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# SOMALI LIVES ACROSS BORDERS, LOCALITIES AND COMMUNITIES

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*Transnational practices in the everyday lives of Somali refugees  
in Amsterdam*



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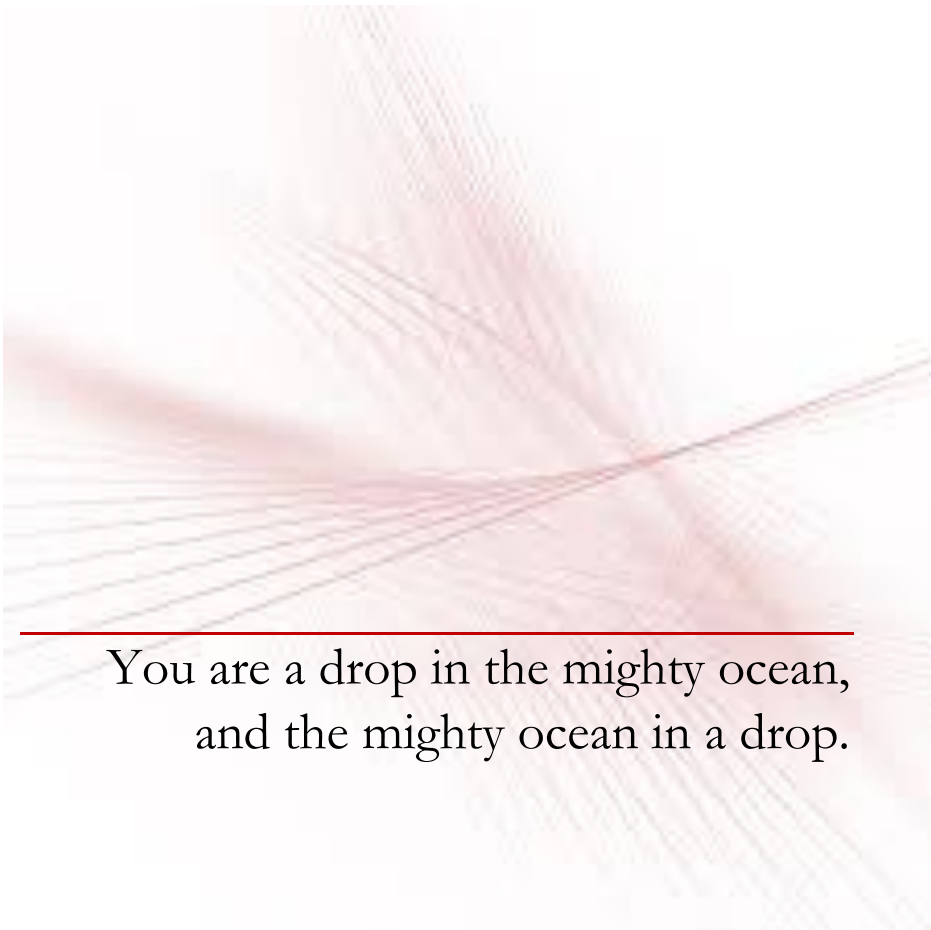
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You are a drop in the mighty ocean,  
and the mighty ocean in a drop.

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Where becomes man  
How fares a soul  
When may the heart speak  
Is there a heaven and  
Who has ever seen it  
And could live to tell  
The wind carries us to new places  
Rain washes away our illusions  
Our desert is an empty station  
The steppe a schoolyard  
A high-rise flat: savannah

The best you can become is yourself  
But whom will I become if I can't be who I am  
What creates my existence  
Who will talk to me if I should not exist  
I am not a news item

My name is not 'media report'  
I am a history and a future  
I am not my country  
I am not my passport, my identity  
I am a promise  
A cloud full of opportunities  
A heart, a love  
A lawn with the promise  
Of flowers in the spring  
A summer with rain so soft  
With people dancing in the park  
  
I can love this country  
Like I once loved my origin  
I am progress  
Because I continued  
When I thought of better  
The best is yet to come  
With that thought I started my journey

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# Table of Contents

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<b>Acknowledgement - <i>A word of thanks</i></b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Prologue - <i>A short side path</i></b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Societal and scientific relevance .....	12
Somali refugees in Amsterdam – <i>heterogeneity explained</i> .....	14
Reader’s Guide.....	14
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>16</b>
A critical transnational research lens .....	16
Structures - <i>Nations, borders, places</i> .....	17
The nation-state and deterritorialisation .....	17
Place-making; locality versus mobility .....	17
Networks - <i>Social networks and social spaces</i> .....	18
Social networks and ties .....	18
Flows and social capital.....	19
Transnational families.....	20
Agency - <i>Community and strategies</i> .....	20
Refugee experiences and diaspora.....	20
Strategies .....	21
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Single-sited research on a transnationally located phenomenon <i>Context of fieldwork and methods applied</i> .....	23
Operationalization <i>From theory to the everyday</i> .....	24
Selection criteria for interlocutors <i>Access points during the fieldwork</i> .....	26
Challenges of my research .....	28
<b>Chapter 1 - Leaving home, ending up in Amsterdam - <i>experiences of arriving, asylum and acceptance</i></b> .....	<b>29</b>
Differentiated experiences.....	29
The ‘old generation’ and the ‘newcomers’ .....	29
Legal statuses, illegal lives .....	31
Refugeeness and scattered families.....	31
<b>Chapter 2 – Lives across borders - <i>transnational phone calls, migration and capital</i></b> .....	<b>34</b>
Transnational social practices .....	34
For the love of family: family care & management.....	34
Migration strategies and legal capital .....	36
Remittances & resources.....	37
<b>Chapter 3 – Living in the local reality of Amsterdam - <i>obligations, constraints and capital</i></b> .....	<b>40</b>
Transnational linkages rooted in locality - effects.....	40
Obligations and the pain of living with your heart in multiple locations .....	41
Home-making; an involved community .....	42
<b>Conclusion &amp; discussion</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>46</b>

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# Acknowledgement

## *A word of thanks*

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This thesis would not have been what it is without the contributions of some wonderful persons. First of all, I would like to thank all the people I spoke to, for taking the time to share your experiences and gave me insights into some very intimate, private episodes in your life courses. I had a really nice time while talking to you and I am very grateful for the way you made me familiar with Somali values like hospitality. Then, I would like to thank Anne, whose beautiful, intimate and nuanced ethnographic research among undocumented refugees in Amsterdam has been my *guiding light* on the path I followed during this thesis. You were an example to me both in the way you carried out your anthropological fieldwork as well as the analytical words you wrote down afterwards, which were so much able to grasp – with passion and nuance - an unbelievable reality, sketching both the harsh reality of living in-between borders and the strength of individuals able to build a community in a place of non-recognition. The enormous ability to have empathy and get a nuanced understand of people with different worldviews is what I most admire in you. Ultimately, I would like to thank Mohamed, my beautiful friend and love. It was amazing to follow your lead through a community that is so hard to fathom. You so openly established contacts, started conversations, made me familiar with Somali values and was so involved with my thesis throughout the whole process. It is fitting to open this thesis with you, for your generosity and support, but also because you very much exemplify what I wish to document in this study: living across borders - with both the beautiful strength and constant pain that comes with it. That makes this thesis not only a search for answers to my research questions, but also a search for understanding the experiences lying behind your eyes. Thank you for giving me these insights in your world that – no matter how close our hearts are - is so different from my own.

June 2014

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## شكر وتقدير<sup>1</sup>

### كلمة شكر

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أن هذه الأطروحة لم تكن ما هي عليه دون اشتراكات بعض الأشخاص الرائعة. قبل كل شيء، أريد شكر جميع الناس الذين تحدثت معهم، لأخذ الوقت لتبادل تجارب خاصة بهم، و إعطاء نظرة ثاقبة في بعض الحلقات الخاصة و الحميمة جدا في حياتهم. لقد استمعتت أحدث معكم و أنا ، التي قامت بعدد الأبحاث الإثنوغرافية بين Anne شاكرا للطريقة التي اعترفت بها للقيم الصومالية مثل كرم الضيافة. ثم، أود أن أشكر اللاجئيين غير الشرعيين في أمستردام. هذه الأبحاث الجميلة والحميمة كانت النور المرشد خلال هذه الأطروحة. كنت مثالا لي سواء في الطريقة التي نفذت فيها العمل الميداني الأنثروبولوجي الخاص بك وكذلك في الكلمات التحليلية التي كتبتها بعد ذلك، والتي كانت كثيرة القدرة على تفهيم واقع لا يصدق، بكل عاطفة و وضوح، راسمة كل من الواقع القاسي الذي يعرفه من يعيش بين الحدود وقوة الأفراد القادرة على بناء مجتمع في مكان عدم الاعتراف. قدرتك الهائلة على التعاطف والحصول على دقة فهم من ناس ذو وجهات نظر عالمية مختلفة هو ما أنا معجبة به الأكثر.

وفي نهاية المطاف، أريد أن أشكر محمد، سدصص وحببيبي. كان من المدهش تتبع قيادتكم الخاصة عبر مجتمع من الصعب جدا فهمه. فلقد انشأت الإتصال بكل صراحة، بدأت التحدث معي، جعلتني متعرفة على القيم الصومالية وشاركت بهذه الطريقة في الأطروحة في جميع أنحاءها. ومن المناسب فتح هذه الأطروحة معكم، شكراً لكرامتك ودعمك، ولكن أيضا لأنك تجسد كثيرا ما أود أن أوثق في هذه الدراسة: الذين يعيشون بين الحدود - بكل من القوة الجميلة والألم المستمر التي تأتي مع هذه الظروف. هذا يجعل هذه الرسالة ليس فقط بحث عن أجوبة على الأسئلة بحثي، ولكن أيضا بحث لفهم الخبرات الكامنة وراء عينيك. شكرا لكم لمنحي هذه الأفكار على العالم الذي تعيشون فيه أنه - بغض النظر عن مدى قرب قلوبنا - يختلف كثيرا عن عالمي.

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<sup>1</sup> For the Arab translation I am very grateful to Skander Jaibi.



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# Prologue

## *A short side path*

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This thesis<sup>2</sup> symbolises a search for understanding lives across borders, in societies in which you may have ended up by chance, in which you may or may not have been welcomed or may not feel accepted in. It reflects on the experiences of the people living their lives in Amsterdam, while having their hearts in multiple places which are not nationally bordered and are not solely enterable by possessing a piece of paper, which indicates where in this world you belong. According to me, the refugee problem is a topic deeply related to humanity, mutual recognition and opening the door of your warm, safe house for others. A deeper understanding of the meaningful experiences of those who are not born in the privileged position of having citizenship of a European country is fruitful for achieving this sense of humanity and recognition.

During the writing of this thesis, the refugees of We Are Here, who have gathered in Amsterdam since September 2012 and have already been standing on the borders of our society for several years, were in doubt whether or not they were able to stay in the place where they found shelter. Saturday the 31<sup>st</sup> of May the inhabitants of the Vluchthaven<sup>3</sup> – an old prison in the midst of the prosperous southern centre area of Amsterdam – were packing their bags again; this was the fourth time in nearly two years that the municipality of Amsterdam decided they were not permitted to stay in their temporary “haven” and had to cooperate to return to their countries of origin. However, for all those men and women from Somalia who haven’t been able to get a residence permit, illegality in Amsterdam is chosen over returning to the insecurity of living in the midst of violence.

Although this research does not focus on Dutch asylum politics and problematic European border policies, I would like to take a short side path to make my readers aware of the extensive consequences these policies have for refugees who are “out of procedure” (*uitgeprocedeerd*), but unable to return to their countries of origins, due to resistance of the home country to provide travel documents or due to fear of insecurity. As thoroughly described by Anne Wonders (2013) in her beautifully intimate, meaningful research within this particular community of refugees, borders are “chasing” these refugees in almost all dimensions of their lives. Every step they take, they are reminded of their reduced identity as an ‘illegal alien’. As Anne stated, the binary oppositions in our understanding of borders as open/closed is not nuanced enough to fully understand the complexity of borders. Every border creates a frontier area in which actors of different background meet each other and where they engage in new forms of community. As this particular group of refugees stayed together, they challenge existing structures of asylum; staying together is a demonstration in itself to reveal the malfunctioning of closing borders.

Many of the truths of fleeing one’s country disappear in unsung deeds, unrecorded acts and untold stories, which to me seem the consequence of a widespread bureaucratic fear among refugees; the fear for unrecognition by the Dutch state, the fear for deportation or illegality, and the fear that all has been for nothing, that fleeing was worthless for you did not arrive somewhere safe. It are these unrecorded acts and unsung deeds that move on with the wind and disappear as a refugee becomes a mere ‘intruder in our society’ that must integrate as soon as possible. And yet these untold stories are necessary to achieve humanity, recognition and an understanding of this Other.

One of my undocumented friends and an interlocutor of this thesis told me a story, full of

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<sup>2</sup> I take full responsibility for the content of this thesis, including for any errors, misinterpretations or misrepresentations.

<sup>3</sup> From December until June the municipality of Amsterdam decided to finally provide the group of around 120 undocumented refugees gathered among the name We Are Here with food and shelter. This was the unavoidable step the municipality had to take after the group made themselves visible, moving from a tent camp, to an empty church and to empty office buildings. Besides, a decision of the European Council for Social Rights stating the responsibility of the Dutch government to provide these refugees with food and shelter was crucial here.

hope and expectations for a better future for his country and his people. Standing in the midst of the old prison – ironically, the temporary “haven” of illegality - he told me:

“Last week I saw on the television a professor in the US, who was explaining that Somalia is in pain and has nothing left. He said it can only be the educated and young people from Europe who will go back with strength and rebuild Somalia.”

- “But do you think you will go back after settling here in Europe?”

“Yes, I am sure we will go back, but first we have to start a normal life and stop this endless ‘waiting’ ”.

With this story I want to start my thesis, as it provides the transnationally located hope and prospects of a young generation living in a no-man’s land, while being geographically located in the most prosperous region of the world - where freedom is paradoxically retrieved from a piece of paper. Social ties with the homeland and integration should be regarded as mutually reinforcing forces. Discouraging refugees to stay and already at their arrival preparing them that they once have to return, is not effective. Instead, I argue that welcoming people is the most effective way to establish meaningful, non-arbitrary linkages between places. Settling nowhere, not arriving, makes establishing meaningful relations difficult and symbolically creates free-floating people living in the loopholes of our system of nations. However, when welcomed and able to start a live, people can better invest in and make use of their transnational social networks. And yet then, it are precisely these loopholes of nation-states that could be used strategically by creating transnational social spaces that link – instead of disconnects - different localities, different worlds full of unshared experiences and different communities with stories that otherwise are left untold.



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## Executive summary

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This study seeks to get a better understanding of transnational practices undertaken by Somali refugees and their family members in the pursuit of asylum, meaningful family relations, livelihood and opportunities for a better life. By focusing on the everyday experiences of Somalis in Amsterdam, the interplay between mobility and locality within overarching social networks that characterize their lives becomes visible. Researching the extent to which refugees' experiences are characterised by strategies of self-reliance and social security mechanisms, creates understanding of lives lived both in and beyond the Dutch welfare state. The notion of transnational linkages and integration as a zero-sum game is rejected, which enables paying attention to both border-crossing practices as well as local structures of inequality and institutionalization.

The notion of a world of fixed nation-states is increasingly challenged by migration and its continuous flow of people, goods, money and ideas. In a context of intensified politicization of asylum, in Europe as well as in the Netherlands, migrants are perceived as a 'problem to be solved'. Instead of following this discourse, this thesis aims at getting a deeper understanding of lives lived across border, thereby striving for a sense of humanity.

Being one of the most voluminous and most recent refugees groups within the Netherlands, Somalis occupy a difficult socio-economic position (Van Klaver et al., 2010). Not being able to fully take part within the Dutch welfare state means living both within and beyond borders of society. The social spaces Somalis occupy do not seem to overlap with territorial spaces. Questioning the relevance and centrality of transnational social ties reveals patterns of mobility and locality in the spheres of everyday.

This question is theoretically studied from a critical transnational research lens, for this takes into account constraints of the nation-state and deterritorialisation (*structure*), while focussing on circuits and flows within networks, and perceives these circuits and flows as human accomplishments (*agency*). Incorporating these three levels of analysis creates a better understanding of the complex and dynamic processes of transnational social networks in the context of seeking asylum and family life at-distance.

Thirteen in-depth interviews, conducted between March 2014 and May 2014 are at the heart of this thesis. To capture the untold, these interviews are supplemented by observations and informal conversations. Stories, narratives, conversations and platforms of communication which are meaningful for the Somali community in Amsterdam are central. By paying attention to these meaningful practices a better understanding of how different transnational practices manifest themselves in daily-lives and how local and mobile social practices can reinforce or contradict each other is gained. Because it implied a constant interaction between data and theory with a thematic analysis of meaningful transnational practices, *qualitative data gathering* was required.

Taking into account the heterogeneous nature of the community, I describe transnational practices often undertaken by Somali refugees living in Amsterdam and their extended families. Three categories of transnational practices could be distinguished: 1) family care & management; 2) migration strategies and; 3) remittance. In addition to experiences of fleeing and the transnational practices, *local reality* is stated to be of importance. Several forms of *capital* are retrieved from the transnational family network to create a better situation within the locality of Amsterdam. This gives Somalis a sense of agency which they otherwise might not have possessed, because of the socio-economic position in which they find themselves. Besides, I argue that there is an involved community in Amsterdam which is also crucial as a social safety net.

Transnational practices play a significant role in the lives of refugees in Amsterdam. Family networks are a central support system that Somali refugees and their families depend on. However, mobility and local dynamics must be seen as a constant interplay. Besides, differentiated experiences are important to take into consideration, as Somalis in Amsterdam are a highly heterogeneous

community. This study describes how Somali refugees are keeping their heads up. Living between borders is often not a choice, but a *must* to ensure livelihood, meaningful family relations and opportunities for a better life; a life in dignity.

Creating a deeper understanding of the lives lived in the spaces in-between borders is useful in European society experiencing cultural diversity and social tensions. Transnational linkages and integration are not a zero-sum game. Settling in a certain locality might contribute to invest in transnational networks and thereby in establishing non-arbitrary, meaningful linkages between places. In the current context of migration meaningful linkages are more productive than border protection.

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# Introduction

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*When chaos and violence broke out in Syria, I was informed about the situation of nine family members living there: my sister and her children, three cousins and my brothers children who are living with one of them. There was no time to hesitate, I had to send money to assist them and arrange their escape. I borrowed a sum of money and helped them cross the Syrian-Turkish border. Most of my relatives decided to go back to Somalia, because they were just tired of being sojourners, refugees. But, most of the money I borrowed I spend on arrange for two nephews to come to Europe. They had no other option. So I helped them escape to Turkey, then in Turkey I transferred another amount of money to them, for that was more safe. From Turkey they came to Greece by boat and then continued onto the Netherlands through Bulgaria on land. It was my decision to let them apply for asylum here, and not in another European country, for here we could assist each other and be together, which is always better for family members. At that time, I had to borrow the money and it was a large amount, but I had no time to think about it: assisting your family is the most important cultural value of being a Somali.*

- Maryam, 44 years old, married and mother of 3 children<sup>4</sup>

The dark contours of the nation sketch our juridical and political understanding of the contemporary world; a world incontestably divided in unambiguous nation-states with an imagined and political inherent sovereignty (Anderson, 1991). As nations suffer and crumble under the banners of modernity and the weight of violence, each person shapes his or her own story of survival indifferent of the rigid lines of the state. One of the places where individual stories of survival coalesce on the symbolic margins of our world and challenge our notion of a world of nation-states is in the Somali community in the Netherlands; a community that lives across borders. Having fled a country that has been in war for over twenty years, in search for cooler ground, Somalis left behind a physical place, but are often said to ‘carry home on their backs’ (Andaldúa, 1987). As the story of Maria above describes, scattered families maintain linkages that still play a vital role in people’s livelihoods, both in securing physical survival and in maintaining one of the most central features of Somali culture: a strong kin-based obligation to assist the ones in need.

By focussing on the everyday experiences of Somalis in Amsterdam, this study aims to understand the lives lived in these spaces in-between. The notion of a world of fixed nation-states is increasingly challenged by migration, associated with a continuous flow of people, goods, money and ideas that transgress national boundaries (Horst, 2006, p. 31). As agents of this transnational phenomenon, refugees connect different physical, social, economic and political space (Mazzucato et al., 2004) and are “anchored in and transcending one or more nation-states” (Horst, 2006, p. 31). Although literature on transnationalism within the academic realm has grown to incorporate a large scope of activities, social formations and political mobilisations (Vertovec, 2009), abstract notions are missing a direct linkages to everyday experiences. As one of the most voluminous and most recent refugee groups within the Netherlands, Somalis occupy a problematic socio-economic position, even in comparison to other immigrant groups (Klaver et al., 2010; SCP, 2014; Van Liempt & Nijenhuis, 2014, 2014). Not being able to fully take part within the Dutch society means living both within and beyond the borders of society, thereby creating social spaces comprised of linkages with contacts in multiple nations that are not congruent with territorial spaces.

It is often argued that the Somali community finds itself in a favourable position to benefit from transnational linkages (Horst, 2006, p.29). Strong social networks are still present after decades of war and often play a vital role in people’s lives (Horst, 2006, p. 29; Al-Sharmani, 2010). As the wider social and symbolic landscape in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular has increasingly been drawn by the multiple colours of diversity, there no longer exists a neat overlap

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<sup>4</sup> My interlocutors are anonymized to increase the changes that neither the person nor the place will be identified. All names in this thesis are fictitious and biographical information and life-course description might also be modified. Especially for the undocumented refugees I spoke to, this was necessary to protect them. However, these changes do not have influence on the contents and context of statements, descriptions and practices.

between territorial spaces on the one hand and social, symbolic and cultural ones on the other. The *embeddedness* of ties in a particular locality has been overshadowed by the multiple transnational social spaces in which ties and relationship between people in different geographical locations coalesce (Faist, 2004, p.4). Starting with the premise that the lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam are as much affected by, on the hand, home orientation, transnational linkages and a shared imagination about what constitutes ‘Somaliness’, as, on the other hand, the social, economic and political context in their new homes in the Netherlands, this study describes the constant interplay of mobility and locality and the overarching social networks - both here and there - that so strongly shape their lives. It seeks an empirically based understanding of the extent to which transnational practices are undertaken by Somali refugees and their family members in the pursuit of asylum, meaningful family relations, livelihood and opportunities for a better life.

The research question to address these aspects of refugees’ transnational social ties is:

*How do transnational social practices affect the everyday lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?*

The aim of this study is to give a nuanced view of the perception, utilisation and maintenance of transnational social practices from the point of view of refugees in resettlement countries, by focussing on Somali refugees in Amsterdam. Hereby, it wonders how the Somali community, by using their skills, talents and (social) capital, enacts on these transnational flows and how central transnational social ties are in their everyday life. Besides, this bottom-up approach centralises agency and hopes to build bridges between the theoretical concept of *transnationalism* and the daily experiences of refugees, which avoids the homogenisation of this highly differentiated community. Not regarding transnational networks and integration as a zero-sum game enables a description of both transnational practices as well as local structures of inequality and institutionalisation, revealing differentiated experiences of Somali refugees living in Amsterdam.

This study approaches Somali refugees’ daily lives through the notion of *transnational social ties*, using a working definition elaborated by Boccagni (2010), which implies “any social relationship and practice ‘at distance’ (along with the identity orientations they build on) that allows immigrants to exert relevant influence on the social lives of those left behind and vice versa [...]” (p.186). Studying transnational ties from the perspective of the everyday experiences of refugees themselves comprises a provocative approach from which to start the study of migration, for it articulates the tensions, irresolutions and contradictions that are characteristic of refugee lives.

### Societal and scientific relevance

This question has a particular societal relevance, for it sheds light on a wide variety of political, economic, social and cultural transnational practices, which take place both at individual and communal level in European societies receiving refugees. In the contemporary world, characterised by increased mobility and large movements of people, refugees have proven an ambiguous and highly politicised category of people (Malkki, 1995). The intensified politicisation of asylum in the current geopolitical climate - more and more visible in Europe’s border protection - led to the production of a discourse on immigrants that starts with the premise that immigrants are a ‘problem’. Striking is the fact that this problem is located *not* in the political and economic oppression of violence that produces massive displacements and movements of people, but within the bodies and minds of the refugees themselves (Espiritu, 2003, p.6). However, this thesis aims to challenge former research<sup>5</sup> (see for examples Harrell-Bond, 1986; Zetter 1988; Ager, 1999) that is merely on the ‘problematized’ refugee – in a humanitarian or juridical sense - and instead tries to catch their everyday experiences and wonder to what extent these experiences are characterised by strategies of self-reliance and social

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<sup>5</sup> Former research within refugee studies has known several mainstream conceptualisations of refugees. Mostly, these conceptualisations consider refugees a problematic category within the *juridical* order (the bureaucratic administration of refugees and the labelling theory which criticises this approach (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Zetter, 1988) or as a *humanitarian* victim, converted victim by the ‘refugee experience’ (Ager, 1999), striped of its political, cultural and historical context (Malkki, 1995).

security mechanisms, taking into account that their worldview is moulded by scattered family linkages and social relationships across continents from which to pursue social capital.

The abstract concept of transnationalism as a general theoretical category is widely applied in social science research, mainly pointing at the impact these transnational mobilised diaspora have on homeland politics and conflict (Kleist, 2008), remittance sending (Ahmed, 2000; Horst, 2004; 2008) and development initiatives (see for example: Sheikh and Healy, 2009; Zoomers and Nijenhuis, 2012). Besides, most of these studies focus on the UK, being one of the largest receiving countries regarding Somali refugees (Griffiths, 2002; Harris, 2004). The literature that exists on Somalis in the Netherlands merely focusses on the moving of a large proportion of these refugees towards the UK as a consequence of the Schengen agreement (Lindley and Van Hear, 2007; Van Liempt, 2011). Recently, as part of a comparative research series, a broad research called *Somalis in Amsterdam* has been published, exploring the Somali community by focusing on five areas of local policy – employment, education, health, political participation, and policing – as well as themes like belonging and identity (Van Liempt & Nijenhuis, 2014, 2014). Describing the large array of integration challenges faced by this relatively new community in Amsterdam, the focus is on a problematic adaptation to society, not so much on the border crossing practices that they engage in to actively fight their problematic socio-economic position.

As an essential contribution to the current debate on multiculturalism and migration within European societies, the question is raised in what way transnational networks are able to create a level of agency that the socio-economic position of these refugees might otherwise have not allowed. The integration of Somalis in the Netherlands current is problematic, both socio-cultural and economic (Klaver et al., 2010). There is a need to understand their social networks and the potential social security strategies implied in these networks in order to fully understand their lives, lived both within and beyond the Dutch welfare state. It is relevant to analyse how Somalis navigate within Dutch society and enrich this by insights on their practices beyond Dutch borders. Knowledge on transnational livelihoods of refugees might be used to design policy on integration topics and get a better understanding of what it means to be a refugee within the borders of the EU in a context of strict border protection and forced deportation.

A scientific relevance is found in taking both a meso- and a micro-perspective that comes with studying transnational ties from the perspective of the everyday experiences of refugees through a critical transnational lens. This approach provokes thinking about the limits of the nation-state, for in the current age of globalisation, the boundaries of the nation-state seldom correspond to the transnational social, cultural, economic and political spaces of daily life (Smith, 1994, p.44). Shifting the focus of refugee studies from a geographically fixed dichotomous division between home- and host country to a more scattered approach towards the notion of space, it provokes thinking about spaces not only as specific geographic sites, but also as circuits and networks (Espiritu, 2003, p.4) and highlights the flows within these networks as human accomplishments (Horst, 2006).

In contradiction to globalisation theory, transnationalism emphasises human agency in an age of globalisation and other processes that are easily interpreted as reducing the power of individual decision-making (Al-Ali, 2001, p.100). By analysing how salient these networks are in the everyday lives of refugees in the locality of Amsterdam, this thesis produces qualitative knowledge on social relations that transcends borders by creating connections between certain geographical, social and political spaces. Combining a meso- and micro-perspectives in a single research locality avoids homogenising refugees by incorporating issues of structural inequality, such as class, ethnicity, gender and religion within national borders that refugees face.

## SOMALI REFUGEES IN AMSTERDAM – HETEROGENEITY EXPLAINED

Although in theoretical debate there is a fierce distinction between refugee studies and migration studies, in line with Horst (2006: 209), this study is built on the premise that this is not a relevant distinction. This distinction based on legal recognition aims at categorizing individual lives and migration motives in dualistic terms like forced versus voluntary or political versus economic, but thereby simplifies the socio-economic and security dynamics that are often blurredly implied in fleeing ones country. Therefore, following Griffiths (2002: 9), throughout this study, the term ‘refugee’ is used in a broader and more inclusive manner than the narrow legal definition, to refer to all those who define themselves and seek protections as refugees regardless of the papers they possess.

However, distinguishing between illegal-legal is more relevant in the context of Amsterdam, for the difference between having or not having a residence document are huge; it implies the difference between a disenfranchised waiting in the boundaries of Dutch society or participating within the Dutch welfare state, thereby enjoying all the rights that come with citizenship to a EU country.

In answering this question, it is relevant to sketch the juridical and bureaucratic heterogeneity within the Somali refugee population in Amsterdam. Analytically, three groups of refugees could be distinguished: 1) refugees who are living the Netherlands for a longer period of time (> 10 years), the ‘old generation’; 2) refugees who recently arrived in the Netherlands (<10 years), the ‘newcomers’; and 3) undocumented refugees who did not receive a legal status as a refugee and are thus considered ‘illegal’ in Dutch society. Years of residence in the Netherlands for these undocumented refugees can vary widely; I met some who stayed here more than 10 years and are still “living on the streets”.<sup>6</sup>

### READER’S GUIDE

This introduction opened my thesis with a description of the objectives of the study. After this Introduction, the research question will be embedded in a solid Theoretical Framework, giving an overview of relevant theoretical concepts. To highlight how refugees’ experiences are as much shaped by the larger context as by their strategic actions, the Theoretical Framework consists of three levels of analysis, *structures*, *networks* and *agency*. The first level will sketch the broader structures in which transnational practices take place by explaining concepts surrounding the nation-state and place-making in a world where borders, on the one hand, seem to have lost their importance, while on the other hand being constantly reinforced. Then, the chapter will take a meso-perspective for analysing social networks, social capital and the flows involved in these transactions. The Theoretical Framework will end with relevant theories on *agency*, explaining how refugees’ strategies and decision-making are ways of actively shaping experiences.

After this theoretical framework the Methodology will thoroughly explain the methods applied, the circumstances of fieldwork, the operationalization of theoretical concept and the challenges encountered during fieldwork.

Then, Chapter 1 - *Leaving home, ending up in Amsterdam; experiences of arriving, asylum and acceptance* – will sketch the heterogeneity of experiences within the Somali population in Amsterdam. First, it will explain this heterogeneity by paying attention to the differentiated experiences of Somalis who arrived in the early 90s and those who only recently entered the Netherlands. Then, a second factor contributing to different experiences of live in Amsterdam is whether or not the refugee received a legal status or not. Finally, the chapter will move on to explain how being a refugee has consequences for the relation with the homeland, family lives at distance and life within an involved community in Amsterdam.

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<sup>6</sup> Although most undocumented refugees have a relatives or friends to stay with, or find shelter together in empty buildings, they do not have legal access to housing. They themselves often refer to their situation as “living on the streets”.



After which Chapter 2 – *Lives across borders; transnational phone-calls, marriages and migrations* - will deal with the importance of cross-border practices in the lives of Somalis in Amsterdam. It seeks to describe these practices, actions and the larger transnational social framework in which these actions take place. By using a transnational perspective, three categories of practices as elaborated by Al-Sharmani (2010) will be dealt with: *migration strategies, family care and management* and *remittances and resources*.

Chapter 3 - *Living in the local reality of Amsterdam; obligations, constraints and capitals* – will analyse in what way these border crossing strategies are of influence in the daily lives of Somalis in the locality of Amsterdam. Hereby, it claims that, in contrast to the enforced homelessness and practices across borders described in the previous chapters, the local reality is of importance. Firstly, it will deal with obligations and constraints that come with the transnational family network. Then it will further elaborate on the capitals that are extracted from this network and how these capitals could be used in the context of Amsterdam, thereby referring to the differentiated experiences of both the ‘old generation’ and the ‘newcomers, as well as the legally recognised and the undocumented refugees.

Finally, in the Conclusion & Discussion the findings will be summarised and discussed thoroughly. The main features of the Somali population in Amsterdam and its heterogeneity will be, of the transnational practices these Somalis engage in and, of the effects these transnational practices have on their daily lives will be recapitulated. It will sketch the interplay that exist between both structure and agency as well as local and mobile factors. In the midst of this interplay, family networks form a central support system for Somali refugees living in Amsterdam.

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# Theoretical Framework

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The Theoretical Framework contains three levels of analysis. First, it will sketch the broader *structures* in which transnational practice take place. This macro-perspective implies explanations on concepts surrounding the nation-state, deterritorialisation and place-making, which will bring forward the inherent ambiguity between mobility and locality. The second part will take a more meso-perspective while analysing social *networks*, social ties being the smallest analytical unit in these networks. Finally, it deals with *agency*, explaining how refugees' strategies and decision-making are ways of actively shaping experiences. However, the Theoretical Framework starts with explaining the transnational research lens, for this takes into account constraints of the nation-state and deterritorialisation (*structure*), while focussing on circuits and flows within networks, and perceives these circuits and flows as human accomplishments (*agency*). Incorporating these three levels of analysis creates a better understanding of the complex and dynamic processes of transnational social networks in the context of seeking asylum and family life at-distance.

## A CRITICAL TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH LENS

Over the past decades, the concept of transnationalism has served as a prominent conceptual lens through which to research international migration and state borders. As several academics have pointed out, in the 1970s and 1980s transnationalism arose as an alternative to the dominant approach in migration studies; an approach that limited itself to two possible conceptualisations of the migrant: either as someone completely adapted to the receiving culture or as a temporary sojourner who eventually returns home (Espiritu, 2003; Horst, 2006; Griffiths, 2002). Introducing a renewed path, transnationalism's main contribution to the debate included broadening up the exclusive, narrow focus on the motivations for migration, which are often blurred and impossible to categorise in dualistic terms like forced versus voluntary or political versus economic (Horst, 2006, p.209). Instead, transnationalism regards migration as a continuous flow of people, goods, money and ideas that transgresses national boundaries and in so doing connects different physical, social, economic and political spaces (Mazzucato et al., 2004).

A transnational focus will be engaged in this research for several reasons. Firstly, in sharp contrast to theories of globalisation, transnationalism has a more agential, geographically bounded scope (Horst, 2006, p.26). Where globalization views processes as decentred from specific national territories and as taking place in a borderless, global space, practices become more impersonal and less intentional processes, occurring without reference to nations (Kearney, 1995). Transnationalism, on the contrary, takes into account both flows and locality, thereby emphasising the flow within these networks as human accomplishments (Horst, 2006, p.26). Secondly, transnationalism incorporate spaces not solely as a geographically fixed, dichotomous division between home- and host country, but also presumes a more scattered approach to the notion of place. It provokes thinking about space not only as specific physical sites, but also as circuits and networks (Espiritu, 2002, p.4).

However, incorporating transnationalism as a lens through which to regard refugees' everyday experiences, does not suggest that Somalis are per definition leading 'transnational lives' (Al-Sharmani, 2010, p.499). Indeed, it is presumed that transnational studies – although it forms a highly fragmented and broad field of study – has overemphasized transnational networks and understated the permanency of immigrant settlement (Espiritu, 2002, p.3).

## STRUCTURES

### *NATIONS, BORDERS, PLACES*

#### **THE NATION-STATE AND DETERRITORIALISATION**

Transnational literature in the social sciences has been produced parallel to the growth of scientific interests in globalisation (Guillén, 2001). Linkages between the two phenomenon are multiple, however, the most important one includes the increase in transnational connections between social groups represent a key manifestation of the process of globalisation (Vertovec, 2009).

The globalisation of labour, capital and cultures challenged former assumptions of the nation-state. The classic model of the nation as a sovereign, homogeneous entity with fixed borders has been increasingly characterised by a phenomenon described by Appadurai as *deterritorialisation*, which refers to the undermining of territorially bounded entities which are culturally homogeneous (1996, p.48). In this age of highly interconnected relations that cut across national boundaries, the borders of the nation-state are rarely congruent with the transnational social, cultural, economic and political spaces of daily life (Smith, 1994, p.16). Using the notion of the ‘ethnoscape’, Appadurai emphasises the cultural significance of globalisations:

“By ‘ethnoscape’, I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (1990, p. 297).

According to Appadurai, this global ‘ethnoscape’ is a central feature of the global landscape and led to the emergence of ‘deterritorialised ethnicities’, such as diaspora communities. The Somali diaspora is a particularly interesting diaspora, as they haven’t had a proper nation-state for years (Horst, 2006, p.34). Some authors even argue they never had one (Brons, 2001), as the civil war was merely the collapse of a malfunctioning post-colonial state (Griffiths, 2002, p.27).

Here, transnationalism faces a several challenge of moving beyond notions of nationalism – which implies the “assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Vertovec, 2009, p.20) – while at the same time recognizing the continuing centrality of nation-states in conditioning modes of migration (Faist, 2007, p.16). This implies regarding social relations not as confined within borders - but merely as relationships over and beyond, rather than between or in nation-states - without disregarding the importance of borders. It is fruitful to keep recognising that refugees remain structured by the nation politics and national culture of their host country (Espiritu, 2002, p.11), given that in the current world-order - no matter how much challenged by globalisation - the political, territorially fixed nation-states remains the main organising principle.

In the case of refugees, the prevalent influence of the nation-state particularly visible in the fact that their activities - from the moment that they leave Somali - are shaped by the overarching political-juridical frameworks of receiving states and the EU. This does not merely affect destination choice, but also the story told, the ease of being granted asylum, choices in marital and reproductive activities (Fleiser, 2011, p.3) and opportunities to participate in the receiving society.

#### **PLACE-MAKING; LOCALITY VERSUS MOBILITY**

Within the debate concerning transnationalism, the notion of translocality has become increasingly important, as it is perceived as a ‘grounded’ and situated alternative to former deterritorialised notions of transnationalism (Brickell and Datta, 2011). Instead, of regarding refugees as free-floating individuals within a globalised order (Espiritu, 2003 p.10), it “insists on viewing such processes and identities as place-based rather than exclusively mobile, up-rooted and travelling” (Oakes and Schein, 2006, p.20). Translocality emphasises both the mobility and locality through paying attention to the

localities in which social networks are maintained, sustained and negotiated in the everyday life (Brickell and Datta, 2011, p.1). By connecting processes of transnational migration to local geographies, the importance of local-local connections in migration is emphasised. Simultaneously linking space, place and social networks, translocality is the most productive theoretical tool to study the ways in which everyday spaces and place acquire meaning and salience through migration.

By highlighting place-making in a context of locality and mobility, this study hopes to clarify the theoretical relationship between territorial and social spaces. From a transnational perspective, societal spaces cannot be regarded as equivalent to territorial spaces (Faist, 2010, p.31). In general, a transnational approach emphasises a constructivist view on territorial space, which implies that transnational social formations and networks cross and overlap territories of national states. Regarding space as “the cultural, economic and political practices of individual and collective actors within territories or places”, it comprises an analytical category differentiated from place, which solely refers to one specific location (Faist, 2004, p.4). A constructivist notion here helps us to understand spaces as circuits and networks in sharp contrast to bounded social science concepts, such as community and culture (Espiritu, 2003, p.10).

Although the symbolic power of the nation has diminished, geographical places still play an important role in determining people’s activities. moreover, locality remains an important factor in the creation of spaces. As Espiritu (2003, p.12), notions of deterritorialisation and globalisation as stated by Appendurai undervalue the “enduring importance of local spaces, memories, and practices, [...] and implies a formation that is not structured by domestic and global power relations nor shaped by differences in culture, class, gender, race and national origin”. No matter how scatter their lives are across borders, nations and communities, Somalis are not deterritorialised, free-floating people (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p.15). As such, in line with Espiritu, in the context of this research place-making will imply “a process of local meaning-making, territorial specificity, juridical control, and economic development, however complexly articulated these localities become in transnational economic, political and cultural flows” (2003, p.12).

Being at the same time “spatially mobile and spatially bounded” (Espiritu, 2003, p.10), this study will emphasise the inherent ambiguities between locality and mobility; while living across unequal borders and in transnationally imagined communities, refugees find themselves in a certain locality which bounds them with economic and political power and regulating institutions. Mobility is defined here as “the physical movement of people in transnational space” (Dahinden, 2010, p.53), while geographical propinquity could be referred to as its counterpart; the embeddedness of ties in a locality (Faist, 2004) or “being rooted or anchored – socially, economically or politically – in the country of immigration and/or having a set of social relations at specific places” (Dahinden, 2010, p.53).

Specifically the undocumented group of refugees have conflicting relationship to their locality. As in international politics, the border area is defined as a non-place (Augé, 1995) – a space in which people are only passing by – they are stuck in between two symbolic realities: their home country and the country in which they arrived. Fighting both binary opposition of legal/illegal and in/out the nation-state, undocumented refugees challenge the notion of the border as a *non-place* by actively creating meaningful places and social linkages while standing on the border. This could also be seen as a process of *place-making* (Nordstrom, 2004, p.36).

## NETWORKS

### *SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SPACES*

#### **SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TIES**

Taking social ties as an analytical perspective from which to study transnationalism in the everyday life, the concept of social spaces and (transnational) social networks are simultaneously incorporated. Firstly, social ties are the smallest analytical units of social spaces, for these space are constituted out of practices and relationships between individuals and collective actors (Faist, 2004, p.4) These ties

can have a social or a symbolic nature and are characterised by the “ascription of common interest, obligation, expectations and norms” (Faist, 2000, p.4). Spaces are linked to ties by the spatial organisation of these social and symbolic relations. Analysing ties in terms of their extensity, intensity, infrastructure, institutionalisation and impact is what visualises social spaces.

Secondly, linking together social ties reveals a complex social network that transcends national boundaries. A network makes visible the social ties that cut across institutions and social unities, such as the family, neighbourhood, class or clan (Vertovec, 2009, p.33). This social network consists of complex human relations in which individuals negotiate power positions and in which a multiplicity of social relationships is present along which goods, money and service could be provided (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 1994). An important notion here is that social ties are not stable, fixed entities. Rather, these ties are being reproduced and networks are constantly being socially produced and challenged by their members (Nohria, 1992).

Castells (1996) gives a complete description of what characterises networks in the current context of the global information economy:

“The components of the network are both autonomous and dependent vis-à-vis the network, and may be a part of other networks and therefore of other systems of means aimed at other goals. The performance of a given network will then depend on two fundamental attributes of the network, its *connectedness*, that is its structural ability to facilitate noise-free communication between its components; its *consistency*, that is the extent to which there is sharing of interests between the network’s goals and the goals of its components.” (p.171)

Highlighting both the *connectedness* and the *consistency*, Castells indicates the autonomy as well as the dependency of different social ties within a certain network. Social ties are thus fairly differentiated, however, connected in a network which intertwines them in a singular social space.

## **FLOWS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Social capital, a concept closely related to social networks, is defined by Portes (1995, p.12) as: “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures. [...] [T]he resources themselves are *not* social capital; the concept refers instead to the individual’s *ability* to mobilise them on demand”. This makes social capital not a possession of an individual, but rather a resources that could be drawn from personal social ties and relationships (Vertovec, 2009, p.36).

Bourdieu (1986) has done extensive research on social capital and emphasises two important aspects: group membership and social networks. Firstly, in order to be able to access social capital, it is necessary to belong to certain group, which could be the family, an association, or another form of group (Fleiser, 2010, p.91). Membership in a group causes solidarity between individuals belonging to that group. Group members mostly share a sense of common identification and thus are expected to share values and norms (Bourdieu, 1986). Secondly, as a consequence of the reciprocity that comes with belong to a group, a network of social relations is created between members of that group (ibidem). However, reciprocity is always theoretical, and there is no guarantee that an individual can actually rely on social ties. Thus, according to Bourdieu (1986, p.249), social capital includes obligations and responsibilities, but also benefits, improvement of power positions within the network and accumulation of support and trust.

There is an extensive academic debate on the relation between social capital and other forms of capital, such as financial, cultural and human. Social capital, as the ability to enact on a person’s web of relationship, could be converted into other forms of capital, when retrieving resources from the social network. This is described by Bourdieu as the ‘multiplication effect’ of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital merely serves as a facilitator in accessing and mobilising other forms of capital (Faist, 2000, p.118).



## TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

As described earlier, one of the most important conditions for accessing social capital implies group membership. Being one of the most important groups to which all individuals implicitly belong, I will here discuss the family as a social network. According to Bourdieu (1996, p.22) belonging to a family implies sharing a “family feeling”; emotional and loving social ties between different family members, but also between non-biological relatives. This “family feeling” forms the basis for cohesion within a group. Examples of sources of common identification as family within a group are sharing a family name or growing up in the same village (Fleiser, 2010, p.91).

“Family feelings” are an important factor that connect members to the group and creates feelings of belonging. As stated earlier, membership to a group also brings along responsibilities and obligations (Bourdieu, 1996), as related to the social capital that is accessible through group membership. The role each individual has within the family network depends highly on power relations and the hierarchical structure implied in family relations (such as the relationship between parents and their children) (Bourdieu, 1996). However, these positions are not fixed and power positions could be challenged or at times switched (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 1994).

Family ties are characterised by a “solidarity of interests – both by capital and for capital” (Bourdieu, 1996, p.24). According to Bourdieu, the family is one of the most important ways to accumulate capital, as a consequence of the multiplication effect of social capital.

However, family relations at-distance must be clarified in a different fashion, for “family life has been extensively modified in light of transnational practices” (Vertovec, 2009, p.61). Although the family remains one of the main ways through which to pursue social capital for Somali refugees (Al-Sharmani, 2007), both means and ends through which to maintain social ties have changed. Firstly, the means through which to maintain relationships has been facilitated by technological developments that enabled transnational flows over large distances with much greater frequency, speed and regularity, thus affecting a much wider group of people (Castells, 2001). Secondly, signifying the ends or purposes of maintaining transnational family ties I will make use of the four dimension described by Al-Sharmani (2007, p.2-12). These dimensions include: 1) sharing resources, remittances; 2) transnational family care and management; 3) reproduction of family and community and; 4) politics of movement (referring to facilitating migration of family members). These dimension are productive in determining the utilisation of transnational ties in Somalis’ everyday relationship with family members.

## AGENCY

### COMMUNITY AND STRATEGIES

## REFUGEE EXPERIENCES AND DIASPORA

*A community diaspora first comes into being and then lives on owing to whatsoever in a given place forges a bond between those who want to group together and maintain, from afar, relations with other groups which, although settled elsewhere, invoke a common identity.*  
Bruneau, 2010, p.35

Historically, refugee studies have largely focussed on what was called the ‘refugee experience’ in the social sciences. According to Stein (1986, p.6) this implied that “the refugee category is defined by the trauma and stress, persecution and danger, losses and isolation, uprooting and change [...]”. Malkki (1995) has challenged this manner of approaching refugees by analysing the constant categorisation of refugees as *dehistoricized* and *depoliticized*. She shows that this constant victimisation of refugees serves the ‘national order of things’, because it attempts to categorize people who are unclassifiable according to the principle of nation-state; the stateless people<sup>7</sup> (p.7). As already stated by Hannah Arendt (1968) is that refugees as a category cause blurring of

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<sup>7</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been composed in 1948 to protect people and secure a life in dignity. In the world system made up of nation-state, every has a particular nationality. The nation-state has a role in guaranteeing human rights or its citizens. Already in the 1950s Hanna Arendt (1967) described the paradoxical situation of people who lose their nationality as a consequence of fleeing and thus lose the protection of belonging to a nation-state. When being legally recognized as a



national boundaries and challenge “time-honoured distinctions between nationals and foreigners” (p.286).

Refugees have been forced to move and leave their ‘homes’ as a consequence of human suffering in the homeland. In her article “Transforming Trust: Dispossession and Empowerment among Palestinian Refugees” Peteet (1995) refers to *refugeeness* as “a framework for experiencing, interpreting, and acting on the world, giving location to self and community in an immediate socio-political order and in an international community” (170). Understanding the concept of refugeeness as a framework for experiences, it is important to elaborate on the context in which to understand this framework: “In the age of the nation-state and its accoutrements such as passports, citizenship, and diplomatic representation, the stateless are exceedingly vulnerable and face the world with circumscribed options”(170).

Here, the concept of diaspora comes into being. As stated by Al-Sharmani: “I argue that Somali refugees [...] are ‘diasporic’ because they are part of a dispersed national group who share a particular history and heritage; engage in construction and contestation of collective Somali identities [...]; and maintain regular and significant ties with family members living in the home country as well as other countries” (2010, p.500).

Although the relation between the concept of diaspora and transnationalism is problematic and difficult to clarify (see for example Faist, 2010), it is most common to state that a diaspora is a particular form of a transnational social organisation or community (Horst, 2006; Vertovec, 2009). In theory, concepts of place and space, roots and routes are often linked. However, the main difference between diaspora and transnational communities is the shared sense of belonging or “the extent to which people’s roots are stressed” (Horst, 2006, p.34). As a dispersed population with no per se a global reach, diasporas are said to have a triadic relationship towards space. This relationship contains 1) global dispersal, but maintain a collectively self-identified ethnic group 2) a tie with territorial states and context where groups reside and; 3) maintain ties with the motherland states and context where they or their forebears came from (as in Sheffer, 1986; Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1997). This triadic relationship highlights the spatial organisation of the community, which transgresses national borders while maintaining embedded in localities. Home as both an *actual* and an *imagined* geography (Espiritu, 2003, p.2) is what binds the Somali diaspora.

## STRATEGIES

Despite structural factors that constrain individual decision-making, strategic individual practices are able to positively affect the livelihoods of refugees and their families. In literature strategies are explained as a series of activities undertaken to get access to required resources and to mobilize these resources (Jacobsen, 2002, p.100). As several anthropologists have explained in ethnographies on people in fragile situations of violence or a lack of opportunities, these strategies might be ‘coping mechanism’ (Allen & Turton, 1996, p.10) or ‘social security strategies’ (Horst, 2006).

Strategies can be undertaken in two distinct domains: the legal and the non-legal. Non-legal ways are not by definition illegal, however, they take place beyond the juridical defined areas of the state. As a large proportion of the population researched are considered illegal in the Dutch state, non-legal ways of coping with the situation are used widespread. Illegality must be considered as a socio-political position with specific strategies to cope with this situation characterized by a lack of human rights. This means the creation of ‘cloudy’ social structures which the state cannot possibly control – *structures from below* – is an effective strategy to still pursue a livelihood (Van der Leun, 2003), referring to a broad scale of strategies aimed at improving circumstances of life in illegality (Engbersen et al., 2002, p.97). As Allen and Turton claim: “And yet these very strategies, [...] by which they seek to maintain some degree of control over their lives, are likely to be classified by ‘the

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refugee, another state will take over the responsibility for your human rights. However, being an unrecognized, undocumented refugee, you find yourself in a gap between the borders of nation-states; a *stateless* individual for whom no single nation takes the responsibility (Khosravi, 2011, p.321). The notion of *statelessness* must not be confused with the juridical concept; getting a legally acknowledge status as such is only possible when your state of nationality does not exist (as is the case for Palestinians).

system' as inappropriate and undesirable" (1996, p.10). As Jacobsen concludes in her article on livelihood strategies employed by refugees in refugee camps in Kenya, refugees are able to effectively move between these two domains, while securing capital in both and, accordingly, mix their strategies (2002, p.100).

As indicated by several researchers, refugees and migrants very much rely on family-based networks as a strategy to improve their current situation (Van Liempt, 2009; Al-Sharmani, 2010). The kin-based network is often an essential coping mechanism to deal with unemployment, urban poverty and failed welfare policies (Stack, 1975). Especially for the undocumented refugees, but also for refugees who face troubles integrating and finding a job, network practices, such as the exchange of goods and share care of family members, are not only family obligations at-a-distance, but also are essential as coping mechanism (Stack, 1975).

In particular on Somali refugees, Al-Sharmani concluded after her ethnographic research in Egypt that the transnational family-based network is an essential support system for refugees and their families, mainly in coping with displacement and its multiple marginalizing effects (2010, p.500).

Thus, transnational social ties, when enacted on strategically, provide different forms of capital. It is exactly here where social capital is acted upon and used to pursue other forms of capital. Transnational networks as a consequence of the fact that it accumulates capital, creates relations of obligation, reciprocity and gratitude between family members and close friends.

However, a person's ability to make strategic use of this network and thus the possession of a form of agency by a refugee must be slightly nuanced. Not all refugees have the same opportunities to make use of their network. Mahler and Pessar link this to the 'social location' of the refugee in their social network, defining this concept as "a 'person's' position within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kin-based and other socially stratifying factors" (2001, p.446). In the case of Somali refugees in Amsterdam, important stratifying factors might be: having family members in other Western states to assist you, possession of a passport, having a job and thus being able to remit money and invest in the family network.

This is why a transnational research lens does not merely end on the level of the network; social capital implied in these networks gives the individual the capacity to strategically extract resources from the network.

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# Methodology

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This research pays attention to stories, narratives, conversations and platforms of communication which are meaningful for the Somali community in Amsterdam, to understand how different transnational practice manifest themselves in their daily-lives and how local and mobile social practices can reinforce or contradict each other. Because it implied a constant interaction between data and theory with a thematic analysis of meaningful transnational practices, qualitative data gathering was required.

## SINGLE-SITED RESEARCH ON A TRANSNATIONALLY LOCATED PHENOMENON *CONTEXT OF FIELDWORK AND METHODS APPLIED*

The study is based on a single-sited research on a transnationally located phenomenon, conducted in the period March 2014 until May 2014 in one particular locality. It grasps an understanding of how multi-sited lives are lived and how the constant interaction between spatial mobility and spatial boundedness manifests itself, retrieved from 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and several observations and informal conversations. This is a case study of a single community: Somali refugees in Amsterdam. Amsterdam is not claimed to be representative for the Netherlands. As a study of one community, this thesis will not have statistical weight outside itself, it only concerns the people I met, which decreases the external validity of this research.

By using different methods (*triangulation*), gathering rich, embedded data (*thick description* (Geertz, 1973)) has been aspired. Firstly, at the heart of this research are 13 in-depth interviews with Somalis living in Amsterdam. The interviews had an open and explorative character, which gave the interlocutor the opportunity to lead the conversation and bring in their own thoughts (Boeije, 2010, p. 67) and made their perceptions and experiences central in the conversation. Secondly, informal conversation were often much more enlightening and insightful than formal interviews. This is mainly because highly sensitive topics, such as having family members in different countries, passing different countries before entering Europe or receiving and sending money from or to family members, could not have been properly addressed in a structural conversation which was written down and perceived as a ‘serious test’. Also, observations were included, for these are able to capture the untold. Observing has proven a fruitful method for revealing everyday practices that exist in the disconnection between what people say and what people do. Supplementing data gathered in interviews by observations and situating these observations within a larger framework of transnational social networks helps in filling gaps in the data retrieved from interviews. As suspicion in interviews was a problem, especially among undocumented refugees, spending time in locations in Amsterdam helped both in building trust and grasping at the same time the reality of their daily lives. Finally, I have made use of document analysis<sup>8</sup> with mainly socio-demographic data on the Somali population in the Netherlands to explain heterogeneity within the population and to contextualise the population in the locality of Amsterdam.

During the process of data collection, I switched between research methods. Interviewing, observation and informal conversations are no separate research processes, rather, these domains of data collection are intertwined and mutually depended. Because of a great amount of suspicion and the reluctance to talk about private experiences, using audiotapes was difficult. Therefore, interviews, conversations and observations were written down in a notebook and elaborated on the same day.

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<sup>8</sup> Socio-demographic data comes from the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) of the Dutch government, the Bureau Onderzoek en Statistiek from the municipality of Amsterdam (O+S). Data on asylum application and – procedures and (challenges of) integration come from publications from Vluchtelingenwerk, a Dutch civil society organization supporting refugee, and a recently published investigation of Van Liempt & Nijenhuis (2014) as part of a comparative research on Somalis in European cities.

Although exploring movement across international borders might require multi-sited research methods which adjust to the mobility of flows and circulations of people, money, goods and ideas (Marcus, 1995), the intimacy, nuance and depth of a community study allow to examine at close look and in contextual detail how people's everyday experience in a single locality are shaped by far-reaching transnational social ties. Thereby, this study aims to emphasise at the same time local and extra-local circumstances that affect their lives and shape new social spaces in the country of resettlement. Moreover, believing that most Somalis are here to stay and that the permanency of migrant settlement has been underestimated in most literature on transnationalism (Espiritu, 2003, p.3), the focus on a single location of settlement will be able to incorporate the inherent ambiguity between locality and mobility faced in everyday lives at-distance.

## OPERATIONALIZATION

### *FROM THEORY TO THE EVERYDAY*

As follows from the content of the Introduction, the research question at the heart of this thesis is:

*How do transnational social networks affect the everyday lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?*

In order to fully address the complexity of this question, the following sub questions will be dealt with throughout the research:

1. What factors shape the experiences of the Somali population in Amsterdam?
2. What kind of transnational practices are Somali refugees in Amsterdam engaged in?
3. How do transnational practices influence the lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?
4. How do local practices influence the lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?

This paragraph explains how these sub questions have been elaborated in the topic lists used during the interviews, which is included in Appendix I. Besides, the link between the sub questions and the main research question will be explained.

1. What factors shape the experiences of the Somali population in Amsterdam?

This question will provide a description of the Somali population in Amsterdam. It will search for an overview of the socio-demographic background of Somalis and thereby intends to sketch the heterogeneity within the Somali population in Amsterdam. It will search for differences in stories of arrival, length of residence, asylum procedures, legal statuses and relevant socially stratifying factors, such as education, professions and class. These factors might cause differential experiences and different frames of reference towards society. Here, the importance of *structures* (socio-economic and juridical) in shaping the everyday experiences becomes visible. Furthermore, experiences of being a refugee and, consequently having scattered family relations, will also be incorporated in this sub question. It will shine light on the multiple relations with territorial spaces and the home country, as a consequence of this refugeeness and seek for understanding how this influences everyday experiences and worldviews. The following topics have been included in the interviews:

- Socio-demographic background information: age, gender, marital status, place of residence, profession, length of stay in the Netherlands, legal status, age at arrival, presence of relatives in Netherlands
- Experiences of fleeing
- Experiences of living in AZCs
- Experiences of 'feeling at home'
- Experiences of contact between 'old generation' and 'newcomers'
- Experiences of contact between refugees with a legal status and undocumented refugees

2. What kind of transnational practices are Somali refugees in Amsterdam engaged in?

This question implies analysing which practise across borders are present in the lives of Somalis in Amsterdam. It will seek for practices, actions and connections that Somalis engage in as they maintain relations with their home land or with family members all over the world. It will concern actors involved and the kind of social relations between them, localities and spatial boundaries, infrastructure used to enact on this network, flows within this network, utilisation of the network, experiences with transnational family relations. It will implies all three levels of analysis. First, the functioning of the (family) network will be analysed by paying attention to relationship between family members, interactions and positions within the network. Then, it will seeks for the agency involved in strategically exploiting transnational social contacts. What strategic practices are undertaken and what forms of capital can be extracted from the network? Finally, the macro-level highlights how structural factors might constrain decision-making and how national border manifest themselves within the network and within private relations between family members. The following topics have been included in the interviews:

- Maintaining contact with family members in other countries; where, how, what about?
- Motives for contact; why?
- Engaging in the sending of receiving of remittances; how, why and to whom?
- What media are used to engage in links with homeland? Private or also public linkages?
- Migration strategies; did you receive help when migrating or did you assist others?
- Marriages across borders
- Transferring goods
- Visiting relatives across borders

3. How do transnational practices influence the lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?

This sub question will analyse in what way these border crossing strategies are of influence in the everyday lives of Somalis in the locality of Amsterdam. Thereby, it addresses the ‘mobile’ dimension of lives in Amsterdam. Looking for the influence of transnational practices, the following outcomes will be kept in mind: meaningful family relations, safety and asylum, belonging/recognition and remittances or resources to enhance livelihood. It will pay attention to the forms of capital extracted from the transnational network and utilisation of this capital. Besides, as Al-Sharmani (2010) highlights the constraining effects of the network, I will look for the negative consequences of networks (obligations towards family members, tensions in relation at-distance) as well. This sub question will focus on the level of agency the transnational network has brought with it. However, this agency must again be perceived in the context of the social network with its power relations and obligations. Besides, structural factors such as state policies must be taken into account as well.

4. How do local practices influence the lives of Somalis in Amsterdam?

This sub question describes the influence of local practices and the local context on the experiences of Somalis in their everyday lives in Amsterdam. It concerns embeddedness in Amsterdam as a social place, a sense of belonging created by the community and the frequency of contacts with non-Somalis. Besides, during interviews and observation I paid attention to their everyday activities and involvement in certain social groups. It hopes to draw a nuanced sketch of refugees’ experiences concerning the permanency of settlement and the participation in the receiving society, not as a contradiction to transnational practices, but merely as a supplement. By taking structural factors in the locality of Amsterdam into account (e.g. socio-economic position, profession), it will reflect on the position and possibilities Somalis in Amsterdam have within their social networks both within and beyond the nation-state.

## SELECTION CRITERIA FOR INTERLOCUTORS

### *ACCESS POINTS DURING THE FIELDWORK*

At the core of this research are 13 in-depth interviews with Somali refugees in Amsterdam (10 male and 3 female). I tried to avoid one-sidedness in my sample by using different access points and by intending to diversify according to gender, age and length of stay in the Netherlands. However, as several groups have proven difficult to access, the age variation, male/female variation and variation in length of stay in the Netherlands is not representative for the whole Somali population in Amsterdam. This research therefore does only concern the people I spoke to and cannot be generalized.

Although Amsterdam is not the city that hosts the largest group of Somalis, the Somali population in Amsterdam is considerable, being the fourth largest in the Netherlands (CBS Statline, 2013). Besides, a mobilised group of undocumented refugees has since September 2012 found shelter in several empty building in Amsterdam. Getting access to these Somalis who are living their 'illegal lives' within the border of the Netherlands, makes Amsterdam the most suitable case study in researching transnational social ties. Through previous contact with this group of refugees, I have been able to create a confidential atmosphere in which to have in-depth conversations.

Fieldwork has been conducted between March 2014 and May 2014. The first, mainly explorative period of fieldwork involved establishing contacts within the community through multiple access points. In this period I visited several Somali community organisations in Amsterdam and spent several days a week in the place where a group of illegal refugees – among which a large proportion of Somalis – found shelter; the Vluchthaven, a former prison on the Havenstraat in Amsterdam Zuid.

After establishing a relationship of trust and friendship, I held in-depth conversations with both Somalis accessed through the group in the Havenstraat and community organisations. Later on, in order to reach more Somalis, I selected interlocutors through 'snowball sampling', which implies asking existing interlocutors to recruit further interview partners from among their acquaintances (Bernhard, 2002). Conversations and discussions with Somalis in the organisations whom I didn't know before required an extensive explanation of who I was, why I was doing this particular kind of research, and what the objectives of the research were. Explaining my former involvement with undocumented Somalis and my personal circumstances helped to gain trust and confidence and enabled me to ask questions about sensitive topics, such as the demands of family members for remittances, interaction with the Dutch population, the relationship between documented and undocumented Somalis and the practices and strategies across borders and within the Netherlands. Gladly, I was able to identify different some key informants who were willing to discuss migration and family issues several times with me and provided me with highly useful and reliable information through several clarifying discussions and informal conversation.

Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the 13 interlocutors that have been interviewed.



Table 1: List of interlocutors (n=13)

	Gender	Age	Legal Status <sup>9</sup>	Length of residence in the Netherlands	Marital status	Occupation
1	Male	25	Undocumented	3 years	Unmarried	-
2	Male	23	Undocumented	4 years	Unmarried	-
3	Male	30	Undocumented	4 years	Unmarried	-
4	Male	20	Undocumented	4,5 years	Unmarried	-
5	Male	25	Undocumented	6 years	Unmarried	-
7	Male	26	Temporary residence permit	4,5 years	Unmarried	Unemployed, studying for <i>Inburgeringsexamen</i>
8	Male	26	Temporary residence permit	5 years	Unmarried	Just finished study (mbo), in search of employment
6	Male	22	Dutch passport	6 years	Unmarried	Unemployed
9	Male	33	Dutch passport	8 years	Unmarried	Studied (hbo), works in logistic sector
10	Female	44	Dutch passport	14 years	Married	Midwife, volunteers in several organisations
11	Female	42	Dutch passport	17 years	Was married	Volunteers in several organisations, teacher
12	Male	30	Dutch passport	20 years	Unmarried	Works in sector of Humanitarian Aid
13	Female	25	Dutch passport	24 years - Lived in Netherlands and UK	Unmarried	Studied (university), works in a chemical sector

<sup>9</sup>After being recognized as a refugee by going through the asylum procedures, the Dutch government provides the refugee with a temporary residence permit. The *Integration Exam (Inburgeringsexamen)* is a requirement for obtaining a permanent residence permit. This exam deals with both language and cultural norms and values in Dutch society and is learning cycle finished with an official exam after which a permanent residence permit is granted. Five years after the start of the asylum procedure, a refugee can opt for a Dutch passport.

## CHALLENGES OF MY RESEARCH

*“Both the [researcher] and her informants live in a culturally mediated world, caught up in ‘webs of signification’ they themselves have spun”*

- Rabinow, 1997, p. 151

Data collections are never pure description, but already words trying to capture a non-static reality, intermingled with personal interpretations. This makes reflecting on my role as a researcher during the process of data collection necessary. My position as a Dutch, white, female, unmarried student with a passport and experiences of my country of nationality as a ‘home’ has influenced my research on several dimensions<sup>10</sup>. Firstly, as stated above, interpreting data, getting an understanding of the lived reality and the experiences lying behind the eyes of my interlocutors is drenched with my personal interpretation, based on what I have experienced. Through stories and words, mutual understanding was enhanced, but these descriptions maintain caught up in my personal frame of references and relationship to the world around me. Secondly, my position influenced the access points I was able to use during my interview, the persons I could approach for an in-depth conversation and the people I spend time with. Thirdly, my position affected the amount of trust that existed between us, which further influences the extent to which my interlocutors shared private experiences with me. With knowledge on the stressful asylum procedure, the interviews with the IND and the many causes of lying in the asylum procedure in order to get a legal status in mind, I was very much aware of the reluctance of several refugees to talk. Why would they share information on their life course with someone for a research, if they did not even share this with their fellow Somalis? And why would they run the risk of undermining their asylum claim, by telling me facts they did not share with the IND?

Furthermore, it could be perceived as a challenge to distinguish between my position as a researcher and my personal relationship with several of my interlocutors and maintain these domains separated. However, I am very much convinced that personal involvement is a plus in fieldwork which tries to grasp the experiences of people, for the considerable amount of trust necessary to retrieve intimate, in-depth experiences on subjects which are difficult to talk about is only present when the researcher is personally involved. Moreover, a more severe challenge during my research was the fact that time constraints made it impossible to establish confidential relationship with people whom I did not have contact with before. This makes the selection of interlocutors random, for I was totally dependent on the cooperation of the people I met and their willingness to talk in-depth with me.

Lastly, being a highly political and sensitive issue, findings I describe as transnational strategic practices used in the pursuit of asylum, safety and better opportunities might be classified as ‘inappropriate’ regarding their extra-state, non-legal and non-formal (Nordstrom, 2004) character. However, the aim of this thesis was to create an understanding and increase knowledge on the experiences of living a transnational live. Only by taking the whole range of strategies, including marriage and migration strategies, into account, a realistic understanding of the experiences of these Somalis can be achieved. I hope this research gives the reader a more nuanced understanding of the action of the different Somali refugees involved.

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<sup>10</sup> Because of I continuously would like to position myself within the context of this research, I chose to write this thesis in the first person singular – I.

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# Chapter 1 - Leaving home, ending up in Amsterdam

## *experiences of arriving, asylum and acceptance*

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The disintegration and collapse of the Somali state in 1991 has dispersed its population and forcibly uprooted human beings from the place they once knew as 'home'. A great amount of Somali refugees sought safer grounds in the region, but a large proportion of the population also migrated towards European countries, and, to a similar degree to Canada, the US and Australia (UNHCR, 2013). Amsterdam being one of the destinations in which they ended up. Although this chapter will explain the heterogeneity of the Somali population in the Netherlands, what they all have in common is the experience of leaving home and arriving in the Netherlands.

This chapter sketches the heterogeneity of the Somali population in Amsterdam by explaining differentiated experiences which profoundly shape their frame of references towards both the Netherlands as well as transnational linkages. With different routes of fleeing, different stories of survival, these Somalis all ended up living in Amsterdam. Firstly, heterogeneity can be explained by the differential experiences of Somalis who arrived in the early 90s and those who only recently entered the Netherlands. An overview of the most important socio-demographic details of this relatively new ethnic group in Amsterdam will be provided. Secondly, experiences vary largely between those with a legal status and the undocumented refugees living in 'illegality'. As a consequence of the collapse of the Somali state, passports or birth certificates were no longer issued, which complicated the asylum procedure for the new generation Somalis, not being able to prove their nationality on arrival in a European nation state with restricting asylum policies. Finally, the chapter will explain how being a refugee has consequences for the relation with the homeland, family lives at distance and life within an involved community in Amsterdam. As all Somalis entered society through the system of applying for asylum and therefore lived several months or years in AZCs, I will describe experiences of life in AZCs shared by several of my interlocutors. Hereby, I argue that the Dutch system of asylum, at the very moment of arriving, is important in shaping the atmosphere for cross-border involvement, for it isolates refugees from society and thus makes them very much dependable on each other.

### DIFFERENTIATED EXPERIENCES

#### **The 'old generation' and the 'newcomers'**

The first Somali refugees started arriving in the Netherlands in the beginning of the 1990s as a direct result of the collapse of the state and, consequently the civil war (Van den Reek, 2001). This first wave of Somalis merely originates from North-Somalia (now Somaliland). After the worsening of the situation and the crisis in southern areas of Somali in 2007, a second wave of refugees could be distinguished (Moors et al., 2009). The second flow includes more young people than the first Somalis that arrived and was made up mainly of Somalis coming from Mogadishu (Moors, et al., 2009). For the situation in Somalia has been fragile and violent for over 20 years, the group that recently arrived is marked by having lived in war and chaos for decades and thus a lack of proper education. The lacking and malfunctioning of a government led to a high proportion of Somalis who lack proper documents of identification, like passports and birth certificates.

In 2013 a total number of 34.631 Somalis were living in the Netherlands, of which 24.597 are first generations Somalis (CBS Statline, 2013). Amsterdam is the city that hosts the fourth largest Somali population, with a total of 1.398 in 2013 (CBS Statline, 2013). Besides, in Amsterdam a large number of undocumented refugees united themselves to become visible and start a political demonstration against the strict asylum policies of the Dutch government. Under the name *We Are Here*, the group consists of undocumented refugees from several African countries, however the

majority coming from Somalia. Over the last 2 years they found residence in several locations in Amsterdam.

There is a great leap between experiences when arriving as one of the first refugees from Somali in the beginning of the 90s, or arriving more than twenty years later. Not only has the socio-political climate in the Netherlands changed, as explained thoroughly by Van Liempt (2011) in her research among Dutch Somalis relocating to the UK, also the experiences of having lived in a country of fragility and violence is a factor that causes an enormous differentiation between these two groups; the 'old generation' and the 'newcomers'.

As Fatma explained to me: "We (the ones who arrived early) were the ones who were leading a good life before the war. It are always the wealthier and educated people who leave first. My brothers and sisters and I were lucky enough to already have finished our education, when the war broke out". The first Somalis, mainly coming from northern areas, which is now Somaliland, are also stated to be more tolerant and to "have known a different Somalia". This can partly be explained because the 'newcomers' have lived in a situation of insecurity and violence, without proper institution, medical care and education. Also, several women stated that in the Somalia where they used to live, "religion was not that much present on the street". As Saafi explains to me: "my parent were, and still are, very open and tolerant". The Somali community in the Netherlands in general is perceived to be very closed-off and very religious, as confirmed by research (Moors et al., 2009, Van Liempt & Nijenhuis, 2014, 2014) and by several of my interlocutors.

Moreover, as a large proportion of Somalis arriving recently in the Netherlands has already spend decades as a refugee in a country in the horn of Africa or the Arab region, their experiences are more and more shaped by a lack of 'home' and a nomadic way of live. A lot of them living in neighbouring countries in illegality as well, while sometimes having to cope with a daily fear of being deported. In the words of Walid: "those young guys, they have seen already seen the whole world". The whole world – however, from a different perspective, living in-between borders, in the gaps of the nation-state system, searching for a place where they do "have opportunities".

These differentiated experiences cause a kind of breach within the community. Although there is frequent contact between Somalis, no matter when they arrived, I have heard in several conversations that it is difficult to understand each other, despite the shared identity and cultural background. Fatma and Maryam told me that the organisation they are working for especially targets those women who recently came and aren't able to find their way through Dutch society. As a group of "successful, old refugees" they started activities to help other refugees integrate, participate socially and get acquainted with the juridical-bureaucratic system.

"We cannot expect the same from those who have come here twenty years ago, with their passport and diplomas in their hands, they had a stronger position when they entered the Netherlands. Newcomer lag behind on education, emotion, have a lot problems and have seen a lot of misery. They have already experienced being a refugee for so long. And when things don't work out well when they are in the AZCs here, they feel they cannot be anywhere; they like they are nothing more than just a number".

A huge difference is noticeable between the lives of, on the one hand, Somalis who arrived a long time ago with their (extended) family and have been able to cope with learning the language, rule of society etc. They have been able to find work and give their children a proper education. On the other hand, there are refugees who arrived recently and, because of not speaking the Dutch language and a lack of education, feel unable to participate in society in any form. It are these differentiated experiences that do not presuppose, however, highly influence, the extent to which transnational social practices play a role in their daily lives in Amsterdam.

During my research I came across a Somali man who had a residence permit which stated "nationality unknown". This is done by the IND when an individual is unable to provide sufficient official documents to prove his or her nationality. As Ali Ware, leader of Somali community

organisation SOMVAO whom I met during my fieldwork, explained in a research of Van Liempt and Nijenhuis (2014, p 29): “These Somalis did not have proper documents upon arrival and were never officially recognised as Somali”. This means that they do have a residence permit, but do not appear in official registers, as a consequence of the collapse of the Somali state and its bureaucratic apparatus, which makes passports and birth certificates inaccessible for a whole generation.

### LEGAL STATUSES, ILLEGAL LIVES

*“If I would have a verblijfsvergunning, I would be able to start my life, you know”*  
- Umar, 23 years old

Beside the differentiated experiences between the ‘old generation’ and the ‘newcomers’, there exists a gap between Somali with a legal status and Somalis who remain undocumented and unable to legally claim any of their human rights, such as housing, food, education or work.

All of the undocumented Somalis did enter a legal application for asylum. However, there are several reasons they were not able to prove their refugee status with a coherent fleeing story or the correct legal documents. In order to make these undocumented – by law considered illegal – refugees return to their home countries, in 2001 an intensification of detention for illegal took place (Vreemdelingenwet, 2001). This was supposed to complete the cycle of asylum policies and fasten the – often involuntarily – return of refugees. However, in reality policies don’t always work out as they are intended. The country of origin must provide the Dutch government with the correct papers to make a refugee return. Due to various reasons this return is often not possible. Identity and origin of the refugee must be stated by legal papers, which most of the times was a reason for rejected asylum (Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie, 2013). Besides, the country of origin must recognise the refugee as a citizen. Temporary travel documents also must be provided by the country and the border officials must provide the refugee with access (ibidem). Somalia is one of the most problematic examples of where the Dutch asylum policy fails; since 2010 only few forced deportations have taken place. A large proportion of the undocumented Somalis in Amsterdam did not receive asylum, but in fact is unable to return to their country (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2013).

An estimate of the CBS in 2010 stated the total number of undocumented Somalis between 1.300 and 5.900 (qtd in: Klaver et al., 2010); a broad estimate, which grasps the difficulty to control this group. I myself witnessed the last couple of years how several undocumented Somalis left the Netherlands – mostly through illegal channels – to find better opportunities somewhere else. However, the number of undocumented Somalis also increases, for Somalis who finish their asylum procedure and were not able to get a residence permit, are put “on the streets” regularly.

Living an ‘illegal’ life in Amsterdam, means not having access to a “normal life”, as stated so many times by the Somalis I met. As Dutch laws restrict work, rent of housing and education, there are no options to participate socially. Also, the Dublin Convention II prohibits crossing the border towards another European country, to avoid applying for asylum there. With your fingerprints marked in the Netherlands, you ended up in Amsterdam – often by coincidence – and are unable to leave or stay.

### REFUGEEENESS AND SCATTERED FAMILIES

This paragraph explains the complication of being a refugee is in “the age of the nation-state and its accoutrements such as passports, citizenship, and diplomatic representation” (Peteet, 1995, p.170) The term *refugeeness* as elaborated on by Peteet implies “a framework for experiencing, interpreting, and acting on the world, giving location to self and community in an immediate socio-political order and in an international community” (1995, p.170). It is precisely this framework of experiences that is leading in the experiences of Somalis who all crossed borders and entered the Netherlands to ask the Dutch nation-state to give them asylum. Moreover, when gaining a legally recognised refugee status is not achieved, living as an undocumented refugee even more severely excludes you to a *non-place* (Nordstrom, 2006).



As all first generation Somalis have been through an asylum procedure when entering the Netherlands, I argue here that the Dutch system of asylum, from the very moment of arriving onwards, shapes the atmosphere for cross-border involvement, for it restricts the social participation of refugees and thereby makes them entirely dependable on each other. AZCs have importance in establishing contacts with other refugees, and in particular with other Somalis. As several of my interlocutors stated, they met friends in the AZCs with whom they sustained contact after leaving the AZC. Besides, some met friends or distant family members whom they knew before fleeing to the Netherlands, but of whom they were not aware that they also ended up in the Netherlands; of all places.

Entering through an asylum procedure means having lived in AZCs for a considerable period of time. However, as several of my interlocutors, Somalis who arrived at a very young age, don't keep memories of that period. Taking into account that the Dutch asylum politics have been problematic over the last decades and policy changes have been made, some Somalis who arrived more recently have stayed in these asylum residence for several years. As Anwar told me, he had lived in AZCs for over two years and was relocate six times. Besides, Fatma, who arrived as a single mother of three children, lived for four years in a AZC.

Here, the non-congruency between geographical and social spaces is obvious; although located within the Dutch borders, not being able to take part in Dutch society and thus maintaining social contacts with other refugees in the AZC or with transnationally located family members, makes these spaces more transnationally located than interacting with Dutch society.

The Dutch government implemented a categorical protection policy between 2004 and 2009 as a consequence of the break-out of large scale violence in Somali (Staatscourant, 2005). This led to granting a lot of resident permit to Somali refugees in this period. This made the procedures fast and therefore shortened the period in the AZC, which made gave Somalis the opportunity to very rapid start life in the Netherlands and don't waste time 'waiting'. Several young Somali men I spoke to, arrived during this period and respectively send 3 and 6 months in procedure, nothing when compared to the four years Fatma spend in AZCs.

'Waiting' or 'sleeping' is often the word that Somalis use to refer to the period they lived in the AZC. Characterized by a lack of opportunities, a lot of stress of the application and the geographically isolated location of these camps, time spend in the AZC is seen as a period of being in-between; having fled Somalia, but not yet able to enter the Dutch society. The isolated location, away from cities, makes it difficult to get acquainted with Dutch society, intersected by the denial of the rights to participate socially, is specifically targeted to prevent integration and instead prepare asylum seekers for the possibility that they will not be granted refugee status and therefore need to return to their home countries (Van Liempt & Nijenhuis, 2014, p. 72).

In the AZCs the non-congruency between geographical and social spaces is embodied; although located within the Dutch borders, not being able to take part in Dutch society and thus maintaining social contacts with other refugees in the AZC or with transnationally located family members, makes these spaces more transnationally located than interacting with Dutch society. Besides being an actual location, AZCs have an important symbolic meaning within the community itself. AZC or 'camp' is a very common linguistic concept referred to in conversations in different languages. As most Somalis are familiar with live in the AZC, the shared experiences led to a common frame of references.

Beside individually applying for a residence permit, a large proportion of Somalis received a legal status through family reunification (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2013). In the period 2001-2011 one-third of the Somalis who received a permit also received a legal status as 'refugee', the other half received their permit through family reunification (CBS Statline, 2012). Maryam (44 years old) told me she was lucky to get asylum by means of family reunification after marrying her husband in Yemen. After being displaced in the region for ten years, she was happy not to have to go through a lengthy, stressful asylum procedure. As she herself refers to it: "I have been a refugee for over 24



years now, that is more than half my live. Around 2000 I was lucky to join my husband and almost immediately start a life in the Netherlands”.

Being a refugee not only shapes the relationship with the Netherlands, but also marks the relationship with the home country, for it robs Somalis of a place to return to, for in their ‘home’ they fear persecution or violence. As Fatma puts it:

“...and that is where we are different from other migrant groups, like the Turks or Moroccans. They came her in search of work opportunities and still have their country and their families to return to”.

Some of my interlocutors are young Somalis who grew up without knowing his or her country, a generation that has lived scattered all over the world, as a nation without a territorial state, mostly legally unrecognised because of a lack of passports, which only further underlines the statelessness of a whole generation of young Somalis. Having lived in Somalia until he was eleven years old, Cali fled with his family to Yemen. The fact that Yemen welcomes Somali refugees while the richer countries in the Arab Peninsula apply very strict procedures and frequently deport Somalis (Morris, 2010), gives urban settled refugees without a legal status the opportunity to attend school and so did Cali. In 2008, however, hoping to join his brother living in the Netherlands, Cali left Yemen, passed through Syria and Turkey, reached Greece by boat and continued onwards until arriving in the Netherlands. Having lived in several place, in severe insecurity, I do not think Cali is an exception. It could be stated that a young generation of Somalis grew up without knowing its country or with only knowing Somalia in insecurity, a generation that has lived scattered all over the world, as a nation without a territorial state, mostly legally unrecognised because of a lack of passports, which only further underlines the statelessness of a whole generation of young Somalis.

Secondly, the fact that the war in Somalia has been enduring for over twenty years now, led to scattered families, living all over the world. As a typical characteristic of a diaspora, I would like to underline the triadic relationship towards space (Cohen, 1997) that several of my interlocutors have stated to have. As Libaan explained to me, part of his direct family is living in North Somalia, Djibouti, Egypt and Italy. Besides, he has a sister and a brother living in the UK and a second cousin in the Netherlands. Relationship with these relatives are maintained, while settling and creating a tie with the territorial state of the Netherlands and more specifically with Amsterdam. Besides, a strong tie with the motherland is maintained, even though some of my interlocutors have left this country at a really young age. This multiple ties with geographical spaces creates a series of transnational contacts with family members which is inexhaustible. After stating here that, as a consequence of the enduring fragility in Somalia and of being a refugee, family members have relocated themselves to various countries in the world, the following chapter will elaborate on the multiple forms in which these transnational linkages are enacted on.

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## Chapter 2 – Lives across borders

### *transnational phone calls, migration and capital*

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Practices across borders are present in many aspects of the lives of Somalis in Amsterdam. In this chapter I will describe these practices, actions and connections that occur in the midst of our capital city, but that are extracted from the eye by the layers of invisibility caused by unrecognition of the extra-state nature of these actions of uncategorised people; the people not confined to as singular national category.

I use a critical transnational perspective to call attention to the border-crossing practices that Somalis engage in as they maintain relations with their homeland or families scattered all over the world. It seeks an empirically based understanding of the extent to which transnational practices are undertaken by Somali refugees and their family members in the pursuit of asylum, meaningful family relations, livelihood and opportunities for a better life. Partly in line with Al-Sharmani's research on transnational family networks in the Somali diaspora in Egypt (2010), this chapter will focus on four constitutive dimensions of transnational practices: *migration strategies, family care and management, financial support* and *cultural, communal reproduction*. However, these four dimensions are in reality often conflated and not easily separable, as for example a marriage might imply access to legal capital (migration strategy), a strategy of family care, a financial transfer that the family might need at that moment and, ultimately, it gives the Somalis the opportunity to continue their cultural practices and maintain a distinct identity.

#### TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PRACTICES

##### FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY: FAMILY CARE & MANAGEMENT

*"I am in touch with a lot of relatives in different countries. In the past we used to call each other, or talk on MSN, but now in the 'phone-age' everything goes by Skype, Whatsapp or Facebook. When there is a birthday in the family, we can call per Skype and see each other for a while. My family living in Puntland, Somalia, is easy to reach, for they have proper internet. I also have a cousin in Mogadishu whom I sometimes call by phone, because getting an internet connection is more difficult for him."*  
- Samiira, 44 years old

As stated by almost all of my interlocutors, several contacts between family members are sustained on a frequent basis. Internet-based chat media are used to keep in touch and inform about the situation of relatives living elsewhere. Because of steady improves in the internet connection in Somalia over the last few years, almost everyone can be reached cheaply and fast. Besides, as for example Walid explained to me, some are engaged in Facebook groups with family, people from the same neighbourhood in Mogadishu, Somali friends they met in the AZC, etc.

Several times I also was informed about more urgent ways of contacting family members, namely when a violent event happened in Somalia. The news spreads rapidly, not only through formal media channels, but also through personal contacts; family members calling and telling what had happened. As Samiira told me, a week before I met her, she had been worried about the situation of her brother-in-law. Knowing he had left from Puntland to Mogadishu, to arrange paperwork for the inheritance of a plot of land of the family, she was informed about a bombing in the centre of Mogadishu. Alarmed by the news she immediately tried to reach her brother-in-law to ask if he was alright. *Alhamdulillah*<sup>11</sup>, he was.

This example shows the importance of maintaining regular contact with family members

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<sup>11</sup> Most Somalis speak Arabic and repeatedly intermingle languages as they speak. *Alhamdulillah* means 'thank god' and demonstrates how language is often drenched with religious (Islamic) references.

living in fragile situation, not solely in Somalia itself, but also in difficult situations in neighbouring countries. As formerly the Somali community in Syria and Egypt was large, the fragility in these countries also caused a lot of worries for Somalis with relatives or friends there.

Besides these contacts and their importance for the maintaining of meaningful family relationships, the care and management of different family members often comprises a more strategic dimensions, which more directly implies decision-making aimed at improving the livelihood or opportunities of Somalis and their families. I came across an example of such a strategic decision-making process, that occurred within the family of Anwar, an undocumented Somali I spoke to.

“Living illegal in Yemen, my cousin now finds itself in a very hard position. Because of trouble in the family, he cannot stay at the house of his uncle were he used to live. Now, the family is gathering the financial needs for him to travel illegally into Saudi Arabia and cover his life expenditures there. We all transfer 150\$ through *dahabshiil*<sup>12</sup>. However, living illegally in Saudi Arabia is also a risky shot, for he runs the risk of being deported back to Somalia. And, although he has the nationality, he does not know Somali, because he left with his family when he was young”.

Here, collectively deciding where relatives across borders might find the best opportunities for life and assisting each other with financial needs is what makes practices of family care and management transnational.

Another important practice of family care and reproduction is the arranging of marriages across borders. It are either the partners who are residing in different countries or the family members who are involved in the arranging of the marriage from across the border. In general, it is noticeable that the Somali community itself is a very closed-off one. Therefore, ‘mixed marriage’ are not very common, or at least a topic of discussion within the community itself. Most of my interlocutors claimed to have a tolerant perspective towards marriages between Somalis and partners of different nationalities, however, I also discovered the great difficulties to accept a marriage partner of different nationality, moreover when they are non-Muslim.<sup>13</sup>

Several times, I heard stories of marriages being arranged between Somalis with the involvement of family members or partners across borders. For example, a young man (26 years old) I had a conversation with stated he was about to get married. His parents, living in-between Yemen and their hometown in southern Somalia, were about to introduce him to a potential bride: the daughter of a family they are close to, living in the south of the Netherlands. I do not want to state that these traditional practices are common. Another interlocutor who has lived in the Netherlands for over 22 years stated: “those practices occur, but it is more common that two young people meet each other here and ask their parents’ permission, either here or in another country”. However, organisations such as the Somali women organisation *Iftin*, are concerned about forced marriages and parents who ‘punish’ their children when they are not behaving, by sending them back to the home region or an Arab country to ‘find the right path’ and marry a Muslim girl.

Because of the on-going violence and fragility both in Somalia as for refugees living (in illegality) in neighbouring countries, strategies that help relatives flee the country and seek a situation of safety and stability is of prime importance for Somalis. The story of Maryam that opened the Introduction of this thesis is an example of this. Living in illegality in Saudi-Arabia with the constant threat of being deported, living in fragile Yemen, in the large refugee camps or in urban areas with scarcely more opportunities, living in refugee camps in Kenya or in Nairobi or illegally finding shelter in Egypt, who did not sign the UN 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and therefore has no official asylum policies (UNHCR, 2013) – these situations sketch the inherent difficulties implied in

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<sup>12</sup> Dahabshiil is a large scale, Somali based money transfer network similar to Western Union. It has branches in 150 countries and thus reaches Somalis in almost every country in the world (Dahabshiil: <http://www.dahabshiil.com/>)

<sup>13</sup> In Islam, a woman must always marry a Muslim, for the father’s religion will determine the religion of the children; if her husband is not Muslim, the children of a Somali will not be born Muslims.

fleeing and not knowing where you might end up. Here, socio-economic structures and the overarching legal framework have huge implications on the situations of family members. The border is constantly manifesting itself in the daily lives of relatives. But, it is also here as the above mentioned examples indicate, where strategic action of the individual might improve the situation of family members.

## MIGRATION STRATEGIES AND LEGAL CAPITAL

*“A friend of me, he was caught trying to get to the UK with a false passport. His sister lives there. Like him, there are a lot of us who just ended up here without choosing the Netherlands as our destination”*

- Zein, 21 years old

One of the assumptions underlying most migration theories implies that migrants are free to move wherever they want to and make choices based on preferences or the so-called “push/pull factors” (Van Liempt, 2011, p. 256). However, the possibility to choose movement, is very much constrained by actual possibilities within the larger structures; inequalities in power between different countries, entry policies of potential countries and routes of smugglers. It is necessary to see the strategies and choices concerning migration within a larger framework of juridical and bureaucratic structures constraining free movement of peoples. These structures put constraints on the choices refugees have (ibidem). As Zein told me, refugees might not always be in the position to move where they want to go. Almost all of my interlocutors told me they did not know they were going to the Netherlands in particular, they just headed off to Europe with the informal information about fleeing routes and settlement opportunities they won through their social network. Several times I was able to grasp stories of Somalis who initially had wanted to join family members in another European countries, but due to the Dublin Convention<sup>14</sup>, had to apply for asylum in the country through which they entered Europe. An example here is Walid (26 years old, 5 years in the Netherlands), who wanted to settle with his brother in Denmark, but arrived at Schiphol first. He told me he is considering to relocate to Denmark after getting his Dutch passport, to continue his studies and stay with his brother whom he has visited several times.

As the example in the introduction of Maryam explains that it are not only the ‘newcomers’ who are concerned with these migration strategies. The movement of family members, be it from or to Europe or between countries in the region, is a matter frequently discussed and planned within families at-a-distance.

Besides, for the undocumented refugees, migration strategies are of existential importance. Due to the Dublin Convention, which restrict refugees to apply for asylum in another European country, legal options for resettlement are limited. This pushes them in a situation where they are, at the same time urged to leave and unable to do so. In order to find opportunities for a live outside illegality, several strategies might be employed. I want to reveal that these strategies regularly crisscross the legal and illegal domains of society. Firstly, aiming through legal channels to once again start a procedure for asylum goes often hand in hand with obtaining proper documents to be able to prove your nationality and your life course. Through strategic usage of social contacts, both information on which (legal) documents might be useful and how to get these documents is shared. For the people standing on that thin line of survival between legality and becoming a juridical unacknowledged ‘illegal’, the transnational linkage for obtaining legal capital, like birth certificates,

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<sup>14</sup> The Dublin Convention III regulation (which replaced the original Dublin Convention of 1990) states: “this regulation establishes the principle that only one Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application. The objective is to avoid asylum seekers from being sent from one country to another, and also to prevent abuse of the system by the submission of several applications for asylum by one person.” (Summary of European legislation: [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/justice\\_freedom\\_security/free\\_movement\\_of\\_persons\\_asylum\\_immigration/l33153\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_freedom_security/free_movement_of_persons_asylum_immigration/l33153_en.htm)).

passports, etc. – be it official (by contacting parents, urging embassies or organization to provide documents) or false – is of existential importance. Finding a way through the bureaucratic system of asylum in Europe – following formal or non-formal paths, in both the legal and illegal domain – are strategies of existence. However, it are precisely these actions that are often considered inappropriate by the ‘system’.

Secondly, when deciding to leave the Netherlands, but not opting for return to Somalia because of the fear for persecuting or a situation without opportunities, some Somalis I spoke to would like to try and find their luck somewhere else. Because the legal framework restricts legal possibilities to travel to any other country, the illegal channels must once again be exploited. Although I am not sure if these strategies are successful, I noticed that illegal ways of trying to reach another country, most of the UK were intended through false documents or good contacts. Besides, when leaving for another European country, like Germany, information and tricks are shared. This is also how the widespread manipulation of fingerprints of Somalis in the Netherlands, signaled by the IND in 2009 worked. Unable to get legally recognized in another country, like Malta, Somalis intended to go to the Netherlands, where the categorical protection policy was applied in that time. The discovering of fingerprint manipulation eventually led to the abandonment of this particular policy. However, it must be stated that I do not confirm a ‘pulling effect’, in which the country with the softest laws will suck up all immigrants, for dynamics implied in the process of fleeing are not limited to ‘push and pull’ factors; processes of movement are fragmented, full of interruption, luck and misfortune, and interlinked with personal aspirations, limited opportunities and constraining structures. The pursuit of meaningful safety is not a linear, one-way path.

Here the story of Feysal is illustrative: “if you have contacts here in the Netherlands, and it are people you trust, you can ask him to search for a false passport. He searches for passport, mostly from a Somali living in the UK and afterwards you pay. Living illegal in the Netherlands is not a way of life, for nobody, so we look for other possibilities”. This is also why a Somali friend from university told me she encountered much trouble when her Dutch passport was stolen. Arriving at a young age, she has lived in the Netherlands all her live. When she went to the police to report the robbing of her passport, she had to officially declare that she did not sell her passport, which later on could be used by other Somalis.

These examples indicate that migration is not a one-way flow towards Europe. Multiple connections between places exist and still, after arriving in Europe or in Amsterdam, these strategies are of importance for pursuing meaningful protection for the refugee itself or for family members living abroad. In a context of constraining asylum policies and the constant, arbitrary presence of the border for those who do not have the proper legal capital (a European passport), transnational social linkages provide opportunities to move which Somalis would otherwise not have possessed.

## **REMITTANCES & RESOURCES**

Of the three transnational strategies described in this chapter, sharing of remittances and resources across borders might be the most well-known form of transnational involvement. But, to enrich the understanding of these processes of sending remittance, I will explain that money and resources are not solely send to Somalia, but have multiple destination across countries. Besides, the purposes of sending money or resources are often intermingled and might involve more than just assistance.

When I asked Anwar (30 years old) about his engagement in money transferring or receiving practices he explained to me:

“Within the family sending money to assist each other is important, especially to Somalia. My mother lives there, it is difficult for her to get money, because she is a women. If I, for example, receive 200 euros this month, I keep 100 to cover my life expenditures. The other 100 I try to send to my mother, so she can eat. Because I am in a difficult situation, I sometimes receive money from my brother living in Malaysia”.



Very important about the above example, is to perceive flows of remittances that are so common among diaspora, not as one-way flows, but as flows with multiple destinations. Anwar's situation makes this clear; he financially assists his mother in Somalia, while at the same time receiving money from other relatives, because of his situation as an undocumented refugee. Several interlocutors in the same situation as Anwar have stated to receive money from family members abroad.

Probably, sending money from Amsterdam towards the home region is done more often. Saafi explained to me that ever since her parents settled in the Netherlands some twenty years ago, they have monthly send remittances to their brothers and parents back in Somalia. Luckily, her parents adapted really soon to their new environment and have since been able to find jobs to financially sustain both Saafi and her siblings here and family members who were behind. What is also common within the Somali family, is to send money on certain occasions. This can be the case when someone within the family died and the rest of the family must be supported, when there is a wedding or during religious holidays such as *Eid* at the end of Ramadan.

The importance of supporting family members has several times been explained to me by my interlocutors. Walid for example explained to me that he usually sends remittances when his mother and siblings from Kenya call him. "They try not to call too often, because they know it is also difficult for me, because I was studying and haven't found a job yet. And when they call, I have to send them money, I cannot refuse".

Beside these practices there are several examples of collective saving systems. First of all, as the example of Anwar showed, on occasions of crisis within the private spheres of the family, or as the example of Mariam in the Introduction states, in situations of insecurity and violence, collective decision-making within the family might involve collective remitting money. Most of the time, a decision is made about how much every family member must send and to whom. Also, Baashi who has lived in the Netherlands since he was eight years old, states that on occasions his father asks him to contribute something as well for a family member in Somalia who is in need.

Another form of collective saving was explained to me by Anwar and later on confirmed by others. Anwar explained how the traditional Somali saving mechanism *ayunto* works:

"every person contributes a certain amount of money per month, every month one person receives the entire amount of money, so in that month you can do an investment or buy something expensive you might otherwise not have been able to buy. This particular system is done for example by my mother and the women in her neighbourhood in Somalia, or by brothers and sisters. But, I also participated in *ayunto* while living the AZC. A group of young men from Somalia, we would put together a part of the pocket money we receive each week and once in a while, you would receive a larger amount so you could buy shoes or something".

This kind of saving mechanisms between family members do also take place across borders, between relatives in different settlement countries.

The most common channel through which to send money to relatives in another country is through the Somali banking system *Dahabsiil*. This system is set up by Somalis all over the world. Almost all of my interlocutors have once mentioned *Dahabsiil* and often stated it to be a fast, cheap and reliable way of transferring money. Although undocumented refugees might find trouble to legally identify and open an account, most Somalis have friends who can send the money for them. This highly complex system of cash transfers, from and to Somalis all over the world could be perceived as the embodiment of the multiple transnational contacts that Somalis sustain all over the world. It are these linkages that challenge borders and, despite the constraining effect of borders in family life at-a-distance, help sustain meaningful relations.

It is in this last category of transnational social practices that lines become blurred; remitting money is not a strategy in itself, it is a means with another purpose. Purposes are multiple and often intermingled. If a Dutch Somali remits money to his sister living in Saudi Arabia, this might be



because he feels obliged for the well-being of his family members and because his culture teaches him to safeguard the relationships with relatives. It might also be because he wishes she reproduces their culture. And, if her prospected husband would possess Saudi Arabian citizenship, this could also be a migration strategy, which increase her social position and beside her position within the transnational network; afterward she might be able to contribute more to her network. Although this might challenge the dimensions describe above, together these dimensions touch the very core of this research; understanding how transnational practices are undertaken by Somali refugees and their family members in the pursuit of *asylum, meaningful family relations, livelihood and opportunities for a better life*.

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## Chapter 3 – Living in the local reality of Amsterdam *obligations, constraints and capital*

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In the previous chapters, it is explained how Somalis are marked by enforced homelessness and as a result often maintain social ties across multiple borders. These ties often lead to transnational social practices being undertaken by either the Somalis in Amsterdam or their families. This chapter, in contrast, will analyse in what way these border crossing strategies are of influence in their lives in the locality of Amsterdam and what influence the relations and institutions anchored in this particular locality have. Taking into consideration that most Somali refugees are here to stay, their lives are as much structured by their livelihoods in European societies, as they are by social, political, cultural and religious practices connecting them with their home country. Hereby, I claim that everyday lives of Somalis in Amsterdam is characterised by a constant interplay of both mobile and local practices.

First, the effects of transnational lives in Amsterdam will be explained, dealing with capitals extracted from this network and the usage of this capital in the context of Amsterdam. Secondly, obligations and constraints that come with the transnational family network are explained. Finally, in contrast to the ‘routedness’ of the previous chapters, experiences of rootedness and an involved community in Amsterdam are explained.

### TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES ROOTED IN LOCALITY - EFFECTS

Where do these transnational linkages and the local reality of Amsterdam meet? It is precisely in the everyday lives of the Somali population. In-between daily practices such as work, bringing the children to school, meeting colleagues or friends, Fatma states she is knitting a semi-traditional wedding dress for her sister living in the UK, where the whole extended family will be present. Or as Maryam explains: “we regularly Skype with nieces and nephews on birthdays or special occasions. The children, born here, get to know their family while at a distance”. Or, in summer holiday, when Cali finishes school, he will travel to Yemen with his brothers to join his parents for the holy month of Ramadan. Returning to his life in Amsterdam, he will bring a large suitcase with goods from the Arab Peninsula, clothes (both traditional and modern), electronics, traditional food, henna...

These examples illustrate the constant interaction there is between mobility and locality, being two highly intermingled domains of the everyday.

Stating the importance of transnational practices in the pursuit of recognition and dignity, I want to bring forward two examples Maryam explained to me. Firstly, she stated that the experiences of losing everything was fundamental to how she perceives herself in the Netherlands. Living in Puntland, the northern region of Somalia, she explains that from one day to another her family lost everything. From having a safe house with a plot of land, having finished an education and having a job, she had to ask a state – that was not the state of her nationality – to guarantee her safety. Furthermore, she had to start from scratch in a new society in which she found difficulties to manoeuvre. It is in this context of loss that transnational linkages are exploited to cope with the new situation. Here, social capital is some way or another transformed into symbolic capital.

The second example Maryam stated was the frustration of several women, mostly the ones who arrived recently, to not be able to participate socially, because of a lack of knowledge on the Dutch system, not being able to speak the language or illiteracy or because of the low socio-economic position they are in, which withholds them from finding a job. “During the 23 years of war Somalia finds itself in, women have played a crucial role. They have worked as small entrepreneurs and were the head of most families. Arriving in the Netherlands, these women got locked in by a complicated, bureaucratic system, which frustrates them”.

Investing in transnational contact and the homeland might be perceived as a strategy to convert the social capital within networks in symbolic capital, which could be of use in a locality to

comprise a difficult socio-economic position. The downward mobility implied in fleeing is partly compromised by this symbolic capital. Besides, starting a life in the Netherlands also is a form of upward mobility; viewed from a transnational perspective, these Somalis are the ones who succeeded in settling in Europe. Linking this to Bourdieu's explanations: "struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life [...] what is at stake [...] is the accumulation of a particular form of capital, honour in the sense of reputation and prestige" (qtd in: Espiritu, 2003, p.213).

Besides, the fact that cultural manifestation can be contained while away is important to take into consideration. As the example of Fatma who is knitting a wedding dress, shows, transnational linkages give the opportunity to maintain a certain cultural identity. Several of my interlocutors stated that they consider it as a very important aspect of Somali culture to pass this 'cultural capital' on to their children, even though they are raised in the Netherlands. Also, pursuing resources from Arab countries or from the Horn of Africa is a way of both accessing livelihood resources, but also a way of retrieving goods that have a cultural and symbolic meaning. I have seen several times that friends or relatives who travel back to the region for family visits, marriages or other special occasions take with them a lot of typical 'stuff'.

However, it must be stated that there is a huge difference between the refugees who do have legal status and the group of undocumented Somalis. Because of their uncertain situations, the undocumented Somalis are much more relying on the network and much less involved in local practices. They do not have to cope with the bureaucratic system Fatma talked about, which makes them a disenfranchised group 'standing on the border'. Here, the transnational social network is very useful, not only for support to cover life expenditures or accessing goods, also for finding recognition in this world where you seem not welcome in any place. Settling in a transnational space, getting a sense of home in the loopholes of the nation. Social networks might in various manner serve to empower these individuals, who are so vulnerable in their position of non-recognition. However, it must be noted that I did not find a difference between the distinct groups I earlier described. The extent to which a network is used or a locality is lived differs highly between individual refugees. There does not exist a direct linkages to the length of residence in the Netherlands, as I met several women who have been here for over 15 years and are still very much involved with their transnational contacts. On the other hand, I met a man who has been here even longer, but who is very much engaged in Dutch society and has less contact with family members he never met. "My parents are involved with a lot of family members. But because I don't really have a connection with someone solely because he is family. I don't keep memories of most of those relatives".

#### OBLIGATIONS AND THE PAIN OF LIVING WITH YOUR HEART IN MULTIPLE LOCATIONS

Beside the positive effects these networks might have because of the potential to extract capital and the agency this network gives refugees, which they would otherwise not have possessed because of the socio-economic position they find themselves, family lives at-distance also come with certain costs. Firstly, a very strong cultural assumption underlies the need to assist others might be experienced as a severe constraint during life in Amsterdam. As Zein explained to me:

"People with family in Somalia always have to send money back. I think they have too much stress, more than I have, because they have to take care of their families while away. I had a friend in the AZC, his wife and children were back in Somalia. As the head of the family he had to take care of them and send money. He used to cry every day, because he didn't have a status and could not send money. In the end he went back to Somalia. Just like our friend Faaid, who left half a year ago. He could not remain here without a status, because his mother is back in Somalia and he wasn't able to provide her with anything".

Several of the undocumented refugees I spoke to said that they did not tell their families about the situation they are in, because of shame or because they do not want relatives to worry about them. However, this creates an oblique situation in which it is expected of relatives living in Europe to assist the family, while they actually are not able to do so. Furthermore, Zein explained how behaving bad to your family is often corrected by other family members, who might speak boldly to you about your behavior. The inability to contribute anything creates a conflicting, painful reality that must be dealt with.

Besides, the need to assist other (especially the family) has a strong religious imperative, as Cali explained to me:

“It is part of Islam to assist a family member who is in a bad situation without being asked to do so. If your neighbour has nothing to eat and you do have food, it is *haram* not to share this with him. It does not have to be very much or very tasty, but you have to share it with him.”

However, this obligation also leads to frustrations within the family as Saafi explained to me how her parents have been involved in remitting for over twenty years, but how her mother is strictly making a difference between those family members who are able to work and sustain themselves, and those who are really vulnerable. She herself only assist the last group, because it would otherwise make “Somalis very passive”. Her husband, on the contrary, send money to those whom he feels obliged to, whether or not they are in the position to sustain themselves. Deciding whom or whom not to assist is often a difficult consideration. Saafi herself had worked part time beside her study in university, which very much surprised her family members in Somalia. According to her, that illustrates the passive attitude of several of her family members back there.

Lastly, despite the strength and strategies I encountered in the lives of my interlocutors, I also want to tell the other side of the story: the pain of living away from your family. Although most of the Somalis are keeping regularly contact with family members, taking on skype about a happy event or a difficult situation is not a choice, but the forced result of fleeing; a necessary compromise for the distance caused by the borders that cut across these lives. As Zein explains: “When I talk to my mother by telephone, I image her face as it was when I left. But when I see the pictures they send me, I discover she has become so much older.”

Regular visits to family members in other countries – be it in Europe, Canada, the Arab region, or Somalia itself – are undertaken by Somalis who are in the position to do so – who have both the financial and the legal (passport) resources to do so. These actual visits are a supplement to the imagined and virtual family relations existing in the in-betweens of the transnational network. This once again puts the undocumented refugees in a very difficult position; unable to travel they are not able to visit family members and, as a consequence, also miss special events such as weddings or religious festivals in which the family is considered so important in Somali culture.

### HOME-MAKING; AN INVOLVED COMMUNITY

In order to nuance the transnational experiences and take into account the permanency of settlement of refugees in the Netherlands, I will focus here on the way the Somali community in Amsterdam aimed at building a warm nest. Although some Somalis I spoke to state not to feel accepted, they did wish to stay in the Netherlands. The feeling of not being accepted has been brought forward by Samiira:

“I am used to the system here. I visited other countries in Europe, but always preferred the system of how things work here. I even moved to the UK, but came after some months, because I thought the education system in the Netherlands is better. And I am grateful to the Netherlands, because I asked for asylum and they helped me. They gave me a status, a residence and a *uitkering* (state benefit) when I needed one. But I still don’t feel at home here, because I don’t feel accepted.”

I argue that the scattered, extensive form of community that came into being is a compromise for, on the one hand, the distance of relatives and, on the other hand, the experiences of not feeling accepted in Dutch society. This compromise might have its roots in experiences of the asylum path through which to enter society; life in the AZCs as describe in Chapter 1.

Amiin told me about a habit between Somalis. “When you are walking on the street and meet another Somali, it is common to say ‘*wariya*’. But some Somalis think it is not a polite way of talking, because it means ‘hey you’.” Furthermore, Saafi explained how special it is for her to have connection with someone just because he or she is a Somali. When she meets someone on the streets or in a certain place, they start talking and already have a special relationship, because of a shared nationality and a shared culture, although she does not have any lived memories of her home country. This shared nationality also is an imperative for helping each other out.

The sense of community was also very present in the organisations in Amsterdam I visited. These organisations do not solely have a function in service delivery, but more broadly are places where Somalis gather. I talked about how several Somalis perceived the role of these organisations which are familiar to all Somalis I spoke to. Some of my interlocutors told me they regularly visit these organisation to meet Somali friends, to have coffee or lunch, mostly after the Friday prayer. Besides, the voluntary involvement of Somalis who have been here already a long time and those who only recently arrived showed the solidarity between these groups. As Saafi explained, she is so much engaged with the well-being of refugees, both during the asylum procedure as well as with challenges faced during integration, because she remembers what she herself has been through when she fled. She refers to her fellow Somalis as “companions in suffering” (*lotgenoten*).

However, the undocumented refugees in general where not visiting these organisations and when addressing the leap between the undocumented and the Somalis who do have a residence permit during the conversations, I noticed contact between these two groups was sometimes problematic and there often existed a lack of understanding. It is difficult to grasp the negative attitude I encountered within the group of undocumented refugees towards some of these community organisations, but it must be a mixture of absence of solidarity, frustrations of dependency and needing assistance and differentiated experiences, of both Somalia and of arrival in the Netherlands.

Also, the mosque has an important role within the community. Beside visiting the mosque for praying, the mosque is a place to meet. Almost two years ago, the Somali community in Amsterdam started crowdfunding to be able to establish a Somali mosque. They were able to buy a small mosque in the North of Amsterdam, which is now functioning as a community mosque where prayers are held in Somali and where children can follow Somali classes.

Feeling at home, feeling Somali or Dutch and envisioning your future here or somewhere else are topics referred to in different manners by my interlocutors. Most did however state to very much identify as a Somali. And, almost all refugees, except for some undocumented, told me they wished to stay in the Netherlands. However, all of them are in some way involved in the community, be it little or a lot. There are deep friendships between Somalis, that either met here, know each other from earlier times or are close to each other because of clanship, village of origin, mutual friends or families who are close to each other. These friendships here could in some cases be perceived as an extended family feeling. Therefore, the community in Amsterdam - although scattered and not to be conceived as a bordered, static social group, but merely as a dynamic group with challenged borders and different forms of both inclusion and exclusion – is also a kind of social safety net. This is where challenges faced in Dutch society are solved out, where undocumented refugees who have no place to sleep can always knock on the door of a Somali friend and where the nightly dinner of Ramadan is shared with all who visit the mosque, be it legal or illegal, a newcomer or someone who has never really lived on Somali soil.

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## Conclusion & discussion

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At what moment do borders fade away? I met some Somalis for whom the border is constantly present, constraining their action and the actions of their family members in the home region. For them, transnational linkages are a must that might provide the opportunities they would otherwise lack. However, I also met some Somalis who are constantly moving between several nations, disregarding place and border almost completely, living their lives in a global space that, beside the passport checks at the airport, seems borderless. Several forms of capital are the reason for this; legal capital (possession of European passport), socio-economic position, being 'global elite'. With this forms of transnational incorporation comes a particular framework "for experiencing, interpreting, and acting on the world, giving location to self and community in an immediate socio-political order and in an international community" (Petee, 1995, p.170). This framework is very much shaped by the experience of fleeing and asking for asylum, differentiated experiences and socio-economic position are also of influence.

Borders decide who is in as well as who is out. Being an arbitrary line which constrains movement and linking a nationality to a place where to belong in this world, options for refugees are scarce. Telling the individual stories of survival of refugees throws into question hegemonic assumptions about the bordered nation-state and the paradox of the nation as a natural organizing principle. But, in a position where the border is a harsh, sometimes excluding reality, people have sought for strategies to challenge these borders; to live *with* the border, to live *despite* the border. The creative strategies employed in search of opportunities illustrate the strength of a people that seems left with no opportunities. It wonderfully sketches the active manners Somalis have sought to keep their heads up. Although with revealing this strength I aim to reject notions of refugees as "passive victims", I do not want to minimize the difficulties, irresolutions and pains of leaving home, feeling the physical distance between you and your family and living life in-between localities. On the one hand, it is beautiful how people find ways beyond nation-states to live with a certain reality, no matter how harsh that is. On the other hand, these strategies are not able to compensate the harshness of this reality.

This study aimed at getting a better understanding of transnational practices undertaken by Somali refugees and their family members in the pursuit of asylum, meaningful family relations, livelihood and opportunities for a better life. The following research question stood at the center of this study:

*How do transnational social practices affect the everyday lives of Somali refugees in Amsterdam?*

By focusing on the everyday experiences of Somalis in Amsterdam, the nuanced interplay between mobility and locality within an overarching social network is described. Transnational practices play significant role in the lives of refugees in Amsterdam. Family networks are a central support systems that both Somalis living here and their families across border depend on. Transnational social ties function both as a symbolic as well as an actual social security network. Here, strategies are deployed to challenge the constraining impact of structures; the border. However, it must be stated that strategies encounter resistance of structures, for they always take place in the constraining context of the legal framework, of nations and – being an undocumented refugee – in a context of no opportunities.

However, the centrality of transnational linkages must not be overestimated. Taking into consideration that most Somali refugees are here to stay, their lives are as much structures by their livelihoods in European societies, as they are by social, political, cultural and religious practices connecting them with their home country. Structural factors such as access to legal residence, having a source of income, possessing the knowledge and the means to facilitate movement of family



members are shaped by the power differentials both between nation-states as well as between family members. These factors constrain, but at the same time enable the utilisation of a family-based support system.

Mobility and local dynamics must be seen as a constant interplay. The existence of an involved, helpful community in the locality of Amsterdam, shaped by experiences of arriving and going through a lengthy asylum procedure while partly isolated from Dutch society, is important to pursue opportunities for a better life within the nation-state. Besides, the existence of this community could be viewed as a way of compensating the distance of family members and the safety that comes with being embedded in a family network. As most Somalis I met lack the daily presence of their family, relations drenched with an 'extended family feeling' came into being. However, differentiated experiences between Somalis in Amsterdam must always be taken into consideration, as Somalis in Amsterdam are a highly heterogeneous population.

This study must be situated within the dazzling political and social debate of asylum in Europe, which is marked by increased border protection and mutually excluding viewpoints. Research on the political and humanitarian involvement of the Somali diaspora is comprehensive (Kleist, 2008; Sheikh & Healy, 2009; Zoomer and Nijenhuis, 2012). However, this thesis aimed at entering the very private spheres – instead of the public – of family lives and social relationships at a distance and the experiences of both mobility and locality in the everyday life. Instead of following a discourse that is much present in migration studies - that of assimilation and integration in the host society and a linear model of fleeing (here / there) – this study described how Somali refugees are keeping their heads up. The process of seeking meaningful safety and asylum must be viewed as a fragmented process, full of interruptions, on the one hand full of luck and blessing and, on the other hand drenched with misfortune and pain. Living between borders is often not a choice, but a *must* to ensure livelihood, meaningful family relations and opportunities for a better life; a life in dignity.

The limits of migration studies are revealed when focusing on integration. Somalis are said to occupy a problematic socio-economic position in the Netherlands. However, this is seen as a position confined within the borders of the nation-state. Taking a transnational perspective, their positions in a social network scattered across borders is revealed. Depending on legal capital, hierarchy and power implied in social relations, economic means and multiple resources, these refugees that find themselves at the very bottom of our society might in fact be effective and beneficial within transnational networks. The fact that resources are shared across borders, makes calculations on the benefits of refugees for the resettlement society a vain exercise.

I recommend to further invest in understanding lives lived in the spaces in between. Besides, transnational linkages and integration are not a zero-sum game. Settling in a certain locality might contribute to investing in transnational networks and thereby in establishing non-arbitrary, meaningful linkages between places. In a context of migration meaningful linkages are more productive than border protection. Discouraging refugees to stay and already at their arrival preparing them that they once have to return, is not effective. Instead, I argue that welcoming people is the most effective way to establish meaningful, non-arbitrary linkages between places. Not being welcomed means not belonging in this world in which citizenship of a nation-state is essential for claiming human rights (Arendt, 1967). This Fourth World, the world of being a refugee (Horst, 2006, p.77), characterised by a lack of rights, is a non-place, for its non-recognition in the everyday life (Nordstrom, 2004, p37). Settling nowhere makes establishing meaningful relations difficult and symbolically creates free-floating people living in the loopholes of our system of nations. However, when welcomed and able to start a life, people can invest in and make use of their transnational social networks. And yet then, it are precisely these loopholes of nation-states that could be used strategically by creating transnational social spaces that link – instead of disconnects - different localities, different worlds full of unshared experiences and different communities with stories that otherwise are left untold. It are these stories that create a sense of mutual recognition and humanity.

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## Appendix I – Topic list

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### *Topic Lijst Interviews*

#### Algemeen:

- Naam
- Leeftijd
- Getrouwd?
- hoe lang in Nederland?
- Welke andere landen verbleven?
- Legale status
- Woont waar in Amsterdam?
- Werk/studie/bezigheden?
- Spreekt welke talen?
- familie? (hier/daar?)

#### Netwerk:

- met wie veel contact in andere landen? (familie/kinship/friends/uit dezelfde stad/dorp/extended family)
- met wie contact in Nederland? (familie/buren/andere gemeenschapsleden, kennissen uit AZC's)
- hoe contact? Via internet/skype/viber/what'sapp etc.
- Wat voor contact? Financieel, onderhouden familie relaties, responsibility
- Facebook/forums van Somaliërs in Nederland?? Of diaspora organisaties??
- Wat voor rol spelen de verschillende clans in contacten in Nederland? Of in contacten met vrienden/kennis in andere landen?

#### Organisaties:

- Contact/bekend met organisaties Somalische gemeenschap?
- Wat voor contact met deze organisaties? Activiteiten/hulp/sociale contacten/werk?
- Rol van deze organisaties in behartigen interesses/belangen van de gemeenschap
- Moskee – religieus/culturele gemeenschap van Somaliërs
- Rol van moskee in doorgeven traditie/cultuur aan kinderen

#### Identiteit:

- Met wie identificeren: Somaliërs, Nederlanders, Pan-Arabische identiteit, andere asielzoeker, moslim (umma)
- Wat houdt een Somaliër zijn in? Verantwoordelijkheid, gemeenschap? Zorgen voor elkaar?
- Wat is belangrijk in de Somalische cultuur?
- Wat voor invloed hebben de verschillende clans op de Somalische identiteit? Zijn er verschillen tussen de clans? Hoort iedereen bij elkaar? Bestaat er wel een 'Somalisch' zijn?
- Wat is de rol van de islam in deze identiteit? Staat deze centraal in je leven?

#### Effecten:

- Helpen contacten in het buitenland met doormigreren/familiebezoek in buitenland?
- Vragen familie leden naar mogelijkheden om hierheen te komen of naar andere landen te verhuizen?
- Makkelijker om werk te zoeken via kennissen?
- Ben je op bezoek geweest in andere Europese landen?
- Voel je je thuis in Nederland?
- Heb je veel contact met Nederlanders? Met vrienden/kennissen/collega's/buren?
- Wat vindt je van een Nederlands/Somalische huwelijken?
- Wat vindt je van de mate waarin Somaliërs over de hele wereld met elkaar in contact blijven?
- Vindt je het belangrijk om contact met andere Somaliërs te houden? Waarom?
- Zou je terug willen naar Somalië (om te wonen)?
- Wil je altijd in Nederland blijven wonen?

#### Ruimtes:

- In welke plekken in Nederland zie je veel Somaliërs?
- Welke ruimtes/plekken/openbare gelegenheden bezoek je wanneer je contact hebt met Somaliërs?
- Wat vindt je van de AZC's? Is dit bepalend geweest voor je plek in Nederland?
- Welke plekken in Nederland vind je mooi? Op welke plekken voel je je thuis?
- Welke plekken in Nederland vind je lelijk/verschrikkelijk?
- Welke plekken van vroeger/uit Somalië mis je?

### *Topic Lijst Observatie*

- Welke ruimtes in Nederland vormen een middelpunt voor de Somalische gemeenschap? (Internet café, buurthuis, theehuizen, restaurants, moskee, Koranschool, AZC, Ter Apel, Schiphol)
- Op welke manieren staan mensen in contact met deze plek/ welke sociale verbindingen bestaan?
- Woorden om deze plekken aan te duiden.
- Op welke manieren hebben deze plekken een transnationaal karakter? Weinig Nederlanders/ver van het 'normale' dagelijks leven van de Nederlandse bevolking. Verschillende talen gesproken in deze plekken.
- Symbolische scheidinglijn tussen legaal/illegaal, maar intertwined domains in life
- Paths of immigration: the route into society
- Link met locality van deze plekken versus transnational linkages