**International Migration**

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**Categories and Labeling during the migration process**

**Abstract**

One of the key challenges posed by global migration today is the tension between categories and labels created by bureaucratic systems and the lived experiences of migrants. The basis of Israeli categories is the Law of Return, immigration laws which distinguishes between *olim* (Jewish immigrants), *mehagrim* (non-Jewish migrants), and refugees. Zera Beita Israel (ZBI), descendents of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, represent a challenge to this legal distinction. The ZBI journey of immigration to Israel from their villages, through transit camps, and absorption centers, took them through various environments where they were viewed differently, creating ever-changing definitions along the way. In this paper, which is based on an ethnographic study conducted at each of the various sites of the ZBI migration journey, I propose that the difficulties that bureaucratic systems face in categorizing this group created a unique immigration process: Throughout this process, the migrants move between categories, while the fluidity of their movement and daily life challenge the stability of bureaucratic definitions.

**Key words**: immigration, categorization, labeling, transit migration, Israel, Ethiopia

**Categories and Labeling during the migration process**

**Introduction**

I was sitting in a restaurant in the Dangela region of Ethiopia, when I struck up a conversation with Johannes, a local, educated 25-year-old. His family lived a Christian lifestyle in a nearby village. When I told him that I was from Israel, he told me he had ZBI roots, and that his brother Senbatho had immigrated to Israel five years earlier, in 2006, with his wife – also a ZBI – and their children. It turned out that I knew him, from the period he spent waiting in a transit camp in Gondar, and we had even met a few times in Israel. Senbatho had been through the process of conversion to Judaism, had received an Israeli ID card, and was defined as an Israeli citizen. His brother Johannes was an Ethiopian citizen and could not get to Israel.

A year later I met Johannes again – this time in Israel. He had entered the country illegally and had no documents, and the Israeli bureaucracy refused to recognize him as an *oleh*. Instead, he was classified as an asylum seeker[[1]](#footnote-1) (field work, 2011).

The story of Johannes and Senbatho is not exceptional; my data contains many similar example that present the tension between categories and labels created by bureaucratic systems and the lived experiences of migrants. Here we have two brothers, both previously Ethiopian citizens, who are now in Israel – one labled a Jew and a citizen that belongs to the state, the other an illegal migrant- not desirable in the country. As this case makes abundantly clear, such bureachratic distinctions are often arbitrary.

This article examines the complexity that arises between the categorization and labeling of immigrants by countries and organizations, as well as the experiences of immigrants in daily life during the immigration process. The malleability of categorization becomes ‘particularly explicit during migration’ (La Barbera, 2015); during the proceses of migration and in the structures of a new host country, migrants have to (re-)negotiate their identities within new categorizations, new social locations and in terms of new Others (La Barbera, [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13504630.2020.1816952); Chryssochoou, 2004).

Focusing on the experience of the Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) of Ethiopia, this article explores the various categories and labels appended to this group as its members moved from Ethiopia to Israel, and the tensions and conflict that were part of their everyday lives along the way. A close examination of the ZBI will illuminate some of the urgent issues raised by global migration and will cast light on the complex relationship between categorization and state policy. The article also examines how the ZBI migrants respond and react to their categorization, and highlights the ways that they employ their limited agency to negotiate the meaning of labels and categories applied to them.

Shifting classifications of people in general and migrants in particular have been integral to the modern nation state. The ZBI case, like others, is characterized by multiple moves, which challenge both the migrants and the nation states they inabit along the way. Nonetheless, this is an interesting and relevant case study, since the ZBI spend a considerable amount of time in their country of origin, already in transit status before even leaving, and defined by categories and labels that are usually characteristics of later stages in transit migration. Once they arrive at their destination, Israel, the ZBI migrants continue to challenge and disrupt accepted local categories, as will be shown.

This article consists of four parts. In the first, I introduce the theoretical context of the study, and review previous research on categorization. Labeling transit migration and reaction to categorizatiom. The second part introduces my methodology. In the third part, I present the frame of immigration to Israel and The research population: Zera Beita Israel. The fourth part I discuss my findings on how ….. I conclude with a discussion of the main arguments of the article.

**Theoretical Bckground**

One of the most pressing issues facing global migration today is the clash between bureaucratic categories and designations and migrants' real experiences. This paper explores the contradictions and challenges experienced by and posed by Zera Beita Israel (ZBI), descendents of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, as they seek to immigrate to Israel. The basis of Israeli immigration laws is the Law of Return, which distinguishes between *olim* (Jewish immigrants), *mehagrim* (non-Jewish migrants), and refugees. As non-Jewish descendents of Jews, the ZBI a priori present a challenge to this legal distinction. Their journey of immigration to permanent residence in Israel, setting out from their villages, through time spent in transit camps and absorption centers, takes them through various environments where they are viewed and labeled differently, further complicating their experiences and sense of belonging.

Moncrieffe and Eyben (2007) have argued that categorization is directed at transforming dynamic cultural processes into defined constructs. Earlier, Zetter (1991) maintained that labeling turns humans into objects with material and political meaning, enabling the translation of identity for bureaucratic purposes. Labeling creates conditioning by means of differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, stereotypes, and control mechanisms. By their very nature, all of these mechanisms are dynamic and particular (Appelqvist 1999; McAdam 2005): different countries impose different definitions of identity, which results in different rights and obligations (Adelman 1988). These differences become the source of tensions between how newcomers define themselves and their needs and the definitions imposed by the sovereign state (Harrell-Bond 1986; Jenkins 1994; Mazu 1986; Peterson 1958; Robertson, 2015; Zetter 1991).

The bureaucratic and political systems that label and categorize people and communities are inflexible, while the everyday activities and lives of flesh and-blood newcomers are characterized by sociological blurring. Categories have always been an essential tool of political power, the logic of he état civil that Foucault was particularly critical of. the classic categorzzion effect on the ways in which migrants are assessed by the state and will affect issues of resource distribution, residential location, labour rights and ultimately for the most serious. The main reason is that although they might have little sociological value, we have seen that the use of such categories in offi cial discourses does have an impact not only on public perceptions of migratory phenomena, but also on real lives of migrants through enforcement of state policies questions such as refugee status determination, life or death.( Collyer1 and De Haas 2012; Kemp and Yona 2008)

The process of migration may take more then decate, and the literature on transit migration – usually defined as migration to “… one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination, by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal” (Papadopolou 2005. Also see: Collyer et al. 2012; Düvell 2008; Tudoroiu 2017), can help in highlighting the ambiguity and multiple patterns of present day migration Present day migratory phenomena include temporary and circular migration, interal migration, migration to third or even more countries, as well as all sorts of diaspora linkages between countries of origin and destination (Hugo et al. 2014; Düvell 2008; Mingot and de Arimatéia da Cruz 2013; Fargues 2009; Tudoroiu 2017). While current immigration is complex and includes at least moving for four stations in country and between countries categories are becoming challenging .Each station categorization become different and the migrants should responses for state categori and local community.

The fluidity of different category in each station and the different actors (as government, NGOs, neighbours etc). This article shares a Barthian focus on group boundaries and the processes of social negotiations that construct them, rather than seeing the groups themselves as immutable entities (Barth, 1969). Jenkins’ distinction between ‘groups’ and ‘categories’ (1994) is central to my argument. According to this distinction, a group identity is our own internal definition, whereas a category is a definition imposed on us by others, for example by a dominant national group on minority groups. In a new setting, such as after migration, one becomes subject to new categorizations (external definition) by the dominant group. ‘Social Identity is never unilateral’, declares Jenkins, continuing: ‘individuals have some control over how they are perceived in the interaction order1, but their categorization by others is always moot’ (2000, p. 8). Therefore, they must renegotiate their group identity (internal definition) in this new environment, which is inevitably also shaped by the experience of being categorized. The form that these renegotiations take depends on how consensual or conflictual the external definition is perceived as being, and on the power relations that define the opportunities for resistance against the categorization. Jenkins himself introduces five possible responses to imposed categorization. These range from internalization and acceptance to resisting or even denying the truthfulness of the categorization in regards to one’s self-defined identity (2000, p. 21). There are many other examples of theories listing responses against imposed categorization (see e.g. Alba, 2005; Shelton et al., 2006; Tilly, 2004). However, it is Andreas Wimmer’s vast work on the subject of ethnic boundary making (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013) that makes the most ambitious claim of being a comprehensive typology of all possible variations of boundary making strategies. In this case study, the main meaning of acceptance of categories critical for immigration option, and the right to be an immigrant and your ability to obtain citizenship.

It Rather, it is a complex phenomenon in which policy interventions and changed social networks create various categories of migrants, such as legal, illegal and irregular migrants and workers, as well as asylum seekers and refugees (Içduygu 2000; Sahin-Mencütek 2012) and to new migratory intentions (Wissink et al. 2013).

The key point for this paper is that it is the state that, through legislation and policies, intervenes in global flows by deciding who is an immigrant, a refugee or an illegal migrant (Sahin-Mencütek 2012). Different categories of migration and ensuing migratory paths and flows are constructed and shaped by the “interaction between the policies governing migration, the capabilities of migrants and their aspirations” (Dimitriadi 2015: 5; c.f. Mingot and de Arimatéia da Cruz 2013:Düvell 2012).

As noted, labeling and categorization are an attempt to create order, but the movement of people and the complexity of daily life create dissonance and undermine those definitions. This paper tackles specific social processes by employing theoretical perspectives from the literature on transit migration and from studies focusing on categorization and labeling. This combination brings to the fore important questions, such as how people in transit are categorized at different stations along their journey, how their movement and status as being 'in transit' shape definitions and labels attached to them and what is the significance of categories and their construction in the midst of movement.

1. Methodology

This article is part of a larger ethnographic study of migration conducted between 2005 and 2012, which included in-depth fieldwork at each of the four stations of the ZBI journey: their villages of origin in northern Ethiopia, transit camps in Ethiopia, absorption centers in Israel, and permanent dwellings in Israel.

The project is thus a multi-sited ethnography of movement, using the countries of origin and destinations not as the alpha and omega of immigration, but rather as two of many reference points, including transit stations, in a journey shaped by multiple competing practices of place making and perceptions of time. To this end, I travelled with the ZBI , lived in each of the places they lived, and participated in their experiences of waiting and moving.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I used Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2009) as my primary methodology, allowing the main topics of inquiry to evolve and emerge during and after the fieldresearch. As noted, I lived with the ZBI and interacted with them in each of the stations, conducting participant observation and interviews. In this way, I was able to develop a close understanding of their daily experiences, social encounters, conversations, prayer, and especially their experience of waiting and moving. The questions surrounding labeling and categorization emerged from the reaserch as a key elements in understanding these immigrants’ experiences and the state’s preceptions of them.

I conducted in-depth open-ended interviews with 106 people, based on the presumption that the interview is a means of helping people express their perceptions, thoughts, and hidden attitudes (Arksey and Knight 1999). My ethnographic interview guide (Spradley 1979) followed a chronological axis personalized for each interviewee, listing various aspects of their daily life while at each station of the migration journey. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew or Amharic, with the use of an interpreter determined by the location of the interview and the interviewee’s language abilities.

The interviews and observations are supplemented with texts drawn from the wider political and public discourse, including government reslutions and items from the press.

1. **Immigration to Israel and**

Despite being a liberal democratic state, Israel is not a classical country of immigration;to be more precise, it is a country of only one specific form of migration: Jewish migration. Israeli laws and regulations do not allow non-Jewish foreigners to freely come and settle in Israel. Indeed, the right to do so is granted almost exclusively through the process of *aliyah*, or Jewish migration, which is founded on the premise that Israel is the homeland for all Jews around the world, and is enshrined in the Basic Laws of the state. The 1950 Law of Return gives Jews wherever they live the right to migrate to Israel and take up Israeli citizenship. In 1970, this right was extended to people with one Jewish grandparent and to people married to them – regardless of whether these migrants are considered Jewish under the strict Orthodox interpretations of Halakha (religious law). At present, about 73% of the Israeli population are immigrants or descents of immigrants (third generation and less) from around the world. Thus, in most sense, Israel is a multi-cultural immigration society.

Different categories of immigrants are defined by the State of Israel. Each group has significance in terms of citizenship as well as rights and obtain. The most comon categories are *Olim* who come to Israel and receive citizenship and absorption basket, the second group is migrant workers who come to Israel usually on the basis of bilaterally agreements and as of 2020 there are 98,188 legal migrant workers and 18,136 illegal migrant workers in Israel. Asylum seekers who are in temporary status and living in a constant threat of deportation.By 2020, there are approximately 30,511 asylum seekers in Israel from the African continent and approximately 20,000 from Eastern Europe, with only 13 being recognized as refugees[[3]](#footnote-3).

**The research population: Zera Beita Israel**

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the ZBI, known as Feres Mura (Seeman 2009) were part of the Ethiopian Jewish community of Beita Israel, at which time some members of the community began to convert to Christianity, whether by choice or by force. Although these converts lived a Christian lifestyle, they were not accepted as such by their Christian neighbors. Consequently, they lived a religiously liminal life, self-categorized as Christians, but categorized by the dominant Christian community as Jews (Talmi Cohn 2011; Ehrlich, Salamon, and Kaplan 2003; Messing 1982; Salamon 1993; Seeman 2009 Shabtai 2006; Waldman 1995, 2004, 2015, 2016).

Beginning in 1991, thousands of members of this community left their villages and moved to Addis Ababa and Gondar, where transit camps were created for those seeking to migrate to Israel. Their motives for immigrating were varied: Some wished to reunite with their families that had already immigrated as Jews, while others had problems with their neighbors because of their historical status as Jews. For yet others, economic motivations were key. Significantly for this paper, the transit camps were where they first encountered doubts regarding their Jewishness. Their initial applications to migrate to Israel were rejected, and they found themselves stranded in the camps, unwilling to return to their villages but unable to continue to their intended destination.

Questions entertained by Israeli policy makers about the authenticity of their Jewishness led to long periods of waiting and uncertainty, a situation that has not changed significantly from 1991 to the present day. Between 1991 and 2018, around 48,000 ZBI were eventually granted the right to migrate to Israel. Their lives in Israel began with another prolonged stay in absorption centers, and only after about two years did they move into permanent dwellings. Others ZBI, however, are still waiting to be granted the right to migrate to Israel; some have been waiting for more than 20 years.

Yet, the Israeli establishment, and Israeli society in general, have held ambivalent and complicated positions regarding the ZBI, evident from the very first discussions of their case at the Rubinstein Commission hearings: Some argued the ZBI were motivated to make Aliyah for purely economic reasons. Israel’s ambassador to Ethiopia in 1995, for example, described them as “residents of destitute Ethiopia in search of a better place in the wider world.” Others, including members of Israel’s Ethiopian community, labeled them “gentiles” [non-Jews] [[4]](#footnote-4) One activist, for. example, complained, “the state is bringing in gentiles of our color, from the same country we came from” (Brendstain 2008). At the same time, these same ZBI were also described as “Jews who go lost on the way,” or “full-fledged Jews" (State Comptroller 2008). These conflicting views,expressed across decades of government debates and resolutions, also resonate in the daily life of the ZBI, in the way they view themselves, and in they way they are viewed by those around them.

Israel is not the only country where immigration and citizenship laws limit migration based on ethnicity or various other categories, but it is one of the few where the distinctions are ethno-religious.The intricacies of the law are beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that a major complication to the right to migrate to Israel was posed by the mass migration to Israel from the former Confederation of Independent States (CIS) – the former Soviet Union – that began in the early 1990s: some of the beneficiaries in this wave did not have migration rights under the Law of Return. These difficulties continued with the the ZBI of Ethiopia. Each of these groups posed unique challenges to the existing laws governing migration to Israel, by highlighting the tension between the reigning Halachic Judaism enshrined in Israeli state laws, and alternative streams and perceptions of being Jewish. Different solutions that were not necessarily consistent with one another were found for each case (Harel 2015; Kemp and Reichman 2003; Yaron 2015), and challenged the definition of the State of Israel as exclusively a state of Jewish migration (Kemp 2008). It is this clash between immigration regimes that created the unique classification and labeling of the ZBI.

1. The politics of labeling

*" In Ethiopia my neighbour call me Bodea Flash and I behave like Bieta Israel, In Israel they call me Cristian and tell me that I'm not Jews"* (Tamasgan, 2012). The struggle for acceptance that is the reality for the ZBI is a product of the ideological, religious, political, economic, and racial context in which they live. Despite their attempts to belong to a defined and stable category – as Jewish migrants or Olim,[[5]](#footnote-5) part of the Jewish mainstream of Israel – they were confronted daily with issues of labeling. Multiple actors and forces, from state bureaucracies to NGOs, play a role in this complex reality and affect the ZBI both directly and indirectly. Moreover, the state’s arbitrary procedures and resulting frequent policy changes created a sense of insecurity and vigilance for the ZBI.

The questioning of the Jewishness of the ZBI is expressed in ambiguous policies. They include, for example, a years-long chronicle of changing government decisions regarding their entitlement to enter Israel as *olim*; endless debates about their Jewishness and the resources directed toward them; and a long history of government functionaries evading the questions of those who are waiting to come as to their entitlement to *oleh* status (cohn, 2006).

In 1991, the State of Israel conducted Operation Solomon, which transported more than 14,000 *olim* from Ethiopia to Israel. Most were Beita Israel – Ethiopian Jews who had maintained their religious identity. Following this mass migration, about 3,000 members of the ZBI arrived at Addis Ababa, having left their villages with the intent of making *aliyah*. Although this group of ZBI had relatives in Israel, they did not meet the criteria set forth by the Law of Return and by Israeli immigration policies and thus were not granted *oleh* status (Rubinstein Committee 1991, Clause A; Waldman and Kimchi 1992). In 1991, Yitzhak Shamir, then prime minister of Israel, set up the Rubinstein Committee to examine the ZBI’s entitlement to make *aliyah*, and the Committee’s discussions mark the beginning of the processes of categorization and classification. The issue was presented in the its minutes as “the *Falashmura* problem,” which was indicative of the establishment’s approach to the ZBI community: first, that there was a problem; and second, that this problem was essentially one of classification – how should the ZBI be classified so as to confer upon them *oleh* status?

The very name *Falasmura* (or Falashmura, as it came to be used in public discourse) demonstrates the inclination towards labeling and exclusion directed toward the ZBI. It is not the name the community uses for itself, but rather a mispronunciation of a label that Ethiopian locals use to describe – and exclude – Beita Israel.

The name “Falasha” or “Falasa” was commonly used in Ethiopia for anyone whose origins were in Beita Israel, whether that person was from Beita Israel or had converted to Christianity. Eshkoli (1943) understood the root F-L-S as derived from the Ge’ez (biblical and classic Ethiopian) for “immigrant” or “exile”; Leslau (1976, 244), a linguist, claimed that the word means to “lose roots, wander, immigrate.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This understanding is consistent with the fact that Ethiopian Christians perceived Beita Israel, as well as those among the community who had converted to Christianity, as rootless and detached. In interviews, members of the Christian convert community told me that although they lived as Christians, the Christians called them *Falashmura* as a term of abuse.

The use of the names Falasha and Falashmura thus contributed to social exclusion in both Ethiopia and Israel (Wethrell and Potter 1992). According to one of my interviewees, “when they wanted to tease me in Ethiopia, they called me Falasha, and in Israel the state and the people call me Falashmura. There they tell me that I don’t belong, and the same here. So, where’s my home? Where do I belong?” (Yosef, Israel, 2010).

A long after many of the ZBI made *aliyah* to Israel, the question of ZBI entitlement and belonging remains a subject of debate.[[7]](#footnote-7) The use of seemingly permanent labels gives policy makers – and parts of the Israeli general public – a sense of control. These labels have created a fixed perception of the ZBI and a consequent gap between that and their self-perception.

The identity of the ZBI is questioned throughout the entire migration process and this doubt is embedded in the very terminology used by different forces. In this paper, I deliberately use the name ZBI, specifically because this name has not yet acquired an explicit political significance within the context of the interplay between the state, NGOs, and other forces noted above. Nonetheless, the range of names and labels applied to them clearly reflects their complex position in both Ethiopian and Israeli societies.

The ZBI migration has taken the form of a unique journey, one that was not only a process of physical, cultural and religous transition, but also one of transition between categories. Their experiences at the various stations of the journey (from the villages, through the transit camps, in absorption centers, and finally to permanent dwellings) underline the day-to-day implications of labeling and the blurring of categories of classification.

1. The role of the state and its beauracracy

*"The Ministry of Interior asked me about all my family, seven generation back from my mom side and from ny dad'. They intervied my family in Israel, they called me several time and asked a lot of quwstions but, I'm still waiting, eleven years waiting. Live with jewish people that waiting, they once tell us that we will come to Israel, after they tell us later, we are all sad, in stress and worried "* (Gashau, Gondar 2011). Gshus' felling can expose the uncertainty The criteria defining who could make *Aliyah* have shifted and changed during the decades of immigration from Ethiopia, but the process of application has remained the same. The process of their migration is uniqe. Usually, relatives in Israel must apply to the Ministry of Interior and request to be reunited with their relatives. They are required to provide a detailed geneology on a form that is first examined by representatives of the Ministry and then by the Israeli Consulate in Ethiopia, which summons the prospective immigrants for an investigation. Details of the investigation are then sent back to the Ministry of the Interior where the case is evaluated and permission granted or denied. As expected, this process can take many years. Usually, if the application is rejected, the candidates are not informed of the decision. They continue waiting in vain for a response from the Israeli government.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. **Moving between labels: classification and boundaries in the transit camp**

I was born in a village near Shaura, and I was a kid like everyone else; I played and I helped around the house. When friends were angry with me or wanted to make fun of me, they called me Falasha, and then I understood that Ethiopia isn’t really my home. One day, when I was nine years old, my parents said, come, we’re leaving the village and going to Jerusalem; the next day we were gone. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to my friends and my home. Two days later I was in Gondar. I tried to find friends and family but didn’t find many. All of a sudden, we had no land and no agriculture; I couldn’t just run around like I used to. I saw other people and they all told me I’m Beita Israel. In the beginning, I didn’t understand what that meant. Then my father told me that we were making *aliyah* to Israel and will be with the family and we’ll be Beita Israel. Then we stayed in Gondar for many years, we waited there for nine years. Meanwhile, I grew up and started going to school like everyone, then I switched to a Beita Israel school, and we also had a synagogue and a library where I learned Hebrew. I waited many years to make *aliyah* to Israel, and when we did I was really happy. I thought it would be great fun here, I’ll be like everyone, I’ll have a family, I’m coming to the country that my father and grandfather dreamed about all their lives, that I dreamed about so much. And then they told me that I have to study Judaism and take tests to show them that I’m a Jew… (Elpha, 2011, absorption center).

In the interview, Elpha described his transition from life in the village as a Christian Ethiopian citizen to the transit camp in Gondar, as well as the transition from being an Ethiopian citizen who migrated to the city to becoming a candidate for *aliyah*. At the transit camp he was exposed to the concept of *Oleh,* and changes his lifestyle accordingly, trying to adapt to the categoryso as to be able to immigrate to Israel. In the above ethnographic section, when describing being unable to go about freely and of his feelings of alienation and not belonging, Elpha highlights the tension between wanting to be an Oleh and his experience of rootlessness and being a refugee in his own country. Newcomers to the transit camp felt like migrants or temporary visitors who did not belong; they experienced the loss of home, compounded by poverty and hunger (Talmi Cohn 2018).

The transit camp was also where people first encountered Israeli demands, laws, and expectations, all of which determined who qualified for *oleh* status. It is during this stage of waiting that the ZBI begin to participate in Jewish ritual activities and modify their behavior to match expectations. In other words, at this stage they are agents who chose to act in specific ways, so as to conform to a given category. They developed new practices of daily life and combined different perceptions of time and space.

This is the point where clear and open categorization took place, and a person became a migrant, *oleh*, or refugee.

The establishment of the camps as transit points significantly challenged existing categories of citizenship and migration in both Ethiopia and Israel, and encouraged those waiting to fit into the categories that came into being during that time; categories that were shaped collaboratively by the actions of those waiting, the various organizations tending to them, and the nation-states involved.

Below I describe the contradictory dynamics of categorizing the ZBI in further detail and analyze the formation of categories in these stations.

**6.1 Waiting to make *aliyah***

The Israeli government did not maintain a direct presence in the transit camp. There were frequent visits by government officials, but it was aid agencies, that were active in the camp until April 2011 (Seeman 2009; Talmi Cohn 2014). The most prominent were the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. These agencies provided subsistence aid, primarily food and medication, as well as spiritual help, through the provision of a synagogue, library, and *mikveh* (ritual purification bath), and helping the children with their studies. Other organizations, including Shevut Am and Mikhnaf Darom LeZion, provided spiritual aid focused on the return of the ZBI to active Judaism.

The aid provided by those various organizations helped in the creation of a community whose members were unified by their desire to obtain *oleh* status and make *aliyah*. These characteristics clearly distinguished them from the locals, a situation different from what they experienced in their villages, where even if a person dreamed of going to Israel, there was nothing concrete or tangible to differentiate him from his wider environment.

In return for the aid – and ultimately as a condition for making *aliyah* – members of this community were obliged to demonstrate the type of behavior deemed appropriate for returning to Judaism. They had to shed all characteristics relating to their Christian life and to work toward being classified as Jews. For some, the return was swift – as they saw it, once they stopped eating meat like the Christians, continued to avoid intermarriage with Christians, and stopped wearing a cross, they had converted and were once again Beita Israel. Many started attending synagogue, where some of the children learned that they were descendants of Beita Israel, and adults began to acquire a deeper understanding of religious faith and practice:

When we got to Gondar we went to synagogue and stopped eating meat. We had a ceremony there, and took off the necklaces with the crosses we’d been wearing. After this, we became Beita Israel. Now, we go to synagogue every morning, and we celebrate the Jewish holidays. We stopped being like everyone else, the way we had been in the village. We returned to grandma and grandpa’s culture (Mersha, Gondar transit camp, 2005).

Although Mersha felt that changing some habits and espousing others was sufficient for her to regain the label “Jew,” Taganu described his return to Judaism as a complicated process that required constant engagement with the choice between Judaism and Christianity:

When we got to Gondar, I knew that I was Beita Israel. I tried to follow the Beita Israel culture, but it wasn’t easy in the beginning. You see, when it was Timkat or Aba Gabriel [Christian holidays, RTC], I couldn’t stop celebrating, so I went with them. I’d be with Beita Israel all the time, but sometimes it was like before (2009, Israel).

The prolonged waiting was understood at times as a message from a government bureaucracy that doubted their Judaism. This indirect perceived message was also conveyed through arbitrary and inexplicable acts: changes in immigration quotas, for instance, and the intermittent withholding and reissuing of permits. The vague and shifting policies regarding the status of the ZBI preserved the power relations between the would-be migrants and the state, heedless of the distress caused by the long wait for the classification that would entitle them to move to Israel.

As part of the movement from Christianity towards Judaism, we also find a ‘return’ to messianic Judaism which expands and complicateds the boundaries of Judaism and its signficances. [[9]](#footnote-9) The ZBI’s return to Judaism also created tensions between those waiting and their Christian neighbors. When I first visited with Nazirat in Gondar, in 2005we entered a yard shared by a few small houses, and while Nazirat busied herself preparing coffee, the neighbors gathered and started to chat. When I asked Nazirat which of her relatives were in Israel, she just gave me a strange look and did not answer. I was silent. I did not understand what had happened, but realized that I had done something wrong. At the end of our meeting, I asked her what had happened and she explained: “We’re new here. The landlady doesn’t know for sure if we’re Beita Israel, so we don’t talk about this. We don’t want any problems. Even now, she asks us once in a while why we don’t come to church.”

Two years later, when I visited Nazirat again, she had moved with her family to a house that shared a common yard with the houses of other people waiting to make *aliyah*. When I asked Nazirat why they had moved, she explained: “When the neighbors realized that we were Beita Israel, they started giving us weird looks, and we didn’t feel comfortable. We wanted to go to synagogue and be with everyone, and that’s when they heard about it. They didn’t say a thing, but their behavior toward us changed. They understood that we were Beita Israel, and then the landlady decided to raise our rent. No other neighbor had their rent increased, only us. When Mother asked her why, she said, “you’re Beita Israel, you get help and money from Israel.”

Indeed, the conflict between those waiting in the transit camps and their Christian neighbors was intensified by the fact that they received money from their families in Israel, and especially because of the ongoing assistance from the aid organizations, who helped only those defined as “waiting to make *aliyah*.” This distinction also caused problems vis-à-vis the local authorities, who viewed these organizations as exclusionary and discriminatory and called for them to give equal access to all the people in the area, prospective migrants or not.

**6.2 Life as refugees**

Although those waiting for *aliyah* were doing so in their own country, their life differed from the one that they had lived in their villages or towns. They could not return to their homes, and they could not go to Israel. Their life in the transit camps was temporary, their self-definition differentiated them from the local population, and their status and everyday life were shaped by definitions and frameworks that had been created by Israeli and USA-based bureaucracies and organizations. These unique circumstances turned them into a new class of refugees – waiting to immigrate (Cohn 2006). Berhanu described the experience to me in 2010:

I have no place to return to. We’re here in Gondar, that’s what we were told to do. We got an announcement from the Israeli government to get here so we could make *aliyah* to Israel. […] They told us to come, and I thought that we’d be here for a little while. We rushed out and left everything in the village. Then we got here, and we’re waiting. We’re just waiting. We have nothing. Whatever we have is what people send us or the help we get from NACOEJ. We have no land, we have no food. For seven years, I thought, maybe we’ll go to Israel, but no. […] It’s not good to live this way in Gondar. I have nothing here, no family and no work. Everyone makes fun of me that I’m Beita Israel. They steal our money and do bad things.

Bound by their detached and difficult situation, the ZBI had no choice but to do what they were told, especially as they hoped that compliance would lead to confirmation of their *oleh* status and an *aliyah* permit. The situation drove many to poverty and a sense of alienation and detachment from the place where they now found themselves. Although ostensibly they were in their own country and amidst neighbors, they were actually homeless and unemployed and lacked a sense of belonging to the place where they were.

**6.3 Living alongside immigrants and another acquaintance with the concept of migration**

The ZBI migration process is inseparable from other similar processes in Ethiopia (Tadele, Pankjurst, Bevan, and Lavers 2006), especially in Gondar, a large city where different groups have indicated the desire to leave Ethiopia. There are many reasons for wanting to leave Ethiopia, including seeking a wider range of income opportunities (Alula 1989; Kothari 2003; McDowell and de Hann 1997; Stark 1991; Worku 1995), reasons related to women’s status in society (Gurmu 2005), and educational, religious, and medical motives.

In the transit camps in Gondar and elsewhere, people remain Ethiopian citizens. In their own minds, however, they live with the status of transit immigrants from the moment that they left their villages and arrived at the transit camps where theywait to migrate to Israel, existing in a local discourse of migration. From the perspective of the Israeli government, this group of people does not fit any category and, consequently, they are simply under investigation.

**7. Next Step Israel**

The fragility of categories, as is so clear in the case of the two brothers Senbatho and Johannes – an *oleh*, and an asylum seeker– remains even after the ZBI finally arrive in Israel. Senbatho made *aliyah* and successfully completed all the formal procedures and requirements, including a strict conversion to Judaism supervised by Israeli rabbinical authorities Ultimately, Senbatho received an Israeli ID card. All of these milestones would indicate that his journey had concluded and that he could now feel like a citizen among his equals. Yet, even after many years in Israel, ZBI like Senbatho may still be perceived as refugees and asylum seekers by wider Israeli society, especially if they live or work in the same areas as asylum seekers from Eritrea or Sudan.

Upon arrival in Israel, the *olim* are housed in absorption centers, and only after a period of time there do they move on to what will be their permanent dwellings. Whether by choice, by necessity, or by government directives (e.g. earmarked aid), many settle in neighborhoods that are heavily populated by other *olim* from Ethiopia (Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). Their children are placed in schools where most of their fellow-students are from marginalized backgrounds, and most of the adults work in unskilled, poorly paid jobs such as cleaning. High-school-age children are often referred to vocational schools, the assumption being that these are the only schools where they can meet their full potential. Others are sent to residential schools, both to ease the financial burden on their parents and following the official thinking that they will receive a better education there.

The official differentiation in education, employment, conversion, and other aspects is a clear – albeit indirect – expression of racist labeling on the part of the establishment (Ben Eliezer 2008; Goodman 2008; Seeman 2003). Although this differentiation could be attributed to a genuine desire to help this group, it also reveals assumptions about their abilities, limits their possibilities, and preserves the differences, the marginality, and the non-belonging that excludes them from Israeli society in general.

Compounding this differentiation is the ambiguity created by the presence in Israel of asylum seekers and refugees, some of whom come to Israel from areas bordering on Ethiopia (e.g., the Sudan and Eritrea) and even speak Amharic. Despite significant differences between these migrants and the *olim*, who officially belong to the dominant national group, the position of the ZBI in the eyes of the Israeli state and sections of society might be said to be closer to that of labor migrants and refugees.

In interviews, some of the ZBI complained about asylum seekers and refugees, at times in stereotypical terms Adopted and even intensified the local discourse: “The refugees rob us of our employment”; “They drink lots of alcohol”; “They do drugs”; “They carry diseases”; and, “Sometimes they take our girls, and that’s really dangerous.” Some of these claims are based on ZBI prejudices toward non-Ethiopian Africans (often eerily similar to the way that they, themselves, are perceived by other Israelis). Other claims, however, are a sign of the underlying class struggle in Israeli society in which they find themselves participants. Only a few of the ZBI expressed positive or empathetic opinions about the refugees, with statements like “poor people, what a way they had coming from the Sudan,” or “lots of people say lots of things about them, but really, they are just people.”

Israelis who are not of Ethiopian origin find it difficult to distinguish among these groups, and the labels they used for all dark-skinned people reflect this difficulty. A kitchen worker in a hotel in Eilat told me in 2008: “What’s the difference between a black person with a cross on his face and one without? […] We have *olim* and refugees working here. On the outside, they are just the same, and it’s only after I get to know them that I see the difference.” Sarah, a resident of Tel Aviv, was very clear when she told me, “Black is black. Makes no difference if he’s from Ethiopia or the Sudan. He comes from Africa and, anyway, there are rabbis who say that the Ethiopians aren’t Jews at all.”

Thus, despite the seemingly clear bureaucratic distinction between asylum seekers and *olim*, Israelis from Ethiopia are obliged to prove constantly that they are citizens and Jews. In his home in Israel, Sferau told me about his experience in the job market in 2007:

I worked all summer in Eilat. I needed money to help my parents buy their home. But I’m not going back there. You have no idea what it’s like, everyone treats you like you’re a labor migrant or a refugee. I told them a few times that I have an Israeli ID, but they don’t care. The treat us as if we came from the Sudan, they look down on us …. It’s not good.

Rivka, also permanently settled in central Israel, reported discrimination in schools in 2010:

I wanted to enroll my son in a religious school. I came to register him, and I was told that he can’t be accepted. I asked why? They didn’t answer, and then I heard that they tell all the Ethiopian kids that they can’t. Later they told us that we’re not Jews. They told us that it’s because we came from Ethiopia, I don’t understand. What do they think? That we’re Sudanese? We came from Ethiopia. Our parents were Beita Israel, we learned Judaism and were converted, and they won’t take our kids because they aren’t Jews.

These mundane occurrences reveal the discrepancy between official definitions and classifications and the actual experiences of *olim* from Ethiopia in everyday encounters with institutions and parts of the Israeli public. Although they are *olim* with full citizenship, their official status does not prevent the labeling that accompanies the “Falashmura problem.” The ZBI themselves yearn to be fully accepted as citizens and as Jewish *olim* and to partake fully of the spiritual, symbolic, and material resources that come with belonging to the hegemonic group. To date, the gap between the yearning to belong, to shed all labels, and become part of mainstream Jewish Israeli society and the realities of life seems as wide as ever. At the time of this writing, the daily struggle of people of Ethiopian origin, whose classification is in doubt and whose attribution to one category or another is vague, prompts questions regarding the suitability of categorical definitions to the realities of life.

1. **Conclusions**

Every country has its own means of determining who can be allowed into its territory on the basis of classifications as a citizen, migrant, or refugee. This is the principal instrument by which a state can control its national 'character' and social order. The experiences of people in their everyday life, however, do not necessarily conform to these definitions, thus leading to the creation of marginal – and marginalized – groups who struggle for acceptance by the mainstream in their own different ways.

The ZBI, a group whose definition is as unclear in its country of origin as it is in its country of destination, is a specific case of the confluence of categories in one group. However, they are not unique; The encounter with various categories developed along the journey of immigration is an experience shared by all people moving from place to place, with each place stamping them not only with cultural values but with bureaucratic labels. This is a global issue of increasing relevance, when people seek refuge regardless of whether they have been recognized as refugees. Indeed, it is this tension between human needs and desires and bureaucratic definitions that lies at the heart of the immigration experience.

The Israeli state’s treatment of ZBI immigrants is a combination of acceptance and embrace on the one hand, and rejection and alienation on the other. Paradoxically, the journey they embarked upon motivated by doubts about their belonging to religious and social categories in Ethiopian society leads to new doubts, this time about belonging to the dominant socio-religious category in Israel. Doubts about identity and the subsequent processes have made the immigration and absorption process of this community unique in the history of Israeli immigration.Despite the considerable resources and efforts invested by the State of Israel and the aid agencies in bringing the ZBI to Israel and integrating them into society, the state’s insistence on strict categories makes the ZBI a community in perpetual waiting, which must fight for its place in Israel.

This study focuses on the different statuses of a specific group of immigrants, thereby also illuminating citizens’ and societies’ perceptions of migrants: what they are consequently required to do and how they are required to act, and how these processes shape the migrants and their migration. Finally, it also illuminates the power of states and organizations in shaping categories of people.

The process of migration, beyond the physical movement from place to place, is a dialogue with stronger forces that shape migrants’ own perceptions of citizenship and belonging. They are actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with labels and categories applied to them as migrants and others: (1) the questions of status and possibility of citizenship hang over them constantly (2) it is states that define the migrants’ status, and definitions of citizenship vary depending on the immigrants country of origin. In other words, definitions are not applied uniformly to all migrants. (3) The range of interactions at each stage along the migration route further challenge the very categories applied to the migrants, generating new labels and provoking novel responses to those labels. (4) migrants act in response to the categories imposed upon them, but they exercise their agency in some circumstances by choosing the categories to which they adapt themselves , for example by beginning to practice Halachic Judaism, so as to qualify for the category of *Olim*.

Finally, categories and labels do not merely define a migrant’s status, but have a powerful affect on that migrant’s daily life and being. This categorization does not simply affect the migrants, but also defines the state's own social boundaries and hierarchies and thus, profoundly shapes the state and society at large.

1. Interestingly, there is no Israeli legal category for labor migrants from Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea – that is, there is no legal way for them to enter the country other than as Jewish immigrants. Thus they are all categorized as asylum seekers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have reflected elsewhere on how my identity as a woman, as an Israeli, as white, and as Jewish shaped my relationships with my subjects, the very questions I asked, the responses I received and my interpretation of the social reality within which I existed (Cohn 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign\_workers\_stats/he/ZARIM\_q4\_2020.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In a letter sent in 1995 to the head of the conversion administration (Sharvit 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Olim* is the plural of *oleh –* literally, “ascender” –the Hebrew term used to describe Jewish migrants to Israel. The specific act of Jewish immigration to Israel is *aliyah*; both words derive from the same verb root. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One explanation of the word *Falashmura* is that the Amharic word “mora” was added following the conversion to Christianity and that the word means “converted foreigners.” (Corinaldi 1998, 121; Elizur 1998; Salamon 1999, 67-69). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Cohn, (2006) for an in-depth chronicle of the position of State of Israel toward the ZBI from 1991 to 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Only in 2011 did the Ministry begin regularly informing candidates of their rejection, and even then, the message was not always delivered. Thus, distrust of the system developed among those waiting, and even those with scant chances of acceptance continued to wait. Indeed, certain prospective migrants who were initially rejected were lated allowed to immigrate to Israel.. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I did not encounter converts to messianic Judaism among the subject community I worked with, but it did nonetheless exist in the research field, posing a challenge to the Israeli government and complicating the binary choice between Christianity and a return to halachic Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)