

**Auto-ethnography as a Research Method: Evidence from Field  
Research on Ethiopian Irregular Migrants in South Africa**

**FIRST DRAFT**

**(Yordanos Seifu Estifanos)**

**October 2019  
Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA**

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>RESEARCHING IN POLITICALLY SENSITIVE PLACES.....</b>	<b>4</b>
ENCOUNTER IN NORWAY.....	5
ENCOUNTER IN GERMANY.....	6
TO SOUTH AFRICA.....	7
ENCOUNTER IN SOUTH AFRICA.....	8
<b>ETHNOGRAPHY OF SETTLEMENT.....</b>	<b>11</b>
THE RESEARCH SITE.....	11
<i>Jeppe: Tail-end Globalization</i> .....	11
<i>Ethical Dilemma</i> .....	13
SOCIALIZING AND BUILDING TRUST.....	13
<i>Let Them Come to You</i> .....	13
<i>Remain Invisible</i> .....	14
<i>Be Honest</i> .....	16
<i>Stay Calm in Chaos</i> .....	17
<i>Participate and Observe</i> .....	18
RISKS AND DANGERS.....	19
<i>Make a Story Up</i> .....	19
<i>Stay Humane</i> .....	21
STATE VIOLENCE.....	22
<i>The Counterfeit Ploy</i> .....	23
<i>The Immigrant Ploy</i> .....	24
<b>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>27</b>

## Abstract

This is an auto-ethnographic account where personal experiences of the author are interjected within the experiences of irregular migrants during their migration and settlement processes. The field researches took place in two rounds, in 2014 and 2018, among Ethiopian irregular migrants in the informal economy of South Africa. Based on informants' narratives and his experience, I focus upon the ethnography of informality and irregularity in the settlement processes of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. This auto-ethnography of settlement is presented through narratives and experiences of immigrants and myself as a researcher.

In so doing, I place myself within the socioeconomic, cultural and political landscapes under which Ethiopian migrants operate within South Africa and provide insights on innovative ways of socializing and building trust with informants, gatekeepers and locals; mechanisms of minimizing risk when researchers undertake field research in dangerous places like the city of Johannesburg; the research dilemma researchers found themselves when there is a mismatch between theory and practice; and what risks immigrants counterand what triggers those those risks.

Key Words: Johannesburg, Irregular Migration, Informal Economy; Borders; Risk

## Introduction

Researching on irregular immigrants who settled in a clandestine economy, such as Ethiopian immigrants in South Africa, is a daunting task. On the one hand these migrants had to pass through diverse controls and barriers during their migration and harbor a great deal of trauma and mistrust. On the other hand, they are under constant surveillance from the authorities, and are often considered as illegal. Time and budget allocated for field research is another factor that determine the quality of the research. Moreover, political exiles and activists who left home for political reasons have every reason to doubt the researcher and avoid participating in the research.

My encounter with Ethiopian migrants, regulars and irregulars alike, based in Europe and South Africa indicates that the migration background of migrants (as exiles, refugees or economic migrants) and the nature of their livelihood base (formal and informal economy) as well as their experience en route and settlement affect the quantity and quality of information researchers are able to solicit. Imported politics and business environment in the host societies also play a role.

Majority of the current Ethiopian diaspora population in European and North American countries migrated many years before the Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. While the former are mainly political exiles that left the country during the fall of Imperial Regime (in 1974) the latter generally fall under economic migrants who migrated to South Africa starting from the mid nineties. The migration of Ethiopians to South Africa started with coincidence in regime changes in the two countries ([Estifanos and Zack 2019](#)): coincidence in the collapse of Apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994 and the fall of the military *Dergue*<sup>1</sup> regime in Ethiopian in 1991 created a favorable environment for Ethiopians to migrate to South Africa.

## Researching in Politically Sensitive Places

Multiple factors discouraged me from undertaking research on Ethiopian diaspora in European and North American countries. These include their duration of stay; accessibility due to dispersion across geography; their insertion in the formal laboreconomy; and time and budget limitations. The most powerful limiting factor, however, was their migration background (political exile) and their active involvement in the home politics. The latter is also present, notwithstanding degree, among Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. On the other hand, the presence of a relatively moderate political environment and concentration of large immigrant population in enclave economies of South Africa encouraged me to redirect my research focus to Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. My encounters, in Europe and South Africa, which influenced the decision to change my research site, are presented in the following narratives.

---

<sup>1</sup> A name for the military government that has governed Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991

## Encounter in Norway

Given a limited time and budget I allocated for field research, the unrelenting behavior of Ethiopians and Eritreans that I had met in Germany and Norway made me question the possibility of researching such a community. Let alone affectionately speaking with me and providing genuine information for my research, many of the Ethiopian (and Eritreans) in Norway were not willing to even say hello. I could not understand whether the cause was the workload and the high cost of living coupled with the rather gloomy weather or the effect of our politics that tends to become so polarized when it emigrates. It might also be the case that I didn't spend enough time to socialize and build trust with them. Yet, many Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants didn't respond to my greetings, and whenever some did, it is either preceded by a feeling of mistrust or followed by suspicious remarks.

Once, I met an Ethiopian at a bus station in Stavanger, Norway. She said, in *Amharic* – the official language of Ethiopia:

“Are you *Habesha*<sup>2</sup>? What are you doing here?”

“Yes,” I replied

I was delighted to finally find someone to talk to me, and talk to me in Amharic. I told her that I was studying migration at the University of Stavanger and went on about what a current and burning issue it was. I asked her why Ethiopians migrate so that our conversation wouldn't be cut short. After summarizing most of the socioeconomic and political problems prevalent in Ethiopia that triggered migration she said,

“You see my brother.... In fact you must ask, ‘Why people do not migrate?’ What is holding back people from migrating?”

This fashion of explaining migration is a proposition some of the most prominent migration scholars, the likes of Stephen Castel, have arrived at after so much research. Astonished by her reply, I asked her who is to blame for all these problems and awaited her response impatiently. She swayed her hands and said, “We are all to blame. But mainly, it's our past and current leaders” and continued to explain how our leaders and the educated elite ruined our country. And in order to rebuild it, she said, “Everyone should work hard while praying according to his or her faith.” I liked our conversation, so I decided to shoot another question:

“It is said that Ethiopians are poor due to their laziness.”

“Oh no! No one works hard like our people. Come on! Rural and urban people

---

<sup>2</sup> Most Ethiopians and Eritreans I had met abroad call each other Habesha. People I had met in South Africa and other countries say that they use the reference ‘Habesha’ out of good faith and in order not to give effect to the division of the people of the two countries as Ethiopians and Eritreans

worked hard their entire lives, they still do. But it all goes to waste. Nothing ever changes,” she interjected.

I switched the conversation towards her and asked, “What she was up to in Norway?” She said she had lived in Norway for more than a decade. Her goal is to return home, create job opportunities even if it’s just for five people. The bus I was waiting for arrived while the lady was chatting about this and that. When we were about to part ways she glanced at me suspiciously and said,

“You are going to tell’em, right?!”

She meant that I was not there to study, but because I was a government spy. I got into the bus pondering, ‘what an intriguing lot’ our people were. While on the bus, I recollected a story someone had shared with me as to how far suspicious Ethiopian migrants in Western countries could get. On the one hand, I wondered what malady had sucked our trust and had sown fear amongst us even after having crossed borders. On the other, I questioned whether doing research in such environment would produce relevant outcome.

### **Encounter in Germany**

The other incident that influenced me to redirect the research site to South Africa was what I had encountered in Frankfurt.

I decided to join a demonstration Ethiopian diaspora in Germany had organized, protesting the horrendous measures taken by Saudi Arabian government in 2014 in order to kick out Ethiopian and other immigrants living in the country. My friend and I jumped into a train departing from Bremen in the late hours of the night. It was dawning when we arrived at Frankfurt.

The protest was held in front of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Frankfurt. Up to a time the ambiance was that of empathy and recognition of the injustice of it all. Ethiopians who romanticized love of country and held pan-nationalist feelings became helpless because they could not redeem the past glory when they compared the Ethiopian identity with the atrocities the Saudi Arabian government had committed. Their sadness and rage was contagious when they denounced the act, holding up their flag and shedding tears courteously. The long-distance nationalism displayed by each participants spread like wild fire.

At the dawn of Islam, when followers of the Prophet Mohammed left their country and sought refuge in Ethiopia, the Ethiopians welcomed and sheltered them. The Prophet ordered his followers to ‘Let the Abyssinians alone as long as they let them alone.’ The Ethiopians remembered this. But those who were lent gold repaid it with pebbles, the Ethiopians claimed, and men groaned in bitterness and women sobbed to express their fury. Eritreans also joined the protests to show their solidarity.

In addition to carrying slogans written on placards, Ethiopian participants of the

demonstration were also shouting out denouncements in unison, the masses following the leader. Before the protest was over, however, it morphed into something else. The crowd that gathered in front of the Saudi Arabian Embassy suddenly changed its slogans and roared: Death to *Woyane*!<sup>3</sup> Decimate *Woyane*!

Few participants were inclined to beat up an employee of the embassy and stir up some commotion to rouse the protesters to some unbecoming behavior. They were suppressed by the scorn and castigation of the crowd as well as the restraint administered by the German police present at the scene. My friend and I were so confused that we immediately left the protesters and watched what was going on from a corner.

I pulled one of the organizers aside and spoke with him when the whole thing wound down. He categorically concluded that the one to be absolutely blamed for the ill treatment of the immigrants was the incumbent *Woyane* government. I asked him whether he would return home and serve his country if the current regime was ousted from power. He disclosed that he would never go back home: he will stay in Germany and continue protesting against the next government in power.

I headed to Bremen on the next train, brooding over the behavior of Ethiopian diaspora. I realized that I need more time and resources and a strong network in order to conduct research on Ethiopian diaspora in Europe.

### To South Africa

These two encounters and other additional minor incidents persuaded me to change the research site to South Africa. Reading on the few available literature on Ethiopian migrants in South Africa indicate that unlike members of the Ethiopian diaspora in Western countries, several Ethiopian migrants in South Africa are not strung between tense and extreme political positions. They settled in enclave economies within the informal economy of South Africa and operate in the townships<sup>4</sup>. Their settlement pattern and business sites also make them more accessible than the Ethiopian diaspora population in Western countries. Moreover, majority of them are economic migrants who used politics as a pretext to gain asylum.

However, this doesn't mean the politics of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa is totally sane. As indicated in the above section, it is widely known that migration to South Africa started in relation to political change in Ethiopia in 1991. Some of the earliest prominent Ethiopian migrants to South Africa were former soldiers of the *Dergue* regime. These soldiers had made South Africa one of their destinations (or transit) after fleeing to Kenya and other neighboring countries. Few recent Ethiopian migrants are also politically active. Political activities in Ethiopia as well as political ideologies imported from the

---

<sup>3</sup> A name assumed by the contingent of guerilla fighters that started the current ruling party in Ethiopia. It means "Rebel."

<sup>4</sup> In South Africa Townships are also conventionally called "Location." The term mainly represents underdeveloped and backward villages that lack infrastructure built in towns and at the brink of towns from the dawn of the 19th century up to the end of apartheid. The inhabitants of these villages are non-white South Africans, and mainly black South Africans.

diaspora population in Western countries influence the politics of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa, which consists of diverse ethnic groups, mainly Tigray, Amhara, Oromo, and Hossaena.

My encounter in the initial days of my field research in Johannesburg gives insight on the role of imported politics. It also indicates the techniques I employed to socialize with the migrants.

### Encounter in South Africa

One morning, I met an *Oromo* (the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia) guy, in downtown Johannesburg, who called himself “Gebre” - typically a *Tigriyan* (a minority ethnic group that controlled the politics over the past 27 years) name. We were talking by the side of the road where he was doing *Woza-Woza*<sup>5</sup>. Although we both speak Amharic, before we knew each other very well, our communication was all in English. The rhetoric of seceding the *Oromia Region* from Ethiopia and creating the State of Oromia seemed to be re-intensifying at that moment. This intensity that was being boosted by the “*Oromo First*” activists in North America had reached Johannesburg. Consequently, English was the more preferred vernacular among Oromo Nationalists than Amharic - the official language of Ethiopia. After we spoke in English for some time, I told him that I was a researcher looking for information.

Before providing any information or linking me up with a potential informant, he suddenly switched our conversation to Amharic language and asked me I am *Orthodox Christian*. That was one kick for two! I saw what he was getting at. Thus guessing it will neutralize both questions of ethnicity and religion. I replied, “I am an adherent of the Orthodox Christian faith. But I was born and grew up in *Harrar*<sup>6</sup> and studied at *Jimma University*<sup>7</sup>.”

The guy is loquacious and easy to get along with even if he is clearly influenced by political propaganda imported from abroad. We got along more after he examined my political views for some time. He briefed me on how the Oromo have been oppressed and that Oromia must secede and become a country on its own. At this point, I borrowed *Jagama Kello's*<sup>8</sup> words and told him that, “Oromo is a stem. A stem does not secede.” This was a reality check that hit him. He was at once stunned and proud. Talking about such things, we gradually got closer and closer.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Woza Woza*, literally translated into English, is a Zulu term that means, “Come, come.” It is like calling out “here, here” to their customers, perching their items to sell on the street. The selling usually involves loudly and constantly calling the name and price of the items they are selling.

<sup>6</sup> A former Islamic Emirate, Harrar is one of the ancient and holiest Islamic cities in Ethiopia and arguably according to some, the third in the world next to Mecca and Medina. UNESCO also recognized Harar as a city of peace where Christians and Muslims coexisted for centuries.

<sup>7</sup> Jimma University is located in Oromia Region where Gebre is originated from. As an Oromo activist who supports the *Oromo First* cause, Gebre had developed a strong hatred towards Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia, which he and others claim are dominated by Amhara Ethnic groups

<sup>8</sup> A late famous and highly revered Oromo patriot nicknamed “Thunder of Spring.”



In the end, Gebre became one of my *gatekeepers*. Getting to access to research informants is difficult in research contexts that need socializing and building trust. The conventional way of getting into the research community is using key people who have social status and acceptance and are in a position to let the researcher in so that he or she could collect genuine information. Gatekeepers might not be well informed about the research subject, but let the researcher in and connect him or her with key informants. It also helps to easily socialize and build trust. The role of gatekeepers is of particularly important in research settings where irregular migrants are operating in the informal economy.

As Gebre was selling Chinese made clothes by the side of the road, a passer-by shoved him with his arm and poked him with words. The passer-by said:

“You are blocking the road man... look at him!” □

Gebre replied to the guy who he clearly thinks is *Tigriyan*:

“You people! Where do you want us to go? We left the country for you. Now where are we supposed to go? That racist government of yours drove us out of home!”

The passer-by shot back:

“What more do you need *EPRDF*<sup>9</sup> to do for you? They respected your mobility right, gave you a passport and an opportunity to earn a living. You would have otherwise died in that arid village of yours.”

“What passport did they give me, huh?” asked Gebre

“The one that gets you here,” replied the passer-by

“I came here on a piece of paper, man! *EPRDF* only drove me away. You think it’s protecting me here? Shut your mouth!” Gebre groused.

Minutes passed as Gebre continued murmuring something like, ‘He wants me to pick up my stuff!’ He then called the guy and said:

“This is *Johannesburg*! Do you think we are in *Mek’elle*<sup>10</sup>?” and laughed at his own witticism.

Right then, he said to me, “Come ... let me buy you breakfast,” and we headed to Majesty

---

<sup>9</sup> *EPRDF* stand for Ethiopian People Republic Democratic Front: a government coalition of four dominant parties from Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations and Nationalities People Region (SNNPR) and is ruling Ethiopia since the transition period in 1991. Tigray is a minority in terms of population size accounting for around 6% of the total Ethiopian population. However, the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) had dominated *EPRDF* until the recent political reform in Ethiopia in 2018.

<sup>10</sup> The capital of Tigray located in northern Ethiopia.

building. The minute we arrived at the fourth floor of the building and we got off the elevator, he called out loudly:

“Abrehet!”

“Yes... Come in,” Abrehet replied.

Abrehet is an Eritrean immigrant woman who sold *Ambasha*<sup>11</sup> for a living. The aroma of her Ambasha calls out for customers from afar. By the time we entered her shop, Abrehet was talking in Tigrinya to someone else. Gebre gave little recognition to the guy’s presence and kept interrupting their conversation and talked to Abrehet in Tigrinya. The guy became upset because of Gebre’s intrusions. After a few minutes he decided to let it be known.

“Stop it! You are intruding. She’s busy,” said the guy

“Is this intrusion? I’m just practicing my Tigrigna,” Gebre replied, smiling.

The guy turned to Abrehet and went on speaking with her. Gebre also kept trying to talk to her. At that point, the guy became furious and spoke harshly. And Gebre elevated the issue of practicing to speak a language to that of “freedom of speech,” and said:

“Why are you angry? I have every right to speak!”

The guy become even more furious and said:

“Waaai! Are you angry? I’ll slap you if you want”

Gebre instantly left Abrehet’s shop and went to the shop next door and ordered Ethiopian coffee. I bought a couple of slices of Ambasha and asked him if he wanted a piece.

“What’s it good for? You want me to eat Tigriyan Ambasha and **head-butt everyone?**”

I shuddered. Abrehet and the guy cracked up with laughter. I said to myself, ‘*So much for tolerance! Such a community of migrants that I could socialize and build trust with.*’

---

<sup>11</sup> Round at bread of medium thickness, decorated with patterns in such a way that slices of it could be easily detached, traditionally prepared by people of Tigriyan ethnicity.

## Ethnography of settlement

### The Research Site

This section narrates the techniques the author employed in order to socialize and build trust with research informants, gatekeepers, and the locals during the field research. Before directly going to the techniques and process, however, the section provides background information on the main research site in South Africa.

Gauteng is the smallest province in South Africa that is rich in gold, diamond and other minerals. It is the richest and most densely populated province, which incorporates Soweto (the largest home of black South Africans); Pretoria (South Africa's political center); and Johannesburg (an international financial and commercial city). Because of its rich financial capital, the Gauteng province attracts migrants from various African countries. Although many of the migrants in South Africa had come from neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia, East African countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya have also sent scores of migrants to South Africa (IOM 2009; Estifanos and Zack 2019).

### Jepe: Tail-end Globalization

Among African immigrants that end up in Johannesburg, the Somalis prefer an area called Mayfair, a suburb of Johannesburg. The Congolese settle in Yeoville, and the Nigerians are mostly found in Hillbrow (Estifanos 2015). Ethiopian migrants are mainly found and do business in Jepe, which is located in the central business district of Johannesburg (Zack 2014; Estifanos 2016). Jepe, informally called “the Ethiopian Quarter,” is a neighborhood located at the business center to north east of the city, alongside Jepe Street. Retail and wholesale of commodities takes place in Jepe, and Ethiopian migrants do everything from vending and hawking of small items on the streets to importing wholesale merchandise from China and distributing them to retailers (Zack 2014; Zack and Lewis 2018).

Jepe was established and became what it is today over the last two decades. The Ethiopians have enormously contributed to its establishment and development. Pioneer Ethiopian migrants in South Africa took control of abandoned and “ownerless” buildings in the city and used them to start wholesale and retail businesses. They made the city alive by opening small retail shops and starting the street vending business as well as investing and entering into various business ventures (Zack and Lewis 2018; Zack 2014). Then they started working with the South African government and people claiming to be owners of the buildings. They legally leased the buildings and began sub-letting them to other Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants. Business boomed, and Jepe went through economic and physical transformation (Zack and Estifanos 2016).

Today diverse businesses have proliferated on all the buildings. If one enters one of the buildings around, one finds every type of Ethiopian culture and cultural keepsakes. One can find coffee with rue and macchiato, to music and video shops and hair salons, traditional clothes and necklaces, *Tela* (Local homemade beer) and *Tej* (Honey mead),

Ambasha and *Injera* (Ethiopian flat bread made of a tiny grain called Teff), raw meat and bull porridge, minced vegetables, incense and myrrh, thyme, and Cress. Trendy shops are also many: khat chewing parlors, perfume and cosmetic shops, massage parlors, electronics shops, billiard/pool arenas, hookah lounges etc. There are also various imported social institutions such as Idirs, Iqubs, and political associations in Jeppe. There are several money transfer and travel agencies as well as Internet and other service providers (Zack and Estifanos 2016).

Over the past two decades, Ethiopian migrants in South Africa have also taken control of large and medium buildings meant for medical and other services, and altered them to centers of wholesale and retail businesses. They used parts of the buildings as mini and medium supermarkets and lofts. Some have built their own buildings (Zack and Lewis 2018). The business quarter gradually sprawled and currently incorporates around six blocks in the center of Johannesburg along with the surrounding main streets (Zack and Estifanos 2016). The fact that Jeppe is neighbors with the city's main train station has assisted the Ethiopian commercial activity to branch out of Johannesburg and flourish in different South African towns. It also has connections with neighboring countries interconnected by the railway. The railway has created an opportunity for the Ethiopian commercial activity to establish ties with Malawi, Congo, Zambia, Mozambique, and other neighboring countries. Similarly, the main taxi rank of the city is located near Jeppe. This has enabled interconnection with black South African townships, which has significantly expanded the business horizons of Ethiopian migrants (Estifanos 2015; Estifanos and Zack 2019).

Established merchants with strong economic capacity and Ethiopians who had migrated from urban areas make up most of the settlers in Jeppe. For those who are recently migrating to South Africa, Jeppe seems to be saying 'enough!' Multitudes are saying, "Its flesh is devoured and the bones of Jeppe are bare." As a result, new arrivals, especially Ethiopians migrating to South Africa after the 2010 World Cup, are destined for the townships (Estifanos 2015). But Jeppe is still a springboard, which lends the impetus to do business. They find the supply of goods, which they sell leaping from Johannesburg into the townships, from the Chinese who are the avant-garde of economic globalization. The Chinese have several large wholesale shops in various locations in South Africa. The main one, *Dragon City*, is located near Jeppe (Estifanos 2018).

The Ethiopian traders distribute clothing and household items they buy wholesale from the Chinese, to various townships resident. The money made from their customers flows back into Jeppe (Estifanos 2015; Zack and Estifanos 2016). Jeppe has forged a vertical flow with economic globalization in such a way. In order to make this flow robust, horizontal linkages are also forged by taking in black South Africans and other Africans from neighboring countries into the globalization framework. Because Ethiopian merchants conduct most of their trade with Chinese manufacturers in and around Jeppe, researchers call Jeppe, the 'place where globalization met Africa' (Zack 2014).

## **Ethical Dilemma**

It is difficult to fully adhere to research ethics in sensitive topics that deal with irregular migrants who are mostly engaged in informal businesses activities leaving the researcher in dilemma. During the field research, I adhered to ethical issues in most cases, but I was flexible in some circumstances.

Regarding informed consent, for example, I informed my informants about the purpose of the research as well as the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. Most immigrants operating in the clandestine economy have anathema towards written agreements. Hence, instead of seeking written consent, I stuck to verbal consent.

While it is not advisable to give money for informants, I had to violate such principle in more ways than one: I paid money for some of the informants demanding money to provide information; invited food and beverage in exchange for information; paid bills for nightclub time spent together; contributed for fuel cost; etc.

## **Socializing and Building Trust**

Researching clandestine activities that have been criminalized by governments in dangerous places, like the city of Johannesburg and informal townships, requires a high level of trust with the communities, both immigrants and locals. The nature of labor market immigrants inserts themselves (informal economy) and high crime rate in the research site have implications in socializing and trust building processes. Given the nature of the research site, it is not possible to parachute in with a research plan, however well thought out it is, unless there are established relationships on the ground.

To establish such relationships, in both the 2014 and the 2018 field works in South Africa, I employed a research design that verges on ethnography. Accordingly, the first month of the fieldwork was spent on socializing and building trust with informants, gatekeepers and the local communities. In my second field research, in 2018, I benefited from the previous relationship that I had established with immigrants, gatekeepers and the locals.

As part of trust building and socializing process, I chewed Khat - a stimulant plant that is also called Mira and smoked Shisha (hookah). I also participated in social events such as holiday celebrations and church events; travelled with informants and gatekeepers to different informal townships and other cities of South Africa; helped immigrants in street vending; spent time in immigrants' shops; went to bars at night as well as ate food from Muslim owned restaurants. To minimize the risk of facing danger as well as to collect genuine and adequate information during the field research, I employed the following techniques.

## **Let Them Come to You**

In the first few days of my transect walk, around Jeppe, I expected that people would take me as a newly arriving migrant. It is easy for them to spot a newly arriving stranger just

by noticing him or her. Simple signals such as the language one uses to communicate and the style greeting makes one visible. So the interaction would start with non-verbal communication such as bowing your head or saying “Salam” to greet compatriots in a strange environment. The fact that I have read about Jeppe in advance and visited some of the places where these immigrants originate from helped in smoothing out communication and mutual understanding and helped in striking informal conversations.

With the role of gatekeepers it becomes more manageable. Speaking a word or two of the informant’s language opens him or her up. I also avoided asking uncomfortable questions such as how much they earn monthly, what they do for a living, where they live, their political positions and other questions that are personal, at least in the initial days of my interaction.

More helpful in collecting adequate and genuine data is the idea of identifying ideal places and opportunities to find potential informants and gatekeepers. In this regard, I spend adequate time in corners that forge documents, Internet cafes, parking lots, café and restaurants, Khat and Hookah parlors and restaurants and street corners immigrants frequent. The logic behind is that I don’t have to go to places where immigrants live (some of them very far from the city, some live in the townships, and some of them live in dangerous areas). Instead of going to these places, I let them come to me. This has dual benefit of reducing the risk and cost of research on the one hand, and enabling me build trust with informants with the help of shop and business owners, cafeteria and internet café managers, activists and opinion leaders. I also used a former researcher to reach some of the informants I interviewed.

However, getting access to informants is not good enough. In this regard, Whyte argued, that ideas grow up in part out of immersion in the data and the whole process of living and in part as a logical product of growing out of the careful weighing of evidence (Whyte 1964: 3-4). Thus, travelling to the townships and other places where migrants frequent, such as churches and mosques, revealed some of the day-to-day routines of the migrants that I would have not been able to see otherwise. Especially, in my visits to the informal townships, I realized that the risks and dangers immigrants encounter became more evident if and when experienced first hand. This is indicated in the last section of this article.

Like my informants, I am a migrant and hence experienced some of the challenges and life encounters of immigrants, notwithstanding degree, as well as the risks during my stay in South Africa. The following sections provide explanations on the techniques I employed and on how the research was done based on my personal account, my encounters with immigrants and other incidents I had passed through or witnessed during my field research in the informal economy of South Africa.

### **Remain Invisible**

After analyzing the situation of Ethiopian migrants in Johannesburg for some time, I gradually started approaching the migrant community. At first, I used to take the bus to Jeppe rather cautiously. I left my hair untidy; I dressed neutral: not fancy. Some times I

even put on worn-out cloths, before going to the research site, so as not to look attractive to the robbers. I carried just enough cash for my daily expenses, and often times, I put some money aside in case the mobsters come and ask for *their* money (as they say – give me *my* fucken money or *my* fucken mobile phone).

I did not carry smart phone, but an old and worn out model just to call and receive calls<sup>12</sup>. I also left my laptop and camera at home and didn't carry a backpack. I loitered around and did some transecting walk, empty-handed. If anything, I carried a small notebook that fitted in my back pockets and a pen, for jotting down my observations, as the mind is a fickle friend, when I took a break at a random cafeteria or restaurant. I suspected walking fast would attract the attention of the mobsters in downtown, Jeppe. So I put my hands in my pockets and walked rather slowly while scouring for information.

Sometime after, I began visiting some places and expanding the reach of my connections with the support of some Ethiopians that I knew from before as well as with the help of friends and colleagues back home who provided links with established Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.

I took all precautions necessary during the field research. I remained invisible and fluid to the extent possible. All information I revealed about myself was short, precise and evidence-based. In addition, I tried to make the relations I created with anyone or any group of Ethiopian migrants (from various ethnic, religious, political affiliation and lifestyle) to be at arm's length and not protracted. This is to avoid the risk of delving into pre-existing conflicts and taking side, with one group or another group of migrants, unknowingly, which has implication on the quality of information collected. I also attempted to have a good grasp of the life of Ethiopians, as migrants, by visiting various South African cities and informal townships.

Still, there could be some risk. One afternoon, while I was interviewing a young Ethiopian in his shop located within a neighborhood called Berea, in Johannesburg, an adult guy kept coming again and again and eavesdropping and asking us if all was going well. His interruption was disturbing and he had a heavy spirit. I understood the presence of heavy conflict between the two immigrants in retrospect during a post interview discussion I held with a gatekeeper who introduced me to the young man.

I also did my best to make sure the information I received from people was based on their consent and wouldn't be harmful to their identity and safety either in the short or long-term. I strengthened my relationship with Ethiopian migrants in South Africa based on such principles.

---

<sup>12</sup>I have also witnessed many immigrants in Johannesburg had two mobile phones: an old worn out model for the workplace and for moving around Jeppe, and a recent model smartphone for other occasions or they use the latter in churches, inside their cars or at home, or wherever is safe.

## Be Honest

In addition to taking field notes, I searched for studies conducted and books and articles written before I went there. Journalist Abel Alemayehu had written a book titled, *The Indignity of Our People: The Secret Lives of Ethiopians in South Africa* based on the observations he had made when he had spent a short time in South Africa for the 2013 African Cup of Nations. I also discovered other books and newspaper articles written by non-Ethiopians and Ethiopians. I read these and other sources as I kept gathering more information.

One morning, I went to *Majesty* building, in Jeppe, looking for VCDs showing the wedding ceremonies of the youth from Hosaena<sup>13</sup>. I had in my hand Abel Alemayehu's book when I entered one shop and asked for the VCDs. The owner of the shop told me she didn't have them at first. But then she suggested that I might find the VCDs at another shop in *Joburg Mall*. She also told me to tell the owner of the shop in *Joburg Mall* that she had sent me to him. As I thanked her and turned around to leave her shop, she asked me about the book in my hand and if she could have a look at it. I told her to look at it till I came back and went to the Mall.

When I got back with the CD, she told me that I could pick up my book from another shop on the left side of her shop. I went there to pick up my book and ended up getting grilled with questions by another lady. The lady first began by raising the major points in the book and confronted me where I had found that information and how credible it all was. I tried to tell her that I didn't write the book and that the journalist and I didn't even have similar names. She remained skeptical, as she believed Abel was my penname. When I could no longer tolerate her skepticism, I told her that I was in South Africa to conduct scientific research and not to reveal the indignity of migrants.

She immediately abandoned the issues raised in the book and focused on my identity: where I was born and grew up, when I went to school and graduated, where I worked at, where I studied currently, what articles and monographs I have published, what types of issues I want to research etc. When she asked me about every detail of my life, I felt like I was at a job interview. Astonished, apprehensive, worried, baffled, I answered all her questions frankly. My replies were honest and precise.

Two men, who were sitting in the shop, were absolutely silent when all of that was taking place. They seemed rather distracted and didn't at all care about the interview (interrogation) that was taking place. The lady relaxed when she was done interrogating

---

<sup>13</sup> The wedding ceremony in and of itself stirs a huge desire among succeeding migrants, while painting a rosy picture about South Africa. One particular wedding ceremony was exceptionally extravagant that it even exceeded the conventional standards of rich South African wedding ceremonies. The ceremony included a helicopter, expensive wedding cars, and a boat, among other extravagances. Local brokers and smugglers use the wedding video to allure potential young migrants to dream about South Africa. The videos amplify the successes of Ethiopian immigrants in South Africa but simultaneously conceal a great deal of risks and daunting challenges migrants endure in the migration and settlement processes.



me and was convinced that I did not lie to her. I later discovered that she found the support letter I got from my university (Oldenburg University) in the book. She took my name and goggled me! Being the snitch that it is, Google also gave her my CV, and she based the interview on the details there. I was amazed because I never saw this coming from Ethiopian immigrants in South Africa, given their low social status.

### Stay Calmin Chaos

The lady wanted to inquire more about the research I was currently conducting. The University of Witwatersrand, where I did my internship, was also mentioned in the support letter from my University. There are members of the Jewish community at the University, or the Ethiopian community suspects so. The Jewish traders in Johannesburg coveted the commercial area that the Ethiopians had established and became successful at. She might have suspected that I was spying for Jewish people when she read the name of that University in the letter. Moreover, the only professional association mentioned in my CV is Ethiopian Economic Association (EEA). I tried to explain how neutral my research was, fearing she might associate it with Birhanu Nega<sup>14</sup> and his political movement.

The two men were still absorbed in a scary silence. The more I felt familiar with the lady, the stronger her questions became. The more she tried to connect them with unexpected and unfamiliar subject matters, the less I managed to convincingly explain it all to her. I grew drained and defensive. When they noticed that the conversation was becoming increasingly confrontational and I was bored and seemed to pay no heed whether she believed me or not, one of them interjected saying, “It’s for your own sake!”

He explained that spies and journalists from South Africa, Ethiopia and the rest of the world have written inaccurate and adverse reports about Ethiopian migrants in South Africa before. He added that there are entities that want to smear the Ethiopian migrants in South Africa, including Ethiopian journalists, and such publications could turn out to be dangerous for the safety of the migrants. The other man also frankly told me that Johannesburg is a perilous city, and people could easily be murdered. After warning me to be careful with my research, he explained how fast rumors circulated in the city and how people did not check their facts when they spread news. He earnestly warned me this could be very dangerous for me. Afterwards, I began having a warm conversation with my interrogator and advisors. I felt that we were building mutual trust as we kept talking and sharing ideas.

---

<sup>14</sup> Birhanu Nega is an economist turned politician. From 1996 to 2000, he had served as the president of the Ethiopian Economic Association. He has also served as the head of the Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute, a non-profit organization that he helped to establish. He was the mayor elect of Addis Ababa in the 2005 Ethiopian National Election. He is also the founding chairman of the Rainbow Ethiopia: Movement for Democracy and Justice and a Deputy Chairman of Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), for whom he served as chief election campaign strategist. He is also the co-founder and Leader of Ginbot 7, an anti-government rebel group that has been labeled terrorist by the Ethiopian government, until 2018.

My lady interrogator and the two men promised that they could put me in touch with people who could be helpful to my research. Like Gebre, the lady and the two other men served me as gatekeepers and linked me up with relevant informants. One of the men also found and emailed me a study previously conducted on Ethiopian migrants in South Africa that I couldn't locate before. In time, I became close to a wider circle of Ethiopian migrants.

### Participate and Observe

About ten o'clock one morning, I met another young Ethiopian guy who did *Woza-Woza* on Jeppe Street and introduced myself. I helped him for a while, as I did other migrants in an attempt to be a participant observant. This young man introduced me to another matured Ethiopian man saying I was from Harrar. The man asked me where in Harrar I was from. Subsequently, he asked if I spoke *Oromifa*. Before I had the chance to answer that, he asked if I could speak the *Adere* language?"

I replied that I only spoke little *Oromifa* but not that well. I also frankly told him I didn't speak any *Adereword* at all. He peered at me and said, "you are a fraud and from Harar at all," and he burst out in laughter. I too laughed. After a few minutes of conversation about Harar and life of migrants, we got along each other. He bought me coffee from a Zimbabwean lady who sold it from a thermos on the street. Then we took a taxi to *Mayfair*<sup>15</sup> so that he would give me information for my research.

He took me to a place named Fat'e's. He exchanged greetings with Fat'e and they went to an inner room to talk more. Afterwards, he rejoined me and while we were chatting at Fat'e's about his plans to migrate to North America via Brazil, Fat'e brought us food in a slightly submerged basin.

He has ordered the food without asking me, if I felt like eating, and without checking if I ate 'Christian' or 'Muslim' meat. He started eating as soon as the food arrived. I took my eyes off the food and stared somewhere else since I didn't know what to do.

"Come on eat man. What's the matter with you," he said

"Um...I don't eat Muslim meat," I replied as I am Christian

"Alas! This is not Muslim meat. It's ox meat. Just eat."

I joined him. After we ate, the guy took me to a Khat parlor called 'Gadafi.' As we entered the Khat parlor he said:

"What kind of Khat do you chew?"

---

<sup>15</sup> Mayfair is a neighborhood in Johannesburg where mostly Muslim Somalis, Oromos, and Gurages have settled in. It is commonly known as "the Somali Quarter" because the majority of its inhabitants are Somalis from Somaliland.

“Um... I don’t chew Khat,” □I replied

“Ajaiba! What are your teeth for if you don’t chew Khat?”

He cracked me up. I agreed to chew with him since I had to talk to him anyway. I also realized that chewing Khat (Mira), as smoking hookah and drinking alcohol, is one of the socializing avenues in the informal economy of South Africa.

He dumped all he knew about immigrant’s life on me while we chewed that dwarf Khat, which is the discovery of Somalis in South Africa. In addition to frequently exclaiming, “Wollahi” or “Allhamdulillah,” he laughed a lingering and intoxicating laugh while he talked, “Thank you,” I said when I was done with collecting the information I wanted.

He assumed a very stern face and a serious tone for the first time before he said, “Study hard. The Amhara say an educated and well-fed man prevails. You will help us one day. You will help our country too.”

“Insh Allah,” I said and we parted ways.

## **Risks and Dangers**

Field research also creates the opportunity to interact with the local communities. While my primary study sites are downtown Johannesburg and informal townships, in both the 2014 and 2018 fieldworks, I stayed in White neighborhoods in Johannesburg (Auckland Park in 2014 and Parkview in 2018) in order to minimize risk. However, risk was unavoidable.

## **Make a Story Up**

In 2014, to cut down on my transportation expense, I started taking the city bus called Rea Vaya. Because of the prevalence of crime in Johannesburg, the bus stations are not open as in other countries. They look like trenches in the city. They have an entrance and an exit. They are made of sturdy metal and some bulletproof like material that looks like glass. They are also guarded. Only those who have an electric ticket can enter into stations by swiping them at the machine installed near the entrance. This reduces the danger by sieving out thieves and crooks.

I started visiting some places by taking the bus, walking between the guesthouse and the bus station for fifteen minutes. This daily half hour stroll from and to the guesthouse introduced me to the vestiges of apartheid and the street children of Johannesburg. These street children make a living mainly out of begging, or selling fruits and ornaments or by washing windshields during the day. During the night, they change careers and become thieves. I come across these street dwellers during my strolls as I used the pedestrian way and had to cross the zebra.

I decided I should turn my relationship with them to friendship. So, I got closer to them and invited them to get closer to me. I had to respect these children for their humanity

alone, even though the danger and fear was still there. I started showing them thumbs up or waving at them as if we already knew each other. In addition, I made an effort to put into practice Mandela's words; "If you speak to a man in a language he understands, it goes to his head. But when you speak to him in his native language, it goes to his heart." I greeted them in Zulu saying, "Sawubona." After some time, it worked and a good relationship flourished between us. Sometimes, I give them coins for 'breakfast' or 'lodging.' In time, we started chatting, not just exchanging greetings and money. I listened to their stories and told them who I was to an extent. I gave them respect and love, they gave me protection. They began considering me one of their own.

One evening, I missed the bus that I usually took while returning after spending the day at Jeppe. I took the next bus and it was getting dark by the time I got to my neighborhood. I got off the bus and started walking home fast, immersed in fear. I was a few meters away from the guesthouse when I sensed someone was following me. I didn't know whether he had descended from up above or ascended from down below, but a grown up looking man was behind me. I thought I was seeing things. I crossed the street and took the opposite side. So did he. We zigzagged. He surely was following me, but I thought he was after money and I started searching my pockets. Before I finished searching, he was already onto me!

I was afraid of him because he was not one of my friends! His hair was untidy and very dusty. His sweat-soaked and dusty clothes emitted a musty smell. He was thickset, muscular and all buffed up, his eyes were bloody red, and his lips burnt black from heavy smoking. He put his left hand on my right shoulder and said, "Give me a match" in a coarse voice. But it was written on his face that he was not after safety matches. I told him that I didn't have matches since I didn't smoke, but instead, I suggested we could go to my place to pick up some cash, and then we could have dinner together, if he is willing. I made up a deliberately contrived fake story that I was actually down and was badly looking for someone to join me for a beer. Since I indirectly indicated that I didn't have any money, even if he attacked me for it, the young man calmed down and we went home together.

He wandered from one room to another admiring. When he finally reached the kitchen, he swiftly took two bananas, pushed them down nonstop and appeased his hunger. He took some fruits and bread and put them in his pockets. Looking at me, he said he had spent most of his life on various streets and that he has never been inside such houses except looking at them from the outside, and at times not even able to look inside because of high-rising fences and menacing guards. His father was martyred fighting for the freedom of Blacks and his mother died of AIDS. He lived a life he did not want to on the streets. At that point, my fear dissipated and he dropped his cloak of a thug. We stood on an even ground. Our humane side triumphed and we spoke as men.

I saw the other side of Tapello when we sat and talked over beer. He turned out to be a particularly impressive guy who is "black by nature and proud by choice." The night deepened as we conversed on politics, race, religion, economy and culture. I asked the waitress for the bill and paid. When she brought back the change, Tap'ello gathered it all and put it in his pocket as if he had paid the bill. He laughed out loud when I said "Thank

you for the dinner.” He escorted me home after we exchanged phone numbers. As he turned to go, I looked him in the eye and asked him the question that has been gnawing at me. “Did you really need matches earlier?” Laughing, he told me he followed me to mug and rob me. He said, “We don’t do this because we like it.”

## Stay Humane

There is a fifteen-year-old teenager among these street children. She should have been at school as most of the girls of her age. But circumstances conspired to put her on a street corner. She is young in age, but it looks as if the years have passed her by without her living them. The girl didn’t have the opportunity to go to school, but everything she utters has a point. I see her reading a newspaper when I am walking to the bus station every morning. This routine of hers amazed me. As I was walking to the bus station one morning, the girl came towards me and stretched out her hand to greet me. I stretched out my “clean” hand in turn, and shook her “dirty” one.

“How are you my friend?” she said

“Ngikahle,” I replied

Moments into our chat, she suddenly twisted the subject to the changing weather. She talked about how the temperature had risen suddenly and how it was going to affect the nighttime weather in the days to come. She explained that because there was no cloud cover that was capable of smothering the strong heat during daytime, the clouds would disband and converge later, to form raindrops. I wondered whether the girl was a street child or a meteorologist. She continued and said, “It is going to rain in the coming few days.” Three days after her prediction, I was sitting on the veranda drinking a beer brewed. A heavy thundery rain poured.

“My friend,” she said and shook my hand the next morning as I was walking to the bus station. I wondered what she was up to as I returned her greetings and listened attentively. She shared with me how she and her pals considered me their friend even when I didn’t give them money, just because I talked and listened to them. Then she asked me where I was from. When I told her I was from Ethiopia, I wondered, ‘Whether she knew there was a country called Ethiopia in the world at all.’ I was astounded when she immediately attached Ethiopia to the story of the struggle for freedom of the blacks led by Mandela. She further went on to tell me about Mandela’s reconciliatory moves, his firm belief in humanity, and his unrelenting struggle for equal opportunities for all. She underlined that Mandela is a proud African freedom fighter who believed in the equality of the human race and that he fought and sacrificed himself for the freedom of black and white South Africans.

I gradually gave away my clothes and those left behind by the German tenants, with whom I shared the flat, to the street dwellers a week before I left Johannesburg. I packed up my things and enthusiastically waited for the day I got out of that city.

One Saturday, as I was walking home after spending the day in “Jeppe,” that girl from the

street ran up to me and said, “I heard you’re about to leave Joburg” after she shook my hand. I was amazed and shocked. I started checking my pockets all the while wondering whether this was a scheme the girl devised to get some money. I was also in a hurry. While I was searching my pockets and walking briskly, I heard her say, “You must tell them we love them.” I was not paying careful attention, but she was saying other things as well. I managed to give her the two coins of five Rand that I found in my pocket and told her she must share it with her brother who begs in the middle of the street.

All of a sudden, something happened- something that I never expected to happen! I was stabbed in the back! Yes, that’s what most people, including myself, would expect given what we know from history and the media about Johannesburg. That was not what had happened. Instead, the girl threw the coins that I gave her on the ground and broke into tears! This one did stab me like a dagger. I was deeply moved and left speechless. My eyes began to swim in tears. Dumbfounded, and lost for words I only managed to mutter:

“Why are you crying?”

“Because you’re our friend and you are leaving,” she said. □

I told her “Please don’t cry...I will be coming back.”

Still tears welling from her eyes, she repeatedly told me, “Please tell them we love them.” She meant my Ethiopian fellows. We finally said goodbye and I proceeded forward. What came to my mind first was the truth Mandela had written in the Long Walk to Freedom, “I always knew that deep down in every human heart there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than the opposite.” Even though she had wallowed in addiction, poverty and darkness, this girl’s heart was unadulterated.

## State Violence

In addition to risks due to high crime rate in places like Johannesburg, there are other risks associated with the nature of business immigrants are engaged in and the space they occupy in the informal economy of South Africa. Abnormal business competition and the desire to diversify business have compelled many Ethiopian immigrants to relocate and expand their businesses to dangerous business locations such as squatter camps and violent townships as well as *ashotspot* areas within cities exposing them to crimes and risks. However, state violence is the dominant risk perpetrated against immigrants by the South African government. My two encounters, in 2014 and 2018, reveal the nature of the risks and how they are intertwined with inefficient bureaucracy, corruption and vested interests of politicians and leaders.

## The Counterfeit Ploy

One late morning Frew, an Ethiopian migrant who lived for six years in South Africa, and I headed to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of *Madiba* building to have breunch. Like many buildings in Jeppe area such as *Majesty*, *Bafana Bafana* and *Joburg Mall*, the building was inundated with black South African shoppers, cross-border traders and immigrant entrepreneurs from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland, Ethiopia and other African countries.

Buyers and sellers, hawkers and brokers were busy undertaking their regular business. As we take a step on the first rung of the stairs towards the third floor, the bulding went into instant turmoil. Some people started running, other hiding, others crying and yet other in stood still, breathless. Some rushed up the stairs up, others climbed down. Some ran out of the building, others entered. Items that jam-packed the sides of the staircases fall dawn, one pushing the other creating a domino effect, and contributing for the mayhem inside *Madiba*. Songs and musics instantly stopped playing and piercing sound from closing shop windows started make noise instead. Power went out and people kept silent, consumed by fear, and searching for a hiding corner. At this point, policemen fired gun, burned teargas and blasted petrol bomb before they rampaged into the bulding fully armed. Turbulence and instability overwhelmed the building.

This scene was part of a raid the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department (JMPD) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) carried out on illegal immigrant traders, including Ethiopians, to confiscate counterfeit goods. Prima facie, the raid seems an act of ensuring justice and order. However, a deeper look into it indicates the operation is an extension of a narrative that criminalizes, scapegoats and marginalizes immigrants. The operation is also superimposed with inefficient bureaucracy and corruption<sup>16</sup>.

Instead of confiscating the counterfeit goods and taking them to a relevant government office, police officers resell them at lower prices to illegal traders. The South African government also acknowledged the prevalence of corruption and indicated that five police officers that participated in a similar raid, in August 2019, were caught red-handed trying to resell confiscated items to illegal traders in Johannesburg. Two offices that leaked information about the planned raid to illegal traders were also caught ([Source](#)).

Under the pretext of conficating counterfeit goods, the JMPD and SAPS officers are also accused of taking money and goods from immigrants operating legal businesses as well as searching buildings which the court did not give permission to. Such malpractices have encouraged immigrants to react in many ways. Some bribe police officers while others engage in physical fight, as immigrants consider the officers illegal actors. One common way of fighting is throwing stones at the advancing officers, where legal

---

<sup>16</sup>If government was truly serious about counterfeit goods and the effect their sale is said to have on the country's economy, it could do a number of other things to address the matter rather than harassing working-class people at gunpoint. Instead of confronting people with police armored vehicles, government could start with tackling those who import counterfeit and fake goods. Or better yet, it could address the corruption at the ports where these goods arrive, starting with the dishonest customs officials who let them pass through.

migrants join the illegal traders in the fighting. One of the reasons for throwing stones at the police, according to my informants, is to attract more police officers. The logic behind is that if the number of officers increases, they won't have incentive to confiscate counterfeit items because the amount of money each officer will receive from the resell will be low.

The South African government also accuses immigrants of taking the local's jobs as well as involving in criminal activities. These accusations are rooted in lopsided narratives that scapegoat immigrants for South Africa's long-existing and delicate internal problems (Landau 2011). The majority of the traders, including South Africans in *Madiba* building, are engaged in informal (not illegal) business activities that significantly contribute for the economy of Johannesburg. The business area annually circulates around 10 Billion rand worth economy and created job opportunities for immigrants and South Africans (Zack and Lewis 2018). For instance, of the 3000 shops that are owned and run by Ethiopian migrants in Jeppe area, each shop created 3 jobs, on average, and one of them is for a South African (Zack and Lewis 2018).

Despite the presence of few immigrants who participate in criminal activities, the logic of holding immigrants for the high crime rate in South Africa does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. South Africans commit majority of the crime, and data from the South African police, show that there is no correlation between crime rate and immigrants at national level (Landau). On the contrary, immigrants need protection, as they suffer the disproportionate share of the crime and exploitation. Another factor that reinforces exploitation, vulnerability and precarity of immigrants is linked to the inefficiency and corruption in processing asylum cases at the Department of Home Affairs. A UN report in 2016 indicated that South Africa has the highest number of unsettled asylum-seekers in the world (Landau and Pampalone 2018: 92). Such inefficiency has denied immigrants of their rights and left them exposed to precarity, corruption, violence and exploitation of diverse kind (Estifanos and Zack 2019).

In a nutshell, in their capacity as non-citizens, immigrants in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, are left vulnerable not only to state violence but also to the violence by regular citizens. Politicians and leaders who compete for political and economic powers, at national and local levels, mobilize residents to attack and evict immigrants. There are also instances whereby business owners intent on eliminating competition from immigrants, in various townships, had organized violence in the townships.

South African Policemen present at the scene, outside *Madiba* building, were reluctant to protect immigrants and their properties when regular South Africans launched xenophobic attacks on immigrants and looted their businesses. This is more common in the townships, and is discussed in the section below.

### **The Immigrant Ploy**

Black South Africans have a dance that they perform by stomping their feet, swiveling their hips, jogging gently, and chanting a mesmerizing harmony in unison. It's called *Toyi-Toyi* in Zulu. *Toyi-Toyi* is a community protest dance, and it has been their way of



expressing grievances since colonialism and apartheid times. Though Toyi-Toyi is considered a demonstration of protest, it is conducted a bit differently. It usually begins in an orderly and attractive manner and ends rather acrimoniously.

The participants express all the rage and grievance that has been bottled up for years. Moms, students, miners and other segments of the population participate in the act demanding basic services and social infrastructures or asking for pay raise, which are not sufficiently provided to them. The abject poverty and rage in the townships, coupled with corruption and maladministration, and the propaganda injected from townships administrators makes the protest adamant and the subsequent violence and casualties on immigrants in the townships more horrendous. The protesters do not get to see the architects of apartheid or the corrupt black South African elites (mainly responsible for all their problems) face to face. Thus their wrath is unleashed on the immigrants they see beside themselves.

The government in power, tangled in a multitude of problems – old and new, is the entity playing the scapegoating game. The ANC led government has failed to adequately address the social, economic and psychological problems that have been piling up and rolling for ages. It is unable to deliver employment and other services to black South Africans due to the unbridled corruption and other administrative hurdles it is afflicted with. It exploits the migrants in a ploy. The South African government disseminates propaganda blaming the migrants for the multi-faceted problems the country has. However, the logic of foreign demons undermining the wealth of South Africa does not stand up to careful scrutiny. Yet, it is perceptions and not facts that drive politics. This adds insult to the injuries of migrants in South Africa. This way, immigrants serve as double-scapegoats: by the protesters and politicians.

During my stay in South Africa, I have managed to witness how immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa's informal economy lack protection from xenophobic attacks. In Lenasia, a formerly Indian-inhabited township, located 40 Kms away from Johannesburg, black South Africans, with smoldering fury and seemingly blood thirsty, were protesting in the streets. Hundreds of black South Africans blocked the streets asking for promised social services that the local township council failed to deliver: jobs, health and water services. They protested against this singing and dancing.

It didn't take a while for the protests to turn violent, however. All of a sudden, the protesters began burning tires and blocking the streets with big stones. They geared up for attack with sticks, axes, blades, and other weapons. The protesters who have been influenced by the rhetoric: "those to blame for their problems are migrants" unleashed their wrath on immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh whose shops provide day-to-day supplies to the inhabitants of the township.

Jaffer is one among the Ethiopians who were victims of the violence. His tuck-shop is the biggest one robbed that day. The robbers rocked screaming into Jaffer's shop in broad daylight. It wasn't enough to loot the shop; they also pursued and tried to kill Abdi and Jaffer who escaped through the back door. They narrowly survived death because they

found shelter from their pursuers in the home of their customers. The customers are black South African women who are kinder to them than the men. It is these women who are there for them and protect them when such attacks happen. Most of the customers of Ethiopian migrants are women. They sell their items on credit or for a discount to these women. Sometimes they give them items for free. The Ethiopian migrants have saved these women the trip to cities to shop for goods they needed in supermarkets. They don't spend on transportation and they save time as a result. The women are fond of the migrants because they sell goods at lower prices than the supermarkets and they have brought everything they needed nearer. Abdi and Jaffer did the same after they faced the same danger.

These customers sheltered them from the attack for six hours. "The fate of the Ethiopian migrants would have been to be murdered in worse ways if the women were not there for us," says Jaffer when he explains the protection the women offer. The violence and robbery in townships like Lenasia is getting worse by the day. The robbers used to walk into shops pretending to be customers and pull out a gun or knife to forcefully take money, cigarettes or credit for their phone. But the form, frequency, and intensity of the robbery have changed recently. They have begun coming through the roof in the darkest hours, taking all the items in the shop and killing whomever they found.

Although Jaffer and many other immigrants have pressed charges with the local police, they haven't been given any practical response other than text messages that said, "We will investigate and capture the culprits." These immigrants suffered more robberies before the cases they brought to the authorities were resolved and they have many unsolved cases. They indicated that their hope on the policemen has gone to its lowest point. In fact they suspect that there are other reasons for their ineptitude than the corrupt practices in the South African Police. Jaffer asserted that, "Maybe the police and the robbers collude." Abdi and Jaffer hid in their customer's house and repeatedly called the police station to save their lives. But no one responded. They took the alternative option of calling their brothers in Johannesburg. Abdi's brother came to their rescue and took them back to Johannesburg.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The following key messages are extracted from the discussion and narration I presented above. While undertaking field research in risky and sensitive environments, it helps:

(1) To inform informants that they are not going to gain direct and immediate benefit out of their engagement in the research process. I learned that most of the immigrants are in need of immediate solutions to the multitude of problems that encounter everyday. Most see the researcher as a savior who will bring immediate solution. However, their benefit could be a change in the migration narrative and migration policy environment, which often takes time to establish and take effect.

(2) To be brief and honest about yourself and the research you are doing. Informants were suspicious of me because they are operating in the informal economy. Later on, they

explained that their suspicion was also due to their past experience where journalists and researchers from Ethiopia and South Africa wrote biased articles about their businesses.

(3) To avoid one-sided stories and balance your approach. Do not frequent one place or spend more time with one group of immigrants: although they develop a real interest in your work and are eager to help. You might develop an unnecessary intimacy that might compromise the findings of the research. There is also the risk of getting involved, unknowingly, in pre-existing conflicts. More importantly, other immigrants groups might categorize you. This is especially important in contexts where there are abnormal competitions and the business and politics are bridled with imported political ideologies from home and the diaspora population dispersed across the world

(5) To say good-bye when you depart from the field. Departure is as important as socializing and trust building: you never know how long or short your degree of separation is. You also are not sure about where your next project is and whom you are going to meet again and where. This has happened in my case where I get a chance to return to South Africa. Simple acts of respect such as saying “bye-bye” or “thank you” when the researcher departs or serious issues such as publishing biased findings have wider consequences in the long-term relationships. For these reasons, the immigrants welcomed me when I returned in 2018. Not just my informants and gatekeepers but also the street kids of Johannesburg.

(6) To take your research seriously: not only because you can make a difference with the findings but also because people will hold you responsible and demand something from you even after you left the field. That happened to me, when the 2019 xenophobia attack occurred in South Africa. I got an email from one of my key informants asking me what have I done with the entire question I was bothering them with. Luckily, few weeks before I received that email, I published a policy brief on the same topic. And that saved me. I also shared that policy brief with international media and managed to make a news headline and online discussion on the problem by connecting experts, journalist, and immigrants in South Africa

(7) To not jump into hasty generalizations: experiencing the researchsite for few months should not qualify you to make conclusions about a country as big, diverse and complex as South Africa. I did that in my first encounter in South Africa, but corrected myself after my second visit when I got a better understanding of the greater picture about the historical background of South Africa and evolvment of the Ethiopian migrants community in South Africa.

(8) To respect and show curiosity to other cultures: showing a desire to learn the language means a lot in socializing and building trust with informats, gatekeepers and the locals. As Mandela said it “If you speak to a man in a language he understands, it goes to his head. But if you speak to him in his native language, it goes to his heart”

## **Bibliography**