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THE STIGMATA OF MY DEPORTATION

Lucio Cascavilla

with the help of Abdulay Daramy and Meghan Kubic

Summary: And what if you become refused? And the police want to kick you out? What if you become unwanted? In few seconds, you will have a black mark on your passport and you have to leave the country. You have no rights. You are a pariah.

Lucio Cascavilla is an Italian writer, director and musician. After touring in China, with his band, he moved to Sierra Leone where he is developing a documentary about deportation. He published 3 novels and he is cooperating with magazine and blogs. Now is living in Congo

Lucio Cascavilla with Mauro Piacentini and the help of Abdulay Daramy and all the active members of NEAS (Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers) are working on "The Years We Have Been Nowhere", a documentary about deportation, and they have collected these stories from Sierra Leonean deportees. The documentary will be ready in 2022.

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1 *"When I arrived in Sierra Leone, I never thought about it. It was just later that it come to my mind. When you are a deportee, you don't consider the moment on the airplane. That airplane, as a place, doesn't exist. It is only a vector, a carrier, to bring people from point A to point B.*

As I was dragged through the airport, I was blindly grabbing at the chairs, the tables, the railing. I was tied. I was blindfolded. I was chained like the slaves of two centuries ago.

I was not strong enough to stop them. On the stairs of the airplane, I desperately grasped at the handrail."

I desperately grasped at the handrail

"I screamed and I cried. Nobody was interested in me. The police with me didn't care. I grabbed at anyone and anything to stop myself from getting on that plane. But I knew they would be happy to cut off my hand rather than let me stay one minute longer in my own country. In the country where I lived for eleven years. In the country where I left behind my child and my wife.

The airplane didn't exist. Not for me."

The first time I met Oresay, he didn't want to speak with me. He looked at me with a vacant expression, as if he was watching television rather than talking to a person. I wanted to ask him important questions about his time in the UK—the place where he lived for 6 years and the place where he was forced to leave a son and a wife behind. He was hesitant to speak freely with me because he was sure I could not understand what he felt when the deportation happened. People who have suffered through deportation have a different way of seeing the world and Oresay felt that difference created a distance between us that was too big to try to cross.



Image: Attilio Triennese, Sckart

2 *"It was a normal aircraft, but I don't even remember the company, the logo, the size-- nothing. In that moment there were only three characters: me, my new country and my old country.*

My old country was passively waiting, indifferent to my arrival, and my new country was using all its strength to send me back "home"."

Madame Kamakuye decided not to meet me in person. I got her telephone number from The Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers (NEAS). She very politely answered my call, trying to explain that for a woman, being deported from Europe is even more difficult than for a man. Although she was willing to speak on the phone, she refused to speak in front of a camera.



Image: Attilio Triennese, Sckart

3 *"The airplane was the land of nobody. I could not run away. I could not change its course. The hostesses were there. I could feel their eyes staring at me, gazing wide-eyed as if I was a fierce beast. In a cage, surrounded by four tamers, I was the beast.*

I was the bad guy. Innocent or guilty, I was the enemy.

The stewards were careful to come too close. They ventured just near enough to snap a selfie with the beast--maybe to show to their children.

In that space, the police and I, we were like uninvited guests. The Capitan didn't say anything on his microphone about me."

Ibrahim was clearly nervous telling his story. I had the impression that he had fought hard to forget those memories—almost as if, if he could not remember, then the deportation never happened. He has a daughter that he has never seen, born just one week after his “forced repatriation” and I suspect that, for Ibrahim, living without those memories is easier than living with the reality that he has gone so many years without seeing his daughter. In his mind, his daughter, now seventeen, can exist almost as a dream, a wonderful thing to hope for—rather than something he has lost. She turned seventeen the day he agreed to speak with me. As he spoke, his hands were shaking, his thoughts racing and incoherent, and he was not able to describe exactly what happened. He tried to remember but his memories were hazy.

4 Sulemain lived for nine years in the UK, and though he didn’t leave a wife or children behind, he did leave behind those nine years of his life spent building a community and a home. He left behind his friends, his work, his routine—a place where he felt like he belonged. He now suffers from depression because of the trauma of his deportation and he has been hospitalized three times in the mental health clinic in Freetown. Upon his arrival in Freetown, he was refused by his family because he didn’t bring anything for them—no money, no gifts, nothing they felt was useful. He feels like he has no future there.

5 *“I didn't see any passengers, but I could smell them. I could sense the plane was full. Hear their scared whispering. They were speaking about me. They did nothing for me.*

What could they do? Speak to the Captain? Protest against the airline company? I should have felt privileged. I had three seats just for me. The passengers were not on the plane when I arrived. They were not on the plane when I left. When I was given water, with a straw, as I was a kid of 35 years old, I was so thirsty that I could not refuse. I don't know who was so merciful to allow me to drink. Was it the hostess or the steward? Or was it one of the policemen that was bringing me “home” without my wife and my son--motivated by a fleeting sense of humanitarian duty?”

Protest against the airline company?

Abbas left Sierra Leone when he was eighteen, and the civil war started; he arrived to Spain, believing it was Italy. Slowly from Barcelona he moved to France and he started a life, a new life; a life without war and without violence. The life he has been dreaming for years. He is one of the few that strongly admitted that when the German police brought him back, he got a trauma; such a strong trauma that the reasons of his deportations are still foggy.

6 *“When the plane took off, I stopped resisting. **I was sitting in the land of nobody.** I was gagged and I could try to scream and scream, but I would have just wasted my energy. There was no way the airplane would reverse and take me back. After a long time, I don't know for how long, the plane landed in my “hometown”. Home is what the police whispered in my ear. But what is home?”*

But what is home?

"My parents are dead, and all my siblings have moved away from Freetown. The only place where I can find my family is Germany. I could scream that I didn't want to leave that plane, but it would never fly back with me inside. It was not my choice. Just moments before, I was in my country, surrounded by familiarity, and now I am in my "home" country, completely disoriented. In the blink of an eye life changes."

Maria's children grew up in Berlin. Eva, the elder one, doesn't speak with her mother anymore. After Maria was deported, Eva was adopted by a German doctor and grew up without her biological family. She believes she was left behind. Now, Maria is alone in Freetown, but she continues to believe that sooner or later, her daughter will come to Sierra Leone to discover her roots.

7 *"The airplane was just the vessel of change. My life did not change inside the airplane.*

The change was before and after. I tried to resist. I tried to stay in the plane while the policemen were dragging me out. I could feel the sight of the stewards, the Captain and the hostess on me. But my fate was impossible to change. The airplane was just a carrier."

In 1996, Edward and his whole family moved first to a refugee camp in Guinea, and then later to New York—to a new life in the "new world". After committing a petty crime, he spent three years in jail and then, even though he had a green card, he spent an additional three years in a detention camp. Nobody wants a migrant that commits a crime. After eighteen years in the U.S.A, he was forced to go back home—leaving behind his three sisters, two brothers, many nephews and nieces, and even his mother's grave.



Photo: Lucio Cascavilla, 2021

8 *"I was deported I know the story, it is forever etched on my skin. I was living in Germany. My son is still there. The police dragged me through the airport. I was blindly grabbing at the chairs, the tables, the railing. I was tied. I was blindfolded. They dragged me so forcefully that they broke my wrist. I started to scream, but it was too late to stop them, and they put me on a charter flight."*

While listening to Abdulay's story for the first time, I couldn't help but feel like I needed a dictionary next to me—though he was using words I understood, it was like I couldn't fully grasp their meaning. He was speaking about experiences too difficult for me to imagine. I thought the words he was saying must need to be translated for me to fully comprehend them. Abdulay, the national coordinator of NEAS (Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers), laughed when I explained that to him.

The first word I struggled to understand—*deportation*. The act of removing a foreigner and sending him back to his country of origin. As he was explaining his story, I remembered an old John Ford western, "The Cheyenne Autumn", about the sad tale of the Native American tribe from Yellowstone that was deported to the reservation. Surely, this was the closest thing I could think of that would help me grasp the deeper meaning of what he was saying—trying to understand, in my own small way, what it could possibly feel like to be a deportee. Abdulay continues to tell his tale.

Remembering this part of his past was difficult for Abdulay. He was deported in 2009 from Germany back to Sierra Leone, after having lived in Germany for nine years. As soon as he arrived in Freetown, he went to Amnesty International, on Swissy—a corner where all the ex-deportees still meet today. They meet to try to get justice and to come together in the hopes that Amnesty will help them return to the countries they were deported from.



Video: Lucio Cascavilla

9 "I screamed and I cried, but nobody paid any attention to me. The first flight arrived in Las Palmas and I had to wait for a couple of days to get boarded onto another one. I was chained. I couldn't move and the police, before throwing me in a cell, left me under the sun without any water."

While at Amnesty, Abdulay met Albert, another German who was deported at around the same time. Albert had a similar experience of being deported via charter flight. This is another word I am unfamiliar with—*charter flight*. A flight by an aircraft hired for a specific journey which is not part of the airline's regular schedule.

As was the case with Abdulay, Albert was deported due to an issue with his documents. After he lost his job, during the 2008 financial crisis, despite multiple attempts to get his documents renewed, failed to renew Albert's visa. He was arrested and he went to jail for four months—without even committing a crime. The police forced him to buy a ticket back to Freetown and in chains, he was brought to the airport.

To develop the project "The Years We Have Been Nowhere" we interviewed twenty-three people. They left Sierra Leone and migrated to different country, they had different ages and different bureaucratic problems, but they share the pattern of the forced repatriation, and they were telling to me the same story. With a small little difference: the number of policemen grabbing them in to the airplane.