Somalis in Johannesburg: Muslim transformations of the city[1]

Samadia SADOUNI, University of the Witwatersrand, WISER, South Africa

Abstract

Somali refugees represent one of the major groups of African Muslim Migrants in post-apartheid South Africa. In this paper, I try to analyze how religious identities and their transformations shape Somalis' specific modes of incorporation into Mayfair, an area near to the Central Business District (CBD) of Johannesburg. Mayfair is predominantly Muslim, it is here where the established Muslim community, mainly of Indian descendants have provided financial and material resources for Somalis' settlement since 1994. Somalis have since formed their own congregational communities that form support networks and create havens for incoming refugees. The same religious solidarity has also been a main obstacle to rising xenophobia and has helped to secure Somalis' livelihoods in Johannesburg. The situation is far different in black townships where Somali entrepreneurs have been violently attacked and sometimes murdered since the late 1990s. The place of Mayfair enables us to analyze the localized processes of identity construction, religious solidarity and transnational networking.

[1] This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted as part of a Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC, New York) research project on the religious lives of migrants in four urban spaces London, Kuala Lumpur, Johannesburg and Durban.

Theories of secularism in the twentieth century tended to neglect the visible presence of religion in modern urban spaces. With the increasing movement of international migrants, the city's religious landscape has been constantly transformed not least in Western Europe over the last 30 years. Migration is also at the center of major changes in Johannesburg, the economic hub of Southern Africa. In Johannesburg, the Muslim religious landscape has undergone major changes with the incorporation of many new immigrants from 1994 in the post-apartheid era. These include: South Asians from Pakistan and Bangladesh, Africans who come largely from Somalia, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Mali, and to a lesser extent North Africans (Morocco and Algerians), Bosnians and Turks. Pronounced pluralism in Johannesburg has led to the visibility of religion (new religious institutions, religious events, and religious festivals in public space) and the creation of diverse territories marked by the settlement of different migrant communities[2]. These three intersecting transformational modes of the post-apartheid are closely linked to transnationalism.

This paper will focus on a particular group, Somali refugees who add to the diversity of Islam and ways of being Muslim in the country. They have created new Muslim communities and spaces in inner city Johannesburg. Most Somalis in South Africa are refugees or asylum seekers who have fled the wars, political conflicts and ongoing turmoil and humanitarian crisis in Somalia. Somali forced migrations have helped to reshape the neighborhood of Mayfair - an area near to the Central Business District (CBD) of Johannesburg - where the majority of the population is Muslim. Religion has been a source of identity and meaning, as well as group affiliation and group membership. In many ways, it has served as a key resource for the social and political integration of the Somalis. In this paper, I will discuss the receiving context as well as Somalis' impact on that context.

The post-apartheid Muslim religious landscape: the case of Mayfair

During apartheid and with the coming of the group Areas Act, the inner city of Johannesburg became a White area. Forced removals began in the 1950's in Fietas which began as the "Malay location" in 1893 and was established as Pageview in 1943 with different populations

[2] This is not new in South Africa since during colonialism South Africans experienced the perpetual negotiation of frontiers and the marking of territories in order to differentiate 'us' from 'them'.

such as Coloureds, Indians, Africans and Malays[3]. The people were scattered to separate racial ghettos in Lenasia, Soweto, Eldorado Park and the western townships. In the 1980s, South African Indian Muslims were able to move from the so-called Indian suburbs to inner city Mayfair by using proxies - White South Africans - to buy houses on their behalf. Today, Mayfair is predominantly Muslim and home to majority of Somalis living in Johannesburg. Not only has the demography of Mayfair changed since the settlement of the Somalis but also the religious field has experienced transformations. Somalis belong to the Shafi'i *madhhab* (school of Islamic jurisprudence) which is different from the Hanafi *madhhab* to which most South African Indian Muslims adhere. A new Muslim culture has emerged with the construction of a Somali mosque, community *madrasa* (Qur'anic school) and various Somali community organizations. As much as the Somali immigrants add to the diversity of the cultural environment of Mayfair, they were also influenced by the country's political context and by "South African Islam". Before entering into a discussion of the influences of the South African context on Somalis' identities, I will turn to the political context of Somalia and their migrant trajectories.

Most Somali immigrants in South Africa are refugees who left the country for security purposes after the collapse of the government in 1991. The internal conflicts between clans and later the military incursions of the Ethiopian army and government into Somalia in 2006 contributed to the deterioration of the situation in the country (Menkhaus, 2007). This has seriously affected the Horn of Africa region where Somalis have sought refuge, particularly in Kenya. The spaces crossed and created along their migrant trajectories constitute experiences, memories embedded in migration and refugee practices. Indeed, crossing not only affects the identity of the crosser but also contributes in forming a refugee culture brought into South Africa and which will most likely be transmitted to the second generation. The migrant trajectories of most of my informants included the crossing of four or five borders before reaching Johannesburg. These migrant experiences in transitory places such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi coupled with their home identities produced a Somali multi-layered refugee culture (Farah, 2000). In South Africa, they have learnt how to

[3] The terms Cape Malay, Indian, Black and White are used in the 2001 Census even though they are contested. In the specific case of South African Islam, Cape Malay refers to Coloured Muslims, Indian to Muslims whose ancestors arrived from India in the 19th century, and Black Muslim is used to describe the descendants of the Zanzibari population in the province of Natal and the local Blacks converts to Islam. White Muslims are also converts to Islam.

overcome various barriers (gender and clan identities) more difficult to cross at home. For example, gender relations were under great pressure in the context of migration and are being transformed as attested by divorces and single parent families in Mayfair. Somali women gained a measure of independence through involvement in small business; they sell vegetables on the streets of Mayfair or own shops sometimes in partnership with Somali men. The ideology of the male breadwinner has been challenged, and the greater financial independence of women has increased their power in the community. Some of them even venture into African townships in order to earn better incomes. However, inhabitants of the urban townships in the country remain rather hostile to Somali entrepreneurs who have been violently attacked and sometimes murdered since the late 1990s. However in the large cities like Johannesburg the situation is quite different and more secure for Somali migrants.

Community protection

Somalis' relatively secure life in Mayfair is mainly based on a Muslim ethic of solidarity and mutual protection. In fact, a Somali is more a stranger in a black township than in a South African Muslim zone where religion has played a major role in their integration into society. The wave of anti-immigrant violence in Johannesburg in May 2008 did not affect Somalis in Mayfair with the exception of one Somali who was murdered in Newtown, near the CBD. Some Somalis claimed South African Muslim protection when a few of their houses in Mayfair had been identified as belonging to foreigners and singled out for attack[4]. The South African police was asked to patrol the area at different times in order to prevent the incursions of violent mobs. In this case, the support given to Muslim co-religionists in the name of Islam superseded ethnic, migrant and national identities. It has also been in the name of Islam that Somalis have been able to rent houses in Mayfair owned by South African Muslims without entering into complicated administrative procedures for renting a property. However, South African community protection for Somali sometimes also leads to patronage politics and according to my informants abuses by landlords who charge high rents. This has not prevented Somalis from settling in Mayfair since it is considered a Muslim area that is well equipped with mosques, Islamic schools, Muslim butcheries and shops.

[4] Interviews with a Somali family in Mayfair, June 2008.

Such community relations have been strongly influenced by modes for the management of pluralism and immigration in the country. South African Muslim organizations give financial and material support for the integration of Somalis into Johannesburg. Islamic NGO's have implemented a South African norm which considers the community as the key actor for hosting migrants. South African migration policies do not support the establishment of refugee camps. Once their status is granted by the Department of Home Affairs, refugees must seek employment and shelter for themselves (Neocosmos, 2006). Even after the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, the government dismantled refugee camps and asked the refugees to resettle in their "community". Human rights activists denounced this decision as well as the refugees who refused to go back to urban townships fearing a new wave of violence from their South African neighbors. However, the same government migrant policies which put the community at its centre seem to have succeeded in Muslim territories like Mayfair where Somalis are more secure. As part of South African "denominations" (Casanova, 2007), Islam and its moral economy through the distribution of *zakah* (obligatory alms) continue to be central for Muslim migrants. The powerful transnational Islamic missionary movement, Tabligh Jama'at, also assists Somali adjustment to South African society, and its influence appears to be felt by the ones who would not claim to be members. As a pan-Islamic movement concerned with *da'wa* (the call to Islam) or proselytism, the Tabligh Jama'at also provides valuable resources to all its members including foreigners.

The modes of community construction and religious practices described so far among Somalis in Mayfair are also dominated by another form of solidarity, transnationalism. The transnational space represents not only resources in their identity construction but also in economic advancement.

Transnational networking

Transnational networks with co-nationals have been assuming greater significance for Somali refugees as well as for their home country. The Somali diaspora as a political order and in the absence of a state in Somalia helps to define the identities of its members and plays a central role in their daily lives. This diasporic dimension of Somalis' identity largely helps to explain their attitudes in refugee camps built and managed by the UN after the xenophobic attacks. Several media outlets reported how Somalis in the refugee camps protested about their living conditions in the camps and demanded better treatment. This has been understood as a way to

put pressure on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to resettle them in countries such as the USA and Canada. However, it is more their refugee culture accumulated through their experiences of post-nomadism and encampment which has shaped their attitudes. Some of them who transited in refugee camps in Kenya have witnessed the resettlement of their relatives by the UN or have heard about such possibilities. The vulnerable migrants with little economic and political power knew how to become a strong *presence* (Sassen, 1998) through their politics of protest in these non-permanent refugee camps. These protests, made possible by the power of their culture and identity as Somali migrants, were also intended to attract the Somali diaspora's attention to their plight in South Africa. To make public their conditions as refugees was a way to make their suffering known to the world and the diaspora. Their call via the media was directed to co-nationals who send remittances to relatives in Somalia and in various refugee camps in Africa. Remittances as a religious duty and cultural obligation sent by Somalis from Europe, Canada and the US are at the heart of diasporic life (Mc Gown, 1999). The UN and the Somali Diaspora are external powers that can play a major role in raising the social and economic conditions of refugees. These networks of financial assistance formed throughout the Somali diaspora consist of a common transnational practice observed among different diasporas which tend to reproduce themselves in rather similar ways in different social contexts.

The transnational space is also an important resource for Somali entrepreneurs especially for the refugees who do not have a passport. Unable to travel outside the country, such entrepreneurs have to rely on relatives and other kin to get goods from places such as Dubai or elsewhere in Africa. These modes of transnational business which are similar among different immigrant groups like the Senegalese and the Congolese in South Africa (and elsewhere) tend to provoke the hostility of Black South Africans who do not have access to these migration-based economies (Simone, 2004).

Conclusion

The case of Somalis in Mayfair shows how migrant trajectories, the South African national context and transnational identities all intersect. However this intersection differs from one city to another in South Africa and also from the urban setting to the township. Although high rates of crime and many serious obstacles to integrating into the economic and political spaces of South Africa led many Somalis to leave the country, Somalis' immigration in

Johannesburg is part of city life. Somali business networks and the building of religious places such as a Somali mosque and a network of madrasas demonstrate a process of community building in Mayfair. Somali refugees made Johannesburg their own place, not least because of Muslim solidarity. Somali clan differences still remain important in modes of identification but the construction of a more pan-Somali identity has become far beneficial in securing South African Indian Muslim protection and a sense of security. Such religious solidarity has been a main obstacle to rising xenophobia and has helped to secure Somalis' livelihoods and religious and economic life in Johannesburg. Religion, which is a major factor for assessing the level of migrants' incorporation into the city, is still understudied in migration and urban studies. But religion is likely to increase its powerful presence in existing and future megacities.

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