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"We Are Good at Surviving": Street Hustling in Addis Ababa's Inner City

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Abstract Recent studies of the informal economy have tried to understand how the politics of informal actors and their attempts at organizing themselves have created new collective platforms for social practice and social action in the African city (Lindell *Africa's informal workers. Collective agency, alliances and transnational organizing in urban Africa* (pp. 1–33) 2010; Meagher *African Studies Review 54*(2):47–72, 2011). These studies have suggested that the informal is not only the domain of the poor and their form of solidarity but also a terrain where new powerful actors in and outside the city might emerge and where power dynamics and forms of differentiation are at work. With a similar theoretical concern, this paper focuses on how engagement with the "street economy" among men between their mid-20s and mid-30s in Addis Ababa's inner city reveals broader experiences of exclusion and marginalization.

Keywords Hustling · Street · Social navigation · Exclusion · Marginality · Addis Ababa

Situating the Street Economy

In this article, I investigate how forms of marginality and exclusion are experienced, produced, and reproduced on the streets of Addis Ababa and, in particular, in Arada, the old city center of the Ethiopian capital. In the common understanding of academics, development workers, government officials, and journalists, the social and economic reality of the street in Ethiopia is often portrayed as being populated by four main categories of people: street children begging or selling tissues and gums,

This article is part of my doctoral research project, based on 16 months of fieldwork carried out in Addis Ababa before and after the 2010 national elections. My research has focused on marginalized subjects' everyday tactics for getting by and their quest for social mobility in the context of increasing political control and persisting forms of social exclusion.

The real names of my informants that appear in text have been changed to protect their privacy.

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old men and women begging for food, sex workers waiting for their customers and unemployed youth loitering around, doing nothing but chewing *khat.*[1] Whereas street children, beggars, and sex workers have continuously been a concern of academic research and policy making, the "unemployed youth" have recently become increasingly prominent in political and developmental agendas.

Between June and November 2005, demonstrations took place in Addis Ababa to protest against an election that many believed had been rigged.[2] The ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, labelled the protesters as unemployed youth and responded with heavy-handed repression: more than 200 people were killed, and 30,000 people were detained in Addis Ababa alone. As riots and demonstrations spread throughout the city and into major towns across the country, government narratives adopted unemployment as a synonym for unruliness and lack of discipline. Later, as calm was restored, government officials, development workers, and opposition activists themselves came to believe that unemployment was the main cause of the social and political marginalization that pushed young people into rioting against the government. In the years that followed 2005, addressing unemployment thus rose in the priorities of government and developmental agendas, with a special focus on the aim of preventing similar events of political and social unrest happening again.

However, despite the governmental and development concerns with unemployment, the examination of the trajectories of unemployed youth is not always an effective way into understanding the social dynamics of marginality and exclusion at the very bottom of Ethiopian urban society. Economists and, more recently, anthropologists have pointed out that the unemployed are often very similar to public sector workers (Krishnan 1996, p 174) in the extent to which many unemployed youth appear to be usually relatively highly educated (Krishnan et al. 1998; Mains 2012). Such links between education and unemployment have suggested that unemployment is not only a matter of absence of work. Firstly, the rise in education has corresponded to an increase in social expectations. Educated young people, in this regard, aim at public sector jobs rather than taking employment in the informal private sector or becoming self-employed. Secondly, the reduction in employment available in the public sector under the impact of neoliberal policies has resulted in a decrease in the opportunities that educated young people have to fulfil those expectations. In this context, aspiring for a public-sector job has, in fact, a significant effect on the probability of being unemployed. Thirdly, as Mains (2012) has pointed out, in his recent book on the life of unemployed youth in Jimma, southern Ethiopia, that experiences of unemployment and the ability of fulfilling employment expectations often vary, depending on the social backgrounds of the unemployed youth. For those young people who come from wealthy and well-connected families, unemployment is indeed a viable and sustainable trajectory. These young people already participate in an economy of exchanges and interactions that enable them to have access to wealth and, hence, to wait for what they believe to be better jobs. On the other hand, on young people who come from poor families, waiting for public-sector jobs is often not a sustainable and a feasible strategy for social improvement.

[1] Khat is a plant with a narcotic effect that is chewed across East Africa and Yemen.

[2] For overviews on recent Ethiopian politics, see Aalen and Tronvoll (2008), Abbink (2006), and Human Rights Watch (2010a, b).

The existence of such social differentiations seems to suggest that a focus on "unemployment" and unemployed youth seems to offer only a partial understanding of the forms of marginality and exclusion that characterize the bottom of Ethiopian urban society and in the capital especially. Indeed, when I began my research on marginalized youth in Addis Ababa in October 2009 and, in particular, on the streets of Arada, the old city center, I soon realized that the segments of urban society that government interventions were targeting to address unemployment and curb political unrest often had little to do with the educated unemployed youth waiting for public-sector jobs. Yet, whereas education often entailed increased social expectations also in poorer sections of urban society, unemployment was hardly an option for many among my informants.

This paper thus shifts the focus away from the unemployed youth to what I describe as the street economy: that is the material, moral, and symbolic economy of exchanges, social relations, identities, and meanings that my informants participated in to get by and, at the same time, define their aspirations for a better life. In the paper, I hence examine four different niches of the street economy: parking guys, minibus touts, street tourist guides, and full-time hustlers. I argue that my informants' engagement with the street economy was not conceptualized as a means for sustaining unemployment, but rather was it often conceived as a form of "street labor" through which they positioned themselves in the broader society. As a street tourist guide in Arada said when I asked him if he felt he was an unemployed youth: "we are half employed and half unemployed."

Secondly, by focusing on those relations and interactions that shape the meanings and practices of street life in Arada, I analyze marginality and exclusion as embedded in the social fabric of my informants' everyday life. Such a focus on the street economy, in order to understand forms of marginality and exclusion, builds on two theoretical and methodological perspectives. Firstly, I learn from Hart's (1973) methodological invitation to explore the fact that heterogeneous modalities of survival are at work beneath the radar of government, academic and public narratives on employment/unemployment. With a focus on the street economy, I explore the different aspects of the economies of hustling (Wacquant 1998). At the same time, I look at the broader political and social context in which those street transactions and exchanges were taking place. In this regard, this article examines the street economy as part of the broader economy. In doing this, it thus expands on those recent works that have studied the informal economy as a terrain where power and political dynamics and forms of differentiation are at work (Lindell 2010; Meagher 2011; Rizzo 2001), and it investigates how the connections and the disconnections between the "street" and other sectors of the economy produce particular regimes of marginality and exclusion (Perlman 1976; Roy and Alsayyad 2004; Wacquant 2009). Secondly, this paper aims to discuss the street as a particular terrain of social navigation. In his seminal work on excombatants in Guinea Bissau, Vigh (2006) elaborates the concept of "social navigation" to examine how, in situations of turmoil and conflict, social practice consists of a movement through and within a social environment that is itself in motion. Navigation is, Vigh (2006) argues, an "effort to gain directionality" or, rather, "to direct and control the movement of one's life rather than having it be directed and moved by the shifting of the unstable social environment it is immersed in" (Vigh 2006, p 130). As with excombatants in Guinea Bissau,

street tourist guides, full-time hustlers, parking guys, and minibus touts in Arada struggled with gaining directionality. However, whereas excombatants found themselves navigating through and within immediate social dangers and potential social opportunities, navigating the street economy mainly consisted in moving through and within situationality, quests for economic stability, and aspirations for social mobility.

Expanding on these two analytical concerns on informality and social navigation, in the following pages, I will examine my informants' engagement in the street economy. I will firstly describe meanings and identities of experiencing street life in Arada. Secondly, I will give an account of the life and activities of street tourist guides, parking guys, minibus touts, and full-time hustlers. Thirdly, I will discuss how notions of street hustling defined ideas of situationality and stability. Fourthly, I will examine how the connections and disconnections between the street economies shaped the "direction" of my informants' social navigation.

Being in Arada and Being an Arada

Arada is the old city center of the Ethiopian capital and is now characterized by a highly varied mixture of incomes and economic activities. In the three neighborhoods where I conducted my research, for instance, namely, *Asra Hulett Kebelle*, *Seretegna Sefer* and *Doro Maneqia*, shops selling expensive clothes and gold, fancy cafés, restaurants, and hotels concentrate on the main roads. Side roads, instead, are lined with the old houses of merchants and Ethiopian aristocracy of the 1940s and 1960s—where now tenants of government houses live[3]—small shops, khat vendors, chewing houses, video parlors, and cheap restaurants. Finally, especially in Seretegna Sefer, spreading out from the side roads, a wide extension of iron-roofed government houses accommodates the large majority of the population living in this area.

Looking from the perspective of my informants, their families and neighbor, who mainly lived in iron-roofed government houses, Arada is a poor area. A recent study on poverty in Addis Ababa, in fact, has shown that even though, in Arada, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line has decreased from 56 % in 1997 to 29 % in 2008, an increasing number of people have been concentrating around the poverty line since 2000 (Teklehaymanot 2009, p 54). In the experiences of my informants, the mixture that characterized the streets in Arada constituted a particular terrain of social and economic practice. The main roads were rarely places for consumption and enjoyment. Most of my informants, in fact, could not afford to go to fancy cafés or to buy expensive clothes. Rather, by dealing with cars, tourists, passersby and minibuses that populated the main roads, street tourist guides, parking guys, minibus touts, and, to some extent, full-time hustlers defined and articulated their aspirations for regular, stable, and profitable street businesses. On the side roads, my informants instead relaxed, chewed khat, had their meals and

[3] In 1975, the socialist regime, the DERG, which ruled the country until 1991, nationalized urban land and housing facilities. Even though the construction of *condominium* houses throughout the city and ongoing process of gentrification are now bringing about substantial changes in management of land and housing in Addis Ababa, those tenants who still live in government houses, usually coming from the poorer segments of the urban society, pay a low rent that is directly collected by the local government bureaucracy, the *kebelles*.

drinks, and occasionally made a few bucks by running errands or brokering petty transactions.

As I tried to map and make sense of the different street businesses, my research moved along a complex and entangled web of networks, relations, and interactions that often provisionally and situationally came to link together people working, surviving, and enjoying on the street. Interestingly, many of my informants knew each other because they had been bonded together by shared experiences, common locations and memories, and past and present antagonisms. By studying more carefully the niches and terrains of street practice, I found that such connections and disconnections were, to some extent, embedded in a discontinuous, shifting, and extremely dynamic collective dimensions that might be fruitfully understood through the lens of Bayat's (1997) notion of *passive networks*. For Bayat, passive networks constitute the entire range of informal contacts, interactions, and communications that incoherently and situationally link people on the street. In this regard, Bayat writes:

> the street as a public space possesses this intrinsic feature, making it possible for people to mobilize without having an active network. Such a mobilization is carried out through passive networks—the instantaneous communication among atomized individuals, which is established by the tacit recognition of their common identity and is mediated through space' (Bayat 1997, p 19).

In Arada, as in Bayat's analysis of Iranian street politics, there was an interesting tension between the collective and the individual. Common identities of the street were claimed and directly expressed through the related notions of *being in Arada* and *being Arada*. Being in Arada constituted that sense of commonality mediated through space that Bayat refers to. Being Arada, on the other hand, consisted of notions of respect and smartness.

An in-depth analysis of local notions of smartness and respect is not the focus of this paper. However, what is interesting to point out is that the collective dimension of the street was not necessarily expressed through a subcultural identity, but mainly through a shared description of street smartness that people had to have and manage in order to get by and navigate the street. In the words of my informants, street smartness is *irdnna*, and it was believed to be the main characteristic of an Arada. Ideas of street smartness not only constituted and described the collective dimension but also symbolically expressed the atomized dimension of the street and the fact that people have to look out for themselves if they want to get by. Moreover, behind the idea of being smart, there is not only a cultural narrative about the ability to *do* but also the broader capacity for achieving, for *making something out* of one's everyday life. Notions of street smartness, indeed, express not only forms of alternative sociality that people experiment on the street but also the kind of social and economic opportunities that people have access to and the aspirations and the motivations that people have when they turn to the street. To investigate this, in the next section, I provide an account of the activities of street tourist guides, parking guys, minibus touts, and full-time hustlers. Hence, in the rest of the paper, I will provide an interpretation of the reasons for and the modalities and circumstances of my informants' engagement with the street economy.

A Street of Niches and Transactions

Tewodros: a Street Tourist Guide

Around the hotels and the clubs in Arada, where young people, sex workers, and tourists populate the night life, "street tourist guides" live and survive. Street tourist guides constitute a particular niche of the street economy and mainly consist of former street children or young people who left their home cities and regions (often tourist destinations, such as Lalibela, Gondar, and Harar) to find better work in the city. Their job is showing tourists around for a fee. They do not have an office or a tourist agency to which they belong. It is on the street that they pick up tourists. They often present themselves not only as guides but also as young people interested in making friends with foreigners. They often explained to me that the way tourists behaved shaped how they themselves behaved with the tourists. If the tourists were nice, generous, and understanding, the tourist guides would not cheat them. Conversely, if the tourists were not smart in understanding the necessities of survival faced by the street guides, for instance by being "stingy" or even refusing to pay for the time tourist guides spent with them, street tourist guides would resort to various tricks, such as taking a cut on any goods the tourist was buying or setting up a confidence trick in order to make tourists give money away.

Tewodros is from Lalibela, in northern Ethiopia, and he is a street tourist guide. When I met him for the first time, he was 22 years old and had already spent 7 years on the street in Arada. He does not live in a stable place. When he has some money, he shares a room with other street tourist guides in Seretegna Sefer. When he is short of money, he puts his hopes in the money that other street tourist guides might share with him, but this does not always happen. Some street tourist guides keep the money for themselves, not sharing it, or, on other occasions, when no tourists are around, everybody may be without money in Tewodros' clique. In describing his life as a street tourist guide, Tewodros sees street life as a constant struggle: "We are soldiers of life; you have to work and struggle to survive and move up." Despite all the challenges he faced, he told me that showing tourists around or alternatively cheating them might pay well, even something around 2000 birr[4] in a couple of good days. This would enable him and his friends to pay for accommodation, meals, drinks, khat, and enjoyment for a day or two even a week; but, he admits, this is all far from opening up any long-term opportunity. His hopes, instead, consist of meeting or marrying a foreigner who might take him to the West. In this regard, Tewodros argues, "Being a guide is a pass for something else," as it would enable him to gain skills, knowledge, and meet people who might help him in the future.

Ibrahim: a Parking Guy

Moving to the busy main roads, dense with people and cars, shops and cafés, restaurants and cinemas, and government and private offices, the "parking guys"

[4] The birr is the Ethiopian currency. Exchange rates have been changing rapidly over the past few years. During 2010, the US dollar exchange rate went from 12.52 birr to the dollar in January to 16.39 in December; by mid-2011, this had risen to nearly 17.

constitute a new face of the street economy. Their job mainly consists in collecting parking money from car drivers. The parking guys are cooperatives of workers that were expressively established by the government to give jobs to the unemployed youth. Before the government interfered, "parking" was mainly the street business of only a few individuals, and in some areas, the trade of small private companies. Parking guys in Arada now come from different backgrounds: some of them are high school or even university graduates without jobs or young women looking for money; some are former street "thugs," "hustlers," and thieves who have found an opportunity to change their lives and go legit through the parking job.

Ibrahim is 32 years old and grew up in Seretegna Sefer. He is now a parking guy. In the past, he survived by combining different kinds of street activity, such as thieving, cheating, fencing stolen goods, and dealing with drugs. In two different stages of his life, he managed to participate in more mainstream economic activities, working as a manager of a video parlor in his early 20s and, after a few years back on the street, selling shoes in a small container shop[5] in his late 20s. His engagement with the street was not necessarily the consequence of Ibrahim's family failures or other more structural features determined by his social background. He is a high school graduate, and his family is highly respected in the neighborhood. His father works for a well-established pastry shop in the area; his younger sister studies at the university, and one of his brothers now runs a small "mobile shop" in the same place where Ibrahim used to sell shoes. When he started his career as a street actor, Ibrahim told me that the street not only provided opportunities for getting by but also ways of becoming economically independent of his family: "When you are young, your family pay for your food and for your clothes, but once you turn 20, what do you do if you don't have a job? Are you going to ask your family for money for your clothes?"

Now, Ibrahim told me that he is done with his life of "toughness" and "thuggery" even though he is still on the street with his parking job. He does not think that this is a good job, but at least he earns something between 500 and 800 birr a month. However, this is never enough, he admits, and Ibrahim often turns to his skills as a former street hustler to make some extra bucks, brokering petty transactions, running errands, and occasionally fencing and setting confidence games: "I would like to be innocent, but I know how to make money anyway." While remembering his past and dealing with his present, Ibrahim, however, continues to look forward. He had his chance to be a businessman, with his shoe shop, but he ended up losing it because he was squandering the money he earned. Now, he hopes that the money the cooperative of parking guys is making will come to allow him and his colleagues to gain better business opportunities. At the same time, his mother is trying to help him to get a visa for Dubai, where he could work for good money. While navigating the socially immediate and the social imaginary, as Vigh (2006) would say, Ibrahim shared with me what he thinks is an important life lesson: "You know what I learnt? When you pass, you have to live with your respect and leave *hardegnannet* ("being a hard guy")." He continued: "once you get respect, you have to try to find a *mella* (a way of making money) because respect without money is nothing."

[5] Between 2003 and 2005, the city administration arranged small metal *container shops* throughout Addis Ababa in order to boost income generation activities through small-scale commercial businesses.

Yusuf: A Minibus Tout

Minibus touts, or "queue keepers" (in Amharic *tara askabari*), operate on the street, regulating and controlling minibus stops. This business has a long history that goes back to the 1980s. In the past, some of them recounted to me, street violence was the means used by groups of young people to take over the areas where, now, experienced queue keepers work and get their fees from minibus drivers. In the 2000s, the government attempted to regulate and control these groups. However, only after the 2005 postelection violence, were these groups politically mobilized by the ruling party and, hence, officially recognized as—in the words of a local official—"groups of private investors."

Yusuf is a minibus queue keeper. He is in his late 20s and grew up in Arada. "Hey, this is Dubai, a small Dubai in Addis Ababa"—Yusuf told me when I went to visit him—"there is business, jobs, money!" Yusuf is known as a joker among his "colleagues," but his defining a motorpark as a Dubai of business, and money is very intriguing. Spending time with Yusuf and other queue keepers, I came to understand that the "Dubai in his mind" was not necessarily about big money, but rather rested on an idea of stable street employment.

Nowadays, as one of Yusuf's colleagues explained to me, being a queue keeper pays reasonably well, something around 1,000 birr a month and is, in a way, a stable wage. However, it is far from enough to live on. Some of the queue keepers see their jobs in the motorparks as a first step towards a better job in the transport sector. In this regard, becoming a minibus driver is believed to be a better opportunity. Working conditions are much worse, consisting of up to 12 h a day, but the payment, many agreed, is much better. In an interview with a minibus driver, I understood the reason why being a minibus driver is believed to be better than being a queue keeper: "You get money day by day! If you are a queue keeper, you get money week by week or month by month. This is not good, since you could find yourself having no money during the week or during the month. When you get it day by day, you can always have money and will keep on working day by day to get more."

Mikias: a Full-Time Hustler

All around the area, an incoherent web of transactions "feeds" an army of occasional money hustlers. Unlike the other niches of business, this is not necessarily a well-defined niche of street practice. It is rather a terrain of opportunities for getting by. Full-time hustlers are rare, and many people might turn to such a situational economy of transactions and interaction on occasion. These include: being treated to a meal or a couple of drinks or even actively sponging off and scrounging money from others, running errands for someone else for a fee; occasionally acting as a broker in a petty transaction for a cut, and entering in and engaging with the domain of petty crime by stealing, fencing, setting up a confidence trick, and so on. Here, it is the ability to catch the situational or make the best of the moment that makes a transaction happen or not happen. Sam, an occasional money hustler, explained to me that the success of these kinds of transaction depends on the ability to catch "business," while just sitting on a street corner, in a khat house or saying hello to a relative, friend, neighbor, or acquaintance who might ask them to do something for him or her.

Mikias is in his late 30s, and his income mainly comes from his ability to navigate such a web of transactions, exchanges, and interactions. His mother lives in Italy, and she sometimes sends him money. On top of this, together with his brother, he rents out one of the rooms of their government house to a middle-aged woman, her nephew, and granddaughter. This is not enough, he says. Usually, in the morning, Mikias finds some money by brokering petty dealings, helping a friend or a neighbor to find something to sell or something to buy. In addition, in the afternoon and until evening, Mikias hosts his friends. This is quite an important aspect of his everyday life and a key tactic for survival. At lunch, when Mikias goes back home, the fact that many people hang out in his house is a crucial deal. At Mikias's house, there is always someone with money who can treat the others to a meal. Alternatively, a whip-round in the room easily raises the money for a good plate of *injera*. In the afternoon, the parking guys who have finished the morning shift usually spend their time at Mikias's. There, parking guys chew khat and usually club together to buy it. This means that more people are in the room, and more leaves of khat are chewed. Later, in the early evenings, the afternoon shift of the parking guys joins the others. They all come to play cards and gamble until late. The fact that many people stay at Mikias's place is crucial to his survival, as the gambling rules dictate that the owner of the house takes a 20 % cut on the win.

"I know many people," Mikias explained to me. "(I know people) through my family and even when I was in prison. I got to know a lot of people from many areas in Addis Ababa. If I need something or know someone who is looking for something, I know where I should go and ask." During a similar conversation, I asked Mikias if he liked his life; he told me, with a strong sense of realism: "We are good at surviving. Look, here we work, here we eat, nothing else. What else could we do?"

Street Hustling in Arada

Despite differences and individual trajectories, the lives and experiences of Tewodros, Ibrahim, Yusuf, and Mikias share a similar tension between the immediate necessities of getting by and the social aspirations for a better life. The street economy, in this regard, consists of a particular terrain for making sense of and, at the same time, navigating this tension. Street tourist guides, for instance, used the term "hustling" to narrate their everyday life on the street. As Tewodros said, hustling is running for life, literally: "We are hustling; this is what we do every day; we go back and forth." Hence, "hustling is tiring! You always have to be smart, in the street, finding the right way of getting money." Notions of hustling have to some extent travelled from the Black American ghetto to Arada, just as anywhere else, through the lyrics of hip-hop and the gangsta culture of Tupac's lyrics. The usage of the term hustling, however, does not imply that hip-hop culture has "exported" new ways of surviving and getting by from the American ghetto to the urban poor in Arada. Rather, hustling, indeed, came to translate the local category of *mella* that street tourist guides themselves and many other street actors used to describe what they were doing on the street. In Amharic, a *mella* is a "means," a "formula," and a "system." On the street, a *mella* is a trick, a way of getting by. A *mella*, just as Wacquant (1998) pointed out in his work on hustling in the Black American Ghetto, refers to an incredible

variety of activities.[6] Ibrahim told me that he was doing a *mella* when he helped one of his friends to sell a mobile. Mikias was doing a *mella* when he helped a friend to get her stolen mobile back. More than this, a *mella* also refers to the kind of street businesses I have described above, such as touting minibuses, collecting parking money, and showing tourists around.

The fact that the notion of *mella* was used to describe many different street activities does not mean that distinctions were not made on the street. A situational deal and touting minibuses every day are substantially different. Interestingly, the criteria for such differentiations on the street were not primarily, for instance, the amount of money that one street actor or the other made, but rather the situationality or regularity that characterized one business or another. In this regard, my informants made a clear distinction between a *gizeawi mella*, a "temporary" *mella*, and a *kwami mella*, a "stable" *mella*. A *gizeawi mella* is only for the time being, often situational, a way of getting money in the very immediate moment of an interaction. Conversely, a *kwami mella* represents a kind of engagement, such as a job or a street business (including touting minibuses and collecting parking money) people could rely on as a regular source of income. In order to better communicate the tension that my informants expressed when they compared a *gizeawi mella* and a *kwami mella*, I translate these two terms by using an understanding of the difference between a "trick" and a means. These two terms are both possible translations of the term *mella*, but they emphasize in different ways the two dimensions of a *mella*. A *trick* is something situational, a tactic for getting something out of the instant. A *means*, however, is something that goes further, investing in and engaging with the long term.

Knowing the differences and similarities between "tricks" and means on the street is relevant in order to understand the kind of opportunities to which my informants had access. Tricks embody the transactional and situational dimensions of the street. They constitute the kind of opportunities that might come through gifts and exchanges, by investing in an economy that is mainly based on the everyday interactions in which people participate.[7] Means reveal that the apparently situational and fluid nature of the transactions and interactions that take place on the street are instead embedded in broader attempts at achieving a form of economic security. Such a quest is pursued through the constant attempts of street actors to pin down situationality, producing and defining stable niches and terrains of actions. The experiences and the voices of street actors above show that, even though that form of "stability" is sometimes achieved, this does not always correspond to having access to the desired trajectories of social mobility. In the experience of Tewodros, for instance, the chances of achieving a better life are conceptualized as unexpected breaking points, or, as Mikias seems to suggest, there is a substantial discontinuity between the everyday and what lies over the horizon. His statement, "We are good at surviving," shows how the opportunities for change are not only difficult to achieve but also difficult to recognize and identify.

[6] Wacquant (1998, pp 3–4)defines hustling as "a field of activities that have in common the fact that they require *mastery of a particular type of symbolic capital*, namely, the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gain. These activities span a continuum that goes from the relatively innocuous and inoffensive…—to the felonious" (italics of the author).

[7] For an interesting examination of this in urban Ethiopia, see Mains (2012, Chap 5).

The tension between the immediate necessities of getting by and the social aspirations for a better life that encompass the social experiences of Ibrahim, Tewodros, Yusuf, and Mikias, I argue, concerns the particular configuration of situationality, stability, and social mobility, which characterizes life at the bottom of urban society. By dealing with the situational, actors in the street economy find ways to get by in the immediate. In this context, a form of stability and economic security is often achievable. However, as I will try to show in the next section, the stable position that actors in the street economy are able to gain for themselves or, more precisely, the access to trajectories of social mobility not only depends on the relations and interactions that compose the street economy but also and, more importantly, on the interconnections and disconnections between the street economy and other sectors and segments of the urban economy.

"Birds of a Feather Flock Together"

Sitting in Melkamu's office for a couple of hours is a good way to get to understand the job market in Addis Ababa. Melkamu is a broker, or a *dellala* in Amharic. As he likes to present himself, Melkamu is a commission agent. He would like to deal with big businesses and large-scale commercial transactions, but his work mainly consists in finding jobs for people. The kind of jobs he is able to offer his clients represent the bottom of the hierarchy of the urban labor market. Most of his customers, for instance, end up working as waiters in the many cafés and bars across the city, for a wage of between 150 and 200 birr a month. More skilled and experienced individuals might find employment as cooks, guards, drivers, or managers of small hotels and bars, which work tends to pay between 700 and 1000 birr a month. These jobs provide stable sources of income, but are far from opening up "avenues" for social mobility.

When I invited Tewodros to consider other job opportunities, he colorfully replied: "Being a waiter is shit!" *Rollit*, one of his friends, expanded on this: "They get a low salary and they work hard. The bar gives you food and a house, and if you have your own house, the salary might be higher, but it is still nothing. I did this job, but I did not like it. Hustling is about hope and having some hope of moving up. By hustling, you can find a way, a sponsor who could help you." In the words of Tewodros and Rollit then, the kind of jobs that brokers, such as Melkamu, offer are not only bad opportunities but also represent a way of locking oneself into a condition of exclusion.

The jobs that brokers offer are not the only ones on the market, and especially since 2005, the local bureaucracy has been creating new job opportunities. Parking guys, garbage collectors, carpenters, metal workers, rock workers (i.e., squaring stones for government construction sites), and caterers constitute some of the work through which the local government has tried to provide jobs for the urban poor. The workers have been organized into groups. Now, small-scale enterprises, cooperatives, and small trade businesses constitute a common feature of this government-supported local economy. Ibrahim himself found his job as a parking guy through a vacancy advertised by the local bureaucracy and intended to provide employment to the unemployed youth of the area.

Looking more carefully at how these cooperatives work, it is possible to understand the contradictory outcomes of what might be collectively defined as "government employment programs." Firstly, job opportunities in government cooperatives are often dependent on membership of either party, or youth or women's organizations. Secondly, when I was in the field, the success of some cooperatives and the failure of others showed that employment programs were not opening up new social opportunities. The newly established cooperatives that needed more entrepreneurial skills, training, resources, and business networks closed down or were about to close after just a few months. The successful ones were of two kinds. The first were those cooperatives run by people who were already in the business concerned, who had used government connections to establish small enterprises and gain further forms of support. The second group of "successful" cooperatives were those enterprises that did not need any capital, facilities, particular skills, and training. In this regard, it is revealing that the cooperatives of the parking guys were considered to be among the most successful ones by government officials. The fact that the success of the parking guys actually consisted in the regularity of their low income and depended on the unskilled nature of their work shows that government employment schemes were not only failing to open up new kinds of social opportunities but also were being extremely successful in reproducing, cementing, or even furthering the pre-existing conditions of marginality and social differentiation. Ibrahim and his colleagues had found a stable source of income by joining government employment schemes, but were far from engaging in what they initially believed to be a trajectory for social mobility.

As an alternative, when some of my informants tried to imagine a better life beyond their engagement with the street or government employment projects, looking for a life more closely tied to their social reality than their dreams of migration, they often referred to the world of local businessmen. In his late 20s, Ibrahim, for instance, managed to become a "businessman." His mother was working for the local government bureaucracy, and through her, he managed to have a container shop for small-scale trade businesses assigned to him. However, after a few years, he ended up bankrupt and thus returned to the street to get by. I have tried to find ways of explaining what happened to Ibrahim and why street actors hardly ever become local businessmen. Professional brokers, shop owners, and shop managers working in and coming from Arada often told me that the kinds of network people have access to really matter when they start a business. *Zemed ka zemedu*, *aya ka amdu* is a proverb that some of the businessmen use in order to explain this. This proverb literally means, "relatives with relatives, donkey with ashes," but it might be more appropriately translated by the English proverb birds of a feather flock together. In short, people of the same sort will be found together.

As some of the local business people explained to me, spending time with other businessmen with similar attitudes, as well as sharing skills and knowledge about business, is crucial in order to start, find, or carry out new businesses and trades. Some of the youngest businessmen in the area had someone in their families in some kind of trade, even petty trades, such as illegal butchery or selling charcoal on the street. Such provided valuable connections and resources that some of them used in order to open up and run new businesses. Others, without these family connections, managed to build their networks by trying to get access to those circles, running

errands, or finding business opportunities for already established business people. However, as the proverb seems to suggest, these networks are not always inclusive. Street actors and local businessmen do not always and easily communicate with each other, as the owner of a retail shop told me: "I know the thugs (*duruyocc*), but I never do business with them. Doing so would make the police come and I don't want trouble. But, of course, I respect them and they respect me. If there is no respect, things do not work here."

The social position street actors have in this urban society is distinctive. Their engagement with the street economy offered "wages" that were comparable to the ones provided by jobs at the bottom of the urban labor market. However, as Rollit pointed out, the very reason for the engagements with the street is the fact that hustling might potentially open up more opportunities for social mobility than, for instance, being a waiter. On the other hand, when street actors try to establish grounds for actions away from the street, they encounter both government attempts to control and politically mobilize and, at the same time, forms of differentiations that separate, even if respectfully, the street actors from the local businessmen.

We might look again at the history of Ibrahim from this perspective. When he had the opportunity to become a businessman, he failed. Like the newly established small-scale enterprises that closed down after few months under the government employment schemes, Ibrahim failed because he did not have access to that social and cultural capitals that would have enabled him to be recognized as a businessman by other businessmen and, hence, would have opened up for him new business opportunities to support and even expand his shoes' trade. Later on, when he tried to improve his life, Ibrahim became a parking guy. In doing this, Ibrahim gained a form of economic stability and security, but at the same time, he came to experience a process of remarginalization that cemented his position at the bottom of urban society, relegating him and his colleagues among the parking guys to a condition of unskilled and low-income government street labor.

Conclusions

Stories of street actors show that the street economy in Arada is a distinctive terrain of social navigation. Street actors' attempts to get by intertwine with their quests for stability and hopes for social mobility. By combining different tricks and means, street actors survive. Forms of stability are sometimes achieved by participating in government employment programs or, when it is possible, by trying to get access to particular and more productive street jobs (i.e., those of minibus drivers or queue keepers). In the experiences of street actors, however, social mobility and the long-term social goals are not only difficult to achieve but also to recognize and identify. When trajectories of social mobility were pursued, my informants often encountered processes of remarginalization and forms of exclusion that they individually experienced as an inability to improve their lives.

This paper has tried to disentangle these personal and individual experiences in order to provide an understanding of the way marginality and social exclusion are reproduced. In doing this, I have shifted the focus away from an overemphasis on unemployment to look at the web of networks, interactions, and social relations that

shape the social reality of people who live at the bottom of urban society. Networks, interactions, and connections, in this regard, have increasingly become a way of examining the life of the cities. Simone (2004, 2005, 2008), for instance, analyzes the provisional intersections and conjunctions of practices and actions of cities' residents as the mechanisms, articulations, and modalities, which make cities work. In this paper, building on those studies that have looked at how power dynamics, forms of social differentiations, and exclusion are at work in the informal economy (Lindell 2010; Meagher 2011; Rizzo 2001), I have tried to show how those very mechanisms, articulations, and modalities of living, which make cities work, are also fundamental aspects of the way marginality and exclusion are produced and reproduced.

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