

**BUUFIS AMONGST SOMALIS IN DADAAB:
THE TRANSNATIONAL AND CULTURAL LOGICS BEHIND RESETTLEMENT DREAMS**
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Introduction

It is a great joy to participate in this workshop, where over the next two days we will discuss all the topics I am focusing on in my research work from a comparative perspective. As such, it may seem that it was easy for me to prepare a presentation for this occasion, but in fact, I found it extremely difficult. My PhD work focused on remittances, transnational social networks, mobility from the perspective of Somali refugees in Kenyan refugee camps; my post-doc looked at similar issues from the viewpoint of Somalis in Minneapolis, Minnesota. So what contribution do I want to make? What do I think is most useful to elaborate on here? Especially also because the various topics are so much intertwined. Ultimately, I decided to focus on *buufis*, resettlement dreams. First of all because I know Marc-Antoine's work well and assumed he would elaborate on remittance sending. Secondly, because of the research on secondary movement of the Swiss Forum for Migration, to which I think this presentation may contribute. And thirdly, because I still hope to be able to say something about all these topics through my focus on *buufis*. This presentation is based on an article submitted to the Journal of Refugee Studies.

Buufis in Dadaab

In the Kenyan refugee camps near Dadaab, *buufis* is a common phenomenon amongst Somalis. Currently, approximately 135,000 refugees live in the three camps of Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera, and the Somali form the majority of the refugee population there. *Buufi* is a Somali word that means 'to blow into or to inflate'. This literally refers to air, *hawo*, which also stands for a longing or desire for something specific, an ambition or even daydream. Thus, by inference *buufis* indicates a longing or desire blown into someone's mind. After Somalis were forced to flee their country, refugees started applying the word to their new circumstances and *buufis* took on various additional meanings. In Dadaab, *buufis* is mostly used to refer to someone's hope, longing, desire or dream to go for resettlement. The Somali refugees in the camps use it in three other, closely related, ways as well: resettlement itself, the people who long to go overseas and the madness that at times occurs when the dream to go overseas is shattered. Somali refugees confirmed that this interpretation of *buufis* was first used in Kenya; specifically in the former refugee camp Utange. It then travelled outside Kenya with refugees who moved on to other countries, and can now also be found in many other places.

During my fieldwork, I taught English composition to Midnimo Primary School pupils in standard eight, who were approximately between thirteen and sixteen years old. Since resettlement dreams are so common in Dadaab, and they are part of daily discussions, I decided to have these pupils write a composition on *buufis*. The texts collected give a good insight into the rhetoric surrounding *buufis*. Xared Cali's describes: '*Buufis* is a Somali word and the meaning of the word is resettlement. People changed its meaning and said that it is a disease that attacks people who are mentally in America and physically in Ifo. Coming to the refugee camps in Dadaab, I recognized that everybody is eager to get resettlement to a Western country'. The pupils were ambiguous about the consequences of *buufis* for the refugees in Dadaab, and mentioned a wide range of effects. Cali Axmed's explains: 'It is good, but still it is bad. If someone fails the interview, he may tell you that it is better to die than to live in Africa. Many people have failed in *buufis* and became mad, or committed suicide. Others however, pass the interview and go abroad. They send money to their relatives, and some are successful in their new countries'. *Buufis* is seen in terms of threat, as

a sickness people suffer from with risks such as madness, losing investments and such. At the same time, *buufis* entails opportunities; both for those who migrate and for those who remain behind. I will now analyse some of the factors causing *buufis* to exist and be so widespread in the Dadaab camps.

Explaining Resettlement Dreams: Local Factors

During workshops that I organized in the camps, I worked with participatory matrix exercises that provided interesting findings. In group discussions, I asked the participants to answer two questions, which I then organised in matrix form. The first was 'what are the future options open to the refugees in Dadaab' and the second was 'what are the criteria on which to judge these options'. The criteria that refugees mentioned in order to judge where best to live were related to whether it would provide them with a durable solution, a livelihood as well as security, freedom and protection of human rights. Then, I asked the participants to award scores from one to five according to how well they expected a certain place to fulfil a certain criterion, of which this table provides one example, taken from a workshop in Hagadera. As is clear from the table, Dadaab scored poor in all aspects and local options in general were not very popular as durable solutions; in the first place because of an experienced lack of security and freedom. In the case of repatriation, participants said that they could only return if there was maximum peace and security in Somalia. Thus, they opted to give five points for peace/security, freedom and human rights in order to stress that these were necessary conditions for their return. Resettlement in this matrix exercise was seen to be the best durable solution, scoring high in all aspects that the refugees found relevant for the options open to them in the future.

Thus, one may say that resettlement dreams are caused by a combination of poor conditions in the camps and expectations of better conditions elsewhere. One of the reasons why many Somali refugees are suffering from *buufis*, is related simply to the poor quality of their life in the camps. In a participatory meeting that I organised in June 2000 in Dagahaley, to share my preliminary results with elders, I asked them whether they could explain to me the existence of *buufis* in the camps. A woman stood up and said: 'When the refugees came to Dadaab, they soon realised that life in this area is very problematic. Basic necessities like food, water, education and health care were missing and the refugees faced insecurity and found their movements restricted. That is when they started to look for alternatives, and *buufis* developed. At every distribution, I cry when I wait for my ration and see how the respected elders and religious leaders of Somalia are standing in line'. I was told how over the years *buufis* has increased, since the situation in the camps has got worse and a solution to the war in Somalia seemed far off. According to some, the level of *buufis* was directly related to the state of security in the camps and in Somalia. Whereas the refugees obviously experience a need for peace and security, there is no real hope for a speedy solution to their plight as they have no prospect of being allowed to remain and settle in Kenya, whereas repatriation was also not an option for many.

Explaining resettlement dreams: Transnational Factors

Besides the fact that refugees are not satisfied with their lives in the camps, another reason for their wish to migrate is that they are able to imagine a better life elsewhere. During the last century, there has been a technological explosion in the domain of transport and communication that according to Appadurai has led to a new condition of neighbourliness amongst people. Whereas historical precedents to current patterns exist, technological developments have enabled transnational flows over large distances with much greater frequency, speed and regularity than was possible in the past, thus affecting a much wider group of people, including refugees in relatively remote camps such as Dadaab. Whereas

development in transport created the possibilities to sustain transnational networks, the increased spread of information globally created the incentive to do so. As Collinson states, the global communications revolution and the expansion of global electronic mass media and global mass marketing might encourage more people to move from the South to the North. The media produce and disseminate information and images about the world, which according to Appadurai has led to a fundamental change in the nature of imaginations over the past decades. He suggests that the existence of the mass media has made imagination a collective social fact instead of an individual, private experience. Images of the lives of others and a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives to be lived are presented, and in this process, the lines between the realistic and the fictional are blurred, especially for those far from the reality described.

Besides the media, other important sources of imagination are contacts with, news of and rumours about others who have resettled. It is not uncommon for refugees in Dadaab to indicate that they started longing to go for resettlement because their relatives, friends or neighbours have managed to go. The fact that initial migration stimulates migration of others has long been acknowledged, the reasons being not only that the opportunities of those left behind increase due to access to the necessary funds and contacts but also that reports from the early migrants on the situation in the new community stimulates the wish to go. When I asked Moxamed Farah when he first thought of going overseas, he answered: "It was in 1997, when the Somali Sudanese resettlement process began. At that time, I saw a large number of my friends go to the USA and later they sent positive stories about their lifestyle there. They were living a new life while I was still struggling with this harsh life on the Hagadera soil, even though they were the same age as I am".

Being exposed to these two sources of information, media images and personal accounts, more people in more parts of the world see their lives through the prisms of the lives of others. This is not necessarily a positive observation, implying more happiness or more choices to more people around the world. Rather, inequality has become more obvious and ordinary lives are tied up with images, ideas and opportunities from elsewhere. This may stimulate agency, by allowing people to consider migration. But it may also lead to all manner of frustrations if dreams cannot be realised or their accomplishment does not bring the solution hoped for. This is exactly what, to me, constitutes the duality of *buufis*: on the one hand, images cannot be satisfied and only lead to frustrations about global inequality. But on the other hand, *buufis* as a form of collective imagination provides hope in quite a hopeless situation. It also increases people's level of power and choice by making resettlement thinkable and, once a number of people have resettled, improving actual living conditions in the camps, as research in Dadaab clearly illustrated.

My PhD research showed that the links that Somali refugees maintain with their relatives and friends outside the camps, elsewhere in Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia but also reaching Egypt and various resettlement countries, are essential for their daily survival. The remittances that are received enable them to survive in the camps while simultaneously improving the general economic situation there. As a consequence of monetary flows into Dadaab and the accompanying images of life in, for example, North America and Europe, many refugees in the camps dream of going for resettlement, and migration has become a popular investment. The transnational networks within which these flows of money and images take place perform important functions for many refugees. These networks are an important source of information about migration routes and countries of destination. They contribute to dreams of resettlement through providing information on these 'far away countries', but also provide the financial resources for migration and create the organisational infrastructure to enable migration through a variety of ways. At the same time, such networks are part of a culture of migration that has existed amongst the Somali for centuries.

A Culture of Migration

It is important to realise that migration is not only socially but also culturally embedded, manifested in the cultural discourses surrounding migration. Amongst Somalis around the world, the level of actual physical mobility as well as discussions or dreams about migration is very high. Al-Sharmani observes that amongst Somalis in Cairo, ‘The West is physically far but very much present in the lives of the refugees’. They exchange stories of families and friends who live in the West and constantly try to attain the ultimate goal of gaining asylum in one of the countries in Europe or North America. Once this dream has been reached, it is not uncommon for Somalis to dream of moving to other countries again, as various research projects have shown. Somalis, in my view, are ‘transnational nomads’. As Aden Yusuf, who now lives in the Washington D.C. with his family, remarked in support of this thesis, ‘Somalis treat the US – Canadian border the same as they would treat the Ethiopian – Somali border: “If it rains better today, we move there”. They are always on the move and changing their residency and they often do not like to be constrained by rules and regulations’. When I use the term transnational nomads, I refer to a nomadic way of life rather than nomadism in the strict sense of a livelihood. What I call the Somali ‘nomadic heritage’ includes a mentality of looking for greener pastures, a strong social network that entails the obligation to assist each other in surviving, and risk-reduction through strategically dispersing investments in family members and activities.

In fact, the *buufis* I observed in Dadaab is part of a much wider pattern not only in geographical but also in historical terms. Migration has for centuries played a vital role in Somali lives and livelihoods; through nomadic pastoralism, Islam, ancient-old trade patterns and more recent migration of workers, professionals and students. A very important function of mobility has been that it enabled the Somali to deal with insecurity, as people move away from hardship and family members spread out to different places and engage in different activities thereby reducing the consequences of contingencies. Nomadism in this respect is well adapted to the harsh and highly variable conditions of the Somali environment. It also includes investing in other economic opportunities elsewhere, exemplified, for example, by the long trading tradition that has linked Somalia to other eastern African countries as well as to Arabia and the Far East. Travelling as such is a common activity amongst Somalis and investments have been made for many decades in order to send community members elsewhere while remaining connected.

But migration is far more than a mere survival strategy. It has also always presented a way of life, enabling both individual growth as well as community development. As the majority of Somalis are Muslim, travel is important to them for religious reasons. Muslim doctrine explicitly encourages certain forms of travel, like for example the obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) and the obligation to migrate from lands where the practice of Islam is constrained (*hijra*). In Somalia, travel is considered to be a learning process and a source of wisdom not only religiously, but also in a wider sense. Young men, and to a lesser extent women, are encouraged to travel in order to gain education and life experience, as ‘A man who has travelled, a *wayo’ arag*, is one who knows a great deal, has seen things, has lived’. Migration is a popular form of investment since often, the material and non-material gains that it brings to the individual combine to benefit the larger community as well: ‘Travelling, whether for the purpose of scouting for water and green pastures or finding out about foreign countries most likely to offer a good education and favourable socio-economic conditions, is a way to gain information and perspectives that promote the development of the community’.

Conclusion

Resettlement dreams are very common amongst Somalis in the Dadaab refugee camps, and have been framed by the refugees into a fascinating discourse through the concept of buufis. I have illustrated how local and transnational factors combine to explain the occurrence of these dreams in Dadaab. Harsh living conditions in the region become more pronounced and resettlement becomes 'thinkable, practicable and desirable' because the camps are strongly connected to other areas around the world. Being part of transnational networks, refugees in remote camps like Dadaab can compare their lives in the camps to those of others elsewhere. Images of the lives of those others are shaped through the large amounts of remittances that enable survival in the camps and the information received through media and resettled relatives and friends. Yet current resettlement dreams need to be understood through a historical analysis of migration: they are part of wider cultural discourses and practices that place migration at the center of Somali culture. Thus, when understanding dreams of 'elsewhere' amongst refugees, not only local and transnational factors need to be considered, but also the position of migration in a community's culture and history. The Somalis in Dadaab are people with a, strongly mobile, past, hoping to move towards a future beyond the camps. Their links with and dreams of that future elsewhere shape their current lives.