ULTRA-TECHNOLOGICAL REFUGEES: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH CONSUMER CULTURE AMONG AFRICAN REFUGEES IN ISRAEL

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Abstract: Academic discourse tends to view the labor market as a central sphere in the refugee integration process, while other aspects related to the market economy, such as capital accumulation and the purchase of goods, gain less attention if at all. Studying these issues from the perspective of African refugees in Israel enables us to examine alternative means through which the refugee community seeks to integrate into the socio-economic arena in the host culture by adopting popular consumption patterns. The study explores consumer culture among refugees as a means through which they borrow, adopt and translate what they perceive to be the attributes of the desired lifestyle in the host country. Based on ethnographic work, the study examines the ways in which consumption practices form a socio-cultural bridge to blur social boundaries between refugees and Western society. By adopting commodity and consumption patterns, African refugees seek to become a part of the Israeli collective and distance themselves from the monolithic identity of alien-African-refugees.

Keywords: African Refugees, Consumer Culture, Identity, Globalization, Israel.

INTRODUCTION

I didn't choose to come to Israel but now I want to work. Just like you, I also want to make money. You can't live here and buy things you need without money, that is what's most important. Why do you find it odd? Because I'm a refugee?

Like many members of his community, Akhmed[1], a 31-year-old man from Sudan, is a refugee[2] living in Israel. On the backdrop of his temporary status as a refugee without socio-economic rights, as well as the exclusion imposed by the Israeli legal system and the separation it creates – Akhmed's words are particularly important. The desire to earn money does not always correspond to the popular image of refugees, and was a primary reason for my decision to select this as the focus of my study. Akhmed stresses the need to earn money so that, in his words, he can "buy things". During the four years in which he struggled to establish his life in Israel he seems to have identified a central practice in Israeli society which he seeks to

adopt: consumption. This study, in the spirit of Akhmed's words, will focus on the economic sphere as a central arena for examining the African refugees' relationship to Israeli society, which is a hybrid and diverse society, where modern Western life-style and values are dominating. I do not claim that this is the refugees' first encounter with consumer culture, however it appears that establishing their life in Western society enables them, for the first time, to accumulate significant capital which they can translate into consumerist related practices.

Contrary to the prevailing discourse among human rights organizations that tends to view and study refugees as objects in need of help or "fixing", this study joins the new academic discourse that considers refugees to be active agents. Accordingly, the study examines the way capital earned by refugees through hard work is accumulated and directed to adopting consumerist patterns. As I will demonstrate, the need to "buy things" in Akhmed's words, points to practices of assimilating a modern Western lifestyle.

While most current academic research examining economic aspects of refugees focuses on remittance and the prevalence of refugee money transfers to relatives in their country of origin as a phenomenon (Koserand Van Hear 2003; Horst 2004; Riak Akuei 2005), this study will focus on their decision to accumulate capital for personal use. Among other observations, I will demonstrate how this capital is channeled to adopting consumerist patterns through everyday consumer products that may be vital but are not indispensable. Refugee consumerism will be examined by analytically separating the concept "consumer culture" into two complementary dimensions: luxury consumption and brand-related identity. The discussion of luxury consumption will consider the characteristics of consumer products, those meant to satisfy desires rather than needs, while a further examination will explore brand-related identity that is based on the socio-cultural value of commodities and the feelings that accompany the refugees with respect to acquiring a brand product and its central role in their striving to belong to the Israeli mainstream. Since the commodity is at the heart of the study as the platform for belonging, this analytic focus will not concern itself with the meanings embodied in the commodity, centering instead on exploring the ways in which commodities constitute a central arena for identity construction among refugees in Israeli society.

Following Lamont (2001a, b), I will attempt to redefine the symbolic boundaries between the African refugee com-

munity and Israeli society, and the means by which the former try to challenge these boundaries. While Lamont refers to identity as a project of preservation and segregation, this study expands upon its conceptual assumptions, thereby allowing for an exploration of the economic arena as an expression of the African refugees' desire to be a part of the Israeli consensus. Accumulating capital and adopting consumption practices point to the project of marking symbolic boundaries of belonging and to an attempt to blur social boundaries between "us" and "them".

African refugees in Israel sometimes succeed, temporarily or permanently, in crossing social boundaries and in creating new means of belonging through their participation in the labor market, education institutions or activism (Anteby Yemini 2014: 203). Nonetheless, little attention has been paid to examining the informal mechanisms interwoven into the different aspects of the private, day-to-day arena that plays a central role in the integration of the refugee community. This study will focus on the economic system where exchange relations, capital accrual and the purchase of goods takes place, as the main arena throughout which the African refugees pave their way to belonging to Israeli society. As I will demonstrate, the refugee community in Israel uses the purchase of consumer products such as electrical and electronic devices, to blur their monolithic identity as Sudanese or Eritreans, and to construct a new identity compatible with the values of the absorbing society[3]. Much like Douglas and Isherwood (1996), who consider the consumption system to be a central arena through which individuals position themselves in the layered economic system and construct their projected identity, I examine the African refugee community in Israel and its members as active subjects, maneuvering their way between power structures by accumulating objects to mark their belonging to Israeli society.

REFUGEES AND ECONOMICS

The link between immigration and economics has been the focus of broad theoretical and empirical research (Chiswick 1978; Carliner 1980; LaLonde and Topel 1992; Borjas and Tienda 1993; Borjas 1994). Empirical studies examining the economic implications of international migration emerged in the beginning of the 1970's (Greenwood and McDowell 1986), focusing primarily on the economic migrants' level of

economic adaptation. LaLonde and Topel (1997) examined the assimilation processes of migrants in the absorbing society and acquisition of professional tools by unskilled refugee workers in the hosting labor market; Light and Gold (2000) focused on ethnic entrepreneurship in Europe; and McClelland's (1961) classic study followed Italian immigrants and their accommodation to expected work ethics in the U.S. Similarly, Chiswick's (1978a) study found that foreign born men were able to acquire the personal capital required to integrate into U.S. society, thereby deducing that new immigrants acquire a variety of socio-cultural skills that enable them to assimilate into the absorbing society and integrate into its workforce.

Despite the vast literature exploring the integration process of immigrants and migrants into the new economic structure, little is known about the relationship between economics and refugees. Refugees are indeed forced to leave due to socio-political circumstances, but they seem to organize their lives and form their identities in line with the socio-economic conditions in place in the new country (Horst 2006c). The majority of studies about the refugee experience in the absorbing country focus on the socio-cultural dimension in the assimilation process, for example the education system (Warriner 2007; Hatoss and Huijser 2010), government policy (Korac 2003; Nygard 2006; Dwyer 2010; Valenta and Bunar 2010; Juzwiak, McGregor and Siegel 2014), the refugees' cultural capital (Jacob 1994; Cheung and Phillimore 2013), or social entrepreneurship as the key for assimilation (Gold 1992; Lyon, Sepulveda and Syrett 2007). Indeed, in recent years there has been certain increased academic interest in the process of refugee integration into the economic arena, but still, only with respect to the public-institutional domain, and mostly focusing on the different aspects of the labor market (Hauff and Vaglum 1993; Krahn et al. 2000; Bevelander and Lundh 2007; Bloch 2008). This study expands our knowledge of the relationship between refugees and economics by examining alternative ways by which the economic arena becomes the leading route for refugee integration into the host society. It will take a close look at the refugee experience within the boundaries of the economic system as a focal point for exchange relations, capital accumulation and the purchase of goods. The study of the African refugee community in Israel from a different perspective provides an opportunity to follow the process of adopting "local" attributes, by creating a con-

sumer culture and organizing their life around neo-liberal principles and values, on their path to constructing their identity in a new cultural arena.

The limited attention given to the link between refugees and consumerism may stem from fear of replicating stereotypic perceptions that view the third world as characterized by the traditional economy – compared to the capitalistic spirit of the first world (Sabar and Pagis 2014: 264-265). Problematic as this perception may be, I propose examining the integration experience of African refugees into Israeli society based on these contrasted distinctions relying on the personal testimonies of the refugees themselves. In this sense, every reference to the transition from a traditional to a modern economic outlook, as well as to adopting consumerism practices, reflects the refugee's personal narrative and the manner in which he or she has chosen to organize the realm of meanings with respect to Israeli consumerism. Furthermore, a review of current data[4] reveals that African consumers have changed their views, and that new markets that have developed attribute importance to product quality and brand identity. While consumers in North-African countries express a strong desire to purchase international brands, the Sub-Saharan countries (such as Sudan and Eritrea) strongly prefer local-traditional brands. Furthermore, since developed consumerist markets are found mostly in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, South Africa and Kenya, this study focuses on the consumer dimension among Sudanese and Eritrean refugees in Israel – and does so through the prism of a process shaped by the encounter with Israeli culture.

CAPITALISM AND CONSUMERISM: THE ISRAELI CASE

A central feature of modern capitalism is mass production of products intended for mass consumption. Consumerism is free of functional frameworks (Bauman 2000) and its organization signals to its members what is considered the correct, true life, and what is the desired way to live it (Wong 2012). Illouz (2002) characterizes consumer culture as a culture that becomes an integral part of the economy, while the economy becomes "cultural". The individual's personal style is no more than his or her consumerist pattern, and in this sense a consumerist community is fully expressed in the way consumption

plays a central role in the construction of personal identity: "I am what I consume".

Israeli society "inherited" a class structure with proto-capitalist features, a farewell gift from the days of the British Mandate (Ben-Porat 2001: 552-553). A central process in Israeli society has been its transformation into a capitalist society: the class structure that developed resembles the class structure in capitalist countries, while state support of the private sector and the growing number of management-related occupations have shaped the Israeli economy into a "modern", i.e. capitalist economy. The development of consumerism in Israeli society that began in the 1970's was reflected in the continuous and perpetual exercise of desired lifestyles, embodied in changing taste cultures. Dress styles and fashion brands, food, car models and patterns of leisure became the materials from which the image of Israeliness is comprised. Turning everyday culture in Israel into an extension of global capitalist consumerism, a culture that places ambition and personal hedonism at the center of being, is also the realization of the notion of "normalizing" of the Jews that is at the heart of Zionist ideology. This is the case since it locates the cultural endeavor in a position similar to that in other national cultures, with one major difference: it takes place in Israel, and in Hebrew (Regev 2003: 858).

Much like other societies in recent decades, Israeli society is being transformed by international globalization processes, manifested, among other things, in the spread of neo-liberal economics and ideology and the cross-border movement of capital, knowledge, culture and people. These changes create new conflicts, construct new identities and re-shape old ones (Sasson-Levi, Ben-Porat and Shavit 2014). Lamont's ideas concerning relations between individualism and symbolic boundaries of social reality (Lamont 2001a, b) can be used to understand the integration process of African refugees, viewed as a new social category in Israeli society. The term "boundary-work" represents the ways in which groups or individuals distinguish or differentiate themselves from others defined as dissimilar to them, and the practices they carry out in light of these classifications. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions created by social actors intended "to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space" (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). However, while Lamont views symbolic boundaries as a project of distinction, the existence of symbolic boundaries between the African refugee community and Is-

raeli society should be redefined such that it does not only amount to fragmenting reality, but also seeks to challenge it. In this sense, the study aims to expand Lamont's conceptual assumptions with respect to the African refugee community in Israel, and to examine how the adoption of consumerist practices constitutes an expression of the aspiration to belong to the "Israeli" social mainstream as a ticket into the collective (Sasson-Levi, Ben-Porat and Shavit 2014: 8).

Consumer culture cannot exist without prior accumulation of capital. Therefore, the decision to document the material world and examine technological accessories as cultural meaning-producing "texts" (Caron and Caronia 2007) requires the researcher to track the flow of refugee capital. The phenomenon of money transferred to relatives in the refugee's country of origin has attracted much attention in academic discourse (Chami et al. 2005: 57). Yet only a few studies deal with the link between refugees and remittances, and most of them stress the centrality of remittance to refugee life (Sperl 2001; Riak Akuei 2005; Ratha 2005; Van Hear 2006) and its vital importance, mainly to the survival of the communities remaining in the country of origin (Koser and Van Hear 2003). Accurate data is lacking from countries identified with the refugee phenomenon, however studies estimate that remittance income of countries such as Ruanda, Sri-Lanka or Sudan amounts to about USD ten million dollars for each country (Gammeltoft 2002, in Koserand Van Hear).

This study presents a novel perspective, and reveals that much of the accumulated capital is not intended for the welfare of the community in the country of origin but for the personal use of the refugees in the host country. If this is the case, it seems that capital is not accumulated for its own sake, but rather for the opportunity to create the lifestyle identified as the ticket to the heart of Israeli society.

As mentioned above, observing consumer practices among African refugees requires an analytical division of the concept of consumer culture into two complementary dimensions: luxury consumption and brand-related identity. Luxury consumption involves goods that are not required to satisfy the individual's existential needs, products meant to satisfy desires rather than needs. Brand-related identity deals with the social-cultural added value of the brand, expressing consumer feelings created towards the brand. In this sense, the "need" for the brand embodies the desire to belong to a certain group, to be counted among a certain type of people (Tauber-

Pauzner 2012: 104). Therefore, as consuming subjects who develop attitudes and feelings towards the brand (and not the product), the refugees load it with complex symbolic meanings, seeking to express a dimension of belonging by adopting the economic-cultural norms of Israeli society.

ABOUT REFUGEES AND OBJECTS

Beginning in 2005, African refugees have come to Israel in growing numbers. The majority entered Israel through the Egyptian border after a long and arduous journey that claimed many lives. Initially most refugees arrived from Sudan, including Southern Sudan and Darfur, and subsequently by refugees from Eritrea (Yaron 2009: 7). According to current estimates, approximately 45,000 refugees from Sudan and Eritrea live in Israel, following the "voluntary departure" policy that led to the departure of refugees to African countries that were not their country of origin[5]. Although Israel signed the 1951 Refugee Convention[6] and refugees who remain in Israel are granted group protection, they are mostly concentrated in certain neighborhoods and employed in temporary jobs as cheap labor without social benefits[7].

Despite media coverage and public discourse, academic interest in refugees in Israel as the focus of inquiry is small and preliminary. Current research centers on the civil discourse and the work of voluntary organizations (e.g. Ben-Dor and Adout 2003; Human Right Watch 2008), legal aspects and refugee law (Kritzman Amir 2009), healthcare provided to refugees (Willen 2007) and refugees and group identity (Yaron 2009; Sabar 2010). Recent studies however shifted their focus to African refugees as active subjects and to their growing involvement in the Israeli socio-economic arena. Anteby Yemini's (2008) study for example, examines the development of "ethnic businesses" in the municipal arena, among them restaurants, nightclubs, hair salons and electronics shops, such that the refugee community gradually becomes integrated into the local economy as the refugees undergo a process of "Israelization". A similar approach can be found in Barak-Bianco's (2013) study that examines ethnic business enclaves among African refugees, and in Sabar and Posner's (2013) study that focuses on the communal aspect of traditional eating houses in Tel Aviv. Yet while current research is concerned with identity construction of African refugees in

Israel, it seems that the study of different types of ethnic entrepreneurship continues to emphasize the traditional identity characteristics of the refugee experience and the aspects that perpetuate segregation of the community within Israeli society. By exploring consumerist practices, and in the spirit of Lamont's (2001) thinking, the symbolic boundaries between the African refugee community and Israeli society should be characterized not only as a project of segregation, but also as an undertaking that blurs existing social boundaries.

A broad-spectrum study of the world of African refugees in Israel invites examination of everyday material objects. For the various disciplines that focus on object-subject relations, material culture offers different perspectives about the connection between individuals and objects in general, and – in the context of this paper – everyday objects in particular. From its beginnings sociological research directed much attention to the connection between people and objects[8]. Objects, goods and artifacts – as primary bearers of consumer culture – that carry cultural baggage and hold memories, values, thoughts and desires (Turkle 2007: 307), thereby playing a central role in the construction of individual and group identity. However, until the 1970's the preoccupation of academic research with objects was perceived as problematic, objectifying, colonialist and superficial. The return of objects to the research arena occurred in the mid-80's, and involved viewing them as goods – dealing for example with their production and movement and the processes through which they become desired goods (El'or 2014: 117).

Objects were and still are a central cultural marker in people's lives, and in many respects everyday objects create and reflect the image we project. In this sense, it is important to note the accelerated process taking place in recent years whereby objects become subjects and impersonal objects become products that possess a biographic and social meaning (Mitchell 2005) that should now be viewed differently. While Baudrillard (1996) emphasizes that objects are cultural vectors charged with symbolic meaning that are used by people in the process of identity construction, Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue that commodities are a constituting resource to be investigated through the norms, values and cultural symbolism around them. Consumer products create boundaries, maintain identities and help consumers maintain social connections, and therefore the act of consumption should be viewed as complex and loaded with emotional and social

meanings. Appadurai (1986) maintains that an object's definition is modified depending on the cultural context in which it is classified, reinforces the role of consumer products in modern society beyond their functional attributes. Contrary to this approach which maintains that that the social framework precedes the economic context by positioning things as objects merely because they are desired (in: El'or 2014), Latour stands out in attributing a degree of agency to objects. His (2005) underlying assumption is that every social apparatus is mediated through different meanings between its actors, and therefore objects should take center stage as they serve as social mediators.

This study regards objects as consumer culture vectors in the integration process of African refugees into Israeli society. Particular attention is given to everyday objects that are vital but not necessary, specifically electric and electronic commodities such as: mobile phones, laptops, motorized bicycles and fashion brands. The refugees' choice of technological objects such as smartphones or laptops will be examined in the social-cultural context of the economic purchasing process, focusing on the ways in which they serve as tools for personality expression and border-drawing between individuals and the social space around them (Ventura 2014: 209).

METHODOLOGY

Refugees as a phenomenon is complex and multifaceted and thus best suited for ethnographic and inductive research methods. Data was collected and cross-checked from various sources: ethnographic work in refugee community centers, semi-structured interviews with Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and many unofficial conversations conducted in different social settings in the study field.

The study is based on twenty-two semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in 2012-2013 with fourteen Eritrean refugees and eight Sudanese refugees (including from Darfur). I reached the interviewees using the "snowball" method, most of them men living in south Tel Aviv who had been in Israel for more than six months. The interviews, that took place in Lewinsky Garden[9] or at the interviewee's home, centered on the story of their life as refugees – from the reality in their country of origin, through the journey to Egypt to their life in Israel. My decision to interview refugees who have

lived in Israel for over six months served two goals: first, I do
not speak Arabic or Tigrinya I could not converse with them
in their mother tongue or understand the meaning of the
words they chose to describe their world and the experience
of their stay in Israel. After six months in Israel and involve-
ment in occupational frameworks or community activities they
were quite proficient in Hebrew which enabled me to inter-
view them on the English-Hebrew axis[10]. Second, in order to
study the economic arena and the consumer practices they
used as their ticket for participating in the Israeli society, I had
to follow refugees who had managed to establish for them-
selves, by themselves, a daily routine. All interviewed refugees
were integrated into different occupational frameworks, par-
ticipated in community activities in Tel Aviv and indicated
that they engaged with different aspects of Israeli society.

The study is also based on participant observation con-
ducted between 2009-2012 as part of my activity in social or-
ganizations[11] that promote the wellbeing of refugees and work
migrants in Israel. Through the ethnographic work I was able
to visit the refugees' homes, participate in community celebra-
tions, eat traditional dishes, and mainly, hold many conversa-
tions, both official and unofficial. Through participant obser-
vation I had the opportunity to get to know the world of Afri-
can refugees in Israel, to see consumerism as a central feature
of the local culture from their perspective, and thereby – learn
about their interpretation of the "desired" lifestyle in Israeli
society. The combination of different study tools used
strengthens the study's internal and external validity and con-
tributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The
data were collected in a field diary and the interviews were
recorded and fully transcribed. When I did not record interac-
tions, including short, unofficial conversations, I chose to rec-
ord the interviewee's words as accurately as possible. Based on
grounded theory the empirical material will be coded into a
system of themes and categories (Shkedi 2003).

Engagement with the subjects raises ethical dilemmas re-
lated to difficulty building trust and intimacy in the field. Alt-
hough African refugees are tagged as aliens and "others" in
Israeli society, in our relationship, I – a local white woman –
was the alien, I did not belong. Many times they refused to
talk to me, sometimes even fled from me, and the few who
agreed to talk hesitated, not sure whether I could be trusted.
In this sense, my ethnographic fieldwork mitigated the diffi-
culties posed by the interviews. Through unmediated time

spent in the research field I was exposed to behaviors and ide-
as that do not explicitly arise during in-depth interviews, and
to attitudes that subjects do not openly and directly declare. It
provided opportunities to visit refugee homes, to see up-close
the lifestyle they seeks to adopt and the manner in which they
wish to reposition themselves in the stratified structure of Is-
raeli society.

CAPITAL ROUTES – MONEY TRANSFER PRACTICES

Popular Israeli public discourse tends to view the African
refugees as infiltrators[12]. This designation labels the refugees
as disastrous enemies, a national threat, or at the least border-
jumping criminals. One of the prevailing arguments against
this community is that it is in fact labor migration motivated
by economic incentives. The belief that "they're all here just
for the money"[13] even led the Israeli government to legislate a
law in 2013 for the "Prohibition of Infiltrator's Money Trans-
fer outside the State"[14].

Contrary to the government's classification of the African
refugees as proactive immigrants[15] exercising the need to
climb the socio-economic ladder, the underlying premise of
this study is the definition of forced migration as a last resort
which is the outcome of political or religious events that force
people to leave disaster-struck areas. Either way, even if we
accept this assumption we cannot ignore the refugees' growing
participation in the Israeli economy, as a territory that pro-
duces new opportunities to become active players in the con-
sumption space.

As noted above, many of the testimonies reveal that the
capital which the refugees accumulated is intended for their
personal use in Israel. This is reflected in Akhmed's testimony
that describes the importance of quality of life in Israel and
money as a central means for its achievement as significant fac-
tors in his decision to refrain from supporting his family in
Sudan:

My dream is to do business. You need something instant, im-
mediate, I don't have time to go into education – you have to work
and earn money. My family is in Sudan and things are hard there but
they understand I need to live my life in Israel and you need money
to live. When I first came [to Israel] I would send them money from
my work in construction but pretty soon I realized that here in Israel
too I need the money for myself. I want to live well. You need mon-

ey for a good apartment that not many people live in, you need to buy clothes and sometimes also to enjoy life (Akhmed, Sudan 2012).

David from Eritrea observes:

[...] You Israelis keep saying we came here to work and make money. Why can't you understand that I came to Israel because I had no choice, because you can't live in Eritrea. Why do you think I fled from there? [...] Now I have already been in Israel for two years and work in cleaning. The money I earn is not enough so that I can give a part to my parents at home and it's also not enough for me to live here. I keep on thinking with my friends how I can make more money to live better, so that I have things I need here. I don't expect Israelis to give me a good life – I can do it myself (David, Eritrea 2013).

David's objection to considering him and his community members as part of a proactive work migration expresses a strong need to clarify that his presence in Israel is not driven by an economic incentive, but purely from an existential need. With respect to the analytical distinction between proactive and forced migration, David seems to want to be included in the latter. Nonetheless, David's words offer a new interpretation of the common distinction between the two types of migration[16]. This interpretation views proactive immigrants as active agents that have a choice, as opposed to forced migrants who have no real power to act in order to change their life. While David considers himself a political victim of the circumstances, he also chooses to stress the importance of active agency in his identity as the only way for him to fulfill his ambitions in Israel. Identifying the economic arena in Israel in general, and capital accumulation in particular as the main arena for shaping reality, reflects David and Akhmed's hope "to live well", to accumulate enough money to live a convenient life in Israel. The term "to live well" is grounded in the Western-capitalist system of ideas that places the "self" at the center and sanctifies the self's rights. David's demand for a good life attests to his recognition of his rights, for example the right for security or freedom, and in this context – the right for private property. Furthermore, choosing to translate "a good life" to mean economic means is also manifested in the decision not to transfer money to their relatives in their country of origin, instead using the money for their own needs in Israel. This choice is also expressed in the interview with Heila who arrived in Israel in 2006 from Eritrea. When asked

whether he usually sends the money he earns in Israel to his relatives in Eritrea, he frowned, and after a long silence, replied:

I would like to help them, but it's difficult. At first I lived near a construction site where I worked and sometimes I was able to send them some money. Today I live in Tel Aviv, in an apartment with friends, and this money maintains me. If I send money to the family I can't continue living in Tel Aviv (Haile, Eritrea 2012).

Haile's position is important for this discussion, since the decision to send money is secondary to the decision to live in Tel Aviv. When he lived in another city he was able to help his family through remittance, but the move to Tel Aviv brought new priorities for managing his money. In an analogy to Israeli cultural values, he does not perceive Tel Aviv as solely a geographic location, but a place of certain quality and reputation, a geographic icon.

In an interview held in Ismail's home in south Tel Aviv, he also referred to his choice not to send money to his relatives in Sudan, stressing the need to save capital so that he could provide a comfortable life in Israel for himself and his daughter, Hiba:

I wanted to come to Israel from Egypt because I want to be a businessman. I want to open a shop and I couldn't do that in Egypt. Here I have a home, I earn money, I can study if I want but it's too difficult […] in Israel I work at a hotel and I save my money for myself and for my daughter. If I didn't save my money I would end up in the street […] here you must have money because you have to buy things all the time. I know people who send money home, but if you want a good life here, you don't send (Ismail, Sudan 2012).

Ismail refers to the importance of the accumulating capital from his work at the hotel and to his decision not to send it, using it instead to build an "orderly life" for himself and his daughter. He too, like David, emphasizes his aspiration for a good, orderly life. Unlike forced migrants who are described as motivated only by the need to survive, the above quote supports the choice not only to live, but to live the life they perceive to be worthwhile. In this sense, we can view the consumerist capitalism system as encouraging values such as self-realization and pleasure-seeking (Illouz 2002: 96-97), and the subjects' attempts to claim such a lifestyle for themselves.

Although remittance practices were mentioned in various refugee testimonies, it appears that they were not widespread and were for the most part only episodic. Many of the subjects confirm that they choose to save the capital they accumulate in Israel and to use it for personal purposes. The reason Ismail gives for example is that "here (in Israel) you must have money to buy things all the time". If this is the case, then it seems that the decision not to send money home was not for the purpose of capital accrual for its own sake, but for the opportunity to create the lifestyle identified as the ticket to the heart of Israeli society. Choosing to refrain from or reduce remittance to relatives is in line with a new academic discourse that questions whether the remittance phenomenon among immigrants is as absolute and sweeping as it would seem. This includes the study conducted by Ruis and Vargas-Silva (2009) who examined the gradual decline in remittance among Latin migrants in the U.S. as a result of the 2008 economic crisis; Oscar (2013) who presented testimonies of female Philippine migrants regarding their decision to refrain from the commitment of sending money to their family the longer their stay in Israel; and Lim (2014) who demonstrated in her study the choice of female migrants in Israel to sometimes invest their money in ostentatious birthday parties, at the expense of economic support to their families.

In what follows I further the discussion about practices used to channel the accumulated capital to adopting consumption patterns, reflecting the refugee's desire to be a part of the Israeli-Western social mainstream.

CONSUMER CULTURE

The fieldwork offered a glance into diverse consumerist practices among African refugees in Israel. Visits to refugee homes in Tel Aviv, frequent encounters during social activities, and everyday chats about their life experience in Israel provided an opportunity to learn about consumption patterns in the community, as a means of self-positioning within Israeli society. In this part I examine objects as consumerism vectors in the integration process of African refugees into Israeli society. To this end, particular attention is given to everyday objects that may be vital but not necessary, among them: smartphones, laptops, motorized bicycles and brand-name fashion. To understand the meaning of the object in the expe-

rience of African refugees in Israel I will examine the term "consumerism" as comprised of two complementing dimensions: luxury consumption and brand-related identity.

Luxury consumption

The simplest way to define consumption is the use of economic assets to satisfy needs. However, as noted, this does not refer to existential consumption but to material consumption intended to satisfy the consumer's desires, and through which the consumer can gain prestige and social status. Luxury consumption practices were revealed to me through the ethnographic fieldwork and, as demonstrated below, capital accumulated through hard work is oftentimes intended for immediate satisfaction and for purchasing different types of luxuries. The desire to purchase smartphones, laptops, plasma TVs or motorized bicycles was often presented by the subjects as the main goal in the process of establishing their life in Israel. This was apparent in the frequent encounters I had with David, an Eritrean refugee who arrived in Israel in 2006. Atour first meeting David already shared with me his dream to earn enough money to open an electronics shop in South Tel Aviv. One of the times we were to meet in Lewinsky Garden, and after looking for him for several minutes, I found David sitting in the corner, focused on his cellphone. When I told him that I had been looking for him he uttered a short apology and explained that just today he had bought a smartphone from a friend, "the new generation" in his words, and that there was much work to be done on it. "You know, this probably means that now I'm going to start looking for a job where I can earn more money", he said, explaining that "I promised my friend that I would pay him the full amount for the phone within three months, I think I'll start eating sometimes at the 'Lewinsky Soup Kitchen'[17] for that". "If that is the case", I asked, "why couldn't you make do with your old phone?". David gave me a serious look: "This phone makes me happy, don't you get it?".

David's words should be understood within his social-economic context. Like many of his friends, David also has to work at temporary jobs with minimum wages and no social benefits. He lives with two Eritrean roommates in a two-room apartment in South Tel Aviv and share the home expenses such as utilities and municipal taxes. In this context, David's

decision to buy "the newest" smartphone attests to his need to take part in consumer culture that goes beyond satisfying vital material needs in order to construct a distinct lifestyle through the use of status symbols. This choice reflects David's wishes and obvious priorities: spending a large amount of money on an electronic device takes precedence over existential needs, even at the price of using the services of a soup kitchen or searching for more profitable work. Finally, David explains that purchasing the smartphone "makes him happy". I pressed David, asking him what he meant by "happy", but he went quiet (in defiance) and returned to his device. David's refusal to share with me the feelings that accompany the act of consumption exemplifies the assumption set forth by Illouz (2002: 66) that the individual's personal style is nothing more than his or her consumption pattern – with respect to the central role of the object in constructing the individual's personal identity, in this case David's identity as an African refugee in Israeli society.

The attempt to explore the consumption phenomenon often frustrated the subjects. My interest, as a Western-Israeli researcher, in the symbolic meaning of the object acquisition process was often met with surprise. I specifically recall the response of Akhmed from Sudan (quoted above) to my question as to why he finds it important to purchase products he does not need in Israel, while he did not buy the same or other products when he lives in Sudan. "You understand that I'm a refugee in your country?". He asked in frustration. "I have no family here, my home is back in Sudan. I don't have roots here like you do... All I have in Israel is what I can buy on my own". This short confession is indicative in understanding the significance of consumption for refugees as a means of creating social belonging. Product consumption practices do not only serve to satisfy wishes and desires, they embody symbolic meanings of power. Writing about conspicuous consumption, Veblen (1965 [1899]) already dealt with the close link between objects and maintaining the social power of their owners. Akhmed, who was torn from his homeland and family and who came to Israel alone, has no property or capital and lacks any institutional recognition of his existence. His only identity is that of a refugee. He maintains that everything he has is what he can buy on his own, products he accumulated throughout his time in Israel. These in turn have become main actors in rejecting the monolithic identity assigned him – a

Sudanese refugee, offering him the opportunity to project a wide range of identities.

I met Osher, who came to Israel in 2008 from Darfur, in Hebrew classes atone of the activity centers for work migrants and refugees in Tel Aviv. One time Osher came to class earlier than usual, and wearing a big smile took out a new laptop. The students sitting in the classroom approached him with many questions I could not understand. I observed them as they examined the laptop from all sides and checked out its features. I waited until the students returned to their desks and then went up to him and said: "Congratulations Osher!". In response he smiled and asked: "So, do you like my new computer?". Indeed, I was happy for him, but noted that in class we learn with special textbooks, so I was not sure how necessary the laptop would be. Osher explained that I was wrong, because he planned to purchase special software that would enable him to scan the workbook into the laptop and use it to study. Much like David, Osher chooses to invest the money he earns to purchase an electronic product meant to satisfy a need for a luxury product, since, as a veteran student he knew that he had no real need for a laptop for his studies. He argued that the laptop was not only intended for Hebrew classes, but would also serve other purposes, for example access to the Internet and to maintain continuous contact with friends and family in other countries. To consume an object, said Baudrillard (1996), means to use the object for symbolic interpretation value, and modern Man uses objects to construct identity. The need to consume, continues Baudrillard (1981), cannot be defined in naturalistic or innate terms, but as an outcome of productive forces. In this sense, David's need of a new smart phone, just like Osher's need of a laptop, are the expression of consumer force created when linking up with the absorbing country. Musa from Sudan also directly relates to the option of choice embedded in consumerism:

When I came to Israel I didn't have any money. I remember, the day I arrived [in Tel Aviv] it rained all the time. I wore a T-shirt and I was cold I had no money to buy the things I need... I've been here for nearly two years and I work hard, sometimes even 16 hours a day. Life here is difficult and the money helps me do stuff. If I'm cold in winter I buy a coat. I pay money to my landlord and I buy food in the market. Two months ago I bought a motorized bike. This is the first time I have my own money, that I work hard for and I choose what to spend it on (Musa, Sudan 2013).

It seems that Musa does a good job summarizing the idea of luxury consumption while illustrating the transition from the need to exist to the need to consume. Musa came to Israel without prior property or capital and had to build his life in the country through hard work. By doing so, he was able to create an independent economic structure that provides for his necessary needs such as clothes, food and accommodations. Further to satisfying these basic needs there is the added need to buy luxury items such as a motorized bicycle. In his own way Musa illustrates the growing realization that refugees are not only political victims but also active economic players (Jacobsen 2005), stressing the individual dimension in the Israeli economic arena. The act of consumption is charged with complex symbolic meanings not necessarily related to the product itself (Barthes 1957), and it plays a central role in the social position of African refugees in the Western-Israeli fabric.

Marx (1990 [1867]) defined luxury consumption practices as "the fetishism of commodities". Relationships between people appear as relationships between objects, while the relationships between commodities appear as intersubjective – representing and creating identities. In this sense, African refugees' relationship to objects is greater than the sum of its parts. Smartphones are no longer a communication device and the branded pair of jeans, as explained below, is not merely a clothing item but an arena for the creation of active subjects maneuvering between social power structures.

Brand-related identity

The combination of consumer culture and pop culture created the brand, a product that has a tag, an image and an identity (Tauber Pauzner 2012: 104). This part addresses the socio-cultural added value of commodities, specifically the feelings of African refugees as brand consumers with respect to these commodities. Choosing commodities with preferred brand-related identity expresses the consumer's desire to adopt the cultural attributes embedded in it, and to create a new form of belonging to the collective. Since African refugees are stripped of their cultural world and undergo a process of reduction according to which they are defined by their "otherness" (Kritzman Amir 2009: 603), choosing brands with distinct identities testifies to the desire to challenge rigid social boundaries. The ethnographic fieldwork gave me a glimpse

into the world of branded good as perceived by African refugees – clothing and electronic and electrical products become necessary when they carry socio-cultural value, in addition to their technical specifications. Leonard from Eritrea told me how hard he had worked to save money in order to purchase a new "Nikon" camera for his photography studies; Sayid, a young man from Sudan, along with his roommates insisted on purchasing a Samsung TV; Ali from Sudan refused to accept used winter cloths since "they don't look good" and are manufactured by an unknown company.

I first met Avraham, a refugee from Eritrea, in 2009, only two weeks after he arrived in Israel. Since then we would meet regularly at one of the Tel Aviv Municipality-sponsored activity centers, until he had to move to another city following a job offer. In his Tel Aviv days Avraham washed dishes in a restaurant in the city center, an area with many prestigious clothing shops. At one of our meetings Avraham told me that since he began to work at that restaurant, where he had met local young adults who work as waiters, he had grown fond of a fashionable and "young" shoe brand. When I told him I was about to go abroad he asked me to buy a pair of the shoes he desired that were cheaper there. When I returned to Israel he was disappointed to hear that I was unable to buy the shoes he wanted, and he promised himself to buy them soon in Israel. To our next meeting he wore the new shoes and smiled: "Mission accomplished".

Avraham's desire to purchase branded shoes was born of his encounter with Israeli society – the young friends he met at work. Accordingly, his motivation to purchase the shoes was not based on quality considerations, but from the brand name itself. As a consumer, Avraham expects to benefit from the purchase of the brand – not only from its functional value (comfortable material, strong soles) but from its social value (Herman 2001: 29). Furthermore, the act of consumption is loaded with emotional meanings as reflected in Avraham's choice of words – "mission accomplished", the goal was achieved. Whether these are feelings of pleasure, satisfaction or pride, they are directed at the value Avraham expects to gain from purchasing a brand-name product. The symbolic value of the brand does not provides instant gratification only, but an opportunity to pave the way for Avraham to become a member of the group to which he strives to belong. Simmel (1904) maintained that the brand is a central tool in the creation of a distinct socio-economic identity in the modern urban

environment. Avraham's example illustrates that the yearning for a brand in fact stems from the desire to enter the social mainstream and to expand the boundaries of the term "Israeliness" so as to distance himself from his main identity, that of a refugee.

In contrast to Avraham's choice to save money to buy a branded product, the following example shows that the product's visibility is sometimes more important than the brand-name itself. Suleiman, a young Sudanese who had arrived to Israel in 2008, seemed to me over time to be a central figure among young people in the Sudanese community – he was always escorted by a large entourage of friends and dressed in flamboyant clothes. I often met him during my fieldwork but he always seemed busy and we never spoke much. One time I noticed Suleiman walking alone and approached him. As I was unable to ignore his impressive aesthetic touch: the manner in which he wore his cloths, the bracelets dangling on his wrists; the hats he would often change – I asked him if he would be willing to tell me what his choice of clothes means to him. "It's important to look good", he answered firmly. "There was no money in Sudan and there were no shops where I lived. Today I can choose my cloths according to my taste", he said while pointing to the "Adidas" label on his shirt, his "Levi" jeans and "Adidas" shoes. Seeing my enthusiasm Suleiman told me that his wardrobe includes many similar items. When I finally asked whether, given the high cost, it is nonetheless important to wear branded clothes, he smiled and said: "I buy all my cloths in the marketplace. It's exactly the same thing, no one can tell the difference".

Dandyism among African men was documented as early as the beginning of the 19th century, when servants adopted elegant and opulent attire from their European masters to suit the luxury-abundant environment (Martin 1995). Dandyism as a phenomenon in diasporic communities has been studied in recent years, for example the relationship between fashion and identity construction among African communities in the diaspora (Brand and Teunissen 2006), and the ways in which these communities adopt new fashion styles in order to adapt to the norms of their new social environment (Gott and Loughran 2010). In this sense, dandyism is not only a social act that violates class boundaries, but a political act that erodes hegemonic social conventions (Corrigall 2015: 151). Similar to Suleiman's testimony, dandyism is a practice of self-representation

that tests society's normative mechanisms and challenges its boundaries (Miller 2009).

The decision to purchase a fake brand is of interest in this context, since it underscores the importance of external signaling through consumer products. To Suleiman, a fake brand provides the attributes that designate status symbols just like the real brand. The shirt does not have to be original "Adidas" if the imitation succeeds in projecting the same desired social values. Illouz (2002) maintains that consumerism blurs social boundaries since "luxury" items become available to most social groups. A brand imitation gives consumers access to "luxury" items they cannot afford, and in this sense Suleiman's decision points to his desire to belong to a certain status group. The brand becomes a consumer entity based on a system of shared values, norms and conventions (Lash and Lury 2007: 7) and as such it seems that even using the product's casing can preserve these social values and the meanings they embody. Suleiman, similar to many in his community, seeks to expand the rigid boundaries of the monolithic identity ascribed to him in Israel – not just a refugee, an African, an alien. Consumerism, with its many products and brands, reflects the African refugees' attempt to belong to the Israeli consensus by adopting the consumption patterns of the collective. Thus, in Western-Israeli society the product becomes the cornerstone in constructing individual identity, or as Illouz puts is, "'Identity' has never been so fashionable" (Illouz 2002: 96).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Changes to collective meanings of identities sometimes take place indirectly rather than through political struggles (Sasson-Levi, Ben-Porat and Shavit 2014: 8). One such example is the restructuring of social boundaries by the African refugee community in Israel by adopting consumer culture. The aim of the study was to expand academic knowledge regarding the process of refugee integration into the host country, focusing on the economic arena through which African refugees seek to challenge their hierarchical position in the Israeli social system. While the academic discourse tends to view the labor market as a central economic arena in the refugee integration process, other aspects related to the market economy, such as the accumulation of capital and the purchase of goods, are not given sufficient attention. By following and ob-

serving the perspective of African refugees in Israel I was able to examine alternative means through which the refugee community seeks to become integrated into the new economic-social arena in which they live by adopting patterns of popular consumerism.

Consumer culture cannot exist without prior accumulation of capital. Therefore, the decision regarding the use of accumulated money gains importance: whether to allocate savings to realize personal desires at the expense of an existential need, or to invest in a certain lifestyle instead of providing economic support to the family left behind in their country of origin. Either way, the capital accumulated through hard work is no longer needed only to satisfy necessary needs, and is also channeled to luxury consumption. The study inquired into the consumption of electric and electronic products such as smartphones or laptops, and even the preference for highly popular fashion brands in Israeli society. Sometimes, the money refugees spend is not meant to purchase objects of any tangible essence, but to consume a geographic icon, for example choosing to live in Tel Aviv, the most expensive city in the country.

Similar to consumerism in Western society, the motivation of African refugees to purchase, and their choice of products, does not necessarily reflect considerations having to do with quality, but rather with the brand itself. As I showed, brand identity contains local cultural values, and as such represents the desire to belong to a certain status group. Therefore, by adopting commodities and consumption patterns the African refugees seek to participate in the Israeli collective by adopting its norms, values and practices. Consumerism practices are not only meant to increase assets or create material comfort, first and foremost they reflect attempts to become a part of the social mainstream enabling African refugees to distance themselves from their monolithic identity as refugees, Africans, and mostly – as aliens.

The government's disregard of the African refugees and their temporary status is all the more reason to study their consumer culture as their socio-political circumstances limit the routes available to them to become integrated into Israeli society. The language barrier, segregation in the education system, the ongoing refusal to grant work permits and their lack of access to social services-are powerful mechanisms impeding the absorption of the African refugee community into Israeli society. As this study demonstrates, consumer culture offers

refugees alternative routes through which they can maneuver their way between social power structures. This is a subversive, peaceful path that bypasses institutional mechanisms and takes shape through an ongoing and gradual process. Consumerism becomes an arena through which refugees seek to borrow, adopt and translate the symbols and representations of the desired lifestyle, thereby expanding the repertoire of definitions of who is considered an "Israeli".

Is consumerism a phenomenon unique to African refugees in their encounter with Israeli society? It would be worthwhile to enrich academic knowledge about the relationship between refugees and the economy, specifically, the informal mechanisms that enable new groups to become integrated into the collective by alternative means. Future studies could examine whether similar processes take place in the encounter between refugees and the host society in other Western countries, in a manner that empowers the active agency dimension of their identity and their growing involvement in the new economic-cultural space.

NOTES

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] I chose to use the term "refugee" not necessarily based on the individual's legal status in Israel, but according to the definition of the 1951 UN Convention, which states that: "The term "refugee" shall apply to any person who [...] as a result of events occurring [...] and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country [...]". See also: http://www.amnesty.org.il/?CategoryID=244&ArticleID=131.

[3] In this context, and similar to the argument put forth by Sabar (2010), I do not consider concepts such as "refugee", "African" or "Sudan/Eritrea community" to be identical analytic units and ontological concepts. However, since I acknowledge that they share many characteristics with respect to the central place of Western-capitalistic lifestyle in forming personal identities, as a tool for social, cultural and political mobility, I have nonetheless chosen to use them. When a national, ethnic or other distinction was required, I did so to the extent possible under constraints of brevity.

[4] See also: *The rise of the African consumer*, McKinney's Africa Consumer Insight Center (2012).

[5] See also: http://www.piba.gov.il/PublicationAndTender/ForeignWorkersStat/Documents/july2015.pdf. Existing data indicates that refugees departing to a third country, usually Rwanda or Uganda, do not receive preliminary prior information about the absorbing country, are exposed to the danger of arrest and find it hard to submit asylum petitions since their identification documents are taken from them upon arrival in that country. See also: http://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Final-Report-9.3.15.pdf.

[6] See also: www.unhcr.org.

[7] For further information about the legal aspect of Israeli refugees, see: Kritzman, 2009; Ben Dor and Adout, 2003.

[8] See also: Levi Strauss 1978; Bourdiue 1984; Appadurai 1986; Miller 2008.

[9] A public garden known as the "Lewinsky Garden" is located on the ruins of the old central bus station in south Tel Aviv. In recent years it has become a central meeting place, sometimes even the home, of aliens, most of them African refugees.

[10] This choice may narrow the variety of perspectives in the field, since, arguably, these are more educated subjects or subjects who are more familiar with Western culture. However, an interviewee's life story reflects a broader social, cultural and historic context so that it is possible to reach a dynamic conceptualization of the investigated phenomenon.

[11] The fieldwork began in 2009 at the African Refugees Development Center where I helped submit asylum applications. At the "Workers Advice Center" I participated in interviewing refugees and taking testimonies of their journey on foot in Sinai and the living conditions at the "Kziot" confinement facility where they were brought after entering Israel. I also served as a Hebrew Studies assistant for labor migrants and refugees at the "Community Education Center".

[12] See more in the Government Service Portal: https://shituf.gov.il/discussion/400. This term originated in the 1950's with the infiltration attempts of Palestinian and Jordanian refugees into the territory of the State of Israel (Agier 2008 in Anteby-Yemini).

[13] See among others, the response of the Knesset Interior Committee Chairperson, KM Miri Regev: http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/471/274.html.

[14] http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:RfiGZNWQy2gJ: www .knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/rtf/pnim/2012-09-10.rtf+&cd=16&hl=en&ct=cln k&gl=il.

[15] See more about this conceptual distinction: Rwamatwara 2005; Misago and Landau 2005.

[16] See also: Richmond 1994.

[17] A voluntary project that provides food and household items to thousands of African refugees in south Tel Aviv.

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