

PARIS, THE COLONIAL EMPIRE AND MIGRATION

Victor Hugo predicted, back in 1867, the advent of the United States of Europe, with a single currency, open borders and Paris as its capital.

La Ville Lumière ended up as one of the two European capitals with Berlin becoming the other, and the famous French-German lead of the EU; however, the borders are not open for everyone, especially, but not only, for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Africa, despite French colonial past and post-colonial present in the Continent.

Paris was also the capital of a massive colonial empire that, at different stages of its history stretched through every continent on the planet, from the Americas to the Middle East, from the Far East and Oceania to Africa; the empire might be gone, but the same cannot be said of France's military, economic and political influence in its former colonies, also through its language.

It is not surprising, that family and language connections are two important factors in the influx of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa towards France, through the Mediterranean and then Italy, but also through Spain now, following the crackdown operated by the Italian government led by Giuseppe Conte; in fact, on this front and on many others the Minister of Interior and Deputy PM Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right party, the League, is the de-facto Italian Prime Minister.

What happens to African migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, when and if they manage to survive the Mediterranean crossing, travel through Italy and cross the Alps, or travel through Spain and then reach the French capital, the capital of that once mighty colonial empire?

What happens to them if they manage to survive all of the aforementioned tribulations, without forgetting the dangers of the journey that precedes the Mediterranean crossing, especially in Libya ?

I have travelled to Paris, in order to find the answers to these questions and I got in touch with **Yann Manzi**, founder of **Utopia 56**, an association that was created back in January 2016 in order to manage and coordinate volunteers operating in the Calais Jungle, that was dismantled by French authorities during the Autumn of the same year.

While I find pride in my Afro-Caribbean identity and identify myself as black, despite being mixed race, this does not mean that my passport and the ones of those that I met are the same, as they will always differentiate us in this Europe of walls, and also, the tendency of colleagues who are looking into reporting migration as a big show has not given a good reputation to journalists.

Would I be keen to share my story with someone who might put my name, surname, age, face, history and details in a story all over the Internet, maybe without even asking for my consent?

These are questions that journalists of colour, given their different heritage should put at the top of their way of reporting, in order to inspire other colleagues.

UTOPIA 56 IN PARIS

Utopia 56 managed the first humanitarian camp in France in Grande-Synthe, close to Dunkirk when it opened from March to September 2016 and currently, with its volunteers, they organise in Calais, Toulouse, Lille, Lyon as well as in Paris food distribution, sleeping bags distribution and they support migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with all the tools at their disposal.

In Paris, the volunteers operate during the day, using WhatsApp groups as the best tool to coordinate with new volunteers at three main different locations: **Porte de la Chapelle, Porte de la Villette** and **Porte de les Aubervilliers**.

After having followed the volunteers around Porte de la Villette on Thursday, on the following day instead, my first stop is Porte de la Chapelle. Porte de la Chapelle is located in the 18th arrondissement, known as Butte-Montmartre, widely known for hosting the aforementioned district, but also for its artistic history as in the Bateau-Lavoir building, where Pablo Picasso, George Braque and Amedeo Modigliani all lived and worked as well as the house of Italian-Egyptian music star Dalida and most prominently, for the Sacré Coeur Basilica, which sits at the top of the hill and is one of the most known landmarks of the French capital.

In the 18th arrondissement, there is also the district of Goutte D' Or, known as Little Africa, for its large number of North- African and Sub Saharan African residents.

On Friday, around 9:30, I head there with the volunteers of Utopia 56. Just a few minutes up the road, adjacent to the tram railway, the volunteers of the Salvation

Army are serving food, coffee, water and drinks to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who are hanging around the area; nearby, the volunteers of Mèdecins du Monde (World Doctors) are ready to offer medical help to those in need.

Many of them are carrying their asylum rejection letter and are wondering how to appeal against this decision; therefore the advice of the volunteers is welcomed and clear.

Part of the difficulties in the asylum procedure is, I am told by an asylum seeker from Burkina Faso, where French is not a dominant language, also due to the fact that interpreters are not provided on site.

It is assumed that whoever applies for asylum should know French, and this clearly increases the problematics for people who are already vulnerable and have experienced trauma.

He further adds that his asylum application has been on stand-by for more than two years.

He is not the only one: others would say that their practice has been rejected, that has been in stand-by for two, three years or more; stories that might sound unreal but are instead part of the difficulties that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world face.

THE STORIES OF IBRAHIM AND ALKASSIM

Among the ones who are asking the volunteers of Utopia 56 for advice regarding their asylum application, is a young, slender man in his early twenties from Mali

Ibrahim tells me that he has been in Paris for the last three months and twenty days.

When it comes to the reasons that forced him to leave his home, they intertwine with the coup that took place in the West African country in 2013. The MLA, a Malian armed group arrived at Timbuktu and intimidated him and his family to leave, or that they would have been removed by force.

Ibrahim has not seen or heard from his parents ever again after that; from there, he went to Algeria to work and then to Libya, where he was detained in one of those very centres that the Italian government, and the rest of the European Union countries, are financing, blind and indifferent to the brutalities and horror that those incarcerated have to suffer.

As Ibrahim explains, in addition to the invisible wounds and brutalities that he suffered in Libya, it was also there that, due to the horrific hygienic conditions he contracted tuberculosis.

When he reached Catania, Sicily, he was brought straight to the hospital and he was stuck there for a whole month.

Afterwards, he also ended up at the Baobab Experience camp in Rome, behind the Tiburtina station, a camp run by volunteers which has been dismantled in a very spectacular way months ago.

While explaining that French police stripped him of his subsidiary residence permit, really close to where we are talking, in the 19th arrondissement, Ibrahim says: “People in Italy, even the Italian police, respect people more than French and the French police. France has colonised us...they are the Kings in our countries, and we are slaves”.

“They have stolen everything from us, and if you think about their role in all the wars in Africa, you’ll see that they are not the ‘firefighters’, but they actually feed the fire”.

Shortly afterward, after having greeted and thanked Ibrahim for sharing his story with me, I start chatting with Alkassim, from Chad. He is in his early 20s, and I am immediately amazed by the way in which he smiles and seems to have a positive outlook on the world, despite what he has gone through.

Alkassim has been in Paris for a year and he initially left Chad in 2008, and while he does not seem legitimately too keen to share the reasons of his first departure in detail, they can be connected to the chaos that erupted in the country, with the fights between the government and the rebels in that year.

He also went to Libya and then to Italy, but then he returned to his country in 2013 and again in 2017, he crossed the Mediterranean, and after six months in Italy he took the dangerous route through the Alps and eventually reached France. In all of this, his asylum application was also exposed to the changes of the Dublin agreement and his asylum application has been left in a limbo, like so many others.

In 2018, according to the [data](#) of the French Ministry of the Interior, the OFPRA (French Office for protection of refugees and stateless persons) received 122,743

asylum applications, which included 9,421 re-examinations; of the whole amount, 93,742 decisions were taken.

In 2018, there were five African nationalities in the top ten of asylum applications: Guinea and Ivory Coast (at the second and fifth place, respectively), Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali (at the sixth, eight and ninth respectively).

Others around Porte de la Chapelle would share some of the story with me, but I could not take notes at their request and preference; one of them would tell me of his crossing of the Mediterranean crossing from Morocco, to Spain, a route which has seen a growing influx as a direct consequence of the hard stance of the Italian government.

Following other conversations around Porte de la Villette and my farewell to the volunteers of Utopia 56, I reflect on the reasons why some were not keen to talk to me.

If you are left at the borders of society to fence for yourself, your struggle is ongoing. While the news cycle gave great space to migration for years, as it was treated as a massive emergency, that now has stopped.

Migration is still a subject on the road to the European Elections and this is also due to the damages inflicted by a reporting approach, very often unsympathetic to the vulnerability of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been done and have left their mark in the public opinion, in France and all over Europe.

What could I do, at least with this project to change that, from my Afro-descendant perspective?

With these questions, and a reflection on how France like other former colonial powers are shifting away from their faults, I leave Paris Gare du Nord on the early morning of Saturday, heading back to London and preparing the last journey for this project, to Rome.



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CHANGING WORDS CHANGES THE WORLD



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