

# ‘Metema became my Istanbul’ The Complex Transit Trajectories of Ethiopian Female Migrants

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Received: 04 January 2022 / Accepted: 17 March 2022 / Published online: 29 April 2022

Discussions on transit migration have for long focused on presenting the experiences of migrants transiting through a given place at a specific time in a linear manner. Accordingly, most prior research adopts a snapshot approach to examine the lived experiences of transit migrants. This paper argues that such an approach fails to aptly capture the gist of the complex nature of transiting and the dynamics of change in the migration trajectories. It emphasizes the need to have a diachronic approach in examining the transit migration trajectory of migrants, considering the fact that the transit experience is not often bound to a given place and space, as it can be inferred from the case of Ethiopian female migrants presented in this paper. Furthermore, the discourse on transit migration often portrays transit migrants as individuals stranded in a place against their will and lacking the agency to decide about their prospects of mobility/immobility. By drawing on an extended ethnographic study conducted over the course of six years (2017–2022) in Djibouti and in Ethiopia, this paper explores the intricate transit experiences of Ethiopian female migrants in two different transit places and their agency in deciding about their mobility/immobility, redefining their destinations and transit pathways, and settlement, a theme that escaped attention in prior works on female migration from Ethiopia.

Keywords: female migrants, Ethiopia, Djibouti, rerouting transit, agency

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## SETTING THE SCENE

... Istanbul was my dream destination when I left my birth village in Northern Ethiopia back in 2017. Like many waiting here, I am revisiting my plan and looking for other alternatives. My latest plan is to move to the Sudan via Metema in May, Insihallah (Hikmat; 01 March 2018; Djibouti city).

I stayed in Djibouti for 2 years, waiting for the Turkish visa that never arrived. By end of 2019, I left Djibouti and had to return back to Ethiopia to take the Northwestern route with the hope to get to Sudan and proceed further. My stay in Metema, which was originally supposed to be a short-lived one, turned out to be for good. Metema became my Istanbul (Hikmat; 22 October 2020; Metema Town, Ethiopia).

## INTRODUCTION

The account of the female transit migrant, Hikmat, aptly captures the gist of the complex nature of transiting and the dynamics of change in migratory routes, the core issue addressed in this paper. The gendered migration pattern in contemporary Ethiopia can be seen in the massive labor migration to the Middle East and the Gulf states which has for long been dominated by female labor migrants. The post-1990 period in Ethiopia was marked by the mass exodus of thousands leaving the country in search for work in the oil rich Gulf states and beyond (De Regt, 2009). The major destinations for Ethiopian female labor migrants in the 1990s and 2000s include Dubai, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. In addition to the oil rich Gulf countries, thousands of Ethiopian female labor migrants were destined for economically less-developed countries such as Djibouti and the Sudan (Zeleke, 2019).

Despite the mass exodus, there is no official record of the number of migrants leaving Ethiopia, or gender-segregated data, except for a few anecdotal sources. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) estimates that around 1.5 million Ethiopians had left the country illegally between 2008 and 2014 (Girmachew, 2021). During this time, 480,480 Ethiopians migrated to Arab countries legally and women account for about 95 percent of these documented migrants (ibid). Several factors account for the phenomenon of the feminization of labor migration from Ethiopia. These include: the rising demand for cheaper sources of labor in the Middle East and Gulf States; the unemployment and poverty rate in Ethiopia; and structural factors at places of destination, such as the existence of the Khafala labor migrant sponsorship system (Dessiye, 2001). A crucial factor that often went unnoticed or underdiscussed is existing socio-cultural gendered norms and values in Ethiopia.

Reports indicate that about 160,000 undocumented Ethiopian migrants were deported from Saudi Arabia between November 2013 and April 2014. During 2016–2017, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia deported more than 120,000 Ethiopians. An estimated number of 1,780,000 migrants have left Ethiopia for the Middle East and

Gulf countries (Girmachew, 2021).

The objective of this paper is to examine the migration trajectories and lived experiences of Ethiopian female transit migrants moving from Djibouti to the Sudan. The paper elucidates the factors that informed their decisions and choices to reroute their migration paths and assesses the actors and factors involved. The paper pays due attention to the accounts of those who have moved to Metema (a bordering town on the Ethio-Sudanese border), where the migrants spend longer periods of transiting. Through the examination of the lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants, the paper foregrounds the creative strategies the migrants employ while negotiating their precarious and vulnerable positions and making informed decisions about their migration trajectories. Furthermore, the study aims to understand the prospects of mobility and/or settlement of migrants in transit, including the factors that affect their informed decisions to continue the migration journey, to settle down, or to return home. These issues are contextualized by examining whether geopolitical factors in any way affect their potential mobility or immobility. By addressing these themes, the paper aims to contribute to academic discussions on transit migration.

The remaining parts of the paper are structured into five sections. It starts off with the section that provides background information on the gendered trends in the migration and transit trajectories of Ethiopian female migrants. The next section presents a review of the literature on discourses of transit migration, and introduces the analytical framework. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological considerations. The next section presents the empirical material by drawing on the accounts of key informants and their lived experiences in the two transit places. The final section presents concluding remarks.

## BACKGROUND

Ethiopia's official ban of the legal migration to the Gulf States in 2013/4 increased the number of female migrants resorting to irregular migration using different routes. These irregular migration routes involve several stopovers, often referred to as transit places.

Djibouti is a transit country often used by Ethiopian labor migrants destined for the Middle East (RMMS, 2017). Apart from its significance as a transit pathway, Djibouti city, the capital of the Republic of Djibouti, is one of the fastest growing cities in the Horn of Africa region and is sometimes labeled as the "Future Dubai of the Horn of Africa". The civil war in Yemen has resulted in large influx of Yemeni refugees and Ethiopian migrant returnees from Yemen via Djibouti between 2016 and 2019. During this time, some Ethiopian female transit migrants in Djibouti considered looking for alternative destinations and transit routes. According to the finding of the study conducted by the author, between 2017-2019 a significant number of these migrants had left Djibouti for the Sudan. Sudan is one of the major transit and destination countries in the Horn of Africa. The finding of the extended study on Ethiopian female transit migrants indicates how migration routes and

migration aspirations change. The finding of the study conducted by the author further elucidates the fluid space of mobility in the Horn of Africa region.

As there is no direct route connecting Djibouti and the Sudan, the migrants have to travel back to Ethiopia before crossing to the Sudan. Sudan has for long been a transit pathway for migrants from Western and Eastern African countries destined for Europe, the Gulf and Northern African countries (Babkier, 2011). Sudan's geographical location and its long porous border with neighboring countries makes it a transit country for irregular migrants having the strategic significance for smuggling services (Ayalew et al., 2018). The migration routes in the Sudan are destined for Libya (the northwestern route) and the other one leading to the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt (the eastern route) constitutes the pillar of the so-called East Africa Migration Route. There is an estimation that close to three million Ethiopians reside in the Sudan (Zakir, 2019). Ethiopia is one of the top three countries of origin of the migrants in Sudan, after South Sudan, and Eritrea (Babkier, 2011).

This unprecedented complex development of rerouting transit pathways observed over the course of the study has left the author with key questions. In order to understand the changing transit migration experiences of the female migrants under study, the emerging intricate picture needs to be scrutinized in its full complexity. Hence, the paper seeks to bridge this gap by examining the dynamics of the transit migration trajectories of Ethiopian female migrants and thus aims to understand the various factors informing their decisions to reroute their migration paths and the related decision-making process while in transit. The paper sets out to answer several questions. Firstly, what are the different reasons that inform the migrants' decisions to leave Djibouti and re-route to the Sudan? Secondly, drawing on Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou's (2008: 5) point that transiting is a situation that "may or may not develop into further migration", the paper asks, how do the migrants consider the new transit and what are the different factors that influence the migrants' decisions to further immigrate to the Sudan, or to settle at the place of transit, or to return home? Thirdly, by acknowledging the agency of the transit migrants, the paper asks, how do the migrants navigate around and muddle through existing options and changing migration trajectories while trying to make sense of their new social experiences in the new transit setting? The empirical basis of this paper is the extended ethnographic study conducted from 2017 to 2022 in Djibouti and in Ethiopia. This is discussed more fully in the methodology section.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: REFLECTIONS ON THE DISCOURSES OF TRANSIT MIGRATION

Despite the prominence of the concept of transit migration for over three decades, there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of the concept of transit migration. The UN/ECE (1993: 7) defines transit migration as "migration in one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to immigrate to another country as the

country of destination”. Transit is also defined as “the stage between emigration and settlement” (Papadopoulou, 2005: 2). Cassarino and Fargues (2006) conceptualize transit migration as a process rather than a migration status. Coutin (2005: 196) points out the inherent challenges and dangers faced by migrants in transit: “The term transit denotes the time and space when migrants are most bereft of state protection and, therefore are more vulnerable to crime, exploitation, injury, and death. Transit also redefines the territories through which migrants pass”. For others, transit migration refers either to “ongoing mobility” involving undocumented border crossing (Düvell, 2006) or to a period of “involuntary immobility” (Collyer et al., 2010).

A conceptualization of transit by exclusively associating it with countries that migrants cross to get to their respective final destinations, contradicts the common reality in which countries often tend to fit in broader categories of origin, transit, and destination, challenging the discourse of the ‘destination–origin’ dichotomy (Suter, 2012). Two features stand out in the study of transit migration, namely, the migrants’ intention to move on, and the temporariness of the transit (Suter, 2012). The centrality of these two features is however, contested. Ethnographic studies proved that places described as ‘transit’ are often considered as, or become, final destinations (Collyer, 2007).

This paper draws on Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou’s (2008) framework describing transit as the situation between emigration and settlement, characterized by indefinite migrant stay, that may or may not develop into further migration, depending on different factors. This paper adds to the existing discourse on transit migration, the fact that transit migration is characterized by indefinite routes of further mobility as the routes of next migration and destinations might be reconsidered while en route, as the analysis of the empirical findings of the research project on Ethiopian female migrants presented in this paper clearly shows. One of the major limitations in the conceptualization of transit migration relates to the Eurocentric undertones of the term, informed by an underlying assumption describing European Union (EU) countries as intended destinations of transit migrants (Düvell, 2006). Such presumption recognizes countries at the fringes of Europe as main transit countries, while paying less attention to countries located further away (Suter, 2012). By going beyond such geographical bias in transit research, this paper presents the experience of transit migrants at two transit points in the Horn of Africa.

The factors influencing decision-making of migrants in general and that of transit migrants in particular, tend to be varied and complex in nature. Suter (2012) argues that the decision leading up to spatial mobility or immobility in transit is not clear-cut, but a process that highly depends on external factors. Brewer and Yüксеker (2011) accentuate the value of access to information as being a key factor. Van Hear (2004) places emphasis on migrants’ access to economic resources, while other scholars foreground lived experiences of migrants in transit and the conditions they face during transit (Jordan and Düvell, 2002,). Since this paper aims to understand

the factors that affect the decision-making of transit migrants in rerouting their migratory routes, the primary question is: What are the different factors informing the decision of Ethiopian female transit migrants to reroute their migratory pathways from Djibouti to Sudan?

The discourse on transit migration often portrays transit migrants as passive individuals who are contained in a given space against their will (Düvell, 2006). Accordingly, transit migration is often associated with illegality, high risk, and lack of control over one's own state of being (Collyer et al., 2010). Furthermore, the common feature in transit literature is focused on the migrants' journey, the challenges they face, with little or no focus on exploring their lived experience (see e.g., Hammond, 2006).

This paper is framed against conventional discourses of transit migration, that often portray migrants in transit as criminal trespassers, passive actors who lack agency, without control over their mobility and immobility. By going beyond such a pre-biased perspective, this paper aims to contribute to the gap on the agency of transit migrants. As Schapendonk (2018: 665) observes:

... migration trajectories cannot be explained by focusing solely on migrant agency as a form of autonomous power. In fact, the evolvment of individual pathways depends so much on social networks, brokering services, helping hands, un/expected encounters and policy interventions”.

The lived experiences of Ethiopian female transit migrants presented in this paper clearly show how the migrants use the rerouting of migration pathways as a coping strategy and it further examines the resourcefulness of the transit migrants in planning/replanning their mobility and/or immobility from their new transit area, Metema. This paper argues that transit migrants make informed decisions in identifying the migratory routes, their final destinations as well as their overall mobility/immobility, as expounded in the case material presented in this paper. The discussions highlight how the female migrants' action – or inaction; or mobility/immobility – is at times a well-thought-out move, unlike the main discourse that emphasizes the victimhood narrative.

The discussions on transit migration have for long adopted a linear understanding of migration (Oelgemöller, 2011). However, such assumptions on linearity are debunked in this paper, which acknowledges the dynamics of Ethiopian female migrants who change the directions of their migration and their aspirations while in transit.

## METHODOLOGY

The changing nature of migration trajectories in transit often poses a methodological challenge to researchers studying transit migration. The data collection method adopted by the author challenges the common trend of 'methodological nationalism'

often observed in migration research. Methodological nationalism is an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states (Glick Schiller, 2009). By going beyond such an orientation, the empirical study leading to this publication problematizes the migration trajectories of transit migrants as a phenomenon that is not contained in particular space and time. Transit migration research is by and large dominated by sedentarism thought which shapes the data collection method, whereby the researches tend focus on the points of departure and arrival, representing migration as a predominantly bipolar process (Bredeloup, 2012; Schapendonk, 2012; Suter, 2012). The research methods adopted are hence often framed with the expectation of migrants moving in straight lines that commence in the village, go through the town, the metropolis, and eventually reach international destinations (Schapendonk, 2018). By going beyond such a dominant approach of a linear understanding of a transit pathway, as a movement that starts at a place, transits at one specific site and ends at a destination, this research project resorted to a broader approach that examines a spatial-temporal link between migrants' situations in different transit places, both in Djibouti and Ethiopia. Accordingly, the study on the transit lived experiences of the Ethiopian female migrants was conducted in Djibouti and Metema.

As Van Liempt and Bilger (2006) suggest, in order to be able to capture the changing dynamics of migration trajectories of the migrants, ideally the same migrants should be interviewed at different moments along their migration process, to better comprehend their experience. The study adopted such an approach that pays attention to mobility in transit migration and draws on following the lived experiences of the same key informants interviewed in Djibouti. The empirical basis of the paper is an ethnographic study on Ethiopian female transit migrants, conducted in both Djibouti and in Ethiopia from 2017 to 2022. This paper draws on the lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants documented in both Djibouti and Metema. The rapport established with the informants in Djibouti over three years (2017–2019) helped the author to win their trust and maintain strong contact. The author was in close communication with the informants through regular calls and communication via social media, especially Telegram and WhatsApp, which most migrants frequent. This helped the author to gain further insights into their migration trajectories, mainly pertaining to their rerouted transit pathways and their decisions to move/not to move across time and space.

Based on the relationship established and maintained, the author visited the key informants during follow-up visits in Metema, the places migrants moved to in 2020–2021. Of the 15 key informants, two have already left for the Sudan; the author met 12 of the key informants in Metema. Nine of these informants were between the ages of 25 and 30, while two informants were aged 19, one informant was 31 years old, two informants are 33 years old and the oldest one was 35. By going beyond the mere analysis of the factors that affect their mobility and as a way of specifying the

agency of the migrants, the in-depth interviews focused on how the migrants navigate around and muddle through existing options and changing migration trajectories while trying to make sense of their new social experiences. Related to this, one of the questions addressed in the study is: What are the factors that influence the migrants' decisions to further immigrate to a specific destination, or to reside in Djibouti, or to return home?

In addition to in-depth interviews conducted with the key informants in Djibouti and Ethiopia, the researcher conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a group of female migrants in Metema. The FGDs were used to comprehend the lived experiences of Ethiopian female migrants in transit in Metema and to understand the various challenges they faced during transit. By going beyond the normative victimization narrative, during the data collection, due attention was paid to the creative strategies the migrants employed while negotiating their precarious and vulnerable positions.

The multi-site study approach goes against one of the major limitations in the study of mobility in transit research, that often inclines to privilege analyses of separate segments of individuals' migratory paths, rather than capturing the longitudinal character of migration (Castagnone, 2011). The long duration of the study – from 2017 to 2022 – enabled the author to conduct extended fieldwork in both study sites. In addition to the interviews and FGDs, the researcher conducted informal conversations with local residents of Metema town and did observations during the fieldwork in different neighborhoods where the transit migrants resided, with the aim of gaining further insights into the informants' socio-economic situations. During the study, the author frequently visited small coffee shops and restaurants run by the transit migrants, as well as those places where transit migrants were employed, to get insights into their work routines and the prospects of their integration with the locals. As a way of protecting the identity of informants, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

## EXAMINING REROUTED TRANSIT AND SETTLEMENT AT TRANSIT: ACCOUNTS OF ETHIOPIAN FEMALE MIGRANTS IN DJIBOUTI AND ETHIOPIA

This part of the paper closely examines two themes, namely: the factors responsible for the rerouting of migration pathways/transit points; and the factors enhancing or inhibiting forward mobility from the second transit place – in this instance, Metema.

### *Redefining destination and transit*

One of the key general research questions addressed during the course of the study was a question pertaining to how migrants decide to redefine destinations and transit points. Given the complex nature of decision-making during transit, such an attempt to capture the nuances of decision-making of transit migrants should aim at



exploring multiple factors “by going beyond a monocausal analysis of the decision-making process” (Zelege, 2019: 60). Even though factors influencing one’s decision-making process during transit tend to be subjective in nature, the findings of the study show how some factors are shared by groups of informants, as it can be inferred from the discussion here.

### *Geopolitics – Conflict in Yemen*

The civil war in Yemen and the resulting humanitarian crisis that led to the mass exodus from Yemen is one of the developments that affected the migration dynamics in and around the Horn of Africa. Following the uprising in 2011 that overthrew the authoritarian regime led by the ousted president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen ended up in a volatile situation that led to a violent civil war. The war in Yemen has left Yemenis in a desperate situation and by October 2017 around 37,000 Yemenis has fled to Djibouti (Semnani and Sydney, 2020).

Even though the Markazi refugee camp established at the outskirts of the portal town of Obock in Northern Djibouti hosts Yemeni refugees, thousands of Yemenis have moved further south to mainland Djibouti, to the capital Djibouti city. This has affected the soaring living costs in Djibouti where the rental costs and prices for consumable goods, including food, have skyrocketed. Furthermore, the civil war in Yemen has also led to the return of thousands of Ethiopian migrants from Yemen via Djibouti. The transcript from the FGD conducted with five informants in Metema, states how such geo-political situations impacted on the decision-making process of rerouting a migration path:

Following the arrival of the Yemenis, Djiboutian landlords doubled the rentals and the overall living costs in Djibouti soared. The Yemenis came with money and they have a strong support base from their relatives in the diaspora. The locals prefer to rent their houses to the Yemenis who were ready to pay whatever amount they are asked for. Even though they are generally called sidetegna (refugees), the Yemeni started running businesses in Djibouti – opening restaurants and shops. We had to look for other alternatives as there was no way that we could compete with the Yemenis in Djibouti (FGD; 25 March 2021; Metema).

Even though most informants shared the concern of the rising cost of living, two informants described the impact of the civil war on their decision-making differently. For them, a more pressing factor for reconsidering their migration journey, was the insecurity of the migration route via Yemen:

One must be out of one’s mind to consider traveling to Saudi via Yemen at this time. We met hundreds of Ethiopian migrants who made it back to Djibouti and shared their horrific experiences. We also saw with our own eyes – injured

Yemenis and Ethiopians in Djibouti. So how can one consider proceeding to Yemen under such circumstances? (FGD; 20 September 2021; Metema).

The civil war in Yemen and its spillover impact has in one way or the other impacted on the decision-making processes of rerouting the transit pathways of Ethiopian female informants, in their decision to leave Djibouti to look for alternative destinations.

Studies have focused on the nexus between conflict and migration, emphasizing how migration results from conflicts and in return leads to new conflicts (Adamson, 2006). This paper argues that there is a need to go beyond the discussion on the correlation between migration and conflicts in the context of forced displacement. The analysis of the aforementioned cases shows how the conflict dynamics impact on the transit trajectories of migrants – an element that goes beyond the context of forced displacement.

### *Risks associated with strict immigration policy*

In 2011, the government of Saudi Arabia introduced the Nitaqat programme, commonly known as the Saudi Nationalization Scheme – a policy implemented by the Ministry of Labor, requiring Saudi employers to hire Saudi nationals. This resulted in a crackdown on irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia. By November 2013, Saudi Arabia evicted more than 163,000 Ethiopian irregular migrants (Girmachew, 2021). In March 2017 a strict measure targeting irregular migrants was launched by the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This was a campaign known as 'A Nation without Violations' whereby irregular migrants in the Kingdom were granted an amnesty period of 90 days to leave the country. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019) estimated the existence of 500,000 irregular migrants in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by March 2017. The amnesty period lasted until November 2017, after which the KSA government started taking harsh measures of detaining and deporting hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian migrants. About 10,000 Ethiopians on average were detained and deported by Saudi authorities every month (HRW, 2020).

During the FGDs, informants emphasized how this development discouraged their forward journey to crossing over to Yemen and proceeding to Saudi Arabia:

Thousands are being deported from Saudi until this day, while thousands are detained in an overcrowded jail. We have come across short video footages showing how uninhabitable the jails in Saudi are. There was a short 2-minute video that went viral on WhatsApp, showing the hardship of a young Ethiopian mother and her new-born child in an overcrowded prison where her cellmates were trying to help. There were other graphic images coming out about the inhuman treatment of Ethiopian migrants in Saudi and watching those terrible videos was a game changer to my migration plan (FGD; 25 April 2021; Metema).

The strict migration regime was raised as a push factor to reconsider the original plan of traveling to Saudi Arabia. For many, Sudan seems to offer opportunities for work that they aspired to find in Saudi Arabia, but with relatively less pay and a safer working environment:

Even though one cannot compare the fee to be earned in Saudi Arabia to what one would earn in Sudan, for me my life and wellbeing matters most, as I can only enjoy whatever I earn, only if I am alive (Tiruwerk; 03 May 2021; Metema).

The issues pertaining to strict migration regime and immigration policies often draw boundaries that inhibit integration, making migrants feel that they are in a state of permanent transit (Nyamnjoh, 2007). Likewise, the analysis of the data indicates how migrant decision-making is not a straightforward process and points to how an often-overlooked and underexplored factor of the perceptions of risk influences the decision-making of the migrants in rerouting their migration pathway. The circulation and perception of the available risk information plays a role in the decision-making process.

#### *Hardship during transit*

Many informants recounted the hardship encountered during transit in Djibouti and state how that contributed to their decision-making to reroute. Many considered immobility and time spent in transit as being a transitional stage when migrants acquired some life-skills while working in Djibouti. However, the lived experience related to the difficulty of finding a job in Djibouti and the low wages earned in Djiboutian households was mentioned as one of the factors that pushed the informants to look for alternative transits and destinations, as the account by Muna shows:

I arrived in Djibouti in 2015 with an ambitious plan and hope to work as a maid for 6 months and earn an income to cover my trip to Saudi Arabia. I spent 2 years working as a janitor in a hotel in Djibouti but I hardly managed to pay for my accommodation and food, let alone saving for financing my trip to Saudi. When I heard about the better fee and better living conditions in Sudan, I decided to leave Djibouti and traveled to Sudan (Muna; 02 March 2021; Metema).

As Suter (2012) argues, the challenges encountered during transit often force migrants to look for alternative pathways, as the case of Muna and several Ethiopian female transit migrants elucidates.

The other aspect of hardship raised by informants relates to the negative encounters migrants had from abusive police and immigration officers in

Djibouti city. There is a strong crackdown on illegal migrants, leading to frequent imprisonment and deportation of migrants. All 5 participants of a focus group discussion encountered such maltreatment by the local police due to their illegal residential status:

Some policemen feel entitled to getting a bribe from irregular migrants. Bribing the local police is like sharing whatever we earn equally with them. Many of us had to change the neighborhoods we lived in, just trying to run away from such abuses. A local policeman living in the neighborhood approached us through our landlord, asking for a weekly bribe of 100 birr. We were threatened that he would report us to the immigration authorities if we failed to pay him. We used to contribute 25 birr every week and paid him for about 2 months (FGD; 20 April 2021; Metema).

The encounters of the Ethiopian female transit migrants resonate with Horwood's account that irregular migrants in transit in the Republic of South Africa "pass immigration officials in large numbers and pay 'fees' / bribes ..." (Horwood, 2009: 43).

While transiting in Djibouti, the migrants encountered various challenges, ranging from economic hardship, detention, kidnapping for ransom, to sexual abuse. These challenges were described by informants as being among the leading factors that made them reconsider their original migration plans and rerouted their migration route.

### *Social networks and information*

The findings of the extended study conducted at both transit points show the value of social networks in influencing migrants' decision to reroute their migration journey. The value of social networks can be examined from two perspectives. For some, the strong social network they have with friends and family members who took the north western migratory route to Sudan is the main source of information. For this group of informants, their friends and family members in Sudan are their main pool of information about the living conditions in Sudan. This group of informants accentuated how the relative sense of deprivation pushed them to consider leaving Djibouti for the Sudan, as the following account clearly shows:

I have a friend and two cousins in Khartoum. They all earn between 175–200 USD working in a cafeteria in Khartoum. They are free to live on their own and live in a rented room that they share. I am working at a house with extended families of 8 [in Djibouti]. I am a live-in maid and hence I work day and night and earn only 100 USD a month. I have to rent a place for my weekend days off on Friday. The income they earn and the work opportunities they have in Khartoum are by far better than the limited options one has in Djibouti. I will

be leaving for Khartoum in March (Betty; 04 January 2018; Djibouti).

As Brewer and Yüксеker (2011) emphasize, access to information is a key factor that influences the decision-making of the migrants on the move. Betty's account above clearly shows how the information that transit migrants get from their social networks impacts on the decision-making process. In some cases, the value of social networks extends to the provision of a safety-net to migrants in the form of financial support. The second dimension of the value of social networks relates to the networks that migrants established in Djibouti. Migrants in Djibouti have institutional and non-institutional social networks. The weekly church service in Djibouti is one of the main platforms where they exchange information about a wide range of issues, including alternative routes and destinations. Furthermore, there is a vibrant customary self-help association of migrants in Djibouti called *Idir/Kire*, a forum that migrants get information from. It is a customary member-supported association where by members of the association meet on occasions such as weddings and in circumstances when members lose their loved ones. The *kire* social gatherings are occasions when migrants get together and exchange information on a wide range of issues including contacts of brokers, contacts of individuals at the destinations – both in Metema and Khartoum, and exchange information about potential co-migrants, i.e., individuals planning to depart.

The lived experiences of the migrants relate to the phenomenon that Jordan and Düvell (2002) discuss on how lived experiences of migrants in transit and the conditions they face during transit influence their prospects of further mobility and immobility. Based on the analysis of the empirical data on the diverse factors that migrants consider in redirecting their migration journeys presented above, this paper argues against the dominant discourse presuming migration decisions during transit are often taken in the context of idiosyncratic personal needs, stress, urgency, uncertainty, and limited information about livelihood opportunities (Düvell, 2006). Transit migrants are often portrayed as migrants stranded in a certain place against their will, often having limited access to resources and information (Carling, 2002). On the other hand, the lived experience of the Ethiopian female migrants clearly shows how initial plans of migration tend to change and are redefined during the transit phases of the migration trajectory. Furthermore, the paper argues that an attempt to examine the factors responsible for the rerouting of migration journeys, should take into account a multitude of factors, ranging from social networks, and access to information, to experiences during transit.

### *Redefining transit as destination*

By going beyond examining the rerouting of migration journeys, this paper also aims at understanding the multitude of factors and the complex decision-making process of migrants in settling at a place originally considered to be a transit pathway. Examining the issue is essential. Of the 15 key informants whose stories the author

closely followed up, only two proceeded to the Sudan, one reconsidered the whole idea of migrating, while the remaining 12 decided to stay in Metema, a transit place.

Migrants rerouting their journey from Djibouti to Sudan, pass through the border town of Metema Yohannes, commonly known as Metema. The town is located in Northwestern Ethiopia, in Amhara regional state, West Gondar Zone, Metema wereda. Metema wereda has 19 rural kebeles and two urban districts, namely Gendewuha, and Metema Yohannes. Following the administrative adjustment in 2015, Metema Yohannes town was upgraded from a kebele to a town administration with an independent municipality. The town became a bustling business center, given its strategic location on the border of the two countries and its strategic position in its proximity to the Sudan. The area has significant commercial importance in Ethiopian-Sudanese business relationships and also for the historical long-distance trade route running from Gondar, up to Timbuktu via northern Africa (Hagose, 2014).

Metema's significance as a transit pathway for migrants destined for Sudan has a long history (Ayalew et al., 2018). The town of Metema Yohannes and the Sudanese border town of Gallabat in Gadarif state share 10 km border. Metema Yohannes and Gallabat are separated by a porous border – a bridge demarcating this international border. This route was used by thousands of political refugees who ran away from the political persecution of the Derg regime in the 1970s and 1980s (Hagose, 2014). Historically the border area is known for the volatile conflicts that took place at different times (Gezahegne, 2019).

The analysis of these key findings pertaining to the settlement of the migrants at the supposedly transit place, Metema town accentuates Schapendonk's account that migration trajectories in transit are beyond mobility, involving periods of immobility, waiting, reorientation and (un)intended temporary or long-term settlements (Schapendonk, 2012). The circumstances of immobility while transiting in Metema, as the account of the 12 key informants interviewed both in Djibouti and Metema clearly show, are therefore an important part of the migration trajectory that allow the migrants to gain new experiences, acquire new information and reconsider their original migration plans. Schewel (2020) asserts that understanding the multitude of factors that hold people in a place, are important in getting a full understanding of their immobility. The closer examination of the lived experiences of the key informants revealed the interplay of several factors that informed their decisions to settle in Metema, as presented here.

### *Work opportunities*

For many, Metema offers ample work opportunities, mostly in the informal petty business sector and informants recounted how this experience changed their original plans. Metema is the hotspot for both small-scale petty trading and large-scale cross-border trade. The Metema-Gallabat border is well-known for the regular and irregular trade and mobility of goods and people. Metema has a strategic significance for the bustling business due to the mega agricultural cash-crop farming, and its

wealth of livestock resources (Bakewell et al., 2020). A recent policy framework that contributed to the enhancement of the commercial significance of Metema Yohannes is the Petty Periphery Cross Border Trade (PPCBT), an agreement that offers residents of the border areas an opportunity to be involved in small-scale business and trading of food commodities and small consumable goods. This was developed with the intention of controlling the informal cross-border trade.

Three of the informants were actively involved in cross-border informal cross-border trade. They smuggle mainly coffee, sunflower (suf), and butter from the Ethiopian side and bring henna, edible oil, spices/herbs and perfumes from Sudan. The migrants originally started the informal cross-border business as a share business with well-established residents of Metema town. They all mentioned how in due course they became autonomous and changed their original plans of proceeding to Sudan once they found the business lucrative and profitable. Hirut reported it thus:

I came to Metema in February 2019 with the intention of moving to Sudan. But once I reached here, I met several returnees from Sudan who are involved in informal cross-border trade. I was lucky to be introduced to a family friend, a woman who was in Saudi Arabia with my sister and returned to Metema in 2016. She mentored me on how to get into the business. I had only 5,000 birr – money that I used as a start-up capital when I first crossed over to Sudan. Even though my intention was to do the shiqala (trade) for a while and move on, I found myself in this business for the last 2 years. There are some challenges with the tax authorities which at times become discouraging, but I am now learning the best way to deal with it and I do not see myself migrating to Sudan or anywhere else (Hirut; 20 October 2021; Metema).

Unlike the victimization narrative that portrays transit migrants as passive individuals – as passive agents, mere victims stranded en route devoid of agency (Dowd, 2008), in most circumstances, transit migrants make informed decisions in various circumstances.

Hirut mentioned two challenges: the border control of informal cross-border trade often done by the officials stationed at the customs post of the Ethiopian revenue and customs authority in Metema Yohannes; and the curfew. There is a curfew on the cross-border – residents of the two border towns are allowed to cross the borders between 7:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. and they commute across the border daily. This paper argues that while research studies pay attention to the structural constraints, they need to simultaneously engage in examining how transit migrants cope with and overcome the challenges.

For others, the work opportunities relate to starting up a small business. Two other informants had started running small coffee shops, locally often referred to as yajabana bunna bet. The small coffee shops are not limited to the town of Metema

Yohannes, as in some cases, individuals cross the border to Gallabat and sell coffee and tea at the Sudanese market. Tilaye, one of the key informants, mentioned that she decided to extend her stay in Metema after she started the small coffee shop at the bus stop where she serves hundreds of customers in a day. She expanded her business by employing a young girl from Wollo, who crosses the border daily to sell tea, coffee and Ethiopian bread (difo dabo) in Galabat market. Tilaye pays about 200 Sudanese pound (circa 0.50 USD) for the rental of the shade and a tax daily.

Meti, another key informant, runs a small road-side restaurant in Metema town. Her road-side restaurant is made of a rugged and faded emergency tent that accommodates up to seven customers at a time. Her main customers are daily laborers, locally referred to as saluges:

My main customers are the saluges, who come to work on the large-scale plantations and farmland on both the Ethiopian and Sudanese sides of the border. I had a large number of customers over the summer (July to the end of August) as many would come during school break holidays to work and earn an income to cover their school expenses the following year. After paying for the rent of this shelter, and the salary of the girl assisting me, I make a profit of up to 5,000 birr a month on average. Even though this is not much considering the labor that goes into it, I am quite grateful and satisfied with the income (Meti; 20 September 2021; Metema).

The saluges that Meti referred to, work on the Ethiopian side of the border on different sesame and cotton plantation farms in the district during the rainy season. Most of them move to the Sudan during the autumn and work on the large-scale sorghum plantations. Metema Yohannes is renowned for its status as a transit area to these migrant workers. The agricultural high seasons from June to September are times when hundreds of thousands of people working as day laborers in the mechanized agricultural farms flock to the area.

For others, another work opportunity is related to either working in or running bars. Selamawit, a key informant who settled in Metema, runs her own mini-bar in Jingira, a red-light neighborhood. She moved to Metema in November 2019 with the intention of moving further to the Sudan. Upon arriving in Metema she was welcomed by a friend whom she knew back in Djibouti, who was running the bar, which Selamawit took over. She narrated her experience as follows:

I was lucky to be welcomed by Lily, who integrated well to Metema by the time I got here. Upon getting here, I started working in this bar as a bar attendant. I was with her for almost a year and a half before she left for Cairo. Her Sudanese boyfriend, who is a businessman, helped Lily to move to Egypt. I took over her business and now there are three young girls working for me – one of them is a returnee from Sudan who speaks fluent [Arabic]; her clients are mostly



Sudanese tourists. The other two girls have Ethiopian and Sudanese clients. The reason why you don't see many Sudanese men now, is because this is their fasting season, the Ramadan. I don't have any intention of migrating further and I don't also have any plans to do what I am doing now. My plan is to work hard, save enough, get some basic training and open a small beauty salon in Addis (Selamawit; 05 May 2020; Metema).

Selamawit's account indicates how social networks affect migration decisions and subsequent movements of migrants. The stage of waiting while in transit, is significant in giving the migrants in transit a chance to reflect on their further mobility plans.

The Sudanese men often cross over to the Ethiopian side, mainly to Metema Yohannes town for business and entertainment. Most of the small bars sell alcohol, an item which is banned in Sudan. Kinfu (2019) indicates that there are over 300 hotels, bars, nightclubs and restaurants housing sex workers in Metema.

As the lived experiences of the seven informants presented above clearly show, the different work opportunities they secured in Metema are considered as significant improvements in their lives, regardless of how little, but significant the money that they generate is. This shows how the work opportunities that the migrants come across are fulfilling in enhancing their sense of increased self-esteem and self-worth – factors that make them reconsider their further mobility plans.

This phenomenon challenges the very conceptualization of transit that by and large is associated with countries that migrants cross to get to their respective final destinations. As the case of Ethiopian female transit migrants clearly shows, places that are supposedly considered as transit areas, like Metema, tend to fit rather into broader categories of origin, transit, and destination, challenging the discourse of the 'destination–origin' dichotomy (Suter, 2012).

### *Relationships and starting a family*

Relationships and starting a family are additional factors that play a significant role in the decision to settle at the place of transit, reconsidering migration plans. The migrants start relationships, either with local Ethiopian men or in some cases with Sudanese. For two of the key informants, the relationships and the families they established in Metema are described as being key factors that made them reconsider their original migration aspirations. Nina, one of the key informants, married a local businessman and was expecting her first child at the time of the interview. She summarized her experiences in Metema:

Starting a family has been my life-time dream. But considering the situation I was in, like spending three years in Djibouti and with the plan of moving to Egypt. I never saw myself starting a family in the near future. After getting to Metema I got the information about the possibilities of migrating to Israel with the help of Sudanese brokers – information which made me reconsider my

original plan of moving to Cairo, back in 2019. The travel to Israel is expensive and for that I had to work and make a saving. I rented a small verandah where I started running a coffee shop with the hope of working for a year and then proceed further. I met my current husband by the end of 2020. He used to own a grain store around the neighborhood of my coffee shop. He was my regular customer and we started dating. I moved in and started living with him in January 2021. Now I am a wife and will soon be a mother. There is no way that I can leave behind my new family; so Metema is where I will be spending the rest of my time, inshihallah (Nina; 07 September 2021; Metema).

As Schapendonk (2018) observes, the evolvement of individual migration pathways is highly influenced by different factors, including social networks and un/expected encounters. In line with this observation, Zinat's experience of relationship and marriage has impacted her migration trajectory. Zinat is an informant, described by locals as a sheqaba, a broker. Informants emphasized that she is a middleperson working with local and Sudanese brokers involved in smuggling migrants. Zinat is in a de facto marriage with her Sudanese partner, whom she was dating for over eight months and whom she refers to as bal (husband) even though they are not yet officially married. Her partner Kareem is based in Galabat. Zinat related her experiences, below:

My husband, Kareem, is an official agent for the Sudanese investor that runs a cotton farm in Galabat. They often get workers for the farm from here [Metema]. He travels to Metema at least once a month on a business trip. I met him in February 2021 through his Ethiopian friend, a broker who has business here and in Gonder. Kareem is divorced from his Sudanese wife and has three children. He bought this small house for me and helped me to start the kiosk I am running now. I mainly sell coffee, incense and Sudanese perfume. I help my husband with his business mainly in recruiting local workers. Even though many workers would cross the border without any work contracts, my husband and the local delala are also liaising to recruit those who want to cross the border on a work contract (toleb). This does not incur a cost to the saluges, as my husband and his co-worker are paid by the Sudanese investors who are looking for a reliable worker. My role in most cases is to introduce the young men looking for jobs, to the friend of my husband, who is mostly here in Metema. My shop is located near Meqomiya, a station where the daily laborers hang out to be picked. There are dozens of kiimits (mistresses) of Sudanese men in this small town. I don't want to end up like them, but rather start living with my husband and we are in the process of legalizing our marriage (Zinat; 21 September 2021; Metema).

Zinat felt uneasy about being referred to as a sheqaba, as the word denotes being

involved in the smuggling business.

The analysis of the aforementioned case and similar cases shows how social networks shape the migration decisions and subsequent prospects of mobility/immobility of migrants. The social networks might range from the networks that migrants have with their friends, close family members, extended family members, and people they met en route.

### *Essence of time*

There was a phrase which informants used during the FGDs, emphasizing the essence and value of time. On two different occasions informants cited an Amharic saying that seemed to be familiar to all taking part in the discussion: *Gize werik new la set lij degimo almazwa* (Time is gold for all, while it is a diamond for a woman). When the author probed further about the meaning of this popular saying, all informants emphasized how powerful this statement is, underscoring the value of time for the subjects of the study:

One thing that we realized through time, is the indefinite nature of a migration journey. We came here with the assumption that crossing over to the Sudan will be quite easy. I am turning 30 in a week. I have spent three years in Djibouti and another one year here. It might take me another 5 years to get to Europe and bear in mind that I am a woman. I am racing against time as the biological clock is ticking for us women. [At this point, all the FGD participants nod their heads in agreement with the informant, Fozia] ... Once a woman is over 30, it gets harder to conceive, and even if she does, she runs a greater risk of having an unhealthy baby (FGD; 20 April 2021; Metema).

Time spent at the second transit place, Metema, gives the migrants the chance to reflect on their past migration experiences and their future migration plans. The indefinite time-frame emphasized in the quotation above, is considered an essential element affecting the decision to settle at the place of transit. This is a clear example of why researchers need to adopt a gender lens in migration processes.

### *Geopolitics – Crises in Sudan*

Informants referred to geo-political instability as being a key element inhibiting further mobility from Metema. The revolution in Sudan and the subsequent political instability, have their roots in the protests against former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's imposed emergency austerity measures and the resulting economic inflation. These factors have caused many to reconsider their original plans of moving to Khartoum. The volatile political situation in the Sudan in the aftermath of the overthrow of former President Al-Bashir from power on 11 April 2019, and the protests following this event, have left Sudan in an economic crisis, amid political

instability. Finot reflected on her experiences:

My intention upon coming to Metema in 2019 was to get to Egypt, as it is less complicated than getting to Europe. I got a tourist visa in Addis Ababa in March 2019 with the plan to move to Khartoum. The visa was valid through April 24, 2019. My plan was to cross over to Sudan from Metema with a bus, meet the broker in Khartoum and then proceed to Cairo. But the night I got here, there was an intense crackdown on protestors in Sudan and there was a strict border control. The broker told me that I should wait for few months and that I will cross over to Sudan with the tahrish, a Sudanese ID, that he would get me. I met dozens of returnees from Sudan here. Some of them were those who were trapped in Khartoum for months with the hope to cross over to Cairo. Had I left Metema last year, my fate would have been the same. I changed my mind after reaching here. Heading to the Sudan feels like throwing oneself to a flame, as they too, are going through a difficult time (Finot; 03 November 2020; Metema).

Furthermore, informants also mentioned how the growing political tension between Ethiopia and Sudan made them feel insecure to find themselves on the other side of the border. During the FGDs, informants referred to the 2020 deadly conflict and the resulting standoff over al-Fashaga – the 260 km<sup>2</sup> borderland which has been a contested area between Ethiopia and the Sudan for decades. Following the eviction of thousands of Ethiopian farmers from the area in December 2020, there were several clashes that led to tensions and the closure of the border.

The points raised by the transit migrants as factors informing their reasoned decisions, clearly go against the conventional wisdom in the field of transit study – the perspective emphasizing the lack of agency of transit migrants in making informed decisions. Furthermore, this is a point best illustrating the subjective nature of the decision-making process in rerouting migration paths and making decisions to settle in a place of transit. As the case material presented above clearly indicates, destinations are entities defined and redefined through time.

## CONCLUSION

This contribution advances knowledge in the field of transit migration. Through an empirical case study, it has critiqued three dominant discourses in transit migration and has suggested new lines of inquiry. First, is the issue of linearity. The dominant academic discourse in transit research is informed by the underlying assumption of linearity of transit migration (Oelgemöller, 2011). Such a linear assumption considers transit points like Djibouti and Metema as the in-between phase between departure and arrival. The analysis of the lived experiences of Ethiopian female transit migrants in rerouting transit and redefining destinations, as presented in this paper, challenges such assumptions. The rerouting of migration pathway calls for the need for going

beyond methodological nationalism in transit research and following the stories of migrants across space and time, as it was done in this paper.

Another dominant approach in transit migration research which this contribution critiqued, is affording much attention to prospects of further mobility from transit places (Schapendonk, 2012). This assumption is informed by the consideration of a transit area as an in-between space. The discussion on the redefinition of destinations of migrants and the phenomenon of changing the supposed transit pathway to a destination presented in this paper, contributes to the existing academic literature on transit migration. It challenges the bias in contemporary transit migration discourse that focuses heavily on addressing prospects of mobility at the expense of immobility.

Furthermore, the due emphasis given to mobility in prior transit research has for long contributed to the marginal attention given to decision-making processes at the level of the individual, who might prefer to remain in a transit place (Suter, 2012). By paying attention to the case of migrants who settled at a place of transit – in this instance Metema – this paper argued that transit migration trajectories and the related decision-making during transit, are complex phenomena that need to be interrogated and scrutinized in their full complexity, rather than focusing the attention on part of the transit experiences of migrants, at a specific space and time. This contribution emphasizes the need to examine the decision-making of migrants, in contexts of both mobility and immobility.

The dominant trend in transit research has for long portrayed migrants in transit as passive agents (Düvel, 2006). As a way of specifying the agency of the migrants, and by going beyond the mere analysis of the factors that affect their mobility, this contribution argued that researchers need to pay attention to the question of how the migrants navigate around and muddle through existing options and changing migration trajectories (Suter, 2012; Schapendonk, 2018). As the case of the Ethiopian female migrants clearly showed, migrants consider several contextual issues, such as: geopolitics, shifting migration policies, opportunity structures of transit places, and the consequences of moving or not moving in a certain direction, when they decide to reroute their migration paths or settle at a place, originally considered as a transit area. The paper argued that transit migrants' trajectories are shaped by a multitude of factors, including policy frameworks, socio-economic factors, social networks, and more. The gap in opportunities in an initial transit stop, whereby migrants are deprived of participating in socio-economic domains, is another structural constraint that pushes migrants to look for other 'better' alternatives. The agency of the migrants can be best understood by considering how the migrants cope with and overcome the multitude of challenges, including the contextual factors, through creativity and seizing new opportunities as they arise. This also includes rerouting their migration paths and settling at a place and the strategies they employ while negotiating their precarious and vulnerable circumstances.

This paper calls for more research exploring the complex process of decision-making of transit migrants to understand the experiences of migrants in transit. An

essential question to pose in such research, would be the question of how a temporary state of immobility influences migrants' actions and decisions of further mobility/immobility. Such research might explore themes that contribute towards evidence-based policy-making with regard to migration processes in the Horn of Africa region and beyond.

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