

## Memories of Women from the Horn of Africa

*Gabriele Proglia*

### Introduction

In the ERC project I will investigate the relationship between visualisation and mobility of people from the Horn of Africa to Europe and beyond. In particular, I will carry out semi-structured interviews of migrants (male and female) in Turin, London and Amsterdam, and of artists from the Horn of Africa. This supplies me with two different kinds of representation for investigating the processes of mobilisation and particular accumulation of memory on the part of migrants, including the re-activation of memories harking back to Italy's colonial period. I will look at how the geographical imagination of Italy-Europe changes from before, during and after their arrival, and to know the value of images in determining their journeys, in order to affirm identities and to emerge out of the invisibility to which they are confined by their status as either refugees or, worse, 'illegals'.

In this paper I will refer to visuality and mobility from the Horn of Africa to Europe, and in particular the relationship between the written and oral in migrant women from Somalia.

### Boundary as method

As Étienne Balibar proposed<sup>1</sup>, modern boundaries begun with the nation-building process at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, let's look at some historical interpretations of 'nation' in relationship with the idea of boundary. Hans Kohn<sup>2</sup> and Federico Chabod<sup>3</sup> classified many national typologies – i.e. Western and Eastern – or referred to the “naturalistic” and “voluntary” adhesion to the nation. Anthony Smith<sup>4</sup>, in 1986, introduced the ethnic way to explain

---

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d'Europe? Les frontières, l'Etat, le peuple*, La Découverte, Paris 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background*, TB Publisher, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Federico Chabod, *L'idea di nazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Smith, *Le origini etniche delle nazioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998.

nations and nationalisms. On the contrary, Miroslav Hroch<sup>5</sup> used a theoretical system based on a class composition investigation. In these interpretations the boundaries and frontiers correspond, and both are used to circumscribe the land and people unitary or diversification, the power of the national state.

In 1983 three proposals turned around the historiography. In different ways, Ernest Gellner<sup>6</sup>, Eric Hobsbawm<sup>7</sup> and Benedict Anderson<sup>8</sup> took into account the nation as cultural construction. For these approaches 'boundary' and 'frontier' could not correspond. In fact, the first could define a specific community inside the nation, or a territory with its traditions; the second is understood as the territorial limits of a nation.

In 1990, Homi Bhabha edited *Nation and Narration*<sup>9</sup>, collecting contributions from many intellectuals, in particular in the field of comparative literature. In his closing essay the idea of nation is stretched in two different perspectives: the first concerning migrants and specifically about the diasporic condition for which the scattering of the people is transformed in time of subjective and collective narration; the second as cultural construction of nationality, as form of a social and textual affiliation. According to this interpretation the national boundary is the result of multiple and further forms of narration: it is the place where different narratives meet, where the nation is steadily rewritten. Partially, this is due to counter-narratives that continuously try to re-signify history, stories, cultures and identities. From this point of view, we can talk of boundary not only as a geographical and epistemological *limes* but also as a method to follow the migrant and diasporic narratives.

### Rewriting history with collective and intersubjective stories

In this theoretical framework I want to take into account the relationship between written and oral in

---

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nazioni e nazionalismo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nazioni e nazionalismo dal 1780. Programma, mito, realtà*, Einaudi, Torino 2002; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *L'invenzione della tradizione*, Einaudi, Torino 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Comunità immaginate. Origini e diffusione dei nazionalismi*, manifestolibri, Roma 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, Meltemi, Roma 1997.

the case of the Horn of Africa and especially for women from Somalia.

First of all, it is necessary to explain the connections among the Italian postcolonial writings, the colonial memories and the present. As suggested by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*<sup>10</sup>, postcolonial writings constitute a radical critique of the national and Eurocentric notion of language and literature. They use children and grandchildren's native memories of the colonial period for a re-discussion of the past and present, for creating collective identities and to claim rights; at the same time, they are able to mark continuities and discontinuities from the colonial period in terms of subjections – such as racism, sexism, discriminations in general – and see in these occurrences forms of national and European power.

What was proposed in *The Empire Writes Back* happens for the Horn of Africa writings. It is the case of Mahlet, the female character of Gabriella Ghermandi's novel *Regina di fiori e di perle*<sup>11</sup>, who was the witness of violence in Ethiopia during colonialism and in Italy, after 1960. Hamid Barole Abdu<sup>12</sup> proposed in his works that the same cultural framework has been used in different times: during the colonialism in the liberal and fascist periods, and after 1945 in Italy. In general, among other things, these writings are other forms of Italian culture not only white, masculine and European: they re-call into question what is Italian, European, Western affirming hybridized identities.

We can follow the case of women culturally or geographically coming from Somalia. Shirin Ranzamali Fazel, in her *Lontano da Mogadiscio*<sup>13</sup>, makes visible racism and its consequences against her black skin. She writes: “I feel their eyes on my body: it is such as a boundary that make you visible and invisible at the same time”. Kaha Mohamed Aden in her book, *Fra-intendimenti*, describes two conflicting experiences: on one hand the Italian and English colonial domains of Somalia and the regime of Siad Barre; on the other Fortress Europe. In many passages, Kaha expounds her condition of “subject out of place”: she has definitively left her homeland under the

---

<sup>10</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Gabriella Ghermandi, *Regina di fiori e di perle*, Donzelli, Roma 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Hamid Barole Abdu, *Sotterrate la mia pelle in Africa*, Anros, Modena 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Shirin Ranzamali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, DataneWS, Roma 1997.

islamic radicalism and she is disoriented by the new Italian situation, in Pavia. According to her writings her identity was born in a liminal place, between Italy and Somalia. Igiaba Scego, in *La mia casa è dove sono*, tells about her first twenty years: “my attention for this period is because these years prepared the Somali chaos which overwhelmed me when I was child and it hurts me today. In these years Italy changed: from country of emigrants to destination of immigrants. From mothering tv to commercial tv, from politic to anti-politic. I am the result of this chaos. And my map is the mirror of these years of change. It is not a coherent map. It is a center but a periphery too. It is Rome but Mogadishu too. It is Igiaba, but you too”<sup>14</sup>.

Scego, in another novel, writes about her main character, Rhoda, a young Somalia woman who wants to come in Italy-Europe. Italian boundaries are considered European too. In this sense, her counter-narrative role has a relevance beyond the national space and proposes a more articulated geography. Scego used a postcolonial style: the colonial domain language, Italian, interposed with Somali words. In particular, the story of Rhoda is characterized by the word “sdiib”. As Scego refers: “Sdiib means one seeks for the status of asylum. All the inhabitants of my country do it. They have no prospects, no future. Our country has been torn by the civil war and violence come into us like a disease. We broke out in search of peace and a daily routine. Once I will do the sdiib, I'll receive a grant and home. The house not immediately: I'll live temporarily in a hotel. But soon or later I'll have it. And after a certain number of years I'll be a citizen. It seems to me a dream”.

In many others writings, such as that of Sharif Aghil<sup>15</sup>, “sdiib” is described as a path for coming to Europe: Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and then Lampedusa. Nurradin Farah, in *Refugees*<sup>16</sup>, talks about the condition of Somali people in this journey: in UN camps, in Libyan prisons or in the desert. His gaze makes visible a collective and intersubjective *status* of people that move through nations and across extraterritorial places to reach a dream called Europe.

### Oral counter-narratives

---

<sup>14</sup> Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Rizzoli, 2010, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> Sharif Aghil, “Senza voce, senza terra” in, *Lingua Madre*, Seb27, Torino 2010, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Nurradin Farah, *Rifugiati*, Meltemi, Roma 2003.

Sdiib is not only a word but a strategy to crossover the Fortress Europe boundaries. Igiaba was born in Rome and she knew “sdiib” by her mother. In fact, four years ago, when I interviewed Shukri (32) and Indyo (24), two Somali women coming in Turin in 2008, they did not understand “sdiib”. “The correct word is isdhiib” – The same word is used in different perspectives: that of second generations for talking about their roots and the diaspora; that of new immigrants in Italy. Hindiyo replied to me: “It means to let go oneself, lose oneself” and she mimes the act of letting go of her arms. For extension, isdhiib is the exodus, means to wander in Africa searching the Italy-Europe's dream. So, using this perspective, I decided to ask them to draw their isdhiib.

During drawings, Shukri and Indyo explained me isdhiib has its rules. It is necessary *xuhuulo*, to enter in Europe and refer to the authorities about the journey, times and place in particular. The dates are extraordinarily clear. For Hindiyo the path started the 15<sup>th</sup> of December from Mogadishu. The day after she was in Hargeso. She wrote on the map *wacasahay* – it means to be afraid – this word is the connection between two places. The 20<sup>th</sup> of December she arrived in Ethiopia where she was *macabsahek*, “without fear”. The 5<sup>th</sup> of February she was in Sudan. On the map she marked “sansa paura” such as Italy, the goal, should be nearest and able to translate her emotions and hope in Italian. The 3<sup>th</sup> of April she was in Libya where the fear on the map reappeared (*wacasahay*). She waited three months for crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Then she was brought firstly in Crotone, in a Cpt, and then to Turin. Here, on the map the 'sansa paura' changes in 'sansa lavoro'. Her expectations seem to be betrayed. The circle of Turin is connected to Alba, the small town where she lives, with the sentence “Alba molto barva” - Alba very good.

The map of Shukri has the same path of Hindiyo, but another representation. Also times are different. She spent a month in Ethiopia, 20 days in Sudan. On the map she wrote *wazanka cabsanayey xogidtan*, that means “I was afraid of men and Sudanese people”. She arrived in Libya where she stayed two months, in particular she was detained for 21 days in a prison (*waxankujiray xabsi*) then the word *farzad*, the happiness to be at Lampedusa the 28<sup>th</sup> of April.

## Conclusions

Now, let's try to compare written and oral forms in the perspective of visualisation. Novel narratives try to shift in a public sphere the intersubjective diasporic condition of people from Somalia. In particular, characters are attempts to weigh on the Italian discursivity with a narration that makes visible connections between past cultural constructions – such as those of the colonial period – and present (forms of racism). Moreover, written form transmits to the readers the extra-territoriality condition – i.e. refugee camps, prisons in Libya, Frontex military control – a sort of boundary that follows migrants before and beyond the border between Africa and Europe. There are also effects such as the migrant's invisibility in European eyes, or narrations that reduce subjectivity to a collective representation (i.e. in Italian: “i somali”, “i neri”). Moreover, writing makes evident collective forms of counter-narratives (such as the *isdiib* of Igiaba Scego).

Oral form, on the contrary, explains the subjective ways of these strategies. The “*isdhiib*” of Shukri and Indyio are very different for dates, occurrences, feelings, and last but not least for representation. In fact, Indyio map is represented as a path connected with her relatives – it is the allegory of their distance and connection (for example with the remittances). Indyio hopes to bring her relatives to Europe someday. On the contrary, in Shukri's map the time journey is inscribed in a greater migratory project: it is drawn as a circle that starts and ends in Mogadishu. In fact, Indyio would like to return to Somalia to embrace her family.

Two maps, two projects of the same strategy to enter into Europe. In this sense, the use of visualisation allows us to capture both of the global phenomenon, subject of many written texts, to follow both through numerous oral migratory projects, crossovers and ways to stay in Italy-Europe.