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# **En route to Exile: Organizing Refugee journeys from the Horn of Africa towards Europe**

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## **Abstract**

In the face of volatile politics, precarious economic conditions and limited opportunities for legal migration paths large number of Horn of Africa migrants and refugees (mainly Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali) young men and women opt for overland exits through dangerous and long trails across deserts and seas until they arrive in Europe, the Middle East and South Africa. Since the year 2000 Libya has been both a destination and transition node for Horn of African migrants and refugees that use the north-western migration routes towards Europe via the Sudan, eastern Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea. The stepwise mobility of migrants is facilitated by the engagement and interactions of actors, mainly smugglers known in local parlance as *delala* (singular) *delaloch* (plural) in Amharic or *semsaris* (in Arabic), family members in one's homeland; former migrants en route and in diaspora; and the local people along the trails. Unlike the official UN definitions, the service of smuggling is not just offered by an independent criminal organizations. Rather it is embedded in and functions through particular transnational social relations and shared nationality, ethnicity and religion among migrants and smugglers that generate the necessary resources to facilitate the moves and knowhow. However, various types of criminal actors and armed gangs also engage in kidnapping migrants for ransom, labour and sexual exploitation along these migration trails. In this paper, using the practice of smuggling as a central point, I discuss the emergence and role of irregular migration facilitating infrastructures that support and sustain east African migratory mobility towards Europe as well as its impacts on migrants' lives.

**Keywords:** transition, refugee journey, human smuggling, violence, knowledge

## Introduction

In the face of desperate socioeconomic and political conditions in origin and transit lands and the limited availability of paths for legal migration, young male and female migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) opt for exits through dangerous and long trails across deserts and seas. Since the year 2000, Libya has been both a destination and a transition node for Horn of Africa migrants and refugees who use the north-western migration routes towards Europe via the Sudan, the Eastern Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea.

The mobility of migrants is facilitated by their interactions with multiple actors: family members in their homelands, former migrants now living along the route and in the diaspora, local people along the trails, and smugglers known in local parlance as *delaloch*<sup>1</sup>(in Amharic) or *semsaris*(in Arabic). Unlike dominant narratives by the media and state officials that primarily associate irregular migration facilitation only to profit seeking illegal trafficking and smuggling networks, the service of smuggling is not offered by independent criminal organizations. It is embedded in and functions through particular transnational social relations. Shared nationality, ethnicity and religion among migrants and smugglers generate the necessary resources and knowhow. However, various types of criminal and state actors also engage in predatory activity along these migration trails –kidnapping migrants for ransom, or using labour and sexual exploitation, etc.

Several international organizations have repeatedly reported on the human rights violations of migrants and refugees in Libya. The political crisis after the removal of the Gaddafi regime further created security vacuums and led to the emergence of various types of criminal actors who take advantage of migrants by engaging in a vast range of abuses (Frouws et al. 2014a; Belloni 2015). According to migrants' testimonies, the selling and buying of migrants between criminals and prison guards has become a common practice. However, the propensity to be "sold" varies according to the migrant's individual profile. Gender, religion and access to finances in the diaspora or countries of origin are factors that play a role in the kidnapping for ransom and imprisonment of migrants. These conditions also affect the refugees' ability to secure services from well-organized smugglers, who can then rescue them from other criminals in the Sahara and Libya or arrange for improved conditions during precarious sea crossings.

This paper discusses the emergence and role of irregular migration facilitating infrastructures that support and sustain East African migratory mobility towards Europe. It is based upon the premise that smuggling constitutes a social practice: it thrives on being embedded in the flow of information (which route to use and how to get a good smuggler) and remittance from diaspora (to pay smugglers); supports from local people along the migration trail in terms of showing direction, providing accommodation and getting informal jobs. In other words refugee mobility is possible only due to the entanglement of social and smuggling networks. Yet the

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<sup>1</sup>Delala (sing.) delaloch (plu.) is an Amharic term used for all kinds of brokerage that includes buying properties or a house or a car as well as facilitating informal trade. Migrants collectively use the term to indicate all kinds of facilitators such as informal money transfer agents, migrant recruiters at village or town level, the ones help crossing borders, i.e. the guides (pilots), transporters and so on. Delaloch denote all kinds of brokering services or smuggling migrants across borders. Semsari is an Arabic term alternatively used with delaloch.

paper also explores what happens when smuggling journeys go wrong, especially in reference to the impacts on migrants' safety. Lastly, it identifies research gaps and policy implications.

This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Stockholm (Sweden), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Khartoum (Sudan) and Rome (Italy), conducted between 2014 and 2016 for a PhD dissertation. The ethnography produced for the article consists of 104 in-depth interviews with interlocutors and an almost equal number of women and men, including 35 detailed individual migration narratives. Five smugglers were also interviewed, each providing insights into a particular leg of the migration pathway. Primary data findings were also supplemented through reviewing research, policy and critical media reports on contemporary refugee mobility from the Horn of Africa and practices of human smuggling across Euro-African borderlands and beyond.

### **Conceptualizing facilitation of irregular migratory journey**

A journey is a key aspect of the migration process because it has far-reaching bodily, legal and social consequences. The shared experiences of suffering during a journey can affect individuals' social identity and ensuing expectations regarding the receiving society. A journey not only shapes the social and legal status of individual migrants but also defines the process of 'becoming' and 'being' a refugee (Benezer & Zetter, 2014; Belloni, 2016). Benezer and Zetter (2014) pointed out that understanding refugee journeys 'could inform us about the psychological impact of the journey, the relations between meaning and coping, social and individual resilience, issues of trust, how communal and cultural resources are drawn on to deal with risks, and the encounter with and adaptation to the new society' (2014: 7). Mainwaring and Brigden (2016) also stated that 'the journey is not simply a space in between arrival and departure, a temporary moment of mobility between more "normal" static existences, but a social process that shapes migrants and societies alike' (2016: 247). They further emphasized that migratory journey 'as an experience, potentially traumatizes or empowers migrants'. That is, the journey from the societies in their countries of origin to the locations of reception leaves physical, emotional and psychological traces on its survivors.

The journey is rarely linear. With the migration and border controls being increasingly intensified, a journey becomes fragmented and longer, both spatially and temporally, and involves periods of waiting, working and learning in transition nodes (Collyer, 2007; Schapendonk, 2013; Kaytaz, 2016). In what follows I re-conceptualize facilitation of migration journey by highlighting its economic, social, cultural and practical organizations. In earlier studies, some migration scholars introduced interrelated concepts such as 'migration business' (Salt & Stein, 1997), 'migration industry' (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013) or 'illegality industry' (Andersson, 2014b) to explain actors and processes involved in border controls and those facilitating contemporary irregular labour and refugee mobility, particularly from the Global South to North. For instance, according to Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen (2013), the migration industry encompasses 'service providers' to facilitate migration, including human smuggling networks, transnational criminal organizations and trafficking rings, and 'control providers' such as private contractors performing immigration checks, operating detention centres and/or carrying out forced returns (2013: 1-19). Their study emphasized that these various actors maximize and accumulate huge economic gains by

capitalizing on migrants' desire to move and the states' increasing efforts to manage migratory mobility.

This study is partly in line with Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen's (2013) concept of 'migration facilitation industry'. Drawing on Hernández León's notion of the migration industry, they rightly pointed out that the migration industry 'greases the engines of international migration' by providing and articulating the expertise and infrastructural resources needed for cross-border movements. 'Migration industry entrepreneurs include money lenders, recruiters, transportation providers and travel agents, legitimate and false paper pushers, smugglers, contractors, formal and informal remittance and courier service owners and so on' (2013: 6). The strength of the migration industry metaphor in irregular migration facilitation theory is that it enhances our understanding of migration as a multi-level process that involves different actors. For instance, Salt and Stein's (1997) business model interestingly demonstrates how migration facilitators play key roles in three stages of migration: 'mobilizing' exits from homelands, facilitating transitions 'en route' and 'inserting and integrating' in the destination country, demonstrating that migration is a process rather than an act of moving from point A to B.

However, the concept of the migration industry emphasizes the entrepreneurship and business dimensions of facilitating and controlling migratory mobility. It pays less attention to migrants' subjective energy and agency in mobilizing migration resources as well as non-profit factors such as border crossing social and family obligations that complement the organization of migratory trajectories and diverse and dynamic relationships that emerge between migrants and smugglers (Herman, 2006: 217; Liempt & Doornik, 2006; Sanchez, 2015). Moreover, how migrants create and use networks by capitalizing on shared nationality, ethnicity, religion and hometowns during the mobility phase is overlooked in migration industry theory. In fact, a contemporary irregular migratory journey is only possible because of the entanglement of cross-border social and smuggling networks.

Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist have further expanded the elements of the migration-facilitating industry in relation to actors and institutions that engage in the process. Citing Bruno Latour's ideas in actor-network theory, they called attention to services and institutions that facilitate and condition migration and proposed the notion of '*migration infrastructure*' (2014). They defined migration infrastructure as 'the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (2014: 124). Examining low-skilled international migration from China and Indonesia, they demonstrated how the interplay between different private, humanitarian and state actors and institutions, including social networks and technologies, inform, facilitate and condition a migration process, making it self-perpetuating and self-serving. They defined the migration industry as 'commercial infrastructure', state bureaucratic procedures in migration as 'regulatory infrastructure', NGOs and international organizations as 'humanitarian infrastructure' and migrant networks as 'social infrastructure' (2014: 132). They also elaborated on the role of communication and transport technologies in both facilitating mobility and intensifying border controls.

Xiang and Lindquist (2014) suggested using the concept of migration infrastructure as an analytical perspective and methodological tool to explore activities, practices and interrelationships of its elements by accounting for specific historical and social contexts within which it operates. One of the strengths of migration infrastructure theory is that it accounts for various levels of relations, such as historical and social, that feed one another in the process of migration. Migration can be viewed as procedural, multidirectional and self-adjusting movements that are mediated by the involution of the different elements of migration infrastructure, that is, the self-perpetuating and self-serving of various dimensions of migration infrastructures (2014). However, with this study, I do not attempt to map out the operation of the entire migration infrastructure along the Euro–African borderlands. By contrast, I focus on how migrants dynamically mobilize or utilize certain elements of migration infrastructures, namely *delaloch* and social networks, humanitarian and international organizations such as the UNHCR and church organizations and communication and travel technology, while mediating barriers and organizing their journey from the Horn of Africa towards Europe.

Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) noted that when describing mobility, we must consider the ‘spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities’ (2006:3). In the context of migratory journeys from Horn of Africa to Europe, the most important components of migration infrastructures include the emergence and functions of overland migration routes, smuggling networks as well as former migrants’ transnational diasporic engagements, which are less elaborated on in migration infrastructure theory. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, the practice of human smuggling and organizing overland migration partly thrives on being embedded in diasporic transnational social spaces, material practices and migration knowledge productions.

### **Social organization of human smuggling**

Hierarchically organized criminal groups are not behind the facilitation of smuggling along the Horn of Africa routes towards Europe. Instead, migrants make disconnected, non-continuous journeys supported by small and loosely mobilized bands of operators and brokers offering specific smuggling-related services at particular transit points. The smugglers are not fulltime professionals. Rather they are ordinary individuals such as lorry or taxi drivers, shepherds along border areas and former migrants settled along the migration routes. They engage in smuggling tasks to transport migrants and refugees towards specific destinations, often collaborating with bought-out state officials or border guards.

For instance, Kidane, who was in his late 30s when he left Eritrea in 2015 travelled to Khartoum Sudan on foot from Asmara via border towns such as Teseney (Eritrea) and Kassala (Sudan) together with three of his friends. A guide locally known as ‘pilot’ assisted them to reach Kassala.

These pilots have the knowledge about safe directions and routes where the Eritrean security or military is not stationed. The pilots are mostly Eritrean soldiers or people who have worked



and lived in border areas, have experience in crossing borders for trade or other purposes and have acquired substantial knowledge of the shortest and safest passages. They can ‘safely’ guide migrants towards the desired destinations. Migrants also stated that Eritreans in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan sometimes work as pilots and move back and forth to bring new migrants. Pilots can be directly contacted by Eritreans in the diaspora who want to assist a family member escape from Eritrea to neighboring countries so that they can process a family (re)union visa once the member enters Ethiopia or Sudan.

A friend in Kassala, Sudan, accommodated Kidane for a year and later introduced him to a *delala* (*lit. facilitator or broker*) who arranged his trip to Khartoum for 2,000 Sudanese pounds (about 350 US dollars). This shows that unlike the official narratives, smuggling in these particular transition nodes lacks a centralized leadership or hierarchy. Certain ‘pilots’ and their connectors facilitate refugee journeys across a certain distance using specific skills needed to transit to specific locations. Then, refugees find another smuggler with help from former migrants to facilitate the rest of journey at a later stage or immediately, depending on their economic conditions and risk factors en route or transit places. Kidane stated:

*In Kassala I engaged as a labourer in a salt factory. My friend who was working in the factory connected me to that job. After I worked and saved enough money I contacted the delala who assisted me together with 30 other Eritreans to cross the border checks. The delala also arranged [a]minibus that transported us all the way from Kassala to Khartoum the Sudan. ... In Sudan also semseris – they are established Eritrean refugees in Khartoum together with Sudanese transporters –organized transport services and guided us to Libya.*

The above account exemplifies, in the Horn of Africa, smugglers –*delaloch*( in Amharic) or *semseris* (in Arabic) –offer to guide Eritrean refugees along safe routes towards Ethiopian and Sudanese borders, provide transportation services to cross borders, deserts and seas, and secure temporary jobs and safe houses in transit lands such as the Sudan and Libya. For these reasons, migrants and refugees often define the actions of smugglers as a form of support and protection or access to services of mobility which they could not get from formal state institutions, rather than as crimes.

The communication and interactions –which are manifested in terms of information exchange, informal money transfer, supports for accommodation and connection to informal jobs along the trail – that migrants and refugees establish and maintain with family members in their homeland, former migrants en route and in diaspora, and local people along the trails generate a body of collective knowledge about routes, smugglers, and timing. This knowledge is intended to communicate to the traveler how to behave during interactions with smugglers; where to hide money; which clothes, medicine and food to carry, and even ways to avoid and survive violence. Mobility itself also leads to the emergence of intimate relations and emotional attachments among fellow travelers, the ones left behind, those en route and in the diaspora (Vogt 2016). In sum, the social, economic and practical organizations of migratory mobility take place through interactions of varying nature and meaning between multiple actors at multiple locations.

## **When smuggling goes wrong: violence and survival**

Migrants from the Horn of Africa (who are mainly Ethiopians and Eritreans) face extremely challenging conditions during their journeys: first during their mobility across the Sahara desert, when transiting Libya and finally while crossing the Mediterranean Sea before arriving to the European mainland. In recent years Khartoum (Sudan) has become an important transition hub for Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants and refugees entering the country. Once the financial, psychological and material preparations for the journey are made, migrants proceed from this city to Libya via the Sahara desert with the hope of reaching Europe.

Despite all preparations (mobilizing social supports, gathering necessary information and psychological readiness) and attempts to anticipate dangers, the journey is still risky and unpredictable given the obstacles that migrants encounter along the route. All migrants are in a precarious position but the levels of vulnerability vary by virtue of age, gender, ethnicity and class. For instance, those who are physically fragile (such as those with health impairments, older people and children) face greater physical challenges due to exposure to the desert environment. Men are often targets of physical violence while women are more likely to be subjected to kidnapping and sexual violence. However, people with access to financial resources – which often implies having access to remittances – seem to have a chance to escape both violence and exposure by bribing guards and paying ransom to criminal actors. The story of my informant named as Meqdi that is narrated below will exemplify this conditions very well.

Meqdi was an Eritrean refugee in her late 30s when I met her in Khartoum. I met Meqdi in Sudan while she was preparing for her journey in April 2014. I met her again in Märsta, a refugee reception centre in northern Stockholm, after three months of her journey across the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea. Since we exchanged contact details, I was able to follow her journey through phone calls while she was in Libya and Italy. When I met her again in Märsta in August 2014, she narrated to me the conditions she had been subjected to when crossing the Sahara Desert and her experience during the journey. Her trip was typical of the most perilous ones. She, along with 20 other migrant women, was kidnapped by bandits in the desert in a pickup before arriving at Ajdabiya, Libya. They were separated from their group of 184 Ethiopians and Eritreans who had been piled into a lorry and two pickup cars, which were escorting the lorry from the front and behind to guide and protect them from robbers. At the Libyan border the robbers intercepted the pickup in which Meqdi was traveling. They were taken to an unknown place in the desert and sexually and physically abused for four days. Some of them had no families abroad to transfer ransom money (*hawalet*) to the bandits who were torturing them. For instance, Meqdi met two Oromo men from the Bale region in Ethiopia who were abandoned in the desert by the bandits. They had suffered severe gunshot wounds while trying to escape and had not received any treatment. Meqdi commented, ‘They were waiting for death to come and relieve them from their suffering’. The robbers sexually abused Meqdi and eight other women on different occasions. Meqdi recalled some of her experiences:

*They push you for reactions and then they beat you ... one of the bandits pulled me out at night to the bushes and he did what he wanted ... He did this for the*

*three consecutive days... You can't move until they tell you to do so. You wait lying on the ground for the next round or he may call his friend who will continue in turn.... One night, out in the bushes, he insulted me ... You know what he said? 'Your father is a prostitute! Your mother is a prostitute! And you are a prostitute because your parents are prostitutes'. I could not tolerate that. I replied, 'Your father is a prostitute too! You are a bastard! I see it easily from what you are doing on me...!' That gave him 'all good reasons' to do all this to me [showing me her burned hands and baldhead she covers with a headscarf] ... he burned me all over my hands and breast with cigarettes. He shaved part of my hair in three places with broken glasses, and cut part of my ear with a sardine knife to make me as awful as he could ... These kind of things happened to all of the girls. Among us was 16-year-old Feben, a beautiful and virgin girl from Ethiopia. One night, they pulled her too to the bushes three times and five of them raped her turn by turn ... when she came back from the third round, she was in shock and bleeding. In the middle of the night, they grabbed her again and took her to the bushes. This time, she never came back. No one knows what happened to her. We were crying throughout that night...*

Meqdi said that an Eritrean big *semsari* named Ali in Tripoli who works with Libyan smugglers negotiated with the bandits and rescued her and some other girls. However, 15 other migrants were left behind with the robbers because they did not have relatives or friends in their homeland or abroad to pay the demanded ransom money. Meqdi believed that if Ali could not successfully negotiate with the bandits or the migrants could not arrange for the ransom money, the fate of those left behind would be death, transfer to corrupt Libyan police who would subject them to further brutality, be sold to the desert tribes or be enslaved forever. Meqdi paid a ransom of 1,000 Euros contributed by her boyfriend in Sudan and two other friends in Dubai and Sweden. However, for the men and women who came from rural parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, it was very difficult to arrange for the ransom money and save their lives. Many of these migrants reach Libya on their own and lose contact with their families in their homeland. Even if they make contact, their families are generally unable to afford the ransom amount. Some Ethiopian migrants come from poor rural families and, unlike Eritreans, they do not have family members in diaspora who can send remittance for a ransom or bribe if they are detained in Libya.

Libya and Sudan lack both the capacity and an interest to properly receive and provide support to the Horn of African migrants entering their territories that in turn enable exploitation by criminals. Acts of discrimination and exploitation of migrants by virtue of their origin are perpetrated by criminal and officials actors alike, and appear to have become commonplace, especially in Libyan territory. Sub-Saharan African migrants in particular are stereotyped as 'carriers of diseases', 'criminals', 'threats to national security', 'supporters or mercenaries of the Gaddafi regime,' while Christian migrants are seen as unfit to understand Islamic values (see also Reitano, 2015). Irregular migrants and refugees are collectively perceived in Sudan and Libya as 'impure', 'polluting' and 'dangerous' and become marginalized as a result of not fitting into what Malkki called the 'national order of things' (1995: 4-17).

While troubling, the violence migrants encounter en route in the desert and inside Libya's towns and cities, does not merely involve greedy smugglers committing crimes against the state and migrants (Gerard, 2014b). There is in fact a broader context of structural violence in place: the EU has insisted in enforcing its borders and has signed agreements with African transit countries such as the Sudan and Libya (even with criminal factions in today's Libya) to intercept incoming refugees in exchange for aid (see *Gaibazzi, Bellagamba and Dünwald* 2017). Migrant testimonials demonstrate that various types of criminals (armed gangs and robbers) kidnap migrants from smugglers that are transporting migrants across the desert (see the story of Meqdi, narrated in the section above) and hold them hostage for ransom in the Libyan Desert or trade them to employers in Libya seeking cheap labor. However, one should note that these criminals are different from smugglers. The criminals that abuse migrants in the desert are armed gangs and bandits that engage in robbery, sexual and labor exploitations of migrants. But smugglers, as we have seen in Meqdi's story above, negotiate if possible or sometimes fight with these bandits to rescue migrants and transport them across the desert and Libya.

There are also reports of sexual enslavement or of the use of migrants for many other criminal activities. For instance, the most serious threat is some of the Rashaida pastoral tribes who kidnap Eritrean migrants on their journey to Sudan and even from the Shagarab refugee camp in Eastern Sudan (Belloni 2015). For instance, Adhan, the Eritrean refugee who was in his early 30s when I met him in Khartoum in 2014 told me that his eight friends were kidnapped from Shagrab refugee camp by the Rashaida bandits. They were taken to remote deserts and tortured for a week. Only three of them survived, having paid the ransom money which was contributed by migrants' families abroad. No one knows what happened to the rest of those who were kidnapped. They disappeared and their families lost contact with them. Rashida bandits not only hold and torture migrants for ransom but also sell them for illegal organ harvesting, sex enslavement or bonded labor after taking them to Sinai or the Sahara Desert (Ayalew 2017).

Several state actors abuse migrants in a variety of settings including prisons (cf. Triulzi, 2013; Frouws et al. 2014a). The fear of encountering security or military personnel during their journeys has also led smugglers to sometimes abandon migrants in the middle of the desert. When this happens, migrants are likely to end up in state custody and subsequently in jail – or in the worst of cases, die as a result of exposure. Intense shootings between smugglers and robbers, or smugglers and border guards are commonplace. Migrants report that 'those who win take the migrants,' who are seen as 'profitable trade subjects.'

However, migrants are not merely victims of violence or stuck in the desert or Libya. Some mobilize funds from their friends and families in Libya, homeland or in diaspora to bribe prison guards and pay ransoms to criminals. Others establish new friendships, connections and relationships with helpful Sudanese and Libyans or co-travelers, who help them escape prison or generate money for sea crossings. For example, in Khartoum there were large number of Ethiopians and Eritreans who are today settled in Libya and are now assets for new arrivals in terms of support and survival. According to my interlocutors, several *habesha* (Ethiopian and Eritrean) neighborhoods in Tripoli, such as Al krimea, Abu Salim and Gotchall, have been established in Benghazi (RMMS, 2014a). The semi-established and newly arrived who have come via the desert and Ethiopian guest workers whose work contract and visas have expired meet in these neighborhoods. As I have elaborated elsewhere (see Ayalew 2017b), they gather

and share financial resources and information on plans and practices for sea crossings. These networks of help form a community of knowledge and serve as key social infrastructure of migration for people to survive violence and keep moving. Thus, religious, ethnic and diasporic networks and gender positions are used as risk-reduction strategies and resources of mobility along the Sudanese and Libyan borderlands. Uncertainty and violent conditions along the migration trails lead to the emergence of alternative mobility and protection strategies by migrants and their communities. In other words, uncertainty along the migration routes is not only about victimhood and suffering, but also generates creativity and resilience among the mobile subjects.

In this regard Cooper and Pratten's (2015) argument partly explains this kind of life conditions. They argue, 'uncertainty [in the African context] is not always and exclusively a problem to be faced and solved. Uncertainty is also a social resource and can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relations and act as a source for imagining a future with hopes and fears this entails. As such, uncertainty becomes the basis of 'curiosity and exploration' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 2). In a similar vein, 'irregular migrants' transiting the risky Sudanese and Libyan borderlands confront uncertainties and overcome challenges by creatively exploring, mobilizing and sharing necessary resources both in the immediate and distant locations. Owing to technological infrastructures, mainly social media and mobile phones, migrants en route and those in Italy not only learn ways of coping with risks and challenges but also continuously teach and guide those following them along the same routes how to survive risks and meet trustworthy smugglers.

For instance, my informant, Meqdi, told me that before she left Sudan for Libya she collected contact details of reputable smugglers in Libya through phone calls to her friends who had already reached Europe using the same route and smugglers. Former migrants guided her how to find accommodation and hiding places in Libya, how to transit Italy clandestinely and so on. In Libya through the support of former Eritrean migrants she got accommodation and a temporary job as housemaid for two months until smugglers arranged the boat for sea crossings. This shows us how organizing irregular mobility and services of smuggling are embedded in existing social relations and the culture of reciprocity, which mobile subjects reconfigure and revitalize during their harsh journey. Migrants who have social capital have more hope to survive the perilous journey across the Sahara Desert. Others often depend on mere luck. In general, dynamic translocal and transnational relations between migrants and significant others such as migrants' families abroad and smuggling networks generate economic, material and social resources or infrastructural moorings, using which migrants manage the journey and survive ordeals in the Sahara and inside Libya.

The Sahara Desert itself plays a dual role: the long and harsh desert serves as a means to keep away 'the unwanted', but at the same time, it is not fully tamed by the Sudanese, Libyan and European border regimes. Thus, smugglers and other established system of transit and transport facilitate border crossings for those deprived of formal means of mobility, albeit at the expense of migrants' lives and money. The Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea are dangerous and risky, but the only hope for 'people stuck in highways of life' and wanting to move for 'economic and political security' perceived to exist in Europe.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnographic research on irregular journeys in the Horn of Africa indicates that smuggling is far from being monolithically perceived as a criminal activity. Rather it is a socially embedded collective practice, emerging in the context of restricted mobility and migration-enforcement infrastructures and where cross-border social networks, communication technologies, and brokering practices come together.

The risks migrants from the Horn of Africa face en route are part and an extension of complex forms of structural violence: externalization of European borders, reproduction of humanitarian crises, unequal accesses to safe paths to mobility, etc., and far from constitutes response to the actions of smugglers alone. Therefore a possible solution should be tackling the underlying conditions that lead to the reliance on smuggling as a path to mobility. This requires addressing the socioeconomic problems and political crises in migrants' countries of origin and transit, as well as the limited number of legal paths to mobility, instead of the targeting and criminalizing of migrants and smuggling facilitators and brokers. Furthermore, there should be further studies on the changing nature of the smuggling operations that take into account the gender, generational and ethnic dimensions– which this study could not cover – of smuggling and criminal activities inside the Sahara desert and Libya.

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