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Escape, Survival, "The Jump": On African Refugee Routes – Ząbek, Bachelet, M'charek

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 2, S. 181–199

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For from the life that you received,
No magic gate will let you leave.

Czesław Miłosz, *The Moral Treaty*

Suffering, escape, violence. Refugee experiences are both the starting point and the boundary of this text. It focuses on moments when anthropology serves only as a testimony. It is detached from fully comprehending what is ultimately incomprehensible and what may never be fully understood.

In 2020, an exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Poland, as part of an ongoing series. Initially, it depicted post-war reconstruction efforts, but its later version, "Monumentomania," turned its attention to monuments. Visitors were especially drawn to one installation that most closely resembled the essence of a monument – a structure demanding remembrance and continual reflection. This piece was a model of barbed-wire fences, evoking harrowing images from Second World War and the Holocaust – people pressed up against wire barriers. The exhibition was held in the newly designed, brightly lit modernist Zodiak pavilion (initially shown at the TRAF0 Center for Contemporary Art in Szczecin). This meticulously crafted model, created with

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precision akin to a top architectural studio, depicted objects that are never admired – barbed-wire fences or, in their modern form, razor-wire fences with barriers, supports, lattices, and rods.¹ These fences have increasingly lined Europe's borders in recent years to block the flow of refugees, primarily from the Middle East and Africa. Within a few months, such a fence was constructed along Poland's border with Belarus. Thus, the work created by Łukasz Skąpski and aptly titled *Stalemate: The New Architecture of European Borders* is a miniature model of the currently erected barbed-wire fences. These contemporary barriers, in miniature, clearly represented a new form of technology aimed at sealing off Europe's internal territories and isolating them from the influx of refugees – determined arrivals from the Global South. It captures a troubling aspect of early twenty-first-century migration: the rise of newly engineered, technically advanced, professionally built razor-wire barriers. These are fences, metal walls, and wire fortifications equipped with lighting, motion sensors, and cameras.

Until 2020, in the Polish experience, barbed-wire fences tended to matter as distant, remote entities, separated from us by more than half a century in time and hundreds or thousands of kilometers in distance. They were, of course, present in some nearby institutions (such as the army, prisons, and detention centers), but they mainly remained removed from everyday life and work. In September 2020, these instruments of violence returned to Central Europe and came close to home. Since then, hypothermic, exhausted, and dehydrated refugees have found themselves stranded in swamps and forests along the eastern borders of Poland and Lithuania. By January 2022, construction of a high-tech wire fence had already begun. Just a few weeks later, a photograph captured a Yemeni refugee caught in the fence under the glare of powerful lamps – hanging upside down, his foot entangled in the wire, cutting into the top structure of the barrier.

The work of Polish ethnologist and Africanist Maciej Ząbek on exile and refugees in Africa² stands out as an exception, vividly revealing this distant, largely invisible world that had, until recently, been mostly forgotten. Against

1 Łukasz Skąpski, *Klinch. Nowa architektura granic europejskich (trzy modele z dziewięciu składających się na instalację)* [Clinch. New architecture of European borders (three models out of nine that make up the installation)], in Łukasz Zaremba and Szymon Maliborski, *Pomnikomania. Warszawa w budowie, 5.10–3.11.2019*, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, Warszawa 2019, 53, accessed January 20, 2023, cf. https://artmuseum.pl/public/upload/files/WWB_broszura_18_lekki.pdf.

2 Maciej Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce. Etnografia przemocy i cierpienia* [Refugees in Africa. Ethnography of violence and suffering] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018).

the backdrop of earlier works that predate the deaths at the closed borders in Poland and Lithuania amid the influx of people fleeing war-torn Syria and the Middle East (by sea or further overland via Serbia and Hungary), Ząbek's work stands out as the only such multifaceted and deeply layered ethnographies of suffering, escape, and violence. It provides a comprehensive picture of these harsh realities, from which the high-tech installations of the twenty-first century in Łukasz Skąpski's models effectively separate the people of Europe from those in Africa. The book is a series of stories recounting the recurring experiences of refugees – more tales of escape and suffering-laden journeys than of life stories. These are accounts from refugees, escapees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and migrants moving in search of work, water, land, or even the hope of relative safety.

Barbed and razor wire appear repeatedly throughout the book in various contexts. Even on the back cover, we see the serene face of the ethnologist, with a line of barbed wire visible in the background. Two detailed studies expand this image and provide some insight into the anthropology of flight and refuge: Sébastien Bachelet's³ work on overcoming barriers in the Spanish enclaves in Africa, and Amade M'charek's⁴ exploration of the significance of sea-crossing attempts in southern Tunisia.

Anthropology, Violence, War

At the beginning of his extensive book, Maciej Ząbek outlines the origins of international law intended to regulate the mass displacement of people fleeing war and famine. These regulations were created in response to the plight of those who, during Second World War, were forced from their homes, fleeing atrocities inflicted on civilian populations. This relentless, mechanized, genocidal warfare emerged in twentieth-century Europe on an unprecedented scale. Thus, the 1951 Geneva Convention, which established principles for the protection of refugees (and became the foundation for the extensive work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), is, as Ząbek argues, a law resulting directly from the suffering of millions in Europe. Right from the beginning, the author highlights the distinct nature of the African refugee experience.

African refugees today, he writes, are not the same kind of political refugees as those who fled wartime Poland or France during Second World War,

3 Sébastien Bachelet, "'Wasting Mbeng': Adventure and Trust Among Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco," *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology* 84 (5) 2019: 849–866.

4 Amade M'charek, "Harraga: Burning Borders, Navigating Colonialism," *The Sociological Review* 68 (2) (2020): 418–434.

who often carried with them “a certain sense of ideological and personal honor.” “They [African refugees – T. R.] do not have a sense of pride in having resisted authority. Their displacement arises primarily from an accumulation of suffering – family, administrative, and material hardships – and the hope for a better life.”⁵ African states also long debated whether they should accept refugees at all, as the movement of millions of people often represented a threat from their perspective, with the looming risk of losing control. African countries to which hundreds of thousands flee from hunger, such as Sudan, began implementing refugee control policies as early as the 1960s. Later, under UN (UNHCR) influence, they established a strict refugee regime with a support system that ultimately provided inadequate material assistance. What Ząbek makes clear from the outset is, above all, the continuity and enduring nature of displacement in Africa – the near permanence of refugee routes, expulsions, and escapes, and their lasting presence on the continent over at least the past several decades.

An example of the persistence of exile can be seen in the cycles of drought, followed by famine, that affect countries in the Sahel, the southern edge of the Sahara, where fragile, rain-dependent nomadic herding barely sustains survival. These disasters are most famously associated with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Chad, where, as in the late 1960s or mid-1980s, droughts bring devastation – livestock dies, crops fail, and millions of people flee to escape starvation. These people were photographed by renowned humanitarian crisis photojournalists like Sebastião Salgado and James Nachtwey. It was for these hundreds of thousands of refugees that donations were collected worldwide during the famous 1985 LiveAid concert and the multi-artist performance of *We Are the World*. Those who survive will settle on the lands of farmers and other pastoral tribes in Sudan, Darfur, and Chad, gradually sparking tensions and conflicts over land, water, and access to resources. Many migrate to large African cities, such as Khartoum, a sprawling metropolis of ten million, in search of means to survive. Over time, the escalation of armed conflicts in Eritrea and Ethiopia will spark new conflicts and tensions with Sudan in the 1980s. Sudan, for its part, will both implement the UNHCR conventions and requirements and apply the regulations developed by the Organization of African Unity (OAU). These OAU guidelines distinctly differentiate between refugees fleeing war, suffering, and hunger and those perceived as the political and military vanguard of states seen as potential threats to internal security. The history of these hardships lies in the fact that in Africa, especially around the Sahel region, people have periodically been forced to relocate *en masse*

5 Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 74. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

due to meteorological and ecological catastrophes since the administrative decolonization of the 1960s. They often settle on more fertile lands among farming communities, which almost inevitably leads to recurring conflicts and clashes. These conflicts take the form of tribal and religious tensions and wars, as exemplified by the turmoil in South Sudan, the regions of Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains, and the armed clashes along the Chad-Sudan border, particularly in Darfur. In addition to causes of displacement related to recurring crop failures and drought, Ząbek details the brutal logic of ethnic and religious conflicts, such as the more than decade-long war between the Arab-African Muslim North and the predominantly Black Christian and animist South.

In examining the origins of African displacement, a brutal logic of violence and cruelty is starkly revealed, evident, for example, in Sudan's civil war. This logic surfaces in an "ethnography of suffering" – stories of refugees that are intensified through their collection, interconnection, and accumulation. These are the stories of people encountered by the ethnographer in camps on semi-desert peripheries, in urban refugee registration centers in Sudan, and in Kenya. Ząbek follows the works of scholars like Liisa Malkki, John Davis, and Barbara Harrell-Bond into "zones of suffering," where it becomes increasingly clear that ethnography is nearly impossible, both ethically and emotionally. This challenge is heightened by the setting, where such suffering is revealed under the authority of UN camps, with layers of control and protection. It mirrors the experience of hundreds of aid workers moving in air-conditioned vehicles with UNHCR logos to air-conditioned, secure offices standing just beside rows of refugee tents. The author thus writes about conversations in camps in Kenya, for which he obtained official permissions from UNHCR, but these interactions were far from the kind of research where one lives among and shares daily life with people. "The research I was conducting at that time did not adhere to the principles of ethnographic study." "Twice a day, I was driven from the UNHCR base to the refugee camp in a four-wheel-drive vehicle equipped with a satellite radio, wearing a bulletproof vest and accompanied by armed police."⁶

The stories that reach the ethnographer in these settings – in aid stations and refugee camps – are accounts that gather experiences of death, dispossession and escape. At times, these narratives are silenced or obscured; at other times, they are intensified and escalated. They contain underlying constructs, with past and present obscurities, much like the experiences of Second World War and Holocaust survivors – camp experiences that, in Poland, have been collected and interpreted with deep commitment. In Ząbek's book, however,

6 *Ibid.*, 22.

these accounts form into continuous threads of events organized to reconstruct the relentless logic of escalating armed conflicts that devastate the lives of farmers, herders, and refugees, reaching major African cities. These recurring stories and series of remembered atrocities form a sequence of events. Ząbek recounts testimonies from conversations detailing cruelties against women, forced to bear children – future soldiers. He also describes accounts of their killing whenever the perspective of warlords shifts. Soon after, there are also stories of women soldiers who themselves commit atrocities while simultaneously experiencing cruel treatment. In these accounts of ethnic and political strife, we see how violence spreads across the country – how the rebellion in South Sudan transforms into internal conflict, as the people of the Nuba Mountains and the Dinka tribes from pastoral highlands turn against each other and begin to kill one another, drawn into fighting by internal political factions aligning with military leaders.

Thus, when an independent South Sudan finally emerges after years of conflict, it carries with it a history of prolonged suffering that continues to generate tensions and strife. At the very roots of this nation's story are the recurring, severe droughts in the Sahel, which have simultaneously turned people into "environmental refugees." Waves of drought and the collapse of entire herds continually pushed people from Ethiopia into Sudan, which was negotiating refugee policies with the UNHCR and OAU, pressured to enforce controls by international institutions and NGOs (a term sometimes read in African parlance as neocolonial missions: "No Good Organizations"). The droughts in the Sahel also displaced Arab herders from Chad, who then migrated into Sudan's Darfur region, effectively invading local farmers' lands, armed with firearms, as mounted "janjaweed" warriors on horseback. In response, the attacked farmers organized their own new wave of violence: self-defense militias, also armed, sometimes with Kalashnikov rifles. Against this backdrop, patterns of violence and brutality emerge, exposing the vast landscape of Africa's suffering – a "heart-shaped" continent⁷ where, over the past five decades, tens of millions have died in wars with the highest toll worldwide. "Violence," writes Ząbek, "in the broadest sense of the word, is the use of force, coercion, assault, but also the acts of shaming, defiling, desecrating, exerting influence over another person's thoughts, behavior, and physical condition." "Violence and cruelty," the author continues, "are widespread practices in Eritrea, systematic in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of

7 From the publisher's note on the cover of Olga Stanisławska's book, where it mentions Graham Greene's words (who said that this continent, Africa, is shaped like "the human heart"), see Olga Stanisławska, *Rondo de Gaulle'a* [De Gaulle's roundabout] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Książkowe Twój Styl, 2001).

Congo, and constantly present in Guinea, Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, Togo, and Congo-Brazzaville.”⁸ Refugees from Eritrea, for instance, are escaping mandatory military service that can extend beyond six years, where they are frequently beaten, humiliated, and subjected to torture. If they flee abroad and are deported back, they face the threat of execution. These cycles of violence include, in turn, arrest, and beating by police and security forces, imprisonment marked by sanctioned violence, and, more broadly, the experience of being subject to the local legal system.

Journeys, "Voyage," Community: The Passage to Europe

However, the accounts that gather and accumulate acts of violence within the narrative stand out in this ethnography. It is important to remember that these are most often the voices of victims and refugees – people gathered in refugee camps in northern Kenya, Uganda, or Sudan.

The stories – articulated in conversations with a “white,” “bearded” European, a protected official, and at the same time, a patient listener – carry a situational gesture of framing one’s life as an experience of persecution, of recalling trauma and violence. This echoes the accounts of witnesses and survivors of Nazi camps, the “survivors,” as Agnieszka Dauksza wrote, with their “fragmented narratives.”⁹ The biographical method, along with the biographical material itself, encompassing experiences of pain and survival, is far from uniform. It contains layers of past and present obscurities, moments of chaotic, tangled narration – a “trajectory of suffering” in which, as Fritz Schütze and Gerhard Riemann¹⁰ demonstrated, the individual is driven by external forces that are perceived as misfortunes. In his book, Ząbek frequently juxtaposes not so much the biographies as the experiences of the journeys taken by fleeing travelers, which unfold as treks filled with random suffering and accidental death. From Ethiopia to Sudan, Egypt, and then to Europe; from Gambia to Senegal, then onward to Mali, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, and from there to Europe. From Chad to Darfur, to Sudan and Libya, and then to Italy.

Refugees carry their forged or “weak” passports, often unaccepted by border guards and police, who may recognize their status or deny it, depending on the

8 Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 143–144.

9 Agnieszka Dauksza, *Klub Auschwitz i inne kluby. Rwane opowieści przeżywców* [Auschwitz Club and other clubs. Torn stories from survivors] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2016).

10 Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze, “‘Trajektoria’ jako podstawowa koncepcja teoretyczna w analizach cierpienia i bezładnych procesów społecznych” [‘Trajectory’ as a basic theoretical concept in the analyzes of suffering and chaotic social processes], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 36 (2) (1992): 89–109.

political climate, military actions, or the possibility of accepting a bribe. Along the way, they encounter both those who help and those who deceive, bringing death. In the Maghreb countries, especially, the dark skin of people from South Sudan often invites violence, as it does for people from West Africa, like in the stories of migrants from Gambia or Senegal. “The ‘white’ Arabs, or generally people from northern cities like Tripoli, immediately recognize the ‘black’ people from the South and treat them with cruelty,” explained Masane, recounting his journey. “If the police catch you, they can throw you in prison – no trial, nothing. If you don’t pay, they’ll beat you like an animal, hitting you on the head. [...] They give you two days to pay. If you don’t have money, they make you call your relatives, beating you so that your family understands they have to pay.”¹¹ At the same time, strangers also offer help: they give money, and buy food – like roasted corn cobs – as they are aware of the refugees’ difficult fate. In the account of an Ethiopian man, recorded in his memoirs, Sudanese people they met along the way warned them that the desert was terrifying and that they might die there. “His wife cried for us,” he wrote, “but we told him that once we had made the decision, we couldn’t turn back. If we returned to Ethiopia, we would all be killed, and the situation in Sudan was going from bad to worse.”¹²

Recurring themes in the stories include losing one’s way and the risk of death from exhaustion. The desert poses a constant threat, where it’s easy to get lost just a few kilometers away from the Nile. The accounts also show how destructive and exhausting the journeys on foot are, with people lacking the strength to carry enough water. This is where the stage of crossing the “internal sea” begins – the Sahara – where the peoples of the North organize transport. This is the first point at which refugees pay large sums for transport, with families back in Ethiopia, Gambia, Senegal, or Cameroon pooling their resources to cover the cost. Refugees are packed tightly onto pickup trucks, with only minimal water supplies, and along the route, the drivers often demand additional fees. If they do not receive them, they threaten to abandon the refugees in the middle of the desert, condemning them to certain death. Those who refuse to pay sometimes attempt to continue on foot, often with tragic outcomes. Refugees from Central or West Africa, raised amid forests and savannas, are not only unfamiliar with the desert but, as Ząbek shows, are almost panic-stricken by it. They ask fishermen along the Nile, smugglers, and sometimes even conmen for guidance – how to act, where to go, and whom to approach.

11 Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 277.

12 This is the famous story of Taddele, who in the 1970s made his way from Ethiopia to Sudan, then to Egypt, and from there to the United States, see Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 257. See also Tadelles Teshale, *Life History of an Ethiopian Refugee (1944–1991): Sojourn in the Fourth World* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

They all head north: to Algeria and Morocco, and from there to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, where they try to cross fences and barbed-wire barriers – increasingly professional structures, equipped with cameras and motion sensors. Some attempt to reach Spain via the Strait of Gibraltar or the Canary Islands by small boats and rafts. Many also cross the Sahara directly to Libya, a country where the state administration has been volatile for more than thirty years and where there are uncontrolled groups of transporters, but also groups that intimidate refugees and extort money from them. Smugglers use threats, blackmail, and violence. After collecting payment, people set off across the sea to Lampedusa and other islands – ideally in September – in boats entirely unsuited for the journey, often carrying three or four times the number of people they can safely hold. Overloaded and unstable boats capsize under the impact of waves. Occasionally, a fire breaks out on board, forcing passengers to jump into the water. Some are pulled from the sea by local fishermen – chilled, covered in gasoline, and barely conscious. The sea route to Europe from Libya and Tunisia is particularly dangerous, with smugglers writing the risk of death into the whole endeavor. The death toll is counted in the thousands.

As a result, many refugees often opt for the land route. They first settle in Moroccan cities, typically in neglected, trash-filled suburbs, living in terrible conditions as they prepare for the “crossing” into Europe (to Ceuta and Melilla). The ethnographer Sebastien Bachelet spent months with such groups of young migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, in his case – from Cameroon.¹³ He lived, among other places, in the suburbs of Rabat, the capital of Morocco, where he accompanied them as they prepared for the “jump” to Europe. They stayed in a dilapidated, overcrowded building with cramped rooms and no running water. The place was occupied by Cameroonians who gathered there to finally undertake *mbeng*, the “journey to Europe.”

This paints a complete picture of the struggle to reach Europe, to make the “jump” (referred to as “jumping borders,” *sauter les frontières*) across to the other side. It is a process that requires time and careful preparation. In the suburbs, in cramped, illegally constructed buildings, and along the way in forest camps in northern Morocco, the struggle to succeed – to make it across to the other side – unfolds. As Bachelet’s interviewees explain, the key is not so much in knowing how and where to cross but in “building the right mindset” or “developing the proper mentality.”¹⁴ They climb the walls in groups, at multiple spots simultaneously, to make it harder for the guards to bring them down.

13 Bachelet, “Wasting Mbeng.”

14 *Ibid.*, 857.

However, whom one meets during the preparations is crucial, as, in these conditions, people rely on each other for safety. They protect one another from bandits and the Arab city guards, who often expel migrating “black” individuals from the city, even taking them out to the desert.

This closeness in cooperation builds trust among them and, moreover, helps them endure the harshest conditions. Two Cameroonians whom Bachelet met, along with two others, lived for months in the Cameroonian ghetto – a crowded building locally referred to as “the Embassy” (*l’Ambassade*). It is there that plans and preparations take shape as entire groups ready themselves to cross the razor-wire fences. In this “Little Cameroon,” people gather their strength, preparing for what seems impossible – overcoming fences lined with barbed and razor wire, with barriers in between that tear at their hands and bodies. They also prepare themselves for pain, for enduring physical suffering, for experiencing what they call “the shock” (*le choc*). This jump, as the Cameroonians say, cannot be done alone; it requires finding the right people who help build the mental strength needed to reach the goal, to “achieve the goal,” as they put it, and, at the same time, to “conquer oneself.” This does not change the fact that these relationships are fragile, just as life on the refugee journey is unstable. “Life is hard in Morocco,” where they try to work illegally on construction sites and in markets, only to be cheated, intimidated, denied wages, and sometimes even beaten. These temporary bonds also eventually break down; they are fragile, and the worst thing is causing someone to lose their chance, to fail in *mbeng*. Suspicion and accusations may target those who disrupt cooperation, but this is unrelated to the right to an individual attempt, known as *pontiac*. It is understood that such a solo crossing can succeed with the proper mental focus. Thus, it is not uncommon for everyone to know that someone is going solo; by morning, they vanish with their zodiac, a one-person inflatable raft. What truly angers migrants, however, is disrupting the focus, breaking *mbeng*. A properly prepared mindset is like a concentrated force of unbreakable will to overcome the barriers – that is why people with a “good mentality” gather together. The jump is the moment that determines whether they will live, or reclaim their lives; this is the purpose of the entire psychological journey they undergo. When Sebastien Bachelet attended an impromptu gathering at *l’Ambassade*, he met a young man from Cameroon with whom he spoke at length about the crossings. After a while, however, the Cameroonian began shouting, accusing him of being a spy for the border guards. “But it doesn’t matter; we’re ready!” he yelled. “We can eat your fences!”¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., 854.

In Gambia and Senegal, the journey to Europe is almost a cultural archetype – a path to follow, a challenge that defies fate. This journey, known as *backway* in Gambia, as Ząbek points out,¹⁶ is seen as a test of strength, much like the traditional hunt for dangerous animals. This repeated, and highly desired path to success – to Europe – becomes a recurring pattern, where not migrating or not attempting the “jump” is perceived as a “weakness,” a lesser way of life. In the opposite direction, from Europe to Africa, come photos of happy refugees posing against the background of beautiful buildings, well-kept cities, and (often not their own) cars. There are also photos, as Ząbek describes, of joyful brothers after the jump, wearing torn, blood-stained clothes but already in UN camps and undergoing refugee procedures. Earlier, they had not only trained to climb makeshift ladders and ropes twisted from rags but had also carefully burned all their documents and passports to ensure nothing could be found on them. Only a few make it across, but there are stories of Africans being guided and supported by their families living in France, of finding stable jobs – for example, as truck drivers. Most, however, end up working and living on the streets or in forced labor on plantations, many surviving day to day. Many who send their earnings back to relatives or parents in Africa are deceived, only learning of the betrayal years later when they return. However, stories of success and bravery on the journey continue to circulate, inspiring a desire for competition and status within the social structure. They inspire people to cultivate a “strong mentality,” to “test their will,” and to attempt the magical jump – something that, from a systemic and logical perspective, is entirely impossible.

The Awareness of Violence: Journey, Risk, Death

When we view ethnographic research conducted among sub-Saharan refugees as a kind of encounter with an extreme experience, almost impossible to convey, it still reveals a range of realities and diverse stories of suffering and violence. In numerous accounts from conversations in UNHCR camps in Central Africa, it becomes clear that the role of the “official” or the “bearded white man” elicits narratives of complaint, lament, or uncontrollable, painful memories of escape and survival. These stories often accumulate and intensify the portrayal of violence. These experiences repeatedly emerge in successive narratives, not only tied to stories of fleeing war zones, such as in South Sudan or Eritrea but also to the violence present in large African cities that function as refugee camps. Ząbek, like other authors – such as Maaïke Vledder in her work on the camp known as Moria

¹⁶ Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 110–114.

on the Greek island of Lesbos¹⁷ – illustrates that these camps are essentially vast systems of detention and segregation for hundreds of thousands of people. They are mechanisms for controlling and monitoring how refugees live, how they build shelter, how they eat, how they and their homes look like. The materials, coverings, tarps for tents, bags of flour and rice – everything refugees receive for survival – are controlled by humanitarian workers and marked with the logo of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Manuals for humanitarian staff even recommend sudden head-count of camp residents, preferably at night or early in the morning (such recommendations can be found in training guides for the global humanitarian network Oxfam).¹⁸ The Kenyan camps Kakuma and Dadaab, as described in Ząbek's work, are essentially city-states for refugees from South Sudan and Somalia. They are organized into distinct quarters for different ethnic and national groups, each governed by its own strict rules. The food portions distributed there – a ration of flour and a small amount of oil – barely allow for biological survival, with both symbolic and real violence woven into the fabric of daily life. Despite this, refugees try to endure by seasoning their rations, bartering with local farmers and other groups in the camp, and sometimes even growing small gardens. Even a domesticated and familiarized space is under constant surveillance. On Lesbos, in the massive Moria camp for refugees from Syria, the Middle East, and Africa, ethnographer Maaïke Vledder observed how people, after painstakingly adapting to their environment – such as by planting herb gardens to prepare traditional dishes – were forcibly relocated to other areas, how they have additional groups crammed into their already crowded tents, creating unbearable overcrowding.¹⁹ In contrast, the camp staff buildings are usually separate, offering large, modern, air-conditioned spaces that stand in stark contrast to the vast expanses of makeshift homes constructed from sticks and canvas. Also, Maciej Ząbek illustrates how this symbolic, exclusionary violence is widely felt and gradually recognized. When white, air-conditioned, four-wheel-drive vehicles marked with UNHCR logos – equipped with satellite antennas and carrying staff to offices – speed down the camp's pathways, they are often met with flying stones and hostile shouts. Similarly, in the Moria camp, the frustration and anger of refugees, driven by relentless overcrowding and the harsh system of surveillance and

17 Maaïke Vledder, *Agency in the Border Trap: Humanitarian Power in the Moria Camp*, MA Thesis under the supervision of Mateusz Laszczkowski, University of Warsaw, 2021.

18 Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 336.

19 Vledder, *Agency in the Border*, 30–33, 50–53.

headcount, often turned into protests and acts of aggression. In September 2020, a fire broke out in the overcrowded camp on Lesbos, and as the destruction unfolded, cries of euphoria and destructive joy were heard from the camp's own residents. As Maaïke Vledder recounts, they shouted while striking plastic bottles: "Azadi, azadi, azadi, azadi! No camp, freedom! No camp, freedom! Azadi, azadi, azadi, azadi!"²⁰ – "No camp!" "Freedom!" The word *azadi* in Farsi also carries the same meaning: freedom.

In the camps and along Africa's migration routes, the controlled care within refugee camps and the immense risks on migration paths are accompanied by other forms of violence, which, as Ząbek demonstrates, are difficult to comprehend from the legal perspective of the global North. For instance, Sudan's legal system itself incorporates elements of violence. Although Sudan has ratified international covenants on civil and political rights and the Declaration of Human Rights, its legal system effectively combines Islamic Sharia law with premodern forms of tribal law. This includes provisions for material "blood compensation" for crimes and formal permissions for inflicting physical suffering.

Elders' courts, essentially a form of tribal councils, operate in large African refugee camps within the sectors of specific ethnic groups. These courts can impose brutal corporal punishment for violations of customary norms, such as abortion, alcohol consumption, intimate relationships, relationships with Christians, or apostasy.²¹

The outer edges of major cities, such as the areas surrounding Sudan's Greater Khartoum, home to over ten million people, with its refugee settlements and camps, represent the final circle of violence. This is where millions of refugees from the conflict-ridden South Sudan find themselves, fleeing threats posed by both government forces and various factions of fighting rebels. Crowded into makeshift shacks and tents on the city outskirts, these people live without rights or any form of protection. In legal and humanitarian terms, they are internally displaced persons (IDPs). Visibly darker-skinned and originating from the South, they stand out in the hostile cities of the North, where they have slim chances to survive and find work. On the one hand, the authorities classify them as internally displaced persons (thus, they

20 *Ibid.*, 6.

21 These are local, tribal laws, and the deliberations of the elders often conclude with rulings such as compensation for severe beatings in the form of "blood payment," which demonstrates a local acceptance of the right to control another person's life. It is also tied to the frequent violation of human rights in Africa: beatings, imprisonment, the sanctioning of slavery, violence against women, and, most distressingly, widespread violence against children, especially refugee children. See Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 158–162, 185–194.

do not fight in the South), but on the other hand, they are treated with brutality, seen as a burden on the fragile state, and as potential rebels.

They receive no support and exist as if outside the system. While they may seek work and help in the city, they are simultaneously stripped of their possessions and deceived by the authorities. Often, they are ordered to deposit their belongings in the desert and construct settlements from tarps and poles, only to be forcibly relocated overnight as their settlements are then bulldozed. Many are left nearly abandoned in the desert, where, deprived of warm clothing and shelter, they fall ill or even die from the cold.²²

These are the people who, driven by their determination to survive, attempt to cross to Europe. They migrate, gather in Libya or Tunisia, pay smugglers, and board overloaded, unsteerable boats. This escape route from Africa's zones of violence, however, is a conscious one shaped by prior experiences of risk and danger. Tunisian anthropologist Amade M'charek illustrates this experience through the image of refugees' extreme determination – a resolve so difficult to imagine outside this world, particularly among maritime authorities and southern European populations. She photographs and describes, among other things, a boulder on the Tunisian Mediterranean coast with a spray-painted arrow pointing toward the sea and the words: "Europe, this way." Above the word "Europe," written in Arabic, there is also a drawing of a crown. This, of course, represents one layer of African reality. M'charek recalls the words of a refugee who had just paid everything he could and said that while such a journey might cost him his life, "it is better to die than to be dead while living." M'charek highlights the profound irony of this gesture, as everyone knows the way to Europe. At least in theory, everyone knows that they could go to an office, an embassy in Tunis, or travel to the idyllic island of Djerba, connected to the mainland by a causeway, and board a plane from there. And since that is ultimately not an option, this "helpful" clue appears, as much and as little. Young people embark on this journey, defying the logic of borders, as it has been widely known for years in Tunisia and Algeria "they burn them" – undertaking what they call *harraga*, derived from the Arabic word *ahrag*, meaning "to burn." Initially, the term referred

22 Such sudden displacement of people from their encampments in cities, often in the middle of the night, represents one of the most brutal strategies used against internally displaced persons (in this case, by the Khartoum authorities) described in this work. Attempts to resist such evictions to the outskirts of the city, as Ząbek reports, "were suppressed with the help of the police." He continues: "according to eyewitness accounts, the displaced had literally nothing. They couldn't take anything with them because, by the time they returned from work, their homes [tents – T. R.] were already gone. In the remote outskirts of the city where they were taken, they sat on sacks during the day, exposed to the scorching heat without water, and at night, to escape the cold, they buried themselves in the ground. Some in this way died." Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 300.

to bypassing visa rules between Tunisia and Algeria, dating back to a time when it was still relatively easy to travel from the Maghreb to France. Later, it came to signify burning borders and fences – but in a way that left them still passable. In one account, the anthropologist describes a young Tunisian who succeeded in making it to Lampedusa and then Sicily, where his family in France guided him further. They sent money for bus tickets, allowing him to travel through Italy on his way to France. Finally, after a week, his family welcomed him to France, and before long, he was enrolled in a school. *Harraga* is difficult; it requires immense effort from both the daring individuals and their families or wider support networks. Without preparation, determination, and constant strategizing – zigzagging, gathering strength – similar to those preparing for *mbeng* in Morocco, one cannot overcome the barriers of fences and the treacherous sea.

Moreover, as M'charek demonstrates, *harraga* is also a way of “expanding” the living space, as more family members often follow later. At the same time, it is terrifyingly dangerous: people from Tunisia’s southern coast almost daily collect objects, clothing, and shoes washed ashore by the waves. In one of her works, the author describes how a local resident collects and stores these items to raise awareness about what is happening around them and at sea. “Burning” borders, however, is essentially an act of expansion and extension, reflecting the aspirations and hopes for a better, successful life among those fleeing along Africa’s migration routes. In this context, on yet another level, the activist efforts in the Mediterranean Sea, along with critical and activist art responding to the horrific and unnecessary deaths at sea, become more comprehensible. In this instance, a project reflecting such a reaction – both critical and deliberately masquerading as a real initiative – was created by the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty).²³ A few years ago, they presented a deceptively plausible and seemingly straightforward proposal in the form of a video illustrating the construction of a bridge connecting the coast of Tunisia with Sicily. The project’s utility is announced with the accompaniment of triumphant music in a promo-like animated video, complete with EU and Austrian government funding logos, emphasizing its undeniable contribution to improving safety. Subsequent scenes showcase a system of a thousand rescue rafts anchored between Italy and Africa, equipped with communication systems, food, and water. This project, much like the “Europe, this way” inscription on the boulder by the sea, clearly amplifies the deadly risks of crossing into Europe, “burning” its borders, or, as in Morocco, attempting the “jump” over razor and wire fences that seem impossible to breach.

23 *Die Brücke/The Bridge*, Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://politicalbeauty.de/jean-monnet-bruecke.html>.

Closure: Escape and Survival in the Ethnographic Present

Escape routes from the southern Sahara, the Sahel belt, the Nuba Mountains, Darfur, and West African countries have followed similar paths for decades. They are less an extraordinary reaction, like the refugee movements from the time of European wars. These migration routes are far from safe, and traversing them demands immense determination, often referred to in Rabat as “mental preparation” for the journey. It introduces entirely new meanings to the refugee journey, framing it more as a native, perpetual trap shaped by the surrounding environment and the powerful ideals of the backway endeavor, which one can at best attempt to escape through a “magic gate” (to borrow and amplify the words of Czesław Miłosz). Even the sign pointing toward Europe on the seashore, as described by M'charek, symbolizes this jump – one that effectively defies the logic of a world that could otherwise be seen as predictable. In Tunisia, the presence of this fake “grassroots” road sign is particularly significant. In the surrounding area, on the impoverished southern coast, the phrase “living beyond the road signs” is a synonym for ultimate exclusion and entrapment in an overcrowded, impoverished province. This “jump” into another world is thus always abrupt, demanding, and innovative, to borrow a term from a completely different context.²⁴ It astonishes with its audacity, though it offers nothing resembling a happy ending. It is a reckless initiative, like the daring acts of groups of people climbing fences in Ceuta and Melilla, so that at least some might have a chance to make it through. At one point, Ząbek describes an incident at an airport in Eritrea, where a taxi driver, having been persuaded earlier, discreetly drives two men to a departing plane. They hide in the cargo hold but die after takeoff, thousands of kilometers above the ground. On another occasion, as recorded in various reports,²⁵ three Nigerians in the port of Lagos clung to the underwater blade of a merchant ship and, likely taking refuge in the hold at times, traveled over the open sea for more than 4,000 kilometers, eventually reaching the port of Las Palmas in

24 The “jump,” as a mechanism transferred from a different world – the world of migrants, is at the core of Judi Werthein’s poignant work on individuals crossing the borders between Mexico and the United States. It is the Brinco sneaker series – *brinco* meaning “jump” in Spanish. These high-top sneakers, produced “serially” in China at the artist’s commission (to highlight degrading outsourcing practices), feature a map of border areas printed inside the lining, a flashlight and compass hidden in a keychain, and compartments for money. Designed with practicality in mind, they are intended to aid migrants in their attempts to cross the border, see Judi Werthein, *Brinco*, accessed January 22, 2023, <https://www.stationmuseum.com/past-exhibitions/corpcracy/judi-werthein/>.

25 Magdalena Bojanowska, “Uczepili się płetwy sterowej tankowca i przedostali na Wyspy Kanaryjskie. Płynęli 11 dni” [They clung to the tanker’s rudder fin and made it to the Canary Islands. They sailed for 11 days], *Gazeta.pl*, November 29, 2022, accessed January 1, 2023.

the Canary Islands. This time, the daring individuals miraculously survived; severely dehydrated and hypothermic, they were taken to hospitals, though it remains unclear whether they stayed in Spain afterward.

In the journeys and experiences of refugees amidst the vast web of African conflicts, it is difficult to find any trace of positive logic. The escape routes depicted in Ząbek's book are marked by inertia and decades-long continuity – patterns of violence and flight that seem to have no end. Survival is the key to understanding the journey and the attempts to break through to a neighboring refugee camp, a neighboring country, and ultimately across the "sea" of the Sahara to the coast, and from there to Europe. The huge gap between the goals of aid and humanitarian policies and the actual conditions of life and survival evokes ambivalent feelings, including resentment toward non-governmental and humanitarian organizations.²⁶ In the book on the ethnography of violence and suffering, there is a distinct critique of the humanitarian aid system – a critique that, at times, is difficult to disagree with.

It is a powerful critique of "dead aid," much like the arguments in Dambisa Moyo's book²⁷ – a condemnation of the humanitarian care camp system, which operates like capitalist enterprises competing with each other. These camps employ sophisticated techniques of control and segregation, enforce exploitative management systems, and "cut costs" in areas where other care providers struggle to intervene. Anna Hoss expanded on this point in her review of Maciej Ząbek's book,²⁸ noting that even more critical perspectives on the humanitarian aid system emerge alongside such pointed interpretations. It is portrayed as a vast "humanitarian industry" and criticized for excluding the existence of suffering from the modern world, failing to recognize it as an inherent aspect of the social and lived world. In the author's interpretation, it represents a vision rooted in modern or Enlightenment-era pretensions.²⁹

This final statement, however, provokes in me an anthropological objection, as it leans toward a certain extremity, which seems to obscure the level of reflection and ethical debate that has been shaped within contemporary anthropology and post-war ethical discourse, grounded in the knowledge

26 See, e.g., an anthropological study of the development of humanitarian enterprises in Poland during the transformation period, Elżbieta Drążkiewicz-Grodzicka, *Institutionalised Dreams: The Art of Managing Foreign Aid* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020).

27 Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

28 Anna Hoss, "Nagie życie. Co różni pomoc od przemocy" [review of Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*], *Etnografia. Praktyki, Teorie, Doświadczenia* 5 (2019).

29 See Ząbek, *Uchodźcy w Afryce*, 446–449.

of the Holocaust and the two World Wars. This does not, however, alter the broader picture of suffering, violence, and the “jump,” “the ethnography of violence and suffering” present in the book and in subsequent ethnographies of escape, the conscious determination in Bachelet’s work, the burning of borders, and the systemic order of violence explored by M’charek. At the same time, this ethnography of escape routes – tragic for many yet still frequently traveled from Africa’s conflict zones – and the conflicts themselves starkly challenge the very possibility of creating a definitive account of zones of suffering and violence. These zones emerge regularly in specific locations, shifting politically and historically yet retaining continuity. It requires a different perspective and, in a sense, undermines anthropology’s task of documenting the world of actions, desires, relationships, political ambitions, and social conditions. What remains is merely a description and a kind of testimony, but at times it takes the form of an “ethnographic present,” that is, a timeless, ahistorical testimony, an atemporal depiction of socio-cultural systems. It is a record that, by employing the formula of an ahistorical present (or in a “safely” distant past), pushes aside what is happening in the here and now. It *de facto* separates the described world from political, social, or embodied experience. It ceases to be coeval and loses its agency and connection to the anthropologist who writes and observes.³⁰ Surprisingly, this “present tense” proves adequate here, as it allows for description only. Moreover, it can also serve as an effective tool elsewhere and a form of continuous, transformative reflection, as demonstrated by Narmala Halstead.³¹ Furthermore, such an approach can be employed as a way to extend the experience of “presentness” within the research field. In this case, the closure of experiences is tied to their continuity and repetitiveness, their almost fearless nature. It takes the form of a “stalemate,” as depicted in Łukasz Skąpski’s project – a model of thoroughly modern, technologically advanced fences constructed with barbed and razor wire. This, then, is an anthropology that at times struggles to incorporate elements of change and political agency, uncovered and almost advocated by contemporary ethnographies.

Instead, what emerges are portrayals of migration routes retraced over decades, with descriptions of refugee paths and elements of ingenuity and determination, which gradually transform into an awareness of the impossible, an insurmountable barrier. However, what seems impossible here also

30 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

31 Narmala Halstead, “Experiencing the Ethnographic Present: Knowing through ‘Crisis,’” in *Knowing How to Know. Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Present*, ed. Narmala Halstead, Eric Hirsch and Judith Okely (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

becomes possible, and in some cases, a “jump” to another world, to Europe, is achieved. For this reason, escape and refuge demand an immense amplification of strength and a “good mentality” to break through and cross to the other side. Yet, as a whole, this picture remains difficult to accept. Ultimately, it portrays a form of changelessness, the permanence of zones of suffering and violence, a kind of eternal present, such as that found at Europe’s borders – something anthropology strives so hard to challenge and, if only partially, dismantle.

Translated by Inga Michalewska-Cześniak

Abstract

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Escape, Survival, "The Jump": On African Refugee Routes – Ząbek, Bachelet, Mcharek

This text outlines anthropological and ethnographic insights into African refugee routes. By describing the anthropology of migration, escape, and survival in Sub-Saharan Africa, I highlight the enduring presence of suffering and violence in the Sahel region and Central Africa, as well as the persistent myths surrounding journeys to Europe. I first refer to Maciej Ząbek’s work, which sketches a panorama of refugee routes in Africa, then I turn to Sebastien Bachelet’s study of the community of desperation and migrants overcoming the fences surrounding Spanish enclaves in Morocco. I also reference Amade Mcharek’s work on African migrants crossing and “burning” Europe’s borders. In conclusion, I reflect on the paradoxical relevance of the ethnographic present in describing such experiences.

Keywords

refugees, migration, Africa, ethnography, survival, suffering