

CHAPTER 3

ZENAB'S PROTECTIVE SCROLL. A MIGRANT VOICE, AND A GRAPHIC ESSAY

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Abstract

Despite its epistemological shortcomings, the anthropological use of qualitative methods and of argumentation by illustration as a source of knowledge has a positive side: that of helping us surmounting the opposition between us and the others and allow for empathy to check our analytical and cultural biases. Availability to listen and to let other people's minds in ours is an essential corollary of anthropological research. The following paragraphs and drawings are an attempt to both let a "migrant voice" be freely expressed within an academic publication and a mediated form of reaching out to cultural values and experiences that lay outside the bounds of the host population. It offers an edited and anonymised testimony interspersed with drawings inspired by the Ethiopian art of the *abənnät*.

Keywords: human mobility, migrant voices, travel memories, Ethiopian illustrations

Refugee crises, migration flows, and mass tourism tend not to be jointly analysed, and yet they are three concurring facets of present-day human mobility, as they frequently converge in time and space to places that, for diverse reasons – namely, affluency – act as population magnets. Longing for safety, for jobs and for leisure are not mutually exclusive drives; on the contrary, they often feed each other, complexifying the pull-and-push analytical approach to human mobility.

In a much-quoted 2015 article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, the editor of *SiliconAfrica*, has made an interesting point about the debatable but usually not debated nature of racial categorisations surrounding the lexical distinction between “expats” and “migrants” when referring to transnational working mobility. In Western vocabulary, he says, everyone can be a migrant, but “expat” is a word exclusive to migrant “Europeans” (a term he equates with “whites” and “anyone with roots in a western country”; Koutonin, 2015).

In fact, the ideological framework that applies to this self-ingratiating distinction extends much further to encompass a labyrinthine portrait of national identities, social boundaries, and a myriad of economic and demographic inequalities. Is an asylum-seeker not a migrant? A tourist not a (temporary) exile? Can’t a migrant, or indeed an invading soldier, not be viewed, and view him/herself, as a tourist? Legal and security apparatuses are summoned to politically legitimise such social distinctions and such semantic borders, but in doing so they create the basis upon which performative discourses can dialogically develop in multiple contexts, and somehow establish some sort of parodical common ground where mobile and non-mobile people, insiders and outsiders meet and come to grips with linguistic and cultural diversity.

That the above-mentioned correlations tend to be inadmissible as propositions in the public arena and in most specialist studies is a given, as they threaten to inconveniently pull the rug from under ideological conviction and narrative certainty. In this respect, for whomever may find such correlations palatable, Portugal could stand out as a particularly rich case-study. Being a traditionally poor and peripheral country, its population has for centuries tended to migrate and establish communities of various sorts in the four corners of the world. Such solipsist marginality was strikingly dissolved three decades after its accession to the European Economic Community (later the European Union) in 1986. The traumatic aftermath of the worldwide 2008 financial crisis that led to a state of near bankruptcy of public finances was characterised by a *de facto* loss of the country's national sovereignty, and far-reaching legislative and structural transformations during the so-called “troika years”.

This short period was marked by direct and indirect interventions of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank, not only in Portuguese public finances and economy but also in core legislative areas such as employment, housing, transport, and migration policies. By 2015, the country that emerged from these intensive transformative four years was profoundly challenged by an unprecedented movement of incoming people (Lestegás, 2019). As its capital city and other urban conglomerations started to accommodate a sudden and massive tourist boom and a wave of “expats” (that is, affluent migrants from all world’s regions), they also began attracting a growing number of low-income “migrants” to work in both the tourist services industry and in intensive greenhouse agriculture. As is obvious, mass tourism, expat settlement and economic immigration aren’t in themselves rare phenomena in today’s richer world. What was notable was the fulminant way in which it occurred, to the point that in just four years Portugal became the world’s fourth country most dependent on tourism (WEF, 2018), a sector making for almost 20% of the national GDP just before the Covid19 pandemic hit, in 2019 (from under 12% in 2000).¹

A concurring factor in this new situation was the impact of the Libyan and Syrian conflicts on Europe-bound migration flows, and novel securitising conceptualisations aimed at furthering legal and social borders between the statuses of political refugees and economic migrants. Given Portugal's enduring economic stagnation and its geographic position, the territory had been mostly untouched by the intensifying of Middle Eastern and African migration that in the previous 20 years growingly affected European political and social life. But after 2015, the ground had been cleared to put in practice new migration policies and to embrace the European-wide pull towards mitigating some of the most the negative effects of the Dublin Agreement. The country's government enthusiastically embraced the “welcoming” of non-European refugees and vowed to accommodate a share of the refugee/asylum-seekers/migrants amassed in Greek and Italian triage camps.

I found myself being pulled towards trying to understand these above trends, both in my teaching and researching practices. Not only were the classrooms’ composition drastically changing, thanks to the growing number of European and non-European foreign students, but all aspects of Lisbon, and generally Portuguese, public life were being called upon to incorporate this new mobile reality.

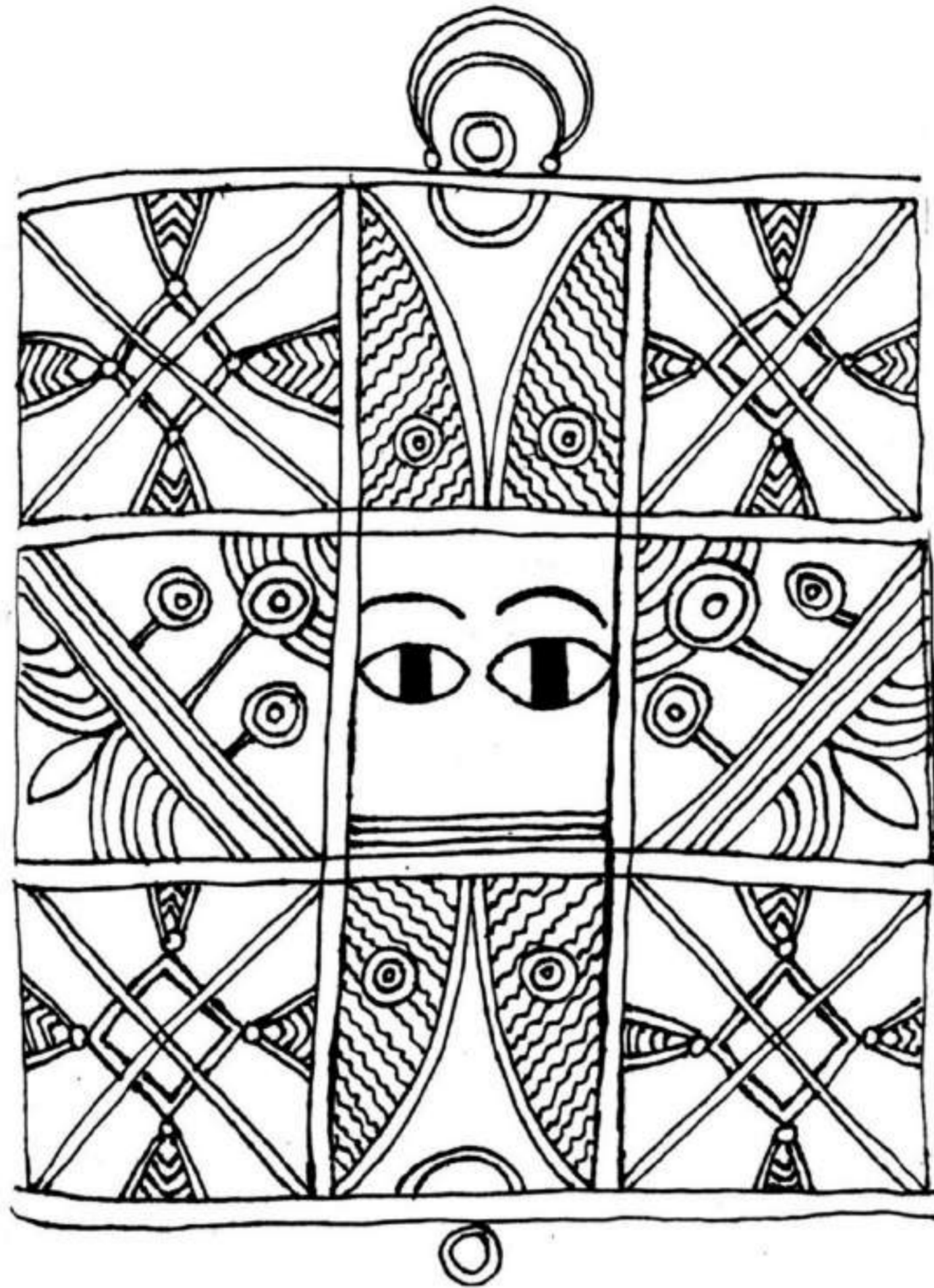
¹ World Data Atlas, 2021. On the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on Portuguese tourism industry, see Almeida and Silva, 2020.

From 2012 onwards, teaching courses on migration, on wars and conflicts, on Europe-Africa relations, working with refugees and asylum-seekers, surveying Asian workers in rural areas, and discussing tourism and gentrification, became for me varying but, as I saw (and see) it, complementary aspects of the study of contemporary human mobility (see Ramos, 2016; Malet Calvo and Ramos, 2018; Pereira et al, 2021).

It was during my inquiries with refugee/asylum-seekers/migrants that I met Zenab (a pseudonym), who had left her hometown in Ethiopia in 2013, had crossed the Sudanese and Libyan deserts towards Tripoli at the height of the second Libyan war, and had managed to board a flooding and overcrowded dinghy headed towards international waters in the hope of attaining European shores by being picked up by a Search and Rescue naval operation. My repairing with her wasn't simply that of an interviewer, since she was also for a Pro period my student and confident, and an informant on Ethiopian matters; concurrently, I sometimes acted as her tourist guide and as mediator in her travails in the face of Portuguese byzantine bureaucracy.

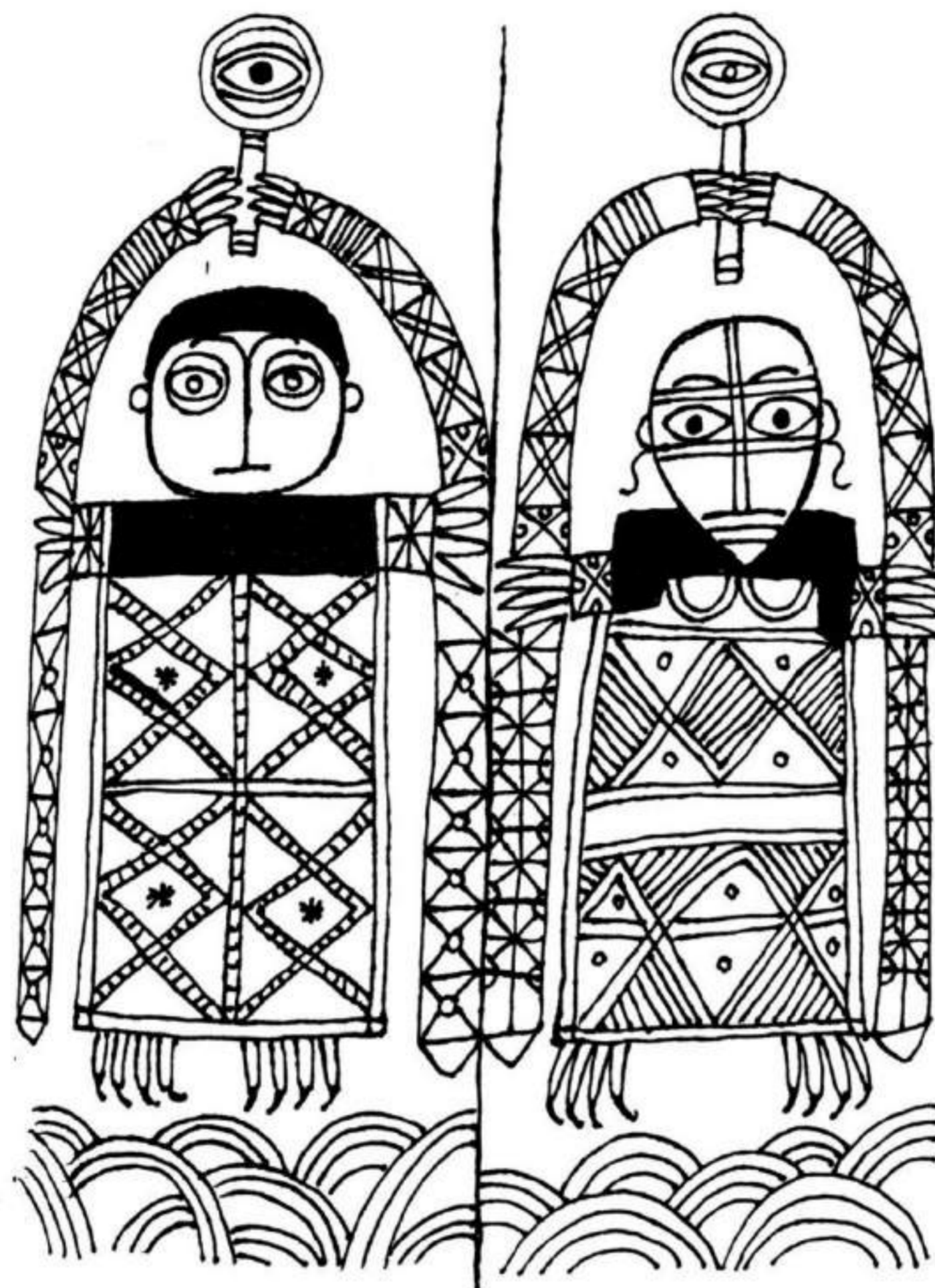
The text below is a strongly edited excerpt of my interviews with her, intentionally cleansed from identifying markers that could somehow jeopardize her requested anonymity. The accompanying illustrations are the result of my rather inept attempts at graphically interpreting her odyssey. In this, I drew inspiration from the very formal, and yet improvising, framework of the imagetic features of Ethiopian *abənnät* productions.²

² *Abənnäts*, more commonly (but mistakenly) known as *asmäts* ("hidden words" or "protective ('magic') scrolls"), are illustrated manuscripts produced by *däbtäras*, unordained clergymen of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, who are practitioners of traditional medicine and masters of "magical" incantations of various kinds (on a comprehensive review of Ethiopian *abənnäts*, see Gidena Adissu Kebede, 2017; also Chernetsov, 2003).



It is you who call me
 Asylum-seeker and not
 migrant and not tourist ::
 Why you want to know
 about me? I tell you my
 story and what I get in
 return? You want people
 to be sorry for me?

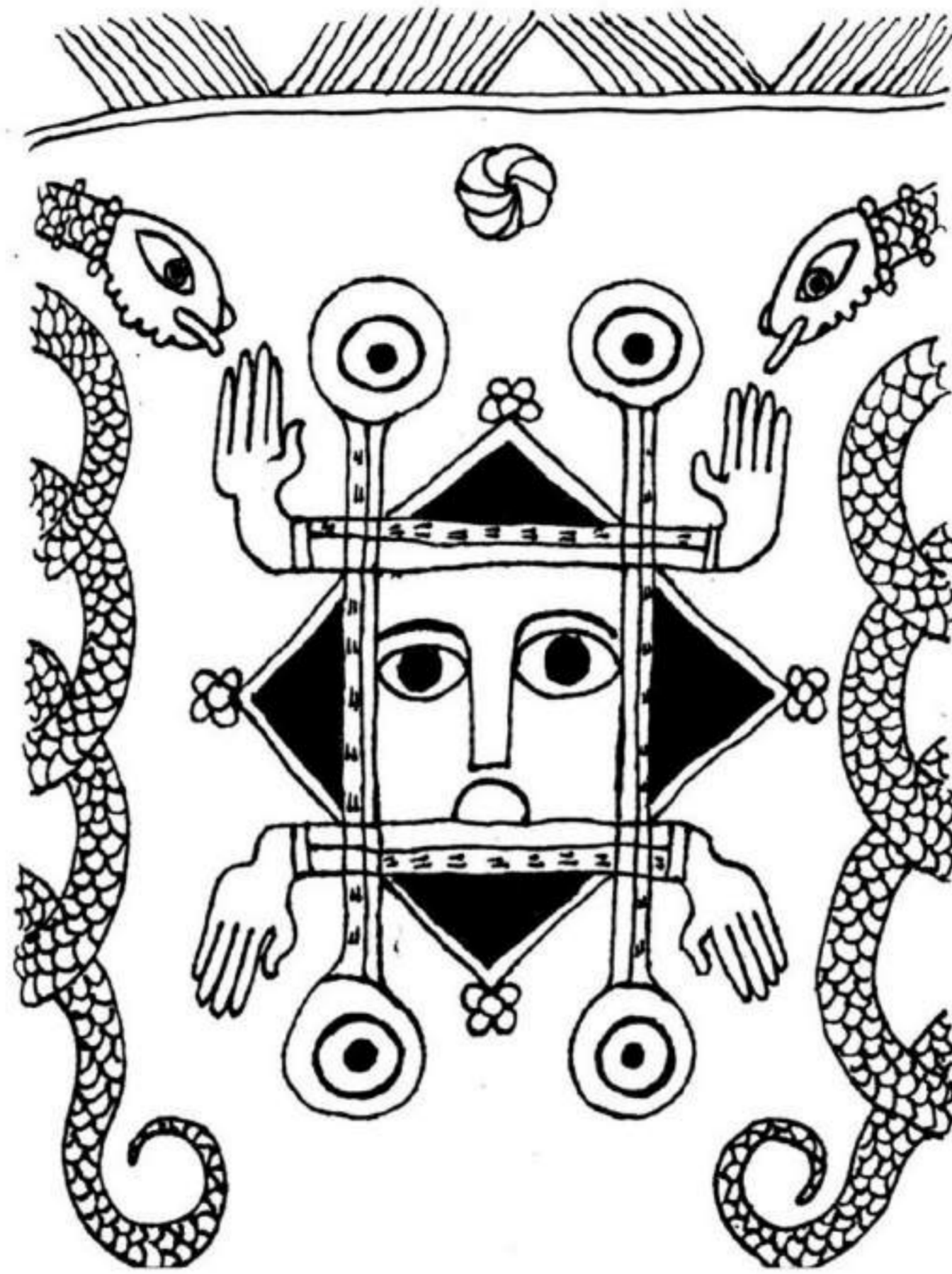
If I say I made it, I am
 blessing the traffickers
 and the police and you ::
 If I tell you I don't like it
 here, you say that is my
 problem, why I don't go
 back ::



Ok, I tell you my story and you can **believe** it or not : I don't care :

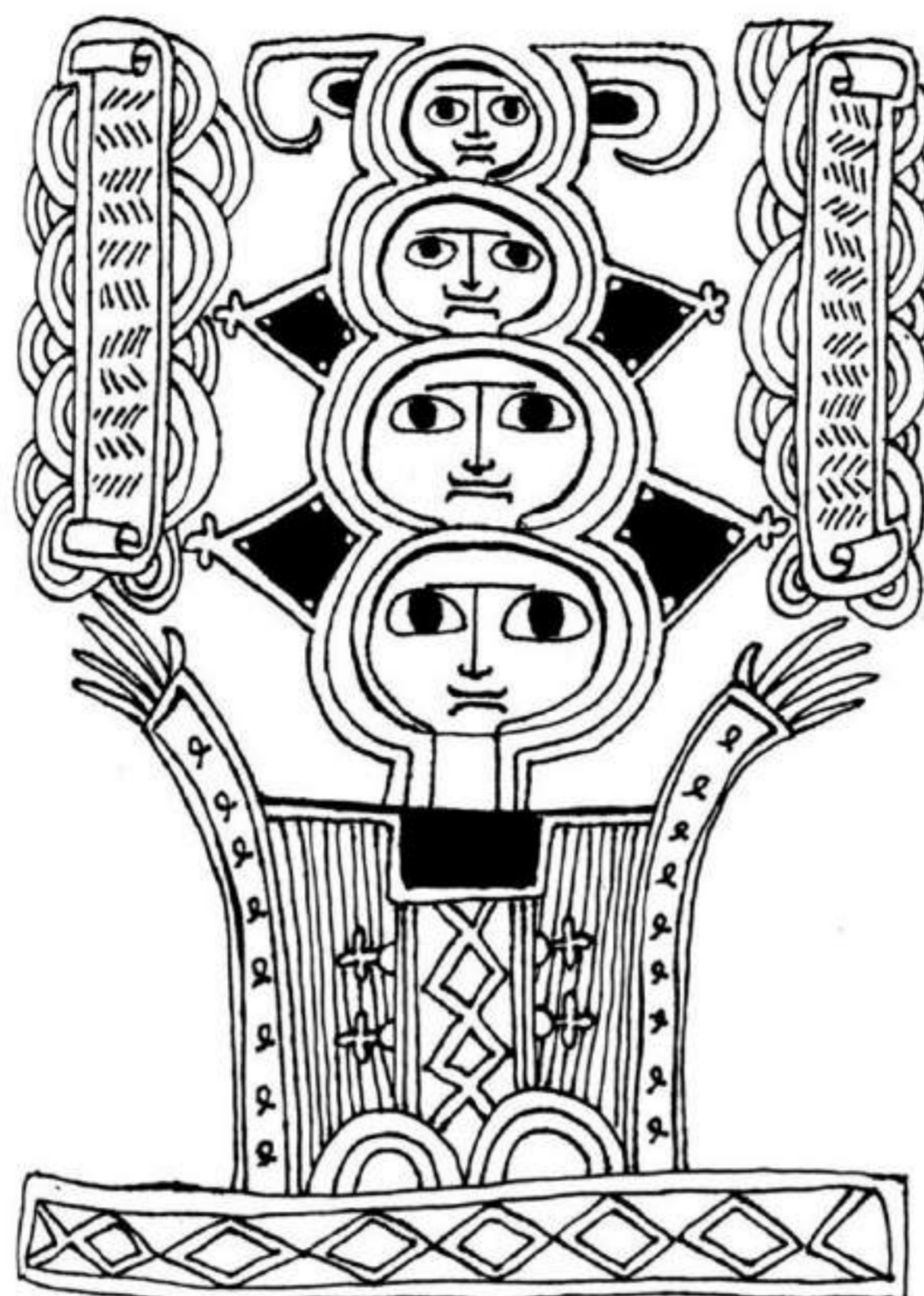
My name is **Zenab** : That means "Precious Jewel" in my country : I speak Amharinya, Oromiffa, Arabic and English : I am learning some Portuguese, but I prefer to learn German and go there :

Who wants to stay here? There are no good jobs : I have no one, that is no family and no friends : Plus, the **SEF** and the people that do the reports for my residence visa. don't recognise my qualification : I took the nursing degree in Addis and I trained as **nurse** in Hayat hospital :



But here they say you have to go back to study from the beginning because I can't get my Ethiopian certification. Here there is no embassy and I can't go to Paris to ask in the consulate. I cry when they say "we welcome the asylum seekers, we are very open." That is what they say to look good to the outside.

To them I am only like a thousand-birr note. The government gets money from Europe to accept me. The CPR gets money from the government to keep me in the Bobadela centre. The language teacher gets money from CPR to make me learn a language I don't need. And the SEF people enjoy giving me a hard time for free.



*We are a mix family,
Oromo and Amhara,
Bétäkrestyan and Islam
; My father wanted that
I married soon ; This is
the custom in the rural
area. ; He wanted that I
marry in a family of the
kebele next to our village
;*

*I said no ; I said I wanted
to study and become a
nurse ; He beat me and
locked me in the house ;
So, I ran to Addis ;*

*I made the trip on foot
and went to live with my
mother's cousin and her
husband ; I worked in the
house and was allowed to
study ; I finished my
degree and my training in
Addis and went back to
our **woreda**. ; I married
there but my husband
didn't want me to work
; He wanted me at home
all the time ; I went back
to my family, but my
father was angry and
locked me inside ;*



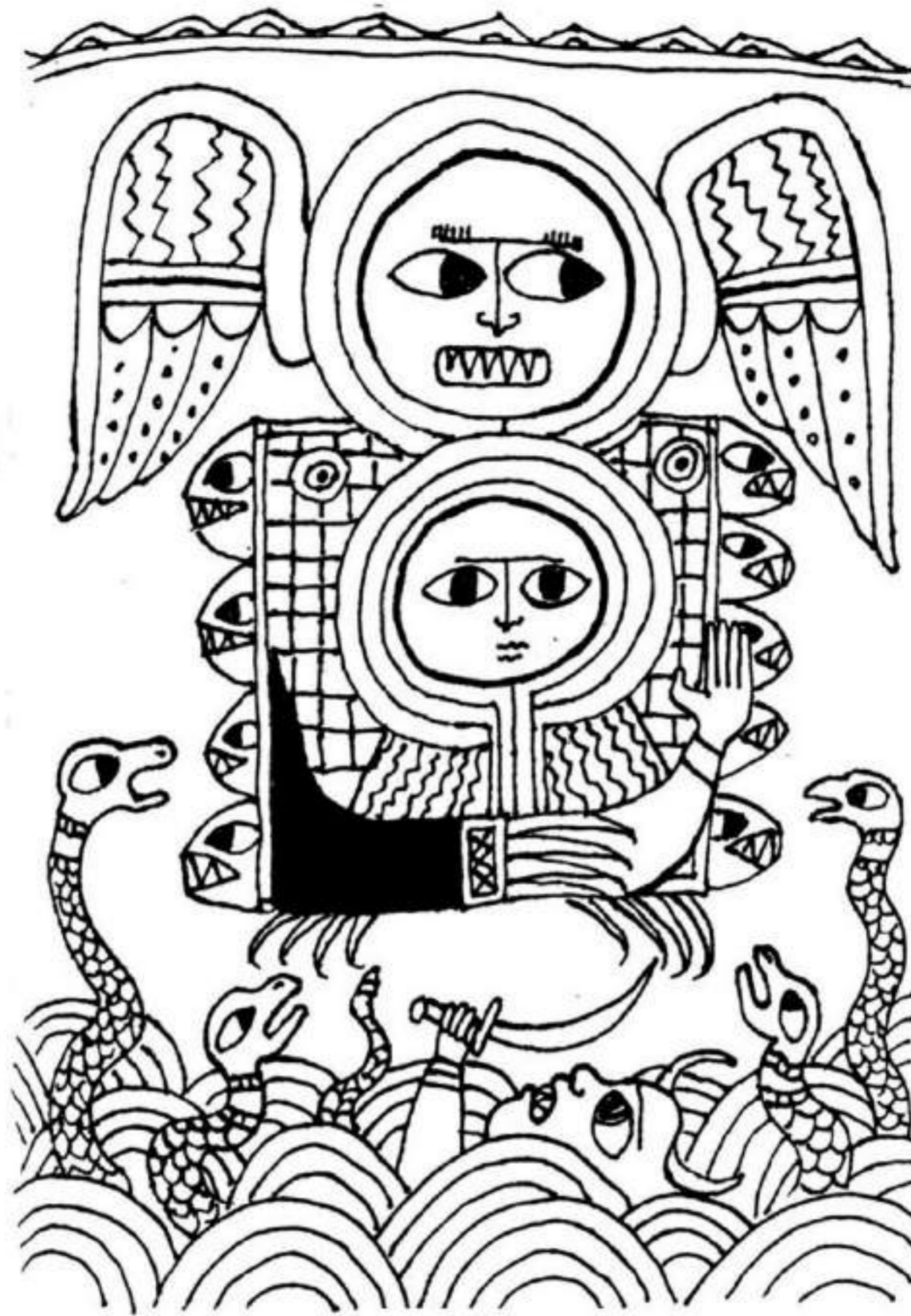
I asked friends to help me and ran away again. My friends were working in **Khartoum** and so I took the Metema road with them. I worked in a big family house, cleaning and cooking. It was there I learned Arabic. But the husband of my lady became in love with me. #

He wanted to take me as second wife. I was afraid to say no, I didn't want to lose my job and go back to Ethiopia. So, I said yes but one night I left the house. I took the Libyan road. The Libyans are very racist against **Habesha** but for me it was ok because I know Arabic and I know the Koran. #



In Libya. I never said I wanted to go to **Europe** ; I arrived in Tripoli after the bombings and the death of the Colonel Khadafi ; I said to the police that I was working for an Arab family ; In the house lived many different people ; I was staying with two Ethiopian women ; They were not careful ; They were Christian and could not speak proper Arabic ;

The police became suspicious and tracked them to the house ; At night they came and arrested us ; They took us to prison ; That was very hard ; We were always afraid because the police always rape women prisoners ; First, was the older woman ; The other night was the younger ; So, I knew they were coming for me ;



When I was being dragged by three police, a Libyan working for the UN came and said that he wanted to interrogate me. He knew what was going to happen and he helped me. He took me near the gate of the prison and said to me: run.

So I ran and was free. I went to the house and got the money that I was hiding there. I had a telephone of a man who deals with the boats. I met him quickly and gave him all my money to put me in the next dingy.

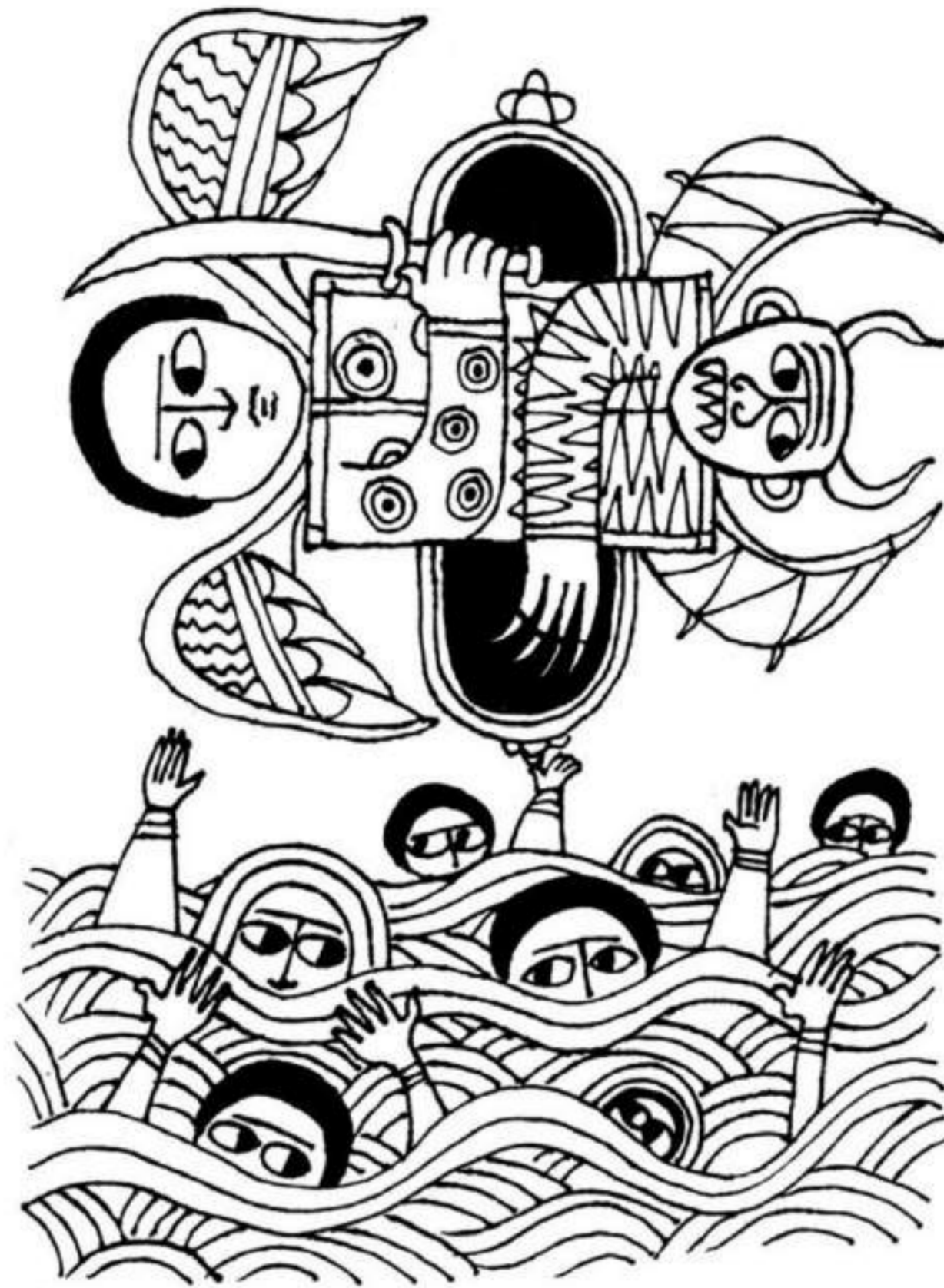


We were **80** in the boat, and we all had to drain the water that was coming in. When we reached the international border, the man in charge started making phone calls to send signal. But it wasn't even dawn, and the boat was flooding too much.

There were women with babies crying. No ship was coming, and we were very afraid because the boat was sinking.

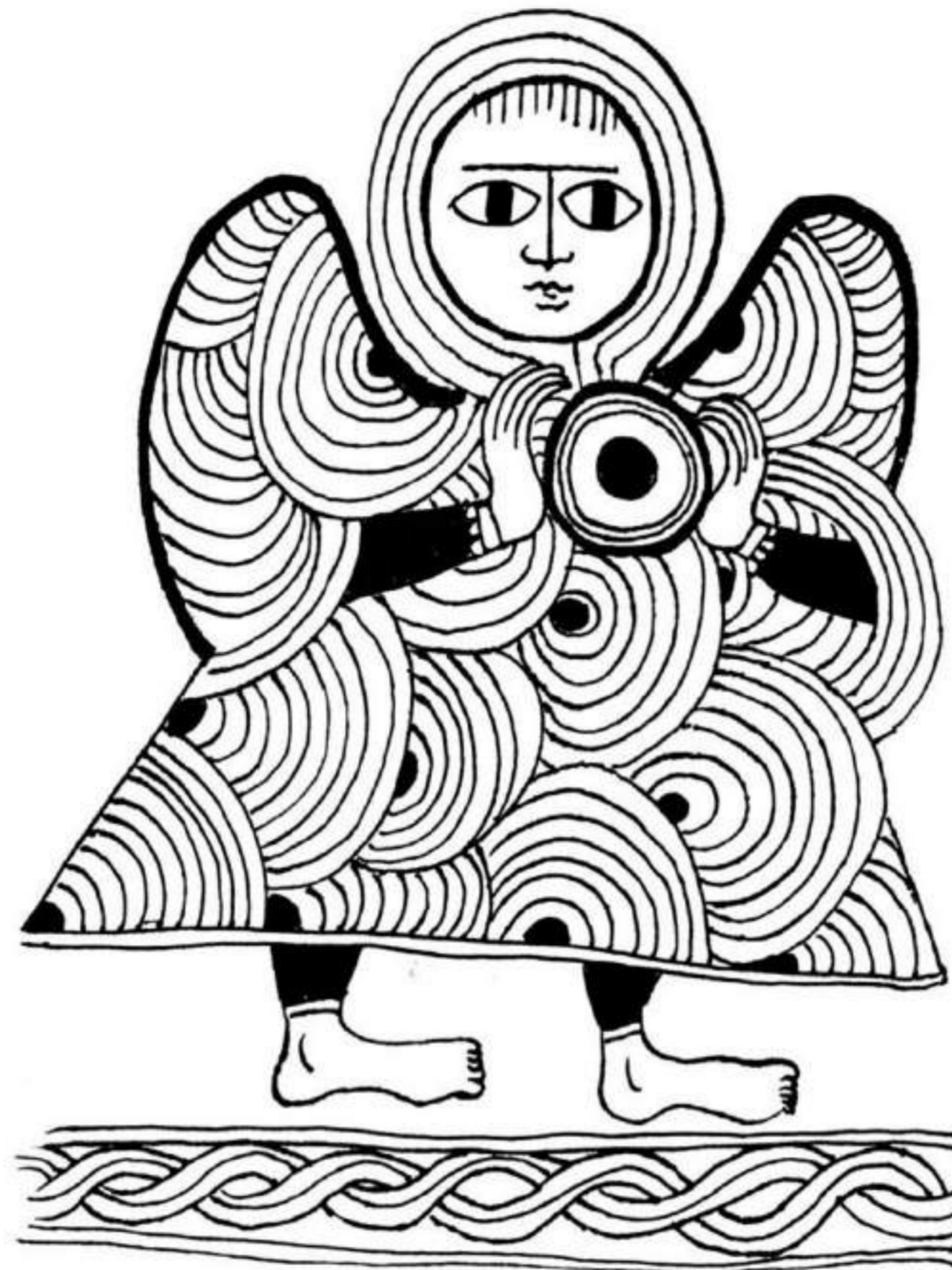
Then a **Spanish** ship came. That was the will of God to save us in the eleven hour.

They took us to an Italy port and asked us questions and documents. And after we were transferred to another ship. They took us to **Lampedusa**. I stayed there three months. There I met other Ethiopians and Eritreans.



One day, the frontier people came to question me : They said I was approved : I asked to go to Germany because that is where everyone wants to go and I have friends there : But they said no : They said, you can go to **Portugal** :: I asked: Is Portugal in Europe : And they said: Yes : So, I said ok : I really regret I said that ::

Now, I got residence : So, I don't care : I can say this : I can say that the Portuguese authorities they just pretend to be like Europeans, but inside they are not different from our government and the police : Creating problems with a smile, saying yes but not doing anything, treating us like **barqa** ::



My story is just like many migrant stories : I was lucky but **God** was good to teach me Arabic and make me smart :

You like drawing, you can make pictures of my story : You can do like a **tālsām**, in a prayer to protect migrants :

Glossary

Amharynia (“Amharic”): an Ethiopian Semitic language spoken as first language by the Amhara people. Serves as lingua franca for most other populations in Ethiopian urban areas.

Barya: Amharic derogatory term denoting someone from slave descent, typically employed as unskilled labour.

Bétäkrestyan (“Christian House”): refers to the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, a millenary myaphisit (non-Chalcedonic) Church, previously administratively part of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church; autocephalous since 1949. Roughly a third of the Ethiopian population is Orthodox Christian,

Birr (“silver”): the Ethiopian national currency.

C.P.R. or Conselho Português para os Refugiados (“Portuguese Council for the Refugees”): a Portuguese NGO dedicated to offering support for asylum-seekers, and running a hosting house at Bobadela, in the outskirts of Lisbon.

Habesha (“Abissynians”): an identifier used to refer to Semitic language-speaking peoples, inhabiting the highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Hayat Hospital: a private hospital and medical college situated in Bole Road, in Addis Ababa.

Kebele (“ward”): can refer to either an urban neighbourhood or a small rural village; the smallest unit of the Ethiopian territorial administration (composed by up to 500 families, or 3.500 to 4.000 persons).

Lampedusa: refers to the Reception Centre (Centro di Accoglienza) located in of Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost island; in operation since 1988, this overcrowded camp is Europe's primary entry point for immigrants sailing from Africa.

Metema (also known as Metemma Yohannes): a town in north-western Ethiopia, bordering Sudan; part of the Semien Gondar Zone of the Amhara Region.

Oromiffa or Afaan Oromoo (“Oromo”): an Ethiopian Cushitic language spoken predominantly by the Oromo people and neighbouring groups in the Horn of Africa. Used as a lingua franca particularly in Ethiopia and north-eastern Kenya.

S.E.F., the acronym for Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (“Foreigners and Borders Service”): a national police agency of the Portuguese Ministry of Internal Affairs responsible for border control, and immigration and asylum enforcement.

Tälsäm (“image”): stylised visual elements inserted in an abännät, or “protective (‘magic’) scroll”, to separate its manuscript parts: the introductory formula, the asmat (or “names”), the so-called Brillenbuchstaben (or “letters with eyeglasses”), the caution, the gäbir (or “execution”).

Woreda (“district”): woredas are third level the administrative divisions in Ethiopia (under zones and regional states); they are governed by an elected council representing each kebele in the district (Ethiopia is divided into 670 rural districts and 100 urban districts).

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