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To cite this article: Tanya Zack & Yordanos Seifu Estifanos (2015): Somewhere else: social connection and dislocation of Ethiopian migrants in Johannesburg, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, DOI: 10.1080/17528631.2015.1083179

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1083179

Published online: 11 Sep 2015.

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Somewhere else: social connection and dislocation of Ethiopian migrants in Johannesburg

Tanya Zack and Yordanos Seifu Estifanos

Planning Department, School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; University of Oldenburg, European Masters in Migration and Intercultural Relations (EMMIR) Consortium, Oldenburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

The meaning of personal relationships for Ethiopian migrants to Johannesburg is shaped by individual connections, by imported social networks that are adapted in the host city, and by the particular conditions of livelihood creation in the emerging Ethiopian entrepreneurial enclave of ‘Jeppe’. In their migration individuals experience both rupture and reconnection – with relatives, as well as through relationships and networks that constitute social capital in Johannesburg. The social world of Ethiopian migrants in this entrepreneurial enclave is complex. Many social connections and dislocations are affected by the life choices in which income generation and economic relations are the primary aim and social relations are necessarily secondary. Others are influenced by the strength of informal social networks that serve the needs of Ethiopian migrants. And, far from ‘here’ and ‘there’ being connected through the use of technology and advanced connectivity, ‘home’ and Johannesburg are experienced as quite separate and different places.

KEYWORDS

Jeppe; Ethiopian migrants; Johannesburg

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of personal (and not-so-personal) relationships for Ethiopian migrants to Johannesburg is shaped by individual relationships, by the imported social networks that are adapted in the host city, and by the particular conditions of livelihood creation in Johannesburg.

In their move from Ethiopia to Johannesburg individuals experience both rupture and reconnection – with relatives, as well as through relationships and networks that constitute social capital in Johannesburg. To explore these experiences of social disconnection and connection, interviews were conducted during 2014 with 22 Ethiopian migrants in the inner city of Johannesburg in ‘Jeppe’ – an area that is an emergent ethnic entrepreneurial enclave.

DuFoix (2008) has postulated that migrants use a number of approaches to manage proximity notwithstanding distance through. He intimates that the Internet and other communication technologies have created the possibility of making distance independent of time, that is, have enabled the possibility of achieving ‘here’ and ‘there’ at the same

CONTACT Tanya Zack tanyazack@icon.co.za

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time. This paper in part interrogates the experience of Ethiopian migrants to Johannesburg in managing proximity through the use of technology in order to explore the ease or complexity of such a dual presence for these particular migrants.

The interviews relied on a random selection and the willingness of respondents. Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions were posed to interviewees, and in most cases interviews were conducted in the home language of interviewees.¹

In terms of the experience of leaving, the questions focused on who migrants had ‘left’ behind, on who they had followed or brought to South Africa, on who they missed, and on how they maintained contact. The technologies used were also explored. They were asked what important life experiences they had personally had while in Johannesburg or what they had been absent from while in Johannesburg and how the separation from home, at these times, had been experienced and managed.

In terms of social experiences in Johannesburg they were asked who their community was and what formal and informal social structures they were affiliated to. They were asked about their experiences of support and of social life and about the comparisons between their social worlds in Johannesburg and those back home. They were asked to reflect on how their migration had impacted on their families.

The findings of these interviews are narrated below. However, before moving onto their stories, this paper describes the migrant situation of the respondents and of the research context.

**Background**

**Drivers of Ethiopian migration to South Africa**

South Africa is a major destination country for African asylum-seekers and migrants aspiring for better opportunities. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated on its website that in 2013 South Africa hosted 67,500 recognized international refugees and 233,100 asylum-seekers, making it the country with the largest single concentration of urban (non-camp) refugees and asylum-seekers in Southern Africa (UNHCR 2014). Although most migrants to South Africa are from Southern African countries, there are also large numbers of migrants from East Africa, particularly Somalia and Ethiopia (IOM 2013).

[But] it is more than likely that no one knows how many Ethiopians, Somalis and Kenyans journey to RSA through irregular means each year. Like that of other irregular, illicit and clandestine activities, information on smuggling is not collated. (IOM 2009, 7)

Ethiopians are amongst the most significant of the migrant populations that have become established in South Africa, and particularly in Johannesburg. While much of the immigration from Ethiopia is undocumented and irregular (Kanko, Bailey, and Teller 2013), thus far at least three migration drivers have been identified. The first recent noticeable migration of young Ethiopians to South Africa came about in the early 1990s with the coincidence of the fall of the military Dergue regime in Ethiopia and the rise of democracy in South Africa, particularly noticeable beginning in 1991 (Messay 2005; Sinedu 2009).

However, the fact that the ‘Kembata-Tembaro’ and ‘Hadiya’ ethnic groups from southern Ethiopia dominate the migration to South Africa begs further explanation, as...
individuals also played a role. Although the role of individuals in establishing international network migration is rare, it is not totally non-existent. Jacqueline Hagan describes the role of an individual in instigating and perpetuating the Mayan Migration to Houston (Hagan 1998), and a former Ethiopian ambassador to South Africa created job opportunities for some youth from his Kembata-Tembaro birthplace in the early 2000s (Kanko, Bailey, and Teller 2013). These youth found job opportunities around major South African cities such as Johannesburg and Pretoria, worked there for some years and then returned home with the money they saved. Their apparent success has motivated other youths in the area, thus creating a feedback loop among former migrants, return migrants, and potential migrants as assumed in the networks theory of migration. The theory claims that once started, an established social network perpetuates migration and reproduces more migrants over time and space, even when opportunities at the receiving end are exhausted (Massey et al. 1998). Human smugglers are also a key factor in expediting migration into South Africa.

A further wave of migration was evident following major events in Ethiopia and South Africa. The politically unstable period in Ethiopia leading up to and following the third-round of national elections conducted in 2005 led some Ethiopians to South Africa (Kanko, Bailey, and Teller 2013), while the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa attracted others. Many of the young Ethiopians who came to Johannesburg in these waves of migration and who continue to enter the city, find themselves in ‘Jeppe’.

‘Jeppe’ – Johannesburg’s ‘Ethiopian Quarter’

The context for this enquiry is ‘Jeppe’. Located in a north-eastern segment of inner-city Johannesburg, ‘Jeppe’ is a retail area that has been created and expanded over a 20-year period, mostly by Ethiopian migrants (Zack 2013). These migrants have transformed what were unused and underutilized office buildings into a plethora of small shops and stalls, predominantly selling discount fashion and footwear imported from China.

Medium- and high-rise modernist buildings have been appropriated for this retail use and function as internalized shopping centers. The enterprise of these migrant entrepreneurs has stretched over many buildings on more than six full city blocks and has extended down many streets in the inner city.

In addition to the dominant offering of low-cost clothing and shoes, home ware products, groceries, and mobile phones are available in ‘Jeppe’. Shoppers to this precinct are hawkers who on-sell goods in neighboring former black townships, in rural areas of South Africa and in towns and villages of sub-Saharan Africa. They buy both small quantities and bulk amounts of goods in ‘Jeppe’. The goods are sourced from Chinese wholesale merchants who mostly operate from warehouse-type shopping centers.

‘Jeppe’ has matured from a place in the early 1990s where a few ground-floor shops began to be occupied and subdivided by Ethiopian merchants. Over the following years spaces within buildings were incrementally converted into retail spaces, to what is now a retail cauldron dominated by thousands of mostly young Ethiopian male migrants. Over time the demand for Ethiopian music, clothing, spices, food and coffee in the area has increased. Many buildings now offer these goods as Ethiopian migrants cater to the needs of fellow migrants. In addition, social institutions offering particular or
community-wide needs, whether for security, political activism or welfare exist in the area. Business, travel, and monetary services are also present.

These responses to the growing ethnic enterprise in the area suggest some mimicking of an ethnic enclave. However, while the success of ethnic entrepreneurialism in ‘Jeppe’ does rely both on the size of the ethnic and consumer populations – preconditions for ethnic enclaves, as noted by Aldridge and Waldinger (1990), it is not primarily driven by a dependency on an Ethiopian customer base. Wilson and Portes (1980) also describe a dependency on ethnic customers in the early stages of the development of ethnic enclaves. By contrast, most Ethiopian entrepreneurs in ‘Jeppe’ rely on a customer base that is external to this community. The clustering of Ethiopian entrepreneurs in ‘Jeppe’ is more important for the social capital role it plays than for its role as a consumer base (Zack 2015).

Experiences of disconnection and connection

The promise of South Africa

Most Ethiopians cite limited economic opportunity at home as the main driver for their migration (IOM 2009; Gebre, Maharaj, and Pillay 2011). Some potential migrants even noted that they would prefer to migrate to South Africa than to complete their studies at home, noting that education is not their final destiny (Kanko, Bailey, and Teller 2013).

In this regard Tadiwos Hailemariam was no exception. His family was extremely poor and his sole aspiration was to work in a government institution in Ethiopia as a route out of poverty. He studied hard and focused only on this ideal. One day, however, his hope shifted toward migration. He saw a recording of a televised sermon being shown in a petty shop in his village. A pastor was preaching in South Africa and Tadiwos Hailemariam noticed that the Ethiopians in the scene looked rich and healthy. He also heard stories of Ethiopian migrants’ success in South Africa and saw pictures that these migrants sent home – of themselves posing with (their) cars. These images gave him new hope, and he immediately started making a plan to go to South Africa.

Disconnection and reconnection

Like many other young men Tadiwos Hailemariam would leave his family and head south. He would follow his elder brother on a well-trodden route in a culture where the eldest child carries the responsibility for contributing to the family well-being and is thus the most likely to migrate first. Kanko, Bailey, and Teller (2013) found that a high proportion of migrants from southern Ethiopia to Johannesburg were first borns in their families and that they provided experiential information to younger siblings to migrate. Sara Alemu is also the eldest child in her family and came to South Africa for medical treatment. Afterwards she stayed on to study, and eventually married and settled in Johannesburg where she ran a shop in ‘Jeppe’. But her birth order not only burdens her with economic responsibilities. She also spoke of loss. As the eldest in the family, she had emotional responsibilities to hold the family together. Her absence was thus a big loss for the family.

While most migrants follow someone or join relatives, friends or people who are connected to someone they know, there are those who do not immediately enter a network. ‘I
arrived alone,’ said Mulualem Gebru who had been in Johannesburg for 14 years and had never been back to Ethiopia. In Ethiopia he was a soldier. He fled with no means of support and no money. He came straight to ‘Jeppe’. But he said:

when you come here you find people and they guide you. One Ethiopian guy gave me a place to sleep and food. He showed me how to sell belts and wallets. I bought from ‘Jeppe’, and I sold in townships.3

From there his progression was not an unusual route for Ethiopian migrants as he went on to buy a shop in a town east of Johannesburg and later opened an Ethiopian restaurant in ‘Jeppe’. His story also reveals a bittersweet disconnection and reconnection.

Mulualem Gebru was not married before he left Ethiopia. But he was in a committed relationship and he had a child of 18 months. He sent money home to his girlfriend and daughter every two or three months and at holiday times. And he often phoned them. But he also became involved in a new relationship in South Africa and six years after leaving Ethiopia he had a child with his South African girlfriend. Although the love relationship did not last, Mulualem maintains contact with his child. After 14 years in South Africa Mulualem brought his first girlfriend and his eldest child to Johannesburg. To his surprise his girlfriend was pregnant when she arrived. ‘She had fallen in love with another man and didn’t want me,’ he said:

But she also had my 15-year-old daughter with her so I was happy. What can I do? I cannot be angry. I had another girlfriend. Look for how many years I was here. She did not know if I would ever go back or we would ever be together. Now her new man has come to live here too. I see her as a sister. And I get to have my child with me a lot.

And his connection with his daughter had been maintained over many years, both through technology and through the strength of his family connections in Ethiopia.

We get along well and because I used to talk to her a lot and send photos. We were not strangers when she arrived. In Ethiopia she also had a lot of contact with my brothers and sisters so she is part of my larger family too.

Several interviewees talked of the many years of disconnection from close relatives and friends. Addisalem Gobena said she had been totally disconnected from her many friends who emigrated to the USA and to Europe. During his 12 years in Johannesburg intermediary4 Admassu Mulugeta has neither visited Ethiopia nor had visitors from home. He was unmarried but in a committed relationship when he left Ethiopia – and he had a daughter. His girlfriend has since died in Ethiopia and Admassu’s mother now takes care of his child. His father died three years ago. He is still unmarried. He says that in both times of loss the Ethiopian community in ‘Jeppe’ comforted him.

In spite of his eagerness to find opportunity in South Africa, Tadiwos Hailemariam talked of the wrench of leaving home. He said departing from his mother was traumatic. He had to be physically pulled apart from her. And seven years after his arrival he was processing documents in the hope that he could visit Ethiopia, and see his mother ‘while she is still alive’.

Perhaps the most extreme disconnection is that experienced by Ashenafi Mamo. An only child, he was born into poverty in the rural south of the Hossana region. He says he left home, as a young child, after his father died and his mother had no means of supporting him. After years on the streets of Addis he moved to Kenya where he managed to
get a low-paying job. He then came to South Africa where he lives a marginal existence of depending on favors and handouts of fellow Ethiopians. He last saw his mother 25 years ago and has no way of contacting her. ‘I don’t know if she is alive,’ he says:

Dereje Hussen summed up the complex experience of loss faced by those living away from their homeland: ‘Migration strengthens your physical endurance, but spiritually, you are weakened.’

Respondents also told of reconnection. It is less usual for married people to migrate, according to Kanko, Bailey, and Teller (2013). Embedded social ties and responsibilities generally bind them. Jemal Abdela, who was married when he migrated in 2000, said ‘I missed my daughter the most’. He came alone at the age of 31. ‘My child was two years old when I left and I was separated from my daughter and wife for more than 13 years. They came to Johannesburg in 2013.’ He spoke of the loss of the years lived apart. ‘The changes in my daughter made me feel that I am lost. But I give thanks to God that my family is beside me now.’

Phoning home

Like most international migrants Jemal Abdela maintained contact with his family through calling. Madianou and Miller (2011) have examined the importance of technology in communication for migration. The means to communicate with relatives and those from whom migrants are separated is pivotal to maintaining interpersonal connections. The smart phone age has made such communications easy and possible, once the initial costs are covered. This is true also for the respondents in this enquiry. Sara Alemu maintained contact with US and European-based friends through social media, mobile applications, and direct phone calls. But she said the connection to Ethiopia is ‘still weak’ and her main contact with her relatives is by telephone.

Most of Sara Alemu’s cohort of school leavers migrated out of Ethiopia. They live in the USA and in Europe and she maintains contact with them via Facebook, and the video call application Tango. In order to keep in contact with his family, Tadiwos Hailemariam bought mobile phones for each close relative, ‘both to keep in contact and because it’s a status symbol to have a phone there – they all wanted one’. Endriyas Desta talks on the phone and writes letters to his parents and his little sister in Ethiopia, ‘because my mother and father don’t have [an] email account’.

Marta Agonaifar said she talked and sent pictures to her family on her phone. She also uses WhatsApp. She used the service provider that offers the most competitive rates for connecting to Ethiopia from South Africa. And she often went to Internet cafes to communicate with her relatives or friends by email and Facebook. Addisalem Gobena avoided having a smart phone because of the threat of theft in Johannesburg, and so did not use mobile phone applications to contact her family. ‘Cell C is relatively cheap,’ she said of her service provider. ‘With R25 I can call home.’

Following others

Following the networks theory of migration that define migration in terms of the interpersonal ties that connect migrants in networks of friendship, kin and shared origin (Massey
et al. 1998), respondents were asked about their experience of bringing or following friends or relatives. Dereje Hussen said a few friends followed him when they heard of his success. Also, Helen Zewde followed her brother to South Africa. She came six years ago and her brother paid for her trip. He also found her a job in a shop in ‘Jeppe’ and helped another sister to go to school because of the remittance he sent home.

Most of the migrants either followed older siblings or brought younger ones to South Africa. Some of them followed their relatives or friends, and others come without knowing someone, but find one in South Africa. And has any relative or close friend joined Sara Alemu? In spite of her role as the first born, and the roots she is apparently planting in this city through employment and marriage. ‘No one came to join me, and never will I let anyone to come,’ she says of Johannesburg – offering the first glimpse of the complexity of this particular city as a place of arrival.

**Social capital in Johannesburg**

Social institutions are part of this social capital in ‘Jeppe’. Amel Yimer (2012) compares the Ethiopian quarter in Johannesburg with Ethiopian enclaves elsewhere in the world and notes that Ethiopians bring to these spaces a strong sense of tradition as well as centuries-old institutions that are recreated in the host society. Her research examines transformations that occur in Ethiopian social institutions when brought into South Africa. She explores the workings of two social institutions that emanate from Ethiopia: Idirs or funeral clubs and Mahbers or social clubs. These are the vehicles through which members essentially interact with one another and reinforce their belonging to that society (Yimer 2012, 14). She posits that when Ethiopian migrants leave their home country they leave a social environment, including such social institutions that sustain and validate them within networks of people including neighbors, friends, co-workers, churchgoers, etc.

Some Ethiopian migrants to ‘Jeppe’ access ethnically oriented organizations that range from trade and support organizations to support political organizations. These independent organizations offer various services or network opportunities to individuals, to particular trading groups, or to ethnic minorities.

When asked about social networks many respondents referred to churches, social clubs, and the practice of ‘helping one another’. They intimated that Ethiopians go to church together, celebrate weddings together, and create an Ethiopian way of life here. Eskindir Alemu said he had made many friends in Johannesburg and felt that fellow Ethiopians help one another in times of need. Ketema Teshome agreed: ‘When someone has problem with money we help; when he is sick we visit him.’ Besides, every denomination of Ethiopian church is represented in Johannesburg. Dereje Hussen commented:

As an Ethiopian wherever you go you try to keep your culture, religion and social ties. You cannot totally isolate yourself from society in the destination country. It is impossible. You may also live near Ethiopians so that you can communicate and spend time together. So you do recreate the social life back home here. But its never the same quality or depth.

Mulualem Gebru felt ‘the Ethiopian community is my community’. He had first-hand experience of community help when his mother died in 2011 and his father died six months before we interviewed him. He had not seen either parent since he left Ethiopia.
in 2000. He said that although he had not been a member of an Idir ‘they comforted me. They visited and sat with me to help me forget’. In Johannesburg, the period of mourning was shortened to a few days. ‘In Ethiopia they sit for longer but here you cannot afford that time because you must get back to your shop,’ he added. He also enjoyed socializing with Ethiopians:

At night I go to places where you can get Ethiopian food. There is a flat where we meet a night. It’s like a social club. Saratoga Gardens. It’s like being in Addis. That social time is good. Its time to talk football and politics.

But Misganaw Goshu said:

I don’t think I only belong to the Ethiopian community. I live with different nationals. South African, Zimbabwean, Malawian and others and these are all part of my community. I have two countries. Ethiopia and South Africa.

The talk of community was not universal. There are some signs of the geographies of home impacting on social networking in Johannesburg, as ethnic affiliations affect some interactions. Mulualem Gebru said, ‘someone from another ethnic group cheated me. But I didn’t get help from the elders. Some ethnic groups protect each other. Villages will protect each other here in “Jeppe”’. And Abraham Ashagre said he had difficulty getting orders for samples he brought to ‘Jeppe’ because he is one of the Tigrayans in ‘Jeppe’ who are associated, by some, to the ruling class in Ethiopia. ‘Others don’t support me,’ he said of his business dealings.

**Loss and longing**

Some respondents when asked what they missed most spoke of the country as a whole. Jemal Abdela said, ‘Ethiopia is my home. I am only here because of political problems. I am not happy about my life here. I miss everything, the rivers and the mountains.’ Ketema Teshome said, ‘Ethiopia is in my blood. On each and every celebration I miss home.’

Many respondents echoed a longing for home and loved ones that are associated with celebrations. With the simplification of important holiday celebrations to four times a year Dereje Hussen calculated that he had missed 40 special holidays while living in Johannesburg. Sara Alemu said it is her family tradition to celebrate Saint Gabriel. Several feasts and rituals were held in honor of the saint in her family home, and she missed these events. She had timed her few visits back home to coincide with the ritual. Even now, she said, ‘I am waiting for a friend to bring me special food that was prepared for the most recent Saint Gabriel celebration.’

‘I miss my kids the most,’ Mulatu Tekle said. He was 29 when he left his wife and three children in Ethiopia. That was nine years before we interviewed him. He had not seen any of them since. He talked to them on the phone and sent letters and photos. Marta Agonaifar did not mention her father until we had almost completed the interview with her. Then she said, ‘I miss my father the most.’ She told us that he had been deported to Eritrea in 1999. She had not seen him in 14 years. He returned to Ethiopia after she had left home. Marta had sent money to fund the costs of smuggling him back into Ethiopia via Sudan. ‘But I haven’t seen him myself,’ she said of her 77-year-old father.

Dereje Hussen said:
I left my family and my girlfriend behind. The last time I saw my family was ten years ago. I
missed all of them, my mom, my brother, my sisters … and also the neighbours. I miss the
Ekub, the Idir, the gatherings, and the way we celebrate religious occasions.

He said he missed his girlfriend the most. ‘But I have stayed here for ten years now, and I
have lost her already. She has married someone. No one can wait you for ten years.’

Arega Hailu had to flee Ethiopia as he was a political activist and under threat. His
approach to the loss he felt was to avoid things that reminded him of home.

I do not celebrate Ethiopian events. It’s too painful for me. I don’t want to remember things
from home. If I celebrate Ethiopian things I long too much, so I would rather not do that
here. I also don’t socialize here. Only my body is in South Africa. My mind is not here. I am
not at peace here.

**Life events in absentia**

Some respondents had missed out on both happy and sad life events since having left
Ethiopia. On the flip side, migrants’ relatives had also missed out on important
moments that the migrants had experienced in Johannesburg. ‘My sister died while I
was here and I could only phone home. It’s not a good way to mourn,’ said Dereje
Hussen. He also regretted the stunted mourning period in Johannesburg that results
from the urgency to get back to work. ‘Back home, you learn a lot while sharing and com-
forting one another. You share life experiences, beyond comforting. It is real emotional
sharing.’

Shemsu Shiferaw had missed the weddings of two of his sisters. He married an Ethio-
pian woman in Johannesburg and his family missed his wedding. Marta Agonafir said her
younger sister got married and she missed that event. She sent money for the wedding.
Misganaw Goshu said, ‘My dad passed away last year and my little sister got married and
there are more occasions that I have missed. Sometime I cry …’ He added, ‘I met my wife
during the Ethiopian millennium celebrations in Johannesburg and married her here.’

Tadiwos Hailemariam spoke of the pain of not having his mother at his wedding and
of how hard it was for her. He explained that weddings are special for Ethiopian parents.
‘It’s something they want to see. Parents may even push their children to ensure they
marry before they die.’ Addisalem Gobena agreed. She married an Ethiopian migrant
in Johannesburg. Her family missed her wedding. This especially upset her mother.
She explains that families put a lot of emphasis on their children’s weddings and it
was a big loss for them to miss this ceremony. She sent a video of the proceedings
and her family watched it and held a celebration in honor of her marriage while they
watched the video.

Some respondents also indicated that they had been able to maintain traditions trans-
nationally. Sara Alemu met her husband in Johannesburg. His parents back home sent
elders to her parents, as is customary in traditional marriage proposals. The families
agreed to the marriage terms. In Johannesburg Sara did not move to the home of her
would-be husband until their families had agreed on the marriage. Afterwards the
couple went to Ethiopia to celebrate their engagement and to register their marriage in
an Ethiopian court. Her family also celebrated her life events in absentia. Before Sara
gave birth to a child her female relatives celebrated the anticipation of the birth, in
Ethiopia, in the traditional way of entertaining and cooking for friends and in particular of sampling the porridge – genfo.7

Finding community – or not

Respondents were asked about the roots and networks they had established in Johannesburg. Belahcew Niguse was 20 years old when he came to South Africa. His brother later joined him. Belahcew is married to a South African woman and has two children. He felt that he had ‘grown up’ in South Africa. ‘Johannesburg is my community. I work with locals, with Zimbabweans, with Chinese and so on. I also help any Ethiopian guy who has a problem. Ethiopia is my first home, South Africa is my second.’

Endriyas Desta had been in South Africa for 11 years. At the age of 19 he followed his brother to South Africa. He was married and his wife joined him. But, they divorced and he married a Xhosa woman. Yet he said, ‘My community is the Ethiopian community. We help each other with money and ideas and so on. And I am Ethiopian. My home is Ethiopia.’

Zerihum Mengistu arrived in Johannesburg in 2003 at the age of 29. He married a South African woman and they have visited Ethiopia together. ‘She is my first point of comfort,’ he said. But he added that the Ethiopian community was very important to him, ‘we do anything to help with money, ideas, and information’.

Respondents reported mixed experiences of social networking in Johannesburg. Sara Alemu had made many friends, had a sociable husband who also had several relatives in the city, and she had an established social life. She felt that her relationships with fellow Ethiopians were often unstable. ‘Some Ethiopians here are unpredictable,’ she said. ‘Today they may greet you and tomorrow avoid you. Loyalty cannot be taken for granted.’ ‘I strategized,’ she added, ‘I made best friends with Zimbabwean and Malawian women. I taught them some Ethiopian cultural practices such as sharing food and making coffee ceremonies. They are my closest friends, for now.’ ‘Nevertheless,’ she sighed, ‘the social world at home is irreplaceable’.

Social capital in a work-dominated environment

The dominance of work in this Ethiopian entrepreneurial enclave is overwhelming. Much of the social capital in this area is informed and inspired by economic connections. Yimer notes that the proximity of businesses in the area where Ethiopian migrants spend long hours allows them a physical closeness to and ongoing interaction with one another. Yet she finds that ‘the relationships formed in this community do not extend to more than knowledge of one another’s basic background information such as city of origin, religion or marital status’ (Yimer 2012, 38). Indeed she notes that ‘(i)n the case of Ethiopian migrants who come to South Africa seeking better financial opportunities, their communal virtues are replaced by competition, cash, and conflict’ (Yimer 2012, 34). These findings were borne out in the interviews conducted for this study.

Dereje Hussen repeated his sense of having lost a lot by moving to Johannesburg. Some of this is the absence of shared personal history even with fellow Ethiopians.

There is nothing satisfying or that makes you happy here. You can smile but you are not 100 per cent happy. You live together and communicate with friends but it’s just superficial. Social
life here is not real. You are here to just work. And in your spare time, you talk to friends. You
gather and you talk but you are thinking of somewhere else.

He has a metaphor for this sense of inauthenticity. ‘Life here is like pp,’ (per procurationem)
he says, as if he could equate his life here with the act of signing on behalf of someone
else. Dereje’s major point of comparison between his hometown and Johannesburg is
the work style.

Back home you work Monday to Saturday morning. On Saturday afternoon you gather with
friends and enjoy life. On Sunday you go to church and go visit relatives. But here life is
busy. You work Monday to Monday. You can’t tell whether you are fulfilling your dreams or
not because every day is busy … you are not satisfied here. At home you can be satisfied in
small ways. Here it takes a lot to get satisfied. Even though we now hear that the cost of
living back home has increased and life is harder, but people support one another there.

Mululem Gebru said that as a soldier in Ethiopia he had lived in fear of dying. His stress
now is work focused. He said there were too many shops in ‘Jeppe’ and business was
tough. He was constantly worried that he would not succeed. Marta Agonafir said ‘Johannes-
burg is not home. We are only here to work and there is no social life. I have few friends
here. I only have people to talk to about business.’

Similarly, Tadiwos Hailemariam said:

When you come to Johannesburg money has power. It is what works here … You don’t
have real friends. Everyone’s relationships are mostly about money. And the competitive
and sometimes clandestine nature of the job and environment makes you cautious and
suspicious.

Social impact of risks faced in Johannesburg

The host city presented other obstacles to peace of mind. High levels of crime circumvent
social freedom in Johannesburg, said Tadiwos Hailemariam. ‘It is stressful. There are high
risks. You could be attacked if you go out at night.’ And so he says, ‘You have your freedom,
but you can’t exercise it.’

Eskindir Alemu added that crime against foreign migrants was a major threat. He said
the problem with being in South Africa was xenophobia – ‘if something goes wrong in the
country, all eyes are on migrants,’ he said. He always felt tense outside of ‘Jeppe’ and away
from his fellow countrymen. He said that even during the 2010 FIFA World Cup ordinary
people insulted him and other Ethiopians, telling them they should leave the country. He
said, ‘although business is good, we are not welcome here’.

Gemechu Bedassa owned a supermarket in a township west of Johannesburg. He was
attacked and shot there. ‘I was shot in both legs,’ he said. He had very little assistance.
Although he was taken to hospital and one bullet was removed, another one remains
in his leg and he is never given assistance at the state hospital he attends monthly. On
another occasion he was mugged. ‘I lost my front teeth,’ he says as he removes three
false teeth ‘they hit me in the face with the butt of a gun.’ Gemechu added ‘I think
Joburg is temporary. It’s not my home. I am scared to stay here. I want to go anywhere
else. To a sane country.’

A recent book on the xenophobic attitude toward migrants in South Africa indicates
that:
The simultaneous demonization of mobility and the practical impossibility of controlling it have elevated migration and migrants to an official and popular obsession in which they become a convenient scapegoat for poor service delivery, crime, and other social pathologies. (Landau 2011)

Regarding this, Addisalem Gobena said the crime in Johannesburg was frightening. ‘You are not even sure if you will reach home safely.’ Several interviewees echoed a sentiment that is often expressed in ‘Jeppe’ – that Johannesburg has a bad spirit. Addisalem says ‘they say there is a bad spirit here. I don’t know if its money or demons, or crime or corruption, but it has a bad spirit’. She wondered if some problems lingered for so long and then transformed into a bad spirit across the area. Another respondent made this point more directly: ‘this is a devil’s place’.

**Benefits and costs of migration for relatives ‘Back Home’**

In terms of the benefits of migration, most respondents talked of remittances they sent home. But these benefits were offset by the emotional hardship of separation. Tadiwos Hailemariam said that while his family had saved the expenses of taking care of him, they missed his love and company. They had benefitted financially as he sent regular remittances, and pays for fertilizer expenditures – a costly commodity back home. ‘I also brought my younger brother,’ he says, ‘so they are getting extra remittances from him’.

Addisalem Gobena said that by emigrating she became her family’s hope: “There is the hope that if my parents fall ill, I will cover medical costs. Also help them if something bad happens. So, it’s not just the money I can send them. More important is that they have a daughter in Johannesburg.”

She indicated that if necessary relatives could be brought to Johannesburg. ‘But,’ she added, ‘they miss us a lot. Whenever there is a celebration my mother will always say, “if only we were together”’.

Respondents reiterated that the monetary benefits of migration were neither automatic nor immediate. Shemus Shiferaw said that in the first five or six years of his life in Johannesburg his family didn’t benefit financially. It took him time to settle in business. He also said that because he is the eldest in the family he carried a lot of responsibility at home and his departure meant that the family lost those benefits. He had worked in a private company in Addis and had a good salary.

**Social freedom and vigilance**

Tadiwos Hailemariam said that the Ethiopian community moderated the increased social freedom in Johannesburg. He said, ‘You are watched by fellow Ethiopians and people will still admonish you if you misbehave. You can say “voetsek,”’ he said, evoking a South Africanism of reprimand usually reserved for chasing away a dog. But he added that the social control could not be escaped. It was necessary to watch each other and to keep people on track because, ‘it’s possible to fall out of the system if you do not keep working properly’.

Addisalem Gobena noted, ‘for various reasons you have to be reserved. Everyone knows the details of everyone else’s life here. There are no secrets. If you do well you will be identified in the community. And there are suspicions’, referring to the Ethiopian
community. ‘You may not dress up or display anything. The environment doesn’t allow that. We only dress up on celebrations and weddings.’

Sara Alemu hinted at rivalries and jealousies within the ethnic business enclave, ‘People watch whether you change in Johannesburg. If you show off or wear flashy clothes you can be identified for making a fortune here.’ And this vigilance was not restricted to fellow Ethiopians. She said the identification of Ethiopians as wealthy and the specific risk that this brings in a city with an astronomical crime rate is linked to the public display of success that was afforded Ethiopian migrants during the African Cup of Nations. Sara says Ethiopians who dressed well and celebrated lavishly at that time were identified and targeted as successful migrants.

Addisalem Gobena indicated that suspicions within the enclave of ‘Jeppe’ could become very personal. She said, ‘When you are away and alone you feel too much.’ She says social life is difficult.

It is difficult to build trust. Even with your husband. Because its not only between you and your husband. Others watch you. If you stay outside late at night they talk to him. They say why do you give her so much freedom. People interfere. Unless God gives you a good husband, relations here are very difficult.

The people who Addisalem met in ‘Jeppe’ were not friends beyond the workspace. ‘Even though we eat together, these are not real friends.’ She may also have been reflecting the gendered relations in ‘Jeppe’ where, Yimer (2012) finds, women are caught up in the day-to-day operations of running a business and unlike the men have limited access to socialize and to opportunities to interact on a non-business level with fellow Ethiopians. Addisalem expressed loneliness and a lack of trust in the community. She said she coped by ‘closing my door and praying’ and by receiving counseling from a church elder. She says her sister is her best friend.

**Gender violence and risk**

Helen Zewde described her experiences of abuse as a woman migrant. The shop owner she worked for was good to her. When he asked her to marry him she agreed. Her life changed dramatically. When she first arrived and worked in ‘Jeppe’ as a single woman she had been able to send money home to help her family. Her husband stopped that. He put restrictions on her, including banning her from using Skype to connect with her family. ‘So for years I couldn’t see what they looked like when I talked with them,’ she said. When she fell pregnant he became physically and verbally abusive. The abuse continued for two years and was often linked to his accusations that she was seeing other men in the workplace. When she was interviewed for this study she was filing for a divorce. She said the suspicion and the abuse was one of the difficulties of being a woman in this overwhelmingly male-dominated business environment. She added that she had few friends to turn to, as relations in ‘Jeppe’ were business focused. She said that after work hours she was alone, ‘It’s just me, my baby and God’.

Askale Dagnachew who came to Johannesburg alone at the age of 25 said living alone as a woman in Johannesburg and in the Ethiopian community was very tough, ‘When you need something they want something from you,’ she said of the pressure she was constantly put under for sexual favors. She wanted to return home.
Keeping up appearances

The interviews highlight the pressure to succeed that migrants experience both in Johannesburg and from their families in Ethiopia. Several respondents indicated that there was a family expectation that the migrant would achieve success in the host country and that it was a matter of honor to prove that success. It would be shameful to return home without having been materially successful. Addisalem Gobena said that her mother became ill and she and her sister visited even though they had not yet made money in Johannesburg. ‘We came here to make a better life and our family expects us to be in a better position,’ she said. ‘Many people stay abroad waiting to make a success, even though they want to return home,’ she said.

Conclusion

The narratives presented here demonstrate widely varied and individual experiences of Ethiopian migrants’ separation and of connection with relatives and others who they have left behind, as well as of social capital available and social connections forged in the host city of Johannesburg. While the narratives are not intended to offer generalizations, they do offer insights that highlight features of social disconnection and connection that are particular to the Ethiopian migrant experiences in the Johannesburg context.

The irregular nature of migration to Johannesburg as well as the route to regularization – that of seeking political asylum places heavy restrictions on the probabilities of migrants’ returning to or visiting Ethiopia once they have left. Respondents in this study expressed the palpable emotional rupture of loss of contact with home, family, and friends. Several respondents expressed the experience of living physically in Johannesburg while longing emotionally for home. Loss and severe disconnection with close relatives was reported.

There is evidence of a substantial network of formal as well as informal social institutions that are designed to import Ethiopian tradition and social apparatus to the host society. The centrality of religion in the tradition of Ethiopians has been accommodated and most migrants working in ‘Jeppe’ observe celebrations. All the major Ethiopian faith-based denominations are present in the city and are frequented by Ethiopian migrants. These are sites not only of worship but also of socializing and support. Formal institutions and non-profit community organizations have been set up in response to the needs of individuals or particular groups within the Ethiopian community. Traditional Ethiopian social institutions have also been imported and adapted for the needs of migrants. Funeral clubs and social clubs are common and the practices of these have been adapted to suit the life and work style of migrants. Meeting places are often not in the home and mourning periods are restricted to accommodate the need to return to work as soon as possible.

The web of social capital in this dense ethnically dominated enclave is thus significant. Yet respondents report that there are social ruptures within the space that undermine the support possible in this area. A sense of disconnection within the broader network of connection was evident as people spoke of loneliness and mistrust. The social capital is further influenced by the overwhelming role of ‘Jeppe’ as a place to make money. This dominates all social interaction within the Ethiopian enclave and makes this it, in the first instance, an entrepreneurial enclave. There is enormous competition and high economic risk in the
saturating entrepreneurial enclave of ‘Jeppe’. Thousands of small-scale traders are vying for the same goods and the same customers. In this cauldron of near-perfect competition the risks of failure are extreme. There is a transparency of information in this economic cluster where business operates in small highly visible shop fronts. There are few business secrets. And social interaction is constrained by the features of business interaction that include competition and suspicion, which, at times, turn into conflicts among these migrant entrepreneurs. This latter point has been raised in research on migrant entrepreneur in other contexts (nDeon et al. undated).

The move to a more modern context of Johannesburg did not necessarily offer respondents unqualified social freedom. Respondents expressed both the pressure to conform and the freedom not to abide by strictures of Ethiopian society in Johannesburg. High levels of economic, social and personal vigilance amongst fellow Ethiopians were noted and respondents reported widespread suspicion amongst fellow Ethiopians. Mistrust is linked not only to business competition but also to vigilance over displays of wealth and to patriarchal practices toward women.

The context of Johannesburg impacts on social connection. Crime and the threat of xenophobia loom over the lives of migrants. Socially the danger of being mugged, robbed or killed limits migrants’ movement and socializing as it restricts movement and hours spent in the public domain. Migrants may opt for modest attire in order to lessen the risk of being targeted as successful and so threatened with theft.

In terms of the notion of dual presence the responses in this research do not support the idea that technology has eased the possibility of being both ‘here’ and ‘there’ at the same time. While it has undoubtedly enabled connection and degrees of continuity in relationship, technology has not translated into a sense of dual presence. Respondents speak categorically of Johannesburg and of their source country or neighborhood as distinct places. They convey a string sense of ‘home’ being irreplaceable. While several express the sense of a longing for Ethiopia the experience is more one of feeling split between two contexts rather than having integrated a co-existence of the ‘here’ and ‘there’. Home is decidedly separate and is the source and host contexts are ‘somewhere else’.

In summary, this research explored the nature of social networks that exist for Ethiopian migrants whose mainstay in the host city of Johannesburg is making money. The social world of Ethiopian migrants in this entrepreneurial enclave is complex. Many social connections and dislocations are affected by the life choices in which income generation and economic relations are the primary aim and social relations are necessarily secondary. Others are influenced by the strength of formal and informal ethnic social networks that serve the needs of Ethiopian migrants.8

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes
1. Research assistance in the form of some direct interviews and translation for some interviews conducted by Tanya Zack were provided by Abraham Tsegaye (at his request, his name has
been changed for the purpose of this paper). Yordanus Seifu conducted interviews in the home language of respondents.

2. At the request of most interviewees, the names of all respondents have been changed for the purposes of this paper.

3. Former black residential areas on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

4. In ‘Jeppe’ intermediaries earn a living by sourcing clothing samples from Chinese outlets to show to Ethiopian traders in order to obtain orders. They insert a small profit into the final sale amount.

5. An Idir is a funeral group that plays a supportive role to grieving relatives at a time of death through regular visits and through assistance with funeral and other arrangements.

6. Mahbers are social clubs originally connected to the Ethiopian Orthodox church and are vehicles for the monthly celebration of patron saints. Members meet at one another’s homes to feast and socialize.

7. Genfo is a stiff porridge served for breakfast in Ethiopia. It is traditional for relatives and friends to come together to eat genfo to celebrate the birth of a baby.

8. Interviewers: Yordanos Seifu (YS), Abraham Tsegaye (AT) and Tanya Zack (TZ).

References

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES
1. Tadiwos Hailemariam (male), interviewed by YS, 5 September 2014
2. Sara Alemu (female), interviewed by YS, 4 September 2014
3. Mulualem Gebru (male), interviewed by TZ, 11 September 2014
4. Addisalem Gobena (female), interviewed by YS, 28 August 2014
5. Admassu Mulugeta (male), interviewed by AT, 14 August 2014
6. Ashenafi Mamo (male), interviewed by TZ, 22 September 2014
7. Dereje Hussein (male), interviewed by YS, 26 August 2014
8. Jemal Abdela (male), interviewed by AT, 17 August 2014
9. Marta Agonafr (female), interviewed by TZ, 20 September 2014
10. Endriyas Desta (male), interviewed by AT, 13 August 2014
11. Helen Zewde (female), interviewed by TZ, 1 September 2014
12. Eskindir Alemu (male), interviewed by YS, 26 August 2014
13. Ketema Teshome (male), interviewed by AT, 14 August 2014
14. Misganaw Gosho (male), interviewed by AT, 13 August 2014
15. Abraham Ashagre (male), interviewed by AT, 17 August 2014
16. Mulatu Tekle (male), interviewed by AT, 14 August 2014
17. Arega Hailu (male), interviewed by TZ, 22 September 2014
18. Shemsu Shiferaw (male), interviewed by YS, 5 September 2014
20. Zerihum Mengistu (male), interviewed by AT, 15 August 2014
21. Matiyas Solomon (male), interviewed by TZ, 28 August 2014
22. Askale Dagnachew (female), interviewed by AT, 15 August 2014


