

God's will for a better life

November 29, 2017

From Ventimiglia to Taranto together with Biniam: the fourth appointment with the headline on the European governance of migration.

An arid summer afternoon gives way to the evening, leaving behind a purple sky reflecting its last rays of light on the walls of the Gianchette buildings along the Roja River. Right here, on Tent Street, is the Church, which for several months has hosted dozens of migrants, mostly women and minors, headed for Ventimiglia. On a wall between the church and the river there is a group of Eritreans with whom I stop to talk. Biniam, a fake name, is praying in the tygrinian language asking the saints (Orthodox Christians of Ethiopia and Eritrea usually do not address God directly) the strength to cross the border, to settle in France. I wait until he is done to ask him more about his tapping into spirituality: he explains that he asks the gods for patience and perseverance, which in these areas are fundamental resources in the attempts to cross the border.

Ventimiglia, he says, is part of the Menghedi (the road, the journey) towards a better life, towards relatives who already live in Northern Europe countries. Biniam has not accepted the endless process and the uncertain destinations of the European relocation program: he wants to reach his goal immediately because he has already wasted many years between travel and the infinite military service to which the Eritrean regime forces all today citizens from the age of eighteen to fifty. Ten years like that, between training and forced labor of sorts in construction, sometimes for foreign companies, in Eritrea. Biniam does not want to lose more time: he is 32 years old and has a wife and children in Khartoum waiting for his news and support, money, a request for family reunion, a home... a future. All what they think can be achieved in northern Europe and the opposite of their existence in Eritrea: that is not life (Heywot aykwennen), he exclaims with bitterness. He looks around: some Eritrean children are arguing with what is clearly a passeur, while others are sitting on the wall talking about the difficulties in border crossings, the rejections, the police. He looks back at me: "This is not life either," he adds with bitterness.

A stretch of Italian territory from the border of the maritime alps to Taranto has become the cage in which Biniam feels trapped: he has tried to cross the border three times; he shows me the scratches he got in the last attempt he made through the woods. In the first two attempts, he ended up at the hands of the French police that, without any consideration of the fact that he is an asylum seeker (see previous episode), handed him back to the Italian police. The latter brought him back to the Taranto hotspot, 1180km southeast of Ventimiglia. Faced with all this, Biniam recognizes the limitation of his own space of action and opens up one on the extra-earthly level: now it no longer depends solely on him, he says, but on the will of God (verbatim the work of God: "amlak srah").

So, the lands of uncertainty are filled with religious language: culture plays again the role, defined by de Martino, of exorcism of the negative elements of being, which risks dragging individuals into the land of chaos, of the loss of the role of agent on the part of the subject who feels instead overwhelmed by the forces of nature or social structure. In this sense, Biniam's prayer is significant and strong in that it allows him to recover, at least on a symbolic level, a possibility of autonomous action and not to cast himself as a mere object among the coils of that border regime that restricts the space of action of migrants.

Not only are the special arrangements around the French border push Biniam back to Ventimiglia, but a special provision leads him to Taranto, which is more than a thousand kilometers away.

The Taranto hotspot is the only one located on continental land and plays a strategic role far beyond mere national interests. It is a center made up of tensile structures located between the port and the industrial area of Taranto, a place with high concentrations of pollutants. Unlike other hotspots – all located between Sicily and Lampedusa – the one in Taranto receives not only migrants from sea rescue operations, which are actually the minority: it mainly carries out the role of accommodating foreigners intercepted by police throughout the Italian territory, mainly at the Ventimiglia border. The Senate's Human Rights Commission, chaired by Luigi Manconi, emphasized this role, reporting that it was part of the plan presented by Chief of Police Gabrielli (according to La Repubblica newspaper instead the plan should be directly attributed to the former Minister of the Interior Angelino Alfano) to "lighten border areas" which could be translated as "lighten migratory pressure on the borders with other European countries", with a definition that is more attentive to the complex force relations within EU countries that are being discharged on migrants in transit. Before March 2016, some migrants were transferred – or deported, in a more radical language – from border lands to Sicilian structures via airplanes. Since then, however, this new route has been inaugurated, which in just 7 months has led 9,528 migrants captured in Italy to the Puglia-based structure. These are the latest official data, but the monitors of various activist networks report the phenomenon as constant, if not increasing. It is therefore a practice to support the will of other European countries to confine migrants to coastal countries. However, the look at the interests involved should be broader and the consequences of such transfers should be considered.

Migrants caught by the French authorities are handed over to the Italian police that sometimes decide to apply this procedure. However, not only the ones captured in France are subject to it: often migrants around the Milan railway station (certainly not a border area in the strict sense) have been subjected to similar operations whose sole criterion was the color of the skin. In addition, the Ventimiglia area and its outskirts itself have sometimes seen migrants transferred to Taranto. After the capture, there is a particular arrest type, up to 24 hours, which precedes an on-site identification and then transfer to Taranto where identification is repeated. Migrants are transferred via bus by Riviera Trasporti, the company that has been contracted for this service.

Different readers will ask different questions here: the moderate but attentive to public spending reader might wonder, "how much does that cost?"; more curious readers will ask themselves instead, "why are they taken to Taranto for an identification that has already been carried out and that, anyway, can be done where they were captured?"; finally, radicals who have read Foucault and Agamben will ask, "but what are the conditions that define the deportability of these people?" In actuality, such questions are not so separate and, based on some

of the concepts of current scientific literature, we will show the intimate connections and resonances.

Each of these trips costs around € 5,000 in addition to the law enforcement officers needed to escort the convoys, who receive overtime and secondment allowances. Each bus sits up to 50 people but they not always full. If we divide 9528 by 50, we get about 190 trips. We multiply 190 trips by € 5000 and we deduce that, from March to October 2016, € 952,000 have been spent. Assuming the flow has remained steady, projecting the expense for this procedure to date, we can estimate that it has reached and exceeded the total of 2 million euros. A remarkable public spending that shows not only waste, but above all an ideological position that chooses the use of economic resources to restrain, and sometimes “punish” migrants where those resources could be employed in policies for people’s inclusion in the socio-economic fabric of the country.

Upon arrival in Taranto – as reported in a STAMP dossier – identified migrants are assigned different destinations: those who are considered “illegal” by Italian law are subject to a decree of expulsion. In many cases, migrants are not forcefully taken to the border, but are allowed to exit the structure with a sheet that “obliges” them to leave spontaneously Italian territory within 7 days (deferred deportation). It is fairly easy to imagine – as do the members of the Republic’s Senate who have drafted the report in March 2017 – that these people will never actually leave the Italian territory but will enrich the ranks of that workforce that can be threatened, since it has no legal protection, which we see working in our countryside and in our construction companies, or in the prostitution market. Those who apply for asylum, after a few days (sometimes weeks) in the hot spot, are entered into the hosting program and later on transferred to SPRAR or CAS facilities. Lastly, the Senate’s inquiry adds, hosting program recipients who have their structure elsewhere in Italy, are released without the money to buy a ticket to travel back to that structure. They can also easily imagine how they can earn the money they need to return to their hosting towns or to the border to try to cross.

Alessandra Ballerini, a lawyer expert in human rights and immigration, has already expressed to the Repubblica newspaper back in September 2016 her perplexity over a transfer procedure that is not justified by any provision of law: the freedom of circulation for asylum seekers is not a limited condition in legal terms. In addition, the transfer of people who have already been identified is not provided by the code. The question that emerges consequently concerns the creation of the conditions of deportability of these people: the plan envisaged by Gabrielli or Alfano was rooted in the need to meet the unpublished political commitment, not set down in black and white either, to alleviate the pressure of migration on the countries of central and northern Europe, and not to meet an obligation. What allows these measures to be applied in absolute exceptionality is the definition of migrants in terms of emergency (although migration flows have a history of at least twenty years), of threat to public security, and of relevance to the terrorist risk.

On the one hand, to be sure, what migrants do not adhere to is the system of flow management of which they are the targets, thus manifesting a profound disagreement with the policies of the European migration government. The network of hosting centers, the current and European form of refugee camps, has in fact a two-fold function rooted in the ambiguity typical of the humanitarian approach (an ambiguity that shows in the conflict between “manifestations” and “latent functions”) unveiled by current anthropology.

On the other hand, taking charge of those who are considered “victims”; on the other hand, a form of population control, a way of managing global inequalities, justified by its humanitarian side of “taking charge” of people who are given only what strictly necessary for their biological survival.

In fact, for many, the hosting center system responds to a logic of semi-detention and storage of migratory bodies (from which a considerable profit is also obtained): think of the mechanism that does not allow them to leave the centers if not for a few days and with special permits, otherwise losing the right to refugee status. With respect to this form of “deviance” (not from law, but from a precise population management strategy) should be read the behavior of those who leave the centers and stay in the Ventimiglia area in the attempt to cross. Likewise, institutional responses do not seem to aim at restoring legality, but the goal seems rather to be the reintegration of the social order. The situation could be defined not so much in the usual terms of “exception space”, but with the recall of a category of Gunther Jakobs, that of “criminal law of the enemy”: a particular rule of law subjecting certain criminals, characterized by having displayed behavior deeply threatening for social and legal order. What migrants in transit violate is not the criminal code, but the social order that provided for them a precise place of care and confinement in camps, with places and processing times provided by others: they renounce their role as victims rescued and taken over by the Western humanitarian system which aims to represent itself as welcoming and charitable, and instead show their active role of subjects with a project, with the will to organize their own lives in an autonomous way, giving up those forms of welcome, crossing the borders, claiming their own spaces of action. Faced with this “embodied” position, the European practices implemented respond to an extrajudicial level that builds the danger, where it faces subjects who, in most cases, are not ascribable to the category of “offenders”. Definitely, in the complex construction of the migrant as a danger, of borders as a matter of mere public order, of the pernicious perception of Islamic terrorism passing through the migratory networks (completely debunked by the biographies of the actual attackers in recent years) it is possible to use a different law and transform free individuals into subjects that can be arrested and deported. When will migrants move to other categories?

As I think of all this, Biniam begins to pray, showing that only a symbolic and extra-human plan where good always wins can give strength to endure, but also criticize and bite, the social structures that define and limit the individual's ability to act.

“The European Migration Governance” COLUMN is edited by OSVALDO COSTANTINI, an associate researcher at the [Center for Religious Studies](#) of Fondazione Bruno Kessler, involved in the lifestyle and conflict research lines. As part of his interests, he writes scientific papers and participates in public press events, especially in relation to those aspects of migration more closely related to the imagination, the desires, and the related frustrations and disillusionments that move the actions of these new “damned of the earth”.

THE PREVIOUS ARTICLES:

[Maritime Alps](#)

[Emisfero Hotspot](#)

[The European Migration Governance](#)

Cover by **Francesco Piobbichi**, [Terra e libertà](#), modified by **Giorgia Miorelli**, Artigianelli Trento School student.

PERMALINK

<https://magazine.fbk.eu/en/news/gods-will-for-a-better-life/>

TAGS

- #migrants&EU
- #religiousstudies

RELATED MEDIA

- Osservatorio diritti : <https://www.osservatoriodiritti.it/2017/07/06/trasferimenti-migranti-costosi-pacchi-postali/>
- Articolo (La Repubblica / Genova) su prechi e misteri delle trasferte al sud : http://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/09/23/news/ventimiglia-taranto_sprechi_e_misteri_delle_trasferte_al_sud_volute_da_alfano-148334380/
- Dossier STAMP: <https://www.unponteper.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/DOSSIER-stamp.pdf>
- Stories behind a line (di Federica Fragapane) : <http://www.storiesbehindaline.com/>

AUTHORS

- Osvaldo Costantini