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Waiting as a site of subject formation: examining collective prayers by Ethiopian asylum seekers in Germany

L'attente en tant que site de formation sur le sujet : étude des prières collectives par les demandeurs d'asile éthiopiens en Allemagne

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In this article I look at collective prayers by Ethiopian asylum seekers to explore how religious narratives are mobilized to deal with temporal angst in the context of waiting. I posit that waiting is a site of multifaceted struggles in which subjectivities are constituted, in response to both the violence waiting imposes and the anticipated freedom it carries with it. Asylum seekers confront life in waiting in various ways until they attain what they wait for and 'settle' in the host country. To settle is imagined as living in Europe as independent and self-reliant workers who could generate their own income which is contingent on waiting for the acceptance of their applications for asylum. Whether people attain what they wait for or not, their subjectivities are formed through a certain idea of themselves, an understanding of their situation and their practices, all of which are located within histories and structures of power relations. My analysis draws on ethnographic data generated from fieldwork conducted in 2016–2017 among Oromo asylum seekers in the city of Nuremberg, Germany.

Keywords: waiting; subjectivities; collective prayers; Oromo; asylum seekers; temporal angst; Ethiopia

Dans cet article je regarde les prières collectives des demandeurs d'asile éthiopiens pour explorer en quoi les récits religieux sont mobilisés pour traiter l'angoisse temporelle dans le contexte de l'attente. J'avance que l'attente est un lieu de luttes à multiples facettes dans lesquelles les subjectivités sont constituées, en réponse aussi bien à la violence imposée par l'attente et l'anticipation de liberté qu'elle apporte. Les demandeurs d'asile font face à la vie en attendant de différentes façons jusqu'à ce qu'ils atteignent ce qu'ils attendent et 's'installent' dans le pays d'accueil. L'installation est imaginé comme vivre en Europe en tant que travailleur indépendant et autonome pouvant générer leur propre revenu ce qui dépend de l'attente pour l'acceptation de leurs demandes d'asile. Que les personnes obtiennent ou non ce pour quoi elles attendent, leurs subjectivités sont formées à travers une certaine idée qu'elles ont d'elles-mêmes, la compréhension qu'elles ont de leur situation et de leurs pratiques, choses qui se situent toutes au cœur d'histoires et de structures de relations de pouvoir. Mon analyse s'appuie sur des données ethnographiques générées par un travail sur le terrain mené en 2016–2017 parmi les demandeurs d'asile Oromo dans la ville de Nuremberg, en Allemagne.

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Mots clés: attente; subjectivités; prières collectives; Oromo; demandeurs d'asile; angoisse temporelle; Ethiopie

Introduction

Writing about the experiences of subjects who stay in refugee camps, Jeffrey states that

people are catapulted out of their everyday lives, or when quotidian life radically alters for the worse, the sense of being caught up in a predictable and engaging set of activities that produce known forthcoming can break down and the present can come to weigh on the minds of the individual subject as a type of 'curse' or 'burden' (Jeffrey 2008, 955).

This in turn creates what he calls 'temporal angst'. I consider temporal angst as 'the emotional experience of a political subject' (Luhmann 2006, 346), and the objective of this article is to describe the multiple ways in which asylum seekers experience and engage angst and how these constitute their subjectivities. I explore the life of asylum seekers from Ethiopia who are waiting for the final decision on whether or not their claims to asylum are accepted.¹ I focus on a religious gathering by Oromo Ethiopians stationed at a refugee camp in Germany after having submitted their applications.²

Describing waiting as a liminal experience shaped by various forms of encounters, Sutton, Vigneswaran, and Wels (2011) highlight that power relations are central to the notion of waiting. Akin to waiting as a work of power, for Bourdieu (2000), waiting is a regime through which power is manifested and the workings of domination are realized. Along a similar line, Kinneret Lahad postulates waiting as

both a temporal construct and as an interactional process which sheds light on how power relations, forms of knowledge, and subjectivities are constituted and reified ... [And waiting as] a contingent temporal construct also opens up a space to critique the hierarchal relations it creates, and how in turn it creates and maintains power relations (2017, 94).

Waiting is, according to Hage, a unique object of politics in terms of the power balance and how it organizes subjects, processes and practices of waiting. It is a medium through which these hierarchical relations are also defined as much as where one stands in the spectrum of human relations (Hage 2009). As Schweizer (2005, 779) argues, we get to see that waiting 'is assigned to the poor and powerless so as to ritualistically reinforce political and social demarcations.' If we narrow it down to a more concrete embodiment of power, this is intricately linked to the manner in which states exercise power on asylum seekers. The state plays the central role in perpetuating certain socio-political and economic demarcations by leaving asylum seekers in a perpetual state of unpredictability and precarity. As a spectacle of domination, waiting reduces those in wait, which in this case are the dominated, to the state's expendables (Schwartz 1974; Bourdieu 2000; Hage 2009; Auyero 2011; Lahad 2017).

Relatedly, Jeffrey (2008) highlights that the pervasive penetration of the state in the everyday life of societies, as exemplified by the bureaucratization of time since the 20th century Europe, has made waiting an inevitable reality to reckon with. More particularly, asylum seekers are exposed to state power and its dehumanizing consequences in at least two overlapping ways. The first one is when the regime (mostly in authoritarian settings) in their country creates conditions to force citizens migrate and become asylum seekers and second when the host country leaves them on pend for an undetermined period of time subjecting them to angst. Haas's (2017) investigation of asylum processes in the USA further substantiates this. According to Haas, asylum process is a locus of suffering characterized by existential insecurity. It is also a process that leaves

asylum seekers in a state of a continued wait which is useful for the state as a disciplining mechanism. The process produces asylum seekers as either ‘legitimate, humanitarian subjects deserving of legal status or as fraudulent, frivolous, or otherwise “bogus” asylum seekers undeserving of status’ (Haas 2017, 76). Along this line, Andersson (2014) argues that waiting and the state’s grip on immigrants’ time is not only just a byproduct of institutions and bureaucracies but also a mechanism Western states deploy to control the mobility of its ‘undesirable other.’ Similarly, Lacroix (2000) highlights that policies and various bureaucratic measures, construct asylum seekers as the ‘other’ and this in turn constitutes new processes of subject formation. Thus, it is not farfetched to argue that asylum seekers’ time is controlled by the state and in keeping subjects in wait, the state uses time to use Griffiths’ (2014) befitting expression as a ‘tool of governmentality’. How do those in wait experience their condition? As I argue, to account for subjectivities as well as their complex and dynamic formations within the context of waiting affords the possibility to analyse how those in wait deal with the angst waiting imposes within such contexts.

One of the critical misgivings about the notion of waiting is associated with the risk of depicting the waiting subjects as passive as pointed out by Rotter (2015) and Pickering (2016). To depict waiting time as empty and subjects as passive, as suggested by Crapanzano (1986) and Haas (2017), emanates from the capitalist notion of productivity that ascribes monetary value to time (Schweizer 2005, 2008; Bissell 2009; Rotter 2015). Pickering (2016) and Rotter (2015) insist on exploring the agency of those in wait by focusing on the ‘while waiting’ and in so doing they interrogate the notion of waiting as passivising. In her research conducted among asylum seekers in Glasgow, UK, Rotter further states that waiting is an integral part of the quotidian practices of the everyday, which is among other things marked by certain activities that fill the waiting time. For her, focusing on the nitty-gritty of everyday life exposes the integration of waiting to the everyday life of those in wait (Rotter 2010, 2015). Brekke (2004) explores the life of asylum seekers in Sweden by focusing on how they experience waiting and what activities fill their time while they are waiting for decision. He remarks that people in wait keep themselves busy with meaningful activities regardless of the outcome of their application.

Focusing on the emotive and experiential aspects of subjectivity, I draw on Sherry Ortner’s conceptualization where she means

the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate the acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, etc. (2005, 37)

Waiting as a temporal premise subjugates and gives rise to ‘subjected selves’ that are constituted by practices which might either be analysed as resistance to that which is subjecting them or simply making sense of their situation; either or both of which produce and shape subjectivities. Therefore, any process of waiting does not exist outside of historical forms of interaction and the current global economy that are undercurrent in every form of human relations and subject formation. Accordingly, waiting is a ground on which subjects reflect, shape and get shaped by their newly emerging experiences that constitute different subjectivities (Schweizer 2008; Elliot 2015). Formation and transformation of subjectivities are vivid in religious congregations where visible emotive engagements expose layers of experiences that might not be accessed in other ways. A similar observation is made by Andersson (2014, 13) where he writes that time in wait is ‘invested with significance through religion, for instance in the humble prayers mumbled’ by those waiting.

A note on method

The ethnographic materials for this work were generated from fieldwork conducted in St. Jacob evangelical church in the city of Nuremberg. The congregation is constituted by the Oromo asylum seekers who gather every Sunday from 10:30 am to 1:00 pm. The space is offered to the community with the help of local activists who realized that some were struggling with attending religious services because of language. Owing to the increasing number of Oromo asylum seekers, language became the rationale for facilitating this place inside the church. The members live in refugee camps in Nuremberg, Bayreuth, Pegnitz and other nearby towns and villages. Most of those with whom I had conversations crossed the Mediterranean Sea. They submitted the needed documents on arrival and got in contact with legal representatives to help them follow their cases. At the time I was conducting this research in 2016–2017, some asylum seekers have spent a maximum of three years in Germany while others three to six months without any concrete idea of their fate.

I have conducted interviews and participant observation as well as group discussions besides recording sermons and prayers. I socialized with some by following them to their accommodations where I was invited for meals and had extended discussions. The congregation's predominant members are young male immigrants who arrived in the course of the Oromo protest of 2014–2016. There are others who left Ethiopia and waited in camps in Libya before they could find their way to Europe. Similarly, some of the females I spoke to left the country as domestic workers a few years before the protest and stayed in the Middle East to save money that was enough to travel to Europe.³ Although both groups struggle with the German language, for the females it is more difficult because their English is as broken as their German or even nonexistent. In terms of their confessions, not all members were evangelicals before they came here. Some converted and there were a few others preparing for baptism.

For this article, I focus on prayers said at the end of sermons mainly because of the diverse thematic concerns raised in this session that make for an interesting input to analyse how waiting is experienced. Following Mauss's (2003) pioneering work on the sociality of prayers, I consider prayers as collective practices that are produced by and reflect the socio-economic, political, spiritual and cultural experiences and dispositions of those who pray. In the context of this fellowship, by looking at prayers in particular, we could discern a myriad of other issues that the waiting subjects grapple with apart from waiting for a response for their applications. The prayers were open to improvisation because of which the leaders took the liberty to choose what to focus on at a moment in time. And yet, each focused on matters of relevance to the congregants as shown in the forthcoming discussions. Matters ranging between collective to individual struggles are put forward for supplication. This makes the issues raised relatable in one way or another by the multitude of attendants. Prayers are also mediums through which emotions are poured out allowing participants to express themselves in various ways. The congregation's response came in the form of unanimous Amen, and a lot of shouting in acceptance. Most closed their eyes, stretched their hands, knelt down while others were standing. Others were crying. The body was actively and vigorously incorporated into the processes where some congregants were jumping, ululating, and some others falling on the ground, still others going on trance like state. To an onlooker, the atmosphere comes across as chaotic but there was an understanding and conversation between the leaders of the session and those in attendance. The prayers were said in the Oromiffa language which I recorded, transcribed and translated into English. I use pseudonyms to refer to the three people who led the sessions- Abebe, Gemechu and Tolessa. Throughout my discussions, I quote prayers said by either one and complement the quote with my observations and interviews I conducted with some members of the congregation.

Prayers, temporal angst and subjectivity

Taking account of the two overarching themes, subjectivity and temporal angst, I organize prayers into two overlapping thematic areas. First I look at what I thematised as experiences- this is where I present examples of prayers that I believe put waiting in perspective by probing into the details of everyday life, histories and aspirations. What I demonstrate here is how invocations are used to make sense of subjects' life while they are waiting for results of their applications. Second I look at the themes interconnections and confrontations-this is where I discuss how the waiting subjects place themselves relationally. Here, global and local connections, structures of power; God, the state and time are prominent issues that asylum seekers engage, negotiate and contest as deduced from the prayers.

Experiences

For the asylum seekers that I interacted with, life seems to be a constant journey both temporally and spatially. They constantly look back as they anticipate what is to come in the process of which they make sense of their present conditions. In this circumstances, they invoke the spiritual guidance to nurture their confidence in the betterment of the future and seek support to face their everyday realities. They ask God to help them be more attentive and conscious of their surroundings and armour them with all that they need to confront challenges as they live life in wait. Although the asylum seekers find the current situation disconcerting, members of the congregation look back in time to assess their experiences of getting here. Using prayers as medium, the asylum seekers make sense of their situation and narrate their lives, their aspirations, their frustrations and their lived experiences at present. In so doing, they link their past to the present state of conditions and the future albeit not necessarily in a linear fashion but in complex web that ties different temporalities. In the payer below, Gemechu invokes the experiences of getting here (both spatial and temporal), the struggle for survival and memory of co-travellers who perished in the desert and the sea.

God has not forsaken us. We are grateful we survived when our brothers and sisters died; some died along the road, others were killed by the state, others were raped, and still others imprisoned. He has not turned his back against us in those times of distress. He never gave up on us when humans did. He is not like us humans, he does not change, his commitment to us is unconditional. Yesterday he accompanied us in our journey, he is with us today, and he will accompany us tomorrow. He said have faith, believe in me, we do and he makes all doors open for us. We will never perish. We have been protected in the ups and downs of life. He knows our background, he knows our destiny. He has been with us in our crossings and dwellings.

It was apparent to me that the prayers above are relatable to most congregants on the spot, as can be deduced from their responses and reactions every time something was said. Almost everyone in the church hall jumped and shouted which makes it safe to argue that the experience of waiting now is put in perspective due to their encounters on their way here. This set of prayer shows that 'while waiting' is not a simple stage one arrives at and one that flows along a certain path a complex process that engenders past experiences. To wait does not necessarily entail forgetting histories, for instance, of escaping state violence the Oromo and other people endured in Ethiopia, the processes of coming to Europe and 'settling' in Germany. This text of prayer imbues life with meaning and makes waiting less stressful perhaps in comparison to a more violent past. The prayers are also reminders of moments of loss and the resulting grief due to what their friends and relatives had to go through. The above text is loaded with gratefulness as much as hope for some kind of reassurance that emanates from the devotion to God. As it appears from the

prayers, to wait is not as much traumatic as the state orchestrated violence they escaped and the migration processes they went through.

Their subjectivities are constituted in the act of mitigating temporal angst by narrating their lives from the vantage point of what it means to wait. Memories serve as repositories of hope for the future and consolation for the present as they wait. It is instrumental in overcoming temporal angst as it offers a perspective from storages of the more repressive past histories. This makes more sense if we pay attention to their experiences of getting here as part of the subjectification through which subjects emerge. Most members of the congregation that I spoke with found their way to Europe through the Mediterranean where most had to spend a fortune to get smuggled. The financial burden becomes less of an issue as one imagines the risk she or he takes until the final arrival at the expected destination. What now seems to be a banal news of capsizing is already telling of the horror and trauma immigrants undergo till they reach Europe. For example, one member of the fellowship, Jebessa Fixa emphatically stated that he does not want to see any water whatsoever and he is still in utter disbelief that he actually survived. He said this to me in a conversation at his residence in Nuremberg recounting his memories of what life was like on the road. As a result, people like Jebessa plead with God to help them speed the end to their waiting but at the same time they actively reflect on other layers of their lives. Thus, through various mediums available to them, they confront the angst waiting imposes. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) intimates, just as much as it might invoke painful memories, re-membering the past has a liberating undertone from the subjugation waiting imposes and is at the same time constitutive of formation of subjectivities in the now. To escape the violence, arrive in Europe safely and to be able to wait are rewards earned from layers of struggles.

Relating to other experiences that are drawn from the bible, particularly the story of Jewish people in Egypt and the exodus is yet another narrative through which the asylum seekers find salve to heal their subjected selves as it is now. As this line 'God sent Moses just when they gave up' by Abebe captures it, there seems to be a belief that God shows his faithfulness to people who persevere in distress. An attempt to relate to this story is suggestive that just like the Israelites, the congregants seem to believe that they are one of God's chosen people which rightfully justifies their suffering. God punishes those he loves and in accepting one's suffering, angst and desperation, better conditions are inscribed. After all, waiting is not so bad because it is a sign that God has some soft spot for people in exile. A great reward is promised if they hold on to their faith in trying times like waiting. In this way, the leaders of the prayer lift the hope of the congregation up, not necessarily counting on the rather unsupportive system in place but on the power they believe is beyond all such systems, structures and individuals who are obstructing the process of 'getting there.' This kind of commitment to God and the belief that he imposes suffering on his loved ones, as the biblical story of Job has it, is also dominant in the religious ethos of most churches in Ethiopia. In this sense, the asylum seeker's conviction is rooted in and draws on their socialisations of where they come from. Apart from being an act of looking back to retrieve the past, remembering gets another dimension here and becomes putting the fragmented pieces back together in response to the demands of subjectivity in the here and now.

Furthermore, members of the congregation are trying to do various activities as part of waiting for the result of their application. This entails a yet another layer of encounters is connected to dealing with everyday activities that come with being in a new socio-cultural and geographic environment, that is western Europe. According to Lahad, 'In western capitalist societies, waiting time generally carries pejorative connotations, partly because capitalist society idealizes notions of efficiency and speed, identifying time with money and, thus, waiting with idleness or waste' (2017, 95). Life is geared towards and meanings are produced along the lines of productivity and self-reliance. The image of a successful individual is one that is independent, active, and busy with full schedule and defined time. This is the epitome of efficiency. For the

asylum seekers, this body of knowledge about the ideal subject is obtained from everyday conversations, own observation, and myriad other sources. Together with their one's own ambitions, this creates yet another layer of temporal angst on subjects in wait. Clearly, the world in which congregants found themselves is one where there is a certain form of attitude which evaluates waiting as inefficient and unproductive that also depicts asylum seekers as liabilities on tax paying citizens. Alluding to this conundrum, Tolessa goes on to say

We beg God to make us full persons, to be self-reliant while we live here, help us get out of poverty that is troubling us. Strengthen the weak. Brighten the low performing. Lift addictions from those who have become its victims. Help those who smoke cigarette, shisha and other drugs. Help them to give up all these bad habits. Change us, rebuild us, and remake us, in the name of Jesus take over our mind. The weather in this country is like fire; the winter burns us the sun burns us everything burns us every time. But because of you God, we rise above the fire. Now I want to say prayers for some people in this fellowship and in the country [Germany] in general. These are people who go through some difficulties. We really want to learn the language and we pray to God so that he opens our mind for it.

Despite the contingency of their situation, since it depends on whether their applications are accepted or not, the asylum seekers prepare themselves in line with the western notion of the individual self without necessarily forsaking the sense of community that underpins their collective practices. This idea of productivity that forms a subject is aligned to the neoliberal idea of a resilient subject whose success is measured by how much an individual labours. Moreover, while they wait for the result of their application, it is obvious that they entertain various other forms of struggles. The weather, food and other conditions that call for new responses are a few aspects that lead to the emergence of new subjectivities which Tolessa puts in the language of being rebuilt and remade. Payers are reflected in the demand for self-cleansing, ethics and righteousness. Beyond and as an act of dealing with temporal angst in the present, life happens that invests asylum seekers with bountiful meanings as the future, whatever it brings, is waited for. Thus, waiting comes across as a complex multiple and multifaceted process and experience for the waiting subject. For instance, in the course of doing this research I have witnessed two weddings and two celebrations of new born babies. This means that waiting entails the subject positions of becoming husbands, wives, mothers, fathers.

The asylum seekers also seek supernatural intervention to help them grasp the language. Aware of the difficulty of learning the German language, Tolessa said 'God please insert the needed software to help us understand the language'. Through prayers, they are involving God in the process of a befitting subject formation. The belief that they have to be productive shapes their formations in relation to certain expectations and ethics that are geared towards productivity. This necessitates carving a self that the future is expecting. Just like the way the Protestant ethic did on early modern subjects, waiting gives rise to and shapes the consciousness of a community in wait by introducing them to what Ortner (2005) calls 'regimes of flexibility', one which forces people to actively adjust and readjust to changing situations in every facet of life, waiting included. For members of the congregation for example flexibility is the making of the circumstance in which they find themselves. They are far from home, building new networks in a different context and life experiences. Such multiplicity in turn breeds 'complex subjectivity, [where] a subject partially internalizes and partially reflects up on-reacts against a set of circumstances in which she finds herself' according to Ortner (2005, 59).

Connections and confrontations

Waiting for a legal status in Europe is shaped by connections with the immigrants' origin as well as their histories. This points to the relationality of migration that Klute and Hans (2007)

emphasize in their work on cultures of migration. Interconnections are marked by the expressed wish for a better political future for others. While waiting, the asylum seekers in the congregation also position themselves in relation to the Oromo people whom they left behind and pray for their 'freedom'. This is manifested through Gemechu's prayer:

Please God look at our people, they are enslaved and there is no struggle to free them unless it comes from you. We do not count on the activists and the journalists, we do not count on the educated people any more, we do not count on the soldiers, we count on you; look at our oppressed people. Some of us run away, others are imprisoned and suffering. Please God look at our oppressed people. How much sin have we committed that you do not listen to us anymore? How is it that there is nobody whatsoever that you can listen to? The country we run away to is enslaving us, why is it that you do not look at our problems? We have got to a point where we do not proudly say we are Oromo. Why are we lacking unity, love, peace stability and why all this violence on us? Why have you forsaken our people what have we done to deserve all this? How bad have we disappointed you that you are punishing us? God we do not have any language you are our language.

This set of prayers in which they confront the divine for having neglected the Oromo shows that waiting is not only for the self it is also for others, hoping is not only for the self it is also for others and praying is not only for the self it is also for others. There is no disconnect the moment someone sets out to a different destination, there is no abandoning of a part left behind. The asylum seekers wait for multiple other things and on behalf of multiple other subjects, making the waiting no more a business of one individual but rather, as Lahad (2017) calls it, a collective project. As can be gathered from the prayers, the community in Nuremberg waits for the asylum, waits for freedom for Oromia waits for friends left on the road to make it to Europe safely. Beyond centring the individual, waiting extends to touch the lives of people who are affected for instance by political, economic and natural upheavals.

Waiting is an entangled site in which the subject's current life and her/his aspirations are closely knitted with the global political social and economic developments. This is shown through sharing the burden of waiting, anticipation, aspirations in the medium of religious practices that in turn unite subjectivities in support of one another. In this sense, communities are built not only among people who are put together in camps, or among people who get together every week for the religious service, through waiting on behalf of others, some new, at times imagined at others concrete networks are created and already existing ones are maintained locally and globally. These imagined or real connections and networks emerge in the act of situating one's condition within a wider perspective as part and parcel of the socio-political, economic predicaments the wider world seems to be facing at the moment.⁴ The self-positioning as 'global citizens' comes out strongly in the prayer vocabularies which are extended out of the fellowship's sphere to consider those languishing in prison everywhere in the world. For example, Abebe prayed

Please God break all the doors of prisons and let the prisoners loose. The world is full of problems: north south east west. It is a problem everywhere and every time: mornings to nights. We are all in distress there is a lot of trouble. Please God speak to us, your spirit, your support, your presence are what we all need to overcome what we are facing across the globe.

So by widening the horizon and refraining from making their situation exclusive to them, the congregants reorient their lives within the broader context of global and historical developments. Waiting as a space of interactions (Lahad 2017) intricately links subjects across temporal and spatial limits and showcases how solidarity is produced from shared encounters. Above all, their invocations show that such connections created in the act of hoping and praying for others too is a source of solace for the self.

As connections are created, there are also confrontations made. This is the other feature of life in wait which is exposed in the manner in which powers are invited and engaged. I show this by focusing on two interrelated invocations: power and time. Peter Dwyer introduces two forms of waiting, situational and existential, without necessarily painting a stark boundary since they are both ‘a personally experienced, and context-dependent threshold’ (2009, 9). In the congregation, situational waiting as an imposition of a bureaucratic processes and existential waiting as the ultimate destiny of religiously embodied subjects are interwoven through prayer. Religious practices, one may assume, are sites from where people simply wait for salvation or transcendental connections. However, other concerns and aspirations for a better future in this world, are as prominent as the urge for eternal salvation. This is discernible in their pleas which oscillate between attending to life on earth while remembering to pray for the afterlife.

Highlighting the connection between global powers and waiting, Jeffrey (2008, 954) rightly points out that ‘waiting is connected to the emergence of new forms of globally organized power and expertise that articulate in complicated ways with the prerogatives and institutions of national government.’ We cannot understand waiting in its complexity unless we account for the interweaving of the historical and global conditions one of whose manifestation is the production of the processes of migration and its outcomes. Kumsa (2006) traces the production of refugees historically to the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade when Africans were forced to leave home and get shipped to the unknown land for their labour to be exploited under the harshest possible conditions. In the current trend of globalization, we witness the hardening of the boundaries that once were ‘open’ to force Africans out of their homes. In what looks like an era of the reversal in history of globalization, we now witness the ordeals through which Africans go to find their way to the West. This reversal as it is, it is also important to note that African immigrants are pushed out of their countries due to the nature of regimes; coercive, dictatorial state structures. In most cases, like that of Ethiopia, certain super power from the West supports dictator’s unlimited and unmitigated stay on power even in the face of the humiliation they are causing on their citizens (Kumsa 2006). The production of immigrants is the work of both local and global forces and the interplay therein creates the condition for the production of asylum seekers who are put on pend until decisions are reached.

In Ethiopia, apart from seeking economic relief (Mains 2007),⁵ Weaver (1988) asserts that there are other factors and events – like political persecution – that generate refugees. In the case of the Oromo for example, over the years, quite a significant number of them have fled the country for various reasons, the repressive political condition in Ethiopia being the prominent factor. This escalated after the 2014 nationwide protest which was spearheaded by the Oromo youth. The protest that went on for over three years was triggered by the introduction of the Addis Ababa Master Plan. This Master Plan was proposed to expand Addis Ababa, which in turn meant taking land away from the surrounding Oromo farmers. As the plan also threatened to engulf the booming towns that are located within the Oromia Regional State, it was regarded as an intervention that compromises the autonomy of the Oromia region. These triggered a nationwide protest.⁶ The government’s responses to the protesters’ demand were heavy handed-crack-down, arrest, detention and killing – as a result of which those who have the network and the financial means decided to leave the county.

After arrival, waiting for asylum subjects the subject to the will of the powerful state which takes the fate of the person that seems to have fallen at its disposal. This makes waiting a site confronting the state bureaucracy and related administrative hurdles. This in turn shapes personhood, consciousness, emotions and experiences as well as methods of struggles. In this payer for example, Gemechu says

all of us are in the hand of God. We cannot run from him, we cannot escape his judgment. Be it the powerful people, the knowledgeable, the educated ... we are all under him. We do not depend on others, not on the country (welfare). Let the mountain problems related with the papers vanish. God is the one who finishes every project. If he says it is not time yet, your lawyer cannot do anything. Empower the poor ... you change histories, change our history.

Two sources of power; of God and the states (here both Ethiopia and Germany) are called on. Considering God as their shield, they confront forces which factor in their current situation. So, if as Bourdieu (2000) says, waiting is a manifestation of the workings of power, the asylum seekers deal with the power that is forcing them to wait by banalising it and asserting that their source of support is more powerful. Through their discursive practices, they deconstruct distinctions and flatten hierarchies. They subordinate to God the power that be, that which subjected them to waiting. They reduce what appears to be formidable to insignificance. They normalize the authorities by stressing how ordinary everyone is compared to and in the face of God. Both the hegemon and the subaltern are equally under God's watch and will; rendering the distinction and hierarchy between humans inadmissible. Waiting in this moment is thus recreated as a site of power struggle which is formed by subjects whose histories are inscribed in such confrontations. The prayers quoted above are exemplary of what other activities are performed to counter authorities, bring relief to their stress and thereby tackle the temporal angst. The congregants who were actively invested in the prayer session reflect upon, question and criticize the new circumstance that dictates itself on them. Subjectivity is shaped in these processes that subjugate the subject in a 'in a world of violence, state authority and pain [...] under the authority of the other' (Luhmann 2006, 346).

There is another layer to this invocation that is related to time and waiting in general. As a temporal concept waiting presupposes a transition from one phase to another having, as Lahad (2017) argues 'linear progression' at its centre. By this logic, humans' worth is assessed based on whether or not they have achieved something in the way of upward social mobility, which is always already temporal. Such vision of time, according to Jeffrey (2008, 955) has exerted 'symbolic violence on waiting populations, who often come to be labeled or label themselves as 'failures' or 'people left behind' according to the standard set by the notion of progress. Once they begin to imagine themselves this way, asylum seekers do not appreciate their living for what it is in the present. They subordinate the present to the unknown future which is imposed by a chronological notion of time according to which they are yet to achieve what Jeffrey calls 'social maturation' (2008, 955). Having the ultimate power to determine when waiting ends, the state keeps asylum seekers in wait by way of which it defines subjects' worth and value.

And this constant state of waiting to 'get there' denies those in wait what Fabian calls 'the radical contemporaneity of mankind' (1983, xi). Denial of contemporaneity means that, according to the chronological ordering of time, there are those who fit as coeval subjects and there are those who are behind in time and have to aspire to catch up. This is, as established by Fabian himself, a manifestation of how power constitutes itself. Going by Johannes Fabian's proposition on the interplay of time and power, a broader question related to the use of the notion of waiting to study the 'other' in relation to the 'self' can be raised here. The idea of time that is carried in waiting, it seems to me, is what Fabian (1983) calls 'secular time' a notion posited in a sharp distinction with the so called 'sacred time'. Secular time appropriated and universalized the ideas of sacred time as linear in which waiting for the afterlife is central. Progress is central to this universal time. Time with this connotation eventually became central in processes of colonial occupation and creation of global forces. One of the uses of time in these projects of domination and subordination is the creation of the 'other' as far, both temporally and spatially, from the

self. The ‘other’ has to follow a certain line of progress which is made effective through colonial occupations (Fabian 1983). If then, as Lahad (2017) argues, waiting has linear progression at the centre, to continue using waiting by the state reproduces Anthropology’s colonial commitment that used the notion of time to produce the ‘other’ and locate it as non-coeval with the ‘self’; processes through which hierarchies are created, justified and reproduced.

We also then discern how the work of power is challenged by the subjects in wait. One way of challenging this violent imposition is unsettling linearity of time which the congregants do by introducing rupture to a secular time the moment they request God’s intervention. God’s intervention results in the collision of times which in turn problematizes the linear notion of time that forms the bedrock of waiting. In their invocation of God, the congregants deconstruct the state the moment they delegate time to the divine. Gemechu closed the session by saying ‘there is just the right time for everything, we give you all the time, we give you all our time’ an invocation common to Christians who wait for God’s time (cf. Robinson 2015). This utterance empowers those in wait and from the perspective of those who pray, snatches the state of the control it has on their time. It also introduces rupture which already hints at disruption in flow of the seemingly predictable and reliable time that the authorities, but not the waiting subjects, know and control. Time is no more a tool of exercising power because it just became unpredictable, unreliable and unknowable, due to the intervention of other forces, the divine in this case. With this, spontaneity is introduced to the work of domination and spontaneity as Hannah Arendt reminds us do not get along (Baehr 2000). As time is lost in the midst of ambivalence, the knowing, and hence the powerful authority that determines cases of asylum gets equally disempowered in this process. Although people who are made to wait are expected to fit into a universal/linear time (be it sacred or secular), which has progress at its centre, they are manoeuvring within this subordinating temporality by actively creating and improvising themselves.

Conclusion

This article challenges certain assumptions and preconceptions about those who wait and their relations with structures of power like the state. With this in mind, I have analysed a glimpse of lived experiences of Oromo asylum seekers by focusing on prayers, to show that religious performances fill voids created by uncertainties of waiting by offering tools to fight the anxiety waiting causes. As symbolic practices embedded in the spiritual world of the Oromo community, collective prayers provide the asylum seekers a soothing solace. Searching God’s intervention brings consolation while experiencing what appears to be a repressive imposition by the state that put everything on pend. The issues raised in the prayers cut cross many facets of life and involve a diverse range of people beside those who are in the same condition. The seeming disconnect across communities are maintained through religious performances. Through the collectivity of waiting, a sense of communities across times and geographies is imagined. As has been shown throughout this article, the world in its immediacy is not lost in waiting. Life in wait is full of practices and processes where new experiences are engendered, connections are made, power structures are challenged and subjectivities are formed.

Subjectivities are shaped by human desires and intentions that unfold in response to specific encounters located in specific historical, cultural, religious, socio-political and economic configurations. The state, with various manifestations of its power, is challenged by the congregation whose engagement can be read as a critique of the implicit and explicit ways in which power operates to determine the life of asylum seekers. Linear conceptions of time and progress are disrupted by the invocations made in the prayers which call God, a force regarded as more powerful than everything else. Memories of past experiences and anticipations for a better future are reiterated to

mitigate the angst prompted by waiting in the present. Thus, apart from being sites of consolation and solace, prayers are mediums through which various structures of power are trivialized.

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Notes

1. For details on how the German asylum process works, see https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Publikationen/Broschueren/das-deutsche-asylverfahren.pdf?__blob=publicationFile
2. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group who live in Ethiopia and other parts of the Horn of Africa. The majority live in the Oromia regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. They are followers of various religions like Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Catholic), Islam, and Waqqeffana, the indigenous belief which has Waaqa (the creator) and other benevolent spirits at the centre.
3. A detailed multi-sited ethnography looking at Ethiopian female domestic workers was conducted by Nicoué (2018). Without necessarily reducing the middle east as a stepping stone towards Europe, Nicoué traces the trajectories of migration of these female migrants some of whom I encountered at the fellowship.
4. This seems to go well with Benedict Andersen's allusions in his book on imagined communities (1983).
5. Mains (2007) describes how urban youth in Ethiopia try to tackle a temporal problem by finding a spatial solution, which is waiting for migration within or outside the country. Mains challenges the imposition of models like capitalism and neoliberalism as the sole explanatory factors to the economic condition of a specific area. He states that the youth are looking for options to migrate to tackle economic problems.
6. I discuss the protests in detail, also in relation to prayer as a site of political pronouncement, in Debele (2018).

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