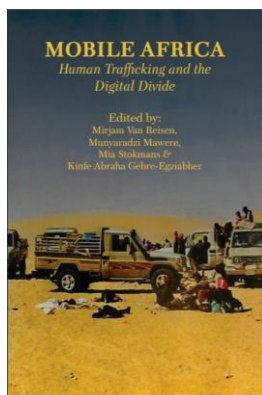


# The Voices of African Migrants in Europe: Isaka's Resilience

*Robert M. Press*

## Chapter in: Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide

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Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in  
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## Chapter 11

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# The Voices of African Migrants in Europe: Isaka's Resilience

*Robert M. Press*

### Introduction

In the ancient hilltop city of Perugia in central Italy, the locals admit, almost with pride, that they are ‘*chiuso*’, or closed-minded to foreigners – which can mean anyone from the next city, and definitely someone from distant Africa. However, a chance encounter, a smile, a nod, a greeting, can dissolve this invisible barrier in an instant. Such an encounter happened one summer evening in 2018 in the main plaza of the city when an elderly Italian man and a young African migrant<sup>1</sup> with a spiked hairstyle found themselves sitting silently next to each other on a stone

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*Although migration is a hot topic at the moment, refugees and migrants' voices and stories from their own perspective are hardly told. This chapter shares the stories of refugees and migrants and the hardships they have suffered told in interviews with the author. This chapter makes the point that refugees are not numbers. Like Isaka, every refugee has a name. Each person has a story: experiences, courage, loss, pain, resilience and dreams. Their presence among us bids us to listen to their voices.*

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bench outside a museum. To capture the contrast between them, I asked if they would lean their heads toward each other for a photo. They happily obliged then fell into conversation in Italian, which the African migrant had learnt. Soon an Italian woman who had been

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<sup>1</sup> “Migrants includes people moving across international borders for any reason, including economic or educational pursuits, family unification, or flight from conflict, which can apply to refugees and asylum seekers” (Connor, 2018a).

sitting on the other side of the migrant, and another Italian man, joined in with smiles all around.

In a Europe that needs migrants to fill gaps in the workforce left by an aging population, public scepticism and outright racist sentiment towards Africans (and other migrants) is being used by nationalist politicians to win votes.<sup>2</sup> Plaza encounters, such as the one above, between Italians and migrants may be unique, but what is not unique, according to European polls, is that people who have actually met a migrant are much more welcoming than those who have not. “Proximity to immigrants correlates with pro-migrant sentiment, rather than the opposite” (The Economist, 2018). Getting to know more about migrants has the potential to affect public views of them – and possibly even the views of policymakers.

In that spirit, this chapter introduces some recent African migrants in Europe today. Italy is a prime initial destination, given its geographic location and relationship with North Africa, the main departure point. Based on personal, private interviews conducted by the author, this chapter introduces some African migrants. In their own words, they share their hopes and dreams, their fears and uncertainties, and their memories of the dangerous journey across the Sahara, through Libya, where torture and modern-day slavery are common, and across the Mediterranean Sea, where tens of thousands have drowned.

In theoretical terms, there is much to learn about migrants from closely examining their journeys, instead of the more traditional method of examining the origin and destination of migration. This study also places their voices against a backdrop of the failure of

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the political rhetoric about a migrant ‘crisis’, the European Social Survey – “one of the most high-quality sources of attitudinal data – asked citizens in 15 countries in 2014 and 2016 about their attitudes to immigration and found that during this period nine countries had become more favourable, four did not change and only two – Austria and Poland – became more negative” (Dennison & Geddes, 2017). Yet by 2018, even some communities originally favourable toward migrants as a way to help their economy have felt the political pressure against migration (Martins, 2018). The immigration of Africans to Italy and beyond to other European countries continues, although it is about 80% less than in 2017 when Italy began helping Libya to capture would-be asylum seekers and send them back to Libya (Torelli, 2017).

origin, transit, and receiving states to provide the kind of human rights and safety in a post-colonial society that, as Hannah Arendt (1973) points out, everyone deserves. This chapter is based on more than 60 face-to-face interviews with African migrants, mostly in Italy, some in France, between 2014 and 2018. The interviews give deeper insight into the migrants' experiences than is available in some studies on contemporary African migration to Europe, in which the voices of the migrants themselves are lost in theoretical arguments and data analysis. By listening properly to migrants, it is possible to better understand their pain, their resilience, their losses – and perhaps most of all – their hopes and dreams. One of these migrants is Isaka.

### **Isaka's story**

Isaka is from Guinea. His story is an example of the resilience, courage, and strategic thinking that helps Africans migrants to survive the journey to Europe. In Perugia, Italy, a major reception centre for African migrants, Isaka has agreed to tell his story. He wears a polo t-shirt and black jeans, holding his cell phone as we talk in private in the courtyard of a former church.

#### ***Deciding to leave Guinea***

“There was [political] fighting; they killed some people in my family; my father was killed” (Isaka, Guinean, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 24 May 2016).<sup>3</sup> Like hundreds of thousands of Africans before him, Isaka set out on a long and dangerous journey that eventually took him through Libya, the main transit state for African migrants to Europe, a lawless land where migrants are frequently sold as slaves (CNN, 2017) and sometimes tortured for ransom. Isaka crossed the Mediterranean Sea in an overcrowded boat to Italy.

“I came [to Europe] to survive. I came to get protection”, he explained. Despite lack of work and still waiting for official permission to stay, he said, “Italy is good”, compared to his native state and Libya. However, African migrants arriving in Italy since

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<sup>3</sup> To protect the identity of the migrants interviewed for this study, the author has used aliases chosen by the migrants or assigned by the author.

2017 have experienced a third state failure: that of Italy. Italy has begun a European Union-supported policy of helping Libya return would-be-asylum seekers to Libyan prisons and possible torture and sale as slaves (BBC News, 2012).

### ***Prisons in Libya***

“The children could take a stone and throw it (at you). We were in a big compound. There was no work.” However, Isaka was hopeful: “I was going to find work”. He found it, but only for a week, on a construction site:

*[Then] they put us in prison in southern Libya. Meals consisted of bread in the morning and couscous at midday. One of my ‘brothers’ [fellow countrymen] heard I was in prison. If you don’t have any relationship, it’s hard for a black. He put me on a bus to a city near Tripoli. I was working there. The place was so nice for me. (Isaka, Guinean, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 24 May 2016)*

Isaka worked for three months building houses; then he was caught by the military:

*They took me to another prison. I was there about two months. I was suffering. There was no good food... They beat us with a big stick. They made us run up a hill carrying a big stone in each hand. (Isaka, Guinean, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 24 May 2016)*

Migrants learn to network along the journey. Once again, his friend helped get him out of prison by contacting the same Libyan who had helped free him from prison before. Isaka’s account of the helpfulness of some Libyans cropped up in numerous interviews, in stark contrast to the militia, gangs, and police who imprison Africans, often demanding ransom for their release. Motives for helping individual Africans may include sympathy, but are almost certainly economic as well. Altogether, he was in prison three times in Libya, ranging from about a month to more than six months. Conditions each time were deplorable: “There was no space. You can never lay down straight.” With his hands, he indicated a small area into which



many people were shoved “like animals. They punch you” (Isaka, Guinean, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 24 May 2016).

### ***Departure***

In Tripoli, all the money he had earned working was stolen when a gang came and started shooting, searching everywhere in the compound. One evening around 8 pm, his ‘boss man’ put him on a truck, covering him with a blanket to avoid detection, presumably by police or Libyan militia, and took him to the seaside. People were boarding a boat. “He had a gun and said if you don’t go I will shoot you.” Speculation among African migrants is that smugglers do not want people to stay in Libya and discourage others from leaving. They describe the dangerous overcrowding of boats. Smuggling is a major business, and the line between trafficking and smuggling is blurred.

### ***Across the Mediterranean to Italy***

His rubber raft with some 150 people left the Libyan shore around 9 pm. It was 29 January 2016. Waves are higher in the winter, making such craft even more vulnerable to capsizing. “I was so afraid”, Isaka said. Like many of African migrants, Isaka does not know how to swim. By eight the next morning, they were spotted by a big ship and were rescued and taken to the Italian island of Lampedusa. After three days there in a closed camp, he was transferred to an open camp in Sicily for a week, then travelled by ferry and bus to Perugia where he joined the Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (Italian Cultural Recreational Association, ARCI) migrant reception programme, which provides temporary housing for migrants while they are waiting for their asylum case to be decided, a stipend for food, and Italian lessons two hours a day. Isaka lived with a Malian, Gambian and two other migrants from Guinea. “Everybody cooks their own rice,” he said. Asked what he eats, he laughs: “couscous”, the food of his prison time in Libya.

### **Migration**

#### ***A problem for senders, receivers and the migrants themselves***

Contemporary African migration to Europe represents a problem for the migrants and Europe, as well as for the sending and transit states.

For the migrants, the problem is obvious: they suffered at home and along the routes to Europe. Once in Europe, they continue to suffer from isolation – although they often make new friends among migrants and with locals in the ‘host’ country. They also have problems integrating in the host country. As the interviews show, migrants are often lonely and disoriented, adrift in a new culture among people who may not want them there. The position taken in this chapter to explain these issues is primarily that of the migrants.

For Europe, the problem is how to receive and effectively use the migrants to fill the gap in the labour force left by an aging population (in addition to calming the political anti-migrant rhetoric that makes reception and integration difficult). For the sending states in Africa, the problem is how to slow the exodus of willing workers by curbing abuses and corruption. For the key transit state of Libya, the challenge is to regain political stability and curb human rights abuses.

### ***In search of dignity and safety***

In practical terms, African migrants in Europe, or still trying to get to Europe, are seeking the safety, freedom and dignity that their origin, transit, and even receiving states have failed to provide. Their decision to migrate usually amounts to an unarticulated protest against this lack of protection of their human rights, as promised in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. For example, in Libya, a major transit state for those seeking to reach Europe, migrants experience a range of abuses by Libyans and Sub-Saharan Africans engaged in trafficking and smuggling. Italy and other receiving states in Europe, which have both welcomed migrants and tried to deny migrants entry, are “complicit” in sending would-be asylum seekers back to Libya, where they face possible torture and slavery (Amnesty International, 2017). As reported in the European Union (EU) Observer, United Nations (UN) Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein is quoted as saying that: “forcing rescued people at sea to return to Libya for detention was inhuman. ‘The suffering of migrants detained in Libya is an outrage to the conscience of humanity’” (Nielsen, 2017). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi,

called the slavery and other abuses in Libya an “abomination” (United Nations, 2017).

According to a Pew Research poll conducted in 2017, “One-in-five or more adults in Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa say they plan to move to another country in the next five years if they have the means and the opportunity” (Connor, 2018b). Although political violence remains the leading cause of migration in Africa, the fact that the poll includes Senegal, Ghana and Tanzania, countries without major political violence, indicates that migrants move for reasons other than national security. As indicated in the interviews, personal security may be an issue even in countries that are politically stable.

### ***State failure***

The scholarly literature on African states and failed states is immense.<sup>4</sup> Often it includes comparisons with Western states and frequently cites Weber’s definition of a state, which focuses on the control of territory (Weber, 1919).<sup>5</sup> Khadiagala (1995, p. 33), notes that: “Since Weber, however, scholars have also conceded the inadequacy of mere territorial expansion, hence the importance of legitimacy, the normative basis for the exercise of authority”. Herbst (2000) points out that geographical differences, including greater concentrations of people in Europe after the 14<sup>th</sup> Century than in Africa due to the environment, help explain why Weber’s definition cannot be applied automatically to African states. “[T]he European experience does not provide a template for state-making in other regions of the world” (Herbst, 2000, p. 22). In the West African savannah, for example, “Under population was the chief obstacle to state formation” (Ilfiffe, 1995, p. 70). Mamdani wrestled with the legacy of colonialism on the African state, arriving at a discouraging point:

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<sup>4</sup> Examples include Zartman (1995); Khadiagala (1995); Akokopari (1998); Whitman (2000), whose book includes chapters listed separately in the references by Du Pisani (2000), Schoeman (2000), and Chokuwenga (2000); Englebert & Tull (2008); Castles (2009); and Herbst (1996/1997; 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Weber defines a state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1919; 1947, p. 78).

*No nationalist government was content to reproduce the colonial legacy uncritically. Each sought to reform the bifurcated state that institutionally crystalized a state-enforced separation of the rural from the urban and one of ethnicity from another. However, in doing so each reproduced a part of the legacy, thereby creating its own variant of despotism.* (Mamdani, 1996, p. 8)

If one agrees that the Western model of a state was never the model for African states, what then is the model when Western governments try to help restore what Zartman (1995) describes as ‘collapsed’ states, including post-conflict states?<sup>6</sup> Some scholars argue that as Africa never had the Western version of a state, when an African state collapses or fails, there is no Western model to follow in rebuilding it. “Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming that most collapsed states at no point in the postcolonial era remotely resembled the ideal type of the modern polity” (Englebert & Tull, 2008, p. 111). These authors then point out that most Western efforts at reconstruction of ‘failed’ states aim at re-establishing the “monopoly over coercion” (Englebert & Tull, 2008, p. 112), similar to Weber’s definition of a state. So even as debates and comparisons of Western versus African states continue, the underbelly of statehood implies a concentration of power, whether legitimate or not, which opens the door to human rights abuses.

Regarding the delicate balance between state capacity and human rights, Englehart (2009, p. 163) notes that: “The more common problem is states that cannot effectively protect human rights. We must take state failure seriously when thinking about the causes of – and remedies for – human rights abuse”. He adds:

*The analysis above suggests that states' protective role outweighs tendencies to violate human rights. On balance, human rights abuse tends to happen in relatively low-capacity states. In general, the better the state apparatus, the safer its citizens will be from the depredations of non-state actors and rogue government officials.* (Englehart, 2009, p. 177)

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<sup>6</sup> Zartman describes a collapsed state as one “where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new” (Zartman, 1995, p. 1).

His argument overlooks the problem that sometimes the state is the violator. The problem continues to be the relationship between the state and human rights. Englehart's study (2009), like many studies on failed states and responses, does not link human rights with migration, and his focus is not Africa. Although Castles (2009) does focus on Africa and migration through the window of development, he makes only one mention of human rights. Castles questions the idea that "international migration (especially from South to North) is a *bad thing that ought to be stopped*" (Castles, 2009, p. 2; emphasis in original). Castles argues that development aid to Africa is likely to increase migration – a point that is now widely accepted by migration scholars, but is not acknowledged by European political leaders – "because [the] increased economic resources and improved communications that development brings make it easier for people to seek opportunities elsewhere" (Castles, 2009, p. 2).

### ***Limitations of the theory of push and pull***

The push-pull theory of migration relies on assumptions of perfect knowledge (i.e., rational choice) and usually focuses on a linear route between point of origin and country of arrival. However, African migration does not fit this model. Hence, this study argues that traditional push-pull theories simply do not apply to the overall phenomena of contemporary African migration to Europe via the Sahara, Libya, and the treacherous Mediterranean Sea.

It is true that migrants are encouraged to leave their home countries, at least in part, because of the failure of their state to provide a decent and safe living environment. And they are drawn toward Europe by the hope of a better life. But the full picture is more complex. The interviews for this study show that their migrations are far from linear, often involving multiple trajectories. Their decisions are based on social networks, not formed in advance, but on the journey, often for reasons of survival. While the push-pull theory provides an important starting point for such studies, much is left out. "Individual feelings and emotions, the angst that accompanies difficult decisions about whether or not to leave one's home, family and friends, and the ways

in which these attitudes and expectations have been shaped over time by culture, communities and communication, are generally overlooked” (O’Reilly, 2015).

“They [the journeys] may consist of multiple journeys going in various directions. As such, they question the linear logics of migration, having its foundation in push pull models of migration theory” (Schapendonk, Van Liempt, Schwarz & Steel, 2018). Furthermore, the African migrants interviewed for this study, for the most part, did not sit down calmly and rationally “weigh up the costs and benefits of various options before making their decisions”, as the push-pull theorists posit (O’Reilly, 2015). Some were lured into trafficking, some left rapidly, fleeing danger, most failed to calculate their potential earnings in Europe or consider the obstacles to getting work as a migrant, and most also failed to realise how dangerous the journey would be.

### **Migrant journeys: Filling a gap in migration studies**

There is a small, but growing, amount of literature that focuses on what can be learnt about migrants on their journeys. The current study is located not in migration during normal times, but looks at migration in moments of crisis, specifically focusing on the journeys which migrants are making from Africa to Europe. Benezet and Zetter (2014) are among the migration scholars calling for more attention to be paid to migrants’ journeys. “The journeys of migrants have generally been overlooked as an important study object”, notes Schapendonk (2011, p. 233). Brachet also notes the lack of attention to the journeys: “Nowadays, the majority of the research work on international migration is carried out in two categories of specific points along the route: ‘departure’ places and ‘arrival’ places” (2012, p. 95). Benezet and Zetter (2014, p. 301) point out that this “lacuna of research exists in spite of the fact that the journey is a powerful notion in the human psyche”. “The first and most important argument is that the journey is a profoundly formative and transformative experience and a ‘lens’ on the newcomers’ social condition” (Benezet & Zetter, 2014, p. 302). They conclude: “We can

better understand how the journey painfully enriches individuals and communities and enhances their resilience and capacity for surviving” (Benezer & Zetter, 2014, p. 314). Mainwaring and Brigden emphasise the necessary adaptability of migrants during their journeys and point out that: “Determining the beginning of a journey becomes even more complicated when migrants change their destinations midstream, adjusting to unforeseeable events encountered en route” (2016, p. 245).

As significant as the study of migrants’ journeys is for determining how this shapes migrants, this study goes a step further. The focus is on how the African migrants themselves recall their journeys, what they are willing or reluctant to comment on, how they see their own story and why they came to Europe.

### **Research objectives**

The main research question that this chapter seeks to answer is: *What are the personal stories of each refugee: how can we understand their personal stories as unique experiences? Now that the refugees are in Europe, how do African migrants look back on their journeys; how do they explain their story? What are their dreams of the future?* Stories can offer the parameters of their experience, but the interviews with migrants who have arrived in Europe offer a window into how they see their journeys in terms of their strategic skills, negotiating abilities, fears, ability to survive and resilience. These face-to-face interviews by the author provide raw, unpackaged portraits that allow one to see migrants’ experiences as they see them, to hear what they recall, and infer from their silences what they do not want to recall. The research highlights some of the contradictions that exist in the layers of revealed reality.

The main goal of this study is to provide insight into the nature, character, skills and dreams of African migrants with the hope that this information may influence an often sceptical public and inform policymakers. The European public may or may not be swayed by knowing more about African migrants, but at least the information, contrary to the images of migrants as hapless and helpless new arrivals

rescued at sea, can offer a different and more realistic portrait. Fear of the ‘other’ is always lessened when the mystery is reduced by facts about who they are. Interviews can help bridge the gap between myth and reality.

Policymakers, on the other hand, are different. There the gap may be more between political ambition and the reality of who migrants are. Migrants make an easy scapegoat for economic woes, as seen in the United States and Europe. No additional information is likely to sway policymakers who consciously engage in the politics of fear. However, their impact may be lessened if an informed public comes to understand migrants better.

### **Research methodology**

*We were three days on top of the sea. We saw so many things. We saw a big ship. I don't know which country it was [from]. They put us in the big ship. ...If not for the rescue at sea, I'd be a dead person. ...The water can change your brain. It's in the hand of God. I'd like to stay here [Italy]* (Diego, Nigerian, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, May 2016)

The journey of migrants “leaves physical, emotional and psychological traces on its survivors”; therefore, “researching and writing about migrant journeys requires reflexivity, humility and caution” (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 251). Benezet and Zetter (2014, p. 313) argue that narratives are “the most obvious and powerful tool in researching journeys,” adding, however, that they are “time consuming [...] pose challenges for interpretation, [and require] great sensitivity” (Benezet & Zetter, p. 314.). Berriane and De Haas (2012, pp. 2–3), in a study of methodologies of African migration research, note that “many methodological challenges face researchers of African migration”, including that “the often vulnerable position of migrants within Africa makes it difficult to approach and interview migrants”.

Winning migrants’ confidence for interviews was not easy and was done one-by-one. It often took a lot of time just being around them



at reception centres and camps. In some cases, confidence came quickly; in others, it was slow to come or did not come at all. The researcher was more hesitant to ask detailed questions during the first summer (2014) than was necessary, as some migrants welcomed the opportunity to talk. However, others were uneasy with detailed questions. One question the researcher avoided until the second and third summers was about whether the migrant had received permission to stay. Once broached, however, many migrants responded readily.

The author conducted 60 interviews, mostly in English or French, between 2014 and 2018.<sup>7</sup> Notes were handwritten and transcribed by the author. A tape recorder was rarely used, and then only with the migrant's verbal permission. The interviews were transcribed and analysed. In order to protect the identity of the migrants, no real names are used in this chapter.<sup>8</sup>

This study uses grounded theory to develop notions about African migrants based on a back-and-forth analysis of the interviews as they progressed and reflections on their significance. The author began the interviews in Perugia, Italy, the site of a major reception centre for migrants. Other interviews in Italy were conducted in Rome, Naples, Caserta, and Foggia. In addition, the author spent three days in 2016 with migrants in a camp on the outskirts of Calais, France.

The semi-structured interview method allowed for deviations from planned questions introduced by the migrants. What the author initially interpreted as mistrust when discussing motives for flight was later found to be reluctance on the part of the migrants to recall the trauma of their journeys. Many had faced death in Libya or at sea. The author had no way of verifying their accounts of why they had

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<sup>7</sup> The author speaks conversational French, but is not fluent, so some details no doubt were not understood. When something was not clear, however, the author asked the migrant to repeat the statement. In the few cases where the migrant spoke Arabic or an Ethiopian dialect, other migrants were used to translate.

<sup>8</sup> This research methodology was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern Mississippi.

fled. What most migrants had in common was that they were escaping from places that lacked a culture of human rights. Some migrants, once they were comfortable granting an interview, candidly identified themselves as what is commonly called ‘economic migrants’: they came to Europe looking for a better life, work and a way to get ahead, something they had not found at home. Some had come with the hope of playing for a professional sports team in Europe. Others told of political reasons for escaping their home country, which, if accurate, would make them good candidates for asylum status. These included war, terrorism or religious threats, human rights abuses, government repression, or threats due to a family member being in the political opposition. Some cited corruption that affected them personally. The study involved spending time with migrants at the reception centres and camps, on visits to their apartment, and just hanging around and walking.

## **Results**

Having arrived in Italy or France and having survived the dangerous crossing of the Sahara, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea, how do African migrants look back on their journeys; how do they remember them; how do they narrate their pain, resilience, and hopes? In individual interviews in informal settings where they could speak privately and personally, migrants shared what they wanted to share. Some avoided the most painful parts; others shared these in what seemed to be part of the healing process. Few volunteered their dreams, but when asked responded with a wide range of hopes for the future – hopes of safety, of usefulness, and of using their skills. What emerged from the interviews was an intimate glimpse into their character, strength, fears, resentments and determination to be someone, to be free, safe, and independent. Each person interviewed had suffered a lot; each was unique; most were discouraged – but none had lost hope.

### ***Down, but not out***

In a small, one-room apartment on a narrow street in the historic district of Perugia, Perry, a Nigerian from Edo State, welcomed me and agreed to tell his story of hardship and unbroken faith in the

future. “I’m very sick; I have pain in my tummy”, he said. Perry was suffering from abdominal pains, which he suggested traced back to a heavy labour job in Benin. He is a high school dropout and never knew his father. After his mother died, his grandmother took care of him. Eventually, he found a job as a driver for six years. He says that Nigeria’s failure to curb corruption and to provide a safe environment led him to flee his country in 2015.

*I left for the corruption; I was a truck driver. It was good. But the corruption was too much. It affected me. They can just attack you, beat you up, take your phone. That’s the reason I left the country.* (Perry, Nigerian, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, Italy, 8 June 2016)<sup>9</sup>

Originally, Perry had no plan to go to Europe. Like many others he had heard that Libya offered jobs to black Africans, as it had historically under Muammar Gaddafi until he was assassinated in 2011. Since then, Libya has been largely lawless with rival factions and widespread abuse of African and other migrants (Human Rights Watch, 2018). To get to Libya, like countless thousands of others, he passed through the Sahara desert. It took five days by truck. “It was very bad; very complicated. You have no food. People were dying on the road; there were human beings on the ground.” People fall off the speeding, overcrowded pickup trucks and often are left to perish. Things got worse once in Libya. In Sabha, in southern Libya, a lawless city in a lawless state, a mafia-style militia imprisoned him. With echoes of post-Civil War in the former US Confederacy, when blacks were jailed on spurious charges then leased out for harsh labour, Perry was leased out to work for Libyans. His job: help build cement block houses. His boss later took him to Libya’s capital, Tripoli, where he found paid work at a car wash. It was there that he heard that many Africans were crossing the ‘river’, which he discovered was the

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<sup>9</sup> He said that upon arrival in Italy in December 2015 he had received a deportation notice from the police before he had a chance to apply for asylum. If true, this violates Italy’s stated policy of granting a hearing to those who apply for asylum. He ignored the order to leave and later applied for asylum. At the time of the interview, he was still waiting for permission to stay in Italy. Attempts to reach him in 2018 were unsuccessful, although an Italian social worker said he was still in Italy.

Mediterranean Sea. Driven by his basic dream of finding safe employment and a decent life, he decided to cross. “I hadn’t heard about people dying. The water got inside the boat. People were crying. Water was coming in. They said we may die.” He was fortunate, they were rescued by an Italian ship and taken to the Italian island of Lampedusa and later to the mainland. When asked if he was discouraged about his future after all that, he said: “I’m confident”.

### ***Minors adrift***

At an age when they should be going to school, playing sports, and maybe falling in love, thousands of African youth have joined the adults migrating to Europe, enduring the same pain, shock, and bewilderment of confinement and near death along the way (The Guardian, 2016). Amelie, aged 18 at the time of the interview, is from Cameroon. She was trafficked to the Central African Republic.

*I didn't know my mother; I was with my father. He had an accident and died when I was six. I lived with a lady. It was not easy with her. I met a Nigerian woman in Douala [Cameroon] who helped pay for my schooling and later took me to the Central African Republic on the promise of paid employment. It was contrary to what she said. Some men paid [for me]; they took off my clothes. I was obliged [to have sex]. I can't think about it, I couldn't live locked in. (Amelie, Cameroonian, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 25 May 2016)*

She asked to continue the conversation later. On 6 July 2016, she agreed to another brief interview. She had come through Algeria then Libya. She spoke of being ‘tortured’ in prison.

*I didn't know where we were. I had problems in Cameroon; that's why I left. A man, the 'Chef du village' wanted to marry me. He already had a wife. I refused. He was too old, in his 30s. When someone is not agreeable with him, it is a problem. I wanted a new life. The new life is protection. (Amelie, Cameroonian, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 6 July 2016)*

Tolessa looked back on his journey to Italy from Ethiopia with horror and shock; but he looks towards the future with hope and optimism. When interviewed, he was staying in a makeshift shelter in an alley in

Rome, amid cardboard boxes, piles of clothing, and blankets. Several minors, male and female, mixed with the adult refugees. “The Ethiopian government killed a lot of Oromo”, said Tolessa, “I left at 15 [years of age]”. From Sudan, he rode 11 days in a big truck. Eight people died along the way. They had no water. In Libya, where he lived in a shipping container, it was worse. “Every day they kick you.” He was in Libya for five months.

*They hate black people. I hated my life in Libya. I lost my mind. [He holds his hands to his head.] They beat you. There were a lot of Oromo people. I was the ‘baby’. They [the Oromo] gave me everything.* (Tolessa, Ethiopian, interview, face-to-face, Rome, 16 July 2016)

Like many migrants, he was obliged to form new networks on his journey, always wary of strangers, but needing help and turning to fellow Oromo. Others recounted, however, how Africans from their own country, sometimes their own region, betrayed them and sold them to Libyans for a profit. Tolessa recounted his experience crossing the Mediterranean Sea. He shakes his head slightly: “It is so bad. Oh my God. A lot of people said: ‘I’m dying’”. There were 400 people on his boat. They had spent only one day on the beach and were launched that evening. Others recounted long stays near the beach with little to eat; one migrant called it the ‘slimming’ camp to make people thinner and lighter so more people could be packed into a raft or boat. Tolessa was at sea two days before being rescued by an Italian ship, probably the Navy. After a month on the island of Sardinia, he took a boat to Rome.

In the same alley camp in Rome, Abdul, 17-years of age, from Sudan, wearing a blue t-shirt and black cap, recalled that in Libya “people took us in handcuffs. Some people were shot; they wanted money. They forced us to call our family [to demand ransom]”. Describing his Mediterranean Sea crossing, he calculated the number who had died: of 150, only 36 survived. “There was a fire in the ship. All people on the ship were black,” he said. He drew a diagram of the crowded ship, which may have been a raft, which are vulnerable to tipping over in the waves. “Some were swimming; some don’t know how to

swim.” Another boat eventually rescued the survivors, apparently after they had been in the water for some time (Abdul, Sudanese, interview, face-to-face, Rome, 16 July 2016).<sup>10</sup>

### ***‘Don’t destroy my hope’***

My taxi driver to a sprawling migrant camp known as ‘the Jungle’, just outside the French resort town of Calais, complains that sensational reporting in the English press of a heavy police presence and running battles with refugees trying to board trucks for illegal passage across the channel has killed English tourism in the area. A military officer at the unfenced entry smiles as I greet him in French and walk into the sprawling camp, which has at least 7,000 migrants from various parts of Africa and the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> The main ‘street’ of dirt and sand leads past wooden-framed food kiosks enclosed mostly with plastic sheeting. Most migrants are still in their tents. In a makeshift collection of wood and cardboard structures known as ‘Jungle Books’, the ‘School of English’ is empty. A sign near a model of the Statue of Liberty reads, ‘Send the homeless, tempest to me’. On a table, someone has written ‘A difficulty in every opportunity’ and ‘Don’t give up’. On a wall is another sign: ‘Don’t destroy my hope please’.

The hope of many in this camp is to get across the English Channel (via the ‘Chunnel’ railroad line) to the United Kingdom, where some have relatives from earlier migrations. They hope for education, jobs, freedom and safety, in a country where many of the migrants can use their English. The United Kingdom refused to accept more than a few hundred of the unaccompanied children from the camp and made it practically impossible for anyone to apply for asylum while in France (Bulman, 2017).

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<sup>10</sup> Abdul is from the Darfur region of Sudan, which is the site of genocidal killings by pro-government militia.

<sup>11</sup> The camp was destroyed in late 2016 by the French government, which dispersed migrants countrywide (The Guardian, 2016).

A few, in desperation, break into trucks in an attempt to enter the United Kingdom covertly.<sup>12</sup> Some, including Haro, from Sudan, decided to apply for asylum to stay in France: “I just want to be free in my life. I want to live in France. I want to stay here”. His dream? “I’d like to be safe, go to school (secondary), then university. Help the people. Everybody needs someone to help them,” he said in a loud voice (Haro, Sudanese, interview, face-to-face, Calais, 12 July 2016).

### ***Contradictions and hidden layers of reality***

Later that morning, deep in the camp, I again meet with a group of young Sudanese migrants clustered around a small, dirt common area between their several tents, where they cook and eat their meals, sharing food provided by British and French volunteer groups. The previous day, I had instinctively refrained from asking for interviews. Today, the second day, having shared a couple of meals and hung out with the migrants, several Sudanese agreed to sit for interviews individually in the relative privacy of their tents.

Toto, one of the Sudanese migrants in the camp, agrees to an interview. His candidness opens a window to the inner world that African migrants feel, but rarely reveal. In a 45-minute interview in a stand up tent, empty except for another sleeping Sudanese migrant, he tells his story of strength, resilience – and vulnerability and loneliness. A member of the anti-government Sudanese Liberation Movement, his village had been destroyed two years earlier by government-supported militia. His parents fled to the mountains where he later found them. “I got the idea it is easy to go to Europe, the land of tolerance. They [European countries] will give you your rights.” Therefore, Toto, who had taken some university classes studying broadcasting, fled to Libya, where he worked nine months as a house servant: “It was the most horrible time. They [Libyans] are primitive: they deal with us like an animal. They shout at your face”.

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<sup>12</sup> One man somehow managed to walk the 26 miles to the United Kingdom in the narrow space between wall and tracks, avoiding being sucked under the wheels by speeding trains. Once in the United Kingdom he was allowed to apply for asylum.

After nine months, he escaped: “I opened the door and said I was going to the market”.

After surviving a typically harrowing five hours on an over-crowded rubber raft on the Mediterranean Sea before his rescue, he was forced by officials in Sicily to be fingerprinted. Instead of staying in Italy until his asylum case could be heard, he headed north. On his fifth attempt to avoid French border guards (each time he was sent back to Italy) he managed to elude them and ended up in the Calais camp. Suddenly, he paused his narrative – and cried. “My wife...is she alive?” He was married only two months before he decided to run away. We are both silent for a few moments. No words seem appropriate (Toto, Sudanese, interview, face-to-face, Calais, 13 July 2016).

In interviews with African migrants over the years, I have discovered several layers of reality:<sup>13</sup>

**Layer 1: Uncertainty, distrust.** The first layer when meeting a researcher was caution and uncertainty and sometimes plain distrust. Who is this person who wants information from me: an undercover immigration official?

**Layer 2: Avoidance of painful memories.** Once over the first barrier or layer, there is often a second layer: avoidance of painful details of the torture and other mistreatment experienced in Libya and on the migration journey, and the loneliness and fear of being on one’s own, forced to form new and uncertain networks in order to survive. Some would look away, one waved his hand slowly in front of his face, others made general comments and went no further. Gradually some migrants opened up, perhaps as they got to know me or as I got bolder.

**Layer 3: Candidness.** Another layer is candidness. Once confidence in the interviewer was established, migrants were often willing to share painful details of their dangerous crossing

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<sup>13</sup> This section does not claim to be a professional psychological explanation. It is simply what this researcher observed first-hand over several summers of interviews with African migrants.



of the Sahara desert, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea, recalling their sheer terror of knowing that they could die at any moment.

**Layer 4: Pretence.** Typically, African migrants' Facebook pages create a façade that is an image of success: photos of themselves in front of fancy cars and hotels, well dressed and with friends.<sup>14</sup> It is not a lie, but only part of the truth; it is their public image. These images are of real people, real places, but they do not tell the real story of their struggle. Migrants generally struggle to get permission to stay, to find work, and to survive. Most live in poverty, ranging from life in dirty, abandoned houses with no power or running water, to more comfortable living on reception programme stipends that provided only for the purchase of bare minimum necessities.

**Layer 5: Loneliness and vulnerability.** The final layer (and there may be others that I never reached) is loneliness and vulnerability. Toto revealed this layer. Far from home, family, the security of loved ones, having no place of their own, no familiar network of friends they can rely on during their journeys, African migrants who were vulnerable on their journeys are also vulnerable in Europe. They are outsiders, observers of a society in which many feel unwelcome.

A year earlier, I had seen that same loneliness and vulnerability that Toto expressed in the sad expression of Lamin, an African migrant from the Gambia. We met in a farm labour camp of wooden-framed cardboard 'houses' and shops near Foggia, in southern Italy. As the African migrants returned from the fields, with dark dirt stains on their pants and shoes, I am struck by the slowness of their gait and what appears to be a slight stoop as they walk toward their plastic bound houses, ready for an outdoor shower. Some of the young migrant workers explain that their back aches, their legs are sore and they are just plain tired. 'Exhausted' might be a better term, given the wilting heat that recently left a 47 year-old African farm labourer migrant dead.

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<sup>14</sup> The author is Facebook friends with numerous African migrants.

In the late afternoon shade of trees at the edge of the camp, Lamin agrees to a photo on the condition of not using his name. Migrants refused to be photographed near the slum-like shacks of the camp to avoid the off chance that someone back home might see them living in such conditions. In person, and in the photo, Lamin looked deeply sad, and reminisced about his family back home: “I saw people coming back from Europe with fine clothes and things”. He was not doing well in the Gambia, and left during a period of political repression. He decided to head to Libya where he had heard there were jobs, but continued on to Italy. Once in Italy, he was unable to find steady work. He had just finished a full day of tomato picking and was aching: “My back hurts, my legs, my arms. This is hard work”. He repeats the phrase about hard work several times. He talks of his children back home. Lamin’s dreams of a better life to help his family have faded. He complains that he is trapped: undocumented, with little formal education (he is vague, but apparently started secondary school). He speaks only a little Italian. “If I could only find a good job”, he says (Lamin, Gambian, interview, face-to-face, Foggia, 29 July 2015).

In the same migrant farm camp, Ali, from Niger, shows me photos of himself on his cell phone. “I’ve changed”, he said, “My friends when they came to the camp said they barely recognized me”. The photos show a slightly heavier version of himself, but, more importantly, dressed in fancy clothes. He had some kind of job working in a restaurant. Another photo shows him in sunglasses and dressed well. Tonight he is wearing an ordinary t-shirt. The one he wore earlier this afternoon had written on it in English ‘No pain, no gain’ (Ali, from Niger, interview, face-to-face, Foggia, 29 July 2015).

### ***Dreams of helping themselves – and others***

A typical theme among migrants interviewed was the desire to find a way to help their family at home, and sometimes others, in the future. Perhaps it was the hardships they survived that made them think of being generous. Sometimes the goal was political. In the migrant camp outside Calais, Adam, a former member of the rebel Sudanese Liberation Movement, explains that he wants to help the Sudanese

people “change the regime because it is a dictatorship”. On 26 April 2004, he said, the government’s militia came to his village in Sudan on horses, killing his brother and sister. His parents fled and were still living in a refugee camp (Adam, Sudanese, interview, face-to-face, Calais, 12 July 2016).

Ivie, from Nigeria, said, “I want to become a nurse; I want to save lives. I just pray my dream comes true”. As we sit in a former church courtyard in Perugia, Ivie is wearing black jeans and a pink sweatshirt. She sets her small backpack down on a stone ledge. After only a few minutes, she says, “I had no one” (referring to when she was in Nigeria). She starts to cry and pulls a handkerchief from her pack (Ivie, Nigeria, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 25 May 2016).

Tolessa, the Ethiopian teenager (then 16) interviewed in the alley camp in Rome, had not lost his hope for the future. He said his fellow Oromo had suffered in Ethiopia. Then in a multi-goal narrative about his plans, he said: “I have a lot of dreams. My wish is English. God willing I will go to Paris. I like Paris. I like football. My dream is playing in the UK. I want to make a film about Oromo history” (Tolessa, Ethiopian, interview, face-to-face, Rome, 16 July 2016).

### ***Looking forward, not back***

African migrants interviewed during the first few years of this research (2014–2016) were focused on their dream of getting permission to stay in Europe, some as a second home with plans to return home periodically or bring their family to Europe. As some received permission to stay and a few found entry-level jobs, their focus began shifting to making a life in Italy. One of those, Mokoba, fled Mali in 2013 for fear of his life, during his third year of university, after running afoul of the then political leadership. In 2015, he was actually leaving Libya on a ship for Australia when he spotted one of the overcrowded rafts with migrants leaving Libya for Italy. Preferring to be with Africans, he asked to leave the safety of the ship and was allowed to board the raft, despite the dangers.

We are sitting in the courtyard of a former church in Perugia, Italy in 2018. Mokoba is wearing a grey shirt and jeans; he pushes his sunglasses up onto his sputnik hairdo. “You decide to live or die”, he says, energetically (Mokoba, Malian, interview, face-to-face, Perugia, 16 July 2018). After he secured a five-year renewable, permit to stay in Italy he began volunteering as a court translator for migrants and helping two migrant reception programmes: “It makes me happy to help my brothers and sisters. They [many of them] didn’t go to school”. Today he uses the Internet to try to help migrants find small jobs. Mokoba has many Italian friends, one of whom helped him enrol in a nine-month course near Perugia, Italy at the Università dei Sapori (University of Flavors). Today, Mokoba, an African migrant who risked his life for a new and safe start in Europe, helps make Italy’s popular ice cream, gelato.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives of the African refugees and migrants reaching Italy and France demand a closer look at the failure of origin, transit and receiving states to protect their human rights. They also demand a more complex explanation than traditional push and pull theories of migration to explain their dangerous, multi-directional journeys, with their ever-changing social networks.

In order to gain a greater understanding of what drives refugees, the differences among them and the unique situation of their circumstances we need to hear their stories. There is a great need to listen to the stories of refugees and to discover their personal experiences, which are unique and distinct. I have learnt that it takes effort to bring out those stories. In the course of this research I discovered that a relationship needs to be built in order to gain access to the personal stories of refugees. I identified the following processes:

Layer 1: Uncertainty, distrust (caution about the intentions of the listener)

Layer 2: Avoidance of painful memories (difficulty telling traumatising events and experiences to the listener)

Layer 3: Candidness (opening up once trust is established)

Layer 4: Pretence (make believe in order to not be seen as a failure in the eyes of the listener)

Layer 5: Loneliness and vulnerability (revealing loneliness and vulnerability to the listener)

Beyond the theoretical arguments, the experience of listening to the stories of refugees, brought me to conclude that we need to put more effort into listening to their voices, to see them as individuals with a personal story, and to allow us, as listeners, to understand their courage and desperation, their ambitions and dreams, their vulnerability and strengths – as members of the fabric of mankind.

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