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Moved by modernity

How development shapes migration in rural Ethiopia

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CHAPTER 9. THE GOOD LIFE

The previous chapters illustrate that understanding migration transitions – from semi-nomadic pastoralism to settled agrarianism to new forms of urban-centric mobility and involuntary immobility – requires a two-fold analysis of change: at the level of social structures (i.e. the state, the market, formal education) and at the level of the social imaginary (i.e. ideas, values, attitudes and norms). There is often a false dichotomy imposed upon explanations of social change, between ‘ideas’ and ‘material factors’ as rival causal agencies (Taylor 2007). But as Taylor (2007) shows, this dichotomy is misleading. Self-conceptions and modes of understanding are essential to explain why certain behaviors come to be seen as normal instead of others. Ideas are internal to material practices; “one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question, which causes which” (Taylor 2007: 212).

This chapter gives closer attention to shifts in the social imaginary, which directs people’s notion of the ‘good’ and determines what opportunities, constraints, and capabilities are important and relevant to their lives. Thus, I focus here on what features constitute a ‘good life’ from the perspective of those born in Wayisso, and how these changed over time. To understand the roots of individual migration aspirations, we have to understand their relation to a social imaginary that orients what people value and ultimately do. I look to the narratives of local people about rural and urban lives and interrogate their social imaginary through their perceptions of the good life. I show how they narrate the movement of the good life from a rural past to an urban future. I then examine the direct role migration plays in shaping the contours of the imagined good life. Previous chapters focused primarily on how processes of development shape the social imaginary and social structures that in turn give rise to migration aspirations and behavior. In the second half of this chapter, I consider things the other way around: how does migration influence a changing social imaginary?

The Transformation of the ‘Good Life’

One lens to examine the social imaginary is to explore how people make sense of their past, present, and futures. The very construction of a past, a present, and a future is arguably a modern conception, based on linear notions of time and progress. Nevertheless, how the past, present, and future are described, desired, or disdained reveals important facets of an operating imaginary. In this section, I show how people themselves describe their pasts; how they see themselves now — often ‘stuck’ between their present realities and idealized futures; and the strands that constitute the good life towards which they strive. As mentioned previously, there

is not a single conception of the good life in this region of Ethiopia. Visions of the good are shaped by generation, by education, by experience, gendered norms, and social hierarchies. Its exact constellations shift along these dividing lines. And yet, a general relocation of the good life from the rural to the urban is a common shift among young people in Wayisso – one that gives rise to widespread migration aspirations.

There were a few recurrent themes that were shared about the good life: the rural life *was* the good life, and the quality of that life was measured in cattle, milk and butter. However, that life has passed, and the village is now a place of poverty and difficulty, of stagnation and struggle. The good life today is in the city, and it is measured in access to material means. For those with the capability to leave, the city promises access to basic needs like clean water, electricity, and education. Perhaps even more importantly, it promises *change* in one’s material and social circumstances.

Nevertheless, some people shared conflicting narratives about the past and present, of rural and urban lives. Young people were more likely to see older generations as ‘backwards’; older generations were more likely to see urban youth as ‘lazy’ and corrupted by the city. Women were more likely to see the past as ‘dark’ and the future as ‘bright’; older men lamented the decline of their once dignified positions in the social web. The following section tells some of the common stories told about the transformation of the ‘good life,’ after which I complicate this narrative by showing divergent perspectives on some of its facets.

The Good Life was Rural

For earlier generations, nearly everyone agreed, the rural life *was* the good life. “Earlier, our families lived a rich life — they simply drank milk and ate butter. Their way of life was good,” one elder shared. The tropes of milk, butter, and honey are everywhere in people’s imaginations of the past. Their ancestors were strong, wealthy, and happy. “During the time of my great-grandfather, our lives were based on the cattle. We lived by drinking milk, by eating butter. We slaughtered the cattle and drank their blood. When you compare these people to the people today, they were stronger, because they drank milk, ate butter, and drank blood,” one middle-aged farmer shared. Some degree of romanticization of the past is inherent in people’s telling of it. “At that time, there were no thieves. There was no killing anyone... without a reason. You loved everyone,” another elder reminisced. Whatever you needed was available; money was not an issue: “We didn’t use much money. There was no place for money. At that time, one cow was one birr. One birr was so much money!”

The symbolic and material center of the good life was cattle. The number of cattle people had was the measuring stick of wealth, and how they ate and drank was another clearly related one. Meat, milk, and butter all came from their livestock. When strangers were received, or marriage rites were held, ‘wealth’ was shared in cattle, milk, butter and meat. As one elder in the community related: “There was one special meal called *Tuma Nyaata*. It was considered that whoever eats *Tuma Nyaata* is respected and is given recognition. He is wealthy and strong enough to do anything.” *Tuma Nyaata* is a form of ground meat. After slaughtering a cow, the red meat was dried in the sun, after which they used mortar and pestle to grind it. They then mixed the meat with butter, milk and blood. “That was the meal for the wealthiest people.”

In addition to cattle, one’s social position was determined by a man’s position within the gada system (see Chapter Six). While only a select few would come to be gada fathers, the advantages this afforded were more social than economic: the respect, prestige, and power this position brought. Certainly, there were also economic benefits, but as described in Chapter Seven, economic inequalities between households were measured in cattle. The more cattle and the more respect a man had, the more wives he was ‘given,’ as one young woman put it. Thus, another measuring stick of wealth and status was the number of wives and children a man had.

The good life — with abundant cattle, good grazing lands, a large family, and a firm position within the established social system — could only be sustained or even envisioned in rural areas. Towns were places for the ‘poor,’ and even as Adami Tulu and Ziway grew in the mid-20th century, the wealthy continued to prefer the rural life. As one elder explained, in the 1960s, even the most advantaged and wealthiest men with ties to Haile Selassie’s government eschewed urban areas:

Ashu Bentuu was one *balabat* during the time of Haile Selassie. Even he didn’t have a house here in Adami Tulu. At that time, we thought that wealthy people were going to live in rural areas, and it is only the poor who are going to move to urban areas. Even Bentuu’s daughters and sons did not have a house in the urban area. Because those who are wealthy, those who have many cattle, are going to be in the rural area. They didn’t want to be in the urban area. It is the poor who settled those cities [Adami Tulu and Ziway].

However, just as people shared a belief in the wealth and prosperity of earlier generations, they shared the opinion that “the rural life has passed.” “The good life is no longer in the rural areas.” The signs of wealth for previous generations were used to illustrate the decline and fall of rural lifestyles. As one older man put it, “In our age, we were drinking milk. We ate butter. We ate porridge. But now we are proceeding to oil. I hate oil. I don’t want to eat it. The life of

society has changed from milk to oil, from butter to oil, from porridge to oil.” Another older woman recounted, “Now butter is too expensive, but before we could get it all the time. Now, it is difficult to even eat butter, but before, we would use it for our hair!” Further, the material and symbolic status of cattle has been replaced by money. As one elder explains in relation to marriage practices:

Earlier, we drank blood as part of the marriage ceremony. The girl’s family will bring a container of blood — if the girl’s family is wealthy, they will bring two — and they mix the blood with milk. Every family member would then drink that blood to show that we are now sharing the blood of each other. And four cattle would also be given by to her family. But recently, times have changed. It has changed completely from blood to money, what we call the *gabara* for the woman’s family. Now, nobody drinks blood. They just give money to her family.

And so, the denigration of the rural life is captured in the movement from butter to oil, from blood to money.

Perhaps more than any objective evaluation of whether the quality of life was truly better before than it is now, these narratives confirm that people have come to see themselves as poor in Wayisso, something they were not before. Their ancestors would certainly be “poor” according to our economic criteria of today — they would fall below the one dollar per day poverty line; they exchanged cattle and goods more than money. They had higher mortality rates, particularly among children. And egalitarian as the gada system may have been, it was strongly patriarchal, leaving little room for women in the decision-making of the community. Yet, these negative elements were rarely mentioned in reminisces about the past. People remember that the lands were green, and their ancestors were wealthy, dignified, strong and happy.

The Good Life is in the City

Today, the good life is nowhere to be found in rural areas. It has migrated to the city. As so many people shared, both young and old, “it is much better to live in the city.”⁶¹ At the most fundamental level, people have changing expectations for the quality of their material life, and what are now seen as basic needs — easy access to clean water, electricity, toilets — are only found in town. As the previous chapter illustrated, young people are often exposed to these facilities when they first move to town for their education. Afterwards, it is difficult to return

⁶¹ Although technically Adami Tulu and Ziway are more likely to be categorized as ‘towns,’ rather than cities (their populations are below 100,000 people), they are ‘cities’ in the imaginations of those who live in the rural areas surrounding them – particularly Ziway.

to areas with no light or plumbing. As one young woman put it, “What can my generation do in Wayisso? There cannot meet our basic needs there. We don’t have anything — no electricity, not enough clean water, no transport. [...] Young people who have left may go back to Wayisso for the day, but they won’t even stay one night there.”

These changing expectations go beyond basic needs. The city is also the realm of consumption, and access to capital, technology, knowledge, and perhaps most importantly, the potential for *change*. This change in socioeconomic circumstances was perceived as impossible in the village. “In Wayisso, you can work hard your whole life, but you do not see any change. The life of a farmer today, even if he works hard his whole life, will look the same in twenty years,” one young man explained. “To change my life” was the most common reason people gave for wanting to leave.

Change manifests itself in many ways: in access to education and for the lucky few who make it to upper levels, and the professional jobs to which it opens doors; in access to business opportunities such as opening a shop, driving a bajaj taxi, or renting out houses; in the proximity of new kinds of clothes, mobile phones, foods, television and films that become outer signs of an inner transition to a ‘modern’ lifestyle. Old signs of social status remain, like being elected as a gada father, or the number of cattle one owns, yet new forms of urban-based status symbols are proliferating. One day I met a teacher who had recently left his job to oversee the distribution of a beer company. He had grown fatter since I last saw him several months previously, and he was doing well in his job. In fact, he boasted, he just had raw meat and beer for breakfast. In the city, one form of ‘conspicuous consumption’ is eating raw meat at butcher stands that open onto the street — a new form of *Tuma Nyaata* (Figure 54).

Men and women adopt new forms of clothing in the city. Men often wear jeans, t-shirts and sleek sneakers. Women begin to wear bras, trousers instead of skirts, and even short, tight dresses on special occasions. There are several Bahá’í women in their late 20s and early 30s who left Wayisso for Ziway and are not yet married. One older man remembers when some of these girls came back to Wayisso in their new clothes (trousers rather than a skirt, bras, tight, white t-shirts and slick shoes), people could not believe it, he laughed. “These women are empowered! They are wearing jeans!”



Figure 54. A Street-Side Butcher Open Late in Zaway

Because the city is perceived as a place with greater possibilities for change, it is also seen a place with greater choice. For young women in particular, the city was described as a place of ‘freedom.’ In the village, women make minor contributions to the livelihoods of the household — through selling goods at the market in Adami Tulu, for example. However, the city represents an opportunity to earn a steadier income, to play a more active part in shaping their family’s economic future or to find income-generating work that would give them more leeway to avoid an early marriage.

New forms of work in the city need not be complex, as Chapter Six showed. One married woman, for example, described her desire to move to the city and sell a few things from her residence. “I know we can generate an income here [in Wayisso], but in the city, you can open a small business in front of your residence. You create work around your living area. [...] Here, in Wayisso, women spend most of their time sitting, or going from here to there, or preparing meals, or just sitting during the winter season.” The desire to work year-round, to earn a steadier income, is itself a new conception of work and economic engagement, another ‘modern’ element added to the social imaginary. Likewise, for many young men, the city was a place to diversify their incomes. They would maintain land in Wayisso, and drive a bajaj taxi in the city, for example (see Chapter Six).

There are many women who cannot migrate to the city, however, because they or their families do not have the means to support the move. The aspiration to migrate internationally — most often as domestic workers to the Middle East — was driven by a desire to accumulate capital that could be invested in income-generating activities in town, such as a shop or restaurant. Migration abroad, then, was a way for women to access the city. Because of networks of brokers and agencies, and the secure and substantial income this migration promised, migration to the Middle East is more possible for poorer families than moving to a town just ten kilometers away. Migrants shared that when they returned, they would open a shop, and with that small degree of financial independence and social distance, they would have far more freedom than they ever had in the village.

Thus, to reduce the allure of the city to capital and consumption would be too narrow; money is necessary to achieve aspired change, but the desire for change goes beyond the desire for money. The city is also the site of education and knowledge, of technology and wider horizons. One young man in Wayisso told me that the city was the place of modernization. When I asked what he meant by modernization, he said, “When I say modernization, I mean education. You get good education in the city. And if you need information, you get this from urban areas — watching TV, using the internet, other things. That is what I mean by modernization.” Indeed, smart phones and the internet bring unprecedented access to a wider world. An excerpt from my field notes illustrates this point:

That evening, some of us sat around the kitchen. All of us crowded in, some chopping collard greens, others chopping onions, garlic, tomatoes, squatting over their cutting boards or the bubbling pots on the electric stove on the floor. Everyone else was absorbed in their smart phones. Mootiti was dancing, mimicking the moves from a video someone played on their phone. Sultan, a recent migrant to the city, sat squinting at the square screen of his small Nokia phone, attempting to scroll through Facebook. Shula made fun of his small screen and he was mad in his macho, half-joking kind of way. Marki gave me his phone to play a game; the avatar runs along train tracks and tries to catch gold coins and avoid being caught by a policeman. He then asked me to help set up an email account for him. Kadija asked me to set up a twitter account for her. Gashi stopped by the kitchen, an older man who loves his smart-phone with equal vigor but nevertheless joked about technology. That everyone was on their phones. How times have changed. That sort of thing. It's the same everywhere, I thought. We were all like a bunch of teenagers in the US, sitting together with our faces glued to our screens. Facebook was only recently introduced and is the most popular app. (7 May 2016)

The city is the access point to a wider social world. This is, practically speaking, because access to the internet is largely limited to urban areas. Connectivity rates are so low in Wayisso

that an internet connection is often unavailable. And generally, those still living in rural areas cannot afford a smart phone. The new ability to consume technology and participate in virtual social worlds is part of what Zelinsky, writing before the age of the internet, described as the “mobility of the mind”:

But perhaps the greatest of the new mobilities is that of the mind. Perception and thought are no longer tethered to the living memory and to the here and now but have been stretched to virtual infinity. Through such instrumentalities as the printing press, camera, telephone, postal system, radio, television, phonograph, electronic computer, library, museum, school, theater, and concert hall, as well as personal gadding about, there remain no effective boundaries beyond which the nimbler mind cannot penetrate. This intellectual mobility is not just outward to all parts of the earth and the observable universe or backward and forward through time but is into other dimensions as well—the psychological, the esthetic, and the scientific. All these forms of motion are closely interrelated: increasing freedom of spatial movement is both cause and effect of other forms of enhanced mobility. (Zelinsky 1971: 225).

Conflicting Narratives and Generational Divides

It is common for older generations to have mixed views about life in the city. While many recognize that the good life is no longer in rural areas, some are quick to condemn the foreign lifestyles of urban youth. I remember one afternoon, the mother of one of the young women with whom I lived in Ziway came to visit from Wayisso. She would visit from time to time, to “take a rest” with them, and to check on how they are doing. But she said she preferred being in Wayisso. “Young people just sit around and laugh all day. They don’t work,” she said, leaning against the wall with her legs outstretched. Her daughter laughed and poured her a cup of coffee.

This mother was proud of what her sons and daughters had been able to achieve in Ziway, while others in Wayisso expressed more skepticism about urban life. They commented that urban youth could become entitled and lazy, or corrupted by *khat*, a plant that is commonly chewed as a stimulant. Echoing the comments of others in Chapter Eight, one older man in Wayisso, Godana, lamented that young people who leave are no longer satisfied with rural lifestyles:

The young people who taste the life of the urban area come to hate the rural life. When they live in the city, they get everything fresh — the meals, even if they are expensive, are good quality. If they work hard, they get money. If they want to go somewhere, they use transportation. But if they come back to the rural area, they can’t get transportation. They can’t get pure water. They can’t access the facilities that they need. This is the great problem, why they don’t come back.

Young people’s dissatisfaction with rural lives is driving a wedge between families. He continues:

They are forgetting their family who are living in Wayisso. There is a gap in families now — between father and son — there is a gap. They don't want to come back and ask after their parents. They don't want to look at the condition their parents are living in. There are some people who die without their sons or daughters visiting them. Even if they come back, they immediately return to the city.

In the worst cases, he explained, young people move to the city and become addicted to alcohol and drugs:

The youth who taste the city life are completely changed. [...] When they go to the urban area, they start to see something different and they become addicted. They start chewing khat. They start smoking cigarettes. They start drinking alcohol. When they become used to these things — and if they don't have money — they want to do something to get the chat, to get the drink, to smoke. They need to have money. From morning to night, they just sit somewhere and chew khat. They hate working and coming here. [...] Even if they don't have money, they start stealing from others. I know there are such kinds of young people.

He went on to tell me two stories about children whose lust after money drove them to turn on their parents. In a neighboring *kebele*, in Qodusa, Godana heard that one young man had moved to the city but would come back to the village to ask for money from his mother. At first, she supported him. She sold her ox and some of her plots of land, and every time he came home, she gave him some of this money. “Whenever he would come, she just gives.” Until one day, she said no. She refused to give him everything. He threatened her, demanding the money, but she ignored him. “I'm going to do something bad if you don't give me the money,” Godana recounted him saying, but still she denied him, returning to her work. The man was so upset that he killed his mother and took the rest of the money. In the second story, another young man from another *kebele* came home one day to ask his father for cattle. “I won't give you any cattle,” he said, “but if you want to change, come with me, plow with me, work with me, and I'll give you cattle.” But his son refused. “If you don't give it to me, I will show you!” and he became angry. Later in the afternoon, when his father was working in the fields, his son tried to stab his father. But others saw his attempt and stopped the boy before he took his father's life. The father did not die, but he can no longer work from his injuries. “He is simply sitting now.” As for the boy, the community gave him a good beating and “gave the boy to the Silt'ee people. They told them to just take him. ‘If you like, kill him.’”

These stories did not happen in Wayisso, and were difficult to verify, but regardless of their objective truth, they illustrate an imagined reality: young people move to the city, are corrupted by a lust for money to such a degree that they begin to value money over family, turning on and even killing their parents. As unfair as this portrayal of the corrupted youth may be, the point that young people come to disdain rural life after being in the city is something

young people do not deny. As one young woman reflected on her childhood: “The life that I spent in Wayisso, at that time [her childhood], was very good. But when I look back at it, I see it was very dark to live in Wayisso.”

Younger generations were equally quick to condemn the attachment to village life that they saw in some of the older generations. As one young man, still living in Wayisso, but with his aspirations set on Ziway, explained:

My mother lives in Suro. She doesn't want to leave her birthplace. There is backwardness around there. They have a custom to say we should not leave our grandparent's birthplace. My mom doesn't like to drink pump water. She hates it. She still drinks the water which the cattle drink, from the lake. People stay because of backwardness. But the younger ones, who first leave their birthplace for the sake of education, they have a change to see modernization, to see change, to see light, to see pure water. And after, they hate to come back to their birthplace in the rural area.

Another young man in a similar circumstance shared a similar perspective, but emphasized the difficulty older generations might have adapting to new ways of living and working in the city.

Young people always want change. They look forward. They think about the infrastructure they will gain in the urban area: like job opportunities, like pure water, like television... all the facilities of the urban areas. But when it comes to the elders, they hate to live in the urban areas. The reason is lack of awareness. [...] They have not seen what is there [in town]. They know and prefer the rural area. Also, their income is based on ploughing and cattle. The work that they know is only this. If they go to the urban area, they cannot be a part of other work. They are not educated. They are not well trained. They don't have the awareness to do it. The work and the life that they are familiar with is only ploughing and cattle, so they prefer to live here.

While many elders agreed that the “rural life has passed,” they felt personally unequipped to migrate and build a new livelihood in town. Often, they put their hope in their children. As Caawaa, one elder in Wayisso, expressed,

The life that we had has already passed. It was good, taking everything fresh, but it has already passed. Now I am close to death. If I have the power to educate my children, I may help them. That's what I wish for those kids. They should work hard and educate themselves and start life like the others in the urban area because life in the rural area has become too difficult. So they should learn more and change their life.

Across generations, education is always considered a good thing. Even the skeptical old man, Godana, admired one aspect of urban life: education.

But the good part for the new generation is education. When they are educated, they create new things for society. Like infrastructures, transportation, even doctors. In ancient times, earlier, we used traditional medicines. If we were lucky, they would cure us but the rest would die. But this new generation has changed this. / Even the mobiles [phones], this is the new generations' work. This is the effort of the new generation

and education. So I would like to say thank you to education. The only ones who can create the plane, who can create the bus, who create anything are those who are literate.

The high value placed on education led to some conflicting narratives about the past. Sometimes these dissonant stories were held within a single individual. For example, Shuko, a middle-aged woman, held simultaneously positive and negative narratives about the past. Early in my interview with Shuko, she presented a romantic vision of how it was before:

Those times were incomparable to these ones. At that time, no one was poor. We drank milk. We ate porridge. Everything was easy. Just we ate, we drank, after that we would play, we would dance and sing with our friends. I didn't worry about life. It's not at all like today. Today, it is too difficult. Nothing is easy. But at that time, our family had cattle. We had milk. We prepared porridge. Just eating and playing and dancing and taking care of ourselves. It was a good childhood.

Nevertheless, later in the interview, when speaking about education, she presented a narrative that conflicts with her earlier account: "My childhood was dark. Because at that time, there was no education. There was no school. Even when the school came, my family registered us, but then they didn't send us or allow us to learn. It was very difficult for girls to study. Girls were only allowed to stay at home." Most older people concluded that the good life is no longer in rural areas, and thus the past was better than the present. The one area in which this narrative did not hold, however, concerned education.

The Good Life, Constraints and Aspiration Adaptation

Although almost everyone felt that the good life was no longer in rural areas, not everyone planned to leave. Notions of the good life shape aspirations, but these aspirations are mediated by the actual opportunities and perhaps more importantly, constraints. As one young woman from Wayisso who was selling coffee in Ziway explained, "In Ziway, you can find work. You can find anything. You have light, water, everything is here. But you need money. If you have money and you are able to work, you can find anything in Ziway." For those without the means to make the move, they preferred to stay in the village. Two older women in Wayisso explained, "Life in the city is very good if you have something in your hand. Otherwise, we prefer the rural life. Here we find everything without money, without expense. But if you are wealthy, it is better to be in the city." Often, when asked what young people first noticed about life in the city, they mentioned the expense. The need to pay for everything — rent, food, tea and coffee. In the village, everything is "free." People may all want to ideally move to the city, but as one young man explained, "people stay because they get married, or they have children, and they don't have the money to make the move."

Because of the discretionary income required to migrate, leaving is not a sign of desperation. Rather, it is more often a sign of wealth. One afternoon I sat with two wives of one older man, both of whom lived in Wayisso. One wife began listing the names of all those who have left and continued:

Those are the people who have money, who move to Ziway. That's what I see in my area. Now their houses are empty. It is sad [...] Money moves from the rural areas to the city. The resources are good in the city. The health is good. You get water and light from the city. Those who go to live in the city don't come back to the rural areas. Even if I went to the city, I know I would not want to come back.

The first wife chimed in, "I would like to have a shop in the city. I would like this!" The second wife continues, "Before people liked milk *too* much. Now they don't even like milk. The time for keeping animals has passed."

Thus, even though most agree that urban lives are better than rural ones, people adjust their expectations and plans for their lives continually. Consider the example of Bilisuma from the previous chapter. He tried several times to move to the city, to pursue his education and thereby secure an alternative livelihood to farming. But because of financial constraints, he could never successfully make the move to town. Eventually, he became resigned to a future in Wayisso. He has no plans to move again, even though he still believes that a better life is elsewhere. This point is particularly relevant to research on migration aspirations. The Gallup World Poll survey, for example, shows just how widespread migration aspirations can be. Between 2010 and 2015, this survey found that thirty percent of the population of 157 countries around the world expressed a wish to move abroad (Migali and Scipioni 2018). However, over this same period, less than one percent actually migrated. In Ethiopia, if you ask someone whether they would like to ideally migrate, many will say yes. Whether they actually plan to, and whether they have the resources to do so, is an entirely different matter (see Carling and Schewel 2018).

Yomen, first introduced in Chapter Eight, provides another example of aspiration adaptation. When I first met Yomen, she was eighteen and living with her family in Wayisso. The youngest of eight children, she was the only girl in her family to go to school. "Earlier people thought that women shouldn't go to school," and her six older sisters "just simply married according to the expectations of our family." Because of her education, however, Yomen sees her future differently: "But in my case, I am educated. I went to school. And I know something. I have a right and the opportunity to look at which [way] is good and which one is bad, and I want to choose the way that I like."

In my first conversation with Yomen, she was quick to ask whether I could help her to migrate abroad. “I would be so happy if I could leave Ethiopia,” she said, “I don’t want to live here.” I asked her why. “In Ethiopia, it is not a good life. Even my own life, when I look back at it, I am not happy with how I’ve spent it. There are many problems here in Ethiopia. That’s why I want to fly abroad.” When asked where she would like to go, she said, “Not to the United Arab Emirates. If I had the chance, I’d like to go to the United States, or Europe, anything except Arab.” Yomen had no plans to actually migrate to the United States or Europe. She had not applied for the Diversity Visa, nor did she know how she might do so.

Yomen was in a position common to many young women with high hopes for the future and limited opportunities to realize them. She failed the national exam after grade ten and was spending the year helping her mother and studying for the resit. She wanted to continue onto preparatory school and then university. She did not like the typical options for women who could not continue their education. “The first option is to get married. The second is to migrate to the Arab countries. The third option is to sit with your families, like me,” she laughed. She wasn’t thinking about marriage yet – “I’m still thinking about improving my education level. I’m not thinking about marriage” – but she was also not eager to leave Ethiopia as a domestic worker. She was particularly influenced by what she had heard from her friends working overseas; while not necessarily victims of physical abuse, they told Yomen that “the Arab people don’t respect Ethiopians.” Her neighbor went to Dubai, and “the work is difficult, they always nag her, they shout at her. That’s why I’m scared [to leave].”

When I met Yomen again some six months later, her future plans had changed. She did not take the resit exam, because she missed the first day of the exams. She was visiting her sister in Qore, and she had not been able to get transportation back to Ziway in time. That is the excuse she told me, anyway. Taking stock of her options, she began an application to migrate to the Middle East as a domestic worker. Yet, she never completed it because she still had reservations. “I am afraid to go there. Maybe I won’t have a good family.” Her family also preferred for her to stay for the same reasons. Instead, she was now considering opening up a coffee hut in Qore, where her sister lives. Her family would help her pay for it. Although coffee houses are an already saturated market, she reasoned the it is “better to try and compete than to sit around doing nothing here.” When asked if she would consider working at Sher, the flower farm down the road, Yomen quickly said no. “It’s too tough. It’s hot in the greenhouse. It’s hard work, and only for 800 birr. [...] It’s not worth it.” I suggested she may be able to make more money at Sher than with a coffee hut. She responded curtly, almost offended, “Work at Sher is not a way to improve my life.”

Yomen, like so many young people around the world, shifted her aspirations and strategies to achieve them continually. When speaking with Yomen sometime later, I asked her again about her future hopes. I was surprised by her response, how much her aspirations and expectations had changed since our first conversation: “Even if it is in a rural area, I want to make my life better than the others. I want the food I prepare to be good. To have a good toilet, a good bathroom. Everything that my children need should be facilitated. This is what I wish for.” When I returned for my final fieldwork visit in October 2018, I went looking for Yomen. When I reached her home in Wayisso, her mother greeted me and threw her hands up into the air with happiness: “Yomen is married!” We went to her new home, now in an the adjacent rural *kebele*, to discover she had just left for the hospital to give birth to her first child.

Notions of the good life set the horizons within which people develop particular aspirations and expectations for their lives, but aspirations shift in relation to individual capabilities. Thus, to say that “the good life is in the city” does not mean all people migrate to the city. They may ideally like to, but life choices are made within a web of opportunities and constraints of both a social and economic nature, giving rise to more immediate and realistic aspirations and plans.

The Role of Migration in Shifting Social Imaginaries

The analyses thus far focus on how processes of development shape social structures and the social imaginary in such a way that urban-centric migration aspirations and behavior become more common. However, it is also important to give some attention to the ways that migration itself contributes to a shifting social imaginary and accelerates structural transformations. Migration is not just a consequence of social change, but also one of its drivers.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that the two strongest forces shaping imaginations of modernity are migration and the media. For those living in Wayisso, migration indeed is one of the strongest forces shaping the broader life aspirations of others (to Appadurai’s list, I would also add formal education, see Chapter Eight). The migration of some introduces new possibilities to others. Those who leave the village and access new income-generating opportunities in town are able to change their lives and the lives of their family in ways that others see and come to desire. Migrants ‘model’ new practices that others observe and then

consider imitating – especially when the first exceptional migration of a few generates conspicuous positive outcomes.⁶²

As migration behavior diffuses throughout a community, it becomes less of an exceptional practice and more of the norm. In some places, migration eventually becomes so commonplace that “people learn to migrate, and learn to desire to migrate,” and a ‘culture of migration’ emerges (Ali 2007; see also Kandel and Massey 2002; Cohen and Jónsson 2011). In Wayisso, one could argue a culture of migration exists relative to migration to town, but international migration is not yet so widespread that one would say it has become ‘culture.’ After the first few female trail-blazers left for the Middle East in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Chapter Seven), this migration corridor is now a potential pathway many young women seriously consider. If a culture of international migration abroad were to emerge, what is occurring now in the ATJK *woreda* illustrates what changing patterns of aspirations and behavior look like before a ‘culture’ of international migration takes root.

To examine how migration impacts the social imaginary, more specifically how the practice of migration shapes values, norms and attitudes of migrants and non-migrants alike, I explore two core mechanisms. First, I use the concept of ‘relative deprivation’ to show how migrant remittances introduce conspicuous inequalities into origin areas that generate new values and evaluations of lifestyles ‘here’ and ‘there.’ Once people do aspire to leave, it is also worth asking why some ‘there’s’ enter into people’s imagined futures more than others. Why do some women move to the Middle East, but no men from Wayisso move abroad? Why are Adami Tulu and Ziway far more common destinations than Bulbulla, another neighboring urban area in the same *woreda*? The general insight that spatial mobility tends to increase under conditions of modernization, as Zelinsky (1971) first claimed, may be true, but why certain destinations become more common than others requires examining how particular ‘migration systems’ take shape (Mabogunje 1971). For this, I adopt the concept of ‘mental maps’ from geographers, and show how the migration of others directs where people imagine their potential futures.

⁶² Learning and modeling others’ behavior also explains other important transitions: the emergence of farming, or going to school, for example. As detailed in Chapter 6, the practice of supplemental farming spread across the *woreda* within a relatively short period of time, sometime between 1967 and 1972, before any government intervention pushed them in that direction. Likewise for education: initially not everyone believed in the merits or benefits of formal education, but the government jobs and steady forms of income to which it gave access showed the potential of education as a pathway into another kind of future. Eventually, more people began to enroll their children, even girls, introducing a wide gap in educational attainment from one generation to the next (see Chapter 8).

Relative Deprivation

Another way to examine changing aspirations is to ask, what are the origins of discontent? What causes someone to be dissatisfied with their current conditions? One might observe the question assumes that people are sometimes satisfied with their local conditions. Perhaps they never are and always seek change. But we do not always see abrupt transformations in the kinds of lives people pursue and live. Long periods of relatively consistent ways of living can shift suddenly in a single generation. As this case study has illustrated, transformations in lifestyles shifted from semi-nomadic pastoralism to agrarianism to urban ‘jobs’ in just four generations. To understand the relatively sudden shift to urban areas, illustrated in the family trees in Chapter Four, we have to ask how people come to see other places and ways of living as *better*.

Some might argue that the desire for change, for continual progress, is the very essence of the modernity (see Berman 1983). After all, discontent fuels the capitalist system. As Streeck has argued, “a highly promising approach to the study of contemporary capitalism would focus on consumption and the evolution of consumer ‘needs’, or better: desires. Here in particular, dreams, promises and imagined satisfaction are not at all marginal but on the contrary central” (2012: 10). Streeck shows how human needs “are not fixed but fluid and socially and historically contingent” (2012: 10). Scarcity is a taken-for-granted condition that acts as the cornerstone of contemporary political economy (Streeck 2011; 2012). Needs are dynamic, and what is seen as ‘necessary’ for life is to a large extent socially defined.⁶³

There are deeper questions that could be addressed on human nature and our capacity for discontent, but there is one concrete way in which migration fuels a sense of discontent among those who remain. This is through what social scientists call “relative deprivation,” the idea that subjective evaluations of well-being or deprivation are made in relation to a reference community, rather than any ‘absolute’ criteria (Lazarsfeld 1949: 388; Stouffer et al 1949). Stark and Taylor (1989) applied the concept to explain international migration dynamics from Mexico. They showed that even when controlling for absolute income gains, the probability of participating in international migration to the United States is directly related to a households’ relative deprivation, that is, their income relative to a reference group. Relative deprivation, as a motivating force in migration, suggests that individuals and families are not motivated to better their lot in absolute terms; rather they evaluate their current conditions and seek to

⁶³ Although, Streeck applies his analyses and arguments to rich capitalist societies, the point remains even in poorer settings.

improve them relative to what they see in their community, or reference group. The implication follows that in communities where incomes are universally low, migration aspirations will be lower than in areas where income-inequalities are wider and more conspicuous, even if average incomes are overall higher.

In Wayisso, the remittances sent home from migrants in town or young women in the Middle East are visible to neighbors – through the construction of a new home (see Figures 55 and 56), in paying the tuition fees for a sibling’s private education, by moving a parent to town – fueling a sense of relative deprivation among households who do not have a migrant elsewhere. De Haas (2003) found a similar reality in Southern Morocco; socioeconomic divisions often lay between households with a migrant abroad and households without, what he terms the migration ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ Through the visible changes remittances bring to the lives of migrants and their families, internal and international migration enters into what geographers have referred to as the ‘mental maps’ of others (Fuller and Chapman 1974), a possible pathway in their imagined futures. Young women who aspired to go to the Middle East would often mention someone they knew who was able to “change their life,” who inspired them to follow a similar route.



Figure 55. A Traditional Home in Wayisso



Figure 56. A New Home in Wayisso, Built with Migrant Remittances

Expanding Mental Maps

Imagined futures and actual migration behavior are directed along particular routes, often the migration corridors others traversed before them. Many young women in Wayisso, for example, imagined their futures in Wayisso, in Adami Tulu or Ziway, or in the Middle East. Few seriously considered Addis Ababa, although they certainly knew it existed, and even fewer seriously considered Europe or America. Often Europe and America were considered the same distant place and referred to interchangeably. As ‘mental maps’ expand, they do so unevenly – not in a simple jump from the local to the global, but in gradually widening horizons with jutting nodes in perhaps unexpected places.

The act of seeing someone leave, noting where they go and what types of change that migration brings to themselves and their families, expands the horizons of those considering their future options. This observation of others’ behavior explains the emergence of migration systems out of Wayisso and within the ATJK *woreda* more generally. For example, the young women who left Wayisso for the Middle East often went to Beirut first, because this is where other women from the *woreda* had gone. Only after leaving, and connecting to a wider network of people with migration experience, would they learn that greater incomes could be had in Dubai or Saudi Arabia. Jaa, for example, recently returned from Beirut, where she worked for a “nice family” for 2500 ETB per month, a higher rate than the average pay in Beirut. Jaa aspires to leave again but this time she plans to go to Jeddah. “I wish to return to an Arab

country, but not Beirut. [...] In other Arab countries, the pay is better.” In Jeddah, they pay around 7000 ETB per month, she told me, and for those who know Arabic, some 9000 ETB per month. “So I have decided to go to Jeddah. But in Jeddah, with the Muslim families, you have to cover your whole face. You only open your eyes. This would be very difficult for me!” Having already left once, Jaa is more aware of the working conditions, payments, and possibilities across different destinations. Through her migration, her mental map expanded and imagined futures and aspirations shifted accordingly.

The same dynamics influence internal migration trajectories as well. Concerning in-migration into the *woreda*, I spoke with many young women who had moved from more distant rural areas of Oromiya or the SNNPR to work on the flower farms in Ziway. For these internal migrants, the move to Ziway can feel as momentous as a move abroad, and their migration decision-making is strikingly similar to those who leave for the Middle East. Many young women came to work at *Sher* when education was no longer an option for them – either because they failed their exams or their family wanted them to marry. Social networks also played a role; many left because, as one young woman said, “other girls from our village had gone to work at *Sher* and told us that there is work at *Sher*. There is money.” Because *Sher* is a foreign-owned company, they expected higher wages than an Ethiopian company. They came at a moment of transition in their life-course and shared the same hopes as those who go abroad: to earn enough money to “change my life.”

Once at *Sher*, however, many young women would turn their gaze to the Middle East. Dissatisfied with the difficult work, low pay and the high costs of living in Ziway or Adami Tulu, they were unable to save and invest in a better future, even if the income they generated did help alleviate the dire difficulties of poverty. After working at *Sher*, young women came into contact with others who shared information about other and better migration opportunities elsewhere. After Ziway, they turned their gaze to Dubai (see Schewel 2018a). Fayine, for example, from a rural area in Southern Oromia, is one such woman. She was working at *Sher* for only a few weeks but already had plans to leave. She said the greenhouses are sweltering and the thorns prick her hands. “Rather than burning here at *Sher*, it is better for me to leave Ethiopia and work in an Arab country.” She knows one girl who went to Kuwait and really “changed her and her family’s life.” She plans to do the same.

For most families in Wayisso, in the hierarchy of destinations, Ziway was at the top. As one young man in Wayisso explained, “No one is going to move to Bulbulla or Adami Tulu hoping that there will be a change. They go there for the sake of education, because there is no high school here in Wayisso. They may go for the market. But if they leave Wayisso, they

prefer Ziway. Not Adami Tulu or Bulbulla.” “Why?” I asked. “The capital city of Ethiopia is Addis. For the people around here, Ziway is like the capital city. They think about it like this, so they prefer Ziway.”

The mental maps of young people with higher levels of education usually include wider horizons. Most had lived in Ziway for their secondary schooling, and for those who had attended university, they had moved to larger urban centers like Jimma, Adama or Addis Ababa. Once there, Ziway was no longer the “capital city.” Migration aspirations were reoriented towards larger urban centers within Ethiopia. They also became more aware of distinctions in international destinations — of the risks of irregular migration to Europe, the difficult working conditions in the Middle East, or the possibility of applying for a Diversity Visa for the United States. Returning to our findings from the *Young Lives* project, young people in rural areas more often imagine migrating to smaller or regional urban centers (see Figure 57). In fact, the difference in aspired destinations between rural and urban residents is most striking for *woreda* centers, like Ziway.

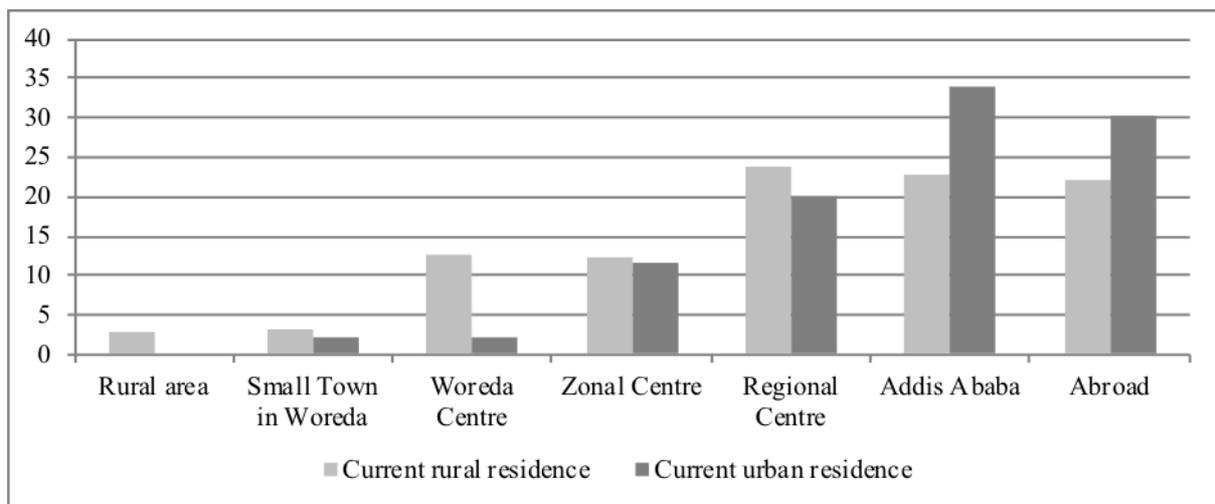


Figure 57. Most Likely Migration Destination (%) by Current Residence

Source: Young lives study Ethiopia, fourth round, 2013/2014, older cohort (n = 823). Reproduced from Schewel and Fransen (2018a, 573)

Conclusion

Urbanization is not just a political, economic, or demographic process. It entails an ‘urbanization’ of the social imaginary: the gradual displacement of values, norms, and attitudes that sustained rural ways of living with values, norms and attitudes that support the social and economic systems of ‘modern,’ urban-industrial society. This chapter narrated how people from Wayisso describe the corresponding transformation of the ‘good life.’ The good life used to be

a rural one, measured in cattle, milk and butter, and the towns were places for the poor. Today, the opposite is true. The village has become a place of poverty, stagnation and struggle, while the city offers the promise of change in one's material and social circumstance. The city is the place of the 'good life.'

It is interesting that the good life never became an agrarian one in Wayisso. People never spoke about farming in that way. The good life was pastoral, until it was not, and then it was urban. This suggests that the transition to the city is of a different nature than the transition into agriculture. Changing aspirations did not drive the transition into agriculture. As Chapter Six detailed, farming was a livelihood pushed by the state's development agenda, and families were initially reluctant to settle into it. But the transition to the city is driven more by aspirations than it is actual opportunity. Aspirations to move to town have shifted faster than capabilities to do so, giving rise to a new existential experience for many non-migrant households: 'involuntary immobility,' the feeling of being 'trapped' in the village (Carling 2002).

The urbanization of the good life means more people aspire to live in town. What is particularly interesting in this region of Ethiopia is that migration abroad is not yet a widespread aspiration among young men. Most hope for an urban future in Ethiopia. Those who aspire to go abroad – most often the young women who plan to leave for a few years to work in the Middle East – do so in order to invest in an urban future in Ethiopia. To understand why the aspiration to migrate abroad emerges, then, it is essential to understand the urbanization of the social imaginary, the relocation of the good life from the rural to the urban, and the costs entailed in realizing a rural-urban move. Migration to the Middle East is a short-term, long-distance migration strategy to achieve a long-term, short-distance rural-urban resettlement.

However, a general urbanization of the social imaginary, and in particular of the 'good life,' does not imply that everyone imagines or aspires to the same future. Individuals adapt their immediate aspirations to the actual capabilities they have to realize a 'good life.' As Yomen and Bilisuma's stories illustrated, aspirations shift over time towards more 'realistic' pursuits, towards bettering their immediate circumstances, even if this entailed accepting a rural future. Furthermore, even if almost all agree that the good life is no longer in rural areas, different generations may not agree about the universal value of 'urban life.' Older generations, for example, lamented the ways in which 'urban youth' were corrupted by drugs or laziness; younger generations lamented the 'backwardness' of their parents, attached to the work they knew and unable to adapt to urban ways. Similarly, people may have different ideas about where, exactly, the good life is, even if they agree it is no longer in the village. For example, Ziway is like the 'capital city' for many in Wayisso, and the flower farms are worth migrating

to for young women from more distant rural areas. However, for those living in Ziway, particularly those with higher levels of education, aspirations can shift towards larger urban centers. The same place some aspire to leave, then, may be the aspired destination of others.

Migration plays its own distinct role in the urbanization of the social imaginary. In Wayisso, how people perceive the world is shaped by their, or others' migration. Migration expands the mental maps of migrants, as well as the mental maps of those they leave behind. When some people leave, people take note of where they go, and a new 'there' enters their social imaginary. Those who migrate, whether internally or internationally, share information and income with those living in the village, thereby constructing new pathways in people's mental maps and imagined futures. Fueled by a feeling of relative deprivation, as well as growing awareness about new kinds of lives elsewhere, more people aspire to leave. And for the migrants themselves, whether those who move to urban areas for higher education or work on flower farms, or those who go to Beirut as domestic workers – these migrants tap into information and networks that further expand their mental horizons. New destinations and opportunities emerge as possibilities in their imagined futures. This mobility of the mind (Zelinsky 1971) proceeds hand-in-hand with actual moving behavior.

Understanding this shift in the social imaginary has implications for migration behavior in the future. Already, values, norms and attitudes are shifting in ways that will encourage more migration: valuing new forms of consumption or higher levels of education; changing gendered norms that increasingly embrace the economic contribution, education, and spatial mobility of women; and new attitudes towards work that are oriented around incomes and economic *change*.