



# Personal Journey

## *KUCHINATE*

### *African Refugee Women's Collective*

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## 1) **Introduction**

One day my wife came back with the information that the International Spouse's Club is having a private sales event with the team of "*Kuchinate*", a group of African women, who have a special background and selling among others handmade basket and carpets.

My wife was not able to attend that sales activity but got some information about the event by LtCol Don Maraska's spouse. So she drove to that shop and bought some things, planned to give them as presents to our friends and families.

Almost at the same time we got the task to do a "personal journey" which should deal with a project which exposes the students to challenges and issues which are not completely on the agenda of the course and maybe even not really on that of the Israel society. The sectors which could be covered are i.a. poverty, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), minorities, disabled, Aliyah and (im-)migration.

In connection with the course of Dr. Eyal Levin about the Israeli society and the incidental talks with our wives Don and I decided to take *Kuchinate* as our project.

Therefore

1. We visited the shop, met Diddi, a South African psychologist, and spoke to two women at the shop; and
2. Made an Internet research about the project and the African non-Jewish minority in Israel.

This is the report about my "Personal Journey".

## 2) **The *Kuchinate* Project**<sup>1</sup>

### **a) General Background**

*"Kuchinate is the Tigrinya word for Crochet.*

*Tigrinya is a language spoken in the highlands of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia."*

(ARTS, 2015, p. Our page)

The project is about helping African female asylum seekers to cope with their situation by providing social, economic and psychological assistance, mainly by supporting them producing and selling baskets and rugs with mostly traditional Eritrean designs. The work is a special African crocheting technique, adding some other materials like can ends. The material is recycled fabric; in their home country they used to work with straw and tree branches. The colorful designs and different sizes and forms make them useable for a lot of purposes. The

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<sup>1</sup> See (ARTS, 2015) and (Lee, 2015)

project began in 2011, was started by ARTS (African Refugee Therapeutic Services) on a initiative of Diddy Mymin Kahn, a South African clinical psychologist, in cooperation with i.a. Restaurateur Puaa Ladijensky and Sister Aziza (whose real name is “*Azezet Kidane, an Eritrean nun and nurse who received the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Heroes Award in 2012*” (Lee, 2015)).

The initiative is currently supported by EU, UN, NGOs and private donators, especially funded by “... *UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), UNVFVT (United Nations Fund for Victims of Torture), the Comboni Sisters, Comboni Fathers, Caritas Spain, and Goldman Sachs Gives.*” (ARTS, 2015, p. Our Story).

### **b) Political background**

Asylum demanded by Africans is a newer problem and since 2006/2007 the number has been growing. Most of them come from the Horn of Africa via Egypt and the Sinai. Altogether there are about 40-50.000 asylum seekers, some speak even of 60.000<sup>2</sup>; most of them are seen by Israelis as economic refugees. The state and especially Tel Aviv know about them, but seem not willing to deal too much with this problem. In some cases they provided money for the voluntary return to home; this has often been used by the men, leaving the women and kids behind. Another way to get the people going back is the placing them in one of the detention centers in the Negev. Diddi describes them as really miserable places, where the heat, the dirt and other circumstances brings the people, mostly men, to go home back voluntarily. However, a deportation back home is expensive and due to the dangerous situation, e.g. Eritrea, in their land of origin often impossible.

At the moment the official number is getting less because it is more difficult to reach Israel due to the security situation in the countries of origin, on the way to Israel and the security measures at Israeli borders<sup>3</sup>. The non-legal status prevents access to basic services such as health care, housing, education, vocational training and employment.

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<sup>2</sup> See (Azriel, 2012). According Diddi the official number in 2011 was 60.000, now the official number is 40.000. In our conversation she was wondering where the 20.000 have gone. Maybe this is more a statistic mean to fog the situation.

<sup>3</sup> “*In 2012, the first of five amendments to the Anti-Infiltration Law (a law deeming all who enter Israeli territory to be ‘infiltrators’) was passed. As a result of this change in policy, a fence was built along the Israeli-Egyptian border.*” (ARTS, 2015, p. Background)

### **c) The women of *Kuchinate***

Most of the asylum seekers are women, mainly from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria and Ethiopia and surrounding countries. They tried to escape from the poorness but mainly from the atrocities and the fighting at their country of origin. Most of them were exposed to huge violence at home, in the area they lived or on the way to Israel; kidnapped, sold by human traffickers, and exposed to torture, sexual abuse and rape. Their escape led them from the Horn of Africa via Sudan to Egypt, on the search to a safe place to live and they all carry a huge trauma with them. Therefore our first talk with them was difficult; they were reluctant to speak to us, the foreign men coming to their shop and asking questions although they are used normally to deal with visitors.

Many of them have children, who are often ill or disabled and some of them the result of the raping. Some of the women came here without a man, just with the kids; being without a family and so being without support or backup makes life much more difficult. Even those arriving with a man are often left by their husbands, who took the governmental money for return, and so they have to deal with the difficulties of a single parent, not knowing how to pay the rent and raising the children. So there is no real chance to become a full member of the society. If the man stays with the family, most of the men are unqualified for a job, therefore unemployed or dependent on low-paid jobs, e.g. in the construction sector.

Due to their illegal status neither the women nor the kids have access to public social systems, especially not to the health system. This status also hinders to get permission to work in official jobs. If they are permitted to work, they often lack the qualification and language skills. Additionally they have to cope with the new culture and a new surrounding in a state, which is also permanently under the danger of (terror) attacks.

So *Kuchinate* gives them next to a kind of sisterhood the chance to work at home and look after their kids simultaneously, because there is no access to public childcare.

### **d) The shop of *Kuchinate***

The shop is in the south of Tel Aviv, near the central bus station. It is located in the back yard of an ugly industrial street. There are no sign, non ads; to find it, you have to know where to search. There was once a pop-up shop in the Brown boutique hotel, which space was donated by the owner. However, that raised some awareness in the posh Israeli society, but was only a drop on a hot stone.

The shop is in the first floor; to reach it you can use a lift, which is not very inspiring confidence, or the dirty staircase. When you reach the shop, the room is even on a cloudy day quite bright. At the entrance there are everywhere baskets, rugs and other things crocheted with fabrics. When you go deeper into the room you realize the small kitchenette and the sofas where the women come together, having a cup of coffee or tea, working and chatting. Here is the place, where the women have a chance to exchange experiences. This is also the place where informal group (therapy) sessions take place and visitors can sit down and get information about the project and the women.

Next to the sofas you see children's toys and there is a longer table where the women can have their meals together. At a desk and in one corner you realize that also some administrative work can be done; Paper, folder and other office materials are stacking. This place is used to teach the women some office and computer skills.

The shop is according to the website open three days the week, in the talk we learned that there are more opening hours; it seems that the store is always open when one woman is there, so almost all days during the working hours.

### e) **Success**

*Kuchinate* is certainly not a financial success story like other start-ups in Israel; however the products are marketed and sold in Israeli and European boutiques and crafts fairs. They also ship their crafts overseas, but until now the shop is not profitable. Therefore they try to get more awareness by approaching different social clubs and groups; additionally a lot of newspaper and internet articles<sup>4</sup> already have been published. Diddi told us that they now hired a volunteer, who acts as an event manager to coordinate the home sales, the visitor groups and so on. Taxes are one factor which hinders the economical success. The gain of the shop underlies higher taxes than other "start-ups". The additional money should go into a special fund for helping asylum seekers, which is highly doubted by Diddi.

However, the real success lies in the improvement of the situation of the women. "*Crocheting provides a connection between Israeli society and African culture.*" (Lee, 2015). Next to the possibility to work here producing and selling the baskets and other things, it gives those women a meeting point. There is always coffee and tea available, a place for the kids to play, and to get help for their daily live. The main thing nevertheless is the chance to exchange

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<sup>4</sup> See (ARTS, 2015, p. In the press)

their experiences and so maybe to alleviate their trauma. Probably these are only small pieces in the whole puzzle, however helpful for them.

### **3) Personal Impressions and conclusion**

I am living in Ramat Aviv and here and in many parts of Tel Aviv, where we spend our time, the town is stylish with posh people. When you drive on a sunny Friday morning through particular districts of the town, you see everywhere people in well situated housings and nice cars, having their Friday morning breakfast at one of the trendy restaurants or bars.

However, not far from the main beach there is a different world. Southwest of the Central Bus Station, Tel Aviv is less attractive, less posh; there the poor, dirty and neglected areas begin. Although we experienced this already once when we visited the Ethiopian restaurant Habash in that area, when I was at *Kuchinate*, I was hit by the appearance of those people, trying to cope with a trauma. Already when you try to find that store, you realize how bad their situation is. The remote location of the shop seems to say that the women do not want to be found.

The women are friendly but reluctant to speak, which is not really a language problem (to be honest I was surprised how well they spoke English), but they seem to be unsure what those strangers want from them; one seemed to be even afraid.<sup>5</sup> Language lessons are according Diddi not really used, because most of the time the women have to work and additionally they are not used to go to “school”. Most of them have no real graduation; so a job in a shop with easy office work is already a success.

We spoke as well about the kids. There were a couple of them playing in the shop and before on the aisle. The question is what will be their further life; they grow up in the Israeli culture, learn Hebrew but have no Israeli citizenship. Some of them go to school, but what will be after that. Joining the IDF without being an Israeli seems impossible and finding a job as well. So they grow up with no clear future.

Nevertheless, it strikes the eye how important projects like these are. The women seem to get back a bit of their self-esteem by the work and thankful for the help to get back on the way. However there seem to be no real future for the women in Israel. Diddi’s reaction was really frank when we spoke about the legal status and the future: “*I am so frustrated about this!*” Still, where could they have a future; in Eritrea, Ethiopia? For sure not!

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<sup>5</sup> Maybe she was thinking of the - in some parts violent - demonstrations against illegal immigrants in 2012. See e.g. (Azriel, 2012)

And this makes it so difficult and gave me a real bad feeling when you get out of the shop again, heading back into our live of oblivion, distracted by our own daily life.

The Israeli society is used to cope with immigrants, coming for Aliyah; and it is used to cope with bad situations, caused by wars and terror attacks. Therefore there is a huge cohesion in the society. Even we as 'expats' (expatriate) experience this cohesion when we lost our way or need help due to missing language skills. However, these African non-Jewish asylum seekers fall through that grid. For the state the problem seems to be less important, even annoying. Only once there were directly confronted with the problems in 2012, when demonstrations against illegal immigrants took place and e.g. "*Miri Regev, a Knesset member from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, referred to illegal immigrants as 'a cancer in our society' and promised to do anything possible to send them back to their home countries.*" (Azriel, 2012). Since then there seem to be no changes although Prime Minister Netanyahu promised solutions. Until now the only activity was building a fence to prevent the arrival of more. Still all of them have to go at least all four months to prolong their visa. I wonder why there are no real changes, only in increasing the burdens to reach Israel, but not to alleviate their problems in Israel. Maybe it is because of the little number of people or as Diddi said "... *who cares, they are black and they are not Jewish*".<sup>6</sup>

The clashes in 2012 seem to be history. The people in Tel Aviv are now used to the illegal immigrants and the immigrants are used to the Israeli culture. So there are no more clashes because of misunderstandings like in 2012, when the Africans were having a barbecue party in the local park on Shabbat. Nonetheless, the fear against hate is still there.

Nonetheless, this project is a good and worthy attempt to do something and the fact that pop-up shops or selling fairs for society groups in connection with press reports give a little bit of hope. The entrepreneur benefit via this shop, the group tours and connections to groups like the International Spouses Club, the community of the Walworth Barbour American International School in Israel or some teacher unions<sup>7</sup> may disburden the life of the women until there is a political solution.

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<sup>6</sup> There are a lot of claims, that there is a kind of racism against black people in the Jewish community, even if they are Jews and arrived here i.a. during the Operation Moses or Salomon. See (Kinet, 2015, p. 154)

<sup>7</sup> There are a lot of teacher unions coming to Kuchinate. They are worthy multiplier and help often voluntarily in the project.

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