Maria Grazia Guido

Representing disrupted identities in West-African migrants' elf-mediated trauma narratives: An on-line ethnopoetic approach

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Representing disrupted identities in West-African migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives: An online ethnopoetic approach

by *Maria Grazia Guido**

Abstract

This paper enquires into West-African migrants' trauma narratives conveyed through uses of English as a 'lingua franca' (ELF) and collected in Italy by means of online interviews. A model grounded on theories of Cognitive-Experiential Linguistics, Modal Logic, and Possible-Worlds Semantics is applied to the protocol analysis of ethnographic case studies investigating the extent to which such trauma narratives contain features from the migrants' typologically-distinct native languages automatically transferred into their ELF variations at the levels of syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and metaphorical patterns. This transfer is assumed to be triggered by migrants' emotional involvement in their trauma narratives. It will be argued that the migrants' degree of adaptation to traumatic experiences is determined by their positive, uncertain, or negative perspectives on the reaching of a 'possible world' that they envisage as a 'utopia', in opposition to the 'dystopian reality' of their home countries. Such perspectives are marked by a recurrent use of modal operators analyzed according to a four-level gradient ranging from possible, unreal, and impossible 'utopian worlds', up to a much-too-real 'dystopian world' as a result of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. In such transcultural psychiatric contexts, the biomedical definitions codified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, issued by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), prove to be inadequate in accounting for the metaphorical and narrative representation of traumatic effects in non-Western cultures where trauma can encompass not only natural and physical causes, but also socio-political reasons, and even religious and supernatural beliefs, often metaphorically referred to by the use of native 'idioms of distress'. Indeed, such idioms mark the 'ethnopoetic organization' of the autochthonous oral narrative of traumatic events that West-African migrants transfer into their ELF variations. Such a transfer seems to be induced precisely by the online videoless mode chosen for conducting the interviews which turned out to be a kind of 'confessional' putting migrants at ease in reporting personal traumatic experiences by avoiding the disturbing face-to-face contact with the interviewer. Acknowledging such narrative peculiarities would mean recognizing the West-African migrants' identity which they often perceive as disrupted and displaced from their own native injured communities.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Migrants' trauma narratives, Ethnopoetic entextualization, Videoless online interviews.

1
Research context

This paper reports on an ethnographic enquiry into West-African migrants' trauma narratives conveyed through variations of non-native/nativized English used as a 'lingua franca' (ELF) in the online context of interviews in the field of

* University of Salento; mariagrazia@guido@unisalento.it.

Transcultural Psychiatry. Starting from the assumption that ELF variations are characterized by semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and metaphorical-narrative transfers from the migrants' native languages (Guido, 2008; 2018), and that they often come to be perceived in host countries (e.g. in Italy) as 'displaced' and 'transidiomatic' (Silverstein, 1998), as if they were defective variants of Standard English, it will be argued that such native-language transfers into ELF disclose the West-African migrants' 'ethnopoetic organization' (Hymes, 1981) of their autochthonous oral narrative of traumatic events. Previous research (Guido, 2008; 2018) cast doubt on the traditional clinical and medical-legal reports that are textualized (or 'entextualized' – Urban, 1996) by applying coherence and cohesion parameters typical of the Western editing into 'paragraphs', without recognizing non-Western native linguacultural structures transferred into migrants' ELF narratives, thus disregarding the actual illocutionary force of their trauma reports. As a possible accommodation strategy, it was suggested an 'ethnopoetic' kind of entextualization (Guido, 2008) first introduced by Hymes' (1981), consisting in a method for transcribing and editing non-Western oral narratives that discloses non-rhyming 'verse patterns' of relevant information that are not intentionally conceived to achieve artistic effects. In fact, an 'ethnopoetic entextualization' originates from the primordial human experiences of sequences and rhythms of bodily actions and emotional reactions to natural phenomena that, from the past up to contemporary autochthonous native oral narratives, have traditionally been reported into verses as a strategy to better recall the orally reported past events. Hymes (1981) identified such ethnopoetic patterns in native-American oral journey narratives consisting of 'three-and-five verse pattern', evoking the sequence 'they left/they travelled/they arrived'; and of 'two-and-four verse patterns', suggesting the chronological sequence of 'first this deed and, then, that deed'. In the corpus of West-African migrants' ELF-mediated oral narratives, from which the case-study narratives analyzed in this paper are drawn (Guido, 2008; 2018), a sonnet-like pattern of 'five-and-three line verses' was instead observed, where the five-line verse usually reports a past or present social context, whereas the last three-line verse reproduces the migrants' emotional reaction to such a context. In the ongoing research reported in this paper, ethnopoetic patterns of 'five-and-two line verses' have been identified in a sub-corpus of Nigerian migrants' trauma narratives (Guido, 2018), where the first five-line verse usually introduces the migrants' experience of traumatic events, whereas the final two-line verse expresses the migrants' reactions to such events and their more or less positive perspectives in the host country. Indeed, such an ethnopoetic transfer is here believed to be induced precisely by the online videoless mode chosen for conducting the interviews, which turned out to be a kind of 'confessional' putting the West-African migrants at ease in reporting personal traumatic experiences by avoiding the uncomfortable face-to-face contact with the interviewer – to the point that only a minimum intervention by the interviewer was required to elicit the migrants' narratives.

2
Theoretical grounds, rationale, and methodology

In this research, a construct developed from models of Cognitive-Experiential Linguistics (Sweetser, 1990), Modal Logic, and Possible-Worlds Semantics (Hintikka, 1989; Pietrovski, 1993; Stalnaker, 1994) was applied to the protocol analysis (Ericsson & Simon, 1984) of ethnographic case studies investigating the extent to which such trauma narratives contain features from the West-African migrants' typologically-distinct native languages, automatically transferred into their ELF variations at the levels of ethnopoetic narrative patterns, ergative clausal configurations, modal verbs and expressions, idioms and metaphors. In particular, it was noticed that, in these narratives, migrants frequently resort to modal operators referring to longed-for 'possible worlds' that they would like to reach in the attempt to escape the destructive effects of traumatic events in their home countries. These effects are often metaphorically transfigured into intentional hideous deeds enacted by animate agentive objects, natural elements and supernatural entities collocated in the clausal position of ergative subjects – such as ruthless Yoruba deities, or dreadful creatures, often hybridized with similar mythological beings typical of the host folk cultures – thus generating novel transcultural idioms of distress projecting reality into a counterfactual metaphysical dimension (Guido, 2020).

The process by which the causes of traumatic events become personified as counterfactual metaphysical entities has been observed in case-study data (drawn from a corpus of West-African migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives – Guido, 2018) collected by means of videoless telematic interviews to Nigerian migrants working in rural contexts during harvest periods and in building cleaning contexts. In analyzing the case studies, the migrants' degree of adaptation to trauma experiences seems to be determined by their positive, uncertain, or negative perspectives on the reaching of a 'possible world' that they envisage as a 'utopia', in opposition to the 'dystopian reality' of their home countries. Such a view takes shape according to a four-level gradient ranging from possible, unreal, and impossible utopian worlds up to a sudden conversion of the desired utopia into an all-too-real dystopian world to escape from, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic during the early months of 2020. Evidence of each of these four degrees in Nigerian migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives can be respectively identified in their feelings of:

(a) Hope for the fulfillment of the migrants' most desired utopian 'possible worlds' (Stalnaker, 1994) considered at reach at the conclusion of their migration journey. Therefore, they narrate the traumatic experiences they endured in both distant and recent past by using 'belief reports' (Lau, 1995; Schiffer, 1996; Stalnaker, 1987), deontic modals expressing 'need' and 'obligation', as well as folk proverbs by which they justify traumatic experiences as 'necessary rites of passage' towards a better life.

(b) Frustration at having to endure problems in the host country that limit their possibilities for deriving benefit from their longed-for 'possible world' that suddenly

becomes 'contrary to present facts' (Hintikka, 1989). This, for instance, may be a consequence of normative restrictions imposed upon migrants' freedom that, if violated, may cause their repatriation or imprisonment. Such frustrating circumstances would trigger in migrants a re-contextualization of their past traumatic experiences within the present contexts in the host country.

(c) Despair at being deprived of the possibility of fulfilling their 'dreams' turned into 'impossible worlds' (Zalta, 1997) – e.g., because of adverse facts that suddenly and hopelessly disrupt their expectations. The Nigerian migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives, in such cases, often employ native 'idioms of distress' (Mattingly, 1998) and modals of obligation by which migrants convey their inner compulsion to re-experience past trauma – extending its consequences to encompass current contexts of the host country – rather than to take action in order to overcome trauma effects.

(d) Urge of escape from Italy that suddenly became a fatal dystopia after the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, the host country was no longer perceived as a 'utopian possible world' or an 'impossible world', but rather an actual, 'real world' that all at once developed into a nightmare that migrants wanted to leave quickly to go back to their apparently safer African homeland. At that time, Africa was still little infected with the pandemic, thus representing an 'impossible utopian world' that migrants could not reach due to the closure of the borders decided by the EU to control the spread of the pandemic.

It is here argued that such feelings actually affected the lexico-semantic, structural and metaphorical organization of the West-African migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives, collected by means of the Think-Aloud Technique (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), consisting in an initial prompt by the interviewer who then left the migrants free to give vent to their trauma reports, spontaneously rendered through ELF into the rhythms of ethnopoetic lines, thanks to the 'confessional effect' of the protective videoless computer screen. Moreover, the subsequent protocol analysis (Ericsson & Simon, 1984) on the transcriptions of these narratives reveals that they may have an impact on trauma representation in Transcultural Psychiatry, especially when applied to clinical and medical-legal issues. For instance, the prevalent assertive tone of such narratives, mainly conveyed by means of a high-value deontic modality of obligation (e.g. "must") (Halliday, 1994, pp. 357-8), reveals the migrants' determination to perform repairing actions to put an end to anguish and begin a recovery process from trauma. Indeed trauma, in West-African narratives, is not represented as a mere individual experience of suffering to be treated by means of specific protocols of psychiatric therapy which, in Western cultures, is conventionally described by resorting to the epistemic modality of logical deduction and codified by the biomedical terminology of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, released by the American Psychiatric Association (latest edition: APA, 2022). In fact, such APA definitions refer to the impact of trauma on Westerners – i.e., US war veterans (Summerfield, 1999), but they fail to classify the manifold effects of trauma on non-Western populations (Peltzer, 1998). Indeed, in non-Western cultures, trauma can have different causes that

are mental and physical, but also – especially in African contexts – socio-political and even spiritual and supernatural, often metaphorically referred to by means of native 'idioms of distress' (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990). These idioms typically mark the 'ethnopoetic organization' in the oral narrative of traumatic events that West-African migrants transfer into their ELF variations. Such peculiar narrative patterns should be recognized and disambiguated in clinical and medical-forensic transcriptions, whereas Western psychiatrists still conventionally interpret them by reference to the APA clinical definitions (cf. Eisenberg, 1981; Mattingly, 1998).

3
Case Studies 1 and 2: trauma narratives of 'hope'

Case Study 1 is an example of ELF-mediated trauma narrative of *hope* that tries to rationalize past traumatic events by representing them as a trial to overcome in order to reach the longed-for 'possible-world'. The subject of the case study is a Nigerian young man, speaking his native language (Yoruba) and his nativized NPE (perceived in the host country as any other ELF variation once displaced from its native context of use – cf. Guido, 2008). He fled Nigeria after a terrorist attack by Boko Haram[1] that had killed his mother, and in Italy he was hoping for a better life. This Nigerian migrant believed in Ori, the Yoruba god of individual destiny that cannot be changed (Ali, 1995; Oduwole, 1996), and he used a complex narrative to justify his mother's tragic death as a necessity (by the deontic modal "must") for him to achieve a better life as the fulfillment of his destiny decided by Ori. This migrant's reasoning is reflected in the seven-line ethnopoetic structure of his trauma narrative built on an interplay of *Accept-Deny* conversational moves (Moerman, 1988), till reaching a reconciliation reflected in the *Accommodation* move (even by making reference to his native folk proverbs) after having struggled to 'accept' his illogical religious belief despite traumatic facts induced him to 'deny' it.

Transcript 1 reports on the migrant's NPE/ELF trauma narrative conventionally transcribed according to African-English phonetic orthographies and typical syntactic structures (e.g., ergative clause structures; pre-verbal tense/aspect markers – as, for instance, *bin* for the simple past – the plural particle "dem"/"them"; the all-purpose preposition "fo"/"for", additionally used as the deontic modal "should" to express moral obligation, etc.) – also adopted for the subsequent case-study transcriptions in this paper in order to preserve the migrants' cultural identities. In the present Case Study 1, the original NPE/ELF transcript is followed by a Standard-English italicized version to facilitate accessibility. The narrative is organized in seven ethnopoetic numbered lines divided from each other by a slash, each conveying a move changing the direction of the migrant's thought during his 'think-aloud' trauma report (collected through the videoless online mode that guarantees anonymity and confidentiality to the speakers).

Case Study 1: Transcript 1

[1] Boko Haram bin kill my mama. One *gbosa*, one explosion big big bin chop my mama body. /
Boko Haram killed my mum. A 'gbosa', a huge explosion reduced my mum's body to pieces.

[2] Mama eye dem look my eye dem and say: tear race, my pikin, you must to run run fo beta life. /
Mum's eyes looked into my eyes and said: run away, my child, you must run immediately to find a better life.

[3] Ori decision fo pipul destiny dem fo no change. We say: "Chicken wey run way go still end up inside pot of soup" /
Ori's decision about people's destinies should not change. We say: "when the chicken runs away, it still will end up inside a pot of soup"

[4] so pipul can no be able fo change dem destiny. /
so people should not be able to change their own destiny.

[5] But we fo tink se Ori decision no bi good, o, like my mama bad destiny.
But we should think that Ori's decision is not good at all, like my mum's bad destiny.

[6] But yes, Ori decide destiny fo beta and my mama bin die fo push me fo beta life./
But yes, Ori decides destiny for better and my mum died to push me to find a better life.

[7] Life na difficult fo Italy, o, but we say "if life dey show you pepper, make pepper soup". /
Life is difficult in Italy, indeed, but we say: "if life shows you pepper, make a pepper soup".

This trauma narrative of *hope* starts with the first ethnopoetic lines [1] and [2] representing the Opening move that introduces the traumatic event of the terrorist attack with the tragic death of the migrant's mother, followed by his attempt to give a sense to such a shocking situation by 'reading' in his dead mother's eyes a supernatural telepathic invitation to him as her child (emotionally referred to by the native loan word "pikin") to leave Nigeria immediately to find a "better life". Here the rhythm of the narration of the past traumatic event is fast and hectic, reflecting the migrant's distress emphasized by the reduplication of the adjective describing the huge explosion ("big big"), emotionally referred to by the native Yoruba loan term "gbosa" (whose labial sound /b/ is an onomatopoeia reproducing the deafening bang of the exploding bomb, which seems to be amplified by the /b/ and /g/ alliteration in "big big" – and also "bin" and even "Boko") and of the verb "run run" conveyed by his mother's eyes, highlighting the extreme urgency for him to leave Nigeria. Lines [3] and [4] introduce an Accept move by which the migrant tries to come to terms, through a lengthy argumentation, with his religious belief in Ori, the Yoruba god of individual destiny that cannot be modified – a belief strengthened by the folk proverb on the fated end of the chicken in a pot. Line [5] is shorter and introduced by the adversative adverb "But", as it represents a Deny move changing the direction of the migrant's thought towards a desperate realization that Ori's decision is too cruel, considering the tragic death of his mother. Yet, line [6] begins likewise with the adversative "But" to mark another change of mind as, together with line [7], it represents an Accommodation move by which the migrant attempted to overcome trauma by justifying the terrorist attack as a sign of Ori's decision that his destiny was

to leave his home country and work hard to improve his life conditions (by referring, again, to the other folk proverb of the "pepper soup").

Such an ethnopoetic structure reveals that this trauma-narrative of *hope* is organized on two levels: (1) the 'indexical actual-world level' ("the terrorist attack as a traumatic fact"), where truth-conditions are established by the conventional sense of a concept in the actual world (or 'primary intension') (Lau, 1995), and (2) the 'iconic possible-world level' ("the terrorist attack as a prompt for a better life"), where the sense of the concept (or 'secondary intension') diverges from its conventional sense insofar as its truth-conditions are established within a counterfactual world (Lewis, 1973; Zalta, 1997). In his attempt to accommodate such conflicting levels in order to accept his "Ori belief", the migrant activated two cognitive strategies: (a) an 'experiential pliability', by adapting his narrative to the illogical 'possible world' of his counterfactual religious belief, and (b) a 'suspension of disbelief' by forcing himself to believe in the illogical 'possible world' of his religion that does not exist in reality (Guido, 2020). In doing so, the migrant organized his trauma narrative on a 'hypothetical syllogism', which undermines the notion of 'syllogism' as a deductive reasoning built on two statements considered as true in order to reach a logical conclusion. A hypothetical syllogism, instead, is built on statements that are, instead, just 'hypothetical' (as in Metaphysical discourse – Guido, 2005) – as illustrated in the following argumentative structure:

Statement 1: *Accepting belief* – People, like the 'chicken' of the proverb, 'cannot' change Ori's destiny;
Statement 2: *Denying belief* – but Ori's decision "is not good" considering his mother's tragic destiny;
Conclusion: *Accommodation* – and yet Ori decided for better: the migrant's mother died to encourage him to find a better life in Italy.

The logical conclusion, therefore, is that not Ori, but the migrant himself can modify his own destiny by turning his 'difficult life' in Italy into a 'better life' (as in the Nigerian proverb of the unpalatable spicy "pepper" to be turned into a tasty "pepper soup").

The direct involvement of the metaphysical entity of Ori, as the cause of the migrant's trauma in Case Study 1, is emblematic of a typical feature of West-African trauma narratives built on ergative and supernatural causation. This represents a native cause-effect construction that does not conform to the typical SVO transitive clause structure (characterizing the Western-language typology), where the Subject represents the animate cause of action, but is instead built on the OVS ergative structure (characterizing many typologies of non-Western languages, such as the African languages of the Niger-Congo group (Langacker, 1991, p. 336). African migrants instinctively transferred this ergative structure into their ELF variations, especially when they felt so emotionally involved in their reports of past traumatic events to the point that native expressions of distress emerge spontaneously in their narratives.

Indeed, West-African migrants make a frequent use, in their trauma narratives, of ergative clausal structures where an animate Subject (S) is no longer at the origin of actions (as typical of SVO transitive clauses), because the force-dynamic cause is instead attributed to an inanimate Object (O) collocated in animate Subject position as the Agent deliberately causing actions (OVS). A variation of this ergative structure is the substitution of the inanimate Object with a counterfactual 'supernatural causation' as the clausal Subject – namely, the personification of abstract deities as Agents (e.g., Ori) affecting people's lives.

Case Study 2 represents an instance of this type of trauma narratives. Here the subject is represented by a Nigerian young man (with a high-school level of education and speaking a Nigerian variation of ELF) who was a survivor of a shipwreck during his voyage to Italy across the Mediterranean Sea, whereas three of his friends drowned. His aspiration was to go to an Italian university and get a degree, but he was reduced to being a seasonal worker during the tomato harvest. In Italy, on returning from the fields, he was injured in a car accident in which two of his friends died. But in spite of the tragic death of his friends, the trauma narrative of this migrant is about *hope*. In it, it is possible to identify both types of ergative patterns: (a) an 'ergative causation' (transferred from his native Igbo language – Nwachukwu 1976) represented by a series of inanimate Objects (i.e., "sea", "ship", "van", "road") become animate Subjects, and (b) a 'supernatural causation' represented by the 'greedy road' as animate Subject – personified as Ogun, the Nigerian god of the roads – causing accidents to feed on his victims.

What follows is the ethnopoetic transcription of the Nigerian migrant's narrative:

Case Study 2: Transcript 2
[1] The sea swallow the boat and three friends when we go to Italy. A ship rescue me. /
[2] I want go to university, but here I only pick pick tomato all day. /
[3] This van take us for our shack after tomato picking /
[4] and the road quick crush the van against a lorry and kill two friends for eat them. /
[5] I remember the poet Soyinka say "the road waits, famished", I learn this in school. /
[6] He say god Ogun become road and cause accidents for kill and eat people. /
[7] But he can no kill me, no, because I must go to university. /

The seven-line ethnopoetic structure of this report of traumatic events emphasizes the chronological development of the narrative depicted as a cinematographic sequence of moving images. In it, each ethnopoetic line is marked by an ergative Subject (two subjects in line [1]) represented first by inanimate Objects that become animate Agents deliberately causing tragic events, or that undergo them (i.e., the "sea" swallowing the migrants' boat; the "ship" rescuing them; the "van" taking migrants back to their shack after work; the "road" crushing the van and killing some of them). In the last two lines, then, the road comes to be ergatively personified as the ruthless Nigerian god Ogun. The last ethnopoetic line shows a change in the direction of the migrant's

thought as he defied Ogun's power to murder him (through the use of the deontic modal "cannot" – "can no"). Indeed, the migrant claimed that his willpower – aimed at pursuing his dream for a 'possible better world' in Italy where he intended to improve his life by getting a university degree (emphasized by the deontic modal "must" after the first-person pronoun "I") – was much stronger than the will of the god. However, in his trauma narrative of *hope*, the migrant could not remove his trauma, as is evident from his resorting to a 'conceptual simple present', highlighted by the demonstrative adjective "this" and the definite article "the", suggesting that the past traumatic facts are still experientially vivid and burning in his mind.

What follows, in the next section, is an example of trauma narrative of *frustration*.

4
Case study 3: trauma narrative of 'frustration'

Case Study 3 is an instance of ELF-mediated trauma narratives of *frustration* (Guido, 2018), which occurs when the West-African migrants' desire for a more favourable 'possible world' is difficult to fulfill, mainly because of institutional or legal obstacles in the host country that migrants often represent in their narratives as metaphysical personifications, rather than looking for practical solutions to overcome them. The case-study subject is a migrant who abandoned his family in Nigeria to escape poverty and, during his journey to Italy, he faced the Sahara desert, the forced labour in uranium mines in Niger, torture in a Libyan detention camp and finally the stormy Mediterranean Sea. Yet, once in the host country, he was risking repatriation because the Committee for Refugees' Rights rejected his asylum application as it considered him just an 'economic migrant', not a refugee. The migrant was interpreting such a misfortune as a consequence of his having left his family in Nigeria in total poverty, and his remorse and sense of guilt for having betrayed the sacred bonds of his family and his homeland was so acute to the point that, in his trauma narrative, he personified such a distressing feeling through a series of inanimate Objects represented as hostile animate Agents in the position of ergative-clause Subjects intentionally trying to destroy him (i.e., "desert", "mines", "tall waves", and "thunder") under the direction of the vengeful Yoruba god Ṣàngó. Indeed, Ṣàngó, personifying migrant's sharp remorse, was determined (highlighted by the deontic modal "must") to haunt him back in Nigeria. In the sub-corpus of West-African migrants' trauma narratives of *frustration*, this report was the only one where personifications of distress take the shape of a merciless autochthonous deity, maybe because in such disappointing circumstances, migrants try to overcome the sense of frustration by searching for concrete solutions, however remote they may be, rather than for supernatural ones.

This specific trauma narrative reported in Case Study 3, furthermore, is indeed emblematic of the extent to which a videoless computer screen during an online interaction can become a real metaphor for the 'confessional' where the migrant, who considered himself a sinner, felt free to give vent to all his metaphors and idioms

of remorse, guilt and frustration. This explains why the recording of this trauma narrative contains various parts – mainly brief digressions – that are not completely understandable, mainly because they are pronounced in a low and rapid voice. In such cases, the task of the transcribers is to 'entextualize' (Urban, 1996) only those ethnopoetic lines that can render the deeper, emotional meaning of the non-Western migrants' oral reports – and this is especially important if these transcribers work in a medical or forensic field. In the case in point, the Nigerian migrant's trauma narrative of *frustration* was entextualized into the seven ethnopoetic lines reported below in NPE/ELF, followed by a Standard-English italicized version:

Case Study 3: Transcript 3

[1] The Committee say my asylum application no good 'cause I'm Nigerian and I'm here only for work. /
The Committee says that my asylum application is invalid because I'm Nigerian and I'm here only to work. /

[2] So I must come back in my country. I vex because Nigeria give no work. /
So I must go back to my country. I'm distressed because Nigeria doesn't give any work. /

[3] The desert no bin stop me, and the mine there in Niger and prison in Libya no break my back. /
The desert didn't stop me, and the mine over there in Niger and the prison in Libya didn't break my back. /

[4] But when I bin lef my country and my family with no money and no food /
But when I left my country and my family with no money and no food /

[5] Ṣàngó must think se I shame my people and my land /
Ṣàngó must have thought that I put my family and my country to shame /

[6] and when I bin lef for the sea for come here he bin throw thunder and wave them, tall tall /
and when I left to come here across the sea he threw thunders and huge waves /

[7] for grasp the boat and kill me. Now he must send me back in Nigeria. /
to grasp the boat and kill me. Now he must send me back to Nigeria. /

In this narrative of *frustration*, each ethnopoetic line is marked by a change of direction in the migrant's thought signaled by a pragmatic use of full stops breaking the flow of discourse, and of link words such as "and", "but", "so". Line [1] displays as its ergative Subject the abstract institutional entity of the Committee for the Refugees' Rights that rejected the migrant's asylum application as he – as a Nigerian – was simply an 'economic migrant'. Line [2] focuses first on the migrant's realization of the fact that he was obliged to return to Nigeria as a consequence of such a rejection (emphasized by the deontic modal "must"), and then on his emotional reaction to such an obligation, expressing his frustration at the fact that Nigeria does not offer work opportunities. Line [3] shifts to the migrant's recollection of his past ordeals (signaled by the NPE past-tense marker "bin") that, however traumatic, did not discourage him from continuing his journey towards his longed-for 'possible world' – each phase marked by a different hostile inanimate element in ergative Subject position implacably trying

to hurt him and stop his journey (in line [3] represented by the cruel "desert", "mine" and "prison"). Line [4] starts with the adversative "But" which marks a sudden change in the migrant's thought now focused on his feeling of remorse at having abandoned his family in conditions of poverty and hunger. His remorse, then, comes to be unexpectedly personified in line [5] as the ruthless god Ṣàngó who condemned him for humiliating his family and homeland (as the migrant conjectured, by using the epistemic modal "must"). Hence, in line [6], Ṣàngó unleashed against him the furious elements of nature (the "thunder" and the "sea" with his huge "waves" – emphasized by the NPE reduplication of the adjective "tall tall"). Finally, in line [7], the migrant drew his conclusions with a sense of deep frustration at realizing that the vengeful Yoruba god was indeed determined (marked by the deontic modal "must") to send him back to Nigeria at all costs.

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5

Case Studies 4 and 5: trauma narratives of 'despair'

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Case Studies 4 and 5 report on instances of ELF-mediated trauma narratives of *despair*, representing the West-African migrants' anguish at realizing that their desired 'possible world' can no longer come true. A peculiarity of this type of narrative is that trauma symptoms causing despair are rendered by means of the migrants' own native 'idioms of distress' (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990) – often personified as merciless folk-mythological creatures (in ergative-subject position) – that they transfer into their ELF variations. What is interesting is that West-African migrants often share their native idioms of distress and metaphysical trauma personifications not only with the members of their own native communities living in conditions of displacement within the same host-country contexts, but also with the members of the host community (Southern Italy, in the case in point). This occurs by 'hybridizing' their native idioms with the host community's parallel ones – rather than by resorting to conventional Western APA lexicon. This may be interpreted as the migrants' instinctive attempt to disambiguate their distress in order to make it accessible to the host environments that they were inhabiting (Kirmayer, 1989).

The subject of Case Study 4 is precisely a Nigerian woman who appropriated a Southern-Italy idiom of distress from the Salento area where she resided – i.e., the 'Taranta's (Tarantula's) poisonous Bite' (a mythical spider that is said to bite exploited female farm labourers causing agonizing seizures and haunting hallucinations), hybridizing it with her native idiom and symptoms of 'Ghost possession', making her feel detached from her body and brain – both human parts collocated in an ergative-Subject position as animate Agents within ergative clauses. The topic of the woman's trauma narrative of *despair* refers to the fact that, in Nigeria, her husband and her two male children were killed in ambush and, as a consequence, she was considered a witch by her community as she was believed to be the cause of their death. Indeed, the actual reason was rather that, as a barren widow, she was regarded as a worthless woman

without children that could enhance the prosperity of her community. Therefore she decided to leave her native community and undertake a perilous journey by sea to Italy where she ended up working hard as a farm labourer harvesting wheat, which worn her out – although in Nigeria she was almost well-to-do, not needing to work. Eventually, she too became convinced that she was a witch causing the death of her family, and this provoked in her trance-like seizures (similar to trauma symptoms affecting the childless women in Guinea Bissau called offensively by the name of 'Kiyang-yang', meaning 'Shadow' – that is, worthless women – Einarsdóttir, 2004). Hence she came to the conclusion that, as a punishment, she was the victim of the Taranta's bite causing her frantic convulsions when she was possessed by the ghosts of her sons.

This is her seven-line ethnopoetic entextualization of her trauma narrative of *despair*:

Case Study 4: Transcript 4
[1] In my village, people hate me because my children bin die because I'm witch. /
[2] I'm sick, my body shake shake, jump, run, /
[3] and brain go out my head /
[4] and I speak with my dead children voice. /
[5] Here people say se [*that*] Taranta bin bite me /
[6] and only a drum can calm me. /
[7] Taranta curse me because I'm witch. /

In this trauma narrative of *despair*, the Nigerian woman's painful memories recollected in a broken voice are reflected in the ethnopoetic lines that, in their brevity, speed the pace of her report. Line [1] introduces the social context where she lived in Nigeria, her home country – and that stigmatized her as a witch responsible of her children's tragic death (her husband, who died in the same ambush with their children, was instead never mentioned). Line [2] immediately introduces her physical reactions to such a traumatic event, with the migrant's "body", in ergative Subject position, represented as detached from her will and moving autonomously and frantically. This is emphasized by the use of a verb reduplication ("shake shake") followed by other verbs of sudden and abrupt movements out of her control ("jump, run"). Lines [3] and [4] are both very short, coinciding with the woman's broken voice overwhelmed by despair, and both introduced by the conjunction "and" that accelerates the rhythm of the woman's trauma narrative even more. In line [3], the ergative Subject is, this time, only a part of the woman's body – namely, her "brain" that autonomously 'goes out of the woman's head' – an animate synecdoche standing for the loss of the woman's reason. Line [4], introduced again by "and", gets to the core of the 'Ghost-possession' idiom since the woman, during her seizure, spoke with the voices of her murdered children simulating them in a trance-like state that signals her obsessive thoughts of her lost offspring. In line [5], the migrant made predictions and blamed the host-country supernatural entity – i.e., the mythical "Taranta" – that is believed to provoke, with its poisonous bite,

the woman's serious trauma sickness. Line [6] introduces another inanimate Object in ergative Subject position – i.e., the "drum" – represented as an animate Agent that, with its deliberate frenetic rhythm, may have the possibility of healing this migrant woman. Finally, line [7] draws a conclusion with the woman's hopeless claim that justifies the Taranta's curse upon her as well-deserved because she came to consider herself a witch.

Another trauma narrative of *despair* is reported in Case Study 5. Here the subject is a Nigerian migrant who conveyed his trauma symptoms by means of the idioms of distress of 'Brain Fag' – i.e., a mental fatigue caused by 'thinking too much' about past traumatic facts – and of 'Heavy Chest' and 'Worm Creeping' (Guido, 2008). The migrant, then, hybridized such autochthonous idioms with the Southern-Italy idiom that expresses mental agony and physical exhaustion by personifying it as a folk spiteful elfish being called 'Sciacuddhi' – a wicked pixie that is believed to live in the Southern-Italian countryside and to press the chests of exhausted peasants when they are asleep, also plaiting the horses' manes at night-time. Then, the migrant, came in turn to hybridize such a personification of distress with the assonant and etymologically equivalent fiendish pixie-like creature belonging to the West-African Yoruba mythology – namely, the 'Shugudu', a Nigerian elfish devil at the command of wronged people ordering him to press the breath out of their enemies' chests and kill them for revenge.

The traumatic experiences endured by the young Nigerian migrant regard the period when, as a boy, he was kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorists who turned him into a 'child soldier', forcing him to torture and kill people. In Italy, where he worked hard picking tomatoes all day until exhaustion, the continuous recollection of his past crimes haunted him and added up to the state of extreme fatigue experienced in Italy, causing anxiety symptoms. In his ELF trauma narrative, these symptoms are in an ergative Subject position in clausal structures and are expressed figuratively by means of his native idioms of distress transferred into his ELF variation and also hybridized with the personified 'Sciacuddhi'/'Shugudu' idiom, typical of the Mediterranean area.

What follows is the transcript of the Nigerian migrant's trauma narrative of *despair* in Nigerian ELF, entextualized by complying with its seven-line ethnopoetic structure.

Case Study 5: Transcript 5
[1] My brain think think murder I done. /
[2] Worms creep in my brain, and chest, here, is heavy, heavy when I sleep. /
[3] My Italian friends in the tomato field think Shakudi sit on my heart the night and choke me. /
[4] They laugh and say Shakudi also make the plaits in my hair /
[5] and I think that he must be Shugudu sent by the family of the little pikin [*child*] I bin kill, /
[6] I cut him throat and he look my eyes and die and he's innocent like my little brother. /
[7] Shugudu now must crush my heart like a tomato, I know. /

The sense of deep anxiety, also in this trauma narrative of *despair*, is evident by the uneven length of the ethnopoetic lines highlighting the broken emotional rhythm of the narrative,

and it is noticeable since line [1] which places in an ergative-Subject position the "brain" synecdoche – i.e., the part of the migrant's body representing the obsessive recurrence of the same painful memories of his past crimes, emphasized by the verb reduplication "think think". Line [2] deepens the image of the "brain" as an autonomous 'thinking creature' by focusing on the metaphor of the "worms" – in ergative-Subject position – 'creeping in the migrant's brain', representing the embodiment of the typical trauma symptom of 'head numbness'. The same line [2] makes also reference to the ergative-Subject of the "chest" in relation to the other trauma symptom of 'chest-tightness'. The emphatic adjective reduplication "heavy heavy" conveys the gasping and syncopated rhythm of the anxiety-induced shortness of breath afflicting him when he was about to sleep after a very tiring day at work. Line [3] introduces the interpretation that the migrant's fellow workers in the tomato field gave of such a 'chest-tightness' symptom, which they represented through the personification of the spiteful creature of the Southern-Italian folklore known as Sciacuddhi (in an ergative-Subject position as supernatural causation) pressing the migrant's chest while he was asleep. Line [4] expands the fellow workers' interpretation of the migrant's trauma symptoms by not acknowledging his anguish (or probably by trying to minimize his state of distress), as they rather made jokes about his braided hair (dreadlocks) that they said was done by the same spiteful creature. Then, in line [5], the Nigerian migrant, in turn, deduced (by using the epistemic modal "must") that such a mythological creature coincided with its Yoruba namesake counterpart – i.e., the Shugudu – the demonic being sent to him for revenge by the family of a little child that he was forced to murder when he was a child soldier under the command of Boko Haram. Line [6] focuses on the very core of his trauma, which is the shocking description of his brutal murder of the little child that he associated to his innocent little brother, and of the child's eyes looking into his eyes while he was dying. In his report of such a dreadful action, the migrant used the 'conceptual simple present' as the tense by which he unconsciously expressed the permanence of his past pain in the present, turning his longed-for 'possible world' into a traumatic nightmare. In line [7], the migrant came to the conclusion that Shugudu was obliged to kill him for his crime (conveyed by the deontic modal "must"), by pressing his breath out and crushing his heart like a "tomato" (a reference to his present work) while he was asleep.

6
Case Study 6: trauma narrative of 'urge of escape'

Case Study 6 reports a recent evolution in West-African trauma narratives due to the Covid-19 pandemic that was raging in Italy during the first months of 2020 and that prompted African migrants to regard Italy no longer as a 'utopian possible world', but as a 'real dystopian world'. This unexpected situation triggered in them an urge to rapidly escape from their host country to return to Africa, still almost unaffected by the pandemic – an escape towards a 'Covid-free impossible utopic world' that was forbidden by the border closure imposed by the anti-Covid EU laws.

The subject of the trauma narrative of *urge of escape* reported in this case study is a Nigerian woman, working as a building cleaner and happy with her job in Italy. Yet, at the outbreak of the pandemic, she suddenly feared for her life. In her narrative, she blamed Western scientists challenging the African god Ọbalúayé who has the power of life or death over humankind and, in his fury, cast his pandemic curse in revenge on the Western countries. Hence – she concluded – if African people stayed in a doomed place like Italy, they would be punished as well. For this reason, she longed for returning to Nigeria (or "Naija", as it is called by its citizens when they affectionately see it as a utopian motherland).

Noticeably, in this case, the videoless online mode of interview produced more than ever its 'confessional effect' on the Nigerian migrant who felt free to express her frantic anguish at the thought that she was entrapped in such a deadly situation with no escape. As in the previous Case Study 3 regarding a trauma narrative of *frustration*, also in this case the migrant's narrative contains digressions pronounced in a low voice, mainly regarding repetitions of the same expressions and concepts. Therefore, the entextualization choice (Urban, 1996) was, once again, to extrapolate the most salient passages of her trauma narrative, which turned out to be precisely seven. Hence, they were reorganized into the 'emotional pattern' of the seven ethnopoetic lines characterizing this type of online trauma narratives.

What follows is the transcription of this ELF-mediated trauma narrative:

Case Study 6: Transcript 6
[1] This job is good, yes, give money for honest life. /
[2] But I must come for Naija [*Nigeria*] quick now, I no want stay here now, no /
[3] why? We say se [*that*] Ọbalúayé now is angry for white men think se [*that*] their science can heal sick people. /
[4] But only Ọbalúayé can kill people for their sin and can heal people, no medicine, no science can heal Covid. /
[5] And if African people stay here in Italy, he go [*will*] kill us. /
[6] Naija is safe place, we respect our land and our gods and they bless and give health for us. /
[7] So I must come for Naija quick quick, but law here say se [*that*] we must no move out Italy. /

In the small corpus of this type of trauma narrative of *urge of escape*, this is the only case with the presence of a supernatural causation (the vengeful god Ọbalúayé). In all the other cases, causation is represented by natural or socio-political events. In this narrative, ethnopoetic lines show an uneven length and an irregular rhythm, reflecting the agitated pace of the migrant's speech induced by her anxiety. Line [1] very briefly outlines her previous state of a person satisfied with her honest work in Italy. Line [2], however, starts with the adversative "But" to introduce a rapid turn in the direction of her thought to express her inner urge (emphasized by the deontic modal "must") to leave Italy and return to her beloved Nigeria that she represented as a safe utopia and defined with the traditional affectionate nickname of "Naija". In the longer lines [3] and [4], she explained the reasons for her desire to escape, which were referred to the

god Ọbalúayé, representing the supernatural causation of the Covid pandemic as the god's punishment against Western scientists who, with their research, aimed to save the lives of people infected with the coronavirus, but actually challenging his divine power of life and death over humankind. Hence, as succinctly pointed out in the next line [5], Ọbalúayé will (signaled by the NPE future-tense marker "go") punish as sinners even those African people who remain in such evil Western places, and thus – with a sudden shift from the third-person plural "people" to the first-person plural "us" – the god "will kill us". Contrary to such a definition of Western countries, line [6], instead, praises Nigeria (Naija) as safe, ethical and blessed by the gods. Hence – the migrant concluded in line [7] – she felt compelled (signaled by the deontic modal "must") to return to Nigeria as quickly as possible (emphasized by the adjective reduplication "quick quick" used as an adverbial form) as an inner obligation to save her own life – a desire immediately denied by her obligation to respect the EU laws (again highlighted by the use of the deontic modal "must").

7
Conclusions

The ethnographic data analyzed in this paper show that West-African migrants' trauma narratives can be classified into four categories: 'hope', 'frustration', 'despair' and 'urge of escape', each marked by typological and metaphorical features of the migrants' native languages transferred into their ELF variations (cf. Guido, 2018; 2020). Furthermore, data show that West-African migrants do not make use of APA terminology to refer to trauma symptoms, but tend to express them by means of native idioms of distress, often of a metaphysical, supernatural type, sometimes 'hybridized' with parallel folk idioms typical of the host community. It has been noticed that the online and videoless interview mode employed for data collection encouraged in migrants a spontaneous process of oral report of traumatic events that needed very few eliciting questions on the side of the interviewer – a process, indeed, that resembled the unfolding of facts and related feelings narrated behind a shielding confessional, where the speaker's and the listener's facial and physical features are kept protected and hidden from view. This novel online 'Think-Aloud' method (cf. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) has therefore allowed the written entextualization (Urban, 1996) of such oral trauma narrative into protocols of ethnopoetic lines (Hymes, 1981; 2003) that better reflect the migrants' emotional rhythms and turn of thoughts in their trauma narratives.

Though ethnographic data in this ongoing research are still too scanty to allow generalizations, they can already envisage the need for developing novel hybrid ELF-mediated trauma narratives and lexicon and new online ethnopoetic modes for collecting and entextualizing them into protocol transcriptions to be employed during specialized encounters in migration contexts (especially in the field of Transcultural Psychiatry). Recognizing such distinctive narrative characteristics would thus help the acknowledgement of West-African migrants' identity, which they often perceive

as disrupted, especially when they feel displaced from their own wounded native communities as they anxiously try to achieve their longed-for utopian 'possible world' – which, all of a sudden, may turn into another dystopian disenchantment.

Notes

1. 'Boko Haram' in Hausa means 'Western education is sin'.

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