

SHAHRAM KHOSRAVI

The 'illegal' traveller: an auto-ethnography of borders*

Borders of nation-states have come to be a natural order in human lives. They are not only edges of a state but also seen as an essential reference of national identity. Based on a capitalist-oriented and racial discriminating way of thinking, borders regulate movements of people. In an era of global inequality of mobility rights, freedom of mobility for some is only possible through systematic exclusion of others. This paper is an auto-ethnography of borders and 'illegal' travelling. Based on personal experiences of a long journey across many borders in Asia and Europe, I attempt to explore how the contemporary border regime operates. The paper focuses on the rituals and performances of border crossing. This is a narrative of the late 20th century through the eyes of an 'illegal' migrant.

Key words borders, nation-states, refugees, irregular migration, human smuggling

Introduction

One cold night in late February 1987 I stood on a gravelled road which was the border separating Iran from Afghanistan. It was around midnight. Deadly silent and pitch-dark. 'If I take a step,' I thought, 'I will be somewhere else. When my foot touches the ground on the other side of the road, I will not be the same person. If I take this step I will be an "illegal" person and the world will never be the same again'.

The paradigmatic scene of the world today is undoubtedly a picture of bodies, squeezed between pallets inside a truck. The picture is taken by an X-ray camera on the border between nation-states. It exposes those invisibles, the people without papers on the wrong side of the border. The X-ray image shows the naked white bodies on a black background – a silhouette of human beings. Metaphorically, human bodies are displayed also naked of their political rights. The image illustrates a depoliticised body, or in Giorgio Agamben's words a *homo sacer* (1998). *Homo sacer* personifies 'the naked life', which differs from the politicised form of life, explicitly represented in the notion of citizenship. The X-ray image testifies to a hegemonic topography of borders. Borders determine how the world looks. The map of the world shows how the world is represented in a mosaic of unities (of nations) with clear outlines and

* I would like to thank Ulf Hannerz, Ilká Thiessen, and two anonymous *Social Anthropology* reviewers for their comments on early drafts.

distinct in different colours. The political map today resembles, in Ernest Gellner's words, the painting style of Modigliani: 'neat flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends, and there is little if any ambiguity or overlap' (Gellner 1990: 139–40). Borders of nation-states have come to be a natural order in many dimensions of human lives (Malkki 1995: 5). Borders are no longer simple edges of a state. 'Borders shape our perception of the world . . . border thinking is a major component of our consciousness of the world' (Rumsford 2006: 166). Borders are essential reference of communal sense, of identity. They are not only external realities but also a 'colour bar' situated everywhere and nowhere (Balibar 2002: 78). Violation of border-regime is thus a violation of ethical and aesthetical norms. 'Illegal' border crossing challenges the sacred feature of the border rituals and symbols. It is seen as a criminal act deserving punishment. Based on a capitalist-oriented and racial discriminating way of thinking, borders regulate movements of people. However, borders are also the space of defiance and resistance. 'Illegal' border crossing and borders are defined in terms of each other. The existence of borders is the very basis of this form of travelling (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 101). In this auto-ethnography I attempt to interject personal experiences into ethnographic writing. It is 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). In auto-ethnographic text the distinction between ethnographer and Others is not clear. It challenges imposed identities and boundaries. Auto-ethnography can be seen as alternative forms of meaning different from the dominant discourse (Pratt 1992). Based on my own journey I will offer a narrative of the polysemic nature of borders, border politics, rituals and performances of border-crossing.

Border guards and border people

That night I took the step and became 'illegal'. But my border biography had in fact begun six months earlier in September 1986 at my first attempt to leave Iran 'illegally'. I had then just finished high school and I was called up to do military service during the ongoing terrible war between Iran and Iraq. To come back alive from the front was a chance I did not want to take. A 'middleman' took me to Iranshahr, a small city in Baluchistan province near the border with Pakistan. He was the link to a local human smuggler. What I did not know was that the smuggler collaborated with the police. He, as we later found out, gave 'small fry' to the police to be allowed to take the 'big ones'. We were arrested on the first night in a hotel. In custody and later in prison, everybody I met had been arrested in connection with the border. For more than one month, I was in cells with big and small drug smugglers, undocumented Afghan immigrants, a dozen young men like myself who had tried to flee the country, and local native Baluchi tribesmen who for generations had crossed the border freely but were now punished for violating the rules.

This border is one of the most profitable borders for smugglers, traffickers and corrupt border guards in the world. A combination of human smuggling and trafficking and drug smuggling has made this border a lucrative place. Through the 909 kilometre border with Pakistan and the 936 kilometre border with Afghanistan, young girls are trafficked from Iran to Pakistan and from Afghanistan to Iran for sexual exploitation. Young boys from Bangladesh and Pakistan are trafficked to Iran en route to the Gulf States, where they are forced to work as camel jockeys, beggars or labourers.

Afghanis seek a future in Iran – either as their country of destination or in transit to Europe. Furthermore, up to 90% of the heroin consumed in Europe crosses this border (Gouverneur 2002). In contrast to the common perception that ‘borders are a boon for traffickers and a nightmare for law-enforcement agencies’ (Rumsford 2006: 164), the borders are beneficial even for border guards. Border crossers without papers are robbed by the guards before they are taken into custody. Not surprisingly, the border people usually view the various border officials as the true criminals and not the smugglers (*cf.* McMurray 2001: 123).

Human smugglers and the sacrifice of border transgressors

After five weeks I was released on bail. Five months later, I tried to leave again. This time I did not turn to a smuggler. An Afghani cellmate put me in contact with Homayoun, a 25-year-old Afghani man who had lived clandestinely in Iran since he was just fifteen. His parents still lived in Kabul under Soviet occupation. One day in January 1987, he called me and said that he was planning a visit to Kabul to marry ‘the most beautiful girl in the town’. He asked if I wanted to come along. Homayoun requested \$500 to take me to Quetta, the largest city in northeastern Pakistan. It was less than half of what my first smuggler had demanded. I have never considered Homayoun in terms of a *smuggler*. Himself an undocumented immigrant, Homayoun facilitated my escape from undesired martyrdom in a long and bloody war. Human smuggling is recurrently misrepresented by the media and politicians as an entirely mafia-controlled criminality. Furthermore, it is also usual not to differentiate between human smuggling and trafficking in persons. Human smuggling is multifaceted and is a complex market for highly differentiated services (see Bilger *et al.* 2006; Liempt 2007). Moreover, there are various actors involved who conduct sequential operations on different levels (see Içduygu and Toktas 2002). Human smugglers do not make up a homogenous group. Alongside the criminal ones there are local people living in the border regions. They might facilitate an ‘illegal’ border crossing for a low price.

I arrived in Zahedan, the centre of Baluchistan province, by air around noon. A taxi took me to a marketplace in a suburb, where I was to meet Homayoun. He took me to a house and brought me some food and said that I should get some rest. We left Zahedan on a pick-up truck in the evening. We drove north for a few hours and then took a side road to the east. Somewhere the truck was stopped and we were ordered to jump down and run towards the silhouette of huge mountains which separated Iran from Afghanistan. I changed my jeans and T-shirt to Afghani national dress and began to climb. It was pitch dark and I tried to stay very close to Homayoun. I had heard stories of how smugglers just disappeared in the night and left their clients alone, which meant certain death. After crossing the mountain we were at the border, a gravelled road. With a few steps I crossed the border and began my odyssey across many national borders, outside all regulations and laws, without travel documents.

We continued going all night. Once, Homayoun said that he was not sure if we were going in the right direction and approaching dawn we saw a border watchtower, which Homayoun said belonged to Pakistan. We began to run in the opposite direction. The guards, Homayoun said, would shoot to kill, not to arrest. However, after 13 hours climbing and walking we reached a camp. It was a sort of self-organised camp

for displaced people who had fled the Red Army. It was 1987 and Afghanistan was still under occupation by the Soviet Union. The camp was not large and consisted of around a hundred tents. There was no running water or any other basic facilities. I did not see any trace of international organisations there. A forgotten camp on the most remote frontier of Afghanistan. An Islamic militia group, perhaps Afghan Mujaheddin, controlled the camp. There were numerous trucks with heavy weapons on them. All the men carried arms. For a few dollars, an old man let us hide in his shelter. He gave us tea and bread, which he said was the only meal in the camp. The day we arrived in the camp was a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath. At noon, militia searched the tents and forced people to attend Friday prayers. A young man with a Kalashnikov in his hand found me and wondered who I was. Homayoun asked me to go outside. After a while the Kalashnikov-carrying man left us alone. He had probably been paid by Homayoun to ignore my presence in the camp. After this incident Homayoun decided to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible and said that he would follow me all the way to Karachi.

According to immigration law, Homayoun was a human smuggler, a law breaker and a criminal. But in fact he saved my life in one of the most dangerous places, under the rule of ruthless criminal gangs, corrupt border guards and fanatic Mujaheddin. Needless to say, not everyone was lucky enough to have a good 'helper'. Later in Karachi I heard horrible stories of rape, homicide, kidnapping and blackmail of persons on the borders by their smugglers. An 'illegal' traveller is in a space of lawlessness, outside the protection of the law. This is the main aspect of contemporary border politics. It exposes the border transgressors to death rather than using its power to kill (Agamben 1988; Mbembe 2003). The vulnerability of border transgressors is best demonstrated by their animalisation. The terminology used in this field is full of names of animals to designate human smugglers and their clients; *coyote* for the human smuggler and *pollos* (chickens) for Mexican border crossers (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 135); *shetou* (snakehead) for Chinese human smugglers and *renshe* (human snakes) for smuggled Chinese (Chin 1999: 187). Iranians usually use the terms *gosfand* (sheep) or *dar poste gosfand* (in the skin of sheep) to refer to 'illegal' border crossers. Represented in terms of chicken and sheep – two animals traditionally sacrificed in rituals – the border transgressors are sacrificial creatures for the border ritual.

Homayoun and I fled from the camp under cover of darkness later that day on the back of a pick-up going southwards. The driver drove very fast on gravelled roads and over wastelands. Around midnight we crossed the border. There were no guards or barriers. A single room, which was supposed to be a checkpoint, was the only trace of a nation-state system on the border. The pick-up kept driving all night. At dawn we reached a small town. It was on the Pakistani side but crammed with Afghani refugees and armed Mujaheddin. The driver said that the Red Army jets occasionally bombed the town because of the concentration of Afghanis. The town was lawless. Homayoun said that all kinds of weapons and drugs were sold openly on the streets. The driver took us to a garage, where I got some rest. Homayoun went out to find out how we could get to Karachi. Around noon he came back with two bus tickets to Quetta, the largest city in northwestern Pakistan. It was not easy to find a way out of the town. Thousands of refugees were searching for a vehicle to take them south to a safer place. The bus, decorated and painted like a holy shrine, was overloaded. Refugees occupied the aisle and even a handful of people sat on the roof of the bus. All the other passengers were Afghani refugees. I still wore Afghani clothes and was instructed by Homayoun

how to present myself as a Kabuli. However, all these precautions did not help when a police officer at a check point said without hesitation: 'You are not Afghani' and asked for my passport. Once again, with some rupees the border problem was solved. I do not know how much Homayoun bribed the border guards, the bus driver to let me on, the hotel managers to overlook my illegality, and many others. I, however, witnessed that many people earned money thanks to my journey. In Quetta, the UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) gave me a letter, which did not have any legal or political significance. I was told that Quetta was not a safe place for refugees and I should go to Karachi. It was a long journey by land to Karachi. It meant many checkpoints and many persons to be bribed. So we decided to travel by air. With the paper I had received from UNHCR, I bought a ticket. We arrived at Karachi at night. We noticed that a police van was following our taxi when we left Karachi airport. After a few kilometres the van overtook us and ordered the taxi driver to stop. A police officer and six policemen surrounded the taxi. Five hundred rupees (approx US\$40) more and we were again free. Later on I realised that it was a rite of passage for all undocumented people coming to Karachi airport.

Just before midnight we arrived in the vicinity of Cantt Station in central Karachi. Close to the railway station, Cantt Station was an odd place packed with Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees, together with poor Pakistani migrant workers, petty gangsters, drug dealers, male prostitutes and a sea of beggars. There were several small, cheap hotels, mostly occupied by refugees. The lobbies and coffee houses next to the hotels were a sort of 'migration market' where human smugglers met their clients and dealers and middlemen hunted newly arrived refugees. Cantt Station was, in some ways, an urban refugee camp within the larger city. There was also an Iranian restaurant and a hostel where Iranians could transfer money from Iran. Iranians who lived in other parts of the city came there to get news and meet other Iranians. Room 404 in Hotel Shalamar, a cheap, five-storey hotel became my home for the next eight months. Amongst the cheap eating places on the pavements, which at night were transformed into sleeping-places for the tired bodies of poor migrant workers, Hotel Shalamar stood, still glamorous with its rosy façade and green windows. Homayoun left me the day after our arrival to continue his journey to his beloved in Kabul. I never met him again. I do not know if he survived the Taliban or the Americans.

Almost everyone had the same answer: 'there is no point in going to the UNHCR'. It was a common belief that it was a waste of time. To flee a war was not enough and only a political case had a chance. In the first days I was offered a 'strong case' with a 'guarantee to be approved' for a US\$100 in the 'migration market'. I made a mistake and did not buy it. My fear of being killed in a horrible war was not 'well-grounded' enough in the view of the UNHCR officer. Later on the 'case-dealer' laughed at me when I told him that my application had been rejected. I agreed with him that it was no use telling the UNHCR the truth. It was all about performance. Those who came first and were interviewed first, in their narratives of their 'well-founded fear', left a hallmark by which the UNHCR officers scrutinised other asylum seekers. The UNHCR officers used information from previous interviews to check the reliability of others' accounts. They had detailed knowledge about *Evin* and *Ghasr*, two prisons in Tehran, as well as about the most infamous interrogators, their appearances and nicknames.

Henry, a young Iranian-Armenian man, who lived in room 308 of Hotel Shalamar, was an activist within a communist militia, *Cherikhaye Fadai*, in Iran. But the UNHCR did not believe him. The reason was a wall painting in a corridor in the basement of

a prison in Isfahan, where Henry had been detained for several months before his escape to Pakistan. In the interview Henry was asked by the UNHCR official to say what was painted on the wall in the corridor, to test his reliability. Henry had not seen such a painting and consequently his application was rejected. How did the UNHCR officer know about the wall painting? How could she or he be sure that there was any painting at all in that corridor? Henry was desperate and did not know what to do. Just a few weeks before my departure from Karachi, one morning when the UNHCR officials arrived in their dark-windowed cars, he poured gasoline on himself and struck a match in front of the UNHCR. Unfortunately, Henry was not the only victim from our refugee community. During the eight months of my stay in Karachi, two dissident Iraqi refugees were brutally killed, probably by Saddam Hussein's agents. Then Babak hanged himself in his room on the second floor. Another friend from Hotel Shalamar whom I lost was Behrooz. He was a young student from Tehran and only three years older than I. After one year in Karachi he decided to go to India. There were rumours that the UNHCR in New Delhi was much more sympathetic towards Iranians. He went to Lahore to be smuggled across the border. It was a cheap but very dangerous way to India. The Pakistani–Indian border was and still is one of the most militarised borders in the world. Besides the military, ethno-religious conflicts made the border crossing even more dangerous. Stories of how people who tried to cross the border were tortured and killed by local people were circulated among refugees in Cantt Station. Yet Behrooz saw no way out. He did not have enough money to try other options. A short phone call from Lahore just before his leaving for the border is the last trace of him.

There were many human smugglers in Cantt Station; from big ones like Nasser, the Baluch who had hundreds of *mosafers* (lit. passenger, clients), to amateur ones. Many smugglers were themselves migrants or refugees who joined the business for a few years before going to the West. In addition there were a large number of dealers, middlemen and lackeys who worked for the smugglers. The smugglers usually demanded the whole or a large part of the payment in advance. When the amount was paid, they let hell loose on the clients. Young women were sexually abused for a long period before the smuggler sent them on. Young men were turned into lackeys who would hunt new clients. Sometimes the smuggler forced their clients to be drug carriers, to take 'a bag' with them to Europe. There was no smuggler in our hotel, except for Farhad. He called himself a smuggler but in fact he was nothing more than a dealer for the big smugglers. In room 304, right under my room, Farhad lived with two Iranian teenagers, a brother and sister. The sister was a few years older than the brother. The siblings had given all their money to Farhad to be smuggled to Canada. It was obvious to all that Farhad had no intention of sending the teenagers anywhere, or of paying their money back. The situation became worse when he moved into their room. After that, the girl never left the room. There were rumours that Farhad was sexually abusing her. How could they protest? Farhad had all the money their parents had saved to send them to safety. Before our very eyes, Farhad was holding them captive. Room 304 in Hotel Shalamar is still a frequent nightmare.

My smuggler was Abbas, a second generation Iranian immigrant in Karachi. In his early thirties, Abbas was a businessman with a 'good' reputation in Cantt Station. His father opened an Iranian restaurant, which was now run by Abbas. For \$2500 he promised to send me to a European country. Two months or so after my arrival in Karachi, my father paid the money to Abbas' brother-in-law in Iran. Weeks passed and I realised that Abbas had no intention of arranging my journey. I asked him to give

me back my money. He refused and said 'I will send you. Come back next week'. This 'come back next week' was repeated for a further four months. Abbas was an influential businessman with connections within the police and the Iranian consulate. I did not even have a passport. The irony was that an officer from the Pakistani secret police was placed in Cantt Station to keep an eye on the refugees while the smugglers mingled freely with diplomats and the police. Powerless to demand my money back, I began a new strategy. One day I stood in front of his restaurant from the time it opened until one or two in the morning when it closed. I did this again and again. At first, he ignored me. Then his workers threatened me and pushed me away. But I was there the next day. Finally after a few months he gave me US\$2000 and said that the remaining US\$500 had been paid for a false passport which he refused to give to me.

One week later, in late October, I left Karachi for Delhi. After eight months in Cantt Station I knew exactly what to do. It was impossible for me to make it to Europe by myself, so I decided to go to India. For \$500 I bought an Iranian passport, whose owner had already been smuggled to Europe. An Iranian-Armenian, famous for high-quality work in forging stamps and changing photos, replaced the owner's photo with mine. He also put the necessary stamps – such as an entry stamp to Pakistan – in the passport. Then an Afghani dealer got me a visa to India for \$500. He also arranged a contact at Karachi airport for a few hundred dollars. I paid my debts to friends and the manager of Hotel Shalamar, who had kindly let me stay on credit. I said goodbye to only a few friends. It was a rule: 'do not trust even your brother'. In Cantt Station you never knew who was friend and who was foe. Rival smugglers would inform the airport authorities in order to damage each other's business. For stateless travellers, secrecy is vital. At the airport, the immigration officer who was bribed to let me go through asked me to follow him to his office. There he asked me to put all I had on the table. It was robbery again. Since I expected such, I had hidden a \$100 bill, all I had left, inside my belt. I put \$20 on the table. He threatened me and asked for more money. He pointed to the chain which I had worn since I was a child, a keepsake from my mother. I refused, vehemently and loudly. He got scared, took the \$20 and let me go. I was robbed twice at Karachi airport, once on arrival by the police and once by an immigration officer when leaving.

The community of displacement

At Delhi airport, an Iranian lady who saw the Iranian passport in my hand asked me to help her to fill out a customs form. When finished I told her that I was travelling 'illegally', so it was better for her not to be seen with me. She got worried and left me, but waited for me on the other side. My passport had been professionally forged and I went through without any problem. The Iranian woman and I shared a taxi to New Delhi. She was visiting her son who had lived clandestinely in Delhi for a long time. It was almost midnight and she kindly let me stay the night at their place. Her son told me I could find Iranians in Defence Colony Market. In the next few days I visited the neighbourhood to find a contact. There were a lot of Iranians, but I did not know any of them. To save money I slept in a park close to Defence Colony. After a few days I got to know Hiva, a middle-aged undocumented Afghani prostitute who usually hung around the market waiting for customers. She had been a dancer in Kabul before she was forced to flee. One aspect of border crossing is anonymity and absence of the

social moral codes. G.B. Road, the red light district in New Delhi, was crammed with Nepalese prostitutes. Border zones offer sites for work which may not be acceptable in the homeland. Nevertheless Hiva was not safe from harassment even in Defence Colony. Other Afghani refugees saw her as a disgrace to their nation. Just as an anthropologist in a new field is first contacted and helped by the most marginalised, Hiva was the only one who helped me. Both of us were outcast and stateless. Through her I found an Iranian man who came from the same ethnic group as I, the Bakhtiari. Thanks to ethnic solidarity I was put up in a single room, which I shared with six other Iranians. Unlike Cantt Station, Defence Colony was a nice middle-class neighbourhood, where retired army officers rented their servants' rooms to refugees. The rumour in Karachi was correct. The UNHCR in New Delhi was much more humane. The personnel were helpful and the building was more welcoming in contrast to the fortress-like one in Karachi. I was recognised as a refugee, but unlike the situation in Karachi the UNHCR offered no migration programme. I got a refugee card and \$50 a month. It was just enough to pay for my share of the rent and for food for two weeks. However, in New Delhi my situation improved dramatically. There was no police harassment and it was easier to move around in the huge city of Delhi. During my five months in New Delhi I shared rooms with many persons in transit. All are now residents of Europe or North America – thanks to the smugglers. Amir, Kian and Jahan went to Holland; Saman, Pour, Masoud, Maziar and Hamid to Canada; Keyvan to England; Mohammad and Manoucher to Germany; Latif to the USA; and Reza to Norway.

Transferring money from Iran to India was impossible. Unlike Karachi, there was no Iranian immigrant community. Those who had relatives in the USA or Europe received money easily through the banking system, but not us whose money came from Iran. Having someone – a sibling, a friend or even a distant relative – in Europe, Canada or the USA meant a lot to refugees. Having such a network gave security and self-confidence. Beside economic support, the network meant access to information and to having a clear and defined prospect of the journey. The choice of country of destination was primarily determined by such networks. After I had been in New Delhi a month or so, my father sent money with an Indian man who came from Tehran. Nevertheless, he gave me a few hundred dollars less than what my father had paid him, arguing that 'it costs'. We 'illegal' travellers were an easy source of income for many people we came across en route. With the money in my hand I decided to leave India and to go on my way. In New Delhi there were two smugglers with good reputations. One was Pooya, a young Iranian in his early thirties, who was a graduate in civil engineering from a university in Delhi, the other was Nour, a middle-aged Afghani man who lived with his elderly mother in Defence Colony. One day in December 1987 when I went to his place to ask about the rates, his mother invited me in and asked me to stay for lunch. During negotiations over rates, destinations and routes, we were served tasty Afghani food. After lunch she joined us and while she prepared tea on a samovar she turned to Nour and asked him to give me a discount. Nour told me that his wife and son lived in Canada and he would join them when he had saved enough money to start a business in Toronto. Her hospitality and kindness alongside Nour's reputation for being reliable and proficient made it easy for me to choose him.

The rates were not fixed. They increased by the week and sometimes by the day. Like shares, the rates for an 'illegal' journey depended on global politics and events. For instance, the death of the President of Pakistan, Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, in a plane crash in August 1988 caused the rates to soar in a day. Furthermore, when a *khat* (lit.

line, flight route) was 'disclosed', the smuggler would raise the price, arguing that the bribes had increased at airports and the routes, flights, combinations and destinations should be changed. Nour always worked with only a handful of *mosafer* (lit. passengers, clients). When they were sent abroad, he would take on new ones. In mid January 1988 I became his *mosafer*. For most European countries Nour demanded between US\$2300 and US\$2500. By then I had only US\$2000 left of the money my father had sent. Just like any other market negotiation, hard bargaining resulted in a discount of US\$300. Nour gave me two options: Holland or Sweden. I chose Holland. Nour accepted to send me to Holland for US\$2000 but without 'guarantee', i.e. in case of deportation or arrest he had no obligation toward me. A 'guarantee' cost a few hundred more, which I could not afford.

The choice of destination was rarely as it was intended and designed. An 'illegal' journey is after all arbitrary. Sometimes the migrants end up in a country just coincidentally. 'Control of one's movement', which is usually seen as the main difference between human smuggling and trafficking in persons, is vague and uncertain. First of all, the destination was determined by the payment. A few hundred dollars could change the destination from one continent to another. Masoud, a roommate, was Nour's *mosafer* at the same time as I was. He had US\$500 more than me and today he is a Canadian citizen, lives in Toronto and his children's mother tongue is English. I am a Swedish citizen, live in Stockholm and my children's language is Swedish: US\$500 destined our lives so differently. However, information or rather rumours of the asylum policy in different countries was also a determining factor in the choice of country of destination. Information came from smugglers but also from the friends and roommates who had been sent to Europe or Canada. By phone and letter, they sent detailed information about the country of destination, the route, the airport and the journey. Nour demanded half of the payment at once to start the 'project'. We agreed that the rest would be paid when I reached my destination. A friend in Defence Colony would do that after receiving a call from me. Nour said that I should contact him regularly. The journey could not be planned too much in advance. Due to all the security factors involved, we could only know the day of departure one or two days in advance.

The performance of border rituals

The most important item of the travelling process was an appropriate passport. Some smugglers have a 'look-alike' strategy, i.e. to find a passport whose owner looks like the client to avoid altering the passport. New Delhi was a huge market for European passports. Many backpackers sold their passports when their money ran out. For a few hundred dollars one could get a Danish, German, Spanish or Greek passport. Southern European passports were much in demand and therefore more expensive, due to the Mediterranean look of these nationals. An Iranian could pass more easily as a Greek or Italian than as a German. Another factor that determined the price of a passport was the number of stamps inside it. More visa stamps and entry/exit stamps in a passport made it more trustworthy and more expensive. However, Nour did not waste money on a real passport for me. He made one. It was a so-called 'second-grade' passport. 'Second-grade' passports were in fact photocopied passports. Mine was a Greek passport. The first time I saw it, I thought it was a joke. It was not even copied adequately. The vignettes on some pages were crooked and some parts of the text at the top of the pages were missing. The cover was worse. It would not even fool the parking attendant at the

airport, let alone an immigration officer. Nour said that the passport was not a big issue and the immigration officer would be bribed to overlook my passport. Nour would also get the boarding card himself. I was not able to protest. I had already paid him half the agreed sum and the rate for Europe was by then up to US\$2600.

In mid February Nour informed me that his 'line' to Holland had been uncovered by the European police. He decided to stop sending *mosafers* to Holland for some time. I should wait for a few months to see what would happen. Nour asked if I wanted to go to Sweden instead; I could be there in a week. 'Sweden?' I did not even know the geographical location of Sweden in Europe. 'Volvo!' said Nour, in an attempt to give me a clue. After 18 months living on borders, I did not really care where I would end up. On 27 February 1988, Nour handed me the passport and ticket and said that departure was the next day. We would meet at the airport. I had a night to prepare my role as the Greek owner of the passport. My first name was Kostas and the surname, which I never learned by heart, was at least four or five centimetres long and impossible to pronounce. The whole night before departure I tried to say and write *my* name by heart. Since I could not count on my photocopied passport, the rest depended on my performance. Border crossing is, after all, a matter of performance. Borders are zones of cultural production, spaces of meaning-making and meaning-breaking (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 64). Border crossing reinforces and challenges our social and political status. It has its own ritual – passport, applying for a visa, security checks and the performance of going through specific places and spaces of border control and customs. Border crossing, being in 'borderland' (Hannerz 1997), a zone of betwixt and between, a predicament of liminality (Turner 1982) is *per se*, in anthropological sense, a ritual. The border ritual reproduces the meaning and order of the state system. The border ritual is a secular and modern sort of divine sanctity with its own rite of sacrifice. Several hundred clandestine migrants die en route to Europe each year. From January 1993 to July 2007 the deaths of more than 8800 border-crossers were documented in Europe. The Mediterranean Sea is turned into a cemetery for the transgressive travellers. The floating dead bodies washed up on the shores of European tourist islands are evidence of border-necropolitics. The border-regime exercises its power not only through 'the right to live or die', but pre-eminently through 'the right to expose to death' (Mbembe 2003; Perera 2006). The border-regime exposes transgressive refugees/travellers to death through consigning them to 'the zones of exemption where the sovereign power cease to function' (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004: 38).

Nour gave me some instructions for the border performance. The first rule was to be cool and not to panic. If you are self-assured, you go through even with the worst passport in your hand. However, your body can betray you. Border guards recognise this at once. They seek the tell-tale signs. It is the body of the border-crosser that provides the signs: furtive eyes, sweaty palms, nervous tension when answering questions (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 131). Body performance is the central part of the ritual. The body should be masqueraded and trained to move. Those with Northern European passports should have the proper coloured hair, eyebrows and even hair on arms. 'Correct' dress was another part of the masquerade. Except for Saman, who had a Saudi Arabian passport and was dressed 'properly' in a suit and tie, to act as a well-to-do businessman, the rest of us were to be back-packer types. Sometimes the smuggler sent one male and one female client as a couple. Their belongings were mixed and they were given instructions on how to perform in order to give the impression of a married couple. The situation was even more complicated if a child was involved. It was difficult

to induce a child to call a stranger 'daddy'. I had spent many hours in Connaught Place and Tourist Camp, the zones with a high concentration of tourists in New Delhi, to observe them. Sometimes I got into conversation with them in a coffee shop, just to know more about them and their journey. I wanted to know how and why they had come to India. I asked them about their backgrounds in their homelands and such issues. Another source of inspiration for border-performance was Hollywood movies. Amir, an old friend in both Hotel Shalamar and later Defence Colony, was inspired by the film *Midnight Express* (dir. Alan Parker, 1978). The protagonist of the film felt profusely nervous going through immigration control, with packets of drugs taped on his body. Before going through, the protagonist goes to the washroom and keeps taking very short, fast breaths for several minutes in order to control his breathing. The night before his departure to Holland, Amir talked a lot about this specific scene and how he would imitate the protagonist. It is a tactic by the 'illegal' migrants to subvert the dominant border-regime (de Certeau 1984).

I met Nour in the departure lounge at the airport. He gave me the boarding cards and showed me where to go and wished me good luck. I do not remember how long I stood there in front of the officer and stared at his fingers browsing through my photocopied passport. Was there really a 'contact' or had Nour just lied? I was anxious and wanted to run, but to where? There was no going back. Heathrow was my transit airport. The flight was arranged in such a way that I was several hours in transit. This made it more difficult for the Swedish police to trace my flight and the country of departure. Somewhere between London and Stockholm, following Nour's instructions, I tore up the passport, the boarding pass and the ticket and flushed them down the toilet. Needless to say, I did not carry any identification other than my Greek passport. I had left letters, photos and my Iranian ID-cards behind to be sent to me when I reached Sweden. At Arlanda airport, two policemen waited at the gate and picked out 'asylum-seeker-looking' passengers. My masquerade and 'performance' did not work in Sweden. Along with a few other asylum-seeker-looking-persons, we were taken to the police station at the airport, albeit still in the transit area. In a corridor we waited outside a door. There were only a few chairs. Some of us sat on the floor and others stood along the wall, while regular passengers passed by. Border crossing can be experienced in terms of honour and shame (cf. Kumar 2000). A legal journey is regarded as an honourable act in the spirit of globalism and cosmopolitanism. The legal traveller passes the border gloriously and enhances his or her social status, whereas the border transgressor is seen as anti-aesthetic and anti-ethical (they are called 'illegal' and are criminalised). We live in an era of 'world apartheid', according to which the border differentiates between individuals. While for some the border is a 'surplus of rights', for others it is a 'color bar' (Balibar 2002: 78–84). The freedom of mobility for some is only possible through the organised exclusion of others (Cresswell 2006: 233). For the first time since I crossed the first border, I was struck by the shame of my migrant illegality. Nowhere else had I experienced the border so tangible, powerful and distressing. Shame is a part of the punishment for transgression of the nation-state sovereignty. The worst was that I internalised the shame and for many years I lied about my route to Sweden. I pretended to be a quota-refugee, one of the thousands of conventional refugees the Swedish government takes to Sweden annually. Shame is an experience of being exposed to the disapproving gaze of others. There is a risk that the illegal migrant, subjected to a gaze and treatment that divests him or her of humanity, internalises the shame – as I did – and understands the lack of travel documents and documentation as personal

deficiencies and inadequacies. The importance and centrality of shame in the experience of migration is still unexplored.

After waiting for a long time in the corridor, I was called inside a room. The police searched me and asked me about my flight and transit country. After Nour's instructions, I answered that I was Iranian and had come via Dubai. The police did not believe me and planned to send me to Istanbul, which they supposed to be my transit country. I was jailed at Arlanda airport for two days. A long interview was conducted by a police officer on the second day. It was a cold day and the window was half-open. I froze in the light jacket I had worn from hot New Delhi. When I mentioned this to the police officer, in the hope that he would close the window, he said: 'You refugees always overdramatise'. What, I thought then, would he say if I told him the story of Hotel Shalamar and its guests. However, after two days in jail I was sent to a refugee camp and six months later I was granted refugee status based on humanitarian grounds.

Final remarks

Eighteen years later, on 18 September 2006, I arrived at Bristol airport, along with a few colleagues from Stockholm University. I was convener for a workshop on 'irregular migration in Europe' at the biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). After passing immigration control, I was stopped by a security official who let my blond fellow travellers pass. In the middle of a narrow corridor a mini interrogation began which lasted for half an hour. 'Bordering is selective and targeted' (Rumsford 2006: 164). My status as a Swedish citizen disappeared at the border because of my face. I answered questions about myself, my education, work, purpose of visit to Bristol. Then she asked about my parents, where they lived and what they did. I was not willing to disclose to her any kind of information about my elderly parents, who have been subjected to persecution by the Iranian state for decades. When I refused to answer her questions about my parents, she threatened to detain me first for nine hours and then, if necessary, for nine days according to the Anti-Terrorism Act. I protested that she had targeted me because of my 'Middle Eastern' look and her selection of suspicious persons was racist. She did not even deny it and said 'you [me and who else?] want to kill us. We have to protect ourselves'. Hearing this, I decided to return to Sweden at once. This was not an option either until I had answered the questions. Put into a petrifying immobility, I could neither move in nor out. I was indistinguishable from the border; I *was* the border. The officer handed me a leaflet on the 'Anti-Terrorism Act', according to which I was obliged to answer any question the officer asked. When she realised that I had decided to be detained rather than answer her questions, she wished me a pleasant time in Bristol! Suddenly I was a full EU citizen again with a surplus of mobility rights and free movement. My legal status as an EU citizen is situational, conditional and unconfirmed. I am a quasi-citizen whose rights can be suspended in the state of emergency. I am included and at the same time excluded. This is exactly how the contemporary border regime operates. Through 'inclusive exclusion' (Agamben 1988: 17), the undesirable persons – 'illegal' migrants, refugees and quasi-citizens – are positioned on the threshold of *in* and *out*. Their experience is indistinct from the operation of nation-state and their very existence is indistinct from the border (Raj 2006). Through rebordering politics, the sovereign power does not merely exclude the undesirable persons but penalises and regulates them by petrifying them into immobility in detention centres, by ignominious and terrifying

forms of deportation, or by racialised internal border control – that turns the citizen into a quasi-citizen. As Balibar puts it ‘some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all’ in geographical or political senses of the terms (2002: 84). Borders have become invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere. Hence the undesirable persons are not expelled by the border, they are forced to *be* border (*ibid.*).

Shabram Khosravi
Department of Social Anthropology
Stockholm University
SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
shabram.khosravi@ceifo.su.se

References

- Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Balibar, É. 2002. *Politics and its other scene*. New York: Verso.
- Bilger, V., Hofmann, M. and Jandl, M. 2006. ‘Human smuggling as a transnational service industry: evidence from Austria’, *International Migration* 44: 59–93.
- Chin, K. 1999. *Smuggled Chinese: clandestine immigration to the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Cresswell, T. 2006. *On the move: mobility in the modern western world*. London: Routledge.
- de Certeau, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Donnan, H. and Wilson, T. M. (eds.) 1999. *Borders: frontiers of identity, nation and state*. Oxford: Berg.
- Gellner, E. 1990. *Nation and nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gouverneur, C. 2002. ‘Iran loses its drugs war’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2002.
- Hannerz, U. 1997. ‘Borders’, *International Social Science Journal* 157: 537–48.
- İçduygu, A. and Toktas, S. 2002. ‘How do smuggling and trafficking operate via irregular border crossings in the Middle East? Evidence from fieldwork in Turkey’, *International Migration* 40: 25–54.
- Kumar, A. 2000. *Passport photos*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Liempt, I. van. 2007. *Navigating borders: inside perspectives on the process of human smuggling into the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Malkki, L. 1995. ‘Refugees and exile: from refugee studies to the national order of things’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495–523.
- Mbembe, A. 2003. ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture* 15: 11–40.
- McMurray, D. A. 2001. *In and out of Morocco: smuggling and migration in a frontier boomtown*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Perera, S. 2006. ‘They give evidence: bodies, borders and the disappeared’, *Social Identities* 12: 637–56.
- Pratt, M. L. 1992. *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Raj, K. V. 2006. ‘Paradoxes on the borders of Europe’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8: 512–34.
- Rajaram, P. K. and Gryndy-Warr, C. 2004. ‘The irregular migrant as Homo sacer: migration and detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand’, *International Migration* 42: 33–63.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (ed.) 1997. *Auto/ethnography: rewriting the self and the social*. Oxford: Berg.
- Rumsford, C. 2006. ‘Theorizing borders’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 9: 155–69.
- Turner, V. 1982. *From ritual to theatre*. New York: Performing Art Journal Publications.

Abstracts

Le Voyageur ‘Clandestin’: Une Auto-Ethnographie des Frontières

Les frontières des états-nations sont entrées dans l’ordre naturel des vies humaines. Elles sont perçues non seulement comme les bordures d’un état, mais aussi comme le point de

référence essentiel de l'identité nationale. Fondées sur un mode de pensée d'orientation capitaliste et discriminatoire en termes de race, les frontières contrôlent la circulation des personnes. A l'ère de l'inégalité mondiale des droits à la circulation qu'est la nôtre, la liberté de circuler de certains n'est rendue possible que par l'exclusion systématique des autres. Cet article est une auto-ethnographie de frontières et de voyage 'clandestin'. A partir d'expériences personnelles au cours d'un long voyage par-delà de nombreuses frontières d'Asie et d'Europe, l'article tente d'explorer les modes d'opération de l'actuel régime des frontières. L'accent est mis sur les rites et spectacles mis en scène lors de la traversée de frontières. Il s'agit d'un récit de fin de vingtième siècle, à travers le regard d'un migrant 'clandestin'.

Der 'Illegale' Reisende: eine Auto-Ethnographie der Grenzen

Grenzen von Nationalstaaten werden zunehmend als naturgegeben angesehen. Sie sind nicht nur die Ränder des Staates, sondern werden auch als wichtigster Bezugspunkt nationaler Identität wahrgenommen. Einer kapitalistischen und rassistischen Sichtweise zufolge regulieren Grenzen die Bewegung von Menschen. In einer Zeit der global ungleichen Verteilung des Rechts auf freie Bewegung, ist die freie Mobilität für die einen nur möglich, weil die anderen systematisch davon ausgeschlossen werden. Der Beitrag ist eine Selbstethnographie von Grenzen und „illegalem“ Reisen. Basierend auf persönlichen Erfahrungen während einer langen Reise über mehrere Grenzen Asiens und Europas hinweg, habe ich versuche herauszufinden, wie Grenzsyste (border regimes) heutzutage funktionieren. Der Artikel stellt Rituale und Performanzen des Grenzübergangs in den Mittelpunkt der Untersuchung. Es ist eine Erzählung über das späte 20. Jahrhundert aus der Perspektive eines 'illegalen' Migranten.

El Viajero 'Ilegal': Una Auto Etnografía de Fronteras

Las fronteras de los Estados Nación se han naturalizado en las vidas humanas. No sólo son los límites de un Estado pero también se consideran una referencia esencial de la identidad nacional. Basado en pensamientos orientados hacia el capitalismo y la discriminación racial, las fronteras regulan el movimiento de la gente. En una era de desigualdad global respecto a los derechos de movilidad, la libertad de movimiento para algunos se hace posible sólo a través de la exclusión sistemática de otros. Este artículo es una auto etnografía de fronteras y del viajar 'ilegalmente.' Basado en experiencias personales de un viaje largo, cruzando muchas fronteras en Asia y en Europa, intento indagar en como opera el régimen contemporáneo de fronteras. El artículo enfoca los rituales y performances de cruzar fronteras. Esta es una narrativa de la última parte del Siglo XX a través de la mirada de un migrante 'ilegal.'

Copyright of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.