

Somali Ventures in China: Trade and Mobility in a Transnational Economy

Emma Lochery

Abstract: Research on Somali mobility and migration has predominantly focused on forced migration from Somalia and diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America, neglecting other experiences and destinations. This article traces the journeys of Somali traders from East Africa to China, mapping the growth of a transnational trading economy that has offered a stable career path to a few but a chance to scrape by for many others. Understandings of migration and mobility must encompass these precarious terrains, allowing for a richer examination of how individuals have navigated war, displacement, and political and economic change by investing in transnational livelihoods, not just via ties to the West, but through the myriad connections linking African economies to the Gulf and Asia.

Résumé: la recherche sur la mobilité et la migration somalienne s'est principalement concentrée sur la migration forcée en provenance de Somalie et des communautés de la diaspora d'Europe occidentale et d'Amérique du Nord, négligeant d'autres expériences et destinations. Cet article retrace les voyages de commerçants somaliens de l'Afrique de l'Est à la Chine, cartographiant ainsi la croissance d'une économie commerciale transnationale qui a offert un cheminement de carrière stable à certains, mais des possibilités limitées à beaucoup d'autres. Une compréhension de la migration et de la mobilité doit donc inclure ces terrains précaires, permettant un examen plus approfondi de la façon dont les individus ont vécu la guerre, le déplacement et le changement politique et économique en investissant dans les moyens de subsistance transnationaux, non seulement par le biais de leurs liens avec l'Ouest, mais aussi à travers une myriade de connexions reliant les économies africaines au Golfe et à l'Asie.

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Resumo: A investigação acerca da mobilidade e das migrações do povo somali tem incidido predominantemente na emigração forçada da Somália e nas comunidades da diáspora sediadas na Europa ocidental e na América do Norte, descurando-se o estudo de outras experiências e de outros destinos. O presente artigo traça o percurso de comerciantes somalis entre a África oriental e a China, analisando o crescimento de uma economia mercantil transnacional que tem possibilitado uma carreira estável para uns poucos, mas também uma oportunidade de sobrevivência para muitos outros. A compreensão das migrações e da mobilidade tem de atender a estes territórios precários, abrindo caminho a uma análise mais rica do modo como os indivíduos lidaram com a guerra, o desalojamento e as alterações políticas e económicas, investindo em modos de subsistência transnacionais não só por via dos laços com o Ocidente, mas também através de uma miríade de relações que ligam as economias africanas ao Golfo Pérsico e à Ásia.

Keywords: trade; migration; livelihoods; Somalia; Kenya; China; globalization

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A Somali businessman from northeastern Kenya working in Guangzhou, China, recounted an incident that took place at a Yemeni restaurant one Friday after prayers. He had been among a handful of Somali men chatting and eating when the police arrived and asked to see their passports to check their immigration status. He explained, “One guy produced a passport from Canada, another from the U.S., one from Kenya—only one guy had a Somali passport, another Ethiopian.” Normally, he said, the police do not converse further with foreigners, “but they were confused.” The police asked them which language they were speaking; “Somali language,” they answered. But, the police continued, “you have Kenyan, British... passports.” The businessman chuckled, remembering the befuddlement of the police (interview with Farah, Guangzhou, July 2, 2016).¹

As a category of belonging, Somali can indicate both an ethnic and a national identity. This article focuses on experiences of people who identify as ethnically Somali, referring to predominantly Muslim, Somali-speaking people originating from what is now Somalia and the surrounding regions of northeastern Kenya, Djibouti, and eastern Ethiopia. Intertwined histories of migration and trade, along with the contortions of empires and states, have long led Somalis from East Africa to different corners of the world.² However, since the civil war began in Somalia in the late 1980s, greater numbers of people have sought to leverage mobility to navigate and escape conflict and concurrent environmental hardship. As Beth Elise Whitaker (2020:22) notes in this forum, Somalia’s diaspora is estimated to number up to two million people; over a million live in refugee camps or urban areas in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen, with smaller populations elsewhere in southern and eastern Africa. About half a million others live in the “far diaspora” in Western Europe and North America (Hammond 2014:9–13). There are also significant communities in Dubai and other

Gulf states (Abdi 2015), while other Somalis have moved farther afield to South and East Asia.

The scale of movement catalyzed by conflict rightfully focuses attention on migration to seek sanctuary—people's quests to move themselves, their families, and, if possible, their assets to safer, more secure places. In this article, however, I seek to broaden understandings of mobility in areas affected by conflict and underline complexities of the interaction between mobility and conflict. Drawing on existing critiques (Lubkemann 2008; Bakewell & Bonfiglio 2013), I focus on three aspects of this complexity. First, there are a range of aspirations and circumstances involved in the choice and ability to move. This range can only be understood by recentering individual agency in any discussion of migration and considering when and how people imagine and frame their migration as a route to self-actualization. Second, mobility itself can be a transformational process and experience, on both an individual and a societal level, altering and determining aspirations and circumstances. Third, areas of conflict should not be analyzed as spaces set apart from the broader geopolitical context; possibilities and meanings of movement during or after conflict are also affected by wider politico-economic reconfigurations.

I explore these three dimensions by tracing the journeys of Somali traders, students, and businesspeople from eastern Africa to the trading markets of China, focusing on the agency and experiences of men and women who, since the late 1990s, have built businesses linking Nairobi, Mogadishu, and Hargeisa to Dubai, Guangzhou, and Yiwu. For these individuals, mobility is indispensable, not only to escape conflict or difficult circumstances, but also for their livelihoods and life-making projects. They rely on their ability to move to enable them to fashion lives that traverse new, if precarious, terrains of self-making, career-building, and business investment. These terrains can prove exclusive and elusive, but nevertheless they are central to the political economy of Somali communities in East Africa and beyond. Individuals' pursuit of profit and construction of commercial corridors shapes their subjectivities and transforms political economies—even if at times inadvertently and incrementally. As they respond to the shifting political economies of East Africa and beyond, these businesspeople search for ways to broker the markets of the future.

The article follows the careers of a handful of businesspeople, mapping their places in the infrastructure of trade and how they envision their lives evolving in the future. I embed the narration of individual experiences within an analysis of how dynamics of displacement in East Africa intertwine with both longer-term patterns of trade and travel and shifts in the political geography of the regional and global economy, most especially liberalization and the rise of China as the "workshop of the world." The individuals whose stories I trace here identify as ethnic Somalis or have a parent who did, but they are from different countries and hold different passports. Their stories highlight the relevance of their position within and beyond Somali networks and their ability to create and nourish new ties.

In the next section, I ground my discussion in the wider literature on Somali mobility before turning to Somali trading economies. I draw on semi-structured and in-depth life history interviews and ethnographic research in Nairobi, Kenya, and Hargeisa, Somaliland, from 2012 until 2013, and then in Nairobi and Guangzhou and Yiwu, China, in 2016. In 2016 in Nairobi, I interviewed retailers, wholesalers, and representatives of Somali-owned cargo companies working in China and Kenya. In Guangzhou and Yiwu, I interviewed and visited markets, offices, and warehouses with brokers, Somali cargo company managers, and businesspeople running trade companies.

The Shadow of Conflict

Research on Somali mobility has predominantly focused on forced migration from Somalia and diaspora communities in the West (Abdile 2010:7), frequently acknowledging neither that Somalis have lived in what are now neighboring countries for generations nor that the Somali diaspora includes people from countries other than Somalia (Thompson 2017).³ This is in part due to the scale of the human consequences of state collapse and war in Somalia. Research has highlighted the plight of people who left Somalia during the civil wars, many of whom were crowded into refugee camps in neighboring countries, had limited rights to move and seek employment, and stood little chance of being resettled (Horst 2006; Rawlence 2016). Scholarship has also focused on dynamics of Somali settlement in Western Europe and North America (Kusow & Bjork 2007; Lindley 2010). Engaging with the “transnational turn” in migration studies (Schiller et al. 1992), research has emphasized the multifaceted ties people create and maintain to home regions, places of settlement, and other diaspora locations (Abdi 2015; Mursal 2014; Hammond 2013).

Focus on refugees and diaspora in the West is reinforced by researchers’ concern with the legal and political categories governing migration (Castles 2003; Bakewell 2008). In policy debates, primarily in the West, migration is generally categorized either as forced movement, in which agency is minimal, or economic migration, when people choose to move for a perceived improvement in economic opportunity (Monsutti 2008:62; Collins 2018:964). Amid restrictive immigration regimes, a humanitarian discourse argues that nation-states have a moral obligation to grant asylum to refugees who have no choice but to flee (Turton 2003). From the 2000s on, policy research has also projected a normative model of a “good” migrant who works hard in the host country, develops his or her country of origin through remittances, and eventually returns home with increased human capital (Sinatti & Horst 2015).

The empirically narrow focus on refugees and returning human capital oversimplifies migration projects and deemphasizes movement within the Global South (Sinatti & Horst 2015; Flahaux & Haas 2016). It minimizes individual agency and essentializes belonging; as Daniel K. Thompson

(2017:8) points out, for example, by overwhelmingly equating Somali identity with Somali nationality, scholarship risks reinscribing “the national order of things” (Malkki 1992), ignoring the contested nature of statehood in the Horn of Africa, the long history of mobility, and more generally, the complex politics of identity.

Migration and mobility are expressions of wider social processes, not solely consequences or causes of social change (Castles 2010). Analysis must consider how mobility is just one aspect of the manifold ways people seek to survive, build a life, and prosper amid institutions, policies, and processes that empower or constrain them (Lindley 2009:10). Such a micro-sociology of migration as situated process collapses the forced-voluntary divide. People journey (or not) for a range of reasons, and migrants’ own interpretation of the degree of volition involved in their decision can differ from that of scholars and destination countries’ immigration regimes (Erdal & Oeppen 2018; Abdi 2015). Paying attention to people’s expressions and enactments of aspirations and desires allows for a focus on agency and personhood, while situating migratory projects in “imaginative geographies, emotional valences, social relations and obligations, and politics and power relations, as well as in economic imperatives and the brute realities of displacement” (Carling & Collins 2018:911).

My approach resists a simplification of the complex relationship between mobility and conflict. First, as Oliver Bakewell and Ayla Bonfiglio (2013:2, 4–5) have argued, conflict and crisis “overlay, contravene, and inform mobility,” which might already comprise part of people’s plans for study, work, business, or building a family, at times reshaping social norms and practices of movement. A reduction in violence, they remind us, does not necessarily imply less movement. Conversely, it may lower obstacles to migration that people judge as important to their livelihoods, aspirations, or role in larger-scale social processes such as post-conflict reconstruction. Second, analysis of places affected by violent conflict should not model these places as spaces apart but rather situate them amid broader geopolitical changes that shape imagined and actual possibilities of there and elsewhere. In the next section, I trace the intertwining of Somali trade and migration circuits and the ways they were affected by war from the late 1980s onwards. I then situate these processes in the context of economic liberalization in East Africa and the economic rise of China, mapping the emergence of new trading geographies. The remainder of the article profiles Somali trading ventures, showing how businesspeople’s quests for social and physical mobility have woven together Chinese producers and East African markets.

The Intertwining of Trade and Migration Circuits

Circuits of trade and migration have long been central to the political economy of eastern Africa. Prior to colonialism, trade corridors ran through Somali territories, as goods and enslaved people from the interior were

exported across the Indian Ocean (Lewis 2002:22, 34). Somali traders built commercial networks inland and voyaged from the coast to Aden and beyond (Dalleo 1975; Ewald 2000). As European colonial empires expanded, communities of Somali seamen developed in British port cities, while others were employed as soldiers and guides by the British in Kenya, later engaging in livestock trade (Weitzberg 2017).

Post-independence, the economy of Somalia grew increasingly extraverted, dependent on aid, livestock exports, and, in the 1970s and 1980s, labor migration to the Gulf. While major businessmen with links to the regime and access to letters of credit could import from producing countries, with the liberalization of the economy in the 1980s, traders with varying amounts of capital began importing from Dubai (Marchal 1996:87). Businesspeople built, essentially, money transfer companies, taking migrant laborers' wages to buy goods in the Gulf, shipping these to Somalia, and using the proceeds to deliver the money to laborers' families (Jamal 1988). Trading circuits linked Mogadishu to Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and India (Marchal 2002; Warsame 2004; Haga 2010), while Somali transporters plied routes across eastern and southern Africa. As Somalia's government grew increasingly repressive, migration and travel elsewhere provided training, employment, business, and citizenship opportunities. These resources and relations shaped people's choices and room for maneuvering during the subsequent war.

The violent end of Siyad Barre's regime splintered the existing circuits of political and economic power. Upon the collapse of the regime, Somaliland declared itself an independent republic in northern Somalia. A political settlement was negotiated in 1993, with financial backing from Somali traders based in Djibouti (Renders 2012). Meanwhile, in south-central Somalia, the outbreak of war destroyed businesses and fractured trading networks. People migrated and, if they could, shifted business interests elsewhere, especially to Kenya or the Gulf. Those who remained reoriented toward importing essentials such as foodstuffs or offering services such as money transfer (Hansen 2007:52; Hagmann & Steputat 2016).

War in Somalia also created opportunities. Emerging businesspeople built symbiotic relationships with militias and profited from foreign aid through protection rackets (Ahmad 2012:318, 324). In the mid-1990s, however, as violence subsided and aid decreased, the protection economy became less lucrative. Commerce grew in the absence of state tax and regulation, "a unique business opportunity for traders with capital, clan protection and connections to Dubai" (Hagmann & Steputat 2016:18–19; Bradbury et al. 2001). Businesspeople cooperated to allow goods, capital, and people to move across clan divides and national borders—"a web of reciprocal arrangements" (Webersik 2006:1466). Over time, a service economy developed, sustained by remittances and transnational investments, with offices and bank accounts in Dubai and Djibouti (Menkhaus 2003:417). Historic migration patterns shaped

these emerging economies, as people leveraged their connections to markets and seized opportunities.

The displacement of people and violent restructuring of the economy in Somalia reconfigured trading networks supplying the broader East African region, most especially in Kenya. Nairobi's Somali-dominated Eastleigh neighborhood had long been one node in the cross-border livestock and small-scale consumer goods trade linking Kenya, Somalia, and the Gulf. As Somali businesspeople arrived in Kenya from Mogadishu and beyond, they brought capital, experience, and expansive trading networks (Carrier & Lochery 2013). Importing textiles and small commodities to Kenya, first from Dubai and then directly from East Asia, Somali businesses based in Eastleigh undercut dominant South Asian merchants. The neighborhood became a wholesale hub for retailers from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and beyond. Lodges were redeveloped into shopping malls, attracting investment from Somalis living in the West (Abdulsamed 2011; Carrier 2017).

Flows of people, goods, and capital connected Eastleigh to other urban areas in Kenya and beyond where Somalis sought sanctuary, studied, or developed businesses (Iazzolino & Hersi 2019). East African nodes were also stations on longer journeys, especially well-trodden paths to South Africa (Steinberg 2015; Thompson 2015). Transnational flows of capital supported intertwining migration and trade routes, manifesting as diaspora economies that for some meant an accumulation of capital and, for others, a quest to scrape by.

Shifting Trading Geographies

The effects of conflict and war in Somalia interlaced with shifts in the geography and political economy of trade across Africa, reconfiguring reasons and possibilities for travel and migration. Geopolitical and technological changes led to a profound globalization of supply routes and the growth of marketplaces where “transnational migrant entrepreneurs from multiple geographical horizons meet” (Choplin & Pliez 2015:2).⁴ Neoliberal policies reduced trade barriers, and further development of the shipping and logistics industry facilitated market integration (Birtchnell et al. 2015). Across the African continent, structural adjustment meant that governments shifted away from import-substitution, curtailing support for domestic manufacturing. Meanwhile, many African countries introduced multiparty politics. These changes reconfigured political economies, destabilizing existing patterns of social and economic reproduction (Sylvanus 2016).

Increased investment by Somalis in Kenya occurred amid this reconfiguration; Kenya instituted multiparty elections and economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Import licensing was abolished and capital controls relaxed, uncoupling “success in the import-export business from proximity to the centre of the state elite network” and making it easier for politically

marginalized groups such as Kenyan-Somalis to increase their market power (Mohamedali 2014:220). Longstanding informal trade in consumer goods became more central to economies of provision and consumption, both as a coping strategy and as a pathway to accumulation (Marchal 2005). As manufacturers struggled with debt and competition, the import-export business was the way to make money; the dynamics of this were especially visible in the textile trade. Newly legalized trade in secondhand clothes from the West boomed, while new clothes from Asia imported via Dubai offered a fashionable alternative (Mangieri 2007).

During the 1990s and 2000s, Dubai positioned itself as a trading interface between Asian manufacturers and consumers in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Reflecting the lingering influence of historic patterns of migration and exchange, Dubai represented “familiar geography” for coastal East Africans entering transnational trade and brokering, and in the 1990s, Somali and Swahili men and women invested in transnational ties born of trade links, religious community, and patterns of displacement (Mangieri 2007:204, 220). These traders laid the ground for “intensified South-South links in the everyday practices of the cloth and clothing trade” (Mangieri 2007:231), the roots of “low-end globalization” (Mathews et al. 2017). Somali-owned cargo companies connecting Dubai to Kenya attracted Somali, Swahili, and other Muslim customers, but also non-Muslim Kenyans, especially Kikuyu traders (Mangieri 2007:194, 201).

Trading infrastructures then expanded eastward, following traders looking to source goods in India, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and finally China. A “double movement” occurred as “importers from Africa and the Middle East were seeking supply contracts in Asia, while...a global trade apparatus was being actively developed in places like China” (Tastevin 2015:5). The Asian financial crisis of 1997 and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 reinforced this movement, redirecting traders from other Southeast Asian countries to China (Belguidoum & Pliez 2015). Connections between Chinese producers and African traders evolved through contingent events, meetings, and savvy—but, as Deniz Yüксеker (2007) emphasizes, “ordinary”—people in the right place to seize opportunities (Bertoncello & Bredeloup 2007).

Until the late 1990s, African traders generally sourced goods manufactured in mainland China through Hong Kong. Heidi Østbø Haugen (2018:47–49) describes how, from Hong Kong, Nigerians in particular ventured into Guangzhou’s trading economy, together with African teachers and students based in southern China. They bought small quantities of goods to sell to others in Hong Kong. Other African traders followed their example. As these early pioneers built up capital, they worked as brokers and then also as wholesalers, filling containers and sending them to Africa. Finding producers eager to sell directly rather than through intermediaries in Hong Kong, many based themselves in Guangzhou, the principal manufacturing hub of China’s Pearl River Delta. Meanwhile,

other businesspeople ventured to Yiwu, Zhejiang Province, the world's largest market for small commodities. By the early 2000s, Yiwu was an important trading post for traders from the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan (Belguidoum & Pliez 2015; Marsden 2017).

Somali businesspeople invested in these shifting terrains, extending existing networks while at the same time forging new connections. In order to examine how they explored opportunities offered by China's economic rise, I begin by discussing how and when Somali traders and students went to China. I then focus on mobile traders and freelance agents, considering how the trading economy brings prosperity to some but remains a precarious terrain for many. Finally, I focus on businesses that facilitate others' journeys, examining how individual and family circumstances, aspirations, and strategies have shaped people's exploration of the changing geographies of trade. I conclude with a look at how Somali traders negotiate the uncertain future of their businesses and aim to use their mobility to chase ever-shifting opportunities.

Seeking out China

Ahmed, a furniture dealer in Hargeisa, Somaliland, described his starting capital after returning from the refugee camps in Ethiopia in 1991 to the bombed-out city as "burning desire and ambition" (interview with Ahmed, Hargeisa, July 4, 2012). Now the owner of one of Somaliland's most successful furniture stores, he began as the last link in a chain of traders, waiting outside a broker's house for clothing brought by visitors arriving from Dubai, which he then hawked across Hargeisa. From this beginning in the suitcase trade, his knowledge of supply chains grew, as did his mobility. With his earnings he established a small business, selling mats, curtains, and mattresses. As Ahmed gained recognition, an already-successful businessman sold him information that his wholesalers were bringing goods from Djibouti. The businessman gave him an address in Djibouti, the price he should be paying, and helped him obtain his first Somali passport in the streets of Hargeisa. After traveling to Djibouti to buy goods in 1996, Ahmed began to visit Hartasheikh, across the Ethiopian border, where a booming market had developed around refugee camps.

In 1997, as more people returned to and invested in Hargeisa, Ahmed looked to Dubai. He radioed Somali brokers, who purchased and sent him goods for a 5 percent commission. A couple of years later, tired of receiving incorrect orders, he traveled to Dubai, equipped with the broker's name. In the face of the broker's reluctance to introduce this savvy businessman to the Dubai markets, Ahmed signed a Memorandum of Understanding, the beginning of a relationship that he credits with bringing him prosperity. Ahmed's networks continued to expand as his Dubai-based brokers moved to China in the 2000s. By the early 2010s, Ahmed's brother was traveling to Guangzhou and Yiwu up to five times a year.

Throughout his business trajectory, Ahmed strove to move up the supply chain, expand his business, and stay ahead of the competition. In this quest, the ability to travel and meet brokers and producers in person was essential, a point repeatedly underlined by businesspeople describing their early travels to China (Bodomo 2010). Hussein, for instance, who sold textiles in Kenya's Eastleigh in the early 2000s, recounted the motivations for his first trip to Guangzhou. He originally sent a friend to survey opportunities in China; the friend attended an exhibition and instructed Hussein to send samples by DHL. Soon, however, Hussein received a container of unsaleable clothes, including trousers much larger than he had ordered. Once goods have been shipped to Africa, it is far too expensive to send them back. Hussein lost around USD70,000 and resolved to travel in person next time. When he traveled to Guangzhou, he placed the order, paid 10 percent of the amount due, and checked every item before paying the balance (interview with Hussein, Nairobi, May 12, 2016).

Trading ventures such as these are the result of experiential and contextual learning; Ahmed and Hussein's entrepreneurial personhood developed over time, through successes and failures. Such businesses are also normally the culmination of an intricate interweaving of individual and family aspirations and strategies, processes of becoming evident in the stories of businesspeople whose travels began with the goal of earning a university degree. Studying abroad has long been an avenue for social and physical mobility for those young Somalis whose families can raise sufficient capital. Ties to other places, travel experience, and knowledge of other languages and cultures are crucial resources in precarious political and economic terrains (Iazzolino 2016:197–99), and the shifting geography of opportunities for a foreign degree is a frequent topic of discussion among young people. One Somali university student in China volunteered that while India had good universities, in recent years it had become difficult for foreigners to secure a place without paying a bribe, an assertion repeated by others in Nairobi. He estimated that in 2007–2008, Malaysia had become a popular place to study, while by 2012–2013, China offered more opportunities (interview with Abdirahman, Guangzhou, June 25, 2016).

Dreams involved in pursuing overseas degrees vary and evolve over time. Some see study in Asia as a path to resettling or pursuing a professional path in the West. For others, China offers an alternative to closed pathways of social mobility in Western Europe; one student recounted that a childhood friend from Somaliland who settled in Sweden had been unable to study medicine there and had instead gone to study in China. As they learn about areas outside the usual trade circuits and gain Chinese language skills, students can earn money by brokering relations between Somali businesspeople and factories (Li 2018). One student explained how, after receiving requests from Somaliland, he began searching for Chinese suppliers, first online and then by visiting their premises. He found "something that was searching for me"; companies already exporting to the

Horn, eager to expand their sales (interview with Abdirahman, Guangzhou, June 25, 2016).

For some, studying abroad paves the way to a full-time trading career, as it did for Ali, who traveled from Somaliland to study in India in 2001, his first time out of the Horn of Africa at age twenty-two. He laughed as he recounted how after missing his connecting flight in Dubai three times, he finally arrived in Bangalore. In his first twenty-four hours there, he took a taxi to the wrong town, was evicted from a Hindu restaurant for demanding beef, and was robbed of his possessions by a fellow Muslim African—though the thief was caught and his possessions returned. After finishing his computer engineering degree, Ali moved to Mumbai, working for six months for a company installing IT systems. He befriended and then worked for some trade brokers, learning how to broker deals between visiting traders and Indian factories, before establishing his own brokering agency in India with customers from Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia, and Kenya. After accumulating sufficient capital, he began to import women's clothes and shoes to Somaliland for his brother to sell. When customers sent samples that Indian factories told him were from China, in 2005 he went on his first trip to Guangzhou. Finding lower prices, he decided to shift his business, "study Chinese language, and never come back" (interview with Ali, Hargeisa, July 16, 2012).

Prosperity and Precarity in the Trading Economy

A multitude of Somali traders now take short trips to and from China and trading cities such as Dubai and Bangkok, staying for a week to a month or longer. Some travel back and forth three to four times a year, buying goods for themselves and friends and relatives who lack the capital to travel. Many Somali women are active in this trade, especially dealing with clothing; a Somali logistics operator with an office in Guangzhou estimated around 40 percent of his customers were women (interview, Hong Kong, June 15, 2016; Huynh 2016:502). Women traders reported selling gold jewelry given by their husbands as *meher* or other belongings for their initial capital, or pooling with others to deal in clothing, perfumes, and other small consumer goods.⁵ Both men and women borrowed money from relatives, and after accumulating capital for a shop and storage space, shifted from buying from wholesalers in local markets such as Eastleigh to placing orders through friends and relatives traveling to China. Once their own capital allowed it, they traveled to China themselves.

As with many transnational trading groups, support provided by kinship networks is crucial for Somali traders' access to business opportunities. However, traders mobilize, invest in, and depend on a wide range of relationships based not just on family and lineage relations, but also friendship, place-based identities, religious fraternity, and contingency. Business success depends on the ability to navigate the sociality of trade and build relations with customers, fellow traders, agents, brokers, and producers of

different backgrounds. In Guangzhou and Yiwu, traders can treat the cities like supermarkets and purchase from a multitude of wholesale markets. However, they can also build relationships with logistics agents from their regions of origin and find and meet producers. In the garment trade, high levels of competition and low barriers to entry make it crucial to bring new designs to market. Building relationships means that between trips, traders communicate with agents of Chinese factories and wholesalers; one businesswoman in Nairobi showed me her ongoing WhatsApp conversation with an agent in Guangzhou who had, that very morning, sent pictures of the factory's latest African-print skirts and blouses (interview, Nairobi, May 6, 2016).

For many Somalis in places such as Eastleigh, although launching a trading venture means following a familiar migratory blueprint (Carling 2002:17), it still involves significant risk and effort and, usually, borrowing financial and social capital from others. Accordingly, behind the stories of successful trading ventures lie not just hard work but deep inequalities in opportunity (Iazzolino 2016; Ritchie 2014). Prosperous businesspeople are those who are able to invest resources in different markets, using their ability to search for possibilities elsewhere and profit from connecting people and spaces. Fatima, for example, a successful businesswoman in Dubai, grew up in northwestern Somalia. When she was sixteen, she married a Somali who took her to Qatar, where she began selling homemade decorations and imported *abaya*, long robes worn by women. She built up capital and launched a cosmetics brand, selling products in Qatar and then "wherever Somalis are." Her father, a seaman, had become a British citizen, and after her first husband died, she traveled to the UK for a few years before establishing a shop in Dubai. By the 2010s, she owned four shops, two in Somaliland, one in Nairobi, and one in Dubai, and was selling wholesale to Somalis across Europe, Africa, and North America. She visited France, Thailand, and China for business, working with factories to manufacture creams and clothes (interview with Fatima, Hargeisa, July 16, 2012).

Indeed, access to alternative citizenships and connections to others currently or previously active in circuits of trade and capital flows structure access to trading careers and other pathways to physical and social mobility (Ciabbarri 2017; Abdi 2015; Marchal 1996). The Somali founder of a trading agency with offices in a new high-rise in Guangzhou, for instance, lived and worked as a bank manager in Canada after escaping from the violence of war in Somalia. He later built a business with a brother based in the Netherlands; traveling to China in 2004 to explore business opportunities, he began by importing electronics from China to Canada and the Netherlands. By 2016, his business was sourcing goods from China, different parts of Africa, and the Gulf for a range of customers, and he was able to invest in agriculture and upscale real estate in Kenya (interview, Guangzhou, November 28, 2016). Trade with China was only one leg of wider circuits of trade and business that enabled him to invest in East Africa.

Many of those making a living out of trading across borders, however, face considerable precarity. While their business spoke to their talent and hard work, Somali traders running small garment businesses often emphasized they had turned to trade lacking alternatives. This mixed narrative resembles that of the Somali women traders Haga (2010) interviewed in Dubai in the mid-2000s; though the women took pride in their businesses, many explained their trade as a consequence of displacement or difficult personal circumstances. Others admitted life was hard, but trade allowed them to fulfill important duties, most especially rooted in family responsibilities.

As with the women Nereida Ripero-Muñiz (2020) profiles in this forum, traders navigated gendered social expectations amid the challenges and opportunities presented by different contexts. For one woman in Guangzhou, what mattered most was that while her relatives in Europe and the U.S. were not able to do much business, she was able to support her parents and send her children to school. Businesses can moreover be passed onto the next generation—one Somali trader in Nairobi explained that her son, currently studying business at a Kenyan university, did most of the traveling for her (interview, Nairobi, May 7, 2016). Trade and travel were thus a way some people tried to build lives that surpassed the limits of their immediate environment, whether they were living amid intermittent violence, endeavoring to support a family, or trying to make a living as a single woman after divorce, haunted by unfulfilled dreams of resettlement to the West, or stuck in a tedious job in a country of asylum.

The experience of Naima, a freelance agent in China, demonstrates the promise and yet fragility of opportunities in the trading economy. Naima's mother is Somali and her father Oromo; she grew up in Kenya and Tanzania. She first went to China when, after her efforts to travel to the West failed, a distant Somali cousin of hers with a cargo company bought her a visa for China, encouraging her to try her luck. She worked hard as an agent in Guangzhou on and off for the next decade, brokering deals with people from African countries, building trust, and leveraging introductions to businesspeople in need of a guide in Guangzhou. When we toured the malls and markets of Guangzhou together, Naima took orders for clothes, sunglasses, and handbags from customers with shops and small businesses in East Africa, hoping they would become regulars. She visited vendors she had previously done business with to survey new designs and reinforce relationships. Stalls in a typical mall displayed a range of clothes, some unbranded, as well as copies of mid-range and high-end brands, from Zara to Versace; they were mainly samples for traders looking to place big orders, but many had stock for sale. Naima bargained hard, one day for example buying forty to fifty pieces of clothing for a customer with a shop in Kenya introduced to her by a representative of a Kenyan-Somali cargo company.

Naima depended on her reputation as an honest agent and broker and her ability to relate to a range of people, drawing on her ties to multiple

parts of East Africa, experience traveling, and charismatic personality. She had to take risks trusting people, taking them around the markets without a guarantee they would pay her USD50 daily fee or make purchases on which she could make a commission. She complained of one Somali man, introduced by a former school friend, who came to Guangzhou looking for car parts with only USD10,000. Naima took him to the spare parts market where an African businessman told him not to waste his money, saying a trader needed USD30,000–50,000 to make money. The visitor returned to Kenya without making any major purchases, and, after being guided around for ten days, paid her less than USD50. Naima complained about the way people leveraged weak ties of shared origins for favors, “this *walaalo walaalo* [brothers/sisters] thing, no more...”⁶ She remarked that sometimes newcomers naively think their travel companions might help them, but business is business, and people are busy looking after their own affairs: “...even Somali, they arrive together but then they all go their own way” (interview, Guangzhou, November 19, 2016).

Building an Infrastructure

To carve out more stable careers in trading posts in China and elsewhere, businesspeople must successfully leverage their ability to utilize mobility, invest their social and financial capital, and navigate the sociality of trade to seize a market niche that makes them part of the infrastructure of transnational trade. Many back-and-forth traders and business owners in Nairobi or Hargeisa depend on brokering, logistics, and cargo businesses established during the 2000s. Ali, the businessman from Somaliland who studied in India, came to China around that time. He learned Chinese, set up a brokering and trading company in Yiwu, and began moving up the supply chain. He strengthened his relations with Chinese businesspeople and factory owners, aiming to act as their agent in East Africa and beyond, and befriended factory workers and people in the hospitality business. A multitude of networks across China, East Africa, the Somali diaspora, and beyond were spun together through his mobile phones.

The most successful of the African brokers who arrived in China in the early to mid-2000s rented whole buildings in cities such as Yiwu. They would host visiting traders for free, guiding them around markets and introducing them to manufacturers, in exchange for commissions. When Ali arrived in Yiwu in 2005, he rented and furnished a building that had a warehouse, an office, and two floors of bedrooms for his customers for less than USD10,000 a year. He secured a business license and hired Chinese translators and a Chinese Muslim cook. Many traders, after their first visit, were happy to send him money and have him purchase goods in return for commission (interview with Ali, Hargeisa, July 16, 2012). These were boom times for skilled pioneers; traders who had been sourcing goods from Europe and elsewhere in Asia were glad to have someone from home guide them around the Chinese markets and provide lodging and familiar food.

Ali was able to develop his customer base out of his connections in Somaliland. He was willing to provide goods on credit to people he trusted, and many customers from his home region were embedded in networks that he could use to damage their reputation should they deceive him. These strong ties allowed him to pass on containers that he received from factories on credit. However, his customer base extended beyond Somaliland to Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and south-central Somalia, as well as to Somalis and Ethiopians in North America. He depended mainly on personal recommendations but was boosted by media interviews with BBC Somali and Voice of America. Before sending goods to new customers, Ali asked for a 30 percent deposit. He then photographed the goods and recorded them being packed into containers. When he sent the customer this video, they would remit the rest of the money, and he would dispatch the goods (interview with Ali, Yiwu, November 22, 2016). Advancements in communication technology have facilitated visual recordkeeping. Brokers can show customers goods live and send videos and receipts for payments by WhatsApp or the Chinese platform WeChat, creating a virtual paper trail across continents and giving discourses of trust material backing.

Besides trading companies and brokers, cargo companies act as consolidators and freight-forwarders. Customers' goods are, either directly or via trusted agents, dropped off at cargo companies' premises. African cargo companies either have Chinese partners or work with Chinese companies; the most experienced companies order a container from a Chinese logistics company which organizes transport to the port and clears it through customs (Mathews et al. 2017:141). For sea freight, goods are compressed and packed into containers together with other traders' goods to be shipped to African ports. Connections to Somalia have become more direct since the early 2010s, with ships from Singapore or Mombasa taking containers to Mogadishu rather than unloading them in Dubai. Previously, goods were shipped from Dubai in 2,000- to 4,000-ton boats; trading company managers in Guangzhou reported up to 20 to 30 percent of goods arrived wet or broken (interview with the Chair and Vice-Chair of Somali-China Chamber of Commerce, Guangzhou, November 28, 2016). Air freight meanwhile is packed and, in the case of eastern Africa, normally flown to Dubai and consolidated with other freight before being flown to Kenya, Somalia, or elsewhere.

While cargo companies serving Africa appeared in Guangzhou around 1999 (Haugen 2019), those serving East Africa proliferated from the mid-2000s. One group of five companies has dominated the cargo business between China and Eastleigh, and is well-known among Kenyan clients. These companies trace their origins to one family business begun by Somalis originally from Mandera, in northeastern Kenya, in the mid-1990s. The founder was a garment dealer in Garissa Lodge, an early Eastleigh lodging house-turned-mall, who imported goods from Dubai. He decided to replace his Arab broker and freight consolidator in Dubai, beginning with his family's goods and then other people's. The family collected the

necessary capital and began flying goods from Dubai into Kenya, taking the chance when, in 1997, a new international airport opened in the Kenyan town of Eldoret. The airport was keen to attract business, and the cargo company could work with new privately-owned Somali airlines such as African Airlines and Daallo (interview with cargo company director, Nairobi, May 12, 2016; Carrier 2017; Mangieri 2007).

The business grew, supplying the Eastleigh boom and establishing branches wherever Kenyan traders needed services. The original company split over the years, as younger family members gained experience and started their own businesses, or in a couple of cases, created partnerships with other groups. One of the most successful companies lists contacts in twenty-seven locations across East Africa, South Africa, the Gulf, North America and Europe, and in Istanbul, Mumbai, Karachi, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou. Organized as share companies in which people have to be invited to invest, the companies hold annual board meetings.

Despite their competition, new companies founded by relatives thicken the family's position within the trade. Founders come from a particular sub-clan, and solidarity is strong. As a manager in one of the Chinese offices argued, their culture of cross-generational support sits at a more profound level than business rivalry. He explained he gave around USD6,000 to 7,000 a year to his parents to distribute across the extended family for school fees and other support. Only the night before, he had gone to the offices of another cargo company to pledge USD1000 to fund a relative's university study in Canada (interview with Farah, Guangzhou, June 30, 2016).

Young men in these family networks may begin working in an Eastleigh shop or for the cargo company, perhaps then moving to manage one of their Kenyan branches before being posted overseas, all the while gaining training, experience, and some capital. Farah, for example, is the manager of a Chinese branch of a Kenyan-Somali cargo company. His trajectory is embedded in the family business, supported by ties that combine family affection and obligation with an institutionalized share company. After finishing secondary school during the Eastleigh boom, he worked at the cargo company until the Eldoret airport closed for a few years, making business difficult. He subsequently worked at his aunt's store in Eastleigh while importing phones from Dubai, then an emerging and profitable business niche. When the cargo company reopened, he was employed in marketing.

While his family networks provided him with employment opportunities, Farah's rise in the company required adapting practices that demonstrated discipline and ethics. He recounted how, after being unjustly framed for theft by a relative at the Eastleigh shop, he had to work to gain the trust of senior family members. When he became the manager of one of the cargo company's Kenyan branches, he realized on the first day that people were gossiping about the incident. He adapted his work style to demonstrate his honesty, writing down every penny he spent and keeping receipts for all expenses. A year later, he said, the company's shareholders liked how

he talked about the business and handled the office and the cash flow. Having gained their approval, he was sent to work in China and Dubai and bought his first share in the company.

Though family networks sit at the core of the cargo companies' structure, the companies hire staff from other parts of Kenya as well as from the countries where their offices are located. They depend on their ability to build connections in trading cities such as Guangzhou or Istanbul and hold these less resilient networks together. There is always a threat that a knowledgeable non-family employee will split off and form his own company. The most successful breakaways can steal whole branches, complete with staff and customers, as happened at Farah's family company. Someone broke away in Dubai, taking with him the company's agents in Turkey and China, and Farah was urgently assigned to re-establish the China office. When he arrived in Guangzhou and visited the offices of their Chinese partner, he realized all their customers had been redirected to the breakaway firm. He set about re-establishing the branch, beginning with their image as a functioning cargo company. As there were no shipments in the first few months, at night he stacked boxes filled with rocks and addressed to Kenya in the office. After two years of hustling and investing his own savings, he was able to rent a bigger office and was rewarded with more company shares. Now, he relies on his brothers to help him run the branches in China (interview with Farah, Guangzhou, July 2, 2016), depending on family networks to protect the enterprise.

Brokering the Future

As they navigate the economies of trading, businesspeople cultivate the skill of reading the market. Traders seek to broker the future, anticipating shifts in the geography of production and consumption, and investing their social and financial capital accordingly. When I interviewed traders who visited or worked in China, they often embedded descriptions of their entrepreneurial journeys within a generalized depiction of shifting geopolitics. Some framed their shift to Asian markets purely in terms of how cheap Chinese goods were. Other narratives evoked the undoing of postcolonial ties, which had once oriented hopes and chances for a new life principally toward the West. Where hopes for seeking asylum in the U.S. or Europe had failed, China's wholesale markets offered a chance to build a transnational life. This option of going to China did not mean a life free of migration constraints—the politics of visas are a major preoccupation of Africans in Guangzhou—but through business, a chance to make money and live an active life.

However, traders travel unpredictable terrains, shaped by the way globalized capitalism generates "multiple forms of uncertainty in the lives and landscapes it simultaneously sustains and undermines" (Knowles 2015). Recounting their trading journeys, Somali businesspeople in China placed their experiences in context. By the mid-2010s, the trading scene had changed.

The days of the pioneers were gone; between China and Eastleigh, in particular, the boom was over and the market saturated. Price differentials were shrinking as production costs in China rose, and China's immigration regime was making long-term stays more difficult (Haugen 2018; Dong Niu 2018). Moreover, the development of trading infrastructure had remade economies of arbitrage and fast profit into a crowded yet structured marketplace. Through their commercial activities and the way they connected producers with buyers, facilitated information flows, and altered the borders of the possible, traders had contributed to the reorganization of the social regimes of time and space.

As with other experienced traders I interviewed, Ali, the broker in Yiwu, was a quick student of the market, keenly aware that he was operating in a rapidly changing situation. He often considered the development of the Chinese economy, observing that much of the economic success he saw derived from early investment in light industry, which requires less capital investment. Indeed, enterprise in Yiwu has been based on trade and then production of small commodities—jewelry to toys, artificial flowers to household utensils—and historically grew out of a model of petty itinerant trade known as *jimao huan tang* (鸡毛换糖), referring to the exchange of candy for chicken feathers used for fertilizer (Li et al. 2016:9; Wang & Gooderham 2014). Chinese economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s allowed manufacturers to build direct relationships with wholesalers and decentralized power to organize and develop markets to local and regional levels (Belguidoum & Pliez 2015). The market platform in Yiwu grew out of the resulting interactions between merchants and the local government (Ding 2012). Their aim is now to produce more value-added and high-tech goods, a challenging prospect (Li et al. 2016:10).

Reflecting the way experienced traders become embedded in local networks in market cities (Bodomo 2012), Ali recounted being questioned by local government officials and business contacts for his opinion on the way forward for Chinese production. He described how local government officials asked how he thought China could develop its own brands and stop making copies. He said he told them, "Who taught people [to] copy?" They answered, "The market taught them copy." He said, "OK...but who is the market?" The officials replied, "OK, we taught them copy." In response he remarked, "OK so now as you taught copies you are going to have to teach them about this new thing: Chinese brands" (interview with Ali, Yiwu, November 22, 2016). Ali was determined to maintain his position within this shifting market. As well as building relations with producers, he was careful to learn about production processes, crucial knowledge for his goal of shifting from importing goods to equipping factories in Africa. He created a mental and smartphone video library of factory processes and traced the sources of raw materials.

Somali businesspeople in the cargo and logistics business similarly interpreted the market, arguing they had to be ready to move on if necessary. One logistics provider explained that trade volumes had risen, but profit

margins had fallen. He cited the example of a group of successful businesswomen in Eastleigh who had been his clients for many years. In the boom years, it was so important to get their goods to market quickly that they would pay him to ship the container even if it was only two-thirds full. Now, if he ships it with even half a cubic meter empty, “they fight!” (interview, Hong Kong, June 15, 2016). He believed it was time for people like him to consider other businesses, perhaps trading rather than cargo, or look to sources in Vietnam or Bangladesh. Farah, the Guangzhou-based cargo company manager, echoed his analysis: “For our business here, for small businesspeople, the rise of the Chinese economy is not good. As they get stronger here, they’ll kick us out.” “With business,” he continued, “you have to think about what’s coming up. Think about both the short-term and the long-term. Think about twenty years to come. . . My next target is Cambodia” (interview with Farah, Guangzhou, July 2, 2016).

Conclusion

Movement, Nikos Papastergiadis (2000:11) argues, is “not just the experience of shifting from place to place, it is also linked to our ability to imagine an alternative.” Imagined alternatives may focus on cool ground away from war as well as on fulfilling other aspirations—meeting family obligations, building a career, and living a prosperous, happy life. Understandings of mobility in places affected by conflict must move beyond a binary forced-voluntary divide to provide space for this richer array of dreams and desires.

The study of mobility must also be embedded in analysis of social dynamics before, during, and after conflict, taking into account transformations at regional and global scales (Castles 2010). The paths of the traders I have described here build on a history of trade and travel influenced by the imperatives of an extraverted economy and, since the late 1980s, protracted conflict. In Somalia, war and displacement have altered the social and material fabric of lives lived and possibilities imagined for millions, reshaping local and regional political economies with long-lasting consequences (Hammar 2014). These changes have interlaced with the shifting geography of the global economy, reconfiguring opportunities and constraints to make a living and build a life. In particular, displaced trading networks were redirected by far-reaching changes affecting much of the Global South, in which liberalized economies were reoriented toward Asian production markets.

Amid these shifting, precarious terrains of risk and profit, Somali entrepreneurs have worked to build careers in business, investing in education and travel, and brokering the importation of products to East Africa. Some people’s families had traded goods to different places for generations. Others were new players who fell into trade as a way to get by and succeeded through hard work, connections, and a talent for building relationships. For all of them, being embedded in networks that facilitated access to

opportunities and capital was essential, but they also had to use those resources to develop new relations, learn the sociality of business, and master the art of the sale.

Trading economies are shaped by inequality of chances, offering only a lucky few a chance of significant wealth. For many, however, they remain a principal means of getting by. Understandings of migration and mobility must encompass these economies, allowing for a richer examination of how individuals have navigated profound change and protracted conflict by building transnational livelihoods—especially beyond the increasingly unfriendly shores of the Global North.

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Notes

1. All research participants are anonymized.
2. See Weitzberg (2017) for a rich discussion.
3. "The West" refers to Western Europe and North America.
4. Beyond East Africa, much literature discusses growth of the suitcase trade in Eastern Europe, former USSR, and Turkey (see especially Yüksek 2007) and connections between North Africa and Europe (see Peraldi 2005).
5. In Islam, *meher* is a payment from a groom to his bride. Specified in the marriage contract, it becomes the bride's property.
6. *Walaalo* literally means "siblings" in Somali but is used more broadly to evoke solidarity, friendship, or familiarity.