

Preface

[...] there is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of a culture; and the growth of social consciousness, like the growth of a poet's mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned.

(Thompson, 1967: 97)

A group of around sixty men and women stand together crowded at the road-side. When we get closer, the scene reveals itself to us travellers as a funeral party. The gathering of people wrapped in beige-coloured cloths seems to us European observers to have fallen out of time – almost like a biblical scene. Quiet chants, the weeping of wailing women and the sounds of the sistrum can be heard. We continue our trip on the bumpy tarmac road through the highlands of Tigray in northern Ethiopia. It was the last time we were able to travel in this area before the war broke out later. We are travelling with a team of GIZ Ethiopia who invited us to visit some of their programs. The impression of the village funeral remains and digs itself deep into my memory. I don't yet realise what significance this short scene will have in some way for our project to research the Ethiopian textile industry.

How can the traditions surrounding the funeral be adapted to modern times and the demands of urban life and world of work? This question emerges as an important crystallization point in many conversations. For example, in various interviews with peasants in the rural Gurage Zone, the difficult negotiation processes in dealing with funerals become obvious. On the one hand, there is a clear expectation in the community that even relatives who live and work far from their home must under all circumstances participate in the funeral of a family or community member – otherwise their bond with the family/community threatens to disintegrate. However, to this day, funerals in various traditional rural contexts in Ethiopia take several days, even up to two weeks. Employers in the country's modern industrial parks complain that workers are often absent from work for days or weeks without permission during social and cultural events or religious holidays – and there is a high number of such events. If there is a lack of transport back to the city, 'absenteeism' from the workplace even expands.

In industrialized Western societies, the end of life is not only associated with a growing business sector – death and dying are also characterized by tendencies towards productivisation.¹ Apart from this, death – at least in a materialistic worldview – can be seen as the least productive part of human existence. It stands in radical contradiction to the economic imperative of productivity. Death is the ultimate end of production and consumption. Moreover, in Western societies, the end of life is increasingly subject to a disposal mentality. It is therefore even more remarkable that death (as an ‘unproductive event’) and the mourning ceremony (as an ‘unproductive time’ from an economical point of view) represent a peculiar source of resistance to economic development, to economic interests (even the own) in traditionally oriented Ethiopian communities. Funeral traditions, particularly in rural Ethiopia prove to be a disruptive factor in the face of modern industrial labor. However, even if these traditions ultimately have little chance of survival in the process of modernization, it is worth taking a closer look.

A male farmer reports how the funeral service in his village was changed:

“During mourning, based on our culture, those relatives of the person who has passed away should gather together, even if they are living in faraway places. Previously the mourning period was for more than a week and may last for 15 days. During those days nobody does anything. These days are consoling days. But nowadays we agreed in our community that this is a bad culture and it should not be like that.”²

The village community finally agreed that the deceased's close relatives should be present for the mourning for only three days. This is followed by the condolences of the neighbors and of more distant relatives. The shortening of the mourning ceremony to a total of five days was made primarily to cater for people who have a regular job in the formal labor market. The decision was made at the Gurage traditional court, called “Yejoka” and located around Imdibir town. It is not an exaggeration to say that the negotiation process over how to deal with funerals is symbolic for a complex transformation process that is shaping social life in Ethiopia.

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- 1 The marketing of dying, death and mourning in Western industrialized societies ranges from death optimization practices in hospice and palliative care and medicalization to organ transplantations and the business of virtual immortalization on the internet, which promises to eliminate grief in the long term.
 - 2 Interview with farmers in the Gurage Zone of Ethiopia (4.12.2022; interviewer: Gifawosen Markos Mitta; interview design and coordination: Dr Michaela Fink; research project on labor turnover and absenteeism in the Ethiopian textile industry, 2020–2022, Justus Liebig University, Gießen).

Ethiopia, with a population of approximately 134 million people (2025), is the second most populous country in Africa, lagging only behind Nigeria. The population is made up by more than 90 ethnicities and nationalities. A large proportion of the population is young. In 1970, Ethiopia had a population of only 28.4 million people (UN, 2015). Given the rapid population growth, Ethiopia faces a major challenge of having to create alternative employment opportunities beyond traditional subsistence agriculture. Despite the government's achievements in expanding the structures for formal labor, up to date small-holder farming and the family networks are the most important means of survival for many Ethiopians. However, small-holder farming is increasingly under threat: not only population growth, but also the impact of climate change exert huge pressure on the land. At the same time, the transformation of the agricultural economy (including land grabbing) is jeopardizing the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. Although rural-urban transformation is ongoing, Ethiopia is still a predominantly rural country with almost 80% of its population living in rural areas (World Bank, 2020).

Ethiopia's "transformation from a subsistence agriculture-based economy to a more modern economy based on the higher productivity – and, thus, higher income – of manufacturing and services" (UNDP, 2022: i) is challenged by unrest and instability. The country faces a difficult mix of economic shocks, with the two-year Tigray-conflict (2021–2022) being the most severe. Since August 2023, a rebellion in the Amhara Region risks plunging Ethiopia into wider conflict (Tadesse, 2023). The country experiences multiple crisis. For 2024, UNICEF expected almost one million children and 350.000 pregnant and breastfeeding women suffering from malnutrition due to the weather phenomenon "El Niño" that caused droughts in large parts of the country. Added to this is a health emergency due to an outbreak of cholera, measles, dengue fever and malaria.

However, despite the various crises, the economic trend is still positive: with a growth rate of 8.1% in FY 2023/24 Ethiopia remains one of the fastest-growing economies in the region (World Bank, 2025). The country's strong economic growth rate builds on a longer-term record of growth over the past 20 years where the average rate was over 8% per year – one of the highest growth rates in the world. Yet despite impressive economic growth, Ethiopia is considered one of the poorest countries in the region with a per capita gross national income of only ETB 1,020 (ca. 7,41 USD in June 2025). (World Bank, 2023) Overall, there is a danger that economic achievements will be cancelled out by constant population growth.

Ethiopia is a fast-changing country, in particular due to reforms initiated by the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (the Nobel Peace Prize winner, who later fights with heavy weaponry against the Tigray People's Liberation Front and against militias in the Amhara Region). Part of the country's development strategy is an active industrial policy that encourages foreign investments and fosters

growth in the textile industry. Investors benefit from tax privileges and subsidized infrastructure services. Large industrial parks were set up as Special Economic Zones for export-orientated production. The extremely low wage level of the textile workers also plays a decisive role in attracting international manufacturing companies to move their production to Ethiopia.³

The strategy of the developmental state aims at providing employment opportunities for the growing young population (in particular unskilled women). The country's fast growing textile industry presents a significant opportunity for job creation. However, the sector holds manifold challenges related to high labor turnover and absenteeism, low product quality, and high cycle of production. Studies point to significant deficits in the realization of fair and humane labor standards in the textile sector (cf. the literature review in this book). A debate among government, business, and trade unions on ways to improve working standards and conditions has been accelerated by the International Labor Organization (ILO).⁴ As a result of industrialization, labor migration also puts a lot of strain on the urban infrastructure. The lack of affordable housing around the industrial parks poses a key challenge for the labor migrants. At the same time, migration to urban areas is causing a shortage of labor in the rural agriculture with the consequence that farmers are increasingly reliant on casual labor.

For a labor-intensive sector such as the apparel industry, building a stable workforce plays a crucial role for the success and sustainability of the sector. Although the sector is still relatively young and in its developmental stage, the challenge of building a stable workforce seems to be greater than expected by international the manufacturing companies. According to the managers, the reasons for workers' absenteeism and turnover are predominantly their 'mindset' (poor work discipline) and the lack of experience with formal wage labor. Most workers come from rural areas, have an agrarian background, and have never worked in a factory before.

This book analyses the socio-economic causes of the high rates of labor turnover and absenteeism in the Ethiopian textile industry. By reflecting the phenomena in the context of social upheaval the book goes beyond a practical-oriented investigation. This involves the question to which extent the high fluctuation is an expression of frictional forces that – like a piece of a mosaic – must be seen in a larger context of social transformation processes in the East African country.

3 In a global comparison of wages, Ethiopia is at the bottom of the list of textile locations. See Goodier, M. (2022): ANALYSIS: Best and worst countries for apparel worker wages since Covid. In: Just Style, March 1, <https://www.just-style.com/features/analysis-best-and-worst-countries-for-apparel-worker-wages-since-covid>.

4 See for example the ILO's Decent Work Country Program for Ethiopia (2019–2020), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_mas/---program/documents/genericdocument/wcms_560920.pdf.

The book describes the challenges of the (mostly female) workers in the garment companies between rural, community-based orientations and the industrial working environment in which they find themselves. For these women, it is often a balancing act between the rural world they come from and their life and work in the city. They are attracted to modern values of career, consumption and urbanity. At the same time, it is hardly possible for them to achieve modest prosperity. Many find themselves in an in-between situation: they have left their village community and culture and follow the promise of a better life through a job in the factory, but without any guarantee of the hoped-for improvement in their lives. In attempting to understand the social transformation processes, simplistic dichotomies between rural-agrarian and urban-industrial lifeworlds shall be transcended through careful interpretations.

The book has been developed against the background of a three-years-research project (2020–2022), which was conducted at the German Justus Liebig University in Gießen.⁵ The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and carried out in the context of the Ministry's "Special Initiative (SI) for Training and Job Creation". (2019–2021)⁶ The increasing importance of employment creation in African countries led the German Ministry to establish the Special Initiative. The project (and its academic cooperation partners in Ethiopia) supported and advised this initiative through the research.

A main interest of the of the research laid on the root causes of the high rates of labor turnover and absenteeism in the Ethiopian textile industry – phenomena that jeopardize the profitability of the companies and undermine the economic development of the country that strongly promotes textile production.

The study addresses the following guiding questions: what is the societal impact of Ethiopia's development path and how are conditions in the garment industry developing? What are the perspectives, motivations, expectations, and expe-

5 The book presented here builds on a publication by the author that appeared in an anthology on the Ethiopian textile industry (17–68), which was published in 2023. This anthology brings together project internal and external contributions on the topic of the Ethiopian textile industry (see Gronemeyer/Fink, 2023). In the research project on which the anthology is largely based, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews and survey data) were used. The book provides further results from the study by the research team (R. Gronemeyer, T. Semela, D. Semela, H. Rössner, M. G. Mitta, and S. G. Teshale); eBook available at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-658-41794-9>. For further publications of the research project see: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fbo3/institutefbo3/soziologie/professuren/gronemeyer>.

6 The BMZ's initiative is ongoing but with a more targeted focus: "As of January 2023, the Special Initiative on Training and Job Creation will be called Special Initiative 'Decent Work for a Just Transition'" (2022–2025), <https://invest-for-jobs.com/en/news/new-focus-and-name-for-the-special-initiative>; <https://www.bmz.de/en/issues/special-initiative-decent-work-for-a-just-transition>.

periences of (female) workers in the textile companies in the industrial parks? How do workers cope with the accelerated industrialization process and how do they perceive their life circumstances in the city? What challenges do they face in the transition from a primarily agrarian to an industrialized environment? Which life skills and which work ethics do they need in order to work in the textile industry? Or, in other words, which life skills that are acquired to adapt to agrarian living are now a hindrance in their industrial surroundings? Which factors contribute to the high turnover of the workforce? How do workers, managers and other stakeholders view the phenomenon? Which measures to stabilize the workforce are implemented by the textile companies and how effective are they? What is the link between the high fluctuation and social upheaval? What are the socio-economic effects of the rural-urban labor migration? How are current crises affecting the textile sector?

Although high turnover of employees is primarily a problem for employers and less so for employees, a mutual and intercultural understanding of motivations, interests and actions could help to improve working conditions, which should ultimately benefit both employees and employers. A strong focus of this book is on the perceptions of female employees with regard to their working and living conditions. For a comprehensive understanding organizational, socio-economic and cultural dimensions are considered. The book combines empirical insights with practice-oriented and theoretical reflections.

The chapters are structured as follows:

Chapter 1, the introduction

- discusses the dynamics and factors that impact Ethiopia's development path with a focus on the textile industry;
- provides an overview of the research project, its background, its approach and methodology;
- analyzes the current state of research on the Ethiopian textile industry and the issue of high rates of labor turnover and absenteeism;
- outlines a theoretical framework along a history of ideas that leads from the concept of development to the concept of social transformation.

Chapter 2 presents the results from the empirical research. Based on the interviews conducted as part of the project, the chapter discusses different perspectives on the problem of high labor turnover and absenteeism, in particular those of employees and employers. In addition to measures taken by the companies for reducing turnover, the chapter outlines actor-specific recommendations for workforce stabilization derived from the study.

Chapter 3 discusses the phenomena of high labor fluctuation in the context of social transformation in Ethiopia. The chapter supplements the interviews with textile workers with the views of rural communities and relatives of textile workers who were also interviewed. For reflection, the interviews are linked with theoretical references from social sciences, historical economics and cultural anthropology. By examining traditional orientations in Ethiopia in historical contexts, the chapter aims to add relevant perspectives to the debate on the 'mindset' of women workers in the textile industry. Following on from this, the promise of modernization is discussed, according to which the orientation towards gainful employment in the textile industry leads to a better life.

Chapter 4 briefly summarizes the most important findings of the book and discusses possible future scenarios, also taking into account recent crises. It also formulates concluding questions for further reflection.

Chapter 5 presents excerpts from a photo documentation of textile workers in their living environment and their workplaces. The photos were taken by the renowned photographer Pietro Sutura during a field trip with the research team to Ethiopia.

By focusing foremost on the voices of Ethiopian textile workers, this book aims to open up new scientific insights that can be useful for German development cooperation and for all stakeholders and organizations involved in the Ethiopian and international textile industry, as well as for academics with an interest in development studies and the global textile sector.

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