

Moralities of Border Crossing

Inside the World of Smuggling and Transnational Marriages

Among Eritreans, the use of smugglers' services and transnational marriages to cross tight international borders is systemic. Whereas policy makers, international organizations and the media generally sanction these illicit migration practices as despicable and exploitative,¹ this chapter highlights the underlying sense of justice, fairness and solidarity underpinning them. From an emic point of view, smuggling and transnational marriages are mostly seen as expressions of solidarity and legitimate economic transactions.

The analysis of migrants' views of these covert and unauthorized practices seeks to illustrate what authors like Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles call migrants' struggles over borders and the political order these borders protect.² Without being explicitly oppositional and political, these views implicitly and practically unsettle dominant politics of migration. They show refugees' awareness of the aleatory nature of today's borders and the lack of legitimacy that bureaucratic bans on visas have in their eyes, leading to their refusal to be subject to them.

Some scholars have recently pointed out that migrants' moral understanding of borders is crucial to analyzing unauthorized migration. Drawing on the studies of legal noncompliance, Emily Ryo argues that Mexican unauthorized crossings to the United States is rooted in migrants' norms and values that do not recognize legal authorities establishing and enforcing border controls as legitimate.³ As she

illustrates by analyzing data from two surveys conducted in Mexico, the perceived unfairness among Mexicans of U.S. border regulations is associated with the decision to breach them. The lack of legitimacy of U.S. border enforcement, she suggests, is rooted in the long history of political, social, and economic interdependence between the United States and Mexico and the relatively recent targeting of Mexican migrants in U.S. policies and procedural justice.

Underlying conceptions of fairness and justice are also crucial to understanding refugees' deceit in institutional settings. Cheating, lying, and noncooperation have commonly been reported in refugee camps, reception centers, and other refugee facilities.⁴ Struggling to survive in an institutional environment shaped by the patronage of different service providers, those in camps have to find their way through lies, deception, and trickery. As argued by Gaim Kibreab, these emerge from a gap between refugees' ethical views, which make them accountable to their community and families, rather than to those managing the structures or allocating aid.⁵

Likewise, emic moralities⁶ are crucial to make sense of migrant smuggling and transnational marriages. By analyzing the protagonists' point of views, I show that these activities should not only be considered as risky, deleterious enterprises to which refugees passively submit. They are instead collective tactics put in place to achieve what my informants believe is their right to mobility. The focus on illicit practices is thus not a voyeuristic investigation aimed at reinforcing the image of the reckless, untrustworthy migrant. Its objective is to uncover their—more or less implicit—radical political dimension. By this, I do not mean to downplay their contradictory and problematic aspects.⁷ Rapes, torture, and death are extremely common among those who are smuggled across borders. Likewise, power imbalances and abuse can at times underpin transnational marriages. These instances are, however, the inevitable implications of the lack of alternatives for legal and safe migration, not the root causes of migrants' suffering.

WHOSE FAULT? PERCEPTIONS OF MORAL AND NATIONAL BORDERS

"Miss Milena, first of all, may I ask you the purpose of your stay?" Hagos asked me in English in front of a group of twelve other Eritrean refugees who had gathered at Sister Kudussan's place to talk to me about the change of visa policy at the Italian embassy in Addis Ababa. That was one of the main concerns for Eritreans at the time of my fieldwork in Ethiopia (2013–14). In fact, a recent change in procedure at the Italian consulate had made family reunification processes with partners in Europe significantly more difficult. Hagos, a thirty-year-old refugee and his fellows from Mai Nefas, a village in Eritrea, had apparently seen in me a possibility to reverse this worrying tendency.

"I am here to conduct my research on Eritrean refugees for my PhD," I replied. Hagos seemed satisfied with my answer and continued:

"Miss Milena, we appreciate you very much because you came here to listen to our stories. So I prepared a few points for you. Point 1: We have been forced to escape from our country because of the lack of freedom, such as the freedom of expression. If someone says something he will be taken to prison and none will hear of him for long time. We have to do national service for long time. Can you comment on this, Miss Milena?"

"I am aware of the problems in your country," I said. Yonas, another Eritrean refugee, translated this into Tigrinya for the other participants.

"Point 2: Here in Ethiopia we face many difficulties because we don't have opportunities for study and work. Ethiopians are our enemies and do not want us to go to Europe and the United States. They took away our rights and shoot us when we express our opinion. We have no freedom here. Can you comment on this?"

I responded that I knew that they had no rights to work in Ethiopia, but that they should also consider concessions by the Ethiopian government, such as permission to attend university and the then recent "out-of-camp" policy, allowing Eritreans with family connections in Ethiopia or who could prove to be able to support themselves to reside outside camps.⁸

"... very few opportunities to study," Hagos replied, smiling. "Third point: Recently a boat full of our people sank in Lampedusa." I personally think that the first responsible for this tragedy is the government of Eritrea; secondly I think the one responsible is the embassy of Italy in Ethiopia, because many people had a process¹⁰ with Italy but their visas had been rejected by the embassy. Can you comment on this?"

I replied that I could not judge other people's work and that the consulate had its own ways to check the plausibility of marriages.

"How can the embassy know which marriages are real and which ones are false?!"

I explained to them that the consulate staff cross-checked the data and the information refugees provided about their partners. At that point, the atmosphere heated up. Dbab, a woman in her fifties, shook her head; Candle, a young woman on my right, exclaimed that the problem was the Ethiopian translator at the embassy. Hagos added "those ... they don't want us to go to Europe." Georgis reported that the previous week, twenty-eight Eritreans had applied for reunification, but only two had been accepted—"But the marriages were true! I know it!" he said. Hagos continued: "Fourth point: because of colonization, I think that Italy has the obligation to receive and welcome Eritreans. Thank you for listening Miss Milena."

Saying that I could not change the laws on asylum and the regulations on international migration, I tried to address their doubts about visa proceedings and rights of asylum seekers. But my answers did not bring solutions to their problems, and most of them left the room unsatisfied. Yonas, the twenty-two-year-old translator for the occasion, smiled bitterly while walking out of the door and murmured,

"I do not need any process. My legs will be my process." He intended to cross the desert and the Mediterranean in the next months with the help of smugglers.

Yonas's statement powerfully exemplifies the determination of many Eritrean refugees to vindicate what they perceive as their rights through actions. Faced with all those bureaucratic and legal mechanisms—such as visa requirements and international asylum regulations—which immobilize them in a geographic, social, and political condition of marginality, my informants' attempts to circumvent borders can be seen as resistance practices expressing their right to escape.¹¹ The practice of unauthorized border crossing to Europe was not negatively sanctioned by the groups of Eritreans I met; rather, it was considered to be the "only possible alternative" to an unfair social and geographic immobility in Africa. Likewise, circumventing consular regulations for the purpose of obtaining visas was not perceived as an immoral act, because embassies and what they represent were not recognized as legitimate authorities.

Hagos's hierarchy of blame for recent migrant fatalities illustrates the extent to which refugees' perspectives differ from the predominant conceptions of history, rights, and responsibilities implicit in the public discourse on unauthorized migration. Faced with the death of their compatriots at sea, he and the other refugees apportioned blame firstly to the Eritrean government, which was compelling them to leave the country, and secondly to the international community, specifically Italy, which did not permit refugees to move freely to Europe and to other developed countries. Ethiopians were also pointed out as enemies, obstructing Eritreans' path to freedom. Although perceptions about smugglers were not univocal among refugees I met, as illustrated later, smugglers were not even mentioned among those possibly responsible for migrants' deaths. Nor were the migrants themselves blamed for their attempts to cross the border illicitly. This perspective completely overturns common interpretations of unauthorized migration in international public discourse.¹²

In the United States as well as in European policy and media discourse, smugglers are typically considered those mostly accountable for migrants' suffering. The European Agenda on Migration, adopted by the European Commission in 2015, identified the fight against migrant smuggling as a priority. Smugglers are targeted "to prevent the exploitation of migrants by criminal networks and reduce incentives to irregular migration."¹³ However, as many commentators have argued, the availability of smuggling services is not among the "incentives to irregular migration." Rather, these emerge from the deterioration of conditions and limited long-term prospects in transit countries. Whereas authorities tend to emphasize smugglers' violence toward their customers, authors like David Spener have highlighted instead the structural violence of nation-state borders, which create a sort of global apartheid.¹⁴ Smuggling, in this perspective, as a mechanism that facilitates "autonomous migration" in violation of state regulations, is a resistance practice.

Hagos's claims were in that period materializing in organized protests – the ones he referred to in his speech against the symbols of the international asylum regime and Western nations. Just a month before I arrived in Ethiopia (October 2013), a large protest had taken place in the camps in the north of the country.¹⁵ During a mourning ceremony for the victims of the Lampedusa accident, refugees voiced their anger at a system that, in their eyes, did not provide them any prospects beyond risking their lives at sea. The main claim was that the Lampedusa tragedy had been the consequence of insufficient resettlement quotas from the camps. Peaceful demonstrations were held, but smaller groups of young refugees also threw stones at local bureaus. Significantly, the most violent acts targeted the symbols of the current asylum regime, such as UNHCR offices and services, as several of my informants who were present at the events confirmed.

My informants' claims, however, were far from being the coherent product of a mature political consciousness. Revolutionary and reactionary aspects were ambivalently present in their claims. While protesting against the injustice of the international asylum system, Hagos evoked Italy's historical colonial role to challenge current restrictive visa policies, saying, "because of colonization, I think that Italy has the obligation to receive and welcome Eritreans."¹⁶ Such postcolonial claims were common among Eritreans across my research sites.

Taking into consideration this shared moral framework is key to overcome simplistic understandings of illicit practices surrounding border-crossing. The analysis of the specific moral, social and economic contexts in which they are embedded reveals blurred boundaries between refugees and smugglers, victims and exploiters, marriages of convenience and those established on the basis of love, tradition, or solidarity. Drawing from my ethnographic interviews with a variety of informants throughout my fieldwork and participant observation among refugees and smugglers in Ethiopia and Sudan, the next sections examine the social and moral roots of smuggling and transnational marriages in the context of Eritrean migration.

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL AND MORAL WORLD OF ERITREAN UNAUTHORIZED MIGRATION

Human smuggling has received widespread attention by policy makers and scholars over the past twenty years.¹⁷ Mostly analyzed concurrently with trafficking, smuggling has often been described for its exploitative character. However, an increasing number of ethnographic studies point to a very different aspect of smuggling. Researchers working on the U.S.-Mexico border have illustrated how *coyotaje*—the smuggling of immigrants into the United States—is socio-economically and morally embedded in migrants' communities.¹⁸ Other scholars working with Somalis, Afghans, Syrians have illustrated how smuggling activities are often framed as acts of solidarity in communities affected by protracted

displacement.¹⁹ Tekalign Ayalew Megiste, in particular, talks about smuggling as system of “protection from below” from below in the context of Eritrean migration. Smuggling, he argues, emerges as a sort of community knowledge historically developed through contextual experience and transnational exchanges of information, “that allows those in transit to be guarded from criminal organizations, environmental challenges, and restrictive migration regimes, but also from the trap that asylum conditions—including refugee camps—have become.”²⁰ My ethnographic investigation similarly shows how smuggling is deeply embedded in its history and society.

DISGUISED AS SHEPHERDS: A LONG HISTORY OF BORDER CROSSING

Clandestine border crossing has long been a necessity in the region. History books, private chronicles from the 1970s–80s,²¹ and oral narrations of first-generation refugees show that many mechanisms of the contemporary smuggling process have been in place for a long time. Escaping the purges of the Derg in the 1980s, Eritreans would disguise themselves as shepherds to avoid patrols. Many of them used local guides—equivalent to contemporary pilots—who requested a payment according to the relationship with the smuggled individual: relatives would not have to pay, while others might pay up to 600 Ethiopian birr—equivalent to about U.S.\$300. Violence, rapes, and kidnappings were also common.

The chronicles of the time testify to the long-standing existence of an elaborated professional and economic system developed around people smuggling.²² Then, as today, this system involved a wide variety of individuals who enabled the unauthorized passage of Eritreans from one country to another. This multiplicity of characters, roles, and activities is hardly reducible to the mainstream categories of the international debate. During my research I heard several terms used for the “professionals” of the migration business. The commonest were *pilots*, *delelti*, and *semseriti*. It became clear that words like “smugglers” and “traffickers” did not make much sense in the context I was studying. Looking at the internal differentiation of the smuggling business in Eritrean migration shows, not only how misleading it is to use the word “smuggler” to identify all these different figures, but that these practices are embedded in Eritrean society and in refugees’ social milieu.

PILOTS: THE GUIDES

“Pilot” is the word used by Eritrean refugees to refer to the “guide” who actually accompanies escapees walking through the border in return for payment. In the literature on Mexico–U.S. border crossing, these guides are called “coyotes.”²³ This role is especially important in the crossing between Eritrea and Ethiopia or Eritrea and Sudan, which is mostly done on foot. However, not everyone I met had crossed

the border with the help of a professional pilot. Many of the refugees I interviewed told me that their getaway was possible because they had been moved to a military post or to a teaching job in some areas close to the Sudanese or Ethiopian border. From there some of them knew the way or had friends who helped them.

According to the refugees and brokers I interviewed, professional pilots are Eritreans highly familiar with the border region. Ex-militaries and shepherds are also suited for this role due to their physical resilience. In fact, they are generally well trained to walk for long hours at night to avoid soldiers.²⁴

It was surprising to discover that aside from a few who lived in border communities and managed to work as guides without being noticed by authorities, the majority of pilots did not live in Eritrea. As I was told in several instances, many of them were Eritrean refugees in Sudanese and Ethiopian camps. They used to go and collect people in Eritrea and then take them across the border. Others had two passports and could freely enter Eritrea and Sudan.

I never had the chance to formally meet a pilot, but my informants spoke about them in almost legendary terms. The disregard of the dangers, their physical resilience and knowledge of the territory make pilots objects of respect and admiration as well as fear and hatred when things do not go smoothly as wished. Petros, a twenty-four-year-old theology student who had recently fled from Eritrea to Ethiopia, said, "They [pilots] are heroes to me! They grant us a way out from Eritrea in spite of huge risks!" However, on other occasions I was told that pilots would not hesitate to abandon slow walkers to the soldiers' mercy if they had to.

While pilots are crucial in the first part of the journey from Eritrea to neighboring countries, drivers become more important in the second and third parts of the journey when people are driven from Sudanese or Ethiopian camps to Khartoum and from there through the Sahara desert in Libya. In Libya, pilots and drivers are replaced by boatmen. As I have been told, while pilots and drivers in the first part of the journey were usually Eritreans, drivers and boatmen in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Libya were of different nationalities: drivers in Ethiopia were usually Ethiopians, and in Sudan, Sudanese; boatmen in Libya were sometimes Tunisians, but in many other cases they were chosen from among the Eritrean refugees themselves.²⁵ People with some nautical experience or mechanical skills are sometimes allowed or asked to steer the boat in exchange for a discount or free passage. These details, however, are continually changing, along with the geopolitical fluctuations surrounding migration corridors. Since my informants passed through Libya, the situation in the country has worsened dramatically, and the conditions of the smuggling business have completely changed. As I was told by several research participants in 2015 and 2016, Eritrean middlemen who controlled the passage through Libya had to interrupt their operations due to the violence in the country, as well as Libyan and Italian police interventions targeting them.²⁶ The seeming lack of well-established Eritrean brokers in Libya and the shift of the control in the smuggling business to Libyan militias and Touba Bedouin may be among the

main reasons for the radical deterioration of the conditions of migrants who want to traverse Libya and a huge increase in the risk of being kidnapped and tortured. If smuggling is, as Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste argued, a system of “protection from below,” anti-smuggling actions risk to further increase migrants’ vulnerability in already extremely unstable and violent contexts.

HAWALAS: THE MONEY-TRANSFER AGENTS

Transactions of money between smugglers, refugees, and relatives abroad paying for the journey usually take place through informal circuits. The financial agents of this informal money-transfer system are called *hawalas*. The system works as follows: the refugee’s relative, who usually lives in Europe or the United States, pays a local hawala in cash; this hawala in Europe has contact with another hawala in Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, or Libya, who pays the money to the smuggler who has provided the service. The two hawalas will each charge a commission for this service, settling with each other later.

This practice is centuries old and well known—albeit by different names—not only in Eritrea, but in the whole Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and South and East Asia.²⁷ These informal financial systems are based on the transfer of the debt from one person to another and can work only if there is trust between agents and between them and the customers. The hawala system originates in contexts where there is no institutional banking or when a formal financial service is not convenient.²⁸

In the case of Eritreans, hawalas are typically individuals who have a shop, or are involved in some kind of trade in Eritrea or elsewhere. To have a shop allows the hawala to settle the debt via a trade transaction, so hawalas usually come from the Eritrean lower middle class, or from more resourceful families who have trading licenses and good contacts with government officials to ensure a smooth business.

These systems of money transfer have increasingly become the target of Western governments’ controls because of alleged implications in funding terrorism, but the greater part of their business consists of migrants’ remittances.²⁹ With regard to the Somali *xawilaad*, Anna Lindley argues that “their services have served to sustain local livelihoods and alleviate suffering.”³⁰ Likewise, the hawala system in Eritrea not only enables payment to smugglers, but is also used to sustain families at home in times of crisis. However, hawalas are not only targeted by Western governments. In 2015, the Eritrean government enacted a series of financial interventions that severely affected the business of hawalas, as well as the positive impact of remittances and the purchasing power of locals.³¹ This may have also indirectly influenced the possibilities of relatives abroad financing journeys out of the country and led, along with other factors, to the decrease in Eritrean arrivals in Europe in recent years.

THE UNIVERSE OF BROKERS

Eritreans in Ethiopia referred to brokers mostly as *delelti*, while those I met in Sudan mostly called them *semserti*.³² Both words refer to specialists in unauthorized migration who are able to provide a wide range of services, from fake papers, like national ID cards and passports, to business marriages and border crossings. Different *semserti* are specialized in different services, depending on their contacts with local authorities, pilots, drivers, and military officers. Their job mostly consists of “connecting” demand with supply—customers with pilots and drivers—and they are usually the ones who make the highest profit. They are often responsible for organizing the logistics of the journey, such as travel arrangements and the provision of food and shelter during stops.³³

However, in every transaction there can be more than one middleman. Let’s imagine that Rachel, a fictional Eritrean girl, wants to find a way to escape from the country. She personally does not know a pilot or a *semsari*, so she would usually ask someone who has already escaped the country to put her in touch with a trusted pilot. Her hypothetical friend, Simon, who lives in Addis Ababa, does not have direct contact with the pilot, but he knows a middleman. Simon finds out that the price to cross the border is U.S.\$1,000. Depending on Simon’s will to help Rachel or to make some money out of her request, he may or may not add U.S.\$500 for facilitating the transaction. Likewise, the middleman whom Simon had contacted may not be in direct contact of the pilot, but, as a ring in the chain of transactions, he may charge some money on top of the initial price set for the pilot to accompany Rachel across the border. The less direct and longer the chain of people that connects the customer and the pilot, the more expensive the trip is.

This gives an idea of the ramifications of the smuggling business within some sectors of the Eritrean population and shows that clear-cut distinctions between refugees and middlemen, and even between victims and exploiters, often make little sense in this context. Most middlemen are refugees themselves, who may have been involved occasionally in helping someone to get out of the country with a big, little, or no compensation in exchange. However there were degrees of professionalism and expertise within the universe of middlemen. Some do it sporadically or in their free time, others do it full time, like Tsegay and Michael, whom I met, respectively, in Addis Ababa and Khartoum.

Tsegay, a church boy . . .

To meet someone directly involved in the smuggling business became crucial for me in order to understand the inside mechanisms of the migration industry, which was moving thousands of Eritrean refugees across the border. However, it was not easy to get to know one of them. When I asked my informants and friends in Addis Ababa, all of them told me that it was impossible: smugglers would be too scared to talk to

me. Public attention was at the time focused on secondary movements of Eritrean refugees from the camps in Tigray to Sudan, and the Ethiopian police were known to be strict with anyone involved in the smuggling business. Adonay tried asking a classmate of his who was working as a middleman on the side. He refused and even got angry at Adonay for mentioning his existence to me. Temesghen, my neighbor in Mebrat, also discouraged me from searching, exclaiming: "They do not want to share their *injera* [flat bread typical of the Eritrean and Ethiopian culinary tradition]."

However, one day in February, Stephanos, one of the young theology students I met through Sister Kudussan, called me to say that his "friend" had agreed to talk to me. Surrounded by excavation works in Mexico Square, Violetta (my interpreter at the time) and I met for the first time with "the smuggler" Tsegay. Contrary to all conventional images of smugglers as cruel villains, Tsegay was a smiling man in his late twenties with a clean, kind face and a funny trotting gait, wearing a checked shirt and a black leather jacket. He invited us for a pizza in a nearby restaurant and told us his story.

Originally from a small village close to the Catholic town of Segeneiti, Tsegay, the third of ten brothers, had been raised in Asmara. After school, he was sent to Assab as a soldier but fled in 2008 through the Danakil desert. He began his activities as *delalai* simply because he needed money. His uncle in the Emirates was not financially supporting him, and finding work was not easy in Addis at the time. He wondered what people desired the most, and found that the answer was easy: "to leave." Together with a former comrade from Assab, he started the business in 2010, about three years before I met him.

In the beginning, his business was mainly based on crossing from Eritrea into Ethiopia. In my understanding, this period of his activities overlapped with his stay in May Aini camp, where as an ex-soldier, he had little difficulty getting pilots to trust him; then, a year before I met him—probably when he had made some money and could move to Addis Ababa—he expanded the range of services he offered. When I interviewed him, he could organize the trip from Ethiopia to direct Sudan or to Libya, provide passports or residence permits in Ethiopia, and arrange business marriages.

Tsegay told us that getting into the business had not been hard. Competition, as he said, was fair. He claimed he had not received any threats from other competing brokers. His job mainly consisted of putting customers in contact with people offering the services they required: staff in the Ethiopian Ministerial Office of Nationality for an Ethiopian passport, a driver for a journey to Sudan, a guide for the escape from Eritrea. Although some collaborations with these other agents were stable, none was set in stone, and they could be changed or canceled if opportunities and conditions changed.

Tsegay planned to work as a *delalai* just until he could get enough money together to leave the country himself. The year before, he had had to pay for his brother to get to Sweden, and this had delayed him, but, he said, "In a year, I

should be all right.” He dreamt of reaching England—in his view a country of opportunities for those like him who wanted to pursue further education.

When the interview came to an end, Tsegay nodded his head and invited his two friends who had quietly been sitting at a nearby table to join us. Violetta was at ease chatting with those guys. They were all *wodat Asmara*, “Asmara boys,” smart talkers, full of jokes and stories. They laughed a lot together, while I tried to catch the main sense of the conversation in Tigrinya. Violetta suddenly remembered that she had seen Tsegay before: “Oh, you were in that comedy at the Catholic Church of Saint Paul [in Addis Ababa]! You were very good and sang with a loud and clear voice in the choir!” Yes, that had been him. He attended that church regularly. After that, Tsegay and his friends became regular visitors at Violetta’s and my place, but he was not the only *delalai* I met. After moving to Khartoum, I happened to run into another broker.

. . . and Michael, “a schoolboy”

It was an ordinary Sunday in Khartoum. It had been a few days since I had started living with Maria and her eight-year-old child, Anna. That day, after going to the market, Maria took me to the house of her friend Seifu, a thirty-two-year-old Eritrean woman who had been Maria’s neighbor in Asmara. Seifu was sharing the place with other two Eritrean ladies and three young Eritrean men. All of them were waiting for a family visa or for the right moment to move to better destinations. Seifu had been in Khartoum for three years and was waiting for a reunification visa with her husband (a “business” one, as I later understood) who had moved to Sweden.

We were sitting in Seifu’s living room chatting with her housemates when Michael and two Somali men walked in the door. Michael was an old friend of the household. Seifu, Maria, and their housemates had all grown up in the same neighborhood in Asmara. Short and thin with shiny curly hair, tidy clothes and a pair of glasses, Michael hardly seemed twenty, like someone fresh from school.

Michael barely said hi to me, but he kept glancing in my direction while Mohammed, his talkative Somali partner, was telling me how he and Michael had become friends during a holiday together. I found myself unable to believe his story entirely, and when Michael and his friends offered us a lift home, I asked Michael, “What do you do in Khartoum?” He ignored me, but the driver answered: “We sell cars.” Before dropping us off, Michael asked for my telephone number, and not long afterward, he called me, saying: “I think we have an appointment. We’ll be there in thirty minutes.” I was surprised, since we had not fixed any appointment, but the prospect of meeting up with Michael also felt promising.

From that meeting on, until I left Sudan, Michael opened up a whole world for me. On that first night out, he revealed to me that he was a *semsari* and took me to one of the bars frequented by people smugglers in the city. Michael and his business became one of my main interests, but hanging out with him was not always

easy. Although I used to meet up with him together with Maria, Anna, Seifu, and other friends on social occasions such as Easter celebration or Sunday coffees, we could not speak about his work in the presence of others, since he wished to keep it secret. He was otherwise available only during working hours, which, for him, meant nighttime. But even then, he was often unwilling to answer my questions, saying: "Not now Milena, I am trying to relax, please." He knew that I was a researcher and that I was interested in his job, but it seemed hard for him to see me as a professional; for him I was more of an entertaining companion. Planning was almost impossible with him. Sometimes he would give me an appointment only to cancel, saying, "Sorry Milena . . . *sra allo* [I had to work]"; at other times, he would just call me in the middle of the night to tell me: "We are coming. Get ready."

I managed to have significant conversations with him in unconventional environments, such as his house before he was too drunk or high to understand what I was asking; in noisy bars full of *semserti*; in romantic luxurious restaurants, interrupted by the continuous phone calls of his assistants; in the warehouse where migrants transiting to Libya were temporarily staying, while Michael and the guardians were drinking whisky and dancing to loud pop and Tigrinya music

KILLERS AND *SEMSERTI*: RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE SMUGGLING BUSINESS

While driving around Khartoum Talata, Michael pointed out at some flashy Middle Eastern restaurants at the side of a popular road we were passing. "These are the shops of the killers. They sell our people like beasts. I am a *semsari*, but I have humanity."

The "killers" in Michael's terms were what international conventions call traffickers, that is to say, criminals who exploit other human beings, usually in the sex industry, slave labor business, and body organs market.³⁴ They are usually distinguishable from smugglers because they get hold of their victims by force, whereas smugglers' services are usually sought by the migrant. Although separately defined in international protocols, authors have often analyzed them as contiguous businesses. Many, in fact, have highlighted that migrants' experiences defy easy categorization, since smuggled migrants may be coerced, punished, and held hostage at many points along the way.³⁵

Although smuggled migrants may end up being trafficked, smugglers and traffickers usually have divergent interests.³⁶ While smugglers want their customers to be highly satisfied with their services, because their profits depend on their reliability and good reputation, traffickers prey on their victims and do not care about their popularity. In the context of Eritrean migration, the Rashaida ethnic group and other Bedouin groups are especially infamous for the kidnapping of refugees who tried to cross the Sinai Desert from Egypt to reach Israel.³⁷ Many kidnappings have also been reported from the area of Kassala in eastern Sudan.

These “killers” took their victims to bases in the Sinai and tortured them so that their screams would convince their families abroad to pay a ransom, which could amount to U.S.\$50,000. According to several reports, from four thousand to thirty thousand Eritreans were trafficked in the Sinai from 2009 to 2013, for ransoms totaling U.S.\$600 million.³⁸ According to Michael, the owners of those restaurants in Khartoum were related to the traffickers and were using the restaurant to launder the money they made from the kidnappings. Once I asked Michael if he had ever sold people to the Rashaida: “No, no, never! You know, one month ago in a village outside Khartoum, there was a truck full of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia. The Rashaida came. They were armed with guns and wanted to kidnap them. My assistants had guns too and protected the refugees. Only one died in the shooting. I care for my customers . . . Ah and do you remember the other day when I told you that I was busy? It was because a truck of people from Ethiopia had been caught by the Ethiopian police. I paid money from my own pocket to free them!”

For Michael it was very important to mark his distance from the killers and to state his “humanity,” despite the irregularity of his business. He also tended to stress that he was taking responsibility for the smuggled refugees. Tsegay similarly said that one of his duties was to look after his customers: “I take responsibility for the people I send.” Were the two smugglers I encountered examples of “good” *semserti* or were these claims just good business?

Tsegay’s and Michael’s attention to their customers, their claim of “being responsible for them” can be interpreted as part of their ethical code or an expression of empathy with the refugees, but also as a marketing strategy. Tsegay did not have difficulties admitting that “to take responsibility” was necessary for the success of his business: “If someone I send dies, I lose customers,” he stated bluntly. As both smugglers explained to me, the success of their activities was mainly based on word-of-mouth reputation: the death or imprisonment of some customers would mean that next refugees would choose another *delalai* over them.

Semserti, in any case, are the ones held responsible by other refugees and their families if something goes wrong. For this reason, collaboration with trustworthy partners (pilots, drivers, other *semserti*) and the control over the whole smuggling process were crucial in Michael’s and Tsegay’s business. Partnerships in business were mainly based on personal knowledge and national belonging. Tsegay preferred first of all to collaborate with Eritreans he had known for long time, then, on a scale of decreasing trust, he could work with Eritreans in general, Ethiopians and with other nationalities, only if they had no other available contacts. Eritreans were the most trustworthy, not only because of national solidarity, but because they were accountable for their deeds. With a somehow disturbing clarity Tsegay reminded me that the business of smuggling people could get serious: “It is easy to track an Eritrean and his family if something goes wrong.” For this reason, Tsegay usually required one of his Eritrean collaborators to accompany drivers of other nationalities and ensure that things went as planned.

Without denying that violence can be an integral part of smuggling, especially when things go wrong, the above ethnographic insights illustrate that it is crucial for scholars to carefully consider that smugglers and traffickers are the same people: they instead belong to competing markets.

A LOT OF MONEY AND HOW TO SPEND IT: A MORALITY OF SHARING

Owing to the covert nature and shifting conditions of the business, it is difficult to give a realistic estimate of the overall amount of money circulating around the smuggling of migrants, but in 2017, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated around U.S.\$10 billion annually.³⁹ In particular, it is calculated that the routes from West, East and North Africa to Europe, and South America to North America generate approximately USD 6.75 billion a year.

Against this background, Michael's was only one of many small enterprises that thrive. He was indeed able to earn a lot of money; during the five weeks I was in Khartoum alone, he received sixty Somalis from Shagarab and thirty Eritreans from Ethiopian camps. If, as he claimed, he earned around U.S.\$1,000 for each person he sent to Libya, he would have grossed around \$90,000 in one month. He was also getting money from people who were crossing from Eritrea to Sudan and those who paid to be driven from Ethiopia to Khartoum. Certainly, Michael's profit might dramatically decrease if his customers were apprehended by the police or kidnapped along the way.

Michael's earnings as a smuggler also had positive implications for those around him. Young men hanging out at Seifu's house often ran small errands for Michael in exchange for some money. Michael was extremely generous with his friends: he bought new furniture for Seifu's house, gave money to Maria and Anna whenever he saw them, bought a big ram for Easter, and treated everyone—including me—to a night of dancing on one of the many barges on the Nile River in Khartoum. His generosity was almost excessive; I often felt I was experiencing some kind of potlatch.⁴⁰

However, not all smugglers are so wealthy. Earnings depend on the popularity of the smuggler, the number of customers available, and the competition. For example, Tsegay told me that his earnings were not so great, probably because he had only recently started out in the business. His income fluctuated strongly, depending on the season. In a good month—usually from January to September—he could earn up to 12,000 birr (U.S.\$550), but in some months, there simply was not enough demand for his services.

LIKE SURGEONS?

Both Tsegay and Michael held anti-government political views. In their opinion, the government is the cause of all the suffering Eritreans face. Tsegay supported a recent political movement called Eritrean Youth for Social Change, which prom-

ises to unite all Eritreans in a single front of liberation from the dictatorship of Isaias Afwerki, the independent nation's first, and thus far only, president. Michael's political views were more ambivalent, but he often declared: "I hate those below [in] the government. Isaias is a hero, I love what he represents and his history, but those below him are all corrupt."⁴¹

Both Tsegay and Michael thought that I, as researcher, had an important role to play in witnessing and denouncing the suffering of their people. It was because of his political views that Tsegay agreed to talk to me. He appreciated the fact that someone was interested and would publicize the hard conditions under which Eritreans lived. Michael similarly often praised me for having made the effort to go to Sudan to see with my own eyes what Eritreans were going through (see Appendix).

Tsegay and Michael regarded smuggling refugees as a "remedy" for the tragic situation of their people, rather than an extension of it.⁴² When I asked Tsegay how he thought of his role as a *delalai*, he replied: "You know, in life good things go together with bad things. Even a doctor has to do things that imply a high risk and sometimes the death of his patients. For example, when a doctor takes his patient into the operating theater, he has to ponder possible risks and positive outcomes of the operation. Similarly, I have chosen to look at the positive outcomes of my work: my customers will benefit greatly from the surgery [I perform]." Tsegay and Michael presented themselves as providing the means to quench people's thirst for a better life and freedom of movement.

Nevertheless, Tsegay and Michael were not completely comfortable with their job, which they tended to keep secret from their loved ones. When I asked Tsegay if his family in Asmara knew about his job, he smiled, embarrassed, and said: "No, I do not think they would appreciate it." Similarly, Michael wanted to keep his job secret from even his closest friends in Khartoum. The first time Michael told me about his other life as a smuggler, he cautioned: "Don't tell Maria, Samson, and the others about my job, okay? They are like my family here; I do not want them to be involved." His generosity could be interpreted as a way of addressing his sense of guilt about the way he earned his money. Although he sometimes boasted about his wealth, he was not proud of his activities. The first time he confessed to me what he did, sitting in the bar that night, he whispered: "All these people are not good . . . I am not good either." Likewise, their customers have contradictory moral views of *semserti*.

CUSTOMERS' VIEWS ON BROKERS: HEROES OR VILLAINS?

Although news media and international organizations characterize people smugglers as profiteers and exploiters, studies show that they are often highly respected in their communities, sometimes even considered philanthropists.⁴³ In other reports, their business does not bear a particular moral connotation and is perceived as something ordinary.⁴⁴

The refugees I met sometimes showed disapproval of smugglers, and sometimes admiration for them and appreciation of their services. When I asked Adonay in Addis Ababa what his view on smugglers was, he answered: "It is not ethical; people are sold from one person to another and they risk their lives." During my fieldwork in Ethiopian refugee camps, Jacob, a twenty-six-year-old engineer resolved to move to Europe, thought likewise. "They are exploiters," he said. "They just want to make money out of people's misery!" Nevertheless, he was determined to use their services before long, and when I pointed out what I saw as a bit of hypocrisy, he replied, "We have no other choice." Isaias, another older Eritrean refugee, who was present during my conversation with Jacob, had a different view: "Smugglers are not exploiters," he said. "They just give people what they ask of them. Some are very generous; they take people even if they do not have enough money to pay them . . . so many times I saw people begging them to put them on the truck during the night!"

I often got negative answers when I asked other refugees directly about smugglers. Positive comments were more common when an opinion was not solicited. Maria and I once visited her friend Gerre in a nearby neighborhood of Khartoum. Like the other Eritreans I met in Khartoum, he was living in a compound he shared with fellow Eritreans. One of his neighbors was a *semsari*. As we were leaving, Gerre said of his *semsari* neighbor: "He is an *honest* one. All the people he sends to Europe get safely to their destination." Gerre's moral assessment of his neighbor was not concerned with the latter's breaking international laws on smuggling; it was based on the reliability of the services provided.

Refugees' answers to my direct questions were regularly influenced by what they thought I wanted to hear. Since I was a white European woman doing research on refugees and smuggling, my informants probably imagined that I endorsed the general humanitarian discourse that portrays smugglers as criminals and refugees as victims. This relational mechanism, I believe, should also be considered when researchers conduct their interviews with refugees in the destination country. Without underestimating the amount of suffering they often experience during their journeys, it should also be considered that refugees may change their attitudes to smugglers once they arrive at the destination because of the labeling process typically produced in asylum procedures and reception: the more the smuggler was labeled as a criminal, the more the refugee could play the role of the suffering victim. Performing victimhood can be crucial for recognition of refugee status upon arriving at one's destination.⁴⁵

Luckily, most of my informants whom I met again after the journey did not have especially bad experiences with their brokers. The sea crossing and long periods of custody while waiting to embark were physically exhausting, they said, and the food provided was bad, but they did not seem to blame all this on their *semserti* in particular. The unstable political conditions in Libya, the risk of being caught by police or militias or being attacked by Libyans were responsible. Trust of and

loyalty to the smuggler remain strong even after they arrive at their destination. Senay, my host in the Roman squat, told me how he had felt protected the entire time until he had crossed the sea by the *semsari* who helped him in Libya. He was deeply thankful to him and ready to reciprocate the favor anytime.

Occasionally, the Eritreans I interviewed modified their declared attitude to smugglers after I clarified my neutrality on the topic. Once I was chatting about smuggling with Gebreyesus, a talented twenty-eight-year-old novel writer who was among Maria's friends in Khartoum. When I asked him what he thought about smugglers, he said that that profession was deeply "unethical," being against international law, but later when I expressed my doubts about the moral condemnation of smugglers, he said: "In a sense, smugglers could be compared to those individuals who helped black people during slavery moving from the South to the North in the United States and today are considered heroes. . . . Who knows? Maybe one day smugglers will be considered heroes, too, because they helped people find freedom."

Comments I heard about *semserti* were not limited to the ethical/unethical nature of the occupation. Gebreyesus, for example, found *semserti* generally quite ridiculous: "They are so arrogant . . . always with their phones, talking about money . . . but they don't think about the consequences of their actions." Maria, my host in Khartoum, was more concerned about the long-term prospects of the profession. In fact, although Michael was very concerned about keeping his work secret to his close friends, Maria suspected it: "Michael has so much money . . . he spends it here and there . . . I think he is in the smuggling business . . . but it is not good for him . . . now he may have a lot of money, but one day he may lose everything. I tried to tell him the other day to be careful, but he is too young, he won't listen."

In sum, perceptions of smugglers among Eritrean refugees are mixed: sometimes, they are depicted as champions of generosity, but hated if customers feel cheated. However, the moral judgment generally does not concern the nature of the activity, but the quality of the service and the way it has been provided. Unauthorized border crossing is not negatively sanctioned, nor are the actions of those who enable it. As a matter of fact, refugees' dreams of moving elsewhere could not be realized without the assistance of these experts.

Aside from unauthorized border crossing, Eritrean refugees have other ways to overcome what they see as the unjustified obstacles to mobility. One of the main alternatives to being smuggled across the desert and the sea is to arrange a marriage with somebody living abroad.

ANOTHER WAY OUT: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES

Transnational marriages can involve partners of different nationalities, but most typically they are contracted compatriots either at home or living in desirable

destination countries. Although such marriages are often organized and paid for with the sole purpose of emigrating out of Eritrea, Ethiopia, or Sudan, many others emerge out of a “cultural logic of desire.”⁴⁶ On the one hand, the desires and romantic dreams of those who feel stuck in Eritrea, Ethiopia, or Sudan are projected onto charming expatriates; on the other hand, those who have reached Europe—mostly men—seek to start a family and plan their future with their first childhood love or a girl recommended to them by their families. These unions are variously the result of geopolitical power imbalances, gender obligations, personal desires, and solidarity.

From a gender perspective, for Eritrean men I met in Italy, as also observed among other groups of migrants, transnational marriages were a way to abide by traditional values, meet kin, and settle down with a “trusted person.”⁴⁷ As described in previous chapters, the achievement of manhood by establishing one’s own family is one of the reasons why many young men have left Eritrea. For their part, Eritrean girls are usually happy to marry compatriots living in Europe. As described in the first chapter, *beles*, migrants, are favored by many young women in search of their soul mates because migrants and the world they represent are positively valued in Eritrean society and because of the opportunities related to a marriage with a person living outside Eritrea. Even families bless these unions, thinking that a *beles* would offer better prospects to their daughters. Arranged marriages, which are often seen as sites of female subordination and distress, may instead be considered sites of agency. In fact, Eritrean women actively pursue their migratory aspirations through them using their family and ethnic networks. However, it would be wrong to think that they favor these marriages only for pragmatic convenience.

Tangled with instrumental motivations and cultural logics of desire, transnational marriages are also solidarity mechanisms in a context where migration represents the main channel for personal realization, socioeconomic mobility and families’ survival.⁴⁸ Exchange of favors among members of the same community and traditional family arrangements commonly underpin transnational marriages.

Before moving forward, it is important to briefly distinguish among the different categories of marriages to which I refer in this chapter. According to the European Council, a marriage of convenience is understood to refer to a marriage contracted for the sole purpose of enabling the person concerned to enter or reside in a member state.⁴⁹ Marriages of convenience are not necessarily “business marriages,” as my informants would call them. The latter imply that someone who wants to move to Europe or elsewhere would pay someone who is already there to marry him/her. Marriages of convenience and business marriages are different from arranged marriages, which are typically organized by families or among the partners even if there is no prior intimate relationship between the future couple. This kind of union is not in any way illegal—it simply reflects a different idea of marriage, family, and love. Marriages of convenience, arranged, and love mar-

riages are much more intertwined in the perspectives of my informants than in bureaucratic categorizations.

When I arrived in Addis Ababa in October 2013, I met many young Eritrean women and men waiting for spousal visas. To my surprise, most of them were engaged in a reunification processes involving a partner in Italy. This had started to be a concern for the Italian consulate in Addis Ababa, which thought there was something strange behind the increase in Eritreans' applications for reunification visas. The complex moral entanglements of these marriages were at odds with the moral assumptions of the consulate's staff.

BUREAUCRATIC ENCOUNTERS: THE ITALIAN CONSULATE AND THE REFUGEES IN ADDIS ABABA

"We see many of them in our visa section," an Italian consular official told me in 2013. "We have up to forty Eritreans a day. Since 2011, it has become a mass phenomenon. We believe these are all fake marriages. We cross-check the data, call the supposed husband or supposed wife and check that they know the person that is applying for visa. Sometimes we find an age gap [that is] too big. For example, sometimes the guy has left the country when the woman was still a child and it is plausible that they had a sentimental relationship. Sometimes it is clear that they never met." The position of this official is based mostly on the cultural assumption that love and intimacy are *sine qua non* conditions for a real marital relationship.⁵⁰ Marriages that do not correspond to this normative ideal are thus put under special scrutiny in the context of bureaucratic procedures for family reunification visas.⁵¹ Federica Infantino found that arranged marriages, holiday flings, couples who had met in cyberspace, and those with a considerable age gap were all often subject to visa restrictions at European consulates in Morocco.⁵² As the notion of "marriage of convenience" is hard to defend in legal terms, much discretion is left to the individual officials, with the result that these bureaucratic practices are often used to filter out not only illicit but also regular migration.⁵³

These observations are pertinent in analyzing the position of the Italian consulate in Addis Ababa. The diplomatic officer cited above, for example, saw marriages between partners with a big age gap as likely to be "fake." The fact that partners had not known each other long before the marriage was also a reason to doubt that there had been a sentimental relationship before the marriage. However, as in many other non-Western societies, a sentimental relationship is not a precondition for marriage in Eritrean society.⁵⁴ It is still widely accepted that men marry younger women, and that marriages are arranged by the families of the spouses. When I told the Italian official this, she replied:

"Yes, but they come to Europe and they have to respect European regulations on marital matters. Anyway, the ones that come to apply for visa certainly are not political refugees . . . these are not like those who land in Lampedusa. These are

young girls, 17–18 years old, with fancy polished nails, that don't even know what politics is . . . it is certain that by now Eritreans know how to cheat the system. . . . There are criminal networks behind these marriages, just as they are behind the secondary movements to Sudan. These young boys and girls would not know how to find the contacts, the houses to rent in Addis, the documents to organize the journey and the marriage.”

The position of the Italian consular official well represents a mix of common misconceptions about marital regulations, criminal networks, and the way real refugees should look. She assumed that arranged marriages were against European regulations—even though at most they could be against European moral views about the right marital motivations. She also equated, or at least related, the traditional practices of arranged marriages and marriages of convenience with the operations of criminal networks. Although “business marriages” may be arranged by a middleman, this does not mean that a whole criminal network lies behind the union.⁵⁵ Finally, the attractive young girls, nicely dressed and wearing nail polish, who regularly came to apply for reunification visas, did not correspond with the official's mental image of political refugees. “These are not like the ones who arrive in Lampedusa,” she said, implying that the ones on Lampedusa were real refugees. Apparently, those in Addis Ababa were not desperate enough.

It should be noted that the interview took place only two months after the Lampedusa tragedy in October 2013, in which over 360 Eritreans died. At the time, no doubt partly owing to the pronouncements of the pope, the prevailing discourse and general atmosphere in Italy tended to see all boat people as desperate refugees seeking safety, whereas at other times, such as the period following the “Arab Spring” of 2011, the public debate was rather dominated by the perception of an invasion of boat people.⁵⁶ Although it was mostly correct to say that most girls who had escaped the country even before going to Sa'wa probably knew little of politics, it is also true that their political stance was irrelevant to their applications for family reunification visas. The Italian consular official was not responsible for assessing the legitimacy of Eritreans' refugee statuses, nor was that relevant to the procedure of family reunification. Instead, the “fake refugees” argument was used by the official as proof that these applicants did not deserve entry visas.⁵⁷

The change in Italian visa policy was a big topic of discussion among Eritreans and source of concern for many of them. As an Italian citizen, I became the target of their complaints, as shown in the remarks of Hagos and the other Eritrean refugees I met with at Sister Kudussan's place, quoted earlier in this chapter. Once, a thirty-two-year-old Eritrean refugee named Simon, who was living in Italy, insisted on talking to me about this, even when I told him I could not influence any of the decisions made by the visa officers. He had come to Addis to get married and found the situation at the Italian consulate very worrying: “How can they pretend to know which is a real marriage and which is not?” he said angrily. “For example, I met my wife on Facebook when I was in Switzerland. Her cousin was with me there and she

gave me my wife's contact info. Then I came here to marry her. This is my life! How can they see in my heart?! In Italy it is hard to find girlfriends and we cannot go back to my country to get married; that is why we came to Ethiopia."

Eritreans usually migrate in their twenties or thirties when they are still single. Thus, it is no wonder that once they have reached their destination, they also aspire to get married and form a new family. These are aspirations which men carry with them from the time they leave Eritrea, where the obligation to do national service hindered their ability to become traditional breadwinners. Almost all my informants in Italy (who were mostly men) got married during the five-year span of my research, and many of these unions were not arranged for economic purposes. Often, getting married with someone in Ethiopia and Sudan was also a strategy to pursue their own social and geographic upward mobility or to help a fellow Eritrean stuck back home or in transit.

These marriages usually involve Eritreans living in Sudan and Ethiopia for a number of reasons. First, it is especially difficult to find a partner in Europe, since there are usually far fewer young Eritrean women in Europe than men. Second, their still limited integration in Europe makes relationships with natives harder to establish. To this, we may want to add common endogamous preferences among Eritreans. Transnational marriages are a solution to all these problems.

The disappointment of Eritrean refugees was rooted in their previously held assumptions about the generosity of the Italian visa section. There had been rumors that the Italian consulate was liberal in issuing family reunification visas. As I was able to confirm through informal interviews with visa officers from the Norwegian, Swedish, and Swiss consulates in 2014, family visas were in fact harder to obtain there. Usually, only couples who had children and could prove it by a DNA test stood a chance of being reunited with their partners.⁵⁸ The less stringent procedure of the Italian consulate might have been one of the reasons behind the numerous applications received by the visa section at that time. More important, this increase may simply have corresponded to the rising number of Eritreans who sought asylum in Italy in those years and wanted to reunite with their previous partners. However, not all these unions were necessarily genuine.

FAKE MARRIAGES?

Although the approach of the Italian consulate to the issue of family reunification visas was based partly on wrong assumptions, some of my informants' claims of innocence were also hard to believe. Since 2009, I had heard of "business marriages"—that is how Eritreans refer to marriages that have been paid for—and throughout my fieldwork in Rome and Genoa, I met many Eritrean refugees who had gone back to Addis Ababa and Khartoum to get married. Some of them did it with the sincere purpose of settling down, but many were paid to do so, or did it as a favor to relatives or friends.

False marriages were common in the squats I visited in Rome. Alazar's roommate in Anagnina, Ibrahim, showed me photographs of himself with his bride in Sudan—standard shots taken in front of the city hall with the witnesses of the marriage and a few individual ones of the groom and the bride in cheap (Western or *habesha*) ceremonial dress. "Is this a real marriage?" I asked Ibrahim. "Yes, yes," he said, and Alazar exploded in a big, revealing guffaw. In September 2013, after his second asylum application had been refused in Sweden, Alazar traveled to Addis Ababa for his own wedding. When he came back he showed me the pictures, saying: "Look how elegant I was in this suit! *Konjo naw?* Beautiful, right?" This marriage was an exchange of favors among families in need. In a few months' time, the reunification documents would have been sent to Ethiopia, and Alazar's "wife" would then be able to enter Italy without being fingerprinted by the consulate and continue her journey to seek asylum in other northern European countries. Moreover, the woman Alazar married had a sister in Sweden, who married Alazar's brother in Sudan to get him a visa to enter the Schengen Zone.

As I learned from Alazar and several other informants, the prices for a bogus marriage in 2013–14 varied from 13,000 to 17,000 euros, depending on the country of residence of the spouse.⁵⁹ For example, a marriage with someone in Italy would usually cost 13,000 euros; a marriage with someone in Norway was worth 16,000 euros; but marriages with a Canadian resident usually cost around 17,000 euros. Although the prices were quite stable, they were not fixed and depended on the reciprocal arrangement or on the commission asked by the middleman organizing the deal.

Sometimes, individuals who trusted me had no difficulty confessing it; others pretended that their marriage was real until their cases had already been rejected at the consulate and they had moved on to other places. For example, Hagos, the speaker for the group of refugees at Sister Kudussan's house, told me that his marriage was fraudulent only when I met him again in Khartoum. He had paid for his marriage in Italy, and as things did not work out with the visa, he was waiting to get his money back.

Pursued by those who have been systematically excluded by all other means of regular mobility, even business marriages can be seen in some instances as collectively organized practices of resistance to a system that does not serve refugees in any meaningful way. Certainly, only refugees who have the necessary family and economic resources can afford them. Others with more limited means may fall back on cheaper but riskier smugglers' services. Still others, of course, are obliged to stay.

I also received many "marriage proposals." At times, the romantic attention I received may have been sincere, but it could also be interpreted as mirroring a specific political economy of desires and values. As a white, middle-class, relatively young woman with a European passport, I was likely to be seen as a sort of exotic object of desire. However, on other occasions, it was impossible to misinterpret the intentions behind marriage proposals. Robel, Alazar's brother, advised me,

“You are not married, right? You could earn a lot of money if you wanted to.” Other times, these proposals were simple requests for help. A young Eritrean man repeatedly asked me if I could help him to reach Europe by marrying him. Sister Kudussan also suggested that I could marry one of her relatives—as an act of Christian charity.

As the above instances illustrate, business marriages were not perceived as negative, immoral practices. Rather, they were mostly normalized as simple business transactions or exchanges of favors among families in need. Sometimes, they were even regarded as expressions of generosity and solidarity among members of the same community in crisis. Although business marriages could also involve reciprocal exploitation among refugees, they were mostly seen as a legitimate way to escape the geographic, social, and gender immobility forced onto them.

LOVE, CONVENIENCE, AND TRADITION

As has been noted, Eritrean refugees are rarely happy to settle down in Italy, but owing to the Dublin Regulation, they often get stuck there. They may then believe that by getting married to someone in Sudan or in Ethiopia, or by reuniting with wives from those countries, they will be able to pursue their initial intentions to obtain asylum in northern Europe. Since family reunification visas did not at that time require them to be fingerprinted by the Italian consulate,⁶⁰ once the reunified partner was in Italy, he/she would immediately move to another European country and apply for asylum there. The refugee, usually a man, who had applied for family reunification from Italy, would then join his partner in the chosen European destination. Thus, transnational marriages both make it possible to move on to one’s desired destination and partially fulfill kin expectations related to manhood. This is illustrated by the case of Ogbazgi, whom I met in January 2011.

On a flight from Rome to Addis in 2011, I met two friendly young Eritrean men, Ogbazgi and Kibrom, who had been living in Italy for three years. Ogbazgi was working in a greenhouse in Sicily, and Kibrom was a builder in Sampierdarena, Genoa. They were going to Addis Ababa to marry two Eritrean girls from their villages in the southern highland region. During our chats, Kibrom kept teasing Ogbazgi, saying that his future bride was almost a stranger to him. Ogbazgi denied this, but other Eritrean friends had already told me about “business marriages,” and I thought Ogbazgi’s was one of them. However, I realized later that Ogbazgi’s case was different.

Ogbazgi and Kibrom invited me to their weddings a few weeks later. The two young women were originally from the same village as the two young men. They had both crossed the border illicitly with the specific intention of marrying their childhood friends. The families had given their blessings. After a few days, Kibrom and Ogbazgi returned to Italy, and their wives applied for visas. In less than a year, the two young brides arrived in Italy and then moved to Switzerland to seek asy-

lum and settle there. Ogbazgi and Kibrom followed them there soon after. I met Ogbazgi again on his way from Genoa to Geneva in summer 2012. He told me that he was going to miss Italy, but at the same time, he was looking forward to a better life in Switzerland with his wife. He had initially had a few problems legalizing his position there, but after the birth of the first child, he was granted legal residence in Switzerland and could stay with his family. Ogbazgi and Abeba have had their second child and have more or less adapted to their new life in Switzerland.

Ogbazgi's case illustrates how family obligations, mobility strategies, convenience, and love can all play a part in transnational marriages. Ogbazgi's marriage was to some extent arranged. The two partners had not really seen each other for a long time, but as they described it to me, they had been best friends as children. Their families were from the same village and agreed that their union would suit both parties. When I spoke to Abeba, his young bride, she seemed happy with their wedding and looked forward to her new life in Europe. By marrying her, Ogbazgi was also pursuing his aspirations to move on from Italy, while forming his own family and achieving an important step into adulthood. Although unconventional from a Western perspective, their marriage cannot be considered fake or one of convenience. Traditional family expectations about marriage and adulthood, the desire to leave Eritrea, the aspiration to settle down with a trusted partner known by the family, feelings of love, care, and solidarity are all valid and even crucial ingredients of marriages across borders among Eritreans.

This brings us back to the morality underpinning border-crossing practices. My earlier account of the world of smugglers and transnational marriages illustrates the gap between legal borders and the moral boundaries of those who cross them. The lack of compliance to border regulations among my informants reveals different perceptions of fairness, rights, and responsibility, which have their point of reference in the community. Although they may involve contradictions, transnational marriages are collectively organized, socially embedded tactics to circumvent what is perceived as an unfair regime of immobility.