

**TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUES:
DEVELOPING WAYS TO DO RESEARCH IN A DIASPORIC COMMUNITY
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Abstract

This paper will look at some of the research techniques that I developed during my PhD project on the ‘social security mechanisms’ of Somali refugees in Kenya. More specifically, I examined the ways that Somali refugees are able to deal with life in the Dadaab camps in Northeastern Kenya, despite the limited livelihood opportunities in the region and the insufficient availability of international aid. My main finding was that the Somali refugees in Dadaab had a certain independence to assist themselves, irrespective of limited local opportunities, because they were part of a network of ‘transnational nomads’. This conclusion made it insufficient to do research only in the refugee camps, and thus I extended my fieldwork to urban refugees. Though I would have liked to include ethnographic fieldwork in one or more ‘resettlement countries’, time limits did not allow. As Hannerz (1998) notes, there is always a trade-off between dispersion and intensity in transnational research. I decided instead to use the same technological developments that have facilitated the formation of transnational communities, to disseminate and discuss my work within the Somali diaspora. Publications on Somali Internet sites, at times accompanied by forum discussions, enabled me to engage in ‘transnational dialogues’ that provided me with valuable information to supplement my fieldwork in Dadaab.

Thesis In order to truly grasp ‘translocal linkages’(Hannerz 1998: 247), it is not sufficient to study transnational communities or networks in multiple localities. In addition, it is essential to develop new research methods *between* sites; an example of which is provided in this paper.

Introduction

Whereas I am in the final phase of my research, having analysed my fieldwork material and written down much of my findings, the topic of this paper is still very new to me. Much of what I did ‘after I collected my data’, after I ‘came back from the field’, seemed obvious and not worth mentioning. After all, as Hannerz (1998: 249) notes, ‘Many anthropologists maintain more or less continuous contact with one or some handful of informants by way of letter, telephone or E-mail’. It also did not seem to be ‘the real thing’, but rather something ‘off stage’, not really connected with my actual research. I only slowly started realizing the value of the discussions I had with Somali refugees, NGO staff, policy makers and

researchers worldwide, through Internet and E-mail. These ‘transnational dialogues’ were not only valuable in providing me with relevant information for my research; adding a new perspective to my ethnographic fieldwork in refugee camps in Kenya. Also, they offered a possible example of a method for understanding transnational networks *between* sites, conceptualising and describing translocal linkages. Because of the newness of the topic, this exploration into ways of doing research amongst transnational communities only provides a first impression. It is rather sketchy, something in the process of being thought out. As such, it seems perfect for this occasion, where we are critically developing our stance in the quite dynamic and recent field of transnationalism.

Background to the research

Between February 1999 and September 2001, I carried out my PhD project in three refugee camps near the town of Dadaab: Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera. My research interest was to understand how the Somali refugees were able to survive in these camps, despite insufficient international aid and limited opportunities in the region. Dadaab lies in Kenya’s Northeastern Province, a vast stretch of semi-arid land that has been the object of dispute between Kenya and Somalia since independence. The area is unsuitable for agricultural production and is mainly occupied by Kenyan Somali pastoralists. The province has a very poor infrastructure and on top of that is insecure due to frequent attacks by *shifita*, Somali ‘bandits’ (Crisp 1999). Inside the camps, UNHCR and various international NGOs provide assistance to the refugees. During my stay in the camps, this assistance often consisted only of three kilograms of maize per person every fifteen days, although the refugees were supposed to get three kilograms of maize, three kilograms of wheat flour and a cup of oil per person. And even this last diet, which is quite common for African refugees, is insufficient not only in caloric terms but also in terms of micronutrient content (Henry et al 1992).

The reason for studying how the Somali refugees themselves were dealing with refugee life in the Dadaab camps was to provide an alternative perspective on refugees. Refugees are often depicted as ‘vulnerable victims’ or ‘cunning crooks’ in media and academic literature. This stands in sharp contrast to my own experiences with refugees during my work for VluchtelingenWerk (a Dutch organization assisting refugees) and in various research projects. I was introduced to individuals who were not passively affected by circumstances but rather

were resourcefully utilizing new opportunities. Personally, I find it an important task of social scientists to continuously question accepted categories and forms of analysis, both within science and the larger society. This is even more urgent considering the fact that (theoretical) constructs are not only influenced by social reality, but also have an impact on the general discourse within that reality and thus on actions (Wolf 1994). The ideas that exist about refugees in the end have a clear effect on the reality of their daily lives. Thus, my aim was to provide an image of human complexity instead of vulnerability or cunningness (Horst 2002: 89).

The research proposal

At the end of 1991, three refugee camps were set up close to Dadaab to host the large influx of Somalis fleeing the collapse of their state. When I carried out my MA research four years later, approximately 120,000 refugees were living in the Dadaab area. Similar numbers are said to be there up to this day. Most of them originated from the regions of 'Jubadda Hoose' and 'Shabeellaha Hoose', the lowlands of the two main rivers in South Somalia. There are also smaller groups of refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and a few individuals from Zaire.

In order to understand the current situation of Somali refugees in Dadaab, it is essential to place that specific situation in a historical context. In the academic world as well as within relief-providing organisations, crises are largely seen as external events interfering with a certain stable social reality. This viewpoint obscures the fact that insecurity is the normal state of affairs for many, and people have found their own ways of dealing with it; their own socio-economic security mechanisms. De Bruijn and van Dijk (1995) argue the same in their study on the Fulbe pastoralists in Mali, for whom insecurity paradoxically constitutes life's only certainty. Pastoralism is an adaptation to an ecologically insecure environment, so there is a danger of focusing on 'normal' conditions that are not very likely to occur anyway. Mobility being the most suitable strategy to climate fluctuations, instability becomes an inherent characteristic of Fulbe life. Reading through the literature on the area, I found that the same is true for the Somali who are now refugees in the Dadaab area. They faced all kinds of insecurities before the collapse of their state, and they had various ways of dealing with those insecurities.

Before the civil war, the Somali had particular ways of dealing with the insecurities they were faced with, which were based on social networks, mobility and dispersing investments within those networks. Most extended families consisted of nomadic, agricultural and urban households that maintained close links although they may be spread geographically. Also, within many individual households diversified family economies existed. The Somali tried to reduce vulnerability to crisis-situations by diversifying their investments in people and economic activities. Besides, a mixed herd composition, nomadism, and the use of various types of crops minimises ecological risks. In situations of extreme scarcity, alternative means of survival are sought through petty trade activities and the (inter)national aid system. Yet, it should be realised that adaptation to insecure circumstances is not only determined by survival functions but also by cultural values and history. The experience of the threat to a way of life may be more real than the experience of the threat of starvation (De Waal 1989).

Research questions

On the basis of these considerations, the main research question was formulated as follows: *What effect does refugee life in Dadaab have on the transactions and interactions within the social networks of the Somali, and what (in)security do NGO and government arrangements provide?* My hypothesis was that transactions and interactions are not only essential for physical survival but just as much aim at preventing the loss of self-respect and identity.

Subsidiary questions followed from this. Because evidence exists that social security arrangements of Somali in refugee camps are largely based on precedents (Kibreab 1993), it is of great interest to study the effect of life in Dadaab on social networks. Do kinship ties still provide the individual with sufficient security when relatives have died, families dispersed, and trust was destroyed? Harrell-Bond (1986) argues that the rupture of family structures results not only from flight and dispossession, but also from the encounter with humanitarian aid. Is this true in the case of Somali in refugee camps? How important is international aid in the household livelihood, and what economic alternatives do men, women and children have? What are the exact causes and consequences of the changes in power relationships between the generations and genders I identified before in Dadaab? Schrijvers (1997) suggests that the men in Sri Lankan camps 'tried to regain power and authority by stressing ethnic distinctions and gender roles, whereas women and youngsters tried to increase their social space'. Is this true in the Dadaab camps as well? If camp policies affect these social relationships and economic

alternatives, is that an intentional or unintentional outcome of (inter)national security arrangements?

Transnational nomads

In Dadaab, I was looking for indications of the continued importance of a mentality of looking for greener pastures, a strategy of spreading the risks of living in a harsh environment by dispersing family members strategically, and a strong obligation to assist each other in surviving. In short, I call this the ‘nomadic heritage’ of the Somali, though nomadic here should not be read in the strict sense of a livelihood, but more widely as a way of living. Soon after my arrival in the camps, I learned about the existence of an extensive, informal system of communication and banking that is only used by Somali. It is called *xawilaad* in the Somali language, ‘*xawil*’ meaning ‘transfer’; usually of money or responsibility (see also Horst et al 2002). There are international companies like Al-Barakhat, Dahabshil, Al-Amal and others, which have branches in many countries worldwide. The Somali use these companies to send money to their relatives elsewhere. This is done through telephones, faxes and nowadays E-mail. On a smaller scale, money can be transferred within Africa by using *taar*; radio-transmitters.

Overall, huge investments are made in means of communication and transfer. This was a clear indication to me that the Somali are interested in staying in touch and assisting each other. What was particularly fascinating was that those refugees with relatives overseas often received amounts of dollars that enabled them to survive in the camps. Furthermore, stimulated by these remittances and the images that came with them, migration became a popular investment for the refugees in Dadaab. A new term had been coined to describe the strong hope of the Somali to go for resettlement: *buufis*. Thus, whereas the social security mechanisms I described originally developed from the local circumstances of life in Somalia, they have now extended to a global scale, facilitated by technological developments in communication and transportation. The main conclusion of my research was that the Somali in Dadaab had a certain independence to assist themselves, irrespective of limited local opportunities, because they were part of a network of ‘transnational nomads’. Or as a Kenyan hotel manager and good friend of Nurudiin Farah, the Somali novel writer, phrases it: “In Kenya, Somalis are seen as spendthrifts both of talk and money, they are wasteful and loud-mouthed. They seem to have an uninterrupted supply of money in hard currency, thanks to

their families' remittances from their bases in Europe and USA. As a consequence, they do not behave like refugees" (Farah 2000).

Developing methods

In order to fully understand the social networks that enable the Somali refugees in Dadaab to survive, I deemed it insufficient to limit my fieldwork to the refugee camps. Since there was a lot of communication between Dadaab and Nairobi, with remittances being sent from Nairobi to Dadaab, I decided to extend my fieldwork to the urban refugees in Kenya's capital city. The two periods of one month that I was able to spend in Eastleigh, the section of Nairobi where most Somali live, allowed me to have a first 'taste' of urban refugee life. Many husbands, sons and daughters had come to Nairobi in order to try to earn some money to send to the camps. Others had come for medical reasons, to study or simply to escape camp life. They did stay in touch with their families and friends in Dadaab, and whenever possible they sent some few shillings. But city life was also not easy for them, being expensive and filthy, with jobs hard to find. And because most of the refugees did not have the papers to be in town, they ran the risk of being caught by the police. This did not necessarily mean deportation back to the camps or even Somalia, but it did imply unexpected expenses. In these conditions, often only a few hundred to maximally a few thousand shillings could be spared.¹

More substantial assistance came from relatives overseas, who at times sent a monthly allowance of about 50 to 200 dollars to refugees in the camps or were able to send a few hundred dollars in times of special need. Though I would have like to include ethnographic fieldwork in one or more 'resettlement countries' in order to understand what it meant for refugees in for example Europe or USA to send money, time limits did not allow. As Hannerz (1998: 248) notes, there is always a trade-off between dispersion and intensity in transnational research. Thus, I concentrated on an in-depth study of the assistance networks from the perspective of the refugees in the Dadaab camps, with a short comparative analysis of the situation from the side of those who stayed in Nairobi. In both localities, people are receiving as well as sending remittances and information. But I still felt that I really missed the perspective from those who 'made it' to go overseas. Having worked for VluchtelingenWerk,

¹ One dollar is about 70 Kenyan shillings

I had the impression that it must be very hard for those who go for resettlement to send money to their relatives; an idea that contrasted with the *buufis* dreams existing in the camps. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to spend time 'in the field' to understand the situation of Somali refugees in western countries, except for some short visits and talks with Somali in the Netherlands.

Internet dissemination & E-mail exchanges

Thus, I decided to use an alternative strategy, which slowly took shape 'in action'. There were quite a number of Somali Internet sites very active in providing written and oral information on the latest developments in Somalia, missing people, business, world news etc. to the Somali diaspora. These sites also offered a space for Somali all over the world to discuss issues related to, among other things, culture, religion, the war, being refugees and immigrants; and to share their knowledge and experience of life in a certain place with others in often-similar positions. I contacted a number of these sites, introducing my research in Dadaab and sending them some of my work. Somalinet published my field reports, and added a 'Forum Discussion'². Here, anybody could respond (anonymously or including his / her E-mail) to the writings. Interesting debates followed, in which I personally also contributed to the Forum Discussion a number of times in order to respond to various comments. In a few cases, the discussions went on in the less public space of E-mail. Somalinet also published a preliminary version of the first chapter to my thesis, adding my E-mail address and encouraging readers to send their remarks to me.

Then, I sent a number of my writings to a UNHCR staff member, who invited me to have it published as a working paper; appearing both on the Internet site as well as in hard copy (Horst 2001)³. This gave me feedback from policy makers, UN or NGO staff and researchers. I thus built up a list of E-mail addresses of a very specialized group of interested readers, and decided to utilize that resource. Starting up a mailing list, I introduced my initiative as follows:

² Somalinet (www.somalinet.com) has greatly reorganized since that time, and the Forum Discussion I mention is no longer available on Internet.

³ UNHCR Working Papers can be found at UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.ch/evaluate/main.htm>.

Some days ago, a Somali student at Melbourne University asked me whether I had ever thought about ‘setting up a group of Somali people living around the world to give you advice on the methods you use, the areas you need to do more research on, or any other support you may need’. At the same moment, I was going through some articles on diasporas, transnationalism and global networks. In many of these articles it was suggested that research in this field should be carried out within a transnational, trans-disciplinary network that consists of academics, practitioners, policy-makers and the ‘transnational migrants’ themselves. I fully agree. The suggestion was brilliant and perfectly timed.

I would send any of my writings through this mailing list, and had discussions with its individual members on my writings and other topics. Thus, I learned much more about the position of Somali in the diaspora and was even contacted by a number of refugees who had lived in Dadaab, some of whom I had met, and were now building up their lives elsewhere.

Abukar Rashid, with whom I had worked in Hagadera, for example contacted me while he was in Nairobi, waiting for his ticket to Canada⁴. We had not exchanged addresses, but he was surfing the net when he found my writings and E-mail address. When Abukar arrived in Canada he contacted me again, and kept me informed about his new life. We stayed in touch, and he was the person who advised me to send one of my more politically engaged articles, on the closure of *xawilaad* offices in the aftermath of September 11th, to Hiiraan.com⁵. When I did, it was immediately published, and the responses were overwhelming. In the first few days, I received over ten E-mails a day. It seemed that taking a stance so firmly to ‘support the Somali case’ and condemn the actions of the US government against certain *xawilaad* offices, really had an impact. I had clearly positioned myself, taking sides, and this was appreciated. More work was published on Hiiraan, and I got in touch with a number of very qualified and experienced Somali; many of them highly educated and in good positions in their new countries.

Transnational dialogues

To illustrate the kinds of dialogues that took place ‘in cyberspace’, I decided to select sections from the electronic dialogues I had with Aden Yusuf. Aden works as a program analyst for a state health department in the USA, and has an MA in Development Economics. He was born

⁴ Names are changed so as to respect the privacy of informants

⁵ This article is still available on: http://www.hiiraan.org/opinion/opinion_march.htm.

in Central Somalia, lived in Kenya for many years and now feels rather settled in USA, where he stays with his wife and three children. Aden initially responded to the article on the closure of the *xawilaad* that I had sent to the Hiiraan website. From there, our dialogues took off. I sent him my various writings and he sent me relevant newspaper articles. He also gave me his detailed feedback on the preliminary chapters of my thesis and came with many examples of the arguments I wanted to make. I asked him for advice when I was struggling with certain Somali words or practices. We had fascinating discussions, which I certainly plan to weave into my thesis; though I still have to think of the best way to do it. Here, all I can do is give a first impression, selecting the most interesting paragraphs and phrases out of much longer E-mails.

After a number of introductory E-mails, to which Aden attached some newspaper articles and I attached some preliminary chapters, I wrote

It is very encouraging to hear that you believe Somalis still cherish nomadism, and that you personally have a nomadic background. Though the concept of the 'transnational nomad' is central to my argument, I expect it to be contested academically. I expect to be challenged for putting forward a 'culturalist' account: explaining what people do on the basis of their 'culture' or 'tradition'. During a conference, someone warned me that I really have to come with a sound case to claim that a strong kinship network, high mobility and dispersing of investments are so particular for the Somalis. As she framed it: 'Do not all people try to survive? And would these characteristics not be common to all refugees?' I certainly do not think so, and I do believe that the Somali nomadic background can largely explain this. So I'm happy to hear that you might be willing to agree with me! (Please, let this not stop you from airing any critical comments you may have!!!).

In response to this, Aden replies:

I am always intrigued by the influence of nomadism and clannism on the Somali. The two are mutually inclusive. One greatly influences the other. I always wonder what are the allegiances of a Somali (religion? clan? nation? state?). One could argue that the only allegiance that a Somali has is that of the clan. But paradoxically that allegiance is highly segmented right down to the level of 'myself versus my half-brother'. You know

where clan begins, but you never know where it ends. The Somali is a complex individual...Your thesis can be demonstrably supported by empirical data. You are right that the Somali nomad has a strong sense of mobility and therefore a strong sense of survivability. Somalis tend to be always on the run, chasing water and grazing wherever they can find it; international borders never restrain them. There are now reportedly several Somalis in Alaska aboard fishing vessels (can you believe this?). They were and are still nomads who were in contempt of fishing and farming. Yet, now they engage in fishing at sub zero temperatures in Alaska. They often work up there 6 months of the year @ \$10,000 - \$20,000 plus expenses. At the end of their contracts, they are able to purchase a truck and start their own business. I personally know several Somalis who managed to get into the trucking business this way. They are making more money than I would ever dream of making in the state civil service, though none of them may have a high school education. Imagine that civil war breaks out in Kenya, God forbid. Would a Kikuyu cope in the same way as a Somali nomad would? The answer is no. Without their strong sense of mobility, the Somali, in my view, would be far worse off.

Before I reply, Aden continues his reflections in another mail:

The Somali is inherently a trader. The article on livestock trading which I earlier sent you seems to indicate how the Somali nomad has strong entrepreneurial skills: livestock is primarily used for trading in the nomadic Somali society. Unlike other recent ethnic immigrants, the Somalis in Minnesota, many of whom came from the Dadaab refugee camps, have managed to establish their own child care centres, laundry facilities, tax preparers, restaurants, department and grocery stores, sewing, mini shopping malls etc. I again suggest you follow them in Minneapolis. This must be unique to Somalis. The Somali is a risk taker; oftentimes very recklessly. I agree that the Somali nomadic background primarily explains this strong sense of kinship networking, high mobility and dispersing of investments. Sometimes my nomadic instincts tells me to just quit the state job and move to another state or city where conceivably it would have rained better (joke). And I consider myself to be a very sedentary person. There is something nomadic about our genes! I hear some Somalis say 'Let us move there. It rained there rather well... Meeshaa roob fican ayaa ka da'ay'

My response follows a week later:

Fascinating, to hear about those Inuit-Somali!!! I wish I could learn much more about them, for these are the cases that illustrate my point. I could include it in the chapter on Somalis in the diaspora, that tries to take a perspective 'from the other side': After having looked at the importance of remittances for survival in the camps, it is interesting to observe what it actually means to send remittances; for those in Nairobi and overseas. What ideas do people have about it, how far does their responsibility go. [...] Have you found the place where it rains best, or do you think you might still look for a better one? Is there something like a home for you? I do not think nomadism implies homelessness; but I am not sure what that idea is based on.... Despite buufis! I do not know why longing for another place to me does not necessarily mean you cannot be at home. Maybe I just want to have a glossy picture? There is a lot of debate nowadays within anthropology about place and space; having roots, or routes? Moving has always implied uprootedness, but it could also be interpreted as 'being at home in the world'

I here refer to an article by Clifford (1998), as well a book by Jackson (1995). The issue of being at home, and what makes people feel they are (Is it necessarily related to land, or could a sense of belonging also stem from people and social responsibility?) has always fascinated me. Especially when it comes to refugees, theories on transnationalism in this respect provide interesting insights. The next day, Aden replies:

With regard to coping strategies of Somali and Kikuyu, I did not want to suggest that Somalis would fare better. What I was merely saying is that they would cope differently in the event of civil war or disaster. Somalis are very mobile, as your thesis would support. They tend to be very shortsighted. They worry about today. They leave their homes, lands and country altogether. With regard to allegiances, I would add also that Somalis, in general, do have little allegiance to land. I know a Kikuyu has a strong sense of allegiance to land. For Kikuyu, land has a sentimental and non-quantifiable value. The Somali, on the other hand, have less emotional attachment to the land. 'If it does not rain here, I will move there'. They are very pragmatic people.

Some concluding remarks

Transnational research is a new, dynamic and developing field that often requires its own research methods. As such, I do not agree with Hannerz (1998: 246) when he states that methodologically, transnational anthropology can hardly be characterized by any one set of approaches that would distinguish it from other anthropology. Though maybe this is true at present, existing ‘tools and techniques’ are certainly not sufficient, and there are attempts by various researchers to go beyond them. In such an exploring phase, Paul Stoller’s view may be appropriate. He states that “the key to doing research in complex transnational spaces devolves less from methods, multidisciplinary teams, or theoretical frameworks – although these are, of course, important – than from the suppleness of imagination” (Stoller 1997: 91). The technological developments in communication and transportation that have facilitated the formation of transnational communities, simultaneously support researchers in their work. Through Internet and E-mail, I have been able to disseminate and critically examine my work within the Somali diaspora and beyond. These technologies allow me to put into practice ideas about dialogical knowledge creation between refugees, policy makers and implementers and academics (See Schrijvers 1991). The ensuing discussions resemble participatory research approaches that are based on the principle that analysis is a collective learning process including the researchers and all the social groups involved in a particular situation (Castles 2000). The underlying idea is that this kind of analysis may also lead to change – attitudinal change and the development of new institutional structures.

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