

Institutional Racism Kills.



Demonstration in Palermo, 26/03/2024 „Who killed Kitim?“

The murder of Kitim Cissay has sent ripples through Palermo. Shockwaves would be too strong a word; the effects are being felt softly, perhaps too softly.

Kitim was a young man from Gambia who arrived in Palermo in 2016 as an unaccompanied minor; he was initially lodged in a reception center for minors in the city. After a few months he turned 18 and was transferred to a different center in the province, far from the friends and contacts he had begun to make. After repeatedly making complaints about the lack of medical services in the center, he was kicked out, and came to live independently in Palermo.

It is not difficult to see, therefore, how within less than a year of being in Italy, the vast majority of state support for Kitim ended; Italy and Europe left him on the street, and over the years he had to make through between a mix of licit and illicit activities. For a while he had documents, but between one government and another did not manage to renew them.

He nevertheless managed to make a family here, and when he died his girlfriend was pregnant with their second child.

He died after being knifed and run-over by a (white) man following a heated argument. He was taken to hospital, where previous medical complications contributed to his death.

The death of a sans-papiers with a criminal record makes little headway in the local press; it was thanks to his family, friends and the diaspora organizations in the city that a voice has been raised demanding the truth about how he died. A vibrant, black-led and mainly black-participated demonstration demanded truth and justice for Kitim, and we await the autopsy results.

The large participation and tangible anger from the West African community is not due only to Kitim having been a well-known and well-liked figure in Palermo, but also – perhaps principally – the widespread familiarity to racist violence. Everyone who spoke on the demo and in the assemblies told of being afraid that she/he too could be victim of the same fate.

There is a double significance of this for Palermo and the societies it represents (Southern, Italian, European). On the one hand the fear that a sans-papiers with difficult social

conditions can be prey to violence of this kind, already a damning comment on the world around us. On the other hand this fear is shared too by young women and men with stable jobs, documents, social networks, with no particular social or legal problems; this is particularly difficult for young African men who have done everything to prove their 'worth' in Italy – that they too fear this violence speaks of an inter-weaving of different levels of racism: both overt and structural.

We see the effects from the countryside to the cities, above all in housing. Landlords systematically refuse to rent rooms to black and brown people, even when they come bearing wage slips and recommendations (which should not be so necessary anyway). This affects everyone: students, workers, farmhands, families; in Palermo as much as in Campobello. The result is precarity and often homelessness. We recently met one young man who had moved to Palermo from Crotone for work; since a month he works as a gardener everyday. He has also spent the last month sleeping rough.

Another structural form of racism is in access to medical services, too frequently refused to people based on a lack of documents, even when this should not be a determining factor, including access to drug rehabilitation services. Here the ripples are being felt the most, as we look around ourselves, knowing full well the problems that have been created for the immigrant communities by successive government policies of removing documents and excluding people from (reduced) welfare services. But everyday brings a new realization of how terrible those consequences can be.



Justice for Kitim

Recently another young West African man that we have known for many years came to us to try and have access to drug rehab services. One of the many ripples of Kitim's death. We can only hope that he maintains his determination – and, even more so, that the door won't be closed to him by a Europe that sees the country he was born, and the colour of his skin, as determining factors in the help he can receive.

Richard Braude, ARCI Porco Rosso

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