

## Cross-border mobility, transnationality and ethnicity as resources: european Somalis' post-migration mobility practices

Joëlle Moret

Laboratory for Transnational Studies and Social Processes, University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

### ABSTRACT

Based on a qualitative study, this article explores post-migration mobility practices developed by Somali women and men who have settled in Europe. It focuses on the 'politics of mobility', considering cross-border mobility an unequally distributed resource through which people access different forms of capital, and thus an element of social differentiation. The article reveals that respondents invest resources in places other than those where they acquired them, benefiting from a favourable symbolic exchange rate between the different places. Furthermore, while a significant part of the economic, social and cultural capital of these migrants is acquired within ethnically diversified contexts, it is mostly reinvested in networks and places where their Somali ethnicity becomes an asset—either in ethnically homogeneous networks or in activities that address Somali people's needs. Cross-border mobility, transnationality and ethnicity become core resources that enable these migrants to mobilise their capital where it can be valued most highly and to access advantageous social positions, thus fostering upward social mobility. The article argues that these strategies are less the result of an identity-based ethnic preference than a compensatory mechanism implemented by people who have few prospects of having their assets valued within the wider networks in their country of residence.

### KEYWORDS

Cross-border mobility; ethnicity as a resource; social hierarchies; transnationalisation of capital; social networks

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, cross-border mobility practices have attracted the attention of researchers, who are interested in defining and analysing them, and of policy-makers, whose aim is rather to control or promote them, depending on the type of movement involved. This article focuses on post-migration mobility practices, defined here as transnational geographic movements performed by former migrants from the country in which they have settled. Based on a qualitative study with Somali women and men who have settled in Europe, it thus addresses the articulation of those specific kinds of mobility practices with the life and migration trajectories of those who develop them. The life stories of three respondents are used to illuminate how mobility may become an intrinsic part of migrants' strategies to improve their social and economic situation. Aman<sup>1</sup> departs

regularly but always for short periods of time from her city of residence in Switzerland, circulating material goods and information between the different locations she visits. Farhan divides his life between Switzerland, where he works as a qualified nurse, and London, where his wife and children live, and where he can fulfil some intellectual needs in specific networks. Safia lives in London, after first having settled in France for four years and then in the Netherlands for a decade: she is actively acquiring specific professional and linguistic skills in Britain that she would like to use in a possible future in her region of origin.

The study takes as the unit of analysis persons defined by their country of origin, Somalia.<sup>2</sup> However, it does not a priori assume the 'ethnic group' as a central category of identification or action for the people under study. Instead, it considers ethnicity a possible outcome of social processes in a particular social and historical context (see also Dahinden 2012; Wimmer 2009 on this issue). The article looks at whether ethnicity emerges as a relevant category in the respondents' mobility practices and examines the relevance of this category in relation to other categories of difference, such as gender, age and legal status (Dahinden 2013). By doing so, it avoids the essentialised and 'groupist' (Brubaker 2004) interpretations that are sometimes made of social processes.

Somali women and men have a long history of crossing borders: migration (for instance for labour or study purposes) and circulation (as is and was the case for nomadic pastoralists and traders) have been common mobility practices for a long time (Kleist 2004). To these, the on-going civil war and the general insecurity and violence that followed have added new reasons to move and prompted millions of people to flee Somalia to find better conditions elsewhere. These important and diversified movements have led to the constitution of wide and dynamic transnational networks and practices (see for instance Al-Sharmani 2006; Hammond 2013; Horst 2006). Studies also highlight the relevance of various types of cross-border movements (in particular return, onward migration or circulation) in the lives of Somali migrants around the world (for instance Hansen 2008; Horst 2007; Moret, Baglioni, and Efiionayi-Mäder 2006).

However, I want to go beyond the explanation of mobility that links it to a cultural heritage of nomadic practices that are reproduced in the context of migration (see for instance Bang Nielsen 2004; Engebriksen 2011 for such explanations). While skills and strategies of risk diversification may have been acquired in past experiences of pastoralism, I opt instead for a specific theoretical stance to examine the post-migration mobility practices of people coming from Somalia. I consider access to, and the potential for, movement as unequally distributed among social actors: mobility, in this light, is a resource and thus a source of social differentiation (Cresswell 2010; Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004). The aim of this article is to analyse how post-migration mobility practices can turn into a form of capital—in Bourdieu's sense (1986)—for a specific group of people characterised by a migration history and a mostly marginalised position in Europe. The focus is on the 'politics of mobility' (Cresswell 2010), that is on how mobility participates in social differentiation and builds on power relations. This theoretical stance opens the path for a differentiated analysis of the 'ethnic group' because it allows for an understanding of the boundaries that occur within it, along the lines of gender, class, age or legal status. It illuminates the heterogeneity of and inherent tensions between 'Somalis living in Europe'.

Next section introduces the theoretical background, which builds on literature from transnational scholarship as well as from mobility studies. The qualitative and interpretive

methodological framework is then described, This is followed by the life stories of Aman, Farhan and Safia, as they represent three ideal types of post-migration mobility practices: ‘star-shaped’ mobility, pendular movements and secondary movements. The discussion section highlights that ethnicity does indeed emerge as a relevant category when it comes to understanding the transnational networks and contexts in which mobility of the informants is grounded. While respondents are embedded in relatively diversified networks from which they draw some of their economic, social and cultural capital, they mostly invest their assets in networks that are Somali based or homeland oriented, that is, where ethnicity is highly relevant. This is interpreted less as the result of an identity-based ethnic preference than as a compensatory mechanism implemented by people who have few prospects of having their assets valued within the wider networks of their country of residence. Mobilising capital within specific ethnically based social networks stood out as a way for the informants to access symbolic capital and therefore a higher social status—a status that would be denied in less homogeneous networks.

### **Post-migration mobility practices, transnationalisation of capital and social hierarchies**

European-Somali men and women may develop diverse ways of being mobile, and of being transnationally active at the social, economic and political levels. To analyse what I have coined as post-migration mobility practices, I draw on literature from migration and transnational studies, as well as from the recent field of mobility studies.

Although all the respondents in the study have settled in Europe for a long time, a majority is simultaneously embedded in a transnational social field, defined by Levitt and Glick-Schiller as ‘a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed’ (2004, 1009). Cross-border mobility is, as I argue, a fundamental dimension of transnationality, understood as the segments of migrants’ lives that take place across national borders (Faist 2010). As the article will show, mobility practices undertaken from the country of residence are rooted in migrants’ transnational networks and identities. These practices are rooted in, and further contribute to the development of a transnational field linking together places in more than one nation-state, as well as connecting mobile and immobile people in those places (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1995; Vertovec 2009).

The notion of mobility has been used by scholars to tackle the complexification and diversification of migratory forms at the transnational level, go beyond analyses of linear migration trajectories and include, for instance, different forms of circulations (see for instance Morokvasic 2003). Transnational scholars have illuminated many of the cross-border movements that migrants may undertake after initial migration and settlement: in particular, they have focused on processes of return (Black and King 2004; Hansen 2008), dual residence and circulation between two places (Duany 2002; Hammond 2013), and onward movement from a first place of settlement to a new one (Lindley and Hear 2007; Van Liempt 2011). The idea of ‘post-migration mobility practices’ is novel because it brings those different forms of movements into a common analytical framework: it highlights the social significance of mobility, whatever its form, in migrants’ lives.

In recent years, mobility itself has become the object of a specific field of studies. One of the most promising aspects of this literature lies in the theorisation of mobility as an element of social differentiation involved in the production of power relations and inequalities. Some prominent scholars have defined this perspective as the ‘politics of mobility’ (Cresswell 2010; Massey 1994). This article builds on this perspective, considering that mobility is an unequally distributed resource that can, under certain conditions, be mobilised and transformed into social and economic advantages (Moret 2015). Seen under this light, mobility may transform into a form of capital (as defined by Bourdieu 1986), that is, a type of resource that can be accumulated and exchanged with other forms of capital, in particular economic, social and cultural capital. Considering mobility as a capital entails the idea that the potential for movement is as important as the actual act of moving in social actors’ deployments of strategies to improve their social position (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004).

Cross-border mobility is a core resource through which the migrants in the study are able to appropriate different places and networks and further develop them (Lévy and Lusault 2003). By doing so, they widen and secure the transnational social fields in which they are able to draw advantages. This article focuses on the strategies actors develop to capitalise on their mobility practices. Cross-border mobility practices become the basis for strategies aiming at ‘transnationalising’ capital. Resources are not given the same symbolic meaning in the different places of reference: the different forms of capital are therefore valued, or devalued, and exchanged in a transnational space (Kelly and Lusi 2006; Nowicka 2013). Thus, capital and its symbolic meaning are the product of struggles and negotiations by social actors over the value of different forms of capital and their convertibility. Migrants often experience difficulties in validating the capital they have accumulated in their country of origin within the legitimate symbolic system of their country or residence (Erel 2010). They often find themselves in a disadvantaged position in their country of residence and are confronted by institutional and structural constraints that give them little power of negotiation, resulting in exclusion. Based on my study, I thus argue that having the option of drawing resources from, or investing them in, a wider spatial portfolio gives social actors a major advantage over those who lack that option. As I will show, unequal access to mobility capital is an important axis of social hierarchies among my informants, in interaction with other lines of social differentiation such as gender, class, age and legal status.

This specific theoretical stance on post-migration mobility practices allows a focus on power relations and thus constructions of boundaries rather than taken for granted alliances, in particular along the lines of shared ethnicity. In other words, the analytical framework of this article opens the way for analysing what role ethnicity plays in those processes rather than defining it as a relevant category beforehand. The result shows that ethnicity is part of the ‘politics of mobility’ and highlights the dynamic interplay between diversified and ethnic-oriented networks in migrants’ strategies. Scholars have stressed the importance as well as the limits of migrants’ bonds to networks outside their ethnic group to access different types of resources (employment, housing, etc.) (see for instance Cederberg 2012; Ryan 2010). This case study goes further by actually describing the concrete interplay between both types of networks, showing that resources acquired in diversified networks are best mobilised and capitalised on when (re)invested within ethnic group-oriented networks. Furthermore, it provides evidence to support the

assumption that ethnically homogeneous networks are not only the locus of solidarity based on a common place of origin, but also a place where social actors can build on differences within the ethnic group to pursue social and economic advantages (see also Anthias 2007).

### **Methodological considerations**

Although Somali migration to Europe did not start in 1989, when the Somali Civil War began, the majority of the Somalis now living in Europe have left their country of origin after 1989 and during the on-going conflict (Kleist 2004). Time of arrival, history of migration and socioeconomic status before the war all constitute important markers of differentiation among the Somali population living in Europe. Many of those who were the first to arrive have now secured citizenship in the West, while newcomers enter European countries as asylum seekers. This article focuses on men and women who arrived in Europe at least 10 years ago, most of whom have become citizens of a European country (not necessarily the one they are settled in), because a European passport, as will be shown, constitutes a crucial condition for access to mobility. It ensues from this sampling choice that, although respondents belong to relatively unprivileged groups of the population, they occupy better legal and socioeconomic positions than the average Somali population in their respective country of settlement. Moreover, like other Somali migrants, they are increasingly subject to collective stigmatisation in Europe, based on religious markers as well as race and ethnicity (see for instance Valentine, Sporton, and Bang Nielsen 2009).

Britain and Switzerland have been chosen as sites of the study because they constitute two very different contexts regarding, on the one hand, the characteristics of the Somali migration and, on the other, national and local legislation, settlement conditions and employment opportunities. In Britain, Somalis constitute one of the largest ethnic minorities. Their actual numbers are very roughly estimated between 95,000 and 250,000 people (Hammond 2013): a majority of them lives in London and holds a British passport. While in the past, most Somali refugees would be granted a refugee status, authorities increasingly grant temporary protection (Harris 2004). Difficulties in accessing the labour market, de-skilling for both men and women, discrimination and very high rates of unemployment contribute to the marginalisation of the British-based Somali population (Harris 2004). Furthermore, a relatively deregulated independent labour market motivates increasing numbers of Somali men and women to start businesses, often with limited success (Jones, Ram, and Theodorakopoulos 2010).

Unlike Britain, Switzerland is not a historical country of migration for Somalis. A little less than 9000 Somali people are officially registered, including 2300 naturalised Swiss citizens.<sup>3</sup> They live mostly in urban centres such as Zurich, Geneva or Bern (Eyer and Schweizer 2010). Swiss authorities have generally granted Somali asylum seekers a provisional admission, which grants limited social rights (in comparison to full refugee status). Furthermore, laws regarding naturalisation are particularly restrictive, based on *jus sanguinis*. Statistics show high rates of unemployment and of the receipt of welfare benefits (Eyer and Schweizer 2010).

The empirical data used here consist principally of two types of qualitative interviews. First, narrative interviews focus on respondents' migratory history and past and present

mobility practices. Second, semi-structured interviews are used to gain a deeper insight into the perception of respondents on their situation, mobility practices and transnational as well as local networks of reference. The data analysed in this paper consist of 25 interviews, 16 of which were carried out in different cities in Switzerland and 9 in Britain (all but 2 in London). Additionally, group discussions were done in London with six Somali women. In total, I have met 30 respondents (18 female and 12 male), some of them more than once.

Respondents are all first-generation migrants originally from different regions in Somalia. Their selection has been the object of special attention. At first, preference has been given to mobile respondents. But this condition could not be met in all cases, as 'being mobile' is not a criterion according to which respondents can easily be identified in advance. The focus on mobility also means understanding how mobility interacts with immobility; therefore, it proved sensible to include immobile or less mobile respondents. I used multiple key informants as well as snowball techniques to constitute the sample. To ensure diversity in the sample, I insisted on meeting people who are generally less easily accessible (for instance, informal businesswomen), as well as people who are 'lost to the group' (Wimmer 2007), in particular men and women who have no contacts with ethnic associations, do not live in areas with a big Somali population (in the London study), or are married to people of other origins.

The methodology chosen is qualitative and interpretive. Research questions and methods were constantly reassessed and adapted in the course of the fieldwork and during the gathering, transcription and coding of the data (Charmaz 2001). The life stories selected for the article have furthermore been analysed using a biographical case reconstruction method (Rosenthal 2004). That is, biographical data emerging from the interviews are sequentially reorganised as a way of reconstructing the 'life history', which is then compared with the 'life story' as it has been told by the respondent. Biographic analysis allows interpretation of specific social phenomena, in this case mobility practices, in the light of respondent's whole biography. The life stories presented below have been chosen because they reflect particularly well the activities and strategies developed by other mobile women and men in my sample.

### **Strategies to capitalise on mobility: three life stories**

Because this article focuses on mobility practices, it mainly portrays individuals who regularly cross borders for different reasons: visits to family and friends, formal or informal business activities, professional activities or transnational political involvement. It is important to keep in mind that this focus on mobility serves an analytical purpose; it does not imply that all Somali people are mobile. In fact, many men and women originally from Somalia travel very little, if at all, either by choice or for other reasons. The practices of those who do move take multiple shapes: the frequency of movements, their geographical locations, the length of the stays in the different places, the reasons for which they are initiated and the collective arrangements they implicate combine in diversified ways. More importantly, the outcomes of those movements—that is, the ways they may give access to different forms of capital—are varied. Using the life stories of two women and a man, this section illustrates different types of post-migration mobility practices and highlights the strategic dimension of transnationalisation of capital.

### ***Aman: 'star-shaped' mobility and the power of circulation***

Aman is a 40-year-old woman living in Switzerland with her husband and their five children. She left Somalia at the beginning of the war and arrived in Switzerland in 1990, at the age of 20. After 16 years in the country, she obtained a passport and immediately started to visit close family members and friends living in other parts of the world—the USA, Dubai, Holland and Egypt. Although she was about to study medicine when she left Somalia, she could not follow that project up in Switzerland and is now active as a freelance intercultural interpreter. This professional situation is quite precarious, as it does not guarantee fixed contracts and wages, but its flexible character gives Aman more freedom to go away regularly but for short periods of time. I define the kind of mobility she performs as 'star-shaped': she leaves her main place of residence on a regular basis, but only for short stays, and then leaving again (maybe for another destination), etc. It is a strategic way of conciliating transnational activities with domestic or work responsibilities in her main country of residence. Aman plans her travels according to her children's school calendar and holidays and her own professional duties.

While she stresses the social dimension of her mobility (visiting family and friends), she concedes that social and material goods travel with her and her children. Travellers are often asked by less mobile Somali people to bring gifts, letters and even small amounts of money (although Aman refuses to carry money) to their kin members or friends living in other parts of the world. Information is another important good circulated by mobile people. Aman recalls having reconnected with cousins with whom she had lost touch since they had fled Somalia. These kinds of services performed through mobility contribute to the establishment of wider local and transnational networks, potentially transforming mobility capital into social capital: 'What is good is that people invite you. When you do these little favours, they thank you and invite you for dinner. And that creates new connections'.

But Aman, like other women, does not limit her transportation to non-economic goods. The weight she and her children are allowed by air companies is mostly used, on their way back to Switzerland, to bring back products Aman will then sell to her own network, mostly Somali women. Informal business activities concern things specifically responding to Somalis' demands and that can be difficult to find in Switzerland: traditional clothes for everyday life or special events such as weddings, jewellery, decoration objects, curtains or food. But they may also constitute a cheaper alternative for global products such as electronic devices or computer games. Although Aman's business remains limited and is not her main source of income, her transnational mobility contributes to her economic survival strategy.

Like other informal businesswomen, Aman is also active in organising and managing rotating savings and credit groups, very popular among Somali women, which they mostly call 'ayuto' or 'hagbad'.<sup>4</sup> These groups of 10 or 15 women pool a fixed amount of money each month that goes in turn to one of the participants, allowing those women to gather at one time a larger sum of money that would be difficult to obtain without this system. While participants often include recently arrived women, *hagbad* managers tend to be more established women with a stabilised legal status. Here again, among other elements, mobility contributes to the (re)production of social hierarchies: mobile businesswomen bring back stuff that those who are not able to travel cannot

access, and offer them a way to pay for them by offering them credit, but also by setting up the *hagbad* groups that further bind their clients to them.

In sum, Aman finds herself in a position to fulfil others' needs, such as maintaining and recreating transnational networks, obtaining emotionally or economically satisfying products and accessing urgently required credit. This position enables her to capitalise on her mobility practices and to convert them into economic, social and ultimately symbolic capital, yet within limited social environments, as I will discuss later.

### ***Farhan: 'penduling' and taking the best of two places***

Farhan is a man in his forties who resides part-time in Switzerland, part-time in Britain. Coming from a middle-class family in Mogadishu, he interrupted his tertiary education when he left Somalia 20 years ago. He arrived on his own in Switzerland and became a Swiss citizen some 15 years later. During that time, as a young and single man, he made a point of investing in higher education: working as an (unskilled) nursing assistant, he first took private German lessons he financed himself, and later, thanks to his savings, entered a private school for two years to get the upper secondary diploma needed to access tertiary education. After four more years of working part-time and studying nursing, he got his degree and found a qualified job in a hospital.

During his studies, he married a Somali woman living in London, with whom he has had four children. Since his marriage to and fro movements between Britain and Switzerland have shaped his life. During the first eight years Farhan kept studying and working in Switzerland, spending as much time as he could with his family in London. Finishing his studies and obtaining a Swiss passport facilitated his regular movements to and fro: the passport meant increased financial means and the end of visa requirements. From then on, he would work long shifts (including night shifts) for three weeks and spend every fourth week in London. At some point, he moved to London with his wife and children. Despite his happiness at being reunited with his family, his working conditions and career prospects never satisfied him. On top of his limited knowledge of English, this situation can be attributed to a lack of 'mobilisable' social capital in London. The necessarily limited connections he has established during his years of penduling are mostly based on kin and neighbourhood bonds, and characterised by ethnic and social homogeneity. They can be associated to Ryan's 'horizontal weak ties' (2010), linking him to people who are themselves in disadvantaged social positions, hence with a reduced 'bridging' potential (see also Granovetter 1983).

As a result, in 2011, he started 'penduling' again, sharing his life between a job at the Swiss hospital he had worked at three years earlier and his family in London, spending about half of his time in each country.

Britain does not only represent family for Farhan. In his own words, it is a way 'to get closer to Somalia': in the last couple of years, he has come into contact with a few highly educated Somali men living in London, with whom he holds regular intellectual discussions about global political issues, regarding in particular but not only the situation in Somalia. He mentions missing such debates in Switzerland and hopes his participation in this informal group will eventually lead to future concrete projects in Somalia. Farhan has not returned to Somalia during the past 20 years—although he is in close contact with his sisters, brothers and other kin members—and does not intend to

return permanently. Yet he repeatedly mentioned his wish to ‘contribute’ in his country of origin, to be involved in its development in one way or another. Others scholars (Kleist 2008; Hansen 2008) have highlighted how (re)creating connections with the country of origin constitutes a way, for Somali men in particular, to attempt at regaining part of the social status they have lost with migration.

During one of our discussions while he was living in London, Farhan told me:

I am Somali deep down, but I am not only Somali. I am also European, I am also Swiss, and I don’t want to lose all these links. In fact, I would like to keep them, and develop them more. It would give me more opportunities, but more work is needed for that, more flexibility.

This quote illustrates Farhan’s utilitarian relationship with mobility, which is a way for him to take advantage of two places, both of which require his physical presence if he wants to attain his different goals. The transnational field in which he navigates has a multiplying and diversifying effect in terms of available options. The Swiss labour market offers him better economic opportunities and working conditions, while London is in his eyes a better place for his family: his wife finds herself in a familiar environment, which allows her to manage their children’s activities; furthermore, their children have access to an education closer to his desire—one that includes the Somali language and religious education. In this way too, London represents for Farhan a close connection to Somalia.

Mobility is the core resource through which Farhan accesses better social positions in different hierarchies. First, his cultural capital enables him to access a rather advantageous socioeconomic position in London and to build his children’s future, allowing him, for instance, to envisage sending them to private schools. Second, he invests it symbolically by trying to access Somali intellectual circles in Britain, whose influence may be more important with regard to the Somali context than the European one. By mobilising specific social capital, he therefore also positions himself at the transnational level, hoping—whether realistically or not—that this position will translate into interesting options in the future and in Somalia.

### ***Safia: secondary movements and the construction of a transnational future***

Safia is a divorced woman in her early 40s, who lives in London. She grew up in a wealthy family and was used to travelling before leaving Somaliland in the late 1980s. She first spent five years in France, then moved to the Netherlands, had a second son and started studying ‘health issues’. She became Dutch in 2000 and decided to move to London a few years later.

In the Netherlands, she founded an NGO that is active in rebuilding Somaliland and with which she travelled to Somaliland a couple of times. She spent six other months there employed by an international NGO. Although she is still involved from afar in the Dutch association, she founded a UK branch, whose activities are directed specifically towards the needs of Somaliland women living in a particular area of London. She is also involved in the local community as an interpreter, using in particular her French and Arabic skills when needed. When I met her, she was perfecting her English and considering entering university: her socioeconomic situation was economically precarious. She was however hoping her education would help her access jobs in international organisations or NGOs working in Africa.

In many aspects, Safia mobilises her transnational networks in the same utilitarian way as Farhan, using mobility strategies to widen the space of opportunities. She transfers different types of cultural resources (language skills and knowledge of European associational rules, for instance) acquired in her previous countries of residence, as well as social capital, into her new context. She also cleverly mobilises her transnational resources for her associational activities, continuing to turn to the Netherlands to fund her association's projects, arguing that it is easier and necessitates less paperwork.

Safia belongs to the many 'European Somalis' (as they often call themselves) who are citizens of a country in mainland Europe but have moved to Britain for economic, social or political reasons. European-Somali respondents often mark a clear boundary between themselves and those Somalis who arrived in Britain directly. Having performed 'onward' or 'secondary' movements within Europe is part of the distinction: while considering long time British Somalis to be 'refugees' who live off of (or abuse) welfare benefits, they see themselves as more active and successful 'work migrants' who have initiative and seize the opportunities they could not access in their previous country of residence (see also Van Liempt 2011 on these tensions). Although their success is often relative, Safia and others establish a hierarchy where mobility and citizenship in another EU country is evaluated in relation to sedentariness in Britain. Safia has developed ability to transnationalise her capitals through her mobility practices.

Similarly to Farhan, moving to Britain is also about building future plans elsewhere. Some respondents consider British education and the mastering of English as resources that can be capitalised in the future, for themselves or their children. Safia justifies her actual educational commitments as investments that will help her access better employment not in Britain or in Europe, but in Somaliland. Her educational choices gain specific value in reference to her future mobility plans (working for NGOs or international organisations in Africa) but also based on her previous experiences of mobility. She is aware of the structural constraints and competition she will face in the British labour market despite her educational and language achievements and opts instead to value her assets in another context (see also Kelly and Lusi 2006). She explicitly mentions her will to access a better social status in Somaliland, hoping her education will allow her to 'be better than them': in her social imaginary about return, this means working shorter hours than in Europe for a better salary, and having servants, just like her family had before they left Africa. Relocating in a country with less economic power is a common strategy for Somalis to capitalise on their Western citizenship to overcome marginalisation and achieve a higher class status (see Al-Sharmani 2006 for the case of Egypt). Yet Safia is ambivalent about relocating permanently and can envisage pendular forms of mobility, working on short-term contracts in Somaliland.

### **Mobility capital and the production of localised and transnational social hierarchies**

These life stories illustrate the varied strategies developed by men and women of Somali origin to 'transnationalise' their resources and to capitalise on post-migration mobility practices. They highlight the need to analyse mobility capital in relation to other forms of capital as the product of struggles and unequally shared resources. Aman, Farhan and Safia present similar—although not identical—stories of initial migration from the

country where they grew up to Europe. They were all part of relatively wealthy families and had just started or were about to start tertiary education when the war prompted them to leave; all three arrived in Europe on their own and in their early adulthood. Yet the contexts they encountered, the resources they could later acquire and activate and the strategies of mobility they implemented differ in multiple ways.

The selected biographies present three ideal types of mobility practices that have emerged out of the empirical data. Star-shaped mobility, pendular movements and secondary movements are three ways through which social actors become able to transnationalise their assets and capitalise on them in places where they are more valued. Aman's frequent travels to different parts of the world, where she has social networks she can mobilise for business purposes, have concrete effects on her everyday life in Switzerland since they help improve her economic and social life. Farhan's to and fro movements allow him to use economic and social resources drawn from Switzerland and capitalise on them in the context of London. Safia, although she does not physically move as often as Farhan, also partially mobilises resources she gathered in her previous countries of residence in her London life. She is also actively acquiring new forms of capital with the intention of investing them in her country of origin in the future. All three respondents are able to strategically extend their 'patrimony of places, territories and appropriated networks' (Lévy and Lussault 2003, 125): they master different locations from which they draw resources.

However, what is at stake is not only an accumulation of resources through a diversification of the places where they are gathered or invested: advantages result from a strategic circulation of assets between those places and a value differential between them. Capital is contextual-dependant and resources not do hold the same value in all mobile migrants' relevant places. Mobility practices allow social actors to widen their 'spatial autonomy' (Weiss 2005): they find themselves in a position to (partially) choose the environment best suited to the resources they already possess or to develop specific resources that they know they will mobilise in other parts of the world. Mobility practices are an integral part of these processes aiming at transnationalising capital: having crossed borders, doing it frequently and intending to keep crossing them on a regular basis are fundamental aspects of the strategies described.

Furthermore, the life stories illustrate how a differentiated endowment in mobility capital contributes to the shaping of social hierarchies. Aman uses her transnational networks and mobility skills to access an influential position among women (and possibly men) also coming from Somalia and living in her city in Switzerland. This influence also builds on restrictive legislation regarding asylum and naturalisation that institutionally divides those forced to immobility from those who can travel. Being on the advantaged side of this boundary, Aman mobilises her mobility capital to be well positioned, yet only within highly localised and ethnically homogenous hierarchies. Similarly, resources drawn from other European countries allow Safia to access interesting positions within Somali networks in her neighbourhood in London. Like other 'European Somalis', she is actively involved in 'community' work (facilitating access to medical services for more vulnerable people, but also advocating for the recognition of the Somaliland community by local authorities), gaining visibility and recognition for her activities. The boundary between secondary movers and more sedentary migrants who have never left Britain is in many aspects a result of differentiated access to mobility and to the related skills of mastering different locations and their networks.

Yet these processes do not only allow migrants to position themselves favourably in certain hierarchies in their main country of residence. In Safia's and Farhan's cases, we have seen that some resources are specifically developed in the hope to capitalise on them later in their region of origin. In London, Farhan is actively developing a very specific network of potentially influential men who could play a political role in Somalia in the future. Safia, for her part, has chosen studies that will help her access interesting employment in Somaliland and potentially improve her socioeconomic status if mobilised in Africa. In both cases, the social or the cultural capital they are accumulating has a 'transnationalisable' character in the sense that its value would be much higher in an African context than in London. Mobility capital, given those plans succeed, allows those who possess it to make a bigger difference 'there' than 'here'. Being part of a small group of intellectual Somali men or mastering the English language and obtaining a degree in health advocacy are mostly not sufficient to improve one's socioeconomic position in London. They may be sufficient when coupled with mobility strategies and mobilised in the right context and within the right networks—or, to use Bourdieu's terminology, when mobilised in the social fields where they can become symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1987).

The study thus reveals how mobility participates in the construction of internal differences and the shaping of power relations among ethnically homogeneous networks. Access to mobility capital helps define social actors' positions within their social networks and shape a differentiated access to varied resources, in interaction with other lines of difference, in particular gender, age, education, social class and legal status (see also Anthias 2007). These dynamic constructions of internal boundaries are further directly related to people's social position and endowment in symbolic capital in the main place of residence, as the next section discusses.

### **Ethnically oriented networks as the locus of compensatory mechanisms for a disadvantaged position in the main country of residence**

Neither the research process nor the analyses of the data were conducted with ethnicity as an a priori relevant category for the people under study. In fact, as the previous section has shown, ethnicity is far from a homogeneous category of identification; instead, it is cross-cut by many other lines of social differentiation. However, a close analysis of the social environments through which the different forms of capital are acquired or in which they are invested offers interesting insights into the issue of ethnicity. The life stories presented above reveal a dynamic and complex interplay between diversified networks (in terms of ethnicity) and environments that are characterised by a strong orientation towards the ethnic group.

On the one hand, a significant part of the respondents' capital is acquired within widely diversified social networks related to the dominant society and to their anchorage in their main country of residence. Farhan accesses employment with good wages and interesting working conditions thanks to his diploma and the people he met through his previous work experience and associational activities in Switzerland. Similarly, the cultural and social capital that Safia mobilises in Britain was acquired within ethnically heterogeneous networks in France and especially in the Netherlands. Aman's job as an intercultural interpreter allows her to access economic capital from a mainstream institution, although her activity still involves ethnicised skills.

On the other hand, the environments in which these different types of capital are invested and transformed are characterised by a strong orientation towards the ethnic group. Most activities performed through mobility *in fine* either address (more disadvantaged) Somali migrants' needs in Europe or fulfil aspirations in contexts directly related to their country of origin. Aman's business activities responding to Somalis' tastes in Switzerland or Safia's humanitarian involvement in Somaliland illustrate the 'Somali-oriented' character of many activities. Furthermore, some capital is consciously acquired in order to be useful in a 'Somali' context later on, in particular within a politically active diaspora (as in Farhan's case) or in the humanitarian/NGOs sector in the region of origin (as in Safia's). The 'transnationalisability' of capital (in other words its potential to be productive in a transnational field) is closely linked to its ethnically bounded character, since in both cases it is in Somali-oriented contexts that it can fully develop and become fruitful.

How can this shift from acquiring capital within diversified types of networks to using it in ethnically oriented contexts be explained? I argue that it should be seen as a strategic way of compensating for a lack of access to a 'contextually validated national symbolic capital' (Hage 1998, 54). The Swiss and the British contexts are characterised by limited prospects for social mobility within mainstream networks and institutions for Somali migrants. The reasons for this situation include the non-recognition of their education and work experience (see Bauder 2003 on that point), discrimination in the labour market, life in deprived and often segregated areas (in particular in Britain) and restrictive national regulations regarding access to permanent-resident status and independent labour (in the Swiss case). Although Aman, Farhan and Safia belonged to the middle or upper class in Somalia and could count on their economic, social (and perhaps cultural) capital in their migration to Europe, they experienced a strong devaluation of their assets. None of them managed to undergo the studies they had planned in Africa, even though Farhan and Safia went into some kind of higher education. Regarding employment, Safia and Aman are both active in relatively precarious segments of the labour market with low status and salaries (associational activities and intercultural mediation), while Farhan has not accessed higher levels of the hierarchy in the different hospitals he has been working at. Furthermore, the three of them live in areas populated by lower social classes and migrants or minority groups. This situation points to a positioning in their main country of residence that, although not marginalised, is quite low within the local and national social hierarchies. Finally, the social connections they have established are, like for other migrants, limited when it comes to 'vertical (weak) ties' (Ryan 2010), that is ties that may reduce social distance and help them access resources outside of their close friends and family (Granovetter 1983).

Rather than entering into 'symbolic struggles' (in the sense of Bourdieu 1987) they have a good chance of losing, all three have chosen to focus on valuing their assets within other networks where they have a better chance of transforming them into symbolic capital. Scholars have highlighted the 'status paradox' (Nieswand 2011) in which transnational migrants often find themselves: while experiencing a status devaluation in the country of destination, they simultaneously enhance their social position in their country of origin (see also Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001). This study shows that the paradox also pervades strategies related to post-migration mobility: while capital endowment relates to a low status in diversified networks, it may be given credit and legitimation in other circles characterised by a strong ethnic orientation. Ethnicity becomes, in those

circumstances, a resource mobilised within the ‘ethnic group’ and based on its internal social differentiations (Anthias 2007). For this reason, I argue that those ethnicised mobility practices are less the result of ethnic preferences than a way of compensating for difficult access to mainstream resources, networks and institutions.

## Conclusion

As shown in the article, Aman, Farhan and Safia, like other mobile Somali respondents, have developed strategies of mobility in order to improve their social and economic conditions. While their initial move (their migration from Somalia) meant a loss of social status, their post-migration mobility practices provide them with opportunities to access better positions, but within specific contexts and networks that are strongly oriented towards the ethnic group or the homeland. These strategies’ efficiency rests on differences within the ethnic (yet transnational) group, based on other—intersecting—axes of social differentiation such as gender, age, education, social class or legal status. Going back to Somaliland as an NGO employee with Western education and citizenship could allow Safia to ‘be better’ than the average local population. Circulating information and goods is a way for Aman to gain authority vis-à-vis less mobile or immobile Somali women from her local networks. Mobilising his cultural capital for socioeconomic purposes in Switzerland while at the same time investing it in London to access a better positioning within transnational Somali networks diversifies Farhan’s future options. Positioning themselves only within the general local population of their main country of residence would in many cases mean staying in the lower levels of the social hierarchies. All three further mobilise a crucial resource when it comes to crossing borders: their European passports grant them extended rights to leave their country of residence, enter other nation-states but also to come back whenever they need or want to. Legal statuses and their associated rights to travel constitute strong markers of differentiation among migrants (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

Yet the study also shows that local and ethnically diversified networks, although not predominant at first sight in the respondents’ accounts, play a crucial part in those processes. They provide a significant pool of economic, social and cultural capital for those mobile migrants: however, these resources can hardly be transformed within those same networks, and are rather reinvested within ethnically based networks. This highlights the importance of taking into account the dynamic interrelationships between different types of environments in which migrants are embedded.

The analysis of intra-group boundaries and power relations through the lens of the ‘politics of mobility’ offers a dynamic understanding of post-migration mobility practices and their ethnic dimension. It gives an understanding of those mobility practices by highlighting their political dimension, rather than their cultural embedding in a romanticised nomadic heritage. It shows that mobility may serve as a means to transnationalise their capital, allowing the Somali migrants I have studied to acquire resources in one place while investing them in a different place, benefiting from a favourable symbolic exchange rate (see also Weiss 2005).

By questioning the relevance of ethnicity in those processes rather than taking it as a natural explanatory category, the article operates a shift from ethnicity as an unquestioned *explanans* to ethnicity as an *explanandum* emerging from empirical data (Wimmer 2009).

Interpretations thus go beyond a perspective on ethnicity as the locus of commonality and solidarity to include tensions and social hierarchies in the picture. The article reveals that the post-migration mobility of women and men of Somali origin is (relatively) successful *because* these individuals rely on such internal differences, along the lines of age, gender, social class and legal status. Networks based on common ethnicity are thus central—although not exclusive—aspects of those processes, but as a resource on which social differentiation is made and higher status is achieved for some, rather than as (only) comforting, supportive and rallying places of belonging and identification. This last point shows that ethnicity cannot and should not be rejected as such by researchers studying transnational processes. The challenge is to let it emerge as a *possible* relevant category of analysis, to question the contexts in which it becomes relevant in specific ways, and to treat it as a category of difference in combination with other axes of social differentiation.

Finally, the article reveals that mobility is not a resource on which only economically and socially advantaged social groups and highly skilled migrants can capitalise. While most case studies focus on some kind of mobile cosmopolitan elite (see for instance Fournier 2008; Ong 2003; Weiss 2005), the women and men I have met do not belong to such an elite. Yet, for them too, cross-border mobility, transnationality and ethnicity may become core resources that enable them to mobilise their capital where it is valued most highly, and to access advantageous social positions, perhaps fostering upward social mobility in the future, if not for themselves, at least for the next generation.

## Notes

1. In order to guarantee respondents' confidentiality, all names have been changed.
2. For the purposes of this article, Somalia includes Somaliland and Puntland.
3. Data from the Federal Office for Statistics (2012), website accessed 2 May, 2014.
4. These systems are not specific to Somali women (so-called 'tontines' are widely known among women in many places in the world), or to the Swiss case.

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