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Contemporary Migration and Transnational Families: The Case of Somali Diaspora(s)

By
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Discussion Paper

Contemporary Migration and Transnational Families: The Case of Somali Diaspora(s)

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I. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that a central feature of Somali contemporary migration is a transnational way of life, which an increasing number of diasporic Somalis and their families are leading. Transnational families become an important space in which Somalis strategize with their relatives, pool resources, share obligations, and arrange for the movements of individual family members. This kind of transnational way of life becomes a fairly effective mechanism through which diasporic Somalis seek security, protection, opportunities for a better life, and different forms of capital for themselves and their relatives in the homeland and elsewhere. However, living transnationally is not free from tension and has its uneven consequences on different family members.

First, I will give a brief overview of contemporary Somali migration. Secondly, I will outline the main dimensions of what I call a transnational life. Finally, I will end the paper by situating the case of Somali Diasporas within the debate on the usefulness of transnationalism both as an object of study and as a methodological approach towards understanding contemporary migration movements. The ethnographic material which I quote in this paper is drawn from various field studies that I carried out among diasporic Somalis in Egypt and North America from the period of 2001 to 2005.

Somali Diaspora(s): Migratory History

In the present era, diasporic Somalis are highly dispersed migrant groups with communities in Africa, Middle East, Europe, North America, and Australia. It is

estimated that 1-2 million Somalis live in Diaspora. (Gundal 2002, Pérouse de Montclos 2003, SFM 2006) A quarter million of these Somalis are in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen. (Waldren and Hasci 1996) South Africa and Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and UAE also host Somali refugees and migrants. In addition, there are several hundreds of thousands of Diasporic Somalis who have settled in Europe, North America, and Australia-with England hosting the largest diasporic Somali groups (70,000-100,000) in the West. (Ahmed 2000, Gundul 2000, Pérouse de Montclos 2003)

The beginning of modern Somali international migration can be traced to the movements of Somali seamen to the U.K. in the early twentieth century. But the first large scale movements were those of Somali workers who migrated to Gulf countries in the seventies seeking better employment and economic resources. It is estimated that by 1987, there were 375,000 Somali labor migrants in the Gulf countries. (Marchal 1996, Ahmed 2000)

With the break of the civil war in Somalia in the late eighties, a large exodus of refugees fled the country. In 1988 and after the Barre regime bombed the city of Hargeisa, the first large wave of refugees (600,000) fled the Northwestern part of the country to Ethiopia. With the collapse of the Barre regime in 1991, the second wave of refugees fled the central and southern parts of the country to Kenya and Djibouti. These also led to movements of refugees to Yemen, Libya, Egypt, South Africa and further to Western countries.

Dimensions of Transnational Life

Many diasporic Somalis lead and manage their lives through extensive networks of family relations, obligations and shared resources that are set up and managed in different nation-states. This transnational way of living becomes an effective strategy to minimize risks to family members, maximize family resources and capital, and to pursue the security and well-being of different family members. In what follows, I will describe four main dimensions of this transnational life, namely: remittance; transnational strategies of

family care and management; reproduction of family and community relations through technologies such as the Internet and video tapes; and finally the politics of movement. This transnational life, however, is not without its tensions and challenges, which are felt unevenly by family members and diasporic Somalis who are differentiated by class, education, and diasporic trajectories and experiences. Thus, as I describe the main features of the transnational family lives of diasporic Somalis, I will also highlight the tensions inherent in this way of living.

II. Sharing Resources: Remittance

Remittance is one of the fundamental ways through which Somalis in the homeland and in different countries in Diaspora share economic resources and burdens. Numerous studies have reported that remittance sent by diasporic Somalis to the homeland is substantial. (Ahmed 2000, Horst 2002, Horst and Van Hear 2002, Pérouse de Montclos 2003) A recent study estimates that diasporic Somalis remit as much as one billion US dollars to Somaliland and Somalia, each receiving 500 million US dollars (Pérouse de Montclos 2003) Other studies also show that remittance money to Somaliland has exceeded international aid. (Gundul 2002, Lindley 2005) In addition, remittance money constitutes 22% of per capita income of a household. Remittance money is primarily used by families on survival and living expenses. However, recent literature also report that remittance money is also being used on establishment of businesses and trades. (Lindley 2005)

Yet, what have not been adequately addressed in the literature so far are the multiple transnational sources and destinations of remittance money. That is, the process of sending and receiving remittance money involves a complex transnational network of relatives who are located in multiple countries. Money is sent not only to family members in Somalia or Somaliland, but also to those in the Middle East and Africa. Remitters, in addition, are located not only in Western countries but also in the Middle East and Africa. The process of remitting is complex. Within a family, there are usually several remitters. The task of remitting to multiple family members is divided among

several relatives; some remitters undertake the obligation of sending monthly remittance while others remit vulnerable family members on special occasions such as religious events or in emergency situations such as escalation of fighting in the homeland or increased vulnerabilities of relatives who live in host societies that offer no legal protection or services to refugees.

For example, a Somali man in Toronto was remitting a monthly sum of \$100 to his parents and younger siblings in Somalia and Ethiopia until few years ago when his parents and two younger brothers joined him in Canada through a family reunification immigration program. This man's older sister, a single mother with six children, lives in Cairo and receives monthly remittance from her two daughters who work as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. In addition to her six children, the mother in Cairo is also taking care of her sister's daughter, a twenty year old young woman who moved from Somalia three years ago to escape sexual violence. The third sister lives in Mogadishu with her three children and the son of her fourth sister who was killed in a sexual assault incident few years ago. The sister in Mogadishu is receiving remittance from her parents after they relocated to Canada to join her brother.

A mother and her mentally-ill son in Egypt receive monthly remittance from her daughter in the U.S.A as well as intermittent money from her other children in the U.K. and Canada once or twice a year. The mother saves some of this money and remits to her nieces and nephews in Mogadishu on several occasions during the year such as the start of Ramadan and during the Eid, and when fighting escalates between different factions in Mogadishu, thus preventing her nieces and nephews from venturing out to *Bakara* market to make a living from petty trading. Meanwhile, aside from the intermittent money they receive from their aunt in Cairo, the nephews and nieces also depend on monthly remittance from some of their siblings in Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands.

Because family remittance is an importance resource that many depend on, it is understandably a cause of tension between relatives. Recipients of remittance money, particularly single men and women, often feel pressure from their family providers to

show that they are in need of the money and are spending it wisely. Remitters also feel pressure from juggling various economic obligations towards immediate and extended family members. Thus, relatives frequently debate and sometimes get into conflicts about how much money is to be remitted, who remits it, who receives it, what the money is spent on, and how often and how long the remittance process should be.

While remittance is a significant means of reproducing and maintaining family ties, it is not the only way. In fact, sending and receiving remittance is intertwined with other strategies through which family members in different nation-states cooperate and make claims on each other in order to overcome hardships and to expand their resources. These non-monetary strategies involve transnational sharing of care for the children, elderly, and the ill in the family. They also involve collective planning and arranging for the movement of some family members from one country to another. Other strategies involve setting up marriages of relatives to partners with more legal and economic resources.

III. Transnational Family Care and Management

Somali relatives across nation-states share the burdens of securing livelihood, the rearing of children and younger siblings, and providing care for the elderly and the invalid in the family. Decisions are made collectively about which family member lives with whom and where. Resources of different family members (e.g. income, legal status, education) are pooled in order to minimize the vulnerability and risks that different family members are exposed to because of the war and its aftermath, and to maximize the security of these members. For instance, a young divorced Somali woman who works in England sent her child to Cairo to be taken care of by her elderly mother and young cousin who arrived from Somalia. The woman remits money to her family in Egypt and in Somalia including her cousin's mother. Another mother lives in Cairo with her children and her mentally ill twenty-year old brother. She is estranged from her husband who lives in Saudi Arabia and who has stopped sending her any money after he entered into a second marriage. But her brother and older sister who also live in Saudi Arabia remit her a

monthly sum of \$100. The siblings feel obligated to support their sister, and are appreciative that she has undertaken the responsibility of taking care of their sick brother after the death of their parents.

Yet, the practices of maintaining and making claims to transnational familial ties are not free from tensions and conflict among different family members as their needs, dreams, and desire for decision-making powers clash. This is illustrated in the following ethnographic example: Nuriya is a thirty-year old unmarried refugee woman who moved to Cairo from Somalia in 1999. Since her arrival, she has been living with her aunt and cousins. Her aunt has recently moved from Canada with her three small children, while her husband and an older daughter live and work in Toronto. Before Nuriya's arrival to Cairo, her parents made arrangements with her aunt to provide a home for Nuriya during her stay in Cairo to apply for refugee status and pursue resettlement in the West. Her aunt agreed. She considers taking care of Nuriya as her familial obligation. She is also grateful that her brother, Nuriya's father, has been taking care of their elderly mother and younger siblings in Somalia. Nuriya's aunt relies on her to do the housework and childcare especially during her frequent trips to North America and Gulf countries. Nuriya does not get paid for the housework and childcare, which both she and her aunt perceive as the familial duty of a younger dependent relative towards her older relative and guardian. However, Nuriya receives from her aunt a monthly allowance of L.E. 50 for her personal expenses (e.g. Internet costs, transportation fare, etc). Her aunt also pays for her weekly Arabic and English classes which cost L.E. 40 a month.

While Nuriya, her aunt, and their family members in Somalia and in the West depend on one another for their livelihood and well-being, there are tensions that are felt by some family members who feel that they are giving a lot more than others and who resent that their individual needs and aspirations are being sacrificed because of their obligations towards their transnational families. Nuriya voices such feelings. She appreciates that her aunt supports her and even helps her pursue some education, but she feels that her aunt benefits a great deal more from the long hours of housekeeping and childcare services which Nuriya provides for her family. Moreover, since she has been rejected for

resettlement in the West, Nuriya has been unsuccessfully soliciting support from her aunt and other family members in the West and Gulf countries to finance the costs of her being smuggled to Europe. Her aunt refuses to contribute to her travel costs, and argues that it is a risky endeavor and is not the right time because there are a lot of family relatives in Somalia who need her financial support. Nuriya's parents who are living in Somalia as well as two other aunts in Dubai are also not supportive of funding Nuriya's travel to the West. Nuriya, however, argues that her being trapped in Egypt with no future is detrimental not only to her future but also to that of her family. If she resettles in the West, she argues that she will be able to work and remit money to the family.

Nuriya also complains that because most of her time is spent in caring for her aunt's family she is unable to work as a domestic worker, which will have helped her save money. She has looked into the possibility of moving out of her aunt's place and sharing an apartment with three female friends who work as domestic workers. Nonetheless, Nuriya is fearful of angering her aunt and the rest of the family. She is not sure either how much she can save even if she finds work as a domestic worker since she will be expected then to remit some of her income to her family in Somalia. She is also concerned about the stigma attached to the job of a domestic worker. She says that although living with her aunt is not helpful to her on the long-term, at least she perceives herself and is perceived by other Somalis as living with her own family in a nice house.

Nuriya's aunt, on the other hand, while appreciative of her niece's help with the housework and childcare, feels that she, too, is carrying a big share of the family's burden by supporting Nuriya as well as remitting money to her extended family in Somalia. She has to juggle her obligations towards her extended family and those towards her husband and children. The aunt feels that her extended family often does not appreciate her support and financial sacrifices. Carrying out these responsibilities towards her extended family often creates tension between herself and her husband, who wants her to put their children as a priority. He continues to remind her that they have not been able to purchase an apartment in Cairo, unlike some of the Somali families who relocated from the West because she shares their income (from his job and her trade business) with her

extended family. Thus while maintaining interdependent relations with family members within and across different nation-states is seen by Nuriya and her aunt as both a familial duty and a necessary livelihood strategy, both are conscious of the tensions and challenges that arise from competing interests and aspirations of different family members.

IV. Internet and Videotapes: Reproduction of Families and Communities

In Ard il Liwa and Nasr City neighborhoods in Cairo where most Somali refugees live, there are dozens of Internet cafes that sell affordable Internet time to local residents at a rate of L.E. 2 per hour. Since Somalis settled in these two neighborhoods, these Internet cafes have been attracting a large number of Somali customers. Emails and on-line chatting enable Somali family members to have discussions, air disagreements, and make the case for their plans and dreams. Parents, children, siblings and extended family members routinely receive emails and pictures from one another. Communications among families focus on the well-being of different family members, the rearing of children, the use of financial resources that are pooled from different members and important family decisions such as marriages and relocation in different host societies. Family disagreements are also aired in these on-line communications. For example, some older children are scolded for rushing into marriages before attending to family obligations such as helping with the relocation of a parent, remitters are criticized for being late with sending remittance money, children who dropped out of school or failed to find employment are reprimanded and husbands are chastised for taking second wives. The Internet is also a way of imagining and aspiring to different diasporic lives as these Somalis debate their past and present and discuss their future with fellow Somalis living all over the world.

Seeking marriage partners is one popular way through which many single Somalis plan for a different future. For many who live in Cairo, the most desirable partners are those living in the West because marriages with such partners provide opportunities for resettlement and a better future. Marriage seekers in the West, on the other hand are

attracted to potential partners in the Middle East and Somalia for two main reasons. For one, some believe that Somali spouses from the Middle East and the homeland are more family-oriented and less individualistic than those who have lived in the West for a long time. Also, some of the single people in the West work long hours and lack the social networks that can help them find suitable partners in their immediate environments, and thus they seek them instead on the Internet or in wedding videotapes sent by friends and family members from Cairo. Young men and women who are seeking romantic relationships and potential marriage partners often use the following strategies: they log into different chat rooms in which they engage in discussions with male and female interlocutors about different topics. The topics vary but the most common ones focus on relationships between Somali men and women, family relationships, clan relations and life for Somalis in different nation-states. Then if the person finds a potential partner among the participants in the discussion, he or she communicates with them separately. While by far this is the most common strategy used by many in seeking marriage partners, some Somalis also post personal marriage advertisements in different Somali-run websites. There are also people who are set up by family or mutual friends and then establish a pre-engagement on-line relationship in order to get to know one another. Although such matches may appear to be convenience marriages, it is simplistic to reduce them to relationships that are solely motivated by material interests.

While many young men and women seeking partners recognize that suitors living in the West provide them with much needed opportunities for a secure and better future, marriage seekers from Cairo stress the importance of many other requirements in potential spouses, which also reflect their opinions on pertinent issues to Somalis in Diaspora. For example, there are those who are interested in finding spouses who belong to the same clan. This is mostly true of those who belong to minority clans. Some marriage seekers are also particular about the religious knowledge and practices that they would like their future partners to adopt. For instance, some women are keen on finding Somali men who take their family responsibilities seriously and do not use religion as a justification to take more than one wife. These examples demonstrate the challenges of single men and women because of their transnational family lives in which they lack

decision-making power, more access to family resources, and higher status within the family. Thus on-line courting, through which romantic relationships are established with desirable marriage partners, becomes a way for these young men and women to dream and (sometimes) realize a life in which they have financial independence and become more valued members of their families.

The Internet also becomes a window to a larger *Somali* world in which individuals feel less dependent and less trapped. These Somali internet users enjoy frequenting chat rooms where Somalis in different countries talk about a wide range of issues such as clan divisions, the on-going civil war, the latest in Somali music, gender relations, child rearing, etc.

In addition to the Internet, video tapes are used by Somalis to send and receive news from other family members, to share information about life in different nation-states and to arrange new marriages. Video tapes of wedding parties are sent back and forth between Somalia, Egypt, Europe, and North America. Often the videotaped parties celebrate the marriage of family members living in Diaspora. The tapes are viewed by family members and a circle of friends and acquaintances; it is not uncommon that the viewers arrange marriages between their relatives and some of the wedding guests viewed in the tape. Video tapes depicting the daily lives of family members in Diaspora are also sent back and forth between relatives. The most popular tapes are those that show relatives in Western countries.

V. The Politics of Movement

Making decisions about the movement of individual relatives from one country to another, arranging for these movements and financing them are central to the management of Somali transnational family life. Relatives in different nation-states make collective decisions about who will migrate, where they will go and how they will do so. While family members with financial resources have considerable say in this process, they are by no means the sole decision-makers. Other relatives also contribute to

the decision-making on the basis of their parental authority, shouldering family care responsibilities, or their access to the knowledge and mechanisms that will facilitate or enable the movement.

The types of movements that are undertaken are diverse. They include primary migration from the homeland to neighboring countries or further; onward movement from one host society to another in neighboring countries or the Middle East; movement from a host society in Africa or the Middle East to a Western country; from a Western country to the Middle East; and reverse migration from the West or the Middle East to a neighboring country, Somaliland, or Somalia.

These movements are motivated by multiple and complex factors that include seeking security and protection, stability, self-sustenance, opportunities for social mobility and positive membership, better income and resources and sometimes the need to salvage marriages and parent-children relations. In addition, the movement a family member (or lack of it) is sometimes part of an effort to fulfill the needs of other family members. For instance, Soad moved with her younger children from Saudi Arabia to Cairo to escape the fear of deportation and to pursue education opportunities for her children. During their stay in Saudi Arabia, the children received no education and were locked in their rented apartment all day for fear of deportation. When the family moved to Cairo, the two older daughters stayed behind to support the family through domestic work.

Ahmed, a Somali refugee moved from Cairo to Ethiopia two years ago in order to improve the chances of his wife and children being considered for resettlement in the U.S.A. Saida, a Somali Canadian woman from Ottawa moved from Canada to Puntland last August to care for her ailing elderly mother. This is the second time that Saida had moved to Somalia in the last four years to care for her mother. The first time she went back to her home country, Saida stayed for a year and ended up moving her mother to Somaliland so that she could juggle taking care of her mother and holding a temporary job which she got in one of the development organizations. Unlike her other siblings, Saida is single and with no children. In addition, she has just finished a masters program

and is currently unemployed. Thus the family decided that she was again the most suited at the present time to care for her mother. Last month, Saida moved her mother to Kenya where her aunt and cousins can assist in caring for her mother while she looks for employment in international organizations. Bringing the mother to Canada has not been possible because of delays in the family reunification immigration process.

Adan, a refugee, lived in Cairo for seven years. In the initial years, his refugee status application was rejected. While waiting for the results of appeal process, he sought education opportunities in Al-Azhar. Eventually, he was recognized as a refugee but was denied resettlement. Three years ago, Adan married a young woman from Mogadishu whom he met on-line. His wife joined him in Egypt. His wife's travel expenses were paid by her aunt who lives in Denmark. Adan and his wife roomed with his nephew and the three lived on the sum total of \$100 that was remitted from Adan's brother in England. A year ago, the couple had a child and Adan's nephew was resettled in the U.S.A. After consulting with the family, Adan and his wife moved to Ethiopia because living in Cairo was no longer affordable with the new addition to their family and the departure of his nephew who was contributing to housing expenses. Ethiopia was chosen because it was cheaper than Cairo and it was still a place where one could pursue opportunities for travel. In fact, Adan's cousin in Australia is looking into possibilities of sponsoring his travel to Melbourne. The travel expenses from Cairo to Ethiopia were paid by the children of Adan's second cousin who were living in the U.S.A. His second cousin collected the travel money from her children to show her appreciation for Adan who took care of her mentally-ill son few years ago.

VI. Contemporary Migration: A Transnational Approach

In the last two decades, the field of migration has witnessed a wave of studies that have examined contemporary movements as centrally located in complex transnational practices, relations and processes. (Basch et al 1994, Kearney 1995, Foner 1997, Glick-Schiller 1999) However, this literature has been critiqued for conceptual confusion, lack of historical approach and its celebratory approach towards transnationalism, which tends

to down play the still significant role of nation-states in the control of movements and subject-making processes. (Mitchell 1997, Waldinger 1997, Mintz 1998, Bailey 2002)

However, I argue that there is a great deal to be gained from studying contemporary movements of refugees and migrants, particularly from the South, from the prism of their transnational practices of surviving, sustaining and reproducing family and community ties, overcoming different forms of vulnerabilities and marginalization and seeking security and well-being. Nevertheless, to have a better understanding of the transnational lives of these diasporic individuals and groups and to respond adequately to some of the above mentioned critiques, we need to address these questions:

- 1) What constitutes a transnational way of life? How frequent and extensive do the transnational ties and relations between the migrants and their relatives in the homeland and elsewhere need to be? What are the spatial boundaries of this phenomenon? Should we be focusing on transnational practices and processes that link the homeland and host societies? Or those that link between migrants in different host societies as well? Who are the key actors in these transnational relations? Are they the migrants who are engaged in multiple movements? Or are they those who stay behind in the homeland? Or those who stay put in a particular host society? What is the significance of the role of these different actors in the creation of transnational families and communities?
- 2) Is there a cycle for a transnational way of living? How long does it last? How does it evolve among second and third generation migrants? How do integration policies and experiences impact the transnational way of living in which migrants and their families engage? Also, how do policies in the homeland shape the lives of these transnational families and communities?
- 3) How are current transnational migratory practices and experiences different and similar to past migration processes and experiences?

Diasporic Somalis engage in extensive and continuous transnational family-based networking, strategies and practices to pursue security and protection, secure livelihood, maximize resources, minimize risks and to feel empowered. This transnational life is not limited to the binary of Diaspora and homeland but is formed and lived through highly dispersed but well-connected circuits of relatives, resources and family relations and obligations. What needs to be studied is the past and future of this transnational way of life. In other words, we need to historicize Somali transnational way of life and identify its links and divergences from past pre-civil war movements. We also need to study how second generation diasporic Somalis are experiencing this kind of life.

In a recent article on transnationalism, Robert Smith (2000) called for in-depth studies of past and present local experiences of a transnational way of living. We certainly need to heed Smith's call and examine how the local realities and daily lives of refugees, migrants and their network of families and communities are shaped by transnational practices, relations and processes in which they engage. Furthermore, we need to examine the policy implications for refugees and migrants who lead this kind of transnational life. (Crisp 1999, Van Hear 2002)

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