Migration in sub-Saharan Africa: The Somali refugee and migrant experience[1]

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Abstract

This forum contributes to debates on migration, displacement, and place-making in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. We bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to move the existing literature past the dominant focus on the *causes* of displacement to a rich and granular exploration of its *consequences*. The forum focuses on Somali refugees and migrants for two reasons. First, Somalia is one of the largest refugee-producing countries in the world. Second, depending on the host states in which they find themselves, Somali migrants and refugees can encounter many different fates, ranging from living in refugee camps to migrating to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa to a small minority being resettled in countries of the global north. These varied circumstances make it possible to study strategies of place-making among Somali communities from several different perspectives. A central theme of this forum is to highlight the agency of migrants and refugees and to emphasize the fact that these groups are more than mere victims of their circumstances. The articles in this volume will be of interest to scholars of African studies, anthropology, comparative politics, migration studies, peace studies, and Somali studies.

The present forum contributes to debates on migration, displacement, and place-making by focusing on the experiences of Somali refugees and migrants in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Despite the presence of a rich comparative literature on migration, this topic has been relatively understudied in the African context. The lack of attention paid to questions of migration and displacement in sub-Saharan Africa is especially surprising, not only because the region has experienced migrant and refugee crises since the 1960s (Gould 1974; Adepoju 1982) but also because these crises have become particularly intense in recent years (Horsti 2008; Laub 2016). While much of the displacement that African populations experienced in the twentieth century was driven by civil wars, today the post-9/11 context and new forms of conflict—including electoral and resource-related violence (Straus 2012)—have generated a distinct set of pressures for numerous communities on the continent, including, among others, pastoral groups in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. One of the distinct features of recent waves of migration in Africa is that the majority of refugees and migrants move to other countries in the region (Shimeles 2010), while at the same time holding out hope of eventually being resettled in Europe or North America (Abdi 2015; Dovi 2017).

Due to a dominant focus on the causes, rather than the consequences, of displacement and migration, however, we still know relatively little about how refugee and migrant communities try to integrate themselves into foreign societies, especially in the African context. In other words, and with a few notable exceptions (Landau & Monson 2008; Jinnah 2010; Lochery 2012), the agency, responses, and strategies of place-making on the part of these groups has been understudied. The present forum seeks to remedy this neglect. Drawing on the work of an interdisciplinary group of scholars in anthropology, peace studies, and political science, it

highlights how migrants and refugees are more than mere victims of their circumstances. Rather, by relying on family and kin connections, once in their new host countries—whether temporarily or permanently—these groups build on pre-existing economic and social networks and also forge new networks of their own to secure their livelihoods. In addition, they navigate the precariousness of being migrants and/or refugees in innovative ways, which range from relying on relatives to finding individuals with connections to the government and to NGOs as a means of traversing the onerous bureaucracies of their host states (see Balakian 2019 in this forum).

Within these environments that migrants must negotiate, notions of belonging and identity become central to migration debates, particularly in a context where large portions of populations are perceived to be non-citizens. Indeed, the question of who "counts" as a citizen and who does not reflects changing normative, political, and socio-economic considerations. Samson Bezabeh (2011) has described this dynamic in relation to Djibouti, for example, where a complex set of nationality laws in the 1970s and early 1980s meant that a large number of people who did not belong to the major ethnic groups (Issa, Afar, or Arab) were not accorded Djiboutian citizenship. Matters eventually came to a head in 2003, when thousands of people who had lived in Djibouti for generations were expelled. These individuals were labeled "illegal immigrants" and described as a "security threat" (Bezabeh 2011). Ironically, the same laws have given Djibouti citizenship to Issa Somalis living in Ethiopia.

Bezabeh is only one of a number of scholars who have come to question who has the right to be a citizen and what citizenship—as a lived experience—means. Even in cases where migrants have legal rights, they are often denied "social membership," regardless of how long they have lived in host countries. This may be because migrants are often quickly linked to

crime, and more recently terrorism, making their position and those of refugees, even those who have lived in host countries for up to three generations, precarious (Nyamnjoh 2007).

The issues of citizenship and belonging are of vital importance to those of Somali decent. Because "Somali" refers both to the citizens of the post-colonial state of Somalia that disintegrated in 1991 as well as to citizens of neighboring countries who are of Somali descent (defined by linguistic and cultural commonalities), it is important to clarify who we are referring to when use the terms Somali or Somalia in this forum. "Somali people" or "Somalis" refers to people of Somali descent, regardless of their formal citizenship status. Although most Somali people who have dispersed throughout the world since 1991 are primarily from the post-colonial state of Somalia including Somaliland, owing to family, religious, and business relations, the contemporary mobility of Somalis throughout the African continent and beyond is shared by people of Somali descent living in different countries in the Horn and East African countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Waves of Somali Migration

To gain a better perspective on the formation of Somali migrant and refugee communities throughout the African continent and beyond, it is important to first understand the dispersal of the Somali people out of their original homelands in the Horn of Africa. The Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa are adjacent to the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. Consequently, throughout their history, the Somali people have been involved in trade networks that linked the Horn of Africa to other regions and continents. One such trade network was based in the Indian Ocean world and linked the East African littoral, including the Benadir ports of southern Somalia, to India and the Arabian Peninsula. As such, travel and dispersal are

not entirely new to Somalis. However, large-scale population movements within the region and beyond have only occurred over the last century. These migrations have contributed to the creation of Somali migrant and refugee communities throughout the world. Although they took place in several waves, the most significant phase of emigration occurred following the disintegration of the Siyad Barre regime in 1991. The waves of dispersal that Somalis have experienced over the years were a reflection of, and a response to, global and regional political and economic developments as well as specific events within Somalia itself. In what follows, we briefly highlight some of the major episodes that led to the dispersal of the Somali people out of their traditional homelands in the Horn of Africa.

The first wave of migration began with the onset of European colonization of the Horn of Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the British Empire established a protectorate in northern Somalia that came to be known as British Somaliland.[2] Part of the British interest in this territory was a desire to find a source of meat for their major military station on the other side of the Red Sea in Aden, Yemen, as well as to protect British ships on the vital waterway of the Gulf of Aden, which separates the Horn of Africa from Yemen (Lewis 2002). Many Somali men were hired as dockworkers on British navy ships. Some of these Somali seamen ended up settling in port cities in Britain such as Cardiff and Liverpool, thus constituting some of the first Somali communities in Europe (Kleist 2004).

Another major displacement of the Somali people, though not necessarily leading to a dispersal out of the region, took place as a result of the Ethiopian-Somali war of 1977–78 over the Ogaden region. This conflict resulted in the displacement of over half a million Somalis from the Ogaden region and the creation of large refugee camps in northern Somalia. The displacement caused by this conflict was region-specific, affecting only Somalis in the Ogaden

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region, but the direct and indirect consequences of this conflict significantly contributed to the fall of the Somali Republic in 1991.[3]

The third, and most important, event that led to the dispersal of the Somali people throughout the African continent and beyond was the complete disintegration of the Somali state in 1991. After a decade of trying to suppress various rebel movements, the dictatorial regime of Mohamed Siyad Barre collapsed. Following its fall, victorious rebel groups failed to form a new government, which further perpetuated conflict. This threw the country into a prolonged period of violence and lawlessness and resulted in the displacement of a significant percentage of the population. As Beth Whitaker (2019:3) notes in her essay in this forum, some estimate that of a total population of about ten million, approximately two million people exited the territory of the former Somali state. Well over half of these refugees remain within Africa, mainly in refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Kenya and Ethiopia, with smaller communities residing in Uganda, South Africa, and Egypt. The remainder moved farther afield and today form large diasporic communities, with close to half a million Somalis having settled in Europe and North America. As a result of this dispersal, there is now a global, networked, and densely connected Somali diaspora, which has meant the emergence of a transnational infrastructure that facilitates mobility and business transactions across the globe.

Contributions within the Forum

In her commentary rounding out this forum, Fatma Ahmed Ali contextualizes the four articles by drawing on her own experiences as a Kenyan citizen of Somali origin. First, in reference to Whitaker's findings, she sheds light on the ways in which the Kenyan government's policies toward migrants have evolved over time, shaped largely by the construction of Somalis as a

security threat. Second, by detailing the challenges that she has faced in navigating the Kenyan bureaucracy, Ali provides a firsthand account of the ways that host states and their policies affect the lives of ordinary individuals. In several ways, this discussion mirrors the findings of Sophia Balakian's ethnographic study. Third, in tandem with Nereida Ripero-Muñiz's and Emma Lochery's articles, Ali highlights the opportunities that Somali migrant and refugee communities create to exert agency, produce and maintain commercial networks, and develop entrepreneurial skills within and across host countries. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the commentary identifies areas for future scholarship, which include research on gender vulnerabilities faced by male members of the Somali diaspora as well lessons that could be drawn from the Somali case about more recent migrant crises, such as the one in Syria.

Given the significant displacement that Somalis have faced, there is now a burgeoning literature on the experiences, identities, and life conditions of different Somali diasporic communities, as well as their varied links to, and impacts on, developments in Somalia (Lindley 2009; Hammond et al 2011; Horst et al. 2010; Hoehne 2006; Galipo 2019; Abdile 2014; Iazzolino & Hersi 2017). With the exception of Kenya and Ethiopia (Horst 2006; Abdi 2015; Carrier 2016), however, the primary focus of much of this this literature is on the Somali diaspora in Europe and North America. To fill the gaps in the extant scholarship on this subject, therefore, the contributions in this forum focus explicitly on Somali migrant and refugee communities in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia.

Each of our contributors begins by taking into account the magnitude of the Somali crisis. In her research on host country governments' responses to Somali migration within Africa, for instance, Whitaker (2019:3) notes that Somali emigration witnessed two peaks: the first one occurred between the late 1980s and early 1990s, while the second took place in the 2000s

following the emergence of the Union of Islamic Courts and the rise of al-Shabaab. Against this background, Whitaker compares the immigration policies directed at Somali migrants in South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. Her research suggests that immigration policies are a function of popular preferences, security considerations, and normative commitments. She explores the ways in which economic and political competition in South Africa have contributed to xenophobic violence, resulting in generalized policies that have limited the economic power of Somalis and other immigrant groups. In Kenya, on the other hand, the perceived security threat of the Somali migrant population has resulted in differentiated policies that impose limitations on Somalis in particular, which other migrant communities do not experience. Finally, Tanzania has adopted a piecemeal approach to its policies, where normative obligations have led the Tanzanian government to naturalize only Somali Bantus while making it difficult for other immigrants to settle in the country.

Balakian engages with the competing claims of humanitarian imperatives, which must provide for the needs of the most vulnerable refugees on the one hand while balancing the security considerations of states on the other. After noting that there are 400,000 Somali refugees in Kenya (2019:5), her ethnographic accounts of Somali refugees in the country bring attention to the ways in which these individuals navigate the resettlement system and are caught in Kenya's 2014 anti-refugee security operation. Balakian thus shows specifically how refugees use their limited agency to strategically navigate complex bureaucratic environments.

The contributions of Ripero-Muñiz and Lochery speak to the agency of migrants in a range of geographical locations both within and outside Africa. Ripero-Muñiz, through a gender-centered lens, raises critical questions about the assumed position of Somali women as "helpless victims of a patriarchal society" by revealing the ways in which Somali women migrants in

Nairobi and Johannesburg have initiated support networks, started businesses, and exerted their agency by drawing on cultural and religious practices.

Moving beyond Somali migration within East and Southern Africa or to the global north, Lochery focuses on the eastward migration of Somali entrepreneurs to China. Her work traces the infrastructure that Somali businesspeople have created to support flows of goods from trading cities in China to east Africa, a mobility built on the trading platforms created by the journeys of pioneer entrepreneurs.

In sum, by studying the lived experiences of one of the world's largest displaced communities, this forum and its constituent articles shed new light not only on the economic activities and networks of Somalis—something that has already received some attention in extant studies (Mohamedali 2014; Ram, Theodorakopoulos, & Jones 2008)—but also on the politics of place-making in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

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Notes

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[2] This is now the secessionist region known as Somaliland. Central to its claim for independence is that it was colonized and administered separately from the rest of Somalia.

[3] Refugee camps were established in northern Somalia (Somaliland) to house those displaced by war from Ogaden. This exacerbated communal conflict in northern Somalia especially after the Siyad Barre regime's attempt to use the refugees to punish communities that it perceived were hostile to the regime. This further undermined the legitimacy of the regime and intensified the conflict in northern Somalia. A more direct consequence of the Ethiopian-Somali conflict was the support Ethiopia extended to Somali rebel groups that eventually defeated the regime.