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# Grasping Kiflu's Fear – Informality and Existentialism in Migration from North-East Africa<sup>72</sup>

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## Abstract

*Five decades after sociologist Everett Lee published his universal 'Theory of Migration', rationalising etic explanations of praxis in unprivileged migration still prevail. In this article I critically discuss commonly used concepts such as coping strategy, agency and creativity that have been widely derived from the study of uncertainty in urban and rural Africa. Subsequently I suggest reassessing the concept of informality within the context of migration, where it evolves alongside migration's informal/formal divide. Informality then includes migration's specific existential dimension and can be understood as a typical mode of action in unprivileged migration. Informality potentially bridges the gap between 'acting' and 'being acted upon' (Jackson 2005), it renders active where otherwise passivity and exclusion have to be faced and thus feeds imaginations of a better life elsewhere. Informality, however, also shapes people and their view of the world. This is explicated exemplarily with reference to my own fieldwork with migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia. I argue that migrants' agency should not be simply alleged from above, but conceptualised from empirical research. The study of migrants' informal praxis can not only contribute to theoretical debates in migration studies but also refers to a global perspective.*

**Key words:** *Eritrea – Ethiopia – migration – Sudan – theory of praxis*

## 1. Everett Lee's uncomfortable heritage

Unsatisfied with 1960s migration studies, American sociologist Everett Lee reformulated Ernst Georg Ravenstein's 'laws of migration' (1885) in an attempt to identify the universal – and therefore comparable – push and pull factors of migration. His focus on very principal questions and

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categories offered a way to explain the diffuse phenomenon of migration from the outside. Migration turned into an assessable demographic category that would allow political and economic calculations. Lee initiated a persistent theoretical model – although extensively criticized (cf. Klute and Hahn 2007) it is still popular and in use (Han 2010: 12-13) – and a debate that has not yet come to its end.

*[W]hile there have been literally thousands of migration studies [...], few additional generalizations have been advanced. True, there have been studies of age and migration, sex and migration, race and migration, distance and migration, education and migration, the labor force and migration, and so forth; but most studies which focused upon the characteristics of migrants have been conducted with little reference to the volume of migration, and few studies have considered the reasons for migration or the assimilation of the migrant at destination. (Lee 1966: 48)*

Today global social and political transformations (e.g. Castles 2007; Vertovec 2007; Faist 2010), international governance and control of migration (e.g. Klepp 2011; Tsianos et al. 2009), refugee administration (e.g. Agier 2011; Inhetveen 2010; Harrell-Bond and Verdirame 2005; Malkki 1995) and present-day labour migration (e.g. Liebelt 2011; Zontini 2004; Stalker 2000) have become prominent fields of interest across migration studies' different academic disciplines. Two major paradigms have won broad acceptance since Lee's days: transnationalism and agency. While the first has certainly refreshed academic debate and research work since the early 1990s (Glick-Schiller 2010; Pries 2008), the latter has guided us towards a very basic contradiction and subsequent standstill – Bakewell (2010) speaks of a 'structure-agency impasse'. Generally, migrants have been accepted as acting subjects, who cannot be reduced to mere victims of circumstances and heteronomy (as Agamben implies in his essay 'We Refugees', 1995). On the other hand it cannot be denied that the bulk of migrants from the global South are formally excluded from access to Europe or Northern America. We understand that informal migration in all its varieties is a product of this dilemma. Politically unwanted and therefore unprivileged migrants live, survive and advance in a sphere of uncertainty (Bauman 2007; Agier 2008; Friedman 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), while migration as a global phenomenon becomes unpredictable as well as ungovernable (Castles 2007). Lee failed in his attempt to explain the big picture, but also more recent authors seem likewise unable to grasp effective actions during migration. Migrants'

capabilities and options to act are either theoretically dissociated – implicating or even propagating autonomous subjectivity and resistance (Tsianos, Hess and Karakayali 2009; Boutang 2007; Mezzadra 2007; de Certeau 1984) – or fully deduced from external circumstances, as implied by the ‘Forced Migration’ approach (e.g. Chimni 2009). Either migrants seem to act freely against all odds or they are forced into informal and extralegal action. While mutually exclusive, both approaches construct agency in migration from the outside. They even take the same political stance and call for empowerment and support.

Furthermore Lee was well aware of the difficulties grasping the wide and empirically rich field of migration with a relatively simple model of “plus and minus factors” (1966: 56). The relativity of rational decision-making, the “diversity of people”, the unpredictability of “intervening obstacles”, the comprehension of migration as a process (“leapfrogging operation”) or his idea of streams and counterstreams can be seen as nascent ideas that already hint towards more recent concepts of migrants’ agency, social and cultural differentiation, transformation processes and step-by-step migration, uncertainty and, last but not least, also the concept of transnationalism (1966: 50-57). From an anthropological point of view these ideas – then neglected in favour of a clear-cut rationalist and demographic model – seem to be the more interesting part of Lee’s ‘Theory of Migration’.

Nevertheless the inherent, not least existential, tension between ‘acting’ and ‘being acted upon’ (Jackson 2005: x-xi) is still an open question for the field of migration. In fact we may need more appropriate conceptual instruments for a deeper understanding of praxis in migration – especially when it comes to informal action in unprivileged forms.

## **2. Coping strategy, agency and creativity – a short critique of praxeological vocabulary**

It has become popular to adapt the concept of ‘coping’ or even ‘coping strategy’ from uncertain life-worlds in urban or rural Africa (e.g. Berner and Trulsson 2000; Larsen and Hassan 2001; Somi et al. 2009) to migration from Africa to the global North (Horst 2006; Essed, Frerks and Schrijvers 2004; Kibreab 2004). This concept, however, implies a certain equilibrium and conformity of daily life that is painfully perpetuated and lacks the teleological character that migration into a better world certainly

exhibits. 'Coping' might refer to self-discipline and pragmatic cleverness which aims to keep an overpowering and threatening outside temporarily apart. Literally a 'coping strategy' would not intend to actively solve a problem and aim beyond; it would be a contradiction in terms. The term 'strategy', a word of military origin after all, implies a relatively privileged position to decide. According to Habermas, strategically acting individuals do not only follow their own interests, they also assume that other actors do likewise. Conflict between potential counterparts then is latent and one's own potential success decisive (Habermas 1991: 105). Decisions are pragmatically taken on the basis of information at hand (Habermas 1991: 111). This raises the question if unprivileged migrants are in a position that allows a far-reaching overview over possible options and consequences of their actions? Do they possess privileged knowledge; do they possess the respective 'information' needed?

Migration from Africa emerges between international efforts of political control and antidromic economic attraction. At best those migrants who may act strategically can rely on legal ways or are those who are able to (co-)determine and arrange informal ways and hereby influence or even manipulate other people and their actions, in the way of smugglers and middlemen (cf. Utas 2005: 407). What if migratory knowledge is not saturated at all, but inevitably marred by deficiency and asymmetry? What if knowledge production in migrants' milieus undergoes constant revision and re-evaluation – and therefore rarely allows the privilege of a clear-cut target-oriented decision? Unprivileged migration demands decisions to be made and actions to be undertaken, while successful action – measured by its own standards – is far from being guaranteed. Situations have to be appraised; knowledge is created and has to prove its value, while stress and duress still prevail. Susan Whyte reminds us that the respective experience of uncertainty is not only a "state of mind", but a process of "minding" (2009: 213).

Would 'agency' be a better term to grasp actual praxis in migration? For most migrants agency only applies in a strongly restricted sense. To discuss the story and fate of a female informant during the Liberia wars, Utas tries to conceptualise a specific 'tactic agency', referring to Giddens (1984) as well as to De Certeau (1984). Agency here consists of "constantly adjusting tactics in response to the social and economic opportunities and constraints that emerge unexpectedly and ambiguously" and "represents a range of realizable possibilities that are informed by specific social

contexts as well as larger economic and political contingencies” (Utas 2005: 426). Utas’ idea of ‘tactic agency’ accounts for such restricted opportunities, social context and lack of overview. Still the notion of ‘agency’ highlights a situational and sequential present; an emergent “stream of actions” (Berner 2000: 282) can only be reconstructed in retrospect. Also, Giddens (1984) and Ortner (1984) logically connected ‘agency’ to ‘structure’. Other than in a more classical sense, structure has become dynamic, even fluid, and as such has become hard to grasp as well. Vigh therefore conceptualises ‘social navigation’ as unoriented ‘moving on moving ground’ (Vigh 2009). In unprivileged migration, ‘structuration’ processes usually happen far beyond the individual’s means and influence. Border fortifications, changes of visa regulations or even the establishment of a certain smuggling route rarely respond to individual action (cf. Bakewell 2010). Finally, the idea of ‘agency’ contains an inherent objectivist connotation: referring to universal reason, ‘agency’ opens up a range of clearly discernable practical options. Responsibility is then fully delegated to the acting individual – and disburdens other actors, such as governments, international institutions and NGOs (cf. Mosse 2011: 5). The concept of agency neglects transformation processes, knowledge production and cultural interpretation; it is far too abstract to grasp actual action in ongoing and unprivileged migration.

What else could current literature on praxis in uncertainty offer to migration studies? The notion of ‘creativity’, for instance, often refers to Lévi-Strauss’ idea of ‘bricolage’ (Elder 2000: 209-211; Agier 2002: 333), developed in ‘*La pensée sauvage*’ (1962): new arrangements of available elements lead to new relations and therefore new meanings and options. Unprivileged migration, however, aims at transgressing a familiar world into widely unknown terrain, whereas Lévi-Strauss did not intend to include a teleological moment towards something essentially different. Creativity implies room for reflection and engagement and while it may be helpful and appropriate in other contexts (e.g. Beck 2009) it again may overemphasize self-determination and individual autonomy in unprivileged migration (e.g. Piot 2010; Knörr 2005).

The term ‘manoeuvring’ – used by Berner (2000) and Mbembe (2000) – sounds more promising. As with ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic’, the term is of military origin and implies rational planning with the respective means available. Beyond that it could characterise the complex, demanding and necessarily indirect movement of an inert mass towards a certain goal –

e.g. moving a ship in a port or backing a car into a parking space. The term then embraces the current situation as well as the prospective one, but allows ambivalent space and dynamic movement between outset and aspiration. Regarding unprivileged migration, this concept could certainly open up new vistas. Still, I am not happy with it. “There is one thing wrong with such a picture: no human beings are in it”, William F. Whyte once commented on abstract sociology (1993: xv). Indeed ‘manoeuvring’ is a technical term and lacks the indispensable existential dimension of migration. Remarkably I find this existential dimension in the concept of informality that is already well established in other anthropological contexts.

### **3. Informality, Informalisation and Existentialism**

Following Keith Hart’s work on informal economy in Ghana in the 1970s, informality became an important concept for the understanding of social dynamics beyond governmental regulation (Hart 1973). First of all, the concept of informality allowed the description and framing of forms of economic and social self-help in urban life-worlds (Myers 2011; Lindell 2010, Meagher 2010; Hansen and Vaa 2004; Al Sayyad 2004; Tickamyer and Bohon 2000). Consequently, the idea has been further adopted to explain instrumentalisation, criminalisation and exploitation of the post-colonial African state by its élites (Chabal 2009; Mbembe 2001; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Bayart 1993; Bayart, Ellis, Hibou 1999). Actual spheres of strict formality, as suggested by Weber’s ideal bureaucracy, remain a theoretical construct (Weber 2005: 157-235). It has been shown that formally organised institutions and working environments also rely on informal relationships in order to function properly (Zaloom 2006; Heath, Knoblauch and Luff 2000; Bosetzky 1971). In unprivileged migration informality in all its specific diversity – e.g. circumvention, manipulation, deceit – can be understood as the principal attempt to avoid and bypass formal politics of control and regulation. However, Lindell, Meagher, Hansen and others also widely derive informality from a general concept of agency in the neoliberal era, where an anthropological approach would demand its constitution from emic cultural and social interpretations of the everyday realities (e.g. Sayad 2004, Mbembe and Roitman 1995).

Although informal practices in migration have been reported in detail (e.g. Hirt and Mohammad 2013; van Liempt 2007; Horst 2006; Kibreab 2004)

the existential gap between ‘now and here’ and ‘then and there’ has been neglected. To politically unwanted migrants, who face patronising classification and restrictions at best or else clear-cut policies of exclusion (Agier 2011; Baumann 2007: 44-83; Harrell-Bond and Verdirame 2005; Malkki 1995), informality is valuable and gives them means to stay active. Informal action inherently refers to a longed-for future beyond uncertainty; informality therefore becomes a typical mode of action as well as a specific perception and cultural interpretation of the world. Informality keeps the world accessible and manageable, though also a place of rivalling interests and hidden agendas. Thus it even makes sense of failing.

My own interest in migration from Eritrea and Ethiopia to Europe and North America dates back to my doctoral research on young urbanites’ milieus and life-worlds in Asmara, the Eritrean capital (2001-2005, see Treiber 2005). Most of my then field informants left Asmara successively, some of them have reached Europe or the United States, often only after year-long journeys, others are still stuck somewhere in between, but do not want to give up their dream of a better life elsewhere. During the following years I had the chance to visit several informants – and friends – repeatedly in different stages and stations of their migration, in Cairo, Jerusalem, Minneapolis or Washington DC, where they introduced me into the migrants’ local milieu. A research project to explore ‘Dynamic Worlds of Imagination – Learning Processes, Knowledge, and Communication among Young Urban Migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia’ (together with Kurt Beck, and Délia Nicoué, Bayreuth University, 2009–2013) allowed further fieldwork, from my side mainly in Khartoum, Sudan and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The remarkable preponderance and broadly accepted use of various kinds of informal practices in the encounter with formal administration as well as within the migrants’ milieu itself, motivated to reflect more generally on informality in migration.<sup>73</sup> I assume that this kind of informality evolves in steps and stages prior to the projected arrival. Dynamic processes of learning and transformation result in a process of informalisation and in the habitualisation of informality (cf. Bourdieu 1987). Searching for predictability and reliability, migrants blunder into certain forms of actions, which they actually try to flee.

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<sup>73</sup> Our research project ‘Dynamic Worlds of Imagination—Learning Processes, Knowledge, and Communication among Young Urban Migrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia’ was funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Sciences, Research and the Arts and part of the respective research network on ‘Migration and Knowledge’ (Bayerische Forschungsallianz 2013). The project was located at the Chair of Anthropology at Bayreuth University (2009-2013).



In my own fieldwork I neither encountered autonomous subjects nor disabled victims, though I met people who considered themselves victims and at the same time fought for autonomy. Most of my informants were simply overburdened with the constant and pestering question of doing the right thing to advance successfully under circumstances widely beyond their insight and control. Under stress and duress knowledge about the world was produced, imparted or concealed. People found themselves woven into the respective local as well as transnationally widespread migratory milieu, shaped by mutual dynamic dependencies, rivalries and exploitation, but also benevolent solidarity – expected and unexpected. Communication within this milieu – comprising face-to-face conversation, hearsay and all kinds of electronic telecommunication – represents a (finally global) reference system, in which migrants position themselves. Evidently life in Ethiopia or Sudan means less geographic progress and personal success than life in Europe or North America. Mediating self and world, the migrants' transnational milieu constantly stirs up the existential dichotomy between a concrete now and here and possible futures elsewhere (cf. Graw 2012; Schielke 2012). Informality conceptually evolves from a “formal/informal dialectic” (Hart 2010: 379) and thus encompasses informal approaches in search of the formal and legal: the successful foundation of a new existence in a better and more reliable world clearly depends on a legal and secure status.

Migration policies of the global North oppose unregulated migration, although zero-tolerance enforcement seems effectively impossible (Castles 2007; Castles and Miller 2003: 278; cf. Piot 2010). According to Tsianos, Hess and Karakayali, migration control is therefore designed as deceleration and slow-down (2009: 8-9). Refugee camps bind migrants until their – formal or informal – journey onwards. Legal and administrative processes temporarily exclude them from the labour market. Realpolitik de facto accepts a migratory bottleneck where attempts at full control and possible exclusion have failed. From below this bottleneck migrants are reminded that their way north will be accompanied by numerous difficulties; more importantly, however, it allows for the vision to be finally successful against all odds. It is this bottleneck that feeds migrants' indispensable imaginations (Appadurai 2005; cf. Foucault 2005). The uncertainty of migration allows informal action to work actively on one's subjective future – to counteract the frustrating experience of assigned passivity and exclusion. Subjectivity and transgression of the

present towards a better life elsewhere are therefore inherent to informal action. Informality transcends the immediate, while the future unfolds itself in the very moment of action. Furthermore, informality mediates between a sense of the actual (“Wirklichkeitssinn”) and a sense of the possible (“Möglichkeitssinn”, see Waldenfels 2009: 97-99).

*‘I see no future for myself sitting here, and waiting does not make change...so I gotta do something...’* Aron (30) recently wrote to me from Khartoum, preparing his onward journey through the Sahara. In his – typical – understanding, the need to advance in migration is existential. And indeed Sartre’s idea of ‘need’ in the context of his existential philosophy may help to understand Aron’s uneasy situation between being and longing to be:

*In its full development, need is a transcendence and a negativity (negation of negation inasmuch as it is produced as a lack seeking to be denied), hence a surpassing-toward (a rudimentary project).* (Sartre 1968: 171, FN 3)

To stay, then, means total surrender. In the absence of more reliable ways and means, informality becomes a natural alternative. The “potentiality” (Jackson 2005: xiv) of success even motivates one to take the risk of losing one’s health and life during one’s journey – a phenomenon that neither structure nor agency can explain. In contrast, informality, seen from an existential point of view, could be a concept that allows for overcoming the structure-agency-impasse in migration studies.

#### **4. The Milieu of Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants**

The two neighbouring countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa share complex – though uneasy – cultural, political and historical ties and connections. Not least through annexation, war and labour migration people mixed and intermarried. Today both nations have a lively diaspora and currently undergo considerable emigration. While both groups partially mix in Khartoum, where they are both perceived as ethnic ‘*habeshi*’, Eritrean migrants are widely invisible in Addis Ababa (Treiber forthcoming). Whereas Eritreans mostly deserted the country’s national service and left their home country irrevocably, Ethiopians may be able to go back and forth without considerable difficulties if they are not wanted as political activists. Ethiopia’s current government does not care very

much about the country's youth (as long as it does not pose a concrete political threat, cf. Tronvoll 2010). Migration of the ambitious, but unneeded is even in the government's interest. A growing diaspora means growing remittances and business investments. Therefore migrants from Ethiopia are only exceptionally admitted as international refugees – at least by the local representatives of the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees in respective neighbouring countries.<sup>74</sup> Informality here is always dominant and reaches into all kinds of formal migration processes such as refugee protection, marriage visa and family reunification.

In contrast, Eritrean migrants can easily refer to political persecution. Unlike Ethiopia, Eritrea has become a pariah in international politics (although human rights, press freedom and democracy are not on the agenda in either country). Eritrea certainly has become an unpromising place to stay; the country is run by a corrupt and despotic clique of former guerrilla warriors who took over the state and people after independence from Ethiopia in 1991. Citizens are forced into an open-ended, barely remunerated national service and suffer from mismanagement, political isolation and arbitrary acts (Reid 2009; Tronvoll 2009). In the ongoing crisis, dating back to the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war (1998-2000), people live in distress, poverty and fear (Bozzini 2011a, 2011b; O'Kane and Hepner 2009). The young generation, especially, lacks perspective and commonly deserts the military and national service (Hirt and Mohammad 2013; Kibreab 2009; Treiber 2010, 2009, 2005). Thousands migrate to seek a better life abroad (Treiber 2013a, 2013b, Westin and Hassanen 2013).

For some years the politically cautious UNHCR has been generally granting refugee status to the tens of thousands of Eritrean citizens irregularly crossing their country's national borders every year, while explicitly announcing critical examination of applicants who made a career in the country's government, military or security apparatus and thus may face exclusion from international refugee protection (UNHCR 2011a, 2011b). Leaving Eritrea has thus been declared a just and well-founded cause by an agency of the United Nations, and – as Ethiopia refused so-

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<sup>74</sup> In the global North, where political asylum offers one of the few legal entries, narratives of political persecution are often reconstructed. Active or alleged membership in the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) can of course be a reason for political persecution in Ethiopia.

called ‘local integration’ – formal protection opens the way to resettlement in a willing third country (UNHCR 2011b: 35).<sup>75</sup>

Somehow understandably, the academic discourse describes the difficult life in Eritrea and subsequent emigration by unambiguous labels: ‘forced labour’ (Kibreab 2009), ‘forced migration’ (Hepner and Teclé 2013; Hepner 2011) and even ‘forced retreatism’ (Hirt and Mohammad 2013: 163-164), a form of imposed withdrawal from public life.<sup>76</sup> Certainly this vocabulary is biased by a humanistic stance and consequent political lobbyism and, yes, there are many reasons why one should share the political agenda and name and shame governmental ruthlessness and disrespect of human life and remind the First World of its responsibility (cf. Agier 2008: 73-104). However, these propagated analytical tools are unable to describe and understand what people actually do. Bozzini (2011a: 101-115) and Riggan (2007) illustrate how conscripts often enough comply with the state. With their more or less unpaid service they principally contribute to the continuous rule and authority of Eritrea’s dictatorial guerrilla-government. At the same time, their sarcastic resignation and permanent go-slow strike, their bribing and corruption of civil servants, their efforts to make use of relatives in military, administration and government undermine state and society and respective imaginations of reliability and trust. Müller also shows that Eritrea’s open-ended national service does not lead to the same fate for every recruit (2012). Not every young woman is raped in a military camp, not every young recruit is tied and hung on a tree in the ill-famed ‘helicopter’-style, though, yes, everyone knows people who have experienced exactly that.

‘Having been forced’ becomes a black box. It covers actual motivation and organisation of one’s flight and moulds processes of learning and decision-making before and during migration. It covers the Eritrean migrants’ claim to better their position for protection and – more importantly, resettlement – at the cost of other nationalities, such as Ethiopians, as eligibility, vulnerability and the needs of migrants have an international ranking. Finally, the idea of having been forced also covers the existential gap

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<sup>75</sup> Switzerland has recently declined political asylum to conscientious objectors – with more or less explicit reference to the influx of refugees from Eritrea; BBC-News (9 June 2013), *Swiss back tighter asylum rules* (BBC 2013).

<sup>76</sup> The German term ‘Innere Emigration’ that refers to a specific mode of disengagement and survival under Fascist rule, might be much clearer than uneasy sociological jargon.

between being and longing to be and respective means to actively work on one's future.

Migration studies are certainly in need of a vocabulary that allows empathy and appropriate description and interpretation at the same time. In order to contribute to this debate, I will explicate some examples from my fieldwork that illustrate the intrinsic dialectics of informality and existentialism. These reported practises either aim at manipulating and circumventing formal regulations or at exploiting social relations.

### **5. Manipulating Refugee Regulations**

‘How many people tell the truth in their interview? What do you think?’ Ermias asked me in a discussion on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa in May 2012. Ermias works as a local translator for UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United States Immigration Department and is thus involved in numerous refugee protection and resettlement processes of Eritrean nationals in the Ethiopian capital. Besides, he is a refugee himself, waiting for his resettlement to the United States. ‘Five per cent’, he answers his own question firmly and seems a bit helpless at the same time. In fact, given the broad and formal recognition of Eritreans to be in need of international refugee protection, this sounds most astonishing. For a majority – including all national service recruits and deserters, runaways from prison or imminent persecution, harassed family members of blacklisted citizens – there is apparently no self-evident need to cheat.

In search of an appropriate answer one certainly has to take into account that formal ‘protection’ generally means year-long confinement to an isolated refugee camp and dependency on handouts and remittances from supportive relatives. Refugees under international protection in Ethiopia are subject to an occupational ban and suffer from a frustrating lack of administrative transparency concerning perspectives and the state of one's case. “I am here three years now”, Moges stated in Addis Ababa last May. He once had been a promising young officer in Eritrea's military, admired by peers and subordinates; the local UNHCR office considers him to be at risk and in heightened need of protection. “Three years, that's a Master degree”, he adds pensively.

In the course of our research in Addis Ababa and Khartoum we met numerous informants who – after years of waiting – were eager to leave the status of refugee, its deprivations and limitations, for a more attractive (that is, also more predictable) world and a more self-determined life, subjected to formal, i.e., transparent and reliable, rules. Alternatively they could have taken the initiative and tried other informal and maybe more promising ways, but life-threatening risks, dead ends, tragic fates, daily struggles in foreign and hostile environments and examples of frustrating setbacks are continuously circulated throughout the migrants' milieus and have become well-known narratives to everyone (Treiber 2013a, forthcoming).

To be finally listed for resettlement to the United States, to Canada, Australia or Sweden becomes a crucial, existential, chance, which people do not want to gamble away. Days and nights before and after the subsequent interviews in the process of resettlement are spent agonising and sleepless. Often enough, Ermias, the translator, is called at nighttime and has to calm down doubting friends. To tune up one's case to be on the safe side seems pardonable, reasonable and even necessary. Stories of persecution, repression or even torture that one claims to have gone through are not blatant lies; they usually just happened to someone else. The interviews with UNHCR officers and representatives of potential host countries are considered as an all-dominant exam, without anyone having exact knowledge of its criteria. Nolens volens co-migrants become rivals and competitors in passing a decisive chokepoint.

During a common field visit to Khartoum in March 2011, Kurt Beck and I came into contact with a small group of officers who had deserted a prestigious elite department of the Eritrean military. Fearing abduction by Eritrean security – which indeed happens – they tried to keep a low profile, changing sleeping berth and mobile numbers as often as possible. And suspiciously they avoided the vast local milieu of Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants. As their plea for resettlement to a third country had been rejected twice, they had reorganized as a downsized group of six, approached the UNHCR-office in Khartoum and highlighted their extraordinary exposure and insecurity. Despite its self-confident performance, the group shared only a very partial insight into UNHCR's organisation and formal procedures, into the role and cognizance of Sudan's Commission of Refugees (COR) or interests and formal criteria of potential host countries. At first sight their plea did not look very promising at all. Certainly they were higher military officials; some were combatants in the Ethiopian-

Eritrean border war, one was involved in the military training of foreign opposition groups. Also they were not allowed to leave Sudan's nationally administered refugee camps in Eastern Sudan and approach UNHCR's head office in Khartoum. And finally, resettlement of Eritreans from Sudan is rather exclusive and open to yet very few applicants.

The six officers ignored these obstacles but discussed questions they thought to be much more pestering and decisive: how to deal with the Sudanese staff at COR, but also at UNHCR, considered indiscreet and negligent, or worse, to be security agents? How and whom to bribe to advance one's pending case? And how much should be offered? Was UNHCR's receptionist Eritrean? If yes, what could this mean? And finally, what was the current status quo of Eritrean-Sudanese political relations and thus their cooperation in the field of intelligence? The deserted officers and we, the anthropologists, agreed to cooperate.

We tried to represent their case at UNHCR Khartoum, providing the interest and attention of an academic public. We discussed UNHCR's administrative procedures and legal categories and imparted information – leaked to us, but not to the applicants: the UNHCR was neither prepared for a 'group case', on which the deserters insisted, nor did the category 'special case' exist, which had become very obvious in the migrants' milieu.

Month-long waiting periods could be explained with the extraordinary examination of the applicants' claims – as none of them had been a simple draftee. Indeed all of them told us individually that they had hoped for a once-promising career and after years in service and essential personal sacrifices they felt excluded and exploited. In the meantime they had learned to tell their story and construct their 'refugee case' in an explicit vocabulary of human and refugee rights. Out of Khartoum's tens of thousands of refugees they had managed to make themselves heard to activists in London, Amsterdam and Geneva. And self-confidently they disengaged those who did not provide the expected success. Thanks to multiple efforts to highlight their constant insecurity in Khartoum, even the UNHCR, known as a very slow moving administration, became nervous. Still it took a year until they were listed for resettlement. From our point of view only one out of the six officers had obviously and actively been searched by Eritrean security agents. Three men had observed him and his house; they had confronted him several times and had tried to arrest him.

Still in Eritrea, he had been involved in the military training of Ethiopian and Somali militants and therefore could be considered a carrier of political and military secrets.

The others were believed to have faced similar critical situations, where they had to flee security agents at the last moment. To us, their accounts seemed less obvious and maybe they were neither fully convinced – individually. To the group, unambiguous exposure to hazard was their common and indisputable ground on which they would finally be admitted to resettlement. Eventually their attempt was successful. However, they did not follow a cool and rationally planned strategy, they could not foresee their success and they certainly did not remain unaffected by the story they told. They rather incorporated a mixture of angst – deep existential fear – belief in a just cause and frustration about public disinterest. They certainly did more than ‘coping’; they wanted to overcome their problem once and for all, but desperate as they were, they could not see more than one possible solution and even refused to discuss any other; creativity is something else. Kiflu, then 30 years old, was one of these officers. He stated:

*[I]n Khartoum you do your best [...]. [I]f you are chanceful you can have a good job [...], but the problem for us is, we can't move as we [like]. We always fear. We don't face any bad thing from the Eritrean spies, but we are fearful. You can't (...), if I want to go to Omdurman [on the other side of the White Nile] to have a job alone, I can't go. If I go somewhere to have a job, I can't go, because I['m] afraid.*

*They write a lot of bad thing[s by] e-mail, they make you fear to move and to communicate, to do your best to survive. We are always afraid, we are not free, your mind is not free. We are not [in a] physically bad situation but we are afraid, always afraid. Someone tells you, they talk about you like this, like this in our [military] camp and [that] the military will come and they say things about you like this, like this (...). Someone tells you someone is coming to search you in Khartoum and [...] they tell you your name is written (...) in the [Eritrean] embassy. We are always full of fear. In the mind you are not free. We can't do anything, we're just afraid. Secondly, if I go to Eritrea [in case of arrest] what is going to happen to my family? What is going to happen if I am deported? What is going to happen if they find me anywhere if I am alone? Yes, I am afraid. Ah, thank God (...) I still don't face any charges, but in my mind I am not free. I am*



*living in fear.* [Kiflu, Khartoum, March 2011, interview conducted in English language]

Kiflu here clearly admits that he did not face violence or unambiguous attempts of arrest. Still danger is omnipresent. The mere possibility of being arrested can never be fully excluded – and in my view of his situation, I would certainly consider his risk a lot less than he does. Rumours flock in constantly both through social contacts within the local milieu and through e-mail communication from Eritrea. These are excessively evaluated and interpreted causing mental stress and constant uneasiness. (Other informants avoid social meeting places and excessive internet use when they sense increasing depression and mental instability.) The migrants' milieu, one's own social and cultural environment, becomes an omnipresent potential danger. Kiflu seems to have lost the ability to differentiate and pragmatically read his surrounding; 'they' simply signifies 'the others' and he mixes friends and foes. Kiflu considers his migratory project endangered, its failure has become a concrete possibility and his existential collapse seems almost inevitable.

Kiflu may exaggerate his present risk, but he is certainly not a malicious liar. His pessimism is well-founded. He had reached Sudan already in 2008 and spent an awful time in Kassala prison. He managed to reach Egypt soon after his eventual release, but became one of those unlucky migrants deported from Aswan back to Eritrea in June 2008. When we met in Khartoum for the first time in autumn 2009 he had again managed to escape from a prison camp in Eritrea's coastal desert and reached Sudan for the second time. As if this was not enough, his sister got caught by bandits on the Sinai, who demanded several thousand US dollars for her release (cf. Tesfagiorgis 2013, Mekonnen and Estefanos 2011). While being unable to earn or borrow such a sum, he nevertheless felt it was his responsibility to save her – and his personal fault if he could not. Meanwhile his fiancée, stranded in Addis Ababa, took an overdue decision and broke their engagement. Obviously Kiflu had been unable to arrive somewhere better, get her there and provide a base for establishment, prosperity and family life.

Overwhelmed by the outside world, Kiflu was thrown back into an almost futile existence and found himself trapped in aimless circular thinking, certainly unable to find a strategic rational solution to his complex problems. In his and his colleagues' perception there was but one solution

left – UNHCR must believe them and act accordingly, whatever the formal administrative rules might be. ‘Minding’ uncertainty and existential hazard (Whyte 2009: 213-214, Jackson 2006: 90) provoke informal action, which here was the attempted manipulation of formal protection and resettlement processes. The logical contradiction, that the world beyond might either be formally reliable and therefore incorruptible or show flexibility where needed, was rather not Kiflu’s problem. In his view, moral had to be legitimate, but could well take informal ways.

## **6. Faking marriage, circumventing immigration barriers**

Unlike quiet and shy Kiflu, Selamawit was used to public exposure. Already back in Eritrea’s small and conservative capital, Asmara, I admired her unusual self-confidence to frequent shady bars and get drunk and loud as her male friends and age mates did. She had grown up in more mundane Addis Ababa and did not depend on family in Asmara. Excluded from the city’s restrictive moral economy, she nevertheless established life and life-style. Her boyfriend was known to deal with drugs while Selamawit finally opened her own bar in central Asmara. Together they put money aside for their emigration but while he went to Mekele in Northern Ethiopia to take over a successful family business, she paid 6000 Euros for a ‘fake marriage’ with an Eritrean from the Swedish Diaspora in order to join family members in Norway. Being a practising believer, she officially married in Khartoum’s Ethiopian Orthodox Church and presented wedding pictures together with the marriage certificate at the embassy to back her visa claim. Everything went well; it only took 3 months before her visa was approved and she could leave for Scandinavia. We met during her stay in Khartoum. She had become calmer than before and tried to avoid public commotion. For Khartoum she still behaved provocatively enough. While wearing head scarf and black *ebaya*, she did not dress very conservatively underneath. She ordered *shisha* in a chic restaurant – which in 2009 was still allowed, but for men only, so she had to smoke at home – and visited illegal make-shift bars, run by Ethiopian immigrants, where alcohol was brewed and served. In short – she did not consider more than some basic formal rules and tried to manage things the way she was used to. She moved relatively freely in Khartoum’s demimonde, but not beyond. Still she was not naïve and trusted no one but herself.

I asked her, if she never considered following her boyfriend to Mekele, after all she had spent long years with him. Selamawit looked at me incredulously and amused at the same time: “Nooo!” she cried out. Despite her rather vague knowledge of the First World, she had taken the decision to go there. She had the money and a feasible plan to do so. How could life in a small provincial town in Northern Ethiopia be an alternative? She felt lonely at times and she longed for trusty and reliable relationships, but now she had to withstand the test and postpone everything else. So far her agenda could be called strategic, but only because she had the necessary means to successfully circumvent immigration barriers. Beyond that she was not prepared at all, but intended to leave and overcome the world she knew.

## **7. Making and exploiting friends**

Other than most migrants arriving from Eritrea, Selamawit already brought a certain understanding of informality along. Dawit, in contrast, arrived in Khartoum rather greenly – and penniless. However, he was willing to learn and he already possessed a couple of more or less reliable supporters abroad, a well-maintained social capital. Today, Dawit is a young man in his mid-twenties and has been a helpful ethnographic informant for a long time. He is an Ethiopian citizen but like many other Ethiopians, he grew up in Asmara. Indeed, I had the chance to partially accompany his youth, his development and eventually his migration. At the time of our first interview he was 10 years old, lived in one of Asmara’s very poor neighbourhoods, and dreamed to become a policeman. Then he wanted to protect people from criminals and drunkards who violated social harmony. In 2009 his father died, leaving behind a family with many children. Dawit, the oldest son, decided to migrate, which led him through Sudan and the Middle East.

As a child in Asmara, he used to approach foreigners and visitors from the diaspora in order to sell chewing gum, get into contact and socialize. Keeping the practice of approaching people he created an occupation that could in fact be called a ‘self’-employment. He managed personal contacts with people all over the world whom he considered to be in an influential or at least somehow useful position. He constantly tried to widen his circle by making friends with friends of friends. Most of his acquaintances were more or less open-minded ex-pats from First World countries.

Relationships to local people in a certain position were restricted by social hierarchies that could only be circumvented when a common foreign friend was present who ignored local hierarchies.

Dawit was cultivating his contacts and acquaintances by personal visits, occasional phone calls and e-mails and he tried to make them useful, whenever they promised an advantage for his personal advance. He spent substantial time in internet cafés doing his office work. Also, he approached people in cafés, offices or at the bus stop and collected their business cards for future use. Sooner or later he would ask for financial support. An academic from Zurich was even asked to fund the rather vaguely projected opening of an internet café with 10,000 Euros. Of course Dawit was also acting under duress and lacked a clear-cut plan. He took over responsibility on behalf of his family and had to substitute his late father's income. Also, he eventually became a father himself and tried to be a responsible breadwinner – while eager to keep up the image of promising economic success within the larger family. For that reason, incoming payments had to be controlled and steered.

To ensure his own living and the support of his family, he contacted his acquaintances individually, concealing correlations and concurrent requests – especially when his potential sponsors knew each other. While facing particular difficulties he initiated proper campaigns for his support. That happened, for example, when his forged visa to the United Arab Emirates was running out and he lacked money to move on. Of course his smuggler did not inform him about further upcoming costs – as fraud and dishonesty are essential to the business of irregular migration. However, Dawit could have anticipated and saved some money instead of sending all of it home. Naturally his family was thankful, but could not return the favour. In November 2009 he sent an alerting e-mail:

*I know you can feel the stress which I am dealing with. Try to activate these guys for God's sake. I hope you feel the urgency which forces me to shoot my words sharply. Wish to hear it [that means a successful agreement among his sponsors and subsequent money transfer] very soon.*

Sums he requested and alternatives he suggested changed daily: Ecuador 6000 Euros, Iran several thousand at least, Uganda 2700, Turkey 3000. Towards his sponsors he communicated the specific urgency of his needs on the one hand and the impression on the other that several offers had already been made. So only the addressee's contribution seemed missing to

save Dawit's life and well-being. He warned that his deportation to Eritrea's ill-famed prisons was imminent.

His cry for help finally failed. While the requested sum had simply been too high, the potential sponsors, who were contacted collectively this time, also started to discuss the purported urgency and alternative solutions. To them, Dawit's original Ethiopian citizenship, especially, made deportation to Eritrea unlikely. In fact, he flew out to Kenya a few days later – without any difficulty. These ways to secure his living certainly refer back to his childhood and chewing-gum business, but today's still imperfect know-how had to be learned by experience. One specific incident that he – still fascinated – reported, became an important lesson to him: Abraham, a former student from Asmara University, had managed to establish himself in Khartoum's quite ambivalent migrant economy. He used to run a backyard café in Sahafa neighbourhood and was involved in all kinds of more or less legal businesses. Among other things, he illegally offered places to sleep to the numerous Ethiopian and Eritrean new arrivals in town, who are formally obliged to have a visa or to stay in the refugee camps in Eastern Sudan. When Dawit arrived in Abraham's café, he was recruited to help. Instead of a salary he was taught alternative ways to generate income, for example through initiating a personalized moral dilemma. So Abraham, who planned to reestablish his café in a more promising and public location, once sent a text message to an acquaintance who worked as a staff member of a European embassy in Khartoum, appealing to his humanitarianism and requesting a large amount of money. Without this money he had no more perspective in the Sudan and would have to risk his life in Libya. Dawit remembered that it took a quarter of an hour before the confirmative answer arrived and the good news could be triumphantly celebrated. Of course the defrauded European did not want his friend Abraham to disappear in the Sahara, in Ghadaffi's prisons or on the Mediterranean Sea. Abraham, however, had proven that he was in a position to strategically manipulate people. Dawit told me that he found this coup in fact morally disputable, but he was nevertheless impressed.

During his migration process and within the migrants' milieu, Dawit learned that he could apply his communicative talent for his own material end. In an interview later on he indeed used the term 'creative' to describe his way to get along and progress. In the situation described, however, he lacked an overview and plan beyond the immediate, therefore acted hastily and finally even panicked. Devastating desperation and rollicking

overestimation of his own capabilities alternated, as informality mediates both, a sense of the actual and a sense of the possible.

## **7. Conclusion**

For Everett Lee in the 1960s the future of migration studies lay in the formulation of universal laws that would allow unambiguous analysis and subsequent political action. Generalizations were to be based on big demographic data and not on numerous, but diffuse, if not contradictory ethnographic field studies. While migration turned out to be unpredictable and therefore ungovernable, the idea to explain migration from the outside remained. This led migration studies into a structure-agency-impasse: both structure and agency were conceptualised from a rational perspective, but became more and more fluid and hard to grasp. While most scholars would agree today that even unprivileged migrants possess agency, it remains disputed and theoretically unsolved if these act autonomously against all odds, if they are 'forced' and act under mere coercion, if they act strategically throughout their migration trajectories or simply chaotically in uncertain environments. None of these presumptions promises a deeper understanding of the actual actions taken by the group of Eritrean army officers, by Selamawit or Dawit in decisive periods of their migration. And certainly none of them allows interpreting Kiflu's fear in a satisfactory way.

In this article I tried to show that migration studies are in need of more adequate concepts and vocabulary to grasp praxis and learning processes in unprivileged migration. For this purpose I referred to the migration from Eritrea and Ethiopia and my own fieldwork in Khartoum and Addis Ababa. I also tried to show that even a small and restricted ethnographic approach can contribute to a broader debate. In situ, our methodological tools and academic concepts have to prove themselves; if unfitting, we have to seek for more adequate ones. In my case I found the idea of informality, originally derived from economic and political anthropology, to open up promising vistas in the field of migration studies, especially when seen from an existential perspective.

While it may be difficult to classify informal praxis clearly into fraud, manipulation, circumvention or exploitation, we generally agree that informality has become a decisive trait of unprivileged migration through our brutally asymmetric world. One may find different terms and concepts

to name and approach this phenomenon; but it has to be acknowledged and cannot be explained away – even if politically inconvenient. Informality develops alongside the encounter with formality, which also means formal exclusion from legal immigration. It allows subjective action where ordered passivity and exclusion otherwise lead to frustration and collapse and therefore may bridge the existential gap between now and here and then and there. Informal praxis is considered appropriate by the marginalised and it is always at hand. Nonetheless it also changes social life among migrants and shapes respective local and transnational milieus. It transforms the individual actors and their perceptions of the world as well. While imagining another world – formally ruled, reliable and well-organised – unprivileged migrants perceive and experience their concrete reality prior to a projected arrival as dangerous and hostile but potentially manageable and manipulable through informal means. This discrepancy alone opens up a whole range of questions, invites for further comparative research and eventually a global perspective – from migrants’ further individual and cultural learning processes to the general state of our world and its prospect for global democracy and prosperity.

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