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“It Is Better to Do Business in Africa than in Europe” – Socio-Economic Positionings among Business-Minded European Somalis Moving to Kenya

Tabea Scharrer 

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

ABSTRACT

Using the example of European Somalis moving to Kenya, this article argues that although these middle class return migrants share many similarities, they also differ in significant ways. Focusing on economically independent migrants, this paper will show that their move to Kenya is both return and onward migration at the same time. The transnational socio-economic positioning of Somali returnees in Kenya, this article demonstrates, rests on the importance of legal capital for enabling transnational mobility, which in turn is relevant for the convertibility of capital in the various local settings in which migrants settle.

KEYWORDS

Kenya; Somali; migration; return migration; secondary migration; social class

Introduction

This article deals with the question of how migrants who had lived as refugees in Europe position themselves socio-economically when re-migrating to their region of origin. Using the example of Somali¹ return migrants in Kenya, I focus on one specific group, first generation migrants moving back to East Africa by becoming economically independent, while at the same time distinguishing them from returnees relying on remittances from abroad. When Somali middle-class migrants of the first generation move abroad as refugees, it is often not possible for them to retain the socio-economic status their families held in East Africa, due to several overlapping factors. Their re-migration in the opposite direction is therefore also an attempt to rebuild that formerly held status. This process is linked to the preservation, accumulation and conversion of different sorts of capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in the course of these migrations. This perspective implies that socio-economic positioning takes place in a transnational setting and can change over time.

With this approach, this paper aims to speak to two different sets of literature – the growing research about return migration and the still relatively small field concerning transnational socio-economic positioning in the setting of migration.

Regarding the first issue, return migration, I argue that in the case of European Somalis in Kenya their migratory move to East Africa carries features of return migration as well as of a secondary or onward migration.² In recent years there has been a proliferation of research on the topic of return migration, ranging from a focus on voluntary return, to assisted return, to deportations (e.g. Carling et al., 2011; Cassarino, 2004; Hagan & Wassink, 2020; Vathi & King, 2017). This literature shows that return often demands considerable resources, and is therefore only

CONTACT Tabea Scharrer  scharrer@eth.mpg.de  Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, Halle 06114, Germany.

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affordable to those having secure socio-economic positions within the society they migrated to (Sinatti, 2015; Hernández-Carretero, 2017). This is similar to cases of onward migration, whose protagonists have been described as often being in a better socio-economic position than return migrants (Nekby, 2006; Kelly & Hedman, 2016).

Even though socio-economic aspects play such an important role in the migration process, much less research has been done on the transnational socio-economic positioning of migrants. This is mainly due to the nation-state focus of most socio-economic stratification research, making it difficult to include migratory practices within that framework (Weiß, 2005; Beck, 2007). With the term socio-economic positioning (Nowicka, 2013), I explore how return migrants transfer and convert financial and cultural capital within and between various localities. This term also encompasses migrants' own evaluation of their status, and the extent to which this translates into choosing a lifestyle that sets returnees apart from local populations (i.e. the formation of milieus), a process described as display of migratory success in the literature (Gmelch, 1980). Somali migrants in Kenya move in a transnational setting that links the Somali society in East Africa and in the diaspora, with Kenyan society, and the countries outside of East Africa they had lived in. Adding to Weber (1922), who spoke of class in the sense of life chances resulting from the possession of goods and skills securing a certain income within a given economic order, Weiß (2005) argues that in a world system social positions are not only structured by resource values, but also "by spatial autonomy and the quality of the spaces to which (migrant) populations have access" (p. 708). Building on both that notion and the work of Bourdieu (1984), I use the term 'legal capital' to refer to all the various legal documents that make this spatial autonomy possible. This also includes anything that enhances the ability to stay in a specific place and to access educational structures, social security and health systems, and the economic realm by investment or incorporation into the labor market (Moret, 2018).

While there are still many Somali migrants going to Europe, there is also a reverse movement taking place. A good number of those returnees settle in Kenya, as Somalia is still regarded as too insecure. In urban Kenya they find a strong Somali community, made up of ethnic Somalis who are Kenyan citizens, as well as refugees from Somalia living in Kenyan cities. At the same time, European Somalis are mostly foreigners in Kenya and regarded as outsiders.

The quote in the title of this article derives from an interview with Omar (February 2018, Salzburg)³, who was in his mid-twenties. He had come to Austria about three years before, after having studied in Turkey for about the same time. Neither his degree from Turkey nor his diploma from Somalia were recognized in Austria, a devaluation of cultural capital faced by many immigrants in Europe (Bauder, 2005). When we met, he was pondering the possibilities of moving back to East Africa, but did not yet have a viable plan.

Following the introduction, I provide background on the research methods, Somali global migration and on return migration to Kenya. In the main part of the paper, I will discuss two aspects in detail. First, I will argue that in the case of European Somalis in Kenya their migration can be treated analytically as return and as onward migration. There are, however, differences between various groups of returnees, the most important of which are between those building up independent businesses and those returning to keep their children close to a Somali lifestyle. In a second section, I outline the transnational socio-economic positioning of Somali returnees in Kenya, by focusing on the first group. Here I will show the importance of legal capital for enabling transnational mobility, which in turn is highly relevant for the convertibility of capital in the various local settings.

Methods

The data for this article has been gathered during 10 months of anthropological fieldwork with Somali migrants in Kenya, Germany and Austria since 2010 and by using different approaches.

One major part of the research involved working with a social network analysis approach (Mitchell, 1969; Schnegg & Lang, 2002) in different Somali neighborhoods. For each person mentioned as a closer contact of the interviewee, data on that person's migration history and their socio-economic attributes (such as occupation and education) was gathered. A second major approach was the usage of biographical narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2004) with Somali return migrants in Kenya (from Europe and elsewhere), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Somali migrants in Europe who were aspiring return. A total of seventeen in-depth interviews with return migrants in Kenya were conducted, including data on their own socio-economic position, their evaluation of this position, and socio-economic trajectories within the families. Interview partners were found through snowball-sampling with various entry points and research in Somali neighborhoods. In addition, three interviews were carried out with Somali migrants who had concrete plans to move from Europe to Kenya (see Table 1). All of those living in Europe or North America had at least for some time a refugee status, even if they entered the region as students in the 1980s.

Nine further interviews were carried out, which focused on the topic of return migration. Interviews concerning return migration are part of altogether about 150 interviews carried out with Somalis in Kenya, Germany and Austria over the research period, and are supplemented by participant observation and by keeping contact to some interview partners over a longer period of time.

Somali global migration

With the increasing disintegration of Somalia, which began with the Ogaden war between Somalia and Ethiopia at the end of the 1970s, people fled to the neighboring countries, among them Kenya. This movement intensified when the civil war reached southern Somalia, culminating in the fall of the president Siad Barre in 1991. In 1992, about 300,000 Somalian refugees lived in Kenya, this number increased to about 500,000 in 2011 and has been decreasing since to about 260,000 in March 2020⁴ (Hammond, 2013). From the beginning, many Somalians also moved to Europe or North America, as well as to countries on the Arabian peninsula or to South Africa (Fagioli-Ndlovu, 2015; Marchand et al., 2017). The majority of Somalian refugees, however, stayed in East Africa, moving back and forth between the refugee camps, Somalia and the urban areas of the host countries. Not only were people from poor families in most cases unable to migrate to Europe, they were also often not capable of moving from the refugee camps to the Kenyan cities (Horst, 2002; Jansen, 2016). Likewise, many of those in Europe were not able to return to East Africa. In cases when they moved further, they often migrated to other European countries or to North America (Lindley & Van Hear, 2007; Moret, 2018).

The situation in the central and southern region of Somalia changed over the years, varying from periods of war to periods of non-state order (Hammond, 2013), but it has not become stable enough to allow people to move back to Somalia on a bigger scale (Danish Refugee Council, 2017). In 2017, about two Million Somalians were still living outside the country.⁵ It is very difficult to estimate the number of Somalis in Europe due to several reasons (Fagioli-Ndlovu, 2015, p. 11; Moret, 2018, p. 31).⁶ Somali migrants are not only relatively mobile between different countries, they are also placed in different migrant categories (as asylum seekers, students or family members in cases of family reunification). Furthermore, a good number have acquired citizenship in Europe.

Somalis returning to Kenya

Almost from the beginning, there was also movement in the opposite direction, from Europe, North America or Arab countries to East Africa. Most Somali migrants moved to East Africa on

Table 1. Return migrants interviewed.

	Gender	Approx. Age during Interview	Education	Profession	Family background	Migration history
1	m	45	A: studied in US	EA: company owner until 1991 A: hotel owner in Dubai	EA: father - politician until 1991	Somalia - USA - Somalia - Egypt - Dubai - Kenya - Somalia (politics, business)
2	m	55	EA: high school A: unfinished studies	EA: military officer A: assembly line EA: businesses in Kenya and Somalia	EA: father - military officer	Somalia - Germany - Kenya (business)
3	f	50	EA: high school A: unfinished studies	A: - EA: restaurant owner	EA: father - political opposition and exile in Kenya, later Sweden	Somalia - Egypt - Canada - Kenya (business)
4	m	50	A: university degree	A: low-level management EA: electronics trade	EA: father - trader A: wife - university degree, UK citizen	Somalia - USA - Dubai - Kenya (business)
5	m	40		EA: war militia in early 1990s; hotel owner after return	EA: family of major warlord	Somalia - Norway - UK - Tanzania - Kenya (business)
6	f	35	A: university degree	A: NGO employee EA: consultancies	same father as 3	Somalia - Sweden - Kenya - Sweden (business)
7	f	45	A: Ph.D.	EA: founded NGO; consultancies	EA: father - diplomat	Somalia - Kenya - Canada - Kenya (business)
8	f	40	A: university degree	A: bank clerk EA: interior designer	A: parents studied in Egypt	Somalia - Egypt - USA - China - Kenya (business)
9	m	60	A: unfinished studies	A: taxi driver	EA: father - trader	Somalia - Australia - Kenya (health reasons)
10	m	45	professional training	A: mechanic	A: wife - nurse in Canada	Somalia - Canada - Kenya (children)
11	f	45	EA: dugsi (Islamic school)		A: husband - high school degree, owns business in Denmark	Somalia - Denmark - Kenya (children)
12	f	39	high school	EA: business	A: husband - high school degree, owns business in US	Somalia - USA - Kenya (children)
13	f	44	high school	-	A: husband - high school degree, truck driver in US	Somalia - USA - Kenya (children)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Gender	Approx. Age during Interview	Education	Profession	Family background	Migration history
14	m	38	high school		EA: wife - dugsi	Somalia - USA - Kenya (children)
15	m	19	A: finishing high school	-	Kenyan Somali A: father - bus driver	Kenya - Sweden - Kenya (assisting mother with health problems)
16	m	30	A: secondary school	A: was in jail EA: helps family business	Kenyan Somali A: family lives on social welfare	Kenya - UK - Kenya (after being wounded in a gang fight)
17	m	65	EA, A: university degree	journalist, worked for IOs, politician	Kenyan Somali	Kenya - UK - US - global postings - Kenya (politics)
18	f	27	A: finishing B.A.	-	EA: grandfather - engineer A: father worked in Qatar until 1991	Qatar - Somalia - India - Germany - plans move to Kenya to unite family
19	m	25	university degree (Somalia, Turkey)	A: works in real estate agency	EA: husband - UK citizenship, runs business in Nairobi EA: father - business owner	Somalia - Turkey - Austria - plans return (business, politics)
20	m	50	secondary school	A: dishwasher; tire trade business in Mozambique	EA: family owns property in Kenya	Somalia - Austria - (Mozambique) - plans move to Kenya (business)

EA - East Africa, A - Abroad.

their own, off the radar of European countries. The example of Dirir shows that there was also an onward migration to Kenya taking place quite early:

Dirir moved to Germany in the early 1980s as student, but immediately applied for asylum which was granted without problems. At first he resumed his studies, most of his degrees were accepted. But soon he married a Somali woman and started to work on an assembly line. His wife held a high school degree and beside raising the children worked in a lower ranking, but permanent and well paid job. Both of their parents had worked for the Somali government, in the army and in the administration. After receiving German citizenship in the mid-1990s, the family moved back to East Africa – to Nairobi in Kenya. Dirir explained this move by his wish to have his own business, something he regarded as impossible in Germany. Their children went to the German school in Nairobi and later moved back to Europe to study and to work. Dirir started his business by exporting lorries from Germany to Kenya, later he imported Chinese electronic goods into Kenya via Dubai. His economic success came by cooperating with Safaricom (the biggest mobile provider in Kenya) in 2001. Dirir now heads some 30 electronics shops in Kenya. In addition, he supplies logistics for international organizations in Somalia. Regarding a possible return to Somalia he was cautious. Even though Dirir would like to settle in Mogadishu, a city he visits several times a year, at the moment of the interview he found it too insecure for his family to move there. Furthermore, such a move was only possible with enough resources. Therefore, Dirir planned to keep his mainstay in Kenya, even when returning to Somalia. Yet, also to Germany his links were still active. During vacation time they visit their children there and some years ago Dirir bought them a flat in a big city in southern Germany, thereby investing in Germany at last. (Dirir, November 2018, Nairobi)

Dirir's case exemplifies two aspects of Somali migration which I discuss in detail in this article – the conflation of notions and structures of return and of onward migration, and the changing socio-economic position and status through the migration trajectory.

Among Somali migrants, the move to Kenya is discussed as return, as the country is not regarded as a place of the *qurbajoog* (Somali: diaspora, lit: those who stayed abroad), but as belonging to the neighboring region where many Somalis settle. Analytically, the situation for Somalis in Kenyan cities can be interpreted as providing a framework for return and onward migration at the same time. In Kenya, Somali returnees can use the strong, already existing, Somali economic networks. These have been built up since the early 1990s by Kenyan Somalis and Somalian forced migrants moving to the Kenyan cities (Carrier & Scharrer, 2019). In addition, Kenya is chosen as a destination, because it is economically and politically relatively stable and secure (especially in the long run and compared to Somalia), and at the same time close to Somalia – it is fairly easy to travel to that country from Kenya, if required. Kenya is also seen as favorable in the educational realm, this concerns primarily towns such as Mombasa, Nairobi or Nakuru. Even the way Kenya dealt with the post-election violence in 2008 was seen as proof for some returnees that Kenya manages to stay stable in a situation of erupting violence (Bile, July 2011, Mombasa), in contrast to Somalia where many return aspirations had been shattered by the fall of the Islamic Courts Union at the end of 2006 (Hanad, November 2018, Nairobi). Somali neighborhoods in Nairobi (such as Eastleigh or South C), as well as in Mombasa and Nakuru, make it possible to live a Somali lifestyle, one similar to what would be the case in Somalia.

However, Somalis have an ambiguous position in Kenya (Scharrer, 2018). In the case of Kenyan Somalis this goes back to colonial times and the Shifta war of the 1960s, when the Somali populated areas tried to secede from Kenya. Their citizenship became even more ambiguous after Somalians began to flee to Kenya from the early 1990s onwards, blurring distinctions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Somalis have also been targeted as potential terrorists, especially since Kenya's army became one of the warring actors in Somalia in 2011 and the following retaliatory attacks in Kenya by al-Shabaab. Time and again the Kenyan state has organized roundups of Somalian refugees and 'terror suspects'. Since their migration to the Kenyan cities, Kenyan Somalis and Somalian refugees have furthermore been accused of 'taking over the country' economically and politically.⁷ Poor and lower middle-class Somalian migrants, who are the majority

of that community, are not part of the Kenyan public imagination of Somali migration, which focuses on people like Dirir (often disregarding Kenyan Somali internal migration entirely).

Return as onward migration

Similarly to questions of socio-economic positioning, return migration has often been treated within the framework of methodological nationalism. In that sense, the move of European Somalis to Kenya would not be treated as return. In this article I argue that it can be discussed as both – as return and onward migration at the same time, therefore this example is speaking to both bodies of literature, which often portray return migrants and onward migrants separately and differently (e.g. Nekby, 2006).

Economic aspects of return and onward migration

Research on the economic aspects of return has mainly focused on labor migration, often with the implicit assumption that migration is a carefully planned voluntary and unobstructed movement of less-educated workers in response to wage inequalities (Hagan & Wassink, 2020).

This perspective also informs the proposed answers to the question of who is returning, often putting economic reasons in the focus (see de Haas et al., 2015). Dustmann and Weiss (2007), for instance, named price differences, consumption patterns and higher earnings due to human capital acquisition as motives for return. Economic aspects are also often in focus where the outcome of return is concerned. One main difference made in this regard is whether returning migrants engage in self-employment or enter the labor market. Self-employment is described as the most viable path to upward social mobility in low and middle income countries for people without high school degree (Hagan & Wassink, 2020), with the time abroad as influential for the accumulation of cultural and financial capital. Concerning formal employment, there are indications that returnees earn higher wages than the non-migrant local population (Hagan & Wassink, 2020). This, however, is highly dependent on local structures where people have settled during their migration process and the cultural capital they can acquire and use in those respective settings (Hagan & Wassink, 2020; Gmelch, 1980).

Research concerning onward migration of forced migrants often deals with movement within Europe. There are a number of studies of Somalis moving from Sweden, Switzerland or the Netherlands to the UK after becoming EU-citizens (Lindley & Van Hear, 2007; Moret, 2018; Van Liempt, 2011). The putatively more liberal business environment in the UK is often mentioned as one reason for this onward migration. Research with Iranian refugees has shown that onward migration within Europe is often chosen as a way to overcome structural barriers in the labor market, especially by people with a relatively high educational level and, in relation to this, a rather low income (Kelly & Hedman, 2016). Comparing characteristics of onward and return migration of former immigrants in Sweden, Nekby (2006) came to a similar conclusion, showing that onward migrants had higher educational levels than return migrants.

Different kinds of return

Another difference noted in the literature about return and onward migration relates to the time people actually spend in the region after moving there (Carling & Erdal, 2014). This aspect is complicated by the often occurring divergence between the length of stay aspired and the actual time spent in the region of return (Moret, 2018, p. 59).

In the case of Somali return migration the shortest stays are linked to regular return visits in vacation time, a practice carried out only by a minority of those living abroad. Some (often elder) Somali migrants moved to East Africa for health reasons, either foregrounding the preferable

climate or the existence of Islamic healers in the region. Also in that case, return was regarded as temporary, even though some migrants stayed on for longer periods of time.

This stood in contrast to people like Dirir who moved to Kenya with his whole family, aiming to establish themselves economically independently. This group of returnees as independent business owners can be distinguished from another one, which settles in Kenyan cities in an even bigger number – returnees who migrate to Kenya because of their children. They bring their children back to East Africa as *dhaqan celin*, to ‘return to culture’, for periods ranging between several months to years, when they feel their children have become disconnected from *Somalinimo* (Somaliness, based on Islam and Somali ‘traditions’) – children who are seen as corrupted by ‘Western lifestyle’, who have psychological problems, who are taking drugs or alcohol or even have become involved in criminal activities.

Even though both groups aim to stay for a longer period of time in Kenya their way of receiving an income differs. The group I am focusing on in this article relied only on their businesses in Kenya, while the second group still received substantial parts of their income from the global North (either in form of remittances or as pension), sometimes in combination with additional income through business endeavors in Kenya.

Socio-economic similarities among Somali returnees

Most of the Somali ‘returnees’ in Kenya I interviewed, regardless of whether they belonged to the independent business owners or if they were living on remittances, were in similar legal situations and had comparable migration trajectories. They had lived in Europe or North America for several years as refugees and held the citizenship of the country of the global North they had lived in. Holding the citizenship of these countries was, for all of them, a prerequisite to return. This not only made it possible to move back to their country of citizenship in case their stay in Kenya was a temporary one, but also to stay in close contact with their family there. And for businesspeople in Kenya, this passport, enabling them to be mobile globally, was an important item with which to secure their enterprise. Some had migrated to Europe just to obtain a passport, with the clear aim of returning and building up their own business (Hodan, October 2018, Cologne). And all of them could be regarded as upper-middle class or upper class according to East African standards.⁸

Hernández-Carretero (2017) shows that many returnees are uncertain as to how they might maintain their lifestyle once they settle down in their African region of origin, and that many only do so after they have built up a financial safeguarding (in the form of savings, investments or permanent incomes) and when they have acquired a permanent residence permit in the global North. Concerning Somali returnees to Kenya, this applies especially for those who see their return as more than a temporary one. In many cases it is easier to remain in a safe economic position in Europe or North America compared to when moving to East Africa. Not only are social security systems absent there, the public sectors are basically private and everything needs to be paid for, especially where education and health care are concerned.

Return and entrepreneurship

Those interviewees who build up their own businesses in Kenya, have not gathered experience in that sector in Europe: like Dirir, most of them did not see a possibility of doing so while living there. When still residing mainly in Europe, they slowly built up their business endeavors in Kenya and only settled there with their families once their economic situation allowed to do so. Others had started businesses elsewhere (such as in Mozambique, Dubai or even China) before moving to Kenya.

Regarding reasons for moving to Kenya as independent businesspeople, structural as well as individual aspects were mentioned by interviewees. Structurally, some had experienced a devaluation of their cultural capital after migrating to Europe, or felt that social mobility was not possible due to discrimination and racism in the labor market. Hodan, for instance, who was planning to join her husband in Nairobi after finishing university in Germany, often felt that she had fewer chances of success in her application procedures because of her being visibly Muslim (Hodan, August 2017, Cologne). Some stated that Somali children do not have the chances they deserve when living abroad, for example due to discrimination in school (Buule, September 2017, Wiesbaden). In Kenya, however, it is difficult as a non-Kenyan to find work in the formal labor market (in which also only a minority of Kenyans is working), therefore building up one's own business is the only viable option. On an individual level the wish for economic independence was mentioned frequently, which at the same time enables spatial mobility and results in a high social status among Somalis. Furthermore, for Somalis it is sometimes possible in Kenya to forget "not to belong here" (Bilal, June 2011, Mombasa), in contrast to the situation in Europe.

Looking at the different kinds of enterprises set up, ranging from the telecommunications trade, restaurant ownership to consultancy work or interior design, the differentiation made in the literature between work on one's own account (with no employees) and entrepreneurship (the creation of businesses with employees: Piracha & Vadean, 2009) does not hold in the case of Somali returnees in Kenya. What matters more are the sector of the economy the business is situated in, as well as the income generated through it, making it more convincing to differentiate between survivalist and prosperous self-employment (Gindling & Newhouse, 2014).

Transnational socio-economic positioning

Socio-economic positioning in a transnational setting

Even though socio-economic aspects play a major role for the ability to move within and beyond the region as well as for the ways people settle down, it has not been widely studied in forced migration research. There are a few studies regarding the interplay of financial resources and mobility (Van Hear, 2014). Another aspect related to socio-economic stratification, which has been covered rather well in forced migration studies, are remittances. These also play an important role in the Somali setting, which translates into a strong focus on this topic in the research (Horst, 2006; Lindley, 2010).

Therefore, the scarce research on transnational socio-economic positioning, including in the setting of return, mainly refers to migrants who have not, in the majority, been legally categorized as refugees. Many of these studies build on Bourdieu's notion of capital (Kim, 2018), with some authors arguing that mobility itself can be regarded as a form of capital (Kaufmann et al., 2004).

In his research with Ghanaian migrants, for instance, Boris Nieswand (2014) showed that in the context of migration, capital cannot always be converted straightforward from one location to the other. This was especially true for the convertibility of economic capital into symbolic capital. This resulted in a 'status' paradox for migrants who had earned money under precarious conditions in Germany, but found that they were treated with suspicion on returning to Ghana – their economically relatively high position lacked "the conventional legitimation, such as high education, prestigious occupation, and/or descent" (p. 404).

Another study focusing on the socio-economic positioning of migrants in a transnational setting was done by Magdalena Nowicka (2013). Using her research on Poles in Germany, she distinguishes three types of migrants' transnational social positioning: in the "single-space" of one country, as "bi-local" when capital obtained in one country was used to improve the position in the other, and as "overlapping" when in "continuous conversions in two directions, ... migrants

live almost parallel lives, being embedded in two countries simultaneously” (Nowicka, 2013, pp. 34–35).

When looking at the example of Dirir, one can argue that his transnational social positioning is not only “bi-local” but “multi-local”, in Kenya, Germany and Somalia. He has used the financial capital acquired in Germany to build up his business in Kenya and later in Somalia, a process enhanced by his ability to travel due to holding a German passport. At the same time, his links to Germany are still strong, through his children, investment in Germany, but also his membership in a German business association in Kenya, while his base remains in Kenya.

Transferability and convertibility of capital

Based on the interviews carried out, another difference between the two groups of business owners and of returnees living on remittances emerges – the socio-economic positioning of the return migrants and of the families they grew up in. All of my interview partners who had established themselves in Kenya by running their own businesses already had a good education when they were still living in Somalia (up to university level). In those cases where they were still too young when leaving, they had attended university in the countries in the global North in which their families had settled. They had left Somalia and the East African region rather early, already in the 1980s or in the early 1990s. They also had parents who either had positions within the political structures of the Somali state or were themselves businesspeople, and the transfer of capital within their families had helped to build up a relatively good starting position. In contrast, returnees relying on financial resources from abroad had, in most cases, lower educational degrees compared to the first group. In addition, while many of them had moved to Europe in the 1990s as well, they had done so a few years later than the first group.

In the case of the returning Somali business owners, legitimation of a higher socio-economic status through education and belonging to a respected family (within Somali society) was observable in most cases. The ability to convert capital was, however, linked to the age during migration.

Rukia, for instance, moved to Sweden at the beginning of the 1990s, when she was 13 years old. She had lived in Sweden for more than half of her life and had moved to Kenya in 2008 after finishing university, following the example of a sister from Canada who had successfully built up a restaurant in Nairobi and who was living in the same area. Their father had been active in Somali politics, but had to go into exile in the 1980s, enabling him to bring his family to Sweden when the war broke out. When I met Rukia in Nairobi the first time in 2010, she was then in her early thirties. In contrast to most other Somali women, she was not yet married and had no children. Rukia lived alone in a three-room flat in a mixed upper-middle class neighborhood close to the city center. She earned her living doing consultancies in Somalia from time to time, but otherwise enjoyed city life as an expat in Nairobi. Even though Rukia was in a relatively good socio-economic position, in 2013 she left Nairobi and went back to Sweden, a return from return. This step was among others influenced by the scarcity of employment opportunities in Kenya and the difficulty of keeping the living standard to which she aspired. Since returning to Sweden, she has been working as a consultant in social projects related to migration.⁹

This example shows how the convertibility of cultural capital (high education) into financial capital depends on the socio-economic structure prevailing in a given location. Return or onward migration to East Africa is difficult for people trying to find employment in the rather narrow sector of international organizations, and finding work in the wider formal employment sector is, for non-Kenyans, also rather unlikely. Building up an independent business in East Africa seems to be easier, because the business environment there is less restrictive. Somali migrants are, however, also aware of the high volatility of the business environment in Kenya, making it even more important to maintain links with Europe (Hodan, October 2018, Cologne).

Dirir’s and Rukia’s migration trajectories show that age during migration plays an important role. While Dirir was already about to build up his own family when migrating to Europe, Rukia

was still in her early teens and going to school. This had implications for their educational and employment trajectories, which in turn influenced their possibilities for moving to Kenya – Dirir built up savings through his employment in a low-status position without furthering his education, while Rukia had studied and moved to Kenya with her knowledge and status, but without the idea of investing in her own business, or the money to do so.

In Dirir's case, it was not his (unfinished) education which resulted in a high socio-economic status in Kenya, but his ability to use money earned from rather lowly regarded work in Europe to build up a successful business in Kenya, an endeavor highly prestigious among Somalis. Higher education and, therefore, cultural capital was in his case not so much a means of staying or becoming upper-middle class, but rather a symbol and indicator of being part of it.

This changed somewhat for his children. Dirir could use the profit from this business to send them to highly regarded private schools in Kenya and, later, to enable them to study in Europe. This allowed his children to stay in Europe while holding jobs which had high status and were well paid. With their degrees, however, it was also easier for them to find employment in Europe than in East Africa and Dirir does not think that his children will ever return to Kenya or Somalia.

Many members of this second generation identify as European, only waiting to return to their 'real home'. Hanad, who was in a similar situation as Dirir (having moved abroad as a student before applying for asylum in 1991), told me about his daughter, who, when she was only six years old, said "I am British and will always be British" (November 2018, Nairobi). Children who moved from Europe to Kenya when they were already in their teens were especially likely to express strong feelings of displacement. Often, they did not speak the local languages well, neither Kiswahili nor Somali.

For this second generation, there is also a danger that return or onward mobility can hinder social mobility. Especially when moving back and forth more than once, children have to cope with different schools, languages and educational expectations, making it harder to obtain a degree acknowledged transnationally (employee of the Norwegian embassy in Nairobi, December 2018). Those returnees building up successful businesses, know of this danger and do everything to avert such an outcome, for instance by sending their children to international schools (which offer internationally acknowledged degrees) and not to integrated schools, which combine a secular curriculum with Islamic education. The cultural capital obtainable in the latter schools is much more difficult to transfer to and convert in Europe. They also know about the legal frameworks and the legal documents necessary for their transnational mobility, so that they do not get stuck in East Africa, not being able to return to Europe, as happens to some youth sent there as *dhaqan celin* by their parents (ibid.) – bringing to a halt spatial as well as social mobility.

Mobility and legal capital

Cultural capital also equips migrants with the knowledge of where to go when migrating, and how to plan their migration. In Mombasa, for instance, I met a hotel owner who had, in the early 1990s, decided against two possible options for migration: the US and Italy. Coming from the family of a high ranking Somali politician, he had studied in the US and knew that migrating to the global North would mean a steep fall in his families' socio-economic positioning (especially for his parents). So, he went to Dubai with them instead, where he built up one of the first Somali hotels (Bile, July 2011, Mombasa).

This ability to choose destinations carefully, combined with the financial means they were equipped with, enabled a relatively quick and safe long-distance migration. In whatever country they then settled in, they also needed comparatively little time to acquire citizenship. Once equipped with this citizenship, it was easier to return to East Africa and build up their own businesses, as these often require high international mobility. Cultural and financial capital were,

therefore, converted into something that could be called legal capital (Al-Sharmani, 2006; Moret, 2018), which in turn enabled the accumulation of other resources and hence another conversion into financial as well as cultural capital (especially for the next generation). Legal capital in that sense does not refer only to citizenship (Bauder, 2008; Kim, 2018 subsumes it under social capital), and, concomitantly, to international mobility, but also to the differential legal status migrants can have in the respective countries of residence (for instance as students or as asylum seekers). This status then regulates unequal access to educational structures, social security and health systems, and the economic realm.

This finding supports Weiß' (2005) argument that social positions on a global level are structured by spatial autonomy and the quality of the spaces one can access. Both aspects are linked to legal capital in general, and to specific sorts of passports in particular. While most of the returnees I interviewed had European or North American citizenship, Bile, the hotel owner from Mombasa, was able to travel on a diplomatic passport. Most of them used their non-African citizenship and their financial resources to acquire long-term legal residency permits in Kenya.

Ideas of successful return and lifestyle

In contrast to other groups of forced migrants, such as Syrians in Egypt (Suerbaum, 2018), socio-economic positioning did not play, for Somali migrants, a major role in narrations about migration – it was rather played out in lifestyle. In particular, those migrants who had lived somewhere in the global North displayed a different lifestyle (expressed in clothes, language, meeting places and public appearance) than those who had stayed in the region or in Arab countries. These contrasting lifestyles have already been the subject of research on returning *qurbajoog* in Somaliland, the place where most research on Somali return migration has been carried out so far (Musa, 2016; Galipo, 2018).

The processes of migration to the global North, and of return to the region of origin are both loaded with expectations. Those migrants who manage to settle down in Europe or North America are expected by their families and acquaintances to be “successful” and to share that success with those who have stayed in East Africa, especially in the form of remittances. Spatial mobility is therefore expected to result, also, in social mobility (Ali, 2016). In cases where they return they are likewise expected to match that image of “success”.

Tiilikainen (2011) shows that for Somaliland, local ideas about successful migration and return derive from those who either come for vacation from Europe or who move back for good, and who present their success through clothing, houses and cars. In my research, I could observe this display of success as well. Returnees were very visible in the cities, where they were often living together in middle-class neighborhoods, frequented the same restaurants and their children went to the same private schools.

There was, however, a marked difference between those Somali returnees who mentioned their children as the main reason for their return and those who aimed at building up a new life in Kenya by establishing successful businesses. While the first group, putting much importance on *Somalinimo*, often stayed in predominantly Somali neighborhoods (such as Eastleigh or parts of South C in Nairobi) and sent their children to Muslim or integrated schools, the second group often settled in mixed neighborhoods (such as Nairobi's Hurlingham) and sent their children to international schools (mainly those teaching the British curriculum). When asked for the reason behind these differing choices of living environments, I was told, by a returnee businesswoman, that people staying in the Somali neighborhoods were “a different group of people”, focused more on religious education (Filsan, November 2018, Nairobi). Following Neubert and Stoll (2018) one could speak of different milieus of return migrants, subcultural units grouping together people with similar views and ways of life (p. 69).

Conclusion

In this article I set out to characterize the socio-economic positioning of European Somali migrants trying to settle down in Kenya permanently by becoming economically independent, and distinguished them from Somalis moving there to raise their children in a Somali way. In doing so, I aimed to shed light on two different aspects of migration research – the field of return migration and the socio-economic positioning of (forced) migrants in a transnational space.

Concerning the aspect of return migration, I argued that the case of European Somalis in Kenya should be discussed not only as a form of return, but also as a type of onward migration. It is return in the sense of moving to the region of origin and of living in an environment that is economically, politically and culturally closer to Somalia than Europe, and it is an onward migration in the sense of living as a foreigner in a national framework that is neither the one of origin nor the one of one's (acquired) citizenship. Both kinds of movement, onward migration as well as return, require financial capital as well as legal capital. Furthermore, cultural capital helps with the acquisition of both.

Settling down in Kenya therefore often results, for Somali migrants, in a 'tri-local' or 'multi-local' positioning (Nowicka, 2013). While this positioning includes in all cases the European country of citizenship as well as Kenya, it can also encompass Somalia (as in the case of Dirir) or countries where migrants enjoy business connections, such as Dubai (where Hanad had lived before moving to Kenya).

As this article has shown, European Somalis in Kenya are not a homogenous group and there are differences between their migration motives – while for independent business owners moving to Kenya is an onward migration, for those aiming at bringing their children closer to Somali lifestyle it is more of a return.

Linked to this, there are, also, differences in transnational socio-economic positioning. While the group this article has focused on mainly tried to establish itself in Kenya, the second group relied much more on payments from Europe and therefore remained in an established position there. Members of the first group often come from upper-middle class or upper class families, and were often unable to retain that status in the global North. Their return to their region of origin is an effort to rebuild their previously-held status. While in Europe they often had to take up employment which was below their qualifications, in East Africa they might be overqualified for the positions available in a relatively narrow formal job market, creating another kind of exclusion. This situation somewhat changes for the next generation, who in many cases move back to Europe after their education in Kenya.

The research laid out in this article showed two important aspects of transnational socio-economic positioning. On the one hand, it outlined the difficulties of convertibility of capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Nieswand, 2014) involved in moving from one locality to another, in turn inducing another migratory step. Further research needs to take into account other aspects that influence this convertibility of capital and, therefore, transnational socio-economic positioning. These aspects include gender and age, but also the transfer of capital within families: this would enable researchers to transcend a too narrow perspective on socio-economic position, which sees it as an attribute of individuals. On the other hand, the research showed how important legal capital is for spatial autonomy (Weiß, 2005), because it enables transnational mobility and therefore, also, return in the first place. In addition, financial capital is also needed for the kind of return migration described in this article, in order to make it stable.

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Notes

1. The term Somali is used to refer to an ethnic category, while the term Somalian refers to people coming from Somalia as a national category.
2. The term onward migration is used instead of secondary migration (which is more prevalent in the literature), as in many cases this move is already the third or fourth migration.
3. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, all names are pseudonyms. The quote also hints at the discussion among Somalis, whether European or American Somalis are more successful economically.
4. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/Kenya-Infographics-31-Mar-2020.pdf>; retrieved May 18, 2020.
5. https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=stock_abs_origin&t=2017&cm49=706, accessed May 07, 2019. In 2014 it was estimated that about 12.3 Mio. people lived in Somalia (including Somaliland) (UNFPA, 2014).
6. In 2018 a journal estimated that about 300.000 Somalis were living in Europe (5 facts about Somali diaspora, Gulf News, August 16, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/5-facts-about-somali-diaspora-1.2267203>; retrieved June 6, 2019), a number corresponding to statistics available (eg. EUROSTAT).
7. Report by Kenyan student from a public discussion during which one of the participants said “We are being colonized by refugees” (Nairobi, November 2010).
8. This statement is based on census data from 2009 and six expenditure classes derived from it (Wiesmann et al., 2016, p. 104). Also concerning urban settings the interviewed Somali returnees were to be found above the mean expenditure line.
9. Offline and online communication with Rukia, especially September 2012, Nairobi & August 2018 (online); interviews with her sister and a close friend, November 2018, Nairobi.

ORCID

Tabea Scharrer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5640-116X>

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