

The rocky road to success
Social and physical (im)mobility of young men in rural Ethiopia

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Abstract

The lives of young men in rural Ethiopia are often characterized by social and physical immobility. Many young men struggle to become independent adults as they are unable to attain social markers attributed to adulthood, such as steady employment and marriage (Prothmann 2019). As such these men often find themselves in a position of waithood: an involuntary position of prolonged adolescence (Honwana 2012). With meager opportunities to overcome this position, they face existential immobility: the feeling of going nowhere in life (Hage 2009). At the same time these young men encounter physical immobility as they live – often involuntary as well – in a rural area that lacks infrastructure and is thus poorly connected to nearby urban areas. This research describes how these young men in waithood live their lives in search of a way to get ahead in life.

Acknowledgments

This research is conducted in collaboration with the RAIN foundation and their local partner in Ethiopia, MetaMeta. I would like to thank everyone of the RAIN foundation and MetaMeta for making this research possible for me. I am especially grateful to Maarten, Lysanne, Frank and Nardos for giving me the possibility to do my fieldwork in Ethiopia. It has truly been a once in a lifetime opportunity.

During my time in Ethiopia, I have met so many wonderful people and I learned so much in such a short amount of time. My greatest acknowledgments go out to all my research participants, that took the time to talk to me and answer my many questions.

As my supervisor, dr. Nikkie Wiegink, strikingly articulated it: you are trying to describe a three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional report. I think there are various ways in which this thesis could have been structured. However, although nuances are incredibly important, I did want to create something that is readable at the same time. I therefore prioritized what concepts and definitions I wanted to work out extensively and which ones not. I hope that indeed, I have created a thesis that is engaging for its readers while still giving a complete picture of the lives of young men in Key Amba.

I would like to lastly express my gratitude to Nikkie. Writing this thesis was challenging for me and I would never be able to finish it without her. I want to thank her for her patience, kind words and guidance during these past months. It means a lot to me.

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Introduction

Every day, as I leave my home, I am a bit hesitant. Even after over two weeks I still have not gotten used to walking through the big crowd of young Ethiopian drivers that stands with their parked bajaj – a three-wheeled vehicle that is best described as a motor driven rickshaw – in front of the guesthouse where I am staying. As I make my way through the broad road – that looks more like a crowded and very chaotic parking lot – many of the men yell to me “Ferengi, ferengi!” which means foreigner in the Amharic language. It makes me wonder. Do these men have nothing better to do than being here all day and get excited over the same foreign girl day in day out? As time passes and I get to know some of these men I realize that indeed, there is not a lot else that these men can do. Being a bajaj driver means being able to work only a few hours per week and many of the young men seem to have no idea how to fill the rest of their time.

This thesis focuses on rural male youth in Ethiopia that struggle to become independent adults. It builds on ethnographic research on young men from Key Amba, a small rural *kebele* – a village – in Northern Ethiopia. Among these rural men, unemployment and underemployment rates are incredibly high. In this thesis, I define unemployment as not having a job or any income at all. By underemployment I refer to what Dooley, Prause, and Ham-Rowbottom call “inadequate employment”: meaning low-wage employment and/or involuntary part-time employment (2000, 421). The struggle that many young men from Key Amba encounter in finding ‘suitable’ employment, results for many in other struggles as well. As such, many men from Key Amba are unable to leave their parents’ house and to stand on their own feet. Because such common social markers of adulthood (Prothmann 2019, 209) are almost impossible to obtain for these men, they find themselves to be ‘stuck’ in a period of extended youth.

To describe the position that these men find themselves in, I use the concept of ‘waithood’: a period between childhood and adulthood (Singerman 2007). Whereas on the one hand the men are no longer children in need of care, on the other hand they are neither independent adults (Honwana 2014, 28). With meager chances of employment in and around Key Amba, most had little outlook on realizing a better future. As such, many of the “young” men from Key Amba I met were unhappy with their lives.

Although this thesis will further elaborate on the concept of waithood in chapter two, it is important to note that not just in Key Amba or Ethiopia, but all over the world people are struggling with involuntary prolonged youth (Honwana 2012, 6). I thus argue it is of subsistent

societal relevance to gain a deeper understanding of youth in a waithood and how they imagine to overcome this position. Since young men's struggles were prevailing during my period of fieldwork, I decided to focus on male youth. In the first chapter this choice will be explained further.

For this research, I relied heavily on Honwana's studies on waithood in Africa (2012). However, Honwana mainly stresses how youths that find themselves in the position of waithood, instead of passively lingering, are dynamic and creative in coming up with ways of being – whether engaging in daily survival strategies such as street vending or becoming involved in criminal activities (2012, 4). Although I do not deny her claims on the resourcefulness of youth, based on my findings I do argue that in sometimes the lives of youth in waithood can be characterized by passive waiting on their lives to change too. After all, how can you expect someone to be resourceful when there are no resources in sight? As I aim to sketch a complete picture of the lives of young men in waithood, this thesis includes this passive, waiting, aspect of young men's lives as well. I hereby aim to contribute to the literature on youth in waithood. In doing so, I build on Ghassan Hage's theory of 'waiting it out', 'existential mobility' and 'stuckedness' (2009), linking these concepts to youth and waithood.

Firstly, Hage argues that a viable life presupposes some form of existential mobility: "a sense that one is 'going somewhere'" (2009, 1). Hage defines the opposite, a sense of not going anywhere in life i.e. existential immobility, as 'stuckedness' (2009, 3). Secondly, waiting it out is different from waiting in general as it firstly, is always passive, and secondly, it always means waiting for something unpleasant to be over – whereas waiting in general can very well mean to wait for something to come (Hage 2009, 3). Young men from Key Amba that find themselves in a position of waithood often lack the sense of existential mobility, thereby finding themselves in a position of stuckedness that for some people can lead to waiting it out: waiting for this period of existential mobility to be over.

The lives of young men from Key Amba were not just characterized by limited existential mobility, but also by limited physical mobility. As their village was hard to reach and to leave, many spent hours every week in going up and down from Key Amba to the city by foot. Also, while many young men have the desire to migrate from their kebele to the city most were unable to engage in this form of physical mobility. Although already in 2012, Salazar and Smart argued in their article "Anthropological takes on (im)mobility that the literature is replete with metaphorical conceptualizations attempting to describe a various range of different physical mobilities" (2012, i). As such, I do not think I will contribute any new findings regarding physical mobility in this thesis. However, as (a lack of) mobility is intrinsically tied

to the lives of young men from Key Amba I argue it needs to be included in this thesis to provide a complete as possible picture of their experienced stuckedness.

Research question and structure of the thesis

This thesis aims to combine the concepts of youth, waithood and immobility. As such, this study answers the following research question:

“How do young men in Key Amba, Ethiopia, who find themselves in a position that can be characterized as waithood, move through this period in search of a way to get ahead in life?”

I operationalized this question in three sub questions, which represent the three empirical chapters of this thesis.

“What does it mean to be a young man in rural Ethiopia?”

“How is life in waithood experienced by young men in rural Ethiopia and how do these men attempt or imagine to overcome their position of waithood?”

“What role does physical mobility have in the lives of young men in rural Ethiopia?”

This thesis is structured as follows: the first part consists of the methodological note. Here I elaborate on my research methods as well as giving a more personal description of my fieldwork and how I experienced it. The first chapter, “Forever young”, focuses on youth. It starts by elaborating on the concept of youth and ultimately narrows its scope to male youth from Weldiya. This chapter also gives an extensive description of the research scape – thereby providing contexts on the circumstances that the young men I studied found themselves in. The second chapter, “Patience is a virtue” focuses on the position of waithood among youth and how young men imagine to overcome their position of waithood, i.e. how they imagine to attain existential mobility. Much more than in the first chapter, in the second chapter a lot of participant data is incorporated. The third and final chapter, “The road to Weldiya and beyond” focuses more on physical immobility. It covers the concept of mobility, as well as the road between Key Amba and the city and migration between the two. To conclude, I make ends meet by means of a section summarizing concluding thoughts.

Methodological note

As often is the case in qualitative research, this research has the goal of understanding, rather than quantifying the phenomena under study (Musante and DeWalt 2010, 47). Understanding waithood and how young men from Key Amba live their lives in search of a more tolerable life warrants an ethnographic approach. As the struggles that the young men from Key Amba face are complex, vary per person and are embedded in multiple systems an ethnographic approach is required in researching these (LeCompte and Schensul 2018, 41). As an ethnographer, I have taken the position that human behavior and the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific (LeCompte and Schensul 2018, 16).

For this research, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Ethiopia over the course of six weeks. Many young men from Key Amba spent a lot of their time in Weldiya; the nearest city to Key Amba. As such, I conducted my fieldwork in both Key Amba and Weldiya. By combining different qualitative research methods, I have gained a deeper understanding of young men from Key Amba and the position they find themselves in. Through observation as well as interviews and informal conversations with young men, governmental officials, older inhabitants of Key Amba and other people I met, I have collected the ethnographic data on which I have built this thesis.

I conducted this research in collaboration with the RAIN foundation. For a future project targeted at decreasing unemployment among youth in Key Amba they wanted to gain more insights on unemployed youth in the kebele. The RAIN foundation arranged a local contact person for me, Nardos, in the capital city, who in turn arranged my stay in Weldiya. However, to find youth from Key Amba I had to get to Key Amba first and that was not as easy as I had hoped.

The RAIN foundation has good connections to the ministry of agriculture in Weldiya, so upon arrival in Weldiya I had gotten appointed a new contact person that worked for the ministry. Meles was his name and he would drive me to Key Amba and be my translator, I was told. There were only two problems. Firstly, I did not speak Amharic and Meles did not speak English very well and as such the communication between us was difficult. Secondly, the four-wheel drive in which we were supposed to go up the mountain to Key Amba was out of order. I had been told it was impossible for me to go to Key Amba without guidance, so when Meles and I could not go there I faced a problem. Luckily I had made two friends that studied at Weldiya University, who connected me to Degife. Degife was a 32-year-old man and was

always dressed from head to toe in immaculate white. He worked as an English professor at the university of Weldiya in the linguistic department and he agreed to be my translator over the course of my fieldwork. However, he did emphasize how the working conditions for him would be very hard in Key Amba due to the long travel, the height and the heat. As such, he only agreed to go there one or two times a week. Whenever we went to Key Amba, Degife would arrange a bajaj to come pick us up in the early morning. Bajajs were the main means of transportation in Weldiya and outnumbered cars by far in the city.

Degife was my first entrance to the field and looking back I realize he has been my key informant. Degife not only knew the area of Key Amba, but it seemed like almost everyone in the area knew him as well. Whether it was due to his neat appearance, due to the fact he was accompanied by me – a ‘Western woman’ – or due to something else, everyone wanted to speak to him and as such speak to me as well. From the moment that I had done a few interviews and spoken to a few people, things started to go more easily. One young man introduced me to his friends and all of a sudden I did not have to search for research participants anymore.

A by coming benefit was that I learned that many of the men from Key Amba apparently spent a lot of time in Weldiya – where I lived. As such, I was able to meet them more often as Degife and I did not have to go all the way up to Key Amba.

Although Degife has been a great help during my research, working with a translator also had its downsides. Firstly, it was often hard to notice sentiments of research participants as we were not talking to each other directly. Secondly, Degife often used similar words or sentences in translating the answers of different people. It should be clear that almost all conversations and interviews I did were firstly translated by Degife and after that interpreted once again by me. As such, I only included quotes of my research participants if they either told me the quote themselves, or if I am fairly sure that the translation was sufficiently literal. For the latter category, I therefore mainly used quotes that were not only translated by Degife but that I ran through an extra check with my Dutch-Ethiopian research colleague, Beza. Although she did her research mostly in a different area, she was willing to listen to parts of my recordings to get the translations on point.

Even though I wanted to engage in participant observation during my fieldwork, I did not manage to do so like I had hoped for. The language barrier and the fact that I could not go to Key Amba by myself were partly the cause. However, as a blonde, western woman, it was impossible to fit in and ‘be a fly on the wall’. Instead, everywhere I went people turned their heads and often started to behave differently than before they had seen me. As such, I was very aware of my position as a white, young and unmarried woman. Whereas I believe this position

opened doors for me – every young man I approached was willing to take the time to talk to me, to meet up an extra time or to call his friends for interviews – I believe it may also have closed some doors. However, initially I was afraid that my position could have a negative effect on young men’s honesty on topics such as unemployment, income or living with their parents. Instead, the opposite was true. Overall, the young men that I spoke to were so open and they were willing to answer all my questions. Ethiopians like to praise themselves on their hospitality and I can only agree with that.

After a bit of a rough start of my fieldwork, I finally had the feeling I was beginning to make some deeper connections to some young men, I had learned some basics of Amharic and I felt at home in Weldiya. However, I had only spoken to one young woman yet. I called Degife and we agreed to have a ‘women’s week’ the following week, in which we would focus on finding female youth from Key Amba.

Then, suddenly I had to return to The Netherlands. Due to the global pandemic of the Covid-19 virus borders all over started to close and I immediately had to rebook my ticket to go home. Although my research focuses on young men, “no study of masculinity can be undertaken without paying attention to women and the relationships they collectively have” (Morell 1998, 629). Unfortunately, due to leaving the field early I have not been able to have conversations with young women. This is sad, because it would have contributed to the validity of my thesis if I had incorporated a study of females as well. Including young female participants in my research would have resulted in a more holistic view of waitthood among youth in Key Amba. Next to that, I did have some hope that over time I would be able to engage more in participant observation.

However, by combining my ethnographic data with an extensive literature study, I was still able to answer my research question. Upon returning home and structuring my gathered data, it occurred to me how the road from Key Amba to Weldiya had been a recurring theme in the conversations I had in Ethiopia. As such, I decided to include mobility and infrastructures in this thesis as one of the main concepts – although I had not planned this in advance of my research. This shows how by means of ethnography one can “[i]dentify and describe unexpected or unanticipated outcomes” (LeCompte and Schensul 2018, 41).

Chapter 1: Forever young

This research concerns youth in rural Ethiopia. But what is youth? When are you considered ‘a youth’ and when are you an adult? What does it mean for one to be youth in the 21st century? And what does it mean to be youth in Ethiopia? This chapter firstly describes the concept of youth. As will become clear in this chapter, age categories are not natural but very much formed by context (Mintz 2008, 93): one can be considered as young in one situation but as adult in another. After discussing the concept of youth, this chapter will subsequently narrow its focus to youth in Africa, followed by male youth in Ethiopia – and specifically young men in Weldiya and Key Amba. An overview will be provided of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts that these youths find themselves in, and where the category of youth is created.

1.1 Youth

Traditionally, in social and cultural sciences, youth or adolescence has been perceived as the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood (Honwana 2012, 13; Bucholtz 2002, 532). The anthropology of youth is a relatively young field of study (Bucholtz 2002, 525). Initially, youth was studied from an adult-centered perspective and merely perceived as a developmental or transitional phase (Bucholtz 2002, 533). This perspective emphasized the transition to adulthood, but thereby downplayed youth-centered interaction and cultural production (Bucholtz 2002, 525). However, in her work on African youth, Honwana argues that youth “is not only a transitional phase, but it also constitutes a here-and-now moment with particular experiences, practices, and concerns” (2012, 13). Bucholtz too, emphasizes that youth are cultural actors that not only respond to, but also shape cultural forces (2002, 533). Both of these statements are in line with a more recent development in the anthropology of youth, which focuses on youth as a cultural entity in itself (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006, 14). Within the social sciences - including studies on youth – there has been an ongoing debate for many years on the primacy of agency and/or structure (Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 461; Varelas, Tucker-Raymond and Richards 2015). In this thesis, I do not aim to contribute to this discussion in terms of to what extent young people’s lives are influenced by either social structures or their agency. However, I do agree with Bucholtz that although lives of youth are partially shaped by the conditions they find themselves in, they also shape their own worlds through social and cultural practices (Bucholtz 2002, 533). I thus study youth from a structure-agency perspective. Also, when studying young people’s lives, I propose that it is important to keep in mind that

indeed youth consists of people that are not yet adults and therefore find themselves in a transitional phase. However, it is also important to realize that there is more to youth than just a phase towards adulthood.

So, where does youth end and adulthood begin? When looking at official definitions one can see that there is no straight answer to this question. In the United States for instance, persons aged 15 to 24 are considered youths, while the Kenyan government uses the ages between 18 and 35 to describe this group (Mwaura 2015, 31). Hence, whether someone is considered a youth or an adult – by themselves or by their surroundings – depends more on contextual factors than the person's age. As such, youth is often perceived to be a 'shifter': a word whose meaning changes depending on the situation (Bucholtz 2002, 528; Durham 2004, 592; Honwana 2012, 12). The following quote by a research participant of Christiansen, Utas and Vigh's study on social becoming among youth in Guinea Bissau, Kenya and Lesotho, gives a striking example of the fluidity of the concept of youth and age categories in general:

“My father, if he wants me to do something, he calls me; ‘boy’ he says ‘go get me this... go do that’ and I cannot refuse (...) [but] If I need his help he says to me; ‘what, you are an adult now’ and he will refuse me” (2006, 11).

This quote illustrates how age categories are a social construct embedded within power relations and certain expectations.

Certain social markers or expectations, such as “standing on one's own feet, having a stable job, being married and having children”, are attributed to adulthood in many societies (Prothmann 2019, 209). Such social markers vary per context, culture and – not least – between men and women (Honwana 2014, 33; Honwana 2012, 8). Youth and gender are inseparably connected (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006, 13). Male youth and youth cultures however, have received most scholarly and public attention (Jones 2009, 3; Bucholtz 2002, 537). In her study on youth in Great Britain, Jones argues it is thanks to the news media that the term ‘youths’ brings young men in hoodies to mind, as the term tends to be male-specific but also laden with negative meanings (2009, 3). Many scholars consider youth culture to be a male phenomenon and some maintain that the purpose of youth cultures is to work out issues of masculinity (Bucholtz 2002, 537).

During my own fieldwork, male youth was very much in the foreground as well. While I saw young men – often in duos or in small groups – almost every time I went outside, I saw

very little young women around me. Also, in nearly all conversations and interviews I had – whether with Nardos, an employee of the NGO MetaMeta in the capital of Ethiopia, with Wodaj, the chairman of Key Amba, or for instance with Desta, a single mother with a little shop in Weldiya – when it came to youth, the focus was on young men and the problems they encountered in their lives. Honwana too argues that men in Africa often find themselves longer in the position of youth than women, who generally seem to assume adult roles of wives and mothers at a younger age (2012, 12). So, while acknowledging the gap in the literature about female youth cultures (Bucholtz 2002, 537), I have decided to focus on male youth and masculinity, as the presence and concerns about the position of young men in Key Amba were most visible and accessible to me during the fieldwork period. Additionally, this focus allows me to make an intervention in debates about youth, masculinity and waithood in Africa.

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1.2 Youth in Africa:

Initially, social sciences focused only on youth in ‘modern’ Western societies (Bucholtz 2002, 526). However, since the end of the 20th century, youth in Africa gained considerable scholarly interest (Burgess vii, 2005; Honwana 2012, 14). In his work ‘Global Shadows’, Ferguson argues that “Africa is inevitably characterized by reference to a series of lacks, failures, problems, and crises” (2007, 8). Since the 1980s, when scholarly and political interest regarding African youth started, much emphasis was on the youth’s problems and crises (Honwana 2012, 14). Popular themes have been youth participation in violent practices such as war and gangs (Abbink 2005; Vigh 2006; Honwana 1999), the threat of HIV/AIDS for youth (Honwana 2012; Leclerc-Madlala 2002; Swart-Kruger and Richter 1997), and youth’s exclusion from the labour market (Honwana 2012; Honwana 2014; Mains 2007).

As Christiansen, Utas and Vigh put it: to talk about African youth “is [to talk] about a generation of people who have been born into social environments in which their possibilities of living decent lives are negligible and in which many have found themselves stuck in positions of inadequate life chances and bleak prospects” (2006, 9). The statement of Ferguson that “[African] people appear as victims over and over” (2007, 8) obviously does not hold for all studies on African youth, but there certainly seems to be a trend. However, as I emphasized in the previous section, youth is not only shaped by the conditions they find themselves in, they also shape their own worlds. As such, one should be careful to deny African youth of their intentionality and agency (Abbink 2005, 2), thereby sketching an image of them as being

passive actors in a world designed by others (9).

Although I do not want to ‘victimize’ Africa and its (young) inhabitants, I do think it is important to acknowledge that in many African countries poverty, a growing competition for natural resources and the exponential population growth are of influence on the well-being of young people (Alfonsi et al. 2019, 2). Although these contexts apply to both young men and women on the African continent, each gender category has its specific challenges. For both male and female youth in Africa, one of the important social markers of being an adult is to start a family. Whereas marriage and motherhood remain the most important markers of adulthood for women (Honwana 2012, 25), traditional ideals depict male adulthood as synonymous with being a provider and a person of some authority (Honwana 2012, 27). A male adult in this perspective is “a worker, a husband, a father, and a contributing member of the community” (Honwana 2012, 28). Besides getting married, obtaining a job or some form of livelihood is an important marker of adulthood as well (Honwana 2012, 28).

As mentioned before, this study focuses on male youth, who are struggling to become independent adults and find themselves in an involuntary state of prolonged adolescence. They face unemployment, the inability to leave their parental homes, and difficulties to marry and start their own family (Honwana 2012). The specific hardship of male youth is illustrated by the common West-African term ‘youthman’, which does not have a feminine form (Honwana 2012, 12). Youthman refers to men who have not attained social adulthood, despite their legal adulthood (Honwana 2012, 23). When talking about male youth, we are inherently talking about masculinity. Similar to youth, masculinity is a social construct that is fluid, ambiguous, and different across cultures and contexts (Gutmann 1997, 387).

1.3 Youth in Ethiopia

With its lastly recorded 110 million inhabitants in 2018 (World Bank Group), Ethiopia is Africa’s second most populous country. As shown in figure 1, it consists of nine regions and even more ethnicities and languages, making the country highly ethnically diverse (Karbo 2013, 43). Oromo and Amhara are the two largest regions of the country and the main language in Ethiopia is Amharic – the original language of the Amhara region (Ziso 2018, 81). There were two features that many proud Ethiopians I met were eager to tell me. First of all, that Ethiopia is one of the oldest countries in the world. Second of all that it is an exception from most African

countries, as it has never ‘really’ been colonized. Italy tried to, but the Ethiopians were too strong I was told. However, Ethiopia’s history is also problematic and characterized by many conflicts, both within the country and with its neighbors Eritrea and Somalia. Although Ethiopia is now led by a democratic government and the current president even received a Nobel prize for his peace efforts (New York Times, 2019), the situation remains fragile and tensions easily rise (Ziso 2018). For example, in 2016, Ethiopia declared a state of emergency due to nationwide protests (Allo 2017, 137-138), in which young men played an important role.¹²

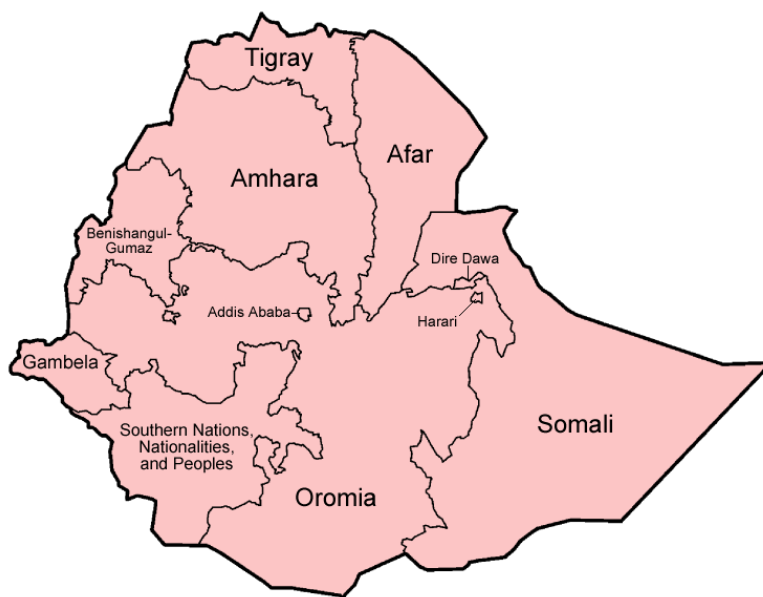


Figure 1. Ethiopia and its regions.³

The active role of young men in uprisings is not surprising, given their particular challenges such as unemployment, landlessness and poverty (Kosec et al. 2018; Mains 2007). Being one of the least urbanized African countries, most of Ethiopia’s population is dependent on – mostly small-scale – agriculture for their livelihoods (Alamirew et al. 2015, 1123). Increasing land

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/13/freedom-oromo-activists-geerroo-ethiopia-standstill>

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/25/world/africa/ethiopia-protests-prime-minister.html>

3 Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regions_of_Ethiopia

scarcity has posed a specific challenge for the new generation of rural Ethiopians (Bezu and Holden 2014). Exponential population growth and a land redistribution in 1975 resulted in less land left to be distributed among people born after the land reform (Bezu and Holden 2014). Additionally, since the beginning of the 21st century, the government has adopted neoliberal policies, which have made land acquisition more attractive for foreign investors (Alamirew et al. 2015, 1121). Insufficient rural job creation in the face of these land shortages threatens young people's livelihoods and may lead to rural-to-urban migration or intergenerational conflict (Crivello and van der Gaag 2016, 11).

1.4 Key Amba, Weldiya and male youth

Many young men from Key Amba spent a lot of their time in Weldiya; the nearest city to Key Amba. As such my fieldwork took place in both Key Amba and in Weldiya. Key Amba and Weldiya are situated in the Amhara region, around five hundred kilometers' northeast from Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa (Reta et al. 2019, 3). Although Key Amba and Weldiya are only a little over twenty kilometers away from one-another, I found the contrast between the two to be enormous.

During my fieldwork, I lived in a guesthouse in Weldiya, about 15 minutes walking from the city's main square: Meskele square. I experienced Weldiya as a lively city, albeit only during the daytime. From dusk till dawn, the city was exceptionally quiet and completely dark, except for the thousands and thousands of stars you saw when you looked up. As soon as the sun rose the city came to life as well; every day at 5:30 in the morning I was woken up by the prayer call of the imam from the nearest mosque. As I looked out of my window, I saw merchants open their shops or stall their wear on the streets, young men gathered on the piazza square, and bajajs lined up to pick up their first passengers.

At piazza square many young men would gather in the early morning, hoping to be chosen to do some daily labor. These jobs were 'simple jobs' in the informal sector, such as helping in constructions. Although the wage was very low, hundreds of men stood at the square every morning to offer their labor. In front of my window, right next to the piazza square, dozens of bajajs were parked with the young men driving them in it or next to it chatting to one another. During the daytime, the people of Weldiya amply compensated for the city's stillness during the nights: wherever you looked, something was happening. And whenever you listened, the continuous sounds of loud voices, the never stopping honking of bajajs and the bleating of goats

and sheep mingled together until I would almost not notice it anymore. Not only the people, animals and bajajs in Weldiya seem to be continuously on the move, and many of the buildings in Weldiya were in the works as well. The many high buildings – which were often still under construction while simultaneously seemed to be degrading already – defined the city’s look for a large part. The air was full of sand and dust – caused by bajajs, the construction of buildings and drought. The continuous hassle and ‘dirty’ air made me appreciate the trip to peaceful and quiet Key Amba even more.

Key Amba – literally translated to ‘beautiful hill’ – is a rural kebele on top of a mountain. During my fieldwork, the last rainfall had been about nine months ago, yet I noticed that the fields in the village were surprisingly green. The majority of Key Amba’s population practiced small-scale farming for their livelihoods. Most of the farmers I spoke to had a rather small piece of land where they grew vegetables, fruits and coffee beans. They often had some chickens and goats, and some had larger animals like cows and mules as well. A farmer’s house was always situated on their land piece of land. Most houses were small and round with a thatched roof. Inside, the furniture – mostly a bed and one or two benches – was made of stone and covered with animal skins. The kebele had no city center, so there were no shops, markets, food processing venues or other facilities. The only buildings other than homes in Key Amba were some stables for the animals, a primary school and an orthodox church. Whereas in Weldiya the gross of the population was either Islamic or Christian orthodox; in Key Amba Christian orthodoxy was the only religion.

Just like there were few buildings in Key Amba, there was little infrastructure in and around the kebele as well. To get to Key Amba on top of the mountain, there was only one way up and there was no electricity or running water in the kebele. The road to Key Amba was sandy and rocky and as Degife stressed to me multiple times: hard to pass by foot or by bajaj. It was steep and filled with holes and every year during rainy season – from June to August – the road flooded and became impassable. Combined with the fact that there was no electricity and that there were no motor driven vehicles to be found anywhere in the kebele, Key Amba was not an easy place to reach nor to leave. However, to buy and sell goods, most people of Key Amba relied on the weekly market in Weldiya. As most inhabitants of Key Amba were farmers, any surpluses from their yields were sold here and this market trade contributed mainly to their income. For most people from Key Amba however, the trip to and from Weldiya took a lot of time and effort. Most people had to get to Weldiya by foot taking them 3 to 4 hours. Not only the market, also a high school, restaurants, a doctor’s office – everything was in Weldiya. As such, people not only went to Weldiya weekly to go to the market but many people went to

Weldiya for other purposes as well. It were especially young men that went to Weldiya regularly as I will explain in the following sections.

When I made the trip to Key Amba for the first time myself – together with Degife – I met Wodaj, Key Amba’s chairman. Wodaj was a 42-year-old man with a serious but friendly face. He was tall and had a short grey beard. When he spoke, he came off as a calm and charismatic man. As the chairman of Key Amba, Wodaj was the leader of the village. I immediately saw that Wodaj was very committed to the well-being of ‘his’ people: “the people of Key Amba” in his words. During our conversations, Wodaj taught me a lot about his kebele and expressed how happy he was with my research on Key Amba, as he was concerned about the future of his people. His main concern was the high number of youth without a job; with almost 1400 people this group constituted a large part of the total population of 5500 in Key Amba. As I learned later, by youth he was actually referring to young men only; emphasizing once again how male youth appeared to be problematized over young females. I asked Wodaj who he considered to be a young man in his kebele. In accordance with the literature (Mwaura 2015, 31), he made clear that he considered everyone between 18 and 36 years old to be in the category of youth, as after that age most men had left Key Amba and / or had gotten married. Similar to what Singerman (2007) and Honwana (2012) describe, marriage was an important turning point for youth to become adults in Key Amba. For the men in the kebele, marriage appeared to define one’s social status as adult or youth more than age or other social markers. After one gets married, he or she was no longer considered a young man or woman. Although Wodaj pointed out the centrality of marriage in becoming an adult, he made it clear to me later that before a young man from Key Amba could get married he first needed to obtain other social markers of adulthood, starting with a job. As I will further elaborate on in the next chapter, men from Key Amba seem to be expected to adhere to the traditional markers of male adulthood. They need to be a worker, a husband and a father – in that specific order.

1.5 Conclusion of the chapter

As youth is a social construct as well as a social shifter it depends per context whether one is considered to be a youth or an adult. However, many cultures and societies have attributed certain social markers to adulthood – albeit they vary among cultures and societies. For both young men and women in Key Amba, the decisive social marker to become an adult seems to be getting married. However, before a young man could marry he first needs to be employed.

As unemployment rates among youth are very high in Key Amba – and in Ethiopia as a whole – many men that are well in their thirties are still considered to be young men.

Chapter 2: Patience is a virtue: Young men in waithood

Many of the young men in Key Amba were adults legally – they were 18 years old or older – but were not recognized as such socially. This position that the men found themselves in could be characterized as a position of waithood. In her pioneering anthropological work on African youth and waithood, Alcinda Honwana proposes waithood is “a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. On the one hand, young people are no longer children in need of care, but on the other, they are still unable to become independent adults” (2014, 28). This chapter elaborates on the concept of waithood, linking it to existential (im)mobility: the feeling of (not) going somewhere in life (Hage 2009). It then shifts to boredom and passiveness among young men that experience feelings of stuckedness. The following section focuses on employment as the imagined way of overcoming the position of waithood.

2.1 Waithood

Honwana describes how work is one of the most notable virtues in many African cultures. In the multiple African countries she studied, a man’s self-worth and social position is greatly defined by the ability to work and provide for himself and, later, his family (2014, 33). Unfortunately, unemployment among young men and women has become a central feature of globalization (Jeffrey 2010, 465). Especially in Africa, unemployment and underemployment rates among youth are incredibly high (Honwana 2014, 34), and Ethiopia is no exception (Kosec et al. 2018). The struggles that many young Africans face is finding a suitable job and this inability subsequently forms an important barrier to becoming an independent adult (Prothmann 2019, 2010).

As such, all over Africa the period of youth becomes longer and longer (Honwana 2012). The existing markers of adulthood – “getting a job or some form of livelihood; leaving their parents’ house and building their own home; getting married; having children; and providing for the family” (Honwana 2012, 23) – are in most African countries hard to attain. In Honwana’s words: “the old notions of adulthood appear to be incompatible with new socioeconomic realities” (2012, 28). As a result, many African youths find themselves in an involuntary state of prolonged adolescence: a period of waithood (Honwana 2012).

Among the men I met in Key Amba and Weldiya, I clearly felt how the growing permanence of the state of being a youth and being unable to reach the social markers attained to adulthood created a feeling of existential immobility – similarly to what Honwana (2012) and Hage (2009) describe among research participants in their own studies. Hage strikingly refers to existential immobility as “stuckedness”: a feeling of not going anywhere in life and being stuck (2009). Indeed, the feeling of being stuck was what came forward in many of the conversations I had with young men from Key Amba.

One of the men that clearly expressed his experience of existential immobility was Teklaissie, whom I spoke to several times during my visits to Key Amba. When I saw him for the first time Teklaissie was sitting outside on the ground with his aunt. Teklaissie was 28 years old and he had finished his high school a little less than ten years ago. He was one of the few men I met during my fieldwork who spoke English very well – so I could speak directly with Teklaissie, without needing Degife to translate. It is partly for this reason that Teklaissie became one of my favorite people to talk to, next to the fact that he was disarmingly honest and open whenever we talked. It was during this first conversation of ours that Teklaissie told me that although he lived with his parents in Key Amba, he spent a lot of his time here at his aunt’s house as well. Even though she lived only about half a kilometer down the hill from his home, it felt nice for Teklaissie to be able to escape his parental house every now and then. Teklaissie told me how he and his parents had conflicts quite regularly, he told me. He thought this was because of the negative energy he brought into their home. Being financially dependent and having to ask for everything he wants to do, made him so sad that, in his words, it is often unpleasant to be around him. Teklaissie would love to move to Weldiya because it was so much more beautiful than Key Amba in his eyes. I told him that for me it was the opposite: I preferred the views, the green area and the quietness of Key Amba over the crowded streets Weldiya, where everything is always covered in fine dust. Teklaissie replied me that I did not understand him properly: “Here, I have no options and I cannot do anything fun. The city is where it all happens”.

The conversations with Teklaissie show how he felt stuck in Key Amba and he was just one of many young men living in Key Amba that expressed their desire to get away from their current lives. However, for the men from Key Amba who worked or lived in Weldiya, life was often not easy either. One of the men that had moved to Weldiya that expressed how he had a hard time living in the city was Tesfaye. Tesfaye was a 25-year-old environmental engineering graduate born in Key Amba. As I met him for a cup of coffee in a café in Weldiya, one of my first questions was what brought him to Weldiya. “Nothing”, he said, “I have no job”. Actually,

I did not mean to ask what he did in life that brought him to Weldiya, I just wondered what brought him to Weldiya that day. As we continued, Tesfaye told me how he had lived in Addis Ababa over the past years to go to university there. After he graduated, he stayed in the capital and searched for jobs. When he failed to find work after six months, he had to come back to his family because he ran out of money. For over a year now, he lived in his sister's house in Weldiya. He struggled with the fact that his sister – who is married – provided for him.

2.2 Boredom & Passiveness

Many scholars have argued that in the African context, neoliberal policies – especially structural adjustment programs – have played an important role in creating a gap between youth's aspirations and their economic realities (Honwana 2012, Mains 2007, Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006). In Honwana's words, African youths stuck in waitness are victims of modernity. On the one hand, their opportunities and expectations are broadened as they are connected to global culture via mobile phones, television and other forms of media (Honwana 2014, 30). Additionally, in many African countries the population is educated better than ever (Prothmann 2019, 210-211), leading to higher (social) expectations (DiNunzio 2012, 434). On the other hand, these same youths often lack access to basic resources due to 'unsound socio-economic policies, epidemics, political instability and repression', leading to constraints on opportunities and expectations (Honwana 2014, 30). Another constraint in this respect resulted from neoliberal policies that drastically decreased the amount of prestigious public sector work (DiNunzio 2012, 434; Prothmann 2019, 211). Mains too, emphasized how governmental jobs are very prestigious among urban young men in the capital of Ethiopia. During my research as well, especially among the university graduates I spoke with, the government seemed to have a central role in their quest for a job.

Although Honwana argues that a lack of jobs lies at the root of African waitness (2012), the struggle of finding a 'suitable' job should be considered in light of higher expectations in modern times (DiNunzio 2012, 434; Prothmann 2019, 210-211). The levels of education are relatively high among unemployed young Africans (DiNunzio 2012, 433; Serneels 2007, 170). According to DiNunzio, the link between education and unemployment shows that unemployment is not just a matter of absence of work (2012, 433). For instance, Prothmann describes that young, educated Senegalese men aspire to work in the public sector or to be self-employed, while income-generating activities in the informal sector are not desirable (2019,

211). As such, these men were more likely to refuse certain jobs that did not meet their expectations (210).

When looking at various studies – ranging from the fields of health sciences to social sciences – passiveness or even apathy is a common feature among unemployed youths with little outlook on a better future (Carle, 1987; Hage 2009; Mains 2007; Simoska, Atanasov, and Naumovska 2016). During his study on the lives of unemployed young men in Ethiopia, Daniel Mains observed how many young men in a position of existential mobility often felt bored (2007). According to Mains, boredom among these men resulted from a lack of experienced progress in their lives. Because of the inability to realize a future that is different from their present a sensation was produced “that was akin to Western notions of boredom” (2007, 660). Although I would not argue that boredom is a ‘Western’ concept, I did recognize how feelings that could be characterized boredom often prevailed among the unemployed or underemployed men I spoke to – just like Mains had encountered in his research.

Many of Key Amba’s young men, either in the village or Weldiya, seemed to struggle with too much “unstructured time”, as Mains would define it (2009). They had a lot of free time but not so many options to fill it with. Let us get back to Teklaissie, who had been ‘stuck’ in Key Amba for almost ten years. During one of our conversations I asked him what his average day looked like. “Most of the times I help my parents a little bit on the farm. I fetch water for them or walk the animals. But mainly, I am just waiting for the day to get by”, he told me. Teklaissie hereby almost literally described his behavior as ‘waiting it out’ according to Hage’s definition of passively “waiting for something undesirable to end or to go” (2009, 3). I did not only notice boredom and passive waiting with Teklaissie, but I observed it among many young men from Key Amba.

Especially the more educated young men from Key Amba, seemed to have a passive and often bored attitude. Ashenafi was one of these men. Ashenafi was a 26-year-old geologist who graduated from Weldiya University ten months ago. Since then he had not been able to find a suitable job. In his eyes, the problem lay with the government. “The government should give me a job”, he confidently told me. The feeling that the government should provide jobs to men who graduated from university was shared by a large part of the young men I spoke with, and who found themselves in a similar situation as Ashenafi. Additionally, some older men such as Wodaj, Key Amba’s chairman, expressed that the government should create more public jobs for educated young people. However, as that has not happened yet, Ashenafi – just like Teklaissie and many other young men – lived at his parents’ house. He helped his parents by

looking after their animals and by ploughing the land, but other than that he had little to do in Key Amba.

Tesfaye, the 25-year-old university graduate who lives with his sister, had made his boredom quite clear when we first met by immediately telling me how he had “nothing” that brought him to Weldiya. In our following conversations, I found out where this feeling of having nothing to do came from. Tesfaye was the only young ‘immigrant’ I spoke to, who moved from Key Amba to Weldiya without having any kind of work or income there. He explained his reluctance to return to Key Amba after he graduated last year: “[T]he only option for me in Key Amba is to become a farmer. I have a university degree. I cannot become a farmer!” He laughed while saying this, as the idea of becoming a farmer was so ridiculous to him. Living in Weldiya, Tesfaye now spent most of his time with friends and family. However, he explained that he is not always able to join the “fun stuff”. His lack of financial resources affected his social life negatively and it made him often unable to travel to family or to go to a restaurant with friends.

Most men from Key Amba that I met in Weldiya however, did have work, although they were often underemployed. The majority of them drove a bajaj and for them the situation was different: they had some kind of a regular job as a driver, However, for them too, the main part of their week existed of free time. What all of these drivers had in common, was that none of them had enjoyed a higher level of education than high school. One of the drivers I met was Abele – a 19-year-old bajaj driver who brought Degife and me to Key Amba for the first time, and he became our regular driver whenever we went up the mountain. It was during this first trip from Weldiya to Key Amba that I found out that Abele was born and raised in Key Amba and still lives there with his parents. Abele was quite shy – he did not look me in the eye and often started giggling with his head down when I asked him a question. But he was enormously helpful for my research. Not only did he speak to me several times himself, he arranged interviews for me with four of his friends – all bajaj drivers in Weldiya who were born in Key Amba. For two years, Abele had been a bajaj driver. He – and the other bajaj drivers I met – could only work very limited hours a week. There were simply not enough vehicles for all the young men who wanted to drive bajajs for a living – although that was hard to imagine considering the enormous number of white-blue bajajs in the streets of Weldiya.

Consequently, Abele could only work one to three days a week and he never knew which days it would be. Abele’s shifts varied a lot, so he never knows what he will earn that week. On the one hand, his planned shift could get cancelled, which occurs when there is no gasoline available in the city – this happens about once a week. On the other hand, his boss could call

him for any last-minute, extra shifts. Abele is thus always on standby, from Monday to Saturday. Especially after a week where he had not been able to work many hours, he hoped for such extra shifts – as he gets paid per trip. Abele’s friends had similar experiences, in which they make sure to always be available, or waiting, for extra shifts in the hope of earning more money. While Abele officially lived with his parents, he spent most of his week in Weldiya, where he stays with other family members or friends. Although he liked being a bajaj driver “because it is easily accessible without any education”, he did not like the uncertainty that comes with it. Since his job was very irregular and provided him with only limited working hours, he was unable to save money and move away from his parents’ place. In Abele’s words: “I expected my life to improve more when I became a driver. I like that I am more independent now, because I can pay for my own food and clothing but for the rest; I see no improvement.”

2.3 A suitable job as a way out

As has become apparent from the previous sections, not having a suitable job or income seems to be an important factor in the feeling of being stuck among young men from Key Amba. As Tesfaye and I talked about his life and how he sees his future, he pointed it out very clearly: “First I need a job. Then, I can get a house. Only then I can find a wife”. To summarize our conversation: he needed to get a job and an income before he would be able to progress towards his envisioned future. Tesfaye was not the only young man that had his mind clearly made up on the matter: getting a job and enough income forms the foundation for a good future according to many men from Key Amba.

However, generally the ideas of what a suitable job was differed between the more educated and the less educated men. Similarly to what Prothmann (2019) and DiNunzio (2012) encountered during their research, I observed how different educational levels influenced men’s behavior during waitthood. The well-educated young men I met, often had more trouble getting by than the less educated men. Whereas some men were prepared to engage in ‘simple’ jobs in the informal sector, others were unwilling to do so as they saw these jobs as unfit. It seemed to me that the ones with the highest education and the highest job expectations, often seemed to be the ones that had the hardest time getting by.

Abele and most of his friends that I met all started out the same: they started by doing daily labor. With the money that they earned from this, they could get their driver’s license and subsequently become a bajaj driver. Both Abele and his friend and fellow bajaj driver Yasinmohammed dream of driving a bus in the future. As Yasinmohammed told me, eventually, he wanted to become “[his] own boss”. However, he first he needed to save money

to obtain a bus driver's license and then he can start driving a bus working for someone. Since he would earn more as a bus driver, he hoped that he could save enough money to buy his own bus in the future. As I asked him when he thinks he will be able to buy his own bus, Yasinmohammed shrugged: "I do not know", he says, "I cannot save any money now to get my license". The next problem is, he argued, that one needs to have connections to people who have cars or buses in order to become a chauffeur; "I have no contacts [with these people] so I have no chance". Yasinmohammed – and his fellow bajaj drivers I spoke with – were able to get by. However, their dreams and aspirations seemed to be out of reach.

Some young men living in Key Amba told me how their parents sometimes delegated certain jobs to them – mostly the heavier stuff. This way, the men could still earn some money. Teklaissie for instance went to Weldiya at least once a week. He carried wood, tree trunks, to the city and sold it there. Tewodros, another man from Key Amba, got by with similar work. He was eighteen years old and in charge of selling his parents' eucalyptus trees on the market in Weldiya. In return, the men received a (small) part of the profit. Just like these men had a similar way of getting by, they held comparable views on their chances of obtaining a job: those were small. Tewodros, who had quit secondary school after ninth grade, wanted to become a carpenter. However, he explained that he cannot find such work because he does not know the right people. Teklaissie wished to become a driver and transport "foods and stuff" between Weldiya and Key Amba. But, like Yasinmohammed, he was unable to save enough money for a bus driver's license, and he perceived the job to be unattainable due to nepotism. Agitated he told me "I do not get a fair chance! I can never get any job because I do not know anyone!"

For university graduates Ashenafi and Tesfaye, getting by through daily labor or as a driver was no option. Just like Mains observed in Addis Ababa (2009), I observed how well-educated young men from Key Amba mostly aspired to work in the public sector. As previously described, Ashenafi strongly stated that "The government should give me a job". He was one of multiple young men who dreamt of a public job. This desire comes from the prestige that is associated with working for the government. Ashenafi and Tesfaye both had explicit wishes to become a hydraulic engineer or geologist for the government. Other men were less specific. Often, young men would tell me that they wanted to have 'a government job', without specifying what job that should be. For these men, working for the government seemed to equal a successful future. Parents too, seemed to hold this assumption. Biemer – a 41-year-old father of two young boys in Key Amba – told me how he wanted his children to go to university and to find a government job: "So they can have a better life than being a farmer in Key Amba".

Once a month at Meskele square in Weldiya open vacancies are put up on a board. For many young men that found daily labor or driving no suitable jobs for them going to Meskele square every month is their main activity in trying to find work and an income. However, considering the high amount of unemployment and the low amount of vacancies the chances for these young men are meagre. Just like Ashenafi and most other university graduates from Key Amba, the sole activity Tesfaye undertakes to find work is to go to Meskele square whenever the vacancies were put up. However, he knew his chances to find a job there were meagre and he confided that, at times, he was so afraid to be disappointed that he did not go “because I do not want to get my hopes up [every time]”.

2.4 Conclusion of the chapter

Almost all the young men I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction – albeit in varying degrees – about their current lives. The seemingly passive or bored attitude I encountered among some of them could very well be a result of the feeling of being stuck and not going somewhere in life, having little outlook on a better future. The men from Key Amba I met found themselves in different positions: some still lived with their parents and struggled to get by, while others had managed to engage in informal jobs and were able to make a living for themselves. The men also differed in their dreams: some could hardly describe their aspirations, some had a very clear view of how they wanted their career and life to proceed and others were somewhere in between. However, what these men had in common was that they all wished for a better life. Their perceived starting point for that was to find work with a sufficient income. An income to not merely get by, but to work towards ‘a better future’. For these young men, it appeared that finding a suitable job and income was the first step to become independent from their families.

However, all the men I met struggled to obtain such a job. During my fieldwork, I observed that the height of educational levels influenced young men’s aspirations and how they were getting by during their period of waithood. Governmental jobs were viewed as very prestigious. The higher a young man’s education in Ethiopia, the more likely he was to aspire such work. Due to a lack of such jobs, many educated young men were neither able to find this kind of work nor accepted jobs that were more easily attainable – such as driving a bajaj or doing ‘simple’ daily work. Although I would certainly not argue that the height of education of young men is the only influence on their aspirations, expectations and behavior, it did seem to be an important one.

So, whereas Honwana focuses on the creativity of youth in waithood, I argue the position of young men from cannot not entirely be characterized as such. Honwana argues that instead of passive lingering and waiting for their situation to change, youth are dynamic and come up with ways of being and interacting with society (2012, 4). Indeed, this is partly true for the men I met: some men engaged in jobs in the informal sector or helped their parents to get by. However, considering the passivity and boredom I observed among many of the young men I met as well, I argue that their waithood is also characterized by waiting it out. As Hage argues: “The more one waits, the more one is reluctant to stop waiting” (2009, 6).

Chapter 3: On my way: The road to Weldiya and beyond

“Okay”, Degife sighed, “but we have to go very very early because it will become very very hot during the day”. It took some effort, but I had finally been able to convince Degife to go to Key Amba by foot. Even earlier than usual, he came to pick me up at 5 o’clock in the morning. As ever, Degife was perfectly dressed in a slim fitted white shirt, a white ‘pantalon’ and neat off-white shoes. I chuckle. I had put on my hiking shoes and loose hiking trousers, and I wore a backpack filled with three liters of water. As we had left the guesthouse’s terrain while it was still dark, I noticed how the piazza square on my left was still empty. It had yet to be filled with people looking to find some daily labor. After about twenty minutes of walking, we had left Weldiya behind and we had reached the foot of the hill to be climbed. From here on, the road was not paved anymore. As we proceeded towards Key Amba, we were about the only ones walking uphill. Men and women – younger or older, alone or together, carrying a child or walking with sheep, goats or a cow – walked down the road. After three hours of walking, we reached the first house in lower Key Amba. Degife and I were sweating; the road was quite steep and we had taken some shortcuts of the road that required us to climb some parts.

Between the foot of the mountain and reaching Key Amba, I counted 37 men – whom I would classify as young men – walking downhill. Fourteen of them were walking with animals. I also saw six older men and nine women, of whom three carried children. The amount of pots, holes and small to large sized rocks on the road were innumerable. Unlike me in my hiking boots, most people I saw wore colorful plastic sandals. For me, the walk from Weldiya to Key Amba felt like strenuous exercise. For many people in Key Amba it is part of their daily lives.

From the previous chapter, it has become clear that many young men from Key Amba perceive employment as essential for their social mobility. This final chapter will build further on the notion of mobility. However, it focuses more on physical mobility. As social and physical mobility are intrinsically linked to one another (Hage 2009), the notion of social mobility will be integrated in this chapter too. Firstly, this chapter elaborates on mobility as a concept. Subsequently, this chapter will focus on infrastructures – especially roads – before narrowing its focus to the road between Key Amba and Weldiya. Lastly, migration is discussed: both rural-to-urban as daily migration.

3.1 Mobility

“Mobility as a concept-metaphor captures the common impression that our lifeworlds are in constant flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses,

services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating across the planet”

- Salazar and Smart in “Anthropological Takes on (Im)Mobility” (2012, i).

Over the past decades, mobility has regained attention within anthropology and other social sciences (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Lelievre and Marshall 2015 and Salazar and Smart 2012). Although mobility is not a unique feature of our time (Salazar and Smart 2012, ii), in contemporary social science, associations between modernity, mobility and accelerated living have subsequently become the norm (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 459). The hegemonic views of globalism have put much emphasis on mobility, flexibility and time-space compression as defining for a modern and developed society and economy (Harvey 1989; Peck and Tickell 2012). According to Salazar and Smart, discussions about globalism have widely spread the assumption that mobility generates progress. Mobility often refers to the ability to move, the ease or freedom of movement, and the tendency to change easily or quickly. Therefore, it is generally viewed as something positive (2012). Salazar and Smart argue that people almost automatically link geographical mobility to “climbing” or upward vertical mobility: economically, socially and culturally (2012, ii). However, although globalization and modernity is still predominantly theorized in terms of social openness and social fluidity, recently more attention focuses on how globalization also leads to a widening mobility gap (Shamir 2005, 197). The ability to move is spread unevenly among and within societies, and the very processes that produce mobility and linkages throughout the world can also promote immobility, exclusion and disconnection (Salazar and Smart 2012, iv; Shamir 2005, 197).

3.2 The road as a form of physical mobility

Infrastructure, mobility and modernity are intrinsically linked (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012 and Peck and Tickell 2012). Glamourous, expensive, future-oriented infrastructures like grand new airports with huge capacities are built by governments even though they only serve a small elite. Less glamourous, but more useful infrastructures, may however be overlooked. Infrastructures are not just built for their function in the here-and-now, but also for what they signify in the future. They embody the desires, hopes and aspirations of a society or its leaders. As such, especially nation-states often build infrastructures not to meet the needs of the population, but to show that the nation-state is modern and advanced (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018, 19).

In Ethiopia too, big and prestigious state projects have been implemented throughout different political regimes. Under the current government, Ethiopia has embarked on building a series of hydro plants and big irrigation infrastructures with the goal of becoming a carbon-free middle income country by 2025 (Fantini, Muluneh and Smit 2018, 1). In the meantime, these hydro plants cause an electricity shortage, which in practice means that the people in Ethiopia only receive electricity in shifts on alternate days (Mains 2012). That is, for the 25 per cent of the population that actually has access to electricity (Douglas, Golumbeanu and Diaw 2016, xii). It is the promise of certain infrastructures for modernity and a better future that is unclear and uncertain, that inhibits their power to evoke hopes among societies and its leaders (Harvey and Knox 2012, 523; Jovanovic 2019).

In their study “The Enchantments of Infrastructure” on roads in rural Peru, Harvey and Knox describe how especially roads hold a promise of transformation and modernity (2012). On a similar note, Dalakoglou and Harvey discuss the powerful sense of mobility “that [roads] promise [to] carry us back and forth between the sweeping narratives of globalisation, and the specific, tangible materialities of particular times and places” (2012, 459). The three main promises of modernity that roads hold are the promise of speed and connectivity, the promise of freedom and the promise of economic prosperity (Harvey and Knox 2012, 523). Especially the first and third promise can be seen as local manifestations of globalized neoliberal goals. Harvey and Knox describe that in rural Peru these promises of transformation that roads hold were meaningful due to “specific socially problematic circumstances which roads are intended to resolve” (2012, 522). In their case study, the promise of speed comes from the belief that slowness of travel is a barrier that must be overcome to achieve international development goals. The promise of economic prosperity depends on the new road construction jobs for Peruvians as well as the government’s desire to promote access to global markets (Harvey and Knox 2012, 523-524). Similarly, Anand, Gupta and Appel argue that roads are associated with development, improvement and modernity and, therefore, “roads are sites of representation and aspiration”. Consequently, “[c]ommunities that are not connected to the nation-state by roads often see themselves as marginalized by its absence” (2018, 11). Harvey and Knox argue that, on a local level, these powerful promises that roads hold result in the prevalent idea – especially in rural areas – “that roads are a fundamental necessity and social good”. For many, the importance of roads is so high that they take it to the streets, “marching or setting up road blocks to demonstrate the passion and urgency in their desire for roads to come to, or through, their towns” (2012, 522).

Similarly, in Key Amba many people seemed to believe that a better road to Weldiya would improve their life in the kebele. Regarding the young men in this case study, mobility is an important aspect of their lives as well – especially when considering that a large portion of Key Amba’s young men drives a bajaj in Weldiya to get by. However, the poor quality of the road to their village inhibits vehicles to reach the kebele and, therefore, forms a constraint in youths’ mobility. It should thus be no surprise that for many young men I met the lack of a decent road and transportation to the kebele forms a thorn in their side. Currently, the only way to drive all the way up to Key Amba is in a four-wheel drive. As far as I observed, only the agricultural ministry in Weldiya had one of these. The local government promised to construct an improved road from Weldiya to Key Amba five to ten years ago – depending on whom I asked. However, due to ground subsidence and heavy rainfall, the road has decayed even further.

Since the promise of a better road, nothing has happened yet and it is unclear when, or if, the road will be realized. Despite its stalled construction, the promise of the road between Weldiya and Key Amba came forward in many of my conversations. Abele, who just like his friend Yasinmohammed dreamt of becoming a bus driver, told me how he wished to drive the bus between Weldiya and Key Amba “when the new road has been constructed”. Tewodros, the young man who sold his parents’ eucalyptus trees, had quit his secondary school before finishing. One of the reasons he dropped out was the three-and-a-half hour walk to the facility. It therefore makes sense that he was very much hoping for better transportation options to and from Key Amba. Even more so, he wanted to be part of realizing this. As described in the previous chapter, Tewodros deemed his chances of obtaining a job as a carpenter close to zero. Therefore, he had a plan B: he wanted “to be employed in the construction of the road”. After the road would finish, Tewodros wanted to become a bus driver and drive people between Key Amba and Weldiya. The road was not only important to young men, as many older male and female farmers I met in Key Amba also expressed their desire for faster transportation to Weldiya. They explained that it would be much easier for them to sell their products in the city.

3.3 Migration

It should have become clear by now that young men from Key Amba are after existential mobility. Many are determined to find better lives in Weldiya. Some men had already moved to Weldiya, some spent parts of their weeks there and others dreamt of it. However, the

dominant opinion among young men was that working and living in the city was essential for realizing a better future for themselves. This desire for rural-to-urban migration is in line with Hage's theory that "people engage in the physical form of mobility that we call migration because they are after existential mobility" (2009, 2). Anthropologist James Morrissey, did an extensive study on human mobility in relation to environmental stress in Northern Ethiopia in 2011. Part of this research was conducted in Key Amba and Weldiya as well. Morrissey told me how he observed that "[A] huge majority of rural-to-urban immigrants were young people, looking for work in the towns". During my research, this was still the case.

Alongside this permanent rural-to-urban migration many young men that were not able to move to Weldiya engaged in daily migration to and from Weldiya. They went to Weldiya mostly a few times a week, sometimes to earn money and sometimes for fun. Ashenafi is one of the men that went to Weldiya once or twice a week, "for pleasure, to see my friends and my brother". However, the trouble and time it takes to get to Weldiya influenced the lives of a lot of the men. Teklaissie told me how at the start of his unemployment, he walked to Weldiya a few times a week in the hope he could do some daily labor. To get these kinds of jobs meant he had to be at the piazza square in Weldiya around 6:30 in the morning so he had to leave home at 3 o'clock in the middle of the night. Since a few years, Teklaissie had given up on daily labor. The walk to Weldiya was too long, the payment too low and the chance of being chosen by an employer is very small. Now, he goes to Weldiya once a month to try and find work, when vacancies for jobs in the formal economy are being presented on a large message board on main square Meskele. Hence, most of the times I saw him in Key Amba, he was just sitting around, doing nothing, by himself.

3.4 Conclusion of the chapter

The enchantment of roads as described by Harvey and Knox in Peru (2012) seemed to hold in rural Ethiopia as well. Although the promise of a better road was overdue for many years, many people in Key Amba still had hope. Hope for the road to come but mainly hope for how it would improve their lives. Whether wanting to be employed in constructing the road, wishing to drive a bus between the kebele and Weldiya, or dreaming of moving to Key Amba, young men from Key Amba seem to long for physical mobility in their quest to existential mobility.

Concluding thoughts: Making ends meet

The deciding social marker of becoming an adult and to not being considered ‘a young man’ anymore for men from Key Amba appeared to be getting married. However, for most men the first step to becoming an independent adult seemed to be having a suitable job with sufficient income. As many men struggled in obtaining employment that met their aspirations, many men in Key Amba found themselves unable to become independent from their families. As such, many men that had long reached the legal age of adulthood are still considered to be young men.

The men I spoke to either did not have any job or form of income, or they had work that generated just enough income to make ends meet. They were often discontent with their lives as it currently was. Most of the men aspired getting a suitable job with a sufficient income to realize a better future for themselves. However, most men argued their chances on that were meagre. As such, it appeared that most men found themselves to be in a position I have described as one of stuntedness: although these men aspired to gain upward social mobility, they mostly did not know how to attain that.

Like social (im)mobility, physical (im)mobility also played an important role in the lives of many of the men. Some young men drove a bajaj to get by and some dreamt of driving a bus in the future. Most longed to migrate to Weldiya to live there, but as that was often not possible many of the young men commuted between Key Amba and Weldiya. They often expressed desire for the construction of a better road between their kebele and the city arguably comes from the promise of upward social mobility that roads seem to hold.

So, how do young men in Key Amba, Ethiopia, who find themselves in a position that can be characterized as waithood, move through this period in search of a way to get ahead in life? Although different young men moved through what I described in this research as ‘a period of waithood’, I did observe some patterns that seemed to account for the majority, of the men I spoke to. Whereas better educated young men seemed to be mostly waiting to be employed in a suitable job – preferably a governmental job, many men with lower educational levels seemed to mobilize themselves more working in ‘simple’ jobs to get by. However, none of the young men that I met seemed to be able to find a way to get ahead in life for now.

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