

Migration as Prophecy Fulfilled: A Case Study of Hadiya Migration from Southern Ethiopia to South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the role religion has played in the process of Hadiya migration from southern Ethiopia to South Africa—from decision-making to processes of settlement at destination. Religion, specifically evangelical Christianity, has played a key role in the various phases of the migration process: from imagination of a sacred destination, signification of migration as a gift of God, risk perception and negotiation through to place making and spiritual engagements to overcome specific challenges of the new migration habitus. The article situates migration processes within a broader historical context and explains how spiritually animated migratory agency has helped Hadiya migrants negotiate the historically shaped regional inequality within Ethiopia. It concludes with an emphasis on how the Hadiya migration story ethnographically demonstrates the crucial role religion plays in migration processes, with a call for migration studies to take seriously intangible factors in migration.

Keywords: religion, migration, Ethiopia-South Africa corridor, Hadiya

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the richest countries on the African continent, South Africa is a major destination country for migrants moving within Africa. Close to three million migrants resided in South Africa in 2020 (UN DESA, 2021). Ethiopians are among the most significant of these migrant populations, with estimates varying between 200,000 and 300,000 (Cooper and Esser, 2018; Estifanos and Zack, 2019; IOM, 2022). According to a report by the South African Department of Home Affairs (2015), Ethiopia was ranked second in the top 15 migrant-sending countries. This is remarkable, given that Ethiopian migration to South Africa is a recent phenomenon; its history is barely three decades old and is entirely located in post-apartheid South Africa, but with a profound impact on places of origin.

The journey of Ethiopian migrants to South Africa is perilous, involving crossing state borders of up to six countries and covering close to 5,000 km. The journey follows different routes and modes of transport: by air, water and land. The few migrants who can afford it take a direct flight from Addis Ababa to Johannesburg or countries that border South Africa, but most combine bus, boat and foot travel. Typically, the land route from Ethiopia to South Africa starts in Kenya and passes through Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique/Zimbabwe to South Africa (IOM, 2022). Most Ethiopian migrants are engaged in the informal retail trade, running shops predominantly in Jeppe, the Ethiopian commercial enclave in Johannesburg, and in nearby townships, known as “locations” (Zack and Estifanos, 2016). Most Ethiopian migrants in South Africa come from southern Ethiopia, with the highest concentration being from the Hadiya-Kembata area (Feyissa 2022; IOM, 2022).

This article examines the role religion has played in the process of Hadiya migration to South Africa—from decision-making to processes of settlement at destination. Religion, specifically evangelical Christianity, has played a key role in the various phases of the migration process: from imagination of a sacred destination, signification of migration as a gift of God, risk perception and negotiation through to placemaking and spiritual engagements to overcome specific challenges of the new migration habitus. Spirituality is also invoked as an overarching scheme of interpretation, even when migration is recast as a “liability” with a diminishing return, evident in the increasing risks of the journey and the spiralling migrant-on-migrant violence in South Africa. Migration studies have been dominated by objective economic factors, especially in decision-making processes (Kuhnt, 2019).

The conceptual framework of the article is informed by the role of intangible factors in migration processes. Migration is often analyzed primarily in economic terms, focusing on tangible factors such as livelihood opportunities and maximizing material well-being more broadly. This emphasis on economic explanations stems from the relative ease of measuring factors such as income disparities, access to resources, and employment prospects. Economic theories of migration often suggest that people move in response to absolute or relative deprivation, with migration choices determined by an individual’s ability to afford the associated costs. While

economic factors undeniably play a central role in shaping migration patterns, the case of Hadiya migration to South Africa highlights the limitations of solely focusing on material conditions.

For the Hadiya, increasing pressure on agricultural land is a key economic driver of migration. With one of the highest population densities in Ethiopia, the Hadiya Zone faces severe land constraints, which lead to fragmentation of land tenure and declining productivity. In addition, recurrent droughts, worsened by climate change, make farming a precarious livelihood. However, these economic challenges are not unique to the Hadiya; neighboring regions also contend with high population densities and similar land pressures, some even more severe. If migration were driven solely by economic factors, we would also expect to see greater migration from these other regions, which are economically better off due to cash crop cultivation. This is not the case, highlighting that economic conditions alone do not fully explain the scale or direction of migration. Policy shifts have also played a crucial role in the onset of Hadiya migration to South Africa. The more liberal immigration policies in post-apartheid South Africa, which allowed for greater freedom of movement and access, coincided with the political and economic changes in Ethiopia after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991. This period saw the relaxation of restrictions on internal and international migration, offering new opportunities for Ethiopians, including the Hadiya, to seek better prospects abroad. The convergence of these policy shifts created a more favorable environment for migration, facilitating the movement of people from Ethiopia to South Africa.

While tangible economic factors and policy shifts are clearly important, the focus on them has often overshadowed the role of intangible, non-economic factors in migration. Migration is not merely a response to material deprivation or economic opportunity; it is also shaped by social, cultural, spiritual, and emotional influences. Factors such as religious beliefs, cultural norms, social networks, emotions, and personal aspirations play a critical role in migration decisions, yet these intangible factors are frequently overlooked in traditional economic and policy analyses. This article seeks to address this gap by placing intangible factors at the core of migration decision-making, alongside the more conventional economic drivers.

Among the subjective factors in migration processes, beliefs and values remain the least studied (Docquier et al., 2020). Various studies have demonstrated that religion *does impact* on migration decision-making. Belief could provide spiritual resources for some migrants in their decision to migrate and may have a psychological effect on their commitment to endure the hardship of migration and assist with sense-making in places of destination. This article examines how Hadiya migrants draw on the spiritual resources of evangelical Christianity in the decision-making process, including in the geographic imaginary, risk perception, and negotiation of the perilous journey to South Africa, as well as spiritual guidance and protection during the process of travel to and settlement in South Africa. Belief also plays an important role in the decision to stay. Spiritual resources in decision-

making processes in Hadiya migration to South Africa include prophecies, prayers with migration content and gospel songs, which all shape aspiration and animate migratory agency. Throughout the migration process, there is a strong collective component in the way Hadiya migrants use religion as a space of agency from which they build capability.

However, the article argues against an opposition between tangible and intangible factors, suggesting instead that they inform and reinforce each other in shaping migration processes. Drawing on a growing body of literature on the role of subjective and intangible factors in migration (e.g., Zanker et al., 2023), this work explores the spiritual dimensions embedded in the Ethiopia-South Africa migration corridor. Specifically, it examines how belief systems and spirituality influence various stages of the migration process—from the initial decision to migrate, through the journey itself, to settlement at the destination.

The article argues that by recognizing the complex interplay between tangible and intangible factors, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of migration processes. This broader perspective allows for a more comprehensive view of the motivations behind migration, capturing not only the material conditions that drive people to move but also the spiritual, emotional, and cultural forces that shape their decisions. Such an approach helps illuminate the full complexity of migration, especially in contexts where intangible factors are as crucial as economic ones.

The article draws on findings from a study conducted by the author as part of the *Migration for Development and Equality* (MIDEQ) project, a UKRI/GCRF-funded comparative research initiative that spans five years (2019–2024) and covers 12 countries across six migration corridors. The author coordinated the Ethiopia-South Africa migration corridor within this broader project. Initially, the Ethiopia-South Africa corridor was not included in MIDEQ's focus on migration decision-making. Instead, it concentrated on resource flows, children left behind, and income inequality. However, as research participants began sharing their migration experiences, questions related to decision-making emerged organically, often beginning with inquiries into the motivations behind migration. It was during these discussions that the theme of spirituality as a significant factor in migration decisions consistently surfaced across the 100 interviews the author conducted, with support from the MIDEQ Ethiopian research team. This led the author to explore the role of subjective, non-economic factors in migration in greater depth.

The 30 informants featured in this article are all male, as migration patterns in the Hadiya community are highly gendered. While Hadiya men predominantly migrate to South Africa, women tend to migrate to Gulf countries. The sample represents a range of age groups: 75% of participants were between the ages of 25 and 35, 20% were between 36 and 50, and 5% were over 50 years of age. The religious demographic of the participants mirrors that of the Hadiya community at large, with more than 90% identifying as evangelical Christians, in line with the census data that shows that 70% of the Hadiya population follows evangelical Christianity.

At the time of the interviews, over 90% of participants had lived in South Africa for 10 years or more, with 7% having been there between 11 and 15 years, and 3% for less than 10 years. To address potential limitations of retrospective narratives and to mitigate what Jerolmack and Khan (2014) call the “attitudinal fallacy”—the tendency to conflate self-reported oral accounts with actual behavior—the study cross-referenced life history interviews with data from in-depth interviews conducted with those aspiring to migrate and other stakeholders. This triangulation provided a more comprehensive picture of the role of spirituality in migration, a theme consistently affirmed by all participants, including those who expressed skepticism about the foundational prophecy.

Additional data was also gathered from brief fieldwork in South Africa among Hadiya migrants in Johannesburg and Cape Town in November 2023. Ethnographic observations also contributed to the study, as the author attended Hadiya religious events such as sermons, preaching, and gospel songs with migration-related themes. These observations offered further insights into the Hadiya community’s self-understanding as leaders of evangelical Christianity and their receptivity to prophetic messages regarding migration.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia and the author’s native tongue, which most Hadiya participants were fluent in. In rural Hadiya, some interviews were conducted in Hadiyissa by a Hadiya-speaking research assistant. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Following ethical research protocols, the names of participants were anonymized, and sensitive issues were handled with care to ensure that no harm was done to the participants or the broader Hadiya community.

The discussion is organized in five sections. Following this introductory section one, section two embeds Hadiya migration to South Africa in a historical context in the *longue durée*, that is, how Hadiya have been transformed from a glorious past under a powerful sultanate into peripheral subjects during the process of state formation, and their mode of incorporation into the Ethiopian polity. It situates migration processes within this broader historical context and explains how spiritually animated migratory agency has helped Hadiya migrants negotiate the historically shaped regional inequality within Ethiopia. Section three discusses how religion plays out in Hadiya migration decision-making—from a sacred imagination of South Africa fuelling aspiration to risk negotiation during a perilous journey. Section four discusses spiritual practices of Hadiya migrants in South Africa that ease the process of settlement and building up their businesses. Section five examines the changing contours of the Hadiya migration project from a collectivist to individualist orientation, and the implication of this for the viability of the Hadiya migration project. It analyzes how the Hadiya are recasting migration from being a blessing into a curse, as ever-increasing migrant-on-migrant violence and other criminal practices are believed to have brought the wrath of God. The last section concludes with an emphasis on how the Hadiya migration story ethnographically demonstrates

the crucial role religion plays in migration processes, with a call for migration studies to take seriously intangible factors in migration.

HADIYA SOCIO-CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS: AN ISLAMIC PAST AND A CHRISTIAN PRESENT

Located in southern Ethiopia with a population of 1.2 million, the Hadiya society forms part of the broader southern periphery of the Ethiopian state. Previously, it was part of the medieval Hadiya Sultanate dating back to the 13th century (Braukamper, 2012), itself part of the wider Islamic political communities in the Horn of Africa in competition with the Orthodox Christian empire of the Ethiopian northern highlands, also called Abyssinia, which evolved into the modern Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century (Taddesse, 1972). The incorporation of Hadiya into the Ethiopian state resulted in their political marginalization, social discrimination and economic exploitation. Subsequently, they lost autonomy and the local economy became dominated by people from the north, and partly by neighbors such as the Gurage, who managed to attain greater socio-economic mobility within the Ethiopian empire through internal migration, mainly to Addis Ababa (LeBell, 2011).

Located 230 kilometers south of Addis Ababa and established in the early 20th century, Hosanna is the capital of Hadiya Administrative Zone. Notwithstanding its being one of the oldest towns in Ethiopia, Hosanna was the center of imperial rule in Hadiya. In fact, most inhabitants of Hosanna towns were people who came from the north, especially members of the dominant Amhara ruling class. The long-term impact of imperial rule in the southern periphery is structural inequality, marked by ethnic stratification. This has undermined the capacity of Hadiya citizens to aspire to a better life with the requisite capabilities. As research participants mentioned, this is expressed in the form of self-doubt or lack of self-confidence.

The Hadiya population, like most of their southern neighbors, were excluded from the politics of the Ethiopian empire and were subjected to social discrimination. They were turned from a once proud and great nation into a mistreated ethnic group. The Hadiya people were referred to with a pejorative term, *gudela*, in line with similar debasing names used to disparage other people of the periphery (Braukamper, 2012; Grenstedt, 2000). Although some Hadiya members managed to achieve individual socio-economic mobility within the Ethiopian polity, most were left behind and, over time, incorporated the external negative definition of who they are. Since the 1950s, the only opportunity the Ethiopian empire provided for the Hadiya people was labor migration to the budding sugar estates in the Awash valley, especially to sugar plantations in Wenji. Although this wage labor contributed to modest household well-being for migrant families, it did not lead to Hadiya's meaningful economic participation at local and national levels. Nor has the stigma associated with their ethnic identity changed. If anything, it added a new pejorative layer, as they were referred to as *shenkora korach* (people who slash sugar canes). Imperial rule came to an end in 1974. Despite promises made by the 1974 revolution to redress ethnic

inequalities and promote greater inclusion of peoples of the periphery into national affairs, Hadiya people continued to occupy a marginal status throughout the Derg period (1974–1991). In fact, whatever was in the local economy was extracted to fund Derg's endless wars, while military conscription brought a heavy toll on Hadiya youth (Feyissa, 2022).

When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power (1991–2018) and developed its constitutional structures of ethnic federalism, this kindled yet another hope for social transformation and democratic transition. However, the self-rule that the constitution granted to ethnic groups (nations and nationalities in the Ethiopian parlance) has not led to real political and economic empowerment (Turton, 2005). True, change is visible in local political leadership. Members of the Hadiya elite rule the newly created Hadiya Zone as one of the administrative zones within the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR), now replaced by the Central Ethiopia Regional State. Hadiya are also given the right to use their language as a language of local government. However, EPRDF's self-rule has not translated into the kind of socio-economic transformation expected. Political legitimacy continues to comprise extroverted local elites, operating under the centralizing logic of EPRDF whose interest they primarily serve.

A Hadiya opposition party, the Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO), put up a strong resistance against EPRDF rule through peaceful means. In fact, HNDO won the seats for the 2001 parliamentary election in Hadiya Zone, but the result was later declared to be flawed and EPRDF became the winner through a repeat election (Tronvoll, 2001). Meanwhile, the economic situation in Hadiya Zone worsened with the politicization of internal labor migration. Thousands of Hadiya labor migrants from Wenji (now in Oromia regional state) left the area after three decades of residence, as wage laborers went back to Hadiya Zone when ethnic federalism turned them into "outsiders" overnight. Hadiya Zone was already suffering from land shortage because it has one of the highest population densities in Ethiopia, so it could not absorb returnee internal migrants, which created a social crisis. Nor was there a single factory which could have provided a modicum of employment opportunity for the Hadiya youth and the returnee migrant population. In 2019, political reform replaced EPRDF with the Prosperity Party (PP). This was an attempt to distance the country's politics from ethnic federalism. However, six years on, Ethiopia has not yet made that transition to democracy. In fact, the country has been plunged into civil war and communal violence, though the South has been relatively calm.

The Hadiya population found the engine of socio-economic transformation and their aspiration to catch up with members of Ethiopia's dominant population groups in religious salvation, to which the onset of migration to South Africa is intimately connected. Despite its Islamic past, contemporary Hadiya are predominantly Protestant Christians. According to the latest 2007 census, Protestants constitute 75.3% and Muslims 11.3% of the population of Hadiya Zone. Orthodox Christians,

most of whom are non-Hadiya, constitute 8.45% (CSA, 2008). By the turn of the 20th century, Western Protestant missionaries were active in southern Ethiopia, including among the Hadiya. This sharply contrasts with peoples of the northern highlands, the core of the Ethiopian state, who are predominantly Orthodox Christians. Protestant Christianity was brought to southern Ethiopia through missionary societies in the early 20th century. There is an aspect of resistance ideology in the manner with which the Hadiya, and southern Ethiopians more broadly, embraced Protestant Christianity as a counterpart to the Orthodox Christianity of the northern highlands (the core of the Ethiopian state identified with Orthodox Christianity). But it seems the high receptivity to Protestant Christianity was also influenced by the lure of modernity that it promised. As early as the 1930s, the missionaries opened schools and clinics among the Hadiya, and in 1949 Hosanna hosted a Bible conference (Grenstedt, 2000).

Contemporary Hadiya society recounts a “rebellious” pre-Christian past, with protracted conflicts between the Christian empire and its various tribes. This past was fundamentally transformed into a “God-fearing” and “God-loving” people. A pastor thus surmised: “God has a tendency to choose people or individuals who are rebellious and change their identity. As Paulos’ rebellious spirit was changed by God, so was the history of Hadiya changed with our conversion to Christianity.” The first generation of Hadiya converts is associated with three names: Shigute Dada, Sebbero Wasaro and Aba Gole. They are affectionately referred to as Yenwengel Aribegnoch (Patriots of the Gospel) and they played a critical role in spreading the new faith, not just among the Hadiya but also among neighboring societies.

Data gleaned from interviews with research participants suggest that contemporary self-understanding of Hadiya society is a vanguard of Protestant Christianity. They are being rewarded for this, not least by the new opportunity structure that migration to South Africa has provided. The Hadiya have tapped into evangelical religious resources, such as prophecies and prayers, to build their migratory agency and enhance socio-economic mobility. As discussion in the following sections shows, there is a strong spiritual component in Hadiya migration to South Africa, evident in the various phases of the migration process: from decision-making before the journey to during the journey and settlement at destination. Echoing a global trend and spurred on by transnational networks, Protestantism among the Hadiya has also witnessed a charismatic turn, with a greater emphasis on prophesy and the power of faith. The Hadiya have used this brand of Protestantism as a space of agency, extracting religious resources and building migratory capabilities. This contrasts with the tenets of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (EOC) whose sacred narratives present Ethiopia as the promised land (Malara, 2022).

At the heart of religion and migration among the Hadiya, we find a foundational prophecy delivered by a Canadian pastor in Hosanna in 2001, declaring that God has opened a “southern door” for the Hadiya through which prosperity would come. Following in the footsteps of the Canadian pastor, local prophets have proliferated divining the future of prospective migrants, advising some to migrate and others to

stay behind and invest in the local future. In this process of social change, we find the Hadiya negotiating a historically shaped regional inequality within Ethiopia, through transnational flow of finance, ideas and goods. Both the process of migration and its outcome have collective dimensions. In this scheme of things, migration features as a divine script expressed in collective terms: it is South Africa, not the Ethiopian state, which promises transformation through remittance and investment by migrants. Indeed, for Hadiya Protestants, the promised land is South Africa, not Ethiopia. But this is a temporary exit, with an end game of going back home to improve the life of themselves and their families, as well as the Hadiya collectively.

In recent years, as Hadiya migration has become less idealist and more materialist, criticism of the changing role of migration is also framed in religious language, that is, the failure to manage God's blessing is fast turning into a curse. As greed kicks in, collective redemption is replaced by God's wrath. This is expressed in the form of rising homicide and other forms of crime among Hadiya migrants in South Africa. This is considered a negative remittance, as some migrants have brought the culture of violence home with them. The following section expands on the role of religion in Hadiya's migration decision-making.

RELIGION, MIGRATION, AND DECISION-MAKING

Hadiya migration to South Africa—the 2001 foundational prophecy

In 2001, Peter Youngren, a Canadian pastor and founder of World Impact Ministries, came to Hosanna and delivered a prophecy that constitutes a critical part of the history of Hadiya migration to South Africa. Pastor Youngren and his World Impact Ministries have outreaches in more than 100 countries. He is considered one of the most influential evangelical pastors. Youngren's international events are called Friendship Festivals, with attendances ranging from 10,000 to 600,000 in a single service, often in big public spaces.² Hadiya who participated in the Hosanna Friendship Festival mentioned that hundreds of thousands of people attended the event at *gofer meda*, Hadiya's main public square. Although healing the sick and gospel teaching were part of his mission, Youngren's key message (or so the Hadiya thought) was a prophecy that promised socio-economic transformation of the Hadiya through international migration; God has opened a "southern door" for the Hadiya through which prosperity will come.

This is an extract of Youngren's prophecy, reconstructed from stories recounted by participants of the Hosanna Friendship Festival:

I have a message from God to deliver to you. I saw God opening a new southern door for Hosanna [meant to refer to Hadiya]. From now onwards you will see a constant flow of people (*ye mayiqon ye hizb jiret*); that people will migrate (*yifelisalu*); they work hard and they prosper; that they will bring blessing to

² Editor. "Passion for People." Celebrate. 2013. Pages 14–15.

Hosanna and to Ethiopia more broadly. Hosanna town will be transformed beyond recognition. The time will come when three-wheeler cars [the Indian-made Bajaj] will fill the streets of Hosanna and a country where people go to without a visa. There will also be rain and abundant crops. God will allow movement of people; one which will bring prosperity. You will soon see signs of the prophecy working.³

Youngren did not directly refer to South Africa but to a “southern door opened by God,” a door through which God will redeem the Hadiya from their deprivation. Hadiya believe God used Youngren as a conduit to bless them. Otherwise, they claim the blessing as a fruit of their collective effort, not least the heroic acts of Hadiya “Patriots of the Gospel” and devout prayers of elders to help their people overcome the social and economic deprivations they were facing at the time of the prophecy. This prophecy was also perceived as an affirmation of God’s favoring the Hadiya as “committed” Christians, as elaborated by Feyissa (2022).

While the prophecy never mentioned South Africa as a specific destination, the Hadiya themselves interpreted the “southern door” as leading to South Africa. This destination looked profitable in economic terms, so intangible factors have been entangled with tangible ones right from the beginning. It was also not an entirely unknown destination, as some Hadiya had already migrated to South Africa via Kenya in the late 1990s. After all, South Africa is south of Ethiopia and Moyale, the first Kenyan border crossing point en route to South Africa, is the nearest “south” to the Hadiya.

This prophecy has since informed the decision of many Hadiya to migrate and was often given as the specific reason in the life stories of research participants. The following account by Pastor Birhanu, a Hadiya migrant from Johannesburg who was interviewed in Hosanna during a family visit, indicates how the prophecy informed his decision to migrate to South Africa:

Youngren’s prophecy made the journey a lot easier than one would have expected. I migrated to South Africa in 2004, three years after Peter came to Hosanna. I was a student at that time. I talked to my friends about the idea of going to South Africa. They all readily agreed. When we decided to travel, it felt as if we were already in South Africa. I remember the enthusiasm and confidence we had while deciding to migrate. We never thought of the risks we might encounter during the journey and the language difficulties we might encounter. It felt like we were moving from one house to another within Hadiya. (Pastor Birhanu, interviewed in Hosanna, November 12, 2020)

³ Interviews with participants of the Hosanna Friendship Festival, January 2020–2022, Hosanna and other parts of Hadiya Zone, southern Ethiopia.

Pastor Birhanu's statement "When we decided to travel, it felt as if we were already in South Africa" echoes what Cangia and Zittoun (2020: 5) call "mental journey" and "imagined mobilities": "Imagination, as a form of symbolic mobility, represents the mental journey people can embark upon to escape the here-and-now of the present, independently from real opportunities and capacity to move." In Pastor Birhanu's words, we also learn how important imagination is in migration decision-making, as a condition for aspiration as well as belief, instilling confidence without caution. Religious people find moral strength and perseverance in their beliefs, which makes them arguably better placed to cope with adversities experienced during migration.

The Hadiya retrospectively view the large numbers of their community migrating to South Africa as an indication that the prophecy has been fulfilled. Additional signs that the prophecy is working include the relative business success of Hadiya migrants in South Africa, despite multiple obstacles, and the consequent economic transformation of Hadiya through remittances and investments, both in places of origin and in South Africa. Returnee migrants mentioned that they could not recognize the Hosanna they had left behind, because it had changed so much to now include high-rise buildings and several commercial banks. This change has occurred in the last two decades and was contributed to by the transnational flow of finance, goods and ideas/knowledge coming from those who had migrated to South Africa.

A common saying in Hosanna is, "Whichever way you turn in Hosanna, there is South African money." Other signs of the prophecy working include a bumper harvest. As noted by many research participants: "The same year Youngren came to Hosanna there was a lot of rain; so much so that 100-birr wheat was sold for 40 birr. Unlike the years before the prophecy, everyone had much more than for subsistence."

The prophecy was indeed a message of hope that was well received by the Hadiya due to the political and economic context of the time. Politically, this was a time of great upheaval in Hadiya Zone. There was political instability related to the contested 2000 election: Hadiya was the only region where an election was won by an opposition party (HNDO) throughout the EPRDF period. This was followed by a severe government crackdown. The post-election repression ended in "a bloodbath of the Hadiya" (Tronvoll, 2001). As mentioned earlier, the return of Hadiya migrants from Wenji further compounded the situation in the early 1990s creating a deepening sense of social crisis, as the returnees put a claim over family land already in scarce supply. This was also a time of increased poverty because of a drought that resulted in crop failure. Political insecurity, grinding poverty, and the strong roots laid down by evangelical Christianity among the Hadiya seem to have created a high receptivity to Youngren's prophecy.

The Hadiya even went further in embedding the spirituality of their migration to South Africa due to the historically shaped regional inequality. Migration to South Africa is seen as a way of renegotiating the inequality between the "core North" and the "peripheral South." Hadiya attributes a spiritually mediated "inherent link"

between peoples of the periphery and their greater representation among migrants in South Africa, as the following commentary by a returned migrant suggests:

How come Amharas, Tigres, and Oromos [people of the core regions] are not migrating to South Africa as much as the Hadiya and other Southerners [people of the periphery]? Their oversight is not accidental. God has blinded them of this opportunity protecting it for us. Had they known about the opportunities in South Africa, these people would have dominated South Africa as much as they have done elsewhere. They are everywhere. Many Ethiopians in Europe, the US, and Canada are Amharas, Tigreans, and Oromos. They have money, knowledge, and wider social networks. And yet we [the Hadiya and other peoples from southern Ethiopia] managed to make it to South Africa despite our apparent lack of skills and political networks. This is because God awakened us (*aberalin*). (Interviewed in Hosanna, 2021)

The word *aberalin* used here refers to a collective self, explaining that God has been engaging Hadiya as a people, not individually, by opening a southern route through which prosperity flows. In this sacred narrative, Hadiya migration to South Africa features as a quintessential spiritually animated future-making project, which at the same time guarantees tangible socio-economic mobility.

Prophecy goes local

Reflecting a global pattern, there has been a charismatic shift in Ethiopian Protestantism, with a greater emphasis on the power of faith and prayer. There has also been a boom in self-proclaimed prophets, increasingly involved in divining the future for people as they engage with the uncertainties and vagaries of life. Among the Hadiya, these new prophets are playing a crucial role in migration decision-making. Churches contribute to migration facilitation through their prayer programs, and institutionally by arranging exchange programs with churches in southern African countries. For instance, priests/pastors usually pray for potential migrants to succeed in their aspiration to migrate to South Africa; they make prophecies on behalf of individual aspirants that their future will be great in South Africa. This gives hope and courage to potential migrants, encouraging them to take risks. When potential migrants are about to start their journey, fellow Christians gather and pray for their success.

A returnee migrant recounted how his decision to migrate to South Africa was a direct result of an unexpected “revelation” by a pastor during a Sunday service:

The idea of migrating to South Africa was suggested by my brother who went there earlier. He told me to come to South Africa, which I did with the money that he sent me. But why I decided to go to South Africa was not because my brother sent me money but rather after I realized it was God’s will. On a

Sunday service, a pastor came straight to me, put his hands on my head, and prayed. He then mentioned that God wanted me to go to South Africa and that unlike other migrants nothing bad would happen to me throughout the journey. I had my doubts when my brother advised me to join him. As you can see, I am not as young as the other migrants, and I feared I might not be able to withstand the challenges. All my doubts disappeared after the revelation by the pastor who said, “your journey has already been made.” God has been with me during my journey and throughout my stay in South Africa. While many of the people who went with me were imprisoned either in Tanzania or Malawi, my journey to South Africa was faster and safer. Although I was robbed several times in South Africa, I was not once physically hurt throughout my ten-year stay, unlike the experience of nearly all Ethiopian migrants. (Interviewed in Jajura, July 5, 2021)

Spirituality not only plays an important role in mobility, but also in immobility. Immobility is involuntary for some but desirable for many others (Schewel, 2019). In some instances, Hadiya prophets and pastors who de facto act as migration counselors advise prospective migrants to drop their plans to migrate. The following story sheds further light on how decision-making, including the decision to stay and invest in a local future, is shaped by a prophetic tradition:

There was a spiritual father called Aba Gole in Anlemmo [one of the Patriots of the Gospel], where I was born and grew up. He was a well-known religious leader who extensively traveled throughout Ethiopia. One day he visited my parents before I was conceived. He prayed and told my mother that she would have a baby boy and that boy would continue his legacy of preaching. So, I am a result of that prayer that shaped my purpose in life, serving God and His people. However, my mother's family who are Gurage [least connected to migration to South Africa] wanted to send me to South Africa and proposed to pay for my flight, so that the life of the family would be changed. But I refused. Then in 2009, when I finished high school, I wanted to join university, but my mother told me if I became a civil servant the government would be my master and I couldn't give all my time to serve God. She also said that Aba Gole's sweat is in our house, so I have to carry his legacy. I prayed the whole night and got my answer that said “I will join theology college.” It turned out that I scored one point less in the national school leaving examination than the required grade to join a university. Thus, I ended up studying theology and I became a pastor, as prophesied by Aba Gole. (Pastor Samuel, 2021)

In this story, the preference to stay relates to a life project already shaped by belief, even before birth. The Church has a vested interest in endorsing migration projects, as successful migrant believers remit money to the churches as a form of thanksgiving.

Churches publicly recognize money received from migrants, taking credit for migrants' success enabled by their prayer. Some migrants send money to the church as a gift, while others remit in the form of a tithe (*asirat*). According to Protestant tradition (also taught by pastors), one pays a tithe to the original church one belongs to, often in places of origin. From the remittances they get from migrants, most local churches in Hadiya have bought a keyboard, sound system, and generator. These are essential goods to enhance public visibility in the increasingly competitive Ethiopian religious landscape, adding to Hadiya's already distinctively Protestant public space. Most churches in Hadiya are financed by migrants through their philanthropic efforts. For some migrants, spirituality has quite a functional role.

Besides pastors and prophets of mainline Protestant churches, local spiritual entrepreneurs have proliferated, claiming the power to divine an individual's future, including whether to migrate, when, and how, functioning as de facto migration counselors. They call themselves *miriit agelgayoch* (sent by God to convey His messages to specific individuals), although their detractors call them *festal agelgayoch* (amateur door-to-door spiritual service providers) and liken them to *festal hakim* ("plastic bag doctors," village-based amateur health professionals). Some of the *festal/mirit agelgayoch* are seen as predatory, but even those skeptical of their service consider their prophecy and migration counseling largely accurate. People interested in migrating often seek these specific migration services from *festal/mirit agelgayoch*, although advice is also received spontaneously. They go to the parents of prospective migrants and tell them which specific family member has better prospects of success, convincing them that it is worth investing in sponsoring a particular person whose migration project is ordained by God, thus ensuring "value for money"—a safe return of the money invested in the migration project. In some instances, the *mirit agelgayoch* advises prospective migrants to drop their plan to migrate.

Capability and resilience built through blessing, prayer, and gospel songs

The previous accounts by migrants, returnee migrants, and stayees evidence how belief plays an important role in decision-making regarding mobility and immobility. The prophecies and prayers of evangelical Christianity as spaces of migratory agency draw on the traditional beliefs of Hadiya society. In traditional Hadiya society, fate is understood as something that is not fixed but amenable to elders' authority, either in the form of *masso* (blessing) or *duunchcha* (cursing). Heads of lineages are believed to have greater power over blessing or cursing by their proximity to ancestors (Worku, 2019). Some elders have the power of blessing and cursing not just for members of a lineage but also for the whole local community. They are called *ayanto*. Elders/*ayanto* use *kitfa* (a mixture of honey and water used as a spiritual ointment) which they sprinkle onto people who seek blessing for good fortune in life. Elders have extended this spiritual power to the realm of migration.

How the spirituality of evangelical Christianity operates in the migration realm is similar to traditional spirituality, with the only caveat being the switch of a register from elders to pastors and prophets, and the replacement of *kitfa* with anointing oils, also called miracle oil. Compared to Hadiya's traditional belief, evangelical Christianity puts a higher premium on the transformational agency of prayer. When asked about why they decided to migrate to South Africa despite the risks involved in the journey, many prospective and returnee migrants mentioned, "I want(ed) to check my fate. If I die during the journey or in South Africa, it is because I am meant to," and they would add, "Who knows when and how I die anyway, even if I do not migrate?" In this risk regime, prayers feature as a badge of confidence that downplays the risks of migration, a belief that simultaneously shapes aspiration and builds migratory agency.

Prospective migrants often respond *atseliyebetalehu* when asked what preparations they have made for the journey, meaning "I got my plan prayed upon." In some prayers, pastors even include specific information about the risky spots in the migration journey, such as the Tete bridge over the Zambezi River at the border between Mozambique and Malawi where, in 2021, 60 Ethiopian migrants perished in a suffocating container while trying to cross the border (Feyissa, 2022). A prayer with migration content is couched in the saying *amen yale teteqeme yalale temelesa* (those who said "amen" benefited [made it to South Africa] but those who did not came back [died] or were deported).

Beside prophecy and prayers, gospel songs are important aspects of belief that shape the decision-making processes of prospective Hadiya migrants. One is by Yoseph Samuel and is called *Chaltoto*, which in Hadiya language means "overcoming the challenges of the journey." The song originally referred to the spiritual sense of the term "journey to heaven" but is increasingly imbued with migration content. Lyrics of the song include: "We will go, pass the hurdle, and inherit the kingdom regardless of the storm of the sea." This is the most favored gospel song played when prospective migrants and their planned journeys are blessed by a pastor, during the farewell parties, and it is the most listened to during the journey. On all these occasions, the meaning decoded is "you will make it to South Africa despite all the challenges."

Others use specific gospel songs to build their resilience during their repatriation from detention centers in transit countries. Watching a joyful video clip posted by a group of returnee Hadiya migrants brought by IOM en route from the Tanzanian detention center to Ethiopia gives the impression that this is a celebration, rather than coming to terms with a failed migration project. But the message of their chosen song was loud and clear: it is not *if* but *when* they go back because there is nothing impossible for the omnipotent God that they counted on. A follow-up of these returnee migrants discovered that most of them went back to Moyale to restart the journey to South Africa. After all, God would not fail, it is only that people might get it wrong sometimes if their hearts are not upright.

SPIRITUALITY AT DESTINATION PLACES

Not only is spirituality a significant factor in their decision-making and a powerful force during the journey, Hadiya migrants continue their religious practices at their destination in South Africa. They continue to refer to the Youngren prophecy while reflecting on and sense-making their experience, not least from their perspective, in the unprecedented success of their small businesses in South Africa's informal economy, despite entry barriers. They sought spiritual support from Youngren, invited high-profile pastors and prophets from Ethiopia to bless their finances, and initiated a spiritually imbued *de facto* vigilante group to overcome the rising violence and criminality among migrants.

In what appears to be seeking a spiritual boost, the religious leaders of Hadiya migrants in South Africa reached out to Youngren to come to South Africa and bless the land. While expressing his delight at seeing the prophecy fulfilled, Youngren nevertheless declined the invitation mentioning that prophecy does not work on demand. So, the largely Protestant Hadiya congregations reached out to high-profile pastors and prophets in Ethiopia to come and bless South Africa. Subsequently, many Ethiopian pastors, mostly from southern Ethiopia, went to South Africa and blessed its land. They prayed that South Africa share its bounty with Ethiopian migrant groups, blessed their businesses, and prayed that migrants would overcome the challenges they faced there, including the increasing homicide rate among Hadiya migrants in South Africa, which is a cause for alarm for Hadiya society at large.⁴

In doing so, the Ethiopian pastors and prophets draw on the teaching of the Prosperity Gospel with a stronger focus on the power of faith, not just salvation for life after death, but more importantly in the here-and-now. Prosperity Gospel, also called seed faith, is “a religious belief among some Protestant Christians that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's health and material wealth. Material and, especially, financial success are seen as a sign of divine favour” (Hill, 2019). A Prosperity Gospel-inspired Ethiopian pastor who frequently travels to South Africa is Yonatan Aklilu, one of the most trending pastors in Ethiopia. The following is a summary of one of his preachings in South Africa in 2022 among Ethiopian migrants, with a focus on *moges* (spirit of God's favor):

What you should seek is *moges*, the spirit of favor. No matter how deep [remote] location or township your businesses might be, the spirit of favor helps you attract customers like a metal is attracted by a magnet. I now call upon you to summon the spirit of favor. If you get the spirit of favor, documentation becomes a lot easier. Next year we meet, your business will be ten times bigger than it is now. Mark my word! A case which they [South African immigration authorities] have closed in council, I will not only unlock but dismantle it with the power of God. The prosperity spirit is hovering on you! You might feel that

⁴ Focus group discussion with Hadiya migrant people in Johannesburg, November 15, 2023.

you are in another country but I say the whole universe belongs to God. You will walk in and out with the spirit of favor. As Aster is favored by God as a wife of the king Hage despite her disadvantages among prospective wives, so will you be the Asters of South Africa!

Key messages to migrants by Pastor Yonatan are “belonging” and “agency.” Pastor Yonatan’s message regarding the path to prosperity contrasts with the previously more work-based transformation project inscribed into Pastor Youngren’s prophecy. The first generation of Hadiya migrants was self-made, though their aspiration and the migration project had been God-sanctioned. They used religion as a space for agency. Now Prosperity Gospel is promising shortcuts to material prosperity. What is interesting about Pastor Yonatan’s offer is a new sense of belonging to South Africa, despite or because of the exclusionist and increasingly xenophobic South Africa. This is because ultimately the “whole universe belongs to God.” Pastor Yonatan offered agency to migrants, couched in the language of “the spirit of favor” that blesses their businesses and finances.

RECASTING HADIYA’S MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA FROM A BLESSING TO A CURSE

Hadiya society is going through a reflexive moment regarding the pros and cons of migration being a quintessential part of future-making. The risk during the journey has increased and the homicide rate is increasing in South Africa. This is as often committed by migrants on migrants as it is part of South Africa’s broader crime and violence that targets migrants.⁵ Even church leaders have become skeptical about the mass migration of Hadiya to South Africa.

Many research participants expressed concern that unless Hadiya use the gift of migration in a responsible manner, a *bereket* (blessing) could be turned into a *merigemt* (curse). In the context of rising criminality, migrants and their families, and Hadiya society more broadly, are now reimagining South Africa from “a promised land” to “a land of death.” A returnee migrant surmised that “more Hadiya are killed in South Africa than in the numerous battlefields they participated in Ethiopia during the war with Somalia and Eritrea.” The rise of robbery, abduction, and homicide against migrants in which fellow migrants are implicated has generated a public outrage. In January 2023, Ethiopian migrants in Johannesburg demonstrated against this rising violence among Ethiopian migrants. Two of the six suspected criminals were Hadiya migrants.⁶

Migration to South Africa was initially welcomed because it was understood as God creating a new field of possibility for the Hadiya to change their peripheral existence, which reflects the historically shaped regional inequality within Ethiopia. Yet, migration is messing up life, both in places of origin and destination, leading to a

⁵ Key informant interview with Hadiya migrants in Cape Town, November 4, 2023.

⁶ Interview with a participant of the demonstration, Johannesburg, November 17, 2023.

new signification of migration. This situation urged a Hadiya migrant to write a book entitled *Metshafe Hosanna: Egna ena Debub Africa* (The Book of Hosanna: Us and South Africa, 2018). The term “Hosanna” is used in this book in the biblical sense of “cry for help.” Mamushet’s cry for help relates to what he considers the process of spiritual and moral decay generated by the acquisitive drive and the greed connected to that. He considers that this has cut deep into Hadiya migrant peoples’ social fabric and that of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa more broadly (Mamushet, 2018: 154).

CONCLUSION

The ethnography presented in this article amply demonstrates the role religion has played in the process of Hadiya's migration to South Africa. This is not just a case study but contributes to the literature on the role of intangible factors in migration processes, a subject matter that has had a lack of emphasis in migration studies long dominated by analysis of tangible factors, especially of an economic nature.

We have seen how evangelical Christianity generated a sacred imagination of a destination in which South Africa emerged as the promised land for Hadiya migrants. This has fuelled migration aspiration, further boosted by the practice of prayer and gospel songs, to negotiate the risks of the perilous journey to South Africa. This sense of belonging has been reinforced by transnational religious practices in which pastors and prophets from Ethiopia encourage migrants to claim South Africa, despite or because of exclusionary practices and increasing xenophobia in that country. Here we find a situation where religion generates aspiration and helps build migratory agency, as well as a sense of belonging to South Africa, because ultimate ownership and sovereignty, as it were, belong to God.

However, in recent years, Hadiya migration has taken an individualist turn. This is expressed in various forms that include the commodification of faith, both in places of origin and in South Africa, and the rise of crime and violence among Hadiya migrants in South Africa. Hadiya migrants and Hadiya society more broadly call this spiritual and moral decay, related to migrants’ new material conditions of life, that is, a massive increase in migrant numbers and stiff competition over business turf, further compounded by their exposure to and immersion in South Africa’s culture of violence. On the face of it, the Hadiya migration project is endangered, casting doubt over its viability. Contemporary Hadiya society is going through a reflexive moment, redefining migration from being an asset to a liability. But they take responsibility for their new predicament. Once again, we see an overarching spiritual interpretation at play, including in sense-making. As God cannot be wrong, their trouble must have been related to “the wrath of God,” as fellow Hadiya migrants have “abused” the blessing (the migration gift) along the way, harming not only the wrongdoers but also Hadiya society at large.

In this shift from a collective to an individualist direction, migration is now considered less feasible and desirable. Hadiya parents are less happy and cooperative about sending their children to South Africa. Migration is now reimagined as a

problem and danger, rather than as a blessing and resource. The previous societal consensus on migration has unraveled. There is now a feeling that the misuse of the gift of migration has turned a *bereket* (blessing) into a *merigemt* (curse). However, reflecting a generational tension and fuelled by a more materialist imagination of migration, an increasing number of Hadiya youth are on the move, notwithstanding the growing risks during the journey in transit countries and at destination.

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