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# Tanzanian Migration Imaginaries

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**Abstract**

The European continent has been so inundated by images of African migrants trying to enter 'fortress Europe' that many Europeans now uncritically assume that the majority of Africans wants to emigrate. But how do Africans themselves imagine such migratory process? Based on ongoing fieldwork in Tanzania, this paper critically explores the currently dominant imaginaries of migratory movements in function of the desire to belong to a broader imagined cosmopolis (often the one depicted in entertainment media). Not only is Tanzania a marginal player in the global field of migration, contemporary images and ideas about emigration in this East African country appear to stand in sharp contrast with common European views on African (im)mobilities. Using an ethnographic approach, I illustrate how migration, in the broadest sense, is much more than mere movement between places; it is embedded in deeply engrained but dynamic processes of cultural meaning-making.

**Keywords:** Migration imaginaries, anthropology, ethnography, the West, media, Tanzania

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ça bouge? [Is it moving?]

Common greeting among francophone Africans

An image says more than a thousand words. This might be a platitude, but I was really dumbfounded when I picked up a specialized magazine targeting Belgian expatriates and noticed a full page advertisement of a real estate company depicting a smiling young African man in Samburu regalia standing in front of the Brussels Stock Exchange, with the accompanying slogan 'Just arrived in Brussels?'.<sup>2</sup> The obvious sales message is that whoever arrives in the heart of Europe can rent one of the company's furnished apartments. I spotted this remarkable advert shortly after returning from Tanzania, where I had conducted ethnographic research on contemporary migration imaginaries. The image of the ad comes across as odd, for several reasons. Being published in a Belgian magazine (written largely in Dutch), African migrants are certainly not the primary target. After all, very few Africans arriving in Brussels can afford a business flat, and the majority of them rely on existing ethnic, home country, or language networks to help them with practical issues such as housing. Moreover, many Africans reside illegally in Belgium, a fact that is magnified by frequent negative reporting in the news media. The advertisement struck me particularly hard because my fieldwork in Africa had revealed a surprisingly different picture. Contrary to generalized European imaginaries of African mobility (de Haas 2008), and in contrast with the situation in many West African countries, the majority of Tanzanians does not wish to migrate. In fact, Tanzania has received far

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<sup>2</sup> The Samburu (or Loikop) are an ethnic group of semi-nomadic pastoralists living in north-central Kenya. They are related to but distinct from the better-known Maasai.

more people than it has ever lost. In search for answers to understand why this is the case, this paper explores how present-day Tanzanians imagine their (im)mobility.

## **African Mobilities**

Research on migration as well as broader discourses on mobility – from the paleoanthropological Out-of-Africa hypothesis to the slave trade – have long been at the centre of African studies, not the least because mobility is a fundamental social and historical aspect of African life (de Bruijn et al. 2001). Apart from daily or periodical mobilities (e.g. nomadic herding), border-crossing migration has been an integral part of labour markets and livelihoods across much of the African continent for at least the last century. The factors that have determined such ‘culture of migration’ have been complex and variable (Carling and Åkesson 2009, Hahn and Klute 2007). Over time, and in different places, it has taken a number of forms including internal, regional, and transnational movements. It has cut across class and skill boundaries, and exists in widely different demographic contexts. The different patterns, directions and motivations of human mobilities were severely affected by colonialism. Even if the colonial system did not introduce long-distance mobilities as a new feature in pre-colonial African societies, the character of migration and its effects on local societies changed fundamentally (Egerö 1979). Colonial imaginaries about African migratory movements in general, and conceptions of ‘traditional’ land tenure and patterns of settlement in particular, still have a huge influence over contemporary European images and ideas of Africa (Bilger and Kraler 2005).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The prime example of an influential colonial migration imaginary is the by now well-refuted Hamitic hypothesis. According to this ethnocentric pseudo-scientific theory, Caucasoid peoples who migrated from the north (Iraq or Mesopotamia) were responsible for a number of pre-colonial cultural and technological achievements in Africa. Such ideas served to legitimize European intervention and colonization. Ironically, these European imaginaries have now become accepted by certain ethnic groups in Africa as their myth of origin (cf. Rekdal 1998).

Anthropologists have long been concerned with migration, movement and mobility in Africa too (Salazar 2008). Over the years, their focus has shifted from movement impact studies on 'tribal' life (Colson 1971, Schapera 1947, Richards 1952) to analyses of how narratives about migration and mobility have moved to the centre of political discourse and how claims over past or present migrations have turned into a pretext for exclusion (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, Geschiere 2009) and studies on the local meanings of people's movements (Coplan 1994, Masquelier 2000, Malkki 1995). Border-crossing migration can take many different forms, both in space and time and with respect to the motivations involved.<sup>4</sup> Migration, in the broadest sense, is much more than mere movement between places; it is always embedded in wider processes of meaning-making. In other words, migration in particular and mobility in general are socio-cultural constructs involving important imaginary and discursive dimensions (Frello 2008). Historically laden imaginaries are at the roots of many (if not all) voluntary movements to unknown destinations (cf. Pajo 2007). Such voyages can be physical but also imagined. Indeed, apart from actual, bodily movement, people also engage in metaphorical journeys. Old and new information and communication technologies – from snail mail, fax and fixed telephones to mobile telephony and the Internet – allow people to travel virtually and meet others, hereby transcending geographical and often social distance as well. Especially visual media such as television, photography, film and websites give people the opportunity for imaginative travel. Empowered by mass-mediated master narratives, imaginaries of migratory movements have become global. They are sent, circulated, transferred, received, accumulated, converted, and stored around the world. The images and ideas of other (read: better) possible places to live – often misrepresented in popular

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<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding involuntary or forced movements, mobility as a concept generally evokes a positive valence, denoting (1) the ability to move or to be moved; (2) the ease or freedom of movement; and (3) the tendency to change easily or quickly. This translates in three commonly held assumptions that have been widely spread in discussions about globalization: (1) there is (increasing) mobility; (2) mobility is a self-evident phenomenon; and (3) mobility generates change (which is often imagined as improvement of some sort).

culture – circulate in a very unequal global space (Englund 2002) and are ultimately filtered through people’s personal imagination.

By extending our research focus beyond local or national borders, the role of imagined Others – both people and places – becomes more visible. This is not just relevant for studying groups and individuals who cross borders, but also those who – at least physically – remain firmly located within the limits of a particular area throughout their lives. In this paper, I am particularly concerned with imaginaries of migration. Taking Tanzania as a case study, I explore contemporary imaginaries of migratory movements in function of the desire to belong to a broader imagined cosmopolis (often the one depicted in global entertainment media). Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork, I address the following issues: What are the contours of power, agency, and subjectivity in imaginaries of migration and the intersecting social categories those visions both reify and dissolve? How are widely spread practices of mobility such as migration erasing existing boundaries while at the same time erecting new ones? Are border-crossing mobilities more than the newest form of accumulating symbolic capital? Who are the so-called ‘immobile’ and how are they creating their own forms of mobility? Before delving into the ethnographic material, I briefly explain what I understand under the notion *imaginaries*.

## **The World of Imaginaries**

I would like to call ‘imagined worlds’ ... the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imagination of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities).

Appadurai 1996: 33

Studying widely circulating collective imaginaries and the personal imagination is not an easy task because these notions are widely used but rarely properly defined (Salazar 2010). Scholars from a wide array of disciplines have given attention to the human imagination and the existing literature is vast.<sup>5</sup> The vernacular or unofficial imaginations people rely on, from the most spectacular fantasies to the most mundane reveries, are usually not expressed in theoretical terms but in images, stories and myths (long-standing objects of anthropological inquiry). They may take a variety of forms – oral, written, pictorial, symbolic or graphic – and include both linguistic and non-linguistic ways of producing meaning. Social imaginaries are shared unspoken schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies. As representational systems that mediate reality and form identities, they are ‘complex systems of presumption – patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness – that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally (i.e., in terms not wholly idiosyncratic)’ (Vogler 2002:625). Gaonkar defines imaginaries as ‘first-person subjectivities that build upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices’ (2002:4).

Although culturally shaped imaginaries influence collective behaviour, they are neither an acknowledged part of public discourse nor coterminous with implicit or covert culture. They are imaginary in a double sense: ‘they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings, even when they acquire immense institutional force; and they are the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world’ (Gaonkar 2002:4). While they are alienating when they take on an institutional(ized) life of their own (e.g. in religion or politics), in the end the agents who imagine are individuals, not societies. A given group of people can participate in shared practices and can be exposed to discourses and

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the intellectual history and contemporary uses of the imaginary in anthropology, see Strauss (2006). Despite their frequent references to the imaginary, contemporary anthropologists have been less concerned with imaginative processes than with the product of the imagination.

symbols that evoke conflicting meanings, but individuals' subjectivities are not completely expressed by collective discourses and have to be understood in their particularity. Paradoxically, imaginaries help produce our sense of reality (Beidelman 1993). For imagination to become 'effective', it has to relate closely to reality. We all socio-culturally construct peoples and places as mixtures of the real and the imaginary. According to this perspective, identity is to be understood less in terms of geography, nation, ethnicity and culture, than in terms of how people imagine – Appadurai's (1996) concepts of 'imagined worlds' and 'possible lives'. The imaginary can thus be conceived as a mental process, both individual and social, that produces the reality that simultaneously produces it.

The notion of the imaginary draws on Lacan's (1977) mirror phase in human development, when a child sees its own reflection as Other. This confused identification permits the appropriation of certain critical and valuable aspects of the Other as an essential part of the self. For Lacan, the imaginary involves a phantasmatic identity because the subject has its identity only in the mirror of the gaze, desires, and language of Others, which guarantees its reality but also displaces and refracts it. Not surprisingly, then, many collective imaginaries are structured by dichotomies – sometimes difficult to discern in practice – that construct the world in often paradigmatically linked binominals: nature–culture, here–there, male–female, inside–outside, local–global (cf. Durand 1985). The role of the imagination, acknowledged as a social practice, is thus of crucial importance to understand the local production of meaning in an increasingly globalized world (Weiss 2002). The psyche's propensity to produce imaginations is the primary fact; economy and politics provide triggering mechanisms, assisting in bringing idiosyncratic images together in socially acceptable formulas, but remaining secondary facts when studying the socio-cultural production of fantasy (Thoden van Velzen 1985:108). I will show below that this is clearly the case in the context of migration, where the link with imaginaries is established through the recognition of possibilities, of alternative

constructions of future lives in other places. Migration seems to be tied to particular representations of reality such that potential migrants view it as a route for success, regardless of the actual reality.

## **In Search of Green Pastures**

The noteworthy point is that migration, movement and mobility are variously imagined in Africa (and, of course, elsewhere) and that, of late, anthropologists have been keen to detail the myriad ways this is so. By imaginings, anthropologists do not mean that such things are culturally-concocted fantasies that can therefore be ignored. On the contrary, many anthropologists today see such imaginings as crucial to understanding migratory processes. This is because people's ideas about movement are not just ways of thinking about the world. They also provide ways to act upon that world. Cultural imaginations, to use Clifford Geertz's terminology, are both models 'of' and models 'for' reality.

Sanders 2001: 28

In Tanzania, most migratory movements are internal and rural-urban, favouring circular mobility and permanent migration to commercial attraction poles like the coastal city of Dar es Salaam (National Bureau of Statistics 2006:140-161). The small streams of emigration in the country's early postcolonial history consisted of labour migration to the Copperbelt in Zambia and to the Rand gold mines in South Africa and people going to neighbouring Kenya and Uganda in search of either wage employment or land (Egerö 1979). Contemporary emigration is still insignificant, probably not exceeding one percent of the population, with most migrants moving to nearby East African countries and only a very small group journeying all the way to Europe, the USA or the Middle East (Prinz 2005). In the global field of border-crossing migration, Tanzania is thus an extremely marginal player.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, and

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<sup>6</sup> Studies of transnational migration within and beyond the African continent are hampered by insufficient data. Tanzania's National Bureau of Statistics, for instance, has no data at all on

contrary to European imaginaries of African (im)mobilities, Tanzania hosts a very large contingent of refugees – nearly one million people – from neighbouring countries (IOM 2008:408).

The most important reasons to migrate overseas are to get access to higher education, followed by motivations such as self-fulfilment, experience, good living conditions or a change of one's living situation. Elements of spirituality, politics and culture are also influencing the decision-making process (de Bruijn et al. 2001). Brain drain of young talent seems to constitute a great part of the migration from Tanzania to Europe (IOM 2008:521). This is due to the fact that rather people in the higher income bracket (or their children) – generally a part of society with higher education – are able to afford the expensive journey overseas. The so-called 'war on terror' and increased measures of border security have made it more difficult to migrate to the USA or the U.K., with many (especially businesspeople) trying their luck in the Middle East and East Asia instead. Tanzania has also been identified as a country of origin, transit and destination for trafficked persons. Trafficking is mostly internal; girls and boys are trafficked from rural to urban areas for the purpose of domestic labour, commercial agriculture, fishing and mining industries, and child prostitution. On the international level, women are mostly trafficked out of the country for prostitution and/or domestic work in Saudi Arabia, Dubai and South Africa. A senior police officer in Dar es Salaam told me that adventurers migrating abroad often end up being involved in smuggling illegal substances on the route from Pakistan over Zanzibar to Nigeria.

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emigration. Prinz (2005) estimates that there were between 54,000 and 240,000 persons per year for the period from 2000 to 2003, approximately between 0.15 and 0.7 percent of the Tanzanian population, and only a fraction of the estimated 150 million people (including refugees) worldwide migrating every year (IOM 2008). In Europe, most Tanzanians are found in (in alphabetical order) Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the U.K.

Most Tanzanians I interviewed (in Dar es Salaam, Arusha and Brussels) make a clear distinction between two groups of overseas migrants: (1) those who are schooled and already had an established life (usually including a good job) before they migrated; and (2) the adventure-seekers who are less schooled and who venture out looking for a better life. The former category almost invariably returns to Tanzania after having had a short-term educational or working experience abroad because they know that they will have a better quality of life back home (with the competitive advantage of having international experience). Samweli, a senior professor at the University of Dar es Salaam who did his studies in the U.K. stresses how different the lifestyle in Europe is compared to Tanzania. That is why he decided to spend just enough time in the U.K. to receive a proper education and earn some extra money. When I ask him whether he ever contemplated migrating abroad permanently, he answers smilingly: 'Me? Remaining in Europe is very difficult and very expensive and it's hard to educate children. I'm stuck here [in Tanzania] now with a big house and farms!' Many of those who are mainly in search of a better life elsewhere already failed life in one way or the other at home (e.g. they stopped their studies) and they often get stuck in the country they migrate to as well (although this is something that is generally not communicated to those who stay behind). As Alicia, a former migrant to the USA tells me: 'Even when disappointed they don't come back. They are really embarrassed and it would be hard to establish new networks back home... Things have changed when they return and many of their old friends have been successful in Tanzania'.

Despite the remarkably low rate of emigration, migration imaginaries, especially of 'the West', are shared by large parts of the Tanzanian population.<sup>7</sup> As Moyer (2003) notes in her doctoral research on the prevalent imaginaries among youth in Dar es Salaam, in many ways temporary emigration out of Tanzania is imagined in ways

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<sup>7</sup> In the context of this paper, 'the West' refers to a widespread imaginary (cf. Nyamnjoh and Page 2002), not to a specific geographic location with homogeneous cultural traits and historical background.

similar to rural-urban migration within the country, as a mode of looking for a (better) life.

Dreams and imaginings of emigration were not limited to the United States. Europe, Asia, particularly Pakistan and India, and South Africa figured prominently in such discourses as well. All such foreign lands of economic opportunity are collectively referred to as *majuu*, a noun formed by placing the lexeme for "up on top" into the *ji/ma* noun class, again a class for unusually large and out of proportion things. Alternatively, people may use the word *ulaya* to refer to Europe and the West as a whole in more concrete terms, but when referring to a geographic imaginaire, a place of hopes, dreams and possibilities, people are more likely to use the term *majuu*. One might purchase a plane, boat or train ticket to travel to Italy, India or South Africa but, in many ways, the specificity of the destination is irrelevant when it comes to imagining what such a trip might provide in terms of economic opportunities. The way one enters into the individual economies of these destinations is entirely dependent on specificities of course, but such details should not get in the way of material longing before one even sets out on one's journey. (Moyer 2003: 271-272)

Many Tanzanians have stories about other people's experiences of transnational mobility. Though few have actually travelled outside of Tanzania themselves, nearly all have close relatives or friends who have. As a result, many of the tales told about *majuu* are actually interpretations of other people's migratory movements.<sup>8</sup> Such tales, sometimes mere rumours, are almost always intertwined with discussions about possibilities for earning a living abroad. Most stories told about *majuu* centre on the USA, Europe, South Africa or Asia. Tanzanian youngsters identify the U.K. as the most

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<sup>8</sup> *Majuu*, literally 'the things up there' in Swahili, is often used as a synonym for Europe (or the West). The 'up' is explained by Tanzanians as referring to the high living standard (implying distance from the daily life of most people), the orientation on a map (in the north), or the fact that Tanzanians must fly to get to Europe. Other commonly used terms are *uzunguni* (the land of the white people), *ng'ambo* (overseas, the other or opposite side), and *mtoni* ('at the river', referring to the oceans surrounding the African continent).

attractive country of destination, followed by other Western European or North American countries (Prinz 2005:132). Most of these countries have either been colonial powers, or currently give foreign aid to Tanzania (e.g. Sweden, USA, Italy, Canada, Germany, Australia, and the Netherlands). Tanzanian youths generally perceive Europe highly positively. They specifically emphasize its high level of development, its education system, certain aspects of the political and social situation and the economic opportunities Europe offers (Prinz 2005:124). Interestingly, Europe is not perceived as a geographic unit, but rather as a list of countries associated with certain features such as high level of development, wealth, social security and political power – in some cases, even Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA are regarded as European countries.

The cosmopolitan West is a dream, an act of imagination and an aspiration. For its imaginative features it is not only socially and economically appealing, but also fascinating because it points to a utopia, to a product of fantasy. The images and ideas of the West and the migration process derive from and are perpetuated by information from various sources, some of which people are aware of (e.g. mass media and transnational networks) and other sources of which they are unconscious. The latter include popular images, stereotypes and prejudices, or collective impressions that are socio-culturally transmitted. The Tanzanian university students that Prinz (2005:135) interviewed explicitly named books, educational institutions, national newspapers and European exchange students. One must also not forget the role of early European explorers, adventurers and colonial administrators in creating the 'myth of the Occident' (Ranger 1992). Not surprisingly, television is among the most influential sources, followed by the Internet, newspapers and radio. Images of the USA, for instance, are largely transmitted through hit television series. Some depict the dream lives of multi-millionaires, others the relaxed atmosphere of American college campuses, still others invite the viewer to enter the warm and cosy world of affluent African-American families. As much as basketball and rap music,

these images over the past few decades have helped turn the United States into a virtual reality for a large segment of the Tanzanian population. While Tanzania is one of the world's poorest countries, the television soaps depict a world of flat screen TVs, gated houses, servants and expensively decorated rooms – clearly offering an aspirational lifestyle. Sometimes spectators do not realize that they are actually watching Latin-American *telenovelas*. For them, all stories take place in an imagined 'Western' world.

Especially for young Tanzanian men, the consumption of these televised fantasies facilitates the imaginative construction of overseas migration as a solution to all their problems.<sup>9</sup> It allows for 'skipping one or several steps' (Ludl 2008), various obstacles and efforts, but also risks. They think of migration not merely as an economic promotion but also as a specific strategy of upward social mobility, conferring an extraordinary status in Tanzania. Youngsters share rumours about how returnee migrants come back refined, sophisticated and educated, and always well dressed. The new authority and cosmopolitan identity acquired through the Western experience has a huge effect on the migration imaginary: Here things are bad, there things are better (at least so it seems). The West does not merely stand for a better education and more money; it also means fame, victory, respect and admiration. Young people have a strong desire to belong to this fantastic cosmopolis, to the promising world out there, the imaginary world they know from popular entertainment media (Jónsson 2008, Ferguson 2006). In the context of West Africa, Timera (2001) argues that no project has ever fed so many dreams, phantasms and imaginaries like the plan to migrate to the North. In a similar vein, Lado describes how the longing for mobility is almost obsessional, an 'irresistible desire' turning into a true 'emigration virus' (2005:17). How comes, then, that in a poor African country like Tanzania, these imaginaries hardly generate excursions out of the homeland, but

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<sup>9</sup> Although things are slowly changing, Tanzanian society remains largely paternalistic, making it harder for women to move around.

that they merely encourage their emulation? After all, there are a whole series of harsh realities – governmental policies, impoverished soils, drought, famine and so on – that could compel people to move away. Apart from obvious reasons (e.g. the lack of capabilities, means and support to actually migrate), there are some other processes at work here. It is to these processes that I turn next.

## Changing Winds

Cool guy, don't lie to yourself. Don't run off to Europe, you can also be successful here, even by growing tomatoes. It's best to know what you are doing. Cool men haven't gone to school. They don't even know English, just two words: 'yes' and 'no'. Is that all you are able to say on the street? What will you be speaking there then? Think first before going, so that you won't drool that day. Will you not be a mute person where you are going? The problem is that you don't want to work, that you want to go with the times, but what times are these, cool guy? You don't even have a tartan to wrap yourself in, your shirt is worth ten thousand shillings, your trousers are worth ten thousand shillings, and your shoes are worth twenty thousand shillings. Will you cover yourself with your clothes at night? Take any kind of job [here], so that you earn some money.  
John Walker featuring Ras Lion (Bitozi)

Few Tanzanians would prefer to call another country their home. This, of course, goes against European discourses suggesting that most Africans would rather migrate to Europe than continue living in their own countries. In fact, the extremely low Tanzanian emigration rates stand in striking contrast to the thousands of other (mainly West) Africans trying to make the journey to Europe each year as illegal migrants – risking people smugglers, deserts, sea crossings and the possibility of being sent home, all for the dream of a better life. This is striking because, in the end, most Africans rely on comparable migration rumours and entertainment media representations to build up an imaginary of cosmobility and of its characteristics –

some of which is real, and most of which is dreamt up (cf. Jónsson 2008). In some cases, the dream of migration works like a kind of opium; reality is no longer confronted and less people actually undertake concrete steps to migrate. The creative construction of this fantasy is one important factor leading some to even accept long-term unemployment as they anticipate an eventual opportunity to journey abroad.

While Tanzanians imagine *majuu* as a place preferable to their own country in terms of economics, they also offer critiques that illustrate that overseas migration is best envisioned as a temporary endeavour, undertaken mainly to improve one's life at home. In practice, the discourse of migration often remains just that, a discourse. While dreaming of migration is very important for young people's day-to-day life, travel abroad will not be a reality for most. Besides, the majority now doubts that the greater part of migrants in the West stand good chances to get a job with decent working conditions. Somehow, people start acknowledging that the spaces of marginality they are trying to escape will reappear abroad, in the peripheries of European towns, in the social marginality most African migrants are doomed to live and work. In earlier times, people may have greatly over-estimated the impact of migration and conceptualized these in terms of their worldview and expectations for their future. Nowadays, things seem to have changed.

Many returnees have a clear message for their fellow citizens who contemplate making the big move. Victor, for example, was already working as a judge before going to the UK for further education. There, he had to work at a gas station to make ends meet. Upon his return, he wanted to share his sobering experience with as many people as possible. Binadamu migrated to the USA in the hope of realizing the American dream. It all turned out very different from what he had expected. Like many others of his age, once he had finished Form 6 (secondary school), he wanted to go to the USA. In his words: 'I had watched MTV and wanted to become like them'.

The little money he had saved in Tanzania was quickly lost in university tuition fees and he had to take two or even three jobs to make ends meet. When visiting other Tanzanians, he realized that he was not alone in this situation:

On the phone they always sounded very positive but when visiting them I could see how miserably they live... The story they tell to those back home is that the U.S. is good, the economy is good, and the system is good. What they don't tell is that you're like a third class citizen.

To those who think life in 'the West' is great, Binadamu has a simple answer ready: 'That will not be YOUR life'. His experience has made him realize that life in Africa is better, but that you need a working spirit, an insight confirmed by Malaika, a promising young artist from Arusha who spent some time in Europe: 'People think life abroad is easy, but it's not, it's difficult. You need to have a mission and a purpose... What I learned there [in the U.K.] is to toil, work like a donkey and live like a queen'.

Youngsters these days seem better informed and have a more critical mindset than before. John, a young Tanzanian who has no personal migration experience, tells me:

When at secondary school, we all imagined to migrate when finished. I had an uncle in the U.K. and cousins in California, Sweden and Italy. But few made their dreams come true... Maybe there's too much pressure abroad and when you return home people of your age have built up their lives and you have nothing... People generalize too much from popular culture but television doesn't show real life... Take the example of 50 Cent [American rapper] who made money doing illegal things.

Kwanza, who is doing an internship at a prestigious consultancy company in Brussels, follows the same line of thinking:

Young people in Tanzania are increasingly realizing that it's not all good. In the media, there are now a lot of negative stories. This is very different from the 1990s, when going to the U.K. and the U.S. was seen as hip. The mindset has

shifted... now more people are considering setting up a small business in Tanzania.

Kwanza is happy with this change, because in his opinion the old 'migration mentality' destroyed the image of Africans in the West. When I confront him with the fact that many West Africans still try to migrate to Europe he explains the difference by referring to cultural roots (West Africans are more aggressive, Tanzanians have learned from Mwalimu Nyerere to 'live in a culture where life is easy and good') and opportunity (West Africa has fewer resources to be shared among a better educated population, in Tanzania many opportunities in the country are not yet taken). This type of explanation was echoed by other people I interviewed: 'Migration is not a very Tanzanian thing to do... After all, it's a nice country to live in'; 'Going far away isn't a thing to do... Maybe it all has to do with tradition'; 'Tanzanians are not the most ambitious people and they usually have a family they can rely upon'; 'Tanzanians are fearful, we don't have a mentality of conquering'. The relevance of such cultural testimonies lies in the very images and categories that are used by people to describe and situate themselves within changing social worlds. They reaffirm that all (im)mobilities are 'imaginatively crafted through particular cultural lenses' (Sanders 2001:27).

The change in thinking is also reflected in the messages spread around by the increasing number of Tanzanian media productions, which are very influential in shaping imaginaries, especially among young Tanzanians. John Walker's song *Bitozi* (slang term to denote a 'cool person'), mentioned in the beginning of this section, is a perfect example.<sup>10</sup> In *Uhamiaji* (Migration), Dr. John criticizes the bureaucracy in

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<sup>10</sup> The songs discussed here can all be classified under *Bongo Flava* (or *Fleva*, from the English 'flavour'), a popular style of music in Tanzania that was originally modelled on American hip hop but now encompasses a great variety of musical influences. The term serves as an umbrella for Tanzanian music that is mostly performed in Swahili, produced by relatively young musicians and enormously popular among Tanzanian youth. The style mushroomed in the 1990s, thanks to the free market and

Tanzanian migration offices. One fan of the song left the following telling comment on its YouTube site: 'Yes man, I am in Europe, in the United Kingdom. It's up to the Tanzanians to build their home in Tanzania. I'm a Somali but born in Tanzania. Europe, Europe, Europe, it's a gamble... not all people can be successful' (own translation).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in Mkoloni's *Tajiri na Masikini* (Rich Person and Poor Person), a poor person is not at all impressed by a rich person who brags about his children studying in Europe and he himself often travelling there. Ally Kiba's song *Mac Muga* tells the tale of a fellow Tanzanian singer, Mr. Nice, who wasted his fame and millions, moving to South Africa and the U.K. squandering his money on women and the high life.<sup>12</sup> Now the man is back in Tanzania and has nothing to show off. Some of the YouTube comments on the lyrics are revealing: 'This is about reality and responsibility', 'So simple yet so real....hope people in the diaspora are listening', 'The Mac Mugas of USA and Europe should listen to these lyrics... Nyumbani ni nyumbani jamani. Hebu mrejee b4 it's too late!' (Home is home friends. Well, come back before it's too late!).<sup>13</sup>

The Tanzanian diaspora is well aware of the issues at hand. Filmmaker Joseph Kibira, himself a migrant in the USA, drew on his personal experience to produce a couple of feature films on migration imaginaries and practices. *Bongoland* (2003) is about an illegal Tanzanian immigrant in Minnesota (the U.S. state with the largest concentration of Tanzanians). Many issues come up when the main character's dreams for a better life collide with the realities of everyday life for an undocumented worker. After having experienced some initial successes, his world starts to crumble and he finds himself facing the difficult decision of whether he should continue to

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the privatisation of the media. *Bongo* (the augmentative form of *ubongo*, brain) refers to the 'big brain' or cunningness necessary to survive in Bongoland (Tanzania).

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GK2oh1qPsEU>

<sup>12</sup> Mr. Nice, alias Lucas Mkenda, became famous all over East Africa by integrating musical elements from Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. He went professional in 1999 with the release of his maiden album and soon became one of the highest paid entertainers in East Africa.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93b1NB5XrKE>

struggle for success in a country that is supposed to offer so much opportunity or return to his native Bongoland. There is also a discussion about the amount of information immigrants send home about their living conditions. Most project the image that life is really good, conferring the illusion of having achieved betterment. This makes the people left behind to continuously put pressure on them with demands for help for school fees, demands for money to start new projects, et cetera. The migrants who receive these requests from home, somehow have to find ways to fulfil them. This is what the main character is asking: Is this lying and pretending that life is good really worth it?

The sequel, *Bongoland II: There is no Place like Home* (2008), follows the character from the first movie as he returns to Tanzania. He is happy to be reunited with his family but overtime he becomes frustrated by the level of poverty that almost everyone around him faces on a regular basis. He is convinced that most people in Bongoland are not short of cash but are poor – which is a state of mind. Above all he is amazed by how everyone seems to be OK with ‘this’. Despite all the disappointments, he is very determined to make a difference because as he puts it... ‘This is our home ...our only home... we are obligated to take care of it... if we won't who will?’ While such messages are extremely relevant for young Tanzanians, Kibira’s movies are hard to find and virtually unknown in his home country.

Locally produced Tanzanian VCD films (sometimes dubbed Tollywood movies) increasingly address the issue of mobility imaginaries too. The Swahili comedy *Welcome Back*, for instance, tells the story of a Tanzanian businessman coming back from Europe with a German girlfriend (played by a German PhD student in anthropology). However, it’s hard to keep up appearances when the woman discovers that he has a Tanzanian family and that he lives far more modestly than he claimed (and imagined). In a similar vein, *Yebo Yebo* (slang denoting a combination between hallo and yes) is a comedy about a Tanzanian migrant returning from the USA, while

*The Stolen Will* handles the theme of Tanzanians relying on relatives in Europe or the USA. In *Dar 2 Lagos*, a Nigerian-Tanzanian coproduction (combining Nollywood and Tollywood actors), a Tanzanian goes to Nigeria searching for relatives who migrated there. One of the most remarkable Tanzanian VCD productions so far is the recently released Chinese-Tanzanian co-production *From China with Love* (parts 1 and 2). It tells the unlikely tale about a Maasai businessman who falls in love with a Chinese girl he meets on a business trip to China. He brings the girl back home to marry her but the couple faces many problems, many of which have to do with cross-cultural communication difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

Despite some exceptions, and despite increasing opportunities for Tanzanians in places such as Uganda, South Africa, India, the Middle East and Egypt, the predominant migration imaginaries remain remarkably centred on the 'West' as the preferred locus to accrue symbolic capital and cosmopolitan status. In other words, the mainstream imaginary of migratory mobility, of belonging to a global cosmopolis, has to be qualified because it is clearly directional. Some of the people I interviewed suggest there is a growing category of young Tanzanians, mainly informed by migration narratives and rumours from returnees and new entertainment media representations, who do not really want to go abroad, but merely dream about the possibility. Yet, the recent Obama-mania (which hit Tanzania as much as it did many other parts of the world) shows that drawing such a conclusion might be precarious. It is not unlikely to suspect that Obama's election as President of the United States will reinvigorate the imaginary that the American dream can also be realized by

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<sup>14</sup> While this is an acknowledgment of the fact that these days Tanzanians also travel increasingly east, China and the Chinese are viewed rather negatively by Tanzanians. When Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Tanzania in February 2009, a commonly heard rumour in Dar es Salaam was that it was probably not the real president visiting, but a stand-in – in analogy with the cheap Chinese products flooding the Tanzanian market that look very much like renowned expensive brands but are of a much lesser quality. People in general feel increasingly cheated and exploited by Chinese products and people. Tanzanians also find it very hard to classify the Chinese as they seem to break all (imagined) barriers of the existing social hierarchy.

African migrants: 'Yes we can!'. After all, the economic failure of previous migrants does not lead to a decrease in migration amongst people from the same place of origin (Hahn and Klute 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Imagination relates to the ways in which people picture a world different from that which they actually experience. It provides a means by which people extend their vision of what may be possible or at least desirable or feared if things are not all that they are claimed to be or seem to be at first. This ... meaning of imagination relates not only to ways that society may change but also to ways that its members may stand back to scrutinize, contemplate, and judge their world. In this sense imaginative exercise constitutes means for criticism, for distortion, even subversion, of the social order. It offers the possibility of questioning some aspects of the version of the system in which imagination itself is rooted.

Beidelman 1993: 1-2

While Africa has long been described as an immensely mobile continent and continues to be viewed in this vein (de Bruijn et al. 2001), there is a marked decline of Africa's share of international migrants. Most analyses explain this by referring to the widespread economic decline, the still rather negligible share of African migrants in Western countries, and the recent stabilisation of the number of refugees in Africa. The findings discussed in this paper, however, suggest that the predominant migration imaginaries can quickly change too. Besides, border-crossing migration is something quite different from mobility in general; a decline of international migration may well go hand in hand with rising mobility levels nationally and regionally. Most importantly, all forms and types of mobility are deeply embedded in wider socio-economic structures and, thus, migration needs to be analysed in the specific context in which it occurs or is absent. This paper, for instance, illustrates that

migration clearly has an instrumental role, but one which is guided by flexible socio-cultural imaginaries more than mere economic considerations as such.

Only a tiny fraction of Tanzanians heads towards 'the West', but the fantasy to migrate there (usually temporarily) is quite popular. For people in Tanzania, such imaginaries of the 'good life' serve as an essentially creative act that facilitates their ability to move beyond existing structural imbalances of power and economic constraints (Weiss 2002). Increased global mobility and new means of communication enable them to desire the signs and styles of a global cosmopolitan order, while facing ever-narrower means by which to satisfy them – a situation not unlike that of many refugees (cf. Horst 2006). Highly desired cultural goods may only be accessed within particular spaces, and that isolation often creates struggles over the right to imagine possible futures. Despite individual creative efforts, which reveal an evident local agency, the opening of wider horizons and the multiplication of imagined and fascinating life possibilities also makes exclusion and frustration increasingly evident (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). On the one hand, people witness the widening of their horizons, to new stimuli for the imagination; on the other they suffer from a chronic lack of means. In sum, imaginaries – whether true or false, or somewhere in between – have real enough effects. Importantly, imaginaries are so widespread and popular because they give people at least some feeling of control in a world where they increasingly feel controlled.

As this paper has illustrated, human mobility – be it physical or imaginative – is moulded by personal and cultural knowledge, skills, technological and financial means, and positions within larger socio-cultural networks. Culturally rooted understandings of migration, based on media images as well as personal accounts, are as relevant as real physical movements in attempts to explain migratory phenomena (Hahn and Klute 2007). Anthropology fruitfully contributes to this field of inquiry by ethnographically detailing how migration is a contested ideological

construct involving much more than mere physical movement. It can, for instance, assess how imaginary activities and social relations concerning migration are materialized, enacted and inculcated. Migratory movements have created new avenues for the transnational flow of identities, ideas and practices. An anthropology of imaginaries of mobility – narratives and ideas that depend on the creation of the otherness of people's own identity as well as of the Other – reveals how local lifeworlds are always negotiated and contested, and constantly under transformation. Studying imaginaries of mobility offers a novel way to grasp the ongoing transformations of globalization (Barrère and Martuccelli 2005). It is in acknowledging the role of the imagination in migration that possibly one of the most exciting opportunities for an anthropology of global and transnational processes is located (Wilding 2007).

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