants strategise their moves is neglected. Secondly, how agents' perceptions about the structure are produced, shared and re-inforced through interactions thus creating 'information' that migrants can draw upon is particularly relevant as it will be discussed across the thesis. The gap in theory here would be whether general-dispositions and conjuncturally-specific knowledge about external structures are drawn upon in the same way.

Colin Hay's (2002) concept of 'strategic actor', made from a critical realist perspective, seems here more fit to address the above mentioned issues – that are the focus of these thesis. According to the author, actors are 'capable of devising and revising means to realise their intentions. This immediately implies a relationship, and a dynamic relationship at that, between the actor (individual or collective) and the

context in which she finds herself. For, to act strategically, is to project the likely consequences of different courses of action and, in turn, to judge the contour of the terrain. It is, in short, to orient potential courses of action to perceptions of the relevant strategic context and to use such an exercise as a means to select the particular course of action to be pursued' (132). In this account, the actor is embedded in a context that structures conditions for courses of actions. Hay's strategic actor does not act on the basis of full knowledge, instead, s/he however, is not always fully cognisant of the structuring conditions that frame his/her capacity to act. As Mainwaring (2016) points out, Hay's work is relevant in that it applies to the decision-making capacity of people on the move, who are complex strategic actors who make decisions and negotiate conditions that are far from easy (see also Squire, 2017).

As Squire (2017) points out, this theory presents some limitations, that is the fact that the actor is presented as having predefined qualities (in terms of capability of strategic action). The focus, here, is more on the individual as a unit of analysis, whereas processes that contribute to individuals' capacity formation are somehow disregarded. These limitations will be addressed in this thesis not only by focusing on the individual-level decision-making, but also on the processes that inform and influence decision-making (intersubjectively or through the interaction with the context).

3. DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

The decision-making of asylum-seekers is at the heart of this thesis. For the reasons mentioned in the previous sections, the interest on this process is renewed in the field, especially when it comes to microlevel dynamics. In order to develop a clearer understanding of it, it is important to build on current empirical research, which helps identifying specific traits of decision making.

Among other disciplines, demographic research has recognised the importance of decision-making applied to migration models. As pointed out by Klabunde and Willekens (2016), the literature on migration in the field of demography tried to explain observed migration flows in order to predict future migration and relied, for a long time, on the "gravity model", which postulates that 'the volume of migration between two locations increases with population size in each location and decreases with geographical distance between the locations' (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 73). This model underwent different modifications culminating in the 'spatial interaction models' that considered other determinants of migration and historical migration patterns in addition to population size and geographical distance. These models, however, while accounting for macro-level migration flows, failed to capture the individual dimension which originated those flows. This gap was partially filled since the 2000s by 'microsimulation models', which put the individual at the centre of the model and started considering individual actions a results of decision processes (as an example see Billari and Prskawetz, 2003). In these models, individuals are treated as autonomous entities and the interaction between them is considered varying depending on randomized parameters that represent individual preferences and tendencies. However, many scholars, such as Klevmarken (2008) for instance, highlighted the shortcomings of these models and, in particular, the lack of details and clarity about 'the path [economic] subjects follow to reach a decision' (33).

These deficiencies have been lately addressed by 'behavioural models' of migration which put emphasis on the decision-making process in migration. According to this paradigm 'an individual is likely to leave a location if he/she expects to be better off elsewhere, and the barriers to migration are manageable' (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 74). In this framework, migration is triggered by the considered utility or value to

move elsewhere and destinations are evaluated according to the same parameters. While focusing on the individual, most of these models also address how institutions and the interaction with other individuals affect migration. Some of these models also recognise the impact of life events on the utility or value attributed to migration, and therefore try to incorporate them as variables.

Further progress in the direction of incorporating individual decision-making into migration model has been achieved since the 2000s by 'agent-based models', which consider individual agents, their decision-making processes, and the outcome of interaction with other individuals on decision-making processes (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 74). This type of modelling has been mostly applied to demographic studies on households, marriage, and social care among other issues (see Billari et al., 2007; Noble et al., 2012), whereas agent-based models of migration are quite a recent development and are still in need of further improvement.

These models differ considerably among each other but, nevertheless, provide important reference points when discussing individual decision-making. They are relevant, for the purpose of this thesis, in that they help identifying important issues in the decision-making process to build upon. Firstly, they give a precise definition of agent. According to Macal and North (2010), agents are distinct autonomous entities that take decision following rules. Individuals, however, are not considered as isolated beings; in fact, they interact with each other and they can be influenced by other individuals or by the outcome of their interaction. It follows that interaction among individuals according to behavioural rules create complex patterns at the population level (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 77). It can be argued, then, that these models also

partially aimed at addressing the link between agency and structure[22]. However, in most of these studies the connection between the interactions at the microlevel and the structures that those interactions generate at the macrolevel remains blurred[23].

A second important contribution of some of these models – especially those that developed from economic theory and focus on utility maximisation as a driver for decision-making – is that they recognise the importance of information acquisition as part of the decision-making process. For instance, some of these models (e.g. Silveira et al. 2006) posit that individuals move to maximise their income. In order to identify which location guarantees the highest income the individual collects information through a comparison of their neighbours' earnings: if his/her income is lower than his/her neighbours', s/he will decide to move. Despite the deterministic approach and oversimplification of reality of such theories, they highlight that information is a key asset in decision-making and that individuals can elaborate different strategies to obtain relevant information.

A third relevant aspect, linked to information availability, is that some models (e.g. Jansenn, 2010; Hafizoglu and Sen, 2012) take into account 'shortcuts' in decision-making: individuals often rely on strategies that ignore part of the information in order to 'take decisions more quickly and /or accurately than more complex methods' (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 81). These strategies are what Tversky and Khaneman (1974) defined as 'heuristics'[24], that is cognitive processes that are not based on perfect information. This is particularly important for migrants, as they very often find

[22] Different studies can be cited to support this argument. For instance, Schweitzer (1998) focused much of his research on studying outcomes of agents' actions on the macrolevel and the rules that create those outcomes (e.g. his study on the relation between migration and economic agglomeration in space). Another example is Silveira et al. (2006) study on the determinants of rural-urban migration.
[23] This is particularly so in agent-based minimalist models, which tend to oversimplify decision rules.
[24] These are: representativeness, availability of instances or scenarios, and adjustment from an anchor.

themselves in a situation of scarcity of relevant information and need to recur to different strategies to overcome the obstacles they face.

Finally, agent-based models of migration also cover a wide range of approaches that derive form social psychology. The 'planned behaviour model' first formulated by Ajzen (1991) and its following developments by Kniveton et al. (2011) is relevant for the purpose of this study as it also highlights the role of subjectivity in decision-making processes and emphasises the distinction between desired and actual behaviour. According to Fishbein and Ajzen theory (1980; 2010), an individual evaluates different outcomes of the action he/she is considering to take and ponders the probability (subjective) they have to occur. This processes generates an attitude towards the action (in our case, migration). This attitude does not necessarily translate into the intention to migrate. The latter is in fact the result of a decision-making process that takes into account other factors, such as influence by others, and the perceived behavioural control the individual perceives to have over the action. For instance, as it will also be highlighted in this study, previous migration experience was considered by many informants as an element boosting perceived control over the outcome of the decision to depart.

Although agent-based models of migration are far from comprehensive, each of them addressing diverse issues often under the lenses of different theories, they help indeed identifying some of the relevant variables or key questions to be considered if one is to address the problem of agency at the individual level. For instance, a very important question is the role of expectations in individual agency. It is evident that, usually, individuals take into consideration future outcomes when pondering their decisions, thus forming expectations of what may (or not) happen if a certain action is taken. In this respect, the consideration of the available information is of paramount

importance, as agent use information to predict future outcomes. In general, agent-based models of migration consider different levels of information available to agents, from perfect information to no information at all. On the one hand of the spectrum, models by Heiland (2003) and García-Díaz and Moreno-Monroy (2012) take into account individuals with perfect information about the present. They posit that if the environment is simple and different individuals behave the same way, agents can easily predict the future and form expectations that inform their agency (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 84). On the other end of the spectrum, individuals have almost no information and, therefore, as they are not able to predict the future and form reliable expectation can only take very limited decision based on a limited time framework (e.g. Schweitzer,1998). The most common argument in agent-based models of migration, however, is that individuals act neither on the basis of full information nor in complete absence of it. These are actually the most interesting models as they need to give an account of how individuals use the available information. As pointed out by Reichlová (2005), if actors have relevant information about one variable they take the decision assuming that the other variables will remain constant. Other models, instead, posit that if an individual does not have perfect information on any variable, they will resort to other strategies: for instance, they might compare him/herself to others that took a decision under the same circumstances and look at the outcomes of those decisions, they might compare the actual situation to their past experience (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 84), or they might recur to the heuristics.

According to these models, the sophistication of the decision making process also depends on the information available to agents (see Janssen and Jager, 2001). That is, if the agents have little or complete information they will use very simple decision-making rules that maximise utility. The highest level of sophistication is postulated,

instead, in cases where agents have some but imperfect information. In this situation, they will need to assess different variables according to the information they have on each of them and often consider the interplay between them.

Finally, a very relevant feature of some of these models is that they try to incorporate the role of networks. As a matter of fact, there is a common understanding in migration theory that networks are an important factor in determining not only migration but also integration in the host country (among others see: Boyd, 1989; Portes, 1995 and 1998; Massey et al., 1998; Calavita, 2005; Biao, 2006). Migration researchers have typically defined migrant networks[25] as interpersonal ties linking kin, friends, and community members in their places of origin and destination (Poros, 2011a)[26]. Necessary resources, such as information, money, persuasion, influence, and aid must be exchanged within these ties to make migration possible (Poros, 2011a). Some agent-based models, therefore, include some form of network influence over agency. In particular, networks are considered in these models as a form of social capital, and the mechanisms by which relevant resources are distributed among migrants (Haug, 2008). According to Klabunde (2014), for instance, networks serve both as transmitters for information and as a form of social capital.

All the features of agent-based models previously described are clearly relevant for this study, as the shed light on particular dimensions of the decision-making process of agents. However, some limitations can be found, that bound the validity of these models. First of all, because many of them originate from economic theory, they tend to represent the agent as a rational actor in the economic sense, that is, an actor that tend

[25] According to Poros (2011a; 2011b), a social network is made up of individuals and organizations, often called "nodes," which are tied together by different sorts of relationships, such as friendship, economic exchange, influence, and common interests.

[26] For example, traders from the Middle East might migrate to Venezuela or Brazil with the help of business contacts in order to expand their businesses into foreign markets (Romero, 2010).

to maximise utility. Empirical data, however, gathered from qualitative studies such as this thesis, show that individuals often take into account considerations other than simply maximisation, many of which are ascribable to their emotional sphere (see among other, Svašek, 2010). As it will be described in this thesis, emotions play a very important role in the formation of perceptions which, in turn, inform agency (see chapter four). Secondly, agent-based models of migration tend to oversimplify the environment in which the decision-making process takes place. This is also true for the ways expectations are formed in these models: most agents assume that today's conditions will be valid in the future as well (Klabunde and Willekens, 2016: 89). In reality, however, events occur that modify today's conditions and this is particularly true for migrants, who are often forced to make decisions on the basis of highly variable contingent situations. Furthermore, many of these models do not account for subjectivity in a convincing way. As it will be discussed in chapter four, individual perceptions play a fundamental role in leading to specific sets of expectations and, thus, in shaping agency. Finally, agent-based migration models often overlook human life course, by including a very limited set of events in the model (under the form of randomization). Nevertheless, it can be argued that an analysis of the way in which other life events impact on decision-making is very important in order to understand migration trajectories and, therefore, cannot be disregarded.

4. EMOTIONS ON THE MOVE

The importance of the study of emotions has been recognised in social sciences in the past decades, to the point that several authors (Schützeichel, 2006; Kleres, 2009; Albrecht, 2015) postulated an 'emotional turn' in the field. Nevertheless, the emotional side of migration has been predominantly disregarded (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015;

Albrecht, 2016; Mai and King, 2009), although scholars are showing a growing interest in the consideration of emotions in the field of migration.

Indeed, as Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) among others point out, 'the nexus between emotion and migration makes for an important research field' (74). Firstly, through the migration experience, the migrant is confronted with changing environments and different cultures that influence his/her emotions. A study of emotions 'on the move' can be effectively carried out especially through the lenses of the migration process. Secondly, an emphasis on emotions could help overcoming the paradigm of the migrant as a 'rational agent' in economic terms, that was predominant in past approaches on migration. The study of emotions could, in fact, provide useful correctives (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015: 74) to reinforce explanations of very debated instances, such as, for instance, transnational engagements and integration trajectories to the host societies. Thirdly, from a theoretical point of view, as emotions are internal to the individual sphere and, at the same time, interpersonal (as they are intersubjectively shared and expressed in the public domain), they can 'link micro and macro level of analysis' (Turner and Stets, 2005: 1; also quoted in Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015: 74) and act as a bridge between agency and structure (as posited by Barbalet, 2002). As Albrecht (2015) points out, 'emotions are relevant in any social context, and social interactions and relationships are only understandable adequately id emotions are involved' (26).

But what are emotions? Following Svašek (2010), emotions can be regarded as a 'dynamic process through which individuals experience and interpret the changing world, position themselves vis-à-vis others, and shape their subjectivities' (868; Svašek, 2005, 2008). This echoes Hochschild (1983) argument that 'based on our feelings we develop our own view of the world' (41). Therefore, emotions are always relevant, and

'social interactions and relationships can be understood only if emotions are analytically involved' (Albrecht, 2015: 26).

So far, the literature on emotions in the field of migration has mostly focused on two main directions: how migrants are emotionally influenced in their society of origin and how migrants' emotions are influenced by the host society (Svašek, 2010). The focus has been on mainly two concepts: emotion work carried out by migrants and emotional transnationalism. However, emotions have been mostly approached from a pathological perspective, that is, negative emotions or effects of being emotional have been discussed (Albrecht, 2015; as an example of this approach see among others Falicov, 2005; Schulze, 2006; Gu, 2010; Lindqvist, 2013; Wettergren, 2015).

The concept of 'emotion work' in the context of migration has been developed by a number of scholars. The concept was first introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1979), who distinguished between emotion work from emotional labour[27]. Furthermore, Hochschild identifies a connection between emotions and action: feeling is a pre-script to action. When we do emotion work, it is a form of internal behaviour that prepares us to act externally. To further develop this argument, the author recognises that there is an 'emotional' social norm for every social setting and situation, that is, a 'feeling rule' (Hochschild, 1983; 2002; 2013): 'feeling rules are what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges' (56).

The concept of emotion work has been applied to migration by different scholars interested in how migrants perform or negotiate their feelings. Among them, Mona

[27] The former concept refers to the kind of emotional management that occurs in a private setting, where a person manages and performs emotions for an unpaid benefit. Emotional labour instead, has an exchange value: emotions are evocated or suppressed in the context of a work relation (e.g. waitresses, doctors, nannies, maids, sex workers, etc.) leading to a commodification of emotions (Hochschild, 1983; 2002).

Lindqvist (2013) explores how emotion work becomes a necessary practice for women migrants to Sweden to facilitate their integration. In her view, emotion work is an intrinsic cognitive process of integration (Mona Lindqvist, 2013: 231). Following Bourdieu concept of 'habitus', she states that migrant women develop a 'foreign habitus', which enables them to develop and perform a 'migrant-self' (229). The marker of this habitus is the feeling of being a stranger (Lindqvist, 2013; Albrecht, 2015). This emotion arises from the acknowledgment that feeling rules are different in the new society and that, therefore, one's own emotional behaviour must be controlled in the public sphere to comply with normative expectations. Migrant woment then choose what emotion to display according to social rules in the new setting (Lindqvist, 2013: 233-242; Albrecht, 2015: 27). However, several criticisms have been raised against Lindqvist work. In particular, Albrecht argues that the author does not fully develop the concept of foreign habitus, which remains quite undetermined in relation to the empirical material gathered in the study (Albrecht, 2015: 27)[28]. It would have been interesting if the author inductively showed what specific feeling rules were adopted by migrants in which specific situation and how migrants themselves described them. Furthermore, Lindqvist sample is quite small[29] and all her respondents were refugees with traumatic experiences in their home countries. This leads Albrecht (2015) to question whether 'this sample is also implicitly created from a pathological point of view'.

Wettergren (2013) proposes a deeper analysis of emotion work. Her study deals with interactions of asylum-seeker from the Horn of Africa with frontliners in Sweden and Italy. The author focuses mostly on local social workers than on migrants; in fact,

[28] That is, it is not clear how, in practical terms, migrant women develop the foreign habitus.
[29] Only six interviews with migrants coming from countries with different backgrounds and levels of education and job attainment.

she highlights the feeling rules that the former deem to be relevant for the latter to comply with. Any deviation from performing those felling rules is ascribed by frontliners to migrants' lack of knowledge on the society of arrival. Very interestingly, she also highlights a sort of 'micropolitics of emotions', where migrants (who have less power in the relationship) need to show emotional restrain whereas local workers (who have more power in the relationship) can show a greater emotional register.

The concept of 'emotional transnationalism' – where transnationalism is defined as 'the degree of connectivity of individuals and groups across borders' (Faist et al., 2014: 12) has been evoked by Albrecht (2015) as a space for further expansion of sociological research on emotions in the context of migration (31). This topic has been addressed by a limited number of scholars. Amongst them, Gu (2010) analyses how Taiwanese women migrated to Chicago develop strategies to deal with suffering and distress. The pathological focus is here once again clear. The author posits that her informants try to control themselves by shifting from continuously from the social norms in the host society and those in the society of origin and vice-versa (687). However, an analysis of why (and which) migrants decide to recur to one feeling rule rather than to the other is lacking. A step forward in the topic of emotional transnationalism has been taken by Albrecht (2015), who argues that:

'feeling rules and patterns serve the individual for interpreting their own actions and interactions with other, which does not mean that individuals can only act in conformity with these rules. On the contrary, a decision could be to position themselves against these rules and in doing so being capable of enacting themselves' (31).

Migrants are engaged transnationally, and this creates transnational emotional spaces that influence people no matter the place where they are. Transnational spaces

are then 'multidimensional and could convey an interesting frame for analysing emotions' (31).

If the connections between the 'multiple emotional attachments of migrants to their homelands and new places of residence, and the emotional interactions between migrants and members of local communities' (Svašek, 2010: 871) are important to analyse in a more comprehensive way, so is the role of emotions in relation to agency. In relation to this, Svašek (2010) points out that 'cultural categories of emotions produce knowledge about the world and the self that is often historically and group specific'. The author also highlights the performative nature of emotions, which enable the individual to act: feelings are often consciously managed by individuals to control or change the situation (876). Furthermore, the author sees emotions as embodied experiences. Emotions could be based not only on actual interaction but also on ideas: memories and imaginations could provoke as strong emotions as a bodily encounter. As it will be shown in the course of this thesis, even the physical manifestations of colonial relations (architecture, names, traditions, etc.) are able to produce very strong emotions and a narrative about current relations between two countries.

5. OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This partial review suggests that attention has been paid to the interplay between structure and agency, in order to identify particular structural contexts that force migration or to develop models of migration ranging from reactive to proactive migration (Lindley, 2010: 4), but an understanding of asylum seekers' agency from a micro-level perspective is still germinal. A new approach has emerged recently, which borrows from anthropological studies and which aims to address this gap. For instance, scholars like Bozzini (2011), Hepner (2011) and Treiber (2008), who mainly focus their

work on Eritrean migrants, consider issues like the circulation of knowledge on the journey from Eritrea, the way refugee laws can trigger asylum seekers' actions, contributing to the growth of Eritrean human rights movements, as well as the way national measures can develop a specific representation of the state among Eritrean refugees.

Following this trend, this research attempts to develop a dynamic understanding of Eritrean asylum seekers' strategies vis-à-vis structural constraints and changing circumstances - not only in relation to the choice of the country of destination, but also aimed at overcoming everyday obstacles posed by the asylum process and the reception system in the country of destination - introducing perceptions and emotions as relevant factors shaping their agency. In this respect, Emirbayer and Mishes' (1998) definition of agency appears to be particularly fit. I will intend human agency as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future project within the contingencies of the moment' (963). This conceptualization, in a way, allows for the considerations of all the relevant aspects of decision-making that have been previously discussed.

I will also focus on the concept of 'perceptions' as a fundamental element in asylum-seekers agency. Here, perceptions are understood as a dynamic process of receiving, selecting and interpreting information, e.g. a particularly structured process of acquiring, collecting and assessing information on Italy and its asylum system. Perceptions could be considered as an element linking structure and agency. Some scholars have elaborated a passive model of perceptions (Gibson 1966, 1987; Gregory 1974) that was widely used until the 1960s and argued that perceptions depend on

various factors, i.e., outside stimuli, guiding maps or models of the perceiving actor. Thus, this model underlines the reactivity of perceptions and on the importance of outside stimuli. Although this model is losing momentum nowadays, we still can assume that events in Italy and the activities of Italian actors do provide occasions and assets for the formation and reproduction of perceptions by Eritrean actors. However, an active model of perceptions is adopted in this study: a single activity can give rise to very different perceptions so they are systematically biased and it is thus important to analyse 'mental maps' of perceiving actors in order to empirically validate and theoretically understand individual or collective responses to outside stimuli. Perceptions are not formulated and articulated according to fixed mental maps, but are rather to be considered more as the result of an interactive process of negotiations, struggles, trial-and-error games, and that time is an important factor in their creation. The analysis will concern two levels: at the individual level, the individual is confronted with other (similar, antagonistic, or simply different) perceptions that are important reference points for the same individual perception formation. At the collective level, intersubjectively shared perceptions become a product of collective interaction processes: for instance, specific reference groups might recur routinely to a particular perception in order to make a specific event or activity meaningful or might expect their members to use specific ones rather than others. As social relations create and reproduce a structure of meanings (Mead, 1934), they contribute to the definition of individual perceptions of the country of destination and its asylum policies (see Passy and Giugni, 2001; Chong 1991; Hardin 1982). When asylum seekers flee in different waves in time, perceptions of people back home can be shaped, for example, by their transnational engagements (Morawska, 2001). Due to their flexibility to change,

perceptions are therefore a valuable tool to understanding agency in volatile circumstances.

The novelty of this study also resides in that it addresses the interaction between perceptions, emotions and agency. In sociology, theories of emotions fall into a set of theoretical approaches that includes evolutionary theories, symbolic interactionist theories, dramaturgical theories, ritual theories, power and status theories, stratification theories, and exchange theories (for a comprehensive review of these theories see Turner, 2009). However, there has been so far no wide application of such theories to the field of migration and, in particular, to explanations to asylum seekers strategy. If asylum seekers strategies cope with changing circumstances, it can be argued that the emotional aspect is very important, as it provides further resources for agency. This point is made by studies in the field of the sociology of revolutions (for example Reed, 2004 as it will be discussed on Chapter Four), where emotions are a crucial factor in determining forms of participation. Here, I argue that is concept is a useful tool for understanding asylum seekers' agency as well.

The case study or Eritrean asylum seekers to Italy provides the opportunity to address these issues from a privileged point of observation. Chapter One will address the colonial relation between Eritrea and Italy and provide an account of how perceptions about Italy are produced and re-produced in Eritrea. Chapter Two will focus on the Eritrean internal situation, and describe liberation movement and its modern declination. This is key to understanding the paradoxes that characterise contemporary Eritrea, including the dynamics within the Eritrean Diaspora in Italy, and the milieu in which young Eritreans who flee the country are now socialized. Chapter Three will address Eritrean refugee movements from Eritrea and give an account of the trajectories of these movements. More importantly, it will provide an explanation of

how asylum seekers strategize their move treating changing perceptions as a relevant factor. Finally, Chapter Four will deal with asylum seekers strategies in coping with the Italian asylum and reception systems giving an account of the role of social networks in spreading perceptions and relevant information on how to deal with the system.

CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY

1. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

When it comes to exploring asylum-seekers'/refugees' perceptions of Italy, its asylum policies and the impact of these policies on their strategies, the underlying ontological and epistemological issues necessitate adopting a research strategy that is sensitive to individuals' interpretation of reality. The perceptions of asylum-seekers/refugees cannot be studied empirically from the outside through quantitative tools, a realist ontology or a positivist research paradigm (Bryman 1984, Blaikie 2009), which imply the existence of a reality disjoined from the meanings and interpretations, motives and intentions that people use in everyday life to guide their behaviour.

Instead, the standpoint adopted in this research project is ontological 'idealism', according to which social reality is made up of 'shared interpretations that social actors produce and reproduce' (Blaikie 2009: 93) in the course of their daily lives. This is the most appropriate approach for an account of how asylum-seekers/refugees perceive and experience the world. From an epistemological perspective, this study shares the 'constructionist' conviction that everyday knowledge is fundamentally interactive, the result of individuals' efforts to 'make sense of their encounters with the physical world and other people' (Blaikie 2009: 95). Consequently, a qualitative methodology combined with an abductive research strategy represents the best way to give an account of asylum-seekers'/refugees' 'inner' point of view and of the manner in which their understanding of the world influences their behaviour. This study, therefore,

adopts a 'bottom up' approach that first entails gathering data in an exploratory fashion, so that the data can then shape the development of a theoretical framework used to explain the phenomenon.

2. THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND THE CASE STUDY

The aim of the research project is to study how asylum seekers strategize their moves, and how their perceptions of the receiving country and its immigration and asylum policies influence their decisions. In order to answer this research question, a relevant case study has been selected, namely, Eritrean asylum seekers having migrated to Italy. Case studies are 'the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context' (Yin 2003a: 4). They are useful when the relationship being studied is characterised by a certain degree of ambiguity or uncertainty. In the case of this research project, it was strategic to rely on instrumental case studies (Stake 2005) since they provide a better insight into the research problem, and help to develop a theoretical understanding of it. By the second year of fieldwork, in 2014, Italy ranked 5th among the 10 major refugee-receiving countries according to UNHCR data, whereas Eritrea was the 2nd major sending country. Moreover, according to data collected by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, in 2014, the number of Eritrean mgrants to Italy sharply increased, reaching unprecedented numbers, representing 25% of the total inflow of migrants.

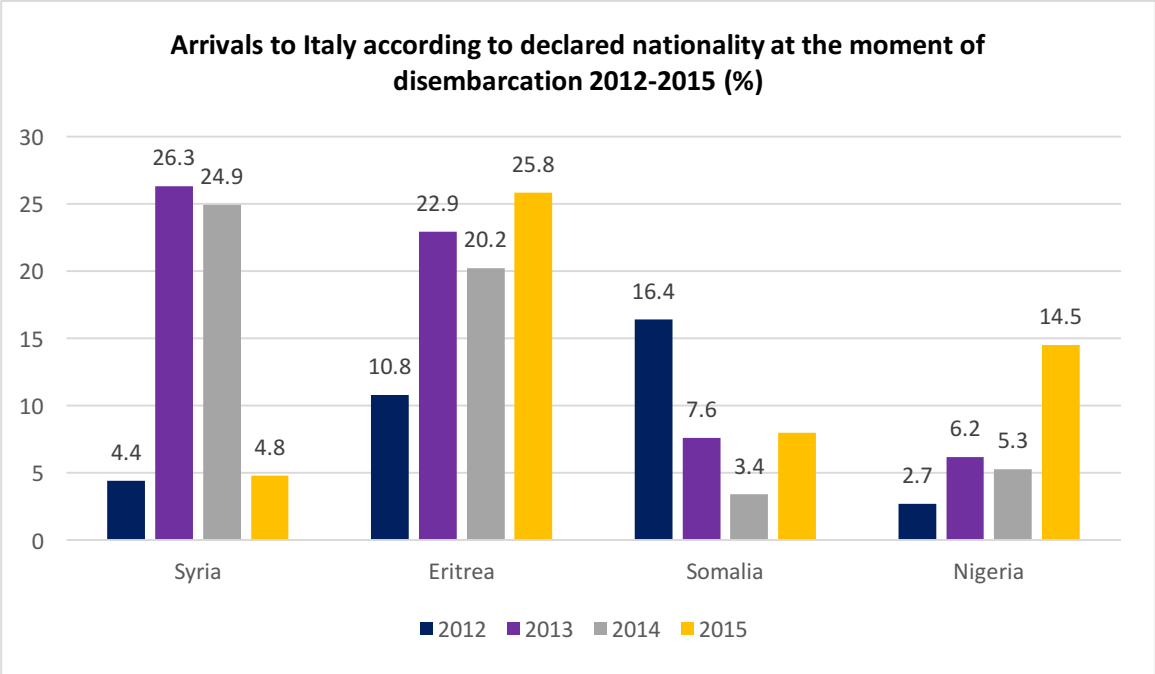
The tables below provide descriptive data about Eritrean asylum seekers and about Italy's performance in granting forms of protection in comparison to other EU countries[30]. As it can be observed, there is a striking difference in the numbers of those

[30] Data on asylum seekers and, more generally on migrants, are highly politicised, as countries (and I should also say international institutions) have their own agenda in representing the phenomenon as more or less serious. Methods of data collection vary highly not only from one country to the other, but

who disembarked on Italian shores and the asylum claims lodged[31] confirming, as it will be discussed later, that most Eritrean do not claim asylum in Italy but tend to stay irregularly in order to move elsewhere.

Table 1 - Ranking of declared nationalities at the moment of disembarkation on Italian shores (2012-2014). Source: Italian Ministry of Interior.

2012		2013		2014		2015	
Somalia	2,180	Syria	11,307	Syria	43,323	**Eritrea**	**39,162**
Eritrea	**1,431**	**Eritrea**	**9,834**	**Eritrea**	**34,329**	Nigeria	22,237
Egypt	1,221	Somalia	3,263	Mali	9,908	Somalia	12,433
Syria	582	Egypt	2,728	Nigeria	9,000	Sudan	8,932
Nigeria	361	Nigeria	2,680	Gambia	8,691	Gambia	8,454
Gambia	348	Gambia	2,619	Somalia	5,756	Syria	7,448
Mali	224	Mali	1,674	Egypt	4,095	Mali	5,826
Other	6,920	Other	8,820	Other	54,998	Other	49,350
TOTAL	**13,267**	**TOTAL**	**42,925**	**TOTAL**	**170,100**	**TOTAL**	**153,842**



Source: Italian Ministry of Interior

also among national institutions (as is the case of Italy), which makes numbers not comparable from a strictly statistic point of view. Furthermore, outcomes reported in the tables may actually refer to claims lodged in previous years due to lenghty asylum procedures.

[31] Although there were no available data for Eritreans on asylum procedures outcomes in EU countries, it can be argued that they follow a similar trend as the aggregate date (table 3 and 4).

	2012	2013	2014	2015
Requests	**734**	**2109**	**474**	**729**
Granted refugee status	**117**	**930**	**850**	**129**
Granted subsidiary protection	90	417	409	443
Granted humanitarian protection	17	57	85	15
Denied protection	3	39	33	16
Unreachable	17	79	121	52
Other outcome	52	-	1	6
TOTAL	**296**	**1522**	**1499**	**659**

Table 2 – Asylum requests lodged in Italy by Eritrean migrants (2012-2014). Source: Italian Ministry of Interior.

2013/ Country	Requests	Granted refugee status %	Granted subsidiary protection %	Granted humanitarian protection %
Austria	17,520	68.5	31.5	Not provided for in national legislation
France	66,265	83	17	Not provided for in national legislation
Germany	126,995	53.2	30.5	16.3
Greece	8,225	41.3	29.9	30,7
Italy	26,620	21.3	38.9	39.9
Spain	4,495	39.6	58.6	1.8
Sweden	54,365	28.2	64.9	6.9
TOTAL EU	**435,390**			

2014/ Country	Requests	Granted refugee status %	Granted subsidiary protection %	Granted humanitarian protection %
Belgium	22,850	81.1	18.9	Not provided for in national legislation
France	64,310	78.6	21.4	Not provided for in national legislation
Germany	202,815	79.2	12.8	8
Italy	64,625	17.7	37.1	45.2
Sweden	81,325	33.3	60.2	6.5
Hungary	42,775			
United Kingdom	31,945	82.7	1.4	15.9
Other	**116,070**			
TOTAL EU	**626,715**			

Table 3 and 3 – Asylum procedure outcomes in EU countries receiving the highest number of requests (2013 and 2014). Source: Eurostat.

Eritrea and Italy have a long-standing relation, which dates back to the Italian colonial venture in Eritrea, which lasted from the end of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth. In Italy (and in Rome in particular) there is a big Eritrean community that is also very active transnationally. As of January 2014, according to the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) there were about 10,600 Eritrean registered residents in Italy, of which more that 4,000 were residing in the municipality of Rome.

Thus, for the purposes of this research, it becomes crucial to understand Eritrean asylum seekers' perceptions of Italy and of the Italian asylum system. Accordingly, I investigate how Eritrean asylum seekers' perceptions are shaped in their country of origin and after their arrival in Italy (given the many links between the meso-level of community and the macro-level of policy). I also try to determine what perceptions of the Italian asylum system Eritreans had before leaving their country of origin; whether those had an influence in the choice of their destination; and whether (and in what manner) these perceptions were modified en route, once they came into contact with the Italian asylum system and came to stay in Italy. Finally, I look into how these perceptions, along with other factors, influence the strategies of Eritreans' in the process of asylum seeking and the ways that they cope with the Italian asylum and reception systems.

3. THE FIELDWORK

For the purposes of this study an extensive fieldwork was carried out in Rome, mainly between 2012 and 2014. Some additional research visits were made in 2015, in order to gather updates on the respondents and to fill the gaps in the data that emerged after the first analysis. Moreover, fieldwork was completed by 10 days of travel in Eritrea in 2014, of which 7 were spent in Asmara and 3 in Massawa. This research

therefore relies heavily on participant observation and on interviews with Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees, as well as with organisation members, practitioners in the field of asylum, members of the Eritrean community in Rome, and Eritreans residing in Asmara. Additionally, I made extensive use of official documents about asylum legislation and reports on migration; and other secondary sources such as local (Italian and Eritrean) newspapers, reports and the immigration law of Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Fieldwork in Rome

In order to carry out this research, gaining access to Eritrean asylum-seekers and refugees, and also to organisations, professionals, advocates, and policy advisors was of the essence. The project was designed to operate at three levels. At the *micro-level*, it consisted in semi-structured interviews with asylum-seekers *and* refugees; at the meso-level, it relied on open-ended interviews with organisation representatives, lawyers, policy advisors, members of the *Ufficio Speciale Immigrazione* (Immigration Office), municipal employees, activists and members of the Eritrean diaspora; and at the macro-level, it entailed a detailed analysis of the policies implemented by Italy towards asylum seekers.

Overall, I conducted 52 interviews with Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees (13 women and 39 men, aged between 19 and 45) and 10 interviews with Eritrean migrants from the diaspora community. Since one of the presuppositions underpinning the research was that perceptions are not fixed but intersubjectively shared, and therefore reactive to outside stimuli, I decided to interview asylum seekers at different stages of the asylum process. The rationale was that interviewing asylum seekers at different stages would yield a more complex account of how Italy and the Italian asylum policies

and processes are perceived. Therefore, I needed to gain an 'observation' point that would allow me to both 'witness' and understand their asylum process. As I had expected from the beginning, this proved to be the most difficult task for a number of reasons. First, as I did not have any previous ties to the Eritrean community in Rome, I originally planned to gain access to asylum seekers by carrying out voluntary work for organisations that assist asylum-seekers throughout the asylum process. However my identity as a researcher turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle: explaining what I wanted to do minimized my chances of being accepted as a volunteer. Due to the sensitivity of the asylum issue and of the way it is handled, volunteers (and especially researchers) are not always welcomed, especially in state-run centers, such as CARAs (*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* – reception centre for asylum seekers). In addition, organizations that are run by (or have strong links with) the Catholic Church are very cautious when it comes to accepting 'external' help. I therefore targeted my efforts at gaining access to centres belonging to the SPRAR network (which are usually smaller and more flexible), and in particular to the Baobab Centre in Rome, which is close to the Tiburtina Station and to the Verano Cemetery. This small facility represented a privileged standpoint for observation. Located inside the premises of a former glassworks, the centre was set up in 2005 following the evacuation of what was then called the 'Hotel Africa', a building close to the Tiburtina Station, mainly occupied by Eritreans but also by Ethiopians. The evacuation led to the creation of different centres; one of them, Anagnina, is now occupied by Eritreans and has become an illegal squat. The Baobab centre, on the other hand, represents an interesting experiment, as the people in the organisational committee of 'Hotel Africa' became social workers in the centre. The nationality of the guests has changed over time: at the beginning, it only hosted people from the Horn of Africa but now it is open to all refugees, even though

Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians still represent a majority. When I was carrying out my fieldwork, Baobab nominally hosted around 120 refugees (who are allocated through the SPRAR system, through two different kinds of agreements), but in reality there were fewer guests. In addition, the centre had another 40 spare places for emergency cases.

The centre has different areas, which are accessible both to refugee and asylum seekers and to people from the neighbourhood. One of these is the corridor where the refugees' rooms are located (each is shared by about four people). Along the corridor, in front of the showers, there is a bar, where refugees and asylum seekers hang around, sit, play cards and table football, and there is also a gym, where they exercise with other men from the neighbourhood. Next to it there is an Internet access point, and a lounge, where they usually sit with guests or play draughts. On the other side of the building there is an Eritrean restaurant, where refugees and asylum seekers eat for free and where parties and events are organised; there is also a recording room. The latter is at the heart of many of the refugees' activities, since they record experimental ethnic music pieces and produce albums of Eritrean performers (including external ones). The specificity of the centre is that there is no clear separation between the areas accessible to guests and those reserved for refugees. As a result the centre is well integrated into the local community, and has become a hub for social interaction between refugees and locals.

This project has been very reliant on the help of gatekeepers, the 'individuals that have the power to grant access to the field' (Brewer 2000: 83). Their influence was key in determining whom I got to talk to and to interview (Blaxter et al. 2006). Contrary to other researchers, who sometimes find themselves in an unnaturally powerful situation vis-à-vis their informants (see Fontana and Frey, 2005; Atkinson and Silverman, 2007) I felt unnaturally powerless. During my volunteer work, I had access both to the

administrative paperwork and to asylum seekers and refugees. Although I spent a lot of time in the centre with them, they were very wary of participating in my research. They had already been questioned several times by the Italian authorities, and was rarely a positive experience. Moreover, they found the degree of interest I was showing suspicious, and, as it later surfaced, they feared that I would report what I found to either Italian or Eritrean authorities (they were well aware of the extent to which the Eritrean government controls the diaspora) and that this would be detrimental to them. In the end, it was through the help of the Eritrean social workers in the centre, in particular that of a man named G., that I managed to slowly gain the confidence of the other men in the centre. My relationship with G. was then fundamental for this study. Due to his past as a fighter in the Eritrean-Ethiopian border war in 1998 and his experience in Rome as one of the leading occupiers of the 'Hotel Africa', he was highly regarded among his fellow nationals at the Baobab centre and in Rome. At the time of this study, he also mantained sustained relations with his family and some friends in Eritrea, especially through Facebook, Whatsapp and Skype. I was introduced to him by Domenico, the director of the refugee centre, who agreed that, as part of my volunteer work I would help G. run ordinary tasks for the centre. This allowed me to spend a lot of time with G. in and outside the centre to perform ordinary duty (e.g. not only registering entrances and exits from the centre, dealing with accommodation issues for the residents in the centre, and supervising activities, but also grocery shopping, bringing the van to the mechanic, picking up guests). The activities that were performed outside the centre, very often with the participation of other Eritrean personnel empployed in the centre were fundamental for me to gain G.'s trust, who tested me through those activities[32].

[32] This had a lot to do with 'power' balance among us. In fact, during 'indoors activities' it was clear that I

G. introduced me to the residents who had been staying at the centre for a longer period, and who were usually reference points for newcomers. I usually spent the afternoons[33] playing draughts with them – and irremediably loosing – which gained me their sympathy. It became quite a fun game among us to make turnaments at draughts and to celebrate (with me bringing cookies) in the rare occasions when I would win. During the afternoons, I would also help them with learning Italian and answer some questions about Italian politics – with which they were very familiar – and Italian culture more generally. Furthermore, many of them spontaneusly started sharing their problems with integration with me and would very often also share their memories and tell me about their families and their lives before departing. They slowly came to accept me and began to seek me out in order to explain the problems with their claims and to ask for help, including asking me to mediate with the head of the association running the facility.

Although they were aware that I was a researcher looking at Eritreans asylum seekers in Rome, I decided to start with the interviews at the centre at a later stage – that is, after almost three months of participant observation -, when I felt that their suspitions against my presence were starting to fade. Having begun to conduct interviews, I then asked my informants to refer me to other Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees, including those outside the centre, which allowed me to collect data through a non-probability snowball sampling method. This method is conventionally used 'when a population is widely distributed or elusive' (May 2001: 95), and involves

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depended on G., as he knew how to relate to the other residents, and therefore I was in a subordinate position. Instead, 'outdoors activities' were performed in a setting (the city of Rome) with which I was more familiar than him. As he realised that I was able to elicit better responses from Italians to our requests, he started to see me as a 'valuable asset'. Moreover, he started to 'like me' and to trust me as I become a constant presence at the centre: in his own words, '..when I saw that you had these people's best interest at heart. You were interested in these people for real'.

[33] During the day residents were not allowed to stay at the centre.

'using a small group of informants who are asked to put the researcher in touch with their friends who are subsequently interviewed, then asking them about their friends and interviewing them until a chain of informants has been selected' (Burgess 1984: 55). Snowballing is very appropriate in the case of refugees, as members of this group are typically 'hard to locate and are therefore hard to identify for the purpose of sampling' (Bloch, 1999: 371) and it has been extensively used by other researchers in the field (among others: Griffiths 2002; Wahlbeck 1999; Gammel et al. 1993). An important feature of this technique is that it makes it easier to establish a relationship of trust between participants and the researcher as 'the intermediaries are known to potential respondents and trusted by them and thus are able to vouch for the researcher's *bona fide*' (Lee 1992: 130).

Another relevant gatekeeper in the centre was Daniel, the other director of the centre, who is an Eritrean naturalised Italian. Due to his position, his role was different from that of G.: Daniel had strong relations with specific members of the centres and of the Eritrean Diaspora – most of them fellow musicians – with whom he engaged in music activities (music recordings, organisation of events, etc.), but he did not engage a lot with the rest of the residents. Furthermore, due to his hypheneted identity and his believed higher position in Italian society, he was considered as an 'outsider' by most of the Eritrean residents, and even by G.. Nevertheless, Daniel's connections with the Diaspora, with other members of the Eritrean community in Rome (who migrated during the independence war) and associations were essential for me to gain access to them.

Women were very hard to reach, and they would only agree to be interviewed if a male friend/relative 'allowed' them to participate. This issue was eventually solved over time, as I consciously maintained a constant presence in the refugee centre and became

more involved in the daily activities of the men and women who were working in the kitchen. Especially Selam, the cook, played a fundamental role in introducing me to other friends and couples living in the squat buildings, which I was lucky enough to visit (especially 'Collatina', 'Anagnina' and the new occupied building in Tiburtina).

Language, of course, has been one of the main issues affecting this research. Most of the respondents spoke almost no Italian and very little English. I therefore had to rely on the gatekeepers, whom they trusted. Another issue was tape-recording the interviews: asylum seekers and refugees were very wary; therefore, as I realised that recording the interview was making the informants uncomfortable and conditioned their answers, I decided to give up the recorder and to just take notes.

I also noticed that the answers they gave me during the interviews were very similar, representing a sort of façade version of what they were really thinking. This 'standard version' seemed to clash with the material I had gathered in Eritrea and with my interviews with practitioners. A change of strategy was therefore necessary and I began to approach refugees more informally by chatting to them while playing board games or just hanging around. However this meant that I needed to gather more material from different types of sources in order to be able to 'triangulate' them.

Besides the interviews, my research therefore also relies on notes about what I witnessed at the refugee centre, my own interactions with asylum seekers and refugees, their interactions with each other, and the interactions they had with the Italian staff and the head of the association (with whom I developed a very good relationship).

This part of the fieldwork was concluded in mid-2014 and was carried out throughout with a different 'pace'. During 2012 I spent in the centre and/or with Eritrean asylum seekers from 5 to 6 days a week; however, as I was hired by the Italian government at the end of December 2012, I had to reduce my presence at the refugee

centres. I still managed to hang out there in the weekends and during late afternoons (usually twice a week) and I kept my engagement with key informants also through whatsapp. I managed to keep my contacts regular, both with key respondents and with the staff of the centre, and this allowed me to go back to the field on several occasions, even after 2014, and also to keep my data updated following new developments both in the national and in the international arena.

Accessing organisations, professionals, and the Eritrean community

As had been the case with asylum seekers and refugees, accessing organizations and professionals did not prove to be easy. In my research project, I had initially planned to interview organisations that dealt, on the one hand, with refugee issues and with assistance and, on the other hand, with those involved in the Italian asylum process. I therefore deemed that the most appropriate sampling technique to select the organisations to interview was the so-called purposive sample technique, where 'a selection of those to be surveyed is made according to a known characteristic' (May 2001: 95). In practice, the selection is 'a matter of judgement as to which organisations would be most appropriate' (Blaikie 2009: 178). Thus, my selection was based on a territorial criterion (being based in Rome, although I also visited Crotone CARA), and on the services they provided to asylum seekers and refugees at different stages of the asylum process (for example legal aid, legal representation, housing and benefits). I also contacted refugee community organisations (RCOs), that is, 'organisations rooted within, and supported by, the ethnic or national refugee/asylum-seeker community they serve' (Zetter and Pearl 2000). In the case of the first type of organisations, contacts were initially made via e-mail: I sent a cover letter with a description of the study and with all the relevant information in an attachment to the various

organisations. Later on, further contacts were made via telephone, in order to elicit faster responses. A key element in gaining access proved to be the 'mediation' of the head of the Baobab centre, who had personal links with the other associations. Moreover, and in particular in my relations with the CIR (*Comitato Italiano per i Rifugiati* – the Italian Refugee Council), I used my willingness to contribute to their research and to their reports as a means of leverage to obtain access (Thomas 1993: 84; see also Ives 1980: 40-41). I therefore managed to conduct several interviews with member of the following associations:

- Centre for Migration Studies in Rome (CSER)
- Astalli Centre (Centro Astalli)
- the Red Cross (that had also been in charge of the CARA in Castenuovo di Porto)
- CIR (*Comitato Italiano per i Rifugiati* – Italian Refugee Council)
- Community of Sant'Egidio
- Dioniso Cooperative
- Erythros organization
- IOM – International Organisation for Migration
- UNHCR (Italian Office)

Access to these organisations also entailed access to lawyers, practitioners and advocates working in the refugee sector. Moreover, through personal networks developed during my fieldwork, I managed to interview the head of the USI (*Ufficio Speciale Immigrazione* – Special Immigration Office), and to attend and observe 7 asylum claim interviews with Italian authorities. The material gathered was very valuable not only because it provided a comprehensive overview of the role of organisations as meso-level actors, but also because it helped to establish the legal context confronting asylum seekers, and to elaborate a more coherent view of the

asylum process and of the reception system. The latter required considerable effort, and I did it by examining the relevant legislation and the recommendations issued by the organisations.

Snowball sampling was also used in accessing the members of Eritrean diaspora in Rome. To avoid obtaining a sample that was too homogeneous, I differentiated my 'points of entry'. My two gatekeepers were a man with links to the Erythros organisation, and a female Eritrean activist with links to the Sant' Egidio community. Although Eritreans are well established in Rome, they are also very wary as some of them fear the regime's reach; on the whole, however, they seemed to be more accessible than refugees and asylum seekers.

A small trip to Eritrea

Since the beginning of the research project, it was clear that managing to carry out fieldwork in Eritrea would improve the overall strength of the study, especially in terms of analysing Eritrean perceptions of Italy. However, in spite of several attempts during 2012 to organise a trip to the small African country, it seemed unfeasible. Eritrean authorities do not allow researchers to carry out fieldwork or other research activities without being informed about them beforehand, and without the authorization of the Ministry of Information or of the Ministry of Education. This means that in order to receive this official sanction, it is necessary to first submit a formal request to the Eritrean authorities through an Eritrean embassy abroad. The researcher needs to motivate his/her request, and to submit documents along with a 'mandate' from his/her institution/university. Usually, he/she is not allowed to travel alone, but is chaperoned by a representative from the Ministry of Information ostensibly to guarantee their 'safety'. Special permits issued by the Ministry of National Development

are necessary to leave the capital city, Asmara, and they require filing a formal request. Permits are not always granted, if the reasons for applying are considered inadequate or generally subversive, and if the subsequent research could reflect badly on the government. Being stopped outside the capital city without a permit can lead to arrest and detention and, in the best-case scenario, to expulsion from the country. Alternatively, one can be arrested on the charges of carrying out activities detrimental to the Eritrean State. It is therefore evident that conducting empirical independent research in Eritrea is exceedingly difficult.

However, in 2014, a series of circumstances related to my job made it possible for me to visit Eritrea for a period of 10 days (7 days in Asmara and 3 in Massawa). During that period, I could gather a lot of interesting material even if I was not officially travelling for research purposes. In particular, I was able to speak (with great caution) to representatives of the establishment, as well as to other Eritreans, to Italian residents, to former Ascari, and to missionaries in Eritrea.

In this respect, my activity at the Baobab centre and the contacts I had developed with Eritrean asylum seekers at the squat buildings were crucial to make the most of this small travel. In fact, many of my informant, with whom I grew closer in time, had informed their families living in Asmara or Massawa abou my trip, and asked me to meet them. This allowed me to meet around 30 Eritreans during my short stay. Two considerations are relevant here: first, as I was introduced by my respondents as a 'friend', I found their relatives and friends very keen to meeting me and very welcoming, despite the dangers that they might have incurred if they were caught talking to a foreigner holding a diplomatic passport. Many respondents asked me to bring small presents to their families, who in turn were eager to receive news about their loved ones. In a way, I became 'embedded' in and a 'vehicle' of their transnational emotional

engagement and considered as a 'friend' by local Eritreans I have never met before too: in those moments I embodied their transnational missing kin[34]. Second, in order to minimise the risk of endangering my respondents, meetings were carried out very informally in public spaces such as very busy bars or the Pavonian library. In those occasions, people they knew at the bar would also join the conversation, adding important elements to my research.

In Eritrea, I carried out my observations in the Asmara and Massawa, visited Italian School, where I interviewed two professors and several students. This was made possible through contacts I developed for my work activity with the cultural attaché of the Italian embassy in Asmara. I also visited neighbouring villages while travelling from Asmara to Massawa. Moreover, I also met representatives from organisations such as Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the UNHCR (employees in the Shimelba camp); and Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE).

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As it emerged from the description above, I started my research with the idea of conducting interviews and participant observation in Rome not knowing really how long it would be necessary to remain engaged in the fieldwork in order to gather sufficient data. However, circumstances along the fieldwork (being hired by the Italian institutions, developing very close ties with some informants) undeniably shaped the collection methods, which ended up being different from what I had originally planned. First of all, the fieldwork proved to be very long providing for stronger relationships to be developed with key informants. This, in turn, opened new unpredicted settings for research, such as for instance the possibility to visit squat buildings and traveling to

[34] A similar experience has been described by Loretta Baldassar (2008) in relation to her fieldwork among parents living in Italy of Italian migrants living in Australia.

Eritrea. This allowed for the collection not only of interviews and fieldwork notes, but also for example visual data from Eritrea, leading to a higher diversification of sources. The study has then slowly shifted into a multi-sited ethnography, as the study of the subject was not focused on different sites (Falzon, 2016). Indeed, a multi-sited ethnography of a topic such as perceptions of asylum-seekers, which is *per se* transnational, enhances the researcher's lenses giving him/her a very powerful opportunity to study across space the fundamental relations at the core of the phenomenon. Second, an important point to acknowledge here was the role of the state (both in Itlay and Eritrea) in shaping data collection. In Eritrea, pervasive state control of researchers and individuals constrained the possibility to carry out fieldwork in Eritrea. The risk of endangering the participants and myself by investigating a very sensitive political issue for Afewerki's government was very high and this led me to resort to alternative strategies to engage locals in Eritrea. Even in Italy, Eritrean state control over its migrant citizens influenced the research, as fear of repercussions against their families in Eritrea was tangible among Eritrean asylum-seekers. These problems were partially balanced by my job for the Italian government, that allowed me, on the one hand, to travel to Eritrea and, on the other, to have access to privileged data and institutional representatives.

As to the tools, I needed flexible data collection instruments in order to obtain detailed and exhaustive information from the participants. As I stated earlier, I therefore relied on semi-structured tape-recorded qualitative interviews. My approach consisted in drawing up a topic-guide or a list of questions to be covered (interview guide), but one in which "the interviewee had a great deal of leeway on how to reply. Questions did not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that were not included in the guide were at times asked as the interviewer picked up on

things said by interviewees" (Bryman, 2004: 321). Because of the flexibility of the semi-structured interview as a tool (see Bryman, 2004; Blaikie, 2009), it allows us to better understand how the interviewee sees and understands complex issues, "that is, what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour" (Bryman, 2004: 321). Furthermore, in relation to this investigation, the methodology presents some significant advantages compared to unstructured interviews: as my investigation already had a fairly clear focus, it was more useful to adopt a semi-structured interview that allowed me to direct the interviewee towards the kind of information I needed, without therefore cutting off the possibilities to expand and redirect the focus of the interview, and to integrate ,new issues raised by the interviewee (Beardsworth and Keil, 1992).

Different interview guides were designed depending on the type of participant. When it came to asylum seekers and refugees, my guideline was structured in three parts and the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The first part was designed to establish a relationship with the interviewee by asking him/her about his/her personal experiences and life before he/she was forced to leave. This was a crucial part of the interview as it made clear to the interviewees that my aim was not to assess whether they were genuine or 'bogus' refugees (by using the expression 'forced to leave', it was clear that I already believed them and that their claims would not be scrutinized). Moreover, in the first part of the interview I also attempted to gather background information and to explore why they had chosen to come to Italy; what they had know then about Italy and how they had obtained this information (newspapers, school, photographs, etc.); what they had imagined that their life in Italy would be like; what they had known about the asylum process and what they had expected. The second part of the interview was designed to gather information about how their

perceptions of the asylum system, of Italian authorities (border police, police, etc.), of Italy and its policies changed in the course of the asylum process and what this entailed in terms of their own agency. Finally, in the last part, I focused on their experiences after having been granted refugee status, and on their relations with their new host society. However, the interviews did not necessarily unfold in the same way nor strictly follow the order of the questions. As 'accounts are not simply representations of the world [but] part of the world they describe' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 107), I was interested in the way refugees actively seek to ascribe meaning to their personal experiences and, therefore, I sought to follow the interviewee's account rather than my own order, asking for more precise information when needed. What also prompted me to adopt this strategy was the fact that talking about certain traumatic experiences and sensitive issues can be very difficult and, therefore, letting the refugees decide how to tell me their story was necessary to minimise distress. It is important to bear in mind that the personal traits of the researcher as well his/her point of view on the subject under study have an important influence both on the data collection process and on the data analysis (Bryman 2000). The researcher is never neutral and always carries with him/her a particular personality and life experience (Scott 1990). In this study, it seems that my personal background as well as my age and gender had a significant influence on the way some refugee participants opened up to me. Young female researchers are typically perceived as less threatening, and in some cases my male respondents seemed more comfortable in talking to me about their emotions and allowed themselves to show more emotion. In the same way, my personal experience of living in different countries during my childhood and my more cosmopolitan identity represented a sort of common ground with my participants, as they imagined I knew what it was like to live in a different country and to be a 'stranger'. As for Eritrean community members in

Rome, I adopted the same strategy in approaching them, with a slightly different focus: they were asked to give a retrospective account of their experiences in Italy and to specify how it differed from or conformed to what they had hoped/believed before leaving Eritrea, and I paid more substantial attention to their transnational engagements and to their relations with other community members.

As for *organisations*, the interviews with them lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and a different interview guide was designed each time, taking into account their particular organisational objectives and the services they provided, in order to develop a better insight into asylum-seeker/refugee issues and vulnerabilities, and into the problems of the asylum process. However, these interview guides were less structured than the ones designed for refugees, in that they identified specific areas of discussion rather than precise issues. This choice was guided by the consideration that my interviewees possessed great expertise, and that it was best to draw on their knowledge and to ask further questions on emerging interesting topics during the interview. The same rationale was applied to the interviews with *professionals*.

The interviews I gathered were transcribed and analysed according to the 'manual thematic coding procedure'. This method of data analysis makes it possible to organise and manage the large amount of information gathered through semi-structured interviews, by categorising the information into themes and sub-themes using a thematic framework (Mason 2002; Silverman 2001). I created two different frameworks (one for asylum seekers and refugees and another for organisations and professionals) to analyse the themes and sub-themes discussed in the transcripts. Subsequently, I also elaborated two other keys in order to systematise the data prior to analysing it: the first one reported the list of discussed themes, and the second gathered

quotations from the transcripts corresponding to each theme and sub-theme. These two keys were used simultaneously during the writing-up of my analysis.

5. ETHICS

Research with vulnerable groups and on sensitive issues always raises several ethical concerns, in particular in relation to the possibility of involuntarily harming those participating in the study. Respondents can be harmed by the careless disclosure of confidential information, or by the distress caused by thinking about traumatic experiences. In addition, in several contexts, their participation in the study could cause suspicion among their fellow-nationals or community members (understood in a broad sense). For these reasons, interviewing refugees can be very problematic. First of all, they have already been questioned several times by border officers, lawyers and other governmental officials, which could have led to emotional, psychological or even physical distress. Secondly, while narrating their stories, refugees are forced to re-think about unpleasant subjects. In this situation, the researcher must act with sensitivity and tact in every phase of the research, from the recruitment of participants to the choice of the interview setting.

In this research study, no pressure was put on the contacted asylum seekers and refugees to force them to participate. As a matter of fact, whenever I had the suspicion that the individual I contacted was afraid of being interviewed or had been reluctantly pushed into accepting by his/her friendship with my gatekeepers, I decided not to interview him/her. Moreover, full and detailed information was given to the participants at the time of the first contact, and their verbal consent was requested before each interview (when access to research participants is difficult and rests on their feelings of trust for the individual researcher, formal requirements to obtain

written consent could have a detrimental effect on the relationship (Miller and Bell, 2002)). Refugees and asylum seekers were also offered the possibility of withdrawing from the interview at any time, in order to minimize the distress caused by talking about very traumatic experiences. I also decided to anonymise all the interviews by default. Therefore, I asked my participants to choose a name by which they would be referred to and quoted in the study. I always tried to make sure that each participant had fully understood the implications of participating in the study, his/her right to withdraw from it at any time, and what it meant for the interview to be confidential and anonymous. Interviews with the asylum seekers and refugees staying at the Baobab centre were carried out on the premises, in a separate office. As for the other interviews, the interviewees themselves chose the setting, since I considered that being in an environment they liked or were familiar with would make them feel more comfortable. The same rules were applied to interviews with members of the Eritrean community in Rome, and I was particularly careful not to disclose any information, even to other participants, about who had been interviewed.

As for the interviews with organisations and professionals, my approach consisted in first sending a formal cover letter accompanied by a description of the project, and then requesting their written consent prior to the interview. In all cases, a clear description of the aim of the project and the use to which the interview would be put was provided to the interviewees, whose anonymity was also guaranteed.

Another critical element was the data gathered through participant observation. Although I had made it clear since the beginning that I was conducting research on this specific subject, several times I found myself in a difficult position: observing is a very natural process, and since I had established a relation of trust with the people in the centre, it was not always easy to determine whether the information they provided

could also be used for research purposes, especially when they touched on very sensitive issues. In the end, the strategy I adopted was to withhold any piece of information that, if disclosed, could be detrimental to a specific respondent, despite the fact that they had been anonymised.

Finally, the collected data was password protected, safely stored and backed up on an external hard drive.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COLONIAL RELATION: THE PRODUCTION AND RE-PRODUCTION OF PERCEPTIONS OF ITALY IN ERITREA

1. ITALY AND THE CONQUEST OF A 'SPOT IN THE SUN'[35]

The first thing you notice while flying over Eritrea is its elongated triangular shape; it is a very small territory compared to its neighbours Sudan to the West and Ethiopia to the South. It is still a wild territory, arid to the west, and dominated by the central plateau, where the capital city Asmara lies. From there, it takes a short time to reach the sandy coast, which dives from 2,360 m (7,600 ft) down to sea level in about two hours. Locals consider this to be a unique feature; they are proud to tell foreigners 'we have three seasons in two hours'. It is striking that this strip of land, which looks so small on the map, produces one of the largest flows of asylum seekers, More that 440,000 refugees and asylum seekers originated from Eritrea in 2015 (UNHCR, 2015). War, dictatorship, and the country's increasing militarization have led many to flee, and yet these factors have also helped to forge Eritrea's national identity and have given its inhabitants a strong sense of pride. In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, today's Eritreans are very much the result of half a century of colonial domination and ensuing conflicts, since Italian colonisation and its legacy has had a deep influence on the way Eritreans perceive themselves and their country's relationship to Italy.

[35] The expression '*un posto al sole*' ('a spot in the sun') (most English academic writings uses simple quotation marks rather than double quotation marks, I am therefore tempted to change them. Do let me know however if there are different conventions in your specific field) was used by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini with reference to the 'Italian colonial empire' in East Africa.

Eritrean-Italian colonial relations have been the object of several studies. Among them, Jacqueline Andall's (2005) work stands out, as it addresses the relationship between Italian colonialism and contemporary immigration to Italy, which she claims to be an area that has received limited academic attention (191)[36]. The author posits that The presence of Eritrean migrants in Italy can undoubtedly be associated with the colonial legacy. As it will be argued in this thesis, this legacy can be observed regarding Eritreans' destination and settlement decisions and in relation to their treatment within Italy[37].

Years of conflict have kept most of Eritrea frozen in time. While rich businessmen and contractors were already exploiting the resources of other colonial African countries, the economic stagnation that followed the Armed Struggle (the thirty-year-long resistance to Ethiopian rule which began in the 1960s) helped to preserve the country's cultural and historical legacy. This is particularly true when it comes to Asmara, where traces of the Italian domination period are everywhere to be seen. Walking through the city really gives one the feeling of strolling in an old 1940s Italian town, or of leafing through the pictures of a family album. Evidence of the passage of Italian colonists can easily be seen in the city's architecture, but also in

[36] As Andall claims, it is probably as a result of the growing salience of immigration in Italy that some scholars of Italian colonialism have recently sought to make a connection between Italian colonialism and contemporary immigration, emphasising in particular the racist dimension of Italy's colonial past (Sorgoni, 1998; Labanca, 1999; Barrera, 2003b). Sorgoni (2002) has acknowledged the difficulties of elaborating on 'similarities or continuities between colonial racism and that experienced in present day Italy' (56). Labanca attributes the latent colonial attitudes in Italy to the absence of a political debate on colonialism in the post-war period and maintains that such attitudes have been re-activated against migrants.

[37] According to Andall, (2005), Italy's situation in terms of numbers of ex-colonial subjects on her territory differs from other several European countries where post-war colonial labour migration occurred at an earlier stage and, frequently, prior to de-colonization. Italy experienced an unusual form of external decolonization in the immediate post-war period as it was dispossessed of its colonies. Moreover, while other colonial countries (France, UK) where receiving labour migration in the 1950s, Italy was a sending migration country. Italy's transformed immigration status (from sending to receiving) would gain recognition only in the 1980s. Moreover, Andall argues that today in Italy Eritreans occupy hybrid and overlapping spaces as colonial labour migrants, political refugees and second-generation.

everyday objects, and in the habits and language of Asmarinos and of the inhabitants of Massawa. As Carlo, an Italian resident in Asmara, points out,

> 'today there are only a few Italian families living here…mostly elderly people…people who came back after Independence in 1993 to the places where they had lived and that they feel is their home'.These people, and the very few old Italians who never left Eritrea, are called in Italian *gli insabbiati* (literally 'those who have buried by sand'), an expression which corresponds to the English idea of 'going native'.

'The colonial experience has left marks on both the Italian and the Eritrean sides', says Br. Ezio Tonini, an Italian Pavonian missionary (the Sons of Mary Immaculate also known as Pavonians, are an order founded by Saint Ludovico Pavoni). He is not like other missionaries I have met before. He is not fighting on the frontline, trying to defeat the many plagues that affect this war-torn country. As we speak, he tells me he moved to Eritrea over forty years ago, during the war with Ethiopia, and I realise that he has played an essential part in Eritrean society by helping to preserve certain memories. In the Pavoni Social Center in Asmara, he founded a library devoted to ancient books and rare publications about Eritrea and the Horn of Africa; it is probably one of the most comprehensive collections on the subject, ranging as it does from history and anthropology to geography, agriculture, botanic, linguistics, etc. The library is open to the public, and is used by students, international scholars, diplomats as well as by people who are simply passionate about the subject. He claims that

> 'It is important to keep the memory of what happened here. Many would like to erase the past; to others memories are too painful. But it is through our history that we know exactly who we are'.

Br Tonini explains to me that, in order to understand the relationship between Eritreans and Italy, I need to start from the beginning, that is, from the colonial era.

> 'You know, that bond is strong. Historians and scholars in general have written about it [colonialism]. The problem is not the lack of material. The issue is the way it happened and what it meant for those involved…I mean, for Italy as well, because of the role of the liberals and especially of Mussolini. It is difficult to separate the judgment about colonialism from the judgement about what happened during those years in Italy'.

The relation between Italy and Eritrea was always fraught and fluctuating, alternating between love and hate. The meaning of colonialism itself was repeatedly put into question by the Italian governments of the time. Indeed, the Italian colonial adventure in the Horn of Africa happened at a time when the young and small European country was searching for a common national identity. Inner discrepancies, mostly related to the lack of a widespread national sentiment, marked the Italian unification, which was the work of a small elite. The weakness of Italy's national identity stemmed from the fact that its underlying values were essentially secular (whereas the majority of the population was traditionally Catholic) and that the newly established state lacked a strong and well-established state tradition capable of reconciling different historical, political, linguistic and cultural traditions (Castronovo et al., 2004). At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the Italian nationalist movement slowly began to consolidate its ideology and to appeal to the masses. At that time, Italy had one of the highest birth rates in Europe and emigration was increasing dramatically, with more than 9 million emigrants leaving Italy between 1870 and 1930, mainly for the Americas and Australia. Moreover, on the political side, the new government found itself internationally isolated and suffocated by growing tensions with France and territorial disputes with Austria. As a consequence, Italian nationalists started pushing for an imperialist foreign policy, in order to transform the crowds of emigrant into an army of conquest and to gain international prestige. These ideas

were shared by many intellectuals, writers, poets, and artists, who had developed a fascination with Africa after listening to explorers' tales of exotic wildlife and fierce tribesmen. They believed, then, that Italy had a 'civilizing mission' which it had a duty to fulfil.

Italy established its first foothold in Eritrea in 1869, when the fifty-nine-year-old Giuseppe Sepeto, an explorer and a missionary belonging to the Order of S. Vincenzo de' Paoli, bought the port of Assab from a local sultan, on behalf of the Rubattino shipping company. Assab was a strategic location, especially following the opening, in the same year, of the Suez Canal that created a direct route between Europe and the markets in the Far East (Montanelli, 2011). Later, in 1882, the Italian government bought it from Rubattino, in order to further penetrate the area. In 1885, on the pretext of retaliating for the massacre of an Italian commercial expedition in Dancalia, the Italians occupied Massawa – which was run by the then weak Egyptian regime – without a single casualty. This expansion was supported by Great Britain, which was worried that France, its competitor in Africa, would take advantage of Cairo's weakness in order to gain a foothold in the Red Sea (Wrong, 2005). Soon, Italy controlled the coastline and Massawa was chosen as the capital city of the colony, named Eritrea after the Latin name for the Red Sea, *Erythraeum Mare*. Massawa was then turned by the then Governor, General Baldissera, into a recruitment hub: due to the need for new military recruits in order to further expand Italian territorial control, local young men were recruited under the name of *ascari*.

At that point, politicians in the Italian Parliament disagreed about what path the Italian expansion should take. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, pressed for an expansion towards Sudan, but a revolt led by the religious leader Muhammad Ahmad, known as the *Mahdi*, made the plan impossible,

leading Mancini to resign. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Count de Robilant, decided to launch a campaign in the direction of the Eritrean central plateau, into Abyssinian territory. The Abyssinian Empire was ruled by several local sultans (*ras*), who were formally under the control of the emperor (*Negus Neghesti*, that is the 'King of Kings'), but in fact they had a high level of autonomy. The relations between colonists and the *Negus* were fast deteriorating, as the Italians were cementing their control of the coastline, occupying territories that fomally fell under Egyptian rule but which were *de facto* run by the Empire. According to the reports of the proceeding in the House of Representatives, Italian politicians had underestimated the strength of the Abyssinian army: on 24 January 1887, Robilant argued that 'it is wrong to give so much importance to four marauders who are standing in our way in Africa' (Montanelli, 2011: 203)[38].

As a result, on 26 January 1887, 500 Italian soldiers who were heading to Saati in order to reinforce the village's defence lines were ambushed and killed near Dogali by Abyssinian soldiers led by *ras* Alula. Only one officer and 86 soldiers survived, and most of them mutilated or severely injured. Following that defeat, the Italians abandoned Saati. This event also highlighted the lack of preparation of the Italian contingent: for instance, the soldiers were wearing winter uniforms, which were utterly unsuited to the climate. Some of them were also suffering from malaria. The defeat was a major blow for Italian nationalists and politicians; it led to street protests in Rome and brought about the resignation of Robilant and an ensuing government reshuffle (Sabbatucci and Vidotto, 2009; see also Montanelli, 2011). At that point, the divide between the political elite and the masses was growing stronger, and many critics of the political class were also opposed to Italy's colonial

[38] Translated from the Italian: "e non conviene certamente attaccare importanza a quattro predoni che possiamo avere tra i piedi in Africa".

projects. The defeat in Dogali still occupies an important place in Italian people's memories of the colonial period, it is an event that seems very difficult to forget. This traumatic event has left a mark both in Rome and Dogali. One of the main squares in Rome, *Piazza di Termini*, was dedicated to the 500 fallen soldiers and renamed *Piazza dei Cinquecento*. A memorial was also built in the square, topped by an Egyptian obelisk. In the 1930s, during the fascist rule, a special bridge was built in Dogali by Piedmontese workers.

Figure 1 - Dogali Bridge.

The bridge was commissioned by General Menabrea. What makes it really interesting is the motto carved into the bridge in the Piedmontese dialect: '*Custa Lon Ca Custa*' (Whatever it Takes). This is a testimony to the fascists' determination to push ahead with the Italian colonial project, and it is not a coincidence if it was engraved precisely on the Dogali bridge, where the fascists considered that Italy's sons had made the utmost sacrifice. Years later, a memorial was set up to commemorate the fallen, who are buried in mass graves in the vicinity.

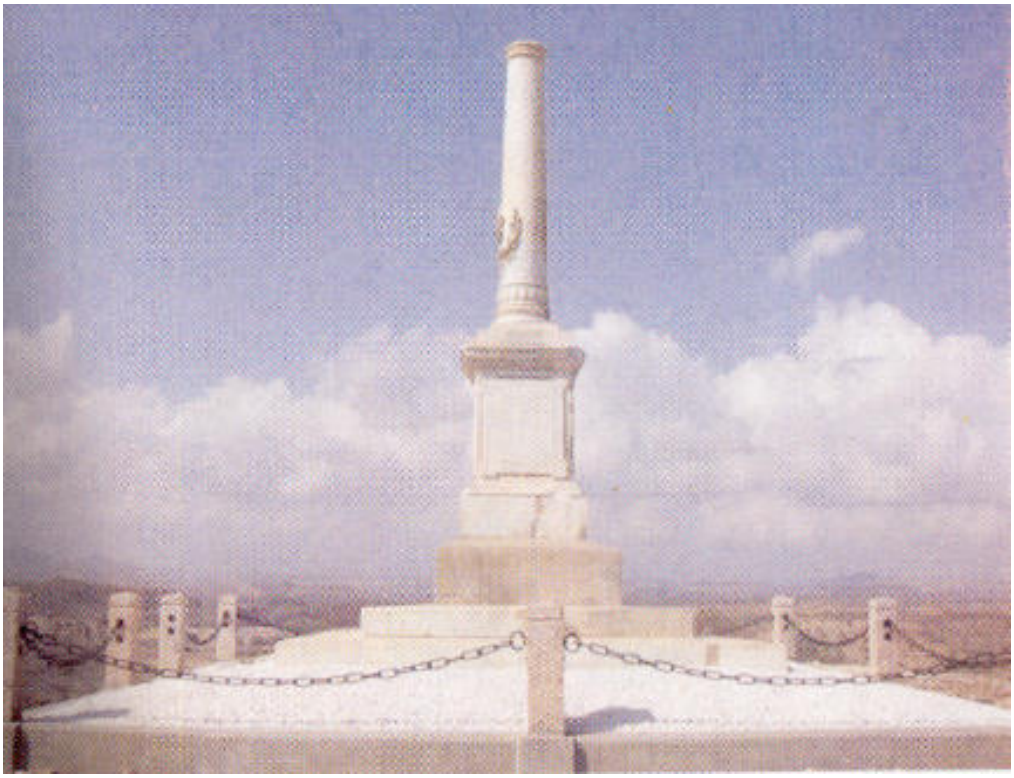

Figure 2- Dogali Memorial

Following the setback in Dogali, General Baldissera reorganised the colony militarily: in particular, he boosted the recruitment of *ascari* who were regrouped into the *Corpo Speciale d'Africa* (Africa Special Corps), composed of four battalions led by Italian officers. Then, taking advantage of the death of the *Negus* Yohannes IV in the battle against the *Mahdi* in 1889, who was succeeded by Menelik II, Baldissera commanded the *Corpo Speciale d'Africa* to advance towards the plateau. The Italian strategy was to avoid battle whenever possible and to reach agreements with local *rases* according to a *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) logic. Their advance was very slow; *ascari* and Italian soldiers had to build bridges and roads, working side by side. Finally however, in 1889, Keren and Asmara were occupied and the 'Treaty of Uccialli' signed between Italy and Menelik II; and in 1890 Eritrea formally became an Italian colony (Battaglia, 1958).

1.1 The 'liberal' administration

Baldissera's administration of the colony was brutal (Romandini, 1996). He established a military regime and repressed dissent, filling Massawa's jails and killing suspected traitors (Martini, 1891). Some rumours of what was happening in the Eritrean port reached the Parliament in Rome, and public discomfort with the colonial adventure – which had already caused the loss of many Italian lives – grew stronger. Newspapers were also feeding this disapproval, and loudly called for an investigation. Therefore, in 1891, the then Prime Minister Antonio Starabba Marquess Di Rudinì launched an inquiry into the atrocities perpetrated by the two Italian commanders Dario Livraghi and Eteocle Cagnassi, and sent a delegation to Eritrea to assess the situation. This could have been a turning point (Wrong, 2005), as many members of Parliament were militating for a retreat from Eritrea for a number of different reasons. Echoing popular resentment, some politicians were questioning the government's spending on infrastructure in Eritrea; they argued that Italy itself needed investments for development, especially in the south. Others claimed that the colony was too militarised and argued for the need to establish a civil administration (Montanelli, 2011). This position eventually triumphed: Di Rudinì decided to remove the colony from the control of the military, to secure its borders, and to reduce colonial expenditure.

Under the newly appointed governor, Ferdinando Martini, the colony experienced a strong infrastructural development and the foundations were laid for a new colonial society. Eritrea's capital was moved to Asmara, and the colony was divided into nine provinces. Departments of health, education and finance were established, along with a judiciary system.

Martini quickly realised that it was not possible to boost the colony's economy without a reliable connection between the coast and Asmara. Italians and *ascari* had earlier created a sinuous road up to the plateau, but it had been built in haste and it was still difficult to travel from Massawa to Asmara, especially if carrying construction materials or supplies. So a quicker and safer connection was deemed necessary, and Martini started planning a railway. In his 7,000 pages long memoirs, *Il Diario Eritreo*, he expresses his enthusiasm for the project, but also his disappointment with Rome. The fact was that, having cut the colonial budget, Rome was not supportive of constant requests for money. Moreover, after the tremendous Italian defeat against the Abyssinians at Adua in 1896, in which more than 6,000 Italian soldiers and *ascari* lost their lives (Montanelli, 2011), the colonial venture was facing growing opposition among the Italian population, and many socialists and other intellectuals were loudly calling for Italy to pull out of Africa. As Martini puts it, 'the railway would be the only really effective remedy to many – perhaps all – of the colony's ills. But they do not want to know this in Rome' (Martini, 1946, vol.3: 3)[39].

Strongly committed to achieving his aim, Martini pulled together almost 1,000 Eritrean workers and Italian superintendents, and started the groundwork for the railway, which was very complicated, due to the very steep grade of the slope which the railway had to ascend (1 in 28) (Martini, 1946). All things considered, the railway was an engineering 'miracle' of the time, and it connected the two main cities in 1911. Martini dreamt of connecting the Eritrean railway line to Sudan's network, but by the time he left office, in 1907, the railway was not completed (Wrong, 2005). The works continued during the 1930s, but the Italian-Ethiopian war, sparked in 1935, interrupted the construction of the final section to Sudan.

[39] Translated from the Italian: 'La ferrovia sarebbe l'unico rimedio effettivo a molti – se non a tutti – i mali della colonia. Ma a Roma non ne vogliono sapere'.

Eritrea's governor was also worried about the relations between settlers and locals. During that period, the Italian community was small, mostly composed of soldiers. Being far from their home, many of them took Eritrean women as concubines (*madamismo*) setting up house together (Cassata, 2006; see also Wrong, 2005). The number of interracial births was very high, and while some men abandoned their half-Eritrean children when they returned to Italy, others brought them with them (see Pianavia Vivaldi, 1901; and Barrera, 2003a). Missionaries set up schools where Italian fathers could send their Italian-Eritrean children to receive an Italian education. Italian local authorities in Eritrea deplored this phenomenon as they considered it to be a threat to the 'purity of the race' and to the 'dominance of the white man'. However, Italian officials in Eritrea saw things differently and completely disregarded their superiors' directions.

The education system established under Italian domination was also marked by this racist view. Italian and Eritrean pupils were kept separate, to avoid them forming any close relationships: the 'dominance of the white race' was to be preserved at any cost. Martini was certain that Eritreans understood Italian rule as a form of necessary evil, given the benefits it gave them in terms of development, in comparison to their Abyssinian neighbours; he believed they considered the Italians to be kind but stupid (Martini, 1946). The Italian governor noticed that Eritreans were very clever, especially when it came to learning languages (Italian was taught to them in school). So he believed that they could undermine the 'superiority of the white race', were they to attend the same classes as Italians, or, even worse, instil revolutionary ideas into their Italian peers (Martini, 1946). Segregation was also enforced outside the classrooms, with separate neighbourhoods and different accesses to public transportation.

By the time he left Eritrea to return to Italy, Martini had transformed the colony from a military garrison into a developing state However, he also left a dark inheritance, as his belief in the necessary separation between Italians and Eritreans paved the way for the more extreme policies implemented during the fascist period (see Wrong, 2005).

1.2 The fascist administration

Ironically, one of the most zealous champions of the superiority of the 'white race' was a former socialist, Benito Mussolini, who in his early years had opposed Italy's 'imperialist war' and denounced the invasion of Libya (1911), which earned him a five-month jail term (De Felice, 2005, Montanelli 2011b). Mussolini was expelled from the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI – the Italian Socialist Party) because of his criticism of the party and of socialism itself, which had (in his view) failed to recognize the national problems that brought about the First World War (WW1); another part of the reason was his support for the Italian intervention in the war. Gradually however Mussolini changed his views and adopted the ideology of revolutionary nationalism, transcending class lines (Gregor, 1979: 191). When he came to power as Prime Minister in 1922, he had already developed the idea that colonial expansion was the natural path for such a demographically strong country as Italy.

Indeed, demographic growth was one of Mussolini's main concerns. In 1927, he warned against demographic decline in Europe. In a very famous speech before the House of Representatives (in May, 26 1927), he stated that: 'if we decrease,

gentlemen, we will not create the Empire, we will become a colony'[40]. He saw African colonies as a natural outlet for Italian emigration, especially after the economic crisis of 1929. Migration to the African colonies could, in his view, deter Italians from heading to the Americas and to other European countries, thereby boosting the colonial economies and contributing to local demographic growth. However, in spite Mussolini's best intentions, migration towards Africa never became as important as the flows directed to the Americas (Di Nolfo, 1966).

In the meantime, in Eritrea, following the invasion of Libya (1911), thousands of *ascari* were sent to fight side by side with Italian soldiers. With the rise of fascism the conditions of conscripted Eritreans did not improve. A clash between Abyssinian and Italian troops in Welwel (in eastern Ethiopia) served as a pretext for Mussolini to justify the invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, in which both *ascari* and Italian troops participated. In 1936, the Italian expansion was finally complete, and the Empire was named *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI – Italian Eastern Africa). To Mussolini, Adua was a lesson learnt, so he sent an oversupply of men and materiel. The cost of the endeavour, however, was very high: roughly 12,000 Italians and another 4,000 to 5,000 Libyans, Eritreans and Somalis died in the battle (Weinberg, 2005: 276). Also, the economic cost of the conquest excessively strained the Italian budget; as a consequence, dissent about the colonialist expansion was growing in Rome.

The invasion of Abyssinia represented a boost for Eritrea's economy, as the country became the staging post for further expansion, and the settlement Mussolini so desperately wanted to create in order to lure Italian migrants. The railway had been expanded and towns such as Keren were greatly benefiting from their location along the line. Along with soldiers and Blackshirts, Italy dispatched an almost

[40] Translated from the Italian: 'se si diminuisce, signori, non si fa l'Impero, si diventa una colonia'.

50,000-strong work force (Wrong, 2005) made up of workers, engineers and surveyors to develop the colony. They built hospitals, airports, bridges, and paved roads. In order to showcase Italy's technical skill, the Ceretti & Tanfani Company constructed the highest funicular cableway of the time, linking Massawa to Asmara, in a mere two years (1935-1937); it was designed to transport goods from the port to the capital city. However, the cableway only lasted a few years, as it was damaged by the Second World War (WW2) and closed in 1941.

'The 1930s were frenzied years in Eritrea, especially in the cities…the countryside was still unsafe…' These are the words of Pippo Cinnirella, one of the last *insabbiati* living in Asmara. This was the period when his family migrated to Eritrea, and started a button factory specialising in natural materials (such as wood, oysters, etc.) and in fabrics made with euphorbia. Tall, thin, white-haired, he is one of the old Italians who truly feel they belong in Eritrea. Above a shelf in his house there is a picture of him taken about 10 years ago: in it he is wearing the traditional Eritrean white tunic, while holding the son of some members of the diplomatic community in Asmara for baptism. He claims that

> 'During that period, the cities were transformed…Asmara was drained and eucalyptus trees were planted all around it in order to prevent outbreaks of malaria. *Avant-garde* architects designed modernist buildings…for instance, the Fiat Tagliero building…did you see it?'.

The architect Giuseppe Pettazzi designed the Fiat Tagliero petrol station in 1937-1938; it is one of the world's best examples of Futurism. It is shaped as an aeroplane, with a central building and two long 'wings'.

> 'Legend has it that when the petrol station was finally finished, the workers refused to withdraw the scaffolding as they feared that the project was too ambitious and that the wings would collapse. At that point, Pettazzi went mad and pointed a gun to the head of the building

supervisor threatening to kill him', says Pippo Cinnirella. Much to Pettazzi's satisfaction the wings held and the petrol station is still intact today.

Figure 3 -FIAT Tagliero petrol station in Asmara

The migration of Italians to the colony naturally created concerns in Rome regarding the relations they would establish with the local populations. These worries were not new: as mentioned earlier, during the pre-fascist period, Eritrea's governors had tried to tackle the phenomenon of *madamismo* and 'interbreeding', with almost no success. The fascist government was worried that the presence of Italians would lead to the creation of a nation of *meticci*, thus undermining the superiority of the white 'race' over all the others.

According to the civil registry, the number of Italian civilians had increased to almost 4,000 in 1931. Moreover, the Italian population growth was primarily due to new births, rather than to immigration (Barrera, 2003). By 1931, in fact, 40% of

Italians in Eritrea were born in the colony (Castellano, 1948). Many of them were sons and daughters of Italian men and Eritrean women. Very few Italian women immigrated, and most of them were already married.

As the frequent call to the protection of the 'white race' did not have the desired effect on the Italians' behaviour in the colony, Mussolini promoted a stricter legislation against 'interbreeding'. The tacit racism of the liberal administration became institutionalised during the fascist years. In the summer of 1935, Mussolini urged the then Ministry of the Colonies, Alessandro Lessona, to prepare a 'contingency plan' to tackle the phenomenon. As a result, the 'New Regulations for AOI' were drafted and came into force in June 1936 (Sabbatucci et al., 2004; Montanelli, 2011b). This set of laws barred the offspring of unknown white fathers from obtaining Italian citizenship[41], whereas a bill passed in 1937 prohibited sexual relations between Italian citizens and African subjects. A year later, mixed marriages were forbidden, and many of those which had taken place were declared null and void.

Furthermore, in order to force Italian residents in the colony to comply with the law provisions, a sanctions regime was also introduced[42]. For instance, an Italian citizen convicted of having had sexual relations with natives would be imprisoned for five years. Overnight stays in'indigenous' neighbourhoods, as well as frequenting places where Eritrean hanged out were prohibited. In addition, Eritreans of mixed descent were equated to locals and, therefore, excluded from the education

[41] Already in 1933, the fascist government had restricted the possibility for the offspring of unknown white fathers to claim Italian citizenship: it specified that when they came of age (at 18 years old), they needed to demonstrate that they had met specific cultural and moral requirements. Moreover, they also needed to undergo an 'anthropological' diagnostical procedure, to establish that they were 'dark white' rather than 'light black' (see Cucinotta, 1934).

[42] Regio Decreto Legislativo del 19 aprile 1937, n. 880, *Sanzioni per i rapporti d'indole coniugale tra cittadini e sudditi*; Legge del 29 giugno 1939, n. 1004, *Sanzioni penali per la difesa del prestigio di razza di fronte ai nativi dell'Africa italiana*; Legge del 13 maggio 1940, n. 882, *Norme relative ai meticci* (see also Goglia, 1988).

historically provided by missionaries. Being Eritrean, they were only allowed to attend school until the fourth grade, in all-black classes.

Thinking that interbreeding was the result of single men migration, Mussolini regulated the duration of their stay: single men could not stay in the colony for more than six months; married men could stay longer if their families were to come and join them. To finally solve the problem, Mussolini decided in 1938 to promote the migration of Italian women to the African colonies (Di Lalla, 2014)[43].

According to Pippo Cinnirella,

> 'Il Duce [Mussolini] introduced these laws...but they were not really followed! Many of the Italian soldiers already had a girlfriend; many were already married to an Eritrean woman. As a result of this policy, many decided not to go back to Italy and to remain here forever with their Eritrean families'. He adds that 'some men or couples decided to settle in Eritrea, like the Casciani family in Elabered[44], for example. Why prohibit people from having relations with locals? It was natural'.

Segregation was also enforced in physical spaces. As Solomon, an 87-year-old *Ascaro* tells me:

> 'In Asmara, Eritreans couldn't walk alongside Italians, who would always walk alone. You needed to walk at least two steps behind and you would have to step aside when they passed. Also, in the cinema, Eritreans had their seats in the gallery, they had their own queue at the public offices, and they couldn't enter bars reserved for white people'. Eritreans were also forbidden from entering the city centre outside working hours. Locals

[43] About 28,000 women moved to the colonies during those years. They were not only married women, but also young unmarried teachers, nurses, office workers, as well as prostitutes that considered migration as a chance to better their lives (see Di Lalla, 2014).

[44] A subregion in the northwestern Anseba region of Eritrea. The Casciani are considered by the Italian community in Eritrea as a form of 'founding fathers'. At the end of the 1890s, Pietro Casciani (a lawyer and notary) and his wife, Maria Verolini, were allocated an estate in the Anseba valley, 10-12 km away from the Asmara-Keren railway. At the beginning they lived in a modest *tucul*, a form of local shed. Together with their neighbours, the Acquisto brothers, and the support of an Italian entrepreneur, De Nadai, they created an efficient irrigation system, setting up small dams on the Anseba river. The estate (around 1,500 hectares) produced fruit, vegetables, wine and medical plants. The livestock produced milk and cheese. A village quickly developed around the estate, with houses for the workers, a church and a school. In 1975, when Afewerki forced Italians to return to their country of origin, the estate was nationalised.

still call that area the *commishtato*[45], their pronunciation of the Italian *campo cintato* (enclosed field) (see also Wrong, 2005: 74).

Then he adds,

'these were the rules, but in practice sometimes things were different. I had many Italian friends. One especially, came from a town named Sicilia in the south [he probably refers to Sicily, the island]'.

2. CREATING AND REPRODUCING PERCEPTIONS

2.1 The *ascari*, and the *Casa degli Italiani*

Walking through Asmara is for me a unique experience. The impression is odd; it feels like walking inside my great-grandfather's photo album, although everything is dustier and the sun is brighter. The paint on the buildings is faded, turning the grey or red *palazzi* into a uniform sand colour. Here and there, something gives you a hint of human activities aimed at preserving their state: a refreshed white shop sign, a clean shop window.

I walk alongside Pippo Cinnirella, I am accompanying him to the barbershop. The sign says 'Giovanni's'; the interiors are vintage and the walls are decorated with pictures of celebrities with dashing haircuts. Pippo greets Giovanni, the barber, an Eritrean man in his late sixties, and introduces me to him. When I tell Giovanni I am Italian he says: '*tiliana*, you belong here!'. Giovanni is not his real name. He is called Tesfaye. When the Italian shop owner died, more than ten years ago, he left his shop to his assistant and friend. Together with the shop, the latter decided to informally take on his predecessor's name as a sign of continuity with the past.

[45] According to some historic testimonies, the origin of this name is prior to the segregationist policies, and is related to the original use of the area as a military centre by the Italians (Baldissera, 1987:12).

> 'Everyone calls him Giovanni' says Pippo, 'this is normal here…many Eritreans who have worked with Italians take their name when they die or go away. It means that they are proud of this relationship'.

I decide to ask Tesfaye some questions about his relation to Italy; he speaks just a few words of Italian and no English, so Pippo Cinnirella offers to translate from Tigray.

> 'Italians are good people', Tesfaye says. 'You see…Us and the Italians, we liberated this country from Ethiopia, we fought together…my father fought. They built the city like Rome, we had many things…it's not like the English, they destroyed everything. […] I like Italy, we are friends'.

He says that Giovanni took him on as an assistant many years ago, when he was a teenager, as he knew his father, and taught him how to run the shop. In time they actually developed a close friendship. He recalls,

> 'I remember in the 1940s and 1950s, there were still many Italians here, it was a nice period. Then they left. But I tell my grandchildren about that time…for young people it is different now. It is very difficult'.

Indeed, 'Giovanni' has a very positive perception of Italy, which he transmits to his relatives. His relationship with Giovanni has proved to be a fundamental part of his identity formation process; he sees himself in some way as the heir of an important legacy linked to Italy, since he is the owner of 'Giovanni's' and the son of an *Ascaro*. Moreover, his relationship with Italians remains strong, as his shop is still attended by the Italian who still live in Asmara. These are generally old people, who tend to speak about the past with Tesfaye, nostalgically recalling old memories, both sweetened and smoothened with the passing of time. In a sense, his positive perceptions of Italy are constantly recreated through his interaction with his clients, but they are mostly linked to a distant past and, therefore, they are not in any way related to present-day Italy. In fact, Tesfaye seemed totally unaware of the issues

affecting Italy today, apart from vague pieces of news heard from his Italian friends or picked up during formal occasions, such as official visits of Italian politicians to the local *Casa degli Italiani*, which he regularly attends. These events are of course designed to publicize a very positive image of Italy and are by no means a reflection of the country's real situation.

The *Casa degli Italiani* is an important place for Italians in Asmara. Funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, with the aim of promoting Italian culture and the Italian language, this institution is a gathering point for many Italians of the older generation, for entrepreneurs and for Eritreans as well. Small in numbers but very active, the Italian community organises events, many of them related to the history of the Italian community and, consequently, to colonialism. Through these events, a positive image of Italy is reproduced, magnified by the testimonies of *ascari* and Italians, who are all very attached to a past in which they played an active role.

Pippo walks me to the *Casa degli Italiani*; he has arranged an interview with an old Eritrean man who fought alongside the Italians during World War II. One of the last *ascari* still alive, Solomon emanates dignity and firm determination in spite of his old age. He wears a Borsalino hat and an elegant brown suit with a beige tie, and he gives me a friendly smile as he slowly walks towards us. Pippo has told me that Solomon is always happy to talk about his story, and that he is held in high esteem by the Eritrean regime, the local population and the Italians.

> 'I was born in Tessenei and my father was a peasant. I am 93 years old now…I am very old', he tells me in good Italian. 'At that time, the situation was not very safe, because we were right at the border with Sudan. And there was not much to do either apart from farming. I knew the Italians were looking for Eritrean manpower to build bridges, defences…they were renovating Massawa's port and Asmara. I knew they were paying good

> salaries. So I decided to go to the city and see if I could find a better job. I think I was 17 or 18…back then, at that age we were men. In the city, I met an Eritrean *Muntaz* [*ascari* corporal of the *Corpo Speciale d'Africa*] by chance and I enrolled. The salary was higher than that of workers. Then my wife also came. […] It was difficult at the beginning because I had to learn Italian, and how to use weapons. We followed the orders of Italian officials. I remember a *capitano* [captain], Betti, he was inflexible [smiles], I guess he was like that because he wanted us to learn discipline and to be prepared. We were respected, anyway. You know, I had many Italians friends…we were eating together, fighting together…we fought the invasion by Ethiopia, we built the nation. But then, when the British came, things were different, they dismantled the factories, the port, everything! They left us with nothing!'.

During the years when he served under the Italian flag, Solomon met Idris Salim Awate, a former *Ascaro* himself and the future leader of the ELF, who fought against British domination in the 1940s and, later on, against the Ethiopian regime. Awate also gave momentum to the growing Eritrean independence movement, which Solomon joined and with which he later fought the war for independence. Solomon's account is very representative of the experience of the ascari: his story is similar to that of many others who also joined the independence struggle. These very proud Eritreans are those who mostly contributed to the country's military and infrastructural development and, most importantly, to the construction of a national identity. In this respect, serving as an *Ascaro* also contributed to that.

According to historic accounts about the period, roughly 30,000 Eritreans served in the Italian colonial army in the period between 1890-1935, with a peak of about 60,000 during the Ethiopian campaign in 1935 (Killion 1998:91). At that time, the Eritrean population stood at around 600,000 individuals (Negash, 1986:51).

Ascari played a very important role in Eritrean society during the colonial era. As Dirar points out, they had a complex social role since they were expected to act as a social filter between the colonial administration and its colonial subjects (2004:546). The colonial government's aim was, in fact, to progressively incorporate

these Eritrean soldiers into the colonial structure (Negash, 1987). This approach entailed, first of all, the development of a level of mutual trust: on the one hand, the Italians needed to be confident that the *ascari* would not turn against them; on the other hand, the latter needed to feel included and respected by the colonists. In Solomon's case, the statement 'we were respected' is key: despite the difficulties he encountered, this sense of respect led to a positive self- evaluation, which, in turn, caused him to develop a sense of pride and a good relationship with the Italians. Consequently, Solomon has a positive perception of the colonial times, especially compared to his memories of the English rule, that did not maintain or replicate this system.

The first step of the process was recruitment. Italians preferred to enlist married Eritreans because they were thought to be more trustworthy and more likely to stay for longer periods because of their family responsibilities, thus providing the colonial army with very experienced fighters (Dirar, 2004). Furthermore, families became an important element of the construction of colonial society. The Italian authorities of that time paid a lot of attention to the family as the original nucleus of society. This can be seen from the amount of laws, bills and decrees on the family that were passed and approved both by Rome and by the Eritrean government. In Eritrea, the 1908 disciplinary regulations for indigenous soldiers serving in the Royal Corps of Colonial troops of Eritrea (*Regolamento di disciplina per i militari indigeni del Regio Corpo di Truppe Coloniali d'Eritrea*)[46], gave *ascari* the right to bring their families with them during military campaigns. It also specified that new residential areas for *ascari* and their families were to be developed in the cities. These neighbourhoods were called *campi-famiglia* (family

[46] Approved through Ministerial Provision (*Disposizione Ministeriale*) n. 39429 of 20 September 1908.

camps) (Dirar, 2004:543; Mori, 1914a:346). In order to encourage families to live in these new districts, the regulation explicitly emphasised that only families who resided in the camps would benefit from housing allowances. However the families unable to find accommodation in such camps for exceptional reasons would nonetheless be entitled to a monthly 15 lira stipend (Dirar, 2004:543). In the *campi-famiglia*, *ascari* were supposed to build their own house using locally available materials (Vitale, 1960). In general, the works were were supervised by Italians officials. Moreover, the *campi-famiglia* were developed in accordance with the local town plan, which indicated that *ascari* houses needed to be similar to each other, giving the camps a sense of order and uniformity.

Education also played a very significant role in the shaping of the *ascari* as an important component of colonial society. Education was provided free of charge to all *ascari* children. Growing up in the *campi* in constant contact with Italian officials and administrators, they were expected to realise that they were part of a society in which they were called to become prominent participants. In addition to the education of children, ever since the 'liberal' administration, colonial authorities sought to secure the loyalty of Eritrean soldiers by teaching them Italian[47]. Colonial troops underwent a process of 'Italianisation', which proved to be very effective. In order to incentivise *ascari* to learn their rulers' language, the knowledge of Italian was required to obtain promotions (Dirar, 2004; see also Mori 1914a:333). Language was one tool used to win the loyalty of Eritrean troops. The same aim was pursued by several other means, for instance by the possibility which existed for loyal *ascari* to serve in the public administration once they retired from the army; furthermore

[47] This was theorised by General Baratieri, then military governor of Eritrea, as early as 1892. In his view, loyalty was to be created through the teaching of Italian and the free allocation of land (Baratieri 1988: 146; cited in Dirar, 2004).

the salary which ascari received during during military campaigns was undeniably far superior to the average wages of Eritrean workers (Vitale, 1960:101). Moreover, the social status of Eritrean soldiers was reinforced through promotions, given on the basis of military merit and seniority. They received decorations consisting of special medals, gun licences, and honorific titles borrowed from the local military tradition (Vitale 1960:109; see also Dirar 2004:546). As Solomon told me:

Figure 4 - Decoration for the ascari

'Many *ascari* received promotions…a friend of mine, he was older than me, became a *Saleqqa* [a commander of a battalion[48]], after serving for more or less 10 years. He was a very important man among the *ascari*, he was also held in very high esteem by the Italians. […] There was a ceremony, it was very formal. We were all deployed and the group that was to be promoted was at the front. The Governor was there and they were given a medal for their bravery. […] I thought that I wanted to become important as well'.

Unfortunately, Solomon never received any promotion, as the Italians were defeated before he had spent the requisite amount of years as a soldier. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the hope to attain a high social status - in comparison to the other colonial subjects – and the possibility of gaining prestige, also in the eyes of others, was an important factor in Solomon's decision to loyally serve the Italians.

[48] A battalion was composed of 1,000 men.

It seems clear, then, that the colonial administration succeeded in designing an efficient and complex system to include Eritrean soldiers into colonial society. They became the 'ideal' colonial subjects, loyal to the Italians and able to mediate between their rulers and other Eritreans. Through their involvement in the colonial administration, the *ascari* and especially their children were intended to develop a new identity and thereby to help preserve the colonial social organisation. As in Solomon's case, the local fighters openly embraced this new identity, which represented a source of pride, and gave them a higher social status than ordinary Eritreans.

The creation of a body of local troops was useful to Rome in order to defend its territories and to further expand its control over neighbouring regions, and in order to create an elite characterised by a strong sense of belonging to the colonial society. At the same time, however, it also helped to foster a new form of Eritrean identity and thereby to bolster nationalism (Le Huerou, 1999; Taddia, 1986: 263). The massive recruitment of Eritreans in the colonial administration and especially in the army changed their own perception of their ethnic and religious identity. Colonial soldiers were first of all taught to serve under the Italian banner and to be loyal to their armed section. Even though differences in ethnicity and religion were to a certain extent taken into account in the formation of battalions, platoons and divisions, these were often socially and culturally mixed. As Dirar points out, fighting side by side with men from neighbouring territories who had also migrated to the city at least partially smoothened 'localism and ethnic-based antagonisms, and paved the way for the development of a germinal Eritrean nationalist feeling' (2004: 547). Furthermore, these identity differences were relegated to the private sphere, as they were considered less important than the joint participation in the colonial project.

Many Eritrean intellectuals consider the 1930s as the years in which Eritrean identity formation started (Wrong, 2005). Following the line of reasoning presented above, it is possible to argue that this identity appears to be inextricably linked to the Italian colonial experience. The Eritreans' participation in the war under the Italian flag, fighting alongside Italian soldiers, and more generally, their participation in the colonial development project, created the perception of a new and more homogeneous political community. This new identity is deeply rooted in the experience of the *ascari* and their offspring, who tend to maintain and reproduce positive memories of the Italian rule.

> 'I was a soldier. An Italian soldier' says Solomon. 'When the British attacked us I stayed to fight with my companions. Many of us were massacred, but I survived. I was imprisoned for a while but then I managed to escape and I walked to Sudan. I think it took me 17 days to reach Sudan. But after three years I returned to Eritrea, and I was dismissed from the army in 1947'.

In Solomon's case as in many other cases, readjusting to a different lifestyle was very difficult and, in the following years, many *ascari* joined the resistance movement against Ethiopia and played an active role in the Eritrean liberation war. What further reinforced the former *ascari*'s perception of a strong connection to Italy was the Italian government's 1950 decision to grant former *ascari* a monthly pension of 100 Euros (200 Euros for the disabled). Even today, many *ascari* survivors go to the local Italian consulate to collect their pension.

The valuable contribution of the *ascari* sometimes came at a great personal cost. Having this 'sacrifice' recognised also by the Italian authorities – even after the collapse of the Italian Empire – gave the *ascari* and their families a sense of entitlement. And it is not rare to to hear them express feelings of disappointment about the meagre compensation which the colonial troops obtained. This is the case

of Emsegheb, who attended the latest exhibition on the *ascari* at the *Casa degli Italiani*, and who commented in the 'Remarks Book':

> 'This [exhibition] reminds new generations of our grandfathers, our fathers who paid a great price on several fronts in the interest of Italy. To thank them for their bravery, what does the Italian government give us today? What sort of moral or economic help? Young Eritreans ask the Eritrean government, and the white and the black if there is a sufficient price for the construction of the country that does not hinder our progress. We do not want anything else. This exhibition reminds us that we have gone through very difficult times'[49].

2.2 Urban space and language

The years under colonial domination were very difficult for many, and they still remain quite controversial today. As Brahim, a secondary school teacher in Asmara points out,

> 'among Eritreans, especially nationalist Eritreans, the assessment of the colonial times is ambivalent. First of all, they establish a distinction between the first Italians who came to Eritrea…what is known as the 'liberal' period…and the ones that came during the fascist era. Despite the fact that they all came from a humble background, the first wave seemed keener on putting down roots in the country. Therefore, their attitude towards the local population was different. The fascists were harsher; some of them would kick the locals if they didn't get out of their way when they were passing. They were racist, arrogant bullies! But it is true that many of them did not comply with the fascist regulations and that was a problem for the regime…Mussolini really didn't know what else he could do to make them behave accordingly…In the end, many of them did not even return to Italy, they stayed with their local families! Then, there is also another facet to consider. Almost everybody knows that the Italians' legacy has been enormous: by the 1930s we were the most developed African country…we had a rising economy, lots of factories, there was a lot of expenditure on infrastructure, new neighbourhoods were built. Beautiful buildings that still remain. A lot of investments in health and education as well, even later on, in the 1950s, such as the creation of the

[49] From the Italian: "Questo ricorda alle nuove generazioni i nostri nonni, i nostri padri che per l'interesse dell'Italia pagando un prezzo grosso in vari fronti. Grazie a loro e al loro coraggio oggi il Governo d'Italia quale aiuto morale e finanziario ci ha dato? I giovani eritrei chiedono al Governo dell'Eritrea e ai bianchi e ai neri se c'è un prezzo sufficiente per la costruzione del paese che non intralci il nostro progresso, non vogliamo altro. Questa mostra ci ricorda che abbiamo passato momenti difficili".

> University of Asmara[50]. This created employment possibilities and led to a huge migration from the countryside to the cities. I think this is what made it unbearable for Eritreans to regress under Ethiopia, a less developed country. However, the perception still remains – and it is not just a perception – that Eritreans were considered to be second-class citizens. They were not allowed to be educated for more than four years. Italy feared that if Eritreans were too educated they would overthrow their rulers. So better to keep them in chains!'.

Brahim underlines an important aspect of the Eritrean perception of Italy, that is, the fact that positive perceptions of Italy are mostly linked to infrastructural progress and to the Italians' participation in the development of the country. It is possible to argue, then, that those years left their mark, both socially and spacially. Traces of the passage of Italians and of the 'golden' economic years can be found everywhere, there are visible reminders both in the city and in the countryside. Daro Ghunat, Cheren, Dogali, Massawa, and Asmara, all bear the footprint of the colonial adventure and of its cost in terms of human lives, both Eritrean and Italian. Memorials and cemeteries have been left to commemorate that part of Eritrea's history, and to honour those who fell in battle.

[50] The University of Asmara was the first university in Eritrea. It was funded by the Comboni Sisters in 1958, and was at first attended mostly by local Italians. In 2002 the government shut down all undergraduate programs, on the pretext of relocating and re-distributing higher education institutions across the country.

Figure 5 - Italian cemetery in Massawa

Massawa's Italian cemetery, for instance, was built in 1968. It holds the remains of 1,586 Italian soldiers who died between 1885 and 1946. They were buried in several national cemeteries across the country, which were lately abandoned. In its two lateral crypts, this impressive mausoleum also holds the remains of more than 1,120 Italian civilians. Over time, just like Asmara's Italian cemetery, it has become a sort of attraction for tourist and for school pupils, who visit them during history classes. When entering Asmara's cemetery, which is mostly dedicated to civilians, the feeling one is struck by is that 'the Italians were there to stay', as Br Ezio Tonini puts it. The elaborate family chapels are engraved with Italian surnames. Families hired Italian architects to carefully design chapels that would make posterity aware of their high social status. What is very interesting about these monuments is that some of them, such as Daro Ghunat and the Cheren war memorials, built respectively in 1939 and 1941, hold the remains of both Italian soldiers and *ascari* in the same crypt, thereby erasing any differences between them. This choice conveys a powerful

message: ‘War made them equal’, ‘fighting for Italy made them equal’. This is yet another tile in the wider mosaic of Eritrean identity.

Cemeteries are not the only visible relic of the colonial era. Especially in Asmara and Massawa, it is very easy to come across *Art Déco* buildings, such as the cinemas, Roma and Impero, that were built to screen Hollywood movies, and wicht are still in operation. These movie theatres still serve as a gathering point for young people, adults and families, and they are therefore central to the Eritreans’ everyday life and routine.

Figure 6 - Cinema Roma in Asmara.

Figure 7 - Cinema Impero in Asmara.

These are not the only buildings the Italians left behind. In the 1930s, Asmara, dubbed *piglo Roma* (‘*piccola Roma*’ that is ‘small Rome’) by many Eritreans, was a paradise of modernist architecture. Modernist landmarks include the Catholic cathedral, the schools, and there are still shops, such as Bini’s optical shop, that are now run by Eritreans but have kept their old signs and appearance.

It is possible to come across cafés with Italian names, such as the *Bar Lia* in Gherar (Massawa), which still resists modernisation with its bright green and red colours and old Gaggia coffee machine. Other examples ae the *Savoia Hotel* in Massawa or the *Albergo Italia* in Asmara. Many signs are still in Italian and Tigray, and these places’ toponymy is heavily influenced by Italian.

Figure 8 – Bini's Optical Shop in Asmara.

In Asmara, there are still many places whose name comes from Italian. In the city, you can hear people talking about the *Forto*, an Eritrean corruption of '*forte*', which means fortification. Usually, 'most of the villages grown up during colonial times have their own Forto, which, actually was the pivotal structure around which those centres expanded' (Dirar, 2004: 544). As Asmara became the capital city, many fortifications were built around it and they were usually named after the most important Italian commanders in the colony. The *Forto Baldissera*, for example, is still known by this name.

There are many other places in Asmara that have kept a name which reflects their original military function. An example is the district named *Deposito* or *Deposito Invalidi* (the Italian for 'warehouse' and 'warehouse of the disabled'). At the beginning many army warehouses were located in this area, but it later became a residential neighbourhood for disabled veterans. In Asmara there are two

neighbourhoods that were originally inhabited by colonial irregular troops which were employed by the colonial government for police activities (Tracchia 1940: 188; Dirar, 2004: 544). These irregular troops were called '*Bande*' (bands) and gave the name to *Gheza Banda Habasha* (*gheza* means house in Tigray, so the name can be translated as 'House of the Abyssinian Banda'), and to *Gheza Banda Tillian* ('House of the Italian Banda'). As Dirar (2004) points out, this is a very peculiar name as it reflects the transition between colonial irregular troops to Italian troops. Many other areas bear the name of their original consignees: for instance, *Villaggio Azzurro* (Blue Village) was named after the colour of the decorations that were awarded to brave veterans, who were then allowed to live there; *Villaggio Genio* (Village of the Engineers) was the area were the Italian army engineers used to live; Haddish Adi (New Village), was a district allocated to migrants from neighbouring regions who were looking for employment in the colonial army. Some street names, such as 'via Comboni' or 'via Bologna' also reflect this connection to Italy.

If the physical traces of the Italian colonial era are very difficult to ignore, the same goes for the influence that they had on the Eritrean language. Besides toponymy, many other Italian words also entered the Eritrean vocabulary. Even though Italian is now only taught at the Italian school (which is mostly attended by Eritreans) and has widely been replaced by English, it is not rare to hear one person ask another '*Come stai*?' (how are you?), or to hear someone urge a crowd on by saying 'A*ndiamo, andiamo*' (come on, come on). Many Eritreans speak at least a few words of Italian, so when they realise someone comes from there, they try out various Italian expressions such as 'Va bene, dopo' (ok, later) or 'bishkoto?', the Eritrean corruption of 'biscotto?' (biscuit?). Children and teenagers playing football

will cry out '*mano! mano!*' to point out at a hand foul, or scream '*fallo!*' (foul!); finally, one of the preferred greetings is the widespread '*Ciao'*.

Figure 9- Sewers in Asmara.

Interestingly, above and beyond these everyday words, many others are the result of Eritrean participation in the colonial administration. As it was pointed out earlier in this chapter, both under the so-called 'liberal' administration (from the 1890s to the early 1920s) and under the fascist administration (from the 1920s to 1941), the colony underwent a process of expansion and of infrastructural modernization. This process mostly relied on a workforce made up of Italian migrants – some of them temporary – but also, very importantly, of Eritrean labourers.

The Italian colonial adventure in Eritrea nourished hopes of finding employment both among unemployed Italians in Italy and among the numerous Italian immigrants who had already settled in other African countries (Bellucci, 2014:

296). However, the influx of Italians into the colony was never regular. During the liberal period, the colonial government delegated the recruitment of workers to various contracting firms (and their intermediaries). In general, these companies preferred to hire Eritreans, as they were considerably cheaper to employ than Italian workers. However, when it came to the mechanical sector or to agricultural work that required higher specialization, contracting firms preferred to hire skilled Italians[51]. This indirectly influenced the migratory flow from Italy to Eritrea, as low-skilled Italians who came to the colonies had to compete with Eritreans and often found themselves unemployed. Thus the numbers of Italian workers in Eritrea remained quite low, and the majority of those living there where highly skilled.

As I mentioned earlier, the fascist model of colonialism saw the AOI as a place to transfer all of the home country's labour surplus, including its national workforce. This of course boosted the presence of Italians in the colony: from March to June 1935, 22,783 national workers came to Eritrea; in February 1936, this increased to 43,378 workers who were there to pave the way for the conquest of an Italian empire (Battaglini, 1938: 42, 216; Bellucci, 2014: 301). These are also the years in which the process of infrastructural modernisation gained momentum, as thousands of Eritrean workers found employment in the construction sector under the supervision of Italian engineers and surveyors. Of course, Italians did not understand construction in the same way as Eritreans. For instance, the typical Eritrean dwelling of the time was the *tucul*[52], a circular shed, usually made of clay, topped with a conical straw roof. It consisted in a single room that was used for cooking, eating, and sleeping. Although the first Italians in the colony, such as the Casciani, adopted this

[51] This was partly due to the fact that the colonial army had already recruited most of the skilled Eritreans..

[52] Also called *aguᵕŭdò* in the Tigray language and *bi̯ē´t* (house) in the Amaric language.

type of housing, a strategic building plan was eventually developed, in particular in the cities. Many houses, especially in the Italian neighbourhood, were built according to the Italian 'standard', and consisted of several rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.

Furthermore, construction techniques were also very different, as Italians employed specific tools and procedures that were unknown to the Eritreans. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Eritrean Tigray language slowly absorbed Italian terminology linked to the construction industry and, in general, to the technical and administrative fields which were first developed by Italians overseeing the work of locals[53]. Even today, it is very easy to hear local workers in Asmara call a window '*feshtra*' (corruption of '*finestra*'), or a toilet '*bagno*', a pickaxe '*bicone'* (corruption of '*piccone'*), etc.

Clearly, Italian colonialism left a lasting mark on space and culture in Eritrea, which is still very visible. This is mostly due to the intrinsic characteristics of Italian colonialism in Eritrea; the small African country was essentially seen as an Italian outpost, an 'Italy overseas' (Bellucci 2014: 301).

2.3 The Eritrean regime's public discourse

Since the end of the Italian domination, Eritrea has experienced different trials, from English rule to its annexation by Ethiopia, from the resistance fight against the Derg to its declaration of independence in 1993, followed by territorial conflicts that led to yet another war against Ethiopia in 1998. Decades of armed conflict, followed by a dictatorial regime – also based on militarisation of the masses – refashioned Eritrean identity and consolidated the foundational role played the

[53] In the colonial administration a variety of positions were available to local Eritreans, ranging from interpreter, telephone and telegraph operator, to administrative clerk; many, were reserved for colonial subjects (see also Dirar, 2004).

struggle for independence. According to the narrative of Isaias Afewerki's regime, the war for independence was a war against colonialism – not Italian or British colonialism, but Ethiopian colonialism. As one of the regime's representatives (a businessman I met in Rome) pointed out during our interview,

> 'the issue is that in 1962, when Ethiopia occupied Eritrea, we were economically advanced while they were very backwards. Have you ever seen a colony that is more developed that the colonising country? We had foreign investment, infrastructure…yes, the English dismantled most of it but we could still run everything better than the Ethiopians. We were more qualified. Instead, the United Nations let backward Ethiopians treat us as a colony!'.

Quite strikingly, and contrary to what one would expect, the regime's discourse presents the Italian colonial period in a positive light, as a time during which Eritrea underwent a process of infrastructural modernisation and economic growth, as I described earlier. However, the relation with Italy is also conflictual. If, on the one hand, the colonial inheritance is evaluated positively, on the other hand, it also gave Eritreans a sense of entitlement. Therefore, Italy's disengagement from Eritrea, due to adverse political and economic circumstances, is harshly criticised. The regime's representative frankly underlined that 'Italy doesn't do enough for Eritrea'. When asked why he believes Italy should do more in Eritrea, he replied:

> 'because we have a relationship that dates back to over a century. We are a former colony, so Italy should endorse us. You also have to remember that we gave a contribution to Italy during the wars. Our fighters fought with your country's soldiers against Ethiopians and also against the British. We lost many men'.

This discontent about Italy's 'absence' has been expressed by President Afewerki himself on several public occasions; he has stated that 'Italy's policy in the region serves Ethiopian interests against Eritrea's own'[54].

[54] This was reported by several Italian diplomats in Asmara and echoed in local newspapers.

According to Cristoforo, a 65-year-old Italian man who was born in Asmara to Italian parents, but who returned to Italy during the Ethiopia-Eritrea war, the turning point of the relationship between Eritrea and Italy is August 1975:

> 'On January 28, 1975, Asmara fell to the Ethiopians. The 1970s were very difficult years in general: various Eritrean liberation movements – the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Liberation Front for the Eritrean People (LFEP) – were fighting against the Ethiopians, but they were also fighting against each other because they had different political agendas[55] so, in the end, they were weak. When Asmara fell, Italy organised the evacuation of the Italians from Eritrea by airlift. At that point, there were only five or six thousand Italians left in the country. […] It was crazy; there were a lot of killings, a lot of violence going on in the streets. And Ethiopia delayed the airlift because it wanted it to land in Addis Ababa first, in order to use it to carry more soldiers to Eritrea. They [the Ethiopian government] did not want the plane to land directly in Asmara. At that point the outskirt of the city were almost deserted. There were no Italians left in *Villaggio 78* or in *Gheza Banda*. Asmara was bombarded. At the end, we managed to leave the country, but many of us had nothing to return to in Italy, so many wanted to wait for the situation to calm down in order to go back to Eritrea. However in August the Ethiopian government declared the nationalisation of all economic assets, including all properties belonging to foreigners, that is, in Eritrea's case, to Italians. In the end, there was nothing left to go back to'.

As Cristoforo's testimony points out, in 1975 Italians lost their properties and were forced to disengage from economic activity in Eritrea. The country's instability and its difficult political situation never made it possible for many of the Italians who had left to come back, nor for the Italian government to step up its investments. Even as I write, many Italians who wanted to return after Eritrea's independence still have not had their property rights restored. According to members of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation,

[55] The ELF and the LFEP were divided due to ethnicity and political agenda. In fact, the ELF gathered in its ranks mostly Muslims from the lowlands, whereas LFEP's members (especially at the beginning) were from the Tigray region in the plateau and had a marxist ideology.

even the Italian Cooperation Services find it difficult to work in Eritrea[56], mostly due to the dictatorial regime's ambivalent attitude.

The regime's complicated relationship to Italy has been made explicit by policies implemented in the last decade, which have targeted Italian properties.

'The *Villa Melotti* [in Massawa] was the most beautiful villa in the country. You should have seen its white arches on the beach!" recounts Pippo, enraptured by the memory of the *Villa Melotti,* also known as *La Cyprea*. Eritrea's most famous beachfront villa, it was commissioned in the 1960s by Emma Melotti, the widow of an Italian businessman who had started various companies in Eritrea in the 1940s – including the local beer factory. The architect was the famous Luigi Vietti. In Pippo's words:

> 'Back then [the 1950s and 1960s], all of Italian-Eritrean polite society passed through Luigi Vietti's study. He was very popular among the Italian upper class, and also here; having him build your house demonstrated your high social status. The Melotti family was a very important one and, after WWII, they were in favour of Eritrea's independence, which they thought should take place under an Italian protectorate. But things didn't go that way. Mr. Lucio [Emma's husband] died in 1946 and Mrs. Emma took charge of the family business. She also helped rebel Eritrean independence fighters. When the Ehiopians took Massawa, she opened her house to the Eritreans who were fleeing from Ethiopian bombardments. Afterwards, the rebels saved her and brought her to Sudan, publicly acknowledging her support for their cause. It is undeniable that the Melotti family is tightly linked to the history of Eritrea! Yet Afewerki's government – and note that Afewerki himself was a guest at the villa in the 1990s – decided it wanted to expropriate the villa! Some say he wanted to keep it for himself, but that someone eventually told him that it wouldn't have looked great considering the living conditions of the rest of the population. Others say he wanted to turn it into a resort. I don't know. The only thing I know is that he sent in his bulldozers and razed it to the ground in 2006'.

According to Italian diplomats present in Asmara in 2006, the regime had promised a

[56] The Italian Cooperation Services had been operating in the country until 2004-5, and have resumed some projects in the past few years.

> 'ridiculously low sum as compensation for the expropriation. There was no agreement with the family, who sought help from us. When the Ambassador decided to send the First Secretary of the delegation [Ludovico Serra] to check on the state of the villa, he was arrested without any notice to the embassy, detained at the Massawa naval base for two days, and his car with its diplomatic plaque was confiscated, and finally he was expelled from the country' (interview material).

This case garnered a lot of attention in local and international newspapers, who also recalled the expulsion of Ambassador Antonio Bandini in 2001 – the first case of an Italian Ambassador being expelled from a country since the end of WWII. The alleged reason given for his expulsion was his interference in Eritrean internal affairs, the Ambassador having intervened on behalf of the European Union to defend the case of eleven MPs arrested by the Eritrean regime.

Italian diplomats in Eritrea are not the only ones targeted by Afewerki's ambiguous policies. In his public speeches or in interviews in local papers – such as *Haddas Eritrea*, a daily newspaper in the Tigray language, or the *Eritrea Profile* in English – Afewerki argues that Italy should be more engaged in Eritrea, yet at the same time the President seems clearly hostile to the staff of the Italian school in Asmara. As Giuliana, an Italian teacher in the school points out:

> 'our school consists of a kindergarten – which is private however – and of an elementary school, a middle school and a high school. In high school, students can choose among different curricula, like science, the humanities, and others which are more oriented towards building technical-professional profiles. I think that in total we have about 1,500 students, but the majority are Eritreans or Eritrean-Italian dual citizens. […] The government barely tolerates us. Many times trivial issues have sparked controversies, like when the government tried to prevent Italian teachers from coming to teach here, by claiming that we Italians carry diseases'.

It is clear that in a country where education is strictly controlled by the regime, the presence of schools that the government cannot completely control is considered a problem. As it is, the Italian school is the only place where Italian is taught to

students, and where curricula include subjects such as Italian history, geography and literature, which help new generations to acquire a positive perception of Italy, despite the reigning public discourse.

2.4 Perceptions of Italy among the younger generation

> 'If I were to leave the country, I would go to Italy. In fact, I often think I want to leave Asmara and go abroad after finishing high school. I really don't want to serve forever in the army and to be stuck in this country!'

So tells me Demsas, a middle-class sixteen-year-old student at the Italian school in Asmara. As soon as I arrived at the school, he volunteered to talk to me about how he envisioned his future and what his opinions were about Italy.

> 'I want to study to become a doctor. A surgeon, you know? Like the ones you see in the movies. They actually save people's lives. But I am not sure whether I will be able to do that.' Demsas sighs sadly.

Whether Demsas will be able to get into medical school or not will depend on what the government decides about the grade he will get in the national examination at the end of high school. In the worst case scenario, his parents might have to bribe an influential person in order to save him from being conscripted.

> 'I would like to go to Europe, to Italy. First of all because I learnt Italian at school. Secondly, because I feel close to Italy. I think Italy and Eritrea have a special relationship. Plus, if Rome looks like Asmara I won't feel like a stranger'.

Demsas's statement is very significant, as it highlights, very concisely, three important elements regarding the choice of a potential destination country: i) the importance of mastering the language of the intended country of destination; ii) the perception of a special relationship with the destination country; iii) the importance of visual cues when it comes to perceiving *proximity* to a certain country. Of course,

as Demsas was just playing with the idea of leaving the country, and not making an actual plan, he did not take into account other important elements that would shape his journey, such as the paths used by smuggling networks (this issue will be addressed in the following chapter). Almost all the Eritreans I interviewed mentioned a combination of these factors as being relevant when they compared various possible countries of destination. However, as we will see later in this thesis, only a few of them ended up going exactly where they intended, as their journey was constrained by other factors.

Despite the fact that Italian is not widely spoken anymore in Eritrea, and that English has become the dominant language in education, large numbers of Eritreans still believe there exists a special relationship between Italy and Eritrea. As a matter of fact, signs of the presence of the Italians permeate the entire environment. As Gabriel, an Eritrean asylum seeker in Rome explained with disappointment,

> 'I really believed that we [the Eritreans] would be welcomed here and treated well because we were a former colony. I thought there was a sort of privileged path for us to stay, in comparison with other migrants. You can *see* in Eritrea that it is true that we have a special relationship to Italy, for instance if you look at the city or if you listen to many of our grandparents'.

Gabriel's account especially points out the importance of visual cues and of oral memories as evidence of the existence of such a special relationship. As I already explained, it is also reinforced by a public discourse that feeds their sense of abandonment.

Visual cues of the former Italian colonial domination are especially prevalent in the cities. Italian architecture, toponymy and its general influence on the urban space strongly impact people who live there or who frequently go to the city,

creating and reproducing perceptions of an *affinity* between the two countries. This is also reflected in the words used by the Eritreans I interviewed to describe their relation to Italy: most of the expressions they used fell within the visual domain. As one example among many, Selam, a twenty-four-year-old female Eritrean refugee living in Rome told me:

> 'you could see traces of the Italians everywhere in the city. You know, Asmara looks like a small Rome. Even the signs are in Italian!'.

Modernist architecture gives many Eritreans a misleading impression of *grandeur*, of economic wellness, which does not correspond to the current economic situation in Italy and to its high level of unemployment. This misperception is confirmed by several migrants. As Yrgalem, a twenty-year-old asylum seeker in Rome, puts it;

> 'I stopped calling home because I did not want to tell my family that I am unemployed and that it is very difficult here. Many of us call home but say that everything is fine, that everything here is great. They lie because they cannot tell the truth. But then they are desperate because they cannot either send any money to their families'.

In rural villages, perceptions are mostly reproduced by listening to older people's oral accounts. Many of them are former *ascari* or were employed as construction workers by the colonial administration. Others were born during the fascist era and try to transmit the memories of those times to younger relatives. Their accounts are thus transmitted from one generation to the next. Oral memories, however, are more than a mere narration of events. Language, whether in speech or in written form, has numerous communicative functions, including an emotive function that expresses subjective states (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 1999). They give information about the context and the setting where events or actions took

place, but they also have an intimate dimension; they convey an individual's interpretation of reality. Certain events acquire a subjective meaning reflecting the way a person understood a certain event. It is clear that the cognitive dimension (the understanding of reality) has an emotional dimension attached to it (how the person felt about it). These dimensions are not separate but interact with each other. For instance, the way one understands reality is mediated by the emotions it generates; at the same time, a certain understanding of reality can generate further emotions. Oral testimonies are laced with emotion[57] which is transmitted during the narration and which influences the listener's perception. It is possible to argue, then, that the younger generations who do not have any direct memory or experience of the colonial period (or of Italians in general) are nevertheless influenced by the perceptions of their elders, which thereby shape the collective imagination about Italy. As Woldu, a nineteen-year-old asylum seeker from a village close to Barentu told me:

> 'my grandfather used to tell me and my friends about the time when he served in the colonial troops, how he was well regarded, how and the Italians contributed to the fight against Ethiopia. He told me about the origin of some traditions, such as *pasta*[58], and explained that the Italians are good people. So I guess I was happy to come to Italy, even though I first tried to go to Switzerland because a friend of mine was already there. I really hoped it would be easy for me in Italy. I thought I could find a job and live in tall palace'.

Whether conveyed orally or visually, or both orally *and* visually, perceptions of Italy are in most cases shaped by hope, which is also fuelled by a sense of entitlement based on the common notion that there exists a special relation between Italy and Eritrea. What is important to point out is that Italian colonialism deeply influenced

[57] Emotions can be expressed through verbal markers. As Jean-Pierre Reed points out 'hope, anger, fear, and a variety of other emotions can be ascertained through an individual's verbal behaviour' (2004: 663).
[58] *Pasta* has become part of Eritrean cooking habits as a replacement for *injera*, the Eritrean and Ethiopian flat bread, partly due to the difficulty of finding the necessary taf flour during the Eritrea-Ethiopia wars.

the relationship between Eritrea and Italy and the way that this relationship is understood in both countries. Whereas Eritreans still feel that there exists a special relationship between both countries (which influences the expectations thay have about Rome), this is not true of Italy. As the beginning of this chapter shows, the colonial venture never enjoyed the unanimous support of the Italian population. Even the political elite had divergent positions about it. Furthermore, the Italians' perceptions of colonialism in the Horn of Africa is linked to their attitude to the fascist regime. As Francesco Perfetti, a specialist of contemporary history at the LUISS University in Rome, expresses it:

> 'in Italy there is still no common memory about that period. People and politicians tend to sweep it under the carpet. This concerns all the aspects related to that specific historical time, and especially colonialism, since it became Mussolini's hobbyhorse. It should not come as a surprise, then, if colonialism does not mean anything to most of us'.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, the disjunction between the way many Eritreans and many Italians perceive the relationship between the two countries has a severe impact on the Eritreans' experience of the asylum process, and thereby on their perception of Italy.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM THE STRUGGLE TO POSTWAR ERITREA: THE FAILED REVOLUTION

'So, you are interested in Eritrea, right?' Aklilu asks me. He is a twenty-seven-year-old Eritrean refugee who arrived in Italy in 2013, after fleeing from Eritrea in 2007, aged 21. He is one year younger than me, but he looks much older. Something in his appearance tells me that he had to enter adulthood very painfully and too soon. A wounded soul also leaves marks on the body.

> 'You have to write that our revolution has been betrayed by the same people who first wanted to achieve independence and to build a new country. […] Our history is a history of fighting. If you ask my generation, they can't recall any moment when we were in peace. I can't. But we hoped that conflict would stop at some point, that we could start to live our lives. This never happened.' he says.

Conflict has indeed been Eritrea's modern and contemporary *leitmotif*, and, with the colonial experience, it has influenced the development of Eritrean society and Eritrean identity. As many other African countries, caught between global pressures and national agendas, today's Eritrea is very much the product of its colonial period, of the strife that followed its decolonization, and of its conflictual relationship with its neighbour Ethiopia. As Tricia Redeker Hepner and David O'Kane put it, 'from Italian colonialism, British occupation, and ill-fated federation with Ethiopia, to sovereign statehood in 1993 following three decades of war, the true liberation of Eritrea may still

remain elusive fourteen years later' (2011: xviii). If the seeds of national identity were planted during the colonial period, it is during the thirty-year liberation struggle that a sense of belonging to Eritrea as a nation developed, modifying social relations and, very importantly, creating a new bond between the individual and the state.

This chapter gives an account of the liberation movement and its later incarnations, which are key to understanding the paradoxes that characterise contemporary Eritrea and the *milieu* in which the young Eritreans who flee the country have been socialized.

1. POST-COLONIAL ERITREA, THE STRUGGLE, AND THE CIVIL WAR

After World War II, Eritrea passed under British military administration pending the Allies' decision about the future of the small African country. Although the ten-year British Military Administration (1941-1952) of Eritrea is not the focus of this dissertation, it is important to note that those whom I interviewed considered this short interlude to be very controversial. Although it is true that British rule did not impede the development of modern socio-political institutions such as syndicates and political parties (Redeker Hepner and O'Kane, 2001: viii) – which had already emerged during the Italian colonial period[59] – many Eritreans nevertheless vividly remember that the new administrators dismantled and gave away most of the industrial infrastructure which had been built in the previous decades.

[59] The Italian intervention in Eritrea recived the support of a secret society, the *Comitato Assistenza Eritrei* (CAE), which received both its funding and its directives from the Minister of Italian Africa. From 1948 to 1950 the CAE funded, created and supported political parties in Eritrea and tried to build up a free press. The aim of this operation was that to maintain the privileged position of the Italian community residing in Eritrea (estimated at around 25,000). The Italian government believed that the division of Eritrea or its annexation to Ethiopia would be detrimental to the interests of the Italian community. Although ultimately Italy did not attain the result it was seeking, its work in favour of independent political organisations benefited the Eritrean independence movements (Negash, 2004).

At that time, Eritrea was a pawn in a larger game between superpowers (the USSR and the USA), who were trying to redraw their international spheres of influence. As a matter of fact, different actors spoke out about Eritrea: the USSR, confident in the communists' victory in the Italian after-war polls, was first in favour of returning Eritrea to Italian rule. The British instead suggested that Eritrea be divided along religious lines and annexed to Sudan and Ethiopia. Ethiopia wanted to annex Eritrea and the Italian Somaliland; some Arab states were in favour of Eritrea's independence, and supported the Independence Bloc of Eritrean parties who constantly petitioned the UN General Assembly that a referendum be held to determine the future of the country (Sabbatucci and Vidotto, 2002).

Finally, in December 1950, during its fifth session, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 390(a-V), indicated that Eritrea would be federated with Ethiopia under the rule of the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie I[60]. Elections were held in electoral colleges in 1952, which led to the appointment of a multi-party Eritrean Assembly that adopted a UN-drafted Eritrean constitution (Mekonnen and Tronvoll, 2014: 24). This constitution also incorporated Human Rights: for the first time it was officially stated that Eritreans had rights on which ruling authorities could not impinge. The Eritrean Assembly passed laws which applied to Eritrean citizens, and which aimed to create a balance between ethnic and religious groups[61]. The federal ties were supposed to be very loose, Eritrea was to have its own flag, and its own administrative and judicial structures, as well as control over its domestic affairs, including police, local administration, and taxation (Habte Selassie, 1989). However, the Ethiopian regime had quite a different interpretation of the resolution and soon started crushing any sort of

[60] Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. Ethiopia ratified the UN Resolution in 1952.

[61] For instance, Tigrinya and Arabic were established as the official languages of Eritrea; local communities were allowed to choose the language in which their children would be educated; Christians and Muslims were ensured equal participation.

movement or institution that could be considered separatist, such as syndicates (officially banned in 1958), student movements, and parties (officially banned in 1955). At that time, the Ethiopian government had allies in the Eritrean Assembly – the so-called Unionists – who worked with the imperial rulers to crush independent Eritrean organizations. This policy culminated with the imposition of Ethiopian law in 1959[62] – in violation of the Eritrean constitution – and with the abolition of the Federation, voted unanimously by the Ethiopian Parliament and the Eritrean Assembly in 1962 (Andebrhan, 2014). Ultimately, the Ethiopian government also turned against its Eritrean allies, and intervened on a massive scale in the day-to-day running of the 'Eritrean Administration', causing disputes between the two capitals.

The annexation to Ethiopia was a serious blow to the aspirations of a large proportion of Eritreans, as many – especially urbanites – considered Ethiopia to be a backward country compared to the level of development already reached by the small country on the Red Sea. During these years, many Eritrean intellectuals, students and professionals, who had been forced into exile, tried to organise a resistance movement against the imperial government. In 1958, a general strike was organised by a movement of workers and intellectuals with broad popular support, but it was immediately crushed by Haile Selassie (Killion 1997). As many have argued, the repression of the popular resistance movement led to a new form of militant resistance dominated by more conservative groups (Treiber 2007a; Treiber 2007b). These were the early days of a debate that would gain momentum in the following decades, eventually leading to the affirmation of an Eritrean national identity. As Amal, an Eritrean PhD student in African History at *La Sapienza* (Rome) points out,

[62] For instance, Tigrinya was banned as an official language and replaced by Amharic, the official Ethiopian language.

> 'during the 1950s the feeling that we wanted to be an independent country grew stronger among the intellectual elite. The end of the British Protectorate was seen as the chance to finally have an independent country ruled by Eritreans.'

The 1960 creation, in Cairo, of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) led by the émigré Idris Muhammad Adam[63] (a leading political figure in Eritrea in the 1940s) and the 1961 establishment of its armed wing, the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA), led by Idris Hamid Awate[64], represented the first step in the 1961 war for independence, also known as *Gedli* (the long war) or 'the Struggle'.

There were different currents within the Eritrean independence movement, informed by different agendas and different understandings of Eritrea's political future, and they ultimately resulted in the social fractures that still persist to this day in Eritrean society. At its beginning, the armed rebellion had a conservative Muslim leadership based outside the country[65], mainly composed of Eritreans from the pastoralist western lowlands and from the eastern coastal areas, who accused Christians from the highlands of supporting the imperial government. According to Birhane, an old Eritrean intellectual who was educated in Cairo, who participated in the long war in its early days and who moved to Rome in the 1980s,

> 'the ELF was ruled by tribal leaders that wanted to end Ethiopian rule but who did not care about transforming society and creating a nation. I joined the movement in 1967, because I was fed up and wanted to do something about the situation we were in. I only realised that the movement was that closed when I started being viewed suspiciously because I was a Christian. I did not expect ethnicity and religion to be so important for the ELF! They were also wary of people talking about the importance of nationalist discourses…of course they wanted to establish an independent country, but they also wanted to maintain divisions along ethnic boundaries so that each tribal leader could rule his territory as a warlord'.

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[63] A leading Muslim political figure in 1940s Eritrea.
[64] He was born in 1910, died in 1962 and is considered to be the 'Father of Eritrea'..
[65] Due to the worsening of the economic conjuncture in Eritrea following the end of WW2, many Eritreans migrated to neighbouring countries, such as Sudan and Ethiopia, or to North Africa and the Middle East.

Birhane's argument is supported by several historical and socio-political studies about the liberation war. There is a consensus about the fact that ELF leaders had a powerful vested interest in preventing initiatives meant to promote social transformation and to further a nationalist agenda (Connell, 2001: 346). This was also reflected in the ELF's methods and strategy, which were inspired by the Algerian National Liberation Front (Redecker Hepner and O'Kane, 2001: xix; Connell, 2001: 348) and in the way the Eritrean Front was organised, being separated into four independent geographical and clan-based sections, which were essentially fiefdoms dominated by local warlords who cooperated, but did not act as a national army (Connell, 2001: 348). This reinforced sectarianism. These divisions soon became five, as a new one was formed in the Hamasien highlands, mostly composed of Tigrinya-speaking Christians. By the mid-1960s, many Christians had joined the ranks of the ELF, creating a problem for the leadership. As Birhane points out, showing me a big E cut into his upper arm when he pledged allegiance to the ELF and still visible despite his age:

> 'There were different trends within the ELF, there were the conservatives and the leftists. But among the leftists there were also different political lines. This led to several splits in the group, much to the detriment of our effectiveness on the field'.

These tensions were heightened by several factors. First of all, the Struggle against the imperial government was joined, at an early stage, by many young and not-so-young individuals who came into contact with leftist nationalist ideas while studying in Arab countries, where, at that time, nationalist discourses were being developed and were taking root. Even on the Eritrean and Ethiopian campuses, stories about resistance movements and liberation experiences in other African countries circulated widely. Secondly, many of the first soldiers of the ELF came from communist Sudan and many others were sent abroad on training programs to Syria, Cuba and China, and came back

ideologically charged. In particular, the support given by China[66], not only in terms of funding and arms but also in ideological terms, accelerated the splits and infighting that would follow. Thirdly, a powerful offensive launched by the imperial government threw the Eritrean front into further confusion, and definitely undermined its efficiency in defending the territory it controlled. As a result, to borrow Connell words, the 'opposition coalesced around three issues: unifying the fighters, bringing the leadership inside, and guaranteeing the human rights of the civilian population, whose only role to that point was collecting money and supplying food to the fighters" (2001: 350).

Several cases of internal splintering occurred since the end of the 1960s, the most important one leading to the formation of three main new groups, namely the People's Liberation Forces 1 (PLF1) based in Aden (South Yemen), where leftist radical ideas and organisations were flourishing, the People's Liberation Forces 2 (PLF2) based in the Ala Valley (south of Asmara)[67], and the Eritrean Liberation Forces. These groups would eventually merge and give birth to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1970 (Connell, 2001; Redecker Hepner and O'Kane, 2001; Sabatucci and Vidotto, 2002). Very importantly, this new group established a secret Marxist party, the People's Party (PP) that was meant to lead the Front ideologically during the fight against the Ethiopians. The PP was in charge of transforming the EPLF into a political and social force able to promote new values and to develop a new national identity that would overcome sectarian and tribal divisions; its task was to work for the creation of a modern Eritrean society. This transformative revolutionary project was pursued through a pragmatic approach typical of the Maoist interpretation of Marxism. The idea of 'modernity' as a driver for revolution can be traced back to the Italian legacy and in particular to the 1930s, when Eritrea was seen as a blank canvas for modernist

[66] Ethiopia was instead supported by the USSR.
[67] This group was led by the current President of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki.

architects, artists and developers. The best expression of this trend is Afewerki's idea of the importance of permanent revolution to promote collective development.

> 'The party was created to reduce infighting. In 1973 a wing of the 'Ala group' [PLF2] was trying to speed up the unification with other groups. It was taking too long and that was undermining the military resistance against the Ethiopian regime. At that point, the EPLF was also fighting against the ELF. There were several factions in the PLF that remained loyal to the ELF and this increased the need to establish a clear leadership with a program' Birhane argues.

It is at this stage that the fear of internecine fighting and betrayals became internalised by the movement, triggering a desire to fully control the group and, later on, the entire population. This was also hieghtened by the international isolation of the EPLF movement that did not receive enough external support. To put it bluntly, using Birhane's words, 'nobody cared'. The EPLF could rely only on itself, which led to the development of the notion of 'self-reliance' as a pillar of the liberation struggle and of national identity.

Meanwhile, on the Ethiopian side, the emperor was ousted by a military coup in 1974 that put the Derg – a communist military junta – in command. Haile Mariam Mengistu, a prominent officer in the Derg, was appointed as its chairman; this marked the beginning of another truly dictatorial regime, which soon alienated other leftist movements, such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP)[68], which began to closely collaborate with the EPLF. After assuming power, the Derg pursued a military campaign against rebellious ethnic groups and the political opposition. The latter organised itself into a coalition – the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). An alliance with

[68] Established in 1972.

the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was also made possible, for the Derg represented a common enemy.

The fight against the Soviet-backed Derg could, at the ideological level, threaten the internal coherence of the movement, which adopted (at least formally) a Marxist ideology. This dilemma was solved by adopting pragmatism as an ideological position (see also Redecker, Hepner and O'Kane, 2001; Pateman, 1998). Although the movement presented itself as fundamentally anti-colonialist, it founded its rhetoric on notions of modernity and *avant-garde* that were typical of Italian Fascism. It also aligned itself with Arab nationalism but was critical of Islamic conservatism. It coped with these ideological contradictions by creating a narrative based on key ideological concepts which were selected pragmatically according to the needs of the moment. In the case of the fight against the Derg, more emphasis was put on the idea of self-reliance and on nationalist discourse.

By 1977 the ELF and the EPLF controlled almost all of Eritrea, except a few major cities (Pool, 1993). But a USSR-backed Ethiopian offensive in 1978 pushed back the two fronts, mobilising the peasant youth (Pool, 1993). By 1981 the infighting between ELF and EPLF was so strong that the former was driven out of the country, and many of its members scattered, joining the Eritrean diaspora, which was already numerous. The Ethiopian campaigns in 1982 and 1983, and the famine that broke out in 1984 put a strain on the EPLF and on its humanitarian branch, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), which was carrying out a cross-border relief operation with almost no external support.

By the second half of the 1980s, the EPLF had been swelled by an increasing number of fighters who joined its ranks. This meant that running the PP secretly was becoming more and more difficult, especially considering the geographical expansion of

the Front (Connell, 2001). Therefore a new shift occurred within the EPLF, which renamed the PP the Eritrean Socialist Party (ESP) and which adopted a more democratic *modus operandi*. The idea was that the party should engage the masses, who would cooperate in shaping the National Democratic Program, which would lay out guidelines about issues ranging from the running of the Front, to land reform and education. The program was put forward during the Second Congress in 1987.

Finally deprived of USSR support, the Derg was defeated in 1991(Gilkes 1993), and the Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation fronts became political points of reference for how to establish new governments through the reorganisation of the state and of the military (Campbell 2009). On the Eritrean side, as the need for a military organisation diminished following the Ethiopian regime's defeat, resources were shifted in order to transform the EPLF into a real mass political movement, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ); this was decided at its third congress in 1994 (Connell, 2001: 361). According to Birhane,

> 'it was a nationalist umbrella group, more worried about nationalism and development now. But there was also a generational shift, as many of the early high-ranking fighters were not included into the political and administrative hierarchy, whereas fighters that joined in the second decade of the struggle were given prominent positions' (see also Connell, 2001).

This sealed the merging of the ESP into the EPLF.

As the EPRDF and the EPLF had fought on the same side of the barricade, a set of agreements between the two were concluded that foreshadowed Eritrean independence in 1993 (Brietzke 1995). The Eritrean leadership was aware not only that the Ethiopian transitional government would not oppose independence, but that the international community was also in favour of it for three main reasons. First the fact that during the 1984 famine, the ERA had already collaborated with several Western

governments, and therefore the relationship between the latter and the EPLF was already established and had the support of public opinion in the West. Secondly, in the aforementioned 1987 National Democratic Program, the EPLF had radically changed its Marxist language and orientation to a more nationalistic discourse which recognised (on paper at least) the importance of establishing a multi-party system, and of attracting foreign investors in order to speed up the country's reconstruction (by limiting state intervention to a regulation role). Thirdly, its self-reliant and pragmatic approach made it a reliable partner for Western countries. Therefore, when it came to setting the date of the referendum for independence, it was clear that rushing it could have had a huge backlash in terms of the resurgence of a nationalist sentiment among Ethiopians, in which case resources would have had to be reallocated to pay for military expenditure rather than to development programs. Furthermore, the size of the Eritrean community in Ethiopia was another element that played an important role in balancing the transition towards independence. In particular, among the Eritrean *emigrés* in Ethiopia there were a considerable number of committed nationalists (engineers, skilled workers, teachers, administrators, etc.) who organised support networks, collected funds and passed on information to the Eritrean fronts (Pool, 1993: 393). As it was, holding the referendum was viewed as crucial to international legitimacy (Pool, 1993: 393).

The referendum was ultimately held in 1993 under UN supervision and was widely supported by the diaspora community: this is also important, as it allows us to at least approximately assess the number of Eritrean refugees.[69] On 23-25 April 1993, the overwhelming majority of Eritreans voted for independence. On 21 May, Isaias

[69] Until then, no statistics were available on Eritreans abroad as they were registered as Ethiopian upon their arrival in European countries. According to the data, a total of 84,370 votes were cast by Eritreans outside Eritrea (Referendum Commission of Eritrea 1993) (al-Ali et al. 2001).

Afewerki, the secretary-general of the EPLF, was made president of a transitional government, and on May 24 he proclaimed Eritrea officially independent.

As a new African state, Eritrea was granted membership in the UN and in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and received the support of the international community, which empowered its authority over its territory and citizens (Woldemikael 2013). However, after achieving international recognition, the first Eritrean independence act was to deport 130,000 non-Eritreans (i.e. people accused of complicity with the Ethiopian administration, including the Eritrean children and wives of Ethiopian soldiers); this was a tangible proof that the climate of suspicion remained deeply embedded in the new Eritrean government and society.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE INDEPENDENCE WAR AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

The liberation war was pivotal in different ways as it contributed strongly to the development of specific characteristics that were associated with 'Eritreanness' in nationalist discourse; it also led to the emergence of large diasporic movements which helped to make Eritrea a 'transnational state'. Many other arguments can also be made about the importance of the liberation war for the formation of national identity.

One hotly debated issue among scholars is how to determine what support the independence war enjoyed among urban and rural Eritreans respectively. Settling the question of whether the 'revolution' did or did not occur from below is of paramount importance to understand the identity formation of Eritreans. In general, the ELF and the EPLF (now the PFDJ) have constantly reinforced the idea that the independence struggle expressed the desire of Eritrean people for self-determination and for the right to live in a free Eritrea (Mahrt, 2011). This idea is repeated endlessly and it is

emphasized by top-down, demonstrative displays of nationalism, such as parades during the celebration of Independence (24 May). Among scholars (see for instance Pool, 1993; Connell, 2001; Pateman 1998) there is a widely shared assumption that this support was based on an understanding which existed between the liberation movements and the population about the cause which the movements were fighting for. This argument, however, does not appear to be completely consistent with historical accounts about the formation of the liberation movements and with the testimonies that exist about those years. This is not to say that the claim is wrong, only that it cannot be generalised to the Struggle as a whole. In particular, as it emerges from Birhane's account, the liberation movements were, at the beginning, quite elitist, since their leaderships were composed of a few well-educated individuals, some of whom were exposed to external ideological influences. Secrecy was one of the main characteristics of these organisations, in order to protect the movement from repression and to preserve the members' own interests (for instance, vested interests in maintaining their rule over certain areas). The mystery surrounding the exact nature of the central core of the EPLF, which decided on strategy and important political matters, remained until the end of the liberation struggle, when the party eventually merged with the liberation front. It was in this context that ideas about the nation were first discussed. As Biniam, who was responsible for a section of the PFDJ, stresses:

> 'even the participation in the front of people living or working in the cities was secret. In general, the front had secret cells in the cities that would give information about the Ethiopian government and its supporters. If these people were caught they would be killed for sure…it was really tough'.

This is clearly one reason why people in the cities could not openly show their support, especially at the beginning of the war. Furthermore, the liberation movements were based in rural areas, where they gradually conquered new territory.

What support did the independence struggle have in the rural areas, then? When one travels in these parts of the country, the Struggle's legacy is less *visible* than in the cities; there are no impressive memorials commemorating it, although it did leave a scar in every family: there is no household, in Eritrea, that has not lost a family member to the liberation war or, later, to the 1998-2001 border war with Ethiopia. Nevertheless the perception of the 30-year war in rural areas is not what one would expect. Efrem, a sixty years old man from a village some kilometres south of Mendefera, close to the border with Ethiopia, talks about that time as *gezie shaebia* (the time of the PFDJ), whereas he refers to the previous period as *gezie Derg*, *gezie Selassie*, *gezie Englizi*, and *gezie Tilliani*. In the conversation, there is no indication that the events of the liberation war (such as the annexation in 1962, the liberation in 1991, or the independence in 1993) constitute important time markers for him. This may confirm Mahrt's (2011) thesis that the liberation war was perceived from a specific spatiotemporal perspective that did not correspond to the nationalistic notion of Eritrea as a limited, sovereign geopolitical space. This argument is very comprehensively outlined in his ethnographic work about the villages during the war, and how they perceived space, time and the nation differently. Building on Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' (1991), and on Tuan's (1977) ideas about the creation of space through spacial practice, as well as on Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of war as a special practice (1986), Mahrt argues that daily life in the village revolves around localized economic and social activities, whereas changes in the government tend to follow principles that are unrelated to day-to-day life in the villages (20). This thesis is underpinned by the

fact that, prior to 1991, the main point of contact between villages and the government was taxation (*gult*)[70], which changed very little as a practice during the thirty-year Struggle. Only the people entitled to collect it changed: first they were the vassals of the Ethiopian emperor, then the representatives of the Ethiopian administration, and then the EPLF and, eventually, the PFDJ. Furthermore, the liberation fighters were by many considered to be *shifta*[71], that is, people who are not settled, but move from one place to the other in space (29). Becoming a *shifta* usually implied disobedience to the established authorities or breaking the rules governing the village (for instance by appropriating another villager's plot of land). The *shifta* was forced into hiding until his family or the community could solve the dispute. Liberation fighters were considered rebels as they were fighting against the ruling authorities and since they were also constantly on the move, they were became equated with *shifta* (Mahrt: 24).

In the interviews I carried out with some members of the Eritrean diaspora in Rome, who arrived from Eritrean villages in the 1980s, references to the fighters as *shifta* are very common. For many, they were at first considered to be yet another group fighting for power. Allegiances were not strong at that time. As Dehab remembers it,

> 'we were trying to survive and to continue to live our lives in the turmoil. In the 1960s, I was a little girl. I remember we had to leave our houses sometimes, because armed men would come and it was dangerous. Mostly because they would question on whose side you were. For instance, if the Ethiopians came my father would tell them that we were supportive of the emperor and, to demonstrate it, he would show them our papers. If the ELF came, he would greet them and give them food and some provisions, and hide the Ethiopian documents.'

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[70] As it also emerges from Mahrt's ethnographic work, villagers tended to evaluate the various governments in power in terms of their performance and of the impact they had on their daily lives. Many villagers had a positive memory of the Italians, 'as they were less troublesome than later rulers, they liked local girls unlike the British and unlike the Ethiopians they treated them well' (Mahrt, 2011:).

[71] The *shifta* (bandits) were very common in Eritrea. They would live on illicit activities, such as robberies, kidnappings, etc., but were also used as a sort of mercenaries for destabilising rivals. After the end of the Italian colonial period, their activities were also directed against the Italians who remained in Eritrea.

It is clear, then, that many apparent allegiances were part of a broader survival strategy. An important aspect to note in this regard is that the fighters did not stay in the villages to provide protection for the residents. Furthermore, as it was discussed earlier, the lack of a unified front and the many rivalries that existed between the liberation movements – often based on tribal loyalties – complicated the situation for the villagers, also in terms of their adherence to the cause.

However, the increasing brutality of the Ethiopian government, especially in the border areas, was an important factor contributing to a change of perception among many villagers. The increasing violence of the war and the indiscriminate oppression they experienced in their homeland turned most Eritreans against Ethiopia, thereby producing a steady stream of young recruits for the nationalist movement. This is very clearly explained by Fessehaye:

> 'one day, in *gezie Derg,* I was working in the fields near the village. My little cousin, he was five, came running to me and the other men. He was sent by my grandfather, who was the *chica-shum*[72], to tell us that we needed to hide because the Ethiopians were coming. […] How did he know they were Ethiopians? Because of the uniforms they were wearing. It was actually very easy to distinguish who was who by their clothes and also their overall demeanour. […] My grandfather wanted us to hide because we were young and able to work the land. He was afraid that something bad would happen to us. So we hid in the forest. We could hear the screams from there. The Ethiopians had entered the village, burnt down the houses and gathered all the men they could find. Many of them were returning from the fields when they saw what was happening and tried to stop the Ethiopians. Anyway, they were all shot dead like dogs. When I came back to village at night I saw what happened, my brother was dead. And there was nothing left of our house. Only ashes. I felt frustrated and angry. I shouldn't have hid. We were targeted anyway, just because we were close to the border. So I decided to join the EPLF. My friends did too. I was 14.'

Fessehaye's sad account echoes that of many other rural Eritreans. In most cases, they were identified as enemies *tout-court* because they lived in border areas from

[72] The head of a village. Usually this title was passed through patrilinear descent.

where attacks were often staged against the Ethiopian forces, thus imposing on them a geopolitical allegiance which they had not chosen, but which dramatically changed their perceptions of their own position in the conflict – from actors worried about their survival to actors engaged in the conflict because of the physical space they occupy in the Ethiopian-Eritrean geographical landscape.

From the end of the 1960s onwards, as historical analyses demonstrate, the support for the liberation movements grew stronger as fighting intensified in border areas (Sabbatucci and Vidotto, 2002). What these accounts and other ethnographic work also demonstrate is that this support was not dictated by an ideological adhesion to the independence war or by a sense of belonging to a specific community identified as 'the Eritrean nation'[73], but rather to pragmatic survival choices.

Another important factor contributing to this shift in perception is the fact that, over time, the EPLF gradually took over control over many rural areas, thereby phasing out the presence of the ELF. The latter had often been criticized by the EPLF for 'using the villages' as a source of food supplies and of recruits, without sparing any thought for the villages' own development and without establishing any clear presence in the area. The EPLF, on the contrary, made decisive interventions in line with its efforts to transform Eritrean society and to build a new nation. In the villages, they promoted land reform, village democratisation, and gender equality (Connell, 2001). As Birhane explains:

[73] This made little sense as most of the allegiances were on tribal and ethnic bases. As some of the tribes were scattered across the Ethiopian-Eritrean border and many activities (such as pastoralism) were also carried out across the border, it can be argued that, at that stage, a clear demarcation of the boundaries of the Eritrean state did not exist for villagers living at the borders. Therefore, the perception of the Eritrean nation defined by specific boundaries, as it was later promoted by nationalists in the official account of the liberation war, was absent.

> 'the EPLF designated some middle-ranking people to survey land tenure in rural areas in order to reorganise it in a more effective and egalitarian way'.

Villages usually had 'a *chica-shum*, *danya*, or lay judge, that dealt with all types of civil and criminal cases, ranging from petty theft to arson and murder (but did not involve crimes against the government, such as tax avoidance and disobedience of any kind)' (Mahrt 2011: 26). Aside from this, 'villages had what was known and still is (though in a changed form), as *baito*. This is a type of village parliament where villagers would debate issues of concern to them all. However, these individuals were exclusively male heads of households, or *gebar* (Mahrt 2011: 26)'. The EPLF modified this system introducing a 'system of sectoral representation based on a new mass organisation of peasants, women, workers and youth, themselves segmented by class position' (Connell 2001: 355). This was also intended to break the dominance of rich peasants who had an interest in blocking land reform (Pool, 1993). Representatives were selected by each sub-group and formed the village assembly. This system, although it was later changed, allowed for the empowerment of all groups, including women, who had representation quotas in the assembly, and even of the young. At the same time, this process was beneficial to the party since it served as recruitment mechanism for new members. In fact, this corrective mechanism counteracted the earlier bias which had existed in the recruitment of party members because of the secrecy of the organisation: opening up to the masses led to a more competitive selection process. In general, elections were held every three or four months and they were an important occasion for evaluating the performance of the representatives (Connell, 2001); in a way, it can be argued that individuals were 'educated' and introduced to democratic practices through participation. Land reform remained a pillar of the EPLF's work in the highlands as well, as it was considered to be the first step in the revolutionary process.

A second pillar was education, which has always been an essential tool for the EPLF and, later, for the PFDJ regime. Since the stated aim of the EPLF was to work for social revolution and for development, they needed to mobilise the masses, and this was achieved by the diffusion of ideology through education. The primary subjects of this policy were the EPLF's own rank and file fighters, and the people living in the territories under their control. Education was organised in stages, with a growing level of sophistication. For instance, during the first stage, newly recruited fighters were required to attend training camps, which lasted for around six months. The second stage entailed attending discussion meetings on political subjects three or four times a week with EPLF cadres. As Ermias, a former EPLF fighter now living in Rome recalls:

> 'we would meet to discuss Eritrean history. For instance, before the Struggle, there was the colonial period, then the occupation of Eritrea. We learnt that we were fighting for auto-determination, liberation. In order to reach that, we had to study the Marxist revolution, its goals and methodology'.

Ermias's account highlights an important aspect of education, that is the establishment of an empty, homogenous time line (Anderson, 1991) on which nationalist discourse can be based. This meant inculcating, *a posteriori*, the idea that there existed such a thing as an Eritrean nation subsuming all ethnic and tribal differences, a nation which had a clearly demarcated territory that was occupied and needed to be liberated. As part of this discourse about a nation going through different phases in different times, the Struggle was presented as the process through which the nation could reach its final destiny (this was the teleological orientation) (see also Connell, 2001; Mahrt, 2011; Hepner, 2011; Pool, 1993). In this view, liberation fighters were presented as *tegadelti* (fighters) rather than *shifta*. Society was to be transformed at large by shaping its members through political education. Once educated, the idea

was that they would actively participate in the shaping of the EPLF's politics, in accordance with the nation's teleological goals. The EPLF also ran school for cadres, where more advanced subjects were studied, such as historical and dialectical materialism, and other topics core to Marxist doctrine.

Throughout the 1970s, as the EPLF was swelling its ranks, adult literacy programs were carried out across the country. In Ermias's experience,

> 'many of us were taught how to write in Tigrinya. Fighters were given some time off to attend classes in history, geography, mathematics...basic stuff'.

During the same period, the EPLF's cadres began to realise the need to draw up formal curricula for the political education of civilians and fighters alike. Therefore, in 1975, a book entitled *General Political Education for Fighters* and produced under the party's direction was issued. This book was used by cadres for teaching fighters and civilians and was usually relied on at different educational stages – the same topics would feature in various syllabi but would be treated at a basic level in elementary classes and more in depth in advanced classes.[74] The book started with a generic introduction to the main geographical features of Eritrea – its location, its nationalities, its main towns and villages. Then, it included an account of the origins of the Eritrean people; this chapter featured a history of colonialism, of the various annexations as well as a description of the traditions of Eritrea's various ethnic groups. The third chapter dealt with the country's political history, and included a definition of the nation, and an explanation of Eritrea's development in the nineteenth century after foreign intervention, and this section highlighted the importance of modernism. The following

[74] This book was written in Tigrinya and has not been officially translated into English. A translation of the topics is available in Connell's *Against all Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (1997). For the purpose of this research a copy was consulted with an interpreter, who confirmed the translation made by EPLF members as reported in Connell's book.

chapters covered Eritrea's economy and provided an analysis of the reigning class structure in Eritrean society with a special focus on the importance of the working class. The history of the Eritrean revolution followed; it was separated in periods according to the status of the nation's geopolitical space (liberated or occupied) and it showed Eritrea moving toward the achievement of its final destiny, liberation. Very interestingly, this chapter also included a section on the civil war with the ELF. The second part of the book contained less factual information and was instead intended to provide a focus for specific discussions. It defined the aims of the political revolution (inside Eritrea and against its enemies), gave a description of the liberation goals[75], of who was a friend or an enemy of the revolution, what its tactics were, and outlined the reasons for its inevitable victory in the Struggle, ending with a description of the future Eritrean society. This section also provided sophisticated information on how to handle contradictions through self-criticism and a gave a Marxist account of the development of society by describing the various political economic phases it had to go through (primitive society, slave society, feudal society, capitalism, imperialism, and so on) (see also Connell, 1997: 322-323). This syllabus was modified in 1989, following the 1987 Congress. The new manual was more focused on practical aspects than on theory. Its main focus remained Eritrea but it also contained information about Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and the international situation (Connell, 2001).

It is important to underline that this focus on education also had a darker intent, that of controlling fighters and civilians. As Ermias recalls;

> 'during class conversations we were asked about our opinion on different matters. If you said something not completely in line with the EPLF account, you would be viewed suspiciously, and maybe they would start

[75] Here an explanation of the difference between freedom (political independence) and liberation (social emancipation) was provided. These were considered to be the equally important goals of the Struggle (see also Connell, 1997).

> looking closely at you or interrogating you as they thought you were a spy of the ELF or of the Ethiopians'.

In Birhane's words,

> 'the EPLF used education and other policies as a form of control over the minds of fighters and of people living in the territory it controlled. There were many cases of people who were accused of being dissidents or spies, arrested or brutally killed'.

The EPLF was Janus-faced;, the authoritarian tendencies that characterised the PFDJ's rule and which had been reinforced by the border war were always present within the movement. As Redeker, Hepner and O'Keane point out, there is a link between the extreme circumstances in which the movement had to operate, the poverty of the vast majority of the population, and the revolution; as they put it, 'the apparently positive aspects of the revolution were accompanied by the centralization of power in an unaccountable authoritarian leadership, and purges of those who threatened nationalist "unity"' (2011: xxvii).

3. POST-LIBERATION ERITREA, THE BORDER WAR (1998-2001)

In 1993, at the dawn of Eritrea's independence, David Pool analysed the policies that were then shaping the reconstruction of Eritrea and concluded that 'the shape of future national structures in Eritrea is as yet unclear. There was talk in Asmara of the EPLF becoming a party, of two parties emerging from the Front and of a multi-party system. [...] The EPLF has generally been considered authoritarian. Elections to the provincial assemblies, however, appear to have been competitive and PGE [Provisional Government of Eritrea] guidance has been limited to specifying representations for women and minorities and nominated members of the EPLA [Eritrean People's Liberation Army] provincial units" (401-402). Many post-colonial theorists, academics,

practitioners from development agencies, and, more generally, many international observers were fascinated by the EPLF's effective organisation and self-discipline in the fight for auto-determination, and they believed that Eritrea could become an example of development and democracy.

Following independence, Eritrea appeared to be enjoying a period of economic growth, despite its poor relations with neighbouring countries, with the noteworthy exception of Ethiopia. It is clear now, more than a decade after the declaration of independence, that the high hopes that existed for development and democracy in Eritrea have not been fulfilled, as constant wars and border disputes with Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti and Ethiopia have shattered Eritrea's earlier economic and political progress. Tension with Sudan throughout the 1990s centred on mutual allegations that each country had attempted to destabilize the other. In late 1995 and in 1996, Eritrea engaged in a brief but violent conflict with Yemen over the Hanish Islands, an archipelago in the Red Sea claimed by both countries but ultimately recognized as Yemeni. Even relations with Ethiopia, initially good, became tense due to trade issues and to the fraught question of Ethiopia's access to Eritrea's Red Sea ports (Sabatucci and Vidotto, 2002).

In 1998 relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea deteriorated rapidly when a border dispute, which had to do with the settlement of Badme, erupted into violence. Although three decades of liberation war had led to a sense of unity among Eritreans, the fluid border between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998-2000) gave both governments a free space to carry out ethnic cleansing and to deport more people, creating large population movements. After a peace agreement was established in 2000 (Treaty of

Algeri), the UN ran a peacekeeping mission along the border, which ended in 2008[76]. Finally, relations were also strained with Djibouti, due to another border dispute in the Ras Doumeira area, which escalated into conflict in 2008.

Following the 1998-2000 war, the Provisional Government of Eritrea, ruled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – the former EPLF – led by President Afewerki, postponed the promulgation of the country's constitution, which had been ratified in 1997, and indefinitely deferred parliamentary and presidential elections. After seizing power, Afewerki's government abolished the free press, and started implementing compulsory conscription policies based on forced recruitment[77] carrying out searches, and killing deserters (HRW)[78]. Scholars are divided about whether this authoritarian turn was or was not caused by the conflict However, as I mentioned earlier, authoritarian tendencies had always been intrinsic to the liberation movement.

The new Eritrean government established a society based on a two-layered structure, in accordance with what Ong (1999) would call a 'principle of graduated sovereignty and citizenship'. It differentiated between the *Tegadelti* (fighters) and the *Hafash* (masses) (Woldemikael 2013). The former were mostly EPLF members who fought in the independence war. Since the blood they have shed contributed to the nation-building process, they are considered to be the most deserving citizens and, therefore, receive higher salaries and occupy more important positions. For instance,

[76] Relations also soured with the UN. As Ethiopia refused to leave the territory it had occupied and which had been declared Eritrean by the international border commission, the PFDJ regime accused UN peacekeepers of espionage.

[77] The Eritrean school system was reformed, centralising 12th grade education at the Sawa military training centre in order to restrict the students' movements. Students have to enlist with their fathers, and a photograph of both assures that the father can be held responsible should his daughter or son disappear. However parents who are accused or imprisoned have the possibility to be released by paying a significant compensation in US$. This way, even desertion benefits the finances of the regime, which needs foreign currency (Treiber and Tesfaye 2008).

[78] Within the government there is an almost total denial of any involvement or responsibility for violations of human rights.

50% of seats in the national assembly are reserved for former fighters, although they represent a minority. In addition, all members of the Cabinet of Ministers are *Tegadelti*. The *Hafash*, on the other hand, include those who were not members of the EPLF and are not either members of the PDFJ, civilians in Eritrea and in the diaspora (Woldemikael 2013).

The economic and political crisis which began with the thirty-year war with Ethiopia was made more severe by short-sighted economic reforms aimed at imposing state control over labour and natural resources, and by UN sanctions which were imposed in 2009 (Security Council Resolution 1907) as a consequence of Eritrea's support for the 'al-Shabaab' terrorist group trying to overthrow the emerging Somali Government. In 2011, further sanctions were imposed, as Eritrea did not comply with the UN resolution (Security Council Resolution 2023).

The harsh rule of the regime and the economic and humanitarian crisis in Eritrea have intensified internal conflicts, to such an extent that should Afewerki die suddenly, this could lead to conflict between the country's different groups, and, in particular, to a confrontation between Christians and Muslims. Whereas they coexisted peacefully in the past, the relations between these two communities have now changed. As an Italian diplomat in Eritrea told me,

> 'since independence, Christians have held key positions in Eritrean institutions; the only activity that was left to Muslims was sheep farming in the lowlands and fishing. The State is ruled by Christians; although there has always been a Muslim representative in the government, they have never held key positions. Moreover, the size of these two groups has changed over time: nowadays, Muslims outnumber Christians'.

Internal instability is also due to a power struggle between the ruling party and the army. Members of the diplomatic community residing in Eritrea agree that

> 'in the army, there are different views: some – those who hold key positions in the Eritrean establishment - still have a Soviet or Chinese approach, as they were trained by the former USSR and the Chinese; others have been educated in the West[79]'.

The government exploits regional insecurity to further its portrayal of the country as being under siege, through practices that perpetuate a despotic mode of governance and which rely on surveillance on every aspect of social life (Bozzini, 2011). President Afewerki has repeatedly claimed that he intends to defend the country against 'external aggressions' (also referring to human rights activists and the international community). Having centralised all power, he thus exercises strict control over other state institutions and on ministers[80], as he is increasingly afraid of plots aimed at toppling him.

With respect to human rights violations, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Osman Saleh, presented a statement at the 25th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) on 3 March 2014, criticising the validity of the HRC's resolutions on Eritrea. The government, however, keeps perpetrating massive violations of human rights, including arbitrary arrests and torture. The latter mainly relates to the treatment of forced labourers working for the government in the fields. However, since it is not possible for human rights organisations to openly work in Eritrea[81], the extent of these violations is

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[79] Some have studied in Italy, a few others in the UK, one group in the US during the first period of independence.

[80] Among the ministers, the Minister of Defence, Sebhat Ephrem is the most targeted. Even if Ephrem fought alongside Afewerki during the liberation war, he has been repeatedly presented, by some members of the diaspora as well as by the international community, as the only person who could replace Afewerki. He is believed to be less despotic than the president, and more prone to compromise and to finding solutions for the good of the country. Also, there a widespread belief that he would only occasionally resort to force and violence, and only in extreme circumstances, not in the same continual and systematic way as the actual president. The Minister of Information, Ali Abdu Ahmed, defected in November 2012 during a business trip to Europe, and has since claimed asylum in Sweden. His father, brother and fifteen-year-old daughter were arrested in Eritrea shortly after his defection.

[81] The UNHCR does not have an office in Eritrea anymore. Red Cross activities have almost been abandoned. It was present on the ground in order to supervise prisoner exchanges between Eritrea and Ethiopia (prisoners that had been detained during the 1997 conflict – the Badme border dispute), until the new outbreak of the conflict in may 2000. They had access to police detention sites, but they never

sometimes difficult to assess precisely. For instance, human rights reports have accused the government of keeping detainees in jails with tin-plated roofs. It so happens, however, that Eritreans living outside Asmara, except those living in some parts of Massawa and in some areas of Kerala, routinely live in tin-plated sheds, since this is an easily obtainable building material. Another possibility is to build roofs with leaves, but these offer insufficient protection during the rainy season. Therefore the majority of the houses are all tin-plated (they are known as "*onduline*"), which undermines the case for considering the use of tin roofs on prisons as a human rights violation.

The Press Proclamation, the Transitional Penal Code for Eritrea, and the Proclamation to Determine the Administration of Non-governmental Organisations allow authorities to repress dissent (Article 19, 2013). However, as Fnan, an Eritrean teacher in Asmara, says:

> 'if you're very careful, and keep yourself away from any kind of political engagement and don't express criticism against the regime, they [the regime] usually leave you alone and you don't have any major problems'.

4. *WARSAY*, STUDENTS AND CONSCRIPTS: ERITREAN YOUTH AND THIER SEARCH FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT

I met Abel in Trastevere, a lively neighbourhood in the centre of Rome, on a summer day. I was meant to meet some representatives of the 'Sant'Egidio Community', whose headquarters are very close to the ancient church of 'Santa Maria in Trastevere'. I was waiting, and I was probably the only Italian in a big room full of migrants from all over the world, who lingered in the room and in the big corridor next to it waiting for their turn to receive legal assistance or some other kind of help, or even only 'some

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had access to political detainees, to the former representatives of the government or to MPs arrested in 2001.

good advice' – as Sambene from Senegal put it. Abel, a diminutive young man in his early twenties, who was sitting close to Sambene, said he was Eritrean and had been granted asylum. He told me that

> 'the problem with Eritrea is that we [the young] don't have any hope. We don't have a future. Either we serve in the military forever or we escape. But if you're caught you're dead. But, I guess, if you serve in the military you are dead anyway'.

Abel's account is echoed by the testimonies of the many men and women I met during my fieldwork. In the name of 'national security', the current dictatorial regime has taken a high toll on Eritrean youth, men and women living in the cities or in the rural areas. In general, Eritrean young people have always faced enormous demands as every ruler (from the colonial regime to the liberation movements, and the post-independence government) has required that they make the ultimate contribution to build a new state. The young now carry the burden of being *warsay*, that is, the heirs and the social subordinates of the *ykealo*, the almighty liberation fighters who carried out the revolution.

Today, the regime presents Eritrea as a developmental state that attempts to mobilise the nation by embracing the concepts of self-reliance in the face of aid dependence; it relies on a discourse of dire need. The key tools used by the regime for mobilising the masses are mass conscription and education. In general, a developmental state has two components: a structural one, whereby sustained development is a source of legitimacy of the state (Connell, 1992: 56); and an ideological one, which refers to the ability of the ruling elite to establish an ideological hegemony (in a Gramscian sense), so that the state's developmental projection becomes a hegemonic project to which key actors in the nation adhere voluntarily (Mkandawire, 2001: 290). As I mentioned in the previous paragraphs, in the Eritrean hegemonic narrative the state and the nation are

considered to be a single entity, and this is coherently expressed by the compulsory indefinite conscription, as in the army the distinction between the state and the citizen becomes blurred.

Following the referendum on independence and the continuous territorial spats with neighbouring countries, mass conscription into the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) was introduced in 1995 for all men (from the age of 18 to 40) and women (from the age of 18 to 27). It entailed six months of military training and one more year of civilian reconstruction activities, either in development projects or in the public administration. Although this policy was not welcomed by the general public, especially those who thought that they could seek remunerative position in the private sector following the end of the war, or even just undertake their missed higher education, resistance to conscription was not so strong.

> 'We were frustrated, but we understood that, in the end, it was a small price to pay for the country's development. Just one year and a half'

Mekonnen tells me, who was 20 at the time.

However when the border war broke out in 1998 and conscription became indefinite, most people were disappointed, but they hoped that, at some point, the crisis would be defused and that they would have regain control of their lives. At that stage, almost half of the population was below the age of 15 and, therefore, had no previous experience of the liberation war. Instead, they were schooled under the EPLF programs, and raised in 'what can be described as a 'moral and political zone of indistinction' where the political is thoroughly embedded into everyday life practices' (Müller, 2011: 55).

Today, Eritrean youth are exposed to a global environment and to external cultural influences through music, cinema, and the Internet. The seeds of discontent are present everywhere as young men and women feel deprived of their future.

> 'There is no true war. I don't understand why we have to serve in the military forever. I've always wanted to travel abroad. I feel like it will never be possible for me to do what I really want. It is just very unfair'

says Fatimah, a young girl who, at the time of this study, was attending ninth grade. Despite exercising a high degree of control over its citizens, whom it indoctrinates through education, the legitimacy of the ruling clique is vacillating and attitudes of resistance are emerging among the young.

Education is one of the most important tools the regime uses to promote its desired social agenda. It can be argued that the militarisation of society also occurs through education, especially after the implementation, in 2003, of new promotion policies in Eritrean secondary schools. Although an accurate discussion of the Eritrean education policies is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to say that these were aimed at avoiding 'wastage' in Eritrean society (see Riggan, 2011). In the official discourse of the Ministry of Education, the problem was that the Eritrean system was too competitive, causing the majority of students not to complete high school, which left them with no opportunity to enter higher education. Underlying this system was the belief that only hard work and good students could contribute to the development of the state and of Eritrean society. In a way, 'competition for the scarce opportunities for university education combined with the university's symbolic value as a marker of 'modernity', 'development', and 'national culture' shaped the educational imaginary in Eritrea' (Riggan 2011: 81-82).

The introduction of the new policy, coupled with the provision that students who passed the twelfth grade would attend twelfth grade in the Sawa military boarding school, located in the Western lowlands, demonstrated that the real intent of the policy was to change the role of secondary education into that of transforming students into soldiers. Moreover, from 2003 onwards no students were sent to Asmara University, which was closed down and replaced by a newly built campus in Mai Nefhi, a few kilometres from Asmara. This had a devastating impact on student performance. As Naim puts it, echoing Riggan's observations,

> 'I knew that I would end up straight in the military with this reform, so I just didn't show up at school. It was too difficult to fail the grade because the teachers were told to make us all pass. So the only solution was not to show up in class'.

This resistance strategy that, according to Riggan, was largely relied on by the students, testifies to the widespread perception that having a bright future by working hard in secondary education was no longer possible.

Frustration is also common among higher education students. University education is also heavily regulated by the state, which considers that higher education needs to be embedded in the national community as a whole instead of standing apart as an elitist institution (see Thompson and Fogel 1976). Universities should therefore be open to everyone, but access is regulated by the state. Every university faculty is under the authority of the corresponding ministry, which makes them subject to political interference. Students who wish to enter higher education have to take a matriculation exam. On the basis of their scores, students are allocated to various departments, irrespective of their individual preferences. Scholarships to pursue further studies abroad are frowned upon, as the university (that follows state directives

and is accountable to the party) prefers students to follow established university channels for studying abroad (see also Müller, 2011).

> 'We can't decide anything. You have to ask the government for permission for everything'

Eyob tells me, who decided to leave the country during his time at university. For him, leaving Eritrea and depriving the country of the investment it made in his education is the ultimate resistance strategy.

As part of their degree, students are required to undertake some summer work, the nature of which depends on the country's need (which are decided by the government). From the state's point of view, this mandatory state labour (*ma'atot*) is seen as a way transforming students into citizens able to administrate the land. But they are also presented as the 'nation's children', who harvest the fields of elderly people whose children were martyred or conscripted into the EDF, a form of replacement for missing kin (Poole 2011). One episode is often mentioned in the interviews I have carried out[82], maybe because it happened in 2001, at at time when (unlike today) disappearances, imprisonments and political murders could still be debated in the private press, albeit not directly. In 2001, students of the still existing University of Asmara were required to do an extra period of summer work. However, many of them did not show up to the gathering point as they wanted to help their families who needed them either to work for money or to help harvesting their crops. As a result, students were asked once again to gather, while others were rounded up in the dormitories, under the threat of having to face severe consequences. They were brought to the Danakil desert, and later to a village in the coastal area, where they were made to do construction work. Two students died of heatstroke, and it became clear that the work

[82] Although my interviewees did not experience this event directly, they were still impacted by it.

really was a punishment for not initially answering their summons. This was confirmed by the fact that students had to individually sign apology letters to the government. Failing to do so would have resulted in a longer stay. This early episode already demonstrated the extent of the regime's authoritarianism.

Stories of torture, disappearances and forced labour are also common among conscripts in the EDF. The Eritrean National Service consists of thousands of young people who are mobilised for military and civil purposes by the state (see also Bozzini, 2011; Hepner, 2011; Wrong, 2005), resulting in an open-ended system of forced labour (Kibreab 2009). Young recruits (*warsay, 'my heirs'*), are mistreated and humiliated by their superior officers (*ykealo, 'all powerful'*). They are meant to serve indefinitely (until the age of 50) in the National Service, with no consideration of their own individual aspirations, in a form of modern bondage. During their military service, conscripts are trained in the methods and ideology of national defence and they are also employed in development projects, such as the building of infrastructure or agricultural work. Any infraction against the rules imposed on conscripts result in severe punishments, including isolation and reclusion in sweltering hot buildings in the desert.

Abel's story is representative in this respect. After completing twelfth grade in Sawa, Abel was forced to remain in the ELD, as his grades were not good enough to allow him to undertake a university education.

> 'It was very tough' he says, 'but I tried to be a strong person and to face it as well as I could as my parents taught me. The only thing I could think about all day was when I would be given a permit to go home again to my family for a while. […] One day, I found a Bible that was hidden close to the dormitories. So I took it. I don't know what I was thinking. I've never been very religious and I've never liked to read much anyway. I think I was just curious, and bored. The Bible was something new. It helped me to go through the tough daily routine because I had something else to think about all day…a sort of escape from my life. [….] But then they discovered I had it. I was dragged out and beaten and then I was locked up in a dark

> metal shed. There was another person there with me. Another man. But I couldn't understand him as he spoke another dialect. I really believed it was the end for me. But a miracle happened…that night, a guard was distracted and did not properly close the shed. There was a gap between the door and the wall so my companion and I had the same thought: to escape. We escaped together all the way to the border, but afterwards I have never seen him again'.

Apart from the terrible effect they have on individuals, conscription and forced labour also have dire consequences on those development policies the regime purports to foster. Agrarian development in particular[83] is considered to be a pillar for the regime, since it couples the idea of national sovereignty with the onus on food security[84]; soldiers (and students) are frequently assigned to do agricultural labour in state-owned or smallholder farms (Poole, 2011). However, the majority of private farms do not receive this kind of help.

As Amanda Poole's ethnographic work clearly shows, conscription has led to the disappearance of young people from rural areas, thus disrupting kinship and community networks on which the traditional communal work (*wofara*) in villages was usually based. Old men and women, the only ones who are left in the villages, find themselves unable to cope with agricultural work, with severe consequences on productivity and therefore on food security. Community-level projects are now sometimes carried out during *ma'atot*, the mandatory work of all able-bodied people in the name of development[85] (Poole, 2011). Since able people tend to be either in the military, or performing *ma'atot*, there are few of them left for *wofara*[86], resulting in a problem of food sovereignty, that is, the ability of rural villagers to have some power over food production; it has also loosened the social bonds that are fundamental for the

[83] All land has become legally nationally territory since the Land Proclamation Act of 1995. Therefore, farmers are allocated land that they can cultivate but they do not formally own those lands.
[84] Food security was at the basis of the state interventions in the agrarian sector since 1991.
[85] Performing *ma'atot* is crucial to obtain the right to claim food aid and, from the state point of view, to control and making legible the population.
[86] *Wofara* entails a form of reciprocity between villagers who perform, thus strenghtening social bonds.

reconstruction of a post-war society. Moreover, state conscription plans has led to the mechanisation of labour: the government has made tractors available (which are not the traditional instrument used by villagers for farming), but the cost of renting them cannot is prohibitive for poor farmers. Conscription has also resulted in an increased dependence on state intervention.

Today, many Eritreans question the state's inability to provide people with the means to build a secure livelihood for themselves, while young people continually flee the country in the search for a future somewhere else. In stark contrast to the regime's rhetoric of self-reliance, its insistence on work ethics and on national development, what the reality of life on the ground suggests is that the country is slowly being wrecked. If the liberation war was meant to sow the seeds of a new society, based on 'democracy' and 'justice', as the PFDJ motto claims, then it becomes painfully clear that the revolution has ultimately been betrayed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM ERITREA TO ITALY: JOURNEYS TOWARDS HOPE

1. NEGOTIATING LIFE IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT: STRATEGIES TO COPE AND TO LEAVE

'I would do it again a hundred times', says Abel, as we share a cup of Eritrean *chai* at the refugee centre. 'It was very difficult, but I couldn't stay any longer' he claims. Despite Abel's confidence and his calm and controlled appearance, it is difficult to assess what impact the migration journey has had on him. As Benezer and Zetter (2014) point out, the refugee journey is a powerful experience that affects individuals in life-changing ways.

In general, asylum seekers relate to their journey as a very important part of their lives. It represents an integral part of their life-story, as it affects their sense of self and the ways in which they re-evaluate and re-construct their previous expectations about their 'new life' in the country of destination (Benezer and Zetter, 2014). As Mariam, another participant, puts it:

> 'The journey really changed me. I mean, it was so difficult I thought I couldn't manage…but I discovered aspects of myself that I didn't think were there'.

Although empowering in certain ways, as we shall see later, the journey out of Eritrea was generally a very difficult experience for the participants in this study. Many of them hardly managed to cope with the dangers along the way, and many either witnessed or

experienced acts of torture, rape, and other abuses. As Gebrane, a former NGO worker in Asmara, points out:

> 'I knew it was dangerous, but I didn't quite realize to what extent.[…] In any case, the situation back in Eritrea was getting too hot for me, I knew they [the Government] were looking for me and I didn't want to be imprisoned.'

This statement is echoed by the accounts of almost all the respondents in this study. It is clear that in many cases the women and men who chose to leave were not fully aware of the risks they would incur; they expected the journey to be perilous to a certain (often underestimated) degree, but they still *felt* they had to leave. What then were the drivers behind their decision to leave?

From a macro-level perspective, poor economic conditions, a general lack of possibilities to fulfil personal life projects, continuous human rights violations, all represent triggers for the outward journey. This general explanation, however, is not completely satisfactory. Macro-level drivers are of course very important in determining the setting of asylum migration. Nevertheless, the decision to leave is generally taken at the individual level and, therefore, it is necessary to look at the micro-level to fully understand the triggers of the journey and the stages of the decision-making process.

Many observers of the Eritrean domestic arena would argue that Eritrean citizens are accustomed to dealing with the country's dictatorship, as many of them have been involved in the border wars and are familiar with the repression of dissidents and of alleged spies. In many ways, Eritreans learn to negotiate the hostile environment they find themselves in on a daily basis, finding ways to cope with it.

Aster's story is enlightening in this respect. I met this young Eritrean woman in Asmara back in 2014. At the time she was 19 and working in her family's fabric shop

with her sister, Abrihet, who was 16. She had already attended 12th grade at the Sawa military camp, and she had served in the military for an additional 6 months before her parents managed to bribe a commander in the Ministry of Defence to get her released from duty.

> 'The military was terrible. We were yelled at all the time and punished as well, if we couldn't perform a task. Bad things happened to girls especially…you know what I mean… I was lucky because I was assigned to controlling the access to the barracks, it was not a physically heavy duty and I was working under the supervision of a woman. But I heard terrible stories. People disappeared from time to time. Others were harassed. I really don't want to go back'.

Aster's strategy, as she explained to me, consisted in avoiding *giffa* (round-ups) which happened from time to time in cities and villages, and in regularly paying 400 Naqfa to her family's contact in order to be kept off the conscription lists. Nevertheless, her situation became worse in mid-2013. During this period, round-ups became increasingly frequent, and they were complemented by workplace and house searches. This was interpreted by locals as being a reaction on the part of the Government to the increasing number of desertions from the army and of escapes from the country. As I later learned from my contact in Asmara, Aster was caught when her shop was searched. She was reportedly about to close the little store with her father when *warsay* entered and checked her documents. She was then taken to the station/barracks for 'further controls'. Despite her family's connections in the Ministry of Defence, Aster was conscripted again and sent to barracks close to Barentu. Aster's experience prompted her family to elaborate a new strategy to protect Abrihet, since they thought that bribes were not safe enough as a way of avoiding conscription. As Abrihet came of age and completed high school, she married her second cousin, as married women have a greater chance of being exempted.

The story of Aster and Abrihet is echoed by the experiences of of other participants, who also saw the many dangers of life in Eritrea as being negotiable, if only one was careful enough to avoid the *giffa* and to keep a low profile[87]. Lindley's study based on the livelihood analyses[88] of migrants fleeing from Mogadishu (Somalia) in 2007-2008, goes in the same direction, pointing out that respondents to her study generally tried for some time to cope with the challenges they described and to adapt to them, before finally deciding to leave (2009: 17).

Eritrean respondents adopted a variety of coping strategies, which were heavily dependent on their social position in society and on their economic, social and political resources. For instance, bribing officials to avoid conscription has proved to be an effective strategy for individuals, especially urban middle class individuals, who can rely on modest financial assets, and/or who have ties with individuals in key/strategic positions within the administration. Marriage is both a coping and an exit strategy. As in Abrihet's case, young women often resort to marriage as a way to gain exemption from conscription, as the regime favours pregnant women and mothers (in order to improve the fertility rate). However it is also true that today marriage among young women and men in Eritrea is often delayed due to financial constraints, and can rarely be achieved without family subsidiaries (Treiber and Tesfaye, 2008: 282). Marriage therefore also depends on human/social capabilities and assets. Over time, marriage has also become an exit mechanism: as women are often demobilised in their twenties, educated women have better chances to secure an official Eritrean exit visa by marrying an Eritrean living abroad or by being awarded an academic scholarship.

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[88] Livelihood analyses focus on the abilities and resources people have at their disposal (these can be natural, physical, human, socio-political and financial assets), and how these resources are mobilised and mediated by the wider structural environment (of policies, institutions and processes), in order to provide means of sustenance (Lindley, 2009: 5).

Leaving Eritrea is, in most cases, a stategy of last resort. As Demsas, a 22-year-old man I met in Rome at the refugee centre, points out:

> 'I wasn't really thinking about leaving at the beginning…my parents were in Eritrea. I didn't want to leave them. But then the situation got worse and worse, and they told me 'you have to leave'. It was too dangerous for me to stay there'.

The same argument appears in the narratives of, other respondents, including Haile, a 21-year-old student from a rural area close to the Mai Nefhi campus. As he was good enough academically to make the necessary grades to enrol at the Electrical Engineering faculty, he soon perceived that controls and the harassment of students were increasing.

> 'I spent 12th grade at Sawa. I had to enrol with my father. That was the normal procedure. They [the regime] force parents to register with their children, so that they can be held accountable and imprisoned if one of their offspring goes missing. It was a difficult time, but in the end I managed to get into university. I didn't get to choose what to study, but that was still ok with me as I really didn't want to serve in the military. At the campus we were also forced to perform community tasks other than studying. For instance, during the summer, we would be sent to work in the fields. We were often intimidated by the *yikealo* or older *warsay*, and they threatened us that our parents would be arrested if we didn't obey orders or that we would be conscripted. However, as the son of the general who was in charge of controlling Mai Nefhi was himself a student at the Engineering faculty, we were not treated too harshly. For instance, we still managed to go to Asmara once in a while, without being punished. But during second year the general was removed from his position. They said he was in contact with some Ethiopians, but I don't know if that is true. Anyway, the situation really deteriorated for us. We were harassed all the time, with unexpected searches in the dorms and random controls. Also, our duties increased. Some of the students who tried to avoid summer camp to go home and help their families harvest their crops were arrested. Being at the campus was not safe anymore.'

As these examples make clear, coping mechanism were valuable tools for respondents to survive the hostile environment they found themselves in. These strategies, however, relied heavily on human capabilities and assets. These were, in turn, influenced by key

interdependent factors whose sudden change negatively affected the individuals' ability to negotiate their livelihoods in their environment. In particular, the increasing repression of dissent since the 2000s, the State's growing control over all aspects of social life, the tightening of conscription provisions, the loss of socio-political protection alongside severe economic stagnation led to mistrust, suspicion and rivalry about resources. Denunciation, for instance, was heavily used as a means to secure additional food supplies (cfr. Treiber and Tesfaye, 2008).

Kifle's narrative is very telling in this respect. By the time I met him at the Baobab refugee centre in Rome, he had already spent 7 months in Italy and was waiting to receive notification about his refugee status. Aged 26, slightly built, with a mountain of hair that covers his gentle expression, he is a Biher-Tigrinya[89] from Mendefera. At the age of 16, following his father's death, he moved with his mother to Asmara's rural areas, where his uncle was living with his family.

> 'We moved to my uncle's because following my father's death we lost our plot of land. So my uncle offered us a place in his house. I started working with my uncle and my cousins. On Sundays we would gather at a neighbour's house for prayers[90]. People in the village knew that we were Orthodox, but we led a normal life. My uncle had good relations with other people in the village who would turn a blind eye to us, especially to me and my mother who came from Mendefera […] But later, there was a very bad drought and food was scarce. Most of the young men, including two of my cousins, were conscripted and moved to other parts of the country. […]Most of the people in the village relied on insufficient food supplies from the central government. One day the officials came to village looking for me and my mother. One villager had told them that we were Orthodox and had links with Ethiopia. Maybe he wanted an extra ration for his family or maybe he was suspicious and thought we had provoked the drought. Anyway, my uncle gave the officials 100 Naqfa and they went away. But we knew we were not safe anymore'.

[89] Biher-Tigrinya (Tigrinya Nation) is an Eritrean ethnic group that occupies most of the Eritrean highlands and the Tigray region in Ethiopia. People belonging to this ethnic group are often referred to as the 'people of the highlands' or 'people of the kebessa' (kebessa means highlands). In Eritrea, they mostly live in small communal villages and they work in smallholding farms. Most of them are Christian Orthodox, but some of them have turned to Catholicism and Protestantism.

[90] He and his family were members of the Eritrean Ortodox Tewahedo Church, a minority religion.

In this case, the worsening of the village's economic situation coincided with a general exacerbation of the Eritrean government's rhetoric against neighbouring Ethiopia, which fuelled a climate of suspicion among poor rural communities of mostly non-educated Eritreans, leading to the disruption of the social bonds that provided Kifle and his mother with protection. A change in the circumstances of life in the village, and a wider sense of insecurity, prompted Kifle to consider leaving, which he finally did four months later.

In a context of changing circumstances and of reduced human/social resources, mobility became a central part of the way people negotiated life in their modified environment.

Several factors facilitate mobility in the Eritrean environment. Amongst other factors, two stand out as being the most important for the participants in this study. First, the fact that the independence war, the border conflict with Ethiopia and the tensions with neighbouring countries have forced many Eritreans – especially those from border regions – to leave their villages and to move to other parts of the country. Younger generations have also experienced displacement, as part of the conscription program: young conscripts are not usually assigned to the areas they are from. As it emerged during this research, most of the young Eritreans fleeing from the army described moves within the country as their first experience of migration, since it already entailed uprooting and the severing of existing community ties and networks. As Hayat (22) explains,

> 'I thought that going abroad wouldn't be so very different from when I moved from the coast to the Ethiopian border. Everything was different there, even the weather. I thought that if I had made it the first time, I could make it a second time'.

The second factor that emerged as relevant was the existence of earlier successful experiences of migration within the individual's family or community network, or in his or her broader entourage. As we will see later, examples of escape and of integration which are portrayed as successful by the migrant or the migrant's family have an impact on the propensity of members of the migrant's relational network to also leave. In Zula's (21) words,

> 'The cousin of Yemane [a close friend of his] had to escape from Eritrea because he thought the government wanted to imprison him. […] Yemane's family was very worried and his aunt was crying all the time from the fear that he could possibly have died, as they didn't receive any news. But after two years he called from Europe. Yemane told me that his cousin was given asylum and found a job and was sending some money to the family. […] Then I thought that if things became bad for me I would escape too. After all, Yemane's cousin was doing all right'.

If positive migration experiences empowered people and reinforced their own thoughts of leaving, unsuccessful experiences only worked as a moderate deterrent. Even respondents who directly knew people who died trying to escape or during the course of their journey still decided to leave the country, as their situation became unbearable.

2. TRAJECTORIES: RUMOURS AND STORIES FROM THE FIELD

At the time when this study was carried out, Italy was facing a massive inflow of Eritreans seeking international protection under the Geneva Convention (they represented the second largest nationality among migrants). These were mostly recruits from the Eritrean Defence Forces, who yearned to be able to focus on their own individual life projects in a more promising post-war situation or young Eritreans who feared being trapped in the country in an endless conscription that frustrated their dreams of a better future.

As the normalisation most Eritreans hoped for did not take place, many – including my participants – started to re-evaluate their existing conditions and the extent to which it allowed them to satisfy their desires and requirements. In this process, the possibility of satisfying personal aspirations and needs is evaluated not only in relation to the current personal situation in Eritrea, but also in relation to individual perceptions and ideas about life in the West or 'First world'. An excerpt from an interview with Adiam, a 24-year-old Eritrean woman I met in Asmara four months after she was released from the military, is very representative in this respect. When asked about her situation in Eritrea and how she envisioned her future, she replied:

> 'I've been in the army for six years and I was released some months ago. Because of that, I couldn't continue my studies nor start my own family. […] Since I was a little girl, I've always wanted to become a physician. My village is close to the Ethiopian border, so when the border war broke out, many people were displaced or injured, including my little brother. A Sudanese doctor [from the Red Cross] helped him. So I thought I wanted to become a medical doctor myself, to help people. Now I have to be realistic. I know that I have no chance of doing that. So I am just concerned with getting on with my life, with finding a good job. But here this isn't easy. […] I fear being forced to join the army again or being imprisoned by the government. Several family friends have been imprisoned. Life in Europe and in the US is much simpler. People have good jobs and a good life, much better than here. There are more possibilities, more freedom. […] I know because my cousin is in Italy. He said he found a job in a restaurant and that he's doing well. He sends some money to the family to help out. He also told me I should go there, but I don't want to leave my parents here.'

In general, my participants' perceptions of the West or the 'First World' – as many of them call wealthy European countries and the US – were positive before their departure. In their accounts, the West is depicted as a 'land of opportunities' and of personal fulfilment, and associated with positive ideas of wealth and prosperity. These perceptions are often collectively shared, resulting from the circulation of information among migrants and their families and/or acquaintances. As I will explain later on this chapter, perceptions are amplified by interactions among individuals and by rumours.

Perceptions about the West in general are often accompanied by perceptions about individual countries, which rank differently in the Eritreans' scale of preferences. In the past, during the war for independence, Italy ranked higher in the scale than today. As Daniel, the Eritrean director of the Baobab refugee centre in Rome, points out,

> 'The first Eritrean migrants who fled from the *Gedli* had a stronger relationship with this country [Italy]. In fact, many of them were sons and daughters of Ascari, and the others knew at least one person in their family who had lived under the Italian colonial rule. In addition, until that time, not only were there more Italian entrepreneurs in Eritrea, but the number of Italians was larger in general, and many Eritreans spoke Italian. This means that Italy was a natural point of reference. Today, instead, young Eritreans are subject to multiple influences. They have access to diversified channels of information. Many already know that there are other countries in Europe that have better provisions for asylum seekers, for example higher allowances. It is true, however, that memories about Italy are still strong among some Eritrean youth. The accounts of grandmothers and grandfathers about Italy still play a role, together with stories of success and integration conveyed by the Eritrean diaspora in Italy'.

Although memories and traditions play an important role in determining the hierarchy of the countries in the preference scale, these are not the only factor. In fact, the elements taken into consideration by respondents to this study are diverse, and are related to different domains. The most common concern is that of the 'integration offer'. In the interviewees' views, the prospects for integration in the host country were very important; these included, amongst others, things such as housing rights, allowances and access to the job market (including the black market). In some cases, the treatment of foreigners by the host community was also brought up as a relevant factor, together with the notion of 'cultural proximity'. For some, this related to the existence of cultural ties with the host community. A second concern taken into consideration by respondents was the existence of personal or family links within the host community. For instance, the presence of a broader Eritrean diaspora or of family members or

friends is indeed a factor that matters in terms of the support available for the asylum seeker. A third concern is related to the accessibility of the country, that is, to how easy it is for the migrant to safely arrive in the country and to be recognised as an asylum seeker. Of course, these domains are interrelated, and individuals weigh them against each other in an assessment process that continues throughout their journey every time they gather a new piece of information about one of these domains. All of my respondents took them into account, but to different degrees. As I will explain later on, migrants collect information about these domains before and during the journey, and even after arrival. They have a relevant role not only in determining the preferred country of destination, but also in shaping later trajectories.

This is not to say that individuals always choose their intended destination prior to departure. As a matter of fact, when their situation suddenly becomes worse, individuals typically flee with no further plan than escaping the danger. However, when the moment then comes to choose the intended destination – and this can be either at the beginning or during the course of the journey – that decision reflects perceptions that had taken root in the individuals long before their departure but that were, in some cases, modified *en route*.

It is true that paths followed by migrants depend on several factors, such as the circumstances of their flight, transport availability, the shifting geography of conflicts in the region, or financial resources. As we will see later, these elements shape the options that are available to asylum seekers and determine the framework in which the abovementioned evaluation process takes place.

2.1 The journey

The central event in asylum migration – and in migration in general – is the journey. The perilous travel across borders is a powerful life-changing experience that deeply influences whoever undertakes it. The central importance of the journey is evident in asylum seekers' accounts, which are always filled with references to it. The travel clearly acts as a watershed and neat demarcations between the time 'before the journey' and 'after the journey' are common in asylum seeker discourse. In my respondents' narratives, for instance, the travel represented a clear unit in itself, imbued with a specific meaning and significance (cfr. Benezer, 2002: 9). Moreover, they related to it as a very significant part of their lives.

Powerful changes happen during these journeys that affect both the individual and the community in transformative ways. At the individual level, as I will demonstrate, the journey affects the way asylum seekers perceive themselves. As they follow their route, they are confronted with obstacles and have to negotiate dangers and to find strategies to move forward that can entail playing different roles according to their needs, and this allows them to develop a greater general resourcefulness, particularly in terms of risk awareness and of the speedy identification of opportunities. During the journey, asylum seekers are confronted with shifting normative and values systems, where attributes such as resilience, coping abilities, and norms of mutuality are either sustained or fractured by the demands of the journey (Benezer and Zetter, 2014: 311). These changes, moreover, mediate the way asylum seekers experience their arrival to the host country and, as we will see, the way they interact with the asylum system.

At the community level, their experiences affect the way in which migrants from the same society perceive themselves as a group, and their social identity, as well as

their ensuing expectations regarding the receiving society and the way it will treat them (Benezer and Zetter, 2014: 303). Eritrea represents a case in point in this respect, as the protracted mass exodus has shaped the way Eritrean society perceives itself. For instance, the Eritrean diaspora in Rome has reconstructed its identity in Italy around the myth of displacement (see Thompson, 1977).

> 'We are a diasporic country' says Daniel. 'Displacement has become an integral part of how Eritreans perceive themselves. The journey is the common denominator of the people in the Eritrean diaspora'. As I will explain in the next chapter, the journey turns into a central aspect of the group's identity in the host country, a powerful myth that affects refugees' expectations.

The asylum journey has its own characteristic spatio-temporal dimensions. For instance, the travel from Eritrea is never linear and might last for several years: life for Eritrean asylum seekers consists of rapid and hopeful transitions interspersed by long and disillusioning periods of monotonous waiting in unfriendly environments, sometimes quite similar to the one they left behind (Collyer, 2005; Schuster, 2005; Treiber, 2008). It is difficult to ascertain when their travels actually end, whether at the reception centre or refugee camp, or at the moment of arrival to the intended destination. As we will see later in the next chapter, the data gathered during this study suggests that asylum seekers continue to think in terms of 'mobility', even within the host society, and that the idea of 'arrival' is very much linked to the goals they hope to eventually achieve (for instance, in terms of different degrees of integration or fulfilment), which then come to represent the 'end' of their travel.

Furthermore, events that take place while travelling also affect asylum seekers' perceptions of the country of destination and thereby impact their strategies. Developing an understanding of asylum seekers' journeys is therefore of the utmost importance. Of course, these travels are dependent on path availability - the

permeability of the boundaries is influenced, among other factors, by geopolitical change. At the time when the fieldwork for this study was carried out, Eritrean asylum seekers relied on three main routes to escape the country[91]: the first two entailed crossing the borders with Ethiopia and Sudan respectively, while the third one involved reaching Yemen by boat. A fourth migration route was also in operation, going to Israel through the Sinai desert. Although respondents to this study followed one of these routes, some of them (13 out of 54) followed more than one route. For instance, six of my respondents had previous experiences of migrating to Arab Gulf states or to Israel[92]. These 'patchwork' experiences prove to be valuable assets for asylum seekers, as they improve their resourcefulness and general abilities, and help them to fine-tune their strategies, thus allowing them to acquire a higher status among their fellow travellers.

In the pages that follow, the journeys of four respondents, Teodros, Semira, Habel and Isaias, will be examined in greater detail. They present common characteristics to those of other respondents but the way they are told also helps to clearly illustrate important aspects of migrants' perceptions, agency and strategies.

Teodros: travelling through Ethiopia (never give up hope)

I met Teodros two days after his arrival at the Baobab refugee centre in Rome. He had landed on the Italian southern island of Lampedusa a month before, after leaving from Tripoli (Libya), crossing the '*mengedi haqin fetehen*' – 'the road of truth and justice' as Eritrean migrants call the Mediterranean Sea – by boat. and being rescued by the Italian

[91] By the time I am writing up this thesis, these paths have already been reshaped by the conflict in Yemen, by the further deterioration of the security situation in the Sinai (Egypt), by the conflict in Libya, and by the restrictive turn in Israel on asylum policies.

[92] Three of them returned to the Horn of Africa because of the obstacles they met along the way, which did not allow them to proceed further, whereas the other three returned after staying illegally for several months due to harsh circumstances and a general lack of opportunities.

Coast Gard as smugglers had left the overcrowded boat adrift as they approached Italian waters.

> 'I was lucky because I survived. Not all of us made it. People were really scared because the ship wasn't made to cross the Mediterranean and it was overcrowded. In addition, we were forced to hide under the deck where we couldn't breathe. We faced rough sea for two days before being rescued. At that time, some of us had stopped crying or screaming because we were already dead, suffocated. A woman fell from the ship and drowned. I said my last prayers because I didn't think I would make it. I was clinging to hope, hoping that God would protect us. […] When I heard the sirens I was so relieved. It was a miracle'.

Teodros' journey lasted for six years. He was 20 then, and was serving in the Eritrean Defence Forces in the Baraka Province, in an area close to the Ethiopian border. During that period, three of his comrades-in-arms disappeared; rumour had it that they had been transferred to the prison on Nokra Island, for challenging orders given by their superiors. No one, including Teodros, really knew what had happened, but according to rumours that circulated in the camp, officials were still looking for other soldiers responsible for the unknown event. As covert conversations about this continued among recruits and soldiers, Teodros and two close friends started talking about escape. Teodros feared that his commander would arrest him for being an accomplice; the official disliked him, so the young soldier feared he would take advantage of the situation to get rid of him. Escaping was the only solution, according to Teodros and his friends.

> 'Sometimes we spoke of what kind of life we would lead if we lived in the West. Kifle [one of Teodros' friends] had an uncle in Italy. He kept telling stories about how easy it was to start out there. I had heard different stories from my brother-in-law, though: that the crisis had hit Italy too and that today it was better to go to the US or to northern Europe. But how bad could that be? For sure not as bad as here! Plus, I thought that maybe it was easy to get refugee status in Italy, as many Eritreans had already been recognised as refugees. […] I thought that was partly the result of a preferential treatment because of the strong ties between us, or because

> there were many Eritreans there that were already working without creating problems'.

Teodros and his friends finally decided to leave. The first step was crossing the border – which was close enough – to get to Ethiopia. One of them had previously spoken to a villager, who told him that there was a refugee camp not too far away from the border. So Teodros and his friends agreed that they would try to get to the camp – Shimelba – and then decide what to do next. The group was of Tigray origins, so they were confident that they would get help from Ethiopians if needed, as that area is populated by Tigrinyas on both sides of the border[93].

In spite of the government's orders for sentries to shoot anyone attempting to cross the border, Teodros and his friend escaped at night and entered Ethiopia. Other respondents opted to bribe the Eritrean officials in charge of patrolling the border, in order to cross more safely.

> 'My lungs were bursting. We ran so fast… I thought I would die. I never looked back, I just kept on going straight. I ran for one hour before I stopped and checked out if Kifle and Biniam had managed to cross as well. They did. We wanted to rest but we decided to keep moving instead. We were afraid that the patrols[94] were looking for us'.

After walking the whole following day, Teodros, Kifle and Biniam reached Shimelba[95]. This refugee camp dates back to the early 2000s, having been set up at the time of the 1998 border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. When the Ethiopian troops withdrew from Eritrea in June 2000, they were followed into Ethiopia by Kunama and Tigrinya farmers (cfr. Treiber and Tesfaye, 2008: 284). At first, these farmers settled in the

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[93] There are close links between the Tigray region (Ethiopia) and the bordering territories in Eritrea. In fact, the majority of its population (almost 97%) belongs to the Tigray people, which is also present in the northern and central areas of Eritrea.

[94] Eritrean patrols routinely enter Ethiopian territory to search for deserters.

[95] The Shimelba refugee camp is one of the main camps that Eritrean asylum seekers try to reach. The other camps are May Aini and Hitats. By the end of 2014, 110,950 Eritreans were assisted by UNHCR in these camps (UNHCR 2014b).

border area, in Wa'ala Nihibi[96]. However, when this provisional camp started growing due to a continuing flow of migrants from Eritrea, Ethiopian authorities decided to move it further from the border, fearing the risk of weapon smuggling, and of being infiltrated by Eritrean spies, insurgents and agitators. The closeness to the border also increases the migrants' perception of insecurity, as, according to my respondents, they are aware of numerous cases of intrusion by the Eritrean army or PFDJ spies, that ended with the arrest or the killing of several Eritreans who had fled the country.

As scholars like Treiber and Tesfaye (amongst others) have pointed out, Shimelba is located at the bottom of a hill, where several Ethiopian and International offices are positioned. The camp is overlooked by several NGOs, the UNHCR office for the camp and the Ethiopian 'Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs' (ARRA): in terms of spatial semantics, this creates an opposition between the 'top' (the relief agencies) and the 'bottom' (the recipients of aid) (Treiber and Tesfaye, 2008: 284). Living conditions are usually difficult. There are no provisions under Ethiopian law for the local integration of refugees (see Kibreab 2004). While the country has reservations about the 1951 Convention, notably to Articles 17-19, it does support an out-of-camp scheme that allows refugees to live outside refugee camps and to engage in activities in the informal sector in order to earn a living[97] (UNHCR 2014b: 1). The possibility of entering and exiting the camps without any significant controls, combined with their location close to the border, facilitates illegal practices such as smuggling and trafficking.

[96] Wa'ala Nihibi is located on the road between Sheraro (Ethiopia) and Badme, the disputed territory that was at the origin of the 1998 war. Currently, Badme is controlled by Ethiopia, despite the 2002 ruling of the Border Commission, which placed Badme in Eritrean territory.

[97] Officially, the main beneficiaries so far have been students attending universities, whose fees are paid by the Government (75 per cent) and UNHCR (25 per cent).

Figure 10 – Infirmary in Shimelba.

Within the camp, ordinary life patterns are produced and reproduced. This can be noticed at first sight as different neighbourhoods exist in the camp whose features reflect different life styles. On one side, *tuculs*, the traditional Eritrean sheds topped with straw roofs, are scattered in the area where Kunama families from rural Eritrea live. On the other side there is a livelier area mainly populated by young Eritreans from the major cities. There, shops and gathering places, such as small cafés, tentatively re-create the atmosphere of Asmara's urban environment.

> 'They [the residents of the aforementioned area of the camp] live as if they were in Asmara or Massawa…Only, they sit around all day because of lack of work, listening to loud music. It makes people feel as if they were at home' says Teodros.

Figure 11 - A blacksmith in Shimelba.

Figure 12 – Shops in Shimelba.

People in the camp live in limbo, many waiting to hopefully be relocated somewhere else (especially the US and Canada), others just lingering around and trying to organise the next stage of their journey towards the north. Living in the camp is considered a transitory state by most, even though many of them actually end up being 'stationed' there for several years, eventually settling and setting up businesses – a condition that bespeaks sedentariness rather than mobility. According to Makele, another respondent who stayed in the Shimelba camp for a year before leaving for Europe,

> 'People pretend to believe that they will leave some day soon, even though, deep inside their hearts, they know they won't and that's why they organise their life in the camp. I think that for them it's very difficult to accept to be trapped there [in the camp]'.

Focusing on mobility, then, represent a strategy to deal with this limbo situation and to ward off depression.

During the day, people (mostly men) sit in cafés and talk about the future. Accounts of people who just arrived are listened to with great curiosity and information is exchanged about what is happening in neighbouring countries or in the 'First World'. According to Teodros,

> 'In the camp, we would hear men discuss the latest developments. […] I mean, things like the best routes and the best places to go, for example. They were curious about how we got there, and whether we were planning to stay or to move on. They said the safest route for Europe was through Addis Ababa, then to Libya. They told me I should speak to a man. He had contacts with people in charge of the business [smuggling] and with people in Europe who had managed to get there. […] Kifle and I met this man at the Dolphin Café, he said that he had a contact, that he could bring us to Sudan and put us in contact with somebody else. However, he needed time to arrange everything, and it would cost us 1000 USD to get to Sudan. That was a favourable price he said. […] As for the final route, he said it was better to go to Italy than to Malta. It was safer, he said, because the boats are usually rescued [by the coast guard]'.

Teodros' account clearly illustrates how perceptions are shared, reproduced and reinforced within the camp. It can be considered an 'epicentre' for the diffusion of rumours and perceptions; as a matter of fact, it becomes the main hub for communication and the exchange of information between Eritrea and the diaspora abroad, through networks that are developed within the camp[98]. It is also the space where perceptions are shaped through the elaboration of fictional futures: residents imagine desired outcomes in order to better tolerate present deprivations and bad living conditions (Schiffauer, 1991: 172). Hope, then, plays a key role in this process, as those trapped in delayed resettlement procedures anticipate brighter futures elsewhere. Moreover, their dependence on aid from NGOs, the UNHCR, ARRA, etc. has a detrimental impact on the self-perception of many refugees, who see themselves as recipients of aid rather than independent individuals able to provide for themselves. As we will see in the next chapter, the flip side of this coin is that it does not only result in disempowerment, but also in a sense of entitlement to passively receive aid, including in the country of destination.

As Teodros' narrative points out, an essential strategy is to identify individuals with key roles within the camp. These are people that have connections to smugglers or to travel facilitators - as well as to individuals abroad willing to fund the travel of fellow-nationals in exchange for the payment of high interest rates – and who also have convenient links to the camp administration. Informal political pressure groups exist in the camp, who are able to push one's cause and to cut waiting times. As Teodros explains,

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[98] According to the data I gathered, communications between residents in the camp and their friends and/or relatives in the Diaspora are frequent. Several among my interviewees said that people living in the camp received financial help from their relatives abroad in order to start potentially profitable economic activities, that would allow them to save up for further travelling, to pay debts to smugglers or to better survive.

> ‘In the camp, we were introduced to Tekle, a 32-year-old Eritrean man who had lived in the camp for 6 years and who was waiting as he hoped to be relocated. He knew a lot of people there [in the camp] and, because he had been there for such a long time, he was the person many turned to for advice. He had also befriended a guy from the UNHCR, so he knew a lot of things about the correct procedures to obtain things. People also contacted him because they thought that he could influence and expedite the [resettlement] process, or help to obtain larger food rations or primary commodities’.

Teodros and his friends stayed in the camp for eight months before leaving again. The man that the young Eritrean mentions in his account contacted other individuals in the smuggling network and arranged for them to leave the camp for Addis Ababa, and from there to Khartoum. It took them 8 months of work in the camp to raise money as a deposit. Since it was not sufficient, Kifle asked his cousin in Italy to send more. The rest of the payment was to be made upon arrival in Khartoum. This was actually a very favourable condition, as payments are usually requested upfront by smugglers since the risk of asylum seekers not arriving alive to their destination is so very high. This agreement, according to the man they were in contact with, guaranteed that they would arrive to their destination as smugglers had a greater incentive to keep them alive. Furthermore, he suggested to Teodros and his friends to say that the payment would be made by a contact in Khartoum once they arrived, to discourage smugglers from robbing them along the way or, at best, from abandoning them in the middle of nowhere. In Teodros’ view,

> ‘He gave us good advice. He was very experienced; he knew how things worked. So I always remembered his advice. Even afterwards, when I had to deal with travelling on my own, I always followed those instructions’.

Teodros and his friend did not stay long in Addis Ababa. They hid in a safe house for one week before continuing their journey, as controls were frequent. One night, a van picked them up and brought them to Goha, a small town in the eastern Beshangi region that lay

close to the border. From there, the three men walked with a local guide until they reached the border, where they were expecting to find another intermediary who would bring them to Khartoum. However, while crossing the border they were intercepted by Ethiopian guards. Only Teodros managed to cross, only to realise that there was no vehicle on the other side.

> 'I was scared; I didn't know what to do really. Couldn't see the others. I could only hear some open fire and men shouting. I just decided to keep going. […] I walked a long distance, all night long. In the morning I saw an old car approaching, they said they were looking for me. I asked them if they knew about what had happened at the border. They said it was our fault because we were too early. We probably ran into a border patrol. […] They brought me to Khartoum and locked me in a small room in a flat. They said I should pay for my friends too. Even if they didn't make it'.

This setback forced Teodros to work in order to repay his (and his friends') debts. As is often the case, he lived clandestinely for four years in Khartoum, which is a very difficult environment for Eritreans as many other informants also point out (Semira's story will be informative in this respect). Living clandestinely exposes asylum seekers to all kind of dangers. As they 'do not exist' in the country, once they are apprehended by local security forces, organ traffickers or criminals, they can easily disappear. Recalling his time in Sudan, Teodros pointed out that several of his companions in misfortune – he and other illegal migrants shared a flat owned by members of the smuggling network – simply disappeared.

> 'I learned not to ask questions about it [the disappearances]. I guess some were caught and imprisoned, but others were sold by the smugglers to traffickers, either to ask their families for ransom[99] or to extract organs for wealthy people. I also think that life was so hard and the debts so difficult to repay that some might well have sold a kidney or something else in order to repay their debts and try to move on. […] Escaping was not an option in Sudan. Where would I go without knowing the place?'.

[99] The 'Eritrean business', as they call it, is considered to be more profitable than others by smugglers and traffickers. Eritrean illegal migrants are known for being able to mobilise more money thanks to the large diaspora.

In this type of 'underground' situation, asylum seekers rely even more on the faintest of rumours. In such dire straits, for example, Teodros and his roommates would gather together after work and share whatever news they got during the day. Major events were the rare calls some of them managed to make to their family either in Eritrea or abroad. These were occasions when it was possible to get information that was deemed reliable about how to move on, or to receive news about the funding made available to them (in some cases entire villages collected money to fund the journey). News about other travelling individuals acquainted with the family or the people in the village were also transmitted during those calls, thereby impacting asylum seekers' perceptions of the country of destination. For instance, one of Teodros' roommates 'had news that getting to Italy was safer than getting to Malta, even though, if you want to go to Denmark or somewhere else, you shouldn't get your fingerprints taken[100]'.

Finally, four years after his arrival in Khartoum, Teodros managed to continue his journey towards Libya. When the time came, the young Eritrean approached a man he had heard of from his roommates as a reliable person to arrange the travel to Libya. However, the smuggler refused to arrange the trip, unless Teodros recruited more people to travel with him, thereby changing Teodros' role from that of smuggled person to that of facilitator/intermediary. After three months of travelling across arduous Lybian terrain using different modes of transport (by vehicle or on foot) Teodros reached Tripoli[101].

After the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, and the establishment of two different governments, one in Tripoli and the other in Tobruk, the chaos in Libya has opened up new possibilities for criminal networks to operate in its lawless environment. So in the

[100] This is possibly a reference to the Dublin Asylum Regulations and the EURODAC procedures.
[101] During this stage, he was travelling with a group of six people, to whom a further eight were added on the way.

last few years Libya has become a prominent hub for illegal trafficking and smuggling, and the main departure point towards Italy[102]. The business of illegal migration has flourished even more. Migrants leave from several coastal areas, such as Khums, Benghazi, Garabulli, Gargaresh, Misrata, Sabratah, Tajoura, Tripoli, Zawia, Zliten and Zuwarah. Moreover, migrants coming from sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East pass through the area delimited by Oubari, Sebha and Marzuq.

In Tripoli, Teodros once more adopted a strategy of 'minimal visibility', in order to avoid being arrested:

> 'A fellow traveller had told me that people who enter the Libyan jails never get out. They do terrible things to you. They even deport you to the desert and let you die there. […] So, I didn't want to stay in Libya for a long period, just the necessary time to organise the transfer to Italy. […] I didn't use to go out in the streets a lot, I tried to keep a low profile'.

The security situation in Libya was critical, due to confrontations between different militias. In this context, smugglers from Sudan relied on their connections to networks inside the country. In Teodros' case, a boat was found that could take him from Tripoli after only two weeks. Very interestingly, a fellow Eritrean who was also travelling to Italy told Teodros that he had a cellular phone and a number to call a person in Italy that would warn the Italian coast guard that a boat was adrift, in case things went bad. This strategy has proved to be very common and, most importantly, effective. As in Teodros' case, many migrants have been rescued by the Italian coast guard, thus strengthening the perception that, even though the risks are still very high, reaching Italy is safer than reaching Greece, for example, since according to the migrants, Italians are better at and more willing to rescue migrant vessels than Greek authorities.

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[102] According to data provided by the Ministry of the Interior, in 2014, 83% of the total number of migrants arriving in Italy (170,100), came through Libya.

Semira and Amang : Khartoum as a migration crossroad

I first met Semira, an Eritrean middle-class woman, at the Baobab refugee centre in Rome in 2013, when she was 19 years old. Daniel – the Eritrean director of the centre – found her a job as a cook there, after he met her at another refugee centre for women and families. Her journey was easier than most, but certain aspects of her narrative shed light on the situation in Sudan.

Semira lost her father at a very early age, so she grew up living with her uncle in Asmara. They were very close, so when the girl started high school, her uncle started worrying that her niece would soon be conscripted or harassed. This fear was also fuelled by the fact that they were Evangelists, which was considered illegal. Therefore, when Semira reached the age of 17, her uncle started mobilising his resources in order to find a way to safely take her out of the country. According to Semira,

> 'My uncle told my mother that it was a good idea for me to leave the country, but in a safe way. They didn't tell me until they found a way to do that. […] My uncle had many important friends, being an official at the time of the *Gedli* [the War for Independence]. He knew that a friend of his, in particular, had a position at the visa office[103]'.

Semira's uncle's plan was to make her leave the country with an exit visa for visiting a relative in Khartoum[104]. Once there, he believed she could be employed in his brother-in-law's business. He wanted at all costs to avoid the dangerous journey by land, which is mostly undertaken by men. Strategies adopted by women mostly consist in finding safer – and therefore more costly - modes of travelling, which put them at less risk of violence, or they opt to marry a husband living abroad, in order to benefit from family

[103] Semira could not specify what office and under which ministry.
[104] Semira's uncle's brother-in-law had migrated to Sudan during the war and was running a profitable business in Khartoum.

reunification procedures. This partly explains why migration from Eritrea is such a gender-specific phenomenon, with flows that are mostly male-dominated.

Many respondents to this study report having crossed the border with Sudan. In many cases their trajectory entails moving from Asmara to Barentu, and from there to Tesenei and then Kassala. Their intention is to reach Sudan in order to migrate towards North African countries, and then to Europe, where they usually try to reach those countries where there is a strong Eritrean community, including Italy. In most cases they have recourse to smugglers to do so, including high-ranking officials in the Sudanese Army, who also have ties to the smuggling networks. Police and other security officials are also involved insofar as they are often bribed. Migrants consider the border with Sudan easier to cross, as border posts are easier to avoid.

As in Teodros' case, once they enter Sudan many migrants are stationed in refugee camps. Amang, for instance, a young Eritrean man from northern Eritrea, arrived in the Shagarab refugee camp (East Sudan, located in the Kessala region),

> 'I entered the refugee camp, but I didn't register. Other migrants I met on the way told me not to, unless I wanted to stay there. […] The thing is that you can always escape from the camp, but if you register then it is possible that you'll have more controls. […] I realised that the camp wasn't safe, because people disappeared suddenly. Also, smugglers in the camp aren't to be trusted, as they are mostly Sudanese. I bet that some of them pass information to the Eritrean government!'.

As Amang reported, abductions from the camp are very frequent. As a UNHCR official confirmed,

> 'these practices are usually the work of Sudanese and Eritrean fellow nationals from the Rashaida and the Hidarib Bedouin tribes. Another problem in the camp is that reportedly, there are links between some people in the camp and Eritrean agents. Furthermore, the Kessala region is not considered safe for Eritrean refugees, as the regional government allows the Eritrean military forces to deport deserters back to Eritrea. Therefore, draft dodgers tend to use the camp as a temporary base to

> organise further travel. Some of them come from camps in Ethiopia. In fact, mobility between camps is high[105]'.

In the Kessala region, a sort of 'border economy' has begun to emerge in the last 10 years, benefiting not only smugglers, but also robbers who attack the crossing refugees. They do so with the tacit support of corrupt Sudanese and Eritrean military staff, of the local population, and of *warsay* or migrants with good connections in the country (see also Treiber and Gebereigthabher, 2009).

Figure 13 – A temporary Eritrean settlement in the Kessala region.

[105] This was confirmed by data gathered for this study: most of the respondents who were first staying in one of the Ethiopian camps reported having moved to the Sudanese camps as part as their migration journey.

People involved in this parallel economy also hold valuable information for asylum seekers. As in the Shimelba camp, information also circulates in the Sudanese camps. According to Amang,

> 'I made contact with smugglers through a friend of mine who was already in the camp. He married in the camp, so he really couldn't leave the camp with his wife. So he was postponing his journey. […] Anyway he had all the information about who to turn to. And the people in the camp knew what was going on and where it was best to go. They were talking about it a lot. I told them I wanted to go to Sweden, because there are better provisions for asylum seekers. But I didn't want to go through Greece, but through Italy. […] In any case, even if I have to stay in Italy, that's ok, I thought. I could always then try to move north; Italians are lazy in their controls! But Italy is better than Greece. They [smugglers] told me there were two possibilities: from Khartoum, I could either go to Tripoli or to Cairo'.

As it is, Khartoum represents a major crossroads for migrants: on the one hand, it gives them the possibility to fly to destinations all over the world; on the other hand, it also opens routes by land to Tripoli or Cairo.

Once in Khartoum, Semira stayed at her relatives' place. However, she lived in a very precarious situation, both in terms of her own safety and of that of her host family, who in order to avoid repercussions would not allow her to go out in the streets alone or to meet anyone. It is very important to speak Arabic in Khartoum. Eritrean refugees who do so have more freedom to move around and are less likely to be robbed, tricked, or harassed. Furthermore, non-Muslim strangers, such as Semira, face discrimination and are often the victims of round-ups or assaults.

The girl's situation worsened three months after her arrival, when she learned that her uncle had been considered responsible for her flight and incarcerated. However he had been given the chance to buy himself out of prison for 3000 USD. This is a common strategy used by the Eritrean regime, which is notoriously in need of foreign

currency, to even turn desertion into a way of filling its own coffers. At this point, Semira's relatives refused to help her pay her uncle's bail. In her words,

> 'They told me they couldn't help me. That it was already dangerous for them that I stayed there, since I was Christian, and that it wasn't good for their business. At that point, I had already made up my mind that I wanted to leave. I didn't want to live in such a place, where I didn't have any options about my future. No further education. No possibility to find a job and to be independent. I used to spend time on the internet, looking at places to go and how to get there. There were several online forums about this. […] I decided that I wanted to come to Italy because Asmara is like Italy. And my uncle had taught me some word in Italian, that he learned from his father. I thought it would be easier. […] I also knew there were many Eritreans in Italy. […] So, I told my relatives that I wanted to leave, so they could be better off and I could go to a place with more possibilities for me to earn money and to free my uncle. I asked them to give me some money to buy a ticket, that I would return it with interests once I found a job. They were reluctant but in the end they agreed.'

Semira then flew to Rome where she claimed asylum at the border. She got her papers from the Eritrean embassy in Khartoum. This is not surprising, as the embassy in Khartoum will issue a passport for about 100USD within a few days, ever since the Ethiopian embassy began to do so. This has become a part of the ongoing rivalry between the two countries;, emigrants to the West represent a future influx of cash and are therefore considered a government investment[106] (see on this Treiber and Gebereigthabher, 2009).

As for Amang, he ended up going to Cairo as a step on his journey to Libya and then to the European shores. Generally speaking, Cairo is safer than Khartoum. Like Sudan, however, Egypt has transferred its general refugee administration to the UNHCR, but it nevertheless retains its national sovereignty in all fields. The UNCHR , contrary to

[106] This practice is convenient for the Eritrean government, as it turns illegal migrants into a source of revenue (they have to pay 2% income tax once they join the diaspora). The government also profits for the remittances these migrants send home.

the image it projects in the West, actually remains largely powerless and tied up by bureaucratic hurdles (Treiber and Gebereigthabher, 2009).

Opting for a strategy of maximal invisibility (see on this also Kibreab, 1999), Amang and other Eritrean migrants used to meet in specific neighbourhoods, such as Ard al-Liwa (in Giza), where relevant information and rumours could be shared and discussed. According to Amang's account,

> 'I used to go to a teahouse in Ard al-Liwa. Contacts in the camp [Shagarab] told me I should look for a Tunisian named Ali, who was in charge of the business [smuggling]. They gave me a description, so I went to the teahouse for a week, every day, to find the man. I could have asked but it is never a smart strategy. You have to be sure that it is him you are talking to, and you don't want to be noticed. In the end I saw that there was this man who was meeting different people very frequently, and had a different accent. So I approached him and told him who sent me. That's how we arranged everything'.

Amang managed to go to Benghazi and from there he left for Italy after only one week. He is one of the 47 survivors of a shipwreck in the Mediterranean that took place in May 2014.

Habel's and Isaias' failed migration to the Gulf and routes to Israel

Although most of the respondent to this study reported having travelled through Ethiopia and Sudan, a few told me of their previous migration experiences in the Gulf, and these, even if they turned out to be unsuccessful, represented a practice run for their later migration to Europe, especially in terms of learning how to negotiate risks during the asylum journey.

Among them, two brothers, Habel and Isaias, told me of their migration to the wealthy Gulf states in 2012, in particular to Saudi Arabia, having been attracted by the possibility of working and of earning more money. Both of them first tried to reach

Yemen by boat. This trajectory was not particularly difficult, for two main reasons: first, it only takes one night to reach Yemen from the closest point of Eritrea, the Dancalia area; secondly, the Eritrean Army does not have the means to carry out controls at sea. However, travelling through Yemen exposes refugees to another great risk: security is very poor given the presence of jihadists, and kidnappings are therefore very frequent. Clandestine migrants represent a source of income, as they can be either exploited or used to extract a ransom from their families; this has gotten much worse following the recent Yemeni crisis. Trafficking in the area, as well as in the Sinai desert, has become a real business. As Isaias points out,

> 'I've heard several cases of people who were kidnapped and tortured. Not only in Yemen, but also in the Sinai, on the way to Israel. Eritreans are more vulnerable than people from other nationalities, since we are more appealing to traffickers'.

Traffickers and criminal groups are well aware that, because of the support they receive from the Eritrean community (and the diaspora), Eritreans are able to pay higher prices.

Habel and Isaias managed to reach Saudi Arabia without any major incidents, as they were travelling in a group. According to Habel,

> 'We were four leaving from Eritrea. Several fishermen in Assab profit by transporting migrants to Dhubab, in Yemen. One of them brought us on his boat together with two other Eritreans from the region. Once in Dhubab, our contact [contacted over the internet, after being recommended to him by other people who had previously migrated to the Gulf] was waiting for us together with other migrants. […] We paid upfront and were stowed in the back of a truck, under the seats'.

Once they reached Saudi Arabia, the Eritrean brothers found employment as labourers in the construction sector. Those who manage to reach Saudi Arabia were usually employed as unskilled labourers or as domestic staff, often through a system of

"sponsorship": if illegal migrants work for a Saudi citizen (who becomes their 'Tehir" or sponsor), they do not need to be regularised as the sponsor vouches for the migrants. However, the sponsor has an enormous power over the migrants in his/her service: if the sponsor decides they are not needed anymore, the migrants are brought to the police, to be either expelled or detained if they are guilty of committing some crime or offence (see De Bel-Air ,2014; and van Reisen et al., 2013).

However, since March 2013 the Kingdom has faced such a constant inflow of migrants from the Horn of Africa and South Asia that it has put stricter rules in place in order to limit the presence of illegal immigrants, and it has reformed its job market legislation. Moreover, it has repatriated almost 2 million illegal workers, most of them from Ethiopia and Yemen, and it tries to control movements at the Yemeni border, partly by constructing a 1,800 km fence between the two countries. These new developments, together with army operations against the Houthis in Yemen and the general instability that characterises the region, have made it more difficult for Eritreans to reach the Gulf countries, and it is yet to be seen whether the flow will be diverted onto other routes.

Habel and Isaias returned to Eritrea after eight months, as the circumstances were not favourable, in order to try to reach Italy instead (which they did in 2014). At that point, they had acquired valuable knowledge about how not to be tricked by traffickers, how to pass through a border crossing post, etc. According to Habel,

> 'Travelling through Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya to reach the First World was not easy of course. But we knew what to expect as we had already confronted these kinds of dangers when we fled to Saudi Arabia. We were more experienced than other migrants. So when we were staying with them in the safe-houses, they would ask us or the others about our previous experience. […] I think this was to see whether they could learn any useful lesson from us that they didn't want to ask us directly. […] Maybe they didn't want to ask because they didn't want to hear about people being

> tortured and other sad stories, and also because you never know who to trust'.

As previously mentioned, sharing information with fellow travellers is an important tool to reproduce and change perceptions about routes and destinations.

Another route that is worth mentioning is the one going to Israel. Although none of my respondents reported having followed this trajectory, many knew about relatives and friends who had. This is a really dangerous route, as it entails travelling from the coast by sea or through Egypt by land. The risks pertain to trafficking and to the practice of torture in the Sinai region; there is also the risk of being imprisoned in Egypt, or of being pushed back from the Israeli border (van Reisen et al., 2013).

Smugglers are very active in Egypt. There are specific places in Cairo where migrants know they can contact smugglers: specific cafés, small retail stores or small money exchange offices. However, the risk of being tricked and to fall prey to trafficking is really high: once in the hands of the smugglers, the migrant is asked for ever more money. If the new amount is not paid, the victims are tortured and forced to call their families back home, their friends or their relatives in the diaspora. According to earlier research, the majority of the victims of trafficking in the Sinai are Eritreans (van Reisen et al. 2013). However the refugees interviewed for the purpose of this study stated that Eritreans who decide to go to Israel are very few, as most of them are discouraged by the tales of hardships told by fellow nationals, or by a third party. Eritreans refugees seem to be more vulnerable than people of other nationalities, as they are more appealing to traffickers, who usually ask for a higher ransom from them: they are aware that thanks to the Eritrean community (and the diaspora), Eritreans are able to pay higher prices. Being deported back to Eritrea is another possible outcome. Despite the fact that Egypt is party to all the relevant international conventions and legal

instruments designed to combat human trafficking (see Law n. 64), it *de facto* criminalises the victims of trafficking. If traffickers are arrested by the army or the police forces, their hostages are put in detention centres, sometimes for several months (even though Egyptian national Law n.64 in theory provides some form of victim protection) and they are not entered into the asylum system. Moreover, they have no access to legal advice or to translators. Their only way out is to be deported back to their home country, but first they have to collect enough money to pay for the travel expenses.

In Israel the situation was very difficult as well. After Israel built a fence on its border with Egypt, the number of migrants entering Israel dropped drastically. Moreover, Israeli law metes out severe punishments to so-called "infiltrators", that is, to anyone crossing the border illegally[107]. The law, for instance, mandates the imprisonment of asylum seekers in closed or open facilities, for three years or more before their deportation. In these camps, asylum seekers are encouraged to leave voluntarily. Some Eritreans still try to enter the country by pretending that they are Jewish Ethiopians[108]. Moreover, in 2013, Israel launched a repatriation program targeting African migrants (estimated by the government to number about 60,000). This was partially suspended at the end of 2013, following public demonstrations outside the Parliament.

[107] This law came into force for the first time in 1954, and it is the first one that refers to illegal migrants as 'infiltrators'. At the beginning, this was used to refer to Palestinians, but in 2012 it was amended to also include African migrants as well.

[108] Ethiopia has long had a significant Jewish population (also called Beta Israel), in particular in the Ahmara and Tigray regions. The Mossad has evacuated many members of this community to Israel through covert operations, such as "Operation Moses",, the evacuation of the 14th Jewish tribe, the Falasha, from Ethiopia to Israel in 1984-1985, and "Operation Solomon", the evacuation of Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa in 1991.

2.2 The importance of emotions and the circulation of information

The examples presented above illustrate how asylum seekers develop different strategies, at various points of their journey, and they also highlight how these strategies are shaped by an interaction between emotions and perceptions. Moreover, they show that the circulation of information changes perceptions. These two elements will now be the focus of a more in-depth analysis.

The role of emotions

Attempting an exhaustive analysis of the role of emotions in changing people's situations is beyond the scope of this research; nevertheless, the data gathered provides material to explore the interrelation between the emotions experienced by asylum seekers and their agency.

Emotions permeate all dimensions of social existence; they are part of our response to our environment, and they shape our actions (Reed 2004:664). According to Jack Katz (1999), emotions are invisible forces that provide a form of mediation between *embodied* subjectivity (i.e. the bodied individual/self) and *perceived* objectivity (e.g., the social environment, 'other' people).

> 'Emotions are situation-responsive and situation-transcendent narrative projects that allow an individual to navigate social situations or to establish ontological security when unforeseen, unexpected, or extra-ordinary circumstances violate an individual's *embodied* sense of social reality' (Katz, 1999: 6-7).

In other words, emotions must be understood as a sort of 'existential toolkit' that links a personal problem to a broader issue and helps to elicit a response that is adequate in order to overcome the problem.

In general, from a psychological-cognitive point of view, the way individuals navigate social contexts depends on how they perceive the surrounding environment. More specifically, the feeling that a certain situation is too difficult or too easy indicates whether the individual in question finds himself on a familiar or an unfamiliar path, and whether habitual or new actions are needed as a response (Reed, 2004: 666). For example, asylum seekers who suddenly find themselves in new circumstances have to find strategies to cope with the new environment in a way that minimises the damage to themselves. Usually, this is done automatically, in an unreflective way, but it is possible to argue that perceptions and emotions have a prominent role in this process.

When individuals find themselves in a situation that violates their expectations of reality, emotions serve several purposes. First of all, they amplify the perception that the situation in which individuals find themselves is indeed unfamiliar. Secondly, their emotional response helps individuals to recognize how their behaviour relates to a wider interactional context that they typically take for granted and that shapes their experience (Reed, 2004: 665). This happens when asylum seekers feel that they are in the hands of forces beyond their control. In this way, emotions help individuals who find themselves in unknown circumstances to re-define their situation, to determine possible courses of action, and to overcome the situation. In other words, emotions help to interpret, construct and transcend a given situation.

Furthermore, as emotions are historically and culturally situated – that is, as their nature depends on the historical and cultural context – they can help to determine the severity and urgency of a given problem, to understand what actions will be feasible and efficient as a response, and, ultimately, to determine how to transcend their earlier perception of their environment (as being more or less hostile than before), in order to re-evaluate their actions (Reed 2004, 666).

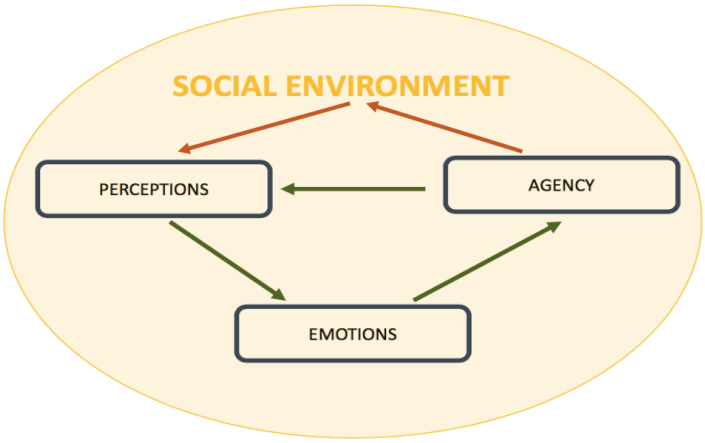

Figure 14- Model of interactions between perceptions, emotions and agency.

Emotions, therefore, can be understood as toolkits that shape agency, thereby leading individuals to overcome unknown situations. Furthermore, as Reddy points out, emotions are both an individual and a collective medium of communication that embodies the revolutionary-political, often in the absence of favourable opportunity contexts (2000: 115).

If emotions help individuals to shape appropriate courses of actions, in the case of the accounts of asylum seekers, two different emotions were predominant: hope and fear. The two had different repercussions on the respondents' agency. Hope has an empowering effect (see Jasper, 1997: 114), as it leads migrants to look forward to a better situation in the future. Hope allows individuals to project themselves in the future, to evaluate their goals, and to determine the best way to reach them. This ability to mentally project themselves in the future can also, as we have seen, represent a strategy for migrants to mentally 'escape' from a dire situation, thereby reducing their overall levels of distress.

If hope has a strong transformative potential, fear can clearly thwart migration projects, but it can also encourage people to take action. Fear helps actors to realise

where their interests lie, and can point them in the right direction to achieve them (Barbalet, 1998: 149).

Asylum seekers' accounts show that even if emotions can be pre-reflective and individuals occasionally overwhelmed by them, this does not mean that they always neutralise an individual's ability to pursue specific goals. On the contrary, they become a constituent part of the process that helps individuals to realise these goals. Emotions are not 'irrational' in the sense that they do not challenge reason (Read, 2004: 664). Instead, emotions and reason are mutually constitutive. My research highlights the extent to which emotions are 'rational', insofar as they represent logical ways of responding to specific events or situations.

The importance of the circulation of information

The accounts of Eritrean asylum seekers highlight the great extent to which information circulates among them. In all the examples given above and, one could even say, in all the interviews conducted for this study, there are numerous allusions to what asylum seekers *knew* or *heard* about changing circumstances elsewhere, that led them to leave, to choose or avoid specific routes, that shaped the way they dealt with traffickers, that informed their perception of the provisions in receiving countries, and so on. As we have seen, by influencing their perceptions of certain problems, this type of information – which we will call *rumours* - shapes their agency.

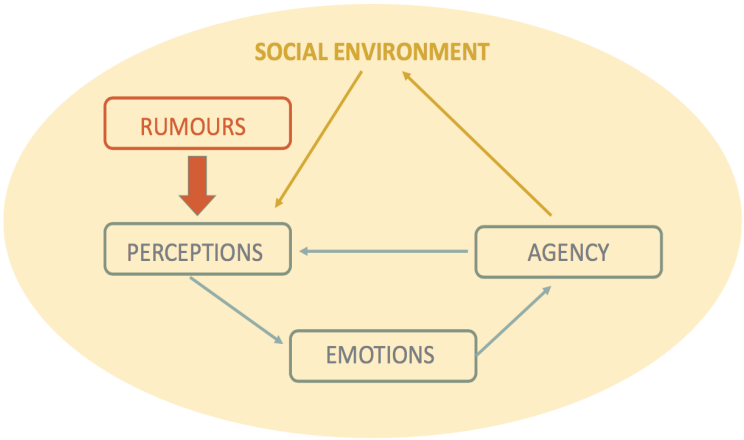

Figure 15 - Role of rumours in the model of interactions between perceptions, emotions and agency.

For the purposes of this study, rumours will be defined as unverified news that emerge in ambiguous contexts characterised by information scarcity. Oman (1918), Prasad (1935), R. H. Knapp (1944), Carrard (1953), and Shibutani (1966) have all specified that rumours develop where there exists an unsatisfied need for information. Individuals who find themselves in new circumstances very often act on the basis on rumours, not because they really believe them, but because they believe it would be unwise to disregard them. As Efrem puts it,

> 'I heard that it was better to cross at Tessenei. I really wasn't sure if it was true, but I couldn't take the risk. If so many people were saying it, maybe there was a reason'.

Asylum migration movements represent a very favourable environment for the emergence of rumours. These movements are triggered by problematic situations over which individuals have little control. Events suddenly become the focus of excessive attention since they break the individuals' usual routine, which is normally based on predictable expectations. As Shibutani points out, each individual shapes his conduct from moment to moment according to a pattern of normal expectations, and any departure requires some reorientation, however slight this may be (1966:35-36). In a way, as asylum seekers project their expectations about what may or may not happen

onto the wider environment, they become sensitive to the cues that are relevant to understand whether their expectations are going to be fulfilled. If expectations are already firmly established, then fewer cues are needed to confirm them (Shibutani, 1966: 86).

When expectations are not fulfilled, the need to adjust one's perception of the environment becomes more pressing, in order to formulate a new and adequate response. In this context, action is temporarily suspended pending a better definition of the environment. Individuals are confronted with an information gap that they need to fill, and therefore the demand for pertinent news increases. However, it is important to stress that, as Shibutani's ground-breaking work points out, it is not so much the intrinsic importance of an event as the existence of a problematic situation that converts what would otherwise be an ordinary piece of information into news. Whenever the situation is ambiguous, whenever there are alternatives to be weighed, whenever important decisions have to be made, any item that might affect the outcome becomes "live matter" (1966: 40).

If there is a shortage of useful information from reputable sources, or if the available information is not trusted – as is the case with Eritrean government information (in general, censorship increases rather than decreases the importance of rumours) – then the ambiguity of the situation remains unresolved and, consequently, the information gap remains unfilled and action cannot be undertaken. Therefore, a definition must be improvised. Rumour is the collective transaction that makes improvisation possible (Shibutani, 1966: 57). As Hudson (1954) points out in his work, the first step in solving this ambiguity through the construction of rumours is to project hypotheses. As Teodros' account makes clear, what finally pushed him into escaping from Eritrea was the fear of being killed or arrested, after some of his comrades

suddenly disappeared and the explanation that began to circulate among *warsays* was that they had been arrested. Amang, on the other hand, saw that people were disappearing from the refugee camp in Sudan where he was staying; he explained it by hypothesising that they had been kidnapped by traffickers.

During asylum migration, the need for action may arise very quickly: some situations call for very rapid responses. This leads to a very rapid circulation of rumours among the relevant audience. This includes everyone who is potentially interested by the ambiguous event, that is, everyone who is preoccupied by it because he/she can potentially be affected by it. In fact, as the literature points out, 'an area of preoccupation is one that is unstable and only partially organised; a preoccupation represents a mobilisation to act that has been interrupted. The initial selection of topics of conversation occurs on the basis of shared interest. Rumours are always timely; they are usually a better index of the preoccupation of a public than most other forms of verbalisation.' (Shibutani, 1966: 64-65). Of course, the more important the event, the more rumours will begin to circulate about it.

As asylum migration relies on smuggling or trafficking channels that survive thanks to their secrecy, there is no official information to be had about them that asylum seekers could rely on. Instead, as the present research illustrates, official channels are routinely and totally disregarded: for instance, none of my participants had consulted the embassies' official information about how to apply for a visa, as that information was neither trusted nor deemed reliable. In these circumstances, people rely mostly on rumours, which become a very important bargaining chip. The possession of such information, especially of rumours from credible sources, is very valuable for migrants, who are often willing to share it in exchange for something else.

A peculiar characteristic of rumour construction in the context of asylum migration is that, as individuals realise that they all share the same difficult situation, they become willing to share news with each other. Sharing is also important in order to validate one's own information and to assess the reliability of one's own sources. However, since news are so valuable, asylum seekers do not often share them completely. This is mainly done in two ways: on the one hand, they report their news but disclaim any responsibility about their reliance, and they share the news without seeming to attach too much importance to the content, thereby casting doubts on the reliability of the news. In this way, as Teodros puts is, 'What I knew would be confirmed without me putting all my cards on the table'. In many cases, rumours may really reflect the hopes of those who share them. On the other hand, asylum migrants often rely on 'slanting' (Shibutani, 1966: 44), that is, they try to create the desired impression by omitting relevant parts of the rumour.

As this research shows, the circulation of information among Eritrean migrants happens very quickly. The speed of this process is related to the communication channels that are developed within the community. As we know, Eritrean society is characterised by a high degree of transnationality, and the links between the homeland and the diaspora abroad are very strong. As the interviews demonstrate, contacts between individuals in the diaspora and friends and family members at home are very frequent, and even refugee camps often constitute communication hubs. The structure of these communication channels also impacts asylum seekers' assessment of the credibility of rumours. As some respondents have explained to me, they would consider those rumours that came from established channels as more reliable, as these channels have usually generated rumours that were either true or useful. When migrants

frequently turn to the same channels, these become well-established and are thereby considered more reliable.

Migrants also ascribe a high credibility to news generated by renowned fellow-migrants, people who, due to their particular circumstances or to their previous migration experience, have acquired a high status in the asylum seekers' community. It is important not to forget, however, that these exchanges of information also have a power dimension that is clearly perceived by migrants. In Teodros' account, for instance, he specifically mentioned Tekle, whose acquaintances in the camp and among the administrators (and whose consequent access to information unavailable through other channels) had given him a very influential position in the camp.

As Isaias acknowledged:

> 'in the end, it's all about negotiation. We negotiate our lives, trying to reduce the level of risk. But in a dangerous situation we are powerless, unless we either have money to buy passage or something even more valuable, information. […] In our journey, information was the resource most dear to me'.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENTERING THE ITALIAN ASYLUM SYSTEM: PROCEDURE, RECEPTION AND COPING STRATEGIES

1. THE ASYLUM PROCESS: A'VERY COMPLICATED' MATTER

'I didn't expect it to be so complicated' says Geometra, an Eritrean refugee in his forties who works at the Baobab refugee centre in Rome. 'But you learn how to deal with the process, to make the best of it, even if it's difficult'. Geometra arrived in Italy about fifteen years ago, after a first unsuccessful attempt to migrate to Saudi Arabia. His real name is not 'Geometra' – which is the Italian word for 'surveyor' –, but everybody knows him by that name. Geometra is a bit of a celebrity among the guests of the centre and among many other Eritreans in Rome because from their perspective, he has acquired a higher status than any of the rest of them. He is also the person everybody turns to in order to obtain practical advice on how to deal with the system. At the time of writing, Geometra himself is waiting for one of his daughters to come to Italy through a family reunification procedure, as he is afraid that she might be conscripted soon. This is his third attempt, as the paperwork is, in his own words, 'very complicated'. 'Honestly, I'm quite depressed. I've already tried twice but the *Questura* [the provincial police station] is complicating things all the time. […] But I'm sure I will find a way around it!'.

As Geometra's statement shows, the life of asylum seekers is complicated by a number of obstacles and hindrances. It is therefore not possible to analyse their agency without taking into account the context in which it operates. I will argue here that the asylum procedure and the reception system condition the opportunity structure of the

asylum seekers' agency (see also Brekke and Brochmann, 2014). On the one hand, procedures and reception conditions constrain the opportunities asylum seekers have to achieve their goals but, on the other hand, they also leave gaps that they can strategically make use of. As we will see, perceptions matter a lot. In fact, these perceptions typically undergo a change when the migrants encounter the Italian asylum system, thereby providing them with elements to elaborate strategic solutions to the obstacles they encounter, and to define possible means of integration (a lot depends on the perception of having settled). Therefore, in what follows, I will focus both on the context and on asylum seekers' responses to it.

2. THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

2.1 The European Union's asylum framework

The current Italian asylum system has been heavily influenced by the evolutions undergone by the asylum framework of the European Union (EU), which aims to gradually harmonise national asylum procedures and reception conditions. For many years, EU member states have cooperated, establishing a 'burden sharing' arrangement. This began with the Dublin Convention (1990), and was further developed with the Dublin II (2003) and Dublin III regulations (2014), which ostensibly replaced the first Dublin Convention. They form the cornerstone of the Dublin System, which is made up of the Dublin Regulation and of the EURODAC Regulation, which established a centralised, European-wide fingerprint database comprising the prints of all unauthorised entrants to the EU. According to the Dublin Regulation, member states have to assess which member state is responsible for processing an asylum application lodged in their territory, on the basis of objective and hierarchical criteria. As I will explain in greater detail later on in the chapter, the system is designed to prevent

'asylum shopping' and, at the same time, to ensure that each case is processed by only one member state (Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003).

Many criticisms have been levelled at this system. The European Council of Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for instance, have reiterated that the system does not provide fair, efficient and effective forms of protection, and that it impedes the legal rights and the personal welfare of asylum seekers, including their right to a fair examination of their asylum claim and, if it is recognised as valid, their right to obtain effective protection; they also criticise it for impeding the even distribution of asylum claims among member states. As O'Sullivan (2009) points out, 'this agreement does not set out any harmonised standards in relation to the definition of a refugee or to refugee decision-making procedures, and it is generally considered to have been of limited success' (242).

In general, it can be argued that since its inception, the EU asylum system developed with little regard to humanitarian norms, and with only a partial transfer of sovereignty from member states, and a limited amount of cooperation between them (Lavenex 2001). However, ever since the European Council summit held in Tampere in 1999, this approach has changed, and the focus has shifted towards an externalisation of refugee policy, and towards the creation of a 'Common European Asylum System' (CEAS)[109] obtained by harmonising asylum law (Boswell 2003). The focus was both on the better control of and on the prevention of migration. The first concern led to an increase in controls at the external border of the EU, while the second attempted to reduce the number of migrants arriving in Europe by addressing the root causes of forced migration, and by providing forms of protection in the areas from which refugees

[109] The CEAS consists of four EU Directives: the Dublin Regulation (2003/343/CE) and its revisions in 2003 (Dublin II) and 2014 (Dublin III); the Asylum Procedure Directives (2013/32/EU, processing asylum cases); the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU recast); and the Reception Directive (2013/33/UE recast).

originate. This means that member states guarantee the rights of refugees beyond the strict border of the EU, leading to a decoupling of protection and sovereignty (Haddad 2008: 186). This has led several other international actors, such as the UNCHR, to express their concerns as regional protection could undermine the right to seek asylum, by limiting the opportunities to exit the country of origin and by keeping asylum-seekers in a situation of insecurity.

As a result, while the externalisation of protection has fostered a more humanitarian approach outside the EU's borders, 'security' remains an issue managed at the international level through strict control procedures. Because of the externalisation of EU asylum policies, the dimensions which are still managed internally, at the level of member states (such as the welfare provisions for asylum-seekers, the provision of support services and of resettlement programs) has been neglected. The EU has recently sought to address this gap by the Procedure Directive n. 2013/32/UE (recast) and the Reception Condition Directive n. 2013/33/UE (recast). The former especially aims to improve the efficiency and the fairness of asylum procedures, by strengthening the minimal guarantees and by facilitating the access of claimants to asylum and appeal procedures. The idea is to guarantee both an easier access to reception procedures and the implementation of higher standards. These directives are gradually being implemented by the national states, so it it is still unclear whether they will produce their intended results.

Generally speaking, however, national differences when it comes to the conditions of reception, the access to integration, welfare and social rights still seem to persist, in spite of these efforts to coordinate policies across Europe. As we will see later, these differences are a key factor explaining the secondary migrations of asylum seekers, the very same movements that the CEAS was intended to prevent (see Brekke

and Brochmann, 2014: 146-148). As the literature makes clear, recent developments in the harmonisation of asylum procedures such as the Dublin Regulations mean that the current EU authorities, by trying, for instance, to prevent secondary movements, 'tur[n] some refugees into 'illegal migrants' in political and public discourse and shields EU Member States from their international legal obligations' (Schuster 2011: 1).

Another institution that influences member states' asylum policies is the Council of Europe. It spearheaded the elaboration of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which came into force in 1953. While it does not directly mention asylum-seekers, it made important contributions to their protection. Firstly, it established the European Court of Human Rights, which individuals can have recourse to if they feel that their rights have been violated under the Convention. Secondly, the sentences of the Court are binding for member states and their execution is monitored by the Council's Committee of Ministers. The Convention, therefore, allows the individual to play an active role in the international arena. On different occasions, asylum-seekers and refugees have made use of this right, in particular in relation to Article 3 (which prohibits the forced return of a person to a country in which there is reason to believe that he/she runs a real risk of torture or inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment), Article 5 (which relates to detention), and Article 8 (which concerns respect for family life).

2.2 The right to asylum in Italy

According to Francesca, a lawyer working part-time at the *Centro Astalli*, and who gives legal advice to asylum seekers,

> 'the regulation of asylum rights in Italy is the result of a complex history involving two parallel and underdeveloped systems of protection. The country's constitution recognizes asylum in very generous terms, but

> these norms are seldom applied in practice. The Refugee Convention was ratified, but implemented in a rudimentary way. More recently, the right to asylum has fallen victim to the over-politicization of the immigration debate. This has led to misunderstandings about the options legally available to policy-makers and about their obligations under international, European and constitutional law'.

As Francesca points out, Italy's approach to asylum migration is ambiguous. Asylum law reflects the way societies perceive themselves and their attitude to migration; more specifically, it often indicates whether they predominantly perceive themselves as sending or as host societies. Italy is a case in point, as it still perceives itself as a country of emigration rather than immigration (El Hariri, 2010). There are historical reasons for this: around the time of its unification, in 1861, Italy was mostly a country of emigration, and this remained true for most of the twentieth century. Only recently, due to the problematic integration of second-generation immigrants and due to the increase in immigration following the so-called 'Arab Spring', does one note a slow evolution towards a more accurate perception of Italy as an immigration and transit country (El Hariri, 2010). Furthermore, asylum has played a very important role in Italian contemporary history. During the fascist period (1922-1943), many opponents of Mussolini's regime sought political asylum abroad; thus, when they drew up the new constitution (1947), its authors were acutely conscious of the importance of asylum since many of them had experienced political persecution (Bonetti 2004). So they introduced Article 10 paragraph 3[110] , which features among the Constitution's 'Fundamental principles'. This provision has a much broader scope than the 1951 Geneva Convention, but a formal law specifying the criteria of constitutional asylum was

[110] 'A foreigner who is denied the effective exercise of the democratic liberties guaranteed by the Italian Constitution in his/her own country has the right to asylum in the territory of the Italian Republic, in accordance with the conditions established by law' Article 10 paragraph 3, Italian Constitution (English Translation), available at: legxven.camera.it/cost_reg_funz/345/346/listaarticoli.asp.

never passed. Thus Italy never established a clear and sustainable policy on asylum, and much less did it adopt precise rules on the issue' (Messineo 2010).

Moreover, when Italy ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention in 1954, it opted for a geographically and temporally limited definition of 'refugee' – mostly designed to protect Europeans who had been persecuted before 1951 - which sharply contrasted with the intentions of the drafters of the Constitution. The temporal limit was removed in 1970 – when Italy ratified the 1967 New York Protocol – but the geographical one was only abolished in 1990 with the 'Martelli Act', which, for the first time, set out a procedure to determine who could claim refugee status. Until then, as is still the case in the UK, asylum was granted on a case-by-case basis by the executive, or by the UNHCR's office in Rome.

As a result, one can distinguish between two parallel systems of asylum regulations (Messineo 2010): one *corpus* concerns constitutional asylum, the other the 1951 Geneva Convention. As far as the first is concerned, the authorities competent in deciding asylum claims have, until recently, been the administrative and civil courts. , As it turns out, Article 10 paragraph 3 was interpreted in a restrictive way until 1997, when the *Corte di Cassazione* clarified its scope and defined the right to asylum as a 'perfect subjective right' in Italian legal terminology: this means that the right is conferred to the individual, who can claim it directly, and that it has to be recognised by the court. Nonetheless, due to the absence of rules clarifying the conditions and procedures of constitutional asylum, the courts have interpreted the content of the article restrictively – very few cases have been decided favourably – and the rules of civil procedure still apply. This makes the whole process very long – it can take years to be recognised as a refugee – and costly. The judiciary decides alone on the outcome of the applications submitted by asylum-seekers or referred to them by public authorities.

As for the system put into place by the 1951 Geneva Convention, it has developed in three main ways. As I stated above, the first procedure to determine refugee status was set out by the 'Martelli Law', which specified rules of implementation[111]. Article 2 of this Law established the 'Central Commission for the Recognition of Refugee Status' in Rome, which was to make the decisions. In general, the idea was that asylum-seekers would file their request at the local police office, and would then be asked to return to be photographed and to provide details about their experience. He/she would then receive a receipt, which would later be replaced by a temporary residence permit. A few months later, he/she would be called for an interview with the Central Commission. Many NGOs have considered this interview one of the main flaws of the system: according to Marco, from the *Lunaria* NGO, 'the interview is very brief, and the claimant is offered no legal support'. Claimants are then finally notified of the outcome by the police – and in the case of a negative outcome, it is possible to ask for a judicial review. In general, during this period (which can last from 18 months to over two years), the asylum-seeker is not allowed to work nor entitled to welfare support such as housing benefits (Messineo 2010).

In 2005, this framework changed radically with the implementation of the 2002 'Bossi-Fini Law', which established seven Local Commissions[112] with the authority to decide on asylum cases. Moreover, the Central Commission in Rome was renamed the National Commission, and given a supervisory role and the competence to revoke refugee status (Messineo 2010). It also made possible the detention of asylum-seekers in certain specific circumstances – for instance, if they needed to be identified – which in effect meant that almost 97% of asylum-seekers ended up being detained during the

[111] Presidential Decree of 15 May 1990 n. 136 .

[112] The Local Commissions are located in Gorizia, Milan, Rome, Foggia, Crotone, Trapani and Syracuse, and they are made up of a senior civil servant from the Ministry of the Interior (who presides), a member of the police forces, a representative of the local government and a representative of the UNHCR.

first year of their asylum application, according to reports released by 'Doctors Withiut Borders'. If the Local Commission issues a negative decision, the claimant is then expulsed. The Local Commission can, however, recommend the police authorities to grant 'humanitarian protection' to those they reject. This grants them a one-year residence permit – which is very difficult to renew – as well as the right to access the Italian health system and the right to work (which in practice means the right to work in the informal economy). In spite of the fact that the number of people granted humanitarian protection increased following its implementation, this Act was very much criticised, and some of its provisions were called unconstitutional because they violated the *non-refoulement* principle – for instance, an appeal against a negative decision does not automatically suspend the effect of a deportation order.

A third development concerns the 'Security Pack' adopted in 2008. This resulted from the implementation of two Common European Asylum System Directives: EC Directives 2004/83/EC (qualifications) and 2005/85/EC (procedures). Together with the law implementing the Directive on minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, these two directives led to a first attempt to rationalise Italian refugee law and, while it retained most of the Boss-Fini framework, it created a three-layered protection system: asylum, subsidiary protection and humanitarian protection.

Today, there is still no single text regulating the asylum system, but a set of different laws and provisions that make it very difficult to fully understand the way it is regulated and the way it works in practice, and, as we will see below, in effect this often jeopardizes the right to asylum.

2.3 The Asylum Procedure

According to Italian legislation, there is a single procedure that should determine both an individual's refugee status and his/her subsidiary protection status. However, for the sake of clarity, it is possible to distinguish between the "regular" procedure, which is made up of different phases (lodging and registering the asylum request; the interview before the Territorial Commission; the eventual appeal phase), and the Dublin Procedure.

2.3.1 The "regular" procedure

Registering the Asylum Application

According to the law (Article 6 of the Legislative Decree 25/2008), an asylum seeker can lodge his/her claim either with the Border Police upon their arrival or at the Immigration Office of the *Questura*. However, the timeframe for presenting this request is not specified: the law generally indicates that the application should be submitted as soon as possible, unless there are impeding circumstances. As a result, a delay in the presentation of this request does not constitute a reason for rejecting it, nor for denying the claimant protection.

Whether the asylum claim is initiated at the border or at the *Questura*, the asylum process starts with the initial registration of the request, which can be divided into two phases. The first step is when the claimant undergoes the so-called *fotosegnalamento*, during which the authorities take pictures and fingerprints of the applicant. At this stage, if the asylum request is presented at the *Questura*, the applicant needs to indicate an address (proving that they have a residence), which will be then feature on the official residence permit. In Italy, practices vary very much in this respect: in Rome, for instance, it is enough for the applicant to show a temporary address provided by some

NGO, whereas in other cities an actual proof of residence is required. According to the UNHCR (2014c), in some Italian cities the need for a proof of permanent residence makes it quite difficult for claimants assisted by NGOs to receive their temporary permit to stay while living at the address provided to them by those NGOs. On the contrary, if the asylum request is presented at the Border Police Office, claimants are not required to present an address, and they receive a *verbale di invito* to go to the competent *Questura* to complete the procedure. According to several lawyers working at CIR (*Comitato Italiano per i Rifugiati* – the Italian Refugee Committee), 'sometimes it is difficult for asylum seekers to go to the *Questura* from the border location, as they lack financial support to pay for public transportation. This is sometimes provided by NGOs working at the border, but it is dependent on establishing an agreement with the *Prefettura* [that is, the office of the Ministry of Interior responsible for representing the Government at the province level]'.

The second step is when the asylum request is formally registered at the *Questura* (*verbalizzazione*). During this stage, a form (*Modello C3*, also called *Verbale*) has to be filled in with all the relevant information about the applicant's personal history, his/her journey to Italy, and the reasons why he/she felt he/she was forced to leave his/her country of origin. The applicant can also provide a statement in his/her native language about his/her history. The form is then signed by the applicant, who is given a copy of the *verbale* and of the other documents submitted. As for asylum seekers who disembark on Italy's shores or who are rescued at sea (these represent the majority of my Eritrean respondents), these two steps – the *fotosegnalamento* and the *verbalizzazione* – usually take place in the CARAs, the first reception centres.

The first step (the *fotosegnalamento*) and the second (the *verbalizzazione*) do not necessarily take place at the same time, especially in large cities. As a matter of fact,

most of the asylum seekers I interviewed were formally registered several weeks after they had first lodged their asylum claim. This delay has very serious consequences as asylum seekers waiting for their *verbalizzazione* are not allowed to enter the reception system and have no access to health care[113]. During this phase, asylum seekers are given a temporary permit to stay with the right to work after 6 months.

Italian authorities have made important efforts to speed up the migrants' access to the asylum procedure and to reduce the delay between these two steps (AIDA 2013). A modernization process began in 2009 that aimed to completely automate the administrative procedures related to immigration and to issues of civil liberty. It resulted in the creation of a unified immigration registration database (BAI- *Banca Dati Anagrafica Unificata dell'Immigrazione*), of an interconnected system linking together all the offices and bodies involved in immigration procedures, and in the possibility for users to upload their applications online and to verify the progress of their application. As for international protection claims, this new system has put into place the so-called VESTANET-C3 online system, which enables the *Questura* to transmit asylum claim forms electronically (*Modello C3* or *verbale*) to the competent Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection[114]. According to the law implementing the Regulation (CE) No. 343/2003, the Dublin Unit is also involved in this system, through the DUBLINET application.

An important aspect of this procedure pertains to the information provided to the applicant at the time of registration. This is one of the areas with the greatest divergence between theory and practice. According to Article 10 of the Legislative Decree 25/2008, police authorities must inform the claimant about his/her rights and

[113] At this stage, only emergency health care is granted to asylum seekers.
[114] According to the law implementing the Regulation (CE) No. 343/2003, the Dublin Unit is also involved in this system, through the DUBLINET application.

obligations during the asylum procedure, and of all the means that are put at his/her disposal to support the application. Moreover, according to Article 3 of the Legislative Decree 140/2005 (Reception Decree), within 15 days of the beginning of the application, police authorities shall provide the claimant with information about the reception system. In both cases, information is provided through information leaflets, which are issued in 10 different languages. However, in practice, these leaflets are very seldom distributed, and neither is the right information always provided orally, since the law does not explicitly mandate it. As a consequence, given their poor Italian, the shortage of interpreters, and the limited numbers of police staff available, asylum seekers are often not made aware of the procedures governing asylum claims nor of the reception conditions.

The Territorial Commissions

According to Italian law, both the granting of refugee status and of the subsidiary protection status are supposed to follow the same regular procedure. In fact, however, asylum applications tend to be examined by the Territorial Commissions for International Protection and the sub-Commissions[115], administrative bodies specialised in asylum matters.

The law mandates that police officers, but also civil society representatives and the staff of specialised international organisations should participate in the decision-making process. This is meant to ensure a more comprehensive approach to the asylum claim, and to guarantee a fair decision. Therefore the Territorial Commissions are composed of two representatives from the Ministry of the Interior (one of which is a

[115] Because of the increasing number of applications, in 2014 the Italian legislature increased the number of Territorial Commissions from 10 to 20, and created 30 additional Sub-Commissions (Decree No. 119/2014).

senior police officer), one representative from the local authorities (the municipality, the province or the region), and one representative from the UNHCR. Although decisions are made by majority vote, only one member, who then presents the claimant's file to the board, usually carries out the interview (in most cases a 'same gender' principle is adopted[116]). This can be a problem, given the importance of the interview in terms of favourable outcomes: several lawyers have pointed out the need for a control procedure during the interview, and the need to further professionalize the decision-making body (UNHCR, 2015).

The Territorial Commissions are supposed to carry out the interview within 30 days of receiving the asylum application, and they are meant to make a decision in the 3 days following the interview. According to Article 27 of the Legislative Decree No. 25/2008, however, this term can be extended if the Territorial Commission needs to gather more information. In this case, both the asylum seeker and the *Questura* are supposed to be informed. In spite of the law's provisions, however, it usually takes a much longer time for the interview to be scheduled and for the final decision to be made. This mostly depends on the delays that build up between the applicants' *fotosegnalamento,* their *verbalizzazione*, and the forwarding of their applications to the Territorial Commission. In addition, the administrative paperwork also takes a long time, depending on which Territorial Commission processes the claims. According to the Eritrean asylum seekers and the representatives of NGOs that I interviewed, in Rome the whole procedure can take from 6 to 10 months.

According to Article 12 of the Legislative Decree No. 25/2008, the interview is to be carried out in a confidential manner[117], and applicants are entitled to request an

[116] As decreed by Article 12 (1) of Legislative Decree No. 25/2008, as modified in 2014 by Law Decree No. 119/2014.
[117] Moreover, it cannot be video- or tape-recorded.

interpreter. However interpreters are usually available only at official border posts, and they are very few in number[118]. The transcript of the interview is to be given to the applicants, so they can add comments to them. In practice, however, there are usually concerns regarding the applicant's ability to add comments in the absence of an interpreter. Furthermore, the quality both of the interviews and of the transcripts vary depending on the interviewer. Some of the transcripts consulted for this study were undeniably short, and relied on very standard questions.

At the end of this procedure, the Territorial Commission can (AIDA, 2014):

a. recognise the claimant's refugee status and issue them with a 5-year residence permit;
b. concede subsidiary protection and issue a 5-year residence permit;
c. reject the claim but recommend to the police that they issue the claimant with a 1-year residence permit on humanitarian grounds;
d. reject the claim outright and issue a return order.

In cases b, c, and d there exists an appeal procedure. Article 35 of the Procedure Decree No. 25/2008 (as amended by the Legislative Decree 150/2011) indicates that an asylum claimant can appeal before the Civil Court within 30 days of being notified of the Territorial Commission's decision, and that they have the right to be represented by a lawyer. Applicants detained in the CIEs (*Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione* – identification and expulsion centres) and in the CARAs (*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* – reception centre for asylum seekers) have only 15 days to appeal. In effect, this prevents many asylum seekers from appealing, since the short timeframe makes it almost impossible to find an interpreter and a lawyer. Normally, the appeal

[118] The sensitive nature of these of interviews has led the bar of interpreters and translators to draft a Code of conduct.

should automatically suspend the Territorial Commission's decision[119]. The law also makes it possible to lodge second and third instance appeals to the Court of Appeals (within 30 days, according to the Civil Procedure Code), and to the *Corte di Cassazione*[120] (within 60 days). The Court can decide to either reject the appeal or to grant international protection. In practice, this procedure can take 18 months or more.

In some cases, the Italian authorities can rely on a shorter procedure to examine asylum applications directly, in particular when:

a. the requests are considered to be manifestly well founded;
b. the claimant has been found to be a vulnerable person (Article 8 of the Legislative Decree No. 140/2005);
c. the claimant is held in a CARA[121] or in a CIE;
d. the claimant has been convicted of crimes such as smuggling, sexual trafficking, drug trafficking, or has already been notified with an expulsion order.

According to NGOs and asylum lawyers however, this procedure is mostly applied to applicants held in CIEs, especially if they fall in category a. In practice, vulnerable asylum seekers may at times benefit from this procedure, but their chances are higher if they are assisted by lawyers or NGOs. As for victims of torture, rape or, more generally, of violence, the problem is that their status may not be swiftly identified, which means that they do not always benefit from the shorter procedure.

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[119] However, there are some cases in which the decision and its effects are not suspended: in the case of a claim that is manifestly unfounded or inadmissible; in the case of a request made by an applicant held in a CIE; in the case of a request filed after the applicant has been stopped trying to avoid border controls; in the case of applicants who escape from a CARA; in cases where a notification of expulsion has been issued prior to the moment when the applicant presented the asylum claim. In these cases, the judge can decide on a case by case basis wether the decision should be suspended (Legislative Decree 25/2008, see also CIR, 2014).

[120] The *Corte di Cassazione* is the court of last instance and guarantees the uniform application and interpretation of legal rules.

[121] This is not applicable to migrants held in the CARA for identity verification.

2.3.2 The Dublin Procedure

In 1990, the Dublin Convention established a common European framework for all member states to examine the asylum claims of those seeking international protection under the Geneva Convention and the EU Qualification Directive[122]. This document is the pillar of the so-called Dublin System, which also relies on the EURODAC Regulation, which establishes a European database that gathers fingerprints and information on all undocumented migrants entering Europe.

This system was actually designed with a dual purpose in mind: on the one hand, its was intended to ensure that asylum applications would be examined by only one member state, on the other hand, it was designed to prevent further intra-European movements by asylum seekers. Despite the fact that the Dublin III Regulation did introduce some positive changes[123] (according to scholars and to various practitioners in the field), the system has had a negative impact overall in terms of extending the right to asylum (AIDA, 2013; ASGI, 2009; Di Rado, 2010; UNHCR, 2014c) and, as we will see later, it did not prevent the secondary migrations of asylum seekers.

According to the Dublin procedure, during the registration phase, the asylum claimant's fingerprints are in theory checked against the EURODAC database. If there is a match, his/her documentation is supposed to be transferred to the national "Dublin Unit", a subordinate body to the Ministry of the Interior, which is in charge of examining the criteria set out in the Regulation to identify which member state is responsible for the specific asylum application.

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[122] The Dublin Convention was first replaced in 2003 by EU Regulation No. 343/2003 (Dublin II Regulation), and most recently in 2013 by EU Regulation No. 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation), which came into force on 1 January 2014.

[123] For instance, it modified the definition of the family members of a minor by making specific reference to a father, mother or to any other responsible adult; it introduced the principle that an appeal could suspect a transfer decision; it also gave guidelines for custody in case of flight risks.

When another member state is considered responsible for examining the application, the "Dublin Unit" informs the asylum seeker (through the *Questura*) that the procedure is closed, and indicates where he/she will be transferred. They are also supposed to provide information about how to appeal[124] against the transfer decision.

Normally, the asylum claimant is asked to present him/herself in a location indicated by the *Questura* in order to be transferred. If he/she does not do so, the Italian authorities can ask for an extension of up to 18 months. Only the applicants held in CIEs are escorted to the border. However, every member state has the possibility to apply the so-called "sovereignty clause" (ECHR). NGOs are increasingly pushing Italian authorities to apply the clause to suspend the transfer of asylum seekers to specific member states, namely Greece, Hungary and Malta (AIDA 2013), where there is a significant risk that their human rights will be violated[125].

Dublin returnees, the so-called "Dubliners", face very different situations when they are transferred, depending on whether they applied for asylum before moving to another EU member state, or whether a decision had already been issued. If the returnee has previously applied for asylum and if the Territorial Commission has issued a positive decision, the claimant is issued a residence permit. If their application has been rejected, the returnee's situation varies depending on whether he/she has been notified of the decision or not: in the first case, if they did not lodge an appeal against the decision, or if the appeal was rejected, the asylum seeker is issued with an expulsion

[124] Appeals can be lodged to the "Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale" (TAR- Regional Administrative Court) within 60 days following the transfer decision, or to "Consiglio di Stato" (the Council of State), as a second instance of appeals. It must be noted, however, that these bodies are competent to take decisions on procedural matters, but are not specialised in International law. According to the law, an appeal can also be lodged to the President of the Italian Republic within 120 days.

[125] Several court judgements have declared the transfer to these member states as being unlawful (Tribunale Amministrativo del Lazio judgement No. 8508/2010 and No. 1363/2011; Consiglio di Stato parere cautelare ordinanza No. 3428/2009). Making reference to EU jurisprudence, the Courts argued that the Dublin Unit must enforce the "sovereignty clause" whenever there is evidence of a violation of the standards laid out by EU provisions. If not, Italy can be accused of infringing Articles 3 and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights

order, and eventually placed in a CIE; in the second case, an appeal procedure can be started. If the asylum seeker did not present him/herself at the interview with the Territorial Commission because he/she had already left the country, the body issues a negative decision but the rejected claimant is entitled to ask for a new interview.

The Dublin Procedure permits travel to other European countries, but under certain strict conditions. If the asylum seeker has been issued a permit of residence he/she can travel freely within the Schengen area for a maximum of three months, beginning on the date of their official registration by the authorities of the state to which he/she travelled. Refugees and people who have been granted international protection, who formally applied for asylum at least five years earlier, can request an EU residence permit designed for long-term residency, that makes it possible to stay in the Schengen area for longer than three months; however this permit has a limited duration.

The Dublin procedure has a strong impact on the access of Italian returnees to the reception system. According to the CIR and to lawyers from the "Fondazione Astalli", 'in practice, returnees have a limited access to reception facilities, as their asylum procedures are for the most part concluded once they are returned to Italy and, therefore, they are no longer considered asylum seekers' (CIR, 2010: 35).

As Brekke and Brochman (2014: 148) point out, far from preventing the secondary migrations of asylum seekers, the Dublin procedure has really led to two major problems: first, the 'first country of arrival' principle puts a disproportionate burden on Southern European countries; secondly, differences in how easy it is to enter the protection regime, in national provisions governing the access to social rights and benefits, in reception conditions, coupled with structural differences in national economies and in labour markets, mean that the Dublin procedure actually leads to

competition between different regimes, thereby triggering the secondary movements it is supposed to prevent.

2.4 Legal assistance

As I stated before, offering legal assistance to asylum seekers is one of the key elements improving their chances of a positive outcome, but it is also one of the most controversial issues in the asylum procedure.

According to Italian law (Legislative Decree 25/2008), asylum seekers are supposed to pay for legal assistance with the asylum procedure. However, legal aid is in practice provided free of charge by several NGOs through national funds or private donations. The Italian Ministry of the Interior has established a "*Fondo nazionale per le politiche e i servizi dell'asilo*" (National Funds for Asylum Policies and Services), which allocates funds to local bodies running reception projects[126] for refugees and for individual seeking asylum or subsidiary protection. In this scheme, funds are allocated for legal services provided in the CARAs by CARA's legal staff. Moreover, State funds are also made available for legal counselling at the border crossing points. However, legal services are not always available, both because of the increase in demand (due to recent international developments) and because the funds are not always sufficient.

Lawyers provide different kinds of assistance:

- *before the interview*: lawyers prepare the claimants for the interview before the Territorial Commission, giving them information about the procedure and on the

[126] Local bodies and third sector parties voluntarily present projects in response to a public invitation to tender. The projects' consistency with the requirements of the invitation to tender is assessed by a Committee composed of: one representative of the Ministry of the Interior; one representative of the "*Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni Italiani*" (ANCI - National Association of Italian Municipalities); one representative of the "*Unione delle Province d'Italia*" (UPI – Italian Provinces Union); one representative of the UNHCR; and one representative of the Regions (see http://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/sistema-accoglienza-sul-territorio). In 2014/15, an investigation into the allocation of these funds in the Municipality of Rome led to a scandal called "Mafia Capitale".

questions that are likely to be asked; they gather all the useful elements needed to present the applicant's personal story in a convincing way, including information on the situation in the country of origin, and they sometimes write a report to be sent to the Territorial Commission (especially in the case of vulnerable individuals); at times they contact the Territorial Commission to declare that the applicant is unable or unfit to undergo their interview;

- *during the interview*: although the applicant is supposed to answer the questions on his/her own, the lawyer can intervene to clarify some aspects of their personal story.

During the appeal phase, asylum applicants are entitled to free legal aid (Legislative Decree 25/2008). However, the law sets two limitations, which, in practice, makes it very difficult for asylum seekers to avail themselves of this right.

Firstly, claimants must prove that they have an income lower than 11,369.24 Euros per year. This raises the issue of income certification: since the claimants' income often comes from abroad, they need to provide the Bar Council with an income certificate from the Consular Authorities of their country of origin; alternatively, they can provide a self-declaration of income. In practice, in some municipalities, Rome in particular, the Bar Council only accepts the consular certification, thus jeopardizing the right to free legal aid[127]. In this respect, the Civil Court of Rome ruled in 2014 that "asylum seekers cannot be forced to have recourse to their Consular Authorities"[128], thus putting a stop to these unlawful practices in Rome.

[127] As a consequence, in 2013, several charities and NGOs (namely, the Italian Council for Refugees (CIR), Associazione Progetto Dirittti, Focus-Casa dei Diritti Sociali, ASGI, Laboratorio 53, Associazione Europa Levante, Centro Astalli, Save the Children Roma, ARCI- Roma, A Buon Diritto) sent a letter to the Ministries of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs to stop the practices of the Council Bar in Rome (http://www.asgi.it /wp-content/uploads/public/1_013_lettera_ordine_roma_gp_asilo_asgidocumenti.pdf) .

[128] Rome Court (XI Civil Section), sentence n.8688/2014, 17 November 2014.

Secondly, the Bar Council can refuse to provide free legal aid if it considers a claim to be unfounded. The issue here is that, in practice, because of the State's long delays in paying lawyers for asylum appeals and because of the small amount of money they receive for each case, lawyers typically take quick case-by-case decisions on whether it is worth to lodge an appeal.

3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: ASYLUM SEEKERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

What has been said shows very clearly to what extent Italian asylum provisions are fragmented and, at times, contradictory. Although the Italian asylum system incorporates most EU provisions, in practice it still allows for some degree of discretion in how liberally it grants asylum. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive text on asylum makes it almost impossible to gain an exhaustive knowledge of how the system works. This is particularly true for asylum seekers, who face a number of barriers when they try to develop an understanding of the system. As I will discuss below, asylum seekers' perceptions of Italy and of its asylum system often change when they find themselves confronted with the reality of it inner workings, and an adjustment process becomes necessary in order to redirect their agency.

3.1 Treated like 'everyone else': the frustrated feelings of entitlement of Eritrean asylum seekers

As many of my respondents pointed out, information about how the system works is key in order to initiate one's claim in the right way. Abraham's story illustrates this very well. I first met him while he waiting in line at the Astalli Centre to receive legal advice. As I asked him about his case, he told me:

> 'I didn't think that claiming asylum would be so complicated! Back home I had spoken to other asylum seekers that were here in Italy, they told me it wasn't easy but I didn't think it would be such a burden! Especially for Eritreans, we are friends after all!'.

As his statement demonstrates, Abraham was surprised that there was no special provision for Eritreans allowing them to gain refugee status faster. He had trouble believing that he had to undergo the same procedure as 'everyone else', as he routinely put it. This expectation turned out to be quite widespread among the respondents in this study. Those who were most shocked were the Eritreans who wanted to stay in Italy, because, as we saw in the previous chapter, how easy it is to obtain refugee status is an essential consideration in choosing one's country of destination.

The colonial ties between them, the investments made by Italians in Eritrea, the presence of a large Eritrean diaspora in Italy – mostly in Rome and Milan – all contribute (alongside other factors) to giving Eritreans a sense of entitlement, and the conviction that they will be given a preferential treatment during the asylum application process[129]. As Dan, a 21-year-old Eritrean asylum seeker I met at the Baobab refugee centre in Rome, puts it:

> 'I mean…England gives preferential treatment to those who come from their former colonies. In France it's the same. Why doesn't Italy do that too? It's simply ridiculous! If I was the Italian government I would want to first accept people coming from countries that have a relationship with Italy, I would think that it would be easier for them to integrate. Here in Rome there's a large Eritrean community. They came during the war and they were accepted, they followed a different procedure. I know because my lawyer told me. But he told me that things had changed. Why did they change?'

[129] A similar point is made by Zimmermann (2009) in her study on the irregular secondary migrations of asylum seekers. Building on her case study of Somali asylum seekers, the author argues that former colonial ties with Italy raise expectations about receiving a warmer welcoming and about benefiting from better provisions among some respondents to her study.

Before the European asylum system came into force in Italy, Eritreans were mostly granted asylum on the basis of their nationality, since it was internationally recognised that they were fleeing from war. These people now form part of the Eritrean diaspora in Italy, and some of them keep in frequent contact with their family back in Eritrea. Maryam is one of them; now aged 52, she left five brothers and sisters behind to reach her husband in Italy. Now most of her siblings are married, have a family and keep in touch via Facebook and Skype. At the time of this study, she volunteered for a charity helping asylum seekers. On the matter of the perceived differences of the current asylum procedure from the past, she argued that:

> 'I'm in contact with my family in Eritrea. […] We used to talk a lot about asylum, in the past when I was in the process of applying and during the following years, because many wanted to come. So they were asking me how Italy was, especially how easy it was to get asylum. […] I used to say that because of the ongoing war it was quite easy to get some kind of protection and that the real problem was finding a place to live and a job. […] Today, I think that because there's no real fighting going on, getting asylum is more difficult. […] I guess it's also a matter of competition with other nationalities, since people arrive in larger numbers, or so they say. […] I think newcomers already know about this before leaving, at least to a certain extent. They're young and they use the internet. But, of course, they don't know exactly what it's like because, when they ask people that are already here, they don't want to tell them the truth about the problems they have to face here, how you end up sleeping in the streets. This is the one thing that hasn't changed from before, I mean, there's a certain reticence about talking of hardships. I've been there too: I didn't want my family to worry so I didn't tell them many things. Also, many young Eritreans leaving today do so with the economic support of their families or village members. When they come here, and find nothing, they are ashamed, and many of them won't even call home for a long period, until they find a job, because they fear they will be asked to send some money to the family and to the village, and to repay the debt'.

As Maryam explains very well, the migrants' feeling of entitlement might also derive from an awareness that in the past, asylum was granted more easily to Eritreans. Furthermore, rumours about what asylum seekers will find once in Italy are not always accurate, especially because many refugees tend to only talk about the bright side of

their experience. Of course, there are cases of individuals who report more accurate information back home; however, due to the complexity of the asylum system, it is very unlikely for specific and detailed information to be passed on, as asylum seekers are almost unaware of the system's technicalities.

The migrants' feeling of entitlement, as I mentioned above, is partly due to the colonial relationship between Italy and Eritrea, to the perception that there exists a 'special bond' between the two countries. However, this perception soon fades when Eritrean asylum seekers realise that in Italy, there are no obvious traces of the colonial period and that, as we saw in the previous chapters, there is no collective memory of those years, which means that Italians don't perceive themselves as a colonial power. As Gebrane pointed out,

> 'I was shocked. If you go walking in Asmara you can see signs of the Italians, but here there are no signs of the empire. Once, I was helping a friend of mine that had an [illegal] stand at the street market. Some Italians called me *marocchino* [i.e. the Italian word for Moroccan] and I said 'no, I'm from Eritrea'; one of them replied 'it's the same, to me there' s no difference'. I was so disconcerted…Italians are so ignorant; they don't even know their own history!'

Differences in the meaning of the colonial period for Eritreans and for Italians become visible to Eritreans once they arrive in Italy, and it typically generates feelings of frustration and irritation.

The feeling of entitlement can also derive from the mode of travel adopted by Eritrean asylum seekers. During the interviews I carried out, a connection emerged between feelings of entitlement and the way the respondents had reached Italy. In particular, this feeling was stronger among those who had crossed the Mediterranean by boat, as their statements make quite clear. As Gaim points out,

> 'We risked a lot to come here. We suffered a lot. I was tortured in the desert. I left my children behind to go and find a better place for them too. Do you think I would have risked everything if it wasn't necessary? I am not a 'bogus' refugee. I didn't come comfortably by plane.'

According to the data gathered, many Eritreans consider their journey across the Mediterranean as the ultimate evidence of their despair, a sort of proof that they are 'genuine' asylum seekers, since they were willing to risk their life to reach Europe. They often contrast their experience with other modes of travel, arguing that they should really receive preferential treatment, if not because of the strong relationship between their country and Italy, then at least because of the dangers they endured: asylum ought to be their 'reward'. For instance, Idris argued that,

> 'I don't understand why we [Eritreans, but he could also be referring more broadly to people coming from the Horn of Africa] are not given precedence over other migrants. I think those who suffer the most should be accepted first'.

As we will see later, for those granted humanitarian protection, this sense of entitlement also translates into repeated requests to be allowed access to rights and services.

Asylum seekers react differently to the frustration born of their feeling of entitlement. The most common immediate emotional reactions are outrage, fear and despair. All these emotions lead the respondents to re-evaluate their relation to Italy and to Italian society, since their expectations have not been fulfilled, their dreams crushed, and their expected feeling of closeness to Italy in a sense denied; as a result, the informants' perceptions of their proximity to Italy sometimes changed. As Anbessa clearly explains,

> 'I realised that I had thought that Eritrea was special for Italy, but in the end I realised that for Italians we were like everybody else from Africa. We were just Africans'.

The realisation of how one-sided the cultural proximity between Italy and Eritrea is, and of the fact that the asylum system does not reflect it, led many of the respondents to re-evaluate the news already in their possession, and to look for new valuable information. As Gebrane, who arrived by sea and stayed in a CARA pointed out,

> 'At that point, I needed to quickly understand how to get asylum. I mean, I wanted to know what the procedure was and which was the most effective way to go about it. So I tried to speak to other people who had stayed in the CARA for longer than I to see whether they had more information and what their experience was.'

Birhane, who overstayed his travel VISA and who claimed asylum at the *Questura*, also explains:

> 'When I realised it was more difficult than I had expected, I asked my cousin [who was granted subsidiary protection in Italy and who was staying in Rome] if he knew anybody who could help me. I really felt I needed to do something about it'.

Although Gebrane and Birhane began their asylum procedure in different ways because of the mode of their arrival to Italy, in both cases, their changes in perception triggered an urgent desire to gather more information. This was essential in order to determine a more suitable strategy to be granted asylum. It is possible to argue, then, that the frustration of their sense of entitlement – through the emotions it gave rise to - in both cases accelerated their agency.

Having their sense of entitlement frustrated changes the perceptions of asylum seekers. As I mentioned earlier, the encounter with Italians changes their perceptions of Italy and of its asylum policies, of authorities and security forces, of practitioners in the field of asylum, and of regular citizens. However, in the case of entitlement, what is important to highlight is the relational nature of the perceptions that change: having their sense of entitlement frustrated leads asylum seekers to develop a new awareness

of their own relationship to Italy and to Italian society, that is, it prompts them to re-evaluate the supposed closeness between both countries, to reposition themselves in the host country and to find new strategies to obtain asylum.

3.2 The interview: telling 'credible' and 'consistent' stories

As we saw in the previous chapters, a crucial step in determining the asylum process is the interview before the Territorial Commission. During the interview, asylum seekers are asked to narrate their story, the credibility of which is then evaluated by the commission when it makes a decision on whether to grant any form of humanitarian protection to the asylum seeker.

It must be noted, however, that in the course of the asylum process, asylum seekers are requested to narrate their story several times to different audiences: at the *Questura* for the registration of their asylum claim, at the Territorial Commission when their claim is assessed, in court in the case of an appeal, in the refugee centres if they ask for legal and psychological support. During this process, asylum seekers meet a multiplicity of individuals – officials, interpreters, lawyers, judges, practitioners, and social workers – who are entitled to hear, collect, evaluate and ultimately challenge their accounts.

Asylum seekers quickly learn about the crucial importance of the interview. Many of them call it "the Test", underlining how determinant it is in the eyes of the Italian authorities. In Eric's experience,

> 'I was told by the social worker in the refugee centre that I had to present my story. But I already knew that because I had already been told about it by other people I knew who went through the procedure. […] They told me to be very careful because it would depend on the interview if I was accepted [as a refugee] or not'.

Similarly to what happens with the choice of trajectories along the journey, information and rumours about the interview circulate a lot among asylum seekers. This phenomenon is particularly amplified in refugee centres and squat houses, where there are large communities of asylum seekers. Rumours about the interview procedure are quite vague; for instance, many respondents tried to determine whether a lawyer would be present and in what role, and whether someone else than the members of the commission and the lawyer would be present. Of course, my informants often reported having received this information from Italian officials or social workers, however as Biniam argues,

> 'I didn't really trust them [the Italian social workers running the refugee camp]. Honestly, they told me several things that ended up not happening the way they'd said. For example, they told me I'd meet a lawyer before the interview but he never showed up! [...] the best way to know important things is to ask those who have already had their interview. If you hear from some of them, then you get an idea of what to expect'.

Confirming Biniam's views, the majority of the Eritrean participants in this study reported trusting the accounts of fellow nationals much more than the institutional information given to them, as the information that came through institutional channels often did not correspond to what happened in practice. In the refugee centres or within the Eritrean community, small talk about the key aspects of the interview was very common. Respondents were particularly interested in analysing the behaviour of the territorial commissioner, to determine his propensity to question the asylum seekers' accounts. In addition, many tried to keep track of the success rate of interviews with specific commissioners. In Kifle's words,

> 'I really hoped I wouldn't be interviewed by 'the spiteful guy' [nickname given by the respondent to a certain commissioner]. I'd heard he didn't even listen to what you said and that he always questioned you. They told me it was very difficult to be accepted if you were interviewed by him. I'd

> also spoken to the lawyer about this, even though I knew he might not show up at all, but at the time I really felt afraid'.

According to my respondents, another very relevant figure is that of the interpreter. This is particularly true for Eritreans, because of the high level of surveillance and control that the Eritrean dictatorship exerts over the diaspora. Asylum seekers are fully aware that the Eritrean government has ramifications abroad and that the information they share with Italian authorities can potentially endanger their relatives back in Eritrea[130]. They are therefore extremely wary of fellow nationals working as interpreters during the asylum interview. Conversely, when the interpreter is from a different ethnicity, suspicions often arise about the accuracy of the translations. Many respondents fear that ethnic rivalries might jeopardize their claim to asylum.

From the examples mentioned above and many other accounts gathered during this research, we can deduce another important aspect of the process, which is that participants tried to shed light on what makes an asylum claim successful by any means available. Biniam explained how it worked very clearly:

> 'We heard news about the interviews from others who told us about them. They'd tell us what they were asked…I mean, besides their personal stories, what kind of questions they ask you. We knew that they wanted to make sure that we were truly coming from Eritrea so they'd ask you things like: who is the President? Who is the minister of Defence? In which region is Asmara? And so on. Also, they [the interviewers] would question your story a lot, like they'd interrupt you in the middle and ask you a question about something you'd said before, especially about details. A man I know was rejected because they said that his story was inconsistent. Inconsistent… I don't know what that means. Why should a story be consistent and conform to what they think should happen?! What do they know?!'

[130] As we have seen in the previous chapters, it is common for relatives to be arrested in an attempt to influence the behaviour of asylum seekers.

We can deduce from Biniam's account that being able to answer questions about relevant public figures and locations in one's country of origin, and being able to tell one's story in a 'consistent' way are important elements in order to be deemed 'credible'. Valerio, an official in the Territorial Commissions, stated that:

> 'We look both at the evidence provided by the claimant and at the story. […] The story is a very important part of the assessment. Most of the rejections actually derive from problems in the story. Sometimes accounts are inconsistent, for instance if they are not logical. Or the interviewees omit information that was presented at the first stage of the procedure or they present it differently, that is, they don't follow the same line of argumentation or narrate episodes in a different order. Sometimes, what they say isn't really credible. It's too easy to say, for instance, that you were captured but then suddenly released because someone else took pity on you. In these cases, we really need to make sure that this is really what happened. […] The story should flow easily and should match the other accounts. […] We know that they speak to each other about what to say during the interview so we look for contradictions. […] It's a difficult task, some of them are really fragile and you can tell they suffered a lot. But there are many that don't fit into the category of asylum seekers, but are rather economic migrants'.

If consistency and credibility are relevant aspects during the interview, it must be noted that these concepts are affected by cultural factors. Consistency and credibility are evaluated on the basis of the asylum seekers' narratives and lot of importance is ascribed to details like *how* things happened, by *whom*, and *when*, as any of these variables can introduce variations in the account that can affect its consistency. As we said, asylum seekers typically tell their stories several times. Each time, the story is narrated, translated and transcribed by different persons in different versions, all of which are cross-examined by the commissioners and checked against the interview with the Territorial Commission. Narratives are therefore produced in environments that are highly controlled, and where power relations are strongly asymmetric. In this respect, all of my respondents reported having felt uncomfortable and intimidated. As Abel puts it,

> 'I felt totally exposed. It was very difficult to tell my story because of the way they were looking at me, like they didn't believe me. […] I was often interrupted and asked to go back and forth to answer questions. Then my lawyer would jump into the conversation to clarify one thing, it was difficult to keep track of everything that was happening there'.

In this respect, an important point must be made about the way stories are narrated. As the literature in the field of asylum and exile has underscored (see for example Wong, 199; Vazquez and Araujo, 1988), asylum seekers' accounts typically reflect a particular use of time. As we have seen in the previous chapter, time is perceived in a very subjective way by asylum seekers as it is marked by meaningful events - for instance, relevant encounters, managing to reach a different stage in their migration 'plan', a specific event that has a strong impact on the possibility to move further, etc. This is reflected in the way asylum seekers tell their stories: they can completely overlook long periods without meaningful events to devote more time to the description of (even shorter) periods that were significant for them in different ways. Moreover, their narratives often move back and forth between significant events that are not always ordered chronologically; as Valentina, a psychologist providing assistance at the *Comunità di Sant'Egidio* in Rome, points out,

> 'Traumatic events are very difficult to reconstruct in a rational, orderly way. There are gaps, and memories are often 'disconnected' from each other. Moreover, it's important not to underestimate the influence that the characteristics of the interviewer can have (in terms of gender for instance) on what asylum seekers are willing to tell; there are cultural aspects that pertain to shame that are not taken into account by interviewers. […] Giving voice to those traumas during the interview, becomes extremely difficult, as interviewers expect that you remember things chronologically and that accounts are consistent'.

Given that presenting the interviewers with a consistent and credible story represents one of the main obstacles for asylum seekers facing the Territorial Commission, there are many rumours that circulate about what the interviewers

consider a credible and consistent story to be. These rumours reflect a 'cultural issue', that is, the need to overcome cultural differences by presenting a story that will be considered 'acceptable' by western audiences with little background in Eritrean culture. Of course, this is not to say that stories are completely made up nor that the respondents in this study deliberately tried to present false accounts, but rather that certain elements are believed, on the basis of successful interviews, to help the credibility of the narrative. These are often singled out and discussed with others. In some cases, informants modify their stories slightly to include some of these elements and they also 'rehearse' their stories with other 'trustworthy' asylum seekers. As Geometra points out, who at the time worked as a social worker at the Baobab refugee centre:

> 'It's better to say that you fled abuse in the army, or that you faced religious oppression, rather than to say that you feared for your life because of your political opinions. That's much more difficult to prove; you need to prove that you were involved in some kind of political activity...they don't understand that in Eritrea, you can be arrested even if you aren't actually involved in anything, you can be arrested only because the authorities suspect you. But if you say that you were harassed in the army, that you were detained in tin-plated sheds under the blazing sun or that you were beaten or sexually harassed, it's easier. They [the interviewers] know these things, because they have been told about them in the reports of human rights associations; so, you don't have to convince them that these things happen in Eritrea. Plus, if you escape from the army, you're a deserter. That means that even if they don't completely believe you, they may grant you protection anyway, because they know that if they send you back you're as good as dead!'

Geometra's line of reasoning was frequently shared by other informants, who reported having learned from fellow nationals what kind of stories were the best to tell. As Yemane recalled:

> 'I was told by a friend in Anagnina [a squat building] that I had to be careful not to contradict myself and to remember what I said every time social workers and police officers asked me about my story. He said 'keep

> it straight and simple'. He believed that going into too much detail could complicate things and make them want to challenge my account. […] I was told it could be difficult, so I tried to prepare myself. I repeated my story hundreds of times in my head, deciding what I would insist on and what to leave aside. I also asked other people about their accounts. Some of them were not really willing to talk about it, but others told me what they said and gave me advice'.

As these testimonies suggest, issues pertaining to the interview were often anticipated by asylum seekers who developed various strategies to address them, based on trustworthy information. Again, as during the journey, the trustworthiness of the information was determined not on the basis of an institutional source but, rather, on the basis of their fellow nationals' experience. Perceptions about what the Italian authorities expect to hear – on the basis of past successful interviews - provided some respondents with elements which they used to re-adjust their narration in more convenient ways, in order to maximise their chances of obtaining refugee status. The interview, then, represents a good example of how Eritrean asylum seekers strategically overcome structural obstacles that they feel could jeopardise their claim to asylum.

3.3. The 'Dubliners'

For asylum seekers, the Dublin system represents one of the major obstacles to their freedom of movement and to the realisation of their goals. This is particularly true of many Eritreans (34 out of the 52 interviewed) who only considered Italy as a transition point on their journey towards more desirable destinations. Although some participants (18 out of 52) decided during their journey that Italy was a good destination in the end (18 out of 52) – mostly because of family ties or the presence of an Eritrean network – many others saw Italy as a gateway to Europe. Rumours before their departure or during the journey about the better living conditions available for asylum seekers in northern European countries led many of them to decide that they

would try their chance somewhere else. Even those who arrived in Italy with high hopes, were often disappointed and their expectations were frustrated. As we have already seen, changing perceptions of their opportunities and of their own position within the host society can spur a re-evaluation of these possibilities and, consequently, an adjustment of the migrants' strategy. By the time I conducted my fieldwork, as many as 10 out of of the respondents who had initially chosen to settle in Italy were considering moving further. This data reinforces the argument often made in the literature that 'safety was not all that they sought because it was not all that they had lost' (Zimmermann 2009: 14). As I have pointed out throughout this study, asylum seekers are concerned with building better livelihoods, that do not only ensure their safety or their access to work, but which also provide them with other forms of wider social support.

Asylum seekers are therefore very sensitive to rumours about the different opportunities available in various countries. This also emerges from Brekke and Brochmann's study (2014) on the secondary movements of Eritrean refugees from Italy to Norway, which was based on fieldwork carried out in 2012 (at the same time as the fieldwork for this research started). During this study, the perceived differences between member states encouraged Eritrean participants to migrate further, towards other destinations (particularly the UK, Sweden and Norway). Some respondents, especially those who depended on external support to survive during their stay in Italy, were encouraged to move to other countries by people within the network. For instance, Yemane told me of being persuaded to leave by his mother back in Eritrea,

> 'I needed to send money back home, so that my family could repay the money I borrowed to leave and to pay for my father's release from

> prison[131]. […] I didn't really tell my mother about the hard situation here in Italy… I mean, that I was sleeping at Termini [main train, metro and bus station in Rome] and that I was selling lighters at traffic intersections. But I think she realised things weren't going very well. […] Then I met Kevin [Eritrean asylum seeker] and I moved to Collatina [squat building]. I was living on five Euros a day, so I couldn't send a lot of money home. […] So, one day, my mother told me that her friend's son was in Sweden and that he was sending more money home surely because things were better in Sweden. I mean, there are better provisions than here. She suggested I should go there too. So I checked with some Eritrean friends in Collatina. They said it was true, but one also said that his brother had been there but was returned. According to his brother, living in Sweden is difficult because it's always dark and you feel depressed. […] In the end I decided I would try to move to Sweden and see how it went'.

Assessing the achievements of those who had stayed for a long time also encouraged further movements. Fikru's experience is a case in point; he reached Italy by sea in 2012, after a short stay in the CARA in Crotone; he came to Rome but he could not find accommodation in any of the facilities set up for asylum seekers. After sleeping in Termini for almost a week, he met fellow Eritreans who offered him accommodation in a shantytown close to Tiburtina (the second largest train station in Rome). There, he met other fellow asylum seekers who had stayed in Rome for a long period. He argued that:

> 'I saw these people living in the shanty house. Some of them worked in the construction sector with other Eritreans and had lived in Rome for four years. But it looked to me as if they were still struggling, that their living conditions were not better than if they had stayed in Eritrea. So I started worrying that I would end up like them. They weren't even learning Italian or doing vocational training or anything like that! They were just abandoned! So I decided that I'd try to go where there are more opportunities for me'.

As this example demonstrates, the marginal position and the lack of integration of fellow nationals who had stayed for a long time has an impact on newly arrived asylum seekers' perceptions of the opportunities left open to them in the country. On

[131] Yemane's father was arrested following his son's desertion from Eritrea.

the contrary, positive examples of integration have the opposite effect, as Biniam argues:

> 'When I arrived at Baobab [the refugee centre] I was surprised to see Geometra and other Eritreans running the centre together with Italians. […] At Baobab there were always many Eritreans from Rome but also some coming from other countries to record their music [the centre comprises recording premises and musical equipment, and part of the activities in the centre revolve around music production]. They looked like they were doing well, so I thought that after all I could make it too'.

Information about how to circumvent the Dublin Procedure also circulates online. During my fieldwork in the Baobab centre in Rome, I noticed that a big part of the asylum seekers' daily activities revolved around the centre's internet access point. At first sight, they mainly seemed to use social networks such as Facebook to communicate with relatives and acquaintances residing in different countries, but they also established useful contacts within the Eritrean community because, as Geometra would repeat as a mantra, 'you never know, they might come in handy'. Yet another part of their online activity consisted in visiting websites for migrants that were specialised in asylum matters. Geometra explained that

> 'they [the asylum seekers in the centre] regularly consult this kind of websites, in order to better understand how to deal with the system. Actually, these websites give valid suggestions. […] They also report some of this information to friends or family who are travelling and who can't easily access the web. I did that myself, when I helped my little brother to come here'.

Geometra then showed me one of these websites that was consulted by Baobab's residents, the one which, according to him, was the most popular. It did provide a clear explanation of the Dublin Procedure and a guide of 'what to do' depending on whether one wanted to stay in Italy or to travel further north. Here are two excerpts from the website:

> 'The Italian police and members of the European agencies (such as Frontex and Europol) might ask you some trick questions to make you qualify as an "economic migrant" rather than as an "asylum seeker". If they ask you, for example: "why did you come to Italy?" and you respond "to work" then they prevent you from applying for political asylum. For several weeks, in the places where immigrants arrive, Italian and European authorities have been using a form that does not clearly state that it is possible to apply for asylum, whilst the other options are indicated very clearly (such as "work" and "reunification with family"). First of all, remember that you have the option of asking for political asylum and remember to explain and/or to write briefly in a language you know (or with the help of a translator) why you cannot go back to your country and that you choose to apply for international protection' [132]

and in the section about the so-called 'Dubliners':

> 'Remember that you can, in any case, make an appeal, with the help of a lawyer, by invoking the "discretionary clauses" of the Dublin Regulation[133]. These are the "sovereignty clause" and the "humanitarian clause". Until your appeal has been examined and a final decision has been taken, you have the right to stay in the country where you wanted to apply for asylum, without being sent back to Italy. Contact the associations or lawyers in the European country where you are at the moment, so that they can help you to lodge an appeal against your refoulement to Italy. You can find contacts in these countries here.'[134]

As most Eritrean asylum seekers in Italy keenly feel the need to move further north to find better opportunities and as those movements are hindered by the Dublin procedure, my informants developed different strategies to overcome this obstacle. As during the journey, they relied heavily on rumours that circulated in their networks, by phone, email and especially on Facebook. Evidence of the importance of these rumours, whether or not they corresponding to reality, can be seen in some of the specific developments in migration flows that took place between 2012 and 2014, when I carried out my fieldwork. A good example is the case of secondary movements to

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[132] http://www.w2eu.info/italy.en/articles/italy-dublin2.en.html

[133] According to the "discretionary clauses" (the "sovereignty clause" and the "humanitarian clause"),in certain specific situations the application for international protection must be evaluated not by the first country of arrival, but by the country where the asylum seeker actually desires to apply.

[134] http://www.w2eu.info/italy.en/articles/italy-dublin2.en.html

Switzerland. Until late 2012, Switzerland was one of the preferred destinations for Eritrean asylum seekers, many of whom tried to pass through Italy undetected in order to reach the northern country and to claim asylum. Many of my informants had family members and friends who had reached the small country and claimed asylum. This flow, which according to official reports had up to then remained steady, suddenly began to decrease in late 2012, following amendments to the federal law on asylum, including the refusal to recognise refugee status in the case of conscientious objection or of desertion (DEMIG, 2015). This shift in Swiss law was perceived as restrictive by Eritrean asylum seekers since they typically claim asylum on the ground of forced conscription in their home country. The news about this circulated very fast, so much so that I directly witnessed many respondents changing their minds about trying to reach Switzerland. These included Yohannes, a university student who arrived for a conference but who overstayed his VISA and who had planned for months to reach Switzerland in order to claim asylum there:

> 'I don't know anymore. I've heard it's become more difficult now. Contacts in Switzerland told me not to go now. […] I think I might wait a bit longer and see what happens'.

Most of the respondents in this study had learned about the Dublin procedure from rumours circulating either back home, during their journey, or after their arrival. Of course, this information was in most cases not very accurate, but it still influenced the strategies of asylum seekers. Several relevant examples of this emerged during my research.

The first example is related to the EURODAC Database. Information about the Dublin procedure was unevenly distributed among asylum seekers. For instance, eight of my respondents were not fully aware of the different steps of the procedure.

However, rumours did circulate in migration networks about the importance of fingerprints, and many respondents were warned that being fingerprinted would prevent them from going elsewhere. Hagos, who was rescued at sea in 2014, told me that

> 'Before arriving, I was told by my friend [who at that time had been returned to Italy from Germany on the basis of the Dublin Regulation] to avoid having my fingerprints taken at all costs when I arrived. Others in the boat were told the same thing by other people. …] So we decided we would run once we reached the shore, and that we would resist having our fingerprints taken, even if it meant fighting'.

Having been rescued by the Italian coastguard off the coast of Lampedusa, Hagos and his traveling companions strongly opposed the Italian authorities' decision to fingerprint them. The altercation escalated into a fight, which the asylum seekers lost and which led to their detention in an Identification and Expulsion Centre (CIE). Many of the Eritreans I interviewed, especially young males, also tried to escape by night from reception centres in order to continue their journey towards their desired destination. As this type of behaviour became increasingly widespread, the Ministry of the Interior decided in September 2014 to issue an internal document addressed to prefects, police commissioners and police officers, and which stressed the need to photograph and fingerprint all arriving undocumented migrants, "under any circumstances", even in the case of an outright refusal[135].

Freselam and Efrem, two of my informants who disembarked in 2013, adopted a more radical strategy to avoid being fingerprinted. As Efrem points out,

> 'I knew that they [the Italian authorities] would take my fingerprints and take pictures of me. […] How did I know? A Somali that was in my group in Tripoli told me. I'd already heard about that, but I wasn't really sure it was

[135] This was also requested by other EU countries, especially by Germany, that particularly worried that the radical increase in arrivals would lead to a lack of capillary control in migration flows and so to security gaps with consequences for all member states.

> trustworthy information. I spent seven months in Tripoli, at that time there were many of us and news about what was going on circulated a lot. […] I wanted to avoid being fingerprinted. I learned that some people burnt their fingertips, so I did the same. […] But I ended up stuck here [in Italy] anyway'.

As this example shows, it was clear to many participants that detection at the border after their arrival – which in practice meant being fingerprinted and photographed – would prevent them from moving further towards their intended destination. Identification was generally considered as something to avoid, although dodging controls was deemed to be very difficult. Among my Eritrean interviewees, only four[136] managed to avoid detection at the border and, by the time I met them, they were staying for a couple of nights in occupied buildings, with the support of people in the Eritrean network that they (or other intermediaries) had previously contacted. Once again, this highlights the importance of weak migration networks of Eritrean asylum seekers (which, as we will see later, are different from family ties), which are defined by Lin (2001: 76) as important in order to acquire resources for 'instrumental action', such as in this case to move further north while avoiding controls.

A different example of the strategies shaped by the circulation of specific news are the returns from Norway under the Dublin Regulation. In January 2011, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued an important ruling on the case of M.S.S. vs. Belgium and Greece (Application no. 30696/09). The court decided that Greece was violating the human rights of M.S.S., an Afghan refugee, by detaining him under inhuman conditions and by leaving him homeless. It also judged that Belgium had violated his human rights by deporting him back to Greece. Following this decision, several European countries stopped deporting migrants back to Greece, making it *de facto* possible for refugees arriving to Greece to move further and to claim asylum in

[136] No statistical inference can be drawn from these data. In fact the huge difference in numbers is mostly a result of the sample technique used for this research.

another European country. At the same time, in Norway, NGOs opened up a debate about prohibiting returns to Italy, arguing that the country's reception conditions were insufficient. These news became viral among asylum seekers including in the Baobab centre or in the squat buildings, as they considered that it meant that they could perhaps move to Norway without incurring a forced return to Italy. As Birhane told me at the time,

> 'My brother's in Norway now, he said that he'll argue that he can't be returned to Italy because of the lack of decent reception conditions. This is what many are doing there'.

Some parts of this practice are also highlighted by the aforementioned Brekke and Brochman's study (2014), which confirms that asylum seekers are highly responsive to rumours.

A last example concerns what asylum seekers in the Baobab centre and their friends in the squat buildings called 'going on vacation'. During the fieldwork in Rome, I began to notice the many times refugees or people granted other kinds of international protection would leave the refugee centre or their homes to travel to northern Europe, saying that they were going 'on vacation'. Though they were formally travelling to meet their friends, they were actually going there for other reasons. As we have seen, individuals with legal residence in Italy can travel within the Schengen area for no more than three months. However, many of the people who left did not return within that time-span. As Geometra pointed out :

> 'They try to see whether there are opportunities for them, I mean, for moving there. Here we don't have many chances, there instead you have better allowances, for instance, and better housing'.

Many Eritrean refugees in the centre used to go 'on vacation' extremely often. Martin was one of them, and he explained :

> 'I have a friend in Sweden, he has his business so I go there to work. Here I can't find a job, whereas Tseggay pays me well. I earn more and I can send more money home. […] I wish I could move there!'

Martin, like several other respondents, overstayed his three-month allowance several times, each time he ended up being returned to Italy. Among them, Samson was returned to Italy after illegally spending almost two years in Germany. He described his conditions on his return:

> 'I'm so sad. I'm very depressed. I was creating a life for myself in Hamburg, I started learning German, I even had a job! Now, I don't have anything here. I don't belong here! I have to start all over again!'.

As we can see from Samson's words, being returned after a prolonged period abroad puts an enormous psychological strain on asylum seekers, since they once more feel deprived of the future they wanted for themselves. Many 'Dubliners' represent useful sources of information for other asylum seekers who are evaluating the possibilities open to them. Some of them return with sad stories and provide negative news about life in other countries (for instance, about the fact that people in Northern countries are 'depressed'). This phenomenon has a double effect on fellow asylum seekers. On the one hand, it shows that expectations can be disappointed, as Michael's words show:

> 'it wasn't at all what I expected. I thought it was a better place but there [Sweden] nobody speaks to you, they don't even look at you. At least here people are friendlier. […] It was really hard, and I ended up sleeping in the streets anyway and it was so cold.'

As many others, Michael had idealised life in the northern countries based on information from other migrants living there. As we have seen, though, it is not rare for asylum seekers to embellish their narratives. Driven by their hope for a better future, several asylum seekers took the risk of travelling to another country only to be returned

and to have to start from zero, which resulted in, as they put it, a considerable 'waste of time'. On the other hand, negative accounts also function as a deterrent for further migration. At least twenty of my informants had at some point thought about leaving Italy but were discouraged by negative stories. As Samira told me,

> 'I thought of moving somewhere else but I was afraid it could turn out to be a fiasco. I see that here I don't have many opportunities, I thought it would be easier, especially for Eritrean refugees, but there is no real support for refugees other than assistance to get the status, then you are on your own. I heard that in other places it is better, but I also heard about people being returned. […] I think I will stay here for the moment and see how it goes, if I can find a safe way to move'.

Samira's testimony is very clear and it is representative of the attitudes of many of my respondents. Having had their perceptions of Italy negatively changed while they had to deal with their asylum application, they ended up in an ambivalent state of uncertainty, as they were held back by fear but pushed to take action by hope. As a result, they did not see Italy as their final destination, which slowed their integration process, but at the same time they had an unclear idea about how to move further. Their situation was quite lucidly described by Abel during a conference on asylum seekers at the *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*:

> 'I feel trapped. I'm not here, but I'm not somewhere else either. I'm in limbo'.

4. The Reception System

Despite attempts made at the EU level to harmonise asylum procedures and reception conditions, member states still have different approaches in dealing with the reception of asylum seekers (Bank, 2000: 149). In Italy, the reception system for asylum seekers is regulated by a plurality of laws, such as the Legislative Decree n.

140/2005[137], Presidential Decree n. 303/2004[138], and Articles 20 and 21 of Legislative Decree n. 25/2008[139]. Besides these laws, the so-called "Puglia Law"[140] is particularly relevant as it regulates the reception centres where migrants, including asylum seekers who travel in mixed flows and disembark on the Italian shores, first arrive. However this framework, does not make for a coherent reception approach, as there is no coordination between different laws, which results in gaps and in contradictory regulations that are very difficult to interpret and to apply (see also UNHCR 2013, and UNHCR 2015).

On 26 June 2013, the recast Reception Condition Directive n. 2013/33/UE was adopted. It is intended to provide better and more harmonized standards of living for those who apply for international protection throughout the EU, irrespective of the member state in which the application has been made. It sets out new rules governing detention and mandates better standards for vulnerable persons including (unaccompanied) minors. Moreover, according to the new Directive, member states that wish to do so can adopt even more favourable rules. The Italian legislative branch is in the process of transposing it into domestic law[141]; in particular, as suggested by the President of the Italian Republic, the Government has given the Parliament a mandate to reform national asylum laws through a single text that is also supposed to include the transposition of EU laws on international protection. According to the experts interviewed, this could represent a unique chance to overcome the emergency approach that has been the norm in the last few years, and, therefore, to respond in an appropriate manner to the increasing numbers of asylum seekers, including through the

[137] It transposes the EU Reception Conditions Directive 2003/9/UE into domestic law.
[138] It is also called the "Asylum Regulation".
[139] It transposes the EU Procedures Directive 2005/85/UE into domestic law
[140] Law n. 563/2005.
[141] Some reform proposals were included in the Senate's agenda item 9/1836-A/10 and in the Chamber of Deputies' agenda item G/1519/1/14.

establishment of reinforced mechanisms, data-gathering tools, planning and monitoring.

The Italian reception system was established very late, in 2001. This delay can be ascribed to the Italians' self-perception as a country of emigrants rather than a destination country for immigrants. Based on the experience of associations and NGOs who have carried out decentralised and network-based reception activities around 1999-2000, the Ministry of the Interior signed an agreement with the "*Associazione Nazionale dei Comuni Italiani*" (ANCI - National Association of Italian Municipalities) and the UNHCR to establish a "National Asylum Programme". This model relied on a system of shared responsibility between the Government, local authorities and civil society.

In general, the reception system is based on the SPRAR network ("*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*"-Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) and on other types of reception facilities, namely CPSA ("*Centri di Primo Soccorso ed Accoglienza*" – First Aid Reception Centres), CDA ("*Centri di Accoglienza*" – Reception Centres), CARA ("*Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo*" – Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers), "*Centri Polifunzionali*" (Multi-functional Centres), "*Centri della Protezione Civile*" (Civil Protection Centres), and CIE ("*Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione*" – Identification and Expulsion Centres).

As provided by law n. 189/2002, the SPRAR network is run by local bodies and coordinated by the *Servizio Centrale di Informazione Promozione, Consulenza, Monitoraggio e Supporto Tecnico agli Enti Locali*[142] (Central Service providing Information, Promotion, Advice, Monitoring and Support to Local Bodies). The latter is

[142] It monitors asylum seekers and individuals under international protection; it has created, manages and updates the database of interventions carried out in favour of asylum seekers and individuals under international protection; it publicizes its interventions; it gives technical support to local bodies; and provides support for information and guidance services, which are carried out in governmental centres for asylum seekers.

run by ANCI, which in turn relies on the operative support of the *Fondazione Cittalia*[143]*.* Local bodies have access to the "National Funds for Asylum Policies and Services" for projects related to "integrated reception", and which in theory provide not only food and accommodation but also information and guidance plans, in order to lay out individual paths for socio-economic integration. For instance, activities include learning Italian, adult education, access to education (especially for minors subject to compulsory education), legal assistance and advice about the rights and duties of the beneficiaries of international protection. The SPRAR network relies heavily on the voluntary help of non-profit organisations that contribute in fundamental ways to ther projects. In practice, the SPRAR network consists of middle to small reception structures, which are spread out over the Italian territory. SPRAR facilities are mainly flats (76%), community homes (4%), and small reception centres (20%) (ANCI et al. 2014: 100). Projects usually last six months, although in some cases they can be extended to twelve months[144]. Some of these projects are specifically targeted at vulnerable individuals, such as victims of torture, individuals with disabilities, unaccompanied minors, pregnant women, and single parents. Moreover, the "integrated reception" approach organises activities aimed at increasing awareness of asylum issues among local residents, thereby establishing links with the local community. Due to the increase in the number of asylum claims compared to the limited number of spaces available, The Ministry of the Interior has called for the creation of an additional

[143] It is the body which ANCI has charged with research on issues considered relevant for Italian Municipalities. Created in 2008, this foundation deals with issues related to the environment, institutions and innovation, and of late it has focused on welfare and society, social inclusion, participation, the management of public spaces, and urban policies.

[144] As of October 2014, 456 SPRAR reception projects were in place (data provided by the Department of Civil Liberties and of Immigration to the CIR).

16,000 places in the period 2014-2016[145]. In 2014 it also allocated an additional 50 million Euros to the "National Fund for Asylum".

CARA[146] centres were established in 2008 and replaced previous identification centres. They are considered as "first reception centres" in which migrants are allowed to stay for 20-35 days (although these limit are usually not respected, and can be extended to more than six months when the asylum procedure takes a long time). According to Article 20 of the Legislative Decree n. 25/2008, they can accommodate the asylum seekers that meet one of the following criteria:

- they are undocumented or have false documents which means that identification is required;
- they lodged an asylum claim after being stopped for avoiding or attempting to avoid border controls[147];
- they lodged an asylum claim after being stopped because of their irregular stay in Italy.

The Ministry of the Interior set out common minimum standards for CARAs in 2008, and respecting them is a requirement to be eligible for the tender process. These centres can be run by local bodies and, more generally, by public or private bodies through case-by-case agreements for a three-year renewable period. In practice, though, they are often run by private bodies and, in particular, by cooperatives, that see the "reception business" as a profitable branch, which the so-called "Mafia Capitale"

[145] Ministry of Interior Decree n.9/2013. According to data from the Ministry of Interior, the places available within the SPRAR system number around 20,000 at the moment.
[146] As of December 2014, there were 10 CARAs and CDAs on national soil (data provided by the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration to the CIR).
[147] According to practitioners and asylum lawyer from the CIR and the Fondazione Astalli, most asylum seekers who disembark on the Italian shores or are rescued at sea are placed in CARAs under Article 20 (b).

scandal (that also implicated the CARA in Castelnuovo di Porto, a small town close to Rome) made quite clear.

The quality of the services provided in such centres varies depending on the facilities (UNHCR 2013: 12). Some of them, such as the ones in Bari, in Catania (Mineo) and in Gorizia are overcrowded, and are located in remote and disconnected places. In addition, the quality of services is not comparable to that offered by SPRAR centres, which are usually smaller. This has severe consequences in terms of the availability of legal advice and psychological support. There have been several protests in CARAs in the recent years due to the poor reception conditions and the delays resulting from the Dublin procedure.

CDA[148] and CPSA[149] centres are reception centres for undocumented migrants, but often they also accommodate asylum seekers. These centres are intended for temporary stays, but in fact migrants are often temporarily placed in CDAs or CPSAs depending on the spaces available, and the identification procedure is carried out there. They are then transferred to other facilities (namely CARAs or SPRAR centres).

The so-called "*Centri Polifunzionali*" were established in 2007 following an agreement between the Ministry of the Interior and the cities of Rome, Florence, Milan and Turin, in order to help those municipalities to deal with their high number of beneficiaries of international protection and other vulnerable people. In some cases they work jointly with the SPRAR network.

The "*Centri della Protezione Civile*" were established in 2011 by the Prime Minister's Decree of 12 February, which declared a state of "Humanitarian Emergency" following the unprecedented flows of migrants arriving by sea from North Africa. The Civil Protection Centres were in charge of elaborating a "National Contingency Plan" and

[148] Created in 1995, they are located in Sicily, Apulia, Calabria, Marche and Lazio.
[149] Created in 2006, they are located in Sicily and Sardinia.

of distributing migrants across the regions, according to the availability of reception facilities. However, the emergency status was called off in 2013 and the responsibility for dealing with migration flows returned to the competent bodies[150].

CIE centres are facilities for irregular migrants waiting to be expelled from the country (detention cannot last longer than 18 months). Asylum seekers can only be held in these centres in certain strictly defined cases, for instance if they commit a crime or receive an expulsion decree.

Due to the need for additional accommodation for migrants following the unprecedented increase in arrivals by sea, on 10 July 2014 the Government reached an agreement with regional and local authorities to establish a "National Plan" to tackle the migration flows. This plan incorporates three phases: migrants are first rescued at sea; they are then transferred to regional "hub" centres where they are identified; they are then transferred to SPRAR facilities[151].

The law[152] mandates that the access to reception centres should be guaranteed once an applicant lodges his/her asylum claim[153]. More specifically, asylum seekers who cannot provide adequate living standards for themselves or their family have to present a declaration of destitution and a request for reception when they lodge their asylum request at the *Questura*. However, despite these legal provisions, asylum seekers can only access the reception system after their claim has been formally registered. Because of the delay between the initial registration and the *verbalizzazione*, which can take several months, asylum claimants have serious problems to find other types of

[150] See Protezione Civile, Dossier Emergenza Nord Africa, available at http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/jcms/it/view_dossier.wp?contentId=DOS24090.

[151] See Ministry of the Interior, www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.interno.it/dipim/site/it/documentazione/politiche_immigrazione_asilo/2014/Varato_il_Piano_Nazionale_per_fronteggiare_il_flusso_straordinario_di_migranti. See also CIR, 2014: 60-62.

[152] Reception Decree n. 140/2005.

[153] Article 5 (5), Reception Decree n. 140/2005.

temporary accommodation, which means that they resort to friends, some of whom live in occupied buildings, or who sleep in the streets. This situation mainly concerns asylum applicants who lodge their claim at the police station, rather than those who disembark on Italian shores or who are rescued at sea, as the latter are immediately transferred to reception centres, where they lodge their asylum application (ANCI et al., 2014: 125).

After the *Questura* receives the migrants' reception applications, it transfers them to the *Prefettura*, which assesses the asylum seekers' resources using the criteria used to obtain a tourism visa (Article 4(3), Legislative Decree n. 286/1998). As reported by the CIR, in practice the *Prefettura* generally validates the claimants' self-declarations (see also: Benvenuti 2011). According to Articles 6(2) and 5(2) of the Reception Decree n. 140/2005, the *Prefettura* is supposed to find a place for the asylum seeker in a reception centre, in which he/she is usually free of their movements[154]. It is important to note that accommodation is supposed to be provided on the basis of the asylum claimants' needs (that is, special consideration is supposed to be given to people with special needs such as single parents with children, families or vulnerable people). The *Prefettura* therefore checks SPRAR availability. However, if there is no place in SPRAR facilities, claimants can be referred to CARAs. By law[155], if neither SPRAR centres nor CARAs have any room, the *Prefettura* has to grant the claimant an allowance[156] until a space opens up in a reception centre. In practice, however, this provision is never applied, and the *Prefettura* allocates asylum claimants to reception centres even when

[154] According to Article 7(1) of the Legislative Decree n.159/2008 (which amends Legislative Decree n. 25/2008), the Prefect can limit the freedom of movement of asylum seekers to a pre-defined area. However, according to practitioners in the asylum field, this has never happened. However, in some cases an authorisation is required to leave the reception facility. Whenever a person infringes this rule and does not return within a short period of time (normally set by the specific centre administration), they are not readmitted to the facility.

[155] Article 6 (7), Reception Decree n. 140/2005.

[156] According to Article 6 (7), the allowance shall be provided in two instalments, and it amounts to 27.89 Euros per day.

there are no vacant places, thereby increasing their overcrowding. In general, asylum applicants are supposed to be given access to the reception system within 15 days from the presentation of their request. Again, as this request is usually processed only after the formal registration of the asylum application, it usually takes longer to access the system. In addition to the services provided by CARAs and SPRAR centres, asylum claimants receive 2.50 Euros per person in goods or as pocket money from the CARAS and from 1.50 to 2.50 Euros in SPRARs.

The law indicates that family units should be respected both in SPRAR centres and in CARAs. This means that children cannot be separated from their parents. However, if the parents are accommodated in separate wings or in different centres, children are usually accommodated with their mother. Moreover, asylum seekers who lodge an appeal against a negative decision are only entitled to access the reception system if they are not allowed to work or if they are prevented from working for psycho-physical reasons.

This system faces major hurdles, which limit both the efficiency and the prevailing standards of the reception system. In particular, there is often a lack of information available about the procedure to apply for accommodation. This is particularly true in Rome, where the problem is made worse by a shortage of interpreters and of cultural mediators. Furthermore, the length of the asylum procedure (and in some cases of the appeal phase), together with the limited number of reception facilities, make it difficult to provide new asylum seekers with accommodation, since earlier applicants typically stay for long periods. In this regard, the situation is becoming worse due to the continuing flow of migrants. This has led to a proliferation of occupied buildings, where neither security standards and nor minimum living standards are met. Moreover, another factor that contributes to overcrowding is that

many asylum seekers do not want to move from SPRAR centres and prefer to stay in those that are close to large cities, as it makes it easier for them to find a job.

As I briefly mentioned above, under the Dublin Procedure asylum seekers face considerable difficulties when they try to access the reception system. According to Italian law, if the asylum claimant's application has to be examined by another EU member state and if a transfer order has therefore been released, the asylum seeker can be accommodated in a reception facility under the same rules that apply to other asylum seekers[157]. The situation, however, is different for asylum claimants who are returned to Italy under the Dublin Procedure. Only those individuals who have not already benefited from accommodation provisions while they were in Italy are still entitled to enter the reception system. Given that it can take a long time to find available places, many of them, like the respondents in this study, are forced to resort to 'self-organised' solutions, such as occupied buildings. Of course, exceptions are generally made for vulnerable persons.

5. THE REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES OF RECEPTION

5.1 Living in Rome: the Baobab refugee centre

As we have seen, life for Eritrean refugees in Italy unfolds against a backdrop of poor reception conditions and a lack of sufficient reception facilities. In Rome, walking around the Termini and the Tiburtina stations as well as the neighbouring areas is enough to get a sense of the situation, with many young migrants – and even some migrant families – sleeping in cardboard boxes on the floor, on isolated benches, or inside the many tunnels. Zacharias is one of them. Like many of his young fellow nationals, he deserted the army and fled the country:

[157] This is possible as the Italian law does not mandate that individuals waiting to be tranferred have to be detained.

> 'I hoped I could find a better life in Europe. […] I came to Italy by plane from Khartoum. I had a friend that was here, he was a friend of a friend and we talked over the phone and via Facebook and Whatsapp. […] He promised he could help me with the asylum claim and to find a place to stay. […] At that time he decided to try to move to Germany, but I could stay at his place, a small flat he shared with other Eritreans. After four months of staying there, the police came because they had been tipped off that some black people were living in the flat without any contract. […] In the end, we couldn't go back to that place. I went to the municipality office to ask for accommodation, but they told me there were no places available, that I had to wait for 6 months at least! […] So now I sleep here at night, during the day I go to *Centro Astalli* to see whether they have news about my process…they give me some food. […]this situation… it is so humiliating!'

Zacharias' case is a good illustration of the situation of many asylum seekers in Rome. Some of them came to Rome because they had a support network in the capital, others because they thought they would be more comfortable in Rome as they were sure that 'Rome looked like a bigger Asmara'. This reasoning, which might sound naïve to many, turned out to be recurrent in interviews with asylum seekers from urban areas, which suggests that a perceived familiarity with their natural environment provided them with a form of 'psychological comfort' that mitigated the feeling of being uprooted. There are also more practical reasons why so many settle in Rome. One is related to the job market; as Abel puts it,

> 'I think it's better to stay in Rome rather than in a small town because it's easier to find a job. […] If I had to give some advice, I would say try to find a place in accommodation centres in the city'.

Abel's view was shared by the majority of my respondents, who strongly believed that living in a big city increased their chances of getting a job. Although most of the respondents expressed a clear preference for living in Rome, some like Medhin remarked that:

> 'I really didn't think much about it. I just ended up in Rome. When I was released from the CARA in Crotone I was only given the money for a train ticket. Rome was the furthest I could get with that money'.

Asylum seekers leave the CARAs with a small amount of money that they use to travel to cities like Rome, where there are a larger number of secondary reception centres. Rome[158] has thus emerged as a transit point for Eritrean asylum seekers.

At the time of my fieldwork, among the different refugee centres of the SPRAR network, the Baobab refugee centre[159] represented a 'one of a kind' project. Located in Rome's via Cupa, in the Tiburtina area, on the premises of a former glassworks between Piazza delle Province and via Tiburtina, the centre is a privileged location to observe asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa. The centre was set up in 2005, following the evacuation of what was then called 'Hotel Africa', a building close to Tiburtina Station occupied mostly by Eritreans but also by Ethiopians. The evacuation led to the creation of different reception centres; one of them, Anagnina, is now occupied by Eritreans and has become a squat building. Baobab represented something of an experiment. Geometra was one of the first occupants of 'Hotel Africa' and a member of its 'governing committee'. He recalls that,

> 'We were living in 'Hotel Africa'. Have you heard of it? Yeah...it was one of the first buildings occupied in Tiburtina. We were Eritreans and Ethiopian *weddy 'addey* [it means 'son of my mother' and is used to express companionship; it is used mostly by Eritreans to address Ethiopians and *vice versa*] living there; we didn't have anywhere else to go. So we stayed there and organised ourselves. There was a sort of governing body that ensured the safety of the premises and which settled issues among residents. It was also in charge of dealing with the associations that came to the building…I mean, like doctors or social services or cooperatives. […]

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[158] According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), there were almost 4,000 registered Eritreans in the municipality of Rome as of 1 January 2014. www.istat.it.

[159] The Baobab refugee centre was dismantled by the municipality in 2015 following the declaration of a 'humanitarian emergency' due to the sharp increase in migrants arriving to the country by sea. Instead Baobab became a 'transit centre' that is, a centre for migrants transiting to northern Europe. According to volunteers who were working in the centre during this period, the owner of the premises totally dismantled the centre so as to render it inhabitable. It was then evacuated again in 2016, despite protests from activists and volunteers.

> In 2005, the Italian authorities decided to evacuate the building. We knew that eventually we would have had to leave, but we resisted because we wanted to negotiate our terms. They offered to move us to other facilities, but we were sick and tired of being told what to do. In these centres that's how it works...you're given rules and you have Italian staff that ensure that you respect those rules. But we are independent people!'

Eventually, an agreement was reached according to which refugee families would be transferred to different reception centres, while single male refugees moved to the premises of what would become the Baobab centre. Building on the experience of 'Hotel Africa', the Baobab project was designed to respect the wishes of people who were able to self-organise. The members of the governing committee of 'Hotel Africa' – including Geometra - became social workers in the centre, in charge of running daily activities, including controls. The Baobab centre, which at the very beginning mostly hosted Eritreans and Ethiopians as well as a small minority of Somalis, in time opened its doors to asylum seekers of other nationalities[160].

Geometra's account sheds light on very important elements, which as we have seen in the other chapters, are key aspects of the Eritrean identity, that is, resilience, self-determination and self-sufficiency. One Eritrean man, who took part in the border war with Ethiopia, who was a young boy during the independence war, and who was proud to be an *Ascaro*'s grandson, described the importance of this self-organisation for Eritreans, and opposed it to the dependence that results from living on welfare. In his words,

> 'We're independent. It's not good to depend on the assistance of others; we don't come here to beg. […] The system takes everything from asylum seekers, even their dignity. It makes you dependent. […] It's the kind of

[160] This change was introduced by the Italian cooperatives that ran the centre in order not to lose their public funding from the municipality. At the time of the fieldwork, Baobab nominally housed around 120 refugees (allocated through the USI circle, through two different kind of agreements), but in fact there were fewer guests. The centre also had other 40 spare places for emergency cases. Men from the Horn of Africa were still the majority, with the number of Eritreans refugees staying in the centre varying between 22 and 37.

> support it gives you; for instance, many people here don't have the right to find a job, so instead of giving them the possibility to attend vocational training they're just given 3 Euros and thrown in the street during the day: go and find a job'.

As we saw in the previous chapters, the idea of self-sufficiency is central to the indoctrination process undergone by the younger generations in Eritrea; consequently self-sufficiency becomes a point of honour and of national pride. This is reflected in the discourse of many young respondents, like Nikos, who claimed that

> 'I feel disappointed with Italy. I expected it to be better. […] First, it should do more for Eritreans, we're treated like we're rubbish! Many of us sleep in the street! Secondly, the system in place doesn't enable you to care for yourself. Here in Baobab I was sent to Italian courses so that I can take the 8th grade Italian school certificate and that's a good thing. But people who are able to do so are just a minority. […] It takes a lot of time to become self-sufficient again'.

In addition to the conviction that Italy should do more, what mattered for many of my Eritrean respondents was *how* this was be done, that is, they were adamant that it had to be done in a way that enabled them to care for themselves in as short a time as possible. The Baobab centre was intended as an answer to the claims voiced by Eritreans from 'Hotel Africa'. When centres for Eritrean asylum seekers were set up and entirely run by NGOs, cooperatives and charitable associations – as in the case of Anagnina – the projects failed[161] and the buildings were eventually occupied by residents who ran them on their own. As one can imagine, these experiences had a strong repercussion on the refugees' integration. Although determining the exact level of integration of refugees is beyond the scope of this research project and would necessitate a longitudinal study, it can be argued that while experiments such as the

[161] The reasons for this failure can in part be attributed to constant changes in the municipality administration that had a negative impact on tenders for the management of SPRAR centres and CARA by third sector organisations. The management of these centres has not always been transparent, as the 'Mafia Capitale' scandal in 2014-2015 made clear, when it was discovered that tenders had been allocated to specific cooperatives that ran them as profitable business intended to act as covers for other illegal businesses, much to the detriment of refugees and asylum seekers.

Baobab centre enabled Eritrean residents to self-organise and to play a part in the managing of the centre, while also creating a valuable space for residents to interact with inhabitants from the neighbourhood, failed experiences that turned into occupations created impenetrable cultural enclaves, with a very limited interaction with the surrounding Italian environment.

In spite of the fact that Eritrean refugees participated as social workers in the Baobab reception centre, power relations were still unbalanced, insofar as the Italian staff (made up of four people) ran the administrative part and took relevant decisions about the length of the asylum seekers' stays and the procedures to follow, while the Eritrean social workers dealt with minor daily issues and had to report back to the Italian staff. These power relations were also spatially evident, with a clear space demarcation in the form of a glass wall between the offices of the Italian staff and the areas where asylum seekers spent their days; furthermore, interactions between the Italian staff and the residents typically took place in the office spaces, and thereby acquired an official connotation. Interactions between the Italian staff and the asylum seekers rarely took place in the area where the latter socialised, except during parties and events. On this matter, Domenico, the director of the refugee centre, argued:

> 'It's important that they [the asylum seekers] perceive you as having a specific role as the director of the centre, rather than as a friend. I know it sounds awful, but it's better this way because you need them to respect specific rules – even in their own interest – and this isn't always easy. Some of them are used to behave in a different way and it's not very easy to deal with them, because they don't always recognise your authority. Eritreans, for example, are very difficult to convince for instance when paperwork needs to be done in a specific way, when they need to produce some documents or to sign papers…they're very wary, they don't trust you. So, sometimes they refuse. Then you have to use your authority as a director. You see, if they saw you as a friend it wouldn't work! […] Their relation with the Eritrean staff and with Geometra, in particular, is different. They recognise his authority as he is one of them, he's had the same experience, and what is more he was also from the military and a

> former key member of the occupation, so he has a clear place in their hierarchy. If he says something they'll do it. He knows how to deal with them'.

However this demarcation was perceived quite differently by my Eritrean respondents. Many brought it up as yet another aspect illustrating how their expectations had been frustrated, another sign of Italy's indifference towards them. As Habte put it,

> 'I came here and I thought that because of our ties there would be special provisions for us, or, at least, that Italians would facilitate the procedure for us. Instead, we're treated like everybody else… it's as if we were transparent for them. […] Even here in the centre, they don't mingle with us'.

When asked why they thought that the Italian staff would not socialise with them, the most frequent answers were: 'because they don't speak other languages, not even English...they're ignorant!', or 'because they're scared of us', or 'because they don't care'.

It must be noted that the residents of the centre perceived the administrative staff as a specific kind of Italians, Italians with ties to the authorities and who 'make the asylum process very difficult, a real bureaucratic hurdle!', using the words of Mekonnen. One can argue, therefore, that the experience of the asylum process resulted in a negative perception of the Italian asylum policies and (especially) of its provisions, and that it caused refugees to eventually associate the people who were in charge of administering the asylum process with the process itself. In the eyes of the residents, this perception was corroborated by the attitude of the Italian staff, which – as we learned from Domenico – really reflected a strategy aimed at efficiently managing more than one hundred residents and which was not intended to marginalise them.

According to the respondents, and based on their experience of interacting with Italians, there were at least two other types of Italians: the 'regular' ones, who 'were ok';

and the 'racist ones' who 'looked at them with contempt'. Interactions with the population of the neighbourhood were encouraged by the very structure of the centre, where there was no physical separation between the spaces intended for asylum seekers and those where Italian visitors spent time. In fact, these spaces were not clearly demarcated and, with the exception of the bedrooms and of the showers (which, it must be noted, could in theory be accessed as well since they were not locked) Italians and residents could socialise in the rest of the centre. During the fieldwork, it was not unusual to see Eritrean asylum seekers playing draughts with local friends whom they had met during their Italian courses, at the bar across the street, or at a music session, (and who were inexorably defeated). Local visitors could also access the gym facility where residents worked out, for a small fee. Moreover, there also existed another space of interaction in the centre, in the guise of an Eritrean restaurant that was frequented not only by residents (who ate for free) but also by people from the neighbourhood. Meals were prepared by Eritrean refugees, men and women hired by Daniel - an Eritrean man who had been naturalised Italian, and who was in charge of the cultural aspects of the centre. This space was also used for events, mostly book launches, cultural evenings, ethnic music shows and even parties. Music, had a very important role in encouraging exchanges between Italians and Eritreans – and thus in promoting their integration. Daniel, a musician himself, set up a recording studio for Eritrean musicians in a spare room in the centre, which was frequented by Eritrean musicians (also by some who were residing in other European countries and even in Canada and the US), by residents of the centre and by Italian musicians. Daniel had his own group – the top singer was Selamina, who also worked as a cook in the restaurant – that performed in local ethnic festivals and, once a year, in the *Auditorium* (a big concert hall in Rome). Attending the music sessions in the recording studio – to which I was

admitted because of my past as a dancer – it was not rare to hear discussions among residents and guests about the municipality's policies towards immigrants and asylum seekers, or about welfare provisions in other countries, or about rumours concerning the achievements or failures of friends elsewhere in the diaspora. Very interestingly, developments in Eritrea never seemed to be a topic of discussion. According to Geometra this was mostly due to the fact that

> 'No one's really thinking of going back. In the situation they're in here, it's hard to look back at what they left, especially family. But, anyway, people think of the future, it helps them to cope. […] There's also the problem of government spies: people are afraid to talk because they're afraid that what they say could be reported back to the authorities and affect their possibilities to obtain documents or their families back home'.

While we will come back to the issue of control, it is important to note that, in the other common areas of the centre, interactions (including with Italians) often centred on practical issues, ranging from the way to get a bus card for free to the means of securing various forms of assistance. Interactions with Italians were considered very important insofar as they made it easier to understand the official position on various matters of interest - such as asylum, reception and welfare benefits – by discussing news in the Italian papers, incidents, and declarations from the authorities. This was critical for the residents as they were not able to read Italian and were not familiar with journalistic language. It is not exaggerated to say that almost all the Eritreans I spoke to in the centre were very well informed about what was happening in the Italian political arena, including the policies of various parties on migration. I was also considered a source of information: because of my international experience and of my position as a PhD student in the field of asylum, they used to ask me questions about provisions elsewhere and clarifications about the Italian approach to these issues. Finally, interaction with the 'outside world' were also encouraged by the rules of the centre,

that forced them to leave the centre after breakfast and only allowed them to return after 4pm. During these hours outside the centre, some socialised with their friends in the squat buildings, but many looked for available jobs, even in the informal economy, which, according many respondents among whom Kifle,

> 'is the best thing Italy has for us. It's hard to find a regular job, but at least you can work in the informal sector and send money to the family'.

According to Geometra,

> 'finding a job in the informal sector was easier in the past. Now there's the economic crisis and it's become more difficult. […] Anyway, if you don't work legally, you can't prove you have an income…for family reunification it's important for instance, or if you want to rent a room in a shared flat. So working illegally is only a temporary solution to earn some money, but it doesn't solve all the problems'.

By the time I carried out my fieldwork, only 20 respondents were working in the legal economy, mostly as cooks, as waiters in restaurants, as gardeners, as watchmen or in the construction business. The others were either unemployed, or occasionally employed in the informal economy.

Because of the interactions described above, the Baobab centre can be considered as a hub for the creation and diffusion of perceptions. Perceptions about the Italian asylum system, Italians, and Italy in general were produced and reproduced by discussing the news gathered in the ways described above. Among asylum seekers, discussions on whether it was the right moment to leave Italy to go somewhere else, or about what to do in relation to a specific problem were common. Moreover, due to the personal links between residents in the centre and those in the squat buildings, information gathered in the centre was regularly transmitted to those outside it, thus influencing their perceptions as well. For instance, on more than one occasion, Eritreans staying in the squat buildings came to the centre to speak to Geometra or to other

residents about specific developments in their cases, and to ask whether they had 'heard' something as they had a readier access to information. Finally, information and perceptions obtained in the centre were very often conveyed home or to people in transit, especially through email, Facebook and Whatsapp, which were considered safer means of communication.

5.2 'Alternative' solutions for accessing housing and basic health care: some examples

As we discussed above, one of the major issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees, in addition to unemployment, is the problem of finding housing. As we saw, the Italian system has no provisions for long-term accommodation, and there is a lack of reception facilities. This phenomenon explains the rise of the so-called '*occupazioni*', that is the illegal occupation of buildings, and the emergence of a 'parallel' housing system.

As Geometra points out, occupation is a way for asylum seekers to cope with the shortcomings of the Italian reception system and, indeed, it often represents the only viable solution apart from sleeping in the streets. It should be mentioned that, during my fieldwork, as the number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers increased, more and more buildings seemed to be occupied. In Rome, at least two buildings were occupied in 2013, one close to the Baobab centre, in via delle Province, and one close to the Termini station, located in Piazza Indipendenza. This building, formerly called 'Palazzo Curtatone' is an 11-storey building, which formerly contained the offices of

ISPRA (*Istituto per le Ricerca Ambientale* – Institute for Environmental Research)[162]. As Adhanom, the caretaker of the building explained to me in 2014,

> 'We're more or less 900 Eritreans and Ethiopians. A lot of families. But we are waiting for other friends to come from Sicily'.

The occupations, however, are usually the outcome of interactions between Eritreans and Italian associations, rather than a purely Eritrean initiative. In fact, these occupations are mainly organised by three groups, "Lotta per la Casa", "Action", and "Movimento per la Casa", who support and facilitate sit-ins by migrants in order to draw public attention to the housing issue, and to fight welfare cuts. As Yemane, who had resided in Rome for more than 10 years at the time of the fieldwork, and who is one of the leading activists in this field, explained:

> 'In this respect, we and the Italians have a similar interest in pointing out a very serious problem. We can't sleep in the streets. We want to live legally, we all have papers, but there's no system in place for us. So we don't have any choice but to find a solution on our own!'

Of course, the Eritrean respondents who were actively engaged in organising the occupations were fully aware of the fact that their cause was 'instrumental', insofar as it allowed the Italian associations to push a wider political agenda. Nevertheless, this kind of interaction was seen as a means to an end, that of finding accommodation in the short term.

On the other hand, Eritrean respondents who lived in the occupied buildings but who did not take part in the occupation procedure were not fully aware of the wider political implications. As Sophi, an Eritrean woman living in Collatina points out,

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[162] Its occupation followed the Lampedusa shipwreck (3 October 2013), that caused the death of almost four hundreds migrants. This incident was followed by new arrivals by sea, and the new asylum seekers were supposed to be moved to the CARA in Castelnuovo di Porto. However, due to sudden flooding, they could not access the centre and were moved to 'Palazzo Curtatone'

> 'Yeah, we heard about it…but we don't see many Italians around. Not from those associations. People from the ASL (health services) come here sometimes, or other NGOs, but not very often'.

These perceptions reflect the way occupations end up being carried out. As Yemane explained,

> 'The Italian associations know what buildings can be occupied. There's a meeting with some of us. […] Then we go there with friends who already live in other occupied buildings and we open the road. So, when new people arrive, especially families, they can find accommodation there'.

The mobilisation of people in the other occupied buildings is carried out through word of mouth among members of the network. For instance, when a new building was occupied in Tiburtina in 2013, residents of the Baobab centre participated, even providing some food and supplies (which were provided by Italians for the most part). Very interestingly, most of the mobilised participants to the 'enterprise' were *in regola*, that is they had regular papers and had already had their status determined. None of them was waiting for family reunification. As Geometra, who is also a very close friend of Yemane, told me,

> 'It's especially people who can't have legal problems that are asked to participate. I mean, if one is still waiting for one's status to be determined then it's better not to be involved, you never know what might happen… maybe the police comes. […] I didn't go to the occupation because I'm trying to have my daughter come here, it's better if I don't have problems with the police'.

As it emerges from this account, this selective participation strategy aims to limit the risks and repercussions that could affect more vulnerable participants. A similar strategy determines what premises to occupy. These can be divided into three types: office spaces, private houses or apartments, and hotels. Office spaces were the most

common kind of occupied premises[163]; very often, these belonged to large corporations that left them empty or they were public buildings that were out of use; in other cases, office spaces were made available by the owners (public or private foundations) in exchange for the occupants paying certain bills: this for instance was the case of the buildings owned by the Order of Malta in Collatina. The occupations of private houses are mostly demonstrative, and sit-ins tend to last for shorter periods as Italian authorities are compelled by law to vacate them. Finally, according to my respondents,[164] hotels are sometimes occupied following an agreement with their owners, who in the absence of clients decide to let refugees in, so as to ask the Municipality of Rome for compensation. This sort of agreements are usually reached by Italian associations, whose role is obviously very important when it comes to minimising the risks for refugees.

In terms of organisation, the occupied buildings represent a unique experience in terms of how cohabitation rules are developed. Parallel systems of norms and parallel economies emerge. The overall control is in the hands of the controlling committee[165], which is made up of Eritrean and Ethiopian asylum seekers with previous experience of occupations or self-organisation. It is difficult for outsiders to access these buildings as entrances are controlled by watchmen in charge of security. Eritreans, in particular, are very wary of strangers: on the one hand they fear being controlled by the Eritrean government, on the other, they mistrust Italian civil servants, members of associations and NGOs, and journalists, as they feel they have been let down and thus believe that they have nothing to gain by talking to them.

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[163] For instance, this was the case of the buildings in the Collatina, Romanina and La Rustica neighbourhoods, in via delle Province, and of the Palazzo Curtatone.

[164] No other data is available on this topic, as it was not possible to cross-check this version of events with interviews with hotel owners, nor was it possible for me to visit any occupated hotel building.

[165] It is similar in this way to the governing body of 'Hotel Africa' discussed earlier.

It is possible to enter if one accompanies a resident, or if one has previously obtained the permission of the members of the controlling committee. Even so it is not easy, as Selam told me,

> 'It's not safe for you; they might think you're a spy or someone with ties to the police. It's better if you are accompanied by one of us'.

So, I arranged a visit to Collatina on the pretext of visiting Selam and her husband, Ephrem. When we arrived, we entered the huge building (it has seven storeys) and passed controls. We walked through the halls where bicycles and strollers were stored. Of course, taking pictures is strictly forbidden. In the building there are several communal areas used for community life: a meeting room, a gathering space with a TV, a sort of theatre room, a leisure room with tables and a pool table. There are also several illegal economic activities being carried out: there is an Eritrean restaurant with pictures of the dishes served that day, with office desks covered by fancy tablecloths in paper; there is a small canteen, a bar with sodas and beers exhibited on a large bookcase, as well as a *hawala*[166] shop to send remittances back home. The income from these activities is partly destined to pay the bills. On the other floors are the private apartments of the residents, which are made up of smaller or larger rooms, in which the sleeping areas are separated from each other by ethnic swathes of cloth hung from the ceiling. Ephrem explained to me that, with Selam,

> 'we bought this flat for 1,000 euros. We were renting it for 50 euros, so we decided it was better to buy it, so we can sell it when we move. There are a lot of queries'.

[166] The term derives from the Arabic root "HWL" ("change"). Sometimes this word is used as a synonym for "trust", which is the principle on which the entire system is based. In fact, it does not rely on regulated financial channels but on networks of trust. If an Eritrean costumer wants to transfer money to a family member in Asmara, for example, s/he delivers the amount to be transferred to the hawala broker in his/her city or neighbourhood, who in turn, contacts the hawala broker in Asmara, orders the transfer of money to the family and promises to pay the debt at a later stage.

The 'flat' is a 3x5m room. When they saw my perplexed expression, they added:

'we bought it from the committee, who's in touch with Action'.

Later, Yemane explained that part of the money from rentals and sales is used for common expenses, and part goes to the committee. As for the prices of the 'flats', they vary according to the size. A housing market[167] of sorts has developed, with owners sub-renting part of their room to other families, in order to earn some extra money. Owning a 'flat' also gives the owner prestige and a higher status, both in the community and back home, as can be inferred from Selam's words,

> 'I called home to tell my mother that I bought a flat in Rome! She told me she was very proud!'

As we discussed earlier, this clearly shows how positive (but distorted) perceptions of life in Italy become reproduced back home.

Occupied buildings are also the place where perceptions are reproduced and information is centralised. One can argue that, because of the isolation faced by those living in these enclaves, their perceptions are shaped by their encounter with Italian authorities during their asylum process, but in fact they are mostly the result of information and experiences conveyed by fellow-nationals living in less enclosed refugee centres or in shared flats. Moreover, it must be said that as fellow nationals and friends are considered to be more trustworthy than the official channels, refugees are more influenced by the news they obtain through these networks.

Another peculiarity that shows how asylum seekers overcome obstacles posed by the asylum system has to do with health care. Although Italian law in general provides

[167] A specific housing market for migrants has developed even outside the occupied buildings: many migrants find accommodation – mostly through their network of fellow-nationals or through friends met in the refugee centres, but also through Italians – in shared flats, sometimes in bad conditions and without a contract.

everyone with free access to health care, asylum seekers face obstacles due to language barriers and to the fact that they lack proofs of residence. In order to access basic health care, it is necessary to register with the ASL (the national health care system) by providing an official address. However Eritreans living in the streets or in most occupied buildings cannot provide an official address, complicating their access to basic health care. However, by navigating the system many Eritrean respondents figured out how to overcome this problem. For instance, one afternoon at the Baobab centre a resident left in an ambulance that had been called by the Eritrean social workers; it seemed he was in a lot of pain, but everyone else seemed calm and unaffected. In fact no one paid the event any attention, nor did they comment on it (which was rare). The next day, when I returned to the Baobab centre, I asked Geometra what had happened. He told me in an offhand manner that the resident was fine. However, I must have looked very worried, so Geometra explained:

> 'When I arrived I was sleeping at Termini station. At that time, the system was even worse than it is today. One night, my stomach started to hurt. I thought that it was maybe something I ate, but I was scared it was something more serious due to the way I was living. I didn't really know what to do, until another man from Ethiopia who was also sleeping there told me: 'let's call an ambulance'. It was true that I couldn't go to the general practitioner's office the next day because I didn't have an address, but I didn't need an address to access emergency care! The man told me: 'I call them but then you need to complain a lot, like you're in a lot of pain, so that they take you to the hospital'. That's how we did it.'

Similar stories circulate a lot within asylum seeker networks, suggesting that these practices are very common. Solidarity, shared experiences and trial-and-error all lead Eritrean refugees to develop ways to overcome many of the hindrances that they face on a daily basis.

5.3 The Eritrean diaspora and the role of 'weak' social capital networks: bounded solidarity, reciprocity and issues of trust

There is a general agreement in the literature that the Eritrean nation is essentially transnational (on this topic see amongst others O'Keane, Hepner, 2011; Bernal, 2004), with a large Eritrean diaspora scattered across Europe[168], especially in Italy, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Germany.

As I mentioned above, by the time I carried out my fieldwork, there were about 4,000 registered Eritreans in Rome. You notice their presence if you walk around the area of Piazza Indipendenza, and in the city centre, close to Termini station, where shops and small ethnic cafés play loud Eritrean music and sell traditional dishes and colourful clothing; or when you walk by the refugee centres or the occupied buildings. These are the two faces of the same coin, one reflects integration and entrepreneurship, while the second evokes survival and marginalisation.

In Rome, the Eritrean community organises music and cultural festivals, as well as religious celebrations, which are attended by asylum seekers, refugees and long-term residents alike. In spite of this cohesive façade, a closer look at the social dynamics at work in the diaspora reveals that it is not monolithic in nature, and shows that there are underlying tensions between different groups. This is mostly due to two factors. The first one is related to the different times at which they left from Eritrea. The declaration of independence creates a divide, which can help us to identify three categories in the diaspora. Displaced by the conflict, many left the country during 'the Struggle' but contributed greatly from abroad by funding the fight for independence and by drawing international attention to the conflict. In the following years, they also contributed through a huge inflow of remittances that helped the country's reconstruction and

[168] According to the information available, as many as 60,000 Eritreans leave the country each year (www.unhcr.org/5671b969.html; Horwood and Hooper, 2016).

strengthened Afewerki's government (for an extensive analysis of the role of the diaspora during those years, see Bernal 2004). As I discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, after independence there were purges and arrests of opposition members, which gained such momentum that they became more than a contingent and limited policy aimed at preserving stability, rather turning into a long-term strategy for repressing dissent. At this stage, political rivals and alleged opponents fled the country. As the militarization of all sectors of society increased, and as the notion of indefinite compulsory leave was formally introduced in 2002 with the 'Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign' (Kibreab, 2009), an increasing number of young Eritreans started fleeing forced labour and abuses in the military. The Eritrean diaspora therefore includes both supporters of the regime, opponents to it, and a cohort of young asylum seekers. The latter are considered 'traitors' to the revolution by older Yikealo in the diaspora, and by those who contributed to the fight. Estefanos' statement illustrates this very well; as a well-reputed member of the diaspora's first wave of migrants, the 64-year-old-man considers that

> 'Those who are arriving now should be ashamed. They're not asylum seekers. They betrayed their country because they don't want to take responsibilities. They are selfish and want better economic prospects. That's who they are'.

Note that these tensions in the community are not openly disclosed to the non-Eritrean public. Instead, both long-timers and new asylum-seekers tend to give strangers the impression that theirs is a cohesive community. However, different attitudes to the regime undermine the trust between groups. As Biniam, a young Eritrean in the refugee centre stated:

> 'I don't have many contacts with the [established] community here. I don't trust them. I'm afraid they can denounce you to the regime as they are very close'.

The second reason that there are tensions within the community pertains to the widespread forms of control exerted by the Eritrean regime over the diaspora, including through embassies and cultural institutes. An example of how this control expresses itself is the 2% income tax that is paid to the government through the Eritrean consulates. This tax[169], which is paid by most Eritreans, fills different purposes: it's a precondition to have a passport issued or renewed – and, therefore, to be entitled to go back to Eritrea – and also to be allowed to bring relatives out of the country –for instance, through a process of family reunification. It also improves the status of their families back home, reassures migrants that their relatives will not have any problems and will generally not be harassed by the government.

As the interview material shows, this tax is also paid by members of the "opposition" and by asylum seekers. The latter are rarely willing to admit it, as it could be considered to undermine their asylum claim; however, the crucial importance of this practice for some of my respondents is illustrated by Ergaalem's statement, who at the time was living in Collatina and was unemployed,

> 'I'm really worried about it [the tax]. I don't have a job, so I don't have an income, so I can't pay the tax. […] I'm worried because I'm afraid something could happen to my family in Eritrea because I'm not paying it. I don't dare to call my mother anymore'.

[169] According to information that emerged during the fieldwork, funds collected by way of this tax are directly and secretly managed by the PFDJ; informants close to the PFDJ argued that these are used to buy provisions from foreign contractors on behalf of the government through some state-owned companies.

Fear of being spied on or denounced by elements close to the PDJF was extremely common among my asylum-seeker informants, and conditioned their behaviour,[170] often leading to a certain degree of paranoia.

Furthermore, relations between long-timers and new asylum seekers in Italy are also strained by structural constraints, such as access to the job market. As Collyer (2005) points out in his study of the use of social capital networks by Algerian asylum-seekers having moved to the UK, migration restrictions limit the possibilities of having 'strong networks' based on family ties that could support new migrants. In the Italian case, the lack of welfare provisions for asylum seekers makes them dependent on support from others. However, the problems that previous waves of migrants had in accessing the job market means that they do not have the possibility to give support to new migrants. This reason, combined with the mistrust they feel towards well-established members of the Eritrean community, pushes asylum seekers to rely on looser or 'weak' networks[171] to acquire social capital[172], to obtain relevant information or to satisfy basic needs such as accommodation or finding a job in the informal sector. For the same reasons, some of my informants appeared not to be very keen to encourage others to reach them.

Furthermore, the Dublin System is another relevant factor that pushed asylum seekers to rely more on 'weak' networks rather than on family ties. As Gebrane explains,

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[170] For example, they always refused being photographed.

[171] According to Lin, these networks are not based on family ties and are more important when it comes to gaining resources for instrumental action (2001: 76). This is not to say, however, that they do not have relations with relevant members of the established community, for example in order to find accommodation, since many Eritreans are involved in the 'parallel' housing system.

[172] Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (1985: 248). Building on this definition, Portes adopts a broader definition, which I also adopt here. Portes defines the concept as 'the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (Portes, 1998: 6).

> 'I had an uncle in Germany. But when I arrived in Italy I was fingerprinted. So, if I were to go to Germany I would be undocumented. I would only be a burden for his family because I couldn't find a job and I would have to avoid controls'.

Biniam had similar concerns:

> 'I thought of reaching some cousins in Denmark. But I thought it was too risky because I could be returned to Italy [under the Dublin regulations]. It would just have been a waste of money to go there'.

Another aspect that is worth noting is that some respondents declared that they did not resort to ask family members for help as they wanted to avoid social control.

All these reasons, as I have mentioned, fostered the development of weak networks in the capital. These networks were not only local, but were developed transnationally through social communication platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp. These were considered 'more secure' means of communication, beyond the reach of the 'regime's spies'. The expansion of this kind of networks is explained by the instrumental use that asylum seekers make of them, since they use them to circulate relevant information and to inform perceptions. As Burt (1992) highlights, light ties ('structural holes') among individuals in the network facilitate the circulation of new information and resources, whereas thicker networks tend to convey redundant or irrelevant information.

Following Portes' classification, social networks among Eritrean asylum seekers rely on both consummatory and instrumental[173] motivations to make resources available, and they are bounded by solidarity and reciprocity. Solidarity comes from finding themselves in a similar situation. For instance, in Geometra's words,

[173] Consummatory motivations rely on internalised norms that make a behaviour possible and that are accessible to others as a resource, whereas instrumental motivations are linked to norms of reciprocity (Portes, 1998: 7).

> 'We faced a lot of dangers on the way here. Before that, we all feared for our life in Eritrea, feared that we wouldn't have a future. And here, we're all in (or at least passed through) the same shitty situation…that's why we count on each other'.

It must be noted that this kind of solidarity is also an important dimension of the national warsay-yikealo program and, as it was demonstrated in the previous chapters, was an essential component in the formation of national identity.

One could think that such a network would be more beneficial to asylum seekers who need access to social capital (in order to obtain information and to change perceptions, as we said) than to social capital holders, that is, those who already have access to valuable information. However, the findings from this study suggest the opposite. Sharing information and informing perceptions is also beneficial for social capital holders since, by virtue of it, their inclusion in the network is guaranteed. This means that, whenever they need it, they can also quickly receive the social capital they do not already possess.

The velocity of the transmission and the width of the network are of paramount importance, since asylum seekers live in a permanent need of relevant information in order to adapt to changing circumstances and to contingency and to ensure a positive outcome. Moreover, given the nature of the European asylum system, a network that extends to different countries increases the reliability of information. As we discussed in the previous chapter, more reliable information means that through a process that involves both perceptions and emotions, it is possible for asylum seekers to chart a more efficient course of action and to develop relevant strategies to reach their desired ends.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown how Eritrean asylum seekers' perceptions of Italy and its asylum and reception systems shape their agency, both prior to the departure, during the journey, and after their arrival in Italy. The various experiences they have alter their perceptions, thereby providing them with elements to elaborate strategic solutions to the obstacles they face, and to chart various courses in order to integrate into Italian society.

By focusing on Eritrean asylum seekers, I have also sought to explore a number of wider sociological issues related to asylum migration. Although the scope of this thesis did not allow for an in-depth account of all the matters it touched upon, the value of this research, I hope, lies in its dynamic approach to asylum seeker agency, thereby providing elements for further research.

Three main findings did emerge from this case study. The first one concerns the way perceptions of Italy in Eritrea are produced and re-produced, thereby leading to a set of recurrent expectations. As we saw in Chapter two, perceptions of Italy were mostly conveyed through Eritrea's colonial heritage and oral histories. Visual cues of the former Italian colonial domination are emotional material that shape the perceptions of Eritreans, especially in urban areas, where Italian architecture, toponymy and its general influence on the urban space have a strong impact on people who live there or who frequently visit, creating and reproducing perceptions of an existing affinity between the two countries. However modernist architecture gives many Eritreans a misleading impression of *grandeur*, of economic prosperity, which

does not correspond to the current economic situation in Italy and to its high level of unemployment. In rural villages, perceptions are mostly reproduced by listening to older people's[174] oral accounts, which help to transmit perceptions from one generation to the next. In both cases, there is a strong emotional dimension to these perceptions, that generates a feeling of proximity between Italy and Eritrea. The collective imagination of younger generations is shaped by the perceptions of their elders as well as by Eritrea's colonial heritage, which highlights how relational perceptions can be. Whether conveyed orally or visually, or both orally *and* visually, perceptions of Italy are generally quite positive, with a strong undercurrent of hope, and they often result in a vague sense of entitlement because of the perceived special relationship that binds Italy and Eritrea. Italian colonialism left a deep mark on Eritrea and influenced its relationship to Italy and the way this relationship is understood in both countries. Whereas Eritreans feel that there exists a special relationship between both countries (which influences the expectations they have about Italy and Rome), this, as we have seen, is not true of Italians. Having their expectations of cultural proximity frustrated changes aylum seekers' perceptions of themselves, of the country, and of their own relation to Italy, thereby leading to the elaboration of new courses of action in order to cope with the asylum system. It is clear in this respect, that government policies and possibilities and constraints that are intrinsic to Italian institutional settings impact on migrants' emotional dynamics shaping their perceptions and their interactions with locals. A very important point is that, as in the examples illustrated in the thesis, migrants' transnational emotional engagements act as a platform through which changing perceptions are conveyed to other members of the Diaspora or back home.

[174] Many of them are former *ascari* or were employed as construction workers by the colonial administration. Others were born during the fascist era and try to transmit the memories of those times to younger relatives.

Perceptions are also changed significantly through 'first encounters'. These encounters could happen back home or during the travel, and in most of the cases analysed here, at border crossings. In this respect, the role of employees at places of departure and arrival as well as social workers in refugee centres is pivotal in shaping asylum-seekers perceptions of the country. At the same, as Domenico's narrative about his specific role as Baobab's director highlighted in Chapter Five, Italian social workers also perform emotion work in order to push for specific kind for interactions based on power relations. Although this topic was not the object of this thesis, tha data gathered show that it could be a fruitful venue for further research. First encounters are not necessary bodily, but they could also relate to beaurocratic processes: for instance, the unexpected difficulties of the Italian asylum process were the most important factor accounting for negative changes in asylum-seekers' perceptions of Italy, thus even impacting their integration trajectories.

The second major finding concerns the role of emotions, and the circulation of rumours and information as resources that asylum seekers can draw on when their circumstances change. The examples I have used in this research illustrate how asylum seekers develop different strategies at various points of their journey, and how these strategies are shaped by an interaction between emotions and perceptions. Moreover, the examples also show that the circulation of rumours and information change perceptions. The interview material and my observation of participants reveal that emotions represent an 'existential toolkit' that links personal problems to broader issue, thereby eliciting responses that are adequate in order to overcome these problems. When individuals find themselves in a situation that violates their expectations of reality, emotions amplify the perception that the situation is indeed unfamiliar. Their emotional response then helps individuals to recognize how their

behaviour relates to a wider interactional context that they usually take for granted and that shapes their experience (Reed, 2004: 665). This typically happens when asylum seekers feel that they are in the hands of forces beyond their control. In this way, emotions help individuals who find themselves in unknown circumstances to re-define their situation, to determine possible courses of action, and thereby to overcome the situation. In other words, emotions help to interpret, construct and transcend a given situation. Moreover, they help to determine the severity and urgency of a given problem, to understand what actions will be feasible and efficient as a response, and, ultimately, to determine how to transcend their earlier perception of their environment in order to re-evaluate their actions (Reed 2004: 666). In the specific case of the accounts of asylum seekers, hope and fear were the two predominant emotions that helped them to shape appropriate courses of action. Hope had an empowering effect: for instance, hope to find better life possibilities elsewhere was a leitmotive accounting for the decision to leave or to move further in the migration trajectory. As shown by many examples throughout the thesis, hope also helped respondents to develop coping strategies to face difficult periods through the elaboration of fictional futures. Fear, instead, in some cases thwarted migration projects, but it in other cases encouraged respondents to take action.

As to the circulation of rumours, the accounts of Eritrean asylum seekers highlight the great extent to which news circulates among them: by influencing their perceptions of certain problems, rumours shape their agency. Asylum migration movements represent a very favourable environment for the emergence of rumours. These movements are triggered by problematic situations over which individuals have little control. When asylum seekers project their expectations about what may or may not happen onto the wider environment, they become sensitive to all the cues that

might be relevant in order to understand whether their expectations are going to be fulfilled. When expectations are not fulfilled, the need to adjust their perceptions of the environment becomes more pressing, since it is a prerequisite for the formulation of new and adequate responses. The need for action may arise very quickly, leading to a very rapid circulation of rumours among the relevant audience. Moreover, this research identifies a peculiar characteristic of rumour construction in the context of asylum migration: as individuals realise that they are all in the same difficult situation, they become willing to share rumours with each other. Sharing is also important since it allows them to verify their own news and to assess the reliability of their own sources, thus producing reliable information.

The third finding concerns the strategies developed by Eritrean asylum seekers, once they arrive in Italy, to cope with the various obstacles they encounter in the asylum and reception systems, and their reliance on information and rumours obtained through 'weak' networks. For the respondents, coping mechanisms were valuable tools to survive the hostile environment they found themselves in. These strategies were heavily dependent on their human capabilities and assets. In this sense, there is an important difference between the type of networks that asylum seekers relied on during their journey, and after their arrival in Italy. The existence of earlier successful experiences of migration within the individual's family or community network, or in his or her broader entourage, is an important factor in explaining the mobility of Eritreans. Examples of escape, migration, and integration that are portrayed as successful by the migrant or the migrant's family have an impact on the propensity of other members of the same relational network to also leave. These ties are mostly based on strong relations among members, although respondents also used looser networks. In Italy, instead, tensions within the diaspora – mostly due to different attitudes towards

Afewerki's dictatorial regime and towards the widespread forms of control exerted by the Eritrean government over Eritreans abroad – led to issues of trust and created divides between long-timers and new arrivals, which privileged the development of weak networks in Rome. These networks were then expanded transnationally through the extensive use of social communication platforms. The expansion of this kind of networks exponentially increased the possibility of circulating relevant rumours and, therefore, to influence each others' perceptions.

These findings all point to the importance of devoting more attention to asylum seekers' agency. This thesis confirms the argument by Albrecht (2015) that asylum-seekers are not only passive victims of the circumstances: by interacting with possible unknown environments, they develop creative solutions to perpetuate their capacity to act under uncertain circumstances. This research went some way towards developing a notion of agency that also takes into account the dimensions (such as the importance of perceptions and emotions) that are sometimes overlooked in forced migration studies, thereby contributing (or so I hope) to a more informed and subtle view of asylum seekers' movements and of their interaction with their surrounding environment.

APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

FOR INTERVIEWS WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS/ REFUGEES

1) Introduction: explanation of the study and its purpose; obtention of consent (verbal or written), and information about my policy of anonymity (ask if he/she wants to choose a name for him/herself); explain what confidentiality means/entails; explain that it is possible to cut the interview short at any time.

2) General information: could we start with you telling me a little about your life in your home country, where you grew up and what your experiences were before you were forced to leave the country?

3) Life previous to the departure: Why did you leave? How did you decide to leave? Did you discuss this decision with someone? How did you decide where to go? Any specific reason for this? What did you know about the country of destination? Main sources of information? What did you expect? How did you imagine Italy and/or living in Italy? Did you know about the asylum procedure? What did you know about it? Who told you? To whom did you talk about it? Was there anything that you would have like to do differently at that moment?

4) Being an asylum seeker: How did you leave? Did you plan the flight? What happened during the flight? How did you decide your next step in the journey? On what kind of information did you rely? Did you change your intended destination? Did you

receive/gather news about possible destinations?

5) Applying for asylum: What did you think when you arrived to Italy? Was it as you had imagined? What was your first impression? Were you aware of the asylum procedure? How did the procedure unfold for you? How was your relation with Italian authorities? What do you think about Italian authorities? What do you think about the asylum procedure? Did you have problems in accessing housing and health care or any other provision that was relevant to you? Did you plan to move further? If so, why and where?

6) Reception conditions and integration: How is your life in Italy? Where do you live? What do you think about Italy in general and about Italians? Do you maintain a relation with relatives or friends in Eritrea? If so, what do you usually discuss? What did you tell them about your experience in Italy? What are your plans for the future?

7) The diaspora: Who do you rely on for support? Do you have friends in Italy? Are they Italian or Eritrean? Do you have family members in Italy? Do you have family members in Europe? When did they arrive? Did they help you? Do you have any friends among the Eritreans who came to Italy before 1993? Do you attend community events? Do you go to the Eritrean Embassy or to the Consulate in Rome?

7) Is there anything you would like to add or anything that you think is important and that I did not ask about?

CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

1869	Giuseppe Sepeto buys the Port of Assab from a local sultan, on behalf of the Rubattino shipping company.
1882	Italian government, led by Agostino Depretis, buys the Port of Assab from the Rubattino shipping company.
1885	Italians occupy Massawa.
1887	Italians are defeated in the Battle of Dogali.
1890	Italy proclaims colony of Eritrea, with Massawa as capital city.
1891	Italian Prime Minister Antonio Starabba Marquess di Rudinì sends a delegation to Eritrea to inquire into the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by Dario Livraghi and Eteocle Cagnassi.
1896	Battle of Adua. Italians, led by lieutenant general Oreste Baratieri, are defeated by troops of *Negus* Menelik II.
1897	Asmara becomes new capital city of Eritrea.
1911	New railway connects Massawa to Asmara. Benito Mussolini denounces the invasion of Libya.
1914-1918	World War I.
1922	Benito Mussolini becomes Italian Prime Minister.
1934	Clashes between Abyssinian and Italian troops in Welwel (eastern Ethiopia).
1935	Italian-Ethiopian war begins.
1936	Italian-Ethiopian war ends; Italy annexes Ethiopia and the Italian colonial empire is named *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI – Italian Eastern Africa). The 'New Regulations for AOI' come into force.
1935-1937	The highest funicular cableway of the time, linking Massawa to Asmara, is built by the Ceretti & Tanfani Company.
1937	A bill prohibits sexual relations between Italian citizens and African subjects.

1938	Benito Mussolini promotes the migration of Italian women to the African colonies.
1939-1945	World War II.
1941	British forces occupy Eritrea. A movement against British domination arises in Eritrea.
1941-1952	British administration of Eritrea as a United Nations trust territory.
1952	Eritrea is federated with Ethiopia, following 1950 UN General Assembly resolution 390 (a-V). Elections are held; a multi-party Eritrean Assembly adopts a UN-drafted Eritrean Constitution.
1955	Parties are officially banned by Ethiopian regime.
1958	Syndicates are officially banned by the Ethiopian regime. A general strike is organised by a movement of workers and intellectuals with broad popular support, and crushed by Ethiopian emperor.
1960	Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) is established in Cairo by Idris Muhammad Adam and other intellectuals.
1961	Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA), armed wing of the ELF, is established and led by Idris Hamid Awate.
1962	Abolition of the federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Ethiopia annexes Eritrea. War of independence begins.
1969	Leftist factions of the ELF split to form the People's Liberation Forces 1 (PLF1) based in Aden (Yemen), the People's Liberation Forces 2 (PLF2) based in the Ala Valley (south of Asmara), and the Eritrean Liberation Forces (ELF).
1970	PLF1, PLF2 and ELF merge and give birth to Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).
1972	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) is established.
1974	Military coup in Ethiopia ousts the emperor and puts a communist military junta (Derg) in command.
1975	Asmara falls to the Ethiopians.
1977	ELF and EPLF make significant advances in the war against Ethiopia.

1978	USSR-backed Ethiopian offensive reverse ELF and EPLF advances.
1981	ELF is driven out of the country by infighting with EPLF.
1984	Famine breaks out.
Late 1980s	USSR withdraws its support from Ethiopian government.
1991	EPLF captures Asmara and forms a provisional government. The Derg, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, is toppled.
1993	Referendum for independence is held in Eritrea under UN supervision; Eritrea is declared independent. Isaias Afewerki (secretary-general of the EPLF) is made president of a transitional government.
1995	Mass conscription of men (aged 18-40) and women (aged 18-27) is introduced.
1995-1996	Conflict with Yemen over Hanish Islands.
1997	Eritrea's constitution is ratified.
1998-2000	Eritrean-Ethiopian border war.
1998-	Ongoing tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia.
2000	Ceasefire and peace-talks between Ethiopia and Eritrea, entail the withdrawal of troops and UN peacekeepers, but the border disagreement is not settled. Following the war, Afewerki postpones the promulgation of the constitution, defers parliamentary and presidential elections, and restricts freedom of press.
2003	New promotion policies are implemented in Eritrean secondary schools. Introduction of 12th grade at Sawa military camp. University of Asmara is replaced by Mai Nefhi campus.
2008	Fighting between Eritrean and Djiboutian troops in the disputed Ras Doumeira border area.
2009	UN sanctions are imposed on Eritrea for supporting terrorist group 'al-Shabaab'.
2011	Further UN sanctions are imposed on Eritrea.

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