'Becoming Someone'
The Imagery of South Africa as a Destination by Ethiopian Migrants

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Abstract

Ethiopians are amongst the largest migrant groups living in South Africa. Their journey to South Africa is long, perilous, and expensive and, once at the destination, Ethiopian migrants are marginalised both by national immigration policies and along gender and class lines. Yet Ethiopian migration to South Africa has been continuing steadily for over twenty years. With this article, we aim at shedding light on how subjective factors play out when individuals consider where to go (imagined destinations), how their life could change (imagined lifestyles), and what emotions and feelings accompany them. Previous literature has shown that the 'reputation' of a destination plays a critical role in destination decision-making, alongside tangible factors, and, to a lesser degree, migration policies. We build on this evidence, reflecting on the question of how destinations are perceived and chosen. This allows for a more thorough understanding of the Ethiopian migration to South Africa and, ultimately, of migration decision-making as a process.

Keywords

migration decision-making, imagination, emotions, feelings, Ethiopia, South Africa

Introduction

As of 2020, there were 44,181 Ethiopians regularly living in South Africa, making them the 10th most represented nationality (Statista, 2023). The real figure is however much higher, as most Ethiopians in South Africa are undocumented or living on a temporary permit (Zewdu, 2018). Most of them are young men from the Southern areas of Ethiopia who belong to the Hadiya and Kembatta ethnic groups.

In order to reach their destination, those travelling irregularly have to cross several borders (Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, and/or Zimbabwe, or other countries depending on the route), sometimes even on foot, rely on brokers while paying them high fees, and embark on a journey during which they face a wide range of dangers, from physical threats to the chance of being imprisoned or sent back.

In South Africa, Ethiopian migrants are "increasingly occupying informal trading spaces in townships, rural areas, and in selected central business districts across the country", commonly working as door-to-door vendors or shopkeepers (Netshikulwe et al., 2022). In their daily life, they experience two intersecting marginalities: first, they are "pushed to the margins" by state policies preventing them from obtaining regular residency documentation, registering their business, and even sending their kids to public schools; second, they are marginalised along gender and class lines within their own community (Netshikulwe et al., 2022). The product of this marginalisation is all too often inequality and vulnerability to violence, both personal and institutional. Amare, an Ethiopian man living in East London, claimed, "We do this job because we have no options and there [is] no place [to] go; the only choice we have is working".

In addition, the life of Ethiopians in South Africa (as that of Africans from other sub-Saharan countries) is further complicated by the xenophobia they face in their daily life. Xenophobic behaviours and violent attacks motivated by other reasons are common and, contrary to what might be expected, have not decreased since the transition from apartheid to majority rule. Rather, over the past decade there have been several serious incidents targeting migrants and their businesses, such as looting and killings (BBC, 2019; Haffajee, 2019). In 2022, the UN warned that South Africa is on the brink of "xenophobic explosive violence", while condemning some political parties, for whom racism and xenophobia have become a central campaign strategy (UN News, 2022).

This issue emerges quite strongly from the interviews on which this article grounds – "murder is common", as Abay shared in his interview. However, the participants reported they do not usually share accounts of violence and hard times with their network in Ethiopia and, because of this restraint, it is impossible to assess how aware prospective migrants are of the struggles they will face once in South Africa. Yet, despite these concrete and serious obstacles, Ethiopian migration to South Africa has not shown any signs of slowing down.

With this article we aim at broadening and deepening the body of knowledge on migration decision-making focusing on the role of subjective and intangible factors,

as well as presenting the specific case study of Southern Ethiopian migration to South Africa. In particular, we aim at shedding light on how these subjective factors play out when individuals consider where to go (imagined destinations), how their life could change (imagined lifestyles), and what emotions and feelings accompany them through this decision-making process. Previous literature has shown that the 'reputation' of a destination plays a critical role in destination decision-making, alongside tangible factors, and to a lesser degree migration policies (Hagen-Zanker & Crawley, 2019). We build on this evidence, reflecting on the question of how destinations are perceived.

Grounded on a set of interviews with Southern Ethiopian migrants in South Africa, we provide new empirical material and analysis by answering the following questions: 1) why do some destinations become popular amongst a specific group of (prospective) migrants? 2) what are the reasons why migrants select those specific destinations as opposed to other equally or even more reachable ones? 3) just how are those destinations and someone's future life there imagined by migrants? and 4) what are the prevalent emotions and feelings involved in this trajectory?

Over the past two decades South Africa has become the most popular destination not just for Ethiopians, but also for citizens of other African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, or Mozambique. Other destinations, such as Sudan, Nigeria, or the Gulf countries, are also destinations for young Ethiopian men[1] and yet South Africa remains by far the most sought-after. Obviously, there are tangible reasons for this: as of 2022, South Africa was the third largest economy of Africa after Egypt and Nigeria, with a GDP of US$ 949.846 billion (International Monetary Fund, 2022). The local currency (the rand) is relatively solid and there are many opportunities for business and entrepreneurship in the country, while taxes are fewer and lower than in Ethiopia. These economic factors tap into the importance of tangible inequalities between the two countries, which constitute a core factor of migration decision-making as long established by research (Mazzilli et al., in press).

Yet our study shows that considerations on economic benefits and investment opportunities are complemented by equally relevant considerations on the image of the destination country and someone's imagined life there, personal status, relative deprivation, and feelings of emulative jealousy towards peers. In the context of Southern Ethiopians' migration to South Africa, photos and videos of special moments (in particular weddings) recorded and sent home by those who have already migrated have been key in shaping the imaginary of the country as a place where it is possible to establish a profitable business, live a more than comfortable life, and ultimately 'become someone'.

The article sets off from a description of the history of Ethiopian migration to South Africa. The text then moves onto a review of the literature on imagined destinations, imagined identities, and emotions and feelings in migration decision-making, providing insights into the experiences of Southern Ethiopian migrants

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1   In this article we focus on young men's experiences and perspective. This is due to two reasons: firstly, the vast majority of individuals migrating to South Africa from Ethiopia are men (Feyissa et al., manuscript in preparation). Women migrate in lower numbers, and often they do so in order to join a partner (either fiancée or husband), while men tend to leave in search of work and a better socio-economic position. Second, men are much more represented amongst the participants in the in-depth interviews conducted on the Ethiopia-South Africa migration corridor as part of the MIDEQ project (Migration for Development and Equality). Future research should expand on this and bring women's experiences to the fore.

collected during our study. A total number of 63 interviews were conducted in the cities of Cape Town, East London, Hermanus, George, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth between 2021 and 2022[2]. When quoted in the text, the interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Ethiopian migration to South Africa: past and present

In the early 1990s a series of political events both in Ethiopia and South Africa generated a positive conjuncture for migration. The end of apartheid in 1994 triggered the opening of South African borders and the establishment of more liberal immigration policies that remained in force until 2011. Even now, the country retains some hints of this political line, as only in South Africa – amongst the other countries of the region – refugees and asylum seekers have freedom of movement and the right to work (Moyo, 2021). At the same time, Ethiopia was going through a time of extreme political turmoil. The last years of the *Derg* military rule[3] (which had been in power between 1974 and 1991) had been marked by droughts and famine, but also by insurrections particularly in the Northern regions. In 1994, Ethiopia approved a new constitution that entered into force in 1995. Art. 32 of the constitution established people's right to movement, which enormously facilitated departures from the country. This was in stark contrast to the Derg rule when migration was regulated through a strict visa system. The liberalisation of movement in both countries gave the possibility to some Ethiopians to pioneer the route to South Africa (see Feyissa et al., manuscript in preparation, Kuschminder et al., 2017; Estifanos & Freeman, 2022).

Estifanos and Freeman (2022) explain how the nature of Ethiopian migration to South Africa has changed over time. Besides an increase in overall numbers, migrants' place of origin has shifted from being primarily urban and concentrated around the capital Addis Ababa to mostly rural, specifically from the southern Hadiya-Kembatta area. Regional federalism in Ethiopia has not benefitted Hadiya in terms of socio-economic transformation, restricting their internal labour migration to their own region and thus breaking a long-established system of livelihood. But even before that, Hadiya had been resentful of the marginal place the 'peripheral South' occupied in national politics in comparison to the 'core North' (Feyissa, 2022). Therefore, clashes broke out between the Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO) supporters and the ruling Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which contributed to push some people, especially young ones, to migrate to South Africa (Feyissa et al., manuscript in preparation).

Since then, Southern Ethiopian migration to South Africa has grown more and more diverse in terms of gender, age, and socio-economic status. While still a male-dominated migration, more women have migrated to South Africa in recent years, many of whom to join a partner. The average age of migrants is getting younger, as recently more and more teenagers and young adults have started leaving

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2   This study is part of the MIDEQ Project (Migration for Development and Inequality) on South-South migration, encompassing 6 migration corridors and 12 countries of the Global South.

3   The Derg was the military junta that ruled Ethiopia and modern-day Eritrea between 1974 and 1987. Although the Derg was formally abolished in 1987, when the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was formed, the government in power until 1991 still included a majority of Derg members.

their home even when not supported by their parents (Feyissa, 2022). In terms of socio-economic status, while in the early 2000s migrants had mostly little or no education, and came from dire economic situations, currently more and more graduates and civil servants in relatively better economic position have joined the migration to South Africa. This has happened mostly because they have been attracted by the wealth achieved by migrant-sending families through remittances (Estifanos & Freeman 2022) and because migration is overtaking other options as a desirable social mobility pathway (Feyissa, et al., manuscript in preparation). This is interesting not only in and of itself, but especially when considering that job opportunities for Ethiopians in South Africa are mostly in informal trade and manual jobs (Netshikulwe et al., 2022; see also Yimer, 2012), which can be challenging especially to those that previously held civil service positions and/or come from wealthy families.

Yet, migration to South Africa has also become part of the culture: research has shown that having a migrant in the family signifies prestige and the possibility to have a story to tell (Feyissa, 2022; Feyissa et al., in press). Not just rational decisions based on the promise of economic profit, but also a plethora of subjective factors are behind Ethiopians' migration to south Africa. Imagination of both destination and identity/lifestyle plays the biggest role in the decision-making process.

Imagination and feelings in migration decision-making

Imagination

Imagination is a complex process involving an individual's cognitive skills and psychology, but also has social and anthropological collective dimensions. The Cambridge dictionary (n.d.) defines imagination as "the ability to form mental pictures of people or things, or to have new ideas". For this reason, imagination applied to migration has also been defined "cognitive migration" (Koikkalainen et al., 2020) and "mental journey" (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020).

Koikkalainen et al. (2020) define cognitive migration as the "the act of pre-experiencing futures in different locations" (p. 54), arguing that imagination of what a certain place can offer acts as "a powerful magnet for people with poor prospects in their countries of origin" (Koikkalainen et al., 2020 p. 54). This argument is particularly suitable for the case of most young Ethiopian men that we present in this article, although, crucially, imagination lies behind the migration of even those who *do* have prospects in their country of origin, be it because of education, family wealth, or social prestige (Ali, 2007). For instance, Dawit, a man interviewed in East London, narrated that his migration journey was much simpler than for most people, presumably because he could rely on consistent family wealth. Similarly, Melaku, a man interviewed in George Town, shared, "I was not as such poor, but I observed improvements in the living condition of Ethiopians who migrated to South Africa". And in fact, we argue that the lack of prospects in the country of origin is not the only reason that lies behind a desire to migrate. However, as pointed out by Carling and Collins (2018), the desire for change is a key component of migration: while for some this desire is motivated by poor circumstances or lack of prospects, for others it can be motivated by a quest for improvement, or for something *just different*.

Cangià and Zittoun (2020) highlight the ever-changing nature of imagination, which keeps producing "alternative worlds and lives that in turn affect people's capacity and (im)possibilities to move" (p. 641), arguing that imagination and human mobility shape each other. Connecting this argument to our study, we show that this imagining/mobility dynamic does not only involve the person who imagines and/or moves, but also their family, peers, community members, and neighbours.

Imagined destinations

For a long time, discourses on the 'culture of migration', considering how migration can sometimes become an accepted norm amongst particularly young people in certain communities, were the only approach "incorporating cultural [or, we argue, subjective] facets of migration decision-making" into research (Thompson, 2017). Thompson (2017) criticises the cultures of migration approach arguing that, even though it goes beyond the mainstream focus on economic, social, and political factors, it does not capture the complexity of decision-making because of the approach's "reluctance to fully engage with the importance of place". To close this gap, Thompson (2017) proposes a "geographies of imagination approach".

Geography as a discipline has long analysed place and its role in sociality, although not necessarily in relation to migration. Human geographer Tuan explores how place differs from space, in that "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan, 1977 p. 6). Tuan (1977) suggests that places shape up in specific ways in the minds of individuals, generating meaning and feelings – mostly but not exclusively of attachment. Cultural geographer Massey (1991) uses the term 'sense of place', to indicate the unique "character on [their] own" that places have, and that differentiates them from others. Other scholars such as Jackson (1994) speak of the "spirit of a place", building on the ancient Roman belief in a spirit inhabiting and protecting a place, from which a community "derives much of its unique essence" (Jackson, 1994 p. 24, cited in Woolf, 2008). More recent research (see for instance Campelo et al., 2014) connects the spirit of a place not to a supernatural element but rather to a social component that has become the place's most well-known trait.

Grounding on the results of our data collection, we argue that South Africa has gained a specific meaning in the mind of prospective Southern Ethiopian migrants, which makes it unique and preferrable to other destinations. Abay explained,

> We grew up hearing how migrants in South Africa would easily get prospered and live a decent life. The remittances they send [are visible]: building homes for their families, supporting their younger siblings to get educated, and generally satisfying the needs of their families. Therefore, it became my dream goal to come here and improve myself, and then change the life of my family for the better. Being a migrant, I had to drop out of school and not complete my education, but I was determined to compensate it through creating the opportunity for my younger siblings.
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> He continued, "I grew up with the idea of migrating to South Africa. In my childhood conscience, South Africa was not conceived as a remote foreign-land, but like as one of the nearest town to our locality". Finally, he

added, "It is in the collective conscience of young men of our community to migrate; even in the aftermath of mourning tragic deaths of loved ones, who lost their lives wandering in the jungle".

When adopting a geographies of imagination approach (Thompson, 2017), scholars do not only engage with the question whether to stay or to migrate, but also with questions around destinations, that is, reflections on how places would be like both in comparison to the place of origin and other destinations (Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021). Belloni (2022) provides a particularly meaningful contribution to this literature, discussing the comparative mental processes according to which prospective migrants decide where to migrate, which she defines as "cosmologies of destination". Grounding on a multi-sited study of Eritreans in their country of origin and abroad, Belloni (2022) explains that their migration destinations were carefully mapped according to "an implicit but widely shared normative and moral scale, with different levels of perceived safety, individual freedom, social recognition and economic achievements" (p. 557). Countries' overall 'reputation' (see also Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019) or sense of place feeds into this destination mapping. For instance, Koikkalainen et al. (2020) discuss the case of Iraqi migrants who arrived in Finland in 2015. They describe the environment where the participants in the study lived prior to migration as extremely unsafe and precarious both in material and psychological terms, which had led them to feel a loss of agency, lack of prospects, and mistrust. The participants' bleak view of their own society contrasted with the image they had of Finland: "a peaceful country with a high standard of living, democracy, and a good education system" (Koikkalainen et al., 2020 p. 59). Similar findings are reported in a study on the motivations of a diverse group of asylum-seekers for migrating to the UK (Robinson & Segrott, 2002).

Overall, the destination countries (and Europe by extension) were associated with democracy, respect for human rights, a solid economic position, and the possibility of finding work and/or to pursue an education. Some of these associations are the same as those made by Ethiopians migrating to South Africa. For example, Menab, a man interviewed in George Town, shared that he decided to migrate to South Africa because of "rumours that ignite your curiosity". In his opinion, those rumours were true, as he explained when narrating that all successful business opened in Ethiopia over the last years have been opened by or thanks to the remittances of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.

This body of work connects to wider research on the way policies in countries of destination are perceived by (prospective) migrants. This topic has been attracting growing attention by European policy-makers examining the factors influencing destination choices in order to design policies for migration control and management. Yet Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2019) argue not only that European migration policies over the past two decades have been shaped by "*assumptions[4]* about the factors shaping the 'choices' that refugees and other migrants make about where to go" but also that those assumptions disproportionately focus on the alleged detailed knowledge by asylum seekers of the differences in migration policies accessibility among European Member States. Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2019) criticise this approach firstly by pointing out that migrants' decision-making "is a dynamic process" (p. 21) that can take quick and unexpected turns as a

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4   Italics not in original.

consequence of social, economic, and political changes. Historical and geographical factors such as colonial ties, a common language, and the resources that a migrant is able to mobilise all concur to shape their destination choice. Second, labour market access and possibility to find work have emerged from the literature as factors stronger that the openness of migration policies (see Hanson & McIntosh, 2012; Riosmena & Massey, 2012). This shows that destination preferences reflect the "coming together of different factors", often based on the idea that somewhere is "a good country to live", that is the country's overall reputation (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019, p. 32; see also Bal, 2016). When migrants consider migration policies, preferences are based on the *interpretation and perception*[5] of these policies by migrants – which are not always accurate or correct (see also Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2022 for a more detailed discussion on how migrants encounter and engage with policies).

Tuan (1977) highlights that places gain meaning over time not just for people living there, but also for people watching and imagining from a distance. And in fact, the establishment of South Africa as a 'good destination' has gradually consolidated over the past twenty years. In contrast to the late 1990s, when departures from Ethiopia to South Africa were few and far between, migration has picked up steadily since 2001. A prominent inception point for this migration flux is thought to be Canadian Pastor Peter Youngren's visit to Hosana in 2001, during which he delivered a prophecy concerning "a vision of God opening a Southern route for the Hadiya through which people will go and bring back prosperity to Hosanna" (Feyissa et al., manuscript in preparation). Since then, it has become more and more common for Hadiya young people to migrate to South Africa in search of better economic opportunities, while the remittances sent back to the Southern Ethiopian region has allowed for local investments – and in turn self-fulfilled the prophecy.

Time consolidates and legitimises narratives about places and their own character. Some scholars argue that it is only through narratives that places (as opposed to spaces) come to actually exist. For instance, Ryden (1993) states that "places do not exist until they are verbalised" (p. 242), that is, until they have a special place in conversations, stories, and narratives more in general. Over the past twenty years, the literature on the formation of geographical imaginations has considerably expanded in this regard. Word of mouth and rumours have maintained a pivotal role in spreading a specific image of a place (Belloni 2022; Koikkalainen et al., 2020), but scholars have more and more pointed at the role of TV (Conrad Suso, 2020; Dannecker, 2013; Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2016; Mai, 2017; Piotrowski, 2013; Salazar, 2011; Willems, 2014) and social media (Koikkalainen et al., 2020; Kölbel, 2020) in portraying destinations and lifestyles. Stories, photos, and most importantly videos of Ethiopians living in South Africa fuel specific imaginaries of destination in the mind of those in Ethiopia, which generate a range of feelings and, ultimately, impact on their decision to migrate too. The most striking account was that of Samson, a man interviewed in Port Elizabeth, who narrated,

> There was a guy [...] from our village town, who managed to have an extravagant wedding ceremony here in South Africa in 2004; unfortunately he was killed by robbers sometime afterwards. A video of his wedding was viral in our hometown in Ethiopia; some people used to travel to

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5   Italics in the original.

urban centres just to watch this video – paying an entrance fee at the show centres. Hence, the video had an enormous effect [on them, to the point] that after watching it many people used to have a strong aspiration of traveling to this land of opportunity.

Imagined lifestyle

Together with mental pictures of a destination, individuals can imagine their own selves and life in a place. Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey (2021) point out that migration can indeed constitute the ultimate "opportunity to reinvent oneself" (p. 10). Studies on this specific topic are not common, but those that exist focus on prospective migrants' desire to access a modern lifestyle and partake in the excitement of globalisation (Raitapuro & Bal, 2016; Brown et al., 2017), which triggers reflections and imagination over migration. Other research focuses on the possibility to modify or change someone's identity according to someone's preferences, for instance in terms of gender, and the cases when this can be exclusively enabled through migration (Sjöberg & D'Onofrio, 2020; Vogel, 2009). Both identity and lifestyle are relevant components of Ethiopian migration to South Africa, in that the status of migrant grants social prestige to the migrant himself and their family.

Improving someone's social status has emerged as a central element of the migration accounts that we have collected. For instance, Samson talked about an Ethiopian man who migrated to South Africa and currently owns a flour mill in Addis Ababa, saying that he is considered a local hero because he provides livelihoods to many locals. Existing literature echoes this result: for instance, Vigh (2009, 2018) reports that disadvantaged urban men living in Guinea Bissau imagine that migrating to Europe could allow them to leave social stagnation behind. Crucially, social status is connected to wealth although this should not be interpreted as material wealth in and of itself, but also as a means to contribute to the welfare of the origin community and, through it, becoming a notable member of the citizenry. Participant F shared the story of:

> One of the migrants with whom we share the same church [who] donated 1000 birr to our church [and] was blessed openly in the church. I was born in the richest family in the village, but I couldn't do that. 1000 birr was a lot of money at that time, which is 15 years ago. Back then donating 10 birr was a big deal. So, I felt jealous.

As for imagined destinations, imagined lifestyle and identities do not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they are influenced and shaped by place-specific social dimensions such as class, ethnicity, age, and gender (see for instance Broughton, 2008), which determine what someone 'can' aspire and what they can dare to dream about.

Emotions and feelings as drivers of migration decisions

The understanding of the role of emotions and feelings in migration decision-making – together with the literature on the topic, have been growing steadily over the past few years. Chakraborty and Thambiah (2018) argue that emotions are both an outcome of migration and a driver of mobility, and we find that this argument also works for feelings. Some streams in academic literature differentiate between the two, explaining that emotions refer to spontaneous reactions common to all

humans despite cultural differences, while feelings concern individuals' personal and cultural interpretations of events. Yet our stance is to consider them together, due to the constant overlap of emotions and feelings in daily life, and the common understanding of them as one. As in the case of imagination, feelings also keep changing all throughout the migration journey and play several functions. For instance, Khan (2018) states that feelings help migrants making sense of their world and the place migration has in it. As such, feelings might trigger migration, onward migration and/or return in conjunction with certain events and cultural elements, but they might also produce the opposite outcomes in conjunction with others. For this reason, we do not want to offer a one-size-fits-all model, and instead illustrate which feelings come into play in the context of young Ethiopian men's migration to South Africa.

The data collected for this study has revealed the prominence of specific feelings: on the one side we identified admiration for role models, jealousy, peer pressure, and peer competition/rivalry in relation to those who have already established their life in South Africa. The latter especially emerges when those abroad can mark their presence in the town of origin through donations to the local church, the purchase of land, or the construction of buildings. As we discussed above, these feelings do not concern these markers *per se*, as much as the prestige they represent. On the other side, we also identified feelings of curiosity, urgency, sense of adventure, and hope, which push young men to undertake a journey that is often risky and dangerous.

Other studies had already documented the emergence of a variety of feelings in different contexts. For instance, several studies highlight that peer pressure and competition are particularly strong in coincidence with a local culture of migration, which sets migration as an implicit norm especially for young men (Ali, 2007; Bylander, 2015; Jónsson, 2008 among others). For instance, Bylander (2015) examines the case of Cambodian men migrating to Thailand, reporting that not conforming with the local culture of migration results in negative judgement from peers for those who have opted for immobility, together with anger, frustration, and pressure. Local culture of migration does not necessarily depend on economic needs, as shown by Ali (2007) in his study of young Muslim men's migration from Hyderabad, India. Although Hyderabad has witnessed increased capital investment, especially in the field of IT, and consequent increased opportunities for jobs, aspirations to migrate among young Muslim men have remained strong. These aspirations ground on the shift in social status that has happened through reception of remittances over time: social status has changed from being ascribed to achieved, and migration has become a virtuous way to accumulate wealth and capital for someone's self and their family. This point connects to the imagined identities discussed above.

Another case in which peer pressure and competition are particularly strong is when migration symbolises a 'rite of passage'. As such, it mostly influences young people, and especially young men, as reported in Zagaria's (2019) study on Tunisian men embarking on risky sea journeys to Europe. Zagaria (2019) also explains that one of the main factors pushing young Tunisian men to cross the Mediterranean Sea is the jealousy they feel for those who have already migrated, which resonates with the results we present here. 'Emulative jealousy' has been reported to fuel migration aspirations in various contexts, such as for instance the Gambia (Gaibazzi, 2010), as well as Ethiopia (Belloni, 2022; Feyissa et al.,

manuscript in preparation). Besides the account by Participant F above, Abal, a man interviewed in East London, stated that it was his friends who told him that it was easy to make money in South Africa. Although his family didn't want him to leave, the peer pressure from his friends and the general migration trend was stronger – and because of this he left as well.

Lastly, hope has a very peculiar role amongst all other feelings involved in migration decision-making. Hagen-Zanker et al. (2023) consider it as a reinforcer "of someone's decision, [which operates] through the mediation and elimination of uncertainty". The literature on the topic does not show univocal results, as some studies show that hope can push someone towards migration and help them coping with the uncertainty and hardship of the journey (Hernandez-Carretero, 2016; Grabska, 2020), while others have linked hope to the decision to stay. For instance, Schewel's research (2021) in Senegal concluded that individuals with higher hope that things will improve in the place where they live – in this case, framing this as God's will – are less likely to migrate than other whose hope is lower. Tarik, a man interviewed in George Town, said,

> After watching some fellows who have been working here in South Africa and gained success in improving their lives, I came here. I thought of giving it a try, of course if God is willing, I would be able to work and improve my life, help my family, and change my country, and also open a company to undertake some business activities. That is why I left my country and came here.

This imagination and the hopes that imbued it upon arrival in South Africa help many to cope with the hostility that too often characterises the experience of African migrants in South Africa. From constant harassment by law enforcement agents to organised mobilisation by a new movement-turned political party whose sole mission is the forcible removal of African migrants[6], the respondents at times portray the feeling of siege. Their everyday life is partly possible thanks to the communities of support and solidarity that they form, made up of co-nationals but also locals. Migrants also find strength in remembering why they are in South Africa in first place, and in having actualised what used to be just a thought. Using the analogy of Apartheid and its racial hierarchy to explain his situation, one respondent interviewed in Hermanus said, "We are the new Blacks", referring to both oppression and the capacity to overcome oppression as the end of Apartheid showed.

Conclusion

This articles has reflected on the decision-making process behind the movement of young Ethiopian men from the Hadiya and Kembatta ethnic groups in Southern Ethiopia to South Africa, unpacking the main reasons why this specific migration has become so popular over the past decade despite the dangers involved in the journey and the tough living and working conditions at destination. Netshikulwe et al. (2022) have described this situation in great detail, pointing out how the

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6   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66808346

majority of Ethiopians is "pushed to the margins" in multiple ways: first, by the South African state's migration policies, which prevent them from obtaining regular residence even after several years of residence and work in the country; second, by the specificities of the job sectors they occupy, consisting of informal trade spaces exposed to economic uncertainty and risks for personal safety; and finally, along social divides such as gender and class. Notwithstanding these factors, South Africa is still the most attractive destination for the Ethiopian youth.

Three elements emerged as crucial from our study, drawing on interviews with 63 Ethiopian men who had migrated to South Africa: imagined destinations, imagined identity/lifestyle, and the emotions and feelings involved in migration decision-making. Concerning imagined destinations, the interviews on which this article grounds revealed that, over the years, South Africa has achieved a solid reputation amongst Ethiopians. This reputation has imbued the place with a specific meaning and made it not only attractive but also preferable to other destinations. As several geographers have argued (Ryden, 1993; Campelo, 2014; Thompson, 2017; Belloni, 2022), it is through narratives that places acquire a certain identity. In this case, our interviews revealed the constant presence of South Africa in the narratives of those who have stayed in Ethiopia: South Africa and the opportunities it would offer can be heard in people's conversations, reflected in the remittances, or seen in the photos and videos of special moments – particularly sumptuous weddings – sent by migrants. Through that narrative and visual material, South Africa has come to signify a place where a migrant can establish himself and 'become someone'.

Together with specific mental pictures on South Africa as a destination, our study revealed the importance of mental pictures of someone's future life in the preferred destination, which we have described as 'imagined identity/lifestyle'. This research revealed the importance of migration to specifically improve someone's social status within his own community. Social status was not just based on material wealth, but also on a notion of social importance based on someone's contribution to the welfare of his community. Donations to the local church or investments in the town of origin were discussed by the interviewees as reasons behind the consideration of a migrant as a "local hero" (interview with Samson). Imagined destinations and identity/lifestyle go hand in hand, as migration to a specific place is deemed to open up specific possibilities to change and improve one's life.

Finally, our research revealed that emotions and feelings are ever-present in the migration decision-making process, and that they keep morphing when a person comes in contact with specific events, cultural elements, and other individuals. In relation to this, Gladkova and Mazzucato (2015) theorise the role of chance encounters, namely those that happen unplanned, in shaping migration trajectories. They suggest that "how people deal with chance is an influential factor in the ways people migrate from the Global South to the Global North and manage their lives in transit" (p. 1). As such, it is impossible to predict the outcome of these encounters, since they depend on personal factors that are different for each person. In this specific case, a crucial role is played by the Southern Ethiopian strong evangelical Christian orientation (Feyissa, 2022; Estifanos & Freeman, 2022), which lies behind the migrants' description of their decisions as part of a divine plan and their embracing of the future in a fatalistic way. The most compelling

feelings involved in the various phases of the migration from Ethiopia to South Africa are admiration for role models (for those who have already migrated) and – what can be considered the flip side of the same coin – peer pressure, competition, and rivalry, heightened if situated in a 'rite of passage' phase. In addition, many of our interviewees' accounts let shine through feelings of curiosity, urgency, sense of adventure, and hope.

The idea of human movement because of economic considerations has long dominated the literature, policy work, and state approach. Yet, a single focus on the material dimension of migration decision-making has the effect of side-lining the social meaning of economics itself. For, livelihood and the economy are closely related to aspirations, culture, and shifts in modes of social validation. Thus, what might on the surface appear to be purely economic might as well be influenced or triggered by non-economic considerations. Taking all these elements together can allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective and intangible elements that lie behind a dangerous migration. In thinking about how people decide to migrate within Africa it is important to take seriously local histories of movement, local belief systems, and the shifting meanings of migration for belonging, social status, and their basis of validation.

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