

African Asylum-Seekers in Israel: Illegalization, Incorporation and Race Relations

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005 African asylum seekers began entering Israel clandestinely from Egypt. Most were originally from Eritrea and Sudan (including Christians from South Sudan and Muslims from Darfur and other regions), while migrants from Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana and Congo (DCR) came in smaller numbers. Their main motives for migrating to Israel stem from the insecurity they felt in Sudan, Egypt and Libya, the transit countries they passed through on the way to their destination. In these transit countries they were subject to arrest, detention and deportation, in particular after the tragic 2005 Cairo sit-in when dozens of Sudanese were killed by the Egyptian police. The precarious living conditions in these countries—no work permits, few schooling options, no social or medical rights and daily racism¹—added to their feelings of insecurity. Israel thus offered a new destination for those fleeing religious and ethnic persecution (Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea), unrestricted military conscription (Eritrea), civil strife or conflicts (DRC, Ivory Coast) and human rights violations. Most migrants paid Bedouins smugglers large sums of money to guide them through the Sinai desert to the Israeli border. Along the way many were tortured, severely abused, kidnapped and held for ransom (see Rozen, this volume). Today the number of asylum seekers in Israel approaches 40,000. The majority of them (72% from Eritrea and 20% from Sudan) cannot be expelled, yet they have no legal status. In addition, around 3,000 are being held at Holot, an "open" detention facility near Israel's southern border where conditions are precarious, while 18,000 have been forced to return "voluntarily" to their countries of origin or to third countries (usually Uganda and Rwanda).²

This article has three main objectives: a) to examine how the State of Israel has begun tightening its geographical and political borders; b) to explore asylum seekers' growing participation in Israel's economy and society; and c) to attempt to map the complex relations developing between Ethiopian-Israelis and these new African migrants. Indeed, Israel has begun to tighten its geographic and political-legal borders in an attempt to contain the flow of non-Jewish African asylum seekers by resorting to processes of criminalization and illegalization, economic exploitation and abuse, and social and urban marginalization. At the same time, the asylum seekers are becoming increasingly involved in economic and social spheres of Israeli daily life. Thus they are challenging the state's policy of exclusion by demonstrating reverse trends of informal incorporation, turning them into a new urban minority that shapes them as local economic and political actors. While the main image put forward both by civil society and the refugees themselves is one of victimization, this population has simultaneously begun to demonstrate the dynamics of agency, socioeconomic mobility and

Israelization. Finally, the increasing visibility of this African population in Israeli society challenges both the territorial borders and the political boundaries of the ethnocratic Israeli regime and raises new issues concerning identity, race, and migrant categories. The new racial constructs offered by the presence of these black non-Jewish groups in Israel become particularly salient when examining the relations between the Ethiopian-Israeli population and the African migrants.

The material discussed in this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Israeli cities between 2008 and 2012. The fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan. The interviews were conducted in English and in Hebrew and took place at shelters, cybercafés, churches, social gatherings and demonstrations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.³ In addition, the researcher conducted interviews with Israeli residents of South Tel Aviv in December 2011, with Ethiopian-Israelis between 2010 and 2012 and with Israeli employers in 2012. Some of these interviews were set up in advance, while others resulted from random conversations. Nevertheless, due to large divisions within each migrant community along gender, religious, ethnic, tribal, regional and class lines as well as based on migration motives and status in Israel, the experiences described here should not be seen as representative of each group.

I. UNWANTED "INFILTRATORS": TIGHTENING BORDERS AND GENERATING EXCLUSION

The recent flow of non-Jewish African asylum seekers has challenged both the sovereignty of the State of Israel and its international commitments. In response to this challenge, the authorities have tightened the geographical and legal borders confining the migrants by detaining them as criminal "infiltrators" and tolerating their economic exploitation and urban marginalization. By excluding the asylum seekers from access to social and political rights, Israel hopes to discourage the settlement of non-Jews. Israel has adopted a similar logic of exclusion with respect to labor migrants who have been entering Israel from Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa since the 1990s (Berthomière, 2008; Kemp and Rajjman, 2008; Kritzman-Amir, 2009).

1. Political illegalization

The rate of migrants crossing Israel's southern border rose sharply, from 2,758 individuals in 2006 to a peak of 17,242 in 2011.⁴ In an attempt to curb the influx of migrants clandestinely crossing its southern border, in 2010 the State of Israel decided to build a "smart fence." Growing terrorist activity in Sinai was another justification for this decision. The 245 km fence along the Israeli-Egyptian border was completed in December 2013. Extending from Rafah in the north to Eilat in the south, the 5 m high steel grid barrier is topped with barbed wire and equipped with advanced surveillance equipment, including cameras, radar and motion detectors. Once a porous border that was easily crossed, the border is now almost hermetically sealed. Since completion of the fence, the number of asylum seekers entering Israel from Egypt has abruptly dropped, with only 43 migrants entering Israel in 2013. This drastic decrease is also due to political unrest in the Sinai and harsher treatment of the migrants by Bedouin smugglers and Israeli authorities. Yet this reinforced border security raises new

legal and ethical dilemmas for Israel, which at the same time must contain non-Jewish African asylum seekers and also uphold its international obligations as signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees (1951).⁵

Other repressive measures taken by the government to deter African migration include creating detention centers, passing amendments to existing legislation and exerting pressure for “voluntary” repatriation. Asylum seekers who cross the border are usually apprehended by Israeli military troops patrolling the border zone and handed over to the Israel Prison Service, which detains anyone entering the country unlawfully under the Entry into Israel Law. Saharonim, a makeshift detention center made up of tents and prefabricated cubicles, was set up in July 2007 in the desert close to the Egyptian-Israeli border, adjacent to the Ktzi'ot prison. Up until June 2012, African asylum seekers were detained there several weeks or in some cases several months, their pictures, identity details and fingerprints were entered into a biometric data base and they underwent medical exams. They were released “conditionally” if they could prove they were Sudanese or Eritrean nationals, who *prima facie* were issued collective temporary protection. The renewable visas they were given, which varied from one to three months, were actually non-deportation orders that did not grant them permission to work. Moreover, they were denied access to refugee status determination (RSD) procedures, financial assistance, medical insurance and social rights. In 2007, as a humanitarian gesture a small number of Muslims from Darfur (450) were granted temporary resident status and the rights associated with this status (access to welfare, work permits). In addition, Israel also deports migrants when their requests for asylum are determined to be unfounded or their home country is deemed “safe” again. Thus, when the temporary protection of Ivoirians expired in 2010, they were expelled, while in the summer of 2012 South Sudanese were brutally deported to this newly independent country.⁶

Starting in June 2012, under the newly amended Prevention of Infiltration Law all migrants who crossed the border were detained up to three years without judicial review, or indefinitely if they were citizens of an enemy state such as Sudan. Only in September 2013 did the Supreme Court order that this automatic detention be cancelled. To circumvent this decision, in December 2013 the state opened the new Holot “open” facility, where detainees are allowed to leave during the day but must be present for roll calls and at night. In 2014, the Knesset passed a fifth amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which allowed anyone illegally crossing the border from Egypt to be detained administratively for up to 20 months. In February 2016 the Knesset limited detention in Holot to 12 months. Most of the 3,300 asylum seekers detained in Holot were summoned to the facility when their visas were not renewed. Many had been in Israel for several years, and some were leaders in their communities. During the period of their detention, Israeli authorities pressure them to choose whether to leave Israel or remain in detention. This explains the high number of “voluntary departures” between 2013 and 2017, totaling around 18,000.⁷ Some are returned to Eritrea and Sudan, while others are sent to a third country (Uganda or Rwanda) that signed secret agreements with Israel to accept these migrants in return for unspecified aid. The asylum seekers often become illegal in these third countries, do not receive any protection or means of subsistence and re-emigrate elsewhere. The

fate of those who return to their homeland remains difficult to assess, though some report on detentions, torture and threats to their lives.⁸

Since 2009 the Israel Ministry of Interior has been in charge of processing all asylum claims, determining refugee status and issuing visas. Only since 2013 have Sudanese and Eritreans been allowed to submit applications for RSD (refugee status determination), but as of October 2016 only four Eritreans and one Sudanese have been granted refugee status, a recognition rate below 1%. The state mainly brands the migrants as “infiltrators,” a category originating in the 1950s to designate Palestinians and Jordanians who clandestinely entered Israeli territory. This designation echoes today's global trends toward the criminalization of asylum seekers (Agier, 2008). De Genova (2002) defines migrant “illegality” as a spatialized socio-political condition that is central to the ways in which migrants are racialized as “illegal aliens” in the space of the nation-state. In the Israeli case, *illegalization* of African asylum seekers is even more iniquitous since they are legally entitled to protection by state-issued visas. This ambiguous policy of repression and humanitarian assistance has led to the emergence of right-/less non-citizens who cannot be expelled (according to the UN High Commission on Refugees’ guidelines for Eritreans, Sudanese and Congolese) but who have no possibility of continuing their migration, leaving them trapped between the political borders of rights and the territorial borders of the state.

2. Economic abuse and exploitation

Depending on their visa type, some asylum seekers can work legally in Israel, but most cannot. Yet since the Israeli High Court of Justice decided in 2011 that employers who employ asylum seekers with conditional release visas and no work permits would not be prosecuted or fined, the Ministry of Economy has not been implementing sanctions on employers. As a result of this ambivalent policy, thousands of Eritreans and Sudanese are employed in hotels and restaurant kitchens, in cleaning, in construction work, in shops or in local food markets. Recruitment agencies and temporary employment offices also subcontract this migrant work force, including to municipalities. Yet Israeli employers often exploit the migrants' vulnerability, hiring them as day or week laborers and disregarding labor laws or employing them without providing medical coverage. Numerous migrants complain about unpaid salaries, wages below the minimum, long hours, unpaid overtime, and no paid days off. Oscar from Eritrea recounts:

“I worked as a waiter in a wedding hall for one year – the conditions were very bad. I didn’t get paid for the last three months and now the employer refuses to give me the money. I used to be a teacher in Eritrea. I never did this kind of work. Now I need to send money to my family who lent me thousands of dollars to pay the smugglers. When I came to Israel I thought I could continue my studies in biology and do a master’s degree. I don’t understand why we cannot go to university here...”

Many asylum-seekers are educated and skilled workers for whom working in unskilled and poorly paid jobs represents professional downgrading. In addition to the abuse and lack of protection, they have very little employment security. Unemployment is high, part-time employment is common

and some work several shifts. These jobs are mainly found in urban centers like Tel Aviv, which, like other global cities, has a high demand for low-paid unskilled service jobs such as cleaning, restaurant work and work in the tourism sector. This situation generates economic exploitation, labor restructuring and new forms of global inequalities that often lead to the formation of a legally and economically disadvantaged migrant underclass and produces poverty and urban marginality (Sassen, 1998).

In the Israeli job market, this new migrant work force has indeed resulted in competition and a restructuring of interethnic relations. For instance, asylum seekers now compete with Israeli Arabs for low-skilled jobs, with Jewish Israeli employers often preferring African migrants over locals. Avi, an Israeli who owns a fruit stand in the Jerusalem Mahane Yehuda market, prefers to employ Eritreans rather than Arab-Israelis, as he once did:

"Eritreans work harder, I pay them less and I know tomorrow they are not going to stab me in the back."

Hundreds of Sudanese are also employed as cheap labor in Arab villages in the north of Israel, though tensions sometimes erupt when young Arab Israeli locals object to their presence.⁹

3. Social and urban marginalization

The African asylum seekers are often portrayed as the ultimate Other, differentiated from the local population by clear racial, cultural and religious boundaries. This "othering" is also reinforced by the rhetoric of certain politicians and religious figures that consider the African migrants to be a demographic threat to the country's Jewish and Zionist identity and depict them as racialized others who spread diseases, increase criminality by stealing goods or raping women, and render the public space insecure.¹⁰ In addition, municipalities and influential individuals threaten landlords and real estate agencies not to rent to African migrants. In 2010, for example, the city of Bnei Brak launched a campaign against renting apartments to asylum seekers following a letter by rabbis condemning landlords resorting to this form of income.

Since 2010, hostility and resentment have grown among the residents of neighborhoods with a high concentration of asylum seekers. Signs such as "Go back to Sudan" are displayed on some buildings. Shula, a middle-aged Israeli woman who lives in Tel Aviv's Neveh Shalom neighborhood, claims she is afraid to walk down her street at night, where dozens of beer-drinking Africans gather on the benches. Lenny, an elderly Israeli man from the Shapira quarter in south Tel Aviv, says he feels unsafe sitting in the park where "Africans sleep, eat, urinate and defecate." Haim, a prominent religious figure and resident of the Hatikva neighborhood, declares: "They've conquered our neighborhood!" These discourses clearly evoke images of invaded spatial boundaries and attempts to reclaim national borders by regaining control of local urban territory. The alienation felt by most south Tel Aviv residents in public spaces can be seen as an "erosion of their urban rights" not only vis-à-vis recent migrants but also with regard to residents of north Tel Aviv. Thus they are motivated to protest in the name of the "imperiled right to the south of the city" and act out of a sense of "defensive urban citizenship" (Cohen and Margalit, 2015).

Indeed, during the first months of 2012 several criminal acts by Israelis against African asylum seekers culminated in a violent anti-immigrant riot in May 2012. Molotov cocktails were thrown at daycare centers and businesses run by asylum seekers, Eritrean stores were vandalized, apartments in Jerusalem and Ashdod were set on fire and asylum seekers were physically attacked.¹¹

Mulu, an Eritrean who has been in Israel since 2009 and owns a cybercafé in Jerusalem with his uncle, reflects on his fears from the violent attacks:

"Two apartments were burned during the past year. I'm afraid next time it will be mine. Sometimes I think coming to Israel was a mistake and I would have been better off staying in Eritrea... Israelis insult me, tell me to go home to my country. I wish I could go somewhere else but I have no choice but to stay."

Madeleine from Eritrea describes it like this:

"We cannot know about the future because we don't know if we can stay in Israel, if we should learn Hebrew, if we should move to a bigger apartment. We are so anxious and we feel unwanted. We are scared."

In turn, the asylum seekers complain they cannot survive without legal status and without access to welfare services, health insurance or social benefits. The Levinsky Park in Tel Aviv has become the main area where homeless asylum seekers sleep on the grass or benches. This is where between 2012 and 2013 a soup kitchen even served free meals daily to the African communities. When I visited the park in 2011, I met Roy, a student from Eritrea who crossed the border into Israel that same year. He was released after several weeks at the detention center near the southern border and had been sleeping in the park for the past three days. Benjamin, from Sudan, who lost his job and had no more money to share the rent with other migrants, had slept here for the last week. Ali from Darfur, who has been in Israel since 2009, commented as we walk through:

"Israelis pay taxes to have a nice park, not a place where Africans sleep. The government of Israel needs to do something about this. We find this shameful too."

The veteran asylum-seeker community in Israel provides a welcoming space for newly arriving migrants, who rapidly contact friends or relatives to provide emergency lodging and financial support during their first weeks in Israel. Sharing apartments with other asylum seekers is common. These apartments are mostly in run-down and overcrowded buildings, where conditions are often unbearable.

II. INFORMAL INCORPORATION OF "REFUGEES": VICTIMIZATION, AGENCY, AND ACCULTURATION

Israeli civil society and local NGOs often depict the asylum seekers as "refugees" and victims. Yet their increasing participation in the economic and social spheres of daily life has empowered them as new urban actors and has highlighted the agency of these non-citizens who in many ways are becoming "new Israelis," albeit without rights.

1. Vulnerable victims and Israeli civil society

Since the first massive wave of asylum seekers streamed into Israel in 2007, civil society has been playing a major role in stressing Israel's humanitarian duty of welcoming African "refugees," noting that many Israeli citizens or their parents were themselves refugees fleeing Eastern Europe or the Middle East. A number of NGOs have been instrumental in offering humanitarian support (including emergency shelters), monitoring the treatment of asylum seekers in Israel, pushing for legislation to defend their rights and filing petitions against human rights violations, and criticizing the detention policy and conditions, especially regarding women and children.¹² In addition, left-wing Knesset members and Israeli activists, who have created an image of African "refugees" as vulnerable victims, continually struggle to legitimize the presence of these Africans in Israel, using what Fassin (2011) has elsewhere referred to as the "politics of compassion" to explain certain forms of humanitarianism towards migrants in Europe when they are not granted political asylum.

Furthermore, the asylum seekers themselves justify the necessity to be recognized as refugees by recalling their arduous journey to reach Israel and their need for a safe haven. Some asylum seekers traveled for years before reaching Israel, spending various periods in transit in Sudan, Egypt or Libya. Others planned to migrate to Israel while they were still in their home countries. Itineraries evolved and a wide network of smugglers began organizing passages directly from the countries of origin. Crossing the Sinai desert was fraught with danger and violence (Anteby-Yemini, 2008) and became even more risky with increasing trafficking in human beings. Asylum seekers have been detained, tortured and sexually abused by Bedouin smugglers who demand a high ransom to release them¹³. Even though they were aware of these dangers, many claim they had no choice, as Meles, who arrived from Eritrea in 2012, reported:

"I had nowhere to go; I was afraid of trying to cross from Libya to Europe; my brother died on a boat trying to get to Italy. Israel was the only place of refuge. When my country is safe, I want to go back."

Many refuse to be seen as criminals, especially if they are victims of human trafficking and torture, such as John, a young Eritrean who has been in Israel since 2009:

"Why are we arrested like criminals and thrown into prisons? All we want is a safe place. We are fleeing persecution and now, after all we go through in Sinai we are treated like criminals here."

In Israeli cities, asylum seekers have begun mobilizing and protesting as well, and the city has become a site for new claims and entitlements and a place where the politics of contestation emerge (Sassen, 1998). Asylum seekers invoke their suffering and persecution in Africa to establish a parallel with Jewish history and the "refugee" past of many Israeli citizens. Some, particularly those from Darfur, do not hesitate to compare the horror of the genocide in Sudan to that of the Holocaust in Europe (Anteby-Yemini, 2009; Sabar, 2010). They set up their own organizations, such as the *African Refugee Development Center*, to defend, promote and claim their rights as "refugees" and to

incorporate the international human rights discourse on asylum. They demand access to RSD procedures and to social and medical rights. On the one hand, they voice local claims linked to the rhetoric of victims of persecution and aimed at an Israeli audience, while on the other they make global claims as part of a transnational discourse on refugee rights (Anteby-Yemini, 2009).

2. Ethnic entrepreneurs and urban actors

A growing number of Eritreans and Sudanese have also opened ethnic businesses, especially in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Eilat, among them restaurants, cybercafés, bars, nightclubs, hairdressers, groceries, photography shops (for weddings and baptisms), celebration halls, and phone and computer stores (Anteby-Yemini, 2009). Restaurants in particular have thrived for they answer a need among many single men who have no wife, sister or mother to cook at home and also play a symbolic role in remembering the homeland (Sabar and Posner, 2013). A study by Barak-Bianco and Raijman (2015) among Eritrean and Sudanese restaurant owners in Tel Aviv shows that many see self-employment as a path to mobility and to restoring their self-esteem. They manage to overcome legal barriers and restrictive regulations by resorting to fictitious owners and using self-financing, given the lack of capital in the community. Nevertheless, these asylum-seeker businesses are marked by high failure rates and low profits.

Intermediaries within these migrant communities become real estate agents or employment contacts for restaurants looking for workers. Some even invest in other African countries, such as Emmanuel from Sudan, who told me he sends money to an account in Uganda because he knows he will need to leave one day and claims his country is not safe. Women also run small businesses, such as informal childcare or beauty services (sometimes in their homes) and bridal shops. One Eritrean woman manages the first shelter for battered women among the asylum seekers. Musical ensembles and DJs perform at churches, nightclubs and various events. The asylum seekers have also set up numerous organizations, such as mutual aid associations or political opposition groups (Hashimshony-Yaffe and Yaron Mesghenna, 2015), thus creating Eritrean or Sudanese communities in exile.

The asylum seekers also consume goods and services, pay rent and can be seen as new consumers and productive laborers, similar to the Sudanese refugees in Cairo (Grabska, 2006). Like in other global cities where migrants have become new urban consumers (Sassen, 1998), the marginalized urban asylum seekers in Israel thus contribute to the local economy by demanding low-cost services, products and housing, consuming food products, purchasing digital devices, using public transportation systems and sending money abroad. Indeed, this has led to the emergence of semi-formal neighborhood economies. As has also been observed elsewhere (Agier, 2008), new forms of agency have emerged that provide a different image of asylum seekers than solely as victims.

3. Israelization processes

African asylum seekers have also become new city users by developing new ways of belonging through their workplace or leisure activities. They become visible by appropriating public spaces such as parks and playgrounds, lawns and street benches, which become spaces of urban

sociability. They are also highly visible in the cities as they bike or take buses to work, shop at local markets or stroll along the beaches. Every morning at 6:00 am, before starting work at his cleaning job, Maurice from Sudan works out at the gym facilities on the Tel Aviv beachfront. Elizabeth from Eritrea jogs every evening along the promenade to keep in shape. Every Friday afternoon, Leonard from Eritrea goes to a beach restaurant with music, dancing and a “big party” to unwind from the week’s work and meet Israeli friends. Children and families sometimes spend Saturdays at the beach. These various appropriations of city spaces suggest a new form of urban citizenship among asylum seekers.

The children of asylum seekers attend school in the Israeli public school system,¹⁴ where they quickly learn to speak Hebrew and become acculturated into Israeli culture. Interestingly, many African families choose to give Israeli first names to their children born in Israel, some explaining they hope to stay in the country. In their eyes, this social strategy may give their children chances to be included in Israeli society, just as hanging Israeli flags in their shops and homes can be seen as an instrumental social practice of belonging.

The workplace is also a space of interaction with Israelis, local cultural norms and the Hebrew language. Bernard from Eritrea says he is good friends with Israelis at the restaurant where he works: “We often joke and eat together before the restaurant opens.” Thomas, once a history student in Eritrea, claims he has been reading books about Jewish history and the Holocaust and knows all the Jewish holidays from his daughter’s school and from discussions with Israeli co-workers. Paul, also from Eritrea, explains he has mastered the laws of kosher cooking from the restaurant where he works. In this sense, some of the asylum seekers have acquired “working-class cosmopolitanism” (Werbner, 1999) with competences in Israeli culture. This informal incorporation into local society also raises new issues concerning identity, race and migrant categories, to be examined through the asylum seekers’ relations with Israeli citizens of Ethiopian origin.

III. NEW RACIAL RELATIONS: AFRICAN NON-CITIZENS AND ETHIOPIAN-ISRAELIS

The ethnic visibility and racialization of African asylum seekers in the Israeli setting is further challenged by the presence of the Ethiopian–Israeli population, thus compelling us to rethink the boundaries of the sole color line within Israeli society and to examine racial difference in relation to identity, legitimacy, belonging and citizenship.

The first massive migration of Ethiopian Jews was Operation Moses in 1984-5, followed by Operation Solomon in 1991 and the ongoing immigration of descendants of Ethiopian Jews (Falashmoras). Today the Ethiopian community in Israel has grown to over 130,000. Because of persistent problems in the social, cultural, economic and religious integration of Ethiopian-Israelis, they are often portrayed as a poor, illiterate, and marginalized underclass subject to discrimination and racism. Few studies exist on those who have successfully integrated and on the emergent middle class of Ethiopian-Israeli professionals (Fanta-Vangenstein and Anteby-Yemini, 2016). The question of race has been a major component of the Ethiopian-Israelis’ integration experience. For those who feel completely Israeli, skin color is no longer an issue. For others it remains an important identity marker,

as they still encounter racist attitudes and experience discrimination (Anteby-Yemini, 2004). Research on how Ethiopian origins, class, blackness, Jewishness and nationhood are negotiated and reconfigured today in the Ethiopian-Israeli community is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of the recent presence of over 40,000 Christian and Muslim non-citizen African asylum seekers in Israel.

Relations between the two groups remain complex. Most Ethiopian-Israelis despise the “infiltrators” for illegally migrating to Israel, while others feel solidarity with the “refugees” and even develop romantic relations with them. Contact and interaction may occur at concerts or dance clubs, or in the workplace, where Ethiopian-Israelis in the police, the army, and the prison services come into contact with asylum seekers. Furthermore, interesting business relations have developed between the two groups. At first, Ethiopian-Israeli shopkeepers and restaurant owners hired Eritreans to work and clean. At the same time, Eritreans began buying spices, traditional clothes and ethnic products in Israeli-Ethiopian stores and became eager customers in the bars and restaurants of the Ethiopian-Israeli community. Gradually, Eritreans opened their own businesses and now rely on Ethiopian-Israelis to supply them with imported Ethiopian merchandise for their groceries and restaurants. Nevertheless, two opposing trends characterize these inter-group relations: (1) Israelis of Ethiopian origin recognize the threat African asylum seekers pose to their own identity and fiercely distance themselves so as not to be confused with them, or (2) Israelis of Ethiopian origin support and defend African asylum seekers in order to denounce racism in Israeli society at large.

1. Distancing and differentiation of Ethiopian-Israelis from African asylum seekers

A number of Israelis of Ethiopian origin refuse to associate themselves with the African asylum seekers. One reason is that they have sometimes been mistaken for African migrants, thus challenging their own identity as Ethiopian-Israelis. Roni, 20, a woman born in Israel, claimed:

“I don’t want to become close with them; we have nothing in common.”

Another young Jewish man of Ethiopian origin adds:

“I don’t want to have anything to do with African refugees, especially the Sudanese who were so cruel to my people in the refugee camps in Sudan, on their way to Israel.”¹⁵

An Israeli-Ethiopian soldier cautioned me:

“The Sudanese are dangerous; they will turn against us and ally themselves with the Arabs; it’s like letting enemies into your country.”

A woman of Ethiopian origin in a prominent government position even complained:

“All the infiltrators should be sent home... this is not their country and they can find another place of refuge!”

Several Ethiopian-Israelis have also been known to wear a *kippa* when walking through the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station area in order not to be mistaken for African migrants, stopped and asked for their documents.

Perhaps Mark, an Israeli-born young man of Ethiopian origin, best illustrates the ambiguous economic ties developed with this cheap labor force. Mark owns an Ethiopian restaurant in Jerusalem. He hired an Eritrean asylum seeker to clean and wash the dishes yet claims that "Eritreans are mean," "they've always been at war with Ethiopians" and in Israel "this hatred continues." He pays his Eritrean worker less than minimum wage but says he is so intelligent that one day he will probably open his own restaurant right next door... He is also worried about the increasing number of African asylum seekers moving into his neighborhood and believes they should be expelled to their country.

Some of these quotes clearly show that some Ethiopian-Israelis believe that asylum seekers do not belong in Israel. In a way this assertion allows them to claim their legitimacy as citizens and to draw the boundaries of the Israeli nation. These Israeli-Ethiopians adopt the official discourse against "infiltrators" and reproduce the internal borders the state has constructed between Israelis and illegal African aliens that are a threat to the country. This allows them to differentiate themselves from Africans (and especially Eritreans), who are sometimes physically indistinguishable from them, and to construct social and political differences vis-à-vis a group that otherwise may seem too similar to them. Some of the Ethiopian-Israelis' animosity towards the asylum seekers, especially those from Eritrea, may also derive from the decades-long war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, even though opposite trends have also been observed.

2. Solidarity and identification of Ethiopian-Israelis with African asylum-seekers

Other Ethiopian-Israelis have a different attitude and demonstrate compassion towards African asylum seekers. Tesfay, who immigrated from Addis-Ababa to Israel in 2000, also owns an Ethiopian restaurant in Jerusalem. He told me he had very few customers until the asylum seekers began arriving. Now his restaurant is always full. He is very happy these people migrated to Israel and says he helps them whenever he can:

"If they need an apartment, I try to find them a place to live; I call friends and see if there is a room available somewhere. Also when they look for work, I try to see if I know something, if I hear about something. I even give them food from the restaurant when I can."

Paul, a young Eritrean student who fled his country in 2010, has for the past three years been working at a restaurant owned by an Ethiopian-Israeli family of religious leaders in Tel Aviv:

"I am very happy in this job. The owners are very nice to me and always invite me to eat with them at their gatherings. They treat me like family and pay me well. If I need something, I can ask them. They even helped me find an apartment."

Marsha, 31, who immigrated to Israel when she was small, is also sympathetic to the asylum seekers:

"When I hear the Eritreans' stories, I remember how my family fled to Sudan and how difficult escape journeys can be and I think we must help them."

Esther, who immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia in 1991 with Operation Solomon, and her husband own an Ethiopian music and video store in the center of Israel. She recently hired a young teenager who arrived alone from Eritrea to help out in her shop. After a few days, she felt so sorry for him that she “adopted” him. She lets him sleep at her house and feeds him and says he is “like a son.” Other Israeli-Ethiopians are more outspoken about defending the asylum seekers’ rights and a few young activists have even demonstrated with asylum seekers in support of their cause. This solidarity is exemplified in an interview with an Israeli-Ethiopian lawyer, Emmanuel Melese Hadana:

“The Sudanese in Israel are the same Sudanese who accepted us with open arms when we were refugees in their country... I don’t want Israel to close its gates to refugees... it’s not a Jewish value.”¹⁶

These responses indicate that some Ethiopian-Israelis are kind to the African asylum seekers, sometimes feel close to them and identify with their plight. They also benefit from this new consumer group when they own ethnic shops or restaurants. The discourse of these Ethiopian-Israelis emphasizes the asylum seekers’ identity as “refugees” and vulnerable victims who need to be “saved.” Yet no shared identity or solidarity as “blacks” has emerged among the two populations due to the very different ways in which each group’s racialized construction has been produced and the major distinctions played by citizenship, identity and belonging in differentiating between them. When it comes to racist rhetoric and violent attacks on the asylum seekers, however, several Israelis of Ethiopian origin did hint at a common threat as “non-whites” in Israeli society, where racism can turn against “all blacks,” including them. This is especially true among some integrated Ethiopian-Israelis who had discarded the racial issue and were suddenly reminded of their skin color when mistaken for asylum seekers. Therefore, various re-racialization and de-racialization processes allow Ethiopian-Israelis to either redraw boundaries and differences or reenact identification with African asylum seekers.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that despite the state’s criminalization and tolerance for the exploitation and marginalization of asylum seekers in Israel, these people are gradually being incorporated into the local economy and society and are undergoing processes of Israelization. They are also demonstrating agency and entrepreneurial initiatives by investing in small business ventures and by becoming urban consumers, in contrast to remaining the victims that civil society has labeled them. In addition, their migration has compelled us to rethink race in Israel, in particular by looking at relations with Ethiopian-Israelis. Some Ethiopian-Israelis believe that asylum seekers should be expelled, reinforcing their sentiments regarding Israeli citizenship and defining who does or does not belong. Others support the asylum seekers’ cause, also reinforcing their feelings as Israeli citizens confident enough in their status to include non-citizens in Israeli society and extend the borders of belonging to other migrants from Africa.

Perhaps the specificity of the situation of African asylum seekers in Israel lies both in the repressive official measures generating their exclusion and in the various modes of belonging and incorporation adopted by these marginalized non-citizens as they construct local Israeli and diasporic Sudanese or Eritrean identities. Despite Israeli exclusionary migration policies toward non-Jews, this refuge migration is nonetheless broadening Israel's religious, cultural and racial borders and adding it to the global map of African forced migration. The greatest challenge of this migration is perhaps to the notions of identity, space and citizenship. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the Black Hebrews, an Afro-American group of Christian origin who consider themselves to be the "authentic Israelites," have succeeded in obtaining basic rights in Israel (education, residency, health insurance, welfare services), thus representing a mode of "soul" citizenship that offers an alternative model to the link between identity, territory and nation (Markowitz et al, 2003). Only the future will tell whether African asylum seekers will be excluded from joining the Israeli collective or whether they will find a path to new forms of inclusion.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more on racism in Egypt, see for example Grabska (2006).

² Figures are from the Israel Ministry of Interior, Population, Immigration and Border Authority (https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/foreign_workers_report_q3_2016/he/foreign_workers_STATS_Q3.pdf).

³ Fieldwork in 2008-2009 was partly funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) through the MOFIP project directed by C. Parizot.

⁴ Source: Israeli Population, Immigration and Border Crossing Authority

(<https://www.piba.gov.il/PublicationandTender/July2013>)

⁵ On the legal and moral aspects of the Egyptian-Israeli border see T. Kritzman-Amir and T. Spijkerboer (2015).

⁶ See ARDC and Hotline for Migrant Workers Report, Feb. 2013: "Do not send us so we can become refugees again": from 'nationals of a hostile state' to deportees: South Sudanese in Israel.

⁷ The Israel Interior Ministry's yearly reports give the number of "African infiltrators" who "voluntarily" left the country. For the last report see:

https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/foreign_workers_report_q1_2017/he/foreign_workers_stats_q1_2017.pdf

⁸ See Hotline for Refugees and Migrant Workers reports: "Deported to the Unknown": testimonies of asylum-seekers who left Israel to a third country, Dec. 2015 and "Where There is no Free Will: Israel's 'Voluntary Return' procedure for asylum-seekers", with ASSAF, April 2015.

⁹ cf. H. Shaalan, "15 Hurt in Brawl between Africans, Kfar Manda Residents", Ynet News, 14.06.2012.

¹⁰ Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu declared that migration of "African infiltrators" is a "national catastrophe and a threat to the society, the economy and the security", *Haaretz*, 07. 12.11.

¹¹ See E. Tsurkov (2012), "Cancer in Our Body": on racial incitement, discrimination and hate crimes against African asylum seekers in Israel, Hotline for Migrant Workers report, Tel-Aviv.

¹² The Refugee Rights' Forum includes most organizations working in this field: ASSAF, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, Hotline for Migrant Workers, Kav le'Oved, Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Amnesty International, African Refugee Development Center and the Program on Refugee Law of the Tel-Aviv University Law Faculty.

¹³ See *The Dead of the Wilderness: Testimonies from Sinai Desert*, Hotline for Migrant Workers report, 2011, Tel-Aviv, and Mirjam van Reisen et al., *Human Trafficking in the Sinai: Refugees between life and death*, Tilburg University/EEPA, Brussels, Oct. 2012.

¹⁴ Regardless of their status, children must attend Israeli public schools under the compulsory education law. However, because Israeli citizenship is based on *jus sanguinis* and not *jus solis*, these children have no possibility of becoming citizens.

¹⁵ He is referring to Operation Moses, in which Ethiopian Jews who had walked from Ethiopia to Sudan in the hope of reaching Israel were secretly airlifted to Israel.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mec0CpQrVmM>, retrieved on Oct. 2, 2013.

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