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Assemblages of mobility and violence: the shifting social worlds of Somali youth migration and the meanings of *tahriib*, 2005–2020

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on two periods of fieldwork (2007–2008 and 2019–2020) conducted between Somaliland and Italy, this article traces, from a longitudinal perspective, the migratory journeys from Somalia to Libya and Europe of a new generation of young asylum-seekers. The underlying thread linking the two temporal frames is the transformations of the word *tahriib*. Travelling between Libya and Somalia, the word takes on new meanings: while in the emerging institutional language on migration, the word referred to growing dimensions of control and containment of mobility (in Arabic it refers to human smuggling), for the new generation of young Somali asylum-seekers it alluded initially to a dimension of danger, adventure, and generational rupture, and then became increasingly associated with violence and disruption. These transformations, I argue, reveal the shifting social worlds of Somali youth migration, where protracted crises in the country of origin and struggles for social inclusion in the new transnational Somali society had to adjust to increasingly restrictive forms of regulation of international migration. As the destructive transformations of *tahriib* unfold, their effects pervade not only the areas of origin and transit but also affect the attempts at integration in European countries, showing the deceitful and uncertain nature of diaspora.

The protracted situation of conflict and instability that has emerged in Somalia since the end of the 1980s has given rise to massive and recurrent forms of population displacement, both within Somali borders and beyond. Such displacements were linked to major war-induced events – in the capital city Mogadishu as well as elsewhere – but also to many forms of micro and persistent insecurity, clashes and violence which cumulatively generate local breakdowns and a 'dismembering of daily life'[1] within family and kinship groups.

From the various hotbeds of conflict towards safer areas, these population movements have re-drawn the political geography of Somalia, with relevant impacts also on neighbouring countries. Internally, they attested to the fragmentation of the forms of

citizenship built by the postcolonial State, replaced by a new territorial distribution founded on the interrelated ideas of origin, belonging and security, or on mere occupation. In the Horn and East African countries, these displacements have been contained and concentrated through the establishment of refugee camps,[2] but their transformative force has also impacted the main cities (Nairobi, Addis, Kampala) and has developed into networks where economic opportunities, religious, educational or kinship ties have nourished the formation of new interconnected Somali communities.[3]

Further directions of these movements have equally been well documented: towards other African countries, the nearby Arabian Peninsula, Europe, North America and many other locations, cumulatively giving rise to new Somali diasporic, transnational and profoundly extraverted societies.[4] In the Horn of Africa this is not a unique case: Victoria Bernal has for instance represented Eritrea as a network-nation calling into question diaspora and cyberspace but important overseas communities are also pivotal for Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan.[5]

In the Somali territories, these changes do not entail the simple emergence of an external social sphere impacting on the societies of origin, but a general process of societal transformation in which mobility, transnational networks and diaspora are brought to the core of their social reproduction. These adaptations are always contingent in nature and constantly evolving. From a forced mobility perspective, the transformative tendency of these processes – in combination with the increasing disavowal of Somalis as legitimate asylum seekers at the international level (particularly after 9/11) and the expanding policies of exclusion of the international mobility regimes – has meant the conversion of a war-induced migration,[6] into a much more complex and fluid web of transnational movements, within which youth emigration – long-distance and irregular[7] – has over the years played a major and dramatic role.

This article explores forms and reasons behind such mobility transition, focusing on the emergence of irregular Somali youth migration to Europe as a historical process (thus taking shape and varying within a combination of specific legal, social and political forces) analysed over an extended period of observation. In particular, my analysis draws on two research experiences conducted at different times: in 2007–2008 and in 2018–2019. The first took place mainly in Somaliland but was complemented by research in Italy, the second mainly in Italy and complemented by periods of research in Somaliland. In both cases, conventional ethnographic research was accompanied by a one-month research workshop focused on self-narration and video production directly involving young Somalis. I focus on a series of emic expressions (in particular on the word *tahriib*) and argue that their transformation across space and time reveals the shifting social worlds of a new generation of young undocumented migrants, whose struggles for social inclusion require coping with the increasingly restrictive regime of international migration. Moreover, I show how the destructive evolution of *tahriib* disrupts integration attempts in European countries, uncovering the deceitful and uncertain nature of the diasporic promise.

The social worlds of undocumented migrants

As they set out on the road – leaving behind or having lost the protection and recognition of the social groups and political entities which they are attached to – undocumented

young migrants potentially become prey to a broad array of social types: border guards, police, official and unofficial military groups, opportunistic fortune seekers, exploiters and traffickers of all kind.

At the same time, they are never totally alone and – besides webs of ambiguous facilitators – they move through old and new specific social milieus where support, solidarity and rescue, alongside hostility or fraud, can potentially be found. In reality, these individual trajectories cannot be totally disconnected from social 'projects' embedded in the attempts of social reproduction, resilience or survival of the groups they belong to, as they express the web of (even expulsive) social forces operating in the locations where they live. While many scholars have contributed to moving beyond the idea of 'transit' as a mere interlude between departure and arrival and have stressed strategies, infrastructures, systems of knowledge, care and solidarity sustaining high risk undocumented migration,[8] my attempt here is more focused on investigating what mobility implies and produces in terms of space transformation, local reactions, social structures and forms of subjectification, combining transit to changes in the societies of departure (as well as in the many destinations). In this regard, the expression 'social worlds'[9] could be extremely useful in order to capture this set of contradictory elements where shifting assemblages of mobility, violence and social transformations emerge.

Engaging in the exploration of the social worlds of refugees was suggested in an introductory reflection in the field of refugee studies by Emmanuel Marx,[10] even though this analytical frame was then not developed fully and simply conflated into the analysis of refugees' social networks. The idea of the social world encompasses such networks but also opens up insights into the contexts within which migration takes place, thus furthering the analysis of the way in which these movements are linked to the emerging transformations in the areas of departure, transit and destination under the action of people's mobility and circulation (including reactions to such mobility). In Marx's suggestions, social worlds precisely intended to capture emerging social structures not necessarily anchored to specific territories but connecting different spaces, or taking shape as individuals move across them.[11] Spatial and temporal fractures produced by war and displacement thus generate specific social orders as well as centrifugal trajectories.[12] As far as Somalia is concerned, this relates to the formation of transnational and diasporic societies, to the conditions under which international globalized networks take shape and, in turn, the conditions under which they reproduce societies, to the significance for local groups of the inclusion into such global networks as well as the expulsive forces they are subject to. Clearly, these elements are also linked to the specific form that the youth question, intergenerational relations and 'social becoming' take in a society affected by war, and connect the topic to the broad literature on these themes in Africa.[13] On the other hand, such issues also relate to changes in international mobility regimes whose paradoxes produce specific social fields of mobility and control. All these dynamics are in this article seen through the prism of undocumented youth migration: how does the latter phenomenon relate to the former? Does it simply reveal streams of exclusion, dispersal and loss from conflict-ridden societies (where part of their youth is just gambling away its future) or is this also related to something more permanent, to core transformations of societies and politics in the region?

Prologue: re-surfacing winds of migration

The emergence of irregular youth migration from Somalia to Europe in the early 2000s took place within extremely ambiguous and contradictory forces. As a consequence of the new border regime developed by European states since the 1990s, the conditions of mobility and access between Europe and Africa were in those years radically remoulded. Increased restrictions were introduced, comprising improved systems of passport control, visa systems, collaboration with private carriers (particularly air-carriers) for pre-departure screening, biometric databases, stricter controls and barriers along the border zones.[14] As a result, whereas the Somalis during the 1990s reached Europe by air, on the basis of real or forged documents, since the 2000s their mobility has in most cases been forced to clandestine sea and land routes. Arrivals in Italy by sea in 2000–2005 from Somalia (and the Horn in general) witnessed a slow but steady increase, combined with a decrease in asylum claims at Italian and European airports in the same periods. At the same time, there was a dramatic fall in the official recognition of asylum claims from Somalia, even before 9/11 but becoming much more evident in its aftermath.

In Italy, the most emblematic representation of how the possibilities of migration radically changed at that juncture was expressed by the opposition between 'vecchie lire' (lira, singular, was the national currency before the introduction of the euro at the beginning of 2002) and 'titanic' (the shipwreck movie released in 1997). Frequently used by the Somalis living there, the opposition highlights a generational division between the Somalis who reached Italy during the 1990s (*vecchie lire*) and those who arrived by sea on precarious boats starting from the 2000s (*titanic*).

If we now move to the departure zones, other concurrent expressions help in defining the turning point of the intensification of undocumented Somali youth migration to Europe I am referring to.

'Migration is like the wind' one of my interlocutors kept repeating during field research conducted in Somaliland in 2007, as I was describing to him my ordinary encounters with young Somalilanders. His expression was descriptive, reflecting what he was observing in the streets of the city where we were living, but came also out of his personal experience. He had in fact fled Northern Somalia during the 1988–1990 war for a refugee camp in Ethiopia and from there managed to move to Europe where he was recognized as a refugee in Finland. There he became a Finnish citizen and started to return to Somaliland to contribute as a doctor in health projects, initially for short periods of time then almost permanently, while his family remained in Finland: quite a common but also paradigmatic trajectory shared by many other Somalis and constructed over about 15 years.[15] From his point of view, talking about the wind of migration meant pointing out how emigration is made up of different temporal waves, and that the wind that blew so strongly at the beginning of the war involving his generation was starting in his view, under other conditions and opportunities, to blow again. But it also meant that, like the wind, migration was somehow seen as unstoppable, impermeable to any consideration of the risks involved.

One may wonder, however, where exactly that new wind was coming from. Based on the many interviews I had during fieldwork at that time, it certainly came from contacts with relatives and friends already living abroad (in short, from the confrontation between

the new generation born after the war and the changes it generated) but frequent reference was also made to the return of war to Mogadishu since 2006, coinciding with the contested rise of the Islamic Courts movement and the consequent intervention of the Ethiopian army. This caused in Mogadishu and surrounding areas massive new displacements, which to a certain extent resembled those of the early phases of the conflict. Despite attempts at regional containment, these events also ignited new waves of long-distance emigration and, most significantly, were accompanied, in Europe and Western countries, by the partial reopening of asylum policies for refugees from Somalia, torn apart no longer by warlords but by fundamentalist Islamic movements.[16]

To put it more clearly: after years during which international mobility was for the Somalis prevented (as the echoes of the war in the early 1990s faded and the UN international mission was withdrawn), and then highly curbed in the aftermath of 9/11, the 2006 events prompted a partial loosening of such obstacles.[17] A new generation born during the war was thus ready to get these chances and ready and willing to be carried away by this wind. Though already since the end of the 1990s – early 2000s undocumented youth migration towards Europe (as well as other destinations) started to emerge, from around 2005–2006 the wind begun to blow more intensely from the epicentre of Mogadishu, expanding to other parts of Somalia and dragging along with it young people from those areas. The previously heterogeneous and dispersed paths that were heading towards Libya with the goal of moving to Europe were thus unified within a single generational trajectory.

The 2008 workshop: the haunting wind of *tahriib*

In order to explore the many social worlds attached to these initial phases of *tahriib*, a necessary premise is that their variety and diversity reflects the many Somalias formed in the social and political fragmentation of the country, and the complexity of the different routes leading to Europe.

I will first focus on northern Somalia, specifically on the independent region of Somaliland, where besides conducting fieldwork (and discussing the wind of migration with my interlocutors) I also co-organized in 2008 a video-workshop on youth migration. The workshop invited local young people to compose poems and create migration stories, drawing on the direct and indirect experiences of *tahriib* that they had, which would then be presented through short docufilms. Through the preparatory work, the conversations held during their making, and the final results, it was possible to discuss motivations, imaginaries and representations connected to the phenomenon of emigration, and link them to fieldwork data.

Simple as they are, initial elements of analysis can emerge from the synopses of the stories and the stereotypical names used, like rudimental morality plays, for the characters and the titles (the 'Nationalist', the 'Traveller', 'The one who just speaks', and so on). I will review them briefly. In the first, Nur, a boy who emigrated to Europe a few years earlier ('Left to conquer the world'), returns during summertime for a visit. This opens up a contrast in the group of friends who welcome him, between those willing to show him how the country has changed positively during his absence (the reconstructed urban landscape, the new commercial buildings linked to remittances, money transfer and telecommunication, shipping and import agencies which collectively show the success of the

diaspora economy) and those who focus instead on how he himself has been positively transformed by living abroad (in styles of clothing and consumption, purchasing power and accumulated wealth, in his experiences). Among his friends, one (Abdi) will decide a few weeks later to leave, after a dispute with his father who refused to back his departure as an undocumented migrant (*tahriib*) and after Nur has assured him his help if he reaches Europe. Meanwhile, at the end of the summer, Nur returns to Europe and the video reveals the hard life he is facing there as a cleaner and porter in a hotel; Abdi will instead be mistreated and captured by the Libyan police, managing only after months to get back to Somaliland ('back to the ruins of scarcity').

A second and third video follow a similar scheme. Entitled 'Misunderstanding', the second is again focused on the return of a boy who emigrated to Europe a few years previously, but his intention is in this case to resettle in his homeland and convince potential migrants not to leave. The speeches he addresses to the other boys, however, have a very normative tone, even though in the film (rather than in reality) they seem to work. The happy ending reveals that one of the young men who was convinced not to leave (and the only one who in real life had already attempted to go on *tahriib* – he just gave up because he ran out of money midway), became a few years later a successful businessman. The third film focuses on the conflicts between two young boys determined to leave, their fathers and their schoolteacher, and tragically ends with their death in the Libyan desert.

In contrast, the fourth, the one that was regarded as most successful, has the structure of a short love story: a girl betrothed to a local boy, who after a 7-year engagement has finally found the resources to propose marriage to her, meets on the street another boy from Norway who is visiting his home country. It is love at first sight and, thanks to his offer of a dowry of 15,000 US dollars, he gets the hand of the girl with the consent of her family, despite the fact that in their view he is dressed like an American rapper and speaks a hybrid of Somali and English. The rejected boyfriend will spend the money he had put together (much less than the Norwegian dowry) to finance the trip to Libya, ending up badly in the desert.

The dynamics of the workshop condensed a number of contrasting elements: youth, jobs, diaspora, business, nationalistic fervour, urban landscape, wealth and poverty, packaged in the form of dreams, disillusion and death.

A first contrast is between poverty and wealth, but this dualistic scheme is continually challenged until it is reversed: those returning from abroad embody wealth but suddenly their hard life overseas is revealed; others who are abroad are longing to return to contribute to the country's reconstruction, but those who leave complain that this reconstruction is not providing opportunities for them. The urban landscape incorporates at times the ruins of war, but at other times reconstruction. Resources are invested locally but also thrown away to finance illegal travel. The homeland is invested with emotional feelings and political meanings related to the struggle against the past Somali government but then it is quickly abandoned. The risk of travel is constantly evoked, but it then evaporates when contrasted to horizons of hope and fantasies of good life abroad. Among other things, these ambiguities point quite systematically to the role played by the diaspora in subverting and redefining the local value systems, economically as well as socially and morally. But ambiguity also deeply affects the meaning of diaspora itself, as effects of social visibility select the successful one and its imaginary presence. In these terms, its effects stress the divisions between groups who can or

cannot access international mobility but also imply a clear-cut generational divide. This is because the previous generation could at the beginning of the war be recognized as refugees entitled to international protection and was thus partly included in the international regime of legal mobility, while the new generation is mostly excluded. In this sense, the generational contrast staged in all the movies does not derive simply from an absence of access to international migration but from its elusiveness since it occurs in extremely unequal and shifting forms. On the one hand there are young people aged between 16 and 20 born after the war and raised surrounded by the rhetoric of the reconstruction and independence of Somaliland and its transformation into a diasporic society in which the contribution of emigration abroad is central. On the other hand there is the generation that embodies the memory of the conflict (which in this region was particularly severe between 1988 and 1991 and again in 1994–1995), the immense social transformations that ensued, the forced displacement, and that struggle in finding a place in the new urban economy but that can also, in certain cases, boast connections with the diaspora or is part of transnational families.

This set of contrasts precipitates at the level of families and kin groups: it is implicitly expressed in the parents' difficulty in asserting their authority and controlling young people's behaviour; it is ambiguously fuelled by the inability of young people to maintain their social standing and family status or to prevent downward trajectories; it results explicitly in the requests they address to parents and the extended family to secure employment or an opportunity abroad as their attempts to find socio-economic inclusion in society are frustrated.

Overall, the workshop stood alongside other initial attempts to foster a public discussion on *tahriib*, involving Somaliland society through narrative and poetry productions or local and international NGO programmes[18] and which later changed into more pervasive and top-down public and media campaigns as well as actual governmental controls in the major towns and at border posts.

If generational tension is a central and pervasive element in any Somali region, the factors leading to *tahriib* are as varied as the protracted crisis in Somalia is multifaceted and heterogeneous.

In the 2019 workshop, which will be dealt with more extensively in the final section, I collected stories of flight of young people from other regions, which though referring to later periods of time did not change so much with respect to these earlier days of *tahriib* in terms of motivations and social background. Overall, they refer to very different contexts: recurrent instability and conflict in the south, stability but exclusion from international mobility in Ethiopia, profound precariousness in the migratory spaces around Somalia. Some examples involving four people who participated in the 2019 workshop: Ahmed and Abdulkadir came from the agricultural regions around Mogadishu, still plagued by conflict and the presence of armed groups (they left the country in 2013 and 2015); the story of their flight referred to the destructive incursions into their village of groups connected to al Shabaab but this was perceived as just one of the many micro-crises precipitating their difficulties in facing uncertainty and precariousness. Said in contrast was a 28 year-old man living in the Somali region of Ethiopia, a graduate who worked in the regional administration and was married to an Ethio-Somali woman who had managed to migrate to Canada thanks to family connections. Since in Ethiopia he was repeatedly denied a visa to reach her, he tried in 2017 to

reach Egypt via land, thinking that the Canadian embassy there could be more sympathetic, but he was captured by armed groups in Sudan and taken to Libya. The story of Nur is finally even more paradigmatic as he was on the move since he was 12: at that age, in 2011, he travelled from the war-torn Mogadishu with a friend to Bossaso, Northern Somalia. After a few years, from there he crossed the Red Sea to Yemen and then to the Emirates. He went back to Somalia working on the trading ships connecting Dubai with Berbera and Bossaso, and from there went to Uganda. After a few more years, in 2017, he decided to move to Libya and then to Europe, where he found out that being homeless and jobless was much harder than in Africa.

The (new) networks of dissolution.[19]

In the workshop analysed above, the term *tahriib* was used to indicate, in a fairly descriptive way, the specific mode of emigration: undocumented travel to Libya and, from here, the sea crossing towards Europe, Italy or Malta.[20] The term was not, in other words, loaded with that sense of generational identification emphasizing the sense of risk, challenge, and rupture, which it will later take on.

Moreover, initially the term was accompanied by a series of other expressions which, more strictly, referred to the socio-cultural dimension of migration, as well as to the dreams and expectations that crowded around this idea, and the way in which they appealed to young people. I will argue that the semantic expansion of the word *tahriib* which later emerged reflects the transformations of the forms and practices of undocumented migration towards Europe. This section will be specifically devoted to outline such transformations, as described by the scientific literature and reconstructed through ethnographic data.

The title used for the 2008 workshop was *Dhoof baa i galay* ('travel has haunted my mind', literally, 'travel has entered into me' – contemporary substitution for the condition of falling in love, *jacaal baa i galay*: literally, 'love entered into me') and similar expressions were also reported by other scholars.[21] These expressions conveyed the sense of a head full of thoughts and hopes of becoming someone else and living somewhere else by means of migration, stressing the impossibility of doing so in the current local conditions. The word *buufis*, analysed in terms of dreaming of migration and resettlement in the study of Cindy Horst on the refugee camp of Dadaab (Kenya),[22] has similar origins, referring to the act of breathing and inflating. This inflation of the mind (too many thoughts in the head) in the context of the diasporic society of the North somehow recalls the monetary inflation of remittances and their capacity to subvert local value systems,[23] whereas in the context of the Dadaab refugee camp in Northern Kenya it becomes a metaphor for the tension between the limited number of resettlement programmes and the many potential candidates applying for them, as well as the pervasive and endless sense of being 'on hold'.

So, how did the term *tahriib* expand to define not only the form of the journey but also its own experience? Here too we are faced with a fluid term, moving across different semantic fields as well as spaces.

Tahriib, an Arabic word, is first of all a term that has always inhabited borderlands as it refers to smuggling and illicit trade. As such, it was also widely known in Somalia since the historical commercial practices with, particularly, Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula

always involved smuggling or informal exchanges. However, the term did not acquire a stable presence in the Somali language until recent years. In order for this to happen, *tahriib* had to pass from a term applied to goods to a term applied to people, and move from the borderlands of clandestine migration, from Libya or Yemen, to the Horn of Africa, becoming in this way, in the Somali language, inextricably linked with the emergence of the unregulated youth migration described in this essay and a term to identify those who undertook it.

The Arabic root of the word (مرب) refers to terms such as to flee, escape, smuggle, elude, evade; the noun that derives from it (*tahriib*) is therefore illicit trade, trafficking, smuggling (but in other forms it can also become a fugitive or smuggler). As such it has perfectly lent itself to being absorbed into a legal language that presides over border crossings no longer of goods but of people. In the Arabic version of the Palermo international protocols on human trafficking and smuggling of migrants established in 2000, it is used to define migrant smuggling, authoritatively entering the contemporary field of international migration policing, border controls and the fight against transnational organized crime. The term however did not limit itself to written documents as it moved from the field of international migratory conventions and laws to the field of migration practices and controls operated by the police and the army between Africa and Europe. In Libya, drawing on a well-established tradition under the Gaddafi regime of control of the foreign migrant labour force through recurrent forms of detention and expulsions,[24] it establishes itself as a term used as an accusation against migrants, in operations no longer conducted autonomously by the Libyan state with the aim of controlling labour migration but also as an element requested and supported by Europe in the new diplomacy of combatting irregular transit migration through Libya to Europe which between 2000 and 2009 became a kind of passe-partout for the redefinition of the diplomatic relationships between Europe (in particular Italy) and Libya.[25]

As reported by Hamood, *tahriib* was precisely the accusation launched by the Libyan police against young (Somali and not) migrants.[26] As such, it then travelled southward, in just one of its probably multiple genealogies,[27] and was re-appropriated and re-signified by Somali migrants to denote an experience shared by an entire generation of border-crossers. The word *tahriib* describes undocumented migration but it also allows us, following its vicissitudes and transformations, to uncover, along the transit routes, the specific social worlds of which clandestine migration is made. Networks of power, control and violence, overall forming shifting assemblages of mobility and violence, can thus be analysed in this way not as structural elements purely modelled by restrictive migratory policies decided elsewhere but in their historical transformations and causative effects,[28] opening up our enquiry into a history of social spaces made up of smuggling networks, migratory spaces, people on the move and actors of control.

The studies of Hamood, Triulzi and MacKenzie[29] provide essential information on the conditions in Libya and along the transit routes of the migrants from the Horn of Africa during the 2000s while subsequent studies like Ali's[30] portray the transformations that occurred after 2011 and during the civil war in Libya. These, taken together, allow the transition in this article from the 2008 to the 2019 field research and workshops.

In the 2000s, the networks that managed such clandestine mobility were still described as poorly organized and structured, located at every single junction of the migratory routes without covering their entire length.[31] There were also various types of facilitators

not connected to specific forms of organization along the way. Frequently the smuggling organizations only let information pass and disseminate along the migratory routes and in the centres along these, but often this information also circulated autonomously and without any control. Violence was certainly an integral part of these paths (abandoning people in the Libyan-Sudanese desert, intimidation, beatings, robberies and murders) especially close to the Sudan-Libya border crossing. In defining the ambiguity of these figures, Sandro Triulzi has used the effective expression of 'conveyor / robber' which on the one hand highlights how migrants, stripped during the transit of all rights and protection, totally rely on them, and on the other hand highlights the highly coercive nature of the economies of mobility between the Sahel and Libya.[32]

In Libya, as Hamood documents, the treatment of migrants included various forms of exploitation and violence, in ways not entirely different from those historically reserved to the entire population of resident foreigners working in the country who were regulated by temporary contracts, recurrent arrests, detention and expulsion. Since the 2000s, detentions and violence – including cases of torture and rape – were increasingly carried out by the Libyan police and army as part of the 'fight' against illegal immigration negotiated with European countries.[33] The systems of violence were therefore at that time in the hands of Libyan state personnel, the army and prison guards, and were based on the detention system. A first turning point occurred with the start of the pushbacks at sea policy inaugurated by Italy during 2009–2010 (after the Italy-Libya treaty). The migratory trajectories from Eastern Africa, in the face of this closure, partly diversified eastwards, to Egypt and, especially in the case of Eritreans, augmenting the already existing flow through the Sinai with final destination Israel.[34] It was precisely from the Sinai and along this route that various testimonies were collected in those years of a trafficking chain operating with much more ferocious means (kidnappings, torture, combined with ransom requests) and directly aimed at extracting profit from the bodies of the people who were victims of this system (to the point of testimonies reporting deaths related to organ trafficking).[35] Torture, even by poor and simple means – a plastic bag burnt on the victim's back – and kidnapping for the purpose of extortion will become forms later reproduced along the Libyan routes as the country descended into internal disorder.

Two elements contributed to these changes. On the one hand, smugglers' organizations increased their effectiveness and coherence, pushed by the incentives to extract more profits and expand their 'business'. Migration policies emphasizing control over the corridors naturally reinforces this structuring. In the case of the transits of young Somalis from the Horn of Africa to Libya, these organizational structures expanded and developed networks of brokers along the various points and hubs of the corridor, until they reached (something that will be later replicated by the control policies) the places of departure. Ali has described how these brokers connected to traffickers[36] began to operate through new forms based on a deferred-payment scheme: migrants were allowed to leave without having to pay money and routed towards the Sudanese-Libyan border where they were stopped and taken hostage. At that point a ransom was demanded from their families for the release of the young migrants. This form of organization freed young people from the burden of financing the trip before departure, thus bypassing any necessary mediation by parents or other family members. This perfectly captures the nature of these journeys as a generational phenomenon emerging from the contrast between young people and their extended families or kinship

groups. Secondly, in a Libya suffering regime collapse and internal disorder, these forms of organization met with similar internal incentives towards the development of extortion networks variously composed of ex-army and police staff, local militias, paramilitary forces from neighbouring countries and, specifically on the coast, politico-military forces looking for international recognition, all interested in extracting profit from the migrants and asylum seekers on the move (and whose flows had to be quickly reproduced in order to renew profits). The new tactics continued to be based on the centrality of detention, although no longer linked to expulsion but to the organization of migrants' sea crossings first and their mere extortion later on, since a renewed Libya-Italy agreement in 2017 almost halted, for a while, departures.

In the informal detention centres in Libya (*mezra*), violence became systematic and was not only an expression of modes of action inherited from the military corps of the Gaddafi regime or from individual perversions and cynicism but also from the need to control a large number of people that far exceeded that of the guardians. This control could only be exercised through terror, through exemplary punishments, beatings, murders and rapes that marked the territory and the hierarchy of power. Another element that sustained the violence was the need to convince the relatives of the people imprisoned to pay for their release: in this case, the violence took place in front of the telephone.

In such markets of violence and extortion[37] the assessment of the economic value of the migrants, specifically founded on the capacity to mobilize resources through money transferred to them from their connections at home and in the diaspora, was crucial. In this regard, the Somalis, by virtue of their well-structured integration in diasporic networks and the lack of protection by political institutions at home, were quickly identified as extremely remunerative clients and costs for them soared. Social networks turned into networks of dissolution and diaspora showed its dark side.

Disrupted diasporas

Such assemblages of violence are contrasted by assemblages of forms of solidarity, consisting of tenuous networks where support is provided and struggles take shape to access or to create new social milieus along the transit routes or in the destination countries. Under the pressure of illegalization and control which have characterized the *tahriib* trajectory here described (embodied in its very name), the social worlds emerging in such situations present various combinations of isolation, exploitation and violence, but also surprising hope and tenacity. Drawing on field research carried out in 2018–2019 in Somaliland and Italy I will refer now to these specific social worlds. I will first keep my focus on Libya and then move northward. From an unexpected encounter in Somaliland, a meaningful fragment of such precarious social worlds opened before my eyes.

In the summer of 2018, during a research stay in Hargeysa, I was contacted by Khadra, a recent graduate in Business and Administration at one of the city's universities, who, knowing my involvement in the topic, presented me with her situation, looking for suggestions and help: her cousin Wedhsame, aged about 20, had left for Libya more than a year earlier (in June 2017) and there had been no direct news from him for at least seven months. It was known for sure that he was inside Libyan territory, a prisoner in one of the

many informal camps managed by groups of traffickers, waiting to be able to embark for Europe but in practice just stuck there because embarkations were very rare after the block put on departures from mid-2017 through the renewed Libya/Italy collaboration. From November/December 2017 communications about him had come only indirectly, through friends and acquaintances who were with him since his departure, or had met him later, along the journey, and who came from the same town, Hargeysa, or nearby areas. Indeed, it seemed that Wedhsame could no longer speak or even move, he was beaten several times and reduced nearly to death, then slowly cared for and looked after by his friends, who fed him and helped him move with the others when the hiding place was changed. He was, Khadra understood, as if in a coma: his friends with the help of some Sudanese boys who could communicate in Arabic with Libyan traffickers managed to have Wedhsame taken to a nearby hospital and treated. He returned, it seems, after about two months with a feeding tube. According to messages from his friends, this happened in the area near Sabha, on the southwestern border, while at the time of our conversation he had been carried further north towards the coast, probably to the Sabratha area. The last indirect contact had taken place about a month earlier. Khadra confirmed that the family had already paid the money for Wedhsame's release more than once. Wedhsame's close family is poor, consisting of his mother and a sister, so they turned to Khadra's family: they are not rich, but they could do something more. They collected from relatives and friends, as happens in these cases, the requested sum: 8,000 US dollars. But unfortunately, things did not end there.

Khadra initially followed the whole issue directly, but when Weedhsame got worse she realized she could no longer take on this role and asked her sister to fill in for her: 'after the phone calls with Libya I couldn't sleep, and was sick for even a week' she said. She also maintained relations with the families of the other boys and girls who came into contact with Weedhsame in Libya – all left more or less in June 2017, at the end of school, and then found themselves in prison camps – but as the situation was not resolved or even got worse, each family withdrew into itself, into their pain, mutual complaints or suspicions about payments. Referring to these contacts, the fragile and tenacious protective net around Wedhsame became visible. Initially, Khadra said, Weedhsame was with Shakib: he was the one who used to telephone and give information after his illness, together with Abdillahi, another boy from the area. Maybe they were the ones who insisted he had to be taken to the hospital. But both Shakib and Abdillahi later died. Shakib's body, Khadra learned when she was still talking to his family, remained abandoned for two or three days in a shed, where the Libyan guards had brought him after one of the countless doses of beatings and violence, aimed at selected boys and girls, sometimes chosen at random, for fun or as demonstrative acts targeting all the prisoners, for extortion calls to relatives, or for punishing small signs of indiscipline or complaints. Friends asked to bury him, insisted on it, until the guards brought a shovel and had them bury him themselves. Nagib, Shakib's cousin, was initially with them but at a certain point managed to escape from the camp – apparently later on he came into contact with some international organization, perhaps UNHCR, or ended up in a government camp, but they were not able to get more information. A fifth boy, Abdirizaq, managed to escape and it seems that he was in Tripoli at that time but even from him there was little news. Salman, another boy who managed to run away, had returned to

Hargeysa just a few days before, on a repatriation flight organized by IOM, after being stopped by the Libyan police, taken to a government centre and made to wait there for months, until he agreed to take part in the repatriation programme. One girl, Rahma, was part of the group that initially helped Wedhsame, and continued even after the deaths of Shakib and Abdillahi operating as a telephone bridge with Khadra. Rahma's family, like all the boys mentioned above, also paid the ransom. In her case, after being transferred to the coast together with Wedhsame, she was taken to the embarkation points and actually managed to embark, while Wedhsame, it is not clear whether due to his condition or otherwise, was told to wait for another chance. It was after this that Khadra received another call asking for more money, 800 US dollars, which she was able to give personally, as the rest of the family disagreed, by selling part of her dowry in gold. At the time of my contact with Khadra only two interlocutors were left with Weedhsame, helping him and sending news to the family, Muna and Bedra. It seems, says Khadra, that both of them, who had already paid shortly after entering Libya, were asked for another 2,000 US dollars. This intertwining of stories reflects a particular moment in the broader history of the migrations of young Somalis through Libya. The entire framework – detentions that become kidnappings, extreme and systematic violence, extraction of value by trafficking networks no longer from the mobility of people but from their own bodies, the resale of migrants between different networks of traffickers and the consequent new extortion demands on families, the increase in costs since they were no longer to remunerate smugglers but aimed at keeping migrants alive – is ascertained in many similar stories collected in the course of my ethnographic work, documented by other researchers or in journalistic investigations or court cases.[38] In response to Khadra's request, a number of people working in Libya aid organizations (Libyan contacts at INGOs and Red Crescent, expatriate contacts at UNHRC and INGOs) were called, but with no success since Wedhsame probably never left the informal prison system.

A set of direct relationships involving travel companions and indirect relationships at a distance (within family or clan group, within the Somali diaspora or involving personal contacts, humanitarian or solidarity associations) moves around Wedhsame, accompanying him on his journey. Such relationships collectively compose those assemblages of solidarity I was referring to made up of tenaciousness, precariousness, tensions and temporary alignments of shared goals and principles. In such alignments specific 'values' are played out (humanity, solidarity, kinship, friendship), coexisting at the same time with divergent views and behaviours deriving from the specific social positioning of the various social actors (age, social belonging and background, origin and residence etc.). In the situation here briefly described, it is clear that the more *tahriib* releases a number of disruptive forces, the more difficult it is for the extended groups involved to maintain their mutual relationships: families and individuals in Hargeysa become increasingly isolated, suspicions and mistrust break down social connection, personal and family assets (from jewels to money to plots of land) are sold and debts are incurred. The retreat into their individual private spheres of those directly connected to *tahriib* stand in stark contrast to its generic condemnation in the public sphere through public campaigns aimed at dissuading potential migrants and with increased controls in public places and at border posts.

The conclusions of *tahriib*

As the destructive force of *tahriib* spreads, its effects pervade not only the areas of origins and transit but touched also the attempts at integration in European countries, in the peculiar atmosphere which emerged here during the so called 'migrant crisis' (2014–2018). Drawing on fieldwork conducted there, including a video workshop, which accompanied the studies conducted in Somaliland, I will now briefly look, to conclude, at one last frame of the social worlds of *tahriib*.

The workshop conducted in 2019 in Italy took place at the end of a five year period of sharply increased irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean route, as an effect of the Libyan conflict and its continuing instability. Despite the unitary framework constituted by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the inequalities accumulated since the 1990s between the asylum schemes of different European states produced a proliferation of secondary movements of asylum seekers and refugees from the so-called first entry countries to neighbouring states.

In this situation, the peregrinations of Nur, Ahmed, Abdikadir and Hassan from Somalia, documented during the workshop and above described, were replicated in Europe. Their stories were quite similar to those of many other Somalis who landed in the same period: after arriving by sea in Italy, they headed to other European countries, trying to reach contacts already living there, or just following rumours gathered during the journey, or the indications of smugglers; these further movements sometimes occurred before, sometimes after the application for international protection, in some cases after entering the reception facilities in Italy, in other cases just crossing the Italian territory without stopping. When, in any case, the asylum requests made in the European countries were rejected, they had to return, according to the Dublin Regulation, to Italy. Abdulkadir went first to Switzerland and Germany, Hassan first to France and then to Germany, but it was Ahmed who, from 2013 to 2017, made a real tour across several countries, at the end trying to settle down in Belgium (where he first applied for asylum), after having touched also Austria, Sweden, Germany and France. A definitive denial from the Belgian authorities – without having understood the reasons: 'out of a group of about 50 Somalis, I was the only one coming from Mogadishu' – led to his return to Italy. Nur, the boy who had been travelling since he was 12, was the only one who always remained in Italy. The unfolding of these extremely unstable and fragile paths, often including periods of time spent on the street, made stays in the reception facilities, once they were finally deported to Italy, particularly uncertain and precarious, aimed at searching, with a head full of thoughts, for permanent forms of integration through work placements and courses. Their paths on European soil followed those already trodden by those generations who, in the space of 15 years, had previously tried *tahriib*, although the micro-variations in the control policies made these young people perceive their experiences as unique and much worse.

As a result, the wind of migration which at the beginning of the *tahriib* trajectory was metaphor of aspirations and change was here replaced by a gloomy atmosphere. Again, this sense was expressed in the 2019 workshop through specific metaphors combining lightness or heaviness of the head, air, breath. Thoughts that buzzed in the head to the point of making it burst, a head swollen with air, of a heaviness that was no longer bearable, were recurring expressions. Such thoughts did not lightly project the individual

towards travelling, but, becoming heavy, told of the frustrations and failures of the migratory path. While expressing their current distress through the image of a heavy head in which thoughts press and converge, they refused to describe their departure as deriving from a purely imaginative drive that became an obsession, a *buufis* in short. They insisted on material needs, on insecurity, on the fact that they had to help their respective families, on everyday survival and everyday uncertainty in Somalia.

Moreover, the spectre of being declared illegal immigrants in Europe prompted them to reject the term *tahriib*, from which they tried to distance themselves, when referring to their journeys. The threat they perceived was not being deported (they often invoked the possibility of being sent back to Somalia) but ending up living on the streets and without income. Similarly, they also distanced themselves from the term diaspora: 'We are not diaspora, we are *muhajirin* [emigrants]'. Diaspora for them meant those who found very different conditions upon arrival, the possibility of choosing where to settle and an economic integration. It referred to successful emigration (the one of the *vecchie lire*), generating an income that could in part be transferred to the places of origin.

These considerations, emerged during the workshop, represent the end point of the historical trajectory of *tahriib*: from the initial hopes and expectations of migration in the various Somali territories, to the evolutions of prison camps in Libya, to further paths of dispersion in Europe. But in guiding me to these considerations, the workshop's protagonists generated also the conclusions of this article. The conclusions of *tahriib* in this sense have not to be intended geographically (once in Europe travels continue) but in terms of a social trajectory forged by power and history, as much as *tahriib* itself can be regarded not only as a journey across dangers and sufferance, but as a term whose trans-formations express the social worlds that mobility has created. The persistence and expanding nature of these social worlds attests their power in generating contemporary (re)configurations of space, social and political relationships, in Africa as elsewhere, con-necting far-flung territories. As youth condition in war-torn zones seems to oscillate between hostile social environments and diasporic dreams, at the end of a trajectory of irregularized migration, the same category of diaspora appears deceitful and uncertain. Scholars[39] have long stressed how diaspora is not a descriptive concept, but it rather expresses an ambition, a claim, and an incorporation of social value, as well as specific forms of social and power visibility, as noticed above. From the point of view of this article, the transnational Somali communities in Europe where diaspora is potentially generated look like a composite social field where struggles for access (to rights, recog-nition, protection) and for socio-political inclusion are staged and where in recent years precariousness and marginal conditions have been amplified. Diaspora production has winners and losers and the attempts at social inclusion enacted by the Somali asylum seekers contemplate failure. Certainly, the cases presented here are not fully representa-tive of all the paths taken by those who arrived from 2014 to 2019. On the contrary, their specificity has to be seen in the combination of random and arbitrary factors which acted upon their lives and in the absence of contacts and relationships with Somali commu-nities and groups already living in Europe which would facilitate their integration: whereas structural factors were not fully differentiating those going on *tahriib* at the departure, such factors clearly play a role at the destination points.

Surely, however, this kind of outcome was much more frequent in recent years than earlier. Through the prism of their experience, and from the diachronic perspective here

presented on *tahriib* as a historical phenomenon which started in the early 2000s under quite different conditions, it is possible to weigh how the social worlds composed of such elements as generational becoming, undocumented travel and access to diaspora underwent decisive alterations.

Notes

1. Lindley, Leaving Mogadishu.
2. Ciabarri, "Productivity of Refugee Camps"; Declich, "Fostering Ethnic Reinvention"; Horst, Transnational Nomads; Hyndman, Managing Displacement.
3. Carrier, Little Mogadishu, Carrier, Lochery "Missing States?"; Iazzolino, Hersi, "Shelter from the Storm"; Thompson, "Scaling statelessness."
4. Abdi, Elusive Jannah; Bjork, Somalis Abroad; Horst, Transnational Nomads; Kusow and Bjork, From Mogadishu
    to Dixon; Lindley, The Early Morning Phone Call. The extraversion of the Somali political elites – see Bayart, "Africa in the World" – was followed by the extraversion of the entire society: see Ciabarri, "Estroversione della società."
5. Bernal, Nation as Network; Dereje Feyissa, "The transnational politics"; Falge, The Global Nuer; Iyob, "The Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict"; Poole, "Ransoms, Remittances and Refuge."
6. Involving large sectors of the population irrespective of age, sex, wealth or social status.
7. The term irregular and undocumented are here used interchangeably to refer to the border crossing of migrants outside of state sanctioned regulatory norms or border posts.
8. Ayalew, "Refugee Protections from Below"; Belloni, The Big Gamble; Massa, "Waiting for an opportunity"; Schapendonk, "Migrants' Im/Mobilities"; Schapendonk, "Navigating the migration industry."
9. See Ciabarri and Simonsen, "Fragments of solidarity," in this special issue.
10. Marx, "The Social Worlds of Refugees."
11. Ibidem, p 189.
12. Bradbury, Becoming Somaliland; Little, Economy Without State.
13. I refer to studies on the social, historical and existential dimension of African youth, stressing the impossibility of social becoming, expectations, local and global imaginaries of future, sense of waithood, uncertainty: see Christiansen, Utas, Vigh, Navigating Youth; Graw, Schielke, The Global Horizon, Honwana, De Boeck Makers & Breakers, Triulzi, McKenzie, Long Journeys.
14. Andersson, Illegalitiy Inc.; Geiger, Pécoud, The Politics of International; den Heijer, Rijpma, Spijkerboer, "Coercion, prohibition, and great expectations."
15. The role of diaspora and remittances is extensively discussed in the Somali studies. For a recent assessment: Kleist and Masud Abdi, Global Connections.
16. Ciabarri, "Dynamics and Representations."
17. This is a succinct description of a complex phenomenon: for a full picture we should also take into account, in Europe, the partial harmonization of the recognition rules for asylum applications, including the introduction of the subsidiary protection and in Libya the increased connection of its space with migratory circuits in Sudan and the Horn of Africa.
18. Ali, Going on Tahriib; Geeldoon, We kissed the ground.
19. Networks of dissolution was the title of Anna Simmons's book (1995) which portrayed the decline of the Siyad Barre's regime and its descent into state collapse and civil conflict.
20. Alternatively, it was referred to for the route towards Yemen.
21. Horst, "Buufis amongst Somalis in Dadaab"; Rousseau et al., "Between myth and madness."
22. Horst, "Buufis amongst Somalis in Dadaab."
23. Ciabarri, "Estroversione della società."
24. Bensaâd, "L'immigration en Libye."
25. Morone, "Cycle of migrants' containment."

26. Hamood, African Transit Migration.
27. Just to name a second one: the strait between Somalia and Yemen from the early 2000s emerged as another irregular migration route (officially referred to as East African route), crossed mainly by groups from Ethiopia, but also partly by Somalis. At the same time, it is also an historical commercial route, in which it is evident the overlap of the two fields of application of the term tahriib: goods (first) and people (subsequently).
28. In sum, my perspective on migrant smuggling and trafficking does not present them as, alternatively, mere creation of European discourses on border controls or as unique organizers of migration. On this opposition see Zhang, Sanchez, Achilli, "Crimes of Solidarity in Mobility."
29. Hamood, African Transit Migration; Triluzi, MacKenzie, Long Journeys.
30. Ali, Going on Tahriib; Simonsen, Tahriib.
31. Hamood, African Transit Migration.
32. Triulzi, "Like a Plate of Spaghetti."
33. Hamood, African Transit Migration, p. 31.
34. Human Rights Watch. Sinai Perils: Risks to Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Egypt and Israel. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008.
35. Kidnappings, ransom, extortion are in reality reported along many migrant routes, from the border between Iran and Afghanistan and further west, to the border between Mexico and the US. They look like as recurrent outcome of the most mature migratory routes, where well-established systems of exploitation by smugglers/traffickers combine with control and repression by state agents.
36. Ali, Going on Tahriib; see also Simonsen and Tarabi, this issue
37. Elwert, "Markets of violence."
38. United Nations Support Mission in Libya & Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Desperate and Dangerous: Report on the human rights situation of migrants and refugees in Libya, 20 Dec. 2018.
39. Brubaker, "The diaspora diaspora"; Kleist, "In the Name of Diaspora."

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