

SOLROUTES

Informal Solidarity in Libya

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Introduction

This research node explores manifestations of informal solidarity among and towards people on the move in Libya (from mutual help within migrant groups to unexpected gestures from external actors) that may positively impact migrants' route-making.

By 'informal solidarity' I mean those manifestations of mutual or unilateral help or support that do not happen in formal contexts and mostly remain hidden from public view because they take place at smaller scales and involve a limited number of people.

As opposed to those acts of solidarity that were analysed in Node 1 concerning migrant mobilisations and protests in Libya (Cuttitta 2024), informal (micro-)solidarity acts do not directly address external institutional or otherwise formal actors (e.g. local, national or international authorities, or NGOs), asking them for help, assistance, support, or simply the recognition of someone's rights. Instead, these actions are directly aimed at (or merely result in) route-making, despite the action or inaction of the above external actors and regardless of existing legal frameworks or humanitarian considerations.

Informal solidarity is the opposite of formal solidarity, best exemplified by the different forms of support provided by international organisations (IOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unions, activist groups, or other organisations in various contexts, from search and rescue at sea to aid in reception or detention centres. While many actors work within specific projects supported by governmental funding, some only receive private funding, and others are just unpaid volunteers.

Informal solidarity instead emerges as mutual help within migrant groups or in the form of unexpected, natural gestures from external actors that migrants happen to come across while in the process of route-making towards Europe. Individual or collective actors do not provide informal solidarity to fulfil their official, professional or institutional mandate but for other reasons that may be of any kind (religious, ethical, political etc.). These reasons may also remain unidentified by the same solidarity actors: informal solidarity providers do not necessarily know why they act the way they do. Sometimes, indeed, an act of informal solidarity is just a natural and possibly uninterested gesture, one that is unexpected not only for the beneficiary but also for the solidarity provider.

Informal solidarity is normally provided for free. Whether it is compatible with some kind of (minor) economic transaction or any type of self-interest is a question for further reflection (for an expanded notion of solidarity, see Bonnin et al. forthcoming). For example, professional travel facilitators cover a broad spectrum of activities and range from reckless criminals whose only aim is to maximise profit through migrant exploitation to professionals who respect their customers, care for them, and even exempt them from paying if they are in need. With specific regard to the Libya route, for example, the Italian-based Eritrean filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer (2013) mentions an Eritrean broker in Khartoum who earned his living by facilitating the journeys of Eritreans who

arrived to the Sudanese capital and wished to travel further to Libya. Sometimes, he did it even for free; otherwise, he did it for a fair fee, offering his customers professional service rather than exploiting them.

The work of anthropologist Marthe Achtnich (2021; 2022a; 2022b) instead sheds light on the common spaces created by West African migrants in Libya, the 'foyers' or 'ghettoes' where people en route to Europe live, waiting for something to happen. This 'something' might be finding a job to save money for the sea-crossing or recovering from an illness or detention. People in the 'ghetto' or 'foyer' help each other with their everyday issues, care for each other, and support the sick in getting healthy enough to board the next boat. In these contexts, landlords can also be of help. While some works, such as Achtnich's, indirectly address informal solidarity and make it visible, migration scholarship has not specifically focused on this kind of acts and the way they contribute to route-making – not just in Libya, and not just along migrant routes to Europe. The stories summarised in this paper suggest that this would be a fruitful avenue for further research.

Data collection

Data for this paper were extracted from the life stories of three young men who arrived in Europe between 2016 and 2017. Two interviews (with a Malian and a Gambian, both based in Palermo) were conducted in person. A third interview was conducted online with a Senegalese based in Genoa. Given the interviewees' fluency in the host country's language, the interviews were conducted in Italian. Besides these three new stories, useful information was found in four online interviews in English (with a Swedish-Eritrean journalist and three migrants, of whom one from Eritrea, one from Sudan and one from South Sudan) of the 25 that I carried out for the first node (Cuttitta 2024).

Note: All names have been changed to protect the interviewees' privacy.

The context

Exploring informal solidarity is all the more enlightening in a context such as Libya, where heavy limitations are imposed on formal solidarity provided by pro-migrant international organisations and civil society actors (Cuttitta 2023). Migrants' agency in Libya is also severely restricted by both state and non-state actors, as people on the move are exposed to all kinds of abuses. Moreover, grassroots support from groups (e.g. political activists) that are not officially registered as associations is impossible in light of the political context.

Importantly, all migrant interviewees whose testimonies have been used in this paper witnessed the peak years (2014-2020) of the Libyan civil war. Checkpoints were spread all over the country and were also used to arbitrarily detain migrants. There were also other places and roads where the chances of being kidnapped for extortion were higher. A crucial act of solidarity among

migrants was exchanging information through social networks about avoiding checkpoints and other high-risk places. Militias were also forcibly recruiting African migrants to fight for them. Therefore, it was also important to share information on how to avoid conscription. For example, since militias were looking for people who were strong and healthy, it was suggested to "act as if you are physically not fit".

This demonstrates that even in the worst possible scenarios, some room may open up for manifestations of informal solidarity, both from within migrant groups (endogenous solidarity) and from external actors (exogenous solidarity).

Stories

Sadio

Sadio is 16 years old when he leaves Mali in 2015. His first move is taking a bus from Bamako to Niamey in Niger. While transiting Burkina Faso, the bus must stop at several checkpoints, where undocumented people have to pay a bribe to avoid arrest and continue their trip. Burkinabé guards not only rob Sadio of most of his money but also beat him violently. Once in Niamey, Sadio would like to travel further to Agadez, so he asks the bus driver to help him find the bus to Agadez. He also shares with the driver his concerns: not only is he shocked by the beatings, but he has only a little money left, which will likely not be enough for the Nigerien guards. The bus driver brings him to the bus and introduces him to his colleague, asking him to take care of the boy. The new bus driver asks the boy for a small amount of money. In exchange for this, he will take him under his wing. Indeed, the driver lets him sit next to him during the journey, and every time they have to stop at a checkpoint, they get off together, and the driver acts as if the boy is travelling with him. Sadio doesn't have to deal with the guards, and the guards do not ask for more than the little money given to them by the driver.

Once in Agadez, Sadio convinces his mother back home to collect and send him some more money to continue his journey to Libya. After two weeks, he receives the money and leaves for Libya. His first stop is Ghatrun. Then, he is brought with fellow travellers to Sebha and from Sebha to Bani Walid. There, the group is brought to a nearby mountain. The smugglers tell them to stay there and wait: because of the civil war, they should not go to town, which is too dangerous. They should remain in hiding instead, and someone will come to sell them food every day.

When Sadio runs out of money, his friend Ousmane, a young Burkinabé, offers him his food. They had become friends at a previous stage of the journey, when Sadio bought a chicken and invited Ousmane to share it with him. Now, Ousmane still has some money, and he promises Sadio that he will keep sharing his food with him. After a few days, however, the other migrants run out of money, too. As a result, the person in charge of selling them food stops coming. Ousmane doesn't reveal that, but he still has significant money. He fears that all his money will soon be exhausted if he starts feeding the entire group. Then, some of the migrants, including Sadio and Ousmane,

decide to go and explore the countryside nearby, looking for food, and after a while, they come across a shepherd. He invites them to his place and offers them food and water, which they thankfully accept. They can also take water for the rest of the group when they leave. The shepherd eventually asks them if they want to work for him daily in exchange for food and water. The deal is made. They can earn their living for the remaining days until they are transferred from Bani Walid to Tripoli. Unfortunately, their lorry is intercepted by the police, who bring the migrants to the Abu Salim detention centre.

Before entering the prison, guards search everyone for money and mobile phones. Ousmane realises there is no way he can hide his money effectively, so he asks Sadio for help. Sadio has a thick jacket and hides Ousmane's money in the inner lining. Luckily, while Ousmane's clothes are cut into pieces, the guards do not thoroughly search Sadio's jacket. Sadio keeps Ousmane's money in his coat during detention, as this is the only relatively safe place. In the end, with an additional sum Sadio receives from home, they buy themselves out of the Abu Salim detention centre. Once released, Sadio and Ousmane go their own way.

Sadio wants to go to Sabratha to embark for Italy from there, but he is first kidnapped by a militia and forced to work for them, then sold to the Zawiya detention centre. He gets so sick there that the detention centre manager decides to release him. When Sadio is out on the street, he doesn't know what to do or where to go, so he asks passersby for help until he finds a Tunisian who speaks French and is willing to help. He lends Sadio his phone so he can call his coxeur, who is based in another town, and he also helps Sadio explain to the coxeur where they are. Finally, the Tunisian tells Sadio that he can sleep at his workplace, which is a construction site, until the coxeur can come and fetch him (because of the civil war the coxeur has to wait until the situation allows him to travel by car from his town). Then the Tunisian leaves, and Sadio remains at the construction site. It is not comfortable, but it's better than nothing.

In the evening, a Libyan man passing by sees Sadio alone at the construction site and asks him where he comes from and if he needs anything. Sadio explains that he is from Mali and was just released from detention. The Libyan guy says, "Great, a Malian guy is working at my place", and invites Sadio to go with him to his place. There, the Malian guy and the Libyan guy's family provide shelter, food, and medicines, ensuring smooth communication with the coxeur. The coxeur arrives three days later and takes Sadio to Sabratha, where he is accommodated in a warehouse. There, Sadio rejoins Ousmane and another Malian friend with whom he had shared part of the journey. Both have been told they will leave with the next boat in five days. In the warehouse, the smugglers only provide little food of very bad quality, and only once a day. Ousmane and the Malian friend still have some money and buy food also for Sadio during those five days. But in the end, when the two friends are ready to leave, Ousmane has run out of money. The Malian friend still has some Libyan cash instead. Since he will not need that money anymore, he gives it all to Sadio to buy food until he leaves.

John

John is a Sudanese who is held in a Benghazi detention centre. He shares his cell with twelve Chadian men. One day, the Chadians are told they will be repatriated that night. When the police come, John's cell mates collect their stuff and leave one by one. When John sees the last one approaching the door, he whispers to him in Arabic (John knows Chadians don't understand Arabic, but he tries, just in case): "Leave the door open!". The man turns to him, looks at him and understands. He leaves the door half-closed. The door looks as if it is closed but can be opened from inside. Thus, John can leave his cell, eventually climb the wall, and escape. Once out of the detention centre, John doesn't know where to go. He walks and walks until he comes across a group of Sudanese. One of them brings him to his place, where there are around twenty more undocumented Sudanese who do not dare to go out for fear of being kidnapped or arrested. John stays for two months with them. After this period, he feels that he has regained his strength and is ready to resume his journey, so he leaves and finds a job as a shepherd to earn money for the sea-crossing.

Yohannes

In 2018, because of the civil war, managers and guards leave the Salah-ed-Din detention centre in Tripoli and abandon its prisoners to their fate. Detainees can flee, and they divide themselves into small groups. Yohannes is part of a group of ten Eritreans. Two of them are minors, and another two are disabled, as they have been injured by violence and accidents in Libya. They promise they will never leave anyone behind.

The group seeks shelter from the bombings of the civil war, but its members don't know where to go. When they see a mosque, they decide to get closer. Once close to the mosque, they hear and see a Libyan man calling them. They also see that this man is not alone. With him are four Sudanese who were also detained in Salah-ed-Din. The Eritreans fear the Libyan man may kidnap them, but they decide to go. Far from kidnapping them, the man invites them to his place and offers them water so they can drink and wash themselves. Then, he lets them use his phone to make phone calls. Yohannes contacts his niece in Germany. Then, the Libyan man takes his bicycle and asks them to follow him on foot. After two hours, they reach a neighbourhood where some West Africans live. All black people are the same in the eyes of the Libyan man, so he says, "Here are your brothers". He leaves the Eritreans with them. The West Africans give the Eritreans some refreshments. Later that day, the Libyan man comes back. He has received a call from Yohannes' sister, who is in Tripoli, and wants to get the two in touch. Yohannes can thus speak to his sister, rejoin her in Tripoli, and, after further vicissitudes, eventually reach Europe with her.

Yaya

Yaya, a fifteen-year-old Gambian boy, takes a bus to Bamako with some Gambian friends at the end of 2015. It is their first time travelling abroad, and they don't speak French and are unfamiliar with the currency (CFA) used in Mali. On the bus, they meet a middle-aged Malian man who lives in Spain and is going to Mali on holiday. The man helps them as a translator and, more broadly,

assists and advises them on the issues arising during the journey. For example, he explains to them the worth of CFA bills and coins and suggests they prepare the exact amounts of money needed every time they have to pay so as not to show all their havings, lest the guards take everything.

At the border between Burkina Faso and Mali, the young Gambians have no valid passports, so the Burkinabè border guards ask them to buy false Malian or Nigerien passports that the Malian border guards will accept (this is a business run jointly by Burkinabè and Malian guards, who share all revenues deriving from passport sales). Each passport costs 150 €, but Yaya only has 100 €, so his cousin pays 200 €, thus lending Yaya 50 €. Yaya has no more money now, but another Gambian boy travelling with them pays for Yaya's food and water until Niamey. There, their paths part. Yaya and the other young Gambian make friends on Facebook to keep in touch, and maybe one day Yaya will be able to return what he received.

Yaya eventually arrives in Sebha, the first Libyan city after the border, together with the other Gambian friends. There, they meet a small Gambian community of people who have been there for one or two years and provide support to the newcomers. Yaya and four Gambian friends arrive in Tripoli but are detained and sent back to Sebha because they cannot pay the 1000 € requested for each release. In Sebha, they are sold to a local criminal gang that holds them prisoners and asks each of them to pay 700 €. Their jailers tell them they will be released after the payment and allowed to stay with them while looking for work. When they earn enough money, they will be brought to Tripoli. As for now, only Yaya and one of his friends can pay the 700 € ransom, but they want to help the other three. Therefore, they ask their jailers to allow all five to go out to work. As the traffickers refuse, they insist, arguing that if they let the other three go out, they will be able to work, earn some money, and eventually pay the entire amount requested. Otherwise, their friends will never be able to pay because their families back home are not in a condition to send them any more money. Finally, the traffickers accept: only two pay now, but all five are allowed to go out and look for a job. The other three will pay as soon as possible. The five young Gambians, however, do not trust their jailers and look for an alternative. Through the Gambian community in Sebha, they get in touch with more reliable smugglers, secretly make a fair deal with them, and one day they escape from their jailers. After reaching the coast and paying for the sea-crossing, Yaya leaves Sabratha and arrives in Italy at 16, less than a year after his departure.

During the interview, Yaya tells me that he also knows about people whose employers have helped them leave Libya. Some are so lucky that they don't even have to pay because their employers pay for them or have good connections and make sure they can travel for free. The next story testifies to this.

Ibrahima

In 2016, Ibrahima is only fourteen when he joins a group of young men who are older than him, have enough money and want to go to Europe. He doesn't have money and doesn't want to go to Europe; instead, he only wants to leave Senegal because of problems with his family. Ibrahima

joins them for the first leg of their journey until Bamako, Mali. They help him when money is needed by paying for him or ensuring he is exempted. For example, they explain to the bus driver that he has no money and they cannot leave him behind because of his age, and the driver eventually allows him to travel without a ticket. However, they cannot help Ibrahima when they encounter checkpoints in Malian territory where guards ask for money. Ibrahima has to call his grandmother and ask for a money transfer, pretending he will use the money to go back home. After a month in Mali, Ibrahima leaves for Burkina Faso. There, he meets other people on their way to Libya. He joins them to settle in Libya and find a job there.

Once they arrive in southern Libya, however, he and his travel mates are immediately arrested and transferred to a detention centre with other people. There, they are asked to pay a collective ransom to release them. Because only some detainees have money, whereas Ibrahima and others have none, the former pay for all. This reminds of the etymology of the word solidarity: the obligation in *solido* in Roman law, based on which each party of an obligation can be held responsible for the entire amount of the debt.

Once released, Ibrahima goes to one of those places, those informal, open air 'employment offices', where Libyans go to select cheap, exploitable migrant workers. There, he is recruited by a man looking for someone to care for his house, garden, car and swimming pool. After a test period of one week, the man invites Ibrahima to move to his place, where he lives with his wife and children. He offers him a private room, food, and a monthly salary. Ibrahima integrates well into the family's life, makes friends with his employer's children, and doesn't dream of leaving. He is also happy with where they live, a small town near Sebha. After over a year, however, the man tells Ibrahima that he and his family have to move to Tripoli and cannot take him with them. What he can do for him, if he wants, is to help him go to Italy. This is the first time Ibrahim seriously thinks about going to Europe, and he finally accepts. He doesn't have to do or pay anything. His employer, who is a politician, organises everything for him. One night, some people come to fetch Ibrahima, bring him to the sea and board him on an overcrowded dinghy. Ibrahima recalls that even at this stage he is lucky compared to other passengers: "They didn't put their hands on me, they didn't do anything to me, they didn't even insult me! They treated me well". The sea-crossing is easy, too. Soon after reaching international waters, the dinghy meets a Spanish rescue ship that takes everyone on board and brings them to Sicily.

Self-interested solidarity?

In 2015, when it was at the peak of its power in Libya, also including control over part of the country's territory, ISIS started kidnapping Christian migrants, mostly from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Some were beheaded, and the video of their execution was published online. Others managed to escape. Escapees mostly didn't know where to go or how to get there. A Europe-based Eritrean journalist was contacted by fellow nationals who had just fled ISIS captivity and were asking for

help. In the region, no NGOs, international organisations, or state authorities were available to rescue them. The journalist thought local smugglers were the only option and contacted them. Indeed, the smugglers took their cars, rescued the escapees and brought them to a safe place. According to the journalist, they did this not only because they would thus regain their customers but also because they hoped the journalist would rehabilitate their public image, which press reports had harmed. While no rehabilitation followed, this case nicely exemplifies the question posed in the introduction of whether self-interest may be compatible with informal solidarity.

Conclusions

In Libya, people on the move suffer from unspeakable violence and abuses from a host of state and non-state actors, while formal solidarity provision is severely limited and discouraged. The media, as well as scholarly and grey literature, have widely documented this. Less attention has been paid to what is here called informal solidarity. Based on first-hand testimonies, this paper has shed some light on instances of small-scale micro-support to migrants in Libya. Actors as diverse as bus drivers, employers and passersby, cellmates, travel companions and local migrant communities can provide money, food, information, work, accommodation, connections with other people and other forms of help. These informal solidarity acts create opportunities for people on the move to shape their trajectories autonomously, break free from immobilisation, and continue their journeys despite the obstacles created by the current border regime.

Surely, the concept of informal solidarity needs to be further refined. Still, the above stories suggest that studying this kind of small-scale interaction may shed important light on route-making processes.

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