

# Agency of Somali Migrant Women in Nairobi and Johannesburg: Negotiating Religious and Cultural Identifications in Diasporic Spaces

Nereida Ripero-Muñiz

**Abstract:** An ethnographic analysis of two interconnected cities for the Somali diaspora—Nairobi and Johannesburg—helps to uncover alternative narratives about the lives of Somali women and the ways they renegotiate their cultural and religious identities in diasporic contexts, moving beyond the widespread representation of Somali women in the global imagination as helpless victims. Using the domains of marriage and female circumcision, Ripero-Muñiz analyzes how these women exercise their agency while at the same time negotiating the cultural and religious practices of their community. By focusing on the ways in which Somali women re-negotiate their identities, this article helps to locate the agency of women in refugee and migrant communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Résumé:** une analyse ethnographique de deux villes interconnectées pour la diaspora malienne, Nairobi et Johannesburg, permet de découvrir d'autres récits sur la vie des femmes maliennes et la façon dont elles renégocient leurs identités culturelles et religieuses dans des contextes diasporiques allant au-delà de la représentation répandue dans l'imagination mondiale des femmes maliennes en tant que victimes impuissantes. En utilisant les domaines du mariage et de la circoncision féminine, Ripero-Muñiz analyse comment ces femmes font usage de leur libre arbitre tout en négociant les pratiques culturelles et religieuses de leur communauté. En mettant

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*African Studies Review*, Volume 63, Number 1 (March 2020), pp. 65–92

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l'accent sur les façons dont les femmes maliennes renégocient leur identité, cet article aide à localiser l'agence des femmes dans les communautés de réfugiés et de migrants en Afrique subsaharienne.

**Resumo:** Através de uma análise etnográfica de Nairobi e Joanesburgo – duas cidades interligadas da diáspora somaliana – é possível encontrar outras narrativas acerca da vida das mulheres somalis e do modo como elas renegoceiam as suas identidades culturais e religiosas nos contextos da diáspora, superando os limites, muito presentes na imaginação internacional, da representação das mulheres somalis enquanto vítimas indefesas. Perscrutando os domínios do casamento e da circuncisão feminina, Ripero-Muñiz analisa o modo como estas mulheres exercem a sua agencialidade, ao mesmo tempo que negoceiam as práticas culturais e religiosas da sua comunidade. Ao focar os mecanismos segundo os quais as mulheres somalis renegoceiam as suas identidades, o presente artigo ajuda a compreender a agencialidade das mulheres entre as comunidades de refugiados e de migrantes na África subsaariana.

**Keywords:** Somali women; agency; identities; Nairobi; Johannesburg; Somaliness; Islam

(Received 31 July 2019 – Revised 03 December 2019 – Accepted 03 December 2019)

## Introduction

I first met Saynab in February of 2013. She had come by road from Somalia to South Africa in 2007, crossing Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, in a journey that took several months. Along the way she had stayed with friends and relatives who lived in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Nampula. Her new husband, who owned a *spaza* shop in one of Gauteng's townships, had been waiting for her in Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> They had never met before, as their families had arranged and formalized their marriage while Saynab was still in Somalia. They settled in Mayfair, "as locations are too dangerous for women," and her husband used to travel back and forth between the township and Johannesburg.<sup>2</sup>

Saynab arrived in South Africa full of dreams of a better life in the south of the continent, but her dreams did not last long. Soon after her arrival, she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. It was then that the relationship with her husband started to deteriorate; he began to chew *khat* on a daily basis and then stopped working, neither supporting her nor their child.<sup>3</sup> She asked for a divorce, but he would not agree to it and even took her refugee papers away to prevent her from leaving. Their families were not nearby to intervene in the conflict, as would normally be the custom. After much transnational negotiation and talking between both families, her husband finally granted her the divorce. He refused to support Saynab or the child, so Saynab started working as a cashier in a shop in Mayfair, but she had to send her child back to her parents in Somalia as she

was not able to look after her on her own. After Saynab saved some money, she invested it in *Fong Kong* clothes that she then sold in Jeppe Street.<sup>4</sup> This venture, however, did not work out, as the police used to frequently run raids and confiscate fake branded goods. At the time I met her, she had left that business and was studying English. After our interview, she agreed to meet again, but by the time I tried to contact her, she had disappeared. Then, a couple of weeks later, I went to Mayfair again, and the Somali women whom I knew in *Amal* reported: “Have you heard? Saynab, she has married, to a Lebanese! Can you believe it?”<sup>5</sup> They told me that they didn’t understand how her family had agreed to it, that it was unacceptable. When I finally found Saynab, she had moved with her new husband to a flat in Mayfair. She was aware of the gossip circulating about her, but she didn’t care much, because she believed she had done nothing wrong. After all, she had married a Muslim, and her family supported her in her decision. She also told me how this husband seemed better than her previous spouse. But several months after the wedding, things started going wrong again, and less than one year later she had divorced the Lebanese man also. She continued to work as a cashier, but she wanted to study and improve her life, so several months later, she left for the United States in search of a “better life.”

Saynab’s story, unique as it is, mirrors in many ways the experiences of Somali migrant women in Johannesburg: arranged marriage, young motherhood, problems with husbands, divorce, struggles to make a living, remarriage, desires to study, and after every attempt for improvement failing, leaving South Africa in search of a “better life” somewhere else. This desire for a “better life” that Saynab expressed was a frequent concept articulated to me during the three years of ethnographic fieldwork and forty interviews that I conducted in Johannesburg and Nairobi. The connotations of a “better life” are complex and multi-layered, and exploring their contours is beyond the scope of this article, but nevertheless this vignette does reveal the cosmopolitan aspirations and the desires for membership in the new world order that scholars such as James Ferguson (2006) have discussed. Cawo Abdi’s (2105) ethnography on Somalis living in the U.S., UAE, and South Africa reflects similar aspirational desires on the part of respondents she interviewed. She emphasizes the important role the imagination plays in the migration process, observing that “how desired destinations are imagined is crucial on how migration is experienced” (2015:8). The desire to belong to a world in which one can move freely, work, study, and improve his or her quality of material life and those of his or her families becomes a strong motivation for migration.

Beyond her aspirations, Saynab’s story also demonstrates how the agency of Somali women is informed by their personal experiences in relation to the cultural and religious beliefs and practices of their local and translocal communities. Individual agency—understood as “the individual’s ability to act according to her own best interests and to resist oppressive power relationships” (Mack 2003:151)—is always expressed as a response to social structures (Giddens 1979), and either implemented in the repetition of everyday practices or in the contestation, transformation,

or discontinuation of some of these practices (Butler 1990). These practices can sometimes differ or even be contradictory, and it is up to the individual to decide how to navigate them. For instance, Saynab's decision to marry a Lebanese man was a personal choice, and even if that meant facing some criticism by the Somali community in Mayfair, she still went ahead with it, justifying her choice by arguing that she was marrying a Muslim. She was upholding the standards of a "good" Muslim woman, something that became more important for her in this case than being a "good" Somali woman, which would have involved marrying another Somali man, following an unwritten customary practice. Saynab's case, as that of others presented in this article, showcases how the relationship between her expressions of agency and the social structures they are embedded in is performative, contextual, and fluid (Butler 1990, 2010; Giddens 1979; Leming 2007).

Building on recent studies on gender and migration that emphasize the agency and decision-making power of female migrants (Curran & Saguy 2001; Palmary et al. 2010; Pessar & Mahler 2003; Rostami-Povey 2007), this article analyzes how Somali migrant women negotiate their cultural and religious identities in order to contest certain practices they disagree with. Understanding identities as performative (Hall 2008; Butler 1990) and dialogical (Bakhtin 1981) allows us to examine how transnational migration affects the way Somali women renegotiate their cultural and religious identities within a context of displacement. Diasporic identities are constantly open to transformations (Brah 1996), with their members living in many cases "dual lives" (Portes 1997). Members of diasporic communities keep certain beliefs and practices from the homeland while at the same time being exposed "to new networks with different beliefs [that] will serve to challenge one's established world view" (Curran & Saguy 2001:59). Transformation of practices and beliefs may occur due to the migrant's experiencing greater freedom far from her original social community and cultural norms (Yeoh et al. 2000). However, in the case of Somalis living in Nairobi and Johannesburg, the strong links they keep with their local and translocal communities also has an effect on the way women navigate their identities, as they are expected to follow certain customary and Islamic precepts. Women navigate these expectations by renegotiating their Somali and Muslim identities in relation to specific situations, and by doing so they exercise their own agency and decision-making power within a context of displacement.

The line between what constitutes an Islamic practice versus a cultural one "from the African side" (in the words of some of the women interviewed) is blurred and not always clear, especially taking into account the syncretism of Islamic and African cultural practices (Ware 2014). In the case of Somalia, this distinction is especially hazy due to the strong Islamic revival that has taken place in the country since the 1960s (Elmi 2010) and gained strength during the war in the 1990s. In this regard, the differences between cultural and religious practices expressed in this article reflect the distinctions—or lack thereof—made by the Somali women I talked to in

both cities. These were categories that they imposed as a form of social organization, and they are not static, but rather fluid and dialogical (Giddens 1979; Hall 1992, 1996, 2008; Bakhtin 1981); they are used to express Somali women's sense of identity in relation to their Somaliness and to Islam as well as with regard to other Africans and other Muslims.

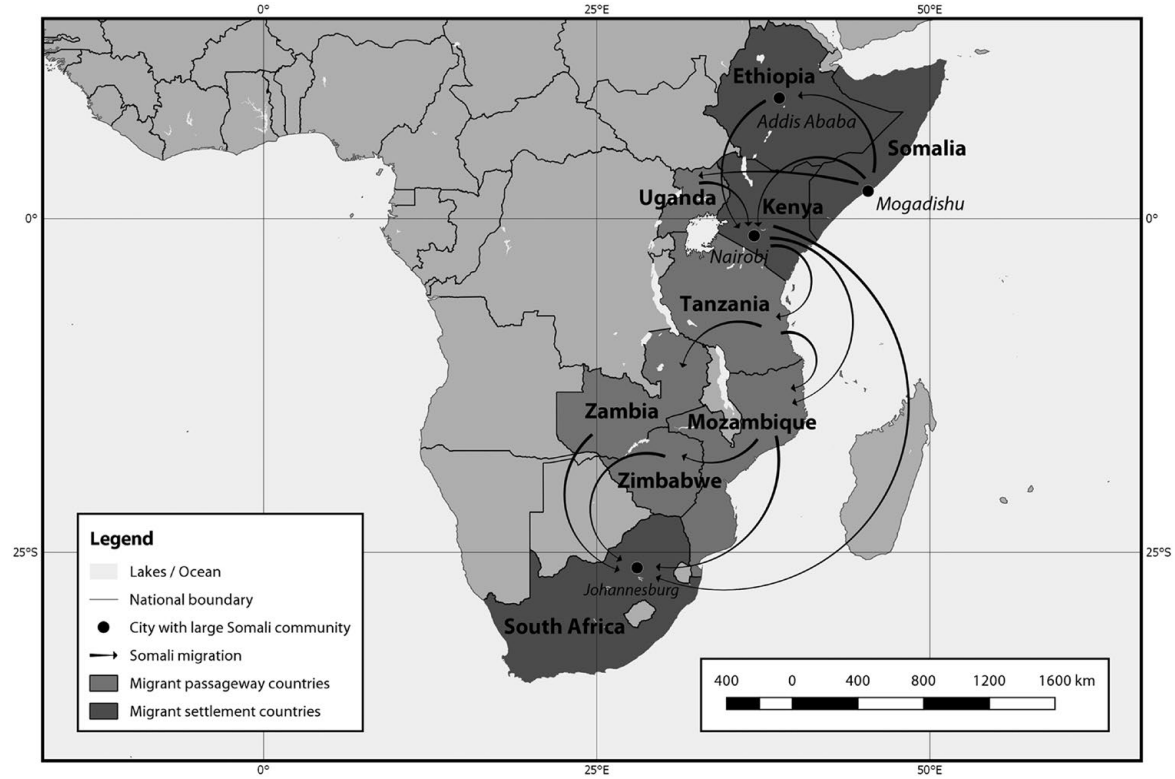
This article focuses on the particular African urban contexts of Nairobi and Johannesburg, two interconnected cities in the Somali migration network. Research in these cities has uncovered similar patterns with regard to how Somali women negotiate their cultural and religious identities. The data for this study is based in three years of ethnographic research in Mayfair, Johannesburg, and Eastleigh, Nairobi, between 2012 and 2015, as well as on interviews with forty Somali women. The interview sessions involved uncovering life stories followed by in-depth interviews with each participant. Participants were all over eighteen years of age, and their original names have been changed to protect their anonymity. The body of narrative data was approached using a thematic analysis. I compared what was said in the two contexts studied and contrasted it with my observations in the field, in order to find similarities and differences between the two interlinked cities. I have not conducted fieldwork in Somalia or Somaliland to contrast the views Somali women expressed in Nairobi and Johannesburg. The references made to their homeland are based on their own views and opinions on their lives before migrating. Many of these women considered people in Somalia to be extremely traditional and religious, imposing strong rules of conduct upon their everyday lives. Migration opened opportunities for these women to reconsider and sometimes update their previous attitudes and beliefs, while at the same time the change of context has provoked the creation of a new consciousness regarding what it means to be a Somali and Muslim woman. This, however, does not mean that expressions of women's agency do—or did—not take place back in Somalia, as for example, the essays collected by Judith Gardner and Judy El Bushra (2004) on the active role Somali women played during the war explore. Still, it cannot be denied, either, that these expressions of agency have become stronger with the migration process and in diasporic contexts (Farah 2000; Abdi 2015).

By illuminating the translocal situation of Somalis in Nairobi and Johannesburg, this article analyzes how migration has affected gender roles, relations, and practices among Somalis. It then reflects on how Somali women's sense of identity is informed by different sets of cultural and religious practices and how the women strategically distinguish between them in order to challenge certain practices they don't agree with, such as the politics surrounding marriage and the practice of female circumcision, two pivotal events in their lives that they often wish to transform or eradicate.

### **Somalis in Nairobi and Johannesburg**

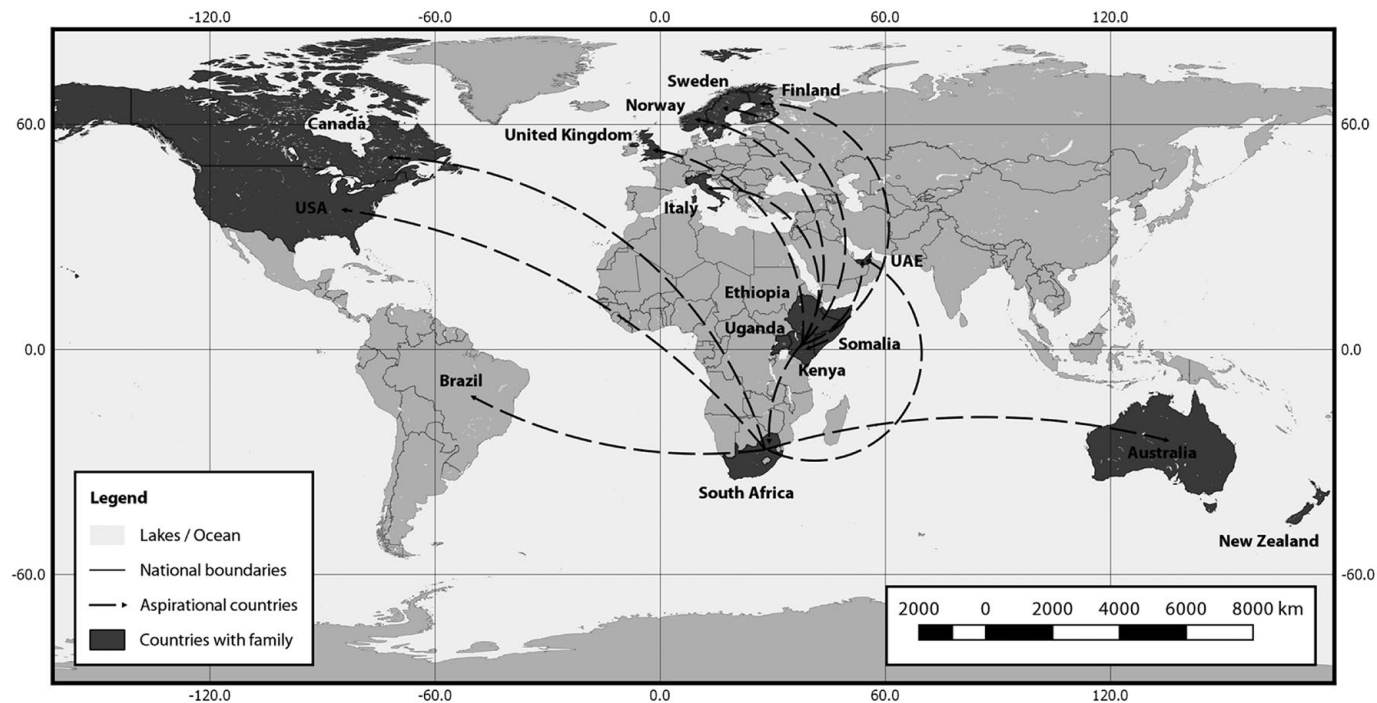
Together with Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa are among the countries in Africa that attract the most Somali migrants (Figure 1). Kenya has a

Figure 1. Somali Migration along East and Southern Africa



Somali Migration along East and Southern Africa

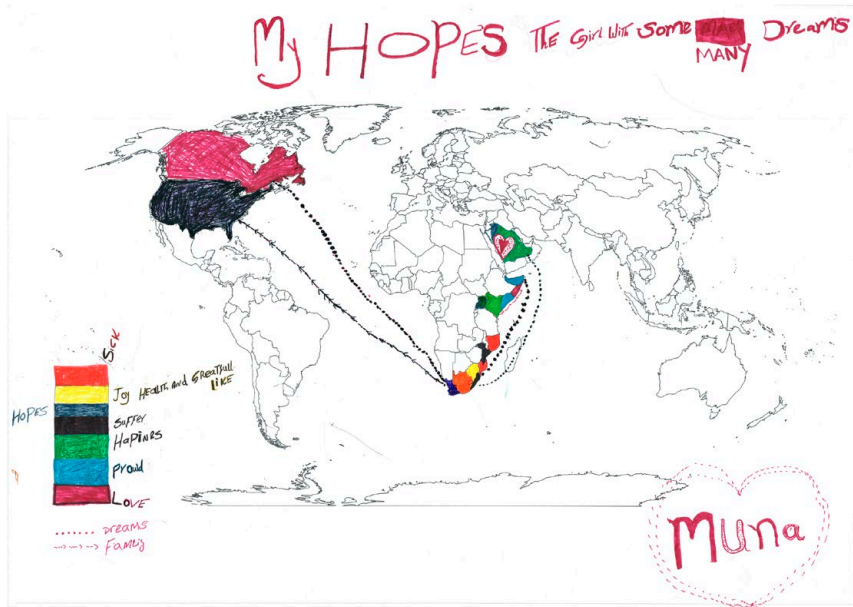
Figure 2. Family-Based and Aspirational Migration among Somali Migrants



Family-based and Aspirational Migration among Somali Migrants



**Figure 3. World Map of migration to South Africa made by one of the participants of the project #EverydayMayfair, in which several maps were created using participatory methods. In this one, participants colored the countries they passed by on their route to South Africa, giving a meaning to each color and showcasing also family destinations and aspirational countries.**

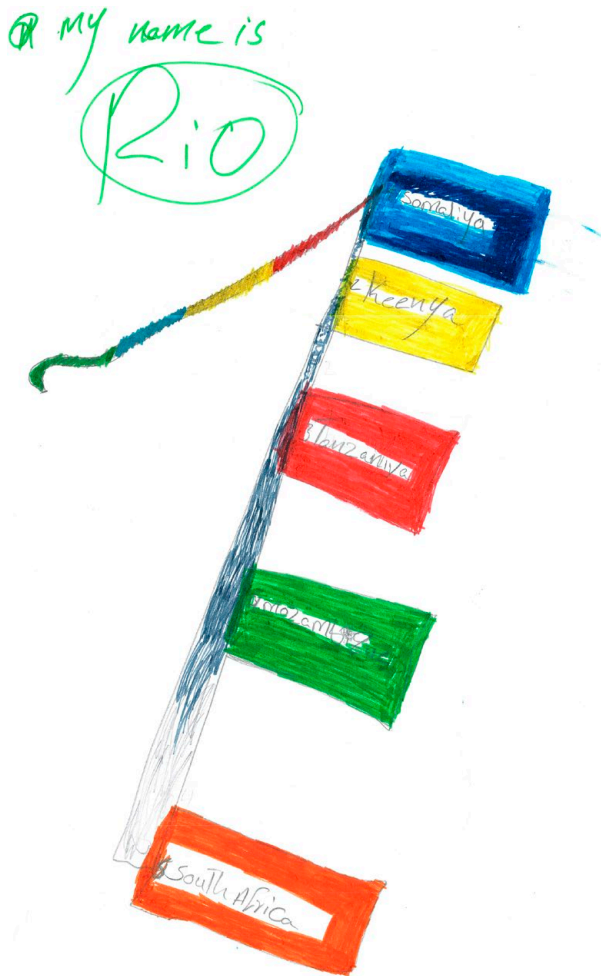


long history as a destination for Somali refugees, due to its geographical proximity to Somalia. There are currently approximately half a million Somali refugees in Kenya (United Nations 2017). These figures must be taken as very rough estimates, because the Somali diaspora in Kenya is comprised not only of refugees living in camps in the northeastern part of the country, which is where UNHCR mostly collects its data, but also of urban refugees in Nairobi and other Kenyan cities (Campbell 2006). Additionally, the Somali diaspora in Kenya is comprised of Somalis who have obtained legal status as Kenyan citizens. Somalis started arriving in South Africa after the outbreak of civil war in their home country and the droughts that devastated the country in the early nineties. The UNHCR estimated a count of 31,000 in January 2018 (UNHCR 2018); however, there is no exact data regarding the number of Somalis in South Africa.

Even though South Africa and Kenya represent very different destinations for Somalis, both countries share some important characteristics. First, due to their geographical locations in the African continent, the countries are more accessible for Somali migrants than Western countries. And in many cases, both countries become the first stop on the journey to relocation later to a third country in the West, the UAE, or Australia



**Figure 4. Migration map made by one of the participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



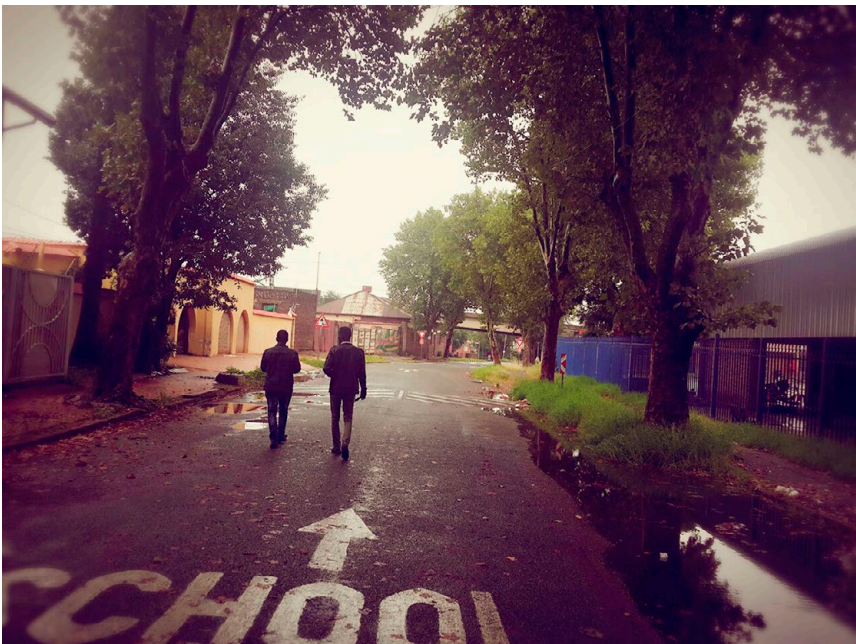
(Figures 2 and 3). Both in Kenya and South Africa, Somalis frequently encounter hostility from members of the local population and government organizations (see Whitaker in this forum; Jinnah 2010; Murunga 2009; Sadouni 2009). In Kenya, anti-Somali hostility is not a new phenomenon, as Somalis have been stigmatized both by the government and the police due to historical conflicts that originated in colonial times. The massive arrests carried out by the Kenyan police in April 2014 in the aftermath of the Westgate terrorist attack serve as one of the latest examples of such hostility (see Lochery 2012 and Weitzberg 2017 for a detailed description of the situation Somali citizens endure in Kenya). South Africa does not share the same conflict-ridden history with Somalia that Kenya has. Nevertheless, the great social and economic inequalities in that country make migrants

**Figure 5. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



from other African countries vulnerable to hostility and even xenophobic attacks. Probably the most significant attacks of this nature took place in May 2008, leaving 64 dead and thousands displaced (Hassim et al. 2008)

**Figure 6. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



**Figure 7. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



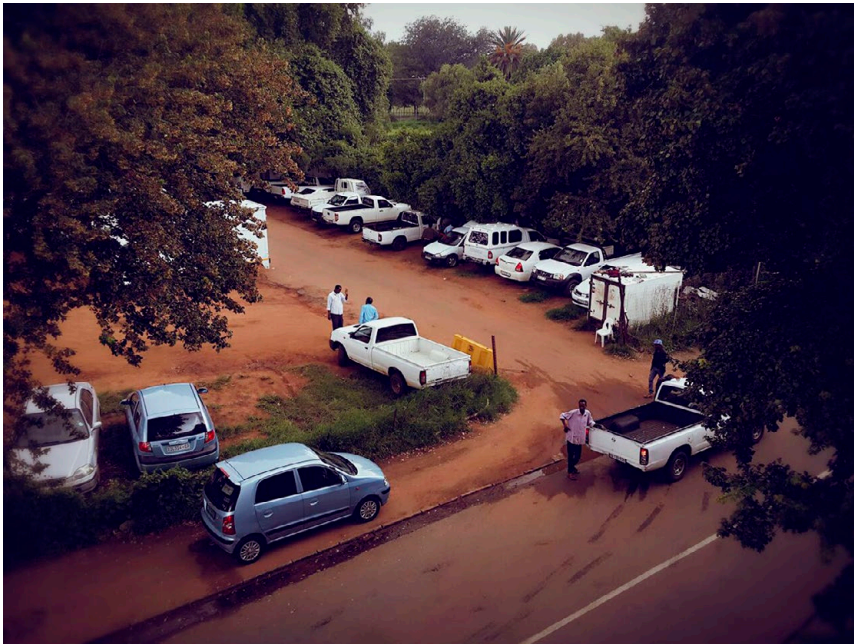
and again more recently in January 2015. During these xenophobic episodes, Somalis are often attacked due to their successful businesses in townships and their ownership of spaza shops; as a result, many Somalis have temporarily moved from townships and rural areas to Mayfair looking for protection and support among their compatriots, with plans to later relocate back to Somalia or to another country where they might feel safer.

However, despite such hostility, xenophobia, and marginalization, Somalis in Kenya and South Africa find Nairobi and Johannesburg to be cosmopolitan cities where an African modernity flourishes. Both cities have become transitional places for Somalis as many of them journey through or temporarily inhabit these two cities that are often used as waystations to somewhere else. The two cities are also deeply connected in the migration route followed by many Somalis, as Somalis living in Johannesburg have often journeyed through or resided previously in Nairobi, which gives rise to strong social networks linking these two cities (Figure 4). A reverse route is sometimes also taken, as was the case after the wave of xenophobic attacks that broke out in South Africa at the beginning of 2015, when many Somalis staying in South Africa returned to Nairobi after temporarily transiting through Mayfair.

The Somali population in Nairobi, comprised of Somali refugees, ethnic Somalis with Kenyan nationality, and diaspora returnees, generates a greater network of support for Somalis living or transiting through the city.<sup>6</sup> Nairobi can be seen as a central port for the Somali diaspora; due to its proximity to Somalia, it is normally one of the first stops for refugees who leave the country and the main base for diaspora returnees to reenter Somalia. Eastleigh also functions as a cargo port, a major node of commerce for the Somali diaspora, providing goods not only for Kenya but for eastern and southern Africa, and even to other places around the globe



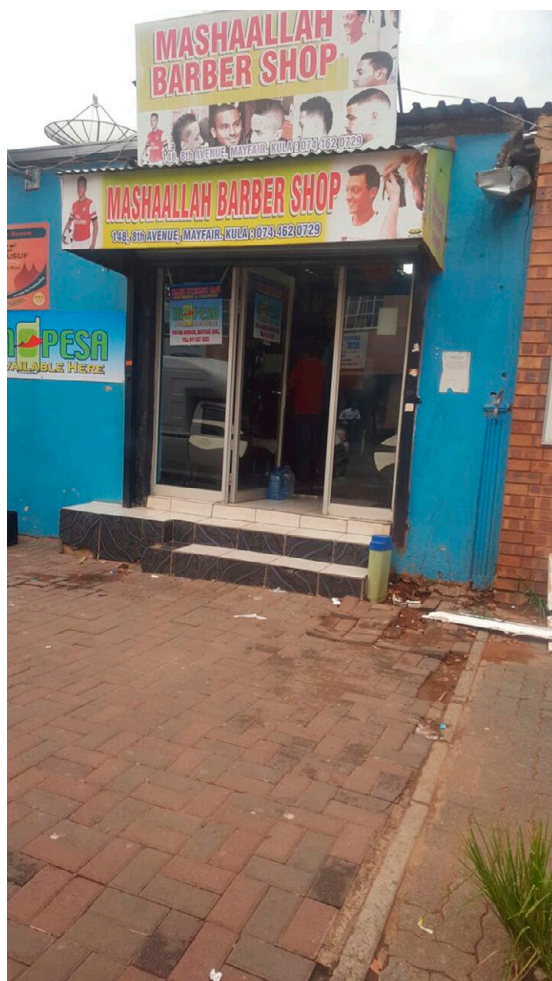
**Figure 8. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



where Somalis can be found (see Carrier 2016 for a detailed ethnography of Eastleigh).

Meanwhile in Johannesburg, a much smaller Somali community can be found, mostly formed of refugees and asylum seekers, and isolation seems to be the main feeling among Somalis living in Mayfair. Nevertheless, this isolation that Somalis feel also offers a kind of protection. Some Somali businessmen in Mayfair are aware that they could be making much more money opening shops in townships, but they choose to stay in the quarter as they feel more secure inside this island (see Ripero-Muñiz 2019 for a deeper analysis of the relationship between identity and place with regard to Somalis in Mayfair and Eastleigh). Despite the difficulties they endure in Kenya and South Africa, Somalis have transformed the two neighborhoods of Eastleigh and Mayfair into two “little Mogadishus.” Distinctive Somali businesses, restaurants, and products, together with the reproduction of cultural and religious practices, recreate on a small scale the social, economic, and cultural everyday life of a once-peaceful Mogadishu that no longer exists (Figures 5 to 10). As Abdi notes, “Somali refugees around the globe strive to re-create the meaning of *home* in their new countries of settlement” (2015:13). The “meaning of home” is not only expressed through material recreations of the lost city, such as shops, restaurants, and coffee shops, but also by the everyday practices taking place in those spaces such as gender relations and religious practices (see Ripero-Muñiz 2017 for a visual documentation of everyday life practices in Mayfair).

**Figure 9. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project  
#EverydayMayfair**



The reproduction of cultural and religious practices in a particular locale connects the two neighborhoods to each other, and also to Somalia and to other places where the Somali diaspora has settled. Thus, even if Somalis are nowadays spread around the world, the repetition, contestation, and transformation of certain practices connects Somalis across borders, creating a translocal community. The concept of translocality (Appadurai 1995) emphasizes the agency of migrants in the migration process; it “describe[s] socio-spatial dynamics and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013:373). Such is the case of the Somalis living in Eastleigh and Mayfair, where the translocal reproduction of cultural and religious

**Figure 10. Photo of Mayfair taken by participants of the project #EverydayMayfair**



practices—including repetition or contestation—creates a sense of belonging to a collective that spans borders, independent of the territorial boundaries of the nation state.

### **Empowerment of Somali women**

The Somali community survives because of the women, because women were taking care of all aspects of life as the men were busy with the war. The men in Somalia were controlling because they had money. But life is changing now. The economy is controlling, not the man. Before, women didn't have anything, but now [this] is changing. After the war, the men

don't work; they are confused, [and] they don't know what to do, where to start... But all the women are working. The women know how to take care of their husbands and their children...Men have become a hassle. Somalis survive because of women. If not, Somalis would have long disappeared. (Interview with Falis, Nairobi, January 6, 2014)

Non-western women tend to be perceived as incapable of autonomy (Philips 2007), dominated by strong patriarchal, cultural, and religious power structures. Somali women in particular are viewed as the epitome of the "Third World Woman": black, Muslim, and uneducated (Mohanty 1988), oppressed by a strong patriarchal society that relegates them to an inferior place without voice or choice. This is a monolithic perception that doesn't take into account that women migrate independently, start businesses on their own, and take ownership of many of their cultural and religious practices as a way to exercise their agency.

Falis's case, like others presented here, challenges this widespread stereotypical representation. Falis is one of many Somali women residing in Nairobi since the conflict broke out in Somalia. Divorced several times and a single mother to an extended family, she makes a living as a businesswoman, often traveling to the UAE, where she buys goods such as perfumes, textiles, or gold to resell later in Nairobi. As she explains, the war created a situation of power circulation in which women became economically empowered, gaining more control over their lives and those of their families and creating in this way new forms of power and social organization that benefitted the whole community (Allen 1999). Moreover, the situation of war and conflict also turned gender into a "core organizing principle" (Boyd & Grieco 2003) in the migration process of Somalis, because women are normally given preference when migrating. There are two main reasons for this gendered approach to migration: first, it has been suggested that it is a way to avoid gender-based violence, and second, there is the widespread belief that women tend to be more responsible and will always send some money back home in order to support other family members (Al-Sharmani 2010). As Fatma, a teacher in her early forties and a mother of two children who lives between Nairobi and Europe, where her husband resides, stated:

Men prefer women to emigrate because they either work or send money home, or they have children and receive benefits from the government of the countries in which they are staying. Women have become the survival kit of the Somali society. (Interview with Fatma, Nairobi, January 20, 2014)

The economic empowerment some women experienced as a result of the war was then bolstered by transnational migration, with women becoming the "survival kit of Somali society." Nuruddin Farah (2000) illustrated this point in relation to Somalis living in Italy, where Somali women have become the breadwinners, supporting men completely. Abdi (2015) also



emphasized the importance for Somali women to work in the South African context in order to maintain their independence and support their families. Most of the youngest and unmarried women I interviewed in Johannesburg declared that, for them, the main difference between living in Somalia and South Africa was that in South Africa, they have to work; they have had to learn to survive on their own. Married women sometimes also found that the money their husbands brought home was not enough, so they also tried to work and, in this way, were also able to help their family members back in Somalia. Divorced women were the ones who struggled the most, as they did not normally get support from their ex-husbands, and if they worked, they could not take care of their children, resulting in many having to send their children back to Somalia to be looked after by parents or other relatives, as Saynab was forced to do. Somali women have then become an economic engine both inside and outside of Somalia and in many cases, such as Falis's, they serve as the main providers for their families, transforming in this way gender roles and practices both inside and outside the country (Al-Sharmani 2010; Bryden & Steiner 1998; Farah 2000; Gardner & El Bushra 2004; Hopkins 2010; Jinnah 2010; Langellier 2010). However, even if the war and transnational migration have contributed to the transformation of gender roles and practices, gender relations among Somalis living in Nairobi and Johannesburg are strongly regulated by Islamic percepts and beliefs, as Kadijah, a well-educated Somali-Kenyan woman who works as a consultant for the UN and NGOs based in Nairobi stated during an interview: "You cannot talk about women's roles in the Somali culture without Islam. If you are going to talk about gender relations, religion is always going to emerge" (Interview with Kadijah, Nairobi, December 15, 2013).

### Somaliness and Islam

Islam doesn't allow the mixing of men and woman who are not from the same family. It's a way of controlling proximity and promiscuity. That's the difference between the West and Islam. If you know about a single man that is interested in you, you can marry or not, but this thing of going out for a long time...you are testing the water before you get in, so Islam doesn't allow it... (Interview with Fadumo, Johannesburg, July 15, 2014)

Fadumo is a very devout woman who used to run a wholesale shop in the upper floor of Amal, before she was resettled by the UNHCR in the United States. She was married but never had children; even though she would have liked to have become a mother, she stated that she had come to accept Allah's will. Moreover, being childless had left her with plenty of time for reading and learning, and she taught herself several languages, including Arabic, which made it possible for her to have direct access to Qur'anic writings. Her words describe her experience of the way Islam regulates gender relations among Somalis. All of the women I talked to in Nairobi and Johannesburg followed Islamic precepts. They identified

themselves both as Muslims and as Somalis. Their sense of Somaliness emerged as an identification with certain discourses, narratives, and practices based on shared structures, together with the implementation of cultural and religious practices in everyday life, as explored above. One of the most frequently repeated statements during the interviews in both cities was: “One language, one culture, one religion,” which emphasizes an apparent sense of unity among Somalis. Islam is an important identifier among Somalis, and it has become deeply interlinked with Somaliness, as Afyare Elmi (2010:50) described:

Islam as a religion has played a significant role in the lives of Somalis. It was and still is a strong identity... Hersi writes, “Islam as a religion and a system of values so thoroughly permeates all aspects of Somali life that is difficult to conceive of any meaning in the term Somali itself without at the same time implying Islamic identity” (Hersi 1977:109). Moreover, Islam informs many facets of everyday activities.

Muslim identity is so prevalent among Somalis that some of the women interviewed saw no difference between being Somali and being Muslim. Amina was a young Somali woman who had been living in Eastleigh for a year at the time of her interview. She was waiting to travel to Ethiopia to marry her husband-to-be before relocating with him to the UK. Amina stated, “I see no difference between Somali culture and Islam; whatever we do is Islamic. Being a Somali woman means being a Muslim woman” (Interview with Amina, December 20, 2013, Nairobi). Amina equates being Somali with being Muslim; however, many other women insisted on making a clear distinction between what they considered culture and what they considered religion. Samia, a Somali-Canadian woman in her mid-forties, left Somalia with a scholarship to study in Canada just before the conflict began in the nineties. After more than twenty years in Canada, she decided to return to East Africa in order to “give back.” Although she has her residency in Nairobi, she runs an NGO in Somalia that seeks to empower women, and she travels often to Mogadishu. Her years living abroad have made her question certain aspects of her “Somali” culture and reject those ones that relegate women to second place:

I don’t want to accept certain elements of Somali culture; I won’t accept especially those that discriminate women but I fully accept Islam. Islam, unlike culture, is divine. I cannot question. I can engage, understand, and don’t rely on somebody’s interpretation. Culture is man-made, not divine. That’s why it can be challenged. But I cannot challenge my God. But you can challenge other human beings, because they make mistakes. (Interview with Samia, Nairobi February 2, 2014)

Samia’s words distinguish very clearly what constitutes culture for her—something “man-made”—versus religion, which is something she perceives to come directly from God and which therefore cannot be challenged. In the

case of Samia, her feminist background makes her very critical of some aspects of Somali culture, but she does not question her faith. The distinction Samia makes also carries with it the implicit connotation of the sacred versus the cultural practices of the everyday life (Yuval Davis 2014). Coming from a very different background is Halima, a very devout older Somali woman, mother of four grown children, who owns a business in Mayfair, where she has lived for more than twenty years, even as she longs to move to Australia. Halima is a very religious and strict Muslim woman, and even if her age, background, and life story are very different from Samia's, she expressed similar views in regard to culture and religion:

For me, religion is more important than culture. Because I'm Muslim and religion is important. I don't like culture. I like religion. We don't follow culture. The culture is from long time ago, now we follow the religion. We don't follow culture, because if you follow culture you don't dress like this [she is wearing a *niqab*]. Our culture is Muslim. We dress like Muslim. So, if you dress like culture you leave your religion. We leave the culture now and we follow the religion. Everyone in Somalia follows religion for a long time now. (Interview with Halima, Johannesburg, March 10, 2013)

Both Halima and Samia placed religion ahead of culture; even though their arguments might be different, their religious identities seem to play a more relevant role in their lives than their cultural backgrounds. During interviews and interaction with women in the two cities, whenever a distinction was made between culture and religion, the latter was always favored and considered more important. Even my research assistant in Johannesburg assured me that no Somali was going to answer differently; "Religion will *always, always* come first for Somalis." Islam offers for Somalis a unifying identification above the categories of clan, gender, class, or even nationality. Islam also cuts across time and space, creating a coherent continuity in the context of displacement.

These views on culture vis-à-vis religion reflect, among other things, the strong Islamic revival that Somalia has undergone since the 1960s (Elmi 2010) and that intensified during the war in the 1990s. Works by Adeline Masquelier (2009) and Saba Mahmood (2005) have documented this process of Islamic revival also taking place among Muslim women in other regions of Africa, such as Niger and Egypt respectively. But in the case of Somalia, the Islamic revival was slightly different. During the 1960s, Somali scholars who had been granted scholarships to study in the Arab countries of the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, began to return to Somalia, bringing with them a stronger view of Islam and particularly *Wahabism*. So even though Somalia was already a Muslim country, various Islamic interpretations and practices were more relaxed than they are today, when Islam has permeated all aspects of Somali society. There is, however, a tendency to believe that religious people have no agency at all (Mack 2003), as their lives are dictated by religious mandates; this attitude ignores the fact that the individual is still able to exercise his own agency by choosing how to implement those religious mandates or precepts.

Both Samia and Halima considered Islam to be a higher category than “culture,” but the way they interpret and implement it is different. For instance, it means wearing a *niqab* for Halima, but Samia is content to cover her hair with a turban and wear jeans. Here, agency is not only exercised in relation to one’s free will, but also in relation to something that is right, adding a moral, ethical, or religious component to individual agency (Mack 2003). As Marja Tiilikainen observed among Somali women living in Finland: “Islam may work as a moral and also practical compass in everyday life for Somali refugee women” (2007:224). Moreover, as Laura Leming indicates, “Religious agency is enacted in emotional, intellectual, and behavioral strategies, thereby enabling individuals to negotiate overlapping and valued identities” (Leming 2007:73). Samia and Halima both value their Somali and Muslim traditions, but their religious agency make them consider Islam a more significant identification. This negotiation between different identifications becomes in some cases strategic, as may be observed in the case of Saynab’s choosing to marry a Lebanese man on the grounds that he was a Muslim, and as the other cases presented in the next section also aim to demonstrate. There is also an important temporal dimension to religious agency, as it is “fueled by memory and a vision for the future” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998:77). Religious agency looks to the past, in the sense that is based on and inherits a “tradition,” but it also looks to the future, as it can transform the way tradition is implemented. A tradition is not something static, but rather fluid and open to change through the implementation of practices adapting to new contexts (Macintyre 1981; Asad 2009). In this context, the agency of Somali women relies on how they relate to and implement the precepts of Islam. Reflexivity becomes the key to acting in one way or another (Archer 2003), before making an important decision, such as whom to marry or whether to circumcise their daughters. Women consider and evaluate their cultural and religious values before acting in one way or another, choosing what they consider is right. This reflexivity is always dialogical (Bakhtin 1981), as it refers to the everyday dialogues between individuals and the social structures they are embedded in, as well as the internal dialogue we enact with ourselves before actions are taken.

Therefore, by negotiating their religious and cultural identities within a context of displacement, Somali women become agents in the production of practices, choosing consciously which ones to implement and which ones to discontinue. They make use of their religious agency to challenge cultural practices they disagree with; they enhance their agency by supporting it with Islamic arguments in order to make it stronger and to some point incontestable. Moreover, the sense of Islam as a “moral and practical compass” empowers some Somali women, as they use arguments based on Islamic teachings to question and, in some cases, discontinue practices of their Somali culture that they no longer wish to perform. When a tension arises between cultural and Islamic beliefs, the Islamic one is normally favored. This was the case in both contexts studied, emphasizing the translocal connection mentioned before and further analyzed in the next section in relation to the politics surrounding marriage and female circumcision.

## Cultural and Islamic Practices in Dialogue

Even if transnational migration has in many ways transformed gender roles and empowered women, female circumcision and marriage remained two pivotal events—almost rites of passage—in the lives of the Somali women who were interviewed for this project.<sup>7</sup> The majority of them were young women in their early or mid-twenties who started questioning marriage and female circumcision once they left Somalia. A context of displacement in which women were exposed to other realities made them realize that circumcision among women is not the norm globally. Many came to learn this during their pregnancy or when they gave birth, through their contact with hospitals, medical practitioners, or other African women who were experiencing motherhood at the same time. The politics and dynamics surrounding these practices, marriage, and women's ideas about what makes a good husband are quite revealing in terms of understanding how Somali women express and navigate their agency.

Hodan, a young Somali-Kenyan, the daughter of a businesswoman in Nairobi, was a student of International Relations when I first met her. After graduating in Nairobi, she decided to go to Khartoum to learn Arabic, where she now resides. Her parents wanted her to marry a Somali man when she finished her studies in Khartoum, but she didn't want to do so. Instead, she wanted to work at the Qatar Foundation so that she could practice her Arabic and live in Qatar. She noted that if she ended up marrying an Arab, her parents would think she was crazy, but she wasn't too worried about such a perception, because she knew that as long as her prospective husband was a Muslim she would not be doing anything wrong. Hodan is one of many young Somali women in Nairobi accessing the Qur'an herself thanks to her knowledge of Arabic. Among other things, this gives her some power, a certain measure of control, and the confidence to rebel against certain aspects of her "Somali culture," such as the marriage convention which prefers a Somali husband. She uses her firsthand knowledge of the Qur'an to contest a customary practice she doesn't want to follow. This same situation occurred with Saynab in Johannesburg, who decided to marry a Lebanese man, arguing that he was also a Muslim, so she was not doing anything wrong, despite the criticism she received from most members of the community in Mayfair. Both cases showcase how a distinction between Islam and Somaliness is clearly made to contest the politics surrounding marriage.

Marriage brings with it many expectations, and the Somali women I spoke to expressed ambivalent feelings toward these expectations. Several of these women were marrying for the first time, and they expressed romantic ideals both about the wedding ceremony itself and about the lives that awaited them. Others viewed marriage as simply an arranged transaction in order for them to survive, and for their families to benefit from the bride-wealth. Finally, a few women viewed marriage as an act of liberation and emancipation. As such, marriage was also described as elevating the status

of Somali women in society. Arranged marriage is quite common among Somalis, and young women, in some cases—especially for economic reasons—find it difficult to refuse the family decision for her to marry a man who has been chosen for her. This was the case for Saynab, whose first marriage was arranged and formalized between her family in Somalia and her husband-to-be in Johannesburg, a man whom she had never met. In some situations, young women are married against their will, the imposition of an unwanted marriage coming from the woman's family. However, according to respondents in both cities, more women are starting to rebel against unwanted marriages. As Hibo, a young Somali who has been living in Nairobi for several years, stated, "Most of the girls who live in Nairobi are more exposed, they see the cosmopolitan life" (Interview with Hibo, Nairobi, December 18, 2013). According to Hibo, women exposed to a more "cosmopolitan life" become more aware of the freedoms that they could enjoy. Her position on how migration opens a space for more cosmopolitan expression to take place echoes the views of many other Somali women interviewed for this study. These women state that they were only exposed to certain ways of doing things in Somalia, and that the experience of living in a foreign country had opened their eyes to other possibilities. This does not imply that expressions of cosmopolitanism do not take place in Somalia itself; historically, Mogadishu was one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the Indian Ocean, a commercial node for centuries. The city also became a cultural hub for the arts, with its golden age occurring in the sixties and seventies. Instagram accounts such as Best of Somalia post images from this period in which cosmopolitanism flourished. Instagram is also used as a platform to share current cosmopolitan expressions in Somalia. Ugaaso Abukar Boocow, a diaspora returnee known as Ugaasada, who has a following of thousands of people, regularly posts images of her cosmopolitan life in Mogadishu.

Both in Somalia and in the diasporic communities of Nairobi and Johannesburg, the involvement of the whole family is a norm when choosing whom the woman should marry. Such an arrangement can give rise to a situation in which the woman, wanting to marry a man whom her family doesn't approve of, decides on an agreed elopement with the man she has chosen. This is one way in which women express their agency fully, even if that means a complete rejection from their families. At the same time, access to the Qur'anic teachings gives women arguments for contesting a practice they don't always agree with. As Fauzia states:

Islam gives the lady the right to choose. The father has a right, but he cannot force her to marry. That is what Islam teaches. If your father brings someone to marry, you have the right to say: "No father, that's not the man I want." People talk a lot... but Islam gives a woman all the rights... (Interview with Fauzia, Johannesburg, August 5, 2014)

All the women interviewed in both cities described an ideal husband as someone who is respectful, educated, and who can provide them with a

“better life.” Many women also strongly argued that they could marry anyone as long as he was Muslim, and some of them, such as Saynab, do so even if that means facing criticism from the entire community. The social pressure of the community plays an important part. As Deqah, one of the respondents in Nairobi, asserted:

It is not the family, it's the community...what are people going to say? It is always very difficult to make decisions in Somali families because [those decisions don't] depend on you. Those who tell you that is not a problem to marry a Muslim [who isn't Somali], they are lying... Try to have one in your family; let's see what they say... (Interview with Deqah, Nairobi, January 9, 2014)

Deqah's words highlight the enormous pressure from the community to marry a Somali. This reveals the importance of backing up a personal decision by using arguments from Islamic teachings. As these cases demonstrate, one of the central ways by which Somali women in Nairobi and Johannesburg exercise their will and engage with the politics surrounding marriage is to use economic and personal reasons that are supported by arguments from the Qur'an, rather than capitulating to the expectations placed on them by the local and the translocal Somali communities in which they are immersed.

Female circumcision is another case in which women use such arguments to contest a cultural practice they want to discontinue. In Somalia, female circumcision is practiced in its most drastic form; infibulation or pharaonic circumcision has been practiced for centuries.<sup>8</sup> The practice of infibulation is linked to marriage, as one of its main objectives is to ensure the virginity of the woman and the bridewealth the family will receive when she gets married. Also, as two young women explained in Nairobi, men prefer that their wives should be circumcised in order to control their libido:

Hibo: Men actually want women who have not been touched.

Ayaan: Men nowadays, the ones who are from the Somalia's rural areas, they want the one who's circumcised, you know?

Hibo: They believe [that] if a woman is not circumcised, she'll have very, very high hormones; she'll look for other men (Interview with Hibo and Ayaan, Nairobi, January 9, 2014)

Although different organizations such as Equality Now or the Somali Women Studies Centre are involved in efforts to eradicate female circumcision, it is not easy to discontinue a practice that has been performed for centuries. Women explained that female circumcision was based on Somali nomadic traditions, and they pointed to older women as the ones responsible for the continuation of this practice. As Luul put it:

In Somali culture it's very complicated. It has to be a revolution from within. It is an identity that is already constructed, and to deconstruct it



from the outside is very difficult. Even more, there are people who keep generating that identity, the grandmothers, the mothers, the aunts... (Interview with Luul, Nairobi, February 12, 2014)

However, grandmothers and older women are not solely responsible for the perpetuation of this practice, as they are governed by the rules of a society that supports certain interpretations of the Qur'an in their favor, which Faiza, an activist working for a women's rights organization in Nairobi, pointed out. She stated that to eradicate the practice in Somalia completely, religious leaders would have to come together and deem female circumcision un-Islamic.

All women interviewed in Nairobi and Johannesburg during my research referred to their circumcision as a traumatic event with painful physical and psychological side effects, and all of them expressed their desire to not put their daughters through it. The way they challenge a traumatic cultural practice is by exercising their religious agency on the basis that it is a practice not supported by the Qur'an. They blame people in Somalia for being uneducated, and the fact of being away from family members, especially grandmothers, has led them to question and repudiate a practice they consider un-Islamic. They also realized that circumcision is not the norm for women around the world. As Kadijah in Nairobi explained:

When you live in a place where everyone is one-armed you believe that's the normality, but then you arrive to another place where people have two arms and then you realize that having one arm is not the norm. (Interview with Kadijah Nairobi, December 15, 2013)

Many women became aware that circumcision is not a widespread practice when they gave birth, as Sagal, a young woman who has been living in Mayfair for a couple of years realized when she had her daughter in a neighborhood hospital:

In Somalia you cannot understand because they know nothing, but when you come to South Africa [and] you see everything, [then] you realize and maybe you [won't] do [the same thing] to your daughter. The culture is not important; the most important thing is the religion. (Interview with Sagal, Johannesburg, October 30, 2015)

Sagal distinguished again between culture and religion, giving priority to the latter. All the women interviewed considered circumcision a cultural practice, and not something that was prescribed by the Qur'an. As Amina stated: "Circumcision for women is not emphasized in Islam. At least the way Somalis do it. That is Somali culture from the African side" (Interview with Amina, Nairobi, December 20, 2013). This was a view that was also held by less-educated women, who don't access the Qur'an themselves but who are aware of the discourses and narratives currently circulating

inside and outside the Somali diaspora in this regard. Most of the women in both cities declared that having left Somalia had opened their eyes in this regard, as they have since realized that circumcision is not the norm everywhere, and that it can be contested. It belongs to the cultural realm and “culture is man-made...that’s why it can be challenged,” as Samia stated previously. Sagal’s words show once again the importance of religion above culture among Somalis; this, together with the effect of migration on her life, became an argument to discontinue a practice with which she doesn’t agree. Some of the women in Nairobi and Johannesburg emphasized how the practice is decreasing in both places, that they are not doing it to their daughters. In short, having access to the Qur’an and interpreting it themselves appeared to have given women arguments with which they could challenge the practice of female circumcision. As Samia declared:

Those who exploit, those who have more power, they want to keep people in the dark and they will decide [to translate] certain verses... Translate the whole verse! I know because I am an educated woman but they cut, they trim it because they want people to remain where they are so they can retain their power... People don’t know, so they don’t question. The more women become knowledgeable about their faith, the more chances the practice of FGC will decrease. Mothers aware of the Qur’anic teachings won’t put their daughters through that because they know it is un-Islamic. (Interview with Samia, Nairobi, February 2, 2014)

## Conclusion

This article has explored specific expressions of Somali women’s agency in the two African urban contexts of Nairobi and Johannesburg, two cities deeply interconnected through the migration route of Somalis, where they have transformed the neighborhoods of Eastleigh and Mayfair into what is commonly known as “little Mogadishu.” Somali women’s economic independence and decision-making power have increased in both cities, where they have also come into contact with other ways of living that have led them to question specific aspects of their culture that they wish to discontinue. However, the pressures of their local and translocal communities still encourage the women to behave in a certain prescribed manner, especially taking into account how gender relations among Somalis in these two cities are strongly regulated by Islamic precepts. Somaliness and Islam are deeply interwoven, and the line separating an Islamic practice from a cultural one is not always clear. Both Islam and Somaliness function as strong identifiers for Somalis, but these are not static categories, and Somali women engage with them in a fluid and dialogical manner. Moreover, many women make a strategic distinction between the two as a way to challenge certain practices they want to transform. Focusing on the domains of marriage and female circumcision, this article has shown how women may use Islamic

arguments to contest customary practices they wish to change or discontinue; in this manner, they exercise their individual agency while at the same time transforming the cultural and religious structures maintained across the translocal Somali community. Islamic arguments have given Somali women in Nairobi and Johannesburg the power to make decisions over crucial personal matters, such as whom they want to marry, or to stop a cultural practice that they disagree with. The women act as carriers of knowledge, and they can be active agents in important decisions regarding their own lives. They navigate their cultural and religious identities dialogically as a way of asserting their agency within the complex context of displacement which has come to characterize Somali society over the past three decades. Exploring the narratives of Somali migrant women has showcased the complex dynamics underlying identity formation processes in translocal communities and the need for further attention to these processes in order to change perceptions about migrant women in their interconnected world, in which the power of women's agency often tends to be overlooked.

## Acknowledgments

This article was made possible thanks to a research grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation: Research and Publication Support for Young and Emerging Scholars. Funding for #EverydayMayfair was received from Security at the Margins (SeaM) and the Migration and Health Project Southern Africa (MaHp). I would like to thank the forum editors as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. Thanks also to the participants who gave their time for the interviews and the workshop of #Everydaymayfair, as well as to Quinten Edward Williams for the elaboration of maps based on the workshop.

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## Notes

1. These are convenience stores in townships and informal settlements in South Africa, which are often run by Somalis. They are very successful businesses and constitute a central aspect of the Somali economy in South Africa. However, due to the recurrent hostility from South Africans, which sometimes escalate to fatal xenophobic attacks, *spazas* can be dangerous, and as a result, only men tend to go to work there. See Cawo Abdi (2015) and Jonny Steinberg (2014) for a more detailed description of Somalis living and working in South African townships.
2. Locations is the name given during Apartheid to townships and black designated areas.
3. This is a plant with amphetamine effects traditionally chewed in the Horn of Africa.
4. This is the name given to fake branded clothes from China that Somalis buy from Chinese wholesale malls and then re-sell in stalls in the Johannesburg Central Business District.
5. Amal is the Somali shopping mall in Mayfair where most shops are run by Somali women.
6. Somali refugees have been arriving in significant numbers in Nairobi since the armed conflict began in the nineties. There is also a Somali ethnic population historically living in Kenya, especially in the impoverished northeastern province. Somalis have always been perceived as second-class citizens by the Kenyan government. Works by Emma Lochery 2012 and Keren Weitzberg 2017 explore in detail their situation in terms of citizenship and identity. In the last few years, many Somalis who have been living in the West for decades, in countries such as the U.S., Canada, or Norway, are returning to live in Nairobi for different reasons: retirement, wanting to give back to the community, or wanting to rise their children in an African context so they don't become too Westernized. They all form a network of support for the floating migrant population transiting through the city at the same time, which generates a greater feeling of belonging among Somalis residing in the city.
7. There is plenty of controversy not only surrounding this practice but also in its naming, normally referred as female genital mutilation (FGM) or female genital cutting (FGC). However, I have chosen deliberately to use the term female circumcision in this article as this was how my informants referred to it.
8. This type of female genital cutting implies the cutting of both the clitoris and the labia, which are sewn together afterwards leaving a small orifice for the passing of urine and menstrual flow (Brady & Files 2007).