

# Separated Children's Migration in the Mediterranean Sea. An Ethnohistorical Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*In the imaginary of Italian people, the Island of Lampedusa (Italy) has always been considered a paradise destination for summer holidays. The beauty of this small island at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, far from big harbors and cities, with its rich biodiversity and unspoilt nature, has made it a national and international tourist attraction. However, in recent years its name become associated with scenes of tragic, desperate journeys made by people of different origins trying to reach Europe from North African coasts. This shift exists not only in Italian people's perception, but also all over the world, as the news related to Lampedusa and other Italian areas affected by this phenomenon often finds a place in major foreign newspapers. Even if migrants have been reaching Italian (and, more generally, South European) coasts for the last 20 years, the date of 3 October 2013 constitutes a significant turning point, as the shipwreck that occurred on this day led to numerous deaths and the Italian coast guard has been accused of an unsuccessful, belated rescue of the people on the vessel. In recent months the number of people, especially unaccompanied children, arriving by boat has increased. Most of them are fleeing from wars and persecution, and even if they are aware of the risk of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, they still decide to try. The paper presents the results of an ethnographic research conducted with unaccompanied and separated children in Sicily, in order to point out their oral memories.*

**Keywords:** *Human mobilities, Unaccompanied and Separated Children, Forced Migration, Mediterranean Sea, Ethnohistory.*

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the oral way to represent the migrant children's experiences by themselves, emphasizing the importance of oral sources of forced migrants as contemporary subaltern communities from an ethnohistorical perspective; the work gathers together the life histories of unaccompanied and separated children during their symbolic-liminal passages through the Mediterranean Sea and narratives and memories collected in the Sicilian area by ethnographic methods. The Island of Lampedusa has taken on a mythological connotation, as nowadays it represents the border between Europe and those who wish to reach it. Lampedusa, in fact, is not a real world anymore, as it is the first stop-over at the beginning of a journey into Europe. Terms such as »wall« or »invasions« should be reconsidered when writing about migrants and migrations; in fact it has been noted that when the Italian and international media makes claims about these arrivals using the terminology of fear, for example the words »invasion« or »assault«, this complicates perceptions of an already most complex issue. This is why

in 2008 the Italian National Council of the Journalists' Association (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Giornalisti, CNOG) and the Italian National Press Federation (Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana, FNSI), agreed on a »Code of Conduct Regarding Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Victims of Trafficking and Migrants«, called *Carta di Roma* (the »Charter of Rome«)<sup>1</sup> in order to reaffirm the importance for journalists to pay a particular attention to the terminology used while talking about migration. The Code also stresses that children's rights need to be protected and invites journalists to consult experts if they need to. Specifically, this paper focuses on forced migrant children's oral representations, fixing the relevance of this kind of oral sources in the contemporary era from an ethnohistorical point of view; the work gathers together the life histories of migrants during their symbolic and liminal passages through water and narratives and memories collected in the Sicilian area through ethnographical research.

## Separated Children as Subaltern Classes

Since its origins, Ethnohistory has characterized itself as an anthropological science that studies cultures and their evolution according to a complex matrix. For such reason, it is necessary to rely on diverse sources while conducting a research study: not only canonical, official ones – usually in written form – but also and especially oral sources and other kinds of information – for instance, gestural, iconographical, material and audio-visuals evidence<sup>2-8</sup>. This methodology allows Ethnohistory to propose itself as Ethnography and Interpretive Anthropology, which gives particular attention to the so-called »people without writing« or subaltern cultures. The ethno-historical approach endeavors to be especially attentive to gathering, recording, and preserving the oral tradition as a valuable, fragile source at risk of dissolution and destruction. Referring to this theoretical perspective, refugee children's or separated children (under 18 years of age, who are outside their country of origin and separated from either parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver) could be compared to a marginal or minority group in contemporary era, whose culture is committed to oral sources only and whose identity is subjected to fragmentation. In fact, their life stories consist on the »history told from below«, that is the subaltern factor derived from Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony<sup>9</sup>. In this perspective, forced children's mobility implies the belonging group abandonment and the obliged assimilation process in host society. The diasporic trip, in fact, is finalized to reach a better life and to realize the economic mandate as result of a family decision. The improvement of living conditions is the reason that mainly pushes minors to migrate. To determine this decision also contribute other reasons, such as fleeing from war, the search for new employment opportunities and escape because of religious persecution. Frequently expectations concern the economic and social redemption that should be finalized to find a job and earn in order to live in a satisfactory way and, at the same time, to give economic support to own family. As a consequence, for many children the journey is seen as a detachment from familiar bonds and the securities, it represents a moment of transition to adulthood. For Bracalenti, Saglietti<sup>10</sup>, the journey becomes a route, a displacement which can be real or metaphoric, between geographically and culturally different places and, finally, to adulthood. Despite their young age and the uncertainties inherent to some evolutionary phases, many migrant children perceived themselves such as adults, sole responsible for the economic livelihood of the family. The separated children' imaginary reflects, in fact, their sense of responsibility which can be traduced in a sense of duty to rescue and redeem the belonging family. Children experience an ontological precariousness that comes from their parents' choice; they undergo the decision to emigrate. Parents face the choice of son/daughter migration with great hope: on him/her converge the expectations of the whole family, who has a decisive role in all phases of the migration project, both during the preparation both when arriving in a new country. The bond with the family of

origin materializes in the experience of migration more present than ever, it puts pressure for the child. Unaccompanied children find themselves questioning their ethnic identity and having to integrate into a new culture and society trying not to lose their cultural traits. The migration experience is an element of fragmentation, because they are forced to deal simultaneously both the socialization process related to the particular stage of the cycle of life they are going through, both the acculturation related to the process of immigration. Separated children are also at risk of discrimination that derives from the condition of difficulty and disadvantage.

## Life Histories by Underage Migrants from an Ethno-historical Perspective

The research conducted on sea crossings to Lampedusa availed through having Ethno history as a methodological framework to capture the life stories of migrants. In this regard, qualitative interviews were conducted at the lodging houses »Guglielmo I«, a structure designated to the underage migrants living in the city of Palermo (located in Corso Calatafimi 45), during the months of April and May 2014. The system chosen was a focus group with 8 young men – 17.5 years old declared and presumed also by radiography performed to the radial bone – to encourage a better disposition towards narrating the experience of the sea voyage. The interviewees from Sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt developed and related their life stories under the reassuring presence of educators, with whom they share daily life in the residential home. The young survivors narrated stories of the fatigue they suffered during their journeys across land (Egypt, Gambia, Senegal, Nigeria and Ivory Coast) and sea. During the free interview I tried to grasp the migrant point of view, adhering to an anthropological, emphatic scheme and a suspension of judgment; but I had not taken into consideration that migrants face a journey across land before their journey across sea. Longer or shorter, the overland journey is for them the first stage of moving away from home. They are driven by strong, decisive motivations: from poverty to inter-ethnic conflicts or family expectations on future revenues entrusted to the chosen traveler. Leaving home and facing the overland journey leads to new aggregations of groups of strangers who become venture partners and share moods, expectations, and oedipic imaginary scenarios. Although exhausting – consider for example the route from Mali to Libya – in this phase of the journey survival is guaranteed by sufficient resources of food and water. No guarantee, however, is given on the length of the sea journey, nor the outcome of the crossing itself. Leaving the family home means facing the desert, human traffickers, marauders, and possible rapes and beatings. Proceeding through the qualitative interview, the young migrants lingered a little on the idea of the boat itself, as many of them are farmers coming from villages of Africa's inland areas, and had never seen the sea or a vessel before. Furthermore, due to their young age and low levels of literacy, I observe they are not able

to draw up a symbolic imagery related to the vessel. Experiencing the exhaustion brought about by a lack of sufficient water and food after four days of crossing, having to drink seawater, and having no knowledge of their distance from the mainland, a feeling of suspension was aroused in many of the migrants. The oral narratives deliver to us an idea of a flat, suspended time, because they spent it sleeping under conditions of strong despair and physical dehydration. »Sea no good« is an expression that recurred frequently throughout the interviews. A sense of becoming water during the journey followed the neglect of one's own body. To the migrants, the boat becomes a hospitable place, womb, or means of transport no longer; it is, rather, a liquid limbo, with each migrant barricaded in by the exhausted bodies and clouded mind of other travelers. Life perishes onboard these migrant boats. There, fellows do not know about other fellows dying, despite being crammed together forcibly.

Another powerful recurring episode which emerges from several of the oral narratives is the salvific sighting of a large boat which seems to them to embody, synecdochically, the intervention of the (Italian) people who welcome them. The spotted hull becomes a *deus ex machina*, hyperbolic and decisive of the sea wayfarer's fate. Following the sighting, time starts to flow again, hope returns, and the mind takes strength. This is the attainment of the dry land long spoken of by those ones who have before reached it; accounts of this mythic El Dorado-like land reach Africa with an absolutely unreal imagery made up of misunderstandings concerning the economy, welfare, culture, and sexual behavior of women that will greet them on arrival. But, for those who make it, berthing has the flavor of the beginning of a new life. Unlike the children's, the adults' life stories, quite naturally, are full of references to the most harrowing moments of the sea journey and its more or less lucky conclusion near Lampedusa. The tragedy of this chapter in their lives often marks indelibly all those men and women who ploughed the sea. At the migration medical practice of Palermo, the ethnopsychologist Monti has, since 2010, listened to migrants' stories and observed the resulting psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorders, and depression which so often follow. 17-year-old Lamin from Ghambia has a recurring nightmare linked to the sea and has always the feeling of swaying. Fear manifests itself in the liquid shape of a wave for Aissa also; an eighteen year old Somali survivor of a shipwreck, Aissa was rescued only because she caught hold of a boy who was also fleeing the wreck. Since that very day, she has suffered epileptic fits and bouts of a loss of consciousness during which she moves strangely, as if she were swaying amidst waves. Contrary to their travels through desert lands where water represents salvation, for migrants onboard the boats, water is representative of death. 19-year old Soni from Libya had run away from home with his brother and, once onboard a boat across the Mediterranean, he witnessed all sorts of tragic episodes including pregnant women crushed underneath dozens of bodies and even men fighting over an empty bottle of water as that empty bottle could act as lifesaver

in case of shipwreck. Soni eventually ended up in the sea. His boat capsized and Soni, who was not able to swim, clung to a floating piece of wood until he made it to safety; unfortunately, his brother did not make it<sup>11</sup>. For others, salvation comes from above, from a military helicopter that gathers up a father, mother, and their baby, while their eldest son is left to the waves where salvation proves absent and he drowns. A question arises at this stage: considering their lack of knowledge of what the journey ahead of them entails, of the vessel and the sea, and given that they are not able to swim in most cases, how is it possible that these exiles have no fear at all? The exodus by sea leads to some reflections about those cultural issues related to the journey and the salvific entrusting to the waters. In particular, the recent phenomenon of underage migrants arriving by sea on their own is increasing, and I am finding that these lonely child migrants are getting younger and younger. According to data published in 2013 by Save the Children, in 2011, 2737 minors arrived at Lampedusa, 2599 of which arrived without their families, in 2012 they were 2123 and by 2013 numbers had reached 7928<sup>12</sup>. They arrive as bearers of a desire of hope, of a better life, and this dream is entrusted to them by their families; perhaps, it is possible to assume that parents are willing/forced to renounce the need of love that binds the relationship between mother and child, as they are inclined to renounce the human capital that the child embodies, which is an absolutely primary condition in autochthonous cultures. Water, exemplary medium of a potential birth/rebirth, often associated with the idea of life in its various forms, not only is present in primitive and archaic cultures, but also in all Western complex cultures. Various cosmogonic myths have water as protagonist, or at least consider it as an element of relief, generative and fruitful, often coupled with the moon. For this reason, since prehistoric times, the complex Water-Moon-Woman has constituted the anthropocosmic circuit of fertility<sup>13-14</sup>. Conversely, as well as generating life, water is also able to take life away. In fishing or shipping trade communities the waters of sea, lakes, or rivers represent an oxymoronic source of both livelihood and danger at the same time: episodes such as shipwrecks and drownings favor a negative connotation of the water, which is therefore considered as a symbol of death. And indeed, among the life stories of migrants by sea, there are episodes of human sacrifices to placate the god of water. An Italian journalist for RAI has in recent years gathered on Lampedusa pier some stories from those who were fortunate enough to survive their travails at sea:

Some [migrants] are killed to reduce the weight of the tramps when water gets in, or to extinguish a protest generated from hunger, thirst or from an act of violence, or to eliminate witnesses, for contempt for the human life and for simple stupidity. It is said also of human sacrifices, children or adults left drowning to appease the fury of the sea. And people thrown into the offshore sea, so to remain far from the coast, and getting through that on their own: swim or die!<sup>15</sup>.

As in the legend of Moses, once given to the waves, our migrants, whether adult or child, can only hope that waters peaceful and salvific like those of the Nile, will carry them to the Sicilian coasts. Therefore, human life and its materiality are sacrificed to the sea water, in order to enhance its cosmogonic, magical and therapeutic function. And many children were born during the sea crossings. Here, birth becomes a public spectacle on a floating stage: there is no warmth or solace for the mother but for the company of her fellow travelers, there is nothing with which to clean the baby and nothing to take care of him but the naked body of his mother. It is an extreme physicalness, a forced ancestral feeling: there is no place for modesty, for reservations, nor a moment of solitude for that temporal border of maternal closeness. Gymnophobia is not allowed: men and women report using an empty bottle or a plastic container if they need to relieve themselves. In response to these dehumanizing practices of survival, Doctors Without Borders<sup>16</sup> have always drawn attention to the vulnerability of pregnant women or women in labour and women and men who are victims of abuse or torture in their home countries. Once migrants set foot on dry land, the poor welcoming conditions they are given and the beginning of a life in segregation conditions make them even more vulnerable. Those ones who survived the shipwreck are likely to remain confined for months in the Lampedusa center of first aid. Uncertainty about the future becomes more urgent and daunting: staying is an option, but escaping to reach northern Europe is the most attractive choice but it is equally risky. Among the many minors on the run, there are also those who try to integrate in the new land by learning Italian. There are some who want to forget, and others who want to be reconciled with the sea; water is ever-present in various rituals of purification and/or initiation, such as ablutions, sprinklings, lustration and baptism. A young man asked the social workers who assist him to bring him back to the sea; they led him to Mondello beach, a tourist-residential area of Palermo, to be reconciled with the sea and make peace with it. Metaphorically, he wanted to proceed to a baptism, a bath of re-establishment to mark this new phase of his life. First he knew the waters as a potential bringer of

death, and then, thankfully, as a bestower of life and even as an apotropaic element.

## Conclusion

From this perspective, both oral memories and written texts can be seen as cultural products by ignored actors of contemporary history. It is key to consider that ethno history takes into account the people's own sense of how events take shape and their own ways of constructing the past and of structuring life. In fact, as Simmons points out, ethno history is: a form of cultural biography that draws upon as many kinds of testimony as possible – material culture, archaeology, visual sources, historical documents, native texts, folklore, even earlier ethnographies – over as long a time period as the sources allow. One can't do this without taking account both of local-level social history and the larger-scale social and cultural environments that affected that history. This kind of holistic, diachronic approach is most rewarding when it can be joined to the memories and voices of living people<sup>17</sup>.

In this paper, I tried to compare sea crossing migrants' voices, in an attempt to capture their collective imaginary, elaborated during the travel, transmitted orally to their communities and reworked once again by those who are about to start a new boat migration. This comparison of oral production goes beyond geographical boundaries and spreads through sometimes precarious subaltern channels of communication (oral transmissions, satellite phones, Facebook and other social media, etc.). It would also be interesting to look at the audiovisual products of the recent years that refer to Lampedusa. This is why the last point to be underlined, in these final considerations, is that the issues related to migration by boat in the Mediterranean Sea are spread all over the world and discussed not only by scholars and politicians but also by the civil society, because of the impact that these news stories have on people. The Charter of Rome has been mentioned, but associations and blogs also contribute to provide quality information and updating analysis on themes related to asylum seeking and migrants' rights.

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## **MIGRACIJA SEPARIRANE DJECE NA SREDOZEMNOM MORU IZ ETNOHISTORIJSKE PERSPEKTIVE**

### **SAŽETAK**

U imaginariju talijanskog naroda, otok Lampedusa (Italija) se oduvijek smatrao rajskim odredištem za ljetni odmor. Ljepota ovog otočića u srcu Mediterana, daleko od velikih luka i gradova, sa svojom bogatom biološkom raznolikošću i netaknutom prirodom, ga je učinilo nacionalnom i internacionalnom turističkom atrakcijom. Međutim, u posljednjih nekoliko godina njegovo ime je postalo povezano s prizorima tragičnih i očajnih putovanja od strane ljudi različitog porijekla koji pokušavaju doći do Europe sa sjevernoafričkih obala. Ovaj pomak postoji ne samo u percepciji talijanskog naroda, nego također i u cijelom svijetu, kao novosti vezane uz Lampedusu i drugim talijanskim područjima pogodnim ovim fenomenom često pronalaze svoje mjesto na stranicama velikih stranih novina. Iako su migranti dostizali talijanske (i južnoeuropske) obale u posljednjih 20 godina, 3. listopada 2013-e predstavlja značajnu prekretnicu kad je brodolom koji se dogodio na taj dan doveo do brojnih smrtnih slučajeva, a talijanska obalna straža je bila optužena za neuspjelo i zakašnjelo spašavanje ljudi na plovilu. U posljednjih nekoliko mjeseci broj ljudi, posebno djece bez pratnje odraslih, koji dolaze brodom je u porastu. Većina od njih bježi pred ratovima i progonom, pa čak i ako su svjesni opasnosti prelaska Sredozemnog mora oni se ipak odlučuju pokušati. U radu su prikazani rezultati etnografskog istraživanja provedenom na Siciliji u suradnji s djecom bez pratnje i djecom separiranom od roditelja. kako bi istaknuli svoja usmena sjećanja.