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Cosmologies and migration: on worldviews and their influence on mobility and immobility

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the concept of ‘cosmologies of destinations’ is a useful theoretical tool to provide an emic understanding of the social and moral meanings of migrants’ journeys. By this concept, I refer to the hierarchical representations of the world that orient migration journeys. Drawing from my multi-sited ethnography with Eritreans at home and abroad, I illustrate how migration destinations were mapped by my informants along an implicit but widely shared normative and moral scale, with different levels of perceived safety, individual freedom, social recognition and economic achievements. After charting the theoretical field concerning social imaginaries and cultures of migration, I show the importance of symbolic and moral structures for understanding my informants’ mobility choices at different stages of their migration process. I conclude by highlighting the potential of this concept to study the interplay of mobility and immobility, particularly in the framework of increasing constraints.

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Introduction

Alazar has lived in Italy for six years. He sought asylum there in 2008. He then tried to resettle in Norway, but was forced to return to Italy in accordance to the Dublin Regulation, which states that the first European country reached by an asylum seeker is the one responsible for the procedure of granting asylum. In 2015 Alazar had a small job as a bartender in Rome and lived in an occupied building. His living conditions were precarious, but Alazar spoke Italian and had a good social network in Rome. In a way, he was starting to settle there. However, in the eyes of his family, Alazar had not yet arrived at his true destination. His brother in Canada, Gaim, was trying to find ways – mostly expensive and irregular – for Alazar to join him.

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I met Alazar's mother, father, youngest brother and sister in Eritrea in 2013 and then again in Addis Ababa where they escaped in 2014. Minnia, Alazar's mother was often comparing her children to each other: 'Alazar was so brave as a child ... not like him', she teased, pointing to Robel, her 23-year-old son who lived with them. Gaim, however, was the mostly praised. 'I would do anything for Gaim', said Lula, the youngest girl, 'because he did everything for us. He is so clever and I want to make him proud'. Everyone in the family seemed to feel the same way. After fleeing Eritrea, Gaim worked for some years in Israel. In spite of the hard conditions there he managed to earn enough to pay for his own way out of Israel to Canada, to support his parents and siblings left behind in Ethiopia.

The moral worthiness of Minnia's sons overlapped with the attractiveness of the countries they had been able to reach. Gaim, the most admired, was in Canada, one of the most desired destinations among Eritreans; Alazar was respected, but still criticised for staying in Italy, a country considered familiar due to the shared colonial history, but known for its limited socio-economic opportunities; Robel was reproached for still being stuck in Eritrea – what was once home, but had now become an open-air prison for young people – and then in Ethiopia, where refugees had limited rights to work and live outside the camps. The geographic imaginary concerning 'good' countries of destinations overlapped with a moral hierarchy of merit. These migration-related worldviews with all their social, moral, and emotional aspects ordered in a hierarchy of value are what I call 'cosmologies of destinations'. In this notion, images about the outside world are connected to a normative scale of values, expectations and meanings which influence migrants' and non-migrants' understanding of their own position in the world.

Following Abramson and Holbraad (2012), I argue that the concept of 'cosmology', once separated from its holistic ambitions, still represents an important heuristic tool to link representations of reality with local perceptions of morality and prescribed actions. The usefulness of this notion goes beyond the realm of anthropology of religion. For instance, Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) employ the idea of cosmologies to connect perceptions of risk, worldviews and social organisation in contemporary societies; Sahlins (1994) used it to refer to the capitalist system and its encompassing narrative; Ferguson (2013) talked about 'cosmologies of welfare' to define social security conceptions in South Africa. My aim here is to show how this concept can be applied to understand the worldviews of a diasporic population, such as Eritrean migrants and their left behinds, that underpin their decisions to migrate even under highly constrained circumstances.

After clarifying the genealogy of this notion and mapping the field of relevant conceptual tools, I draw from empirical material collected with Eritreans in their homeland as well as in exile to show the importance of symbolic and moral structures in mobility choices at different stages of their migration process. Between 2012 and 2014 I conducted participant

observation in a few nodal points of Eritrean migration. After sharing the daily lives of refugees living in Rome, I moved back to Eritrea to meet their families and investigate the everyday life of young people in the country. My ethnography then took me to Addis Ababa and Khartoum. There, I lived in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Eritreans. Across these field-sites there were remarkable continuities in the migration aspirations expressed by my research participants as well as in the moral commitment to reach certain destinations. In conclusion, the article highlights the theoretical potential of using this concept to study “turbulent journeys” (Schapendonck 2012 and Steel 2014). Although this article is informed by long-term ethnographic research,¹ this work should be read mainly as a conceptual reflection on the relationship between migration practices and hierarchical imagination.

Some notes on cosmology

The concept of ‘cosmology’ has a long-standing history in anthropology. Derived from the ancient Greek ‘cosmos’ – order, harmony, world – and ‘logos’ – discourse – cosmology was historically intended as the knowledge or study of the structure and shape of the world. In anthropology, cosmologies are conventionally defined as widespread representations of the world as a hierarchically ordered whole (Howell 1996). Traditionally pertaining to the vocabulary of the study of religions, cosmologies have progressively come to refer more generally to systems of classifications, and their related moral and emotional attitudes. Crucial elaborations of this concept can be found in the work of scholars such as Watanabe (1983), Tambiah (1985) and Douglas (1966), who have worked at length on indigenous classifications. In these scholars’ studies, cosmological beliefs encompass the realm of the sacred and inform the classification of natural objects, moral conducts and behaviours around risk in contemporary technological societies (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). Tambiah, for instance, defines cosmologies as:

“classifications of the most encompassing scope. They are frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter, motion and peopling it with gods, humans, animals, spirits and demons and the like. [...] A classification as a system of categories [...] describes the world and [...] entails evaluations and *moral premises* and *emotional attitudes* translated into taboos, preferences, prescriptions and proscriptions.” (Tambiah 1985, 3-4) [italics, my own]

Tambiah’s definition highlights that cosmologies are not simply cognitive ways of representing the world, but emotional attitudes and moral norms attached to these representations. As I illustrate later, the systematic

connection between cognitive schemes and moral and emotional attitudes, is what distinguishes the concept of cosmologies of destinations from other concepts, such as cultures of migration and social imaginaries.

It is precisely from Tambiah's structuralist tradition of thought that the concept of cosmology migrated to refugee studies thanks to one of the founding texts of this research field: *Purity and Exile* by Liisa Malkki (1995). The 'national cosmology' – that she also calls mythico-history – is the collective re-elaboration of genocidal history experienced by Burundian refugees living in Tanzanian camps (Malkki 1995, 52–104). Malkki argued that this mythico-history and the category of 'purity' emerging from it were of crucial importance for understanding her informants' social actions. For instance, farming activities were seen as part of Hutu original identity, and intermarriage with locals was considered as a threat to the long-term project of returning home (Malkki 1995, 105–152).

The strength of Malkki's work lies in the ways she links the symbolic structures of her informants' beliefs with their everyday moral understanding and practices. Malkki considers that cosmologies are not static traditional systems (see also Powers 1987), but represent continuous elaborations which reflect structural circumstances, social conflicts and historically crucial events for social groups. Mythico-history is not a symbolic construction unrelated to history. Rather, it is the product of recent genocidal violence in the homeland.

While the national cosmology studied by Malkki characterised the life of those refugees in camps, the hierarchies of countries and moral obligations connected to them which I noticed among Eritreans are not specific to a segregated group of people. As illustrated by Alazar and his relatives, Eritrean families – as well as villages and neighbourhoods – are often dispersed across continents, but remain connected through different flows of information, images and money, not unlike many other migrants' groups (see, for instance, Horst 2006, on Somali refugees' transnational connections and their effects). Cosmologies of destinations are thus transnationally diffused – communicated across international borders.

However, due to legal limitations as well as difficulties in finding housing and speaking the local language, Eritreans tended to pool their socio-economic and cultural resources by living together in Addis Ababa, Khartoum and Rome. They were a closed-knit group of people transnationally in contact, but with low levels of interaction with locals. In the process of exchanging information on how to carry out the journey and how to reach the easy and good destinations, they also reproduced the feelings of obligation – towards their peers and their left-behinds- to move onwards no matter the cost.

Unlike Malkki's mythico-history, the notion of cosmologies of destinations stems not only from history, but also from social and economic remittances (e.g. Mazzucato 2011; Shaffer, Ferrato, and Jinnah 2018) and exposure to

global cultural circulation and consumption models (e.g. Fardon, Van Binsbergen, and van Dijk 1999). The hierarchies of preferences that I observed are embedded in a global developmental logic, which shapes the material world where many Africans live, and their self-understanding as subjects positioned at the margin of the global society (Ferguson 2006; van Binsbergen, van Dijk, and Gewald 2004; Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012). This perception of marginality is tightly linked with the aspirations to reconnect to the core of global society by migrating to those areas perceived as 'modern' (Vigh 2009; Graw and Schielke 2012; Bal and Willems 2014).

This brings us to another scholar who has used the concept of cosmologies to talk about migration or the desire for it. In her 'cosmologies of credit', Chu (2010) shows how immobility has become the primary form of displacement for contemporary Fuzhounese. Against a background of China's rise onto the global scene, Chu's informants were seeking ways to become cosmopolitan subjects through migration.² While investigating her informants' struggle for mobility, she describes how their efforts are reinterpreted through categories of popular Chinese religion. Different gods and spiritual system of debts and credits are mobilised to pursue migration. In line with my argument here, Chu illustrates how her informants' desire for mobility is embedded in a wider web of social, moral and religious understanding of the world.

Spiritual understandings of mobility were also populating my informants' narratives and everyday practices in different sites. The success of migration attempts was often framed in terms of divine will and grace. Prayers and promises were part of almost every migrant's internal battle to overcome the fear of the journey. Although religion can be an important aspect of *cosmologies of destinations*, what makes this concept a crucial tool to analyse migrant pathways is, as I argue here, the way in which it ties a social understanding of the world as a hierarchic whole with moral obligations – often tinged with spiritual and religious beliefs – and emotional orientations. Before further elaborating this idea, however, let me discuss how the notion of cosmologies of destinations builds upon previous debates, surrounding the concepts of cultures of migration and social imaginaries.

Cultures, imaginaries and aspirations: mapping the field and ways ahead

The concept of 'cosmologies of destinations' feeds into the trend of studies aiming to overcome simplistic mechanistic models of migration by employing a more culturally sensitive approach as well as by recognising the role of agency, aspirations, and emotions, in migrants' pathways (Cohen and Jonsson 2011; Bal and Willems 2014; Carling and Collins 2017). Therefore, the idea of cosmologies of destinations builds on other notions widely used in migration studies, such as 'cultures of migration' and 'social imaginaries'.

The idea of culture of migration has been used by anthropologists and sociologists in different ways: the former use it to illustrate the fact that mobility is a traditional livelihood strategy to cope with environmental hardships as well as political instability (e.g. Klute and Hahn 2007); the latter employ the same idea to describe the widespread perception of migration as the solution to social stasis and relative deprivation among the members of communities with long-standing emigration history (e.g. Kandel and Massey 2002). In these communities, most individual aspirations turn around the desire to leave. There, a socially respected status overlaps with the condition of the *émigré*. Although the anthropological and sociological views of culture of migration differ, they both highlight the importance of studying culture to understand people's motivation for moving.

The concept of cosmology of destinations builds on the one of culture of migration, sharpening it by paying attention to the hierarchical dimension of expectations, imaginations, and practices of migration. Mobility desires are differentially addressed to specific locations, which are historically, culturally, and economically linked to the context of departure (e.g. Gardiner 1995). In other words, the concept of cosmology accounts for individuals and communities' scales of preference with respect to possible destinations. Eritrean migration represents an interesting case to analyse how aspirations are directed towards certain places in ways that are not always easily predictable.

Among Eritreans, hierarchical categorisations of the world include cultural assumptions and moral norms about places and people inhabiting these worlds. While people in 'destination countries' are often perceived as progressive, free and responsible³; distrust and suspicion are generally attached to imaginings of life in 'transit countries', such as Ethiopia and Sudan. These assumptions about life in different countries stem from historically stratified conceptions,⁴ and ongoing cultural circulation among left-behind Eritreans and those living in different parts of the world. Pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experiences, such as deep-rooted inter-ethnic relations, Italian racial discrimination and the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia (Bereketeab 2010) feed into common stereotypes about places and their inhabitants.

The idea of social imaginaries has also been widely employed in migration studies (Salazar 2011; Vigh 2009). Salazar, for instance, writes (2011, 576–577):

"Historically laden imaginaries – socially shared and transmitted (both within and between cultures) representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices – are at the roots of many travels, whether in the context of tourism or migration. [...] Empowered by mass-mediated images and discourses, such imaginaries have become global and have changed the way in which people collectively envision the world and their own positionalities and mobilities within it"

Scholars showed how these imaginaries reflect not only local views, but are also the result of colonial legacies and more recent developmental discourse. Often these social imaginaries portray hierarchical visions of the world (Pajo 2008).⁵ For instance, in his investigation of urban youth in Bissau, Vigh (2009) talks about

“an understanding of a world order consisting of societies with different technological capacities and levels of mastery over physical and social environment, as well as the spaces and social options which are open or closed to persons of different social categories within it.”

Not unlike young Eritreans whom I encountered, Vigh's informants felt ‘humiliated’ in what they perceive as a developmental void of their home and imagine the positive prospects awaiting for them elsewhere. As Ferguson noticed, these categorisations reflect the developmental model which since the 70 s has categorised the world into first, second, third world and fourth worlds in a sort of spatial and temporal scale of progress.

Scholars employing the concept of social imaginaries highlight that these are not simply cognitive and symbolic structures, but are related to practices. Vigh (2009) defines the social imaginary as a ‘project of action’. Salazar (2011) notices that imagining is an embodied practice that crucially influences reality. However, it remains to be investigated how social imaginaries influence subjects’ actions in contexts with significant obstacles to mobility. My argument is that the moral and emotional aspects of a shared cosmology of destinations is the background of mobility practices at all costs. In other words, the concept may be employed to interpret the tension between volatility and resilience of migrants’ project in restrictive ‘mobility regimes’ (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; Schapendonk et al. 2018).

Several authors (Schapendonck and Steel 2014; Schaffer et al. 2018) showed that migration projects change as migrants meet new people, collect new information and navigate border regimes. Given the long amount of time and tortuous trajectories that characterise contemporary journeys, aspirations about life and destinations may transform along the way. However, if some projects are volatile, others are extremely resilient to obstacles and time. To understand the resistance of these migration plans, it is key, I argue, to consider the reproduction of moral obligations towards peers and families along the way. This is why the idea of cosmologies of destinations is important as it connects shared imaginaries about places with moral judgements and values related to migration destinations and goals.

For instance, Eritreans often move in very constrained conditions. To escape an undetermined national service, they leave Eritrea without a permit. They face the challenges of living as refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan with limited possibilities to move (out of camps) and prospects to work. Legal avenues to move out of these first asylum countries are also

extremely limited; less than 1% of the refugee population worldwide manage to resettle in a third country. If they manage to reach Southern Europe, usually Italy, they have a hard time finding decent housing and jobs that would allow them to achieve some socio-economic and existential stability. Due to the Dublin Regulation, however, many cannot easily move to other European countries (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Kuschminder 2019). Alazar and his family's mobility pathways reflect both the extremely constrained conditions of mobility experienced by many migrants, as well as 'the power of imagination' (Salazar 2011) in shaping their pathways. A cosmological approach reveals how hierarchically ordered imaginaries and related moral norms reproduce mobility in spite of the risks involved.

By drawing from multi-sited fieldwork along the migration corridor connecting Eritrea with Italy, the rest of the article exemplifies how hierarchic worldviews shared by Eritrean families and migrants shape migration preferences and practices through moral obligations. Ethnographic material is here used in a cursory way to develop the conceptual reflections around the relation between migration, the hierarchical dimension of aspirations and geographic imaginaries.

The symbolic dimension of cosmologies: perspectives from Eritrea

Like Alazar's family, most families I met during my fieldwork in Eritrea had some of their sons or daughters dispersed in different countries. Due to poverty, war and lack of freedom, Eritreans have been migrating en masse since the fifties (Riggan 2013; Marchetti 2014). Migration in Eritrea is thus a multi-generational experience. Some domestic workers followed their employers to Italy once colonial rule came to an end; others escaped to Sudan to avoid the war and some find their way to Europe or the USA; still others left for Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries looking for work opportunities. These historic conditions made the Eritrean diaspora one of the most numerous worldwide with more than 1 million people compared to a population of four million in the home country.

The dispersion of Eritreans as well as family exposure to international migration form the backdrop the development of a rich geographic imaginary and the hierarchy of destinations that characterises it. Moreover, given the long-term implications of the latest border conflict with Ethiopia (1998–2000), political lack of freedom, and economic constraints are still an everyday reality for the population. This makes migration a widespread desire especially among young people (Riggan 2013; Treiber 2018) and turns geographic imaginaries into a map of preferred destinations for future migration.

These dominant imaginaries about places away from home entail a socio-political and historical understanding of Eritrea within the larger world.

Retrospectively (Vigh 2006), Eritreans see their history as long chain of suffering and chronic crises. Their dreams for development promised by the new Eritrean government after the thirty year independence war were dashed by another 20 years of cold war with Ethiopia (Hirt and Mohammad 2013). This cold war has justified militaristic policies and obliged most young people to serve public duty in different ministries with extremely limited salaries ('the national service'). After Italian colonisation, which is ironically often perceived as a period of growth and progress, Eritrea has been subject to progressive decline on multiple levels, which makes the country, in the eyes of most, a place with no future (Belloni 2019a; Treiber 2018).

For many Eritreans, especially young people caught in the trap of the national service, geographic mobility had almost an eschatological significance, as it represented not only an expected source of safety and stability, but also salvation from a life of meaningless repetition of the past in a remote place disconnected from the world. However, no matter how widespread a desire migration was among Eritreans, some had chosen not to move. Patriotic feelings of loyalty to national development as promised by the government were still motivating some to stay. While immobility was the result of lack of choices for most – involuntary immobility (Carling 2002; Lubkemann 2008) – some Eritreans aligned themselves with government ideals and expressed their willingness to stay to support their country through their daily work.

Seeing the 'cosmologies of destinations' gives insight into why some want to move to certain places at all costs as well as why others want to stay put in spite of difficulties: it is not only about geographic imagination, but also about the moral achievements connected with reaching or being in a certain destination. The narrative shared by patriotic Eritreans portrays migration as a betrayal of the national project. The Eritrea of the future is in their cosmology the destination that shall be achieved through individual sacrifice (Bernal 2014).

Most Eritreans I spoke to reported elaborate representations of different countries that had been built up through the multi-generational experience of international migration and the continuous exposure to social and economic remittances. These representations varied depending on their family history, educational background and, most importantly, interest in migration. However, these representations generally picture the world as hierarchically ordered, both along spatial and temporal lines. Different countries were ordered from the most to the least desirable place to live. For instance, while complaining about the situation in Eritrea, a taxi driver in Asmara stated:

'Italy, Europe and America are the first world. India and South Africa are the second world; the Middle East is the third world ... Eritrea is the fifth world! In the first world people are brilliant. It does not happen that there is shortage of electricity, or no water supply. They have good management. Here

in Eritrea we do not have fuel, no water, no electricity, even though we have resources! We have gold in Bisha but all the government is corrupt ... It's so bad. But if I go to Switzerland, Sweden, Norway they even give me money to support myself ... That is first world!

Although this hierarchy of countries was the taxi driver's own categorisation, his words represent widely shared imaginings. There are good, developed, civilised countries and bad, underdeveloped, corrupt countries. Eritrea can be included in the last group. In between the 'first world' and 'the fifth world' there is a range of worlds. Each country presented, in the eyes of my informants, opportunities and difficulties concerning the climate, the legal context, the labour market, the characteristics of the local population etc.

These hierarchies of preferences partly mirror racialised explanations of the world's distribution of wealth and power, which position Africa as a hopeless and unstable continent vis-à-vis progressive Western countries (Vigh 2006). However, it is hard to reduce these hierarchies to one single ordering logic. Colonial legacies and developmental narratives are certainly at play here, but memories are constantly reinterpreted in the light of information and images coming from co-nationals living in the diaspora. Italy, for instance, the colonial motherland, does not represent the apex of possible destinations, as it is known that refugees there often live in destitute conditions due to the pitfalls of asylum reception there.

The cosmologies of destinations that I encountered were characterised by different axes of preferences; the most salient ones were: freedom/lack of it; access to resources/lack of resources; social fairness/corruption; moral righteousness/moral decay; and related aspects such as clean/dirty, personal freedom/social and religious restrictions. These dimensions were reproduced in varied ways by my informants depending on their gender, political attitudes and age, to mention only the most important factors.

My young female urbanised friends, for instance, tended to look at destinations that would have allowed them to reach not only safety and economic stability, but also some freedom from traditionalist ideas about female conduct. 'I cannot wait to leave this country', said 24-year-old Hellen, who planned to reach Sweden. 'Here people judge you if you go out and have fun. Here women must stay at home and cook and wash. That is it. In Europe things are different'. Many other young women whom I met in Asmara saw migration as a way to be free from the control of their families (Belloni 2019c).

Young men, instead, sought migration to avoid a life of conscription, to be able to marry and to support their newly formed family. They aspired to become adult men and to gain recognition from their families and friends. 'I have been in the national service for 10 years and am still begging for money from my mother. This is not life. I must go', a research participant in Asmara told me. Interestingly enough, the socio-economic independence that they

aspired to was not easily achievable in Ethiopia, nor in Sudan (nor even Italy, as I show later). In spite of migration, their socio-economic situation had become even worse at times, as they were dependent on relatives abroad to survive in exile. Young men whom I met in Eritrea, Addis, and Khartoum between 2013 and 2014 wanted to reach countries such as Norway, Sweden and Germany. Even Israel was still considered a good destination since Eritreans in Israel had been able, like in the case of Alazar's brother, to send significant remittances. Israel was an attractive destination in spite of the fact that the Sinai border was already closed and that most people knew how precarious the legal conditions of their co-nationals there were. This may be a case in point for the role of moral obligations trumping social imageries in the migration destination hierarchy, a point to which I will return shortly.

Thus, hierarchies of destinations may assume different subjective meanings, gender implications and generational values. The crucial point here is that the notion of cosmologies of destinations should not be considered as a fixed collective hierarchy of preferences, but rather a shifting relation between geographic imaginaries, symbolic and moral orientations towards them. Depending on family histories, exposure to different information flows and religious background, to mention just a few factors, the people I spoke to across several sites expressed different preferences, but always within a hierarchical vision of the world. For example, my 24-year-old housemate in Asmara, Salam, thought that migration to Europe was not convenient anymore:

'Now everyone knows that Europe is finished. It is better to go to Dubai where there is a good international community and you do not need a visa to enter. If you know somebody who can find work for you, then you are fine. In Africa there is work, in Europe there is crisis; they also said it on TV [...].'

Salam portrayed Eritrea as the lowermost of possible choices and Canada as the most desirable final destination; but other African countries were described as possible good places to live. Each possible destination was accorded a different value, which determined its place in the imagined hierarchy. Through her friends abroad, Salam had gathered very specific ideas of possible alternative destinations, together with their pros and cons:

In Juba [South Sudan], if you have some money to start an activity, you can make a lot of money. A friend of mine has opened a supermarket there [...] but it is not safe there and it is too hot. In Kampala [Uganda], instead, the climate is good and the people look beautiful with their dark and shiny skin – men look also handsome – you can enroll as a refugee there and wait for resettlement to Canada.

Salam's words represent an interesting instance of how imaginaries of possible destinations can quickly shift and, probably, in the long-term, produce a change in the set of the moral expectations shared by migrants and families. Due to restrictions to go to Europe and dwindling prospects of reaching

Israel, which had been a popular destination a few years before, Uganda and South Sudan had moved up within the general hierarchy of destinations.⁶ Cosmologies of destinations could thus be considered long-standing and simultaneously flexible constructions, depending on but not overlapping with opportunity structures.

Although ideas about destinations may be transformed by rumours and widespread images, it takes longer to influence the moral expectations connected to these destinations. To put it differently, potential and current migrants may be relatively fast to pick new information up and adapt their pathways to new obstacles and opportunities, but societal and family expectations of what migration to certain countries entails in terms of moral achievement and social development are more resistant to change. This is where the concept of cosmologies may be more suitable than imaginaries, as it encompasses not only the symbolic, but also the deep-rooted moral prescriptions and obligations which produce and reproduce migration.

The obligation to move onwards: the moral aspect of cosmologies

Cosmologies of destinations entail specific moral prescriptions about where a migration journey should end and what the person that arrives there should do. These moral prescriptions become evident when migrants have to face significant obstacles to moving onwards. That was the case of Alazar and the group of Eritrean refugees whom I met in Italy between 2008 and 2014.

As mentioned at the beginning, Alazar and many other Eritreans with whom I spoke had experienced on their very skin the consequences of Dublin Regulation: many had to leave their fingerprints with Italian authorities when they arrived and this had made Italy the only country legally responsible for their asylum case. However, they were usually planning to reach a country in northern Europe where they believed they could benefit from better assistance and job opportunities (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Kuschminder 2019). Even if all my research participants had successfully secured legal protection, learned some Italian and sometimes made friends in Italy, they decided to invest more time, money and energy in attempting to seek asylum elsewhere. Some had tried up to three times before succeeding or giving up (Belloni 2016).

These instances show the limits of post-colonial interpretations of contemporary migrations (Mains et al. 2013). In spite of the relatively positive reinterpretation of the colonial period, Italy, unlike other colonial motherlands, has come to be seen as a country of transit by Eritreans. As Marchetti (2014) points out, Italy was a country of transit already in the seventies and eighties. The limited application of the Geneva Convention to people coming from outside Europe had made Italy a place where Eritreans escaping war at home could not seek asylum, unlike other European countries and the US.

Moreover, job opportunities were mostly limited to domestic labour and other cheap labour in low sectors of the economy. Today, the residual reception measures for asylum seekers confirm the general belief among Eritrean migrants and their transnational families that Italy is not the most desirable country for settlement (Brekke and Brochmann 2015).

Common beliefs about opportunities elsewhere were continuously reproduced by cultural circulation and social remittances from their peers who had settled in Northern European countries. As already noticed by Al-Ali et al. (2001), Eritrean refugees are constantly engaged in transnational dynamics. My informant, Senay (age 28), often received visits from co-nationals who spend their holidays in Rome. He was also often checking the Facebook profile of his brother who lived in Sweden. Even if his brother was still learning the language and was dependent on Swedish welfare, he had limited funds that he could send to his family in Eritrea. He was also staying in a fully furnished apartment, which Senay envied him since he himself was still making do with an under-furnished and uncomfortable room.

Interestingly enough, Van Heelsum (2017) describes the frustrations of those who reach countries commonly perceived as 'good destinations'. She illustrates, for instance, the immigrants' challenges of finding a job, learning a language and establishing a network of local friends in the Netherlands. My research participants in Italy seemed aware of these difficulties. 'I called by brother yesterday', reported 29-year-old Kibreab, whose brother lived in Norway. 'He told me that it is so cold there. He is a bit depressed ... people are not sociable there. In Italy people are different'. Kibreab, as most of my informants, often expressed positive comments towards Italian friendliness – in spite of the increasing xenophobia in the country – and enjoyed living in a city that reminded them of Asmara (the capital of Eritrea) – often referred to as little Rome because of its abundance of Italian architecture. However, this did not decrease their determination to leave.

Eritreans living in Italy have a hard time remitting back home, which makes migration onwards not only an individual desire but a moral obligation towards families. While survival in Eritrea becomes increasingly dependent on resources from abroad, Eritreans leave their homes not only to flee political oppression, but also to provide for their left-behinds. The journey, thus, should end where the migrant is able to fulfil his family obligations. This is not only what Eritreans desire, but also what the families expect from them. 'We are here for our families, not only for our own sake', as one refugee living in a shanty town of Rome told me. He had already tried twice to seek asylum in Sweden and was on the verge of trying again.

My informants often reported feeling guilty. This feeling is an important manifestation of unaccomplished moral obligation (Baldassar 2015), and a mechanism motivating further mobility attempts (Belloni 2019b). Conversely, families' judgements about the emigrants oscillated between

disapproval regarding their inability to reach better destinations – as families have often a limited understanding of Dublin Regulation – and commiseration with their condition.

In this context of transnational obligations, moral worthiness is judged on the basis of the support that migrants are able to offer in many different aspects. Settled migrants in Europe are also expected to enable the migration of other siblings from Eritrea. Alazar's brother in Canada was for this reason the most admired person in the family: in spite of his precarious legal condition in Israel where asylum requests are almost systematically rejected, he worked overtime and earned enough money to help his whole family to emigrate from Eritrea and to get himself a visa to Canada. In comparison to him, Alazar's situation was not successful. He could not remit as much and could not emigrate from Italy. The comparison reproduced not only a hierarchy of moral worthiness among the brothers, but also a worldview in which Italy was only a transit place to more unfamiliar but indubitably better destinations.

As the above ethnographic instances show, geographic mobility and immobility are always more than geographic or physical statuses (e.g. Kleist and Jansen 2016). They are also a matter of social positions, moral stances and symbolic recognitions. Reaching a 'suitable destination' represents more than the acquisition of safety and individual well-being. It signifies social accomplishment and moral worthiness in the eyes of the migrant and his/her group of reference. Conversely, geographic immobility in an undesirable place denotes not only the impossibility, but sometimes also the perceived inability to achieve social recognition and moral approval of one's own family and community. This web of moral obligations and expectations related to certain destinations forms the hierarchical framework in which the continuous search for home can be understood.

Conclusions

This contribution illustrates how the concept of 'cosmologies of destinations' can be a useful theoretical tool to provide an emic understanding of migrants' journeys in their social, moral and emotional aspects. Cosmologies of destinations can thus represent crystallised hierarchies of geographic preferences widely shared by the members of a group. On the one hand, this notion refers to the complex sets of images and information regarding specific far away localities and, on the other hand, to the moral obligations and social expectations about getting there. Building on previous literature on cultures of migration and geographic imaginaries, cosmologies of destinations point to the connection between imaginaries of places and the moral and symbolic values attached to living there. In doing so, it facilitates the understanding of how migrants can place their desired destinations in a hierarchy of value that motivates them to move on from the good to the better destination.

Drawing from the case of Eritreans living in different sites along the migration corridor connecting Eritrea with Italy, I illustrated how mobility and immobility choices could be understood only if analysed within their worldviews and those of their communities (families, co-nationals and peers). The notion of cosmologies of destination has the potential to highlight the interconnectedness of symbolic and moral aspects that produce and reproduce mobility at different stages of migrant journeys, notwithstanding significant obstacles.

In this article, I described how ascending the hierarchy of destinations not only held important symbolic value in the eyes of many of my research participants, but also constituted a moral obligation towards their families. Migrants' mobility pathways are embedded in transnational communication, which links them with families back home as well as with those who have already reached 'good destinations'. The comparison with peers living in 'destination countries' strengthens relative feelings of deprivation and the consequent aspirations to move, while reinforcing family expectations back home. This may explain why shared cosmologies about the hierarchy of suitable migration destinations can be resistant to policy impediments and repeated reality checks.

This bundle of symbolic, social and moral expectations about the world as an ensemble of different places to be left, traversed and reached, as characterised by the 'cosmologies of destinations' is a crucial lens through which to analyse not only Eritrean migration pathways, but also those of other migrant groups. According to specific history, social, religious and cultural characteristics, every group may have different cosmologies that influence the way they orient their migration choices or how they interact with local populations abroad. Cosmologies of destinations could thus be employed as a conceptual tool to: grasp the tension between volatility and resilience of plans to move to certain destinations; explore how imagined hierarchies of destinations are connected to transnationally reproduced moral obligations; and account for the reproduction of im/mobility at all cost across restrictive mobility regimes.

Notes

1. The empirical material presented in this article has been developed in Belloni 2019a.
2. Destination, rather than present home, was what anchored her informants' narratives and source of meaning. This is what she defines as 'politics of destination', a play on words inspired by Max Weber's politics of predestination (Chu 2010, 12).
3. This does not mean that first world inhabitants would be praised in all aspects. At times, Europeans, for instance, were morally judged by my informants for

their lack of care for the elderly, for the coldness or for their deviant sexual attitudes towards homosexuality.

4. Historically developed stereotypes towards Ethiopians have been discussed by Sorenson (1990) and Bereketeab (2010). Complex interethnic relations between Eritreans and Sudanese are described by Kibreab (1995) while looking at the specific challenges faced by Eritrean refugee women in Khartoum. The colonial legacy on categories of dirty/clean, developed/underdeveloped are examined by Marchetti (2014) in relation with labour relationships, and Treiber (2010) in relation with urban development in Asmara.
5. Pajo's (2008) work on Albanian international migration analyses the resilience of imaginaries connected to migration in spite of the significant social emotion that Albanians face in Greece and Italy. He highlights the hierarchic aspects of their social imaginaries picturing Albania as the worst of possible worlds and other countries ordered along several lines such as freedom, development and work opportunities.
6. However, South Sudan has already lost its volatile popularity in the wake of independence due to the violence in many parts of the country.

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